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THE PROMISE OF MOURNING

A Dissertation Presented

by

SAMANTHA ROSE HILL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2015

Department of Political Science

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THE PROMISE OF MOURNING

A Dissertation Presented

by

SAMANTHA ROSE HILL

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ABSTRACT

THE PROMISE OF MOURNING

FEBRUARY 2015

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This dissertation project offers a critique of the ethical turn within contemporary political theory through the Frankfurt School tradition of critical thought. While many contemporary political theorists rely upon Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia in order to argue for forms of democratic political action, I examine the relationship between loss, mourning, melancholy, and temporality in the works of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Sheldon Wolin, and Theodor Adorno in order to think about the relationship between critical thinking and political action. Focusing on their different approaches to time, history, and loss in relationship to politics demonstrates how concepts like mourning and loss can be opened up in new and interesting ways.

Chapter one focuses on the work of Hannah Arendt and offers an account of her writings and reflections on the emergence of totalitarianism and the relationship between thinking and action. In thinking about the future of political resistance, Arendt turns towards the works of Franz Kafka and the French poet René Char in order to conceptualize the spirit of resistance in what she terms the lost treasure of the revolution. Her reflections on resistance, time, and the loss of tradition in modernity turn us towards the breakdown between language and thought.

Chapter two explores Benjamin's conceptions of history and time through his discussion of *Trauerspiel* and sovereignty. Turning to Benjamin's work in "Theses on The Philosophy of History", *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, and his reflections in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, I examine how he helps us to think about the relationship between our understanding of history, a critical temporality, and the politics of mourning.

Chapter three explores Wolin's conceptions of democracy, democratic time, and his move from vocation to invocation in order to think about the ethical turn in contemporary political theory. In "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" Wolin offers a critique of what he calls the "systematization of loss" that illustrates how theorists have conformed to rhythmic cycles of capitalist production and consumption. Wolin's turn towards Adorno in his essay on invocation is a rejection of demands for democratic political action. Wolin's understanding of invocation is akin to Adorno's understanding of melancholia in *Minima Moralia*, which refuses what he calls a "vain hope" for redemption.

In the Conclusion, I return to the problem of the ethical turn within contemporary political theory, exploring how this reading of loss and mourning in relation to politics affects the way contemporary political theorists think about questions of political action.

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"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain." Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

"If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needs to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with the cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic." Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

"To survive, the idea of vocation might have to be revoked and replaced by the sobrieties of method or invoked: Invocation as vocation's conscience recalling it to the cross-grained." Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation"

PREFACE

I began thinking about the relationship between loss and the work of political theory while reading Hannah Arendt's essay "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future*. She begins: "In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was — and not what is — authority?"[1] Arendt's simple admission is telling. Her essay is not meant to offer an account of authority, but rather an account of what authority was and how it has changed over time. This slippage demonstrates how we often ask what something is in order to excavate what something was and how it came to be the way it is. This *what was* assumes a passage of time, a transformation, and for Arendt points us towards something that has been lost. Arendt's work often takes the form of thinking through something that once was but is no longer: The loss of the public sphere to the social, the loss of culture, the loss of work, the loss of freedom, the loss of tradition, the loss of authority, the lost treasure of the revolution, and so on. For Arendt, loss is not so much a conceptual category as it is a place from which she begins her work of political theory. Loss for Arendt becomes a means to understanding the world, and a central theme throughout her work.

The *what was* also reflects Arendt's own methodology in doing the work of political theory. Her work often claims a premise or authoritative voice to only transform it into her own. She does damage to the text and that is the consequence of her thinking process — that is the conversation between herself and others.[2] On the one hand the disregard with which she treats others in writing demonstrates her methodology, and on the other it becomes easy fodder for undoing her work. I don't offer this as an apology for Arendt's

[1] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 91.
[2] For example with Kafka to think about time, or for Cicero to think about "the Greeks" and *thinking*.

methodology, but as an explanation of my own thought process in approaching her work and beginning the project. It would be easy to argue, for instance, that Arendt hides in the cloak of Kafka to talk about temporality and subjectivity, but I think it is more important to acknowledge her methodology and treat her argument about temporality as her own, because it is. Kafka is her interlocutor, and we can ask what has been lost in her manipulation of his work, and what has been gained. Beyond this, given that *thinking* as a conceptual category in itself plays a principal role in this work, I think it is more helpful to be an interested observer in Arendt's thinking process and see how that comes through her writing.

I began my own writing focused on the concept of loss, broadly conceived. Arendt's claim that authority and tradition have been lost to modernity seemed to point towards a loss of a more essential kind. Loss not so much as a conceptual category that could be treated in any certain sense, but loss as a form of experience that takes many forms. Loss leads to the process of mourning, which can lead to melancholia, which creates a sense of longing and absence. Each author I encountered approached loss differently. In reading Wolin, loss often means a form of attenuation or erosion, and is a claim to something like democratic powers in the Constitution or the vocation of political theory. In reading Benjamin, loss came to signify the pile of debris left at our feet by the forces of progress and historical time. For Adorno it is the rejection of return and the claim that we can no longer ask the philosophical question "What is the good life?" because the good life is no longer possible. The word 'loss' in-and-of-itself often provides a conceptual frame or starting place from which we can approach our object of consideration.

As such, there is no singular loss I am responding to, but rather a sense of loss that occupies the center of our contemporary condition. This was my suspicion, and while this is

where I began, I realized that loss is not so easy to come to terms with. Oftentimes, while I was using the word 'loss,' I was referring to a moment of crisis that was perhaps or perhaps not indicative of an experience of loss, but seemed to signify a greater cultural, or political break. Change produces losses, and we live in a society that thrives off of constant change. Or, as Wolin notes, "Perhaps, however, there is something paradigmatic left: the domination of the world by change, by changes that are, to a significant degree, premeditated, however imperfect the grasp of unintended consequences."[3] The only thing certain is that we are always losing something. This idea that the world is always changing and that we are always losing something cannot be untwined from the materiality of life. Attempts to dominate the unwieldiness of nature through *technological rationality*, or homogenous, empty time, or *the systematization of loss* signify claims to power.[4] These methodologies claim that we can somehow know the world. At the same time there is a push forward. The logical domination that enabled material domination has created this world governed by change.

Thinking about the relationship between constant change and the condition of loss lead me to Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. His critique of *petit-bourgeois* culture, knowledge, and possessive love through the philosophical language of immediacy provided a counter-point. A claim to tradition or fidelity, to any one thing over a period of time, can be seen as a form of resistance to the dominant cultural mode. Benjamin documents this in his *Arcades*, where the industrialization of Paris and the influence of capitalist culture demanded the world be run on what he calls 'homogenous, empty time.' In this spirit, the quotations I've laid out at the beginning are meant to serve as a kind of lineage. Benjamin, Adorno, and subsequently Wolin call upon us to attend to the cross-grained, to brush up against this homogenous,

[3] Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation", 15.
[4] Respectively, I am referring to Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Benjamin's conception of homogenous, empty time, and Wolin's argument that contemporary political theory has systematized loss.

empty time, to challenge the dominant cultural norms of the day. This seems especially challenging in our world today that is continuously erupting with political movements, leaving the appearance of tiny fissures which perhaps articulate new democratic boarders. This, perhaps, is a lingering reluctance. What does it mean to attend to the "cross-grained" today, where even political and social movements seem to have become part of the domination of the world by change? I'm not sure what is meant by democracy; I'm not sure that 'democracy,' as a conceptual category, hasn't entirely fallen in with the rhetoric of progress and the need for change. With these hesitations and suspicions, the question of loss became the question of political action, and how political action arose out of our historical and temporal positions in the world.

In reading, the problem of loss became the problem of the ethical turn within contemporary political theory that posits an "I" at the center of world, along with the rejection of metaphysics. I could not escape the question of moral philosophy, and so Kant is the not-so-silent interlocutor that I deal with here. The problem of loss became the problem of the ethical turn because contemporary theorists treat experiences of loss as opportunities for political action through a Freudian form of mourning. Grieving becomes a way to express political grievances, and collective traumas become opportunities for a form of left-wing action. In other words, mourning becomes a site of political promise.

I also came to loss from a general frustration with the American left, or lack thereof. Having engaged in various forms of political action, responding to the critical political events of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, I feel myself at a loss. My critique of thinkers like Judith Butler who calls for resistance or Jodi Dean who calls for communist revolution comes from a place of political sympathy — of being discontented with how things are and how they are going. How do we conceptualize new forms of political action?

Why do political theorists rely so heavily on categories like mourning and melancholy to argue for *democracy*? How do we ask these questions in a time when it is self-defeating to state the obvious facts of our political reality: September 11th, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, severe economic disparity, NSA surveillance, gun violence, rape culture, genocide, hunger, homelessness, wars, and revolutions. The list goes on and on, and it is not new. As Benjamin so eloquently wrote, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[5]

In *The Ethics* Aristotle draws a distinction between "accounting" and "offering an account."[6] We can account for what is happening - we can make lists, and treat events and ongoing political conflicts as policy problems to be solved and managed - but there's no reason to be hopeful that this will do anything. Or, we can at least try to begin to offer an account, to understand, and to think about what we are doing. Americans can "Occupy Wall Street," but as long as they are replicating the institutions of neo-liberalism they aren't going to change the system. But, it's not clear what 'change' means here either. What strikes me in reading Arendt, Adorno, Benjamin, and Wolin is a sense of metaphysical certainty, and a reading or critique of Kantian ethics that somehow draws us closer to answering these questions. Or, perhaps at the very least, will give us new frameworks for thinking about our contemporary condition.

So instead of calling for immediate action, or asking what can be done in the face of so much, this project attempts to move against the grain, turning simultaneously towards and away from the ethical turn which seems to direct current discourse in political theory. In

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[5] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 248.

[6] Aristotle writes, "Evidently, then, the irrational part of the soul also consists of two parts. The vegetative has no association at all with reason, but the desiderative and generally appetitive part does in a way participate in reason, in the sense that it is submissive and obedient to it (this is the sense of logon echein in which we speak of 'taking account' of one's father or friends, not that in which we speak of 'having an account' of mathematical propositions.'" Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 2003), 30.

doing so, I look towards those theorists that address the relationship between temporality and history, and the classic philosophical distinction between thinking and action.

In this spirit, this dissertation offers a critique of how contemporary political theorists deal with questions of loss and mourning, focusing on the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. While many contemporary thinkers focus on questions of loss and mourning in order to politicize mourning as an opportunity for democratic political action, the tradition of critical theory approaches moments of loss and mourning differently. Focusing on the works of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Sheldon Wolin, and Theodor Adorno, I explore how moments of loss and mourning can be opened up in different ways that don't give way to a form of systematization or reinforce a false sense of hope for left-wing struggles, or democracy.

INTRODUCTION

For many political theorists, the work of political theory is born from a place of loss. Loss has a rich history within the tradition of western political thought. From Thucydides' telling of Pericles' "Funeral Oration" and Plato's loss of Socrates, to contemporary reflections on sovereignty and rights, theorists have laid claim to loss as a political concept. Peter Euben writes, "I want to argue that while philosophy may begin in wonder that things are the way they are (Aristotle), or may be a preparation for death (Plato), or the acceptance of finitude, much political theory begins with loss. Loss animates it as an enterprise and forms its problematic."[7] At the outset of *The Presence of the Past*, Sheldon Wolin tells us that his work is "in one way or another . . . concerned with a particular kind of loss, the loss of democratic values, the constriction of democratic hopes, the attenuation of the democratic element in institutions not otherwise conspicuous in their constraint to democratic ends."[8] In "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political" Wolin writes: "The loss of the political [which is the orientating experience governing Arendt's entire project] is a clue to its nature: it is a mode of experience rather than a comprehensive institution such as the state. The thing about experience is that we can lose it and the thing about political experience is that we are always losing it and having to recover it."[9] For these thinkers, and many others, loss does not so much become a theme or central concept as a place or disposition from which their inquiry begins.[10] The losing of something, or the apparent loss of something or someone, is a form of experience that shares an intimacy with the act of thinking and the

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[7] Peter Euben, *Vocations Of Political Theory*, (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2000), 61.
[8] Sheldon S. Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 4.
[9] Sheldon Wolin, "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political," 1983.
[10] In the brief essay "Evening Land" on Wolin and Theodor Adorno, Anne Norton writes: " [t]he practice of democracy is the practice of loss." She later amends her claim to read, "[d]emocracy, then, is the long practice of loss, practical discipline in the being toward death."

practice of theory. For others, loss becomes an object, detached from experience, and something that can be used to reach political ends.

The Promise of Mourning in Contemporary Theory

Within contemporary political theory there is a predominant trend towards thinking about loss as 'that which we lose.' Loss in this way most often takes on the work of mourning — a working through of lost loved-objects. How do we treat moments of loss? In Freudian terms we can either turn to mourning or melancholia from a place of loss. Mourning requires reattachment to new love-objects in the world, whereas melancholia rejects or cannot form (new) attachments. Because processes of mourning require new attachments, mourning opens up space and requires reattachment, it requires having a form of hope in the world and future. Understood in this way, loss as a kind of break becomes the impetus for a means to political action, the discovery of new humanisms in *Antigone*, an opening of space for democratic opportunities after 9/11, a site for political resistance after the Financial Collapse of 2008. It is something to be recognized and taken advantage of, memorialized and reflected upon; it is a space that can be opened up. This idiosyncratic understanding of loss that reduces Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia into a useful conceptual framework dominates contemporary discourse. Perhaps this is a product of our methodological inclinations as political thinkers to think through themes, or our reliance upon conceptual categories and divisions to approach problems. Perhaps it is more skeptically what Sheldon Wolin calls the "systematization of loss," where theorists take to moments of loss like ambulance chasers to crime scenes. These are not losses that are understood politically, but rather losses rendered as politics.

Loss and experiences of loss are not necessarily political. In trying to understand or comprehend the experiences of the past century—wars, revolutions, genocides, terrorism, HIV/AIDs—contemporary political theorists have rendered these events as political losses that need to be worked through. The transformation of experiences of loss into spaces for politics or political action illustrates the ethical and aesthetic turn in political theory. For example, Judith Butler's reading of American politics post-9/11, or Jodi Dean's idea of communism and the Occupy Movement conceptualize moments of collective loss and crisis like 9/11 and the Financial Collapse of 2008 as an opening of space for radical political action. These renderings emphasize loss as the loss *of something*, which then leaves space for something new for us to attach to and hope for. What is not asked is whether or not these losses are real to begin with. In "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud emphasizes that the losses we experience might be real and or imaginary, but either way we move through the process of mourning. So, reading political events as losses creates a framework that demands mourning and reattachment, or in political terms, action. It seems obviously questionable that such events might be thought through in these terms of loss, but this methodological impulse allows us to speak to the affective experience of such collective events, and render from them something that can be utilized for political purposes.

Thinking about collective economic or political crisis, the lost love-object appears to be a form of rupture or break that opens up space for thinking about the institutions and conditions that govern daily life. This loss doesn't really seem to be loss at all, except that we talk about it in familiar terms, something has been eroded or taken away, or we're made to feel like or believe we've lost something. In some respects this is true. In the event of the financial crisis, these conceptual losses translated into very real losses — the loss of homes, retirement plans, communities, and so on. If we're going to think about it this way, though,

the supposed democratic losses, seemed to have already occurred — the privatization of public institutions, the creation of an "economic polity" (to use Wolin's phrasing). Our attendance to these losses seems a little too late.

Many contemporary political theorists who approach questions of loss and mourning use Freud's dichotomy between mourning and melancholia in order to talk about democratic political action. The Freudian framework demands reattachment to the world, which means that we can lose and re-attach to as many objects as we like, but we are never actually changing our framework for thinking about the world, or for approaching the world in a way that is guided by principles of historical materialism and so critical of the way things are. Mourning and melancholia in these terms are restricted to a delimited Freudian frame that appears to not only be a misreading of Freud, but more problematically a foreclosure of other and perhaps more interesting ways of thinking about loss, mourning, and melancholia in relationship to politics. The promise of mourning is a kind of political hope that sees opportunity in moments of political crisis that are called to our attention.

For theorists like Judith Butler reading *Antigone*, mourning is seen as an opportunity to retrieve or claim democratic goods that have been lost in struggles of power. The primary problem with this model of democratic mourning, however, is that it presupposes that one can re-attach to some form of original loved-object that has been lost without considering the possibility that these objects were real, or in what ways they might have existed. Or, whether or not they are desirable in the first place. Wolin is not exempt from this problematic either: for him it is the attenuation of democracy, it is the sense of collectivity in politics.[11] The question that we must ask is: Did the loved-object ever exist? Did democracy ever exist? Or equality? And so on. The lost loved-object in the case of contemporary

[11] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, 1.

political theory is the claim to democratic goods. If we assume that it did exist then at best we are only re-attaching ourselves to an idealized notion of something that is no longer what we desire to bring forth into the present. This is not mourning at all, it is a form of melancholia. It is what Walter Benjamin described as the melancholic form, those once rich political concepts that we hold on to, but have lost all content.[12]

Butler's argument for democratic mourning rests on the claim that Freud "softened the distinction between the states of grief and melancholia." In *Precarious Life*, Butler writes "he (Freud) suggested that successful mourning meant being able to exchange one object for another; he later claimed that incorporation, originally associated with melancholia, was essential to the task of mourning." Freud's earlier claim that attachment might be formed anew implied a "certain interchangeability of objects as a sign of hopefulness."[13] Butler is not wrong in her reading of mourning, citing Freud's movement between "Mourning and Melancholia" and his later work in *The Ego and The Id,* but her conflation of mourning with melancholia is misplaced. Instead of thinking about melancholia as a rich mental state that enables thinking, reflection, the work of memory, and ultimately mourning, Butler places melancholy within the work of mourning as an aggressive state that needs to be overcome.

In making this claim, Butler dismisses melancholia as a pathological form of mourning, as a kind of "uncompleted grief." Butler's account of "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Psychic Life of Power* and *Antigone's Claim* stretches Freud's distinction to consider the original lost loved-object, to think about what she calls "gender melancholy." For Butler, melancholia is understood as an inability to mourn. She offers the example of AIDS in the nineties and the inability to publicly grieve the seemingly endless loss of life. In

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[12] Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005), 423–27.
[13] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), 20–21.

The Psychic Life of Power, she turns towards Melanie Klein's work to buttress her reading, but fails to acknowledge the dynamic relationship between the two states, which are given weight by both Freud and Klein. Using Klein, Butler argues that "melancholy is the limit of the subject's sense of power," and causes a rift in subjectivity. The claim that melancholy as a form of uncompleted grief causes a split in the subjective consciousness is a misreading of both Freud and Klein. Melancholy doesn't cause the "rift" it is a symptom of the already fragmented subject. This is more apparent in Klein than it is in Freud, who argues that the original loss, which causes dissociation from the bad loved-objects, can never be mourned. The individual with no good attachments is forever condemned to a fractured existence hence the title *Psychogenesis of Manic-depressive States.* In returning to the work of mourning, Freud continually seeks to better understand the melancholic state. Freud identifies melancholy as part of the work of mourning, acknowledging that mourning does not cease as he claimed in his early work, and he doesn't subsume melancholia within mourning. Mourning is a continual and persistent state that is characterized by melancholia; it is not a process with a clear end. As a result the lost loved-object is not released from the subject's psyche, and instead is incorporated and preserved in the mourner.[14]

There is a clear drive to hold mourning over melancholia in contemporary theory because melancholia is still considered a pathological affect. Butler goes so far as to say that the "socially instituted foreclosure of the intelligible" political institution's unwillingness to offer recognition through speech and acts is "socially instituted melancholia." She likens the melancholic state itself to Antigone's tomb.[15] For Butler melancholy is not a viable political state, it is one that illustrates political oppression and is posed counter to the promise of

[14] Derrida and Kierkegaard, whom Derrida draws from, attain to a similar understanding of mourning. See: *The Work of Mourning, The Gift of Death*, and *The Work of Love*.
[15] Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 80–81.

what she sees as the democratic work of mourning. Mourning and melancholy are drawn together only insofar as we try to move from melancholia to mourning, and in Butler's work, from specific instances of mourning to what Stephen K. White calls a "persisting disposition, within which one attends more consciously to the kind of being one is."[16] The emphasis on mourning over melancholy is telling. The perceived pathological state of melancholy is seen as something to be overcome through its productive counterpart mourning. Melancholy is seen as the destructive, aggressive part of the process of mourning, which offers reconciliation and reparation. What world is it that we seek to be recognized by? What are we trying to repair? Is it not the state of things as they are? Is it not the vision of utopia that Wolin fears we have fallen into lock step with?

In a similar vein, Wendy Brown's essay "Resisting Left-Melancholia," works through Freud's essay via Walter Benjamin's "Left Wing Melancholy." Brown almost steps away from the idealization of mourning in her reflection on left wing politics in America, but she too calls for another form in arguing for a rich political vision of the future. Contrary to Butler, for Brown hope manifests as the ability to re-attach oneself to a new loved-object altogether, but one that still attains to an existent conception of democratic politics. Citing Freud she argues that meditation on melancholia represents a loss of a more ideal kind than mourning, where the object has not necessarily died, but has been lost as an object of love. She further reiterates Freud's argument that we will often not know what has been precisely loved about the lost object, but that it is part of the subject transposing the love of the object onto oneself, and then losing it.[17] Brown argues that the collective losses of the left — without a viable political alternative to the capitalist system, and without a conviction of truth about the social order and a "rich moral political vision" to guide and sustain political

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[16] Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 102.
[17] Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 19–27.

work — have left us in a state of disorder, lost without a way of life and course of pursuits. Brown's conceptualization is politically problematic, because to say that we must have a visible alternative to capitalist politics charged with a rich moral vision is to reinstall through lamentation the same formula of hope that has left left-activists where they are while calling for a collective *ethos* to action. She forgoes Freud's later work on mourning altogether, and suggests that we must look back in some new way and find what else was left behind without asking whether these losses are real, what we lost, and who has suffered the loss. Instead Brown asks, "Now our challenge would be to figure out who or what is this substitutive object. What do we hate that we might preserve the idealization of that romantic left promise? What do we punish that we might save the old guarantees of the Left from our wrathful disappointment?"[18] These questions are misguided and are representative of her framing of citizenship and resistance in the language of hatred and injury. Instead of asking what the present looks like, Brown returns us to the question: What will the new love-object appear as? whereas Butler's question at least asks how mourning enable solidarity and empower political action.

Tom Dumm, contrary to Brown, turns back towards Wolin's invocation of Adorno — arguing that memorializing the past does not necessarily mean dwelling on it. Rather, it is possible in the daily life of politics to carry the past with us while reconsidering it. The space between past and present, which Wolin argues is compressed by time, Dumm sees as an opportunity for political theory to do the work of mourning while not turning away from melancholy altogether. "The turn towards the world from a place of loss is the turn towards politics, towards constructing common and uncommon spaces of agnostic exchange and misunderstanding, of revelation and projection, of new coinages and destructions, partial and

[18] Ibid., 22.

fragmentary, neither utopian nor dystopian, but, as Wolin to seems to suggest, and Emerson would endorse, encompassing both."[19] This is consistent with Freud's own expansion on the states of mourning and melancholy, and it does not entirely foreclose the importance of melancholy. For those who experience a loss of a more profound kind, as Freud later realized, mourning never ceases. It is tempered through the passage of time and the reattachment to new loved-object, but the gap created by the original lost loved-object is only ever filled by others. The persistence of mourning is a form of melancholia; it is the persistence of the trace of the lost loved-object that can never fully be lost. The aggressive tendencies of melancholy that present during stages of mourning, that engage the destructive impulse and could lead to suicide, eventually subside. The individual is able to attach to new loved-object, but not without the trace of the other, and in some cases not without the narcissistic impulse that can drive individuals to attach to others in the first place. That is, attach in a way that allows us to see the other as another, as opposed to as an extension of oneself.

On the other hand, for Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin loss is a question framed within the language of temporality and history. It's not simply a recovery of something that has been lost — to violence, to the world, to the passage of time — but rather an ontological imperative that shapes the way we conceive the world as it is, what it has become, and how it might be. The drive towards making sense of human experience and actions through reason and a form of moralized ethics leads us towards a faulty ontological device that masks moments of loss and mourning with a process of systematization by focusing on action. This faulty logic tells us that moments of collective loss like The Holocaust, for instance, are knowable in a way that allow us to believe we've mastered history and move forward justly

[19] Thomas Dumm, "Political Theory for Losers," in *Vocations Of Political Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2000), 161.

or democratically. This reasoning is the result of a conflation between morality and ethics that pushes us towards a superficial understanding of historical events and lived experiences by pushing us past them, assuming a shallow understanding that forces one to ask: "What can I do?" Many thinkers have paradoxically turned to a moralized ethical frame, which calls for some form of political action, imposing the same rational logic that enabled such events to occur in the first place. At the end of *On Totalitarianism*, when Arendt turns to the concept of loneliness to understand the rise of Third Reich, she captures the totalizing effect loss can have upon an individual, a community, a country. Loss and mourning are provocative conceptual categories to contemporary theorists, because they offer the illusion of intimacy through the construction of community, erasing the loneliness or individuating sentiments that we often associate with them.

In contrast to much of the work being done around loss which focuses on democratic political action, in the chapters that follow I turn to the works of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Sheldon Wolin, and Theodor Adorno to argue that experiences of loss do not necessarily open up space for democratic political action, nor should they. My work turns towards the tradition of critical theory in order to emphasize the need for contemplation and thinking, while questioning what is meant by democratic political action. I argue that moments of individual and collective loss historically have not opened up space for democratic resistance, but rather are utilized by institutions of power to maximize sovereign authority. The tradition of critical theory that informs my work illustrates how loss, mourning, and melancholia can be utilized conceptually to critique normative narratives around loss and mourning.

Chapter one focuses on the work of Hannah Arendt. While Arendtian scholars have focused on Arendt as a theorist of beginnings, natality, promise, and forgiveness, I argue that

her work is primarily concerned with loss. For Arendt, a radical form of loss that she conceptualizes as worldly alienation defines modernity. This form of loss reflects several elements in the development of postmodernity. The first is the loss of tradition, which for Arendt was preceded by the breakdown between language and thought, as she lays out in the beginning of *The Human Condition*. With the loss of tradition came the loss of authority. In a lecture on the history of political theory delivered in 1955 Arendt said, "The thread of tradition is broken. And in this field of theory, there can be no authority without tradition." She argues, "The breakdown came about in stages, but really in the political sense only with the appearance of totalitarian regimes."[20] For Arendt there is a direct relationship between the two-fold loss of tradition and authority within the modern world, and the work of doing political theory.

Central to Arendt's conceptualization of totalitarianism is a discussion of the functionality of despair and hope in response to the losses that occurred during the Second World War. This language of despair and hope is found throughout Arendt's writings, beginning with her early work on the Jewish question in the 1940s. Arendt understood the condition of despair to be at the root of both political theory and totalitarianism.

In thinking about the future of political resistance, Arendt turns towards the works of Franz Kafka and the French poet René Char in order to conceptualize the spirit of resistance in what she terms the lost treasure of the revolution. Her reflections on resistance, time, and the loss of tradition in modernity turn us towards the breakdown between language and thought, which Arendt returned to throughout her career. Here we see her conceptualizing the Gap-Space, which represents a radical break with the tradition of linear temporality in order to think about how we might repair the loss of authenticity that accompanied the rise

[20] Hannah Arendt, "The History of Political Theory" (LOC Archives), 1955.

of fascist authority and modernity. Her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* further illustrate the relationship between the Gap-Space and a form of present politics, which refuses both modernity's futurism and the moralization of ethics by turning towards what she calls *critical thinking*.

In Chapter two I turn from the work of Hannah Arendt to the writings of Walter Benjamin. In this chapter I explore Benjamin's conceptions of history and time through his discussion of *Trauerspiel* and sovereignty. Turning to Benjamin's essays "Theses on The Philosophy of History", *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, and his reflections in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, I examine how he helps us to think about the relationship between our understanding of history, a critical temporality, and the politics of mourning. Moving to Benjamin's conception of Messianic time in his works on history, we see an alternative understanding of loss and mourning open up, which is bound to his understanding of historical materialism and historicity.

Benjamin's refusal to accept a linear temporality offers a counter-argument to contemporary theory's politicized mourning, which relies upon a Freudian notion of mourning and linear progression. Benjamin's work dismembers this constellation, and while Adorno might have seen this as a move motivated by materialism, for Benjamin it was a rejection of time's order and the march of progress. It is also a critique of crude Marxian methods, which willfully accepted narratives of progress while ignoring humankind's decent into barbarism. For Benjamin the question wasn't one of mourning or moving past loss, it was one of redemption.

Chapter three offers a reading of Sheldon Wolin and his turn towards Theodor Adorno. Wolin offers a different perspective on the relationship between loss and political theory in turning towards Adorno's *Minima Moralia*.

Instead of calling for a new form of resistance or political action, Wolin turns us towards Adorno's *Minima Moralia* in order to invoke or re-call the theorist back to the vocation of political theory as a historically grounded practice, emphasizing the need for a critical vantage point, while calling attention to systemic political problems as opposed to technical ones. "Invocation" he writes, "is vocation's conscience recalling it to the cross-grained." Wolin's argument implies that something has been lost, that the world has been diminished in some way and he is unsure as to whether or not we can reclaim the vocation of political theory. Wolin's understanding of invocation is akin to Adorno's understanding of melancholia in *Minima Moralia*, which refuses what he calls a "vain hope" for redemption. In this way, Wolin and Adorno allow us to break apart the constructed relationship between mourning and melancholia.

In the conclusion, I will return to the problem of the ethical turn within contemporary political theory, exploring how this reading of loss and mourning in relation to politics affects the way contemporary political theorists think about questions of political action. In no way is this meant to be a conclusive study of loss or mourning in contemporary political theory. There are many primary and secondary authors I have been unable to address. I am working with a small segment of the ethical turn in contemporary political theory, which remains absently present.

CHAPTER I

HANNAH ARENDT: LOSS AND TOTALITARIANISM

> Human history knows no story more difficult to tell. The monstrous equality in innocence that is its inevitable leitmotif destroys the very basis on which history is produced — which is, namely our capacity to comprehend an event no matter how distant we are from it.
>
> — Hannah Arendt

> There can be little doubt that the experience of the loss of what was most familiar to her lay close to the root of what later became central to her understanding of the political: her sharp, firm, unwavering distinction between the private and the public realms of human existence.
>
> — Jerome Kohn

In this chapter I explore why we should resist the urge to focus on Arendt as a theorist of democratic political action, and instead turn to her as a theorist of loss in order to see how experiences of loss can open up space for critical thinking and understanding. Arendt's work turns from the experiences of The Holocaust to a place of critical thinking and present politics that asks us to reckon with the losses of the twentieth century. While many contemporary theorists have recognized the significance of the losses experienced in the twentieth century, and have tried to deal with the fall-out of the twentieth, many conceptualize loss as an opportunity for democratic political action. The desire to find a space for democratic political action during and after moments of loss and crisis illustrate a desire to get past loss and move forward. This desire to get past, as we will see in Arendt's writing on *Thinking* and her lectures on Kant, is part of the philosophical turn towards futurist thinking, which relies upon a kind of mastery of history and moralization of ethics.

Introduction

Hannah Arendt is usually characterized as a theorist concerned with the public sphere and political action. A stringent divide between public and private drives much of her work; and yet, there is a dimension to her work, an undercurrent that is concerned with the

problem of loss. It is out of the experiences of loss in the twentieth century that Arendt's first major themes as a political theorist emerges, addressing the Jewish Question at the onset of World War Two. It is from the experience of totalitarianism that Arendt begins to conceptualize what she thinks is a necessary framework for understanding the terror of The Holocaust. Arendt did not draw an explicit connection between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, but there can be little doubt that she was directly addressing the horrors of the twentieth century in both works. In order to offer an account of the rise of totalitarianism, modernity, and the human condition Arendt moved from a place of loss to the relationship between thinking and action in order to develop a conceptual framework for understanding that relies upon strict divisions between the public, private, and social spheres.[21]

While some have tried to explicate the relationship between Arendt's earlier works on The Holocaust that directly deal with loss and totalitarianism, others have focused on her later more developed works which rely upon these conceptual divisions between public, private, and social. In recent years many have turned away from Arendt as a critic of modernity and theorist of the twentieth century to think about how her theoretical categories of natality, the public sphere, plurality, promise, and political action might be applicable to democratic politics. For example, in Bonnie Honig's reading of *On Revolution* she concludes that Arendt "theorizes a powerful and suggestive practice of political authority for modernity, a practice that is uniquely activist and appropriate for a democratic politics."[22]

[21] The closest Arendt comes to relating *The Human Condition* to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* comes at the end of in "The Vita Activa and the Modern Age." Here she reiterates her line of reasoning from imperialism to totalitarianism, describing modern worldly alienation. Arendt argues that "The German example shows very clearly that under modern conditions the expropriation of people, the destruction of objects, and the devastation of cities will turn out to be a radical stimulant for a process, not of mere recovery, but of a quicker and more efficient accumulation of wealth…"[21]

[22] B. Honig, "Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic," *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (March 1, 1991): 97.

She writes, "Arendt is ambivalent about the disappearance of authority in modernity. On the one hand, it marks the restoration of the world to humanity, the recovery of human worldliness, and new possibilities of innovative political action. On the other hand, it leaves the modern world bereft of the very things that once secured the foundation and longevity of the Roman republic: tradition, religion, and authority."[23] Honig's formulation illustrates the contemporary attempt to render Arendt as a theorist of democratic political action, while at the same time criticizing her work for being too nostalgic. Honig focuses on plurality and the performative qualities of speech and action that Arendt outlines in *The Human Condition* without considering the ways in which Arendt develops these concepts against totalitarian practices. Upholding Arendt's conception of plurality and heroic action to argue for a kind of democratic politics ignores the specific set of historical conditions that Arendt is responding to. The focus on the promise of democratic politics also ignores Arendt's arguments in *The Life of the Mind* and her lectures on Kant, which argue the publicity of action is problematic because it conflates the public and private sphere. Honig is right to focus on the critique of authority in politics in the context of founding, as Arendt makes clear her own frustration with living in a secular world, which lacks authority; but for Arendt this loss of authority indicates the metaphysical breakdown of the modern world, as well as a the loss of moral terms by which we can act as democratic citizens in the first place. Arendt emphasizes critical thinking as a form of political action, because she understands the collapse between thinking and action in philosophical terms as the reason for the emergence of Nazi ideology and ensuing mass participation. It is the absence of thinking, *Denklosigkeit*, which allowed for the loss of authority and tradition to occur in the first place.

[23]Ibid., 98.

Consequentially, political action is not synonymous with mass politics or protest politics for Arendt. As Jeffrey Isaac argues in "Oasis in the Desert" Arendt's argument in *On Revolution* points us towards a more "vigorous" conception of political action. Vigorous, in Isaac's terms, becomes a misnomer for critical thinking, meant to further separate political action from unthinking mass political action.[24] While Isaac tries to save Arendt as a democrat, he also recognizes the "deep tension between mass behavior and meaningful citizenship" in Arendt's writing.[25] Arendt's resistance to mass political behavior was a direct reflection of her philosophical resistance to totalitarian ideology. For Arendt, the totalitarian ideology deployed by the Nazi party helped to invent mass political behavior. Mass political thinking became synonymous with Nazi politics. In "Tradition and the Modern Age" Arendt writes, "[h]owever, neither the twentieth century aftermath nor the nineteenth century rebellion against tradition actually caused the break in our history. This sprang from a chaos of mass-perplexities on the political scene and of the mass-opinions in the spiritual sphere, which the totalitarian movements, through terror and ideology, crystalized into a new form of government and domination."[26] The collapse of tradition and authority, which is so

[24] Another prominent place this critique is featured in Arendt's work is *Crisis in the Republic*, where she criticizes the American protest movement.

[25] Jeffrey Issac, "Oasis in the Desert," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 157. Isaac focuses on Arendt's appraisal of the New England town councils. Isaac writes: "Tragically, these political forms did not-perhaps could not last." This is tragic because, as Arendt insists, 'whenever knowing and doing part company freedom is lost.' The councils incarnated a vigorous, participatory, and egalitarian politics. The represented 'a new form of government that would permit every member of the modern egalitarian society to become a 'participator' in public affairs.'"

[26] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 26. Arendt goes on to draw out the relationship between action and Nazi ideology: "Totalitarian domination as an established fact, which in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought, and whose 'crimes' cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization, has broken the continuity of Occidental history. The break in our tradition is now an accomplished fact. It is neither the result of anyone's deliberate choice nor subject to further decision."

essential to Arendt's conception of totalitarian loss, was directly related to the way Nazi ideology operated in society.[27]

In situating Arendt's historical analysis Jerome Kohn writes "[i]t is only in the present dimension of time — that which lies between past and future, between what has already happened and what has yet to come — that freedom and the priority of the political for the human world fully emerge in Arendt's thought."[28] Arendt turned to write about freedom and "the priority of the political" in the world only after the emergence of totalitarianism. In order to think through what was happening, Arendt had to re-shape the political theoretical frameworks of understanding, so that theory in itself and the world of thinking could act critically. The space between past and future, where understanding is possible, represented an opportunity for critical thinking as political action for Arendt. This form of present politics, however, required a new theoretical framework, which was capable of addressing the contemporary condition.

In this way, Kohn situates Arendt's conception of political freedom in *The Human Condition* alongside her account of totalitarianism. The categories that Arendt presents us with in *The Human Condition* like labor, work, and action, represent the "human world" as

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[27] In "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism", Margaret Canovan traces Arendt's argument from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the development of totalitarianism as a concept in the twentieth century. Canovan conflates Arendt's problem of finding a theoretical framework for understanding totalitarianism and her conception of beginning anew. She writes, quoting Arendt, "'Everything we know of totalitarianism demonstrates a horrible originality . . . . its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions . . .' In other words, totalitarianism illustrated the human capacity to *begin*, that power to think and act in ways that are new, contingent, and unpredictable that looms so large in her mature political theory." While Arendt does struggle with the concept of beginning anew in some of her early reflections on totalitarianism, she does not use the language Canovan is imposing upon her thinking about the newness of totalitarianism itself. Arendt mostly speaks of beginning anew in terms of natality, reflecting upon the fact that individuals were murdered for simply having been born Jewish. Totalitarianism is a new phenomenon, for Arendt, but that does not relate to her conception of action or *beginning*. What is so problematic about the emergence of totalitarianism is the absolute destructive power of Nazi ideology that belonged to no philosophical tradition, and possessed no form of utilitarian logic. The phenomenal quality of Nazi ideology meant that we needed to develop new categories of understanding in order to account for the Holocaust historically. Margaret Canovan, "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27.

[28] Dana Villa, *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 113.

opposed to the "inhuman world of totalitarianism."[29] The categories that Arendt conceptualizes represent the divisions between the different spheres of life in which we move. The inhuman world of totalitarianism was characterized by the loss of movement, the ability to appear in the world, and the complete isolation of individuals from one another and society, so freedom had to be defined by the re-institution of political divisions. The lines drawn between the spheres of life were so forcefully guarded in Arendt's work because they represented the capacity for movement, which signified freedom. The lines between social, public, and private make the world a dynamic place, as opposed to a singular static reality where all are reduced to one. In other words, when and where we see the boundaries between public, social, and private collapsing we should be wary, according to Arendt. The spheres of life we go between enable us to move, and when they collapse in upon each other, we have nowhere left to go. If movement is the mark of democracy, and boundaries enable movement, we should safeguard the lines of demarcation.

In "Arendt and the Holocaust", Mary Dietz takes up Arendt's question "What does it mean to comprehend what is historically incomprehensible?" in order to illustrate the relationship between totalitarianism and *The Human Condition*. The unprecedented collapse of tradition and authority that Arendt observes poses a theoretical and a political problem for understanding what happened. Dietz cites Arendt's correspondence with Eric Voeglin where she asks "how to write historically about something — totalitarianism — which I did not want to conserve but on the contrary felt engaged to destroy."[30] Dietz argues the task of comprehending The Holocaust posed at least two problems of thinking for Arendt. The first, historiography, "led Arendt to criticize the standard approaches of the social sciences as

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[29] *Ibid., 126.*
[30] Mary Dietz, "Arendt and the Holocaust," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 87–88.

well as political theoretical frameworks . . ."[31] The second problem Arendt faces was how "we move from what we know of the event to how to remember it."[32] Dietz's understanding of the twofold problem Arendt faced in her work creates an obvious divide between Arendt's early accounts of The Holocaust and her later, political theoretical work which deals more directly with comprehension, remembering, and thinking. The factual reality of The Holocaust is easy enough to state as Arendt herself demonstrates, but it is far more difficult to comprehend and remember. In Arendt's 1946 review of *The Black Book* "The Image of Hell" she writes: "The facts are: that six million Jews, six million human beings, were helplessly, and in most cases unsuspectingly, dragged to their deaths."[33] She goes on to lay out the linear and systematic terror and murder of the Jewish people in order to demonstrate how facts are not enough for understanding. The story in itself is not enough either, and so neither the historians nor the logicians can make sense of what Arendt saw as an entirely new phenomenon in the world.

In order to begin to comprehend what had happened Arendt turned to a theoretical form of understanding the world in *The Human Condition*. The totalitarian destruction of all pre-existing tradition and authority, which lead led to the complete collapse of the social and public spheres of life, left the world in an abyss of wreckage. Arendt wrote "[a]fter Auschwitz, the space one occupies if one 'pulls back' from the abyss is 'an empty space where there are no longer nations and peoples but only individuals,' in a way that leaves the

[31] Ibid., 88.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Hannah Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York, N.Y.: Schocken, 2005), 198.

factual territory behind and national pasts surmounted . . ."[34] Arendt's account in *The Human Condition* is an attempt to offer a political conceptualization back from the abyss.[35]

I. The Loss of Tradition and Authority

> "...The institution of concentration and extermination camps, that is, the social conditions within them as well as their function in the larger terror apparatus to totalitarian regimes, may very likely become that unexpected phenomenon, that stumbling block on the road toward the proper understanding of contemporary politics and society which must cause social scientists and historical scholars to reconsider their hitherto unquestioned fundamental preconceptions regarding the course of the world and human behavior."
>
> — Hannah Arendt

For Arendt, loss is a manifold concept that encompasses the material losses of life from the loss of home, to the death of loved ones, to the loss of the world, or the loss of traditions that offer continuity in social and political life. She uses the word loss in a variety of contexts: polemically, sincerely, and descriptively. The word itself is not a conceptual category for Arendt, but it is used to signal the collapse of something that no longer exists, some piece of life taken away by totalitarian force.[36] In order to begin to think about Arendt as a theorist of loss, we must turn to her work on the two-fold loss of tradition and authority in modernity. Although Arendt wrote essays directly addressing the conceptual losses of

[34] Dietz, "Arendt and the Holocaust," 89.
[35] In a similar vein to Dietz and Kohn, Lisa Disch focuses on Arendt's undefined concept of the storyteller, in "Storytelling as Critical Understanding". Here, Disch argues that in order to facilitate the process of understanding what happened, Arendt turns to the art of storytelling as a model for critical understanding that lies beyond historical narrative and wholly outside the methodologically driven frameworks of some social science. Disch works to make clear the relationship between Arendt's early and under-read writings on the Holocaust that grapples with the problem of understanding the phenomenon of totalitarianism. The a priori assumptions of social science techniques regarding human behavior, and the utilitarian logic that governed how theoretical frameworks were applied to individual actions and institutions, were simply not fit for comprehending the Holocaust.
[36] For example: "For the Jews the destruction of the content of history means the loss of all historical ties…" Hannah Arendt, "The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question," in *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken, 2008), 15.

tradition and authority in *Between Past and Future*, it is necessary to look back to her contextualized accounts of this twofold loss from her earlier work.

In several of Arendt's early works she argues that we need to think of new frames for understanding The Holocaust, because our traditional categories of understanding are not adequate. Nazi ideology overturned all pre-existing frameworks of understanding and tradition, challenging our moral and ethical systems of thought to reach beyond conceptions of right or wrong, good or evil. In 1945, Arendt wrote "Approaches to the 'German Problem'", which explores how Nazi propaganda turned to the "playground of history", in order to destroy all preceding traditions. For Arendt, Nazism marked the negation of tradition in the modern world. "Ideologically speaking," she writes, "Nazism begins with no traditional basis at all, and it would be better to realize the danger of this radical negation of tradition, which was the main feature of Nazism from the beginning."[37] The negation of tradition created space for the Nazi party to emerge in Europe, causing the "instantaneous breakdown" of all existing social and political structures.[38] The Nazi party only claimed a philosophical tradition insofar as they could turn to it in order to justify or give logic to their own propaganda.

Although the loss of tradition and authority are more theoretical in nature, they opened up the necessary space for material losses to occur. The social stigma, laws, and forced emigration that followed from the Nazis' rise to power led to the collapse of the social sphere. For Arendt, this collapse of the social sphere signifies the loss of humanity, erasing the boundaries between public and private life.

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[37] Hannah Arendt, "Approaches to the German Problem," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York, N.Y.: Schocken, 2005), 108.
[38] Ibid., 111.

The Nazi party's propaganda simultaneously appealed to the philosophical traditions of the nineteenth century and the nostalgia for nationalism during the First World War while negating them. Given the economic, social, and political reality of Germany after WWI, the Nazi party transformed the ideology of nihilism from the "quiet realm of mere negation" to the "intoxication of destruction as an actual experience."[39] Here, Arendt exposes the space between the tradition of nihilism as an emergent philosophy in the German tradition and the Nazi party's utilization of this language to appeal to a sense of destruction. "When the Nazis appealed to the famous *Fronterlebnis*, they not only aroused memories of the *Volksgemeinsschaft* of the trenches, but even more sweet recollections of a time of extraordinary activity and power of destruction enjoyed by the individual."[40] The appeal of solidarity in society through nostalgia became a dangerous vehicle for political organization. The Nazis played to the people who had fought in the trenches of WWI and their memories of belonging to something extraordinary, along with their capacity for destruction as a form of collective political action. The element of total destruction inherent in Nazi ideology meant that we could no longer apply our usual, utilitarian, moral categories. Arendt writes, "[i]ts current application to politics, by no means a monopoly of totalitarian thinking, indicates a profound crisis in applying our usual standards of right and wrong."[41]

For Arendt, the Nazis' utilization of nostalgia as a political instrument to enlist men and women to their cause was built upon nothing. In addition to being built upon nothing, it also opened the door for a new form of neoconservative politics. In "The Eggs Speak Up" Arendt argues that it is one thing to love the past and revere the dead, but quite another to

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[39] Ibid., 110.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Hannah Arendt, "The Eggs Speak Up," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York, N.Y.: Schocken, 2005), 283.

"pretend that the past is alive in the sense that it is in our power to return to it."[42] The question in this essay unasked but at hand is: How is one supposed to return to the silence of good and normalcy in political and social life? Arendt observes that the silence of normalcy is actually much more difficult to withstand than the chaos of crisis. She writes "it is much harder not to lose one's head in our century during the periods of quiet and seemingly normalcy than to keep one's head during the panic of catastrophes." The brief silences of a century so filled with war and violence, were only testament to the story Arendt was trying to tell.[43]

In this vein, neo-conservatism only came into existence when the traditions and customs began to crumble away because of Nazi ideology. Conservatism, she writes "has always maintained the superiority of silent customs and inarticulate tradition in political life over programs, ideas, and formulae."[44] This form of conservatism that finds solace in the sentiment of nostalgia is seeking to escape from reality. The German Problem, as Arendt defines it, is the wish to move past what happened and not come to terms with it, let alone understand the condition of the present informed by the past — to recall only that time before the war, or look to the time when Germany will be forgotten by the next war. This form of absent memory was very politically troublesome for Arendt. She writes, "Watching the Germans busily stumble through the ruins of a thousand years of their own history, shrugging their shoulders at the destroyed landmarks or resentful when reminded of the deeds of horror that haunt the surrounding world, one comes to realize that busyness has become their chief defense against reality. And one wants to cry out: But this is not real —

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Arendt writes, "The emergence of ex-radical or communists as conservatives after the war," she argues, were "attempts at over-shouting the threatening silence that reveals itself the very moment we look tot he past for advice in our present situation." Ibid., 282–283.

[44] Ibid. Neo-conservatism is my word here. Arendt writes "conservatism", but she is inflecting it with elements of what has become neo-conservatism.

real are the ruins, real are the past horrors, real are the dead whom you have forgotten."[45] Arendt was troubled by the busyness she observed, which appeared to ignore what had happened. "Tradition and the past are not the same." Arendt argues that tradition guides us through the past, and what is "worth remembering." In order to understand what happened, the recent past could not be ignored.[46]

The philosophical break with tradition that Arendt observes with the emergence of Nazi ideology made it impossible to understand what had happened. Nazi terror broke down all existing semblances of reality, which created a twofold challenge: to return to the reality of politics on one hand, and find a way to offer an understanding of what happened on the other. In Arendt's 1946 essay, "The Image of Hell", she writes that "From innocence beyond virtue and guilt beyond vice, from a hell where all Jews were of necessity angelic and all Germans diabolical, we must return to the reality of politics."[47] In the same stroke, Arendt writes that "The story in itself can yield nothing but sorrow and despair", arguing that we must move beyond the telling of what happened towards a critical understanding of how and why this form of terror was able to emerge and operate.

The often polemical language deployed by Arendt in her early account of The Holocaust demonstrates the problem of understanding that she is struggling with. In "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule", written in 1950 Arendt writes:

> The melancholy story of postwar Germany is not one of missed opportunities. In our eagerness to find a definite culprit and definable mistakes we tend to overlook

[45] Ibid., 254. In her essay "The Aftermath of Nazi rule", Arendt writes: "But no where in this nightmare of destruction and horror less felt and less talked about than in Germany itself. A lack of response is evident everywhere, and it is difficult to say whether this signifies a half-conscious refusal to yield to grief or a genuine inability to feel. Amid the ruins, Germans mail each other picture postcards still showing the cathedrals and market places, the public buildings and bridges that no longer exist. And the indifference with which they walk through the rubble has its exact counterpart in the absence of mourning for the dead, or in the apathy with which they react, or, rather, fail to react, to the fate of the refugees in their midst." Arendt, "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule," 23.

[46] Hannah Arendt, "The History of Political Theory" (LOC Arendt Archives), 1955.

[47] Arendt, *Essays in Understanding,* p. 200.

> the more fundamental lessons this story may teach us. When all is said and done the twofold question remains: What could one reasonably expect from a people after twelve years of totalitarian rule? What could one reasonably expect from an occupation confronted with the impossible task of putting back on its feet a people that had lost the ground from under it?[48]

Apart from the questions Arendt poses, what is interesting and revealing is her formulation. What is the eagerness to find a culprit? Why are we so quick to write the story, to memorialize the event and move on? In *Between Past and Future* Arendt offers a brief definition of crisis writing, "A crisis forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case direct judgments. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with preformed judgments, that is, with prejudices. Such as attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides."[49] A crisis ought to force us to ask the basic questions and critically think about what happened, while forfeiting our pre-judgments and opinions, or reliance upon familiar frameworks of reason. This is another way of saying that pre-existing frameworks cannot help us to understand something like The Holocaust. If we try, the pre-existing frames of understanding and reason impose themselves on the event, precluding reality. The way we think about crises is directly related to whether or not our understanding, and remembering of the event, correlates to reality.

For Arendt it was necessary to develop a conscious understanding of the present condition and the events that led to it. In her preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she says that "[c]omprehension . . . means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden that events have placed upon us — neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened otherwise. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of,

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48 Ibid., 268.
49 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 171.

reality — whatever it may be or might have been."[50] Arendt is wary of the impulse to try and re-write history, or *look-back retrospectively*, at what *might* have happened, or happened differently. For Arendt, the attempt at beginning to offer a history of anti-semitism was at attempt at creating consciousness of the present condition, of understanding. For Arendt, the events of the twentieth century demonstrated not what might or might not have occurred, but the extreme actions that men were capable of, and understanding for Arendt, as a category, was politically necessary for humanity.

The tendency to try or want to rely upon existing theoretical frameworks to understand contemporary events is illustrative of our dependence as theorists upon frames of reason and conceptual categories, which are informed by some claim of morality. To indict something as good or bad, just, democratic, or totalitarian is to pretend that the faculty of judgment, which guides moral precepts, is at all related to reason. The emergence of Nazi ideology, which relied upon pre-existing philosophical traditions and collective sentiment, caused the loss of tradition because it revealed the fragility of reason and constructed categories that gave form to a sense of tradition in the first place. In the same vein, trying to account for the past, or what happened, is equally problematic because it reinforces the same dominant logic of mastery whereby the past and experience can be known through reason, judgment, and conceptual categories.

II. Understanding Loss: "We Refugees" & *The Human Condition*

> To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an 'objective' relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself.
>
> — Hannah Arendt

[50] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* (Schocken, 2005), 57.

In trying to understand the rise of totalitarianism Arendt needed to construct and guard the spheres of life that create space for meaningful speech and action. To speak and act are not enough in this world to make us human. This is nowhere better seen than in Arendt's account of the number of suicides that occurred among Jewish people before and after the war in her essay "We Refugees." Written in 1943, two years after Arendt emigrated to the United States, "We Refugees" was written for the Jewish journal *Menorah*. [51] Penned before *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* and most of Arendt's well-known published work, "We Refugees" directly explores the relationship between loss and politics, discussing the progressive collapse of the public and private spheres of existence, which led to total alienation from the human world. The essay is uncharacteristic of Arendt's work because it represents a rare instance where she reflects upon her Jewish identity.[52] It also demonstrates how fleeting any distinction is that one might attempt to draw between public and private. Despite Arendt's personal experience with being a Jewish woman during The Holocaust, for her, this history is entirely political in nature. Arendt was concerned with how such experiences could be addressed and processed at a political level. This is not to say that it is devoid of emotion or passion, but rather that it moves beyond the sentimentality of private feelings often associated with loss.

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[51] Thomas Dumm offers an account of "We Refugees" in his book *Loneliness as a Way of Life* to illustrate how Arendt conceptualized the relationship between loss and loneliness. Giorgio Agamben's "We Refugees" was published as part of a symposium, and draw out Arendt's definition of "refugee." Hanna Fenichel Pitkin draws from Arendt's opening passages of "We Refugees" in her essay "Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social" in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*. Her essay uses Arendt's "We Refugees" to draw out the distinction between pariahs and parvenues. Bat Ami Bar On utilizes "We Refugees" in "Women in Dark Times: Rahel Varnhagen, Rosa Luxembourg, Hannah Arendt, and Me," drawing out how the loss that refugees experiences foreclosed the possibility of political action in both public and private. In Chapter 4 of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's *For the Love of the World* she makes several references to "We Refugees" to illustrate how Arendt attempted to "understand her people." Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 117.

[52] We know from her correspondence with Jaspers that Arendt drew a sharp line between her private identity and public Jewishness. When Jaspers asked her if she was a German or a Jew, Arendt wrote "I just noticed your question [again] about whether I'm a German or Jew. To be perfectly honest, it doesn't matter to me in the least on a personal and individual level." Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926-1969* (San Diego: Mariner Books, 1993), 31.

"We Refugees" touches upon several themes that recur throughout much of Arendt's later writing. "The space between men" that constitutes "the world," pariahs and parvenus, and the distinction between the public and private that comprise the conceptual framework Arendt uses to think about the condition of Jewish refugees.[53] Throughout the essay, Arendt develops a relationship between the personal experiences of loss and the concepts and categories she uses to explain the rise of totalitarianism. In this essay, loss is put at the center of Arendt's reflections on politics, and her personal existence as a refugee in the world. The emergence of statelessness that Arendt traces in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* leads to the destruction of the social sphere and subsequent collapse of the private and public spheres of life.[54]

Arendt begins "We Refugees" by saying "[i]n the first place, we don't like to be called 'refugees.'" She goes on to explain that historically the term "refugee" has been applied to people who have been forced to flee due to political persecution, or because of some crime they had committed. Therefore, those driven from Hitler's Reich merely because of their Jewish identity preferred to be called "newcomers" or "immigrants," because they had not committed any crimes. She notes that Jewish people were even more sensitive to being called refugees before the war, because they wanted to be perceived as having left on their own accord, to start over, or "rebuild" their lives. She writes, "[i]n order to rebuild one's life one has to be strong and an optimist."[55] Arendt's essay unfolds as she reflects on the condition of Jewish refugees and the number of suicides that occurred during and after the war. Arendt quickly reveals how the optimism that was necessary to "rebuild one's life"

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[53]Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken, 2008), 264–74.

[54] Arendt writes, "Man, it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity."[54] It is only when individuals are no longer able to participate in a polity, to belong to a homeland that they lose all essential human dignity, because they no longer belong anywhere.

[55] Arendt, "We Refugees," 264.

was created in the face of loss. Her disdain for this kind of feigned optimism forcefully reminds readers that it is really an expression of deep despair, wrought from the many material and worldly losses that people suffered. She writes:

> Our optimism, is indeed, admirable, even if we say so ourselves. The story of our struggle has finally become known. We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives.[56]

Arendt's list of losses reaches past the components of daily life, and into the core of human identity and what makes life livable in this world — a sense of familiarity that allows us to move freely, an occupation that gives one's day-to-day life meaning, language that threads tradition and heritage together, the human lives lost, the friends and family. The tangible things one acquire, a home and belongings, the personal ties people form with family, friends and community, all of these crucial elements of identity were stripped away. With the physical disappearance of so much came the loss of meaning. With the loss of home came the loss of familiarity with "daily life;" with the loss of language came the loss of "naturalness" or the ability to express one's genuine form of self without affect or pretense. With the loss of loved ones, came the loss of those ties that make social life livable. For Arendt, these losses totaled a loss of the world.

Throughout the essay, Arendt expresses much frustration with the idea that the Jewish people were somehow, in the face of this catastrophe, supposed to be "optimistic," supposed to be able to move on and turn away from what was happening. The sardonic use of optimistic language that Arendt begins with quickly becomes a reflection of the despair of a displaced people, and recognition that optimism was a superficial attempt to overcome

[56] Ibid., 265.

these losses. The need to forget and be optimistic becomes one and the same for the Jewish people who were forced to emigrate. Reflecting on this desperate optimism Arendt emphasizes the fact that such forgetting is not possible, writing: "No, there is something wrong with our optimism. There are those odd optimists among us who, having made a lot of optimistic speeches, go home and turn on the gas or make use of a skyscraper in a quite unexpected way."[57]

From this passage one can see how Arendt drew a line between the public need to appear optimistic and the inability to be so in private. The private quality of such loss cannot be forced to appear differently in public, giving speeches, or talking with others. Even though they were told not to speak about what was happening, they knew the truth. When they could not bear it any longer, their false optimism and forced happiness gave way to complete hopelessness. "Their optimism is the vain attempt to keep head above water. Behind this kind of cheerfulness, they constantly struggle with despair themselves. Finally, they die of a kind of selfishness."[58] The attempt to forget, to not mention "such events," to adopt a new home, to "not be Jews" was in vain. It was the denial of their lives and their selves, of what was left after all had been taken, that led them to reject the world by taking their own lives. In this way, it is easy to see how Arendt takes such a hard-lined view of optimism, but moreover, how the losses that occurred shaped her understanding of what it meant to live in a world where all boundaries between public and private life had been destroyed.

If we read this essay through the more fully developed concepts of public, private, and social that Arendt presents us with in *The Human Condition,* then we see how this essay

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[57] Ibid., 266.

[58] Ibid., 268. This uncharacteristic essay of Arendt's has been largely unattended to, and yet, it is one of the rare instances where she talks about her personal experience with the Holocaust.

complicates her dichotomy between public and private. The collapse of optimism in "We Refugees" is also the collapse of the public/private distinction. The Jewish people, of which Arendt writes, were supposed to appear in public to be optimistic, but privately were living in a state of despair. When they were no longer able to put on the public face of optimism and deal with the reality of their private lives, they transgressed both realms of living by committing suicide. The social realm of existence had been extinguished by the rise of authoritarianism, and so they were pushed into an isolated existence, where they could chose between living or living as someone else. With the collapse of the social realm, individuals could no longer appear in public as they once had. The simplest act of buying bread became a reflection of their rejection from the world. Arendt writes, "We try the best we can to fit into a world where you have to be sort of politically minded when you buy your food."[59] They were no longer welcome where they had once been at home.

The collapse of the social sphere pushed individuals into extreme states of hope and despair. For Arendt, hope and despair are intimately bound to the loss of one's self, and the conditions that make life bearable and livable in this world. In Arendt's first preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she repeats the same hesitation about both hope and despair, writing: "The central events of our time are no less effectively forgotten by those committed to a belief in an unavoidable doom, than by those who have given themselves up to a reckless optimism . . . This book has been written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair."[60] This passage, which sets the tone for her dissection of anti-Semitism, is a direct reflection of Arendt's earlier thoughts in "We Refugees" on the effects of authoritarianism. For Arendt, the turn to "blind optimism" or "reckless despair" constitutes the same dangerous turn away from the present. The denial of loss, of the

[59] Ibid., 269.
[60] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Vii. .

experiences of our existence, affects the way that we interact with the world and one another. "The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, to play roles."[61] If we are told to "forget" then we are in essence denying a part of ourselves and forced to live a factitious existence. Moreover, for Arendt, to deny one's past and not come to a critical understanding of the world is tantamount to denying the human condition, and turning away from humanity.

In a later published essay, "The Destruction of Six Million," Arendt turns to Polish poet Tadeusz Borowski to express her political frustration with hope and optimism. Born in 1922, Borowski was only a teenager when the Nazis invaded Poland, and was captured and sent to Auschwitz and Dachau. He was liberated from Dachau on May 1, 1945 by U.S. Troops; and it was only six years later that he too took his own life, by putting his head in a gas oven. In his collection of short stories and poetry, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman*, Borowski captures the silence of hope that Arendt tries to overturn. Borowski writes:

> Despite the madness of war, we lived for a world that would be different. . . . Do you really think that, without the hope that such a world is possible, that the rights of man will be restored again, we could stand the concentration camp even for one day? It is that very hope that makes people go without a murmur to the gas chambers, keeps them from risking a revolt, paralyses them into numb inactivity. It is hope that breaks down family ties, makes mothers renounce their children, or wives sell their bodies for bread, or husbands kill. It is hope that compels man to hold on to one more day of life, because that day may be the day of liberation. Ah, and not even the hope for a different, better word, but simply for life, a life of peace and rest. Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers.[62]

For Borowski, giving up hope means rejecting life for life's sake. Their hope was not hope for a better world, but for life itself. It was a hope for a return to the world before concentration camps and Hitler's regime. It was a hope that what they once had might be restored. This form of hope enables a form of action that is destructive, breaking down

[61] Arendt, "We Refugees," 270.
[62] Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Reissue edition (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 122.

social ties and human relationships. In this example, as Borowski puts it, hope overcame man. In this sense hope is rooted not in the will to live in the present, but in the will to return to a former space in time. Hope becomes a powerful instrument of control and destruction. For Borowski, clinging to hope meant helping the Nazi soldiers unload the rail cars and herd people towards the gas chambers in return for pillaging the goods they brought. Borowski could remain hopeful as long as his silence kept him alive.[63]

From this quotation, Arendt describes how "hope" becomes a dangerous barrier to life, critical thinking and ultimately remembering what happened. In the face of despair, hope and optimism are usually seen as mechanisms that enable us to reach up and out of the crises we are facing however, for Arendt and Borowski they only dig one in further. Arendt writes, "*Hope stronger than man* — that means hope destructive of the very humanity of man."[64] When hope disables action, and optimism forces individuals to turn back upon themselves away from the world, not only does the distinction between public and private life collapse, but also humanity is extinguished. This is no clearer than in Borowski's own account of Auschwitz, where he describes in morbid detail how one learned to live within the hope of rescue through participating in the horror of what was going on. The despair of the real weighed too heavily on any attempt to find reprieve in optimism.

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[63] In Arendt's reading of Borowski we can see part of her argument for the banality of evil emerging. She was desperately concerned with how the prisoners themselves became complacent in the Holocaust. Borowski's harrowing account offers a narration of such co-optation for the means of survival. He writes: "The train has been emptied. A thin, pock-marked S.S. Man peers inside, shakes his head in disgust and motions to our group, pointing his finger at the door. '*Rein*. Clean it up!' We climb inside. In the corners amid the human excrement and abandoned wrist-watches lie squashed, trampled infants, naked little monsters with enormous heads and bloated bellies. We carry them out like chickens, holding several in each hand. 'Don't take them to the trucks, pass them on to the women,' says the S.S. man, lighting a cigarette". Ibid., 39.

[64] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 494.The end of this quote reads: "And even more destructive perhaps of this humanity was the very innocence of those who were trapped in this whole monstrosity, namely, that they were innocent even from the viewpoint of their persecutors. Their apathy was to a very large extent the almost physical, automatic response to the challenge of *absolute meaninglessness*." Jerome Kohn also uses this description to explain Arendt's understanding of terror and totalitarianism. Perhaps what is most shocking about Tadeusz' account, and explains his own suicide, are the stories and poetry of his own account of Auschwitz. He was forced to participate in the daily execution of Jews in order to save his own life.

At the other extreme, another way optimism manifested itself during and after World War II was in parvenus, and the desire to turn away from one's previous life. To illustrate the severity of this personality, and the mentality that the Jewish people were encouraged to accept, Arendt offers the story of Mr. Cohn in "We Refugees." Mr. Cohn was from Berlin, where he claimed to have "always been 150 percent German. In 1933 that Mr. Cohn found refuge in Prague and very quickly became a convinced Czech patriot - as true and as loyal as Czech patriot as he had been a German one." When Mr. Cohn was forced to leave Prague under Nazi pressure in 1933, he found a new home in Vienna where he became an Austrian "super-patriot." And on and on Mr. Cohn became the best citizen wherever he was forced to emigrate to. Arendt ends her anecdote with the addendum that "As long as Mr. Cohn can't make up his mind to be what he actually is, a Jew, nobody can foretell all the mad changes he will still have to go through."[65] Mr. Cohn suffers from what Arendt calls "the desperate confusion of these Ulysses-wanderers" who are unable to admit to themselves their true identities.

In Arendt's rejection of the parvenu's optimism to start over, she praises the pariah who chooses to take his or her identity and carry it through the world. The pariah's refusal to forget is a way of acknowledging the losses that have shaped their identity as Jewish people. Arendt writes, "A man who wants to lose his self discovers, indeed, the possibilities of human existence, which are infinite, as infinite as is creation. But the recovering of a new personality is as difficult - and as hopeless - as a new creation of the world."[66] Arendt recognizes the limitless possibilities of human existence, the constant and ever renewing potential to begin again. When a person tries to willfully lose himself, though, and become someone else, it is completely hopeless. In attempt to cast off their pasts, some were trying

[65] Arendt, "We Refugees," 271.
[66] Ibid..

to forget the experiences that had brought them into the present. Such forgetting is not possible, and so such absolute creation is not possible either.

Arendt's reflection on the desire to start over also reveals the desperate relationship between hope and despair. It illustrates how hope becomes a superficial attempt at becoming and appearing as someone else in the world. Loss might create the possibility to begin anew, but contained within this possibility is the knowledge that one will never be able to assimilate or regain one's former self. The opportunity to start over, in other words, is forced. This experience of loss is constituted by an extreme deprivation of familiar life. For Arendt, the condition of the Jewish people has always been one of constant homelessness. As she begins "We Refugees" she reiterates the statelessness, or loss of one's homeland. The loss of one's home is not only central to Arendt's understanding of the Jewish Question, but it reveals how fundamental a home for people (not necessarily *a* people) is to the human condition. The experience of this new kind of loss of home — a loss that comes about through the denial of one's very self, permeates Arendt's Jewish writings. This lesson extends beyond the displacement of the European Jews. Under the right conditions any or all of us may be subjected to a similar experience of loss.

In "We Refugees" Arendt begins with "we lost our home" and moves to the broader losses of language, community and country of origin. Not having a proper place, somewhere to call home, the Jewish people were doubly cast out — from both their private homes and their homelands. Arendt writes, "The Jews have been wandering around the world for two thousand years, taking in tow their belongings, their children, and their nostalgia for a homeland."[67] Without any specific place to call home, the entire world paradoxically

[67] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 32.

becomes one's shelter, and life is not defined in terms of allegiance to some place, but rather becomes life in and of itself.[68]

The loss of the world that occurs when the components of daily life have been stripped away through violence is a kind of loss that exposes the bareness of life. Without a place to call home, the Jewish people were pushed out into the world and forced to emigrate; but once there, they were told to forget why they left and become citizens of a new state. In this experience, Arendt saw how the internalization of loss ultimately led to a turn away from humanity and the world. For Arendt, increasing worldly alienation that arose out of the collapse of the social distinctly marked the modern era. In *The Human Condition,* defining the private realm of property Arendt argues that the modern condition can be characterized by the "mass phenomenon of loneliness." In the private sphere, the mass loneliness takes on its most anti-human form. She writes, "The reason for this extremity is that mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, deprived men not only of their place in the world but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered from the world and where, at any rate, even those excluded from the world could find a substitute in the warmth of the hearth and the limited reality of family life."[69] As we see in *The Human Condition*, modernity is characterized by loss for Arendt, and this ultimate loss of meaning and alienation from the world was signaled by the loss of tradition, authority, public space,

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[68] This is an element of what it means to be cosmopolitan - cosmopolitan is often a disparaging term for the Jews in the twentieth century. Giorgio Agamben also takes much from this Arendtian formulation in his *Bare Life*. In Agamben's "We Refugees" he wrote that "Arendt" overturned "the condition of refugee and person without a country - which she herself was living - in order to propose this conditions as a the paradigm of a new historical consciousness." Agamben emphasizes Arendt's insistence that continued assimilation from one country to the next is not possible, and rather refugees should stop wanting to be assimilated. Agamben also draws out Arendt's critique of the nation-state as specifically important to the purported claim that the nation-state is declining. Soon all will become refugees in one form, he writes, and we will need to take the refugee as the figure from which to reconsider the "rights of man." He supports his argument drawing on Arendt's chapter in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she draws together "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man." Giorgio Agamben. Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in *The Jewish Writings*, (New York: Schocken, 2008), 264–74. *Symposium*. 1995, No. 49 (2), Summer, Pages: 114-119.

[69] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 59.

culture, and identity. All of these losses meant vulnerability to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.[70] In the twentieth century, with the creation of mass society and culture, bureaucratization and animalistic laboring, Arendt saw public freedom, tradition, individualism and humanity being eclipsed by private values, atomization, loneliness and a disregard for the past.

In this vein, being with others is at the heart of Arendt's concept of worldliness. In many of Arendt's writings on Jewishness and totalitarianism she refers to what she calls the "space between men." The space between men for Arendt is what constitutes the world in common by allowing men to stand apart and yet together. In other words, it allows men to remain individuals while participating in society and politics, interacting with one another. To be, to exist in the world is necessarily a kind of social relationship that is constituted by the space between, and facilitated by a shared language that renders "experience" intelligible and the world "common." Perhaps most notably in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt argues that this loss of space between men created room for totalitarianism to take hold. She argues that when this space was destroyed, men became susceptible to totalitarianism, because they lost the social world that they shared in common with others, including their individuality and ability to think independently.[71]

Isolation in the political sphere is parallel to loneliness in the social sphere.[72] While loneliness as a kind of solitary condition contains positive potential for thought, it also

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[70] Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

[71] Seyla Benhabib argues that Arendt's transformation of the Heideggerian concept of world re-stored being-in-the-world with our "experience of worldliness." See Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 50. Dana Villa also takes up Heidegger's influence on Arendt's concepts of "world, " "worldlessness" and "worldliness" in Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton University Press, 1995).

[72] "What we call isolation in the political sphere is called loneliness in the sphere of social intercourse. Isolation and loneliness are not the same. I can be isolated—that is in a situation in which I cannot at, because there is nobody who will act with me—without being lonely; and I can be lonely—the is in a situation in which I as a

creates the bare conditions of existence that opened up room for ideological tyranny, while simultaneously closing the space that allows individuals to move freely in the world. Terror destroys the capacity of motion, by eliminating the space between men that is required for action.[73] The loss of individuality, in this instance, which leads to the reduction of individual men to masses does not open up space for action. Rather, this loss delimits what is possible. When people are confined to a solitary existence within the world that still houses the artifices of past social conditions, they are forced to turn back upon themselves. "What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time."[74] Creating the conditions of isolation and loneliness are germane to totalitarian movements.

For Arendt, despair springs from man's inability to act in the world, and action is directly related to her conception of freedom. Caught between past and future, without any inheritance, man is left in a state of despair unable to look either backwards or forwards. The loss of tradition in the modern world left us in darkness.

Arendt used the public/private distinction in her work as a conceptual framework to restore a form of democratic life before the rise of totalitarianism. Democratic in this sense, for Arendt, does not mean a form of democratic political action. Instead, it becomes a kind of reclamation where the wasteland of political life is somehow rendered fertile for critical thinking. It represents an opportunity not to return to a moral-ethical framework of good,

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person feel myself deserted by all human companionship—without being isolated" Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 613.

[73] Ibid., 600.

[74] Ibid., 614.

bad, democratic &c., before the war, but rather the opportunity to understand why those very frameworks came into being and were undone. In order to talk about understanding history versus mastering history Arendt's later works on *Thinking, Willing,* and *Judging* and lectures on Kant examine the concept of history in itself, and our own relation to time in thinking through political moments and events.

III. In Between Past and Future: The Gap Space

> The fact that we usually treat matters of good and evil in courses in 'morals' or 'ethics' may indicate how little we know about them, for morals comes from *mores* and ethics from *ēthos*, the Latin and the Greek words for customs and habit, the Latin word being associated with rules of behavior, whereas the Greek is derived from habitat, like our 'habits.'[75]
>
> — Hannah Arendt

The space between past and future is a theoretical way of grasping the space between offering a historical account of something that has past, like the holocaust, and the responsibility we have to think about it. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt primarily talks about loss in the sense that tradition is being lost to time and the progression of philosophy. The tradition that Arendt points us to in this essay is the relationship between the desires for secular immortality versus religious immortality. With the breakdown of the Hebrew-Christian traditions in modernity, the notions of beginning and end no longer resonated. Arendt writes, "The growing meaninglessness of the modern world is perhaps nowhere more clearly foreshadowed than in this identification of meaning and end."[76] Arendt uses this foreshadowing to criticize the utilitarian philosophy of means and ends that was "so characteristic of the earlier industrial phase of the modern age."[77] The framework of

[75] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.
[76] Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, 78.
[77] Ibid., 79.

utilitarian logic, driven by the desire to find meaning, leads us to nothing more than patterns along a historical or ahistorical timeline. Arendt argues that the problem with this utilitarian logic is that only patterns make sense because only patterns can be made.

From Arendt's account of secular meaninglessness in the modern age and critique of utilitarian philosophy, which sought and seeks to create meaning, she transitions to an introspective critique of her own attempts to account for totalitarianism. She writes:

> "In my studies on totalitarianism I tried to show that the totalitarian phenomenon, with its striking anti-utilitarian traits and its strange disregard for factuality, is based in the last analysis on the conviction that everything is possible — and not just permitted, morally or otherwise, as was the case with early nihilism. The totalitarian systems tend to demonstrate that action can be based on any hypothesis and that, in the course of consistently guided action, the particular hypothesis will become true, will become actual, factual reality. The assumption which underlies consistent action can be as mad as it pleases; it will always end in producing facts which are then 'objectively' true."[78]

Arendt's critiques of pragmatism and utilitarianism as attempts to impose meaning on modern man here are directly connected to her own attempt to understand how it was that totalitarian ideology was able to arise in the twentieth century. The philosophical traditions that dominated the nineteenth century were guided by the emergence of nihilism, which opened up space for a kind of mathematical or logical understanding of the world and individual's actions. With the emergence of nihilism Arendt argues the moral standards by which we could judge the world were loss. Faith and reason were lost. Without standards, faith, or reason, totalitarian ideology had the ability to justify anything it pleased through a claim to objectivity.

As we just saw this critique is present nearly twenty years prior in Arendt's work. Except instead of struggling to comprehend how Nazi ideology was able to emerge from the existent philosophical tradition, calling upon it while destroying it at the same time, Arendt is

[78] Ibid., 87.

struggling to find a way to understand the historian's desire to derive meaning from history. The difference between the two sets of work is the difference of time, which has given us an opportunity to both process and offer an account of The Holocaust. Here we see the problems of history and remembering come together in Arendt's indirect critique of contemporary social scientific methods. The "social techniques" of understanding only have to wait for a "certain time-lag" in order to construct meaning from history. The drive to find meaning or truth from history, to make sense of how something could have happened, for Arendt, in part explains the loss of tradition.

This form of accounting for past events is wholly problematic for Arendt. Not only does she draw an indirect comparison between forms of social scientific technique and totalitarianism itself, which relied upon invented meaning, but she also blames this form of historiography in part for the "growing worldly alienation" that characterizes the modern age. The existing frameworks of understanding were not only inadequate for understanding the events of The Holocaust, but were and are dangerous for the way we think about history.[79]

IV. *Critical Thinking and The Gap Space*

In order to understand the events of the twentieth century Arendt proposes a kind of understanding that tethers one neither to the past or the future. As opposed to offering an account of something that has occurred, she turns us away from an understanding of *action*

[79] Arendt writes, "In the situation of radical-world alienation, neither history nor nature is at all conceivable. This two fold loss of the world—the loss of nature and the loss of the human artifice in the widest sense, which would include all history—has left behind it a society of men who, without a common world which would at once relate and separate them, either live in a desperate lonely separation or are pressed together in a mass." In this passage we see Arendt bring together her critique of theorists and historians attempts to impose meaning with pre-existing frameworks of understanding and reason, and her own understanding of the effect of Nazi ideology. The language of "desperate lonely separation or pressed together in a mass" directly reflects her argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she describes how Nazi propaganda and law forced individuals into a state of isolation and loneliness.

towards *her rendering of thinking and judging* through her lectures on Kant to argue for what she calls *critical thinking*.[80] This theoretical model for dealing with loss is useful to the work of political theory because it demonstrates how political action can exist as a form of critical engagement and thought. By politicizing loss Arendt meant that it had to be made public, intelligible and visible. For Arendt, thinking is not a private activity. She further explicates this argument in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* writing, "critical thinking, while still a solitary business, does not cut itself off from 'all others.' To be sure, it still goes on in isolation, but by the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides; in other words it adopts Kant's world citizen. To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting."[81] Critical thinking, according to Arendt, necessarily implies communicability. The act of thinking depends on others. It is a form of analysis that allows one to engage in a conversation with oneself with others.[82] Thinking critically means discriminately incorporating the ideas one receives from others into one's own thought and applying *critical standards* to one's own thought. It is a self-engaged, conscious, form of thinking. Critical thinking, for Arendt, is a form of plurality that anticipates one's ideas will enter the world, and relies upon the notion that men cannot think alone. The act of thinking is necessarily dependent upon the condition of plurality in the world, and thinking will eventually, inevitably, lead to action.

In Arendt's preface to *Thinking* she begins by sharing her own thought process during the Eichmann trial, which led her to the concept the *banality of evil*. She questions her arrival

[80] Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* were published posthumously and meant to complete what would have been her final work on judging. As such, the published volume I am working with begins with her post-script to *Thinking*.
[81] Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 43.
[82] Ibid., 42. "To think critically applies not only to doctrines and concepts one receives from others, to the prejudices and traditions one inherits; it is precisely by applying critical standards to one's own thought that one learns the art of critical thought."

at the concept, and with what right she used it. It was the trial of Eichmann, she tells us, that prompted her study of "those moral questions" and ethics.[83] She writes, "There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and through-out the pre-trial examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*."[84] She goes on to write, "It was this absence of thinking — which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to *stop* and think — that awakened my interest." In these passages we hear reverberations of her prelude to *The Human Condition* and the axiom she presents us with: to stop and think what we are doing. Instead of trying to understand the world through some form of reason or historiography, in these last works Arendt subtly argues for a new form of political action as critical thinking. While this work can be considered more philosophical than theoretical, perhaps it has more to contribute to the work of political theory in the sense that Arendt is attempting to offer an example and study of the art of critical thinking as a political activity. Whereas *The Human Condition* attempts to understand the world through the construction of conceptual categories, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* attempts to offer a historical account of how totalitarianism emerged, in these late works on thinking, willing, and judging we see the essential questions that drove her studies: What motivates "evil-doing?" And, can *thinking* make men stop "evil-doing"?[85] If evil in the world is the consequence of acting without thinking, than perhaps critical thinking in itself is a form of political action that can prevent such events from happening again.

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[83] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Mariner Books, 1981), 6.

[84] Ibid., 4 ."Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence."

[85] Ibid., 5.

Unsatisfied with the answers philosophy and her previous undertakings had provided to these questions, Arendt calls her own study of *The Human Condition* into question. She reminds us that the work began "more modestly" as in inquiry into "The Vita Activa": "I had been concerned with the problem of Action, the oldest concern of political theory, and what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter, namely, *vita active*, was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective."[86] Wary of the distinction that thinkers like Marx had drawn between thinking and *praxis*, Arendt moves to undermine this dichotomy by arguing that thinking is not an isolated activity that occurs in some sort of desert. She argues that while thinking is often seen as a sort of withdrawal from the world, it is not. And, not only is it not a wholly solitary activity, but it shouldn't be seen in contrast to acting in the world, or notions of action or *praxis*. This false philosophical division between thinking and action, she argues, made men like Eichmann possible. She writes:

> "If, as I had suggested before, the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to 'demand' its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be . . . In any event, the matter can no longer be left to 'specialists' as though thinking, like higher mathematics, were the monopoly of a specialized discipline."[87]

Acting without thinking is, for Arendt, the problem that political philosophy must address.

Arendt turns to Kant's distinction between *Vernunft* and *Verstand* — reason and intellect — to further draw thinking as an activity apart from "the scandal of reason."

[86] Ibid., 6. She also gestures towards her use of Cato at the end of "The Vita Activa" in *The Human Condition* quoting '"never is man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself."'

[87] Ibid., 13. The full quote reads: "Kant—in this respect almost alone among the philosophers—was much bothered by the common opinion that philosophy is only for the few, precisely because of its moral implications, and he once observed that 'stupidity is caused by a wicked heart.' This is not true: absence of thought is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wicked heart is not its cause; it is probably the other way round, that wickedness may be caused but absence of thought."

"Hence, the distinction between the two faculties, reason and intellect, coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning, in the first category, and cognition, in the second."[88] Reason is inspired by the search for meaning, but truth and meaning are not the same thing. Arendt blames the failure to make this distinction on the refusal to draw a distinction between reason and intellect, between "the 'urgent need' to think and the 'desire to know'."[89] The desire to know is motivated by the need to understand, to make sense of, to reason something, but this urgent desire does not lead men towards truth, and often times it turns us away from both truth and thinking. Put another way, thinking is instrumentalized in the name of reason, and this is why it is important for Arendt to return to Kant and draw a distinction between *thinking* and *critical thinking*.

In order for Arendt to address this question of thinking, it is necessary to address what she calls the "thinking ego" and Cato's question: Where do we go when we think? In *Thinking*, Arendt argues that the in-between Gap Space is a place where the present can open up and thinking can occur. It is a space for consciousness in the present moment. She asks where the thinking ego is located in time, and whether its relentless activity can be temporally determined. In *Between Past and Future* Arendt draws a line between the loss of tradition within a historical framework and the collapse of tradition that enabled totalitarianism. One consequence of the loss of tradition in modernity meant that our inheritance to the past had been cut off. Future generations are born into an old world, and are submissive to the old order of things, but no longer have a tradition to look back upon in order to justify their own position in the continuum of life. With this loss, the linear temporal framework of the world collapsed, and man no longer positioned between past and

[88] Ibid., 14.
[89] Ibid., 15.

future ascended above the linear line of beginning and end. For Arendt, this loss of tradition is directly related to modern worldly alienation.

In this sense, Arendt thinks about tradition temporally and spatially. Turning to the poetic works of René Char and Franz Kafka at the beginning of *Between Past and Future*, Arendt conceptualizes the relationship between history and time in order to explain what tradition was and how it has ceased to exist. She writes:

> This gap (between past and future) was bridged over by what, since the Romans, we have called tradition. That this tradition has worn thinner and thinner as the modern age progressed is a secret to nobody. When the thread of tradition finally broke, the gap between past and future ceased to be a condition peculiar only to the activity of thought and restricted as an experience to those few who made thinking their primary business. It became a tangible reality and perplexity for all; that is it became a fact of political relevance.

Here, we see Arendt describing the relationship between the loss of tradition, thinking as an activity, and the Gap Space between past and future. She turns to Kafka here and later in *The Life of the Mind* while discussing *thinking*, because of the visualization he offers in breaking with a linear conception of time.[90] In Kafka's parable "He" man is caught between the forces of past and future man, elevated to look down upon the continuum of time, creating space between himself and the world. This space between past and future is necessary, for Arendt, for critically thinking about the present moment of time and the act of thinking. Arendt's conception of this gap-space described in the language of time is critical to understanding her argument for a present politics in the face of totalitarian society.

In both texts she first turns to French poet René Char in order to drawn upon Kafka — the relationship between the two is one of poetic expression. For Arendt they:

> analyze poetically our 'inner state' in regard to time, of which we are aware when we have withdrawn from the appearances and find our mental activities recoiling characteristically upon themselves . . . The inner time sensation arises when we are not entirely absorbed by the absent non-visibles we are thinking about but begin to direct our attention onto activity itself. In this situation past and future are equally present precisely because they are equally absent from our sense; thus the no-longer of the past is

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[90] In the subsection on "The gap between past and future: *the* nunc stans" Arendt writes, "In the hope of finding out where the activity can be temporally determined, I shall turn to one of Kafka's parables, which in my opinion, deals precisely with this matter." *Ibid., 203.*

> transformed by virtue of the spatial metaphor into something lying *behind* us and not-yet of the future into something that *approaches* us from ahead.[91]

This Gap Space opens up an inner state that experiences time differently. Arendt describes the Gap Space as "a timeless time in which men can create timeless work with which to transcend their own finiteness."[92] The "absent non-visibles" we are thinking about represent that which is present, but which is not materially present. Past and future collide in the mental apparition of what has past, and its projection onto the future. However, both past and future are absent in the materiality from life in the moment.

Arendt points out that this conception of the in-between is different from our ordinary everyday use of the tenses past, present, future, where past signifies yesterday, present today, and future tomorrow. "Here too," she writes, "the present is surrounded by the past and future inasmuch as it remains the fixed point from which we take our bearings, looking back or looking forward."[93] We take our bearings; find some standing ground from the present that is sandwiched between the past and future. The linear time continuum that we occupy is dependent upon the activities of daily life and our individual activity in the world: yesterday I did this, tomorrow I will do that. The non-thinking self that moves in the world experiences time differently from the thinking ego, which exists independent of spatial circumstances. This dichotomy is reflective of Arendt's philosophical training, and essential to understanding how we are in the world. The difference Arendt highlight points to fragmentation of the mind — that which exists in the material bio-historical world and is subject to the constraints of temporality, and that which exists outside the world and free of what she calls "spatial circumstances." To think is to leave the world, which we are materially constrained by. *Where do we go when we think*? The home philosophers find in the world of

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[91] *Ibid., 203.*
[92] Ibid., 211.
[93] Ibid., 205.

thinking is different from the material world that we must engage with daily, but these worlds do not exist wholly apart from one another. This distinction in the spatial construction of the Subject is essential to Arendt's conception of thinking and acting.

The spatiality of everyday life allows us to conceptualize the past as lying behind and the future as lying ahead. Consciousness is the "I" sense, not the thinking ego, which is driven by our condition of material nature, what Arendt calls historical biographical time. This is an important distinction for Arendt's conception of thinking. The material ego is not subject to the constraints of material life. Arendt describes the Gap Space as "a timeless time in which men can create timeless work with which to transcend their own finiteness."[94] The present is timeless, since time only exists in the past or future tenses.

That this Gap cannot be left to us by tradition is perhaps what Arendt means when she begins "The Gap Between Past and Future" with this passage from René Char- *Notre heritage n'est precede d'aucun testament* - "our inheritance was left to us by no testament."[95] Arendt reads Char's melancholy reflections on the French resistance to think about what she calls "the lost treasure of revolution." If we read Arendt's preface to *Between Past and Future* alongside *Thinking,* her use of Char and Kafka come into focus. She writes "After a few short years they were liberated from what they originally had thought to be a 'burden' and thrown back into what they now knew to be the weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs, once more separate from 'the world of reality' by an *epaisseur triste*, the 'sad opaqueness' of a private life centered about nothing but itself." Arendt understood the in-between moment of resistance and revolution, politically motivated, to be a space where freedom could come into existence, where thought could be guided by something other than the "sad opaqueness" of private life. What lies at the center of our political thought, from what point

[94] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 211.
[95] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 3.

do we turn? What center do we turn to? The material, historical, and biographical self, which is the self that goes about the daily activities of life? Or, the thinking ego that stands apart from the mind that shares an intimate relationship with the material impressions the world leaves upon the self?

The treasure that Char found in the resistance, as Arendt summarizes it, is that "they had discovered that he who 'joined the Resistance*, found* himself," that he ceased to be 'in quest of [himself] without mastery, in naked unsatisfaction,' that he no longer suspected himself of 'insincerity,' of being 'a carping, suspicious actor of life,' that they could afford 'to go naked.' In this nakedness, stripped of all masks — of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself in his psychological reactions against society — they had been visited for the first time in their lives by an apparition of freedom . . ."[96] That they had become challengers points to the antagonistic nature of our ability to reflect and think about the world around us, to create the space necessary for reflection to be observers of the event or spectacle. Here again we see a difference emerge between the material ego and the thinking ego — Arendt turns to Char to draw out the differences between the two. In what circumstances can we cast off our fabricated masks, our socially constructed sense of identity? How do we thoughtfully interact with the world around us while preserving our own individual freedom? How do we become and remain conscious critical thinkers? In contrast to society, in the trenches, in the experience of resistance, Char found freedom and was able escape the demands of society.

Arendt's critique of the private sphere of life is methodical and dissatisfying. What she does not explicitly say, but is found in reading her use of Char across *On Revolution, Between Past and Future,* and *Thinking*, is an indictment against the banality of private day-to-day life,

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[96] Ibid., 4.

and the social realm of interaction where we must conform or put on masks. The public space that Arendt envisions is not necessarily one of politics, but rather a space from which one can exist as oneself, in a critical capacity, without succumbing to the privacy that drives us away from the world, or the impressions that social life marks us with.

Conclusion

Arendt's conception of the Gap Space and non-time is similar and different from Benjamin's conception of crystallization and homogenous empty time, which we will see in the next chapter. Much like Arendt, Benjamin turns to poets to consider the relationship between time and experience. "It seems plausible", Arendt writes, "that Benjamin, whose spiritual existence had been formed and informed by Goethe, a poet and not a philosopher, and whose interest was almost exclusively aroused by poets and novelists, although he had studied philosophy, should have found it easier to communicate with poets than with theoreticians, whether of the dialectical or metaphysical variety."[97] As Arendt describes, Benjamin has the great gift of thinking poetically without being a poet, and certainly this compliment can be extended to her own writing as well. However, their relationships with poetics lead to a great difference in their conceptions of time, history, and tradition. Whereas Arendt relies upon a kind of detached metaphysical understanding of time separating out bio-historical narrative from non-time, Benjamin's mysticism combined with his Marxism leads to his distinction between homogenous empty time (capitalist time) and crystallization (a way to revolt against capitalist time).

Much like Arendt, time is central to Benjamin's understanding of the world. If Arendt divided up the world with conceptions of spheres and realms of living, then Benjamin did so

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[97] Hannah Arendt "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 14.

with forms of time. Time, for Benjamin, is central to understanding the instruments of domination, practices of power, the possibility of resistance to power, and the promise of redemption. In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin discusses Historical time, tragic time, mythic time, individual time, messianic time, and musical time in order to offer an account of the melancholy mourning play, while critiquing (then) contemporary notions of sovereignty. In "On the Concept of History" Benjamin returns to time, juxtaposing historicity with historical materialism, reiterating his early arguments in the *Trauerspiel* book against the tyrannical impulse of individual and tragic time, which seek to overcome historical time.

Benjamin's conception of historical materialism binds his sense of poetics and mysticism with a Marxian critique of materialist forces and modes of production. Arendt is critical of materialism as well, but in a different way, and it is Benjamin's sense of mysticism that she can't incorporate into her reading of his work. Benjamin's sense of mysticism forms his conception of what he calls *historical time*, which is bound to the notion of Messianism, leaving the door to the future open, without claiming to know what will come. Arendt and Benjamin are both wary of trying to master the past and predict the future. For both, a critical temporality is necessary to displacing the idea that history is marked by events that can be grasped through reasoning or empirical processes — that somehow we can master the past.

CHAPTER II

WALTER BENJAMIN: HISTORY, TIME, AND *TRAUERSPIEL*

"Historicism is 'additive' and it "musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters a monad."

— Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

"Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation."

— Walter Benjamin, *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*

In this chapter I am going to look at Benjamin's approach to history in relationship to time, loss, mourning, and melancholia. While in many ways Benjamin and Arendt are dealing with similar topics of investigation — the impact of modernity and the rise of totalitarianism — Benjamin has a different conception of loss and time, which affects the way he approaches questions of authority and tradition. Through a close reading of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *On the Concept of History*, I examine Benjamin's critique of *historicity* and his argument for historical materialism. In conclusion, I turn towards contemporary work being done on Benjamin and *Antigone*, in order to demonstrate how the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory — specifically here Benjamin's work — works against the philosophical reasoning of moralizing ethics. Through *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and Benjamin's distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, I turn to Bonnie Honig's *Antigone*, *Interrupted*, which deploys Benjamin in the name of what she terms "agonistic humanism."

Introduction

In Hannah Arendt's essay "The Dark Times" she begins her account of Benjamin's life and work through a kind of personal narrative. Her tone is unusually poetic and stern, revealing her personal attachment to Benjamin more than his thought. There is no question

she situates her own work next to Benjamin's using the same repetitive turns in language and philosophical pretext that we find throughout much of her writing. "No doubt, the Jewish question was of great importance for this generation of Jewish writers and explains much of the personal despair so prominent in nearly everything they wrote. But the most clear-sighted among them were led by their personal conflicts to a much more general and more radical problem, namely to questioning the relevance of the Western tradition as a whole."[98] Here we see Arendt's understanding of the relationship between the Jewish question, despair, and the loss of tradition present itself within the context of Benjamin's work. And, although these topics certainly hold a great interest for Benjamin — especially the past, history, and tradition — Arendt and Benjamin maintain very difference understandings of history and time.[99]

For Benjamin, memory and remembering is a dynamic process that does not displace the present or predict the future. Benjamin's historical materialism is guided by what he sees as the detritus of modernity. The detritus — an old door frame, a neon street sign, milk crates, empty streets — does not signify an empty form for Benjamin, rather, each object is a

[98] Ibid., 37. A few pages later Arendt repeats, "Truth, so Benjamin said shortly before he became fully aware of the break in tradition and the loss of authority, is not 'an unveiling which destroys the secret, but the revelation which does it justice.'" Ibid., 41.

[99] According to Arendt, Benjamin "knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past." Arendt paints Benjamin as a pearl-diver, and characterizes the diver as a rescuer of those "rich and strange" things which are cemented beneath the surface and must be brought up into the light. She draws together Benjamin's conception of crystallization, the Flâneur, and the collector. She describes Benjamin's collection of fragments as netting, gathering up the bits that had been left behind. According to Arendt, Benjamin's collecting of fragments, of pearls and coral, is the work of redemption. It is the redemption of history without the "aid of tradition." Arendt's romantic vision of Benjamin work as the redemption of history without the aid of tradition is a projection of her own concept of redemption. For Arendt, working through what was, tracing back, and digging down into history redeems the loss of tradition in the modern age. The quote Arendt cites from Benjamin's notebooks draws out the distinction between her idea of redemption and Benjamin's. For Arendt redemption is the work of restoring tradition and context to the objects or debris that are cast aside by or lost to the progression of time; for Benjamin redemption is a rejection of context, of tradition, and restoration. Benjamin isn't praising the nostalgia or utopian longing of the "revolutionary." Instead he is observing the relationship between the act of "collecting" and the desire for redemption in the material world. Benjamin isn't trying to redeem what has been lost, although he is working with the debris that loss leaves behind.

trace of something left in the world and is a key for entry into the world. By approaching ordinary objects with a sense of religious reverence, Benjamin's conception of historical materialism requires a different understanding of history and time. As a result, his work is possessed with both a mysticism and sensuality that transforms the everyday into radical possibilities for "weak Messianism."

In *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Benjamin writes "My assumption was that the feeling of longing would no more gain mastery over my spirit than a vaccine does over a healthy body. I sought to limit its effect through insight into irretrievability — not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability of the past. This has meant that certain biographical features, which stand out more readily in the continuity of experience than in its depths, altogether recede in the present undertaking."[100] In knowing that the past cannot be restored one must set aside continuity of experience, sacrificing a linear narrative for understanding. Benjamin knew the future landscape would no longer resemble the past he had grown familiar with. He knew he would have to say goodbye to the place of his childhood, so he performed a kind of invocation through the work of memory. He returned to the place of his childhood in memory in light of his impending feeling of homesickness. He turned away from the contingent biographical features which we often rely upon to construct continuity through experience, and instead toward the "necessary social irretrievability of the past." His account of his childhood is not a bio-historical narrative told through recounting a succession of formative events. Instead, Benjamin offers an account of his childhood in the same way he offers an account of Paris in the nineteenth century, through the material objects that give form to experience. For Benjamin recalling the room in which the experience occurred is as important if not more so than the experience itself.

[100] Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2006), 37.

The material objects are portals into the fabric of memory that give shape to Benjamin's understanding of the past, which is guided by affect as opposed to reason. His method of accounting for the past in this way is not only a-temporal; it works against the rectilinear succession of time by displacing memories through the process of remembering.

Instead of offering a list of events than can be placed on a timeline, Benjamin offers a constellation of memory. In this way the event is removed from historical time, from the past, and one is able to re-experience it again as a new beginning. When the event, or fragment, is ripped from the context of historicism in this way, it can no longer be known, it cannot be mastered. The work of history loses its authority, which relies upon a linear temporal framework. Benjamin isn't bridging over the gaps in history; he is working to blast open the continuum of history.

To read Benjamin as nostalgic or longing to redeem the past is to misperceive his political project. The apparent emptiness of objects removed from history is the physical debris progress leaves behind. For Benjamin this debris is what remains, and these objects do not belong to the tradition of history or the work of historicism, but are rather caused by them. As such, they are signifiers for locating practices of power, the destructive promise of technological progress, and the visible wreckage left behind by the so-called victors of history. They are the dialectical images and the objects of contemplation that offer us a way in.[101] In this way, Benjamin's understanding of historical thought is laid out in his works on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and "On the Concept of History". In these writings, Benjamin focuses on the relationship between *Trauerspiel*, melancholy, history, and time.

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[101] There is an interesting dance here between Benjamin's conceptions of objects and the material of life and Arendt's assertion that language is essentially what is left behind. Since objects are necessarily possessed by language, they take on a linguistic form that is continuously unfolding for Benjamin.

In critiquing Carl Schmitt's conception of sovereignty, and refusing Aristotle's definition of tragedy, Benjamin draws important distinctions between tragedy, which is bound to mourning and the *Trauerspiel*, which is characterized by various melancholic personalities. Throughout his texts Benjamin conflates mourning with melancholia, complicating the traditional dichotomies and definitions. The distinction between tragedy and the *Trauerspiel* is useful for thinking about contemporary politics and modes of political action.

I. Melancholy

For Benjamin, the melancholic disposition represents a critical temporality. Conceptually, melancholy is imbedded throughout much of Benjamin's work and many scholars have turned to this pivotal theme to explore his writings. For example, Max Pensky situates the concept of melancholy at the heart of all of Benjamin's work, focusing on his definition of *acedia*; Eric Santner focuses on the passages in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* that bind melancholy to the condition of creaturely life; and Jonathan Flatley focuses on Benjamin's criticism of left melancholy, arguing that melancholy must be connected to present political concerns. Each of these readings emphasizes a different aspect of Benjamin's writings on melancholy. There is no singular melancholy, but rather histories of melancholies at play throughout Benjamin's work on the *Trauerspiel.*

In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama,* Benjamin offers a brief history of melancholy, focusing on Saturn, *Chronos,* and *acedia*. For Benjamin, melancholy is a complex disposition with a dynamic past that gives form to his understanding of materialist dialectical thinking. Melancholy is the key trait of the characters in the Baroque mourning-play, and each character expresses a different form of the affective disposition. Benjamin begins by

referencing Kant's definition of melancholy in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, which is rooted in the "work of the older theoreticians." Melancholy is depicted as "'vengefulness . . . inspirations, visions, temptations, . . . significant dreams, presentiments, and miraculous portents.'"[102] For Benjamin, melancholia cannot be confined to medical, astrological, or sociological disciplines, but instead veers from one into the other. Marked as an ancient pathology, as a medical ailment melancholy was assigned to the rule of Saturn, and later the spleen. From observation, melancholics have an "inclination for long journeys," genius, providence, and contemplation. In vaguely tracing these wandering definitions of melancholia, Benjamin demonstrates the inability to confine the affect to some form of empirical reality. His working through the rough history shows how the interpretations and reinterpretations of a concept like melancholia can be opened up in different ways.

At heart melancholy is, if nothing else, riddled with contradictions.

> The astronomical explanation of this is obscure. But not if the distance of the planet from the earth and the consequently long duration of its orbit are no longer conceived in the negative sense of the Salerno doctors, but rather in a beneficent sense, with reference to the divine reason which assigns the menacing star to the remotest place, and if, on the other hand, the introspection of the melancholy man is understood with reference to Saturn which 'as the highest planet and the one farthest from everyday life, the originator of all deep contemplation, calls the soul from externalities to the inner world, causes it to rise ever higher, finally endowing it with the utmost knowledge and with the gift of prophecy.' Re-interpretations of this kind, which give the transformation of these doctrines its fascination, reveal a dialectical trait in the idea of Saturn, which corresponds astonishingly to the dialectic of the Greek conception of melancholy.[103]

Saturn exists in the spirit of contradictions. "Like melancholy, Saturn too, this spirit of contradictions, endows the soul, on the one hand, with sloth and dullness, on the other, with the power of intelligence of contemplation; like melancholy, Saturn also constantly threatens those who are subject to him, however illustrious they may be in and of for themselves, with the dangers of depression or manic ecstasy . . ."[104] Reading Dürer's *Melencolie 1* through

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[102] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Verso, 2009), 148.
[103] Ibid., 149.
[104] Ibid.

Panofsky and Saxl, Benjamin focuses on the dialectical quality of melancholy through the various representations.

According to Benjamin, the German *Trauerspiel* "remained astonishingly obscure to itself, and was able to portray the melancholic only in the crude and washed-out colors of the medieval complexion-books."[105] Benjamin focuses his study on Dürer's artistic rendering. The genius of Dürer's work was its use of symbolism — the downward gaze, the prophetic dreams, and the dog, are just a few of the melancholic emblems present in the masterpiece. In the Baroque there is a relationship between the symbolic and the allegorical, which contains destructive potential and dialectical force. "For the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory."[106] Allegory is a mode of political contemplation, defined by a melancholic disposition; it is not a form of political action within the material world of objects.[107] Ultimately, Benjamin is critical of the mourning-play. The disruptive potential Benjamin sees in the Baroque is undermined by its idealism. The theological impulse of German idealism is anti-political, and the accompanying conception of melancholy that emerges with allegory relies upon a removed contemplative gaze. Within this view, the world of things — "dead objects" — cannot be redeemed, and the gaze is shifted towards the after-life.

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[105] Ibid., 158.
[106] Ibid., 185.
[107] In *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss nicely summarizes Benjamin's argument about the relationship between allegory and melancholy writing, "The Baroque poets saw in transitory nature an allegory for human history, in which the latter appeared, not as a divine plan or chain of events on a 'road to salvation,' but as death, ruin, catastrophe; and it was this essentially philosophical attitude that gave allegory a claims beyond mere aesthetic device. The forsakenness of nature, understand as a theological truth, was the source of the melancholy of the allegorists: 'The steadfastness which expresses itself in the intention of mourning is born out of loyalty to the world of things.' But it is a world of 'dead objects,' a realm of 'infinite hopelessness.' In it, political action is judged as mere arbitrary intrigue.' Now at the crucial point—and this follows necessarily from the melancholic's politics of contemplation rather than intervention—allegory deserts both history and nature and (like the whole tradition of idealist philosophy that comes after it), takes refuge in the spirit. All hope is reserved for a hereafter that is 'emptied of everything that contains even the imperceptible breath of the world.'" Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 175.

This impotent definition of melancholy is extended to the principal character, the sovereign, in the mourning-play, and Benjamin's discussion of the sovereign plays with a paradoxical definition of melancholy as *acedia* that becomes a way of critiquing sovereignty. In describing the sovereign this way, Benjamin draws into focus the question: what is political action? Benjamin's discussion of *acedia*, in this sense, is inline with his critique of Eric Kästner in his essay "Left Melancholy." In this essay, Benjamin offers a very sardonic form of melancholy, which is characterized by meaningless action. Instead of the sovereign's "right" to act being undermined by his *acedia*, the left-wing radical's desire for political movement in undermined by his sentimental insistence on acting in the past. What the sovereign and the left-radical share in common is a desire for some form of political action. The forces of capitalist production have reified left wing struggle, transforming political movements into objects of consumption, bound by a form of identity politics.

Benjamin discusses the empty forms of left wing resistance. He argues that political struggle in itself has been turned into an object of consumption. Written as a critique of the left intelligentsia during the collapse of the Weimar Republic, Benjamin criticizes Kästner's poetry for mirroring the petit-bourgeoisie it appears to critique. [108] "In short, this left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer, in general, any corresponding political action. It is not to the left of this or that tendency, but simply to the left of what is generally possible. For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet. The metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption--that is this literature's

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[108] Benjamin writes, "No wonder Kästner, in settling accounts with the bankers in 'A Hymn', is as obliquely familial as he is obliquely economic when he presents the nocturnal thoughts of a proletarian woman under the title 'A Mother Takes Stock.' Ultimately, home and income remain the strings with which a better-off class leads the mewling poet." The poet, Benjamin argues is *heavy-hearted* because he has succumbed to routine through loss of indignation. He has *forfeited the gift of being disgusted.* The style of irony, in which Kästner writes, has become routine in itself.

latest hit."[109] The signs and symbols represent the leftover sentimentalism of past political struggles. Repeated rhetoric and the clenched papier-mâché fist come to replace actual left-wing resistance. The objects once produced alongside a movement have become isolated signs of movement that provide gratification in the same way any other object of consumption does.

Benjamin expresses a consistent and general wariness towards political action through his writings on melancholy. Absent theology, the radical potential of melancholy as a political disposition lays in its distant stance towards the world. It can easily be argued that melancholy is the key conceptual category in much of Benjamin's writings, but it is important to remember the relationship Benjamin draws between political action and melancholia in critiquing both the sovereign and left wing activist.[110] There is a tendency in reading Benjamin to transform his use of melancholy, or critique of the mourning-play, into a new form of left political action. There is a reductionism in reading Benjamin this way that often misses his critique of linear temporality and conception of historical materialism.

I.II. Reading Benjamin's Melancholy

As Jonathan Flatley surmises in his *Affective Mapping*, "For Benjamin, melancholia is not a problem to be cured; loss is not something to get over and leave behind . . .Thus, he persistently critiques a melancholia that leads to inaction and complacency, such as the one

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[109] Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 19.

[110] For a critical summary of *melancholy* as the organizing principle in Benjamin's work see: Ilit Ferber's *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language*. For a critical history of melancholy see: *Saturn and Melancholy* by Fritz Saxle, Raymond Klibansky, and Erwin Panofsky. For a more contemporary history of melancholy see: *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* by Jennifer Radden, and *Black Sun* by Julia Kristeva.

he finds in the (at the time) popular poetry of Eric Kästner."[111] Focusing on the left melancholy Benjamin is critical of, Flatley argues that melancholy must be connected to the present, and present political concerns. He writes, "What emerges is the picture of a politicizing, splenetic melancholy, where clinging to things from the past *enable* interest and action in the present world and is indeed the very mechanism for that interest." Rejecting Aristotle's definition of melancholy wholesale, Flatley turns to the idea of "melancholy as method" tying together Benjamin's *Arcades* with *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* through the theme of allegory. Flatley too wants to draw some form of "politicizing" action out of melancholy arguing that melancholy is not so much a disposition for Benjamin as marker of "historical-allegorical insight."[112] In order to explore this idea of melancholy as method, Flatley turns to Benjamin's "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" and brings together his reflections on remembering and *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Objects facilitate a form of remembering that is not experience proper, but a form of "memory-experience." Flatley writes, "Indeed, one might say that this memory-experience does not really happen *in* the subject, but outside of us in the world of things."[113] For Flatley, Benjamin's idea of historical materialism is a practice of melancholy remembrance that enables engagement with present political concerns.

In *Melancholy Dialectics*, Max Pensky focuses on the contradictory nature of melancholy as *acedia*. According to Pensky the melancholic experiences a desire to transform his or her melancholy into a productive form of action. Pensky argues the dialectical potential of melancholia is contained in the paradox of simultaneously experiencing *acedia* and the drive to action. Pensky writes, "He demands a moment of recognition, in which

[111] Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), 64.
[112] Ibid., 65.
[113] Ibid., 68.

contemporary melancholia would be forced to reveal its duplicity with the agents of oppression, and he proclaims a critique that, stripped of all its esoteric, contemplative ornament, would publicly demand a decisive commitment to political action."[114] Pensky is not referring here to traditional notions of political action, but rather to a critically engaged form of thinking and writing that essentially inverts melancholia, turning it back upon itself. He argues that Benjamin is taking his own melancholia and using it to do something productive through writing, which is counterintuitive. While I agree with Pensky's conclusion that melancholy more broadly contains dialectical potential, it is the potential of historical materialism. Melancholy cannot be reduced to a form of *acedia* any more than the sum of Benjamin's writings can be reduced to his own sad nature.

In Pensky's terms of talking about melancholy as a form of *acedia* there is an assumption that melancholy is not an active affect. That it is sedentary, or inward in a way that puts it at odds with the way we think about political action. Benjamin's characterization of the sovereign in the *Trauerspiel* is caught between a desire and imperative to act and the inability to fulfill the action. This paradox is meant to illustrate how the power of the sovereign is truly saturnine. It is not in itself dialectical in a traditional or productive way. If we are to wrest a conception of dialectics away from Benjamin's writing it must focus on his conception of historical materialism and temporality in relationship to melancholy.[115]

Benjamin's contemplative approach to the objects of his work is testament to the melancholy dialectic. The critical potential of what Pensky calls Benjamin's melancholy

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[114] Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: Univ of Massachusetts Pr, 2001), 18. Pensky continues, "This critical demand is not merely opposed to melancholia—it is precisely antithetical to it. If melancholia had always borne connotations of the intensity of subjective contemplation, Benjamin demands a post subjective, socially engaged form of thinking and writing."

[115] While Pensky rightly highlights the paradox contained within Benjamin's writings on melancholia, his emphasis on what he perceives to be the melancholic's desire to transform his melancholy into something useful essentially transforms melancholy into a methodology for dialectical thinking and writing. In focusing on Benjamin's own "sad" melancholic disposition, Pensky wants to argue that Benjamin sublimates and assuages his melancholy through his work in order to overcome it.

dialectic is a form of critical temporality that arrests time. Pensky writes, "Melancholy occupies the space that separates Benjamin's 'messianic' and 'materialistic' gaze — it is a space that is carved between the subject and the object by a question concerning the possibility of meaning: a space Benjamin sought his life long to fill with the storehouse of images yielded up to him and constructed in his shocking, healing writing."[116] The objects of contemplation that Benjamin collected in fragment-form in his *Passagenwerk* or *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* are dialectical images that represent what he calls *crystallization*. These dialectical images broken away from the mosaic, re-thought and given new context, have the power to interrupt the linear flow of capitalist time, what Benjamin calls homogenous, empty time.

In convolute "N" of the *Passagenwerk* Benjamin nicely describes the relationship between dialectical thinking, the object of contemplation, and time.

> "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language."[117]

For Benjamin, the image in itself contains a dialectic, which is accessed through the way the subject approaches its object of contemplation. The image is "dialectics at a standstill", and in different places, Benjamin describes this standstill as a *flash, a lightening flash, crystallization,* and the *nunc stans*. In *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* and "On the Concept of History" Benjamin approaches the relationship between the subject and the object by considering temporality. In the *Arcades Project* we see Benjamin carrying out his work as a form of critique, whether or not we can call this political action is debatable. Benjamin is offering a critical dialectic between the subject and the object that is both materialist and messianic in

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[116] Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 16.
[117] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002), 462.

order to critique normative narratives of progress and time that reify capitalist logic. Within this dialectical play, which has the power to hold the object of contemplation apart from its historical context, Benjamin argues that philosophical truth can be discovered. The relationship between the melancholic disposition, which turns the subject towards the object with a contemplative gaze, and the search for truth through thinking and writing has been documented back to Aristotle.[118] The melancholic suffers from melancholy precisely because he or she can see reality, and yet cannot augment reality.[119]

Unlike Pensky, Santner focuses on the concept of "creaturely life" in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book. Man's condition in the world, or what Benjamin calls *das Kreaturliche*, is a part of his study of melancholy. In *Creaturely Life*, Eric Santner focuses on the passages in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* that bind melancholy to the condition of creaturely life. He writes, "In his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin argues that the melancholy affect 'emerges from the depths of the creaturely realm' and 'is the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses.'"[120] For Santner melancholy becomes the universalizing feature of humanism; to be creaturely means to be vulnerable, to suffer. For Santner *creaturely life* and the affect of melancholy do not represent a critical temporality, but rather a temporality of violence, where the individual is subject to the sovereign because of his creatureliness.[121]

The idea of creaturely life that Benjamin constructs is interesting and worth attention, but the way Santner approaches the texts willfully reduces melancholy to a singular definition that rejects the histories of melancholies Benjamin is describing. Benjamin actually

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[118] Aristotle, *Problems, Volume II: Books 20-38*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[119] In the *Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin discusses the relationship between the ability to see or predict the future and melancholia.

[120] Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 16.

[121] The creature is created by the sovereign when he is subjected to his violence. Santner ties this definition of creaturely life to the idea of *natural history* that Benjamin discusses in his "Critique of Violence" essay, which argues that natural history becomes an instrument of power in the form of laws. It is this form of naturalized power that gives the sovereign the authority to inflict violence against embodied beings, interpellating them as subjects.

writes, "If melancholy emerges from the depths of the creaturely to which the speculative thought of the age felt itself bound by the bonds of the church itself then this explained its omnipotence. In fact it is the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses, and it has always been noticed that its power need be no less in the gaze of a dog than in the attitude of a pensive genius."[122] A few passages later he clarifies that "This gloomy conception of melancholy is not of course the original way of seeing it. In antiquity it was, rather, seen in a dialectical way. In a canonic passage in Aristotle genius is linked with madness within the concept of melancholy."[123] Benjamin is actually criticizing this "gloomy conception of melancholy."

Melancholy for Benjamin serves a different political purpose; melancholy as *acedia* is characterized by an inability to act. The distinction between historical time and history that Benjamin offers is characterized by the duality of melancholy. A parallel runs throughout the play between the divinity of historical time and the constraints of creaturely history. Historical life is the object of the mourning play, but history is the instrument given to the sovereign to wield his power.

Benjamin begins his study of "Trauerspiel and Tragedy" saying that the object of the *Trauerspiel* is historical life, but his point is that historical life is a *Trauerspiel*. The main character in the play is the Prince, who holds history in his hands. History in the hands of the Prince serves a specific political purpose, one that differentiates him from creaturely life, but firmly posits him within creaturely life. His claim to authority and power is given credence by the loyalty of his followers but, as Benjamin points out, loyalty in the world of things is always unfaithful. And so, "The Prince is the paradigm of the melancholy man. Nothing demonstrates the frailty of the creature so drastically as the fact that even he is

[122] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 146.
[123] Ibid., 147.

subject to it."[124] The materiality of creaturely life undermines the Prince's claim to sovereignty, and reveals the tyrannical nature of his actions. Despite his clutch on history he cannot overcome historical time, he has no control over fate, unlike the heroes in tragedies. The power he has to make the decision, to declare a state of emergency, is even subdued by his melancholy mournful character, which is further undermined by the treacherous loyalty of his followers.

II. The Mourning Play and the Melancholy Prince

"Mournful melancholy mostly dwells in palaces."
— Walter Benjamin

Trauer, for Benjamin, is a form of work or play, and comes from the German baroque tradition. For Benjamin, the distinction between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy relies upon a distinction between "historical time" and "tragic time". In the *Trauerspiel* the main object of the content is historical life, and the main character is the monarch or sovereign. "Historical life" he writes, "as it was conceived at that time, is its content, its true object. In this it is different from tragedy. For the object of the latter is not history, but myth, and the tragic stature of the *dramatis personae* does not derive from rank — the absolute monarchy — but from the pre-historic epoch of their existence — the past age of heroes."[125] Historical life composes the true object of the *Trauerspiel,* as opposed to the tragedy, which relies upon the determined narrative of heroic actions and death. Historical life, in Benjaminian terms, is not bound to the confines of earthly, creaturely narrative. In saying the object of the *Trauerspiel* is historical life, Benjamin is opening up the politically disruptive potential of the text. Unlike tragedy, which relies upon myth and history, the *Trauerspiel* breaks with a determined

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124 Ibid., 142.
125 Ibid., 62.

narrative. Benjamin begins his definition of *Trauerspiel* with a passage from Opitz, arguing that core of *Trauerspiel* is comprised of "the commands of kings, killings, despair, infanticide and patricide, conflagrations, incest, war and commotion, lamentation, weeping, sighing, and suchlike."[126] Those who write mourning plays must be well versed in the language of politics.

Mourning, which Benjamin conflates with melancholy, "is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of a mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it. Every feeling is bound to an *a priori* object, and the representation of this object is its phenomenology. Accordingly the theory of mourning, which emerged unmistakably as a *pendant* to the theory of tragedy, can only be developed in the description of that world which is revealed under the gaze of the melancholy man."[127] Mourning in this baroque sense becomes an ornament to the theory of tragedy. Mourning and melancholia understood together offer a different definition of mourning. The root of this melancholy mourning, Benjamin argues, is a product of Lutheranism, which deprived human acts of all value, giving birth to an empty world.[128] The laws that govern the *Trauerspiel* are found in the heart of mourning, which is not so much a feeling as it is the depiction of the relationship between a subject and object — the subject who approaches the object for contemplation. For example, Benjamin offers up the prophetic image of Dürer's figure *Melencolia*, where "the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation."[129] Active life is separated from the melancholic figure that observes the world from a distance with a turned down face. In this conception of melancholy mourning there is an explicit divide between the active world and the act of contemplation. Melancholy

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid., 139.
[128] I'm rephrasing Benjamin. Ibid., 138–139.
[129] Ibid., 140.

in this sense represents a simultaneous withdrawal from and engagement with the world through thinking and contemplation.

For Benjamin there is a direct relationship between the concept of sovereignty and the concept of history. The sovereign "is the representative of history. He holds the course of history in his hand like a scepter."[130] According to Benjamin this depiction of sovereignty arose with the new concept of sovereignty that emerged in the seventeenth century during the counter-reformation. The baroque definition of sovereignty, he argues, is a result of the absence of eschatology. "The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world…"[131] The sovereign in the German Baroque period is defined by his relationship to and separation from the divine. The move to undercut transcendence liberated the sovereign from God, reifying his powers within the earthly realm. Benjamin's delicate dance here directly undercuts Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty in *Political Theology*. In Benjamin's words "The level of the state of creation, the terrain on which the *Trauerspiel* is enacted, also unmistakably exercises a determining influence on the sovereign. However highly he is enthroned over subject and state, his status is confined to the world of creation; he is the lord of the creatures, but he remains a creature."[132] The absence of an eschatology meant that the sovereign remained a man among men. Without the authority of divinity, the sovereign's actions were no longer beyond the human realm. In "transcending transcendence," claiming his power through proclaiming a state of emergency, the sovereign simultaneously undermines his ability to enact the power of sovereignty he claims. In other words, the sovereign is impotent, because "The prince, who is responsible for making the

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[130] Ibid., 65.
[131] Ibid., 66 . " . . .and from it the baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation and, at is high point, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven, enabling it, as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence.
[132] Ibid., 85.

decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision." The Prince's indecision is what turns him from a prince into a tyrant, because he has no real authority.[133]

Benjamin's depiction of the baroque sovereign is designed as a counterargument to Schmitt's discussion of the state of emergency in *Political Theology*, which claims that "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception." Benjamin writes, "Whereas the modern concept of sovereignty amounts to a supreme executive power on the part of the prince, the baroque concept emerges from a discussion of the state of emergency, and makes it the most important function of the prince to avert this. The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of emergency."[134] If the sovereign has the right to declare a state of emergency, but has no ability to decide on proclaiming a state of emergency, then he is revealed as a tyrant. "The drama makes a special point of endowing the ruler with the gesture of executive power as his characteristic gesture, and having him take part in the action with the words and behavior of a tyrant even where the situation does not require it; in the same way it was probably unusual for full robes, crown and scepter to be wanting when the ruler appeared on stage."[135] The tyrant and the sovereign are different faces of the same coin in the baroque, and "the function of the tyrant is the restoration of order in the state of emergency: a dictatorship

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[133] Ibid., 70–71.Samuel Weber makes this point nicely. He writes: "In emphasizing the dictatorial tendency of the sovereign, Benjamin follows Schmitt here practically to the letter ('The theory of sovereignty, which takes as its example the special case in which dictatorial powers are unfolded, positively demands the completion of the image of the sovereign, as tyrant'). But in so doing, he arrives at a result that is almost diametrically opposed to that of Schmitt: the very notion of sovereignty itself is put radically into question. One extreme illustration of this is the figure of Herod, Kind of the Jews, 'who, as autocrat gone mad, became emblematic of a deranged creation' and as such also an exemplary illustration of the fate of the 'sovereign for the seventeenth century': the summit of creation, erupting into madness like a volcano and destroying himself and his entire court.... He falls victim to the disproportion between the unlimited hierarchical dignity with which he is divinely invested and the humble estate of his humanity." Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Diacritics* 22, no. 3/4.

[134] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 65.

[135] Ibid., 69.

whose utopian goal will always be to replace the unpredictability of historical accident with the iron constitution of the laws of nature."[136] The impotence of the sovereign combined with the tyrannical nature of his personality is the form of the martyr-drama *Trauerspiel*. In this mourning play the prince's impotency is revealed through his indecisiveness, which proves he is not above men. Like anyone else he cannot rise above the movement of historical time, because he is human, individuated, and so is subject to the temporal constraints of this world. The function of the tyrant is to forcibly impose order upon the unpredictability of historical time, but historical time cannot be subjected to empirical processes. Put another way, it doesn't matter how many children Saturn eats he will always be undone.

For Benjamin, in order to undermine the notion that sovereignty is the exception to the rule he had to construct a temporal framework for thinking about what it is the sovereign does (or doesn't do) and where the power to act comes from.[137] In a separate short fragment published in Benjamin's collected writings, entitled "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy", he approaches the differences between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy through the different ways they relate to historical time. Historical time, according to Benjamin, is unfulfilled time. He writes:

> Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence. For empirical events time is nothing but a form, but, what is more important, as a form it is unfulfilled. The event does not fulfill the formal nature of the time in which it takes place. For we should not think of time as merely the measure that records the durations of a mechanical change. Although such time is indeed a relatively empty form, to think of its being filled makes no sense. Historical time, however, differs from this mechanical time. It determines much more than the possibility of spatial changes of a specific magnitude and regularity that is to say, like the hands of a clock-simultaneously with spatial changes of a complex nature.[138]

The concept of historical time is directly tied the discussion of the figure of the sovereign.

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[136] Ibid., 74.

[137] Again, Benjamin is responding to Schmitt's claim that "The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception."

[138] Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 2005, 56.

Separated from Benjamin's conception of mechanical time, or what he will call empty homogenous time, historical time cannot be bound by reason or progress. It is not mechanical time; empirical processes cannot grasp it. For empirical events time is nothing but an unfilled form. On the other hand the event does not fulfill the formal nature of historical time in which it takes place. A process that is perfect in historical terms is indeterminate empirically. Benjamin draws a further distinction within historical time, between tragic time and messianic time. He writes,

> This idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time. Moreover, the idea of a fulfilled historical time is never identical with the idea of an individual time. This feature naturally changes the meaning of fulfillment completely, and it is this that distinguishes tragic time from messianic time. Tragic time is related to the latter in the same way that individually fulfilled time relates to a divinely fulfilled one.[139]

This distinction between tragic time and messianic time, between the fulfillment of individual time and the fulfillment of a messianic time distinguishes the mourning play from the tragedy. Messianic time is bound to historical time and is always unfulfilled, extending in every direction. It is the idea of a divinely fulfilled time. Tragic time, on the other hand, is related to individual time, and is fulfilled by the individual — the hero who dies of immortality. Benjamin writes, "Tragedy may be distinguished from the mourning play through the different ways they relate to historical time. In tragedy the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time. He dies of immortality." The "overdetermined" death of the tragic hero relies upon the idea that individual time can be fulfilled. In the mourning play there is symmetrical mirroring between the absolute and the finite, between the divine and man. For Benjamin, the repetition in the script iterates the play between the two forms of time. Whereas in the tragedy the fate of the hero is "overdetermined" and he must die of immortality, because of the immediacy "individual time confers on the action", in the

[139] Ibid.

mourning play "the law governing a higher life prevails" over "earthly existence." In other words, in the mourning play the acts are carried out on two planes, what Benjamin describes as a hyperbola, where one branch is restricted to the earthly realm while the other exists in infinity. This mirroring repetition is the law on which the mourning play is founded. In the *Trauerspiel* time is not fulfilled, it is infinite, nonindividual, and without historical universality. The mourning play does not present us with the "image of a higher existence" but with "one of two mirror-images."[140]

Another way to think about the mirroring Benjamin describes is through his distinction between Historical Life — the object of the mourning play — and historical time, the temporality that guides its movement. While the Prince has the power to wield history, he does not have the power to control historical time, which emerges as the true contemplative object of the *Trauerspiel*. In this sense, historical time becomes a powerful check on the Prince's right to claim sovereign authority through declaring a state of emergency. If the Prince cannot make his declaration, but exercises his power anyway he is revealed as a tyrant, who becomes subject to historical time, transforming him into a martyr.

Historical time is the uncontrollable force in the mourning play that denies the Prince the ability to fulfill time or make a decision. Mourning is at the heart of history, because it provides the time sequence of historical life that grounds its narrative. In this melancholy mourning play contemplation is directed towards the empty material objects of

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[140] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2004), 57 ."The universality of its time is spectral, not mythic. A sign that it is related in its innermost core to the mirror-nature of games is that it has an even number of acts. As in all other respects . . . Its characters are royal, as is necessarily the case in the tragic drama because of the symbolic level of meaning. The play is ennobled by the distance which everywhere separates image and mirror-image, the signifier and signified. Thus, the mourning play presents us not with the image of a higher existence but only with one of two mirror-images, and its continuation is no less schematic than itself. The dead become ghosts. The mourning play exhausts artistically the historical idea of repetition. Consequently, it addresses a problem that is completely different from the one dealt with in tragedy."

life that carry meaning; whereas the real object of contemplation for us the audience is historical time itself.

Historical time, as the object of contemplation, opens up the possibility of exploring messianic time. In Benjamin's last work, "On the Concept of History," he draws a direct connection between the "state of emergency" and the practice of fascism, which operates against historical time. He writes, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm."[141] In the mourning play the sovereign holds history in his hands, wielding it like a scepter, but in his hands it has no more value or power than his crown and purple robes. The *Trauerspiel* is a form that reveals the impotency of the sovereign by offering us a different temporality. In other words, the mourning play offers us a way to take history out of the hand of the Prince revealing that the so-called state of emergency is never an exception. It is only the belief in a history that proclaims the state of emergency is an exception that gives the oppressor power.

In *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin describes historicism apart from historical materialism as a form of *acedia* that always falls on the side of the victor. In fragment number seven he writes,

> Fustel de Coulanges recommended to the historian, that if he wished to reexperience an epoch, he should remove everything he knows about the later course of history from his head. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a procedure of empathy. Its origin is the heaviness at heart, the acedia, which despairs of mastering the genuine historical picture, which so fleetingly flashes by. The theologians of the Middle Ages considered it the primary cause of melancholy. Flaubert, who was acquainted with it, wrote: "*Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage*." [Few people can guess how despondent

[141] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

> one has to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.] The nature of this melancholy becomes clearer, once one asks the question, with whom does the historical writer of historicism actually empathize. The answer is irrefutably with the victor. Those who currently rule are however the heirs of all those who have ever been victorious. Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time. This says quite enough to the historical materialist. Whoever until this day emerges victorious, marches in the triumphal procession in which today's rulers tread over those who are sprawled underfoot. The spoils are, as was ever the case, carried along in the triumphal procession. They are known as the cultural heritage. In the historical materialist they have to reckon with a distanced observer. For what he surveys as the cultural heritage is part and parcel of a lineage [*Abkunft*: descent] which he cannot contemplate without horror. It owes its existence not only to the toil of the great geniuses, who created it, but also to the nameless drudgery of its contemporaries. There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another. The historical materialist thus moves as far away from this as measurably possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.[142]

Here in Benjamin's last work we hear him echoing his understanding of the relationship between *acedia* as a form of melancholic mourning and sovereignty that he developed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The historicist suffers from a form of *acedia*, which is his weakness. His sympathy falls on the side of the victor. The historicist, much like the Prince, wishes to conquer historical time, ordering the events of history along the linear path of homogenous, empty time.

If we are willing to accept a singular static notion of history then we are complicit in sympathizing with the victor. Whereas the historicist offers a universal conception of history, the historical materialist offers a specific experience with the past. The experiences of the past, history, are the object of contemplation, which means that it is the responsibility of the historical materialist to constantly return to the object of contemplation. Historicism is "additive" and it "musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it

[142] Ibid., 256–257.

crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters a monad."[143]

In order for Schmitt to endow the Prince or Monarch with the power of sovereignty through the declaration of a state of emergency, he had to ascribe to a universal notion of history. History in the hands of the sovereign bears the weight of authority, and is used in order to preserve tradition and so power. This is what Benjamin means in "On the Concept of History" when he writes that history is in danger of becoming "a tool of the ruling classes."[144] The messiah comes not only as the redeemer of history but the subduer of the Antichrist, the Antichrist being the conformist, who seeks to turn history as an object proper into an instrument of power for the ruling classes like the sovereign. Benjamin is critical of what he calls a "vulgar-Marxist" conception of nature that accepts "progress" as part of our inheritance of history. Instead of recognizing the barbarism inherent in the narrative of progress, which is handed down by the victors, Marx accepts technological progress as a condition of the laboring process. "It recognizes only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays by the technocratic features later encountered in fascism."[145] For Benjamin the conception of historical progress is bound to the historicist's universal offering of the past. Progress is the narrative of history.

The historicist's conception of historical progress is the progression of a homogenous, empty time.[146] Benjamin draws a further distinction between *Jetztzeit* and *Gegenwart* — the present time and now time — in order to further separate the historicist

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[143] Ibid., 262–263.
[144] Ibid., 255. "In every era the attempt must be made anew to rest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist."
[145] Ibid., 259.
[146] Ibid., 261."The concept of historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself."

from the historical materialist. "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]."[147] The *nunc stans*, the non-time is the spatial disposition of the historical materialist who operates beyond the realm of history. "A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For the notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past."[148] The lack of commitment to the other that Benjamin's describes in the relationship between the courtier and the prince illustrates the importance of material-fetishism, which illustrates the relationship between historical life and *trauerspiel* in the construction of Subjectivity. Although Benjamin is a "thinker of things," understanding the world through objects, which give form to daily life, he understands that redemption for the oppressed does not exist within the things themselves. The world of things belongs to "homogenous, empty time" where the past is recycled into the new through processes of production and consumption.[149]

II.I. The Courtier

Benjamin further strips the sovereign of his power by introducing us to another character in the *Trauerspiel*, the courtier. The relationship between the courtier and the Prince

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[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid., 262.
[149] In Capital, Karl Marx describes the difference between ascribed value and use-value. Use-value is value in and of itself while ascribed value is the market value assigned to an object through the processes of production. The objects that surround us and give form to our sense of self are constantly being emptied out and filled with meaning. Benjamin's reading of Marx is idiosyncratic in the sense that he focuses on his notion of the superstructure, which gives form to Benjamin's use of historical materialism. Focusing on subject-object relationships, Benjamin draws out the relationship between the work of historicism and material fetishism. Susan Buck Morss draws out the relationship between Benjamin's *Passegenwerk* and Marx's idea of "commodity fetishism" in *The Dialectics of Seeing*. Walter Benjamin et al., *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Reprint edition (Verso, 2009), 142. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* (London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 1992).

reveals the shallowness of the subject's attachment to the authority of the Prince. The melancholy of the prince, as Benjamin describes it, is *acedia*. Saturn causes people to be 'apathetic, indecisive, slow'. The fall of the tyrant is caused by indolence of the heart. Just as this characterizes the figure of the tyrant so does unfaithfulness — another feature of the saturnine man — characterizes the figure of the courtier."[150] The Prince's claim to authority is undermined by his melancholy disposition, and his power as Prince is further undermined by the *acedia* of his subjects. Melancholy, here, serves a dual purpose. It reveals the Prince for who he really is, a man among men, and it reveals the perfidiousness of the subjects who are supposed to be loyal.

Benjamin describes the courtier's melancholy in terms of material attachment. His treachery is:

> …a dismal and melancholy submission to a supposedly unfathomable order of baleful constellations, which assumes an almost material character. Crown, royal purple, scepter are indeed ultimately properties, in the sense of the drama of fate, and they are endowed with a fate, to which the courtier, as the augur of this fate, is the first to submit. His unfaithfulness to man is matched by a loyalty to these things to the point of being absorbed in contemplative devotion to them.[151]

The courtier is loyal only to the accouterments of power, and treats them as dissociated objects of melancholy contemplation. His commitment relies upon the symbolic order of power, which the Prince embodies and signifies. The power to declare a state of emergency, the crown, robes, and so on all signify the authority he has been granted. All meaning is contained within the material objects, which facilitate ritual and the enactment of authority. Benjamin's depiction of the courtier illustrates the subject's commitment to material objects over individual human beings. The courtier's "Loyalty is completely appropriate only to the relationship of man to the world of things."[152]

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[150] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 156.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid., 156–157.

The Courtier betrays the *prince* because his commitment is to the material representations of kingdom over the individual princes who manifest their power through the materiality of rulership. In "critical moments" the courtier will abandon the ruler, with a sense of mourning, which Benjamin calls parasitical. The other who signified authority was only able to do so because of the material structure and ritual available. As long as the courtier has a prince it doesn't matter who the prince is. Loyalty only exists in the realm of creaturely life. Benjamin writes, "all essential decisions in relation to men can offend against loyalty; they are all subject to higher laws. Loyalty is completely appropriate only to the relationship of man to the world of things. The latter knows no higher law, and loyalty knows no object to which it might belong more exclusively than the world of things."[153] The mournful melancholy Benjamin describes between the figure of the Prince and the courtier is one founded upon the idea of betrayal, and lack of loyalty, revealing once again the earthly constraints of either's commitment. Loyalty, in Benjamin's terms, betrays the world, and melancholy betrays the world "for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them."[154] The fragility of the Prince's power, or the conditions of his creaturely life, as Benjamin might describe it, is what characterizes his melancholy nature.

The world of things represents another marked distinction between the *Trauerspiel* and tragedy.[155] This distinction between the tradition of romantic drama and tragedy is characterized by the introduction of stage property, which signifies and seals the tragic fate. "For once human life has sunk into the merely creaturely, even the life of apparently dead objects secures power over it. The effectiveness of the object where guilt has been incurred

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[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid., 157.
[155] Ibid., 133–134. "But if tragedy is completely released from the world of things, this world towers oppressively over the horizon of the *Trauerspiel*."

is a sign of the approach of death. The passionate stirrings of creaturely life in man — in a word, passion itself — bring the fatal property into action."[156] Benjamin is primarily discussing Hamlet here, which for him signifies the martyr-drama *Trauerspiel*. By stage property he is very directly discussing the materiality of theater, the dagger, for instance, which symbolizes the seal of fate. The tragedy, on the other hand, which relies upon individual time renounces fate, the end has already been determined. The tragedy ends with a decision, but in the mourning play an ambiguity remains, what Benjamin describes as "an appeal of the kind martyrs utter."[157]

As such, the *Trauerspiel* has no proper end. The lack of ending is testament to the condition of historical time, which extends infinitely in every direction.[158] In many respects, materiality is the condition of creaturely life that gives form to the *Trauerspiel*; it is the subject of melancholy contemplation, and the cause of mourning. History in itself is set apart from historical time in order to represent a higher order of things. Benjamin must juxtapose his study of the mourning play with traditional tragedies in order to demonstrate the dynamism of time in the former, while explicating the narrowness and singleness of the latter. In the tragedy, the hero who dies of immorality through some consequential decision is saved in name only — the material signification of his being. In the mourning play the death is not

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[156] Ibid., 132.

[157] Ibid., 137.

[158] Benjamin writes, "its conclusion does not mark the end of an epoch, as the death of the tragic hero so emphatically does, in both an historical and individual sense. This individual sense—which also has the historical meaning of the end of the myth—is explained in the words that tragic life is 'the most exclusively immanent of all kinds of life. For this reason its limits always merge into death . . . For tragedy death—the ultimate limit—is an ever immanent reality, which is inextricably bound up with each of its occurrences. Death, as a form of tragic life, is an individual destiny; in the *Trauerspiel* it frequently takes the form of a communal fate, as if summoning all the participants before the highest court . . . Whereas the tragic hero, in his 'immortality', does not save his life, but only his name, in death the characters of the *Trauerspiel* lose only the name-bearing individuality, and not the vitality of their role. This survives undiminished in the spirit-world." Ibid., 136.

individual, and the one who dies is only stripped of his materiality. The *Trauerspiel* grants the possibility of a higher order of truth; tragedy denies it.

III. Honig, *Interrupted*

> This thoroughly vain attempt to present the tragic as something universally human just about explains how the analysis of it can quite deliberately be based on the impression 'which we modern men feel when we expose ourselves to the artistic effects of the forms with which ancient peoples and past ages endowed tragic fate in their literatures.' Nothing is in fact more questionable than the competence of the unguided feelings of 'modern men', especially where the judgment of tragedy is concerned.
>
> — Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*

> Thus, we might draw from Antigone inspiration for an agonistic humanism that sees in mortality, suffering, sound, and vulnerability resources for some form of enacted if contestable universality, while also recognizing these resources are various and opaque in their significations, just like language. In quest of a politics that is not reducible to an ethics nor founded on finitude, agonistic humanists draw not only nor even primarily on mortality and suffering, but also on natality, and pleasure, power (not just powerlessness), desire (not just principle), and *thumos* (not just *penthos*).[159]
>
> — Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*

The contemporary turn towards ethics is illustrated by the proliferation of work being done on the Greek tragedy *Antigone*. If we are sympathetic to Benjamin's critique of tragedy and study of the *Trauerspiel*, the consequences for contemporary political theory are important. For Benjamin, mourning does not signify the promise of redemptive politics. Nothing can be postulated from the tragic form, or the *Trauerspiel*. As he tells us in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue* and reminds us in "Trauerspiel and Tragedy," the philosopher must always return to the object of contemplation in order to make new beginnings. The object of contemplation in the *Trauerspiel* is historical life, and in order to engage his object Benjamin frames his study in terms of temporality.

Temporality is central to Benjamin's study of the *Trauerspiel,* and his critique of Aristotelian poetics, and the tragic form. Benjamin does not separate questions of temporal difference between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* from history. He can't, as historical life is the

[159] Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19.

object of the *Trauerspiel*. Painted in historical terms, Benjamin traces the emergence of the German baroque mourning play to the anti-reformation movement, and melancholy mourning to Luther. The "formal language" of the *Trauerspiel* emerges from the "contemporary theological situation," which is characterized (as we saw earlier) by the "disappearance of eschatology."[160] Benjamin writes, "Here, as in other spheres of baroque life, what is vital is the transposition of the originally temporal data into a figurative spatial simultaneity. This leads deep into the structure of the dramatic form. Whereas the Middle Ages present the futility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German *Trauerspiel* is taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption as it knows resides in the depths of this destiny itself rather than in the fulfillment of a divine plan of salvation."[161] The German *Trauerspiel* is bound to the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Redemption only exists in a messianic form, in the movement of historical time. If we remember that *Trauerspiel*, unlike tragedy, exists on two planes, we see that no character and no action in its play can offer reprieve from or for the sovereign, or release us from the instruments of power, let alone hand them over to us. Even when the sovereign is brought down, it is because of this temporal gap between creaturely life and historical time.

There are three principles characters in the *Trauerspiel*, as Benjamin describes it, with two faces: the Prince and the tyrant, and the courtier who is the intriguer or the servant — and who will ultimately undermine the authority of the sovereign. In order to introduce the intriguer, Benjamin turns to the temporal distinctions between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*. This figure is unique to the *Trauerspiel* form and organizes its plot, which does not follow a spatial continuum. "In contrast to the spasmodic chronological progression of tragedy, the

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[160] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 81.
[161] Ibid.

Trauerspiel takes place in a spatial continuum, which one might describe as choreographic. The organizer of its plot, the precursor of the choreographer, is the intriguer."[162] Benjamin traces the emergence of the intriguer in the *Trauerspiel* form to the Spanish tradition, where the king "proves to be a secularized redemptive power."[163] Benjamin writes, "The German dramatists did not dare to plumb the vertiginous depths of this antithesis in one character. They know the two faces of the courtier: the intriguer, as the evil genius of their despots, and the faithful servant, as the companion in suffering to innocence enthroned."[164] The intriguer is only one face of the courtier and represents the evil genius behind the despot.

Honig's section "Trauerspiel and/as Tragedy" in *Antigone, Interrupted* ignores the distinctions Benjamin draws between classical Greek tragedy and the different forms of the *Trauerspiel*, in order to introduce the figure of the *intriguer* or courtier. This move is predicated on the idea that melodrama is a form of tragedy is a form of *Trauerspiel*. She writes,

> "Conspiracy is the theme that will help us make this move (towards an agonistic humanism).[165] It comes from Walter Benjamin whose *Origins of the German Tragic Drama* (or *Trauerspiel*) picks up, as I have already intimated counter-chronologically, where Fassbinder leaves off: with the mourning or martyr play that is melodrama's low-culture cousin. Extending Benjamin's own arguments, we saw in Chapter 3 how melodrama, modernity's democratized *Trauerspiel*, might have potentially transformative or, at least, interruptive powers. But Benjamin offers us till more. In Benjamin's account of the *Trauerspiel*, we find suggestive resources by way of which to receive anew Sophocles' great tragedy. There is surely a great deal of irony in this, for Benjamin, after all, is the one who insisted on the difference between the two genres, and charged that the *Trauerspiel* was brought down partly but the efforts of its purveyors to be 'measured by the models of classical tragedy.' Invoking Aristotle, they sought evaluation by standards they could never meet. It is their 'gesture of submission' to the classical ideal that Benjamin rejects. But the account he gives of the traits unique to the *Trauerspiel* does not just evidence the distance between that genre and classical tragedy nor only attest to the failure of the Baroque to rise to the standards of the classical. As it turns out, the traits of the *Trauerspiel* serve surprisingly well as genre cues for classical tragedy itself."[166]

While Honig claims in her introduction to be critiquing, in one form or another, the contemporary "turn to ethics", or the "ethical turn", her dissection of Antigone only reaffirms this turn. It is not the embodiment of beings that facilitates the ethical turn, but

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[162] Ibid., 95.
[163] Ibid., 81.
[164] Ibid., 98.
[165] My parenthesis.
[166] Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 85–86.

rather the drive towards a form of political action that is removed from history. Whereas Benjamin's study of the *Trauerspiel* can and does provide a useful framework for critiquing the ethical turn that wants to claim new humanisms, Honig's appropriation of his work, only affirms her own political agenda and instill an agonistic humanism. The move she wants to make cannot be facilitated by Benjamin's careful study.

In the introduction to the second part of *Antigone, Interrupted,* Honig turns to Benjamin to move away from Butler's reduction of Antigone to "ethics" towards what she wants to call "agonistic humanism." Unlike other contemporary readings of Antigone that find a universal humanism in "principled suffering" or "an anti-humanism of death-driven, desiring monstrosity", Honig wants to "foreground the politicality of lamentation all the way down, as it were, in the hope that this may help release us from the spellbinding assumption that suffering or lamentation get beyond politics to the stark 'human.'" She writes:

> Thus we might draw from Antigone inspiration for an agonistic humanism that sees in mortality, suffering, sound, and vulnerability resources for some form of enacted if contestable universality, while also recognizing these resources are various and opaque in their significations, just like language. In quest of a politics that is not reducible to an ethics nor founded on finitude, agonistic humanists draw not only nor even primarily on mortality and suffering, but also on natality and pleasure, power (not just powerlessness), desire (not just principle), and thumos (not just penthos). This alternative, agonistic humanism grows out of my reading of Sophocles' Antigone, detailed in Part II, in which Antigone is not just a figure of resistance or a lamenter. Or better, what it means to lament turns out to have not only something to do with shared human finitude but also something to do with vengeance, politics, and the quest for sovereignty.[167]

Identification with the materiality of life, or our embodiment as beings will only ever reinforce the "coerciveness of logic," by reducing people to singular bodies. The points of common reducibility will not lead to a "humanism," which is counterintuitive or operates as a modality of resistance, but rather will become subject to the methodologies and instruments of power. Universalist history belongs to the victors of history. Transforming tragic heroes into victors, re-appropriating sovereignty, as Honig claims, isn't a move against

[167] Ibid., 19.

the cross-grained; it's a move that seeks to blend that which was cast aside into the dominant and normative narratives of history. Re-writing history, re-writing the myth doesn't redeem the past, it doesn't "blast open the continuum of history"; instead it changes the experiences of history to be more consistent with what is perceived as more democratic.

There is difference between doing the work of the historicist and doing the work of the historical materialist. It is essential to remember that Benjamin's study of the *Trauerspiel* form is a critique of sovereignty. In the mourning-play the sovereign represents power, and the assumed question is how can we subvert the power of the sovereign? Honig's question appears to take this form, but the question is how can we occupy or claim the power of the sovereign. It seems essential also here to remember that the tragic hero always dies in the end. Sovereignty as a political form is like *Chronos*. We can re-appropriate sovereignty, but sovereignty will always lose. In this way, Benjamin is very clear in his critique of sovereignty, which Honig wholesale ignores.

Instead of reconsidering political action through Benjamin's critique of sovereignty, Honig argues that we should try to exist within her understanding of the mourning-play, so that we may assume the power of the sovereign. Honig writes, "Benjamin presses on us throughout his work the idea that, like the messenger, we have both more and less agency than we think. We may be hopelessly embedded in structures and fantasies, discourses and iconographies, beyond out control but there is hope nonetheless. Small alterations, not always intended, may open up chasms of change — this is what Benjamin calls weak Messianism."[168] If anything the messenger in Antigone represents the faithful servant, not the intriguer. Either way, neither figure contains hope for any form of redemption let alone even a weak Messianism. Neither of these forms fulfills Honig's desire to paint the figure of

[168] Ibid., 88.

the courtier into the Greek tragedy Antigone. The plotter is Weber's reading of Benjamin's *intriguer*, not Benjamin's understanding of the role of the courtier in the *Trauerspiel.* Mourning is the site where the victor claims his past. History retains a linear temporality through the process of mourning, which relies upon past and future attachments to objects, or subjects masked with objects. The play of mourning, Benjamin finds, reveals one's true material nature as a courtier; that is to say, attached to the accouterments of power instead of struggling against the grain. Honig wants to argue that this "plotter" conspires to disrupt the order of signification, the value objects that represent power have, but in Benjamin's work this figure merely reveals the relationship between the figures that wield power and the objects they use to signify that power.

Beyond this, as Benjamin demonstrates, the courtier is no better than the sovereign. The courtier only subverts the authority of the Prince because his attachment is to power and the signifiers of power itself. He is thoroughly embedded into the narrative of power; and is perhaps even more attached than the sovereign to his creatureliness and the world of things that signify power. One of the primary differences Benjamin draws between the tragic form and the *Trauerspiel* form is the difference between tragic time and historical time, respectively, as we've already seen. As Honig writes, Creon makes decisions, as so does Antigone. Neither character is paralyzed by the *acedia* found in the mourning play. Honig writes, "Creon's decisions accent the gap between his power and capacity as ruler, and the guilt that ensues (to which Benjamin sensitizes us) works through the action and drives it. Creon cannot enforce his decrees and in time comes to see them as in error."[169] Creon can make decisions, he just can't enforce them, and his decision-making is ultimately the root of his demise, as is characteristic of the tragic form, not the *Trauerspiel.*

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[169] Ibid., 86–87.

Benjamin draws a distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* for a reason — Tragedy conforms to a historicist conception of time that is marked by fulfilled individual actions and time. *Trauerspiel*, on the other hand, represents historical time and the dialectical play of melancholy mourning, which can break free from the historicist's reactionary politics. Tragic time depends upon an over determined narrative, where the tragic hero has the agency to make a choice. The tragic narrative reaffirms individualism, and the tragic narrative of mourning, for instance in *Antigone*, reaffirms a form of individual fulfilled time. There is an essential flaw, Benjamin argues, in trying to recognize "elements of Greek tragedy" in the *Trauerspiel.* As such, "the philosophy of tragedy has been developed as a theory of the moral order of the world, without any reference to historical content, in a system of generalized sentiments, which, it was thought, was logically supported by the concepts 'guilt' and 'atonement'."[170] In trying to read Greek tragedy into the *Trauerspiel*, *Trauerspiel* is reduced to a theory of moral order, without historical content, systematizing general sentiments, supported by concepts like guilt and atonement. Why does Honig go looking for the guilt of Creon? What is being atoned for? In claiming that *melodrama* is "modernity's democratic *Trauerspiel*" she is subverting her own claim to turn away from a "universalized humanism" and ethics.[171]

In grounding *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in the *Epistemo-Critical Prologue*, Benjamin is critiquing any move towards Universalist *humanisms* from interpreting Greek tragedies. Benjamin is working on multiple levels to critique the application of methodology in philosophy (the study of art), including Aristotelian frames of poetics and Schmitt's

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[170] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 100–101.

[171] Honig writes, "But the account he gives of the traits unique to the *Trauerspiel* does not just evidence the distance between that genre and classical tragedy nor only attest to the failure of the Baroque to rise to the standards of the classical. As it turns out, the traits of the *Trauerspiel* serve surprisingly well as genre cues for classical tragedy itself." Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, 85–86.

conception of sovereignty. Benjamin separates knowledge from truth, arguing that the work of philosophy is the work of representation, of truth, which cannot be reduced to conceptual categories, which always operate in a scientific manner to divide the world. Benjamin writes,

> The reasons for the uncritical use of inductive methods have always been the same: on the one hand the love of variety and, on the other hand, indifference to intellectual rigour. . . . In the same way — hypostatizing after the fashion of primitive mythologies — we posit a being of uniform substance and complete reality and call it Humanism, just as if it were a living individual. But in this and countless other cases like it…we ought to be clear that we are doing nothing more than inventing an abstract concept in order to help us come to grips with an infinite series of varied spiritual manifestations and widely differing personalities.[172]

Universality enables one to claim to know the world, and universal theories of being enable the practices of sovereignty. The invention of an "abstract concept" is meant to help us come to terms with the world — to "come to grips with an infinite series of varied spiritual manifestations — "and it is this coming to terms with that signals the drive towards knowledge away from truth. Benjamin wrote that even though beauty is what truth seeks to represent; "beauty will always flee: in dread before the intellect, in fear before the lover."[173] If the content of truth is beauty, composed in the world of ideas, it is the philosopher — the lover's — duty to give chase in pursuit of truth. Knowledge, on the other hand, seeks to capture and possess. "Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of — even if in a transcendental sense — in the consciousness. The quality of possession remains. For the thing possessed, representation is secondary; it does not have prior existence as something representing itself. But the opposite holds good for truth."[174]

Honig's conception of agonistic politics, which claims to reject universalisms derived from human finitude, is a rejection of non-participation, those who might seek a form of political withdrawal. This agonistic politics, she says is "very optimistic", because it refuses to

[172] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 39–40.
[173] Ibid., 31.
[174] Ibid., 29.

allow refuge from the political contour of power in a private sphere. Honig takes linguistic cues from Arendt's conception of plurality in *The Human Condition* — defining agonistic politics as a "commitment to action in concert", which has focused on the possibility of producing something new.[175] Honig's deployment of Arendt, however, not only collapses her politically problematic albeit necessary distinction between the public and private realm, but also pushes us towards a form of political action that Arendt would have rejected. Honig makes her intentions clear,

> We have talked a lot about publicity and public things, but to be really clear it is around these things that equality and liberty and justice take shape. When they become merely procedural values, or when the form they take has to do with targets or indicators, they become shapeless and unrewarding values. They can only do the work that makes us value them if they are situated in the material life of citizens and residents together. And that I think is the optimism of agonistic politics.

Equality, liberty, and justice being watchwords of neoliberal democracy, hardly equate to a form of *agonistic* democratic practices. Honig herself admits, "agonism is not per se always oppositional or inherently contestational. It just anticipates resistance to all efforts to institute and maintain equality or justice." In order to begin to think about what might constitute democracy or democratic practices, one has to question the structural formation of language, signification, and the social institutions that house power and sovereignty. To put it another way, Honig isn't thinking about a form of democracy or democratic action in her re-reading of Antigone that has the ability to undermine the state, instead she's developing a sentimental conceptual framework that positions agonists to claim sovereignty. She likes the game of politics, as we might understand it. She wants to become the courtier to the sovereign in the Spanish mourning play. In contesting the power of the sovereign, the

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[175] "Moreover, if you crave withdrawal but find waiting for you in the so-called private sphere, accretions of power and privilege that signal your impotence in a world beyond your control and influence, then agonism's commitment to action in concert is for you, and its screams optimism." "The Optimistic Agonist: An Interview with Bonnie Honig," *Open Democracy*, http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/nick-pearce-bonnie-honig/optimistic-agonist-interview-with-bonnie-honig.

courtier doesn't subvert the structure of power, but rather merely reveals how its instruments operate. The courtier exposes where the authority of the sovereign comes from. The "cloak and dagger" routine, as Benjamin calls it, is just that. Power hungering after power.

Her turn away from the ethical turn is not a turn at all. Instead, it's a reconstitution of liberal democracy masked with a form of humanism that posits a more socially conscious (plural) subjectivity in the center. This "life in common", "action in concert" plurality is still an imperative to act, which is still the conflation of a sentimental morality derived from tragedy, which claims the name democracy, with ethics.

Conclusion

To argue for "counter-sovereignty" that contests normative claims to power and authority, is to argue that we become Benjamin's courtier in the *Trauerspiel*. This argument is illustrative of Benjamin's greater political critique of left melancholy, which remains attached to the significations of power rather than overturning power in itself. The rejection of universalism here is a false rejection masked by a superficially melancholic lust for power. Honig ends up reconstituting universalism in the name of democracy instead of undermining its underpinnings, or questioning contemporary political theory's claim to democracy itself. In order to actually turn towards Benjamin, one must turn away from the Greek tragic narrative, and towards an understanding of melancholy that encompasses a dialectical possibility for resistance to both ethics and universalisms.

CHAPTER III

WOLIN AND ADORNO:

THE PROMISE OF MOURNING IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY

"If theory is absorbed into the discourse of action so as to become inseparable, it will be impossible for it to perceive when action has fallen short of what it should be. It is the nature of action to fall short of theory and it is the role of theory to declare that. Theory can only perform that critical function if it retains a separate identity. Otherwise theory becomes *techne*, and the theorist becomes indistinguishable from the technician of power."

— Sheldon Wolin, "On the Theory and Practice of Power"

"That something should be done is a belief held by everyone nowadays; what is found to be problematic is when someone decides not to do anything for once, but to retreat from the dominant realm of practical activity in order to think about something essential."

— Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*

In this chapter I turn towards Sheldon Wolin's conception of democratic time and invocation in order to further explore the contemporary turn towards mourning. I am going to discuss contemporary political theory's turn towards a politics of loss and mourning through Wolin's critique of the "systematization of loss" and turn towards Adorno in order to argue against the systematization is a gesture that refuses the proliferations of "turns", themes, and conceptual categories in contemporary political thought.

Introduction

In this chapter I explore Wolin's conceptions of democracy, democratic time, and his move from vocation to invocation in order to think about the ethical turn in contemporary political theory. In "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" Wolin offers a critique

of what he calls the "systematization of loss" that illustrates how theorists have conformed to rhythmic cycles of capitalist production and consumption. Wolin's turn towards Adorno in his essay on invocation is a rejection of demands for democratic political action. It is a rejection of normative narratives of political struggle that rely on winners and losers, and it speaks to a metaphysical desire that rejects the moralization of ethics. Loss of one form or another — the attenuation of democracy and the political events of the 20th Century — form the center of Wolin's work. In his movement from vocation to invocation Wolin focuses these losses on the loss of the collective, which is necessary for both his conception of the political and political theory.

Wolin usually begins his work by attempting to offer a definition of political theory, while offering an explanation of the political problem(s) he is addressing. His conception of the political, which cannot be separated from his vision of democracy, demands a center, something to respond to. Certain conceptual categories and philosophical questions form the center of Wolin's work — democracy, politics, the political, and political theory. What is the work of political theory? What is the political? What is politics? How might we think about democracy within the context of American politics? How have postmodern forms of power changed the political terrain? What constitutes political action? How might we engage in it?[176]

In *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* Wolin defines the work of political theory in the context of the western tradition of political philosophy, Plato's "inquiry into the nature of the good life," and "methods of analysis and criteria of

[176] This is not meant to be exhaustive, certainly there are other conceptual categories and questions at play in Wolin's work, but I take these to be his primary theoretical concerns.

judgment."[177] Wolin first describes the relationship between philosophy and political philosophy; then moves from political philosophy to political theory to say that theorists have "accepted as their own the basic quest of the philosopher for systematic knowledge."[178] Political theory emerges from the tradition of political philosophy as something that is created and radically new.[179] At the beginning of *The Presence of the Past* Wolin writes, "Political theory might be defined in general terms as a tradition of discourse concerned about the present being and well-being of collectives. It is primarily a civic and secondarily an academic activity. In my understanding this means that political theory is a critical engagement with collective existence and with the political experiences of power to which it gives rise."[180] In "Political Theory as a Vocation" Wolin describes the work of political theory "as the vocation of the 'epic theorist'", there is a sense of "magnitude" where "by an act of thought, the theorist seeks to reassemble the whole political world. He aims to grasp present structures and interrelationships, and to re-present them in a new way."[181] Wolin never stops wrestling with the question of political theory and what it means to be a political theorist. This struggle informs the way he addresses political problems, the question of democracy, and the work of political science as a profession more broadly.

At the beginning of Tocqueville: *Democracy Between Two Worlds* Wolin tells us that he is investigating Tocqueville's conception of political theory, how he experienced it and practiced it. Wolin asks, how did he combine theoretical life with the life of the politician– the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*? Wolin returns to the Greek definition of theory as

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[177] Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Expanded edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4.
[178] Ibid. Wolin sets out by describing his attempt to define political philosophy.
[179] Ibid., 4–7.
[180] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*. p. 1
[181] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation," *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (December 1, 1969): 1078. There are more definitions of political theory that Wolin offers in his writings, these are just a few that I think demonstrate the way he thinks about the work of political theory.

theoros identifying the affinity between the wanderer, the outsider, and the theorist. He argues " 'theorist' comes from the Greek word *theoros*, which was the name for an emissary who traveled on behalf of his city to other cities and societies. A *theoria*, from which 'theory' was derived, meant 'journey.' Travelling is, of course, an encounter with differences. . . ." Wolin's conception of *theōria* emphasizes the aspect of seeing and publicity. Within his spatial and linguistic construction of theory Wolin draws us towards an understanding of temporality.

Conceptions of loss and temporality are central to Wolin's definitions of political theory and democracy. Within Wolin's shifting conceptions of politics, the political, and political theory there are different notions of temporality that pull out the relationship between time, space, and politics. Wolin's proclamation that political time is out of sync echoes Hamlet's lament "our time is out of joynt."[182] There is a dissonance and discomfort felt when the present fails to exist beyond the shadow of past or future. Within this dissonance there is a need to think through the political theorists' relationship to history as an object of contemplation, but also time and temporality as it informs our understanding of history and what light it can shed on our contemporary political situation.

In "What Time is it?" Wolin argues, "Political time is out of sync with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture."[183] Wolin begins from the premise that part of the task of political theory is an ongoing consideration of what "counts as politics" and what should be included in the "domain of the political." In this spirit the work of political theory ought to embody a kind of dynamism that is able to respond to social, economic, cultural, and political shifts. Temporality becomes a measure of political

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[182] In "Democracy and Bad Dreams" Wendy Brown notes Wolin's use of *Hamlet* and the relationship between moments of justice or injustice and the space they create for thinking and reflection writing: It is no news that Wolin is, finally, a dark thinker. Even when he is arguing on behalf of democracy, the darkness seeps in. 'Democracy requires', he argues against Rawls, 'that the experiences of justice and injustice serve as moments for the demos to think, to reflect, per chance, to construct themselves as actors.'" Wendy Brown, "Democracy and Bad Dreams," *Theory & Event* 10, no. 1 (2007).

[183] Sheldon S. Wolin, "What Time Is It?," *Theory & Event* 1, no. 1 (1997).

form, and for Wolin a democratic temporality requires "an element of leisure." Part of the task of the political theorist, according to Wolin, is determining what is political. Within contemporary theory Wolin argues that there are two dominant trends he writes: "The promise of democratic political freedom of spatial limits has found both defendants and detractors among contemporary political theorists, dividing those who seek new political possibilities within these transformations from those who lament the disappearance of a common public space." Arguing against Jeffrey Isaac, Wolin articulates the importance of thinking about temporality in relationship to politics and doing the work of historically informed political theory that rejects homogenous, linear narratives.[184]

For Wolin, the work of political theory is governed by political time, which stands in opposition to "the temporalities of economy and popular culture." His critique of political theory in "What Time is It?" asks why it is so difficult for the theorist to stand outside these dominant economic and cultural modes of temporality. The implication being: if the theorist was interested in the work of democracy, she would necessarily be opposed to capitalist rhythms of time that are only interested in production. At the end of "What time is it?" Wolin says, "It is not at all clear today what would not count as politics." The proliferation of politics, what counts as political, is itself a product of what Wolin calls economic and cultural time. Temporality gives form to politics, and a critical temporality — thinking through the relationship between history and the work of politics, beyond lamenting our presumed democratic losses — is necessary to the work of theory. So, how do we escape the

[184] Wolin writes, "The objection is in part that there is no single shared 'political time', only culturally constituted different times. Their self-conscious character produces the equivalent of a different time zone that contributes to a disruption and undermines the possibility of a common narrative structure and, along with it, a common identity -- formerly a staple element in conceptions of the political. These diverse time
zones help to promote (what can be called) 'the instability of political time' and to expose a broader political problem, one which I can best approach through the language of temporality. I am referring to a pervasive temporal disjunction that has contributed to serious political difficulties and helped to make the task of the theorist daunting." Ibid. Wolin reiterates what he considers the work of the "historical informed" political theorist to be in "Politics as a Vocation."

tempos of contemporary capitalist culture?

One need not be in sync with to be attuned to the present moment. In a piece titled "Hannah Arendt and The Ordinance of Time," Wolin argues, "Thinking was not like work, form-creating, but as Heidegger would later phrase it, *Bestimmung*, 'attunement,' that is, a sensitive responding to or feel for the atmosphere surrounding Being and a glimpse into its essential nature."[185] Here, thinking is presented apart from work — apart from a form of synchronicity between action and the temporal order of capitalist, empty, homogenous time to use Benjamin's language. To be 'attuned to' is to have a feel for, to have an ear for the harmony, but it doesn't mean one must sync to it. The demand for a democratic time is also a spatial demand that requires political theorists to have distance from what they are critiquing. To remain at once within and outside of is the dissonance in the lament 'our time is out of joynt,' but it is also Wolin's warning that theory has become attuned to and synchronous with the dominant measurements of temporality.

The fast pace of contemporary political thought must to an extent mimic our time, but Wolin is rightly concerned. In replicating the pace of life, Wolin is afraid political thinkers have begun to mimic the forces that endanger it. The methodical rhythm of production and consumption shouldn't be the drumbeat to which thought marches; thought shouldn't march at all, especially if it is to do the work of political theory.

I. Fugitive Democracy and *Democracy in America*

The question of democracy in America is at the heart of Wolin's work. Democracy has always been a fraught question for Wolin. Intimately interwoven with the role of the

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[185] The rest of the quotation reads: "In her studies and reflections on ancient Greek philosophy and politics Hannah Arendt acquired that "attunement" and she gave expression to it in a celebration of authentic politics . . . "

political theorist, the question for Wolin is idiosyncratic, and expands beyond claims for redemption or saving. The absence of democracy is our inherited loss as political theorists. Democracy operates as a signifier in Wolin's work, invoking a set of questions and problems to which we must answer. Wolin's understanding of democracy is deeply rooted in his reading of Tocqueville, which proffers a particular conception of democracy. As Wolin notes, Tocqueville "was the first political thinker to put the question of democracy at the center of his work" while also expositing the role of the political theorist. With these definitions, Wolin isn't turning us back to an Athenian conception of democracy, but rather his reading of democracy in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*."[186]

Wolin's conception of the political is tied to his conception of democracy. "Fugitive Democracy" re-draws Wolin's distinction between the political and politics. The political is an expression of the idea that a free society is diverse and enjoys moments of commonality, where through public deliberation, collective power is used to promote or protect the wellbeing of the collectivity. *Politics* refers to the legitimized and public contestations, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity. Politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless. Wolin is "reluctant" to call democracy a form of government; instead he argues that democracy is the political — episodic and rare. In "Democracy in the Discourse of Postmodernism" Wolin offers a genealogy of postmodern political thought further critiquing the problem of individual subjectivism that undermines the possibility of a *dēmos* within contemporary democratic forms.

[186] In "Norm and Form: the Constitutionalizing of Democracy" Wolin writes, "American democracy appears to have succeeded precisely where Athenian democracy failed. When Tocqueville asserted that in nineteenth-century New England he had discovered 'a democracy more perfect than antiquity had dared to dream of,' he meant that Americans had resolved the tension between democracy and constitutionalism . . ."

Wolin's conception of democracy as moments of the political are always appearing and disappearing. Just as he draws a distinction between politics and the political, he draws a distinction between democracy and moments of fugitive democracy. Wolin is concerned with what he calls the attenuation of democracy, which is characterized primarily by the progressive privatization of public institutions, of politics. In "Fugitive Democracy" Wolin writes:

> Institutionalization marks the attenuation of democracy: leaders begin to appear; hierarchies develop; experts of one kind or another cluster around the centers of decision; order, procedure, and precedent displace a more spontaneous politics: in retrospect the latter appears as disorganized, inefficient. Democracy thus seems destined to be a moment rather than a form. Throughout the history of political thought virtually all writers emphasize the unstable and temporary character of democracy. Why is it that democracy is reduced, even devitalized by form? Why is its presence occasional and fugitive?[187]

In this passage Wolin observes that democracy is rendered as something occasional and fugitive. Democracy is a moment, and not something that can be institutionalized. He asks us to reconceive democracy "as something other than a form of government." Democracy in America is absorbed by the political rhetoric of constitutionalism. The political as a form of fugitive democracy is fleeting. It contains within it possibility, but it is not a form of government, and it is not permanent.

For Wolin, there is a necessary relationship between democracy and the political. Both are temporal categories for Wolin and rely upon a form of collective memory. Democracy exists as a possibility and relies upon the ability to remember the political. It is not necessarily revolutionary, but contains revolutionary potential. It is a moment of rebellion.[188] Democracy in these terms of re-calling the political is not a call to action, to

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[187] Sheldon S. Wolin, '"Fugitive Democracy.,"' *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 1, no. 1 (April 1994): 19.

[188] Wolin writes, "Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being which is condition by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent

control, or to influence the State apparatus. Definitions of democracy that rely upon "citizen-as-actor and politics-as-episodic" are incompatible with the modern State, he argues, "as the fixed center of political life and the corollary conception of politics as continuous activity organized around a single dominating objective, control or influence over the State apparatus."[189]

The modern state is characterized by what Wolin calls 'managed democracy.' Managed democracy refers to the way in which the world is organized and manufactured by the government and corporate elites who shape our perception of reality — received information and images — "to maximize the modes of power which they command"[190] He writes, "Managed democracy is a created world of images, sounds, and scenarios that makes only occasional contact with the everyday reality of most people. The rest of the time the world floats in dissociation, a realm wherein reference has been suspended."[191] Wolin is drawing a line between a manufactured world and the "everyday reality of most people."

II. Invoking the Political Theorist

At the end of the twentieth century Wolin revisited his essay "Political Theory as a Vocation." Wolin begins his millennial reflections on the future of contemporary political

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possibility as long as the memory of the political survives. The experience of which democracy is the witness is the realization that the political mode of existence is such that it can be, and is, periodically lost. Democracy, Polybius remarks, lapses 'in the course of time'. Democracy is a political moment, perhaps the political moment, when the political is remembered and recreated. Democracy is a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may not." Ibid., 23.

[189] "What is actually being measured by the claim of democratic legitimacy is not the vitality of democracy in those nations but the degree to which democracy is attenuated so as to serve other ends. The most fundamental of these is the establishment and development of the modernizing State. The so-called 'problem of contemporary democracy' is not, as is often alleged, that the ancient conception of democracy is incompatible with the size and scale of modern political societies. Rather it is that any conception of democracy grounded in the citizen-as-actor and politics-as-episodic is incompatible with the modern choice of the State as the fixed center of political life and the corollary conception of politics as continuous activity organized around a single dominating objective, control of or influence over the State apparatus." Ibid.

[190] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Democracy in the Discourse of Postmodernism," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (April 1, 1990): 28.

[191] Ibid., 27–28.

theory in "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" with a "confessional note" that lists his formative political experiences, all of which are in one way or another "dominated by loss." He reflects that in a "culture that measures life by notions such as progress, development, innovation, and modernization, loss tends to be an experience we are advised to 'get past.' Loss belongs to history, while politics and life are about what is still to be done."[192] In beginning this way Wolin illustrates the role loss plays in his own political work. All formative political moments are in one way or another dominated by loss, they compose the center or place from which Wolin begins his work of political theory.

At heart, Wolin's essay is mournful of political theory as a practice. Instead of calling political theorists to vocation he offers a critical and at moments derisive dirge: "It would be nice to end on an uplifting note and invoke political theory to come to the aid of democracy, but besides being fatuous that call may be too late in the day."[193] He doesn't leave us entirely empty handed, though. In turning towards Adorno, and the promise of future political theory, he offers us a way of thinking about moving forward, a way of "recognizing

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[192] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," in *Vocations Of Political Theory*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3.

[193] Ibid., 21. There is darkness to Wolin's thinking, as Brown wrote in "Democracy and Bad Dreams", and this essay is perhaps the most mournful of Wolin's writing. Something seems irretrievably lost in Wolin's reflections upon the contemporary state of political theory. The language of solitude, loneliness, and loss, is not new to his writing, though, it solemnly punctuates his work on Tocqueville and frames the *Presence of the Past*. In "Evening Land" Ann Norton focuses on Wolin's turn towards Adorno to discuss democracy and America as what she terms *Abendland*, or a land of death. She laments that without history, Americans have no sense of place, that Americans are always between past and future without being present. She writes "Democracy requires that at some moments, and in some respects always, one will cease to be. . . .The practice of democracy is the practice of loss." Democracy is a way of being towards death, what she describes as "the long practice of death." And so, democracy, like theory, must need deal with the cross-grained, with that which is left behind. At the beginning of the collective volume *Democracy and Vision*, William E. Connolly begins by reflecting on Wolin's original "Politics as a Vocation" and notes in an explanatory way that to do political theory in the 1960's was "moribund," writing "The air was thick with funeral orations. Because a new science of politics was on the verge of consolidation, political theory in the 'normative' or 'traditional' sense had become unnecessary." Democracy, like political theory, is subject to constant change, and while it is swept up in the temporality of contemporary life, it must find a way to remain attuned to the cross-grained. Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly, *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political.* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001).

democracy as the dystopia of our time."[194] While the work of political theory has always been the work of retrieval, calling, and re-calling for Wolin, in a way his move towards invocation breaks with his past practice — and it must, if theory is going to move against the current tide, and embrace the cross-grained.

Wolin places the question of loss in the hands of Adorno in order to argue that even if knowledge attains to the rectilinear succession of history it cannot do away with those who have been cast aside to the cross-grained. Instead of letting this dynamic illustrate the dialectical movement of history, it illustrates what Wolin calls a symbiotic relationship between losers and victors, where each requires the other. Wolin's turn towards Adorno and his rejection of dialectics in favor of a symbiotic relationship pushes us back towards a neo-Kantian critique of the subject, which forces us to consider both "We", "I", and the relationship between subject and object. What is lost in the historical narratives that Wolin wants to critique is this dynamic relationship, and it is also a certain form of collective we. The victors of history have defeated the losers, but not erased them, and require their continued existence.

The loss of contemporary political theory is twofold: The loss of vocation in the practice of political theory, and the attenuation of democracy perpetuated by the rapid pace of technological change and the privatization of the public sphere. The loss of vocation for Wolin is evidenced by the number of "intellectual permutations" that only seem to align with the constant change that characterizes this contemporary world. "The theorist has replicated the pace of technological change: he and she are synchronous with the utopia."[195] The utopia of course is really our dystopic reality. Wolin sees the turns in contemporary thought as severed from the traditional *raison d'être* of politics, where political actors are no longer

[194] Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," 21.
[195] Ibid.

responding to a collective calling that must be responded to if democracy is going to be saved, if the political is going to exist.

In his own way, Wolin has moved from mourning the loss of democracy in America to a form of reflective melancholia, concerned that while returning to political theory as a vocation is more important than ever, that perhaps it can't be re-called. He asks "Or is the concept of a calling still plausible, even urgent, in the context of pseudo-democracy, not as a personal choice or as institutional certification but as a public commitment for a time when the idea of publics has pretty much been superseded by that of constituencies or dissolved into various identities based on race, gender, or sexual preference?"[196] The loss of vocation as a practice is traced to the emergence of two philosophical turns: "one the cultivation of subjective individualism and the other the objective or rational self-interest."[197] Wolin addresses the latter in his first essay on vocation, taking aim at methodologically bent political science, while the essay on invocation takes aim at the prior.[198]

Wolin believes that the democratic way of life is best for the "vast majority" of human beings; he laments democracy being replaced by meritocracy as the work of political theory is replaced by imperatives to act. The losses between vocation and invocation described are not dissociated from one another. For Wolin, the attenuation of democracy is marked by the public/private inversion. Today, we can no longer differentiate between the political state and private economy. We live in what Wolin terms an "Economic Polity, " and the collective that he wants to guard has been steadily eroded by the erasure of the public/private distinction. Progressive privatization of public institutions has transformed

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[196] Ibid., 5.
[197] Ibid., 6.
[198] Wolin doesn't seem to link this to the loss of authority he cites in Weber. For Luther, a calling presupposed a certain "structure to the community" a place for the practice, which assumed the actor would be acting in the interest of the community, and the community needed and wanted what the practitioner provided.

collective political life into collective economic interests, which are regulated by the wants and needs of individuals. This appears ever more present in contemporary American politics. Wolin argues, our sense of powerlessness as a collective in the balance of struggle is "most acute when terrorism irrupts."[199] What is at stake for Wolin is the collective identity of the polity as it is expressed through our constitutional power. Instead of collective crisis strengthening democratic subjectivity, Wolin sees moments of loss making power "available to government, the loss [of which] is experienced by them [citizens] as political passivity."[200] Our powerlessness is illustrated in that we have become the passive objects of power rather than active political subjects.[201] Wolin traces this collective "identity crisis" to the eighties with "changes in the form and substance of power," which are characterized by the expansion of state power through the merger between private economic interests and public institutions.[202] American politics post 9/11, post the economic crisis, have only been further characterized by the merger between private and public. These moments of collective crisis do not open up space for democratic politics, because that the shareholders of power create and use that space. When democratic political action takes shape, it appears, at best, symbolically confined within the rhetoric of "never again," or "not on my watch." One could argue that corporative power interests have had more success in accessing constitutional rights in the past ten years than citizens have. Surveying the political

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[199] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, 30–31. He continues: " . . . it is the perfect symbol of frustrated will: the vast majority of Americans want nothing more than to muster all of our vaunted power and use it to annihilate terrorists and the third-rate powers that subsidize them. And yet . . .we know that at the bottom we are helpless."

[200] Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," 12. He writes, "The peculiarity of the American way of legitimating power is that it tends, simultaneously, to disguise the actual expansion of state power under the category of pragmatic programs (from 'internal improvements of the nineteenth century to Chrysler bailouts in the twentieth) while welcoming the increasing power of the 'private' economic institutions and interpreting that increase as located 'outside' the proper 'sphere of government.'"

[201] Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, 31.

[202] Ibid., 12. He offers the example of Chrysler Bailouts in the eighties, an example that surely resonates today after 2008.

landscape, with this view of American politics today, there is little to be hopeful for, which gives way Wolin in his move towards invocation.

While Wolin has always been critical of the attenuation of democracy and protective of the work of political theory, there is an undeniable shift between *The Presence of the Past*, *Politics and Vision* and his essay on invocation. Wolin moves from critiquing the loss of the polity in *The Presence of the Past*, to mourning the loss of the promise that political theory might be able to retrieve or restore democratic losses in his essay on invocation. *The Presence of the Past* draws us to the vocation of political theory, arguing that it ought be "primarily a civic and secondarily an academic activity."[203] In reflecting on the inversion between public and private interests, Wolin again turns us back towards the public as the realm of the common good, where public service and political theory, as such, should be conducted in the "spirit of disinterestedness."[204] In part, this disinterestedness is lost in the loss of the collective. There is no collectivity to issue a call to, no body to respond to, because the privatization of public interests has fractured the collective (democratic) identity, leaving us with privatized "subjective individualism."

Drawing a distinction between vocation and invocation, Wolin tells us that while vocation deals with acting, invocation is a response to a certain kind of loss. Invocation is signified by the loss of something irreplaceable. The world is in some way diminished by loss, and invocation assumes an understanding of the past, the present, and a sense of what is to come.[205] In this sense Wolin's work has always been a labor of invocation. A kind of

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[203] Ibid., 1.

[204] Wolin is drawing on Weber, who is drawing on Martin Luther, and the idea that politics as a vocation is performed out of a kind of selflessness. Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," 25.

[205] "But what of invocation, of that which signified that something irreplaceable has gone, perhaps fled or been rendered ineffectual, with the result that the world has been diminished? What is at at stake is not the mere recognition of loss but how one works through it. To invoke presupposes that one has a grasp of how things have been, perhaps how something came to be, how some practice, expectation, or value became sufficiently powerful to gain a foothold and become established in the world." Ibid.

recalling that forces us to think about the work of political theory as retrieval, a reconstructing of the collective. To put it in Wolin's own terms vocation is that which deals with "politics and life" and "what is still to be done," while invocation deals with losses, which belong to history. In setting up this movement from vocation to invocation as his title suggests, Wolin turns us away from the former to the later, asking us to consider these losses out of history. He is concerned that political theory has forgone the work of vocation altogether, and now cannot be invoked. If everything is political then how can political theorists think about what is politics, or the political? To what would they respond? Let alone, to whom?

"Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation" accuses contemporary theorists of being hypercritical, to the point that everything becomes politicized. Instead of being uncritical in approach, theorists have become overly critical. If everything is political, Wolin argues, then politics loses all meaning. He is essentially affirming a problematic and creating one at the same time, drawing a delineating line around political theory and acknowledging the problem of doing political theory post-68', post-Foucault, where everything becomes a site of possible contestation and power.[206] In this vein, Wolin argues that critical thought today has morphed from the Greek *krisis*, to the contemporary "critic." Political theorists are no longer responding to certain political events or moments; conditions "so grave as to force a turning point." Instead, critical theory today has been inculcated in the twenty-four-hour-a-day news cycle.[207]

Wolin's initial essay on political theory as a vocation was a response to specific political events. He was responding to something as he points out in his work on invocation, saying "Whatever the shortcomings of my original essay, its reference point was plainly to a

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[206] Wolin explicitly cites Foucault.
[207] Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," 15.

widely acknowledged crisis in American politics centered in the Vietnam War."[208] Wolin goes on to say that although the war was connected to other conflicts of the period like civil rights and racism, the fact of having a political center — some specific event to write in response to "lent an intensity to politics as well as to theorizing." The one paradigm left, Wolin suggests, is "the domination of the world by change . . .We live in a utopia in which loss has been systematized, a utopia whose existence depends symbiotically on the perpetuation of dystopia."[209]

II.I. Systematized loss

The systematization of loss that Wolin criticizes illustrates the contemporary ethical turn, which is characterized by the proliferation of conceptual categories and themes, which are designed to turn us towards a form of democratic politics, or illuminate where such democratic possibilities exist. Within contemporary political theory there is a call to a form of democratic political action that somehow moves us closer to a form of democratic politics. Wolin is right to point out that some political thinkers have turned towards the work of loss and mourning in order to call for new forms of political action in the name of democracy. In the movement from vocation to invocation Wolin is calling into question the rhetoric of democracy itself within political theory.

Wolin is critical of those who try to reduce politics to a form of what he calls "vapid morality," but his own work demands a political center and expresses a kind of metaphysical longing. The Foucaultian identity politics that Wolin critiques has done away with the

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[208] Ibid., 13. Wolin goes on to say that the "Although at the time the war was understood to be connected to other conflicts, such as those over civil rights and racism, and to the revolts taking place in the inner cities, the fact that there was a center lent an intensity to politics as well as to theorizing. The essay accused political science of complicity by its uncritical, accommodative relationship to power, and of beings so focused on methodological applications as to be unaware that it was merely producing a simulacrum of the existing political order."

[209] Ibid.

collective center of democratic politics — in the sense that Wolin talks about democratic politics — and the *grandeur* of political theory, which requires a different temporality (leisure time) and spatial positioning, the political theorist as outsider and wanderer. Wolin's late turn towards Adorno is another step towards critiquing normative conceptions of political action that rely upon narratives of wins and losses, the moralization of ethics, and neo-Kantianism that denies metaphysical understanding of the world in favor of reasoning. This critique comes through most clearly in *Tocqueville: Between Two Worlds*, where Wolin contrasts Tocqueville's reading of Pascal's Descartes and Tocqueville's own epic theory that imitates the eye of God.

Wolin reveals an affinity between Tocqueville's project and his own in describing *Democracy* as framed by loss — caught between a world that was passing away and a new one that was beginning to emerge. Continuity through the construction of a tradition is meant to give ear to the work of the political theorist. It is meant as a form of counter-argument to the systematizing tendencies that Enlightenment thought ushered in. Here in his careful study of Tocqueville, Wolin composes a critique of the moralization of ethics that has come to define the American post-modern liberal definition of identity politics, which are defined in Tocqueville's terms as "individualism" and "privatization".

As a counter to "managed democracy" Wolin conceptualizes a democratic temporality and conception of democratic moments that are more in line with Tocqueville's conception of how democracy functioned in New England. Leisure as a temporal category is central to Wolin's conception of democracy and political theory, and signifies the mode of *vita contemplative*: the space where political thinkers go to think, that quiet sounding wall of

inner-reflection that creates space, and an Aristotelian sense of wonder.[210] Wolin's emphasis on leisure can also be read as a political argument to refrain from action. To stand apart from the world of politics, a 'pausing for breath' as Benjamin might say. The sharp dividing line that was laid down between theory and action is complicated by Wolin's portrait of Tocqueville.[211]

And yet, Wolin is calling upon the rhetoric of democracy; his work presupposes a kind of tradition that must be attained to, and one to which we must be attuned.[212] It is itself a methodology for doing the work of political theory that straddles a line between practicality, addressing specific political problems, and what he calls the creation of the *mytheme*. It is the rapid pace of change that characterizes modernity that immobilizes the political theorist into inaction. At the same time, in a quieter voice, Wolin's work possesses a sense of metaphysical certainty. Biblical metaphors, passages, and references pepper his works, but beyond his instrumentalization of the Old Testament, through Tocqueville, Wolin draws a direct parallel between God and the work of the political theorist.[213] Wolin is

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210 Through Wolin's rendering, we can picture Tocqueville wandering through the great northern territory confronted with the expanse of wilderness beholden by the phenomenon of the New World. As Wolin describes, he experiences what political theorists had only imagined "the state of nature complete with noble savage." Wolin also makes notes of Tocqueville's journals, which he often returns to in offering an account of his journey. "The life of the theorist cannot be untied from the personal life .. ." This is not reductionist. It implies that there is a necessary relationship between the interior workings of the life of the mind and the work political theory.

211As it was by Arendt as well, when she notes at the beginning of the Life of the Mind that her original intention had been to address that ancient question between theory and action. To think and to act are two conflicting sentiments that require one another—to act in the world and to live the life of the philosopher—and rely upon the tension and anxieties produced by too much or too little movement (action).

212 Wolin doesn't offer an oration for the work of political theory, perhaps because he always seems to fall back upon a kind of melancholic, not out of hope but commitment. There is an unwillingness to let go of the possibility of the future. Arendt might have called this natality or promise. For Wolin there is something even more precious here. There's an insistence and fidelity to the work of political theory as a vocation and the work of democracy. The changing definitions he offers reflect perhaps his own changing relationship to the field of political theory.

213 Wolin writes, "Where, then, was a theoretical model for such a feat to be found? From the same note cited in the preceding epigraph Tocqueville concludes with an injunction to himself, 'See as much as possible through the thought of God and judge from there.' The archetypical theorist was God and the paradigm of perfect theoretical knowledge was embodied in God's way of thinking. God sees 'the resemblances that make [an individual] like his fellows' just as he see 'the differences which isolate him from them.' To see as God

not just calling the theorist back to the vocation of political theory, he is calling us back to a center that requires a shift in our metaphysical premises that reject Descartian and Kantian logic.

This critique of modern methodological discourse that requires standards of knowledge cannot be separated from the metaphysics underlying Wolin's writing. Here we can easily situate Adorno next to Wolin. The primary lament of modernity is methodologies stripping the world of mythology and wonder. The metaphysical demand is a turn away from the primacy science, relativism, and positivism. The turn towards positivism is a displacement of the objects and prioritization of the subject. The elevation of the self over all object relationships forecloses the possibility of "returning to the object of contemplation" to create new meanings, as Benjamin might say. The self is thrown back upon the self, foreclosing the possibility of giving meaning.

If we take Wolin's reading of Tocqueville seriously and follow his turn towards Adorno we have to return to a critique of Neo-Kantianism, which somehow seems to have been lost, and face what I want to call a vocative loss of we. Democracy as a conceptual category alone cannot stand at the center of contemporary political theory and neither can forms of humanisms derived from Neo-Kantian principles.[214] The tragic tradition relies upon

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would see, to think as God would think, would meant being able not only to see into the future, but to grasp at one and the same moment the particular and the general, the individual and the collectivity, aristocratic singularity and democratic generality/equality. It would mean not sacrificing the particular to the general, as was the wont of democracy, or the general to the particular as was the vice of aristocracy. In an astonishing passage toward the close of *Democracy*, Tocqueville wrote, 'I strive to penetrate into the viewpoint of God, and it is from there that I seek to consider and to judge human things."

[214] I think it's worthwhile to note the importance of conceptual categories to the work of political theory and to call their utility and function into question. Wolin points out the number of turns and ideological shifts within contemporary political theory, emphasizing the idea that theorists mimic capitalist forms of production and consumption. The proliferation of and reliance upon conceptual categories illustrates his argument. In *Between Two Worlds*, Wolin points out that generalizable conceptual categories like the ones Tocqueville relied upon have the power to undermine or at the very least pose a challenge to Cartesian logic. However, as Wolin points out there is an "affinity between generalization, abstraction, and systematic, logical thinking . . .". So the question becomes: "How, then, to employ generalization yet avoid its political pitfalls and historical association?" Sheldon S. Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* /

a narrative of great deeds and great men, and ultimately upon demise. This is a mournful thing, and creates a wallowing that echoes Wolin's lament, "perhaps it is too late in the day." Not too late in the day for some form of democracy to emerge, but too late to take the time to do the work of political theory; to return to the tradition of critical theory that was fractured by the turn towards Post-structuralism. Too late if we are somehow committed to the tragic narrative and emphasis on *democracy*, which demands a moral center and yet continues to refuse a metaphysics that displaces the Subject from the center of reasoning and logic, thus reifying the modalities of domination that have forsaken a collective we in favor of a we masked with a subjective I.

III. The Lost Object, Mourning, and Melancholia

Mourning, construed politically is bound to loss, and assumes a kind of opening occurs. Something that once took up space no longer is, and so we can form new attachments. The politicization of mourning in this way is also a spatial rendering. To create space, rhetorically, does not perform the same function as, for example, Benjamin's notion of Messianism — busting open the historical continuum. While Benjamin's conception of Messianism might require a loss it demands a break. Space is not opened up within, the way forth is cleared and the past is left behind. When Tocqueville talks about historical loss or Wolin moves between two worlds, we are given a temporal and spatial account of how to think about both past and present, and the loss of meaning.

This is important because it shapes the conceptual categories that theorists use, which can lead to understanding, meaning, and sometimes action. Certain conceptual

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Sheldon S. Wolin. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 92–93. Wolin emphasizes the quality of loneliness and solitude that accompanied Tocqueville on his journey, noting that his solitude was not a question for Cartesian certainty, but rather "the setting for recollecting loss." Ibid., 91. Conceptual categories are instruments developed by political theorists to aid in understanding, not an end in themselves.

categories like abyss, catastrophe, crisis, mourning, and melancholia are metaphors for loss and signify different aesthetic senses of disconnectedness and loss of meaning. Disconnectedness, a lack of rootedness, is part of what Wolin in *Between Two Worlds* terms as contemporary Cartesianism, which demands a subjective I. This Cartesianism, that Wolin emphasizes in Tocqueville's theoretical perception of America is related to the neo-Kantianism that has guided the ethical turn, emphasizing — even demanding — the subjective I and forms of democratic political action.[215] For Wolin, this comes at the cost of collectivity, which is essential to his conception of democracy. What is lost is the collective We.[216]

In thinking about the relationship between loss, mourning, and politics Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, Wendy Brown, Thomas Dumm, and Jodi Dean, to name a few, all turn to Freud's 1917 essay "Melancholia and Mourning."[217] In doing so they prioritize the conception of mourning over melancholia, or treat melancholia as a pathological symptom that can be mobilized for political action. This allows them to systematize loss as an opportunity for democratic political action through the work of mourning that is available to

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[215] Kant modeled his metaphysics on Descartes schema, which stripped metaphysics of the senses and left all knowledge to reason. It was a way to systematize knowledge, and Descartes' physics required a new metaphysics that separated the mind from the body. *Cogito ergo sum* reduces being to the I in thinking, which logically deduces and depends upon intellectual faculties. As a side note, metaphysics were the roots of the tree and morality was a branch of Descartes' pictograph of his devised worldview in *Principles*. The roots nourish the tree and Descartes stripped the tree of *bodily* senses and crafted a science of knowledge. Pascal once commented: "I cannot forgive Descartes; in all his philosophy, Descartes did his best to dispense with God. But Descartes could not avoid prodding God to set the world in motion with a snap of his lordly fingers; after that, he had no more use for God."

[216] "Democracy would be Cartesianism operationalized, a political society that had traded meaning for uniformity, the political analogue to reductionism. In place of genuine diversity, it substitutes mere subjectivism, its version of Descarte's *cogito* principle, 'I think, therefor I am.' Democracy, like Cartesians, would seem the realized condition that Pascalian void opened up by modern revolution and carried to extremes in American, a society without a common identity." Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, 89.

[217] Sigmund Freud, *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia* (London; New York: Penguin Books, Limited, 2007); See: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Reprint edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2006); Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Slavoj Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (July 1, 2000): 657–81; Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 19–27; Thomas Dumm, *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008); Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2012).

the polity. Despite their somewhat different readings of Freud, each treats mourning as an experience that can be overcome, in some way, through politicization.

In Freud's seminal essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," he attempts to offer a definition of melancholy against what he calls the normal affect of mourning. Freud begins by offering a definition of mourning, writing that "mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on."[218] When the loss of a loved-object produces a state of melancholia instead of mourning, Freud concedes that the subject is suspected of a pathological disposition. Mourning, on the other hand, is not considered pathological because "we rely on it being overcome after a certain lapse of time." Melancholia is characterized by "painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment."[219] Freud argues that with the exception of "disturbance of self-regard," the same traits are found in the mourning state. Profound mourning of a lost loved-object such as a person causes a turning away from the world, where the world cannot recall the mourner. The person is unable to adopt a new loved-object, which would mean replacing the one that was lost. Freud admits that it is only because we are so familiar with mourning that it does not seem pathological. Mourning is characterized by a deep sense of aloneness, where the individual is still mentally and emotionally bound to the lost object; and it is only when a person has fully mourned the loss of the loved-object that they are able to "become free and uninhibited again." This form of

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[218] Freud, *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia*, 311.
[219] Ibid., 243.

grieving is drawn out and forces the individual to relive each memory and hope that bound their libido to the lost object.

For Freud, melancholia may or may not be the reaction to the loss of a loved-object. Where the exciting causes are different one can recognize that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not actually died, but has been lost as an object of love. In yet other cases, one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. For Freud, melancholia like mourning is brought on by a lost loved-object, but it is withdrawn from consciousness, "in contradistinction from mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious."[220]

Freud's essay is an attempt to understand melancholia with and against common psychoanalytic understandings of mourning. Contemporary political theory's emphasis on Freud's understanding of mourning as a social category opens it up for political possibility. It is by nature a collective concept to which each individual has access. Melancholia, on the other hand, appears more individual in nature. It is not necessarily something that each person experiences as a part of the human condition. It is however bound to loss like mourning, which is the point from which Freud began and returns to in *The Ego and The Id*. If we think back for a moment to Wolin's introduction from "Vocation to Invocation" we are reminded of the construction of political subjectivity through experiences dominated by loss. The losses that give form to political subjectivity are experienced by each individual and can be set aside from those real and psychosomatic losses that Freud returns to in understanding the dynamics of mourning. What, politically, collectively, is our lost-loved-

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[220] Ibid., 244.

object? Does it exist? What does it mean if the melancholic has no reserve of good loved-objects to which she can re-attach, re-pair the harmony of the self? Or, what does it mean if the melancholic willfully refuses attachment to the so-called "good loved-object", because they're not desirable?

Unlike the successful and productive process of mourning, the melancholic lives in a constant state of dissociation, subject to waves of mania and depression, constantly being thrown back upon oneself in anxiety; the inner world is always one of chaos and one is incapable of experiencing trust. The internal world is prioritized over the external world because reality always fails testing, and there is no affirmation of good. Instead, each time the subject tests reality she is surrounded by bad objects. As such the melancholic cannot love the world as it appears. The melancholic lives in a perpetual state of loss according to those who are able to attach to the world, but their loss is only the lost possibility of good love-objects that never existed in the first place. Consequently, the melancholic exists in a state of hyper-subjectivity because the only loved-object is the lover herself and the internal world that is created against the external one. Politically, theorists are drawn towards mourning over melancholia because mourning is hopeful; mourning carries with it the promise of renewed existence in the world, melancholia seen as such does not. Melancholia forces us to break with the trusted reality of the world and challenge it as illusion. How can it be real if it consistently fails the reality test? The work of mourning is the work of retrieval in the sense that we must retrieve the good from the lost loved-object if we are to move forward and attach to another, to free up space in our capacity to love (what Freud calls the libido). The question in reattachment is whether or not we insist upon replicating the lost loved-object in some form, or whether or not we can release the libidinal desire altogether and attach to a

new object. The prior is a form of melancholic mourning that is attached to the form, without, or at best with, different content.

Freud alludes to, but fails to explicate, the critical capacity of melancholia. Melancholia doesn't seem productive in the same way that mourning does, because it doesn't offer us an ability to re-attach to the world to re-pair oneself as whole, because there was never any whole to begin with. Melancholia is a fragmentation of being that refuses the conceptions of wholeness, which in part explains Adorno's critique of Hegel in his reflections on a damaged life. Wolin and Adorno are both undertaking a kind of melancholy work, thinking about the future of a democratic political life that breaks free from the dominant narratives of homogenous time and historicity.

III.I Melancholy and the Vocative Loss of We

"In melancholy truth presents itself, and the movement of melancholy is one toward the deliverance of lost 'meaning.' A truly dialectical motion. For if truth presents itself in melancholy, it indeed presents itself to pure inwardness exclusively in semblance. Truth is, in the pure imagination of inwardness, comparable to the pleasure of the melancholic: 'The essence of the pleasure does not lie in pleasure itself, but in the accompanying consciousness.'"

— Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard*: *Construction of the Aesthetic*

Mourning and melancholy are two different affects, although they share many commonalities, and are sometimes subsumed within one another. At bottom, both are caused by the experience of loss. It is sometimes possible to say what has been lost, sometimes not. While the identification of loss is always possible in mourning, it is not in melancholy. Instead, it becomes a trace, mimetically reproduced in the subject's psyche. To say that we as theorists have become numb to the experiences of loss is not quite accurate, because it would assume that we have consciously lost the ability to experience moments of

loss. Instead, the terms of our power struggles have shifted, and we have nothing we are consciously trying to retrieve. If power struggles produce losses, and the terms of struggles have shifted from the public sphere of civic engagement to the private sphere of subjective interests, then what is at stake has changed. The loss that Wolin turns us to in invoking theorists to democracy is the vocative loss of We, it is the identity of democracy that has been fragmented by the production of private interests. The privatization of the political sphere has meant the privatization of political theory coupled with the persistent idea that there must be a Left and that the Left must act. The proliferation of private interests are mirrored in the proliferation of philosophical turns, in schools of thought, the most damaging of which, for Wolin, is the turn towards ethics. Instead of recalling democracy, we have to first recall the collective we, a sense of collectivity.

Wolin turns to Adorno in thinking about loss and contemporary political theory in order to address the "rectilinear succession" of victory and defeat, which ignores the defeated, and celebrates the victor, because Adorno looks outside the linear narratives of history to find what survives. The dominant cultural mode, which hails the victor and ignores the defeated, furthers the drive to move past loss. In order for Adorno to escape the linear temporalization of victory and defeat, he must escape the perceived dialectical movement of history. In doing so, he turns to what he calls "the cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material [which] . . . Is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic."[221] It is the defeated that is cast outside the linear narrative of history, which hails the victor, which theory must address.

The loss of vocation for Wolin is illustrated by the loss of a collective sense of politics. It is the loss of a collective we to the subjective I, or what he calls subjective individualism.

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[221] Wolin, "Political Theory: From Vocation to Invocation," 4.

The melancholic state that Adorno emphasizes is illustrated in the vocative shift that Wolin points to in this loss of collectivity. It is the prioritization of the self over the world, and the prioritization of the ego over all others that moves us to think about politics today as a way to act in the world, but also to treat mourning as an opportunity for political action. 'Systematized' for Wolin becomes another word for methodology, and it is in some ways the same problem for theory that he addressed in his original essay on vocation.

Adorno and Wolin are both concerned with the turn towards ethics, and the moralization of ethics in political theory. Whereas Wolin calls for a clear form of political work, Adorno recalls us to the activity of thinking in itself. In many ways, Wolin's essay on invocation is recalling us to thinking, to what he calls "leisure time." Adorno is more wary of the need for direct political action than Wolin, although both are reaching for a form of resignation from the dystopic reality of our contemporary political situation.

In Adorno's lectures "Problems of Moral Philosophy" he expresses great dis-ease at the outset at sitting in the comfort of a classroom with students offering to discuss morality at all. He tells them that the "good life" is no longer possible, and makes clear that what is at stake in moral philosophy is thinking about moral questions and not guidance for action. He has no intentions of laying down a set of 'norms or values' that ought regulate behavior. Here Adorno's is consistent with his dedication in *Minima Moralia*, which asserts that wrong life cannot be rightly lived. "The melancholy science from which I make this offering to my friend relates to a region that from time immemorial was regarded as the true field of philosophy, but which since the latter's conversion into method, has lapsed into intellectual neglect, sententious whimsy and finally oblivious: the teaching of the good life."[222]

[222] "Moral philosophy in this sense means making a sustained effort - without anxieties or reservations - to achieve a true, conscious understanding of the categories of morality and of the questions that relate to the

According to Adorno, moral philosophy has no direct connection with lived reality, but does have a "necessary connection with practical action." Citing Kant, Adorno makes clear that the question "What shall we do?" is the critical problem of contemporary thought.

> According to Kant . . . this question "What shall we do?" is the crucial question of moral philosophy. And I would like to add that it is the crucial question of philosophy in general . . . Today, this question has undergone a strange modification. I have found again and again that when carrying out theoretical analyses - and theoretical analyses are essentially critical in nature - that I have been met by the question: "Yes, but what shall we do?", and this question has been conveyed with a certain undertone of impatience, and undertone that proclaims: "All right, what is the point of all this theory?"[223]

Adorno argues that the dialectical relation between theory and practice that was developed by Lenin eliminated theoretical thinking altogether. He urges us to pause and question our reliance upon the unity of theory and practice, lest we become what "Americans call a joiner, that is to say, a man who always has to join in, who has to have a cause for which he can fight. Such a person is driven by his sheer enthusiasm for the idea that something or other must be done and some movement has to be joined about which he is deluded enough to believe that it will bring about significant changes."[224] Adorno argues, "this impatience can very easily become linked with a certain resentment towards thinking in general, with a tendency to denounce theory as such."[225] The impatience with theory, which Adorno likens to critical thinking, is tied to a general drive towards actions and the need to do *something*. Adorno urges us to be patient with the relations between theory and practice, and not to give way to a hasty desire for action.[226]

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good life and practice in the higher sense…" Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 34.

[223] Ibid., 3.

[224] Ibid., 5.

[225] Adorno takes it a step further and argues that from here it is not long before people denounce intellectuals.

[226] Adorno acknowledges that practice has "made great inroads into theory . . . Into the realm of new thought in which right behavior can be reformulated." He writes, "This idea is not as paradoxical and irritating as it may sound, for in the final analysis thinking is itself a form of behavior. In its origins thinking is no more than the form in which we have attempted to master our environment and come to terms with it - testing reality is the name given by analytical psychology to this function of the go and of thought - and it is perfectly possible that in certain situations practice will be referred back to theory far more frequently than at other times and in other situations." Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 4.

Adorno argues that it is necessary to retain the concept of morality, albeit critically, in part so that morality is not replaced with the "sentimental concept of ethics."[227] The reduction of morality to ethics disappears the relation of the individual to the collective, and all that is left is the idea that each should live in accordance with one's own nature. Collective moments of loss are treated like opportunities for political action, and when movement fails to take hold, lost opportunities are folded into lamentation. The modernist rut of production and consumption that Wolin characterizes as "endless change" does not cease.

For Both Wolin and Adorno the ethical turn in theory signifies the desire for action over thinking. Mourning is an attractive political category because it is by definition a process that re-pairs what has been lost through reattachment to the world. It requires action and a feeling of resolve. Melancholy as a disposition, set against and placed within mourning, does not appeal to those determined to find a way to act democratically in the world, or render the world more democratic. Melancholy is discontent with reality as it is perceived, it is paranoid and untrusting of the world in its manic state and does not believe that it can attach to good loved-objects outside itself, because each always fails the testing of reality. For the melancholic there is nothing to re-pair, there was never anything to be had in the first place. For Adorno, this melancholic state is illustrated in narratives of crisis and catastrophe, it offers its own aesthetic that refuses hopefulness in action, which he links to the reduction of morality to ethics and our impatience to act. Melancholy and despair serve as an affective

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[227] "...There has long since been a tendency to smuggle in the notion of ethics as a substitute for the concept of morality, and I once suggested that the concept of ethics was actually the bad conscience of morality, or that ethics is a sort of morality that is ashamed of its own moralizing with consequence that it behaves as if it were morality, but at the same time not a moralizing morality. . . In other words, to reduce the problem of morality to ethics is to perform a sort of conjuring trick by means of which the decisive problem of moral philosophy, namely the relation of the individual to the general, is made to disappear. What is implied in all this is the idea that if I live in accordance with my own ethos, my own nature, or if, to use the fine phrase of our own time, I realize myself, then this will be enough to bring about the good life. And this is nothing but pure illusion and ideology. . . ." Ibid., 10.

counterweight to our impatient desire to act in the world, or better yet, be told how to act in the world.

Melancholy as a form of contemplative inwardness is not necessarily a depressive affect. Melancholy creates an interstice between inwardness and the semblance of an external reality. In this way, it necessitates a form of plurality, of being in the world. In turning inwards upon one's self a space is created not only between the self and the world, but also between the Self and the subjective self that is formed by the world. Melancholy is deceitful of the so-called world and reality, and refuses placement within the linear narrative of worldly existence. This interstice, or liminal space, allows the melancholic to disrupt the linear temporal narratives and refrains of everydayness. Here, we find the difference between "resignation from" and "refusal to go on." The melancholic's resignation from the world is not necessarily refusal of the world, but is instead an act of resistance to the semblance of reality that claims authority and truth through ordered narratives and tempered dispositions that are considered suitable for living in the world.

In Adorno's study of Kierkegaard he further explicates a concept of melancholy drawn from Kierkegaard's reading of Benjamin's study of *Trauerspiel.*

> Thus it is in the nature of melancholy to be deceitful." As semblance, however, mythical melancholy is not depraved but dialectical in itself. "Providence" is concealed in it. Providence "endows an individual with uncommon powers of dealing with reality." "But then," says providence, "lest he occasion too much harm I have confined this power in melancholy and thereby hide it from him" — Just as "truth" itself, according to Kierkegaard, is hidden from inwardness. "What he is capable of he shall never learn to know, but I want to make use of him. He shall not be humbled by any reality, to that extent he is treated with more partiality than other men, but in himself he shall feel shattered such as has no other man. Then and only then shall he understand me, but then he shall also be certain that it is I he understands." Thus truth subordinates itself to melancholic semblance through semblance's own dialectic. In its semblance melancholy is, dialectically, the image of an other.[228]

Providence is hidden in melancholy. Adorno writes that Kierkegaard identified with the counter-image of the Baroque tyrant, the martyr. It is the martyr-side of the tyrant who is the

[228] Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1989), 61 .

witness to truth, he who has the gift of providence, the ability to attain to providence through melancholia, but is never given access to it. The tyrant cannot gain mastery over historical time, the movement of history; he shall never "learn to know" the truth that is within his melancholic state. The presence of historical time and providence is the shattering force that fractures the subject — The attunement to "truth", but inability to capture it.[229] Melancholy, Adorno writes, is the self's spiritual body "harrowingly divided up into its affective impulses as though they were its limbs."[230] The interior life is likened to the Baroque graveyard, forcing the question of what constitutes living? Similar to Adorno's own problematic in *Minima Moralia*, which "bears witness to a *dialogue interior"*, that asks: is the good life possible today, while simultaneously positing, "Our perspective of life has passed into ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer." [231]

The question of the good life or bearable life that we find in Adorno resounds in Wolin's lament that perhaps it is "too late in the day," and his turn back to Plato in situating the work of political theory within the tradition of political philosophy. Wolin's move from vocation to invocation is a gesture that wants to say maybe something can be saved. It leaves space, because it's unwilling to completely let go. That holding on, though, is not so much a gasp of hope as it is what Benjamin calls the "continual pausing for breath." The space allows for return to the object of contemplation, which for Wolin, I would argue, is democracy of a more ideal kind. Wolin, much like Adorno, is interested in redeeming the work of political theory, which refuses to cheer on the narrative plot twists contemporary theory has bended to in its tragic form.

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[229] "Kierkegaard himself identified with the dialectical counterimage of the tyrant, the martyr, whose concept so thoroughly rules his later theology that in his final polemic Martensen, with justice, accused Kierkegaard of simply equating the 'witness of truth' with the 'martyr.'" Ibid., 62.
[230] Ibid., 63.
[231] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), 15.

In *Minima Moralia*, in "Over the hills," Adorno retells the story of Snow White, writing that it is the perfect image of melancholy. "As the granting of her wish is death, so the saving remains illusion." This sentiment perfectly expresses the disposition of a melancholy that refuses saving. If she were to die or remain in the coffin, the audience would have to mourn her departure from the world, but this idea of losing implies that the world was somehow desirable in the first place. The hopeful breath drawn in vain articulates our attachment to the idea of rescue, but this mournful rescue is not a messianic one. It redeems nothing of existence. Adorno writes, "All contemplation can do no more than patiently trace the ambiguity of melancholy in ever new configurations. Truth is inseparable from the illusory belief that from the figure of the unreal one day, in spite of all, real deliverance will come."[232] Consciously or unconsciously in repetition of Benjamin, Adorno brings melancholy as an affective disposition together with contemplation and thinking. The illusory belief is that one day real deliverance will come from the unreal. Truth here becomes the figure of deliverance, and the object of contemplation. This story represents melancholy because it understands the play between life and death. How can one be brought back to life, to the world, if they were never alive? "Everyone is asleep; only the dead rise at this hour from the grave revived. But I, I am not dead, and so I cannot be revived; and if I were dead, I could not be revived for indeed I have never lived."[233]

The metaphysical world has withered away along with the turn from the good life. Ethics demands commitment to living, but not political action. And certainly not a 'sentimental' or 'vapid' morality. The sentimental moralization of ethics responds to answer Adorno's axiom that the good life is no longer possible. 'Possible' should not be rendered as 'hopeful.' To re-pair the relationship between the subject proper and the ideal of the good

[232] Ibid., 121–122.
[233] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 63.

life is a form of romanticism that throws us back upon a tradition of neo-Kantian idealism. In turning us back towards Adorno, Wolin is rejecting the contemporary desire for reparation or retrieval, which pushes us forward demanding political action. This push past loss forgoes the essential question of addressing the subjective I.

Conclusion

In *Minima Moralia* Adorno writes "Dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means. But since it must use these means, it is at every moment in danger of itself acquiring a coercive character: the ruse of reason would like to hold sway over the dialectic too."[234] The danger of the coercion of logic is systematization, which looks like a form of critical dialectic, but functions like a methodology reinforcing the logic of domination. The logic of domination and the instruments of reason cannot be separated from our understanding of the movement of history and our understanding of temporality, which frames and gives form to our own subject position in and/or against the world.

The systematization of loss within political theory undermines the work of theory as a vocation. Wolin's turn towards Adorno's *Minima Moralia* brings together vocation and invocation: He writes, "Theory must needs deal with the cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such has admittedly from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic." Wolin is invoking the political thinker back to the vocation of political theory, but it is not that simple. For Wolin and Adorno it is the work of theory to collect the debris cast aside by the forces of change and recover them through the work of memory. In this sense, Wolin's use of Adorno

[234] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 150.

allows him to think about the relationship between loss and politics, and the relationship between post-modernity and loss which leaves precious time for understanding experiences of loss or crisis. Wolin and Adorno are concerned with political understanding — for leisure in thinking, deliberation, and consideration. If political theory is vocation then it must be attuned and sensitive to the world; resistant to domination of the world by change while remaining open and dynamic.

CONCLUSION

Adorno's rejection of the good life is a useful political critique for conceiving new forms of political action. His premise necessarily rejects a Freudian conception of mourning. There is nothing to mourn for, because to do so would mean that the world could somehow be redeemed. Adorno demands that we acknowledge the distinction between moral judgment and ethical action; and that thinking is necessary for determining the relationship between these philosophical categories. If we accept certain ethical axioms for acting, because we are determined to act, and fail to think about the moral claims supporting them, then we are responsible for our actions and their outcomes.

Adorno and Benjamin's portraits of Melancholy in modernity, through the *Trauerspiel* and various vignettes, give voice if not meaning to a sense of displacement. The melancholic state expresses discontent with the order of things, with the world as it is, or appears to be. Fidelity to one another and the world as a principle of promise has been broken, and is continually being broken. For Benjamin and Adorno, melancholy is an affective framework for political analysis. Thinking about how we think about politics, and the position the political theorist occupies in the world, poses a question of space. That is, what space do we occupy, what vantage point do we assume, what frame do we look through when we look at the world? Adorno's *Minima Moralia* offers one answer, placing the political thinker is a state of melancholy, a position of sorrowful meditation at once removed from the world and firmly rooted in it. Instead of a will to act paralyzed by melancholy, though, Adorno argues for a form of political withdrawal. Action becomes inverted and placed within the realm of thinking. Similarly, for Arendt critical thinking becomes a form of political action. Characterized by a critical vantage point and distance from experience in the world, Arendt's

conception of thinking is grounded in temporal terms. How can we find to the time to stop and think about what we are doing? For Arendt, a form of present politics demands thinking and accountability if we are to understand and address the events of the twentieth century and now twenty-first.

For these thinkers, there is a consistent turn away from action towards thinking. In contrast, for contemporary theorists today there is a drive towards action, and so to a turn towards ethics, and how to act in the world. The paradigmatic impulse today is: But what can I do? Not, "to stop and think what we are doing." In this move towards action there is a conflation that occurs between morality and ethics, which pushes us towards righting wrongs and injustices, without considering their moral premises. There is a sentimental morality that seems to guide what it is we mean by acting. A morality that often seems to replicate the dominant norms and ethos of the empty, homogenous time Benjamin describes.

The drive towards action, and conflation of a sentimental morality with ethics, is seen in the contemporary turn towards aesthetics. Many political thinkers writing within this turn focus on the relationship between mourning and politics, and in so doing rely upon a Freudian understanding of loss that leads towards mourning. Mourning as a productive category contains the promise of renewal. The promise of mourning is the promise of change. It is the promise that despite our losses, real and or imaginary, the world will go on, we will form new relationships; we will overcome. That there might be a happy ending. Contained within this logic is an acceptance that anything can be redeemed through time, that if we submit ourselves to the process of mourning, the past will recede and the future will open up new possibilities. For Arendt, Benjamin, and Adorno, though, this "vain hope" is a kind of catharsis that rejects thinking, understanding, and the possibility of resistance.

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