

This living voice, which you wanted to stir up from the bosom of the German language, has become husky. Will someone be found who can still hear it?"

This question makes the last words of the Jerusalem address tremble (cf. Gershom G. Scholem, "L'achèvement de la traduction de la Bible par Martin Buber," a speech given at Jerusalem in February 1961, in *Le messianisme juif: Essais sur la spiritualité du judaïsme*, trans. Bernard Dupuy [Paris: Calman-Lévy, 1974], pp. 441-47).

*b.* Rosenzweig also recalls the "Jewish" languages constituted by Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish when *spoken effectively*.

*c.* Rosenzweig finally recalls sacred language, the language of prayer, which remains a language *proper* to the Jewish people when they practice, read, and understand it—at least in the liturgy.

Now, to remain with the thus-privileged taxonomic viewpoint, the typical situation of the Franco-Maghrebian Jew that I am trying to describe is one in which, to underline it again, expropriation extends to the loss of these *three resorts*:

*a.* "Authentic" French (a French ostensibly "maternal" was, perhaps, at his disposal, but it was not metropolitan, only a French *of the colonized*—something the German of Rosenzweig, as well as that of all the Ashkenazic Jews of Europe, was not);

*b.* Judeo-Spanish (which was no longer practiced);

*c.* the sacred language, which, more often than not, where it was still used [*prononcée*] in prayer, was neither authentically nor widely taught, nor therefore understood, except in exceptional cases.

**2. Arendt.** The linguistic ethics of the German Jew who was Rosenzweig was not that of the German Jewish woman named Hannah Arendt. No recourse for her to either a sacred language or a new idiom like Yiddish, but an ineradicable attachment to a unique mother tongue, German. (To a limited extent, which we will not analyze here, her experience would be analogous to that of Adorno. In *Was ist Deutsch?* [which was initially, in 1965, a radio talk; French trans. M. Jimenez and E. Kaufholz, in *Modèles critiques* (Paris: Payot, 1984), pp. 220 ff.], Adorno gives us to understand that he did not take the constraint of English and lin-

guistic exile very well—an exile that, unlike Arendt, he interrupted by returning to Germany, where he could rediscover a language in which he never ceases to recognize a “metaphysical privilege” [p. 229].)

The famous declarations of Arendt on this subject in “Was bleibt? Es bleibt die Muttersprache,” a talk with Günter Gaus which was aired by German television in 1964, won a prize and, what is noteworthy, a German prize, the Adolf Grimme prize, are well-known; the talk was published in Munich in Günter Gaus, *Zur Person*, and in French translation as “Qu’est-ce qui reste?: Reste la langue maternelle” in *La tradition cachée: Le Juif comme paria*, trans. Sylvie Courtine-Denamy (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1987). Arendt responds in a way that is at once disarmed, naïve, and learned when she is interrogated about her attachment to the German language. Did she survive exile in America, her teaching, and her publications in Anglo-American, “even in the bitterest of times”? “Always,” she said, plainly and without hesitation. The reply seems initially to consist in one word, *immer*. She always kept this un-failing attachment and this absolute familiarity. The “always” precisely seems to qualify this time of language. Perhaps it says more: not only that the language called maternal is *always* there, *the* “always there,” the “always already there,” and “always still there,” but also that there is perhaps no experience of the “always” and the “same” there, as such, except where there is, if not language, at least some trace which allows itself to be represented by language: as if the experience of the “always” and loyalty to the other as to oneself presupposed the un-failing fidelity to language; even perjury, lying, and infidelity would still presuppose *faith in language*; I cannot lie without believing and making believe in language, without giving credence to the idiom.

After having said “always,” very simply, as if the answer were sufficient and exhausted, Arendt, however, adds a few words when confronted with an insistent question about what happened to her habitation of the language in those “bitterest of times,” at the time of Nazism at its most unleashed (most unleashed as such, unleashed as Nazism, for there is *always* a time of Nazism before and after Nazism):

“Always. I was telling myself: What is to be done? It is not really the

German language, after all, that has gone mad. And in the second place, nothing can replace the mother tongue” (“Qu’est-ce qui reste?” p. 240).

These *two sentences*, apparently simple and spontaneous, follow each other naturally, without their author seeing—without, at any rate, her giving to see—the abyss opening up under them. Under them or between them.

We cannot return to all the twists and turns of these classic statements. Like “maternal solicitude,” which is, as Rousseau said, not “supplemented,” *nothing*, Arendt confirms, *can replace the mother tongue*. But how can one think this supposed uniqueness—singularity, irreplaceability—of the mother (indestructible fantasy accredited by the second sentence) together with this strange question about a madness of language, an envisioned delirium excluded by the first sentence?

When Arendt seems, in an interrogation followed by an exclamation, to deny, as an absurdity, the idea that a language can become mad (“I was telling myself: What is to be done? It is not really the German language, after all, that has gone mad”), what is she doing? She is not denying, she is disclaiming. [*Elle ne nie pas, elle dénie.*] She is visibly seeking to reassure herself, in the exclamation of a “not really . . . after all!” “I shall never be made to believe that, in spite of everything!” First of all, she seems to think, commonsensically, that a language in itself can be neither reasonable nor delirious: a language cannot become insane; it cannot be given health care or placed in analysis; it cannot be committed to a psychiatric institution. To allege the dementia of a language, one has to be mad or to be seeking alibis. Hence commonsense whispers this incredulous protestation to Arendt: it is not really language, after all, that has gone mad; that does not make any sense, it is extravagant, who could be made to believe it? Hence it is the subjects of this language, humans themselves, who are losing their minds: Germans, certain Germans who were once masters of the country and that language. Only those people had at that time become **diabolical** and frenetic. They have no power over the language. It is older than they; it will survive them and will continue to be spoken by Germans who will no longer be Nazis, even by non-Germans. Hence the logical result, the

same commonsense which links the second sentence to the first, namely, that the mother tongue cannot be replaced.

Now what Arendt seems not to envisage at all, what she seems to avoid, disclaim, or foreclose, in the most natural way possible, is, in a word, more than one thing:

*a. On the one hand*, that a language can, in itself, become mad, even a madness, madness itself, the place of madness, madness in the law. Arendt is not willing or able to think this aberration: in order for the “subjects” of a language to become “mad,” perverse, or **diabolical**, evil with a radical evil, it was indeed necessary that language have a hand in it; it must have had its share in what made that madness possible; a non-speaking being, a being without a “mother” tongue cannot become “mad,” perverse, wicked, murderous, criminal, or diabolical; and if language is for them something other than a simple, neutral, and external instrument (which Arendt is right to assume, for it is necessary that language be something more and other than a simple tool in order to remain all the time, “always,” with oneself through displacements and exiles), it is indeed necessary that the speaking citizen become mad *in* a mad language—in which the same words lose or pervert their so-called commonsense. And we will understand less than nothing in something like Nazism if, along with language and speech, we exclude everything that is inseparable from it: it is not nothing, it is almost everything.

*b. On the other hand*, and for the same reason, it is necessary for a mother, the mother of the language called “maternal,” to be able to become, or to have been, mad (amnesiac, aphasic, delirious). Whereas she should have been led there by her very subject (the irreplaceable uniqueness of the mother tongue), what Arendt does not seem, more profoundly, to have in sight even from very far off, what she did not perhaps *wish* to see, *could* not wish to see, is that it is possible to have a demented mother, a mother “unique” and demented, demented because unique, in the logic of the phantasm. Even if a mother *is* not demented, can one not *have* a demented mother?

This terrible hypothesis can be stated in several ways. One among them would lead us back to the great question of the phantasm, the ques-

tion of the imagination as *phantasia* and as the place of the *phantasma*. In order to remain close to the Rousseau of the “maternal solicitude that does not supplement [*supplée*] at all” we could, for example, tie this thematic of (phantasmatic) imagination together with that of compassion. The one and the other, the one as well as the other faculty seem coextensive with supplementarity, that is, with the power of supplementing, of superadding by replacing, therefore with a certain way of replacing the irreplaceable: for example and *par excellence* the mother, where there are grounds to supply the non-suppliable. There is no maternity that does not appear subject to substitution, within the logic or threat of substitution. The idea that one “naturally” knows who the mother is, unlike the father, at the spectacle of birth is an old fantasy [*phantasme*] (still at work in the Freud of *The Ratman*), one that we should not have waited for “surrogate mothers” and “assisted births” to identify as such, namely as a phantasm [*phantasme*]. Let us recall that strange name that someone I do not know (Voltaire says it is Malebranche) gave to imagination: “*the lunatic lady of the house*” [“*la folle du logis*”]. The mother can become the madwoman of the home, the lunatic of the cell, of the place of substitution where one’s home [*le chez-soi*] is lodged, the cell or the place, the locality or location of one’s home [*le chez-soi*]. It can happen that a mother becomes mad, and that can certainly be a moment of terror. When a mother loses her reason and common sense, the experience of it is as frightening as when a king becomes mad. In both cases, what becomes mad is something like the law or the origin of meaning (the father, the king, the queen, the mother). Now that can sometimes happen, no doubt, as an event, and, one day, once upon a time, in the history of the house or the lineage, threaten the very order of one’s home [*chez-soi*], of the house [*casa*], and of the home [*chez*]. This experience can cause anguish like a thing that happens but could possibly not have happened: it even *ought* not to have happened.

But the same thing can be said in two more radical senses, at once different and not different from this one: namely, that (1) formally, the mother as unique and unsuppliable but always subject to substitution, precisely as the place of language, is what makes madness possible; and

(2) more profoundly, as such an always-open possibility, she *is* madness itself, a madness always at work; the mother as the mother tongue, the very experience of absolute uniqueness that can only be replaced *because* it is irreplaceable, translatable because untranslatable, where she is untranslatable (what would be translated otherwise?), the mother *is* madness; the “unique” mother (let us say maternity, the experience of the mother, the relationship to the “unique” mother) is *always* a madness and hence, as the mother and the place of madness, always mad. As mad as the One of the unique. A mother, a relationship with the mother, a maternity is always unique and hence always a place of madness (nothing drives one crazier than the absolute uniqueness of the One or of the She-One [*l’Une*]). But since she is always unique, she is always only replaceable, re-placeable, suppliable only where there is no unique place except for her. A replacement of the very place, in the place of the place: *khōra*. The tragedy and law of replacement is that it replaces the unique — the unique as the substitute subject to substitution. Whether one is a son or daughter, each time in a different way depending on whether one is a son or daughter, one is always crazy about a mother who is always crazy about that of which she is the mother without ever being able to be uniquely that, precisely at the place, and in the main house [*logis*] of the unique home [*chez-soi*]. And subject to substitution because unique. It could be demonstrated that absolute uniqueness renders one as crazy as absolute replaceability, the absolute replaceability which replaces the emplacement itself, the site, the place, the main house of one’s home [*le logis du chez-soi*], the *ipse*, the being-home [*l’être-chez-soi*], or the being-with-oneself of the self.

This discourse on insanity brings us nearer to an energy of madness that could well be linked to the essence of hospitality as the essence of the home [*chez-soi*], the essence of the being-oneself [*l’être-soi*], or of ipseity as being-at-home [*l’être-chez-soi*]. But also as what identifies the Law with the mother tongue, implanting it or at any rate inscribing it therein.

“Always. I was telling myself: What is to be done? It is not really the German language, after all, that has gone mad. And in the second

place [in the second place!], nothing can replace the mother tongue.” After having indicated the irreplaceable, the un-suppliable, of the mother tongue, Arendt adds: “One can forget their mother tongue, that is true. I have examples of that around me and, moreover, these persons speak foreign languages much better than I do. I always speak with a very heavy accent, and often I happen not to express myself in an idiomatic fashion. They are, conversely, capable of it, but there we are dealing with a language in which one cliché expels the other because the productivity that one shows in one’s own language has been neatly cut off, as one forgets that language.”

The interlocutor then asks her whether this forgetting of the mother tongue is not the “outcome of a repression.” Arendt agrees: Yes, the forgetting of the mother tongue, the substitution which supplements [*supplée*] the mother tongue would indeed be the effect of a repression. Beyond that Arendtian formulation, it could perhaps be said that this is the place and the very possibility of repression par excellence. Arendt then names Auschwitz as the cut-off, the cut-off point, the cutting-edge [*le tranchant*] of repression:

“Yes, very often. I have experienced it near certain persons in a completely distressing manner. You see, what was decisive was the day we heard news about Auschwitz.”

Another way of recognizing and accrediting the obvious: an event such as “Auschwitz,” or the very name which names this event can be held accountable for *repressions*. The word remains a bit vague, it is no doubt inadequate but it places us, without mincing words, on the path of a logic, an economy, a topic which no longer has to do with the ego and properly subjective consciousness. It reminds us to address these questions beyond the logic or the phenomenology of consciousness, something which still happens too rarely in the most public sphere of contemporary discourse.

3. *Levinas*. For Levinas, the ethics of language is still other: neither that of Rosenzweig, nor that of Adorno, nor that of Arendt. A different experience, indeed, for someone who wrote, taught, and lived almost all his life in the French language, whereas Russian, Lithuanian,

German, and Hebrew remained his other familiar languages. There seems to be little solemn reference to a mother tongue in his works and no self-assurance assumed in proximity with it, except for the gratitude he expressed, on behalf of someone who declared that “the essence of language is friendship and hospitality,” to the French language on each occasion, to French as an adopted or elected language, the welcoming language, the language of the host. In the course of a conversation (Why are such serious things often spoken about on the occasion of public conversations, as if the speakers were caught off guard and spoke in a kind of improvisation?), Levinas names a soil of the soil, the “soil of this language which, for me, is French soil.” (François Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas, qui êtes-vous?* [Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987]). At issue is the classical French of the Enlightenment. By choosing a language which has a soil at its disposal, Levinas speaks of an *acquired* familiarity: the latter has nothing originary about it, it is not maternal in its figure. A radical and typical suspicion, a kind of prudence one would anticipate from Levinas, in the place of what one could call Arendtian radicalism, namely, the attachment to a certain *sacrality* of the *root*. (Levinas always distinguishes holiness from sacrality—in Hebrew even if it is difficult to do that in other languages, German, for example.) As the Heideggerian she remains in this respect, but like many Germans, Jewish or not, Arendt reaffirms the mother tongue, that is to say, a language upon which a virtue of originality is bestowed. “Repressed” or not, this language remains the ultimate essence of the soil, the foundation of meaning, the inalienable property that one carries within oneself. Levinas grants what he says about French in his/its own history first to the language of philosophy. The language of Greek affiliation is capable of accommodating all meaning from elsewhere, even from a Hebraic revelation. Which is another way of saying that language, and above all the “maternal” idiom, is not the originary and irreplaceable place of meaning: a proposition that is, indeed, consistent with Levinasian thought of the hostage and substitution. But language is “expression” rather than generation or foundation: “At no time was Western philosophy losing, in my view, its right to the last word; everything must indeed be *ex-*