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**Countering destruction with spontaneity, redescription,
and playfulness: a philosophical reading of Kross**

Master's thesis

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Introduction

The experience of the Third Reich and Stalinist Soviet Union in 20th century Europe presents multi-sided social, moral and political issues. Looking back at the regimes, the experiences of the people who lived through them, and the numerous highly troubling realizations about what people are capable of offers ample food for thought: German-Jewish political thinker Hannah Arendt has highlighted the unsettling and unprecedented nature of totalitarian regimes. The bureaucracy-bound mechanisms of normalizing violence and harm influenced every aspect of the society; the isolation and fear that totalitarian governments planted in the society in general reached its peak and full realization in the concentration, extermination and forced labor camps.

There is a myriad of literary texts written about the experience of Gulag forced labor camps and Nazi concentration camps, in genres ranging from memoirs and autobiography to fiction, covering a variety of works that reside between accounts of what one remembers to have experienced, and imaginative narration. Many of the novels and short stories written by Estonian writer Jaan Kross are placed somewhere between memories and fiction, telling fictive stories about the narrator Peeter Mirk's (Kross's *alter ego*) experiences in Estonia during Soviet and Nazi occupation, as well as his life in Gulag forced labor camps in North-Russia during the Soviet occupation.

This thesis brings together the views of Arendt with those of American 20th century neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, and undertakes the task of offering a philosophical reading of Jaan Kross's Gulag stories with the help of a synthesis of Arendt's and Rorty's key ideas. The synthesis of their ideas is going to be addressed in a separate subchapter, where we present a philosophical framework for reading concentration camp literature. This framework joins Arendt's and Rorty's views on evil and cruelty, elimination of spontaneity and unmaking someone's world, highlighting the concern about language and freedom of narrativity as the connecting element in their works.

We show that Arendt's reflections on the social mechanisms of totalitarianism, and especially her discussion on the manifold destruction (with its meaninglessness and surreality) of human beings can be connected to and reconciled with Rorty's ideas: Rorty's views about truth, politics, and morality have often been considered controversial and contentious. Hence, the task is clearly a non-trivial one: why include Rorty, when his philosophical works do not have a place in the canon of discussing totalitarianism? Rorty is an attractive choice for writing about the topic at hand for the reason that his figure of the

liberal ironist enables us to speak about (the importance of) solidarity and moral concerns without a ‘religious’ edge: without grounding moral judgments in human nature, appealing to an unchanging core-self, or search for objective truth and absolutes.

The central question of the thesis, from which Arendt’s and Rorty’s conversation emerges, is concerned with making moral choices in difficult conditions: facing moral choices in a forced labor camp, what options remain? How could we interpret those choices in the context of the camp life – i.e., what does it *mean* to choose the way Kross’s characters do? With that, we are addressing the question: if a character makes a moral choice, what does this choice mean from the perspective of, firstly, their chances for surviving¹, and secondly, their prospect of resistance? Based on our reading of Kross’s stories, we introduce a concept of playfulness (*mänglevus* in Estonian). The playfulness that we emphasize is a moral choice that defies the destructivity of the camps and functions as a self-constructive force. It enables one to stay spontaneous and redescribe, thus upholding the very freedom of narrativity – the freedom to weave coherent stories about oneself and the world – in the camp inmates.

The first chapter asks what kind of conclusions could be made from reading Kross’s fiction: the aim of this chapter is to draw the boundaries of the argument that the thesis makes, by showing Kross as a good choice for discussing the ‘limbo’ area of the camps, but does not allow us to discuss the harshest of the camp conditions. As the forced labor camps had milder living conditions than the death camps (of which Arendt has written at length, for example), they are a suitable setting for looking at moral choices: the stakes are high enough due to the destruction that still looms on the horizon, as we know from the writings of Varlam Shalamov; at the same time, life in a forced labor camp still leaves room for vocabularies and moral dilemmas. In this chapter, we also address the genre of the thesis by outlining some of the principles according to which philosophical analysis of literary works is conducted in this thesis.

The second chapter focuses on the synthesis of Arendt and Rorty. The chapter first introduces Arendt’s political philosophy and then, in the second subchapter, some of Rorty’s ideas. The chapter highlights the aspects of their approaches that are relevant for our analysis of playfulness as a form of resistance that employs redescription and spontaneity, i.e. the

¹ The word “survive” has a twofold meaning in this thesis. The first meaning is perhaps the most commonly understood one: surviving means staying physically alive. The second meaning stems from the particular context of the camps, where the term “living corpses” indicates that people die, in some sense, already before they *physically* perish; survival, then, would mean staying mentally and emotionally alive (and hence also maintaining the moral faculty, the ability to make moral decisions).

meaning and consequences of complete destruction of a person, and spontaneity as a phenomenon that goes hand in hand with staying alive inside, and the importance of redescription amidst destruction. In the third section of the chapter, we present a philosophical framework for reading Kross, which emerges from merging Arendt's and Rorty's conceptual toolboxes and approaches. This part focuses on the narrative nature of human beings as it is outlined and (even though sometimes tacitly) emphasized by both Rorty and Arendt – the need to make sense of oneself as well as one's surroundings.

In the third chapter, this philosophical framework (as well as our knowledge about Arendt's and Rorty's approaches to the destruction and unmaking a person's world) is applied in interpreting the moral choices of Basile and Dr Ulrich in Kross's "Vürst" ("The Prince") and "Halleluuja" ("Hallelujah") (Kross 2004). These two stories have the figure of an eccentric – a misfit in the camp lifestyle – in their center. Even though they are very different, both Basile and Dr Ulrich were the masters of their redescription of the self (without adopting the 'camp-redescription' of themselves, a term I introduce in the first chapter) and realized spontaneity via their playfulness and quest for originality, thus resisting the camp script that, together with accumulating sufferings, slowly took inmates towards less and less possibilities of forming coherent narratives. The playfulness that we discuss is a very particular kind of playfulness; a great part of the chapter is dedicated to outlining its characteristics and nature, which also helps us distinguish Basile's and Dr Ulrich's game/playfulness from a cruel game.

1 Kross and the ‘limbo’ of the camp experience

In this chapter, we will place Kross’s works alongside those of Auschwitz and Gulag survivors, Primo Levi and Varlam Shalamov. Kross’s stories differ from the works of Levi and Shalamov in important ways. Addressing those differences will help us understand the relevance of Kross’s stories for this thesis, as well as to draw the boundaries of the area of interest that Kross’s texts illuminate the best. Given that this chapter is concerned with the choice of Kross as such, the question of the genre of the thesis – philosophical analysis of literary works – shall also be addressed, in order to outline some of the principles according to which the analysis is conducted.

Levi’s and Shalamov’s accounts of their survival could be considered some of the most well-known and classic literary texts written about personal encounters with a violent state apparatus (the experience of camps in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union). A brief mapping of the experiences and stories of Kross, Levi, and Shalamov will help us answer the following questions: why are Kross’s works important for understanding the moral dilemmas that arise in totalitarian societies when individuals encounter the violent state apparatus? How realistic are his works in depicting such encounters and issues? Thus, this chapter is an essential building block for the whole project at hand, as it defines the scope (and limitations) of the conclusions that could be drawn after a close reading of Kross.

1.1 Building bridges between philosophy and literature

To understand the boundaries of the thesis and what kind of conclusions can be made, we should look further from Kross and turn our attention to the approach that is taken in this thesis: bringing together philosophy and literature. In case of a philosophical interpretation of fiction, the examples that are drawn from literature are treated differently than the examples that occur, for example, in thought experiments; as Peter Singer wrote in *The Moral of the Story: An Anthology of Ethics Through Literature*: “Hence philosophical examples in ethics usually lack depth, the characters in them are mere ciphers, and the context is absent or at best, briefly sketched. Sometimes we are asked to imagine things that are, in practical terms, impossible, or wildly implausible.” (Singer and Singer 2005, x) The goal of creating bridges between philosophy and literature is to enable an analysis that benefits both from the richness of context, historical background, and realistic, life-like characters and situations that are embedded in the time and place that the plot dictates, i.e.

in their historical setting, as well as the argumentative precision, nuance and freedom that philosophy encourages and enables.

Due to their compact, concise, and purpose-bound nature, philosophical thought experiments do not offer this richness of context and embeddedness of the agent. However, philosophy is important for the task at hand, as well, although in different aspects: with the help of philosophy, we can draw more general, technical, and/or precise conclusions due to the lack of constraints that an aesthetic narrative poses. For example, if a novel about life in a totalitarian system went into very much detail about how and why the regime came to be, and described the socio-political dynamics that led up to the regime with the same detail and precision of political-theoretical nuances as a treatise on political theory, it might lose a considerable part of its aesthetic nature (its flow, for example). Hence, as the phrase “bring together” indicates, neither philosophy nor the literature should be stripped of their character and particular advantages.

In the case of literature, this means maintaining the richness, character building, and integrity of the text we are dealing with. The text’s richness manifests itself in the language use: the vocabulary, metaphors, and style of detail depiction enable us to imagine the life-world that the characters inhabit; the writing style, including the choice of what is told, emphasized, and left untold, also guides the reader’s experience and mingles with it in complex ways. The reader perceives the place, time, lifestyle and values that the characters live in and possess via the linguistic devices that the author employed. Character building is also related to the richness of the text and the literary techniques which give the reader access to the setting of a story. In fiction as well as in literary analysis, characters are not reduced to mere ciphers whose behavior serves as a sketch of an action or decision that is relevant for some theoretical purposes; instead, we take Rorty’s view and treat them as embodiments of *possibilities* that the variety and plurality of different societies (could) hold in themselves, some more, some less realistic. They can bring us a view of what a certain possible future is like, or be part of a specific description of the past. As illustrators of possibilities, the characters are just as alive (and often just dangerous, reconciliatory or reassuring) as the people we meet outside of books. Characters have their past, more and less complex psychological construction, and certain outlooks – horizons that border their experiences and perspectives to life – which are integral to understanding their choices.

This leads us to integrity – a literary text should be treated as a whole, since the narrative into which the characters are set creates a context for understanding them. Regardless of whether a character’s motivations, desires, and background unfold to the reader at once, as

is often the case in more compact and concise genres, as the short story, or gradually, perhaps even over several stories/books by the same author, literary texts derive their power from how the parts come together as a whole. However, when integrating literary texts into philosophical analysis, it is easier to maintain the integrity of shorter, more concise genres like the short story. The short story is simply more easily graspable as a whole, and is therefore especially apt for philosophical interpretation.

With regard to creating bridges between literature and philosophy, we face the question about the challenges that come with creating such bridges. It is important that philosophical analysis of literary works may face the danger of cherry-picking: with a certain philosophical question in mind, one can look at a text and, with the help of enough interpretation, see the text as an answer to the question; this is especially relevant if the text itself does not mention or discuss the question (or any philosophical question, for that matter). Here, we can see the importance of the fictive text's integrity for a philosophical interpretation of literature – the less the (parts of the) text is treated as a skeleton of context-independent logical constructions, useful for confirming an already existing idea, the smaller the chances of cherry-picking.

Hence, philosophical analysis of literary works should be sensitive to contradictions between the text (from beginning to end) and the interpretation. The problem is less current if the text offers a point of connection for analysis by already asking philosophical questions. This is the case with Kross's stories, as they reflect on problems of morality, dignity, identity, and responsibility, and individuals' encounters with violent political power. The narrator of many of Kross's texts, Peeter Mirk, is a thoughtful character, which enables us to draw on his reflections about what one can and should do as an inmate of a forced labor camp, what one ought to do in a newly occupied country where the threat of being arrested is constantly hanging above one's head, and whether (and why) it can be a good decision to be playful with the power structures.

1.2 Themes of destruction in Shalamov's and Levi's writings

For the task at hand, Kross is an interesting choice for a number of reasons. As he had experienced both regimes and encountered both the stress of being arrested by the Germans and the deportation to Vorkuta by Soviet authorities, a Gulag camp in North-Russia (Kross spent eight years in this part of Russia before his return), his stories reflect his own experiences. The personal nature of his depictions of the characters' encounters with the power apparatus and the difficult conditions in the camps is evident. However, the stories themselves are a mixture of fictive events and characters, the events that actually took place, and the people Kross actually met. In this sense, his stories about camp experiences form a body of historical novels and short stories.

Genre-wise, Kross's Gulag stories are very similar to Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. Shalamov was a writer, journalist and Gulag survivor, who was arrested twice during the Stalinist era, and spent a total of approximately 17 years in the camps. The *Kolyma Tales* are noteworthy, as they offer a detailed and hopeless account of the camps as a stage for death and moral corruption. The length and intensity of Shalamov's experiences are helpful for putting certain aspects of Kross's works into a perspective, for example the cheerful unbreakability of Peeter Mirk, the narrator, as well as themes of curiosity, the prospect of maintaining one's sense of solidarity with others, and playfulness.

Kolyma Tales illustrated how moral barriers being pushed aside in the camps. The inmates realized that "it is possible to commit base acts – and live. It is possible to lie – and live ... In camp a human being learns sloth, deception and viciousness," and "all human emotions – love, friendship, envy, concern for one's fellow man, compassion, longing for fame, honesty – had left us with the flesh that had melted from our bodies during their long fasts." (Shalamov 1994, 41, 364) While life in the camps was generally hard, Shalamov described the mines as particularly destructive (Shalamov 1994, 291). Given those tendencies, it becomes a moral choice to avoid the destruction as long as possible, to retain one's sense of solidarity. It is also interesting that the destruction that the camps entailed for the inmates' emotional and physical lives has notable connections with Rorty's emphasis on the relation between torture (as it occurs in *1984*) and the personal narrative of the victim.

The destruction of a human being's physique, spirit and morality can occur over a much shorter time period than 17 years – Italian Jewish chemist and writer Primo Levi spent 11 months in Auschwitz, and yet his most well-known book, *If This Is A Man*, speaks of the breaking of the inmates ('the demolition of man') to a similarly dark extent, with the hope,

dignity and self of the inmates being quickly removed in the camp, to use the words of Howard Jacobson who wrote the foreword to the 2013 edition of *If This Is A Man* (Levi 1987, ii).²

Levi and Shalamov both describe the process of automatization, through which the inmates turn machine-like, in the sense that their vocabularies shrink, and they give up asking questions. With Arendt (and also Rorty), one gets the feeling that this is indeed intentional: the aim of the camps is to break, to make the inmates think of themselves in the lowest possible terms. Inspired by Rorty, this process could be called adopting the ‘camp-redescription’. Camp-redescription could be seen as a way in which a totalitarian system molds the minds of the people, in an attempt to eliminate their individuality and dominate them as one instead of many different individuals, as we know from Arendt’s accounts of totalitarian systems. Its power resides in the reduction of language, and transformation of complex human beings to merely body-oriented, predictable entities. The vocabulary of the descriptions of camp life, with all the sufferings and daily life, reveals the reduction of language that took place in the Soviet forced labor camps (as well as in the Nazi concentration and death camps). The intellectuals were in a particularly unfavorable position: “The intellectual convict is crushed by the camp. Everything he valued is ground into the dust while civilization and culture drop from him within weeks.” (Shalamov 1994, 367) The descriptions of daily life revolve around food rations, rosy fingers, frostbitten fingers, toes full of pus, the decay of bodies, seeking and craving the warmth of sleeping shoulder-to-shoulder, etc. Regarding vocabulary, Shalamov wrote:

My language was the crude language of the mines and it was as impoverished as the emotions that lived near the bones. Get up, go to work, dinner, end of work, rest, citizen, chief, may I speak, shovel, trench, yes sir, drill, pick, it’s cold outside, rain, cold soup, hot soup, bread, ration, leave me the butt – these few dozen words were all I had needed for years (Shalamov 1994, 263).

This kind of reduction of language is a response to the difficult conditions in which the inmates were put by the state. It can be distinguished from the reduction of vocabulary that is required by the state, as *1984* illustrated by introducing Newspeak.

Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben has dedicated his book *The Remnants of Auschwitz* (Agamben 1999) to exploring the themes of witness, testimony, and the

² Given that Shalamov’s and Levi’s books speak of a similar kind of destruction of the inmates, the difference between the time that they spent in the camps could be an important indicator of a difference in how the German and Soviet camps were organized and to some extent also in how the inmates were treated.

phenomenon of the *Muselmann*. In this book, Agamben collected Holocaust survivors' accounts of the camps for his analysis. The *Muselmann* is a dark illustration to the scope of the destruction that is ever-present as a thread in Levi's and Shalamov's works, as well. In fact, Agamben's analysis dwelled largely on *If This Is A Man*.

All the Muselmänner who finish in the gas chamber have the same story, or more exactly, have no story ... Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmänner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. (Levi 1987, 90)

The *Muselmänner* had a different name in almost every camp in the Nazi camp system. Primo Levi called them "the drowned", and they made up a considerable part of the whole camp population. It is important that Levi described the *Muselmänner* as people who had no story. They are "the drowned", as Levi called them – metaphorically, we could say, they are drowned in meaninglessness.

1.3 Kross's labor camp stories: carefulness, curiosity and luck

The important part – for our purposes – is that the difficult conditions in the camps are destructive not only for the physical and emotional well-being, but also for the ability to feel solidarity, reflect on moral dilemmas, and to make moral judgments. Hence, it is important for us to consider that Kross was fortunate and did not have to work in the mines, for example, for which he was considered too thin and tall in Inta. He had been warned against working in the mines, but he was given the work of transporting log platforms from railroad to sawmill before he could even express his preference for working on the ground. Altogether, he worked as a territory cleaner, log transporter, felt drier, coal enricher and occasionally as a snow shoveler in Inta (Kross 2003, 278–79). It is therefore understandable that Kross's stories do not depict the absolute destruction of one's emotional and moral faculty. However, Levi's and Shalamov's works highlight that such a destruction can, in cases less fortunate than Kross's, be horrifyingly real.

The perception of being lucky was there for Kross also during the German occupation in Estonia. He was arrested by the *Sicherheitsdienst*, the intelligence agency of the SS, interrogated and sent to the Tallinn Work and Education Camp, the former Central Prison, in April 1944. He found himself in the same cell with 4 other internees. The others were sentenced to death, vanishing from the cell one by one as days went by (except for the man

whom Kross named Lill). Kross experienced the growing anxiety and emptiness that the absence of the cellmates left behind.

Turning back to the question of automatization and elimination of moral judgments/feelings of solidarity, it is relevant that this kind of automatization which comes with stopping to ask questions is not present in Kross's stories of life in the Gulag camps and in the Estonian SSR. This is understandable in light of his experiences at the forced labor camps and at the hands of violent foreign powers. Instead of an existence that is "dead to the world" (Arendt 1998, 176), his works speak of curiosity in the narrator, moral considerations in the choices and behavior of the narrator and the fellow inmates, and an elaborate web of hopes, fears, desires and expectations which explain the characters' behavior, choices and judgments. In this thesis, we discuss at length the playfulness that is present in most of Kross's labor camp stories, and that is interwoven with some of the moral choices that the characters make.

Even though Kross's stories do not illuminate the extremities and the utmost potential of destruction that the camp experience entails, his works shed light on the 'limbo' of the camp experience, revolving around the experiences and (moral) choices of those who had good enough health, sufficient energy, and were fortunate enough to maintain a sense of solidarity, responsibility and/or concern for the fellow man. In coming to understand how moral judgments and decisions function at the meeting point of the individual and a repressive state apparatus, studying this 'limbo' of the camps is essential, as it was the reality for many people. The limbo allows us to take a closer look at the values and moral choices that can arise in very difficult, but not fully destructive conditions.

If one takes Shalamov's accounts of life in the camps seriously, it is also clear that a sufficiently long time in the Soviet camps, with hard work and a few unlucky contingencies, put the inmates in danger of losing any moral concerns, sense of solidarity, and responsibility. One of the basic assumptions of the task at hand is that studying moral choices is possible only in settings in which the spontaneity (and freedom of narrativity) of a person persists. However, while conducting an analysis of the choices and values that can emerge in the 'limbo', it is important to keep the perspective of destruction in mind, in its depth, seriousness and the consequence of this perspective existing: avoiding this destruction becomes itself a moral choice. We could say that coming to understand the seriousness of the 'demolition of man' (Levi 1987, ii) brings us closer to understanding what is at stake for many of the characters of Kross's stories, given that Kross was aware of the level of demolition of human beings which he himself was fortunate enough to avoid.

Kross's Gulag stories illuminate the moral and emotional half-tones between the two extremes that can be found at an individual's 'meeting point' with a violent totalitarian state apparatus: the complete destruction of the camp inmates on physical, emotional and moral level, and the comfort of the normalized 'moral blindness' (to use Zygmunt Bauman's phrase, (Bauman 2000)) of many of the bystanders and the less troubled, from which the banality of evil is born. Arendt's analyses of the way totalitarian societies function are very helpful in giving meaning (in a larger socio-political framework) to the individual processes that Kross's stories illustrate. Similarly, however, Kross's stories highlight the particular moral complexities that arise due to the socio-political dynamics that Arendt has described and analyzed at length in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

2 Towards a synthesis of Arendt, Rorty, and Kross

This chapter focuses on introducing the works of Arendt and Rorty (primarily excerpts from *Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*). Their key ideas (especially concerning themes of destruction, playfulness, and spontaneity) will be brought together and discussed in the third section of the chapter, where we present a philosophical framework for reading Kross. This framework is based on our discussion of Arendt's and Rorty's works, and incorporates some of the themes from Kross's texts which will be opened further in the third chapter.

2.1 On the destruction of a human being: senselessness and loss of spontaneity

Arendt was indubitably one of the most prominent political thinkers who has dedicated her time and energy to researching totalitarianism. Her works, especially *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1985) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 2006), highlight the novel aspects of the Third Reich and Stalin's era in the Soviet Union – the systematic nature of the crimes against humanity, combined with their enormous scope and elaborate bureaucratic organization. She has pointed to the moral problem of the normalization of violence, reduction and transformation of language, and lack of resistance (silent and willing participation), from which the concept of the banality of evil emerges. In this subchapter, the aim is to outline those aspects in Arendt's discussion of total domination that are most integral for our analysis.

Her account of camps as the central institution of totalitarian regimes provides us with an understanding of the depth and meaning of the horrors which succeeded in molding the camp inmates into automated living corpses. Those changes include the shrinking and transformation of language (specifically, the vocabulary) people used, normalization of violence without being driven by hate or ideological conviction, and silent willing participation of a huge number of people in crimes against humanity. The appearance, utterances and behavior of SS-lieutenant colonel, major organizer of the Holocaust Adolf Eichmann at the trial before the Jerusalem District Court in 1961 inspired Arendt to develop the concept of banality of evil.³

³ However, Eichmann's trial and the notion "banality of evil" marked a significant turning point in Arendt's moral philosophy; in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, published 1951, she referred to radical and absolute evil in her accounts of the totalitarian terror, sometimes in quotation marks, sometimes without, signifying the worst possible evil:

2.1.1 The circumstances of terror: hopelessness and loss of meaning

Arendt has drawn our attention to the unprecedented changes that totalitarianism brought to life in dialectics and language. Total domination exploded several moral and juridical distinctions and categories, rendering them empty and inapplicable due to the scope of the terror, destruction, and heinous acts which later became recognized as crimes against humanity. Besides the scope of terror which problematized the use and sensibility of concepts like “crime” and “justice”, totalitarian regimes established circumstances and situations which made it impossible to do good or even choose between good and evil, rendering the distinction useless. (In Arendt’s (2003, 122) words, “What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?”) In her discussion of the killing of the moral person in man, Arendt mentioned situations that are utterly hopeless – situations where even suicide is not a moral escape, as it may mean sending one’s friends and family to their immediate death. While this kind of situations are not unique to totalitarian systems, totalitarianism succeeded in normalizing and institutionalizing them.

When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family – how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. Who could have solved the dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed? (Arendt 2003, 133)

The elimination of the “individualist escape” – a conscience whose decisions are sensible and/or unquestionable – carried the same token of meaninglessness and nihilism that Arendt has repeatedly mentioned with regard to totalitarianism. The inclusion of the masses by their support and participation in the large-scale killings as well as the blurring of the line between victim and perpetrator (inmates made responsible for the administration of various crimes) realized the totalitarian belief that *everything is possible* (Arendt 2003, 119).

She outlined the novelty of totalitarian terror not just by emphasizing the unprecedented circumstances that exploded moral categories and introduced a sort of general dialectic meaninglessness, but also by drawing our attention to the meaninglessness and the air of

When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. (Arendt 2003, 140)

madness that surrounded many aspects of the phenomenon of the camps. The senseless had an organizational, (inmate's) experience, and remembrance aspect, and all of them together established an understanding of the camps as sites of rupture and isolation. Again, the fact that totalitarian atrocities cannot be made sense of with the existing vocabulary, with concepts such as good or evil, perpetrator or victim, life or death, brings us back to the enormity of the killings and destruction.

Arendt categorized the final solution as completely anti-utilitarian, because killing millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and numerous other groups of society was a costly and energy-consuming procedure that required money and efforts of co-ordination (e.g., for organizing deportations and for the building and maintenance of the camps). Thus, the senseless in the organization of the camps is evident. Most of this was done at a time when both financial and human resources were needed for winning the war.

The unreality and loss of meaning manifested itself also in the experience of horrors *in* the camps. The scope of the sufferings, combined with the fact that they were often completely undeserved (as the camp inmates were mostly innocent people, not even criminals) made it useless and eventually impossible to ask questions. This experience-aspect of senselessness in the camps is also related to the survivor's accounts losing meaning, being unable to convince. As Agamben also pointed out in *The Remnants of Auschwitz*, death camps problematized the concept of witness and testimony, as the majority of the inmates of Auschwitz and other death camps perished without leaving a trace (the *Muselmänner*).

The "true" witnesses, the "complete witnesses," are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness. They are those who "touched bottom": the Muslims, the drowned. The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. (Agamben 1999, 34)

The way the 'Muslims' perished – the decay of the body, the dying of the soul, and finally, the actual physical death – rendered leaving any message or testimony impossible. Arendt has dwelled on a similar point, claiming that neither recollection or eyewitness report can do much to enable our understanding of the horrors. The writer who attempts to communicate her or his experiences always senses "the terrible abyss that separates the world of the living from that of the living dead", and so they are unable to produce anything more than a sequence of remembered occurrences which seem all too otherworldly for the reader to leave any impression (Arendt 2003, 122).

The dialectic aspect of the senselessness which Arendt's works address emerges with the example of death. In the sphere of the living dead, death loses its meaning. The concept of

“crime” is rendered futile, as there is a difference between murder and the mass-production of corpses.

The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive), robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense they took away the individual’s own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed. (Arendt 2003, 133)

Death was stripped of its dignity as “the end of a fulfilled life”. Those whose individuality has been destroyed are not alive, and yet their death is rendered meaningless, since any trace of the victim is wiped out; the victim, anonymous and isolated from the world of the living, perishes in a void of information.

2.1.2 Stages in the “preparation of living corpses”

As the unreality of the camp experiences emerges from the background of the complete destruction of a human being, it is important to see how Arendt described the destruction of human beings that is finalized in the camps. The complete destruction of human beings that she described is a larger social process of which the ‘demolition of man’, described by Levi and Shalamov, forms just a part. The three stages are related to the social dynamics that also enabled the general population to grow increasingly indifferent to the sufferings that various ‘unwanted’ groups experienced: Arendt turned our attention to the growing social exclusion and sense of superfluousness that Jews, for example, experienced.

The “preparation of living corpses” had three stages, according to Arendt: killing the juridical person in man, killing the moral person in man, and killing the individuality. The first stage, killing the juridical person in man, means leaving certain people out from the protection of the law and placing the concentration camps outside of the normal penal system (Arendt 2003, 128). Innocent people and criminals (who would be sent to the camp only after the completion of their prison sentence) lived in the camps side-by-side, while the criminals formed the aristocracy of the camps in both the Soviet and Nazi system (Arendt 2003, 129).

Different ranks of criminals – and identifying oneself as part of the “lowest” layer of the society – were part of the morally complex vocabulary in “Vürst”. As Arendt pointed out, criminals are an essential element in the camps, as they signify that the camp is an institution for ‘asocial elements’. This signification is important for propaganda reasons as well as for making it clear to the innocent inmates that they have landed among the lowest people of the

society (Arendt 2003, 129). Arendt described the camps as a system of punishment which is designed to be unpredictable, thus exploding the legal categories of ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent’; In case of “Vürst”, the effect is a curious kind of internalization of belonging among the lowest of the low, which – although it leads to immoral choices at the first glance – turns out to be an instrument for carrying out a choice that I interpret as a form of resistance and as a moral choice. (By this, we mean the choice to *play*.)

However, Basile’s self-identification as a rascal does not speak for the experience of Kross himself. In his book of memoirs, *Kallid kaasteelised (Dear Co-Travelers, Kross 2003)*, Kross described his arrest and detention during the German occupation as well as the life and work in Siberia and Komi with a feeling of clear distance from the criminals in the camps and prison, and completely without a sense of guilt. His attitude towards the company of the *blatnois* (the criminals) and the conditions of the camps overall could rather be concluded with the words of Peeter Mirk from the short story “Tuhatos” (“The Ash Tray”). Mirk reflected on the company in which he ended up on his way to the camp, in the train compartment:

Regarding the attitude towards the situation in general and towards blending in, especially, I had if not a flawlessly practicable stance, then at least a guiding attitude-ideal already since long: regard the situations like an interested and observant tourist and blend into the surroundings as much as is needed to avoid troublesome tensions, but internally never blend in with anything or anyone here. (Kross 2004, 53–54)

In addition to Mirk’s ideals regarding the situation and blending in, we find ironic attitudes towards criminals as “the friends of power” in “Tuhatos”, which is a further indication of the fact that the arbitrariness of the arrests worked against the propagandistic goal of establishing the camp inmates as members of the lowest layer of society: the sense of injustice (which we find, for example, in Kross’s novel *Väljakaevamised*) keeps one from identifying oneself with the criminals and keeps the distinction between a victim (of injustice) and a punishment-deserving culprit intact, although Mirk never regarded himself as a victim, but rather as a representative of the contingencies of the place and time he inhabits. He did, undeniably, sense the objectification that came with the arrests and the fact that suddenly, he – as an intellectual, law-abiding Estonian citizen – was left outside from the protection of the law. The sense of objectification was present in his numerous encounters with the occupation-time authorities, described in “Stahli grammatika,” (“Stahl’s Grammar”) as well as “Morse” (“Morse”) and other short stories, for example: “... we were mere objects for [the captain]. With whom there should not be any communication. At least

not while the colleagues are watching.” (Kross 2004, 367) Instead of having an internalizing effect, being objectified by the power seemed to fuel Mirk’s careful and yet playful attitude and occasional manipulation with the power apparatus.

There is a difference between the experiences of Estonians under the rule of Soviet Union, and Jews in the Third Reich and occupied territories. The sudden switch of power apparatus that occurred in Estonia in 1940 with the establishment of Johannes Vares’ government and the staged coup d’état which resulted in joining Estonia the Soviet Union rendered Estonian legal system *de facto* outdated, while the Republic of Estonia still existed in exile. In contrast, Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 could rather be seen as a result of the inner tensions and crises in the Weimar Republic, instead of external intervention. This also meant that the legal system of the republic perished with the state, and the Nuremberg laws of 1935 deprived the Jews of their citizenship, basic rights, and the protection of the law. Hence, the killing of the juridical person in man was conducted differently in the Stalinist Soviet Union and the Third Reich, which might also explain why Mirk, as a character, was less affected (in the sense of disregarding the status given to him) by being categorized as “asocial” and finding himself among the lowest layers, the criminals, and subject to contempt and objectification. However, Arendt’s discussion of the camp as an institution for ‘asocial elements’ remains relevant for understanding the camp experiences that Kross’s stories incorporate. This is due to the daily company of the criminals whose language, behavior and manners set a norm. In a sense, we are referring to a horizon of experiences that bordered one’s perspective and sense of normality, providing a kind of “script” of expected behavior.

The second stage was the killing of the moral person in man. For Arendt, the core of this stage lies in the banishment of memory, which renders the deaths and lives of the victims worthless, stripping them of the dignity of being remembered, grieved and thought of with fondness by one’s family and friends. She pointed to how personal ties with a friend or spouse are broken behind the other party’s back, metaphorically at gunpoint – this was done, for example, in order to save the lives of oneself and/or the children, as was the case with many wives of arrested men (Arendt 2003, 132). *Kolyma Tales* speaks of the same kind of maneuvers, made by wives and daughters, and in Shalamov’s stories, the (emotional) meaning of this move is made painfully clear with the response of the man whose beloved daughter has officially denounced and rejected him: the reaction is that of a man who has lost his last emotional anchor.

Killing the moral person in man is a nuanced phenomenon: on the one hand, Arendt emphasized that the inmates cease to be subjects of moral behavior because their existence

loses social meaning; on the other hand, she brought out that opposition might be found in the conscience of the people who are sent to their death:

This attack on the moral person might still have been opposed by man's conscience which tells him that it is better to die a victim than to live as a bureaucrat of murder. Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal. When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every way responsible, to their death ... how is he to decide? (Arendt 2003, 133)

This aspect of the destruction of the moral person focuses on the lack of a good option; the destruction of a moral person resides in the fact that one can no longer choose between good and evil, but murder and murder. There is no way to get away with a clean conscience, and the distinction between the categories of the victim and the perpetrator become blurred.

However, to those two nuances of eliminating the moral person that Arendt highlighted, Levi's and Shalamov's works add a third: the loss of empathy and concern for fellow man, i.e. becoming unable to make moral choices at all, because any concerns over solidarity fall to the background of one's mind. This loss occurs because of the circumstances in which it is difficult and often impossible to *think* of anything, as we have seen, and to direct one's behavior in any other way than towards physical survival.

This aspect of the destruction is closely connected to the third stage in the "preparation of a living corpse", which Arendt recognized as the ultimate effect of the camps: the removal of spontaneity and individuality (Arendt 2003, 119). Eliminating individuality is almost always successful after the juridical and moral person in man have been killed. It manifests itself in lack of resistance, as "millions of human beings allowed themselves to be marched into the gas chambers" (Arendt 2003, 135). To kill the uniqueness and individuality is to destroy a person's ability to begin anything new out of their own volition (as an action, as opposed to a *reaction*), to be spontaneous – it is a sign of complete submission. Even though for the most part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt stressed the lack of utilitarian motives in total domination, she recognized the destruction of identity and spontaneity as purposeful actions – their utility resides in submission itself, as it testifies that the system is capable of "keeping a whole people in slavery" (Arendt 2003, 135).

Indeed, as Arendt described it, the removal of spontaneity is a process that aims to reduce every person to a "never-changing identity of reactions", and this bundle of reactions could be changed according to the will of the authorities, we could see the removal of moral faculty from everyday matters as a part – and consequence – of the removal of spontaneity. This is

important, since spontaneity cannot be removed under normal circumstances, as it is connected not only with freedom but with life, “in the sense of simply keeping alive” (Arendt 2003, 120). In a sense, spontaneity was systematically reduced also in the elaborate bureaucratic machinery which was an essential tool for organizing mass-killings, although it was not removed completely as in the case of the camp inmates: Arendt has lengthily described the banality of evil in Adolf Eichmann, whose trial she observed in Jerusalem. She noted that his speech was full of clichés and stock phrases, with thoughtlessness and comfortable platitudes coloring his ways of speaking.

The difference is that in his case, the issue of responsibility is more burningly present than with the inmates whose options to act against the circumstances created by the authorities and enforced by camp officials were limited. Eichmann did not live in the ‘preparation of living corpses’, the fatally difficult circumstances of hunger, cold, humiliation, fear of death, and exhaustion. While the loss of spontaneity was simply pushed on the camp inmates by altering their living conditions, the same does not hold in Eichmann’s case. In his case, the process was assumedly much less ‘automatic’ than with the camp inmates, in the sense that the creation of the new normal required his (and others’ of his kind) endorsement and participation. Even language-wise, the reduction of his vocabulary to *Officialese* which was maximally disconnected from the actual experiences of the Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, Poles and other persecuted and exterminated groups, was a process which required a *transition* from the words and values he used and possessed before the Third Reich to the new set of values designed for life-distant bureaucrats, an acceptance of the new norm.

In her essay “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship”(Arendt 2003, 44), Arendt has shown the problem that arises in the context of a totalitarian regime with regard to a unified and consistent, fixed set of values. She pointed to how the members of respectable society yielded to the new order, which in her view could be considered a proof that their consciences were functioning in an almost automatic way. One system of values was exchanged for another. Exchanging one set of values for another was also largely the point of emergence for the concept of the banality of evil (1971, 7).

Those who chose not to participate in the totalitarian regimes, however, did not base their actions on a set of rules, which could be applied to any particular cases that one encounters in life. In that way, every new experience or situation one can find is already prejudged beforehand. Instead of applying the learned rule, the people whom Arendt had in mind – the non-participants – turned towards thinking in the sense of asking and answering the question

to what extent they would still be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds (Arendt 2003a, 44).

The kind of thinking that Arendt emphasized is not technical by its nature, nor is it even concerned with theoretical problems. The part that is important for us here is the *spontaneous action* on the side of those who chose not to participate and who did not treat moral choices as technical problems to which one conclusive formula can be applied. While the camp system attempted to mold the inmates into non-thinking, non-willing automatons, similar processes happened (due to different circumstances, in different ways) with the general population of workers, bureaucrats and people who had nothing to do with the camps – people who led their everyday lives in the Third Reich or Stalinist Soviet Union. The shift in values (and their fixed, generic nature), the changed language, and blindness to violence in Hitler's and Stalin's policies indicate a similar kind of automatization-process as the killing of spontaneity in the camps.

In the light of this analysis of stages of destruction that Arendt outlined in her works, the question arises: what remains in the camp, if there is no hope? What are the (moral) choices for the people who are subject to willful destruction and sufferings, given that the final result is the death of the juridical, moral, and unique person in the camp inmate? Once the unique person in a human being is killed, no choices and no empathy remains. This does not only spell doom for the person whose moral faculty perishes: it also means the corruption of relationships, and a transition into unworldliness to an even greater extent. In this light, playfulness (which is by far not possible or accessible for everyone in the camps, but under certain circumstances, such possibility might arise) becomes a form of resistance, which – through resistance as such – maintains the unique identity of the person, as opposition and action keep alive those spaces that distinguish us from others and prevent us from dissolving into one with them. It could also be seen as a moral choice, which contributes to maintaining one's ability to keep making moral choices, even if the future is dark and short.

2.2 Rorty's conceptual toolbox and totalitarianism: redescription and unmaking someone's world

In his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty presented his view about private and public aspirations with the help of a theoretical framework that employs the concepts of contingency, private (and public) irony, social hope, and solidarity and moral progress. At the core of Rorty's project in the book lies the attempt to show that the public and private aspirations are equally valid and yet, in many aspects, completely incommensurable (Rorty 1989, xv). Questions about the distinctions between private and public are addressed with the help of his conceptual framework which employs notions of redescription and vocabulary among others. In his discussion of *1984*, he addressed issues such as cruelty, humiliation, and unmaking someone's world, which enable interesting connections and bridges with Arendt's political philosophy.

Rorty's ideas have not been relevantly presented in debates on totalitarianism and its moral issues. In some aspects, the horrors of Auschwitz and Gulag have been thought to represent a firm point of criticism against Rorty's anti-foundationalist views on truth and language, as the memory of the death camps, violent occupations and repressions seems to call for certainty and a strong foundation for human rights. Those sentiments are well represented by Michael Sandel's criticism of Rorty's anti-foundationalism:

If one's convictions are only relatively valid, why stand for them unflinchingly? In a tragically configured moral universe, such as Berlin assumes, is the ideal of freedom any less subject than competing ideals to the ultimate incommensurability of values? If so, in what can its privileged status consist? And if freedom has no morally privileged status, if it is just one value among many, then what can be said for liberalism? (Sandel 1984, 8)

From Sandel's perspective, Rorty's ideas – e.g. that truth is a characteristic of sentences between which people make choices, and that there are no moral facts out there, waiting to be discovered – might indeed look dangerous for liberalism. However, Rorty's response to Sandel drew our attention to the fact that Sandel's question, "in what can the privileged status of the ideal of freedom consist?" demands for some kind of criteria. The question makes sense in a framework which relies on criteria as the basis of justification. This is a framework that Rorty abandoned. Instead, he encouraged us to think in terms other than criteria, and saw the tendency to justify a claim on the basis of certain criteria as "a species of the more general temptation to think of the world, or the human self, as possessing an intrinsic nature, an essence," and instead of correspondence to reality, he emphasized free discussion as the practice which determines the justification of sentences (Rorty 1989, 6, 84). Besides Sandel,

several other authors have criticized Rorty's views regarding politics, morality, and truth. However, we explore the question of how things might look like if we took seriously some of Rorty's central ideas and explored them further. The idea behind this section of the thesis is similar to the idea behind the last subchapter (on Arendt): we focus on explaining some of the key terms in Rorty's conceptual toolbox (for example, his approach to solidarity, vocabulary, and redescription), and reflect of Rorty's discussion of cruelty, tentatively highlighting the aspects that are relevant for reading Kross's texts.

2.2.1 On solidarity, redescription, and vocabulary

Rorty's project of showing the private and public aspirations as equally valid and yet forever incommensurable is of interest for us especially in places where he discussed books that sensitize us to the sufferings of others – those are books of public importance – and books that aim to offer aesthetic bliss, thus helping us pursue autonomy and self-perfection.

He discussed Orwell's *1984* as an example of the kind of book which makes us aware of various forms of suffering. Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* fall into the same rough category, but they are relevant for the liberal hope in different ways: they demonstrate the compatibility of cruelty with a sensitive, artistic character. Rorty was particularly interested in the kind of books that dramatize the tension between our attempts at autonomy and our duties towards others by highlighting the pain and harm that can be caused in the course of striving for private perfection and aesthetic bliss. While *1984* illuminates the effects of social practices and institutions on people, Nabokov's works demonstrate ways how we (as individuals) can be cruel to other people.

Books that sensitize us to the sufferings of others play a role in moral progress (if such a thing exists) as Rorty saw it. Such books help us widen our sphere of "us". Rorty's discussion of moral progress emerged from Wilfrid Sellars' notion of "we-intentions", which focused on the status of being considered "one of us", where "us" is a particular group of people smaller than humanity, expressed in phrases such as "our sort of people", "a comrade in the [radical] movement", "a Greek like ourselves", or "a fellow Catholic". Rorty claimed that the argument about belonging to a particular group possesses more force than the argument of being "one of us human beings" and that "feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which differences strike us as salient" (Rorty 1989, 190, 192). Moral progress, for Rorty, is about including more of the different people, the strangers, in the sphere of "us".

Rather, [solidarity] is thought of as the ability to see more and more of the traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, custom) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of “us”. That is why I said, in chapter 4, that detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in, e.g., novels or ethnographies) rather than philosophical or religious treatises, were the modern intellectual’s principal contributions to moral progress. (Rorty 1989, 192)

Rorty emphasized the role of novels and ethnographies, as they are powerful mediums of redescription, and redescription allows us change our perspective of describing things – thus also changing how we understand them. Hence, it also enables us to shift emphasis to the similarities, rather than the differences, that a perceived group of “us” has with another group, identified as “them”. Redescription occupies a relevant, or perhaps even the central, place in Rorty’s project of detangling the private and the public aspirations and reflecting on moral progress, private irony and liberal hope. The importance of redescription emerges from Rorty’s understanding of language as a phenomenon that is our creation, subject to selectivity and prioritization rather than a representation of a reality out there. He did not define “redescription”, but one gets a sense for the meaning of the word from the context in which he uses the term. His use of the concept of redescription emerges from his epistemological stance: while the world might be out there (meaning, independently of us), descriptions of the world are not – we create the descriptions, manipulate with them, choose among them, etc. Truth and falsity are characteristics of those descriptions, but two very different descriptions can be true at the same time (although not necessarily always). While confining our attention to single sentences enables us to let the world dictate the truth or falsity of descriptions (and hence choosing between such sentences is often easy), the same does not hold with vocabularies which enable the descriptions and in which descriptions are phrased.

In Rorty’s conceptual toolbox, a vocabulary denotes a set of concepts which constitutes a coherent linguistic and cultural entity. In speaking of different language games (a term which Rorty borrowed from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*), Rorty listed the vocabulary of ancient Athenian politics (compared with Jefferson’s), the moral vocabularies of Saint Paul and Freud, the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle, etc. Those are examples of large-scale descriptions of the world, which support Rorty’s claim that *we* (and not the world) choose between such descriptions. The message is that different vocabularies are good for different purposes (Rorty 1989, 5–6), and it would not make sense to say that one of such vocabularies is more true than another. Which vocabulary happens to dominate the public discourse is a contingent, not predetermined matter.

Rorty used the term “final vocabulary” to denote the set of words which each of us employs to justify their actions, beliefs, lives. This kind of vocabulary is final in the sense that “if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse.” (Rorty 1989, 73) Rorty made a distinction between people who maintain a certain awareness of and distance from their own final vocabulary, and those who take it for granted. He calls the first kind of people ironists. Ironists have “radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary [they] currently use ... [They] realize that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve those doubts ... [They] do not think that their vocabulary is closer to reality than others.” (Rorty 1989, 73) The second kind of people are “metaphysicians” in Rorty’s jargon: people who intend to uncover the nature of the phenomena they are studying, and do not question the final vocabulary that guides their quest for truth. “[The metaphysician] is still attached to common sense ... He does not redescribe but, rather, analyzes old descriptions with the help of other old descriptions.” (Rorty 1989, 74)

So, descriptions of the same phenomenon can be given in various vocabularies. As we see, Rorty’s notion of irony emphasizes that point, and builds the figure of the ironist from it. The ironist helps us see what is to be understood by “redescription” – does it denote shifting around in the same vocabulary (using different words that are part of the same language game), or does it rather refer to changing the vocabulary? As Rorty wrote, an ironist is someone who has radical and continuing doubts about their own final vocabulary, because they are aware of the diversity of vocabularies, having been impressed by many of them via books, for example. The ironist realizes that “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (Rorty 1989, 73). The distance that the ironist maintains from their own final vocabulary stems from their awareness of the power of redescription. So, we have seen that a description is a linguistic entity that is concerned with reflecting on the characteristics of a certain phenomenon with the help of a particular vocabulary; redescription, then, is describing *again* and differently, i.e. offering a reflection on the same phenomenon in a different vocabulary.

Emphasizing the diversity of equally useful (for different purposes) and yet different vocabularies is compatible with Rorty’s liberalism. He has also handled the question of taboos in language, speaking of the hierarchy of discussion questions that characterizes totalitarianism: he pointed out that liberalism aims to avoid the kind of general agreement in society which settles certain questions were always in point, certain questions prior to certain others, and there was a fixed order of discussion, flanking movements not permitted. It is

evident that language rules in the Third Reich resulted in the decrease of the amount of possible, legitimate vocabularies and ways to express oneself. Indeed, Rorty has pointed out how problematic such an act of narrowing is from a liberalist's point of view. "That would be just the sort of society that liberals are trying to avoid – one in which "logic" ruled and "rhetoric" was outlawed." (Rorty 1989, 51)

2.2.2 O'Brien and cruelty in *1984*: unmaking someone's world

Rorty's liberal utopia cherishes freedom of speech and thought. In his discussion of *1984*, Rorty addressed the question whether the focus of Orwell's work was on the connection that our utterances have with reality (the importance of an objective truth), or rather on the importance of our freedom to say what we think is true. This discussion is inspired by the last part of *1984*, where O'Brien was torturing Winston. Rorty's analysis of the torture scenes is manifold, as he dwelled on several aspects of it: the relevance of O'Brien's character, the meaning and purpose of the torture, and the question whether the fact that O'Brien forced Winston to admit that two and two makes five problematizes the loss of objective truth or the loss of Winston's freedom to say what he thinks is true. Rorty offered an interpretation which shifts the emphasis away from the actual truthfulness of Winston's belief. According to his reading of *1984*, the torture would have succeeded in breaking Winston even if he had held a false belief and been subject to the forcible tearing down of the belief itself, as well as the linguistic structures that make up his narrative world.

All that matters is that if you do believe [that two and two make four], you can say it without getting hurt. In other words, what matters is your ability to talk to other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true. If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself. (Rorty 1989, 176)

Rorty saw "two plus two makes four" as a symbolic: a true statement, the truth value of which was important for Winston. However, an untrue claim could have been just as integral for Winston's sense of self and coherence, as Rorty wrote.

This interpretation is unsurprising, given Rorty's general conceptual toolbox and the emphasis that he put on final vocabularies: they are integral for our sense of self and understanding of the world. When turning to his discussion of cruelty in Orwell's *1984*, Rorty made a strong claim:

There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them – their ability to use language, and thereby to exchange beliefs and desires with other people ... To be a person

is to speak a particular language, one which enables us to discuss particular beliefs and desires with particular sorts of people. (Rorty 1989, 177)

This quote speaks of his view of human beings where the crucial element of our humanness is the cultural aspect in us, the language. Even if we reject the strong variant of Rorty's claim and rather say that the physiological construction of human beings mingles with the socialized aspects in intricate ways instead of insisting that there is nothing to people but socialization, we can still appreciate the emphasis that Rorty set on our socialized, narrative ways of being. The beliefs and desires that are crucial for one's identity are understood and expressed thanks to the linguistic capacities that we possess. Rorty drew our attention to vocabulary, which enables us to express those beliefs and desires, and give meaning to them – i.e., to give them a place in a certain kind of story.

The task that Orwell carried out with *1984*, according to Rorty's interpretation, was to sensitize his audience to the forms of cruelty that the audience had not noticed, and to "give us an alternative context, an alternative perspective, from which we liberals, the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do, could describe the political history of our century." (Rorty 1989, 173) According to Rorty, Orwell's project (as well as that of Solzhenitsyn's et al.) is particularly valuable for the redescription that it offers – the vocabulary, perspective and context which Orwell utilizes show what a totalitarian system can look like, what kind of sufferings it can cause. It constituted a warning, advising against the use of a certain kind of vocabulary – the kind that is used at the Ministry of Truth.

This redescription of the post-World War II political situation was not the only achievement of *1984*. Rorty brought Orwell's depiction of O'Brien to our attention. The message that accompanied Orwell's portrayal of O'Brien, as Rorty read it, is somewhat similar to that of the characters of Humbert and Kinbote in Nabokov's books: a combination of perfect intellectuality and cruelty. Rorty's interpretation of the view that Orwell offered through his creation of O'Brien is particularly sinister:

[Orwell] convinced us that there was a perfectly good chance that the same developments which had made human equality technically possible might make endless slavery possible. He did so by convincing us that nothing in the nature of truth, or man, or history was going to block that scenario, any more than it was going to underwrite the scenario which liberals had been using between the wars. He convinced us that all the intellectual and poetic gifts which had made Greek philosophy, modern science, and romantic poetry possible might someday find employment in the Ministry of Truth. (Rorty 1989, 175–76)

Rorty responded to the critics who claimed that the third part of *1984* deteriorated and that Winston's reactions in the torture scenes seemed unrealistic, clearly written by someone who had not experienced torture. He defended the book, presenting his reading which saw

O'Brien as the central figure in focus in the torture scenes, instead of Winston; it was about torturing, not *being tortured*. The torture that O'Brien put Winston through was not arbitrary, impulsive, nor aimed for making Winston accept the Party doctrine. O'Brien put Winston through the kind of torture that is specific to humans as linguistic beings. Rorty wrote:

O'Brien reminds us that human beings who have been socialized – socialized in any language, any culture – do share a capacity which other animals lack. They can all be given a special kind of pain: they can all be humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief in which they were socialized (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves). (Rorty 1989, 177)

In the view that Rorty offered, the aim of sadism – and particularly in cases like that of O'Brien – is not mere pain, but humiliation. There is an element of humiliation present in the act of “tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.” (Rorty 1989, 177) Rorty drew on Elaine Scarry's account of torture in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Scarry 1987), and concluded that the worst thing one can do to a subject of torture is not just to cause pain and agony, but to make sufferings such that the person who underwent the torture will later be unable to reconstitute themselves. This is achieved by making them say, do, think or desire things which they will later be unable to come to terms with having done or thought (Rorty 1989, 178). In Scarry's words, the torturer can “unmake the world” of the tortured by rendering them unable to use language to describe what they have been.

Naturally, to unmake someone's world, their most important beliefs, desires and fears have to be addressed during the torture. Rorty assumed that for each of us, there is probably a sentence we cannot utter sincerely and still put ourselves together, as well as the worst thing in the world which could make us utter that sentence. For Winston, this sentence was “Do it to Julia!”, and the utterance was triggered by rats, the worst thing in Winston's world. The aim of the torture was not merely to make Winston endorse the Party doctrine (Rorty 1989, 179). The aim was the breaking of the person– “the sound of tearing” the mind apart – rather than putting the tortured person's mind together again in the forms and shapes of one's choosing.

2.3 Philosophical framework for reading literature on totalitarianism

In this section, we synthesize Rorty's ideas with those of Arendt. While Arendt's and Rorty's views depart strongly in certain things (Arendt was strongly influenced by Immanuel Kant, who could be seen as Rorty's “greatest nemesis”), they come together in other things.

We will demonstrate how Rorty's ideas on final vocabularies/redescription/irony and cruelty constitute a valuable additional voice to Arendt's reflections on the most pressing political issues of 20th century, namely the problem of complete destruction and circumstances which bring to life both morally and physically inescapable situations. Upon a closer reading of Rorty, it comes to light that many of the conceptual tools he uses are complementary to Arendt's reflections on death camps, total domination and destruction.

Arendt's works were guided by the emphasis on a functioning conscience, independent moral thought, and human dignity. There was not a trace of relativism (or pragmatism) in her writings, which is why this synthesis is a particularly interesting and challenging task. She spoke of evil, a word that which carried strong moral importance in her works, while Rorty never addressed the problem of evil: he wrote about cruelty instead. This is important for understanding the difference between the overall philosophies/social theories that Arendt and Rorty cultivated: since evil is a concept rooted in religion and 'metaphysician' moral philosophy (i.e., the kind of moral philosophy that seeks grounding and essence), it does not fit into Rorty's conceptual toolbox. In the other direction, it is clear that "cruel" is too modest of a word for Arendt's project, which focused on highlighting the unbelievable scope and depth of horrors and destruction that certain social institutions and practices brought with them.

Rorty's conceptual toolbox disconnected the urgent and pressing social concerns, including moral progress, from a search for stable philosophical foundation and the *inner nature* of those (important and/or urgent, as defined by the members of society via conversational practices) social phenomena. However, in his discussion of cruelty, Rorty dwelled on themes of total domination and the unmaking of someone's world, for example, which indicates a lack of conflict between his use of the term "cruel" and Arendt's use of the concept of "evil" – they come together in the cases which serve as examples of evil and cruelty, as Arendt elaborated on similar themes while presenting those occurrences as examples of evil rather than cruelty.

2.3.1 Unmaking someone's world and eliminating spontaneity

We have illuminated one side of the problem of language and freedom of narrativity in totalitarianism, namely that which concerns reduction of vocabulary and banality of evil. The relationship between our freedom of narrativity, freedom to redescribe and say what we believe is true, and radical evil is another side of that problem. Speaking of radical evil, we

should turn to the example of O'Brien in *1984*. Rorty interpreted O'Brien as a warning, because he was dangerous and *possible*. "[Orwell] invented him to warn us against him, like one might warn against a typhoon or a rogue elephant." (Rorty 1989, 176)

However, people are likely to take preventive measures against a typhoon and a rogue elephant. The aspects of Rorty's pragmatism which emphasize that *we choose between vocabularies* do, indeed, indicate our responsibility in avoiding empowering possible O'Briens by doing all we can to not favor the ways of speaking that are characteristic of the Ministry of Truth. This realization emerges only if we think of the context in which O'Brien lived and worked more broadly. O'Brien's cruelty and intelligence are most dangerous in a system which legitimizes and systematically calls to life the kind of sufferings that O'Brien inflicts on Winston, for example. This statement emerges from the realization, emphasized in several of Arendt's works, that the institutional and bureaucratic organization of the totalitarian regimes (as well as the development of mass movements) were behind the scope and efficiency of the crimes against humanity that were conducted both in the Third Reich and in Stalin's Soviet Union.

While O'Brien could be seen as an embodiment of radical evil, with his intelligence, sensitivity to the world, to other people's feelings and states of mind, and his deliberate cruelty, Arendt's reflections on banality of evil and the vast network of bureaucracy (with its numerous workers) that were essential for the organization of totalitarian regimes suggest that a deliberate wish to torture, cause suffering and "re-make" human minds did not necessarily characterize the individual people who worked for the Third Reich and contributed to the functioning of death camps and the great machinery of oppression; rather, as Arendt wrote in her report of Eichmann's trial, it was thoughtlessness which enabled the collaboration. The collaboration, in turn, enabled the mass killings of several groups/categories of people (Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, freemasons, Slovenes, Jehovah's witnesses, Spanish republicans, Soviet POWs).

However, torture and "re-making" of the human beings (or rather, as we shall argue, "un-making") were the reality of the camps, regardless of whether the torture – in more and less metaphorical sense – was administered by O'Briens or more thoughtless people caught by the banality of evil. As Arendt argued, this un-making of people was in certain aspects useful for the government. The submission of the inmates, which was one important stage in their complete destruction, served as a guarantee that the regime is capable of "holding a whole people in slavery" (Arendt 2003, 135). If we combine the elimination of spontaneity, which Arendt emphasized as the ultimate goal and effect of the horrors, with survivors' accounts

of what life and people in the Auschwitz and Gulag looked like, we get something that is chillingly similar to the unmaking that Rorty described. That is to say, in the *Muselmänner* the freedom of narrativity perishes – memories, hopes, sense of identity and uniqueness, and let alone curiosity and spontaneity; anything but a shadow of their biological self vanishes.

2.3.2 Senselessness, stopping to ask questions, and freedom of narrativity in the camps

However, with *1984* Rorty was discussing an occurrence of torture that took place one-to-one, with Winston being the subject of O'Brien's 7-year-long observation. Such personal attention was not the rule in the camps, and the tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief that the inmates possessed occurred via a different path. According to our interpretation, it was the combination of the intensity (greatness) and the senselessness of the sufferings which, over time, exploded the freedom of narrativity in the victims and rendered them incapable of thinking, reflecting, desiring, hoping, and in the most extreme cases, even fearing.⁴

A sense of amazement and the futility of asking “Why?” – a phenomenon that Arendt also turned her attention to – is evident throughout the book, and echoes also from the stories of other survivors, including the survivors of the Soviet camps (although, as has been already mentioned in Chapter 1, the complete breaking and destruction of the inmates emotional and physical selves was not as quick as in the German camps). Rorty's description of this kind of torture, its aim, and the loss of freedom of narrativity we describe resonate with Arendt's reflections on the air of unreality and madness that surrounded the camps (extermination camps in particular). Arendt saw the concentration and extermination camps as stages for verifying the belief “everything is possible” (Arendt 2003, 119), including turning people into machine-like beings.

The survivor stories that, for example, Agamben brings to us in *Remnants of Auschwitz* allow a convergence with Arendt's conclusions about the camps' aim: to break and subdue. Shalamov's writings about life in Kolyma forced labor camps speak of the same kind of breaking. For example, Shalamov used the phrase “distracted bitterness” to describe the state of lost hope, incuriosity and prioritization of bodily issues into which many inmates lapsed

⁴ The difference with Rorty's analysis of 1984 is that in 1984, the same effect was achieved by making the torture subject say, believe or desire something that they could not later continue living with. As we have seen in our discussion on Arendt, there were also choices and dilemmas in the camps which most likely had the capacity of tearing a mind to pieces (e.g. choices between murder and murder).

as a result of hard work, neglect and lasting fear. It seems that Rorty's interpretation of the aim of torture in 1984 holds also in the case of the lasting terror that occurred in the Soviet forced labor camps and Nazi concentration and extermination camps.

The phenomenon of the *Muselmann* suggests that the inmates who were the unluckiest and slowest in getting accustomed to the camp ways of life were in danger of becoming unable to tell a sensible story about themselves and the world. They fell victim to a similar kind of torture as that which Rorty drew our attention to: the unique humiliation that humans can be made to feel when their particular structures of language and belief are being forcibly torn down. The world of the unluckiest, the *Muselmänner*, became unmade in the sense that they lost their freedom of narrativity, that is, any hope of constituting a coherent narrative: we can find evidence of that in the reduction of language to a handful of body- and work-related words and phrases that Shalomov brought to us via *Kolyma Tales*, in Levi's description of the "non-men" who "march in silence", "too empty to really suffer" and who have no fear in the face of death, as they are "too tired to understand". As Arendt wrote, the victims of the death camps were reduced to beings who could not act out of their own spontaneity, but only react. The killing of the unique person in man meant the killing of their freedom of narrativity – their ability to describe and to redescribe.

I treat the fact of having questions, general attempts to make sense of the situation one is in, and anticipation of the future as crucial elements of one's personal narrative, which, employing a certain linguistic value system (in Rorty's words, *final vocabulary*), is a framework that enables the understanding of the world around us – and of others with whom this world is shared. In this approach, Arendt's and Rorty's emphasis and key concepts come together, allowing us to sketch a tentative bridge between Arendt's political philosophy and Rorty's pragmatism.

3 Playfulness, spontaneity and redescription in Jaan Kross's short stories

The short stories “Halleluuja” (“Hallelujah”) (1990) and “Vürst” (“The Prince”) (1993) are the focus of this chapter. The stories are set in late 1940s and early 1950s. Both share the setting of a Soviet labor camp and are narrated by Peeter Mirk, a careful, curious, thoughtful and humorous observer with a lust for life. Both “Halleluuja” and “Vürst” have an eccentric figure in the spotlight, Dr Ulrich and Basile accordingly.

Recalling Rorty's distinction between the kind of books that sensitize us to the sufferings of others and those which help us pursue autonomy, self-perfection and aesthetic bliss (or illuminate the meaning and effect of this pursuit), it is clear that Kross's works fall into the same category with *1984*. This is because they also illuminate the sufferings that certain social practices and institutions can cause, instead of focusing on the “effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others.” (Rorty 1989, 141) However, unlike *1984*, Kross's stories about life in Soviet forced labor camps and under totalitarian and authoritarian regimes maintain a sense of hope, as the narrator of the stories Peeter Mirk (as well as Kross himself) manages to avoid the most difficult conditions thanks to luck and careful decisions, and often, there seems to be an escape (even if not hope for an actual physical survival) from the destruction and meaninglessness also for the most notable characters around him. As such, Kross's stories are capable of highlighting some moral dilemmas that are specific to certain aspects of life in a totalitarian regime, instead of being depictions of hopelessness and destruction. The latter would leave no space for the readers to argue about the meaning of the characters' moral choices, first and foremost because such choices lose their force and relevance - indeed, they never arise - for camp inmates who go through most extreme forms of suffering. Suffering and pain figure in Kross's works in subtle ways, and come to light mainly via the people around Mirk whose life stories (and painful encounters with the political regime) form a noteworthy set of fates. As Kross's texts contribute to making us aware of the pain and suffering of the people who live under totalitarian rule, subject to various forms of repression, deportations, arbitrary arrests, forced labor, violent interrogations, threats and fear, Kross's works count as literature which helps us become less cruel, i.e. literature of public importance.

3.1 Play and the status of an “emergency rascal” in “Vürst”

In “Vürst”, we follow the story of Basile, a colorful figure whom Mirk met in Inta. It is hinted that he had come into conflict with the Soviet authorities by freeing some people whom the German occupying forces had arrested in Poland, although the reasons for his arrest and punishment are never disclosed with clarity or in detail. Mirk described him at the first encounter in the camp as someone who has an edge of “impertinently confident homeliness” and “dangerous flippancy inappropriate for this place” (Kross 2004, 195).

Yet, regardless of those first impressions, a delicate kind of solidarity develops between Mirk and Basile. Basile invited Mirk to a “dinner party” with some fellow inmates. Due to Basile’s attitude and use of language, the “party” had an air of grandeur, which, given the circumstances of the camp, seemed eerie and unfitting, bubbling with a kind of vitality that seemed out of place in the camps. Basile told his friends that met the chess world champion Capablanca in a train once, and Capablanca challenged him for a blind chess match. Basile was very proud of that fact, and the metaphor of the blind chess match also serves as an explanation for Basile’s behavior and (moral) choices in the camp. His comment about the chess match speaks of the honor of playing blind with a grand master, which distinguishes him from the general mass of people.

Ha-ha-ha-haa. I had to play. Well, you can believe that the miracle didn’t happen, and he checkmated me on the 11th move. But I can say: I have played with the world champion. First. But secondly, and it is much more uncommon, since there are hundreds of those who have played with him. I am super-probably the only person in the world, who has played their first and hitherto only blind match – against the world champion! (Kross 2004, 211)

It is difficult to avoid the parallel with Goethe’s *Faust*: especially when considering the question who might be the “world champion” against whom Basile plays the game of his life, in the context of the camps where there is nothing to hope for. The figure of the devil is present in “Vürst” both implicitly and explicitly, even if we overlook the similarities in how the titles of those works sound. The devil figured in Basile’s moral judgments as firmly as God did, but in somehow more convincing ways, perhaps because Basile associates devil with earthly matters and the world here and now. When speaking of a criminal who endangers his life in the camp, Basile said:

I think he’s too small of a scoundrel to be something in the eyes of the world or the devil. Like, say, Hitler or someone else, you know who I mean. And with his eleven murders still too big and unstylish of a scum for the God to forgive him. As he does to little rascals, the emergency-rascals (Kross 2004, 237).

The game was not aimed for winning, as Basile did not think there is anything in the camp for him to hope for: “Here⁵ everything is clear anyway. Even much more than everything. So there’s nothing for me to fear here. And of course also not to hope for, either.” (Kross 2004, 214) Despite that fact, Basile’s play in the camp was play with high stakes, just like in *Faust*: his extravagance and bravura were balancing between singling him out, earning him the tacit respect of others (at least the respect from Mirk), and getting him into trouble. The urgency and importance of the play seem to be connected to its existentially reflective and aesthetic nature, rather than any pragmatic considerations. The combination of hopelessness and play had a somewhat liberating effect on Basile, given the eccentric ways in which his performative and aesthetic ways allowed him to take the last out of the camp-experience.

Even though Basile had no agreement with the devil, there was a game to be played with him, and not just because of vanity. The game certainly had a somewhat sinister and serious edge to it. This is due to the lack of hope, the determination with which Basile had set himself the mission of playing till the end, and the implicit indication of the presence of a Grand Master. The flavor of the presence of the Grand Master seems to connect to Basile’s repeated mentioning of the devil in different contexts. This reading of the short story could be illustrated with the combination of his grand, theatrical hospitality, and his role as an “emergency rascal”.

The play, then, is compatible with the moral choices that Basile had made: in his youth, freeing the birds who were to be taken to the slaughterhouse, and later in Inta refusing to be subdued or stripped of his individuality, defying adjustment to the vocabulary and the ways of the camp, or even the act of reporting a fellow inmate Akim Akimõts to the camp authorities for attempting to sell a pair of pants to Mirk. Freeing the birds (during Basile’s student days) who were caged, tied up at a marketplace and about to be taken to their death was described as an act that was full of youthful passion for life, and less as a rebellion against the social order and the power – after all, Basile and his mates freed only the birds, praising them as “Christ’s flying birds”, and left the pigs alone. The deeds of Basile’s youth illustrated the fact that playing pranks creates confusion in a world of scripts and rules; similarly, his pranks in the forced labor camp created confusion in the script of camp life.

⁵ At the time when the short stories were published (1990s), expanded text was a device for emphasis in the typesetting.

Basile's vocabulary and manners of speech embodied the kind of diversity and richness that were uncommon in the camps.

"Vürst" is spiced by one particular thread of action that occurs throughout the story. It is a kind of mystery: the person on duty in Mirk's bloc, Akim Akimõts, offered him (as well as Mirk's friend Tammo) a pair of pants for sale. Mirk did not buy the pants, but mentioned the incident to Basile in passing. It later turns out that someone informed the camp authorities of Akim's attempt to sell the pants; Akim was punished and suspected Mirk and Tammo, as they were the only people whom he had offered the pants. In the end of the story, we learn that it was Basile who informed the authorities.

In the context of the forced labor camp, informing on others seems to denote a dangerous level of conformity, as it speaks of adjusting to the script by which the camp life runs. Basile seems to have internalized the redescription that the camp offers: "everyone fights for themselves", "one must not get caught". This would already bring him closer to losing himself to the destructive power of the camp which rendered the inmates unable to feel concern for their fellow men. Due to Basile's tacit solidarity with Mirk, the choice to report Akim's deed and implicate Mirk and Pallo comes over as puzzling. Certainly, this apparent contradiction raises questions about Basile's motives. Did he risk causing trouble to Mirk and Pallo due to his conviction that one ought to act by the rule 'everyone [fights] for themselves' and "one must not get caught", or is there an alternative explanation, which is perhaps even based on moral considerations?

Interpreting Basile as *seriously* sticking to the rule "everyone for themselves", i.e. as adopting the camp vocabulary and principles, might be correct if we had known Basile as a serious, non-playful character before the camp-period. As Arendt's and Agamben's works also indicate, internalizing the redescription that the camps entail was a common and indeed often inevitable path, unless one decides to rebel against it (like Dr Ulrich in "Halleluuja", for example). Given that Basile was a prankster who had a past of committing deeds that disrupt the order of a given social system and violate the 'script' of appropriate and expected behavior, however, his decisions in the camp incorporate the same spirit of disruption, creating confusion, going for the unexpected, and tending towards playfulness. In this conversation between Mirk and Basile, Basile had revealed "the rules of his game". The most basic rules of Basile's game come down to evasion and self-centeredness:

"Why, this is ridiculous. My person on duty also offered me a pair of pants a quarter an hour ago—"
"Your Akim—?"

“Yes. That is, if I had bought them, both of us would have gotten walking papers? He from the position of the person on duty, and I from the place where you put me tomorrow. We would have been sent to the lock-up for a week and afterwards to underground-work. But I would have been buying due to lack of knowledge and he would have been selling due to hunger!”

“Nobody asks for motives here, *mon cher*. It’s just: one shouldn’t get caught—“
(Kross 2004, 205–6)

Basile demonstrated how playfulness can uphold the freedom of narrativity that totalitarian concentration and forced labor camps destroy; in this kind of playfulness, spontaneity is realized and redescription is employed. Spontaneity, redescription and playfulness are incompatible with the kind of fixed framework of action and thought that both Arendt and Rorty criticized. Aside from being important for survival, maintaining one’s freedom of narrativity enables the person to keep their ability of making moral choices intact. Basile’s choice to report Akim’s attempt to sell the pants (which were camp’s property) was not driven by the intent to harm another prisoner; it was rather a part of his resistance to the desolate reality of the camps. Despite announcing the rules of his game, Basile did not aim to maintain/achieve a (safe) position in the camp hierarchy, but to perform, to enact the unexpected. Instead of making the camp-script his own, Basile responded by realizing and enacting the unexpected, working with the possibilities that life in the camps offered. This response manifested in his adoption of the role of the prankster: another aspect of Basile’s playfulness comes to the surface if we look how aesthetically the *role* of an ‘emergency rascal’ was played out. This role tended towards bravura, as the game came with heightened risks to Basile’s survival – after all, he constituted a disruption in the order of the camp life, which was most probably also the reason why, in the end of the story, his life was endangered by the “main bandit” of the camp.

His game was a meta-stance, a reflection on the rules and self-description that he was *supposed and expected* to adopt and adhere by. This playful reflection creates a distance from the set of rules that it reflects on – hence working with the same dialectical dynamic as the figures of the sceptic and the ironist whom Arendt and Rorty (respectively) praised for their carefulness, reflectivity, and independence of thought. For Arendt, the sceptic was the only morally trustworthy kind of person at times when the ‘chips go down’, since the sceptic was spontaneous, unbound by standards and rules in their (moral) judgment; for Rorty, the ironist’s practice of redescription played a key role in moral progress, and freed intellectual practices from the shackles of searching for objective truth (by attempting to refute descriptions of phenomena with the help of other old descriptions, without creating new ones).

Kross's other stories, set in restless times of war and occupations, also highlight the moral and aesthetic-emotional force of play, albeit Mirk's playfulness focuses on the play as a moral choice while emphasizing different aspects of it than Basile's play. The basic rules from which their playfulness emerges are different. Mirk's rules of the game go down to surviving *and* staying true to one's core self via careful balancing between resistance and 'blending in', thus serving as a witness and *koondsatus* (concentrated fate/set of fates) of his time and its historical/political contingencies. Basile's play, on the other hand, emerges from a sense of existential greatness. This makes Basile's play almost an ode to the aesthetic potential of the diversity of life and its possibilities.

The fact that Basile has undertaken the mission to play even though there is no hope to win seems to raise a bittersweet conflict between a sense of respect and pity for him, and those feelings waver in our perception of Basile's character from the beginning to the end of the story. The concept of play is manifold, as "Vürst" illuminates two aspects of play which are relevant for understanding Basile: a play, the theatrical power and aesthetic relevance of which stems from being performed *to* someone, hence maintaining a certain distance from oneself and what is played, and play(ing) *against* a Grand Master, an imagined opponent (or perhaps even a comrade). From the point where Basile tells the story of his chess match with the world champion, we start to perceive Mirk as a spectator of the game that Basile is playing, a game that indeed has to be doomed – as Basile also noted himself – and yet has to be played.

Mirk's presence brought to life the possibility for Basile's play to be played and gave him an audience. The theatrical aspect of Basile's play comes to life in being presented, which is also supported by his generally theatrical ways of being. In the second paragraph of "Vürst", Mirk associates him with the Doctor from Rolf Hochhuth's play "Deputy". The somewhat shy, unspoken appreciation between Mirk and Basile could stem from the fact that Mirk was the spectator of Basile's play, allowing him to bring certain things (like the beauty of unexpected and unpredictable acts of mercy, kindness, or hospitality) to the surface, letting them emerge, and through the aesthetics of all that, allowing Basile to resist the purposiveness and destructivity of the camps.

Treating Basile's playfulness as a moral choice raises a question about the moral vocabulary of "Vürst". The moral vocabulary of Kross's labor camp stories is not enunciated clearly, but emerges tacitly: in the camps, the moral framework focuses on themes of preservation and (moral) survival, rather than active altruism. It also becomes clear that there

is a boundary, expressed in the words “scoundrel” and “scum”⁶, beyond which one cannot be respected as a human being. It is a category which Mirk cannot really tolerate, in his own words, and for which Basile also expresses his distaste. The moral vocabulary of Basile himself manifests itself most clearly in the opposition that he draws between his role (as an emergency rascal) and the deeds of an actual criminal. In the scene where Basile described Kotelnikov, “the main bandit” of the camp⁷, who had allegedly decided to kill him, Basile’s words “too big and unstylish of a scum” speak of his distaste for the seriousness of Kotelnikov’s deeds (“too big ... of a scum”), i.e. the robberies and murders, as well as for the lack of *style* (“too ... unstylish of a scum”): Mirk’s brief description of Kotelnikov indicates that he was a simple criminal who, quite probably, was not motivated by some deep sense of misanthropy, nor did he give the impression of the type who has a liking for nuance and fine-grained elaborate play.

Kotelnikov’s shortcoming in style was not simply an aesthetic issue, as the style is, given Basile’s own words and behavior, quite clearly one of the keywords that guided Basile’s choices. It has a value that extends beyond a reasonable concern for the beauty of the game; a stylish game/role is a kind of skill which seems to give the game its force. This skill is, on the one hand, a skill for an aesthetic and existential reflection, but on the other, it is also a skill for working with the unique and often limited/restricted *possibilities* that the situation offers, doing it as artfully and masterfully as possible. In Basile’s hands, it is also a skill to create confusion in a morally deplorable, destructive system, instead of perpetuating unlawfulness and moral depravity in a non-destructive system.

A difference between Basile’s game and a *cruel* game is evident: cruel and evil games tend to be destructive rather than constructive. To the extent that Basile’s game carries moral and aesthetic force in a combined fashion, it is essentially and necessarily different from a sadistic game which, first and foremost, rejoices in the sufferings of others. Basile’s game was self-constructive, as it kept him emotionally alive, his freedom of narrativity flourishing and intact. The moral vocabulary of “Vürst” helps us here: the categories of a scoundrel and a scum were clearly distinguished from and (regarding the question of possible forgiveness by God) opposed to the label of an emergency rascal in Basile’s vocabulary. The moral framework of Kross’s forced labor camp stories does not problematize this categorization;

⁶ *kaabakas* and *mölakas* in Estonian.

⁷ Kotelnikov was a kind of celebrity in the camp: he had 9 train robberies and 11 murders on his account, which earned him the reverence of his peers. Mirk did not describe him as a particularly notable figure, but as rather average and inconspicuous (Kross 2004, 235).

while Mirk (as the narrator of several of these stories) was certainly intrigued by Basile and his choices, Mirk did not condemn him.

It is also clear that while Arendt's account of the totalitarian terror (as well as various more and less theoretical reflections on the same topic by intellectuals of the 20th century), films (e.g. "Schindler's List", "The Pianist", "A Love to Hide"), and survivor accounts (Levi, Shalamov, etc.) equip us with examples of cruel and senseless games 'played' in the forced labor, concentration and extermination camps in the Third Reich and in Stalin's Soviet Union, those games do not seem to carry the same meaning and function as Basile's game. Levi, as we have seen, brought to us a graphic picture of a senseless cruel game which relies on the fact that fresh Auschwitz inmates had no idea what was happening to them and *why* – the greatness of the sufferings and the injustice simply did not fit into any sensible narrative. The futility and dangerousness of asking questions gave a sudden powerful start to the decline of the inmates' freedom of narrativity, inviting a madness-like, automated state of existence. Instead of having a reflective/constructive edge (as Basile's theatrically grand manners did, for example), these kinds of games contributed to destroying the inmates' freedom of weaving coherent stories.

3.2 Steadfastness as a form of resistance in "Halleluuja"

The main character of the story "Halleluuja", Dr Ulrich, is similar to Basile in many relevant ways, yet Mirk's attitude towards him is very different. Mirk met Dr Ulrich in a coal mining camp. Dr Ulrich's appearance and behavior inspired Mirk to note his uncommon ways. Dr Ulrich's clothing and manners (which were generally not maintained or preserved in such a way in the camp lifestyle) gave him away as misfit. For example, the fact that Ulrich knocked on the door, while in the camp no one knocks on the door before entering. Mirk described the edge of absurdity in their meeting: "He had a ... face that was bluish from the cold and dead serious despite the absurdity of the moment." (Kross 2004, 97)

Dr Ulrich's personality started to become more illuminated as he told the story of his time in Berlin. He had been a historian. During the intensive bombing of Berlin, he stayed in the city and took care of his archive amidst the chaos. His reasoning was that he was not a Nazi but a historian, and he was *responsible for the values that were entrusted to him*.⁸

⁸ In Estonian, "vastutas tema hoolde usaldatud väärtuste eest": there is an ambiguity as to what „väärtused“ refers to specifically, since it could be both „valuables“/“valuable objects“ and „values“ in the sense of principles.

(Kross 2004, 98) Indeed, this is an important thread in the story. The argument that Dr Ulrich is responsible for the values that are entrusted to him could be seen as an explanation to many of his acts.

Amidst the chaos of wartime Berlin, Ulrich arranged a surprise birthday gift to his friend Mr Palmquist: a difficult task, given that Ulrich was determined to express his respect for his friend in a “more or less original way” (Kross 2004, 102). The war-ridden city left no possibilities for originality anymore, though: the shops that were still functioning did not offer a diversity of goods that would have enabled an original, personal and unique present. Amidst the chaotic and nervous circumstances and reduced possibilities for originality, Dr Ulrich figured out an idea for a present that had a taste of oddness, childlike joy of life, and uniqueness. At the same time, the gift was half-way a prank, not for Mr Palmquist, but certainly for the norms and expectations of the society of wartime Berlin. It was a car horn that produced the sound of HAL-LE-LU-JAH from (G. F. Händel’s “Messiah”).

HAL-LE-LU-JAH!

HAL-LE-LU-JAH!

the horn was whooping, amplified by the car battery, amidst the bare trees, moonlight shadows, ruins and still intact walls of houses. Silvery. Clear. Triumphant. (Kross 2004, 106)

Dr Ulrich’s quest for originality has an element of pride in it, which was noticeable in how he described the gift. Honking the car horn in a war-ridden city brought along the annoyance of other people, besides violating curfew. However, Dr Ulrich seemed to perceive the car horn as something quite essential and symbolic, as an act of rebellion against the destruction and a preservation of originality, the past values and the joy of life. Dr Ulrich’s stories about his war-time experiences in Berlin reveal his quest for originality, which is combined with a certain amount of bravery and unpracticality in his character.

This kind of emphasis on *keeping going*, happily – or rather fiercely – in the dire circumstances, as in the camp, could be understood as an expression of Dr Ulrich’s responsibility to take care of the values of his era, with which he had been entrusted.

‘Well, I slept my fill – as much as it is possible while listening for the air raid alarm through sleep and Hallelujah-chorus, and Palmquist as well, and from then on he drove happily around Berlin with his car horn. As happily as the circumstances allowed. I mean, rather fiercely than happily.’ (Kross 2004, 108)

In describing the car horn, Dr Ulrich used the words “fascinating” and “hooligan”: “that in this tact,’ the doctor continued, ‘was hidden a praise to God, but God was a *persona non*

grata in the Greater Germany ... And the main thing, fascinating and hooligan, was that the word behind the call of our horn – hallelujah – let us praise Jehovah, you see – was intangibly despicably⁹ in Hebrew.” (Kross 2004, 108) We could see the same elements of enacting the unexpected (as in Basile’s case) in his behavior in the camp, the joy and pride of taking the risk and not doing what one is expected to do: a prank-like despicability (*sigadus*) against the system.

In the second part of the story, the focus shifts to Dr Ulrich’s life in the camp, and that part of the story is more engaged with Mirk’s perspective and opinion about Dr Ulrich. Here, the reader encounters the problematic sides of Dr Ulrich’s inclination for originality, manners, precision, and staying true to and preserving the values that he sustained before his arrest. Dr Ulrich did not even attempt to fit in as Mirk observed – he did not accept the set of rules that the inmates in the labor camps use to stay alive. “Halleluuja” concluded with the scene where Dr Ulrich rejected one of the survival strategies. In this scene, Mirk found out his attempt to get Ulrich physically un-demanding work in the kitchen during convalescence had resulted in failure. Namely, the head cook had been secretly watching how Dr Ulrich, the cook’s assistant, was cutting cheese, and to the cook’s surprise, Ulrich did not eat even one piece of cheese in the process. This was in such a stark contrast with expected behavior in the camp – food theft for survival – that the cook fired Dr Ulrich immediately, freeing the kitchen job for people who might benefit from the opportunity of having some extra snacks during their work.

Mirk pointed out that although the inconveniences that followed from Dr Ulrich’s rigorous reluctance to adjust brought him closer to physical perishing with each passing day, his mental energy only seemed to grow. It is evident that Dr Ulrich’s *extravagance* of moral firmness, excessive precision and reluctance to adjust to the morals of the camp served the purpose of moral survival for Ulrich, if not physical: it could be seen as a kind of resistance against the “moral strangulation” (Kross 2004, 108) of his time, carrying an element of doom and joyful bravery at the same time. This reading is supported by the increase of mental energy in Dr Ulrich that Mirk observed:

... it seemed to me that his knees were shaking every time from the weakness that was threatening to overwhelm him. At the same time, his mental energy seemed to rather increase. His anecdotes seemed only more polished. His personal stories included only more surprising punch lines. (Kross 2004, 110)

⁹ “sigaduslikult” in Estonian.

Indeed, there is innocent, almost child-like playfulness present in Ulrich's stories, imitations and theatricalities. In the light of the senselessness of the sufferings and difficult circumstances in which the inmates of the German and Soviet camps found themselves, and the decline in their ability to act and be spontaneous as their physical situation deteriorates, Rorty's interpretation of Orwell's message in *1984* is relevant for us also at this point of the discussion. With Orwell, Rorty found confirmation to his point about the contingency of community: the idea that future is up for grabs, that O'Briens are possible, and there is nothing in the nature of man, truth, or language that would prevent the rise of social institutions and practices which subdue the individuals, mold them into an unthinking mass, and cause pain and humiliation.

In this context, Rorty interpreted Winston's steadfastness in holding the belief "two plus two makes four" as a form of resistance, and saw Orwell's project as useful advice for when the chips go down: "So I read the passage from Winston's diary about the need to insist that two and two equals four not as Orwell's view about how to keep the O'Briens at bay but, rather, as a description of how to keep ourselves going when things get tight." (Rorty 1989, 185) In our interpretation, insisting that two plus two makes four was a way for Winston to remain connected to himself and to maintain a coherent narrative amidst a society where talking to fellow people (in the sense of having an educated, free discussion) does not make sense anymore. The same theme, "how to keep ourselves going when things get tight" is important for understanding Dr Ulrich. His steadfastness about his values enabled him to keep going in the camp, and was essential for his emotional and moral survival, although it increasingly destroyed his chances for actual physical survival day by day. However, his freedom of narrativity remained intact, and his death which must have followed soon thereafter, could not have been the vanishing of a *Muselman*.

Dying with dignity, having remained capable of resistance (and hence also spontaneous) through joyful (or rather, fierce) playfulness constitutes an act of standing up against the aim of the camps (to subdue and break the individuality and freedom of narrativity of the prisoners), even if it has no hope for physical survival. This choice is contrasted with Peeter Mirk's pragmatist choice to play along the rules in the camp (while deciding to internally *never* blend in), and keep himself going like this. Arendt's works have provided us with thorough analyses of the "achievements" of the camps: anonymous deaths that are stripped of meaning and remembrance, and the killing of the unique person in man. Dr Ulrich resisted those prospects via his choice of vocabulary and via redescription of the place he was at, as well as his role in it – in this aspect, his choice was similar to that of Basile's. Basile also rejected the redescription of himself that the camp offered, which we could roughly phrase like this: 'you are on the lowest

level of society, and your first and primary concern is to take care of your physical needs in this hopeless situation, if you want to survive as long as possible.’

Hence, it seems that Dr Ulrich’s choice to reject the survival strategies and guard his values is a fully serious one; naivete and steadfastness seem to dominate in his behavior at the first glance. However, his stories about his life in Berlin (especially the surprise birthday present for his friend Mr Palmquist) create some dissonance in this impression, as well as Mirk’s occasional remarks that there is an edge of daring bravery present in Dr Ulrich. Ulrich’s search for originality was compatible with dignified pranks that would realize the joy of life. The joy of life (even if realized with effort, through “clenched teeth”), bravery, and the dignity of a man and his values must remain – this seems to be the motivating force from which Dr Ulrich’s steadfastness emerged. Dr Ulrich described an emotionally powerful scene: he was being transported inside the ‘Black Raven’¹⁰ in Berlin by the Russians, and in the traffic of the war-ridden city, he heard the sound of Mr Palmquist’s horn, “HAL-LE-LUU-JA!”. Dr. Ulrich said: “ [It sounded] three times. Not more. But not less either. Well, I do not have to explain to you how I felt right then.” (Kross 2004, 113) Dr Ulrich’s reaction to this incident could be interpreted as carrying the same sense of triumph and joy of keeping going, fiercely and originally, amidst chaos. The end result for Dr Ulrich was a play with risks, which, unlike Basile’s play, did not have the performative aspect, but which risked with the “player’s” survival just the same. Ulrich’s play also did not have an edge of bravura, unlike Basile’s.

Ulrich’s dignified maintenance of his values was linked with dog-like¹¹ behavior in “Halleluuja”: Dr Ulrich himself expresses surprise over how dog-like his moral choices are. Imagining the possibility of a traffic accident having happened with the car in which he was transported after the arrest, Dr Ulrich mused, “... if such an accident would happen, I should remain standing by the black raven, and call out for help – And that would be more than dog-like, but the only right thing to do.” (Kross 2004, 113) Despite expressions like “the only right thing to do”, which might refer to some fixed moral framework, Dr Ulrich’s firmness is not a sign of him operating with a fixed set of values in Arendt’s sense, which he would generally employ in the situation he encounters (although the incompatibility between his values and the situations he was in was very strong). We could say that he *stayed true* to his belief that there are values to be guarded for him, and refused to adopt the camp-redescription, the way in which one was supposed to see life in the camps.¹² The camp-redescription, which both Basile and Dr Ulrich avoided, is a power tool. Its end result – a

¹⁰ “Black raven” was the colloquial name for the car in which prisoners were transported.

¹¹ “Koeralik” in Estonian.

¹² We have introduced the term, “camp-redescription”, in section 1.2.

person who is not really living, not really dead – lacks freedom of narrativity, as the person ceases to form stories of themselves and others, hence also stopping to hope, fear, and contemplate.

There is a clear difference between how the characters are perceived: Basile invites respect (partly also due to his special relationship with Mirk), while Dr Ulrich evokes mostly pity. Their moral choices employ redescription in ways which address the possibilities and hope that remain in the worst of conditions on a larger scale, even if they themselves did not have much to hope for: they both avoided the silent vanishing of anonymous, subdued, automated inmates whose death is not really a death and not really their own. As the camp experience was a rupture of everyday habits and lifestyle, playfulness cannot really be seen as a habit. Even if the person has a habit of playing, the circumstances in the camp were very particular and different from every-day life, and the play makes it possible for novelty and uniqueness to arise. The artistic side of the decision to play – the presence of theatricality and spectator(s), for example – comes with a sense of profundity that starts to flavor the character's choices for the reader. Playfulness – playing with the devil, enacting the unexpected, spicing one's theatricality with bravura, as well as playing with the risks and possibilities in search of originality, is something that requires courage, individuality, and improvisation, therefore entailing an artistic and spontaneous element, which the camps were designed to break. Denying the redescription of the camps, not adopting the new manners and ways of life, also speaks of resistance, although the resistance did not include playfulness. Playfulness and survival, seemingly contradictory concepts, are interwoven in intricate ways in Kross's works.

Conclusion

Jaan Kross's works use rich language, presenting curious, humorous, and complex characters, and depict the moral dilemmas that arose amidst World War II and the totalitarian repressions of the mid-20th century. As we have seen, the (possibility of) 'moral strangulation' of the people who lived in dangerous times and experienced painful encounters with a repressive state apparatus, lingers in the camp settings that Kross presented in "Vürst" and "Halleluuja". Interestingly, despite such hopelessness, the reader gets a sense of the strong freedom of narrativity in the characters at the same time – a sense of their survival regardless of swiftly approaching death. This sense of survival might, at the first glance, seem odd and unrealistic when compared to the complete destruction of a human being that Arendt wrote about, or the unmade worlds of Winston and Julia in *1984*, analyzed and brought to us by Rorty.

In this thesis, we have presented a framework for elaborating on this combination of physical hopelessness and moral force and giving meaning to it. This framework has the concept of playfulness at its center, and employs the idea of the freedom of narrativity (which emerged from our synthesis of Rorty and Arendt) in highlighting the importance of that kind of playfulness. Both Arendt and Rorty addressed the issue of senselessness/meaninglessness with regard to the destructive power of torture and totalitarian terror. Arendt and Rorty saw the terror and torture as eliminating two phenomena that are essential for our (emotional) survival: spontaneity and freedom to redescribe, respectively. Hence, besides a language-related practice like redescription, spontaneity also plays a role in maintaining one's freedom of narrativity as a more general ability to *begin something new*. Playfulness, in the way in which it emerges in Basile and Dr Ulrich's case, helps one maintain those capacities and freedoms. We have also shown how in the context of a forced labor camp playfulness can have a strong moral and aesthetic force, and the 'game' – with its rules clearly spelled out – can on a more abstract level serve as a kind of aesthetic/existential nonverbal reflection on one's situation, due to its distance from the seriousness of life and the situation in which the player finds himself.

This playfulness cannot emerge in extremely difficult conditions where people are quickly rendered unable to redescribe and where spontaneity is swiftly and successfully eliminated, however. In the first parts of the thesis, we have dwelled on such conditions at length, introducing the stages of destruction that Arendt outlined, and the seriousness of the situation where a person's world has been unmade and they are unable to weave a coherent

story about themselves again. Those processes of destruction are important to keep in mind as a *horizon* – a possibility that loomed also in the forced labor camps and of which Kross and the main characters of his works were aware. The possibility of destruction allows us to see the (moral and existential, dignity-related) urgency of the kind of playfulness we describe, and highlights playfulness clearly as a form of resistance.

Besides the playfulness which manifests itself in performative theatricality, the figure of a prankster, and unexpected behavior, there is also the playfulness of Dr Ulrich that emerges from the combination of moral steadfastness, a daring attitude of bravery that plays with risks, and a quest for originality. It is a subtler kind of play, which looks like the opposite of playfulness on the first glance: Dr Ulrich's faithfulness to his moral principles is very dominant in the story, and the playfulness comes out in nuanced ways, not spelled out as clearly as in Basile's case. However, Dr Ulrich's quest for originality as a fueling aspect to his moral steadfastness enables him to keep himself going, without adopting the vocabulary of the camp.

With this analysis, we have started a conversation between Arendt's and Rorty's ideas. Through outlining the role of redescription in playfulness, it has become clear that Rorty's concepts and ideas are useful for analyzing and interpreting the larger socio-political processes (loss of meaning, rise of senselessness), moral dilemmas (situations from which there is no escape, like Winston's situation in Room 101), and dialectical changes (shifting categories, blurred distinctions and reduced vocabulary) that totalitarian systems entail. The relevance of the thesis for the society and general public lies in the subject matter, as well as the way the thesis is built up. To avoid the devaluation of the term "totalitarian" (which, in the face of populist politics, is used quite often), it is important to have knowledge about the social and political dynamics and processes that come with totalitarianism. Arendt is a classic choice for such a task, as she has described and analyzed such processes in depth, which is why the thesis discusses her analyses.

All in all, the thesis serves as a redescription of ways in which we can keep ourselves going in a situation as difficult, potentially destructive, and complex as life in a forced labor camp. However, the subject matter itself also reminds us of the fragility of human lives, and the power of bureaucratic organization when it is combined with isolation, violence, and banality of evil; this is knowledge that is worth preserving and deepening in a free, liberal society. Besides the description of playfulness that this work offers (which is the core of the project), this thesis also handles the question about the specific conditions that invite and cause the dilemmas and choices that Kross's characters face.

Abstract

Countering destruction with spontaneity, redescription, and playfulness:

A philosophical reading of Kross

This thesis focuses on a philosophical analysis of literature. The central question is: when making moral choices in a forced labor camp, what options remain? Hannah Arendt has written about the forced labor, concentration and extermination camps as the central institutions of totalitarianism, where the project of complete destruction of unwanted human beings is carried out; the end result is the removal of spontaneity and uniqueness in people. We join Arendt's insights with those of Richard Rorty who employed the concept of unmaking a person's world in his discussion of Orwell's *1984*. A synthesis of their ideas highlights the importance of language and the freedom of narrativity for countering the elimination of spontaneity (Rorty emphasized the importance of redescription). Chapter 3 uses this synthesis for analyzing the Gulag stories of an Estonian writer, Jaan Kross. Our reading of the stories "Vürst" and "Halleluuja" outlines the concept of playfulness which employs independent redescription of the characters themselves and the situation, and upholds the inmates' freedom of narrativity and spontaneity. This playfulness emerges in theatricality, bravura, distance from the situation and its script (the distance-keeping has a notable parallel to Rorty's concept of irony), enacting the unexpected, and playing with risks and possibilities.

Resümee

Hävitusele spontaansuse, ümberkirjelduse ja mänglevusega vastates:

Filosoofiline tõlgendus Krossi töödest

Antud magistritöö keskmes on kirjanduse filosoofiline analüüs. Keskne küsimus puudutab raskete valikute ees seismist totalitarismi kontekstis: seistes silmitsi moraalivalikutega sunnitöölaagris, millised on valikuvõimalused? Mida tähendab laagris teatud moraalivaliku langetamine (nii füüsilise kui moraalse) ellujäämise ning vastupanu osutamise perspektiivist? Hannah Arendti käsitluses on sunnitöö-, koondus- ja surmalaagrid totalitarismi kesksed institutsioonid, kus teostatakse soovimatute inimolendite täieliku hävituse projekti; lõpptulemuseks on inimeste spontaansuse ning unikaalsuse kaotamine. Selles töös toome Arendti sissevaated kokku Richard Rorty ideedega, kes rakendas Orwelli 1984 analüüsis inimese maailma koostvõtmise ideed. Arendti ja Rorty ideede süntees toob esile keele ning narratiivse vabaduse olulisuse võitluses spontaansuse kadumise vastu. Töö kolmas peatükk kasutab narratiivsele vabadusele seatud rõhuasetust Eesti kirjaniku Jaan Krossi GULAGi-lugude tõlgendamiseks. Töö pakub tõlgendust novellidest “Vürst” ja “Halleluuja”, tuues esile idee mänglevusest, mis kirjeldab iseseisvalt ümber nii tegelase enda kui ka ümbritseva situatsiooni ning hoiab alal vangide narratiivset vabadust ja spontaansust. Selline mänglevus tõuseb esile teatraalsetes viisides, bravuuris, teatavas distantsis situatsioonist ning selle ‘skriptist’ (säärasel distantsil on märgatavaid sarnasusi Rorty ironismiga), ootamatuste väljamängimises ning rõhutamises ning riskide ning võimalustega mängimises.

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