

HANNAH ARENDT

1907-1975

EVEN HANNAH ARENDT'S CRITICS, AT THE TIME OF HER DEATH IN 1975, generally agreed that she was one of America's foremost political philosophers. But William Barrett's description of her mind as "something of an eighth wonder" was perhaps more to the point.

It was a distinction achieved through a life of considerable suffering, from the early death of her father through her displacement as a German Jew, first to Paris in the 1930s and then to the United States. In America, her talent and courage were tested once again when she had to face critics who almost wilfully misread her books, particularly the controversial study, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). An analysis of the catastrophe of Nazi Germany, it demonstrated the inadequacy of the legal system to deal with "the facts of administrative massacres organized by the state apparatus." Like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it was a warning to all, not just an expose of an isolated case; and some commentators resented her scrupulous honesty in telling the story of those complicit in the destruction of the Jews.

Hannah Arendt was elegant, even aristocratic in manner and style. Although many of her books and essays were initially written in German, her later informal essays read as if they were written by someone native to American English. Two memorable sayings, slightly paraphrased, suggest something of the depth and liveliness of her thought:

- (1) One must remember that in choosing the lesser of two evils one still chooses evil;
- (2) And if you can't laugh away the learned and sophisticated rubbish about

'adjustment' to one's environment, what help is there? To disprove point by point all the nonsense our century has produced would demand ten life spans, and in the end the disprovers would be indistinguishable from the victims.

Born in Hannover, Germany, on October 14, 1907, Hannah Arendt studied at the universities of Marburg and Freiburg and at Heidelberg where, at 22, she received a Ph.D. in philosophy, minoring in theology and Greek. At Heidelberg, she studied with Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, whose work she later edited, and wrote a dissertation on St. Augustine. With the rise of Hitler, she fled to Paris in 1933, working among other Jewish refugees, and finally to New York. Her thirty-year marriage to Heinrich Bluchner was a happy one, as were her friendships with various writers, including W. H. Auden, who once proposed to her; Randall Jarrell, who read poetry to her; and Mary McCarthy, who edited Arendt's posthumously published volumes, *The Life of the Mind, Thinking, Willing, and Judging* (1978).

Before being named a full professor at Princeton in 1959 (the first woman to hold that position), Arendt worked as an editor and administrator in New York. Later she taught at other leading universities, including the University of Chicago and, at the time of her death, at the New School for Social Research.

In returning to several of her writings, one is struck by how indispensable each of them remains: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), on the Russian and German political scenes during the 20th century; *The Human Condition* (1958), on three fundamental human activities of labor, work, and action; and the revised edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she answers her various critics.

Among the other books, *Crisis of the Republic* (1972) deserves special attention by anyone active in justice issues, because of its discussions of nonviolent direct action and of fundamental social change. It includes a careful analysis of the successes and failures of student radicalism in the 1960s, defining for contemporary culture such terms as *power, authority, force, and violence*. "Out of the barrel

of a gun grows the most effective command resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience," Arendt says (challenging the Maoist doctrine). "What never can grow out of it is power." She regarded the concept of civil disobedience as a peculiarly American phenomenon, related to other political institutions. "In contrast to the conscientious objector, the civil disobedient is a member of a group, whether we like it or not, founded in accordance with the same spirit that has formed voluntary associations."

Among her more popular writings were the telling portraits of John XXIII and Berthold Brecht, in *Men in Dark Times* (1968). In all of her writings, for the general reader as well as for the scholar, she is concerned with education, which she defined as "a preparation for the task of renewing a common world."

A persistent theme in Arendt's writings is the relationship between private matters—a philosopher's language, for example—and public affairs. The philosopher, she says in *Men in Dark Times*, "resembles the statesman, in that he must answer for his opinions." She recognized and fulfilled that responsibility in a special way, continually testing her thought against the major issues of her time. Although she was extremely knowledgeable about the past (she taught seminars on Plato and Aristotle), there was no doubt in the reader's mind as to what century she lived in. (With most academics, one is never sure.) As she once said to Karl Jaspers, her mentor, indicating a fundamental conviction of her life, both philosophy and politics concern everyone.

Such a position led Arendt to make rather pointed criticisms of her academic colleagues and of earlier philosophers. In "Martin Heidegger at Eighty," about her mentor, she wrote, for example: "We who wish to honor him . . . can hardly help finding it striking and perhaps exasperating that Plato and Heidegger, when they entered into human affairs, turned to tyrants and Fuhrers."

Although she loved the United States and its political traditions, she spoke out vigorously against what she saw as the

corruption of language and thought in contemporary politics, especially during the Nixon administration. She said in *Crises of the Republic*,

The quicksand of lying statements of all sorts, deceptions as well as self-deceptions, is apt to engulf any reader who wishes to probe [*The Pentagon Papers!* which, unhappily, one must recognize as the infrastructure of nearly a decade of United States foreign and domestic policy.

Arendt hoped nonetheless that the United States might still regain its integrity. It became clear to her in 1971, she said, that "the halfhearted attempts of the government to circumvent constitutional guarantees and to intimidate those who have made up their minds not to be intimidated, who would rather go to jail than see their liberties nibbled away, are not enough and probably will not be enough to destroy the Republic."

As a philosopher knowledgeable about the harsh realities of contemporary politics, Hannah Arendt made unique contributions to modern social thought. Her writings and her life carry always the mark of true humanity, suggesting that thought and language have consequences and that, even in dark times, reason has a chance.

BY HANNAH ARENDT

Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience, On Violence, Thoughts or Politics, and Revolution. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovenovich, 1972.

Men in Dark Times. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968.

Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. New York: The Viking Press, 1963, 1964.

The Origins of Totalitarianism. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1951, 1966.

And others.

ABOUT HANNAH ARENDT

Young-Bruehl, Elizabeth. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.