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On Hannah Arendt

[Robert Lowell](#) [May 13, 1976 Issue](#)

Hannah Arendt was an oasis in the fevered, dialectical dust of New York—to me, and I imagine to everyone who loved her. We met in the late Fifties or early Sixties in Mary McCarthy's apartment. She seemed hardly to take her coat off, as she brushed on with purpose to a class or functional shopping. In her hurry, she had time to say to me something like "This is an occasion," or more probably, "This is a meeting." I put the least intention into her words, but later dared telephone her to make a call. The calls were part of my life as long as I lived in New York—once a month, sometimes twice.

I was overawed. Years earlier Randall Jarrell had written me in Holland that if I wanted to discover something big and new, I would read Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Randall seldom praised in vain, but my Dutch intellectual friends, as usual embarrassingly more into whatever was being written in America, were ahead of me, and were discussing *Origins* with minds sharpened by the Dutch Resistance, a hatred of Germany, and a fluency with German philosophers. I felt landless and alone, and read Hannah as though I were going home, or reading *Moby Dick*, perhaps for the second time, no longer seeking adventure, but the voyage of wisdom, the tragedy of America.

Writing when Stalin was still enthroned and the shade of Hitler still unburied, Hannah believed with somber shrewdness, like Edmund Burke, that totalitarian power totally corrupts. Compared with Melville, however, she might seem an optimist about America. *Origins*, like many of her books, is apparently a defense of America, one that overstates and troubles us by assuming that we must be what we declared ourselves to be in our Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary beginnings. Her dream, it is both German and Jewish, now perhaps seems sadly beyond our chances and intentions. Yet the idea is still true, still taunting us to act. What is memorable, and almost uniquely rare and courageous in a thinker, is that Hannah's theory is always applied to action, and often to immediate principles of state. Her imperatives for political freedom still enchant and reproach us, though America has obviously, in black moments one thinks almost totally, slipped from those jaunty years of Harry Truman and the old crusade for international democracy. We couldn't know how fragile we were, or how much totalitarianism could ameliorate, bend, adulterate itself, and succeed.

Hannah's high apartment house high on the lower Hudson always gave me a feeling of apprehension, the thrill, hesitation, and helplessness of entering a foreign country, a north German harbor, the tenements of Kafka. Its drabness and respectability that hid her true character also emphasized her unfashionable independence. On my first visit, I blundered about a vacant greenish immensity unable to find the name of any owner. Then I ran through the small print cards, uniform as names in a telephone book, that filled a green brass plaque camouflaged to lose itself in the dark green hall. No Arendt; then I found what I was seeking: *Blucher 12a*. It was inevitable for Hannah to use her husband's name for domestic identification. The elevator was brusque and unhurried; through my ineptitude, it made false premature stops. A vehemently not-Hannah German woman appeared and gave me advice that sent me to the

A vehemently non-Hannah German woman appeared and gave me advice that sent me to the top of the building. Did another lady dart out shouting wrong directions? So it seemed, but memories magnify. Later when my arrivals were errorless though gradual, it seemed an undeserved rescue to find Hannah in her doorway and ready to kiss me.

Once inside, the raw Hudson, too big for New York, was chillingly present, but only in a window at an angle and raised several feet above the floor. We almost had to stand to see it, and it was soon lost in the urgency of conversation. I sometimes had an architectural temptation to cut away the unalterable window.

How many fine views have given me comfort by their nearness, yet were only taken in by chance over a typescript or the head of a friend. How unconsciously Hannah held the straying mind. Though a philosopher in every heartbeat of her nervous system, she belonged, like all true thinkers, to culture and literature. Coming to America in early middle age, she had the pluck not only to learn English but to write it with a power of phrase and syntax that often made her a master, the strongest theoretical writer of her age. Phrasing, syntax, and vehemence—her finest sentences are a wrenching then a marriage of English and German, of English instantness and German philosophical discipline. She translated many of her books into German, but I imagine if she had written in German and let someone else translate her into English her freshness, nerve, and actuality would have suffered a glaze, a stealing of her life.

Because I once failed to speak out, yet was stirred almost to hysteria by the smearing reception of Hannah's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, I want to take it up now, yet evade what is beyond my non-Jewish limitation. I read her book innocently in *The New Yorker* before the anger of faction could accumulate and burst. I was astonished to discover a new kind of biography, a blueprint of a man flayed down to his abstract moral performance, no color, no anecdote, nothing kept that would support a drawing or even a snapshot—yet a living kicking anatomy, Eichmann's X-ray in motion. It was a terrifying expressionist invention applied with a force no imitator could rival, and to a subject too sordid for reappraisal. The book's lesson seemed to be that given the right bad circumstances, Eichmann is still in the world. I have never understood why Hannah's phrase the banality of evil excited such universal polemic. She wasn't writing of Attila or Caesar, but Eichmann. The Eichmann who managed the railroading of thousands, perhaps millions, to their death camps was an apallingly uninteresting man both in his criminal efficiency and in his irrelevant pedantry and evasions while on trial for his life. Since Hannah has written, who has dreamed of painting Eichmann as colorful? Hannah's rage against Eichmann's mediocrity was itself enraging.

It was far more so when she turned with the same heat against the rhetoric and windowdressing of the Eichmann trial in Israel; and far more still when she said that certain Jews, themselves martyrs, cooperated in the destruction of other Jews. Who can expound the sober facts? Must not justice allow that Hannah Arendt, where she was wrong, wrote with the honest foolhardiness of a prophet? Perhaps her warnings to us to resist future liquidation are too heroic to live with, for nearly all of us are cowards if sufficiently squeezed by the hand of the powerful.

No society is more acute and over-acute at self-criticism than that of the New York Jews. No society I have known is higher in intelligence, wit, inexhaustible willingness to reason, bicker, tolerate, and differ. When Hannah's *Eichmann* was published, a meeting was summoned by Irving Howe and Lionel Abel, normally urbane and liberal minds. The meeting was like a trial, the

storming of an outcast member of the family. Any sneering overemphasis on Hannah, who had been invited but was away teaching in Chicago, was greeted with derisive clapping or savage sighs of amazement. Her appointed defenders drifted off into unintelligibly ingenious theses and avoided her name. When her tolerance was eloquently and unfavorably compared with Trotsky's, Alfred Kazin walked self-consciously to the stage and stammered, "After all Hannah didn't kill any Jews." He walked off the stage laughed at as irrelevant and absurd. His was the one voice for the defense. I admire his bravery, and wish I had dared speak. Half my New York literary and magazine acquaintance was sitting near, yet their intensity was terrifying, as if they were about to pick up chairs.

Hannah did other portraits, genial, penetrating, good-humored ones, and had an unlikely genius for the form, as if the universal could win in a contest for hunting down particulars. How Disraeli and Clemenceau shine in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*. A subtle, relentless search for truth animates her essays on Rosa Luxemburg, Brecht, and Auden.

My meetings with Hannah were most often alone and at four in the afternoon. They had the concentrated intimacy of a tutorial. Large nuts were spread out on the table, the ashtrays filled, the conversation rambled through history, politics, and philosophy, but soon refreshed itself on gossip, mostly about people one liked, the dead and still living. Hannah made crushingly laconic sentences, but narrow slander, even of one's enemies, bored her. She thought and breathed within boundaries, ones held with such firm belief that she could function safely with almost torrential carelessness. She used to talk with merry ease, revising my definitions and her own, as if haphazard words could be as accurately attuned as writing. Yet all was warm, casual, and throwaway. It seems immoral to remember her epigrams I used to repeat, her acuteness and good temper seemed to inspire me to make sense beyond my custom.

I felt so much at home, I used to bring her poems. Rhythms with meaning would delight her, but she was quick to find obscurities and uncouth, pretentious generalizations. Mostly the poems were a device to diversify our talk about history, politics, and persons. I tried not to overstay, but sometimes I left in the dark and was late for supper—so cooling and kind was her affection, a parenthesis in the unjust blur of ordinary life.

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