Contemporary
Literary Criticism

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# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

**Deborah A. Stanley**EDITOR

Jeff Chapman Pamela S. Dear Jeff Hunter Daniel Jones





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<sup>2</sup>Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 223-26.

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## Hannah Arendt

German-born American philosopher, journalist, editor, and translator.

The following entry provides criticism of Arendt's work. For further information on her life and career, see *CLC*, Volume 66.

#### INTRODUCTION

A distinguished political philosopher and cultural historian, Arendt directed her writing towards the analysis of modern political movements, most notably of the events and circumstances that led to the rise of totalitarianism and to the ubiguitous sense of personal, social, and political alienation in the twentieth century. Arendt maintained that political activity expresses what is most valuable in human endeavor and argued that individuals achieve a sense of purpose and meaning through active participation in decision-making processes concerning social change or the preservation of ideas. Her reputation as a profound and independent philosophical analyst of political systems began with the publication of The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), but her best-known and most controversial book is Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963), which blends reports of the 1962 trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann with observations about Nazism and anti-Semitism. The work also suggests a Jewish complicity in Germany's atrocities during World War II. Ever ready to apply philosophical thought to current events, Arendt examined a broad range of topics-racism, war and revolution, culture and the life of the mind, the nature of evil, the social effects of technology—yet her main concerns were twofold: the problem of political evil in the twentieth century and the dilemma of the Jew in the contemporary world. "Twenty years after her death [her admirers] see her desire for a 'new politics' of collective action vindicated by the revolutions of 1989," remarked Tony Judt, "and her account of modern society in general and totalitarianism in particular confirmed by the course of contemporary history."

#### **Biographical Information**

Born October 14, 1906, in Hannover, Germany, to erudite Jewish parents active in social causes, Arendt spent her childhood in Konigsberg, her father's ancestral home. She studied philosophy, theology, and Greek under instruction from three leading contemporary German philosophers: Martin Heidegger, with whom she had a brief liaison, at Marburg University; Edmund Husserl at Freiburg University; and Karl Jaspers at Heidelberg University. Heidegger's ideas strongly



influenced Arendt's own thought, and Jaspers directed her doctoral dissertation on St. Augustine's concept of love, which was published in 1929. Forced out by rising anti-Semitic sentiments, Arendt fled in 1933 to Paris, where she worked with Jewish orphans and refugees and completed her first book, a biography of an eighteenth-century Berlin salon hostess, Rahel Varnhagen (1958). In 1940 Arendt married Heinrich Blucher, an art historian. The two moved to New York, where Arendt served as research director for the Conference of Jewish Relations from 1944 to 1946 and as chief editor of Schocken Books from 1946 to 1948. She became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1950 and received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1952. During this time Arendt established herself as an incisive political commentator by writing essays and reviews for Aufbau (Construction), an emigre newspaper, and secured her reputation with the publication of The Origins of Totalitarianism and The Human Condition (1958). Following her appointment as the first woman professor at Princeton University in 1959, Arendt later lectured for the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago from 1963 to 1967, when she joined the graduate faculty at the New School for Social Research. Eichmann in Jerusalem, which first appeared as a series of articles in *The New Yorker*, generated furor over Arendt's comments about German Jews, and Arendt lost many friends despite her efforts to reply to her critics. Arendt voiced her response to the revolutionary zeal of 1960s in *On Revolution* (1963), *Men in Dark Times* (1968), *On Violence* (1970), and *Crises of the Republic* (1972). Arendt died suddenly of a heart attack on December 4, 1975, in New York City.

#### **Major Works**

The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt's first major publication, analyzes the historical circumstances that fostered the development of fascist ideology in twentieth-century German and Russian society, tracing its roots to anti-Semitism and nineteenth-century imperialism. Closely related to Origins, The Human Condition outlines Arendt's views on the public realm or vita activa of human activity, interpreting the causes of personal and social alienation in terms of the nature of labor, work, and action. Her posthumous The Life of the Mind (1978), a proposed three-volume study of the elementary mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging, of which only the volumes "Thinking" and "Willing" were published, treats the private realm or vita comtemplativa, analyzing the processes of the mind and their effects on action. Arendt's belief that political activity was the noblest of human endeavors expressed itself in the highly controversial Eichmann in Jerusalem, which suggests that the failure of Jews to act against the policies of Nazi Germany actually enabled the state to proceed with the Holocaust; though never intending to exculpate Eichmann's guilt, Arendt showed that he was not a mere evil madman, but rather someone who had developed an inability to think. Her other book-length studies include On Revolution, which is a comparative analysis of the American and French revolutions, and On Violence, which argues that violence is a reaction to a lack of power. Some of Arendt's best work is found in essays she wrote for a variety of periodicals and later collected in such volumes as Men in Dark Times, which contains biographical sketches of her personal heroes; Crises of the Republic, which offers her observations on the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the Watergate scandal; The Jew as Pariah (1978), which collects pieces on Jewish themes; and Essays in Understanding (1995), which features the writings of her early career.

### **Critical Reception**

Arendt's writings provoked widespread debate among political scientists, sociologists, and historians, who in turn generated a wealth of contradictory commentary on a variety of subjects; at the same time their influence has proved extraordinary, extending even to the American judicial system. (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* has been cited in several court decisions protecting the rights of displaced persons and expatriates.) "To some she represented the worst of 'Continen-

tal' philosophizing. . . . For such critics her insights into the woes of the century are at best derivative, at worst plain wrong," observed Judt, who added, "Others . . . find her a stimulating intellectual presence; her refusal to acknowledge academic norms and conventional categories of explanation, which so frustrates and irritates her critics, is precisely what most appeals to her admirers." The paradoxical reception of Arendt's work derives in part from ambiguities detected in the works themselves, which have provided fodder for both her supporters and detractors. Margaret Canovan, for instance, detected a "serious inconsistency" between the "elitist" and the "democratic" aspects of Arendt's political thought, while such critics as Sheldon S. Wolin, George Kateb, and John Sitton, contrary to prevalent analyses of her work in terms of totalitarianism, have scrutinized her writings for indications of her attitudes toward democratic government. Although the hostility that greeted Eichmann in Jerusalem has subsided, the volume continues to fascinate readers. Walter Laqueur, for example, reevaluated the question of "whether, in fact, [Arendt] was misunderstood and injustice done to her"; Tony Seibers analyzed the book in terms of its affinities to literary elements of storytelling; and Barry Clarke examined Arendt's representation of the "banality of evil" in the personality of Eichmann. In addition, numerous comparative analyses of Arendt's writings and those of other philosophers—from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant to Walter Benjamin and Heidegger-further illuminated her own ideas. "[Arendt] made a good many little errors, for which her many critics will never forgive her," admitted Judt. "But she got the big things right, and for this she deserves to be remembered."

### PRINCIPAL WORKS

Der Liebsgriff bei Augustin: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation (dissertation) 1929

The Origins of Totalitarianism (philosophy) 1951

The Human Condition (philosophy) 1958

Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess (biography) 1958 Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought (philosophy) 1961

Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (journalism) 1963

On Revolution (philosophy) 1963

Men in Dark Times (philosophy) 1968

On Violence (philosophy) 1970

Crises of the Republic (philosophy) 1972

The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age (philosophy) 1978

The Life of the Mind. 2 vols. (philosophy) 1978

Lecture's on Kant's Political Philosophy (lectures) 1982 Hannah Arendt—Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969

(letters) 1992

Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975 (letters) 1995 Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954 (essays) 1995

### **CRITICISM**

### Denis Donoghue (essay date May 1962)

SOURCE: "After Reading Hannah Arendt," in *Poetry* (Chicago), Vol. 100, No. 2, May, 1962, pp. 127-30.

[In the following essay, Donoghue relates "the profound, humane reflections" in Arendt's works to contemporary poetry, noting that he "had the disturbing impression that she had far more to say—more of humane relevance—than any ten contemporary poets."]

I first read Hannah Arendt in Partisan Review, a classic essay on Hitler's concentration camps. The essay was free from hysteria, violence, vituperation; there was only the violence within-Wallace Stevens's great phrase-animating the prose; no "rhetoric". I had not thought much about the camps; they were not part of my weather. I was eleven when the War started and no one took me aside to tell me about "original" guilt, categorical responsibility, and my share thereof. So after a few days or weeks the essay faded, I economized on emotional expenditure--Hiroshima Mon Amour is at least half-true—and went on my way, such as it was. Then after several years I read The Origins of Totalitarianism and now, very recently, The Human Condition. These books are operations performed upon the modern conscience in the hope, even now, of giving it a second chance. Perhaps if we could be made to see what we're doing, we might quit and begin again.

One of the most disturbing implications in Hannah Arendt's books is that there are facts, situations, events with which the human imagination cannot cope. I had always assumed that the imagination was good enough for anything, and I had been delighted by Stevens's picture of reality and the imagination in dynamic poise, the violence within grappling with that other violence which is its occasion, its challenge. Dynamic accord; reality and the imagination equal and inseparable. But Hannah Arendt is right; the human imagination is dazed by the reality of the concentration camps; it staggers, doubts its own evidence, lurches in torpor or hysteria. It cannot disclose the real.

I had always assumed that reality is "there", outside the self, a nexus of people, values, things, and events to be apprehended with faith and good-will by the senses, the intelligence, and the imagination. Growing up in a Christian context I acquired a dim but pervasive notion that human life is sacred, that nothing is trivial or absurd, that a modest object

like a table is good for holding things and somehow "valid" because it brings people together. I had not thought much about it. I still adhere to this rough-and-ready notion of reality because I have not encountered a better one. But *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* document its practical failure in the modern world. "Modern man, when he lost the certainty of a world to come, was thrown back upon himself and not upon this world; far from believing that the world might be potentially immortal, he was not even sure that it was real." He resents "everything given, even his own existence"; he resents the fact "that he is not the creator of the universe and himself". The self is now the only reality. Hence the beautiful dynamic poise of reality and the imagination is a delusion; the only reality is each man's transaction with himself.

I knew a little of this before reading Hannah Arendt, but I thought it a philosophical causerie rather than the glum, faithless axiom of our lives. I knew nothing of its connexion with totalitarianism, imperialism, anti-Semitism and the local motives which conspire with those realities. The evidence is beyond dispute. But what can we do? Most of Hannah Arendt's sentences are indicative rather than optative, but a certain persuasion is implicit: I shall describe it, adding a few marginal notes. We must try to dissolve our resentment and be grateful for the gift of life itself; we must re-establish human rights as rights to the human condition independent of any inborn human dignity; we must sponsor in ourselves and others attitudes of reverence, respect, volo ut sis, mutual responsibility. We must certify the revelatory character of human action, thought, choice, and sufferance. We must know what we are doing. We must think. (Perhaps thought would be enough; with good-will.)

One of the most disturbing implications in Hannah Arendt's books is that there are facts, situations, events with which the human imagination cannot cope.

—Denis Donoghue

Our occasion is literary. I remind myself of this with a certain embarrassment because while reading Hannah Arendt I had the disturbing impression that she had far more to say—more of humane relevance—than any ten contemporary poets. In comparison with her mind most of the literary minds on current exhibition seemed thin, slack, frivolous. This impression came more in sorrow and dismay than in anger. It may be faithless, even chimerical, but let it stand. At least our topic