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Arendt After Jerusalem

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ARENDR AFTER JERUSALEM

Graham MacPhee

Hannah Arendt, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, New York and London, Melville House 2013, 136pp; \$15.95 paperback

Marie Luise Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, D. Dollenmayer (trans.), New York, Other Press 2014, 173pp; \$22.95 hardback

Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, R. Martin (trans.), New York, Alfred A. Knopf 2014; \$35.00 hardback

Walter Benjamin's insight into the interpretative effect of historical duration is perhaps nowhere more strikingly borne out than in the case of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). As Benjamin observed, 'the history of works prepares for their critique', for over time 'the concrete realities rise up ... all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world', and 'the interpretation of what is striking and curious ... becomes the prerequisite for any later critic'.¹ Famously, what continues to prove so 'striking and curious' about Arendt's report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann is her invention of a new political category for modernity, 'the banality of evil'. Yet the nature of the controversy surrounding Arendt's coinage has changed over time. Where the phrase was initially taken by its critics to imply a sneering disregard for the plight of the victims of the Holocaust and an arrogant dismissal of the monstrosity of the perpetrators, as Roger Berkowitz argues, a 'new consensus' has subsequently emerged. This 'holds that Arendt was right in her general claim' about the recasting of the conditions of evil in modernity, but 'wrong about Eichmann in particular'.² On this view, Arendt may be credited with a larger theoretical insight, but her text is marred by her naive acceptance of the lie of Eichmann's smallness. With hindsight, Eichmann can now be seen as a shrewd operator who skilfully duped Arendt by downplaying his own deeply held ideological commitment and fanatical anti-Semitism. But, as Benjamin would surely object, the historical material through which Arendt constructs her theoretical optic cannot be dispensed with so lightly. For the constellation that gave her the 'banality of evil' depends on the challenge that the historicity of the figure of Eichmann poses for the application of Kantian moral universality. That is, the constellation comprises the ongoing interplay of conceptual framing and historical events as they are reconfigured in the perpetual readjustment of viewpoint over time. The attempt simply to iron out the difficulties of Arendt's text forfeits the opportunity to develop the meaning of this radically unsettling political concept.

All three books considered here provide important new insights for Anglophone readers into Arendt's rethinking of evil in modernity - although

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael V. Jennings, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, p298, p297.

2. Roger Berkowitz, 'Misreading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*', *New York Times*, July 7, 2013, <http://www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/misreading-hannah-arendts-eichmann-in-jerusalem>.

perhaps not always as their authors may have intended. The studies of Eichmann and Arendt are both translations of recent books by German intellectuals who work outside of academic institutions and consequently they exhibit a level of freedom from standard generic and stylistic conventions, albeit in different ways and to different effects. The translation of Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer* has been long awaited for its dogged pursuit of the archival record of Eichmann's career up to his appearance in the Jerusalem courtroom. Stangneth's study marshals this historical material to craft a sustained analysis of Eichmann's self-presentation through interviews, his own writings, and activities designed to shape his public image. This focus on Eichmann's self-presentation provides the basis for a running engagement with Arendt that is designed, according to the dust jacket blurb, to 'permanently challeng[e]' her 'notion of the "banality of evil"'. Marie Luise Knott's *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt* seeks to restore the temporally situated character of Arendt's work in a different way, by returning to Arendt's own concern for the public life of thinking in language. Knott's approach is original and intellectually insightful while managing to exhibit the very playfulness and accessibility that she sees in Arendt's own writing. The book pulls off a remarkable feat in that both the seasoned scholar and the newcomer to Arendt will come away with an enlivened sense of the inventiveness of her thinking and her poetic sensitivity to the intersubjective happening of language - its role in constituting what Arendt calls 'the world'.

The other text included here, Melville House's *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, brings together translations of four interviews with Arendt in an inexpensive and efficient format. Two of the interviews, by Günter Gaus in 1964 and Adelbert Reif in 1970, are already available in English. However, the interview by Joachim Fest in 1964 and Arendt's last interview conducted in October 1973 by Roger Errera appear here in full translation for the first time (the latter appeared in partial translation in the second issue of the *Arendt Newsletter*). The three interviews by Gaus, Fest and Errera all engage with the figure of Eichmann and the reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and, interestingly, Knott's book draws on these interviews extensively. Indeed, the interviews with Fest and Errera in particular do more than just chart Arendt's response to the controversy surrounding her book; they also offer invaluable insights into her continued thinking and rethinking of the banality of evil. Having translations of these interviews together in a single volume provides a helpful and highly usable resource for English-speaking scholars and students.

Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* draws a compelling picture of Eichmann's life prior to his abduction and rendition to Israel that emphasises his unrelenting activity as an artificer of his own self-image. The most telling sections relate to the project of ideological renewal and self-justification that he embarked upon after reaching Argentina in 1950. As well as attempting to become a fully-fledged author, Eichmann played a central if uneasy role in an

extended series of recorded interviews conducted by Willem Sassen, a Dutch collaborator and SS propagandist who for a while successfully reinvented himself as a journalist. Sassen attempted to enlist Eichmann in an elaborate programme of Holocaust denial aimed at securing the political rehabilitation of National Socialism in the context of Cold War anti-Communism. Stangneth painstakingly traces the twists and turns that led to the collapse of this programme, which ran aground on the fundamental divergence between their respective strategies of deception. Although Eichmann shared Sassen's goal of rehabilitating Nazism as an operative political force, his closeness to the mechanics and scale of the Final Solution meant that he realised that outright denial was simply implausible. Instead, his strategy was to minimise the number of victims - 'fewer than a million' (p208) - and frame their deaths in terms of the necessities shared by all sides within the new condition of total, global war (pp216-18). But for Sassen, this insistence on the necessity of mass murder (albeit scandalously diminished and rationalised) undermined the whole stratagem of Holocaust denial, and Eichmann's testimony, recorded and duly transcribed, became a toxic liability.

Eichmann Before Jerusalem draws two methodological conclusions from this historical reconstruction. First, that Eichmann was a master liar on a scale that has never been adequately understood, a specialist not in Hebrew and Judaic culture as he once claimed, but in the art and strategy of deception. Second, that because the Argentinian documents were never fully disclosed at the trial (although portions were available to the prosecution, and passages from the Sassen interviews were published in *Life* magazine), there is a fundamental disparity between 'Eichmann-in-Argentina' and 'Eichmann-in-Jerusalem' (p397).

Stangneth's point is not that one is unproblematically true or unmediated, since in her view this is never the case with Eichmann. It is rather that the disparities between the strategies of deceit employed successively in Argentina and then in Jerusalem testify to Eichmann's consciousness of criminal intent, his ideological commitment, and his zealous anti-Semitism, without the need to establish exhaustive proof of his inner feelings or sincere intentions. For Stangneth, Eichmann's exorbitant and all-consuming will to lie catches him out, revealing an 'ideological warrior' (p268) whose desire for domination was fuelled by a deeply held and worryingly coherent system of 'totalitarian thought' (p222).

Stangneth's challenge to Arendt therefore involves more than simply the addition of new historical materials. More seriously, Stangneth charges that Arendt misunderstood what she *could see* of Eichmann and his worldview. Although Arendt realised that Eichmann was 'deliberately posturing', she fatally 'drew the wrong conclusion, imagining the main reason ... was foppish vanity and a lack of rhetorical skill and philosophical knowledge' (p220). For Stangneth, this was not simply a personal underestimation of Eichmann's character. Rather it was an intellectual misjudgement that led Arendt to 'an

overhasty and dangerous' (p219) dismissal of the coherence and power of the ideological project pursued by Eichmann and other unregenerate Nazis like Sassen:

Although Hannah Arendt may have been right to point out the 'macabre humour' with which horror sometimes tips over into comedy, in light of the Argentine documents, her characterization of Eichmann's 'inability to speak' and 'inability to *think*' seems insupportable. Eichmann's words in Argentina ... weren't thoughtless drivel but consistent speech based on a complete system of thought (pp267-68).

For Stangneth, Arendt's conception of 'thoughtlessness'³ dismisses Nazi ideology as 'pseudo-philosophy' and exempts her own philosophical vantage point from investigation by inadvertently implying that 'philosophy is ... automatically good' (p221). As such, Arendt is seen as renouncing the project of philosophical renewal required to guard against the totalitarian impulse in thought.

3. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, Penguin, 1992, p287.

Yet for all the attention Stangneth pays to Eichmann's self-narration and self-presentation, she seems curiously unaware of Arendt's persistent and penetrating concern for the public life of thinking in language. Notwithstanding the important historical reconstruction undertaken in *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, the broader claims it makes rest on an oddly restricted and nonphilosophical interpretation of Arendt's text that separates it from other aspects of her thinking and from the wider intellectual culture with which it was always in dialogue. This disconnection subordinates the conceptual and interpretative play that animates Arendt's writing (and which makes it so often appear frustrating or self-contradictory to unattuned readers), subjecting it to a literalist reading that reduces her insights to propositional logic. It is in this connection that the value of Marie Luise Knott's *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt* emerges most clearly. In a connected series of essays on 'Laughter', 'Translation', 'Forgiveness', and 'Dramatization', Knott adroitly traces Arendt's concern for language's ability to sustain thinking within the crisis of the political in modernity, a concern shared with a line of thinkers and poets that reaches from Nietzsche and Rilke through Brecht and Benjamin to figures such as Nathalie Sarraute and Ingeborg Bachmann.

Knott follows this concern back to Arendt's witnessing the intellectual collapse following Hitler's rise to power, when she endured 'the excruciating experience of watching her intellectual friends become *gleichgeschaltet*' [coordinated] with National Socialism (p20). But as Knott recounts, it became inescapable in the face of 'the genocide of the Jews [which] could not be comprehended by any existing political categories or judged by any existing judicial instruments' (p61). This rupture convinced Arendt of the necessity of what Knott terms 'unlearning', a 'g[iving] up' and 'reconceiv[ing]' (p60) that would attempt to 'comprehend modern experience' without the

support of 'traditional concepts' (p59). Arendt 'wanted to comprehend the world as it actually presented itself instead of limiting herself to what could be understood, in the sense of "deduced", from preconceived ideas, existing worldviews, or all the precious small and large lies we cling to' (p21). Arendt's stylistic choices reflect this impulse, notably her use of familiar English words in quite specialised and nonstandard ways, so that new meanings are developed and explored across texts and in different contexts. As Knott writes, 'the positing of her own concepts and metaphors is exactly what lends specific weight to what is new and fresh in her thinking' (p46).

The central term that Arendt refunctions in articulating her conception of the banality of evil is 'thinking'. Stangneth uses the term in the standard way: as mental activity or, more strongly, as ratiocination. Hence she refers to Eichmann's 'thought' (p198) and his 'thinking' (p276), and describes National Socialism as 'fundamentalist thought', 'totalitarian thought' (p222), as 'a complete system of thought', and as a mode of 'political thinking' (p268). As a result, she takes Arendt's judgment that Eichmann was unable to think as recklessly dismissive of his commitment to National Socialist ideology and blind to his relentless investment of mental energy in fashioning, rationalizing, and revising his various personae, justifications, alibis, recollections, and disquisitions. He may have talked in clichés, but, Stangneth counters, he made 'clever use' of them (p96). The problem is that Stangneth wholly disregards Arendt's idiosyncratic usage of the term 'thinking', a usage that is designed not to defend philosophy against pseudo-philosophical ideologies but to identify a much broader and entrenched danger in modernity's atomisation and social disintegration.

Arendt's usage is fleshed out in her 1964 interview with Joachim Fest, which is included in the Melville House collection. Her conception of thinking 'isn't technical' in the sense of demanding philosophical knowledge, training, or terminology, but is 'a kind of which anyone is capable' (p58). She elaborates by rehearsing a story told by Ernst Jünger in his diaries of World War II about a German peasant who is repulsed by the sight of starving Russian prisoners: 'they're subhuman ... like cattle! ... They eat the pig's food' (p48). For Arendt this statement exemplifies the absence of thinking not because it proceeds outside accredited philosophical paradigms - after all, she had witnessed her intellectual peers expressing equivalent opinions in the period of *Gleichschaltung* [coordination] - nor because it lacks a recognisable pattern of ratiocination, in this case the deduction of an abstract characterological quality from empirically observable evidence. It is 'thoughtless' because of its liquidation of the intersubjective reflectiveness that for Arendt defines 'thinking', the requirement 'as Kant says ... "to think in the place of every other person"' (p49). As Arendt observes, 'the man doesn't see that this is what starving people do, right? And anyone would behave like that' (p48).

Arendt's conception of thinking in fact depends on a more socially embedded and less abstractly universal positioning than this allusion to Kant

suggests. It fully makes sense only in the context of her account of ‘social texture’ developed in chapter 9 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and its re-articulation along the axes of ‘speech’ and ‘action’ in *The Human Condition* (1958). In contrast to the Enlightenment’s grounding of political community in the social contract forged between atomised subjects, Arendt’s conception of ‘social texture’ provides an intersubjective conception of human personality and agency by way of a quasi-Hegelian framework of recognition.⁴ As Andrew Buchwalter puts it, ‘communal substance [depends] on the experience of subjective reflection’, and, conversely, political community substantiates the subject’s reflexive ‘opinion’ and ‘action’.⁵ This is why Arendt argues that ‘the fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective’, a fate endured by the inmates of the *Lager* so powerfully described by Primo Levi.⁶ That is, ‘opinion’ and ‘action’ are not properties of pre-existing subjects but dispositions of subjectivity that take place in and constitute the ‘between’ of the ‘world’ – or, as she puts it in her interview with Günther Gaus, ‘the space in which things become public’ (p34). For Arendt, then, thinking is not merely organised mental activity or ratiocination but the engagement of consciousness in the difficult intersubjectivity of mutual recognition. As she says in her interview with Roger Errera, ‘to think always means to think critically. And to think critically is always to be hostile’ (p123). ‘Thinking’ in this sense is the responsibility of consciousness to be ‘hostile’ to itself.

In fact, if we fold this usage back into Stangneth’s historical reconstruction, her account becomes surprisingly compatible with the evaluative framework she criticises. Stangneth writes of Eichmann that ‘it didn’t occur to him that some people found days other than those at the end of the war “calamitous”’ (p273); she notes with bitter irony that he ‘refers in all seriousness’ to the transports of children to the death camps ‘as the “children’s story”’ (p280); and, again ironically, observes that ‘Eichmann ... had clearly forgotten that the “enemy powers” [that is, the Jewish civilian populations destined for extermination] had been defenceless, frightened humans, and that he had been chauffeur-driven to their annihilation in a warm winter coat’ (p279). More systematically, her identification of Eichmann’s need for frameworks of justification ‘that allowed his actions to seem “right”’ (p221) is in fact deeply consonant with Arendt’s analysis of his ‘thoughtlessness’: this is not ‘thinking’ but its liquidation.

Despite this striking compatibility, however, there *is* a difference at stake here. This becomes evident in Stangneth’s formulation that ‘the reason Eichmann was so receptive to the totalitarian system was that he was already in thrall to totalitarian thought’ (p222). For Stangneth, Eichmann’s alignment with ‘a complete system of thought’ (p268) predisposed him to the totalitarian project of National Socialism. In which case, the danger is localised in ‘totalitarian thought’ or the toxicity of certain modalities of ideology, and

4. Roy T. Tsao, ‘Arendt and the Modern State: Variations on Hegel in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*’, *Review of Politics* 66:1, 2004, pp105-36.

5. Andre Buchwalter, ‘Hegel, Human Rights, and Political Membership’, *Hegel Bulletin* 34:1, 2013, p102.

6. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, San Diego, Harcourt, 1973, p296; Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz [If This Is A Man]*, New York, Touchstone, 1996, pp87-89.

by extension the remedy is located at the level of opposing, and providing alternatives to, such systematic and all-encompassing ideologies. Arendt's vision, however, is much more expansive and thus much more troubling. In Arendt's terms, the problem is not 'totalitarian thought' per se - which of course is not 'thinking' in her sense at all. The problem is rather the disposition of atomised subjectivity under the disintegration of social texture, which tends to substitute identification with 'unworldly' dynamics for the reflective intersubjectivity of thinking. Such dynamics may indeed take the form of structured and systematic ideologies like National Socialism, but they might just as well articulate themselves through porous, fragmentary and flexible discourses of self-affirmation, self-expression, secularism or the defence of liberal values and a freedom that is not free. For Stangneth, the problem is the lie of National Socialism, whereas for Arendt it is the lies we tell ourselves.

If Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* does not 'permanently challeng[e] Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil"', its contribution to our understanding of the figure of Eichmann is indisputable. Yet if we attend to Benjamin's conception of the historicity of interpretation, Stangneth's study also helps to refine and reformulate our conception of the banality of evil by pointing to its imbrication in the intersubjectivity of social texture and its crisis in modernity. As Arendt tells Joachim Fest, Eichmann 'wanted to say "we"' but without the reflective processes of 'discussing things together, reaching certain decisions, accepting responsibility, [and] thinking about what we are doing' required by political action. And this was 'quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible' (pp43-44).

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