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Hannah Arendt, 1969.

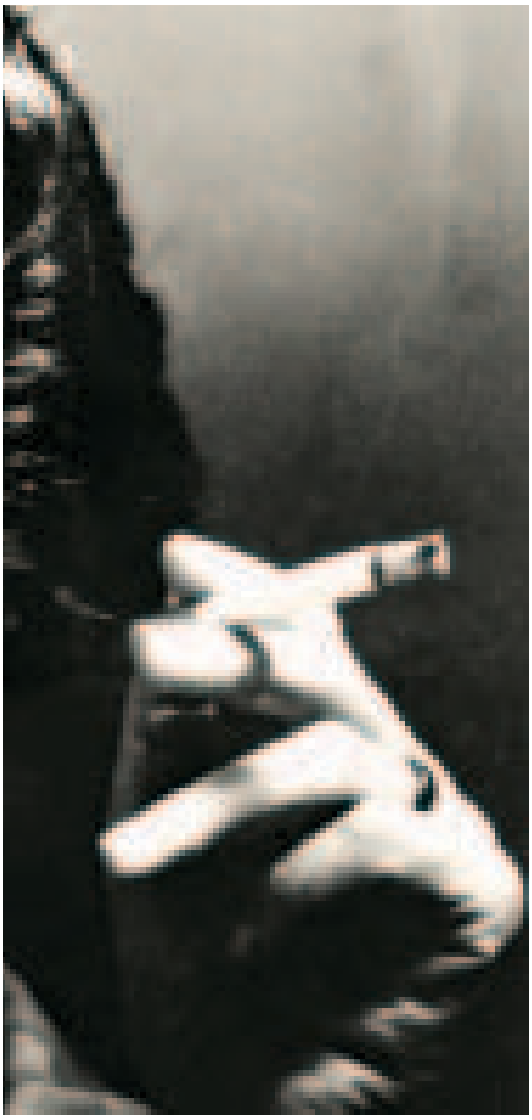
The Trials of Hannah Arendt

by COREY ROBIN

Events have the last word. Journalists report them, historians contextualize them, and philosophers interpret them. But whether war or revolution, assassination or inauguration, deeds and their doers routinely escape the grasp of their chroniclers. Even in the works of the greatest analysts—Hobbes on the English Civil War, Marx on the Paris Commune—events have a way of evading their command.

Sometimes, however, a writer does get the last word. Do we know of a Trojan War that is not intimately Homer's, a Richard III who is not Shakespeare's? This is especially true of trials. Socrates has no apology apart from Plato's; Gary Gilmore, no song that is not Norman Mailer's. It's not clear why a trial should be more hospitable to a writer's control than other events. Lawyers and witnesses tell stories, too. Why should a writer's story endure, but not theirs? Any writer whose narrative of a trial outlives that of its protagonists has achieved something rare.

Hannah Arendt's five articles on the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann by the state of Israel appeared in *The New Yorker* in February and March 1963. They were published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* later that year. The book immediately set off a controversy that a half-century later shows no signs of abating. Just this past fall, the intellectual historian Richard Wolin (a colleague of mine at the CUNY Graduate Center) and the Yale political theorist Seyla Benhabib fought bitterly over *Eichmann*



in the pages of *The New York Times* and the *Jewish Review of Books*. The book has become the event, eclipsing the trial itself.

The *Eichmann* fires are always smoldering, but what reignited them last fall was the appearance in English of Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, first published in Germany in 2011. *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* aims to reveal a depth of anti-Semitism in Eichmann that Arendt never quite grasped. Stangneth bases her argument on the so-called Sassen transcripts, a voluminous record of conversations between Eichmann and a group of unreconstructed Nazis in Argentina in the 1950s (only a portion of the transcripts were available to Arendt, who read and discussed them in *Eichmann*). Yet Stangneth's is merely the latest in a series of books—including Deborah Lipstadt's *The Eichmann Trial*, published in 2011, and David Cesarani's *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer,"* which appeared in 2004—arguing that Eichmann was more of an anti-Semite than Arendt had realized.

There's a history to the conflict over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and like all such histories, the changes in how we read and argue about the book tell us as much about ourselves, and our shifting preoccupations and politics, as they do about Eichmann or Arendt. What has remained constant, however, is the wrath and the rage that *Eichmann* has aroused. Other books are read, reviled, cast off, passed on. *Eichmann* is different. Its errors and flaws, real and imagined, have not consigned it to the dustbin of history; they are perennially retrieved and held up as evidence of the book's viciousness and its author's vice. An "evil book," the Anti-Defamation League said upon its publication, and so it remains. Friends and enemies, defenders and detractors—all have compared Arendt and her book to a criminal in the dock, her critics to prosecutors set on conviction.

Like so many Jewish texts throughout the ages, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is an invitation to an auto-da-fé. Only in this case, almost all of the inquisitors are Jews. What is it about this most Jewish of texts that makes it such a perennial source of rancor among Jews, and what does their rancor tell us about Jewish life in the shadow of the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel? What does the wrongness of *Eichmann*'s readers reveal about the rightness of its arguments?

In the first decades after its publication, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* provoked readers primarily over what it had to say about Jewish cooperation with the Nazis. Arendt cast her eye on everyone from the Zionists who negotiated with the Nazis to the Jewish Councils that provided them with detailed lists of Jewish property for dispossession, helped Jews onto the trains, administered the ghettos, and helped Jews onto the trains again. She concluded, "The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people." It was a sentence for which she would never be forgiven.

The charges against Arendt were many: She blamed the victims; she ignored the trap the Jews were in; "she saw symmetry," in the words of Lipstadt, "between the Nazis and their victims where there was none." According to Wolin, "Arendt made it seem as though it was the Jews themselves, rather than their Nazi persecutors, who were responsible for their own destruction."

None of this is true, but neither is Arendt's account of Jewish cooperation beyond reproach. She did fail to confront the fact that, with or without the cooperation of the Jewish Councils, the Jews were slaughtered—often, as historian Yehuda Bauer observed in *Rethinking the Holocaust* (2000), with greater dispatch when there was no cooperation or leadership. In the wake of the Nazis' invasion of the Soviet Union, for example, the *Einsatzgruppen*, German police battalions, and local death squads killed Jews without assistance from Jewish leaders.

Yet, as Arendt tirelessly reminded her readers, murder on the Eastern Front was not Eichmann's concern. His portfolio encompassed Western Europe to the Balkans, but it did not include the "bloodlands" of eastern Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, or the Baltics. Before the killing machine began operating, Eichmann's job was to move the Jews out of areas under German control; after, to send them to their deaths. Working with Jewish leaders, as Cesarani shows, was one of his signature methods. To write about his crimes, Arendt had to write about these methods.

Eichmann, however, was more than an empirical report about one man on trial. It was also a work of political theory. To understand Arendt's approach, it helps to set her account of Jewish cooperation in *Eichmann* against her account of total terror in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which appeared in 1951. In this earlier work, Arendt had argued that totalitarian ideologies conjured a world of perpetual motion: the movement of history, in the case of Soviet communism; the rhythms of nature, in the case of Nazism. The purpose of terror was to liberate that motion, to eliminate all friction from the human machine. Men and women were reduced to a Pavlovian minimum, offering no resistance to the forces of nature or the wheels of history. Whether hunter or hunted, predator or prey, they were repurposed to serve as the pliant materials of these ideologies. Even at the highest rungs of the regime, even at the cost of their lives: "The process may decide that those who today eliminate races and individuals or the members of dying classes and decadent peoples are tomorrow those who must be sacrificed. What totalitarian rule needs to guide the behavior of its subjects is a preparation to

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fit each of them equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim."

But as Arendt came to realize, if everyone, including the regime's top leaders, was perfectly outfitted for his own murder, how could anyone be criticized for not opposing the regime? If perpetrators were mere implements of an ideology—and ultimately its victims—how could they be condemned for executing its verdicts? "There exists a widespread theory," Arendt would write later in a letter, "to which I also contributed [in *Origins*], that these crimes defy the possibility of human judgment."

With *Eichmann*, Arendt retreated from this view, extracting from a blurred silhouette of mass ruin detailed sketches of discrete men, making discrete choices, taking discrete actions. There was room for maneuver under the Nazis—indeed, the regime depended upon it—and how one maneuvered made a moral difference.

That difference was most evident in Arendt's five chapters on the regional patterns and variations of the Holocaust, from Denmark to Bulgaria. These chapters focus not on the Jewish leadership but on non-Jews. Where local non-Jewish officials and cadres opposed, evaded, delayed, or sabotaged the Nazis' plans, they saved Jews; where they cooperated, collaborated, or stood by, they made a catastrophe. Geography mattered for Arendt: not the physical terrain of a country, but its institutions, leadership, and personnel, the particular decisions they made, the actions they took, the support they offered or withheld.

In her effort to restore some room for maneuver, some sense of responsibility, to the Nazi edifice, Arendt ranged widely—sometimes clumsily, sometimes cruelly—into the darkest spaces of its cornered victims. But if she overstated her case regarding Jewish cooperation—"these people had still a certain, limited freedom of decision and action," as she wrote in a famous letter to Gershom Scholem, which was true of some leaders, not others, in some places, but not all—it's important to remember that her most informed critics have also insisted that Jewish leaders did not react like automatons; they acted in a variety of ways, depending on context and circumstance, and those differences sometimes made a difference. While Arendt may have misconstrued the empirics of collaboration and resistance, what she was calling attention to was not the failure of all Jews to resist, but the failure of Jewish leaders to refuse the role that had been thrust upon them. And her judgment of that failure—from top to bottom, the micro-politics of refusal and collaboration—remains salient.

Discussed in This Essay

Eichmann in Jerusalem
A Report on the Banality of Evil.
By Hannah Arendt.
Introduction by Amos Elon.
Penguin. 312 pp. Paper $16.

Eichmann Before Jerusalem
The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer.
By Bettina Stangneth.
Translated from the German
by Ruth Martin.
Knopf. 579 pp. $35.

The Eichmann Trial
By Deborah Lipstadt.
Schocken. 237 pp. Paper $24.95.

Becoming Eichmann
Rethinking the Life, Times, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer."
By David Cesarani.
Da Capo. 458 pp. $27.50.

That may be one reason why Arendt's discussion of the councils and other modes of collaboration provoked such controversy: She showed that what people did during the war, people who were still alive in 1963, was a matter of moral importance. She exposed a fault line among the survivors of the camps. Throughout the 1950s, the argument over Jewish collaboration had been gathering steam, especially in Israel. As Lipstadt notes, the Israeli law "under which Eichmann had been tried, the 1950 Nazis and Their Collaborators Law, was instituted in response to grassroots pressure from survivors, not to punish Nazis, but to punish Jews." The Knesset, Lipstadt adds, "did not adopt the law in anticipation of the arrival of Nazi war criminals in Israel. The intent of the law was to ensure that Jewish survivors who had 'collaborated' with the Nazis by serving as Kapos or the like were punished."

Eichmann, then, came to distill a shared bitterness among a subset of Jewish survivors whose testimony on the stand—and shouts from the audience—Arendt witnessed firsthand. On the other side stood a different group of Jewish survivors, who had worked with the Nazis and who, Arendt believed, were now well ensconced in Israel. The emotional sensitivities of American Jewry—who agonized over not having done something, or something more, to save their European brethren from destruction—also were felt in the controversy. As Irving Howe, a fierce partisan in the *Eichmann* wars, put it in his memoir *A Margin of Hope* (1982): "As it seems to me now, the excesses of speech and feeling in this controversy had as one cause a sense of guilt concerning the Jewish tragedy, a guilt pervasive, unmanageable, yet seldom allowed to reach daylight."

More generally, Arendt's commentary spoke to a generation for whom World War II would serve as a touchstone of moral experience as such. What Arendt had called "the haunting specter of universal cooperation" with evil—whether as foot soldier, collaborator, or bystander—found postwar expression in anxious texts of self-scrutiny, from existentialist manifestos in Paris to Stanley Milgram's shock experiments in New Haven. Arendt categorically rejected the notion that there is an "Eichmann in every one of us," but her insistence that the success or failure of mass murder depended in part on the choices of discrete individuals in discrete situations naturally led readers to ask: What would I have done if I had been in their shoes? As late as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)—in which an older American veteran, looking back on the sacrifices of his comrades, memorialized in the tombstones of Normandy, implores his wife, "Tell me I have led a good life…. Tell me I'm a good man"—World War II would continue to furnish these set pieces of the moral imagination.

But today, that generation is nearly gone, and the question of the Jewish Councils, of collaboration and war, has receded. And while the controversy over *Eichmann* remains, the controversialists have moved on. Now the focus is on Arendt's treatment of Eichmann's anti-Semitism. That issue was always lurking in the antechamber of discussion, but in the last decade it has entered the main room—and with it, the fate of the state of Israel.

Hannah Arendt had a long and complicated relationship with Zionism, at times supporting the idea and taking great risks on behalf of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, at times excoriating it as a fascist enterprise. In *Eichmann*, she leans in the latter direction. She condemns the attempt of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to turn the Eichmann sessions into a "show trial." She compares Israeli laws to the Nuremberg laws. She hints at a spiritual lineage between the Zionists who negotiated with Nazis and the leadership of the Israeli state.

From the beginning, then, the state of Israel has been in the background of the

debates over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Initially, however, Arendt's animus against Zionism garnered little attention. It appeared only episodically in the endless series of attacks and counterattacks that *Partisan Review* featured throughout 1963 and 1964. An extraordinarily hostile review of *Eichmann* in *The New York Times* gave it a one-sentence mention. Instead, what infuriated critics was Arendt's discussion of Eichmann's anti-Semitism. In his famous attack on *Eichmann* in *Commentary*, Norman Podhoretz thrice claimed that, according to Arendt, Eichmann wasn't anti-Semitic. But Arendt said no such thing. What she did say, once, is that "his was obviously also no case of insane hatred of Jews, of fanatical anti-Semitism." While Eichmann had anti-Semitic opinions and feelings, her point was that they were neither clinical nor outsized.

By plumbing the depths of Eichmann's anti-Semitism, Arendt's critics are attempting to refute a claim that she did not make. What are they trying to achieve? Perhaps they're worried that Arendt was offering "a version of the Holocaust in which anti-Semitism played a decidedly minor role," as Lipstadt writes, and that this treatment will have baleful consequences today: "Differences of opinion about the Eichmann trial may well be metonyms for attitudes toward and perceptions of contemporary anti-Semitism."

Hovering over those attitudes and perceptions is "a dire and existential threat to Jewish well-being." According to Lipstadt, that threat is most evident in the willingness of former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—"a Holocaust-denying president of a large country…poised to have nuclear weapons"—to "threaten the existence of the Jewish state." In other words, behind the discussion of Eichmann's anti-Semitism today is the increasingly fraught geopolitical status of the state of Israel. And if it can be shown that anti-Semitism was not present at the nadir of Jewish history, what justification can there be for a Jewish state today? Could the arguments of *Eichmann* become weapons for the likes of Ahmadinejad? Hence the effort to undermine Arendt by disproving a claim she never really made.

For Arendt, the question was not whether Eichmann was an anti-Semite. Nor, contra Lipstadt, did she doubt the anti-Semitic character of the Holocaust. (As Arendt wrote in a 1964 essay, "These mass murderers acted consistently with a racist or anti-Semitic, or at any rate a demographic ideology.") The question Arendt posed in *Eichmann* was whether Eichmann's

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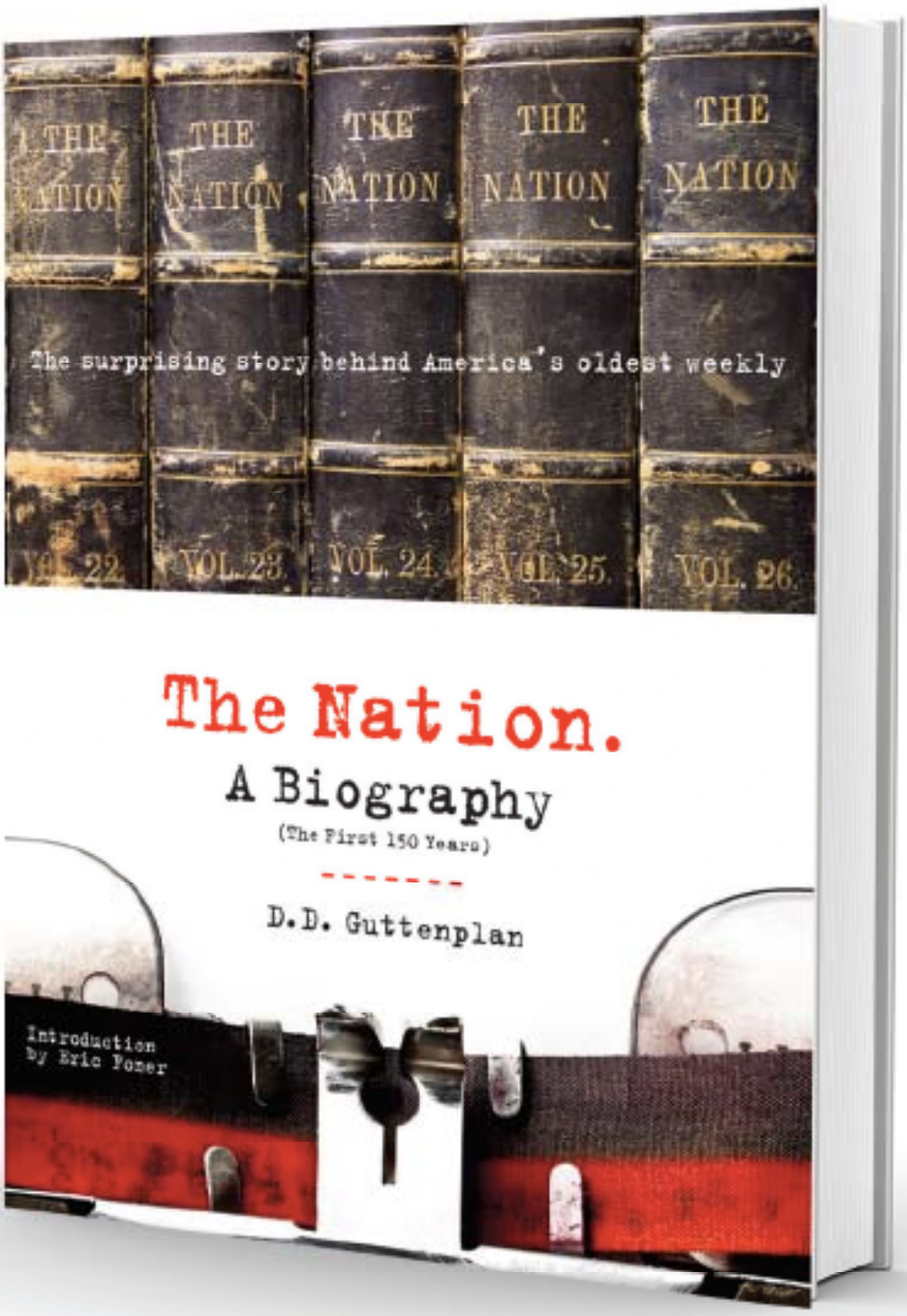

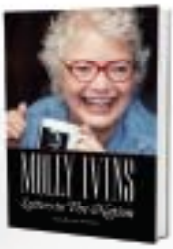

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contribution to the genocide of the Jews was motivated, could be accounted for, by "his fanaticism, his boundless hatred of Jews."

This was a theme—the chasm separating Eichmann's murderous deeds from his state of mind—that Arendt would return to again and again in her commentary on the book. She began her 1971 essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations" with the following definition of the banality of evil: "the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer." In a conversation she had in 1964 with the German journalist and historian Joachim Fest, she stated: "Ideology, in my view, didn't play a very big role." And in a letter to Mary McCarthy, she writes: "If one reads the book carefully, one sees that Eichmann was much less influenced by ideology than I assumed in the book on totalitarianism. The impact of ideology upon the individual may have been overrated by me."

Even if Eichmann was a rabid anti-Semite, one had to be mindful of the gulf between his thoughts and his actions: "extermination per se," Arendt added in the letter to McCarthy, "is more important than anti-semitism or racism." Attending to Eichmann's motives risked a loss of focus. It threatened to drown him, with all his undetermined agency and criminal excess, in the stream of his intentions, itself the overflow of a pool called "ideology." That is why Arendt took such umbrage at Ben-Gurion's claim that "it is not an individual that is in the dock at this historical trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history." As she remarked in *Eichmann*, "It was bad history and cheap rhetoric; worse, it was clearly at cross-purposes with putting Eichmann on trial, suggesting that perhaps he was only an innocent executor of some mysteriously foreordained destiny." In *Origins*, Arendt believed, she had come perilously close to doing just that; she wasn't about to run the same risk again.

By erecting a wall between anti-Semitism as a motive and the execution of the Holocaust, however, Arendt was less interested in making a claim about Eichmann or even the Nazis than she was in mounting a philosophical argument about what Susan Neiman has called, in *Evil in Modern Thought*, "the impotence of intention." Against centuries of moral teaching and jurisprudence, which assumed that the nature and extent of a wrongdoer's guilt are determined by his intentions, Arendt suggested that inner states of mind—ideologies, beliefs, intentions, motives—could neither mitigate nor aggravate an offense. They simply didn't matter. The body count of the Holocaust was so massive that it rendered any intention, no matter how malignant, moot. In Neiman's words: "What counts is not what your road is paved with, but whether it leads to hell."

That is why Arendt proved so willing to entertain Eichmann's most outlandish claims about himself: that "he 'personally' never had anything whatever against Jews," that "he had plenty of 'private reasons' for not being a Jew hater." If Eichmann was lying, then he had failed to confront the reality of his deeds. Did he seriously think his role in the Shoah might be mitigated if he could show that he bore the Jews no ill will? If he wasn't lying, then his honesty was a piece of almost comic lunacy—a self-confessed mass murderer insisting that he never meant anyone any harm—made all the more terrible by the fact that it was true.

In the literature of ancient Greece, a smallness, a blankness, can tear a hole in the world: Hector doesn't slay Achilles, Paris does. There is a cold, almost cruel, accent on the disproportion between actors and actions, intentions and consequences. Arendt's insistence on the blankness behind Eichmann's actions—"except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement," she wrote, Eichmann "had no motives at all"—issued from a similarly chilly outpost of antiquity. Since the 1950s, Arendt had been resurrecting the Greeks' emphasis on action, the manifest deeds of individual actors in and of the world. And a trial, as the literary critic Harold Rosenberg pointed out in a 1961 article in *Commentary* about Eichmann, is the nearest approximation we have in the modern world to Greek epic and Greek tragedy: With its emphasis on incident and fact—and its refusal of testimony about the unseen inside of a motive—a trial suggests "that sequences of actions can organize themselves apart from human intention to bring about a catastrophe."

Arendt's account of Eichmann's evil—with its leeriness of his inner state and ideology, its almost archaic attention to the fullness and finality of his deeds—was a natural extension of her return to the Greeks. "In every action the person is expressed as in no other human activity," she told Günter Gaus in 1964; what a person does was all she—we—needed to know. Hence her contemptuous references to Eichmann's "private reasons," his "personally" not feeling any hatred for the Jews: Whatever Eichmann's feelings or intentions, all his railroads led to hell. What further proof of his criminality, his evil, did one need?

Setting Arendt's *Eichmann* against the backdrop of her Greeks may seem strange: Wasn't he the consummate organization man, a cog in the machinery of death? How could this station agent measure up to the stylized distinction of classical heroes, whose deeds revealed their particularity and greatness? As early as 1952, in her review of a book on the Holocaust, Arendt gave a hint that she thought the opposition between epic action and impersonal organization might be too sharply drawn:

> Today no man in an official position can take the slightest action without immediately starting a stream of files, memos, reports, and publicity releases…. Hitler's great ambition was to found a millennial empire and his great fear, in case of defeat, was lest he and his fellows go unremembered in centuries to come. Red tape was not simply a necessity forced on the Nazis by the organizational methods of our time; it was also something they enthusiastically welcomed and multiplied, and so they left to history, and for history, typewritten records of each and every one of their crimes in at least ten copies.

And for all the misleading claims that Arendt saw Eichmann as a simple bureaucrat—that was occasionally how he tried to present himself, and she rejected the performance each time—there is ample evidence in *Eichmann* that she saw him more as an ambitious if frustrated striver, who loathed the humdrum and the ordinary, who longed to escape the anonymity of his prewar and postwar existence, who bragged and boasted of his achievements, who acted with an unanticipated initiative and zeal, and who wanted to be part of something glorious and great. The question raised in *Eichmann* is: How does such an ambition work its way through a bureaucratic maze? What happens to a mass murderer when he finds himself swimming in paper, festooned in red tape?

In a remarkable article, "Anonymous Glory," recently published in the *European Journal of Political Theory*, the University of Chicago political theorist Patchen Markell shows that Arendt didn't simply contrast the individualized glory of Greek action to the anonymous and impersonal processes of modern life. Her intimation was more unsettling: In the modern world, for better and for worse, individual action and impersonal process were intertwined. The actor acted

within, was supported and constrained by, a web of social processes; those processes, in turn, had to be understood as a series of actions, of individual agents and particular choices. No matter how much criminals like Eichmann may have tried on the witness stand to deny it, and no matter how much social scientists failed to see it, the fact remains, as Arendt wrote in an overlooked passage in *The Human Condition*, which Markell recovers to great effect, that the "human experience underlying" our modern notions of process "is action."

For Arendt, the faceless anonymity of the Shoah had to be broken down into a set of micro-deeds of individual actors, each with a capacity to initiate a new course of action—if nothing else, to say that a particular path of evil would not continue its course through him. Similarly, Eichmann had to be understood as a partner in a criminal joint enterprise. That was the flip side of Arendt's frequent claim that Eichmann was not an evil villain out of great literature or central casting: not simply that Eichmann wasn't black of heart, but that he was also not a single and solitary actor, like Richard III, who originated and executed the evil many would like to trace back to him. Evil in the modern world wasn't like that. "In our context," Arendt wrote in "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," "all that matters is the insight that no man, however strong, can ever accomplish anything, good or bad, without the help of others." This collaborative dimension of mass murder was another reason Arendt de-emphasized motive. When evil is sufficiently large-scale, not everyone involved will share the same intentions; people will act for a variety of reasons, many of them having nothing to do with the criminal nature of the enterprise itself.

In the modern world, the most common mode of collaboration is work itself. Requiring the cooperation of millions, it extends across continents, and, with a few exceptions, everyone does it. That is why Arendt pays so much attention to Eichmann's careerism, less as a personal motivation than as a structure of action. Genocide is a form of work: from the maids, cooks, and butlers who beautified the villa at Wannsee where plans for the Holocaust were finalized in January 1942, to the men who met there to finalize it. It is a job for which men and women get paid, promoted if they do it well. And it has its own murderous claims to monumentality: "What for Eichmann was a job," Arendt wrote in *Eichmann*, "with its daily routine, its ups and downs, was for the Jews quite literally the end of the world."

For many critics, all the elements of Arendt's argument—the blankness of Eichmann; the distinction between his actions and his inner life; the downplaying of ideological factors, including anti-Semitism; the focus on careerism and collaboration—can be summed up by a single phrase: "the banality of evil." What Arendt meant by that phrase is notoriously elusive, but in her argument with Wolin last fall, Benhabib offered a strong sense of what Arendt might have been thinking.

It could have been about Kant, less the philosopher of the categorical imperative than the writer of the *Critique of Judgment*, who insisted that we "think from the standpoint of everyone else." Kantian judgment requires not a deep dive into one's own intentions, not a purification of the will, but a willingness to see one's actions as other men and women see them; to depart from oneself; to take on, for a time, the viewpoints of others; "to imagine," in the words of Arendt in her interview with Fest, "what the other person is experiencing." This, says Benhabib, was something Eichmann was incapable of doing: to see the world as others, particularly his victims, saw it. He simply could not understand, or at least could not take the trouble to understand, how his actions might have appeared to the men and women he ruled and ruined.

Arendt focused on Eichmann's cluelessness not to dramatize his inner life but to externalize it.

Arendt cites multiple examples of what she calls Eichmann's "thoughtlessness." There was his continuous carping throughout his interrogation in Israel, to a Jewish interrogator, about his repeated failures to ascend higher in the SS hierarchy. How unfair it all was, he complained to this refugee from Nazi Germany, that he hadn't been recognized for his contributions to and talents for mass murder. "What makes these pages of the examination so funny," writes Arendt, "is that all this was told in the tone of someone who was sure of finding 'normal, human' sympathy for a hard-luck story." Or there was the time when Eichmann, in Auschwitz, spoke to a former leader of the Viennese Jewish community who had once done his bidding; surveying the man's dismal prospects, Eichmann says, "Well, my dear old friend, we certainly got it! What rotten luck!"

At one point, Cesarani and Lipstadt report, the Israeli interrogator tells Eichmann that his father was murdered at Auschwitz, and Eichmann responds: "But that's horrible, Herr Hauptmann! That's horrible!" Stangneth relates a similar instance of Eichmann's inability to see beyond himself, though she interprets it differently: In 1950, Eichmann, along with 15 other fugitives from justice, managed to flee Europe and set sail for Argentina from Genoa. Years later, he reminisced about the relief he felt to have escaped his would-be jailers. Drawing a parallel only he could have made, he marveled, "Once it was the Jews, now it was Eichmann."

Benhabib makes a compelling case that when Arendt accused Eichmann of thoughtlessness and banality, she was thinking of this ethical fog of his, this moral nescience, this callowness that, no matter the circumstance, no matter the part being performed, could not be contained or concealed. Even if Eichmann was feigning concern for his interrogator's family, he seemed not to grasp that no one—least of all a refugee from Nazi Germany who had lost his father to Auschwitz—could take him seriously. So caught up was Eichmann in his own head that he simply forgot whom he was talking to.

To the extent that Arendt's allusions to Eichmann's banality might be construed as a foray, however tentative, into Eichmann's inner life—something her orientation toward the Greeks would seem to preclude—it reinforced her emphasis on his deeds and the world in which he acted. Not his deeds as he intended them, but his deeds as they appeared to his victims. Arendt focused on Eichmann's cluelessness not to dramatize his inner life but to externalize it, to give it objective form in the world, much as Rosenberg had written about the ancient and dramatic structure of a trial. As she explained to Fest: "This inability, as Kant says…'to think in the place of every other person'…. This kind of stupidity, it's like talking to a brick wall. You never get any reaction, because these people never pay any attention to you." Such a person, she went on, is "infinitely worse" and "incomparably more fearsome" than a murderer who kills from passion or self-interest, because "he no longer has any relationship with his victim at all. He really does kill people as if they were flies."

For his part, Wolin believes that this Kantian reading of *Eichmann* is "unsustainable":

> Arendt's reliance on Kant's theory of judgment—the idea that we broaden our mental horizons by virtue of our ability to reason from the standpoint of other persons—is limited to one meager passage [in *Eichmann*]…. As most Arendt scholars are aware, Arendt only developed these Kantian precepts in earnest circa 1970, in the course of her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* and in the complementary essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations."

In fact, as Markell and others have shown, Arendt's engagement with Kant's theory of judgment began in earnest well before she went to Jerusalem. Throughout the late 1950s, Arendt was at work on an essay that was eventually published in 1961 as "The Crisis in Culture." In it, she invokes Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, calling it "perhaps the greatest and most original aspect of Kant's political philosophy." It's a strange gambit—turning to Kant's aesthetics for a political vision—but it's a move that became increasingly important to her thought in the 1950s and after. Her argument is that in expressing our tastes, in sharing our responses to the objects of this world, we not only reveal ourselves—like action, a person's taste "discloses…what kind of person he is"—but we declare a community of fellow appreciators. We fashion a solidarity of sensibility, a company of critics: "taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it."

That "who belongs together in it"—a thought Arendt first voiced in 1958, at a talk in Germany, five years before *Eichmann* was published—has an eerie resonance. In the epilogue to *Eichmann*, Arendt offers what she thinks should have been the Israeli court's judgment against Eichmann. Her very last two sentences read:

> And just as you [Eichmann] supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations…we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.

It's hard to read these lines and not think that Arendt believed Eichmann's actions could be usefully understood by Kant's account of taste. In doing what he did, Eichmann not only was revealing himself to be the man he was; he was also executing a terrible and perverted judgment about who belonged with him in the world. His consignment of a portion of the world to a darkness from which they would never appear, at least not to him, was consistent with thoughtlessness in the Kantian sense. It was the act of someone who did not see a portion of the world because he could not see the world from their portion.

For Arendt's harshest critics, however, no amount of Kantian references or arguments can buttress the thesis of the banality of evil. It threatens something too vital, too fundamental. It puts at risk one of the 20th century's most precarious moral ideas: the notion that despite no longer having an objective or shared foundation for our sense of what is good or right or just, we do know what is evil. And because we know that, because there is no dispute that genocide is not merely an evil but the ultimate evil—the *summum malum*, as the political theorist Judith Shklar would have called it—we can build our politics and morals with some assurance that we are doing the right thing, or at least not the wrong thing. Since the 1970s, the idea of a negative foundation for morality has assumed an increasingly prominent place. Not just in academic political theory—where it is called, variously, "negative liberalism" or "political liberalism"—but in the larger world of politics and punditry.

The Holocaust, it's clear, is Exhibit A for those who would make such an argument. As a *Boston Globe* columnist wrote in 1994, after the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC:

> In an era of moral relativity, the Holocaust museum serves as a lodestone. Here there is no rationalization…. Here is an absolute. And in that absolute of Evil, maybe, the prospect of an absolute Good…. We live amid the ruins of "the modern"—the era in which Western man discarded age-old standards and creeds and placed his faith in science…. The Holocaust museum offers a basic moral foundation on which to build: a negative surety from which to begin.

According to Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999), the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow was perhaps the first to observe and closely study the invocation of the Holocaust as a negative foundation for morality. Based on a large data set of survey responses, Wuthnow argued that Vietnam and Watergate had rattled public confidence in traditional institutions and values. "Whether someone was politically liberal, moderate, or conservative," he wrote in *Meaning and Moral Order* (1987), "that person was more likely to be interested in the Holocaust if he or she perceived serious problems in the moral order…. It was the Holocaust as symbol of everpresent evil rather than the Holocaust as historical event that was of interest to persons troubled about the moral fabric."

One of the reasons Arendt's argument about the banality of evil is so threatening is that it undercuts the ability of political theorists and public moralists to regard the Holocaust as something other than a historical event. By denying evil profundity and depth, by insisting on its banality, she divests it of any gravitas or grandeur, of any capacity to generate anything at all except more evil. As she famously wrote to Scholem:

> It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical," that it is only extreme, and that it possess neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like fungus on the surface. It is "thought-defying," as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality." Only the good has depth and can be radical.

And that is what Arendt's critics detect and dislike in her thesis of the banality of evil: a denial of evil as the *summum malum*, of its capacity to serve as the basis of a political morality. Arendt denies readers this last bit of comfort, which we have managed to salvage from a dark and wintry age. But rather than confront that challenge, Arendt's critics evade it. What she is really doing, they say, is diminishing the significance of evil. In Wolin's words: "If Eichmann was 'banal,' then the Holocaust itself was banal." And "if the Holocaust was banal, then it was not evil." And if the Holocaust wasn't evil, well, what do we have left?

There's an old theory about anti-Semitism that goes something like this: The reason so much of the world hates the Jew is that the Jew asks so much of the world. From Sinai to the soviets, from Moses to Marx, the Jew has sat in judgment, insisting that the world be other, better, than it is, and always for the sake of an ideal so remote—a God who cannot be represented, a utopia that cannot be sketched out—that it requires a hallucinatory zeal to sustain it. The "blackmail of transcendence" is what the lit-

erary critic George Steiner calls it: the insistence that the world take a leap into the void in the name of a God who cannot be named.

Three Jews, says Steiner—for even Jesus counts in this figuration—have issued these "summons to perfection," and each time their judgments have provoked a revolt, often from within: The Israelites rebelled against Moses, clutching at their idols in the desert; the Christians rebelled against Jesus, erecting a cathedral of priests more pharisaical than anything parried by Christ; the Stalinists rebelled against Marx, creating a continent of slave labor. For there is something too inhuman, too unaccommodated and unaccommodating, about these absent presences that send us marching after Moses, Marx, and Christ. "Hebraism," Matthew Arnold thought, "has always been severely preoccupied with an awful sense of the impossibility of being at ease in Zion, of the difficulties of that perfection of which Socrates talks so hopefully." He considered this "the source of its wonderful strength." Most people, says Steiner, prefer the warmth of their weaknesses: their idols, churches, and states.

But the more murderous revolts have come from without: from the peoples of the world who have felt challenged and accused by the bad conscience of the Jew. "Three times the Jew has pressed on us the blackmail of transcendence," Steiner has Adolf Hitler say in his own defense in his imaginary trial in the Amazon, the setting of Steiner's novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*:

> Three times he has infected our blood and brains with the bacillus of perfection. Go to your rest and the voice of the Jew cries out in the night. "Wake up! God's eye is upon you. Has He not made you in His image? Lose your life so that you may gain it. Sacrifice yourself to the truth, to justice, to the good of mankind."… We had to find, to burn out the virus of Utopia before the whole of our western civilization sickened. To return to man as he is, selfish, greedy, short-sighted, but warm and housed, so marvelously housed, in his own stench.

These Romans, these Christians, these Germans, these anti-Semites—all have raged against the troubled conscience of the Jew, with his eternal demand for justice, goodness, perfection, a paradise on earth that must be sought but never achieved. You're not required to finish the work, says the *Pirkei Avot*, an early rabbinic collection of statements about ethics, but neither are you free to give it up. Keep pushing that rock up the hill—the one that threatens to roll back down on you. No, thank you, says the anti-Semite; I'd rather push the lot of you into a pit and set you on fire.

That's the theory, at least: a bit too psychological and self-congratulatory for my tastes, but during my re-immersion in the Arendt/*Eichmann* archive, I've begun to wonder if there isn't something to it. Not as a theory of anti-Semitism, but as an account of why this very Jewish text by a very Jewish author presenting new moral challenges to Jews arouses so much venom… from Jews. Can it be that the reaction to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—a text denounced for decades as self-hating and anti-Semitic—has something about it that, while not driven by Jew-haters or Jew-hatred, nevertheless draws deeply, if unwittingly, from that well? Let us proceed with caution.

First, there is the book itself. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a Jewish text filled not only with a modernist sense of Jewish irony—a combination of Kafka and Kraus—but also with an implicit Decalogue, a Law, and the Prophets, animating every moment of its critique. To a German correspondent, Arendt privately confessed what she publicly denied: *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was not simply a report on a trial

but "an approach toward 'the groundwork for creating new political morals.'"

In her interview with Fest, Arendt described *Eichmann*'s teaching this way: Moral responsibility "can only develop in the moment when a person reflects—not on himself, but on what he's doing." To journalist Samuel Grafton, she wrote: "We resist evil by not being swept away by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think—that is, by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life." That combination of seemingly antithetical ideas—that we always and everywhere think about what it is that we're doing, that we always and everywhere think beyond what we're doing—lies at the heart of a religion so dedicated to the extraction of the sacred from the profane, of locating the sacred within the profane, that it encircles human action with 613 commandments, lest any moment or gesture of a Jew's life be without thought of God.

If you stumble upon a bird's nest, take the eggs to sustain yourself, but not the mother. So says the law. If you build a house, put a railing round the roof so no one falls off. If you lend money to the poor, don't charge interest; if your neighbor gives you his coat as collateral, give it back to him at night lest he be cold. A king should not "multiply horses to himself": perhaps to make him and his people stay put, perhaps to keep his kingdom focused on God rather than war. Who the hell knows? The point is that Judaism imposes a mindfulness about material life—the knowledge that it is out of our littlest deeds that heaven and hell are made—that turns our smallest practices into the peaks and valleys of a most difficult and demanding ethical terrain.

Even though Arendt was not an observant Jew, that same kind of mindfulness stalks every page of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In the face of great evil, every choice matters, every decision counts. Had there been more men like Anton Schmid, a sergeant in the German Army who, Arendt writes, gave forged papers and trucks to Jewish partisans—and was executed for it—"how utterly different everything would be today."

WIKIMEDIA

The Red Cross document that Adolf Eichmann used to enter Argentina under an alias in 1950.

To those who would say that such actions are "practically useless"—totalitarian regimes seek to eliminate not merely resistance but any recognition or memory of resistance—Arendt replies: "The holes of oblivion do not exist." "One man," she adds, with echoes of Sodom and Gomorrah, "will always be left alive to tell the story." It's true that "most people will comply" with tyranny, "but some people will not"—and in that zone of possibility, where an ethical minority chooses to act differently from the rest, stands a chosen people, not of descent but of dissent.

Arendt attends to the smallest moments of the Shoah, not to lend her account novelistic detail but to make the point that the devil literally is in the details. "Cooperation" with evil is "gradual," she explained to a correspondent. It's always "difficult indeed to understand when the moment had come to cross a line which never should have been crossed." That is also the banality of evil: the smallness of its package, those gray lines, those devilish details. And it was a sign of Eichmann's evil that he could not remember any of them, a failing that Arendt keeps returning to throughout the text: not to fault his memory but to reveal his thoughtlessness—a charge that, when set against this Jewish backdrop, takes on a different meaning from that assigned to it by either Benhabib or Wolin.

If evil comes in small steps, overcoming it, nearing goodness, also inheres in small steps. As Susan Neiman explains: "Arendt was convinced that evil could be overcome only if we acknowledge that it overwhelms us in ways that are minute. Great temptations are easier to recognize and thus to resist, for resistance comes in heroic terms. Contemporary dangers begin with trivial and insidious steps." Return the coat of collateral at night; take the eggs, not the bird; give a hunted Jew a truck.

Jerusalem, then—not the Athens of the Greeks or the Königsberg of Kant—may be not only the site but also the spirit of Arendt's text. The intransigence of her ethic of everyday life, her insistence that every action matters, that we attend to the minutes of our practice—not the purity of our souls but the justness of our conduct and how it will affect things; if not now, when all is hopeless, then in the future, when all will be remembered—that kind of mindfulness is reminiscent, too, of the Hebraic ethos described by Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*: "this energy driving at practice" that "would not let the Hebrew rest till, as is well known, he had at last got out of the law a network of prescriptions to enwrap his whole life, to govern every moment of it, every impulse, every action."

On December 21, 1962, two months before the first of her articles would appear in *The New Yorker*, Arendt gave her friend, the literary critic Alfred Kazin, a copy of the manuscript. The next day, he finished it. Overwhelmed by "the stink of so much evil," he went out for a walk. He "walked and walked," he writes in his journal, "shivering to get the wintry pure air into my lungs." Then he was hit by a realization: "Hannah in her imperious yecke [a Yiddish term for German Jews] way *is* one of the *just*."

> This is the lightning in her to which I always respond. She has the fundamental sense of *value*. She still believes in the right. Oddly enough, she still believes *in* the Ten Commandments.

So that is the text, and how Arendt's friends see it. What about its enemies?

Mary McCarthy exaggerated when she wrote that nearly "all Miss Arendt's hostile reviews…have come from Jews," but not by much, especially if we include the opinions of organizations, editorial boards, intellectuals, and old friends. Scholem, *Partisan Review*, the Anti-Defamation League, Howe, the World Jewish Congress, Podhoretz, the state of Israel, *Dissent*, Kurt Blumenfeld, *Aufbau*, Lionel Abel, *Commentary*, the World Zionist Organization, Marie Syrkin, Hadassah: They all lined up against her. "The Jewish community is up in arms," noted the political scientist Hans Morgenthau. Informing Arendt of the ADL's plans to destroy her and her book, an insider in the organization begged her to return to New York: "I can't single-handedly preserve you from character and scholarship defenestration." Howe called it "a civil war"; McCarthy compared it to a pogrom.

Behind this phalanx of accusation stood legions of discontent. Not only had Arendt cut herself off from the Jewish community—"It is a pity that you do not love the Jewish people," Israel's former minister of justice wrote to her, echoing Scholem's famous charge that Arendt showed so "little trace" of "Ahavat Yisrael: 'Love of the Jewish people'"—but she appeared to think that she was better, smarter, more righteous than they were; indeed, that this was the reason for her separation. "Hannah Arrogance," her critics had always called her, and the *Eichmann* controversy only amplified that charge.

Podhoretz may have written the most extreme version of the indictment, in the November 1963 issue of *Commentary*. But, as in so many things, his was merely the vanguard of wider hostilities to come. After opening with a strange and unsettling comparison between Arendt and James Baldwin—"If Baldwin is all eloquence and no cleverness, Miss Arendt is all cleverness and no eloquence"—Podhoretz went on to turn all the virtues of Jewish modernism, "complexity, paradox, and ambiguity," the kinds of sensibilities the New York intellectuals had championed since the 1930s, into symptoms of a most terrible vice. "The brilliance of Miss Arendt's treatment of Eichmann could hardly be disputed by any disinterested reader. But at the same time, there could hardly be a more telling example than this section of her book of the intellectual perversity that can result from the pursuit of brilliance by a mind infatuated with its own agility and bent on generating dazzle."

Podhoretz subtitled his article "A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance." The parallel structure with the *Eichmann* subtitle, *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, was too obvious to ignore: Arendt was like Eichmann. ("I have actually heard people say Hannah Arendt is worse than Eichmann," noted William Phillips, no friend of the text.) One might be tempted to say that never has intelligence been so maligned, so criticized as the pathway to evil, by a magazine of ideas—and a Jewish magazine at that—were it not for the fact that so many other magazines and intellectuals piled on. One writer complained in *Partisan Review* that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is "'sophisticated' and 'modern' in a way which makes the Israeli analysis appear crude and naïve." Another Jewish writer called it "an arrogant, perverse book."

But nothing so irritated these Jewish nerves as the suspicion that Arendt had set herself up as a moral judge, an imperious executor of The Law, issuing rulings from on high. Lionel Abel asked, "Can we in 1963 judge the actions of the leaders of the Jewish Councils morally or politically?" He never answered the question, but of one thing he was certain: "Miss Arendt cannot." Scholem extended Abel's dictum far beyond Arendt. While acknowledging that the issues Arendt raised about the Jewish Councils had to be discussed, he insisted: "I do not believe that our generation is in a position to pass any kind of historical judgment." On the one hand, that generation was too close to the events: "We lack the necessary perspective." On the other hand, it was too far away from the events. "I do not know," Scholem wrote, whether the Jewish Councils "were right or wrong. Nor do I presume to judge. I was not there."

Too near, too far: The only ones who could judge were the ones who were there, and nearly all of them were dead—in other words, no one. That was an implication of Scholem's argument that Arendt seized on in her "postscript" to the book. "About nothing does public opinion everywhere seem to be in happier agreement than that no one has the right to judge somebody else." The refusal to judge, in other words, was not peculiar to the controversy over *Eichmann*; it was a general sensibility, shared by the wider public, that seemed to fear in judgment the recrudescence of an atavistic, unforgiving, vengeful god, the God of the Jews.

There was no escaping it: In Arendt's judging and her judgments—and here we come to ground zero of the Steiner theory—readers, particularly Jewish readers, detected the return of a strenuous ethic, native to their tradition, that demanded righteousness, an ethic that reminded the Jews of their peculiar obligations to their God. Podhoretz, no fool, at least not then, was quick to spot that ethic in Arendt. Sadly, poignantly, honestly—one could almost feel the weight of her exigency upon

Dark Night's Fly Catcher

Thatched myself
Over with words.

Night after night
Thatched myself

Anew against
The pending eraser.

CHARLES SIMIC

him—he nearly gasped at "the inordinate demands she is always making on the Jews to be better than other people, to be braver, wiser, nobler, more dignified." The Nazis "destroyed a third of the Jewish people. In the name of all that is humane, will the remnant never let up on itself?" Exhausted from their wanderings, were the Jews not at last entitled to their Zion in ease? In a debate marked by rancor and rage, by lies and exaggerations, this was a rare note of plain-spoken emotional truth.

Half a century later, that note still travels. In 1982, long after he and Podhoretz had parted ways politically, Howe would look back on these passages in *Commentary* as "perhaps the most judicious words in the whole debate." In *Heidegger's Children*, which appeared in 2001, Wolin writes that "perhaps Arendt's greatest failing as an analyst of the Jewish response to Nazism" was that "she came off seeming hard-hearted." And just a little over a year and a half ago, literary critic Adam Kirsch complained in *The New York Times* of Arendt's demand that the Jews be held "to what she conceived to be the highest personal standards." Kirsch acknowledged that her "stringency was a form of respect," but he couldn't escape the conclusion that *Eichmann* "would be a better book, perhaps, if Arendt were not so intent on demonstrating mastery over her material, and could admit that at times the only adequate response to the Holocaust was mute pity and terror"—mute being the operative word.

Hannah Arendt's was a voice drawing from ancient reserves of pride and belief.

Arendt was not insensitive to these charges; nor was she unaware of the combination of Jewish and anti-Jewish tropes—religious, cultural, psychological—they drew upon. As she wrote in a series of notes to herself, which she used for a lecture: "For conscience to work: either a very strong religious belief—extremely rare. Or: pride, even arrogance. If you say to yourself in such matters: who am I to judge?—you are already lost." The response of critics like Podhoretz only seemed to confirm that hers was a voice drawing from ancient reserves of pride and belief.

Podhoretz offered one final, if inadvertent, insight on the matter: "This habit of judging the Jews by one standard and everyone else by another is a habit Miss Arendt shares with many of her fellow-Jews." It's not clear that Arendt did share that habit, but if she did, it would have put her in the company of a line of Jews stretching back to Abraham. The Aleinu, the prayer Jews recite at the end of each of their daily services, praises a God

> who has not made us like the nations of the lands
> nor placed us like the families of the earth;
> who has not made our portion like theirs,
> nor our destiny like all their multitudes.

For centuries, this sense of apartness, this fugitive destiny, had been a point of pride among Jews and admiration among gentiles. Thomas Paine praised the Jews for this refusal to ape the ways of the "other nations"; as he put it in *Common Sense*, "Their true glory laid in being as much unlike them as possible." But the Jews' enemies always saw this strain of exceptionalism as a toxic threat, an affront for which Jews should be forever murdered and denounced. Did Podhoretz and his allies now seek to put that threat in their crosshairs, too? It was one of the stranger ironies of the *Eichmann* controversy that this leading note of anti-Jewish persecution throughout the ages should at last be turned, by Jews, on one of their own.

Traditionally, these anti-Semitic armies of accusation were led by cruel men of power against a people with very little of it. What the Jews possessed by way of moral authority was balanced by what they didn't possess, politically, in the world. They lacked, and often craved, sovereignty, the ability to govern themselves, free of the interference and domination of others. Theirs was a most terrible fate: one of the most indomitable and enduring senses of peoplehood set against an almost complete absence of self-rule. As evidenced, most visibly and painfully, in their inability to overpower and punish their tormentors.

The nadir of that history was the Holocaust. And then, within just three years of its end, the situation reversed itself. The Jews got sovereignty. They got armies, law, prisons, and prime ministers, the ability to overpower and punish their tormentors. That was the true miracle of the Eichmann trial, as voices in Israel immediately recognized. Not simply that Jews could strike back, but that they could deliver justice. "Jewish blood will never be defenseless again," stated an editorial in *Yedioth Ahronoth*. "However powerful all the pogromchiks under the sun may be—they will be caught by us and judged by a Jewish tribunal." This marriage of the law and the sword, of right and might, harked back to some of the earliest memories of Jewish history, as Arendt acknowledged: "For Israel the only unprecedented feature of the trial was that, for the first time (since the year 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans), Jews were able to sit in judgment on crimes committed against their own people, that, for the first time, they did not need to appeal to others for protection and justice."

But such rapid turnarounds, from the abject powerlessness of the Holocaust to the mega-power of the modern state, dyads of political experience about which Arendt was both leery and skeptical, were also a source of concern. Not merely on secular and fairly conservative grounds—the novelties of sovereignty, Arendt thought, the sudden acquisition of power by the powerless, can be a proving ground of much mischief—but also on Jewish grounds. As she reported in her letter to Scholem:

> Let me tell you of a conversation I had in Israel with a prominent political personality [it was Golda Meir] who was defending the—in my opinion disastrous—nonseparation of religion and state in Israel. What [she] said—I am not sure of the exact words anymore—ran something like this: "You will understand that, as a Socialist, I, of course, do not believe in God; I believe in the Jewish people." I found this a shocking statement and, being too shocked, I did not reply at the time. But I could have answered: The greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love toward Him was greater than its fear. And now this people believes only in itself? What good can come out of that?

There is some precedent for this anxiety of Arendt's, that in the elevation of the Jewish people to sovereignty they will find the seeds of their decline. Each Saturday morning in synagogue, Jews read a portion of one of the five books of Moses. Their annual reading cycle opens with the first verses of Genesis and concludes with the last chapters of Deuteronomy. In those final passages, God tells Moses that he will die, and that the Jews will cross into Canaan,

forsake the covenant, go a-whoring after strange gods, and be destroyed. The cycle closes with Moses' death: All we know of the Jews is that they are preparing to enter Canaan, to begin their experiment with sovereignty, an enactment of godly rule that God has told us must fail. But that's the end; we don't read on. Instead, we begin the cycle by returning to the first verses of Genesis, when the earth was without form and void. As if the consequence of sovereignty is the chaos of the cosmos itself.

A less cheerless, more secular version of the same story can be found in Haim Bialik's classic essay "Jewish Dualism." Two impulses, Bialik argued, lie at the heart of the Jewish experience: One propels the Jew out into the world, to disperse among the nations and become a diaspora, the other to contract to the center, to gather in the exiles. Throughout Jewish history, the cycle repeats: the return to home, followed by a scattering abroad. "And now," Bialik writes in 1922, "for the third or fourth time," we are "once again returning to our land."

> And who knows? Perhaps after hundreds of years we will be emboldened to make another exodus which will lead to the spreading of our spirit over the world and an assiduous striving toward glory.

Whether religious or secular, hopeful or lachrymose, something in Judaism denies to the Jew the experience of permanent sovereignty in the land. The problem with Zionism, the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen told Franz Rosenzweig, is that "those guys want to be happy." In his memoir *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, Scholem says that Cohen's is "the most profound remark ever uttered about Zionism by an opponent of this movement." The Jew cannot be at ease in Zion; should he find that ease, should this remnant ever let up on itself, he and they will find their world destroyed.

For Arendt, powerlessness posed as much of a threat to ethical action and judgment as sovereignty. The whole point of genocide, she argued in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, was to make the individual—whether victim or bystander, collaborator or perpetrator—superfluous, to render his actions pointless, his contribution to society meaningless. When you kill 6 million people, it's easy to ask yourself, "What's one more?" In the face of mass murder, it's difficult for anyone not to wonder, "What do I matter? What do my actions matter? What difference can I make?"

In *Eichmann*, Arendt replied: A lot. Action still mattered, whether it was the action of the Jewish Councils or the SS. There's little doubt that this was ultimately a faith, a leap into the dark (or the light)—McCarthy accurately described *Eichmann* as "a paean to transcendence"—but it was a faith that had sustained a marginal people throughout centuries of their wandering and persecution. Whether that faith could withstand the nihilism and numbers of the Holocaust was a different matter. Podhoretz, again, was quick to spot an opening:

> But it is unnecessary to pursue the absurdities of Miss Arendt's argument on this issue, just as it is unnecessary to enter once again into the endless moral debate over the behavior of the Jewish leaders—the endless round of apology and recrimination. They did what they did, they were what they were, and each was a different man. None of it mattered in the slightest to the final result.

In the face of the Nazis, what could anyone do? There simply was no room for action, much less judgment.

As a matter of empirical history, Podhoretz may have had it right: None of it did matter in the slightest. It's a question about which historians still disagree. But as a moral proposition, as a matter of ethics, it's a claim that Jews resisted for centuries. Whether they could resist it after the Holocaust, whether they could still insist on the importance of ethical action or abandon themselves instead to the newfound power of their state, was an open question, a question that Arendt posed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and that has been reverberating ever since.

It's a strange thought, I'll admit, but could it be that one of the consequences of the catastrophe of the Shoah and the creation of Israel is that they've not only liberated the Jew from his Judaism but also allowed him to indulge the classic canards against it? The notes struck by Podhoretz, Abel, Howe, even Scholem, may sound purely defensive—anxious strictures against a Jew airing the Jews' dirty laundry in public—but they can also be interpreted as simultaneously defeatist and triumphalist: Now that we have a state, now that we have a home, may we not give up the burdens of judging and being judged, may we not enjoy our ease in Zion, may we not give up this bloody-minded mindfulness, may we not at long last be like other nations?

No, Arendt said, we cannot. And if the past found in Jewish writing is any guide, she may prove to be right. ■