

Hannah Arendt and the Literary Presentation of the Holocaust

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to peace philosophy.

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I. Introduction

Hannah Arendt's account of the trial of Eichmann is shocking, not so much for the facts it lays out since these could be known from other sources, but because it is a well-told story written from the point of view of one of the villains. Arendt (1906-1975) tried to understand Eichmann (1906-1962). For many people this attempt was one that was incomprehensible. The holocaust should only be recounted from the point of view of the persecuted. To do otherwise seemed to insult the memory of the dead. Since Arendt's work, literature and films about the holocaust have continued to come out, in many cases singling out the heroes of the persecution, but few have been as bold as Arendt in tackling the story of the villains in the play. In this presentation I would like to explore Arendt's literary genius, contrasting it with that of other authors, and asking why it is she felt it necessary to discuss this topic in the way she did.

The paper firstly develops the theme of history as the history of individuals and history as a detective novel. It then looks at the presentation of evil and at criticism of Arendt on this point. Finally it notes features of Arendt's writing that are peculiar to peace philosophy.

II. Sources Consulted

Holocaust literature is too broad for me to make any pretence to have read it all or even to have made a fair selection. For the present purposes I intend to simply rely on works readily to hand, which, for the most part, have the merit of being holocaust classics in their own right. Martin Gilbert's *The Holocaust: A*

History of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War is the classic historical account, outlining in vivid detail the chronology of the massacre. Carol Anne Lee's biography of Otto Frank (1889-1980) is, perhaps, the closest in style to Arendt's work since it too tries to understand who betrayed the Frank family and why. Anne Frank (1929-1945) and Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) provide personal diaries of the suffering in hiding and in the transit camps; Primo Levi (1919-1987) gives an account of life in the death camps. The short account *Im Tunnel* by Götz Aly takes up the case of an unknown victim, Marion Samuel (1931-1943), from what is now Poland. *The Pianist* looks at the life of Wladyslaw Szpilman (1911-2000). Finally, I choose the diary of Wilm Hosenfeld (?- 1951), the German officer who helped protect Szpilman.

These texts cover both works by and about the perpetrators, victims and bystanders of the holocaust. Put beside the portrait of Eichmann this could be considered misleading. Would it not be better to choose only those accounts by the perpetrators themselves? We could take the memoirs of Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, or of Franz Stangl, commandant of Treblinka, dictated to Gitta Sereny, or of a much less known person such as Felix Landau, who served as an SS Einsatzkommando (Bartov, 2000: 185-203). However, Arendt's essay is not like these in that it is not a picture of the holocaust from the point of view of the Nazis, but rather an attempt to understand and judge the Nazi point of view. She is not just concerned with the story; she is more concerned with asking where evil lay and hence we must look also at the Jewish account of the holocaust, in order to understand the enormity of the crime.

Rubenstein and Roth discuss more traditional kinds of literature, poetry, plays and novels, and assess the ways in which they meditate on the holocaust. While they include diaries in their overview there is no mention of Arendt's work as a piece of literature. They underline the themes of lamentation,

resistance, endurance, survival, honesty, choice-making and protest (Rubenstein and Roth, 1987: 257), pointing out that the challenge of the Holocaust is to present it as something utterly unique and beyond comprehension whilst also trying to talk about what actually happened in the real world:

The corresponding tension for a reader, at least for one who was not “there” is between an effort to understand and an awareness that the Holocaust eludes full comprehension (Rubenstein and Roth, 1987: 256).

Arendt’s account might fit into the choice-making category in so far as she is largely concerned with examining why Eichmann in particular was led to act the way he did. Her account, too, will constantly try to cope with the tension of portraying Eichmann as a normal person whilst knowing that he did abnormal things.

III. History of Individual

(1) Individual Histories

What these writings have in common is the need to look at the holocaust from the point of view of individual human persons. In face of the depersonalisation of the Jews in particular, but of all men and women as well, we cling to stories like these to try and grasp a hold of what went on. We sense the need to understand how individual persons reacted to their situation because we cannot comprehend the lists of statistics and figures. Suffering demands that we look at what people like us went through, how they reacted and what they felt because only in this way can we grasp something about what was going on.

Arendt notes that her account is the account of a trial and not the history of the holocaust or of Germany in the third Reich or even a “theoretical treatise on

the nature of evil”, rather:

The focus of every trial is upon the person of the defendant, a man of flesh and blood with an individual history, with an always unique set of qualities, peculiarities, behaviour patterns, and circumstances (Arendt, 1977: 285).

And yet the choice of the person as the window into the history and issues of the time is not as simple as this would suggest. Arendt does make comments of a more general kind, both historical and philosophical. She also moves outside what Eichmann himself said at the trial, as at the beginning of chapter seven:

My report on Eichmann’s conscience has thus far followed evidence which he himself had forgotten (Arendt, 1977: 112).

Her detailing the history of deportations in some cases takes her beyond what Eichmann himself was responsible for. Hence in this sense her work is not like a diary; it has the advantage of the third person who can roam more broadly over the canvas.

(2) Intimate details

The accounts, then, take us into the personal and intimate details of the lives of the protagonists. Anne Frank’s description of her own feelings and of little events in the house have a charm of their own,¹ or why on 16 May 1938 Marion Samuel had to move to a new school in the Jewish district of Berlin (Aly, 2004: 57). Arendt too takes us into the personal life of Eichmann, his business upsets, even his girlfriend in Vienna. Gilbert’s history is likewise full of such

1. For instance, Anne talks about the food: “For a long time we ate nothing but endive. Endive with sand, endive without sand, endive with mashed potatoes, endive-and-mashed potato casserole.” (Frank and Pressler, 1995: 245). In the Anne Frank museum there is still a copy of the menu she wrote for Saturday 18 July 1942 which contains an impressive list of dishes written partly in French, but the irony is always present: 1 Pomme de terre, for instance (van der Rol and Verhoeven, 1992: 35).

personal details, which is one of the reasons it is so much more moving than the drier account of Barkai.

(3) Personal and General History

There are dangers in this kind of individualised approach. The account can become so taken up by daily events that there is little time to focus on more general issues of evil and morality. Or it can become so much focused on the hero, counter-hero in Eichmann's case, that it loses track of the whole. The first person diaries by Frank, Hillesum and Levi all run the risk of devoting their whole attention to the individual protagonists. Of course in the case of the two Dutch girls, the diaries were not originally intended for publication.² Levi gets round the problem by an appendix added to the 1976 edition (the original edition is dated 1947). In this appendix he addresses questions put to him by school children to whom he had spoken about his experience, such as "Did the Germans know what was going on?" "Did prisoners try to escape from the camps?" "How do you explain the fanatical hatred of the Nazis against the Jews?"

Arendt's talent is to combine this kind of question with her account, such that she can bring out her answers to them in the course of the narrative. For instance, Levi, in his *appendix*, judges the German response:

To know and to let it be known around you was, however, a means – not so dangerous as all that – of taking a distance from Nazism; I think that the German people as a whole, did not avail themselves of this means and I believe they are fully guilty of this deliberate omission (Levi, 1987: 195).

Arendt's examination of Eichmann's conscience leads her naturally into considering the conscience of ordinary Germans. Hence her condemnation of the

2. Otto Frank noted that Anne would have wanted to publish an account based on her diary on her 21st birthday. She writes, "I'd like to publish a book called *The Secret Annex*." (Frank and Pressler, 1995: 291).

general response is both more understanding and more profound and not any the less damning:

Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted *not* to murder, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbours go off to their doom (for that the Jews were transported to their doom they knew, of course, even though many of them may not have known the gruesome details), and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation (Arendt, 1977: 150).

This statement ends the chapter, leaving the reader in suspense in a way that Levi's clearer and simpler judgment does not.³

IV. History as a Detective Novel

(1) Detective Novel

Another trait that many of the accounts have in common is the theme of a

3. Aly's account of Marion Samuel avoids an over-exclusive account of Marion, partly because there is simply not much information about her, and partly by extending the account to cover her family and those people who knew her. In the lives of her family members we can follow Jews whose response to persecution was emigration, or others who were married to Christians and hence had a different fate. Similarly Lee ranges her focus over all those who could have betrayed the Franks and even over all the details of how Otto felt obliged to cover things, Arendt, however, is much more single-mindedly attached to Adolf Eichmann himself. His family scarcely appears and other figures such as Hitler or Himmler are either off-stage or only appear to shed light on Eichmann himself.

The advantage of such an approach can be seen when we read a traditional type of history such as Barkai's. Barkai naturally includes a few personal accounts but his account is more technical and more remote. It states times and dates of laws, informs us of the number of Jews deported or executed and tries to give a generalised picture of the whole. The account of German Jewry ends with a tragic scene in the Jewish hospital depicted by Cordelia Edvardson, as Jews working for the Gestapo, in the hope of being freed from the fate of their fellow Jews, prey on an elderly and sick population. But this account lacks any names. It arouses general horror rather than a sense of "x" is guilty, which Arendt succeeds in doing.

detective novel. Lee's biography of Otto Frank looks like a classic detective story: who betrayed the Franks? Aly's study of Marion Samuel is also a detective story, a search through archives to gradually uncover the life of someone wholly obscure. The diaries, however, are not detective stories, though they do keep our interest as we wait to know how the writers will encounter that fate: when and how will the Franks be discovered, for instance. Of course we know what will happen and when, but the event is none the less dramatic in that we cannot know how it felt to be in that end situation.

Szpilman's last chapter *Nocturne in C sharp major* is the most dramatic in his whole account. Just when least expected a German officer comes to his rescue. Of course, we know that he will survive. His account is written post-war but the delicate way in which the German officer asks him to play the piano in the deserted house is one that no reader can forget.

A detective story helps not only in maintaining suspense, but also for two other reasons. It gives the author the right to use knowledge that goes beyond that of any one of the protagonists. Arendt claims to be reporting what happened at Eichmann's trial, but she often introduces material that was not used at the trial. This is in part historical, records of the Nuremberg trials, in part based on philosophical considerations of the nature of Eichmann's personality. Thus she can see the judges as bound not only by the actual material presented in the case, but also by their inability to fathom what motivated Eichmann.⁴

Secondly, a detective novel immediately suggests that a crime has been

4. Part of the fascination of Aly and Lee is that the way in which they find material itself becomes part of the plot. Aly mentions how he searches through address books, how he places an advert in the paper for a class photo from a particular school, for instance, and how this even leads to a picture of Marion herself. Lee too uses the same technique as she uncovers hidden archives and in particular draws attention to the fact that she uses Otto's diary entries referring to Tonny Ahlers (1917-2000) and interviews people who knew him (Lee, 2003: 188-9).

committed. In the case of the holocaust that crime is one that almost surpasses belief. Indeed many Jews of the time simply refused to believe that the accounts of murder by gassing could be true. As in a detective novel, there is clearly a crime and a criminal and in the case of the holocaust this is also the case. Arendt presents this clearly in the context of one criminal, not because she denies the responsibility of others, particularly Hitler, but because her aim is to highlight Eichmann's role and not use the simple excuse that he was merely following orders.⁵

Arendt's account is like Lee's but unlike most detective stories in that crime and criminal are known from page one. This enables her to focus on the motives for the crime, on why Eichmann acted the way he did. She needs to do this because she wants to understand how it is that such an ordinary person could have committed such a terrible crime. She needs to understand the fundamental springs of criminality and avoid simplistic judgements of black and white, good and evil. Lee's account also seeks to fathom the motives of Tommy Ahlers and in doing so she touches on the complicity of others such as the policeman, Silberbauer, who 'respects' Otto Frank's former army service. But Lee's story is like that of Arendt in another way: it uncovers unexpected threads. Lee draws out the complicity of Otto Frank himself in the cover-up of his own arrest, whereas Arendt will also accuse the Jewish Councils of cooperation in the extermination of the Jews.

Arendt's account and Lee's have another trait in common: the desire to get

5. Götz Aly, however, acknowledges the crime and the victims but is less clear about who is to blame: is it Hitler, the Nazi system, Germans who refused to speak up? His focus is rather on the victims and on one young girl in particular. Lee's account presents us in the *Prologue* with Tonny Ahlers cycling up to the Franks' firm. It becomes clear that Lee believes him to be the culprit, but in the course of the narrative she uncovers other threads and it is only in the last chapter that we realise that his wife, Martha, was probably the one who made the fatal phonecall.

behind the contradictions and lies placed in their paths. Arendt notes how Eichmann can say that he will never take an oath and then immediately go on to take the court oath. These contradictions help her to fathom his deeper motives. Lee encounters lies and deception in many places. For instance, when Tonny's brother Cas admits that Tonny was the betrayer, he fails to reveal his own murky past. Then in the final section, Lee points a finger also at Tonny's wife (Lee, 2003: 316; 324-5).

(2) Conscience & "Love" of Jews

Arendt's is a detective story, set in a Jerusalem court, but looking back through Eichmann's life to try and work out how he could become a murderer for the SS. She concentrates on what was going on in his conscience, or not going on, to try and see where the source of his motivation lay. There are two parts to this: on the one hand his attitude to the Jews and on the other his ambition and desire for promotion.

Already in the initial introduction to "the accused", Arendt notes that Eichmann had Jewish relatives, even a Jewish mistresses, and that he never had any hate for Jews as such. Indeed, he was proud of his good relationships with the Jews, even as he persecuted them. In particular he admired the Zionists, because they were "idealists". Arendt notes that the few books he read in his life included two Zionist classics, which were to become the norm for his own work (Arendt, 1977: 40-41).

Another sign of Eichmann's "love" for the Jews is his claim that in organising their elimination in a rational way he saved them from the horrors of waiting and butchery. Arendt notes that Eichmann found visits to the East where the Einsatz groups were at work utterly horrifying. He was also horrified by the gas vans in Poland. However, he enjoyed his visits to Auschwitz, where of

course he never had to see the gas chambers. He worked on the assumption that these people had to be killed, but at least they should be killed in a “civilised” way. Arendt later mentions the horrors of execution Rumanian style (Arendt, 1977: 190-191). She notes how he reacted with indignation to the way in which SS men had treated the Jews, failing to equate this with his own perfect willingness to have them die, but in a painless way, as he thought it.

In the case of a normal person, it might be thought that the conscience would encourage one to reflect on one’s victims as persons. Hence the court was concerned to know about Eichmann’s crises of conscience. Arendt notes two important ones: the decision to move from emigration to execution, taken at the Wannsee Conference, and the approach of defeat in 1945.

The term “Wannsee Conference” is actually a post-war name used to refer to a meeting held in January 1942 which set in motion the systematic extermination of German Jews.⁶

Eichmann felt that the Wannsee Conference answered the last qualms of

6. It was originally planned for 9 December 1941 to discuss issues such as what to do with part-Jews and Jews working in the factories. On 8 December it was delayed because of Pearl Harbour. It finally met on 20 January 1942. While there was some discussion over the question of part-Jews there was no objection at all to the decision to exterminate all German Jews. As a result of the Conference and after discussion with the railways, plans were set for the systematic carrying out of the policy. Between 4 and 15 May 1942 the first 10, 161 German Jews were taken from Lodz to be killed in Chelmno. On 6 May the first transports from Vienna left for Minsk and the people were killed at Trostinez (Gerlach, 2000:113-115).

Eichmann insists that the importance of the Wannsee Conference was that it assuaged his conscience. Many authors have noted, though, that it failed to resolve the question of half-Jews and part-Jews which ostensibly seemed to be have been its purpose. In fact Gerlach notes that its real decision was that of eliminating German Jews and the lack of opposition to this idea was precisely what Eichmann correctly noted. Looking over what happened to German Jews before and after the Conference. We can see why it was called in the first place. Train loads of Jews from Germany and Austria to Lodz (15 October - 4 November 1941) and to Minsk (8-28 November 1941) were not deliberately gassed or murdered. Only in Kaunas, Lithuania, were German and Austrian Jews executed by being shot on arrival in late November (25-30 November 1941). This later action aroused protests which sparked the need for the Conference. (Gerlach, 2000: 113-115).

conscience he might have had. There was no-one against the Final Solution (Arendt, 1977: 126). After discussing in what ways Jewish functionaries had cooperated in the destruction of their own people, Arendt returns again to Eichmann's conscience:

His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which "good society" everywhere reacted as he did

Nobody, not even a Protestant minister who came to visit him, ever suggested that what he was doing as his duty was wrong.

In the case of possible defeat in 1944-45, Eichmann was faced with another crisis of conscience, that of maintaining the 'purity' of the decision to eliminate the Jews against those, like Himmler, who sought now to save them in the hope of using this as a bargaining chip with the Americans, or who, like Hans Becher, sought to get money out of them (Arendt, 1977: 140). Arendt notes that it was Eichmann's conscience which prompted him "to adopt his uncompromising attitude during the last year of the war" (Arendt, 1977: 146). He had to obey what he knew to be Hitler's orders.

(3) Conscience & Ambition

The second item of exploration within Eichmann's psyche is that of ambition. In her initial presentation, Arendt leaves the chronological presentation to rush ahead and list all those incidents where Eichmann seemed to fail and hence felt hurt in his ambition: his plans to send Jews to Madagascar or to the Nisko region of Poland. Above all, his regret at never advancing beyond the rank of S.S. Obersturmbannführer (Arendt, 1977: 33). Arendt notes how ambition was behind the seeming simplicity with which he had entered the S.S.:

What Eichmann failed to tell the presiding judge in cross-examination was that he had been an ambitious young man who was fed up with his job as

travelling salesman... (Arendt, 1977: 33).

Ambition was the one quality that he really admired in Hitler himself:

[Hitler] may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German Army to Führer of a people of almost eighty million.... His success alone proved to me that I should subordinate myself to this man (Arendt, 1977: 126).

At the Wannsee Conference the thing that really seems to have touched him was not the assault that the decision for elimination rather than emigration might have had on his conscience, but the fact that he was able to spend time with men of higher rank (Arendt, 1977: 113).

The picture of Eichmann that we now have is of a frustrated man, stubborn in carrying out orders, willing to leave behind any moral qualms once he sees that his superiors do not share them. But the exploration cannot end there. Hence Arendt pursues her enquiry into the realm of evil itself.

V. The Presentation and Reflection of Evil

(1) Evil

A key element in the holocaust stories, is how evil is to be presented. It can sicken and overwhelm us as in Gilbert's history, or it can seem remote and obscure as in the Dutch diaries, or completely senseless as in Aly's biography of Marion. Primo Levi, Thomas Keneally (*Schindler's List*) and Władysław Szpilman take us away from evil as such to give us figures who can redeem the suffering and somehow present us with heroes in the midst of destruction.

Arendt is above all preoccupied by this question of evil. She wants to know how and why it should happen. In her picture of Eichmann she gradually builds

up those precise elements that will enable her to indicate what really went wrong. For instance, in chapter three we learn that bragging was one of his vices (Arendt, 1977: 46). Admittedly, his bragging was of a curious kind, since he wanted to claim responsibility for killing five million Jews. But Arendt is more interested in another aspect:

A more specific, and also more decisive, flaw in Eichmann's character was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view (Arendt, 1977: 47-48).

She notes his constant use of clichés, and from this draws a further conclusion about the above-mentioned flaw:

His inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of someone else (Arendt, 1977: 49).⁷

For Arendt, the philosopher, this feature is further illustrated when she notes a surprising part of the trial when the judge asked Eichmann to explain what he meant by saying he lived according to Kantian moral precepts. He admits that when he was carrying out the Final Solution, he had already left Kant behind. However, Arendt notes that in fact he had transferred his allegiance to a Nazi version of Kant:

Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land (Arendt, 1977: 136).

Eichmann felt bound by the law and bound to fulfil the law wholeheartedly. In the Third Reich, Hitler's words had "the force of law" (Arendt, 1977: 148) and

7. In this context, it is worth noting what Rachel F. Brenner says about Edith Stein (1891-1942), Simone Weil (1909-1943), Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum. Brenner notes that what distinguished them was their "*being for the other*": "Stein's identification with the suffering Jews, Weil's wish to die caring for soldiers on the battlefield, Frank's feeling of betrayal for not being able to help homeless Jews, Hillesum's voluntary work at Westerbork (Brenner, 1997: 176-7). Brenner sees the writings of these four women as illustrating what Emmanuel Levinas says about responsibility and commitment to others.

hence he felt bound to whatever he knew to be Hitler's desire, even if this meant going against common sense (trying to escape in the last days of the war, for instance) or against humanitarian norms. Arendt notes how Germany managed to make what was essentially evil appear not only good, but even lawful and hence morally binding (Arendt, 1977: 149). What is more, she notes that this was not only true for Eichmann; it was equally true for other Germans as well.

Hosenfeld has a more traditional explanation of the evil: people are moving away from Christianity (Szpilman, 1999: 196; 201). They prefer to hate each other rather than love each other. He finds it hard to believe that Hitler could want to murder all the Jews, but if it is so he can give only one explanation: "they are sick, abnormal or mad" (Szpilman, 1999: 198). He traces this evil to the human heart: "Evil and brutality lurk in the human heart. If they are allowed to develop freely they flourish, putting out dreadful offshoots" (Szpilman, 1999: 199). Like Arendt, he constantly returns to the question "How is it possible?" In response he says:

There can be only one explanation: the people who could do it, who gave the orders and allowed it to happen, have lost all sense of decency and responsibility. They are godless through and through, gross egotists, despicable materialists.

Out of these various reasons: godlessness, abnormality, lack of responsibility, materialism, Arendt will focus on "sense of decency and responsibility".

Lee, like Hosenfeld, sees a wider range of motives, but the dominating one is that Ahlers was "vicious and spiteful", a trait he retained in later life.⁸

8 "... Tonny Ahlers had several incentives to betray the people in hiding: he needed money (having become bankrupt that summer); he hated Jews; he had to prove himself to the Gestapo so that they would protect him against Rouwendaal; he may have wanted Otto Frank out of the way now that the tide of war was turning against Germany; and, above all, he was vicious and spiteful enough to want to send people to their deaths." (Lee, 2003: 129).

Perhaps this too fits Hosenfeld's "loss of all sense of decency". However, Arendt wants to go further in her effort to understand exactly what this evil is.

(2) Evil: Banal

It is at the end of her account of Eichmann's life, just after his execution, that Arendt finally mentions the subtitle of her account:

It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us — the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil* (Arendt, 1977: 252).

By introducing this phrase "the banality of evil" at this point in her account, Arendt brings the narrative to a climax that is both dramatic and unexpected. We just do not expect the word "banal" to appear in the climax. And yet, the whole work has prepared us for just this word. The word "ban" originally means "decree, proclamation" and is still used in that sense in the phrase "marriage bans", but the adjective "banal" has come to mean "trite, trivial, clichéd". It thus captures Arendt's portrait of evil very precisely. Eichmann is indeed someone bound by the proclamations of Hitler, which for him and for the Third Reich, were laws. But these proclamations are presented in clichés, which became for Eichmann, even in death, the things which gave meaning to his existence. In Arendt's account he lived in clichés to such an extent that he could no longer see reality. It was in this sense that his deeds were truly evil.

Yet, Arendt also plays on the word "banality". She knows it will shock, defying word and thought, because it means "unimportant". That someone and something so unimportant could have brought about something as utterly evil as the holocaust, is precisely the message that she wishes to give. Hence she is at pains to show that Eichmann is not motivated by great hatred or passion; in this he is unlike Ahlers. He is not an evil counter-hero like Milton's Satan or even

Shakespeare's Iago. He is rather totally unheroic and uninteresting. And this is the uncomfortable message of her book. In a sense we would rather have our devils breathing fire and smoke in the style of Tolkein's Mordor because then the distinction between evil and good is clear. We can safely and comfortably judge the other, because he/she is not like me, because she/he is abnormal in some sense. But Arendt wants to show that evil is neither abnormal nor commonplace (Arendt, 1977: 282). To understand her, we must look into the background of the term "banality".

The expression "banality" to refer to the evil of the Nazis was first used by Karl Jaspers in a letter to Arendt of 19 October 1946 (Bernstein, 1996: 139). Jaspers wants to reject any idea of satanic "greatness" or "demonic" interpretation of Hitler:

It seems to me that we have to see those things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them (Bernstein, 1996: 139).

In previous writing Arendt had used the notion of 'radical evil' to talk about the Nazis.⁹ She understood this to refer to the way in which, under the SS, concentration camps were organised to make human being superfluous. In the camps human beings were deprived of their juridical person, then of the moral person — chiefly by making martyrdom impossible — and finally of their individuality (Bernstein, 1996: 134). As Bernstein notes, even when she shifts to the term banality of evil rather than radical evil, she still retains this definition of what was entailed by the Nazi system. In so much as there is a change of terminology, though, she shifts emphasis from the superfluosity of human beings to the thoughtlessness of the Nazis (Bernstein, 1996: 142-143).

9. She found the term "radical" evil in Kant's *Religion within the limits of simple reason*.

Thoughtlessness involves the same steps in the degradation of human beings, the failure to think of them as human individuals. Thought, she wrote in reply to a critic, “tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots”. Evil has no roots, “it spreads like a fungus on the surface” (Bernstein, 1996: 129). This is its “banality”, she explains.

In the Postscript, Arendt returns to the matter of the banality of evil. She notes again that Eichmann “lacked imagination”: he never realised what he was doing, never thought about the moral significance of his acts. “It was sheer thoughtlessness... that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.” (Arendt, 1977: 288). She goes on to note that this thoughtlessness is even worse than all evil instincts:

That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together... that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem (Arendt, 1977: 288).¹⁰

(3) Response to Evil

As well as trying to understand evil, Arendt is also concerned to know what a valid response to evil should be. In chapters nine to fourteen, whilst Eichmann is not entirely left out of the picture, his figure recedes into the background as

10. The lesson seems to have been learned by later commentators. Horwitz, writing about the civilian populations around the concentration camps, comments on their compliance and quotes the philosopher Mary Midgley: “If we ask whether exploiters and oppressors know what they are doing, the right answer seems to be that they do *not* know, because they carefully avoid thinking about it – but that they could know, and therefore their deliberate avoidance is a responsible act.” (Horwitz, 2000: 214) Hence to fail to think is in itself a moral act and it is this which is the source of Eichmann’s evil.

Arendt’s term ‘banality of evil’ was contentious and yet, Bartov argues, it has been given new meaning from the diaries, letters and statements of the ordinary individuals who carried out the extermination policy. It was an unprecedented event, but it was also “one which was perceived by its perpetrators as part of their normal routine”.

Arendt recounts the deportations from all over Europe. She notes that at the trial witnesses from Europe spoke, mainly from Poland and Lithuania, and also notes that in many cases the horrors they describe could in no way be imputed directly to Eichmann, hence as trial testimony this material was of dubious value. However, the conclusion that she seeks to draw is whether it is politically possible to resist a regime of terror:

The lesson of such stories is simple and within everyone's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that "it could happen" in most places but *it did not happen everywhere* (Arendt, 1977: 233).

Arendt draws hope from the few who did stand up to the Nazis. Martin Gilbert sees hope even among those who died or who did nothing:

To die with dignity was in itself courageous. To resist the dehumanising, brutalising force of evil, to refuse to be abased to the level of animals, to live through the torment, to outlive the tormentors, these too were courageous. Merely to give witness by one's own testimony was, in the end, to contribute to a moral victory. Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit (Gilbert, 1985: 828).

This uplifting conclusion, coming at the end of over 800 pages of suffering, is not what Arendt provides.¹¹ She is more struck by the failure to respond to evil than by its being overcome by the survivors. Hence her book does not leave us with a sense of hope and elation, precisely the kind of way Eichmann liked to live, but with a warning: failure to want to share the earth with others, is in itself grounds for denying our own right to exist.

(4) Genocide

11. Take, for example, Arendt's comments on the popularity accorded Anne Frank. In 1962, Arendt said that this was a form of "cheap sentimentality at the expense of great catastrophe" (Laqueur, 2001: 224b).

Another lesson that she draws is that the holocaust is not simply part of an ongoing history of anti-Semitism. This conclusion is presented clearly in her Epilogue. Again, it is one that she knows will shock her readers, especially the Jewish readers:

The supreme crime it [the court] was confronted with, the physical extermination of the Jewish people, was a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people, and that only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism (Arendt, 1977: 269).

Accounts of the holocaust that stress its unique nature do not dare to make this conclusion. Arendt does so precisely because she accepts Kantian moral principles and hence sees in the individual Jew first and foremost a human person. She puts in the mouth of an imaginary judge the following condemnation of Eichmann:

You 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 — as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the earth (Arendt, 1977: 279).

Whilst this conclusion moves the focus from the Jews as such to human beings as such, the shift is not so different in other works. Above we have noted Gilbert's conclusion, "Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit". He refers to the *human* spirit rather than the Jewish spirit.

Captain Wilm Hosenfeld's diary underlines the similarity between the Nazis and the French and Russian revolutions: the extermination and annihilation of people who think differently from them (Szpilman, 1999).¹² A

12. Hosenfeld retained his ability to judge during the war. He did what he could to rescue Jews, not only once but several times. He also learnt Polish and even went to Sunday mass with the Polish Catholics. He is one of those who can rightly fit Arendt's hope that some will resist evil. He died in 1951 having been tortured by the

similar conclusion is drawn by Götz Aly. The crime of the holocaust was precisely a denial of humanity as such:

If we want to honour the worth of the victims, we must restore their individuality to them. They were young or old, poor or rich, men, women or children, full of dreams and hope, like Marion Samuel in the picture with a bow in her hair.¹³

What is at stake in the debate here is what emerged in the German historians' debate, *Historikerstreit*, of 1986. The central issue is whether the holocaust can be seen as one instance of inhumanity, along with Russian gulags, Chinese *laogai* and a history of anti-Semitism, or whether it stands out as a unique instance.

By stressing its uniqueness, we seem to give greater respect to the Jewish people in particular and to the utter horror of the Nazi regime. Auschwitz, Dachau and Treblinka seem to demand this of us. Yet if the holocaust was unique because the Nazis were unique then now that they are no more, it cannot happen again and we can consign it to history. By affirming that the holocaust is only one example of inhumanity, we can learn from it and perhaps be on our guard against a similar thing happening elsewhere, either to the Jews or to other people. Yet by making it comparable to other instances of inhumanity both past and future we seem to be lowering the value of what is represented by Auschwitz.

LaCapra argues that any historian must realise that historical discourse itself is not and cannot be neutral. In the case of the holocaust this is even more

Soviets in a POW camp at Stalingrad. They could not believe his story that he had saved a Jew (Szpilman, 1999: 215).

13. "Wer ihnen [die Opfer] ihre Würde bewahren will, muss ihnen ihre Individualität zurückgeben. Sie waren jung oder alt, arm oder reich, Männer, Frauen oder Kinder — voller Träume und Hoffnung, so wie Marion Samuel auf dem Bild mit der Schleife im Haar" (Aly, 2004: 149).

so. The voice of the victims, such as Elie Wiesel, is so unique that no-one else can claim it for themselves. Moreover, to exclude such voices in the interests of ‘objective’ history would itself be a step towards negating them. LaCapra prefers to say that the “Nazi crimes” are both unique and comparable.

They are unique in that they are so extreme that they seem unclassifiable and threaten or tempt one with silence. But they will be compared to other events insofar as comparison is essential for any attempt to understand (LaCapra, 1994: 47).

He then quotes, with approval, Eberhard Jäckel’s description of the uniqueness of the holocaust:

The Nazi extermination of the Jews was unique because never before has a state, under the responsible authority of its leader, decided and announced that a specific group of human beings, including the old, the women, the children and the infants, would be killed to the very last one, and implement this decision with all the means at its disposal (LaCapra, 1994: 49).

Arendt describes this situation as one where Hitler is the “sole, lonely plotter of the Final Solution”,¹⁴ who uses the state and the war to destroy the people:

14 Christian, Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference, the fate of German Jews, and Hitler’s decision in principle to exterminate all European Jews,” in Bartov, 2000: 106-161. [1998] questions Hitler’s sole responsibility. While Hitler made no secret of his anti-semitism and while the murder of Jews in the East had already begun, it would seem that it was the entry into the war of the USA following Pearl Harbour that led him to unleash the full extermination of all European, including German, Jews. On 30 January 1939 Hitler made a speech in the Reichstag decreeing the extermination of the Jews in the event of world war: “If the world of international financial Jewry, both in and outside of Europe, should succeed in plunging the nations into another world war, the result ... will be the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe.” (Gerlach, 2000: 122). On 12 Dec 1941 in his private residence he addressed the sectional leaders of the National Socialist Party and the regional party leaders. Goebbels notes mention, “The Führer... warned the Jews that if they were to cause another world war, it would lead to their own destruction. Those were not empty words. Now the world war has come. The destruction of the Jews must be its necessary consequence.” (Gerlach, 2000: 122).

Hence it would seem that Hitler’s speech of 12 Dec gave the impetus to something many of the leaders wanted to do anyway. In fact on 8 Dec Himmler and Heydrich had given permission to start using the gas at Chelmno. This decision was taken without direct reference to Hitler.

Individual Jews, whole Jewish families might die in pogroms, whole communities might be wiped out, but the people would survive. They had never been confronted with genocide (Arendt, 1977: 153).

LaCapra (1994: 65) argues that the very uniqueness of the holocaust can drive language to the limits and to silence. If we look at Arendt's account in this way, this aspect comes out in the way many of her chapters end with a question mark, with comments that invite thought, as when talking about the few who resisted Hitler:¹⁵

Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation (Arendt, 1977: 233).

This assertion is simply set as a given whilst yet begging the question: why is it enough that some people only resist? Why is it enough 'humanly'? Why is it enough 'rationally'? There is no answer given and Arendt would suggest that silence is the only possible response.

VI. Criticism of Arendt: Good and Bad

While Arendt is at pains to point out that Eichmann was no sadistic monster and hence not "irredeemably evil" and she also alleges that the Jewish councils in cooperating with the Nazis served to blur the line of good and evil, nonetheless her account still retains a clear line between good and evil, between the Nazis and the Jews. This line is maintained in all the early holocaust literature and reemerges in Aly's account of Marion Samuel. It is even more marked when the holocaust moves into film, where there is perhaps even less scope for the gray areas on the borderline of good and evil. In many ways it is appealing: we know where we stand and with whom to identify. Judgments are

15. See Note 12.

possible and clear.

Yet later holocaust literature has begun to undermine this clear division between good and evil. Normal citizens living around concentration camps, we now know, could not but know or at least could not but know that there were dreadful things happening. Even the allied airforces could have done something to stop the gassing of the Jews, but they failed to do so. The most disturbing of this kind of review of the holocaust accounts is by Primo Levi and what he says could apply to Arendt's account as well.

Levi notes that as social animals we easily divide the world into 'us' and 'them' and that we enjoy watching games in which there are clear winners and losers. We thus want to simplify but this desire of ours does not necessarily correspond with reality:

The greater part of historical and natural phenomena are not simple, or not simple in the way that we would like (Levi, 2000: 253).

He notes how the victims in the camps also became themselves perpetrators of evil towards others less unfortunate and hence desires to turn his gaze on the gray area in which twilight figures, neither devils nor saints, exist:

The time has come to explore the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors, and to do so with a lighter hand, and with a less turbid spirit than has been done, for instance, in a number of films. Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is, it is studded with obscure or pathetic figures... whom it is indispensable to know if we want to know the human species (Levi, 2000: 255).

In fact, Arendt's exploration of Eichmann could be seen as one the first attempts to enter this grey area. Yet Levi believes that in the situation of the camp deprivation led to a situation of pure survival "in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero". Levi discusses in particular the "crematorium ravens", those prisoners who were forced to work in the squad

which manned the gas chambers. He asks us that we suspend judgment on their behaviour because it is impossible for us to know what we might have done:

I believe that no one is authorised to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not (Levi, 2000: 266).

To judge would require us to imagine ourselves in their shoes and this is impossible.

Levi's view has not gone unchallenged. LaCapra notes that when looking at these people in the gray area we should remember that they were placed in such ambiguous situations by perpetrators of crime. Hence he concludes:

The deconstruction of binary oppositions [perpetrators-victims] need not result in a generalized conceptual blur or in the continual suspension of all judgment and practice (LaCapra, 1994: 11).

He goes on to quote Geoffrey Hartman, whose views on judgment have immediate relevance to Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann:

The aim of judgment in historical or literary-critical discourse, a forensic rather than juridical sort of inquiry, is not that of determining guilt or innocence. It is to change history into memory: to make a case for what should be remembered. This responsibility converts every judgment into a judgment on the person who makes it (LaCapra, 1994: 11).

Arendt did not need to discern Eichmann's guilt. It was patently obvious. But she did seek to understand why he was guilty and how he became guilty and in that sense her investigation is forensic, a detective story. She also highlights what should be remembered: Eichmann's thoughtlessness. In so doing she challenges herself and the reader to watch out for the same mistake in our own

conduct, in other words to be always on the alert for the need to think.¹⁶

For Arendt thinking and judging are essentially negative activities as they require the subject to break out of the mould of clichés and formulae. Wellmer describes her analysis:

Thinking has no definite results (as cognition has), it is destructive (rather than constructive); judgment is not compelling (as truth is) and is not arrived at by moving within a rule-governed calculus (as logical conclusions are) (Wellmer, 1996: 42).

The result is that for Arendt the exercise of thought and judgment is bound by definition to be an exercise carried out by a lone person who is able to step outside the bounds of the ‘normal’ ways of thinking of society. Wellmer notes that while this seems plausible in the context of Nazi Germany it cannot be wholly correct. Whether my moral judgment can claim universal acceptance depends on whether my description of the facts is morally correct. Eichmann and his colleagues started off with a false description of the Jews as non-Germans and as of an inferior race. Once this view is corrected it becomes impossible to maintain that they should be exterminated or even forced to emigrate.

VII. Peace Philosophy

By highlighting the way in which Arendt and other writers present the holocaust, attention has been drawn to important features that, while found in all history, are particularly relevant in peace thought. The features we have noted are firstly the personalisation of the accounts, seeing the horrors through the life

16. Arendt dislikes any attempt to put Eichmann into a category. As Ring puts it, “*Eichmann in Jerusalem* was intended to unfreeze those frozen interpretations about the nature of evil without offering a comfortable category into which Eichmann and other perpetrators of political evil would fit (Ring, 1998: 163).

of individual human beings; secondly a philosophical reflection set in the context of how concrete persons reacted to it in their lives, and, finally, the detective story narration technique.

The personalisation of history is an important part of peace philosophy, because it is generally recognised that the first step away from peace is the denial of the human identity of the other. It is complicity in the word-play by which well-established German citizens were defined primarily as Jews and hence as “other” in a German culture to which they belonged, that was the first step in the road to the gas chamber. Whereas history can talk in abstract terms about movements and structural causes, peace history and peace philosophy, whilst not neglecting structural aspects, must always bring us face to face with concrete individual persons, who engage us as persons. The Nobel Peace Prize is one indication of this. The Nobel Committee does not work from an abstract definition of peace and find the persons who best fit this mould. Rather the Committee makes decisions which themselves expand the notion of peace, to include human rights, environment, agriculture and the like and this expansion takes place because that is where concrete persons have taken the notion of peace.

This personalisation of peace leads to the second aspect, the reflection on evil in the life of historical persons. The evil being dealt with in the case of genocide and the holocaust is too immense for us to grasp a simple list of casualty figures benumbs and hence stops us from encountering the reality. There is a danger that we put the evil aside as something that could only happen in that past time and place and hence as remote from us. Or there is the danger that we cast ourselves as heroes and virtuous people who would certainly have reacted differently, in which case we look down on and despise the victims, or at least feel annoyed by their passivity. This is a feeling Arendt often refers to in

her account. By seeing the story from the angle of someone who is stuck in it, we can better understand the way in which the evil had an all-embracing hold and thus are less liable to “overcome” it by pious platitudes.¹⁷

It means that peace philosophy, however much it may discuss theory and history in general, works through individual examples and hence in a disparate way, awakening our pity, compassion or sense of justice because of one person before us.

Finally, I refer to the theme of a detective novel, one in which suspense is maintained until the very end. In the case of Lee’s account of Otto Frank it literally is a search for possible culprits and the reader has to read to the end before all is clear. In Arendt’s case the search is for what it is that made Eichmann into such a great murderer. It is a search within for the source of his guilt. Moreover, the reader could not know the answer because, like most normal human beings, the reader will come with the usual prejudices: evil is done by really wicked people, or by people caught in a system where they must obey unpalatable orders. The detective, Arendt, leads us through these ideas to one that is shocking and unexpected: evil is banal.

The detective framework then not only holds the reader’s attention, but also helps to eliminate the expected and find the culprit precisely where we least expect. Adam Hochschild’s (1999) *King Leopold’s Ghost* is a similar work set in Belgium and the Congo of the late nineteenth century. It too uses the detective

17. Levi brings out this point with great poignancy when he describes the fate of one girl of 16, found alive, in the gas chamber. The men responsible for the chamber are transformed: “They no longer have before them the anonymous mass, the flood of frightened, stunned people coming off the boxcars: they have a person.” (Levi, 2000: 264). Levi comments that while the saint may be moved by the suffering of the masses, the average person only has, “The sporadic pity addressed to the single individual, the *Mitmensch*, the co-man: the human being of flesh and blood standing before us, within the reach of our providentially myopic senses.” (Levi, 2000: 265).

narrative to tell us that the seemingly bumbling and cultured Leopold II of Belgium was in fact a mass murderer.

The detective novel not only works best when the villain turns out to be the most unexpected character in the book, but also when it ends on this note, leaving us to ponder why a seemingly good person should have committed the crime. Holocaust narrative also leads us to this silence of pondering, which, as we have seen, is one way in which the enormity of the guilt can be portrayed beside the comparability of the events.

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漢娜·鄂蘭與浩劫在文學的述說

雷敦穌*

鄂蘭從加害者的觀點討論艾希曼的審判而引起世人震驚。

本篇從文學角度討論鄂蘭述說艾希曼案，並與其他討論浩劫的日記、歷史和哲學書作比較。浩劫的可怕性超越我們平常能想像的，因此形容浩劫的作者必須用一些文學的方法領導讀者進入與普通生活不同的倫理環境。

關鍵詞：全燔祭（浩劫）、鄂蘭、安·法蘭克、艾希曼、希特勒

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