



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

Notes and Comment

NOW and again, in the most unlikely places, there appears a little paradigm of the sort of misunderstanding between men of presumably good faith and sound intelligence which, in personal or international affairs, brings on catastrophe. Such a paradigm was presented recently in the pages of the *Times Book Review*. Hannah Arendt had written for this magazine, and for publication in book form, an account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. No one was more qualified than Miss Arendt to undertake such a work; her experience as German Jew, historian, philosopher, and humanist enabled her to approach her subject with feeling, with reason, and with knowledge. She outlined precisely and brilliantly the structure of the Nazi hierarchy. She analyzed the character of Eichmann, a member of that hierarchy, and found him, despite the scope of the horror that it was within his power to inflict, a man without depth of character, of passion, or of intelligence; six million victims could not have been executed without the dogged efficiency of such simpletons as he. She recorded the behavior of individuals and of nations, and found within her story a moral for Germans, for citizens of other Western countries, and for Jews—in descending order of responsibility: It is evil to assent actively or passively to evil, as its instrument, as its observer, or as its victim. She criticized the Israeli handling of the case for its lapses into histrionics at a moment that called for calm analysis and for the rendering of justice to an individual who reflected the almost total collapse of conscience in a formerly civilized nation. One of the assumptions underlying her work was that, while compassion is one enemy of evil, a stronger and more reliable force for good is reason, for the dictates of reason in moral questions are most likely to coincide

with the demands of conscience. She was concerned with all the sins of omission and commission that contributed to the disaster, and, concluding that evil is never grand but (an infinitely more terrible thought) unremittingly trivial, she subtitled her work "A Report on the Banality of Evil."

But, with the perversity that often interrupts even the most lucid and brilliant discussions of ethics and historiography, Michael A. Musmanno, a Justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, chose, in the pages of the *Times*, to misunderstand. In reviewing her book, he accused Miss Arendt of an excess of sympathy for Eichmann (her condemnation of the Nazi leaders was far more withering than any that had been made before) and of a lack of sympathy for the Jews (her sorrow over their suffering was far more eloquent than the Justice's own). He ignored all Miss Arendt's ironies (referring to her "Alas, nobody believed him," unmistakably ironic in context, as a "lament" for Eichmann). He accused her of indifference to "the screams of horror-stricken women and terrorized children as they saw the tornado of death sweeping toward them," although an important purpose of her inquiry was to determine the causes of those screams, so that they might never be heard again. To Miss Arendt's

quiet, moral, rational document he opposed such rhetorical exclamations as "Himmler!" "Hitler!," as though these were enlightening statements in the philosophy of history. When, in a letter solicited by the *Times*, Miss Arendt attempted to clarify her already clear position, Justice Musmanno, in a reply, simply distorted it again, in such a way as to make fruitful discussion of "Eichmann in Jerusalem" almost impossible. The *Times* published this unsymmetrical exchange without comment, and, evidently no more sensitive to irony than Justice Musmanno himself, added to the confusion by presenting a letter written in Miss Arendt's defense as though its author, Irving J. Weiss, had taken the side of Justice Musmanno. The refusal to listen, the frightening breakdown of communication, is nothing new; we have grown accustomed to it in life and in the headlines. But the very essence of literature is communication, and to find such a breakdown in the literary section of a major newspaper is profoundly disappointing.

Anniversary

THE Rehearsal Club, which occupies two five-story brownstones on West Fifty-third Street, is the home away from home of some forty girls, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty, all of whom are bent on becoming star actresses, singers, dancers, or what you will in the performing arts. The other day, the Rehearsal Club gave a party to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, and we were among those invited to be present. No sooner did we ring the front-door bell than the door swung open and a maid beckoned us into a darkly wainscotted entrance hall, charged with the presence—here, if only in portrait form—of an awesome Episcopal deaconess named Jane Harris Hall. It was this sombre personage who, with the help



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