

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

A Public Life

SEYLA BENHABIB

BETWEEN FRIENDS: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975. Edited and with an introduction by Carol Brightman. Harcourt. 412 pp. \$34.95.

On January 22, 1976, shortly after Hannah Arendt's death in her New York City apartment the previous December, Mary McCarthy wrote an obituary for her friend and mentor of over thirty years. Titled "Saying Good-bye to Hannah," this piece was remarkable in its invocation of Arendt's physical, or to use the old Latin word, "corporeal," presence. Beginning with a short summary of Arendt's last work, *The Life of the Mind*, which she posthumously edited and saw to publication, McCarthy went on to remark:

She was a beautiful woman, alluring, seductive, feminine, which is why I said "Jewess"—the old-fashioned term, evoking the daughters of Sion, suits her, like a fringed Spanish shawl . . . She had small, fine hands, charming ankles, elegant feet. She liked shoes, in all the years I knew her, I think she only once had a corn. Her legs, feet, and ankles expressed quickness, decision

This invocation of Arendt's bodily being, the almost lewd references to her feet and ankles, startled the reader. Perhaps it is only now, with the publication of their correspondence, that we can appreciate the multiple levels along which the friendship of these two extraordinary women unfolded. Like a piece of music moving with great ease from the andante to the allegretto, Arendt and McCarthy waltz between the personal and the political, the intimate and the public, with grace and sovereignty. These creative and passionate women treat each other with respect and love, support and gentle criticism, but above all with enormous generosity toward what the other has to offer—ranging from thoughts and emotions to gossip and travel accounts.

Between Friends: The Correspondence

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of *Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, is a beautifully edited and prepared volume by Carol Brightman. It provides unparalleled insight into the emotional and intimate being of these women while bearing testimony to the life and times of what McCarthy referred to as "the minority of a minority." This minority, the American and European "anti-communist Left" of the post-World War II years down to the outbreak of the student movement in 1968, is the "public world" that Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy shared.

McCarthy analyzed and interpreted Arendt's thoughts, in the manner of a brilliant graduate student who would be fond of poking holes in her professor's argument.

They first met in Manhattan in 1944. McCarthy, a classicist by training, was then married to Edmund Wilson, and Arendt was being introduced to the larger circle of New York intellectuals through her pieces in *Partisan Review* and *The Nation*. It was their affiliation with the group around *Partisan Review*, edited by Phillip Rahv and William Phillips, that brought them into close collaboration in the early fifties. The various marital problems and writing blocks of Dwight Macdonald, founder and editor of the short-lived journal *politics*, appear and disappear in the pages of this correspondence. Robert Lowell, affectionately referred to by the two as "Cal," is ever-present with his alcoholism and clinically borderline bouts of paranoia. Who could forget Arendt's inimitably caustic remark, "and little Podhoretz, already soooo 'tired' like the proverbial Jewish waiter, and Alfred [Kazin] whom Harold [Rosenberg] described to me as resembling in walk and posture an arrogant Camel"?

And how not to chuckle over McCarthy's inquiry to Arendt from a letter dated December 19, 1967: "But I read that Susan Sontag was arrested [in an antiwar demonstration]. And what about her? When I last watched her with you at the Lowells', it was clear that she was going to seek to conquer you. Or that she had fallen in love with you—the same thing. Anyway, did she?"

The correspondence begins with a brief note from Arendt to McCarthy on March 10, 1949, stating how much she had enjoyed *The Oasis* (1949), a short novel about utopian intellectuals of McCarthy's generation. It continues and takes off with a long letter from McCarthy in April of 1951 concerning Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. McCarthy calls this book a "truly extraordinary piece of work . . . and also engrossing and fascinating in the way that a novel is." McCarthy's astute comments set the pattern for the exchange between the two women: McCarthy read, analyzed and interpreted Arendt's thoughts in the manner of a brilliant graduate student who would be fond of poking holes in her professor's argument. Arendt, for her part, regularly acknowledged everything of Mary's that she had seen in print or that had been sent to her, but there is no engagement on her part with McCarthy's thought commensurate with the latter's attempts to understand Arendt. Perhaps this is what leads Carol Brightman to call their relationship "a filial one." Arendt represented the high culture of European philosophy and literature that McCarthy, six years Arendt's junior, treated with adoration as well as skepticism, with veneration and, occasionally, a touch of Yankee disrespect and common sense.

On August 10, 1954, McCarthy writes to Arendt with a philosophical query: She has been pondering Raskolnikov's old problem in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, "Why shouldn't I murder my grandmother if I want to? Give me one good reason." Arendt writes back with a professorial gesture that acknowledges the depth as well as difficulty of McCarthy's question: "The philosophic answer would be the answer of Socrates: Since I have got to live with myself, am in fact the only person from whom I never shall be able to part, whose company I shall have to bear forever, I don't want to become a murderer; I don't want to spend my life in the company of a murderer."

McCarthy is unconvinced: "The mod-

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ern person I posit would say to Socrates, with a shrug, "Why not? What's wrong with a murderer?" And Socrates would be back where he started." McCarthy may have been thinking of Walt Whitman's famous lines: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.) . . ."

Nearly twenty years later they return to the same question. Arendt has written a manuscript called "Thinking and Moral Considerations," which she has sent to McCarthy to edit. McCarthy, and not for the first time, complains about Arendt's vocabulary, and her tendency to force the English language to mean what it does not mean. Arendt argues that "thoughtlessness," the inability of the individual to engage in the dialogue of the soul with itself, is at the root of moral depravity. McCarthy observes that "thoughtlessness" in English would mean "heedlessness, neglect, forgetfulness," and that Arendt should come up with a synonym like "inability to think." But what is Arendt really after? "The banality of evil," the phrase that Arendt, partially borrowing from Karl Jaspers, applied to Eichmann's person and deeds, suggested that what Eichmann suffered from was not stupidity, extraordinary moral wickedness or depravity but "thoughtlessness." McCarthy was unconvinced then, and remained unconvinced, retorting that Eichmann "was profoundly, egregiously stupid. . . . Here I rather agree with Kant . . . that stupidity is caused . . . by a wicked heart."

Despite her skepticism toward her friend's reflections on moral thinking and evil, Mary McCarthy was absolutely horrified by the reactions to Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Referring at one point to the outburst as "assuming the proportions of a pogrom," she set out to defend Arendt against their former *Partisan Review* colleagues. They both recognized that Arendt's characterization of Eichmann in terms of the much-misunderstood phrase "the banality of evil" was less crucial than her views about the role played by the Jewish Councils in not being able to resist the Nazis and their extermination machinery.

As McCarthy's response to the accusations against Arendt got more and more agitated—she was completely taken aback and never forgave the headline of the *Observer* upon the French translation of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, "Est-Elle Nazie?"—Hannah is like a rock in the middle of the storm. She writes in October 1963 that the campaign against her Eich-

mann book is political, "led and guided in all particulars by interest groups and governmental agencies," that she as an individual is helpless when faced with this machinery, which has time, money, connections, and can manipulate public relations. Arendt makes a startling confession to McCarthy: "You were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted—namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria. And that ever since I did it, I feel—after twenty years [since the war]—light-hearted about the whole matter. Don't tell anybody; is it not proof positive that I have no 'soul'?"

The use of the term "light-hearted" here may be another infelicity in Arendt's vocabulary; she seems to mean that her heart was lightened by having gotten rid of a burden. We have known since Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's masterful biography of Arendt, *For Love of the World*, that writing on the Eichmann trials was a "cura posterior" for Arendt. By voicing in public the shame and rage she had carried in private for thirty years—that the Jewish people had not been able to resist and fight back against the onslaught of the Nazis' Final Solution—Arendt was finally unloading the burden that history had imposed on her. The correspondence with McCarthy throws unprecedented light on Arendt's very private thoughts and feelings on this issue.

As the troubled sixties unfold, the Vietnam War escalates; Kennedy is assassinated; Johnson, whom both women loathe, comes to power; urban crime increases; and New York City is visibly deteriorating. Arendt shows that she is a European refugee, never again at home anywhere in the world. She confides in McCarthy that she and her husband, Heinrich Bluecher, have been considering immigrating to Switzerland; perhaps the old Continent is safer after all. McCarthy's answer is emphatic: Although she herself is an expatriate living in Europe for most of this time, she pleads with Arendt not to quit the "new republic." Arendt appears to take her friend's urgings to heart, and her political writings on the United States—*On Revolution* (1963), *On Violence* (1969) and *Crisis of the Republic* (1972)—take shape.

During this period McCarthy sets into political practice the virtues of citizenship that Arendt regarded as one of the unique achievements of American democracy. McCarthy is one of the first American intellectuals to clearly oppose the war and to visit Hanoi and South Vietnam; she even suggests that her hus-

band, who is an American diplomat, will have to consider resigning if the policy of the U.S. government keeps on. In June 1968 McCarthy reports to Arendt that the students in the Odéon Theatre in Paris, who held a round-the-clock "talkathon," called *liberté de la parole*, were marvelous. It is Mary McCarthy who joins a group smuggling oppositional figures out of Chile after Allende's fall, and who gets Arendt, among others, to "write a small contribution."

The Arendt-McCarthy correspondence is not the first of Arendt's posthumously edited collections of letters. In 1992 Lotte Koehler and Hans Saner brought out an equally masterful edition of the Arendt-Jaspers correspondence. When compared with the ceremonial, often stilted, and pompously deep quality of the letters between Arendt and her teacher Jaspers, the correspondence with McCarthy is an exchange between near equals, but above all between women friends. It combines humor and seriousness, chattiness and sorrow, in a remarkable way.

Her correspondence with McCarthy and with Jaspers adds greatly to our understanding of the private persona of Hannah Arendt. Although she put reflection upon the public realm of politics at the center of her mature philosophical work, Arendt was an intensely private person, who shied away from "the light of the public." Her letters, particularly those she exchanged with McCarthy, make vivid to us a generous and opinionated, affectionate and temperamental, steadfast and kind woman.

Unfortunately, though, our picture of Arendt remains incomplete in a crucial way. A very significant part of her correspondence, with her teacher and onetime lover Martin Heidegger, remains unedited, largely due to objections of the Heidegger family and their refusal to make public the material in their possession.

By now the facts are well known. During 1924-25, Arendt, who was a student of philosophy in Marburg, fell in love and had an affair with the brilliant young dozent of philosophy. Their affair continued intermittently after Arendt went to Heidelberg to study with Jaspers. By 1933, Arendt was a refugee in Paris, working with a Zionist organization to settle children in Palestine, while Heidegger had become the rector of the University of Freiburg, in charge of bringing the university "in line" with the demands of the National Socialist Party. After the war

Arendt sought Heidegger out, and they resumed contact in the 1950s. With equanimity she appeared to forgive Heidegger his "mistake," while Heidegger continued his tortured attempts at a metaphysical justification of his political error.

Arendt, at the age of 22, wrote the following to Heidegger on August 22, 1928: "The way which you have shown for me is longer and harder than I had thought. It requires a whole life. . . . I would have lost my right to live, if I would have lost my love to you." The letter ends without a greeting but with the remark, "And if there is a God, I will love you better after death." In 1960, as the German edition of *The Human Condition* was published, Arendt sent him a copy with the note that "if things had gone properly between the two," she would have dedicated the book to him. Instead, she noted on a piece of paper, "The dedication of this book is forbidden/How should I dedicate it to you/the one who is so dear to me [*dem Vertrauten*]/to whom I have remained faithful/and not/but both, in love."

This correspondence reveals a different side of Arendt than that with Jaspers or McCarthy: Instead of the sovereign distance with which Arendt handled so much misfortune and criticism, these letters show despair and great pain. But the light they shed on how and why Arendt "forgave" Heidegger his collaboration with the Nazis and how she explained those actions to herself make them an important piece of the history of "this awful century" now approaching its end.

Arendt's correspondence with McCarthy is not touched with the darkness and despair of the letters to Heidegger. Instead, their friendship was a source of public reflection and personal solace in a world that often seemed on the brink of disaster. Through their writing and lecturing, public participation and involvements, Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy earn their place among the few women of our tradition who have discovered, in Arendt's words, "the joys of public life," of acting and speaking in common in a shared public sphere. □

Istanbul Expressed

CHARLOTTE INNES

THE BLACK BOOK. *By Orhan Pamuk. Translated by Guneli Gun. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 400 pp. \$25.*

One image stays with me from a visit to Istanbul some years ago: the floor of a mosque, covered with layer after layer, perhaps century after century, of intricately patterned rugs. This clever cushion for the knees of the faithful seemed to symbolize the difference between East and West, between the preservation of a multi-layered past and a tear-down, throwaway culture; between a textured life, full of meaning and mystery, and one that's all surface and instant gratification.

Re-examining these impressions after reading *The Black Book*, an extraordinary, tantalizing novel by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, I'm embarrassed by my unconscious stereotyping, even my easy assumptions that life must have meaning and a rug can be something other than itself. For Pamuk delights in shredding preconceived dichotomies—East/West, sameness/difference, commu-

nity/individual, fiction/reality, meaning/nothingness, certainty/ambiguity—considering them part of our universal quest for identity.

In the process—and process becomes a major player in this book—Pamuk also challenges the ability of literature to describe the Big Questions. Sometimes playful, sometimes angry, he wrestles with the demon of writing, not to give logical shape and meaning to his story but to resist that natural impulse, because those qualities don't exist in life.

This game of mirrors in which the survival of literature is at stake is familiar from other modern fantasists like Italo Calvino, Jeanette Winterson, William Gass and especially Jorge Luis Borges. But Pamuk seems more dangerous. He's like a charming, turn-of-the-century huckster, luring literary prospectors through a desert of mental contortion, only to leave them suddenly, without map or sustenance, to complete the search for meaning by themselves.

That Pamuk pushes readers close to the edge of what they are likely to accept has already been proved in his native Turkey. In this most Westernized country of the East, *The Black Book* has been both a best seller and the object of condemnation, not only for its overwrought sentences and postmodern style but also for

Charlotte Innes writes about books for the Los Angeles Times and many other publications

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