

roducing the first post-war number in 1919, in which Jacques Rivière wrote:

We are the most candid people on this earth. Others may find us hard and pugnacious. They can take us to task for our nature, often scornful and aggressive. But we cannot be surpassed for the truth of our feeling or for the readiness with which we express it. The Russians have perhaps said things more base, more intimate than we have dared say, but their words are blended with lies or at least with dreams. Our literature is the most purified, the most free of all hypocrisy that any nation can produce.

This boast is probably justified. Gide, in fact, in his attempt to put the whole of one modern man onto paper, was going to confess things which were original in their baseness and intimacy. Proust was going to analyze human emotions with a thoroughness that has never been surpassed. Valéry, in the immense *Cahiers* which are only now being brought out, was carrying intellectual self-consciousness further than anyone had ever done before. Claudel deliberately built himself up into a mountain of dogmatism; Benda represented adamant nationalism; Montherlant did what could be done with erotic, neo-Catholic dandyism, and so on. If a literary culture is to be defined by the variety of extreme types it produces, then the France of the inter-war period can offer a display that has no equivalent anywhere.

Because of the violence of these oppositions, the intellectual temperature at the center of the *NRF* must have been one of the highest on record. *Criterion* had *The Wasteland* in its first number but did not reach that height again. A major part of modern French literature went through the *NRF*; all French writers were affected by the review's intense awareness of Surrealism, Freudianism, Marxism, foreign literatures, etc.; all were conditioned by the implicit assumption that the artist's essential loyalty is to his temperament and the thinker's to his thought, wherever it may lead him.

Some people have held that this is a suicidal conception of culture; that to offer everything up on the altar of the spirit is to consume the very basis of culture. It is, they say, to forget that nations are held together by a collective inarticulate, by healthy stupidities, which are better left untampered with. Certainly the size and contradictory brilliance of the French bourgeois elite provided no immediate protection against the onslaught of German fascism, and certainly the higher achievements are rarely allied with sound political sense on the everyday level. The French have paid in the past for their exemplary artistic and intellectual recklessness, and they may have to pay again. But on Judgment Day they will have several unique things to show, and one will be the collected files of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

Dark Illumination

THE HUMAN CONDITION. By Hannah Arendt. The University of Chicago Press. 333 pp. \$4.75.

Richard Peters

IT IS A brave philosopher who will venture to write a "remarkable thesis" on "the human condition" which casts new light on "such subjects as semantics, philosophy, politics, aesthetics, the family, economics, labor movements and the growth of psychology and the social sciences."

As a matter of fact, Dr. Arendt's thesis is not all that remarkable. It is that we have become a society of laborers, preoccupied with survival rather

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than with creating objects that last or with making our mark in public life. Modern developments in space travel and automation are likely to set us free from the habitat of our survival and from labor. What will then happen to us, a society of job-holders, "where the only active decision required of an individual is the rejection of his personality"? For we have lost the zest of the Greeks for public affairs and the joy of the medievals in craftsmanship. And the life of contemplation is quite beyond the ken of most of us.

This rather somber and sententious diagnosis is wrapped up in metaphysical musings in the Hegelian style. The various transformations of "the human condition" are described in very general concepts, and the thought of most philosophers from Plato to Whitehead is interpreted in terms of them. Somewhat surprisingly, the concepts themselves

are not of the rarefied and abstract sort so often associated with such high-flown enterprises. They are the earthy ones of labor, work and action.

Nevertheless these earth-bound concepts preserve the mystical overtones of so many previous trinities. When Dr. Arendt stresses the connection between labor and what is done for survival and consumption she is particularly difficult to follow. Whitehead once advised philosophers to ponder upon their organic sensations. Dr. Arendt seems to have taken him very seriously. "A philosophy of life," she says, "that does not arrive, as did Nietzsche, at the affirmation of 'eternal recurrence'... as the highest principle of all being, simply does not know what it is talking about." Dr. Arendt arrives all right, and she may well know what she is talking about; she does not always make it clear to the uninitiated.

Labor, claims Dr. Arendt, is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body; it is bound up with the survival of the human organism. But the initial trouble about such a view is that there are so few activities of this sort. Almost nothing that man does, apart from things like breathing and swallowing, corresponds to a merely biological process. For an act—let alone labor—cannot even be described without reference to social standards and conventions. Even eating is not just a matter of getting food into the stomach. Life is seldom a matter of mere survival, it is a matter of surviving in a certain manner. What constitutes "labor" in a given society is quite inseparable from the standards and conventions which make it a society and not just a multitude of men.

LOCKE, for stylistic reasons in all probability, spoke of "the labour of our body and the work of our hands." He had in mind the activities of the early colonists in digging the soil, making fences, hewing wood and drawing water. But Dr. Arendt elevates a stylistic gimmick into a crucial metaphysical distinction. "Work," she claims, is distinct from "labor" because it brings about a durable world of objects. Tools were invented to erect such a world, not primarily to help the human life process. (How does she know?) "Without a world between man and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity." (Are the stars, then, less "objective" than electric-light bulbs?) Fabrication has a determinate, predictable end, labor has neither beginning nor end.

Is a man, then, who digs a latrine of a semi-permanent nature "working" or

"laboring"? Is the fisherman not a laborer because he must use his hands rather than his body? He is, after all, furthering a life process—unless he fishes for fun. Or does he work when he fishes and labor when he eats the kipper? Or does he work when he makes nets and labor when he uses them? Where do "life processes" begin and end? Work, it is said, is the only activity that has a beginning and an end. But drinking, surely, has as much a beginning and an end as making a straw to drink with. For "end" is, of course, used in at least two senses—that of end-product and that of the terminating point of any activity whatsoever.

DR. ARENDT's concept of "action" is even more bizarre than her other two concepts. She wishes to reserve the term exclusively for activity that goes on between men and men, where men reveal themselves in speech to one another, make their mark and shape their stories. The city state arose from the need to multiply such occasions of "immortal fame" and to remedy the futile evanescence of action and speech, which passes away unless it is preserved in stories or history.

Action, Dr. Arendt goes on to say, may have a beginning but no predictable end. But this is surely an outrage to ordinary usage. For the model case of a human action is something done to bring about an end.

What Dr. Arendt really means is that the consequences or results of actions are unpredictable. That is no doubt true, but so are the consequences or results of producing material things like steam engines, wheels, pickaxes, and golf clubs.

Wittgenstein once said that language is a "form of life," and Dr. Arendt, to a certain extent, shares his insight into the sort of life made possible by speech. But she fails to see how far this insight must be pushed—right into the realm of what she calls "work" and "labor." She has intimations of what is distinctive of "the human condition" which are quite beyond the ken of Marxists, behaviorists, and machine-bound information theorists. But the concepts she uses to present them are too coarse and confused to pinpoint its complexities. They are, indeed, so bizarre that the reader is constantly struck by their strangeness instead of by what they are meant to illuminate.

The point of her scrutiny, however, is revelation rather than recommendation. "What I propose," she says, "is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing." And on her view "thought... has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results" (She even thinks that the laws of logic are rooted in the structure of the human brain!) Modern man, she concludes, is a laborer, oblivious to "work" and "action." He is alienated from his world by the adoption of the universal point of view introduced by Galileo, turned in on himself by Luther, the craven victim of Cartesian doubt. He may well be. But Dr. Arendt forgets that Descartes also introduced into the modern world the passion for clarity and distinctness, a passion which she does not seem to share. Her thesis is therefore bedeviled by the obscurity of her concepts and their lack of distinctness from one another. Like Collingwood's artist, she is pregnant with a message that she cannot clearly utter. Yet without her trinity of labor, work and action, would she have any message at all? Is the metaphysics of "the human condition" much more than the rigging of concepts to match a mood?



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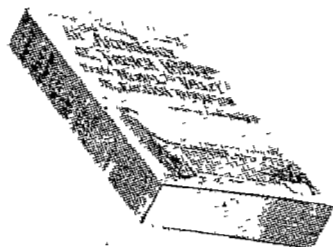


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