

# Slump in Sages

MEN IN DARK TIMES. By Hannah Arendt. Harcourt, Brace & World. 272 pp. \$5.95.

## PAUL ROAZEN

Mr. Roazen is the author of the recently published *Freud: Political and Social Thought* (Knopf) and teaches political theory at Harvard.

Political philosophy has fallen on bad times. There has been, as Sir Isaiah Berlin once put it, a slump in sages. In pragmatic America it is always easier for scholars to gain support and recognition for narrow empirical research projects than for more speculative examinations of the fundamental premises of our political and social thought. Thinking about how we think should be the theorist's job. But when political philosophy is pursued, too often it is simply academic and irrelevant to the contemporary world.

Hannah Arendt is that rarity, a public philosopher with an audience. She has fully earned the right to be considered one of our ranking social thinkers. Her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, which examines the links between anti-Semitism, imperialism and totalitarianism, is a splendid study, full of ideas. Her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was capable of upsetting intellectuals, especially Jewish ones, all around the world; this book remains a shocker—for the terrible historical tale it tells, for the trial it records, and for the viewpoint it presents.

*Men in Dark Times* is a collection of assorted essays about leading Central European intellectual figures of the last century (with the exception of the opening essay on Lessing). Despite an occasional tendency to pontificate, Miss Arendt can be a very moving and eloquent writer. Some of these essays were originally written in German and their English translations do not read as smoothly as the ones composed in English. Though this is not a major book of the author's it does present some of her most characteristic outlooks.

A refugee herself, Miss Arendt is a messenger of ill tidings. The rise of Hitler put an end to the rich cultural life of a Continental intelligentsia, forcing many of its members to flee and scatter abroad. Other men at other times have found it easy to perceive the break in their personal lives as a shattering of the Western tradition. Maybe each of us is doomed to nourish his own provincialism. For those educated in the best of Western culture, the disruption of their own societies was almost bound to foretell the decline of the West. It is perhaps un-

necessary to point out that, despite the holocausts of this century, culture—even of a distinctively Western variety—has in fact succeeded in flourishing outside the German-speaking world.

Against the background of her general theme that our era is one of public darkness, Miss Arendt's form of cosmopolitanism has given us some brilliant essays on individual figures. The study of Rosa Luxemburg, for example, is wonderfully evocative of a human being, and presents an outstanding account of a great and neglected figure in the history of socialism. A few pages on Pope John XXIII make him live as a simple man of faith and humanity, at the same time a most impressive Prince of the Church.

A very long and devoted chapter on Walter Benjamin attempts to give this man of letters his due recognition, although her essay fails to convey persuasively the sources of her enthusiasm for his talent. (Miss Arendt is responsible for some of Benjamin's work appearing in English now for the first

time, and a debate is already under way over his contribution to literary and moral life.) A fine, clear essay on Bertolt Brecht illustrates her range of appreciation; she is most interested in him for his political and social convictions, and the way his ideology could conflict with his art. Yet it is the poet in Brecht, as well as his playfulness, which has captured her imagination. Miss Arendt also sensitively treats Isak Dinesen, Hermann Broch, her teacher Karl Jaspers, as well as her personal friends Waldemar Gurian and Randall Jarrell.

No such book of reviews, addresses, essays and tributes can be expected to have the satisfying coherence of a sustained or developed argument. Such a collection almost necessarily acquires a continuity more of mood than of logic. These articles do form a piece, however, with her larger body of work, which has focused on defining the limits of the public realm. Although she writes so often on literary subjects, and demonstrates a real talent for understanding the artist's dilemmas and inner conflicts, in the end Miss Arendt takes her stand on moral and political grounds. As a public philosopher she toils on, contributing by her illumination to relieving public darkness.

## A Slave in Our Time

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A RUN-AWAY SLAVE. By Esteban Montejo. Edited by Miguel Barnet. Translated from the Spanish by Jocasta Innes. Pantheon Books. 223 pp. \$4.95.

## OLIVER T. MYERS

Mr. Myers is chairman of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

The possibility of running into a person who grew up as a slave, someone who might recall with a clear mind the circumstances of slavery and the event of abolition, has now about reached zero in the United States. This is not so in Cuba, where slavery did not end until 1880, nearly twenty years before independence from Spain was won. A few years ago, Miguel Barnet found Esteban Montejo, an ex-slave who had reached manhood almost at the same moment he became a free man.

Montejo was born into slavery around 1860 (he gives that date, although the interviewer and editor suggests a year or two earlier), ran away into the forests as a teen-ager for a life of solitary and illicit freedom, and did not emerge until he was convinced that slavery had indeed

come to an end. In 1963 Miguel Barnet, a young poet and folklorist, gathered the story of his life through tape recordings and friendly chats over a two-year span, and this remarkable book is the result, a series of talks with a man whose mind is as free and open as his spirit had always been. It probably would not have attracted as much notice twenty or thirty years ago as it does now; for we have rediscovered slavery and have been forced to consider the cultural heritage of some of our friends and neighbors as Africans, and as American slaves.

Montejo (Barnet condescendingly refers to him as Esteban) was a born loner. He found slavery intolerable, not so much for its cruelty or repression, as for the total absence of independence, the independence he was to crave even during his years of freedom. "Lots of Negroes wanted to be friends with me, and they used to ask me what I had done as a runaway. I told them, 'Nothing.' I have always been one for my independence. Idle gossip never helped anyone. I went for years and years without talking to anyone at all."

It must have been something then for Barnet to get Montejo to talk enough to put together a book of this length. Read-

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