
BOOKS & WRITERS

Thinking What We Are Doing

By *W. H. Auden*

THE NORMAL consequence of having read a book with admiration and enjoyment is a desire that others should share one's feelings. There are, however, if I can judge from myself, occasional exceptions to this rule. Every now and then, I come across a book which gives me the impression of having been especially written for me. In the case of a work of art, the author seems to have created a world for which I have been waiting all my life; in the case of a "think" book, it seems to answer precisely those questions which I have been putting to myself. My attitude towards such a book, therefore, is one of jealous possessiveness. I don't want anybody else to read it; I want to keep it all to myself. Miss Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition** belongs to this small and select class; the only other member which, like hers, is concerned with historical-political matters, is Rosenstock-Hussey's *Out of Revolution*.

Possessiveness is, of course, an immoral emotion and, if the following remarks misrepresent or fail to do justice to Miss Arendt, at least they have been a moral discipline for me.

Nobody, I fancy, feels "happy" about the age in which we live or the future which even the living may know before they die. At all times in history men have felt anxious about their own fate or the fate of their class or community, but there has seldom been a time, I believe, when the present and future of the whole human endeavour on this earth have seemed questionable to so many people.

Miss Arendt is not, of course, so foolish or presumptuous as to offer saving solutions. She merely asks us to think what we are doing which we can never manage unless we can first agree about the meaning of the words we think with, which, in its turn, requires that we become

aware of what these words have meant in the past.

It would not be inaccurate, I believe, to call *The Human Condition* an essay in Etymology, a re-examination of what we think we mean, what we actually mean and what we ought to mean when we use such words as nature, world, labour, work, action, private, public, social, political, etc.

Consequently, the best way to approach it might be by discussing some of its definitions as if it were a dictionary.

NATURE: Man is part of nature in that he is a biological organism subject like all other creatures, to the laws of nature and the temporal cycle of generation. From the point of view of nature, man has no history, only the proto-history of the evolutionary processes by which the human species came into being. For nature, every man is an anonymous member of his species, identical with every other, or, at most, divisible into male and female. For nature, therefore, so long as the human species exists, there is no such thing as death, only life, and terms like growth and decay have no meaning, for these are only relevant to individuals of whom nature knows nothing. This natural biological man is, like some but not all animals, *social*—the survival of this species requires that its members associate constantly with each other—and he is a *labourer*. Miss Arendt defines as *labour*, any behaviour which is imposed by the need to survive. Thus, a tiger hunting its prey, can be said to be labouring. Man, however, is the labouring animal par excellence—the bee runs him pretty close—firstly because his particular needs and his numbers require that he spend a much greater part of his time in acquiring or producing what he needs to survive, and secondly, because he seems to be endowed with both the capacity and the instinct to produce a

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surplus over and above his immediate needs of consumption.

Man, the labouring animal does not act; he exhibits human behaviour, the goal of which is not a matter of personal decision, but dictated by the natural instinct to survive and propagate life. His motive, if the word can properly be used at all, is pleasure, or rather the avoidance of pain. Though he is social, the experiences of the labouring animal are essentially *private* and subjective. What he experiences are the unsharable experiences of the body. He needs the presence of his fellows not as persons but as bodies, another set of muscles, a fertile member of the opposite sex.

To man the labouring animal, past and future have no meaning. All that is temporally real to him is the present point on the biological cycle. For this reason he has no need of *speech*. If he uses words, he uses them as bees use dance-movements, as a code for conveying necessary information.

Lastly, man the labouring animal does not and cannot ask what his behaviour means, for life as life is something given, not made. It is like asking whether we live to eat or eat to live.

WORLD: In addition to being a member of the human species, every man is, what no other animal is, a mortal individual, aware that, though the race may be immortal, he and every other human individual must die.

At the same time he is aware—or was aware until modern science has made him doubt the evidence of his senses—that the realm of nature is made up not only of mortal creatures, but also of things, the earth, the ocean, the sun, moon, and stars, which are always there.

Out of this double awareness, of human mortality and the everlastingness of things, arises the desire and hope of transcending the cycle of natural birth and death by *making a world* of things which endure and in which, therefore, man can always be at home.

As Miss Arendt says:

Birth and death presuppose a world which is not in constant movement, but where durability and relative permanence make appearance and disappearance possible, which existed before any one individual appeared in it and will survive his eventual departure. Without a world into which men are born and from which they die, there would be nothing but eternal recurrence, the deathless everlastingness of the human as of any other animal species.

The mortal individual who is man the maker is not social, that is, for the process of fabrication he requires the presence, not of human beings, but of the various materials out of which he fashions a world. The object he makes, on the

other hand require the existence of a public community of human beings to use them and enjoy them. The fabricated world has an objective reality which is lacking in both human behaviour and human action.

Against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature. Only we who have erected the objectivity of a world of our own from what nature gives us, who have built it into the environment of nature so that we are protected from her, can look upon nature as something "objective." Without a world between man and nature, there is eternal movement but no objectivity.

What distinguishes working from labouring is that the results of labour are immediately consumed by the labourer while the products of work, whether use-objects like tools or enjoyment-objects like works of art, once they are completed, persist as they are unchanged and, ideally, for ever. A tool may wear out or be replaced by a better one, but this is an accident, while the notion of a loaf of bread that lasts forever is absurd; if it is not consumed, it is worthless.

The attitude of the worker or maker towards time, therefore, is quite different from that of the labourer. The past and future have a meaning for him but in a special way. What he assumes is that the future will be like the past; time for the maker, that is, has neither the cyclical motion of nature, nor the unilinear irreversible flow of history—like space it does not move but is there. All he knows about time is that it takes time to make an object so that he can only define it to himself as that which must not be wasted.

While the labourer always remains the servant of nature upon whose fertility his survival ultimately depends, the worker regards nature as raw material which has no value until he confers value upon it by transforming it into a world of objects.

To the degree that these objects have enjoyment value as well as use value, they may be said to be forms of speech. A beautiful temple "addresses" us no less than a beautiful poem. But it is the thing that speaks not its maker. While the labourer cannot even ask the question "what does life mean," the worker can say "life itself is meaningless but it provides the opportunity for making a meaningful world. He does not desire glory for himself but immortality for the things made with his hands.

ACTION: In addition to being a member of the human species, subject to natural necessity, and a mortal individual who can transform mortal life into immortal objects, every man is a unique

person. Though all must die, the birth of every human being marks the beginning of the existence of a being the like of whom never existed before and will never exist again. To be a person is to be able to say "I" and to have a *biography of one's own*, and the sum of all human biographies constitutes what we call history. While the labourer may require the society of other members of his kind and the worker the existence of others to use or enjoy his works, only the person requires a *public* realm of other persons to whom through his *actions* he discloses who he is. For human action is unintelligible without speech whereby the agent identifies who he is, what he is doing, and intends to do.

Labour is recurrent, work comes to an end when it has completed its task (which can be undone), but action is unpredictable, unrepeatable, and irretrievable. The name of the actor, even the act itself, may be forgotten, but it will effect the actions of others till the end of time. Action tends to be as boundless as the freedom in which it is grounded and would destroy us if we did not voluntarily set limits to what we do.

The three principle limitations are law, forgiveness, and promises. By laws we establish a common agreement to prohibit certain actions and to punish offenders rather than take unlimited vengeance. By forgiveness we dismiss an error for the sake of the person who committed it. In an admirable sentence, Miss Arendt indicates the relation between law and forgiveness.

Men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish, and they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable.

By promises we set a bound to our actions in the unknown future. Promises are always specific, valid for an agreed purpose; a general promise like saying "I promise to be good" is meaningless.

IN HER historical review of these notions, Miss Arendt starts with the Greeks.

It is hard to say which is the most astonishing, the Greek pride which identified the human with the human person who acts out of freedom not necessity and relegated all that men do with their bodies or their hands, all that is necessary or useful to a sub-human status, or the Greek clear-sightedness which saw exactly what, in their age, such a premise must involve. The truly human person can only exist if there are semi- or sub-human beings who will supply his necessities and build his world for him. But no human beings exist who will do this of their own free-will; they must be compelled. The necessary pre-political condition for the free community of

persons is violence and slavery. It is to their credit that the Greeks never pretended, as some later upholders of slavery have done, that certain kinds of human beings are happier as slaves than they would be as free men; on the contrary, they argued that a slave must be a base fellow because he did not kill himself rather than be enslaved.

Life in the Greek City state was divided, therefore, into two realms, the private realm of the household, which its master ruled by force, and in which not only the business of rearing a family but also all the activities we call economic were carried on, and the public realm of politics in which the free citizen disclosed himself to his peers by speech and action and strove to win glory.

Miss Arendt is more reticent than, perhaps, she should be, about what actually went on in this public realm of the Greeks. My knowledge of Greek History is very limited, but the picture given by Thucydides is not, to my mind, very alluring. Miss Arendt may be right when she deplores Plato's attempt to eliminate the freedom of the public realm and turn politics into a form of craftsmanship, but the way in which the Greeks had used their freedom makes it understandable. They realised that the great political virtue was moderation and the great political vice *hubris*, but how their ideal man who, thanks to the labour of others, was freed from all natural necessity could escape the temptation to *hubris*, it is hard to imagine, for he was not a god but a mortal man leading something very like the life of a god. As Miss Arendt says:

The price of absolute freedom from necessity is, in a sense, life itself, or rather the substitution of vicarious life for real life . . . for mortals the easy life of the gods would be a lifeless life.

To make a vicarious life real, to prevent it being meaningless and boring, the free Greek citizen had to seek to make it as extraordinary and daring as possible, and politics conducted thus are apt to end in disaster.

Miss Arendt's definition of political power, as distinct from violence or strength, is admirable, but I do not think the Greeks possessed it.

Power is actualised only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, when words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy, but to establish relations and create new realities.

If the Greeks made the mistake of attempting to split up the threefold nature of man, to assign his labouring body to one class of men, his

working hands to another, and his active personality to a third, they were perfectly correct to value action so highly. While someone who neither labours nor works ceases to be human, it is in personal action, not in labouring to live or working to make a world, that a man becomes himself and gives meaning to his existence. A society dominated by the modes of thought proper to work, as was the mercantile society at the beginning of the 19th century, loses its *raison d'être*.

While only fabrication with its instrumentality is capable of building a world, this same world becomes as worthless as the employed materials, a mere means to further ends, if the standards which governed its coming into being are permitted to rule after its establishment.

Our own modern technological society, whether it call itself capitalist or communist, is dominated by the modes of thought proper to labour; its members consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families—the artist is virtually the only worker left—and their value to society is conceived in terms, not of what each produces but of his function in the collective productive process.

So long as these standards prevail, the more successful our society becomes in achieving its goal—a mastery over natural necessity which will abolish the necessity for labour—the more meaningless it will get. Technology has already advanced to the point where it is possible to conceive of a society in which production has become automatic and the only necessity left to men is consumption. The land of Cockagne, so charming as a wish-dream, would be less charming in reality.

The danger is that such a society, dazzled by the abundance of its growing fertility and caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process would no longer be able to recognise its own futility—the futility of a life which does not fix or realise itself in any permanent object which endures after its labour is past. . . . What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of labourers without labour, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse. . . . The spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites.

THE significance of the words *private* and *public* in the life of the modern nation state are almost the reverse of their significance in the Greek *polis*.

Politically, even in a democracy, we are divided, like the Greek household, into rulers

and the ruled. The rulers, it is true, are not persons, but officials, and the obedience of the ruled is secured less by naked violence than by the anonymous pressure of social conformity, but “the rule by nobody is not necessarily no rule: it may indeed, under certain circumstances, turn out to be one of the cruellest and most tyrannical versions.”

Public Life, in the Greek sense, has been replaced by social life, that is to say, the private activity of earning one's bread is now carried on in public.

What a modern man thinks of as the realm where he is free to be himself and to disclose himself to others, is what he calls his private or personal life, that is to say, the nearest modern equivalent to the public realm of the Greeks is the intimate realm, and we have a noun, unknown to the Greeks, *the Public*, that curious body made up, as Kierkegaard said, of people at moments when they are not themselves.

The modern equivalent to the Greek man of action is the scientist who can say, like Werner Von Braun—“Basic research is when I am doing what I don't know what I'm doing,” and the historical consequence of their deeds has been the alienation of man, not from himself, but from his world.

What is new is not that things exist of which we cannot form an image . . . but that the material things we see and represent and against which we had measured immaterial things for which we can form no images should likewise be “unimaginable for however we think it is wrong; not perhaps quite as meaningless as a triangular circle, but much more so than a winged lion.”

What men now have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking; their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody.

At first sight it might seem logical to hand over the government of society to the scientists, but the only kind of action they understand is action into nature; with the human being they can only deal in so far as he is natural and impersonal.

The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists qua scientists is that they move in a world where speech has lost its power.

I hope that these remarks and quotations give a faint idea of the richness and fascination of *The Human Condition*. Let me end with one final epigram by Miss Arendt which we may, if we are unlucky, have cause to remember.

It is far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think.

D'Annunzio's Mythomania

The Poet as Superman, Gabriele D'Annunzio, a Biography. By ANTHONY RHODES. *Weidenfeld and Nicolson.* 25s.

IT HAS sometimes occurred to me that Italy is in a kind of deep freeze for most Englishmen to-day. There is little about Italy in the English press: at most occasional news of a popular new Pope, of a luscious scandal, or a riot involving police and workers. When a European conference is being arranged, the "four Western Powers" are taken to mean ourselves, France, Germany, and the United States. Some fifty million Italians down on the Mediterranean remain unaccounted for. Somewhere on another level altogether there is an awareness that Italians have strikingly good taste in design. Our biggest car firm gets its bodies re-designed in Italy; promptly the biggest popular German car firm rushes south to do likewise. Men's and women's fashions from Italy penetrate our London and provincial shops. Vermouth is in every glass before meals. It only remains for Italian fashion designers to burst into the empty field of fashions for the older woman (who is inevitably becoming a major consumer of fashions) to win a resounding æsthetic and economic victory. On yet another level tens of thousands of Irish, Welsh, Scottish, and English tourists go to Italy every year; many (one surmises, perhaps wrongly) in order to keep up with the Joneses who went last year, but many, quite young, return from lone trips enchanted, and eager to return. On this quite human level there are plenty of Anglo-Italian ties, some indeed dating from the war and the Eighth Army.

The traffic in reverse, of Italians visiting England, becomes heavier every year. There are summer days in Piccadilly, when the sound of Italian spoken by groups of jovial young Italian visitors rings in one's ears, and car numbers from all over the peninsula pepper the stream of traffic. All these, however, are the private rather than the public Anglo-Italian bridges. There is nothing in the mid-1950's which remotely corresponds to the public, official, and widespread English enthusiasm for "Italian unity" in the middle of the last century, carrying in its train the amateur art historians, the host of minor Ruskings, John Addington Symonds, and Mrs. Jamiesons. What these students of Italy wrote of Italy's past has rarely been equalled in this century: great picture-books have taken the place of great prose.

In this tenuous, almost private, and unofficial world of Anglo-Italian relations comes Mr. Anthony Rhodes' study of an Italian poet and his times, a period roughly between 1880 and

1940. Deliberately I write "an Italian poet," because in the long run, if Gabriele D'Annunzio survives, he will surely survive as a poet, and not at all as a "superman," any more than Dante has survived as a preacher of imperialistic myths (*pace* the late G. A. Borgese), but because again and again Dante names love as the geometry and the measure of those who would understand anything at all profoundly, and calls (through Ulysses) upon men to remember their heritage and follow virtue and knowledge, rather than live like brutes. Here is my first quarrel with Mr. Rhodes' preface, well written, distilled (with acknowledgements) from a very long book by Signor Borgese called *Goliath*. One of Signor Borgese's themes is that Dante and Machiavelli must be held responsible for sponsoring the dream of a revived Roman Empire among succeeding generations of Italians.

Now if Mr. Rhodes had seriously made the Borgese theme his own, then *The Poet as Superman* would not have been a biography of D'Annunzio's amorous and political adventures, but an examination of his texts and speeches and actions referred back to relevant passages in Dante and Machiavelli. But the preface hangs in mid-air; afterwards the argument is dropped. Mr. Rhodes then exploits another Italian writer's thesis, that of Signor Aniante who wrote a book called *D'Annunzio, the John the Baptist of Fascism*, and works some pages into this pattern (notably in the essay which appeared in the December number of this journal). I think Mr. Rhodes has set too much store by Signor Aniante's thesis, and here I venture to speak from experience. Mussolini's upbringing inside a working-class mass movement which he will conquer, pervert, and use to his own ends and as his chief instrument, is never properly grasped by Mr. Rhodes. Not emulation and mere difference of degree, but a radically different approach to the seizure of power separates D'Annunzio from Mussolini.

There is no lack of Italian books about D'Annunzio, and the most chatty and curious of all (especially politically curious) is the book written by D'Annunzio's private secretary, Tom Antongini. I think the trouble about embracing any of these Italian theses about D'Annunzio is that they involve embracing a whole lot of Italian prejudices with them. This happens in *The Poet as Superman*, so that the reader is left puzzled, carrying away a faint taste of irony about Italy such as really inspired all those Englishmen (and let us remember that they were in the majority) who thought that Mussolini was "a good thing," and that such an undisciplined, volatile people as the Italian people "ought to have a strong dictator. . . ."