[redacted]
HAZEL CREST, IL 60429

22 Oct 93

002594 NOV 2 93
002594 NOV 2 93

Dear Brian Lamb:

Last summer you expressed surprise, interviewing an author, at his high "All-Star" placement of Hannah Arendt among the major individual political forces of our times.

Soon after, the Times Literary Supplement, the London weekly, printed this wrong-headed review of three new books about Arendt by a misguided reviewer so politically correct as to get her & her work [and what she said] all wrong.

But I have seen nothing better so I send it to you hoping it will be of interest.

This review masks the fact that Arendt is a major problem for Jewish liberal thinkers + writers trying to

(2)

Deal with the Nazi experience. Jews tend to try to be silent about her but this is not possible, for three (really four) reasons:

(1) *Eichmann*, for Jews a shattering book, demolishes the idea of the Nazi killers as *demons*, shows them as in fact "banal" in their evil, ordinary products of a bureaucracy: the "iron cage" of Max Weber (died 1921 – prophet of our age].

her word – "the banality of evil"

(2) *Eichmann* also demonstrated that in fact the Jews did not resist the exterminators. Their Jewish councils, village to city to national, thought they were smarter than the Gentiles, that deals could be made. Stung by Arendt, a whole industry of "finding" cases of resistance was launched but withered [just like similar imitative effort to find US Black uprisings against slavery].

(3)

(3) Arendt, a ~~friend~~ student shaped by Karl Jaspers and early friend of Heidegger. Resumed corresponding with them after the war. This demolished absurd attempt to demonize them [or anyone who had to deal with the Nazis to survive] and write non-exile German thought out of history. [Arendt's example on Heidigger may have influenced fight against comparable attempt in music to demonize Fürtwangler, which has also now failed — and, in physics, Heisenberg, et alia].

(4) The power and purity of Hannah Arendt's thought (e.g., very early, on automation) ~~dct~~ makes her impossible to ignore. She seems the best as well as the last product of the Assimulated German Jewry's embrace, with both German & Judaic reservations, of The Enlightenment.

(a ~~trifling~~ trifling but interesting example)

The TLS reviewer evades most of this by criticizing "Eichmann" as wrong because it hurt the feelings of Jews. And, hence, showed a lack of political instinct!

Changing subjects: you were not at your best in the Oval Office piece with the President. You seemed spiritually unprepared. A few suitably deferential "Sirs" in your dialogue might have helped. Mr Clinton did his best to help you but you put yourself in the awkward position of seeming to order him around in his own office + then blocking the the camera. The "unmediated" style was all wrong for the occasion. You should have known Stuart, Peale, etc on the noble Washington portrait.

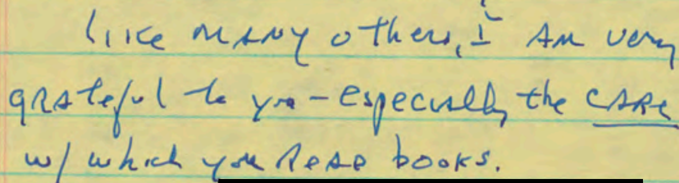
5

The camera work, choice of lenses etc, was dreadful.

We were left with no feeling for how the office looks in any direction, no feeling for the decor + the notion that you yourself knew nothing, was interested only in trivia etc.

This was unfortunate as I believe you are, for cognoscenti, the most admired figure in American Television, earned by hard work, undeviating honesty, superb interviewing ~~[illegible]~~ skills and a wonderful omnivorous curiosity.

Like many others, I am very grateful to you — especially the care w/ which you read books.



dence in March 1990. Sajudis (the Lithuanian Popular Front) had won parliamentary elections the previous month on a pro-independence platform, but few people, voters or politicians, expected independence to come immediately. Lieven was present during the vital debate in the Seimas (parliament) and records that most deputies were hesitant about moving fast. However, once the issue was on the agenda, it created its own momentum. In the words of a moderate Sajudis deputy, "To have voted against an immediate declaration would have been seen as voting against the declaration itself, not against the date".

However one explains it, this was a fateful moment. Up till then, no republic had seceded from the Soviet Union, and few politicians anywhere outside the camp of irreconcilable anti-Soviet dissidents had even seriously considered such a step. But over the following months, as Gorbachev failed to punish Lithuania's apostasy either by economic blockade or (in January 1991) by military intervention, secession became a "normal" option, part of the mainstream political discussion. In that sense, Lithuania's declaration marked the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union.

The legacy these attitudes have left to post-independence Baltic politics is an ambiguous one. Lieven rightly draws attention to the anomalous situation of the substantial Russian-speaking minority (mainly but not exclusively Russians) in Estonia and Latvia. Mostly immigrant labourers living on low wages in the stark high-rise suburbs of industrial towns, they cannot understand why the locals should regard them as "occupiers". They were victims of the Soviet Union like everyone else: they or their parents were sent to the Ministry of Labour to staff the new factories. Now they wake up to find that the place where they have lived for anything up to forty-five years is a foreign country, where they have no automatic rights of citizenship. To become citizens, they have to demonstrate knowledge of the local language, to take an oath of loyalty to the constitution of their adoptive republic and to renounce other citizenship. Their civil rights are in theory guaranteed, but not to be a citizen in a time of rapid economic change can easily mean being among the first to be laid off and being disadvantaged in the search for education, housing or further work.

One might have expected that this prospect would have stirred Russians to organize themselves and invoke the power of their native land. That they have not done so is partly a result of the studied restraint with which Yeltsin and Kozyrev, in spite of occasional cautionary rhetoric, have conducted Russia's policy towards former Union republics. It results partly too from the distrust which Russians share with everyone else towards the old Communist apparatus: they are reluctant to be drawn into any political enterprise which smells of Communist domination. Asked about the leaders of Interdvizhenie (which up to 1991 was trying to keep the Baltic republics in the Soviet Union), one Russian worker in Tallinn said, "Those Communist bastards! Do you think I don't know they've been stealing from us all these years. . . . But what other leaders do we have?"

That question poses the dilemma precisely. Given a sharp economic downturn in Estonia, or given a new, more nationalist leadership in Moscow, those workers might turn again to the only leaders they have. One can imagine the following scenario: in Narva, a town with 90 per cent Russian population and on the border with Russia, several factories are closed down, and thousands of Russians lose their jobs. During the subsequent elections, in which almost no Russians have the right to vote, a big protest demonstration demands the attachment of Narva to the Leningrad region. There is violence: casualties result, and troops are mobilized on both sides of the border.

Such an incident would provide an ideal springboard for a nationalist and authoritarian movement in Russia, with incalculable consequences for the rest of the ex-Soviet Union. With such dangers only just over the horizon, Lieven is right to argue that Estonia and Latvia should be following the Lithuanian example and reassuring the Russians about their political and economic rights. After all, many of those Russians backed them in seeking independence during 1989–91, they were keen or at least willing to become Baltic citizens. Now their loyalty is divided. One understands the aloof attitude of the Estonians and Latvians towards these people (the Lithuanians can afford to be more tolerant, since there are fewer Russians among them). But as a matter of political expediency, why drive them into the embrace of the potential enemy?

Lieven's book is a labour of love. Not only was he present in the region for most of the decisive three or four years, he studied all three peoples carefully, and absorbed much of their history and culture as well as observing closely their changing politics. As a result, his account communicates the atmosphere and character of all three countries better than any other work I have read. The text is at times breathless and ill-organized, but it has been produced and brought to the reader with extraordinary speed (it covers events up to March 1993). The publishers are also to be congratulated on a fine piece of book production at a relatively low price.

One of the pioneers of the revival of Estonian nationalism in the late 1980s was the Heritage Society – a loosely organized network of young chroniclers who set about collecting oral accounts of the recent history of their country. They were especially interested in the lives of ordinary people under Soviet occupation, of which there were no truthful published accounts.

A leading member of the Heritage Society was Mart Laar, who during 1985–7 rode on his bicycle from village to village noting down old people's accounts of their lives. In late 1987, he brought out in an underground journal his first extended summary of what he had discovered. *War in the Woods* is a fuller version, and it recounts the long partisan struggle conducted by the Forest Brothers after the Soviet reoccupation of the country in 1944. As well as oral testimony, it contains material from the Soviet Estonian archives, which have recently become available.

It is the fullest account which exists in English of any of the Baltic guerrilla movements of the late 1940s. It records how, after the war, many young men who had served as German auxiliaries, or were threatened by conscription or new Soviet deportations, fled into the forests, taking their weapons with them. Although for a time (1947–9) they had a co-ordinating centre of a kind, the Armed Resistance League, their units were mostly isolated, quite small and seldom equipped with more than machine guns. They lived in improvised bunkers and dug-outs, which in the winter months they scarcely dared to leave for fear that their footprints would betray them. Their military operations were mainly ambushes, attacks on police stations and official buildings, raids to free imprisoned comrades, and murders of Soviet personnel whom they considered guilty of especially heinous crimes.

War in the Woods does help us to understand how the Baltic peoples have survived. It is an account of a dogged and desperate struggle against overwhelming odds, continued when all hope of success in the usual sense had passed. The partisans were unable to prevent or even seriously to hamper the brutal deportations of March 1949, when some 20,000 Estonians, including old people and children, were herded into cattle trucks and transported to Siberia.

And yet they did achieve a victory of a kind. Only people like these, with memories like these, could outlast the Soviet Union and even initiate the process of its dissolution. Laar, their historian, went on to become leader of the Christian Democratic Union and (a fact not recorded on the dust-jacket) from October 1992 Prime Minister of independent Estonia. The cycling chronicler and his people have both come further than seemed possible when he began his work. Let us hope that their uncompromising spirit does not jeopardize what they have achieved.

Geoffrey Hosking's books include a History of the Soviet Union, 1917–1991, *which was published in paperback last year.*

The nagging glory

Hannah Arendt and the Greek *polis*

DAVID MILLER

Margaret Canovan
HANNAH ARENDT
A reinterpretation of her political thought
297pp. Cambridge University Press. £35.
0521419115

Jeffrey C. Isaac
ARENDT, CAMUS AND MODERN REBELLION
320pp. Yale University Press. £17.95.
0300052030

David Watson
ARENDT
143pp. HarperCollins. Paperback, £5.99.
0006862373

In anyone raised in the Anglo-American empirical tradition, the writings of Hannah Arendt are likely to provoke some mixture of bewilderment, frustration and admiration. The bewilderment and frustration arise from the way that she sets out to defend her views: her love of paradox and irony, the apparently arbitrary conceptual distinctions that she continually draws, the carelessness with which she treats both historical facts and the ideas of the political thinkers to whom she looks for inspiration. Isaiah Berlin, to take one example, reacts to her in that sort of way: she gets Russian history all wrong, she attributes completely false views about work to the Greeks – "it is all a stream of metaphysical free association" – so why should we pay serious attention to what she says?

Yet we may feel a certain admiration too. No one who counts John Stuart Mill among their intellectual ancestors can fail to have some regard for a thinker who displays such independence of mind, such a disregard for the complacent pieti of her age, such a determination to think outsi the conventional contours of the political ma Arendt was neither conservative, liberal n socialist: a passionate foe of totalitarian regim in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, yet an equal resolute opponent of the Cold War mentalit deeply committed to the political liberation of th Jews, yet a fierce critic of the Israeli state in th form in which it was established in 1948 – the li could be extended indefinitely. She abhorred an form of political correctness. Her blunt remark about proposals for courses in African culture fo blacks, to say nothing of her robustly critica attitude to the women's movement, would get he into hot water on American campuses today. No one reading her work can be in any doubt that here we have someone struggling, often perhaps in strange ways, to make sense in her own terms of the momentous political events of her time.

Among these events there is no question that the central one, for Arendt, was the rise of totalitarianism in Germany and the Soviet Union. How had such unprecedented, and appalling, political regimes come into existence? What had happened to European society to allow, perhaps even encourage, the abandonment of all the limits and safeguards which Enlightenment liberalism had put in place? What, if anything, could safeguard post-totalitarian societies from falling victim once again to this hideous deformation? For Arendt did not believe that totalitarianism was simply an aberration, an outbreak of mass psychosis in what were otherwise rational societies; nor did she accept strictly political explanations of the rise of totalitarian regimes. Instead, she purported to find the roots of totalitarianism in the development of industrial society itself, in ideas of automatic historical progress, in the creation of mass society, as well as in more specific phenomena such as imperialism.

One very great virtue of this perspective is that it may preserve us from an understandable kind of

The Girlhood of Iseult

Clearly, I can see your past:
The isolated lodge
On the old road to the coast;
The girls, all sisters, younger
Than yourself – white knees, white
Ankle socks startle the grass.

There is an old horse, bridled,
And about to be saddled,
A dismantled motorbike
In the shade of the wall:
And the girls are at play
With maimed dolls, or matches.

I can see you stand apart,
Raised hand at your brow –
A salute to the strength of light.
You are wearing a light-checked girl's
Summer frock, pre-puberty's last,
As you turn your gaze to the fields,

To the shipyard cranes as far
As the sea, charting the course
Of the river. At the drop
Of a match the first crop's
Stooks will suddenly catch, the air
Smear with a watery glaze.

GEORGE CHARLTON

and disreputable falsehoods became the centre of Soviet existence. The famous black Trotskyite, C. L. R. James, said to Wicks at the time of one of the great Moscow Trials that it would open people's eyes. Wicks replied with the extremely perspicacious remark, "no, it will close them". Henceforward the Communists, but especially the Communist intelligentsia, lived a lie which must in some degree have been implausible even to themselves. As Julian Symons (also from the non-Stalinist radical left) put it: "they accepted monstrous incongruities", but "they had not been deceived. In relation to the Soviet Union they had deceived themselves, and in the end one has to pay for such self-deceits."

There were various levels of credulity. That the USSR was wonderful; that it was at least better than the West; that it was at least no worse than the West. These propositions, all untrue, seemed to indicate no more than stronger or weaker appetites for myth. Thus the Soviet Union became for many a kind of "virtual reality". Whatever was actually going on could be phased out, and a different version infiltrated into their brains through fictional video and audio pick-up.

It is true that Stalin's men worked a variety of "Potemkin" operations – special collective farms for foreign tourists or statesmen, special rehabilitative prisons, special children's homes. But even this is an inadequate explanation. Malcolm Muggeridge, in Moscow as correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, is more penetrating still, on Quakers applauding tank parades, feminists ecstatic about women bowed down under a hundredweight of coal, architects looking up with awe at gimcrack buildings, just erected and already crumbling. And all of them admiring the new type of "democracy".

In earlier days, a tyrant would be rather proud of his status. When Tamerlane erected his "pyramid" of 70,000 skulls at Isfahan, he did not explain that it was a humanitarian measure. "Laying a country waste" was normal procedure. In the *Mabinogion*, there is a scene in which Peredur encounters one of the various evil knights of his pilgrimage who states his position clearly: "The Black Oppressor am I called. And for this reason I am called the Black Oppressor, that there is not a single man around me whom I have not oppressed and justice have I done unto none." A refreshing frankness compared with the more modern tradition which would change this to a claim to be acting in the interests of all decent people, even if occasionally – though understandably – forced to take severe measures against agents of evil. But, Orwell was (as usual) the first to point out that Stalinophiles wanted to have it both ways – to claim to be immensely humanitarian, and at the same time to enjoy, perhaps even not consciously, the joys of tyranny and torture.

No: it is time to admit that the attitudes of many in the West were essentially faulty and misleading. As suggested above, it is hard to disentangle political and other prejudice from an inbuilt academic programming of ignorance on the basis of defective, or selective, political theory. It always was much easier to consider the Soviet Union in terms of institutions, and official documents, and statistics, than to do the serious work implied by considering that it might be a wholly alien and abnormal phenomenon.

Anthony Powell, in his autobiography, writes (in connection with the personality of Guy Burgess) of the failure of officialdom, as of the army, to understand what a person is "like". This was, vis-à-vis the Soviet regime as a whole, the basic, built-in error of most Sovietology.

It is sometimes urged that only part of Western research into Soviet reality was misleading. Rather as if an astronomical society should defend its record by saying that only some of its members were flat-earthers. A recent piece in the *TLS* pleaded for clemency in dealing with such aberrations. But it was our failure to show sufficient rigour in condemning them which, at least to some degree, let them flourish like the green poison-ivy tree. If they had indeed made amends, and forsworn further supposed expertise on the Soviet past, yes. But nonsense is still commonly inculcated into students, and the palliatives of mere factual refutation have been water off a loon's back.

It might be too much to ask of an academic who has built his career on misjudgment that he abjure. But there are precedents. The eminent French pre-historian Émile Cartailhac for decades denounced the Altamira paintings as fakes, but in the end made a public *mea culpa* – actually using that phrase. Let's hear it from Professor X and Dr Y.

As to what the Soviet Union was "like", we meanwhile continue to get characteristic details about it from Moscow. For example, *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* lately printed a 1935 report from the NKVD to Stalin that two officials of a Moscow factory were under arrest for producing 120,000 buttons with a swastika design for reasons of fascist ideology and propaganda. Stalin minuted, "The nerve!" Such petty detail is, in its way, almost as illuminating as more serious documents, such as newly published pleas from provincial party secretaries in 1938, when things were at their worst, to the effect that they have shot the two or three thousand allotted to them for a six-week period, and asking permission to add another thousand or more. This, of course, demonstrates some of the psychological mechanics of the purge. A party secretary who did not show himself enthusiastic would soon be suspect of "rotten liberalism". Indeed, the reality being built up in this way is, if anything, even worse than we thought. Thus the full story of Katyn is also available – notably in *Katynskii Labirint* (Novosti. 2R 90 k); its account of the proceedings of the secret commission charged with falsifying the Soviet evidence at the Nuremberg Trial is especially striking.

There is much revealing material in the annual *Istoricheskii Arkhiv*, 1992 (LIT. $50), under the editorial chairmanship of the learned and courageous Rudolf Pikhoya. It is an immensely rich and varied collection. Its documents go back to Ivan the Terrible's claim to the Polish throne and the details of the career of Peter the Great's "African", Pushkin's great-grandfather. In Soviet times, we get the instruction to keep several thousands of Lenin's documents secret, as making him or the regime look bad (for example, on the Red Army's participation in pogroms in the Civil War); for the Stalin period, the plum is Yezhov's letter of resignation as head of the NKVD, partly on the grounds that he held himself responsible for the fact that virtually all Soviet intelligence operatives in the West had proved traitors, together with the three successive heads of Stalin's own bodyguards; and partly on the basis of a risky gamble of denunciation by a local NKVD official.

We likewise learn elsewhere (*Golgofa* by Kirill Stolyarov. Yuridicheskaya Literatura. 5 R) some of the motives of Police Colonel Ryumin (later to be General and Deputy Minister of State Security and chief villain of the "Doctors' Plot" frame-up), when in 1951 he took the similarly dangerous step of denouncing his then boss, MGB Minister Abukumov, to Stalin. He feared that the Ministry was on the point of discovering that he had falsified his *curriculum vitae* – by omitting the facts that his father had been a cattle-trader, his brother and sister jailed as common criminals, and his father-in-law a quartermaster in Kolchak's army. We get more of the "feel" of the police state from such random examples than in many serious analyses, though *Golgofa* is also the most illuminating work yet on the whole mechanics of the Doctors' Plot. As to the characteristics of the Brezhnev era, the same work provides some illumination in the fact that three Mercedes and a BMW, bought for the purpose of testing for suitability in police work, were all, in fact, given to, and registered for, individuals in the family of the then MVD Minister, Shchelokov.

The reaction of serious students to this almost endless accumulation of major and minor monstrosities and meannesses is often that there must be some explanation. There is: this was the Soviet Union.

Robert Conquest, Fellow of the Hoover Institution, California, is this year's Jefferson lecturer, the US Government's highest award for intellectual achievement in the humanities.

A will to survive

The Baltic peoples' struggle to recover nationhood

GEOFFREY A. HOSKING

Anatol Lieven

THE BALTIC REVOLUTION

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the path to independence

454pp. Yale University Press. £22.50.

0300055528

Mart Laar

WAR IN THE WOODS

Estonia's struggle for survival, 1944–1956

Translated by Tiina Ets

272pp. Washington, DC: Compass; distributed in the UK by New Romney: Bailey. £27.50 (paperback, £12.50).

0929590082

Nations are strange, capricious historical formations. Out of the myriads of tribes and peoples mentioned in chronicles only a very few have survived into the modern world, with its urban culture, its mass education and its diversified social structures. Most have fallen victim to larger or more determined peoples and seen their languages wither, their costumes reduced to museum exhibits, their folklore cherished only by antiquarians and ethnographers.

By all normal expectations, the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians should not have been among the successful nations. Peasant peoples wedged between Poland, Germany and Russia, they should have fallen by the wayside long ago, their "dialects" relegated to farmyard status, while their promising village lads got themselves an education in Polish, German or Russian and went off to the city to become lawyers or doctors. That this did not happen constitutes one of the most remarkable ethnic survival stories of the modern world. How can one explain it? That is one of the tasks Anatol Lieven tackles in *The Baltic Revolution*, which, starting as a journalist's account of the events he lived through while reporting for *The Times*, has finished up as an interpretive history of the Baltic peoples, culminating in their breakaway from the Soviet Union.

In the Reformation, the Latvians and Estonians adopted the Lutheran faith of their German masters, and that Church's insistence on Bible reading offered them the first step on their road to nationhood, since it provided them with the scriptures in their own tongues. In Poland, the Catholic Counter-Reformation was not far behind, and the Lithuanians had their own Bible too by the eighteenth century. The German Enlightenment also left its mark. Herder, Europe's first great theorist of national identity, was a pastor and teacher in Riga in the 1760s. He believed that each nation had a unique spirit, which resided in its folklore, and which could survive for centuries even in the absence of a higher culture. Much of his theory he built out of the study of Latvian and Estonian songs, which were then systematically collected by his successors, German scholars and pastors of the nineteenth century. Their work did as much as anything to fix the Latvian and Estonian languages. By the end of the century, great song festivals had become regular events among both peoples – "like Rousseau's General Will set to music", as Lieven aptly comments.

Perhaps even more important, by that time more than 90 per cent of Latvians and Estonians could read, a direct consequence of their Lutheran heritage and of the serious German attitude to education. Their peasants were moving into Riga, Tallinn and other cities which, originally German, Russian and Jewish in character, were beginning to be colonized by the indigenous peasant peoples.

At this stage, their awkward situation between Russia and Germany was actually an advantage. Most Germans considered the Latvian and Estonian national awakening a trivial matter, while the main adversary in the Baltic was the Russian bureaucracy; they even discreetly encouraged it as a counterweight to the looming imperial presence. The Poles took a similarly tolerant view of the Lithuanian revival.

This cultural and demographic advance could never have led to national independence, however, without the extraordinary coincidence that the German and Russian Empires collapsed more or less simultaneously – and moreover in conditions which induced the Western democracies to extend diplomatic and even some military protection to the fledgling Baltic republics. All three countries enjoyed a twenty-year period of independence which in retrospect seemed like an idyll. It ended when Soviet troops occupied them in 1940 and organized bogus elections to give the appearance of popular support to their incorporation in the Soviet Union.

The period of Soviet occupation was a national nightmare which till recently seemed as if it would never end. Anyone who might conceivably lead national resistance – lawyers, teachers, writers, businessmen, pastors, members of non-Communist parties – was deported *en masse* to Siberia. Guerrilla movements in the forests were ruthlessly stamped out. Large-scale heavy industry was brought in, especially into Latvia and Estonia, and with it hundreds of thousands of Russian workers, to provide for the military and heavy industrial needs of the Union as a whole. One can still see its legacy in the smokestacks of Riga or the unsightly, bleached-looking shale mines of north-eastern Estonia. The local languages were beginning to be squeezed out: educated locals could all speak Russian, but few Russians could return the compliment.

By the 1980s, Latvians and Estonians were beginning to fear that their nations might gradually wither away altogether. By 1989, Latvians formed only 52 per cent of the population of their republic and were a minority in their capital city, Riga. I remember a heated political discussion in the Latvian Academy of Sciences in that year. Several people had been arguing (wrongly in retrospect, though I agreed at the time) that Latvia should aim at far-reaching autonomy within the Soviet Union, but that it would be foolhardy to attempt to secede. One scholar objected that, without full independence, in twenty years' time the Latvians would be in the same position as the Udmurts. Someone asked, "Who are the Udmurts?", to which the stinging reply was "Precisely, that's my point".

This existential despair combined with nostalgia for the golden age of independence to inspire the Baltic peoples with the conviction that their best hope lay in taking a final uncompromising stand. The political initiative in their national liberation movements gradually passed to those who regarded the Soviet occupation as an illegality which could be expunged from their nations' history. The result has been to impart to their national liberation movements a quality at once tough and nostalgic, both anti-Soviet and anti-Russian. As a result, at an early stage rejection of Moscow became a litmus test of commitment to democracy and independence. Any politician who found himself in difficulties could squirm into a more anti-Russian stance in order to position himself for a comeback. When the tiny political parties were bargaining to set up alliances, the natural direction in which to achieve internal compromise was by becoming externally more uncompromising.

This was probably the dynamic which pushed the Lithuanians into their declaration of indepen-

Mysteries of mass appeal

RICHARD HOGGART

Joseph McAleer

POPULAR READING AND PUBLISHING IN BRITAIN, 1914–1950

284pp. Oxford: Clarendon Press. £35.

0 19 820329 2

The English are, so far as I know, the hardest worked people on whom the sun shines. Be content if in their wretched intervals of leisure they read for amusement and do no worse.

In trying to understand the appeal of best sellers, it is well to remember that whistles can be made sounding certain notes which are clearly audible to dogs and other of the lower animals, though man is incapable of hearing them.

Almost a century and a quarter separate those two pronouncements, by Charles Dickens and Rebecca West; but many similar to them, and others of the four or five commoner judgments on popular fiction, can be found throughout those years and right up to the present. Still, Rebecca West's diktat is staggeringly contemptuous, and the more so because it is only a few years old and hence runs dead against the fashionable, the preponderant, view that no fiction, no work of art, no recreation, no judgment is intrinsically superior to any other; and anyone who says otherwise is a bourgeois elitist. Against that miasma, Dame Rebecca's awful snobbery can for a moment seem almost tonic.

For, though books on this branch of Literary/Cultural Studies now appear regularly, the debate does not much improve. There are those who, though they clearly do not read it themselves, give an easy justification and benediction to popular fiction and its readers; a justification which is implicitly patronizing, if not unconsciously contemptuous. Dickens's remark belongs to the mild and generous branch of that category; its less attractive successors can be found today in, especially, what used to be called high-to middle-brow writers in the broadsheets.

On the other side are a group who represent a modern form of the conspiracy theorists, who see popular fiction as chiefly a capitalist device to make money, while keeping the workers quiet – a *Nineteen Eighty-Four* fiction factory. There is some truth here, but it will not be seen properly through determinist and usually jargon-imprisoned simplifications; cultures are not that two-dimensional.

Here too is an important principle: do not apply to the text, from outside, your predetermined theories, like an ideological waffle-iron. If you do, you will not hear the text. Remember George Orwell's superb ending to "The Art of Donald McGill", after he has attended to the text, after his charismatic entrance into the world of "these ill-drawn postcards, leading a barely legal existence in cheap stationers' windows". The final sentence runs: "The corner of the human heart that they speak for might easily manifest itself in worse forms, and I for one should be sorry to see them vanish."

Then there are the peg-on-the-nose critics, poking over the rubbish-heap from some distance. Rebecca West's statement, so external, so inhumane, is the worst I know of that sort. Q. D. Leavis's otherwise very impressive and pioneering *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) has something of that attitude. She talks of what she nicknames the "tuppenny dram shops", which lent their "worn and greasy novels" to "the poorest class". Hogarthian phrasing. But much further on, her eye is clearer, so that she can say, "there is no reason for supposing that novelettes [there's a class-bound label] are bought exclusively by the uneducated and the poor". Well, yes; neither are many other similar confections.

And there is that *nostalgie de la boue*, or an easy imitation of it, which makes some people say – as though they were confessing to a partiality for anonymous-roadside-stall hamburgers – that they positively enjoy "that kind of thing".

Thirty-seven years ago, I tried, in *The Uses of Literacy*, to do something towards clearing the air. One impulse then was that, though I admired much in Mrs Leavis's work, I thought it limited by its lack of reference to the context, the homes, the common attitudes, within which popular fiction was read. (Incidentally, it made me feel wry and sad to hear, many years later, that Mrs Leavis had claimed that Raymond Williams and I had acquired fame and fortune from climbing on her shoulders. It was more like nipping at her ankles; and there were no fortunes, nor other than some circumscribed repute – though more of that than either of us had sought or expected.)

H. M. Bateman's drawing, "The man who bought the last copy of The Readers Digest", will be included in the sale "English Literature, History & Illustration" at Sotheby's, July 19.

So: little advance over the years; and some of the best things said many years ago now, useful little levers which can move great weights. By T. S. Eliot, of all unfashionable people, who said "culture is ordinary" long before Raymond Williams elaborated it and made it one of the rallying-cries of the New Left; by Orwell, in those two or three justly famous essays, of which the best is the McGill one; and by C. S. Lewis, in a passage which puts forward the idea that readers can bring to or find in cheap commercial literature good attitudes, and perhaps have those attitudes strengthened rather than weakened (listen to the reader as well as to the tale, to adapt Lawrence).

It might be as well to draw up a short first list of approaches we could now make and hope to develop in looking at popular fiction, at many of the popular arts. Most of them follow from what has been said above. We need to know more about the contexts in which it is read and – the two are not the same – about the manner in which it is read, received. How far and in what way does it "reflect" the attitudes of its readers? This is an important and general question about all popular print. To understand it better might inhibit us from assuming, for instance, that because the most popular newspapers are widely read they present and represent the whole range of attitudes of the great body of people, rather than offering a heightened selection from some of those attitudes, the more "ooh-aah" elements. Here, for once, Orwell nodded: he claimed that the small newsagent's shop was "the best available indicator of what the mass of the English people really feels and thinks". In *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914–1950*, Joseph McAleer has some useful corrective material on this: about sex, homeliness, the exotic (especially the exotically wicked woman) and the ideal of marriage as, above all, a tender partnership, in young women's reading. Quoted by him also is the splendid, Johnsonian-down-to-earth, declaration of middle-aged working-class women, which I remember well from my own childhood: "There's enough tragedy in real life without having to read about it." Misguided, but entirely understandable; and not confined to working-class readers.

As to the effects of reading, we know little. Here also the argument concerns, must concern, all kinds of reading. At the best, we can say that some literature may perhaps broaden and deepen our moral sense. We cannot claim that it will change, will develop that moral sense; only that it stands available to do so, if we so wish. To claim more would be to reduce free will. Here, too, the question of reading's effects is related to, but in important respects differs from, those about the effects of film, television, video; and discussions about those, too, get no further in these days. But it would be simplistic to assume that, because proof of effects is hard to find, the insistent repetitive drip of certain implicit assumptions – to take one obvious instance – is without effect. Professor McAleer recognizes the problems, but in a dispirited way: "In the end the extent to which readers were actually influenced by such fiction, and by the publishers' views on morality, class, and patriotism, is difficult to gauge." That comes two pages from the end of the book, and that is all; one could have fairly expected more, if only for a survey of work so far done in this area.

Then there is that old innocent assumption, the onwards and upwards hope. In my time at the Arts Council, it was much clung to by some Council members, though not, certainly, by the Literature Director. A century ago, Wilkie Collins saw the reading of popular fiction as a "springboard to better things". It wasn't and isn't; rather, "the appetite grows by what it feeds on"; and the market meets it more than half-way. McAleer recognizes this, that there is no such "graduation". He seems less sure about a related case, whether the Film of the Book leads to reading the Book of the Film; again, it doesn't. In addition to all the cultural impediments to such movements, the imaginative processes of the two art forms differ too much to make transition easy.

McAleer also shows very thoroughly that popular fiction, as a commodity, was well established many decades ago. It is, true, much more market-led nowadays, and its operators more blatant, seeing no need now to put on a high-minded, educative fig-leaf. The sales chief of a large chain of booksellers simply assumes (in a recent programme on the radio) that the judges of the NCR non-fiction prize will put sales considerations first; his counterpart within a smaller chain announces, as if to remind us that the earth goes round the sun, that in all he does his first duty is to his shareholders. So be it; and fig-leaves are no substitutes for virtue, only disguisers of what might once have been thought rude.

Yet McAleer's pages on Mills and Boon are enough to take the force out of the more obviously ill-considered jokes about that remarkable firm's productions. Some at least of what the firm publishes has for long been thoughtful, not soppy, moral without being merely conventionally moralistic. They reminded me of a small personal revelation of a few years ago: that to read, for example, Catherine Cookson, in neither a peg-on-the-nose nor a let's-slum-together mode, is to recognize considerable perception into moral complexities.

Behind all this is the great unanswered question: of the relation of social class, of the class sense, to popular fiction. McAleer hints teasingly at it, but seems to feel the subject does not need full attention from such as himself, a scholar in publishing-history. Orwell said that popular publishing is traditionally of the Right, and so non-confrontational. Of some popular publishing that is obviously true; the market does not like to have the boat rocked, and all forms of radicalism do that. But most popular fiction is neither of the Right nor of the Left, neither deferential nor resentful. And it can or, perhaps better, could be subversive. Recent research into what are usually called "Dickens's plagiarists" shows that some of those writers for working-class readers were not simply plagiarists, but often mickey-taking critics of Dickens's presentations, to his substantially middle-class audience, of both middle and lower-class characters.

Last of this list of aspects of which McAleer's book reminds us, we need to think much more closely about one: what explains, and what should be done about, the decline of the very idea of the Public Library as, whatever else it may be, a guide to good literature? The figures given here, of the range and volume of borrowing only a decade or two ago, almost make you weep when you compare them with those for today. But if you say that in their buying policy, and in their methods of display, too many Public Librarians now confuse democracy with populism, you will be roundly abused; in, predictably, all the fashionable, populist, verbal cant. But hardly any of the educated, liberal *bien pensants* of the day will join their voices with yours – against this or against other current corruptions of the idea of a literate culture.

So this is a useful study; but a mine to be raided, not an advance in understanding the underlying issues. The author's difficulties are, though, a mirror of the times. He is, he would rightly say, a scholar, not a polemicist. But there can be no virgins here; even a scholar has to show understanding of the moral complexity of the issues involved. McAleer is aware of this, but hopes to keep clear of the bog by the use of single inverted commas. Otherwise, why does he produce again and again, entirely undefined, phrases such as "Allen Lane's desire to direct readers towards 'better' books"; or "Plots became more bourgeois in tone and 'realistic'. Taste 'improved' . . . "; or "Occasionally even 'trash' had difficulty getting published . . ."? "Better", "realistic", "improved", "trash" all hang in the air, suspended only by their evasive inverted commas. But if they are not brought down to earth, stripped of their commas, and then rooted in at least an attempt at definition, they are meaningless, shifty. And why does he write a non-sequitur sentence such as this: "Although much criticised, given its concessions to low quality and novelty, commodity-style publishing was very successful between the wars"? No "Although much criticised" is needed there, only an "Of course, given . . . ". This is confused, insurance-policy writing. And talk about the taste of "the reading masses", what they "devour", sounds like a study of biscuit consumption by a market-research firm. There's no release in this war, neither from cultural judgment nor from semantics; even for the most conscientious of academics, such as Professor McAleer.

Richard Hoggart has just finished a new book, a social-cultural portrait of an English town in the 1990s.

liberal complacency in the wake of the collapse of Communist regimes – the view which says that liberal democracy is the inevitable historical destiny of economically advanced societies, that fascism and communism should be seen as regimes of transition from the pre-industrial to the industrial world, and which, therefore, belong firmly in the historical past. Arendt would have had none of this. Without reaching the absurd conclusion of some of her fellow-refugees from Nazi Germany that liberal societies merely represented a mild form of totalitarianism, she argued that political freedom in those societies remained a precarious achievement, constantly under pressure from the automatic routines of economic and social life. This may still look to us too pessimistic a view, distanced as we are by space and time from the direct experience of totalitarianism. But there is no question that, when we read Arendt, we are forced to confront fundamental issues of political theory beside which the current preoccupations of liberal thought may come to seem pretty trivial.

And Arendt does indeed continue to be read. The three books under review are simply the latest in a long and, if anything, swelling stream of books and articles devoted to her thought. Two of them can be recommended wholeheartedly. Margaret Canovan, who has written on Arendt before, now gives us a beautifully composed and mature account of her political thought as a whole, drawing extensively on unpublished sources to illuminate major works such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*. Jeffrey Isaac has chosen to write comparatively on Arendt and Camus, arguing persuasively that they have in common the experience of being political exiles trying to come to terms with the traumatic events of mid-century, and afterwards seeking a third alternative to totalitarian communism and liberal capitalism. Each thinker is used to throw light on the other, and although very occasionally one feels that they are being pushed artficially close together, in general the approach works well.

Hannah Arendt in 1970

It is harder to find a justification for David Watson's book. This is a brief account of Arendt's life and work which jumps rather quickly from one text to the next, without making any real attempt to get to grips with the deep issues posed by her major work. It might perhaps be of use to someone who wanted a quick fix on Arendt but was disinclined to tackle the 500 pages of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's fine biography *Hannah Arendt: For love of the world* (1982). It is not in the same class as the other books considered here.

Both Canovan and Isaac are deeply sympathetic to Arendt. They agree that the key to her thought lies in her response to totalitarianism, and they both insist that her best-known work of political theory, *The Human Condition*, must be approached with some caution. In that work Arendt apparently draws a sharp distinction between private and social questions on the one hand and political matters on the other, and recommends a rarefied form of politics, inspired by reflection on the Greek city-state, in which actors achieve personal glory through their performances on the political stage. From this perspective, the mundane politics of liberal democracy, preoccupied with economic and social issues, and carried out through coalition-building, compromise and the like, comes to seem thoroughly second-rate, indeed not in Arendt's terms real politics at all. Canovan and Isaac want to claim that previous commentators have drawn this distinction in too rigid a fashion. Arendt did not categorically exclude economic and other such issues from the agenda of politics; instead, she sought to draw (admittedly not with much success) a distinction between the genuinely political and the merely technical aspects of these issues – the latter to be dealt with by bureaucratic means.

Canovan also argues that Arendt's response to the Greek *polis* was more ambivalent than might at first appear. Seeing the self-disclosure achieved in political speech in the Athenian assembly as, so to speak, a secularization of the Homeric tradition in which heroes performed glorious deeds to be recorded by the poet, she also observed that personal competition for recognition and esteem played a distorting role in Greek politics. The public realm, in other words, was not just a space in which individuals vied with one another for celebrity; it also required mutual trust, and a genuine attempt to think about issues from the perspective of other people besides oneself. So Arendt looked to other models besides the *polis* – to the Roman republic, to the founding of the American Constitution, to the councils and soviets established in the course of popular uprisings in this century.

For all that, Arendt's idea of politics remains a highly voluntaristic one. She focuses always on the new beginning – the founding of a republic, the creation of a public space in a society where none yet exists. When the new beginning takes on institutional form, consolidates itself into a party or a parliament, Arendt's enthusiasm wanes. In Kuhnian terms, her interest lies in the dramatic paradigm shifts, not in the normal, problem-solving mode of politics that occupies most of human history. Isaac has judicious things to say about this deficiency in Arendt's thought. As also in the case of Camus, he notes the anarcho-syndicalist elements in her thinking – the celebration of directly formed popular councils, combined with a failure to consider how these councils might in practice federate to form stable political institutions which could discharge the normal functions of a modern state.

Canovan's Arendt is a rather more conservative figure, someone who, while celebrating those comparatively rare moments at which genuine "action" is possible, is also acutely aware of its limits. She stresses the centrality in Arendt's thinking of the idea of human plurality – the fact that we inhabit a common world with others whose ideas are often very different from our own – and draws the implication that political action is always unpredictable. We set in motion a train of events whose outcome depends on the reaction of others to our initiative. This was one reason why Arendt wished the state to renounce its traditional claim to sovereignty, and to create instead a mixed constitution in which different political bodies checked and balanced one another.

We cannot in the end make sense of Arendt's attitude to politics without recognizing the continuing influence of German existentialist philosophy on her thought. She was not herself a philosopher, and her attempt late in life to produce a philosophical treatise has not generally been judged a success. Nevertheless she carried with her the preoccupations of those who were her teachers and later her friends, Heidegger and Jaspers, and there is a sense in which she looked to politics to provide answers to the basic questions of human existence that they had posed; in Heidegger's case in particular, she faced the awesome task of identifying the deficiencies in his thinking which had made possible his support of the Nazis without abandoning the general philosophical tradition in which he stood. But the demands she made on politics were impossible ones. Questions such as "How can human beings rise above their inherited patterns of behaviour and live authentic lives?" or "How can individual subjects establish a common reality between themselves?" can only be answered by giving general accounts of human action and human cognition, not by picking out and privileging one particular mode of human interaction. If we try to see politics as somehow providing answers to these questions, then inevitably we end up portraying it in the most esoteric terms. Only great and heroic actions like overthrowing a Communist state will count; deciding where to site the local rubbish tip has to be relegated to some other realm of human experience.

So we have in Arendt the paradox of a thinker deeply committed to a republican style of politics, and yet all the while preoccupied with certain philosophical issues whose transposition to the political realm could not but have a destructive effect. There is another, more personal, aspect to this paradox. Arendt's own interventions in politics were uniformly unsuccessful. These were sporadic: she was active in one wing of the Zionist movement in post-war America, and later through her more journalistic writings she engaged with some of the political events of the day. Her most notorious intervention of this kind was *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and we can see here quite clearly the reasons for her political failure. Arendt gave a completely direct and honest account of her reactions to the trial of Eichmann; having convinced herself of Eichmann's sincerity when he said that he thought he was doing his duty when ordering the deportation of Jews to concentration camps, she reported this to her readers and invited them to join her in asking how such a failure of moral understanding was possible. She did not consider the effects of her words; she did not ask how they would be received by those members of the Jewish community whose relatives had perished in the camps, or about how they might influence the perceptions of the Holocaust of those outside. It was, in a sense, a perfect example of disinterested philosophical inquiry. By the same token it was profoundly unpolitical. It lost Arendt many natural allies, lessening her influence with those she might have hoped to convince in the future.

This example reveals only too clearly why politics cannot be a realm of authentic self-disclosure. When we act politically, we try to persuade others to join us in supporting some motion or cause, and the arguments we use are those that have the widest resonance in the political community, not those that we regard as most uniquely our own. It would be wrong to suggest that Arendt is wholly unaware of this. There are places where she understands the need for political judgment and speaks of "representative" thinking whereby one tries to see the world from the standpoint of as many others as possible before reaching a conclusion. But still, nagging away in the background, is Heidegger and "the shining brightness we once called glory", which according to Arendt "is possible only in the public realm". Neither in theory nor in practice were these two perspectives reconcilable.

Yet Hannah Arendt must still be read. We should not take her historical excursions at face value. We must recognize that her whole effort is directed at understanding the present, which is still to a significant degree *our* present. Confronting directly the formative political experiences of the century, she argues that the fences erected by liberalism are not enough, that only genuine politics can protect us from totalitarian deformation. If we could strip away the German metaphysics that encrusts this insight, we would have something worth holding on to.

David Miller's most recent book is Market, State and Community: Theoretical foundations of market socialism, *1989*.

Literary Criticism

THE RETURN OF THE VISIBLE IN BRITISH ROMANTICISM
William H. Galperin

"The most original and engaging work on Romanticism I have read in several years."—Garrett Stewart, University of California, Santa Barbara

"I cannot think of a current theorist of Romanticism, whether deconstructive or new historicist, who will not have to take this challenging view of the movement into account."—Jay Clayton, Vanderbilt University

£33.00 hardcover

ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE SHADOWS OF CHANCE
The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France
Thomas M. Kavanagh

"This is an important study, brilliantly argued on its own terms, but more importantly, a study that is bound to have major implications for the way we critics will understand the French Enlightenment."—Josué V. Harari, Emory University

£30.00 hardcover

FORMS OF REFLECTION
Genre and Culture in Meditational Writing
David Hill Radcliffe

"A sophisticated application of a newly important kind of theoretical inquiry: the use of genre theory in the rewriting of literary history. . . . Provides an innovative history of the construction of 'culture' as an informing category of our literary and social experience."—Clifford Siskin, State University of New York, Stony Brook

£32.00 hardcover

PRINCES TO ACT
Royal Audience and Royal Performance, 1578-1792
Matthew H. Wikander

Matthew Wikander describes how theater and monarchy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries existed in mutual dependency and mutual mistrust, leading to performances that both affirmed and challenged the social boundaries between monarch and actor, audience and performer.

£40.50 hardcover

JOHNS HOPKINS

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Distributed in the U.K. by Plymbridge