

## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

**Michelle-Irene Brudny** *Hannah Arendt. An Intellectual Biography.* Melville House Publishing, 2008.

Several recently published translations of the biography of one of the most prominent twentieth century Jewish philosophers seem to have filled the void which existed in this area in Poland. Apparently Michelle-Irene Brudny had a very difficult job in satisfying the experts on Hannah Arendt's life and philosophy, as her book was published relatively late – in 2006. Inevitably then, her work was compared and judged against the most recognised biography of Arendt written by Elisabeth Young-Bruel in 1982 (still unavailable in Polish translation). The Rouen-based professor, aware of this publication, as well as several other renditions of Arendt's biography, started her book by acknowledging all other writers who had addressed the life and work of the Jewish philosopher.

Following Brudny's approach and discussing all publications would show how difficult her task was, but let me just focus on the books which might be familiar to the Polish reader. In 1987, the professor of political science Wolfgang Heuer published Arendt's biography in Germany. A Polish edition of his work appeared in 2009. Twelve years later, in France, Julia Kristeva started a series titled *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words* with a volume dedicated to Arendt: *Hannah Arendt* (Polish edition 2007). Another attempt at a summary of the philosopher's life and work dates to 2005 with the book published by Laure Adler (translated into Polish in 2008). In the meantime, in 1995, a controversial book written by Elisabeth Ettinger – *Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger* – was published in the USA. (Polish translation 1998). This particular publication was described by Brudny as "a tale woven with fantasy" (see p. 32). Arendt and Heidegger's correspondence was falsified to such an extent – according to Brudny – that Hermann Heidegger (the philosopher's son and the executor of his will) decided to publish the letters again. She pointed out in her book that Ettinger's publication is, to this day, a source of other, equally distorted, descriptions of the relationship between the pair of famous philosophers (as for example in Claudio Magris' book).

Michelle-Irene Brudny's book does not add any new facts to what we already know about Hannah Arendt's life. She begins by reminding the reader that Hannah Arendt was born into a family of German Jews in Linden on 16 October, 1906. She goes on to describe her difficult childhood – her father's death, escape from Königsberg, where she grew up, and problems with adopting to the new school in the outskirts of Berlin just a few months before the outbreak of WWI. Brudny sees these events as ones which led to Arendt's taking the Abitur exam

externally, a year earlier than her peers, while she was already a student of Berlin University. The next chapters see young Hannah move to Marburg, where she befriended many interesting people of her generation. One of them – Hans Jonas – was to remain a close friend till her death. It was also where she met professor Martin Heidegger and had an affair with him. They split, and their passion, which later evolved into friendship, was severely tested by Heidegger's decision to join the ranks of the NSDAP (the National Socialist German Workers' Party) in 1933. Michelle-Irene Brudny goes on to describe Hannah Arendt's and Günther Stern's wedding in 1929, and her work on a dissertation on the concept of love in the thought of Saint Augustine, under the existentialist philosopher-psychologist Karl Jaspers. Facing problems with Stern's habilitation the couple decided to move back to Berlin, from which they were forced to escape in August 1933, in the wake of anti-Semitism. First Günther fled the city, and then Hannah – following her eight day arrest and interrogation by the Gestapo. Arendt reached Paris via Prague, Genoa and Geneva. In 1936, still in the French capital, she met and fell in love with her future husband Heinrich Blücher, a well-read self-educated poet and philosopher. Brudny highlights the ease with which Arendt mixed with new and fascinating people, which resulted in a friendship with Walter Benjamin. Arendt and Blücher got married in 1940, in France, even though it was no longer a safe place. The situation deteriorated after France's capitulation and abolishment of the protection that the country had offered to Jews. Faced with the danger of imprisonment, most Jewish refugees sought their safety in the USA. Hannah and Heinrich Blücher followed the example of others. Only in New York, after difficult years of exile, could the couple enjoy the prospect of a happy life and fruitful academic career. In the epilogue of her book, Brudny describes Hannah Arendt's death on 4 December, 1975.

The originality of Arendt's biography as written by Michelle-Irene Brudny, then, lies not so much in the treatment of the philosopher's private life as in the portrayal of what could be called her intellectual achievements. The Rouen-based professor describes her discovery of an unpublished text titled *Antisemitismus* in the Congress Library in 1992. At that time she found it very unlikely that a text could exist that had not been published yet either by Arendt herself, or one of the executors of her will. However, after a thorough examination and analysis of the manuscript, Brudny put forward a hypothesis that the date of conception of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* – one of Arendt's most prominent works – could be "moved back in time". Before Brudny's discovery it had been assumed that the earliest essays that made *The Origins of Totalitarianism* were written by Arendt in 1943 or 1944, so during the time when Hannah already lived in New York. The text found by Brudny dates back to Arendt's Paris period, 1933-1940. The Rouen-based professor drew the conclusion, then, that Arendt began her work on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* when she still lived in France.

This interesting discovery is not the only strength of Brudny's publication, however. She also offers a clear and comprehensive description of the way Jews were treated in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. Brudny based

her observations on the work of such established Jewish philosophers as Gershom Scholem, Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber. This part of the book constitutes an especially interesting read because the writer brings back from relative obscurity a lot of interesting representatives of Jewish thought who shared the same fate as Hannah Arendt, and allows the contemporary reader to understand their view of historic events they witnessed.

Another interesting element in this biography is Brudny's hesitation to describe Arendt as a "philosopher". Several times she insists on calling Arendt "just" a thinker. This seems justified by the fact that Arendt herself often stressed that she "thought" first, and then quickly noted down her conclusions. Also the aversion of the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to being called a "philosopher" is well known and documented. Still this term may be a little unfair if we take into consideration the sheer amount and quality of intellectual heritage that Arendt left. *The Human Condition*, *Willing*, or *Thinking* are not only firmly based on philosophical texts, but also the conclusions presented in these works have a distinct philosophical character. Such a simplified approach to Arendt may result from the fact that Brudny decided not to mention *Thinking* in the biography, claiming that the Jewish philosopher did not edit the work herself. However she seems to forget that it is the first volume of the series called *The Life of the Mind*, and that – when she died – Arendt not only had already finished writing the second volume titled *Willing*, but also the title page of volume three – *Judging* – had been already resting in her typewriter.

Brudny focuses also on Arendt's style, or rather the lack of it. She describes her writings as "aphoristic and categorical". She highlights Arendt's willingness to form judgements contrary to common opinions expressed at that time. Such was the case with *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in which, using historical data, Arendt drew her original conclusions which she had to defend till the end of her days. To Brudny's justice, she does not limit herself to describing the controversy connected with the reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but also reminds the contemporary reader that Arendt's other works, such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* also were welcomed with a dose of criticism.

Working on a biography of someone as established as Arendt, it is extremely difficult to come up with thoroughly original material. Yet professor Brudny undertook this challenge, and managed to portray Arendt's life and intellectual work in an interesting and inviting manner. What distinguishes her work from other biographers is that she used unpublished texts, new translations of Arendt's works and letters, and that she tried to show the philosopher's relationship with Heidegger in a new light. All of these, as well as other interesting issues analysed in the biography, make the book much more than a mere copy of biographies published previously. It is truly a very insightful publication for everybody interested in Hannah Arendt's political philosophy.

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