

Hannah Arendt – Critical Lives

Samantha Rose Hill: *Hannah Arendt*, London: Reaktion Books, 2021, 232 p.
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The steady rise in popularity of Hannah Arendt's work and her exceptionally eventful life make it surprising that Reaktion Books have only recently added a biography of Arendt to their *Critical Lives* series. This series explores the life and work of leading cultural figures of the modern period and already counts over a hundred biographies of artists, writers and philosophers. The author, Samantha Rose Hill, is well placed to now add a biography of Hannah Arendt. She worked as the assistant director of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College and as associate professor at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. The fact that Hill has extensive experience in discussing Arendt is evident from the book. She manages to translate Arendt's complex and wide-ranging ideas into an accessible and very readable book.

The aim of the book is to rouse the curiosity of readers who are new to Arendt and who do not necessarily have a background in philosophy or political theory. At less than 250 pages, the book is meant as an introduction to Arendt that brings together the key concepts of her work, the most salient biographical facts and the relevant political and historical context. The book is divided into twenty chapters chronologically following Arendt's life and work. The first eleven chapters bring the reader up to 1949, and focus more heavily on biographical elements. The following nine chapters, which deal with Arendt's most productive period, primarily focus on her works.

The author opens the book with a remark Arendt made in 1972 at a conference in Toronto: "What is the subject of our thought? Experience! Nothing Else!" (7). This quote functions as a framing mechanism of the book. While Hill discusses a wide range of topics from Arendt's work, the concept of thinking is the main theme. Hill emphasizes how for Arendt living and thinking are always intertwined. This does not merely signify the commonplace observation that every thinker is shaped by the political and social conditions of their time. More importantly, Hill conveys how Arendt's passion for thinking, for understanding the world, is inextricably linked to a passion for experiencing the world. She stresses how for Arendt the activity of thinking is not an academic pursuit and that Arendt is not a thinker who locks herself away in the life of the mind. The main lesson Hill wants her readers to take from Arendt is how to think and how, through this activity of critical self-reflection, to cultivate a love of the world. "Arendt shows us how to think the world anew, how to free ourselves from the tradition of Western political thought, how to hold ourselves accountable for our actions, how to think critically without succumbing to ideology. Only when we do this, she says, will we be able to love the world" (14). Hill uses the different episodes of Arendt's life to illustrate how Arendt time and again engaged in the work of thinking, allowing new experiences to unsettle and question her beliefs, and how Arendt continually searched for a way to understand the world with all its suffering and love it anyway (13). Through these episodes the reader gets a strong

sense of how Hannah Arendt not only preached but also embodied the virtue of thoughtfulness even under the most difficult circumstances.

Hill succeeds in bringing Arendt to life on the page. The image of the serious and stern philosopher is opposed with that of a person with an exceptional lust for life. She paints a picture of a woman who loved dancing, who was quick to laughter and who had a wide circle of friends to whom she was fiercely loyal. The biographical anecdotes, entertaining *faits divers* (we learn that Campari and soda was Arendt's favourite drink and that she had a marked preference for Ferragamo shoes), and amusing descriptions of Arendt by her friends and critics (Arendt as "the Weimar flapper" (9) is my personal favourite) are expertly curated. From them emerges a picture of Arendt as a vivacious, rebellious, courageous, conscientious, demanding and stubborn person. Hill also manages to invest the book with a surprising emotional depth, especially in the final chapters. Here Arendt's earlier vivaciousness is contrasted with the end of her life, where, after the deaths of her husband and many of her friends and with her own health failing, Arendt, all passion spent, starts to retreat from the world she has loved so dearly.

These biographical elements are deftly woven together with Arendt's philosophy. For example, Hill uses Arendt's stay in the internment camp in Gurs to introduce her thoughts on hope and despair, or her travels to Europe after the war to present Arendt's views on forgiveness and reconciliation. In doing so, Hill gives the reader a clear view of how Arendt's thought organically developed over time. We encounter all the elements usually mentioned in a description of Arendt's intellectual development: her early reading of Homer and Kant, the influence of her two great mentors Heidegger and Jaspers, her turn towards politics due to the rise of Nazism, the impact of her time as a refugee, the Eichmann trial and the banality of evil. But Hill also makes a few surprising choices. Quite some attention is paid to the importance of literature and poetry. We learn of the books Arendt reads at different moments in her life, of the profound influence of Kafka, Brecht and Broch, and of the literary techniques Arendt deploys in her own writings. Hill even includes some of Arendt's own poems (though this is perhaps not entirely surprising as Samantha Rose Hill is also the editor of *What Remains: The Collected Poems of Hannah Arendt* which will be published in April 2023). She also spends more time on Arendt's interpretations of St. Augustine and Karl Marx than one would expect from a short introduction. Finally, Hill also centres some elements that play a minor role in Arendt's work but are of particular interest for the readers of today, such as Arendt's views on feminism and racial equality. More space is allotted to the discussion of the essay 'Reflections on Little Rock' than to the whole of *Between Past and Future*. But the discussion also shows that Hill does not want to shy away from the more controversial elements of Arendt's philosophy. She handles this contentious essay with confidence. She cuts to the crux of Arendt's position, easily dismissing misinterpretations while also revealing where the weakness of Arendt's argument lies. And she stresses how Arendt's blindness to the particular conditions of the oppression of black people in the US is not an anomaly within her thought, but part and parcel of her views on equality and discrimination. This discussion shows that, while Hill clearly admires Arendt, she does not let her admiration get in the way of presenting the reader with an honest, unsentimental and well-rounded picture of Arendt as a person and as a thinker.

Samantha Rose Hill is not the first author to write a biography of Arendt. The monumental effort of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* has ensured that other biographers can offer very little new information about Arendt's life and times. And indeed, the book does not offer new facts about Arendt. But this is not what Hill sets out to do. She does not want to present the reader with an exhaustive account of Arendt's life and thought, nor introduce a hitherto unknown side of Arendt. Her approach is more narrow and focused. With a well-selected blend of biographical information and philosophical reflection she wants to paint a vivid picture of Arendt and her continuing philosophical relevance. The scope of the book is more closely related to that other recent biography of Arendt, *On Love and Tyranny: The Life and Politics of Hannah Arendt* written by Ann Heberlein and published by Pushkin Press in 2021. Both books provide a general introduction to Arendt for newcomers. However, Hill's impressive ability to present complex concepts and ideas in a concise and comprehensive manner without losing the nuances of Arendt's thought and the excellent balance between philosophy, historical context and little tidbits of gossip, make Hill's biography the better effort of the two. For readers who want to delve into Arendt for the first time, Hill's introduction is an excellent place to start.

An Dufraing

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