

Why Write?

Curtis W. Hart

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Those of us who spend a significant amount of our time each day reading, writing, revising, and discussing texts of one sort or another may periodically ask ourselves the question: “Why write?” It is a good question, a fair question, and a necessary question. Why spend long hours composing sentences, drafting and re-drafting paragraphs, or making certain tables of data are correct in order to show that an article tells the story it is meant to tell? If it is done for the pursuit of tenure, the seeking of some other form of recognition, or for economic benefit, then this process may become unsustainable both emotionally and intellectually over the long term.

Why write? I suspect that all of those who contribute to or read this *Journal* understand all too well why this question inevitably arises. We all know that we write because it is our job, or part of it. We do it because it is part of what it means to be a professional in one’s field. Or we do it because we are persons who simply love or are enthralled by words and then by a subject that will not let go of us. There are risks here, of course. Readers or reviewers may misunderstand and take issue, fairly or unfairly, with what has been thought or said or what they believe has been thought or said. And by its very nature serious writing is part of a process, a portion of a journey toward greater understanding of our own selves and our world. We do not begin or end it. Here, we face our finitude, the limits of our knowledge, our experience, and our capacity for expression even as we glimpse a horizon of additional and enhanced knowledge. I believe these risks are among the reasons that keep so many talented, articulate persons I know and have invited to contribute to the *Journal* become reticent, gun shy, when considering writing an article even if their subject matter is worthy and a desire for being published is present.

I have been dramatically reminded of the problem in answering the question “Why write” of late. I have embarked on reading Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of the Banality of Evil*. This is an appointment with a text that for me is long

C. W. Hart (✉)
New York, NY, USA
e-mail: cuh9001@med.cornell.edu

overdue. Arendt's historical and philosophical work was originally published in a series of articles for *The New Yorker* after her having attended and reported on the trial in 1961–1962 of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. Arendt was trained in philosophy. Her background was both German and Jewish. Along with her husband Heinrich Blucher, she was detained in France after the Nazis conquered that country in 1940 and later escaped through Portugal to the USA. In the USA, she held a number of academic positions and wrote a series of noteworthy books among them *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Eichmann was an architect of the "Final Solution" who spent the better part of the years 1945 through 1960 running from the scene of his monstrous crimes in Europe during World War II. He was captured in Argentina and spirited away by Israeli secret service operatives to Jerusalem where he was to face judgment regarding his role in the Holocaust. Arendt later published a full version of *The New Yorker* articles in book form in 1963. It is a book that has been debated, vilified, condemned, criticized, understood, misunderstood, and lauded for a wide range of reasons ever since. I do not wish to enumerate these varied responses save to say that these issues have recurred for the period of 50 years after trial and 39 years after Arendt's death in 1975. This legacy is remarkable. The *Eichmann in Jerusalem* phenomenon, while exceptional, reminds us of why we write in the first place. She raises questions, makes assertions, and comes to conclusions, provisional or otherwise, worth talking about today even as they were some 50 years ago. Her book is acutely personal, while at the same time, grounded in the philosopher's quest for precision of language and clarity of thought. For those who are interested, the movie *Hannah Arendt* released in 2012 offers an artistic biographical rendering of the writer, her circle, her reporting on the trial, and the storm of controversy that followed.

I undertook reading Arendt following my reading Bettina Stangneth's contemporary volume (2014) *Eichmann After Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*. Stangneth's objective, among other things, is to make available through her voluminous research into the writings and life of Adolf Eichmann a fuller portrait of the man before he was brought to Jerusalem for trial. She explores many materials that Hannah Arendt did not have access to. Stangneth explores Arendt's description of Eichmann as the prototype of "the banality of evil", a concept that became problematic to some and accurate to others regarding both the man and the diabolical cause he embodied. She describes in depth the circle of ex-Nazis and collaborators in Argentina to which Eichmann belonged and to whom he revealed a persona not visible at the trial. Stangneth's effort demonstrates why careful and painstaking scholarship and documentary research are not only fulfilling to the author but also valuable to the reading public. Her description of the politics of the era in both Europe and Latin America in relation to Eichmann and the search for other escaped Nazis is illuminating.

Why write? Provocative explorations such as those of Hannah Arendt and Bettina Stangneth remind us why we write: to inform, reform, review, append, argue, elucidate, illuminate, and occasionally confound conventional wisdom. *Why write?* Because doing so engages us, changes us, and makes us think. What better reason is there than that? *Why write?* Because we *must* as a sign of fulfillment of self and calling and because we *should* for the sake of the world in which we live and for which we are responsible.