

A Mountain of a Man Seen Close-up

The Letters of Carl Sandburg, edited by Herbert Mitgang (Harcourt, Brace & World. 577 pp. \$12.50), reveals the steps through which a private of the Spanish-American War became a world celebrity. Stanley Weintraub has written books about Aubrey Beardsley, Reginald Turner, and Bernard Shaw.

By STANLEY WEINTRAUB

CARL SANDBURG WANTED HIS LETTERS published preferably when he was "under the grass roots." The 640 of them now printed little more than a year after he died show few signs of having been fashioned with at least one eye on posterity, although by his death Sandburg had been a public institution for a generation. It is, however, the correspondence of the generation that precedes the canonization which has the most appeal; for the transition from Private Charlie Sandburg, Midwest volunteer in the Spanish-American War, to the prelegendary Carl Sandburg of *Chicago Poems* and *Smoke and Steel* that the letters record reflects vanishing Populist America.

The unknown Sandburg is the young man of the early correspondence, the struggling but optimistic traveling salesman for stereographs who later applies his capacity for delivering a spiel to Chautauqua-type lecturing on Walt Whitman and Bernard Shaw for Elbert Hubbard's circuit. Afterwards comes his epistolary courtship of Paula Steichen and tandem writing of Socialist journalism and socially-conscious poetry. While the journalism kept his family eating regularly, the poetry gradually made his reputation.

"Life," Sandburg wrote a friend, "is a series of things that vanish." Setting out to fix the fading images in rough and unrhythmical verse, he produced 260 pieces collectively entitled *Chicago Poems*. Then, to prospective publisher Alfred Harcourt, he had to justify diplomatically but sturdily his un-genteel attack on Billy Sunday and his ode to a trade-union dynamiter. Both poems were

part of "the literature of democracy," he insisted, and both stayed in.

After the success of the book in 1916 his publisher prudently left Sandburg to his own language and subjects. Ironically, however, Harcourt had nothing further to worry about, for his famous new poet responded to acclaim with verse that, although ostensibly in the same vigorous style, contained less and less anger. Sandburg's correspondence indicates that the change was one he never recognized. For a while after 1918 the outside world almost disappears from his letters, and it is only in 1933 that a single reference to the Depression turns up.

His mid-career mail shows Sandburg decreasingly at work as a poet. New interests had flowered—the perpetuation and popularization of the American folk song, and the elaboration and extension of the Lincoln saga. He apparently thought of his folk-song research and recitals primarily as commercial enterprises necessary to finance the time that he spent upon Lincoln, yet they have proved to be a more powerful (although indirect) influence on midcentury culture than Sandburg's romantic, outsized and immensely successful six-volume biography. In the early Twenties, before the Lincoln work became obsessive, he had written to a former newspaper colleague, "This whole thing is only in its beginnings, America knowing its songs. . . . Understand, a new song learnt is worth more to me than any Jap print or rare painting. I can take it into a railroad train or a jail or anywhere." But as labor upon the biography continued into the mid-Thirties, with respites for the performance of folk music and for the composition of such long poems as "The People, Yes," his voice-and-guitar appearances were downgraded to "bread-winning exploits." "Without the platform work. . .," Sandburg confessed to Malcolm Cowley, "I could not get by

for a living while doing the sort of long-time books I am on."

Between the two world wars most of the letters are filled with reports on the research for and progress with the Lincoln biography. The postwar letters show Sandburg settling into his well-won position as an institution: writing to the great and responding to the small; advising fledgling writers; congratulating his literary peers while maintaining communication with the surviving friends of his youth. He describes his reactions to a Broadway production of *The World of Carl Sandburg*, and he authorizes the opening of his boyhood Illinois home as a shrine and the naming of a school—the first of sixteen—in his honor.

Surprisingly, the letters stop five years before Sandburg's death with a note to a friend from his wife that "Carl is in very good health but he simply does not write letters [any more] . . . , for he thinks he is entitled to a vacation." It is an abrupt ending, leaving at least one reader to wonder why a writer who so enjoyed maintaining his friendships by mail suddenly had discovered that he had written himself out; for, he once told a friend, "[I write] in somewhat the same spirit as I give my songs at the end of a recital; if the whole audience walks out on me I am only doing what I would be doing if I were at home alone."

IN at least one case a letter appears to be dated a year too early; however, Herbert Mitgang's editing is otherwise informative and unobtrusive, and we are in his debt not only for the publication of so many letters of a major literary figure so close upon his passing, but for our having found in the process an exception to the biographical rule the poet formulated when he was still very young: "A Great Man is like a mountain and looks grandest from a distance." The letters do not diminish Carl Sandburg.



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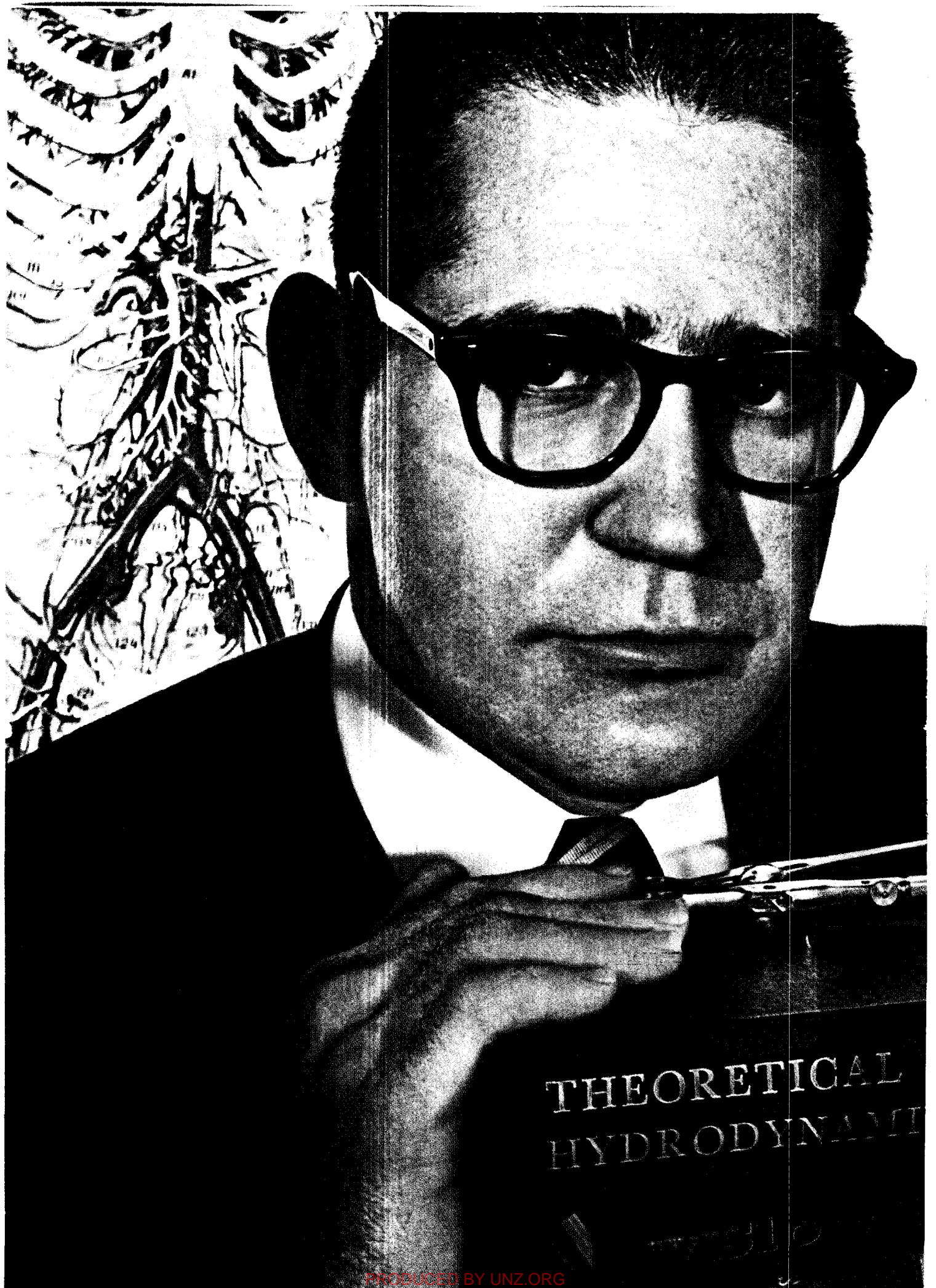
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Homage to Many

Men in Dark Times, by Hannah Arendt (Harcourt, Brace & World. 272 pp. \$5.95), covers ten figures ranging from Rosa Luxemburg to Pope John XXIII. David Littlejohn, who teaches English and journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of books on Samuel Johnson and American Negro writers.

By DAVID LITTLEJOHN

WHAT MAY LOOK LIKE a new book by Hannah Arendt is really a publisher's compilation of eleven of her essays, addresses, and book reviews from the past thirteen years. What unites the selections is the dedication of each to a single important figure, all but one of them from the twentieth century—the “dark times” of the title—and all but one of them dead.

It is a rare publisher (or author) who can pass up the opportunity to fill out such a book with lesser pieces, transient or specially directed essays that need never, in all justice, have been broadcast beyond their initial audience. In this category fall five of Miss Arendt's articles: a vulgar and vapid halo for John XXIII; two academic eulogies (for Karl Jaspers and Waldemar Gurian) in the sentimental, mock-Roman, lifeless style of that nineteenth-century genre; a gauche, informal memoir of Randall Jarrell, and an essay-review on Isak Dinesen originally published in *The New Yorker* that is simply very badly written. But after subtracting these five we are left with more than 200 pages of substance.

The six remaining essays are on Hermann Broch, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Gotthold Lessing, and a second, more provocative essay on Karl Jaspers. Let me say a few words about each of these useful reflections, and in the process try to reconstruct the critical mind that lies behind them.

Miss Arendt has paid her homage elsewhere to the novels of Hermann Broch. The present essay is essentially a chart of his desperate philosophic journey during the years after he abandoned literature. As such it may well prove the least accessible or meaningful to the average intelligent reader of the selections in this volume. Broch lived in holy terror of death, disorder, contingency, and time, and spent his last years in an obsessive quest for a new absolute, for a new, nonmythical, demonstrable *logos* that would freeze the world's chaos and the mind's confusion in the security and stillness of a premodern era. His philosophic quest, and Miss Arendt's reproduction of it, have about them a satisfying and invigorating elegance. But to those who share neither Broch's anguish



—Fred Stein.

Hannah Arendt—“keep talking.”

for the absolute nor Miss Arendt's passion for philosophy, the whole enterprise may seem rather unearthly. What grounds this study in the same earth as the others is the dark vision of the twentieth century—“the century ‘of the darkest anarchy, the darkest atavism, the darkest cruelty.’”

I find the review-essay on Rosa Luxemburg, like the introduction to Walter Benjamin's essays, at least as interesting for what it reveals about Hannah Arendt as for what she reveals about her subject. The first is a sustained, deeply committed defense of an independent-minded, nondoctrinaire Leftist-by-compassion, a woman, a Jew of German cultural origins, antiwar and antinationalist; and I think it not perverse to see in it an idealized mirror-image of the author, a kind of unconscious *apologia pro vita sua*.

THE biocritical study of Walter Benjamin, the German critic who committed suicide in 1940, seems to reveal another face of the author's own intellectual ideal. One can, I think, always discover the shape of a moral-intellectual personality by superimposing the outlines of its models. The fact that so many of these “portraits” take the form of abstract fables—none of them really evokes the living man—leads one to suspect that Miss Arendt is overstating her subjects' qualities and importance in order to assert an ideal. The case of Walter Benjamin affords her a pretext for eloquent reflections on the Jew in Germany, on the role of the free and independent critic, and on the relevance of tradition in this junkyard of ruins.

This last theme animates as well “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World,” an especially provocative analysis. Jaspers, like everyone else Miss Arendt discusses here, finds Today appalling in contrast

to Yesterday. The technology that has at last, suddenly, and somewhat frighteningly united “Mankind” in a simultaneous, contiguous present seems of necessity to be destroying “all national traditions . . . the authentic origins of all human existence . . .”

Its result would be a shallowness that would transform man, as we have known him in five thousand years of recorded history, beyond recognition. It would be more than superficiality; it would be as though the whole dimension of depth, without which human thought, even on the mere level of technical invention, could not exist, would simply disappear . . . It looks as though the historical pasts of the nations, in their utter diversity and disparity, in their confusing variety and bewildering strangeness, are nothing but obstacles on the road to a horribly shallow unity.

It is precisely because Jaspers suggests a means of using (and hence preserving) this past, these traditions—not as dogmas of “truths” but simply as the free substance of human discourse—that Miss Arendt treasures him so highly.

THE Brecht essay is a special case, and difficult to summarize justly. The three central sections isolate with justice and insight the essential human and artistic qualities of Brecht's genius, and one is grateful to have them. But they are inserted into a judgment of Brecht's political “sins” which is specious, pretentious, nervous, and incomplete, a piece of confused anti-Communist polemic quite inadequate to the complexity of the man or the nature of his compromise. Miss Arendt seems most angry, if I may say so, at the fact that Brecht's hatreds were not directed at the same targets as hers.

The keynote of the book is set by its first essay, “Humanity in Dark Times,” an address given in Hamburg in 1959 on the eighteenth-century playwright Lessing. After a few thorny pages of academic ritual, this is the most touching and desperately pertinent of all the essays. In it Miss Arendt reaffirms her belief that these are, indeed, dark times, when the public world has become so ugly that men of good will have taken to avoiding it altogether. And yet, since all action is willy-nilly political, and since *humanitas* depends on public discourse, then such retreats, such silences, such closings of the ranks—the results of dark times—lead toward the end of humanity. Miss Arendt pleads, through the example of Lessing, that we keep talking, keep the discourse alive and political; that we remain silent about nothing. For, in the definition of this eloquent and anxious woman, independent but intensely political, “humanity” consists of intelligent men conversing freely on public affairs.