THE LANGUAGE OF THE HOLOCAUST IN THE RICH MAN

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In his "Introduction" to Henry Kreisel's somewhat neglected first novel,"**The Rich Man**," John Stedmond tends to underplay the importance of the historical background : "the story in a sense exists independent of its time and place" (1). Although the holocaust is not as overt in this novel as in Kreisel's second, **The Betrayal,** nevertheless, given the fact that he wrote it immediately after World War II, set it a decade earlier, and personally escaped the horrors of the concentration camps only to be detained in the internment camps of the new world, one cannot accept the opinion that the events of the Thirties are merely peripheral. To comprehend Kreisel's fictional approach to the historical events in"**The Rich Man**," the reader needs to examine the problematic nature of language exhibited in the novel's voices, gestures, crowds, quarrels, and aesthetic symbols.

George Steiner's theory about language and silence in response to the tragic genocide in the Second World War provides some assistance when applied to Kreisel's work : "Nazism found in the language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery. Hitler heard inside his native tongue the latent hysteria, the confusion, the quality of hypnotic trance. He plunged unerringly into the undergrowth of language . . . And instead of turning away in nauseated disbelief, the German people gave massive echo to the man's bellowing" (2). This confusion of language, the voices of both victimizer and victim, and the mesmerized crowds are all in evidence in **The Rich Man.** Tassigny's description of his painting, **L'Entrepreneur,** the novel's central symbol that refers to Hitler, resembles Steiner's comments : "It means a man, who . . . who . . . how shall I say, **Monsieur,**who . . . who has something to show off and he shouts and screams so people will hear and come and pay to see. They come, they pay, sometimes only money, sometimes more, the whole body and the soul" (36). Stammering through this explanation to an uncomprehending Jacob Grossman, Tassigny reveals the difficulties of linguistic expression experienced by most of the characters as he continues to describe the hollow, megaphonic voice on the canvas : "But the man cares nothing, for he is full of falseness. And more and more people come, **Monsieur,** because his voice is so . . . so powerful and loud . . . They are caught by the voice . . . The people seldom see the face, most of the time they

only hear his voice -- from the radio, from loudspeakers" (36-37). Kreisel's emphasis on "voices" is not merely an artistic and dramatic end in itself, but is also a means of conveying the modern barriers of communication erected by despots like Hitler, manipulating language. In addition to the tormentor's abuse of language, the victim's attempt to convey his experience of the ineffable is of equal importance to gain a fuller picture of the complexities of language related to the holocaust.

Some of the earliest voices in the novel are broadcast on the faceless radio with a Negro quartet singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot". "Their voices were deep and infinitely sad. 'Coming for to carry me home'. One by one the voices fell away until only a full-throated bass voice was left" (10). Following this song that prepares for Jacob's return home to Vienna is "a modern arrangement of that old favourite-- The Blue Danube Waltz" (10), the jazz version of the old tune pointing to the differences between the new American world and the old European. As soon as the music is over, the "suave voice" of the announcer reports the news of Goering's statement of Germany's rearmament. Every time Jacob listens to his favourite melody, The Blue Danube Waltz, the illusion is shattered. On the ship Jacob's pleasant reverie is interrupted by the reality of seasickness : "Even the music is sick ", announces Tassigny. In Vienna Jacob soon discovers that the musicians in the street are beggars : "I am only a poor street singer, searching somewhere for a bit of luck" (142). Jacob cannot hold on to his dream for long when he asks them for the Waltz : "They were not even pretending to play in harmony any more. Each man played the tune himself, as if he were playing a slow solo" (142). The music which had earlier been sick now "sounds like a funeral march".

Hollow music and empty voices form part of the problem of communication within Jacob's experiences reflecting the breakdown of meaningful language in the international arena. A procrastinating Prufrock with a bald spot on the pate of his head, the middle-aged presser plans to ask his employer for a leave of absence : "How would he go on ? It was difficult to find the right words. Ah ! If he could talk to him in Yiddish, everything would be fine. But in English !" (9). But his handicap in expressing himself is more than a matter of the immigrant's lack of fluency in the new language, for he cannot capture the right word to depict his own appearance : "How would he look coming into Duncan's office in these old pants with the patch on the left knee so clearly visible ? Like a nobody, like a . . . like a . . . He couldn't think of another fitting term" (9). Paralleling Tassigny's struggle with

language, Jacob's ill-fitting terms, like his clothes, accompany him to Perfect Clothes where he goes through the interview with Mr. Duncan, seeking to suggest through manual gestures what his mouth is unable to utter. "He was thinking hard, trying to find the right beginning. He stammered a few words and then he was quiet. He fumbled about in his pockets for nothing in particular and brought his hands out empty.Twice, without opening his lips, he began to talk with his hands, but dropped them again" (17). Jacob longs for the historical tongue to express his needs : "I vished I could talk in Yiddish mit you, Mistah Donken. It is not good for me to talk in English over serious t'ings. English is all right to make a joke or kibitz wit' the boys. But over serious t'ings it is good to talk in the modder language" (17-18). Jacob's pursuit of the mother language complements his quest for the old country.

As the interview progresses, the tension between voice and gesture builds :

> He did not use his hands. They lay stretched out on the desk now, rough hands, hands tired after a lifetime of labour. And now they looked like strangers because he was expressing something in which they had no part . . . He tried to make his voice sound impersonal, casual, cool. His hands strained to take part in the talk . . . "I marry here. We live quietly, we have children." . . . He could no longer treat his hands as strangers. He drew them to him and they joined in the conversation. "I have a son a doctor, Mistah Donken !" The pride nearly burst him. His voice took on an almost unearthly tinge of happiness. It was a cry of joy, an expression of a supreme achievement (18).

Like Sherwood Anderson's grotesque Wing Biddlebaum, Jacob summons his hands in the conversation from crescendo to climax. Most interesting of the immigrant's solecisms is his use of the present tense merging successes and failures of the past with great expectations in his son's future. What the voice fails to express, the synecdochic labourer's hands add when they respond with their own language ; in this fusion of gesture and accent the aging anti-hero in the new land finds self-expression as Kreisel exploits dramatic dialogue with supporting action. But Duncan's curt allusion to the Nazis'murder of Dollfuss undermines the foundations of the elaborate structure and style of Jacob's performance.

The contrast between the old and new worlds, between Europe and North America, between the grandfather and child in Grossman, and between an Orthodox Jewish past and an assimilated present emerges in Jacob's use of language, especially in the pun on his favourite word, the Yiddish equivalent for "so", "**alors**" or "**n'est-ce-pas**": "The word **Noo** was the richest and most expressive word in his vocabulary. He could play with this little word like a virtuoso. He could thunder it in a loud bass, and he could whisper it softly, drawing it out gently. He could pronounce it sharply, almost threateningly, like a stab, and he could speak it lightly and playfully, modulating his sing-song, his voice wavering and trembling until it died away like the closing notes of a sad aria. In the mouth of Jacob Grossman this little sound was capable of expressing the profoundest emotions and the most delicate shades of meaning" (16). Since this passage occurs during a discussion about money and work with the "rich man" facetiously referred to as J. Rockefeller Grossman, another entrepreneur, "richest" aquires a double meaning while the operatic metaphor anticipates Tassigny's painting. The last word the protagonist utters at the end of the novel as he iconoclastically throws his albatross out of the train window is not an affirmation like Molly Bloom's "yes", but his favourite ambiguous sound, the only possible articulation from the "entrepreneurial" megaphone : "Noo ?' he said in bitter exasperation, glaring at the picture. And in final despair, 'Noo ?' " (207).

On the **Ile aux Noix** which Jacob mistakenly calls the **Illinois** -- another linguistic lapse pointing to the distinction between Europe and North America -- the language barrier continues between the French artist and the Jewish gesturer. "Soon they were deeply involved in conversation, chiefly distinguished by the fact that neither understood the other's English. Tassigny tried French, but that didn't work, and he switched back to English. They made some progress , although for the time being they communicated more by sweeping, expressive gestures than by words" (27). They "gesticulated together for a short time, somehow understanding each other" (29). When Jacob is invited to join in a game of cards, "With a politeness that was alien even to himself, and a conscious effort to speak flawlessly, he informed the gentleman punctuating his remarks with large, apologetic gestures, that he did not know how to play bridge" (28). Jacob's response to Tassigny's **pictura poesis** of the waves demonstrates again the failure of language : "Nobody had ever talked to him like that . . . He felt the limitations of the foreign language, the limitations of any language, even his own, to express the

phenomenon of a turbulent sea . . . Jacob was at a loss for words" (32).

The difficulties in communication multiply when the two men argue about painting, the artist advocating form while the simplistic viewer opts for representational content even though he carries optical illusions with him wherever he travels. Language frustrates both of them in their debate : "But I (Tassigny) cannot explain to you in words . . . He (Jacob) did not knowwhat to say . . . Jacob did not seem to comprehend anything he said" (35). Explaining his cubistic canvases to Jacob, "Tassigny grew irritated, and talked more rapidly. He talked with his hands, gesticulating wildly" (35), but all of his theorizing about design, form, and feeling means little to Jacob whose hands grope for words. After Jacob purchases the painting, he has a surrealistic nightmare about a monster : "The voice grew louder and more insistent and more threatening" (39). Jacob is plagued by many voices, including his own. Like most of the relationships in **The Rich Man,** the friendship between Jacob and Tassigny deteriorates and they soon part company.

In Europe the voices become more threatening, for to get to Austria Jacob must first traverse the inferno of Germany where a Nazi officer examines his passport. Ironically, Jacob, who has had so much trouble communicating with other characters, understands the storm-guard officer easily. No sooner does he arrives in Vienna, however, than meaningful dialogue is defeated : "They were all talking mumbled sentences and nobody made an effort to understand what was being said" (44-45). They stand in silence, for they "had so much to tell each other that nobody said anything . . . They were for the moment isolated within themselves, alone among the multitude" (46). The same silence and isolation reappear at the circus when Jacob informs Koch of the family's tragedy, "expressing himself more by gestures than by words" : "The two men looked at each other in silence. They were now an island within themselves, isolated and far away" (158).

During the ride to the Grossmans' home when the two young nephews ask their uncle about anti-semitism, a "thick cloud of silence fell into the car and settled" (50). At home the naive, inquisitive family asks their visitor from the new world about Niagara Falls : "It is so big . . . I can't tell you in words. The noise from the falling water is so powerful, you can't hear even your own voice" (60). And later when Jacob accompanies his nephews to their secret cave comprehension between characters becomes perplexing. "The boys walked on either side of him, talking rapidly, and both at the same time, so that Jacob had a

great deal of difficulty understanding what they said, and no chance at all of saying anything himself. His difficulty was further increased by the fact that they began talking in the broad Viennese dialect as soon as they were in the street, and Jacob could only get every tenth word or so" (109).

Amidst this confusion of language among the Grossmans, the language of Albert Reich (whose name means ironically both "rich" and "empire" in German) stands out, setting him apart "from the rest of the family. For the first time, too, Jacob noticed the quality of his language. He could not easily fit him into the picture" (63). Like Tassigny, Albert "paints a black picture" : "His voice, when he was agitated, had the same driving intensity as the Frenchman's" (65). In this sequence of "voices" Albert describes Hitler's voice, "loud and strong, and it kept on getting more powerful" (64-65). These voices recall the symbolic megaphone of **L'Entrepreneur** and the demonic, Babel-like abuse of language in propaganda. Albert remains an outsider in the eyes of the rest of the family : "but he didn't speak so we could all understand what he said, but he was talking with big words and nobody knew what he was saying. How can you like a man when you understand some of the things he says, only they are like poison to you, and other things that you would like to hear he says in a way you cannot understand ? " (98). The voice of reason in characters such as Albert, Koch, and Tassigny penetrates the facade of false rhetoric while innocent victims like the other Grossmans remain deaf to the language of reality.

Once the truth of Jacob's financial status is divulged, his other brother-in-law, Reuben, exclaims his impatience with the impasse of language : "But what is the use talking. Words, words, words" (191). And Jacob once again fails to express himself when he writes to his son. "All these things he wanted to say, speaking from a full heart, but the words were cold once he put them on paper, and when he read over what he had written, he was dissatisfied and tore up the letter, stuffing the pieces into his pocket. He could not express in writing what he wanted to say . . . perhaps it would be better not to say anything to anybody" (198). Lost in the labyrinth of language, struggling through futile gestures to tell their story, Jacob and his family are forced to confront the impending doom of Nazi persecution.

Besides the perplexities of language, voice, and gesture, several scenes and episodes in the novel are related directly to the historical

background or indirectly through their symbolic association with **L'Entrepreneur.** Tassigny's impressionistic description of the waves, for example, carries the same prophetic implications as his painting :

> The water changes all the time. It is never the same. Never for one minute. The colour is different every second. A thousand different shades. But the most interesting of all are the waves. Sometimes you see the wave come slow, as if she is afraid, and is not sure what will happen when she hits the ship. She waits there on the top, trembling a little, and then, suddenly she rushes down like mad and breaks herself against the ship. Sometimes the waves come quick, so quick you cannot see, one behind the other as if they cannot wait, as if they have lived enough, and now want only to destroy themselves. And it seems as if each wave wants to be the first to die (32).

This rather pessimistic interpretation not only contrasts with Jacob's sanguine expectations of gay Vienna, but acts, as well, as one of the many adumbrations in the novel that point to the current political situation with the rise of Fascism leading to mass destruction. The waves represent both fate and its victims when Jacob tells Koch in the middle of the circus about Albert's death : "the noise which raged all about them came to them, muffled and indistinct, like the sound of the waves lapping and breaking themselves against a desolated shore when the sea is calm" (158).

Another example is Jacob's demonic dream recapitulating images from his past along side the cubistic **L'Entrepreneur.** The price he pays for the painting is not merely thirty dollars -- a materialistic reduction of the aesthetic artifact ; rather, as with Frankenstein Promethean **hubris** exacts a haunting monster. First he sees a huge pile of white suits in contrast to the jet-black megaphone of the face in the painting. "Suddenly a faceless giant with enormous legs came stalking through an open window . . . The monster came closer and closer, walking very slowly . . . He could not take his eyes off the giant. Looming behind his right leg there was a thin, mask-like face, and when Jacob looked closer he saw to his amazement that it was Sam Silver. Now the ghoul was within arm's length, and he could feel its breath, and he wondered where the breath was coming from since there was no face. Two powerful, hairy arms reached out and grabbed him, and the last thing he saw was Tassigny

sitting on the window-sill, eating a corned beef sandwich and laughing" (39). The nightmare provides the subconscious language for conveying what ordinary language fails to express (3) ; the confused identities of Sam Silver and Tassigny parallel the confusion of language. Silver, the aspiring capitalist who plays a Sancho Panza to Grossman's Quixote, replaces the original painting's female face representing the women who control Jacob's life, while Tassigny replaces Jacob at the delicatessen prior to his departure.

This interchanging of identities occurs in other relationships and forms part of Jacob's illusions about himself and the rest of the world. Jacob's son becomes a surrogate for the father who has denied himself and his daughters some of life's pleasures in order to provide for David's education. Thus, Jacob boasts first to Duncan and then to Tassigny, "I have a son a doctor", a pet phrase showing where the rich man's fulfillment lies. Similarly, he distorts his relationship with Tassigny to add "I have a friend an artist" to his collection of delusions. Falling prey to the enchantment of music, an international language, Jacob takes pride in the Frenchman's piano playing and confuses him with his son. "Jacob felt his heart swell with pride. He felt as if he personally had something to do with Tassigny's playing. It had been like that . . . when he had sat in Convocation Hall that day David received his degree of Doctor of Medicine. He remembered the deep and solemn swellings of the organ . . . and when his son kneeled and the purple hood was placed over his head, a part of it belonged to him and to Malke. Had they not deprived themselves of many things that they might live to see this moment ? " (29). Jacob also associates Tassigny with Albert, who is also interested in art : "Jacob's eyes were glued on Albert. There was something about him that reminded Jacob of Tassigny. His voice, when he was agitated, had the same driving intensity as the Frenchman's" (65). And Albert and Jacob mirror each other on the question of Jacob supporting the family : Albert tries to ask for a loan, but "the words stuck in his throat " (141) ; Jacob wants to help, "but the words stuck in his throat" (176), for the paralysis of silence afflicts all of those unemployed during the Thirties.

The first of the diabolic visual symbols Jacob encounters after **L'Entrepreneur** is the deep red band with the black swastika in a white disk on the German storm-guard officer. Then "Jacob saw the strange and ominous insignia on his cap -- two crossed bones and a leering death's - head" (43). The next visual representation, a sculpted variation of **L'Entrepreneur**, is a landmark in the centre of Vienna. "They had

almost reached the end of the long Praterstrasse where it gets shabbier and is suddenly redeemed by the huge, obelisk-like monument of Admiral Tegetthoff. The monument fills a big square into which flow five long avenues. Steps lead up to it, and its wide base is covered with straining figures of warriors and foaming horses, writhing wildly against the harnessing bridles. A thick, marble, pillar-like column, adorned with beaked prows of warships, shoots out against the sky, and on top stands the admiral, gazing far out into space, his hand gripping a telescope" (49). The nineteenth-century heroic warrior contrastswith the modern anti-hero, Grossman ; the sole instance of the historical present tense in the narrative underscores the antithesis between the heroism of the past and the barbarism of the twentieth century ; the monument, nevertheless, is a reminder of war and is therefore a sculptured presentation of Tassigny's abstraction with a telescope instead of a megaphone.

From this monument Kreisel turns to a description of the murals in the steam chambers, grim reminders of the gas chambers : "The walls were covered with frescoes, depicting the part that water had played in the progress of the human race through the centuries. Not all the frescoes were of equal artistic merit, but a few were executed with a magnificent, sweeping power, and the painter's brush had caught a moment of man's gigantic struggle to wrest energy from the roaring masses of water and had given it form and substance on the wall" (95). Aesthetic parallels of **L'Entrepreneur**, these artistic creations change to destructive "execution" of "roaring masses" of mankind.

Another part of Jacob's initiation into the old world is the cave episode where he and his nephews can view the world from a Gygean vantage point as Kreisel invokes Columbus' discovery of America in their pursuit of primitivism. In an adventure worthy of Huck Finn, the **rite de passage** involves an oath not to reveal the location of the Platonic cave ; they join hands in a symbolic gesture and Jacob becomes a true confederate : "Now you're one of us" (114). In the cave Bernhardt repeats his history lesson, **"Patra nostra olim provincia Romana erat"**, a reference to the contemporary Austrian servitude. When the two brothers begin to argue and wrestle furiously, "straining like wild horses" (115) -- the same image as in the militaristic Tegetthoff monument -- Jacob calms them by reminding them of their federation in language reminiscent of the European alliances. "A fine pair of partners you are . . . What kind of a federation have you got ? You make a federation and then you fight" (115). Indeed, the cave becomes a microcosm for the events to follow internationally, for not only do the boys discuss

the arguments and anger of their parents, but more crucial is the confrontation with the anti-semitic gang. The pacifist Bernhardt suggests, "Let's make a pact with them", whereas the militant Herman responds, "Let's fight them" (117).

Having escaped from this cave of the Cyclops, they head for the Circean enchantment of the circus at the Prater and in so doing they move from isolation to crowds and music. The decadence portrayed in the film **Cabaret** or the propaganda in Leni Riefenstahl's work is analogous to Kreisel's implicit suggestion about the manipulation of the irrational crowds by Wagnerian sensationalsim : "From all sides came the tin-clang of weary Wurlitzers, accompanying the endless circles of merry-go-rounds. In the beer-gardens and in the open-air cafés loudspeakers blared out the latest jazz hits, newly imported from America. It was a mad, whirling, strident cacophony" (120). Old and new worlds meet through the medium of jazz, the musical counterpart of the cubistic **L'Entrepreneur**, which echoes the jazz version of The Blue Danube Waltz at the beginning of the novel. For the diabolic undertones associated with the illusory circus world, one need only think of Coketown in **Hard Times,** Archibald Mac Leish's sustained metaphor in "The End of the World", and Robertson Davies' Faustian troupe in **Fifth Business** -- indeed, the star of the show, **Die Dame ohne Unterleib,** would fit well in Dunstan Ramsey's crippled world.

The merry-go-rounds in the circus form part of a circular movement reflecting the general confusion of language and identity. Jacob's voyage "has been going around and around" (13) in his head for many years. After Shaendl's accident, Albert's "head began to spin, slowly at first, round and round, in large circles, and then faster and faster, with the circles narrowing until his head seemed to revolve around a tiny axis at fantastic speed" (152). This vertigo leads to his death and is soon followed by Jacob's dizziness when he thinks of Shaendl's need for money : "Endlessly revolving like the needle of a gramophone caught in the spiral groove of a record" (175). Jacob's "head was reeling"(177). The novel comes full circle when he remembers the Kafkaesque factory clock near the beginning of the novel : "The illusion, the wonderful illusion of the past few weeks had now suddenly come to a shattering, painful, ugly end. He was an insignificant, poor presser again, No. 1003, pushing his way into crowded streetcars every morning hurrying to punch the time clock, and all the grandiloquence, all the splendour, all his luxurious pretensions had now quite fallen away, and from the recesses

of the past mocked at his pitiable nakedness" (177). The wheel of fortune turns, leaving a fallen Lear ragged and exposed.

At the circus the bugler and the barker, yet another in the list of **les entrepreneurs**, draw the unsuspecting masses as if by dictatorial suasion. "The crowd gathered round the platform, giggling and talking, shuffling impatiently, like a lowing herd of cattle waiting to be led to pasture" (120). The pathetic pastoral simile is a repetition of Tassigny's image of the people who see **l'entrepreneur** : "One goes and all follow, like a herd of sheep" (36-37). The victims of this mesmerizing propaganda become the tormentors who seek other victims, the innocent scapegoats. The political parallels in mob psychology are too evident when all the world's a circus : "The clown kept on making jokes which were ancient and bad, but he had a receptive and very uncritical audience, ready to laugh at anything, and thankful that they were being entertained free of charge" (121). The standard joke about the dead father prepares for the visit to Solomon Grossman's grave and the death of Albert while recalling Jacob's favourite biblical story about Joseph and his brothers, especially the part when he asks if his father is still alive (104). The deluding circus, effete yet childish, ends with **Die Dame ohne Unterlieb,** the lower half of the distorted legs of **L'Entrepreneur.** "The fact that the wheelchair was not of the orthodox kind, but looked rather like a big wooden box on wheels, seemed to trouble few of the spectators" (122).

The loss of individuality in the midst of the crowd may be seen at the circus or in the mass political rallies of the period. After Shaendl's accident the curious crowd gathers and the interne in the ambulance shouts, "This isn't a circus" (148), Kreisel displaying a Swiftian aversion to these onlookers. Yet Jacob feels the need of losing himself in these crowds. "And suddenly, as he walked, alone and unable to escape from his own thoughts, he felt the desire to mingle with a large crowd of people, to disappear in it, and thus perhaps to escape from himself" (155-156). In this act of bad faith and disengagement Kreisel explores the universal theme of the individual shirking responsibility in the lure of the anonymous, dehumanizing crowd (4)."He knew the cruelty and the indifference of a great city. He knew how utterly alone a man can be even among a million other men. The crowd pushed and pulled about him, hundreds of men and women, out to amuse themselves and have a good time, but he was not a part of them. That was the way he had felt, walking about the hot pavements of New York and Detroit and Toronto with Sam Silver " (156).

Poverty, unemployment, visual and aural symbols, arguments within the family, the motif of the crowd, the difficulties in the exchange of language from character to character, the decadent world of illusions closing its eyes on unbearable realities, lengthy political debates--all of these render the events of the 1930's more than peripheral. Albert's statement applies to the Jews as well as to Austria : "And to us here who had to look on helplessly it seemed that nobody in the whole world cared. This is such a little country. Only six million people. We don't matter" (63). And Koch's prophesy demonstrates the explicitness of the holocaust in **The Rich Man :** "I feel that out of all the agony, out of all the suffering, a new state of mind, a new world spirit will eventually be born, even though I will probably not survive the holocaust" (133).

NOTES

(1) **The Rich Man,** *Toronto : Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1961, viii. Future references in my text are to this New Canadian Library edition.*

(2) *George Steiner,* **Language and Silence,** *Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1969, p. 140. For another theory of* **L'univers concentrationnaire,** *see Lawrence L. Langer,* **The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination,** *New Haven : Yale University Press, 1975.*

(3) *Albert's feeling of guilt is another manifestation of* **L'Entrepreneur :** *"a monster without a head, lurking on the fringes of his consciousness" (150).*

(4) *For a discussion of the "crowd" see Walter Benjamin,* **Illuminations,** *edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, New York : Schocken, 1969, pp. 166-76.*