

More Banal Than Evil

By ANATOLE BROYARD

AN ASSASSIN'S DIARY. By Arthur H. Bremer. With an introduction by Harding Lemay. 142 pages. Harper's Magazine Press. \$6.50.

Arthur H. Bremer, the man who shot and crippled Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama, is an odd example of what Hannah Arendt described as "the banality of evil." Except for that single act, Bremer would seem to be only banal. In the diary that he kept while he was planning first to assassinate President Nixon and then Governor Wallace, we find little more than pathetic delusions of grandeur. Shooting a famous man was the only way he could think of to "make a name" for himself.

His motives were not recognizably political, for we learn that he also considered Senator George McGovern as a possible target but correctly foresaw that Mr. McGovern was not the stuff of which names were made. Bremer does not seem to be unduly moved by rage or frustration, either. He is complacent enough to note down what he eats, how much his various hotel and motel rooms cost and how attractive they are, the changes in the weather, the civility or rudeness of gas-station attendants, the quality of the roads he travels, and so on.

He is extremely conventional. On one occasion, he runs back two blocks—to the rud gas station—because he had forgotten to pay for a can of oil. He remarks that he likes "a good cop" and seems to have nothing but contempt for protesters and longhairs. In New York, he stays at the Fifth Avenue Hotel and the Waldorf-Astoria and is disappointed in both. He also hires a limousine for a few hours and enjoys the sensation of having people look in at him as he goes sightseeing through the city.

The One That Got Away

As an assassin, Bremer comes across as Chablinesque—and in fact, in a playful nod he compares himself to Chaplin. His original intention to assassinate President Nixon is a comedy of errors before he abandons it. As he remarks himself, he encounters the President six times and, for reasons buried in his unconscious, never manages to carry out his plan. While following Mr. Nixon to Canada, he hides his guns in order to cross the border and manages to push one of them so deeply in the frame of his car that he cannot retrieve it. He even forgets both guns on a plane, and the loudspeaker in the airport washroom requests him to come back and get them. Seeing what he takes to be the Presidential car in front of a Canadian embassy building, he rushes back to his hotel to brush his teeth, change his suit and take two aspirins—and returns to find that the car is gone. One senses that, in spite of his yearning to do something "big," he feels that the assassination of the President of the United States is too big for him.

When he decides, quite arbitrarily, to switch to Governor Wallace, he reproaches himself that this may not guarantee him immortality. Any one of a number of possible events, he speculates, might push him off the front page. But he seems more

comfortable, as if this job were scaled down to his size. In fact, mixed in with his hunger for fame is another hunger—for peace. But for this or that contretemps, he reflects, he would be "relaxing in jail." He has such an overwhelmingly ordinary air about him that one suspects he is almost as surprised as the onlookers when he finally pulls the trigger.

The longest entry in the diary may be the most revealing. After three months of not talking to anyone but people who serve him food, sign him into rooms or fill the tank of his car, Bremer goes to a "massage parlor" in New York. He chooses one from an ad in a magazine and walks past it again and again before entering. After selecting his "masseuse" from a album of nude photos, he is locked into a room with her for half an hour. He is now nude, and she is wearing nylon panties.

He begins by giving her a \$30 tip, above the \$18 fee. She makes no comment. As she attempts to please him in the manner of such places, he makes small talk with her about a burglar alarm he noticed that has been ringing for two days and about the weather. When she refuses his advances, citing the "rules" of the establishment, he says that he cannot respond to her approach and leaves. He has his own sort of sexual integrity, for, although he is a virgin and she has excited him, his desires are unavailingly orthodox.

Delusions, But No Answers

Though Bremer's spelling is illiterate, he has literary pretensions. He says "call me Ishmal," his version of the opening words of "Moby-Dick," and compares himself to a Russian novel. Two poems are included in his diary, and apparently the author believes that his record of his thoughts and feelings will be "the most closely read pages since the Scrolls in those caves." We never learn why he has buried the first 148 pages of the diary, why he refuses to divulge their hiding place, where he got the money he lived on while stalking President Nixon and Governor Wallace. For that matter, we can only guess at the original impulse that led him to choose this particular path to "fame" rather than another.

In a long and passionate introduction, Harding Lemay suggests that "we" determined Bremer's choice: "he was nourished by the same societal manure that stains us all." Bremer's crime is "existentialist," a function of the same "unfocused rage" that rides all of us who know that "life is a sham and a cheat." He has tried to kill a man to counteract the feeling that he has been "condemned to impotence and failure." If this were so, it would seem to follow that there would not be an official alive in our Government. Besides, such an explanation dehumanizes and reduces Bremer still more than Mr. Lemay's "society." Even a moron "wailing along the margins of nonentity," as William Blake put it, has a personality. With all our concern for civil rights, we should not forget that even an assassin's soul is entitled to its mysteries.