

Review Essay

Hannah Arendt. *The Jewish Writings*. Ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman. NY: Schocken Books, 2007. 559+lxxvi pp.

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Schocken Books, the German-Jewish publishing house that employed Hannah Arendt as an editor in New York during the 1940s, has released a new collection of Arendt's work entitled *The Jewish Writings*, an extraordinary assembly of occasional pieces, essays, editorials, book reviews, and letters that document Arendt's ongoing engagement with Jews and Judaism, beginning with her reflections and analyses of anti-Semitism in the 1930s, moving to the war and post-war years and the foundation of Israel in the 1940s and 50s, and concluding with the Eichmann controversy in the 1960s. Opening essays by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman and a concluding memoir by Arendt's niece, Edna Brocke, offer biographical and intellectual backgrounds and contexts. As the pieces unfold year by year and sometimes week by week, we witness the drama of Jewish statelessness, Holocaust, nation-formation, and their consequences for American, European and world thought and politics as they devolved for one of the twentieth century's most engaged, opinionated, and original intellectuals. Some of the interest of the volume stems from the uncanny glimpses of history in formation; when Arendt refers to "Palestinian terrorist organizations" in 1944, she is speaking, of course, about right wing Zionist groups such as Irgun, not about the *intifada*, and when she writes in 1938 that the Soviet Union is "the only country where the civil rights of Jews are guaranteed by law" (51), we know that she must not yet know of Stalin's purges.

The deeper excitement of the book lies in recognizing the relationship between these often occasional pieces and the works that would establish Arendt as a major interlocutor on the nature of politics. An early draft on "Antisemitism" from 1937/38, translated and published for the first time in this volume, provides the arguments and insights of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The classic essays "We Refugees" and "The Jew as Pariah," previously collected by Ron Feldman in *The Jew as Pariah* (NY: Grove, 1978), are now republished alongside pieces contemporary to them from *Aufbau*, a newspaper for German-Jewish expatriates published in New York during the war years. Arendt's drive throughout these pages to define a Jewish *politics* (rather than a Jewish religion,

ethnicity, identity, or culture) discloses the existential source of her deep commitment elsewhere to distinguish absolutely the political from the social.

At the head of the collection stands an intense little piece entitled “The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question,” an essay in intellectual history from 1932 that establishes many of the key concerns of the more journalistic and editorial pieces that follow. Arendt begins by reflecting on the specifically Enlightenment project of Jewish emancipation, and then turns to the historicism of Johann Gottfried von Herder, who affirmed the content and texture of Jewish life in its particularity, apart from any rationality it might manifest in itself or for Christianity. Herder directly links this reappropriated significance to the status of the Jews as a people, seeding the national element in German historicism: “He does not concede to them their sameness with other peoples—which for the Enlightenment is the only means of making them human beings – but instead emphasizes their foreignness” (13). Herder restores historicity to the Jews, but deprives that history of its content by canceling its theological foundations: “Thus the Jews have become a people without a history within history. Herder’s understanding of history deprives them of their past. Once again they stand face to face with nothing” (16). The Jews, newly rationalized by the Enlightenment and then historicized by its Romantic turn, find themselves at sea in a fundamental groundlessness: “In their struggle for emancipation they are forced continually to perform a *salto mortali*, to attempt a leap into their own integration” (16).

In the Enlightenment essay, Arendt notes the identification of the Jews with “a position of exceptionality” (16), at once inside European history as part of its typological architecture and economic machinery, yet cordoned off from it by the operations of civil and religious law. The problem of the political exception, which has become such an urgent theme in contemporary discussions of the war on terror, recurs throughout *The Jewish Writings*. In the long draft on “Antisemitism,” Arendt argues that political exceptionality has repeatedly marked the condition of the Jews as a group integrated economically but excluded politically from the nation-states that house them. Since emancipation conferred citizenship as a privilege rather than acknowledged it as a right, citizenship could be, and often was, revoked by the same nation-states that had granted it. Moreover, emancipation was often extended only to wealthy Jews, whose capital and

services benefited the state, deepening the divide between the bourgeois citizen-Jews invited into assimilation and the poor Eastern Jews who remained locked in *shtetl* culture, taking exception to modernity. Whereas emancipation appeared to incorporate the Jews as citizens into the modern nation-states of Western Europe, its selective mechanisms actually maintained the Jews in a suspended state of emergency, as became disastrously clear with the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, whose “laws of exception” (31) revoked Jewish citizenship in 1935.

The tension between emancipation and exception—between integration into European society and a continued distance from it—remains a constant theme throughout *The Jewish Writings*. Although Arendt associates assimilation with the insecurity and opportunism of the parvenu, she also acknowledges that a degree of assimilation necessarily attends the process of Enlightenment, whose rezoning of Jewish intellectual possibilities in modernity are reflected and advanced in Arendt’s own life and work. She titles an early essay on the Jewish salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833) “Original Assimilation,” a phrase that grasps the virtuosity of Varnhagen’s love affair with European culture. Choosing a Biblical figure to capture the shallow brilliance of Varnhagen’s assimilationist intellect, Arendt compares Rahel to Adam: “Purely independent, because born into no cultural world, without prejudice, because it seemed no one judged before her, as if in the paradoxical situation of the first human being, she was compelled to appropriate everything as if she were meeting it for the first time” (25). Varnhagen’s assimilation is “original” because it flows out of and gives shape to the very moment of historicized Enlightenment grasped with such poetic exactitude by Herder. Disengaged from tradition, “dependent on unprecedent” (25), Varnhagen is left with the subjective orientation of “experience,” the egoistic and ultimately “vacant” matter of “her own life,” as her only ingress into “an alien history” (26). Although critics have often seen in Arendt’s biographical musings on Varnhagen elements of identification (the charismatic intelligence, the sexual venturing, the intermarriage), Arendt clearly distinguishes her own insistence on the power of precedence, both Greek and Jewish, from Varnhagen’s experiential romanticism. If Rahel is Adamic in her desperate innocence, Hannah resembles Jeremiah in her prophetic pursuit of a new covenant, a *berit hadashah* that might reconnect the Jews to each other in a politics that

would take shape through and beyond the catastrophes of exile and the casualties of forgetfulness.

At various points in the collection, we watch Arendt attempting to fill the vacancy created by the Varnhagens of German Jewry without renewing Judaism through religious practice. In a fascinating short piece from 1932 entitled “Against Private Circles,” Arendt argues for the need to develop Jewish grammar schools for the children of an increasingly disenfranchised German Jewry:

The coming generation must know the *history of Jewish assimilation* and of *antisemitism* as well as it knows the history of Judaism up until assimilation. Only in this way can they be provided with a basis from which to judge their environment and themselves in a genuinely *reasonable* way; only in this way can they lend substance to a self-consciousness which as a merely ethical command must always remain vacant. (20)

Arendt diagnoses the vacancy embraced by Varnhagen as the general condition of assimilated German Jewry, and she tries to craft a positive pedagogy, based on history and reason, that would provide content and structure for increasingly besieged and bewildered secular Jews. Recalling aspects of the *Tarbut* or “culture” schools, a network of secular, Hebrew-language schools in Eastern Europe, the education she envisions is political not only in terms of the materials Arendt hopes to deliver (something like *The Origins of Totalitarianism for Children*), but also in the public rather than private space of instruction, a true community day school that would bring together the alien sectors of the Jewish population for collective study of the conditions that have led to both their internal divisions and their escalating exclusion from German life. How long such a pedagogy could survive disconnected from religious education, however, remains questionable; the *Tarbut* schools of Eastern Europe have now become, in at least one American instance, *Tarbut v’Torah*, culture *and* law.¹

Arendt’s most consistent tack in the search to reground modern Jewry in a content other than religion or experience is the idea of the Jews as a “people.” She writes from New York in 1941, “we do have the right to be a ‘people like all peoples’ and human beings among our fellow human beings” (161). In a recurrent topic of her wartime

editorials, Arendt argues that the Jews should be allowed to fight under their own flag, to go to war *as Jews* and not simply as soldiers of the British Army. A Jewish army would grant the Jews the dignity of confronting their enemies, rather than relegating them to the passive status of victims, refugees, and recipients of aid. Some of Arendt's reasoning here bears comparison with Carl Schmitt's account of the fundamental transformation of the structure of hostility in the "total wars" of the twentieth century; indeed, Arendt gives Schmitt a less than damning footnote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

To be "a people like all peoples," a phrase borrowed from Zionist discourse, establishes the Jews not as a religion but as a nation; Arendt uses the phrase in order to reject the gentrification of Judaism into a faith by the Reform movement and to revitalize the political core of the Jewish tradition at risk of destruction by assimilationist tendencies (149-50). By placing Jewish peoplehood within the "communal life of nations" and the "history of humankind," however, Arendt flags her discomfort with the nation-state solution increasingly championed by the main wing of Zionism. As Judith Butler has argued in her review of *The Jewish Writings*, Arendt in these pieces is seeking "an idea of the 'nation' that is uncoupled from both statehood and territory."ⁱⁱ Such a project resounds in Arendt's support of federations of national groups that would participate in collective decision-making, whether in a new European union or in a Mediterranean federation that would link Jewish settlements in Israel with both Arab and non-Arab groups in the region.

Missing from Arendt's account of the Jews as a people is an account of its covenantal foundations in the Hebrew Bible, where God recommits to all creation after the Flood (Gen 6), promises nationhood to Abraham in the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17), and finally constitutes Israel as a *goy kadosh*, a holy nation, with the giving of the law at Sinai (Ex 19:6). There are, I think, two reasons for the absence of a covenantal vocabulary in *The Jewish Writings*, one taking its bearings from within Arendt's political thinking, and the other reflecting the limited terms of her own covenant with Judaism. Arendt's mature political writings, as crystallized in *The Human Condition* (1958), take human action, not law, as the essence of politics; covenant and contract have no real place in her genealogy of politics, since they already signal the absorption of genuine

politics into the economic negotiations of the merely social. Meanwhile, from within Judaism, covenant signified religious observance and an historical particularism at odds with the rational universe of philosophy; covenant would have seemed too redolent of orthodoxy to appear politically useful to Arendt and her circle.

Both the marked absence and the residual pull of covenantal thinking make themselves felt in Arendt's open letter to Gershom Scholem of 1963: "To be a Jew belongs for me to the indisputable facts of my life ... There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been *given* and not *made*; for what is *physei* and not *nom*" (466). Judith Butler comments in a constructionist direction: "Is there not a making of what is given that complicates the apparent distinction between *physei* and *nom*?" I would suggest somewhat differently that Arendt chooses *physis*, nature, as the last grounds that the secularization of Judaism leaves behind when it has evacuated *nomos*, law, of its ongoing validity. *Physis*, like her concept of peoplehood, echoes ethnicity as a genetic heritage, evokes certain forms of textual reasoning, remains reconcilable with Enlightenment, and stands apart from religious practice or belief. Such a *physis* attempts to materialize and render positive the gap created by Herder's historicism and Varnhagen's vacancy. By evoking "gratitude," an aspect of *hesed* or covenant-love, in relation to the givenness of *physis*, Arendt suggests something like a post-covenantal relationship with the God of the Jews, a reappropriation of Judaism that occurs not simply at the subjectivizing level of understanding (as Herder describes the dialectic of Jewish *Bildung*), but through a more existential acknowledgement of a creative debt that precedes the subject and cannot be fully cognized by her.ⁱⁱⁱ Arendt's declaration of gratitude for Jewishness as something which for her simply and incontrovertibly *is* reaches beyond a nativist nationalism in order to grasp at the extraordinary inscribed givenness of Judaism as a set of writings, rites, and memories – of observations and observances—oriented around the legislative speech-act of covenant in its several instances and destinies. Such an acknowledgment, however, never crystallizes into a positive program; Arendt remains, like Herder's Jews, "face to face with nothing," ever attempting that *salto mortali* into integration with the community of nations from a fundamental groundlessness that remains the hallmark of her Jewish generation.

In *The Jewish Writings*, Arendt struggles to articulate a relationship to Judaism that is neither assimilationist nor separatist, a settlement that would allow Jews to participate in Western political forms, but without either giving up their status as Jews, validating that status through religious observance, or embracing the nation-state as the essential form that politics must take. Although some readers may, like me, be left unsatisfied by the indeterminacy of Arendt's account of Judaism, *The Jewish Writings* are uniquely revelatory of the ambiguities and achievements of Judaism in modernity. Moreover, Arendt's habitation of a conceptual circuit distinct from the cultural and materialist ones that have guided so much literary study in recent years may suggest new directions for conceptualizing the Jewish presence in Western and world traditions—including those, like covenant, that Arendt herself falls short of developing.

ⁱ Tarbut v'Torah Community Day School, Irvine, California.

ⁱⁱ Judith Butler, Review of Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, *London Review of Books* 10 May 2007: 26. For Arendt's federative proposals, see "Can the Jewish-Arab Question be Solved?", *The Jewish Writings*, 193-98.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Hesed* is translated from the Hebrew as "loving-kindness" or, in the Christian tradition, as "grace." Daniel Alazar translates it as "covenant love or the loving fulfillment of a covenant obligation. *Hesed* is the operative term in a covenant relationship, which translates the bare fact of the covenant into a dynamic relationship." *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 28.