

Interrupting Auschwitz

Josh Cohen

Continuum, 2003

224 pages

\$24.95

The cover of Josh Cohen's book *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy* (Continuum Press, 2002) features a close-up image of a burned book. It instantly takes you back to Heine's aphorism: "Where books are burned, human beings are destined to be burned too" from his verse-play "Almansor" written about the persecutions of Muslims by the Spanish Inquisition. Paraphrasing on Heine, the question whether books can be written where people were burned represents the main problem discussed in Cohen's recent study.

The author, Dr. Josh Cohen is Lecturer in English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the author of *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing* (Pluto Press, 1998) as well as a range of articles on modern literature, continental philosophy and cultural theory.

The starting point of this study is Adorno dictum "after Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric, and this even erodes the cognition articulating why it became impossible to write poems." This determination is closely linked to the observation made earlier in Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1944): "The idea that after this war life could go on "normal", or culture even be "rebuilt" is idiotic—as rebuilding culture is its negation by itself. Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this shall be an interlude and not the catastrophe itself? What is this culture waiting for?"

Although "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," Adorno believes that it is nevertheless appropriate to pause and reflect on this consideration. In fact Adorno claims Auschwitz imposes a "new categorical imperative" on mankind to think and act such that nothing similar will happen. Faithful to Adorno's opinion, Cohen underscores the necessity to remember history and write literature, or make art that can face-up to the terrible past and provide moral principles that could assure that Auschwitz will never happen again. Simultaneously the author is acutely aware of the impossibility of doing so. Rather than adopting Adorno's pessimism, Cohen reasons that the impossibility of this assurance places ethical thought in a state of continuous, endless incompleteness. Thus, closure is impossible, redemption

is unattainable and our responsibility never ends. Drawing on the notions of art, philosophy and their limits in Adorno himself, and the interplay of aesthetic and religious motifs in the French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas and the Egyptian-Jewish-French poet Edmond Jabés, Cohen argues that the imperative demands a fundamental reworking of the meaning of redemption or *tikkun* (a term borrowed from Lurianic kabbalah). Rather than being understood in terms of a will to finality, the redemption is interpreted as an “interruptive” thought, a refusal to bring thought to any point of completion. Very creatively, Cohen calls this ethical task “interrupting” which signifies two distinct meanings, but both essential to our present-day thinking. On the one hand, it suggests the effect of the inassimilable trauma of Auschwitz on thinking and culture (“Auschwitz interrupts”); on the other hand it suggests the imperative of thinking and acting against the recurrence of Auschwitz (“Auschwitz must be interrupted”). Paradoxically, Cohen believes that it is this awareness and understanding of “interruption” that will safeguard man from Auschwitz repeating itself.

The logic of “interruption” which stands at the center of Cohen’s discourse is borrowed from Levinas’ work, which places “one’s responsibility as the major task in encountering the other” (whether this other is a fellow human being or God). This responsibility therefore calls for an eternal vigilance that is depicted by the second interpretation of the concept of “interrupting.” I have no trouble with Cohen’s using the Levinasian language and metaphors to drive his message.

However, Cohen is reading Levinas’ Jewish thought as a sustained philosophical reflection on the moral and ethical implications of Auschwitz and the necessary, fundamental ethical obligation and responsibility of every individual (including every Jew) after the Nazi Genocide. Here is where I find the essential problem in Cohen’s discourse. I would contend that a closer evaluation of Levinas’ Jewish writings will bring one to the conclusion that Levinas denies that Auschwitz poses any unique theological challenge to traditional “Rabbinic Judaism.” In fact Levinas believes that “Rabbinic exegesis is eternally contemporary” (*Difficult Freedom*, 138). In contrast to western philosophical and ethical traditions, Levinas argues that Rabbinic Judaism retains its full integrity after Auschwitz. When Levinas talks to his fellow Jewish westernized intellectual colleagues he does not call for a rethinking of Jewish traditions in the light of Auschwitz but rather calls for a return to the Jewish ethical foundations embodied by the Talmud. Similarly when speaking to non-Jews, Levinas invites modernity to learn from authentic

Rabbinical Judaism. Some brief examples to illustrate my position:

1) Regarding the doctrine of “an eye for an eye” Levinas writes: “The Doctors of the Talmud anticipated modern scruples: eye for eye means a fine. “But” as he continues, “yes eye for an eye. Neither all eternity, nor all the money in the world, can heal the outrage done to man. It is a disfigurement or wound that bleeds for all time, as though it requires a parallel suffering to staunch this eternal hemorrhage” (Difficult Freedom, 146).

2) Regarding the question of applying the old Rabbinic Law to a contemporary situation that differs politically, socially and economically from the order envisaged by the Law, Levinas states: “The social and political situation described by the Bible and the Talmud is the example of a given situation that is rendered human by the Law. From it we can deduce the justice required for any and every situation. This is an idea which we consider fundamental. The great books of Judaism do not in fact express themselves as parables that are open to the whims of a poetic imagination or as concepts that are always schematic, but as examples that betray nothing of the infinite relations that make up the fabric of the social being. They offer themselves up as an interpretation that is as rigorous as parables are vague and as rich as concepts are poor.”

Levinas himself does not experience any crisis of faith or theology when confronting the absolute evil of the Auschwitz experience. Levinas’ conceptions of current events are prefigured in the “great books of Judaism.” Thus, Levinas states “In executing the priests of the city of Nov, Saul left the Gibeonites who served them without a means of subsistence. The Midrash affirms that the crimes of extermination begins before murders take place, that oppression and economic uprooting already indicate its beginning, that the laws of Nuremberg already contain the seeds of the horrors of the extermination camps and the final solution” (Nine Talmudic Readings). Similarly, regarding another Talmudic passage Levinas asks, “how could Hanina have been so harsh as to refuse thirteen times to grant the forgiveness that was humbly sought of him?” Levinas suggests the following explanation: “One can, if pressed to the limit, forgive the one who has spoken unconsciously. But it is very difficult to forgive Rav, who was destined to a great fate. One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger. If Hanina could not forgive the just and humane Rav because he was also the brilliant Rav, it is even less possible to forgive Heidegger” (Nine Talmudic Readings).

In their entirety, these remarks allude to Edmond Jabés conclusion: “I say that after Auschwitz we must write poetry, but with wounded words.”

Reviewed by C. Oscar Jacob, University of Southern California