

Aesthetics in Religion: Remarks on Hermann Cohen's Theory of Jewish Existence¹

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My focus is here to connect Hermann Cohen's *Aesthetics of the Pure Feeling*² with his philosophy of religion. In his "Introduction" to Cohen's *Jewish Writings*, Franz Rosenzweig was the first to note the strong aesthetic impact on Cohen's last writings. Rosenzweig believes that after having written his *Ethics of the Pure Will*, Cohen wanted to reveal in his *Aesthetics* all the surplus material and thought for which there was no place in his *Ethics*.³ So he was constrained to write his book on aesthetics, and to make this "experiment in thought" before he could be sure that there was indeed a surplus of reflection which he had been unable to subsume within his *System of Philosophy*.⁴ But the discovery of this 'post-aesthetical' surplus does not imply that religious thought will disclose totally new matters for inquiry. As has often been pointed out with respect to Cohen's ethics, we must also assume close links between his religious philosophy and his aesthetics. The present paper focuses on two aspects: the question of compassion, closely linked to Cohen's dramaturgy of tragic art, and the question of reconciliation, bound up with his theory of lyrics.

Compassion

At the end of 1913, the lawyer Genrich Borisowitch Sliosberg from St. Petersburg visited Hermann Cohen in Berlin.⁵ The case of Mendel Beilis in Kiev had just finished; although Beilis was acquitted of ritual murder, suspicions regarding such practices

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²*Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*. 2 vols., Berlin, B. Cassirer 1912 (= H. Cohen: *Werke*, ed. Helmut Holzhey. Hildesheim etc., Olms 1977 ff., vols. 8 and 9, 1982) [hereafter: ArG I/II].

³Rosenzweig: "Einleitung," in: H. Cohen: *Jüdische Schriften*. 3 vols., Berlin, Schwetschke 1924, vol. 1, XLII f. Cohen's *Ethik des reinen Willens* was published in 1904 (2nd ed. 1907, *Werke*, vol. 7) [hereafter ErW].

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Cf. Aharon Steinberg: "Sichoth-chulin debe Hermann Cohen (Coheniana)" [Yiddish], in: *Davke. Revista trimestral Israelita* 33–34 (1958, "Hermann-Cohen-Nummer"), 132–137; H. Wiedebach: *Die Bedeutung der Nationalität für Hermann Cohen*. Hildesheim etc., Olms 1997, 16–18.

were not allayed. Consequently, one of the most famous Jewish thinkers from the West, Hermann Cohen, was invited to tour Russia and give lectures on modern Jewish thought and philosophy. The official authorities as well as the Jews themselves were to be assured that the Jewish religion harbored no atavistic or even cannibalistic elements. During his journey through Poland and Russia in May 1914, Cohen saw Jewish life and Jewish suffering to a degree and intensity he had not imagined. From a biographical point of view, it is very likely that the impulse acting on Cohen to create a religious theory of compassion sprang from that Eastern European encounter and experience.⁶

The formal structure of Cohen's theory of compassion, however, is based on his *Aesthetics of the Pure Feeling*, especially on his definition of dramatic art. He discusses extensively the interaction between the actors on stage and the audience: dramatic art simply does not exist without the spectator. The most impressive action on stage would be senseless if nobody was there to see it. And that correlation of actor and spectator, according to Cohen, constitutes the formal structure of compassion both in tragic art and religion. The genesis of this correlation can be described in the following way. The actor on stage – the tragic “hero” – represents the human being subject to the law of the past. His ancestor's deeds and their guilt shape and inscribe the destiny of his own life. Aeschylus' Orestes executes the law of vengeance for his father Agamemnon who has been murdered by his wife Clytemnestra: Orestes kills his own mother. The guilt obviously cannot be extinguished by a new murder; on the contrary, it takes on a new and even more pejorative quality. Trying to do what is right, he does wrong. Cohen concludes: “The problem posed in the *Oresteia* is the problem of tragedy in general” (ArG II 86).

This problem has a face both ancient and modern. The *Oresteia* shows the ancient face: Orestes actually murders his mother on the stage. From a modern perspective, however, the dramatic conflict must be internalized within the subjectivity of the hero, according to Cohen exemplified in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet meets the ghost of his murdered father who orders him to avenge his death. But Hamlet does nothing. There is no tragic murder on stage, no “blow of the sword” (87). But it is precisely this “negative” deed which constitutes what Cohen calls the “aesthetic act” (*ibid.*). Without the paraphernalia of theatrical action, Hamlet displays the pure form of tragic existence: inescapable psychological suffering under the law of the past.⁷ As long as the tragic hero is considered an isolated figure on stage (or in life), there is no possibility of escape. This law seems to be total.

However, the structure of dramatic art itself negates this isolation. The spectator, feeling that horrible isolation, reacts with compassion. Thus, within the dynamics of tragic aesthetics, the suffering of isolation is imbued with a *purpose*; it leads to its own overcoming. And it is obvious that for Cohen, such an intensive process cannot merely be one of passive perception. He describes compassion as an *active* feeling which engenders ethical responsibility. It is what Cohen calls “affect,” i.e.

⁶This special notion of compassion appears for the first time in Cohen's essay “Die Lyrik der Psalmen” (Cohen: *Kleinere Schriften*. 6 vols. [*Werke*, vol. 12–17], ed. H. Holzhey, J. H. Schoeps, C. Schulte. Hildesheim etc., Olms 1997 ff., vol. 5, 172 f. [*Jüd. Schr.* I 243]). Bruno Strauss, who edited this essay for the first time from Cohen's estate, dated it to the year 1914.

⁷It is not necessary to explain the importance of that structure for psychoanalytical theory. The most important step into that direction was made by Cohen's teacher in Breslau, Jacob Bernays: *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie*. Breslau, E. Trewendt 1857.

the psychological impulse as a necessary (pre)condition for moral practice.⁸ Compassion leads men to ethical action.

Under the impress of this condition, the whole situation changes. Cohen transposes into the framework of ethical thought his reflection on aesthetics. It is a kind of reciprocal interaction: tragic art shows essential elements of the generative process of moral acts; *ethical* theory describes the moral aim governing the *aesthetic* structure of dramaturgy. The role of the hero's suffering is inscribed with an ethical meaning, in Cohen's view: the logic of time is replaced by another. The suffering of the hero as an isolated person remains his subjugation under the law of provenance, the constraints of the *past*. Yet correlation to the spectator ascribes to it a teleological significance. Now, having been granted a *telos* via the compassion of another person, the hero's suffering can be considered as under the law of *future*. Through compassion, the ideal of an ongoing process of increasing justice and humanity – as developed in Cohen's *Ethics of the Pure Will* – comes to the fore, an ideal pitched against the law of vengeance. The hero's suffering obtains its *telos* through its degree of efficacy in and upon the spectator's moral feeling. In this ethical dramaturgy, even the hero's death on stage changes from an emblem of mythical punishment into a symbol of successful grounding of the moral affect. It serves as a sign for aesthetic effectiveness, initiating "a mental process, which, as such, does not end" (ArG II 71).⁹ In its ethical significance, the correlation of compassion reveals one of the fundamentals of what it means to be human.

But we need to proceed with caution. Dramatic art differs from social reality. In daily life we do not hear soliloquies such as Hamlet's "To be or not to be," few heroes walk our streets. Nevertheless, we obviously use similar forms of mythological judgment to those we discovered in tragic art. If another person suffers under social conditions worse than ours, and h/er situation does not change, we sometimes feel a tendency to ascribe to h/er a certain kind of guilt. Such guilt is a mythological category. The logical structure of that judgment follows the very law of the past as seen at work in tragic events depicted on stage. The poor and the tragic hero are isolated prisoners of the conditions under which they were born. And just as in the context of a tragedy, the whole structure of logic changes if there is compassion with the poor. The social and political system which gave rise to such poverty is recognized as unjust. We discover the mythological logic of guilt as an internal function of self-justification within that system, supported by our interest in preserving the social conditions we are accustomed to. According to Cohen, there needs to be a distinct logical step of judgment in order for the falsity of such mythological guilt to be recognized. And with his *Logic of the Pure Cognition*, this step of judgment can be defined as the "annihilation" or extirpation of a certain kind of thought which contradicts the fundamentals of what it means to be human.¹⁰

⁸Cf. ErW 198 f. Very instructive is Cohen's little book *Die dramatische Idee in Mozarts Operntexten* (Berlin 1915/16), in: *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 6, 1–108, esp. 41 ff. (introd., §§ 37 ff.).

⁹[. . .] ein geistiger Prozess, der, als solcher, kein Ende hat."

¹⁰For the logic structure of such "annihilation" cf. Cohen: *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, 2nd ed. 1914 (*Werke*, vol. 6) [hereafter LrE], ch. "Das Urteil des Widerspruchs," 104–120. The term "Vernichtung" (Annihilierung) occurs 106 f. – Cf. 116: "Ohne das [sic] Erkenntnis der Falschheit [falsity] könnte es kein Urteil, als das Urteil der Erkenntnis, geben."

Such annihilation of falsity does not remain a merely negative act. In Cohen's *Logic*, this judgment transmutes itself into productive activity.¹¹ Similarly, as already mentioned, compassion, including the negation of mythological guilt, is more than passive reaction. It must be acknowledged as "a whole and full activity."¹² Detecting the "falsity" of the poor man's guilt, the feeling of compassion initiates the true judgment on his social situation by discovering a new task for activity. Instead of mythologically structured isolation, the task of social integration becomes the leading principle of political logic. And in a similar sense, just as *tragic* compassion had revealed one of the central aspects of being human, *social* compassion lets us recognize the poor as the typical human being (*Typus des Menschen*, RV 158/RoR 136).

Now we can better grasp the relationship between tragic art and religion. On the one hand, tragic art provides the necessary psychological (pre)condition of social culture. On the other, the field of *genuine praxis* must apparently be entered through religion. No kind of art, even if its pure feeling results in tragic compassion, invokes before our minds the earnestness of genuine suffering: "hence, the feeling of art is not suffering by any means, but [...] rather the most supreme and pure pleasure."¹³ Political reality shows the human being *vis-à-vis* an "abyss of intelligible contingency." In the field of practice more than in theoretical investigation, human beings discover a metaphysical uncertainty of knowledge.¹⁴ Poverty seems to reveal a domain of general weakness or the inability of the individual to manage h/er moral affairs. While within ethical reflection Cohen's concept of human spirit (*Geist*) points to a principle of practical *ability* to manage moral politics, poverty by contrast points up the very lack of that ability.

Cohen none the less calls poverty an explicitly "*spiritual*" kind of suffering (RoR 136/RV 158)! This means that human beings are indeed able to handle the social situation, even if in any historical moment the majority of humankind "in every people and in every epoch" must be considered poor (*ibid.*). Tragic compassion makes men aware of a necessary change in political logic. But where is the link between that tragic impulse and human trust in an ongoing political reform – despite the revelation of fundamental weakness? One must prove the possibility of that link, the correlation between compassion and the origin of social justice, as a *genuine concrete fact in human history*. It cannot be constructed in terms of "pure logic" or as a kind of highlight of feeling.

¹¹The judgement of contradiction ("Das Urteil des Widerspruchs") "betrifft die Tätigkeit des Urteils selbst [...] als Tat des Urteils" (LrE 116). The annihilation of falsity doesn't in itself reveal the true content of thought, but it is the active moment in generating that content.

¹²Cohen: *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, tr. Simon Kaplan. New York, F. Ungar 1972 [hereafter RoR], 141/*Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*. 2nd ed. Frankfurt/M., Kauffmann 1929 [hereafter: RV], 164.

¹³"Daher ist das Kunstgefühl keineswegs Leid, sondern [...] höchste und reinste Lust," Cohen: *Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, 1915 (*Werke*, vol. 10) [hereafter: BR], 92.

¹⁴Cf. Cohen: *Kants Begründung der Ethik*. 2nd ed. 1910 (*Werke*, vol. 2), 185 (1st ed. 1877, 160): "Vor dem Abgrund der intelligibeln Zufälligkeit entspringt das Problem des Sittlichen. [...] Eine eigene Ordnung, eine eigene noumenale Gesetzmässigkeit muss da walten, wo das Sittliche anhebt." Cf. Peter A. Schmid: *Ethik als Hermeneutik. Systematische Untersuchungen zu Hermann Cohens Rechts- und Tugendlehre*. Würzburg, Königshausen und Neumann 1995, 143, 155. For Cohen's transposition of Kant's *epistemological* problem of "intelligibler Zufälligkeit" into an *ethical* one, see Helmut Holzhey: "Wissenschaft und Gottesidee. Cohen vor dem Abgrund der 'intelligibeln Zufälligkeit,'" in: *Vernunft, Kontingenzen und Gott*, eds. U. Dalferth and Ph. Stoellger. Tübingen, Mohr 2000, 273–290.

Jewish Tragic Existence

We find Cohen's answer in his interpretation of the historical existence of the Jewish people. He considers the biblical sources a document revealing the impact of social compassion on political reality. In his view, the prophets had demonstrated the possibility of a compassionate administration of justice. Drawing on the findings of nineteenth-century historical biblical higher criticism (Julius Wellhausen *et al.*), Cohen reads the Book of Deuteronomy as a late text already influenced by the social prophets. The central commandment is one of remembrance: "Love ye therefore the stranger, for ye were strangers in the Land of Egypt" (Dt 10:19; RoR 127/RV 148). For Cohen there is no principal difference between poverty and the insecure status of the resident alien in a foreign state. To be poor signifies not only a shortage of money. Poverty, in a more general sense, signifies that a person lacks all relevance within the process of political organization.¹⁵ More precisely, it is a situation where no statute in the legal system of a state protects that person or group. Exploitation of industrial workers as well as disdain for the human rights of others (e.g. aliens) causes poverty. The commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy demands compassion with these forms of poverty, and it does so by reminding the Jewish people of their own slavery in Egypt. The Jewish people should discover the fundamental law of human suffering within their own history – a process of *anamnesis*, similar to the spectator's recognition of the tragedy of human existence in h/er compassion with the hero on stage.

Prophetic politics shows the same structure as tragic art. However, "the practical aspect of prophecy absorbed the form of art" which is to say, "prophecy exhausted and surpassed all tragedy, albeit not its specific form" (RoR 26).¹⁶ The prophets did not remain silent in awareness of the powerful effect of suffering the spectator might feel after a performance of the *Oresteia* or *Hamlet*. They found a possibility to convert their insight into action. But once again, this action had two sides. On the one hand, they practiced *social reform* within their political system; Cohen reads the Book of Deuteronomy as a document of their legal impact. On the other, they prepared a *new language of prayer* and new forms of divine service, an aspect much more intimate than the political one.¹⁷ It springs from the awareness of fundamental weakness in the face of suffering, and it also results in a new phenomenon of religion: the correlation between God and man. Again, the underlying structure of that phenomenon derives from a special form of art: from lyricism, accomplishing the conversion of an aesthetic structure of feeling into the historical structure of existence. Consequently, we need to reflect on certain events in Jewish history through which Israel adopted a new kind of existence, possible to describe as lyrical in character.

The constitutive event was the demise of the Jewish state, which, strictly speaking, occurred twice: first in the days of Jeremiah and Jechezkel, when Israel was taken into exile in Babylon, and for the second time in the year 70 C.E., when the Second Temple was destroyed – and, according to Cohen, the era of temple-service

¹⁵Cf. Wiedebach: "Hermann Cohen's Theorie des Mitleids," in: *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion. International Conference in Jerusalem 1996*, ed. S. Moses and H. Wiedebach. Hildesheim/Zurich/New York, Olms 1997, 235.

¹⁶"Die Praxis hatte hier die Kunstform aufgesogen," – "der Prophetismus hatte alle Tragödie, wengleich nicht in der Form, erschöpft und übertroffen" (RV 30).

¹⁷See Cohen: "Der Stil der Propheten" (1901), in: *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, 262–283, esp. 268 ff.

definitely came to an end. In either case, Israel lost its political power, and its role changed from being a people in its own state (*Staatsvolk*) to a community defined solely by religious categories. As a people without state, Israel took over the role of a pauper among other people, and in striking fact, no principal difference remained between the Jewish people and other powerless or even persecuted individuals or groups. But there is an important difference between the two events. After the catastrophe of the year 70 C.E., no second Cyrus delivered Judah from dispersion, diaspora.

Cohen considered the reaction of the sages of Jabneh to the Roman violence as mirrored in many sources¹⁸ to be the methodological paradigm *per se*: a conversion of the *negative* principle of suffering, considered merely as a *lack*, into the *positive origin* of social politics. In terms of logical analysis, we again have an act of negation combined with positive productivity, similar to the changing mode of time – from past to future – in compassion. Using Cohen’s logic of cognition, it can be described as an attempt to negate a certain kind of privation (RoR 63/RV 73). In its formal structure, this “negation of privation”¹⁹ characterizes Cohen’s principal concept of “origin.” “Origin” means creation of spiritual validity and existence, in scientific cognition as well as in ethical acts, in religion, and also in Jewish political self-understanding.

To Cohen and many others in his time, Jewish spirituality would have been denied, if the Jewish people assimilates itself to the empirical behavior of the “nations of the world.” For his person, he considered political restoration and/or the building of a third Temple impossible, indeed undesirable from the year 70 C.E. on. The value of poverty, in Cohen’s aesthetical ethics turning to the virtue of humility (*Demut*, ‘*anavah*’),²⁰ radically puts political restoration into perspective. It is for this normative reason that he opposed Zionism.²¹ For Cohen, the terms “Jewish people” and “Judaism” were misunderstood if and when defined on the basis of empirical descriptions of a certain group of human beings or a historical phenomenon. Their meaning was properly determined only *sub specie aeternitatis*, i.e., through a deontological reflection on the conditions of an eternal realization of ethical world-history.²²

¹⁸Cf., e.g., Cohen’s allusion to the formula “*lo’ coben gadol le-bakrive korban*” from the Yom Kippur Tehinnoth: “keinen Priester und kein Opfer,” in: “Der Jude in der christlichen Kultur” (1917), *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 6, 444 [*Jüd. Schr.* II 208]; see also his short reflection on the difference between Christian church and the *kabal Jisra’el* in Cohen: *Reflexionen und Notizen*, ed. H. Wiedebach. Hildesheim etc., Olms (*Werke, Supplementa*, vol. 1) [forthcoming], No. 86.

¹⁹Cohen refers to Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 59 (Ibn Tibbon: *sblilat be’edarim*), in: “Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis” (1908), *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 3, 258, note 2. The expression “negation of privation” is probably taken from Salomon Munk’s French translation: *Le guide des égarés. Traité de théologie et de philosophie par Moïse ben Maimoun*. Paris, Franck Libraire, vol. 1, 1856, 258, and 245, note 3.

²⁰Cf. Cohen: “Mahnung des Alters an die Jugend” (1917), in: *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 6, 575–601, esp. 592–600 [*Jüd. Schr.* II 186–191]; RoR 425–428/RV 494–496.

²¹Cohen’s position has been described quite often; most recently by Aharon Shear-Yashuv: “Darstellung und kritische Würdigung von Hermann Cohens Stellung zum Zionismus,” in: *Aschkenas* 10 (2000), 443–457. With respect to the “post-Zionist” debate, see David Novak’s essay “Hermann Cohen on State and Nation: A Contemporary Review” in Reinier Munk’s forthcoming volume *Hermann Cohen’s Critical Idealism*. Further references in Wiedebach: “Hermann Cohens Auseinandersetzung mit dem Zionismus. Briefe von H. Cohen und Hermann Badt an Martin Buber,” in: *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999), 373–388.

²²Under the condition of an existing Jewish State, Cohenian “Post-Zionism” should ask whether the ideal of “prophetic socialism” might be strong enough to influence current *mishpat ivri*, as David Novak defines it: “the body of Jewish law dealing with interhuman relations, [...] which is considered by its proponents to be fully capable of providing a jurisprudential basis for a state both Jewish and secular” (“Hermann Cohen on State and Nation,” ch. 3: “Translating Cohen for a Post-Zionist Age.”).

The methodological turning-point of that originative change in human self-definition is God as a unique entity. Unique does not mean “one” in any arithmetic sense. In Cohen’s thought, it signifies the impossibility of comparison.²³ In his philosophy of religion, he ascribes Being (*Sein*) in an ontological sense only to God (RoR 41/RV 48), which implies that the World and Nature cannot be defined as Being. What we call natural “Being” must be described as Being-there (*Dasein*),²⁴ or, even more accurately, as a process, as “becoming” (RoR 60/RV 69). The correlation between nature as a process and God as the fundamental Being is one of infinite creation. Cohen’s interpretation of Maimonides culminates in the definition of God’s perpetually renewed creation as a negation of privation. The notion of God’s Being (*Sein*) as the creative principle *per se* negates the lack of all natural existence, i.e., the lack of being limited by physical inertia: “God is not inert [*she’eyno ketsar yekholet*]²⁵; this means: He is the *originative principle of activity*” (RoR 64).²⁶

Man, however, is not able to realize a similar creative principle with respect to physical nature. Following Maimonides, however, Cohen interprets the 13 divine attributes (*middot*) as “attributes of action” (*to’arey ma’aseh*)²⁷; they are “prototypes for human acts.”²⁸ A religion of reason means assimilation to the creative originality of God. Compassion serves as the initiating affect. Cohen defines it as the “original power of the pure will” (RoR 142), as a “dawning of moral consciousness.”²⁹ But it must be developed to a political organized ethical “will,” based on the principles of humility. Humility itself, however, grounds in true knowledge. And thus philosophy became the central discipline of all “hodgegetics,” i.e., of all “path-leading”³⁰ in the direction of what Cohen called the “unity of cultural consciousness”: “the philosophy of Judaism is the essence of Judaism; and without philosophy, this essence cannot be conceived. [...] The future development and continued existence of Judaism [is contingent] on its philosophical foundation.”³¹

Following Zacharia Frankel, his renowned teacher at the Breslau Seminary, Cohen practiced his philosophical “Wissenschaft des Judentums” as a *religious* duty. Frankel claimed that the fundamental concern of a representative of this school should be “to reveal the spirit of the Jewish people,” and only then should he fight

²³Cf. already LrE 170, 474.

²⁴Not to be confused with Heidegger’s terms!

²⁵Maimonides: *Guide*, I, 58, tr. Josef Kafich, Jerusalem, Mossad HaRav Kook 1977, 93. Cf. Salomon Munk: “... qu’il n’est pas impuissant” (*Le guide*, vol. 1, 244).

²⁶“er ist der Ursprung der Aktivität” (RV 73).

²⁷This is Cohen’s expression, cf. Almut Sh. Bruckstein: *Hermann Cohen’s ‘Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis’* (Diss. Temple Univ.) 1992, 12, n. 42. See also Bruckstein’s forthcoming translation and commentary: Hermann Cohen: *Ethics of Maimonides*, Univ. of Wisconsin Press [2002].

²⁸Cohen: “Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis,” *Jüd. Schr.*, vol. 3, 246 ff., cit. 246. Cf. *TB Rosh HaShana* 17b on Ex 34:6–7; Maimonides: *Guide*, I, 54.

²⁹“Urkraft des reinen Willens” (RV 164); “Aufdämmern des sittlichen Bewußtseins,” *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 5, 72 [*Jüd. Schr.* I 208].

³⁰Cf. Cohen’s definition of systematic psychology as “hodgegetische Enzyklopädie des Systems der Philosophie” (ArG I 432), i.e., a “path-leading” discipline of systematical thought, which unifies all forms of cultural consciousness in an analysis of the development of history (“entwicklungsgeschichtliche Analyse,” *ibid.* 428). The relationship between this notion of psychology and Cohen’s theory and phenomenology of Jewish religion is obvious though not as yet precisely analyzed.

³¹“Die Philosophie des Judentums ist das Wesen des Judentums; und ohne Philosophie läßt sich dieses Wesen nicht fassen. [...] Die Fortentwicklung und der Fortbestand des Judentums [ist bedingt] durch seine philosophische Begründung.” in: “Die Errichtung von Lehrstühlen für Ethik und Religionsphilosophie an den jüdisch-theologischen Lehranstalten” (1904), *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 2, 115.

for equal rights or against anti-Semitism.³² The unwavering commitment of Frankel, and that of his student Hermann Cohen as well, to the revelation of the spirit of the Jewish people is exemplified by their well-known pious respect for the Hebrew language and its liturgical usage. Both of them combined historical critique of the oral tradition, based on modern scientific methods, with an uncompromising reverence for the Hebrew language in all divine services. It is at least one aspect of *Hebrew liturgy* that we must turn to in order to gain a fuller appreciation of another aesthetic element in Hermann Cohen's concept of Jewish existence.

Jewish Lyrical Existence

The emphasis on the Hebrew language leads us to the methodological relation of religion to lyricism.³³ Just as in dramatic art, in lyric poetry we need to differentiate between two aspects. In tragic dramaturgy, we encountered the mythological question of guilt, which isolates the actor on the stage (even on the stage of historical and political reality). And we encountered the anti-mythological purpose of his action, which is embedded in the correlation between tragic hero and spectator (or, in the analogous situation, between myself and the Other in a social-political context). In historical reality, however, man also feels *his own inability* to solve the practical problems of world politics. The challenge changes from a question put to the political establishment into a question to the self: why, in some many situations, am I unable to follow the ethical imperative? Posing this question, man feels an absolute loneliness or, as Cohen calls it, he discovers the problem of his "absolute individuality" (cf. RoR 165/RV 193).

Here, even more than in Cohen's historical phenomenology of Jewish humility, we must ask: why did he discuss the problem of absolute individuality with respect to *Jewish sources* and not within a theory of religious reason in general? One could say that it already follows from the preceding historical phenomenology that it must be a *Jewish* question, albeit one that entails universal significance and that is not restricted to a particular tradition or religion. Cohen, ascribing to Israel the special role of a world-historical teacher in spiritual politics, may feel a certain Jewish responsibility to solve this problem by making Jewish experience "vicarious" for all. But in that vicarious role we cannot as yet discern any argument of principle. The real point must be located elsewhere.

Cohen was convinced that the Jewish tradition, although finding its expression in particular terms, is characterized by an everlasting "originality" with respect to universal reason. No other topic shows that element of conviction more obviously than the problem of absolute individuality. The absolute individual cannot be sufficiently

³²Rivka Horwitz: *Zacharia Frankel and the beginnings of Positive-Historical Judaism* [Hebr.]. Jerusalem, The Zalman Shazar Center for the Furtherance of the Study of Jewish History 1984, 15.

³³Some elements of my interpretation have already been raised by Martin Yaffe: "Liturgy and Ethics: Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig on the Day of Atonement," in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7/2 (1979), 215–228, esp. 217 ff. Shaul Magid gave an important paper on "Idolatry, Messiah, and the Critique of the Rabbis: Cohen and Rav Kook on the Efficacy of Art" during the AJS-conference in Boston, Dec. 2000. He also focused in part on Hermann Cohen's religious interpretation of lyrics. I am grateful to Prof. Magid for sharing his manuscript with me.

exposed in terms of pure logical or ethical knowledge, although that knowledge serves as a necessary condition. In addition to logic and ethics, absolute individuality needs to be resolved through terms of *confession*. In the realm of extreme loneliness, only authentic evidence is relevant. The person Hermann Cohen must bear witness to his own experience, and therefore must speak as a Jew and in Jewish terms. Confession becomes a *methodological* principle of philosophy.³⁴ In this, more than in any other aspect, Cohen's philosophy of religion shows continuity with his aesthetics. As he wrote in the preface to his *Aesthetics of the Pure Feeling*: "here the feeling admirer [*scil.* the observer of art who *bears witness* to his personal feelings] is germane to the issue, he is part of the adjudging of the proofs" (*Der nachfühlende Bewunderer gehört hier zur Sache, zum Beweisverfahren*, ArG I IX) – In a similar sense, the confessing philosopher takes part in the procedure of explanation and proof in the context of religious theory.

Yet the confessing individual is not the point of departure. The problem arises, as mentioned before, with an awareness of weakness within the Self, which *prima facie* indicates guilt and inevitable isolation. Even more threatening than exposed in the context of tragic guilt and compassion, this absolute isolation reveals the mythological character of that consciousness. In this situation, it would be impossible for the Self to transform this mythological character into another through critical enlightenment. Nothing else is left but the question of guilt and longing for justification. With such longing, however, the Self remains within the domain of the mythological root of human consciousness. For Cohen, no possibility of critical rationalism and enlightenment would actually exist in human history without reflection on such fundamental forms of mythological consciousness. In this aspect he followed his teacher Chajim H. Steinthal, one of the great philosophical linguists of the nineteenth century.³⁵

Thus, in a first step, the totality of isolation must be fully acknowledged as what it is: a contradiction to any possible opening of the Self to find an *expression* for its longing. The isolated Self remains within a closed cosmos of guilt. This growing silence is most likely *the essential problem* of the mythological state of existence. Every expression indicates or creates relationship. If the isolated self-consciousness would actually have the opportunity to express itself as a speaking "I," then it would enter into another domain: the critical cognition of a justified Self or, in Cohen's words, of a *reconciled I*. Again we must face the problem of past and future. Similar to compassion, the Ego must emerge as an "indexical performance," as a "precise return to the past for the sake of the future."³⁶

Together with that problem another question arises. The problematic Self, even if it were able to express its confession, needs a court of law before which he may plead for justification. But where may such a court of law be found and what

³⁴Guided by that principle, Franz Rosenzweig will call the "new" thinker "Standpunktphilosoph," i.e. a philosopher whose thought bears witness to his confessing "Self."

³⁵Cf. Dieter Adelman: "H. Steinthal und Hermann Cohen", in: *H. Cohen's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Stéphane Moses and H. Wiedebach. Hildesheim etc., Olms 1997, 1–33; and *Chajim H. Steinthal: Sprachwissenschaftler und Philosoph im 19. Jahrhundert/Linguist and Philosopher in the 19th Century*, ed. H. Wiedebach and Annette Winkelmann. Leiden etc., Brill 2002.

³⁶Robert Gibbs: *Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities*. Princeton Univ. Press 2000, ch. "Performance of the 'I'", 329 ff., cit. 330.

would be the appropriate language to be used in pleading one's cause? In Cohen's thought, the final aim of this "law suit" must be to gain critical distance to any mythological roots of consciousness. The human individual must find his justification by means of autonomous reason, and this also means, not by divine, i.e., heterogeneous, liberation. On the one hand, that authority thus cannot be outside the consciousness that is longing for judgment. Neither, in Cohen's view, may the court of law be situated in God. On the other hand, it needs to be an objective institution, uninvolved in the psychological motions of the I. The I must realize itself in external relations and through physical expression. So the law court must be *human*, and it must be "a *public institution*" (RoR 196/RV 229). Nevertheless, no solution will be possible without a *transcendent point of reference*, because human consciousness itself is on trial for its failure.

Cohen gives his answer in his theory of the Hebrew-speaking Jewish congregation (cf. RoR 197 ff./RV 230 ff.). Cohen's religious concept of "correlation" has the character more of a promise than the significance of a legal contract.³⁷ But similar to a legal contract, the correlation of God and man establishes the possibility of an objective state of existence with respect to human affairs. Owing to that alliance, the congregation can be considered a public and objective institution, though this does *not* mean an ethical institution.

The congregation constitutes itself as a unification of institution and individual. The single I is nothing but a part of the congregation, and the congregation is nothing but an inclusive, i.e. a collective, I. There is no isolating personal confession in Jewish liturgy: even the great *Viddui* during the Day of Atonement knows only "our sins," not "my sins."³⁸ That confessing congregation serves as its own tribunal. As a special form of objective human existence, it is constituted by its transcendent counterpart: the congregation, and the single I within it, stands, as often stated in prayer, "before God," *lipbney haShem* (RoR 203/RV 235). This constitution is the outcome of a *lyrical* form of expression. Lyricism, as Cohen teaches in his *Aesthetics of the Pure Feeling*, is identical with the confession of longing, finding its answer in the *lyrical idea* of the beloved Thou, no matter whether or not it exists in *social* reality.³⁹ The lyrical confession of longing unifies suffering and happiness, the longing I and the beloved Thou, in a single speech act. But again: the answer is not given by a person who exists physically – which means that the lyrical I remains lonely, even in its greatest happiness.

For Cohen, the Jewish congregation represents a lyrical state of human existence, longing for God and finding its expression together with the answer. The medium of that expression is Hebrew prayer, realized in its paradigmatic form in the Psalms.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, precisely at this point of confluence between religious lyricism

³⁷Already in his first reaction to the manuscript of the *Religion of Reason*, Rosenzweig suggested replacing the word "correlation" through "covenant" ("Bund"), cf. his letter of March 9th 1918, in: *Briefe*. Berlin, Schocken 1935, 288.

³⁸Cf. RoR 217 f./RV 254 about public confession, and Cohen's essay "Die Versöhnungsidee" from the 1890s, *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, 134. The essay was written about 10 years before the *Logic of the Pure Cognition*, and it is therefore incorrect to ascribe Cohen's notion of the I and its reconciliation solely to his *late* philosophy. Cf. an extensive discussion of that topic in Michael Zank's *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, Providence, Rhode Island 2000 (*Brown Judaic Studies* 324), esp. 101–161.

³⁹Cf. ArG II 24 ff. For the religious dimension of that lyrical longing, cf. Cohen: "Die Lyrik der Psalmen," *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 5, 163–198 [*Jüd. Schr.*, vol. 1, 237–261].

⁴⁰Cf. RoR 388–393/RV 451–457. The importance of the Hebrew prayer was emphasized by Cohen quite often, at least since 1909, cf. the postscript from to "Religiöse Postulate," *Jüdische Schriften*, vol. 1, 16.

and the *Aesthetics of the Pure Feeling* and its “pure lyrics,” one can also see the important difference. Hebrew is called the holy language or, in Cohen’s translation of *leshon hakodesh*, the “language of holiness.”⁴¹ In Cohen’s interpretation, this means that in Hebrew prayer, there is no separation between lyrical feeling and juridical liability. Goethe’s poems, for example, may speak about God or even symbolize the act of reconciliation, but these pure lyrical confessions do not really reconcile the human being with respect to h/er sins.⁴² In Hebrew prayer, Cohen hears the real sentence of an existing public tribunal: “And all the congregation of the children of Israel shall be forgiven, and the stranger that sojourneth among them; for in respect of all people it was done in *shbegagab*” (Num. 15:26, RoR 217/RV 253).⁴³ This sentence, quoted immediately after the *Kol Nidre* at the beginning of the Day of Atonement, anticipates the answer, given to the congregation during that “long day” of repentance and *teshuvah*.

This same sentence, which Cohen calls “the motto for the Day of Atonement” (*ibid.*), reveals the legal relevance of Israel’s longing for justification. It can be cited already at the beginning, because, due to the inclusion of the juridical sphere of judgment in the liturgical sphere of lyrical confession, no other sentence will be possible. Being an answer of love, it excludes condemnation and brings happiness to the I who is confessing. The human being feels and knows h/er *true* reconciliation, rather than merely a symbolic one. It is an act of human self-purification, albeit no human being would be able to construct or synthesize such a combination of lyrical expression and legal validity. In Cohen’s religious thought this possibility of holiness, finding its historical representation in Hebrew language, is the innermost phenomenon of revelation. And he knows: no other people or non-Jewish congregation can use or even understand Hebrew language in that sense of holiness. Here we can find Cohen’s self-consciousness of Jewish election, of being a member of the people chosen by God.⁴⁴ Therefore, in a strictly systematical sense, he can say God forgives sin and man reconciles himself: “Blessed are ye, O Israel, who purifies you, and before whom do you purify yourselves? It is your Father in Heaven.”⁴⁵

⁴¹“Sprache des Heiligtums,” in: “Zionismus und Religion” (1916), *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 6, 219 [*Jüd. Schr.*, vol. 2, 325].

⁴²On Goethe’s lyrics, for Cohen the outstanding example of pure feeling, cf. ArG II 30 ff.; 41 ff.

⁴³The term of *shbegagab* as “*unwitting* transgression,” which merits intensive discussion in Cohen’s religious theory (cf. “Die Versöhnungsidee,” *Jüd. Schr.*, vol. 1, 131 f.; RoR 199 ff./RV 232 ff.), transposes the problem from the mythological domain of guilt to the epistemological domain of knowledge, which, in Kantian terms, must always be considered as limited.

⁴⁴Probably one has to add this aspect to David Novak’s important discussion of that topic in his *Election of Israel. The Idea of the Chosen People*. Cambridge Univ. Press 1996, 50–77.

⁴⁵The motto of Cohen’s *Religion of Reason*. Cf. R. Akiba in *Mishnah Joma* VIII, 9; *BT Joma* 85b.