

# Aesthetics in Religion: Remarks on Hermann Cohen's Theory of Jewish Existence<sup>1</sup>

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My focus is here to connect Hermann Cohen's *Aesthetics of the Pure Feeling*<sup>2</sup> 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*.<sup>3</sup> 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*.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup>*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].

<sup>3</sup>Rosenzweig: "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].

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Cf. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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<sup>6</sup>This 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.

<sup>7</sup>It 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.