



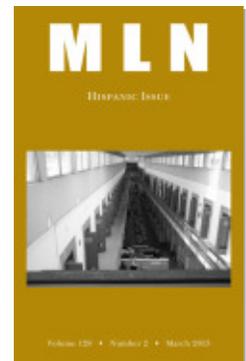
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Irreconcilable: Ethics and Aesthetics for Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin



Rochelle Tobias

Over the past thirty years Benjamin scholarship has convincingly shown the importance of Judaism for Benjamin's thought from the early writings on language to the later reflections on history, modernity, and urban life. The same strain is evident in Benjamin's critique of metaphysics, as exemplified in the Christian notion of grace. Benjamin dismisses the notion of the redemption of the individual from history and replaces it with the idea of the redemption of the historical past in a mystical now or punctual present.¹ What has received surprisingly little attention is the impact of Judaism on Benjamin's reflections on aesthetics in essays like "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin" and "Goethe's *Elective Affinities*," in which he grapples with the relation of art to life and the truth, or essence, of semblance (*Schein*). While Benjamin's thought need not be confined to religious or Judaic concerns, the reluctance of critics to identify Judaic elements in his aesthetic writings has reinforced an existing prejudice. According to this prejudice, Jewish art is based in the prohibition of graven images,

¹See Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch, and Modern Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 78–124; Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German-Jewish Responses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 155–67; Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992) 3–67.

which amounts to saying that Jewish art consists in the dissolution of its images or the negation of its representations. Among the twentieth-century thinkers to adopt this position was Theodor Adorno, who made the biblical injunction against graven images into a defining feature of modern art.² While Benjamin understood the limits of the aesthetic image, he did so within a broader frame. Art was not to be confused with religion or ethics, lest they both become myth. (I will elaborate on this point later.) In the essay on the *Elective Affinities*, he distinguishes between art and ethics in a startling way: by invoking the Jewish Day of Atonement (in German, *der Versöhnungstag*) to oppose the sacrificial logic of Goethe's text.

According to this logic, the novel's heroine Otilie must die to make up for the rift she causes in Eduard and Charlotte's marriage not through any deed, but her mere presence in the household. Benjamin emphasizes that Otilie is not guilty of any misdeed, any trespass against the marriage since such conduct would automatically disqualify her death as a sacrifice. Rather she can expiate the sins of others only to the extent that she is not tainted by sin, like the Nazarene Jesus whom Benjamin refers to at the end of the essay.³ Benjamin readily admits that the framing of Otilie's death as a sacrifice belongs to "the deepest intentions" (*GS* I: 140) of the novel. At the same time, he insists that there is another religious model at work in the *Elective Affinities* that requires neither sacrifice nor the negation of one's most ardent wishes. This model comes to the fore in the novella "The Marvelous Young Neighbors" embedded in the main text, which Benjamin

²See, for instance, Adorno's statement, "Das alttestamentarische Bilderverbot hat neben seiner theologischen Seite eine ästhetische. Daß man sich kein Bild, nämlich keines von etwas machen soll, sagt zugleich, kein solches Bild sei möglich," in T.W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) 106. For Adorno, natural beauty cannot be reproduced in an image since beauty is not a substance but a form—specifically the form in which nature appears and, in appearing, surmounts itself. Elsewhere in the *Aesthetic Theory* he refers to beauty as the surplus (*das Mehr*) in art. An artwork can be true to natural beauty only if it negates itself in accordance with the biblical prohibition of graven images. For a lengthier discussion of the prohibition of graven images in Adorno's thought, see Gertrud Koch, "Mimesis and Bilderverbot," *Screen* 34:3 (1993): 211–22.

³Benjamin suggests that the concluding line of the novel in which the narrator imagines Eduard and Otilie's eventual resurrection is too Christian in orientation and in this context says that the mystery of the work lies not in "this Nazarene being" but in the image of a shooting star presented five chapters earlier. In Walter Benjamin, "Goethes *Wahlverwandtschaften*," in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) I: 200 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text and in the notes as *GS*).

reads not only as an inversion of the novel's plot but also, and more importantly, as an inversion of the logic underlying it.

The novella, like the novel, concerns two lovers who are drawn toward each other, although they have given their hand in marriage to someone else. (In the novel Charlotte and Eduard are married; in the novella the young girl is engaged to an older acquaintance.) But unlike the characters in the novel who passively endure rather than actively challenge their fate, the protagonists in the novella risk everything, including their life, to realize their love in this world instead of the next. They are willing, in other words, to sacrifice themselves, which makes the "wondrous" or "marvelous" outcome of their act of defiance all the more astonishing. Benjamin describes the marvel as follows:

Weil nämlich wahre Versöhnung mit Gott keinem gelingt, der nicht in ihr—soviel an ihm ist—alles vernichtet, um erst vor Gottes versöhntem Antlitz es wieder erstanden zu finden, darum bezeichnet ein todesmutiger Sprung jenen Augenblick, da sie [die Liebenden der Novelle]—ein jeder ganz für sich allein vor Gott—um der Versöhnung willen sich einsetzen. Und in solcher Versöhnungsbereitschaft erst ausgesöhnt gewinnen sie sich. (GS I: 184)

What enables the two lovers to gain each other and reunite with their family and friends is a death-defying leap that the two take together, but also apart, insofar as each confronts God alone regarding his fate. The association of this leap with a reversal of fortune would seem to recall Kierkegaard's leap of faith, according to which one must give up everything as lost in order to find it again, as if it had never been lost, as if the world had always been as it now presents itself.⁴ But this reversal has an equally important precedent in the holiday of Yom Kippur as interpreted by Hermann Cohen in his magnum opus

⁴In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard contrasts the knight of infinite resignation with the knight of faith, who demands the fulfillment of his desire in the here and now instead of in the hereafter. Kierkegaard writes, "[The knight of faith] does exactly the same as the [knight of infinite resignation] did: he infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life; he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens; he makes one more movement even more wonderful than all the others for he says: Nevertheless I have faith that I will get her—that, by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible." The marvel of faith described by Kierkegaard resembles the marvel of reconciliation Benjamin sees in "The Marvelous Young Neighbors." In both cases the impossible becomes possible through the intervention of an infinite, spiritual force in the finite, empirical world. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, Vol. 6, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 27–53, esp. 46.

Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism, published posthumously in 1919.⁵ Benjamin wrote his text in 1922 and published it in 1924.

Originally the Day of Atonement was observed as a collective rite, in which the community repented for its sins through the sacrifice of an animal. After the destruction of the Temple, the holiday was redefined as an individual act of penance, in which the individual had to stand alone before God. What Cohen adds to this fairly standard account of the evolution of the holiday is the claim that even at the time of the Temple, the sacrifice had taken on largely symbolic significance. Through recourse to Ezekiel he argues that animal sacrifice was a ritual performed by the temple priest to remind the congregation of the work it had to do on its own without the benefit of an intermediary. For Cohen, the solitude of this work is crucial for understanding that the God of monotheism does not want to be placated through sacrificial offerings or other compensatory gifts. Instead he wants to redeem those who, in repenting, demonstrate their trust in him. Indeed Cohen insists he wants to redeem them in the here and now, in the historical world.

Little has been written about the influence of Cohen on Benjamin's work with the exception of Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky's groundbreaking study *Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen*. Even Deuber-Mankowsky, however, limits herself to exploring the link between the *Elective Affinities* essay and Cohen's *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*, which Benjamin cites on two occasions.⁶ In the first instance, he invokes Cohen to

⁵Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (1929; reprint, Wiesbaden: Fourier Verlag, 1995). All references to *Religion der Vernunft* will hereafter be cited as *RV* parenthetically in the text. All translations of this work are my own. Cohen wrote another essay on Yom Kippur entitled "Die Versöhnungsidee," which I have not referenced in this text, since the essay was published in 1924, after Benjamin had already completed his investigation of the *Elective Affinities*. See H. Cohen, *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften*, ed. Bruno Strauß with an Intro. by Franz Rosenzweig, vol. 1, *Ethische und religiöse Grundfragen* (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924) 125–39.

⁶Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, *Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen: Jüdische Werte, Kritische Philosophie, vergängliche Erfahrung* (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk 8, 2000) 251–80. Deuber-Mankowsky compares Cohen's and Benjamin's concepts of love. She argues that Benjamin revises Cohen's conception to allow for a particular love as opposed to the universal love of mankind in any one person. While my emphasis is different than Deuber-Mankowsky's, I nonetheless agree with her general position that Benjamin reflects on the nature of art through the figure of Otilie. It should be noted that in another essay, Deuber-Mankowsky suggests at the end that the idea of hope that Benjamin develops in his study of the *Elective Affinities* may indeed be derived from Cohen's notion of reconciliation and redemption. See Deuber-Mankowsky, "The Image of Happiness We Harbor: The Messianic Power of Weakness in Cohen, Benjamin, and Paul," *New German Critique* 35:3 (Fall 2008): 57–69.

support the claim that the characters in the novel cannot be regarded as moral subjects since, unlike human beings, they play no role in determining the course of their life; rather the formal composition of the novel dictates their fate.⁷ Later he draws on Cohen's analysis of passion (*Leidenschaft*), affection (*Neigung*), emotion (*Rührung*), and love (*Liebe*) to indicate that, as the attachment to another person grows more sublime, it also depends less and less on the visual register.⁸ The absence of scholarship on Benjamin's Goethe study and Cohen's *Religion of Reason*, however, is startling given the centrality of reconciliation in both texts for distinguishing ethics from aesthetics and redemption from sacrifice.⁹ For Cohen, reconciliation is first and foremost a process of self-purification and sanctification (*Selbsteheiligung*) that begins with the act of penance (*Buße*), a term he understands quite literally through the Hebrew *t'shuvah*, which means reversal and return. In penance, one turns back to examine the sins one has committed and in acknowledging them, one reverses the course of one's life; one is born again. Cohen does not hesitate to identify the moment of repentance with rebirth: "[In turning away from sin] the new man is born and the individual becomes an I" (*RV* 225). For reasons that exceed the scope of this essay, Cohen claims that ethics does not provide a concept of the individual, much less of an "I." Instead, it offers an ideal of humanity that the individual can achieve only at the expense of his selfhood or in his words *Ichheit*.¹⁰ Ethics triumphs in the dissolution of the individual and his replacement with a subject without any distinguishing features, not even a biography.¹¹ Monotheism, by contrast, is based in the individual to the extent that it posits for every living soul the task of realizing the "correlation of man and God," which is a key concept for Cohen that enables each individual to achieve holiness in this life. Through the process of self-purification and sanctification (i.e., penance) the individual lives up to the biblical verse, "Sanctify yourselves

⁷See *GS* I: 134.

⁸See *GS* I: 191.

⁹Martin D. Yaffe goes so far as to claim that the chapter on reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) and the Day of Atonement (*Versöhnungstag*) constitute the core of Cohen's reflections on ethical monotheism in Martin D. Yaffe, "Liturgy an Ethics: Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig on the Day of Atonement," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7:2 (1979) 216. Michael Zank identifies reconciliation or atonement as the key term that links Cohen's thought on religion, ethics, and culture in M. Zank, *The Idea of Atonement in the Philosophy of Hermann Cohen* (Providence: Brown University Press, 2000) 19.

¹⁰Cohen uses this term, which has a long history in German thought dating back to Meister Eckart, twice in the text. *RV* 219 and 273.

¹¹See Deuber-Mankowsky's discussion of Cohen's dispute with Kant on this point in "The Image of Happiness We Harbor," 60.

... and be holy" (Lev. 11:44), which Cohen cites on several occasions to indicate how the individual corresponds to, or correlates with, the God of monotheism.¹²

Man is charged with the task of purifying and sanctifying himself since he alone among the creatures is endowed with the holy spirit. It may seem odd in an avowedly Judaic text to find reference to the holy spirit. For Cohen, however, the concept is indispensable to the degree it allows him to see the individual as the author of his sins as well as his purification. With this characterization of the human being, Cohen decisively rejects the doctrine of original sin. Man is not born guilty, nor does he inherit the sins of his father, but in his ignorance, he errs. He forgets "the call [*Ruf*] and therewith the calling [*Beruf*] to holiness" (RV213), as Cohen puts it, and thus sins not only against God but also against himself. For this reason Cohen repeatedly argues that knowledge of one's errors is a precondition for reconciliation with God in statements like, "[In monotheism] the knowledge of sin can only mean one thing: to become free of sin" (RV222). But he also adds that knowledge alone does not suffice to remind the individual that his calling is to be holy like God. For this, one needs a unique God, who not only forgives man's trespasses—but also inspires the individual to realize the correspondence between man and God in his own person. Whenever this is achieved, the individual emerges as a unique and sovereign "I" endowed "with the authority to create for himself a new heart and a new spirit" (RV226).

Cohen insists on the latter point for at least two reasons. First, he needs to establish the ethical dimensions of monotheism, and the idea of a unique God enables him to focus on the individual as a moral agent instead of as a member of a collective body. Secondly, he needs to emphasize that self-purification is an ongoing task, and by positing the holiness of God as the aim of the process he insures that it will never reach an end. How could one ever match God's holiness? For Benjamin's essay on the *Elective Affinities*, these two aspects of Cohen's argument are of critical importance. Benjamin's emphasis—to return

¹²Bernhard Caspar defines the term "correlation" in its most formal aspect as a "relation of correspondence" in Caspar, "Korrelation oder ereignetes Ereignis? Zur Deutung des Spätwerks Hermann Cohens durch Franz Rosenzweig," in *Hermann Cohen's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Stéphane Mosès and Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997) 54. The link between self-purification and holiness is more pronounced in German than in the English translation, where the former is designated as *Selbsteheiligung* and the latter as *Heiligkeit*.

to the passage originally cited—that the two lovers in the novella stand “each entirely for himself alone before God” (*GS*I: 184) takes up a point Cohen makes on the ritual observance of Yom Kippur. While on some holidays the individual lies prostrate before God, on the Day of Atonement he is obliged to stand during the closing service: “Der Mensch steht vor Gott. So wird die Selbständigkeit des Menschen in der Korrelation mit Gott deklariert. In diesem Stehen vor Gott vollzieht das Individuum seine Selbstheiligung” (*RV* 256). Cohen notes that man is the only creature that stands upright before God, in contrast to the animals that walk on all fours. Were this the limit of Cohen’s interpretation of man, it would hardly be a novel contribution to ethics. The distinction between two-legged and four-legged creatures dates back to Aristotle and is frequently invoked in political and moral theory. But what Cohen adds is that man’s bearing is a sign of his direct relation with God. He faces him without the mediation of a priest or a sacrificial offering, and this is precisely why he can be redeemed and reborn, provided he recognizes his errors and rises up to his calling. Monotheism’s singular accomplishment is to posit an individual who is free to dictate the course of his life in contrast to myth, which frames the subject as a victim of fate regardless of his conduct. Cohen categorically states that in monotheism fate does not exist.¹³

Monotheism does not need a concept of destiny because of its focus on the relation of the individual to the one God. Cohen would not deny that the burden for forging this relation falls to the individual who has to recognize and confess his own sins which even if committed unknowingly—and these are the only ones that Cohen regards as reconcilable—constitute acts against God, as they violate the holy spirit planted in the human being. But Cohen would be equally adamant that the individual could not commit to this endless task if he did not trust in God’s goodness. The work of penance is always undertaken “with a view toward God” (*RV* 241), which is to say with a view toward a supreme and benevolent being that forgives all sins and in so doing redeems the individual. Seen in this light, every confession of wrongdoing is simultaneously a confession to God’s goodness, which Cohen says is not only the aim of self-purification but also the means.

¹³In an interesting reading of Benjamin’s “Kritik der Gewalt,” Carlo Salzani comments that the concept of fate belongs to law, not religion. See C. Salzani, “Violence as Pure Praxis: Benjamin and Sorel on Strike, Myth and Ethics,” *Colloquy text theory critique* 16 (2008): 25.

For the correlation of man and God ensures an unusual reciprocity. Just as man shares in the goodness, unity and holiness of God, so too God shares in the goodness, unity, and holiness of man, as expressed in the labor of penance. This is the meaning of reconciliation for Cohen, which he explicitly equates with redemption. Reconciliation is the realization and renewal of the holy spirit embedded in man. The emergence of the individual as a spiritual being signals his birth as an “I,” that is, as a being whose wishes no longer conflict with his nature, for he knows now whence he comes. For this reason Cohen can declare that redemption is based in the reconciliation of man with God, which engenders “the reconciliation of man with himself, in himself and to himself” (*RV* 235).

To some degree the novella “The Marvelous Young Neighbors” is tailor-made for Cohen’s account of ethical monotheism. The central conflict of the text is an internal one. The two lovers are torn between the demands of the social order on the one hand, and the desire of their hearts, on the other. At stake is whether they acquiesce to the social order, and in so doing forfeit all authority over their life or whether they follow the dictates of their heart and turn them into a law, albeit a law that applies only to them, as it is the law of *their* heart, *their* spirit. For Benjamin, it is critical that the two decide to defy the social order, even if doing so will result in their death, since living in a world governed by an alien law is itself a form of death: the death of the heart, the spirit. This is the significance of his otherwise cryptic remark that “every love grown in itself must become master of this world [*Herr dieser Welt*]” (*GS* I: 187). What Benjamin here calls mastery—in particular, the mastery of love—he calls law elsewhere. Indeed in the continuation of this passage he indicates that the lovers determine the law for themselves in a manner that has distinctly Jewish overtones:

Dies hat Goethe in der Novelle ausgesprochen, da der Augenblick der gemeinsamen Todesbereitschaft durch göttlichen Willen das neue Leben den Liebenden schenkt, auf das alte Rechte ihren Anspruch verlieren.
(*GS* I: 188)

Given the centrality of the concept of reconciliation in this essay, it could hardly have escaped Benjamin that the opening prayer on Yom Kippur is a legal formula canceling all previous vows, so that from this day onward they “lose all claim” to validity. But what is equally astonishing in the passage is the echo of Cohen’s idea that in reconciling with God, man is born again. He is born into a world that accords with his heart, as it was just this world, in which the desire of

the individual would coincide with the law, that the heart demanded. For Benjamin this is the world in which the two lovers find themselves after their death-defying leap. The two are welcomed back into the fold of the family in spite of having violated the implicit social law, for in their commitment to each other they explicitly lay down a new law. For Cohen, this law is grounded in the correlation of man and God, which gives man the ability to reverse the course of his life and to become master of his situation: "Only now does man become master of himself and is no longer at the mercy of fate" (*RV* 226).

The same could not be said of Otilie who lives her life, as if she played no role in determining its course. "[She] lives on [*dahinleben*] without deciding anything" (*GS* I: 176), as Benjamin puts it, and for this reason she is subject to fate, as are the other characters in the novel. Otilie's fate, however, is not merely to die without consummating her love; such a death would be regrettable but not remarkable as it also befalls Charlotte and the Hauptmann. Rather in her passivity she is stripped of her personhood and reduced to a semblance, which neither lives nor dies but carries on indefinitely as an image. This is the significance of Otilie in Benjamin's reading. Her figure enables the critic to read both the possibilities and limits of art with respect to life and ethics.¹⁴

Benjamin explores the distinction between life and art, or ethics and aesthetics, in an unlikely place: in Otilie's innocence, which at first glance would seem to attest not to their difference but their convergence in the novel. For Otilie's innocence would seem to have just as much to do with her appearance as her essence. Benjamin cites Friedrich Gundolf's characterization of Otilie as a saint to indicate the general tenor of the commentary on Goethe's novel.¹⁵ For Benjamin, however, Otilie's innocence never amounts to more than a semblance, because in her silence she never demonstrates the clarity of purpose or resolve that defines innocence. In a famous passage he writes, "No moral decision can come into being without verbal expression

¹⁴Deuber-Mankowsky arrives at much the same conclusion in *Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen*, 265.

¹⁵Several critics have noted that Benjamin's harsh rebuttal of Gundolf's interpretation of the novel represents a more general critique of the George Circle with its glorification of the artist as a creator in the image of God and the elevation of the work of art to reality in its own right, rather than a play of appearances. See Deuber-Mankowsky, *Der frühe Walter Benjamin und Hermann Cohen*, 248–51; Beatrice Hanssen, "'Dichtermut und Blödigkeit': Two Poems by Hölderlin Interpreted by Walter Benjamin," *MLN* 112 (1997): 810; and Sigrid Weigel, *Literatur als Voraussetzung der Kulturgeschichte: Schauplätze von Shakespeare bis Benjamin* (Munich: Fink, 2004) 117–21.

[*ohne sprachliche Gestalt*] and strictly speaking without being an object of communication” (GS I: 176). A decision must be articulated to amount to an ethical act, since only in speech does man attest to his freedom as a spiritual being, even if he remains constrained by the flesh. Benjamin adopts the traditional distinction between the body and spirit, but not as framed in the New Testament by Paul, who characterizes the spirit and the flesh as irreconcilable opposites in such statements as, “There is . . . no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1–2). Benjamin relies instead on Cohen who interprets the body as the cause of man’s sins but not as an impediment to the expression of spirit. (As I have indicated, the body in its finitude limits man’s powers of judgment and thus leads him to err.) Only through self-recognition and self-purification is man able to achieve his correlation with God and to regain the innocence he had at birth. Cohen notes that the rabbis changed the text of God’s thirteen attributes for the service on Yom Kippur, so that the final attribute would read, “God renders [the guilty] innocent” (RV 260) instead of “he does not leave [the guilty] unpunished” (RV 259), as it does on all other days.

Benjamin employs a similar set of assumptions in his polemic against the glorification of virginity as the consummate expression of innocence:

Zwar gibt es, eine natürliche Schuld, so eine natürliche Unschuld des Lebens. Diese letztere aber ist nicht an die Sexualität—und sei es verneinend—sondern einzig an ihren Gegenpol den—gleichemmaßen natürlichen—Geist gebunden. (GS I: 174)

Virginity can be equated with innocence only if one considers the natural world to be so hopelessly fallen that the sole remaining testament to virtue is the renunciation of all things earthly. But if one assumes with Benjamin that spirit is given in nature or, put otherwise, that it is as natural as sexuality, then innocence too can achieve expression in the historical world as a positive phenomenon, as something that exists and shapes our experience. For Benjamin, innocence is manifested in character, which he defines as “the unity of individual, spiritual life” (GS I: 174) in a curious echo of Cohen’s concept of the “I” as “sovereign unity.”

Inasmuch as character is spiritual, it never assumes visible form. Its sole means of expression is linguistic; one is tempted to say it enters into the world as a verbal figure or *Gestalt*. For this reason, Benjamin

later comments, "Truth is discovered in the essence of language. The human body is laid bare—a sign that man stands directly before God" (GS I: 197). Only in language is man exposed without cover of any sort, for only in language does his spiritual life take shape as his appearance retreats into the background; he appears to no one but God. This is why the articulation of a decision is central to any ethical act, and why ethics is inseparable from Judaism for the Benjamin of this essay, which is informed by Cohen's notion of ethical monotheism. In one of the most overt references to Judaism and especially Yom Kippur, Benjamin writes, "Nur die Entscheidung, nicht die Wahl ist im Buche des Lebens verzeichnet. Denn Wahl ist natürlich und mag sogar den Elementen eignen; die Entscheidung ist transzendent" (GS I: 189).

Insofar as Otilie never announces a decision and lapses into silence, she presumably is never registered in the Book of Life. She forfeits her autonomy as a physical and spiritual being and in the process becomes an aesthetic phenomenon subject to mythical forces, as chemical elements are subject to the laws of nature. Benjamin points to this aspect of her being when he remarks, "In Otilie's figure the line between the epic and painting is transgressed" (GS I: 178). If Otilie is more suited to the visual than the verbal arts, it is because in her silence she never amounts to a "person in action," which was the basis of the epic for Aristotle. She does not speak or reach decisions, which for Benjamin constitute the signature acts of man, insofar as they reveal the contours of his inner life, his character, his freedom as a moral agent. Otilie by contrast is not free, and not merely because she does not assert or manifest her character, but because in her silence she only appears to have a spiritual life. Or rather, her spiritual life exists in appearance only.

This is the cloak Otilie dons or the veil she wears. She is hidden by the semblance of a spiritual life, which is paradoxical in more than one respect, for it not only implies that her inner life is turned inside out and transformed into a semblance. It also suggests that the very innocence and nobility—in short, the character—one imputes to her is nothing but an enticing fiction or alluring, if false, impression. It is in this context that Benjamin remarks that virginity awakens instead of dampens desire and thus represents an ambiguous sign rather than an unequivocal one, which is a requirement for the expression of innocence. Otilie is beautiful by virtue of the semblance of innocence that surrounds her figure and defines her every movement in the novel. And yet the fact that her innocence never amounts to more than a seeming reality raises a fundamental question for Benjamin: Is there truth to beauty? Does beauty have an essence?

Benjamin devotes the final pages of his study to answering this question. He does so with a fervor unusual even for him given that the stakes of the matter are ultimately whether art can be divorced from myth:

Alles wesentlich Schöne ist stets und wesenhaft aber in unendlich verschiedenen Graden dem Schein verbunden. Ihre höchste Intensität erreicht diese Verbindung im manifest Lebendigen und zwar gerade hier deutlich polar in triumphierendem und verlöschendem Schein. Alles Lebendige nämlich ist, je höher sein Leben geartet desto mehr, dem Bereiche des wesentlich Schönen enthoben und in seiner Gestalt bekundet demnach dieses wesentlich Schöne sich am meisten als Schein. Schönes Leben, Wesentlich-Schönes und scheinhafte Schönheit, diese drei sind identisch. (GS I: 194)

At first glance, the passage would seem to be organized around two contradictory claims. On the one hand, Benjamin argues that everything “essentially” beautiful relies on the medium of semblance, and nowhere is the link between the two more evident than in that which is “manifestly alive,” which is to say in man. On the other hand, he tells us that all living creatures, and especially human beings, transcend the realm of the beautiful, which would suggest that beauty does not belong to, or is not part of, the essence of the human being. On closer inspection, however, these two claims are not as inconsistent as they first seem. If they appear irreconcilable, it is because the subject of the first claim (i.e., that beauty is tied to semblance) is the essence of beauty, whereas the subject of the second (i.e., that living creatures transcend the beautiful) is the essence of man. Beauty is not the distinguishing feature of the human being; he can, however, only appear as such to his fellow men. Whenever the human being appears, it is as a beautiful phenomenon, because beauty is the essence of his appearance. For this reason, Benjamin can conclude the passage with the almost dizzying assertion, “Schönes Leben, Wesentlich-Schönes und scheinhafte Schönheit, diese drei sind identisch.”

This seeming circle brings Benjamin to the heart of his argument on the difference between art and myth. As mentioned previously, to draw this distinction Benjamin must show that art borders on and brushes life in much the same manner as a tangent touches the circumference of a circle at one unique point.¹⁶ Benjamin readily admits

¹⁶Benjamin employs the metaphor of a tangent that touches a circle to describe the relation of a translation to the original in “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” GSIV: 19–20.

that the human being can only appear to others draped in a veil: the veil of beauty, which is the one form in which he becomes visible to his fellow men. At the same time he cautions that man's appearance as a beautiful phenomenon does not suggest that beauty is merely a mask that hides man's inner essence:

Nicht Schein, nicht Hülle für ein anderes ist die Schönheit. Sie selbst ist nicht Erscheinung, sondern durchaus Wesen, ein solches freilich, welches wesenhaft sich selbst gleich nur unter der Verhüllung bleibt. Mag daher Schein sonst überall Trug sein—der schöne Schein ist die Hülle vor dem notwendig Verhülltesten. Denn weder die Hülle noch der verhüllte Gegenstand ist das Schöne, sondern dies ist der Gegenstand in seiner Hülle. (*GS1*: 195)

Benjamin categorically rejects the idea that beauty is the manifestation of a hidden truth, which he interprets as a gross distortion of the Platonic distinction between appearance and essence. Rather he contends that beauty is an essence that remains true to itself only when hidden beneath a veil or cloaked in a semblance. The polemic that Benjamin advances here is two-fold. On the one hand, he wants to dismiss the argument that beauty has no substance in itself, which is a position typical of the baroque as epitomized in Gryphius's famous lyric "Es ist alles eitel." On the other, he wants to resist the idea that beauty could exist apart from all appearance, since the latter would do nothing but invert illusion and reality and thus inaugurate a return to myth. Benjamin's critique in this case is directed at the George Circle, which regarded beauty as the one true substance to be worshipped in art, which assumed the role of a cultic practice or religion. Benjamin stresses that beauty is neither a veil nor a veiled object, but the appearance of an object in a veil: "Dies ist der Gegenstand in seiner Hülle." Hidden in a veil, the object can remain true to itself, even as it becomes manifest to others, for it becomes manifest only as that which is invisible or, more precisely, that which is withheld from sight. The appearance of something in a veil and as veiled constitutes beauty for Benjamin. Art never entirely discloses its object—indeed it could not without sacrificing itself as a medium of presentation—but it does expose the veil that makes the object visible as something mysterious, as something that is never exhausted by its artistic representations.

This is the relation of art to truth. Art reveals that something is hidden that cannot be unveiled. It has the capacity to move its audience precisely because it makes known that something lies beyond the reach of aesthetics. For Benjamin, what holds the artwork open and insures its relation to life is a force he variously calls "the expressionless" [*das Ausdruckslose*], "the moral word" and in reference to Hölderlin, the

caesura as a counter-rhythmic interruption (*GS I*: 181). Within works of art, the expressionless is a purely negative force. It punctures the illusion that a work of art produces and thus prevents it from becoming a totality, a myth. But if the expressionless is to have the function of a foreign element that disrupts and fragments the work of art, it also has to have a sphere in which it operates as a proper element or autochthonous force. Benjamin vacillates in identifying this other sphere as the religious or ethical realm. On the one hand, he wants to insist that in speech man lays himself bare; he throws off the veil of art and exposes his character by articulating decisions that give his life its distinctive shape. On the other, he wants to reserve this instance of transparency or nakedness for man's encounter with God. Each of these strains is evident in the following two passages:

In der hüllenlose Nacktheit ist das wesentlich Schöne gewichen und im nackten Körper des Menschen ist ein Sein über aller Schönheit erreicht—das Erhabene, und ein Werk über allen Gebilden—das des Schöpfers. (*GS I*: 196)

Entdeckt wird die Wahrheit im Wesen der Sprache. Es entblößt sich der menschliche Körper, ein Zeichen, daß der Mensch selbst vor Gott tritt. (*GS I*: 197)

Benjamin's impasse, if one could call it that, is the same as Cohen's. Both need a guarantee that the human being has dispensed with all illusion, and the only authority they can invoke to judge whether this has happened is God, who sees what does not appear or, put otherwise, what does not take refuge in an appearance. It is in this spirit that Benjamin says that true reconciliation is "completely otherworldly and scarcely representable for the work of art" (*GS I*: 184). And yet the addition of the qualifier "scarcely" does suggest that reconciliation is on occasion registered on this side of the heaven-and-earth divide, in the phenomenal world. Benjamin accordingly offers that in the "conciliation [*Aussöhnung*] of one's fellow men" reconciliation finds its "worldly reflection" (*GS I*: 184). His position is consistent with Cohen's claim that the confessions of Yom Kippur must take place in public to signal one's private trust in God's goodness. Neither thinker, however, is entirely convincing on this point. Indeed both would seem to undermine the rigor of their arguments by insisting on the public performance of an act, which by their own admission can never be public.

More compelling is the turn the two take toward the affective register. The possibility of reconciliation is registered in hope, which

Benjamin specifies is not a hope one maintains for oneself but only for those whose life has been dictated by fate:

Elpis bleibt das letzte der Urworte: der Gewißheit des Segens, den in der Novelle die Liebenden heimtragen, erwidert die Hoffnung auf Erlösung, die wir für alle Toten hegen. Sie ist das einzige Recht des Unsterblichkeitsglaubens, der sich nie am eigenen Dasein entzünden darf. (GSI: 200)

As Sigrid Weigel has noted, Benjamin rejects the conclusion of the novel in which the narrator anticipates the day when Otilie and Eduard will reawaken and realize their love, which they had no chance to do in this world.¹⁷ Benjamin turns instead to a sentence five chapters earlier to locate the caesura of the work, the point where life punctures the aesthetic illusion. The sentence reads, “Die Hoffnung fuhr wie ein Stern, der vom Himmel fällt, über ihre Häupter weg.” The hope that the work awakens in the reader is not that Otilie and Eduard will be resurrected as they are just now, but that they will have occasion to reconcile with God, so that they may finally disappear from our sight as they gain each other in love. Love, Benjamin tells us, is based not in the desire for happiness but in the premonition of a “*seliges Lebens*” (GSI: 196; my emphasis), which as Freud pointed out in his Schreber study (1910) has to be understood as both a blissful and a blessed life, a life of carnal pleasure as well as heavenly solicitude.¹⁸ While Cohen does not concern himself with either sensual pleasure or the afterlife, he nonetheless maintains the hope for a blessed life in the here and now, in which the finite individual can face his infinite Creator: “Die Erlösung braucht gar nicht hinausgeschoben zu werden auf das Ende der Tage, sondern sie haftet schon an jedem Momente des Leidens, und sie bildet an jedem Momente des Leidens einen Moment der Erlösung” (RV 274).

Just as suffering figures the possibility of redemption for Cohen, so too the shining (*das Scheinen*) of a spark in the night sky symbolizes for Benjamin the possibility of freedom from all semblance (*Schein*) in a realm beyond art—in life or the ethical sphere. For all the emphasis on the gulf between Benjamin’s early and late work, it is startling how consistent the image of a shooting star is. In “On the Concept of

¹⁷Weigel, *Literatur als Voraussetzung*, 111–12.

¹⁸Sigmund Freud, “Psychoanalytische Bemerkungen über einen autobiographisch beschriebenen Fall von Paranoia (Dementia paranoides),” in *Sigmund Freud: Studienausgabe*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, and James Strachey, vol. 7, *Zwang, Paranoia und Perversion* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982) 156–58.

History,” which Benjamin wrote almost two decades after the *Elective Affinities* essay, he states: “Das wahre Bild der Vergangenheit *huscht* vorbei. Nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten” (GS I: 695). Here it is not the poet but instead the historical materialist who possesses the gift “to fan the spark of hope in the past” (GS I: 695). What Benjamin calls “the spark of hope” are the signs of a life that is not constrained by the representations of art or the political order. In this sense one can, and ought, to say that Cohen’s analysis of reconciliation and redemption provided Benjamin with a model of religious and ethical life that was achievable in the here and now, in this world.

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