In the Image: Figures of the Face in Modern Jewish Aesthetics

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Introduction

"In all faces the Face of faces is seen in a veiled and symbolic manner."
—Nicholas of Cusa, *De visione Dei*[1]

"The Beautiful is not ultimate. The Beautiful can be discussed as a Face. But in it there is also the possibility of enchantment, and, from that moment, a lack of concern or ethical cruelty."
—Emmanuel Levinas, 1989 Interview[2]

In the opening lines of *De visione Dei,* Nicholas of Cusa offers up a prayer. Tasked with introducing the monks of Tegernsee to the wonders of mystical theology, he asks the divine to infuse him with powers of explanation, revealing to his brothers what lies beyond all sensible, rational, and intellectual sight. Given the nature of the challenge, Cusa undertakes the task by appealing to a surprising source. He has sent the brothers an "omnivoyant" portrait—a piece he titles the "Icon God." Suggesting that they hang the icon on the monastery's northern wall, he instructs them to gaze at it as they move about the room. Notice, he remarks, how "the icon's gaze looks at you in equal measure in every region and does not desert you no matter where you go."[3] Remarkably, every brother feels himself to be the sole object of the icon's gaze, even as he confirms with his fellows that they too share the same sensation. Thus, via an engagement with an innovation of Renaissance art, Cusa is able to evoke what the powers of speech could not accomplish on their own: in all human seeing—in every human face—the vision of God is present.

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[1] Cusanus, Nicholas. *De Visione Dei*. Translated by Jasper Hopkins (3rd Edition) (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988), p. 689.

[2] As cited in: Eaglestone, Robert. *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1997), p. 113.

[3] Cusanus. *De Visione Dei,* p. 684.

The boldness of Nicholas Cusa's mystical vision lies in this humanism. By locating the *Imago Dei* in human faces, he breaks with the patristic and scholastic traditions, claiming that *all* human seeing takes part in the Absolute sight of God. In his lifetime, Cusa would apply this principle to political and religious life in astonishing ways—envisioning the possibility of Church reform and peaceful religious dialogue that seem centuries beyond his time. If the humanistic character of Cusa's mysticism surprises, so too should his willingness to appeal to artistic imagery to convey it. This latter move breaks with a long Platonic heritage that distrusts art as a reliable vehicle in the pursuit of transcendence.

These two innovative aspects of Cusa's thought make him an interesting counterpart to Emmanuel Levinas. Like Cusa, Levinas makes the face a central theme of his philosophy, assigning it divine significance as the only reliable source of transcendence this side of post-modernity. Levinas on art, however, appears to be another story. Often compared with Plato on the theme, Levinas and aesthetics may seem to go together like water and oil. "Art," he infamously writes, "brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings irresponsibility that charms as lightness and grace… Magic, recognized everywhere as the devil's part, enjoys an incomprehensible tolerance in poetry. Revenge is gotten on wickedness by producing its caricature…evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak."[4] This passage, and others like it, have led critics to surmise that

[4] Levinas, Emmanuel. "Reality and Its Shadow." *The Levinas Reader*. Edited by Seán Hand. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1989), p. 141.

Levinas regards art with antipathy, reducing it to idolatry, and thus rendering aesthetics an unviable subject for ethics.[5]

Given such critiques, the suggestion that Levinas's phenomenology of the face has anything to do with aesthetics seems at best provocative, at worst, sacrilegious. After all, the face represents the breaking of images, not their production. As a living presence, the face "destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me."[6] It "is present in its refusal to be contained."[7] It "resists possession, resists my powers."[8] "The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute… the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance."[9] Such a portrait of the face suggests the end of all portraits—the destruction of images—the iconoclasm of any artistry that makes its bid for mastery. This is the portrait of the face that Levinas paints for us, and yet, it is a portrait nonetheless. As Levinas himself would rightly concede, the primordial and precognitive encounter he describes necessarily eludes the words of its own description. The description therefore can only be a mediation of the described, and any form of mediation will necessarily entail aesthetic features: substance and form via the sound, shape, and meaning of words we ascribe to it. It will draw

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[5] E.g. Robbins, Jill. *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Eaglestone, Robert. *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1997). Both Robbins and Eaglestone read in Levinas's aesthetics a polemic against art akin to the Biblical proscription of images. Richard Cohen has challenged this reading, endeavoring to show that Levinas is not ultimately adversarial to art, but to aestheticism—the dogma that regards art and the beautiful as ultimate. See: Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas on Art and Aestheticism: Getting 'Reality and Its Shadow' Right" in *Levinas Studies, Volume 11*, 2016, pp. 149-194.

[6] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh, PA, 1969), p. 50.

[7] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity.* 194.

[8] Ibid., 197.

[9] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 86.

upon concepts and images culturally recognizable to both author and reader—and, if done well, rhetorically recognized as beautiful. Levinas's *description* of the face contains all of these features, and therefore may be properly called aesthetic. What constitutes this aesthetic—its formative figures, its qualities, and its history—is the question the present thesis begins to answer.

Boundaries of the Face: Parameters of Study

Samuel Moyn's *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics* presents a chronological narrative of Levinas's "discovery" of the ethical other. Moyn suggests that this other be characterized as an "ethical theology," adapting the term from Carl Schmidt's use of the term political theology.[10] Like Schmidt's concept of sovereignty, the other is a secularized theological concept, developing out of the interwar theology of Rudolf Otto, Karl Barth, and Franz Rosenzweig, as an innovative answer to the problem of intersubjectivity arising within phenomonology. While each of these thinkers defined revelation as an encounter with the "wholly other," it was ultimately Rosenzweig who inspired Levinas to employ the concept within his "ethics."[11]

Moyn's chronology is incredibly illuminating, and his characterization of Levinas's other as an "ethical theology" is instructive. However, I believe both the narrative and characterization become complicated when one introduces "the face" as a conceptual modifier to Levinas's "other." Though the two concepts are related, they are not the same, and represent two distinct

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[10] Myon, Samuel. *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 13.

[11] Moyn. *Origins*, p. 115.

intellectual pedigrees that come together in Levinas's thought. Put another way, while phenomenology and interwar theology may be able to account for Levinas's discovery of the ethical other, they did not give that other its face. That distinction belongs largely to modern Jewish aesthetics of, or associated with, the Neo-Kantian persuasion. The principle thesis of this paper is, therefore, that Levinas's phenomenological description of the face draws on aesthetic developing from Neo-Kantian readings of history and art. With this thesis in view, "aesthetic" emerges as a third category for understanding the legacy leading to Levinas's thought, as well as a necessary supplement to the binary of philosophy and theology so often used to interpret that legacy.

Levinas notes two potential sources of the face in his ethics. The first comes in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, wherein he notes that Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* is "too often present in this book to be cited."[12] The human countenance emerges in the climatic moment in *The Star* as a configuration maps all the aspects of Rosenzweig's vital system—the *elements* of philosophy, the *courses* of theology, and the *figure* of redemption, in the unified expression of the human face. The second source referenced by Levinas, somewhat less known, is Max Picard. Levinas's claimed to have read all of Picard's works, though he was most likely thinking of Picard's 1930 *The Human Face* (Das Menschliche Gesicht)[13] when referring to his thought as a "philosophy of the face." Of this philosophy, Levinas writes: "It is in the human

[12] Levinas, *Totality.*, p. 28. The full quote reads "We were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern Der Erlösung*, a work too often present in this book to be cited. But the presentation and the development of the notion employed owe everything to the phenomenological method."

[13] Picard, Max. *The Human Face*. Trans S. Guy Endore. (Farrar and Rinehart, 1930).

face that—beyond the expression of human singularity and perhaps because of that ultimate singularity—*the trace of God is manifested, and the light of revelation inundates the universe.*"[14]

Each of these overt references imply variegated trajectories for the origins of the face. Rosenzweig, representing the stronger of the two influences, confirms a direct pedigree running from Levinas to Hermann Cohen and the Marburg School of Neo-kantianism. Rosenzweig's indebtedness to Hermann Cohen is almost as well known as Levinas's is to Rosenzweig. The human countenance (Gesicht, Antlitz) figures prominently in Cohen's *Aesthetik des reinen Gefühls*, and makes a return appearance in his *Religion of Reason*, both of which were hugely influential in Rosenzweig's writing of *The Star*. Picard, on the other hand, suggests the theme of the face has a much more pervasive legacy than the direct lineage running from Cohen to Levinas; Picard's phenomenology of the face was highly influenced by the work of Martin Buber and Georg Simmel, two thinkers whose thought runs parallels to, but not through, Marburg.

Given the narrow parameters of this study, I have chosen to confine myself to the more direct pedigree in Rosenzweig and Cohen. It should be noted, that, despite its thesis, this paper is not primarily about Levinas's thought, nor is it of Cusa. Rather the two stand as book ends in a larger chronology that this paper only begins to explore.

Chapter One, "The Face of History: Individuality and the 'Crisis' of Modernity," gives a brief account of a debate amongst 19th and 20th century German intellectuals over the origins of modernity. This debate centered largely around the emergence the 'human individual' as a historically conditioned concept, giving rise to "crises" of cultural conflict. Cusa figured prominently in these debates as the "first modern man," as both the "discoverer" of the human

[14] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Proper names*. Trans. Michael b. Smith. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996)., p. 95.

individual and early respondent to the emerging crises. More importantly, the reception of Cusa's thought came to play a role in shaping an emerging aesthetics, wherein the face came to represent an aesthetic unity in the midst of an otherwise fragmentary modern world.

The following two chapters take a closer look at how this aesthetic developed in Cohen and Rosenzweig. Chapter Two, "The Face of Feeling: Hermann Cohen (1842-1918)," explores elements of Hermann Cohen's treatment of the human countenance in his *Aesthetik des reinen Gefühls.* For Cohen, the unity of the face represents a source of meaning arising from a correlation between the human and divine. I begin by showing how Cohen privileges language in his theory of poetry as a means for conditioning visuality. Turning to his analysis of the Mona Lisa and Hendrikje, I examine how this view is employed to show how the face in portraiture becomes a source of both ideal knowledge and moral affect, particularly in its ability to elicit compassion in the artful depiction of humor. Chapter Three, "The Face of the Figure: Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929)," explores how some features in Cohen's aesthetic are adapted in Rosenzweig's *Star*. Using his "configuration" as a guide, I explore Rosenzweig's treatment of the human countenance in three thematic ways: the mask, the gaze, and the kiss. I show that while Rosenzweig follows Cohen in privileging speech as a means for shaping our encounter with the visual world, it takes on the added quality of disrupting our vision, reimagining the face as a vital unity.

When it comes to Levinas's thought, the 'face' is perhaps his most recognizable theme. Well-worn by decades of established discourse, it has almost become platitudinous. It is my hope that the present inquiry will begin to illuminate the theme once more by defamiliarizing it. To use

the language borrowed by Levinas from one of the subjects in this study—by shattering the ‘plastic image’ of the face that Levinas has left us, it might begin to once again be made new.

Chapter 1: Facing History—Individuality and the "Crisis" of Modernity

In the latter 19th and early 20th centuries, a debate over the origins of modernity arose among German intellectuals. In this debate, the distinguishing feature marking the turn from the medieval period to modernity was the emergence the 'human individual.' Cusa figured prominently in debates as the "first modern man" or "discoverer of the human individual." Though many of the observations made about Cusa's historical legacy have merit, his characterization as the "first modern," one could say, was largely aesthetic—a means, in the words of Michael Moore, for "apprehending the meaning and shape of modernity."[15] That shape and meaning would have implications for emerging aesthetic theory of the same period.

In this chapter, I will give an abbreviated outline of this debate via some of its key participants, showing how the concept of the human individuality came to represent the central problem of modernity: radical differentiation leading to social fragmentation and cultural crisis. Cusa's thought came to play a role not only in apprehending the meaning of modernity's crisis, but also in shaping a response to it in an emerging aesthetics. Within that aesthetics, the face came to represent an aesthetic unity and locus of meaning in an otherwise fragmentary modern world.

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[15] Moore, Michael. *Nicholas of Cusa and the Kairos of Modernity: Cassirer, Gadamer, Blumenberg*. (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013)., p. 1. Moore's essay explores Cusa's treatment within three prominent figures in this debate: Ernst Cassirer, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hans Blumenberg.

The Renaissance and the "Discovery" of the Human Individual

Our story begins roughly with Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), the Swiss historian who spent the majority of his career teaching at the University in his native Basel. The thesis that the discovery, or invention, of the human individual is what separated the medieval from the modern period did not originate with Burckhardt,[16] but his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) was responsible for popularizing it. He writes:

> "In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such."[17]

Burckhardt's thesis claims that the discovery of the individual coincided with the idea of a universal humanity, promoting a reassessment of the way said individual related to both her world and state. In many respects a response to the many "philosophies of history" propagated by many German nationalist movements of his era, Burckhardt argued that it was the political and cultural conditions of early Renaissance Italy—and not those of the German Reformation and Enlightenment—that gave rise to conditions of modernity. In fact, Burckhardt identified three concepts that marked the transition from the medieval period to modernity: the human *individual*, the *self*, and *world,* terms that permeate and orient the thought of many of the thinkers

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[16] Burckhardt's thesis is articulated by Georg Voigt's *The Revival of Classical Antiquity* (1859), and Jules Michelet's *Renaissance* (1855), suggesting that Burckhardt was a product of his time. See Peter Burke's introduction in Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of Renaissance in Italy*. Trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York: Penguin Books, 1990). 12.

[17] Burckhardt, *Civilization*., p. 98.

to follow in present in this study. Of these three concepts, however, the "individualism thesis" would have the most profound legacy.

A significant early proponent of Burckhardt's thesis was his young colleague in Basel at the time, Wilhem Dilthey. Dilthey was at least in part responsible for popularizing the thesis to a German philosophical academy still dominated by historical approaches to philosophy. Despite Burckhardt's distaste for the ever proliferating "philosophies of history" in the German speaking world, his thesis followed a couple of key tendencies within those approaches. It took philosophical concepts to be historically and culturally conditioned (in other words, generated within a particular time and place), and it located the seminal shift in an individual genius. In Burckhardt's case, that genius was Petrarch. Dilthey would incorporate the thesis into his own ever evolving philosophy of history, though he disagreed with Burckhardt on the exact moment or in what person the concept of the modern individuality emerged. While he acknowledged the Renaissance as a preliminary stage in the development of modern individuality, he chose instead reemphasize the Reformation via the renewal of Roman stoicism in the thought of Bodin, Althusius, and Grotius.[18]

For Dilthey, the advent of the human individual represented both a problematic and progressive moment. Individuality, viewed as differentiation and even fragmentation, represented the greatest challenge to social and cultural harmony. Individualism thus became the central problem of modernity, manifesting in the series of crises arising in the forms of political and cultural conflicts following the Reformation. Nevertheless, the discovery of the individual paved

[18] For an in-depth view of how the individuation thesis unfolds in Dilthey's Philosophy of History see Frohman, Larry. "Neo-Stoicism and the Transition to Modernity in Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of History." *Journal of the History of Ideas, Apr., 1995, Vol. 56, No. 2* (Apr., 1995), pp. 263- 287.

the way for the realization of the inestimable value of the person, independent of his or her social function: “In opposition to every corporation the person now felt his own intrinsic value… The religious expression of this was that man, alone with God, defined his relation to the invisible in his own way and through his own labor.”[19] The inestimable value of the human individual would not only pave the way for the Enlightenment and the concept of inalienable rights, but held the promise of a more comprehensive an lasting unity, one which took seriously the challenges of individual expression.

Without going into greater detail of Dilthey’s account here, we need only note that his approach to appropriating and critiquing Burckhardt is indicative of how the individualism thesis would be interpreted by German intellectuals in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries. When it came to debates surrounding the “problems” of individuality and modernity, critics of generally accepted the premise that modernity emerged with the discovery of the human individual—they only disputed the when, where, and who.

Nicholas of Cusa: Father of Modernity

How Nicholas of Cusa became the more common answer to the “who” is a longer story. Well before he was bandied about as the “first modern thinker,” Cusa had long held, in many minds, the honor of the title “father” of both german and modern philosophy—a rather surprising

[19] Dilthey, Wilhelm. *Gesammelte Schriften II.* (B. G. Teubner, 1960). p. 21. As cited in Frohman, “Neo-Stoicism., p. 267.

claim, given that Cusa was not rediscovered in Germany until the 1820s.[20] Take for instance Richard Falckenberg's *History Of Modern Philosophy From Nicolas of Cusa to the Present Time* (first edition, 1885, second edition, 1892), a textbook in the history of philosophy used in courses in Germany and translated for the same purposes in both England and America. Falckenberg begins his book by raising the question of who deserves the title of first modern philosopher, even framing the debate in nationalist terms: "Germany, England, and France claim the honor of having produced the first modern philosopher, presenting Nicolas of Cusa, Bacon of Verulam, and René Descartes as their candidates, while Hobbes, Bruno, and Montaigne have received only scattered votes."[21] For those voting Cusa, Falckenberg lists an extensive array of authors dating back to the 1830s.[22]

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[20] As Morimichi Watanabe has noted, Cusa is rediscovered in Germany in large part thanks to the work of Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838) and his students at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Tübingen. See Watanabe, Morimichi. "The Origins of Modern Cusanus Research in Germany and the Establishment of the Heidelberg *Opera Omnia*." in *Nicholas of Cusa: in Search of God and Wisdom. Essays in Honor of Morimichi Watanabe by the American Cusanus Society.* Ed.s Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki. (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991).

[21] Falckenberg, Richard. *History of Modern Philosophy from Nicholas of Cusa to the Present Time*. Trans. A. C. Armstrong, Jr. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1895). pp. 14-15. For what it's worth, Falckenberg decides to bestow the honor on Descartes, but still claims Cusa as a foundational and transitional figure. For his full and final assessment of the debate, here is the remaining quote: "The claim of England is the weakest of all, for, without intending to diminish Bacon's importance, it may be said that the programme which he develops—and in essence his philosophy is nothing more—was, in its leading principles, not first announced by him, and not carried out with sufficient consistency. The dispute between the two remaining contestants may be easily and equitably settled by making the simple distinction between forerunner and beginner, between path-breaker and founder. The entrance of a new historical era is not accompanied by an audible click, like the beginning of a new piece on a music-box, but is gradually effected. A considerable period may intervene between the point when the new movement flashes up, not understood and half unconscious of itself, and the time when it appears on the stage in full strength and maturity, recognizing itself as new and so acknowledged by others: the period of ferment between the Middle Ages and modern times lasted almost two centuries. It is in the end little more than logomachy to discuss whether this time of anticipation and desire, of endeavor and partial success, in which the new struggles with the old without conquering it, and the opposite tendencies in the conflicting views of the world interplay in a way at once obscure and wayward, is to be classed as the epilogue of the old era or the prologue of the new. The simple solution to take it as a *transition period*, no longer mediaeval but not yet modern, has met with fairly general acceptance. Nicolas of Cusa (1401-64) was the first to announce *fundamental principles* of modern philosophy—he is the leader in this intermediate preparatory period. Descartes (1596-1650) brought forward the first *system*—he is the father of modern philosophy."

[22] Ibid., p. 15-17.

The thesis that Cusa represents the "first modern thinker," the 'discoverer' of the human individual, is most often attributed to Ernst Cassirer's *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (1927). Cassirer, while agreeing with Burckhardt on the 'when' and 'where' of the emergence of the human individual, critiques him for his neglect of Renaissance philosophy.[23] In Cassirer's view, Cusa, the philosopher, was responding to his own crisis in the collapse of medieval civilization. In a departure from the otherworldliness of medieval theology, he sought to reconcile divine transcendence with earthly particularity—establishing concordance between God and man. This gave birth to a new orientation towards the problem of knowledge (*docta ignorantia*, or learned ignorance), which takes the opposition of infinite and finite, or the absolute and particular, as its starting point. Cusa's definition of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites) was an attempt to reconcile the contradictions of every day life.[24] By taking into account the finitude of human knowledge, Cusa was able to begin to imagine a cosmopolitics, affirming not only the intrinsic value of the individual, but the value of each individual's perspective of the divine:

> The *De vision Dei* taught us that the truth of the universal and the particularity of the individual interpenetrate each other, so that the Divine Being can only be grasped and seen from the finitely multiple individual points of view. In like manner, we can see the being that is prior to any limitation, prior to any 'contraction', only through the limitation itself. The ideal towards which our knowledge must strive, then, does not lie in denying and rejecting particularity, but in allowing it to unfold in all its richness. For only the

[23] Cassirer, Ernst. *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy.* Trans Mario Domandi. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000). p. 35. "There can be no doubt that the Renaissance directed all its intellectually productive forces towards a profound examination of the problem of the individual. In this respect, Burckhardt's fundamental thesis remains unshakable. But Burckhardt, in fact, portrayed only one aspect of the great process of liberation by which modern man matured towards a consciousness of himself."

[24] Cassirer, *The Individual.*, p. 36. "…Cusanus considers 'the apex of the theory' to be the insight that the truth which he had sought earlier in the darkness of mysticism and which he had determined to be the antithesis of all multiplicity and change, reveals itself, in fact, in the very realm of empirical multiplicity; indeed, it is common, everyday matter."

> totality of faces gives us the One view of the Divine. The world becomes the symbol of God, not in that we pick out one part of it and provide it with some singular mark of value, but rather in that we pass through it in all of its forms, freely submitting ourselves to its multiplicity, to its antitheses.[25]

Cassirer's emphasis on the human face as a central theme and hermeneutic of Cusa's thought is certainly unique among his contemporaries, though many of the other elements in Cassirer's interpretation were not entirely novel.[26] He reflects some of the thinking on Cusa claimed by Cassirer's teachers in Marburg, particularly Hermann Cohen. Cohen's interest in Cusa seems to have been chiefly as a mathematic thinker, and he precedes Cassirer in crediting Cusa with the discovery of the epistemological significance of infinity. The distinction, in Cohen's view, warranted Cusa the title "first German philosopher" and "father of German philosophy."[27] Yet Cassirer's interest and thinking on Cusa possibly predated his studies at Marburg, extending all the way back to his year of study at Berlin in 1895. There he attended the lectures of Georg

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[25] Ibid., pp. 36-37. Cassirer's attention to Cusa's thematizing of the human face does raise the question of a potential influence on Levinas. Levinas was aware of Cassirer's work, having famously sided with Heidegger against Cassirer in the latter twos Davos disputation. Reportedly, Levinas would comes to regret this decision after Heidegger's infamous membership with National Socialism, even apologizing to Cassirer's widow on a post-war visit to America. See: Moyn, *Origins*. pp. 11-12, fn. 20. The difficulty in establishing such a connection is that Levinas makes no references to Cassirer on the theme of the face and, as far as I am aware, never mentions Cusa in any of his works.

[26] Cassirer's own interest in Cusa predates *The Individual* by more than two decades. Cusa appeared in his doctoral dissertation: *Descartes Kritik der mathematischen und naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis* (1899), written under the supervision of Hermann Cohen, and later republished as an introduction in his *Leibniz' System in seiner wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (1902). Cusa also figured chiefly in the opening two chapters of the first volume on massive three volume history of epistemology: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit, Bd. 1*. (1906), and in his *Zur Einsteinischen Relativitätstheorie: Erkenntnistheoretische Betrachtungen* (1921).

[27] See Cohen, Hermann. *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1914). p. 32. Cohen's reception of Cusa is complicated by his dual commitments to Judaism and German Idealism, and the correlation between them. On the one hand, Cohen sees in Cusa the modern interests and cosmopolitan values affirmed by Cassirer, but he does not ascribe him the honor of "first modern man" or "discoverer of humanity." The latter title is reserved for the prophets, though the discovery does not reach its full expression until Kant. See: Cohen, Hermann. "The Social Idea in Plato and the Prophets" (1916. In *Hermann Cohen: Writings on Neo-Kantianism and Jewish Philosophy*. Ed. Rober Schine and Samuel Moyn. (Brandeis University Press, 2021)., p. 110.

Simmel (1858-1918), an immensely popular speaker and famed German sociologist.[28] Simmel attracted many students who would go on to great fame, including Cassirer, György Lukács, Max Scheler, and Martin Buber.

The thesis that Cusa represents the first modern predates Cassirer in Simmel. In his 1904 essay "Religion and the Contradictions of Life," Simmel begins by defining Cusa's understanding of God, the *concidentia oppositorum*, as "the unification of that which has been torn asunder," anticipating the differentiation and fragmentation brought on by the advent of modernity.[29] According to Simmel, what made Cusa a precursor to modernity was his stress on the uniqueness of all things, their individuality and particularity, which only could come together again in the Oneness of the divine unity.

This reading of Cusa most likely inspired another one of Simmel's students, Martin Buber. Buber, who studied with both Simmel and Dilthey in his year of study at Berlin in 1899, echoed the same thesis in his 1904 dissertation *Zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblem (Nicolaus von Cusa und Jacob Boehme)*. "(Cusa) proves to be the first modern thinker, especially in the foundation of the problem of individuation, in the question of individual difference and the uniqueness of the individual."[30] According to Buber, Cusa's individual is at

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[28] Simmel's lectures apparently inspired Cassirer to study Kant with Cohen in Marburg. Having acquired an interest in Kant, Cassirer heard Simmel declare the midst of a lecture: "Undoubtedly the best books on Kant are written by Hermann Cohen, but I must confess I do not understand them." See Watanabe, "Modern Cusanus Research," p. 28, quoting Schlipp, Paul, ed. *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer.* (Evanstan, 1949), p. 6.

[29] Simmel, Georg. "Religion and the Contradictions of Life" in *Essays on Religion*. Trans Horst Jürgen Helle in collaboration with Ludwig Nieder. (New Have: Yale University Press, 1997).

[30] Buber, Martin. "Zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblem (Nicolaus von Cusa und Jacob Boehme)" in *Martin Buber Werkausgabe, bd. 2.1 Frühe religionswissenschaftliche Schriften*. (Gütersloher, 2013), p. 80: "Als der erste neuzeitliche Denker erweist sich Cues namentlich in der Grundlegung des Individuationsproblems, in der Frage der individuellen Verschiedenheit und der Einzigartigkeit des Individuums."

the center of the infinite world process—its elements coming together within him as a "bounded limited being," and coming apart again from his "dissolution into the flowing whole."[31] Following the thought of Dilthey and anticipating Cassirer, Buber reads Cusa as affirming the infinite value of every being. A natural consequence of which is that each individual desires to persist in its own being, and to perfect its own being. "And only from the fact that each develops its own (individuality) powerfully, the harmony of the world events arises, which represents the One God in the countless diversity."[32]

In both Buber and Cassirer's readings of Cusa, one finds the elements of the promise and problematic of the human individual. As a privileging the infinite value of the individual, he paves the way for the cosmopolitanism and individual expression prized by the modern ethos. On the other hand, the challenge of individual particularity represents a constant threat to social cohesion, eventually resulting in the cultural and political conflicts within the modern period. In this regard, Cusa's *concidentia oppositorum* not only represents an initial failed attempt at overcoming modernity's crisis, but a way of framing the problem of modernity itself. The search for a new synthesis of world view—a unity in diversity—would become the ongoing task of modern humanism. While this theme touched many aspects of German thought at the turn of the 20th century, it was in aesthetics' treatment of the problems of modernity and individuality that the human face would emerge.

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[31] Buber, "Zur Geschichte," p. 82.

[32] Ibid., p. 82-83. Buber would later identify in Cusa (and critique) a notion of the self that develops in isolation. See: Buber, Martin. *Between Man and Man.* Trans Ronald Gregor Smith. (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 130-132. Sarah Scott has made the claim that Buber's early interest in, and later critique of, Cusa informed the development of the former's dialogical philosophy. See Scott, Sarah. "Knowing Otherness: Martin Buber's Appropriation of Nicholas of Cusa." *International Philosophical Quarterly. Vol 55, Issue 4, Dec. 2015.*, pp. 399-416.

Facing Aesthetics: Simmel and Aesthetic Synthesis.

As evidence to the emergence of the concept of the human individual in the Renaissance period, art historians often point to the emergence of portraiture in the same era. Burckhardt himself wrote well-known essay on Renaissance portraiture, and connected the rise of individualism with the emergence of heroic personalities and likenesses.[33] In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer—borrowing Theodor Hetzer's term—claims that the "sovereignty of the picture" was not achieved until the high Renaissance.[34] As recently as Gottfried Boehm's 1985 *Bildnis und Individuum,* the 'individualism thesis' has been reformulated in connection with the rise of Renaissance portraiture.[35] The rise of the depiction of individual likeness meant that they represented "unified and closed structures." With regards to the portrait, faces came to stand as signifiers for the inner life of the individual—a reliable expressions of the possessor's soul. Even in its aesthetic forms, the human face came to be regarded as productive loci of synthetic meaning, and Simmel's aesthetics stands out both as representative and significant influence.

Simmel really warrants his own chapter in this study. However, given the constraints of time, and owing to my late discovery of him in the process of my research, I will only hazard a brief sketch here. Outside his writings on religion, Cusa's c*oncidentia oppositorum* functions as a

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[33] Burckhardt, Jacob. "Das Porträt in der Malerei." in *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte von Italien.* (Basel: C. F. Lendorff, 1898). pp. 145-294. Peter Burke, while noting many of the criticisms of the individualism thesis, believes there is something to it with regards to the modern impulse for producing individual likenesses. See: Burke, Peter. "The Renaissance, Individualism and the Portrait" in *History of European Ideas* 21 (1995), pp. 393-400.

[34] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method.* trans Joel Weinscheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (New York: Continuum, 1975). p. 131. "Here for the first time we have pictures that stand entirely by themselves and, even without a frame and a setting, are in themselves unified and closed structures."

[35] Boehm, Gottfried. *Bildnis und Individuum: über den Ursprung der Porträtmalerei in der italienischen Renaissance.* (Munich: Pressten, 1985).

unifying theme throughout Simmel's work, extending to all spheres of social life. Aesthetics is no exception, and in fact represents a unique form of expression and union between particularity and generality. In the words of Willi Goetschel: "Simmel regards aesthetics as the intersection of the particular and the general, the subjective and the objective sides of social interaction. His comments on the social aspects of art – art as commodity and as a medium of self-expression – are less concerned with purely aesthetic issues of art per se. Rather, his approach aims at comprehending the particular ways in which art is produced, consumed and interpreted as social artifacts in a particular historico–cultural moment."[36] For Simmel, the feelings that give rise to aesthetic expression necessarily emerge within a given social context. But art can be removed from this sphere, becoming a whole unto itself. In a 1922 essay, he describes the picture frame as the boundary of this whole: "The essence of the work of art, however, is to be a whole for itself, not requiring any relation to an exterior, spinning each of its threads back into its own center. Insofar as the work of art is that which otherwise only the world as a whole or the psyche can be, a unity of individualities, the work of art closes itself off against everything external to itself as a world of its own."[37] Thus, the artwork when removed from the social sphere that produced it, represents its own form of synthesis that is productive of meaning, although that meaning will be radically altered depending on who, when, and where the artwork is perceived.

Beginning with his 1901 essay "The Aesthetic Significance of the Face," Simmel identifies the face as one of the last, if not most profound, opportunities of synthesis in an

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[36] Goetschel, Willi. "Georg Simmel" in *Key writers on Art in the Twentieth Century*. ed. Chris Murray. (Milton Park, OX: Routledge, 2003), p. 246.

[37] "The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study." in *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*. ed. Austin Harrington. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 148.

otherwise fragmentary modern world.[38] This is only accentuated by the fact that in the modern world the face remains the only uncovered feature of the human body.[39] In fact, the face is what realizes individualization for Simmel, in that it represents the 'most remarkable' aesthetic synthesis of symmetry and individuality. This is ultimately what allows the face to be so productive of meaning:

> Unity has meaning and significance only to the degree to which it contrasts with the multiplicity of whose synthesis it consists. Within the perceptible world, there is no other structure like the human face which merges such a great variety of shapes and surfaces into an absolute unity of meaning. *The ideal of human cooperation is that completely individualized elements grow into the closest unity which, though composed of these elements, transcends each of them and comes into being exclusively through their cooperation. Among all perceptible things, this fundamental formula of life comes closest to being realized in the human face. By the spirit of a society we mean the content of those interactions which go beyond the individual—although not the individuals—which is more than their sum, yet still their product.* In the same manner, the soul, lying behind the features of the face and yet visible in them, is the interaction, the reference of one to the other, of these separate features. From a purely formal viewpoint, the face, with its variety and diversity of parts, forms, and colors, would really be something quite abstruse and aesthetically unbearable—if, that is, the complexity were not at the same time a complete unity.[40]

Here Simmel makes a key connection between one of the key tasks of modern humanism and the significance of the face. The ideal of human cooperation—an external unity of individuals—and the inner unity of expression in the face, reflecting the inner unity the soul. The objective unity

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[38] Scholars have noted a "subjective turn" in Simmel's work occurring around 1890, wherein Simmel abandons the hope of an objective, universal synthesis in the macrocosm, in favor of it in microcosm—e.g. in subjective encounters with faces. See: Podoksik, Efraim. *Georg Simmel and German Culture: Unity, Variety and Modern Discontents.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 146.

[39] Simmel, Georg. "The Aesthetic significance of the Face" in *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*. ed. Austin Harrington. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 233. Compare Simmel's reflection that the face remains the only naked portion of the body since the rise of Christianity with Levinas's description of the face as 'naked.' "The skin of the face is at its most naked and defenceless. The most naked even though this nudity is decent. The most defenceless too: the face carries within it a certain poverty; the proof of that is that we try to mask this poverty by assuming poses, an attitude." Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 81.

[40] Simmel, "Aesthetic," p. 232. Emphasis mine.

sought in the former is now expressed and obtained within the latter. This remarkable assertion foreshadows, as we shall soon explore, the aesthetics of both Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig, both of whom interpret art against the challenge of isolating particularity.

According to Simmel, the aesthetic quality of the face is therefore dependent on its unity of expression—which implies a vitality. Art, and in particular the human portrait, has the ability to achieve the appearance of such a unity. The eye in particular is most active in mirroring the soul. Simmel concludes that the eye needs a special study, for "it is precisely this achievement with which the eye, like the face generally, gives us the intimation, indeed the guarantee, that the artistic problems of pure perception and of the pure, sensory image of things—if perfectly solved —would lead to the solution of those other problems which involve soul and appearance. Appearance would then become the veiling and unveiling of the soul."[41] In a high appraisal of art's ability to reveal truths in its imitation of life, Simmel anticipates the work of the next subject in our study. For Hermann Cohen, our encounter with the face in portraiture has an important role to play in the task of humanism.

[41] Ibid., 235. For a more general picture of Simmel's treatment of the face in and outside of aesthetics, see: Werth, Margaret. "Modernity and the Face" in *Intermédialités / Intermediality, (8) autumn 2006*, pp. 83–102.

Chapter 2: The Face of Feeling: Hermann Cohen (1842-1918)

This chapter explores Hermann Cohen's *Aesthetik des reinen Gefühls* and its treatment of the human countenance. Cohen's aesthetics shares Simmel's view of the face as a locus for the production of meaning via the unity of consciousness, though this view is qualified. Cohen believes that meaning arises in the face via the correlation between the divine and human depicted within art. As this view appeals to a specific content, it should come as no surprise that discourse plays a significant role in Cohen's aesthetics. I begin by showing how Cohen privileges language in his theory of poetry as a means for conditioning visuality. Turning to his analysis of the Mona Lisa and Hendrikje, I examine how this view is employed to show how the face in portraiture becomes a source of both ideal knowledge and moral affect, particularly in its ability to elicit compassion in the artful depiction of humor. Via these elements of his aesthetics, Cohen anticipates the ethical significance Levinas's ascribes to the Face, while laying the foundation for similar movements in Rosenzweig's thought.

Before we begin, it will be first necessary to outline the major terminology and themes of Cohen's *Aesthetik*, in addition to how the *Aesthetik* functions within his larger *System.* According to Cohen, the task of a system of philosophy is show a whole life of culture. Put another way, a its task is to show how all of parts of the system form a whole, or "unity of consciousness."[42] In the first two parts of the *System,* Cohen shows how both pure knowledge (in *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*) and pure will (in *Ethik des reinen Willens*) are capable of generating their own

[42] Cohen, Hermann. *Aesthetiks des reinen Gefühls. Bd. 1* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1912). p. 4

content. In other words, each faculty is "pure" insofar as it is independent of all external influences. This "method of purity" represents Cohen's own approach to the transcendental method, its central requirement being that knowledge must originate in thought. The task of aesthetics is therefore the unity of art, and "pure feeling" (reines Gefühl) represents its autonomous subject and starting point, but it is distinguished from knowledge and will in one key aspect.

Cohen believes that feeling is the generic, or primal form (*Urform*) of consciousness, and therefore the root of all other forms of consciousness. He defines feeling essentially as movement, or an awareness of movement within the nervous system of an organism (e.g. the feeling of "temperature," or "pleasure" and "displeasure").[43] Pure feeling is simply love. Love, for Cohen, is the striving for communication, the escape from isolation, to seek "communion, relative in friendship and marriage, and absolutely in humanity, and for this purpose in the state."[44] According to Cohen, humanity flees from solitude, seeking the company of others. This is also the driving creative force in Art: "when man speaks and sings, when he writes and draws, he seeks means for the purpose of communication, because he seeks communion."[45] Thus Cohen

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[43] Cohen. *Aesthetik.* 1. p. 136: "Das Fühlen ist die Disposition des Bewußtseins, als solches, die zum Inhalt, wie die zum Innern. Der Inhalt selbst darf im Fühlen noch nicht vollzogen, sondern nur angelegt sein, wie etwa in Lust und Unlust, die nur hin sichtlich des Innern die Richtung auf den Inhalt bezeichnen. Da nun aber dieser Ursprung an der Temperatur angenommen wird, so ist das Fühlen das Fühlen der Temperatur, Die Temperatur aber ist eine Urform in der Bewegung des Nerven systems und des Organismus. So ist also das Fühlen der Temperatur die Urform des Bewußtseins, als Bewegung. Die Bewegung wird im Fühlen der Temperatur zur Urform des Bewußtseins."

[44] Ibid., p. 175: "Die Liebe ist dieses Streben nach Mitteilung. Sie ist Flucht vor der Isolierung auf sich selbst. Sie sucht Gemeinschaft, relative in Freundschaft und Ehe, und absolute in der Menschheit, und zu diesem Zwecke im Staate."

[45] Ibid.: "Wenn der Mensch spricht und singt, wenn er schreibt und zeichnet, so sucht er Mittel für den Zweck der Mitteilung, weil er Gemeinschaft sucht."

believes the proper subject of aesthetics is love, and aesthetic feeling is none other than the love of humanity.

As aesthetic feeling represents the root of both understanding and will, it may be divided according to which of those faculties is dominant. Cohen defines the beautiful as the objectification of pure feeling, and he identifies two forms of the beautiful corresponding to the facilities of understanding and will. In the *sublime*, cognition dominates the will, whereas in *humor*, the will dominates cognition. The sublime and humor are also divided according to the higher and lower limits (*Grenzen*) of human nature. Whereas the sublime corresponds with the upper limits of human nature, "occupied by the gods and the goddess," humor corresponds with the lower, occupied "by the animals, and the animal in man himself."[46] Thus the sublime is our experience of striving towards an ideal beyond our limitations, and humor is the realization that we are, after all, merely limited animals. In the words of Frederick Beiser, "It is the task of humor to expose the animal in the human, the fallibility and fragility of human nature, despite all our grandiose hopes and ambitions. Humor is when the ideal crashes against the hard rocks of reality."[47] Each form of the beautiful therefore relates to the correlation between the divine and human, but in converse ways. The sublime heightens the sense of human by elevating it to the level of the divine, and humor dashes the ideal by revealing human limitation, drawing attention between the gap.

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[46] Ibid., 179: "Die Natur des Menschen hat eine obere und eine untere Grenze. Die obere wird von den Göttern und dem Göttlichen eingenommen, die untere von den Tieren und von dem Animalischen im Menschen selbst."

[47] Beiser, Frederick. *Hermann Cohen, An Intellectual Biography*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). p. 260

The play between the sublime and humorous largely governs how Cohen interprets individual works of art. Different genres and cultures tend to favor either the sublime or the humorous, though ultimately the two forms of beauty complement one another. As we shall explore later, humor elicits the purer form of love in compassion (*Mitleid*). The human face in portraiture, and particularly the "Jewish type" of face, have a preeminent role in stirring this compassion. But prior to exploring that association, we must first explore another privileged aspect of Jewish expression in Cohen's aesthetic: the word.

Poetry and Visibility

It may seem strange to begin a chapter on the theme of the face in Cohen's aesthetics with a section on poetry. Given that love—the striving for communication and communion—is the starting point of an aesthetic theory, the privileging of written and spoken forms of expression comes as no surprise. What is surprising is that Cohen's aesthetic theory of poetry is essential for understanding how the face is mediated in other forms of art, even in the visual, or plastic, arts.[48]

As we have seen, Cohen views the unity of art as the task of aesthetics. This unity is achieved through pure feeling and beauty. While pure feeling, the love of humanity, represents the pure production of all arts, beauty represents the objectification of the pure feeling. The distinction between pure feeling and its objectification is essential for understanding how art is a

[48] Leora Batnitzky has cited Cohen's *Religion of Reason* as evidence for Cohen's distrust of plastic arts and its images in favor of the ethical superiority of biblical poetry. Against Cohen, she reads Rosenzweig's *Star's* embrace of vision as an attack against this polemic against images. However, Cohen's close attention to the relationship between poetry and visibility in *Aesthetik* suggests that Cohen has a more nuanced approach to images, and is much closer to Rosenzweig in the way he privileges language. See: Batnitzky, Leora. *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). pp. 84-85, and Cohen, Hermann. *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism.* Trans. Leo Strauss. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995). pp. 57-58.

form of communication. Whereas pure feeling first produces a unity of consciousness and the drive to express it, this in turn results in the generation of the beautiful, which, via its own unity, also may achieve its own unity of consciousness.[49]

The problem of discerning how such a unity arises comes back to the problem of the individual. According to Cohen, the whole notion that one sees humanity in any interaction with art represents a challenge. When one sees a man within a portrait it comes down to a sameness shared between the form depicted and the man: "The sameness must be thought out and thought into the facial perception of the woods and the stones. The equality is a concept, an idea."[50] For Cohen, it is precisely because an individual's humanity is a concept that one is able to make the association between the face one encounters in life and in art. If such an equality is only achievable via a concept, then it cannot take place via pure visibility, but must at least originate in thought:

> … visibility is by no means the first. For it is now a logical common property of physiological education, that in the perception of the face a great deal of logical contrivance is already involved, as even the so-called unconscious conclusions already play a part in it. Therefore it remains with the traditional truth that thinking is the very first beginning of all culture, and not only the beginning, but rather the true origin. The thinking of cognition is the first precondition of pure feeling; and only insofar as seeing belongs to this thinking, only insofar it belongs to the eaten bread of art, to the necessary preliminary practice of artistic creation.[51]

For Cohen, this represents a more general problem beyond the realm of art, extending to all forms of perception. A human individuality cannot become visible—cannot be verified as a single object—precisely because individuality itself is an abstraction. Only things which are

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[49] *Aesthetik 1,* p. 349.

[50] Ibid., p. 352

[51] Ibid. p. 355-6

concrete (and always particular) may become visible. The concept of an individual necessarily conditions one's vision of the individual. However, Cohen does not sell the sensory short by stopping at thinking. There is one sensory means via which thinking may achieve its own inner unity: language.

As we noted in the opening of this chapter, Cohen defines feeling as movement of the nervous system. All movement represents the generation of consciousness. Language is also defined as movement: "the expressive movement of thinking." As an expressive movement, it "brings the content of consciousness to the first production, it gives the first expression to consciousness… and its content."[52] Thus language represents a key connection between thought and perception, even in the form of visibility. Because language is not only verbal, it can be expressed in gesture, particularly within localized contexts, wherein the gestures have definite reference. In fact, even spoken or written language relies heavily on gesture and inflection, which can have great weight on the expression's resulting affect. In this regard, language is understood as a form of movement wherein thought gains sensibility, even visibility. Cohen therefore takes a very interesting turn away from the privilege of thought towards the privileging of language. Though thinking still represents the preliminary condition of visibility, thinking requires language in order to generate consciousness. Thinking both originates in movement (as response) and develops in movement (as expression). Only in this double sense of consciousness can feeling be understood as the origin of movement, as well as the origin of sensation.

Because language is an expression of thought and sensation, feelings of thought come to correspond with feelings of sentence and word. Cohen speaks here of "word-feelings" and

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[52] Ibid., p. 361.

"sentence-feelings." Language is not only "expressive movement of the concepts and the formations of judgment," but also at the same time the "expressive movement of the thinking-feelings in the sentence-feelings and in the word-feelings."[53] It is remarkable that in his chapter on poetry, Cohen spends an elaborate amount of time discussing the problem of visual representation of the individual in fine arts:

> If we ask how a human individual can become representable and recognizable in a picture, this question must not be based solely on the assumption that the individual becomes recognizable only as a concept… For the object becomes a content of the consciousness not only as a concept, but at the same time also with the feeling which is connected with the concept. The features of a person are not only conceptually united in the image of his face, but the emotional annexes attached to them are also associated with the corresponding elements of thought. And the recognition of a man is not only a product of the cognition, but it is co-conditioned by the cooperation of all the innumerable relative feelings, which underflow the course of cognition. The visibility remains limited also from this consideration, but it is not completed by the thinking alone, but also by the thinking feelings.[54]

In the above paragraph, Cohen brings the question of feeling and expression to bear on the problem of the individual and visibility. The features of the human face are conceptually united in the image of a human face due in large part to the 'emotional annexes' attached to those features. Feeling, as the *Urform* of consciousness, conditions the cognition enabling one to recognize an individual in the image of a face. But it is ultimately language that makes such unity possible. Language both expresses the movement of thought while creating the conditions for being moved, because it draws on both the concepts of thought and the feelings associated with them. This represents language's ultimate advantage over visibility. Only language ultimately has the power to unify the arts, and consequently why visual art must partake in

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[53] Ibid., p. 362.

[54] 365-6

language: “The objects of the visual arts must first become words, not merely so they can become concepts; but also because corresponding feelings of thought depend on words. And the concepts themselves, which in music become notes in the musical sentence, require, as notes, the formulation through language, and indeed with a double sense.”[55]

Cohen’s reflections on language have larger implications than merely providing the conditions of his theory of poetry. Poetry, as epitome of the unity of concept and word-feeling, is the precondition of all arts. As we shall explore in the next chapter, this particular privileging of language prefigures Rosenzweig’s assertion that language is the organon of existence. It also is fundamental in understanding how Cohen approach’s images of the face in visual arts. It is not as though Cohen makes some sort of category error when considering the unity of consciousness open in one’s encounter in a portrait. Rather, Cohen regards feeling as inextricably bound up with thinking in such encounters, and language necessarily both expresses and conditions the feelings associated with them. That is why art can remind us of people, why its imitation of life is so profound. In our encounter with the face in a portrait, we are moved, and this movement has implications for both our knowledge and ethics. We now turn to how Cohen interprets the meanings of such encounters, beginning with his encounter with the most famous smile in all of portraiture.

The Smile: the Face of Kindness

In the opening of this chapter we explored how the correlation between humanity and God appears in Cohen’s aesthetic categories of the sublime and humor. We explored how the sublime idealizes humanity, pushing towards perfection, and humor reminds us of our

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limitations, revealing the gap between ourselves and the divine. When Cohen discusses the distinction between sculpture and painting, he does so by associating the former with sublimity and idealization, the latter with the hard reality of humor. Cohen adapts a saying from Max Liebermann, claiming that all painting borders on caricature, though stopping short of pure caricaturization.[56] Caricatures are ugly, but humor, still in touch with ideality, keeps painting in the 'nimbus' of the beautiful. Thus Cohen is able to make the double claim: "no painting without ideality… no painting without humor."[57] Without the presence of humor, the portrait would only be an abstraction—never an object of the love of humanity.

In another distinction between sculpture and painting, Cohen claims painting is the medium in which the human individual attains unity. While Roman sculpture gave portrait busts individuality, it only represents a precursor to the portrait. The portrait is the medium wherein the unity of man, as interpretation of soul and body, becomes possible. This is what Cohen refers to as the "painterly secret" (malerische Geheimnis), or the "painterly problem of individuality." The portrait is the "man of painting," precisely because it represents humanity as an individual. In it, the antimony between humanity and the divine is heightened. In a reading of Renaissance painting aligned with his contemporaries, Cohen claims that this heightened antimony is what distinguishing Renaissance portraiture from the hagiographic artwork from the Byzantine era. Renaissance painters, recognizing that only the individual is a human being, represented humanity in individuality. This constitutes Leonardo da Vinci's singular genius and originality:

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[56] *Aesthetik 1*, p. 295: "Hier grenzt das Porträt eben an die Karikatur an; aber der Humor hält das Bild im Nimbus der Schönheit. Die Karikatur könnte nur eine Mittelsform des Schönen sein ; an sich aber ist sie eine Verletzung der konventionellen Schönheitslinien , nicht etwa nur eine Ermangelung und Vermeidung derselben: die Karikatur ist häßlich. Der Humor aber ist eine Art der Schönheit."

[57] Ibid., pp. 296-7.

he was able to free "painting from the prejudice of the antinomy between man and God, thus giving it a true ideality. The whole material of religious painting would otherwise be considered an obstacle to painting."[58] In a seemingly paradoxical claim, Cohen states that by freeing art from its medieval religiosity, Leonardo was able to more greatly express humanity's divinity:

> He has given the portrait that human individuality which reaches the limits of the divinity. How could he do that?… Either the divine is humanized as the portrait inexorably demands, or the human individual becomes once again a mythological type that eludes the portrait. What did Leonardo do with the human being in order to give him neither a torso nor the torso of a Titan, but rather only and solely the face which radiates that divinity of which the human divinity must remain part?[59]

Cohen answers his own question with a smile—the most famous smile in all of art. In the Mona lisa, Leonardo "gave to the human face that expression which alone designates the ideal essence of man: friendliness, not only in the shyness of its radiance, but in all the supra-mundane power of its radiance."[60] For Cohen, this radiance produces a new antinomy between humanity's friendliness, "the central sun of the human individual," and the "seemingly transitory" expression of the smile in the human face. The smile, representing man's kindness, is not permanent. Thus Cohen acknowledges the transitory nature of humanity's goodness, which is implied in her individuality as it is in her changing facial expressions. But herein lies the miracle of portraiture —Leonardo challenges what is permissible in painting by giving this moment of power duration:

> The kindness of man has this eternal value when it radiates from the basic source of goodness, which, although not only and exclusively the original ground of his being, has an undetachable, an indestructible share in his being. Man is not good, but he has goodness. The kindness that his smile radiates bears irrefutable witness to this. And this kindness of man, in which alone he is the image of God, it alone can give unity to his nature. Everything else is a changing play of facial expressions in the human face; all the

[58] *Aesthetik bd. 2,* p. 34.

[59] Ibid., 343-344.

[60] Ibid., 344.

> expressiveness of his features, which merge into one another in all their variability, is a play and reflection of the moment. He cannot base his individuality on this himself, nor could the painter. In this interplay, man is only a plaything of time, its coincidences and momentary beginnings.[61]

It is thus that Cohen is able to interpret Mona Lisa's smile as a vision of perfection, an idealization of human expression which is able to overcome all that is transitory in humanity's facial expression as well as in her character. For Cohen the image of God represents humanity's idealization—the image or potential of an implacable goodness that is not yet humanity's attribute, but nonetheless humanity's possession—even in the instance of a smile. The radiance Cohen describes here certainly represents the mark of divinity, but it also is significant to Cohen's own understanding of idealism in relationship to the unity possible within images. In a discussion of Rembrandt's use of light, Cohen describes how light establishes the infinity of space. When it is bounded by the form of a line, however, it remains merely an "inexhaustible abstraction." Light achieves its greatest potential when only when it is separated from the principle of form. In such cases, light "penetrates the isolation of a single body." This penetration is both literally and figuratively illuminative, as it leads to an increase of the purity of feeling, and with it a deepened sense of the knowledge of reality. The object no longer remains an individual object, but is "placed in the universal allness of nature." Thus the increase of light corresponds with an increase of the single body's unity in its image.[62]

Cohen's description of light, especially in the context of the human face, seems to anticipate and even prefigure some of the ways in which Rosenzweig describes revelation, as well as the concept of infinity one finds in Levinas. What seems to distinguish Cohen from the

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[61] Ibid., pp. 345-6.

[62] Ibid., 380.

latter is that radiance described here is tied with ideality and thus divinity. And for this reason it is not merely fodder for knowledge, but also for ethics: "Only when the mystery of goodness radiates from the human face, only with that all change in the human being is cancelled in unity. Now not only the mouth and the eye smiles, but the soul reveals itself." For Cohen, this moment of radiance would mean that the soul, allegorically described as virtue, is no longer an abstractum, but the "most concrete life that can exist in the world. This life realizes the portrait. This realization in ideal perfection is the Mona Lisa."[63]

The Ugly: the Face of Compassion

According to Cohen, Rembrandt is the painter of humor.[64] His innovative genius is that he revealed humor as a moment of beauty. Humor, as a moment of beauty, proves itself in the ugly: "The ugly is not par excellence the contradiction to beauty, but it is a contradiction which as a moment becomes an immanent characteristic of beauty."[65] Elsewhere in the *Aesthetik*, Cohen associates beauty with the ideality of the human body, with its sensuousness in the naked form. Following Plato, he claims that sensuality is a "paraclete" to pure knowledge. In order for ugliness to gain a similar equivalent methodological meaning, it must be understood as more than a mere contradiction to the beauty of sensuousness. Humor and its "moral moment" give ugliness its positive meaning. The ugly therefore becomes the "paraclete" of morality in humor. Ugliness draws out the general problem of humanity—its moral task. In art, the ugly face is far more capable of accomplishing this above that of the beautiful face. Whereas the latter may draw

[63] Idid., p. 346.

[64] Ibid., p. 382.

[65] Ibid., p. 383.

one towards the ideality of humanity, bringing forth a theoretical insight, the ugly face produces a moral response:

> …it seizes the pure will and becomes in it a moral affect. Now a genuine compassion (Mitleid) sets in; not the haughty pity that looks down on the distance in which the ugly man stands apart from the model image in his own person… but the vital, moral compassion which laments the general weakness and nakedness of humanity in those creatures of deficient beauty; in which this lamentation becomes as an accusation against the Creator whose image man is supposed to be. This compassion for the ugly has the power of theodicy.[66]

In description of the ugly face as "weakness" and "nakedness," Cohen seems to anticipate Levinas. However Cohen associates the weakness and nakedness of the human face not with infinity, but rather, in the context of humor, an acceptance of what is finite in the human form. But this acceptance does acknowledge the presence of the infinite: the infinite task of the moral spirit aroused by the sight of the ugly face. The result is an idealization of ugliness that employs a concept of infinity that could be described as vertical rather than horizontal. If it were sublime, one might describe this notion of infinity as aspirational, but here it can only manifest itself as compassion—lamenting the difference between reality and its ideal. It represents a deficiency in the *Imago Dei* and therefore becomes "an accusation against the creator." Cohen's assertion that the feeling of compassion contains "the power of theodicy" is thus another remarkable anticipation of Levinas and his anti-theodicy.[67] It also shows that Cohen, with his concept of ugliness and humor, is able to challenge the self-contained understandings of beauty that both Levinas and Rosenzweig are worried about in their own aesthetics. In the words of Andrea Poma: "…in idealizing the ugly, humor opposes the completeness of canonical beauty, which is

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[66] Ibid., pp. 386-7.

[67] See: Levinas, Emmanuel. "Useless Suffering" in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other.* Robert Bernasconi & David Wood (Eds.), (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988).

an illusory, external, and intellectualistic completeness, in order to reveal another type of completeness, of a moral, internal, authentic origin: quiet acceptance of the finite, which comes from the capacity to perceive and love, in its concrete narrowness and deficiency, the presence of the infinite, which is real and authentic too."[68]

Compassion (Mitleid), as a response to the visibility of the sufferer, is one of Cohen's great themes in the *Religion of Reason*. Cohen identifies the poor as the true bearers of human suffering. This is crucial for understanding Cohen's messianism: the poor are elected to vicarious suffering on behalf of humanity. Their suffering correlates with ugliness as a visible sign of deficiency—a reminder of social inequalities and an accusation of responsibility. According to Cohen, Israel, as a people, is elected to this very task.[69] It is therefore no mere coincidence, then, that Cohen sees in the countenances of Rembrandt many Jewish "types."[70] What may further set Cohen apart from both Levinas and Rosenzweig is the great confidence he places in art's ability to achieve this type of response. He believes, for instance, the highest vocation of the artist is to reveal ugliness's share in the beautiful. Rembrandt achieves this by transfiguring "the ugly man

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[68] Poma, Andrea. *Yearning for Form and Other Essays on Hermann Cohen's Thought.* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006). p. 162.

[69] *Religion*, p. 433. "Suffering becomes the "suffering of love". This is the theodicy which dawns upon the prophet in view of the history of his people: the suffering of the exile is transfigured by this theodicy. The prophet's patriotism becomes for him, in Messianism, a philosophy of history. Here too religion testifies to its prominent share in reason. Not only individuals suffer for their era but people are elected; the people of Israel is elected in order to suffer for mankind." Cohen is well aware that not all Jews, as a collective people do or can live up to this ideal, and therefore idealizes Israel as the "remnant," which points to the future of mankind and corresponds to the idealization of the Messiah. p. 260.

[70] For instance, in no subtle allusion to the association between Judaism and Messianism, Cohen describes Christ's countenance as bearing a Jewish type: "Why has (Rembrandt) with few exceptions filled the scenes of New Testament history with Jewish types…? In his most beautiful pictures… he has given the most intimate, most beatific, most pious expression of beauty to the Christ head; and it is unmistakably the Jewish type, which is imprinted on this sublime countenance here. *Aesthetik 2.,* 381.

by his share in the beautiful," giving him "aesthetic citizenship." "His ugly men are by no means monstra; but the magic of Eros rests on them… he makes them all lovable."[71]

Cohen believes this best exemplified in Rembrandt's "Hendrikje," which he contrasts from his earlier reflections on the Mona Lisa. Whereas Mona Lisa presented us with the problem of humanity's goodness by placing that goodness in the a transitory facial expression of a smile, Hendrikje's "eyes are wet with melancholy; here humor shines as the pure soul force of compassion, of compassion for the lot of mankind."[72] Alluding once again to the her Jewish quality of her expression, Cohen notes how her "face nevertheless bears the unmistakable features of the tribe that had not only the misery of the ghetto but also the horrors of the Inquisition to depict on its retina."[73] In symbolically associating Hendrikje's eyes with the suffering of Jews, the symbolic representative of the vicarious sufferer and messiah, Cohen not only anticipates Levinas, but also the horrors of the Shoah that would recapitulate the terrors of the ghetto and Inquisition. But Cohen does not leave his reflections on Rembrandt's portraiture on such a negative note. Instead, he turns away from Hendrikje's sad eyes to the eyes of those beholding them. Those are the vital eyes that have the change to glimpse something better, an ideal which floods the object of his gaze with unifying light: "In front of this etching, in front of the sunlight that floods in from this window, one would like to say: O you see, full of sunshine — but of course, here the pain is surpassed by the prophetic eye (Seherblick) that rises to the sun."

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[71] *Aesthetik 2.,* 387.

[72] Ibid., p. 390.

[73] Ibid.

Chapter 3: The Face of the Figure: Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929)

In the last chapter, we began to explore how several elements of Cohen's treatment of the human face within his aesthetics anticipate similar movements in Rosenzweig and Levinas. This chapter takes a closer look at Rosenzweig's treatment of the face in *The Star of Redemption*, exploring how some elements of Cohen's aesthetics are adapted within it. Prior to summarizing the trajectory of this chapter, it is necessary to outline the basic structure of Rosenzweig's system.

The *Star of Redemption* is divided into three parts, and each part subsequently divided into three books. The first part, "The Elements or The Ever-Enduring Proto-Cosmos," presents three concepts or *elements* of a philosophical system: *God*, *world*, and *man*. The second part, "The Course, or the Always-Renewed Cosmos" traces the ways, or *courses,* in which the three elements come into relation with one another: creation (the relation between God and world), revelation (the relation between God and man), and redemption (the relation between man and world). The Third part, "The Configuration, or The Eternal Hyper-Cosmos" envisions the *figure,* or configuration of the star as a redemptive unity between the elements and courses of the prior two parts.

The structure of *The Star* is so multi-dimensional that it can be characterized in a dizzyingly complex number of ways. Expressed in terms of genre, it may be thought as a movement from philosophy, to theology, to lived experience. Expressed temporarily, one may think of the three parts as a movement from past, to present, to future. It may also be said that

each of the elements, courses, and the figure, are present within each part in one form or another, so that each part stands on its own as an independent work.

Given that the primary focus of this chapter is Rosenzweig's treatment of the human face, I will use his famous passage on the configuration of the star in relation to the face to plot our own course. It is therefore worth quoting at length:

> Just as in the two superimposed triangles the Star reflects its elements and the collection of the elements into the one path, so too the organs of the countenance are divided into two levels. For the vital points of the countenance are after all these ones where it enters into contact with the surrounding world, be it receptively or actively. The ground level, the building blocks so to speak, of the face, the mask, is made up, is arranged according to the receptive organs: forehead and cheeks. The ears belong to the cheeks and the nose to the forehead. Ears and nose are the organs of pure receiving. The nose belongs to the forehead and it occurs in the holy language to mean the whole face. The fragrance of sacrifices applies to the nose as do the moving of the lips to the ears. Over this first basic triangle, as it is formed by the midpoint of the forehead as the dominant point of the whole face and the midpoints of the cheeks, there now lies a second triangle which is made from the organs whose action animates the rigid mask of the first one: eyes and mouth. The eyes do not as it were mimic each other identically, but whereas the left one sees more receptively and uniformly, the right one looks sharply focused on one point; only the right one "sparkles"—a division of labor that frequently also eventually engraves its traces in the soft area around the eye sockets of old heads, so that then that asymmetric formation of the face becomes noticeable from the front, which otherwise is generally noticeable only in the well-known difference between the two profiles. As forehead dominates the structure of the face, so its life, all that wrinkles up around the eyes and shines out from the eyes, collects finally in the mouth. The mouth is what completes and consummates all expression of which countenance is capable: both in speech and finally in the silence behind which speech fell back: in the kiss. It is in the eyes where the eternal countenance lights up for man, it is by the words of the mouth that man lives; but for our teacher Moses who while he lived was permitted only to see and not to set foot upon the land of his longing, He sealed this finished life with a kiss of His mouth. So seals God, and so seals man too.[74]

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[74] Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption.* Trans. Barbara Balli. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). pp. 445-446. As noted by Richard Cohen, the symbols of the face and body of God—representing the totality of the cosmos—have their roots in Jewish Mysticism. See: Cohen Richard. "The Face of Truth in Rosenzweig, Levinas, and Jewish Mysticism," in *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion*, ed. Daniel Guerrière (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 175-201.

This passage outlines the structure of a six pointed star, symbolizing the trajectory of the whole work, and setting them in relation to the features of the human countenance. The "mask" of the first triangle represents the three elements of part one: God is signified in the forehead or nose, both self and world are signified in the cheeks or ears. Notably, ears and nose represent purely passive organs. The three courses are represented by an inverted triangle with the organs of eyes and mouth. The left eye signifies creation, the right, revelation. The mouth, as completion and consummation of expression, the locus of both speech and silence, signifies redemption.

This chapter will follow a similar trajectory, tracing the elements and courses of the face as Rosenzweig employs them throughout *The Star*. I will be interposing Rosenzweig's general philosophical outlook with occasional references to his theory of art, firstly, because Rosenzweig interposes the two quite often, but also because it is in his aesthetics—a field so consumed with how one expresses and perceives—that one finds robust reflections on the face. The first section, "The Mask," outlines Rosenzweig's treatment of the 'plastic' in philosophy and art in relationship to the face and its receptive organs. The mask represents the inert face prior to its active, expressive engagement with the world. The second section, "The Gaze," traces the different ways of seeing as one moves from apprehending towards communication. Here Rosenzweigs's view of language as the "organon of existence" echoes Cohen's theory of poetry as the precondition of all arts, applying the same aesthetic principle to the broader scope of his system. For Rosenzweig, like Cohen before him, language transforms vision, ultimately making community possible. The third and final section, "The Kiss" follows Rosenzweig's return from speech into silence—the silence of death. Here the encounter of the face takes on messianic

significance, offering a vision of the divine countenance with of a new unity: the hope and peace of eternity.

The Mask: Elements of the Face

The Star opens with a reflection on death. According to Rosenzweig, every mortal creature lives in fear of death, and that fear drives the impulse towards a cognition of "the All." Thus philosophy emerges, having "the audacity to cast off the fear of the earthly, to remove from death its poisonous sting, from Hades his pestilential breath."[75] With its pretensions towards universal synthesis, philosophy seems to offer a cure, to point to a world beyond—a totality that cannot die. For "only that which is singular can die, and everything that is mortal is solitary."[76] Moreover, philosophy's idealism is the tool employed to win its victory, enveloping death with the concept of the "One and All." The concluding wisdom here is that death is nothing, for it stands outside of an all encompassing ontology.

It is notable how Rosenzweig uses facial metaphors in these opening lines to describe philosophy's disposition. To the "I" who faces his unimaginable annihilation, philosophy "*smiles* its empty *smile*"[77] pointing to its world beyond. If philosophy were more honest, it would not "stop its *ears* before the cry of frightened humanity,"[78] nor would it "close its *eyes* before the terrible reality,"[79] the reality that death is surely not nothing, that its nothing is most definitely a something. A reality from which mortals cannot ultimately flea, but must confront face-to-face.

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[75] Rosenzweig. *Star*, p. 10.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., p. 9.

[78] Ibid., p. 11.

[79] Ibid.

According to Rosenzweig, philosophy cannot offer a true escape from death, but merely a suicide—a premature, unnatural death. The world it points to is plastic, the face of its god a mere mask. In this case, a death mask belying humanity's true desire: to live.

These anthropomorphisms in the *Star*'s opening lines are more than mere wordplay. Rosenzweig is giving clues as to how the organs of the human face will be symbolized throughout the work, as well as drawing our attention to alternative capacities those organs have for perceiving and communicating. From philosophy's standpoint, there is a deliberate failure to perceive associated with a tendency towards deception: ears that refuse to listen, a mouth that smiles but does not speak, eyes closed to the reality of death. Nevertheless, philosophy is prepared to produce its own image of a totality, suggesting that there are both authentic and inauthentic ways of hearing or seeing.

Let us return briefly to the configuration passage quoted at the start of this chapter, considering that part of the passage defining the mask of the countenance. Recall that the vital points of the countenance are those which enter into contact with the surrounding world: organs of perception. These are divided into receptive and active, with the receptive organs approximating the mask of the face, the "ears and nose are the organs of pure receiving. The nose belongs to the forehead and it occurs in the holy language to mean the whole face. The fragrance of sacrifices applies to the nose as do the moving of the lips to the ears."[80] We can discern from this passage that the receptivity of the nose and ears constitute a limitation, though not an ultimate limitation, of this dimension of the face. As passive organs they cannot communicate, but they can receive communication in the form of "fragrance", and in the form of language from

[80] Ibid., p. 445.

another's lips. The implication being that the organs of the face are vital in so far as they relate to the surrounding world, but also insofar as they are able to reliably integrate with the other organs of perception. Philosophy's deliberate closure of its own eyes, mouth and ears, mirrors the closure of its own system, a system which not only excludes death but with it every particularity.

In the first part of *The Star*, Rosenzweig emphasizes 'plastic' iterations of the three elements (world, God, and self), tracing them across pagan mythology and philosophy: the plastic cosmos, the mythological deity, and the tragic hero. Each of these represents its own totality—works of art, inanimate closed systems deriving their beauty and meaning from their aesthetic unity. Throughout the first part, he "breaks the being" of the plastic form of each element by showing how each particularity does not rely on an original metaphysical unity, but generates itself out of its own nothing. He accomplishes this by what he terms the two "ways," they way of *affirmation*, or the "Yes" and the way of *negation*, or the No.[81]

The way of the "Yes" is an affirmation of what is not-nothing within each element—a quality or "being" attributed to it. The way of the "No" is a negation of nothing within each element that relates to an "active" quality of the element, that which sets itself as something particular. In the words of Stéphane Mosès, "affirmation represents a pure *positing of being*, whereas negation represents pure *difference*."[82] In the element of God, infinite being represents infinite possibility (God's "Yes"), whereas infinite freedom represents God's infinite power (God's "No"). These are further symbolized as God's being against God's freedom. The two fuse

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[81] Rosenzweig makes his only reference to Cusa, in which he appears to repeat a misinterpretation of Cusa from Hermann Cohen's *Ethics of Maimonides.* In that text, Cohen wrongly claims that Cusa…

[82] Mosès, Stéphane. *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*. Trans. Catherine Tihanyi. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992). p. 78.*

together to form God's vitality, which is precisely the moment in *The Star* when the divine countenance first emerges:

> So out of the infinite movement which comes out of the freedom to flow into the domain of the essence, there arises the divine countenance, infinitely self-configuring: with a nod of his head, he shakes far-off Olympus, and yet his brow is furrowed, because he knows the verdict of the Norns. Both, the infinite power in the free outpouring of pathos and the infinite subjugation under the constraint of destiny—both together constitute the vitality of God.[83]

This schema of fusing being and freedom will repeat itself in the elemental world (as fusion of logos and vital particulars), and, more importantly to our discussion, in the elemental self (as fusion of enduring character and free will). Rosenzweig draws a distinction between the individual and the self from Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason*. The *individual* derives his individuality from its participation in society and nature. In this regard, the individual is regarded as a part of a larger totality, and emerges at birth. The *personality* is an accident of the individual, produced in correspondence with the individual's particular role within a society. The self, or *daimon*, on the other hand, rebels against this totality by affirming its autonomy. The self likewise asserts it freedom and particularity in infinite determination. The enduring *character* is a reflection of this infinite self-determination. Rosenzweig claims that both self and character emerge not a birth, but after its first encounter with Eros.

The self is broken in this first encounter. Eros "robs him in one blow of all the riches and all the goods that he claimed to possess. He becomes very poor, he has no more than himself and knows only himself, no one knows him any longer; for there is no one there besides him. The Self is the lonely man in the hardest sense of the word."[84] According to Rosenzweig, Eros

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[83] Ibid., p. 39.

[84] Ibid., p 80.

remains the self's constant companion throughout life. At the end of life, Eros removes its mask to reveal its true identity: Thanatos. Death. This represents the second birth of the self, and the second and final death of the individual. Whereas the birth of the self in life, with its encounter with Eros, leads to loneliness, in death it leads to self-sufficient isolation: "There is no greater loneliness than in the eyes of one who is dying, and there exists no isolation that is prouder and more arrogant than that which is painted on the set countenance of a dead person. Between these two births of the *daimon* there is everything that becomes visible of man's Self."[85]

The essential point to be made here is that Rosenzweig, at least in this first stage, associates autonomy with irreducible particularity. Any systematic unity of the "All" cannot be a reduction, as German Idealism would have it, of all beings to a metaphysical synthesis. It is only through the relationships between particulars—each self generating via their own negations—that a truer systematic unity can be obtained. Since true unity can only be achieved with relations of particulars, it becomes clear why the merely passive organs of the face alone would make up the mask. Without those organs possessing the more active and expressive qualities, the face cannot differentiate, nor realize its own vitality. But realizing vitality can only be the first step towards a truer synthesis, for what is vital remains particular, and therefore isolated. In its lonely autonomy, the plastic mask has only begun to crack with signs of life, striving after the unity that would keep it from becoming a mere death mask. How might such a unity and vitality begin to manifest itself in lived experience is the subject of the following section.

[85] Ibid.

The Gaze:

"The eyes do not as it were mimic each other identically, but whereas the left one sees more receptively and uniformly, the right one looks sharply focused on one point; only the right one "sparkles"—a division of labor that frequently also eventually engraves its traces in the soft area around the eye sockets of old heads, so that then that asymmetric formation of the face becomes noticeable from the front, which otherwise is generally noticeable only in the well-known difference between the two profiles."[86]

As noted in the opening of this chapter, Rosenzweig's distinction between the two eyes symbolize a relationship between two elements. The left eye, creation, stands for the relationship between God and world. The right, revelation, represents the relationship between God and man. Rosenzweig's instance on the asymmetry of left and right eye is one of the more interesting features of the configuration, primarily because it upsets the common view that faces are symmetrical. This manifests not merely in how one sees (as in dominant and non-dominant eyes), but how one is seen (as in dominant and non-dominant sides). So while Rosenzweig's distinction may seem like a mere playful construction—symbolic rather than physiological—he actually highlights a key quality about our perception largely ignored by philosophy, and especially by philosophical idealism. Our perception is produced by a union of two fields of vision. This is an indication that Rosenzweig is not speaking purely symbolically about the configuration, but rather that the configuration seeks a unity of sensory perception and symbolic meaning. Put somewhat more reductively: between vision and speech.

In this section, I will treat each eye in its symbolic turn, exploring how each represents a key stage in the ever deepening relations within Rosenzweig's system. By moving from creation to revelation, I aim to show how the "gaze" (Schau), is used by Rosenzweig in both a negative and positive sense. This is due to the fact that in order for vision to begin to approach truth, to

[86] Ibid., p. 445.

encounter life, it must transformed by speech. Prior to exploring how vision is so transformed, we should make note a key Rosenzweig makes from part one to part two of *The Star*.

As we explored in the last section, the first part of *The Star* explores a dialectic of affirmation and negation in the forms of *being* and *difference* in order to show how each element —God, world, and man—arises. The second part turns the meaning of each dialectical element on its head. In the movement from concept to lived experience, affirmation and negation are necessarily inverted: the previous affirmation is negated, and the previous negation is affirmed. Whereas affirmation was an assertion purely of being or essence, it is now is an assertion that diversity is lived in *continuity*. Whereas negation was an assertion of difference, it now asserts that essence is lived in *discontinuity*. For Rosenzweig, this explains not merely the ever-renewing dynamism of life, but how meaning arises from our perception and articulation of the relationship between the three elements. According to Stéphane Mosès: "in the reality of existence, elementary concepts, even though they may acquire a radically new meaning, at the same time keep a part of their original sense: *the passage from the elementary to existence is at the same time rupture and continuity.*"[87] This dialectic between *continuity* and *rupture* constitutes a fundamental movement from vision of creation to revelation.

The latter Rosenzweig defines as the experience of finding oneself already in the world (Dasein). Prior to its expression in language, a view of creation must always conform to an individual perspective. Even once it enters language, creation, as a narrative reflection on the past, relies upon a continuity of experience—distinct from, but not entirely unlike that of the systematic coherence one finds in philosophical metaphysics. One key difference being that

[87] Mosès, Stéphane. *System and Revelation.,* p. 78.

narratives assume an interlocutor, thus it has the potential of openness to something wholly other and discontinuous with its own view. That wholly other meets us in revelation, the always present, and is expressed linguistically in dialogue.

Rosenzweig believes that language is the organon of existence. In other words, existence is contracted by and through language.[88] Echoing Cohen's aesthetic theory of poetry, Rosenzweig broadens it to incorporate all forms of perception. In that sense, a gaze—the way one sees the world—is ultimately shaped by speech. Rosenzweig can therefore refer to the gaze in both a negative and a positive sense. To speak of the gaze in the first, potentially negative, sense, Rosenzweig defers to Idealistic understandings of aesthetics. According to Rosenzweig, Idealism rejected language as the organon of existence in favor of a language (logic) whose interlocutor is absent. The result is a dangerous reflexivity that is enclosed to the language of God in creation. In an overt critique of Kant, and perhaps a veiled critique of Hermann Cohen, Rosenzweig explains how idealist aesthetics looks to the work of art as both a manifestation of and a means for compensating for this deficiency:

> …for idealism art became the great justification of its way of proceeding, if assailed by doubts about the permissibility of its method, that of the pure "panlogical" generator, it sufficed it to *gaze* upon the work of art, a reality begotten by the mind and yet natural, in order to retrieve its good conscience.[89]

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[88] Ibid., p. 120. "Real language between beginning and end is mutual to all and yet a particular one for each person; it unites and divides at the same time. So real language includes everything, beginning, middle and end; the beginning as his visible and present fulfillment: for language, of which we say that it makes of man a man, is today, in its many figures, his visible distinguishing mark and the end: for also as individual language of today and even as language of the individual, it is ruled by the ideal of perfect understanding, which we envisage in the language of humanity."

[89] Ibid., p. 159, emphasis mine.

This kind of gaze can only be objectifying, for it fundamentally distrusts the "word" of the human soul that fundamentally binds creatures into relation with one another.[90] The first eye of the configuration, representing on its own a limited view of the relationships bound in creation, is under threat of making a similar mistake. It is only when it is opened to the wholly other in revelation—to rupture of its own continuity—that it may catch a glimpse of the divine countenance.

The gaze takes on a positive meaning in the context of Revelation. Rosenzweig describes revelation as a soul's experience of the present, that "though resting on the existence of the past, does not dwell in it; on the contrary, this present walks in the light of the divine countenance."[91] This statement in the opening page of *The Star*'s middle chapter summarizes much that will follow. Revelation cannot be understood as carrying any particular content, rather it is defined by a negation of 'mute essence,' by its power to transform in the moment of speech:

> (Revelation) can be nothing other than the self-negation of a merely mute essence by a word uttered out loud, the opening up of something locked, of a silently reposing permanence by the movement of a blink of the eye. In the illumination of such a blink of the eye there resides the force to transform the created-being that is touched by this illumination by turning the created "thing" into the testimony of a Revelation that has come to pass. Every thing represents such a testimony already because it is a created thing, and the Creation is already itself the first Revelation.[92]

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[90] To be clear, Rosenzweig does not see art as problematic per se. Art does represent a form of silent communication, its uncanniness (Unheimlichkeit) always points beyond itself. But its scope is limited and indirect, and for that reason art is unable to produce community. It is only a necessary "limb" of the vast teeming expression of human life present within his system. It is only when said limb is deified—its isolated internal unity taken as ultimate—that art becomes problematic. In Leora Batnitsky's words, Art's unity represents its ability to produce "commonality" rather than "community," and accounts for what Rosenzweig refers to as the "magic flute of art." See: Batnistky. *Idolatry*, 87.

[91] *Star*., p. 169.

[92] Ibid., p. 174.

Revelation has the power to transform every created thing into a testimony, and therefore speech issuing from all points of creation has the power to disrupt in the giving of its own account, and human face-to-face encounters are at the center of Rosenzweig's account of Revelation. In dialogue, the gaze takes on an essential role in communication. "In dialogue, the one who strictly listens… is also speaking… equally as much when he raises the word onto his lips through his lively listening, through the attuned or questioning glance of his eye at the one who is directly now speaking."[93] The gaze of the other is distinguished from that of art in that it is communicative, prompting a response. In the words of Robert Gibbs: "In the face-to-face encounter, the other's looking at me is the key to dialogue. I speak, not in response to any spoken words, but in response to his look which speaks to me, which forces me to respond."[94]

It is ultimately love that draws the soul into this experience of the present. In words reminiscent of Cohen's pure feeling, Rosenzweig tells us that it is not the love of the beloved that so draws us, but that of the lover. The lover is "implanted" in the moment of origin, and thus must "deny all other moments, it must deny all life." This represents a new kind of totality—a totally of the present. It is through this new totality that Rosenzweig claims the lover can grasp the whole of created life: "it really can do it; it can do it by traversing this whole with ever new meaning and by shining its rays and its life upon now this and now that single thing."[95]

Love in humanity manifests both as self-transformation and a self-renunciation. But it is ephemeral—like the brief expression of a smile—representing a rebirth in the narrow space of a

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[93] Ibid., p. 328.

[94] Gibbs, Robert. *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 27.

[95] Ibid., p. 176.

moment. It only mirrors the eternal love of God. Rosenzweig insists that love is not one of God's attributes, but an event. Like the miracle of Mona Lisa's smile, it is the fundamental form, "the solid, immovable form," of God's countenance. In a passage that combines the themes of the mask and the portrait, Rosenzweig gives us his most profound statement on the divine countenance:

> … it is not the hardened mask which the one who has molded it removes from the countenance of the dead person, but the evanescent, never exhausted change of expressions, the always new light that shines upon the eternal features. Love balks at making a portrait of the lover; the portrait would harden the living face into a dead one. "God loves": this is purest present whether it is going to love, or even whether it has loved—what does love itself know of this? It is enough for it to know one thing: that it loves.[96]

In words reminiscent of Cusa's reflections on the omnivoyance of the 'icon of God,' Rozenzweig insists that the divine love is not a universal "all-love," which would be in keeping with an attribute, but always wholly in the moment. "God's love loves whom it loves and where it loves."[97] This passage also reflect's Cohen's own use of light as that which penetrates the isolation of the single body, reflecting a messianic vision that both Cohen and Rosenzweig share. God's countenance and loving gaze, its "never exhausted change of expression," has the ring of an ideal. For Rosenzweig, the form of the divine countenance must shine forth in all human faces in order for such a love to become universal. What separates God's love from an "all-love" is only a "not-yet."

(In)conclusion: A kiss

The mouth is what completes and consummates all expression of which countenance is

[96] Ibid., p. 177.

[97] Ibid.

> capable: both in speech and finally in the silence behind which speech fell back: in the *kiss*. It is in the eyes where the eternal countenance lights up for man, it is by the words of the mouth that man lives; but for our teacher Moses who while he lived was permitted only to see and not to set foot upon the land of his longing, He sealed this finished life with a kiss of His mouth. So seals *God*, and so seals man too.[98]

Rosenzweig begins the final chapter of *The Star* with a kiss—a kiss of death,[99] thus bringing the book's tripartite structure full circle. Rosenzweig began the book with a reflection on death—its universality and inescapability for all living creatures. Philosophy had attempted to construct an alternative, a plastic "All," that could subsume everything living and thereby exclude death. Given the great lengths Rosenzweig has gone to shatter the plasticity of Philosophy's illusory totality, giving birth to a new, vital one, a return to death in the closing pages may appear somewhat ironic, but it is far from incidental. This ending, after all, mirrors to that of Cohen's *Religion of Reason.* It too ends with a note on death, claiming it as "the world of peace." Peace, for Cohen, represents the telos of all life and striving:

> "The Hebrew root of he word "peace" means perfection, and the latter is the end and goal of man… it makes all other ends of nature and spirit into its means. Peace is, properly speaking, the spirit of holiness. Peace, as the end of man, is the Messiah, who liberates men and peoples from all conflicts, who conciliates the conflicts, and who finally effects the reconciliation of man with God."[100]

Cohen will go on to say that "Peace is the unity of all vital powers, their equilibrium and the reconciliation of all their contradictions. Peace is the crown of life."[101] Death, as the world of

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[98] Ibid., p. 446.

[99] Zachary Braiterman gleans a Maimonidean influence in Rosenzweig's employment of the divine kiss. He writes: "For Maimonides, the kiss of God represent the highest state of prophetic-philosophical consciousness. The soul dies and leaves behind the material veil that has obscured its apprehension of the Active Intellect. By turning to this image, Rosenzweig links the spectacular vision of absolute truth with death's advent." See: Braiterman, Zachary. *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern jewish Thought.* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 122.

[100] Cohen. *Religion*, p. 458.

[101] Ibid., p. 460.

peace, is not the antithesis of life, but its culmination. It represents the end of virtue and the hope of Cohen's messianism. It is also no coincidence that Cohen looks towards human faces as the sign of peace in his closing chapter. Alluding directly to his aesthetics, he tells us that there are two physiological signs of the life of peace: the feeling of being moved and joy. When one is moved with pure feeling, with love, that love shines out of the human countenance, reflecting "the splendor of the pureness of this feeling of being moved."[102] Rosenzweig goes a step further, claiming that it is only in the countenance that one can move beyond figurations of the truth, and simply see:

> Man has above and below in his own corporeality. And as truth, which is given configuration in the Star, within the Star as whole truth is on the other hand attributed to God and not to the world or to man; so the Star too must once more be reflected in that which within the corporeality is again that which is above: the countenance. It is therefore not human folly when Scripture talks about God's countenance and even his individual parts. Truth cannot at all be expressed otherwise. Only when we see the Star as countenance are we quite beyond all possibility of possibilities and simply see.[103]

According to Rosenzweig, it is only in human faces that one begins to see a supra-world, or a world beyond the world, and life beyond life, within the world itself. This constitutes a revelation, but one that is now seen, no longer merely heard. In an ethical turn in the closing lines of *The Star* that inspired Levinas, Rosenzweig unites the meaning of the vision of the divine countenance with the words of command the countenance speaks:

> … the sight on the height of the redeemed supra-world shows me nothing other than what already the word of Revelation bade me in the midst of life; and to walk in the light of the divine countenance happens only to him who heeds the words of the divine mouth. For—"he has told you, oh man, what is good, and what the Eternal your God requires of

[102] *Religion*., p. 457.

[103] *Star*., p. 445.

> you: to do justice and to be good with all your heart and to walk humbly with your God.[104]

This passage, so reminiscent of Levinas, seeks to unify the vision of the redeemed world with the command issuing forth from the divine mouth. Whereas Levinas describes that responsibility phenomenologically as an infinity that overflows, Rosenzweig, like his teacher Cohen, expresses it as unity. For Cohen, the proof of this unity arises in the face at the image of a good deed:

> Peace is as effective in joy as in compassion… The feeling of being moved by the experience of a good deed proves this positive power of joy and with it the reality of peace. On the occasion of hearing an account of a good deed… joy shines in my eyes at the image of a good deed… Consciousness prefers to attach itself to that tendency which would like to detect only the good in the actions of men, because one's own peace of mind, one's own unity of consciousness, always demands and longs for this experience. Peace in man is the longing for the good in man.[105]

Thus Cohen sees peace as both the consummation of life and a longing for goodness. What is implied by both is an ethics ascribing to an infinite task of responsibility. Thus Cohen's task, adopted by Rosenzweig, contains all the elements of an ethics open to infinity, with perhaps this one proviso: it has for its *telos* a vision of unity, a joining of people.

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[104] Ibid., pp. 446-447.

[105] *Religion*., p. 457.

Conclusion:

As we noted at the beginning of this study, Samuel Moyn believes Levinas's other is best characterized as an ethical theology—a secularization of a theological concept.[106] In response, I suggested that "aesthetics" should be considered as a third category for understanding the legacy leading to Levinas's thought, as a necessary supplement to the binary of philosophy and theology often used to interpret that legacy. I also made the provocative claim that Levinas's description of the face might properly be construed a an "aesthetic." In light of the present study, I would like to make a suggestion to these ends by way of a personal reflection.

In his reflections on Max Picard's phenomenology of the face, Levinas writes "Picard's philosophical analysis is a poetic analysis. His reading of faces and the world is not always conceptually justifiable, nor phenomenologically convincing. It is poetically certain."[107] The words "not always conceptually justifiable, nor phenomenologically convincing" come very close to words I have heard used to describe Levinas's own philosophy. As one of my teachers often puts it "how does my encounter with the face of the other tell me 'thou shalt not kill' any more than it does 'kill… or be killed!'" When searching for an answer such a question, one can be at a loss for words. To make matters worse, Levinas appears to be of little assistance, for he is

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[106] In similar fashion, Robert Gibbs believes that the idea of adaptation, or even *midrash*, is appropriate when speaking of how Levinas adapts Rosenzweig's thought within his own philosophy. See: Gibbs, Robert. *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 32.

[107] Levinas. *Proper Names*, p. 96.

very clear that the responsibility one encounters in the face is prior to anything said.[108] We are therefore left without recourse to any speaking that might prove or disprove the claim. However, if we are to apply Levinas's reflections on Picard to his own thought, I suggest that we take the praise with critique. Even when Levinas is "not always conceptually justifiable, nor phenomenologically convincing" he is, at least as far as this reader is concerned, "poetically certain."

I am not suggesting that Levinas is a poet rather than a philosopher. Nor would I wish to imply that his is an "aesthetics" rather than an "ethics as first philosophy." I only wish to suggest that we begin to view Levinas's language—his discourse on the face and the other—as a poetic expression in the vein of Cohen, or an "organon of existence" in the sense of Rosenzweig. His face in its elements—as plastic, masked, naked, poor—does not merely seek to *persuade* us that the faces of others disrupt our own cognition. Rather, Levinas himself disrupts it, and his language thereby conditions how we approach, receive, and express ourselves in the face of others. He does this in language that is both familiar and new.

I began this study with a question regarding the origins of Levinas's face. Given my deep interest in Cusa, I wondered if the latter might be an anonymous source for the former. As we saw in the first chapter, the similarities are not entirely incidental, but when it comes to the face, Cusa is not the ultimate source for Levinas, Rosenzweig or Cohen. The reason being that all four undoubtably share the same source: scripture.

Perhaps the most famous reference to the face of God in the Hebrew Bible comes from Moses's Priestly benediction, which, though spoken to Aaron and his sons, was meant for the

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[108] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998)., p. 148.

whole of Israel: "The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26, NRSV).[109] In the closing of the last chapter, we explored how Cohen and Rosenzweig view peace as the consummation of life. The blessing of God's countenance—in their reading—represents a unity that gives rise to the most profound meaning, not in an fragmentary sense, but in a more vital sense. On this point, I believe that Cohen and Rosenzweig reveal why we as "moderns" still find thinkers like Cusa so compelling. Their sketch of the infinite value of the individual certainly draws us, as does their willingness to paint this individuality with the image of divinity. But I wager it is their visions of impossible, dynamic unity that stirs in us a sense of the beautiful: the coincidence opposites, a love of humanity that begins with compassion, the face of the other that disrupts our false sense of self-sufficiency. These all operate on a shared principle of contraction: the joining of peoples. In those images of the face, we catch a glimpse of the lure and presence of peace.

[109] Note how "Seek my face" is a common divine imperative to Israel throughout the Hebrew Bible. E.g. "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14, NRSV), "Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, God of Jacob" (Psalm 24:3–6). "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, LORD, do I seek." (Psalm 27:8) The hiddenness of God's face also represents alienation from others as well as God. Most notably after Cain's murder of Abel: "Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence (face); I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." (Gen. 4:13-14).

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