Sounds of Revelation: Aesthetic-Political Theology in Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron

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I. Interpretive Strategies

Much has been written in the last four decades on Arnold Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron, yielding many interesting and important philosophical, historical and musical insights. This interpretive tradition seems to be guided by a shared series of interrelated premises, equations, and discriminations. Adding another appraisal to this vast literature can be justified, perhaps, by proposing an analytical approach that rests on a partly different set of presuppositions and contextualizations. The premises shared by many start with an unmediated association between the composer of the work and its main protagonist: Moses is interpreted in line with Schoenberg’s biography and artistic and intellectual preferences, and Schoenberg is seen in terms of the behavior and fate of his hero. The close linkage between theological ideas, purported by Moses, and theological, political and aesthetic views advocated by his creator is seldom challenged. Also a correspondence between twelve-tone technique, rigorous, ascetic Modernism, and an extreme version of negative theology is often taken for granted. Likewise, Moses’ “failure” or the failure of negative theology to win the hearts of other protagonists in the opera (Aron, the People) is taken by some in terms of the failure of Schoenberg’s extreme Modernist aesthetics. As a result, the gap between the two brothers – the former being representative of the spiritual and the abstract and the latter of the material and the sensually concrete, is mapped on these predetermined categories. Contemporary historical events – the dire need for the exodus of European Jewry, felt so keenly by Schoenberg, are further viewed as paralleling the story of exodus from Egypt as told in the opera. And last but not least, the final form of the work with its un-composed third act is interpreted in terms of a built-in crisis in the opera’s structure of meaning, which in turn is sometimes viewed parallel to outer or inner events associated with the composer’s life and beliefs.

While the stress on one element or another tends to change between critics, the temptation of mimetic mirroring of “reality” by “fiction”, the often mechanical equation of artistic means and modes in relation to a determinate, interpretive outcome, and the well known trap of “intentional fallacy” lurk behind the work’s fairly established interpretative tradition. To be sure, the cultural-political context of the work’s inception is crucial to our understanding of Moses und Aron, but its reflection in the work cannot be reduced to references or simple analogies with outer events or even inner dispositions. In and of themselves, artistic techniques, though limiting the range of what is imitated or expressed, can never be strictly associated with only one kind of a subject matter or an expressive content. In the final analysis, works of art, even those produced by highly self-conscious artists, often force upon their creators unanticipated turns, becoming internally animated or even defiant with regard to their creators’ matrices and plans. This last lesson can be learned from the original biblical story of the Golden Calf, i.e., the answer biblical Aaron gives to biblical Moses concerning the disastrous events associated with the Golden Calf:

And Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?” And Aaron said, “Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, “Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” So I said to them, “Let any who have gold take it off.” So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf. (Exodus 32: 21-25)

Shifting part of the responsibility to Moses, Aaron maps out a “time-saving” strategy, which he, filling in for the missing leader, first performed: collecting gold jewelry. Then he comes to the crucial point in his story: “So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire,” “And I threw” – in
biblical Hebrew "ואשליכהו" – means: putting it in the hands of chance or fate (cf. Genesis 21: 16). “And out came this calf” – as if from within itself, with no clear intentional plan or supervision. The material, “artistic material” – gold, in this case, has its own internal disposition, which, when wedded to the “technique” of fire could bring unexpected mimetic objects like golden calves.

Aaron teaches his brother a profound aesthetic rule. The convergence and interplay of artistic means and modes – perched, as they are, between what is physically, sensually, and culturally predetermined (gold, oil paints, musical sounds, stones, words) and what is fashioned by and as (cultural) techniques (forging fire, brushes, genres and styles, automatic writing) – could yield unexpected results for which the artist could be seen as only partially responsible. At the very heart of artistic creation, then, lies an inherent unpredictability that often surprises creators and spectators alike. Later in the Jewish tradition, this idea will be further developed in relation to the Golem trope: that concrete creature, or automaton, is brought to life by words endowed with power and thus can rebel or resist its own human creator, to the latter’s horror and dismay.

And yet Aaron’s account leaves something missing, or incompletely explained: even if this particular kind of calf was not expected, some form of animal or creature of sorts had been there, to begin with, be it as a dim precept or as an object recognized in retrospect for the one who forged this object or for those who subsequently identified it. We note that the object is recognized both by Aaron as “this calf” and by the people who, according to Aaron’s story (but not according to the preceding narrative) first demand: “Make us gods who shall go before us.” And then, once the idol has been fashioned, they say: “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32: 23; 4) As W. J. T. Mitchell (following Abi Warburg) has argued, images are never without precedence or repercussion; their endurance over many generations and persistence are major religious, social, and cultural sources of creativity and control. At the same time, their actual form, combination, timing, and likeness are unlimited and unpredictable.

Images that surprise are thus part of the game, especially the Modernist game. To the challenge put to him upon completing Gertrude Stein’s portrait (1906) – it does not look like “her” – Picasso famously replied: “it will”, conveying a new insight that had dawned upon modern artists, concerning not only the reversal of the imitative process (from work to world instead of world to work), but also the a-posteriori nature of artistic meaning. An underlying presupposition of some of the main Modernist movements, it encouraged artistic experiments in varieties of modes, forms, means, and matters, that interact with each other and with a “reality” – political, social, and cultural – which they constantly addressed. Such experiments tended to blur the Aristotelian distinction between means, modes and objects in the mimetic act, while also highlighting their interdependence. At the same time, even the most abstract trends in Modernism (e.g. Kandinsky’s “musical” compositions), never doubted the power and persistence of primordial images and forms; aspiring to freedom from decadent formulaic patterns, they sought pictorial balance in primitive, atavistic cultures.

Whether derived from an imagined future or a past, either close or distant, and from communal or biographical reservoirs of meaning, images intermingle within the domain of artistic creation even if their way to it is apparently barred. Those that strike us as “uncanny” or unheimlich, as Freud (following Otto Rank) was to call them, tend to proliferate in modern art, including music, though they can at times be already found in pre-Modernist art. (One only needs to recall one of Freud’s preferred examples from nineteenth-century literature, the stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann.) These images stand for premonitions on the verge of becoming real, things repressed suddenly and unexpectedly expressed by and embodied in automatons and animated, inorganic objects.

Furthermore, if Modernism emerged out of a growing acknowledgement of basic discontinuities and ruptures – be they social, religious, economic, or political – it was likewise characterized by the impulse to work with and rework these discontinuities, or to build new edifices on them through innovative means, ideas, and energies. Such is the case in Futurism, Suprematism, Dadaism, Surrealism and the like. This condition was a source of unmitigated tension, and it enjoined that procedures of artistic realization and expression be continually updated. Discontinuities were essential to the artistic process, and they were acutely pertinent to modern Jewish artists, however differently the latter interpreted their Jewishness. As has been repeatedly argued, their often ardent participation in the enterprise of Modernism relates to such
heightened sensibilities, which sometimes relegated them to the role of Modernism’s symbol and scapegoat, thereby highlighting the movement’s uncanny dimensions.\textsuperscript{16}

By way of bringing all this to bear on a reassessment of Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron, I propose in what follows to situate this \textit{sui generis} work within multiple frames whose ordering remains deliberately unsettled. It is my argument that this irresolution constitutes the central theme of Schoenberg’s work, one whose interpretive results could by definition not be known in advance. Insights, gained from parallel artistic and intellectual endeavors in Schoenberg’s vicinity will be introduced so as to widen his opera’s historical and theoretical frame of reference. The composer’s Jewish background is relevant, though I invoke it primarily as I consider his transmutation of the theological and the political into the aesthetic, especially as regards his treatment of sound. My overall aim here is to show how the work’s internal coordinates interact, contradict, and overlook each other, and I examine their implications for the experiences induced by this work and its structure of meaning. Phenomenological and semiotic considerations will guide my thick, though selective, analysis of several short excerpts. Formulated in terms of irresolution, this will bring me to pit Schoenberg’s work against the famous seventeenth century \textit{Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus} by Baruch Spinoza, the first modern attempt by a Jew to address the subject of a non-theocratic Jewish State and its desired leaders.

\section*{II. Artistic and Existential Choices – Vienna circa 1930}

Starting with the immediate environment in which Schoenberg lived and created, one should recall how increasing anti-Semitic attacks added to and, in his case, further deepened his already profound alienation from society and, consequently, his sense of vulnerability as an avant-garde artist. Like Freud, he reached the point where a lifetime artistic and spiritual enterprise seemed to be inexorably drifting away from the world to which it belonged. Moses and Monothelism,\textsuperscript{17} in which Freud expressed his increasing anxiety concerning the future of psychoanalysis, is in many respects complementary to Schoenberg’s opera on the same subject, as I have argued elsewhere.\textsuperscript{18} Though Schoenberg had since 1925 lived in Berlin, where he conceived and composed the opera, his Viennese background is still pertinent for understanding his artistic choices.\textsuperscript{19}

In what follows, I will discuss use some of the insights gained from the comparison between Freud’s and Schoenberg’s work, as well as that between their works and those of two novelists – one a Jew and one a non-Jew – deeply troubled by post-War anxieties and by perplexities in a world steadily losing the moral and existential ground it had so emphatically claimed prior to the Great War.\textsuperscript{20} My examples are David Vogel’s novel \textit{Married Life}\textsuperscript{21} (first published 1929-30), and Robert Musil’s more famous \textit{The Man without Qualities} (the first volume of which was published in 1930, part of the second in 1933, and remaining texts posthumously in 1943.)\textsuperscript{22} All four works were created approximately at the same time, and in their own distinctive ways, each expresses a deeply troubled perspective on post-War modernity. Like Schoenberg, poet and author David Vogel (1891-1944) was a Jew from an east-European background; unlike Schoenberg, however, he would not be alert enough to leave Europe in time, and thus was murdered by the Nazis in 1944. His great, pessimistic novel realistically situated in post-World War I Vienna, tells the story of Rudolf Gurdweill, a Jewish anti-hero caught in a brutal, sado-masochistic marriage with the Baroness Thea von Tako. Though written in Hebrew, the novel’s subject matter in no way relates to Zionist themes, and, apparently, has only the most tangential relationship to Jewish topics of any kind. This basic discrepancy between means and objects (Vogel’s protagonists, to be sure, do not “speak” Hebrew\textsuperscript{23}) reinforces the \textit{Verfremdungseffekt} that permeates the entire novel, giving it an ominous, prophetic dimension, and drawing attention to the hero’s Lukácsian aura of “transcendental homelessness” as he roams a city both familiar and foreign.\textsuperscript{24} Though at all times the language is descriptive and the mode of narration mainly metonymic, the text verges on the pathetic or even the pathological. The main protagonist, whose consciousness is the narrative’s primary focal point, remains forever preoccupied with minute emotional changes as these occur within himself and in those around him. The same appears true of his friends and acquaintances – mostly fringe characters, whether of the intelligentsia or otherwise, as they are heard through
direct and indirect speech and description. An *unheimlich* effect, evident throughout the novel, stems from protagonists who never really choose their fate, but allow a blind, though not arbitrary, chain of events to lead them along convoluted, disastrous paths.25

The fact that Musil’s anti-hero, “der Man ohne Eigenschaften” (“Ulrich”) descends from the nobility, accounts for that novel’s substantially different set of events and narrative technique. Whether related by the hero or the omniscient narrator, Musil’s narrative tends to work with ironic effects at once more aloof and more acerbic, effects partly achieved by Musil’s microscopic dismantling of commonplace phenomena into their atomistic, seemingly gratuitous constitutive parts, be they scientific or otherwise. The novel’s famous opening, with its meteorological description of what is usually called “a fine day in August,” instructs the reader how to approach the work and the world to which it refers. The “ohne Eigenschaften” theme is pertinent to Musil’s strategy, for only by dissecting conventional formulae and imagery into their basic constitutive elements can one delve into reality beyond its hypocritical, petrified social, and political configurations and so renew contact with life at its vital, indigenous source. This gives the plot a character of “possibility” rather than “necessity”, of generality rather than particularity (“seinengleichen Geschichte,”26 a story *sui generis*), the deconstructed elements of which can always be otherwise combined or rearranged according to changing causal connections.27 As they oscillate between feelings of sovereignty, futility and resignation, both the narrator and some of his protagonists appear to grasp this essential contingency of the real on the narrative technique by which it is captured.

Both works depict a city full of inscriptions written on its walls, with only a few dwellers making the effort to decipher them. Thus both novels start with that inevitable attraction of the open public space, streets that draw their heroes outside, if only to discover disaster: here a drowned girl (who committed suicide; her image will pop up in one of Gurdweill’s nightmares later in the book), there a car accident (bureaucratically “resolved”), and in both cases the people – a multitude – who callously crowd the street theatre.28 Crime and punishment at the social and familial level characterize both novels, works that also prove acutely sensitive to the sonoric environment of their respective worlds.29 Vogel’s narrative ends with an inevitable calamity, whereas Musil’s novel remains, as in the case of *Moses und Aron*, in a state of incompleteness. In Musil’s text, the calamity is not only World War One and the demise of the “Kakanian” empire but also the impending Second World War, already known to the readers in hindsight. In both novels, there is the attempt to take refuge elsewhere, out of town, out of civilization, in an uncontaminated nature, even if only temporarily – in a sort of utopia which, in both cases, will prove either unrealizable or deceptive.30

*Moses und Aron* begins with a quest for utopia. It attempts to surmount or, maybe, disclose internal and external discontinuities through a variety of artistic and expressive means. Ultimately, however, the work gravitates towards an inevitable catastrophe whose outline is being drawn from the outset by Moses’ acceptance of and obedience to God: He pledges himself to “enouncing” (*verkünden*) to the people his idea, the only God, as well as his choice of the Israelite people and his redeeming them from subjugation to pagan Egypt. Like Vogel, Schoenberg devises expressive means that are immune to the object of presentation, in particular the twelve-tone system, to which I will return shortly; like Vogel again, he struggles with the imprint of a well-known plot that he experimentally ventures to reapply, in a different manner, to a new context; and, like Vogel, he does so by tracing the emotional flow of the major protagonists – Moses, Aron, and the people.31 Like Musil, Schoenberg works with multiple artistic trajectories that often coexist indifferently, at times even incongruently. In the case of *Der Man ohne Eigenschaften*, these trajectories relate to a more conventional strategy of multiple plot threads, with each exhibiting its own logic of continuity, mood and involvement.32 As we shall see, *Moses und Aron* is another such instance of heterogeneous artistic procedures simultaneously applied.
III. Voice, Noise, and Sonic Imaginaries

a. The Jewish question

Approaching Moses und Aron in the context of this history and its artistic manifestations, the Modernist predicament, along with the Jewish connections mentioned above, can be seen to vex in especially acute ways Jewish composers and musicians living under clouds of anti-Semitic Wagnerian propaganda that had become particularly vituperative by the turn of the century. Whether they did so consciously or not, musicians of Jewish origin constantly had to rebut charges of insubstantiality and of lacking a capacity for artistic invention in music. Such critiques often centered on the original noisy element from which the Jewish musical imagination supposedly arose and its rootless detachment from a genuine “healthy” folk-lore.

This “genre” of anti-Semitic musical aesthetics and music criticism, however, should be seen as a part of a larger musical entanglement of Jews and Christians throughout the nineteenth century, an entanglement often framed by tropes of noise and harmony. Part of this entanglement was focused on the oratorio – both as a formal genre and as a bundle of compositional modalities that penetrated other genres (opera, Lied, symphony etc., but also literary genres). As I argue elsewhere, the genre and its modalities were enlisted for the symbolic embodiment of communities as exclusive or inclusive, for the interactive experiencing of their shared past, and for projecting their being into the future. It could have a special appeal to Jews, when even an authority like Hegel, following Kant, included the oratorio in the category of the sublime, while attributing its sources to ancient Hebrew culture. When the universal project of Enlightenment met the particularistic sensibilities of Romanticism, the ancient Hebraic sublime came to be revalued and devalued as degenerate “Hebräischer Kunstgeschmack.” According to Hannah Arendt, as “Pariah” artists, Jewish authors became perhaps all the more keen on finding universalistic modes of expression (Arendt, 1978, 67-90). As is well known, Schoenberg himself was a direct victim of this hostile environment (a situation aggravated by his artistic choices), which bitterly affected him. Like Meyerbeer, Heine, and Börne before him and, Kafka, Tucholsky and Mahler in his lifetime, he was among those who felt both deeply connected to German culture and increasingly estranged from its indigenous sources and current trends.

It is against this background that Schoenberg’s initial plan for Moses und Aron, as an oratorio with a narrator and numerous choruses, should be viewed. To be sure, since 1912, Schoenberg had become gradually attracted to the religious realm, a development that soon found expression in his compositional choices. This attraction, however, was not a private spiritual matter for him, once it became connected with the anti-Semitic experiences he endured and the nationalist Jewish affiliation he started to cultivate. And while the genre of oratorio seemed most appropriate to the biblical subject he chose, the subject itself was deeply related to currents and undercurrents in contemporary Judaism. At the same time, his oratorio was a bead in a German-Jewish oratorical chain that had begun with Bach and Handel and had continued through Haydn, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Brahms, and Mahler. The fact that in the process of composition Schoenberg saw fit to turn the work into an operatic piece, with a straightforward dramatic action, should not change this basic appraisal.

As we shall see, the choice of operatic frame was crucial for the dramatic character of the work, but even in this latter format, many oratorical traits were preserved, such as the big choral numbers, the schematic fabula, and the archetypal quality of the dramatic personae. As a result, Schoenberg edged closer to another canonical work that, as scholars have noted, was to become an anti-model for Moses und Aron – Wagner’s Parsifal.

b. Adorno’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s critique

In his critique of Moses und Aron, Adorno addresses some of the issues related to the work’s attempt at fashioning a religious expression of the unrepresentable holy. He argues that since a vital experience of the holy must go through an entrenched language of holy sentiments, only an organic congregation has access to them. New music, like that of Schoenberg – a product of the secular, modern, individualized, and alienated subject – cannot claim such access. No wonder, he
argues, that in order to compensate for this lack, Schoenberg turned to old operatic modes such as leitmotivic techniques, as well as recitative, and choral textures. According to Adorno, however unwilling he was to take this approach, Schoenberg remained caught in a paradox: while adhering to an abstract musical language, he employed generic procedures, at once sensual and imitative; it was by virtue of just such procedures that music, since the seventeenth century, had been admitted into the temple of the arts of representation and, hence, to the forbidden site of idolatry. Even worse, in an attempt to compensate for his work’s lack of communitarian values Schoenberg employed Gesamtkunstwerk techniques. As in a Wagnerian work, the work became saturated, imbued by false coherence and the numbing cathartic effects of bourgeois art, which otherwise Schoenberg had sought to avoid. According to Adorno, Schoenberg comes close, despite himself, to Aron’s sinful position; he is driven to the bourgeois “great work of art” just as Moses’ brother was driven to the pagan Golden Calf, with the latter re-emerging as an artistic Golem that takes over his master.

This indeed should alert us to the relations of old and new, the sensual and the abstract, the conventional and the avant-garde in the work. Generally speaking, however, Adorno’s criticism seems too confined within its neo-Marxist frame, overlooking other crucial factors; firstly, the general Jewish-political predicament that the work addresses beyond its theological content and secondly, the wider theological issue beyond the pagan drift of its vocal imagery. Philip Lacoue-Labarthe rebuts this aspect of Adorno’s critique. The structure of vocal forms in Moses and Aron, he claims, stresses rupture by drawing attention first to the un-pitched Sprechstimme used in the work alongside the sung elements and to the work’s oratorical spirit (though Lacoue-Labarthe seems unaware of its role within the genre’s compositional history.)

Relying on Kant and Hegel, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that these components (alongside elements of tragedy and philosophical poetry), connect Schoenberg’s work with the sublime, a realm which Adorno was too hasty to leave aside owing to his tacit association of the work with the beautiful. Indeed, the category of the sublime naturally befits a theological object; in the case of the oratorio, especially one composed in accordance with the twelve-tone system in combination with sprechstimmlich elements, the effect is indeed of a meta-sublime nature. That is, Schoenberg conceives of his sublime object by sublime expressive, deliberately non-sensuous, and non-conformist modes of tonality and sonority, thereby highlighting discontinuities and ruptures. Lacoue-Labarthe’s insightful correlation of oratorio, Sprechstimme, rupture and the sublime also seems warranted from the point of view of the history of style. As a musical genre, the oratorio aims religiously to convey a biblical story through a mélange of declamatory and expressive styles and genres that cumulatively yield discontinuous temporal experiences and heterogeneous planes of action.

c. Vocal imagery: the theological, the psychological, and the communal

The aesthetic cum theological status of vocal imagery seems central in both Adorno’s and Lacoue-Labarthe’s critiques, but neither of these directly addresses the question as to what sort of concreteness Schoenberg’s vocal images bestow upon their referents, and whether his compositional design and practice are indeed at odds with the prohibition on idolatry – in Judaism in general, and according to the strict negative theology propounded by his Moses in particular. Sonoric elements are central in the biblical Revelation on Mount Sinai and should give us a good starting point for this discussion – as they were perhaps also for Schoenberg:

וויחי בות התלושים במדת הפקר ואלה קולות ברקיקים וعقود על תנים ווקל שופר ווקל והלחם פאניס והלחם פאניס והלחם פאניס
כול בלע וחוא מקום . . . ויהיELLOW קול שופר וחוא מקום פல קולות ויהי...

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled . . .

And as the sound of the trumpet (sic: Shofar) grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. (Exodus 19: 16-19)

And immediately following God’s enunciation of the Ten Commandments we read:
Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” (Exodus 20:15-16)

The role of sound in creating religious awe was undoubtedly great in this constitutive event, or in its subsequent recollection. Together with spectacular visual effects – which tend, however, to blur sight, the voices became visible – that is, palpable, clear, distinguishable. According to the biblical account, this synaesthetic Divine scenery was perhaps too successful, for the *mysterium tremendum* it evoked was unbearable for its witnesses, who asked for a refuge in a human replacement.42

In any event, the transcendental and sublime qualities attributed to the vocal element seem to immunize it against sensualism and reified representations and thus to qualify it as a vessel for delivering the second commandment itself.43 For Freud, this aspect of vocal behavior rendered it an ideal vehicle for the psychoanalytical process. Associated with the abstract, authorial (Jealous God), and spiritual principle of the father, and devoid of visual distraction, it stood at the opposite pole of the direct sensory, tactile and visual perception, connected with the mother principle, the principle of unconditional love and mercy. His student and colleague Theodor Reik’s interpretation of the Sinai revelation as told in the Bible, goes in this direction, strongly associating the terrifying voice of the Shofar as God’s voice – a residue of a totemic culture.44 This bifurcation, however, stands in contradiction to other entrenched configurations of voice vs. sight in the Western tradition, which associate the voice with a natural, primordial motherly element; both pre-symbolic and pre-lingual, the voice is a vehicle for rendering basic, vital human emotions before they succumb to grammatical, visual, and logical ordering. Modern aesthetics of music, from Vincenzo Galilei, through Rousseau and Nietzsche to Suzanne Langer and Walter Ong, have emphasized the “unlogiced mental” aspect of vocal, sonorous phenomena,45 which nowadays may get some support from the field of contemporary research in mother-infant pre-lingual communication.46

As a matter of fact, Western music embraces both principles of voice and sound: an abstract, transcendental vocal principle (*mysterium tremendum*), and an immediate, sensual vocal principle, connecting sound with bodily emotions. From a psycho-acoustic point of view, the two are anchored in the same phenomenal order of sound perception, and thus are mutually interpenetrating. In the historical development of musical expression in the West, the two indeed tended often to blur, anchored as they were in the same musical language. This language came into being through the musical imitation of the “inflections of the voice” in heightened speech, which brought about a rich and rather differentiated taxonomy of emotions and moods, including that of love and reverence, compassion and repentance, as well as the divine sublime. A semiotic apparatus, enabling its affective mobilization, was part and parcel of this whole system. Though this system could be criticized for its sensualism – and no doubt this element was stronger in it than the more sublime, spiritual one – it was by and large accepted also for rendering religious subjects, evoking only slight theological resistance (in both Lutheran and Judaic circles). As Kalman Bland has argued, the alleged rejection in Judaism of all sorts of visual representation – the so-called Jewish aniconism – is a late ideological development of modern times, paradoxically proclaimed by both pro-Jewish and anti-Jewish ideologues.47 If in the Jewish tradition visual representations of that which is not directly divine was mostly permitted, and sometimes promoted, all the more so for musical expressionism, which was even less challenged by theological consideration of this kind.

The basic dichotomy of Divine and earthly sounds was further obscured by communal sonorities in their modern embodiments in general, and in relation to Christian-Jewish entanglements in particular. In the Modernist approach, not only harmony and disharmony became relative – as dissonance, Schoenberg’s preferred musical idiom, was emancipating itself from its confines – but sounds previously unrecognized as musical were now making inroads into works
which aimed at coming closer to the experience of modern reality. This has again its literary counterpart. In the above mentioned novels urbane noises, separately and in combination, are vividly and repetitively described, functioning sometimes as a metonymic extension of the protagonists’ feelings or as part of their mental and sensual environment. The sum total of urbane sound experiences becomes a being unto itself – an aural framework.48 Even so, older layers of sonorous experiences and aesthetic expectations still persist within the listener’s aural and aesthetic imaginary and thus continue to penetrate into the present, realistically and symbolically. They further accentuate the fact that what is harmonious for one congregation (Jewish) is disharmonious for the other (Christian) and vice versa. Again, Gurdweill’s surprising testimony in Married Life, which hides Jewish sentiments under the cover of an assimilated surface existence, offers us a unique glimpse into a uniquely Jewish perspective on “their” (Christian) music:

In a little village, unlike a city, religion will play an important role in life. The boundaries are well-defined. Jews are Jews and Christians are Christians. You can’t possibly confuse the two, especially in the little settlements of Galicia and Poland. My parents weren’t Orthodox but nevertheless they had nothing to do with Christians. In short: the Christians fascinated me in their strangeness. When I grew a little older, I would hang around the church on their holidays, moved and excited, waiting for something. The singing of the choir, threatening and obscure, would come pouring out into the fresh summer air like a slow stream of thick black tar. By then I already knew about the Inquisitions, the Crusades, the persecution of the Jews, and I was constantly afraid that they would suddenly seize me and drag me inside and force me to do something terrible . . . Once I dared to approach the door and look inside. I saw nothing but dense darkness, dotted with weak candle flames. I could see people kneeling, too. From that day on, whenever I thought about Christians I would see something dark with flickering candles . . .

The simile of Christian harmoniousness as black tar is revealing, not only because it is at odds with conventional Christian similes for such music but also because it evokes a host of Jewish images related to martyrlogy and persecution referred to in the text.

IV. Incompatible trajectories: Means, modes and medium in Moses und Aron

Coming from a background similar to that of Vogel and his protagonist, “Gurdweill”, Schoenberg likely harbored, if only unconsciously, similar associations as regards Jewishness and its divided relationship to the conventions and norms governing the sonorities and aesthetics of Western European music. Like his compatriots, he also was persistently exposed to the same kind of auditory Viennese mixture, which could not but infiltrate his musical imagination as it probed for new sonorous mixtures. It is also tempting to divide his creative enterprise into a sensual “motherly” preoccupation with sound – in the so called atonal period, where he experimented as painter and composer with synaesthetic transfigurations as well as with the primordial emotional substrata, and a “fatherly” engagement with strict, twelve-tone music, an “odysssee” (to use Ethan Haimo’s apt term) on which he embarked in his unfinished oratorio, Die Jakobsleiter.50 In the first period, he even sought a new inflections-of-the-voice technique, more adequate to the expression of modern plights: Sprechgesang. While it is true that his first phase in twelve-tone composition necessitated focusing on the strict logical-technical aspects of the system, he by no means – despite Adorno’s claims to the contrary – evaded the more immediate psychological considerations. In fact, as I have argued in relation to Moses und Aron, once he had familiarized himself with the system, he was able to achieve a new musical emotionalism, one more attuned to the theologico-political issues that were increasingly occupying his thought and capable of registering the impulses and cathexions of the subconscious, including what I elsewhere call political, charismatic flow, in musical form.51 To that end, Schoenberg fused modes of composition developed in both periods, such as Sprechstimme, synaesthetic ostinato texture, and pictorialism. It is their combination that creates the special effect of the work.
This point brings us back to Adorno. If Schoenberg’s “pagan” musical imagery cannot be grounded in historical and/or theological claims, then his deployment of what Adorno calls “bourgeois artistic means” whose effect, invariably, is to anaesthetize socio-political awareness, would still expose the composer to the charge of deploying musical elements for symbolic or modern idolatry. Here one should directly address the most crucial question concerning the opera: what indeed is it all about? Is it intended to glorify negative theology and aesthetics (the way Bach’s Passions are supposed to glorify the crucifixion) or does it engage a more tangible issue, such as the meaning and the effect of introducing a theological principle to human society? Or does it ask how a post-traumatic people—a folk of slaves—are supposed to receive such ideas? And, if so, who should lead them, and in what ways? What changes will such a people undergo as a result of these challenges? In opting for opera—and thus, inevitably for “old operatic (bourgeois?) habits”—as the encompassing frame for this troubled history, Schoenberg seems to pursue another option, one that strikes us as artistically, politically, and intellectually more intriguing. Indeed by featuring “floating” human figures and suspending the Aristotelian spatiotemporal specificity of representation, the oratorio avoids reifying its protagonists and so proves a medium ideally suited for creating a spiritual community that endures over time. However, it is only in the domain of opera that people directly and consistently confront each other, that their subjectivities, which experience agonies, ecstasies and doubts, are materialized and made known; it is only there that basic communal forces interact with them, demanding concrete action, and that a solution of conflicts—or a lack thereof—will be experienced unmediated by abstract or symbolic voices. In this manner, Schoenberg was able to occupy the same dramatic terrain in which Wagner had worked; yet while “the hands” were apparently those of the Wagnerian tradition, “the voice”, undoubtedly, resembled more the type heard in Brecht’s and Weill’s epic theatre.

The task, then, becomes to bring all of the foregoing concerns to bear on the analysis of Moses und Aron. In staging the conflict between the harmonious and “noisy” elements, expression and charisma, primordial and transcendental models of voice, theological dogma and politics, Schoenberg presents us with a highly complex and agonistic compositional design. Thus Moses und Aron includes several compositional trajectories, or coordinates, themselves harboring internal antinomies. Its mode of appearance comprises a rich array of emotional-existential fluctuations that circumscribe the protagonists and issue an interpretive challenge to listeners/spectators. In particular, the following coordinates appear mostly underdetermined in relation to ideology, value, and meaning:

1) There is, first, the biblical story, to which the Schoenbergian text stands as a commentary rather than as a text. In this it differs from the tradition of the opera in which, for example, the Shakespearean Othello does not threaten to compete with or intrude on the Verdian Otello; it also differs from the Literaturoper of Schoenberg’s time, which took play scripts as they were, only shortening them for the sake of their musical embodiment;

2) Next, there is the order, or orders, of the twelve-tone (dodecaphonic) row and its derivative constructions, deliberately distancing themselves from the gravitational forces of tonal harmony;

3) At the same time, old musical habits, conventions, structures, genres and the whole system of aesthetic (listening) expectations implicit in them (e.g., the baroque ritornello, like folk dances, choirs, prayers, leitmotifs) continue to lurk behind a superficially “realistic” drama that purports to unfold an unstylized action;

4) Yet another antinomy concerns the oratorical vs. the operatic drift of the dramatic presentation;

5) Finally, there is the declamatory, or linguistic order, embodied by Sprechstimme or strict spoken parts, which obeys rhetorical and prosodic rules clearly at variance with those governing pitch-based musical structures.
Let us look more carefully into four of these coordinates (no. 4 has been already discussed) as they articulate the phenomenological arena of the work:

1) **Biblical text vs. operatic libretto**

In her profound discussion and close reading of *Moses und Aron*’s libretto, Bluma Goldstein addresses major issues such as the work’s image-and-word dichotomy, the idea of wasteland as a substitute for the land of milk and honey, the skipping of major events told in *Exodus*. In her view, the last act of Schoenberg’s work clearly shows a transformation in Moses’ attitude, stemming from what had transpired in the first two acts. The lack of music in this act, she maintains, is consistent with this change in spite of Schoenberg’s claims to the contrary. We will come back to this new Moses shortly. What should concern us here is that Schoenberg’s deliberate changes of the original biblical plot, unlike the medium-oriented long operatic tradition of adapting literary text to libretto, were grounded primarily in political-theological considerations and only subsequently conceived sonorously – that is, in what befits a melo-dramatic medium. Schoenberg believed that updating of this kind is an existential necessity. Max Aruns, the main protagonist of Schoenberg’s spoken drama *The Biblical Way* (completed 1927) claims in relation to the dictates of the Jewish lore: “What is eternal in God’s word is its spirit! The letter (Wortlaut) is merely phenomenal form, adapted to the moment, to the demands of wandering in the wilderness.”

Aruns’ claim for a spiritual, rather than a literal interpretation of God’s words evokes criticism from another protagonist in the drama, showing how relative the distinction between the two can be. This did not stop Schoenberg from being himself quite explicit in his insistence on the necessity for ever interpreting the old lore in terms of modern reality: “I believe that the forms of the ancient Biblical language are no more convincing in our present use of language. One has to talk to the people of our time in our own style and of our own problems.” Schoenberg here partially echoes Lord Warburton, the author of the *Divine Legation of Moses* who already in 1738 situated biblical narrative and prophecy in a cultural phase that communicated through palpable images and embodied actions that later on would give way to more abstract modes of thought and communication.

The need for such textual updating means that the basic spiritual narrative embedded in the biblical narrative remains the same for both texts. The old theoretically lurks behind the new as a source to be constantly referred to, and to which the new can be compared. This diacritical structure, I argue, permeates all of *Moses und Aron*. Thus, as Goldstein has observed, Aron appears closer to the original Moses than does the new Moses. However unwittingly, Schoenberg adopted an approach akin to traditional Jewish biblical commentary, be it of the old Rabbinic midrashic or the later medieval tradition, which was inspired by contemporary theological and philosophical trends. Be this as it may, the Holy Script stood for Schoenberg as a source of meaning whose internal contradictions he tried to reconcile, in accordance with his own political theology.

At any rate, Schoenberg’s adaptation is categorically different from the kind of critical reading of the Bible advocated by Spinoza, often considered the initiator of biblical criticism. Spinoza, as Menachem Lorberbaum claims, interprets the story of Moses historically, aiming to derive from it an understanding of Moses as both theologian and statesman of his time. At the same time, Schoenberg was not attempting to subsume older versions of myths within a new mythology, nor was he aiming to replace them – as Wagner did. This has crucial implications, as it differentiates the protagonists’ assumed consciousness from that of the listeners’/spectators’ experience of it. Schoenberg’s protagonists are unaware of their being substitutes or “doubles” of original figures, whereas the listeners/spectators must be cognizant of this being the case. It is by judging the new in terms of the old that spectators can reach the latter’s full meaning, preserving the old vividly in order to derive new meanings from it.
The twelve-tone system

As developed by Schoenberg, the twelve-tone system has long been considered the epitome of the Modernist spirit in music. In the context of Moses und Aron, its aesthetic presuppositions and the procedures they imply gain a special significance. From the plethora of endless sound-combinations, symbolized in the more limited infinite space of possible chromatic twelve-tone orders, a certain, row, Reihe, is selected, (auserwählt). Within the boundaries of the chosen tonal world the composed work is a further selection (for endless compositions can be based on the same row), which exists, in relation to the sonoric universe, as a monad of sorts: closed within itself yet indirectly reflecting other such monads. The forty-eight interrelated permutations it yields are realized on the basis of strict rules and well-defined procedures. They include further divisions of the row, including “aggregates” that allow for more freedom in relation to the predetermined order of the row while still preserving its “selectivity”. Adorno would say that these rules and operations betray the spirit of cultic laws; more specifically, the laws, Gesetz, of the Old Testament. Indeed, the objectivity and strictness of the system goes beyond what characterizes systems that developed organically, like the old tonal-harmonic system; in this sense they do aspire to the condition of a given law. At the same time, the free choice of the tonal material – both in terms of the chosen row as well as the specific configurations it yields – emphasizes its artificial and combinatarial nature and the author’s sovereignty in regard to both.

The theological paradox underlying the work – that of prophesying the word of the omnipresent, yet elusive God – attains an emblematic embodiment. In each of its tonal configurations the work realizes the unbearable tension between the idea of an eternal, unrepresentable, and infinite God, and the limited, artificial, subjective human concretizations of his idea, which, at the same time, are theoretically endless. Once applied, the chosen row creates internal tensions akin to the perceptual gestalt it yields. In the case of Moses und Aron it consists of half and whole tones, two strategic tritones, and one minor third. The row’s motivic gestalt resembles melodic contours that are part of traditional operatic literature and that carry their own expressive import and leitmotivic potential. Moreover, Schoenberg’s motivic elements facilitate perception through their affinity with long established musical procedures, such as transposition and variation. Yet this last perception, as Michael Cherlin has pointed out, is in terms of the work’s epistemology, ultimately erroneous. By the same token, when (through legitimate combinatorial procedures) a given row “fortuitously” emanates particular intervals, such as the fifth or the octave, or even a major chord, the result will be a sense of foreignness signified, as well as a sense of lost familiarity (on the level of old perceptual habits).

Here we return to Adorno for whom this abstract, atomistic compositional method yields, despite itself, concrete and formulaic patterns that expose Schoenberg’s musical design to the very tonal gravitational forces that the composer’s serial method aims to avoid. Indeed, this dialectic is intrinsic to the basic compositional matrix of Moses und Aron; it seems no less intentional than the first one involving source and libretto. The irreconcilable, though aesthetically productive tension between the two systems – the “atonal” series of twelve notes and the chromatic/diatonic tonal – lurks behind the work’s overall mode of presentation. What does it consist of, and what does it communicate? Are those who use it or are enveloped by it – the protagonists – aware, however slightly, of the nature of the medium in which they express themselves? Or is the medium a message solely addressed to those outside of the protagonists’ world, that is, to listeners enabled and called upon to scrutinize this world accordingly?

Old musical habits or allusions

As they evolve from within the new modern constituents, old musical habits or allusions can be viewed as inherent, rebellious “golems” but also as part of a compositional strategy. In this latter sense, they amount to experiential procedures whose communicative and dramatic/emotional force derives from their cultural embeddedness and from their inherent, material qualities – such as motivic and leitmotivic elements that, in the listener’s mind, suggest, anticipate, or recollect more
distant musical elements and experiences. A homogenized and perpetuating musical texture exerts an incantatory effect often associated with ecstatic rituals. Generic elements – a baroque ritornello, an arioso, and musical topoi conveying certain emotional connotations – enable signification and communication. Among these procedures and topoi are those rendering sound as authoritative and transcendental (the “fatherly”, masculine element discussed above, as used by the Priest, in Act 1, Scene 3), and those rendering sound as sympathetic and immanent (the more “motherly” or feminine element, shared by various figures), through traditional and nontraditional elements. But even the traditional is deployed non-traditionally. In other words, in the semiotic continuum that extends between conventional and avant-garde (deviant) meanings, the generic elements tend to produce meanings associated with the latter pole.

4) The declamatory vs. the melodic

While the juxtaposition of the declamatory and the melodic – the pitched and the non-pitched elements – is not new (it is associated, in fact, with lighter genres, such as Singspiel and operetta), what is unique to the work is their simultaneous carrying of the same text, creating a special form of Turba (when dividing the people’s group expression) or revelation (when used for embodying God’s “voices”). As noted, the pitched and the non-pitched elements obey different rhythmical dictates, evolving inherent incongruity, which vexes listeners, calling them, if not through direct realistic means, to consider the utterances as part of a non-unified universe. From the point of view of its users, these divergent modalities can signify a difference: one is usually rougher and more direct, the other more pathetic and nobler. But not always; sometimes melos will appear more appealing (and thus direct), and the spoken parts more transcendental and mysterious.

The order of the four trajectories or coordinates discussed above remains unstable. Thus each claims priority from the point of view of the compositional process, and each carries its own internal tension, thereby highlighting or often exacerbating tensions inherent in the plot itself. Both the internal antinomies comprising these coordinates and their relations to other coordinates vary along the work. They can be indifferently juxtaposed to each other as if deaf to their mutual presence in the compositional matrix; they can replace or double each other, creating redundancy; and they can mutually illuminate each other, and work complementarily.

V. ‘Here You Stand, You Cannot Do Otherwise’: First Scene’s Voices

In the Bible it starts with vision. Moses, leading his flock near Horeb, is attracted by the burning, unconsumed bush; it evokes his curiosity: “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” Only when seeing him approaching, does God cry from within the Bush, “Moses, Moses,” and Moses answers: “Here I am” (Exodus 3: 3-4). The vocal element by itself, although it is the content and substance of the revelation, cannot suffice for instantiating itself as the Divine; for that, a magical, material image is needed, even though the image itself can only ever be a temporary locus of God’s voice. The actual voice and the words it carries bestow meaning on the image; but the voice itself appears less miraculous. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it seems a human voice. True, no-body seems to be its producer, but voices often so behave – disengaged from their source, or projected beyond its appearance. In Moses und Aron, no stage instructions are given as regards the scenery of the Burning Bush. Instead Six Divine Voices – (not identical with the Voices from the Burning Bush, which appear later) are heard before the curtain has been raised. The closed curtain announces that this is a stage work, not an oratorio. Something is perhaps taking place behind the curtain, some vision, action, gesture, which remains hidden from the sight of the beholder. All this is still unknown. What we hear is a mysterious O, pianississimo (ppp), carried antiphonally – 3+3 – by the Voices and given further emphasis by compatible instruments. This mysterious sound is created through non-harmonic
combination; the antiphonal response is heard as slightly different, a kind of unfamiliar, though perceptible, completion:

Example 1: Act 1, Scene 1, measures 1-7

We (or better, Schoenberg’s imagined audience) readily recall similar oracular moments. Perhaps recollection will come only later, when the same signal repeats itself; when text comes to fill the void O. We may be reminded, then, of another biblical moment, taking place likewise on Horeb/Sinai – the revelation to Elijah in 1 Kings 19, 11-12, which in more than one respect runs parallel to Moses’ various revelations on Horeb. As a preparation for the coming event Elijah is told:

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the fire a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. (1 Kings 19: 11-12)

Clearly, this constitutes an improvement on the Burning Bush scene; God is no more associated with fire, nor with any other miraculous vision, and the extraordinary scenes of wind, earthquake (in Hebrew: רעש Ra’ash, which also stands for other “noisy” natural events), and fire are but its herald. Used by Schoenberg, who was still officially a Lutheran when he created the text and the music, Luther’s translation – as well as the Jewish Simon Bernfeld’s (a translation rather widespread among German Jews) which followed Luther’s example – does perhaps more justice to these enigmatic words than the English: “Und nach dem Feuer kam ein stilles, sanftes Sausen” (דקה דממה קול). Even better, in Buber-Rosenzweig’s translation, which Schoenberg could not consider, we read: “Eine stimme verschwebenden Schweigens.” 69 This translation suggests something on the verge of being heard and unheard, neither harmonious (because harmonious already implies fullness) nor familiar, though still specific and capable of being identified as such, even as it differs radically from the warmth and mellowness that characterizes the rendering of this moment in Mendelssohn’s Elijah. If anything, the phrase seems closer to the moment of revelation in Mendelssohn’s Paulus oratorio where, on Paul’s way to Damascus, the Lord appeared to him solely as a voice: “And his companions which journeyed with him, stood, and they were afraid, hearing a voice but seeing no man!” For his part, Paul was blinded and “saw no man.” Such a moment of revelation, of voice without magical vision, should be considered by Schoenberg as stronger, purer, and theologically preferable. Mendelssohn, one may recall (and surely Schoenberg did), embodies this moment through a feminine choir, “of 4 daughters of the voice” (he was criticized for that, for it is written: “and he heard a voice”) in pianissimo. Mendelssohn could appreciate the centrality of the message carried by these voices; himself a convert, he knew it changed not only Paul’s life, but, as a result, the life of so many after him. That Mendelssohnian moment of voice without vision, might infiltrate here; though, of course, without the communal musical language and intentions that were so central for Mendelssohn.70

Also here we find voice without vision. There is no real bush, not even behind the closed curtain, though the voices perhaps serve as its replacement. Or might they be understood as celestial “sirens” attracting pious listeners?71 To be sure, their sonority at once defines the scene...
and moves beyond it. Thus the voices transcend their initial location in the manner of the Shechina – a divine “residence” that moves to wherever its people are. But first these voices envelope Moses’ speech and motifs, as well as the words spoken by the “Voices from the Burning Bush.” From the point of view of the twelve-tone row of the work, the first two step chordal progress consists of the outer six elements of its basic order; with the second complementary one a sophisticated palindromic structure is being completed, as Michael Cherlin shows, with two additional notes from the “internal” hexacord (Cherlin 1991, 55-7). This, it should be stressed, is known only through interpretative labor, which in turn can guide the ear. For the non-enlightened ear, it can be misunderstood as but a slight chordal variation, missing its “grammatical” twelve-tone function, as Cherlin argues. Whether such double-face procedures, procedures that can be interpreted in terms of both old and new musical grammars – extant all through Moses und Aron – should be scrutinized with regard to their epistemological “correctness” remains to be seen. For now, I merely claim that they are inherent to this aesthetic-political-theological edifice. Be that as it may, this sonoric structure betrays a clear perceptual identity, and thus can operate as sign and locus, leitmotif and auditory frame.

Into this chordal frame, which is repeated (the curtain is still closed, we are in measure 3) – now its first unit is carried by oboe, flute and bassoon – a jerky, ascending melodic contour appears as the main voice (Hauptstimme) carried by the piano, molto staccato. Is this musical opening, at once poignant and enigmatic, to be regarded as an internal subjective reaction of an unseen agent? Does it mimic some upward movement, such as the raising of the theater curtain? A similar gesture follows, now augmented in rhythm and colors (and, through addition of xylophone and piccolo) accentuating the sharpness and hardness of the former gesture. It reiterates the first chordal unit while also proffering its resolution by the complementary notes of the row, carried by the Hauptstimme. Then the curtain opens. A sort of reply is heard by the trumpet, as if heralding something. The violin has just played two downward fifths; to be partially echoed, upward, by the trombone, connoting, through gesture and timbre, divine judgment, or maybe even death, all within the framework of the divine and the mysterious. Now we see Moses. When exactly did he arrive? How long has he stood there? Did he see, or experience, anything before this “in-medias-res” beginning? Unlike us, Moses is not bothered by the possibility of being associated with a Paul or an Elijah; the upward and downward jerked contour could be, in the tradition of dramatic music, “his” – a sort of internal movement. When he starts speaking, the enveloping Divine sound stops. Moses’ bare voice is now only sparsely accompanied by dyad chords – pitch associations that will soon be linked with his persona. We hear him speaking German, using terms that became in this culture theologically loaded. His “tiefe, große Stimme” (deep resounding voice) should slowly, monotonously, utter the syllables, without falling into real pitch: “Einziger, ewiger, allgegenwärtiger, unsichtbarer und unvorstellbarer Gott!” (“Only one, infinite omnipresent one, unseen, and unpresentable God”). In poignant divergence from Exodus, this theologian, who learned his lesson so well, repeating it syllable by syllable, acknowledges that which he experiences in terms of the ideas he has so long cultivated. What does he expect? Clearly, from his point of hearing, our musical surrounding (that which is beyond the voices) can be but a symbolic representation of his internal mental course.  

In whatever form he received it, Moses gets a divine reply. He never doubts its origin. The sonorous “O” is now verbalized. That which it carries – to be more precise, that which the six solo voices carry – is replicated by the speaking (four) “Voices from the Burning Bush” that should be “very clearly pronounced.” Together they say, in different temporal parsing: “put off your shoes: you have walked enough; you stand on holy ground.” And then, only three of the six voices (second unit) with no spoken equivalent: Nun verkünden, now go and tell, bring the message. A new musical layer is being added to this divine utterance – a six-note melodic motif carried by various instruments – consistent both with the twelve-tone row and with the unfolding of texture and expression. Its “transpositional” repetition, moving upward, seems to follow the Wagnerian tradition of leitmotivic, dynamic, and registral intensification. They suggest a “Moses” motif, representing his internal, emotional reaction, tension, aspiration, and maybe even pain. Cumulatively, these various elements produce a distinctive soundscape or sonorous signature that will readily be identified when it subsequently reappears.
When Moses speaks again, it will be clear he understands what this *Verkündigung* decree means. He now knows it is related to his people, the children of his forefathers (exchanging roles with the biblical God); he knows that his idea of God is intricately connected with God’s grace and mercy, and nevertheless he raises arguments on behalf of rejecting the mission. At this point, his views differ from those of the biblical Moses, resembling rather those of biblical Amos and Jeremiah. The Divine Voices reply, turning upside down God’s saying to biblical Moses: “Du hast die Greuel gesehen, die Wahrheit erkannt” – “you have seen the suffering” (which biblical is true) and, having viewed it, “you recognized the truth.” (In the biblical text God says: “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings . . .”) And then, clearly echoing Luther’s famous saying, the Divine Voices continue: “so kannst du nicht anders mehr: dein Volk befrein!” – here you are, you cannot do otherwise. You must free your people (in the Bible: my people). The Voices thus correct Moses: the idea of God that was revoked in you is the result of your historical, human background, as well as of sympathy and compassion. It does not emerge out of pure philosophical reflection; it is a moral inference. And you yourself know that you must abide by its inevitable implication. You must lead this people to freedom, both spiritual and existential (thus political). Musically, an inversion of the former structures – in fact the same texture as that of mm. 11-15 is partially played backward. By intoning the same soundscape, it communicates: no matter how you slice it, it is so.

These moments are indeed saturated, but not along the lines suggested by Adorno. They are so saturated that explication in this detailed way, right to the end of the scene, is much beyond the dimensions of this paper. But even thus far it is clear: all the above coordinates – Script and script, twelve-tone row and tonal procedures, old musical allusions and habits and straightforward realistic unfolding, oratorical and operatic forms, melodic and declamatory settings – are constantly playing against, parallel or in agreement with each other. The result is that at any moment Schoenberg’s music operates beyond what can be grasped by a continuous, accumulative perception. Like the scripture to which it refers, this music calls for interpretative investment and so naturally invites more than one interpretation.

In sum, the above analysis of the work’s first thirty measures suggests the following interpretation: a certain line becomes clear, which will be reinforced all through the scene and throughout the opera; the theological and the political are inseparable, since the political itself is embedded in the moral realm. The aesthetic should be related to both. How and why? This will become clear later. The Voices, still in the opening scene, urge Moses himself to perform aural and visual miracles (as in the Bible). They also offer him Aron as an assistant and companion – in a soft, suggestive melodious contour – and the revelation ends with a motif of choice/redemption, derived from the “Moses” motif. They make it clear that God reveals more of his “positive” than “negative” attributes, even though he remains an abstract Idea. It seems Moses is unwilling, or unable, to perceive this conflicted message. Could he have thought the Voices were misleading him? Why at a certain moment in the scene did he stop interacting with them? Was he overwhelmed? Had he lost his power? Perhaps this question remains unresolved even for Schoenberg himself.

**VI. Leadership of love and compassion: an idolatrous liaison?**

Moses’ reluctance becomes clear right at the beginning of the second scene, which takes us through its twenty-five opening measures from the Burning Bush episode to Moses’ meeting with Aron in the Wasteland.”
Example 2: Act 1, Scene 1, measures 98-109

What does this music, played by flute, accompanied by the harp and violins, tell us? It draws on something familiar: warm, transparent and light. It supplies us with melody, with several “keynotes”: musical, emotional, and ideational. The melodic element is not perceived as dodecaphonic. The first phrase (98-100) seems to reside in the happy precincts of B major. Enharmonically, it moves in the second phrase to F minor, a triton below (this triton is structurally central in the twelve-tone row), in which it continues, until it seems to switch again, in m. 105 to B. The tension and ambiguous tonal relations between the minor and major areas appear later in different, related temporary “keys”. The section could end on, perhaps, Ab-major. The melody organizes itself rhetorically: similar openings are found in m. 100, and 101, and in m. 102 and 104, and in m. 107 and 110. The rhythmic structure is also carefully woven, as is the registral dispersion. Throughout the score in its entirety, however, the twelve chromatic tones appear in each measure; being so transparent they give a bitonal rather than atonal feeling, particularly in relation to the flute line. The music is picturesque and atmospheric; the flute melody creates an aura of spaciousness, as in Mahler’s Lied von der Erde (“Der Abschied”) or Debussy’s Après Midi
It creates an oxymoronic impression of restlessness, sacredness, and pastoral, for the tonal disruptions hamper an immediate sympathetic response. *Whose* music is it, we ask, seeing the brothers walking towards each other? It may be Moses’ music, Aron’s music, or an atmospheric music which wraps them both; it can also stand for the composer’s voice – his point of view. It may remind us of a grand ritornello in a Bach oratorio; a long opening section, which repeats itself, almost note for note, as an infrastructure, in the sections that follow (125-147). Schoenberg indeed conceived it as an infrastructure of the scene, for as we learn from his sketchbooks the melody preceded the other parts:

The main repetition of the ritornello occurs when Moses and Aron start to talk to each other. Aron, as many have noticed, sings on the notes of the dodecaphonic row, something he will not do again to this extent. These very notes are carved from within the previous music, as if they were part of it, dormant in it. The other tones of the ritornello change accordingly, to fit into the new “melody”. But in the middle of each of Aron’s phrases, the ritornello music stops and Moses enters, against a sparse orchestral backdrop, declaiming his reactions in *Sprechstimme*. The opening music seems thus to stand for Aron’s music; Moses has almost no share in it. It may signify what the biblical God told Moses in advance: “Aaron cometh forth to meet thee, and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart” (*Exodus* 4: 14). He will be glad, and not you, suggests Schoenberg. Were he more enthusiastic, could it turn the ensuing “dialogue” into a better conversation? Moses and Aron, it soon becomes clear, are not really listening to each other; Moses reacts to the first words of Aron, then he bursts into his phrase, unheard by his melo-dramatic brother. He appears as if he is out of “order”. He neither belongs to the old tonal order, nor to the new dodecaphonic one. What was still unclear in the first scene now becomes obvious: Moses is not part of the musical universe, but rather lives in its margins: “And Moses took the Tabernacle, and pitched it without the camp, and called it the Tabernacle of the congregation. And it came to pass, that everyone who sought the Lord went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp” (*Exodus* 33: 7). “Pitched without”, or be “out-of-pitch” (a pun possible in English alone and of no use to Schoenberg): the idea of being out of pitch, outside of the public order, so as to reach that which is above being, has been time and again mentioned in the critical literature on this opera, with particular attention to the moment Moses “chooses” to enter into the
row, disintegrating immediately into his *Sprechgesang* habits. But unlike the biblical Moses, whose “pitching without” served the people’s religious needs, this going “out of pitch” conveys only little communal concern. Moses, it seems, has not learned much from the Burning Bush revelation. He reiterates, and almost in the same form, his previous convictions, even more vehemently denying any concreteness that the Divine Voices allow. Does his autism react to Aron’s exaggerated emphasis on concrete, communicative elements in the religious mission – a refusal to live by the antinomy that inheres in God’s message?

The final composed scene of the opera, following the confrontation over the golden calf, is a partial recapitulation of the second scene. After all that has transpired the two brothers have no alternative but to listen attentively to each other. Aron is full of judicious claims against Moses’ stark purism, becoming an empiricist philosopher cognizant of the imagistic aspect of all human communication, including the purportedly divine ones. Their musical environment becomes even more suggestive than in the former dialogue between them, highlighting the emotional flow and reinforcing its pictorial elements. This becomes clear in the opening exchange, which thematizes the idea-word-picture-miracle element in relation to both its visual and vocal embodiment, and their effect on the struggle over the people’s spiritual guardian- and leadership:

Moses: Aron, was hast du getan?
Aron: Nichts neues! Nur, was stets meine Aufgabe war: Wenn dein Gedanke kein Wort, mein Wort kein Bild ergab, vor ihren Ohren, ihren Augen, ein Wunder zu tun.
Moses: Auf wessen Geheiß?
Moses: Ich habe nicht gesprochen.
Aron: Aber ich habe dennoch verstanden.
Moses (drohend eine Schritt auf Aron zu): Schweig!

(Moses: Aron, what have you done?
Aron: Nothing new! Only, what my task has always been: when your idea brought forth no word, my word brought forth no image, I made marvels before their ears, before their eyes.
Moses: Commanded by whom?
Aron: As always: I heard the voice from within
Moses: I have not spoken.
Aron: But nevertheless I understood it so.
Moses: (threateningly takes a step towards Aron): Quiet!
Aron (steps back alarmed): Your . . . mouth . . . you were long far from us . . .

Later, the Wasteland ritornello even more clearly accompanies only Aaron’s utterances, and now directly reveals his emotions and motives – what he feels towards the people he was chosen to lead (m. 1023): “Auch du würdest dies Volk lieben, hättest du gesehen, wie es lebt, wenn es sehen, fühlen hoffen darf.” (“You also would have loved this people, had you only seen how they lived if they allowed to see, feel and hope.”) And a few measures later in 1043, the melody now passes from the flute to the oboe (see Example 4), “Umschreibend, ohne auszusprechen: Verbote, furchterregend, doch befolgbar, sichern das Bestehen, die Notwendigkeit verklärend: Gebote, hart, doch hoffnungserweckend, verankern den Gedanken. Unbewußt wird getan, wie du willst.” (“Let me present it then,” says Aron, let me present how I see the way the idea, your idea, should be communicated to the people: “periphrastic, never specific, guarantee stability while transfiguring necessity. Stern prohibitions that inspire fear yet can give rise to hope, anchor the idea. Unconsciously we have done thy will.”) The idea, when communicated to the people, should be glowing emotionally. Fear, perseverance, hope, love – these would be, according to Aron, the emotional stages of the people on their way to attaining the idea as a guiding force in their life.
Example 4: Act 2, Scene 5, measures 1043-44

VII. Emotion, Sympathy, and Ideal States

In the dialogue between the biblical Moses and God, there is one exchange with tremendous theological implications, which Schoenberg chose not to include in his text. This occurs when Moses asks God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I will be what I will be” And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I will be has sent me to you”’ (Exodus 3: 13-14). I cannot do justice to the richness and complexity of God’s reply, which might well be adopted by Modernist artists as a political-theological-aesthetic message. Luther seemed to understand the power of this utterance for his own reformation project when he translated it as: “Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde. Und sprach: So sollst du zu den Israeliten sagen: ‘Ich werde sein’, der hat mich zu euch gesandt.” Schoenberg could not be unaware of this version; the other Jewish translation he owned (Bernfeld) rendered it in more “orthodox” vein yet: “Ich werde sein, der bin ich.”

Fixing God in name, image, content, or law is perhaps the root of all idolatry and of social exclusiveness. The God of the Old Testament is essentially openness itself and, as such, defies all patterns and fixity, or at least he can be so conceived. By the same token, he also fits into modern trends of Judaism, including those of Freud and Schoenberg, with the latter choosing to make this conception of God the leading idea of his 1938 American Kol Nidrei.

A possible reason for Schoenberg’s omission of this biblical passage from Moses und Aron may be that he expressed it indirectly elsewhere in that work, such as when God is worshipped in the wilderness in Act III. Wilderness – a major trope of modern Jewish authors – is, as Goldstein emphasizes, an image mediating “between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, between the locus of the concrete activity and the attainment of a spiritual goal” (Goldstein 1992, 154). Yet reading carefully the text of the third act, one does not get the impression that even this image is central to Moses’s thinking; the wilderness is an ambiguous place associated with both a community’s failure and instruction on its way to God, rather than a mere trope for indeterminate, open existence. More generally, though the last word in the written text is Moses’ (who beforehand bemoaned his lack of the appropriate word), the missing music, and Schoenberg’s prolonged wrestling with it, suggests that something did not work the way he thought it should. It could be that Schoenberg did not include God’s famous line in Exodus because he preferred to posit the inherent dilemma it entails for modern people through other means and connections than those of the Bible.

For what we have seen is that the conception of a God ohne Eigenschaften, a universal God devoid of all traits, not even negative ones, was in fact Moses’ own radical innovation, an idea of
divinity incompatible with that of the God of the Burning Bush who reveals his contradictory nature to Moses. In a paradoxical way, Moses’ vehement defense of his idea suggests an odd antagonism towards the revelation that God intends to historically appear on the political stage and redeem the Volk, the people, from its oppression by Pharaoh. His failure to hide his feelings points to Moses’ underlying failure to recognize the two essential faces of the monotheistic God, of which Spinoza, the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher, was well aware. Spinoza developed an abstract notion of a monotheistic God, in a way more abstract than that of Maimonides, though more immanent than the one advocated by Schoenberg’s Moses. At the same time, as Shlomo Pines has indicated, Spinoza understood that as a moral guarantor of the social contract of the modern, democratic state, the monotheistic God, if he were to be grasped by all people, wise and ignorant, elevated and simple, had to make use of images. Only images could generate the proper emotions, of love, fear, charity, and compassion, all necessary for the balanced operation of the multi-communal, liberal state Spinoza espoused. Spinoza left unspecified which “subjective” God each member, or group, of his community would choose for itself. But he knew well that emotions are necessary for the dynamic activation of a community obedient to God’s moral decree. As we noted, the life of the emotions is the main concern of Aron’s religion and political style, a concern that prevents him from seeing the overarching abstract spiritual idea that should govern it. Like Schoenberg’s Moses, Spinoza believed that philosophers should dispense with the specific embodiment of God’s ideas, and seek something beyond the sentiments of a specific religious community. Like Schoenberg, he maintained that “no men are esteemed less fit to direct public affairs than theorists or philosophers.” Schoenberg demonstrated that even the double rule of the philosopher and the statesman does not really work.

Ironically, Moses cannot escape his own emotive element. Once we understand this, it becomes clear that the work never tried to cope with the question of a musical-dramatic representation of God, but rather treats the emotional and existential conflicts instigated by his idea once they irrupt into an earthly human world populated by individuals and multitudes seeking to enlist it on behalf of their redemption. The twofold perceptual status of various musical operations, explained above, bespeaks the same epistemological bifurcation; it thus gives phenomenally distinctive expression to this philosophical idea. Such conflicts are compatible with the nature of the medium which expresses them: the opera. And yet, unlike traditional or even some Modernist opera, Moses und Aron seems to leave its emotional conflict unresolved.

The Modernist Jew, Schoenberg, has an advantage here over the modern Jew, Spinoza; he also perceives art as having a distinct advantage over philosophy. Had he been able to, Spinoza would have dispensed with all representation. He turned Moses into a Christ who directly communicates with God, soul to soul, rather than face to face or mouth to mouth. Theology was for him a necessity, so long as human beings still cling to concrete phenomena, though he was well aware of the perceptual and psychological dimensions of all human knowledge, and the irrational elements it introduces into all human consciousness and action.

In the post-Kantian world, aesthetics, rather than theology, looms large. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the Modernist era, philosophers and thinkers tried to listen more carefully to the ever-engaging configurations of art, and seized them for their own purposes. They were likewise well aware that art and aesthetics are always in danger of being petrified in self-serving, personal, or ideological forms. Adorno’s above mentioned criticism of the Gesamtkunstwerk is drawn along such lines. But there was another line, parallel and compatible with this one, which tended to emphasize the role of images as embodying memories and sentiments “that no argument could lay dead,” as George Eliot, voicing it through Daniel Deronda, maintained. Images granted the freedom to worship a communal God, thereby instantiating a freedom compatible with liberal convictions. Jews, as Leo Strauss maintained, tried to reconnect these ideas back to the theological space Spinoza had opened up, granting them a more immediate socio-political dimension. Schoenberg was probably influenced by these trends when he formed his Janus-face God as the ultimate emblem of these epistemological intricacies. Schoenberg’s God, or better, his imagined Divine presence indeed encompasses the entire gamut of possibilities to be expressed by voice and speech, dodecaphonic and free composition, operatic and oratorical techniques, the abstract and the concrete, new and old forms of expression. He thus appears much more a God with unendliche Eigenschaften, as Spinoza had conceived him, than as the...
abstract, unvorstellbarer God of Schoenberg’s Moses. And if one listens to the vox popoli, at the Zwischenspiel between Acts I and II, one hears how close God and the people are to each other. In placing this scene in the same strategic point in which the Burning Bush scene occurs (before the real action of the following act), Schoenberg makes it clear that the people are waiting for Moses who is late: “Wo ist Moses? Wo ist der Führer, Lange schon hat ihn keiner gesehen!” (Where is Moses? Where is the leader? It has been a long time since he was seen.) Forty days are enough for their feelings of frustration and anxiety to be awakened, feelings that will nurture, dynamize, the entire second Act – the act of the Golden Calf. In a way, the people, substituting the Burning Bush or its Voices, become themselves the revelation: God will not appear again. Listen to the bristling effect of their hissing voices, the short tromoli in a chiaroscuro orchestration, which creates a transparent, fragile texture, and to the dominant interval of the fifth which foreshadows the orgiastic rites. Human beings are left to their own struggles, trials, and errors. But God, in the first and only epiphany he offers, expresses his love and compassion for the people. He loves, as does Aron, who mediates this face, or phase of the divinity for the needy folk.

Schoenberg, like Aron, pays heed to the people, granting their experience of fear, suffering, hope, admiration, devotion and ecstasy a central place in the world he creates. One may still argue that there is an element of ironic detachment, even mockery, in the way he treats them. If this is the case, then all the protagonists should be so interpreted. Being situated in their experiential world, all characters, including Moses, prove clearly unable to extricate themselves from their traumatic and existential background, though they take steps in this direction. In the debate between Cohen and Rosenzweig regarding Spinoza’s interpretation of Judaism, as it is presented by Leo Strauss, the issue of the sympathetic judgment of Spinoza looms large. Cohen accuses the seventeenth-century excommunicated philosopher of an uncompassionate treatment of his own people and lore, of overlooking their agonized history and dire circumstances, a criticism which Rosenzweig subsequently turned back on Cohen himself, claiming that Cohen had failed to take into account Spinoza’s own situatedness in the historical context in which he acted and wrote. Thus they convert a problem which was central in the polemic between Jews and Christians in the nineteenth century into an internal Jewish one. For George Eliot, who had long pondered the status of sympathy as a unique moral sentiment in the tradition of Adam Smith, the principle of sympathy centers on the requirement to balance at all times our judgment of other people’s minds and actions with our understanding of their “fate” or history. Schoenberg seems to treat his protagonists very much in accord with this underlying precept of Eliot’s realist art, thereby giving his work its moral and experiential force.

All this, then, brings us back to Moses, of whom we must now ask: is he really so oblivious to the people’s plight, and autistically preoccupied with his own idealistic world? Yet God – or the Divine voices – said that precisely this plight brought him to his idea of Him. Does he really go through a transformative process, the way Goldstein maintains, in which he returns to this more complex understanding of man and God? The main charge in his understanding is perhaps that his philosophical idea finally acquires a clear ethical dimension – i.e. service of God through Wunschlosigkeit or, as Freud was to call it in Moses and Monotheism, Triebverzicht (“renunciation of the instincts”). This obliging ideal, both Schoenberg’s Moses (and probably in this case also Schoenberg) and Freud maintain, embodies the essence of being chosen. Both Schoenberg and Freud, though one is a theist and the other an atheist, left the specific form of such renunciation open. In the case of Schoenberg’s Moses this should be understood within the context of the opera’s specific aesthetic properties. By speaking rather than singing Moses in fact opts for a domain which is not yet part of the universe of musical sounds, or art, though it is part of its acoustic substance. Like the congregation’s tabernacle, the spoken voices, from the point of view of music as art form, are in principle, un-systematized, outside “the camp” (Exodus 33: 7). They smash the sanctioned metaphysics of music, in particular that of Schopenhauer, who saw music as the origin of all origins – the Urwille – just as Moshe had smashed the old tables. Indeed Schoenberg, as Carl Dahlhaus has pointed out, moved away from such metaphysics; for him texts, programs, and the like “appear as interchangeable surface phenomena of the music”. This was an essential component of Schoenberg’s Modernist Monotheism, which needs undetermined borders and anti-fetishist dynamics in order to constitute thought, transcendence and art. The fact that the
not-yet-aesthetic is included within that which is artistically well-defined is one of the many paradoxes that underwrite this work.

So we have a monotheistic God, but a divergent world with at least two heroes, two aesthetics, and two ethics or existential modes. Our sympathies are thus divided, for we can feel for Moses, for Aron, for the people: for all or for none. Harmoniousness is likewise thwarted, as in the old synagogue, by way of a rich soundscape full of unconsummated, heterophonic vocalities. In this sense the work goes beyond the sublime. It has devised both a mode and the means to confront the sublime deity wherever it has fossilized into a mere idol or fetishized representation. Schoenberg’s achievement here benefits from juxtaposition to an analogous dramatic moment at the end of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* and, even more poignant yet, *Parsifal*, with only one form of compassion, one mode of worship, aestheticized through and through. By contrast, *Moses und Aron*, in both its double ending – the musical second act and the spoken third one – fades out brokenly, indecisively, like a shadow play. And while it addresses the pre-war world, its complicated message, which grew out of Schoenberg’s Jewish experience and artistic conscience and consciousness, seems of great relevance even today. Our postmodern world in which we hear desperate calls to create a pluralist polity committed to an overarching ethical vision, should sensitize us to the multiple and contingent voices of human existence. Even as we perceive these voices as potentially susceptible to argumentative weakness and dogmatic narrowness, we should open our ears and hearts to the daring call – artistic and otherwise – that bids us to search for ways to go beyond them.

Notes

1Preliminary versions of this paper were given as lectures in Oxford’s “Faculty of Music Lectures” (May 2000) and in “Einstein Forum” Potsdam (January 2001). My work on this essay also benefited greatly from my stay as a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 2004-5. The score of the work referred to in this article is *Moses und Aron, Oper in drei Akten*, Studien Partitur (Mainz: B. Schott’s Söhne, 1958). For the extant scores and documents see [http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/no_op/compositions_Moses_Quellen_e.htm](http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/no_op/compositions_Moses_Quellen_e.htm). I have used the English translation (embedded in the score) by Allen Forte but allowed myself often to diverge from it. I thank Thomas Pfau for his further improvement of these translations. Though musical analysis is pertinent to the argument, its technical elements should not deter the non-musicological reader; they can be skipped over like mathematical equations of sorts. Some of the technical terms are explained below, when used.


4 For a summary of various solutions to this incompleteness see Goldstein 1992, 151-2.

5 Schoenberg himself interestingly expressed his need to distance himself from the object of imitation: “the big step away from the imitation of nature (sic: the object being imitated) is the first step of art.” In “Some Ideas about the Establishment of a Modern Theory of Composition” (ca. 1900), quoted in David M. Schiller, Bloch, Schoenberg and Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 93.

6 In the following the biblical brother is always Aaron, whereas the Schoenbergian – Aron.

7 The following English translations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, online edition.

8 The script itself insinuates that Aaron was lying, since according to the Bible’s narrative (told from an omniscient narrator’s point of view), the people did not demand a substitute god, and he made quite a deliberate act of creation: מסכה עגל ויעש בחерт אתו ומיצר "and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf.” But even then, Aaron’s description can be taken as the creator’s own process of creation which was much less deliberate, rather than from that of its final result.

9 This without taking into consideration a history of perception and reception which further transforms the import of the art object.

10 For the history of the Golem legend see Moshe Idel, Golem, Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions On the Artificial Anthropoid (New York: Suny, 1990).


12 For the story of this painting and the above anecdote see: http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_Of_Art/viewOne.asp?dep=21&viewMode=0&item=47.106

13 Aristotle, Poetics (London and New York: Penguin), Chapter 1.


The first years in Berlin had a positive effect on him. See Ringer 1990, 125-7.

The reason for taking literary and not musical examples stems, in this case, from the attempt to show similarities across media in relation to their actual activation; to bring “realistic” evidence to bear on some of the notions the opera addresses in a more arcane way and to use the more familiar (literature, psychoanalysis) in order to throw light on the less familiar (technical musicological stuff).

Echoes of the German are heard through the Hebrew in many places, some of them hilarious. Thus Vogel creates a sonoric equivalent to the German – Na Ja, in Hebrew: Na, Yafeh, a very idiomatic expression in German, literally meaning in Hebrew, “nice” but signifying more here – “that’s it” or “I see . . . ” – similar to the German equivalent (see 225, 243 in the Hebrew text; no such equivalent in the English translation). Such “phono-semantic transposition” played an important role in the development of Modern Hebrew, according to Ghil’ad Zuckerman in *Language Contact and Lexical Enrichment in Israeli Hebrew* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). It can however be a literal translation from Yiddish: Nu scheun (I would like to thank Yifat Monnickendam for calling my attention to this possibility). In other places the use of Du (you) is deployed in the way that it socially functions in German (114) but definitely not in Hebrew (231). Even more straightforwardly, a popular song is quoted in its German original.

The language, learned in Vogel’s childhood as part of his Jewish upbringing, the holy language of prophets and poets, has been secularized by two generations of writers and speakers, without forgoing its former religious layers (ironically or suggestively used). The idea of discrepancy between the art object and its imitated reference as a measure for aesthetic quality (i.e. the greater the discrepancy the more aesthetic merit the art object gains) was elaborated by Adam Smith in his essay “Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts” (first published posthumously in 1795).

Examples to this involuntarism are ubiquitous all through the novel, especially in the case of Gurdweill himself.

The title of the second part of the novel, which is translated by Wilkins as “Pseudo Reality Prevails”; this seems to miss this aspect of the German title and the novel’s esprit, as it is also expressed in Chapter 4 entitled: “Wenn es Wirklichkeitsinn gibt, muß es auch Möglichkeitsinn geben” – “If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility.”

This clearly betrays a Leibnizian notion of “possible worlds” along its epistemological and aesthetic ramifications.
28Typically, Gurdweill is part of this crowd, whereas Ulrich remains at home, viewing from that protected place the occurrences below.

29See my discussion of this below.

30Utopia is a predominant theme in Musil’s novel, particularly the utopia chapters that take us out of town, to Ulrich’s lost sister Agathe, in his father’s house (Vol. 2). For Gurdweill there is no utopia, only a missed one. A piece of life out of the usual urban hell, upon the birth of Martin, his supposed son, at Cobenzel is a reminder of what life could be: an afternoon tour, with Lotte and Dr. Astel, strewn with signs of the impending catastrophes (Chapter 24). See also next footnote.

31Freedom from images, from pre-conceived qualities, is impossible, as we are reminded time and again. In highly assimilated Vienna, a new kind of existence brings out the most phantasmagoric notions of the devouring Christian woman (sometimes depicted as Lilit) horrendously depicted in Agnon’s famous short story, “The Lady and the Peddler” in Near and Apparent (Shocken, 1951). I propose to read Vogel’s novel as an allegory in the Benjaminian sense of the term, utilizing this mythological plot: a seemingly possible community (premised on cultural assimilation) of Jews and Christians unravels into a horrific dystopia.

32These separate plot trajectories include, for example, that of Moosbrugger, the serial killer of women; that of Clarissa, a devotee of Nietzsche and Wagner; the various people related to the ‘Parallel Campaign’; Ulrich’s lovers, as well as the different rhetorical modes associated with them (including variations in meaning of the same terms and words); the non-linearity of the narrative; and the tensions between the scientific and the mystical, all of which nevertheless aspire to a totality which is never achieved.

33I follow Yaron Ezrahi’s distinction between images and imaginaries (in Necessary Fiction: Imagining Democracy between Modernity and Post Modernity, forthcoming): whereas images are concrete and usually discrete representations of entities and objects, imaginaries are composites of facts and fictions that may acquire a degree of reality when they are widely treated as unquestionable givens. See also Charles Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).


36It might be also that Hegel’s visits to Abraham Mendelssohn’s house, where he could become directly exposed to old Moses Mendelssohn’s aesthetic ideas, or later to the oratorios of his grandson, the young Felix Mendelssohn, had an impact on him in this regard, but this is mere speculation. For these relations see Larry Todd, Mendelssohn, A Life in Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182-3, 187. Terry Pinkard, Hegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 602f., 618-20

37A dissonant melody, first intoned by an anonymous anti-Semitic critic of Meyerbeer, in Schumann’s Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, it caught the attention of a certain K. Freigedank, (Richard...
Wagner’s pseudonym, meaning free-thought). Wagner took this as a starting point for his notorious Das Judentum in der Musik of 1850, where he tried to explain the ground for the Volksstümliche Abneigung that good Germans feel against Jewish essences. Trying to search for the ground of this aversion, Wagner disavowed Jewish musical expression of the holy of harmoniousness and euphoniousness. “Geist verwirrenden Gurgel’s, Gejodel’s und Geplapper’s” (mind- and soul-bamboozling gurgling, whinnying, and prattling). See HaCohen, 2006.

38 On this creative process see White 1985, 7-48.


42 This concept in relation to religious phenomenology, and the role the auditorial/vocal could play in it, was developed by Rudolf Otto in his famous book, Das Heilige, Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen (Gotha: Leopold Klottz Verlag), which was published in seventeen editions between 1912 and 1929!

43 “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20: 3-6).


48 See Musil, Ch. 1. Similar notions appear in Married Life, e.g.: “Not far off, the park band was playing, and the tune united with rattling of the trams and the hooters of the cars outside to form a curious medley of noises and sounds. By concentrating intently on the music it was possible to weed out the foreign elements and return it, with a strenuous effort, to its pristine state. But
Gurdweill actually preferred it the way it was, with the pulse of the life of the city beating outside it. Thus he imagined the music of a band playing on a ship at sea, and absorbing into itself the pounding of the mighty waves” (283; in the Hebrew source 198).

49Vogel 1998, 211:


52David Lewin (1972), was perhaps the first to pursue this line of argument, when remarking that “the problem posed by the drama is not whether Moses or Aron is ‘right,’ but rather how God can be brought to the Volk” (62).


54The classical works in this trend are R. Strauss’s Salome, Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande, and Berg’s Wozzeck.

55See also Lewin (1972) and the recent, insightful essay by Jan Assman “Die Mosaische Unterscheidung in Schönbergs Moses und Aron” in the program notes for the performance of the work at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin, 2004, 15-24.

56“Ewig in Gottes Wort ist sein Geist! Der Wortlaut ist nur Erscheinungsform; dem Augenblick angepasst, den Erfordernissen der Wüstenwanderung.” Quoted from Arnold Schönberg, “Der Biblische Weg: Schauspiel in drei Akten,” see the original in the Arnold Schönberg Center

The English translation is Goldstein’s, (see Goldstein 1992, 145).
An accusation concerning literalness/materialism vs. allegorism/spiritualism, which Christians and Jews leveled against each other, is brought in the context of this drama between the Orthodox David Asseino and the liberal Jew – the leader Max Aruns.


This disposition is featured first and foremost in the three magical signs, in the water from the rock, and in the pillar of smoke and fire. In the Bible all are associated with or performed by Moses rather than Aaron.

At the time of the composition of the opera Schoenberg probably owned two translations of the Bible – Luther’s and Simon Bernfeld’s. When I find it instructive I refer the reader to both translations. For the content of his library, see the Arnold Schoenberg Center website: [http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/books/books_b_e.htm](http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/books/books_b_e.htm)


Menachem Lorberbaum, “Spinoza’s Theological-Political Problem,” *Journal of Hebraic Political Studies* 1: 2 (2005), 222. I would like to thank the author for letting me quote this article before publication.

In this it is different from musical works of the tonal era, which are tonally more continuous in relation to each other and thus sometimes exchangeable.

For the opening set form of the work in Schoenberg’s handwriting see [http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/no_op/compositions_Moses_Quellen_Hilfsmittel_e.htm](http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/no_op/compositions_Moses_Quellen_Hilfsmittel_e.htm) no. 3048. White’s (1985, 160-225) pioneering analysis of leitmotiv elements in the opera sometimes overlooks the perceptual constraint of leitmotifs (they should be well profiled) which is crucial for the efficiency of the leitmotifs qua leitmotifs.

Michael Cherlin, “Dramaturgy and Mirror Imagery in Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron: Two Paradigmatic Interval Palindromes,” *Perspective of New Music* 29: 2 (1991), 56. Cherlin allegorizes this erroneous ascription of new grammatical operations to older musical ones as the misunderstanding of Moses’ words by Aron and the people. This will be differently interpreted below.

For illustrating this question, I suggest the following comparison: when Shakespeare’s protagonists shift from blank verse to rhyme verse before they exit – what does it tell us about their consciousness? Of course, not a technical knowledge, but rather the awareness that they are concluding an interaction, an occurrence, moving elsewhere. The spectator sensitive to this cadential element more readily reflects on that which transpired as a closed unit. The phenomenology of protagonist and spectator is thus different and yet closely interrelated.
In the Passion tradition (e.g. St. Matthew Passion), Turba stands for the chorus sections representing the voices of the many in the biblical story – priests, people, disciples, treated in musical-realistic means (rhythmical fugato sections).

Martin Buber und Franz Rosenzweig (verdeutscht), Die Schrift, Bücher der Geschichte, Stuttgart: Bibelgesellschaft, (1955) 1992, S. 406. This collocation became central in “Unetane Tokef,” one of the most central prayers in the Jewish Days of Awe.


Celestial sirens as allegorical figures appear in Milton’s “At a Solemn Music.” He himself relies on a tradition that distinguished celestial sirens from earthly ones. Descendents of the former appear in Schoenberg’s Jakobsleiter.

See fn. 67 above.

Schoenberg’s technological idea for this clear rendition was rather hilarious, suggesting that telephones and loudspeakers be used for temporal adjustment.

Again, as Cherlin argues, this is likewise “false” though immediate.

For Schoenberg’s handwritten score of this page see: http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/music/works/no_op/compositions_Moses_Quellen_B_e.htm; no. 2782-3.

Hemiola – the rhythmic relation of three notes in the time of two.

Are they walking towards each other as the Bible, and later the people in Scene 3 imply? No instructions in the score itself are given as to how they should behave during this opening part.

Taken from Arnold Schoenberg, Moses und Aron: Oper in drei Akten kritischer bericht, heraus, von Christian Martin Schmidt, (Mainz: Schott’s Soehne, 1977-1998), 112. The letters and Numbers above the notes stand for the permutation of the “row” from which it is taken.

“Reinige dein Denken, lös’ es von Wertlosem, weihe es Waherm” (Purify your thinking. Free it from worthless things. Let it be righteous) he says in a rather Wagnerian way; and then, no longer sung: “Kein anderer Gewinn dankt deinem Opfer” (no other reward is returned for your sacrifice); Latham (2000) has shown that this moment takes place, when the energetic flow of the dialogue of the two reaches its most intensive point, and coordinating with Aron’s “spoken” moment, thus signifying a moment of emotional annoyance. It also manifests Moses’ capability to sing, to express “worldly” emotions and hence his refusal to routinely do that.

Note that Aron correlates emotions with restrictions and commandments the way Spinoza does (Treatise Chapter 5, 72-4). Musically speaking, the metamorphosis the ritornello undergoes sounds like a tonal equivalent of the subjunctive mood of Aron’s rhetoric.

Buber-Rosenzwieg went beyond that translation, granting the verse an even more clear ethical-experiential sense: “ich werde Dasein, als ich Dasein werde.”
Eli Zaretzky in “The Place of Psychoanalysis in the History of the Jews” (a paper read at the Jewish Museum Berlin, May 2005) describing Freud’s perception of Judaism as an openness, an essence inaccessible, is relevant here. I would like to thank Eli Zaretzky for allowing me to quote from this article before publication. On Kol Nidrei see the fascinating psychoanalytic analysis by Theodor Reik, ibid, 167-219, and my interpretation of Schoenberg’s work in “Negative Theology as a Gesture of Negation: Comments on Schoenberg’s Kol Nidrei,” Chosen articles from the 13th World Congress of Jewish Studies – an Online Edition, 2003 (in Hebrew): http://www.lekket.com/articles/003000021.pdf. The idea of Jewishness as openness was prevalent at the time, and was expressed by many, e.g. Franz Werfel as quoted by Alma Mahler (Tagebuch – 31 Juli 1918, in Alma Mahler – Werfel, Mein Leben (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 106.

“Immer, wenn ihr . . . verwendet eure Gaben zu falschen und nichtigen Zwecken, um im Wettbewerb mit fremden Völkern an ihren niedrigen Freuden teilzunehmen, immer, wenn ihr die Wunschlosigkeit der Wüste verläßt und eure Gaben euch zur höchsten Höhe geführt haben, immer werdet ihr wieder heruntergestürzt werden vom Erfolg des Mißbrauches, zurück in die Wüste . . . Aber in der Wüste seid ihr unüberwindlich und werdet das Ziel erreichen.” (Moses und Aron, 3 Akt)

See Shlomo Pines, “Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologic-Politicus, Maimonides and Kant,” Studies in the History of Jewish Philosophy, The Transmission of Texts and Ideas, (ביביסת היאב ומאימונידס וקנט) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1977 in Hebrew), 306-349. This argument is supported by Lorberbaum, where it is argued that Spinoza advocates a “polity congenital to individuals seeking their own good and not a polity charged with realizing human perfection.” (Lorberbaum 2005, 212)

This calls to mind Schoenberg’s Biblische Weg multi-vocal society. See Goldstein, 2000, 144.


Gehardt, Spinoza, Opera (Heidelberg 1925) Chapter 1, 21 (as quoted in Pines, 1977, 314).


Though no copy of Spinoza’s treatises is to be found in Schoenberg’s library, Spinoza’s ideas could have reached him through other channels, such as through his acquaintance and correspondence with Jacob Klatzkin, well-known for his Hebrew translation of Spinoza’s Ethics. Any comparison between Spinoza and Schoenberg should of course take into consideration that unlike Spinoza, Schoenberg was not a democrat and, like many of the Weimer generation of Jewish intellectuals, adhered to a certain form of enlightened autocracy, that in his case orients itself in those years into the Zionist revisionist ideology of Zabotinksy. Still, Schoenberg was pluralist and, despite his tendency to take extreme ideological positions, was not dogmatic in his philosophical inclinations.


This is discussed in my forthcoming book, see footnote 2.