

# PHILOSOPHIES OF LITERATURE IN THE WORKS OF NIETZSCHE AND BENJAMIN

by

JOHN ALLEN STEPHENS

(Under the direction of Beatrice Hanssen)

## ABSTRACT

In Friedrich Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy and Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" the emergence of art is based on cultural traditions which are negated by modernizing forces. For Nietzsche these modernizing forces can be negated by the re-emergence of tragedy through the "German spirit" that possesses the same capacity for aesthetic sensitivity and creativity as the Hellenic genius of Greek tragedy. For Benjamin however, modern culture is unable to utilize storytelling as a remedy for the modern world's loss of meaning. Under Benjamin's perspective of historical realism, culture and social structure are both tied to particular historical moments, and the present is unable to recover past experiences. This thesis considers how Nietzsche and Benjamin assess the connection between art and culture, and how these philosophies of literature reflect different assessments of the possibility of the rebirth of art.

INDEX WORDS: Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, The Storyteller

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by

JOHN ALLEN STEPHENS

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by

JOHN ALLEN STEPHENS

Major Professor: Beatrice Hanssen

Committee: Christine Haase  
Max Reinhart

Electronic Version Approved:  
Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
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## PREFACE

Following the practice of many Nietzsche scholars, references to “The Attempt at Self Criticism” (SC) and The Birth of Tragedy (BT) indicate sections, not page numbers. References to Benjamin and all other works cited refer to the page numbers (of the translations when applicable.)

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The question of literature and its cultural role is taken up by Nietzsche in The Birth of Tragedy and Benjamin in “The Storyteller.” These works look at how the literary genre fills the role of justifying existence for culture through an aesthetic relation of man to the world. The justification of existence is not merely a result of cultural and artistic developments, but emerges from a need for man to relate to the world around him. This need is in some respects grounded in the particular culture traditions in which the literary work emerges, and in other respects indicates a natural need. By looking at how the question of existence has been answered in the art of past cultures, and how these redemptive forms have died or become archaic due to modern impulses that delimit the world of modern man, both authors assess the possibility of the re-emergence of an aesthetics of redemption.

The question of justification can be divided into three main areas of inquiry: how has existence been justified in past cultures through a combination of aesthetic principles and metaphysical needs, how has this justification been undone by changes in modern culture, and what kind of justification is needed to answer the question of existence for modern man. In answer to the first part we find a basic similarity in the development of art through a balance of the need for individuation and unity. In the second we see a common shift in each case towards the individual need. It is the third part where the assessments of Nietzsche and Benjamin show

the largest divergence. Nietzsche predicts the rebirth of tragedy in the “German spirit” and sees Richard Wagner and his music as the realization of a German reawakening. For Benjamin the story is the art of a bygone era that cannot be reclaimed by the modern world.

Nietzsche, in his claim that “it is only as aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are truly justified,”<sup>1</sup> points to a basic existential crisis that persists across cultures. Thus the Greeks’ answer to the question of existence in the form of tragedy is not only an example of justification, but exemplary in its unification of natural and eternal artistic impulses. According to Nietzsche’s philosophy of literature, tragedy is the product of an artistic genius who combines natural artistic principles into a form which justifies the terror inherent in nature. For Benjamin, the story belongs to all who tell it and remember it, and it reflects the social structures and values of the people who take part in its oral tradition. In the story as in the tragedy nature is reconciled with death, but the perception of nature and death are both culturally determined in Benjamin’s case. For the story need is culturally determined and related to the extent to which a culture is capable of framing its own question of existence.

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<sup>1</sup> [nur als ästhetisches Phänomen ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig gerechtfertigt] BT 5.

## CHAPTER 2

### PHILOSOPHIES OF LITERATURE IN THE WORKS OF NIETZSCHE AND BENJAMIN

In the “Attempt at Self Criticism” added to the beginning of the 1886 edition of The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche asks why the Greeks of all people should have needed tragedy, the “art form of pessimism.” By introducing pessimism as a principle of strength, exhibited by the Greeks of “the strongest, and most courageous period,” Nietzsche attempts to revalue the concept of pessimism and its opposite, optimism. In contrast to the popular conception of pessimism as a “sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary and weak instincts,”<sup>2</sup> pessimism can also indicate the “fullness of existence,” the desire to face the difficulty of existence as a test of one’s own strength. Pessimism is freed from its pejorative connotation as cultural weakness and is used to indicate an outlook that sees the world as horrible and threatening. The result of pessimism can be reaffirming or negating depending on the capacity of a culture to create a form of aesthetic redemption. For the Greeks of the tragic period, the ideal culture in Nietzsche’s view, pessimism allowed for the development of art to its highest form, while in other cultures a lack of strength and redemptive art can lead the to weakening of “the instinctive lust for life”<sup>3</sup> and an ethic of self-destruction.

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<sup>2</sup> [das Zeichen des Niedergangs, Verfalls, des Missratenseins, der ermüdeten und geschwächten Instinkte] SC 1.

<sup>3</sup> [die instinctive Lust zum Leben] BT 15.

As an outlook related to weakness and as the cause of the death of tragic culture, optimism too undergoes a reevaluation. Optimism is likewise neither positive nor negative. It masks the suffering in the world through faith in a theoretical or theological belief, but this masking is by its very nature illusory. The illusion of optimism is an escape from pessimism and indicates a decline in strength, and preserves man by providing principles of rationalization. The transition from the period of Greek tragedy to the period of Greek cheerfulness and Socratic thought was a shift from pessimism to optimism that undermined the aesthetic need of the tragic Greeks and brought the end of the greatest era of Greek culture. .

Through the reevaluation of pessimism and optimism Nietzsche redefines their connotation based on their ability to provide true redemption of the world. The optimistic view is steadily attacked so that, by the time it encounters modern culture in Nietzsche's account, it is in sore need of correction. Here we encounter a problem: the extent to which optimism and pessimism are redemptive or not does not define a need. Despite the falseness of their experience, the optimists are happy to go on dreaming in their dream, and Nietzsche shows how, for hundred of centuries, science has resisted its own correction. How are we then able to explain the need for tragedy, and the need for its rebirth? The key is the need of the genius. For the Hellenic genius, because it possessed superior sensibilities of art and intellect, optimism was insufficient to provide even a false sense of redemption. It knew the terror of the world and desired to face it. In contrast, the man of science does not wish to face the terror of the world. However, the new force emerging from its sleep – the German spirit – does see the terror in existence, the false justification of the world in the empty promise of scientific thought. The need that we now have for tragedy is a need once again made possible by genius, this time the German genius.

The need that we see in the relation of genius to tragedy actually indicates two kinds of needs, one of want and one of necessity. The genius needs tragedy as an urgent desire to reveal and justify the world, and the world needs tragedy as a necessity of its justification because, as Nietzsche defines it, “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are truly justified.” In a certain way tragedy is always needed, because tragedy alone is the art form that presents the world and existence as justified, but it takes genius to recognize this need and to see how the current justification of the world may be false. (Although it may be the case that some other art form could create aesthetic world-justification through another synthesis of Dionysian and Apollinian artistic effects, but it has thus far not been realized, at least not in Nietzsche’s view.)

#### The Tradition of Greek Pessimism

The Greeks as an ideal culture were poised to take the greatest advantage of a pessimistic outlook since they possessed the cultural, artistic, and mythic impulses necessary to develop an art form that answered their pessimistic need. The question remains however of where the pessimistic outlook of the Greeks and the cultural sensitivities necessary to support it originated. The Greeks of the tragic period acknowledged and felt the “terror and horror of existence”<sup>4</sup> of the ancient world, but the response to this terror in the period leading up to Greek tragedy was to veil the terror of existence through the myths of the Olympian gods. Nietzsche found the apparent suffering inherent in the world in all realms of Greek life, from the barbarism of the pre-Homeric age, to the turmoil of military and civil unrest, to the constant threat of natural

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<sup>4</sup> [die Schrecken und Entsetzlichkeiten des Daseins] BT 3.

disasters such as famine. There were plenty of reasons to be pessimistic, and Silenus expressed the terror of existence in his wisdom that that the best thing for man is to never have lived, and the second best is to die soon.

The ancients did not reply to this wisdom with tragedy, but instead interposed the world of the gods between man and nature. In doing so the pre-tragic Greeks failed to recognize existence as terrible and negated the pessimistic wisdom of Silenus. It was Apollo who “gave birth to this entire Olympian world,” and under the “bright sunshine”<sup>5</sup> of the gods (an allusion to Apollo as the “shining one, the deity of light”<sup>6</sup>) the worst thing of all is to die, to be deprived of the connection to the Olympian world. By identifying Apollo, the god of appearance [*Schein*], with the Olympian myth, Nietzsche shows that although the ancient Greeks were able to shield themselves with the appearance of myth, the truth of Silenus’ wisdom still lies veiled beneath the Apollinian myth. In this veiling we see the early formulation of the Greek impulse to comprehend the world as beautiful, which will remain the Apollinian impulse towards beauty throughout the text.

The optimism in the preference of existence does not develop in isolation however, for wherever the Apollinian encountered the ecstatic sounds of festivals and folk-music allied with the god Dionysus it was “checked and destroyed.”<sup>7</sup> These two impulses are opposed throughout pre-tragic Greek history, and for Nietzsche this is epitomized in the preservation of Sparta. Sparta resisted the Dionysian onslaught by strengthening everything opposed to Dionysus: it

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<sup>5</sup> [hellen Sonnenscheine] BT 3.

<sup>6</sup> [der ‘Scheinende’, die Lichtgottheit] BT 1.

<sup>7</sup> [aufgehoben und vernichtet] BT 4.

became the embodiment of restraint, structure, and defense. The pre-tragic Greeks were faced with two fates: either Dionysian self-oblivion or Apollinian regimentation. While these two fates were perhaps not always met with the severity seen in Sparta, they were still exclusive to one another – Apollo and Dionysus did not yet know how to speak with one another. Only through the development of an art form that enabled the mutual revealing of the secrets of each impulse could the tragic Greeks ultimately redeem the world while preserving themselves.

It has been pointed out by several authors that the superiority of Greek culture and their art are lauded by Nietzsche without question. It seems to me however that the substantiation for the tragic Greeks as an ideal culture is based on the same principle as the power of the Apollinian and Dionysian impulses. If the Apollinian and Dionysian impulses of nature are accepted as primal, and if their identification in Greek art and the redemptive effect they have in aesthetic combination are correct, then the perfection of Greek culture follows from the Greek mastery and sensitivity of the primal impulses, or is at least reduced to a question of the value of Greek tragedy. Nietzsche provides a mechanism for how this mastery and sensitivity would have developed in the account of the strife between the Apollinian and the Dionysian in ancient Greece. The Apollinian was strengthened when it encountered Dionysian ritual and resisted obliteration, and the strengthening of the Apollinian impulse would also strengthen the Greek need for beauty. While the Dionysian was resisted, it was also made familiar, so the resistance of the Dionysian is still an introduction of Dionysus into the Apollinian world. Folksong and dithyramb still inevitably would have made inroads into Greek culture where ecstatic orgies did not. Thus we have a culture developing an ever growing need for beauty while coming into increased contact with an impulse that revealed the beauty of man and his oneness with the

world. What seems to be missing is an explicit answer to why the Apollinian adopted such a distinctly Dionysian form as the pre-dramatic tragedy and its chorus of worshippers as an art form. We seem to have a partial answer in indications that the Apollinian and Dionysian, although they oppose each other throughout Greek history until the age of tragedy, actual yearn for one another. Nietzsche believes that the Greek man of culture felt himself “nullified in the presence of the satiric chorus.”<sup>8</sup> In the first dramatization of the tragedy “the attempt was made to show the god as real and to represent the visionary figure together as something visible for every eye.”<sup>9</sup> Each case indicates an inability for one impulse to resist the other. The Apollinian is unable to resist Dionysian beauty in anguish, and the Dionysian desires to have its ecstatic vision made apparent in Apollinian form.

There is a problem in this interpretation however, in that along with the increased need for beauty in the Apollinian we would also have an increase in the need for individuation, and the question becomes whether the need for beauty became so strong that it overcame the need for individuation. Likewise, the Dionysian need for beauty is already fulfilled completely in its immersion in the primal unity, and the Dionysian would have to, at some point outside the ecstatic state, desire apparent beauty in addition to natural beauty.

However it occurred, the eventual union of the impulses was finally attained. Tragic insight allowed for the combination of the impulse to perceive the world as beautiful, which is found in myth, with the destructive power of ecstatic states that reveal “the fundamental knowledge of the

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<sup>8</sup> [in Angesicht des Satyrchors aufgehen] BT 7.

<sup>9</sup> [Später wird nun der Versuch gemacht, den Gott als einen realen zu zeigen und die Visionsgestalt sammt der verklärenden Umrahmung als jedem Auge sichtbar darzustellen] BT 8.



oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken.” By unifying the Apollinian and the Dionysian, tragedy preserved the individuation of the onlooker while it offers a glimpse into the primal unity of existence.

### The Apollinian and the Dionysian

The form of aesthetic justification of the greatest period of the Greeks, the tragedy, evolved from the interaction of the Apollinian and the Dionysian impulses in art. Their interaction in tragedy is a series of masking and revealing, and in order to show how their ability to interact with (and not simple react to) one another developed, Nietzsche defines their roles as artistic impulses of nature and then looks at how these impulses developed as principles in the tradition of Greek art.

The Apollinian and the Dionysian, which will be used by Nietzsche to define the aesthetic Athenian outlooks on life, are first shown as natural impulses through the analogy of physiological phenomena. The Apollinian impulse is identified with the dream state, and the Dionysian with the state of intoxication. These states are viewed as “bursting forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist.”<sup>10</sup> They are the two forms in which the world is interpreted by man aesthetically. As natural impulses neither is distinctly Greek nor beneficial, seen in the case of the Dionysian in the example of the ecstatic revelries of barbaric cultures that created a harsh mixture of sensuality and cruelty. The Apollinian impulse also presents a danger, as the principle of individuation and its effect of delimiting the world will

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<sup>10</sup> [aus der Natur selbst, ohne Vermittlung des menschlichen Künstlers, hervorbrechen] BT 2.

eventually leads to a “pathological effect” if a certain boundary, the recognition that the delimitation is mere appearance, is overstepped.

### The Apollinian as Expression of the Principium Individuationis

The Apollinian has two functional aspects, individuation and production of beauty. In the metaphysical sense of individuation the subject under the Apollinian impulse separates himself from others and the world around him by drawing boundaries and finding contrasts. This action of the *principium individuationis* not only individuates the subject, but also resists disindividuation. In the aesthetic sense the dreamer creates a dream that, unlike the confusion of waking life, is ordered and interpretable and appears to give a deeper understanding of life. This illusion, combined with the beauty of the dream state, grants the dreamer respite from troubled concerns. In each case the subject creates a world of appearance and illusion that reinterprets the world that he lives in. We see both of these aspects in Apollinian art. In the plastic arts the metaphysical principle is found in sculpture and architecture, mediums that emphasize measure, boundary, and balance. In classic Greek literature the purest example of Apollinian art is the Homeric epic, an artistic representation of human reality in which the Olympian gods “vindicate life and make it desirable by living it themselves more gloriously.”<sup>11</sup> The Homeric epic represents the aesthetic aspect of the Apollinian, the need to see the world as beautiful. The twofold use of the term ‘Apollinian’ by Nietzsche represents an important aspect of each operation of Apollinian art; the metaphysical sense obviates its illusory nature and the action of

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<sup>11</sup> M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, Nietzsche on Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 65.

the *principium individuationis* in forming the vision, while the aesthetic meaning emphasizes the employment of this view to create a pleasing and redeeming impression for the subject.

### The Dionysian and the Collapse of Individuation

The Dionysian state is also seen in two aspects, the loss of the subject in a collective identity and in intoxication. Metaphysically the Dionysian is in opposition to the delimitation and individuation of the Apollinian principle, a collapse of individuation. The aesthetic contrast of the ecstatic wildness of these eastern cult festivals with the restraint and structure of the worship of Apollo mirrors the difference between Dionysian and Apollinian music. Whereas Apollinian music is characterized by rhythm and overall restraint, Dionysian music, or music proper, is charged with emotional power. The dithyramb is taken as the essential Dionysian music form in connection with tragedy, and in combination with the dances of cult festivals it induced a rapturous state. The Dionysian in its metaphysical sense is purely the loss of the individual through identification with nature as a whole. In the aesthetic, artistic sense that Nietzsche uses, it is not only the subject's momentary forgetting of himself that is important, but the use of this world-identification to celebrate life and overcome the world's apparent suffering. As a contrast to the dreamlike state of the Apollinian artist, the Dionysian artist is described as producing a state of intoxication, a state which at once reflects both the danger of the loss of inhibition that allows the subject to forget himself, and the relief that the subject gains through this process. While the pre-Homeric period was dominated by the Apollinian impulse, the emergence of the Dionysian impulse is traced from the revelries of the near-East cults that worshiped Dionysus, and it is only later that the Dionysian cult became established in Greece.

Although these two Greek impulses are opposed in both their metaphysical and aesthetic natures, this does not mean that the two are unable to be united in art. There is a delicate balance between presenting “the greatest distance between the two impulses” and allowing for an “account of their reconciliation.”<sup>12</sup> The Apollinian and the Dionysian have been viewed in different aspects as both “diametrically opposed to one another”<sup>13</sup> and “very different... although not diametrically opposed.”<sup>14</sup> What allows their unification in tragedy is that, while they “are not reducible to each other... they are interweavable but ever distinct modalities.”<sup>15</sup> The possibility of a union of these two tendencies is the basis of Nietzsche’s formulation of Greek tragedy as the pinnacle of Greek art, being both the union of the two outlooks that guided Greek culture and the justification of life in a world of suffering. Tragedy allows a complex interweaving of Apollinian and Dionysian effects, a series of masking and revealing that allows for tragic insight but protects the audience through the intervention of the chorus and the placement of the burden of existence on the tragic hero.

#### The Union of Apollinian and Dionysian Impulses in Tragedy

Having shown how each tendency evolved individually, Nietzsche turns to the birth of tragedy itself, and shows historically how the originally Dionysian tradition came to encompass a interchange of Dionysian and Apollinian impulses. In order to show the synthesis of the Apollinian and Dionysian in Greek tragedy, Nietzsche concentrates on the nature of the chorus,

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Pothen, Nietzsche and the Fate of Art (Ashgate: Gower House, 2002) 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Pothen 14.

<sup>14</sup> David Lenson, The Birth of Tragedy: A Commentary (Boston: Twayne, 1987) 27.

<sup>15</sup> Victorino Tejera, Nietzsche and Greek Thought (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) 61.

assessing its effect from its early ritualistic origins up to the classic Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus. Contrary to Schlegel's analysis of the tragic chorus as representing an ideal spectator and Hegel's interpretation of the chorus as the representation of the populace, Nietzsche argues that the cultural tradition that gave birth to Greek tragedy was comprised originally of chorus and nothing more. Since the chorus predates the action of drama, the chorus could not play the role of ideal spectator since there was no spectacle to observe. This original satyr-chorus of Dionysian ritual involved the chorus members taking on ritual roles that emulated the Dionysian myth, and in taking on the role of the satyr they gave themselves up to an ecstatic state. That the chorus reached this state through invoking the image of the satyr shows the early integration of the Apollinian with the Dionysian: the ecstatic state, while involving disindividuation, is done through an image, a process that resembles the art of the lyricist who expresses the power of music through his individual imagery.

As the employment of Apollinian imagery in the representation of the Dionysian god, the imagery evoked in tragedy is different from the Apollinian visions of the epic poet who envisions the actors and event as something independent of himself. Even with the addition of actors to represent Dionysus (who was previously evoked, but not actually represented, by the chorus<sup>16</sup>) and other dramatic elements, the audience of the tragedy saw themselves to be one with the world around them. This was accomplished through the chorus. Through their ecstatic state the spectators were drawn into the vision of the participants, and when they saw the hero "they did not see the awkwardly masked human being but rather a visionary figure, born as it were

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<sup>16</sup> Silk and Stern 70.

from their own rapture.<sup>17</sup>” This effect was amplified by the layout of the Greek stage. Due to the situation of audience, orchestra and stage, the audience was physically able to “actually overlook the whole world of culture around him and to imagine, in absorbed contemplation, that he himself was a chorist.”<sup>18</sup>

The addition of drama to the Dionysian state of the onlooker completed the integration of the Apollinian and the Dionysian through the tragic myth. The Dionysian chorus provided the onlooker with a metaphysical feeling of oneness with nature, and an aesthetic feeling that life is powerful and pleasurable. The excess of life threatened the onlooker, and the tragic myth and hero intervened as a protective mask to prevent the nausea induced by looking into the unveiled wisdom of Silenus from plunging the onlooker into despair. The tragic hero took the place of the onlooker and was plunged into the abyss of myth, and the death of the tragic hero related the danger of knowledge of Silenus’ wisdom. However, at the end of the tragedy the Dionysian burst forth again and revealed the illusion of the Apollinian element. The interaction of Dionysian music and Apollinian imagery in the tragedy is an extension of the analogy of dream and intoxication in their combination as “symbolical dream image.”<sup>19</sup> In order to avoid both entrapment in the world of illusion and dissolution in Dionysian excess, the subject must shatter the Apollinian illusion from within the illusion. True insight into the nature of the world cannot be gained, but the subject gains knowledge of the illusory nature of his existence in the image.

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<sup>17</sup> [dass sie... nicht etwa den unförmlich maskierten Menschen sehen, sondern eine gleichsam aus ihrer eignen Verzückung geborene Visiongestalt] BT 8.

<sup>18</sup> [die gesammte Culturwelt um sich herum ganz eigentlich zu übersehen und in gesättigtem Hinschauen selbst Choreut sich zu wähnen] BT 8.

<sup>19</sup> [gleichnissartigen Traumbilde] BT 2.

Thus taken separately, neither of these Athenian outlooks is able to completely redeem the world around the subject, and it is only in their union that the Apollinian and Dionysian are able to offer comfort.

### The Death of Tragedy

Having resolved the answer of how the Greeks answered the question of existence through tragedy, Nietzsche chronicles the death of tragedy, showing how the aesthetically redemptive outlooks of the Apollinian and the Dionysian are supplanted by a new outlook, introduced to the Greek people by Euripides and Socrates. Before Euripides, Dionysus “had never ceased to be the tragic hero”<sup>20</sup> in that the actors and myths represented were masks for the deity. Euripides brought the spectator onto the stage, and with this tragedy died and New Attic Comedy was born. The drama no longer represented the ancient myths of the Greeks with their “grand and bold traits,” but instead the lives of the Greek spectator, with their “botched outlines of nature.”<sup>21</sup> Euripides had taken the Dionysian element from tragedy and replaced it with the art of the thinker, which is unable to attain the effect of the only true artistic impulses found in Apollinian and Dionysian art. This “aesthetic socratism” holds knowledge and intelligibility as its foremost virtues as a counterpart to the Socratic dictum “knowledge is virtue.”<sup>22</sup> The problem with this dictum is that it places all its emphasis on plot and action and takes no account of the Dionysian chorus.<sup>23</sup> The Socratic need for intelligibility precludes the ecstatic disindividuation of the

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<sup>20</sup> [das niemals bis auf Euripides Dionysus aufgehört hat, der tragische Held zu sein] BT 10.

<sup>21</sup> [die großen und kühnen Züge ... die misslungenen Linien der Natur] BT 11.

<sup>22</sup> [nur der Wissende ist tugendhaft] BT 12.

<sup>23</sup> Lenson 63.

Dionysian and, while it is related in part to the metaphysical Apollinian aspect in its role as appearance, it opposes the aesthetic Apollinian principle of the idealization of beautiful forms. At the same time scientific thought fails to recognize that the apparent understanding it provides is illusory.

With the spread of Socratics it is not only the form and aesthetic properties of art that change, but the also very usefulness of art itself. While its goal is the same – to reach an understanding of the world – the basis for this understanding is completely different. In contrast to the amoral comforts of beauty in appearances, on the part of Apollo, and the negation of the will on the part of Dionysus and his music, the Socratic aesthetic is based on a moral outlook, a belief in the boundless capability of science and critical thought to understand the world and to even correct it. Whereas tragedy overcame the pain of existence for the Athenian through an amoral mask of idolization and disindividuation, science and the “theoretical man” tried to overcome the pain of existence by removing and altering that pain, bringing the Athenians’ terrible existence in the world into its sphere of intelligibility. This Socratic outlook places false hope in science. The limits of science, while boundless to the theoretical man who promotes it, will eventually prove to be unsurpassable, and science will “coil up at these boundaries and bite its own tail.”<sup>24</sup>

### The Rebirth of Tragic Insight

Having assessed the birth and death of Greek tragedy and the aesthetic principles underlying it, Nietzsche brings us to “the gates of present and future” and asks if and how there can be a regeneration of art. One possible answer is that science itself will spur this regeneration though

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<sup>24</sup> [sich an diesen Grenzen um sich selbst ringelt und endlich sich in den Schwanz beißt] BT 15.



its own inadequacy: “Only after the spirit of science has been pursued to its limits, and its claim to universal validity destroyed by evidence of these limits may we hope for a rebirth of tragedy.”<sup>25</sup>

This pushing to the limits of the boundaries of science is seen in the works of Kant and Schopenhauer, who have gained a “victory over the optimism concealed in the essence of logic” through their “extraordinary courage and wisdom.”<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, in making parallels between the ancient Greeks and the modern world, offers a model for how art can act as an aesthetically redeeming force. By drawing parallels between Greek and German culture, Nietzsche considers the ability for tragic art to emerge from the reawakening of the German spirit.

A comparison of Greek and German culture is not strange to Nietzsche’s time as “there was an idea prevalent in Germany that a special affinity links German thought of the period with classical Greek thought.”<sup>27</sup> The tradition of Greek Hellenism found “suggestive affinities between Greek and Germanic myth, language, thought, and art”<sup>28</sup> and Nietzsche subsumes these affinities under the term “German spirit.” The German spirit, the modern parallel to the Hellenic genius of the Greeks, is in need of awakening, shown by the proliferation and idealization of Socratic thought in modern times. The Socratic (or alternately, Alexandrian) ideal and the hunger for knowledge that it provides has “reached a universality in the widest domain of the

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<sup>25</sup> [und erst nachdem der Geist der Wissenschaft bis auf seine Grenze geführt ist, und sein Anspruch auf universale Gültigkeit durch den Nachweis jener Grenzen vernichtet ist dürfte auf eine Wiedergeburt der Tragödie zu hoffen sein] BT 17.

<sup>26</sup> [der Sieg über den im Wesen der Logik verborgen liegenden Optimismus”; “der ungeheuren Tapferkeit und Weisheit] BT 18.

<sup>27</sup> Silk and Stern 2.

<sup>28</sup> Quentin Taylor, Republic of Genius: A Reconstruction of Nietzsche’s Early Thought (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 1997) 111.

educated world”<sup>29</sup> and in opera this crisis is especially apparent. Opera sacrifices the musical element for the intelligibility and distinctness of words, and thus “music is regarded as the servant, and the text as master.” Opera is “intrinsically contradictory to both the Apollinian and Dionysian impulses” and lies “outside all artistic instincts.”<sup>30</sup> The gratification in opera is the gratification of a non-aesthetic need, the optimistic glorification of man.

It is this world that finds the opera as the embodiment of the principles of Socratic culture that the German spirit must rise against. The German spirit will attain the true art of Hellenic genius through the “gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit,”<sup>27</sup> and this Dionysian root of the German spirit gives birth to German music. Wagnerian opera is at the end of the gradual awakening of the German genius that is traced “in its vast solar orbit from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner.”<sup>31</sup> Rather than a musical formulation of arithmetic principles of counterpoint, listening to Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde has the power to connect the listener to the “heart chamber of the world.” Nietzsche claims that to perceive Wagner’s opera with a true musical ear without the mediation of the words or the hero would be unbearable, due to its overwhelming expression of the world as joy and pain. From this rebirth of Dionysian music we can expect the rebirth of German myth, a true mask for the redemption of the world through Dionysian German music. Although not expressed as such in The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche’s

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<sup>29</sup> [Wie eine nie geahnte Universalität der Wissenskier in dem weitesten Bereich der gebildeten Welt] BT 15.

<sup>30</sup> [die Musik als Diener, das Textwort als Herr”; “den Kunsttrieben des Dionysischen und des Apollinischen in gleicher Weise so innerlich Widersprechendes... außerhalb all künstlerischen Instincte liegt] BT 19.

<sup>31</sup> [in ihrem mächtigen Sonnenlaufe von Bach zu Beethoven, von Beethoven zu Wagner] BT 19.

first book, the rebirth of tragedy through the German spirit is an early expression of his concept of “eternal recurrence” as the repetition of events over long periods of time and it is the “antithesis of any faith in infinite progress.”<sup>32</sup> Here the recurrence of the tragedy is opposed to the faith of the unbounded progress of science, and the German genius appears as the herald of science’s eventual downfall.

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<sup>32</sup> Kaufmann 321.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE GROUNDING OF THE STORY IN TRADITION

Benjamin in “The Storyteller” takes up many of the same themes that Nietzsche deals with in the Birth of Tragedy. Benjamin looks at how the story, a familiar but archaic art form, gave order to experience by examining it as a reflection of how the pre-modern world viewed existence. As in Nietzsche’s assessment of tragedy, Benjamin looks at genre-specific principles that are embodied in the story and its preceding art forms and how these principles have changed in culture over time. In Benjamin’s case these principles are not based on their aesthetic or metaphysical functions, but on their employment in social roles and their reflection of the existential views of culture. Benjamin’s examination of the social basis for defining the existential outlook of man is based on the method of historical existentialism. As defined by Marx, this method considers that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.”<sup>33</sup> Although Benjamin “only knew the classics of historical and dialectical materialism, Marx and Engels, from tertiary forces,”<sup>34</sup> he takes a similar consideration of the way that consciousness is shaped by forms of labor, economics, and industry. Existence is a product of social forces and from the present we are unable to experience past modes of being because the “opportunity

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Theory (New York: International, 1970) 12.

<sup>34</sup> Momme Broderson, Walter Benjamin: A Biography (London: Verso, 1996) 181.

granted to each historical moment lies... in secret agreement with a corresponding moment of the past.”<sup>35</sup> The inability of the present to recover the past mode of existence leads Benjamin to see the need for the emergence of new art forms to meet the needs for the particular mode of existence that has been produced by modern society.

Unlike Nietzsche, Benjamin begins with a description of the death of the art form, which suits his theory of the story since death defines both the authority the story was based upon as well as its status as an archaic literary genre. If we first look at the origin of the story however, we find that its roots are almost as old as those of tragedy, stemming from the epic. The epic’s primary existential characteristic, which distinguishes the epic from other forms of art as well as the various epic genres from each other, is memory [*Erinnerung*]. The primary role of memory, the “epic faculty *par excellence*,”<sup>36</sup> was to create a chain of tradition between generations. This principle of epic memory, reminiscence [*Gedächtnis*] “starts the web which all stories together form in the end”<sup>37</sup> and is the memory of an event in multiple contexts. Within the earliest form of the epic a second undifferentiated characteristic of memory is concealed that is dedicated to events as singular occurrences. This element, remembrance [*Eingedenken*], is dedicated to “one

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<sup>35</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, “The Measure of the Terrible, the Weight of the Real and the Heat of the Moment,” The Actuality of Walter Benjamin, Ed. Marcus and Nead (London: Lawrence, 1998) 22.

<sup>36</sup> [das epische Vermögen vor allen anderen] Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” Trans. Harry Zohn, Illuminations, Ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968) 97.

<sup>37</sup> [Sie stiftet das Netz, welches alle Geschichten miteinander am Ende bilden] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 98.

battle, one odyssey, one hero.”<sup>38</sup> The unity of these two principles of memory has disappeared with the decline of the epic form, and reminiscence and remembrance developed separately in the successors of the epic, the story and the novel. By looking at the changes in society that accompanied the reversal of the dominance of the story, Benjamin shows how our very perception of existence has changed.

### The Story and Tradition

The story’s connection to reminiscence is linked to the dependence of the story on tradition as a basis for providing mutual and timeless understanding of experience. The ability of the story to give counsel is a result of the connection of men with one another through tradition. In Benjamin’s case tradition as the web of all stories is not only “the handing down of stories, beliefs, customs, etc. from generation to generation,”<sup>39</sup> but the integration of stories from all places and times. The transmission of stories over time and space is seen in the two archaic types of storytellers, the “resident tiller of the soil” and the “trading seaman.”<sup>40</sup> The resident tiller of the soil passed down local stories from generation to generation, while the trading seaman brought the stories of far away lands. For the society of storytellers there was no difference in old stories or new stories, local or foreign, all were connected through the idea of eternity, the ability to relate to the experience of all times and places. Thus the story persists as it

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 98. [Das erste ist dem einen Helden geweiht, der einen Irrfahrt oder dem einen Kampf]

<sup>39</sup> “Tradition,” Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1988 ed.

<sup>40</sup> [sesshaften Ackerbauer; handeltriebenden Seemann] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 85.

“concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.”<sup>41</sup> This is why counsel is such an important aspect of the story; every story is linked to all others by their integration into a continuous view of time and space.

Because of the interrelatability of any story in tradition with one another, despite spatial or temporal distance, every story “contains, openly or covertly, something useful.”<sup>42</sup> We see this aspect not only in Leskov, but even more pronounced in Gotthelf, Nodier, and Hebel who give instruction to their readers on topics as diverse as agriculture, the perils of gas lights, and bits of scientific instruction. This wide range of experience that the storyteller can relate is not only seen in “the rural, the maritime, and the urban elements in the many stages of their economic and technical development,”<sup>43</sup> but in “the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder... extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds.”<sup>44</sup> This aspect is seen from the beginning of the story in the fairy tale, where counsel allied man symbolically to nature in order to combat the needs of myth. In more recent times we see counsel given in the terms of religion, pedagogical perspectives, and hermetic tradition. Counsel is not only free of fixed contexts, but it is also free to express itself through any relation.

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<sup>41</sup> [Sie bewahrt ihre Kraft gesammelt und ist noch nach langer Zeit der Entfaltung fähig] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 90.

<sup>42</sup> [Sie führt, offen oder versteckt, ihren Nutzen mit sich] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 86.

<sup>43</sup> [das bäuerliche, das maritime und das städtische Element in den vielfältigen Stadien ihres wirtschaftlichen und technischen Entwicklungsgrades] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 101.

<sup>44</sup> [die Unbeschwertheit... mit der sie auf den Sprossen ihrer Erfahrung wie auf einer Leiter sich auf und ab bewegen. Eine Leiter, die bis ins Erdinnere reicht und sich in den Wolken verliert] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 102.

While any subject is a possible theme for a story, the storyteller must not force the psychological connections of the events on the listener or he will be unable “to interpret things the way he understands them.”<sup>45</sup> The greater the degree to which the story has a compactness that precludes psychological analysis, the greater the degree to which the listener commits the story to memory. It is only by committing the story to memory that the listener will spread the story to others.<sup>46</sup> The extent to which the story is committed to memory and assimilated in the listener also depends on mental relaxation and the ability of the listener to attend to the story. The integration of the story in the experience of the listener is not only necessary for the listener, it is essential for the possibility of the story in its function of reminiscence.

### The Story and Artisan Culture

Because of its artisan division of labor the Middle Ages were particularly well suited for the telling of the story. In artisan culture the resident tiller of the soil met the traveling sailor in their new roles as the resident master craftsman and the traveling journeyman. These craftsmen not only worked in the same room, but because of the introduction of apprenticeship into artisan culture, every master craftsman had at one time been a journeyman. Every master had the knowledge of stories of local tradition and far away places, and in traveling every journeyman transported their own stories while they learned the new ones of the master craftsman. Here eternity in the aspects of both time and space were able to flourish. However it was not only the intimate interaction of artisan division of labor in the workplace that allowed the ideal conditions

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<sup>45</sup> [sich die Sache zurechtzulegen, wie er sie versteht] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 89.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 91.



for the story and its reminiscent form of memory to develop. In the artisan mode of production the role of the hand was essential and produced two effects. The first was that this pre-industrial form of work entailed a certain amount of boredom and mental relaxation in the slow crafting of objects unaided by mechanization, and this relaxation led to the integration of the story in the listener. The second effect of artisan production was that it allowed the story to develop by the “piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers”<sup>47</sup> through many retellings of the story. The artisan storyteller was able to make the story his own, so that traces of the storyteller left their imprint on the story “the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.”<sup>48</sup>

The oral tradition of storytelling in artisan culture was just as essential as the other economic structures of modern culture, since it was the mouth-to-mouth retelling of a story that allowed the emergence of “the perfect narrative”<sup>49</sup> through the introduction of subtle differences and the mark of the storyteller. Unlike a printed text, reproduced exactly the same way in every copy, the story is able to be adapted for and by each listener. Furthermore, it is oral retelling that provided the connection between storyteller and listener, and enabled a ritualistic exchange of counsel. By removing the story from social ritual we find what Benjamin calls the loss of the art object’s “aura,” the “unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>50</sup> It is as ritual

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<sup>47</sup> [langsame Einander-Überdecken dünner und transparenter Schichten] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 93.

<sup>48</sup> [wie die Spur der Töpferhand an der Tonschale] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 92.

<sup>49</sup> [die vollkommene Erzählung] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 93.

<sup>50</sup> [sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befindet] Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 220.

function in the exchange of experience that the story possessed meaning as a cult object, and the stripping of the aura divested the story of its ability to relate memory as reminiscence.

In establishing where the authority of the storyteller originates, Benjamin looks outside the artisan economic system and identifies the public process of death as its source. Death was everywhere, there was “no house, hardly even a room, in which someone had not once died.”<sup>51</sup> As a most exemplary public process it was the occasion for throngs of people to pour into the house of the deceased, and it was through this spectacle that the meaning of one’s life was transmitted to the surrounding people. Death’s prominence as public spectacle placed it as part of the cycle of natural history, and Benjamin gives us the example of Hebel’s “Unexpected Reunion” where the death of a miner and the intervening span of time give death the appearance of natural regularity. Through its immersion in natural history death became part of eternity. The placement of death in natural history requires presence for the exchange of meaning to take place, since it is transmissibility that made death not an end, but a bridge through which wisdom transcended the life of the individual and persisted in the world of the story.

### The End of the Art of Storytelling

The decline of the story occurs as other epic forms prosper, and the decline indicates a change of the artisan social structures that supported the story. We see change in all the aspects of culture that allowed the story to prosper, the mode of production, the division of labor, the oral tradition, and the prominence of death. These changes individually and in combination promoted the steady growth of new (or newly popular, in the case of the novel) art forms since

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<sup>51</sup> [Ehemals kein Haus, kaum ein Zimmer, im dem nicht schon einmal jemand gestorben war] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 94.

industrial culture replaced artisan culture. In examining the loss of the story Benjamin shows that it is not only the art form that is lost, but the reminiscent form of memory found in tradition as well.

The short story reflects the changes in production methods that allowed the story to be told in abbreviated form, outside of the oral tradition of tellings and retellings in the presence of others. This is one indication that time has lost its connection with eternity. This is worsened by the change of artisan production from a mode where “the rhythms of work permitted relaxed reception” to the factory and street life that favored a “parrying of shocks” and “quick-wittedness” that prevent assimilation.<sup>52</sup>

As the epic-derived form that is marked by remembrance, the novel contrasts with the qualities of the story in its focus on experience as an individual event. The view of time as disconnected has only had the conditions to grow since printing developed and death was removed from the public sphere. Like the short story, the novel is also removed from oral tradition. This allows the reader of a novel to make the novel his own since there is no storyteller present to share the telling with him. Eternity and tradition are further negated by the decline of death as a public event. Benjamin notes that “eternity has ever had its strongest forces in death” and that, if the idea of eternity has declined “the face of death must have changed.”<sup>53</sup> The reader of the novel no longer sees death in the world. By looking for the death of characters

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<sup>52</sup> John McCole, Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 275.

<sup>53</sup> [Der Gedanke der Ewigkeit hat von jeher seine stärkste Quelle im Tod gehabt.] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 93.

in the novel the reader supplicates a need that has been left vacant by his division from tradition, driven by “the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.”<sup>54</sup> This hope cannot be realized however, since in the novel, death and the end are the same, and they are the boundary beyond which the novel’s meaning cannot extend or be assimilated into reminiscence. The effect of this is that time becomes a constitutive principle in the novel. Time is surely present in some form in the epic and the drama, but there is “no qualitative difference between the past and present”<sup>55</sup> and “the life-immanence of meaning is so strong that it abolishes time.”<sup>56</sup> The presence of time as a constitutive element is further evidence that life has lost all meaning for the reader, and the novel is a struggle against time because it has lost the idea of eternity, of past and present as a single unity. The reader of the story found himself grounded in tradition, but the reader of the novel is faced with a transcendental homelessness that leaves him untethered from the context of the world as a whole.

In information the principle of abbreviation is even more pronounced than in the short story. Information is not only limited to the present, but to nearness as well. We see the abbreviation of the spatial element, that information that is at hand and relates to events concerning the reader is more important than relations of foreign affairs. In addition, items of information are discrete

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<sup>54</sup> [Das was den Leser zum Roman zieht, ist die Hoffnung, sein fröstelndes Leben an einem Tod, von dem er liest, zu wärmen] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 101.

<sup>55</sup> [keinen Qualitätsunterschied des Erlebens zwischen Vergangenen und Gegenwärtigen] Georg Lukacs, The Theory of the Novel, Trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) 126.

<sup>56</sup> [In der Epopöe ist die Lebensimmanenz des Sinnes so stark, dass die Zeit von ihr aufgehoben wird] Lukacs 122.

and “shot through with explanation”<sup>57</sup> that preclude assimilation. Like the novel (although for different reasons) information is self contained: the prime requirement is that it appears understandable in itself without the need for interpretation through one’s own understanding. The influence of the printing method is most pronounced in information as news is meant to be consumed steadily and often.

The new industrial methods that the novel, the short story, and information utilize are set against the principles of artistic production. Printing replaces oral tradition, crowded cities replace quiet life, and death is hidden from the public eye. Through each replacement the ability to exchange experience in the form of reminiscence has declined, so much so that its replacement by remembrance is chronic. Although technology offers the opportunity to travel as a substitute for the exchange of stories found in the apprentice system, the soldiers Benjamin sees returning from war are “not richer, but poorer in communicative experience.”<sup>58</sup> Reminiscence is a casualty of the same process that has caused the decline of the story. Neither has any place in the modern world since the methods of social and economic interaction prevent the communicability of experience.

#### The Relationship between Story and Tragedy

Nietzsche’s description of tragedy as it justified the existence of the Greeks and Benjamin’s account of the role of the story in artisan culture both show a similarity in their ability to provide a particular need to each culture. Each justified the world through a balance of individuating and

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<sup>57</sup> [mit Erklärungen schon durchsetzt] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 89.

<sup>58</sup> [ärmer an mitteilbarer Erfahrung] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 84.

disindividuating impulses. For Nietzsche tragedy fulfilled the need for balance between the Apollinian impulse towards beautiful appearance and preservation of the individual on one side, and the need for tragic insight and ecstatic states provided by Dionysian music on the other. For Benjamin the story provided a means for the artisan to view the world as eternal and interrelated while still being able to provide individual counsel. In each case we also find that knowledge and verification are the principles of the artworks that replaced the tragedy and the story. Despite these similarities Nietzsche and Benjamin give different answers to the question of the re-emergence of the fallen art forms. This difference is directly related to the connection of tragedy to natural impulses by Nietzsche and the assessment by Benjamin of art as a product of historical social forces.

The extent to which the story is the art form that responds to socially constructed needs and institutions is important for assessing how the passing of the story is an indication of a discontinuity in culture, where changes in the way man relates experience will require a new art form to respond to the new conditions. For Benjamin “the disjunction of history and theory, the shock of fascism, the horror of militarism, mean that to stop the recurrence of the nightmare new modes of thought need to be developed.”<sup>59</sup> The new art form in Benjamin’s case will respond to a new set of needs and social sensibilities. These needs will be to prevent the use of the new forces by those who will misuse them at the expense of the people. For Benjamin the most imperative response of art is not aesthetic, but political. A consequence of this is that the

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<sup>59</sup> Stephane Moses, “Ideas, Names, Stars. On Walter Benjamin’s Metaphors of Origin,” For Walter Benjamin, Ed. Ingrid Schnurmann and Konrad Schnurmann (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1993) 185.

modality of the new art form is not permanently determined, but decided based on how and for what purpose art and politics are employed.

The history of tragedy was also shaped by social changes, but the aesthetic principles underlying tragedy are themselves natural and persistent across cultural change, and the union of the Apollinian and the Dionysian remains the means for the true justification of the world. The need in The Birth of Tragedy is the same need in the case of the Germans as it was for the Greeks, an aesthetic need for justification of the world. The modality of the new aesthetic art form is in both cases music, the true art of Dionysus.

Both Benjamin and Nietzsche are in a way searching for a means to combat modernity. For Benjamin, the dangers of modernity need to be combated with the possibilities created by the same forces that threaten culture. The shift away from storytelling and wisdom is not a result of an increase in information and explanation, it is a result of the loss of the ability to exchange counsel, which we see expressed in these changes. Because of this, information is not itself the cause of the increasing inability of the story to provide a redemptive synthesis between man and nature, it is a symptom of the changes of modernization that preclude counsel between people, and the “demise of the story signals a corresponding loss of meaning in life itself.”<sup>60</sup> Benjamin warns against viewing the decline of the novel as a symptom of decay. We should see the decline rather as “a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history.”<sup>61</sup> Adorno

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Wolin, Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 220.

<sup>61</sup> [Vielmehr ist es nur eine Begleiterscheinung säkularer geschichtlicher Produktivkräfte] Benjamin, “The Storyteller” 87.

points out in regard to Benjamin's philosophy that "it would be a mistake to think that modernism is an aberration susceptible of correction."<sup>62</sup> This is because "it is futile to argue for a return to a solid ground that no longer exists."<sup>63</sup> Unlike the death of tragedy through a false reliance in scientific knowledge, the passing of the story is a result of societal change that neither needs nor is capable of correction because it is not the problem, as the story is no longer a part of the social equation.

### Comparison of the Tragedy and the Story on Existential Principles

Both Nietzsche and Benjamin base their assessments of literary genre by examining the culture of the societies that produced them and the roles that the genres fulfilled in justifying existence. For Nietzsche, ancient Greek society developed the natural artistic impulses of the Apollinian and Dionysian as an amoral justification of the world. Greek tragedy reflects the aesthetic sensibilities of the Greeks to develop the Apollinian and Dionysian impulses into the highest art form, and because these impulses themselves originate not in Greek culture, but in nature, we can hope for a rebirth of tragedy and a reunification of the two impulses through the awakening of the German spirit.

The story is a different kind of hallmark of a society. It requires a culture that can relate experience in the same way as the travelers and tradesmen of artisan culture, who are able to counsel one another and present the epic side of truth, wisdom. Since we have arrived in a new era of news, printing, and a general inability to relate our experiences to one another, we are no

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<sup>62</sup> Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, Trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) 34.

<sup>63</sup> Adorno 34.



longer able to tell stories: the oral transmission of one's life is not subject to the verification and tangible accessibility that are emphasized today. Greek culture and its particular art forms were unique in their joining of Greek sensibilities with natural impulses, but the veiling of nature by the rationalization of theoretical man is merely that, a veil, and does not change the presence of Apollinian and Dionysian impulses in man and nature.

The role of science in connection to the passing of each form plays a similar role, but the actual aspect of science that brings about change differs. For Nietzsche it is the beginning of the age of rationalization and the idea of science itself that oppose tragedy. The older form of tragedy has given way to the New Attic Tragedy that, like the Socratic man, places faith in the ability to describe the world and to tame the world by bringing it into the sphere of man's control through scientific description. In Benjamin's case, it is not so much the theory underlying the thrust towards information and verification that has caused the collapse of the story, but the products of science that have been created since the high point of Renaissance tradition. War, mechanization, labor and economic change have opposed the experience of modern man<sup>64</sup>, and in contrast to the theoretical basis of change in The Birth of Tragedy, Benjamin presents the demise of literature as a change directly related to the physical changes of social interaction in the world. This has been attributed particularly to the effect that the war had on Benjamin, and he "resists all attempts to reconstruct it."<sup>65</sup> The changes of the war cannot, and should not, be

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<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, "The Storyteller" 84.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Jay, "Walter Benjamin, Remembrance, and the First World War," Perception and the Experience of Modernity, Ed. Geyer-Ryan, Koopman and Yntema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002) 190.

reconciled through reconstruction of the reminiscent side of memory. The proper way to encounter the changes in the world is to face squarely what has happened.

The consequences of each philosopher's assessment of literary death also show different points of emphasis, Nietzsche in the forming of a new art of redemption, and Benjamin in anticipating the final collapse of the epic form. For Nietzsche a void is left by the absence of Greek tragedy, since the question of how to redeem the suffering of human existence still remains. The Greek tragedy is the particular example that Nietzsche uses to build support for praise of Wagner as the artistic genius who might fill this role for the modern man, and "perhaps other blessed hopes for the German genius."<sup>66</sup> By once again bringing forth Dionysian music to unveil the mere appearance of existence, hope is given for the birth of German myth, and through the union and myth and music, tragedy.

Benjamin however does not posit that the role of storytelling that is now vacant should or needs to be filled in the same manner that the story once did. The passing of the story from the landscape of literature is not only the product of a transition to the modern scientific age, but necessitated by it. Stories were the literary corollary of the artisan culture from which they sprung, the exchange of knowledge between travelers and between the master and the journeyman craftsman. This is a role particular to those times, and the need to exchange experience in this way is not the timeless need that Nietzsche's aesthetic redemption of human experience is. Furthermore, the story, and modes that would convey experience in the same manner, are precluded from taking up this role again because culture itself has changed, it is

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<sup>66</sup> [und welche andere selige Hoffnungen für das deutsche Wesen] BT 16.

unable to relate to the sensibilities of the previous era. While the passing of the story from our culture may be mourned, along with the benefits of its ability to transmit personal experience and wisdom, it cannot be brought back.

The consequence of the nature of the roles of story and Greek tragedy and the difference of the two in their need to have their roles realized in modern times is one reason for the difference in Benjamin's and Nietzsche's assessment of the forces that replaced each of these modes. Nietzsche's opinion of Socratic ideals is particularly caustic, seeing the optimism of science as dangerously misplaced, and furthermore, a mistake in need of correction. For Benjamin, there is something lost in the transition from the oral form of the story to the written forms of novel and information, but with the emergence of these modern forms also comes new opportunities, and the new beauty and appreciation of the story that these forms allow in hindsight may even be seen as beneficial (although this "optimism" in the further development of rationalization is expressed less strongly than in Benjamin's "Mechanical Art in the Age of Reproduction"<sup>67</sup>). While we do lose the ability to relate experiences and to counsel one another, this is a symptom of changes in society whose effect is seen in literature, and does not represent a danger to culture: in fact, it is the result of a change in culture.

What is necessary for the new art form for Benjamin is the recognition that the ability to communicate the truth of life through wisdom has been lost. We have for example Kafka, whose work "presents a sickness of tradition,"<sup>68</sup> and by sacrificing truth he clings to the power of

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<sup>67</sup> Wolin 224.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka" 143.

transmissibility. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Benjamin also asserts that art has been emancipated from its “parasitic dependence on ritual” and emphasis is instead to be found “on the exhibition value of the work.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore photography and film are poised to fill the new role of art as the forms that are the most closely connected with exhibition. The change of culture’s relation to art requires new art forms to satisfy the new needs produced, and a return to the story, based on principles that have been vanquished, is impossible.

### Conclusion

Benjamin expresses mixed feelings in the mourning of the story’s death and the new possibilities provided by technology, whereas Nietzsche shows considerable contempt for popular modern forms and calls for a return to the wisdom of the Greeks. Both see the causes of the death of the art form as consequences of changes in modern thought. In The Birth of Tragedy opera and the New Attic dithyramb are closely connected to the need for knowledge and explanation in Socratic thought. The increased emphasis on information, its tangibility and subjection to verification in Benjamin’s text results in a similar emergence of art forms that present the world as single, disconnected events. For Nietzsche, this process is reversible, and pessimism can once again conquer the weakness of optimism through the rebirth of tragic insight. Counsel on the other hand cannot return because the society and its connection to death required for counsel have disappeared. Death is the justification of the storyteller, allowing a person’s life experiences to be distilled and transmitted, and the relegation of death to private and institutionalized spheres has resulted in the disappearance of this justification. The influence

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<sup>69</sup> [parasitären Dasein am Ritual; auf dem Ausstellungswert des Kunstwerkes] Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 224.

of death in daily life no longer has a bearing on the individual. The terror inherent in the world in Nietzsche's view never actually left, it was only subjugated to science through an initial faith that is ultimately doomed to failure. Science promised to provide solutions for the world, and created optimism that there was nothing that was outside its reach. In connection to this we see the way in which different cultures are distinguished by Nietzsche and Benjamin. For Nietzsche the Greek and German cultures are unique in so far as they possess the particular genius required to develop an aesthetically redemptive art form, but the problem that this art form faces, the negation of the individual in the face of terrifying existence, is inherent to life. For Benjamin the change of culture itself defines the changes in the problems that it must solve. An artisan culture based on tradition and a need for men to counsel one another found this in the story, but the new culture of modern war, mechanization, and politics must produce an art that faces the problems of the individualization of experience, the effect of reproduction in emphasizing exhibition over ritual function, and the politicization of art.

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