

WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEOLOGY OF THE CORPSE: ALLEGORY IN LOHENSTEIN'S *SOPHONISBA*

I. Constellations: Ideas and Truth

In *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* Walter Benjamin asks the following question: How does one represent an idea that has a name, when the goal is to regenerate this name-giving act through philosophical contemplation? How can philosophy restore this primal way of understanding ideas—this “paradise”¹ prior to language’s structured pitfalls—when words in language are reduced to their most obvious empirical meanings while the “primacy of the symbolic character of the word” is neglected?² Philosophy’s task is the struggle to restore this naming act through the representation of ideas, which discards intention and subjectivity for the immersion and absorption that is not a static inductive definition, rather appearing as a perception “in action, like the blood coursing through the body.”³ Will this name-giving process imbued with symbolic meaning—as *contra* the stagnant appraisal of definitions of words found via dictionary-like precision—provide any *truth*? Will the representation of ideas refer to any true reality, or is it merely an idealistic philosopher’s dream?

To answer these questions, we must determine what “truth” is for Benjamin, and how it is associated with ideas? “Truth is the death of intention.”⁴ Benjamin likens the relationship of ideas and objects to constellations and stars, respectively.⁵ Truth lies within the relationships between the constellations of ideas, where each object of an idea is its own star, and—likened to Leibniz’s monad—contains the image of the world. These

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. By John Osborne, Intro. By George Steiner, (London: Verso, 1998), 37.

² Benjamin, 36.

³ Benjamin, 39.

⁴ Benjamin, 36.

⁵ Benjamin, 34.

constellations allow room for change in the respect to the object of ideas dying or emerging anew, while simultaneously being timeless' ideas and remain, disappear, and are born. Ideas are born out of ideas. Origin is a historical category compared to a "vortex in the stream of becoming" in that the origin is that water which emerges from the swirling of waters that come into being and those that disappear. Origin is a dialectical category of history, and plays a role in the redemptive process that characterizes Benjamin's seeming theology of the corpse. In the constellation of ideas as a sort of fractured mosaic, "phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed."⁶

Truth is not the intention with which one uses a word or language; truth is not mere subjectivity. If we want to know the "truth" about a *Trauerspiel*, we cannot rely on an answer reducible to a particular tragic drama before us as we engage in criticism, nor can we betray the singularity of the work by abstracting and theorizing away the extremes. "The idea is a monad."⁷ The idea reflects an entire world. The representation of ideas is the "outline" of each of these irreducible singularities revolving around other singularities in a constellation. Truth is in this constellation of ideas.

Benjamin asserts that the best way to represent these ideas is through the fragment. This answers why extremes are significant for ideas in the mosaic. One should not, as the sciences do, discard the extremes as anomalies. The extremes are a part of the fragmented mosaic that is made up of monadological ideas, "the distinct and the disparate," and testifies to the power of naming, the force of ideas: of truth itself.⁸ Why does Benjamin say that, "the value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less

⁶ Benjamin, 34.

⁷ Benjamin, 47.

⁸ Benjamin, 28-29.

direct their relationship to the underlying idea”⁹ Does this make for more alluring fragments, more variety in the details of the mosaic of philosophical contemplation—much like the aphorisms scattered throughout the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* itself—that causes the reader to “pause and reflect” all the more?¹⁰ Benjamin states that the “*Trauerspiel* is an idea”¹¹ which means that the German mourning play is a fragment within the mosaic of literature, where in literature there is “no new style.”¹² In the *Prologue* Benjamin names thinking philosophically as that which repeats itself. Similar to the repetition of the conflicts between the divine passions in Lohenstein’s *Choric Interludes*, Love and Hate will fight for eternity, repeating the same arguments, although each articulation adds levels of meaning, like the piecing together of a mosaic. History likewise repeats itself, mirrored in *Sophonisba*’s focus on the rise and fall of empires. How does the *Trauerspiel* rest within the web of ideas, and what truth whirls around this constellation? In this paper I will question why Benjamin describes the corpse as the central allegory of the *Trauerspiel* and how this relates to his “theology” of the corpse, with reference to Lohenstein’s *Sophonisba*.

II. The Corpse and Ruins

Benjamin chose to write a book on the baroque drama for the purpose of bringing to the foreground a marginal fragment of a work that has been forgotten in the flow of history. But why is Benjamin so gripped with death? Benjamin explains:

⁹ Benjamin, 29.

¹⁰ Benjamin, 29.

¹¹ Benjamin, 38.

¹² Benjamin, 53.

The characters in the *Trauerspiel* die, because it is only thus as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse.¹³

This statement shows the secular emphasis of the baroque drama—especially since the tyrant as one of the main characters is always compelled to provide the corpses¹⁴—however it is also a bit shocking: “*for the sake of the corpse*”? The central moment of the baroque drama is the dead body, depicting the “absolute subjection of humanity to the tug of natural history... [where] subject is translated into corpse.”¹⁵ If Benjamin’s subject is the corpse in his explication of the *Trauerspiel*, then in what way can the corpse beckon a theology? The corpse is a discarded dead body; theology expresses some schema of God’s relation to the world, e.g., an eschatology—be it of apocalypse or afterlife—which provide an possibility for the soul after death. Hence the term “theology of the corpse” seems to be paradoxical.

What “light” will begin to illuminate Benjamin’s theology? The German mourning play lives in history, which differs from tragedy that inhabits mythology. The *Trauerspiel* is also essentially allegoric rather than symbolic. One way to begin to understand Benjamin’s stance is through Lohenstein’s *Choric Interludes*. The divine passions express a tension that spirals into an obsession with the corpse of both divine and human. Which passions are fueled by a death-frenzy? All—even Love. Love orates, “See how some letters glow like stars[...] And the world-to-come will show what pure Love can achieve [...] my fires will light thy funeral pyre.”¹⁶ The divine understands the

¹³ Benjamin, 217-218.

¹⁴ Benjamin, 218-219.

¹⁵ Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics* (Amherst: MIT Press, 1993), 81.

¹⁶ Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, “The Choric Interludes from Daniel Casper von

death drive of both history and the individual within the flow of history. “The choruses expound an edifying psychology of the passions”¹⁷ especially in the instance of Sophonisba’s attempt to refute Jealousy by an *ad hominem* attack, calling the behavior of this allegorical figure that of an “insane melancholic.”¹⁸ However, wherever the human traverses, the passions follow—and with these passions a dialogue soaked in blood.

As the forerunners of the 18th century *Trauerspiel*—the engravings of the “Dance of Death” in the 16th and 17th centuries had a similar mechanism providing allegorical significance to the corpse. These depictions reflect the relation between human life and death depicted by the corpse. One could call these engravings “secular,” as well, because the corpse has no religious significance in itself. The corpse reminds the human subject of her fate, her fallen nature. In the provided engraving,¹⁹ as a woman is held in a deep trance with her own reflection, a rotting corpse awaits in zeal to take her hand and show her even more about the fate of her human body. We can only guess that the image she sees in her hand mirror is her own decaying face, since the corpse is leading her into the path of a venomous snake and her meaningless death. The corpse is not a religious figure: it is not Jesus, Zeus, Virgil, etc...that guides the vain woman by the hand in a solemn procession towards the gates of heaven or hell. The corpse is an allegory for both history and humanity—the double sided coin that the *Trauerspiel* represents in its allegories.

Lohenstein’s “*Trauerspiel*,” *Sophonisbe*,” Unpublished translation by Christopher Braider, (Boulder: University of Colorado, Spring 2005), 5.

¹⁷ Benjamin, 192.

¹⁸ Benjamin, 145.

¹⁹ [See Appendix 1] Grossbasel, “Den Todt hab ich im Spiegel gesehen,” Sixteenth Century, <<http://www.dodedans.com/Full/basel.gif>> (3 February 2005).

The corpse is an allegory for natural history: decay and transience; it represents the *Trauerspiel* itself as a fragment of history. The corpse is the debris of the body: the fragment, the ruin.²⁰ Should these ruins be ignored, leveled, forgotten? “The more nature and antiquity were felt to be guilt-laden, the more necessary was their allegorical interpretation, as their only conceivable salvation.”²¹ Allegory expresses some form of lack, which is contrasted with the idea of symbol. Symbol for Benjamin is that which represents a whole or complete idea; allegory is the fallen, fracturing subjective moment that takes on religious meaning and points elsewhere. Benjamin is interested in the fallen ruins of the *Trauerspiel* taken as allegory. The allegory in Lohenstein is secular in nature as it maps the decline of empires throughout time, and points to the resurrection of the empires via Austria’s emergence as a world power. Although the allegory itself is essentially melancholy in its meaninglessness and death obsession, the allegory has a restorative or redemptive overtone in the rebirth of ideas, meaning, and the name giving process, e.g., the birth of the Austrian Empire. It is implied, even in the play itself, that although this new empire is born, it will fall like all the rest. History repeats itself—it cannot escape the swirling vortex of the origin.

In Lohenstein’s *Trauerspiel*, Sophonisba’s corpse insights Masinissa into a hysterical state. Within this madness, Masinissa desires a “dance of death” all his own, an erotic dance involving one living and one dead, in which, as he states, “with your shade I’ll ply both love and pleasure” just “as earlier her body, her corpse...[I will]...bemire”.²² Guilt and lust intermingle within Masinissa as he pledges to take his

²⁰ Benjamin, 107.

²¹ Benjamin, 225.

²² Daniel Casper von Lohenstein. “Sophonisba, A Tragedy,” *German Theater Before 1750*, ed. and trans. by Gerald Gillespie, (New York: Continuum, 1992), 212.

life in this perverse act of atonement; he is entranced by her corpse. “The vacant stare is luring in a tender fashion the ardor of my heart; with all my soul I strive to catch the scent I know upon her lips must thrive,” Masinissa utters. In a similar fashion Benjamin uncovers one of history’s ruins in this baroque form, and is allured by its marginal place in history. The *Trauerspiel* is likened to Sophonisba’s corpse, which also “preserves the image of beauty to the very last.”²³ Fragmented, fallen from life, a rotting cadaver, both the baroque German drama and Sophonisba’s corpse relay a meaning that hovers in the constellation of ideas, constituting a truth that squeeze melancholy sighs in an appreciation for the extreme peaks of the mosaic.

The meaninglessness of Sophonisba’s death is also described through Diotima’s historical prophecy. The Punic War ends, Carthage falls, and Numidia is under Roman rule. Then Rome falls, the Vandals invade, followed by the Arab conquest. This is why Sophonisba proclaims, “I die in ecstasy,”²⁴ because it is her fate as a subject to fall into the meaninglessness of nature: “My life so fraught with sorrow for me holds no more joy. No bounties holds tomorrow. With my King Syphax rose my own good fortune’s sun, and now with him it sets.”²⁵ It is meaningless, but simultaneously fraught with meaning; it is a singular event and an event situated within the web of history. History entails birth and death: the birth of nations, the fall of empires.

Natural history is fallen nature. History as fated and fallen is the allegory of the corpse. Seeing the allegory of the corpse surges forth with meaning rife with fallen ruins, death: empires fall, bodies die, and dynasties turn to ruins, passion decays. Benjamin is depicting the state of all natural history through the corpse allegory. History is a dance of

²³ Benjamin, 235.

²⁴ Lohenstein, Gillespie, 208.

²⁵ Lohenstein, Gillespie, 208.

death, an allegory charged with meaning and truth during the time of the *Trauerspiels* popularity.²⁶ “In the baroque, especially, the allegorical personification can be seen to give way in favor of emblems, which mostly offer themselves to view in desolate, sorrowful dispersal.”²⁷ The corpse was not “dead,” but coursing with a kind of life that is depicted in the image of death’s dialectical play with life, a melancholy play that reminds the viewer of her fallen nature. “Seen from the point of view of death, the product of the corpse is life.”²⁸

III. Subjectivity and Redemption in the Allegory

Christianity plays a vital role in understanding the allegory of the corpse in the *Trauerspiel*, since “The allegory itself was sown by Christianity.”²⁹ Humanity’s fallen nature is sinful to the core, and without divine intervention is fated to die without hope or God. Its only redemption is through the blood of Christ. The aftermath of the Lutheran notion of salvation—founded in faith not works—gave rise to the looming feeling that the world was empty of meaning since all action is futile.³⁰ Calvinism’s doctrine of predestination compounds this feeling of helplessness for the very fact that a devoted Christian may never feel secure that God destined her to attain redemption. This establishes the human as “the conjunction of guilt and transience, the person as guilty nature, as flesh.”³¹ Here the image of the corpse—as the intersection of guilt and transience—is the most fitting allegory for death in the baroque drama because it reveals

²⁶ [See Appendix 2] Hans Baldung Grien, “Dance of Death,” Sixteenth Century, <http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/ij/images/incunabl_dance.lg.jpg> (3 February 2005).

²⁷ Benjamin, 186.

²⁸ Benjamin, 218.

²⁹ Benjamin, 224.

³⁰ Benjamin, 139.

³¹ Pensky, 127.

that humans, as fallen, mourn their state. “Death is the price paid by the guilty; transience secures the universality of death.”³² Benjamin says:

The idea of death fills [humanity] with profound terror. Mourning is the state of mind in which feeling revives the empty world in the form of the mask, and derives an enigmatic satisfaction in contemplating it.³³

But is this contemplation the end Benjamin has in mind, since according to him, “the allegorist is countered by the scornful laughter of hell”³⁴ Where is Benjamin taking us? The allegorical form can only be made possible by knowledge that with the “penetrating gaze of Satan in the contemplative man”³⁵ is equated with evil. As we approach the end of the *Ursprung*, it seems Benjamin is suddenly throwing us into a violently spiraling vortex, inverting his previous ideas, and changing currents suddenly. Benjamin jolts us with his answer to the theology of the corpse:

For it is to misunderstand the allegorical entirely if we make a distinction between the store of images, in which this about-turn into salvation and redemption takes place, and visions of the frenzy of destruction, in which all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins, which reveal the limit set upon allegorical contemplation, rather than its ideal quality.³⁶

Next he goes on to say that the image of Christ on the cross is not merely an allegory of the “desolation of human existence”, but rather as an allegory for resurrection! Now the corpse allegory of the *Trauerspiel* has been reversed in order to turn toward redemption. Where there was once meaninglessness and dead objects, now there is infinity and hope.

³² Pensky, 127.

³³ Benjamin, 139.

³⁴ Benjamin, 227.

³⁵ Benjamin, 229.

³⁶ Benjamin, 232.

Where did this come from, and how does this relate to the baroque mourning play? Did Benjamin bring us this far in his theology of the corpse, only to reverse this direction and show us that it is actually a theology of a resurrected corpse, a Christ allegory? Does the “death’s-head become an angel’s countenance?”³⁷ I think this illustrates that the allegory can be construed to mean anything, therefore it is ultimately meaningless, it goes away empty-handed. Then what is this redemption? It is, in part, the inner awareness of messianic hope in dialectic with the hopelessness of the corpse.

The final section of the book, “*Ponderación misteriosa*” is itself an enigmatic reflection by Benjamin. Benjamin asserts that the “tragedy” of the *Trauerspiel* is the “deficiency of the development of the intrigue.”³⁸ Following this assertion, he seems to come full circle to the messianic optimism from the Prologue. But is this the redemption of the *Trauerspiel*? How can there be redemption when Benjamin has just pointed out the *Trauerspiel*’s most prominent flaw? “Subjectivity, like an angel falling into the depths, is brought back by allegories, and is held fast in heaven, in God, by *ponderación misteriosa*.”³⁹ The fallen nature of subjectivity is redeemed through the allegory’s incitement into contemplation of ideas. Benjamin states that mourning was the outlook that led to a satisfaction derived from contemplating the emptiness of the world. By contemplating the corpse and the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin is led to the allegorical depiction of death. Benjamin is participating in the “dance of death,” as he confirms the finitude of life and history, of the passing of beings and objects, but in a spirit of melancholy—a mournful dance, where Death is not God’s messenger, but the bearer of corpses—Death

³⁷ Benjamin, 215.

³⁸ Benjamin, 235.

³⁹ Benjamin, 235.

itself not cloaked in a comforting religious guise. Benjamin is not a comforter; he is a mourner.

“In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in the lesser buildings[...]for this reason the German *Trauerspiel* merits interpretation. In the spirit of the allegory it is conceived from the outset as a ruin, a fragment. Others may shine resplendently as on the first day; this form preserves the image of beauty to the very last.”⁴⁰

Benjamin has given the idea of the corpse a place within the constellation of ideas—that mosaic that surges forth within the vortex of origin—through the truth imbued in the corpse allegory. “The *Trauerspiel* therefore has no individual hero, only constellations of heroes.”⁴¹ Everything exists within a web, even the heroes of the German mourning play. The theology of the corpse lives through fragmented allegories that breathe the ruin of natural history and of humanity itself. Sophonisba is a fragmented ruin in herself, an allegory of the passions that arouse and ensnare humanity in its death trap. Redemption is likened to Lohenstein’s *Sophonisba* in that the ruins of history are rehashed in an eschatological hope in the overcoming of death in the emergence of an empire that will set aside the failures of the past. However, in Benjamin, the past is always resurrected, even if by disappearing in the whirlpool and emerging in a novel form. Redemption does not lie in the general, it is in the extremes, the margins that have constellations of ideas all their own. The constellation widens, another layer is added to the web, the mosaic’s colors darken with the accumulation of further fragments. Truth is the process by which these constellations are understood as singularities, the name-giving

⁴⁰ Benjamin, 235.

⁴¹ Benjamin, 132.

process that seemed so enigmatic in the start of this exercise of questioning and hypothesizing.

Appendix 1



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