

Revising the Dialectic of Enlightenment: Alfred Baeumler and the Nazi Appropriation of Myth

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Scholars since World War II have distinguished National Socialism from the Enlightenment by pointing to the Nazi recourse to mythic structures in the construction of its ideology,¹ and liberal opposition to Nazism has long been based on the consequent rejection of myth. The attempt to separate the Enlightenment from Nazism based on myth dates back to 1926, when Thomas Mann attacked the theory of myth developed by the budding philosopher, Alfred Baeumler, and accused him of promoting a Nazi agenda by defending the “the great Return to the mystic-historical-romantic womb of the mother.”² Against such a reactionary return to romanticism and mysticism, Mann defends idealism and humanism and seeks the victory of Apollinian rules and concepts over mythic forces, writing that “instead of praying to the myth, one would do better today by helping one’s people to win such victories.”³

Helmut Koopmann argues that Mann’s anti-fascist, Enlightenment position can be differentiated from Baeumler’s fascist one because Mann supports the victory of the father principle while Baeumler sought a regression back toward the cult of the mother.⁴ But as Hubert

1. See, for example, George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Gross & Dunlap, 1964) 204-17 and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Mythe Nazi* (Paris: Editions de l’Aube, 1991) 18-22.

2. Thomas Mann, *Pariser Rechenschaft* (Berlin: Fischer, 1926) 61-62.

3. Mann 62.

4. Helmut Koopmann, “Vaterrecht und Mutterrecht: Thomas Manns Auseinandersetzungen mit Bachofen und Baeumler als Wegbereitem des Faschismus,” *Text & Kritik* 8.2 (1980): 281.

Brunträger has most recently demonstrated, a comparison of Mann's critique with Baeumler's text demonstrates not only that the two are working with the same understanding of myth and human history based on Bachofen but that they are also in full agreement in supporting the victory of "paternal" form over "maternal" chaos.⁵

Though Mann's suspicions about Baeumler's Nazi tendencies were eventually confirmed by Baeumler's later political development, he was wrong about Baeumler's support of archaic, mythic forces. Baeumler did not seek a return to a primitive maternal culture, but instead attempted to justify the paternal victory of "form" over an earlier maternal materiality without form.⁶ In a passage that demonstrates the proximity of Baeumler's position to Mann's, Baeumler writes in support of "the radiant consciousness of a constantly victorious struggle against the power of older, darker perspectives."⁷ The triumph of both epic and tragedy is for Baeumler a triumph of the Apollinian paternal religious perspective over the power of older, darker forces. Like Mann, Baeumler subordinates the mythic and the primitive to the rule of an "Apollinian" law. Both attempt to suppress a Dionysian myth by supporting the victory of Apollinian forms.

The similarity between Baeumler's and Mann's support of Apollinian form over mythic chaos have led to recent attempts in Germany to recover aspects of Baeumler's thought for contemporary, liberal discussions of myth. Brunträger, for example, uses the similarity between Baeumler's and Mann's ideas as an argument for Baeumler's possible liberal affinities and as a means of distinguishing the early work from his explicitly fascist work after 1933. He even suggests that in the Bachofen introduction his views are so similar to Mann's that there might have been a chance of pulling Baeumler "into the democratic camp."⁸ Brunträger thereby follows Manfred Frank's attempts to distill a liberal element out of Baeumler's early work, which might be used for a contemporary discussion of myth. By emphasizing a break in Baeumler's thought after 1933, Frank recovers for

5. Hubert Brunträger, *Der Ironiker und der Ideologe: Die Beziehung zwischen Thomas Mann und Alfred Baeumler* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993) 125-26, 143.

6. As Marianne Baeumler, Hubert Brunträger, and Hermann Kurzke point out, Mann's attack "seems, however, factually unjustified at that time, since Baeumler, as mentioned, welcomed paternal victory and the victory of reason, as it was represented in Bachofen's work." Marianne Baeumler, Hubert Brunträger, and Hermann Kurzke, *Thomas Mann und Alfred Baeumler: Eine Dokumentation* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989) 154.

7. Alfred Baeumler, "Einleitung: Bachofen, der Mythologe der Romantik," in Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Der Mythos von Orient und Okzident* (1926; Munich: Beck, 1956) xxix.

8. Brunträger 130.

his own thinking Baeumler's understanding of myth from the Bachofen introduction while condemning the later "turn" toward fascism. Frank's discussion of Baeumler's work attempts to demonstrate a shift in his thought from an early "cultic" theory of myth to a later racial one, allowing Frank to "save" the cultic theory while condemning the racial one.⁹

But Baeumler's ideas demonstrate a continuity in which the early material is not only entirely consistent with but also logically leads to the racist conclusions of the later work. This continuity in Baeumler's career throws new light on the reconcilability of his position with Thomas Mann's. Instead of demonstrating the validity of Baeumler's early views, the close relationship to Mann indicates the proximity between a Nazi and an Enlightenment understanding of the role of myth in society.

Yet, this proximity between Enlightenment and fascism is unlike the one posited by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who maintain in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that Enlightenment tends to regress to myth and thereby becomes fascist: "myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology."¹⁰ While Horkheimer and Adorno recognize the complicity of Enlightenment with fascism as demonstrated by the similarity between Mann's and Baeumler's positions on myth, the idea of a dialectic of myth and Enlightenment tends to obscure the fact that, instead of carrying out a regression toward myth, both Baeumler and Mann (at least in his attack on Baeumler) oppose the return of myth. Their parallel attempts to recognize the power of

9. Manfred Frank, *Gott im Exil: Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie, II. Teil* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 33-37, 108-09. Frank's interest in myth places him in apparent conflict with writers such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, whose understanding of Nazism as a revival of myth leads to an extreme suspicion toward efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to reconsider the category of myth. They warn, for instance, that the proto-fascist elements of our times are contained in "those already numerous contemporary discourses which refer to *myth*, to the necessity of a new myth or a new mythic consciousness or even another reactivation of ancient myths." (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy 10, my translation) Yet, this apparent conflict between the two variant liberal positions represented by Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy and Frank is actually a sign of the complicity of both with a Nazi perspective regarding myth. While Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy reject the category of myth from the outset, Frank, like Baeumler, recognizes the power of myth only in order to better contain it within rational, philosophical structures. For an extended discussion of Frank's interpretation of Baeumler, see David Pan, "Instrumentalizing the Sacred: From Alfred Baeumler to Manfred Frank," *Wendezeiten - Zeitenwenden: Positionsbestimmungen zur deutschsprachigen Literatur 1945-1995*, ed. Robert Weninger & Brigitte Rossbacher (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1997) 233-47.

10. Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972) xvi.

myth and to manipulate this power did not lead toward a regeneration of myth but rather to a suppression. The commonalities in their projects suggest not only a complicity between Enlightenment and Nazism but also an antagonism of both toward myth.

Horkheimer and Adorno outline the terms of such a differentiation of myth from Enlightenment when they contrast the methods of myth with those of reason. While reason reduces all of nature to an undifferentiated raw material, magic pursues an alternative, “mimetic” strategy:

The world of magic retained distinctions whose traces have disappeared even in linguistic form. The multitudinous affinities between existents are suppressed by the single relation between the subject who bestows meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and the chance vehicle of significance. On the magical plan, dream and image were not mere signs for the thing in question, but were bound up with it by similarity or names. The relation is one not of intention but of relatedness. Like science, magic pursues aims, but seeks to achieve them by mimesis – not by progressively distancing itself from the object.¹¹

This view of magic as mimesis emphasizes the anti-Enlightenment aspect of myth as a positive characteristic. Not only does magic still maintain the qualitative differences in nature, which have been eradicated by science, it provides a way of relating to nature and experience that is based on imitation rather than rational manipulation. As mimesis, myth accurately perceives the power of nature as stronger than man and describes the parameters of this domination: “*mana*, the moving spirit, is no projection, but the echo of the real supremacy of nature in the weak souls of primitive men.”¹² Reason, by contrast, is based on manipulation. “Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them.”¹³

By delineating a conception of myth as mimesis, which they oppose to the rational domination of nature, Horkheimer and Adorno outline how myth and Enlightenment are to be differentiated in a way which vindicates myth over Enlightenment. If one takes seriously the distinction between mimesis and manipulation, one would have to revise the thesis of the dialectic of Enlightenment in order to promulgate a strict

11. Horkheimer and Adorno 10-11.
 12. Horkheimer and Adorno 15.
 13. Horkheimer and Adorno 9.

opposition, rather than a dialectic, between myth and Enlightenment in which the former must be consistently defended against the latter. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest such an alternative thesis in their argument that the Nazi myth is a revival of a primitive one: "The phony Fascist mythology is shown to be the genuine myth of antiquity, insofar as the genuine one saw retribution, whereas the false one blindly doles it out to the sacrifices."¹⁴ By differentiating between genuine and false myth, Horkheimer and Adorno seek to maintain mythic forms of relating to nature while condemning myth when used as an alibi for violence. Yet this differentiation does not actually distinguish between two types of myth, but rather between mimesis, which mythically divines the violence of nature, and manipulation, which is not mythic at all but merely instrumentalizes the idea of myth for rationalist ends.

Such a revision of Horkheimer and Adorno's thesis offers a solution to the question of how the Nazis were able to combine their scientism with a revival of mythic forms. The Nazis never actually sought to revive myth. Rather, their cultural project consisted of an attempt to instrumentalize the *concept* of myth in order to legitimate their rationalist suppression of mythic structures in art and popular culture. The Nazi cultural project was in fact much closer to an Enlightenment attempt to overcome myth than to a *völkisch* revival.¹⁵ If this is true, then the move which ties Enlightenment to Nazism is not the return to myth, as Mann as well as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, but a suppression of myth which has continued into the present day.

Baeumler was, in the words of Hans Sluga, "more than any other German philosopher, the typical fascist intellectual."¹⁶ The ideas he developed in the Bachofen introduction were essential for Alfred Rosenberg's understanding of myth in *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*,¹⁷ who cites

14. Horkheimer and Adorno 13.

15. Concerning the Enlightenment aspects of the *völkisch* and racist currents of Nazi ideology see Lawrence Birken, *Hitler as Philosopher: Remnants of the Enlightenment in National Socialism* (Westport: Praeger, 1995) 23-32, and Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 61-82.

16. Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 127. For a description of Baeumler's career and his role within National Socialist administration of culture and education, see Sluga 126-31, 223-30, and Monika Leske, *Philosophen im dritten Reich: Studie zu Hochschul- und Philosophiebetrieb im faschistischen Deutschland* (Berlin: Dietz, 1990) 203-37.

17. Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (1930; Munich: Hoheneichen, 1934) 43.

Baeumler's work early on in his book. After Hitler's rise to power, Baeumler received an appointment as chair of Philosophy and Political Pedagogy at the University of Berlin, and he worked closely with Rosenberg until 1945, heading the academic division [*Amt Wissenschaft*] of Rosenberg's Office for the Surveillance of the Whole Intellectual and Ideological Education and Training of the National Socialist Party and organizing conferences designed to develop a Nazi philosophy.¹⁸ Though Rosenberg's increasing marginalization within the Nazi hierarchy limited the broader dissemination of Baeumler's ideas, they still represented the best example of a Nazi theory of myth. Not only did Baeumler consolidate current ideas on the power of ritual, the philosopher as politician, and the nation as a symbolic form into a coherent theory of culture, he developed these ideas into a theoretical justification for racism and a practical program for Nazi pedagogy.¹⁹

Yet Baeumler never vindicated myth as a form of aesthetic experience the way Nietzsche did,²⁰ but instead sought from the very beginning to replace mythic structures with philosophical ones. Baeumler rejects aesthetic understandings of myth in order to relate myth to cultic rituals. Because rituals are concrete practices, Baeumler feels that they offer a more "objective" foundation for myth than art. But this scientific attempt to understand myth as a consequence of material facts eventually leads Baeumler to the argument that blood and race are the determiners of culture. His understanding of myth is based on a materialist, scientific explanation and manipulation of myth rather than upon a regeneration of mythic structures grounded in tradition that functions according to a cultural and aesthetic logic rather than a racist and materialist one.

Baeumler's philosophy depended heavily on Nietzsche's ideas, especially his main argument concerning the development of myth that opposed ideas set forth by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Consequently, Baeumler's approach at first seems similar to Nietzsche's to the extent that

18. Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis* 224, and George Leaman, "Deutsche Philosophen und das 'Amt Rosenberg'," *Die besten Geister der Nation*, ed. Ilse Korotin (Vienna: Picus, 1994) 51-56.

19. On the centrality of Baeumler's pedagogical ideas for Nazi policies, see Karl Christoph Lingelbach, *Erziehung und Erziehungstheorien im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Weinheim: Julius Beltz, 1970) 82-96, 188-202, and Winfried Joch, *Theorie einer politischen Pädagogik: Alfred Baeumlers Beitrag zur Pädagogik im Nationalsozialismus* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1971) 20-38.

20. See Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 65-82.

they both point out the importance of myth for Greek culture.²¹ But whereas Nietzsche goes on to explain the connections between myth and art and thereby emphasizes myth's status as a cultural phenomenon, Baeumler insists on a strict separation between religious and aesthetic phenomena in order to interpret myth as a fixed structure which *precedes* culture.²²

This difference between Baeumler's and Nietzsche's readings of myth derives from their various understandings of the symbolic character of myth. Baeumler presents a reading of the symbol as an original symbol of existence whose contents remain constant over time and precede art, and criticizes Nietzsche's failure to share this reading. For Baeumler, myth is an "original symbol of existence" and "an intuitive prehistoric construct with an eternal, all-inclusive, inexhaustible content."²³ As opposed to Baeumler's definition of the symbol in which myth is frozen into a static construct, Nietzsche's notion of myth's symbolic character derives from its exemplary status, its ability to accurately relate to the experiences of the people to which it speaks. Because this aesthetic efficacy of the myth ultimately derives from its cultural reception, the inner form and contents of the myth are put to the test when the myth is measured against experience in the mind of the spectator. Consequently, the religious power of the myth derives from an aesthetic efficacy that is defined both in terms of inner form and reception.²⁴ The individual subject becomes the mediator of the primal forces out of which the particular forms of myth and ritual are constructed.²⁵

By contrast, Baeumler emphasizes the religious force of myth as non-aesthetic and thus "real."

21. Baeumler, "Einleitung" xxxi. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967) 124-39 (Sec. 21-23).

22. Cf. Martin Michael Ross, "'Die staatgründende Tat' – Alfred Baeumler und die Politisierung der Ästhetik," *Die besten Geister der Nation* 66. Because he rejects any attempt to recover art as a mediator of experience, Ross's critique of Baeumler's aesthetic theories as a politicization of aesthetics is too general to be of any value for an analysis of the aesthetic issues involved. In his description of the dangers of an "Einheitsästhetik," he identifies such diverse figures as Kant, Schiller, Schelling, and Martin Gropius as supporters of such an aesthetic and fails to differentiate between their theories and that of Baeumler. Brunträger provides a much more useful description of how Baeumler's ideas on myth diverge from Nietzsche's aesthetic account. Brunträger 94-95.

23. Baeumler, "Einleitung" ccxlviii-ccxlix.

24. Nietzsche's best example of this process is his reading of the Prometheus myth, which condenses the human experience of technology into a parable about the limits of progress. Nietzsche 70-71 (Section 9).

25. See Nietzsche's description of the lyric poet. Nietzsche 49-51 (Section 5).

Nietzsche begins with the *will* to life, which is identical with the instinct for the *future*. Bachofen by contrast places *life* at the center, *real* nature.²⁶

While Nietzsche understands myth and symbol as parts of an ongoing cultural process of becoming, which is grounded in the constantly changing character of subjective experience, Baeumler prefers Bachofen's work because of its postulation of a "real nature" which has a constant structure of "being." Baeumler turns to this static understanding of symbol because he seeks to find an objective and material rather than a subjective and aesthetic foundation for myth and symbol. He rejects all aesthetic-psychological explanations due to their individual subjective character²⁷ and also challenges Nietzsche's explanation of tragedy from an individual experience of ecstasy for the same reason.²⁸ Instead of a concentration on a subjective aesthetic experience, Baeumler seeks to explain myth and tragedy by referring to an "objective" material reality.

After rejecting Nietzsche's subjective, aesthetic explanations of myth and religion, Baeumler argues for the objective, non-arbitrary quality of myth, locating the basis of this objectivity first in ritual and then in blood. In the Bachofen introduction, Baeumler proposes cult rituals as the "objective" foundation of myth because he sees in material practices a greater objectivity than can be found in a purely aesthetic event. He sets out this argument in his criticism of Nietzsche's subjective explanation of the Dionysian.

A simple reflection demonstrates the impossibility of tragedy's development out of a Dionysian enthusiasm. The delight with which the dancer feels himself transformed into the god is the climax of the Dionysian orgy. As a climax, however, this inner process is also an *end*. It is entirely unclear how an objective structure could arise out of ecstasy, a subjective process in the participant that will always remain subjective. The enthusiastic experience itself lacks not only any

26. Baeumler, "Einleitung" ccliv.

27. "It belongs to the irony of the history of thought, that the method of those philologists, whom Nietzsche most vehemently rejected and fought, differs from Nietzsche's method only by virtue of considerably *shallower* psychology. A sense of the *religious* and the *objective* in the life of the older ones has at the same time disappeared (and probably returns at the same time)." Baeumler, "Einleitung" cclxxxiii.

28. "The entire world of the chthonic religion remains from start to finish outside of his [Nietzsche's] field of knowledge and his interest. He lacks every sense of ground, cult, locale, heroes, and the underworld. The experience of ecstasy stands in the spiritual center of the birth of tragedy. For Nietzsche it is that *joy of pain*, which is felt in the most extreme intensification of all the feelings of a lonely subject." Baeumler, "Einleitung" ccxlii.

moment of form but also any point of departure for a formative force. The ecstatically enraptured dancer who has felt the presence of god sinks in the end exhausted to the ground. His experience has a clearly limited trajectory, and nothing points beyond the inner process.²⁹

The crucial issue here is whether an aesthetic experience of ecstasy has any structural form. Baeumler does not see any connection between form and ecstatic moments in the subject because these moments remain confined to a passive inner process, which does not refer to anything outside of itself. This view opposes Nietzsche's idea that it is precisely such an inner process that gives rise to form as the recapitulation of contradictions, which extend from the experience of the subject into the "heart of the world."³⁰ Baeumler sees this Dionysian-mimetic understanding of form as purely subjective, and thus divorced from reality, and seeks to ground tragedy and myth in a "material" reality of cultic ritual. He replaces Nietzsche's aesthetic explanation of tragedy with a cultic one.

For Nietzsche, the myth is always a story and thus a linguistic and aesthetic construction that recapitulates experience. The myth or the ritual, as Dionysian art, is simultaneously an aesthetic and a sacred event that mediates between subjective experience and a cultural tradition. Refusing to make any metaphysical statements about the sacred itself, Nietzsche only discusses the human *experience* of the sacred, analyzing this experience in order to determine how it functions within human consciousness. Nietzsche then concludes that the rules of sacred experience are in fact aesthetic rules.

In contrast to this linking of aesthetic to religious experience in both myth and ritual, Baeumler draws a fundamental distinction between ritual, which is sacred, and myth, which is merely aesthetic, in order to concentrate on ritual as the true source of the tragic. For him, myth is too idealized and thus too abstract to provide the kind of metaphysical foundation, which he seeks for tragedy. The essence of tragedy does not lie in its stories, but in its rituals, the facts of its presentation and performance within a ritual setting. The tragedy is a myth only to the extent that the ritual speaks through it, grounding the tragedy in the sacred realm of ritual and thus turning it into myth.

Myth or ritual as a mediator between subjective experience and

29. Baeumler, "Einleitung" lxxii.

30. "The artist has already surrendered his subjectivity in the Dionysian process. The image that now shows him his identity with the heart of the world is a dream scene that embodies the primordial contradiction and primordial pain, together with the primordial pleasure, of mere appearance." Nietzsche 49.

communal experience in the sacred does not exist for Baeumler. Instead, he claims that the sacred can only exist as an outgrowth of cultic rituals. In his analysis, he differentiates the reality of ritual from the ephemerality of myth and argues that ritual is closer to subjective experience because it consists of a set of actions rather than mere words. As action, ritual functions more effectively as an individual affirmation of a sacred experience.

The tragedy was experienced by contemporary Greeks undoubtedly as a heroic legend in a concentrated form unheard of up to that time. The novelty consisted in the fact that it was not told but depicted, in *dramatic* form. The heroic legend appeared in a word not as *myth* but as *cult*. This transition from myth to cult led simultaneously to the subjectivity of the depiction in the most general sense. Though there is nothing more objective, rigid, or archaic than cultic practices, the cult itself is nevertheless always subjective insofar as it consists of actions, and actions always spring from affects. The cult must be carried out by living subjects, practiced and preserved as a custom in the real world, if it is not to die out. The ghostly form of the word, on the other hand, floats effortlessly through the centuries even without any effort that is subjectively directed toward it.³¹

Baeumler rejects the stories of myth, not only because of their aesthetic as opposed to ritual character, but also because of their idealistic character as language as opposed to actions. Myth for Baeumler can detach itself from the subjectivity of a community because it consists of words which can be preserved without subjective effort. Rituals, on the other hand, must constantly be affirmed by those performing them in order for them to continue to exist. Though Baeumler affirms the importance of subjective experience here, he does not suggest that such experience could define the structure of myth or ritual, as Nietzsche argues. Rather, for Baeumler the ritual takes hold of subjective experience, molding it according to an “objective, rigid, archaic” structure. Baeumler assumes that a ritual (such as baptism) is closer to the sacred than the recounting of myths (such as the Biblical story of Christ) because the former is material while the latter is merely aesthetic. When myth is distinguished from ritual, the subjective side of both is discarded in favor of a presumed “objectivity” of ritual practices. Even though Baeumler argues that the ritual depends on subjective affirmation for its survival, he does not view this affirmation as the basis of ritual, but as an effect. For him, the true source of the symbol’s power lies in a sphere that precedes subjective

31. Baeumler, “Einleitung” lxxvi.

experience. The only basis for this power, which Baeumler can provide, is one that is predetermined by the dictates of either a supernatural or a biological reality. Frank argues that the supernatural explanation for the sacred would be preferable to the biological (and racist) one.³² But in fact both of these explanations have the same structure, and in Baeumler's thought, they both function as a source of the sacred.

Baeumler develops this supernatural explanation for the sacred in his discussion of epic and tragedy. In the Bachofen introduction he depicts the world of the dead as the "primal" reality which provides the foundation for the sacred. He differentiates epic and tragedy, not on the basis of generic characteristics such as formal structure or style, but by referring to the character of the rituals connected to each. In the epic, the rituals are conducted as incense offerings to the dead, while in the tragedy the rituals consist of blood offerings, and the difference between the two is based on varying relations to the dead. The incense offering is abstract because it considers the dead as far away spirits, whereas the blood offering of tragedy maintains the consciousness of the proximity of the dead underneath the ground:

The hero, in whose "honor" one sings, is not far, but hears and enjoys the offering made in conjunction with a sacrifice. The whole is not a concert, a musical presentation, but frightful seriousness. It is not performed for the ears of the listeners, but for a spirit residing in the grave.³³

The tragedy's religious component does not derive from its aesthetic effect on the spectators, but rather from its cultic status as a ritual honoring the spirits of the dead. Instead of considering how ritual determines the spectator's experience of the dead, Baeumler argues that the world of the dead creates the structure of the tragedy. The tragic effect does not derive from its aesthetic characteristics but from its evocation of the dead.

The shudders that surround the tragic work of art are the shudders of the grave. The stricken silence of the participants, that mixture of terror and shock that is transmitted to the spectators according to Aristotle, springs from respect for the dead.³⁴

This supernatural explanation of tragic effects is inadequate in that it

32. Frank, *Gott im Exil* 125-30.

33. Baeumler, "Einleitung" lxxvi.

34. Baeumler, "Einleitung" lxxviii.

presupposes the respect for the dead that it needs to explain. Rather than posited as a given, such respect may itself be a consequence of a ritual's structuring of the experience of the sacred.³⁵ Whereas Nietzsche develops this psychological explanation for the sacredness of ritual (and myth), Baeumler considers the dead as supernatural beings whose inherently sacred status grounds the cultic ritual. In Baeumler's understanding the cultic ritual has a supernatural meaning, which precedes and defines the ritual's significance for human experience.

Baeumler retains the metaphysical structure of his supernatural explanation of the sacred when he moves toward a natural scientific explanation after 1933. Instead of referring to the spirits of the dead, however, he attempts to explain intellectual and cultural phenomena by recourse to the supposed objectivity of material reality understood in a natural scientific sense. In both the supernatural and the biological interpretations, ritual is an expression of basic character traits of a particular people. These traits neither depend on the experiences of individuals nor on the cultural traditions of a community. Rather, they are based upon the material "objectivity" of rituals that pre-exist any psychologically justifying or culturally specific experience. The priority of the "material" in the Bachofen introduction thus opens the way for an argument concerning the fixed "character" of a people founded in blood and race. As Baeumler argues in 1943: "Every genuine myth is a myth of blood. Blood is the final historical reality known to us."³⁶

While the turn to blood as the creator of myth was not made explicit in Baeumler's work until the Nazi period, it was already developed as a possibility in the Bachofen introduction. This text insists on a cultic rather than a psychological or aesthetic reading of myth, and Baeumler must only make a slight conceptual adjustment in order to transform the cult of dead heroes into the myth of blood. Baeumler never develops a theory of the sacred in which it acquires its own independent source of

35. "But without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement. Myth alone saves all the powers of the imagination and of the Apollinian dream from their aimless wanderings. The images of the myth have to be the unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care the young soul grows to maturity and whose signs help the man to interpret his life and struggles. Even the state knows no more powerful unwritten laws than the mythical foundation that guarantees its connection with religion and its growth from mythical notions." Nietzsche 135 (Section 23).

36. Baeumler, *Alfred Rosenberg und der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hoheneichen, 1943) 70.

legitimation. Instead, he separates myth from ritual in order to argue that ritual provides a sacred foundation for myth. Baeumler's mythology of blood and race is consistent with his earlier separation of ritual from myth because both ritual and blood are presented as outside foundations for myth which precede culture and tradition. This search for material foundations only begins when the aesthetic function of both myth and ritual is disregarded as a means of mediating subjective experience. But in disregarding the aesthetic character of myth, Baeumler actually suppresses myth as a realm of experience in favor of what he sees as either the supernatural or the biological foundations of culture.

Baeumler's insistence on a supernatural or material foundation for myth is the move that paradoxically delegitimizes mythic experience in his theory and necessitates a philosophical rather than a mythic understanding of culture. By arguing against an aesthetic understanding of sacred experience, Baeumler has deprived it of any legitimacy as a source of forms and structures derived from an aesthetic imitation of subjective experience. Instead, the realm of the sacred becomes raw material to be manipulated by a conceptualizing consciousness. Baeumler describes the formation of the sacred as a non-aesthetic event in which the cultic material is captured within a formal construct.

Baeumler suppresses the mythic in the Bachofen introduction by treating form as a philosophical means of domination rather than a result of an aesthetic mimesis of experience. The formal element in tragedy is not aesthetic (i.e., it is not an immanent process within the tragedy), and it is not passive. Rather, form is something that captures the spiritual and contains it.

In the moment where the unspeakable, the mysterious, the other, the *spirit* begins to speak, the tragedy is born. The imageless gains image, the formless gains form. In the tragedy the formative power of the Greek has proved itself upon the most monstrous of objects. It is for that reason the most paradigmatically *Greek* achievement of the Greek spirit.³⁷

The characters of tragedy gain their power through the fact that they are the manifestations of dead spirits. The "unspeakable, the mysterious, the other, the spirit" is the raw material that is formed into the tragedy. The presentation of spirits of the dead as characters on the stage is for Baeumler the accomplishment of tragedy and the result of the developing

37. Baeumler, "Einleitung" lxxxii.

power of a people. Form is for Baeumler a means of harnessing the unspeakable and the mysterious in order to link tragedy to ritual. But as he notes, “catharsis is not an aesthetic process.”³⁸ Instead of an aesthetic process presenting a mimesis of experience, form is for Baeumler a conceptual, philosophical harnessing of an original cultic material.

This triumph of “form” over “chaos” becomes the model for Baeumler's philosophy of history. The tragedy's transformation of ritual into concepts represents “the turning point of history.”³⁹ The distinction between epic and tragic religion becomes a difference between a paternal myth and a maternal cult and between an occidental and an oriental mythology. Maternal-based religious forms come from the east and belong to a prehistoric period in human history. This early Asiatic period in human history is gradually overcome in Greece and then in Rome by paternal Western religions which create the rule of law and of the state. The fundamental shift is from a religious cult, which is based on a formless material, to a system, which is based on conceptual forms and laws.⁴⁰ This opposition defines a world historical conflict for Baeumler in which the formless maternal force continually tries to rise up against the form-giving paternal force. The victory of form becomes a suppression of one people, defined as Asiatic, by another, defined as Western.

The era in which the tragedy originates demonstrates many characteristics of an epoch that, from the shining heights of epic “enlightenment,” sinks into the night of superstition. All demons were unleashed by the heart-stirring Dionysus religion. [. . .] In this hour of need the Greek genius succeeded in achieving the tragedy, which spiritually defended the West against the powers of Asia in the same way that the victory over the Persians did so militarily.⁴¹

By understanding form as that which orders chaos and a characteristic of particular peoples, Baeumler prepares the concepts with which Alfred Rosenberg justifies his condemnation of non-Aryan cultures. In referring to their lack of formative power, Rosenberg cites Baeumler's arguments in order to advance his theory about the Aryan world-historical task of giving form to other cultures.⁴² Baeumler himself later uses

38. Baeumler, “Einleitung” lxxxi.

39. Baeumler, “Einleitung” lxxxvii.

40. Baeumler, “Einleitung” cclxviii.

41. Baeumler, “Einleitung” lxxxv.

42. Rosenberg, *Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* 34-44.

this argumentation to argue that the Jewish people “should not be tolerated” because they lack such formative power.⁴³

The centrality of form for conceptually harnessing mythic material provides Baeumler with a justification for the rule of a philosophical leader. Because the meaning of the cult is fixed and pre-defined through physical rituals (in the Bachofen introduction) or blood ties (in *Alfred Rosenberg und der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*) and also undefined in terms of specific contents, Baeumler must turn to the word in order to give it “form.” Since he bases myth on a material unity of cultic ritual or of blood, neither of which have any form that could determine the defining structures of a community, the specific meaning of ritual and blood must consequently remain undefined until someone imposes this meaning. This task falls to a philosophical-political leader:

For those are not simply spectators of things, not simply perceivers, but rather actors, lonely and bold men, chosen by fate to replace the dying myth with a new world view. The philosopher is the creator of the image of the world that takes the place of the popular, mythic one. He has a world-historical leadership role. He does not come from behind, but rather is “thrown ahead.” His teachings are simultaneously a pedagogical and political program for reality.⁴⁴

Because myth has no source of legitimacy on its own and the legitimacy of ritual is mute, the mythic community must give way to a philosophical leader, and myth must defer to philosophy. The victory of the philosopher-leader over the mythic-popular is, for Baeumler, the victory of form.

Though Frank argues that Baeumler’s early work in the Bachofen introduction must be distinguished from the later, explicitly fascist work, this later work is in fact based on the same basic structure of thought as the earlier theories. The victory of form is not just a twentieth-century event, as Baeumler implies in the passage above written in 1930, but already occurs in the 1926 Bachofen introduction as art’s triumph over ritual in Greek tragedy:

43. “Because they does not have any formative powers, the Jewish people always remain what they are; certainly we find in them a ‘striking character,’ but this is not raised to the ‘dignity of personality.’ ‘Therefore these people hate everything that is not like themselves, therefore they should not be tolerated.’ (Rosenberg: ‘Schriften und Reden,’ Bd.I, S.16).” Baeumler, *Alfred Rosenberg* 47.

44. Baeumler, “Nietzsche,” *Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (1930; Berlin: Junker & Dünnhaupt, 1937) 258.

The phenomenon of the tragic does not originate out of a climax in the belief in demons und the consciousness of death, but from out of its *overcoming*. The creation of the tragedy is the most important stage in the path of the Hellenization of the Dionysian religion and for that very reason it is the Hellenic world's decisive step in its relation to the cult of the chthonic powers.⁴⁵

In Baeumler's account, tragedy only participates in the "demonic" insofar as it subjugates it. By overcoming these "chthonic powers," tragedy clears the way for the rule of the philosophical-political leader of fascism.

Baeumler's work was proto-fascist from the beginning, not because it sought a return of myth, but because it insisted on its suppression as a foundation for social order. Baeumler maintains this perspective throughout his career from the 1926 *Bachofen* introduction all the way through his 1943 defense of Alfred Rosenberg's *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*. The delegitimation of myth arises from his attempt to determine a "material" basis rather than an aesthetic foundation for its functioning. In making a fundamental distinction between myth and ritual in which ritual is allegedly more material than myth and the materiality of rituals is taken to be the source of the power of myth, Baeumler assumes that he does not have to explain the sacredness of rituals. But because the rituals are left without a voice, philosophy is necessary to harness the power of ritual, establishing a *de facto* suppression of both myth and ritual as sources of patterns for human behavior and cultural identity. Myth and ritual become tools for the implementation of a philosophical-political project. The goal of Baeumler's theories is not to affirm the truth of myth and ritual (as Mann asserts), but to replace the mythic and ritual structures governing social life with philosophical ones.⁴⁶ This goal links the fascist understanding of ritual and myth to an Enlightenment one. The goal of both perspectives is to delegitimize myth as an organizer of social life in order to replace it with philosophical concepts and organization.

45. Baeumler, "Einleitung" lxxxvi.

46. As Brunträger demonstrates, Mann's understanding of myth was strongly influenced by Baeumler's. Just as Baeumler maintains a separation between an original cultic substance without language and a philosophical appropriation of the ritual, Mann distinguishes mythic substance, which is constant, from a manifestation, which is open to intellectual manipulation. Yet, Mann's view of myth diverges from Baeumler's conception at a crucial point when Mann sides with Nietzsche against Baeumler in recognizing a connection between myth and psychology. Brunträger 116-24.