Shining on the Blues: Reading Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" through and beyond Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*

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Abstract: James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* share much in common. Timothy Golden and Robert Reid have both situated the story within Nietzsche's conceptualizations of the Dionysian and Apollonian. However, this paper fills in, revises, and challenges interpretations by Golden and Reid, emphasizing that the story is an explicit dramatization of *The Birth of Tragedy*, with direct references to Nietzsche's ideas regarding the Dionysian ground of experience and the Apollonian impulse to represent that experience. At the end of the story, however, the narrative slips free from the Nietzschean schematization and suggests a transcendent other at work, an otherness that shines on Sonny's blues and effects a release for the narrator.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Apollonian, Dionysian, Sonny's Blues, James Baldwin, Metaphysics, Transcendence

James Baldwin's "Sonny Blues," first published in *Partisan Review* in 1957, is a tragic story about two brothers in Harlem in the 1950's. It explores the socioeconomic, racial, and personal struggles of African Americans through the sounds of blues, jazz, or bebop (depending on which reading of his music to which one subscribes).[1] The poetic conceits and syntactical rhythms make the piece sing. And the song is beautiful. It is also a thoroughly Nietzschean story, one about what to do in the face of the great no, the idea that it is better not to be born or to live a short life (Nietzsche 505). The story's response to the great no is to sing. Because the story borrows so much from Nietzsche's own musings on suffering and self-transcendence (and music), at times almost verbatim, an exploration of how the story subscribes to or departs from Nietzsche's ideas is important.

Two scholars have connected "Sonny's Blues" with Nietzsche's ideas in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Robert Reid believes it is the light (emanating from darkness) of the Dionysian that delivers the narrator from suffering at the end (452). Timothy Golden, on the other hand, believes that the narrator accepts *Sonny's otherness*—his Dionysian reality—and that, as a result, the Apollonian (representative) and Dionysian (non-representative) blend, represented in the cup of trembling (Golden 566-9).[2] In other words, for Golden, it is not that the narrator transcends his suffering through the annihilation of self as Reid believes; rather, he is able to represent the suffering in a way that does not impose his own standards of living on Sonny. Neither view, however, tells the whole story, for both theories use the Nietzschean idea of tragedy to interpret the narrator's ambiguous release at the end. Upon closer inspection, *The Birth of Tragedy* fails to account for the narrator's experience of the music. The question is not so much whether Baldwin is true to Nietzsche's idea of self-transcendence; the question is whether Nietzsche's idea of (self) transcendence can sustain itself. In short, the story's climax and *dénouement* put Nietzsche's ideas to the test. It is not the agency of the narrator nor of Sonny—or even the music—that occasions the narrator's release from suffering. Attenuated through the music, but separate from it, is a force that releases the narrator. Something shines on the music and, by proxy, the narrator.

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The Dionysian

To address the positive metaphysical intrusion at the end, and how it challenges a Nietzschean reading, an engagement with Baldwin's reliance on Nietzsche is important. The story uses so much space to explore suffering that it seems to have arisen out of extensive engagement with Nietzsche. Of course, as a writer giving voice and song to the suffering of African Americans in the 1950's, it is no surprise. But the ways that the narrator and Sonny discuss suffering—their philosophical angles—seem to be borrowed from Nietzsche's pages. The Dionysian, as both Golden and Reid identify, is the foundation Baldwin uses to build the conflict, appearing in story's the settings, dialogue, and the connections between suffering, music, and representation.

Nietzsche characterizes the Dionysian as a paradoxical impulse, one that annihilates the self and, in turn, celebrates that annihilation. The Dionysian is the primordial unity (which, for Nietzsche, was suffering) and is figured best through the notion of drunkenness (501-2). This dual impulse expresses itself in Sonny. He admits the annihilation of the subjective self when he says that when he "was most out of the world," he "didn't really have to play [piano]," that "it just came out of [him], it was there" (Baldwin 134). He is no longer there, but the music, the Dionysian art, is. So, the reader sees competing sentiments: there is both the nowhere of the Dionysian and also the music that springs from forth from it, which Nietzsche suggests is a celebration (501). But it is not a celebration in any conventional sense. This release from suffering comes from a dark celebration of that suffering. Desmond suggests that in Nietzsche one sees "affirmation…in the sundering" (*AAO* 169).[3]

So, Sonny's release, figured through the music, is predicated upon his own annihilation. For Baldwin and the characters in this story, it points to the suffering of African Americans, but it is also universal suffering. Blues music (or jazz or bebop), of course, communicates the history of suffering for African Americans and is a clear indication that the music expresses that suffering. Baldwin also draws attention to this in other ways. For instance, when the narrator ruminates on musicians at the end, he says, "What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason" (137). Music's wordlessness, and therefore its triumph and terribleness, is a direct connection to Nietzsche's Dionysian: "…as Dionysian artist he has identified himself with the Primal Unit, its pain and contradiction. Assuming that music has been correctly termed a repetition and a recast of the world, we may say that he produces the copy of this Primal Unity as music" (511). Through this Dionysian music, in other words, the terror of Silenus's tragic words—that it is better not to live—grips and dissolves the subject, making him one with the nameless substratum of being. At the same time, however, the song is elevated to primordial unity. As a result, Sonny appears to the narrator as "some sort of god…or monster" (Baldwin 125). Nietzsche, too, says that, under the Dionysian power, one "feels himself a god" (501). This god is the terrifying god of suffering, a monster indeed.

We see another parallel to Nietzsche's ideas at the end of the story when the narrator, although conceptualizing Sonny's song in terms of "freedom," also figures it as representing what Sonny "had gone through and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth" (140). Freedom seems to offer relief, but the song that evokes the feeling or promise of freedom is the song of suffering. In other words, music does not mitigate the suffering but sings it. I will return to this later in the paper, for it is central to understanding the otherness at work in the narrator's epiphany at the end.

It is not only Sonny who exists in the drunkenness of the Dionysian. Music and dancing appear at several points in both Nietzsche and Baldwin's work. Nietzsche writes, "In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak; he is about to take a dancing flight into the air. His gestures bespeak enchantment" (501). But the Dionysian also [kneads] and [cuts] the individual (502). Going further, Nietzsche says that it "seeks to destroy the individual" (502). These ideas are on display at several points in the story. Just after the narrator reads the news of Sonny's arrest, for instance, he stands in front of a bar and sees a barmaid dancing

and laughing, keeping time with the music as she serves the patrons.[4] When she smiles, the narrator says one can see "the little girl" and can "sense the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore" (107). Communicated in the dancing and music is both the innocence of the little girl *and* the doomed, struggling woman: both freedom—figured through childhood—and suffering, figured through the narrator's interpretation of her as a "doomed woman" (107). At the same time, however, the Dionysian reunites the subject with the primordial unity, thus the reason the woman's face appears as a little girl.

The revival meeting on the sidewalk across from the narrator's place is another example of this quality. After two of the men testify, a woman sings, "Tis the old ship of Zion." Although the lyrics say, "it has rescued many a thousand," the narrator says that "not one of them had been rescued" (129). But the woman sings with a "face…bright with joy" (129). As the narrator listens, he says that the people around, once apathetic to the music, begin to focus on "something within" (129): [the] music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last" (129). The first and final conditions are, of course, ambiguous and might refer to the oppositions of childhood and innocence and adulthood and the difficult experiences that they face. Or, situated within the Zion motif, it might relate to the African American tradition of using Jewish captivity and freedom as a representation of slavery, the struggles for equal rights, and a promise for deliverance from the racial hardships that they face, the "final" condition being freedom. Either way one sees the individuals' identities coalesce into a singular, communal consciousness for the narrator, one that recognizes the suffering in the song. Reid believes the song "is simultaneously the slave ship that carries them into bondage and the ship that rescues them from that bondage…" (451).[5] Sonny comments on this scene once he arrives at the narrator's house, saying, "it struck me…how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that" (132). For Nietzsche, the Dionysian reminds us of the "phenomenon that pain begets joy, that ecstasy may wring sounds of agony from us" (504).

But the Dionysian appears not only to rise from song and dance. When he picks up Sonny in a taxi, the narrator depicts the neighborhood in violent terms: "Housing projects jutted up out of [the streets] …like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea" (112). Likewise, 110th street is described as having a "hidden menace which was its very breath of life" (112). Music is a chthonic force, too, making "the pavement [seem] to shake" (107). At work in these passages is the chaos and suffering of the Dionysian. The darkness and violence of annihilation seeps through the music, and the milieux in general, so much so that the narrator feels as though the ground shakes. This is Nietzsche's primordial darkness, the substratum of existence (502). Although it has a particular milieux, the suffering of African Americans in Harlem, for Nietzsche it is also the primordial darkness of everyone's existence. All these connections between music, drunkenness, darkness, and earthquakes are reminiscent of the Dionysian seeking to "destroy the individual" (502).

The Apollonian

Both Golden and Reid see the narrator as representative of the Apollonian impulse. Nietzsche explains the Apollonian as "that freedom from the wilder emotions, that philosophical calm of the sculptor-god" (500). Although the world, as Nietzsche sees it, is unintelligible, through his calm demeanor, the Apollonian figure is 'the shining one,' the deity of light [and] also the ruler over the fair appearance of the inner world of fantasy" (500). He makes the world intelligible through art (the plastic arts or poetry). When discussing the narrator, however, both Golden and Reid focus primarily on the "ordered" side of the narrator's Apollonian nature rather than the artistic side. For both scholars, the narrator's ideas of himself and the world around him are, while ordered, illusory. He deceives himself with his dreams. Golden believes that "his occupation and lifestyle" as "an algebra

teacher…one who has mastered the symmetry and necessity of mathematical operations…" lead him to believe that a "bourgeois lifestyle will yield a life free from tragedy, similar to the way that performing the same mathematical operation on both sides of an algebraic equation will always yield the correct answer" (566). Reid believes the narrator "attempts to save himself through assimilation of the values of the white myth" (444). For Reid, the narrator has superimposed onto his suffering the idea of his own success, but this idea of success does not reflect his reality of suffering, for, although he might have a respectable job, the darkness of Harlem surrounds him (444).

Because he suggests the narrator creates illusions, Reid is closer to understanding the relationship between the narrator and the Dionysian.[6] Golden does not consider the artistic dynamics of the narrator. And neither scholar accounts for the fact that the Dionysian works in tandem with the Apollonian to create tragedy. The Apollonian figure takes the terror of the Dionysian and makes words (or sculptures or paintings) out of it. Nietzsche explains the relationship this way:

> …we may picture him sinking down in his Dionysian drunkenness and mystical self-abnegation, alone, and apart from the singing revelers, and we imagine how now, through Apollonian dream-inspiration, his own state, i.e., his oneness with the primal nature of the universe, is revealed to him in a symbolical dream-picture. (502)

It is not so much that the narrator has created a world different from the reality of his suffering. It is, rather, that the suffering undergirds the effort to represent. The representations come from the suffering. They do not come from adopting an outside dream-image, such as Reid's idea of the white myth. Nor do they come from a mode altogether separate from art, such as the tidiness of an algebraic equation, as Golden believes.

In other words, the narrator is *not* blind to his, Sonny's, nor his community's suffering; it takes only a cursory reading to see that he is acutely aware of his own suffering. In the boys' mocking, denigrating laughter at school, for instance, he hears Sonny *and* himself (104). From that suffering, the narrator dreams. The Dionysian is everywhere, but it is communicated through language. Nietzsche says, after all, that the Apollonian impulse is an "important part of poetry also" (499).

The Interplay of the Dionysian and Apollonian

While the poetry, or his narration in general, is Apollonian in nature, the rhythms of the Dionysian inform his mode of storytelling. We see this on display when he takes liberties with conventional standards of language. The first two sentences of the story serve as a great example: "I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again" (103). In neither sentence does one see conventional grammar. In fact, the grammar undermines the very same parallel structure in two ways, first by eliminating the "and" and using only commas to separate the phrases and, second, by adding "and" between the parallel phrases without commas. Although his words are not a song, they are song-like, mirroring the rhythms and improvisational nature of jazz music. The Dionysian music lurks in the structures of the Apollonian.

The narrator's conversation with Sonny about suffering reveals this interplay as well. He wants to tell Sonny "about will power and how life could be—well, beautiful" (133). He continues, "I wanted to say that it was all within; but was it? Or, rather, wasn't that exactly the trouble? And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded—empty words and lies" (133). Rather than speaking the words out loud, he makes the promise to himself and prays he "would keep it" (133). This is an interesting position for the beauty seer, questioning his own resolve, a slip of the *principium individuationis*, as Nietzsche, after Schopenhauer, puts it in *The Birth of Tragedy* (500). Although he wants to comfort Sonny with the idea of beauty and meaning, something holds him back, and he is unable to superimpose his representative language onto the feeling of hopelessness he has. But there is a doubling at work, for he communicates that lack *through* language. It is a moment during which the Dionysian impulse evokes despair and then the despair is reigned in through the use of working out that terror through words by making an Apollonian promise.

The extensive use of darkness metaphors also points to the Apollonian artist figuring the Dionysian (not evading it, as Reid and Golden believe). For instance, he is attuned to the power of darkness as a metaphor for suffering. On the subway train, once he reads the news of Sonny's arrest, he feels "trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (103). Similarly, Nietzsche's Apollonian figure sits "quietly in his tossing barque, amid the waves" (509). The narrator sees Nietzsche's waves in the darkness of the subway. He does not blind himself to them. He represents them through metaphor, the dream image.

At the end of the story, one sees the language of the narrator echo Nietzsche to an even greater extent. He says, "But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air" (Baldwin 137), echoing Nietzsche's idea that the Apollonian impulse imposes order onto the horror of the suffering of existence: "The Greeks knew and felt the terror and horror of existence. That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians" (505-6). "Imposing" and "interpose" are strikingly similar here. In this case, the narrator claims that Sonny imposes music onto the void much like the Greeks interposed the Olympians onto the terror of existence.

When Sonny begins to play, he faulters at first, trudging along, while Creole tries to coax him into stepping out. When he finally does, Nietzsche raises his head again. The narrator believes Sonny's playing becomes "very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it *was no longer a lament*" (Baldwin 140). This transformation of lament into praise is a direct reference to Nietzsche: "At the Apollonian stage of development, the 'will' longs so vehemently for this existence [life despite suffering], the Homeric man feels himself so completely at one with it, that lamentation itself becomes a song of praise" (506). Further, the narrator says, "I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting" (*my emphasis* Baldwin 140). For Nietzsche, this transformation occurs as a reversal of the Dionysian dictate that it is better not to live. The Greeks, Nietzsche believes, transfigured the suffering of the Dionysian through the representation of the gods as humans so that living becomes heroic. In this passage, Sonny's song is a song of suffering, that it is better not to live, but the narrator, through his Apollonian agency, interposes his representative gods onto the music, thus reversing the sentiment. Suddenly, it becomes heroic for the narrator (and Sonny) to live. This reading challenges Reid's idea that the music "replaces blind faith in the imprisoning symbols" (452).[7] According to Nietzsche, the Apollonian figure maintains his use of imprisoning symbols.[8]

In the relationship between the two impulses, Nietzsche sees a "picture of [man] sinking down in his Dionysian drunkenness and mystical self-abnegation, alone, and apart from the singing revelers" and then, through the Apollonian "dream-inspiration," the man's "oneness with the primal nature of the universe…is revealed to him in a symbolic dream-picture" (502). The aloneness and then union with others through dream-inspiration is exactly what Baldwin captures at the end. At first, the narrator sits alone in the crowd, apart from the singing revelers and disconnected from Sonny. Then, when he hears Sonny play, the symbolic dream pictures of the Apollonian appear; he sees his deceased daughter, his mother, the road upon which his uncle died, and his wife's tears (140).

After hearing Sonny play, the narrator orders a drink for Sonny. Sonny takes a sip and nods at the narrator, and the narrator says, as Sonny begins playing again, that the cup "glowed and shook above [his] brother's head like the very cup of trembling" (141). The cup of trembling has been the central hermeneutical focus of the story for many scholars. For instance, Tracy believes the cup represents a "holistic vision," bringing together the myriad genres (jazz, blues, and Gospel) that Sonny plays (165). For Tracy, this blending represents a blending of the sacred and secular to give voice, or song, to the communal experience of African Americans and, thus, [ameliorate] their isolation, despair, and loneliness" (164). McParland thinks the cup represents Sonny: "[He] is that cup and its contents, mother's milk and song of life, the heat, the sting, and swirl of hard liquor" (138). Knepper believes the cup is "an ambiguous but perhaps hopeful allusion to Isaiah 51:22" pointing to the possibility that

this moment draws the narrator and Sonny "closer" and occasions a "deeper understanding and new acceptance of what they cannot understand" (148). Hobson believes that the cup must be understood within the trajectory of exile, slavery, and deliverance of the Children of Israel (45–80). And Golden believes that it represents a blending of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, a coming together of sorts of the narrator and Sonny.

The pattern of allusions to Nietzsche's work suggests that Golden is perhaps closest in interpreting the symbol: suffering (the liquor) and the Apollonian redemption of suffering communicated through a Judeo-Christian lens: milk from the land of milk and honey from the Old Testament. When the substances are mixed, their composition becomes the work of art, much like Nietzsche sees Raphael's *Transfiguration*,[9] mixing both suffering (the liquor) and art (milk as religious conceit)—or, as Golden believes, the two characters coming together in brotherly understanding and the narrator finally accepting, and relating to, Sonny's differences.

As a result, the story also points to transfiguration. The cup of trembling[10] and the glow above Sonny's head suggest that the narrator has transformed Sonny into a saint. He is no longer the brother he cannot understand. Rather, Sonny becomes more than a brother to him. He becomes a glowing representation of redemption, a suffering savior carrying the weight of his people. He sips from the cup of trembling, for this is his lot. The narrator finally understands Sonny's burden. Because he now understands Sonny's suffering, the narrator erects a representational monument (the image at the end) of him.

Beyond the Dionysian and Apollonian

But this is where the Nietzschean thread stretches taut, for if the basis of Dionysian suffering is the great no—or forming a dream out of the no—is it possible to transcend at all? In other words, how can a "no" ever be a "yes?" For philosopher William Desmond, it cannot. Although the narrator says that the musician "is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air" (Baldwin 137), the void is no-*thing,* so it cannot provide the materials for creation. Whatever the musician does in the throes of musical possession is not done *creatio ex nihilio*; it must be created out of an abundance of "otherness," as Desmond puts it (*AOO* 2). The prior cannot be reconfigured into "something." "Creation," Desmond writes, "is more than an imposition on flux, for something original, something marvelously original, comes to be, comes to shine" (*GOB* 101). Likewise, if it arises out of suffering, how can suffering be redemptive without an outside force? In short, whether the foundation of being is conceptualized as suffering or nothing, the self cannot transform it without something outside of suffering or nothingness.[11]

Desmond contends that Nietzsche's self-transcending "yes" to suffering only seems to transcend the great no because it is "finally engulfed by the horror" (*AOO* 15). He writes, "There is much appealing in Nietzsche's desire to say 'yes,' but if the [Dionysian] origin is as he describes it to be, this 'yes' must be despite its darkness, and a 'yes' despite is not quite the 'yes' Nietzsche desired. It is the darkness again, and horror before being more than joy" (*AOO* 15). Considering the story, the matter might be figured this way: If the narrator transcends his suffering—however briefly—he must transcend it by not embracing the darkness but becoming free from it. And, further, this freedom is given, not derived from the self. The darkness is the point of pivot, not the force that births the freedom or self-transcendence. If the self must embrace the dark, elemental suffering of the Dionysian, from where does the agency to transcend come? In other words, as Desmond writes, "tragedy asks a willing that one cannot just will" (*AAO* 169).

After questioning whether this shine is a result of the self, Desmond suggests that this experience of otherness is "not first our construction" (*GOB* 2–3). Instead, "there is something given, something awakening, something delighting…something of invitation to transcendence" (3). He writes,

> Revealed as creations, a light shines on things from beyond every closed whole. The shine on things has metaphysical and theological significance, beyond reduction and deconstruction. We behold the

> lilies of the field, but does the shine on things tell of a light that endows our power of enlightening? Does this light, neither of us or things, give things of beauty whose luster wakes in the soul a song of praise? (102)

While listening to the music, the narrator believes that in the music, one can hear how to be "free" (Baldwin 139). The power of Sonny's music, then, is not the result of Sonny nor the narrator but, rather, the Original at work, shining on the music. When Sonny begins to "make the song his…it [is] no longer a lament." (140). This undermines the reading that the music transcends the experience of suffering independent of an abiding otherness. The "freedom…around [them]" that the narrator experiences points to something greater than his lived reality. Knepper writes, "Desmond argues that a true 'yea-saying' must acknowledge a primordial goodness of being" in contrast, of course, to the primordial suffering of being (Knepper 164).[12]

Hobson points out that in Baldwin's story "Just above My Head," the character Jimmy "Hears something,' or, rather, 'something hears him,' becomes aware of the artist's ability and uses him or her as single-mindedly as a saxophonist uses that instrument" (Hobson 48). Hobson continues, "This 'something,' not further defined, is the link between the experience of millions" (48). The same can be said of Sonny. Something "uses" Sonny and, thus, transforms the blues to inarticulate wonderment.

Perhaps more importantly, the narrator says that the music "brought something else back to [him] and carried [him] past it" (140). This sentence serves as the most poignant indication of the otherness of the experience, for the vagueness of "it," "something else," and "carried him past it" are telling it slant, as Emily Dickinson might call it. It might be that it serves as an introduction to the memories of the death of his daughter and his wife's tears, but none of the other memories that come to him is foregrounded syntactically as such:

> I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. *And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it.* I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise" (*my emphasis* 140).

In other words, his experience in this sentence is beyond the ability to signify, pointing to Desmond's idea of the Exceeding Origin, which cannot be reduced by any self-determining mechanism and to which we respond with "agapeic astonishment" (Desmond *BB* 251 and *AOO* 108-109).

The culmination of emotions here is titillating. The memories of tragedy appear, and the narrator is "carried past" them (140). Suffering is transcended. It is also interesting to note the agency of the narrator here. He is not the one carrying. It is the music—or what the music (from the Originating Other) communicates. He is "a patience of being before [he is] an endeavor to be" (Desmond 3). Desmond writes, "Our *passio essendi* is on the boundary between receiving and responding—responding that may itself become creative in attempting to bring into being works of art in communication, secretly or more openly, with the originating reception" (*GOB* 3). The music is a gift that the narrator is open to receive. But the music also opens the narrator to the gift. This cannot happen through self-determination or through the power of unmitigated suffering but, rather, something beyond the self's capabilities. The language also slips from the Nietzschean drama, for "something else" and "carried me past it" both evade symbolic representation. "Carried me past it" suggests that the narrator is carried *beyond* suffering; he is no longer responding to suffering. But both phrases, especially "carried me past it," undermine a Nietzschean reading, for the experience of the narrator is beyond the Apollonian capacity to represent it.

Conclusion

Throughout most of the story, a dialectical relationship exists between suffering and representation. The narrator mitigates suffering through representation, the Apollonian figure taking the primordial chaos of the Dionysian and superimposing symbols or words upon it. At the end, how-

ever, when the narrator's speech falls short of representation through its ambiguities, one sees an outside force at work. Such a reading does not undermine its cultural import. The idea of freedom, though ambiguous, does not mean that it is an empty signifier. Rather, it indicates an abundance of feeling, and the reader intuits that this multivalent freedom exists in relation to the suffering of those in Harlem. The otherness, God, Goodness, Truth, or however one might define the otherness, descends to the suffering and harrows it, and, by harrowing it, transforms those who suffer. It is a testament to the power of hope. In this way, the argument is consistent with what Tracy, Hobson, Knepper, *et al* interpret as the promise of deliverance. The otherness of the experience illuminates the tragedy of their lived experience and promises release; it is a vision shown and a promise made from beyond them, not born of their suffering. It is no surprise that this was written during the Civil Rights movement. Baldwin's vision captures the zeitgeist of the era, situating then (de)situating it so that oppression and freedom from oppression are not figured in simple cultural axioms but, instead, given metaphysical weight. It is a call to hope, a hope in beauty despite suffering and the beauty of the (free) world on the horizon.

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Notes

[1] For more explorations on genre, see Tracey Sherard's "Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's Blues Text as Intracultural Critique," African American Review, 32:4, (1998), 691-705,

[2] Reid also believes the narrator at first adopts the Apollonian. He calls this the white man's image and says that the narrator, because of his job as a teacher and his place the middle class, believes he has escaped the darkness of the "brothers" (444-5).

[3] Desmond also suggests that this affirmation in sundering is consistent with what "Nietzsche… communicated to us…[:] he would not have seen what he had seen, been blessed as he was blessed. And perhaps cursed" (AOO 169).

[4] For a discussion of how laughter operates like music in the story, see James Nikopoulos's "'A Kind of Joy': Laughing and Grinning through 'Sonny's Blues.'" *James Baldwin Review*, 8.1, 2022. *http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/JBR.8.3*

[5] Reid also suggests that it is an Apollonian image that uses "death" as a representative salve for despair. The ship, then, also represents the end of their suffering by killing them (451).

[6] It is important to keep in mind that nothing in the story—as represented—can be Dionysian; it can only point to the Dionysian because the Dionysian cannot be represented in words, only music. And here we see words representing music, so the story is a step removed. What we read reflects an effort *toward* order. Just as much, interestingly, as Nietzsche himself was writing toward understanding, writing about something about which language cannot represent.

[7] It is important to remember that Reid identifies the symbols as the "white myth." I addressed this earlier in the paper.

[8] Golden avoids schematizing the Apollonian and Dionysian in his interpretation of *the narrator's* experience of listening to Sonny play. He says only that the music—"when words cease,"—allows the narrator to "fully appreciate Sonny" (166).

[9] About Raphael's Transfiguration, Nietzsche writes, "Here we have presented, in the most sublime artistic symbolism, that Apollonian world of beauty and its substratum, the terrible wisdom of Silenus; and, intuitively we comprehend their necessary interdependence" (508).

[10] Golden says Sonny does not drink from the cup, suggesting the cup of suffering is passed from him (Golden 156); however, Sonny sips from it (Baldwin 141).

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