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VOLUME 10/ISSUE 2, 2023

ISSN 2311-5475

Dialectical Materialism Collective

CRISIS & CRITIQUE

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CRISIS & CRITIQUE
Volume 10/Issue 2, 2023
ISSN 2311-5475

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Introduction: Tragedy... Comedy

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

Ancient tragedy has been depicted as presenting us with a bewildering type of conflict. It is bewildering because this conflict often has only a fundamentally puzzling (non-)resolution. The type of conflict specific to these tragedies is one that confronts the individual with a specific type of contradiction, a contradiction that one could read as an early proof of or insight into the fact that there is no metalanguage, to conjure this Lacanian adage. When two (or potentially more) systems of (normative) orientation enter into a collision, say two systems of laws, and both are considered to be binding, as some of the most famous tragic cases demonstrate, there is no higher (norm or) orientation that would be able to resolve this conflict.¹ This is why the contradiction or conflict leads to a collision. We encounter here an essential feature of the ancient tragic structure: all laws are binding but in case of a conflict of laws, there is no law to decide what to do. The ancient tragic subject then represents the focal point of this collision. The tragic individual is subjectivized by the contradictory summoning of two orders – at least in some famous cases – think: Antigone – and this means: the individual is subjectivized by being confronted with an undecidable choice (and all real choices are obviously undecidable). The structure of ancient tragedy thereby does not only give us an insight into the intricacies of subjectivization, but also into a paradoxical feature constitutive of freedom: tragic freedom is a freedom to choose one's own fate, the freedom to choose one's (symbolic or bodily) death, since it is a freedom to choose without having much of a choice (one cannot not choose). This meant for the tragic heroine to choose her own disappearance as the paradigmatic way of realizing her freedom. The ancient tragedy therefore ends with the overcoming of the contradiction in the disappearance of the tragic subject.

Hegel has pointed out that the ancient tragic subject, even though embodying what seems like a type of abyssal freedom – an act that has no unambiguous normative status, has no coverage in any “big Other”, so to speak –, at the same time still lacks the capacity to distance themselves from the normative orders.² Being able to establish a minimal distance (a standpoint of reflection) is constitutive (only) of modern (tragic) subjects. Antigone, to use Hegel's own paradigmatic case study of ancient tragedy, therefore opts to bury her brother for the sole reason that he is her brother, in short: because of what he *is* and in disregard of what he has done in his life. Antigone – and for Hegel, this is her ultimate limitation – treats her dead brother as if he was always already dead (and has never been acting). But from this limitation two different paths open up. The first leads from the ancient tragic structure to the tragic structure of modernity. The modern subject – and this is for Hegel an

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1 For an analysis of this structure, cf. Menke 1996.

2 See his discussion of Antigone in Hegel 2019.

effect of the Reformation and of the French Revolution – is determined not only by being self-conscious of its capacity to (reflectively) relate to the norms it takes as binding (this type of reflection is brought about by the Reformation) – and to not take anything as binding which it does not believe to be so –, but also by the insight that it is able to undo and remake systems of norms. The modern subject is free and knows that it is (this becomes historically manifest in the French Revolution). But this twofold modern structure does not – as some have argued – leave behind or overcome the tragic constitution. It rather universalizes it. Because there is still no meta-normative framework that would allow for the modern subject to know which norms it ought to accept as binding, a conflictual situation can potentially arise all the time. Modernity in this perspective is the epoch of the universal denaturalization of all norms. But this also means that we move from tragedy – ununderstood, so to speak – to the general insight into tragedy as an insurmountable universal subjective condition in modernity. The first path leads thus from tragedy to a universalization of tragedy...

The second path that one can trace from ancient tragedy, as Hegel notes, leads to comedy.³ Ancient tragedy ended with a reconstitution of the world after the death of the tragic hero(ine) as if unshattered – and this undoing of tragedy was a crucial element of what made tragedy tragic in the first place. Comedy now introduces a peculiar feature. As G.K. Chesterton remarked – before this has been more systematically elaborated by contemporary theorists of comedy⁴: “In all great comic literature... we feel the characters are deathless people in an endless tale.”⁵ If tragedy ends in death, comedy operates with a form of deathlessness, with an impossibility to die that makes its characters go on endlessly as if invincible. Hegel remarked – as Slavoj Žižek pointed out somewhere – that the transition from tragedy to comedy already takes place in the ancient tragic structure (paradigmatically - once more - in Sophocles’ *Antigone*): it appears precisely when Antigone after her act starts commenting on its eternal meaning and the status she will have after her death (for the coming generations) in history. Antigone’s act – in Antigone’s view – is an act never to be forgotten, an act that will not stop being written and spoken about. The move from ancient comedy to modern comedy will – analogous to the move from ancient tragedy to modern tragedy – imply that such deathlessness does become a feature of every subject (and potentially all proper subjective acts - which is why they might at the same time be rather rare). The second path thus leads from tragedy to comedy...

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3 Cf. for example Hegel 1975, p. 1093ff.

4 One cannot but here think of for example: Zupancic 2008 and Heller 2005.

5 Chesterton 1986, p. 94.

However we might be tempted to systematically elucidate (or rearticulate or criticize or even rebuke) these sequences of tragedy-tragedy and tragedy-comedy – maybe one can even risk to identify another more complex one in the sequence that moves from (ancient) tragedy to (ancient) comedy to (modern) comedy (and maybe this now takes places under modern tragic conditions)–, they have tempted some to see in them templates and tools that help to understand historical development and thus are instructive for an analysis of history. That we can move from one to the other seems to point to an inner porosity of the genres. Tragedy does open up to and potentially transforms itself or parts of itself into comedy. This does not mean that the relation between both – if it is one – can best be understood against the background of a larger mixed genre, the tragic-comic. Rather it indicates that the relationship between the tragic and the comic itself deserves to be examined. Is the way, the direction, so to speak, in which we pass from one to the other always determined in advance (we can only move from tragedy to another form of tragedy or to comedy) or are there possibilities for a (re)turn (from comedy to tragedy)? What is the tragic after the comic has taken over? Does it ever take over entirely or does it only come in segments or fragments or sequences? Some, and Karl Marx may be one of the most prominent thinkers to have stated so, added to the above sequence another one, notably one that moves from tragedy to farce... Where does this sit in relation to the link between tragedy and comedy? How do we get from the grandeur of tragedy to the debasement of farce?

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* addresses these questions and brings together contributions that either discuss the porosity of these two genres, the question of their sequencing or the potential of these (and other) sequences for historical analysis or for an analysis of our present. It seeks to do so from a variety of different possible angles and disciplines and, as always, it allows for each of our contributors not to speak as a representative, neither of a genre nor of a discipline, but in her and his own voice. What you are about to read through are thus singular reflections on tragedy... comedy....

Dundee/Prishtina, October 2023

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Humor and Metaphysical Truth

Mark Alznauer

Abstract: One of the more provocative claims that emerged from German romanticism was that a certain specific form of comedy—a form best exemplified by the novels of Rabelais and Cervantes and by the comedies of Shakespeare—reveals a paradoxical truth about human life that cannot be fully conveyed in any other manner. This essay offers us a brief and highly selective history of this thesis from its emergence in Jean Paul's *Preschool of Aesthetics* (1804) to its re-conceptualization in the aesthetic theories of George Santayana and Mikhail Bakhtin, along with some reflections on what it would mean to defend the view today.

Keywords: Jean Paul Richter, Santayana, Bakhtin, humor, metaphysics.

When considering the comparative merits of tragedy and comedy, it might be thought that any preference for comedy is unlikely to rest on claims about its greater truth, however that slippery word is to be understood. Surely it is more plausible to think that *King Lear*, say, shows us something true about the world we live in than it is to think this of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; for when Lear's daughters betray him, we feel that this is the sort of thing that happens; and when Bottom is turned into an ass by Oberon, doted on by a goddess and attended by retinue of fairies, we feel that this is the sort of thing that doesn't. And even if the truth we are looking for is not mere imitation of life but truth in a deeper, more philosophical sense, tragedy has always attracted more advocates. Sebastian Gardner has helpfully identified two opposing ways of defending tragedy in such terms: the view that tragedy is morally true because it reveals the world as fundamentally just, as a world in which vice or *hamartia* is necessarily punished, and the view that it is metaphysically true because it reveals something close to the opposite of this: a world-characterization in which morality has no place, in which suffering is completely and totally unredeemable.¹ On both fronts, comedy can seem comparatively unserious: it is morally capricious in handing out its ridicule—famously finding “the virtues of Malvolio as absurd as the vices of Angelo”—and it seems escapist—keeping any meditation on the ubiquity of human suffering firmly out of mind.²

But even despite these obstacles, there have been attempts to argue that comedy is a deep source of metaphysical truth about the nature of human life. The first fully articulated defense of comedy in this vein was perhaps provided by the German romantic writer Johann Paul

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1 See Gardner 2003. I am simplifying this a bit: for Gardner the moral view of tragedy need only claim that there is no fundamental incompatibility between morality and tragedy, it need not assert that tragedy has a fundamentally moral function.

2 The quote is from Frye 1957, p. 167.

Friedrich Richter.³ Although Jean Paul (as he is usually referred to) is not especially well-known today, the influence of his aesthetic writings throughout the nineteenth century was both deep and wide; he was recommended for an honorary doctorate by Hegel, beloved by figures as different in temperament as Heine and Kierkegaard, plagiarized by Coleridge and Carlyle, and praised highly by Schopenhauer and Freud.⁴ In his chief work on aesthetics, the *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (1806), Jean Paul argued that that a certain specific genre of comedy—a form best exemplified by the novels of Rabelais and Cervantes and by the comedies of Shakespeare—reveals a paradoxical insight about human life that cannot be conveyed in any other manner. Borrowing the term from English, he called this genre ‘humor’.⁵ The term ‘humor’ has come to stand-in for the whole sphere of what evokes laughter, but Jean Paul’s claims are anchored in a specific literary form, indeed, in a canon of classic works mostly from the renaissance period.⁶

In the following, I will offer a highly selective history of the view that a certain kind of literature—one typified by the comic works of Rabelais, Cervantes, and Shakespeare—is uniquely capable of revealing some metaphysical truth about human life. After describing Jean Paul’s theory of humor, I will turn to two critics of his theory: the turn of the century Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana and the twentieth century Soviet literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. As we will see, Santayana and Bakhtin adopt certain central features of Jean Paul’s account—particularly the claim that humor reveals a paradoxical truth about human life—but they disagree about the nature of the truth comedy reveals. These disagreements do not stem from purely aesthetic considerations, but from fundamentally different metaphysical convictions about the place of the of the human mind in the natural world. I will conclude by considering what resources there might be for a contemporary resuscitation of the view.

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3 Max Eastman credits the modern age with “discovery and celebration of benign humor as a great and significant kind of wisdom, and art and yet also a philosophy of gracious life. This discovery was authenticated and recorded in literature by the German romantics and by Jean Paul Richter and Hegel and his disciples, but it was not made by them nor by any person who can be identified. It was made by the English language” (Eastman 1921, p. 165). On the ‘Englishness’ of humor, also see G. K. Chesterton’s contribution to the 1928 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Humour,” which distinguishes humor from wit, satire, irony, and other forms of comic amusement in much the same way as the figures I will be treating here (Chesterton 1928).

4 For a more complete account of Jean Paul’s influence on subsequent reflection on humor, see the Introduction to Fleming 2006.

5 Jean Paul is not entirely consistent in his terminology: sometimes he treats satire, irony, humor as modes of the comic, sometimes he treats comedy, alongside satire, as one of the modes of ridiculous literature. I am following the former usage, where humor marks a kind of comic literature.

6 See, e.g., Morreall (1987).

I. Jean Paul Richter

To understand what Jean Paul might have meant by speaking of the truth of humor, it is important to first understand how he conceived of truth in the sphere of poetry more generally. In his most famous book, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams characterizes the romantic period as taking place amidst a general shift from the classical conception of poetry as imitating reality (poetry as the ‘mirror’ of nature) to a more modern conception of art as the expression of powerful emotions which light the world up in a certain distinctive way (poetry as ‘lamp’).⁷ The quickest way into Jean Paul’s theory of aesthetic truth is to recognize that it is motivated by a rejection of *both* these metaphors, mirror and lamp, and a search for a third metaphor to help us understand the relation between art and life.

In the *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, Jean Paul criticizes the idea that poetry should mirror reality on the grounds that mirroring reality is a pointless, impossible, and unpoetic task.⁸ It is pointless because if we have nature, we do need a duplication of it; it is impossible because any reproduction is necessarily selective; and it is unpoetic because to repeat nature without transforming it is a mechanical and unspiritual operation. The mimetic or ‘copybook’ theory of art had been under assault for some time when Jean Paul wrote, and he saw quite clearly what was presently rising to replace it. This was idea that the artwork is simply the expression of the free play of the artist’s own sentiments, a lamp-like projection of the artist’s own passions. But Jean Paul is just as opposed to any purely subjectivist conception of the artist task, thinking that this entails a kind of sterile egoism or poetic nihilism, one that substitutes an unpoetic reproduction of nature for a fluttering away into an “impotent and formless void.”⁹

Jean Paul’s ambition is to find a way to accept that the romantic insight that experience of beauty is in some important respects subjective, a matter of the way the individual mind or spirit perceives the world, but without relinquishing the more classical conviction that art must reveal the objective truth of reality. To do this, he must see the poetic transformation the real world into the beautiful world not as an extraneous injection of subjective passions into a reality that could be more accurately described in prose, but as somehow completing the real world, allowing it to come to full fruition.

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7 Abrams 1953.

8 Richter 1990. The first edition was published in 1804 and the second in 1813. All the following references are to the English translation of the second edition: Richter 1973.

9 Hegel would later criticize Jean Paul’s humorous novels on just these grounds, saying they present us with a “disorderly jumbling of topics related only in his own subjective imagination,” but he claims Jean Paul’s model, Laurence Stern, is free of these defects, and is capable of what he calls “true” or “objective” humor (Hegel 1998, pp. 601-2). For an excellent recent treatment Hegel’s theory of humor, see Lydia Moland 2018.

The metaphors that Jean Paul chooses to express this relation are, unsurprisingly given the times, organic ones. He says art is to reality as the bloom is to the flower, or that the second world of poetry stands to the first world of nature in the same relation that an English garden stands to its natural surroundings (25). This suggests that the message or truth that art conveys is not a reproduction of what we know already, what is already available in first nature, but a truth that can only come to us “on poetic wings.” In a vivid expression of this point, Jean Paul characterizes art’s relation to nature as a “copy that contains more than the original” (22, 24). Just as the full potentiality of the flower is only manifest in its blooming, the deepest truths of life are only expressible in poetry.

What, then, is the truth of life such that it might only become completely manifest to us in and through poetry? Jean Paul interprets his own metaphor in the following way: he says what the poet adds to reality when he reproduces it in his poetry is “the infinity of the idea”; this enables poetry to show limited or finite nature disappearing into such infinity “as if on an ascent to heaven.” Max Eastman once said that Jean Paul’s “metaphysical grandiloquizing upon the terms sublime and ridiculous, infinitely little and infinitely great, is fruitless of true meaning, and that I suppose was the essence of its value.”¹⁰ But although there is some obscurity in his terminology, we can take a first step towards understanding what Jean Paul means by this by noting that he is quite explicitly and self-consciously attempting to secularize a traditional Christian view of reality. When St. Paul wrote that the created world reveals or makes visible the otherwise invisible reality of God, he suggested that to see only the created world in the created world would be to subject to a kind of illusion, it would be to fail to see all that the created reveals about its own unseen dependence on God. This is not a failure to see, say, a tree as a tree, but a failure to see a tree as what it truly is ontologically speaking, that is, as *ens creatum*.

Jean Paul’s secularized parallel for this the idea that in ordinary experience, we are able to see, feel, and touch only limited objects; “[t]he understanding and the object-world,” as he puts it, “know only finitude” (88). To think these individual, finite things are all there is, is what he calls, borrowing from this religious view, the atheism of the infinite. But in the experience of the world which is afforded by poetry--particularly, *romantic* poetry--all the finite things in the world, including human actions, are placed in a broader, cosmic context (he calls this context “the infinity of the idea”), a context that is supposed to reveal their true or deepest significance in the something like the sense in which the created world only reveals its deepest meaning when seen as created by God, as ultimately dependent on his will.

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10 Eastman 1921, p. 169.

Jean Paul claims that serious and comic poetry accomplish this task in different ways. In romantic tragedy, which he only briefly discusses, the actions and suffering of an individual are placed within the “wild gigantic mill of the universe,” and this placement allows the audience with an insight into the total significance of that suffering (67). According to Jean Paul, the insight this affords the audience is strictly unavailable to the actual sufferer because the sufferer himself “deafened by the storm of emotion”—it is *only* available to the person regards this suffering from the aesthetic standpoint, seeing the figure against the background. The audience of *King Lear* is thus in a better position to understand the significance of what Lear has gone through than Lear is himself, and this is so because of something Shakespeare has *added* to the experience of suffering by depicting it; his way of framing the events of Lear’s life transforms them in a way that allows us to view them not as particular finite events but as a hieroglyph of human destiny.

Jean Paul acknowledges that comic poetry, as opposed to the more serious forms like tragedy or epic, might initially seem to be poorly equipped to afford us any deep insight into the place of humanity in the grand scheme of things, and this for the obvious reason that it often deals with seeming trivialities. But the most influential claim in the *Vorschule* is that there is species of comic poetry, termed ‘humor,’ that is fully worthy of comparison with ‘serious’ romantic poetry, but which is distinct from serious poetry because locates infinity not *in the world* but *in us*. He thinks the greatest exemplars of this genre are modern—they are the peerless comedies of Shakespeare, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and the two famous novels of Rabelais (*Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*)—but he concedes that we can also see flashes of this sort of humor already in Aristophanes.

Jean Paul identifies four components of humor: totality, annihilation of the finite, subjectivity, and sensuousness. For the sake of this discussion, it is the first of these that is most important (though I will allude to the other three). According to Jean Paul, comic poetry expresses totality when it “annihilates not the individual but the finite through its contrast with the idea.” He paraphrases this by saying that humor “recognizes no individual foolishness, no fools, but only folly and a mad world.” This is his way of marking a common distinction between satire and humor proper. The “common satirist” finds some ridiculous thing or person and makes a few jokes at its expense in the name of some standard of common sense or normalcy that the critic accepts. Such a critic is superior to his target. In Jean Paul’s terminology, this is to merely contrast the finite (the target) to the finite (the standard), something does not allow for “infinity” to emerge. But in true humor, the apparent target takes on a more general allegorical significance.

Jean Paul illustrates this distinction by invoking a romantic commonplace about *Don Quixote*, which is that although Cervantes

appears to have set out to write a satire of chivalric romance or peasant, “his genius was too great for a lengthy joke about accidental derangement and a common stupidity”—so he ended up drawing a “humorous parallel between realism and idealism, between body and soul, in the face of the infinite equation; and his twin stars of folly [Don Quixote and Sancho Panza] hover above the entire human race” (89).¹¹ The key thing to notice here is when comic poetry makes the transition from satire to humor, the defects of its target can no longer be viewed as accidental defects, as idiosyncratic follies or vices, instead they stand in for universal and necessary features of human life. From the point of view of infinity, great and small, good and evil, are equally nothing. So understood, the ridicule in question applies to the critic just as surely as his target, and this makes possible a kind of generosity in humor, a willingness in the audience to fully identify with the target of the ridicule rather than pretending to stand above him.

It is just this feature of humor, the thing that distinguishes it from common satire, that gives rise to what, from the point of view of ordinary experience, seems impossible or sheer madness (94). On the one hand, the humorist is fully identified with, or included within the target—this must be so since whatever is being ridiculed in the target is supposedly a *necessary* feature of human nature not an *accidental* vice or stupidity. And yet at the very same time, the action of the comedy allows the humorist to see his own finitude as finite, as ridiculous, and thus to experience a kind of subjective infinity, an ability to outstrip, though comic consciousness, all of the limitations of human life by seeing them as such. The humorist, Jean Paul says, places himself in the breach between these two poles—he is both the fool himself and yet wise enough to see his own folly. By doing so, comedy offers a form of reconciliation with life.

So we are now in a position to see what it might mean to suggest that comedy is capable of expressing a truth that cannot be expressed in ordinary life, or to say that it is a copy that contains more than the original. It is to attribute to humor the capacity of offering us a seemingly impossible or paradoxical form of self-knowledge: one that is simultaneously inside human life, subject to its constitutive folly, and yet outside of human life, capable of seeing such folly as folly. This form of self-knowledge seems impossible for the same reason self-deception has seems impossible. To deceive myself I must both know the truth that I am hiding from myself and yet somehow convince myself, or some part

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11 This characteristically romantic way of reading Quixote as a broad allegory rather than as a satire of chivalry has been searchingly criticized, though on different grounds, in by Anthony Close in Close 1978 who accuses it of being completely anachronistic, and by Vladimir Nabokov in Nabokov 1983 who accuses it of involving genteel evasion of the cruelties and vulgarities that can be found in the actual narrative.

of myself, that it is not true. Similarly, in humor, I must both be subject to a folly qua human being, and yet somehow come to see through it as a god might, seeing it, as Jean Paul puts it, from the perspective of the infinite. In such laughter, the scorn or derision of satire are entirely transmuted; I both fully recognize the intrinsic limitations and finitude of human life and yet by doing so I temporarily adopt an infinite standpoint which has transcended these limitations. Humor thus points to the possible achievement of an absolute standpoint on human life, one that cannot be reached through any other means.

II. George Santayana

Although Jean Paul's reflections on the case of humor were genuinely original and path-breaking, his general attempt to exalt art by showing that it was uniquely capable of revealing a deep metaphysical truth about the world was, of course, characteristic of the romantic period. When Keats famously wrote that "beauty is truth and truth beauty," he was expressing in poetry an idea that had already been batted around in the prose of various literary critics and idealist philosophers for at least fifty years. But by the last third of the nineteenth century, the excesses of the romantic metaphysics needed to justify such claims had provoked various strong reactions from thinkers with more naturalistic metaphysical convictions. An early and quite powerful example of this can be found in Nietzsche's 1878 indictment of the romantic conception of art in the fourth section of *Human, All Too Human*: "From the Souls of Artists and Writers."¹² But the most interesting reaction for the purposes of an inquiry into humor was perhaps the first book by the Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana: *The Sense of Beauty* (1896).¹³

William James famously described Santayana's way of approaching poetry and religion as the "perfection of rottenness."¹⁴ This remark, which was not intended to be as unfriendly as it perhaps sounds, directs us to a striking combination of qualities that is present in Santayana's thought. On the one hand, Santayana has an exquisite sensitivity to the appeal of the ideal, whether poetic or religious, one deeply informed by the romantic metaphysics of the great German period. But he couples this, on the other hand, with an inflexible commitment to a kind of naturalism or materialism according to which all these ideals are just human projections, forms of wish-fulfillment with no real anchor in reality, that is to say, with no independent embodiment or causal efficacy. So although Santayana thought religion was one

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¹² Nietzsche 1989, pp. 103-37.

¹³ Santayana 1955.

¹⁴ James 1920, p. 122.

of the most valuable expressions of human spirit, he also took it to be profoundly and deeply self-deceived about being more than this. His praise of poetry has the same somewhat patronizing quality; he attempts to do justice to the highest experiences poetry affords, like the romantic intuition that it affords us a deep insight into the truth of reality, but on the basis of a naturalistic psychology that shows us exactly how the illusion of such significance is generated.

In *The Sense of Beauty*, Santayana argues that one of the chief confusions of nineteenth century aesthetics was a failure to analytically separate the value of art from the value of the content that great art sometimes express. This confusion gave rise to a belief that beauty itself necessarily held some deep mystical meaning for human life, that it contained a hidden truth that could not be articulated or expressed in any other way than through art. We already have seen one version of this in Jean Paul, but it was ubiquitous in the period, especially in post-Kantian German philosophy.¹⁵ For Santayana this amounted to a mystification of aesthetic experience, a failure to see the need to account for the effects of such literature in terms of what Santayana characterized as “naturalistic psychology”. He described his own work as an attempt to explain the complex and overwhelming experiences of great art that were at the heart of the romantic view, particularly the experience of the tragic sublime, but in terms of principles acknowledged to hold in simpler judgments of beauty outside of the fine arts (v).

It is important to note, though, that Santayana’s criticism of romantic aesthetics does not depend on any crude misunderstanding of what they meant by poetic truth. He recognizes that the romantics clearly distinguish between a more common notion of truth—as correctness of representations—and a deeper notion which is more crucial to poetry but more difficult, if not impossible to define. But he thinks romantic thinkers have only reached for this unspeakable truth because they have paid insufficient attention to the psychological mechanisms by which the effects in poetry that they are so impressed with are actually achieved.

In tragedy, for example, the artist can take a depiction of intense and unmitigated suffering (Santayana’s example is *Othello*) and transform it into an experience of sublime peace, turning it into a spectacle that we can contemplate with ‘sacred joy’ (126). He fully concedes that this is one of the great glories of tragedy and perhaps its most extraordinary aesthetic achievement. The romantic theorist, however, refuses to be content with the psychological experience art affords us, he feels a need to impute a metaphysical truth to tragedy that would justify this feeling of reconciliation with life: for example, a revelation that evils of life are an inseparable component of the

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¹⁵ For a more general account of this tradition, see Gardner 2002.

transcendent glory of the whole or an insight into our ultimate unity with whatever is eternal and divine in us. But for Santayana, the paradox of tragedy is a purely psychological one—how can the artist enable us to simultaneously identify with the protagonist and yet derive a pleasure or even joy from his suffering, a pleasure without which the tragedy itself would be an aesthetic failure—this is a paradox of feeling that the romantic theorist mistakes for a mystical truth of reality that we only get glimpses of through art.

Santayana sees an analogous paradox also arising in the sphere of the comic. Like Jean Paul, he marks a clear distinction between two species of comedy: satire and humor. Satire depends on what Henri Bergson famously described as an ‘anesthesia of the heart,’ for the pleasures of satirical ridicule depend on a lack of sympathy with their target. This suggests that it is a general law of satire that the more sympathy we have with the target, the less a depiction of their folly or error is capable of amusing us; and vice versa. But in the case of humor this general law somehow fails to hold. Humor combines, Santayana says, amicable humanity with amusing weakness; it provides us with cases where the comic aspect of person endears us to the person rather than estranging us from him. This is the paradox of humor, which he thinks of as an important parallel to the paradox of tragedy.

The example that Santayana provides of such humor is an example we have already seen: Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Of Cervantes’ classic, he says:

Don Quixote is mad; he is old, useless, and ridiculous, but he is the soul of honour, and in all his laughable adventures we follow him like the ghost of our better selves. We enjoy his discomfitures too much to wish he had been a perfect Amadis; and we have besides a shrewd suspicion that he is the only kind of Amadis there can ever be in this world (*The Sense of Beauty*, p. 156).

The paradox that Santayana finds here is comprised of a combination of two seeming antithetical reactions—an admiration of Don Quixote based on a deep sympathy for his goodness, nobility, and humanity coupled with a clear perception of the absurdity of his self-conception. If we pay attention to the ridiculous aspect of the hero too much, then we will be prone to read the book as a satire: either a satire of romantic chivalry or of all faith and human idealism. But if we exclusively attend to the admiration and sympathy that he provokes in us, then the humor of the book dissolves into pathos—we are more saddened than amused by his misadventures. For something to work as humor, the tension between these opposing reactions must be fully maintained. For Santayana, Don Quixote’s greatness as a novel is due in no small part to Cervantes’ achievement of this seemingly impossible task.

In a certain sense, Santayana thinks the paradox of humor should be approached in the same way as the paradox of tragedy, not as an inscrutable metaphysical problem but as a tractable psychological one. He says we should resist the temptation to think, as the romantics did, that there is some deep truth or remote significance in Don Quixote.¹⁶ Instead, if we want to understand the effect that the work has on us, we should pay attention to the way Cervantes counterbalances the negative or painful aspects of his story with other aesthetic effects, like the vivacity of spectacle and the luxury of imaginative sympathy. These specifically literary techniques are what enable the complex and unstable balance between sympathy and ridicule to be maintained, not any dark insight into the infinite.

But there is also a sense, clearly detectable in the passage above, in which Santayana retains the claim that humor can reveal a metaphysical truth to us, a truth that enables us to achieve a more just and philosophical attitude towards the ideals of human life. For what does it mean to have a “shrewd suspicion” that Don Quixote represents “the *only kind* of Amadis there can ever be in the world” (my italics)? It means to have suspicion that in every sphere of human interest—from morality, to art, to religion—we are under the perpetual temptation to mistake our moral and spiritual ideals as realities in the world rather than as mere projections of our needs; but it is to feel or know this without any loss of sympathy with those all too human ideals, without relinquishing the claim that it is precisely these ideals are the best things in us, “the ghost of our better selves”. In genuine humor, we are freed from the constitutive illusions generated by human moral and religious ideals but without having to give up those ideals as ideals. Indeed, Santayana characterizes his own philosophic attitude in terms of characters drawn from Cervantes’s novel; he says it is as an attempt to reconcile the gross and earthy realism of Sancho Panza, with the mad idealism of his master: “recognizing facts as facts and ideals as ideals.”¹⁷ Santayana has not really rejected a metaphysical reading of humor in favor of a psychological one; he has just offered an interpretation of humor grounded in a different, more naturalistic metaphysics.

What difference does this make? The issue is complex, but let me offer a quick sketch of where Santayana and Jean Paul overlap and where they diverge. They both see in humor a paradoxical juxtaposition of two perspectives on human life: an inner perspective which allows us to identify with and admire the target, and an external one which decisively contextualizes or undercuts something about the internal perspective. Their metaphysical presuppositions, however, lead them

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¹⁶ For Santayana’s own account of how Don Quixote came to be interpreted in so many ways, see Santayana 1956, pp. 112-9.

¹⁷ Santayana 1969, p. vii.

to characterize the significance of this double-perspective in radically different ways.

For Jean Paul, as we have seen, the great works of comic literature enable us to take a kind of God's eye point of view on human life, the point of view of infinity. They show us how to rise up to an absolute standpoint, a form of subjectivity in which we are able to joyously experience the ridicule and annihilation of all of our finite concerns. What is affirmed in this case, is our capacity to accept the inevitable destruction of all of our finite aims because we identify with the absolute. Santayana is deeply unsympathetic to the sort of romantic idealism central to Jean Paul's view. In an essay on Dickens, who he considered the consummate comedian, Santayana derisively characterizes the romantic viewpoint as one that "swallowed the universe whole, supposing that there was a universal spirit in things identical with the absolute spirit that observed them."¹⁸ For Santayana, the glory of great comic literature was precisely its naturalism, its unflinching acceptance of the human scale, of the finitude and insignificance of human life when viewed from outside itself. Great works of comedy do not exalt us to a higher standpoint on life, they allow us to acknowledge the true relation of spirit to existence which is that, in his words:

[T]his earth has no spirit of its own, but brings forth spirits only at certain points, in the hearts and brains of frail living creatures, who like insects flit through it, buzzing and gathering what sweets they can; and it is the spaces they traverse in this career, charged with their own moral burden, that they can report on or describe, not things rolling on to infinity in their vain tides (*Soliloquies in England*, 64).

For Santayana, comedy offers us not the bliss of joining the infinite, but a peace in acknowledging our sheer finitude, in affirming our human needs and desires and ideals while fully accepting that they have no special significance from the point of view of the universe. Outside the human perspective is not the divine idea, but just "the earth"—nature conceived as entirely indifferent to our projects and ends.

III. Mikhail Bakhtin

The third and final figure I want to bring into this discussion is the great Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. The most important work of his on comedy is *Rabelais and His World*.¹⁹ This book,

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18 Santayana 1922, p. 64. Santayana's specific target in this passage is Walt Whitman.

19 Bakhtin 1965. All subsequent Bakhtin references are to this book.

which was mostly written in the 1930s but only published in the 1960s, takes as its point of departure a seemingly insignificant problem in the reception history of the great comic novels of Francois Rabelais, which is that the capacity to understand and appreciate Rabelaisian humor seemed decrease quite precipitously in the centuries after Rabelais wrote. Bakhtin's thesis is that after the sixteenth century, it became increasingly difficult for readers to fully understand and appreciate Rabelais because his works drew on an understanding of significance or power of laughter that was deeply tied to the popular culture of the medieval period, particularly the folk carnival tradition. In making his case for this, Bakhtin sketches a remarkable history of laughter: one that starts in the middle ages, reaches a kind of summit in the great comic works of the Renaissance (most notably, the novels of Rabelais and Cervantes and the comedies of Shakespeare), and then enters a period of relative decline, as manifest by a correspondingly reduced conception of laughter.

Central to his argument, then, is a contrast between laughter at its apogee—the festive or carnival laughter that achieves its fullest realization in Renaissance literature—and a lesser, degenerate kind of laughter that followed it, and that informed post-Renaissance readings of Renaissance literature. According to the higher, truer conception of laughter:

Laughter has a deep philosophic meaning, it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint (*Rabelais and His World*, 66).

It is this conception of laughter as an “essential form of truth,” one that is equal or perhaps even superior other more serious forms like tragedy, that made the great achievements of renaissance comic literature possible. For if there is a comic aspect of the world, an aspect “accessible only to laughter,” then laughter is not only admissible to great literature, it is indispensable to understanding our place in the world. This rather exalted conception of laughter's power is contrasted with a lower form that he calls “reduced laughter,” of which parody, satire, and irony are examples. In these latter forms, laughter's disclosive power is *reduced* because laughter is no longer itself regarded an essential mode or form of truth, it is seen either as a meaningless amusement, or as serving some other more serious end which is not itself subject to ridicule, or as entirely and one-sidedly negative.

Bakhtin's claims writers like Rabelais and Cervantes were able to create great works of comic literature because they were able to draw on a rich and popular conception of laughter, a conception which had

developed throughout the carnival festivities and comic spectacles medieval period. The problem is that when this carnival tradition died out in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so did this conception. Those who continued to read the masterpieces of comic literature during this later period were forced to draw on comparatively impoverished conceptions of laughter in attempting to understand these works, conceptions which were not able to do justice to them. *Gargantua and Pantagruel* began to be read as a mere satire of ecclesial excesses; *Don Quixote* as a mere parody of chivalry; *Midsummer Night's Dream* as a fanciful fairy tale; and so forth. Although the reputations of Cervantes and Shakespeare were able to survive these misreadings better than Rabelais, in all three cases the deeper philosophic significance of these works was largely lost to view.

There was, of course, a revival of interest in all three of these figures in the romantic period—indeed, as we have already seen, Jean Paul's writings give evidence of this.²⁰ But from Bakhtin's point of view, the romantic retrieval of these figures was only a partial success. His criticisms of romantic theories of irony are thus a useful place to get clear on exactly where Bakhtin's own account overlaps with these earlier attempts to vindicate the intellectual and philosophic value of humor, and where he goes beyond them, striking out into new territory.

Bakhtin identifies three primary characteristics of true laughter, laughter in its unreduced form. I am re-arranging the order in which he introduces them to proceed from commitments that he shares with the romantics (like Jean Paul). The first concerns the question of the scope of the laughter—what exactly is being laughed at? Like Jean Paul and Santayana, Bakhtin insists that the target of carnival laughter is never just a particular individual, event, or institution—the target is always also universal or, in his terms, “world-involving.” If the satirist places himself above his target, who has defects or limitations the satirist himself is free of, the genuine humorist includes himself and everything else within the scope of his mockery. It is this feature of laughter that generates philosophic interest, since it means that even something that would appear to be personal invective, historical parody, or political satire, must also be understood as carrying a global or universal significance, as bringing out limitations not just of some particular individual but of the world itself. His provisional characterization of what is conveyed by this dizzying vision is “gay relativity,” a refusal to see anything in the world, including our convictions or beliefs, as absolute, immutable, or beyond laughter.

The second characteristic concerns the nature of the attitude expressed by this laughter. Bakhtin claims “this laughter is ambivalent:

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²⁰ The other Romantic figures Bakhtin mentions in this context are the Schlegels, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Victor Hugo, and Théophile Gautier.

it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, buries and revives” (11-12). Again, this has a clear echo in the two accounts we have already considered. We saw that Jean Paul insists on a kind of *impossibility* involved in being both the target of ridicule and yet aware of it and that Santayana characterizes humor as involving a *paradoxical* double-vision. Bakhtin’s notion of the fundamental *ambivalence* of laughter or folk humor is clearly in the same family of views. Indeed, he himself characterizes such ambivalence as closely akin to logical paradox.

But on closer inspection, some differences also emerge. For Bakhtin, the ambivalence he is concerned with is analyzed in terms the simultaneous presence of negative pole and positive or affirmative pole. His key example of this is the grotesque realism present in Rabelais two novels, the use of exaggerated images of the bodily functions—eating, urinating, defecating, copulating—which simultaneously serve to undercut a sterile spiritual pretense to transcend the body (this is the negative function), but also serve to emphasize our connection to the regenerating power of the earth (the affirmative function). From this point of view, the romantic version of the paradox of humor is excessively one-sided and negative, for it undercuts every finite object or aspiration, but without any sense of the potential for a renewal of the world through this destruction. Bakhtin complains that: “The positive aspect of the grotesque [or laughter]...is conceived by Jean Paul (as it is by Schlegel) as outside the laughter principle, as an escape from all that is finite and destroyed by humor, as a transfer to the spiritual sphere” (42). This is similar in tone, of course, to the complaint that Santayana makes, which is the romantic conception of humor is excessively spiritualistic, insufficiently sensitive to the radical naturalism of great comic literature, its attempt to return us to an affirmation of the earth, the body, the human scale. But he is adding a temporal element, a reference to natural cycles or seasons of death and rebirth.

The third feature of carnival laughter that Bakhtin identifies is perhaps the most important—it is certainly most characteristic of his own thinking, clearly setting his account apart from both that of Jean Paul and Santayana. This concerns the question of *who* is laughing. On this point, Bakhtin emphasizes that we are talking about *festive* laughter, festive in the sense that is not “an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic event’” but a laughter “of all the people” (11). In carnival laughter, it is not only the case that I see myself as included in the scope of laughter (the universal element), I also see myself as alongside others who also see this, who see it together with me (the social element). For Bakhtin, this marks a clear contrast with romantic conceptions of laughter or the grotesque:

“Unlike the medieval or Renaissance grotesque, which was directly

related to the folk culture and thus belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private 'chamber' character. It became as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy" (*Rabelais and His World*, 37).

What Bakhtin sees in Jean Paul (whom he sees as characteristic of romanticism) is a privatized version of carnival laughter. For Jean Paul, laughter effects a subjective and individual liberation from finitude, a realization of his own personal destiny in rising to absolute; although this is a transcendence of individuality in a certain sense, of the subject-object divide, it is one we achieve on our own. It is clear that this is also true of Santayana's more naturalistic conception of the comic, which also has a kind of elitist or individual character. Although the individual reader is included in the scope of laughter, the view is for him alone; it is not a shared, communal achievement.

For Bakhtin, the most damaging consequence of this subjectivization of laughter is that it obscures the utopian element of humor. Both the romantic and the renaissance conception of laughter refer us to "the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life" (48). But for the romantics, this different world was one that was only present for "abstract thought and inner experience"; whereas previously it was one that could only be fully realized in and through a transformation of social consciousness (92). The contrast here is between utopia as in individual solitary achievement of unity with the absolute, or the infinite striving for such unity, and utopia as experience of the formation of a new society. Indeed, once one is looking for it, it is easy to see that this emphasis on social reconciliation is a major theme in renaissance comedy itself, as later critics like Northrup Frye have rightly emphasized.

Bakhtin's own "social" conception of the utopian element of humor, however, admits of an important ambiguity. Sometimes, as in the final pages of his work, the utopian element of laughter involves a reference to a distant future, and to the mere possibility of realizing a form of human community that would no longer have the limitations and defects of the existing world, even the defects of the most progressive tendencies of the existing world (see, 453-4). Attention to these passages have led to more Marxist or post-Marxist readings which view carnival laughter as itself a nascent form of political resistance. Reacting to this reading, several authors have criticized Bakhtin for overstating the revolutionary character of carnival laughter: they have pointed out that far from being revolutionary, carnival laughter was often licensed by the existing ecclesiastical and political powers because it functioned in a very conservative way, releasing or blowing-off transgressive energies in

order sustain the dominant system and reinforce dominant values.²¹

But in the introduction and first chapter of the work on Rabelais, which appear to have been written much later than the body, we are given another way to understand the utopian element of humor, one that is not subject to this criticism. In these earlier passages, Bakhtin is emphatic that laughter places the *entirety* of the world into question, including all history, all societies, all ideologies (84). This indicates that there is no conceivable political regime no matter how fully reformed, or how far into the future, that would be free of the defects and limitations laughter brings to light. The utopia that laughter points us to, although it is social, is not a utopia that could be achieved outside of laughter, independently of it—it is not a political condition, but one that we enter into only through the collective experience of laughter. It is not elsewhere, or in the future, but here and now. Indeed, it is only this second conception of utopia—as a non-political ideal community effectuated by shared laughter—that is consistent with Bakhtin’s claims that the truth of laughter is intrinsic to it and cannot be transformed into seriousness without being destroyed (94).

IV. The Paradox of Humor

I have spent some time on the differences between Jean Paul, Santayana, and Bakhtin, differences rooted (or so I tried to show) in their competing metaphysical views, particularly concerning of the place of human values within the world. There is no point, I think, in trying to rebut the accusation that these figures were to some degree or other projecting their ultimate philosophical views onto the object under consideration. That they are able to find so much in humor is at least partly due to the basic metaphysical framework with which they are approaching it. This equips them to see a philosophical potential in humorous literature that might otherwise be overlooked. But it does raise the question of whether something like this view is still available to us today, with our own presumably distinct metaphysical or perhaps even anti-metaphysical presuppositions.

In addressing this topic, it is useful to attempt to restate the fundamental thought that they all share, despite their different

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21 See the discussion of this issue in Stallybrass & White, 1986. What makes this criticism of Bakhtin peculiar is that Bakhtin himself emphasizes that carnival laughter was a “temporary” and “ephemeral” release from official life which was “legalized” by the ecclesiastical and political authorities precisely because the “relaxation” it afforded enabled us to return to our ordinary political and religious obligations with “greater zeal” (see Bakhtin 1965, pp. 75-76, pp. 89-91). Whatever Bakhtin might have meant by the “utopian element” in carnival laughter must be fully consistent with these explicitly non-revolutionary or even conservative features, since they are in no way peripheral to his account. The emphasis on these features of carnival is also present in Jean Paul, who emphasizes that carnival flourished most precisely in “the most devout times,” times when there was no risk that carnival humor would be misunderstood as satire (Richter 1973, 82 fn.).

philosophical starting points. The thought is that human reality is most truly comprehended when it is seen as requiring the simultaneous occupation of two strictly incompatible standpoints. The first may be understood as a more internal standpoint in which we find ourselves ineluctably committed to taking our own religious, moral, and political values as entirely serious, as what is highest and most important to our lives. The second is a more external standpoint according to which there is something essentially parochial or absurd or pretentiously self-deceived about taking these values so seriously (the differences among our protagonists being mostly about the nature of this external standpoint). The central paradox, or so the argument goes, is that while both of these are necessary, they cannot be occupied at the same time or assembled into a single unbroken vision of reality.

Once it is put this way, it is clear that something like thought continues to be alive in contemporary philosophy, though it can take very different forms. In Anglo-American philosophy, the best-known defender a view like this is perhaps Thomas Nagel. For Nagel, the problem that faces every rational being, and that is the source of so much philosophical perplexity, is “how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included.”²² But Nagel thinks these two perspectives are both inescapable yet incompatible. He characterizes the feeling of the absurdity of life as stemming from a recognition that we cannot live human lives without taking some things more seriously than others and yet we always have open to us a point of view outside of what we take serious, and from which “seriousness seems gratuitous.”²³ A structurally similar view, though one that draws on very different philosophical resources, is defended by Slavoj Žižek. For Žižek there is an irreducible gap between the transcendental horizon in which reality appears to us, and reality in the naïve, objective sense (the world as if we were not there).²⁴ Žižek’s notion of the “parallax view” is an attempt to articulate what it would be like to somehow see from both of these standpoints at the same time, and despite their strict incompatibility.²⁵

Why might we think humor is uniquely or especially capable of expressing a paradoxical truth of this form--or at least allowing it to

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22 Nagel 1986, p. 3.

23 Nagel 1971, pp. 716-727.

24 For this formulation of the issue, see Žižek 2021.

25 Like Nagel, Žižek thinks the same problem recurs many forms. In Žižek 2006, he argues that there are three main modes of parallax: philosophical, scientific, and political (p. 10). Žižek adopts the notion of parallax from the work of Kojin Karatani. See Coker 2018 for more on the similarities between Jean Paul, on the one hand, and Žižek and Karatani, on the other.

be glimpsed or briefly inhabited or entertained? The claim is deeply implausible if extended to all comic phenomena and everything we might call humorous literature, but it is less dismissible if we focus on those accepted masterpieces which (arguably) manage to bring us to the point of sensing that even our own highest moral and spiritual aspirations, even the whole human point of view, is strangely insubstantial: gratuitous in Nagel's sense. This is, I think, the benefit of rooting our analysis of humor in the achievements of a specific tradition of literary exemplars—a tradition including Rabelais, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Sterne—rather than in a more general psychological phenomenon of laughter as such. And we can get a handle on what these works accomplish by contrasting them to other forms of comic literature, forms which collapse into one or other of the two perspectives that humor, rightly conceived, must somehow keep in equipoise. The collapse into the internal view is characteristic of satire. Satire, as we have seen, is characterized by ridicule or humor which is underwritten by ultimate values which are not themselves impugned by the ridicule; when we satirize a hypocritical political or religious leader, for example, we are implicitly endorsing the value of integrity, placing at least that one value beyond the scope of our laughter. And many have claimed that any serious comedy must at the end of the day hold certain things as sacred, lest it devolve into triviality or even nihilism.²⁶ The collapse into the external view shows up in a variety of forms, but perhaps most saliently in works of all-consuming irony or absurdism. In such works, laughter is indiscriminate and relentless; it takes in everything and seems to exist without any firm standing at all. It is a bravura performance of the artist that generates a generalized skepticism about values or even about the very possibility of taking what the author says seriously. From the point of view of an advocate of this kind of comic literature, any attempt to restrict such irony to some particular domain in order to stop or stabilize it, requires drawing arbitrary lines; it is a moralistic refusal to allow laughter to be total.²⁷

It is hard to see any conceptual space between these two possibilities; it would appear we must either regard some values as beyond criticism or regard everything as being open to being undermined in this way, as an inappropriate object of serious attachment. Although her account of this distinction is quite subtle,

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26 James Agee finds even the classic films of Preston Sturges, which are perhaps the finest examples of humor in twentieth century cinema, defective in just this regard. In an otherwise very positive review, he criticizes *Hail the Conquering Hero*, saying it has "enough themes for half a dozen first-rate American satires" but "not one of these themes is honored by more attention than you get from an incontinent barber" (Agee 1958, p. 116); and he characterizes *The Miracle of Morgan Creek* as "one of the most intoxicating bits of nihilism that the screen has known, but always at the expense of a larger excellence" (p. 345).

27 Here I am paraphrasing the criticism of Wayne Booth in de Man 1996, pp. 165-67.

drawing on some Hegelian conceptual machinery I cannot get into here, a similar dichotomy that is present in Alenka Zupančič's recent opposition of conservative to subversive comedy.²⁸ But in the tradition I have attempted to reconstruct here, the promise of humorous literature, the achievement of its greatest exemplars, is bringing the things we take most seriously—our moral convictions, religious intuitions, or political commitments—into within the sphere of laughter but without leading to any diminishment in our commitment to them. This is not because some part of these is held back from criticism—the laughter is “total” or “world-involving”—but because in humor we recognize both the ungroundedness of our own deepest values, not just those of our benighted ideological opponents, and the absurdity of thinking we could somehow transcend this condition, finding some way to live beyond the scope of laughter. It is subversiveness carried to the point of affirmation: “hot ice, and wondrous strange snow.”²⁹

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28 Zupančič 2008), pp. 30-35. Zupančič's distinction is not exactly the same, since she views irony in the above sense, “playful ironic ease,” as just a form of conservative comedy, since it is often functions to support the existing social structure by giving individuals a space for laughter outside the co-ordinates of the official ideology (4). Her vision of subversive comedy involves cases where a given value or universal notion (her example, drawn from *Borat*, is the American “right to bear arms”) shows itself to “short-circuit” by being necessarily to a seemingly heterogenous and negatively valenced notion (in the *Borat* example, this a taste for shooting Jews). Zupančič's claim is that only subversive comedy is true comedy because it is the only form of comedy that is essentially anti-ideological.

29 Shakespeare, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i. I want to thank Alan Rubenstein, Sandy Goldberg, and the audience at Carleton College for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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Success in Failure: From the Destruction of the Tragic to the Self-negation of the Comic

Jack Black

Abstract: This essay explores the interrelationship between tragedy and comedy, with specific focus given to the potential that comedy can provide in transforming the most tragic of situations. In building this claim, the very dynamics and distinctions that divide the tragic from the comic are considered in view of the self-negation that the comic posits. That is, while tragedy requires a certain acceptance of the finite, from which destiny and circumstance come to certify the hero's tragic predicament, in comedy, what succeeds is that which functions through an act of self-negation. This, it is argued, offers a subversive redefining of tragedy, one that proves constitutive of a comic fatalism that does not mourn one's tragic predicament or fated end, but, instead, fully identifies with our comic predicament. Going beyond the pitfalls of political nicety and moral condemnation, which seek easy gratification or cynical distance, the conclusion examines the conceptual artist, Vanessa Place, and her performance of rape jokes.

Keywords: Comic fatalism; concrete universal; enunciation/enunciated; repetition; self-relating negativity

Whether viewed through analysis, critique, or reinterpretation, the interplay between tragedy and comedy—including the potential transition from tragedy to comedy as frameworks for historical development—suggests a level of permeability, tension, and ambiguity that proves constitutive of each genre. Though examples of tragedy have been subject to transformation (Greek or Roman tragedy, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, revenge tragedy, tragicomedy), it was Hegel who first sought to locate the significance of comedy as residing beyond the tragic. Given that comedy does not function by relieving us of the tragedy of existence, and the horrors of the 'real world', it can, in a decidedly dialectical form, locate our own role in the tragic itself.¹ Beyond the purgative, and in full view of Marx's first as tragedy, then as farce, it is comedy that avers a retroactive position on the very impasses and tensions that the tragic evokes.

In what follows, attention is given to examining the very dynamics and distinctions that divide the tragic from the comic, focusing specifically on the act of self-negation that the latter posits. By distinguishing the effects of repetition in both tragic and comic performances, as well as its relation to the tragic and comic hero, the importance of approaching a Hegelian reconciliation in tragedy and comedy is discussed.² This is supported with reference to the subject of

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1 Black 2021a.

2 In this respect, such a Hegelian reconciliation should not be read as proposing a synthesis, but, instead, a confirmation of alienation as constitutive for both the subject and reality.

enunciation and enunciated, the concrete universal,³ and the freedom that can be achieved through our own 'comic fatalism'.⁴ To conclude, the division between tragedy and comedy is explored in relation to the conceptual artist, Vanessa Place, and her performance of rape jokes.

I.

In drawing a distinction between tragedy and comedy, it is helpful to remember that what can be considered tragic, can be viewed as comic, and what may be perceived comic, can very easily be conceived as tragic. As Zupančič notes, 'The same passions that are the subject of comedy (love, jealousy, greed, ambition, and so on) can also be subjects of tragedy or of serious drama'.⁵ To explore this entwinement, however, we must first identify some important distinctions.

First, for the tragic hero, there is an underlying sense that they remain driven by a purported destiny or unrelenting passion, which, during the course of their actions, leads to their eventual downfall. In the search for truth or some other intriguing discovery, it is in confrontation with this endeavour that the tragic hero's complicity is disclosed. What is revealed 'behind the curtain is [... the tragic hero] as *subject*, his own passion, and it is this confrontation that finally brings him down'.⁶ In contrast, for the comic hero there is no revelation, or, at least, there is nothing exposed behind the curtain, except the appearance of the curtain itself. It is for this reason that the comic hero fails, yet picks themselves up, and returns to carry on.

Though the comic hero is endowed with a vitality that sees them return, unaffected to the same scenarios time and time again, the delineation of the comic can also be found in certain tragic scenarios where the effort to define or comprehend a tragedy proves ineffective. Here, the ability 'to experience a situation as "tragic" is possible only when a victim retains a minimum of dignity'.⁷ As a result, 'it is not only wrong but also ethically obscene to designate a *Muselmann* in the concentration camp or a victim of a Stalinist show-trial as tragic—their predicament is simply too terrible to deserve this designation'.⁸ It is for this reason that the turn to comedy provides, arguably, the best response to tragedy. In the wake of catastrophe, the very horrors of the world,

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3 Zupančič 2008a.

4 Ruda 2016.

5 Zupančič 2008a, 194.

6 Zupančič 2008a, 210.

7 Žižek 2006, 111.

8 Žižek 2006, 111.

and the tragedies it entails, cannot be approached directly; instead, it is only through comedy and ‘its very inadequacy to the actual situation’ that the turn to jokes provide an appropriate response to the tragic.⁹ In this regard, what the “Comic” ... stands for [is] a domain which emerges when the horror of a situation outgrows the confines of the tragic’.¹⁰

Second, we can go further here and make the important clarification that the ‘emergence’ of the ‘comic’ is not a simple revision of tragedy—a happy ending that merely negates the previous horror. Equally, comedy is not an exemplar of “positive thinking,” the ability to find something positive and satisfactory even in the worst situations’.¹¹ Following a path that echoes Žižek’s account of the parallax view, Zupančič notes that what underscores the tragic and the comic is that they ‘spring from two different points inherent to the same configuration’.¹² That is, ‘Not only are they both true—they are both true because they are both “partial” and “partisan”’.¹³ This lends the significance of tragedy and comedy a structural importance: one in which each genre functions to delimit the very antagonism upon which they emerge. Certainly, this antagonism is frequently approached through the form of tragedy: where, in an attempt to break from such antagonism, one is left with the profundity of the act. What is revealed is the importance of the impasse, which finds its return in the defiance and resistance of the tragic hero.

II.

In recognition of the tragedy that can befall such an act, Ruti lays claim to the ‘the agency of the signifier’ and the counterhegemonic transformations that the act can achieve.¹⁴ With reference to the paradigmatic heroine of Greek tragedy, Ruti notes that, ‘Antigone is a heroine because she does not give ground relative to her desire, but rather pursues this desire beyond social limits’, adding, ‘tragic heroes are often isolated in this fashion, in one way or another separated from the structure that surrounds them’.¹⁵

.....
9 Žižek 2022b.

10 Žižek 2006, 111.

11 Zupančič 2008a, 130.

12 Zupančič 2008a, 130. The effects of a parallax between comedy and tragedy is also considered by Dolar (2019).

13 Zupančič 2008a, 130.

14 Ruti 2012, 81.

15 Ruti 2012, 71.

Yet, as Ruti alludes to, there is perhaps a deeper ambiguity to be explored in this separation. That is, while 'Antigone's desire remains the desire of the Other—not of the social Other (law of the city) embodied in Creon but of the Other of immemorial Laws—it is definitely not directly "her own" desire', and, as a result, 'Her act expresses the unconditional fidelity to a deep law, not its transgression—in short, she unconditionally insists on her demand—to bury properly her brother; there is no metonymic desire here, no compromise'.¹⁶ That Antigone does not give ground relative to *her* desire is itself echoed in the various examples of self-sacrifice that underwrite Greek tragedy (albeit, in the case of Antigone, a self-sacrifice brought on by Creon's order of execution). What is often ignored in such accounts, however, is the posterity it reveals—the very fact that one's sacrifice remains at the behest of an Other, for whom one's sacrifice will be recognised from some future position.¹⁷ As a result, in the end, Antigone demands the Cause to which she adheres. Butler notes:

we can see Antigone's 'unconditional' insistence on the Cause here not as something that reroutes the Symbolic but as what allows or entrenches it. We can understand her 'act' not as what breaks with the Symbolic but as that 'inherent transgression' necessary for it. For, in a sense, Antigone protests against the system only in the name of the system itself.¹⁸

Acting in spite of Creon's Law, Antigone's protest—indeed, her very demand—is to uphold the burial rites of the immemorial Law and the recognition of her dead brother; an act that is performed in full view of the Other's presiding gaze.

Accordingly, if the result of the act affords a transgressive attempt to reassert the authority of the Other, it is the failure of the Other—that is, its inherent lack—which proves inherent to tragedy. The Other's lack functions to maintain the tragic hero's interpellation, thus constituting the very course they seek to follow, or, in the case of the revenge tragedy, restoring that which is believed to have been lost.

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16 Žižek 2023, 284 & 285. There is not the space to do justice to the intricacies between Lacan's desire and drive in this article. However, where Žižek acknowledges that 'The best case of the porosity of the distinction between desire and drive is the case of Antigone', what proves significant is 'why Lacan's formula of ethics (do not compromise your desire) is pronounced only once, it never returns, in clear contrast with Lacan's other formulas to which he always returns in new variations?' (2023, 285).

17 Do we not detect an element of transcendentalism in the tragedy of such an act? As opposed to an accepted nihilism, and in the face of one's own fated end, we see the posthumous as an escape from the material towards a transcendent 'beyond'.

18 Butler 2005, 102.

Set against the tragedy of the act, and the lack in the Other, such examples are indicative of the very way in which tragedy can become stuck in a restorative attempt to maintain the current symbolic order through either ‘filling in’ or ‘fixing’ the Other’s lack. Moreover, such attempts are, according to Žižek, reflected in ‘the desperate attempts to reverse tragedy into triumphant comedy’, such as that seen in Todd Phillips’s, *Joker* (2019).¹⁹ Ultimately, by the film’s end, ‘Joker doesn’t go “too far” in the destruction of the existing order, he remains stuck in what Hegel called “abstract negativity,” unable as he is to propose its concrete negation’.²⁰ In examples of comedy, it is in positing the concrete negation that the effects of repetition and its relation to self-negation are asserted.

III.

The very act of repetition works counter to the epic narratives that sustain the tragic form. This is not to say that a tragedy cannot repeat, nor does it suggest that the move from tragedy to comedy occurs due to repetition. Instead, it is in accordance with such repetition that we can begin to identify how the tragicomedy involves the affirmation of obscenity in order to elicit the tragedy at its heart. For example, ‘compulsive jesters tend to identify with the “real” (hidden, obscene) truth of a situation, they like to put themselves (or a part of their body) forward as the embodiment of this obscene underside as the locus of truth’.²¹ Ultimately, such ‘truths’ are asserted so as to highlight the obscenities that underpin the tragic form, repeating not the passion and grandeur that enlivens the tragic hero, but the everyday reality of its inconsequential endeavour. Though such attempts seek to go past the tragic, they go no further than eliciting a comic gesture that fails to move beyond its very debasement. This is not to ignore the fact that the tragicomedy can be enjoyed, so much so that the very ‘enjoyment that tragedy produces in the spectator occurs through the repetition of sacrifice’—a ‘self-inflicted loss’.²² Instead, what sits at the crux of the tragic hero is that such sacrifice must be endlessly sought, unceasingly ‘confront[ing] us with the Real’.²³

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¹⁹ Žižek 2022a, 326.

²⁰ Žižek 2022a, 326.

²¹ Zupančič 2008a, 102.

²² McGowan 2013, 39.

²³ Zupančič 2008a, 179.

In the case of comedy, 'Comedy, ... does not confront us with the Real, it repeats it'.²⁴ This repetition is reflected in those excessive elements and fantasy formations, which, in trying to mask and obfuscate an inherent lack, repeatedly encounter the same underlying Real in often surprising ways.²⁵ If we consider the formal logic of this suggestion, then, rather than 'Repetition [... being] the recontextualization of any positive content', of something that is novel and therefore 'surprising', *comic repetition* can be used to reveal that it 'is the repetition of a Real antagonism or negativity that is left out of (repressed from) the symbolic order'.²⁶ Indeed, 'Because that which is repressed always returns', then to 'repeat' is to draw attention to the underlying antagonisms that perform 'the same unrepresentable X'—something always-already there.²⁷

The act of repeating what is always-already there, occurs in the emergence of the 'minimal difference' (read also as a constitutive gap or split).²⁸ This minimal difference does not necessarily provide anything new, but, through the act of repetition, creates something new in what *is*. We can thus locate the act of repetition in the comic surprise, which offers something different to novelty. That is, by highlighting how 'We can be surprised at something that we know very well, even expect[,] yet when it happens [again], it surprises us', then, we are able to laugh at comedy's ability to surprise us with what we already expect, but in an unexpected way.²⁹

We can see this 'surprise' in comic sequences, such as mistaken identities, where the notion of repetition plays an important role. Here, it is 'us'—the audience—who are often aware of the 'mistake' and subsequently it is the repeated performance of this mistake which makes a particular sequence comical. Such repetition is also visible in examples of hyperbole, slapstick, and double entendre. Certainly, this is not to deny a level of conservatism in the comic performance. As Zupančič highlights, comedy which centres on 'mistaken identities' is frequently denounced as being conservative due to the fact that by the end of the sequence, the mistaken identities are rectified and everything returns to normal: 'it turns the world order upside-down only in order ultimately to reestablish it in its full force, with no cracks to speak of'.³⁰ Instead, if

.....
24 Zupančič 2008a, 179.

25 McGowan 2017.

26 Wood 2012, 50.

27 Wood 2012, 50.

28 Succinctly put, this 'minimal difference' refers to 'the difference of an entity with itself' (Žižek 2003, 80).

29 Zupančič 2008a, 181, parenthesis removed.

30 Zupančič 2008a, 90.

we consider that, for Zupančič (and Lacan), the Real is impossible (the unrepresentable X), then, in her words, 'The Real as impossible means that there is no right time or place for it'.³¹ The significance of comedy is that it is this impossibility which is laid bare.

Such impossibility is reflected in the surprise that occurs when hearing the punchline of a joke. All jokes require a certain element of surprise—a retroactive fixing of the punchline—from which the joke's narrative is given 'a new, unexpected, surprising perspective'.³² If we consider, for example, the scenes from the second Austin Powers film where variations of the word 'penis' are repeated by several individuals—notably, 'as "Willie" in a clip of Willie Nelson, as "Woody" in the presence of Woody Harrelson, and as "Johnson," the last name of the air traffic controller tracking the penis-shaped aircraft of Dr. Evil'—then what we observe 'in such scenes is both the humor of the play on the word "penis," and the fact that it can indeed be played with through language'.³³ Moreover, though each variation produces a different reference to the word penis, what we encounter is not necessarily anything different, but 'a sameness where we expect difference'.³⁴ It is this 'sameness' which Zupančič locates in relation to comedy. Here, 'the Real is the register of repetition as coincidence, rupture, surprise (one could also say: of sameness as novelty)'.³⁵

It is for this reason that comedy can be seen to provide a unique take on success. This is not necessarily a success where something is achieved or where a reward is received, but one in which the production of the same, when we expect something different, nonetheless succeeds. In other words, the repetition of the minimal difference allows us to conceive how success in the form of comedy functions through an act of internal self-negation.³⁶

What is important here is that such success can never be found in the tragic hero, for whom destiny and circumstance come to certify their tragic predicament. Where tragedy requires a certain acceptance of the finite, there exists no comedy and no self-negating function. In accordance with the 'compulsive jester', what so often underlies the

.....
31 Zupančič 2003, 177. What proves integral to examining comedy's subversive significance, is the extent to which we can 'use the Real to reconfigure our symbolic order' (Kunkle 2014, 5). It is in this way that comedy can help 'radicalise' societal norms and values through confronting the Real and 'traversing' the fantasies that structure and frame our social interactions.

32 Zupančič 2008a, 133.

33 Kunkle 2013, 52.

34 Žižek 2006, 109. This is further supported by the fact that the same comic sequence is re-used (repeated) in the second and third Austin Powers films.

35 Zupančič 2008a, 163.

36 Hegel 1977.

tragic form is the fact that we should accept the banality of our failure through the subject's confrontation with destiny. Such self-destitution underwrites Critchley's account of ethics, which he mistakenly aligns with the comic form. In fact, it is in accordance with such human finitude that Critchley seeks to move past any 'tragic affirmation' towards a 'comic acknowledgment' of the subject's very contingency and finitude.³⁷ Examples of self-deprecating humour are subsequently claimed as opportunities for the subject to combat the superego, presenting an ethical self-distance that mitigates against the subject's interpellation. The problem here is the *distance* it conveys.³⁸ Ethically and politically, Critchley argues that such distance can prove conducive for achieving a radical non-self-coincidence of the ego; an ego that 'does not only become an object, [... but] becomes what we might call an object object'.³⁹ However, whereas Critchley's task focuses primarily on an ethics steered towards dislodging or overcoming the subject's subjectivization, what is ignored is the very gap that constitutes the subject—that which exists before the hail of interpellation.

Taking an alternative path to Critchley's self-deprecating humour, Delpech-Ramey proposes 'a comic view of human rights'.⁴⁰ It is this which:

allow[s] us to see that in the backdrop of politics there is never simply a poor, weak, all too-human essence violently caught in the grips of some terrible destiny, interpellation, or abjection. Rather, the comic vision would imply that a certain inhuman excess is always already the essence of humanity—and of politics—itself. Comically considered, humanity simply is an inhuman drive to exists beyond every limitation, even beyond death.⁴¹

There is, therefore, an excess which is performed in the comic performance; an excess that stands opposed to examples of tragedy and 'the hypocritical altruism that is ultimately rooted in the tragic world-view'.⁴² In accordance with the death drive, it is the subject's inability to settle with the excess of being—it's very infinity—which proves so troubling for the subject, but which is subsequently 'played with' and performed in comedy.

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37 Critchley 2008, 82.

38 Black 2021a.

39 Critchley 2002, 97.

40 Delpech-Ramey 2010, 136.

41 Delpech-Ramey 2010, 136.

42 Delpech-Ramey 2010, 136.

Certainly, such excess is not meant to emphasise the ‘burden’ of existence—a burden that would simply require an acceptance of the subject’s tragic finitude. Of greater concern is that such a tragic predicament, which the burden evokes, is often found in examples of comedy, whereupon the effects of the comic realization is predicated on the fact that one should accept one’s fate and one’s own human finitude. We can draw out the problems with this approach when we consider the difference between the tragic and comic performance.

IV.

For most tragedies, there remains a distance between the individual and the universal. That is, if we consider a tragic performance, there is the actor and then there is the essence which they seek to perform: ‘the “birth of tragedy” presents us with real human beings, the actors, who put on their *masks* and represent the essence with the help of the mask’.⁴³ The function of the mask is that the ‘essence’ which is represented and performed is fused in the actor’s performance; or ‘When the actor puts on the mask, he is no longer himself; in the mask, he brings to life the (universal) essence he represents’.⁴⁴ What tragedy reveals, therefore, is a clear distinction *between* the actor (themselves) and the essence—the actor remains separated from the performance they give through their representation of the performance itself. As a result, ‘the essence ultimately exists only as the universal moment, separated by the mask from the concrete and actual self, and that as such this essence is still not actual. The self appears merely as *assigned* to the characters’.⁴⁵ Indeed, such performances are ‘a fusion of ... two’, with the credited actor performing the universal (the ‘tragic’ character) so that the actor and the universal are brought together through a fused coincidence.⁴⁶ Here, the actor’s performance is measured by their ability to represent (‘perform’) the universal.

For comedy, there is no fusion: the actor ‘in a comedy ... immediately *is* this character’.⁴⁷ This reveals how ‘The comic work takes the hero’s position seriously, accepts it, and follows it to the point where it reveals its own absurdity and so destroys itself’.⁴⁸ The inconsistencies of the universal are repeatedly performed in the comic persona, so

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43 Zupančič 2008a, 25.

44 Zupančič 2008a, 25.

45 Zupančič 2008a, 25.

46 Zupančič 2008a, 35.

47 Žižek 2005, italics added.

48 Roche 2002, 415.

that in the case of comedy, ‘some universality (“tramp,” “worker,” “misanthrope”...) has to let a subject in all his concreteness shine through it’.⁴⁹ It is the concrete subject which immediately *is* the universal.

In contrast, the tragic often requires the depiction of the universal *through* the tragic hero. Despite the fact that the tragic hero will fail in meeting this universal principle, the very characteristics of tragedy serve as the lynchpin to the ideal ego, whereupon the ‘imagination makes the subject a tragic hero’, driven by ‘egotistical fascination’, and ‘leading unhappy people to fancy themselves in the role of the tragic hero’.⁵⁰ Such individuality underscores the tragic hero’s failure to meet the universal ideal. Where comedy differs is in the ‘types and generalities’ that it performs;⁵¹ generalities that require the inclusion of the comic subject in order to be enacted. It is in this way that, in comedy, the subject changes its relationship with the representation. Rather than the actor representing a character, as in tragedy, in comedy, the gap between the actor and character is transposed into the character itself. In so doing, ‘the subject-actor appears as that gap through which the character relates to itself, “representing itself”’.⁵²

Ultimately, following Zupančič’s application of the concrete universal, we can conceive how rather than simply performing or representing the universal through tragedy, it is instead ‘in comedy [... that] the subject is (or becomes) the universal, the essential, the absolute’.⁵³ No longer is the universal an abstract representation that the tragic hero seeks to achieve, rather, it is the very imperfections of the universal ideal that are concretely performed in the comic character. It is in this way that the comic character remains funny. In its very excess, in its capacity to get up and try again, it is the imperfections of the universal ideal that are brought to light. There is thus always something comical in how the comic subject is attached to the universal, how its very position successfully enacts and exposes the universal’s failure.

Importantly, the comic hero is not one who simply defies a certain symbolic order or whose very actions function merely to highlight the impasses and contradictions inherent to a particular symbolic order. This, as Zupančič makes clear, would be the work of tragedy. Instead,

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49 Zupančič 2008a, 37. See Black (2021) for a detailed discussion of the true and false comic character.

50 Pfaller 2014, 222 & 248.

51 Dolar 2017, 585.

52 Zupančič 2008a, 36.

53 Zupančič 2008a, 28. As Zupančič notes, ‘This is why, for Hegel, comedy is not simply a turn from the universal (from universal values of the beautiful, the just, the good, the moral . . .) towards the individual or the particular (as always and necessarily imperfect, limited and always slightly idiotic), but corresponds instead to the very speculative passage from the abstract universal to the concrete universal’ (2008a, 37-38).

'Comic characters ... are not subjects as opposed to the structure, they are subjectivized points of the structure itself. They are the sensitive, problematic points of the structure running wild, and running around on their own—that is, independently of the rest of the structure'.⁵⁴ The comic character is thus completely serious, with their very position revealing the absurdity of the symbolic titles that they are provided. Thus, it is never the comic hero that is 'transformed by experience'; instead, 'the "experience" in question is transformed by the triumph of his sheer presumptuousness, his belief in himself'.⁵⁵

This point of subversive potential in comedy is given further elucidation in Žižek's account of mourning and melancholy. In mourning, the narcissistic images that abound in tragedy are attributed to the lost object, so that in the act of mourning the tragic subject mourns the loss of their own image. For the melancholic, the strategy is not to mourn the loss of the object (the narcissistic image), an object which the mourner never had, but to act as if this object was already lost: 'In so far as the melancholic mourns what he has not yet lost, there is an inherent comic subversion of the tragic procedure of mourning at work in melancholy'.⁵⁶

Accordingly, what the melancholic, 'comic' subject reveals is a certain recognition: one in which their very imbrication in the symbolic order and the impasses of the universal are made clear. Rather than succumb to the tragic failure, the lost object, obstacle, or impasse functions as a comic resource. To this extent, while examples of tragicomedy and other forms of derision (the 'compulsive jester') remain within the constellation of tragedy, underwritten by an ignorance of the fact that the lost object was always lost, it is in comedy that the failure of ignorance is performed.

V.

Indeed, it is often the case that ignorance (a lack of knowledge; a failure to know; or a desire not to know an intolerable certainty) plays its part in the hero's downfall. Take, for example, Oedipus, and the fact that he acts without knowing his paternal relation (notably, it is his parents who were in knowledge of the impending catastrophe and sought to prevent it from occurring). In the case of comedy, however, it is the character's knowledge that is uniquely positioned: while the comic character may be in full knowledge of their failings, or the inadequacy of their actions, they nonetheless continue to function in the face of such conflicting doubt. Instead, for the comic character, there exists a surplus-knowledge, or

.....
54 Zupančič 2008a, 194.

55 Kottman 2008, 10.

56 Žižek 2000, 661.

rather, an excess of knowledge, that ambiguously characterises their relation to this very knowledge; demonstrating not only the problems that this entails, but also, more importantly, the comedy therein. Given that ‘Our acts are never self-transparent’ so that ‘we never fully know what we are doing or what the effects will be’,⁵⁷ for the comic character, their knowledge is assured, and what is more, it is this assurance that endows them their comic charm.

Certainly, if ‘Oedipus’s tragedy of destiny touches us because it depicts how it is attempting to avoid your own destiny that brings this destiny about’, that is, despite any action on our behalf, ‘our own fate is determined’,⁵⁸ what the comic suggests is that we do not need to resort to the fatalism that tragedy evokes. Instead, Ruda distinguishes between examples of tragic fatalism and his proposed comic fatalism, noting that for the former:

Tragic fatalism claims that tragic conflict is unavoidable, that it is even mostly unavoidably produced in the very attempt of avoiding it, and that the (social and political) human condition therefore entails a conflict that one cannot but try to resolve, which thereby, first of all, constitutes the conflict as conflict.⁵⁹

In opposition to this, it is only in examples of comic fatalism that we assert a new relation to the unavoidable; a relation which echoes the ambiguity of the comic character’s relation to knowledge. Indeed, ‘Comic fatalism ... asserts against tragic fatalism that only one thing is unavoidable: we cannot avoid the insight [or the knowledge] that everything is always already lost and that our endeavors to do so are actually comic’.⁶⁰ Through a Hegelian reconciliation, Ruda’s comic fatalism redefines the very tragedy at the heart of our activity. Indeed, it is this acceptance which does not mourn one’s tragic predicament or fated end, but, instead, fully identifies with the comic predicament.⁶¹ It is for this reason that the comic character manages to act in full recognition of their knowledge, thus exposing the comic fatalism that they actively perform.

To make sense of this exposition, we must remember that, for Ruda, ‘Comic fatalism follows one ultimate—paradoxically foundational—

.....
57 Žižek 2020, 112.

58 Ruda 2016, 154 & 155.

59 Ruda 2016, 170.

60 Ruda 2016, 170.

61 Certain aspects of this comic fatalism can be read alongside an account of ‘subjective destitution’. See Black (2022).

rule', from which 'the paradoxical structure of this rule is also what makes it comic[:] ... *there is no there is*'.⁶² Implicit here is that it is in the self-negation inherent to the rule's contradiction that the comic position can be found. That is:

'There is no there is' assumes a position of articulation that the proposition itself consequently invalidates. One is within the movement of this proposition thrown back to its very beginning that will have been altered due to this very move. After reaching the predicate, we are thrown back to the very place of its articulation, which will have become different, always already lost within the movement of the proposition itself.⁶³

Essentially, what knowledge this articulation assumes is itself invalidated in the proclamation of this very knowledge. It is this same movement which constitutes the comic character's relation to itself. In representing itself, the full force of the universal is concretely performed in the comic character—a performance which actively plays on the character's knowledge. Accordingly, it is not ignorance that functions to reveal the comic, but the decision to act in full knowledge of one's failure that proves comical. In both cases, the content is included in the form itself. Ruda elaborates on this point, via Hegel, when he notes that 'when the realization of an end coincides with its own relinquishment and destruction, there appears a peculiar Nothing that makes us laugh'.⁶⁴ In a return to comedy's self-negation, Ruda adds:

Therefore we are not only dealing with an act of self-negation (of ends by means of their realization), but it is precisely this self-negating act that produces something, that is not something, that makes us laugh. ... In comedy there is no bitter conflict because in the very frustration of one's aims and achievements, there is an achievement of a different kind. Comedy demonstrates that if nothing is achieved, it is precisely Nothing that is achieved—and although this may sound comical, it is quite hard to achieve (maybe just because it is somehow always already there).⁶⁵

It is this same 'materialization of nothing' that underwrites the comic

.....
62 Ruda 2016, 171.

63 Ruda 2016, 171-172.

64 Ruda 2016, 168.

65 Ruda 2016, 168 & 169.

pun.⁶⁶ In examples, such as: ‘Always trust a glue salesman, they tend to stick to their word’, or Mark Twain’s, ‘Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt’, it is not simply the fact that two disparate orders are brought together (trust and sticking, denial and the Nile) but that the gap which separates them is suddenly brought to bear—‘it is this eliminated *gap*, which normally functions as a negative condition of “making sense,” that now appears as something substantial, albeit spectral’.⁶⁷ Ultimately, there is sense in nonsense, and what is more, we are not necessarily any better off after hearing the pun, beyond the fact that we find it funny.

Again, it is important not to confuse this ‘nothing’ with a false elevation of negativity.⁶⁸ This is what befalls the various examples of political correctness, where, in denouncing their identity—in becoming ‘nothing’ important—the politically correct subject maintains their very position as the universal arbitrar of what constitutes the politically correct outlook. In other words, it is the position of enunciation (one of privileged universality) that undermines the enunciated content (the sacrifice of their very privilege).⁶⁹

Instead, to ask ‘what, precisely, is the thin line that divides tragedy from comedy, the final tragic insight from the final twist of a joke?’, is, for Žižek, given its answer in ‘the unexpected final twist [that] occurs when the position of enunciation *itself falls into* the enunciated content’.⁷⁰ Here, we can assume that it is in accordance with this ‘fall’ that the comic enacts its subversion over tragedy. Echoing that of the ‘self-negation’, which characterises Ruda’s comic fatalism, the universality that comedy avails points not to the content of the enunciated, but to its place of enunciation. Consequently, in the case of the comic character, ‘the place of enunciation does not undermine the universality of the statement but becomes its very internal gap, that which alone generates the only (possible) universality of the statement’.⁷¹ It is here that Zupančič’s adoption of the concrete universal works analogous to Ruda’s comic fatalism, with both approaches offering concurrent positions on the comedy at play in Hegelian reconciliation. That is, in the impasse between tragedy and comedy, there is ‘not ... an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but ... the re-doubling of the gap

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66 Zupančič 2008b, 44.

67 Zupančič 2008b, 44. For McGowan (2017), the pun reveals the coincidence of lack and excess in language.

68 Such a false elevation of ‘nothing’ ignores the recognition of lack that such nothing must imply.

69 Žižek elaborates, ‘In the very act of emptying the white-male-heterosexual position of all positive content, it retains it as a universal form of subjectivity’ (2007, 24).

70 Žižek 2012, 53, italics added.

71 Zupančič 2008a, 60.

or antagonism' so that 'the two opposed moments are "reconciled" when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms'.⁷²

It is for this reason that we can confirm the conclusion that 'Comedy emerges precisely at the point where tragedy is pushed beyond its own limits'.⁷³ In the same way that tragedy relies upon an Other, for whom the act of tragedy is performed for (and, thus, recognized by), it is in attempts to define the human condition as tragic which reveals that 'it is at least this very [tragic] condition that we can nonetheless and always rely on'.⁷⁴ In contrast to the tragic narrative, it is comedy that goes further in eliciting a collapse upon the tragic:

Comedy begins when we arrive at a point where this latent structural optimism of tragedy breaks down, a point where its transcendental form of tragedy itself cracks by being internally related back onto itself, a point where historicity proper arises.⁷⁵

With such optimism founded upon the proclivity for self-destruction in tragedy (either through annihilation or renunciation), it is in the act of being 'related back onto itself' that comedy avails the self-negation of the tragic.

VI.

By way of conclusion, the final part of this discussion will examine the U.S. writer and criminal attorney, Vanessa Place, and, specifically, her conceptual art performance, 'If I Wanted Your Opinion, I'd Remove the Duct Tape' (2016).⁷⁶ The controversial performance sees Place recite a number of graphic rape jokes to a seated audience for 45-minutes. Aside from the banal, almost methodical, manner in which Place delivers the jokes—impersonally recited; excessively performed, one after the other; with no facial expression or intonation—it is the monotony of the performance that helps draw out its significance. This significance is compounded by Place asking: 'What if instead of being the passive woman who's afraid of rape, who either cannot speak or can only speak through victimization [my own], I became the offender?'.⁷⁷

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72 Žižek 2006, 106.

73 Ruda 2020, fn.11.

74 Ruda 2020, fn.11.

75 Ruda 2020, fn.11.

76 In order to watch a version of the performance, see Artforum (n.d.); and Place (2017), for a written selection.

77 Place cited in Kohn 2019, parenthesis in original.

It is for this reason that Place firmly disassociates her performance from a traditional ‘stand-up’ performance, noting that:

The stand-up comic acts as a performance of the close-natural: the routine is memorized, recited off-script as if impromptu; there’s typically a partially improvised banter with the audience before and during the set to create an intimacy; there are often pauses between bits for a sip of something; there is an ongoing engagement with the audience’s response, a performed reaction to their laughter or lack thereof. Heckling is an overt prompt; comedy in this way acts as call and response. None of this appears in my work. I do not engage at all with my audience beyond watching them, I am always clearly reading from a scripted text, I do not react to any reaction, and need no drink. The stand-up comic asserts their humanity or the humanity pinking their comedy. I stress the blankness of its violence.⁷⁸

Consequently, the formal structure of the performance presents several notable distinctions to a typical stand-up routine: namely, there is no direct audience reaction and no response from them is required (no conversation with the audience, no desire to be laughed at, and no thanking them for listening). Of greater concern, is that the performance does not make fun of nor seek to ridicule the tragedy of rape. Instead:

Rape is part of the world we live in. Part of engaging with this world is to think through these things and not just sit passively by and nod and then go out to dinner. Humor, like art, like philosophy, is a form of engagement.⁷⁹

The underlying approach that guides Place’s performance echoes the sentiments that were made earlier: primarily, that it is through the path of humour that the true horror of tragedy can be confronted. Indeed, it is clear that such horror cannot be approached through some ‘true-to-life’ depiction of tragic dignity, which serves only to undermine the tragedy of the act itself. Instead, while tragedy ‘harmonizes’ and ‘unifies’, what a true comedic engagement entails—one open to the comic fatalism at its heart—is ‘a frictive structural engagement [... and] a refusal of reconciliation’.⁸⁰ As Place confirms: ‘what is a rape joke if not a work of friction?’⁸¹

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78 Seltman and Place 2019, 264.

79 Place cited in Kohn 2019.

80 Seltman and Place 2019, 267.

81 Seltman and Place 2019, 267.

On this basis, the criticisms against Place are easily made. The fact that Place, a woman, recites the jokes, as part of an artistic performance, in no way dislodges the fact that the premise of the joke relies upon a graphic act of violence. As a matter of comparison, those in authority frequently make jokes at their own expense, which, due to their position as joke-teller, never challenges the position of enunciation, the position from which the joke is made.⁸² In addition, there is also the suggestion that as soon as the joke's meaning needs to be explained or clarified, then, 'a certain retrospective suspicion concerning its politics' can be expressed.⁸³ In either case, it is the comic relief which is used to build a critical reflection. While such relief can certainly prove critical of popular stereotypes and obscene occurrences, all with the hope of challenging hegemonic discourses, the very rebellion it seeks to achieve goes no further than eliciting a simple transgression.

Frequently, in discussions on comedy, confrontations with certain topics and the deliberate discussion of particular taboos, through the breaching of social etiquettes, are found to be justified in the context of 'jokes'. Nevertheless, while functioning as forms of inherent transgression, satirical performances, acts of irony, and the telling of offensive jokes can end-up constituting the very Law that one seeks to upend. In this respect, Miller elucidates that Place's work 'crave[s] the narcissistic pleasure of being naughty', from which 'The Korean-American artist Cathy Park Hong identified the fundamental hollowness of Place's shock value'.⁸⁴ Hong commented that 'we are called upon to respond, to react. I am sick of reacting because yet again, we have been relegated to the role of chorus'.⁸⁵ The fact that 'Place must have a false piety to rebel against',⁸⁶ serves only to 'locat[e] [her] attempts at humor in the transgression of what is acceptable to laugh about'.⁸⁷ There is, in these cases, no dismantling of the structures that uphold and maintain the social implications that such transgression seek to dislodge. Instead, Place's performance remains reactionary, not revolutionary.

On this level, I argue that Place's use of the rape joke does not detract from the tragedy it depicts. Rape can cause severe physical, psychological, and emotional harm to the survivor, violating a person's

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82 In other instances, both the content and target of a joke can be shared and expressed by those whose very marginalization in society constitutes the joke's content: a Jew, for example, telling an antisemitic joke.

83 Mentinis 2023, 26.

84 Miller 2019.

85 Hong cited in Miller 2019.

86 Miller 2019.

87 Fitzpatrick 2019.

autonomy, dignity, and bodily integrity. In addition, references to rape continue to constitute a normalised part of our cultural discourse. Yet, in light of Place's performance, we can also ask 'at what point is a joke inherently transgressive or truly transgressive?'.⁸⁸ Pound elaborates upon these distinctions, noting that:

The former implies a joke which is transgressive of a situation but which nonetheless helps confers stability on that situation—for example, the libidinal joke employed to release the tension of a situation and hence maintain the situation. The latter implies a joke which is able to offer an entirely new perspective on the given situation.⁸⁹

We can elucidate on Pound's account of the 'truly transgressive' by returning to the collapse in tragedy; a collapse encountered in the self-negation of the comic form, itself encapsulated in the comic fatalism that Ruda asserts. Here, the 'the comic affirmative dimension of freedom' is presented in the very 'nothing' that Place's performance provides.⁹⁰ In provoking the discomfort inherent to the performance, we proceed through a movement that acknowledges, or rather, confronts us with, the joke's obscenity, while also alluding to its very meaningless: a meaningless, which, like most jokes, bears no inherent meaning, beyond the fact that it's very meaningfulness presents a profound reflection on the nothing it evokes—the very act of self-relating negativity.

Though we receive no immediate transformation in the performance of the rape joke, it would be wrong to suggest that nothing changes. Instead, the dislodgement of an Other to fall back on, the very exposure of its lack, left unfulfilled by some tragic explanation, is clearly reflected in the performance of the piece. When performing the jokes live, Place makes no acknowledgment of the audience, with the spotlight shining not on her but the audience itself. Place comments upon the effect this has:

My audience is thrown back on itself ... Of course, I am also the audience in this site specificity, which is why we watch each other, to see what each other will do. We are performers on both sides of the stage, signified as such in the rape joke performance when the lighting source shifts direction from me (the traditional performer's position) to them (I am backlit, becoming only a black silhouette, and they are now in the spotlight).⁹¹

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88 Pound 2015, 180.

89 Pound 2015, 180.

90 Ruda 2020, fn.11.

91 Seltman and Place 2019, 264.

Upon watching the live performance, the audience are immediately placed in a position where one's very actions (one's potential laughter), as well as those sharing in the live performance, are put under the spotlight, literally (in its live form, there is no distance between Place, the audience, and the performance).⁹² Far outside a Brechtian *Verfremdung*, and the nullity of being shocked by one's self-awareness, the audience or reader is left with nothing more than the reality of the joke.⁹³ This is why there exists no therapeutic impulse in the performance and no opportunity for the tension or anxiety to be alleviated. Instead, the performance elicits an anxiety that posits one to question one's very knowledge: a questioning that stands apart from the security of one's self-conscious reflection (*I know this joke is wrong, but is it funny? Should I laugh? Is anyone else laughing?*).⁹⁴ Far outside any tragic constellation, the subject is, instead, immediately located in the ambiguous position of the comic character, acting in full recognition of a knowledge that they know to be true, but which is subsequently contradicted when they either hear or read one of the jokes... and, perhaps, when they laugh at them too.

Such suspension of knowledge draws back to the nothing that our comic fatalism provides. This nothing is confirmed when, during each joke, the subject is confronted with their knowledge of the tragedy and the suspension of an Other 'supposed to know'. With the jokes' recipients confronting the failure of the Other to offer any guidance beyond 'the irreducible singularity of the individual listening',⁹⁵ we can go so far as to suggest that it is the Other's knowledge—the knowledge of the tragedy and its representation as a joke—that appears on stage. Ultimately, there is no rationalisation or legitimatisation of the jokes provided in Place's monotonous performance, where she pays no adherence to the discourse of the master. Instead, beyond the joke itself, we are left with nothing, yet a nothing which is undoubtedly something—a something reflected in the very change that it elicits for the listener.

We can finish here with a final precise of the joke. One must, in the case of jokes, pay equal attention not just to the content of the joke, but also its form. Echoing McGowan's account of Žižek's use of

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92 Notably, for Elkind, the set-up of the live performance provides 'an apt analogy for a book in which readers are both in control of turning the pages and forced to participate in their own discomfort as they do so, particularly in an era in which "aren't we all complicit?" has become a dinner party cliché' (2019).

93 Equally, there is not some 'return to the Real', an approach adopted in both literature and theatre, where the aim is 'to remind the spectator (or reader) that he is perceiving a fiction, to awaken him from the sweet dream' (Žižek 2014, 79). As Žižek notes, 'Instead of reading these gestures as attempts to break the spell of illusions and confront us with the bare Real, one should rather denounce them for what they are: the exact opposite of what they claim to be—*escapes from the Real*, desperate attempts to avoid the Real that transpires in (or through) the illusion itself' (2014, 79).

94 Holmes 2018.

95 Seltman and Place 2019, 269.

jokes, we can suggest that what Place provides in her performance is a serious reflection on the rape joke itself. Here, 'Seriousness does not require simply ignoring humor and the comic but taking it seriously and including it within one's theoretical approach'.⁹⁶ By extension, we can, in Place's performance, link the seriousness of the rape joke to such an approach. Indeed, as Kohn asserts:

The act of rape itself is never what's funny. Rape jokes are, because they're not supposed to be. Good ones have clever word play, a twist in the story. Like any joke, there's a setup, and then a reveal. There's some sophistication to how they're crafted.⁹⁷

What is apparent in Place's craft, however, is not necessarily found in the crafting of the joke itself, but from the position she occupies in its performance.

As previously touched upon, Place's role remains deliberately ambiguous in the performance (is she a victim, a narrator, a simple performer, the audience?). Her presence on stage is lit only by a back-light and her position as the joke teller places her immediately outside the role of recipient or victim. Here, Place elaborates:

So when I did the rape jokes performance, part of it for me was that I'm telling these jokes. Most of these jokes are from the point of view of a perpetrator, a rapist, a child molester. But I'm telling them. I'm a woman, and I'm also a lawyer. So I'm representing, in another way, the voices of this kind of unmanageable desire, that for the purposes of the joke is on a much lower scale than the actual event.⁹⁸

It is only when read alongside the suspension of the Other that Place's position reveals its importance. In fact, we can argue that it is primarily due to the Other's suspension that the performance's positions are dislodged, something that is compounded by an audience who have the spotlight on them. Similar to Chaplin's Tramp, who frequently appears in a place that is not his own, it is this suspension that allows Place to occupy a position that is not her own. On-stage, Place is not removed from the joke's performance, she essentially is the performance, but rather than dramatically representing the tragedy of rape (her own tragedy?), Place's enunciated content (the rape) finds its enunciation in an ambiguous confrontation with the joke teller (herself).

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⁹⁶ McGowan 2007, 66.

⁹⁷ Kohn 2019.

⁹⁸ Place cited in Holmes 2018.

Perhaps, it is for this reason that the difference between ‘everyday common jokes, and the reason why every dialectician likes to envelop his/her theory within jokes’ can be found in the fact that ‘a dialectician ultimately laughs at him/herself’.⁹⁹ Accordingly, it is hard not to see the comic in Place’s performance: the bare lighting; the dull, almost tiresome manner in which Place recites each joke, without any expression or intonation, where, much like the comic hero, each joke is told with the same conviction as the last. What the performance reveals is the ‘minimal difference’, a ‘pure’ difference, which comedy enacts: a revelation that does not produce anything new, but which nonetheless produces something that was not necessarily apparent before.¹⁰⁰ In fact, such a minimal difference makes nothing, as something, *appear* where there was previously nothing.

To this end, there is no secret to be uncovered in the tragedy that Place recites and repeats, and there is nothing of her to be revealed; instead, it is in the performance itself that we experience this minimal difference: a difference grounded upon the fact that our only reference is Place’s reference to herself—the very certainty of the unavowed joke. Such certainty can allow us to rewrite the famous Marx Brothers quip: ‘if this joke sounds like a rape joke and reads like a rape joke; this should not deceive you... it is a rape joke!’.

There is much that can be garnered from Place’s performance. Here, the focus of the above discussion has been to explore how the tragedy of rape is not necessarily lost but afforded a level of dignity in the comic form. The position that Place occupies in the performance, and the excessive repetition in which each joke is told, offers a depiction of tragedy that proves constitutive of comedy’s self-negation and our own comic fatalism. As Place explains, ‘Rape is so comically absurd, so driven by the irrational, which is always cruel, that it has to be addressed with the same level of absurdity’.¹⁰¹ In so doing, Place navigates the pitfalls of political nicety and moral condemnation, which seek easy gratification or cynical distance, introducing, instead, comedy’s self-negation of the tragic—a space in which the true art of comedy can be pursued and confronted. This break or collapse *within* the tragic form bears no guide or point of action, but, through the performance

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99 Žižek 2022, 336. It is for this reason that Žižek admits to ‘compulsively’ reciting jokes in his work. To explain, Žižek notes the following: ‘A meme circulating now on the web gives a correct hint: it tells of an Oak Hill couple sitting at home on Saturday evening—they discover there is a thief in their home after the man tells his wife a joke and they hear a laugh coming from upstairs. So the point is not just to amuse the public but to make the “thief” (the ideological enemy) among them betray himself by his laughter—how? The enemy is not a stupid guy who doesn’t get a joke: he gets it and he laughs at the right moment for the wrong reason—in order to reassert his sexist, racist, etc. prejudices. In short, the enemy laughs at others’ (2022, 336).

100 Black 2021a.

101 Place cited in Kohn 2019.

itself, positions tragedy in the comically impossible. Though nothing is achieved by the end of Place's performance, this does not mean that nothing changes. Instead, by renting apart the tragic in order to reveal the insoluble antagonisms and contradictions that constitute the human condition, we are left with a less than nothing... and it is at this point that we can begin.

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**The Flowers of
Andromache:
Allegory, Ontology,
and Tragedy in
in Baudelaire's
“Le Cygne”**

Nathan Brown

Abstract: Tracing the allegorical scenario of Baudelaire’s apostrophic address to Andromache in “Le Cygne” back from Virgil to its earliest source in Book XXII of *The Iliad*, this article reads Andromache as a figure of temporally divided non-identity, riven between anticipation and belatedness. From this perspective, I draw upon Heidegger’s reading of Kant to develop a transcendental theory of allegorical imagination which links two conditions of allegorical representation in Baudelaire’s poem: the temporal opening of the subject to historicity and the transformation of empirical particulars into abstract universals. Approaching allegory at the transcendental level of the *determinability* of the given, I argue, allows us to understand *how* allegory can function as “the rhetoric of temporality” (de Man) and also *why* Benjamin’s theory of melancholic allegory in the *Trauerspiel* book must be understood as incompatible with his opposition of the figural to the temporal in his theory of the dialectical image. Finally, I trace the figure of Andromache from Homer through incompatible representations of her fate in Euripides and Racine in order to show how contradiction and non-identity—inhabiting the apparent unity of the name—are not only the ground of the tragic, but also of tragedy’s circulation through epic, drama, and lyric.

Keywords: Allegory, Melancholy, Tragedy, Baudelaire, Homer, Benjamin, Heidegger, Kant

For in the tragic lies the completion of the epic, in the lyric the completion of the tragic, in the epic the completion of the lyric.
– Friedrich Hölderlin

Allegory

The basic operation of Baudelaire’s allegorical style is disarmingly simple. He confers a majuscule upon an abstract noun, thus stamping it with the mark of the universal and personifying it as an agent that may be addressed through the rhetoric of apostrophe, as in the poem “Hymn to Beauty”: “Do you fall from the heavens or rise from the abyss, / O Beauty.”¹ Yet this apparently simple operation implies a redoubling of the given which is more metaphysically complex: conceived under the implicit sign of an allegorical name, every beautiful thing implies the presence of Beauty, every instance of boredom or *taedium vitae* suggests the existence of Ennui. In “Le Cygne,” one of Baudelaire’s most important poems in part because it implies a theory of allegory, the three allegorical figures are Work, Sorrow, and Memory (Travail,

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¹ Baudelaire 2021, p. 63.

Douleur, Souvenir).² Work awakens at the cold and clear hour when the street cleaners carry out their task; Sorrow is described as a gracious she-wolf who nurses those “who have lost what cannot be found”; and in the final stanza, Memory rises within “the forest of my mind’s exile,” where it “sounds a full-throated horn.” The allegorical names of Work, Sorrow, and Memory punctuate the movement of the poem and populate it with figures that represent the social reproduction of the city while transcending it, and that commemorate the suffering of isolated exiles as a collective. But the poem also involves another allegorical level: it constructs a historical and mythopoetic allegory wherein the transformation of Paris by Baron Hausmann’s renovation in the 1850s evokes the fall of Troy, mapping the melancholic mood of the speaker onto the sufferings of Andromache and the death of Hector. One of the interpretive demands imposed by the poem is to understand the relation between these two levels of allegorical meaning.

At the center of the poem, we find the association, through rhyme, of melancholy and allegory that will be so crucial to Walter Benjamin’s theory of baroque allegory in the *Trauerspiel* book:

Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancholie
N’a bougé. palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.

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Paris changes! but nothing in my melancholy
Has stirred! new palaces, scaffoldings, blocks,
Old neighborhoods, for me everything becomes allegory,
And my cherished memories more weighty than rocks.

Written in 1859, the poem articulates a melancholic attachment to the city of Baudelaire’s youth:

Le vieux Paris n’est plus (la forme d’une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d’un mortel);

--

The Paris of old is no more (the form of a city
Changes more swiftly, alas! than a mortal heart);

Thus the transformation of the old Paris by Hausmann’s modern renovation gives rise to a meditation upon the differential rhythm or chronology of historical and subjective time, the disjunction between these gives rise to melancholy, and the stasis of such melancholy amid the mutability of the city confers allegorical significance upon its

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² Baudelaire 2021, p. 254-259. All subsequent quotations from “Le Cygne” are from these pages.

inorganic elements (new palaces, scaffoldings, blocks) while turning the affective intimacy of “cherished memories” to stone. “Allegories are in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things,” writes Benjamin.³ In Baudelaire’s famous quatrain, the melancholic attunement of thought converts things into allegory and memories into ruins.⁴

But how, exactly, does the disjunction between historical and subjective temporality relate to Baudelaire’s particular practice of allegory, in which abstract nouns are personified as universals? And what does the kind of temporality at issue in that practice have to do with its attachment to thinking, in the iconic apostrophe that opens Baudelaire’s poem: “Andromache, I think of you!” This is well-trodden ground, and the centrality of “Le Cygne” to modern literature and literary theory is such that these or similar questions are inextricable from Benjamin’s theory of the dialectical image, from Paul de Man’s essay on allegory as “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” and from Fredric Jameson’s understanding of allegory’s relationship to ideology, which situates the subject within a collective social structure. With Benjamin, de Man, and Jameson in mind, one notes that the poem’s opening invocation of Andromache performs the recuperative gesture of linking the transformation of the modern city to ancient myth, honorifically compensating for the lyric speaker’s subjective powerlessness in the face of historical change and its social consequences—which had been driven home, for Baudelaire, by the violent suppression of the revolution of 1848 and the bathos of the subsequent *coup d’état*. Recalling a figure from epic poetry and tragic drama, modern lyric bathes the brute facticity of material power in the light of a classical ideal of melancholic fidelity, bestowing archetypal meaning upon historical contingency and subjective defeat. In the image of the swan, to which we will return, Baudelaire produces a correlate of Andromache adequate to both the nobility of her pathos and the degraded conditions of modernity.

I want to sharpen these questions about the temporality of melancholic allegory and their relation to the figure of Andromache by asking about the transcendental conditions of this kind of figuration. What are the conditions of possibility for that cognitive act which stamps an abstract noun with the significance of the universal, and for that act of imagination which relates this allegorical gesture to a mythic figure through the sign of the proper name? How does the temporality of these figurative gestures partake of those conditions of possibility? These questions may take us behind or beneath, as it were, those theories of allegory produced by Benjamin, de Man, and Jameson,

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3 Benjamin, 2019, p. 188.

4 In addition to the Benjamin’s foundational study, other approaches to the relation between allegory and melancholy in Baudelaire that have informed my thinking include Agamben, 1993; Kukuljevic, 2017; Labarthe, 2015; Newmark, 2011; Stamelman, 1983; and Starobinski, 1963.

illuminating the ontological ground of their references to temporality and history. But to see how and why that is so, we have to start over by looking into the Homeric scene in which Andromache becomes the melancholic figure she will be in Baudelaire's poem.

The opening of "Le Cygne" recalls not Homer but Virgil:

Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve,
Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit
L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,
Ce Simois menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,

A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.

--

Andromache, I think of you! This little stream,
Poor and sad mirror where once reflected
The immense majesty of your widow's grief,
This duplicitous Simois swelled by your tears,

Suddenly made fecund my fertile memory,
As I was crossing the new Carrousel.

The Andromache invoked here is described in Book III of the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas finds her in a grove beside a stream, "offering her yearly feast and gifts of mourning to the dust, and calling the ghost to Hector's tomb—the empty mound of green turf that she had hallowed with twin altars, there to shed her tears."⁵ The stream beside which she makes her offering is referred to by Baudelaire as "Ce Simois menteur" and by Virgil as "falsi Simoentis"⁶—that is, a false and diminished double of the river Simois on the Trojan plain. By now, after having for years been a slave to Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, Andromache has passed after his death into the hands of Helenus, a Trojan, who has established "a little Troy" in Greece, to the amazement of Aeneas. This is the sequence compressed into Baudelaire's other reference to Andromache in the second half of "Le Cygne," where she is described as:

des bras d'un grand époux tombée,
Vil bétail, sous la main du superbe Pyrrhus,
Après d'un tombeau vide en extase courbée;
Veuve d'Hector, hélas! et femme d'Hélénus!

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5 Virgil, 1999, p. 393.

6 Virgil, 1999, p. 392.

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fallen from the arms of a mighty husband,
Lowly chattel, under the sway of haughty Pyrrhus,
Bowed in a trance beside an empty tomb;
Widow of Hector, alas! and wife of Helenus.

Andromache is the widow of a mighty husband, the slave of Pyrrhus, and now the wife of Helenus, a poor substitute for the Trojan hero she first married—Hector the glorious, breaker of horses, scourge of the Achaians. The chronology of this sequence situates us in the Virgilian context after the Homeric epics, and subsequent to the moment depicted by the plays of Euripides and Racine in which we find Andromache “under the sway of haughty Pyrrhus,” prior to his murder by Orestes.

But what can we learn from the moment at which Andromache first becomes what she will always thereafter be, widow of Hector, a moment that already encapsulates the melancholic temporality Baudelaire will evoke when he thinks of her? The scene is narrated with crushing pathos in Book XXII of *The Iliad*. Hector remains alone outside the gates of Troy, after the Trojan army has retreated within the battlements. Achilles closes in on him and begins to chase Hector around the walls of the city, but is unable to close the distance between them:

As in a dream a man is not able to follow one who runs from him, nor can the runner escape, nor the other pursue him, so he could not run him down in his speed, nor the other get clear.⁷

The scene is locked in a state of temporal stasis, as if they were standing still, or as if they might run for all eternity, Achilles the demigod and Hector aided by Apollo, who has lightened his knees. But Zeus has granted Athena’s wish to send Hector to his fate; disguised as his comrade she runs alongside him and persuades him to stand and fight. Achilles drives a spear through Hector’s throat, taunts him as he dies, strips off his armor, and drags his body around the walls of Troy behind his chariot:

A cloud of dust rose where Hektor was dragged, his dark hair falling about him, and all that head that was once so handsome was tumbled in the dust; since by this time Zeus had given him over to his enemies, to be defiled in the land of his fathers.⁸

Hector’s mother and father look on from the battlements, and Hecabe leads the women of Troy in a chant of sorrow.

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7 Homer, 1951, p. 440, ll. 199-201.

8 Homer, 1951, p. 446, ll. 401-404.

All this time, however, Andromache has been at her loom, unaware of what is taking place outside the city. “So she spoke in tears,” Homer says of Hector’s mother, “but the wife of Hektor had not yet heard”:

for no sure messenger had come to her and told her
how her husband had held his ground there outside the gates;
but she was weaving a web in the inner room of the high house,
a red folding robe, and inworking elaborate figures.
She called out through the house to her lovely-haired handmaidens
to set a great cauldron over the fire, so that there would be
hot water for Hektor’s bath as he came back out of the fighting;
poor innocent, nor knew how, far from the waters for bathing,
Pallas Athene had cut him down at the hands of Achilles.
She heard from the great bastion the noise of mourning and
sorrow.
Her limbs spun, and the shuttle dropped from her hand to the
ground.⁹

Andromache’s solitude, “in the inner room of the high house,” is contrasted with the communal mourning of the women on the walls, and the pathos of the scene is constructed through a riven temporality: events taking place at the same time may be spatially divided, and thus belatedly registered through deferred recognition. Intertextually, the scene looks both forward and backward. It anticipates Penelope’s weaving in the *Odyssey*, where a comic resolution reverses the telos of Andromache’s tragic labor. It also recalls Helen’s weaving in Book III of *The Iliad*, where she works scenes of battle into a tapestry even as, unbeknownst to her, Hector has achieved a temporary truce between Trojans and Achaians outside the walls of Troy. In Richard Lattimore’s translation, both Helen and Andromache are weaving “a red folding robe,” but the Greek in each case is *diplaka porphyrein* (δίπλακα πορφυρέην),¹⁰ where *porphyrein* refers to royal purple, and *diplaka* refers specifically to a double-folded cloak (large enough to be wrapped around twice). The color is the same as the fine purple fabric spread before Agamemnon as he returns to the house of Atreus after the Trojan war. The family of adjectives to which *diplaka* belongs describes that which is two-fold more generally: pairs or twins; things doubled or two-sided; an ambivalent or equivocal story; feelings of doubt or indecision; duplicity of conduct. The time of Andromache’s weaving extends retroactively across the scenes of pursuit, battle, desecration, and lamentation we have witnessed, and forward to the punctual moment at which she hears “the

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9 Homer, 1951, pp. 447, ll. 438-448.

10 Homer, 1999, pp. 484, ll. 441.

noise of mourning and sorrow / Her limbs spun, and the shuttle dropped from her hand to the ground.” Hector’s death means that the red folding robe will remain unfinished, and he will never take the bath prepared for him, since he is “far from the waters for bathing.” As the shuttle falls to the ground, the interruption of Andromache’s weaving occurs after, yet doubles, the moment at which death and fate catch up with her husband.

Lattimore’s translation has Andromache “inworking elaborate figures” as she weaves. The Greek is *en dé throna poikil epasse* (ἐν δὲ θρόνα ποικίλ’ ἔπασσε)¹¹ glossed by Gregory Nagy as “inworking varied patterns of flowers,” where *throna* refers to floral patterns. Tracing the relationship between the adjective *poikila* (varied) and the verb *poikillein*, which refers to pattern-weaving, Nagy argues that Andromache’s inworking of patterns amid her weaving figures the pattern-weaving of Homeric narrative, in which the intersection of proleptic and analeptic implications constructs a double-folded temporality of anticipated recollections and recollected anticipations.¹² Andromache’s weaving recalls Helen’s, while the temporary truce of which Helen was unaware comes to retroactively anticipate, double, and ironically invert Andromache’s unawareness of Hector’s death. The *elsewhere* of simultaneity in both these scenes—what happens inside and outside the city walls—is the spatial double of a temporal exteriority, of the *not-yet* and the *already* inscribed in the narrative structure of the epic, its pattern-weaving. What is happening here and now is marked as *the present* through its simultaneity with something happening elsewhere, *at the same time*, but the simultaneity of this *at the same time*, as a construction of the present, is made structurally necessary by the differential temporality of anticipation and recollection, by the exteriority of the now. It is because the now is outside of itself, is never present, that it has to be marked in its passage through an operation of spatial doubling, the simultaneity of here and there. The pattern-weaving of the double-folded cloak may be taken as a figure of this spatio-temporal operation.

As the shuttle drops and her weaving leavings off, Andromache begins to catch up with her fate. “I heard the voice of Hektor’s honored mother,” she tells her handmaidens, and now, she says, “my own heart rising beats in my mouth, my limbs under me / are frozen.” “Surely some evil is near for the children of Priam,” she continues, and as she speaks out the prophecy of a death that has already happened, she hopes not to hear her own voice: “May what I say never come close to my ear.”¹³ Andromache is double to herself, beside herself amid the double

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11 Homer, 1999, p. 484, l. 441.

12 Nagy, 2012, pp. 482-487, digital edition: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn3:hul.ebook:CHS_Nagy.Homer_the_Preclassic.2009

13 Homer, 1951, p. 447, ll. 451-454.

temporality of melancholic prophecy, as Cassandra will be outside the house of Atreus. The flowers she has been weaving are what Baudelaire will call *Les Fleurs du mal*: even as they express her innocence, her not-yet knowing, their pattern bodes ill. Andromache's proleptic dread at hearing the voice of Hecabe anticipates an evil which is then confirmed in a moment of vision that gives way to blindness:

But when she came to the bastion where the men were gathered she stopped, staring, on the wall; and she saw him being dragged in front of the city, and the running horses dragged him at random toward the hollow ships of the Achaians. The darkness of night misted over the eyes of Andromache.¹⁴

Only at this moment in the scene, when she knows she has become a widow, is Andromache named in Lattimore's translation, but she is not named at all in the Greek. Throughout the entire seventy-seven lines of the scene in which she appears—as she weaves, speaks with her handmaids, rushes to the wall, mourns Hector's death, anticipates the unhappy childhood of their son Astyanax, and imagines the desecration and decomposition of Hector's body—Andromache's name never appears in the Greek text, even as the names of Hector, Athena, Achilles, Priam, Astyanax, and Aphrodite all pass through the narrative discourse. First she is referred to as “wife of Hektor” and then as “widowed mother.”¹⁵ In between, at the very moment when she sees Hector's body, the proper name is held in abeyance. It is as if the temporal chasm opened by death holds open the empty place of the generic figure of the widowed mother, of Work and Sorrow and Memory. This is the form of the figure we find in Euripides, in Virgil, in Racine, and in “Le Cygne,” where the apostrophic invocation of the name inaugurates the lyric recollection of epic poetry and tragic drama.

Attending to Book XXII of *The Iliad* allows us to register how the riven temporality of Homer's epic narrative involves a drama of the name, where it is precisely the absence of the proper name “Andromache” that marks a change of state from wife to widow, a transformation that will seal thereafter the significance of the name itself. I mean to imply, and eventually to argue, that this relationship between riven temporality, punctual transformation, and the drama of the name has something to do with Baudelaire's allegorical style, where the capitalization of abstract nouns marks the gathering up of particulars into figures of the universal.

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14 Homer, 1951, p. 447, ll. 462-466.

15 Homer, 1951, p.447-448, ll. 437, 499.

Moreover, close attention to Homer allows us to recognize that Baudelaire's opening apostrophe—"Andromache, je pense à vous!" performs not only an invocation of Andromache but also the displacement of another name, "Hector," which is invoked in Andromache's own apostrophic address to her dead husband just after she sees his body below the walls. "Hektor, I grieve for you," she begins in Lattimore's translation. The Greek is *Ektor, ego dustenos* (Ἑκτορ, ἐγὼ δῦστηνος) where *dustanos* means unhappy, unfortunate, wretched, or miserable—so a more direct translation would be "Hektor, I am unhappy." Hector, I am unhappy; Andromache, I think of you; I think of your unhappiness, of the "immense majesty of your widow's grief." In *The Iliad* the absence of Andromache's name marks the place where "wife of Hector" becomes "widowed mother." In Baudelaire's lyric, the inaugural presence of her name occupies the place, in Andromache's own speech, of the dead husband who is also a dead father. Beginning with Hector's name, her speech will go on to mourn the bereavement of their son, Astyanax, whose name means "lord of the city." Andromache anticipates the humiliations of his fatherless childhood: he "who in days before on the knees of his father / would eat only the marrow or the flesh of sheep that was fattest" will now be driven out of banquets by those "whose parents are living," such that "the boy goes away in tears to his widowed mother."¹⁶ At the intersection of two apostrophes, ancient and modern, one invoking Hector and the other Andromache, we might locate the poet's own position: Astyanax becomes the absent name, never articulated in Baudelaire's poem, of the "I" who thinks, the silent name of the melancholic son. The relation between these two apostrophes would mark the place of a double displacement, suturing the name of the widowed mother and the dead father to the voice of the disinherited son. And even to this day Baudelaire remains the lord of the city of Paris, since it is literature that enables the transmigration of souls.

But for now, my point is that when the lyric I thinks of Andromache it implicitly thinks of Hector as well, and we could even say that the displaced name of the father is transfigured into the title of the poem, "Le Cygne." (This would be one sense in which the title is "The Sign" as well as "The Swan"). Like the desecrated body of Hector, Baudelaire's swan is "far from the waters for bathing," exiled from its native lake and bathing its wings only in the dust of a waterless gutter. The swan's "convulsive neck" cruelly recalls the unarmored throat of Hector, through which Achilles drives his spear. As the lyric speaker recalls the menagerie from which the swan had escaped long ago, his invocation of the street cleaners suggests the cloud of dust rising as Hector is dragged around the walls of Troy behind a chariot. One referential complex flickers, allegorically, with its evocation of another:

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16 Homer, 1951, p. 448, ll. 485-486, 500-501, 499.

Là je vis, un matin, à l'heure où sous les cieux
Froids et clairs le Travail s'éveille, où la voirie
Pousse un sombre ouragan dans l'air silencieux,

Un cygne qui s'était évadé de sa cage

--

There I saw, one morning, at the hour when under the sky
Cold and clear Work awakens, when the street cleaners
Drive a somber storm in the silent air,

A swan that had escaped its cage

Here the first of the poem's three allegorical names, Travail, appears just as the somber storm of dust might recall the desecration of Hector's body. Thus it also recalls the simultaneous scene of domestic labor inside the walls of the city, where Andromache works at her weaving, and we might note that the work of craft and artistic production, weaving figures of flowers, doubles that of the poet, who observes the street cleaners as he meanders through the city gathering materials for his verse, "Sniffing every corner for the chance of rhyme, / Stumbling over words like paving stones," as Baudelaire puts it in "Le Soleil."¹⁷

In "Le Cygne," the temporal disjunction between the pace at which the city and the heart change, between the transformation of Paris and the stasis of melancholy, is the rift wherein *everything* becomes allegory, where everything perceived maps onto the "strange and fatal" myth evoked by the exiled swan, and where every material element of the city comes to signify such essences as Travail, Douleur, Souvenir. Here we return to the two allegorical levels of the poem mentioned earlier: one mapping the modern city onto classical epic, the transformation of Paris onto the fall of Troy, and the other—emerging from the elements of this allegory—producing allegorical names of abstract universals which traverse and conjoin the ancient and the modern. Benjamin (after both Dürer and Baudelaire) theorizes the melancholic production of allegory as a mode of perception whereby "the profane world is both elevated in rank and devalued": elevated by virtue of pointing to *something other*, raised to higher plane and thus sacralized; devalued by virtue of the sense that, as he puts it, "any person, any object, any relation can signify any other whatever."¹⁸ A state in which "everything becomes allegory" is one in which every person or object—and thus every name—marks the place of a possible substitution, and is thus related to not only in its concrete determinacy but also as an empty place, or placeholder.

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17 Baudelaire, 2021, p. 247.

18 Benjamin, 2019, p. 184.

My question is: what is the ground of this allegorical operation of the melancholic subject? What are the conditions of possibility for this act of imagination?

Ontology

We can put this problem in Kantian terms before interrogating the ground of those terms as well: what is at issue here is how the cognition of a determinate object also requires the generic presupposition of an “object in general,” the transcendental “something = x.” Allegory involves a kind of double vision, wherein this generic place of the object is sustained beneath the determinacy of its concept as the place of its possible transformation into *something else*. Note that this implies the metonymic ground of all metaphorical identity theorized by Lacan: behind the identity swan = Hector or Andromache = exile lies the operation whereby the concept of an object is held in place while it comes to refer to another object, or such that a universal may stand in for a multiplicity of particulars, the universal Sorrow traversing the particular sorrow of any individual. The substitution of one thing for another implies this relation between empirical and transcendental levels of determination, constituting and holding, as if beneath its determinacy, the empty place of a name, an image, or a thing.

Yet understanding the relation of allegory to melancholy at the core of Baudelaire’s poem requires us to go beyond Kant through a theoretical framework conjoining the transcendental constitution of objects with a theory of how the exteriority of temporal disjunction—the misalignment of subjective and historical time—is related to the determinacy of moods. It is at this level that Heidegger’s reading of Kant, which subtends the whole project of *Being and Time*, becomes essential. In particular, it is Heidegger’s displacement of the transcendental unity of apperception—the atemporal unity of the “I think”—through a radicalization of the temporality of imagination that will enable not only a transcendental but also an ontological understanding of the melancholic production of allegorical signs. Though Benjamin is frequently at pains to dissociate himself from Heidegger, I would argue that Heidegger’s theory of ecstatic temporalization is a logical condition of intelligibility for Benjamin’s theory of allegory.

Benjamin’s famous fragment on dialectical images in Convolute N of the *Arcades Project* begins with a parenthetical dismissal of Heidegger: “What distinguishes images from the ‘essences’ of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through ‘historicity.’)”¹⁹ Heidegger’s theory of *Geschichtlichkeit*, however, is *necessarily* abstract

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¹⁹ Benjamin, 1999, p. 462.

insofar as it is concerned with the conditions of possibility for any historical index whatsoever, and this has less to do with an opportunistic effort to “rescue history for phenomenology” than with determining the necessary ground of *any* methodological orientation toward history. Benjamin argues that “it is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.” According to Benjamin, such a dialectical image, dialectics at a standstill, is “not temporal in nature but figural.”²⁰ What is at stake here is nothing less than the temporality of figuration, which is denied. But what is the ground of the distinction between “what has been” and “the now,” such that they can come together in a flash? And what enables this condition of possibility to be related to a form of intuition in which, as Benjamin puts it regarding allegorical perception, “any person, any object, any relation can signify any other whatever”?

One might note that the unity of “what has been” with the “now” is itself a temporal determination: namely, simultaneity. What Benjamin seems to mean is that the image is not determined by temporal *succession*, since the past and the present are immanently unified in the dialectical image. But the coming together of “what has been” with the “now” in a composition (the constellation) depends upon holding together reciprocal relations in what Kant calls a dynamical community, such that elements of something like a constellation may be distinguished even as they are unified as simultaneous. The dialectical image is simultaneous rather than successive, but simultaneity is not non-temporal; it is a modality of temporality. Thus there is no opposition between the temporal and the figural; the constellation is itself the figure of a time determination, and the figure can only be grasped temporally.

Of course, Benjamin’s theory of the dialectical image does not involve an experience of *empirical* simultaneity. Rather, it involves the advent of historical simultaneity, through the “historical index” of a sign. In the case of Baudelaire’s poem, this sign is a swan suturing the transformation of Paris to the sorrow of Andromache and the death of Hector. As it is crossed, the appearance of the new Carrousel is displaced by the power of imagination, such that the memory of *what was seen* (“There long ago...”) becomes *what is seen* in the mind’s eye. The image of the swan appears through the power of imagination, stretching its avid head toward a sky which is ironic because it offers the sensible presentation of what is desired, the blue of the lake, without actually being that object of desire. At the moment of the Swan’s reported speech—“Water, when will you rain? thunder, when will you boom?”—the anticipation of the future enters the poem through the temporal language of yearning—*when, when*—synthesizing an originary absence

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20 Benjamin, 1999, p. 463.

(“son beau lac natal”) with a desired future through the immanence of what is imagined to the language of the poem itself: the enunciation of the question. The swan’s desperate question *makes* the present of the poem as the recollection of the past, in the desperate anticipation of a future which may or may not come to pass (the thunder, the rain). Hector, far from waters for bathing, speaks as Andromache, the unhappy one, *malheureux*, through the mouth of a swan ventriloquized by the poet in the mind of the reader, via the materiality of the signifier, *le signe*.

Heidegger’s analysis of historicity elaborates the existential-ontological condition of possibility for the coming together of “what has been” with the “now”: “*The analysis of the historicity of Dasein attempts to show that this being is not ‘temporal’ because it ‘is in history,’ but that, on the contrary, it exists and can exist historically only because it is temporal in the ground of its being.*”²¹ Such temporality, moreover, must be understood in the sense delivered by Heidegger two chapters earlier, in what I regard as the most important sentence of *Being and Time*: “*Temporality is the primordial ‘outside of itself’ in and for itself.*”²² Time is the being of beings that is not a being, insofar as its constitutive exteriority never has the self-identical unity of a substance but only the unity of a synthesis, transpiring through the intersection of the *not-yet* and the *already* with the horizontal constitution of the present as the *in-order-to*. The ecstatic unity of temporality, Heidegger shows, “is the condition of the possibility that there can be a being that exists as its there.”²³ Book XXII of *The Iliad* is a paradigmatic dramatization of such existence, wherein the not-yet and the already encounter one another first through anticipation, then in the belated recognition of Hector’s body below the battlements, then as anticipatory mourning for the future of Astyanax. It is the meaning of widowhood that is constructed here, and thus the significance of the name Andromache: the projection of a future bound to what has already happened yet which will be repeated, in fidelity, as the meaning of a now that is never *here* but is always *there*, and this is what is repeated by the complex rendering of temporal exteriority in Baudelaire’s poem.

In his seminar on the *Critique of Pure Reason* and in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger rigorously elaborates the deconstruction of the transcendental unity of apperception that is implicit throughout *Being and Time*. His argument hinges on a reassertion of what he sees suppressed in the second edition of Kant’s First Critique: the status of imagination as the common root of intuition and understanding—that is, the common root of the subject’s capacity for

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21 Heidegger, 2010, p. 359.

22 Heidegger, 2010, p. 314.

23 Heidegger, 2010, p. 334.

both sensible receptivity (pure sensibility) and productive determination (the spontaneity of pure thinking). There is thus a double function of the imagination. Its *empirical* function is the capacity to produce an image in the absence of an object (just as Baudelaire's speaker sees only in the mind's eye the markets and the menagerie of the old Place du Carrousel when passing through the new one). But the *transcendental* function of the imagination is the power to produce conditions of objectivity *per se*, in the first instance. That is, imagination is the power of "transcendence" which opens the subject to any exteriority at all, which makes it possible to hold any object whatever over against oneself as a determinate being. Imagination is the condition of possibility, at the common root of intuition and understanding, for the transcendental constitution of the object = x, prior to the determination of the *particularity* of any object.

In his detailed reconstruction of the three syntheses in the A edition Kant's transcendental deduction, Heidegger shows that imagination is not only the faculty which makes possible the synthesis of reproduction (as in Kant), but that it must also be the ground of the synthesis of apprehension in intuition and the ground of the synthesis of recognition in the concept. He argues that this last synthesis should be named pre-cognition rather than recognition, since it is already implicit as a condition of possibility for the combination of apprehension and reproduction in the constitution of objectivity. Reconstructing what would have to be the case for these three syntheses to come together through "the formal condition of the inner sense, namely time,"²⁴ Heidegger interprets the three modes of transcendental syntheses as correlates of the three ecstases of temporality: seizing the present (apprehension), reaching back (reproduction), and reaching ahead (precognition). It is the *horizontal* character of subjective temporality which Heidegger reads as at issue in transcendence (the opening of exteriority) and in the transcendental synthesis not only of conditions for the experience of "an isolated object of an isolated perception," but also for the possibility of relation to any object at all, indeed "to nature in general."²⁵

Heidegger's project, then, is to show that an atemporal transcendental unity of apperception cannot be the ground of the unity of the subject, since this renders incoherent the relationship of such unity to temporality: it renders unthinkable the opening of the subject to exteriority, which is also the condition of possibility for the unity of such exteriority. The project of *Being and Time* is therefore to overcome this difficulty in Kant by showing that it is possible to understand the synthesis of a self, a unity of temporal existence and experience, without

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24 Kant, 1998, p. 228, A99.

25 Heidegger, 1997, p. 242.

grounding this in the formal condition of an atemporal unity. The upshot of Heidegger's reading of Kant for his project in *Being and Time* is that, as he puts it in the Kant seminar, grasping the constitutive temporality of imagination makes intelligible how existential-ontological reflection is possible at all:

But if the productive power of imagination is in this way nothing but the most original unity of the three modes of synthesis, then this power has essentially already unified in itself pure intuition and pure thinking, pure receptivity and pure spontaneity—or put more precisely, this power is the root which releases both from out of itself. The productive power of imagination is the root of the faculties of subjectivity; it is the basic constitution of the subject, of Dasein itself. Insofar as the power of imagination releases pure time from out of itself, as we have shown (and this means that the power of imagination contains pure time as a possibility), it is original temporality and therefore the radical faculty of ontological knowledge.²⁶

What constitutes the *existence* of the subject—its being outside itself—is also the condition of possibility for knowledge of the being of beings: time.

I am arguing that such an account of the subject and the faculty of imagination renders comprehensible an approach to allegory as what de Man calls “the rhetoric of temporality,” reconstructed as that rhetoric which *figures* the crux of exteriority and synthesis in the transcendental constitution of the object = x. Allegory involves a double movement, a double-folded process of figuration. There is a movement of subtraction from the empirical to the transcendental, from the particularity of “any person, any object, any relation” to a generic condition in which these may *come* to “signify any other whatever,” as Benjamin puts it. And there is a movement of figurative determination, the construction of a parallel level of significance or the assignment of a universal name. My claim is that Heidegger's account of imagination, reconstructing transcendental conditions of exteriority and synthesis, makes intelligible the allegorical operations of substitution, parallelism, and universalization. As the common root of understanding and intuition, imagination is the common source of the capacity for determination and of the temporal constitution of exteriority, opening the transcendental dimension of *determinability*. The temporality of imagination enables displacements of conceptual determination, wherein allegory may draw *everything* (“everything becomes allegory”) back to transcendental conditions of determinability and reassign its sense.

When Baudelaire's speaker, immersed in the stasis of melancholy,

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26 Heidegger, 2010, p. 283.

declares that “everything becomes allegory,” it seems to be this transcendental field of determinability in which he is immersed, where the empirical is exposed to the implicit determinations of another scene, which will be articulated by the poem. But why would melancholy have this effect? Because melancholy is a psychic structure productive of a peculiar *Stimmung*, an attunement to the ungrounding of origin, to an abyss of loss exposing the ungroundedness of the subject and indeed of nature which is implicit in temporality *per se*. It is an attunement to the absolute outside of itself in and for itself. Melancholy involves an orientation toward the inextricability of temporal synthesis and temporal exteriority, the exposure of subjective unity and conditions of objectivity to an outside that only holds together through the synthesis of the *already* and the *not yet*, and which binds the self as a structure already outside itself, such that cherished memories may seem exterior elements, “more weighty than rocks.” This structure of temporal exteriority, of thrown projection, is precisely what we find in Book XXII of *The Iliad*, where Andromache becomes what she already is—the Widow—through a scene of delayed recognition traversed by proleptic anticipation wherein she hopes that what she says may never come close to her ear. Through an inconsolable, self-lacerating attachment to irrevocable loss, melancholy attunes the subject to the strange play of indetermination and determination operating between transcendental and empirical levels, to the ungroundedness of both subjective and objective synthesis, and to the power of imagination to produce determinate figures in the absence of an object: for example, the double image of Andromache and the Swan, or the allegorical names of Work, Sorrow, and Memory. If melancholy orients one to the universal Loss behind or beneath every particular loss, thereby making insufficient the mourning of that particularity, melancholic allegory compensates by *attaching* a subject exposed to its own nullity to a series of substitutions, such that insubstantial memories are exteriorized as images or universals which then weigh upon the subject with oppressive heft.

What I mean to formulate are the ontological-existential conditions of possibility for Benjamin’s thinking of allegory in the *Trauerspiel* book, of de Man’s analysis of allegory as the rhetoric of temporality, or of a theory like Jameson’s in which

allegory raises its head as a solution when beneath this or that seemingly stable or unified reality the tectonic plates of deeper contradictory levels of the Real shift and grate ominously against one another and demand a representation, or at least an acknowledgement, which they are unable to find in the *Schein* or illusory surfaces of existential or social life.²⁷

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27 Jameson, 2019, p. 34.

These approaches require a transcendental theory of imagination such as that offered by Heidegger's reading of Kant: a theory of both *how* we are open to historicity at all, and of *why* this openness to historicity can be experienced as figurative. And they require a theory of the unity of the self synthesized *through* temporal disjunction, such as that developed in *Being and Time*.

How then does this bring us to understand differently what is at stake in allegory, as a rhetorical trope and as a mode of melancholic intuition? It enables us to recognize that allegory is not only the rhetoric of temporality, but also the rhetoric of the ontological difference. Time is the being of beings which is not a being. It is the movement of exteriority, the disjunctive synthesis of the *already* and the *not yet* that divides all beings from self-identity even as it enables their temporal determinacy, and which is the condition of possibility for openness to the receptivity of beings in general. Melancholy is an inconsolable attunement to such constitutive exteriority, to the *not a being* of the being of beings, to the irrevocable negativity of time, finitude, death, and loss. It is an attunement that interrupts the Work of mourning, that is cathected to loss through Sorrow, that holds within the heart's core the absence of what is desired through Memory. In a word, melancholy is an orientation toward being as *exile*, the being-outside-itself of any determinate being which renders it other than itself, which subjects it to suffering, and which opens it to tragedy. It is this ontological level of reflection that delivers the extraordinary tension between figural synthesis and allegorical displacement achieved by Baudelaire's poem, in which "whoever has lost what can never be found" is gathered under the sign of Sorrow and commemorated by Memory through the figure of Andromache.

The relation between melancholy and allegory thus involves an understanding of allegory as the rhetoric and perceptual modality of this affective attunement to constitutive exteriority, which potentially grasps any particular thing as *something other*. Allegory implies, as a kind of substructure, the transcendental power of imagination which opens the field of determinate objects, and the empirical power to transform these "in the mind's eye" into something else, through the negativity of their temporal constitution. Understood not only as the rhetoric of temporality, but also as the rhetoric of the ontological difference, allegory might be figured as a double-folded fabric, *diplaka*, woven at the switching point of the transcendental and always exposed to incompleteness.

If imagination is the faculty of ontological knowledge, then fundamental ontology is not only a philosophical discourse on the being of beings. It also enables us to grasp how and why the beings we encounter may be transmuted into signs and transformed into something else, conceived anew through rhetorical operations that redouble the empirical and disjoin the immediacy of the present, weaving together the ancient and the modern and folding figures of what we

cannot see into the experience of what is right before our eyes. Like so:

This little stream,
Poor and sad mirror where once reflected
The immense majesty of your widow's grief,
This duplicitous Simois swelled by your tears,

Suddenly made fecund my fertile memory,
As I was crossing the new Carrousel.

Tragedy

A final question: how does the ontological significance of the melancholic production of allegorical signs bear upon the circulation of tragic representation through epic, drama, and lyric?

Consider the relation between the genesis of Andromache as tragic figure of the Widow in *The Iliad* and the representation of her fate in the tragic dramas of Euripides and Racine. Homer's epic narrates Hector's heroism, his death, his desecration, and his funeral rites. This narrative is interrupted and *punctuated* by the scene of Andromache's weaving, which moves us from those mourning Hector's death on the city walls to her interior chamber, and then back out to the walls for the moment of belated vision. When Andromache sees Hector being dragged by Achilles beneath the walls of Troy, the perception of what she sees already has the structure of a recognition, of *anagnorisis*: she had anticipated Hector's death through other sensory signs ("the noise of mourning and sorrow"), she had prophesied Hector's death at the hands of Achilles, and now she sees what was anticipated. The veil of night falls as she sees, and forever after she will *look back* upon what she had *foreseen*. Unmentioned throughout this scene, the name Andromache has come to mean she whose identity, whose tragic fate, is determined at that moment in which anticipation and recollection are interwoven.

Yet as the representation of Andromache moves from epic to tragic drama, that identity, determined through division, will itself be divided. Andromache's first speech after her recognition of the death of Hector prophesies the wretched childhood of Astyanax. But in *Trojan Women*, even before that fate can find him, Astyanax will be taken from Andromache by the Greeks and hurled to his death from the walls of Troy. Thus, in the *Andromache* of Euripides Astyanax is dead, and Andromache clings to her second son, fathered by Pyrrhus. In the *Andromache* of Racine, on the other hand, Astyanax is alive, since another infant was substituted by Andromache to bear his fate. "I hear," says Orestes at the beginning of the play,

to snatch his infancy from the sword,
Andromache deceived the astute Ulysses,
that, wrested from her arms, another child
under her son's name went to death.²⁸

Moreover, in Racine's play *Andromache* has not borne a son fathered by Pyrrhus: her refusal of his advances, and his efforts to seduce rather than violate her, drive the whole dramatic action of the play.

Andromache enters Baudelaire's lyric poem through the recollective thinking of its speaker, and the referential field established by her name does not exclude the representations of either Euripides or Racine. Virgil's depiction of Andromache, to which the poem most clearly alludes, stems from Euripides and also inspires Racine, who notes that the "the whole subject" of his play is drawn from this passage in the *Aeneid*.²⁹ We could say that Baudelaire's speaker thinks of an Andromache who is the mother of a son who is *either* dead or alive, who is the mother of *either* one son or two. But gathering together the movement of tragic representation through both Euripides and Racine into Baudelaire's referential field, we could say that "Andromache" is the name of a widow who both does and does not have son by Pyrrhus; it is the name of a mother whose son by Hector, Astyanax, is both living and dead.

Let us elaborate two consequences of this perspective. First, the sense of the name "Andromache" in Baudelaire's lyric apostrophe entails a synthetic contradiction, implicitly including contradictory predicates of the tragic heroine within the speaker's allegorical meditation. The inclusion of these contradictions is possible, at the most obvious level, because Andromache is a literary and mythic figure, but it is more specifically made possible by the relation between tragic drama and epic poetry. The dramas of Euripides and Racine extend the sense of the name "Andromache" along contradictory paths, Euripides drawing from Homer and inspiring Virgil, Racine revising Euripides by working backwards from *The Aeneid*. If these two tragic dramas endow the figure of Andromache with contradictory predicates, their double elaboration thereby returns us to the complex temporality of tragic determination in Homer, wherein Andromache appears at her loom as she who both is and is not a widow. She is a widow insofar as Hector is already dead, but she is not a widow insofar as she "had not yet / heard." At the moment when she sees the desecration of Hector's body below the walls she both is and is not Hector's wife, since she has already become his widow: he appears as the corpse of marriage itself, its dead survival. Indeed, this contradictory state is the essence of what will be Andromache's

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28 Racine, 1961, p. 7, ll. 73-76.

29 Racine, 1961, p. 2.

tragic character, of her melancholia: unable to work through the work of mourning, she will not pass from wife to widow, nor from widow to wife, sustaining the riven temporality of the moment of recognition that marks the divided synthesis of anticipation and belatedness.

Such contradiction is the essence not only of Andromache's character, but of tragedy itself, "the suffering contradiction" (Kierkegaard) wherein "everything is based upon an irreconcilable opposition" (Goethe).³⁰ Hölderlin's paragraph on the paradoxical significance of tragedies is the most vertiginous and profound distillation of their grounding in contradiction: "If nature actually represents itself in its weakest gift, then the sign when it represents itself in its strongest gift = 0."³¹ Because all potential deriving from what is originary is manifest as divided through individuation, the originary is only presented in its weakness, its division. But through the explicit presentation by tragedy of the individual as weakness, as tragic fate, as 0, as nullity, the originary which is "the hidden ground of every nature" can become manifest in all its power. The nullity of the representative individual—of individuation *per se*—is what enables the explosive force of the hidden ground to emerge within the field of representation.

In the case of Andromache, it is not in tragic drama but in Homeric epic where this synthesis of nullity and totality is first and properly presented. Indeed, it is presented through the absence of the name "Andromache" itself, its suppression throughout Book XXII of *The Iliad*. It is also presented in that moment of recognition wherein what is seen suspends the heroine between wife and widow: here the presentation of the absolute in and through the nullity of the individual is achieved through a negation of sight at the moment of vision, a descent of night—a figural structure that will recur in the Oedipal enucleation. We might then see the representations of Andromache's fate by Euripides and Racine—tragic dramas in which the tragic heroine does not even die—as durational extensions of the nullity crystallized in Homer's scene: extensions of a punctual division of identity, of non-identical identity, extensions of the temporal non-being of identity which, though it may be covered over and forgotten, is "the hidden ground of every nature." The contradictory determinations of Andromache's tragic situation that we find in the dramas of Euripides and Racine might be taken to redouble the non-identity of "Andromache" in the pivotal scene of Homer's epic, which will seal her fate. Cancelled out between wife and widow, Andromache does not die but persists as the 0, and this is what makes her a representative figure of melancholia.

This persistence persists into Baudelaire's modern lyric, where the

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30 For discussion of these and other key philosophical concepts of the tragic, see Szondi, 2002, pp. 34, 25.

31 Hölderlin, 2009, p. 316.

thinking of Andromache is the thinking of this ongoing contradiction, the durational extension of a change of state that is both punctual and temporally divided, seeping into a nineteenth century where “the form of a city / Changes more swiftly, alas! than a human heart.” Considered from the perspective of the lyric speaker’s allegorical recollection of Andromache, Hölderlin’s gnomic formula offers a precise exposition of the circulation of tragic representation from Homer to Euripides and from Virgil to Racine, from these to Baudelaire, and from Baudelaire back to the Homeric source: “For in the tragic lies the completion of the epic, in the lyric the completion of the tragic, in the epic the completion of the lyric.”³² The contradictory representation of Andromache in the tragic dramas of Euripides and Racine completes the moment of contradiction, in Homer, which is the essence of her fate itself. Baudelaire’s lyric completes the contradictory representation of Andromache in tragic drama by drawing the division of her predicates back under the purview of a single apostrophe—“Andromache, I think of you!”—thus synthesizing the contradiction of her character in a punctual address akin to the punctual determination of her destiny in Homer, where the name was suppressed. Baudelaire’s lyric thus returns us to epic: it returns us to *The Aeneid* and, beneath it, to *The Iliad*. Baudelaire’s lyric allegory must be “completed” by understanding the relation between Andromache, the swan, and the desecration of Hector’s body; it is thus completed by returning to the pattern weaving of Homer’s epic narrative. This recursive literary historical movement of tragic representation through epic, drama, and lyric is itself an expression of the staggered, split, exteriorizing force of time upon the determination of identity: the meaning of a name, the sense of its recollection, cannot only be determined through its coherence; one must also register the incoherence of the contradictions that subtend it, symptomatic of the contingencies to which the representation of the name is destined through its exposure to history.

We can now return to melancholic allegory by taking up a second consequence of understanding Andromache as the mother of a son who is both alive and dead. What is at issue here is the profoundly relevant biographical substrate of Baudelaire’s poem and of its lyric “I,” which we alluded to earlier and of which we can now measure the full significance. The disinherited son of a revered father who terminally mourns his widowed mother’s remarriage, Baudelaire is the melancholic double not of Andromache but of her son, Astyanax. If we situate this conscious or unconscious identification as the genesis of the lyric “I” who thinks of Andromache, then the “I” who speaks, the subject of the apostrophe, is a son who is both alive and dead. In the crypt of the name Andromache, the figure of Astyanax is divided between two candles: one

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32 Hölderlin, 2009, p. 311.

burning, the other extinguished. “Le Cygne” is a corpse poem: it tragically recomposes the comedy of “Le Mort Joyeux” on a scale so thematically vast and historically ramified that only the poem’s complex relation to ancient epic and the split determinations of tragic drama could account for so imposing an expansion of poetic vision.³³

From this perspective, the melancholic ground tone of allegorical vision takes on a new cast. As Astyanax, both dead and alive, looks upon the transmutation of modern Paris, it flickers into figures of the ancient city from whose walls he fell and did not fall. Oppressed by a transfigured image of his dead father, he thinks of the fate of his exiled mother, who then becomes a figure of the constitutive exteriority at the core of European modernity: the exiled “negress” who sees within the city what is not there, “the absent palms of splendid Africa.” His thoughts turning, in the “forest of my mind’s exile,” to the indetermination of “many more,” the lyric I seems to regard all the broken subjects “of ancient and of modern history” in the manner of the undead cavalier in “A Fantastic Engraving,” surveying a “horizonless cemetery.”³⁴ All the disinherited, abandoned, vanquished figures of “whoever has lost what can never be found,” binding Sorrow with Memory, both rise from and sink into the tomb, as if their unmarked grave were just the surface of the earth itself, their burial or resurrection suspended like an ellipsis.

Imagination bears the empirical power to bring what is not there into being, to redouble the world through a second series of signs and to raise the particular to the universal. But (and) the strength of this power is also its weakness: the transcendental opening of exteriority it enables stems from a default of interiority, from the groundless self-division of temporal non-identity that undoes the security of every determinate being, thereby exposing each and every one not only to transformation but also to ruin. Melancholic allegory knows this tragic default, abides within it, and makes it manifest as the ungrounding of the “I think,” as the genesis of *poiesis* in contradiction and duplicity, in libations poured alongside a “falsi Simoentis.” It is necessary that the subject of such knowledge, the melancholic subject of allegorical thinking, not enter the poem by name. Rather, at the apogee of modern lyric’s relation to tragic drama and epic narrative, the “I” will be the synthesis of an absence both living and dead, the void of whose presence breeds allegorical signs gathering the ancient and modern into mineral ideality.³⁵ Such would be the completion of the tragic by the lyric, which would require its own completion through a return to epic, there to find the figure of another

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33 On the melancholic poetics of “Le Mort Joyeux,” see Kukuljevic, 2017.

34 Baudelaire, 2021, p. 209.

35 Here I have in mind the conversion of memories to rocks, but for a brilliant reading of phonemic and graphemic materiality in relation to the glass of shop windows in “Le Cygne,” see Newmark, 2011.

absent name whose work is interrupted by wails of sorrow, whose
double-folded robe goes unfinished, whose limbs spin as the shuttle
drops from her hand to the ground, who hopes what she says will never
come close to her ear, and whose sees what she hoped never to see as
the darkness of night veils her vision.

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Volume 10
Issue 2

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**The Young Hegel:
Tragedy, and the
Irreducible Priority
of Absolute
Contradiction for
Critical Social
Analysis**

Wesley Furlotte

Abstract. This essay concentrates on young Hegel's Natural Law essay. It centres on its rendering of the category of "absolute ethical totality"—i.e., the text's essential category for the analysis of modern social life. In exploring the significance of this category, the essay demonstrates the ultimate relationship between comedy, tragedy, and the philosophical analysis of society. In other words, the essay shows how, for young Hegel, analysis moves from the "shadows of self-determination" characteristic of the standpoint of modern comedy, and so too the individualistic standpoint of much of modern political philosophy (Hobbes and Fichte), to the generative and seemingly impassible contradictions of the social totality, the subject-matter proper to the domain of tragedy, and so also young Hegel's speculative philosophy. This essay emphasizes the most important aspect of young Hegel's position for critical social analysis: the priority of irreducible contradiction not only in the comprehension of society, but also in terms of its actual processes, because it marks the very emergence of the new as a real possibility.

Key words: Hegel, natural law, absolute ethical totality, comedy, tragedy, absolute contradiction

1. Introduction to the Young Hegel, Comedy and Tragedy, Contradiction and Social Analysis

Considering Karl Marx's opening to his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, where he states that history has a tendency of repeating itself, "...the first time as tragedy, the second as farce,"¹ is to inquire, in essence, as to the relationship between tragedy and farce. It introduces the possibility of a question: how ought we to think of the relationship between the two, especially as they apply to the project of social analysis, and so historical development? What, in other words, is the ultimate relationship between tragedy and comedy in the context of the analysis of societies in their historical development?

G.W.F. Hegel's interpretation of tragedy provides a perhaps unexpected and yet intriguing potential line of response to these questions, and so also demonstrates his continued relevance within the contours of contemporary social analysis. While important and substantial scholarship has focused on Hegel's conception of tragedy and his original interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone*,² significantly less has examined the ultimate meaning of young Hegel's interpretation of Aeschylus's tragedy *the Eumenides* as developed within his *Natural*

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1 Marx, 2004, p. 85

2 Butler, 2000

*Law*³ essay, and how it develops conceptual resources for the critical analysis of bourgeois society, processes constitutive of its historical development, its evolution and potential demise, and so the possibility of the new. One of the exceptions to this trend is Georg Lukacs' *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*.⁴ This essay aims to further develop lines of interpretation that receive their first inchoate form in that text.

In order to explore the relationship that Hegel proposes between tragedy and philosophical social analysis, this essay concentrates on Hegel's category of "absolute ethical totality"—i.e., the essential category of Hegel's analysis of modern social life in his natural law essay. In exploring the significance of this category, the essay unearths the ultimate relationship between comedy, tragedy and the philosophical analysis of society and concludes that contrary to Marx's formulation where history repeats itself, "first as tragedy, then as farce" social analysis actually moves in the opposite sequential order, i.e., from the finite, to the infinite. To put the same point in terms of the language of the essay on natural law, analysis moves from the "shadows of self-determination" characteristic of the standpoint of modern comedy, and so too the individualistic standpoint of much of modern political philosophy, which Hegel identifies with Fichte (and Hobbes), to the generative and seemingly impassible contradictions of the social *totality*, the subject-matter proper to the domain of tragedy, and so also young Hegel's speculative philosophy. This essay places repeated emphasis on the most important aspect of young Hegel's position for critical social analysis: the priority of irreducible contradiction not only in the comprehension of society, but also in terms of its actual processes, because it marks the very emergence of the new as a real possibility. This emphasis, in turn, also invites the re-evaluation of farce in relation to comedy and tragedy as offering points of insight concerning social analysis. Consequently, the essay concludes with reflections on how exactly tragedy might collapse into the cold cynicism complimenting farce.

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3 Hegel, 1975b; Hegel, 1970b

4 Lukacs, 1975

2. Absolute Ethical Totality, Absolute Negativity, and Tripartite Class Structure

Central to Hegel's *Natural Law* is the concept of "absolute ethical life", "absolute ethical totality" [*absolute sittliche Totalität; absoluten Sittlichkeit*].⁵ The category signifies the dynamic processes that are crucial to the life of a people (*Volk*), a community, a nation. The objective is to develop a comprehensive category that can account for society in terms of its countervailing tendencies, on the one hand, the binding unity and activity, which Hegel denotes by "absolute negativity," [*der absoluten Negativität*],⁶ and which permeates the society in its entirety; and, on the other, the multiplicity of individuals and institutions that compose the various strata of the social formation, its multiplicity. Simultaneously, this category is identical with the movement of conceptual thought itself, and therefore constitutes the very basis of science, and so the very substance of conceptual social analysis. Society, and its philosophical conceptualization, therefore, consists in a totality whereby its binding unity, its "absolute negativity," differentiates itself by way of stratification, only to, in turn, negate those differences and so return within the unity of the whole. The self-differentiating, negating and unifying process Hegel views as "absolute" and "infinite," hence "absolute ethical totality." From that standpoint of the totality and its differentiating processes, Hegel seeks to address the question of human freedom, the nature of the domain of rights and how those, in turn, relate to the register of morality.

The "ethical totality" is composed of the free, universal class, and two unfree classes devoted to the elemental and inorganic spheres. The first class denotes "the living movement and the Divine self-enjoyment of this whole in its organs and members."⁷ Composed of "single individuals" this class is nevertheless unified in terms of a "universal" project. This universal class engage the "inorganic" register of different nations and work together to preserve the nation as an "absolute ethical totality." Hegel says that they must be willing to engage "nullifying death" for "the preservation of the entirety of the ethical organization."⁸ Simultaneously, they are committed to the public interest, "the totality" (which Plato connects with philosophy), and the development of the country's political institutions and so their status as free.

The second class consists of individuals who Hegel explicitly characterizes as "not free" [...*Stand der nicht Freien*...].⁹ Their work

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5 Hegel, 1975b, p.92; Hegel, 1970b, p.480-81

6 Hegel, 1975b, p.57; Hegel, 1970b, p. 437

7 Hegel, 1975b, p.99

8 Hegel, 1975b, p.99-100

9 Hegel, 1975b, p.100; Hegel, 1970b, p.489

relates to the domain of transactions: the “inorganic” objects of possession and property, concerns of physical need. Considered as a whole, the second class is proficient in law and has a sound understanding of the nature of transactions but, because they do not risk their lives in relation to the preservation of the ethical totality, and such a risk is the criterion of freedom, they are unfree. The third class, in turn, consists of those individuals who are not versed in the laws of property and are determined by the “crudity of its uneducative work”, those who deal with the “earth as an element.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, in entering the standing army “in their elemental being” they are connected to the freedom of the first class, they risk “violent death” insofar as they are subjected to the violence of war in the preservation of the “totality.” The social classes’ systolic and diastolic movements constitute the dynamical unity grounding the category of “absolute ethical totality.” While their unique movements and processes constitute the moments of internal differentiation (organs) within the body politic they are constantly deployed and aligned within the immanent negative unity of the “ethical totality.”

3. The Spirit of the Bourgeoisie:

Universal Private Life, Fichte and the Other Comedy

Crucial to Hegel’s conceptualization of the modern “ethical totality” is his analysis of the second class, the bourgeoisie, that class which is primarily concerned with “universal private life,” [*allgemeinen Privatleben*],¹¹ property relations and their corresponding legal rights. Not only does private life function as the *sine qua non* of the second class, i.e., as the spirit of the bourgeoisie understood as a class, but insofar as this class dominates within the modern ethical totality, it follows that it also constitutes the spirit of the modern ethical totality. It can readily be demonstrated, for instance in the context of his writings on aesthetics, but also his writings on the history of philosophy, and even within the context of his early writings on natural law, that the viewpoint from which the philosophical analysis of the modern ethical totality *begins* is that of the individual. The beginning finds one of its most sophisticated conceptual articulations in Fichte’s social philosophy.

Hegel traces the origins of the predominance of the second class in the modern ethical totality at least as far back as the Roman Empire and imperialism.¹² Hegel argues that it is first within the period of Roman

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10 Hegel, 1975b, p.100

11 Hegel, 1975b, p.102; Hegel, 1970b, p.492

12 Harris, 1997, p.230. See especially Chapter 4 “The Expulsion from the Garden” and in particular subsections “VI A (c): Condition of Right”; “(d) The Rule of Law”; “(e) Anarchy” pp. 230-246.

Empire that the principles of universality and equality come to permeate the entire ethical totality and to thus “master the whole.”¹³ This mastering marks the appearance of what Hegel calls “universal private life.” Hegel states that “This universal private life...immediately establishes the formal legal relationship which fixes, *and posits absolutely, individual separate existence.*”¹⁴ It denotes the proliferation of the “system of property and law,” the legal basis of property and contract and so includes “the whole endless expansion of legislation.”¹⁵

The expansion of property and its corresponding legal sphere implicates the technological material developments of industry upon which they depend, as Lukacs has shown.¹⁶ Therefore, advances in production and material wealth generate a corresponding intensification and increase of the domain of property, its mediation within the legal matrix. The two developments inform each other. Moreover, Hegel states “This system has to develop ...it is necessary that this system be consciously adopted, recognized in its rightfulness, excluded from the class of the nobility and given a class of its own realm, where it can make itself secure and develop its whole activity...”¹⁷ Permeation of the second class by the relation of possession results in a situation where each/every individual is capable of possession (at least formally, to say nothing of the excluded, e.g., slaves, women): each is related to all others in the social whole “as being a burgher in the sense of *bourgeois*”, i.e., one who owns property and its enjoyment.¹⁸ Hegel’s analysis maintains that while the origins of private life trace to Roman Empire, this class finds its “whole length and breadth,” i.e., its complete logical and actual development, only in the modern ethical totality.

Concentrating on the social philosophy of the period, and having criticized Hobbesian empiricism as abstract and incomplete in its arbitrary isolation of one characteristic as definitive for human social reality, Hegel examines the idealisms of Kant and Fichte, paying particular attention to the latter. The advantage of *a priorism*, says Hegel, is that it has unearthed, and prioritized, not only the spontaneous activity of the subject, but also that self-positing activity of conceptuality. In this sense, the critical tradition of Kant and Fichte is able to discursively account for the “negative” activity of the subject, and conceptuality, which is only implicit in the empirical tradition, and yet inadequately

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13 Hegel, 1975b, p.101

14 Hegel, 1975b, p.102. Emphasis added.

15 Hegel, 1975b, p.102.

16 Lukacs, 1975, p. 404 ff.

17 Hegel, 1975b, p.103

18 Hegel, 1975b, p.103

conceptualized. In other words, the breakthrough for philosophical inquiry into the nature of social reality that Kant and Fichte represent is in the power and awareness they assign to the spontaneity of subjectivity and conceptuality not only in terms of social reality but also in terms of its philosophical analysis. As a result, critical idealism has the resources, and potential, to develop the much-needed category of negative unity in relation to the social formation in a way that is largely inaccessible to the empiricist tradition's emphasis on observation and multiplicity, and hence the former's advantage over the latter. As is well known, Fichte proposes to deduce the register of rights from the a priori structure of self-consciousness alone, i.e., on the basis of the *individual*. In order for the I, self-consciousness, to be able to posit, bring itself forth, as individual, it must be "summoned" by another free individual. The same condition applies for the other individual. In a sense, therefore, intersubjectivity is the condition for individuality. However, Fichte's philosophical deduction proceeds entirely from *within* the individual standpoint of self-consciousness and I-hood. More concretely stated in terms of the freedoms of individuals, Fichte writes that this mutual summons means that "each is to limit his freedom through the concept of the possibility of the other's freedom."¹⁹

Rational members of a society are therefore tasked with reciprocally recognizing one another as autonomous agents. Mutual recognition's ultimate objective is (1) maximizing the sphere of freedom for each and every member of society. Simultaneously, however, (2) finding the necessary and sufficient number of restrictions on each and every individual's sphere of freedom to respect (1). Yet, there is no certainty in the social setting. Individuals may respect the freedoms of others. Or, they might not. This dilemma therefore introduces the demand for a system of coercion that will enforce against infractions of individuals' freedom and rights. That basic framework, on Hegel's view, functions as a "universal system of compulsion" [*diesem allgemeinen Systeme des Zwangs*].²⁰ What Hegel means here is that as the guarantor of that system, the state must function as a force. It imposes respect for the rights of all.

Hegel argues that the threat of compulsion cannot, in the final analysis, force an individual into submissive identification with the dictates of the legal regime. One retains the possibility of absolute resistance. Hegel writes: "...by his ability to die the subject proves himself free and entirely above all coercion. Death is the absolute subjugator."²¹ For Hegel, this example demonstrates a lacuna within the Fichtean

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19 Fichte, 2000, p.49. See §4.111.

20 Hegel, 1975b, p.85; Hegel, 1970b, p.472

21 Hegel, 1975b, p.91; Hegel, 1970b, p.479

explanatory matrix, accounting for legal freedom strictly in restrictive terms of individuals' physical security, protection in terms of external force. For Fichte, there is a multiplicity of restrictive legal prescripts which enforce such security. However, Hegel argues that the case of absolute resistance demonstrates a level of freedom which is entirely unaccounted for and yet demands explanation if the Fichtean analysis of the social realization of freedom is to be "absolute."²²

Hegel does not claim, however, on this basis, that therefore Fichte's social philosophy is invalid. Rather, just as the complete development of "universal private life" is a necessary within the contours of the modern ethical totality, so also is Fichte's deduction of the legal prescripts pertaining to individual freedoms, the correlate system of coercion. In fact, Hegel says that Fichte's position defines a "system of reality"²³ and so isolates an important dimension of social life—to wit, that aspect concerned with the material domain of possession, property, "physical necessity" and "enjoyment." Hegel would say that Fichte's system constitutes a significant advance beyond the "chaos" of multiplicity characteristic of Hobbes and the empiricist tradition. Though Hegel only attributes the determination to Fichte's position, it applies equally well to Hobbes's empiricism, in that both, due their intrinsic limitations, are "self-cancelling," [*sich selbst aufhebt*].²⁴ Not only does this approach and assessment anticipate Hegel's method of immanent critique, but it also clears the conceptual space for the introduction of the new: a theoretical standpoint that might bypass what, on Hegel's view, are the limitations of empiricism and Fichte's idealism of the individual. Nevertheless, Fichte's displays real shortcoming, specifically in terms of its almost exclusive concern with the abstractions of right, the legal sphere, and the mechanics of coercion. Pressing the point, Hegel goes so far as to characterize Fichte's position as "abstractions without substance", "creatures of imagination, without reality" [*...daß sie wesenlose Abstraktionen, Gedankendinge oder Wesen der Einbildung, ohne Realität sind...*].²⁵ Despite its latent potential for advancing to the standpoint of the infinite, Hegel still sees it as overly abstract, and thus another instantiation of a framework of the finite. Hegel's language in this assessment is highly significant and ought to draw our attention to passages in the natural law essay containing similar language.

For instance, concerning the standpoint of modern comedy Hegel writes that it "...falls within non-life and therefore presents only

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22 Hegel, 1975b, pp.90-91

23 Hegel, 1975b, p.98

24 Hegel, 1975b, p.88; Hegel, 1970b, p.475

25 Hegel, 1975b, p.88; Hegel, 1970b, p.476

shadows of self-determination and absoluteness.”²⁶ The language of “abstractions without substance” connects directly with “shadows of self-determination and absoluteness”—both characterizations, one of Fichte, the other of comedy, insist upon an illusory, even deceptive quality to both. Similarly, when differentiating between ancient and modern comedy, Hegel revealingly writes “The comedy so separates the two zones of the ethical that it allows each to proceed entirely on its own, so that in the one the conflicts and the finite are *shadows without substance*, while in the other *the Absolute is an illusion...*”²⁷ Although “shadows without substance” comes closest to the language Hegel uses to characterize Fichte’s position, it is the latter phrase, “the absolute is an illusion,” that he deploys to capture the essence of modern comedy. Nevertheless, the inference is straightforward enough: comedy does not operate from the perspective of “the absolute,” so it must function in terms of the finite, or the individual. This absence of “the absolute” standpoint is what marks modern comedy in essence as abstraction. It, on Hegel’s view, therefore, operates in terms of the rigid distinctions characteristic of the understanding in contrast to the dialectical nature of reason. The rigidity of the conceptual distinctions stemming from the understanding also has the potential to manifest in social analysis and so political philosophy. Indeed, it is such rigidity that prevents social philosophy from thinking in terms of the conceptual synthesis of multiplicity and unity, the “absolute ethical totality” at the centre of Hegel’s analysis. Consequently, comedy, for Hegel, just as in the case of Fichte’s political philosophy (and we could even say this this holds equally well for empiricism and Hobbes) stems from the standpoint of the finite, the individual, and therefore is limited in its purchase as to what it may truthfully say about social life, the nature of rights, morality, the state.

Pursuing the issue of abstraction further, Hegel writes that in modern comedy “...the ethical urge...must...*transmute the existent into the formal and negative absoluteness of law*. And thereby it must give its anxious mind the impression that its possessions are secure, must lift all its belongings to safety and certainty by contracts and all imaginable varieties of clause and subclause in the formulary.”²⁸ Hegel explicitly identifies modern comedy with the standpoint of possessions, property and the sphere of formal law. This identification therefore also makes significant connections with Hegel’s discussion of the second class, the bourgeoisie, and especially Fichte’s philosophy of right: each unfolds primarily in terms of the individual standpoint and “universal private life,”

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26 Hegel, 1975b, p.105

27 Hegel, 1975b, p.108. Emphasis added.

28 Hegel, 1975b, p.107. Emphasis added.

the coercions of the legal sphere, possessions and property. Modern comedy and Fichte's social philosophy are consistent in their standpoint, despite their different mediums, one in philosophy, the other in the arts, both account for social life from a strict prioritization of the individual.

At first glance, Hegel's identification of modern comedy, and Fichte's philosophy of right, with the individual of private life would seem to consist in a criticism: both present the individual as if it were the only perspective from which to frame social life. This readily demonstrates how, on Hegel's view, this schematic error constitutes their respective shortcomings. But that evaluation alone tends to obscure the important significance Hegel simultaneously assigns to modern comedy, and Fichte's "system of reality," and the register of human social life that each purport to explore. Comedy's value, and this holds for Fichte's system of right as well, stems directly from its inherent limitation: its finitude. True, on Hegel's view, its constitutive limitation is that it does not adopt a holistic standpoint; yet, that very limitation is what defines and assigns its value: it assigns extreme significance to the individual's freedom, their inner life and private personality. Therefore, Fichte and modern comedy prioritize the intensifying complexity and sophistication of the interior life of the individual, or, the intensifying internal dynamics of modern subjectivity, the domain of rights that must be in place for its actualization in (bourgeois) society. Modern comedy's potential for representing important truths about the interiority and freedom of modern subjectivity is why Hegel appeals to it in illuminating the operative logical categories of the second class, the private spirit of the bourgeoisie. The same holds for Fichte's philosophy of right.

But, if this characterization holds, then, it entails at least three further points. First, Fichte and the standpoint of modern comedy isolate something fundamentally true about the dynamics of modern social life because they chart the conceptual and experiential space that must be safeguarded if the freedom of modern subjectivity is to be actualized in society. The individual and their inner strivings, in conjunction with the legal space of property and possession, must be given their due in that process of actualization. This necessity, on Hegel's view, constitutes its truth. Second, the truth of the standpoint of finitude becomes false, however, at the exact moment at which it asserts itself as the only standpoint from which to conceptualize and represent modern subjectivity, its position within the modern social formation.²⁹ Third, it follows that, for Hegel, it is possible to say that the speculative analysis of the modern ethical totality actually *begins* with finitude. In other words, it begins with Hobbes, Fichte and the standpoint of modern comedy. The conceptual progression in Hegel's analysis of the modern

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29 Hegel, 1986, p.29. See especially the section "Infinity" pp. 29-37. There we find that "This alone is the true nature of the finite: that it is infinite, that it sublates itself in its being" (35).

ethical totality, on this reading, is one the actually proceeds, therefore, from comedy to tragedy. Further establishing this claim requires a reconstruction of Hegel's strikingly original analysis of Aeschylus's *The Eumenides*.

4. Aeschylus and Tragedy: the Irreducible Priority of Absolute Contradiction

Hegel's analysis of the tripartite structure of the modern "absolute ethical totality" entails a fundamental tension between the first, "universal" class, and the bourgeoisie. The complete development of the second class entails at least two significant consequences for the ethical totality in which it finds its complete articulation. First, Hegel interestingly argues that when considered as a class, the bourgeoisie denotes a "political nullity" [*die politische Nullität*],³⁰ This for the reason that individually and collectively the second class, the bourgeoisie, are essentially *private* individuals. The paradigmatic logic of the second class determines its de facto orientation: it is committed to the individual standpoint of property and possession, their corresponding legal spheres. Yet, as per Hegel's conceptual schema of the ethical totality, the political substance of the first class concerns *universal* life, the public interest and good, the life of the ethical totality which functions as the negation of the particularity of private life—the domains of the citizen. To the precise degree that the second class's structural logic is that of the private sphere, their normative demand is that of private life and its proliferation, the result is a void politically, if by political substance Hegel means concerns with the universal, the ethical totality as such. What is interesting here is how Hegel anticipates, in inchoate form, the political power that inevitably follows from the predominance of the bourgeoisie, though he does not make the inference that they will or ought to reconfigure the political institutions in line with their own interests. Here, then, we see Hegel's intuitive anticipation of Marx.

Second, and this seems to follow in part from the previous point, under conditions of the second class's continued expansion and predominance, the universal class risks obliteration. This obliteration, in turn, seems to risk a sort of political power vacuum. Hegel writes that "... under the law of formal unity, the first class is in truth *entirely cancelled*, and the second alone becomes the people..."³¹ Insofar as the "formal unity" of private life determines the status of individuals, they are "... gradually reduced to the same level..." with the consequence that they "...no longer possessed that public courage which is nourished by the

.....
30 Hegel, 1975b, p.103; Hegel, 1970b, p.494

31 Hegel, 1975b, p.101.Emphasis added.

love of independence...”³² The priority of public interest and the universal sphere, in other words, disintegrates in terms of the real promises of private life. And, yet, in the interests of the preservation of the ethical totality as the condition for the possibility of the classes whatsoever, Hegel’s analysis ultimately demands the intervention of the universal class against unchecked proliferation of the second class. Hegel, therefore, clearly understands that the proliferation of the second class undermines the composition and practical effectiveness of the universal class. And yet, while acknowledging the dissolution of the power of the universal class, the analysis nevertheless calls for its intervention in checking the second class’s destabilizing expansion.

The significance of this tension between the first and second class within the modern ethical totality cannot be understated, especially when considered in relation to Fichte’s philosophy and so too the standpoint of modern comedy. Hegel’s category of “absolute ethical totality” means that the standpoint of finitude and the individual, the domain proper to the second class, must be thought in terms of its position within the larger architectural schema of not only society, the ethical totality, but in terms of how the classes relate one to the other. The insight and power of Hegel’s conceptual innovation emerges forcefully by way of this dimension of his analysis. With it, he has isolated a fundamental contradiction within the modern ethical totality, i.e., between the bourgeoisie, and the universal class, between the private sphere and the interests of the society as a whole, in other words, the state. And, yet, on Hegel’s view this contradiction is inaccessible, or at the very least obscured, by the individualistic standpoint of Fichte’s philosophy of right, and so too modern comedy. Indeed, this lacuna speaks not only, on Hegel’s view, to the necessity of an alternative perspective, which he claims to satisfy by the category of ethical totality, but which also finds clear expression in the history of the art by way of tragedy.

Concerning the holistic standpoint, Hegel writes that “...the true and absolute relation [*absolute Verhältnis*] is that the one really does illumine the other...”³³ which is to say the logical structures and norms of the first and second classes need to be thought not in terms of isolation, but instead in terms of their relationship to each other. Continuing, he emphasizes that “...each has a living bearing on the other, and each is the other’s serious fate [*ernste Schicksal*]. The absolute relation, then, is set forth in tragedy.”³⁴ Hegel’s use of the “absolute relation” changes throughout the natural law essay, nevertheless, here it seems to suggest that one of the intrinsic merits of tragedy is that it is able to frame the

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32 Hegel, 1975b, p.101-102

33 Hegel, 1975b, p.108; Hegel, 1970b, p. 499

34 Hegel, 1975b, p.108; Hegel, 1970b, p. 499

contradictions that social life entails from the standpoint of the “absolute ethical totality,” that is, from the perspective of society as whole—while still doing justice to the conflicting standpoints involved. This constitutes its advance beyond the perspectives of finitude, which in this context Hegel identifies with Fichte’s philosophy of right and modern comedy.

Consequently, in a strikingly original yet condensed and opaque analysis essential to the argument of the *Natural Law* essay, Hegel deploys Aeschylus’ ancient tragedy *The Eumenides* in order to illuminate the constitutive logical impasse generated by the processes constitutive of the modern ethical totality itself, by which the first and second classes, each driven by their own internal normative commitments, come into a necessary and yet seemingly insoluble conflict—a conflict which Hegel goes so far as to characterize as the “absolute contradiction between these two natures...,” [...*des absoluten Widerstreits dieser zwei Naturen...*].³⁵ Recall that the second class’s prioritization of universal private life (considered conceptually as applying to an entire class) entails a commitment to the normative dictates of the finite.³⁶ The finite here, as we have seen, denotes the system of property and related law. Conversely, the first class signifies the universal class, as we have also seen, that register of the totality concerned with the public good. It, therefore, entails a commitment to the normative commands of what Hegel characterizes as “absolute ethical life” [*absoluten Sittlichkeit*].³⁷ “Absolute ethical life” means the realm of conduct and codification which concern the “...the being and preservation of the entirety of the ethical organization.”³⁸ Given that tragedy proposes that these demands must be thought in relation to each other, it is at this precise point that the normative demand of one class comes into contact with the binding imperative of the other so that the explosive “absolute contradiction” of the modern ethical totality manifests.

Concerning the paradigmatic incompatibility of the two normative demands, Hegel states that:

This is nothing else but the performance, on the ethical plane, of the tragedy which the Absolute eternally enacts with itself [*Aufführung der Tragödie im Sittlichen, Aufführung der Tragödie im Sittlichen, welche das Absolute ewig mit sich selbst spielt*], by eternally giving birth to itself into objectivity, submitting in this objective form to suffering and death, and rising from its ashes into

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35 Hegel, 1975b, p. 104; Hegel, 1970b, p.495

36 Hegel, 1975b, p.102

37 Hegel, 1975b, p.99; Hegel, 1970b, p.489

38 Hegel, 1975b, p.100

glory. *The Divine in its form and objectivity is immediately double-natured, and its life is the absolute unity of these natures.*³⁹

Subsequently, Hegel writes that “*Tragedy* consists in this, that ethical nature segregates its inorganic nature (in order not to become embroiled in it), as a fate [*als ein Schicksal*], and places it outside itself, and by acknowledging this fate in the struggle against it, ethical nature is reconciled with the Divine being as the unity of both.”⁴⁰ The “two natures” of the ethical totality do not evade one another. Rather, as Hegel explicitly states, “ethical nature” actively recognizes, and struggles against, its “subterranean” other. This struggle with a seemingly alien other, which in truth and actuality one is bound to, even identical with, constitutes the very essence of fate.⁴¹ The struggle constitutive of fate, therefore, is one’s encounter with oneself in a form that first appears as otherness. Therefore, the potential for the tragedy in the analysis of the modern ethical totality, for Hegel, consists in its ability to represent the double nature—or classes—constitutive of the ethical totality, and the seemingly irresolvable contradiction that these two normative paradigms entail when brought to bear one upon the other within the concrete specificity of the modern ethical totality. Tragedy does not collapse one into the other, but rather brings the two into unity by perpetually differentiating them via a circular process of fateful, even destructive struggle. It is this fateful “life and death struggle” which constitutes the processes of the ethical totality.

Specifying the further significance of Aeschylus’ tragedy for his analysis, Hegel writes that “the picture of this tragedy, defined more particularly for the ethical realm, is the issue of that litigation between the Eumenides (as powers of the law in the sphere of difference) and Apollo (the god of indifferenced light) over Orestes, conducted before the organized ethical order, the people of Athens.”⁴² Consequently, the tragedy illuminates what is at stake for the *individual and society* as living sites at which these normative dilemmas gain traction. This implicates the figure of Orestes and the people of Athens as represented by the Aeropaus. On the one hand, Hegel sees Orestes tormented by the imperative of the Eumenides, representing the “subterranean powers” of the ethical totality, i.e., the finite registers of property and possession and related laws, their demand for recognition.⁴³ In turn, Hegel’s reads

39 Hegel, 1975b, p.104; Hegel, 1970b, p.495. Emphasis added.

40 Hegel, 1975b, p.105; Hegel, 1970b, p.496.

41 Harris, 1972, p.258. See especially “IV: Frankfurt 1797-1800: Phantasie und Herz” (pp. 258-408), and, in particular, “Punishment and fate” (pp. 346-354).

42 Hegel, 1975b, p.105

43 Hegel, 1975b, p.104

Orestes as open to the summons of Apollo, the “god of undifferentiated light,” viz. the universal imperative of the ethical totality.⁴⁴ Crucially, Hegel states that the contradictory normative demands stemming from each sphere are recognized as legitimate and binding on Orestes by the people of Athens, i.e., the Areopagus. Hegel writes that “Athens, as the Areopagus, puts equal votes in the urn for each litigant and recognizes their coexistence; *though it does not thereby...settle the relation between the powers or their bearing on one another.*”⁴⁵ The Areopagus’ process of deliberation, its impasse as to which normative demand imposes on the other, ultimately implicates the condition of individual and collective freedom which ultimately grounds the very possibility of the impasses itself. It is only because Orestes is freely determinable in relation to either imperative, and that there is no clear reason which determines which is *the* binding command to the exclusion of the other, that the tragedy attains its significance. Undecidability underwritten by freedom propels the tragedy’s constitutive contradiction. Consequently, the potential for the tragedy in the analysis of the modern ethical totality consists not only in its ability to represent the normative impasse that the two classes generate, but also to unearth and render intelligible the sort of radical freedom that undergirds it.

Importantly, Hegel’s use of tragedy to explore the contradiction of the modern ethical totality, the radical freedom which it presupposes, also implicates a crucial limitation within that very same conception of freedom. More precisely, it is highly significant that neither Orestes nor the Aeropaus decide which imperative to pursue. Rather, recognizing the legitimacy of both imperatives, without a higher order normative framework to decide which to pursue, decision and action stall. This constitutes the deadlock of the tragedy. The determining factor in the fate of Orestes is neither he himself, nor the people of Athens. Rather, the determining element is the divine in the figure of Athena—a determining power that is external to Orestes—the human agency—at the centre of the drama.⁴⁶ Yet, a freedom that cannot decide, and so consciously act in terms of its decision, and that must be determined externally by the

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44 Hegel, 1975b, p.105

45 Hegel, 1975b, p.105. Emphasis added.

46 Hegel, 1975a, p.1204. Hegel writes that:

...the Greeks had tragedies which did have an outcome like this, in that individuals were not sacrificed but saved: for example, in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus the Areopagus grants to both parties, Apollo and the avenging Furies, the right to be worshipped; and in the *Philoctetes* [of Sophocles] the divine appearance and advice of Heracles settles the fight between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, and they go off to Troy together. But in these cases the reconciliation comes from outside by command of the gods, etc., and does not have its source within the parties themselves, while in modern plays it is the individuals themselves who are led in the course of their own action to this cessation of strife and to the mutual reconciliation of their aims or characters (p.1204).

decree of a god, isolates a short-circuit in the tragedy's structure of freedom. Hegel, in the *Naturphilosophie*, connects strict determination in terms of externality to the domain of unfreedom, and natural necessity.⁴⁷ The greatest potential of tragedy, therefore, in its rendering of the insoluble contradiction that pertains to human freedom in the modern ethical totality, resides in its ability to represent the ultimate *necessity* of the dilemma. Hegel maintains that the tragedy ultimately implicates "the absolute" standpoint—a standpoint native to speculative philosophy—and so demonstrates that the conflicting claims of the two normative paradigms on the institutions of human freedom are ultimately necessary moments that somehow, yet obscurely, connect to the life of the divine and "the absolute." Without the 'tragedy of the ethical', in other words, neither the life of the totality, nor its oblique connection to the life of "the absolute" itself would be actual. The dual nature of the "absolute" manifests in the ethical totality—this manifestation entails the contradiction that human freedom finds itself ensnared in. This tension constitutes the focus of Aeschylus' tragedy. This manifestation is necessary and the supreme merit of the tragedy, on Hegel's view: it intelligibly represents the necessary processes constitutive of not only the ethical totality, but indirectly the life of the divine, the "absolute" itself.

Tragedy denotes one of the ways in which the community might come to a higher form of self-awareness and self-understanding, a process, in turn, that functions as an opaque extension of the "life of the absolute" itself. Thinking the necessity of the ethical totality's internal conflict, via tragic representation, truly comprehending the necessity of this conflict, the community is able to not only endure it but also to reproduce its constitutive tension. In consciously undergoing destructive antagonism and bifurcation the ethical totality reproduces itself, and its internal differences. Hegel is explicit: cognitive insight of the necessity of the modern ethical totality's bifurcation into "subterranean" and "ethereal" natures transforms the significance of their seemingly irreconcilable normative demands. Hegel writes:

...reconciliation lies precisely in the knowledge of necessity [*Versöhnung eben in der Erkenntnis der Notwendigkeit*], and in the right which ethical life concedes to its inorganic nature, and to the subterranean powers by making over and sacrificing to them one part of itself. For the force of the sacrifice lies in facing and objectifying the involvement with the organic. This involvement is dissolved by being faced; the inorganic is separated and, recognized for what it is, is itself taken up into indifference while

.....
47 Hegel, 1970a, p.208. Concerning nature's status as "otherness," Hegel writes that "In this externality, the determinations of the Notion have the appearance of an *indifferent subsistence and isolation* with regard to one another; the Notion is therefore internal, and nature in its determinate being displays *necessity and contingency*, not freedom" (§248, p. 208).

the living, by placing into the inorganic what it knows to be a part of itself and surrendering it to death, has all at once recognized the right of the inorganic and cleansed itself of it."⁴⁸

Consequently, the final value of tragedy in its illumination of the modern ethical totality consists in its ability to represent the conflicting normative imperatives that the nature of human freedom makes possible, and the *necessity* of this impasse, the unity and continued life the ethical totality actualizes in the reproduction of the contradiction. Tragedy makes possible an understanding that endures, and is born afresh from the totality's antagonisms. This knowing endurance also facilitates the reproduction of the ethical totality. Thinking the necessity of the conflict in terms of the processes of the whole serves to dissolve the alienation of the opposing forces, constitutes their ultimate unity within the sphere of conceptual thought. This reproductive affirmation and dissolution of the ethical totality's constitutive contradiction is what Hegel demarcates by the concept of reconciliation [*Versöhnung*].⁴⁹ Speculative philosophy—conceptuality—categorically unlocks the tragedy's ultimate meaning. This conceptual breakthrough, at least implicitly, announces the ultimate superfluity of tragedy in the comprehension of social life, and so can be read as consistent with the mature Hegel's controversial position as developed within his *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

Hegel's discussion of tragedy's function of reconciliation here is, nevertheless, ambivalent. One of the risks, as I have demonstrated elsewhere,⁵⁰ is that it serves to establish the modern social totality's constitutive contradiction as one that is ultimately insoluble, insurmountable. To the extent that one takes reconciliation to denote a fateful concession to the reproduction of the *same* ethical totality, it risks being reactionary, if by this one means the acceptance, maintenance and reproduction of its constitutive contradiction as an inescapable and necessary 'fate.' Conversely, the most illuminating dimension of tragedy's reconciliation is the way in which it consistently underscores and emphasizes the irreducible priority of "absolute contradiction" in the modern ethical totality. This emphasis points the way, at least implicitly, to the possibility of the dissolution of the tragedy's constitutive elements, the classes, and so also to the possibility of the emergence of the radically new.

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48 Hegel, 1975b, p.104; Hegel, 1970b, p.494.

49 Hegel, 1975b, p.104; Hegel, 1970b, p.494.

50 Furlotte, 2021, pp. 57-78.

5. Prioritizing Real Possibilities and the New: Against Farce and Cynicism

Hegel's speculative analysis of the tensions constitutive of the modern ethical totality means that the analysis *concludes* with "the absolute" standpoint. But, in the lexicon of young Hegel, it is only from "the absolute" standpoint proper to tragedy, and speculative philosophy, though the one tracks in representational thought what the other maps conceptually, that the "absolute contradiction" constitutive of the modern ethical totality, all its attendant consequences, is rendered sufficiently intelligible as to its ultimate significance.

Yet, the *Natural Law* essay's shift in the analytical framework, the shift with which it thinks the problem of right and freedom in modern social life, from the standpoint of the finite to "the absolute," the transition from Fichte to Hegel, or to continue the analogical series, from modern comedy to tragedy, does not pit the correlates in irresolvable tension. Rather, as Hegel's speculative analysis demonstrates, the concept of the absolute ethical totality, like the absolute standpoint in tragedy, incorporates the system of the finite within the conceptual parameters of the ethical totality, just as tragedy's structure is able to incorporate the logic propelling modern comedy within it. The analysis *begins*, therefore, with finitude, viz., Fichte, modern comedy, and the standpoint of the individual, but concludes with infinitude and totality, i.e., Hegel, tragedy, and the categorical frame of the absolute ethical totality. But, and this is a crucial caveat, a totality that is ultimately held open to the new by way of the prospect of reconciliation, understood not in the sense of concession to fate and the inevitable reproduction of sameness, but in terms of the priority it assigns to "absolute contradiction," i.e., the necessary dialectical precondition for the possibility of the emergence of the new—the new in which the constitutive dramatis personae of the previous social world are understood as just that, transmissions from a former way of life.

If we here repose the question that stems from Marx's opening to his *Eighteenth Brumaire* where he states that history has a tendency of repeating itself, first as tragedy and secondly as farce, we inquire, in essence, as to the relationship between tragedy and farce. How ought we to think the relationship between the two, especially as they apply to the question of social analysis, and so history? The position that we have developed here contains an answer by first reversing the sequential ordering of the events in question. As we have seen, analysis of the modern "ethical totality" does not begin with the standpoint of tragedy. Rather, it begins from the perspective proper to that of modern comedy. This beginning introduces the fundamental significance of the individual and modern subjectivity, their demand for freedom as this unfolds, at least in part, in terms of private life, property, possession, and the legal sphere of abstract right. Yet, young Hegel's methodological breakthrough

as developed in the *Natural Law* essay situates comedy, the individual, and so philosophies of finitude, viz. Fichte (and Hobbes), within the broader architectonics constitutive of the ethical totality itself, its complex histories, including that of its explosive “absolute contradiction.” Individuality, modern comedy, and finitude become problematic, ideological in the original sense which Marx deployed it, only once they are taken as final, as the sole perspective and framework through which to conceptualize the dynamics of modern social life. Hegel’s reorientation of the analysis in terms of holistic historical process forcefully yet cryptically demonstrates that the expansion and development of the bourgeoisie comes with direct and irreversible consequences for the social totality in which that development transpires. The evacuation of the universal class, the domination of private interest, the resultant social volatility. The seeds of Hegel’s later insights into the problem of poverty, as explored in the *Philosophy of Right*, are present in this early work: despite an excess of wealth society is not rich enough. Conceptual insight into this explosive contradiction constitutes the real merit of the young Hegel’s essay on natural law.

Yet, not only should we reverse the sequential order between tragedy and comedy, in thinking the relation between the two, but we should also add a term to the sequence. Consequently, modern comedy becomes tragedy becomes farce at the exact moment when the standpoint of totality and contradiction are either jettisoned entirely, as in happy consciousness’ return to the life of comedy, the life of strict finitude, or taken to denote nothing other than the means by which the ethical totality achieves the inevitable reproduction of sameness, all its attendant features, class divisions, power distributions exclusions etc., in short, the status quo. In other words, tragedy becomes farce in those moves, intellectual and material, that service the closure and suppression of the radical possibilities stemming from concrete forms of social contradiction—i.e., in the abandonment of the explosive potential of actual contradictions to generate the radically new. The priority assigned to a society’s real possibilities for new modes of social life is something consistently underscored and conceptualized by Adorno and Marcuse in the wake of a history of philosophy that has consistently subordinated, if not obliterated, the possible in terms of the actual.⁵¹

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51 Adorno, 2006, p.67. Adorno writes that:

...this possibility of making a leap forward, of doing things differently, always existed, even in periods when productivity was far less developed...this entire view of history contains a single strand, and this applies both to the Hegelian and Marxian doctrine. Emancipation from this single-stranded view will only come when we refuse to accept the dictum that it has only now become a real possibility. It is important to realize that in all probability the opportunity we see today of a sensible organization of mankind was *also* possible in less complicated times, when there were far fewer people and social conditions were incomparably more modest (pp.67-68).

In Marcuse's work, for instance, we find the clear statement that one of the objectives of critical theory is to highlight those real possibilities that remain resident—yet suppressed—within the actual intellectual and material development of “advanced industrial society.” Adorno and Marcuse are entirely consistent with the lingering significance of the young Hegel that this essay has underscored. Young Hegel, Adorno, and Marcuse insist on thinking the social formation in terms of holistic process, it follows therefore from the standpoint of tragedy. Yet, not with an eye to fateful acceptance of the contradictions that they discover therein. Rather, the emphasis falls on the real potential of that discovery. Tragedy becomes farce, and the farce more lethal than the initial tragedy by way of cynicism, when it is experienced and conceptualized in terms of the inevitable, the rigidity of a lone possibility which is therefore absolutely necessary.⁵² Undoing the priority of farce finds a starting-point, however modest, in the articulation and pursuit of real possibilities which are in the process of being levelled as impossible within the reproduction of the same.

Also, Marcuse, 1966, p.xi. See especially “the Introduction” where Marcuse writes of the obligation of critical theory to conceptualize possibilities that are “...within reach of the respective society; they must be definable goals of practice” (p. xi). He also writes that “the terms “transcend” and “transcendence” are used throughout in the empirical, critical sense; they designate tendencies in theory and practice which, in a given society, “overshoot” the established universe of discourse and action toward historical alternatives (real possibilities)” (p. xi).

52 Marcuse, 1969, pp. 55-59. Marcuse writes:

All this is the stuff of the twentieth century—but the twentieth from the perspective of the nineteenth, in which the horror of the fascist and postfascist periods is still unknown. This horror requires correction of the introductory sentences of the ‘Eighteenth Brumaire’: the ‘world-historical facts and persons’ which occur ‘as it were twice’, no longer occur the second time as ‘farce.’ Or rather, the farce is more fearful than the tragedy it follows (p. 55).

One of the entailments of this farce, of “reason turned into unreason” (p. 59), is concession to, and withdrawal from, the “severity of the horror.” This I denote by “cynicism.”

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Another Report on Banality

Andrea Gadberry

Abstract: ‘Another Report on Banality’ inquires into the relationship of banality and comedy by juxtaposing a political-theoretical and philosophical history of the ‘ban’ and ‘banality’ with the theory of comedy outlined in Beaumarchais’ preface to revolutionary *Marriage of Figaro*. It examines the omission of feudal and modern banality from philosophies of the ‘ban’ and ‘abandonment’ (Agamben and Nancy, respectively), the absence of banality’s linguistic history in its most famous invocation (Arendt), and a definition of comedy as representative of social inconvenience, unsuitability, or incongruity, in contrast to tragedy’s admissions of fundamental crimes (Beaumarchais). This essay ultimately argues that banality’s absorption both into a language of the merely mundane and into the comic itself conceals the compulsions of domination found in the feudal banal, on the one hand, and in Beaumarchais’ own play, on the other, where Figaro’s simultaneous mimicry of primal sexuality and the origin of property points to an original, ‘banal’ ban. Banality’s linguistic evolution and comic deployment share a common destiny: historical and juridical subjugations are rendered as beyond, or beneath, both history and the law, in spite of their repetitions.

Keywords: ban, banality, comedy, feudalism, law

My topic is banality in general and its usefulness for, and alongside, an interpretation of one comedy in particular: Beaumarchais’ *The Marriage of Figaro*. Comedy, however, is quite fairly not the first association to come to mind when it comes to banality. Anyone who has thought even a little about banality has had to confront its infamous invocation in Hannah Arendt’s characterization of the ‘banality of evil’ on grim display in the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Many readers will know about the disappointment, horror, and contempt her assessment provoked; her critics would hasten to point out the chasms between the evils of genocide and any thought of ‘banality’: bureaucratization dulled no horrors and hardly lessened a world-historical tragedy. When he wrote to Arendt in 1963, Gershom Scholem, for instance, had ‘nothing positive to say’ about his friend’s most recent work:

I am not in the least convinced by the notion of the ‘banality of evil.’...This banality seems rather more of a slogan than the result of the kind of in-depth analysis you presented far more convincingly... in your book on totalitarianism....If this is to be more than a slogan, it must be taken to a deeper plane of political morality and moral philosophy. I regret that, given my sincere and friendly feelings toward you, I have nothing positive to say about your thesis in this work.¹

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¹ Arendt and Scholem 2017, pp. 204-205.

Though far from the only person to object to Arendt's invocation of the 'banal,' Scholem actually does offer a 'positive' contribution in his savvy classification of the phrase itself as slogan.² That is certainly how the phrase often came to circulate in the half century that followed Arendt's work. But in addition to the call for a more probing 'political morality and moral philosophy,' one might also have reasonably asked for more consideration for 'a deeper plane' of language, one that peered into the concept and language of the 'banal.' While hardly explanatory of histories of political or moral evils, banality's lexical past is not banal at all: its etymology is expressive of a history of domination and of that domination's apparent lapse into historical amnesia.

For as Arendt invokes 'banality,' the 'deeper plane' to which one might refer an inquiry into banality in fact exists not so far from the surface of the word: politics and philosophy, if not morality, are already the livewire questions that lurk within it. Even so, 'banality' eludes the attention even of those philosophers most attuned to its cognates and its etymon, that is, the very 'ban' from which Jean-Luc Nancy locates a primal 'abandonment,' spanning the 'Greek and tragic (that of Oedipus), [the] Jewish and exiled (that of Moses)³ and the one that Giorgio Agamben deems so central to sovereignty that it trumps the contract. For all the care to the awesome and awful ban, tragic and exilic abandonment, to bandits and banishment, banality seems to be of interest only for its utility in naming a kind of tedium or designating received ideas.⁴ There is a surprising disinterest in banality's roots, however frequently it is invoked for the sake of diagnosis. But in its earliest appearances, 'banality' did not look at all 'banal' in its current sense; it instead announced the blunt exercise of power: the *banalité* named 'compulsory feudal service' and marked that which 'belong[ed] to the lord's manor.'⁵ Showing how 'banality' might better be understood in light of this history, I argue that 'banality' as we use it today might be better understood as the logical outcome of an historical process in which the tired appeals to the trite named by the 'banal' are the residue of a form of sovereign force characterized by everydayness, drudgery, and only occasionally a spectacularly destructive humiliation. In this light, 'banality' might be understood apart from a bland evaluative vocabulary of greatest use in controversial slogans and instead as containing the unresolved drama of the 'commonplace' that its linguistic history offers to us.

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2 On Lenin and the renewal of slogans, see Hamza, forthcoming.

3 Nancy 1993, p. 40.

4 This is not to say that tedium is without its interest; consider Sullivan's argument that, under capitalism, '[t]he banal also refers to the inauthenticity that derives from replication and simulation.' Sullivan 2002, p. 136.

5 *OED Online*, s.v. 'banal.' On debates about the origin of 'bannum,' see Lupi 2022, pp. 9-12.

I begin, then, with an examination of the linguistic history of the ‘banal’ in and against the twentieth-century political philosophy of the ‘ban’ and ‘banality.’ Considering the centuries of feudal ‘banality’ unimportant to a political philosophy of the ‘ban’ and to modern ‘banality’ alike, I argue that this apparently innocent omission in fact exposes an unacknowledged complaint better understood as an unresolved history of domination. In contrast to a linguistic domestication of the feudal banal, however, is the imaginative engagement with feudal myth to be found in Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais’ eighteenth-century comedy, *The Marriage of Figaro*. There, the legend of the feudal privilege of the *droit du seigneur* arrives in tandem with Beaumarchais’ theory of comedy as ‘*disconvenance sociale*.’ What comedic ‘*disconvenance sociale*’ tames and conceals is the pantomime of banal (in both senses) domination rehearsed by *Figaro*’s title character. ‘Banality’ might not be especially funny, but the word’s development and the play’s share a destiny: historical and juridical subjugations are rendered as beyond, or beneath, both history and the law. *Figaro* puts at the heart of a comedy famous for its revolutionary character a counter-revolutionary solution: the forced retirement of a social contradiction into something more like social inconvenience, a better term for which might be ‘banality.’

Banality: A Brief History

Just about no one thinks that, of all things, *banality* ought to ‘weig[h] like a nightmare on the brains of the living,’⁶ but more people should. For one, ‘banality’ seems to induce a peculiar cerebral effect: its triteness seems so hypnotic as to arrest nearly any inquiry into its historicity.⁷ In its evasion of attention, banality is at once too obvious and not obvious enough. In its association with mere tedium, banality seems somehow too common to merit the place in theories of the ‘ban’ of sovereignty accorded to its downstream derivatives, though the ‘ban’ in ‘banality’ is no less visible than, say, the ‘ban’ in ‘abandonment.’ But banality presents a particularly interesting case in which the word’s usage and meaning have come to make an open secret of its history, both its relationship to the historical conditions the word once named and to its current usage to identify an ordinariness or a triteness so unremarkable that it eludes history altogether. While it is no crime to let etymons rot, ‘banality’ holds on to the ‘class cleavage in language’⁸ with which it violently began

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6 Marx 1996, 32.

7 Noteworthy exceptions include Kohl 2018, where the depth of ‘banality’ pertains to an inquiry into Dmitrij Prigov’s late novels, and Majumdar 2013, where the politics and aesthetics of banality appear as the matter of global modernism under empire.

8 As Lecerclé notes, ‘the division of society into classes, groups, and occupations also impresses its mark on a language.’ Lecerclé 2006, p. 16.

with particular tenacity. After all, the ‘commonplace’ designated by the ‘banal’ comes with a generous hint of the pejorative and says aloud what the feudal banal once forcibly defined: a common place, complete with the accompanying sneer with which the ‘common’ is still, quite often, pronounced.⁹ ‘Banality’ in its current sense would seem to bore rather than to compel, but inhering in the word’s history is the sense that this need not be a contradiction: in fact, both things can and do often happen at once.¹⁰

When it comes to ‘banality,’ then, few seem to have time to take up this grist for the lord’s mill, and fair enough: there is a lot to think about in the ‘ban’ alone.¹¹ Unlike the tepid ‘banal,’ the ban exposes exclusions constituting the most awesome and awful force: it is at the heart of the exception central to a political philosophy from Schmitt onward. It is, indeed, so very important that Agamben claims that ‘the relation of ban has constituted the essential structure of sovereign power *from the beginning*.’¹² Agamben accordingly ‘tak[es] up Jean Luc-Nancy’s suggestion... [and] give[s] the name ban (from the old Germanic term that designates both exclusion from the community and the command and insignia of the sovereign) to this potentiality... of the law to maintain itself in its own privation, to apply in no longer applying. The relation of exception is a relation of ban.’¹³ A self-regulating power, the law’s capacity ‘to maintain itself’ in its absence or in ‘no longer applying,’ the ‘ban’ not only speaks to what Nancy identifies as ‘a world that...abandon[s] us,’¹⁴ it also sets itself up as a self-maintaining force identifiable in the present: ‘We must learn to recognize this structure of the ban in the political relations and public spaces in which we still live.’¹⁵ A ‘structure’ evading recognition even as it undergirds ‘political relations and public spaces’ – those very ones we all inhabit – the ‘ban,’ for Agamben, trumps the contract as the determining social structure. But the short of it is this: if a certain theoretical tradition is to be entertained,

9 Majumdar shows a rare attention to banality’s etymology: ‘[T]he semantic duality contained in the word—that which pertains to everybody and that which is unoriginal—indicates a significant relation between the political and the aesthetic.’ Majumdar 2013, p. 18. Meanwhile, on the grounds of language, etymology, and the problem of ‘imagined natural qualities of language,’ see Wolff 2022.

10 On bureaucracy’s relationship to banality, see Majumdar 2013, p. 10.)

11 In the context of literary modernism and colonial banality, Majumdar calls the banality ‘a form of negative aesthetic,’ a kind of ‘aesthetic failure,’ and one important instance of the “noncathartic” affects [which] gain centrality in the literature of the modern or post-Enlightenment period.’ Majumdar 2013, pp. 4-5.

12 Agamben 1988, p. 68. Italics mine.

13 Agamben 1998, p. 23.

14 Nancy 1993, p. 42.

15 Agamben 1998, p. 68.

then banality is the lighthearted derivative, the utterly forgettable cousin, of sovereign power.

Banality is indeed so trivial it apparently does not need to be acknowledged; instead, it seems to emerge in a political no man's land unimportant to accounts of the 'ban' – or, for that matter, 'abandonment' – that link antiquity to modernity. Though Agamben urges his readers 'to recognize this structure of the ban' in present 'political relations and public spaces,' although he, like Nancy, models a sensitivity to the language of the ban, including its remarkable capacity to adumbrate almost opposite meanings,¹⁶ his directive to try to recognize the ban neither brings him so much as to glance at the banal nor to investigate the epoch that brings 'banality' into language. He therefore does not extend the injunction to recognition to observe a continuity of the ban into the medieval banal, let alone the old banal into the new. In *Homo Sacer*, a brief nod to 'the old subject of feudal relations'¹⁷ is the closest the reader gets even to the epoch of the medieval banal. But what is overlooked in so rapid a shorthand is both the apparently primal political relationship or non-relationship of the 'ban,' in no way concealed in the 'banal,' and the strange feudal history that is no less significant either for thinking about the sovereign and its organization or for grasping the ordinary degradations of the banal – from its subjugating 'common' places to the vapid commonplaces now associated with present-day banalities. In spite of banality's overt relationship to sovereignty, these major theories of the 'ban' neither acknowledge 'banality' in their accounting of the ban's history nor pause as they invoke 'banality' in its current sense.¹⁸

For Arendt, meanwhile, 'banality' accrues synonyms without ever encountering its etymology, which is also to say, without ever encountering its history in language. In spite of the controversy of the 'banality of evil,' the term appears with much greater frequency in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* than in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* where, in spite of the controversy its usage provokes, it hardly appears in the text.¹⁹ But as for Agamben, so for Arendt: 'banality' remains banal, which is to say, it has no history. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, banality seems markedly less 'of a slogan' and more 'the

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16 Freud 1957.

17 Agamben 1998, p. 72.

18 'What confronts us today is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways.' Agamben 1998, p. 68.

19 A postscript of the revised and enlarged edition discusses the controversy around the 'banality of evil' at somewhat greater length. But before this addition, 'banality' only appeared in the book's subtitle and its closing sentence: 'It was as though in those last minutes [Eichmann] was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil!*' Arendt 1976, p. 252.

result of...in-depth analysis,' to borrow Scholem's criticisms of Arendt's infamous banality, but 'banality' remains nebulous, its qualities more or less assumed to be self-evident. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in contrast, we see banality elaborated as the near-synonym of or worthy parallel to the 'uninteresting,' the 'superficial,' and 'frivolity and triteness.'²⁰ Banality's acceptance, meanwhile, is strongly associated with a cynical or merely dull 'nihilism'; in some cases, too, 'pious banalities' stand in as 'the old truths' inhering in 'liberal hypocrisy.'²¹ On the one hand, Arendt really does not stray so far from a standard definition of the term, meaning the trite or the unoriginal.²² On the other, banality seems to elude her: we know – as she does, too – it's vapid and bad; we know it arises out of intellectual and moral sloth; we know it's an affect, an evaluation, a position prompted by fatigue, and itself often indistinguishable from the cliché. 'Banality' occupies the place of a 'common sense' no longer sanctioned for its sensibleness but, precisely because of its mundaneness, detested as viciously ideological in its tedious courting of the obvious.

In all its forgettable, tension-sapping obviousness, then, banality has been weirdly resistant to theorization and historicization even in the hands of Arendt who is acutely sensitive to its operations. And so it is in an almost offhand and certainly abstract way that she offers an instructive reading of banality and a classed history. Citing the warped reception of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* and its slogan, 'Erst kommt das Fressen, dann die Moral' ('First comes the food (grub), then comes morals'), Arendt comes very close to thinking historically about banality: 'The mob applauded because it took the statement literally; the bourgeoisie applauded because it had been fooled by its own hypocrisy for so long that it had grown tired of the tension and found deep wisdom in the expression of the banality by which it lived.'²³ While the mob and the bourgeoisie clap simultaneously, banality wears many faces: it is linked to an over-literalism; it is tied to an easy, even stupid, hypocrisy, and it is something that can be 'express[ed]' in an ethos, or in the very absence of one, an open-mouthed and dumb way of 'living.' As with its close relationship to nihilism, banality indexes the facility of defeat: it emerges, apparently, when one 'grow[s] tired of the tension' and settles in, instead, for some facile obviousness. But 'banality' seems, too, to

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20 Arendt 1968, p. 85, p. 246, p. 246.

21 Arendt 1968, p. 334, p. 334, p. 331.

22 *OED Online*, s.v. 'banal.'

23 Arendt 1968, p. 335. In contrast, consider the Brechtian paradigm in Nancy: 'A statement of Brecht's has the importance of a paradigm for our whole history, for the whole West: If it is said that the theater came forth from the realm of ritual, what is meant is that it became theater when it left that realm.' Nancy 1993, p. 42.

have a starring role as the residue, ‘the expression of’ an historical process that Arendt might have easily called class consciousness (or class unconsciousness): the clapping bourgeoisie ‘grow[s] tired,’ ‘f[inds] deep wisdom,’ and ‘lives’ ‘in the expression of ...banality.’ But the ‘so long’ time in which ‘tension’ cedes to the facsimile of ‘wisdom’ seems to happen outside of history; however concrete and loud the ‘simultaneous clap[ping],’ this is a frustratingly abstract way of describing the expressions and affects of a class.

While its twentieth-century appearances might demonstrate a reasonable indifference to etymology, the feudal ‘banality’ ought to be of interest to accounts either of sovereignty or of the unoriginal and trite: ‘banality’ lapses into the ordinary and the tedious in spite of having once been the topic of fervent complaint, a persistent indignity and a routine subjugation that endured for hundreds of years. Recall how ‘banality’ named an instantiation of a feudal *bannum*, where the one-time power to compel military service (consistent with the force of the ‘ban’ above) instead came to name a restriction and subjection central to village life. The ‘banalité’ designated explicitly a ‘relation’ that, in its compulsion, foregrounded sovereign questions; it included, for instance, an obligation to use the lord’s stove to bake bread and his wine press to make wine.²⁴ In the grand stories of sovereignty and constitutive exclusion, it makes sense that the local mill might play a lesser role and that the earlier ‘ban,’ rather than a downstream effect of such power, would come to the fore. But the appearance of the *banal* is worth remarking alongside that grander story, too.²⁵ This apparent ‘devolution of regalian rights’²⁶ has been seen by medievalists as, variously, “a new form of economic exploitation based not on ownership of the land but on the domination of people”... “a kind of legitimised and organised pillage.”²⁷ In his fascinating history of feudal France, Charles West suggests that a distinctly new form of domination arose, one that happened to inhere in a conceptual vocabulary, nascent in mid-eleventh-century legal texts in both a revival of and departure from Roman precedents, that, incidentally, also included such words as *justitia* (justice)²⁸:

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24 ‘Bannal terminology also began to take a pronounced spatial sense, too, giving rise to the *bannleuga*, meaning a zone with particular judicial significance, from which comes modern French *banlieu*.’ West 2013, p. 17.

25 In the only reference to the banalité in his magnum opus, Bloch readily appeals to banality’s linkage with the ban and states: “The very name of these exactions was significant. They were normally called *banalités*.” Bloch 1961, p. 251.

26 West 2013, p. 178.

27 Qtd. in West 2013, p. 179n21.

28 West 2013, p. 184.

The rise of *bannum* was not actually a shift from power over land to power over people....Rather, instead of using the idiom of landed property as the primary means, alongside court-based ideas of office, of expressing durable rights over people...people in the eleventh century separated out a new layer. Now, property was fabricated directly out of social relations, anchored not in Roman-inspired notions of owning land, but in characteristically medieval ideas of jurisdiction. Social hierarchies were so fixed, so classified, so stable and so self-evidently real, that they were treated as if they actually were separate from the people who made them. Social relations were disembedded, becoming, consciously, the subject of exchanges and interactions: society began to perform operations on itself....Even in cases where rights of *bannum* or *justitia* were being contested, it might seem that we are merely observing arguments over words. Yet it is in fact easy to identify eminently concrete consequences of the new social and political regime. For example, a mid-twelfth-century charter from Gorze recorded what happened when villagers decided to build their own ovens in spite of the monastery's claim to own a *bannal* oven, in other words one which had a local monopoly. An inquiry was held, and the outcome was both predictable and down-to-earth: 'Since many of the men of St-Gorgon confessed that they had unjustly built their own ovens in this village, these very builders destroyed them, in our presence, as justice demanded.' Other similar examples could be given, for instance from St-Martin-des-Champs, showing how real mills and ovens really were demolished in the name of bannal power.²⁹

'[S]o fixed, so classified, so stable and so self-evidently real': add a dash of boredom or some clapping bourgeoisie, and it is not so far from the banal mill late-modern banality, likewise so taken for granted, so trite, that it is not worth inquiring further. But in this description of the 'bannal' prior to the 'banal,' one sees the anxiety inherent in the Janus-faced 'ban,' in 'arguments over words' that have 'down-to-earth' and 'concrete consequences.' Is the destruction of village ovens, authorized by law, the preeminent example of 'the essential structure of sovereign power'? Is there any difference, other than scale and suffix, between the broad ban that announces an awful sovereign power and the small scuffles around bannal compulsion? As far as I can tell, for her report on 'banality,' Hannah Arendt did not care about mid-twelfth-century charters from Gorze. I would speculate that many to most of us, in fact, do not. But midway between the ban and the banal is the *bannal* mill, the wine press, the tedium of a subjugated daily life, the repetitions of its labors, a creation and destruction emergent 'as justice demanded.'

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29 West 2013, pp. 190-191.

Surely the scattered references in a medieval legal corpus about mills and stoves and things amount to a far less exciting theory of political life than, say, an appeal to either a foundational political structure or a politico-existential state like cosmic ‘abandonment.’ But though ‘it might seem that we are merely observing arguments over words,’ ‘banality’ seems to me to be as interesting a contronym as the very ban, with its status ambiguously ‘outside or inside the juridical order,’ to which Agamben awards this parenthetical: ‘(This is why in Romance languages, to be ‘banned’ originally means both to be ‘at the mercy of’ and ‘at one’s own will, freely,’ to be ‘excluded’ and also ‘open to all, free.)’³⁰ The feudal banal achieves this uneasy ambiguity on its own with the banal oven, mill, or winepress being at once inclusive and exclusive: one imagines the men of St. Gorgon destroying the stoves they’d made for themselves in accordance with the law, ‘freeing’ themselves to enjoy the one that belongs to the lord, the one shared in a common subjection. It wouldn’t be fair to foist an early modern idea of the ‘public sphere’ onto this sorry scene, but mills, ovens, and winepresses certainly limited what could be strictly domestic and for whom: ‘Only the largest households had their own ovens. Some baking could be done directly on the hearth, but generally...meat or fish pies...were taken out to a communal oven.’³¹ It likewise showed how one need not be banned or banished to be subject to sovereign force: its power was exerted daily in perfectly trite, utterly ordinary ways. Still, there is no grand political theory regarding where ‘meat or fish pies’ ought to be baked, and it is no spoiler to say that the *loup garou* of *Homo Sacer* neither sniffs nor gobbles up the pastries of the medieval village.³² It is too bad that this intimate – and, yes, tedious – relative of the ban is overlooked: a sovereign power that turns each bite bitter, that parodies the ‘commons’ in a common subjugation, that was the object of hundreds of years of complaint is, apparently, better passed over since it bears a name eventually reserved to describe shopping malls or the clapping masses.

More embarrassing than banality’s transformation, though, is the dirty secret of its consignment to oblivion: the abolition of aristocratic rights and privileges did not exactly extinguish the banality for good. This wasn’t because village peasants were suddenly happy about it. They were not: ‘The *cahiers*, in which [peasants] registered their grievances in 1789 are full of complaints about the cost and inconvenience of the banalities. Yet in the eighteenth century, no commentator on feudal

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30 Agamben 1998, p. 23.

31 Hieatt 1995, p. 497.

32 ‘[T]he life of the bandit,’ writes Agamben, ‘is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.’ Agamben 1998, p. 105.

law appears to have advocated for their abolition.³³ Another way of writing this might be to say that for hundreds of years, countless people complained about banalities: how annoying they were, what they cost – a price that had to do with labor, indignity, and the humiliations incurred by ‘demoli[tion] in the name of bannal power.’ And even after formal abolition, like many feudal dues, banalities ‘were given a new lease of life through being transformed into property rights.’³⁴ Banalities formed under ‘contract’ survived the abolition of ‘feudal’ banality.³⁵ When feudal dues were abolished in full, many of ‘the rights themselves often continued in force under other names.’³⁶ To be fair, technology – and time – have effaced the varied local histories illustrative of this feudal compulsion and the fury it provoked. It makes sense that the feudal banality could be overlooked more easily in theories of sovereign power or accounts of a modern banality where the ‘ordinary’ would seem to have less to do with the complaints of many centuries of peasants.³⁷ If nothing else, we can comfortably assume that the now-citizens of St-Gorgon have their own stoves if no longer the entirety of their pensions. Were our object simply the vagaries of the language of the political, the fate of the old banality (forgettable in accounts of ‘sovereign power,’ dismissible amid legal revolution) would be curious enough. But Beaumarchais’ eighteenth-century drama about an imaginary feudal privilege reflects and refracts one banality’s transformation into another, this time in comedy.

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33 Mackrell 1973, p. 58.

34 Mackrell 1973, p. 183.

35 On the endurance of litigation over banalities into the nineteenth century, see Blaufarb 2012. On attempts to prove the ‘feudal’ or contractual basis of individual banalities, and the endurance of specific banalities through the Napoleonic era, see esp. Blaufarb 2012, pp. 229-242.

36 Mackrell 1973, p. 175.

37 See Root 1985 on peasant litigation and the question of seigniorial authority in the eighteenth century. And consider Mackrell’s blistering verdict: ‘The peasants benefited from the Revolution more in the short than in the long term. In 1789 there was a vogue for engravings in which peasants were depicted bent under the weight of the other two orders. It was the achievement of the upper classes that the peasants continued to bear their weight upon their backs, while there were no longer engravings to tell the tale.’ Mackrell 1973, p. 192.

Banal Play: *Figaro's* Beginnings

Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* invigorates a feudal myth, namely, the practice referred to variously as the *droit du seigneur*, the *droit du cuissage*, or *ius primae noctis*, all of which meant that the feudal lord's privileges included, to forgo euphemism, raping the bride of anyone in his vassalage on her wedding night.³⁸ Famous for its anticipation of nobles soon-to-be-toppled, the play's irreverent representation of Count Almaviva brought the feudal past into the eighteenth-century present: Almaviva unambiguously resembled an eighteenth-century type (the libertine), but his seduction was far less à la mode; within the play itself, Almaviva's attempts on the sexual honor of Figaro's fiancée involved the aristocrat reviving a lapsed feudal right.³⁹ The appearance of the feudal legend of the *droit du seigneur* in *Figaro* is – on its own – an interesting counterpoint to the real banal compulsions I have described above, but the more intriguing parallel is to be found in the quiet theory of comedy found in Beaumarchais' preface to *Figaro*. There, comedy – that which depicts a '*disconvenance sociale*' in contrast to tragedy's portrayal of primal 'crime' – names a form that just so happens to describe the fate of 'banality,' too. For the wrongs of 'disconvenance sociale,' a full recognition arrives from neither history nor the law, yet in *Figaro* itself, the comedy can only begin in and after a pantomime of the origin of both family and property that make the farce and force of law simultaneous.

The theory of comedy found in the preface to *The Marriage of Figaro* is a shrewd defense of the modest ambitions of comedy in contrast to those of tragedy. There, Beaumarchais insists upon the propriety of his play and its adherence to the old Horatian mandate to bestow entertainment and instruction in equal measure. As the preface counters ostensible critics, Beaumarchais positions comedy as the less 'audacious' alternative to tragedy's bold confessions:

I have always believed that one cannot achieve great pathos nor profound morality nor good and honest comedy [*ni grand pathétique, ni profonde moralité, ni bon et vrai comique*] in the theatre without strong situations [*situations fortes*], which always arise from a social incongruity [*qui naissent toujours d'une disconvenance sociale*] in the subject one wishes to treat. The

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38 See Boureau 1998 for history of the development of the myth of the *droit de cuissage* and the myth's absorption of histories of misogyny and sexual harassment. Boureau credits Beaumarchais for the legend's popularization: 'It was in fact with Beaumarchais that the theme became truly public and popular.' p. 40.

39 In this regard, *The Marriage of Figaro* (1778) arrived right on time: the epoch-forming term 'feudalism,' as Kathleen Davis writes, only appeared 'on the eve of the French Revolution'— punctually enough 'to adjudicate between nobility, parliament, and crown, particularly in matters of property, and ultimately to embody the superstitious and fettered past being dragged to the guillotine.' Davis 2008, p. 7.

tragic dramatist, audacious in his methods, dares to admit the atrocious crime [*admettre le crime atroce*] - conspiracies, the usurpation of thrones, murder, poisoning, incest (in *Oedipe* and *Phèdre*,) fratricide (in *Vendome*,) parricide (in *Mahomet*,) regicide (in *Macbeth*), etc., etc. Comedy, less audacious [*moins audacieuse*], does not go beyond simple incongruities [*n'excède pas les disconvenances*], because its scenes are drawn from our manners, its subjects from our society.⁴⁰

Tragedy confesses: it 'dares to admit' every taboo. Comedy, by contrast, does not so much 'admit' to 'crimes' as 'treat' 'subject[s]' in which 'social incongruity' (*disconvenance sociale*) produces 'strong situations.' Beaumarchais stresses the general moral purpose of theatre, spanning tragedy and comedy, namely, to 'corriger sans blesser' (to correct without wounding), but the contrast with tragedy here is instructive: compared to tragedy, comedy is ever so slightly flaccid. In its most active form, comedy distinguishes itself by its restraint: 'it does not exceed incongruities.' This is not to say that the author of comedy has absolutely no audacity. On occasion, he, too, dares: of his *Eugénie*, Beaumarchais says, 'whatever the work contains that is good and useful, was born of the author's courage in daring to carry social inequality to the highest degree of freedom (*tout ce que l'ouvrage a d'utile et de bon naît du courage qu'eut l'auteur d'oser porter la disconvenance sociale au plus haut point de liberté*).'⁴¹ As the bearer of 'disconvenance sociale,' the courageous author of comedy does some heavy lifting as he 'dares to carry' the contradiction to 'the highest point of freedom.' But this locution is telling: in contrast to the audacious confession native to the tragic mode, comedy dares not even to 'admit.'

The difference between an 'atrocious crime' (the subject of tragedy) and 'disconvenance sociale' (social incongruity) is a distinction between an identifiable event – one that can be identified, confessed to, and depicted to spectacular effect – and something harder to grasp and harder still to unravel and identify who is at fault. For the 'legal expert' Beaumarchais,⁴² this seems to mean that tragedy is for the courts and church and that comedy is for contradiction: for mere complaints, for a laughter and dread that may take the place of recognition or redress. There is already something in the category of 'disconvenance sociale' that makes it harder to locate than a 'crime,' that has the strange effect, too, of making comedy seem to appear almost prior to the tragedy. For one, it echoes the category of 'convenance,' which, for Montesquieu

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40 Beaumarchais 1958, pp. 4-5; Beaumarchais 1867b, pp. 104-105.

41 Beaumarchais 1958, p. 7; Beaumarchais 1867b, p. 105.

42 Morton 1966.

and Barbeyrac, among others, described the order of natural law. For Barbeyrac, 'ideas of congruity (idées de Convenances)' were 'founded on the nature of things (fondées sur la nature des choses).'⁴³ In Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, justice itself organized and amounted to a 'rapport de Convenance.'⁴⁴ The 'disconvenance sociale' names a social 'incongruity' or 'inequality.' It gestures to a natural law tradition of 'convenance,' and in doing so seems to place the comic contradiction far away from the state of nature but also perilously close to it: a threat of disorder at the edges of natural law before and somehow beyond positive law and its instantiation.

The 'disconvenance sociale' within *Figaro* holds the comedy in a tense relationship to the tragic. While the preface frames comedy's 'disconvenance sociale' as the digestible alternative to 'crime atroce,' we soon learn that the play's early preoccupation with the *droit du seigneur*⁴⁵ is far from the work's only legal drama. Consider the lobster: the mock trial in the play's third act narrowly spares Figaro from the tragedy of an incest plot, thanks to his unmistakable homarine birthmark, which permits the reunion, rather than the wedding, of mother and her now-adult son Figaro. With tragedy's incestuous marriage eliminated as a threat, Suzanne and Figaro celebrate their own nuptials followed by a final act where Almaviva becomes dupe of a double mischief when Suzanne teams up with Almaviva's wife. But while, for Beaumarchais, a comedy is plainly less daring ('moins audacieuse'), it hardly abrogates a theatrical mandate to examine a 'profonde moralité.' In the crimes that do *not* come to pass in *The Marriage of Figaro*, we evade 'the atrocious crime' of historical or legendary horrors but witness the contradictions inherent in the everyday: 'our manners...our society.' One might also call this a spectacle of 'the banality by which' a society 'lives.' In her study of parodies of Shakespeare, Beate Müller argues that '[b]anality prepares the ground for comic effects in so far as it allows us to abandon a serious perspective, because banal, mundane, everyday matters are not existential.'⁴⁶ I understand Müller's 'banality' here to refer to the unoriginal and the quotidian, but her formulation here is nonetheless more widely suggestive. In indicating that 'banality prepares the ground for the comic,' Müller seems to describe in slow motion the potentiality for comic effects: the sidewalk in front of a fruit stand (banal) is but one person, one banana peel, away from comedy. This is different from saying the banal *is* comic, but for Müller, the banal is also not 'serious...

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43 Barbeyrac qtd. in Korkman 2003, p. 224.

44 Montesquieu 2004, Letter 81, p. 359.

45 In Act I, scene i, Suzanne tells Figaro about Almaviva's plan 'à obtenir de moi...un ancien droit du seigneur.' Beaumarchais 1867a, p. 114.

46 Müller 1997, p. 150.

because not existential.' This is far from the heart of Müller's argument, but she crystallizes the problem of the banal. The 'not existential' seems like an updated way of naming the 'disconvenance sociale' that does not rise to the level of emergency. But in her own formulation, 'Banality...allows us to abandon a serious perspective,' Müller seems to assume the comic is 'not serious,' on the one hand, and to inadvertently, indeed symptomatically, produce banality's snag: banality goes with 'abandon[ment]'; and once again its strange etymological past resounds, an unintended polyptoton made possible only because of the apparent consensus that neither banality nor comedy need be taken 'seriously.'⁴⁷

The opening of the play offers its preparatory banalities with an astonishing displacement: Figaro unconsciously mimes the origins of the family and society. In this, the play's famous opening is surely a 'beginning' worthy of Agamben's argument that 'the relation of ban has constituted the essential structure of sovereign power from the beginning.'⁴⁸ In *Figaro*, the opening scene, then, gestures toward 'the banality' *before* 'a society' begins; an explicit nod to the anxieties around the *droit du seigneur*, the opening surpasses its own comic frame. For what is the beginning of *Figaro* if not a fantasy of *the beginning*? The construction project that opens the play (and the opera) – Figaro's 'eighteen by twenty six!' (and Mozart's Figaro's 'Cinque!') – announces the dimensions of Figaro's marital bed, positioned between the lord's and lady's chambers. This is an opening onto a banal *lieu* in multiple senses: it is a bedroom, it is in between sovereign powers of a kind, it is both included and excluded (private and absolutely not). It is an empirical, measurable reality, on the one hand, and it is also hopelessly 'between.' On the one hand, it exposes the phantasmatic site of everyone's origins: the first bed is the one imagined and measured in the air in a kind of practical miming: the closest anyone can get to one's primal origins is in mimicry.⁴⁹ On the other, it demonstrates the very absence of origins: we all begin *in medias res*, subject to structures we never authored, with the attempt to build anew subject to prior orders – the ones we don't see (the imitative parental bed), the ones whose powers order what within or without (the political order). The 'banal' bed in *Figaro* is, in a mundane sense, the play's alternative to a court of law: it is the ordinary domestic,

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47 On comedy, misogyny, and the problem of the 'unserious,' see Simon 2022.

48 Nancy, too, considers abandonment and the problem of 'beginning.' 'Weren't we born in abandonment, Greek and tragic (that of Oedipus), Jewish and exiled (that of Moses), both of them defined or fated by abandonment, to the point where we do not know where either figure begins or ends, or to what degree the one is Jewish and the other Greek? They are abandoned at birth: that is, from the beginning, in their beginnings, and doomed indefinitely to be born. To be born means precisely never to cease being born, never to have done with never fully attaining to being, to its status, to its stance or to its standing, and to its autonomy. Birth abandons Oedipus and Moses up to the hour of their death.' Nancy 1993, p. 40.

49 On the role of games and play in *Figaro*, see Rex 1974.

a marriage plot spared the tragic aristocratic onus of succession and whose right ordering the play achieves in spite of hilarious near-misses. Yet it also a phantasmatic kernel of possible crimes whose very nature depends on antecedent relations: there is no incest if one is unrelated or unborn; there is no parricide if one is spontaneously generated and has no parents; there is no *droit du seigneur* if there are no *seigneurs*.

Let us take this stupid syllogism of mine further and say: There can be no '*disconvenance sociale*' if there is no '*convenance sociale*.' This might invite a second look at the problem of the beginning, for the play seems to show us the ban and the banal 'from the beginning,' too: the measurement of the bed is not just a fantasy about sex and marriage but also the wish, spoken from the banal *lieu* of Almaviva's house, for property of one's own. From the 'banal' lieu of Almaviva's house is a reenactment of not one but two primal, mythic origins, replayed to bathetic effect. Figaro measures a space in the lord's house for a marital bed, lining up all the jokes on cuckoldry, to be sure, but also pantomiming the unknowable dimensions of a conception that is his own beginning. But this also plainly acts out a 'This is mine' that collapses the precursors to both social and sexual contracts, that repeats a primal crime that can neither be confessed to nor counted as a 'crime atroce' because it precedes the law. It echoes the vicious claim to 'property' inherent in Count Almaviva's *droit du seigneur*, but it likewise points to a beginning that is indeed *the beginning*, if we agree with Rousseau, of inequality. The opening of *Figaro* reworks for comedy the mythic speech that Beaumarchais's contemporary, one Jean-Jacques Rousseau, exposed with horror. 'The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *This is mine*,' Rousseau famously wrote in his Second Discourse (1755), 'and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.'⁵⁰ In the impersonal language of measurement, *Figaro's* opening would seem to be an uncanny fantasy of this original will to private property were it not so horny a parody. This 'disconvenance' both precedes and exceeds the play that unfurls after it.

Figaro starts with a blithe enactment of a terrible, unspeakable confession, then, one that is so mundane in its presentation that it goes unnoticed. For if the measurement of an imagined bed is a bit of nubile festivity (surely it is this), if it is a repetition of the impossible measure and mimicry of one's origins (and it is also this), it is also a sad rehearsal of a first ban, visible only in glimpses as distorted as, say, those provided by the myth of the *droit du seigneur*. The 'ban' conjured here is neither the tragic and Greek one nor the Jewish and exilic one. It is the ban 'in which we still live' that becomes comic in, and possibly because of, its repetitions – and because of its sometimes-abandonment into the banality of comedy. Agamben's injunction seems

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50 Rousseau 2018, p. 164.

worth repeating: 'We must learn to recognize this structure of the ban in the political relations and public spaces in which we still live.'⁵¹ If we are to recognize the structure of the banal, we will notice the irresolution in its history, the realm of everyday, unrepaired, and unremembered indignities: the drudgeries of exploitation, the practices of power we can recall, for instance, among the people of St-Gorgon, going to bake their fish pies in the oven their feudal lord compelled them, by banal law, to use. It is unfathomable to think of demanding restitution for the humiliations of the St.-Gorgon rogues, whose insurrections are now as distant historically as their kitchens are technologically. Yet the cipher for aristocratic excess and the stand-in for ordinary sexual abuse and misogyny, the fictionalized banal law, the mythic *droit du seigneur*, in *Figaro* was enough, in its moment, to provoke an ire that would lead to the abolition of aristocracy even if the banal compulsions I have mentioned above were left intact. For, however much 'disconvenance sociale' might offer a palatable name for social wrongs prior to positive law, *The Marriage of Figaro* nonetheless shows how less 'audacious' comedy might be productive of real-life, world-historical effects. While Beaumarchais' apologia ought to be understood as a canny defense of his work, replete with ironies, his argument that his comedy depicted *only* 'les disconvenances' and admitted to no crime (in contrast to tragedy) seems all the more interesting when we follow the comedy into the world. At one moment, the mere depiction of 'disconvenances' – the tidy comic resolution of such incongruities – was perhaps enough to incite, and possibly even to help cause, revolution.

Today, though, *Figaro* tends to end in applause while 'banality' simply describes or dismisses the trite. With the feudal 'banality' a forgettable chapter in most theories of sovereignty, at best a faint echo of a civilizational Act I better grasped by the 'ban,' it is easier to excise the law altogether from a language that might make the tedious forms of its might audible and identifiable. And so the banal remains the banal, with only the occasional fuss about its unlikely trajectory. And so perhaps the last word on this topic should go to Arendt, not for the 'slogan' she coined but for the one she quoted. Recall how, upon hearing 'First comes the food (grub), then comes morals' from Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, 'The mob applauded because it took the statement literally; the bourgeoisie applauded because it had been fooled by its own hypocrisy for so long that it had grown tired of the tension and found deep wisdom in the expression of the banality by which it lived.'⁵² In retrospect, one

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51 Agamben 1988, p. 68.

52 Arendt 1968, p. 335. In contrast, consider the Brechtian paradigm in Nancy: 'A statement of Brecht's has the importance of a paradigm for our whole history, for the whole West: If it is said that the theater came forth from the realm of ritual, what is meant is that it became theater when it left that realm.' Nancy 1993, p. 42.

achievement of *Figaro* may have been simply to reveal what Arendt's clapping masses seem eager to forget or never to know: the same hands that clap might also seize power. In 1791, banalities had been formally abolished, and those that endured did so wrapped up in tedious litigation or under new names like 'contracts.' In one village where this was the case, 'pikearmed women...seized the ovens.' They seem somehow to have heard Brecht centuries before he spoke. 'Ça ira,'⁵³ they shouted, 'It'll be okay.' One almost has to laugh at so banal a slogan.

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53 In late 1791, 'a crowd of pikearmed women chanting "Ça ira" [an anthem of the French Revolution] seized the ovens.' Blaufarb 2012, p. 232.

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Volume 10
Issue 2

Laughing at and with Psychoanalysis*

**Patricia Gherovici
and Jamieson
Webster**

*Sections of this essay were originally published in "The Bad Psychoanalyst: Watching the Success of Failure" in *Eavesdropping: The Psychotherapist in Film and Television*, edited by Lucy Huskinson and Terrie Waddel, pp.107-126, New York: Routledge, 2015.

Abstract: From Oedipus to Hamlet, psychoanalysis has long been associated with tragedy. Our contention is that comedy is a more productive and relevant model. This insight can explain why the psychoanalysts depicted on the screen are often a laughingstock; as if a successful psychoanalysis reaching its termination could not be depicted accurately or seriously on the screen. If the ending of analysis is unique to each patient and cannot be generalized except for a few figures regarding separation and mourning, the recognition of mortality and endings, as well as, coming to terms with one's history, especially as a history of enjoyment that will not budge, then perhaps it is possible that these failed analyses on screen evoke a question of the end *in absentia*. The audience, solicited into the role of supervisor, imagines the better ending, the more ethical analyst, and bears witness to the trap of history and *jouissance* that makes a real ending impossible. They laugh at psychoanalysis, but also with it at the tragicomedy of neurotic life.

Key words: psychoanalysis, comedy, termination, mourning, film

Introduction

From Oedipus to Hamlet, psychoanalysis has long been associated with tragedy. Our contention is that comedy is a more productive and relevant model.¹ Reversing earlier opinions, at the end of his life, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, made it explicit when he proposed comedy as the representative genre for psychoanalysis: "Life is not tragic. It is comic. This is however, why it is so curious that Freud would not find something better than the Oedipus complex, a tragedy, to discuss it, as if that was what it was about... He could have taken a shortcut—comedy."²

This insight can explain why the psychoanalysts depicted on the screen are often a laughingstock. As if a successful psychoanalysis reaching its termination could not be depicted accurately or seriously on the screen. Would it be boring? Would it be exciting? Perhaps something incommunicable about the story of the unraveling of a symptom can only be conveyed tongue-in-cheek. On the screen, all we find is the picture of analysts who fail, but we enjoy watching them fail in what often becomes the tragicomedy of psychoanalysis. These analysts violate boundaries whether in an erotic or aggressive manner, blurring the lines between professional and personal investment. They often reversing roles with the patient by telling their own story or becoming the center of a neurotic drama.

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¹ For a development of this claim, see Introduction, Gherovici and Steinkoler, in *Lacan, Psychoanalysis and Comedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016.

² Lacan, *Seminar XXV, Moment de conclure* 13 December 1977. <http://www.lutecium.org/1977/12/jacques-lacan-le-moment-de-conclure-elp-2/1689>

Abstinence and neutrality are fundamental rules in psychoanalysis, but they are difficult to depict because of the nature of the unconscious and the inwardness of analytic listening. It looks as if the best way to understand neutrality is by way of its ridiculous failure. And the best role for the audience is the supervisor to the unfolding treatment on screen. Beyond the comic and fantastic exaggerations depicted to cause laughter, there is a deeper message about failure in psychoanalysis. Indeed, Lacan said that analysis is a coming to grips with the failure of the 'father' and the fall of the desired object, in particular, with the failure and fall of the analyst whom in the beginning of the treatment is placed by the analysand in the position of the subject supposed to know, as the embodiment of an ideal to make the analyst worthy of their love. The analysand's initial idealization produced by their transference on to the analyst is a precondition to the progress of the treatment. At the end of analysis, this belief is 'vaporized' (Lacan Seminar XI, p. 267) and analysts fall from this place of idealization (ibid. p. 273) producing a separation from fantasy that frees the object of desire. In this vein, we imagine that we are not actually watching failed analyses on the screen but rather witnessing, as audience, something critical regarding the scene of the termination of an analysis.

Bad Psychoanalysts

Most psychoanalysts on film or television are bad psychoanalysts. These bunglers violate boundaries by sleeping with their patients or falling in love with them. They act out aggressively or simply fail to act. They look more troubled than their patient; the point of the farce is to see how they exchange roles with their patients who often end up listening to the analyst's story. On the screen, the transformative power of patients over their therapists is impressive. In *Good Will Hunting* (1997), a shrewd patient (Matt Damon), a working-class math genius forced to be in treatment to avoid jail time, "cures" his therapist (Robin Williams) who decides to abandon his career as a psychologist altogether. The same plot device of reversal of roles is developed in *Don Juan Demarco* (1995). There, Marlon Brando plays a psychiatrist who is saved from boredom by the temporary delusion of his suicidal patient, Don Juan. The skilled storytelling of the young patient (Johnny Depp) reawakens the clinician's romanticism and thirst for life, just as he is on the brink of retirement. In *House of Games* (1987) the psychiatrist's cure results in identification—she becomes a con artist like her patient. In most cases, it seems that the analysts place themselves squarely in the center of a neurotic drama. In fact, the story that is portrayed on screen is often less a story about the patient's unfolding analysis— their history, dreams, fantasies, played out in the transference— than the analyst's cure, as if we were offered a tragic-comedic parable of psychoanalysis. The audience is conscripted

into the role of supervisor as they watch the cataclysmic failed treatment unravel before their eyes.

With a fascination leading to transgressive pleasure like that triggered by watching “funny fails” videos of people doing stupid things and getting hurt, we are invited to see how treatments derail. This is the main appeal of television shows like *In Treatment*, the American HBO drama about Dr Paul Weston, a charming, self-doubting, melancholic who, expectably, ends up responding to the passionate love of his beautiful patient Laura. However, when he tries to consummate the relationship, he is prevented by an anxiety attack. The touchstones in establishing the frame for listening as a psychoanalyst, like neutrality or abstinence, are only brought to bear on the screen by the audience --when the audience has to intervene and wish for the frame not to be broken. This may derive from the fact that a show that depicts a properly conducted treatment would be uninteresting and ultimately boring. There is nothing dramatic or funny when psychoanalysts do their job well. Who would get excited by the analyst’s silences, by empty speech punctuated by the repetition of a phrase that is only meaningful for the analysand, or laugh at the occasional hums, ‘yes, say more,’ and ‘let’s stop here for today’? For those watching, the action glides into something that is the stuff of comedy or when the timing fails, drama, only when the frame slips out of focus or is broken.

The appeal of the plot is that it forces the audience to disapprove of the analyst’s transgressions and thereby it reinstates a classical Freudian frame. This echoes with the fact that Freud’s most conspicuous and useful accounts of his own psychoanalytic cases are accounts of failures (for instance, Dora, The Wolfman, and the young homosexual woman). This is confirmed by *In Treatment’s* format: weeknight episodes each focused on one patient, followed by an end of the week episode in which Paul meets his clinical supervisor, who tries to guide him away from errors of judgment. If Freud was so pessimistic about the portrayal of psychoanalysis in film, and analysts like Glen Gabbard continue to feel the weight of the unrepresentability of our work, one that leads to stupidity if not sheer blasphemy, how as psychoanalysts can we write about film representations?

One interesting aspect to consider is the relationship between psychoanalysis and history. The origins of psychoanalysis are tied to the rise of technology, from the birth of the clinic and modern prisons as Foucault showed,³ to the emergence of the image, with Charcot’s reliance on pictures of hysterics as one of the first uses of film in the service of “science.” When Freud was writing to his colleague, Karl

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3 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Tavistock, 1973) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.)

Abraham in 1924, psychoanalysis was a young discipline that would soon catch fire and spread contagiously, “like the plague” as Lacan claims he said to Jung.⁵ But psychoanalysis was always opposed to the field of vision, with Freud taking the hysteric away from the gaze of the doctor or camera and placing her on a couch where she could not be seen by, nor see, her analyst. Whatever success psychoanalysis may have achieved in the public eye, Freud always felt that its deepest messages would be resisted. Here is an idea that Lacan took further when indicating that psychoanalysis was fundamentally transgressive, at odds with the world, not compromising with the “moral” order and with capitalism more generally. The ethics of the analyst must be somewhere else, namely in relation to the impossible, to lack, to loss, and to absence. It was for these reasons that Lacan was adamantly opposed to the idea of psychoanalytic cure as a successful adaptation to the world. The idea that psychoanalysis and film could have a seamless relationship should perhaps be resisted along just these lines. The failed analyst on screen and the transgressions of analysis, speak the truth in just the right way. We will know we are in real trouble when there are no more movies about “bad” psychoanalysts! Film, as we have seen, shows the productive failure of psychoanalysis and includes the viewer in a psychoanalytic understanding of this process. This is nowhere better shown than in Moretti’s *The Son’s Room* (2001.) The male analyst is listening to a cantankerous female patient, who berates him for his equanimity. The analyst is there, silently listening to the analysand’s angry tirade. We hear his inner thoughts. He concludes that he has not done a good job, that he has failed in his task. We see his sad face as he assumes that this analysis is over. The analyst’s defeated thoughts are interrupted by the patient who blurts out gratefully, “I feel much better.” It is obvious that the analysand will continue the treatment. The scene, not devoid of comedy, shows an incongruity whose resolution is transformative for both. One might wonder if the portrayal of therapeutic failures and transgressions is the only way that one can depict a frame that is essentially silent; a position held by the analyst that is about an encounter with absence itself. To take this one step further, perhaps it is in the context of inducing a wish for psychoanalysis precisely through its failure, that an artful psychoanalytic play can be felt. Through the circulation of objects or people between analyst, patient, and audience, a matrix of desire is structured, bringing a fundamental truth about psychoanalysis to light. And more often than not, this revelation is punctuated by laughter.

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4 “Letter from Sigmund Freud to Karl Abraham, June 9, 1925 “

5 “They don’t realize we are bringing them the plague,” Freud supposedly told his traveling companions, Carl Jung and Sandor Ferenczi, upon arriving into the New York harbor in 1909. Even though those words may have never actually been uttered, Lacan’s story rings true for Freud’s effect was infectious. (Lacan 1966, 403/Lacan 2006, 336)

Take, as a playful comedic example, *What About Bob?* (1991) with Bill Murray and Richard Dreyfuss. This is a story about a manipulative needy patient, who follows his rather narcissistic and rigid psychoanalyst on vacation. As the patient infiltrates Dr. Marvin's family life, Marvin ends up having a nervous breakdown and is taken to the asylum where he had previously failed to lock up his patient. Of course this provides the comedic reversal in the film. However, looking more closely at the plot, one can see that the psychiatrist's narcissism is powerfully linked to an incestuous object, his sister. She is mentioned at several key moments, and her eventual appearance tips the action in the film, sending Marvin over the edge, causing him to exclaim: "Stay away from my sister!" Marvin goes mad and collapses, comatose in a wheelchair.

Marvin's relationship with his sister is presented to us in contradistinction to his contentious relations with his wife, son (Sigmund), and daughter (Anna), and in fact gives substance to his oscillating possessiveness and shallow aloofness. His sister (Lilith) is the fated surprise gift that his family bestows on him, as the Oedipal oracle decreed him to encounter her at the crossroads, on his journey towards his inevitable castration. Bob, of course, ends up marrying her, and through this forced separation from Marvin's incestuous love-object, the psychoanalyst is cured and recovers from his paralytic state. Interestingly, Bob's original symptom was phobia, and of course there is nothing quite like a phobic fear to keeps one incestuously bound to one's home: a theme Freud portrayed in his case study of Little Hans. The psychoanalyst's cure parallels that of the patient, precisely around the analyst's own attachment to an incestuous object and finally, its dissolution.

This leads back to our question: Why these screen fictions of failed psychoanalysts and psychoanalyses? Why, being coerced into viewing these scenes of therapeutic failure, do we enjoy them so much? And finally, what might these films or programs unwittingly depict beyond the reality of "bad analysts"? Might these films, like *What about Bob?* have something more profound to say about the psychoanalytic process? In particular, we would like to show how, within many of these screen depictions that involve psychoanalysts, the tragic-comedic action of the narrative involves a powerful confrontation with failure. This failure recalls what Lacan called castration. For us the bad image of the psychoanalysis we see on the screen can be a productive one as it offers a subtle depiction of what takes place at the end of an analysis.

Analysis Ending and Unending

While an analysis might take several years, a film must come to an end in less than two hours. We don't need Ingmar Bergmann's ingenious introduction of the figure of death into a film to understand the impact of the words

"The End" that always used to mark the close of classical movies. So when considering depictions of the analyst on film, we need to bear in mind both the end of the film and the suggestion of "the end" of the analysis itself. Certainly, as far as psychoanalysis is concerned, termination involves the literal end of a relationship and also suggests a judgment has been made about a possible cure. We might say that the play and process of an analysis takes place around the patient's own fantasies about the end, and their own fantasies of what constitutes a cure. When we speak of "cure" we speak of the desire that brought a patient to analysis to begin with, and what happens to that desire by the "end".

The question of termination haunted Freud till the end of his life. He wrote a pessimistic paper titled, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" in 1937, that circled around the question of how an analysis ends, or can end. He argued that the end always seems to involve patients confronting what he called "the bedrock of castration", a kind of narcissistic dissolution of one's omnipotent fantasies, exposing the secondary gains achieved through neurotic illness that need to be shed. As the patient in the movie, *The Treatment* (2006) testifies to his analyst, who makes claims to be the last great Freudian, "it's more like a process of exfoliation". Freud said that the dissolution of the transference demands a confrontation with a limit that he called castration— in women, that they will never have a "phallus," and in men, a characteristic repudiation of femininity, meaning that they don't have the "phallus" either. Freud felt that the avoidance of this bedrock was practically a reflex and patients are more likely to choose to remain sick than allow themselves to be "cured" in this way.

Something must be given up in order to be cured and this necessity rubs against the powerful fantasies of patients who believe they are going to be given something by their analysts to make up for a sense deprivation and victimization. Quite to the contrary. The analyst who contains such magical gifts is only the projected omnipotence of the patient themselves. There is nothing but failure for the analyst who falls into this trap laid by the patient, and, of course, this is often exactly how our screen analyst fumbles. In *What About Bob?* Dr. Marvin cannot resist playing the one who "knows". As Lacan put it, the transference is the analysand's fantasy that the analyst is the one *supposed* to know. Analysis is a process in which the dissolution, duping, and destruction of the fantasized analyst's supposed knowledge is the condition of cure. The failure of the screen analysts depicts one of the most crucial subversions involved in the end of analysis.

For Lacan to love is to give what one does not have, meaning that we can only love from a place of castration or loss. The analyst is precisely a figure who knows how to give this nothing, so that this lack can be situated in the analysis, allowing a patient to recover the capacity to desire. A recent film that features a different sort of “therapy” (sex-therapy), *The Sessions* (2012), depicts this meeting between castration and love in stark fashion. The story centers around a disabled man named Mark (who is in most part confined to an iron lung, having survived childhood polio), who loses his virginity with a sex therapist, Cheryl. The frame is rigid—the therapist tells Mark that they are only allowed to have 6 sessions which illustrates the difference between her and a prostitute: her job is to prepare him to leave her, enabling him to move on and love someone else. One might say the same of analysis—a successful cure operates a transformation through which the analysand is able to drop the analyst. At the end of the treatment, analysands not only will be able to let go of the analyst as a prized object but while letting go of this attachment, come to terms with the fact that they are also objects themselves.

Of course, Cheryl falls in love with Mark (and he with her), but because neither act on their feelings, their work is brought to a painful but productive close. Cheryl leaves Mark with a gift: as we see her leaving the motel where they had sex carrying a full-size mirror that she wedges into her car. This gift is a portable equivalent of Lacan’s mirror stage, for in a flashback we see her showing him his own reflection and telling him ‘this is your body’ as if the assumption of their sexual union had led him to fully acknowledge his body. If the acknowledgement of his body is Mark’s gift from the therapeutic relationship, Cheryl’s is the discovery of her own desire, a desire for him. This desire comes at a price and the loss runs in both directions, for both Mark and Cheryl alike. The sexual act between the two protagonists seems less important in the film than the evocative therapeutic discoveries achieved through it.

The Sessions takes up the recurrent theme of the psychoanalyst, therapist or psychiatrist and the patient falling in love, but it does so with a very particular twist, for in this case, falling in love means the end of sexual union. We discover that the end of the film not only depicts the end of their “sessions” but also the end of Mark’s life. We witness the interim period between one end and the other (Mark’s post-analytic life) through the eyes of Cheryl as she listens to the eulogy given by his wife, a woman he met after his therapy with Cheryl. A poem written by Mark and read by Mark’s wife at his funeral is, we know, a poem he had written to Cheryl. This ending is not so dissimilar to the end of *What About Bob?* though it should be noted that *only* the movie about work with a “sex” therapist has an effective termination—the reversal of all reversals since sex with one’s analyst is a therapy that can never terminate since the attachment to the analyst caused by transference is acted out in reality rather than being relinquished and thus resolved.

The loss of the love-object is also a key element in *The Treatment*. The movie opens with Jake Singer, an English teacher in an exclusive Manhattan private school, being rejected by his girlfriend. While she tells him of her marriage plans (she is engaged to someone else) she asks Jake if he is also “seeing” someone, meaning a therapist. In fact, Jake has been in psychoanalysis with the self-proclaimed “last great Freudian” in an effort to work through the failures of his doomed romantic life. He soon falls in love with a beautiful widow, Allegra, whose adopted son attends his school and who is trying to finalize the adoption of a baby-girl who already lives with her. Because she may lose custody of the girl due to her single status, Jake’s analyst suspects that Allegra may be using him in order to improve her chances of securing custody and fool the adoption agency in the process, and so warns him against any emotional involvement with her. The analyst, however, had already admonished Jake for his tendency to prefer women who are unavailable, so this intervention may be a ruse.

At awkward moments, as when in the toilet with a bout of diarrhea triggered by a brief flirtatious exchange with Allegra, Jake hallucinates impromptu visits by his analyst, who admonishes him like the most inopportune super-ego. In his imagined appearances, as well as during his regular analytic sessions, Dr. Morales (morals!) offers pointless advice that Jake ignores every time. Head-over-heels in love, he pretends to be Allegra’s dead husband and almost botches the adoption process, thus depriving Allegra of what she wanted most. Meanwhile, Jake had asked his father to find his deceased mother’s wedding ring, a precious object for both father and son, which Jake does not get a chance to give to Allegra. Only when both lovers accept that they may lose what they desire most, can the couple come together and the happy ending takes place. This reveals the almost chimerical function of the object— it can only come into being when lost. The loss of the object as enabler of love is a common trope in romantic comedies, reiterating the fact noted by Lacan that love is to give what one does not have to someone who does not want it.

The object that causes desire is inaccessible. Lacan calls it “object petit a” to refer to the “little” objects that govern the experience of the child who often ends up wanting to be the object of the attention of the m(O)ther. The child will in due course want to be what the m(O)ther desires and thus become a desirable object. When mother and child separate, thanks to what we call castration (a separation by which both mother and child renounce to a state of fusion), there is, however, a bodily reminder of the union. Something “falls out” from that originary relation of the subject and the Other. Lacan relates these objects that fall from the child’s body to Freud’s drive objects and makes a relatively limited list of them—the breast, feces, the gaze, the voice. While desire has no object other than its satisfaction, the object that causes desire is

“something” that must be lost, a brutally extracted pound of flesh; this is a tale that is often replayed in the end of analysis. The movie *Antichrist* (2009) shows in its tragic dimension the horrors generated by the failure of this process of separation from the object.

Antichrist: The Failure of the Tragic Model

Lars Von Trier’s *Antichrist* has been one of the most controversial films of recent years. It is a cautionary tale that asserts: if you treat your spouse therapeutically, be prepared to learn *all* about castration! While the therapist in the film is not a psychoanalyst but a cognitive behavioral therapist who uses exposure therapy in an attempt to “cure” his wife’s melancholia and fits of panic after the death of their young son (their little boy, Nick, fell from their apartment window while they were having intercourse), we would argue that the movie is keenly aware of psychoanalysis and acts like a parable for its most crucial lessons. Once again, it is best to represent psychoanalysis in absentia.

The film pits the rationalist psychology that defines the contemporary world against psychoanalysis and its historic predecessors, religion and pagan naturalism. “Dreams are of no interest to modern psychology,” quips the wife, “Freud is dead, isn’t it?” to which the husband laughs in approval. His belief in the value of rational and cognitive explanations is questioned by his wife’s stalled mourning, rage, terror of death, and internalization of the war between the sexes (which she calls “Gynocide”).

In fact the drama unfurls as his hyper-rationalism reverses into an even more brutal form of irrationality, while her melancholia deepens into a kind of psychosis. Thus, the confrontation between husband and wife (named only “He” and “She” in the film), centers on this failed “rational therapeutic” encounter, in particular at a place where loss (and all its guises from death to femininity to trauma, to castration and sexuality) must be situated. “Now I can hear what I couldn’t hear before. The cry of all the things that are to die,” she tells her husband. This loss, denied its place, forces it to return in what Lacan calls the Real. This unfathomable realm beyond representation becomes almost perceptible first in the form of this cry, and second, in her acting-out where she attempts to inscribe it brutally in their bodies by cutting off her clitoris with a pair of scissors, smashing her husband’s testicles, and drilling a hole in his leg.

It is important to discuss the opening sequence of the film in order to understand the movie’s violent denouement. It powerfully depicts the primal scene and the subjective consequences of witnessing this act. Trier portrays the act of coitus between husband and wife in explicit, almost pornographic, detail. Against the background of quotidian domesticity (a running laundry machine, a dripping shower, a humble water bottle, an animal wooden puzzle) the intense sex scene unrolls,

taking the couple from the shower to the marital bed. The camera registers in slow motion the passionate sex scene punctuated by the successive falls of objects—a glass with toothbrushes, a water bottle, three metal statues of beggars (that represent pain, grief, despair), the copulating bodies, various toys, and eventually, their child.

The mother, abandoned to her enjoyment, what Lacan calls *jouissance* (that Von Trier is at pains to show on her face throughout) lets her child fall, slip away from her. And the toddler's fall from an open window — shown in excruciating slow motion— is interspersed with this scene of passionate love-making, which the child stops to watch before he climbs out the window. In the exact moment the mother reaches orgasm, the child falls to his death. The next time we see this mother in *souffrance*, she will be at the child's funeral. Love and mourning are tightly interwoven. The camera pointed back at the funeral procession from the hearse with the small coffin, shows this mother— without a trace of emotion on her face in stark distinction to the previous scene—suddenly collapsing to the ground, as her husband, visibly grieving, fails to notice.

This scene is the set-up for the rest of the film, where the husband-therapist will attempt to save his wife from her acute melancholia in their country retreat, "Eden." For Lacan, that which is beyond symbolization is the mix of pain and pleasure that he calls "*jouissance*," especially the *jouissance* of the m(O)ther. *Jouissance* is something terrifying and excessive. Psychoanalysis is often spoken of as a coming to terms with *jouissance*, which our identities, reason, and neurotic symptoms more generally attempt to shield us from. Symptoms act as a barrier against an enjoyment experienced and denied, a history of traumatic pleasure and pain transmitted through the generations. *Jouissance* is situated in the place beyond language that Lacan calls the Real, in a state of radical objectlessness.

It is for this reason that it is so terrifying for any child who, entirely dependent on this Other, need to believe that they are the mother's precious object. That is, the child needs to find a lack or loss in the mother, an empty place that they might try to fill. The lack is crucial for the development of a separate subjectivity. We must construct the object as a representative for this lack or loss in order to contain and separate from an impossible *jouissance*. Such is the function of language, our place as speaking-beings. One might also view the unconscious as that which is used in this process of signifying or constructing loss. This is why psychoanalytic symbolic work has often been described as a process of mourning.

So it is fitting that the cognitive therapist-husband is having difficulty locating the object of his wife's irrational fears. In a piece of paper, he writes a list trying to construct a pyramidal representation of her fears, but *what* she actually fears remains a mystery to him— Is it Eden? Satan? The woods? Death? Initially, while he presses for an

answer, pencil and clipboard in hand, she cannot name the feared object. “Can’t I be afraid without an object?” she asks. Later on, when she tells him about the cry of all that is to die that she heard in the woods of Eden, he feels vindicated: “Eden triggered your fear, you tied an irrational emotional event to a place, it was the catalyst. The scream wasn’t real.” But that night *He* has a nightmare, and when she wakes up and claims to be happy again and cured, we come to understand that this is only the beginning of a series of brutal attacks born out of a wild unhinged sexual-cruelty. The cognitive therapy techniques may have cured her melancholia but they seem to have triggered a madness within her. No longer relegated to unconscious dream-life, they dream the Real awake—the intractable outside, severed from symbolization, can only be half-glimpsed in a nightmarish terror. His attempt to finally fill the hole of her loss with his explanations, and by positioning himself as the agent of all that is real and rational, seems to push her over the edge. “Don’t leave me,” she screams, as if to send him back his desire, to put a lack there where it failed to exist. With this complete circle established between them, loss must literally be created: in the case of *Antichrist* through mutilating her own and his genitals.

“The one who knows how to open the object in the right way with a pair of scissors, is the one who is the master of desire,” writes Lacan (1964-1965, p.105). The psychoanalytic cure finds a way to give representation to absence, playing at the borders of sense and meaning, unraveling symptoms and phantasmic history, which is how its work proceeds as a process of mourning and symbolic castration. Our patient in *Antichrist* enacts this cure in reality, with scissors no less, rather than through speech, dreams, and transference. What is brought to light is the brutality of rationality in the face of a loss intrinsic to the meaning of being human. If Eden is anything, it is a place before the fall, before subjectivity as we know it, and this Edenic nature, far from paradise, is, as Von Trier depicts it in the film, Satan’s church. Our fall is a fall *into* the grace of loss, the “callous grace” according to the ominous words of a wolf who, surprisingly, speaks. The wolf not only talks, it also eats its own entrails at the conclusion of the second chapter of the film, evocatively titled “Pain (Chaos Reigns).” This chaos is the chaos of speech. Paradise is lost in words that transform sexuality into “sin.” Von Trier’s great reversal here is that Eden— as oneness with nature and sexuality— is a horrific, chaotic, unbearable place. Mourning could have been its cure, a humanization of sexuality.

Freud (1908)⁶ said that the child always interprets the primal scene as a sadistic act—kids have no language to understand what is seen. Lacan extends Freud’s interpretation of this encounter to mean a witnessing of a kind of impossible fullness; the primal scene is for

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6 (1908). On the sexual theories of children. SE, 9: 205-226.

Lacan a representation of parental figures that have no lack; sex is seen as a brutal attempt for its participants to possess one another, a terrifying cannibalizing enjoyment. So while the film begins with the child witnessing the *jouissance* of the primal scene, it ends with its enacted interpretation to fatal consequence: in the beginning there was Eden, a lawless world of too much presence, one in which the horror of nature and maternity reign. If psychoanalysis is a coming to terms with both this horrifying world, it is also a draining of it— its *jouissance*— in the direction of radical separation and desire.

Structurally, the mother's melancholy is ultimately incurable because she seems to the audience either psychotic or possessed by the devil. And the fears that her husband tries to dissolve with exposure therapy seem to confirm that at times a phobia can be a spontaneous cure, a sort of holding place, a way to handle something that cannot be otherwise dealt with. Her fears were her idiosyncratic way to maintain her sanity; she goes mad once the phobia is unleashed. Or perhaps she was witch like the women burnt at the stake that she studied in her uncompleted thesis on misogyny. We prefer to venture a different interpretation of the disquieting revelation concerning the son's deformed feet, a disability that has been caused by the mother's inversion of his shoes. Already in the opening scene we see at the bottom of the crib the baby boots inverted, right shoe on the left, left shoe on the right. Later, when the husband questions the wife about this, we witness a flashback of the child crying in pain as the mother forces him to wear his boots on the wrong feet. Not only do we have a horrific display of maternal cruelty, but we see that this child could never be appropriately mourned because he was not inscribed in the Oedipal structure. Oedipus, as is well known, had swollen feet, which allowed him to solve the riddle of man. This son, perhaps persecuted because he is male, was the object of the mother's confused ambivalence, and not yet a separate individual. Therefore, the mother's own mourning is impossible; loss is masked and obtruded, replaced by her psychotic version of melancholy.

We conclude that the husband cannot terminate his treatment with his wife, one which he never should have begun in the first place. Both husband and wife were already in violation of a fundamental law, playing the part of master and God or Satan if you wish, as it is rumored that Lars Von Trier initially had planned to write the script of *Antichrist* to reveal that Earth was not created by God but by Satan. The husband plays a bad psychoanalyst whose violation of the law is turned back against him for just as she is "cured" by him, her symptom re-emerges in even more brutal form: "You wanted to cure me in order to leave me," she screams, and by castrating him (by attaching a weight through a hole drilled in his leg so he "can never leave") she makes him her absolute object. There will be no separation, no loss, no termination.

As we shall in other examples, so many films that depict therapists seem to need to circle around these themes that deal with the role of termination in psychoanalysis. The end of analysis entails a dismissal of the analyst; Lacan went as far as to crudely claim that this meant that the analyst had to be rejected ‘like a piece of shit.’⁷

Melancholic Analysis

We have explored elsewhere⁸ the chimerical status of the lost object as key to understanding why some people manage to work through loss and find a substitute for the lost object, whereas others remain inconsolable and refuse to let go and – in some cases, following it to death, as we have seen in *Antichrist*. Mourning and melancholy are themes of interest not just because the clown class and the successful stand-up comedian very often struggle with depression but because the analyst/therapist/psychiatrist who falls madly in love on the screen or is “cured” by the patient, is often melancholic. Let us take a look at *Shrink* (2009) to illustrate this point. This film combines the “falling in love with a patient” trope with the deadly spiral into the self- destruction of melancholy. Henry Carter (Kevin Spacey), a shrink to the stars and author of a bestselling self-help book *Happiness Now*, is clearly in a state of personal dereliction. After his wife’s death, he turns to marijuana. The only source of joy in his life seems to be his drug dealer’s visits. Every night Carter drinks until he passes out, waking up still dressed to resume another grueling day of analytic appointments, which he tolerates by stealing the odd pot-smoking break outside his luxurious Los Angeles office.

Carter’s shift to good health is sparked by his connection to a new pro-bono patient, Jemma (Keke Palmer). She is a poor African American high-school student who aspires to become a filmmaker, often cutting class to see movies. She ends up in his office after being mandated by her school to see him after punching and breaking a mirror. Both Carter and Jemma share a similar grief. We learn that her mother, like Carter’s wife, had committed suicide. An aspiring screenwriter named Jeremy, loosely connected to Carter’s deceased wife, learns of Jemma’s story and steals her clinical file from Carter’s office. Jeremy briefly befriends Jemma and writes a screenplay about her troubled life. By chance, Jemma discovers the script and Carter starts to take responsibility for her feelings of anger and betrayal.

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7 ‘The end of analysis has never been explained to us like that. What is this analyst who is rejected like a piece of shit? Shit disturbs people enormously. There is not just shit in the object but often it is as a piece of shit that the analyst is rejected. That depends uniquely on the analysand. It is necessary to know whether for him shit is really what was at stake.’ (Lacan, Seminar XV, Unpublished, 27.03.1968.)

8 Jamieson Webster and Patricia Gherovici, 2012

Identified with the lost object, rather than making a scene, Carter, jumps off the stage; he is as lost as his object. Highly intoxicated, he confesses on a live television talk show that his wife committed suicide and storms off the set declaring that his book, *Happiness Now*, is “bullshit.” He stops treating Jemma, who nevertheless seems to have concluded her mourning and reached her own resolution by directing the movie of the script that had so distressed her. Carter learns this, disposes his drug supply, and visits the home of another patient, a beautiful actress to announce to her that he will not see her anymore “... professionally.” She smiles. End of the treatment, beginning of the love story. As the movie closes, for the first time, we see Carter in pajamas going to sleep alone in the big, half empty, marital bed.

In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud proposed that the lost object is not the same in mourning as it is in melancholia: “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud 1917, p. 234). Freud makes a distinction with melancholy, where “the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love.... In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost.... This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object- loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradiction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious’ (ibid., p. 245).

For the mourner, it is the lack of the object that causes the suffering, whereas for the melancholic subject, the object of grievance is not really lost but rather maintained within the subject, buried alive in the ego, from where it remains and causes intense suffering, becoming a devouring vortex of pain. Freud sums this up with his usual eloquence: “In mourning it is the world that has become empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (ibid., p. 246).

In counterpoint with Carter’s despondency, Jemma appears deeply saddened and puzzled by the loss of her mother, and yet she is able to move on and choose life—she is a mourner not a melancholic. One should not be misled by the fact that Carter rejects the intervention orchestrated by his friends who try an involuntary hospitalization to treat his addictions with the allegation: “It’s grief. They want you to have some kind of normal response to grief, you know, so they don’t have to watch. But it’s ‘mine’.” While Carter’s pain of existing is palpable, it is clear that he is not really mourning and his “compassion fatigue syndrome” is a cruel melancholic state in which the lost object is buried within. For Freud, melancholics do not know what it is in the lost object that they desire, thus they cannot begin the “bit by bit” psychical symbolic work of mourning that Jemma performs.

Freud describes mourning as the painful passage over the traces that belong to the object in the subject's mind; a way of discovering the object desired and constructed through of a series of representations that was in fact always bound by loss. In one scene, we see Jemma getting rid of a huge collection of movie tickets hanging from her ceiling that she kept as mementos of the films she watched with her mother. She can let them go and accept the loss they represent. The melancholic, however, identifies with and holds onto the lost, abandoned, or dead object in what Freud calls a "hallucinatory wishful psychosis."⁹ Carter does not seem to miss his wife; his ruminations are not about the loss of her, but about death itself: "It's all bullshit. It's all bullshit, and then you die," he tells his father (also a therapist to celebrities), who responds, "We knew that going in." Carter's bestselling book's title is *Happiness Now*, a title that seems to echo the cruelty of his super-ego's demands.

The key to resolving Carter's dereliction is revealed in the signifier "bullshit." He had complained to his father that "It's all bullshit, and then you die." Only when he admits publically, on camera, that his recipe for happiness is bullshit, can he be free from the ferocious grip of his super-ego. If you lie, you know the truth and choose not to say it, but when you bullshit, as Harry Frankfurt (2005) shows, you lose that distinction.¹⁰ Yet when Carter confesses that his book is bullshit, he puts himself at a distance from his own bullshitting and regains a certain truth. No longer rejecting his unconscious, he makes room for loss and thus also for desire— even if it is at the cost of a certain transgression—but now he is finally able to reclaim his side of the empty bed. He had started to mourn, helped, perhaps, by one of the possible embodiments of the object of desire—shit.

Lacan points out that the obscure object that causes desire is a lost object and as such cannot be contained in the image. Since the aim of the drive is not directed at an object but at satisfaction, the object of the drive is nothing. This nothing functions only as a stain or blind spot in relation to an image, much as desire is forever a blind spot with regard to our sense of self. In relation to the question of the analyst on screen, we wonder if staging the object in film through these peculiar transactions around failure is the only way to bring its presence to bear. Freud himself had little hope for film as an effective medium for capturing the work of analysis. As he wrote to Karl Abraham in 1925 about the film *Secrets of a Soul* for which Abraham was acting as a consultant for: '*My chief objection is still that I do not believe satisfactory plastic representation of our abstractions is at all possible ...*' (Freud 1925 p. 547).

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9 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia, ' in *The Standard Edition*, 14:244–45.

10 Frankfurt, Harry (2005) *On Bullshit*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

For Lacan, a basic psychoanalytic tenet is that at the end of an analysis, the object that becomes crystallized around the figure of the analyst, falls, loses being, and drops away. This making present of absence confronts the subject with choice, and her choice entails a sacrifice: either your life down the toilet or your object of *jouissance*. However, such sacrifice will allow mourning to take place. Short of a position of melancholy, the work with loss, called by Freud “our abstractions,” is hard to portray. An ethical act will only retain its radical edge if this particular kind of failure, loss, and sacrifice, can be represented with it. Psychoanalysis is not a story of Spielberg-triumphalism, but neither is it melodrama; the most productive model for psychoanalysis is comedy because while located at the border between *jouissance* and meaning, it allows us to move a step further from catharsis. As Lacan explains, unlike tragedy where action realizes desire in death (seen in all its gruesome glory in *Antichrist*), in comedy desire exceeds action: “One must simply remember that the element in comedy that satisfies us, the element that makes us laugh, that makes us appreciate it in its full human dimension, not excluding the unconscious, it is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slips away, runs off, escapes all those barriers that oppose it...”¹¹ Perhaps in positioning the ethical desire onto the audience, and failure and loss onto the screen characters, a play can be seen to exist between a subject of desire and the lost object that characterizes the trajectory of analysis. To know for certain, we would have to look further into what Lacan calls the ethics of the analytic act as portrayed by film.

Ethics of Loss

Does Carter’s shrink make an ethical choice? It is not clear, but by no longer compensating the loss with drugs, booze or bullshit, he is closer to realizing a kind of truth. A good example of the necessary ethical decision that needs to occur on the path to “cure” in analysis, is illustrated in the quirky Franco-German humorous neo-noir thriller, *Mortal Transfer* (2001) by Jean-Jacques Beineix, who previously directed *Diva* and *Betty Blue*. In the film, the Parisian psychoanalyst, Michel Durand, drifts off to sleep during a session with Olga, a sexually attractive masochist and kleptomaniac, who is married to an abusive gangster. Upon waking, he finds her dead on the couch from strangulation. Durand places the corpse under the couch and continues his clinical practice but is later (unsurprisingly) dragged into a web of intrigue. One interesting scene pays homage to the pun of the movie’s title. In French “transfer” means both transference, as in the traditional psychoanalytic term and transfer in the sense of relocating something from one place to another, such as a

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¹¹ Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 314.

monetary transaction, or movement of assets. Transference is a condition of psychoanalysis: a successful treatment is a “transfer”--it causes symptoms to transform, pass from one state to another. This “transport” relies on a libidinal redistribution in the unconscious economy, bringing about a subjective transformation. Transference conveys a movement that is key to the cure - one that entails a redistribution of enjoyment, a release of symptoms, a surrendering of *jouissance*, a necessary loss that allows for termination to occur.

Among the several characters that Durand engages with, is a homeless man dressed in a Santa Claus outfit who calls himself a “lottery victim” because after winning the jackpot he developed an irrepressible compulsion to burn money. He names himself “Erostratus” for having set everything on fire, and he manages to live off people’s charity by begging on the streets - as long as he’s tossed coins, which he can’t burn. Erostratus eventually becomes Durand’s patient. Initially he offers to exchange small chores for the sessions but soon realizes that he needs to pay for his analysis for it to work. To prove his commitment to treatment, Erostratus arrives with his shopping cart seemingly just full of rubbish from which he produces a wad of bank notes --the millions whose disappearance have led to the murder of Olga.

Erostratus offers Durand this huge amount of cash to pay for his analytic sessions (he admits that since it is paper money, he had already burnt one million), but Durand refuses the offer. Warning Erostratus that an analysis can take an extensive period of time, Durand says he can only be paid at each session rather than in advance. Erostratus has to keep the money and use it for his treatment. This gamble forces him to choose between his symptom and his wish to be cured. The analyst’s intervention encourages the homeless man to pay, and, by the same token, enables him to relinquish his symptom, and profit from the enjoyment of living without it. The analyst’s intervention provides the patient with an opportunity to make an ethical choice. In other words, the entrance into analysis implies a yielding of symptoms, which implies a forced renunciation of *jouissance*, lifting the destructive *jouissance* of arson, symbolized by the money that will not be burned but used at its right place, that of the universal equivalent of value, and in this case used to pay for analysis. The ethical turning point hinges on this object x, money, and the fantasy of having it all or losing it all. The reinsertion of money in the “normal” circuit of exchange reinserts the homeless man into the symbolic system of shared values. This is a rare example of a successful psychoanalytic act depicted on the screen. Nevertheless, despite his abnegation facing the offer of a fortune, Durand is nevertheless a “bad” analyst--he is convinced that he may have murdered his analysand and then, not knowing what to do, hides the corpse under the couch. This aspect of the narrative is a telling allegory of the demise of classical psychoanalysis in France.

There are a number of cinematic variations on this theme of the ethical quandaries of analysts. Of note are Nani Moretti's *Habemus Papam* (2011) and *The Son's Room* (2001). The uncannily doubly prophetic *Habemus Papam* focuses on a pope who steps down from his elected position as well as portraying a supreme pontiff who asks for the help of a psychoanalyst. In 2017, pope Francis revealed that in his early 40s, when he was the leader of the Jesuit order and still living in Argentina, he did a psychoanalysis with a Jewish woman and now he fears nothing. Unlike the actual 2013 abdication of Pope Benedict XVI, Moretti's pope does so before he has taken his holy seat and this "decision of desire" is made as a result of psychoanalysis. His resistance to the office is emphasized by the panic attack he suffers just as he is about to step out onto the Vatican balcony overlooking St. Peter's square to reveal himself to the people as their new pope. The cardinals cover for the delay, by announcing that the (still publically unnamed) pope felt the need for prayer and reflection before taking his vows, when in fact they suspect some form a breakdown and send for a psychoanalyst. What is interesting about the film is the focus on the anxiety around the lack, in particular a lack felt in time as waiting, created by this pope's stepping back or stepping down. One might even say, what is depicted is the anxiety produced by his silence, (not dissimilar to that created in a patient in response to the analyst's silence). The function of the pope is thus to hide an anxiety and to pretend there is no lack or absence. This is illustrated in the paradox of the phrase, *Habemus Papam* (we have a pope) perhaps meaning, we will always have a pope, we must have a pope. It is close to the creed of divine kingship, "the king is dead, long live the king."

The question of loss or lack is at play between the analyst (who has to stay inside the Vatican because nobody is allowed to leave the premises until the name of the new pope is announced while the pope himself escapes and wanders the streets of Rome) and his own wife, also an analyst (the second best after himself and with whom the pope will eventually consult). The male psychoanalyst kept in the Vatican, describes her as a brilliant clinician despite a certain fixation with the idea of "parental deficit." The idea of deficit seems to resonate with the pope, who upon election said he felt a deep feeling of uselessness and just wanted to be allowed "to go away," to "disappear." Interestingly, he seems to need to return to his favorite play, Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which is about mourning for one's life and the problem of stable meaning. One could say that this encounter with lack is what enables him to make a final, ethical decision, resigning from his Papacy with the words, "I am among those who cannot lead, but must be led. I am not the one who can confront all with love and understanding. Pray for me." The irony of course is that someone who is capable of reaching this awareness is much more capable to lead than one who is not as self-reflective.

As we have seen, this is also true of Nanni Moretti's, *The Son's Room*. The analyst tragically loses his son and likewise comes to a decision to step down and retire from his practice. He is wrecked by the loss that he can't stop revisiting every day. Before the devastating loss of his son, the analyst is depicted by his patients as someone with whom "one never feels guilty," someone "so tranquil, so serene," a benevolent figure, and as such, also being a bit bored, boring, and impotent. Another patient even says to him somewhat sadistically, "everything is fine in the face of you, you are so calm and giving, all will be forgiven. Does no one have to pay for anything?" In fact, his son dies in a diving accident at the same time he dutifully visits a patient out of normal office hours, on a Sunday. This forces the analyst to reflect on his place in relation to his patients.

The loss *in* the analyst, and the enactment of this with his patients by abandoning his practice, surprisingly enables his patients to overcome their symptoms. Even his morbidly obsessional patient who controls everything in her day-to-day life (who, for instance, forces her husband to make compulsory appointments (or what she calls "dates:") with her each evening to allay her anxiety), is able to forgo a referral to another psychoanalyst. She says to him, "I think I'd like to try to do without it," and then asks, "When will you return to work?" He says he doesn't know or know if he ever will, and she replies, "I'll wait. It'll be my next date." She can finally tolerate the anxiety of waiting, allowing a break in time and presence. Just as we see with Moretti's *Habemus Papam*, one finds the true position of the analyst at the moment of the ethical decision to stop or end; it is a metaphor for psychoanalysis at its moment of disappearance, failure, and falling away. So, it is not so much that these films are about the failure of psychoanalysis, but rather that they speak of the ethics of act: the position of the analyst as the one who will not suture the lack that defines us. These films create this possibility through playing with the audience's (transgressive) enjoyment and then by confronting them with the possibility of its loss. Only then is the assumption of desire and ethical choice possible, something perhaps best represented in *absentia* or this space in-between. Let us explore this thesis with another bad psychoanalyst, the charming Dr. Saul Benjamin, who engages in acts of moral turpitude.

Lovesick: A Comedic Parable of Psychoanalysis

In his many papers on psychoanalysis and film, Glen Gabbard has criticized the cinema for its inability to depict the accurate work of psychoanalysts (see Gabbard 1985, 1989, 1997, 2001). The distortions, to his mind, are created by unresolved transference fantasies, whether sexual or aggressive, that are harbored by the writer/director of the film. The analyst's failure, in other's words, should be seen as the patient-

writer's failure to contain or prevent their own transference fantasies from influencing depictions of reality within their films. Woe to the psychoanalyst who is so blatantly mischaracterized in movies! We are the hapless victims of patient's everywhere and their imagination gone wild! What will the public at large think? This latter question is of great concern to Gabbard.

Perhaps a more generous interpretation of why these bad psychoanalysts are failing and flailing all over the screens is that these representations *are* an accurate depiction of something important to the analytic process, something which cannot be captured in a narrative structure, especially in often linear imagistic constructions. In fact, would not Gabbard's good analytic film be utterly boring? Would audiences want to watch the analyst with his strict frame, his adoption of supposedly correct interpretations and interventions, who ushers the patient into the sacred halls of health. And is this even really how psychoanalysis works from beginning to end? Is this a depiction of the ethics of psychoanalysis?

Interestingly, *Lovesick* (1983), written by Marshall Brickman who shares writing credits with Woody Allen on *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979), is the film that Gabbard sees as the most obvious example of a distortion of psychoanalysis, may prove to be the contrary. Gabbard writes:

Lovesick is perhaps the most insidious and potentially malignant depiction of a psychiatrist acting on erotic countertransference feelings that has ever appeared in film. Other films which have touched on the subject, such as *Knock on Wood*, *Love at First Bite*, and *What's New, Pussycat?* are so ridiculous and farcical that no reasonable audience member would take the psychiatrists' actions seriously. Movies such as the made-for-TV *Betrayal*, based on an actual case of a patient's seduction by her psychiatrist, portray the psychiatrist as a clearly sick man rather than a typical member of his profession. *Lovesick*, by contrast, portrays Moore in a very sympathetic fashion--he is not shown as an outrageous caricature, but rather as an ordinary man in love (1985: 173).

It is especially "destructive" because the depiction of analysis is in fact close to "accurate" while still making a farce of the profession by depicting the sexual transgression of an analyst with a patient. "Countertransference" which technically refers to the reaction elicited in the analyst by the analysand's transference, is often used to describe the analyst's entanglement with the patient's feelings, and is a word often thrown around in the film. One witnesses failed attempts at supervision under the persecutory, disapproving eye of the analytic society. Unlike conventional plots with a moralizing aim, those movies in which lost women always die at the end, here the transgressive psychoanalyst does not seem to show any remorse; he not only gets away with breaking the rules, but lives happy ever after.

The problem for Gabbard is that *Lovesick's* main character, Dr. Saul Benjamin (Dudley Moore), is rather likeable and the film becomes an attack on the orthodox institution of classical analytic elders who look more comical than the benighted doctor in love with his patient. In the end, Benjamin 'escapes' into a more spontaneous world of love and Samaritan aid (he decides to work in a clinic for homeless schizophrenics), while his senior colleagues are left to their 'dead society' and the interminable treatment of rich narcissists that sustain them. To be honest, we aren't sure that this isn't an accurate assessment of the field, especially in the echelons of Upper East Side New York psychoanalysis. The attack may simply be justified. Further, we are quite in agreement with the final word of the film given by a fictional Freud (who acts as Benjamin's conscience): "Psychoanalysis was an experiment, it was never meant to become an industry!"

To push our point further, what isn't mentioned by Gabbard is the origin of the *folie à deux* at the heart of the romantic comedy. As Lacan observed, there is something "irresistibly comical" about people in love¹² and refers to the nonsense of love as "funny business" (*betise*).¹³ Dr. Benjamin has to step into the shoes of a dead man with a secret. Just before his sudden death, his analyst is seen at party confessing to Benjamin that he was madly in love with a patient; Benjamin ends up inheriting this woman as a new patient who is referred to him after the unexpected death of her first analyst. Predictably, like his diseased predecessor, he falls in love with her.

As mentioned earlier, this isn't the first time that death permeates the analyst (and patient) on film. (*Antichrist, The Sessions, Mortal Transfer, Habemus Papam, The Son's Room, The Treatment, The Shrink* and even the comedy *What About Bob?* where psychoanalysts are referred to as "a dying breed"; and where, in the closing titles, we are told "Bob went back to school and became a psychologist. He then wrote a huge best seller: 'DEATH THERAPY'.") Death points to something intrinsic in the analytic process.

Once more, the object becomes central in *Lovesick*. It is triggered by the confrontation with a female patient referred to Benjamin after her own analyst had died. She functions to rekindle the analyst's fantasy life. This awakening causes him to make awkward slips of the tongue; parapraxes such as forgetting the time during the sessions. He takes pills and drinks excessively in an attempt to regulate himself from fits of orality but is overcome by voyeuristic impulses till he finally gives in and confesses his love to her. Following the stern advice of his supervisor, Benjamin tries to break off the affair by explaining to this patient the

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12 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VIII, On transference*. p. 134 in the French version.

13 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 12.

concept of transference. She answers “Well, you’re not going to treat me anymore” to which he replies “Treat you? We have been to bed. Hopefully there is no way in the world I could be your patient again.” She quickly corrects him: “Analyst!... you cannot be my *analyst*.” The slip of the tongue reveals the recurrent trope of role reversal and the truth of Dr. Benjamin’s positioning.

Dr. Benjamin even returns the money his patients have paid him, one of many attempts to create a lack. Benjamin states to his supervisor, during an important moment of wrestling with his transgressive countertransference love, “the problem is that my life is tolerable” — namely, there is no lack and so no desire. This proliferation of objects begins to highlight the necessity for a lack to be given representation. Isn’t it precisely in transference love (but here, countertransference love) that one inevitably does this in analysis? Gabbard is annoyed with this scene of supervision; the older supervisor falls asleep during the supervision and seems to be confident that Dr. Benjamin will not act out simply because he trained him. This confidence is asserted in another scene when the supervisor is questioned about his mentoree’s transgression by senior colleagues. But, let us take a look at the “analytic” characters in the film. There is a dead analyst (from whom Dr. Benjamin inherited the patient he ends having sex with) a sleeping supervisor who appears all too comfortable with his power, and the protagonist, Dr. Benjamin, who seems content yet bored with his non-eventful life as a clinician. Dr. Benjamin’s behavior pulls out the rug from under all the bad psychoanalysts in the film (including himself) when he confronts the deadness and indeed slipperiness of his own desire— a desire previously maintained in an objectless “tolerable” state.

The psychoanalytic cure offered by Dr. Benjamin and his colleagues then is, in fact, no cure. Discovering this through a confrontation with the object in his fantasy, he is forced to leave his old, corrupt psychoanalytic identity behind. Their sense of their own authority will never be a means for desire to find its place in relation to radical loss. He is, like the wife in *Antichrist* and the new pope in *Habemus Papam* or the analyst in *The Son’s Room*, coming to terms with the object, as a melancholic would: as something missing, and perhaps for a time felt to be not just a prop but as something utterly useless. “False legs, false thighs, false breasts, ears, and eyes... None of this is any use”, says the wife in *Antichrist*. This confrontation with uselessness as an encounter with the loss *in* the object is a necessary step before one can claim desire, especially the desire *of the analyst*.

This is never a lesson that can be learned by psychoanalytic elders, especially those who believe absolutely in their authority and capacity to cure. Lacan felt that the analyst is challenged by every patient into a new form of uselessness, is duped and destroyed, brought to nothing. Lacan made a pun when speaking about the object, saying one has

to “*faire le tour*” (go around). We turn or circle the object, but in either case, we never lay a finger on it. In the end, the object always manages a disappearing act. If in the beginning of *Lovesick* we have the dead analyst, at the end we have the analyst who has mastered his trick, what we may describe as a thing of nothing: Dr. Benjamin’s, at the dinner designed to redeem him by his fellow society of psychoanalysts, decides to leave altogether, but only before he successfully performs the trick of pulling a tablecloth from beneath the objects set on the table. His former supervisor (the one who was sleeping) celebrates the trick, erupting in a fit of manic laughter. Benjamin exits to meet his lover-patient. Laughter, in a Lacanian perspective, could be a sign of hitting the Real when confronting death, the nothing, the void at the heart of our act as analysts, the tragedy whose other face is comedy. In his *Anxiety* seminar, Lacan highlights the relationship between laughter, death, sex and comedy with a pun: “to *faire l’amour*, if you will, *faire l’amourir*, to do it to death, it is even *à mourir de rire*, to die of laughter. I am not accentuating the side of love that partakes in a comical feeling just for the sake of it. In any case, this is precisely where the restful side of post-orgasm resides. If this demand for death is what gets satisfied, well, good gracious, it’s lightly satisfied because one gets off lightly.”¹⁴ Orgasm, or *la petite mort*, is a lighter ending than the Real ending, one that goes from love (*amour*) to dying (*mourir*) by way of laughter (*rire*), the paradoxical function of death of making life possible.

One last example to conclude: Nicolas Roeg’s wonderful film *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession* (1980). The setting is pre-fall of the Berlin wall Vienna. Dr. Alex Linden (Art Garfunkel), an American lecturer and researcher in psychoanalysis at Freud’s Museum, brings to a hospital a beautiful woman, Milena Flaherty (Theresa Russell) after she had attempted suicide with a medication overdose. As doctors try to save her life in an austere operating room, a series of fragmented flashbacks, which do not follow a linear chronology, give us a palpable sense of time while helping us reconstruct the details of their exuberant love affair. The professor of psychoanalysis is interrogated by a police detective, Inspector Netusil (Harvey Keitel), who suspects foul play on Dr. Linden’s part. In order to find out if Milena simply attempted suicide or if something more sinister took place, Netusil proves to be an excellent listener and intervenes in the style of a very skilled psychoanalyst, astutely probing Dr. Linden’s jealousy and repressed unconscious motivations. Once more psychoanalysis appears where you least expect it.

If most psychoanalysts on the screen are such bad, caricature psychoanalysts, it does not mean that the image of psychoanalysis is tarnished. This generates the counter-pole of the good viewer who

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¹⁴ Lacan, 2016, *Seminar X: On Anxiety*, 263 (translation slightly modified).

tends to the position of the good analyst. Isn't it wonderful to find psychoanalysis where you least expect it? And isn't this precisely proof of its enduring truth? A tragic-comic play between image and Other is certainly something Lacan brought to the foreground through his reading of Freud. It was immediately taken up by film theory and media studies. To transfer this possibility back onto the question of clinical psychoanalysis seems to us like an important move, not just for psychoanalytic theory to explain film, but for film to bring us back to what is crucial in psychoanalytic cure.

Comedy is tragedy plus time— death is there, but bound to life. “Life goes by, life triumphs, whatever happens. If the comic hero trips up and lands in the soup, the little fellow nevertheless survives,” observed Lacan.¹⁵ Comedy affirms life in its impermanence, in its happenstance. A similar strategy to embrace contingency is present in psychoanalysis: there, failure becomes linked to life rather than death and silence. Psychoanalysis, just like comedy, will introduce a new relationship to time—not the sequential time, but the subjective temporal dimension of the deferred action (*Nachträglich*) or après-coup, an interior time that is not chronological. Temporal rhythm, the beat or significant pause, these are key in comedic timing as well in a successful interpretation. The point is to know when and when not deliver the punchline. As Umberto Eco's Friar William puts it, the function of comedy is to “make truth laugh.”¹⁶

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¹⁵ Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, p. 314.

¹⁶ Umberto Eco, *In the name of the rose*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014, p. 527.

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Volume 10
Issue 2

**“Tragic-Comic
Structure Unmoored:
A Note on Julie
Taymor’s Titus &
Children’s Toys”**

Jeremy Matthew Glick

Abstract: This paper reads Aaron, The Moor's *plotting* in William Shakespeare and Julie Taymor's *Titus* speculatively suggesting an alternative way to think about Bergson formulation of the comic as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living"; whereas, plot-as-*structure* becomes dis-articulated from *subject* undermining the work's racist framing of Aaron as "irreligious Moor [and] chief architect and plotter of these woes" (5.3:121-122).

Keywords: *Titus Andronicus*, Julie Taymor, William Shakespeare, The Moor, Tragic-Comic, Subject and Structure.

The struggle against the German political present is the struggle against the past of modern nations, which continue to be harassed by reminiscences of this past. It is instructive for them to see the *ancien régime*, which in their countries has experienced its *tragedy*, play its *comic* role as a German phantom. Its history was *tragic* as long as it was the pre-existing power in the world and freedom a personal whim—in a word, as long as it believed, and had to believe, in its own privileges. As long as the *ancien régime*, as an established world order, was struggling against a world that was only just emerging, there was a world-historical error on its side but not a personal one. Its downfall was therefore tragic.

The present German regime, on the other hand—an anachronism, a flagrant contradiction of universally accepted axioms, the futility of the *ancien régime* displayed for all the world to see—only imagines that it still believes in itself and asks the world to share in its fantasy. If it believed in its own *nature*, would it try to hide that nature under the *appearance* of an alien nature and seek its salvation in hypocrisy and sophism? The modern *ancien régime* is merely the *clown* of a world whose *real heroes* are dead. The last stage of a world historical form is its *comedy*.

—*Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*,
Karl Marx¹

...The advantage of a small [toy] theatre exactly is that you are looking through a small window. Has not every one noticed how sweet and startling any landscape looks when seen through an arch? This strong, square shape, this shutting off of everything is not only an assistance to beauty; it is the essential of beauty. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.

—“The Toy Theatre,” G.K. Chesterton²

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1 Marx, 1843-1844, 247.

2 Chesterton 1901, 66-67

Before he even speaks, the “raven-coloured” Moor appears to be a self-contained, self-incriminating sign system—a darkness that seems undeniably visible.

–*Speaking of the Moor*, Emily C. Bartels³

This essay is about a Moor, a boy, and their toys. What happens when you dramatize and formalize tragic-comic *structure’s* horrific decoupling from *subject*?

In William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1593-94), Titus’s nationalism—his atavistic presumptive logic in relation to imperial Rome in decline’s sense of its national and racial *purity* is perpetually on shaky ground. His is a nationalism-as-production requiring constant repetition and upkeep. One might imagine a professorial admonishment of Old Titus for not being sufficiently dialectical in how he constitutes and consistently calibrates internal and external, national and *inter*-national, friend and enemy. This is an acute crisis symptom and misrecognition in light of the actuality of Rome in its imperial expansion as always, already multi-national. In her characteristic clarity and luminous analytic, Emily C. Bartels probes the representational work of the figure and *actuality* of the Moor-- in the unfolding action of Shakespeare’s play’s procedure as “state-authorized excoriation of the Moor as Other—the Other to outdo and undo all others.” Titus’s brother, Tribune Marcus Andronicus deems Aaron, the Moor as “chief architects and plotter of these woes”⁴ (5.3.122). This paper offers a speculative reading of this evocation of *plot* as tragic structure mechanized and gone awry. Bartels’s critical exposition carefully toggles back and forth tracing the complex calculus of *othering* in relation to the Moor and Goth in constant dialectical attunement to how difference, heterogeneity, and antagonism are internal to Rome as actuality—coherent characteristics of an Empire in decline’s lasts gasp. This is succinctly captured in her diagnosis that “the association of Moor with the alien is not what is given here, but what must be made...”⁵ Aaron, the Moor mitigates and traverses the levels and landscapes of imperial Rome, conspiring in a “place where the crossing of cultures is not the exception but the rule”⁶ This messy separateness of the Moor-- his outsider-insider status-- is not ultimately resolved by way of interpretive incorporation; but rather functions to cast in crisis a ledger that designates inside and outside, external and internal threat-- a multi-nationalism perpetually denied but factual nonetheless. Titus’s players

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3 Bartels 2008, 80.

4 Shakespeare 2005, 106.

5 Bartels 2008, 68

6 Bartels 2008, 70

are “unscripted partners in a volatile history of conquest and consent.”⁷ Part of the mechanistic horror in *Titus*’s unfolding is a kind of run-a-way train mechanized violence that fails to properly balance the proportion of force and consent necessary for sustaining an effective hegemony.

This paper examines Shakespeare’s play alongside how Julie Taymor bookends her theatrical adaptation *Titus* (1999). Taymor’s film stages Aaron’s doings and undoing, mobilizing a provisional, speculative theory of the tragic-comic that poses questions of inside/outside and insurgency appropriate to an Empire in decline. Taymor frames her film’s opening with a modern child (who becomes Young Lucius) as surrogate perspective for her audience surveying much of the action in the play often with skilled surreptitiousness. We first meet the boy adorned in a cut-out paper bag, ravaging hot-dogs and playing frantically with action-figures. He kinetically mirrors a televised military conflict before forcefully *returned* to the Roman Colosseum by a rough and tumble composite Biker-Clown-Legionnaire amidst an array of artillery explosions. A Roman soldier-figure travels back with the boy and the ceremonial washing away its dirt heralds the arrival of a mechanized synced up Roman platoon. Such return inaugurates the film’s Roman plot-- Titus’s most recent return as one part of a sequence of perpetual warfare against the Goths. The film ends with the child exiting the action moving towards a computer-generated sunrise with Aaron and Tamora, Queen of the Goths turned Roman Empress’s infant child in tow. The modern boy becoming Young Lucius turns his back on the action and steps off a Shakespeare modified Senecan tragedy revenge-plot that has piled on the bodies and brutalities. David McCandless’s exemplary “A Tale of Two *Tituses*” succinctly captures how the figure of Young Lucius inaugurates and forecloses the drama: “To the extent that the boy’s violent play called the world of violence into being, his absence from it signifies its collapse.”⁸ Tamor stages Young Lucius with child stepping off of a comic-structure that has effectively unmoored subject from structure, actant from mutually conflicting ideals-- signaling the Hegelian sense of tragedy. Both Shakespeare and Tamor’s are curious variations on the *Return to Rome* as a problem for radical thought. I propose reading Aaron as figural-vengeance plot as a representational counter-measure and counter-attack against how he is racialistically dehumanized. Certainly not because of the horrific brutalization and carnage his plotting directs and realizes, but rather it is how such functioning as plotting architect renders Aaron as a figurative stand-in for structure; therefore, bypassing typical racist tropes and their attendant binaries of nature/culture, feeling/thinking, center/periphery, and ultimately, subject and structure.

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7 Bartels, 2008 68.

8 McCandless 2002 509.

Aaron's *plotting* read here speculatively suggests an alternative way to see comedy and the comic's relation to its earlier tragic-stage. I work with a *progressive-regressive* understanding of Aaron's framing in the play and film; whereas, the staging of Aaron as plot and plotter (Aaron as structure) undermines the employment of racialist fantasy, informing but never completely limiting Aaron as subject. Aaron's plotting offers a speculative opportunity putting forward a provisional theory on how comedy extends and complicates the insurgent work of tragedy and the tragic by how it radically decouples subject and structure, actant and design. Consider Horace Walpole's formula that "This world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel"⁹ in relation to racialist tropes that code feeling and thinking along a metropole-periphery, colonial-scripted *Europe as thinking* and *Africa as feeling* axis. Aaron's conspiratorial plotting as a main engine propelling forward the dramatic plot is speculatively read here as making visible *structure* as thought. The work of dramatic structure to make such structure visible. The comic brings to the fore *structure* brimming with thought and design as its *content*, disarticulating from its condition of possibility—tragedy's fusing of subject and structure, tragedy's heroes fusing with action and ethical-political-military-strategic ideal or dueling ethical or juridical prerogatives. The comic aspect of the macabre-phantasmagoria unraveling in *Titus* stages the push-pull and war between subject and structure, uncoupling a fusion that tragedy relies upon as main operation.

This essay poses the question: What would happen if we take seriously Julie Taymor's 1999 film *Titus*'s opening framing scene of the child frantically playing war with his action-figure toys, emphasizing toys *over* child? Not as a rejection of the trope of childlike innocence and rejuvenating force as answer to tragedy (as in Bengali polymath, writer, and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore's maxim¹⁰); but rather, as a figure for the fusing-decoupling critical work of the *tragic-comic*.

Writing about Andrei Tarkovsky's film adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, Fredric Jameson offers up a compelling counter-intuitive formulation for the relationship between adaptation and original. Speaking on Shakespearean productions by Orson Welles, Peter Sellers, and Kenneth Branagh, Jameson writes: "The word 'text' obscures the dawning suspicion that Shakespeare's original script (or scenario) is not an original in our sense, nor could it ever be. This is no doubt a distressingly subversive apprehension, which might well lead us to another one: namely that the older paradigms of fidelity—and the newer Merchant-Ivory versions—do not faithfully reproduce their originals so

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9 Qt. in Zupančič 2008 8.

10 "Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man." This Tagore quote frames Sean Penn's 1991 film *The Indian Runner*.

much as they produce them—in the process turning them into classics (that is to say, by definition ‘originals’ that invite further such adaptations and performances).”¹¹ This is surely a critical-analog to Marx’s oft-referenced methodological insistence that “the anatomy of the human is a key to the anatomy of the ape.” In this matter of source material appearing *after*, consider this plot synopsis included as possible source for Shakespeare’s *Titus*. Housed in the Folger Shakespeare library is a copy translated from its Italian source is a mid-eighteenth-century chat-book entitled “The History of *Titus Andronicus*: The Renowned Roman General.” Its brevity and concision capture the frantic ensuing palimpsest of gruesome violations and blood drenched succession sequence of *Titus*’s dramatic progression via its writing. Its exposition transitions with the mechanistic efficiency of automata. In Shakespeare’s Act one when Titus slays his son Mutius, Titus queries Marcus: “Whether by *device* or no, the heavens can tell” (1.1: 396).¹² Clearly, this is an echo of the last line of Plato’s *Apology*-- Titus’s musings foregrounds *device* as plot/structure on display here in the eighteenth-century précis by way of its rapid-fire recounting. Here is the expository opening from “The History of *Titus Andronicus*, The Renowned Roman General”:

Who, after he had saved Rome by his valor from being destroyed by the barbarous Goths and lost two and twenty of his valiant sons in ten years’ wars, was, upon the Emperor’s marrying the Queen of the Goths, put to disgrace and banished; but being recalled, the Emperor’s son by a first wife was murdered by the Empress’ sons and a bloody Moor, and how charging it upon Adronicus’ sons, though he cut off his hand to redeem their lives, they were murdered in prison; how his fair daughter Lavinia, being ravished by the Empress’ sons, they cut out her tongue, and hands off, etc.; how Andronicus slew them, made pies of their flesh, and presented them to the Emperor and Empress; and then slew them also; with the miserable death he put the wicked Moor to; then at her request slew his daughter and himself to avoid torment.”¹³

This précis is an effective versioning of the pace of dramatic and cinematic unfolding of Shakespeare and Taymor’s *Tituses*. Its condensed, quick transitioning captures how in both productions, the layering of violence upon violation as its *device* comes off as dis-articulated from its character’s motivations: whether hubris, strategic-errors, or righteous battling against some competing,

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11 Jameson 2011, 216.

12 Shakespeare 1594, 2005, 31.

13 Quoted in Shakespeare 1594, 2005, 116.

mutually-exclusive, established *rights* and *wrongs*. The structure in its unfolding *unmoored* from character suggests another connotation and use, an alternative reading and mobilization of Henri Bergson's self-stated "starting point" from his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Aaron's *plotting* and the Young Boy/ Young Lucius's *play* constitute a shared object lesson: Aaron, the Moor's intrigue contributes to the feeling that the plot of Titus is to evoke Bergson's formulation— *du mécanique plaque sur du vivant*-- or, "something mechanical encrusted upon the living".¹⁴ Here, a speculative meditation on how the comic in the tragic-comic disarticulates character from motivation, fashioning of semblance of dramatic unfolding/plot trajectory as an unmoored automata—enveloping most key characters in its murderous unfolding. Beginning her film with a scene of modern child's play, Taymor is most certainly gesturing at the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, or *Alienation Effect* that decouples actor from role played, disturbing the classical Aristotelian unities as criteria for tragic drama (unities of action, time, and place), creating a disjunctive, incongruous coupling of competing settings (Taymor's Rome of antiquity contains Model-Ts, motor-cycles, video-games, microphones, and punk rock sartorial flavors). For Brecht, famously, this is a technique meant to not let his audience lose themselves in the spectacle and cease critical thinking—the Diderot-sourced dance between duel-valorizing theatrical functions as the pleasure to entertain or the pleasure to instruct. Yet, something else is happening here. The children's toys open up a lane, extending a line to well-established insistences on not underplaying play and the role of the child as sites to calibrate and re-calibrate an anti-fascist political-theoretical and radical dramatic project. Taymor's (and for that matter Brecht's) tactics underscore the Bergsonian dialectic of mechanical/ living. Young Lucius literally discards *encrusted* dirt Roman Legion soldier in the opening gesture of Taymor's film—inaugurating the assemblage of living (yet mechanized) Roman soldiers. The inanimate washed toy soldier inaugurates a soldier mass as mechanistic information actuality.

In a dialogue on Taymor's *Titus* from *Cinéaste*, Young Lucius's character's vantage point and *function* is discussed:

Her dazzling layers of imaginative juxtapositions, notably her sensitive and original framing of the tale through the eyes of the boy Lucius (Osheen Jones), take us beyond the brutality and madness, and provide viewers with a catharsis, an insight into the emotional vulnerabilities behind the violence and human tragedy it ultimately causes. The film's visually stunning final image evokes a fragile but clear sense of hope about the future of humanity.

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14 Bergson 1912 49; Zupančič 2008, 111-126.

Here is Taymor speaking on her mobilization of Young Lucius--adding him to the scene where banished Elder Lucius proclaims “Now will I to the Goths and raise a pow’r / To be revenged on Rome and [Emperor] Saturnine” (3.1:299-300)—and her modification of Shakespeare’s ending pertaining to the fate of Aaron and Tamora’s infant child:

The young Lucius is in mine because he’s watching that event. IN the play I had that as a soliloquy at the end of Part One. I thought those are words that he should say to the child, they are horrific. He’s kissing this boy, they’re saying goodbye, they’re hugging each other, and it just gave so much resonance to how we justify—“Don’t worry, we’re going to avenge”—whatever it may be that we say with children...

In my stage version, the baby was in a coffin that was delivered by the clown onto the banquet table and, when the child opened up the baby coffin, you heard many babies crying, the birds, the bells. That was too oblique and abstract for a movie because that would be saying that the child is dead. In the theater it’s symbolic. So I changed it and I put him in the cage, which is even darker, in a way, because you say, “My God, this child is an animal in a cage and he’s black and... what will his life be!” So with Lucius opening that cage and taking the baby out of the coliseum, the child, now of his own free will, takes the baby and exits out of the coliseum, this theater of violence, of cruelty, and into this bleak but open landscape that has water, which means there’s a possibility for fruition, of cleaning, of forgiveness. It’s also a movement towards the sunrise, which is the next generation **But it freezes on that image, just that slice of the sun coming up** [emphasis mine]. It’s not a full sunrise. It’s about possibility and hope but it’s not about solution.¹⁵

Elder Lucius proclaims Aaron’s *atrocious-exhibition* sentence concluding Shakespeare’s play. The sadistic punishment prefigures Bernard Rose’s reimagining of Clive Barker’s *Candyman* (1992): “Set him breast-deep in earth and famish him; / There let him stand and rave and cry, for food: / If anyone relieves or pities him, / For the offense he dies, This is our doom. Some stay, to see him fast’ned in the earth” (5.3:179-183). The psychopathology of lynching necessitates its audience: Lucius hails an audience for the punitive spectacle. McCandless in his analysis of this closing *shot*, evokes the language of mechanism: “As with Lavinia’s pedestal [where she is bound by Tamora’s sons Demetrius and Chiron after they rape her, cut off her tongue and hands, and replace her hands with spindly proliferating tree branches] Taymor defamiliarizes a

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15 De Luca, Lindroth, Taymor 2000, 29.

process of objectification by concretizing an objectifying mechanism.”¹⁶ McCandless proposes Young Lucius’s exiting the Colosseum as “fortifying the Symbolic against the Real by staging a wish-fulfillment fantasy; a *dénouement* uncomfortably comparable to the Hollywood Happy Ending... What the boy heads toward is an illusion, a haven provided by the flats of aesthetic escapism.”¹⁷ I will conclude this paper, respectfully, with a different reading of Tamor’s staging of Young Lucius and infant child’s grand exit’s relationship to the tragic-comic and how the *Tituses* figure Aaron as conspiring plot-structure unmoored from subject.

One of the object lessons Bergson employs to illustrate his comic principle—his “something mechanically encrusted upon the living” is the infamous *jack-in-the box*:

As children we have all played with the little man who springs out of his box. You squeeze him flat, he jumps up again. Push him lower, and he shoots up still higher. Crush him down beneath the lid, and often he will send everything flying. It is hard to tell whether or not the toy itself is very ancient, but the kind of amusement it affords belongs to all time. It is a struggle between two stubborn elements, one of which, being simply mechanical, generally ends by giving in to the other, which treats it as a plaything. A cat playing with a mouse, which from time to time she releases like a spring, only to pull it up short with a stroke of her paw, indulges in the same kind of amusement...

Now, let us think of a spring that is rather of a moral type, an idea that is first expressed, then repressed, and then expressed again; a stream of words that bursts forth, is checked, and keeps on starting afresh. Once more we have the vision of one stubborn force, counteracted by another, equally pertinacious. This vision, however, will have discarded a portion of its materiality. No longer is it Punch and Judy that we are watching, but rather a real comedy.¹⁸

Tamor’s opening scene regains a *portion* of this *materiality* that her dramatic unfolding and formalization compromises. She stages contrast as dialectical interdependence between vitalism and mechanization, stasis and frenetic movement, contemporary *now-time* and the *Return to Rome*. Bergson’s movement from toy jack-in-the-box, to the mechanistic

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16 McCandless 2002, 508.

17 McCandless 2002, 510.

18 Bergson 1912, 69-71. For an infinitely rich engagement with Bergson and the “Idea of Négritude” see Diagne, Bachir Souleymane, 2007, 2011.

vulgarity of Punch and Judy's puppet policeman's perpetual re-animation after being knocked down – to the fully realized dramatic work (Bergson's example is Molière's *Le Mariage Forcé*) retains a diminished materiality. Alenka Zupančič's, to my mind, unsurpassable critical discussion of Bergson links his theory of the comic with the comparably "aprioristic and rather abstract duality of his basic philosophical position, which perpetuates in more than one aspect the dualism of matter and spirit, body and soul, and in which body (inertia, automatism) inevitably falls on the side of what is imperfect and deficient. This is also why Bergson can ultimately define the phenomenon of laughter as nothing but, or more than, a mechanism of social corrective (of this imperfection)." To make it plain—this is a matter of the competing philosophical methods, outlooks, and their attendant politics—dualistic versus dialectical thinking. With dialectical exactitude Zupančič poses the key question: "What if the mechanical element in the comic is not simply one of its two poles or compounds, which is being "stuck," encrusted, on the other pole (on "life"), but could be said to refer to the very *relationship* between (any) two poles appearing as a "mechanical" relationship?"¹⁹ Bergsonian dualism, in Zupančič's analysis "completely overlooks the possibility of this duality already being a (retroactive) *effect* of the comical, not simply its starting point...the comic movement does in fact real something twofold, a fundamental divergence in what is otherwise perceived as a harmonious or organic whole, and in this sense it could be said to point to an original, preexisting duality."²⁰ On the dialectics of the *tragicomedy*, she elaborates:

...It is a commonplace to say that comedy is full of "mechanical," textual repetitions, whereas we do not really find this kind of repetition in tragedy. But perhaps we can find something more interesting and conceptually productive if we formulate this slightly differently: tragedy cannot stand textual, mechanical repetition, whereas comedy not only stands it, but thrives on it. A tragedy that repeats itself is no longer tragedy (and even if its repetition is absolutely horrible, the latter is deprived of its epic dignity, essential to tragedy proper). Yet if tragedy that repeats itself is no longer tragedy, this does not make it comedy. This point is very important: comedy is not a repetition of tragedy, it is a repetition of something structurally prior or independent of tragedy. There is no direct passage from tragedy to comedy; we not get comedy by repeating. In this respect, we must be careful to distinguish between comic sequences within tragedy (as described above) and

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19 Zupančič 2008, 115.

20 Zupančič 2008, 114-115.

what is usually called tragicomedy. The repetition of tragedy falls into this latter category of tragicomedy.

The genre of tragicomedy, which has experienced such a significant rise all through modernity (and postmodernity), is to be understood in the perspective of the repetition of tragedy (not in the perspective of the development of comedy). It is a development that takes place within the tragic paradigm. It involves the recognition of the fact that the tragic itself (with all its epic splendor) is ultimately but a mask of the really miserable, a mask that cannot survive its own repetition. The repetition of tragic events deprives the latter of their aura and transforms them into something common, unexceptional..."²¹

Titus most certainly rips off the mask. How do the *Tituses* present a speculative re-emphasis and re-working of Bergson's terms and Zupančič's counter? And what about *tragedy*? And how can Zupančič's emphasis on retroactive effect resonate with how the *Tituses* configure and resist Aaron the Moor as both subject and structure, character and plot. Bartels makes the point that focus on the Moor's malevolent design, transgression, and violent punishment (again, he is buried alive to his head and it is decreed that anyone who attempts to provide him sustenance shall be killed)--the attendant racist dehumanization that frames his character functions to ultimately provide cover for the fact that Adronicus's son Lucius--banished, returned, and now aligned with a Goth army has killed the Emperor Saturninus.²² Racist dehumanization, qualifying Aaron as "irreligious Moor, Chief architect and plotter of these woes" (5.3: 121-122) serves to provide "shiny object" cover for the crime of violent succession. To insist on a kind of immanent critique of the tragic-comic, as opposed to the comedy as something vis-à-vis tragedy from without, focuses our attention to internal contradictions, antagonistic and constitutive from within, not without. What I want to suggest is that Aaron's *plottings* can be brought out speculatively to function as a meta-theatrical calling attention to the play and film's structure and unmooring of structure and subject. The terror and comedy of the *Tituses* is as much a matter of how we perceive plotting getting ahead of the plotters, asserting its own dynamism decoupled from subjectivity or reason it is the "slaughter bench of history" on display on the proscenium or screen.

Play is not just object-- it is an inter-play of object and narrative. For G.K. Chesterton (writing on the utility of the fairytale), stories and play do not generate fear and animate devils; but rather primes the child with the

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²¹ Zupančič 2008, 174-175.

²² Bartels 2008, 96: "Bringing Aaron into visibility appears thus as a way to make invisible Lucius's unconscionable murder of the legitimate head of state."

confidence to kill them. Chesterton's is an age-appropriate analog to the adult lesson that *Hangmen Also Die!*²³ Like Brecht, Chesterton emphasizes *clarity* and the theatrical and narrative problems of vicarious stand-ins: "What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of the bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon."²⁴ Taymor's decisions link her film to a long line of critical-aesthetic and radical musings on the gravitas of child's play. Imagine Bergson's jack-in-the-box in Bowie's toymaker's stockpile; or for that matters Benjamin's Russian children's museum window. From David Bowie self-titled 1967 first album, "Come and Buy My Toys":

*Smiling girls and rosy boys
Come and buy my little toys
Monkeys made of gingerbread
And sugar horses painted red*

*Rich men's children running past
Their fathers dressed in hose
Golden hair and mud of many acres on their shoes
Gazing eyes and running wild
Past the stocks and over stiles
Kiss the window merry child
But come and buy my toys...²⁵*

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Bowie's recording is a pageant of playful folk and cabaret tunes reminiscent of what would become his lifelong obsession—Weimar, Germany and its performative afterlives. Weimar markers include the radical song-writing of Kurt Weil, the self-reflexive militant poetics and playwrighting of Bertolt Brecht, the vocal delivery and madcap control of singer Lotte Lenya and Nina Simone's *Pirate Jenny*—the *force of song* marshalled against the ravages of fascism. Recorded during the same dates and times (and studio) as both *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Pink Floyd's *Piper at the Gates*, most of these Bowie firsts are bursts of story juxtaposing adult commerce with youthful play. Gloomy, gothic grown-up matters (*problems of necessity*) meet the joyous and anarchistic business of children (*resources for freedom*). Short beautiful bursts of song are accompanied by John Renbourn on guitar and Dek Fernley on bass. Bowie couples for listeners images of selling solutions

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23 Recall this is the name of the 1943 anti-fascist noir directed by Fritz Lang and adapted by John Wexley from one of Brecht's short-stories.

24 Chesterton 1901-1913, 2015, 47.

25 Bowie 1967

for the harsh winter--“Sell Me a Coat”--and the thirsty-persistent but charming imploring of the youth to “Come and Buy My Toys”. His restrained yet forceful by way of its melodic consistency in tone and vocal delivery weaves a web of associations marrying doom with joy, austerity with abundance, child-like fancies of flight with the crushing, grounding reality-crash of political economy. John Renbourn would go onto forming the folk band *Pentangle* building on the work and form of “Come and Buy My Toys”, especially its folk elements and allusions from the English ballad “Scarborough Fair”. “Come and Buy My Toys” is amongst other things, a poetic *adaptation*. A year prior to the release of English literary and social critic William Hazlitt’s 1817 masterful study on *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (to be discussed later in this paper), London’s *The Monthly Magazine* (home to writings by William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Dickens) published the poem that became the source material for Bowie’s song (See figure one).²⁶ Bowie’s antecedent is the poem “A Toyman’s Address” (subtitled ‘in the style of modern poetry’) by the author “G.N.” published in 1816. Compare this stanza from G.N. with the aforementioned lines from Bowie:

Smiling girls, rosy boys,
Here—come buy my little toys.
Mighty men of gingerbread
Crowd my stall, with faces red.
—from “A Toyman’s Address” (1816)

*Smiling girls and rosy boys
Come and buy my little toys
Monkeys made of gingerbread
And sugar horses painted red*
—from “Come and Buy My Toys” (1967)

Bowie’s adaptation, his repetition with a difference, his migration from poem to song, from page to ear function as a kind of retroactive actualization of G.N.’s promise. Bowie’s song, its relation to its set (the full-length album) makes good on G.N.’s claims to modernity— “in the style of modern poetry”. Incorporating and modifying G.N.’s prosody into a song-cycle, perhaps lacking the militant intention of someone like Brecht; but still resonating with one of the German Marxist playwright’s key concerns. The evisceration of every trace in mass-culture from youth to adulthood of fascist sensibility and dominance—the sort of ominous sensibility that Tamor’s *Titus* portends. There’s a theory of history here bound up in the repetition of art forms, housed in a journey from poem to song.

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26 For further discussion see: <https://www.bowiebible.com/songs/come-and-buy-my-toys/>

Consider the 24 July diary entry capturing the 1943 infamous conversations between Brecht and literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (both country-hopping in Europe trying to outrun the genocidal onslaught of Nazi invasion) at Brecht's house at Skovsbostrand 8, 5700 Svendborg, Denmark:

On a beam which supports the ceiling of Brecht's study are painted the words: 'Truth is concrete.' On a windowsill stands a small wooden donkey which can nod its head. Brecht has hung a little sign round its neck on which he has written: 'Even I must understand it.'²⁷

Brecht's toy-donkey—the insistence on the imperative to understand—resonates with how his friend Benjamin theorizes the appeal of children's toys as both knowledge and play. In the 3 August diary entry capturing their conversation, Brecht foregrounds how a program of revolutionary culture must include an artistic program on par with his song-sequence entitled *Children's Songs in the Poems from Exile*. Poking and proding the *war pigs*, Brecht insists on a project scale that is covers all the bases, both colossal and *cellular*: "We must neglect nothing in our struggle against that lot. What they're planning is nothing small, make no mistake about it. They're planning for thirty thousand years ahead. Colossal things. Colossal crimes. They stop at nothing. They're out to destroy everything. Every living cell shrinks under their blows. That is why we too must think of everything..."²⁸

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²⁷ Benjamin 1943, 89. See also Adorno, 1951 and Dienst, 2011- an indispensable resource for thinking through and past understanding debt as solely capitalistic burden and unwanted obligation.

²⁸ Benjamin 1943, 98.



Figure One: “A Toyman’s Address”--The Monthly Magazine Vol. 42 (1816)²

There is a striking reverberation between C.L.R. James’s 1932 *Letters from London* (cataloging his visit to the *Victoria & Albert Museum*) and Walter Benjamin’s 1927 *Moscow Diaries* in that they are both obsessed with museum collections of children’s curiosities. James captures his enthusiasm with an emphatic expository cry lauding “Models! Models! Models!”²⁹ For James, the enthusiastic explosions of children’s energy, the frenzy of smiles, haptic engagement-- *touching* is the way young people theorize—the way they model and engage their sense-perception, reason, and use. Their sticky hands and gleeful screams integrate theory and practice. It is as well the regaining of a portion of materiality.

Walter Benjamin’s short article “Russian Toys” links handicraft, reflection on cottage industry and different degrees of development in the mode of production with child’s play indicative of the unrelentless intellect captured by the child’s desire and willingness to know:

The toys of all cultures were products, initially, of a cottage industry. The stock of primitive forms in use by the lower groups in society, the peasants and the artisans, provided the sure foundation for the development of children’s toys up to the present.

29 I work with James’s encounter at the Science Museum alongside his (and Rilke’s) meditations on Rodin’s *St. John the Baptist* (1881) in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in *The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution*.

There is nothing remarkable about this. The spirit from which these products emanate—the entire process of their production and not merely its result—is alive for the child in the toy, and he naturally understands a primitively produced object much better than one deriving from a complicated industrial process. Herein, incidentally, lies the legitimate basis of the modern trend to produce “primitive” children’s toys. If only our artisans would not so often forget when doing this that it is not the constructive, schematic forms that appear primitive to the child, but rather the total construction of his doll or his toy dog, insofar as he can imagine how it is made. This is just what he wants to know; this first establishes his vibrant relationship with toys.³⁰

The production is “not merely the result”. It is principally about process—emphasis on the *how*. Aesthetic form, in its simplicity appeals to the child who hasn’t yet had her dialectical curiosity extinguished by the cold road of commerce. The “spirit from which these products emanate” is the desire and ability to know. It is the valorization of *process over product*.

These notes on *Titus* and toys echo the prefatory framing for a project examining theatrical and theoretical meditations on 5th-century B.C.E. Roman General Gaius Marcius Coriolanus and Patrice Lumumba, first Prime Minister of the Independent Democratic Republic of Congo. It extends prior efforts, taking up philosophical, genre-study and (after Raymond Williams) colloquial resonances of *Tragedy*. Recall that Williams in his study *Modern Tragedy* encourages scholars to confront Tragedy as “smash-up on the road”³¹ alongside more academic conceptualizations. Williams wants an analytic that marries how tragedy is used in our day-to-day speech with how it is utilized in a university Classics, Philosophy, or Theatre seminars. I engage this long tradition of thinking about tragedy to revisit the topic of my first book: complexities pertaining to the relationship between insurgent leaders and masses, and works that stage a historical return in Black Radical and Marxist thought.

Variations in the form of plays, philosophical/critical studies, Pan-Africanist missives, and films on *Coriolanus* (for critic Tony Tanner, “the last great tragedy written for the English stage”)³² and Lumumba function akin to *Slavoj Žižek’s* adaptation of Sophocles’s Greek Attic tragedy *Antigone*—specifically, *Žižek’s* experiment with multiple endings as “ethico-political exercises.”³³ As such, *Žižek* adds another entry to the long list of *Antigone* adaptations—dramatic and theoretical-critical

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30 Benjamin 1986, 123.

31 Williams 1966, 2006, 33-34.

32 Tanner 2010, 653.

33 *Žižek* 2016, xxv.

that include Brecht, Rainer Werner Fassbender, Judith Malina, Jacques Lacan, and Kamala Shamsie.

Performance as critical-philosophical experiments and *Tendenz Kunst* [politically partisan art] are the building blocks to secure something different than what we are accustomed. Adaptation is the technique potential product of the radical will that helps bring such *differences* online.

Roman general and warrior Gaius Marcius is given the supplemental name Coriolanus after his sacking of the city of Corioli, banished for his unwillingness to bare his scars to the people at a ritualistic inauguration as tribune at the height of acute class strife and food riots (Shakespeare's version-- in Plutarch's *Lives* he complies). Subsequently, after the long road of banishment he aligns with Rome's enemy the Volscis and makes peace with Aufidius, his Volsci counterpart. They vow to join forces and destroy Rome together--Gaius for the outrage and contempt of banishment; Aufidius for the insult and injury of colonial occupation. Just prior to the epic leveling of Rome, Gaius is persuaded by his militaristic widowed mother Volumnia³⁴ (again more developed in Shakespeare than Plutarch) to renounce this traitorous alliance and broker piece with the Volscis. This brokered peace preempts the infernal leveling of Rome. For his betrayal and re-alignment back with his natal and imperial Rome, Corioalnus dies by Volscis hands.

African independence leader Patrice Lumumba renounces his so-called *Évolué* class status (a colonial administrative policy category / racist settler logic announcing one's status as vetted functionary)-- first as postal-clerk, then as traveling *Polar Beer* salesman (an opportunity to cognitively map what would become the Independent Democratic Republic of Congo martyred, mutilated, buried in innumerable unmarked grades by a willing coalition of Congolese government and military elite [friends in fact], Belgian elite, and the American Central Intelligence Agency. Lumumba traveling the country selling his beer establishes the vision and connections to imagine his country whole and free from one of the most brutal and sadistic regimes of European colonial rule in Africa--the Belgium of King Leopold. Lumumba's murder and dismemberment spreads his body all over the country he worked tirelessly to unite. Subsequently, his ideas and iconography continue to inspire artists, activists, and intellectual interested in a world free of colonial logics and domination.

Why pair Coriolanus and Lumumba--and my attendant categories of Liberalism and Loss? The specific details of such *whys* unfold (Hegel's *Phenomenology's* war against the *Ready-mades* are as prescient now as ever) via juxtaposition. As in my work on theater and the Haitian

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34 For a beautifully forceful discussion of Volumnia see Rose 2018, 50-53.

Revolution, I am interested in the analytic couplet stagecraft/statecraft. *Coriolanus* and Lumumba variants, their proffered possibilities offer keys to theorizing liberalism's evolution and its present crisis and impasse—its contemporary war-scape of racist terror, imperial aggression, its sadistic assault on the trans-community, its consistent wrestling with death cults and suspicion vis-à-vis medical and climate science, its judicial attempt (in the United States) at mandating forced births that risk the health, well-being and very lives of women, a generalized corruption that does not even attempt to hide, an ecological omnicidal devastation and brutal assault on labor. “One, two, many” *Coriolanus* and Lumumbas foreground a dialectical meditation on parts and wholes, mediating claims and tasks of leadership, the severance and persisting of historical memory and radical political desire essential for thinking the scale of revolutionary Pan-African projects waging war against the current actuality of our grim planetary crossroads: either robust and unyielding eco-socialism or death.

Children's imaginary flourish isn't limited to toy figurines. They also have been known to play with insects. Consider these two scenes from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus*, and the “Butterfly Hunt” entry from Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900* respectfully:

Marcus. Alas, my lord, I have but killed a fly.
 Titus. “But!” How, if that fly had a father and mother?
 How would he hang his slender gilded wings,
 And buzz lamenting doings in the air!
 Poor harmless fly,
 That, with his pretty buzzing melody,
 Came here to make us merry! And thou has killing/ him.
 Marcus. Pardon me, sir; it was black ill-favored fly.
 Like to the Empress' Moor. Therefore, I killed him.
 Titus, O, O, O,
 Then pardon me for reprehending thee,
 For thou hast done a charitable deed.
 Give me thy knife, I will insult on him,
 Flattering myself, as if it were the Moor,
 Come hither purposely to poison me.
 [*He strike at it*]
 There's for thyself, and that's for Tamora.
 Ah, sirrah!
 Yet I think we are not brought so low
 But that between us we can kill a fly
 That come sin likeness of a coal-black Moor.
 Marcus. Alas, poor man! Grief has so wrong on/ him,
 He takes false shadows for true substances...(31:59-80)³⁵

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 35 Shakespeare 2005, 68

Volumnia He had rather see the swords and hear a / drum than look upon his schoolmaster.

Valeria O' my word, the father's son! I'll sear 'tis a/ very pretty boy. O' my troth, I looked upon him o'/ Wednesday half an hour together: 'has such a confirmed countenance! I saw him run after a gilded butterfly, and when he caught it he let it go again, and after it again, and over and over he comes, and up / again, caught it again. Or whether his fall enraged him, or now 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear it! / O, I warrant, how he mammoocked it!

Volumnia One on's father's moods.

Valeria Indeed, la 'tis a noble child.

Virgilia A crack, madam.

Valeria Come, lay aside your stichery. I must have you play the idle housewife with me this afternoon.

Virgilia No, good madam, I will not out of doors.

Valeria Not out of doors?

Volumnia She shall, she shall.

Virgilia Indeed, no, by your patience. Ill not over the threshold till my lord return from the wars.

Valeria I will wish her speedy strength, and visit her/ with my prayers, but I cannot go thither.

Volumnia Why, I pray you?

Virgilia 'Tis not to save labour, nor that I want love.

Valeria You would be another Penelope. Yet they say/ all the yarn she spun in Ulysees' absence did but fill Ithaca full of moths... (1.3: 58-87).³⁶

When a red admiral, say, or a sphinx moth—with whom I should have been able to catch up easily—made a fool of me with hesitations, feints, and fits of dawdling. I would have liked to be able to dissolve myself into light and air just so as to near my prey unobserved and pounce on it. And my wish was granted to the extent that each quiver or vibration of those wings for which I'd desperately fallen left its breath on me, or stole into me. The old hunter's adage was beginning to come true for us: The closer I drew to the creature with every fiber of my being, the more butterfly-like I became inwardly, the more did the ways of the butterfly borrow the color of human resolve, and at last it seemed to me that its capture was the sole price through which I might regain possession of my human nature... As for the strange tongue used by butterfly and flowers to communicate before his eyes—by now he had wrested several of its laws. His bloodlust had grown less and his trust greater in like degree.³⁷

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36 Shakespeare 2008, 182-183.

37 Benjamin 2010, 18-19.

Taken as a set, these meditations on fusing and splitting would be rich fodder for Otto Fenichel's analytic. In *Titus*, Young Lucius retroactively assigns a killed fly as stand-in for Aaron as a quick solution to get out of trouble. Titus and Young Lucius's layering of racist insult is a second order rationalization. As such it functions as a microcosm of the play's sleight of hand emphasis on the Aaron plot as a whole and the attendant othering: this sleight of hand draws attention away from a project of succession via revenge-plot. Valeria's invocation of Penelope's weaving Laertes's burial shroud brings to the fore the conflation of a survival strategy as well as a narrative technique: Penelope's weaving and unweaving of the shroud defers the suitors' aggression and holds out hope for Odysseus's return. As a meta-device, the shroud brings attention to deferring the resolution of Homer's epic. Penelope's shrewd tactic to ward off the suitors and their crass violation of *xenia* (ξενία) foregrounds the text's constructiveness. "Over and over he comes, and up / again, caught it again" is the entomological equivalent to Bergson's jack-in-the-back and taunting cat. Shakespeare inaugurates and navigates a logic of mutilation and prothesis. In Tamor's film, Lavinia augments her severed hands replacing branches with toy parts—a nod to the opening scenes action figure frenzy. Whereas, Coriolanus's arms morph into super-human killing machines, the sword fusing with the body via the rhetoric of the play. The capacity for harm is as dire as the impact of the non-compliant "the mutinous parts"(1.1:108) from Menenius's *Fable of the Body Politic*. Benjamin's tableau of childhood-hunter and hunted in all its rhetorical flourish stages a fusing that Coriolanus only achieves, fleetingly, through temporary alliance and counter-alliance wrought from war.

As two of Shakespeare's Roman plays ostensibly concerned with questions of alignment and counter-alignment, mutilation and prothesis, banishment and return, force and consent, diplomacy as both the *deferral* of war and war by other means-- *Titus Andronicus* and *Coriolanus* strike a stark opposition in terms of their critical reception. There is only single mention, designating *Titus Andronicus* as a "flame-tipped welter" in M.W. MacCallum's massive 1925 monograph *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Backgrounds*.³⁸ I will briefly focus on three critics—T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, and William Hazlitt- speaking through Friedrich Schlegel.

T.S. Eliot in the vexatious essay "Hamlet and His Problems" lauds the "tragic success" of *Coriolanus* asserting that it "may be not as 'interesting' as *Hamlet*, but it is, with *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare's most assured artistic success."³⁹ Eliot's other verdict

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38 MacCallum 1925, 177.

39 Eliot 1920, 1998, 57.

lacks such generosity: *Titus* is “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which the best passages would be too highly honored by the signature of Peele.”⁴⁰ W.H. Auden does not go as far as Eliot. His is critique via omission. Auden’s 1946-1947 *Lectures on Shakespeare* at The New School of Social Research are as brilliant as they are hilarious. They are exemplars of punchy precision and serious thinking. Auden lectures weekly on all of Shakespeare’s plays plus *The Sonnets* minus *Titus* and a riotous bait-and-switch operation vis-à-vis *The Merry Wives of Windsor*-- Auden enters class complains about the play’s dullness and instead plays the class a recording of Verdi’s *Falstaff*. During an October 1946 lecture on *Richard III*, Auden reasons:

Henry VI is a general history. *Richard III* concentrates on an individual character: the character of a villain. There is a difference between a villain and one who simply commits a crime consciously, for its own sake. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is an early example of the villain in Shakespeare. Barabus in *The Jew of Malta*, another crude villain, is an example in Marlowe. In appearance these characters—a Jew, a Moor, a hunchback—are all outside the norm.⁴¹

Auden’s delineation between one who commits a crime and the villain resonates with Hegel’s Jena-period essay “Who Thinks Abstractly?” in its meditation on an example of abstract thinking as reducing a murderer to the act of murder and forsaking consideration of other mediations or defining characteristics: “This is abstract thinking to see nothing in the murderer, except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to annul all other human essence in him with this simple quality.”⁴² From a November 1946 lecture on *The Taming of the Shrew*, *King John*, and *Richard II*:

We shall not spend very much time on *Taming of the Shrew*. It is the only play of Shakespeare’s that is a complete failure, though *Titus Andronicus* may be another. The plot of *Taming of the Shrew* belongs to farce, and Shakespeare is not a writer of farce. Ben Jonson might have made the play a success, but it is not up Shakespeare’s alley.

And finally, in a 1947 *Julius Caesar* lecture: “Shakespeare’s two significant tragedies preceding *Julius Caesar*--we can forget *Titus Andronicus*--are *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*.”⁴³

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40 Shakespeare 2005, 2.

41 Auden 2000, 13.

42 Hegel 1807-1808, 1965, 116-117.

43 Auden 2000, 125.

Hazlitt, the always aiming ever so honorable pugilist comes to Shakespeare's spirited defense. In the "Doubtful Plays of Shakespeare" section of his 1817 book of criticism *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, Hazlitt's opening move is to pass the baton to Schlegel citing his insistence that "All the editors, with the exception of Capell, are unanimous in rejecting *Titus Andronicus* as unworthy of Shakespeare."⁴⁴ This offers Schlegel an opportunity to propose his comparative method-procedure where one should weigh the worth of a literary work (establishing its pedigree) alongside comparable works in a set. Schlegel lambasts critics who proceed backwards and "set out with a preconceived opinion against a piece, and seek, in justification of this opinion, to render the historical grounds suspicious, and to set them aside". Warring with critics that he views as help-mates of the *a priori* and the ready-made, Schlegel's verdict on *Titus* is ultimately-- failure. Such failure is bound up with how he views *Titus* as misunderstanding and failing to execute a "true idea of the tragic." *Titus* is "framed according to a false idea of the tragic, which by an accumulation of cruelties and enormities degenerates into the horrible, and yet leaves no deep impression behind..." Schlegel has no time for critics of Shakespeare's *Roman Plays*⁴⁵ and their purported "immaturity." In an astonishing analogic pivot, Schlegel compares such critical misjudgment to early stages in the founding of Rome and imperial designs: "Are the critics afraid that Shakespeare's fame would be injured, were it established that in his early youth he ushered into the world a feeble and immature work? Was Rome the less the conqueror of the world because Remus could leap over its first walls?"

Schlegel sympathetically laments that Shakespeare "found only a few indifferent models." He privileges *process* over *product* asserting that "In Shakespeare's acknowledged works we find hardly any traces of his apprenticeship, and yet apprenticeship he certainly had." It is clear that such *models* for *Titus* include Senecan Revenge Tragedy and Book 6 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—specifically, Tereus's rape of Philomela—the "other [who] has no tongue/ To speak at all."⁴⁶ These are some of Shakespeare's *Titus*'s "few indifferent models." The play's central off-stage horror-- the rape and dismemberment of Andronicus's daughter Lavinia-- who is simultaneously lauded and objectified as "Rome's rich ornament" (1.1:52). As Bartels makes clear, "The Ovidian pre-text...does not begin to tell Lavinia's story, does not begin to voice the horrors of the mutilated body on stage. Nor can the dramatic embodiment of the

.....
44 I consulted a facsimile of Hazlitt's 1817 book now in public domain and available on Project Gutenberg.

45 On Shakespeare's *Roman Plays* see Charney 1961.

46 Ovid, 1986, 141.

pre-text give sustaining voice or meaning to Lavinia's body, "Rome's rich ornament" and tragic "changing piece," which is abstractly more and physically less than the sum of its parts..."⁴⁷ Here the logic of canonization and the reliance upon staged brutalities—a dual-movement of shock and neutralization-- meet at a crossroads. Literary allusion, diegetic references to Ovid cannot expiate a myriad of complicities and itinerary of horrors. What I have tried to make clear is that the "few indifferent models" cannot explain away how the *Tituses* discomfort. The ever-proliferating tragic on the level of the plot become heightened, exacerbated, and palpable, but not obvious. This disclosure/foreclosure, this showing and hiding renders brutalities all the more terrifying by way of dis-articulating such *plottings* from its dramatic persona/ subjects. The comic undoing within the labor of the tragic gets formalized in the *Tituses* via Aaron's dastardly antics and the racialisms that cast his character. A frantic chain of terrors, murders, and mutilation do not only provide adequate cover for bloody succession and the speculative theoretical richness enacted by dramatic form. They substitute for a key formal characteristic of the works—the disarticulation of revenge structure form subject functioning as a *mechanistic* engine, revved up and outside even its architects' control.

In reference to the French Jacobins *Return to Rome*⁴⁸, Marx's sense of the interplay between the tragic and the comic is worked on in his writings on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Marx establishes limits and categories delineating the *world-historical* from the merely *personal* bound up in the interplay between tragedy and the comic. With resonant and typical concision and brilliance, Richard Halpern's *Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy* links Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* discussion of farce with the political problem of the lumpen-proletariat. This is an opportunity to recall Hegel's take on of philosophical labor of laughter: "Laughter, for Hegel, *dissolves*; specifically, it dissolves ethical binding into free self-consciousness. At the same time, comedy must itself remain devoted to presenting the rational. The laughable as such cannot be its aim."⁴⁹ Titus in its particular actualization of the interplay of the tragic and the comic, dissolves structure from subject—the revenge-design consumes almost all.

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47 Bartels 2008, 89.

48 See also the fascinating and dynamic "Critical Battle Against the French Revolution" section of Marx and Engels's *The Holy Family* (1845).

49 Halpern 2017, 217.

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Writing in reference to James A. Snead's magisterial *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* and Melville, Toni Morrison identifies a central device of the racist imaginary as what she calls "Dehistoricizing allegory" which "produces foreclosure rather than disclosure. If difference is made so vast that the civilizing process becomes indefinite—taking place across an unspecified infinite amount of time—history, as a process of becoming, is excluded from the literary encounter... Melville uses allegorical formations—the white whale, the racially mixed crew, the black-white pairings of male couples, the questing, questioning white male captain who confronts impenetrable whiteness—to investigate and analyze hierarchic difference."⁵⁰ What interests me here is how Snead and Morrison think about duration, proximity, and distance. Creating an indefinite gap between *self* and a myriad of others, a temporal trick of imperialism is akin to underplaying the contemporary after-lives of American slavery by positing an infinite long-durée that conflates the Egyptian- happenings in the *Book of Exodus* with the Kansas-Nebraska Act! Titus's scripting of Aaron constitutes a malevolent representational racist calculus that the structure—its myriad of *plottings*-- dialectically undermines.

Young Lucius and infant slow walk into the interregnum of Tamor's partial sun-set. This is not ideological closure of the Happy Ending. Rather, the youth walk off a run-away comic atrocity-exhibition that is the *Tituses* structure unbound from subject. Young Lucius and infant child march off into contingency. Theirs are the as yet undecided possibilities engendered by their refusal of "all chief architects and plotters of these woes.

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50 Morrison, 1992, 68-69.

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Volume 10
Issue 2

Horror and Hilarity in the Work of Samuel Beckett

Alexi Kukuljevic

Abstract: In the work of Beckett, the comic is subtended by horror. Horror is not merely a matter of something horrible that happens and that can be made the object of a description or a story. It unsettles the core of language, and as result, the wholeness of the cosmos, being as such, and the subject who speaks. Horror designates the process of atomization in which the void assumes an ungainly presence, becoming a thing horribly concrete. Yet, this has the effect of making it horribly funny. In Beckett, one learns to laugh at the 'unhap'. A form of laughter that tends towards silence, this laughter serves to enunciate a void which is irreducible to nothingness. Such laughter enunciates a difference between nought and nothing, engendering an 'absentee' subject that laughs at its own unhap. Considering the full scope of Beckett's oeuvre, I suggest that Beckett is the thinker of the tragicomic.

Keywords: Beckett, comedy, tragicomedy, laughter, horror, humour, the void, nothing, Democritus, puns

What I saw was a bald man in a brown suit, a comedian. He was telling a funny story about a fiasco. Its point escaped me.¹

Horror in Beckett can be horribly concrete. In *Rough for Theater II*, a screwball comedy about suicide, two accountants A (Bertrand) and B (Morvan) – bickering and bantering bureaucrats – have been hired by their client, character C, to “sum up” the relative value of the portfolio of his life.² C stands motionless throughout the play with his back to the stage before a window, awaiting their audit, undecided as to if he is going to jump. His casefile is a poorly ordered mess containing fragmentary testimonies, biographical details (a youth's failed runaway attempts, a marriage beset with “five or six miscarriages” ending in “judicial separation”), hopes and aspirations (“hope not dead to see the extermination of the species...literary aspirations incompletely stifled”³) and a “slim file” of confidences that detail a series of infirmities at once horrible (“fibroid tumours”) and hilarious (“pathological horror of songbirds”).⁴ A quick evaluation of his file looks grim:

B: Work, family, third fatherland, cunt, finances, art and nature, heart and conscience, health, housing conditions, God and man, so many disasters.

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1 Beckett, 1995, p. 63.

2 Beckett, 1986, p. 246.

3 Beckett, 1986, p. 242.

4 Beckett, 1986, p. 242.

[Pause.]

A: [Meditative.] Does it follow? [Pause.] Does it follow? [Pause.] And his sense of humour? Of proportion?

B: Swamped.⁵

And like good accountants who sum to the letter, who dot their “i”s and cross their “t”s, B (Morvan) reassures A (Bertrand) that C’s leap into the void does not run the risk of failure. They are on the eighth floor: “He only has to land on his arse, the way he lived. The spine snaps and the tripes explode.”⁶ The fatal impact of concrete on the innards renders the horror concrete while negating the gravity of the fall with a humorous touch. By landing on his arse, the way he lived, the metaphor of his life becomes horridly literal in the manner of his death.

Like all of Beckett’s “people,” his “gallery of moribunds,”⁷ as it is put in *Molloy*, C is a veritable do nothing who clearly has no reason to be something rather than nothing. His folder attests to the fact that he has no principled reason, let alone a principle of sufficient reason, to live. And just when the accountants stumble over the statement – “a morbid sensitivity to the opinion of others... ” – that might give their account pause, the reading light begins to flicker, short, then intermittently cut in and out, derailing B’s effort to find the verb – “Shit! Where’s the verb? ... Hold on till I find the verb and to hell with all this drivel in the middle.”⁸ By the time, he finds the verb, “I was unfortunately incapable—”, we and they have lost the point. The lamp continues to malfunction. Dragging on so long that the “gag” even begins to annoy the characters: “This gag has gone on long enough for me.”⁹ If there was a ground, the gag has ground it into oblivion. When B eventually comes to the end of the sentence, speed reading to the exasperating conclusion – “From then on it might as well never have been uttered”¹⁰ – all has come to nought. Their hope of finding a reason and with it, the metaphysical ground of C’s existence, has not only been dashed, but it has tried the patience of all involved, straining the understanding to a breaking point.

The gag demonstrates the lack of point, and with it, the proposition famously enunciated by Nell in *Endgame*: “Nothing is funnier than

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5 Beckett, 1986, p.238.

6 Beckett, 1986, p. 238.

7 Beckett, 1958, p. 132. The sentence in full reads: “What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerik, Mercier and all the others.”

8 Beckett, 1986, p. 243.

9 Beckett, 1986, p. 244.

10 Beckett, 1986, p. 245.

unhappiness, I grant you that.”¹¹ The author has by this point proven that he shares C’s bleak sense of humor. As the testimonial of his “life-long friend” and “light comedian,” Mr Moore reports: “To hear him talk about his life, after a glass or two, you would have thought he had never set foot outside hell. He had us in stitches. I worked it up into a skit that went down well.”¹² And with no reason to live, he, too, shall indeed go down well. This comedy will not prove otherwise. The accountants can find nothing, no “positive elements of a nature to make him think” it could be otherwise. So down in the dumps, his gaze so slumped that he can find nothing to uplift. As Mr Feckman, a “certified accountant,” recounts: “To all appearances down and out. He sat doubled in two, his hands on his knees, his legs astraddle his head sunk. For a moment I wondered if he wasn’t vomiting. But on drawing nearer I could see he was merely scrutinizing, between his feet, a lump of dogshit.”¹³ Fixated on a turd, a piece of nothing without even the metaphysical pretense to nothingness, Beckett positions C as next to nothing. All but voided, all that remains is the final plummet: the timeless passage of the *do nothing*.¹⁴ The interval of a life “from nought come, to nought gone.”¹⁵ The horror of death’s concretion – embodied in a quintessential image of the void’s incontinence (the tripe exploding and the spine snapping) – conveys the true gravity of the fall. Landing on his arse, C is truly the butt of the lifejoke. The comic effect here touches on the truly *grave*.

In Beckett, comedy is deathly serious. Gravity is punishing, and it is here reinforced by the pun on “grave”: gravity, gravitas, and the grave (the hole in the ground) converge in the fatal contact between arse and concrete. Horror’s concretion, in Beckett, is a thing horribly hilarious. If we laugh, whether full or stifled, loud or silent, it is because so much sense has come to nought, evacuated with the force of the bowel’s exploding. Beckett’s work is singularly interested in the specificity of laughs such as these that, in the words of *Watt*, “strictly speaking are not laughs but modes of ululation,”¹⁶ which is to say, a howl or a wail, shifting registers between horror and hilarity like a demented yodel. It is common to laugh at the mishap, but Beckett forms the stuff of comedy into Art that laughs at the *unhap*. In *Rough for Theatre I*, the character A complains of being lucky but not lucky enough to be able to die. He

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11 Beckett, 1986, p. 101.

12 Beckett, 1986, p. 240.

13 Beckett, 1986, p. 241.

14 Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 162. In conversation with Israel Shenker, Beckett refers to the ‘do nothing’ as “a non-can-er.”

15 Beckett, 2009b, p. 216.

16 Beckett, 2009b, p. 39.

has thought of suicide but not done it: “I’m not unhappy enough. [Pause.] That was always my unhap, unhappy, but not unhappy enough.”¹⁷ In *Watt*, Beckett suggests that the laughter that laughs at the unhap is the highest form of laughter, having traversed the “bitter” and the “hollow” laugh that each laugh at the lack of the good and true respectively. Bitter laughs are ethical, hollow laughs intellectual, but “the mirthless laugh” is “dianoetic.” Here we encounter the *eidos* of laughter: “It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus puris*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy.”¹⁸ Constructing a divided line of ascending “laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs,”¹⁹ which begins with a laugh that is indiscernible from the cry – the biter laugh: “Eyewater, Mr Watt, eyewater” – in order to differentiate the hollow from the pure laugh. This laugh laughs at what makes bitter and hollow laughs possible, namely the capacity to laugh at a life that is neither good nor true, to laugh at life’s lack. This transcendental laugh is made possible by the unhap. One laughs, with the unhap, at the nothing that happens, and it is this relation to nothing that is not nothingness that positions this laugh in relation to itself. One laughs at laughter as such when one laughs at what is not funny, at a horror, at the grave, at the wretchedness of a life born in pain and destined to die. One laughs, in short, at the tragi-comic desire for happiness and the horror this desire has wrought.

This is the laughter that Beckett, in *Texts for Nothing*, refers to cryptically as the “xanthic laugh,” which is an alien form of what in French one terms idiomatically a *rire jaune*, literally, a yellow laugh.

What exactly is going on, exactly, ah old xanthic laugh, no, farewell mirth, good riddance, it was never droll. No, but one more memory, one last memory, it may help, to abort again.²⁰

The Greek, xanthic (yellow), awakens a memory of Watt’s *risus purus* with its mirthlessness, but it alludes as well, perhaps, to Beckett’s early story “Yellow,” the penultimate chapter of his first published collection of short stories, *More Pricks than Kicks*, in which the first of Beckett’s agonists,²¹ Belacqua, attempts to “arm himself with laughter,” the laughter of Democritus, to calm his anxiety in the face of his upcoming surgery, which proves fatal, to remove a toe and tumor “the

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17 Beckett, 1986, p. 229.

18 Beckett, 2009b, p. 40.

19 Beckett, 2009b, p. 39.

20 Beckett, 1995, p. 107.

21 I would like to thank James Krone for this formulation. See his press release for the exhibition, *Fin de Partie*, at Louche Ops.

size of a brick that he had on the back of his neck.”²² Beckett carefully stresses that this laughter is poorly named, for as Beckett writes, “laughter is not quite the word but it will have to serve,” adding: “Smears, as after a gorge of blackberries, of hilarity, which is not quite the word either, would be adhering to his lips as he stepped smartly, *ohne Hast aber ohne Rast*, into the torture-chamber. His fortitude would be generally commended.”²³ This laughter of blackberry hew expresses a state that defies expression, locating the queer presence of what Beckett will later name the unnameable, but here associates with “Bim and Bom, Grock, Democritus, whatever you are pleased to called it.”²⁴ Confronted with unnameable, the subject can only attempt a laugh which is not not a laugh because it is not not sad.²⁵

Beckett associates this vertiginous space of the doubly negated with Democritus of Abdera. In *Murphy*, Beckett refers to him metonymically, as he often does, as the Abderite.²⁶ This Abderitean laughter is a laughter, to quote *Murphy*, that erupts when “the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real.”²⁷ The “guffaw of the Abderite” does not just serve to punctuate Beckett’s preferred translation²⁸ of Fragment 156 of Democritus – “nought is more real than nothing” [*mê mallon to den ê to mêden einaî*] – allowing for the full stress to fall on the ontological determination of nothing. The laugh is also the form of its enunciation. The “guffaw of the Abderite” enunciates a difference between “nought” and “nothing,” which Beckett returns to decisively with *Worstward Ho*. This difference signifies nothing, drawing attention to a difference that fails to mean something but names the real of negation: what remains when the somethings give way or add up to Nothing. This difference does not make sense but does nonetheless

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22 Beckett, 2010, p. 156

23 Beckett, 2010, p. 156.

24 Beckett, 2010, p. 155.

25 For an extensive treatment of the problem of laughter and the awkward joke in Beckett’s oeuvre, see Salisbury, 2015.

26 For the importance of Democritus to *Murphy* as a whole, see Henning, 1985, pp. 5-20. For an overview of the philosophical import of Democritus to contemporary thought, see Dolar, 2013, 11-26. For the importance of the Pre-socratics to Beckett’s work, see Weller 2008.

27 Beckett, 2009a, p. 154.

28 Beckett encountered this formulation of fragment 156 in Alexander’s *Short History of Philosophy*. In Beckett’s Philosophy Notes archived at Trinity College Dublin, Beckett records the following passage: “Aristotle, in his account of the early philosophers, says, ‘Leucippus and Democritus assume as elements the “full” and the “void”. The former they term being and the latte non-being. Hence they assert that non-being exists as well as being.’ And, according to Plutarch, Democritus himself is reported as saying, ‘there is naught more real than nothing.’” (Alexander, 1922, pp. 38-39. As cited by Weller, 2020, p. 112. Shane Weller’s research has been an important resource for this essay.

makes a difference that marks the place where sense goes missing. “Nought,” with its archaic spelling, is a signifier that signifies nothing, but does so differently, naming a difference that evades signification, because strictly speaking it means nothing. In signifying nothing, it registers an evasion at the level of the signifier: a material difference that differentiates two signifiers – “nought” and “nothing” – which both mean nothing. Differentiating this meaning, “nought” meaning nothing, which is to say, a nothing irreducible to nothingness. Nought is not nothingness. By literalizing its signification, the insignificant letters added to its determination, “nought” does not just mean nothing, it embodies it, materializing “nothing” in the senseless addition of the signifiers “ugh”. A true “ugh” if there ever was one.

“Nought” is next to nothing but not nothing, marking the place of a signifier that presents its lack of sense. Like a laugh that signifies a present absence, this “nought” which is not nothing, and certainly not something, presents the signifier (the atom of language) as a hole in sense, as that which makes a hole, and thus makes evident that lack of sense. The atom of the signifier is the place holder of an absence: the void. The marker of a hole lacking all wholeness, the signifier is not at all wholesome. When the atoms of sense touch on this void, one cannot help but laugh, even if it is only silent, to quote Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*, “the long silent guffaw of the knowing non-exister, at hearing ascribed to him such pregnant words.”²⁹

No wonder in *Malone Dies* Beckett refers to Democritus’ strange formula as one of “those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than nothing*. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into its dark.”³⁰ To devote oneself to a signifier that signifies nothing is utterly perilous. The height of folly. For is one not simply devoting oneself to Nothingness? Beckett’s answer, as one might expect, is sheer folly.³¹ His answer is simply, “No.” Nothingness is not nothing. Nothing is “nought” and “nought” is not the same as “not”. This difference falls silent in the saying. To try and address it, to speak about it, imperils all sense, dragging the speaker into a pit by imperiling the claim that all speech, all *logos*, is speech about something. Humanity as a whole, despite being comprised of creatures that cannot do without the nothing, would prefer that, when it comes to its oddness, one remains silent. It is, to quote *Murphy*, one of “the occasions” that “calls for

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29 Beckett, 1995, p. 150.

30 Beckett, 1958, pp. 186-87.

31 In an interview with Gabriel d’Aubade, Beckett states: “All I am is feeling. ‘Molloy’ and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel” (Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 240).

silence,” and Beckett, here, provides one of the best definitions of silence as “that frail partition between the ill-concealed and the ill-revealed, the clumsily false and the unavoidably so.”³² Beckett takes this call – this call for silence – altogether literally. One must summon it, make its presence heard. What is at issue in the “nought” is a silence that can only be “ill-concealed” and “ill-revealed.” One must stumble over these silent letters clumsily placed so as to obtrude, making the “not” bulge with the pus of the letter whose spotting can only be ill seen, ill said. This partition is what Beckett, in a letter to Mary Hutchinson, referring to the Abderite mentioned in *Murphy*, terms the “queer real.” “If there is a queer real there somewhere it is the Abderite’s mention in *Murphy*, complicated – *ibidem* – the Geulincx “Ubi nihil vale etc”. I suppose these are its foci and where a commentary might take its rise.”³³ Beckett positions his work between the void of Democritus and “the beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx: *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*.”³⁴ The beauty lies in the minimal displacements between “*ubi*” and “*ibi*” – from “where” to “there” – and “*vales*” and “*velis*” – from “worth” to “wish.” Beckett translates the formula as: “wherein you have no power, therein you should not will.”³⁵ With these “foci,” Beckett situates his work philosophically between two Nothings: the “nought” of the object and the nihil of the subject, between being and desire, between the void and the subject’s atomization. Beckett’s fiction introduces us to an irreparably atomized cosmos, elaborating a world that is oddly pre-Socratic and post-Cartesian, out of time and out of joint, and governed by what he terms, in an early piece of criticism, “a principle of disintegration.”³⁶

Beckett’s work exhausts itself in the effort to address, or rather, butt up against, this “queer real”. A nothing more radical than nothingness: “Nothing will ever be sufficiently against for me,” Beckett writes to Georges Duthuit, “not even pain, and I do not think I have any special need for it.”³⁷ This is what Beckett terms, in the same letter, “the language of the no.”³⁸

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32 Beckett, 2009a, p. 161..

33 Beckett, 2011, p. 669.

34 Beckett, 2009a, p. 112.

35 Beckett, 2012, p. 456.

36 In a review of Sean O’Casey’s collection *Windfalls*, Beckett writes, “Mr O’Casey is a master of knockabout in this very serious and honourable sense – that he discerns the principle of disintegration in even the most complacent solidities, and activates it to explosion ... If ‘*Juno and the Paycock*’, as seems likely, is his best work so far, it is because it communicates most fully this dramatic dehiscence, mind and world come asunder in irreparable dissociation” (Beckett, 1984, p. 82).

37 Beckett, 2011, p. 97.

38 Beckett, 2011, p. 98.

One must shout, murmur, exult, madly, until one can find the no doubt calm language of the no, unqualified, or as little qualified as possible. One must, no that is all there is, apparently, for some of us, this mad little tally-ho sound, and then perhaps the shedding of at least a good part of what we thought we had that was best, or most real, at the cost of what efforts. And perhaps the immense simplicity of part at least of the little feared that we are and have.³⁹

Beckett's work, his art, can be aptly summed, as a "mad little tallyho" into the "language of the No." A writing, then, that ceaselessly insists on a difference that is *next to nothing*. "Is nothingness the same as nothing?" Adorno asks in his notes for an essay on *The Unnameable* that he unfortunately never wrote: "Everything in B[eckett] revolves around that. Absolute discardment, because there is hope only where nothing is retained."⁴⁰ In Beckett, nothing is retained, not even nothingness; what remains, then, is nothing. Adorno's query is admirable, and cuts to crux of Beckett's concern. Yet, Beckett might quibble about Adorno's expression of hope. Hope is "insufficiently against" for Beckett. Beckett doggerelizes a *Maxim* of Nicholas-Sébastien Roch Chamfort, beautifully.

Hope is a knave befools us evermore,
Which till I lost no happiness was mine.
I strike from hell's to grave on heaven's door:
All hope abandon ye who enter in.⁴¹

The hope of heaven, in Beckett, is not heavenly, nor are its surrogates, particularly, the promise of "home coming."

In an early note, occasioned by his reading of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Beckett pens the imperative: "don't be honing after home."⁴² Home is a horror as Beckett suggests in a letter to McGreevy: "The sensation of taking root, like a polybus, in a place, is horrible, living on a kind of mucous [for mucus] of conformity [...] The mind is in league with one's nature, or family's nature, it pops up and say égal."⁴³ The promise of being at one with oneself, at home in nature or nation— what Jacques

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39 Beckett, 2011, p. 98.

40 Weller and Van Hulle, 2010, p. 178.

41 Beckett, 2012, p. 199. The editors' note that Beckett shares the same birthday as the Aristocrat turned Jacobin, who managed to royally botch his suicide (Beckett, 2012, p. 437). Mladen Dolar reminded me that they both share the same birthday with Jacques Lacan.

42 Beckett, 1999, p. 116. Pilling notes that Beckett's usage alludes to Burton's formulation: "Tis a childish humour to hone after home."

43 Beckett, 2009c, p. 153..

Lacan terms “the archaic form of the pastoral”⁴⁴ – is deadly. Its promise is what Beckett already in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* terms the “wombtomb.”⁴⁵ This contraction refers to Belacqua’s honing after “the pleasant gracious bountiful tunnel” which he “remembers” but from which he is barred irreparably and to which he can only gain entry at ultimate cost. He “cannot get back. Not for the life of him.”⁴⁶ Delivered with deadpan humor, the idiomatic phrase ‘not for the life of him’ assumes a deadly literality. It is the life in him that bars access to the life he desires, which is no life at all.

Such “honing” is what the Ur-promise of Comedy for Beckett amounts to with its promise of an end that ends well. Yet, Beckett’s comic gamut is comprised of life stuff from which no mirth is made.⁴⁷ The mad little tallyho into the language of the no ends with the injunction to say farewell to farewell. To give up on calmatives. The only way of not being at home in hell is to not hope for heaven. To see hope as a thing homely. To view one’s native “land” as the place of one’s “unsuccessful abortion.”⁴⁸ The one who learns to enunciate the nought forms a relation to the unhap that is not not happy. For Beckett, happiness comes to one who abandons all hope and learns to enunciate “like hell it is.” This is, perhaps, what it could mean to laugh at life’s unhap.

Let me end this beginning with some final words, the final words of Beckett’s *III Seen III Said*:

Decision no sooner reached or rather long after than what is the wrong word? For the last time at last for to end yet again what the wrong word? Than revoked. No but slowly dispelled a little very little like the last wisps of day when the curtain closes. Of itself by slow millimetres or drawn by a phantom hand. Farewell to farewell. Then in that perfect dark foreknell darling sound pip for end begun. First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness.⁴⁹

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44 Lacan, 1992, p. 89.

45 On such instance runs as follows, “It was stupid to imagine that he could be organized as Limbo and wombtomb, worse than stupid” (Beckett, 2020, p. 129).

46 Beckett, 2020, p. 130.

47 I am alluding to the title of Ruby Cohn’s *Beckett’s Comic Gamut*.

48 In 1938, Beckett writes, “Do not imagine I am returned to the land of my unsuccessful abortion” (Beckett, 2009c, p. 647).

49 Beckett, 2009e, pp. 77-8.

To know the “No” – to parse the language of the No – leaves the one who desires to know, no happiness. Beckett never tired of his appreciation for Jonathan Swift’s definition of happiness in *A Tale of the Tub*: “happiness, possession of being well deceived.”⁵⁰ Know happiness.

I

In Beckett’s fiction, we inhabit a world whose meaning has not simply withdrawn but been eviscerated. “I listen and the voice is of a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world, under a faint untroubled sky, enough to see by, yes, and frozen too.”⁵¹ The writer draws “back the curtains on a calamitous sky.”⁵² The blue of day has become interwoven with the black of night, unhinging this most foundational of oppositions and un-anchoring the subject of experience.⁵³ The viewer of starry sky is thoroughly disoriented.⁵⁴ We do not live beneath a sheltering sky, but “beneath a sky without memory of morning or hope of night.”⁵⁵ The light of this star, like the light of the stars as such, report upon a calamity that is ferociously indefinite. As Adorno writes, “Beckett keeps it nebulous.”⁵⁶

Samuel Beckett’s work is pervaded with a sense of obscure disaster. In *Endgame*, Hamm’s anguished “What’s happening, what’s happening?” receives a disconcertingly flat response: “Something is taking its course.”⁵⁷ Hamm has a hard time with the indexical, stumbling over its enunciation: “this...this... thing.”⁵⁸ In *Happy Days*, where happiness is far from happy and refers to “the happy days to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the moon has so many hours,”⁵⁹ Winnie states: “Yes, something seems to have occurred, something has seemed to occur, and nothing has occurred, nothing at

50 Beckett alludes to Swift’s line in *Echo’s Bones*. See Beckett, 2012, p. 9 and the annotation on p. 64.

51 Beckett, 1958, p. 35.

52 This phrase is from *Molloy*. See Beckett, 1958, p. 97.

53 In the Addenda to *Watt*, Beckett comments on the sky above and the waste below: “The sky was of a dark colour, from which it may be inferred that the usual luminaries were absent.” (Beckett, 2009b, pp. 217. Another example from *Molloy*: “The sky was that horrible colour which heralds dawn. Things steal back into position for the day, take their stand, sham dead” (Beckett, 1958, p. 134).

54 Already in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, we encounter the remarkable passage: “The inviolable criterion of poetry and music, the non-principle of their punctuation, is figured in the demented perforation of the night colander” (Beckett, 2020, p. 20).

55 Beckett, 1958, p. 35.

56 Adorno, 1992, p. 245.

57 Beckett, 1986, p. 98.

58 Beckett, 1986, p. 98.

59 Beckett, 1986, p. 144.

all, you are quite right, Willie.”⁶⁰ In the below of interminable mud that comprises the hell of Beckett’s *How It Is*, a refrain repeats: “something wrong there.”⁶¹ From the indefinite to the logically impossible to the syntactically wrong, Beckett points to an indeterminacy that could not be more horribly concrete. Clov’s observation in *Endgame* remains exemplary. When he “turns the telescope on the without” at Hamm’s behest all he can report is “Zero ... [he looks] ... zero [he looks] ... and zero.” Adding, when goaded, that “All is [...] Corpsed [Mortibus].”⁶²

If the refrain “something wrong there” is exemplary, it is because it is a wrong that can only be wrongly stated. Ill said, ill seen. If horror, in Sade for instance, was once a matter of demonstration, a thing about which one could speak endlessly because it was external to language – a horror to be designated and described (Sade) – in Beckett horror’s pervasiveness has unsettled the syntactical core of language and the subject tasked with its propositional synthesis. The copulation of meaning has been compromised and this recoils on the unfortunates who happen to speak. Beckett’s “people,” as he puts it, “seem to be falling to bits.”⁶³ In *All That Fall*, Mrs. Rooney in a frenzy: “What’s wrong with me, what’s wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms [Frenziedly.] ATOMS!”⁶⁴ Of an eroded substance, Beckett’s people are composed of a language whose connective tissue is severely compromised. They are *wearish*, feeble, decrepit, like the first appearance of the Abderite in Beckett’s corpus. In an early poem, *Enueg I*, Beckett encounters the enigmatic figure on what is less a journey than a “trundle” worstward, “into the black west / throttled with clouds,”⁶⁵ into “vast of void”⁶⁶ if I may pair the early with the late, through a dilapidated Irish landscape at sundown, giving birth to a corpse like sunset: “the stillborn evening turning a filthy green.”⁶⁷ It is in this grim light that he passes Democritus.

I splashed past a little wearish old man,
Democritus,
Scuttling along between a crutch and a stick,

.....
60 Beckett, 1986, p. 154.

61 Beckett, 2009f, p. 5.

62 Beckett, 1986, p. 106.

63 Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 162.

64 Beckett, 1986, p. 177..

65 Beckett, 2012, p. 6.

66 Beckett, 2009e, p. 92.

67 Beckett, 2012, p. 6.

His stump caught up horribly, like a claw, under his breech, smoking.⁶⁸

Figured as decrepit, ancient, and crippled, Democritus is an amputee more crustacean than human. Less here an “incarnation of laughter” than an embodiment of the void.⁶⁹ *This* Democritus is not ebullient, not filled with cheer, but dour. This is not the “dear droll”⁷⁰ Democritus of poetic legend that Belacqua will try to summon in Beckett’s story “Yellow” to calm his anxiety. This Democritus simply demonstrates that “everything is hollow mockery, drift of atoms, infinitude,” as Lucian has Democritus say in *Philosophies for Sale*.⁷¹ This Democritus might find the life-joke funny, but he laughs no more.⁷² If he does, it is no longer only at but with woe. He offers no calmativ^e to ease life’s distress. “My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?”⁷³

This Democritus is perilously proximate to Heraclitus the obscure. At one point, Beckett flirts with the notion that they meet in the sigh: “Well I might do worse than find myself as it were polarized between Democritus and Heraclitus for all eternity, in a place where sighing is out of melancholy and not out of torment. I would be familiar with the position.”⁷⁴ From Molloy’s perspective the former’s laughter has become a “way of crying” and the latter’s tears, a way of crying “with the noise of laughter.” One for whom “[t]ears and laughter ... are so much Gaelic”⁷⁵

The refrain “something wrong there” sounds a bit funny, but the laugh need not follow. It is without tense. The excision of the copula in the refrain *something wrong there*, which foregrounds the absence of the “is,” conveys with precision the view articulated in Beckett’s letter to Axel Kaun that “language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To drill one hole

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68 Beckett, 2012, p. 7.

69 I borrow the expression from Lutz, 1954, pp. 309-314.

70 This is how the poet Matthew Prior refers to Democritus. As cited by Lutz, 1954, p. 310.

71 Lucian, 1915, p. 475.

72 In a letter to Ruby Cohn, 8.3.68, Beckett writes, “Have heard that Swedish joke before. Still find funny but laugh no more” (Beckett, 2016, p. 115).

73 Beckett, 1958, p. 31.

74 Beckett continues, “There seems to be a contradiction inherent in the idea of Democritus doing anything so romantic, and Heraclitus doing anything so restrained, as sighing, but one must not mind that” (Beckett, 2009c, p. 185).

75 Beckett, 1958, p. 32.

after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through.”⁷⁶ To drill holes into language requires the writer to pass from the depth of signification to the sonorous syllabic surface only to build that surface around gaps, spaces, absences, holes. The relationship between composition and decomposition, making and unmaking, integration and disintegration, coherence and incoherence, signifier and signified becomes unstable. By drilling holes into language’s surface, writing makes present the absence that language contains but cannot name. The hole locates what is *in* language but not *of* language. Literary form does not only seem to be threatened – it *is* threatened by this “not *of*.” “In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form.”⁷⁷

In a letter to Mary Manning Howe from 1937, written shortly after the letter to Kaun, Beckett suggests that his approach is the linguistic equivalent of iconoclasm: “I am starting a Logoclast’s League [...] I am the only member at present. The idea is ruptured writing, so that the void may protrude, like a hernia.”⁷⁸ Logoclasm, or ruptured writing, is related to what Beckett in the letter to Kaun terms “Gertrude Stein’s Logographs.”⁷⁹ Differentiating with approval Stein’s “nominalistic irony” from Joyce’s “apotheosis of the word,” he nonetheless still thinks that her approach to literature has not sufficiently shed its “*heiligen Ernst*,” its sacred seriousness. “*Aufhören soll es*.”⁸⁰ “The fabric of the language [in Stein] has at least become porous, if regrettably only quite by accident and, as it were, as a consequence of a procedure somewhat akin to the technique of Feininger.” The problem with Stein, according to Beckett, is that she remains “in love with her vehicle, if only, however, as a mathematician is with his numbers.” The death of language, like the death of number to the mathematician, must seem to her “indeed dreadful.” Beckett differentiates his own method from both that of Joyce and Stein as a matter of “verbally demonstrating this scornful [mocking] attitude towards the word [*höhnische Haltung dem Worte gegenüber wörtlich darzustellen*].”⁸¹ Beckett calls this grinding of the teeth of language a “literature of the non-word.”⁸² Ending the letter with a remarkable summons: “Let’s do

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76 Beckett, 2009c, p. 518.

77 Beckett makes this statement in conversation with Israel Shenker in which Beckett clarifies what he takes to be the difference between his writing and that of Kafka. See Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 162.

78 Beckett, 2009c, p. 521 (note 8).

79 Beckett, 2009c, p. 519.

80 Beckett, 2009c, p. 515.

81 Beckett, 2009c, p. 519.

82 Beckett, 2009c, p. 520.

as that crazy mathematician who used to apply a new principle of measurement at each individual step of the calculation. Word-storming [*Eine Wörterstürmerei*] in the name of beauty.”⁸³

In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett’s first unpublished novel, he speaks of this introduction of the immeasurable or incommensurable into the number line as the insertion of a “demented” interval, a unit that violates unity. In other words, there is nothing to unify the story line, the development, nothing to rationalize the count, to render consistent the passage from 0 to 1. There is no story to tell and nobody to tell it, because there is nothing to provide the story or character with a measurable, countable unity. Both story and character have been atomized. Neither subject matter (the action or plot), nor the presence of the subject, i.e., the character, provide the unit of measure. The character’s fundamental form, Beckett suggests, is that of Nemo (Latin for nobody) whose presence within a piece of writing makes the “line bulge,”⁸⁴ we might add, *herniatically*. Nemo links Belacqua, the central protagonist of Beckett’s early fiction, to Odysseus, but unlike Odysseus, Belacqua is not only a true nobody, he is a do nothing (a no can-er). Belacqua is the first of Beckett’s unheroes. The name alludes to the Florentine lute maker whose lassitude so impressed Dante that he installed him in weary repose, at the base of Mount Purgatory. Utterly bereft of motivation, he does not even have the desire to turn his gaze upward towards the peak. His reply to Dante is a constant in Beckett’s writing. When asked why he does not ascend, Belacqua replies: “Oh brother, what is the use in going?” Not seeing the point, he is going to wait it out.

Belacqua is Beckett’s first instance of the “Nothing to be done” which will be made famous as Estragon’s opening line in *Waiting for Godot*. Belacqua is the central figure in a novel that is definitively without center like the cosmos it inhabits. As Beckett puts it, he is “not a melodic unit.”⁸⁵ Whereas the melodic signifies “a lovely Pythagorean chain-chant of solo of cause and effect, a one figured telephony that would be a pleasure to hear,” the symphonic unit, in contrast, “is not a note at all but the most regrettable simultaneity of notes.”⁸⁶ The symphonic novel has become noise, baring only a nominal relation to music. Despite the suggestiveness of the adjective, the symphonic is definitively not a symphony. It names the other of its name: a thing coming unstuck from what the name presumes to name: a unit without unity. The name, Belacqua, stands for nothing, marking an empty place that serves to

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83 Beckett, 2009c, p. 520.

84 Beckett writes, “Our line bulges every time he appears” (Beckett, 2020, p. 15).

85 Beckett, 2020, p. 15.

86 Beckett, 2020, p. 14.

locate a multiplicity, a series of “terms” that cannot be summed or defined: “They tail off vaguely at both ends and the intervals of their series are demented.”⁸⁷ Belacqua thus epitomizes nothing: “Yet, various though he was, he epitomized nothing.”⁸⁸ He has nothing to stand for and therefore stands for nothing. He sums to nought. “Oh sometimes as now I almost think: nothing is less like me than me.”⁸⁹

Beckett later would likely choose to discard the “is” – *nothing less like me than me* – as he does with the refrain “something wrong here.” The hole created by the absent *is* produces a contraction deficient at its core, a statement more cobbled than composed from the language wreck. *Something wrong here* cleaves together. It rings true by sounding off. It is no surprise that “the meaning of being” is “beyond” Molloy,⁹⁰ and that existence “has no sense,” as Beckett writes in *Molloy*. “It is a dug at which I tug in vain, it yields nothing but wind and splatter.”⁹¹ The “is” may still be uttered, but it is more sound than sense, an utterance “free of all meaning” amounting to “the buzzing of an insect.”⁹² “Is- zzz” has become onomatopoeic. A presence whose “buzz” indicates the linguistic surface. Like the fly on a Dutch Still-life, or even more pertinently, like the fly that makes Moran’s heart skip a beat: “And I note here the little beat my heart once missed, in my home, when a fly, flying low above my ash-tray, raised a little ash, with the breath of its wings.”⁹³ Language raises the ash of the signifier, the remainder of a meaning that illuminates no more. “Nothing having stirred.”⁹⁴ The buzz of being, sound *sans sens*, presents the language mess. A boil on the body of language. Not being, but the mess. “One cannot speak anymore of being, one can only speak of the mess.”⁹⁵ If one cannot speak anymore of being, one can speak of the hole that being has left. It is a hole that oozes being’s absence. Already in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, he suggests that the writer cannot “conjugate *to be* without a shudder.”⁹⁶ The writer “with a pen in his fist”

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87 Beckett, 2020, p. 130.

88 Beckett, 2020, p. 132.

89 Beckett, 2020, pp. 82-83.

90 Beckett, 1958, p. 35.

91 Beckett, 1958, p. 51.

92 Beckett, 1958, p. 45.

93 Beckett, 1958, p. 156. A few pages later, Moran returns to the flies, emphasizing the “odd ones” that die young without laying eggs, unnoticed: “You sweep them away, you push them into the dust-pan with the brush, without knowing. That is a strange race of flies” (Beckett, 1958, p. 160).

94 Beckett, 2009e, p. 53.

95 Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 242.

96 Beckett, 2020, p. 50.

is “doomed to a literature of saving clauses.” The gaping hole that is the “is” cannot be plugged. Such a plugging would require nothing less than the whole of language, i.e., language as whole, but the writer, like any speaking being, can only proceed atom by atom.

Once cognizant of the peculiar fact, the writer cannot but issue one of those “terrible” smiles that “*broadens and seems to culminate in laugh*” only to be “*suddenly replaced by expression of anxiety*.”⁹⁷ The thinker, Lucien in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, based on Beckett’s friend Jean Beaufret,⁹⁸ possesses a horrible smile,⁹⁹ and Watt’s smile seems “more a sucking of teeth.” Beckett likens its manifestation to a fart.¹⁰⁰ These are smiles that are not smiles, but not not smiles. They resemble smiles, aping their form, and are thus neither “yawn” nor “sneer,”¹⁰¹ but these smiles leave the distinct impression “that something is lacking.”¹⁰² They do not come naturally to the faces they adorn. They are stuck-on. In *Dream*, Beckett summons a horrendous simile for its horror. “It [Lucien’s smile] was horrible, like artificial respiration on a foetus still-born.”¹⁰³ Baroque and futile, this smile of aborted sense belongs to a face that is coming unstuck:

His face surged forward at you, coming unstuck, coming to pieces, invading the airs, a red dehiscence of flesh in action. You warded it off. Jesus, you thought, it wants to dissolve. Then the gestures, the horrid gestures, of the little fat hands and the splendid words and the seaweed smile, all coiling and uncoiling and unfolding and flowering into nothingness, his whole person a stew of disruption and flux. And that from the fresh miracle of coherence that he presented every time he turned up. How he kept himself together is one of those mysteries. By right he should have broken up into bits, he should have become a mist of dust in the airs. He was disintegrating bric-à-brac.¹⁰⁴

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97 Beckett, 1986, p. 145.

98 See the entry on Lucien in Pilling, 2004, p. 57. .

99 For Lucien’s smile, see *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*: “The smile was terrible, as though seen through water. Belacqua wanted to sponge it away. And he would not abandon the gesture that had broken down and now could never be made to mean anything. It was horrible, like artificial respiration on a foetus still-born” (Beckett, 2020, pp. 51-52).

100 Beckett, 2009b, p. 21.

101 Beckett, 2009b, p. 19.

102 Beckett, 2009b, p. 21..

103 Beckett, 2020, p. 52.

104 Beckett, 2020, p. 122.

Flowering into nothingness, the face's atomization presents a subject that *incoheres*, marking the place of an incommensurability between the nominal coherence of a name and the presentation of a disintegrating substance. Character, in Beckett, breaks apart into the characters of which it is composed; the person dissolves into a stew of "horrid features." As a thing written, a character is the impossible sum of its characteristics, each of which are comprised of characters whose material ensures that no character falls into line or "do their dope" in the parlance of this early novel.

II

Beckett thematizes this demented interval at the outset of *Murphy*. Through an introduction of a flaw in the count, Beckett introduces inconsistency into the *logos* of the story and cosmos of *Murphy*.¹⁰⁵ Murphy may believe that life is "a wandering to find home,"¹⁰⁶ but his story, in its telling, attests rather to permanent exile. To be a subject is not to be one. To tell the story of Murphy is to state this "not." Murphy's story is the story of his reduction to nought. Murphy is a wanderer, to be sure, but without destination. Despite his belief in destiny, his adventure ends in accident. The ignition of the gas in the garret consigns Murphy to Burton's "infinite waste," to chaos, to the "vastness of void" that punctuates the pun: gas-chaos.

Murphy's death will be ruled, as Dr. Killiekrankie puts it, "a classical case of misadventure."¹⁰⁷ A "misadventure" sums up a novel and a character that resists summing or summation, and for which there is no classical case. A point made boldly from the outset by a now infamous flaw in the count. The novel begins with Murphy "naked" and bound by seven scarves to "his rocking-chair of undressed teak, guaranteed not to crack, warp, shrink, corrode, or creak at night." Made of material unable to support such a guarantee, no such wood exists, the reader is forced to accept it based on narrative authority. An authority, however, which is promptly nullified, or better, voided as soon as we do the math: "Seven scarves held him in position. Two fastened his shins to the rockers, one his thighs to the seat, two his breast and belly to the back, one his wrists to the strut behind."¹⁰⁸ $2 + 1 + 2 + 1 = 6$. The reader who reads *and* counts, and thus accounts for what has been read, encounters a discrepancy between the legible (seven) and the summed (6). The inconsistency between the sum and the summation is flagrant. The storyteller not

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¹⁰⁵ Hugh Kenner draws attention to this flaw in the count. See Kenner, 1973, pp. 57-8.

¹⁰⁶ Beckett, 2009a, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Beckett, 2009a, p. 164.

¹⁰⁸ Beckett, 2009a, p. 3.

only forwards assertions of dubious merit, he erred so basically, and done so with such candor, that he must either be a careless fool or an utter knave. Intent on engendering doubt, of violating the rudiment of propositional truth, severing the sinew binding word and sense, that all but the fool must suspect the worse. We have been installed within an all-pervasive fiction presided over by “some malicious demon.” Who but a malicious demon of “utmost power and cunning,” as Descartes writes in the “First Meditation”, would suggest that $2 + 1 + 2 + 1 = 7$? The world of *Murphy* is at odds with consistency. “Seven” is itself an odd number which marks a hole in the account.

Neither he nor we inhabit a Pythagorean cosmos. The novel begins with a discordant note. Beckett aligns the modern writer with Hippasos, the “Akousmatic”:

‘Drowned in a puddle,’ said Neary, ‘for having divulged the incommensurability of side and diagonal.’
‘So perish all babblers,’ said Wylie.¹⁰⁹

Condemned to babble, a speaking being cannot but betray the illogic of their *logos*. Those who continue to speak of Harmony or *armonia* (αρμονία) and its surrogates (“Isonomy” and “Attunement”¹¹⁰) can only do so falsely. They must drown out any mention of the incommensurable, round the irrational’s decimal. However, the *logos* has not itself been brought to a halt. Until it does, it will continue to sow confusion, to err, to slip, to fumble its signifying materials. *Armonia* has become “Apmonia,” for Neary the Pythagorean acolyte, through an unacknowledged flaw in its transcription. “It was the mediation between these extremes [the extremes of a heart ready to burst or seize] that Neary called Apmonia.”¹¹¹ Neary has substituted the Greek letter “ρ” (rho) for “p” taken in by the form of its appearance. In addition to being a Pythagorean, Neary is a Gestaltist who believes that ‘all life is figure and ground,’ but here his belief in harmony, that the human is integrated into the cosmos as part to whole, leads to the misapprehension of the signifier leading to a comical note being struck each time it is uttered.¹¹² The whole’s integration of the parts has become an illusion as blatant as the belief that one can suspend one’s heartbeat through force of will or suicide

109 Beckett, 2009a, p.32

110 These are other terms that Neary uses to describe “Apmonia,” which is to say harmony incorrectly transliterated.

111 Beckett, 2009a, p. 4.

112 Beckett shares the suspicions that Lacan articulates with respect to Gestaltism and Merleau-Ponty’s reliance on the Gestalt notion of “good form.” In Lacan’s view the Gestalt conception of form leads to a return of vitalism and “to the mysteries of the creative force” and the “belief that progress of some sort is immanent in the movement of life” (Lacan, 1988, pp. 78-79).

through refusing to breath. Obtruding like a pustule, the “p” signifies a symptomatic element that cannot be integrated into its signification without remainder, without excess. The “p” signifies the primacy of pus: a sign of a body horribly out of step, like Watt’s infamously decentered gait or Belacqua’s boil. Language neither conforms to the body nor integrates it. The “P” forms like “a nice little abscess” on the “windpipe” that Beckett tells us in *The Unnamable* is “the point of departure for a general infection.” The body infected by language is decomposed into “a network of fistulae, bubbling with the blessed pus of reason.”¹¹³

We are, to say the least, a long way from the “harmonizer,”¹¹⁴ Timaeus, and his conception of a cosmic animal “whole and perfect, made up of perfect parts” and “one” without remainder. Timaeus has drowned Hippapsos or, at least, drowned him out.¹¹⁵ The cosmic animal is a sphere so absolute that there is no need of π and thus no need of irrational numbers. “[O]ne whole of all wholes taken together, perfect and free of old age and disease,” the cosmic animal has a surface that is perfectly smooth and a form that is perfectly round. Revolving eternally and uniformly, this heavenly sphere has no need of hands or feet, no need of limbs, because it is all encompassing, without without. No eyes or ears, mouth or anus, this cosmic creature is wholly and completely self-sufficient, at one with itself, perfectly consistent, perfectly centered:

For of eyes it had no need at all, since nothing to be seen was left over on the outside; nor of hearing, since there was nothing to be heard; nor was there any atmosphere surrounding it that needed breathing; nor again was there any need of any organ by which it might take food into itself or send it back out after it was digested. For nothing either went out from it nor went toward it from anywhere—since there *was* nothing—for the animal was artfully born so as to provide its own waste as food for itself and to suffer

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113 Beckett, 1958, p. 347.

114 This is how Peter Kalkavage describes Timaeus in his “Introductory Essay” to his translation of Plato’s *Timaeus*. Interestingly, he also likens Timaeus to another “harmonizer,” Leibniz: “Leibniz’ greatest feat of philosophic harmonization is the reconciliation of final and efficient causes (that is, the reconciliation of Aristotle and Descartes)” (Plato, 2001, p. 5).

115 In a truly superb Appendix to his translation of *Timaeus* on Music, Kalkavage writes, “the world of Timaeus is one in which the war against chaos is constantly being waged. The war mode of the cosmic soul reflects the central role played by *thymos* or spiritedness throughout the dialogue. It is that power of the soul that reason uses to subdue the irrational desire (70A).” Plato he shows demonstrates that the Pythagorean harmony of the sphere, as a harmony of perfect parts in conformity with a perfect whole, can only be maintained through a compromise in the harmonic scale, a coercion that Kalkavage reminds us recalls “the reluctance of the Other to mix with the Same.” He continues, “The Pythagorean solution, for all its beauty, cannot prevent the thirds from being “off” or the **256:243** leftover from being ugly. It is haunted by what one might call a tragic necessity in the realm of tones. The scale is not a complete victory but a beautiful compromise” (Plato, 2001, p. 152).

and do everything within itself and by itself, since he who put it together considered that the animal would be much better by being self-sufficient than in need of other things.¹¹⁶

Feeding on itself eternally, this animal is perfectly content to live off itself, to absorb its own waste, lap up its own shit. It *is* so fully, so full of being, so full of itself, so in command, because it has no need of nothing. It is devoid of void. Yet, to articulate its *logos*, as Plato has Timaeus do, exposes that it is a being that in no uncertain terms is full of shit. Its image of perfection can only be maintained in contemplative silence. When its *logos* is elaborated, when it is held to account, one hears that something is off. The belly of this beast is bloated with gas. It is unable to reason without appeal to the very presence of nothing it declares to be absent. Replete with many “no’s” and “nothing’s,” the articulation of its *logos* presents a seam that betrays the vacuity of its bloat.

In Beckett, the tailor is the first to overcompensate for the flaws in the material. The suit that Murphy wears as he strikes out “on the jobpath”¹¹⁷ is not only “aeruginous,” and thus a bit out of date, but made of material, “advanced by its makers” to be “holeproof.”¹¹⁸ In *Endgame*, Nagg tells a joke about an Englishman who needing “a pair of striped trouser in a hurry for New Year festivities goes to his tailor who takes his measurements.” After a litany of excuses for delaying their delivery, from making a ‘mess of the seat,’ a ‘hash of the crutch,’ ‘a balls of the fly,’ and a ‘ballocks of the buttonholes,’¹¹⁹ the Englishman throws a fit:

‘Goddamn you to hell, Sir, no, it’s indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, in six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less, Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!’ [*Tailor’s voice scandalized.*] ‘But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look – [*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*] – at the world – [*pause*] – and look – [*loving gesture, proudly*] at my TROUSERS!’¹²⁰

A better talker than tailor, one fears for the fit. But the joke turns on the WORLD’S poor stitching, which is suitably exposed by Timaeus’ account.

To maintain its integrity requires that one smooth over the surface of its telling, plugging up its holes, sealing them shut. The

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116 Plato, 2001, p. 63 (33A c-d). *Plato’s Timaeus*, 63 (33A c-d).

117 Beckett, 2009a, p. 46.

118 Beckett, 2009a, p. 47.

119 Beckett, 1986, p. 102.

120 Beckett, 1986, pp. 102-3.

image produced by language is imperiled by it. Its consistency, and smoothness, its perfection, depends upon hiding its seams, not pausing over the “no’s” and the “nothing’s”. As soon as one does, this image of self-sufficiency becomes woefully deficient. One begins to trip over the very holelessness of this image of wholeness and wholesomeness, this image of consummate health. This absence, in its very insistence – “there was nothing” – becomes horribly present. To note the presence of this absence makes a hole in this whole of wholes. If one was to shape this hole into a mouth, “wordshit” would begin to flow. This is Beckett’s verdict in *Texts for Nothing*:

That’s right, wordshit, bury me, avalanche, and let there be no more talk of any creature, nor of a world to leave, nor of a world to reach, in order to have done, with worlds, with creatures, with words, with misery, misery.¹²¹

The babbler would be buried by babble as Wylie subtly reminds us. A man, as his name insists, who has no reason to lie. In the beginning was the bungle and so on. Language betrays the stuff of which it is made: “coprolalia.”¹²²

In Beckett, all is atomization and incontinence: “Incontinent the void.”¹²³

III

Language is Spirit’s refuse and the task of writing is disposing of its remains. In *Murphy*, in the eponymous here’s last Will and Testament, he requests to be cremated and then taken to what “the great and good Lord Chesterfield calls necessary house” in the Abbey Theater in Dublin, where his “happiest hours have been spent,” and flushed without hesitation or show of grief, and “if possible during the performance of a piece.” A poor piece of writing, for sure, for one values clarity and distinctness. For it is unclear whether Murphy’s happiest hours were spent in the Theater itself or its toilet, “the necessary house.” And it is unclear whether, his ashes, his remainders, should be flushed during the performance of a play, or while the one tasked with his disposal is taking a shit. Murphy consigns his life to art whose sense in the end amounts to a shit joke, whose crass emblem has always been the pun. The pustule of amphiboly.

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121 Beckett, 1995, p. 137.

122 Beckett, 1999, 97.

123 Beckett, 2009e, p. 65.

Having what Beckett brilliantly phrases as “a postmonition of calamity,” Murphy may not have seen his death coming – he has no premonition of the conflagration, despite numerous signals, and thus no conscious idea that he will be reduced to a charred, nearly unidentifiable, remainder. However, his “postmonition” offers a different kind of sight. Beckett writes,

In the morning nothing remained of the dream but a postmonition of calamity, nothing of the candle but a little coil of tallow.

*

Nothing remained but to see what he wanted to see. Any fool can turn the blind eye, but who knows what the ostrich sees in the sand?”¹²⁴

What remains to be seen is what he wants to see, which is to say, the Nothing – a matter of turning the eyes towards its blindness. Beckett recognizes that that we can only have a postmonition of the calamity of language, that makes us desire the thing – Nothingness – that brings an end to desire. This is to what the desire for meaning amounts. When we desire in accordance with this desire, meaning itself desires univocity, the reduction of something to nothing, but more profoundly, the reduction of nothing to nothingness. Yet, this amounts to the reduction of the pun to nothing, a thing of language that can be excised without remainder.

Yet, this is not possible for Murphy who is too well aware of how difficult it is to do nothing. *Murphy* is a story about the character, Murphy’s failure to successful conduct a “life-strike.” His efforts to avoid work, “the mercantile Gehenna,” fail because Celia, his “beloved” makes the weaker argument the stronger. If he does not find work, Caelia tells him: “Then there will be nothing to distract me from you.” Beckett continues:

This was the kind of Joe Miller [a bad joke] that Murphy simply could not bear to hear revived. It has never been a good joke. Not the least remarkable of Murphy’s innumerable classifications of experience was that into jokes that had once been good jokes and jokes that had never been good jokes. What but an imperfect sense of humour could have made such a mess of chaos. In the beginning was the pun. And so on.¹²⁵

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124 Beckett, 2009a, pp. 110-11.

125 Beckett, 2009a, p. 43.

Fearing that he will lose this most important of barriers between himself and her, “the nothing,” he strikes out on “job-path,” setting in motion the calamity of which he will only have a “postmonition.” Beckett inscribes not only *Murphy*, and the cosmos of the novel, but the whole of creation within the space of the pun, founding the whole of the *logos* on the metonym of metonyms: “In the beginning was the pun...” If the pun, as the saying goes, is the lowest form of wit – John Dryden referred to it as not only the lowest but the “most groveling”¹²⁶ – Beckett might add to Henry Erskine’s reply that it *lies* at the “foundation.” It grovels because it is *base*. Lying at the foundation, it is a foundational lie that would make those creatures unable not to speak, its victim, the butt of a cruel joke. “What but an imperfect sense of humour could have made such a mess of chaos. In the beginning was the pun. And so on.”¹²⁷ Beckett lodges the pun at the crux of the *logos*, suggesting that the passage from nothing to something, *creatio ex nihilo*, proceeds by accident, an original unhap. The pun introduces a “demented interval” into language and, likewise, the subject who has the unhap of happening to speak.

IV

A Piece of Monologue begins hilariously: “Life was the death of him.”¹²⁸ When life itself is ‘the death of one,’ as the idiom goes, there is no hope of escaping the horror. No writer or thinker in the 20th century is more keenly attuned to the wisdom of Silenus. This wisdom sums up, according to Nietzsche, the truth of Tragedy. Condemned to desire what is utterly out of reach, the companion of Dionysus tells King Midas, what is best for this “wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery” is “not to be born, not to be, to be nothing” and the “the second best” is “to die soon.”¹²⁹ Nietzsche indexes tragedy to the chorus’ judgment in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*: “not to be born [*me phynai*].” The human horror is one with its birth. Barred from the best, the human being desires the very thing it can never obtain, *me phynai*. This miserable fate, however, has a way of bestowing a certain grandeur on human wretchedness. The tragic hero’s impossible striving, despite its failure, elevates this creature from its animal muck. Tragedy ennobles as it destroys. Tracing the trajectory of a fall, the tragic story only has meaning for a being who has something to lose. Tragedy maintains a relation to loss, preserving a relation to what is always already lost.

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126 See Redfern, 1984.

127 Beckett, 2009a, p. 43.

128 Beckett, 1986, p. 425.

129 Nietzsche, 2000, p. 42.

Yet, in Beckett, tragedy loses its solemnity. The wisdom of Silenus has become that of Grock (one of Beckett's favored clowns known for saying *sans blague* (no joke). From *Long After Chamfort*:

Better on your arse than on your feet,
Flat on your back then either, dead than the lot.¹³⁰

Comedy has become hardly separable from horror, separated, perhaps, by the partition of nothing. In *The Unnameable*, the pearl of Silenus's wisdom is delivered stillborn. "I'm looking for my mother to kill her, I should have thought of that a bit earlier, before being born."¹³¹ A liminal joke that is funny, perhaps, if indeed it is funny, in being not all that funny. Adorno refers to this as: "The humour of the last human being: that is the humour that can no longer count on any laughing."¹³² If the best is not to be born, all life, barred from the best, tends *worstward*. "Better than nothing so bettered for the worse."¹³³

Tragedy bestows on life a value it lacks. Beckett again from *Long After Chamfort*:

The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes
About life and death and other tupenny aches.¹³⁴

Tragedy is a form well fit for a being who longs to mean something, helping to forge a relation to an absent presence that preserves the promise of hope. Seeking to express nothing failingly, such writing installs itself within the tragic absolute. However, the guffaw of the Abderite shifts focus from a meaning that lacks to the lack of meaning, from absent presence to present absence. Differentiating nought from nothing, the subject knows that there is no happiness outside this knowing, and thus, knowing just enough to say, as the Unnameable will say, "there I am the absentee again."¹³⁵

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130 Beckett, 2012, p. 198.

131 Beckett, 1958, p. 285.

132 Weller and Van Hulle, 2010, p. 168.

133 Beckett, 2009e, p. 92.

134 Beckett, 2012, p. 197.

135 Beckett, 1958, p. 406.

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**The Comedy of
Tragedy:
A Marxist Reading of
“Wuthering Heights”**

**Jean-Jacques
Lecercle**

Abstract: The essay starts from a critical question: why does Heathcliff, at the height of his power, give up everything, let himself die and allow what was so far undiluted tragedy end on the comic mode of a happy end for the second generation. The question is linked to the narrative scandal of a novel that breaks the transcendental framework of the Aristotelian “complete story” by allowing, from the first volume to the second, a repetition of the plot with variation and reversal. This reversal is a revolution in the *rapport de forces* between two groups, or classes, the “upper orders”, i.e. the “old families” of the Earnshaws and Lintons, and the subordinate classes, of which Heathcliff is the representative. The rise to power of Heathcliff is assimilated to a social revolution and his brutal and systematic destruction of the old order is an image of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The rest of the essay seeks to demonstrate that such anachronic concept is relevant to the novel, with reference to the two social and political conjunctures of the Luddite troubles and the Chartist movement.

Keywords: Aristotle, Chartism, class struggle, complete story, dictatorship, Luddite troubles, orders (upper and lower), proletariat, *rapport de forces*, repetition, revolution, *Shirley*, transcendental framework, working-class novel.

1. Why did Heathcliff give up?

There is something puzzling in the ending of *Wuthering Heights*. Why did Heathcliff, at the very acme of his power, when his enemies have been crushed or are dead, and their offspring reduced to a state of abject poverty and dependence, suddenly give everything up and let himself die, thus allowing the world of *Wuthering Heights* to return to its initial state, through the coming marriage of the second Catherine and Hareton Earnshaw, a “happy end” that allows comedy to succeed what so far had been undiluted tragedy? The Gothic explanation – he is haunted to death by the ghost of the first Catherine is hardly sufficient to account for this late reversal.

I am afraid that at this point a brief reminder of the intricacies of the two volumes of this complex but symmetrical narrative is in order.

In the first volume, Heathcliff is a foundling, brought back to *Wuthering Heights* from Liverpool by old Earnshaw (who promptly dies). He is hated by the son, Hindley Earnshaw, but loved by the daughter, Catherine Earnshaw. With the death of his protector, he is reduced by Hindley, the new master, to the status of a farm hand, a mere servant, as wild as he is scruffy. As a result, Catherine is torn between her love for him (“I am Heathcliff!” is one of her better-known lines) and her attraction for her more civilised neighbours the Lintons of Thrushcross Grange, who belong to the same social class as she does, and whose son,

Edward, she decides to marry, upon which Heathcliff vanishes.

He reappears several years later, affluent and elegant, but as wild as ever and still endowed with the vital strength the Lintons signally lack, only to find a wedded Catherine in the last stages of a decline - she dies giving birth to the second Catherine, Catherine Linton. The second volume is largely devoted to Heathcliff's revenge, which takes him the best part of twenty years. Now rich and powerful, he systematically crushes the Earnshaws (he ruins Hindley and ends up battering him to death; he appropriates Wuthering Heights and reduces Hareton, Hindley's son, to the status of a servant, uncouth and illiterate) as he destroys the Lintons (he marries Isabella Linton, whom he despises, with the sole purpose of spiting her brother Edgar; he kidnaps the second Catherine and forces her to marry his weakling of a son, Linton Heathcliff - who promptly dies; with the help of a crooked attorney, he manages to capture Catherine Linton's inheritance and becomes master of both Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights). Then, at the height of his power, he chooses to die, leaving Hareton Earnshaw and the second Catherine in amorous converse.

The puzzle of this sudden renunciation is merely the symptom of the problem posed by the narrative structure of the novel. Why, in what seemed to be essentially the tragedy of the impossible love between the first Catherine and Heathcliff, is the resolution of the plot a happy one (Hareton and the second Catherine will recover their lost property, marry, be happy and have many children)? How can the starkest of Romantic tragedies thus end in the comic mode?

2. Tragedy.

The first volume, from the point of view of the plot, is entirely coherent. It tells of the tragedy of Catherine Earnshaw, a version of the Romeo and Juliet *topos* in its modern bourgeois version. The love between Catherine and Heathcliff is not the object of an interdiction, due to a feudal conception of family honour, but it is tainted with social disapproval: a member of the "upper orders", as they used to be called, like Catherine Earnshaw cannot marry a member of the lower orders, namely a foundling, of dubious proletarian origin, who is at that moment no better than a farm hand. This impossibility is experienced by Catherine in the form of a subjective contradiction, between the requirements of her social position and her irrepressible love for Heathcliff. She experiences the classic dilemma of the tragic heroine: she must make a choice, but whatever choice she makes will have disastrous consequences. And she pays the price of this unavoidable choice by dying at the end of the first volume. As to Heathcliff, he is caught up in Catherine's tragedy in the form of the bourgeois Romantic *topos*, "she is another man's wedded wife", a situation which causes the suicide of young Werther

and of Jacopo Ortis, the hero of Foscolo's *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*. Heathcliff too dies, seemingly haunted by the ghost of Catherine, but it takes him the whole of the second volume and the best of twenty years to do so, two decades devoted to systematic social revenge.

And yet, that the tragedy of the first Catherine is the essence of the novel is widely recognized. We find an excellent instance of this type of reading in the first film version of the novel, William Wyler's 1939 *Wuthering Heights*, where Heathcliff is played by Lawrence Olivier and Catherine by Merle Oberon. That version will puzzle anyone who has read the novel. It is natural that the film version of a classic should take liberties with the original text. But the film takes this practice to extremes - it cancels half of the novel, namely the whole of the second volume: no second generation, no second Catherine, very little of Heathcliff's revenge. The first Catherine dies in Heathcliff's arms, not in giving birth to the second.

What the film cancels is the structure of repetition (with inversion, that is with passage from tragedy to the comedy) that characterises the novel. But there is coherence in this choice. The tragedy of Catherine Earnshaw having reached its due end in the death of the heroine, all that remains is the expectation of the inevitable death of the hero, as a direct and quasi-immediate result of her death. There is no need to wait twenty years for this: Romeo cannot survive Juliet to the point of becoming rich and powerful and destroying the Capulets. There is something scandalous in Emily Brontë's narrative, a scandal due to the structure of the plot.

3. Scandal.

The narrative scandal of a plot which, from one volume to the other, is repeated with variation and inversion has a clear origin: the novel breaks the transcendental frame of narratives, a frame that was first sketched by Aristotle and the maxims of which are conformed to by the generality of 19th century novels. We can formulate three such narrative maxims.

Maxim n°1, the maxim of completeness: a complete story is a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end. You have recognised a famous passage in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle is dealing with the plot of tragedy as the "combination of incidents", which he calls the fable, and he analyses the way the fable may be constructed ("since, he adds, this is the first and most important part of tragedy"):

Now we have assumed tragedy to be an imitation of an action that is complete and entire; and that has also a certain magnitude; for a thing may be entire and a whole and yet not be of any magnitude. By entire I mean that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not necessarily suppose anything before it, but which requires something to follow it. An end, on the

contrary, is that which supposes something to precede it, either necessarily or probably, but which nothing is required to follow. A middle is that which both supposes something to precede and requires something to follow. The poet, therefore, who would construct his fable properly is not at liberty to begin or end where he pleases, but must conform to these definitions.¹

On the face of it, this is a string of resounding platitudes. But that is only a superficial reading. What Aristotle is sketching is a transcendental frame, the reason why the author of a fable “is not at liberty to begin or end where he pleases”. This frame has two characteristics: it imposes a fixed order on the narrative (you do not begin your story *in medias res*, nor do you end it before its natural closure) and it supposes a certain form of progress, a teleological impulse that moves the story forward towards its end in both senses of the term, its terminal point and its goal. Thus, the proper end of tragedy is the death of the hero, the appeasement of the Gods and the restoration of order.

A second maxim derives from this maxim of completeness, which we might call the maxim of unity. It is formulated through the following antimetabole: the life of a story is the story of a life. We all know the rules of unity that were supposed to govern classical tragedy: one hero, one action, one day. The prose narrative develops its “magnitude” (according to Aristotle, a fable must have a “certain magnitude”) along the progress of the life of the main character, thus translating the maxim of completeness into the contents of the plot: the heroine’s or hero’s birth, loves and death. The titles of 19th century novels testify to the importance of this rule: *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*.

The third maxim is the maxim of resolution. It defines the end of the fable in both its senses. And here, a choice is offered, which concerns the novel rather than the original fable of tragedy. The maxim, therefore, has two formulations, a comic one, “they were happy and had many children,” and a tragic one, “they were miserable and died”. Tess is hanged in Dorchester prison, and Jane Eyre utters her exultant cry, “Reader, I married him!”.

The transcendental frame is made up of maxims, not laws or constitutive rules: it is meant to be exploited and flouted, as are Grice’s maxims of conversation, from which implicatures are derived. Thus, novels have recourse to analepses and prolepses that flout the maxim of completeness in that it imposes a fixed order on the story, but they presuppose that order. And the maxim is also flouted by focalisation on one moment of the natural progress of the story, as in the common and garden love story (we know nothing of Elizabeth Bennet’s childhood or of

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¹ Aristotle 1963, p. 17-18.

her life after she marries Darcy) or in the *Bildungsroman*. Not to mention Tristram Shandy, who takes his time being born. As for the maxim of unity, it is exploited through extension from one life to two (the conjoined lives of Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy, in the comic mode, or of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, in the tragic mode) or to a whole family (*The Buddenbrooks*).

Flouting the transcendental maxims, therefore, is common practice for the novelist – they are *meant* to be exploited, as “rules” of grammar are exploited by the poet for expressive reasons: without such flouting, Grice’s maxims of conversation would not give rise to implicatures. There should be, therefore, no scandal in Emily Brontë’s flouting of the narrative maxims – she could even have a tragedy with a happy end (this is called tragicomedy, the best example of which is Corneille’s *Le Cid*). But there is, not because of the flouting, but because of the contradictory juxtaposition of conformity and infraction. *Wuthering Heights* contradictorily flouts the maxims and follows them, in an unholy mixture of conformity and nonconformity. Thus, to take the maxim of completeness, the novel has a middle (between two volumes, two generations, two Catherine’s), but this middle is also an end (to the tragedy of the first Catherine) and a beginning (to the comedy of the second). Or again, to take the maxim of unity, the life of this story is the story of one life, the life of the first Catherine, as in the film, a life entwined with that of Heathcliff, but it is also the story of two lives, not in their conjunction but in their succession, as the second Catherine’s life repats the life of her mother with inversion of mode. As a result of which the maxim of resolution is also flouted as the novel chooses both the tragic ending, in the case of the first Catherine, and the comic one, in the case of the second.

The narrative scandal of the novel lies in that confusion, the epitome of which is the passage from tragedy to comedy, a passage that ruins the tragic coherence of the story, a coherence so powerful that the comic ending appears to be an arbitrary imposition of the author, a kind of narrative *deus ex machina* – tyrants do not resign and there is no justification for Heathcliff giving up.

4. Reversal.

The site of this narrative scandal is the second volume, as the film implicitly recognizes by cancelling it. The repetition it enacts has two striking characteristics that form a contradiction: the exacerbation of tragic violence, over the twenty years of Heathcliff absolute power, which turns the tragedy of unfulfilled passion into a Jacobean revenge tragedy; then, in contradiction, the sudden passage to the comic mode in the shape of the bourgeois happy end. This sudden reversal is the crux that needs to be accounted for.

But before that, at the turning point of the volumes, another reversal has taken place: the rise to power of Heathcliff, a power which he exerts with the utmost violence. That power is political in the widest sense, that is both social and economic: it is sustained by a complete reversal of power relations.

The reversal can be spelt out in six propositions, or theses.

Proposition one: in *Wuthering Heights*, repetition (of the first volume by the second, of the first generation by the second) takes the form of an inversion, or reversal.

Proposition two: this reversal is an inversion of power relations, whereby the dominant party is now dominated, the slave becomes master.

Proposition three: the reversal concerns not so much individuals (Heathcliff vs Edgar Linton) as whole families, i.e. social groups: the Lintons and Earnshaws are overthrown by Heathcliff, the upstart, the son of nobody, who has neither family nor lineage.

Proposition four: as a result, this reversal is social and political, an inversion in the power relations between social groups or classes. The groups in question are two: the lower vs the upper orders, servants vs masters. Thus, when Heathcliff reappears, although he is rich and looks like a gentleman, Edgar Linton refuses to receive him "in the parlour", which provokes the indignation of his wife, who addresses Nelly Dean thus: "Set two tables here, Ellen : one for your master and Isabella, being gentry ; the other for Heathcliff and myself, being of the lower orders".² The first Catherine of course exaggerates when she claims to be a member of the lower orders, but such is Heathcliff's status in the first volume.

Proposition five: the effect of the reversal is a form of Saturnalia, only one that aims to last more than a few days, as the destruction of the former social order is systematic and appears to be definitive.

Proposition six: the essence of Heathcliff's revenge, animated not so much by passionate rage as by extreme cruelty, is the systematic destruction of the old order, that is of the means of domination of the former ruling class, which are replaced by those of the new dominant class.

Before turning to Heathcliff, who is the very embodiment of the reversal of power relations, I offer two hints of such inversion.

In *Wuthering Heights*, few characters strut upon the stage for the whole length of the novel. The first generation, with the exception of Heathcliff, die, either at the end of the first volume, like Catherine Earnshaw, or in the course of Heathcliff's revenge, like Edgar Linton and Hindley Earnshaw. And the second generation, of course, are born in the middle of the story, thus starting the repetition of the first story

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² Brontë 2003, p. 95.

by the second. But Heathcliff is not the only one to survive: two other characters are present from beginning to end - Joseph, the puritanical servant who grumbles in dialect, and Nelly Dean, who brings up two generations, in the persons of the first and the second Catherine. In other words, the masters are transient characters, and most of them die, but the servants survive. Heathcliff embodies this survival of the fittest class, the lower orders.

This inversion of power also occurs in the narrative framework of the novel. The novel has two successive narrators. The first, Lockwood, belongs to the upper orders: he is affluent and rents Thrushcross Grange from Heathcliff, its new owner. But, a recent arrival, he knows nothing of the past and must rely on Nelly Dean, whom Heathcliff has promoted as housekeeper of Thrushcross Grange, for the details of the story – to the point that he soon abandons his role as main narrator and is content to repeat Nelly Dean's words, only, as he says, a little condensed. And he adds that “she is, on the whole, a very fair narrator and I don't think I could improve her style”³ – in other words, he resigns his function as narrator of the tale and transfers narrative power to a servant. And Nelly Dean is no mere narrator, but an active participant in the action, even if her agency takes the form of passivity: she withdraws information from her employer, Edgar Linton, thus, in her own words, betraying him at the critical moment, which makes her a *de facto* accomplice of Heathcliff's machinations. This occurs twice, when Heathcliff elopes with Isabella, Edgar's sister (not without hanging the small dog that is the favourite pet of his future bride), and when he kidnaps the second Catherine and forcibly makes her marry his weakling of a son. Even if she repeatedly denies it, Nelly Dean practises a form of class solidarity with the social upstart and helps him become “the master” (as she now calls him).

The agent of the social revolution is of course Heathcliff himself. What is striking in his rise to power is not so much the extent to which he is successful (he does become the master of both houses and their surviving inhabitants) but the systematic cruelty (that confines to sadism) with which this power is exerted. This is not the rage of blind passion, this is malice aforethought – not uncontrolled violence but systematic destruction. I have mentioned the hanging of the dog, which shows that the only reason why he marries Isabella Linton is to use her as an instrument to make the Lintons suffer and hasten their destruction. Another instance of this cruelty occurs when, having kidnapped the second Catherine, he tries to prevent her from going home to be with her dying father in his last moments. In so doing, he breaks a moral injunction central to Victorian culture: the necessity for the offspring to be present by their parents' death bed, hence the crucial importance of the family death bed scene (Dickens was famous for these).

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³ Ibid, p. 157.

In both cases, the intensity of the cruelty which, at first sight, is unnecessary, conforms to a rationality that is not individual and emotional, but social. What Heathcliff seeks to destroy is not so much individuals as social positions. As a result, he exerts his new power in three privileged fields, in which he practises systematic destruction: the family, property and the law.

We have seen the main instances of his successful attempts to destroy the Linton family. And he does the same with the Earnshaws: he ruins Hindley Earnshaw and gets hold of his property, Wuthering Heights; he causes his death by physically manhandling him; he captures the inheritance of his son, Hareton Earnshaw, whom he reduces to the position in which he himself was when a child. This assault on the family is aimed at overturning the old social relations of domination: the “old families” disappear, or rather are reduced to a state of subservience, as power is now in the hand of the ex-servant. This clearly appears in the case of Heathcliff’s wife, Isabella: “So much had circumstances altered their positions, that he would certainly have struck a stranger as a born and bred gentleman; and his wife, as a thorough little slattern!”⁴.

The dissolution of the old families is hastened by an assault on property. Heathcliff, whom Nelly Dean describes as a miser, manages to appropriate the property of both the Lintons and the Earnshaws, which enables him to deprive the second generation of their rightful inheritance and reduces them to a state of dependence. And it is true that he behaves like a miser in that he doesn’t make use of his ill-gotten fortune and continues to live a life of abstinence. In other words, he is not so much a miser as a revolutionary, who overturns property relations in so far as they are the basis of relations of domination.

Lastly, Heathcliff now has the power of the law on his side. When Edgar Linton becomes aware of his coming death, he seeks to protect his daughter Catherine’s inheritance by making changes to his will. But the local attorney is now the legal instrument of the new master and he manages to postpone his visit to Edgar Linton, who dies leaving his daughter’s inheritance unprotected. The law has not changed its function, as the instrument of the domination of the ruling class rather than the expression of an abstract universal right: it is now clearly the servant of the new ruling class.

The time has come for an interpretative jump. I have moved from the neutral language of social groups (the higher vs. the lower orders) to the language of class. What I am describing, therefore, is the destruction of the instruments of domination of the old, pre-revolutionary ruling classes by the new, emergent ruling class. If the said “old” ruling classes are the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy or gentry, as was the case at the time of the writing of Emily Brontë’s novel, then the name of this

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4 Ibid, p. 146.

destruction is the dictatorship of the proletariat. Hence my provocative central thesis: Heathcliff's revenge stages (is a metaphor for) the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The provocation is immediately countered by two objections, one chronological, the other epistemological. Even if the phrase appears in Marx as early as *The Class Struggle in France*, first published only three years after our novel (Marx is describing the communism of Blanqui, in its three characteristics: a permanent declaration of revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat and the suppression of all classes), the concept was not independently developed before the texts on the Paris Commune, and it had to wait for Lenin not only to produce the theory of it but to put it into practice. This objection is weak: neither the class struggle nor, in E.P. Thompson's terms, "the making of the working class," waited for the scientific concept to be produced. But it does take into account the retired life the Brontë sisters led in their parsonage, far from the madding crowd and seemingly oblivious of the social unrest by which most of Europe was torn and which culminated in the revolutions of 1848. The second objection is even more serious: I am introducing a concept, which makes sense within a field, the theory of the state, into another field, the literary field, in which it is totally irrelevant. In other words, how can I read an expression of exacerbated romantic passion, which is individual and strictly subjective (*parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était elle*) in terms of the rational behaviour of a social class, as it conducts the class struggle against its class enemy? Answering the first objection will be easy, but the second will take a little more time.

5. Conjuncture.

The retired life of the Brontë sisters is mere appearance. Their Yorkshire was not only a landscape of wild moors, it was one the main sites of the industrial revolution. The contrast between the landscapes of Emily Brontë's and Jane Austen's novels is not so much between the sublime Yorkshire heath and the charms of Hertfordshire as between a county where the industrial revolution, with its emergent working class, occurred and an agricultural, still semi-feudal county, the site of Cobbett's rural rides.

And the class struggle did come close to the Brontë family. In the history of the luddite troubles which I have read, the reverend Patrick Brontë makes an appearance, even if it is in the guise of a minor character.⁵ He witnessed the night marches of the luddite weavers and was said to carry a brace of pistols in his pockets in case he was attacked by enraged revolutionists. The anecdote must have been part of the family folklore, as we find a trace of it in the opening pages of

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⁵ Reid 1988, p. 31-7.

Shirley, where the Irish curate, Mr Malone, carries pistols in his pockets and spends the night drinking in the local mill owner's counting house, under the pretext of protecting his threatened property.

True it is that the luddite troubles took place in 1812, and the novel was written in the eighteen forties, but the memory of what had been one of the first examples of class struggle by an emergent proletariat was still alive. All the more so as the forties were a time of social and political turmoil. A history of the early Victorian period states that "no period in British history has been richer in movements for radical and social reform than the years 1830-1850".⁶ This is of course an allusion to the Chartist movement, the first time the British working-class produced a political party to represent its interests, much to the dismay of the ruling classes, which used all the instruments of repression at their disposal to crush the Chartists. The same history quotes an old Chartist who, at the end of the century, reminisced:

People who have not shared in the hopes of the Chartists, who have no personal knowledge of the deep and intense feeling which animated them, can have little conception of the difference between our own times and those of fifty or sixty years ago. The whole governing classes – Whigs even more than Tories – were not only disliked, they were positively hated by the working population. Nor was this hostility to their own countrymen less manifest on the side of the "better orders"?⁷

It would appear that hatred, the feeling dominant in Heathcliff's psyche during the long years of his revenge, was widely shared among the antagonistic social classes involved in the class struggle. It would also appear, therefore, that the historical conjuncture is not absent from the novel, even if we must take the only chronological information supplied by the text, the single date "1801", as the usual *in illo tempore* of fairy tales. The part the luddite troubles play in the collective psyche of the Brontë family is equivalent to those dreams analysed by Freud in which the dreamer, on the eve of a challenging day, re-sits an exam he passed with distinction when he had to take it: as with the Luddites who were duly defeated, so it will be with the Chartists who are threatening our social order.

We find yet another indication of the influence of the historical conjuncture on the writing of the novel in the fact that roughly at the same time, Charlotte Brontë was writing *Shirley*, which was published in 1849 and whose eponymous character is said to have been inspired

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6 Harrison 1971, p. 179.

7 Ibid., p. 186.

by her sister Emily. That novel, together with novels by Disraeli, Charles Kingsley and Mrs Gaskell is one of the so-called “working-class” novels, which sought to take into account the new social question of what was not yet called the class struggle. The novel, set at the time of the Luddite troubles, contains a famous scene of the attack of a textile mill by a crowd of unemployed workers.

It would seem, therefore, that the phrase, the dictatorship of the proletariat, is not entirely irrelevant for a reading of *Wuthering Heights*, in both its aspects of dictatorship (Heathcliff’s systematic use of his total power to destroy the old social order) and of proletariat (the political revolution whereby the lower orders become dominant). But two problems remain for my Marxist reading of the novel. The metaphor is very indirect and there is no question of a reflection of concrete historical events, as there is in the “working-class” novels – this indirection remains to be analysed. And my initial question, why does Heathcliff suddenly give up? - in other words why does the novel change its mode from tragedy to comedy? - still remains unanswered.

6. Feeling.

Indirection first. There is no question in *Wuthering Heights* of the “realism” of *Shirley* and other working-class novels. If realism there is, in other words if the historical conjuncture is somehow inscribed in the novel, it is not a realism of actions and events, but of affect, of what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling”.⁸ We must try to describe that structure of feeling.

The 1840s were an era of social turmoil. Troubled times are the cause of social feeling as intense as it is deep. But such feeling is unevenly distributed among classes. As we saw, the feeling that dominated among the working classes was one of class hatred. There were good reasons for this: the violent proletarianisation of the weavers (which affected Yorkshire); the crushing of the luddite revolt that ensued; the violent repression of all demands for political reform, as exemplified in the Peterloo massacre; and, last but not least, the repression of the Chartist unrest. But we also saw that such intense class feeling was shared by the ruling classes, where it took the twin forms of class hatred for “the great unwashed” and of the fear that the revolt might be successful and the social order overturned. This powerful affect produced policies of harsh repression and oppression (remember the Tolpuddle martyrs, who were transported to Australia for daring to found an agricultural workers’ trade union), but it also produced apotropaic symbolic practices, that evoked the possibility of a rising of the working classes only to stage its defeat. This is the ideological function of the

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⁸ Williams 1976, p.132

working-class novel, of which *Shirley* is an excellent example: the point of view adopted is that of the ruling classes, of the mill-owners, the landed gentry and its parsons and the Luddites are described as a bunch of imbeciles led by a handful of inebriated scoundrels.

But such “realism” is not the only way for the historical conjuncture to be inscribed in the novel. The melodrama of the Gothic tale is another form of inscription. This is why Heathcliff in his revenge is consistently described as a devil. “Is Mr Hetahcliff a man?”, as his wife Isabella famously asks Nelly Dean. And she provides the answer herself: he is not a man but a devil and a monster. Even as the monstrosity of Frankenstein’s monster evokes the revolutionary mob, the *sans culotte* of the French revolution,⁹ Heathcliff’s devilry is an indirect evocation of the possibility of the success of the Chartists, of the overthrow of the ruling classes and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

We understand now the intensity of Heathcliff’s apparently unnecessary cruelty (that confines to sadism), as we may answer the question which provided my starting point, namely the seemingly arbitrary passage from tragedy to comedy. The grandeur of Emily Brontë’s novel is that it takes the evocation of the possibility of revolution to its logical extreme, the dictatorship of the proletariat, with the violence and destruction it involves and that it is the only novel to do so (in *Shirley*, the attempt against the mill ends in defeat and flight for the attackers, whose leaders are relentlessly pursued, arrested, tried and duly transported). But because this evocation has apotropaic function, the novel must end in the restoration of the threatened social order, even if it at the cost of a *deus ex machina*, an arbitrary authorial intervention whereby Heathcliff suddenly gives up and dies. His death duly reestablishes the bourgeois social order in its three aspects of family (the coming marriage of Hareton Earnshaw and the second Catherine), property (they will both recover their misappropriated fortunes) and the law (which will again guarantee that all is as it should be for the dominant classes). Heathcliff’s death is the symbolic equivalent of the arrest and trial of the luddite leaders in *Shirley* – but unlike them, he has been able to wield power for the whole length of his revenge, systematically to practise the inversion of power relations that we now call the dictatorship of the proletariat, to revel in the proletarian tragedy of social revolution, before the usual bourgeois farce of the restoration of the power of the upper orders is finally enacted. As Marx famously said (in the opening pages of *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*), events occur twice, first as tragedy, then as comedy or farce.

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9 Lecerclre 1988.

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Volume 10
Issue 2

**A Divided
Emancipation:
The Alienation of the
Modern Tragic Hero**

Todd McGowan

Abstract: What separates the ancient tragic hero from the modern is the alienation evinced in the modern figure. The contrast between Antigone's obedience to her ancestor and Hamlet's questioning of his dead father makes clear this split. The alienation evident in modern tragedy provides the basis for emancipation because it reveals how subjectivity cannot coincide with the injunctions of any form of social authority, even that which challenges the ruling order.

Keywords: modernity, tragedy, Antigone, Hamlet, emancipation

Breaking Up With Oneself

Emancipation is only on the table in the modern universe. It involves subjectivity breaking from the hold that the authority of tradition has over it. This break requires the subject to recognize that it doesn't fit within the social order that it inhabits. Seeing the mismatch between subjectivity and the social order is the sine qua non of emancipation, and this mismatch becomes visible only in the modern universe, where displacement becomes evident throughout society. Modernity confronts subjectivity with the alienation that traditional society obscures. The illusion of belonging entraps subjectivity within the external determinations that frame its existence. Alienation, in contrast, separates the speaking subject from itself and allows it to act against the external factors that would otherwise determine its existence. It is only the subject aware of its alienation that can participate in the project of emancipation. Modernity does not have a monopoly on alienation. But alienation can only be genuinely emancipatory when we recognize it.

The destruction of the illusion of belonging to the social order and its tradition is the great accomplishment of modernity. The inventions of modern science and the innovations of modern art demonstrate that the subject sticks out from its world. Modernity frees the subject to experience the alienation that defines it as a speaking being by making evident the distance that separates the subject from the identity that purports to define the subject. As modern science displaces the subject from its position within creation, modern art reveals the ramifications of this displacement in aesthetic form. Modern tragedy shows the alienated subject as the figure capable of defying its social position and even itself.

This separates modern tragedy from even the greatest ancient tragedies, such as Sophocles' *Antigone*. Unlike her modern counterparts, Antigone knows what she must do and does it. She never doubts the rightness of burying her brother Polyneices, nor does she ever question how she goes about doing her duty, even when it engenders catastrophe for herself and the entirety of Thebes. Duty is unequivocal.¹ From the first

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¹ The motivation for Antigone's act gives it its ethical bearing. She doesn't simply disobey the law

scene of Sophocles' tragedy, Antigone commits herself to an ethical act with such vehemence that the whole force of the legal authority that Creon marshals cannot dissuade her from this commitment. Nothing that happens subsequently causes Antigone to question her motivations or her judgment. Antigone's absence of self-doubt enables her to be the model of ethical comportment for many interpreters of the play.² But this absence of self-doubt separates Antigone definitively from the modern epoch. Her inability to question herself prevents her from being a figure of emancipation.

Antigone's refusal of doubt is evident from the first scene of *Antigone*. In this scene, she makes no allowance for the legitimate questions that her sister Ismene poses. Instead, after Antigone briefly lays out the situation for Ismene, she says categorically, "That is the new trouble. And now you can prove / who you are: good sister or coward / and disgrace to our brave ancestors."³ Antigone's statement leaves no wiggle room for Ismene to reconcile herself with Creon's law. But at the same time, Antigone appeals to a duty that they have to the authority of the past. They must act in accordance with the demands that tradition makes on them as opposed to following the ruling law of the land. Despite the radicality of Antigone's act, she cannot formulate this act in terms of a break from tradition. Although Sophocles shows Antigone revolting against Creon, he never depicts her departing from the tradition that she inherits. The primary barrier to her autonomy is her inability to glimpse her disjunctive relationship to the society.

The contrast between Antigone and Shakespeare's major tragic heroes reveals that emancipation relies on alienation. Unlike Sophocles, Shakespeare emphasizes the distance that exists between the forces of the social order and the tragic hero, a distance that the heroes themselves grasp. Antigone's single-minded determination to act stands out from the barrage of internal questions that modern tragic

for the sake of disobeying the law. She transgresses Creon's law in order to preserve the singularity of Polyneices, a singularity that the law overruns. Polyneices takes up arms against his own land, which is what prompts Creon to forbid his burial. But Antigone doesn't recognize the law's authority to go this far. She defends Polyneices against the law going too far. As Jacques Lacan points out, "Antigone's position represents the radical limit that affirms to unique value of his being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polyneices may have done, or to whatever he may be subjected to" (Lacan 1992, p. 279).

2 In her discussion of *Antigone*, Joan Copjec clarifies what the play and the character reveal about the subject's irreducibility to its conditions. This irreducibility is the basis for freedom. If the conditions in which we exist determine us, we cannot be free. According to Copjec, "Because the law contains this mad excess where it loses its head, as it were, the subject can carry out the law or carry on the family name without simply repeating in the present what has already been foreseen and dictated by the past" (Copjec 2002, p. 45). Antigone is not simply what her social order makes of her. Her excessive response to the law that Creon lays down reveals the excess within the law itself, the law's failure to coincide with itself.

3 Sophocles 2007, p. 3.

heroes unleash on themselves. Emancipation becomes a possibility in the modern universe because alienation becomes evident to the subject itself—and modern tragedy makes this alienation manifest to the spectator.

Questionable Demands

Shakespeare wrote his four most important tragedies at the beginning of the modern epoch. It is not coincidental that the first of these, *Hamlet*, was first performed in 1600, the date that symbolically marks the dawn of modernity. Along with *Hamlet*, the other major tragedies—*Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—all take the alienation of the subject in modernity as their primary focus. Characters in these plays are capable of tragic grandeur thanks to their inability to fit in their world or to achieve harmony with themselves. Shakespeare illustrates the possibility for emancipation by insisting on the necessity of alienation. Even when the characters in Shakespeare's tragedies are diabolically evil, this evil stems from a fundamental disjunction that becomes apparent in the modern universe. When one contrasts *Hamlet* with *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Othello* with *Ajax*, it quickly becomes clear that the sense of what constitutes the tragedy has dramatically changed with the birth of modernity. Shakespeare's tragic heroes evince a self-division that the single-minded heroes of Sophocles do not. They cannot simply follow the dictates of the gods as Antigone does. Instead, modern subjects must question what they can believe no matter what authority articulates what they must do. There are clear oppositions in the world of Sophocles—between Antigone and Creon, between Electra and Clytemnestra—but there are internal contradictions in the universe of Shakespeare. He stands at the beginning of the modern epoch as beacon showing that alienation is not a situation to be overcome but the basis for freedom.

Shakespeare's panegyric to alienation is most evident in *Hamlet*, the first of the great tragedies. Hamlet is a figure of self-doubt and self-critique. His division from himself stands out and enables his distance from the dictates of the social order in which he exists. Toward the beginning of the play, he receives an order from his dead father, the ultimate figure of symbolic authority.⁴ But rather than embark straightaway on carrying out the dead king's command to kill the usurper Claudius, Hamlet questions the source of the order, how properly to obey if the authority is legitimate, and his own status as a royal son. The ancient hero Antigone knows what she must do—bury her brother Polyneices despite the ruler Creon prohibiting this act under penalty of

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4 When Hamlet first appears, we see his distance from the current ruling authority in Denmark, his uncle Claudius. While everyone else celebrates, Hamlet remains aloof and insists on his distance from Claudius and his mother who has married him.

death—and quickly does it. Hamlet, in contrast, relates to his duty and to himself from a distance.

Hamlet's alienation is the source of his refusal to act promptly and slay Claudius immediately. All the critical energy caught up in solving the problem of Hamlet's inaction fails to recognize self-doubt and self-questioning as the modern forms of action. We should not see them as inaction but rather as ways to act. No matter how convincing we might find a certain explanation of Hamlet's delay, conceiving of the play in terms of a delay misses how the alienated subject acts.⁵ It doesn't act through self-certainty but through a self-laceration that divides the subject from its social situation just as it divides it from itself.⁶ Hamlet is a modern subject because he acts by questioning the figure of symbolic authority and his own identity that receives its support from this figure.

Toward the beginning of the play, Hamlet expresses both his own alienation and the generalized alienation of the world in which he exists. The play articulates this with reference to temporality that no longer appears to operate as it should. Hamlet states, "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right."⁷ In one sense, Hamlet refers here to the disorder that Claudius unleashes when he kills Hamlet's father and marries his mother. The world is out of joint for him specifically. But in another sense, Hamlet speaks for the modern subject as such. There is no modern subject for whom time is not out of joint: the homelessness of universal alienation becomes evident for everyone, not just for those with murdered fathers. Although Hamlet talks here about setting time right, his actions indicate that he does not believe in restoring a premodern sense of place. At no point in the play does Hamlet abandon the act of questioning that defines his modern subjectivity. His salient characteristic is his defiance of the authority of tradition, an authority that those who flee their alienation seek as a refuge.

The subject as such receives its orders from tradition, just as the ghost of Hamlet's father commands Hamlet to avenge his death by his killing his murderer Claudius. But the modern subject, in contrast to the

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5 Once one accepts the hypothesis of a delay, Sigmund Freud offers the most convincing explanation for it. His interpretation, developed initially in a footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, receives a fuller treatment in Jones 1976. According to Freud and Jones, Hamlet delays because he unconsciously desires to do what Claudius has done—namely, to kill his father and have sex with his mother.

6 In an essay that recognizes Hamlet's act taking place throughout the play, Walter Davis argues that the entirety of the play consists in Hamlet attacking Claudius (and every other character) psychically to force them to confront the trauma of their own subjectivity. Davis states, "Shakespeare put in the soliloquy [when Hamlet refrains from killing Claudius ...] so that even the groundlings in academe would see what Hamlet has been doing all along, torturing everyone psychologically, murdering people the way his true successor Iago does, by planting poison in their psyches then watching it work" (Davis 2011, p. 280).

7 Shakespeare 1997a, act 1, scene 5, lines 188-189.

subject of tradition, can respond with doubt rather than with obedience. Rather than trust the figure of paternal authority, Hamlet questions this authority, and his response leads to further questions about the significance of existence itself. The defiance of traditional authority produces a cascading series of doubts that transform Hamlet into an exemplar of subjectivity. The articulation of a question at the site where tradition demands obedience reveals the gap in which subjectivity exists. Hamlet cannot respond to his father's demand in the way that he should because he already senses that he doesn't fully belong to the world of his father. His questioning evinces his alienation from the world in which he exists.

Hamlet's incessant questioning defines his rejection of the authority of the paternal injunction. He questions in lieu of obeying, and this questioning signals his allegiance to modernity. Shakespeare never shows Hamlet rediscovering a place within tradition during the play. Instead, he sticks out as a figure alienated from the tradition that attempts to give him a clearly defined place. His questioning does not preclude ultimately acting. When Hamlet does act and kill Claudius, Shakespeare does not present this act as the fulfillment of the destiny that his father gave to him, which is why the ghost of Hamlet's father is nowhere to be seen before, during, or after the death of Claudius. Although his father's ghost does return after his original visitation to remind Hamlet of his duty, he is absent in the play's decisive last scene. Hamlet kills Claudius as one alienated from the destiny that the father gives to him. When it comes finally to killing Claudius, it is entirely Hamlet's act because his questioning divorces this act from the authority that initially commands it. He acts without relying on any authority, but he does act rather than just content himself with rebellion because Shakespeare understands that alienation requires that the subject take responsibility for its own actions. Hamlet cannot turn questioning into its own form of symbolic identity as so many do when they challenge figures of authority. The absence of Hamlet's father while Hamlet accomplishes the act makes clear that Shakespeare never abandoned the break that he inaugurated in the play.⁸ We never return from the alienated subject of modernity to the assurances of traditional authority.

The enduring popularity of *Hamlet* derives from its status as the exemplary modern work. Although people throughout modernity attempt to take refuge in a symbolic identity, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare shows the impossibility of finding any refuge there. The attempt to do so always fails, as Hamlet's demeanor relative to the other characters in the play

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⁸ One could imagine an alternate ending of *Hamlet* in which the ghost appeared on the stage with a satisfied look on his face just after the death of Claudius. If George Lucas had written *Hamlet*, this would surely have been the result, mirroring the miraculous appearance of the ghosts of Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness), Yoda (Frank Oz), and Anakin Skywalker (Sebastian Shaw) at the conclusion of Richard Marquand's *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

reveals. Hamlet's refusal to rely on his symbolic identity as a basis for acting offers a paradigm for modernity that simultaneously exposes the failure of any such investment. The modern subject can try to invest itself in symbolic identity, but Hamlet shows why this is not going to work out.

From Ethics to Evil

There are two figures who highlight alienated subjectivity in *Othello*—Othello and Iago. Neither of these figures stay where the social order places them. Neither fit within the symbolic identity assigned to them. Both use signification to challenge their social position, even though they seem completely opposed to each other. Othello acts with integrity to defend the established order, while Iago works diligently to upend it. But their trajectories overlap through their shared defiance of place, their shared expression of the subject's alienation.

As a military leader, Othello upholds the structure of Venetian society. But while prosecuting the interests of this society, he ends up frequenting the houses of the society's elites, including that of Brabantio. This leads to a romance between Othello and Brabantio's daughter Desdemona, a romance that challenges the racist proclivities of the society that Othello defends. As a Moor, Othello doesn't appear as a proper son-in-law Brabantio's eyes. His romance defies the structure of the social order, but it also works against Othello's own interests by putting him at odds with the society he defends as a military leader. His love for Desdemona augments Othello's alienation from his society and from himself. It ultimately portends his self-destruction after he kills her for an imagined infidelity.

The play villain, Iago, leads Othello to self-destruction by taking advantage of Othello's alienated status. The play involves Iago persuading Othello that Desdemona is cheating on him with Michael Cassio. Because he knows that he does not fit in the social order, Othello becomes susceptible to Iago's appeals to jealousy about Desdemona and Cassio, even though they are not romantically involved with each other. Iago's awareness of Othello's alienation gives him the upper hand on Othello, who never suspects Iago of duplicity because Iago proclaims himself to be honest. Iago grasps how alienation structures subjectivity and relations between people. He uses this knowledge to destroy the relationship between Othello and Desdemona.

The appeal of Iago as a character derives from his insight into successful deception. He plants the seeds of doubt about Desdemona within Othello's psyche while at the same time proclaiming that there is nothing suspicious going on. This double gesture works perfectly on Othello due to Othello's naïve relationship to signification. Iago states, "When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with

heavenly shows, / As I do now.”⁹ Everything that Iago says to Othello evinces a distance between what he says and what he desires. Othello doesn’t catch on to Iago’s duplicity until after he kills Desdemona for her supposed infidelity. He can’t recognize the primary fact of alienation and its consequences for all his interactions. But in his final speech he demonstrates that he dies with an awareness of his alienation that escaped him throughout his life.

At the end of his life, Othello relates to himself from a distance. He has absolute loathing for himself. The subject that permits Iago to deceive him and betrays his love for Desdemona is a subject that now merits only contempt. Othello kills this subject by killing himself. As he does so, he proclaims, “I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog / And smote him—thus.”¹⁰ This is Othello’s moment of self-transcendence, a transcendence that alienation makes possible. In smiting himself, Othello reveals that he grasps the ramifications of his self-division in a way that he hasn’t before. At the end of the play, he finally embraces his status as an alienated subject. The play emphasizes the embrace of alienation as the foundation of modern subjectivity in this final gesture.

In contrast with Othello, Iago has a clear awareness of alienated subjectivity. He knows that signification necessarily distorts what we say, that our actions are always misperceived, and that no one can overcome self-division. And yet, he takes up this insight in the service of evil rather than ethics or political emancipation. His evil does not result from a failure to take alienation into account but rather from integrating the inescapability of alienation into his conception of subjectivity. The figure of Iago represents an omnipresent possibility in modernity. Awareness of alienation does not only open up the possibility for emancipation. It also creates the ground—or the lack of ground—for unspeakable evil.

Iago’s evil is not banal.¹¹ He does not instrumentalize his evil acts, using them to achieve some larger aim. Iago is a figure of diabolical evil, someone who performs evil not to accomplish some hidden interest but just for its own sake. Diabolical evil is evil done for the sake of evil. In the case of diabolical evil, as Kant would have it, the subject has “an absolutely evil will” and makes “resistance to the law” its reason for

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9 Shakespeare, 1997b, act 2, scene 3, lines 351-353.

10 Shakespeare 1997b, act 5, scene 2, lines 355-356.

11 Hannah Arendt famously labels Adolf Eichmann’s brand of evil banal in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. While she is surely wrong to take at face value Eichmann’s claim that he was just a party functionary with no animus toward Jews, we can see in her insistence on the banality of his evil a political effort to bar Eichmann from reaching the status of Iago or Vautrin (in Honoré de Balzac’s *Père Goriot*). Arendt states, “It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period” (Arendt 2006, p. 287-288). For Arendt, to categorize Eichmann as a figure of diabolical evil is to credit Nazism with a transcendence that it cannot achieve.

acting as it does.¹² The subject of diabolical evil enjoys being evil, which is exactly what one could say about Iago.

Although he brings up diabolical evil as a theoretical possibility, Kant quickly dismisses it as an impossible position for the subject to take up. He doesn't believe that a subject can will evil for its own sake. As Kant sees it, there is radical evil—trying to do good for the wrong reasons—but there is no diabolical evil—not trying to do good at all. It's clear that Kant's insight into moral philosophy suffers from him not having read *Othello* or not having met Hannibal Lecter. Through the character of Iago, Shakespeare offers a convincing portrait of someone adopting an evil will. This is a possibility that exists as a result of the subject's alienation. Kant's dismissal of this possibility leads him to miss how diabolical evil helps to clarify the project of political emancipation.¹³

Because Iago achieves the heights of diabolical evil, he reveals the limitations of this position relative to that of emancipation. In contrast to the emancipatory position, there is a clear absence of freedom in what Iago does. His actions require Michael Cassio and Othello as the enemies opposed to him. Iago needs enemies to undermine. Without them, his diabolical evil would have no way to realize itself. He couldn't act evilly, a fact that contrasts his activity with the freedom of emancipation, which does without any enemies. Emancipation takes universal alienation as its point of departure and sees its own self-division in that of the other. For this reason, it doesn't require enemies. Iago's diabolical evil cannot go this far and thus remains stuck in unfreedom. He doesn't reach the heights that Cordelia does in *King Lear*.

The Impossibility of Retiring

It is Lear, not Hamlet, who is Shakespeare's ultimate figure of indecision. At the beginning of *King Lear*, Lear expresses a wish to step outside of alienated subjectivity and enjoy a comfortable retirement. The problem is that there is no such thing as a comfortable retirement for the subject. No matter how earnestly one attempts to withdraw from the problems of existence (or the intrigue of the kingdom, in the case of Lear), one inevitably finds oneself involved. The subject's self-division results in its engagement with the social order, an engagement that survives

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12 Kant 1996, p. 82.

13 Alenka Zupančič contends that Kant disallows diabolical evil to protect his own version of morality. According to Zupančič, the Kantian moral act is formally indistinguishable from diabolical evil. In *Ethics of the Real*, she writes, "Following Kant—but at the same time going against Kant—we thus propose to assert explicitly that *diabolical evil, the highest evil, is indistinguishable from the highest good, and that they are nothing other than the definitions of an accomplished (ethical) act*. In other words, at the level of the structure of the ethical act, the difference between good and evil does not exist. At this level, evil is formally indistinguishable from good" (Zupančič 2000, p. 92).

all efforts at retirement.¹⁴ *King Lear* is a play about the impossibility of escaping one's alienation through an act of withdrawal. Although alienation provides the path to emancipation, it does so by thrusting one inescapably into a confrontation.

In the first act of the play, Lear takes his leave of running the kingdom by passing the authority over to his daughters. To decide how to divide the kingdom, he asks each daughter to tell him how much they love him. The opening sets up a contest of flattery, but the game is fixed from the beginning. Lear has a clear favorite, Cordelia, on whom he plans to bestow the greatest share. All she needs to do is to say what he expects to hear from her. But the contest doesn't come off in the way that he expects.

Lear fails to understand that he and his interlocutors are all subjects of language—and thus alienated from what they say. He aspires to a straightforward statement of desire that cannot exist. When he demands expressions of love from each of his daughters, he receives sycophancy from his two disingenuous daughters, Goneril and Regan. Cordelia, who genuinely loves him, recognizes that subjects cannot express themselves directly, especially on command in front of a crowd. Any such statement would inevitably have its motivation in the desire for winning favor, not in love. Her response disappoints Lear because it avoids the rhetorical flourish of her sisters. Her love for her father prevents her from articulating it in the way that he demands.

While Lear suffers from failing to recognize the alienated status of subjectivity, Cordelia evinces a profound awareness of it. She shows her love for Lear specifically by not turning this love into a performance. The indirection of her speech is requisite given the alienation of her subjectivity within signification. She tells her father, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent."¹⁵ When Lear reproves Cordelia for her lack of expressiveness, she doubles down on her refusal to make a direct statement. Cordelia continues, "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less."¹⁶ It is Cordelia's alienation—and her recognition of herself as an alienated subject—that prevents her from heaving her heart into her mouth and speaking like her sisters do.

Cordelia's refusal to betray her alienated status and present herself as identical with her symbolic status make her the hero of *King Lear*. She refuses to act as if she can be reduced to the position of

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14 What Lear says that he wants, "To shake all cares and business from our age," is impossible for the speaking subject (Shakespeare 1997c, act 1, scene 1, line 39). The subject cannot exempt itself from cares because it is always outside of itself in the world that it inhabits.

15 Shakespeare 1997c, act 1, scene 1, line 62.

16 Shakespeare 1997c, act 1, scene 1, lines 91-93.

daughter as her sisters do. Her alienated subjectivity gets in the way of her ability to play the part that her father demands of her. Although the play concludes with the reconciliation of Lear with the one daughter that genuinely loves him, both Lear and Cordelia die just after this reconciliation. Lear's reluctance to accept the necessity of his alienation and that of the family dooms him to ending his life in ostracism. Through the negative example of Lear, the play shows the damage that the flight from alienation brings about. Cordelia's ethical being, in contrast, stems from her steadfast embrace of her alienated subjectivity.

Modern Insomnia

In relation to the three earlier tragedies, *Macbeth* appears to stand out. It is this latest that Shakespeare wrote, and it has no figure approximating the ethical stature of Hamlet or Cordelia. Macbeth himself is the least appealing of the tragic heroes that populate Shakespeare's four great tragedies. But even he reveals the foregrounding of alienation that arrives with modernity. The play begins with the three witches that announce the inversion of everything. They say together, "Fair is foul, foul is fair."¹⁷ Although the introduction of witches suggest a premodern epoch, what they say bespeaks their modernity. The inversion that they announce in this chant is that of modernity, an epoch in which subjectivity transforms that with which it interacts into its opposite. They subsequently prophesize Macbeth's rise to the position of king. When Macbeth takes the prophecy of the witches into his own hands, he topples the ruling order and accedes to the throne. He introduces disorder into kingdom because he has an alien relationship to it. This disorder is not simply external to Macbeth but permeates his own subjectivity. His response to his own criminality reveals that he cannot coincide with himself. He is not reducible to this criminality.

Even before he commits them, Macbeth is unable to live with his criminal deeds. This is what makes him a modern tragic hero in the vein of Hamlet or Othello. Prior to killing Duncan and making himself king, Macbeth has to confront a "dagger of the mind" that threatens his gains in symbolic status.¹⁸ After killing Duncan and then Banquo, Macbeth's relationship to the world becomes much more alien. His psyche cannot simply accept what he has done. Instead, he must confront the bloody deeds without respite. The killing of Duncan haunts him immediately in the wake of the act. He tells Lady Macbeth, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep.'"¹⁹ In addition

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17 Shakespeare 1997d, act 1, scene 1, line 11.

18 Shakespeare 1997d, act 2, scene 1, line 38.

19 Shakespeare 1997d, act 2, scene 2, lines 32-33.

to tormenting Macbeth internally, his psyche produces fantoms that undermine his authority when his subjects see him interacting with the empty air. These psychotic moments reveal a subject not at home in his world. This displacement is what gives Macbeth his tragic grandeur but also what ends up undoing him.

Even Macbeth's death occurs through a break from nature. An apparition comes to Macbeth and tells him that no one born from a woman will kill him. He feels confidence going into battle thanks to this prophecy. But he subsequently loses this confidence when he learns about his opponent—that "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd."²⁰ Macduff's unnatural birth allows him to be the vehicle for Macbeth's death. Shakespeare emphasizes the break from nature from the beginning of the play to the penultimate act. When Macduff brings Macbeth's head to the new King Malcolm at the end of the play, the latter proclaims that proper measure will prevail. But we can be sure that in the modern epoch this will remain an empty proclamation.

In each of the four great tragedies, the irreducibility of the subject to what conditions it becomes starkly evident. The subjects of these tragedies stick out from their situations. From Hamlet's questioning of the dead father to Macbeth's inability to eliminate Duncan and Banquo psychically, Shakespeare's heroes evince the subject's alienation. Even though Hamlet acts on this alienation with a display of radical doubt and Macbeth finds himself unable to get away with murder, in both cases the subject's distance from itself and from its society stands out. Shakespeare's four tragedies point in the direction of emancipation by highlighting the inescapability of alienation.

Alienated into Emancipation

The alienation that suffuses Shakespeare's tragic universe has no antecedent in ancient tragedies. While ancient tragedies can depict a revolt against the oppressiveness of the social order, they don't reveal subjectivity's failure to fit within this order because they don't reveal subjectivity's failure to be identical with itself. The most radical hero of ancient tragedy—a character such as Antigone—evinces a security in her position that undermines her radicality, despite her capacity for resisting the ruling order to the point of her own death. Antigone stands out in Greek drama, but she doesn't stand out from herself. This limits her ability to point the way to emancipation.²¹

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20 Shakespeare 1997d, act 5, scene 8, lines 15-16.

21 Alenka Zupančič points out that Antigone emerges from the contradiction that divides the Greek social order from itself. What Antigone shows, according to Zupančič, is that "the subject is not simply an effect of the structure but the effect of its inherent contradiction or negativity—which is not the same thing" (Zupančič 2023, p. 61). What marks the limit of Antigone as a figure of

Even relative to a character as evil as Iago, Antigone remains removed from the possibility of emancipation. Sophocles presents Antigone as identical with what she says about herself, whereas Shakespeare emphasizes the distance between Iago and his representation of himself. Iago reveals an awareness of this distance, an awareness of his alienation, which highlights the space for emancipation. He runs through a series of clearly false explanations for his betrayal of Othello. His recourse to multiple explanations indicates the falsity of each one as it also shows his own awareness of his alienation. At no point does Shakespeare reveal that Iago coincides with himself. His self-division—the fact that he is never what he says he is—exposes the distance between Iago and his social position. Although he destroys himself along with Othello, Iago's alienation bespeaks an emancipation from authority that is foreign to Antigone. The spectator of *Othello* must confront the subject's alienation in a way that the spectator of *Antigone* need not.

The emergence of the modern tragic hero foregrounds the problem of alienation. This is the fundamental distinction between ancient and modern tragedy, a distinction that opens the path to emancipation in the modern universe. None of Shakespeare's heroes can locate themselves relative to any social imperatives. They constantly run up against their failure to fit in any social identity. Their tragedy derives from their inability to be themselves. They are tragic figures insofar as they challenge themselves, and this self-division emancipates them from any social authority. But this emancipation cannot evade the problem of doubt that appears so prominently in the case of Hamlet. Antigone appears as an appealing contrast today because she can devote herself to a cause without manifesting any alienation from this cause. It seems as if Antigone should be a paradigm for the project of emancipation. But this is a path down which we should not follow her. The inability of the modern tragic hero to recognize itself in its own acts is the path of its emancipation.

emancipation is that she cannot see herself in this inherent contradiction. Instead, she believes that she merely obeys the unwritten law of the gods—and Sophocles cannot demonstrate otherwise to the spectator.

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The Manoeuvres of Seriousness:^{*} Expelling Comedy from Philosophy and Politics

Manfred Schneider

*“serious” and “seriousness” here stand for the German word “Ernst”. Actually, the English “earnest” is more closely related to the German “ernst”, as will be seen below. But the English “serious” is much closer to the German word usage of “ernst” in literature, philosophy and politics.

Abstract: There is in modernity in philosophy, politics and literature an intense desire for seriousness, for a turn or return to seriousness, as if the old idea of the world as theater and comedy were also its reality. The home of seriousness is world history. But in modernity it too seems threatened by “edification” (Hegel) or laughter, as Napoleon’s words “Du sublime au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas” indicate. Hegel therefore demands to “get serious about recognizing the ways of Providence (...) in history.” Or Nietzsche announces in “Die fröhliche Wissenschaft” the “great seriousness” of the tragic for the coming time. Ernst is linguistic-historically a synonym of fight, duel, death. This philosophical and political seriousness is opposed to all varieties of irony, laughter, poetry, the comic, happiness, but also to the dispute of words, peace. So how serious are prominent thinkers of the 20th century, Adorno, Heidegger, Carl Schmitt or Ernst Jünger, about seriousness?

Keywords: seriousness, manoeuvre, world history, laughter, polemos, comic, ridicule.

I

If there were that universal-historically educated ear of which Nietzsche spoke, the fine ear that listens at the “heart chamber of the will of the world”¹, it would not hear any laughter of the will scattered and gathered again in the times and spaces. No laughter from the world history of the “res gestas”, the campaigns and battles, conquests and state actions, the revolutions and political murders would reach this ear; and just as little would any cheerful laughter reach the ears of the historians and philosophers of the “historia rerum gestarum”. At best, it is seriousness itself that laughs: bitter or hostile or tragic laughter, as Nietzsche tells of the wise Silen of the Greek folk tale, who, to the question of King Midas as to what is the very best thing for a human being, answers with raucous laughter that the very best thing is not to be born.² From the history of the world, Livius (XXX, 44), for example, reports that Carthage’s commander Hannibal, after his defeat by the Romans, reacted to the heavy tributes that the peace treaty cost with a laugh that, according to his explanation, came from a “heart almost insane from the shock of misfortune”.³ Emperor Caligula explained his laughing fit differently, but similarly mad, according to Suetonius’s account⁴ to two consuls who were his guests: All he had to do was nod briefly and they would both have their necks snapped.

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1 Nietzsche 1980, t. 1, p. 135.

2 *ibid.*, p. 35

3 “*prope amentis malis cordis (...) increpatis*”

4 Suetonius: *De vita Caesarum*. Vita Gai. 32: “effusus subito in cachinnos...”

In the 30 or so laughter scenes of the Old Testament, too, signs of hostility come almost exclusively from the mouths.⁵

In the world history of all three registers, of deeds, reports and thoughts, seriousness reigns. Leaf through the Histories of Herodotus, the war report of Thucydides, the Annals of Tacitus, Plutarch, Livius, Diodorus, Orosius, Otto von Freising, Gibbon, Michelet, Ranke, Mommsen, Burckhardt: kings, dictators, presidents, ecclesiastical and secular rulers come and go, but seriousness is the immortal sovereign of great history. All the more so in the *philosophy of history*, of which Hegel says that it has to “get serious about recognising the ways of Providence (...) in history.”⁶

If modern philosophy is serious about knowledge, then seriousness is not only the will to recognise the seriousness that prevails in the world; it has to deal with a world and history where seriousness is constantly threatened by comedy, irony, wit and ambiguity.

The threat of laughter comes from realisation. At some point, the thinkers opened their eyes and no longer saw any difference between the theatre and a real or political world. Subliminally, the old Platonism continued to run along, according to which the real world is only an untrue double of the realm of ideas, or, as it says in Platon's *Nomoi*, that people are puppets of the will of the gods, hanging by the strings of their urges (*Nomoi* 644b). But it was something new. Detached from Platonism, the metaphor of the world theatre, the “*theatrum mundi*”, experienced an astonishing career from the early modern period onwards, ultimately serving as a concept for the *representation of* almost all forms of knowledge. In the process, the theatrical metaphor sometimes dissolved its rhetorical structure, in that it was intended to mark not only the similarity, but above all the difference between false appearance and true reality.

But how can you show that something is not a pretence? Can one *show that* something is pure seriousness and not a game? Can anything at all be erased from the world, which is after all a theatre, or as Nietzsche thinks: a play for entertainment, for the “*g o l d e n laughter*” of the gods? Or has the image of the world as theatre long since contaminated the world to such an extent that it can no longer recover from it? More strongly than all utopias that wish for a world of equality and brotherhood, a world of justice, of perpetual peace, a classless world republic, modernity pursues the desire to have a serious world purified of everything theatrical. This desire for the world immersed in complete seriousness or rising in glorious seriousness is obviously a European dream that defines our modern history more deeply and powerfully, more seriously and more violently than any other political dream.

Literature knows many such dream scenes and bears witness to

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5 Cf. Roেকেlein 2002, p. 100f.

6 Hegel 1969-1970, t.12, p. 26 (my transl.)

them. One example is Jules Michelet's 1847 preface to his *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. The preface begins with Michelet's account of a scene that recurs every year. After the end of his lectures in July, the historian, as he writes, stops to think about himself. He questions the spirit of the Revolution about the work he is writing, and to give space to this contemplation, he walks through the quiet summer streets of Paris, his footsteps echoing on the pavement next to the Panthéon, his destination the Field of Mars. There he sits lonely on the dry grass at the edge of the great scene and immerses himself in the spirit of the revolution. He breathes deeply *le grand souffle*, the great blowing that passes over the deserted field: wind, emptiness, midday light and the lonely historian form this scene of remembrance.

“The revolution is inside us, in our hearts; outside it has no monument. [...] The Field of Mars is the only monument left by the Revolution. The Empire has its Column and, moreover, almost to itself, the Arc de Triomphe; royalty has its Louvre and the Invalides; the feudal church of 1200 is still enthroned in Notre-Dame; even the Romans have their Thermae of Caesar. And the Revolution has for a monument - the void.»

«Et la Révolution a pour monument... le vide...»⁷

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A scene opens up around the past revolution that shows only emptiness and that has left a palpable residue only in the *grand souffle* of the summer wind. Michelet has described the French Revolution as a vast unique spectacle, as a series of dramatic scenes, tragedies, comedies that replaced each other in rapid succession. Again and again, he sharpened the events between 1789 and 1796 into *scènes, spectacles, tragédies*. They are immensely comic and sublime. But it is not without paradoxes, for ambiguity lurks in all the great scenes. Michelet asks about the convocation of the Estates General in the spring of 1789: “What did Necker want? Two things at once: to be seen a lot and to do little”. But this mischievousness and cunning of Necker's smothered in bloody seriousness. The revolution passed over the stage of world history in scenes that repeatedly turned play into seriousness. Staging and comic failure, theatre and de-theatricalisation followed each other and devoured each other.

Here, in the summer of 1847, the historian once again immerses himself in the emptiness of the place and celebrates it as the monument of the completed revolution. It has left behind only emptiness. It has destroyed the traces of itself, nothing but spirit remains of it. The triumph of the revolution is shown in the fact that it has closed the theatre. It has ended a terrible laughter. Still in the first volume of his history,

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7 Michelet 1952, p. 1. (my transl.)

Michelet traces a memorable scene. He recalls the pathetic victims who, in ancient Rome, had to carry an egg through the arena past the teeth of hungry wild beasts for the amusement of the spectators in the Colosseum. In the figures of this “farce sublime et terrible”, which accompanied the terrible laughter of the audience, he recognises at the same time his fathers and brothers, Voltaire, Molière, Rabelais, who carried “la Liberté, la Justice, la Vérité, la Raison” past the cruel laughing enemies to the seriousness of the new age.

However, this triumph is endangered, Michelet continues the scene of memory, because contemporaries abuse the sacred field of Mars, where the mighty spirit of history blows, as a theatre of their amusements. And so the historian sets about enlivening this void with the ghosts and spectres of the Revolution. His book opens and closes once again this unique spectacle whose actors had set out and failed to put an end to all theatre, to all political theatre, and to impose definitive seriousness on the world.

This seriousness, this will to be serious, the sometimes radical will to be serious, goes as far as Michelet implies and dreams: to the triumph of emptiness, to the complete de-staging of the old world theatre. The French Revolution was not only serious in his eyes, serious with the destruction of the world theatre, with the de-comedialisation. What remained was only emptiness, only wind, this delusion of perfect unambiguity: becoming pure, unmediated presence. Of course, it is no coincidence that this moment takes place on the field of Mars, because the talk of seriousness is a *manoeuvre*.

II

But what does “*serious*” or “*emergency*” mean? The German words “Ernst” and “Ernstfall” carry within themselves the semantic memory of the enemy. Linguistic history shows that the Old High German word *ernust* and subsequently the Middle High German *ernest* as well as the Anglo-Saxon *eornest*, which in turn gave rise to the English *earnest*, had the original meaning of “fight”, “death struggle”. The Old Norse word *orrusta* (battle) can also be traced back to a common linguistic root with *ernust* and *eornest*, but it developed different semantics than the English and German words. All the lexical entries for *ernust* draw the same trace in the history of language, namely the shift from the meaning “fight”, “duel”, “war”, “battle” to *ernust* as the *characteristic* of such fights.⁸ Seriousness (Ernst) passes through this metonymy because it belongs to the decision of life and death. Seriousness (Ernst) opens up the bloody future arena, a Martian field where a decision is in the offing. So it is only from this punctual moment of decision, of a duel, that seriousness

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8 Cf. the article „Ernst” in the *Deutschen Wörterbuch von Jakob und Wilhelm Grimm*, t. 3, col. 923.

draws its semantic potential, namely to mark a moment, a discourse in such a way that it absorbs all ambiguity, all ambiguity, everything that provokes laughter. The *serious* duel in the sense of “Ernst” itself forms a scene where two parties demand unambiguity, where the dispute is decided as a problem of two. As one of two claims remains, the speech of seriousness results from the desambiguation, the self-presentation of seriousness results. Seriousness, the announcement of seriousness, indicates a discursive manoeuvre that desires to strip away the ambiguous, the non-committal, in the end even the linguistic itself.

The metonymic turn in the semantic fate of the German word “Ernst” became apparent early on. The history of language already provides corresponding evidence from Old High German times (before 1100). *Serious* means the real, the true, what is meant this way and not otherwise, the unambiguous, the opposite of joking and fun. With this semantic career, the old basic meaning was gradually lost. It could therefore be seen as a revision of this process, the metonymisation of *seriousness*, that the word *Ernstfall* was incorporated into the German lexicon in the 19th century. It is military experts who distinguish seriousness from exercise, from manoeuvre or, as an early record in the *Allgemeine Militär-Zeitung* from 1833 emphasises, from parades.⁹ Now that *seriousness* (Ernst) has ceded its old semantic potential to the distinction of play, from joking, to the end of laughter, the new word *Ernstfall* again indicates the danger of decision and the proximity of death.

This brief linguistic-historical reminder reveals why the *Field of Mars* is a place of seriousness, the place where the end of all play is indicated. The Field of Mars in Paris, as we know, was laid out as a copy of the Roman Field of Mars, where this preparatory seriousness took place. The Field of Mars was used for exercise and manoeuvre. The two fields of Mars in Rome and Paris were therefore not places of decision, but of military exercises preparing for the real thing.

Now one could say: the talk of seriousness is a language game. It brings about a clarification in the world about the world and nothing more. It is a language game that indicates the termination of language games. The discourse of seriousness indicates that the enemy has no ontological foundation; rather, it is the result of a sudden transformation when one remembers that the enemy is, linguistically speaking, a former friend as indicated by the words *inimicus*, *ennemi*, *enemy*. Transforming the enemy back into a friend is also an easy manoeuvre. “Oh, mes ennemis”, Michelet had the spirit of the French Revolution lament in 1846, “il n’y a plus d’ennemis”. The seriousness is gone, because the enemies are gone.

There are more Martian field scenes. In Christian Dietrich Grabbe’s drama *Napoleon or the Hundred Days*, completed in 1831, there is no talk of anything but seriousness. The hundred days from the landing

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9 *Allgemeine Militär-Zeitung* No. 41 (22 May 1833), p. 324

at Cannes on 1 March to the defeat at Waterloo on 18 June run in the sequence: theatre, seriousness, theatre. Shortly before Napoleon arrives in Paris on 20 March 1815, the playwright once again calls all the parties of the revolution to the stage, the whole spectacle of the years after 1789 is *repeated*, and thus all those involved regard themselves and the others as comedians until Napoleon once again has the Constitution invoked on the Field of Mars on 1 May 1815 with the additional charter. Then battle scenes follow in which armies parade across the stage. In the fifth act, Wellington's entire army fills and overflows the stage, artillery and cavalry appear in formation, the general stands on the heights of Mont Saint Jean, and incessantly, as the stage directions state, French cannonballs *smash* into the huge army piles. This scene is not empty, but full. Then the drama is over. Napoleon has lost the battle and declares that now the seriousness is over. There are no more enemies for him either:

“Instead of the golden [age] there will come an earthen, crumbling one, full of half-measures, silly lugs and folly, - of course one will hear nothing of mighty deeds of battle and heroes, all the more of diplomatic assemblages, convent visits of high chiefs, of comedians, violinists and opera whores - - until the spirit of the world arises, touches the floodgates behind which the waves of revolution and my imperialism lurk [...]”¹⁰

Everyday political life, the comedy of the political, the theatre of diplomacy and the play of the media, theatre, music and opera, take their place. But a new apocalyptic seriousness, the seriousness of the apocalyptic announces itself in Napoleon's words. Grabbe puts a preview of the July Revolution of 1830 on the tongue of the beaten man. Napoleon speaks as the supreme authority of the world's seriousness, on which both art and politics hang. The seriousness will always return.

III

But when did it start, the political laughter that is otherwise hardly to be heard in world history? When does this laughter begin to haunt politics and history? When does the old image of the world theatre become ambiguous and not stop wavering between tragedy and comedy?

Perhaps Emperor Napoleon provides the appropriate cue. When he got serious in 1812 and went to Warsaw to prepare for his long-planned Russian campaign, he talked to the ambassador there, Dominique Georges Frédérique du Pratt, who recorded the conversation. Du Pratt noted his observations about the emperor's excessive need to talk and his habit of repeatedly inserting certain phrases into his endless

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¹⁰ Grabbe 1960ff., t. 2, p. 457f. (my transl.)

monologues. As if he suspected that he had just invented a catchphrase, the Emperor repeated the sentence “Du sublime au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas” more than five times in his explanation.¹¹

Napoleon was convinced that one had to know the ancient and modern tragedian poets in order to play a role in world history. He had memorised entire tragedies himself and liked to quote them. According to Talleyrand’s testimony, he explained the motive for this study to his visitor Goethe: “Une bonne tragédie doit être regardée comme l’école la plus digne des hommes supérieures!”¹² And therefore the emperor was inevitably a follower of Charles Batteux’s theory of tragedy, according to which what mattered in tragedy was the *height of the fall*: Only *hommes supérieurs*, rulers and heroes, were suitable as illustrations and examples of tragic fate and the absence of laughter. They alone guaranteed the cathartic effect of falling from the summits of power into the depths, as Batteux explained: “Le degré d’élévation où ils sont, donne plus d’éclat à leur chute.”¹³ But this no longer seemed to apply when Napoleon, in the staccato of his sentences on the *sublime* in Warsaw, reduced the tragic fall from the sublime to the ridiculous to a single step. Once the depth of a well was considered the measure to trigger the anti-sublime impulse, for the primal scene of laughter at the fall of a great man is the fall of the philosopher Thales of Miletus, who had fallen into a well amidst the laughter of a maid. Since then, falling has been the paradigm for the laughter-inducing comic. Thus Hobbes writes in his *Elements of Law*, “To see another fall, disposition to laugh.”¹⁴ The example of a dignitary who falls eliciting laughter is immortal and is also cited by Artur Koestler¹⁵, Elias Canetti or Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹⁶

Perhaps a tragedy should only be performed once. In the modern age, the word about the tiny gap between the sublime and the ridiculous seems to come true in such reprises. Is this perhaps where the intellectual effort to expel the comic begins? In his *Lectures on the philosophy of history*, Hegel still believed that the upheavals of the state in world history were justified by repetition.¹⁷ Recall Grabbe’s Napoleon drama, where a parody of 14 July 1789 is performed once more before the return of the exile on Elba. Marx, on the other hand, indirectly echoed

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11 du Pratt 1816, p. 215ff.

12 *Mémoires du prince de Talleyrand*. Publiées avec une préface par le duc de Broglie de l’Académie française. Vol. I (1754-1808). Paris 1891, p. 442.

13 Batteux 1764, p. 71.

14 Hobbes 1889, p. 48

15 Koestler 1964, p. 48.

16 cf. Friedrich 1999, p. 142 seq.

17 Hegel 1969-1970, (note 6), t. 12, p. 380.

Napoleon's oft-repeated aphorism in Warsaw, when he added to Hegel's words with regard to Louis Napoleon's coup d'état in 1851, according to which these repetitions were played once as tragedy and once as farce.¹⁸ Now Napoleon had studied Plutarch's parallel biographies, in which Rome's great men are portrayed as doubles of the Greek heroes, and he himself regarded his appearances in world history as a renewal and completion of Caesar's mission. He also planned his Russian campaign as the fulfilment of a plan that Caesar was no longer able to realise. But that could go wrong.

The laughter about his fall resounded to Napoleon after his last defeat, especially from English caricatures. When he landed on St Helena in 1815 and it subsequently became known that his modest accommodation at Longwood was full of rats, this was used to ridicule the fallen emperor. An English caricature shows him riding a cat, with a group of frightened rats in front of him. The speech bubble has him declare: "Inhabitants of St. Helena, let's be friends. I declare you a free people. I give you as a pledge this faithful servant whom I have with me."¹⁹

IV

In the history of philosophy and politics, the manoeuvre of becoming serious, the turn to seriousness, has been repeated everywhere. René Descartes was perhaps the first to make such a turn in theory in his *Méditations* (1641). As he reported in the *Discours de la méthode*, he had exposed himself for years to all the temptations of doubt, ambiguity, literature, the world and all the "comédies qui s'y jouent"²⁰ in order to know in the end: There are universals that withstand doubt and all sensory illusions. Whether I am fooled by a dream or whether I pursue my activity of thinking while awake, through both worlds the figures of geometry and the laws of arithmetic do not change their shape. Whether I am dreaming or awake: two plus three is five.²¹ This is an early turn of seriousness in the philosophy of modern times. Cartesian doubt ventured daringly into the world comedies, into the polysemy of signs, into the susceptibility of the senses to ghosts and chimeras, but doubt did this only to assure itself of the certainty of seriousness. The generalities, the forms of geometry, numbers, God, establish and secure the realm of a seriousness withdrawn from all doubt. Seriousness is the common elementary structure that encompasses all departments of the *res cogitans*.

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18 Marx 1985, p. 96-189, p. 96.

19 <https://shannonselin.com/2016/09/caricatures-napoleon-st-helena/>

20 Descartes 1953, p. 145

21 Ibid., (Note 19), p. 270.

The weariness of scholasticism and its language dispute that drove Descartes into doubt also dictated to Thomas Hobbes the charge that the gibberish of terms such as “hypostatic”, “transubstantial”, “consubstantial” or misleading ambiguous words only led to strife, turmoil and hatred.²² Hobbes was also a bitter enemy of laughter. In *Leviathan* and the treatise *On Man*, he discovered laughter to be a sign of a lower affect: “*Sudden Glory*, is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER”.²³ Since the 17th century, many intellectuals regarded laughter as contemptible. La Rochefoucauld boasted in his self-description of 1659 that he had been seen laughing no more than three times in the previous two years. And so Hobbes also expressed himself disparagingly about this affect. He counts laughter among the signs and sounds of the state of nature.²⁴

Mars fields and civil wars are the sites of the state of nature. And the polysemes that trigger quarrels make them grow. War forces decision and unambiguity. Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel continues this thought in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There he attacks, among other things, contemporary theology and its idea that the divine work is a *game*:

“The life of God and divine knowledge may thus be pronounced as a game love play with itself; this idea sinks to edification and even to blandness if the seriousness, the pain, the patience and labour of the negative are lacking in it.”²⁵

This turn from love to seriousness, which is the life of God, allows Hegel’s speech about the “seriousness of the concept”²⁶ to be recognised at the same time as a variety of those philosophical manoeuvres that announce seriousness as the negativity and the overcoming of all edifying words and thoughts that have become corrosive through the influence of time. The “seriousness of the concept” likewise strides “smashing” over the heroes in tragedy and saves him from all laughter.²⁷ His polemic against the edifying ideas of Eternal Peace also shows their warlike will in the famous addition to § 324 of the *Philosophy of Right*. There it reads:

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22 Hobbes 1981, p. 116f.

23 Ibid., (note 22), p. 125.

24 Hobbes 1991, p. 114.

25 Hegel 1969-1970 (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in: *Werke* (note 6), t. 3.), p. 24. (my transl.)

26 *ibid.*, p. 14

27 *ibid.*, p. 535.

“One hears so much talk in pulpits about the insecurity, vanity and unsteadiness of temporal things, but everyone thinks, however touched he is, I will still keep what is mine. But when this insecurity really comes up in the form of hussars with bare sabres, and if it is serious, then that touched edification which foretold everything turns to pronouncing curses on the conquerors.”²⁸

There is, Hegel explains, the speech of the uncertainty or change of things. But it remains stuck in ambiguity, in ambiguity, because something quite different is its “coming into speech”. This “coming to speech” ends all language games. The soldiers with the bare sabres translate the edifying speech into bloody seriousness. Philosophy is the manoeuvre of this seriousness that will spread over the world.

The definitive seriousness is the end of history. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a scene comes to an end where, on Golgotha’s hill of the dead, the definitive earnestness of spirit closes all manoeuvres of certainty, consciousness and self-consciousness. End of art, end of unseriousness, end of all manoeuvres. Golgotha is Hegel’s field of Mars, above which le *grand souffle* of the spirit comes to rest.

With a similar trombone blast of programmatic, self-explanatory seriousness, Friedrich Nietzsche concluded the “Preface to Richard Wagner” to the *Birth of Tragedy* in 1871. He had gathered the thoughts of this book in the “horrors and sublimities of the war that had just broken out.”²⁹ And to the address of a public still edified by the ambiguity of cheerful art and serious life, Nietzsche declares that for him there is no problem *more serious* than that of art. The gesture of the tragedy writing can be entirely rewritten according to this manoeuvre, that it is about tearing the veils of appearance and letting the seriousness of the world appear. But all this would remain only a game if it were only a game of irony and seriousness, as Karl-Heinz Bohrer said.³⁰ It is not Romantic irony but the political seriousness of a Hölderlin, a Kleist and the philosophical seriousness of Hegel that set the tone. Kleist’s suicide, Hölderlin’s madness, the anti-Napoleonic furore give expression in this epoch to the seriousness that no longer wants to be a manoeuvre. The young Schiller reader Friedrich Staps, who tried to kill Napoleon at Schönbrunn in 1809, refused to obtain Napoleon’s mercy through a theatre of regret and preferred to be shot.³¹ Similarly, the student Karl Ludwig Sand stabbed

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28 Hegel 1969-1970 (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, in: *Werke* (note 6), t. 7,) p. 492f. (my transl.)

29 Nietzsche 1980, (note. 1), p. 23.

30 Bohrer 2000.

31 Ernst Borkowsky: Das Schönbrunner Attentat im Jahre 1809; mit Benutzung der geh. Police Files of the Franz. National Archives in Paris, Naumburg an der Saale o.J.

the comic poet August von Kotzebue to death in March 1819. In his 1872 lectures on the *future of our educational institutions*, Nietzsche still described this assassination as the “tragically serious and only instructive attempt” to open up the “dark flashing, fertilising, blessing cloud” of the “true German spirit”.³² Ten years later, Nietzsche announced an even truer, downright *inhuman* spirit in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, which would dismiss everything “that had hitherto been called holy, good, untouchable, divine” as a *game*. The previous earthly seriousness would then only appear as a parody. For then “the great seriousness” would begin and the tragedy would begin.³³ With a view to his coming philosophy, Nietzsche could also announce the *Superseriousness* (“Überenst”). Nietzsche, on the other hand, hears the “inhuman spirit” of the gods laughing in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. He has no doubt that the gods know how to laugh in a “superhuman and new way - and at the expense of all serious things!”³⁴ The expulsion of laughter is followed by the expulsion of the old earth-seriousness. Nietzsche is thus far ahead of his contemporary exorcists of play, laughter and comedy.

V

In *Negative Dialectics* of 1966, Adorno writes: “Philosophy is the most serious thing, but not that serious.” Previously, with a view to Hegel, he had determined the paradox of how little thought approaches what is thought “and yet must speak as if it had it all. This approaches it to clownery”.³⁵ Thinking must always allow itself to be asked how serious it is. Thinking must allow itself to be asked whether it is play or merely manoeuvre. Walter Benjamin reports on such a courtroom scene in his notes from his 1934 holiday in Svendborg with Bertolt Brecht. In it, he records a statement by the playwright that allows a glimpse into Brecht’s inner conscience. The poet speaks there:

“I often think of a tribunal before which I would be questioned: ‘How’s that? Are you actually serious?’ I would then have to acknowledge: I’m not completely serious. I also think of too many artistic things, things that benefit the theatre, for me to be completely serious.”³⁶

.....
32 Nietzsche 1980 (*Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten. Fünfte Rede*, in: *Sämtliche Werke* (note 1), t. 1) p. 732f.

33 *Ibid.*, (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in: *Sämtliche Werke* (note 1), t. 3.) p. 635.

34 *Ibid.* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in: *Sämtliche Werke* (note 1), t. 5.) p. 236.

35 Adorno 1975, p. 26.

36 Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rudolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Theodor W. Adorno u. Gershom Scholem, Frankfurt am Main 1974ff, t. VI, p. 524f. (my transl.)

This non-seriousness of his art, the conversation continues, distinguishes Brecht from the so-called substance poets, who are quite serious: Kafka, Kleist, Grabbe, Büchner, whom, however, he regards as failures. Now, in 1934, however, this own unseriousness or half-seriousness will prevent him, Brecht fears, from speaking *seriously*. He lets it be known that his lack of seriousness has disqualified him for seriousness. He admits that we no longer believe his seriousness. Benjamin Brecht goes on to record that the same effect would have occurred if Confucius had written a tragedy or Lenin a novel. Literature, literary manoeuvres of language, would have ruined the speech of these men; they would no longer have been able to perform the great decisive turns of seriousness that are otherwise associated with their names. That is the point of this comparison. Once Brecht and never again Lenin. Before Walter Benjamin's court, Brecht admits that he was never entirely serious. So his speech, as would be necessary now that Hitler has become serious, now that Hitler's seriousness has turned Germany into a field of Mars, can no longer take itself seriously. The game, the literary game, the word game, can literally gamble away the seriousness. Whoever wants to make a revolution, whoever wants to declare a war, must not have first disempowered his speech through irony and play. Even if play can always turn into seriousness, non-seriousness can lead to the impotence of law. In fact, Hitler, who disavowed parliamentarism as ridiculous theatre and instead, as Volker Ackermann has shown³⁷, elevated the funeral ceremony to the centre of political representation, brought the serious, the serious speakers and serious thinkers to his side: Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger.

Seriousness, to say this here against all misunderstandings, the duel (Ernst) of seriousness, is not a fascist thing, it is not politically or morally disavowed. On the contrary, seriousness is probably the deep, enigmatic, infinite secret of modernity. This is shown by the exemplary scene that is called up in Horkheimer/Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the fall of reason and analysed as the distant founding moment of fascism. It is the moment when reason, in an act of violence, detached itself from the power of nature and from the embrace of myth, where it set itself as difference and entered into violent opposition to the mythical powers.³⁸ This was the process of disenchantment. The displacement of myth led to its violent return. Fascism, the hitherto singular combination of technology, violence and myth, abandoned this great terrible legacy. Adorno now finds the beginning of this story inscribed in the narrative of the encounter of Odysseus and the Sirens.

.....
37 Ackermann 1990

38 Horkheimer & Adorno 1988.

For Adorno, the encounter between Odysseus and the Sirens is a primal scene. Here, a hero gifted with reason and the most tenacious will to survive escapes the power of nature. He escapes from seriousness because he escapes from decision. The sirens are, after all, nothing but an embodiment of the powers of nature, the beautiful, violent powers of nature. The powers of nature, Adorno thinks, have a claim to the duel. But what takes place is a duel without a fight. Reason does not fight, but outwits. But the victory of reason without a fight, Adorno thinks, will be a Pyrrhic victory. Odysseus, chained to the mast, who can only force the enjoyment of nature through the duel that has been transferred to his inner self, through the violent peace of reason, is the symbol of this separation. It is the “foreboding allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment”.³⁹ The domination of nature is the violence of the will to live. It sacrifices pleasure and escapes danger, for in the rational exchange death is exchanged only for the fullness of life. The sacrifice is erased from thought.

But what about art? “Since Odysseus’ happy-miserable encounter with the Sirens, all songs have been diseased, and all Western music is labouring under the contradiction of song and civilisation (...)”.⁴⁰ This is the unserious theatre. Song is no longer an event, but a game framed by the will to enjoyment. For the sirens, their singing is their profession, their nature, their seriousness, their reality. But because the artifice and the medium of contemplation interpose themselves between this song and its addressee, who can actually only participate in this seriousness through his death, this song is diseased. It is the disease of art, which alone is still play. You could call it manoeuvre sickness. The sirens of the harmony of the spheres sing as well as the moirs because this is the sound of the world. Song was once the *grand soufflé* of the winds or the roar of the sea.

VI

This reading of the *Odyssey* in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the unjust, fatal, cunning, pacifist avoidance of the struggle with the forces of nature imagined there, shows a very obvious closeness to the turns of seriousness in the thinking of the German theorists of war, seriousness and the enemy: Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger. Admittedly, these three authors have quite different enemies in mind. And yet a common enemy schema can be discerned that carries their discourse. A first example that suggests itself here is Martin Heidegger’s *Parmenides Lecture* from the winter semester of 1942/43. The lecture

.....
39 *ibid.*, p. 69.

40 *ibid.*, p. 67.

turns against modern thought, or as Heidegger puts it: against the “immuring of *alätheia* in the Romanesque bulwark of *veritas*, *rectitudo* and *iustitia*”.⁴¹ Heidegger presents the history of metaphysics here as the worldwide seizure of power by the legal Roman distinction between true and false. This Roman *verum* and its opposite, the *falsum*, encircled the original Greek terms *aläthäs* and *pseudos* in imperial form and reversed their essence. The Roman encirclement of *aläthäs* took place through the adoption and falsification of Greek word usage. Heidegger’s example is the Livius phrase “fallit hostis incedens” (unnoticed the enemy approaches). The Roman understanding, however, inverts “unnoticed” in the sense of “hidden”, into “deceiving” or “going behind”.⁴² Thus, the ambiguous Greek word pair *hidden / unhidden is* reinterpreted into the unambiguous Latin relation of *true / false*. The Livius example of the hidden enemy stands as a model for the whole line of thought in the *Parmenides Lecture*. Heidegger’s polemic against the metaphysics of the world-encompassing *iustitia* of a mundial *pax* is thus a war against entrenchment, against the denial, depolemisation of truth. The lecture of 1942/43 repeats the war that is always effective in the *alätheia* itself. For in § 2 of the lecture, there had previously been talk of the fact that the essence of truth, in itself, *is polemos*: dispute. The Heraclitean dictum of war as the “father of all things” means, with Heidegger: “The polemos is the clearing (“Lichtung”)”.⁴³ Truth is serious, truth is the inner strife of concealing and unconcealing. Here Heidegger also suggests that this strife belongs to the agonal of Greek culture rediscovered by Burckhardt and Nietzsche. The quarrel, the war and, one may add: the seriousness of Greek truth are based on the contradiction of concealment and unconcealment, as a struggle of forgetting and reflection.

In Heidegger’s *Parmenides Lecture*, the term “seriousness” is not used, even though “seriousness” is mentioned several times. But it would require an explanation that goes too far to find this Heideggerian seriousness in the context developed here. It is rather significant that behind this very figure of the enemy or enemies there is hidden a particular enemy, an actual enemy, which for its part has an inverted figure. The enemy called *falsum*, whose name is followed by other pseudonyms such as “truth”, “justice”, “technology”, falsity is the result of a process in world history where the empire of truth has developed from the dispute (*polemos*). Heidegger describes here a seizure of power that is structurally similar to the process described by Horkheimer and Adorno. Whereas in the analysis of the siren episode in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* it was the violent closure of the agon between nature and man, the becoming of the

.....
41 Heidegger 1992, t. 54, p. 72.

42 *ibid.*, p. 61f.

43 Heidegger 1954, p. 249-274, p. 269.

object of art, the enthralling of art, Heidegger analyses the enthralling of the *polemos* and the becoming of the object of truth as *verum*.

It is now inevitable that the *serious case* (Ernstfall) that Carl Schmitt develops in his 1932 treatise *The Concept of the Political will* also come up. Heidegger's and Schmitt's thoughts go in the same direction. Both inherit the turns towards seriousness that are prominently associated with the names of Hegel or even Kierkegaard. Schmitt's whole effort in 1932, as is well known, amounts to tying the political to the presupposition of the opposition of friend and foe. The political cannot go back behind this opposition, nor can it abolish it without abolishing itself. Therefore, as Schmitt writes, it is a matter of holding on to the "reality in terms of being and real possibility" of this distinction. The distinction is supposed to lead into the real, concrete, being-like this side of an otherwise "completely moralised and ethicised world".⁴⁴ Although a world without this elementary difference is also conceivable for Schmitt, it would be a world without politics. Perhaps it would be a comic world? The by no means simple proof of this thesis then leads via a series of linguistic findings, including the word family of Latin *hostis* and Greek *echthros*. Even more important to Schmitt is the proof that all political concepts, ideas and words have a "polemical sense". War is already rooted in the lexicon of the political; all political semantics presupposes this opposition of friend and foe. As truth is for Heidegger, for Schmitt the political is at its core divisiveness and seriousness.

Schmitt's reflections are, of course, too complex to be presented here in extenso. They are, after all, largely known. Schmitt's readers know and recognise from their own seriousness that the polemical sense, which according to Schmitt constitutes the political, also pervades his treatise. The "concrete and being" reality does not alone constitute the political world that the treatise sets its sights on; rather, the writing itself participates in the manoeuvre it describes. The treatise and representation of the polemic, of killing and being killed, the grounding of the political in discourse, carries out this polemic itself. Schmitt's serious war aims to secure the possibility of war. This is what his axiomatic sentence says: "political, in any case, is always the grouping that is oriented towards the serious".⁴⁵ The enemy that appears in Carl Schmitt's polemical manoeuvring field is the collective name of all tempters who seek to steer the world into the perspective of a universal peace, a universal legal order. Nothing is more hateful to Ernst than the thought, or rather the thinker, of such a peace. Peace is for him, as Grabbe's Napoleon already said, a comedy, when the seriousness is war. One might think that it is the hostile figure of a political theory; but

.....
44 Schmitt 1963, p.

45 *ibid.*, p. 39.

this seriousness is determined by an enemy who strives to eliminate the seriousness and with it the political itself. But if this is so, where does the friend appear in this configuration? Is friendship, then, comedy? Who else but the speaker, the writer, the tongue that lets words slip into the world in the first place, are the friend? Jacques Derrida has posed this question about the equivalence and logical uniformity of the two members of Schmitt's divided friend/enemy pairing.⁴⁶ The aporia of this treatise, which itself wants to be a *serious case*, becomes apparent at another point. For the serious case of the serious case, which fills the whole world, is the exceptional case (Ausnahmefall). But the exception, and this problem encompasses the entire doctrine of sovereignty, is rare; as Schmitt himself explains, it is becoming increasingly rare. It is only in this rarity that Schmitt sees the "particularly decisive and revealing core significance" of the exception.⁴⁷ The rarer, the more significant. Here too, as with Heidegger, an earnestness/seriousness that tends to elude history or even teleology is preserved with a universally polemical gesture. In war, something discloses itself, something reveals itself, and the possibility of this revelation must be secured. The war of the treatise is about preserving the seriousness, and the seriousness of the treatise steps in for this. Otherwise the world would turn into an unreal second deceptive spectacle. That would be the world of peace (of comedies).

Paradoxically, Schmitt wants to save this type of serious in order to ward off another type of *polemos*, the odious conflicts of absolute enmity. They form, as he perhaps clairvoyantly recognises, the flip side, the future polemic flip side of an order that encompasses the world and depoliticises, depolemises the world, of a "pacified globe". This would be, says Schmitt, a world without anthropological ground, it would be a fictitious unreal world. Without the intensification of opposites to the point of friend and foe, there will be no politics, there will be no bloodshed, no killing, there will be no more seriousness. The forces that come into play seem much more dangerous, as Schmitt's treatise on the partisan will later show.

In these fragmentary remarks, then, the aim was to make the turn to seriousness recognisable as a modern gesture in philosophy, art and politics. These proofs and very shorthand analyses leave open the question of to what force, indeed perhaps to what seriousness, this stereotypical movement can be attributed. Similar to Georg Büchner's Danton's question, "What is that in us that hurts, steals and lies?" similar to Danton's question about the anthropological substrate of the false or evil, the question about the nature of seriousness could follow here: What is it that demands the turns of seriousness in us moderns? Is there perhaps a desire for seriousness that masks something else? With this

.....
46 Derrida 1994 (.)

47 Schmitt 1963 (note 44), p. 28.

question, one should go back the way to psychoanalysis, admittedly not out of revisionism (how can one revise seriousness?), but in order to make progress. Especially since the question was posed by the seriousness theorists themselves as an anthropological question. With the psychoanalyst and jurist Pierre Legendre, the responsibility for this question can be reclaimed: The anthropological ground is the theatre.⁴⁸ The desire for seriousness, the desire for seriousness that not only unsettles modernity but literally drives it into wars and elevates the experience of war to the highest, only certainty of *seriousness*, this desire for the *Great Seriousness* is not content with securing the unambiguousness of speech, with bringing language back into naming, with peeling language out of the medial, out of polysemy, out of deception, with definitively strangling the eternal *as if* in the duel of seriousness. The deep desire of seriousness is silence. Michelet's commemoration on the Field of Mars stages such a silence. Silence spreads over Hegel's Golgotha. The end of philosophy, as Heidegger announced it, is silence. The fire that reduced books and the Reichstag to ashes in 1933 wanted silence. Silence is the end, the goal, the moment of seriousness. Silence gives the certainty that there is no theater. Here is a short passage from the essay of an author who himself bears the first name Ernst. It is Ernst Jünger's essay *Feuer und Blut* (*Fire and Blood*), which, according to the *works*, first appeared in 1925. Here the author gives a diary-like account of a battle in 1914 on about 100 pages, and the account does not differ much from similar texts in *Stahlgewittern* or *Wäldchen 125*. The context is also irrelevant, because the reflection is so general that it could appear anywhere in Jünger, in the younger Jünger. The short meditation belongs to the preliminaries of a battle and constitutes an attempt to put the impending seriousness into a historical, ontogenetic, phylogenetic and cosmic perspective:

“Every time has its tasks, duties and pleasures, and every time also has its adventures. And every time also has a youth that knows its hour and loves adventure, in which the child's colourful play is given meaning by masculine seriousness. That is where the real meaning of life must lie, in the movement through a space filled with a thousand dangers, as it takes place in every drop of water, where light-green and crystal-clear bodies draw their ever-threatened courses under the same vibration that moves us.

Certainly, it is bitterly serious. But the adventure is the splendour that lies above the threat. The task is life, but the adventure is poetry.”⁴⁹

.....
48 Legendre 1994 (Leçons III).

49 Ernst Jünger: *Feuer und Blut*, in: E.J.: *Werke*. Stuttgart o. J., t. 1. Tagebücher 1, p. 477seq.

This perspective is Nietzschean, in any case it is radically aesthetic. According to Jünger, seriousness is the male, adult version of childlike play. Play forms the preparation, play is the school of seriousness. Play is the manoeuvre. Seriousness, on the other hand, is the essence, the poetry of life. All turns of seriousness, all talk of the serious call up the absolute aesthetic. This absolute aesthetic pursues nothing but the solemn restoration of the world as original. The more serious the self-declaration of seriousness, the stronger the pathos of reference, the more radical the language game that announces the end of all language games, the clearer the disgust at a second-hand world, at the mediality of experience, at a language that has become insipid, at a discourse that loses itself in polysemy. Jünger's poetry, however, does not want to be literature, but an element of life itself. Literary poetry even forms an opposition, the hostile opposition to the poetry of action. In his essay *The Struggle as an Inner Experience* ("Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis"), Ernst Jünger evokes a veritable catharsis of words in war. There it says: "the fine, the intricate, the ever more sharply honed nuance, the sophisticated fragmentation of pleasure evaporated in the spraying crater of drives thought to have sunk."⁵⁰ This poetry of poetry-lessness, of poetry-ending, of silence repeats once again the gesture that introduces all turns of seriousness. Its secret meaning is the revision of becoming human itself, for it leads into the inauthenticity of language and play. The speaking subject is never with itself. The radical alterity recognised by psychoanalysis, which captures the subject in an image, its mirage and in the language of the other, is reversed in the duel of seriousness to appearances. However, to note this now at the end, the talk of it remains a manoeuvre.

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50 Ernst Jünger: *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, in E.J.: *Werke*, (note 49), t. 5, p.38.

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Oneself as an Enemy: Tragedy and the Dialectic

Alberto Toscano

Abstract: This article explores the speculative, historical and political relationship between tragic form and dialectical thought first by revisiting Peter Szondi's interpretation of the German Idealist invention of the tragic, and then by surveying the multiple articulations of tragedy in the writings of Henri Lefebvre. It proposes that a complex figure of self-enmity, individual and collective, defines tragedy's post-revolutionary dialectic, by contrast with the progressive politics of innocence and immediacy that bedevils much Leftist thought.

Keywords: dialectic – G.W.F. Hegel – Henri Lefebvre – Peter Szondi – tragedy

1. An army of negations

The modern, which is to say the *post-revolutionary* dialectic, is born of a confrontation with the *form* and the *idea* of the tragic – a confrontation known by shorthand as 'German Idealism'.¹

In his wonderfully economical and incisive *An Essay on the Tragic* (1961), the German theorist of literature and drama Peter Szondi, explicated how, ever since his earliest writings on natural law, ethical life and Christianity, the young Hegel had forged his comprehension of negation's dynamics through a powerful and multi-layered recoding of Ancient Greek tragedies.² Here, he was anticipated by his former roommates at the Tübingen seminary, Schelling and Hölderlin. In his 1795 *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, the twenty-year-old Schelling had advanced a bold and superbly anachronistic interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* as the drama of free will revealed in the throes of transgression (the anachronism was anatomised by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his essay on the intimations of the will in Greek tragedy³). For Schelling, the speculative lesson of Greek tragedy, crystallised and modelled by the arc of Oedipus' downfall, lay in what he termed 'the conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world'.⁴ This conflict was mediated by a Christianised conception of *crime* and *guilt*; tragedy's sublimity came to be figured in a protagonist, a *subject* able to 'willingly endure punishment even for an *unavoidable* crime, so as to prove [his] freedom precisely through the loss of this freedom and perish

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1 It may be noted that the Platonic dialectic was in its own way shaped by a fantasised deportation of the tragic poets. The latter appear as rivals to philosophy's political-pedagogical project, purveyors of myths of conflict and spectacles of lamentation that could not but divide the city, the *polis* – as Nicole Loraux has magisterially demonstrated in Loraux 2002.

2 I have explored Hegel's appropriation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in his early theory of natural law in Toscano 2015.

3 Vernant 1988.

4 Schelling, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 7.

with a declaration of free will'. Where Schelling indicated in the assertion of freedom antagonised by fate the modern lesson of ancient drama, in the remarks that Hölderlin appended to his translations of Sophocles one encounters instead a speculative if enigmatic attention to the play of division itself. As he wrote:

The presentation of the tragic rests primarily on the following: that the terrible and the monstrous – how the god and man mate and how the power of nature and man's innermost depths boundlessly become one in wrath – is understood by this boundless union purifying itself through boundless separation.⁵

While in both Schelling and Hölderlin ancient tragic form anticipates the figures of modern, post-revolutionary negativity, their interpretations of tragedy in terms of the notions of *indifference* and *caesura* respectively keep themselves at a remove from the *historicization* of tragedy – a historicization mediated by the Passion of the Cross – which is arguably the precondition for the convergence of tragedy and the dialectic.

It should be noted that the extraction of a tragedy qua philosophical model is of enormous significance here, and that the young Hegel's use of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* is redolent with consequences: the taming of the nomadic and matriarchal form of justice embodied in the Furies and their patriation to Athens, in a mythical act of political foundation, plants the seeds of the state into this figure of negation.

It is thus in the shape Christian fate (so alien to Greek *Ananke* or necessity), that the young Hegel imagines modern tragedy. This fate, tellingly contrasted to Jewish Law, is 'nothing foreign like punishment' but rather, in an unsurpassable formulation, a veritable antidote to any progressive politics of innocence, 'consciousness of oneself, yet as something hostile'.⁶ It is striking that this crucial figure of 'oneself as an enemy' remains shadowed by the question of criminality and guilt. As Szondi highlights, it is with reference to a modern tragedy, namely Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, that Hegel develops this dark insight. 'After murdering Banquo, Macbeth is not confronted with an alien law existing independently of him', writes Szondi, 'rather, in the form of Banquo's ghost, he faces injured life itself, which is nothing foreign, but his "own forfeited life"'. And quoting from Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity*:

It is now for the first time that injured life appears as a hostile power against the criminal and mistreats him, just as he has mistreated others. Hence, punishment as fate is the equal reaction

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5 Hölderlin, quoted in Szondi 2002, pp. 12-13.

6 Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 17.

of the criminal's own deed, of a power that he himself has armed, of an enemy that he himself has created.⁷

The deep ambivalence of this dialectic is already in effect: on the one hand, a vital intuition of the non-identity of the subject, on the other, its inoculation by means of a super-egoic mechanism that presages the interiorisation of the state, the law, punishment – *you are punishing yourself, in the last instance*. In Hegel's cycling through the historical and aesthetic forms of the tragic, this inner, spectral enmity will be coupled with the more overtly political and frontal antagonism modelled after the clash of Creon and Antigone, anachronistic figures of the modern State and the modern Family. As he writes in the *Aesthetics* (in a passage that resonates with the treatment of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*):

The original essence of the tragic consists then in the fact that within such a collision each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*; on the other hand, each side can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and infringing upon the equally justified power of the other. Therefore, each side – in its ethical life, and because of it – is equally involved in *guilt*.⁸

Viewed from this Sophoclean vantage point, what is the dialectic? It is the speculative and historical effort to overcome the tragic, immanently; in other words, to pacify the *civil war in the domain of ethical life* which is the very matter of tragedy – not least in the fraternal carnage that plagues and pollutes the city of Thebes in the *Antigone*. To pacify, but not to neutralise, since, like the Furies-turned-Kindly Ones in the *Oresteia*, the energies of antagonism need to be captured and mobilised by the dialectical, which is to say, the conquering *polis*.

It is not too much of a stretch to couple the further adventures of the dialectic to the rediscoveries, revitalisations, and reprisals of tragic form, all keyed to different post-revolutionary conjunctures. Friedrich Engels's narrative of the prophetic defeat of Thomas Müntzer's theological communism in *The Peasant War in Germany*; Georg Lukács's wrestling with the metaphysics of the tragic across his conflicted conversion to communism; C.L.R. James writing and re-writing the

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7 Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 18. As Szondi notes, Hegel's figural and historical operations around tragedy make for disturbing short circuits, as in this passage from *The Spirit of Christianity*: 'The fate of the Jewish people is the fate of Macbeth, who stepped out of nature itself, clung to foreign beings, and thus in their service had to trample and slay everything holy in human nature, had at last to be forsaken by his gods (for they were objects and he their slave), and be crushed to pieces on his faith itself.' Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 21.

8 Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 19.

Haitian revolution, in history and drama, between the 1930s and 1960s,⁹ as both the tragedy of Toussaint and the irruption of the mass chorus of the 'Black sansculottes'¹⁰ into history (while also creatively reviving the Hegelian legacy in his *Notes on Dialectics*¹¹); Aimé Césaire tracing the tragedies of decolonisation in the figures of King Christophe and Patrice Lumumba. The examples – or rather the critical models that tragedy provides for thinking dialectically the shifting forms of collective politics – could be greatly expanded. Through these models, one can sketch a dialectical-historical excavation of tragic form that locates its antagonisms (within the individual; between normative orders, classes, sexes, racialised groups) in different conjunctures of crisis. Among its defining elements are:

1. The attention, inaugurated by Aristotle's own poetics of tragedy, to *reversals* and *catastrophes*, now thought in the register of collective action: *how do revolutionaries become their own enemies?* How, to borrow from Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, does human praxis, diverted and ossified by its engagement with natural and social materiality, turn into a kind of *anti-praxis*?

2. The staging of seemingly intractable conflict, of *stasis*, of civil war.

3. The identification of the historical *transition* between political or normative orders as tragic form's generative force-field, as in C.L.R. James's annotation from 'Notes on *Hamlet*': 'It was Shakespeare's good fortune to live in an age when the whole economic and social structure was in the throes of revolutionary change on a colossal scale'¹² (this is an insight that matches many classicist's understanding of Ancient Greek tragedy as a product of crisis and transition in Ancient Athens itself¹³). The idea of tragedy as the political genre of transition, can also be conceived in terms of an art of the emancipatory aftermath, rather than the revolutionary event. As Aimé Césaire remarked in a 1969 interview around his play *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, 'liberation is epic, its tomorrows are tragic' (*La libération c'est épique, mais les lendemains sont tragiques*).¹⁴ What tragedy mobilises and nourishes, to borrow now from Suzanne Césaire's '1943: Surrealism and Us', is the 'massive

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9 Douglas 2019.

10 James 1984.

11 James 1980.

12 James 1992, p. 236.

13 See Meier 1993.

14 Quoted in Frost and Tavárez 2020.

army of negations' catalysed by the politics and poetics of anti-colonial insurgency.¹⁵

4. The effort to think through the figures taken by *fate* and *necessity* in modern capitalism: from Hegel's uncanny coupling of Aeschylus's Furies and the emergent forces of the market in his 1802 *Natural Law* essay¹⁶ to Max Weber's delineation of capitalist modernisation as a mighty coercive 'cosmos' determining the destiny of every individual born into its mechanism 'until the day that the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed'.¹⁷

2. Henri Lefebvre, theorist of tragedy

In what remains, I want to expand on these elements, widely if incompletely explored in the literature on tragic modernities, to touch on an author whose contribution to our conception of the dialectic destinations and limits of tragedy has been largely ignored, Henri Lefebvre. To the aforementioned elements, Lefebvre adds three interesting and important dimensions, which I want merely to enumerate here. First, an engagement with the powerful strand of modern anti-dialectical thinking about tragedy, in his 1939 book on *Nietzsche*. Second, a historical materialist analysis of the way in which the frozen dualism of a tragic vision can be the product of specific class trajectories, as elaborated in his 1953 treatment of *Pascal*. Third, the proposal that we may find in revolutionary practice itself, and namely in the festivals of the Paris Commune, a model of tragedy irreducible to the bleak dialectic of crime, guilt, debt and their interiorisation.

A. *Nietzsche, or the tragic dialectic*

Whether in his anti-colonial and anti-racist appropriation in the metaphysics of *négritude*, or his rediscovery as an anti-dialectical war machine in the early 1960s by Foucault and Deleuze, Nietzsche has often been seen to provide the most powerful antidote to the Hegelian and Marxist lineage that transfigures tragedy into the dialectic, ethical conflict into political revolution. Lefebvre's 1939 *Nietzsche* intervened into the debate on Nietzsche and fascism with striking sympathy and nuance, combining a conjunctural diagnosis of Nietzsche's tragic impasse with an effort to salvage the creative and disruptive dimensions of his thought. For Lefebvre, Nietzsche's effort to recover the Dionysian origins of a tragedy buried under the moralism and rationalism of a Socratic,

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¹⁵ Césaire 2012, p. 37.

¹⁶ Toscano 2015.

¹⁷ Weber 2002, pp. 120-1.

Christian, and now 'socialist' history was a product of the inability to live with the uneven, motley interregnum in which he was condemned to exist, after the compromised failure of the 1848 revolutions. Resonating with Ernst Bloch's contemporaneous analyses of proto-Nazi consciousness in *Heritage of Our Times*, Lefebvre painted a Germany unable to work through and overcome its past, buried in toxic psychic and social *survivals*, and dominated by an unholy alliance of feudalism and finance. An unjustifiable present thus goaded Nietzsche into the doomed effort to recover tragedy not as a spectacle but as an *act* and a *myth*. It also pushed him to try to attain a kind of purity – identified by Lefebvre as the tragic quality par excellence. The great weakness of the tragic philosopher is that he will be vanquished by everything he has left behind to attain this purity, and that this purity will be tainted by a nostalgic inability to traverse the present. As Lefebvre writes of Nietzsche:

His desire to fight the baseness and 'motley' character of Bismarckian society finds refuge first in the survivals of a patriarchal epoch, then in the memories of the Renaissance and Greece, then in the anarchism of Wagnerian aesthetes worshiping art for art's sake and the solitary genius, and, finally in the confused idea of a culture to come.¹⁸

As this philosophy of tragedy consolidates its anti-democratic insight that Greek culture was founded on slavery and domination, engendering a purified conception of violence, it also, according to Lefebvre, 'already expresses an emerging imperialism and unconsciously searches for a style for this imperialism'. But Nietzsche also intuited a tragic dialectic that could allow one to correct what Lefebvre deems the all-too satisfied speculative plenitude proper to Hegel with the experience of the 'irrational, inhuman moments of existence: struggle, risk, voluptuousness, conquest and death'. But this tragic dialectic always falls back with Nietzsche into the purifying affirmation of the irrational moment, the inability to give concrete form to a 'Third' able to transcend and transmute the tragic duality ('Dionysus the philosopher', 'Socrates the musician'). This impasse can ultimately be chalked up to Nietzsche's refusal to confront the fact that tragedy's singularity and force can only be truly appreciated if one is sensitive to its character as an art and form of *transition*, which, as Lefebvre notes (here echoing the contemporaneous comments by C.L.R. James on Shakespeare), presupposes the dynamic clash of historical worlds, the tension and anxiety thrown up by social forces in conflict. This tragic dialectic, though disavowed in his regressive fantasies of transvaluation, was grasped by Nietzsche in his lessons on the pre-Socratics, where he wrote of Empedocles that:

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¹⁸ Lefebvre 1939, p. 50.

In him two epochs fight one another, the epoch of myths, tragedy, the orgiastic – and that of the democratic statesman, the orator, the scientist.¹⁹

B. Pascal, or, the limits of tragic consciousness

Though somewhat more constrained by methodological orthodoxy than his *Nietzsche* (as we may suspect from the occasional footnote referencing Zhdanov or Stalin), the second volume of Lefebvre's *Pascal* reprises the method and orientation of the 1939 book. Pascal both discovers and betrays a tragic dialectic, ossifying it into an ideological, mystifying dualism. Critically sparring with Lucien Goldmann's contemporaneous study of Pascal and Racine, *The Hidden God*, Lefebvre rejects the idea of a 'tragic worldview' in which the individual thinker and his class (in Pascal's case, the so-called *noblesse de robe*) would communicate without remainder. This would be to lose the temporal unevenness without which both historical materialism and tragedy itself become unthinkable. By ossifying the abyssal juxtaposition of self and world, we

eliminate the conflicts, the contradictions, the deep (historical) reasons of 'tragic consciousness' (*conscience tragique*). We eliminate the terms that are opposed to the isolation of the 'private' individual, as well as the efforts at a resolution of conflicts. Archaisms, feudal feelings issuing from the clan or the family, feelings and values emerging from the old agrarian and urban communities – 'values' born from the competition and deployment of individual energy – social relations born from this competition – action of superstructures and the state – moral or aesthetic 'values' destined to throw a bridge over the abyss between the 'private' individual and the world or society – this vast and moving ensemble disappears. The individual is reduced to a kind of desperate void, a negative essence; and life, to some tragic instants.²⁰

A bad historical method is thus complicit with Pascal's own aestheticized ethics of human abasement, a mystified 'pseudo-dialectic' that traduces the philosopher's own scientific and proto-materialist insights into mathematical infinity the better to subordinate them to an inscrutable and all-powerful theological infinity, making of the human being a 'speculative monster' torn by contradiction, beyond, *or rather beneath*, any dialectical movement – in Lefebvre's own words, 'a broken infinite, at

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19 Nietzsche, quoted in Lefebvre 1939, p. 156.

20 Lefebvre 1953, p. 51.

war with itself'.²¹ In the final analysis, for Lefebvre, Pascal's tragic vision sees man *from the point of view of death* – whence the juxtaposition of two mottos. First, Pascal's: 'consider perishable things as perishable and even already perished'. Now, Lefebvre's: 'consider things being born as growing and even already grown'.²²

C. *The Commune, or, the tragic festival of the people*

Could this second motto be applied to the concern *par excellence* of modern tragedy, namely revolts and revolutions? That may be seen as a methodological principle behind Lefebvre's 1965 book on the Paris Commune (*La proclamation de la Commune. 26 mars 1871*), but only if we also incorporate into our thinking of emancipation the negativity, the suffering that accompanies this 'growth'. After all, Lefebvre chose as an epigram from *La proclamation* a speech by Herakles from Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, in which the hero speaks of his wasted body, caught in a net woven by the Furies, captive to unutterable bonds (in the French translation: *Venez, regardez, contemplez ce corps de misère...*). It is in a captivating discussion of the *style* of the Commune that Lefebvre introduces the theme of tragedy in a radically different key than the one applied to the philosophical and individual dramas of Pascal and Nietzsche, namely with relation to the character of the Commune as a grandiose collective festival (note that the criticism of Pascal and Nietzsche's undialectical philosophies of tragedy hinged on the way their *style* was a false resolution of real contradictions).

Tragedy here names the profound ambivalence of this festival, the festival of *community* becoming *communion*, as it mutates into a *spectacle*. Here we should note first, that this text was an object of polemical denunciation by Debord, whose own *Society of the Spectacle* came out two years later; second, and more significantly, that Lefebvre is creatively transposing the crucial insight of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, namely the latter's origins in collective popular ritual. By way of commentary of Karl Liebknecht's dictum regarding 'the horrible and grandiose tragedy of the Commune', Lefebvre produces a capsular theory of collective tragedy – one with fascinating resonances with Furio Jesi's study of the symbology of another defeated uprising, Liebknecht's own Spartacus rebellion of 1919.²³ As he writes:

We know that Tragedy and Drama are bloody festivals, during which are accomplished the defeat, sacrifice and death of the superhuman hero who has defied fate. Misfortune mutates into

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²¹ Lefebvre 1953, p. 117.

²² Lefebvre 1953, p. 221.

²³ Jesi 2013.

greatness and defeat leaves behind a lesson of force and hope in the heart purified from cowardly fears. ... Those who fought crying *Liberty or Death* prefer death to capitulation and the certainty of subjection. They continue to fight, desperately, madly, with boundless courage; then they light with their own hands the bonfire on which they want to be consumed and disappear. Tragedy ends in a conflagration and disaster worthy of it. ... Following to its very end and bringing to its ultimate consequences its titanic defiance, the people of Paris envisages the end of Paris and wants to die with that which is for it more than a stage-set [*décor*] or a frame: its city, its body. Thus the Festival becomes drama and tragedy, absolute tragedy, Promethean drama played without any hint of frivolous play, a tragedy in which the protagonist, the chorus and the audience coincide in a singular fashion. But, from the beginning, the Festival harboured the drama: a real and collective festival, a festival lived by the people and for the people, a colossal festival accompanied by the voluntary sacrifice of the principle actors in the course of its defeat, tragedy.²⁴

Coda: Catharsis

If the modern dialectic – be it Hegel’s, Marx’s, or that of their heretical heirs – can be seen to originate from a recombination and traversal of the elements of tragedy, we can also, following Lefebvre, trace the reverse trajectory, as the revolutionary dialectic comes to confront the new, *collective* dramas that follow upon its epic realisations. In his prison notes, Antonio Gramsci refunctioned a critical component of the Aristotelian poetics of tragedy, *catharsis*, to think the collective conversion of necessity into freedom.²⁵ As he details in the *Prison Notebooks*:

Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the ‘cathartic’ moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis, and the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic.²⁶

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24 Lefebvre 2019, pp. 28-9. For a more detailed treatment of Lefebvre’s interpretation of the Commune as a ‘tragic festival’, see Toscano 2021.

25 Thomas 2009.

26 Gramsci 1971, pp. 366-7.

It is striking that in a late book on the problem of representation, *La presence et l'absence*, published in 1980, Lefebvre would also turn to this exquisitely complex, even enigmatic term in the arsenal of tragic thought, to define the liberating, demystifying potential that lies in viewing politics in a tragic key – shifting tragedy from the register of spectacular defeat, and of collective *sacrifice*, to that of patient critique. As asked himself whether all tragedies are not in the end fictions of power that 'show its failures and falls, its limits and contradictions ... Catharsis would then stem from the fact that that tragedy frees us from power, that is from the power of representations and the representations of power'.²⁷ It is fitting, to conclude, that this definition of catharsis could double as a précis of the dialectic, evoking the relentless sapping of the foundations of political illusion and the disclosure of our own complicities with power, our own hostility to freedom, even as we struggle towards emancipation. 'Among the enemies' names / write your own too.'²⁸

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²⁷ Lefebvre 1980, p. 73.

²⁸ Fortini 1978, p. 252.

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Issue 2

Reading the Tragedy of Covid

Jennifer Wallace

Abstract: *Shifting the focus from Hegel to Aristotle allows us to see tragedy primarily as a collective form for bearing witness to suffering and seeking to make it intelligible. This paper draws on the key features of Aristotle's ideas of tragedy – hamartia, anagnorisis, catharsis – to attempt to “read” the tragedy of Covid. Our responses to the global pandemic both conformed to traditional tragic practices and also deconstructed them. But this resistance to tragic pattern and intelligibility positions the Covid event paradoxically in line with many tragedies, both dramatic and historical, in our past. Ultimately, it is argued, the tragic tradition carries a moral and political force. Setting individual events within a wider pattern of narrative has the merit of making intelligible what seems particular. It makes it recognisable and therefore grievable.*

Keywords: Covid. Poetics of Tragedy. Aristotle. Hamartia. Recognition. Catharsis. Mourning.

Volume 10
Issue 2

Reading the Tragedy of Covid

In June 2022, after more than two years of the world pandemic, I caught Covid for the first time. I suffered the usual relatively mild symptoms of those who have already been safely vaccinated - sore throat, headache, fatigue, slight fever – and I did not need to be hospitalised. But as I lay on my sofa feeling sorry for myself, I considered how very strange it was to realise that the virus which had damaged the world economy and closed down country after country, from China to Europe, from New Zealand to the USA, had somehow settled now in my own throat. There could be, I reflected, no more graphic an illustration of the simultaneously global/local nature of the pandemic, the coming together of the generic and the particular in any experience of tragedy, than the intimate feeling of harbouring the world's first truly global plague in your own tonsils. How could my knowledge of the western tragic tradition help me to read the historical crisis I found myself participating in?

According to Elaine Scarry, understanding another's suffering is as challenging as accessing a “deep subterranean fact” or an “interstellar event”. Pain marks the crucial demarcation between an intimate form of knowledge and an estranging bewilderment. “For the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty’”, she observes. “For the other person it is so elusive that ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt’”¹. She goes on to elaborate these distinctions. The sufferer

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¹ Scarry 1985, pp. 3, 4.

finds that physical pain not only cannot be expressed but also shatters language, reducing the sufferer to some prior state which might be considered more immediate and intense than anything accessible to verbalised cognition. Meanwhile the person who witnesses that suffering in another individual is brought to confront his or her necessary distance from that experience and his or her inability ever to fully inhabit or know it on a rational or expressible level. And yet that act of witness can also be an act of imagination as well as of doubt. Pain unmakes the world but the attempt to imagine another's pain remakes it.

Scarry's observations on pain, language and the act of witnessing go to the heart of what is at stake in the tragic tradition. The distinctions she identifies between experience versus explanation, or between sufferer and witness, are central to thinking about both tragedies on the stage and also the tragic crises of our times. For tragic dramas are like traumatic events which "simultaneously defy and demand our witness", according to Cathy Caruth.² They appeal, as Aristotle said, to our capacity for compassion, for pity and fear when witnessing the suffering of another.³ Yet at the same time they remind us that we can never fully share that suffering and indeed that there might be degrees of troubling pleasure in the very act of viewing the experience of another.⁴ Tragedy thus demarcates sharply the experience of the individual from the collective, the immediate from the abstract, while appealing to just such a human capacity to cross such boundaries through sympathy and imagination. Indeed, as George Eliot put it at the end of *Middlemarch*, which rethought tragic representation in the new "medium" of the novel, "the growing good of the world" is partly dependent upon small acts of sympathy and compassion, on the "unhistoric acts" of recognising that other ordinary people have an "equivalent centre of self" to our own.⁵

The prevailing assumption behind this *Crisis and Critique* volume is that tragedy is defined by "conflict" and "collision" in which the "tragic individual is subjectivised by the contradictory summoning of two orders". But this is not the only definition of tragedy nor the only form it has taken through history. If we are guided not by Hegel but by Aristotle, and if we think – in Peter Szondi's terms – of a "poetics of tragedy" rather than a "philosophy of the tragic", then the emphasis falls more on the act of witness.⁶ Tragedy becomes shaped by the emotions felt by protagonists and participating audience, Aristotle's "pity and

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2 Caruth 1996, p. 5.

3 Aristotle 1987, p. 44, chapter 13(c).

4 See Strindberg 1998, pp. 57-58; Nuttall 2001.

5 Eliot 1965, pp. 896; 243.

6 Szondi 2002, p. 1.

fear”, and crucially by the act of recognition or acknowledgement. The consequence of this shift in emphasis is to see tragedy not as an ethical dilemma for the individual but as a community endeavour of action and reaction in which there may well be wide disparities of suffering and sympathy but where nobody is untouched. Tragedy, I contend, is traditionally the form in which societies register their sense of grief, responsibility, collective compassion and individual relief at survival and through which they seek a kind of moral wisdom. It is the form in which they express their desire for explanation and their bewilderment at not achieving it, while potentially also “remaking the world” through their sympathetic act of watching.

In refocusing away from Hegel and back to Aristotle’s analysis of tragic drama, however, I do not want to restrict tragedy to the theatre stage, along the lines articulated by Hans-Thies Lehmann. According to Lehmann, in his book *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (2016), the “tragic must be thought of as a mode of aesthetic articulation and not as a lived reality”. It is, he says, a “phenomenon strictly tied to the theatre”.⁷ Lehmann wants to exclude cinema (too individualising), literature (too reductive), philosophy (too rigid), and even the wrong kind of dramatic theatre from his account, as well of course as “everyday tragedies”; all of these are said variously to “reduce” tragedy. But his “crystal-clear determination” (as he puts it) to restrict the definition of tragedy seems to me a desperate defence against a far-more interesting conundrum of our times, namely that we encounter the world through spectacle and media reports, we immediately turn an event into narrative, and we form communities of response, whether of pity or fear or shock or anger or even the half-acknowledged guilt of indifference. Surely the relationship between event and experience and idea (referred to fleetingly and enigmatically by Raymond Williams as a *quasi* definition at the beginning of his book *Modern Tragedy*), speaks more urgently to our times than do Hans-Thies Lehmann’s tight restrictions.⁸ Rather than continue to demarcate “literary” tragedy from the “glib way in which the word is used in the vernacular”, I have striven in recent years to take the “vernacular” seriously, to think about what it might mean to analyse tragedies in the world with as much serious critical attention as we have devoted so many times before to the tragic canon.⁹ Tragedy offers us a tradition, a mode of thinking, a genre, for seeking to make intelligible political crisis, wars, revolutions, manmade disaster and environmental destruction, the material circumstances we live through. The traditions associated with

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7 Lehmann 2016, p. ?

8 Williams 1966, p. ?

9 See Wallace 2019. For an interesting similar approach, reading the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa through Aristotle’s *Poetics*, see Quayson 2003: pp. 56-75.

the generic tragic form allow us to attend both to our participation in these affairs and also to our detachment and our problematic capacity to aestheticise difficult experience.

I am interested, therefore, in how far the experience of the Covid pandemic conformed to the Aristotelian ideas of tragedy but also re-wrote them. We can use the expected features of the tragic genre to try to “read” the tragedy of Covid. But we must also simultaneously attend to their deconstruction as tropes for understanding. And, indeed, in that deconstruction Covid paradoxically follows a recognisable trend in tragic drama, that of defying witness and shattering the rules and patterns for expressing suffering.

Hamartia of plague

Tragic plots revolve around the moment when the hero makes the wrong choice or what Aristotle calls the *hamartia*, sometimes wrongly translated as fatal flaw. There is then a very limited period of time between deed and consequences. As soon as Macbeth kills the king, he is damned and unnatural signs of turmoil, such as horses eating each other, follow that very same night. But in certain tragedies there is actually a considerable time lapse between transgression and consequence and indeed it is hard to pinpoint exactly the moment of *hamartia*. In *Oedipus Rex*, for example, Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother years before the play begins with his journey towards discovery. And even then, those fateful decisions to murder and to marry were arguably not the first tragic choices in the story but were preceded by Oedipus’s journey to the oracle at Delphi to find out his parentage, and that was in turn preceded by his parents’ tragic choice to seek to destroy him at birth. There is also a case to be made about the tragedy of minor characters, those caught up in the tragic plot, as victims, collateral damage, unwilling participants. *Hamartia* can be dispersed across multiple parties, or indeed one person’s *hamartia* can cause tragedy for many people. Responsibility in tragic drama is highly complex, reflecting our continuing sense both of our culpability in world-changing situations and also our inability fully to control them.

The consequences of the Oedipal *hamartia* are evident in the plague that form the opening crisis of the play. Imperceptible at first, the infection has spread inexorably as the pollution and incest at the heart of the city’s government has festered undetected. Plague is thus cause and consequence of the play’s action, both the immediate catalyst and the longer-term environmental context for the catastrophe that ensues. Plague in tragedy functions as a moral litmus. Angry Apollo shoots his plague-filled arrows down on the Greeks for ten days at the beginning of the *Iliad*. Mired in stalemate conflict, disease is a sign of moral corruption in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. Pandarus sets

the tone with his “whoreson phthisic” and “rheum in [his] eyes” and he infects the whole camp, making their sick bodies a sign of wider social sickness.¹⁰ Characters in tragic drama become sick because they have neglected to confront a sin at the very core of their community (*Hamlet*’s “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” leaving ambiguous whether that rottenness is located in the ghost’s appearance or in the prince’s “wax[ing] desperate with imagination”).¹¹ Even Creon in *Antigone*, responsible for leaving his dead nephew unburied and allowing his niece to be buried alive, is told the news that the altars in his city are being polluted with the pieces of Polyneices’ unburied body dropped by birds.¹² Sin leads to disease and pollution; human *hamartia* creates the conditions for sickness and infection.

The origins of Covid were somewhat opaque and so inevitably conspiracy theories quickly developed to fill that gap. It’s more comforting for people to be given explanations or even secret plots behind world events than it is to acknowledge the role of accident, unpredictability and lack of human control. Conspiracy theories work a little like tragic fate, with the lone conspiracy theorist similar to the soothsayer deciphering the riddling oracle. The truth is to be found hidden beneath the surface and it is somehow reassuring to the theorist to find confirmed their pre-existing distrust of the authorities that supposedly protect us. So, while the general consensus is that the virus emerged in the wild meat or “wet” markets in Wuhan, suspicion focused upon the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where bat coronaviruses are studied, and specifically the human tampering with different strains and proteins of viruses known as “gain of function” research.¹³ Could a super-virus, artificially created in the lab, have accidentally escaped into the community? Was this the Frankenstein-like consequence of interfering with nature, made all the more insidious and powerful because of the efforts to deny it and hush it up? China had delayed the quarantining of Wuhan until the 3rd week in January, although “Patient Zero”, a 70-year old man, fell ill on 1st December.¹⁴ Similarly, Oedipus’s miasma festers and spreads because it has been hidden, “pollution inbred in this very land”, as his brother-in-law Creon says.¹⁵ And for conspiracy theorists any denial is only interpreted as a cover-up, proving all the more powerfully the plots of our rulers.

But you don’t need conspiracy theories about lab leaks to interpret

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¹⁰ *Troilus and Cressida*, 5.3.104, 107; 5.11.31.17-18, 23-24. In Shakespeare 1997, pp. 1905, 1910-11.

¹¹ *Hamlet*, 1.4.67, 64. In Shakespeare 1997, p. 1684.

¹² See Sophocles 1994, p. 35, lines 1014-18.

¹³ Dance 2021.

¹⁴ Honigsbaum 2020, p. 133.

¹⁵ Sophocles 2015, p. 18, line 97.

Covid-19 as a consequence of our worldwide environmental hubris. Transgressing further and further upon the wild, whether exploring in the bat caves around Wuhan or selling wild animals like wolf cubs and crocodiles at food markets there or chopping down the rainforest in the Amazon, we are perhaps even more guilty of trespass in the twenty-first century than Philoctetes was when he stepped into the holy sanctuary of the goddess Chryse and was inflicted with an unhealable wound on his leg as punishment. Zoonotic diseases – viruses that leap from animals to humans, the spread of infectious diseases between species – are only going to increase with environmental destruction and have not come without warning from veterinary ecologists. Indeed, according to Mark Honigsbaum in *The Pandemic Century*, even at the time of the first SARS outbreak in 2003 scientists could see that “the consumption of exotic sources of protein, urban overcrowding, international jet travel, and the growing interconnectivity of global markets presented” the perfect conditions for a rapidly spreading worldwide plague.¹⁶ Natural equilibriums are being upended by human activity and will only get disordered with climate change. In Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, Ulysses sets out the classic Early Modern beliefs about the “discord” that follows if you disrupt the moral and political order and “take but degree away”:

When the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues, and what portents, what mutiny?
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth?
Commotion in the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture. O when degree is shaken,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick.¹⁷

One might see an entanglement of environmental, political and moral disorder lying behind the “sickness” of Covid-19, “diverting and cracking” the “unity and married calm of states” around the world.

Narratives of Covid

Aristotle famously pointed to the importance of the tragic plot. Every tragedy should have a beginning, a middle and an end; well-constructed plots should not end in random. Tragic narratives are formulated to

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¹⁶ Honigsbaum 2020, p. 136.

¹⁷ *Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.109-110; 1.3.94-103. In Shakespeare 1997, p. 1847.

order, explain or understand inexplicable catastrophe and suffering. They attempt to name the unnameable, combining memory, commemoration, dramatic storytelling and feeling to powerful effect. Homer might create the large epic poem describing the siege of Troy, but Greek tragedies were made up of “large cuts taken from Homer’s mighty dinners”, finding within the large tragic event, little tragic stories of different individuals caught up in that wider conflict.¹⁸ One might, in this context, think of a comparison with “reading” the tragedy of 9/11, where the whole catastrophe was triggered by those planes flying into the World Trade Center but contained within it there were multiple tragic narratives: individual choices and lives lost on that day as well as individuals affected by subsequent events happening in the name of 9/11.¹⁹ But just as in tragic drama where events exceed the neat Aristotelian structure and its expectations, so the need to impose a narrative pattern upon events as a form of explanation or comfort is so often thwarted by our experience of excessive, inexplicable suffering, injustice or chaotic violence.

The tragic plot of Covid was arguably an algorithm. There was the trackable time lag between infection, presentation of symptoms, hospitalisation, and death. There was the R number (rate of infection) which, when it rose above 1, indicated the exponential spread of the disease. The pandemic could be understood statistically or even as a graph. We were told in the early days to practise “social distancing” in order to “flatten the curve”. We were reduced, accordingly, to statistics and patterns. But individual fear was exacerbated by the sense that no graphs or predictions seemed able to control the future. Country after country closed down, air travel ceased, stock markets crashed. Mary Shelley’s prophetic novel *The Last Man* (1826) envisaged just such a global pandemic, an “invincible monster”, moving inexorably from Asia to the West and eventually wiping out the human race:

Nature, our mother and our friend, had turned on us a brow of menace. She shewed us plainly, that, though she permitted us to assign her laws and subdue her apparent powers, yet, if she put forth but a finger, we must quake. She could take out globe, fringed with mountains, girded by the atmosphere, containing the condition of our being, and all that man’s mind could invent or his force achieve; she could take the ball in her hand, and cast it into space, where life would be drunk up, and man and all his efforts forever annihilated.²⁰

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¹⁸ Athenaeus 1930, vol 4, p. 75: 8.347e.

¹⁹ See Wallace 2019, pp. 21-28.

²⁰ Shelley 1994, p. 232.

Nature, for Shelley, thus takes on ambiguous force, both protecting and annihilating us. On the one hand, the algorithms and statistics of Covid amounted to an instance of Timothy Morton's *hyperobject*, dwarfing the human scale of comprehension.²¹ But on the other hand, we could read them as society's attempts to understand and contains the virus, an Aristotelian tragic pattern which was then overwhelmed by the even greater *hyperobject* of the pandemic itself.

Covid exposed the incommensurability of global statistics and individual stories. As epidemiologists pointed out, the virus behaves with scientific objectivity, immune to politics and morals, however much politicians might want to wish it away or manipulate it for political ends. Covid doesn't understand national borders, as many quipped at the time. And yet the pandemic revealed the divisive nature of our current politics, the inequality of our world and the very different experiences of individuals suffering its consequences. We only have to look at the disparity of access to vaccines between the wealthiest countries and the Global South, or indeed, in Britain, the mortality rates of the middle or upper classes and the poorest in the country, those workers on the frontline, those of ethnic minority background who were disproportionately affected by Covid. There was a tragic incommensurability between science and politics, between the seemingly inexorable spread of the virus and the stories we tell. Dr Stockmann, in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, is adamant that the scientific truth behind the contamination of the town's Baths is paramount and simple, only to find that the politics and economics of the town complicate the urgency of his message. "As a doctor and a man of science, you regard this matter of the water-supply as something quite on its own", says the editor of the local newspaper to him. "It probably hasn't struck you that it's tied up with a lot of other things". The poison, the editor goes on to elaborate, is due to the "swamp that our whole community is standing rotting on".²²

As the pandemic unfolded, readers turned to plague literature from the past to try to make sense of their experience. Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* helped to reframe the experience of lockdown. Camus's *La Peste* spoke to the early forms of denial and repression associated with an infectious disease running rife through a community and the futile efforts of individuals to avoid their demise. But mostly what became apparent was that pandemic literature itself is haunted by the past, by the traces of traditional culture through which it tries to make sense of catastrophe. Emily St. John Mandel's 2014 novel, *Station Eleven*, does this most strikingly, depicting the impact of a

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21 Morton 2013.

22 Ibsen 1960, Act II, pp. 25, 26.

devastating global virus through the experience of a group of travelling players who survive and perform Shakespeare and classical music. The beauty and “spell” of Shakespeare reminds both actors and audience of the value of culture and briefly allows them to escape their current horror through the memory of former “elegance”:

A few of the actors thought Shakespeare would be more relatable if they dressed in the same patched and faded clothing their audience wore, but Kirsten thought it meant something to see Titania in a gown, Hamlet in a shirt and tie.²³

But besides beauty, Shakespeare also offers reassuring examples of precedent to characters in Mandel’s novel. Plague closed the theatres several times in Shakespeare’s day and *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream’s* Titania, queen of the fairies played by one of the protagonists, Kristen, speaks both of the pestilence of 1594 and of the futuristic one of the novel (approximately 2040), as well as 2020 when the novel enjoyed an even greater popularity: “Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain, as in revenge, have sucked up from the sea contagious fogs”.²⁴ Yet, besides *Station Eleven*, one can see examples of retrieving fragments from the past to “shore up against the ruin” of catastrophe in Ling Ma’s novel *Severance*, in which the main character takes photos of New York steeped in the canonical tradition of street photography. Referencing William Eggleston, Stephen Shore and Nan Goldin, Ling Ma’s protagonist seeks to continue to make sense of her city within the long history of photographic witness even as Zombie-like horror of the plague takes hold of the world and reduces its victims to a terrifying fog of dementia, erasing them from within.²⁵ Even the extremely bleak *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, which also attracted more readers during Covid, draws upon biblical syntax, setting catastrophe within a religious apocalyptic tradition.²⁶

Corrupting tragedy, plague narratives both follow the genre and constantly modify it. Indeed, disease deconstructs and eradicates existing reliable structures whether they be physical bodies, society’s law and order or even narrative patterns related to literary genre. At the beginning of *Station Eleven*, the actor Arthur Leander collapses and dies on stage halfway through performing *King Lear*; the curtain is brought down and the production closed. But the memory of the play and its extended, torturous, spiraling plot structure (“He hates him much

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23 Mandel 2014, p. 151.

24 Mandel 2014, p. 57.

25 Ling Ma 2018, pp. 14, 193-95.

26 McCarthy 2006. See Noble 2020, pp. 98-106.

/ That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer”) continue to haunt the whole novel, from the enigmatic, attenuated father/daughter relationship between Arthur and Kristen, to the unexpected acts of kindness between strangers (like the servant tending to Gloucester’s blinded eye: *King Lear* 3.7.110-111) to the unravelling of character and identity under pressure (“it was becoming more difficult to hold on to himself”).²⁷ If *Lear* exceeds its tragic structure through its “overliving”²⁸ and its dramatisation of the paradox “the worst is not / So long as we can say “this is the worst””, so *Station Eleven* evokes and exceeds even that precedent, eroding the human dimensions of tragic plots through the erasure of catastrophe.²⁹

As the Chinese have discovered with their difficulties of easing out of lockdown, it is hard to declare that Covid is over and that the pandemic has run its course. There is no simple narrative pattern to the disease but rather it runs through peaks and troughs, the graphs dipping and spiking but no longer a feature on the nightly news. “Is this the promised end?”, Kent asks in *King Lear*, on seeing the horror of the aged king walking onto stage with his dead daughter in his arms. “Or image of that horror”, is the reply from Edgar, pushing back once again that promised satisfaction of a conclusion.³⁰ With Long Covid still affecting 2.8% of the UK population and 7.5% of the US population but the news agenda now moved on to the war in Ukraine, the global energy crisis and economic hardship, the pandemic is a forgotten, unresolved tragedy, like Ling Ma’s *Zombie Limbo*, without the necessary recognition or memory traditionally associated with the dramatic form.³¹

Recognition or non-recognition

Recognition (ἀναγνώρις) is one of the key features of tragedy, according to Aristotle. This marks the moment, both for the character and for the audience, when potentially everyone realises that no man should be considered blessed until he sees his last days. For philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler, the recognition of “precariousness” or our “common human vulnerability” becomes one of the beneficial

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27 *King Lear*, 5.3.312-314 in Shakespeare 1997, p. 2552; Mandel 2014, p. 194.

28 Wilson 2005, pp. 113-128. See especially p. 113: ‘the representation of tragic overliving frustrates the spectator’s or reader’s expectations of unified character and unified plot’.

29 *King Lear*, 4.1.28-29 in Shakespeare 1997, p. 2527.

30 *King Lear*, 5.3.262-3 in Shakespeare 1997, p. 2551.

31 O’Mahoney 2023: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(22\)00491-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(22)00491-6/fulltext).

wisdoms of tragedy.³² When we see the protagonist of tragedy is a “man like ourselves” (Aristotle), when we respond to the face of the other, we can be opened up to “what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself”.³³ Indeed, traditionally in tragedy, recognition is followed by lament. We think of Theseus in Euripides’ play *Hippolytus* taking the gathered pieces of his son’s dismembered body “in [his] arms”, or Creon with his son Haemon at the close of *Antigone*.³⁴ Or Lear with Cordelia at the end of *King Lear*. At the close of that play, Lear might not be said to fully “acknowledge” his daughter’s separate existence, according to Cavell,³⁵ or to achieve real recognition of his situation (Lear dies in an “ecstasy” of hope, observed AC Bradley)³⁶ but at least he experiences the non-verbal, non-rational consolation of touch:

Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!³⁷

Tragic recognition takes bodily rather than intellectual form, as characters absorb the information slowly. Pain and loss have to be felt along the heart, as the chorus sing in Robert Fagles’ beautiful translation of the *Oresteia*:

We cannot sleep, and drop by drop at the heart
the pain of pain remembered comes again,
and we resist, but ripeness comes as well.³⁸

Only through the drip-drip of shared grief can we be said to reach some understanding, to “suffer into truth” as Fagles puts it, his translation of *pathei mathos* in the Greek.³⁹ The phrase means some sort of relationship between suffering and learning, although exactly how suffering leads to learning or how the two words are connected grammatically or philosophically is precisely what tragedy explores.

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32 Nussbaum 2003; Butler 2004, pp. 134, 30.

33 Butler 2004, p. 134.

34 Euripides 1997, p. 79, line 1432; Sophocles 1994, p. 43, lines 1261-69.

35 Cavell 2003, pp. 68-73.

36 Bradley 1905, p. 291.

37 *King Lear*, 5.3.308-310 in Shakespeare 1997, p. 2552.

38 Aeschylus 1979, p. 109, lines 180-182.

39 Aeschylus 1979, p. 109, line 179; Aeschylus 1926, p. 18, line 177.

But Covid lockdown rules meant that people were unable to mourn. Elderly parents quarantined in care homes could only wave through a window. Those dying from Covid in hospital were attended only by hospital staff while families were forced to say goodbye to their relatives over Facetime, an experience I had with my own dying father. The last view many Covid victims would have had were of unknown nurses and doctors in full PPE. Medical masks, the sign - as Birgit Dawes has argued - of the very risk which they serve to prevent, “dissolv[ing] ... the boundary between identity and alterity”, also became like tragic masks, hiding individual identity in some larger ritualistic and performative collectivity, which tokens both a common vulnerability and a distancing fear.⁴⁰ Those dying of Covid were and at the same time were not *recognised* in the tragic sense. Indeed, the double sense of estrangement and need for the acknowledgement of the human face was encapsulated in the decision by some hospital nurses and therapists to attach pictures of their unmasked faces to their chests, so that they could be “seen” in printed, laminated form while their actual faces were obscured in alien type masks, goggles and plastic visors.⁴¹ Representation was more recognisable than the surreal reality of the crisis.

In place of family funerals and the opportunity during the pandemic for real mourning and in order to confront the strangely attenuated tragedy of the virus, a community-generated monument to a hidden pandemic has grown up from the metaphorical grassroots in the UK. The Covid Memorial Wall stretches between Westminster and Lambeth bridges along the River Thames in London directly opposite the Houses of Parliament. (See Figure). Red hearts were painted all along it and families from across the country come to claim a heart and write the name of their loved one lost to Covid. It is demotic, haphazard and uncontrolled, and even now it is unclear how long it will be permitted to remain. But it follows a tradition of displaying the dead for lament and witness that goes back to Greek tragedy. Like the bodies rolled out on the *ekkyklema* in the theatre for the chorus and the audience to mourn, the wall’s hearts, which stretch as far as the eye can see, force a public recognition of the more than 150,000 lives lost in the UK, partly because of the wrong decisions or *hamartia* of the government opposite.⁴² This, it seems to me, is the British tragic site of Covid.

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40 Dawes 2021, p. 7.

41 Asmelash and Ebrahimi 2020.

42 For the significance of the *ekkyklema*, see Wallace 2004, p. 4.

Generic intelligibility and the question of catharsis

According to one interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, his notion of catharsis marks the crucial break between the experience of tragedy in the world and the aesthetic enjoyment of tragedy in the theatre. If catharsis is translated as purging or "washing us free of the emotions", then the implication is that the spectator is detached from what is viewed and that he or she exploits that spectacle for therapeutic effect. This allows us, as Brecht believed, to leave the dramatic performance entertained, satisfied and ready to continue ordinary life unperturbed and unchanged.⁴³ But if, on the other hand, catharsis is translated as purifying or "washing the emotions", then the implication is that watching tragedy doesn't detach us aesthetically from the suffering but rather it makes us more sensitive to future watching.⁴⁴ Catharsis in this case becomes more immersive and participatory – a process that we all collectively go through. The global pandemic might seem amenable to the second notion. While we cannot make sense of it yet, we might feel our continued sympathetic witnessing of it make us more attuned to thinking about it in the future.

The experiences of Covid are, in many ways, unthinkable and unrepresentable. They are hard to fathom partly because they are so recent; they have scarcely had time to settle from event into narrative, from experience into knowledge. They also have often removed individuals from the picture, making the pandemic seem not understandable on a human scale. This crisis, we might say, has *disfigured* our imaginations. It has removed the individual figures that make compassion possible – or it literally has prevented the natural processes of grief and mourning.

Yet, through the exploration of *hamartia*, dramatic plot and forms of recognition and lament, we can project the human scale back into the inhuman, global disaster. Thinking about our contemporary world involves a tussle between figural interpretation and disfiguration.⁴⁵ Tragedy can be thought of as a figurative and figuring way of seeing, both in the sense of reminding us of the figure in history, with his or her own feelings and desires, and also in the Erich Auerbach sense of reading one historical event in light of another.⁴⁶ Setting individual stories into a wider, traditional pattern of narrative or theatre has the merit of making intelligible what seems particular. It makes it recognisable and therefore grievable.

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43 Brecht 1964, p. 181.

44 Aristotle 1987, p. 37, chapter 6. See Halliwell's commentary on this passage: pp. 89-90. The literal alternative translations from the Greek "δι' ἐλέου και φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιοῦτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν" (1449b) are my own.

45 See Harries 2007, pp. 103-114.

46 Auerbach 1959, p. 53.

Of course, despite Aristotle's analysis in the *Poetics*, tragic dramas are not strictly patterned. Classical tragedy acknowledges its own blindspots and resistances, and frequently does not conform to, or confine itself within, the pattern. So, reading the experiences of the pandemic now, *figuring* them again, in the tradition of tragedy is by no means to order them. But it is to pay attention to the wider narratives of our times and to think about the attempts to make week-to-week events intelligible through that patterning. This might be the start of action, informing and revising the structures of feelings and ideas of tragedy that respond to social disorder and recuperating a sense of what we all share, what we hold generically in common.

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The Tragic (Modern) Stuttering Machine

Heather H. Yeung

Abstract: This paper attends to the formal, temporal, and material economy of the tragic machine in Modernity. The distinction between two forms of tragic transport and tragic caesura made by Hölderlin (the ‘pure’ and the ‘terrible’) allow us to distinguish qualitative differences between types of and approaches to the question of the tragic form (imperial vs. anti-/ante- imperial; metaphysical vs. machinic; vitalist vs. vital; closed vs. open etc.) through how we address the locus of the tragic transport and the poetology of the break.

Keywords: Friedrich Hölderlin, Paul Klee, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Sophocles, Euripides, caesura

*Hast du schon Leute aus der Stadt beobachtet?
Das zwitschert unaufhörlich. Ist eine Reihe von ihnen
beisammen, so geht das Zwitschern von rechts nach
links und wieder zurück und auf und ab.*
– Kafka¹

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1. ἡ γλῶσσ’ ὀμώμοχ’, ἡ δὲ φρήν ἀνώμοτος: between the two²

Oft-quoted, but let us quote it again, is a phrase from Friedrich Hölderlin’s enigmatic writings on tragedy, which is brought to serve as definition, condensed stand-in for, or summary (of Hölderlin’s definition) of (tragic) caesura: as ‘a counter-rhythmic interruption, a pure word’,³ which is marked, we later discover, for Hölderlin, in Sophocles’ Theban dramas

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1 Franz Kafka, ‘Der Riesenmaulwurf’. The head turns guided by the ears, watching the invisible sound-sources move. Above I give Brod’s alternative title (alt. ‘Der Dorfschullehrer’). The Muirs’ translation runs as follows (alternative tr. for *Zwitscher*: twitter, chirp): ‘Have you ever watched city people? They chatter without stopping. When there’s a whole lot of them together you can hear their chatter running from right to left and back again, and up and down, this way and that.’ (Kafka (1933): 177).

2 Euripides (2005): 184. (LCL:185): ‘my tongue swore, but my mind is not on oath’; the boundless mind and the tied tongue, and their opposites, might be seen as the governing principles of a classical tragic stuttering, a primal dislocation of the mechanisms of speech, with (and in) principle. Simon Goldhill remarks neatly on the apparent scandal caused by this line in Athenian audiences –suddenly, in the articulate disjunction between words and acts moral ambiguity arises, the state-sanctioned pronouncements are under question, the language itself subject (See Goldhill (1986):135): the ‘divine injunction to mankind in mortal language cannot escape the tragic dislocation of that language, the tensions of sense and usage’ (op. cit.: 194).

3 Hölderlin (2009): 318. The theoretically influential translation of and commentaries on Hölderlin by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe is rendered into English by Christopher Fynsk with different emphasis in ‘The Caesura of the Speculative’ thus: “For the tragic transport is properly empty and the most unbound. Whereby, in the rhythmic succession of representations, in which the transport presents itself, what in (poetic) meter is called the caesura, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic intrusion, becomes necessary in order to meet the racing alternation of representations at its culmination, such that what appears then is no longer the alternation of representations but representation itself.” Lacoue-Labarthe (1989): 234. Evidently, ‘intrusion’ and ‘interruption’ at the very least carry different topographical force.

Oedipus Rex and *Antigone* absolutely and only by the speeches of Tiresias. Structurally, what this means is that what is translated for the most part into English as the ‘tragic transport’ (the (inevitable) vector of the plot as mediated through dialogue and action) has a counterweight in the ‘counter-rhythmic interruption [or] pure word’. In this context, there are two directionalities, or two ways of operating against the flow, dependent on quality of plot (paradigmatically for Hölderlin *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*), for which he draws two neat diagrams to accompany his essays: one with a horizontal line (the transport) with, at its centre, a vertical tipping diagonally left to right, the other with a horizontal line (the transport) with a vertical tipping diagonally right to left, as if two images of a car’s windscreen-wiper (or, per. Hölderlin, moving from ‘back to front’, or ‘front to back’: *Oedipus*, *Antigone*).



The vertical meets but does not transect the horizontal, even as the temptation will be to imagine it to do so and creating thus a punctum, the danger of which even if slightly lateral in its composition is to push our reading of Hölderlin into anachrony and towards the late Heidegger, creating a fourfold (*Geviert*). Such a speculative metaphysical geometricization (it is all too easy to take the *Geviert* of the 1949 Bremen lectures – its gathering of earth, sky, humanity, and the divine – and posit this as structuration onto the (Greek) tragic mode as conceived by Hölderlin, and, indeed, more broadly) leads us to denature the rather simple diagrams of Hölderlin, and to forget the metrics from which Hölderlin’s theory and diagram is a strange borrowing, a borrowing to which he even gestures. The paradigm of the (Classical) tragic ‘caesura’ for Hölderlin is twofold: one is a reality (the metrical operations of the poetic line, about which there are different rules dependent on the technics and nationality of the meter, particularly regarding the placement of the caesura, which in histories of prosody remains a clouded entity at best) and the other is a figuration (the adoption of the miniscule – the figure of caesura, and, indeed, the idea of the line and its rhythmic, machinic process – for the majuscule, to elucidate the rhythmic and explosive aspects of the unfolding of the plot towards and as tragedy (the former as event, the latter generic crystallization). In the miniscule, caesuring counter-rhythm is a *silence*; in the majuscule, *speech*. This blow-up is where we meet, then, the question of the *machine*, for which in both cases the diagrams are more of an elucidation. The machine which, for Hölderlin, creates meaning through paradox.⁴ A paradoxical

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4 Hölderlin (2009): 316.

formulation demands counterrhythmic impulse, but does not brook ambiguity (or, only that which the windscreen-wipers above would brook, which is to say an appearance of but no real ambiguity), as ambiguity would do something to the 'transport' whereas a paradoxical formulation, leaving the transport untouched neatly closes a system whilst allowing for a suite of sophistic speculation to result.

And so the infamous Theban doubles, so neatly contained: the tragedy of father/king (*Oedipus Rex*) who, travelling towards a birth right commits final actions are inevitable from a cursed beginning, and the tragedy of daughter/supplicant (*Antigone*) who, returning to the city of her birth commits initial actions which precipitate a cursed end. The 'pure words' of the Tiresian interventions, speculative counterrhythms beyond that offered by the chorus, moderate and make provocative the propulsion of the tragic transport towards the end of the play; the words 'pure' because hybrid: Tiresias in vatic persona, having been godstricken, both man and woman, already twice dead and yet present, and unrelated to the agonistic structure, is untouchable, unhearable, by those other active players in the plot. Without committing the infelicity of speaking directly to the audience, a counterpoint which is neither an epiphany, nor a chorus, nor an agonistic interchange, enters the fray, significantly unheard yet heard, dramatic but impossibly so, exposing the play's action for the poetic machinery, and the play's staging for the architectural machinery, that it is. Paradox: we have been moved by something that is nothing, or, even, less than nothing, in terms of action. We depart, noting it, in voices radically different from those which have just moved us through their performance. We depart, into time and out of it. We have heard the 'timeless' voice of the figure assumed to be fool or outsider expose a truth. All these are commonplaces of the sort of metatheatrical discourse that demands attention to (dramatic) effect (interior to the play) and aftermath (result – audience survey! – exterior to the play), whose earliest formulations interact with the question of tragedy with its use in state control of affects as catharsis-generating artifice. There is no room for ambiguity here, and no way out. The choice or question so often played out for its ethical dimensions appears to be one (to be *Oedipus*? to be *Antigone*?; within the latter, to be Antigone? to be Creon?, and so on) but is not (add: 'to be *unheard* (of)'), as we are neatly propelled in one, and then the other, direction (back to front; front to back) counter-rhythmic to the tragic transport's inevitable movement towards an already inscribed end by the figure which conceptually binds and propels these two plays, the figure whose relationship to death is also one of metamorphic rebirth: Tiresias. The rug is pulled out from under the neat mechanism, something the poet was eminently conscious of.⁵

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5 The well-known letter to Böhlendorff (4 December 1802) demonstrates Hölderlin's pleasure in setting up an apparently instructive paradox and then indicating that the reason displayed only 'sounds

What first makes Hölderlin's thesis stutter in its application to tragedy more generally is an apparent avoidance of the third play which completes and complicates his sequence, even competing with the very idea of sequentiality he lays down, *Oedipus Colonus*, which is interestingly one of the first Sophoclean plays there is evidence of his translation engagement with (1796 translation of the choral address to the 'stranger' (ξένος), the blind Oedipus), and one of the last (towards the end of his full composition of *Antigone* and *Oedipus*, lines of the opening scene's dialogue between the blind Oedipus and Antigone).⁶ It is that which, in his 'Notes on the *Antigone*' he disassociates from the characteristic 'Greek' drama he takes the other plays as representative of. In his writings on poetic genre, his schematizations of epic, lyric, and tragedy, Hölderlin does not reach the 'terrible word' of *Oedipus Colonus*,⁷ or barely does, and whether this is with or without intent we can only speculate. We must forgive him, also, for the eccentricity of reversing the compositional sequence of the plays in his order of translation which he takes from their interior chronology, but we can see that this only allows us to exist further within the paradox artificially generated out of the existing material proofs – the one play (*Antigone* or *Oedipus Tyrannus*) leading both forward and back to the other, and so on – and for the neatness of this.⁸ This is a paradox-practise also partaken of by his most influential translator into theory and into French, Philip Lacoue-Labarthe (Lacoue-Labarthe adds a third play, though – Euripides's *Phoenician Women*, which was composed around the same time as *Oedipus Colonus* – which he translates after Hölderlin's *Antigone* and before *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in an act of speculative re-mythemization akin to, for example, Anne Carson's move in her *Oresteia* – to combine Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Sophocles's *Elektra*, and Euripides's *Orestes* –; Lacoue-Labarthe also mirrors Hölderlin by first appending his own notes on tragedy, *The Caesura of the Speculative*, onto his *Antigone* translation).

paradoxical'. Hölderlin (2009): 207. My emphasis.

6 Both choices of parts to translate underline Hölderlin's ongoing poetological obsession with strangeness (cultural, lexical, metrical). Constantine (2011) provides for non-German-readers unsurpassed comments on the various and varied Hölderlin translation fragments, their chronologies of composition, and formal dimensions. Many of these are not translated into English and some are scattered across different translation-projects (for instance Hölderlin (2018) offers a selection of 'Translations from the Greek'; also see Hölderlin (1998) *passim*), indeed there is not yet any systematic English edition of Hölderlin, but all are collected across volumes of the 'Frankfurt' and 'Stuttgart' editions.

7 See Hölderlin (2009): 330. Beyond the limitations of the 'Greek', *Oedipus Colonus*, anticipating modernity, demonstrates how 'the word from an inspired mouth is terrible, and kills'.

8 Something about the poet's own schematic approach, his tabulations and 'tone theory' of literature, indicates that the neatness demonstrated at this point in the project (*viz.* by the two 'completed' play-translations) is only a step within a larger working through.

Both the ante-Romantic and the Contemporary thinker avoid to consider fully, that play which transposes the elegance of dramatic rhythmicity into something more contested, which ungrounds the transport, and exposes the imperial support offered to the tragic transport by the 'pure word's caesuring mechanics: together and uncontested these mean that the play must go on, ping-ponging between *Rex* and daughter, *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, inevitability and choice, etc, etc. They avoid *Oedipus Colonus*, which activates, simultaneously *post hoc* (it is written substantially after the other two) and *in medias res* (its action takes place between the other two) a suite of alternative relations, a suite of alternative interpretations within the Sophoclean tragic figurations of Thebes, and does not even exist on common ground to the others: it is geographically an Athenian, not a Theban, play; the exodic vectors which propel the drama of interactions are at the very simplest reversed at the more complex utterly contested – it is a play that perhaps has more in common with Euripides's dramas of immigration and assimilation than with the rest of the Sophoclean corpus's dramas of the law; it hovers in the sacred grove and katabatic chasm of the Eumenides, the latter perhaps more familiar to us from the conclusion of Aeschylus's Oresteian cycle and the ultimate regime-dissolving regime-founding event of the *Oresteia* where the Furies become Eumenides, but who are, here, called many names at once throughout (thus calling up many, often contrary functions simultaneously, almost a practical or dramatic heteronomy, a proto-modernist mode beyond the simplicity of the poet's mask(s) that Hölderlin-Scardanelli would emphasise repeatedly). If there were to be a figure most appropriate as caesuring parallel to Tiresias's 'pure word(s)' it would be Oedipus himself, rendered through his articulate self-figuration as 'foreign', a stranger to and within each aspect of the stage-scene (the wilderness, the sacred grove, the two city's cultural matrices), estranged even from the force and condensation of his own name, and thus continually figured as 'untouchable' within the play. Thus, the origin of the modern (tragic) caesura; a sub-division of figure within the tragic schema is necessary, which also means that the figure which propels and is propelled by the 'transport' is also that which provides its necessary counterrhythm. The 'pure' word of fictional tragic form finds its 'terrible' counterpart in that work which engages the problems of the apparent representational self-enclosure, the anti-hybridity, of the 'Greek'.

With *Colonus*, radically, Sophocles might also be seen to make significant adjustments to the structure on the level of plot (he readjusts the temporality of the father's curse on his sons: the myth acceded to by both Aeschylus and Euripides is to precede the argument of Eteocles and Polyneices by Oedipus's curse, upping the metaphysical ante, whereas here Sophocles has the curse follow the argument, underlining in an almost Euripidean way the blood-drama, also altering significances

in the post-*Colonus* re-reading of *Antigone*),⁹ character (there is for instance a flattening of the filial piety of Antigone and Ismene – another shock to the screen-memory of *Antigone* fans), and mechanics (an innovation cognate with the period of the play's writing of having four rather than three agonists speaking on the stage, reducing the amount of character doubling, materially increasing the distance between this and the two Theban plays though *appearance*). What then is the tragic mechanism if the 'pure' word is corrupt through excess of signification and its embodying figure disappears, according to the playtext, down a chasm towards the buried site of the fates rather than proving their death, and if the caesura and transport are sites of contest rather than condensation?¹⁰ There is a problem of re-cognition. The catharsis-seekers are left without what they came for. The windscreen-wipers go haywire. Ambiguity rather than paradox enters the mechanics of the tragic drama, indeed, enters into from within the very chronological sequence of those dramas so often read as paradigmatic of tragedy itself, complicates what traditionally acts as concrete evidence for the definition of tragedy to be (not as Hölderlin outlines, a phenomenon whose meaning exists in paradox) the ultimate aristocratic, even imperial, artform.

Before we move to modernity (that strange space between the Romantic and Contemporary, our, as it were, third – *Oedipus Colonus* – and at the same time the site where the strangeness of the Hölderlinian tragic experiment was exhumed from the tomb of laughter in which it has been interred for a century, and recontextualized) we must attend briefly to a second stutter. For Hölderlin's machine operates also on the miniscule level, which, zooming back in from the grander outside of the tragic plot to which we have just attended, becomes better visible. We have established the borrowing from the poetological, but what happens when we read back into it? If we, following Hölderlin, attend to the difficulty of the transportation-mechanisms, the simultaneous differences at the heart of the act of *übertragen* – its existence in the translational and metaphorical senses, and (particularly in the poetic imaginary, perhaps) as both? If we remark, in line with this, the poet's insistence (in the realm of the tragic) on the 'difference between the ground of knowing and the real ground',¹¹ what might we then make of

9 Speculatively following Hölderlin's own logic from the 'Notes on the *Antigone*', what this may do is dangerous – it would destabilize the 'too equal' balance, the lyric characteristics, of *Antigone*, and, by the un-Greek nature of *Colonus*, bring it forward into Modernity's demands not of a tragic drama of the body's murder or death, but one of the vexed relation between body and word which represent also the immanence of oblivion.

10 *Oedipus Colonus* seems to evade the usual vectors and conventions of the stage machinery, and thus operates eccentric to their symbollicity. There is no clear line (of travel) for Oedipus, no direct mechanics or translation – the play baffles the line further.

11 Unfinished early essay 'On the Concept of Punishment' (ca. Jan. 1975). Hölderlin (2009): 230.

the comments on that other insistent metaphorology applied to the tragic mode, which, contra the lyric as a continual metaphor of (a single) feeling, the tragic is a metaphor of an intellectual intuition.¹² Tragedy thinks, through which thinking may come the possibility of doing, differently. But it thinks via transport (as lyric ‘feels’ in the same way), and the way in which such transport moves and is disrupted; such disruption (i[nte]rruption) may be an underlining or an overcoming (the former, ‘pure’, the latter, ‘terrible’) of the prevailing rhythmic force or thinking/logic.

Metapoetically, the ‘line’, in relation back to the Greek tragic plot which is so often a blood drama, is, too, the ‘line’ of (usually imperial) inheritance (both of lineage – throne, polis – and stain – the inheritance of corrupted tendencies which precipitate the continued movement of the transport), following which the (silent) caesura’s metaphorical transfer into the (spoken) ‘pure word’ makes more sense. But here something odd arises, since, if we consider the poetic line the tenor for the tragic transport, and the caesura the ‘caesura or [...] pure word’, we realise that whereas at the majuscule level (the metaphorology of this tragic machinery) for Hölderlin the transport is that which is at once unquestioned in its rhythmic impulse and disrupted effectively by caesura, the line is something with which this poet is absolutely concerned, which this poet disrupts and makes strange even as the (poetic, metrically organised) line follows a rather classical logic really up until the Modern inasmuch as it yet holds within it our expectations of a middle (a caesura – a pause, or, as Philip Sidney metaphorizes, ‘breath’ near or at the centre of the line). Naturally, then, if we assume that the tragic machine’s operation is the dynamic connection of transport to ‘pure word’ and their interdependent definition, through any process of change for the line, the dimensions of the caesura also shift. And poetically, as well as in linguistic experiment, the innovation of Hölderlin’s line – a part of the profound strangeness of his poetic project from its inception through to the period of the poetry ‘from the tower’ – is how his work in *metrical* translation, the import of Greek (and Latin) (quantitative) meters and verse patterns into German (accentual syllabic) meters and verse patterns, is a (soft) mode of denaturing the line itself, and destabilizing therefore also the counter-rhythmic expectation and the dominant ideologies of the line.

Another way of looking at this, through Hölderlin, is that it is a way of *strengthening* the line, through its very denaturing; getting closer, thus to ‘das Lebendige’ (‘liveliness’ - the word he will use in letters to Wilmans regarding for the drive and innovations of his full-length Sophocles translations¹³), a true (poetic) nature – neither ‘truth’

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12 Hölderlin (2009): 302.

13 Particularly those of 28 September and 8 December 1803. See Hölderlin (2009): 215-6.

nor 'nature'. Translations from the *Stift* period onwards may be read as preparation for not only the full translations of Sophocles, but also come closer and closer in formal and figurative modalities to such more explicitly lyric poems as 'The Archipelago' and 'Mnemosyne': we read incorporation into German of Latin hexameters (lines from Lucan), translation-substitution from Latin hexameters incorporated into (in German) *ottava rima* (Ovid, Virgil), into German elegiac couplets (Ovid), into experimental meters (Horace), prosodic prose (Ovid, Homer), and line- and verse-shapes (Athenaeus), Greek dramatic hexameters into German pentameters, or dramatic trimeters into analogous German trimeters (Euripides), idiosyncratically measured lines which are not directly one thing nor another (Sophocles), already-obscure lyric into prosimetra (the 'Pindar-Fragments'), all also carrying different levels of distance from or proximity to the word-order of the Classical originals, and interacting with or rejecting the further formal structuration afforded by end-rhyme (which sonorous organization Hölderlin leave as he 'left' the influence of Schiller, and would subsequently return to in his own writings from the tower).¹⁴ We read a German forced in ingenious ways to a different count or measure, a different accounting, and out of this any logic of caesural placement is disrupted – the line moves with caesura out of, against, a variation of caesarisms – we stutter between anticipations of a Germanic placement (as with the English, for the most part slightly off-centre, but flexible withal, and dependent on accent of words) and what archaeological, or academically instituted anachronistic, metrics teach us to be a Classical one (a harsher set of proprieties and substitutions of lexis, rhythm, and syllable, dependent on syllable length); each option become a stranger within itself to itself as we hear them together in the same line: hybrid, both and neither, there can no longer be a neat simplicity of two options, no unambiguous classification – a speech (in its lexis, sound-patterns, pauses and breaks) neither fully lost in its wanderings and part-assimilations 'abroad', nor, after this, entirely recuperated as it was before; a poetic practise undermining a motion towards a classificatory simplicity expressed through a poetic metaphor. The more-than-double-bind is a practical eccentricity:¹⁵ to retain an 'original' caesural position (an 'original' 'pure word') in a 'new' ('original') work, one must alter its transport, or the progress (lexical, rhythmic) of the line; to retain the movement of the transport or progress of the line, the position of the caesura (or, the composition of the 'pure word') must

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14 Constantine's lecture and *Selected* (vide supra) are again indispensable for English readers here. In my own listing of examples I have relied on Hölderlin (1975-2008) vv.15-17.

15 In Hölderlin's sense this conceptually and practically means the deviation from a central, centrist, or normative central point. His letter of 2 April 1804 to Wilmans outlines the principle and aim of this 'eccentricity', and a determination to continue 'even if that means exposing more boldly that was forbidden to the original poet, precisely by going in the direction of eccentric enthusiasm' (Hölderlin (2009): 220).

change; each move by necessity also alters and progresses the other. The line itself generates an exposing disfluency in its reader - becomes impossible to read from a singular presuppositional stand-point.

Let us zoom out momentarily to the unkindest cut of all, the *untrue* word: we must not forget that Hölderlin's Sophocles translations provoked not the awe but the laughter of his peers. The voices cluster around the corpus – Voss, Easter 1804, with Schiller and Goethe: 'Is the man really crazy or does he only pretend to be? [...] You should have seen the way Schiller laughed' – Schelling, July 1804, to Hegel: '[the translations show] he is a complete degenerate'.¹⁶ Biographically, the period of their writing is often accounted for as the zenith of Hölderlin's poetic career, which fast afterward careened into a different stage, the writing 'from the tower', for whose process there is only patchy material evidence, all of which nonetheless was read and for the most part continues to be read, as writing 'out of madness', as scholars seek biographically grounded reason for the poet's apparent break with his previously articulated ambition and trajectory.¹⁷ Philosophically, we see the contemporary interlocutors of the Hölderlin happy to take a certain brute Aristotelian or Kantian tack – the translations of 'tragedy' acting as a concrete proof of the poet's descent into a lower state, the translations processed as a part of a joke, evidence of which is their provoking laughter and allowing the readers an exercise of wit,¹⁸ the poet, no longer (serious) poet but, as subject to ridicule and seen to be mad is a fool acting as a poet, with the laughing group his audience or diagnosers; turn this on its head, Platonically we see instead a group suffering from scornful abandonment, and the location of the self-ignorance reverses from subject to audience, and the pathetic aspect of the tragic re-settles on the tragedian, but further evident is the very (civic) danger of laughter that Plato warns against,¹⁹ as, much later, Mikhail Bakhtin's extended study of the comic foregrounds, via the figures of the grotesque, of the carnival, and extends to questions of class hierarchy,

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16 Note that even this response is unoriginal: cf. Wilhelm Waiblinger's visit of 1822 to Hölderlin, an attempt to give proof of the madman behind the 'mad' poetry. Pierre Bertaux mobilizes this story in his revisionary biography (Bertaux, 1983).

17 Perhaps the most recent example of this mode of dramatic reading is Giorgio Agamben's *Hölderlin's Madness*. Judith Balso's *Ouvrir Hölderlin* is an attempt to re-set the balance and systematically re-read the full corpus.

18 See across the *Nicomachean Ethics* (book 4) for instance, the movement from the question of wit's value in conversation to its derisory force as laughter (as scorn) and jest (as mockery). All possess a difficult relation (to say the least) with truth.

19 In *Philebus*: the 'admixture of pleasure in our malice produces a mixture of pleasure and distress'; such assumption that what is observed is comedic is a 'delusion of intelligence' Plato (1974): 49-50. In *The Republic*: people 'must not be too fond of laughter, either. Abandonment to violent laughter, generally speaking, is a violent agent for change' Plato (2003): 75. In the latter case the move appears to be to resolve the issue of any potential divide between action and word which literary forms might complicate (see n.2 above for how *Hippolytus* directly also engages this problem).

and social structures.²⁰ A – bad, dangerous – form of too-distant reading, born from being or feeling somehow too-close to the unspeakable event, or the systematic questioning of the tragic machinery and of the inherent Caesarism and – once such caesarism is recognised as a form of (rhythmic, counter-rhythmic) caesuring and acted against, the potentially regime-dissolving attributes – the eccentric (signifying) potentialities – of the line.²¹ Recall a line from Hölderlin's letter to Sinclair of 24 December 1798: 'The first condition of all life and all organization is that no force is monarchic in heaven and on earth'.²² The life-line we are looking for (or at) is the cut of the cut itself.

Interlude: *so geht das Zwitschern von rechts nach links und wieder zurück und auf und ab*

Paul Klee's 'Zwitscher - Maschine' (1922) is a prime example of the artist's oil-transfer method (developed in 1919). The work, made in a period when debates over the artist's *oeuvre* veered wildly from considerations of genius, to accusations of childishness, extending to diagnoses of the apparent schizophrenic madness of the artist, is currently held in MOMA's collections, made the transatlantic move in 1939 after it had been labelled, in 1933, 'degenerate art'.²³ The work, now interpreted popularly much like many of other Klee's works from this period onwards as playful-sinister experiments in his concept of the line, peculiar depictions of unbuildable toys or games, is an exposure of an engagement with a minimal distance between the cute and acute (or cutting) forms in which a bio-machinic materiality expose to us through the de-naturalizing move the ongoing vitality of the tragic subject in the apparently comic guise it takes on in modernity. One examines the mechanics depicted in the picture, following the lines which guide the implied movement, and we initially see something that is a clear advancement on the satisfyingly simple mechanics of the 'pickende Hühne' toy (where, when a hand holding a board turns from side to side, a rope swinging weighted below the board circles, makes toy hens

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20 Bakhtin (1984): *passim*.

21 It is Freud, after Hevesi, in his 1905 text *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, who makes an extended comment on the relation of the (tragic, imperial) caesura with the figure of the (dissident, or innovative) poet's mis-read parapractic-formal re-alignments of the caesuring machinery of the line. With Frank Ruda I have elsewhere expanded on this (seminar 'Caesura or, the M(O)ther of Invention', Harvard Mahindra Humanities Center February 2023; seminar 'Cutting Remarks: Thinking the Poetics of Rupture', Dartmouth College May 2023).

22 Hölderlin (2009): 117.

23 For the fullest provenance information publicly available to date see MOMA's *Provenance Research Project* <https://www.moma.org/collection/provenance/?locale=en>

attached to the rope peck the board): a handle cranks a horizontal line directly related to the bird-like figures, which in turn turns a vertical pole which is anchored in a seemingly transparent stage below. The implication is that turning the handle might make the twittering occur, and that the twittering occurs in the bird-like figures collected along a wire-like line, with the other parts of the mechanism a stage-set for the twittering to occur. The cranks from front to back (or back to front), turning the horizontal line one way, which in turn, turns, the vertical line another way (handy proof of the vertical line's turning are a bow-tie-shaped apparatus in its top third, and a four-part anchor in the table-like four-legged plate below). There is an anti-gravitational structure (which is also its anchoring in the appearance of a real space) which allows for the horizontal line to weightbearingly float, on the left side of the image. We turn the pickende Hühne toy and a pecking movement and pecking sound results; we imagine turning the handle of the 'Zwitscher - Maschine' and imagine the twittering result; we laugh, tickled and shocked at the nature of the toy's work against nature, by the shocks that the movement of the machine brings back to the hand.

One could find analogies between the set-up of the 'Zwitscher - Maschine' and those of the tri-levelled and triply-deep Attic stage: the *mechane* being that which not only lifts but moves the figures, the line on which the figures stand the roof of the *skene*, the pivot-line and bow-tie-like propellor the opening-out space of the central doors and (secondary mechanism) *ekkyklema*, the stage the table-like construct that the vertical line is anchored in, which stops before the *orchestra*. The message here, perhaps, that the odes of the so-called gods are machinic twitterings, supported in their ascent *ex machina* only by the (semi-visible rigging) machine itself, that there is or can only be the machine *ex machina*, nothing else (what does this do to the tragic transport?): the (literally) eccentric representation of a de-re-naturalization of the already un-naturalized. We might even see as rough companions to the 'Zwitscher - Maschine's *ex machina* structural/staging commentary the 'Brauende Hexen' the inevitable Eumenides (here with a Shakespearian cast), the Fates-provoked protagonist 'Der Narr als Prophet', and the 'Gespenst eines Genies' the (notorious) residing spirit of the tragic drama.²⁴ But an initial *frisson* of interaction with the 'Zwitscher - Maschine' is that even though it carries some of the visual rhetoric of a blueprint via the line's transfer-process, it is impossible (impossibly blurred, and impossible structuration), which is to say, fictional. We cannot crank the handle (which is the most recognisable single aspect of the picture). We cannot (from this) build

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24 All of these are oil-transfers of 1922, with graphite or ink sketches often dated prior, watercoloured not necessarily immediately after; there is inbuilt into each work an imprecision of origin. The works of this period often interact with theatrical stock figures, jongleurs, itinerants, puppets, and staging machines – the analogizing above is not wild. Klee often takes on the figure of the harlequin or fool, uniting it with tragic and mechanical devices.

the machine. And the very method of the work is that of this stutter: the stutter which is both in- and towards the machine. We are presented, then, with a dedoubling of the machinic: the stuttering (material properties) is the aesthetics of the twittering (projective effects) machine. And we are presented with this not through what the picture presents but its method, which presents simultaneously a distancing from and a bringing closer to our notice the hand of the artist, and its tools.

The work we respond to is in-itself flat, but this is a creation of a compression of a multi-layered multi-process exposure: a blank sheet is placed on top of a sheet covered in part-dried oil paint or printers ink, on top of which a third sheet with an original drawing, which is transferred by the tracing pressure of a stylus through the pigment-holding sheet onto the blank sheet. Subsequently the image would be water-coloured. The completed work carries with itself thus echoes of the unoriginality of the two photosensitive chemical reproduction technologies of modernity: the blueprint (though the first transfer process offering a simultaneously blurred but finely sharp line) and the hand-tinted early film (the work, after its exposure undergoing a secondary process of colouring); it carries with it the influence of two pioneers of chemical etching / hand-tinting techniques, William Blake and Francisco Goya. But rather unlike these two forms that it echoes (one technical one theatrical), or the prior processes, it is a very simple tracery process, the stylus being the only technical instrument needed. This apparently primitive move leads to the obviation of the necessity of plates from which to print – a privileging of the dynamism of the line (the fluid or tremulous hand-touch of tracing leaving its mark on both original sketch and transfer image) and its progress over a total impression, or impression of a totality – and thus also an increased potential of seeing impress not from the stylus only, but also the hand of the tracer and its inadvertent too-hard impress as it makes the tracing, not to be washed away or dulled in the later hand-colouring process, after which we look through to the transfer-image as if through a screen. The spotty haze in the 'Zwitscher - Maschine' is the impress of the artists hand more than the stylus-mediated stronger or weaker presences of the line – chiasmatic to Dante's hand of the poet²⁵ – the evidence of the work of the work as part of the work itself. A significant part of the work is a demonstration of the mechanics, and the eccentricity of the non-totalizing, unequilibrated modality of the (oil transfer/tracing) machine, a calling attention to the stages of its own untimeliness, the pauses within its production; Klee does what the image demonstrates, makes the twittering picture through a stuttering method, an image of the (literary-linguistic) Deleuzian stutter: the 'dynamic combinations in perpetual disequilibrium'.²⁶

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25 'similimente operando a l'artista / ch'a l'abito de l'arte ha man che trema' - [Nature] working / like the hartist who has the habit of art but a hand /that trembles'. Dante (2011): 270-1.

26 Deleuze (1998): 109.

It was not until 1913 that Hölderlin's *Antigone* was performed, and not until 1921 that saw performance of *Oedipus* (Tyrannos), both stagings coincident with a more general revival of interest in Hölderlin's work in the early 1900s through Norbert von Hellingsgrath's project of a collected edition of the *oeuvre* (1913–1923 (vv.IV–VI completed posthumously)) and publications and lectures of the 1910s hinting and working through the secrets of an essential Germany contained in the late poetry, and swiftly taken up by Stefan George and his circle. Between this moment, and Heidegger's by now infamous lecture series (1934/5) further taking up Hölderlin for a specific, autochthonous, cause, or the re-moval of Hölderlin's *Antigone* into a secondary dramatic context by Brecht, placing importance on a version of the radical speech-forms (1948), Hölderlin, revived, becomes variously untimely, and in the most part becomes echoes not of Hölderlin but an Attic impulse: across this time we bear witness in various ways to tragedy used as a 're-writing machine' of epic for the *polis*.²⁸ This is short but a war-marked hiatus; a hiatus in which the very materiality of the tragic machine – at the level of the line itself – is, across Europe, debated in an intensity unseen since the writings surrounding the French Revolution a century prior. The line exposed once again as either untimely, within itself to itself, or as a centralizing, normative force; or, the normalizing force of the latter had again come to a point where there exists a poetological demand for its breaks. At the same time, the mechanics of the stage shift, incorporating the screen. And, at quite the same time are published first in French and swiftly into English Henri Bergson's ground-breaking essays on the comic, early conceptual reflections on the new alliance between previous cultural reflections and a new cinematic imaginary.²⁹ Reflect back on the tale of the 'unkindest cut', now, under the light of Bergson's diagnosis of a key aspect of the comic as a 'mechanical inelasticity', a certain rigidity of figure (form and gesture) which makes of the comic subject something more machinic than human, as Bergson writes, a 'jointed puppet', see-through; a 'set up mechanism' in which the originality lies in the conjuncture of the appearance as person and transparency as machine.

27 Euripides (2005): 226. ('Oh! Oh! Would that I could stand apart and look at myself')

28 See Simon Goldhill (2020): 71, on the importance of beginnings and (re)beginnings "Sophocles' *Antigone* – tragedy is a machine for rewriting Homer for the fifth-century *polis* – opens with *Ô koinon*, 'O shared': and the play goes on obsessively to dramatize not just the conflicting claims of commonality in the city and family, but also the dangerous power of the appeals to such commonality".

29 The early publication history of these essays is interestingly disjointed: first as a suite in the *Revue de Paris* (1900) whose foreword (by Bergson) is redacted and replaced for a second publication in 1924, in the interstices of which the (first) collection is translated and published in English (1911).

Film technology allows for this shift in perspective and dimensionality; our digression to Klee's multi-layered multivalent 'Zwitscher - Maschine' is illustrative also here.

Such transparency in modernity is a disguise, a cloud or eidolon, a screen, for (and of) the tragic, the stuttering into voice of the question posed by the imposition of the by-now-again stuttering imperial machine and its alliances or otherwise with what the tragic machinery has become (a vehicle for the perspective-twisting vital promise that is comic cruelty). We must not forget to note how Bergson's apparently simple mechanical comic perception (a seeming-person is also a machine-seeming-person that moves with quite some neatness from A to B and back again) has an additional layer: the see-through mechanism which allows us to 'see through' the, well, see-through guise to the thing that is to be seen. There are three things which can be broken down into twos: two subjects: the human, the puppet (this is the illusion); two mechanisms: the puppet, the 'transparency', glass, or screen (this is the device). The puppet is the illusion of a 'true' device which, through the comedic mode, through its own taking-the-human-as-mask, masks the mask itself. To assume the machine's reversals to be something between human and puppet (dramatized as human-become-puppet-like, or human-in-puppet-carapace), whose increasing closeness, as Bergson writes, increases the comedic potential of the work, is to lose sight of the *other* mechanism at play. It is the transparency demands a reversal of the perspective we take, by which reversal we begin to observe the medium again from that other side in which the set-up turns upset. A reversal which is strictly not peripeteia, which bridges the inside and the outside of the 'tragic' line, or machine; the transparency as alternative caesura, or new 'true word'. The screen becomes the exposure mechanism of and protection medium from the tragic which is masked by the comic's partisan cause; it is the unheard interlocutor of the (apparently comic) scene – the (new) 'true word' (which is terrible). What happens to the tragic machinery, then, in these (cinematic) years between the Hölderlinian revival and its most clear Nazification? When the 're-writing machine' of tragedy meets a re-vived questioning of the imperium or singularity of the line – both its (poetic) mechanics and its metapoetics –? Where another interaction with the question of the cut, the 'true word', is stutteringly exposed?

Through its existence as a light medium, through the minimal differences made animate in a chiaroscuric aesthetics of absolute restraint, 'the screen can rise to the ecstatic level of the poetic and religious ideals of pure Sophoclean formula' – thus, the writer Hilda Doolittle (since 1912 also 'H.D.' in her public Poundian figuration, as well as 'Delia Alton', 'Helga Doon' and others), in one of a series of three essays published in 1927 in the pioneering, and short lived, film magazine *Close*

Up.³⁰ The cinema, the screening of film, carries with it the complex of elements, the hypermediation and mechanization, the distance from any pure 'origin' whilst being marked by and (silently) marking this process (of having been translated), which allows for it to – in H.D.'s Hellenophilic idea – vie with a sense of the 'Greek' tragic mode in both its ideal poetic and political functions, without simply repeating in an anachronistic or revivalist mimesis. The 'Greek', or the 'Sophoclean' (here) is the possibility of a prototype for the screen. But, as H.D. goes on to write, cinema rarely realizes this, rather, its dominant tendencies even in the inter-war years (what H.D. elsewhere calls the 'period of [...] dispersion'³¹) is to over-narrativize too quickly, to get bound up in processes of fetishization masquerading as hollow signification –³² paying insufficient attention to the light, the screen, the process of puppets and dolls (the projected characters), and, beyond vulgar *Schattenspiel*, the (rhythmic, counter-current) cuts made and stitched between them; anticipating the critique of cinema's development by Francesco Casetti – what he has named the 'optical spatial dispositif' (a 'projection/projection complex') of screen technologies, marking their developed complicity with heterogenous mechanisms of state power rather than their puncturing.³³ H.D. in her cinematic writings is conscious of and pays particular attention to the shuddering, stuttering, effects of timing in the cut and the montage, the presence of the stutters and exposure of the work of the machine (and the machine workers), allied to questions of statelessness, of the psyche, and the 'borderline'³⁴ (tragic stuttering misconstrued as comic madness), and a literal ek-stasis, or animation of the previously motionless artwork. But the cinematic, for her, has not yet advanced into its full expressive potential, and before it has been able to do so, its dominant mode descends into noisy chatter, even as it is the modern medium of

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30 Doolittle (1927): 39.

31 Doolittle (1950): f1122.

32 H.D. is writes of a broad (Euro-Russo-American) cinema culture here. Her aesthetic sense in cinematic writings is (interestingly) *against* the synchronizing of sound with speech (i.e. is against the 'talkies'), and *for* films which expose and make use of the medium itself before and in the process of making and of projection (Macpherson, Eisenstein...). The two poems 'Projector' that H.D. also publishes in *Close Up* foreground the importance of light, the cut (or line-break), and the arche-type, as well as the projector as both machine and speculative-future-think (light-projection also becomes essential in her analysis with Freud). Cinema is 'Attica', and light a synthesizing, redemptive, force. Or at least H.D.'s version of 'Attica'. This is elaborated in the descriptions of film's function in *Borderline* (pamphlet): a necessary (light-based) 'welding' of 'past static art conceptions in direct line with modern problems' (Doolittle (1930), 15-16). In this (pardon!) light, it is telling that her *Hippolytus*, which we will soon discuss, adds at the opening of the third act an address by Helios: the light cuts through, shapes and is shaped by, the very action of the play.

33 Casetti (2023): passim.

34 See Doolittle (1930): pp.20-24 particularly on the necessary rhythmicity of film, in juxtaposition and montage, p.13 on the very idea of 'patria' and national belonging as (only ever productive if it is only ever) a 'no-man's land'.

expression that, partly because of its technical attributes, may yet allow for the re-writing of the 'true word' and a re-exploration of the 'terrible word', for modernity, (then H.D.'s 'now'), a re-casting of the line.

We must therefore turn, rather than to the cinematic, back to the dramatic to gain a sense of the relation of H.D.'s ek-stasis and the Hölderlinian 'pure' and 'terrible word'. But as cinema was the proto-re-Sophoclean medium for H.D., the dramatic was Euripidean. We return slantways, then, to *Oedipus Colonus* – the Athenian eccentricity of the Theban trilogy, its un-grounding force – which leads us first one way via the Eumenides to Aeschylus, but then another via Theseus to Euripides, or, via the 'outsider drama' displayed in the *Colonus* again, to Euripides. Euripides being the name given to a body of work whose aesthetics and politics of form comes to us as sitting at generic borderlines rather than paradigmatically centrist, troubling the conventions of signifying regimes;³⁵ who, having been taken up by Victorian poetry as a medium through which to articulate dissident modes (poetic and civil),³⁶ gathers a tradition of being taken up in modernity to articulate an outsider poetics,³⁷ and often doing this in plain sight – via a metapoetics of *form* whose imperfect (signifying) interaction between form and meaning leads to a foregrounding of the structural, mechanical, aspects of the tragic mode and the immanence of history within its force, the wave from the mechanical god of the extimate play-form.³⁸ The dis-ordering relation of form and meter to the symbolic is important as an aspect of this transportation, as much as is the incomplete inheritance of the *corpus*. And this is the Euripides who H.D., in her work towards poetic versioning, transposing the classic Aristotelian mimetic move (as from praxis to muthos) into a move which articulates out of a conceptual 'real' (as from logos to muthos), nominates as the paradigmatic translator for the people of high philosophical principle into dramatic-poetic

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35 See the brilliant study of Wohl (2015).

36 Prins (2017) is a wonderful and precise guide here, particularly the *Hippolytus*-focussed chapter pp.152-201.

37 See for instance Maria Stadter Fox, (2001). Fox concentrates on so-called 'Phaedra' dramas, and a very different line (via Seneca and Racine) can be traced here which is for the most part not salient to H.D., however with regard to the question of the machinic stuttering line, and a more general poetological-civil concern against 'patria', Tsvetaeva's *Phaedra* makes a not dissimilar stuttering move in metrical/conceptual innovation as H.D., and indeed the play sees publication in Russian just one year after H.D.'s *Hippolytus Temporizes*, as well as being a continuation of an earlier lyric sequence (see Tsvetaeva 2012; note also Tsvetaeva's letter to Rilke of 1926, 'No language is the mother tongue [...] Orpheus bursts nationality, or he extends it to such breadth and width that everyone (bygone and being) is included.' (Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke (2001): 221)).

38 Wohl (2015) *passim*, but ultimately reflecting the book's final sentence: 'Instead, that [historical, contemporary] context is immanent within them, as their dramatic form gives form in turn to the outside world and reality is conjured for the audience, with a wave of his hand, by the play's mechanical god', p.131.

form.³⁹ So, to H.D.'s Euripides (through the frame of the cinematic as Sophoclean mode): the translator of the 'pure word', through the mode of the 'terrible', becomes (tragic) commentator), in whom she reads a sense of the modern, a contemporary charge ('Euripides lived through almost a modern great-war period'⁴⁰), who she writes of as being like Leonardo Da Vinci an inspired mechanic,⁴¹ and in her version of whose *Hippolytus* she interprets the work as being, and containing inside itself, a projection-machine (or, more strictly, is the mechanism of projection and projected subject).⁴² In Act 3 of H.D.'s work the light (Helios), brought in as foil and fuel for the crystalline projection-machine (Hippolytus), an articulate counter-rhythm to our expectations of the tragic form being an embodied universal rather than *ex machina*, stuttering 'None, none is pure / and none, none is alone...'⁴³

It is, therefore, with H.D.'s *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927) that we take up again the question of the mechanics of the (modern) tragic stutter, its doubly de-naturalizing effects,⁴⁴ that collision between transport and pure word under the question of the line, and the question of the co-incident of the dedoubled double economy of the tragic transport; a play which H.D. describes as 'reflect[ing] the original Euripides *Hippolytus*.'⁴⁵

This apparently simple, even unnecessary (since we intuit it, or even know it to be something of a translation), description of *Hippolytus Temporizes* is in fact a condensation typical of H.D., in which both the 'reflection' and the question of 'original' carry a heavier weight than the sentence might at surface value imply, regarding which it is perhaps instructive to begin at a beginning: the 'original' – what H.D.'s poet's-work 'reflects'. Which is of course debated as much as it is exceptional, and is cast into further debate via the Euripidean *Hippolytus*'s own debatable and non-singular originpoint which becomes starting point of H.D.'s

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39 Doolittle (1982): 23. Here she writes 'the Attic dramatist', but subsequently in the essay Euripides is the most frequent example (of a Tragic poet).

40 Doolittle (2003): 277.

41 op. cit., passim.

42 as 'theme and centre, the portrait or projection of the intellectualized, crystalline youth'; this contains the germ of the projector/eidolon structuration H.D. will carry into her late work out of Euripides, *Helen in Egypt*. Note also the (projection-)machine/figure and the crystalline/figure coming together in a formation similar to that which we have seen in Bergson.

43 In the notes for her 1955 re-reading of this play, H.D. marks these lines (see Doolittle (2003): 143).

44 The move of the 'stutter' of tragic machinery definitively against either its appropriation as echo-chamber (stutter as echoic (non)repetition or disembodied bounce-back from a distinct enunciating figure) or the re-naturalization or embodied move of the 'stutter' qua physiological phenomenon and apparent symptom (of madness, illness, etc) or dis/ability.

45 Doolittle (1950)

project. As Simon Goldhill writes, 'The *Hippolytus* is unique among extant tragedies in that what we possess is a second version by the same writer. The first *Hippolytus* has not survived except in a few fragments and in some reports of its lack of success. In this first version, it would seem that Phaedra made an explicit attempt on stage to seduce her stepson, who fled covering his head in shame – an act which gives the play its title, *Hippolytus Kaluptomenos* ('Hippolytus veiling himself') [...] It was the second *Hippolytus*, with a virtuous Phaedra, which won first prize.⁴⁶ We encounter both and neither of these precursor Hippolytuses in H.D., and must remark that the fact of the (debated) original is certainly an aspect of the play that would have drawn H.D. to it; 'original' itself takes on a different meaning (eccentric rather than singular point of origin) as much as *the* 'original' is debatable ground. And thus the 'reflection' of this an active contemplation of unsynthesizable precursors – two points in a reverse-parallax relation – , and H.D.'s Hippolytus becomes a pro-ject, screen, a location-mechanism, that is also condensation, a crystallization, of these as well as her own precursor works on Hippolytus – a bouncing of the already double reflection back – machine to conjure, and take measure of distance, delay, hiatus, of those eidolon-exposing eidolon-exposed tricks of the cut of the light.⁴⁷

Next, the temporizing of the title is not primarily the sort of temporizing made famous by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – the use of rhetorical excess supported by the dramatic convention of a poetics of an half-foot extended 'feminine' line, productive of an 'out of jointedness' and (existential, ill-fated) negotiation towards a gaining of more time⁴⁸ when the measure has already exceeded itself, or an over-reaching, moving from intransitive to transitive in a first and failed meaning switch almost contemporaneous with *Hamlet* itself: temporizing as the negotiation towards a result (rather than with a person).⁴⁹ Rather, H.D.'s 'temporizing' condenses, negotiates, and moves beyond a sentimental history of tragic temporization through its transitive and intransitive, still-current and obsolete variants, leapfrogging the intrigue of the Hamletian hapax

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46 Goldhill (1986): 131. It is worth noting H.D.'s interaction with this alternatively titled work, as its presence haunts *Hippolytus Temporizes*: passages in H.D.'s 'Notes on Euripides' are a direct answer to, and some an explicit re-writing of Walter Pater's 'Hippolytus Veiled: A Study from Euripides' (Pater 1894). H.D.'s references to 'Hippolytus' often condense reference to both Euripidean plays.

47 As with Hölderlin's Sophocles, H.D.'s Euripides appears passim across her full *oeuvre* in verse (translations and versionings) and prose (both fiction and essays) and reaches its most radical extension in the prosimetra *Helen in Egypt*; with relation to the forms and figures of the Hippolytus drama in particular, in 1919 appear choruses (translated from Greek to English), in 1921's *Hymen* a rehearsal of the figures and relations to eros including a poem of the same title as the verse play, parts of all which are incorporated into the 1927 *Hippolytus Temporizes*.

48 'Temporize, v 3' (1991) *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* – current from 1587.

49 'Temporize v. 4b' – from 1596, now obsolete, rare.

as representation of bourgeois stuckness,⁵⁰ and adding a final distinctly modern sense which points strictly to the mechanics of the play itself – a third sense, or (successful) transitive shift where to temporize is a *provision* of time, an improvisation, extemporization⁵¹ – a move away from the pre-determination of the enclosed convention of the too-invisible tragic machine. H.D.'s *Hippolytus* (both play-form and character-screen) stutters, but towards the transitive, the ex-centric, the locative, whose direct object is the transparency, the transformative break, between the two, and thus its uprooting and modal translation. And indeed, belied by the apparent youth and historied outsider-complexes of both princes, H.D.'s *Hippolytus* could not be more different than Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet – the latter swithering but swearing vengeance and out-of-joint because of the self-generation of an inability to choose, a principle of un-choosing trumping a principled decision; the former acting towards a fixed principle eccentric to the positions of dominant belief-system, state, and kinship, and a refusal to engage with the question of the line (of inheritance). Indeed, H.D. is something of a reactionary to those writers considered comfortable masters of the (or a) poetic line, one example being the choice of Euripides over Sophocles or Aeschylus, another being the interweaving of the mother-line into the Shakespearean intertextualities of her novels and project to 'remember *differently*'⁵² of *On Avon River*, and yet another an interesting re-lineation of Goethe in the manuscripts of *Tribute to Freud*. This latter point is instructive, as it, as do the writings on cinema, demonstrates another aspect of H.D.'s making-stutter of the tragic machinery rather than the projected image, whilst also showing us, through a series of breaks, a critical reading of *Hamlet* and its figure(s) which anticipates Adorno's embedding of the play within a certain bourgeois culture of sentiment and stuckness, and which is a mirror-move to her choice of the Euripidean over the Sophoclean tragic drama here, and elsewhere, to translate.

In an eccentric prosimetric stichomythia between verse and prose, song and narration, H.D. (in prose) unpacks the analyst-analysand / Master-pupil / Psychoanalyst-Poet relation of herself to Sigmund Freud and (in verse) quotes from 'Mignon's Gesang' from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*.⁵³ The obvious biographical analogy here is H.D. (articulately conscious of the translation of 'Meister' to 'Master') casting Freud as Wilhelm Meister and herself (Freud's 'perfect psychic bisexual') as the parentless exotic androgyne Mignon. But we must note how much

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50 cf Adorno (2000): 112. ('at the very outset of the bourgeois age' the play demonstrates the 'irreconcilable contradiction' between 'right consciousness and right action')

51 'Temporize v. 5' – from 1880.

52 Doolittle (2016): 31.

53 Doolittle (2012): 108-111.

Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (obsessed with the dramatic corpus of his Renaissance namesake, increasingly focussed on *Hamlet*) also shows us the *Bildungs* of the machinery of the play form: he moves from puppet-plays to the circus, to the theatre itself, in which economic expedient calls for brutal modifications of an already unoriginal (and translated) playscript, and he sees the 'time is out of joint' as the line which is the key to a full interpretation of the play, a neat mirror to his own never quite being on time. Against this, and against the prose deconstruction by the poet of Freud, we have lines of 'Mignon's Gesang', beginning in a middle verse of the song and circling around through the end to the opening, as if, in the background of the prose is, all along, this song, on a loop; an act of 'creative stuttering'.⁵⁴ Goethe as author of Mignon, and all the famous *Lieder* of this lyric, are exposed as a smoothing over of a violent process of making foreign (let us recall that Mignon stands as a modern equivalent of a spoil of war; at the point of this song in the novel she has been bought out of indenture by Wilhelm Meister, and the song is a plea to return to a lost homeland).⁵⁵ And, as H.D. will not preserve Goethe's linear form, nor does she, in manuscript versions of this work, preserve his lineation, which she continually idiosyncratically breaks into two shorter lines at the point of the caesura ('Kennst du das Land / Wo die Zitronen Blühn' etc),⁵⁶ following her first quotation ('Es stürzt der Fels [...] und über ihn die Flut') which is divided across and divides a passage of prose (at the caesura: 'the rock breaks or falls in ruins, and indeed this is our very present predicament; but')⁵⁷ – de-instituting the 'major' (iambic pentameter) line of which Goethe is cultural upholder⁵⁸ after Shakespeare, but also debunking the primacy of 'out of jointedness'

54 Deleuze (1998): 111. ('Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle [...] Being well spoken has never been either the distinctive feature or the concern of great writers')

55 Following further H.D.'s tendency to condense or crystallise multiple (analogous) figures into a single name-form, it is clear that there is a divergence at play between the Hamlet-figure (associated with Wilhelm Meister, Shakespeare, Goethe, Freud, 'The Master', the Husband) and the Hippolytus-figure (associated with Mignon, Ophelia (via the 'Hamlet' plot), made analogous also to Phaedra, and H.D. herself).

56 See Yale TS not published book of the work: these breakings are editorially smoothed over (or 'corrected') into single iambic lines, which 'corrections' appear to be in Norman Holmes Pearson's hand. We can only assume the correction is with H.D.'s consent or resignation to 'correctness' of 'quotation' (even as elsewhere she is meticulous about the retention of apparent parapraxes). But the 'broken' (or re-lineated) lines are evidence of a different – anti-iambic – poetic 'memory' at work. It is worth noting that the archive of correspondence demonstrates that H.D., earlier, took it upon herself to explain the anti-iambic idiosyncracies of her metrical innovations to Pearson, going so far as to mark up poems with scansion markings, and that she was similarly strict with herself – marking up components of the script of *Helen in Egypt* that she was to read for a recording.

57 Doolittle (2012): 107.

58 There is insufficient space here to extend this, but it is worth noting that Deleuze (1998) figures Goethe as 'the greatest representative of the major language', or of linguistic equilibrium, who would have been horrified by Kleist's making-stutter, making-minor, or turning out from the inside, of German.

as the dominant line or screen-memory, of the tragic mode. H.D.'s *Hippolytus* project, too, shares these anti-caesural lineation tendencies, this necessity of a different measure (demonstrated for instance in Prins's re-lineation of one of the choruses of *Hippolytus* into longer lines to prove their break with Swinburne⁵⁹). Look back to the two lines from Helios quoted above: note that the regular caesural point in a (feminized, here) pentameter line is the line-break, allowing for a completely different post-break rhythm, for the lines (rhetorically) to not only effect different approaches to their subject but also internally re-define these approaches and subject-definitions; and throughout the third act of *Hippolytus Temporizes* the stichomythia are rendered in this way. The line (already) out-of-joint (by alternating speech) is further disjointed, from its centre-point outwards; the important counterrhythmic locus in the tragic transport is visibilized in the very action of its being broken. The 'pure word' (caesura) dissolved into the infinite of the line-break.⁶⁰ A different rhythmicity opens up. The stutter, the terrible word of the modern tragic machine.

In H.D., we note a rejection of a Hamletian 'untimeliness', or 'disjoint' via a condensation of reference in the very breaks of her poetic line and this move, the breaking of the breaks, is a caesural movement in the mechanism itself to de-caesar the tragic machine, to question through its titular central point the ideas of what might be classical 'reflection' and origin-point, (poetic) inheritance, or line. And, as did the eccentricity of Hölderlin's transformative metrical and lexical changes provoke his (comfortable) readers into a certain diagnostic, H.D.'s *Hippolytus Temporizes* exercised and divided its critics, but has since been read with close attention an experimental innovation of form, a novel transformative move, an 'allegory of meter'⁶¹ defined and materially defended in Yopie Prins's virtuoso reading of the play and its related poetic precedents in H.D.'s *oeuvre*, where 'temporizing' is re-cast and cast into the very lines of the play itself, which in moving 'through and beyond iambic meter into a more expansive sense of metrical time' creates 'a different idea of metrical time'.⁶² The play begins with cuts, superimpositions or simultaneities of voice (a precursor effect to the prosimetric overlapping of *Tribute to Freud's* 'Mignon' section) and consistently foregrounds questions of song, rhythm, meter, and 'feet'. It begins with an erasure of the address ex-machina of Athene who opens Euripides's second (complete) *Hippolytus* play. For H.D.: first, an

59 Prins (2017): 189-190.

60 See Doolittle (2003): 139 where the 'Note on the Text' quotes H.D. in 1955 reflecting on *Hippolytus Temporizes*: 'The stanzas and lines run on and into the infinite - '.

61 Prins (2017): 187 (transformation); 197 ('allegory of meter').

62 Prins (2017): 199 (expansive meter); (different ... time) 193.

invocation, or ode, dated 1920, Greece⁶³; then, a list of ‘People of the Play’, an ‘Argument’; then the first act, ‘Below Troezen. A wild gorge or ravine cuts through the trees onto a flat, sandy beach’ (the shore for H.D. is the point of encounter with the infinite, the stage set-up more easy for a cinematic lens than a theatre).⁶⁴ Then, the voice of Artemis, anti-Athenian and in disgust at the human imperial ascriptions of totalizing rhythmic form: ‘I heard the intolerable rhythm / and sound of prayer’, with a desire for their ‘efface[ment]’ (this is significantly reincorporated into the body of the play in Artemis’s final, closing speech).⁶⁵ The play is, immediately, an attempt to uncouple the tragic mode from the radical self-enclosure of an Attic (or any nation-state-based) Imperium. Enter onto this scene of anti-imperial terror-pronouncement Hippolytus, ‘stumbling forward, uncertain in the half-light’.⁶⁶ Evening comes to the coast, and Act 2 opens, on Phaedra, inadvertently echoing the anti-Athenian lines of Artemis: ‘O how I hate / radiant, cold and drear / Greece...’, ‘O how I hate / this world, this west, this power [...] / the tyranny of spirit / that is Greece’.⁶⁷ Act 3 (remaining on the seacoast) gives us Helios, articulating and turning around a divided singular form: ‘I / I who lead the sea-men on the ship...’.⁶⁸ And, following H.D.’s own Hippolytan logic, ‘Hippolytus’ is in fact a figure, and a (crystalline) mechanical unit, a part of the machine-impulse of the work – it is Hippolytus whose refracting mechanisms will bring together in an eccentric orbit these three presiding figures, Artemis (deity), Phaedra (foreigner), and Helios (sun); it is Hippolytus in H.D.’s play who dies in an encounter with the infinite that is not the wrath of a machinic God or Hero (H.D. rids the play of Theseus, Poseidon, sea-monsters); Hippolytus who exists apart, dies, is revived, and dies for a second time, multiple selves and actions refracted and renounced within the play-action multiple times. Lines of the play echo and repeat, calling out their measure. This, then, the

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63 Doolittle (2003): 3. This is one of H.D.’s ‘Hippolytus’ works previously published; the anachronic presentation of *Hippolytus Temporizes* is inscribed in its presentation even before the play’s beginning proper.

64 In line with the ‘Zwitscher - Maschine’'s un-doing of the metaphysics of the Greek theatre, its gods and heroes, H.D.’s setup here implies Troezen as what is at the roof of the *skene*, the stage – land – divided by a ravine (exposing as if by the mechanism of the *ekkyklema*, an interior space of the ‘stage’, and an exposition of the lack of the Eumenides), and the beach as the *orchestra*. H.D.’s play obliterates the gods as well as the emperors *ex machina*, replacing Gods with figures – and cuts the stage into two – all action is situated in the *orchestra*, a third space, total ex-position, which is eccentric to the entire technics and mechanics of the stage set. Hippolytus’s crystalline figure, stumbling onto the strand, obsessed with rhythm up to breaking-point, is the cast of the (new) tragic machinery.

65 Doolittle (2003): 3-9.

66 op cit: 9.

67 op. cit. 48-49.

68 op. cit. 99.

macrostructure of temporization of the work. And it is Hippolytus who is brought into the world-stage-shore of the play holding through the action of his body even as it is young *Oedipus Colonus* – he stumbles; he is in ‘half-light’ – the second Hölderlinian tragic caesura (the ‘terrible word’) which is beyond the ‘Greek’, which, stripped of a young generation as guide and representative of the continuation of a line, can only be differently counter-rhythmic, eccentric, modern.

Nicole Loraux’s *La Voix endueillée*, following and updating the Hölderlinian schematic, remarks on the ways in which the (classical) tragedy’s enactment of a state injunction to forget is punctured by lyric utterance and lamentation, as this latter mode exceeds the totality of the state and provokes formation of different communities whose formation brings the potential for different universals or breaks of dominant racinations, of xenophobias. Exceeding this diagnosis of tragedy’s potential to exceed and puncture the imperial, H.D.’s modal absorptions (it is far too simplistic just to indicate that H.D.’s verse drama is written in ‘lyric’ forms) re-calibrate in a Hölderlinian modality, through a pre-Deleuzian minoritarian stutter, the ‘pure word’ of (both tragic and lyric) caesuring mechanisms, through the encounter with an absolute which the (anti-caesaral) broken (caesaral) break of the line effects; there are no lamentations here except those which puncture the metapoetics of other established genres; we move on, must move on, as much from ‘song’ as from the Attic tragic form, and the mechanics of the ‘stutter’ in and of the line allows for a constancy of this movement. A physics of reading becomes internally self-referential, as well as conjuncturally extimate. The stuttering machine (the stutter in (the) machine) is a demand for recognition, a re-cognition that passes through an initial stage of reactive similitude-making toward a more effective reading protocol which eschews group-think, or untroubled comic artistry, or madness-diagnostics. The trap of the (first) Hölderlinian tragic complex of the ‘pure’ word is punctured by the (second) Hölderlinian tragic complex of the ‘terrible’ word – the hearing of the ‘stutter’ as word, its carrying-over of the infinite – that terror that the eloquent Hamlettian mode, the post-facto Heideggerian-inflected readings of (mad)Hölderlin-who-is-not-Hölderlin apparently excels in its avoidance of, in its always-present plea for there to be an intervention *ex machina* which re-sets the regime-form; the eccentric machine-scene where in incorporating into the tragic comedy’s (vitalist) horrorshow can be enunciated the ‘terrible’ word which is the pass-word when known which leads to recognition and resistance. Start to notice and *das zwitschert unaufhörlich*. The (second) cut of the (first) cut is the exposition of (modern) tragedy’s (stutter and life-) line.

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**The Philosophical
Dignity of Comedy,
Interview with
Robert Pfaller**

**Frank Ruda &
Agon Hamza**

1) Let's begin with a rather general question. Do you think the categories of the comic and the tragic, or of comedy and tragedy are still viable categories to characterize our times? And if so, in what sense?

One may argue, with the formula coined by Simon Critchley, that today we live under the predominance of a "tragic paradigm". Yet one has to be precise here: This apparent bias for the "tragic" is based on a profound misunderstanding – a consequence of metaphysical presuppositions. "Tragic" is misunderstood here in the idealist, metaphysical sense that greatness is by necessity doomed to failure; that this world is so bad that nothing good or great can ever succeed. Every success then comes under suspicion. Good can, as a consequence, only be what has not at all – not even by the smallest success – contaminated itself with this bad world. Only he who is completely weak or a total loser can be good. We can observe this today in the moralist glorification of the "victim", and the subsequent "victimhood competitions", launched by the ideology of "progressive neoliberalism"; the struggles over who is the most pitiful victim: the woman, the homosexual, the person of color, the queer, the asexual etc.? Seen from a little distance, this is all of course not without a certain – yet sad – comicality.

As I have demonstrated in my book "What Life Is Worth Living For" ("Wofür es sich zu leben lohnt, Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2011), this same "tragic", metaphysical philosophy consists in declaring that the world is just a play, or theater, or literature, and that truth is never to be reached and has to be kept under permanent doubt and "deconstruction"; or that its quest is misleading and has to be given up for postmodern "fun culture". Due to its pessimist presuppositions, this metaphysical view of the world thus always leads to characteristic splits: it claims that we can only have either freedom or happiness, only either truth or fun; that someone can be only either clever or beautiful, that something can only be either functional or pleasant, etc.

The philosophical dignity of comedy, as I claim, lies in the fact that it opposes these metaphysical presuppositions and its consequences. Comedy demonstrates: success in this world is possible, and things can at the same time be funny and true; people can at the same time be good or smart and beautiful, etc.

Therefore I regard comedy as a representative, a "lieu-tenant" of philosophical materialism – and a remedy against our culture's reactionary philosophical bias.

2) Hegel has argued that when tragedy reaches its conceptual peak, it transforms into comedy. Some events are just too tragic to be depicted in tragic form, and they seem to explode it. One could thereby maybe say that tragedy reaches its full

concept when it tragically disappears in another form, notably that of comedy and comedy is able to work differently with such a disappearance. How do you account for the relationship between these two forms?

The relationship between tragedy and comedy can be conceived of in different ways: for example, in sociological and ethical terms, as in Aristotle's take; or in logical terms, as in Hegel's. My approach is psychoanalytical, based on the works of Freud, of Lacan, and especially on those of Octave Mannoni. From this perspective, the question is: *what type of illusion is at work here?* Do we have to do with what people themselves believe in, or do we have to do with something that people do not believe in but just stage for others.

Comedy is a prime example for the second – for “illusions without owners”: in comedy, people always try to fool others, but later fall prey to this illusion which they have staged without believing in it.

Yet tragedy, at least in its modern form of “character tragedy” or melodrama, is of a totally different kind. Here the heroes believe in something; they have faith in an idea that they regard higher as themselves, and while they perish, the idea, we are suggested, lives on. There is supposedly some triumph in their failure.

From this perspective, as I have described in my book *“The Pleasure Principle in Culture. Illusions without Owners”* (Verso, 2014), comedy and modern tragedy are working with two different types of illusion, according to Mannoni's classification: Comedy works with *belief*; tragedy works with *faith*. When their actions lead to mix-ups (which happens not only in comedy, but also in tragedy – just think of Oedipus' mixing up his own father with some unknown road user, and his own mother with some foreign queen), the two genres draw opposed conclusions:

Comedy always lets someone who has arrived by chance be mistaken for someone quite specific. It tells us: whoever it is, he is taken for the one whose place he takes. (For example, a tax adviser, mistaken for a psychoanalyst, can successfully carry out a psychoanalytic cure, in Patrice Leconte's charming film comedy “Confessions Intimes”). Tragedy proceeds the opposite way. It lets someone quite specific suffer the fate of being mistaken for just anybody. It wants to make us think that its heroes were right against their environment for which they are indifferent.

Thus comedy reduces the character to the effect of a structure: Everyone is taken for the one whose place he takes. The message is: *‘You are much more confusable than you like to think.’* Comedy takes the side of the symbolic structure against the imaginary of the individuals. Character tragedy, on the contrary, says: *‘You are in truth more than anyone believes.’* It thus takes the side of the characters' imaginary ego.

We can thus say, tragedy provides ego-libido; whereas comedy provides object-libido.

Under these premises, there seems to be no possible point of transition or “progress” between the genres. Yet there is another genre which uncannily borders (and sometimes even shifts) to the comical: the uncanny. Typical comedy elements, such as, for instance, the double, or repetition, also appear in horror stories as well as in uncanny situations in everyday life. What appears uncanny can, under slightly different conditions, be utterly comical. Tragedy does not have the same object as comedy, but the uncanny does. Freud, in his essay on the uncanny, comes to this point several times.

Due to these givens, the ability of tragedy and comedy to represent terrible events in life is certainly different. Massacres and catastrophes are not “too tragic” for tragedy; instead, they cannot be called tragic at all. They do not have anything to do with heroes, or with their strength becoming the very reason for their self-inflicted fall. These catastrophes and mass crimes befall people completely “externally”, without any regard of their guilt, or dignity, or strength. Therefore tragedy is utterly unable to account for such horrors. It could only play them down. Comedy instead, being itself quite indifferent about the who is who of its characters as well as about their responsibility, can quite well account for this indifference of fate. And the fact that comedy makes us laugh does not have to make us blind against the horrors it refers to. Lubitsch’s “To Be or Not to Be” for example, maybe the most hilarious comedy ever, provides a quite astute awareness of the threats and mass crimes of the Nazi regime.

3) Another, at least implicit theoretician of their relationship, is Karl Marx. He famously stated that history sometimes repeats itself and, in the case, he had in mind – the France of the coup of Napoleon III – it repeats itself first as tragedy, then as farce. This is an almost downgrading repetition, where the second Napoleon brings out something that was latent already in the first. But the relationship between tragedy and farce and tragedy and comedy is certainly not the same. Where does for you the comic dimension sit in this concatenation?

One should never forget that describing the real world in literary categories is always a witticism. Otherwise what started as a clever joke could easily repeat itself as a sad stupidity. Marx is only flirting here with Hegel’s remark, but he is not working out some supposed “iron” laws of history’s irony.

Things become different, of course, as soon as some real person imagines herself as a figure on “history’s stage” and starts acting in an accordingly theatrical way. As Alenka Zupancic has rightly emphasized,

what makes people comical is not what they really are or do (for example, that they slip on a Banana), but what they believe themselves to be. When somebody regards himself as the equivalent or legitimate heir to some historical figure, he becomes a candidate for comedy. When he does not only fail to live up to his model, but even succeeds to discredit it by his misrepresentation, it becomes farcical.

4) A long time ago, there was talk about the so-called death of the subject. But then today ever-new theories of subjectivity seem to reemerge. One could here raise the question of the trope of the death of the subject might have been a misidentification of something that cannot be saved (theoretically and practically), something like a tragic death of something that never properly existed in the first place. And then, with the prominence of theories of the subject, what never properly existed and died not even on the cross seem to have survived its own disappearance and insisted. Is there something tragic or comic in (theories of) subjectivity? Or both?

What appears comic to me is the fact that precisely those philosophies who were the loudest to proclaim the “death of the subject” are exactly the same that have lead to today’s excessive subjectivism. Today many people renounce any idea of objectivity and refer to their “feelings” as their ultimate truth – without ever considering whether they might possess some capability to check if their feelings could not deceive them.

It is true, this discourse of the death of the subject presupposed a very limited notion of the subject. The subject could only be believed to be dead by people who had never heard of Spinoza’s or Marx’, or Freud’s or Althusser’s criticisms. These criticisms revealed a double sense that pertains to the notion of the subject – a double sense that was, for example, forgotten in German, whereas it can still be formulated in French and English language: in these languages one can distinguish between “subject to...” (for example, an illness), and “subject of...” (for example, one’s actions). The crucial point of criticism, first made by Spinoza, was that precisely where one is subjected to certain conditions (“subject to...”) the illusion arises to be “subject of...”. For example, the ignorance of determining causes brings about the illusion of freedom. In this understanding, a subject is precisely what imaginarily transforms the “to...” into an “of...”; a servant that regards itself as a master.

Such an analysis and criticism of the imaginary dimension inherent to subjectivity is far superior to the simple postmodernist declaration of the subject’s death. Yet I would not go so far as to state that the concept that has become untenable due to this criticism had never existed. As Gianni Vattimo has remarked, the persistence of this old, idealist notion of the subject reveals itself whenever a theory’s guiding idea consists of

“reappropriation” of some allegedly “alienated” substance (such as, for example, freedom, or nature, or “second nature”, “technology”, “reason”, “progress”, or “economy” etc.).

6) What would for you be a tragedy or a comedy that allows us to grasp something unique and singular about our present (even if it might be the absence or disappearance of what makes it singular)? We are especially thinking of this, as one of your most recent books addresses the concept of shame (and in this context wide-spread phenomena like shaming) and shame does seem to have a direct relationship to both, tragedy and comedy (we here also think of the end of Kafka’s “The Trial” where K. is surprisingly survived by his own shame).

What comes to my mind as instances of such contemporaneity are comedies like “Don’t Look Up” which lovely depicts our contemporary inability to take serious warnings seriously, or the French TV series “Parlament” which wonderfully describes the ‘functioning’ of the European Union’s utterly impotent political apparatus. Not exactly a tragedy, but a good, clear-sighted description of contemporary universities’ sad, stupid and politically reactionary practices of “shaming” and “cancelling” is provided by the US TV series “The Chair”.

I have for a long time been thinking that our time is poor of good comedies (with a very few excellent exceptions, such as Barry Levinson’s “Bandits!”), and I always explained that to myself by Critchley’s thesis of the currently dominating “tragic paradigm”. Yet now I think that we lack tragedies even more. And the reason is quite interesting.

Of course, I have first to lay open what, in my view, would be examples for (good) tragedies. Here is a first interesting point I came upon. As is known, Aristotle stated that tragedy presents people who are better than people in real life, whereas comedy presents people who are worse. “Better” and “worse” have to be understood here not in a moral, but rather in an ethical and (what is for Aristotle the same) sociological sense. They mean something like “more noble” and “less noble”. At first sight, this seems pretty evident – since tragic scoundrels would hardly evoke pity and fear. Yet if we look at 20th century cinema, things are quite different. In the first place, comedy’s heroes are now often people from the highest social classes – just think of screwball comedies like “The Awful Truth”, “Libeled Lady”, “Bringing Up Baby” and “The Thin Man”; or of films like “High Society”, or Hitchcock’s “North by Northwest” and “To Catch a Thief” which are – secretly or more obviously – structured by comedy-logic.

But, and this may appear even more surprising, what can be called tragedies in modern cinema have got heroes who are gangsters. Think for example of “High Sierra”, or Jean-Pierre Melville’s “Le deuxième

souffle”, or “Le samourai”. Or, more recently, and – a great movie just as a great tragedy – Michael Mann’s “Heat”.

These films are in my view tragedies, and I think they reveal the essence of tragedy: Tragedy’s heroes always make a fundamental choice. Forced to choose between, either, a life without honor, or honor, they choose honor. Antigone, for example, could have a more or less comfortable aristocratic life, but she cannot stand the shame not to have buried her dead brother. Antigone thus shows, as Bertolt Brecht would have put it, that she fears bad life more than death. Oedipus, too, could have a pleasant life with this beautiful and clever queen, but instead he takes the challenge to investigate who killed the former king. Again honor prevails against a life without. This is in accordance with Juvenal’s rule that one should never, for the sake of bare life, give up the causes that make life worth living (“summum crede nefas animam praeferre pudori et propter vitam vivendi perdere causas”).

In psychoanalytical terms this type of choice is particularly interesting, since at first sight it appears to imply a kind of revocation of “symbolic castration”. Symbolic castration, as Lacan has put it, forces us to accept a loss, just like a robber who forces us to choose between “money or life”. Clearly we have then to give up “money” (i. e. the imaginary phallus and its enjoyment) and accept a “reduced” life, characterized by lack. Yet the choice made by the heroines and heroes of tragedy carries out the opposed operation. Since the tragic alternative is not, as it may appear, that between life and death, or success or failure, but instead it is always that between a reduced life, lacking of honor, and death. And then the heroes go for the second option, thus refusing the option of a reduced life. Honor is their “money”. They do not accept a life deprived of it. In a certain sense, one could therefore say that not only comedy, as Aristotle and Lacan have remarked, lets the phallus appear, but tragedy does as well. It aims at something great, maybe even impossible, and it refuses what it may regard as a reduced, “castrated” life.

Yet what is crucial here is the fact that this is not a regression into primary narcissism and the enjoyment of the imaginary phallus. On the contrary: sticking to a reduced life, without honor, remaining in the comfort zone of Thebes’ aristocracy, or a life with one’s queen-mother-wife would be the narcissistic choice. It is narcissism that brings one to opt for bare life and to sacrifice the causes that make it worth living. Going for these causes instead brings about symbolic castration of this narcissistic comfort. And what tragedy lets appear is the agent that carries out this castration – a phallus that is not to be described as imaginary, but as symbolic. Tragedy’s heroines and heroes demonstrate that heroism is not at all a narcissistic position, but a symbolically castrated one. Yet what castrates them is not their failure, but their audacious choice.

Now exactly the same type of choice can be observed in crime movies, carried out by the gangsters played by Lino Ventura (in “Le deuxième souffle”) and Robert de Niro (in “Heat”): they could take the money and retire to a peaceful life, but they cannot live with the idea of not having taken revenge on a traitor. They refuse the comfort zone, preferring honor to a life without it.

So, why are tragedy’s heroes in recent times mostly gangsters? – Because we find honor as a guiding system of social control today mostly in the criminal milieu, and hardly anywhere else.

And why is it then that we have got such few tragedies in cinema or series today? – I think the answer is that in our postmodern culture today we have totally lost any idea of honor. It may seem otherwise, especially if one thinks of the enormous presence of issues of “shame”, “shaming”, “cringe” etc. in our culture. And shame is just the flip side of honor (the ancient Greek word “aidos” meant both). But our postmodern understanding of “shame” is completely shameless. For instance, we do not hesitate to point with our finger at somebody whom we find embarrassing, and we “shame” people relentlessly, especially in the so-called “social” media. A true shame culture would do exactly the opposite: It would always be concerned to save people from getting ashamed. Examples for such attempts can still be seen in the movies that stem from the period and the spirit of modernity: just think of how Cary Grant in “Bringing Up Baby” desperately tries to keep public shame away from Catherine Hepburn who unknowingly walks around in her torn dress in the restaurant.

Either / or (you can also refuse the alternatives!):

- 1) Comedy or Tragedy?**
- 2) Lacan or Althusser?**
- 3) Aischylos or Sophocles?**
- 4) Lubitsch or Chaplin?**
- 5) Comedy or Stand-up Comedy?**
- 6) Films or Series?**
- 7) Perversion or Hysteria?**
- 8) Classical or pop music?**
- 9) Shakespeare or Molière?**

I would like to give you the answer of Groucho Marx (when he was asked, “Tee or coffee?”): “Yes, please!”

Dundee/Prishtina/Vienna

Notes on Contributors

Mark Alznauer is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Hegel's Theory of Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Jack Black is Associate Professor of Culture, Media, and Sport at Sheffield Hallam University and affiliated with the Centre for Culture, Media and Society, where he is Research Lead for the 'Anti-Racism Research Group'. An interdisciplinary researcher, working within psychoanalysis, media, and cultural studies, Jack is the author of *The Psychosis of Race: A Lacanian Approach to Racism and Racialization* (Routledge, 2023), *Race, Racism and Political Correctness in Comedy: A Psychoanalytic Exploration* (Routledge, 2021) and co-editor of *Sport and Physical Activity in Catastrophic Environments* (Routledge, 2022). His forthcoming work explores the relationship between sport and psychoanalytic theory.

Nathan Brown is Professor of English and Canada Research Chair in Poetics at Concordia University, Montreal, where he directs the Centre for Expanded Poetics. He is the author of *Rationalist Empiricism: A Theory of Speculative Critique* (2021), *Baudelaire's Shadow: An Essay on Poetic Determination* (2021), and *The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics* (2017). His complete translation of *The Flowers of Evil* is forthcoming with Verso in 2024.

Wesley Furlotte is Assistant Teaching Professor cross-appointed to the Department of Philosophy, History and Politics and the Department of Literature, Languages, and Performing Arts at Thompson Rivers University in British Columbia, Canada. My research and teaching stem primarily from the traditions of critique (especially German idealism and Hegel) in nineteenth and twentieth-century continental philosophy. My work addresses questions of marginalization and domination within modern society. My book, *The Problem of Nature in Hegel's Final System* (2018), explores these problems in the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel and critically evaluates the status of nature, mental illness, crime and the institution of punishment in his conception of modern social life. I have also published on the significance of Hegel's political philosophy for the Frankfurt school of critical theory. My research also draws from early German romanticism (and critical theory) to conceptualize art as an expression of alternative (liberating) human possibilities. I am currently working on problems of ideology and education via a constellation of concepts connecting to the categories of second nature, technological rationality, and maturity.

Andrea Gadberry is Associate Professor at New York University, jointly appointed in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. She is the author of *Cartesian Poetics: The Art of Thinking* (Chicago 2020) and is currently working on one book about causality and literary explanation and another on clapping.

Patricia Gherovici, Ph.D.'s books include: *The Puerto Rican Syndrome* (Gradiva Award and Boyer Prize), *Transgender Psychoanalysis, Psychoanalysis in the Barrios: Race, Class, and the Unconscious* (with Chris Christian; Gradiva Award and Academy of Psychoanalysis Book Prize.)

Jeremy Matthew Glick is an Associate Professor of African diasporic literature in the English Department of Hunter College. He is the editor of *Situations: A Journal of the Radical Imagination* a journal founded by the late Stanley Aronowitz. He has contributed essays to *A-Line: A Journal of Progressive Politics*, *Boundary 2*, and other publications. He is the author of *The Black Radical Tragic* winner of the Caribbean Philosophical Association's Nicolas Guillen Philosophical Literature Prize and is completing a project entitled *Coriolanus/Lumumba: An Essay on Adaptation and Alignment* as well as a book that reads Goya's *Caprichos* and Lacanian theories of re-punctuation as a framework to propose reading strategies for W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America*.

Alexi Kukuljevic is an Assistant Professor in the Department for Art Theory at The University of Applied Arts in Vienna. He is the author of *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently*, published with MIT Press, and he is currently working on a book titled *Like Hell It Is: Horror and Hilarity*.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle is Emeritus Professor of English at the university of Nanterre in Paris. A specialist of the philosophy of language and of Victorian literature, he is the author of, among others, *The Violence of Language, Interpretation as Pragmatics, A Marxist Philosophy of Language, Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* and *De l'interpellation*. His next book, to be published in 2024 is entitled *Lénine et l'arme du langage*.

Todd McGowan teaches theory and film at the University of Vermont. He is the author of *Embracing Alienation, The Racist Fantasy, Emancipation After Hegel, Capitalism and Desire, Only a Joke Can Save Us*, and other works. He is also the cohost of the *Why Theory* podcast with Ryan Engley.

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Robert Pfaller, philosopher, teaches at the University of Art and Industrial Design in Linz, Austria. Founding member of the Viennese psychoanalytic research group “stuzzicadenti”. 2015 “Best Book Published in 2014” award by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABAPsa) for *The Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (Verso, 2014). 2007 “The Missing Link” award by Psychoanalytisches Seminar Zurich, Switzerland. His latest publications include: *Zwei Enthüllungen über die Scham* (2022); *Die blitzenden Waffen. Über die Macht der Form* (2020); 2019 *Interpassivnost*. Ljubljana: Maska, 2017 *Erwachsenensprache. Über ihr Verschwinden aus Politik und Kultur*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2017 *Interpassivity. The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014 *The Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners*, Verso, 2011 *Wofuer es sich zu leben lohnt. Elemente materialistischer Philosophie*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 2009 *Umazano Sveto in Cisti Um*. Ljubljana: Analecta

Manfred Schneider is professor emeritus at the Ruhr University in Bochum, essayist and writer. He studied literature and philosophy in Freiburg. Since 1981 he taught as a literature and media scientist at the University of Essen, since 1999 at the Ruhr-University Bochum. He has taught as a visiting professor at the ENS in Paris, in Japan and in the USA. In his research he deals with European literature, especially with topics of cultural criticism as well as with literature and law. His scholarly books are about the melancholic rebels Heine, Börne, Marx and Engels, about love and deception, about barbarians, assassins and media revolutions. Latest publications: *Das Attentat. Kritik der paranoischen Vernunft*. Berlin 2010. - *Transparenztraum. Literatur, Politik, Medien und das Unmögliche*. Berlin 2013.- *Medienrevolutionen. Die Reformation im 16. Jahrhundert und die Aufstände in den arabischen Ländern 2010/10*. Zurich: Vontobel Stiftung 2014. He is editor of the series “Literature and Law” at Wilhelm Fink Verlag. His literary crime novel: *Die Katze schleicht* was published by Transit-Verlag Berlin in 2021.

Alberto Toscano teaches in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University and co-directs the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is the author, most recently, of *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (Verso, 2023) and *Terms of Disorder: Keywords for an Interregnum* (Seagull, 2023). He edits *Seagull Essays* and *The Italian List* for Seagull Books.

Jamieson Webster, PhD is a psychoanalyst in New York City and teaches at The New School for Social Research. She is the author most recently of *Disorganisation and Sex* (Divided, 2022) and is on the board of Pulsion Psychoanalytic Institute.

Heather H. Yeung 楊希蒂 is Reader in Literature (poetry and poetics) at the university of Dundee, author of *Spatial Engagement with Poetry* (2015) and *On Literary Plasticity* (2020).

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