

«AND WHY NOT?» HEGEL, COMEDY, AND THE END OF ART¹

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Abstract. *Towards the very end of his wide-ranging lectures on the philosophy of art, Hegel unexpectedly expresses a preference for comedy over tragedy. More surprisingly, given his systematic claims for his aesthetic theory, he suggests that this preference is arbitrary. I suggest, however, that this arbitrariness is itself systematic, given Hegel's claims about unity and necessity in art generally and his analysis of ancient as opposed to modern drama in particular. With the emergence of modern subjectivity, tragic plots lose their necessity and so their redemptive conclusions; comic plots disintegrate into mockery and entertainment. In many cases, the dramas in question consequently fail to be art. This does not, however, mean that art ends: insofar as it inspires humans to a better understanding of their unity with the divine, it will continue to meet its mandate. But the lack of necessity in modern drama means we are free to prefer happy endings. Hegel's seemingly arbitrary preference is, in the end, systematically justified.*

Keywords. *Hegel; Comedy; Tragedy; End of Art; Aristophanes*

Hegel is not a philosopher known for his levity. The systematic rigor with which he approaches any topic is daunting; the density of his language and conceptual structure would seem to preclude even the possibility of lightheartedness. It is then surprising to read Hegel expressing, in the last pages of his lectures on the philosophy of art, an apparently personal preference for comedy. «A happy denouement has at least as much justification as an unhappy one», he suggests; «and when it is a matter of considering this difference alone, I must admit that for my part a happy de-

¹ My thanks to members of Professor Georg Bertam's colloquium at Freie Universität Berlin, to members of Professor Klaus Vieweg's *Forschungskolloquium Deutscher Idealismus* at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, and to Bernard Prusak for very helpful discussion of this text.

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nouement is to be preferred». To this already unexpected preference, Hegel adds a seemingly innocent question: «And», he asks, «why not?»³.

Coming at the end of an explicitly systematic treatment of art and art history ranging from Indian pantheistic poetry to the ironic smugness of his own contemporaries, this «And why not?» is almost as surprising as Hegel's professed preference for a cheerful end to a dramatic performance. Is Hegel in the last moments of his lectures abandoning his pledge to give a scientific account of art, derived

³ G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in ID., *Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, 20 vols., vols. 13-15 (I-III), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1970, III, p. 567; English trans. by T.M. Knox, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1975, p. 1232. Abbreviated *Ä* followed by the volume of the German edition, the German page number and finally the English page number. The basis of these sources is a compilation of Hegel's lectures published by his student Heinrich Gustav Hotho in 1835. Philological issues undermining the authority of Hotho's edition have been well known for several decades, prompting some scholars to defer instead to more recently published student notes from individual lecture cycles (see A. GETHMANN-SIEFERT, *Einführung in Hegels Ästhetik*, Fink, Munich 2005, pp. 17-18 and Gethmann-Siefert's introduction to G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotho 1823)*, ed. by A. Gethmann-Siefert, Meiner, Hamburg 2003, pp. XV-XLVI, p. XXII). For specific discussion of Hotho's tendentious editing in the sections on comedy, see H. SCHNEIDER, *Hegels Theorie der Komik und die Auflösung der schönen Kunst*, «Jahrbuch für Hegelforschung», I, 1995, pp. 81-110, pp. 82-83. Given the richness of Hotho's text, its long influence in Hegel scholarship, and the fact that Hotho had access to additional sources now lost to us, I have chosen to use his 1835 compilation with reference to student notes when appropriate. The quotation in my title provides a case in point: the exact phrase («Und warum auch nicht?») does not appear in any of the individual lecture cycles published to date. But its suggestion – that with the advance of subjectivity, art's necessity is weakened and arbitrary preference is the only systematic response – is, as I hope to make clear, supported by Hegel's philosophy generally as well as suggestions within the student lecture notes. The four available editions of student lecture notes are G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik: Berlin 1820/21*, ed. by H. Schneider, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 1995; ID., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotho 1823)*, cit.; ID., *Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift von der Pfordten 1826)*, ed. by A. Gethmann-Siefert, Jeong-Im Kwon, and Karsten Berr, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2004; ID., *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, ed. by A. Gethmann-Siefert and B. Collenberg-Plotnikov, Fink, Munich 2004.

dialectically from its own concept?⁴ Do claims to art's systematic wholeness dissolve, as it were, in laughter?

In fact, Hegel's apparently offhanded preference for happy endings, far from being arbitrary, clarifies several vexing systematic issues regarding comedy's position at the conclusion of his lectures on aesthetics. It also, I will argue, sheds light on Hegel's notorious claim about the end of art. Comedy in one sense quite clearly constitutes the end of art in Hegel's system: it is the last form of drama; drama is the final development of poetry; poetry is the last «individual art» Hegel discusses in Part III, the concluding section of these lectures. But it has remained unclear in the generations since Hegel's death whether comedy's position at the end of this dialectic establishes it as the high point of the highest stage of art, or whether instead it signals an undignified end to art's otherwise sophisticated trajectory. The scholarship has remained divided: Jack Kaminsky on the one hand disparages comedy as a distracting escape for the lower classes; Gary Shapiro on the other claims that its «culminating» status in the progression of the *Aesthetics* makes it «supreme»⁵.

⁴ *Ä*, I, p. 40; p. 22.

⁵ See J. KAMINSKY, *Hegel on Art*, SUNY Press, Albany 1962, p. 166; G. SHAPIRO, *Hegel's Dialectic of Artistic Meaning*, «Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», XXXV (1), 1976, pp. 23-35, p. 32. Other arguments for comedy's preeminence include Anne Paolucci, who describes Hegel as claiming that comedy provides the «ultimate aesthetic catharsis, beyond which art is powerless to move us» (A. PAOLUCCI, *Hegel's Theory of Comedy*, in *Comedy: New Perspectives*, ed. by M. Charney, New Literary Forum, New York 1978, pp. 89-108, p. 104). Gasché claims that the «structural aspect of comedy (as understood by Hegel) [...] would suggest a principal priority of the comic over the tragic for the understanding of both tragedy and dialectics» (R. GASCHÉ, *Self-dissolving Seriousness: On the Comic in the Hegelian Concept of Tragedy*, in *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. by S. Sparks and M. de Beistegui, Routledge, London 2000, pp. 38-56, p. 41). Benjamin Rutter argues that «comedy concludes or completes art, whose project is the embodiment of reconciliation, by completing that reconciliation itself» (B. RUTTER, *Hegel on the Modern Arts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 226). Desmond describes comedy as «a certain acme of the aesthetic» (W. DESMOND, *Can Philosophy Laugh at Itself? On Hegel and Aristophanes*, «The Owl of Minerva», XX (2), 1989, pp. 131-149, p. 139). Roche by contrast argues that Hegel's placing comedy at the end of art's development is a «mistake that derives from his absolutization of subjectivity and subsequent neglect of intersubjectivity» (M.W. ROCHE, *Tragedy*

My argument will be that both Kaminsky's dismissal and Shapiro's praise are too extreme, in part because of the way Hegel's assessment of ancient comedy – in particular the so-called Old Comedy of Aristophanes – differs from his assessment of modern comedy. Old Comedy, I will suggest, by one measure achieves an unparalleled synthesis in art's development, but already in its triumph we see the beginning of art's end. The reason for both comedy's triumph and its dissolution lies in the development of subjectivity and its subsequent depiction in the *action* that characterizes drama as a new art form. Ultimately, subjectivity will positively affect the development of freedom that is Hegel's overarching goal. But its appearance in art undermines both the unity and the necessity that characterize art. In doing so, subjectivity shifts art's focus from the divine to the mundane, driving drama into the prosaic and precipitating art's transition into religion and philosophy. Subjectivity is, then, a major catalyst behind the end of art in Hegel's sense, and nowhere is subjectivity's power – for better and for worse – more evident than in comedy.

1. *The True, The Whole, and The Essence of Art*

First, some background. The true, Hegel famously claims, is the whole. Reality is not a set of atomized objects but an interrelated unified totality. But this whole is neither static nor undifferentiated: in order to be a true whole, it must include division and then reunification. The whole must, as Hegel sometimes puts it, go out of itself into division, then return to itself through acknowledgment that the resulting parts are part of itself and so constitute a unity. This development from unity to division to recognized reunification is, in Hegel's system, also necessary. It begins, as Hegel explains in the *Logic*, with being, which is necessarily limited by non-being; the two dialectically produce becoming, and Hegel's en-

tire system – everything from astronomy to the diagnosis of insanity to the need for a monarch – unfolds in dialectical progression⁶. In this vast conceptual scheme, humans are the part of the whole that provides the conscious recognition of its dialectical essence by conceptualizing and articulating that essence. Hegel calls this dynamic interplay of unity, necessity, and recognition the Idea⁷.

Hegel uses several apparent binaries to articulate this true that is the whole: binaries that, upon philosophical analysis, turn out instead to be evidence of mutually determining unity. One of these binaries is the distinction between divine and human. Ultimately, Hegel argues, the divine *is* the human and only humans' recognition of this truth can complete the ultimate reunification that in turn confirms the truth as the whole⁸. Two consequences of this claim are relevant for our purposes. The first is Hegel's conviction that humans do not merely encounter a world filled with objects that they passively apprehend. Hegel's idealism instead suggests that we, together with each other and our surroundings, create the reality in which we live. The second is that this creative responsibility extends to the normative sphere: humans are also collectively responsible for the norms governing, for example, family and political life. But humans have not always recognized this, instead attributing creation of both the physical world and the normative sphere to distant gods. As long as they do this, Hegel thinks, humans will be unable to understand the true that is the whole. More concretely expressed: only when humans stop looking to an externally posited god and acknowledge themselves as co-constitutors of their own world and norms will

⁶ G.W.F. HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse: Die Wissenschaft der Logik*, in ID., *Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, 20 vols., vol. 8, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1970, § 86-88; English trans. by T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris, *The Encyclopedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1991. This is not to say that historical events themselves are inevitable, a point I argue for in L. MOLAND, *Hegel's Philosophy of History*, in *Hegel: Key Concepts*, ed. by M. Baur, Routledge, New York 2014, pp. 128-139.

⁷ Hegel discusses these concepts throughout his lectures; one central section begins at *A*, I, p. 145; p. 106.

⁸ See for instance *ivi*, p. 113; p. 80.

they recognize the real unity at the heart of existence. Only this recognition will allow them to realize that they in fact give themselves the law and are thus self-determining and free.

Absolute Spirit is Hegel's overarching term for art, religion, and philosophy: three ways in which humans attempt to articulate the true that is the whole. Among these three, art is unique in that it attempts to convey the Idea sensuously, giving it «determinate form». The «Idea in a determinate form» Hegel then calls the Ideal⁹. Art in other words sensuously expresses our unity with the world by highlighting our creative powers: by showing how we transform marble into sculpture, pigment into paintings, sounds into music, words into poetry. In this process, we convert found objects into artworks that express our thoughts and emotions. The object is no longer the same, and neither are we, meaning that artworks model the mutual formation that Hegel thinks characterizes reality. Every artistic endeavor allows humans to engage in mutual formation with the world explicitly in a way they otherwise do only implicitly. Hegel sometimes phrases this claim in terms of humans transforming the prosaic – the everyday, the quotidian – into the poetic. «Poetic» here is not limited to poetry proper but – true to its etymological roots in «to make» – describes a general characteristic of art. Humans' poetic endeavors transform the given into the made, unite subject and object in mutual determination, and so express the unity underlying reality. «[T]he truly poetical element in art», Hegel says, «is just what we have called the Ideal»¹⁰.

In order to express truth sensuously, art imposes both unity and necessity on its matter. A painting should include only forms and colors that support its overarching composition; all sounds united into a song should contribute to its tonal and rhythmic structure; a drama should contain only those actions that support the plotline's coherence¹¹. Art, in other words, should unify, purify,

⁹ Ivi, p. 145; p. 106.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 213; pp. 161-162.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 206; p. 155. See Hegel's description of harmony at ivi, p. 187; p. 140. See also his analysis of how a poet decides what constitutes the beginning of a drama's action at ivi, p. 233; p. 217.

and enhance the familiar world around us, giving it both an artificial simplicity and a heightened sense of necessity. As long as art does this, it conveys an image of the unity at the heart of reality and allows humans to sense their status as mutual creators of the world.

So understood, the determinate expression of the Idea constitutes Hegel's basic definition of art. But Hegel reserves the term 'beauty' for art that expresses humans' unity with the divine most completely. Beauty «cancels the one-sidedness [...] of the subject and its object alike»¹² and so presents this unity in most sensible form. This correspondence was possible only in a circumscribed period in ancient Greece in which, as we will see, the interpenetration of human and divine was most perfectly achieved for reasons as much philosophical and political as aesthetic. But even when it does not achieve this fullest level of beauty, art should strive to convey the unity of human and divine by showcasing humans' creative, normative capabilities. Its sensuous nature means that art can never fully articulate our mutually formative capacities: that full articulation is left to philosophy. But being the sensuous attempt at this articulation assures art's value in Hegel's philosophical scheme. Art is nothing less than «one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit»¹³: three ways of formulating what is ultimately the same content.

2. *Subjectivity and the Emergence of Drama*

Hegel divides the development of art into three major phases. In art's first, symbolic phase, humans conceive of themselves as distinct from the divine and search for meaning in unrelated objects: in natural events, in stone, in animals. But especially in Greek sculpture of the mid-fifth century BC, humans began to imagine

¹² Ivi, p. 154; p. 113.

¹³ Ivi, p. 21; p. 7.

the divine in their own form¹⁴. In these human-shaped gods, «the spiritual was completely drawn through its external appearance; in this beautiful unification it idealized the natural and made it into an adequate embodiment of spirit's own substantial individuality»¹⁵. Human and divine found perfect interpenetration, in other words, in the idealized human forms given to Athena or Zeus. This interpenetration accounts for the «serene peace and bliss» characteristic of art of this period¹⁶. Even when they are depicted as engaging in struggles with each other or with other humans, the gods are «brought back out of every collision and complication [...] into pure absorption in themselves. This most austere repose, not rigid, cold, and dead, but sensitive and immutable, is the highest and most adequate form of portrayal for the classical gods»¹⁷. Because of its deep unity and peacefulness, «classical art became a conceptually adequate representation of the Ideal, the consummation of the realm of beauty»¹⁸. If the Idea is the unity of the divine and the human, classical Greek art achieves this unity *in sensuous form* most completely.

The serenity of this period of Greek sculpture also reflected a deep harmony in Greek civilization itself: in this world «there was no question of an independence of the political sphere contrasted with a subjective morality distinct from it»¹⁹. Individuals in ancient Greece, in other words, lived in deep, uncritical unity with the ethical life surrounding them. But as Hegel suggests in his lectures on

¹⁴ Stephen Houlgate gives a convincing description of which period of sculpture Hegel had in mind in this analysis: see S. HOULGATE, *Hegel on the Beauty of Sculpture*, in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. by S. Houlgate, Northwestern University Press, Chicago 2007, pp. 56-89.

¹⁵ *A*, II, p. 127; p. 517.

¹⁶ Interpenetration, or *Durchdringung*, is one of the characteristics of art Hegel emphasizes in his brief comments on art in the *Encyclopedia*: see § 559 (English trans. by A.V. Miller and William Wallace, *Philosophy of Mind*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971). See also the discussion of *Durchdringung* as key to Hegel's philosophy of art in A. SPEIGHT, *Philosophy of Art*, in *G.W.F. Hegel: Key Concepts*, cit., pp. 103-115, p. 104.

¹⁷ *A*, II, p. 87; p. 486.

¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 127-128; p. 517.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 26; p. 437.

the history of philosophy, developments both historical and philosophical began to splinter this unity, resulting in the emergence of subjectivity: a sense of self independent from community that does not accept tradition as authoritative but requires justification in thought²⁰. To repeat: in the long term, this subjective satisfaction is essential for the self-determination that Hegel thinks characterizes full freedom. Ultimately, the institutions of ethical life should incorporate subjectivity, integrating individual humans' critical capacities into the family, civil society, and the state.

But Greek political institutions, built as they were on acceptance of divine law, had no way to integrate such a perspective. The demand for rational justification was perceived as a threat. Thus excluded from ethical life, the subjective impulse became the antagonistic practice of sophistry²¹. In its most destructive form, sophistry was unfettered subjectivity employed in undermining tradition through specious arguments in pursuit of selfish ends²². Yet Hegel refuses to vilify the sophists²³. They were in a sense ahead of their time, articulating a perspective that was justified but required a place in the community that the community could not provide. Indeed, sophistry found its logical extension in the Socratic method: Socrates demanded «to be free not only in the state, as the substantial whole, not only in the accepted ethical and legal code, but in his own heart»²⁴. Hegel admits that unlike the explicitly destructive uses of sophistry, Socrates' goal was not to attain subjective ends but rather to achieve the «beautiful, good, true, and right»²⁵. Nevertheless, Athenian society remained unequipped to

²⁰ Among the influences Hegel cites in this development are Solon, Anaxagoras, and Pericles: G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I*, in ID., *Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, 20 vols., vol. 18, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1970, pp. 373 ff; English trans. by E.S. Haldane and F.H. Simpson, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1995, pp. 324 ff. Abbreviated *VGP* followed by German then English page numbers.

²¹ *A*, II, p. 118; p. 510.

²² *VGP*, I, p. 427; pp. 370-371.

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 408-409; p. 354.

²⁴ *A*, II, p. 118; p. 510.

²⁵ *VGP*, I, p. 422; p. 366.

absorb this critical point of view. According to Hegel, then, Socrates posed a legitimate threat to the Athenian state. As we will see, Aristophanes agreed.

As one of the ways in which humans reflect on their normative experience, art too began to embody the development of subjectivity²⁶. The result was drama, an art form whose defining characteristic is action. According to Hegel's technical definition, an action is more than a deed or a happening: it requires agents' introspection, their reflection on their intentions and achievements. Characters in drama express this interiority through soliloquy or dialogue. In doing so, they reveal two features that «in their harmony constitute the essence of every true action». The first is «what is in *substance* good and great, the Divine actualized in the world, as the foundation of everything genuine and absolutely eternal». Hegel names the family, religion, and the state as such substantial concerns. The second is «the *subject*, the individual himself and his unfettered self-determination and freedom»²⁷. Dramatic action, in other words, requires the protagonist to interpret a substantial theme through her sense of herself as self-determining.

Ultimately, substance and subject will prove to be one of the merely provisional binaries overcome by an understanding of unity. But initially, their opposition generates conflict. When the individual's freedom collides with ethical life around her, the result is a dramatic plot. Depending on how it combines subject and substance as the two components of action, drama takes different forms. If the drama revolves around substantial issues, tragedy results. If instead the protagonists' «subjective caprice, folly, and perversity» prevail, the drama will be a comedy²⁸.

A. *Ancient Tragedy*

Tragedy, then, foregrounds the substantial: the «true content of the tragic action» will involve eternal concerns such as the family, religion, or the state. Just as important for tragedy is that the

²⁶ *A*, II, p. 120; p. 511.

²⁷ *A*, III, p. 520; p. 1194.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 521; p. 1194.

characters identify with these concerns completely and are «prepared to answer for that identification»²⁹. So complete is their identification that «the mere accidents of the individual's purely personal life disappear, [and] the tragic heroes of dramatic art have risen to become, as it were, works of sculpture»³⁰. Actors in early tragedies – for example in the dramas of Aeschylus – in other words barely acted. They were effectively moving statues embodying conflicting divine laws, with particular expressions hidden by masks and constricting costume limiting gesture³¹. Sophocles' slightly later tragedies already include more subjectivity: Antigone embodies the law of the family, but in her struggle with Creon as representing the law of the polis, she articulates her own understanding of justice. Antigone and Creon nevertheless illustrate a second major characteristic of tragedy that according to Hegel follows from the deep identification of characters with their roles: namely, the one-sidedness of their claims. The completeness with which each character identifies with one law over the other disrupts the substantial order. The characters are, at least initially, unable to see themselves as part of the same ethical substance. Since both sides have divine justification, a clash is inevitable³².

Essential to a play such as *Antigone* being *art*, however, is the fact that the drama ends with a reunification that corrects this one-sidedness. «What is superseded in the tragic denouement», Hegel claims,

is only the *one-sided* particular which had not been able to adapt itself to this harmony, and now (and this is the tragic thing in its action), unable to renounce itself and its intention, finds itself

²⁹ Ivi, p. 522; p. 1195.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ See H.S. HARRIS, *Hegel's Ladder II: The Odyssey of Spirit*, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis 1997, p. 633.

³² *A*, III, p. 549; p. 1217. Hegel famously also makes *Antigone* a major focus of his analysis of Greek *Sittlichkeit* in the *Phenomenology* for instance at § 470 and § 736 (G.W.F. HEGEL, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in ID., *Werke in 20 Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, 20 vols., vol. 3, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1970; English trans. by A.V. Miller, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977).

condemned to total destruction, or, at the very least, [finds itself] forced to abandon, if it can, the accomplishment of its aim³³.

Harmony in the form of *reunification*, in other words, is achieved when the individuals are sacrificed or repudiate their original aims. Tragic plots thus model a unity going out of itself into division and ultimately returning to itself. In depicting conflict that is both inevitable and inevitably resolved in the characters' defeat, they also model the necessity at the heart of Hegel's dialectic. This necessary reunification in turn allows tragedy, despite its tension between human and divine, to be art: to represent the Idea sensuously by revealing the true that is the whole. In a clear echo of Schiller, Hegel suggests that the experience of this reunification was what allowed Greek audiences to leave the theater with cheerful hearts despite the death and destruction with which tragedy ends³⁴. Such cheering reunification will, according to Hegel, find one more explicit expression in the history of art: in the comedies of Aristophanes.

B. *Ancient Comedy*

As opposed to tragedy's basis in the substantive, comedy emphasizes the subjective. In comedy, Hegel writes, «there comes before our contemplation, in the laughter in which the characters dissolve everything, including themselves, the victory of their own subjective personality which nevertheless persists self-assured»³⁵. This boisterous, self-dissolving subjectivity is best observed in the plays of Aristophanes. Most relevant for our purposes is Aristophanes' *Clouds*, whose cast includes Socrates himself and whose plot directly addresses the sophistical tendencies of subjectivity.

What, then, characterizes Old Comedy? First: while tragedy ends with the subject reuniting with substance either by being destroyed or through renunciation of his original aims, comedy reunites the subject with substance through showing the individual's

³³ *A*, III, p. 524; p. 1197.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 547; p. 1215.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 527; p. 1199.

aims themselves to be self-negating. The laughable in general is in fact a response to a kind of self-negation: Hegel claims that «[e]very contrast between something substantive and its appearance, between an end and the means may be laughable». More specifically, we laugh when we see that the «the realization of an end is at the same time the end's own destruction»³⁶. Hegel seems here to build on the theory of laughter explicated by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*. We laugh, Kant claimed, when «a tense expectation is transformed into nothing». Suppose, he continues,

that the heir of a rich relative wants to arrange for him a very solemn funeral service, but complains that things are not quite working out: For (he says), the more money I give my mourners to look grieved, the more cheerful they look³⁷.

Our (presumed) laughter at this short tale is explained, Kant says, by the fact that we worry about the misguided heir's failed arrangements until we see that they are self-defeating, cancelling themselves out.

While Kant employs this insight only to explain brief, joke-like anecdotes, Hegel uses it to delineate three possible comic plots. In the first, «characters and their aims are entirely without substance and contradictory and therefore they cannot accomplish anything»³⁸. Avarice is Hegel's initial example since the collection of money for its own sake is self-defeating; the point of money is to buy the things the miser deprives himself of. The second way a plot's tensions can be resolved into nothing is if the means and the ends are contradictory. Here Hegel gives the example of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* in which women's aspirations to reform the state

³⁶ Ivi, p. 527; p. 1199. Compare G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, cit., p. 234; ID., *Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift von der Pfordten 1826)*, cit., p. 252; ID., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotbo 1823)*, cit., pp. 309-310.

³⁷ I. KANT, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Meiner, Hamburg 1990, pp. 190-191; English trans. by Werner S. Pluhar, *Critique of Judgment*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1987, p. 203.

³⁸ *Ä*, III, p. 528; p. 1200. Compare G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, cit., p. 234.

are inherently contradictory since the means they employ – namely their female selves – are so obviously inadequate to the task. A final kind of comedy – which as we will see already signals Old Comedy's dissolution – uses «external contingencies» to contrast «inner character and external circumstances». Such plots pit characters' aims against the predicaments their intrigues land them in, culminating in the aims and their accompanying schemes canceling each other out³⁹.

We laugh, then, when aims create tension but are self-negating: because they are in tension with themselves, because characters use ridiculous means to pursue them, or because intricate plots at least temporarily thwart them. But Hegel specifies that although there is no end to what people will laugh at, very little of the laughable is actually *comedy*. We also laugh at the incongruity in satire, senselessness, or silliness; there is also laughter of «derision, scorn, [and] despair»⁴⁰. But Hegel reserves the designation comic for works of art that are *dramas* and as such (in Hegel's schema) also *poetic*: plot-based, enacted works that use rhyme scheme and meter to play with language as well as to communicate characters' intentions. In addition, Hegel limits the designation comic to dramas exhibiting the subjective attitude that defines comedy. Comedy, in short, is cheerful:

[comedy] implies an infinite light-heartedness and confidence felt by someone raised altogether above his own inner contradiction and not bitter or miserable in it at all: this is the bliss and ease of

³⁹ Hegel gives no examples of this kind of comedy, but Roche suggests that the plays of Menander or Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* might fit the description. Roche however concludes that Hegel's derivation of these comic plots is not dialectical and suggests a different, much expanded order (M.W. ROCHE, *Hegel's Theory of Comedy in the Context of Hegelian and Modern Reflections on Comedy*, «Revue Internationale de Philosophie», LVI (221), 2002, pp. 411-430, pp. 416 ff.). For reasons that will become clear below, it seems to me that Hegel in fact needs plots foregrounding intrigue to be the culminating form in order to transition to his analysis of New Comedy and satire. My claim, then, is that Hegel's progression is consistent as it is.

⁴⁰ *A*, III, p. 528; p. 1200.

a man who, being sure of himself, can bear the frustration of his aims and achievements⁴¹.

True comedy is in other words possible when the character's aims are self-defeating *and* he does not identify fully with those aims in the way that tragic characters do. Through their antics, their lewdness, and their mischief, comic protagonists stay at a distance even from their own aims and so remain unmoved when their projects fail. Such characters can, in short, laugh at themselves, allowing the audience to laugh with them⁴². If instead «an individual is *serious* in identifying himself with such an inherently false aim» and miserably clings to it, «there is none of the real essence of comedy», no matter how much the audience laughs⁴³.

Comic protagonists' imperturbability makes them powerful and free: they «reveal themselves as having something higher in them because they are not seriously tied to the finite world with which they are engaged but are raised above it»⁴⁴. In comedy, «man as subject or person has made himself completely master of everything»⁴⁵; comic protagonists are in fact «all the more imperturbable the more incapable they obviously are of accomplishing their undertaking»⁴⁶. Hegel explicitly describes this imperturbability as reminiscent of the Greek statues that perfectly embodied the interpenetration of human and divine: comedy's lighthearted destruction briefly restores «the smiling blessedness of the Olympian gods, their unimpaired equanimity which comes home in men and can put up with everything»⁴⁷. Like tragedy, then, comedy returns to the unity of the gods from which action originated. «It is to this

⁴¹ *Ibidem*. Compare G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, cit., p. 235; ID., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotbo 1823)*, cit., pp. 309-310.

⁴² *Ä*, III, p. 569; p. 1233.

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 529; p. 1200. Compare G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotbo 1823)*, cit., p. 310.

⁴⁴ *Ä*, III, p. 553; p. 1221.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 527; p. 1199.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 554; p. 1222.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*. Compare *ivi*, pp. 310-311 and G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, cit., p. 235.

absolute freedom of spirit which is utterly consoled in advance in every human undertaking, to this world of private serenity», Hegel says, «that Aristophanes conducts us»⁴⁸.

Indeed: Aristophanes' *Clouds* exhibits the three characteristics of comedy emphasized above. Its main protagonist, Strepsiades, is not motivated by substantial concerns such as family, state, or religion. His concern is himself – more particularly, his desire to learn from Socrates how to talk his way out of debt. His scheme is ridiculous and, on some level, he knows it – a fact made obvious by his lascivious digressions, punning asides, and other disruptions of Socrates' (likewise ridiculous) lesson plans. His chosen means of attaining his ends are equally self-negating: despite his obvious intellectual limitations, he enrolls as a student in Socrates' Thinkery⁴⁹. When these limitations predictably defeat him, he enrolls his son, who, learning from Socrates that the gods do not exist, promptly abandons his filial duties to Strepsiades, beating and insulting him until Strepsiades flees his own house. The play ends with Strepsiades cheerfully revenging himself by setting fire to Socrates' Thinkery, negating his own attempted negation of the substantial order, reconciling himself again to the old order.

It is this negated negation, to repeat, that confirms Aristophanes' creations as 'genuine art'. Like other art forms, Hegel says that comedy too must use

its presentation to bring the absolutely rational into appearance, not at all as what is broken up and perverted in itself but on the contrary as what assigns neither the victory nor, in the last resort, permanence in the real world to folly and unreason, to false oppositions and contradictions⁵⁰.

I take this to mean that Aristophanes' comedies, for all their raucousness, sensuously embody the Idea by portraying a unity that goes out of itself into division then returns to itself in reunification. Because Strepsiades' aims were contradictory, they destroyed

⁴⁸ *A*, III, p. 553; p. 1221.

⁴⁹ Compare G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik* (Mitschrift von Kebler 1826), cit., p. 235.

⁵⁰ *A*, III, p. 530; p. 1202.

themselves, negating sophistry's attempted negation of ethical life. What is left after this negation is, then, substance: in the case of *Clouds*, the laws of Athens, safe again (however briefly) from Socrates' corrosive critique. But – again like the reconciliation at the end of tragedy – the substance that survives now includes division and reflection and so is a unification of unity and division rather than an undifferentiated unity. As opposite as they are in every other way, ancient tragedy and Old Comedy yield similar results: subjectivity asserts itself in action; its aims are destroyed; it reunites with the whole from which it emerged, transforming that whole in the process.

Clouds also helps us isolate other characteristics of Old Comedy that differentiate it from its modern successors. First: even in all its subjective glory, Old Comedy was still oriented around the substantial. «[T]he old Greek comedy keeps precisely within this objective and substantive sphere», Hegel writes⁵¹; «at least in the old comedy, it is also the general public interests that are emphasized»⁵². Behind their scatological lewdness, Aristophanes' characters almost despite themselves address major concerns about political representation, civic responsibility, war, and the role of art in the preservation of the state. In the case of *Clouds*, Strepsiades' antics in particular raise concerns about political authority in the face of challenges from both the sophists and Socrates. To repeat: in his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel makes clear that Aristophanes and the Athenian court were «perfectly right» to consider Socrates a threat to Greek ethical life. However much Socrates' insistence that the norms of Athens subject themselves to rational scrutiny might be justified in the long term, there was as yet no way to integrate this insight into Athenian institutions. Socrates and Athens were thus necessarily (Hegel even says tragically) opposed. Aristophanes, perhaps out of concern for Athens' security, exposed the destructive side of Socrates' dialectic: its potential to be misused in the service of unscrupulous, self-interested goals instead of in pursuit of a truth that transcends tradition. Despite the

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 553; p. 1221.

⁵² Ivi, p. 536; p. 1206. Compare G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotho 1823)*, cit., pp. 310-311.

fact that his pillorying of Socrates may well have contributed to the latter's execution, Aristophanes consequently earns Hegel's emphatic respect⁵³. Aristophanes «did not make fun of what was truly moral in the life of the Athenians, or of their genuine philosophy, true religious faith, and serious art» but rather of what threatened to undo them. Aristophanes was «not a cold or malignant scoffer», Hegel concludes: «from all his works it appears what a noble, excellent, true Athenian citizen he was»⁵⁴.

But there is yet another layer to comedy – or at least to Hegel's admittedly over-determined analysis of *Clouds* – that I think explains its elevated position in Hegel's system. In more ways than one, comedy shows humans to be self-determining and free, not subject to divine or social law. *Clouds* credits Socrates with teaching that there are no gods: humans instead are the source of their own laws. The 'credit' here is complicated: although Socrates is mocked throughout *Clouds*, Hegel seems to think that the positive side of his message nevertheless comes through, perhaps despite Aristophanes' intent. So Hegel praises Aristophanes *both* for explicitly recognizing the danger of Socrates' teaching and for – perhaps unintentionally – crystallizing its truth. The message of *Clouds*, in H.S. Harris' words, is that humans should «recognize themselves as world-creators, and as the creators of the Gods». If this is true, Harris continues,

⁵³ See also Hegel's discussion of Socrates and Aristophanes at *Ä*, II, p. 120; p. 511. Hegel also praises Aristophanes for correctly isolating the comic tension in Socrates' philosophy itself: «It is, generally speaking, not possible to joke in an external way about what does not contain matters for joking or irony in itself. For what really is comical is to show a man or a thing as they disclose themselves in their extent; and if the thing is not itself a contradiction, the comic element is superficial and groundless» (*VGP*, I, pp. 482-483; pp. 427-428). If Socrates' teaching had been unambiguous or in complete accordance with the times, attempts to laugh about it would be «external» and ineffective. But through the image of Socrates, «Aristophanes presents to us the absolute contradiction between (a) the true essence of religion and political and ethical life, and (b) the subjective attitude of citizens and individuals who should give actuality to that essence» (*Ä*, II, p. 555; p. 1222).

⁵⁴ *Ä*, III, p. 554; p. 1222. Compare G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotho 1823)*, cit., p. 311.

[c]omedy is the moment of perfect self-consciousness of what Art is. We have left the realm of the immediately natural self and entered that of *rational* self-certainty. Thinking is now recognized as “absolute might”; God does not need to be embodied in a statue, in an athlete, or in a tragic hero presented to us in an imitative mode, as a model for our imitation⁵⁵.

In brief, comedy suggests that we no longer need representations of the divine: we *are* the divine. Art was, we remember, meant to express the Idea and so help humans overcome the provisional opposition between divine and human. Insofar as humans now see themselves as divine, this goal too has been achieved.

This self-determination can be seen, too, in the fact that comic characters do not one-sidedly identify with roles as do tragic characters. Comedy in fact explicitly shows its characters to be aware of their power over their roles, able as Allen Speight puts it to «come out from behind a mask and, with a wink at the audience, play ironically with the dramatic illusion» both are engaged in⁵⁶. Comic characters in a sense play with the concept of drama itself, removing the traditional mask to allow subjectivity to emerge. In the case of *Clouds*, Aristophanes famously uses the chorus to cajole the audience into casting their votes in the play’s favor, thus eliminating the fictional distance between actors and spectators otherwise typical of drama. This more open relationship in turn means that «[t]he ‘artist’ in comedy is free to play with

⁵⁵ H.S. HARRIS, *Hegel’s Ladder II: The Odyssey of Spirit*, cit., p. 638. Harris’ account is based on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but much of his analysis is relevant for determining comedy’s role in the lectures on aesthetics as well. As Paolucci points out, Hegel discusses comedy in several unexpected places, including the *Natural Law* essay, where he considers world history in the light of tragedy and comedy and discusses the sense in which Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is indeed a comedy (A. PAOLUCCI, *Hegel’s Theory of Comedy*, cit., p. 91).

⁵⁶ A. SPEIGHT, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 73. Speight uses this characteristic of comedy to develop a theory of its «theatricality» as opposed to tragedy’s «retrospectivity» in a greater theory of art’s role in Hegel’s theory of agency: see especially the sections on comedy at pp. 69-74. It seems, incidentally, that Hegel was wrong in thinking that ancient comic actors did not wear masks (ivi, p. 74).

the strictures of drama that the tragic character could only ‘recognize’ but could not give up»⁵⁷.

Ancient drama in any form cannot match the peaceful interpenetration of human and divine perfectly achieved in sculpture. Yet in another sense it transcends sculpture by incorporating back into a unity what sculpture cannot depict, namely the interiority that converts happenings into actions. Ancient tragedy and comedy retain their status as art by depicting the reunification that follows after action disrupts divine unity: in tragedy through the characters’ destruction; in comedy, through the characters’ self-destructive aims. But comedy, it seems to me, indeed surpasses tragedy’s ability to convey the Idea in sensuous form. Aristophanes, in Hegel’s philosophical analysis, shows humans to be masters of their world instead of tragically succumbing to a necessity they recognize but not as their own. Unlike Antigone, in other words, Aristophanes’ characters do not defer to immutable divine laws. They instead understand themselves as the creators of the gods and so as free. Old Comedy then comes closer to conveying Hegel’s ultimate philosophical conviction: that humans are the part of the whole that recognizes and articulates its contribution to the whole’s dynamic unity⁵⁸.

As much as Hegel celebrates the free exuberance of Aristophanes’ comedies, he is clear-eyed about what they meant for Greek life. «But in this very triumph of the subjective attitude, whatever its insight», he says, «there is implicit one of the greatest symptoms of Greek corruption»⁵⁹. Indeed, Aristophanes’ other

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 73. Shapiro makes a similar claim: «Art realizes its aim when one who plays or puts on this show is no longer clearly distinct from the one who watches the show»; «in fact [Hegel] has attempted to show that tragedy is an incoherent effort to establish a totality of artistic meaning. If the preceding analysis is correct, Hegel has given what amounts to a transcendental deduction of comedy as the only possible way of overcoming the dichotomies posed by our experience of artistic intentions and interpretations» (G. SHAPIRO, *Hegel’s Dialectic of Artistic Meaning*, cit., p. 32).

⁵⁸ See also H. SCHNEIDER, *Hegels Theorie der Komik und die Auflösung der schönen Kunst*, cit., p. 86.

⁵⁹ *A*, III, p. 555; p. 1222.

plays detail the «flighty gossip, litigiousness, etc., and the aberrations of the democracy out of which the old faith and morals had vanished». These vices, combined with the dissolution of the gods, signal the end of Greek *Sittlichkeit*⁶⁰. Hegel suggests that the Athenians, however dimly, recognized this. Old Comedy ends, then, with Athens laughing at its *own* self-negation: at having produced, through subjectivity and its effects, the means of its own destruction. Harris calls this the «*existential* truth of Hegel's claims about the significance of the Old Comedy»: although Aristophanes was depicting the erosion of their way of life, «the audience went to the theater to enjoy themselves. They knew what they were watching, but they laughed»⁶¹.

With the end of Athenian civilization came also the end of art's explicit efforts to depict the interpenetration of the divine and the human. Once the gods are revealed to be human creations, tales of their exploits are no longer compelling. Humans' attention turns from the divine to themselves⁶². The development of so-called New Comedy – the dramas of the Greek poet Menander and his Roman successors Plautus and Terence – is evidence of this shift⁶³. New Comedy seldom depicts gods or even substantial mat-

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 530; p. 1202.

⁶¹ H.S. HARRIS, *Hegel's Ladder II: The Odyssey of Spirit*, cit., p. 638. See also K. DE BOER, *The Eternal Irony of the Community: Aristophanian Echoes in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, «*Inquiry*», LII (4), 2009, p. 318. In his 1823 lectures, Hegel puts it this way: «Dies ist der letzte Punkt der Ausdehnung der Versöhnung, die die Subjektivität sich erringt. Im Komischen hat die Kunst ihr Ende» (G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotbo 1823)*, cit., p. 311). Compare Hegel's comments in G.W.F. HEGEL, *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, cit., p. 235.

⁶² This shift to the human had already begun in tragedy: the older tragedies of Aeschylus had been heavily symbolic, using poetic language to narrate the activities of the gods. Euripides' later tragedies instead took up human concerns in language much closer to spoken Greek. Aristophanes had lampooned this evidence of increasing subjectivity as well: in the *Frogs*, he depicts Dionysus, desperate after Euripides' death to retrieve him from the underworld, instead choosing Aeschylus for the sake of the city.

⁶³ M.S. Silk concludes that Aristophanes' plays *Cocalus*, *Ecclesiazusae*, and *Plutus* all tend in this direction already, making Aristophanes a key in the transition

ters such as family, religion, or politics. Instead it showcases intricate plots of domestic intrigue: slaves trick masters, children deceive fathers, lovers are thwarted then reunited through circumstances ever more ridiculously coincidental. As a result, protagonists' ends are no longer self-negating in the technical sense that they result in nothing and so evaporate, reestablishing a harmony with the divine. Since New Comedy does not even aspire to depict humans reuniting with the divine, it cannot fully satisfy art's mandate.

Given that art has abandoned its defining goal, its development after Old Comedy's dissipation goes in sometimes contrasting directions. The first is an additional genre of dramatic poetry (which Hegel confusingly calls «drama, i.e. a play in the narrower sense of the word»⁶⁴) that provides an easier but more facile reconciliation than Old Comedy. Falling into this category are tragicomedies that simply mix serious action with comic characters, and plays such as *Eumenides* and *Philoctetes*, whose resolutions are artificially accomplished by divine commands⁶⁵. The poet in such works is tempted to «devote the whole force of his production to the inner life of the *dramatis personae*» or to depicting «situations and customs of the period»⁶⁶. No tension between subject and substance is evoked, making reconciliation superfluous. The poetic, Hegel stipulated, signified art's attempts to embody the reunification of human and divine, subject and substance. Lacking even an aspiration to evoke this truth, drama begins to «laps[e] into prose»⁶⁷.

to New Comedy rather than its opponent. Silk concludes: «The narrowing of horizons to a world of social behavior and domestic relationships between more or less ordinary people – the elimination, in effect, of some of the most distinctive characteristics of Old Comedy as a genre – is partly the work of Old Comedy's most renowned exponent» (M.S. SILK, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 52). See also *ivi*, p. 231.

⁶⁴ *A*, III, p. 521; p. 1194.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 532; p. 1204.

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 533; p. 1204.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

Art's second direction in the wake of New Comedy is satire. Satire's primary purpose is to expose the gap between the divine and the human, or between ideals of virtue and corrupt reality. Because it dwells in this disharmony, Hegel says that satire is also more prosaic than poetic: in satire, «poetic reconciliation» vanishes; instead, «the unresolved nature of this opposition in which inner and outer remain in fixed disharmony constitutes the *prosaic character* of the relation between the two sides»⁶⁸. The distance between human and divine is all the more painful in satire since it succeeds the beautiful unity of ancient Greece. Classical art's «peaceful reconciliation» has been deserted; reality appears «godless and corrupt»⁶⁹. Unlike Aristophanes' patriotic attempts to expose the self-negating nature of forces threatening his society, the satirist «clings discontentedly to the disharmony between its own subjectivity [...] and to this extent produces neither true poetry nor true works of art»⁷⁰. As a result, «the classical art-form appears as superseded», leading to the «downfall of the plastic gods and the beautiful world of men»⁷¹.

3. *Subjectivity and Art's Dissolution*

A. *Modern Tragedy*

Despite the appearance of these weakened dramatic genres, however, tragedy and comedy survive and evolve, in less perfect form, in the post-classical world. In both cases, diagnosing their diminished status requires tracing the increasing prominence of subjectivity and its effects on art.

Modern tragedy is characterized by the intensification of subjectivity in a genre whose essence is the substantial: «even in modern tragedy», Hegel says, «the principle of subjectivity, free on its

⁶⁸ *A*, II, p. 123; p. 513 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 125; p. 514.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 121; p. 512.

own account in comedy, becomes dominant»⁷². Tragedy's principal topic is consequently «provided by an individual's passion, which is satisfied in the pursuit of a purely subjective end and, in general, by the fate of a single individual and his character»⁷³. Substantial concerns may still play a role, but only as the plot's background, not as the «ultimate object of [the character's] willing and acting»⁷⁴.

Subjectivity's incursion into tragedy explains several changes in the genre. First: the subject matter of ancient tragedies was limited to issues of substance such as the family, religion, and state. Since by contrast an individual's particular aims can be the subject of modern tragedy, the whole spectrum of human activity is fair game. Modern dramatists consequently produce tragedies featuring political ambition, romantic love, sibling rivalry, and any number of other variations. The shift towards subjectivity also explains the chronic indecision typical of protagonists such as Hamlet or Wallenstein. While Antigone and Creon knew immediately what their roles required of them, modern protagonists' ends have no divine justification. Instead of acting with conviction, they indulge in agonized «swithering»⁷⁵. Worse: when these characters act and bring about their own destruction, the lack of divine justification means that their deaths resemble cold, criminal justice rather than the execution of divine law⁷⁶.

These consequences of increased subjectivity in modern tragedy in turn impact Hegel's evaluation of whether tragedy achieves the unity and necessity characteristic of art. As to unity: since the situations underlying modern tragedies are based in the subjective and not in the substantial, their denouements do not depict the Idea in the sense of the unity of the human and the divine. Since neither Wallenstein's nor Hamlet's aims, for example, are correlated with divine law to begin with, their deaths at the tragedy's end

⁷² *A*, III, p. 532; p. 1203.

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 536; p. 1206.

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 537; p. 1207.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 546; p. 1214.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 565; p. 1230. I discuss these characteristics of modern tragedy in more detail in L. MOLAND, *An Unrelieved Heart: Hegel, Tragedy, and Schiller's Wallenstein*, «New German Critique», XXXVIII (2 113), 2011, pp. 1-23, pp. 12-16.

cannot restore a disrupted divine unity. Art was also meant to reaffirm our unity with the ethical order and give us a sense of restored unity with the divine. Modern tragedies no longer do this.

As regards necessity: the development of subjectivity weakens the necessity characteristic of tragedy in particular and of art in general. Because modern tragedy depicts not the inevitable clash of fated powers but that of contingent human projects, modern tragedy does not share ancient tragedy's inevitability. Unlike Antigone and Creon, Hamlet and Wallenstein could have chosen differently and presumably avoided their fates. Modern protagonists' lack of divine justification is again relevant here. While Antigone and Creon could cite eternal law as their justification, Hamlet and Wallenstein have no justification beyond their own conviction. Their fates are the result of a «purely horrible, external necessity»⁷⁷: necessity not generated by divine law but by the contingent situations humans actions create.

As a result of tragedy's weakened unity and necessity, modern audiences can no longer leave the theater with cheerful hearts. We are denied the relief provided by the restoration of the ethical order and the sense that the characters' suffering was necessary. Modern audiences might take some consolation, Hegel admits, in the fact that Hamlet appeared doomed by his own «inner disgust» for life and that Romeo and Juliet's love seemed too beautiful for the world. Nevertheless, any such comfort will be only «a grievous reconciliation, an unhappy bliss in misfortune»⁷⁸. It will not alleviate what Hegel calls modern tragedy's dreadful, horrible effects⁷⁹. Subjectivity's cumulative effect on tragedy as a genre, in short, is to weaken it, and its weakness makes its culminating suffering unnecessary.

And here Hegel's seemingly cavalier «And why not?» reveals its systematic significance. If, as Hegel claims, «there is no [...] inevitability [in modern tragedy], mere suffering and misfortune are not justified by anything», and dramatists may as well deliver «a

⁷⁷ *A*, III, p. 566; p. 1231.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 566-567; p. 1232.

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 567; p. 1231.

happy outcome». He continues: «To prefer misfortune, just because it is misfortune, instead of a happy resolution, has no other basis but a certain superior sentimentality»⁸⁰. Faced with art's weakened unity and fading necessity, modern spectators' best course of action, it seems, is to laugh.

B. *Modern Comedy*

But since modern comedies also do not escape subjectivity's development unscathed, matters are not so easy. If the effect of modern subjectivity's intrusion into tragedy was to weaken its essential tie to substance, its effect on comedy's core, which is already subjectivity, is to dissociate comedy from substance altogether. The effect, ultimately, will be the same: modern subjectivity loosens comedy's necessity and prevents it from depicting the reunification that sensuously embodies the Idea.

Hegel enumerates several of subjectivity's effects on comedy. The most obvious is that modern comedy follows New Comedy in depicting personal affairs and domestic intrigue. Whereas Strep-siades' self-negating aims served to expose sophistry's corrosive effect on public life, modern comedies limit themselves to the trivialities of the domestic sphere. Like New Comedy and modern tragedies, then, they do not attempt to depict humans' reunification with the divine and so are already a weakened form of art. No interpenetration of divine and human, subject and substance is to be found here, and Hegel phrases his lament specifically in terms of this lost unity: «a frank joviality as pervades the comedies of Aristophanes *as a constant reconciliation* does not animate this kind of modern comedy at all»⁸¹.

Also like modern tragedies, modern comedies lack necessity. As examples, Hegel references tragicomedies of his time in which

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ Ivi, p. 571; p. 1235, emphasis mine. In addition to his discussion of modern comedy, Hegel gives an analysis of humor in the final sections of the second part of his lectures. As I argue in forthcoming work, humor should not be equated with comedy. Although there are similarities, humor was a particularly modern phenomenon with its own aesthetic history.

«some blackguard or rascal» follows his own moral compass, untethered to any objective moral criteria. Given the arbitrary nature of the protagonist's convictions, such comedies easily end with the character's conversion to the good. But since this change tracks no necessary development in his character, the transformation seems superficial and implausible⁸². As another substitute for real necessity, some modern plays further develop New Comedy's propensity for ingenious plotlines driven by cunning deception and far-fetched coincidence. The Spanish are especially good at producing such plays, Hegel says: but even their tightly woven plots have their source in the subject, not in substance, and so exhibit only external necessity⁸³.

In Old Comedy, characters' aims were themselves necessarily self-negating: laughable to begin with and just as laughably pursued. Modern comedies sometimes also reflect a lack of necessity by featuring aims that fail to be self-negating in this sense. As an example Hegel cites the eponymous protagonist in Molière's *Tartuffe*, a religious hypocrite intent on defrauding his hosts. Tartuffe's aims are not inherently self-negating and neither are his means: he is instead a «downright villain» whose aims are «deadly serious» and whose means are distressingly plausible⁸⁴. This lack of necessity in turn undermines the cheerfulness that Hegel claimed should characterize comedy. Tartuffe's mixture of serious aims and spitefulness means we are never laughing with him but only at him. When his aims fail, he becomes the «butt of the laughter of others, often mixed as it is with malice»⁸⁵. Many of modern comedy's stock characters suffer the same fate: «honest masters, fathers, and trustees» are put at the «mercy of the projects of other people»⁸⁶. They cannot join in the laughter; their hapless good intentions are only mocked. There is a difference, Hegel concludes, between comedies

⁸² Ivi, p. 569; p. 1233. Compare ID., *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, cit., p. 234.

⁸³ *Ä*, III, p. 571; p. 1235.

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 570; p. 1234. Compare ID., *Philosophie der Kunst oder Ästhetik (Mitschrift von Kehler 1826)*, cit., p. 234.

⁸⁵ *Ä*, III, p. 569; p. 1234.

⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 571; p. 1235.

in which «the dramatis personae are comical themselves or only in the eyes of the audience»; «the former case alone», he concludes, «can be counted as really comical»⁸⁷. It is not clear, then, that plays such as *Tartuffe* are even comedies in this technical sense. In any event, what passes for modern comedy, Hegel complains, is often moralizing, superficial, and cruel.

Yet another consequence of these characters' deadly seriousness is that modern playwrights, including Molière, sometimes abandon poetry for prose⁸⁸. The language in such cases mirrors the content: Molière's social satires expose the opposition of virtue and reality, the very kind of unresolved tension that led Hegel to proclaim that satire is not poetic but prosaic. This lack of unity finds expression in language which itself makes no pretense to the playful creativity that characterizes poetry.

Hegel sees these subjective trends worsening, lamenting that the «subjective sense of something corresponding with me or not» has «recently been proposed as the principle of dramatic success or failure»⁸⁹. Modern dramas in other words often make no attempt to portray sensuously the unity of the human and the divine: what they produce «is not a genuinely poetic emotion but only one that people ordinarily feel». When modern playwrights are not up to the task of evoking a higher sense of our unity with the world, they instead «seek to reform the public or merely to entertain it» with complicated plots or thrilling effects⁹⁰. In none of these cases is

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 552; p. 1220. Compare *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst (Mitschrift Hotbo 1823)*, p. 310. Here Hegel suggests that in some comedies, servants become the characters who replicate Strepsiades' cheerful self-mockery. He also discusses both Ariosto and Cervantes as successful examples of modern comic sensibility: since neither are dramas and so are not comedies in Hegel's more technical sense, I leave them aside. See *Ä*, II, pp. 217-218; pp. 591-592. See also K. VIEWEG, *Heiterer Leichtsinns und fröhlicher Scharfsinn: Zu Hegels Verständnis von Komik und Humor als Formen ästhetisch-poetischer Skepsis*, in *Die geschichtliche Bedeutung der Kunst und die Bestimmung der Künste*, ed. by B. Collenberg-Plotnikov, A. Gethmann-Siefert, and L. de Vos, Fink, Munich 2005, pp. 297-310, p. 304.

⁸⁸ *Ä*, III, p. 569; p. 1234. *Tartuffe* itself is written in Alexandrine verse.

⁸⁹ Ivi, pp. 524-525; p. 1197.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 533; pp. 1204-1205.

comedy depicting the Idea in sensuous form; in most of them, then, it simply ceases to be art⁹¹.

4. *The Future of Art's End*

Despite its deleterious effects on art, subjectivity continues to develop towards its more positive conclusion by other means, namely religion and philosophy. This, then, is another way art ends: by becoming prosaic and lapsing into other forms of Absolute Spirit. Through religion and philosophy, humans continue to explore how subjectivity can be integrated into ethical life. Christianity for instance began to assert the existence of the divine in every human and so claims the reunification of subjectivity and substance⁹². As of very recently, Hegel thought, philosophy had succeeded in asserting that all humans are free, and that our self-determining status means we must take responsibility for our role in the formation of the world around us. But this assertion can only be articulated in prose, specifically the prose of philosophy. Indeed, a *philosophical* explication of our unity with the divine is what Hegel takes himself to be striving for in his own work⁹³. Hegel's system aims to make clear *to thought through thought* that humans are our own sources of authority, existing in a mutually formative re-

⁹¹ Perhaps this proliferation of comedies that are not actually art explains why Hegel's discussion of comedy is so perfunctory: the range of what can count as modern comedy is vast, but so little of it is *actually* art that there very little, systematically speaking, to say about it. I am grateful to Martin Donougho for this suggestion.

⁹² Schneider points out that in the 1821 lectures, Hegel explicitly emphasizes the transition from the comedies of Aristophanes to religion: see H. SCHNEIDER, *Hegels Theorie der Komik und die Auflösung der schönen Kunst*, cit., p. 108. See also Paolucci: subjective personality «raises poetry to a peak of subjective self-confidence without objective support. It is art's last bloom. It smiles a self-assured smile, and then there is the fall into prose» (A. PAOLUCCI, *Hegel's Theory of Comedy*, cit., p. 107).

⁹³ The question of whether Hegel's own philosophy is also poetic is considered for instance by G. SHAPIRO, *Hegel on the Meanings of Poetry*, «Philosophy and Rhetoric», VIII (2), 1975, pp. 88-107, pp. 100-106.

relationship with others and our surroundings. Hegel's political philosophy, for instance, details the minutiae of political, economic, and family life, showing how everything from marriage to legislative bodies can confirm the unity and necessity implied by his idealism. And while philosophy's articulation of universal freedom was yet to be fully embedded in these institutions, the modern world was no longer hostile to the self-determination and justification that subjectivity requires.

But none of this progress, in Hegel's view, is good news for art. Modern humans are prosaic creatures, concerned with economics and politics and preoccupied by the domestic disputes and social intrigue that characterized New Comedy. We cannot return to the sweeping conflict of Aeschylus or Aristophanes since, just as the Socrates of the *Clouds* claimed, there are no gods to turn to, only ourselves. Our creative god-like powers themselves are, by virtue of being so prosaic, extremely difficult to translate into art. Our keen sense of our interiority makes it difficult to portray our essence in art which, by virtue of being sensuous, can only imperfectly depict the internal. We are also primarily rational, prone to looking for truth in argumentative justification rather than artistic representation. These rational endeavors are next to impossible to embody in music, painting, or poetry⁹⁴.

Despite these obstacles, humans will and should continue to make art. When that art is successful, it will be because it evokes, however imperfectly, the unity and necessity of the Idea. Masters of Dutch genre painting such as Vermeer and Rembrandt, to take a few of Hegel's favorite examples, use their talent for color and composition to create paintings in which each part seems necessary and the whole is unified⁹⁵. A drama can have a particularly well-integrated cast of characters or an especially tight plot in which no action, no dialogue, seems out of place. Hegel mentions Goethe's *Iphigenia* as a «real poetic masterpiece» that manages to combine a serious topic with a happy, or at least reconciled, ending⁹⁶. The reconciliation here is brought about by humans, not gods, a fact that highlights human

⁹⁴ *A*, I, p. 253; pp. 193-194.

⁹⁵ *A*, II, pp. 225 ff; pp. 597 ff.

⁹⁶ *A*, III, p. 533; p. 1204.

agency and makes the play an example of a successful modern artwork. Hegel's editor Hotho offers us the tantalizing possibility that Hegel thought Shakespeare had achieved «a type of comedy which is truly comical and truly poetic» and so had succeeded in rivaling Aristophanes' accomplishments⁹⁷.

Just as the sculpture of ancient Greece embodied the normative worldview of Athenian citizens, art that reflects to us our own worldview will continue to be meaningful. *Humanus*, Hegel ironically reports, is art's new holy of holies; given our new-found understanding of ourselves as divine, we can continue to produce meaningful art by coming to see the divine in our mundane concerns⁹⁸. Dutch genre painting, Hegel suggests, embodies the insight that human concerns are divine concerns by evoking the significance of domestic table settings, a woman's secretive smile, the camaraderie of a group of watchmen. Poetry that reveals hidden meaning and resonance in language can perform a similar function, as modern examples such as Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* show. In general, art that can express «imperishable humanity in its many-sided significance and endless all-round development» will continue to have meaning for us⁹⁹. It will allow us to recognize, admittedly in a limited way, our co-authorship of the world and so to experience the Idea sensuously embodied in the Ideal.

So what can this analysis tell us about the end of art and comedy's place in that end?

First, Kaminsky is certainly not correct to see in *all* comedy only a frivolous distraction. Hegel took Aristophanes extremely seriously, seeing in his comedies a reckoning with the dangers of a subjectivity as yet unincorporated into ethical life. But if Shapiro is right that comedy is the culmination of art, it is a sorrowful, perhaps even tragic, culmination. *Ancient* comedy, specifically Old Comedy, does indeed express humans' unity with the divine in sensuous form, and

⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 571; p. 1235. Unfortunately, there is no evidence in the existing lecture notes that Hegel made this claim about Shakespeare.

⁹⁸ *A*, II, p. 237; p. 607.

⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 239; p. 608.

it aspires to do this more completely than sculpture can by giving us access to characters' deliberations and intentions, however ignoble, and so depicting action. In the most sensuous way possible, comedy embodies humans' acknowledgement that they are the creators of their own gods and so, in Hegel's dialectical sense, unified with them. It shows humans as lighthearted and cheerful in this realization even as it becomes clear that it has come, as it were, too soon to be sustained without dissolving the ethical life that produced it. In their lighthearted self-knowledge, characters in Old Comedy exhibit their understanding that their fate is self-caused, not the product of an inexplicable divine force. For these reasons, Old Comedy is, as Harris puts it, art's philosophical culmination. But as a *philosophical* culmination, it is no longer *art's* culmination but rather the beginning of its protracted end¹⁰⁰.

It is part of art's dialectic that comedy, in gesturing at a higher truth than art can encompass, signals its decline. But even if art is no longer able to articulate the more developed inclusion of subjectivity that the modern world requires, it will remain one of the ways we grapple with our place in the world's structure. Given that the requirements for unity and necessity have loosened, the range of ways art can do this has broadened significantly. Indeed, Hegel presciently imagines a world in which art has neither prescribed form nor necessary content: a world in which anything, essentially, can be art. If this is the case, Hegel's question remains: why not prefer dramas with happy endings? To art's modern lack of necessity, an arbitrary preference is perhaps the only systematically consistent response.

¹⁰⁰ See H.S. HARRIS, *Hegel's Ladder II: The Odyssey of Spirit*, cit., p. 647. Paolucci similarly argues that romantic art is the «most profound (though possibly not the most aesthetically perfect) expression of art» because it is «on the verge, and even beyond the verge, of transcending itself as art» (A. PAOLUCCI, *Hegel's Theory of Comedy*, cit., p. 105). On art's end being an extended process, see Schneider, H. SCHNEIDER, *Hegels Theorie der Komik und die Auflösung der schönen Kunst*, cit., pp. 103-104.

