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Hegel on the crucifixion as comedy

ABSTRACT: The process of bringing an exhausted order to the grave to make space for the life of new societal practice and belief is represented in ancient Greek drama by the death of the gods who ''die'' once in tragedy and once again in comedy. Hegel reads the second and final death of the gods in ancient comedy as enacting a kind of societal action through which a community reclaims its creative agency by destroying the social and political orders that structured a tragic stage of history. Although Hegel highlights this creative action as going beyond aesthetic representation, he sees ancient comedy as achieving a superficial sense of freedom from tragedy, because the community sees itself as separate from its creation, which is destructible. For this reason Hegel moves beyond ancient comedy and locates comic resolution not in the representation of the death of the old gods on the ancient stage, but in the narrative of the death of Christ. This paper explores how Hegel's reading of the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ mirrors the ancient tragedy and comedy. I argue that comedy, for Hegel, is realized through the story of the crucifixion, in which the comic community identifies with that which must be destroyed for the reconciliation of its society.

KEY-WORDS: Hegel, tragedy, comedy, crucifixion, destruction, reconciliation, community.

The process of bringing an exhausted order to the grave to make space for the life of new practice and belief is represented in ancient Greek drama by the double death of the gods who die once in tragedy and once again in comedy. Hegel identifies the comic moment in ancient comedy in the societal action through, which a community reclaims its creative agency by destroying the social and political orders that structured a tragic stage of history. This is represented by the second and final death of the gods on stage.

Yet, while Hegel highlights this creative action as going beyond aesthetic representation, he sees ancient comedy as achieving a superficial sense of freedom from tragedy, because the community sees itself as separate from its

creation, which can be destroyed. For this reason in the *Phenomenology*[1] and his *Lectures on Aesthetics*[2] and *Philosophy of Religion*[3] Hegel moves beyond ancient comedy and locates comic resolution not in the representation of the death of the old gods on the ancient stage, but in the narrative of the death of Christ.

This paper explores how Hegel mirrors the double death of the gods in ancient tragedy and comedy in his reading of the double death of the Judeo-Christian God in the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. I argue that comedy, for Hegel, is realized in the story of the crucifixion, in which the comic community identifies with that which must be destroyed for the reconciliation of its society.

According to Hegel, the first tragic death of the gods on the ancient stage occurs in the surrogate sacrifice of the creative agency of a human individual. In ancient tragedy the gods who rarely present themselves on stage are represented by a specific human subject, who sacrifices her individuality for the sake of an external absolute, even when this absolute is shown as contradictory. Hegel emphasizes how the tragic human representation of the divine is inverted in comedy, when the gods take the stage and are exposed as mere representatives of contradictory human laws and customs, which wear the masks of the absolute. In comedy the deities can no longer hide behind their fiercely devoted human subjects who, without questioning the gods, suffered in their place.

A tragedy like Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, which Hegel chooses as the primary text for the *Phenomenology's* section on tragedy in "The Spiritual Work of Art" [4], stands on the brink of comedy when the gods and Furies take the stage.[5] What appears to be a conflict between the human and divine order in Sophocles' *Antigone*[6] is presented as a contradiction within the divine itself by Aeschylus, who shows the gods quarrelling amongst themselves.[7] As He-

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[1] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. by A.V. Miller, NY: Oxford Press, 1977.

[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol II., transl. by T.M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

[3] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, New York: Oxford, 2006. Henceforth cited as *PR.*

[4] See, Aeschylus I: *Oresteia: Agamemnon*, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides, Vol.1, transl. by Richmond Lattimore, Chicago: Chicago Press, 1969, 88-170.

[5] Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*, 439-452.

[6] Sophocles, *Antigone,* transl. by John Harrison, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 453-456.

[7] I take this point from Robert Leib 'Tragedy of Tragedy: the Gods as Tragic Heroes' in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*." (paper presented at the 50th annual meeting for The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 19-22,

gel explains in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, the warring old gods and new gods in Aeschylus' tragedy hint at contradictions amongst social roles that are reinforced as absolute through the figures of the gods that rule over each. At the end of tragedy, these roles may be questioned, because we see that "*the gods are scattered (…) [their unity] is without content, is empty necessity, an empty, unintelligible power*."[8] However, the *Eumenides* is not yet a comedy, for the final step toward societal reconciliation on the Greek stage is to unmask divine conflict as that which belongs to the *human community*. By identifying the conflict within the absolute as intrinsic to the structures and values of the human society, the comic community reclaims the power to destroy that which they once revered as absolute and recreate itself.

Hegel celebrates Greek comedy as marking the end of art, that is, art as representation, because the true "object" of art is seen in the destructive/creative activity of the comic community.[9] However, he also stresses that the ancient Greek affect of "cheerfulness" at the destruction of a past way of life reflects a freedom that is *merely* abstract, because the community and its past art activity is still experienced as separate at some level. Here the comic community destroys and recreates itself without feeling the seriousness of its loss, because it understands itself as standing over and above its creation, i.e., its social existence.[10]

Hegel locates true comic resolution not in the laughter and humiliation of the Greek gods, but in the serious representation of Christ's crucifixion. Hegel's analysis of "the divine drama" [11] of the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ mirrors his reading of the tragic and comic movement of the double death of the gods on the Greek stage. While the tragedy of the incarnation is a story of the absurdity of an individual caught between two coexisting and

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[8] Hegel, *PR*, 339.

[9] Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol II., transl. by T.M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, 1236.

[10] In *The Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* Hegel directly juxtaposes the Greek flight from the possibility of a deeper self-consciousness achieved through suffering (i.e., abstract freedom) with what he sees as the higher reconciliation of Christianity (i.e., concrete freedom). Unlike the flight from grief in Greek comedy, a higher representation of divinity, he claims, accepts that real transformation through which concrete freedom is realized is often a painful process in itself. In other words, the shift from the tragic stage to the truly comic stage is rarely a festive occasion. By turning to the story of the crucifixion of Christ, Hegel explores how a society's act to destroy its own broken social constructs is a sort of self-destruction. Although this self-destruction can be at once self-restoration on some level, it is nevertheless experienced on another level as a loss.

[11] Hegel, *PR*, 471, n. 214.

irreconcilable orders, the comedy of the cross is a story of a society that takes action to destroy this lingering contradiction within the human community. The incarnation is the story of the first death of God; at this event the Judeo-Christian God dissolves not into absurdity and laughter like the pagan gods in comedy, but into "the finitude, the weakness, the frailty of human nature."[12] All that was absolute and certain in the idea of God now is not. The incarnation of God as man points to the abstractness of the monotheistic God, magnifying what appears as a rift within the divine as well as a rift between the human and divine. [13]

Christ is thus a tragic hero in two ways. First, as in Aeschylus's play[14], the conflict appears within the absolute itself, shattering the idea of universality and oneness in the divine. As Hegel[15] explains, the incarnation is represented through the divine figures of "God the Father" and "God the Son," because it is inconceivable that the two could exist in one.[16]

Second, the conflict of the incarnation is not only in the representation of one God divided into two divine independent figures. The tragic conflict is also situated *within* Christ himself. As Hegel points out, the church also represents the Incarnation through the "monstrous compound" of Christ as "God-man."[17] In this way tragic conflict appears similar to that of Sophocles'

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[12] Hegel, *PR*, 462.

[13] In *The Odd One In: On Comedy,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008, 43-60, Alenka Zupančič analyzes Nathan A. Scott's reading of the Incarnation of Christ as a comedy. While Zupančič explores the Hegelian elements of Scott's reading of the incarnation, she ultimately rejects Scott's characterization of comedy as a materialist/humanist celebration of the limitations and flaws of human nature in the utter dissolution of the divine transcendence. I follow Zupančič's understanding of comedy as, not the translation of the absolute into the merely human, but the recognition of the absolute-divine and more-than-human as belonging to the concrete human subject. However, while Zupančič identifies true comedy in the story of the life and death of Christ, I treat the incarnation and crucifixion as distinct moments and maintain that the Incarnation remains a tragic one. For even if man is recognizes as divine in the incarnation, the sacred in man is still recognized as an isolated moment that is an exception to human life in general. For Hegel, as I point out, the sacred is only realized as belonging to the human community at the crucifixion of Christ, which leads to the Pentecost, an event at which in the final death of the divine Other Absolute Spirit is celebrated in its concrete at that which is intrinsic to the human community.

[14] See, Aeschylus, *Oresteia: Agamemnon,* The Libation Bearers, Vol.1, transl. by Richmond Lattimore, Chicago: Chicago Press, 1969.

[15] Hegel, *PR*, 427: "*Two cannot be one. Each is a rigid unyielding, independent being-for-self. Logic shows that this category of 'the one' is a poor category, the wholly abstract unit.*"

[16] Hegel, *PR*, 425.

[17] Hegel, *PR*, 457.

Antigone;[18] the infinite anguish between divine law and human law is represented by a concrete figure who must answer to both.

The tragedy of the incarnation further parallels *Antigone* in the respect that the conflict that both tragic heroes represent is not only between the divine and human but also between what is identified as more-than-human and less-than-human within this concrete human life. Like Antigone, Christ embodies unwavering devotion to a more-than-human order. In this way Christ is not just a man, but represents a human being who exceeds his humanity. Yet, despite the divine virtue of Antigone and Christ, both are simultaneously marked as less-than-human: the criminal who represents humanity's inability to achieve unity. Both Christ and Antigone are sacrificed for the "sins" of all. Yet the two tragic heroes are not completely parallel; Antigone must choose to be the representative of one side of the conflict that determines her, forsaking her role of as citizen under human law for her role as sister under divine law. Christ, in contrast, as the illogical enactment of God-man, belongs equally to both sides of the conflict intrinsically. He cannot choose. Thus, this human individual is not a *unity* or oneness but a *body* that speaks to the anguish of the infinite cleavage that constitutes his existence.

While the life of Christ may be read as tragic, the hero of Christian mythology meets his end like the Greek gods, in comedy. *The Crucifixion is the second and final death of the Christian God who has already died once in the Incarnation.* The Roman custom of dressing a madman or criminal as a king or god to be paraded through the streets before his execution allowed a community to passionately denounce what was deeply perverse or contradictory within its society. This joyful destruction of corruption was a ritualized comedy in which the whole community played part. The story of the crucifixion is not striking, because humanity does horrific violence to a God; this occurs in the Greek death of divinity as well. Instead, it is striking because Christ's ruin is treated with such gravity.

The serious tone of the comedy of the crucifixion emphasized in Christ's refusal to laugh contrasts vividly, for example, with Aristophanes' *The Frogs,*[19] in which Dionysus laughs and provokes his torturers in the underworld.[20] An-

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[18] Sophocles, *Antigone,* transl. by John Harrison, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

[19] Aristophanes, *The wasps,* transl. by David Barrett, NY: Penguin Classics, 1964. 179.

[20] See in *Greek Laughter*, Cambridge: Cambridge, 2008, 474, Christian Stephen Halliwell (also: Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A study of cultural psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge, 2008) argues that although the public torture and execution of a criminal in the form of communal comedy was not an unusual event for the ancients, the story of the Crucifixion would have been unsettling in the depiction of a god that does not participate in the audience's laughter as he is put to death. Halliwell writes "*To a pagan mind*

cient comedy understood that we are free to laugh at the dissolution of the divine, that is, the destruction of beliefs and practice belonging to a former way of life, specifically because the gods laugh along with us. But there is something unsettling about the seriousness of the comedy of the crucifixion that does not offer the audience the same sense of ease and detachment in bringing its old values to the grave. Comic laughter is disrupted by the grief in Christ's passion; for in the face of the God-criminal at his execution is the reflection of every member of the community. As Hegel notes, while the second death of the Christian God represents the possibility of salvation, i.e., the reconciled human community, it also represents the death of something deeply familiar that disrupts the community's ability to view the sacrifice as wholly Other.[21]

For Hegel the representation of the double-death of God in Christianity surpasses the death of the gods on the Greek stage, because the destruction of that which is more-than-human and less-than-human both rightly embodied in a human form allows for two realizations. First, the less-than-human and more-than-human are not opposed in two discrete and opposed orders or figures; the latter is active even in the former. *There is something sacred within all human life, even that of criminal*. Second, the less-than-human/more-than-human criminal-God, who is destroyed for the reconciliation of the community, also belongs to the community. The experience of otherness - the feeling of awe at what is deemed sacred, the sense of horror at violence or perversion - is inherent to human social life and the human community is responsible for each. The source of both grief and joy at the image of the cross is the recognition that which is executed for the sake of the integrity of the community is not, in fact, an independent Other.

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accustomed to the idea of cruel laughter as an appropriate behavior for the gods themselves, Jesus' meek submission to jeering humiliation was bound to seem utterly unintelligible: to some, indeed, a refutation of claims to divinity."

[21] On the one hand, Hegel claims, the response to the death of the Christ made available to the audience of the comedy of the crucifixion is one of joy, for the criminal represents the corruption within society that inhibits harmonious social and political life. But on the other hand, the response is one of grief. "Here any merely historical view [of Christ] comes to an end," Hegel writes, *"…the subject itself is drawn into the process…On the one hand, the death of Christ is still the death of a human being, a friend, who has been killed by violent means; but…this very death becomes the means of salvation, the focal point of reconciliation*." While the second death of the Christian God represents the possibility of salvation, i.e., the reconciled human community, it also represents the loss of a friend, the death of something deeply familiar that disrupts the community's ability to view the sacrifice as the Other. But in this case the identification is not with one side of the Christ, but rather the identification with the more-than-human and less-than-human in man, now seen as in humanity, disrupts the category of Otherness altogether.

In sum, I have argued that the incarnation verges on comedy, because the tension between what is identified as more-than-human and less-than-human is understood as belonging to a human being rather than an absolute. Other determining human life. However, the life of Christ remains tragic, because that which belongs to humanity as a whole is presented as belonging to this individual alone. The comic insight that can be gained through the grief experience at the death of this human figure representing both God and the criminal is the recognition of the sacred as intrinsic to every instance of human life, even that which is marked less-than-human. "*The point is precisely that the two cannot in fact be dissociated*."[22] The comic community's identification with that which is destroyed in the crucifixion is the acceptance of the absurdity of the two contraries within one communal body, allowing for a transformed understanding of both the sacred and profane.

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[22] Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008, 33.