

# **Tragic thinking: The question of tragedy in German idealism**

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I, Alexandros Gkosevits, hereby confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## **Abstract**

The thesis focuses on the question of tragedy in German idealism, and has two main aims: to investigate the conditions that led to the birth of the speculative appropriation of the notion of the tragic; and to examine how tragedy and the tragic had a cardinal role in modernity's self-understanding at the turn of the eighteenth century. Our inquiry takes its cue from the possibilities opened up by Kant's third *Critique* (1790) and the French Revolution, and follows the eccentric path of idealistic thought in its oscillation between a sense of profound crisis and a longing for the realisation of Enlightenment's unfulfilled promises. This double bind renders the question of tragedy as a paradigmatic case of thinking in times of danger. Two interrelated themes are absolutely crucial to the argument: the tendency of German idealists to subdue the historical specificity of tragedy in order to assimilate and integrate it in the overall systematic structures of their thought; and the subversive quality of the tragic as it often resists and runs counter to systematisation. Together they form the basic interpretive crux of tragedy in the context of German idealism. The analysis of the main corpus of the writings of Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin reveals an elective affinity between tragedy and history, and thereby establishes a potentially radical and productive dialogue between antiquity and modernity. To pose the question of tragedy in speculative thought entails thinking about the limits of philosophical thinking; the reflection of this process confers the tragic character of their endeavour. Insofar modernity remains caught up in its insoluble contradictions and a vague, yet always present, sense of catastrophe seems to permeate its worldview, the constellation of the tragic remains a real presence in our self-understanding.

## Impact Statement

My work will have impact in the field of the intersection between Classics and Philosophy as it seeks to investigate the conditions that led to the birth of the speculative appropriation of the question in the emergence of the notion of the tragic; and examine how tragedy and the tragic had a cardinal role in modernity's self-understanding at the turn of the eighteenth century. My inquiry takes its cue from the possibilities opened up by Kant's third *Critique* (1790) and the French Revolution, and follows the eccentric path of idealistic thought in its oscillation between a sense of profound crisis and a longing for the realisation of Enlightenment's unfulfilled promises. This double bind renders the question of tragedy as a paradigmatic case of thinking in times of danger. Two interrelated themes are absolutely crucial to the argument: the tendency of German idealists to subdue the historical specificity of tragedy in order to assimilate and integrate it in the overall systematic structures of their thought; and the subversive quality of the tragic as it often resists and runs counter to systematisation. Together they form the basic interpretive crux of tragedy in the context of German idealism. The analysis of the main corpus of the writings of Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin reveals an elective affinity between tragedy and history, and thereby establishes a potentially radical and productive dialogue between antiquity and modernity. To pose the question of tragedy in speculative thought entails thinking about the limits of philosophical thinking; the reflection of this process confers the tragic character of their endeavour. Insofar modernity remains caught up in its insoluble contradictions and a vague, yet always present, sense of catastrophe seems to permeate its worldview, the constellation of the tragic remains a real presence in our self-understanding.

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## Introduction

### I

In thinking about tragedy we are always enveloped in a sort of pre-understanding. In an age permeated by the spirit of classification and ‘canonisation’,<sup>1</sup> Greek tragedy has once and for all taken its place among the towering achievements of western civilization. It holds an uncontested status in the *literae humaniores* and is an essential part of our cultural apparatus. It occupies certain facets of our self-understanding to such a degree that it has become part and parcel of our everyday vocabulary. Respectively, to utter the word tragic has become synonymous with a gesture conferring profound existential depth and meaning. Thus, it has become natural to us to speak of the tragedy of life or to listen to the tragic nuances of Schubert’s late piano sonatas. Notwithstanding, these manifestations of what could be characterised, broadly speaking, as the domestication of tragedy and the tragic, as much as they reveal they also hide. Behind our ostensible intimacy with these phenomena lies a subtle distance to them.<sup>2</sup>

It has been argued that the ancient Greeks knew nothing about a tragic worldview and this might actually be the case.<sup>3</sup> However, the lesser claim that when historians of ideas, Aristotle being the first among them, looked back and tried to reflect upon tragedy and encapsulate its essence, they ascertained that the tragic spirit had long vanished, seems closer to the truth as it retains an open hermeneutic horizon. Of course, we are still lacking a systematic reconstruction of the relationship between pre-platonic philosophy and tragedy’s

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<sup>1</sup> The pre-eminent example of this line of thinking can be found in Harold Bloom’s *The western canon: The books and school of the ages* (1994). A similar view had been implicitly advocated by Ezra Pound in his *ABC of reading* (1934).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted from the onset that present study remains indebted to late George Steiner’s *The death of tragedy* (1961). Given that, it shares some basic assumptions regarding the obviousness and persistence of the tradition that tragedy is inscribed to, the uniqueness of its *topos*, i.e. the fact that no other tradition apart of the European knows of a similar genre, and the diagnosis of its death much alike to Hegel’s thesis on the death of art.

<sup>3</sup> Goldhill (2012: 142-6).

underlying conceptual background.<sup>4</sup> The legitimacy of such a comparative reading and interpretation does not come without reservations. In approximating the difficult ground of Greek tragedy we are at once caught up in the dilemma between the historical specificity of the phenomenon and the universal applicability of its ideas; the former quality being endemic among classicists, the latter among philosophers and cultural theorists. Much alike to the analytic-continental divide which has been casting a large shadow over the philosophical landscape since early twentieth century, there seems to be a rift between the two disciplines. Whereas tragedy is a literary genre which has occupied western thought over two millennia, the tragic is considered somewhat of a modern philosophical creation, a deduction of tragedy to the sphere of the speculative.<sup>5</sup> The unfolding of this fundamental difference results in the emergence of a multiplicity of interpretive oppositions between the two camps. The implications of both positions extend far beyond their respective domains and despite their programmatic contradistinction there are hopeful indications that interdisciplinary approaches have a lot to offer.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that the criticism mounted against philosophy's generalizing appropriation of tragedy is not unfounded. Indeed, from the very beginning of its speculative interpretation in German idealism, to its proto-existential understanding under Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, up to its reception in the phenomenological circle of Scheler and Heidegger, tragedy has mostly been examined in its dissociation from its historical and anthropological context and thus under the abstract sign of the tragic. True, if we look closely to Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), wherein we find perhaps the most influential philosophical reading of tragedy along with Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872), we are immediately struck by the fact that there is absolutely no reference to a specific work or hero of Greek

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<sup>4</sup> Bruno Snell's pioneering study *The discovery the of mind: in Greek philosophy and literature* (1946) opened the way for a comparative understanding of the two disciplines. Joshua Billings is currently working towards that direction in his forthcoming *The Stage of Thinking: The Philosophical Poetics of Ancient Greek Drama* (2021).

<sup>5</sup> The works of Jean-Pierre Vernant (1988) and Simon Goldhill (1986) are representative of the critique against the generalizing tendencies underwriting the philosophical appropriation of tragedy.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Porter (2000), Billings (2014), Leonard (2015), Billings and Leonard (eds.) (2015).

tragedy.<sup>7</sup> Correspondingly, despite being a philologist by training, Nietzsche's questionable contextualisation of tragedy sparked the furious reaction of the leading philological authority of his era, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who saw behind Nietzsche's philological pretence the subjugation of tragedy to the speculative demands of his thought and consequently, the explicit subversion of the scientific premises of philology.

It seems that ever since the severance of the tragic from tragedy occurred around 1800, the former has lived an independent life under the aegis of philosophical thought. However, the meticulousness exhibited by commentators in the demonstration and critique of this divergence has been notably absent from their effort to understand the reasons behind this apparent schism. I argue that the turn from the poetics of tragedy to a philosophy of the tragic, should be apprehended as a part of a broader movement in modernity's self-understanding that is inextricably linked to the aesthetic turn following Kant's third *Critique* (1790) and the sense of crisis underwriting the social and historical reality of post-revolutionary Europe (1789-).

There seems to be an underlying thread connecting the real presence of tragedy and the tragic and an indeterminable, yet wholly real, sense of catastrophe. When Plato banished poetry from his ideal *politeia* (375 B.C), Athens was already experiencing a profound crisis, both internally, in the emergence of the notion of individualism,<sup>8</sup> and externally, in its isolation from

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<sup>7</sup> The notable exception being his single reference to the figure of Antigone in §437, which, however, takes place outside of the context of his discussion of Greek ethicality and tragedy.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of individualism has its progenitor in what Bruno Snell succinctly described as the "rise of the individual" which he traced in the lyric poetry of Archilochus, Sappho and Anacreon, in the period spanning between mid-7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and late 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (1953: Chapter 3) against the backdrop of the absence of words in Homer connoting selfhood, subjectivity, or inwardness such as the ego, the mind, etc. In fact, not rarely, moral motivation was often the by-product of the intervention of the gods (Chapter 1). In one his Storr Lectures delivered at Yale in 1962, Isaiah Berlin argues that the birth of Greek individualism should be apprehended as one of the three turning-points in the history of political thought, the other two being Machiavelli and romanticism, and locates it in the immediate aftermath of Aristotle's death (322 B.C.) and in the school of thoughts that followed, namely Stoicism and Epicureanism (2002: 287-321). Charles Taylor follows a similar line of argumentation insofar as he holds the belief that Plato is lacking a fully-fledged notion of individuality and inwardness, i.e. in comparison to our modern apprehension of the notions, see (1989: Chapter 6). Classicists have also been particularly perceptive to this phenomenon. Jacqueline de Romilly argues that whereas in Aeschylus tragic action "involves forces that are superior to man; and in the face of these forces the characters of the individuals fade away and appear secondary. In Euripides, in contrast, all the attention is upon the characters of the individuals." Quoted in Vernant & Vidal Naquet (1988: 71); the displacement of emphasis is indicative. Furthermore, the problem of tragic responsibility – in the absence of a clear-cut notion of the self (individuality)

the rest of the city-states as it slowly entered its period of decline. The message carried by tragedy was one that could not be sustained as it reflected too closely the insoluble contradictions of the *polis*; it was the artistic reflection of the city's demise as the glory of Athens was now irrevocably a thing of the past as it had been more than twenty-five years since the end of the Peloponnesian War (404 B.C.). Similarly, the life of the tragic coincides with the "long nineteenth century" with all its optimism and faith in the notions of science and progress, and then it immediately vanishes from philosophical discussions after the Second World War and the experience of the concentration camps. If writing poetry after Auschwitz was considered barbaric,<sup>9</sup> the notion of the tragic was outright unbearable. German idealism stands in the middle of these two extremes as it had the privilege of a 'sublime perspective', namely to observe from a distance the momentary collapse of the promises of Enlightenment as the revolution lapsed into the sheer violence of the *Terreur*. Tragedy and the tragic come forward in the context of German idealism as interpretive models in thinking about history and catastrophe. The turn to antiquity does not signify a Winckelmannian nostalgia and longing, on the contrary, it seeks to safeguard the possibility of central tenets of modernity's self-definition in a creative reappropriation of the past. It is a distancing from the threatening present back to the Greeks in order to overcome the contradictions and dangers it faces.

In thoroughly dialectical fashion, the crisis in the sphere of the political coincides with one in the field of philosophy. Disillusioned with the developments in France and the exponents of Enlightenment reason, German idealists saw in Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, and in particular in the conceptual space opened up by the relationship between aesthetics and teleology, the potential for a new understanding of art's role in their philosophical endeavours. The gravitational pull exerted by the Greeks inescapably led them to tragedy and its apprehension as the art *par excellence* of both antiquity and modernity. Whereas reason had reached a certain *impasse* in its effort to reconcile the contradictions governing the newly emerged civil society, art could provide them with the necessary conceptual apparatus to

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most properly belongs to the same constellation of problems, see: Vernant & Vidal Naquet (1988: Chapter III, esp. 55ff.).

<sup>9</sup> Adorno (1983: 34).



overcome the sense of fragmentation and alienation permeating their worldview. Tragedy, being inherently a medium presenting us with struggle and opposition but also, according to German idealists, one justifying and attempting to reconcile us with our earthly dwelling, was able to express more than any other form of art, man's oscillation between freedom and necessity and thus acquired in all its time-honored vestige a pre-eminently modern significance.

## II

The thesis focuses on the question of tragedy in German idealism, and has two main aims: to investigate the conditions that led to the birth of the speculative appropriation of the question in the emergence of the notion of the tragic; and to examine how tragedy and the tragic had a cardinal role in modernity's self-understanding at the turn of the eighteenth century. Two interrelated themes are absolutely crucial to the argument: the tendency of German idealists to subdue the historical specificity of tragedy in order to assimilate and integrate it in the overall systematic structures of their thought; and the subversive quality of the tragic as it often resists and runs counter to systematisation. Together they form my basic interpretive crux of tragedy in the context of German idealism. To pose the question of tragedy in speculative thought entails thinking about the limits of philosophical thinking; the reflection of this process confers the tragic character of their endeavour. In this context, particular attention is given to the relationship between their respective theories of tragedy and the place they occupy within their philosophical system. Consequently, I deliberately avoid examining directly their accounts of tragedy in an effort to show how the question emerges organically from the context in which it is posited. I believe that the greater the contextualisation one provides the less arbitrary the positions adopted by German idealists with regards to tragedy will appear to classicists, and hopefully, such an approximation might help towards strengthening the ongoing dialogue between the two disciplines. In contradistinction to relevant and excellent takes on broadly the same subject like Schmidt's (2001) and Billings' (2014) that limit themselves in examining solely what ostensibly appears to form the crux of the tragic in the thinkers under consideration, I proceed to a step by step reconstruction of the

long road that leads to the distinctive amalgamation of the tragic in each thinker. This schematism is bound to be also chronological as the unfolding of specific ideas within the circle of idealists is subject to their internal dialogue.<sup>10</sup> As a result, parts of the study might at first glance seem peripheral to our subject-matter, yet hopefully by the end such an impression will recede.

Chapter I. begins with Schiller in an attempt to show how he forms the conceptual bridge between Kant and speculative idealism through his meditations on tragedy. Despite the relative validity behind the claim that the philosophy of the tragic only begins with Schelling,<sup>11</sup> I contest that it is impossible to pass directly from Kant's third *Critique* (1790) to Schelling's *Briefe* (1795). I consider *Über das Pathetische* (1793) to be the missing link between them, wherein Schiller destabilizes the connection between morality and tragedy and sets the tone for Schelling's *Briefe*. The full force of the Schillerian account of tragedy is evidenced in *Über das Erhabene* (1796) which complements the program of the aesthetic education he expounded in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795) by virtue of the tragic education which tragedy affords us through a quasi-metaphysical insight of our freedom.

Chapter II. is devoted to Schelling who greatly expands Schiller's intentions and observations and is the first to break faith with Kant and transgress his epistemological limits of knowledge by using tragedy as a vanguard form of verifying our freedom against necessity. Here I take up the discussion of both the pantheism controversy and *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* (1795/6) as they are both prerequisite for understanding the contours of the tragic in German idealism. Before reaching the core of his theory of the tragic in the tenth letter of the *Briefe*, I try to demonstrate how his earlier writings, namely the *Form-Schrift* (1794) and *Vom Ich* (1795), form a necessary path that led him to the standpoint of the *Briefe*. I then elaborate on the overall argument of the *Briefe* before examining

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<sup>10</sup> The evident exception is the figure of Hölderlin who is examined last. The reason behind this choice lies with the fact that his conceptualisation of the tragic stands in stark opposition to its integration in a systematic framework of thought that we observe in both Schelling and Hegel, and as such, it most tellingly reflects and represents the closure of the idealistic appropriation of tragedy and its transition to a different order of thinking that passes through Hölderlin to Schopenhauer and finally to Nietzsche.

<sup>11</sup> Szondi (2002: 1)

the particularities of the infamous tenth letter wherein he actualises a move that had great repercussions in the philosophical understanding of the tragic. In the final part of the chapter I turn my focus on the paradox of the *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800), where although Schelling proceeds to a yet again ground-breaking move by inverting the Platonic verdict and ascribing priority to art against philosophy, he remains utterly silent regarding the role of tragedy in this new ordering of thinking.

Hegel occupies Chapter III, which is disproportionately the largest among the four. There are significant reasons dictating why this had to be the case. First, his thoughts on tragedy are scattered among various texts which do not share either the same underlying premises or the same objective. A uniform analysis of his theorisations about tragedy without taking under consideration the explicit differences of the context wherein they take place would inescapably fall prey to the danger of oversimplification. Second, and particularly pertinent to the *Phänomenologie*, it is impossible to detach his remarks on tragedy from the overall systematic structure of the work under consideration. The problem resulting from such an approach would be the devaluation of his original insight to a mere generalisation much in the spirit of vulgar criticism. On these grounds, the chapter is divided in four subsections. The overarching and connecting thread of the chapter is how Hegel gradually develops a progressively abstract idea of the tragic under the notion of negativity. The first section is primarily devoted to *Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal* (1798-1800) and examines the possibility of a tragic modernity under a Christian sky, while emphasis is given to the emergence of Hegel's proto-dialectical concepts in their relation to tragedy. The second is concerned with the notion of 'the tragedy of the ethical' in the *Naturrechts* essay (1802-3) and argues for a quasi-metaphysical interpretation of his thesis. In the next I undertake the task to explicate Hegel's argument in the *Phänomenologie* in a reading that tries to make sense of his idiomatic interpretation of tragedy vis-à-vis the demands of systematicity pertaining to the work. In the final section I try to see how his account of negativity in the *Preface* of the *Phänomenologie* relates to his philosophy of history and whether his prioritising of the moment of the universal effects negatively the course of particularity in world-history.

Chapter IV., on Hölderlin, concludes my investigation on the theory of tragedy in German idealism. The double calling underwriting Hölderlin's life up to 1800, as a poet and a speculative thinker, is reflected in the structure of the chapter. I first examine the philosophical background to his later conception of tragedy (post-1800), which, I argue, originates in his reflections on the philosophical concept of the absolute as appropriated in *Urtheil und Seyn* (1795), wherein we find a relative completion of Hyperion's, the protagonist of his only novel (1792-6), quest for a sense of belonging in the world. The standpoint reached in both of these works precipitates his transition to a much darker understanding of life which is attested in his strenuous and unfortunately unfruitful effort to write a modern tragedy under the title of *Der Tod des Empedokles* (1797-1800). I thereby focus on his poetological works up to 1800 in an effort to elaborate on the theoretical reasons that prevented him from completing his vision of *Empedokles*. In the final part of the chapter I bring in his late hymns and through them I try to shed light on Hölderlin's overly condensed and ambiguous tragic poetics of his *Remarks on Oedipus* and *Antigone* (1803-4) as meditation on the possibility of an enlivened relationship between antiquity and modernity which takes the form of a tragic dwelling.

## Chapter I: Friedrich Schiller

### Introduction

Thinking about tragedy in modernity<sup>12</sup> is inextricably linked to the dynamics between Kantian philosophy and the French Revolution.<sup>13</sup> Both movements contested the legitimacy of their precursors in their respective domains of philosophy and politics, paving the way for a radical reorientation of our self-understanding. To the extent that this twofold, interrelated movement represents the symbolic end point of the intricate process of Enlightenment, it is no wonder

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<sup>12</sup> As the question surrounding the delineation of modernity far exceeds the scope of our research for the purpose of the present study let me state that in the technical use of term employed for our purposes, by modernity I mean roughly the period after philosophy developed a historical consciousness of its very own formation, i.e. in the aftermath of the Kantian philosophy.

<sup>13</sup> On the corresponding relationship between late eighteenth-century German philosophy and the developments that led to the French Revolution, see: Henrich (1992: 85-99).

that a specific crisis of meaning emerged in their immediate aftermath. The events that took place during the *Terreur* seemed to run counter to traditional Enlightenment ideals, while the implicit potential of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilkraft* was initially met with an hermeneutic *aporia*. Schiller will take up the task to respond to this double-edged challenge without lapsing into pre-critical modes of thought, by proceeding to an aesthetic critique of modernity and unfolding the latent content of the third *Critique*. In both objectives he will encounter limits that he was objectively unable to overcome. In the first case, the persistent tension in his thought between the ideal and the real will resolve in favour of the first,<sup>14</sup> whereas in the second, he proceeds up to the point where he transgresses the limits of the Kantian system while at the same time he lacks the necessary conceptual apparatus to break free from his mentor. His work on aesthetics, although caught in limbo, provides the necessary link between Kant and speculative idealism.<sup>15</sup> A decisive step further would require something that he was both unwilling and unable to provide, a fundamentally different theoretical philosophy.

The period around 1800 signifies the transition from the rationalist tradition of aesthetics to the philosophy of art, from Kant to speculative idealism, and from a theory of tragedy to the philosophy of the tragic. Although the first two movements have been the subject of extensive scholarship, the third one remains relatively understudied. The formative process that leads to the philosophy of the tragic seems to be absent from the agenda of relevant discussions, tacitly suggesting a sort of parthenogenesis,<sup>16</sup> or at best, pointing out at the third *Critique*.<sup>17</sup> True, the inauguration of the philosophical, *stricto sensu*, appropriation of the tragic should be sought in speculative idealism; however, in the effort to understand the genesis of

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<sup>14</sup> Although I endorse the view that Schiller's aesthetic turn and in particular the *Briefe* have a political orientation, the fundamental substrate of his thought remains idealistic, see: Lukács (1979: 84-90), Jameson (1971: 85-86).

<sup>15</sup> Despite Hegel's acknowledgment (1835/1975: 61-62.) scholars remain divided on the issue. Proponents of the view of 'continuity' include: Lukács (1969), Henrich (1982), Saville (1987), Pugh (1996); Beiser (2005) stands in middle ground; Willoughby & Wilkinson (1967) in their introduction and remarks on the *Briefe* propose a strictly anti-metaphysical understanding of Schiller.

<sup>16</sup> Szondi (2002: 1), 'Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic.'

<sup>17</sup> Schmidt (2001), discusses jointly Kant and Schelling (73-83), whom he understands as an interlude to the systematic philosophical engagement with tragedy that only begins with Hegel (275).

the tragic such an absolute distinction might not be necessary.<sup>18</sup> Schiller provides us once again with the missing link. There are two decisive factors that determine his theoretical examination of tragedy. First, one should not neglect the fact that he was an influential dramatist in his own right and turned to his theoretical endeavours only after his growing dissatisfaction with *Don Karlos* (1787). Second, his encounter with the Kantian work proved to have a decisive influence on the development of his thought; in the case of tragedy this is attested most evidently by his appropriation of the notion of the sublime. Having begun his intensive study of Kant from 1791, his first two essays addressing the topic of tragedy, *Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen* (1791) and *Über die Tragische Kunst* (1792), and the latter, more speculative, *Vom Erhabenen* (1793), form what could be termed as his early theory of tragedy. Up to then he remains within the territory circumscribed by the two aforementioned factors. In the following essay, which initially formed the counterpart of *Vom Erhabenen*, entitled *Über das Pathetische* (1793), we witness a distancing from the Kantian influenced ethical reading of tragedy towards a moderate paradigm shift that comes full circle in *Über das Erhabene* (1796/1801), where Schiller's worldview undergoes a radical revision and tragedy emerges as the representation *par excellence* of our effort to cope with the fundamental underlying irrationality of becoming and history.

Schiller's philosophical corpus is constructed unsystematically and often, even within a single treatise we encounter contradictions or discontinuities in his reasoning. Instead of dwelling on the antinomies of his thought, a task that would render its original intentions and meaning as mere inconsistencies,<sup>19</sup> I will try to elucidate the 'movement of his thought' with particular reference to tragedy. The chapter is divided in three sections; the first is devoted, somewhat unorthodoxically, to his early understanding of *Geschichte* and his reflections on antiquity, the second dwells on his 1791-1793 writings on tragedy and the last proceeds to an

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<sup>18</sup> There are three interrelated possible explanations behind such an understanding: i) the persistence of a strictly philosophical understanding of the phenomenon of the tragic ii) skepticism towards Schiller's philosophical credentials iii) the intransigence of both classicists and philosophers to cross-disciplinary approaches. Recent efforts to bridge the gulf are: Billings (2014), Leonard (2015), Billings & Leonard (2015).

<sup>19</sup> For such an approach with particular reference to Kant, see: Schaper (1979).

analysis of his last essay on tragedy in its relation to the project of the *Ästhetische Briefe*. Hopefully, such a schematism will contribute to a clear understanding of his theory of tragedy and elucidate the opaque transition to the philosophy of the tragic.

## I. History and antiquity

The subsidence of the Christian worldview as a result of Enlightenment's polemics gave birth to a new type of historical consciousness, which, although profoundly modern, retained a certain eschatological element in a secular form, expressed most generally as faith in the potentiality of progress and reason towards the emancipation of the human condition. The secularization of humanity's potential brings about an openness towards, and longing for, the future, while a sense of temporal acceleration raises the present to a universal historical perspective, properly understood as the hermeneutic standpoint and axiological criterion of history.<sup>20</sup> Schiller was influenced by the newly-emerged understanding of *Geschichte* and actively engaged with the question of history in all aspects of his oeuvre.<sup>21</sup> Understanding the variations of his thought on history is necessary in order to understand the various shifts in his theoretical writings since the historical component will prove to be of cardinal importance when we reach his 'mature' theory of tragedy.

In his 1786 poem *Resignation: Eine Phantasie*<sup>22</sup> we can discern the basic motifs that will later form the backbone of his historical thought. Although the title bears theological connotations its particular orientation is secular. The poem begins with an image of a bridge separating man and Eternity. The finite human being confronts Eternity, with the latter characterized as a judge [*Richterin*] and a requiter [*Vergelterin*], and requests his share of happiness in compensation for the unfulfilled promise of an earthly Arcadia, i.e. the state of bliss in nature which is now forgone. Eternity refuses him and transposes the fulfillment of his wish to an afterlife, demanding in exchange, in a pre-Faustian gloss, the sacrifice of his youth, here taking the form of his beloved. A third voice appears, the world [*die Welt*] (51), mocking

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<sup>20</sup> On the formation of modern historical consciousness, see: Koselleck (1985: 21-42)

<sup>21</sup> On Schiller's historical thought, see: Dann, Oellers, and Osterkamp (1995), Kerry (2007: 153-189); on the relationship between his historical thought and his dramatic work, see: Lamport (1998), Beiser (2005: 157-160).

<sup>22</sup> Schiller, SW 1, 130-133.

and criticizing the premises and promises of religion and eternity, which are revealed as nothing more than human political stratagems in the guise of metaphysics: ‘no corpse ever returned with a message from the great requiter’ (74-75). However, the hero remains deaf to the mundane warnings and repeats his demands. The apparently insoluble interplay between man and eternity is interrupted by the appearance of a *deus ex machina*, a nebulous entity named *Genius* (87), which pronounces the verdict: *Zwei Blumen blühen für den weisen Finder / Sie heißen Hoffnung und Genuß / Wer dieser Blumen eine brach, begehre / Die andre Schwester nicht* (89/92). The division between pleasure [*Genuß*] and hope [*Hoffnung*] modifies the prior ontological division between being and eternity and reinstates the question of our temporal realization but now the framework is wholly immanent: ‘World history is the world’s tribunal’ (95). Eternity has been rendered secular in the form of world history. The dichotomy between pleasure and hope reflects the view of a world divided between the material and limited perspective of our finiteness and an unknown historical horizon that represents the fulfillment of humanity’s destiny. The principle of hope prefigures the future and thus renders the present as the actual temporal state of man’s actualization: “What one refuses in a minute, no eternity redeems” (99-100). History, understood as a juridical authority, constitutes the criterion of human dwelling, in the sense that once humanity’s capabilities become immanent one has to rise to the task of unfolding his potential without getting lost in fleeting pleasures. However, it should be noted, that a latent danger lies in his conception of the unredeemable quality of what did not make the transition from potentiality to actuality and thus of what forms the content and consequently the axiological perspective of history as the world’s tribunal. The answer is not given in the poem but is implicitly present in the *Universalgeschichte* (1789).

In his newly emerging conception of history he stressed the necessity for a systematic apprehension of historical phenomena on the basis of an overarching and unifying understanding of history.<sup>23</sup> In his inaugural lecture *Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?* as a professor of history, delivered on 26 May 1789 at the University of Jena, a few weeks before the storming of Bastille, Schiller endorsed this view, especially in its

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<sup>23</sup> Herder (1768/2002: 259-260; 266-267)



distinctive appropriation in Kant's *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1786)<sup>24</sup>. In this lecture he postulated a teleological view of history in accordance with Enlightenment ideals. The aforementioned demand for systematicity is here realized by reason, i.e. philosophical understanding. The standpoint of reason has a double function; on one hand, it becomes the guiding thread in discerning coherence and continuity in the otherwise opaque proceedings of history,<sup>25</sup> and on the other, it provides humanity with a particular vision of its *telos*, more concretely in the sense of its quality not its determinate content. History follows the steps of mankind in the unfolding of reason through its sensuous education<sup>26</sup> to progressively higher forms of rationality. What is striking in his doctrine is that world-history is constructed retrospectively solely by the events that contributed towards the formation of the 'present consciousness', whereas any discrepancy in the face of lack of causal explanations is either disregarded or absorbed in the grand narrative of reason. Consequently, the present is elevated to an absolute historical perspective that recognizes as the content of world-history only what adheres to the idea of reason. The aforementioned danger now becomes clearer, what does not conform to the premises of the overall scheme does not reveal its truth and is abandoned to historical oblivion. To mitigate the one-sidedness of his approach one must try and empathise with the broader historical climate. The promises of Enlightenment had begun to bear fruit; faith and reason, despite their tumultuous relationship, had been working towards their reconciliation, while progress and peace seemed to be working side by side, giving rise to an ostensibly well founded optimism. It is in this spirit that we ought to understand Schiller's enthusiasm<sup>27</sup> and his call for a self-conscious 'acceleration' towards the future.

Be that as it may, construing Schiller as a full-blown optimist would be an overstatement. The essay *Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet* (1784) reveals

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<sup>24</sup> Schiller had read Kant's work in 1787, see: Letter to Körner, 29 August 1787. He explicitly follows him on the teleological principle of history and shares his 'cosmopolitan perspective'.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Herder's hermeneutic notion of 'Divination' in *Über Thomas Abbts Schriften* (1768) and in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele* (1778) (2002: 167-177; 187-244).

<sup>26</sup> The view of reason as emerging through the sensuous is put forward by Herder (1778/2002: 212). Kant provides a similar genealogy of the 'birth of reason' in his theory of 'social unsociability' (1786/2007: 111f.), which however is unsustainable within the architectonic of the first *Critique*.

<sup>27</sup> Prefiguring an aspect of Schiller's *Briefe*, Lessing was sceptical towards such predicates, especially in the 'absence' of enlightenment in the consciousness of the people, *GW* 9, 423.

his great sensitivity and awareness towards the cultural problems of his era. This often neglected text deserves our attention for a number of reasons. In his attempt to establish theatre's cardinal place in human affairs he proceeds to his very first formulation of art as the harmonious middle condition<sup>28</sup> between nature and reason:

“Human nature equally incapable of remaining in an animal state or of persisting in a state of refined intellectual work, demanded a middle condition, which would reconcile the two contradictory extremes, ease the severe tension into a gentle harmony, and facilitate the mutual transition from one state to the other. In general this is the province of the aesthetic sense, the sense of the beautiful.”<sup>29</sup>

Foreshadowing his analysis of the theory of drives in the *Briefe*, there is an obvious analogy on the one hand, between animal state and the *Stofftrieb*, and on the other, between intellectual activity and the *Formtrieb*. Furthermore, much in accordance with his later formulation, he perceives their harmonious unity as a dynamic relationship. Schiller's second move is to assign to theatre a broader sociopolitical function. He finds in religion the unifying ground of society that translates the maxims of authority into motives and actual behaviour, guaranteeing the unity and coherence of the state. It does so preeminently in a sensuous manner, namely through its vast theological imagery. He observes that theatre operates in a similar way, i.e. sensuously, and that in a period, such as his own, where religion, morality, and the state, seem unable to affect the people, it may prove to be of invaluable assistance. It provides us with an ideal resolution of what remains unresolved in reality and it upholds society's higher values even in their absence; justice is restored, morality prevails, and, moreover, it manages to reach domains where religion and the state refuse to enter, namely the sphere where our supposedly basic impulses seem to reign, a sphere that has been assigned to comedy and satire. The second important theme that the essay prefigures is the view that tragedy acquaints us with our fate and strengthens our fortitude:

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<sup>28</sup> The notion of *Mittelkraft* appears in a Cartesian manner in the first of his two medical dissertations, *Philosophie der Physiologie* (1779), see: Beiser (2005: 28), Martinson (2005: 30-31.), Kerry (2007: 45; 55).

<sup>29</sup> Schiller (1784/1994: 156).

The stage increases our awareness not only of human character, but also of fate, and it teaches us the great art of bearing our lot. [...] It is enough if inevitable disasters do not find us completely resourceless, if our courage and intelligence have already been exercised in similar circumstances, and our hearts have been steeled for the blow.<sup>30</sup>

The experience of tragedy is an apprenticeship in suffering; this is the basis of the focal argument of *Über das Erhabene*, with the significant difference that his current formulation lacks the metaphysical dimension that we find in the latter. But Schiller's principal interest lies in the intersubjective and political role of theatre. In accordance with the spirit of his age and the *Sturm und Drang* movement, he argues for the formation of a national cultural identity and finds in theatre the locus communis of such an endeavour. Theatre is conceived as a medium of enlightenment of the masses, while through its 'national character' it prepares and cultivates the idea of a unified nation. Paradoxically, he reaches his latter conclusion by superimposing his quasi-nationalistic tendencies, which resulted from the national identity crisis experienced by most Germans of his era as Germany was not a nation state in his time – and wouldn't be until 1871 under Bismarck – to a questionable reading of the Greeks:

What bound the Greeks so firmly together? What drew the people so irresistibly to the stage? Nothing other than the patriotic content of the plays, the Greek spirit that breathed in them, the great, overwhelming interest in the republic and in the development of humanity.<sup>31</sup>

While there is an obvious relation between Athenian democracy and the flourishing of tragedy,<sup>32</sup> it is hard to conceive the particular content of Greek tragedies as 'patriotic'; rather the opposite seems to be true, it is the universality and suprahistorical quality of the subjects

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>32</sup> The topic has been extensively researched, see: Goldhill (1986: Chapter 3) for a general overview; D. M. Carter's (ed.) *Why Athens?: A reappraisal of tragic politics* (2011) comprises a series of informative essays that cover a wide range of relevant subjects by further elaborating on the premises set by Winkler's and Zeitlin's (eds.) *Nothing to do with Dionysus?: Athenian drama in its social context* (1990); on Sophocles and Athenian democracy, see Beer (2014).

they bring forward that underwrites their permeating presence up to our days. True, we can discern a common thread running through Greece that could provide us with a broad indication of a *patria*, primarily through common language and religion and secondly, by means of festivals like the Panathenaea and the Panhellenic Games which citizens of all city states could attend.<sup>33</sup> Yet, this begs the question; it is a different thing to argue about the conditions that led to birth of an art-form and its social context in Greece during 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and another to propose that tragedy's subject-matter consists in, or even evolves around, a content that could be apprehended as a patriotic in a manner vaguely similar to the Homeric epics. Nevertheless, whether a rhetorical device or an instance of creative misunderstanding, ancient Greece occupies a central position in Schiller's thought and will emerge as a both historical and ideal antipode to modernity, as an indispensable moment to the formation of modern self-consciousness.

Schiller's understanding of antiquity consists in both historical and speculative formulations. What seems to be at first a rather practical, literary orientation towards the Greeks, gradually evolves to a theoretical appropriation that seeks to overcome the initial antagonistic duality in the form of a synthesis. In other terms, depending on his particular aims, he shifts from the view that stresses their historical specificity to the one underlining their ideality. The transition from one standpoint to the other occurs after his systematic study of Kant. Yet, while such a distinction serves taxonomic purposes it is by no means absolute and this is most evidently demonstrated in his last two major treatises.

Winckelmann's view of classical antiquity in *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764) exerted a gravitational pull on the following generation and Schiller was no exception to the rule. But while he recognized the achievement of the Greeks, he was also influenced by Herder's astute observations on the limits of such an idealization.<sup>34</sup> If the uniqueness of the Greek moment was rendered historical and thus relative, there was no particular reason to

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<sup>33</sup> It is important to underline the existence of the Panhellenic sanctuaries like Delphi and Dodona which were also open to all Greek speaking individuals as they often feature in Greek tragedies. On their significance with regards to the notion of pan-Hellenism, see Morgan (1993).

<sup>34</sup> See Herder (1774/2002: 287-289; 339-340); On Herder's reading of Winckelmann, see: Harloe (2013: 205-243).

adhere to an *a priori* inferiority of the moderns; on the contrary, they could ‘compete’ with them on their own terrain. The attainability of such a goal had been long proved by Shakespeare.<sup>35</sup>

In his 1788 review of Goethe’s *Iphigenie auf Tauris* Schiller has nothing but praise for his towering counterpart. He remarks that the work exhibits a remarkable equilibrium between ancient and modern virtues but most importantly it surpasses the Euripidean original by means of its more noble and enlightened conception of morality.<sup>36</sup> The vindication of the modern against the ancient worldview, on the basis of its advanced rationality and morality, is repeated in his criticism of ancient Greek tragedy in *Über die tragische Kunst*. In the absence of a teleological substratum, fate and necessity appear as the determining factors in the *lysis* of ancient Greek tragedies, undermining our appeal for reason and morality. For Schiller such an outcome runs against the modern understanding of the subject as ‘free and self-determining’ and it certainly does not represent the actual potential of our moral capabilities.<sup>37</sup> The shortcomings of the ancients apprehended as the intellectual, rational and moral, superiority of the moderns, led Schiller to the conclusion that tragedy is the proper ground where the latter can overcome the former.<sup>38</sup> The same line of thought is pursued in his essay *Die Gesetzgebung des Lykurgus und Solon* (1790) where he discusses the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the two legislators. Initially delivered as a lecture at the University of Jena in August 1789, the essay must be understood in the context of the French Revolution.<sup>39</sup> Even though he praises the relative merits of both, namely the individual freedom of the Athenians and the lawfulness of the Spartans, he recognizes that an absolute expression of freedom and law leads inescapably to the demise of the state and thus both paradigms are to be avoided in modernity. Although he does not make the case for the superiority of the modern political regime, implicit in his argument is the view that a future state should sublimate the one-sidedness

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<sup>35</sup> Herder’s *Shakespeare* (1773) essay is representative of this view.

<sup>36</sup> Under the influence of Aristotle and Sophocles, Schiller will reconsider his initial assessment, characterizing the work as profoundly modern and un-Greek, see: Letter to Körner, 21 January 1802.

<sup>37</sup> Schiller, *Essays* 9-10.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>39</sup> See: Beiser (1992: 90-92).

of freedom and law to an harmonious unity; again, the potential of modernity outreaches the achievements of the Greeks.

Schiller's 'idealistic' understanding of ancient Greece is mapped onto the reformulation of his initial teleological conception of history into a triadic dialectic movement. This tripartite model consists of i) the initial state of unity between nature and reason, i.e. the age of the Greeks ii) the state of culture where everything stands divided under analytical reason iii) the ideal future state, namely the aesthetic state. This conception is expounded in the *Briefe* and is implicitly present, in a somewhat different light, in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* (1795).

In the *Briefe* Schiller adopts an hermeneutic standpoint, apprehending antiquity not in its historical actuality but mostly as a means of contextualizing the present and articulating the future. In a speculative sense, the Greeks represent both our origins and our destination. However, the prefiguration of our future in the Greek ideality should not be understood as a call for a return to a past state nor as a mimetic process. In the VI letter of the *Briefe* we find his more elaborate exegesis of the subject. The turn to ancient Greece is brought about by the cultural critique of the present. The development of civilization has necessarily<sup>40</sup> led to the fragmentation of the subject and to the reification of his social relations. This double process, both subjective and objective, is manifested in various forms, which could be subsumed under the unmediatedness of the particular that renders impossible any substantial unity of the whole; specialization of knowledge, division of labour, instrumentalization of reason, are only instances of the fundamental discordance of modern life which has its origins in the initial rupture between nature and reason. In this context, the Greeks represent the opposite condition, that of a fundamental unity between subject and generality, an all-encompassing nature in which reason and sensibility were both complementary and indiscernible. Modernity finds in antiquity the remembrance of an ideal humanity in terms of its relative completeness:

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<sup>40</sup> Schiller argues that the break of the original unity of the faculties was necessary for the development of our capabilities, *Essays*, 102-103. Cf. Kant (1784/2007: 111-112).

“With the Greeks, humanity undoubtedly reached a maximum of excellence, which could neither be maintained at that level nor rise any higher. [...] not rise any higher, because only a specific degree of clarity is compatible with a specific fullness and warmth. This degree the Greeks had attained; and had they wished to proceed to a higher stage of development, they would, like us, have had to surrender their wholeness of being and pursue truth along separate paths.<sup>41</sup>

What is actually prefigured in ancient Greece and represents its ideality, is not the determinate content of the unity but the unity *per se*, in other words, the overall structural and formal relations of life, the inner configuration of reality, man and nature, that brings forth the ideal of humanity. It must be clear that insofar the Greeks represent both a historical and an ideal moment in Schiller’s triadic conception of history, their relationship to modernity extends further than a binary opposition, as their ideality is contained in the third stage of the movement, sublated to an ideal form of higher rationality and morality.<sup>42</sup>

## II. The theory of tragedy

The increasing importance of the idea of freedom, as inaugurated by Kant, in the wake of the French revolution and its reappropriation within the context of aesthetics, along with the suggestion of a potential ‘aesthetic reconciliation’ between the realms of theoretical and practical reason, form the broader conceptual framework in which the investigations of the

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>42</sup> A similar idea is expounded in the tripartite schematism can be discerned in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* where he writes: “They *are* what we *were*; they are what we *should become* once more. We were nature like them, and our culture should lead us along the path of reason and freedom back to nature.” *Ibid.* (180-181). Schiller translates historical periods into types of consciousness, or, in other terms, into creative principles; however, despite the apparent similarity with the triadic movement of the *Briefe*, the internal dialectic of the work does not allow an absolute dichotomy between the naïve and the sentimental and thus the two terms do not correspond in a direct manner to antiquity and modernity; an ample example is that Shakespeare is categorized under the heading of the naïve. The problem of the justification of the naïve within modernity restrict the Greeks-naïve affinity to a mere analogy, see: Pugh (1996: 382-390). Notwithstanding the limitations of a reductive interpretation, one cannot disregard the fact that the underlying logic of his project belongs to a broader movement that tried to overcome the contradictory character of modern art by turning to the Greeks. In this latter sense, and to the extent one allows a reading of the Greeks into the category of the naïve, Schiller’s naïve-sentimental dialectic reveals a profoundly emancipatory understanding of antiquity.

nature of tragedy and the tragic took place during the late eighteenth century. Schiller's theoretical contribution to these discussions consists in five essays,<sup>43</sup> which can be distinguished into two categories on the basis of a shift from an emotive to a cognitive understanding of tragedy. Notwithstanding this general distinction, it should be noted, given Kant's ever-present influence and Schiller's implicit dissatisfaction with his overly subjective aesthetics (*Kallias-Briefe*) and moral rigorism (*Über Anmut und Würde*), that it is questionable whether one could treat the first three texts that form his early theory of tragedy under the same framework. Therefore, without questioning the validity of the basic distinction, I begin with the examination of his first two essays on tragedy, which essentially remain on Kantian grounds, and then proceed to *Über das Pathetische*, where he incorporates elements from his aesthetic and ethical writings and thus departs from Kantian orthodoxy.

In *Über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen* Schiller postulates that the primary aim of the arts is to produce pleasure and he sets out to establish tragedy as the genre *par excellence* that accomplishes this goal. The question of why we take pleasure in witnessing suffering was a common-place in eighteen-century aesthetics and the acutest of commentators seem to agree that tragic pleasure consists in a 'mixed' feeling involving both pleasure and displeasure.<sup>44</sup> Although Schiller's analysis of the phenomenology of pleasure is reminiscent of Mendelssohn's in *Rhapsodie*, especially with regard to his thesis that the pleasure we take in purposiveness consists in 'the awareness of a perfection',<sup>45</sup> the underlying paradigm is Kantian. He endorses Kant's view that the aesthetic can only be moral in virtue of its freedom and that it should not be subject to any external determination,<sup>46</sup> whereas, in his description of how such a free aesthetic pleasure arises, he elicits, in a rather abstract manner, the very structure of the Kantian free play of our faculties:

"I call a free pleasure that which brings into play the spiritual forces –reason and imagination– and which awakens in us a sentiment by the representation of an

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<sup>43</sup> I do not proceed to a discussion of *Vom Erhabenen* as it recapitulates Kant's account of the sublime and does not offer any insight on his understanding of tragedy.

<sup>44</sup> Burke (1759/1968: 40); Mendelssohn (1761/1997: 144-145).

<sup>45</sup> Beiser (2005: 255-256).

<sup>46</sup> On Schiller's understanding of the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, see: Guyer (1996: 116-130).



idea, in contradistinction to physical or sensuous pleasure, which places our soul under the dependence of the blind forces of nature, and where sensation is immediately awaked in us by a physical cause.”<sup>47</sup>

However, contrary to Kant’s general formulation regarding the “subjective play of the powers of the mind” that talks about the interplay between imagination and understanding in beauty, he proceeds by reading into the phenomenology of free pleasure the structure of the Kantian sublime which rests upon the contradistinctive coming together of imagination and reason.<sup>48</sup> By means of the aforementioned homology Schiller is in fact tacitly implying that the ground of the highest degree of pleasure must be sought where the sublime is the representative mode of feeling. He observes that the pleasure we draw from the sublime is counter-purposive<sup>49</sup> as it is produced by an initial feeling of displeasure and proceeds to a rather Kantian restatement of the notion.<sup>50</sup> He restricts himself in the analysis of the dynamically sublime and describes it as a mixed feeling, consisting, on the one hand, in the feeling of our physical impotence and frailty against a powerful object that appears to us as threatening our physical well-being and on the other hand, in the feeling of our moral superiority against it, a feeling that gives rise to the idea of our freedom and autonomy as moral agents.<sup>51</sup>

After having established the relationship between pleasure and the sublime he finds in tragedy the art that combines such a sublime representation with the highest pleasure possible. Before proceeding to his analysis of tragedy, it should be noted that Schiller’s worldview seems to be permeated by an idea of a moral theodicy. Suffering remains unjustifiable insofar as it is not integrated in a moral resolution. Therefore, pleasure in suffering can only be vindicated if there exists a moral purposiveness that justifies it. We experience the greatest pleasure when such a purposiveness clashes with the forces of nature but nonetheless prevails; in other words, the highest degree of pleasure arises out of the conflict between our moral nature and forces

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<sup>47</sup> Schiller, *SW* 5, 360.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Kant (1790/2000: 5:258). For an informative discussion regarding the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in Kant, see Guyer (1982: 753-783).

<sup>49</sup> Schiller, *SW* 5, 362: ‘eine Zweckmäßigkeit zu empfinden geben, die eine Zweckwidrigkeit voraussetzt.’

<sup>50</sup> See Kant (1790/2000: (§28).

<sup>51</sup> Schiller, *SW* 5, 362.

that threaten to undermine us *qua* physical beings. Yet, the most tragically potent opposition consists in the clash between two moral agents where they both act out of duty but one necessarily succumbs, in other words, in the opposition of moral demands.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising that in his formulation of the various forms of tragic pleasure we always encounter a similar moral resolution.

The essay has often been highlighted for suggesting a revision of the Aristotelian canon, later adopted by Lessing, regarding the moral nature of the hero.<sup>53</sup> Schiller provides us with two instances that potentially undermine it. First, he envisages a tragedy where the hero is immoral; however, he allows such a 'transgression' only insofar as the hero shows repentance for his past crimes. Second, he observes that we take pleasure in purposiveness even when it is found disconnected from morality. We indulge in Richard III and Iago's intrigues solely in virtue of the purposiveness they exhibit; nonetheless, as soon as we apprehend them as moral agents the initial pleasure gives place to a feeling of resentment and aversion. Moreover, he remarks that this 'natural propriety', i.e. non-moral purposiveness, can only be a source of a 'perfect pleasure', and by perfect we ought to understand tragic pleasure, to the extent that it eventually succumbs to morality. It follows that Schiller's revision of the canon is less radical than it seems. In the first example he underlines that repentance 'can only exist if an incorruptible sense of justice exists at the bottom of the criminal heart',<sup>54</sup> therefore, contrary to appearances, we are dealing with an essentially moral person, maybe not of 'average virtue' but not, in any sense, utterly immoral. In the second, he explicitly restricts the pleasure we take to a specific perspective of the 'devious' heroes, one that leaves the question of morality aside, but most importantly, he does not identify that sort of pleasure with tragic pleasure *per se*, it is rather a deficient form of pleasure that can only be rendered perfect through its relation to morality. Thus, although he proceeds to an expansion of the canon regarding the nature of the tragic

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<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that such an opposition is not possible within the Kantian context of the second *Critique* and thus Schiller is either not attentive to Kant's theory of duty or he is already departing from Kant before the *Kallias-Briefe* and *Über Anmut und Würde*.

<sup>53</sup> Sharpe (1991: 126); Beiser (2005: 247).

<sup>54</sup> Schiller, SW 5, 367.

hero, his understanding of tragedy remains preeminently reconciliatory.<sup>55</sup> If he argues for a broader conception of the tragic hero, he does so out of his practical considerations of tragedy, trying to find his place between German neoclassicism and the *Sturm und Drang* movement and not because he questions the long tradition of moral interpretations of tragedy.<sup>56</sup>

In his next essay on the subject of tragedy, *Über die Tragische Kunst*, Schiller develops the same line of thought and gives an account of tragedy that closely resembles the Kantian sublime, while the second part of the essay is devoted to a rather Aristotelian exposition of the poetics of tragedy. He proceeds by postulating the interest we take in tragic pleasure as universal on the basis of extensive empirical evidence. However, a stronger, yet implicit, claim on the universality of tragic pleasure may be discerned in the particular phenomenology of the sublime feeling:

“The interest with which we dwell on the portrayals of such themes is universal. Naturally, this holds only for the emotion *communicated or felt afterwards*. For the close relation of the *original* emotion to our instinct for happiness usually concerns and preoccupies us too much to leave room for the pleasure imparted by the emotion of itself, free from any connection with self-interest.”<sup>57</sup>

Without making the point explicit, he is referring to Kant’s suggestion that after the initial feeling of displeasure there ought to be a conscious judgment underlining ‘the superiority of reason’<sup>58</sup> to our mere natural being and dispositions. The universal validity of the judgment lies in the feeling of our moral superiority qua rational beings against the determinations of nature and our mere feelings of self-interest.<sup>59</sup> In particular, tragic pleasure derives from the awakening of our faculty of practical reason, whose highest activity is manifested in the state of its complete freedom, that is, when we perceive ourselves as both, superior to, and independent from,

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<sup>55</sup> See: Steiner (1980: 173-185).

<sup>56</sup> On the question regarding the relation between tragedy and morality, see: Gardner (2003: 218-259).

<sup>57</sup> Schiller, *Essays* 2.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Kant, *CPJ* 5:257; 260-261. The point, in Kantian context, is discussed by Guyer (1996: 212-214).

<sup>59</sup> Schiller will underline the fact, as Kant had done before him, that insofar the sublime involves the faculties of reason and imagination, receptiveness to the sublime, from an anthropological perspective, might not be universal as we cannot postulate the same level of development of the faculties in all human beings; nonetheless, this does not undermine its moral universality, see: *Essays* 4.

nature. Having established, via its affinity to the sublime, that tragic pleasure is inextricably linked to morality, he proceeds to the definition of tragedy as: ‘The particular art that establishes the pleasure of sympathy as its purpose.’<sup>60</sup> It achieves its purpose ‘through an *imitation of nature*’<sup>61</sup> and in particular, through the representation of the conflict between morality and our sensuous nature. The phenomenology of the pleasure we derive from tragedy consists of an initial feeling of displeasure –counter-purposiveness– that is necessarily superseded by the representation of a higher moral purposiveness.<sup>62</sup>

Tragedy according to Schiller affirms our citizenship in the realm of practical reason and reconciles our discordant being with the moral and teleological harmony of the world.<sup>63</sup> What is puzzling about Schiller’s account is that he understates the importance of tragic suffering. In accordance with his understanding of historical dissonance in his writings of the 1780’s, suffering must be rationalized and subsumed under a broader moral teleology. In his relatively optimistic worldview suffering in itself is something fundamentally irrational, a condition that contradicts and potentially undermines the very foundations of such a worldview and thus it ought to be sublated in a higher, moral form if it is to be recognized. Fate and necessity, the ancient perpetrators and instigators of tragedy, are apprehended as inadequate conditions that contravene and subvert our modern –moral and rational– understanding of the human subject and thus ‘leave something to be desired’<sup>64</sup> from Greek tragedy; therefore, antiquity supposedly falls short in providing the necessary moral affirmation of our place in the world. Despite this *prima facie* objection the problem runs deeper. Apart from the obvious fact that his position entails a radical revision of the tragic canon, it restricts tragedy to an interplay of no metaphysical depth that is exhausted within the dialectic of the sublime. It follows that in this context tragic suffering is rendered as something superfluous, a mere hyperbole in sublime moral striving. Schiller’s conception of tragedy could not proceed

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

any further insofar it remained restricted within the Kantian epistemological limits of knowledge.

The year 1793 marked an incisive moment in Schiller's theoretical oeuvre for two reasons. First, the execution of Louis XVI resulted in his disenchantment with the French Revolution<sup>65</sup> and dispelled any concrete political hopes he had for the immediate future. Second, he moved from strict Kantianism to an antagonistic and creative relationship with his philosophical mentor. These two factors contributed to a relative darkening of his worldview, a shift that is also reflected in his conception of tragedy. Before returning to the subject of tragedy, Schiller had taken issue with Kant's aesthetic and moral theory in *Kallias-Briefe* and *Über Anmut und Würde* and had arrived at a series of observations that went beyond the strict letter of the latter's doctrine. These observations were implicitly integrated in *Über das Pathetische* which signifies a significant departure from his earlier theory of tragedy. At the most general level we witness a transition from an emotive to a cognitive understanding of tragedy. The purpose of art, and of tragedy in particular, is to represent the supersensible, that is, freedom in its independence from sensuousness and it does so by portraying our intellectual resistance to suffering. One can immediately discern here the overtones of 'Freiheit in der Erscheinung'<sup>66</sup> and the concept of dignity,<sup>67</sup> however, what is compelling, is the cardinal importance he ascribes to suffering.

In contrast to his earlier writings that reduced suffering to a mere moment in the process of moral affirmation, he now argues that pathos must be presented in all its force and

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<sup>65</sup> See: Letter to Körner, 8 February 1793.

<sup>66</sup> Schiller is implicitly alluding to a close affinity between beauty and the sublime in their ability to represent the supersensible. This affinity originates in Kant's account of aesthetic symbolism (*CPJ*, §59), in his thesis that beauty exhibits aesthetic ideas (§49), and in his understanding of the sublime as revealing our 'supersensible destination' (§29 5:268). Although Schiller's formulation of beauty as 'freedom in appearance' seems to be performing an analogous function to the sublime, he is careful to distinguish, following Kant's paradigm, between their different modes of representation of the supersensible; the counter-purposiveness involved in the representation of the sublime is a negative representation, see: *Essays* 51. On Kant's aesthetic symbolism and the sublime's supersensible orientation, see: Zammito: (1992: 269-291); on the difference between beauty's and the sublime's mode of representation of the supersensible, see: Alison (2001: 340-341).

<sup>67</sup> See: Schiller (1793/2005: 161): 'Dignity is therefore demanded and demonstrated more in *suffering* (pathos) [...] Because dignity is an expression of opposition to natural instinct made by the independent mind, natural instinct must be seen as a power that makes the opposition necessary;'

power in a manner that overwhelms the individual's sensuous nature. Suffering is now understood as a *sine qua non* for the emergence of our intellectual superiority.<sup>68</sup> *Prima facie*, his insistence on the necessity of absolute pathos seems to be guided by a practical consideration regarding the unnaturalness of French drama in which true suffering remains concealed behind propriety and courtly conventions, leaving us with a rather partial representation of what it is to be a human being. In *Über Anmut und Würde* Schiller postulated that the perfection of our humanity consists in the harmonious unity between reason and sensibility, a state where duty and inclination no longer conflict because the former has become second nature and thus we are able to act instinctively out of duty; he named the above configuration of the psyche *beautiful soul*.<sup>69</sup> Although the connotations are moral, what is implied is wholeness of character, or, in other words, a complete and unbiased expression of our humanity. Schiller holds that the Greeks represent the achievement of such a unity<sup>70</sup> and most importantly, that they were able to distinguish between the essential and incidental features of our humanity. However, in his discussion of the Greeks he focuses mainly on the primacy they ascribed to suffering and on the unrestricted expression of passion that they managed to contain by willingly succumbing to it. It follows that if the Greeks are to be praised, on the one hand, for discerning what is essential in our humanity and expressing it in its totality and on the other, for giving suffering a cardinal place in art, then Schiller is implicitly accepting that pathos constitutes an essential element of our humanity, something more than a mere dramatic appendix, an existential condition of being, or at least, and more plausibly, he is promoting a more metaphysical understanding of tragedy than it might initially seem. This metaphysical element will be further elucidated in his suggestion that tragedy provides us with an insight to our supersensible nature.

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<sup>68</sup> Schiller's understanding of suffering has undergone an almost complete reversal from his view in *Vom Erhabenen*: 'It is not absolutely necessary that one actually feel the strength of soul within oneself to assert one's moral freedom in the face of immanent danger.' *Essays*, 43.

<sup>69</sup> Schiller, (1793/2005: 152-154).

<sup>70</sup> The closest we get to an identification of the Greeks with his notion of the *beautiful soul* is when he remarks: 'The Greek is never ashamed of nature, he grants sensuousness the full complement of its rights and is nevertheless certain that he will never be enslaved by it.' *Essays* 46. The aforementioned certainty cannot but be the effect of an harmony between reason and sensibility that ensures that the expression of the sensuous will remain within its limits.

Schiller, argued, however, that the portrayal of suffering does not represent *per se* the objective of the art of tragedy,<sup>71</sup> this is but the first rule of tragedy with the second being the moral resistance to it; suffering and the resistance to it have equal merit in the representation of the tragic. Thus, only when the latter comes in direct confrontation with our passions,<sup>72</sup> do we gain consciousness of our supersensible destination. The whole phenomenology of this process resembles that of the sublime; the attack on our sensuous nature posits us in a state of passion and our moral self resorts to the ideas of reason in order to make manifest our independence qua rational and moral beings from the dominion of nature and establish us as citizens of a supersensible realm:

“In the disharmony between those features of animal nature stamped by the law of necessity and those determined by the spirit in its spontaneousness, the presence of a principle *transcending the senses* in a human being becomes recognizable, a principle that can set a limit to the workings of nature and thus, precisely for that reason, makes apparent its distinctness from nature [...] The more decisively and the more violently the passion expresses itself in the *animal realm*, yet without being able to maintain the same force in the *human realm*, the more evident the latter realm becomes.<sup>73</sup>

The analogy he discerns between the degree of pathos and the self-consciousness of our moral self seems to further underline the point regarding the importance he ascribes to pathetic suffering. Yet, what remains unanswered is the specific content of the principle that transcends the senses.

In *Über das Pathetische* Schiller postulates an intimate relationship between tragedy and freedom in a manner that disentangles the former from its relation to morality. He notices that

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<sup>71</sup> See: Schiller, *Essays* 53n.

<sup>72</sup> Schiller proceeds to an ambiguous distinction between passions and our sensuousness by dividing the latter, on one hand, on the part of our sensibility where our will has no influence [sensuousness] and on the other, on the part of our sensuous nature than we can contain and master [passions]. His intention is to underline the fact that resistance against pathetic suffering can only be achieved through the ideas of reason and never through physical resistance.

<sup>73</sup> Schiller, *Essays* 53.

our response to the phenomenon of tragedy is not necessarily conditioned by moral criteria and distinguishes on one hand, between aesthetic and moral judgment, and on the other, between the hero's moral character and moral vocation. He employs the distinction he had made in *Über Anmut und Würde* between *Wille* and *Willkür*,<sup>74</sup> i.e. will under the command of practical reason and will expressed as the unregulated freedom to choose, and observes that the interest we take in tragedy lies preeminently not in the individual's actual moral behaviour but in his moral capability. It follows, then, that as a moral judgment would potentially conflict with the particular interest we take in tragedy, namely, moral capability, it is only through aesthetic judgment that we can exploit the full potential of tragedy, that is, its expression of freedom in itself [*Willkür*], 'a principle within us that is incomparably great and infinite.'<sup>75</sup>

### III. Ideal and tragic education

Schiller's turn to aesthetics in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution has not been unequivocal. The turbulent and traumatic years that followed the otherwise much applauded storming of the Bastille would suggest that a direct engagement with the political and social issues that emerged should have been an imperative for any intellectual of the age. In this context, Schiller's deliberate decision not to address, at least directly, the pressing questions of his day, but rather devote himself to the seemingly peripheral and unrelated subject of aesthetics, could be interpreted as a retreat to the realm of the ideal. At first glance, such criticism is understandable and self-explanatory, however, one ought to try and apprehend Schiller's move within the broader historical framework.

It has been convincingly argued that the concept of revolution in the eighteenth century differed significantly from the one developed after the French Revolution<sup>76</sup> and we can identify three particular aspects of this difference that are relevant to Schiller's aesthetic turn and

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<sup>74</sup> The distinction is made by Kant in *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793) but it remains uncertain whether at that point Schiller had knowledge of the work.

<sup>75</sup> Schiller, *Essays* 65n.

<sup>76</sup> The observations regarding the pre-1789 understanding of the concept of revolution are mostly drawn by Koselleck's analysis, see: (1985: 43-58).



especially to the project of the *Briefe* and its following addendum, *Über das Erhabene*.<sup>77</sup> First, there seemed to be an overall optimism regarding the outcome of a future revolution grounded on the experience of the 1688 revolution in England and the American War of Independence. Especially the example set by the former gave rise to the hope that such a development would not necessarily involve bloodshed. Schiller shared the expectations of his era and in this light his call for a conscious acceleration towards the future and his recurring praise for the state of peace achieved in Europe seemed well-founded. Second, the prevalent understanding of the concept did not suggest a radical undermining of the status-quo nor did it entail questioning the traditional political and social values, on the contrary, it signified the transition between predetermined forms of governing that succeeded one another indefinitely, reflecting a cyclical view of political reform. Third, the very idea that the lower classes would claim political power and authority for themselves remained firmly beyond the collective imagination of the pre-revolutionary agenda.<sup>78</sup> The course of the French Revolution would mark a caesura that redefined the totality of prevalent beliefs and aspirations. At first glance, Schiller's dramas of the 1780's, especially *Die Räuber* and *Fiesco*, would suggest that he would endorse the ongoing developments, however, Schiller was from the very start skeptical about violence and 'injustice' as a means to an end,<sup>79</sup> whereas he always seemed to vindicate the exceptional individual against any form of collective organization.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, even at his most radical, he never overcame the latent bourgeois limitations of his thought<sup>81</sup> and insisted that any sort of reform should be

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<sup>77</sup> On Schiller and the French Revolution, see: Pugh (1989).

<sup>78</sup> Arendt (1990: 41).

<sup>79</sup> Towards the end of *Die Räuber* Karl Moor in a crisis of conscience cries out: 'O über mich Narren, der ich wädhete die Welt durch Greuel zu verschönern, und die Gesetze durch Gesetzlosigkeit aufrecht zu halten.' Schiller, SW 1, 617.

<sup>80</sup> See his letter to Caroline von Beulwitz, 27 November, 1788, where he contrasts the individual to the state and declares the former as the highest principle of social life.

<sup>81</sup> In 1830 Wilhelm von Humboldt proceeded to the publication of his correspondence with Schiller that took place mostly between 1794 and 1797; as an addendum he included an evaluative essay on the man and his work entitled *Über Schiller und den Gang seiner Geistesentwicklung*. It had been twenty-five years since the great poet's death, a distance which allowed Humboldt to deviate from a typical eulogy, if only for the sake of appearances, and include some insightful remarks. Particularly relevant here is the following: "In *Anmuth und Würde* und in den *Briefen über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen* ist diese Vorstellungsweise ausführlich dargelegt. Ich zweifle, dass diese, mit den gehaltreichsten Ideen und einer seltenen Schönheit des Vertrags ausgestatteten Aufsätze jetzt noch häufig gelesen werden, aber es ist in vieler Rücksicht zu bedauern. Zwar sind beide Werke, und namentlich die Briefe, nicht von dem Vorwurfe frei zu sprechen, dass Schiller, um seine Behauptungen fest

the outcome of a process guided by an ‘enlightened’ few.<sup>82</sup> It follows that, the post-1793 developments of the French Revolution could not have been met with enthusiasm from his part.

Yet, what seems to be at first a flight from the actual world turns out to be a substantially political move. Given the primacy of the notion of freedom in Schiller’s thought and understanding that in his eyes the possibilities for its establishment in the domain of politics were radically undermined by the particular course of the Revolution, it was pertinent for him to create the necessary conceptual space that would safeguard these very possibilities against the contradictions of the present. The task of the *Briefe* was to diagnose the cultural antinomies

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zu begründen, einen zu strengen und abstracten Weg gewählt, und es sich zu sehr versagt hat, seinen Gegenstand auf eine in der Anwendung fruchtbarere Weise zu behandeln, ohne doch dadurch den Forderungen einer Deduction bloss aus Begriffen wirklich zu genügen” GS (6: 501). Humboldt’s main line of criticism focuses on Schiller’s method for being too “strict” and “abstract” and thus preventing him from grasping his subject in a more productive way. Humboldt’s commentary does not tell us how Schiller’s particular approach undermined his effort nor does he specify what exactly would have been a more fruitful apprehension of the content of the *Briefe*. Notwithstanding, we might be able to understand what Humboldt had in mind by comparing his friendly reproach to the valorisation of Schiller’s contribution in art and aesthetics that follows it. In particular, his exaltation of the importance of the *Briefe* is based primarily on Schiller’s analysis of i) the concept of beauty ii) aesthetics iii) the foundations of art. By means of contradistinction it follows that it might be not wholly implausible to deduce that what was missing from the treatise was a firmer and more objective mediation of the sphere of aesthetics so as to bring forward its social formation and function, i.e. the ideal (art and aesthetics and thus the project of aesthetic education) remained unmediated. By apprehending Schiller’s theoretical endeavours post-1793 as latently bourgeois I wish to underline that in the face of political upheaval that followed the French Revolution he did not engage with the actual conditions of the social fabric but proceeded to a cultural diagnosis “from above” and restricted his remedy to the ones that could join him in his privileged perspective. Adorno’s designation of bourgeois *ratio* is suggestive: “The compensatory purpose of systems: *ratio*, which had smashed the feudal order and its intellectual reflex, panicked at the sight of the subsequent ruins as the bourgeoisie panicked politically – it was terrified by the chaos that continued to lurk beneath the surface of its own power base, growing stronger in proportion to its own violence. The incomplete emancipation fears the more complete one. Where something proclaims freedom but refuses to go the whole way it produces only its caricature and discredits the genuine freedom. Because of that it is forced to exaggerate its own autonomy at the level of theory, expanding it into a system that resembled its own coercive mechanisms. Bourgeois *ratio* pretended to reproduce from within itself the order that externally it had negated” (2008: 125). Although Schiller had been sympathetic towards the cause of the revolution, its subsequent distortion led him to a reflective folding back to the domain of aesthetics in order to preserve the possibility of objective political freedom in the subjective notion of an aesthetic education. The rallying cry of latter, insofar it proceeds unmediated by the concrete social substratum, results to the doubling of the malaise it discerns in a regulative ideal and a detached perspective of the world, neither of which do justice to Schiller’s original intentions. For an overall reading of Schiller’s writings vis-à-vis the political element, see Beiser (2005: 133-4).

<sup>82</sup> In his study on the revolution of the Netherlands (1566–1648), *Geschichte des Abfalls der Vereinigten Niederlande* (1788), although Schiller is supportive of their cause, one should bear in mind that the revolution was led by members of the aristocracy, see: Beiser (1993: 88-89).

of his era and offer a solution in the sphere of the ideal, whereas in *Über das Erhabene* we find a more imminent and realistic answer to how one can dwell in the presence of disaster; the two texts are complementary and together they form Schiller's most penetrating contribution to the problems of modernity.

With the exception of a few ambiguous scattered remarks and the undeveloped notion of 'energetic beauty' the *Briefe* remain silent concerning the sublime and the phenomenon of tragedy. Schiller's decision to distinguish between two forms of beauty, melting and energizing, is by no means imposed by the overall architectonic of the *Briefe* in which beauty is apprehended preeminently as a synthetic/methectic principle,<sup>83</sup> one of union and harmony that emerges out of conflicting principles. It follows that a subsequent distinction of the notion and a further analysis of the two distinctive forms of beauty would run counter to the primary understanding of the notion and thus his silence on the form of 'energetic beauty' should not be understood as mere negligence. Furthermore, his statement that the project of aesthetic education is an ideal to be (hopefully) accomplished within the next hundred years along with the rather elitist connotations of the concluding XXVII letter regarding the actuality of the aesthetic condition and the actualization of the 'aesthetic state', leave something to be desired from the overall project.

*Über das Erhabene* explores what was tacitly left unanswered in the *Briefe* and brings full circle Schiller's project of aesthetic education. He begins by reasserting the implicit conclusion he had reached in *Über das Pathetische*, namely that free will is the essential characteristic of human beings, but now the discussion takes place within the ontological context of our finitude. The factuality of death potentially undermines our self-understanding as beings that will in an absolute manner and thus negates our freedom.<sup>84</sup> Unable to physically overcome our finitude we ought to sublimate it by destroying it conceptually, that is, by

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<sup>83</sup> Pugh's account of the paradoxical appearance of 'energizing beauty' is that Schiller is subsuming the sublime under the heading of beauty (1996: 306). However, the absence of any substantial analysis of the notion of 'energizing beauty' could only make sense if Schiller was in fact identifying the sublime with beauty and thus any further analysis of the former would be superfluous. It remains questionable whether the two terms correspond to each other. Here I concur with Billings' reading of Zelle (2014: 89).

<sup>84</sup> Adorno offers an interesting interpretation on how Schiller's concept of tragedy is mapped onto Kantian dualism, see: (2001: 187).

‘submitting to it voluntarily.’<sup>85</sup> This can be accomplished either through moral culture or by following an aesthetic path that acquaints us with our sublime capability. This latter option bring us closer to tragedy’s quasi-ontological cathartic effect. Schiller develops an apparently progressive narrative according to which beauty discloses us to freedom within the realm of phenomena, however, restricted by its sensuousness, as soon as we dwell beyond its territory it reaches its limits and at that point it is the sublime that guides us in the sphere of reason and morality.<sup>86</sup> Through the experience of the sublime we gain a momentary insight to our ‘absolute moral capability’<sup>87</sup> and manage to break free from the dominion of nature. For Schiller the voluntary submission to our finitude and thus its moral negation, consists in the mastery of the sublime perspective which is accomplished by a form of apprenticeship in ‘tragic education’.

The specific content of this education has a theoretical and a practical counterpart. The first lies in his suggestion that world history can be apprehended as a sublime object.<sup>88</sup> Looking back at history we are initially bewildered by the lack of purposeful/causal connection between its various episodes, the underlying pattern of the historical narrative seems to be chaotic and fundamentally irrational as it exhibits ‘far greater acts of nature [...] than [acts] of self-sufficient reason.’<sup>89</sup> This is exactly the same assumption he had made in the *Universalgeschichte* with one important difference: in his earlier essay the content of universal history was in a way

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<sup>85</sup> Schiller, *Essays* 71-72.

<sup>86</sup> The structure of the narrative and particularly the end-beginning imagery, namely that the one ‘genii’ begins where the other ends, could imply that Schiller is in fact prioritizing and evaluating the sublime over beauty, and even further, it may lead to an interpretation of *Über das Erhabene* as a negation of, or a corrective approach to, the conclusions of the *Briefe*. Yet, such a view disregards three fundamental aspects of his thought: i) in *Über das Erhabene* Schiller develops a tripartite scheme that negates the beauty-sublime polarity; in particular, he explicitly discerns two stages in beauty’s development with the sublime occupying the middle moment in this process, beauty ‘although blossoming first, reaches maturity last’ and this latter ‘mature’ stage of beauty should be apprehended as a synthetic moment, i.e. having integrated the rational and moral content of the sublime, *Essays* (77-78) ii) his overall thought is characterized by a critique of the one-sidedness of reason and by the rehabilitation of the senses; it follows that a choristic understanding of *Über das Erhabene* not only implies a fundamental discontinuity and rupture in his thought but moreover stands in direct opposition to his oeuvre up to that point iii) it underplays the fundamentally synthetic orientation of his thought which is further underlined at the very end of the current treatise when he states that aesthetic education becomes a complete whole only via the unity of the beautiful and the sublime, *Essays* (83-84). Ideal and tragic education are and ought to be apprehended as complementary.

<sup>87</sup> Schiller, *Essays* 77.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

theoretically inconceivable, that is, it demanded more than the imagination could grasp, but only if one could envisage an infinite intellect then its specific content could be rendered comprehensible on the basis of cause and effect; on the contrary, in the current treatise, world history resists any conceptualization as it consists of proceedings that run counter to any rational schematization; therefore, whereas in the former essay he imposed the demands of philosophical understanding on history, he now explicitly rejects such an hermeneutical bias.<sup>90</sup> Insofar as we are unable to apprehend history theoretically, it emerges as an uncontrollable force, and provided the fact that its determinate content consists in acts of nature, it appears to us as a moment in the dialectic of the pathetic sublime. It is exactly at this moment that Schiller's thought on tragedy meets history in the sphere of the political. When history does not correspond to our rational expectations and our moral demands conflict with the actuality of the historical events, apprehending it as a sublime object safeguards our highest and noblest ideals, our morality and the consciousness of our freedom, from its destructive force. The above formulation becomes all the more instructive and meaningful if contextualized in the upheavals that followed the French Revolution.

The practical aspect of his programme of tragic education refers to the idea we initially encountered in the *Schaubühne* essay, namely that tragedy acquaints us with images of catastrophe. It should be observed that Schiller is not suggesting a mere tragic spectatorship as the very perspective we adopt in it presupposes the aforementioned theoretical understanding of the world and history as essentially tragic, in other words, it entails a fundamental revision of our worldview and our understanding of history so that receptiveness to the 'magnificent spectacle [*Schauspiel*] of change destroying everything and re-creating it and then destroying it once again'<sup>91</sup> can be made possible and thus raise the tragic perspective above a mere play of the imagination to an insight of metaphysical depth. Repeated exposure to the phenomenon of tragedy develops and strengthens our moral capability to withstand the blows of fate and provides us with a stronghold amidst the torrents of becoming. History, in virtue of its

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<sup>90</sup> For the notion of hermeneutical bias towards history, see: Gadamer (2013: 288-289).

<sup>91</sup> Schiller, *Essays* 83. Cf. Hölderlin's *Becoming in Dissolution* (1800/1988: 96-100).

representation of the infinite struggle of mankind with nature and fate, emerges as the privileged ground of tragic education.

In an idiosyncratic sense, Schiller's *Briefe* were destined to end in an idealistic tone. The all too imminent period of the *Terreur* dispelled the optimism and repudiated the promises fostered by the Enlightenment. Furthermore, Schiller found himself in a transitionary period between the *ancien régime* and the post-revolutionary era, a period where the contradictions of the newly emerged worldview gradually became evident, yet, any concrete apprehension of the antinomies of the present would require a significantly different conceptual framework. His ardent individualism, underlying aestheticism,<sup>92</sup> and his half-way departure from Kant, necessarily confined him within an unmediated sphere of the ideal.<sup>93</sup> However, after having secured the necessary conceptual and historical distance, he proceeded to a penetrating and far more viable suggestion that complemented his project of aesthetic education. Tragedy may not hold the key to the solution of the contradictions of the human condition but it is nonetheless able to help us withstand the burgeoning powers of history and reconcile us with the horizon of finitude. In associating the voluntary submission to suffering with the representation of freedom in an instantaneous insight, Schiller foreshadows Schelling's conception of the tragic in the tenth letter of his *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus* and proceeds to a quasi-metaphysical understanding of tragedy by providing us with an intuition of our supersensible essence. For all his shortcomings and the unsystematic character of his writings, Schiller's thought on aesthetics and tragedy remains informative and forms the bridge between Kant and speculative idealism.

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<sup>92</sup> On Schiller's aestheticism, see: Gardner (2007: 87-90).

<sup>93</sup> Schiller's program of aesthetic education insofar as it i) does not mediate the objective social conditions ii) is unable to actualize its programmatic declarations iii) and is thus, contrary to the author's intentions, left bereft of any import of actual social significance iv) with the exception of an "enlightened" minority. To that extent, the tension between the ideal and the real in Schiller's *Briefe* is resolved in favour of the former.

## Chapter II: F. W. J. Schelling

### Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of Kant's three critiques tragedy casts a spell over speculative idealism. Although a salient episode in the history of philosophy often recognized and broadly accepted as such, it is rarely explicated in its particularity, in terms of how and why philosophy turned to tragedy. Approaches to this 'tragic turn' can be broadly classified in three categories: i) they are confined within a generalizing description of the theoretical and socio-political framework around 1800 ii) imply a lateral relation to Kant's third *Critique* iii) and last, seem to omit altogether the existence and thus the importance, of such a turn.<sup>94</sup> In the effort of contextualizing tragedy's emergence in German philosophical thought, if one had to choose one single point of departure then that should be Schelling's 1795 *Philosophische Briefe über Dogmaticismus und Kriticismus*. It is the first philosophical treatise where we can discern a bold break with issues concerning the poetics of tragedy and as such it carves new wood for both philosophy and tragedy. His thoughts on tragedy arise initially from his diagnosis of a certain impasse between the leading philosophical proceedings of his era and bring to light the underlying tensions of our self-understanding in modernity, while, at the same time and most pertinently, are guided by the impulse to salvage and preserve a genuine possibility for freedom under the uncertain sky of the post-revolutionary era. Taking into consideration the *gravitas* of this formative, or the very least influential, moment in the shaping of post-Kantian thought, one would expect an ample analysis from Schelling's part that would justify the grandeur of proclamations such as 'the birth of the philosophy of the tragic'.<sup>95</sup> Alas, the meaning of the few scattered observations we find in the text does not fully decode Szondi's tribunal if we do not reconstruct and understand it within and through its theoretical genealogy. The same holds for Schelling's subsequent examination of tragedy in the lectures he delivered in Jena (1802-3) and Würzburg (1804-5) on the philosophy of art under the rubric of his 'identity philosophy'. It

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<sup>94</sup> Representative of the first hermeneutical approaches are: Ameriks (2012: 303-323) and Schmidt (2001: 73-76).

<sup>95</sup> The answer to whether or not Szondi's designation of 'a philosophy of the tragic' is meaningful and sustainable will hopefully become clear by the end of the chapter.

follows that his corresponding analysis of the tragic cannot be rendered intelligible in isolation from the broader discussion it partakes, which often bears little, or not any at all, direct relation to the topic of tragedy *per se*.

The overarching aim of this investigation is to try and articulate Schelling's thought on tragedy within his broader philosophical constellation and thus elucidate his contribution to what, if possible, could be considered as the first sparkle of the philosophy of the tragic. Towards that end, the first section proceeds to a provisional and descriptive, rather than explanatory, exposition of issues raised prior to Schelling's theoretical endeavours, which, on the one hand, underwrite a specific crisis philosophy underwent during the last two decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and on the other, constitute the theoretical framework out of which the question of tragedy arose. The second section begins by focusing on how Schelling integrated these insights into his early treatises of 1794-5 and then moves on his early understanding of tragedy in 1795. The concluding section touches on the closing *coda* of his *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800) as signalling the transition to his later 'identity philosophy' and then turns to his remarks on tragedy in his *Philosophie der Kunst* (1802-5).

## **I. Nothing to do with tragedy?**

The ever orphan child of the *Stift* triad, the *Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism* (1796), crystallizes the sediment of a growing dissatisfaction towards all the basic manifestations –theological, philosophical and political- of the pre-revolutionary worldview.<sup>96</sup> The general orientation of its diagnosis and remedy stems from the need to give an adequate reply to the fundamental question “How must a world be constituted for a moral being?”<sup>97</sup> The question though, notwithstanding its radical framing, was in fact not a new one but had already been raised, if implicitly, in Kant's theory of the 'moral image' of the world.<sup>98</sup> Less than a decade separates the two inquiries and one cannot but ponder on the *OSP*'s fervent advocacy for a radical break with the past reigning paradigm. This call, nevertheless, does not suggest that

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<sup>96</sup> For a reading of the text in its relation to tragedy, see: Krell (2005: 26-40) and Leonard (2015: 43-50).

<sup>97</sup> *OSP* in J. M. Bernstein (ed.) (2003: 185).

<sup>98</sup> An excellent reconstruction of Kant's theory of the 'moral image' is given by Henrich (1992: 3-28).



their criticism arose in rebellion against Kant, it rather works through him and tries simultaneously to expand and defend central tenets of his philosophy. Despite their ambivalent stance towards Kant's doctrines, they seemed to agree on the fact that their era had been imbued with a certain malaise and it was their task to overcome it. What follows is an abbreviated outline of the key moments that gave rise to their disillusionment.

Thinking historically was not an indispensable element of philosophical thinking in the late eighteenth century and although philosophy remained dedicated and orientated towards teleological modes of thought, Winckelmann's 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, Herder's writings on history, and Reinhold's insights on the historical exigencies in his effort to reconstruct Kant's philosophy, attest to a gradually changing attitude towards the importance and role of the historical component.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, Enlightenment had already paved the way for the demise of traditional ontotheological and salvific narratives by trying to reach the middle ground between faith and reason. This twofold process had two important consequences: on the one hand, it promulgated the emancipation of the human condition from any external determination, a move that led to the idea of the sovereignty and autonomy of reason by dispelling its past metaphysical omnipotence, and on the other, it facilitated history as an inescapable aspect of our self-understanding in the sense that from then on even rational teleology had to be historically informed. During this process it became clear that systems that adhere to a self-enclosed understanding of reason in consonance with the Leibniz-Wolff tradition were no longer able to account for modernity's multidimensional and elaborate mosaic. The increasing perplexity and multiplicity of phenomena that philosophy had to grapple with, was, at the very least, an indirect result of the aforementioned 'historical' and 'rational' double register. As the former came to the fore philosophy underwent a broadening of its scope and a whole new set of previously neglected concepts and problems entered the philosophical map. Among those, perhaps the single most important theme in the context of our discussion was the exaltation of the role of art and aesthetics, a move that will reveal its full potential only after Kant's third *Critique*.

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<sup>99</sup> On the historical turn in the context of post-Kantian German philosophy, see: Ameriks (2006).

Kant's critical philosophy represents the culmination and the highest moment of the project of Enlightenment and as such it also reveals the inherent antinomies and tensions within this grand narrative. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel underlines the puzzlement and challenge that the first *Critique* brought to its readers, an incident of broader significance, as he remarks that with its publication philosophy was no longer intellectually accessible to the public and became an idiom for the few.<sup>100</sup> Almost a decade later, when Heine will draw the analogy between the Kantian and the French revolution, he observes that the meaning of the first *Critique* found articulation only in subsequent commentaries.<sup>101</sup> At first glance, Hegel's and Heine's observations seem to suggest nothing more than the obvious fact that Kant's highly abstract conceptual language posed an insurmountable obstacle to general readership confining his thought strictly among philosophical connoisseurs. However, the reason for this 'gap' to which they both allude runs deeper than mere linguistic and conceptual complexities. There was a general belief among post-Kantians that philosophy –at least at a formal level- had somewhat strayed away from actual life. From a theoretical perspective their impression took its cue largely from Kant's dualism;<sup>102</sup> yet again, they turned to him, especially to his third *Critique*, to draw inspiration for their ideas on the unifying role of art. From a practical perspective, the affinities between the ideas of cultural criticism shared by Schiller's *Briefe* and the *OSP* underline the discontent among the circles of speculative idealists towards basic aspects of modernity such as the specialisation of knowledge, social alienation and division of labour, with all three moments having as a common denominator the notion of fragmentation. The task of speculative idealism was to recuperate in an holistic and unifying manner all that Kant initially had to divide; to overcome the 'monotheism of reason' through

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<sup>100</sup> Hegel (1825-6/1896: 504-5).

<sup>101</sup> Heine (2012: 75; 87-8).

<sup>102</sup> To Kant's defence, it should be noted that he explicitly acknowledged that ever since his encounter with Rousseau's work, especially *Émile*, his philosophical aspirations were directed on bridging this chasm: "There was a time when I believed this alone could constitute the honour of humankind, and I despised the rabble who knows nothing. Rousseau has set me right. This blinding prejudice vanishes, I learn to honour human beings, and I would feel by far less useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this consideration could impart a value to all others in order to establish the rights of humanity." (1765/2011: 96).

its sensuous education and to form a bridge between conceptual thinking and life; put succinctly, to reclaim the actuality of philosophy.

The aforementioned analogy between Kant's philosophy and the French revolution is usually presented solely in positive light, in terms of their path-breaking role in the formation of modernity. Yet the opposite can be equally revealing. According to this counter-narrative, Enlightenment, both in its theoretical and practical manifestations, had heightened its expectations to such a degree that the unpredictable turn of events that followed the French revolution brought about a profound disenchantment that resulted in an even-greater dissociation between the past paradigm and the coming generation. Schiller's solemn retreat to the realm of the aesthetic is indicative. In proto-dialectical fashion he understood that the realm of theory, irrespectively of the heights it had attained in late eighteenth century, could not be sufficient cause for actual social change if not synchronised with the realm of the practical. Having learned this lesson from the French revolution, he barricaded himself behind the front of aesthetics which in his mind could act both as a medium to recuperate and hold on to all that was swept away by theoretical and practical dilettantism, and at the same time, as a potential unifying forefront of the two realms which reality had kept distinct. Irrespectively of the legitimacy of his approach, it is difficult to reject, if not his political motives, then at least the political implications of his stance.

In this context, as Dieter Henrich argues, the decline of a particular conceptual narrative emancipates and reinstates the potential of the theories it had to negate in order to establish itself.<sup>103</sup> The centrality attributed to art, the Spinoza renaissance, and the search for the absolute (or unconditioned), belong to and result from this twofold register. The emergence and the cardinal importance attributed to these three episodes in philosophical thought can be articulated and explicated in the context of Henrich's suggestion. The French Revolution signalled and accelerated - an already ongoing - conceptual revolution against the past

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<sup>103</sup> Cf. "This is something that very often happens when revolutions take place: a revolution always opens possibilities for those who are rivals of the revolutionaries, yet who had also been victims of the fallen rule. Having been suppressed by that rule in the past, although they are not in any accord with those making the revolution, they receive a new opportunity by virtue of the revolution itself." (2003: 85).

philosophical paradigm. Accordingly, art was no longer *a priori* excluded from the inner workings of one's philosophy, i.e. it was by no means a constitutive element in the formation and grounding of one's philosophical thinking, as was the case, to a great extent, in German aesthetic rationalism (1650-1750). It is in this spirit that Ernst Cassirer observed in *Freiheit und Form* (1916) that: "The aesthetic motive plays no decisive role in the construction of Leibniz's philosophy."<sup>104</sup> Thus, when Kant's third *Critique* implicitly suggested art's severance from aesthetics by incorporating it within an epistemological framework, it set in motion a path-breaking move that run counter to commonplace Enlightenment understanding of art's place within philosophical hierarchy. Regarding the second episode under examination, the Spinoza renaissance, it appears that despite the substantial validity of Jonathan Israel's account of Spinoza as the one who "fundamentally and decisively shaped a tradition of radical thinking which eventually spanned the whole continent, exerted an immense influence over successive generations, and shook western civilization to its foundations",<sup>105</sup> direct knowledge of his works was uncommon during most of the eighteenth century.<sup>106</sup> It is under this light that we ought to understand the provocative remark that Spinoza "seems hardly to have had any direct influence on eighteenth century thought".<sup>107</sup> Given the fact that Spinoza was mostly absent from philosophical discussions within German intellectual circles,<sup>108</sup> it would not be an overstatement to apprehend the renewed interest in him in the aftermath of the pantheism controversy as a comet-like phenomenon. It follows that ever since Pierre Bayle's portrait of Spinoza as a "virtuous atheist" in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) his philosophical reception in Germany remained tumultuous until the *Pantheismusstreit* which gave the impetus for his reappropriation by the post-Kantian generation.<sup>109</sup> The third episode which underwrites the counter-movement of absolute idealism against the crisis of reason in the Age of Enlightenment is the concept of the absolute. Plato's theory of forms bequeathed to

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<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Beiser: (2009: 31-2).

<sup>105</sup> (2001: 159).

<sup>106</sup> See: Moreau (1995: 413).

<sup>107</sup> Cassirer (1951: 187).

<sup>108</sup> Gardner (2014: 27).

<sup>109</sup> On Spinoza's reception in German idealism, see Förster and Melamed (eds.) (2012).

philosophy one of its long-lasting Gordian knots, namely the mind-body relationship which in turn inaugurated the problem of dualism that in early modern philosophy found its chief advocate in Descartes and his *Meditations* (1641). Philosophical thinking during the Age of Enlightenment continued to grapple with the issue at hand until Kant hinted towards a potential exodus with his third *Critique*. The concept of the absolute emerged within the circles of German idealists in response to their disenchantment with Enlightenment reason. In particular, its monistic implications seemed to gratify their desire for greater unity between mind and nature whereas it also provided them with a possible answer to Kant's dualism. Thus, it should come as no great surprise that in their search for an answer to all forms of dualism, i.e. for the absolute or unconditioned, they stumbled upon and were deeply fascinated by Spinoza's vitalistic monism.

It was not until the contestable results of the French revolution came to the fore that absolute idealists called into question Enlightenment's achievements and thus precipitated a paradigm shift that led to the emergence of these three salient episodes as philosophical moments of utmost importance. At this point, it is important to underline that the role which tragedy had to play in the context of absolute idealism and its transition from a subsidiary matter in philosophical aesthetics to a determining element of thinking about history and freedom, and of thinking in itself,<sup>110</sup> belongs most properly to this complex process of philosophy's self-redefinition during late-eighteenth century.

Schelling's appropriation of tragedy and the tragic is entwined with the notions of the 'absolute' and 'identity' which we encounter within his epistemological writings. In it, art, and tragedy in particular, is assigned a cognitive role in the representation of the fundamental underlying unity between theoretical and practical reason, between the real and the ideal. If one forgoes the examination of specific issues seemingly peripheral to tragedy, key terms such as the 'absolute' or the 'ideal, on the hand, and the primary role attributed to art within a philosophical system, on the other, can reveal neither their actual web of connotations, or can bring forth the nuances of his understanding of tragedy. Before turning to Schelling, I would

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<sup>110</sup> Steiner (1984: 2).

like to isolate and give a brief and cursorily account of four ‘intellectual’ episodes which serve as a prologue to Schelling’s distinct philosophical idiom, and which may help us contextualize the ambivalent conditions that led to the ‘tragic turn’; these are: i) the pantheism controversy ii) the Spinoza renaissance iii) Reinhold’s *Grundsatz* iv) Kant’s remarks on the ‘unity of reason’ and his theory of aesthetic judgment.

Enlightenment’s project of abolishing religious dogma in order to make way for a rational theology did not find unequivocal acceptance among German intellectual circles. Hence, although Kant in the first *Critique* attempted to provide a reconciliation between faith and reason, his effort was met with scepticism. When the pantheism controversy arose in 1785 the conflict between faith and reason was recast as an inquiry of the authority and limits of reason. In *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* (1785) Jacobi questioned philosophy’s ability and legitimacy to provide us with a sustainable account of the existence of God and freedom. Put differently, whereas Enlightenment proponents argued that the sovereignty of reason ought to be the guiding principle of the age, Jacobi interpreted their suggestion as undermining traditional moral and religious beliefs. He maintained that all rationalist philosophies cannot be both true to their critical enterprise and at the same time uphold the postulates of God and freedom. Jacobi’s strategy consists of three steps: first, he equates Spinozism with the highest possible form of a rationalist philosophy; second, he unfolds the consequences of such a perspective which he equates with atheism, fatalism, and a lifeless, deterministic universe; third, he tries indirectly to subvert Enlightenment philosophy in *toto* by showing how Lessing, the leading figure of German Enlightenment, was in fact an ardent Spinozist.<sup>111</sup> It follows that the ‘fall’ of the best among them would entail, at least symbolically, the failure of the movement as whole, an outcome that would leave us with no other alternative than to embrace Jacobi’s *Glaube* as the only viable solution that rescues us from the allegedly disastrous effects of Spinozism. What is pertinent to our discussion is that he reached his conclusion by rejecting any effort to reach and assume the

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<sup>111</sup> On the debate regarding Jacobi’s interpretation of Lessing’s Spinozism, see: Allison (1966: 71-76); Beiser (1993: 48-60).

existence of God and freedom through the cardinal principle behind rationalist philosophy, through the principle of sufficient reason. God and freedom cannot be assumed as being part of a chain of conditioned conditions and can only be salvaged if apprehended as utterly unconditional. It follows that these two ideas cannot be given by reason but require from our part a *salto mortale*; in Jacobi's eyes that leap was tantamount with the article of faith.<sup>112</sup> *Prima facie*, his precarious solution does not resonate with our concerns; nevertheless, it invites us to think about the intrinsic limits of philosophy and the necessity to go beyond them, a move that cannot be carried out conceptually but according to his reasoning requires a different kind of 'knowledge', namely, feeling. His suggestion, at least formally and in an incipient sense, discloses the contextual space which later will be occupied by intellectual intuition and art and in this sense we ought to account Jacobi's ideas as an implicit contribution to the long and asymmetrical path that led to the philosophical appropriation of tragedy.<sup>113</sup>

A second aspect of the pantheism controversy that requires our attention and which brings us to the next episode under examination is its contribution to the revival of interest in Spinoza. Jacobi could hardly imagine the impact that Lessing's confession would have on early German idealism when the latter admitted to him: "The orthodox concepts of the Divinity are no longer for me; I cannot stomach them. *Hen kai pan!* I know of nothing else."<sup>114</sup> What, though, are we to make of this influence? It should be noted that Kant in his second *Critique* had further underscored Jacobi's negative reading of Spinoza when discussing the threat of fatalism:

"However, freedom still faces a difficulty insofar as it is to be reconciled with the mechanism of nature in a being that belongs to the world of sense, a difficulty which, even after all the foregoing has been consented to, nonetheless threatens freedom with its utter demise. [...] it nonetheless seems that as soon as one assumes

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<sup>112</sup> George Di Giovanni argues that it would be a mistake to interpret Jacobi as an irrationalist or as a fideist, as later, in *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a Dialogue* (1787), he will further develop his notion of faith within the framework of a theory of knowledge (2004: 96ff.)

<sup>113</sup> On the correlation between Jacobi's feeling and Schelling's intellectual intuition see: Frank (2004: Lecture 4).

<sup>114</sup> Jacobi (1785/1994: 187).

that God as universal original being is the cause also of the existence of substance (a proposition that can never be given up without simultaneously also giving up the concept of God as the being of all beings and therewith his all-sufficiency, on which everything in theology hinges), one must then also concede that a human being's actions have their determining basis in what is entirely beyond his control, viz., in the causality of a supreme being which is distinct from him and on which the human being's existence and the entire determination of his causality depends utterly.”<sup>115</sup>

This leaves us in a paradoxical situation. Inarguably, post-Kantian idealists were well aware of Jacobi's polemics and Kant's objections, and, notwithstanding, they embraced aspects of Spinoza's thought. Certainly, they were not attracted to his alleged atheism nor to his mechanistic worldview, but rather they were drawn to him because of the holistic connotations of his monism; a promise of an exodus from the problems of dualism. Here, one should recall the explicit demand for unity and wholeness found both in Schiller's *Briefe* and in the *OSP*, a call that could be potentially answered in a reconstructed Spinozistic framework. The question held in abeyance was how to spiritualize and animate the Spinozistic universe so it could allow the possibility of freedom; thus, what was at stake, was nothing else than the perennial agon between necessity and freedom in terms of the compatibility between intelligible causation and determinism.

Earlier we saw how Kant's first *Critique* was met with reservations and bewilderment.<sup>116</sup> Heine's suggestion that it was not until the appearance of commentaries that the work was truly appreciated, actually refers to Reinhold's *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* which began circulating in 1786 in Wieland's journal *Der Teutsche Merkur*.<sup>117</sup> The importance of the *Letters* rests on the fact that they became the conduit through which Kant's first *Critique* gained a

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<sup>115</sup> Kant (1788/2004: 5:100-1)

<sup>116</sup> Herder's letter to Hamann in March 1782 is characteristic: "Kant's *Critique* is hard for me swallow. It will remain nearly unread. It was thoroughly reviewed in the Gottingen papers and treated as idealism. I don't know what the point is of the whole heavy pie-in-the-sky [Luftgewebe]." Quoted in Ameriks, (2000: 81).

<sup>117</sup> Kant greeted the *Letters* with acceptance and support, see his letter to Reinhold in December 28, 1787 (1999: 271-3).



wider audience. The popularity they achieved was not without drawbacks, as Reinhold later acknowledged his primary interest in Kant's work was its moral and religious implications.<sup>118</sup> Consequentially, he obviated the epistemological and metaphysical kernel of the work and focused largely on demonstrating the compatibility between the *Critique of Pure Reason* –in particular its moral theology– and the demands of faith.<sup>119</sup> According to his interpretation, the first *Critique* heralded the exodus from the all-or-nothing false dilemma between reason and faith by providing a definitive, paradoxically prospective, answer to the pantheism controversy and thus accelerated the completion of the project of Enlightenment.<sup>120</sup>

Within a rather short period of time Reinhold shifted from being an advocate of the impeccability of Kantianism to a gradual and deliberate distancing towards it which resulted in a radical reformulation of what he took to be the 'spirit' of Kantianism. This change of attitude was stimulated by his increasing conviction that the disparity among interpretations of Kant pointed to three interrelated crucial disadvantages of his theory: it lacked conceptual clarity and systematic methodological unity and it did not stand up to the requirements of a rigorous science. The above criteria set him on the path to his *Elementarphilosophie* where he attempted a reconstruction of the Kantian theory on the basis of a methodologically foundationalist system that recasts the Cartesian requirement of an immediate and self-evident Archimedean principle of knowledge which is presupposed by all propositions of knowledge and provides the ground of their validity. He found his guiding hypothesis in what he thought to be the fundamental and unconditioned proposition of consciousness. Reinhold's methodological monism exerted a profound influence to early idealist thinkers whose theoretical endeavours will begin by accepting the necessity of a *Grundsatz* as their starting point and thus proceed on the basis of the methodological and systematic premises he had expounded.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Reinhold (1789/2011: 23).

<sup>119</sup> See e.g. the second of the *Letters*, Reinhold (1786-7/2005: 18-27, esp. 20 f.)

<sup>120</sup> On Reinhold's conception of Enlightenment and its reading into the *Letters*, see: Martin Bondeli (2010: 43-52).

<sup>121</sup> See Schelling's letter to Hegel dated February 4, 1795, where he explicitly recognizes their indebtedness to Reinhold, in Hegel (1969: 21).

The last and particularly salient episode belongs to Kant and has two aspects: i) his cryptic allusions to the unity of reason ii) his theory of aesthetic judgment. Regarding the first, although Kant's epistemology is constructed on a fundamental dualism, he (seldom) hinted to an overlying unity between theoretical and practical reason. We read in his first introduction to the first *Critique*: "Nothing here can escape us, because what reason brings forth entirely out of itself cannot be hidden, but is brought to light by reason itself as soon as reason's common principles has been discovered."<sup>122</sup> Although in the first *Critique* we are only left with this undeveloped reference, in the second *Critique* he apprehends the idea of a common principle of reason as a regulative ideal that reflects our infinite longing for greater unity: "for they rightly occasion the expectation of perhaps being able some day to attain insight into the unity of the whole pure rational faculty (theoretical as well as practical) and to derive everything from one principle – the undeniable need of human reason, which finds complete satisfaction only in a complete systematic unity of its cognitions."<sup>123</sup> Yet, caution is in order, as his suggestion does not imply that such a unity, in terms of deriving it from a single principle, is actually possible. Kant's reservations did not prevent the idealists who immediately succeeded him from unfolding the implications of his latent suggestions and they did so, much to his dismay, under the *proviso* that they were the true inheritors and continuers of his critical enterprise.

The second aspect foreshadows and informs the distinctive understanding of art in early German idealism. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) we encounter the radical move of the integration of aesthetics into an epistemological framework. This move has two important consequences: first, it elevates the sphere of aesthetics to an *a priori* scientific enquiry and second, it implies that through this enquiry and its 'representative' medium, i.e. aesthetic judgment, we reach something otherwise unattainable by theoretical and practical reason. This 'unknown' consists of nothing else than aesthetic judgment's ability to mediate the distinct faculties of theoretical and practical reason and reveal the "supersensible substratum of

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<sup>122</sup> Kant (1781/1998: Axx).

<sup>123</sup> Kant (1788/2004: 5:91). The issue had been raised earlier in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* where reason is differentiated on the basis of its application (1785/1998b: 4:391). This is the strongest claim we find in his work regarding the theme of the unity of reason which was also left undeveloped.

humanity”.<sup>124</sup> It should be noted, however, that Kant does not ascribe cognitive capacity to aesthetic judgment and thus it does not entail actual knowledge of the supersensible domain. It follows that despite its capacity to represent ideas of reason, e.g. freedom, these remain most properly postulates (regulative ideals) of practical reason. Notwithstanding, the idea of beauty as an expressive symbol of morality and freedom on the one hand, and the reconciliatory role of the faculty of aesthetic judgment on the other, will appeal to idealist thinkers who were particularly alive to the task of bridging the gulf between the two faculties of reason, a task which at least early Schelling will apprehend as inextricably connected to art.

It is true that no single episode can explain the ‘tragic turn’ in its isolation from the others. It even might seem that with the exception of the aesthetic judgment all other instances are, to a lesser or greater extent, somewhat irrelevant to the question under examination. I wish to argue that such an interpretation would only overlook the question and would leave us in the same nebulous conditions under which the ‘tragic turn’ occurred in the first place. It would be futile to search for a linear continuum leading from a specific event or cause to the philosophical appropriation of tragedy. Its emergence is inscribed in the discursive intricacies between ostensibly unrelated issues of late eighteenth-century thought. Hopefully, the correlation of these four moments will provide a lens through which we may understand its incursion into the philosophical constellation. For the time being, it might not be clear how exactly this is accomplished as we are still lacking the actual content of the ‘tragic’. We shall return to this issue after we have examined Schelling’s remarks on tragedy.

## **II. Tragedy and the absolute**

When one encounters Schelling’s thought he soon comes to the realization that it undergoes constant and often radical reorientations, a fact that poses a twofold challenge to any inquiry on a specific topic or question that expands on more than one *stratum* of the divergent path of his thought. First, as it resists systematicity, it eludes a progressive narrative

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<sup>124</sup> Kant (1790/2000: §57, 5:340).

and thus develops in a rather non-linear manner.<sup>125</sup> Second, it renders opaque the theoretical background of his texts, especially the ones between 1794 and 1795, as within a brief period he assimilates diverse and not rarely conflicting ideas often in the same text.<sup>126</sup> It follows that it would be extremely painstaking, if not unnecessary, for the aims of our investigation to traverse Schelling's complete oeuvre. Accordingly, I want to argue, that if we are to come to a clearing with regard to the question of tragedy we ought to restrict ourselves in following the idea of the absolute as our guiding thread. If we gain an insight into his understanding of the absolute then his idea of tragedy will also reveal itself.

The first step in this direction brings us to Schelling's often neglected treatise *Über die Möglichkeit einer Form der Philosophie überhaupt (Formschrift)* which was completed in September, 1794. The issues raised in it, although peripheral to our main concerns, provide us with the basis of his preliminary methodological and epistemological framework. Schelling's primary objective is to delineate the form of forms (*Urform*) of philosophy on the basis of an ultimate unconditioned principle. He begins by reiterating the Reinholdian criticism against Kant's theoretical philosophy, namely that it does not stand up to the requirements of a rigorous science and that it lacks systematic unity.<sup>127</sup> According to his line of thought, these shortcomings of the Kantian enterprise<sup>128</sup> are the result of the absence of a first principle that

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<sup>125</sup> This is exemplified in his two 1795 writings, *Vom Ich* and *Philosophische Briefe*, in which he presents, in the first latently and in the second expressively, ideas which relate and will crystallize years later (1801-1805) during the period of his *Identitätsphilosophie*, while in the interim he focused on developing his own reading of transcendental philosophy which led to his *Naturphilosophie* and the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*.

<sup>126</sup> This is evident in the wide range of interpretations of Fichte's influence in *Vom Ich* and Schelling's appropriation of the notion of intellectual intuition in the two texts of 1795.

<sup>127</sup> On Schelling's engagement with Reinhold's work already from his student years in the Tübingen Stift, see: Manfred Baum (201-3) in Segwick (2000).

<sup>128</sup> It would be misleading to assume that Schelling's reasoning in the *Formschrift* develops against Kant. His main objections are two: first, he is skeptical towards what he regards the paradoxical absence of a first unconditioned principle from Kant's theoretical philosophy (*SW*, I/1.87), particularly because Kant seems to presuppose it in his practical philosophy; apparently, Fichte alludes to the same idea in his letter to Niethammer, December 6, 1793: "Kant has only hinted at the truth, but neither presented nor proved it"; second, he argues that his categories require a theoretical unitary grounding that would also provide them with an interrelational framework (*SW*, I/1.104- 110). However, that said, he clearly draws from Kant in his understanding of the unconditioned, and although he does so by transgressing the limits the latter had set, i.e. apprehending the unconditioned as a constitutive principle rather than as a regulative idea, he remains convinced that he is proceeding according to hints given but not developed by Kant himself. For a reading of the *Formschrift* that tries to discern and highlight the primacy of the Kantian influence on the text, see: Watkins (16-23) in Ostaric (2014).

would guarantee philosophy's internal cohesion and unity by rendering a reciprocal determination between its form and content in their absolute dependence from such a principle and thus elevate philosophy to the science of all sciences, to a *philosophia prima*.<sup>129</sup> Although his position entails strong foundationalist claims which, *prima facie*, take their cue from Reinhold's *Elementarphilosophie*, it should be noted that he will reject his *Grundsatz* (*der Satz des Bewusstseins*) as it falls on the domain of empirically conditioned phenomena<sup>130</sup> and thus does not contribute to solving the problems of the first *Critique*.

Having already assimilated Jacobi's lesson regarding the impossibility of the knowledge of the unconditioned through the 'chain of conditions' and in accord with Fichte's suggestion that the search for the unconditioned in the empirical self-consciousness succumbs to infinite regress, he will locate philosophy's first principle in the originally and absolutely self-positing I which takes the form of the proposition I=I.<sup>131</sup> Notwithstanding his adherence to Fichte, it is possible to discern an implicit deviation from the latter's formulation, according to which Schelling's *Grundsatz* by being posited by 'absolute causality'<sup>132</sup> precedes and makes possible the reciprocal determination between form and content which provides Fichte with the immediate certainty of his *Grundsatz* and thus, contrary to the latter's epistemological concern, his theorizing has primarily quasi-metaphysical-ontological connotations.<sup>133</sup> Assuredly, Schelling had not yet envisaged his conception of the absolute, however, the foregoing argument hints to what could possibly be his first allusion to it, the seed of the idea which through ostensibly diverging paths worked its way to *Vom Ich* to which we now turn.

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<sup>129</sup> It is reasonable to argue that the main impetus behind his thought is Fichte's *Aenesidemus Review* and his *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* (1794). In the first, Fichte attempted to refute Schulze's skepticism against critical philosophy; yet the latter's critique forced to him to reconsider Reinhold's *Grundsatz*, a move that led him to the theses he developed in his subsequent treatise. As is the case with Schelling's early works, there is no unanimity regarding the extent of Fichte's influence and the *Formschrift* is not an exception. For a well-balanced overview of his input in the *Formschrift*, see: Nassar (2014: 162-171).

<sup>130</sup> This objection had already been raised by Schulze in his *Aenesidemus* (1792).

<sup>131</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.96 f.).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.97.

<sup>133</sup> For an elaborate analysis of the argument, see: Nassar (216-7) in Gjesdal (2016). Tilliette seems to agree with this reading when assessing Manfred Schröter's dissertation *Der Ausgangspunkt der Metaphysik Schellings entwickelt aus seiner ersten philosophischen Abhandlung, Über die Möglichkeit einer Form der Philosophie überhaupt* (1908), see: Tilliette (251) in Bauer and Dahlstrom (1999).

Completed on March 29, 1795, *Vom Ich* represents Schelling's attempt to reconcile two diametrically opposed positions, Spinoza's monistic metaphysics and the demand for freedom as they unite in a foundationalist principle of all possible knowledge in what he takes to be the ultimate ground of reality and thinking in itself.<sup>134</sup> His schematism reflects an ambivalence regarding the orientation of his thought and thus leaves us in a state of aporia regarding to where he bestows his allegiance. I want to argue that allowing the interpretation of *Vom Ich* to stand open mirrors faithfully Schelling's philosophical position in early 1795 as we ought to consider that in a period of little more than a year he presented three texts which, although they deviate from one another, represent the beginnings of his lifelong preoccupation with the notion of the absolute. It follows that it would be sensible to understand them as propaedeutic inquiries that seek to delineate the direction of his thought rather as full-blown studies.

In order to understand Schelling's reasoning in *Vom Ich* we can consult his letters to Hegel written in the period between January and March 1795; we read:

"Philosophy is not yet at an end. Kant has provided the results. The premises are still missing. [...] I am now receiving the beginning of the detailed exposition from Fichte himself, the Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge. I read it and found my prophecies had not been proven false. Now I am working on an ethic à la Spinoza. It is designed to establish the highest principles of all philosophy, in which theoretical and practical reason are united."<sup>135</sup>

"For us as well [as for Lessing] the orthodox concepts of God are no more. My reply is that we get even further than a personal Being. I have in the interim become a Spinozist! [...] Philosophy must start from the unconditioned. Now the question is merely where this unconditioned lies, whether in the self or in the not-self. Once this question is decided everything is decided. The highest

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<sup>134</sup> "That is, the principle of its being and the principle of its being known must coincide." (SW, I/1.163)

<sup>135</sup> Letter to Hegel, January 5, 1795 in Hegel (1984: 29).

principle of all philosophy is for me the pure, Absolute Self; [...] The alpha and omega of all philosophy is freedom.”<sup>136</sup>

Taken together, the aforementioned ideas form the pattern of his thought in *Vom Ich*. Schelling’s overall strategy consists in subverting Spinoza via Spinoza in order to ameliorate Kant’s philosophy. More specifically, he extrapolates the former’s monistic principles to provide the ground that the latter’s philosophy had hitherto missed on the basis of an unconditioned first principle of knowledge. Needless to say, in a rather idealistic manner, he tries to preserve Kant by going beyond him, seeking actual knowledge of what Kant had strictly restricted to a regulative idea.<sup>137</sup> How are we to contextualize this bold move? In the preface to the text he speaks of a second (philosophical) revolution, one that could potentially effectuate a profound change in actual life by “liberating mankind from the terrors of the objective world”.<sup>138</sup> What Schelling has in mind is a non-objective understanding of man’s essence, an apprehension of the unity between theoretical and practical reason in their reciprocal determination which reveals as the underlying substratum of all reality and thus of history as well, the actuality of freedom. His call for a philosophy that pays its dues to the value of mankind comes amidst of what he diagnoses as a “spiritless age” that threatens life with subjugation in all forms of its manifestations.<sup>139</sup> Yet, taking his cue from the idea of the “unity of sciences”, first expounded by Bacon and later embraced by Enlightenment circles, and while remaining faithful to the latter’s historical optimism, he foresees a movement towards greater heights of unity and completion in both sciences and philosophy which will establish freedom as the governing reality of humanity, a reality in which man through his practical reason rises above all empirical concepts and contents, transcending the factuality of his being.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Letter to Hegel, February, 4, 1795 in Hegel (1984: 32 f.).

<sup>137</sup> Cf. “Kant was the first to establish the absolute I as the ultimate substratum of all being and of all identity (though he established it nowhere directly but at least everywhere indirectly). Schelling, (SW, I/1.232).

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.156 f.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.157 f.

<sup>140</sup> Although the text operates along epistemological and metaphysical lines one should not neglect the overtly political implications of his position. Furthermore, it is not hard to identify an underlying affinity between the ideas we find in the preface and Schiller’s *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, the first nine letters of which were published in *Die Horen* journal in January 1795 by Cotta publications who were based in Tübingen.

Let us now return to his understanding of his absolute principle and examine in particular the two moments which underline the fact that when he stands closest to Spinoza or Fichte he is in fact departing from them. Schelling's attributes to the absolute-I all the basic characteristics of Spinoza's substance, namely 'absolute unity' (§9), 'indivisibility' (§11), 'absolute reality' (§11), 'non-finiteness' (§11) absolute power and absolute causality (§14). *Prima facie*, one would be inclined to read his absolute-I as nothing more than a mere variation of Spinoza's substance. Though, if that was the case one cannot but ponder on why he retains the Fichtean I in his formulation? Fichte had confessed in his letter to Reinhold July 2, 1795 that he regards Schelling's *Vom Ich* as a mere commentary on his *Grundlage* and that he welcomes his Spinozistic approach as it most adequately manages to explain his system.<sup>141</sup> Fichte's assessment is indeed strange if one considers two important interrelated differences between his *Grundlage* and Schelling's *Vom Ich*. First, Schelling seeks his principle outside the subject-object division, a move that Fichte makes explicit in the third part of the *Grundlage*, which Schelling, not to Fichte's knowledge, had not read when writing *Vom Ich*; thus it is no paradox that the latter believes that the young prodigy is following his steps. Nonetheless, the difference that cannot be reconciled by any means is the one that we found at the end of our discussion of the *Formschrift* regarding their different understanding of the unconditioned, with Schelling attributing to it constitutive and thus ontological validity and Fichte keeping it within a strictly epistemological framework.<sup>142</sup> Combined with the Spinozistic undertones found in the text, such a conclusion becomes evident when Schelling makes the following bold statement:

“*I am!* My I contains a being which precedes all thinking and imagining. It is by being thought, and it is being thought because it *is*; and all for only one reason—that is *is* only and is being thought only inasmuch as its thinking is its *own*. Thus it

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<sup>141</sup> Fichte (1993: 401).

<sup>142</sup> A further moment where the ontological overtones of his understanding of the unconditioned comes to the fore and he implicitly subverts Fichte, occurs when he remarks: “Of course it would be incomprehensible how the whole science could be based on one theorem, if one were to suppose that the science is, as it were, encapsulated in that theorem.” Schelling, (SW, I/1.189 n.).



is because it alone is what does the thinking, and it thinks only itself because it is. It produces itself by its own thinking—out of absolute *causality*.”<sup>143</sup>

As the higher ground he seeks establishes the grounding of thought itself, the principle under consideration resists any objectification, it is that which cannot ever become an object (*unbedingt*). As such, it does not belong to the domain of empirical phenomena and cannot be given in the empirical-I, in fact, it is the absolute presupposition of our empirical consciousness. In Schelling’s strict sense, empirical is anything that stems from the subject-object interplay and thus a transcendental consciousness would also fall to the domain of the empirical.<sup>144</sup> That said, one must not understate that his ulterior motive is to salvage the actuality of freedom, an idea that most properly belongs to the ‘critical’ arsenal. Furthermore, the knowledge via which we reach the absolute-I, i.e. intellectual intuition, seems to imply a peculiar self-relation, which although not subjective, could not possibly be described differently in Schelling’s admittedly negative characterization of both the absolute-I and intellectual intuition. I will return to the notion of intellectual intuition in the context of his *Briefe*. Now, concerning his departure from Spinoza, there are three substantial reasons which prevent a reading of Schelling’s absolute-I as a reformulation in the spirit of the former’s notion of substance. First, Spinoza’s perfect dogmatism does not escape from Schelling’s overarching criterion of the absolute, i.e. to be absolutely unconditioned, as it remains confined within the sphere of the objective. Second, it is unable to provide us with a sustainable account of the autonomous self, and third, it cannot ground the existence of the phenomenal world.

We have reached a point where Schelling’s thought seems to be hovering between two extremes which he respectively tries to elaborate and guide towards the direction of their

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<sup>143</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.168).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.* (I/1.235). According to Schelling’s epistemological thesis in *Vom Ich* any knowledge claim of a self-consciousness regarding the world or itself is bound to fall prey to the critique of skepticism: “Either our knowledge has no reality at all and must be an eternal round of propositions, each dissolving in its opposite, a chaos in which no element can crystallize—or there must be an ultimate point of reality on which everything depends, from which all firmness and all form of our knowledge springs, a point which sunders the elements, and which circumscribes for each of them the circle of its continuous effect in the universe of knowledge” *Ibid.* (I/1.162). It follows that no epistemological program remaining within the domain of the conditioned (empirical) can succeed in escaping the problem of infinite regress.

opposite. From this perspective it even might seem that his position in *Vom Ich* foreshadows the one that he will develop a few months later in the *Briefe*. Despite the ambivalence he exhibits towards both Kant (and Fichte in extent) and Spinoza, the orientation of the text follows the objectives of the former. The issue of his allegiance becomes manifestly clear towards the end of the essay when he focuses on the relationship between absolute and empirical freedom, i.e. the transition for the sphere of the infinite to that of the finite: “The real issue never was the absolute but only transcendental freedom [...] The problem is how an empirical I could have freedom.”<sup>145</sup> As we saw earlier this question cannot be raised in a Spinozistic context and that is the reason that his position should not be understood as seeking a point of indifference between two antagonistic theses in the manner of the *Briefe*<sup>146</sup> but rather as a Spinozistic answer to the puzzling Kantian antinomy of the teleological power of judgment as found in the third *Critique*, through a monistic principle of all knowledge and reality which would reconcile nature’s mechanistic laws (Spinoza’s universe; necessity) and teleology.<sup>147</sup> We have seen hitherto how Schelling’s thought had begun from a strong foundationalist epistemological position regarding the *Urform* of all knowledge which would establish philosophy as a *prima scientia* of all sciences and later moved to an explicit quasi- metaphysical-ontological grounding of reality and thinking on the basis of the unconditioned principle of the absolute-I. Irrespectively of whether he succeeded in his valiant endeavour these are strong claims which reflect an unswerving faith in philosophy’s ability to penetrate, comprehend, and articulate the

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Interestingly enough, in his *Philosophische Schriften* published in 1809 (a collection of his philosophical works up to then), he remarks on the *Vom Ich* “the I is still thought of everywhere as absolute or as absolute identity of subjective and objective, not as something subjective.” Quoted in Nassar (2014: 196 fn.). This formulation comes at odds with the notion of identity he puts forwards in *Vom Ich* where it takes the form of an identity of the absolute with itself (*SW*, I/1.218) and not that of a subject-object synthesis.

<sup>147</sup> Schelling (*SW*, I/1.241-2). See also: “Just as practical reason is compelled to unify the contrast between laws of freedom and laws of nature in a higher principle in which freedom itself is nature and nature freedom, so must theoretical reason in its teleological use come upon a higher principle in which finality and mechanist coincide, but which, on that very account cannot be determinable as an object at all.” *Ibid.* 1.242. Cf. “Just as in the theoretical consideration of nature reason must assume the idea of an unconditioned necessity of its primordial ground, so, in the case of the practical, it also presupposes its own unconditioned (in regard to nature) causality, i.e., freedom, because it is aware of its moral command.” Kant (2000: 5:403). For an informative reading of on the internal role and importance of Kant’s antinomy of the teleological power of judgment in *Vom Ich*, see: Förster (2012: 223-228).

world. As we now approach the shores of his *Briefe* and the philosophical idea of tragedy comes forward, one ought to keep the aforementioned in a state of latent remembrance, as the position he will advance here can reveal its full meaning and importance only in contradistinction to that background.

Before we engage with the actual content of the text we come across Schelling's peculiar decision to express his ideas in a series of letters. This would not be idiosyncratic on his part, Schiller in fact had opted for the same form earlier that year, if it had not been for the high claims he propounded in his two prior works. How could this form of expression meet the demands of a philosophy that claims for itself the status of a *philosophia prima*, aspires to highly systematic unity, and brings together a multiplicity of topics which draw from a diversity of philosophical branches? His decision gives us a premonition of certain discontinuity between his former and current work and in paradoxical sense points back to the inaugurator of the dialogical style in philosophy, Plato.

Schelling's objective in the *Briefe* is threefold. First, he argues vehemently against the Tübingen theologians and their idea of a moral proof of God. Second, he devotes a great share of the text in the effort to demonstrate how both philosophical extremes, criticism (Fichte) and dogmatism (Spinoza), represent one-sided apprehensions of the absolute and how they equally fail in their respective efforts. Third, he proceeds to the noble move of summoning art, tragedy in particular, back from exile and thus cancels Plato's verdict which had lasted for more than two thousand years, in order to proceed where philosophy cannot reach.<sup>148</sup>

Following Kant's publication of *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* in 1793, a group of conservative theologians of the Ältere Tübinger Schule proceeded to a questionable reformulation of Kant's doctrine of the three postulates in order to argue for a moral (objective) proof of God. The task was undertaken by Gottlob Christian Storr, one of Schelling's professors in the Stift, in his *Annotationes quaedam theologicae ad philosophicam Kantii de religione doctrinam* which was published in 1793 and translated in German the following year by his disciple Friedrich Gottlieb Süskind. Schelling was profoundly disturbed

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<sup>148</sup> Schelling will develop this idea in its full potential in the *STI*.

by these proceedings particularly because he saw in them the return old dogmatic Christian metaphysics under a pseudo-critical guise<sup>149</sup> and thus subverting the tremendous efforts that had been made, especially from Kant's part, towards the emancipation of the subject from any heteronomous determination.<sup>150</sup> Schelling will discard their efforts as a conscious sheer misconstruing of Kant's doctrine of postulates which conflates regulative with constitutive ideas, rendering their idea of a moral God empty, from both aesthetic and philosophical perspectives.<sup>151</sup>

Before we engage with Schelling's analysis of criticism and dogmatism I wish to take a brief excursion to what I consider an implicit hint to his understanding of tragedy. The first letter opens as follows:

“I understand you, dear friend! You deem it greater to struggle against an absolute power and to perish in the struggle than to guarantee one's safety from any future danger by positing a moral god. To be sure, the struggle against the immeasurable is not only the most sublime that man can conceive, but is also, I think, the very ground of all sublimity.”

Schelling's formulation is unmistakably reminiscent of his description of the tragic *agon* that we will encounter at the tenth letter. The abstract is important because he fervently dismisses the agonistic context from any Christian teleology and thus eliminates the conceptual grounds that could allow a Christianized interpretation of the figure of Oedipus as an embodiment of a sacrificial idealistic reconciliation. These interpretations cling to a generalizing understanding of speculative idealism as a unified philosophical movement governed by the principle of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*). Although there is partial truth in their claim, it is by no means

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<sup>149</sup> This issue had been troubling Schelling months before the publication of the *Briefe*. We read in his letter to Hegel January 5, 1795: “The great Kantians now everywhere to be seen have got stuck on the letter, and bless themselves on seeing still so much before them. I am definitely convinced that the old superstition of so-called natural religion as well as of positive religion has in the minds of most already once more been combined with the Kantian letter. It is fun to see how quickly they can get to the moral proof. Before you can turn around the *deus ex machina* springs forth, the personal individual Being who sits in Heaven above!” Hegel (1984: 29).

<sup>150</sup> Klaus Düsing provides an extensive account of the issue in Bauer and Dahlstrom (1999: 201-211).

<sup>151</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.157).

canonical nor does it reflect the discursive complexity and differences between the notions of identity, the point of indifference and reconciliation. It follows that approaches of this kind succumb to the first danger underlined in the beginning of the second section regarding Schelling's deviations on the treatment of a specific subject on different texts, as it tends to read retrospectively the theory of tragedy he developed in his lectures on the *Philosophie der Kunst* (1802-5) back into the *Briefe*. True, in the context of the former, tragedy could be interpreted through such a prism, yet not in the *Briefe*.

If one accepts the arguably plausible premise that Schelling's references in the first letter to the struggle/contest against an absolute power/the world are actually prolegomena to his treatment of tragedy in the tenth, then the first letter provides us with remarks of considerable import. In particular, it implicitly opens the question of the possibility of tragedy in the Christian worldview and furthermore, it elucidates the conditions under which it became possible under the all-embracing ancient Greek sky. I quote the relevant passage so we can extricate the potentially underlying insights:

“For the thought of taking a stand against the world loses all greatness the moment I put a higher being between the world and myself, the moment a guardian is necessary to keep the world within bounds.

The farther the world is from me, and the more I put between it and myself, the more my intuition of it becomes restricted and the less possible is that abandonment to the world, that mutual approach, that reciprocal yielding in contest which is the proper principle of beauty.”<sup>152</sup>

The first paragraph could be read as a contradistinction between the ancient Greek and Christian world-image in their ability to produce the aesthetic struggle (tragedy). The former's cosmos was constructed in an unmediated way, insofar as the gods, here understood as higher beings, inhabited the world and each one of them mirrored a specific aspect of the human being so that the totality of his potential in its perfection and the various aspects of reality were distributed to

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<sup>152</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.285)

wide range of godly and god-like beings and thus prevented a singular and thus absolute mediation of reality. Furthermore, even the domain of gods was subject to the absolute governing forces of the world, namely fate and justice (*dikē*, δίκη) and thus despite the great distance separating them from human beings they always stood in proximity to humanity under a yoke that was common for men and gods alike. It follows that the world in the ancient Greek worldview was understood most properly as an objective force, as an ‘absolute power’, and this is exactly the conception of the world which Schelling shall provide us with in the tenth letter. The reference to the ‘guardian’ that keeps the world within its bounds has Christian connotations and most probably refers either to the guardian angels that acted as intermediaries between God and men or to the figure of Jesus who represents God’s decisive act of mediation of the finite sphere. The prefiguration of this mediation is to carry on God’s opaque and ever-elusive plan, which remains most properly inarticulate and untranslatable to conceptual knowledge, in his kingdom. There are two further crucial differences between the antithetic world-images which further support our argument. First, the ancient Greek *Weltgeist* does not exhibit any kind of fatalistic teleology and thus, although the overall determination of the in-the-world- beings remains in the jurisdiction of the primordial forces of fate and *dikē* it does not entail an overall underlying plan. Second, the Greeks had no canonical religious concept of the mediation between their in-the-world dwelling and a retributive afterlife; all men, heroes and peasants alike, ended up at the dark domain of Hades. True, there are exceptions like Tantalus and Plato’s myth of Er,<sup>153</sup> yet, notwithstanding, they cannot be accounted as canonical but more importantly, by no means was the life of the individual dictated according to the promises of an afterlife much alike to the Christian heaven. Their understanding of life was wholly immanent and its value rested upon their earthly dwelling. On the contrary, the Christian concepts of an afterlife operate as mediations of being as they form the background against which earthly existence operates, rendering our mundane being a mere exercise for a better (or worst) hereafter. All differences hitherto between the opposing world-images relate to the problem of distance between the subject and the world that Schelling addresses in the beginning of the second paragraph. An *agon*

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<sup>153</sup> I’m grateful to Professor Thomas Stern for his suggestions.

is only possible in dialectical proximity and such a proximity has long been lost, if it ever existed, from the domain of Christianity. With the exception of this salient passage Schelling will remain silent with regard to tragedy until the tenth letter.

The main corpus of the *Briefe*, letters two to nine, is devoted to comparative analysis of the two main streams of the philosophical thought of his era, criticism and dogmatism, in their search for the absolute. I will focus on the passages which shed light on the path that led him on the idea of their unity. It follows that his meticulous examination of the particularities of each system will only be taken into consideration in passing. Both positions are diametrically opposed, only now, contrary to what he attempted in *Vom Ich*, he does not single out one of the two, but unfolds their practical consequences and finds them equally incomplete. It follows that he could no longer remain confined within an I-apprehension of the absolute and thus he explicitly withdraws his (debatable) prior allegiance to Fichte<sup>154</sup> giving equal merit to his counterpart, Spinoza. He argues that as they both have absolute beginnings, criticism starting from the absolute subject, dogmatism from the absolute object, it is impossible to refute dogmatism on the grounds of theoretical reason and that our predilection for one or the other remains strictly a personal choice that should be evaluated on the basis of their practical implications.<sup>155</sup> It is only on the basis of what he terms as the “egress of the absolute”,<sup>156</sup> i.e. the move from theoretical to practical reason, that both perspectives reveal their actual differences and shortcomings.

In the circles of criticism dogmatism had already been satisfactorily refuted in Kant’s first *Critique* where he had showed that the very moment that dogmatism enters the domain of practical reason it immediately contradicts itself and lapses to criticism<sup>157</sup> and as a result is unable to establish a proper system.<sup>158</sup> Notwithstanding, Schelling will argue that the final verdict on the possibility of any system ought to stem out by its practical realisation in our self, i.e. as an

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<sup>154</sup> Bowie puts forward the plausible idea that Schelling’s departure from Fichte should be mainly attributed to Hölderlin (1990: 67-72). Hölderlin’s letter to Niethammer on December 22, 1795 seems to support his claim.

<sup>155</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.308).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.294

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.301.

<sup>158</sup> It should be noted that both systems have as their common methodological canon Kant’s first *Critique*, which, according to Schelling’s reasoning, belongs to neither of the two and represents the *par excellence* science of knowledge, see: (SW, I/1.303-5).

undertaking of philosophy in man's practical striving.<sup>159</sup> At this point we come across with one of the most intriguing ideas found in the Briefe which resonates with his final move in the tenth letter. Schelling argues for the inherent incompleteness of any possible science so long it remains true to the cardinal principle of freedom and apprehends knowledge as an infinite task that resists rigorous systematicity. His position not only sets him against his own preceding works but more importantly questions the very ground and aspirations of philosophy itself, uncovering the inherent limits of reason.

He reinstates the question he had earlier posited in a more elaborate formulation: "What is unintelligible is how we egress from the absolute in order to oppose something to ourselves that is radically different from us?"<sup>160</sup> His answer in *Vom Ich* was a critical and immanent reformulation of a Spinozistic idea, namely that the transition from the infinite absolute-I to the empirical-I rests upon their shared causality. However, this move is now forbidden altogether.<sup>161</sup> What he now proposes is the exact reversal of his prior solution. The question can be answered only through a postulate of practical freedom which brings together both opposing systems:

"Thus dogmatism and criticism unite in the same postulate. Philosophy cannot make a transition from the nonfinite to the finite, but it can make one from the finite to the nonfinite. [...] the finite itself must have a tendency towards the nonfinite, a *perpetual striving* to lose itself in the nonfinite."<sup>162</sup>

It is easy to misconstrue his idea as a dogmatist position according to which our striving ought to be directed towards the surrendering of our self in the absolute. Schelling though, ascribes to his position only practical validity, meaning that the objective cannot ever be accomplished. Misunderstandings of this sort arise out of what he holds Spinoza responsible for, i.e. the objectification of intellectual intuition in which we mistakenly conflate the "intuition of the inner intellectual world for an intuition of a supersensuous world outside of oneself."<sup>163</sup> Schelling

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.307.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.310

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.177.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.314-5 (emphasis added).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.321.



understands intellectual intuition as a different non-discursive and non-objective kind of knowledge that arises freely from one's self and is akin to a peculiar mode of seeing the immediate unity of our inner self (in non-objective terms) with the absolute.<sup>164</sup> The fallacy to which both systems fall prey consists in the fact they try to represent the absolute as actualized. Schelling's advances an elegant idea according to which if both systems have the absolute as their common goal, then in their infinite striving towards it, there must be a point where their respective principles, freedom (criticism) and necessity (dogmatism), unite, a point which is no other than the absolute, where: "absolute freedom and absolute necessity are identical."<sup>165</sup> If Schelling had stopped the letters here he would have undoubtedly contradicted himself as he strenuously repeats that the actualization of the absolute is not possible. The transition to the tenth letter where he brings tragedy into the question reveals, not only why he did not topple his own premises, but also a new understanding of art's place in thinking.

Schelling returns to the question of tragedy in congruence with the opening remarks we encountered in the first letter:

"You are right, one thing remains, to know that there is an objective power which threatens our freedom with annihilation, and, with this firm and certain conviction in our heart, to fight against it exerting our whole freedom, and thus to go down. You are doubly right, my friend, because this possibility must be preserved for art even after having vanished in the light of reason; it must be preserved for the highest in art."<sup>166</sup>

Schelling's sets the stage of the tragic agon by positing the two principles of criticism and dogmatism, freedom and necessity, in a conflict which enacts their contest beyond the limits imposed by their common postulate. As we saw earlier, Schelling addressed the inherent limits of reason in its effort to enclose within systematic form the absolute and furthermore, restricted

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<sup>164</sup> For a presentation of Schelling's notion of intellectual intuition, see: Estes (173-175) in Breazale and Rockmore (2010); for an elaborate reading of Spinoza's influence in Schelling's use of the notion, see: Nassar (136-155) in Förster and Melamed (2012).

<sup>165</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.331).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.336.

its actualization to an idea of practical reason. Tragedy traverses the path reason had been unable to take and salvages in the most concrete possible form, in art, what had hitherto remained unapproachable by conceptual means. The first movement of this dialectic unravels on the premise that the subject undertakes the challenge in full awareness that it won't survive its passage through the objective power.<sup>167</sup> In light of his earlier observations an actual enactment of the struggle would equal a paradox. Thus he asks:

“Many a time the question had been asked how Greek reason could bear the contradiction of Greek tragedy. A mortal, destined by fate to become a malefactor and himself fighting against this fate, is nevertheless appallingly punished for the crime, although it was the deed of destiny! The ground of this contradiction, that which made the contradiction bearable, lay deeper than one would seek it. It lay in the contest between human freedom and the power of the objective world in which the mortal must succumb necessarily if that power is absolutely superior, if it is fate. And yet he must be punished for succumbing because he did not succumb without a struggle.”<sup>168</sup>

What is usually overlooked in the passage is Schelling's initial question, “how Greek reason could bear the contradiction of Greek tragedy?” Before we are given the participants of the struggle, tragedy is presented as a paradox, faithfully reflecting the dead-end of modernity at which he earlier left reason in its quest for the absolute. To apprehend a cultural form as a contradiction implies the disregard for its conditions of production. In other words, tragedy would not emerge if there was not a certain understanding of reason that could produce an artwork that corresponds to it. Even if one has no sympathy for this sort of dialectic and insists on apprehending a cultural form as a paradox, the sound way to proceed would be to illuminate the distinctive particularities of Greek reason and then show how they contradict the phenomenon of tragedy. The construal of his question implies his relative indifference towards the fact that the

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<sup>167</sup> Cf. “We even see nature, in the process of its free unfolding, becoming, in proportion to its approach to spirit, ever more, so to speak, frenzied.” Schelling (2000: 102).

<sup>168</sup> Schelling (SW I/1.336)

staging of tragedies was preeminently a religious and social event that offered to thousand Athenians a mediation of the *aporias* underlying their social fabric. Schelling's question unveils his understanding of reason as an eternal *ratio* that is not subject to change and thus his method of interpretation is to read the contradictions of reason in modernity back into ancient Greek tragedy, while at the same time, he advances a generalizing idea about tragedy, one that can only be maintained from a small selection of works.

Although he retains the contradictory (in terms of reason) formulation of tragedy he tries to explicate how the Greeks managed to make it bearable. The second movement of his dialectic of the tragic presents us with the actual content of the struggle and consists of two moments, a negative and a positive. The first refers to the overarching and determining element of the *agon* which is the binding notion of fate. A human being has been marked by fate to succumb to an act of crime and nevertheless gives himself wholeheartedly to the negation of its determination only to be doubly punished because he tried to run counter to it at first place. The spectacle was bearable because fate, i.e. the objective world, was the insurmountable, even for the gods, determination of the world, rendering the fall of the hero, *ipso facto*, necessary. The second moment reads as follows:

“That the malefactor who succumbed under the power of fate was punished, this tragic fact was the recognition of human freedom; it was the honor due to freedom. Greek tragedy honored human freedom, letting its hero fight against the superior power of fate.”<sup>169</sup>

The content of the tragic struggle is freedom. If the fight was forbidden altogether then there would be no ground for freedom. Their cosmos would immediately appear as a sheer objective force in which there would be no space for individuality and the essence of humanity would be degraded to a mere *automaton* in accordance with the hidden necessity of fate. The possibility of the struggle is the possibility of freedom. The fact that the hero succumbs does not undermine nor negate the actuality of such a possibility, on the contrary, if he managed to overcome the objective force of the world, then tragedy would appear as nothing more than phantasmagoria,

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<sup>169</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.336)

an imaginary fiction detached from reality, whereas by recognizing the facticity of fate, tragedy carves out the area that allows freedom and subjectivity to emerge. As the subject elects to fight and take a stand against the absolute power by willingly suffering the ordain of fate, the outcome of the struggle is not an abstract but a determined (*bestimmte*) negation that presents us with a higher conception of freedom, or as Schelling puts it: “with a declaration of free will.”<sup>170</sup>

Earlier Schelling singled out Kant’s science of knowledge as the canon for all philosophical systems. Now he discerns a similar role for tragedy: “Greek art is *standard* [Regel]. No people has been more faithful than the Greeks to the essence of humanity, even in art.”<sup>171</sup> The analogy lies in the fact that the Greeks had managed, through tragedy, to provide us with an aesthetic version of the Kant’s third antinomy of the first *Critique* and moreover, not only did they locate the essence of the human condition in the ever-present *agon* for freedom but they managed to salvage its actuality even if that meant confining it within the sphere of art. To translate the tragic dialectic in a system of ethics exceeds our ontological horizon, yet, even if we could possibly leave that issue aside, Schelling assures us that the present age is far too light-hearted for such an endeavour and would rather settle for a world governed by a moral God, much in accordance with the ideas of the Tübingen theologians.

The dictum of tragedy coincides with Schelling’s postulate of infinite striving towards the absolute. Tragedy is the aesthetic representation of the actualization of the absolute where freedom and necessity collide and thus it proceeds where reason could not. In doing so, though, it informs our understanding regarding the limits of our subjectivity and autonomy and gives us an insight into the possibilities of the emancipation of the human condition in moments where the world appears increasingly as a destructive or as a non-conceptually transparent force. Perhaps Schelling’s resort to tragedy was something more than an allusion to an epistemological problem. There is a characteristic darkening of his thought in the *Briefe* that may be the outcome of a growing skepticism regarding the possibilities of freedom in the post- revolutionary era and this is further attested by his bold move to distance himself from claims of grandeur leaving

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* I/1.337.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

behind him the demand for systematicity and questioning the capacity of reason to apprehend the totality of reality. Again, the political implications of his thought, although nowhere explicitly stated, should not be overlooked. His idea of the tragic is a meditation on these issues, and as such, it transforms and informs thinking by becoming a world-disclosing symbol not only of the antinomies of modernity but of thinking itself, an answer to the words of his Tübingen friend: *und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*<sup>172</sup> The crossroad at which Schelling gladly leaves us is not one of reconciliation.<sup>173</sup> True, it is Oedipus standing at the crossroads where his story began, though it is the Coloneus, the one that underwent the tragic dialectic and vanished in the light in what R. P. Winnington-Ingram described as “the greatest coup de theatre”.<sup>174</sup> Oedipus symbolizes philosophy’s current state of *aporia* and it is through this tragic light, by allowing itself to be shaped by it, that philosophy can make its way back to its origins and see with different eyes the roads that open before her in the age of modernity.

### III. A tragic (?) system and the absence of the tragic

The question of origins will resurface in the *coda* of the *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800) where he ascribes to art the disclosing capacity to represent the identity of nature and consciousness through the aesthetic intuition of the absolute. *Prima facie*, the move is indeed reminiscent of the tenth letter of the *Briefe* as in both texts conceptual reasoning reaches an impasse with regards to the representation and actualization of the absolute and resorts to art in order to proceed to what otherwise would remain hidden behind the veil of its non-conceptuality. When examining *Vom Ich* we saw that the underlying aspiration of the text was to provide an adequate response to Kant’s antinomy of the teleological power of judgment. This was the impetus that led Schelling to his *Naturphilosophie* which consequently led him to the development of his own transcendental idealistic theory of self-consciousness in the *STI*. These two *strata* of his thought should be understood as complementary in his effort to give a progressive construction of self-consciousness, beginning from the unconscious and objective

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<sup>172</sup> Hölderlin, *Brot und Wein*.

<sup>173</sup> Schelling (SW, I/1.341)

<sup>174</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1980:256).

levels of nature (*Naturphilosophie*) to the conscious and subjective levels of self-consciousness which end with the work of art that represents an amalgamation of both conscious and unconscious activity and thus provides us with a positive representation of the absolute through the act of aesthetic intuition. The argument of both works is overtly complex to present here and exceeds the objectives of our investigation, thus I will only touch upon the question of the role of art and examine, firstly, how it relates to his renewed systematic ambitions, and secondly, how it forms a bridge between the *STI* and his later philosophy of identity.

Schelling's analysis of the artwork is presented against the background of a quasi-teleological understanding of the development of history which unfolds on the basis of the unity between freedom and necessity. The narrative follows, at least formally, the tragic dialectic we encountered in the *Briefe*, insofar as necessity is understood as something that subverts the conscious and subjective forces at play, appearing as fate or providence, as a 'hidden necessity' that provides us with the stimulus to respond to the demands of practical reason:

“Such intervention of a hidden necessity into human freedom is presupposed, not only, say, in tragedy, whose whole existence rests on that presumption, but even in normal doing and acting. Without such a presumption one can will nothing aright; without it, the disposition to act quite regardless of consequences, as duty enjoins us, could never inspire a man's mind. For if no sacrifice is possible without the conviction that the species we belong to can never cease to progress, how is this conviction itself possible, if it is wholly and solely based upon freedom? There must be something here that is higher than human freedom, and on which alone we can reckon with assurance in doing and acting; something without which a man could never venture to undertake an act fraught with major consequences”<sup>175</sup>

The tragic interplay takes a rather distinctive twist as on the one hand, it attempts to provide an answer to the Kantian problem of motivation in practical reason, whereas on the other, it attests

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<sup>175</sup> Schelling (1978: 204).

to Schelling's turn towards harmonious synthesis of reason and providence, one that translates the tragic in Christian terms (sacrifice). According to Schelling's *ratio* the very moment we leave the domain of self-consciousness (subjectivity) and enter the one of nature (objectivity), we are immediately subject to the yoke of necessity. The uncontested paradox of the discrepancy arising between our free will as it clashes with the barriers of necessity and the end-product of our action leaves something to be desired regarding the meaningfulness of this scheme. True, if one remains confined within the perspective of a singular consciousness the arbitrariness between our action and its actualization threatens to undermine the actuality of freedom. Yet, if we widen our scope and apprehend our action as part of a wider goal, as approximating a collective *telos* then the arbitrariness vanishes. It follows that only if we subsume the orientation of our practical reasoning under the one of the entire species, i.e. the human race, can we restore meaning and actuality in our idea of freedom and thus undertake the task of affirming it despite the contingent distortions of necessity.<sup>176</sup> But what assurances do we have regarding the alignment of the multiplicity of actions that make up the common goal of our species? Schelling rejects the Kantian idea of a moral world-order as a guarantor our collective orientation as a *genus* and puts forward the idea that our common striving can be discerned only in an intuition of our species in history.<sup>177</sup> Still, we are left with the possibility that individuals might follow divergent paths and our picture of history might amount to nothing more than an incoherent and contradictory *summum*.<sup>178</sup>

It follows that if we aspire to discern a historical kinship and a common orientation in humanity we ought to grasp that freedom and progress can only be accomplished on the ground of an equilibrium between freedom and necessity. Unhindered freedom cannot be actualized nor can it take the place of a regulative ideal as it would either take the guise of absolute necessity, i.e. the actualization of Spinoza's necessitarianism, or dissipate towards all directions and thus in the absence of a goal it would cancel itself at the hands of necessity. The common ground, i.e. the objective factor, underlying our striving as a species in history, according to Schelling, cannot be

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* 205.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.* 206.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* 207.

nothing else than an “absolute synthesis” of freedom and necessity that is posited in the absolute.<sup>179</sup> Now if we are to avoid the pitfalls of either part in its absolute manifestation, i.e. lawlessness and atheism in unrestrained freedom (subjectivity) and fatalism in a preordained worldview (objectivity),<sup>180</sup> we have to grasp the absolute identity of freedom and necessity in the context of a “system of providence”, namely in religion.<sup>181</sup> Both movements at play, freedom and necessity, meet at the point of their absolute identity where every dualism disappears, rendering the absolute as the underlying substratum of all the proceedings of history which although it never becomes manifest acts as the ground and guarantor of a quasi-theological conception of history governed by providence. On the basis of these premises Schelling will define history as “a progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the absolute”<sup>182</sup> and will discern in history a tripartite narrative which consists of three stages which differentiate with respect to the understanding of the nature of necessity. Thus, the first one he calls the tragic period where necessity is understood as fate; the second, which is also operating in his era has its distinctive characteristic in the apprehension of necessity as a natural plan and unfolds towards the cosmopolitan idea of the universal state, whereas the third one, supersedes the hitherto understanding of necessity and reveals it as a work of providence.<sup>183</sup> Schelling closes his analysis with the following remark: “When this period will begin, we are unable to tell. But whenever it comes into existence, God also will then exist.”<sup>184</sup> Inarguably, he is not implying a theological objective revelation of God but rather that the absolute will slowly begin revealing itself and thus we shall be able to penetrate to what until now has been impossible to conceptualize.

In the present, however, the only possible means by which we come close to a representation of the absolute are given by the work of art. In the intuition of the artwork we find the identity of the two basic principles of necessity (unconscious productivity) and freedom (conscious productivity) and thus it most faithfully reflects the unification of the two

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* 207.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* 209.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.* 211.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* 211f.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.* 212.



complementary *strata*, *Naturphilosophie* and the transcendental theory of self-consciousness, in a work that arises out of the free act of artistic creation. This is accomplished because of the artwork's inherent dualistic nature; it is a product of conscious productivity insofar it reflects the artist's purposiveness (technique) and yet it also pertains to unconscious productivity as it demonstrates the hidden creativity of the genius. The distinctive feature of the artwork is provided by the representative characteristic of its two components and thus consists in the presentation of an unconscious (nature) infinity (freedom).<sup>185</sup> As such, the artwork exhibits an inexhaustible and open-ended character reflecting the incommensurability of the absolute. Most importantly, being completely non-objective, the absolute resists conceptualization, rendering art its only possible approximation through the act of aesthetic intuition.<sup>186</sup>

Schelling will bring his thoughts to a closure by proceeding to an unquestionably original and elegant 'gesture':

"A system is completed when it is led back to its starting point. But this is precisely the case with our own. The ultimate ground of all harmony between subjective and objective could be exhibited in its original identity only through intellectual intuition; [...] But now if its art alone which can succeed in objectifying [through aesthetic intuition] with universal validity what the philosopher is able to present in a merely subjective fashion, there is one more conclusion yet to be drawn. Philosophy was born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge, and with it all those sciences it has guided toward perfection; we may thus expect them, on completion, to flow back [...] into the universal ocean of poetry from which they took their source."<sup>187</sup>

Schelling's endeavours in the *Naturphilosophie* and the *STI* comes full circle with his analysis of the work of art. Philosophy travelled the long systematic road from nature to self-consciousness only to return to its origins, in poetry. The primacy ascribed to art mirrors, if somewhat

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.* 225.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* 229.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* 232.

implicitly, an inherent stalemate in Schelling's speculative idealism. Notwithstanding reason's great and complex efforts to apprehend the absolute, the very last moment, as it was the case with the *Briefe*, reason finds itself at a gate for which it holds, if not the wrong key, then definitely one that cannot unlock it solely be itself. From this perspective, Schelling's philosophical system, if we can possibly refer to this joint project as a unified system, is a tragic system, insofar it subverts itself on its own ground, as it remains in constant infinite approximation of a goal it does not manage to actualize by its own means. However, such an interpretation overstates the formal development of his thought and understates two important elements that make it questionable. First, although there are substantial grounds to assume that in the period of the *STI* Schelling retained his conception of tragedy as the highest in art, with the exception of his allusion to it when discussing his understanding of history, tragedy is nowhere explicitly mentioned. Second, even if we assume that this is not the case and try to read his analysis of the artwork through the prism of tragedy we come across a rather degraded version of what we were presented with in the *Briefe*, an idea of the tragic that has been severely modified in order to bring to completion a philosophical system which operates on teleological premises, one that discerns in tragedy the *par excellence* aesthetic medium of reconciliation. Not surprisingly, in his subsequent treatment of subject he will emphasize exactly these elements we have already discerned in the *STI*. It follows that his analysis of the artwork as an identity of nature and freedom, unconscious and conscious productivity, forms the conceptual bridge that will lead to his *Identitätsphilosophie*. As the course of his thought from 1796 to 1800 came to a closure with the primacy of the aesthetic Schelling had two possible options, either to withdraw and remain within the sphere of aesthetics or to proceed and begin anew on a different ground; he opted for the second.

Schelling's contribution to the analysis of the tragic reached its highest and most insightful moment in the *Briefe*. His revisiting of the topic in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art* is a mere *addendum* to his previous theory with the difference that now it is ascribed with a reconciliatory role. As he adds nothing substantial to his analysis of the tragic I will restrict my observations on the minor modifications with regard to his respective examination in the *Briefe* and give a brief account of the conditions of the possibility of tragedy in modernity.

Schelling will undertake the task of developing a philosophy art in a series of lectures given between 1802 and 1805 under the umbrella of what is commonly characterized as his *Identitätsphilosophie*. The basic structure of his thinking during this period consists in the interplay between the real and the ideal or differently, between the phenomenal and the intellectual, in their mutual unification in the metaphysical principle of the absolute which he apprehends on the basis of their absolute identity. Whereas on the *STI* he argued for the primacy of the aesthetic over the conceptual, now the past pre-eminence of art is ascribed to philosophy with the former being the closest mode of expression of the immediate representation of the indifference point between the two potencies of the ideal and the real. Absolute identity remains inaccessible to art and is reserved for philosophical thinking. His analysis of tragedy unfolds within this conceptual framework and consists mostly in rephrasing the arguments he developed in the *Briefe*.<sup>188</sup> Notwithstanding, there are three significant departures from his prior analysis and which give it a distinctively different orientation. First and foremost, as already hinted, tragedy is stripped of its ability to provide us with a metaphysical insight into the substratum of reality as it remains confined with the realm of the objective and thus not ‘complete’ representation of the absolute. Second, as he is compelled –and in a specific sense obliged– to find a modern analogue to ancient Greek tragedy he attempts an hermeneutic levelling between the two and reads into the latter elements that are most pertinent to the former. Consequently, the concepts of harmony and guilt are brought into the picture and the *topos* of the tragic dialectic is now to be sought in the principle of reconciliation. True, one could argue that this shift is due to an enrichment of the idea of the tragic as he now expands the tragic corpus to Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and the *Oedipus Coloneus*, yet one cannot but observe the cardinal importance he ascribes to the dissolution of oppositions in the spirit of the overarching principle of absolute identity. Third, and this is external to his analysis of the tragic itself, tragedy is no longer the symbol of the conceptual enigma nor does it stand as an aesthetic answer to the misadventures of reason; it has been apprehended as nothing but a moment within a philosophical system and has been appropriated so that it can serve its role according to the determinations and requirements of

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<sup>188</sup> Schelling (1989: 253).

conceptual thought. It could be argued that we can distinguish between the idea of the tragic and his theory of tragedy on the basis of the freedom allowed to tragedy to shape the form and content of thinking itself. Evidently, when systematic needs are imposed on the idea it is debased to its respective systematic function and tragedy loses its maximum world-disclosing potential. This does not entail that it has nothing to offer within a philosophical system, Hegel's reading of tragedy in the *Phenomenology* is an ample example that proves the exact opposite, nonetheless, one cannot but ponder on the fact that the kernel of the tragic consists in something that resists, if not opposes, systematic conceptualization. In Hegel's case we could provide the following image that possibly encapsulates tragedy's double guise and movement within a philosophical system: if one pictures his *Phenomenology* as an extremely detailed canvas where all figures and motifs have been harmoniously placed so as the final product needs no further touch and can be apprehended as an utmost completed work of art, tragedy occupies that hidden place in the canvas where the light reflects back to a mirror which then illuminates, to the painter's great surprise, anew the whole canvas. It is from such an angle that Hegel's dialectic can be described as tragic and it is from the same point of view that the *STI* could, even if there is substantial evidence that it is not, be described as a tragic system. Again, one could argue that such a reading is borderline parochial as it apprehends tragedy under a light that overstates the elements of ambiguity, catastrophe and open-endedness while remaining deaf to a number of tragedies that having nothing to do with the above. As much as there is firm ground for the above criticism the insistence of philosophical interpretations on these elements cannot be accounted for as mere subjectivism and preference, especially when their primary motive rests on the elucidation of their respective *Zeitgeist*; simply, they speak to us and inform our understanding in a way other tragedies do not.

According to the underlying reasoning of the principles of his *Identitätsphilosophie* Schelling was obliged to undertake the task of coming up with the possibility of tragedy in modernity. As the constructional narrative he develops in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art* rejects a historical unfolding of the various appearances of the absolute in its particular manifestations and advances the idea that each such manifestation is nothing else than a different combination between ideal and real potencies in their indifference, it follows that the differences

between ancient and modern drama are subsidiary to their common ability to give an objective representation of the indifference point between the ideal and the real. Therefore, if the present world-image is to be accounted for, a very specific artwork is required in order to fill in the gap in his system. The structure of the tragic dialectic remains the same, freedom against necessity, with the latter now apprehended in accordance to what he had put forward in the *STI*, as providence, whereas the content is derived from what he takes to be the modern analogue to mythology, namely (Christian) religious myth.<sup>189</sup> The paradigmatic case of modern tragedy he seeks in Calderon's *La devoción de la cruz* (1637), a work he believes that provides us with an aesthetic presentation of "a reconciliation within what we might call sinful art."<sup>190</sup> Calderon's Catholicism provides him with the three necessary elements for his analysis, namely the idea of original sin, the determination of providence, and the possibility of atonement through the grace of God. In stark contrast to what we encountered in the first letter of the *Briefe*, he attempts to reconcile the idea of moral theodicy with the idea of the tragic. Indeed, as Schelling observes, the apprehension of fate as providence provides us with an altogether very different conception of necessity, one that restores to the subject an ethical cleansing and lifts the burden of the primordial determination of sin. What is absent, however, with the exception of the formal analogy to ancient Greek tragedy, is the actual tragic content (freedom) and struggle *per se*. Needless to say, the actualization of the questionable existence of the struggle is redeemed to an afterlife rendering our in-the-world dwelling insignificant to the promises that lie beyond it. Unfortunately, Schelling's aspirations in this *Philosophie der Kunst* were less directed to the task of unfolding the latent dynamic found in tragedy and more orientated towards coming with up with a tragedy that could take its place in and conform to his overall philosophical system of identity. Apart from the obvious case that could be made against the compatibility between tragedy and Christian moral theodicy, we are also bewildered by his choice to elect as the representative modern tragedy one written almost one and a half century ago before his time. It is hard to imagine his fellow Tübingen friends, or almost any progressive mind in early

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.* 275, 268.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* 273.

nineteenth century, retreating to the mid sixteenth century in order to find a voice that speaks to them and reflects their *Weltgeist*.

Regardless of the shortcomings of his subsequent analysis of tragedy, Schelling's overall contribution to the phenomenon of the tragic cannot be undervalued. He remains, with Schiller in close proximity, the first thinker who emphatically broke philosophy's bonds with the poetological understanding of tragedy and tried to embrace its conceptual potencies by integrating it within a philosophical narrative in which he ascribed to it a primacy which no one had dared in the period between him and Plato. The importance of this move was not only structural but most importantly, during a period where philosophy was trying to redefine and reestablish itself on firm ground, was an heuristic insight into philosophy's limits and self-understanding. The undeniably ambiguous characterization of a 'philosophy of the tragic' makes sense insofar we can get close to the theoretical proceedings between 1781 and 1800 and understand how the aspirations for an all-embracing and philosophical totality came to a momentary halt, where, in the state of philosophy's pondering and self-reflection, tragedy emerged as an alternative, or better, as a different path, towards the completion of the latter's absolute goals.

### Chapter III. G. W. F. Hegel

#### Introduction

The heartland of German Idealism's meditations on Greek tragedy and the question of the tragic is occupied by Hegel. The comet light of Schelling's profound, yet often unrefined, observations and Schiller's extremely suggestive post-revolutionary framing of the possibilities of tragedy in modernity, undergo further development and revision while taking refuge in the structures of the vast and always developing Hegelian conceptual design. In this sense, Hegel's account of tragedy, by implicitly undertaking the labour of the negative to its immanent consequences and explicitly delineating the limits of art in our self-understanding in modernity, represents both the culmination of the idealistic interpretative tradition and its closure. Hopefully, by the end of the chapter these claims shall be rendered clear.

According to Rosenkranz, Hegel's first encounter with the works of the ancient Greek dramatists occurred no later than 1788 while he was still in Stuttgart and a few months before matriculating as student at the *Tübinger Stift*.<sup>191</sup> Familiarisation with the works of Greek antiquity was considered commonplace in his circles and although tragedy did not have a prominent role in his early formative years in Bern (1793-6), the fact that he attempted to translate parts of Sophocles' *Antigone* suggests something beyond mere educational formality.<sup>192</sup> Hegel's special affection for ancient Greek tragedy was soon transcribed in philosophical idiom in Frankfurt (1797-1801) and after that never lost its cardinal place in his thinking.

Unfortunately for us, despite the supposedly apparent and reassuring fact that tragedy's appropriation is almost always part and parcel of his analysis of Greek ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), while being at the same time interpretatively intertwined with his dialectical method, the convoluted paths of his thought prohibit the attempt to find a unifying guiding thread behind his understanding of tragedy. The evident discontent and reproachful tone of classicists against

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<sup>191</sup> Harris (1972: 48).

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* (48, n.1).

the generalizing tendency that underwrites Hegel's take on tragedy is not wholly unfounded,<sup>193</sup> insofar it usually appears in far less than perspicuous context and often moves beyond the factual interpretative horizon. Yet, it is equally important, that the same attentiveness should be exhibited in the process of extracting the meaning of his theorisations against the backdrop of the respective philosophical apparatus that accompany them. If classicists do not delve into the intricacies of the broader framing of his analysis and similarly, philosophers refuse to embrace the particularity of tragedy by taking refuge in a unifying understanding of the concepts and notions associated with it, then we are prone either to overlook the potential of his understanding for both fields, or to severely misconstrue it. The first standpoint offers us invaluable insight to the specificity of the phenomenon of tragedy by its insistence on its social context and its political implications,<sup>194</sup> whereas the second, by elucidating the interplay between the overarching systematic demands of his line of thinking and his remarks on tragedy, reveals to us a critical perspective on the reasons behind possible hermeneutic bias from his part and thus dispels common misinterpretations, while, at the same time, it provides us with an elaborate conceptual framework that can only but further expand our understanding of the phenomenon under consideration. Only if we remain in dialogue can we claim the latent possibilities of his insights. Towards that cause the long road that – not often – crystallizes in an intuition of the tragic might be worth traversing as it can only reveal itself much in the manner of the Hegelian *Erinnerung*, i.e. by looking back or recollecting the whole voyage of the tragic rather than pinpointing to specific passages. Obviously, such an approach leaves the method of the current study potentially open to the criticism of vagueness yet I strongly believe that the merits of such an approach strongly exceed and supersede the disadvantages.

Given the aforementioned preliminary observations and endorsing the view that Hegel's thinking up until the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) is a work in progress that later crystallises and takes a definite form in the *Wissenschaft der Logik* (1812-6), I believe that one

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<sup>193</sup> Goldhill (2012: Chapter 6). In a similar vein, against Freud's generalizing account of Oedipus, see: Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1988: Chapter 4).

<sup>194</sup> An exemplary account of this approach is represented by the essays in Winkler and Zeitlin (1990).



ought to proceed in a *genetic* manner.<sup>195</sup> The first section is devoted to *Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal* (1798-1800) and tries to elucidate if and how his nascent conception of a dialectical method *qua* love under a Christian sky can be sustained in its relation with his understanding of Greek fate as an alternative to the formality of law; the upshot of the argument is whether Jesus as a proto-dialectical figure can be characterized as a tragic persona and consequentially, if therein lies the possibility of a tragic understanding of modernity. The second focuses on the *Naturrechts* essay (1802-3) and examines his thesis on ‘the tragedy of the ethical’ with particular focus on the notion of sacrifice as a precursor to his later analysis of the negativity of spirit as expressed in the *Phänomenologie*. The third section is devoted to the *Phänomenologie* where there are two divergent threads of interest to be found, one concerning the exposé of his seminal analysis relevant to tragedy in chapter VI, and another, concerning what could be called the tragic vein of the work that is articulated in the *Preface*. The latter is brought in and discussed in the fourth and last section conjointly with his philosophy of history and the question of whether the movement of the world-spirit, notwithstanding its justifications, could be apprehended as conforming to a very specific appropriation of the notion of the tragic and therefore as having nuances of a pre-critical metaphysics.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> This is not meant to be a claim that touches on the question of the systematic relation between the two works. I merely suggest that the apprehension of his thought as a work in progress up to the completion of the *Phänomenologie* is substantiated in our area of concern by the fact that although Hegel had reached relatively early a fairly conclusive understanding of Greek tragedy in its association with the domain of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), the constellation of the relevant surrounding notions and concepts continues to change as we proceed from one work to the next one, i.e. until we reach the *Wissenschaft der Logik*, and so does their meaning. It follows that in order to keep up with this asynchronous development and not succumb to uncritical generalizations one must proceed one step at a time. See also, Harris (1972: 390).

<sup>196</sup> I do not examine his analysis of tragedy as a work of art in the *Phänomenologie* (§§733-43) and the *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* as it most properly belongs to the sphere of aesthetics and poetics. Given that the overall orientation of our study focuses on the speculative reading of the tragic and insofar the respective discussions have no significant import, as they neither expand radically, nor negate the conclusions we find in the *Preface* and under Chapter VI (Spirit), I consider them superfluous to the present examination. Excellent commentaries on tragedy in the *Aesthetics* include: Houlgate (1986: 198-212), with regard to its comic elements an interesting view is put forward by Gasché (2000: 37-55). On his treatment of tragedy under the heading of ‘Religion of Art’ in the *Phenomenology*, see: Billings (2014: 177-184).

## I. First investigations and dialectical trials

*Bern* (1793-6)

Hegel's Bern investigations reflect an evident tergiversation stemming from his effort to assimilate, combine, and apply, three basic tenets of his thought, namely, the demands of Kantian practical reason and autonomy, the Greek ideal of an harmonious and free society, and the unifying power of religion in the absence of any positive determination, to the strenuous task of overcoming the self-division and degradation of his society that resulted from the lack of proper education and the monolithic Church of his era. During this period, Hegel's orientation was primarily directed towards the practical aspects of social phenomena. His insistence on the importance of feelings vis-à-vis Enlightenment reason (Rousseau), the call for an ethical understanding and reformation of religion (Lessing, Kant), along with his turn to 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens as a meditation on freedom in the present tense and a shining example of a 'living religion', are interdependent narratives in his effort to grapple with the actual *malaise* governing the newly emerged historical reality.<sup>197</sup>

While in Bern tragedy had not yet entered his agenda. However, it is during his last months in Tübingen while still a student that Hegel first apprehended the Greeks as the *par excellence* other of the present, as the comparative category against and through which he was to formulate and test his meditations on ethics. In the *Tübingen Fragment* (1793) he sets out to show that religion ought to become subjective in order to appeal to the hearts of men and thus have an actual effect on a societal level. He develops his reasoning by contrasting private religion, a form of religion based on withdrawal from public life, focused on strict compliance with religious practices and fundamentally of a rather dim outlook, to public religion, a fuller and richer model that integrates sensibility and the law of the heart. The comparison corresponds to and can also be stated in terms of the Kantian distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, which here takes the form of a contrast between analytic understanding that remains within the province of the letter of religion and an organic all-embracing reason enriched by

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<sup>197</sup> On Rousseau's and Kant's influence, especially on the latter's *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793-4), see: Henrich (1970: 27-31). On the broader lines of influence while in Bern, see: Harris (1970: 60-6).

imagination. The latter is actualized in its maximum potential in the *Volksreligion* of the Greeks as a total mediation between the totality of private and public spheres including the state, as the coming together of life through religion and vice versa. Yet Hegel is not oblivious to the impossibility of an actual return to the Greek situation; the question is whether the Greeks can act as a guiding compass in the possible formation of a contemporary *Volksreligion* on the ground of Kantian ethics.<sup>198</sup>

Notwithstanding his highly idealized portrait of Periclean Athens, which was typical of the age, we come across three important observations that are not adjunct to his later thoughts on tragedy. First, he is highly critical of the self-declared scientific or metaphysical understanding of Christian providence, he turns to the Greek alternative which dictates unflinching acceptance of external necessity (*μοίρα*), though without the further mental and emotional ramifications that are customary responses of Christians to the unknowingness of providence.<sup>199</sup> Secondly, when examining the notion of sacrifice he qualifies its Greek form as superior in its disassociation from any Christian compensatory connotations and discerns in it a life affirming element against the implacability of Nemesis.<sup>200</sup> Lastly, although he understands Greek religion as the primary unifying element of their society, he underlines the interdependency of society's various spheres including public theatrical performances.<sup>201</sup> I hold that these are important remarks that lay part of the general groundwork and respectively prefigure the later development of three ideas of central importance in his theory of tragedy. The first revolves around the notion of *pathos* that we shall first encounter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Ancient Greeks were able to withstand with unyielding perseverance the force and the determinations of necessity because 'men can more easily bear what they have been accustomed to regard as necessary from youth up',<sup>202</sup> that is because it is part of their broader *ethos*, i.e. it is essential to and inseparable from who they are. Although such a feature

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<sup>198</sup> Hegel will return to the idea of a *Volksreligion* on the basis of its Christian reformulation in the *Fragment of a System* (1800).

<sup>199</sup> Hegel (1793/1972: 501).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* (504). Nemesis in this context should be understood as the abstract personification of blind necessity. Later on the text he speaks of 'iron necessity' and 'unalterable destiny' (508).

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.* (505-6).

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.* (501).

of one's character cannot be conceived as purely ethical, it plays a constitutive role in the formation of their worldview and thus informs and permeates their ethical life. Additionally, Hegel adds an important clarification which touches on what was to be crucial for Schelling in the *Briefe* two years later: "they could not puzzle over the inner meaning of these things, for their *μοίρα*, their *ἀναγκαία τύχη* was blind – but they submitted willingly".<sup>203</sup> Despite the fact that Hegel will not pursue further the meaning of the *willing* submission to fate, especially as a vanguard affirmation and preservation of freedom, still, the possibility of influencing young Schelling cannot be ruled out. The latter point we can unravel from this telling sentence is Hegel's precursory understanding of the Greeks as lacking a fully-fledged inner world, or more precisely, as not being the fully developed self-consciousness whose inner self is absolutely transparent. The second will be further developed and articulated in the *Essay on Natural Law* in the 'tragedy of the ethical' where sacrifice preserves its affirming character and is viewed as ethicality's mode of reconciliation within ethicality, whereas the third could be apprehended as an embryonic precursor to his post-Frankfurt conception of the Greek ideal.

Hegel's vacillation between the Kantian precepts of practical reason and the gravitational pull of the Greek ideality became explicit in his next endeavour, *The Life of Jesus* (1795), where he tried to apprehend and present Jesus through the lens of Kantian morality. What before was a meditation *in abstracto* is now transposed in an agonistic context between Jesus *qua* Kant and Socrates.<sup>204</sup> This move was partly necessitated by the urgent need to respond to the skepticism imbued by Kant's 2<sup>nd</sup> publication of the *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* in 1794. If the belief in a personal God on ethical grounds was no longer sustainable, it followed that the inextricable link between religion and morality was to come under further scrutiny and his aim was to salvage and reinforce it. It was Hegel's belief that where Luther and the Reformation had failed to provide the necessary unifying apparatus for the German folk to become a people in the sense of a cohesive *Volksreligion*, a radical reinterpretation of the scriptures along Kantian lines could show the way forward by demystifying and rationalizing the transcendent core of

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> For a detailed discussion of *The Life of Jesus*, see: Leonard (2012: Chapter 2).

Christianity. Hegel's strict adherence to Kant's ethical thought apparently undermines his allegiance to the Greeks, who, for the time being, are being pushed to the background. Notwithstanding, the evident prioritisation of the question regarding the compatibility between Christianity and Kantian morality never rose in lieu of the question posed by the Greeks for modernity but rather presupposes it. This becomes obvious when he turns his focus on the phenomenon of positivity.

As Hegel laboured to bring closer two of the three main strands of his thought in *The Life of Jesus*, the deficiencies of both started to reveal themselves. The first subjected to severe criticism was Christianity with his inquiry into the origins of the positivity of Christian religion. Broadly speaking, positivity refers to the process according to which complex social phenomena such as ethics and religion are externally legislated by an unquestionable authority and are eventually amalgamated into hectoring and coercive norms and institutions. In this context, the Greeks always represent the unique counter-paradigm to the devastating effects of the sundering force of positivity. As the overall argument of the *Positivity of the Christian Religion* (1796) is tangential to our concerns,<sup>205</sup> the only pertinent inference we can deduce from the text is that tragedy as the *locus classicus* of the Greek spirit cannot flourish under the heading of positivity. Hegel will soon develop this idea when contrasting the fate of the Jews to that of the Greeks in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* (1798-1800).

However, before we proceed, there is one further point to consider. In an appendix to the *Positivity* essay we find the fragment *Jedes Volk hat ihm eigene Gegenstände* (1796). The relevant passage appears in a joint discussion of the Greek and Roman gods, yet the focus is unmistakably on the former:

“If a man clashed with these lords of nature and their power, he could set over against them his freedom and his own self. His will was free and obeyed its own

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<sup>205</sup> Harris holds that the recognition and restriction of our ‘fear of the lord’ to our natural being without allowing it to get hold of our spiritual being, echoes Hegel's study of Greek tragedy and the *Book of Job* at Tübingen during 1791 (1972: 226). Without disregarding the special affinity between the *Book of Job* and Greek tragedy and taking under consideration the tumultuous history of reception of the former in biblical scholarship, it still remains hard to acquiesce with Harris' conflation; The Jobian ordeal seems to me more germane to the discussion as the idiomatic form of ‘fear of the lord’ is wholly absent from the tragic worldview.

laws; he knew no divine commands, or, if he called the moral law a divine command, the command was nowhere given in words but ruled him invisibly (*Antigone*). This implied that he recognized everyone's right to have a will of his own, be it good or bad. Good men acknowledged in their own case the duty of being good, yet at the same time they respected other people's freedom not to be so; thus they did not set up and impose on others any moral system, whether one that was divine or one manufactured or abstracted [from experience] by themselves.”<sup>206</sup>

What earlier was left undeveloped, the inchoate connection between the willing submission to external necessity as a means of affirmation of one's freedom and self-determination, is now clearly articulated according to Schelling's formulation in the tenth letter of the *Briefe*. This is his first explicit reference to a Greek tragedy. Hegel proceeds along the lines of the *Positivity* essay and conclusively argues for the incompatibility between the worldview encompassing the tragic individual and any form of positivity, being religious or ethical, divine or earthly. The three distinct forms of positivity mentioned here seem to correspond to Judaism (divine), the Christian Church (manufactured), and philosophical ethics (abstracted). The important difference to his prior essay is that now the phenomenon of positivity is transposed and examined in the context of a 'moral system...or abstracted [from experience] by themselves', i.e. of a philosophical moral system. The fragment is rather inconclusive as to whom he is alluding, yet we know that the second strand of his thought that was soon to bring about the deficiency of positivity was Kantian morality.<sup>207</sup> A definitive answer to this question is entangled in the conundrum of the evaluation of Hölderlin's influence on Hegel around 1795, a topic far exceeding the scope of our current investigation.<sup>208</sup> Hegel's relative qualification of tragic

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<sup>206</sup> Hegel (1796/1961: 155).

<sup>207</sup> His criticism of the positivity of Christian religion paves the way for his forthcoming critique of Kantian morality on the same grounds, cf. "In Greek religion, or in any other whose underlying principle is a pure morality, the moral commands of reason, which are subjective, were not treated or set up as if they were the objective rules with which the understanding [Verstand] deals." Hegel (1796/1961: 143).

<sup>208</sup> The issue seems to have divided scholars into two main camps. The first one is represented by Dieter Henrich who has extensively argued for an alleged *turn* in Hegel's thought first occurring in the '*die Liebe*' fragment of 1796 under the influence of Hölderlin which gradually brought about his dissatisfaction with Kantian and

freedom against the first two forms of positivity<sup>209</sup> in some ways provides us with an incipient answer to the question we shall pursue in the context of *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*.

The assumptions derived from his Bern investigations are brought in and re-examined in a different order of thinking which distances itself from the *Reflexionsphilosophie* of Kant and Fichte. The fragmented and reified social reality of his era had been dominated by the principle of positivity under the guise of subjectivity in both religion and ethics. The unity heralded by Christianity and Kantian morality was a false unity inasmuch as it remained within the nexus of coercive norms of authority. In this context, the guiding thread of *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* is the search for a more inclusive, rational, and all-embracing, answer – according to the principles of an enriched *Vernunft* – to the social deformation aptly described by Schiller in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education*. For the young Hegel the only possible solution rested with religion and thus *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* takes the form of a quasi-historical inquiry into the successive forms of religious consciousness that could have an actual import for our self-understanding in modernity. In relation to tragedy, this is the first text where we encounter its appropriation *qua* tragic, i.e. as a speculative idea disentangled from the specificities of its respective literary genre which he either interweaves with broader narratives of thought such as his understanding of the unfolding of history, or apprehends as an ontological determination usually ascribed to the Greeks. Considering the concurrently and diverse running threads of the work I will confine our focus to the absolutely necessary issues that explicate the role of tragedy in the overall scheme of his investigation.

### *The Spirit of Christianity*

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Fichte's *Reflexionsphilosophie* (1997: 119-142, 1970: 37-43, 1965/6: 73-95), whereas the second, under Henry Siltan Harris, tends to recourse to Hegel's pre-Bern (before 1793) meditations on the Spinozistic *hen kai pan* and emphasizes the continuum in the development of his thought (1972: 258-270, 294 n. 2, 323-30).

<sup>209</sup> Despite the romantic overtones in his portrayal of the Greeks, Hegel proceeds, albeit *en passant*, to one of his rare references to the institution of slavery in ancient Greece, which here, however, does not affect the relative ideality they represent (1976/1961: 148).

Hegel's first approximation of tragedy is developed in the fragment entitled *The Spirit of Judaism* which consists in a comparative discussion of Judaism and Greek religion.<sup>210</sup> As his remarks do not actually elucidate his understanding, either of the content or of the idea, of tragedy, we can only proceed negatively and try to decode it by examining to what it is contrasted and how this negative delineation informs us about its essential Greek character. At the end of his overall exposition in the *SC* we find a *précis* of the underlying objective of every religion:

“The need to unite subject with object, to unite feeling, and feeling's demand for objects, with the intellect, to unite them in something beautiful, in a god, by means of fancy, is the supreme need of the human spirit and the urge to religion.”<sup>211</sup>

The picture portrayed is undoubtedly of Greek origin. Their holistic and unifying living religion in beauty represents for Hegel both an irretrievable moment in the progress of spirit and an indication of the requirements that should be met by any religion aspiring to overcome the fragmentary and alienated experience of modernity.

Judaism stands in stark opposition to the Greeks and represents the religious equivalent to the social reality determined by the mark of positivity as if its religious deficiencies had been transferred and integrated into the social fabric of his historical present.<sup>212</sup> Hegel's analysis of Judaism begins with Noah and the violent rupture from nature, finds the true progenitor of the Jewish spirit in Abraham, and concludes with the legalistic positivism represented by Moses. Each of these three moments in the formation of the spirit of Judaism corresponds to three different instances of positivism which respectively characterize three constitutive spheres of man's worldview, namely, nature (Noah), spirit (Abraham) and society (Moses). The primordial violence experienced in the deluge precipitated an immediate and absolute sundering between man and nature, an act that led to the apprehension of the latter strictly in

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<sup>210</sup> On the editorial problems of the text that was first published in *Hegel's Theologische Jugendschriften* (1907) under Hermann Nohl, see: Harris (1972: 267 n.2., 287 n.1.)

<sup>211</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 289).

<sup>212</sup> For an overall survey of young Hegel's stance towards Judaism, see: Yovel (1998: Chapter 2).



terms of domination. In order to sustain the severity of this co-existence with the threatening otherness of the world, the Jews transposed this unity *qua* domination in the sphere of the idea, in their God, who acted as its guarantor in exchange for their absolute submission. The logic of separation inaugurated by Noah was further strengthened and developed by Abraham by the internalization of the principle of domination *qua* separation according to which anything not identical with the Jewish spirit was immediately apprehended and banished as fundamentally hostile and radically evil. The governing principle of the Jewish spirit became an ontological and metaphysical determination of life. The final act was carried out by Moses who objectified their subjective submission into the form of law.

This was the narrative that shaped and determined the inescapable fate of the Jewish spirit. The mystery surrounding the unknowability of their god gave birth to the empty negativity accompanying the manifestations, the *dicta*, and the interpretations of his will:

“The great tragedy of the Jewish people is no Greek tragedy; it can rouse neither terror nor pity, for both of these arise only out of the fate which follows from the inevitable slip of a beautiful character; it can arouse horror alone. The fate of the Jewish people is the fate of Macbeth who stepped out of nature itself, clung to alien Beings, and so in their service had to trample and slay everything holy in human nature.”<sup>213</sup>

Let us begin with a provisional remark on the notion of fate in the *Spirit of Christianity*. First and foremost, it should be distinguished from its connotations *qua* blind or natural necessity and thus it should be stripped of its metaphysical nuances. Secondly, although in the dramatic context of tragedy it is associated with a particular individual, it also has the potential to refer and characterize a people, rendering it a collective perspective. Third, it is triggered or unveiled by a significant action as attested by his obvious reference to the *Poetics*.<sup>214</sup>

Hegel seems to adopt Aristotle’s definition of tragedy with a small, albeit important, deviation, when he clarifies that the tragic hero ought to be of *beautiful* character. Apart from

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<sup>213</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 204-5).

<sup>214</sup> Aristotle (1452b-1453a).

this seemingly insignificant aberration, it is on the basis of the Aristotelian text that he draws the line between Greek tragedy and the one represented by the Jewish people and exemplified by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The ostensible conclusion is that there are two different types of tragedy. Let us now return to the beautiful character and try to understand why he deemed it necessary to add this emendation. Earlier we saw that fate in the context of our discussion is appropriated in a significantly different way from its customary meaning. More specifically, it is charged with an ethical import which signifies the displacement of its relation to man from external to internal. The upshot of this shift is that fate is immediately juxtaposed with the notions of individual freedom and self-will. The character is *beautiful* because he brings about and fulfils his fate and by doing so he accomplishes and reflects a tragic realization in an all-around harmonious and free manner that had only been accomplished by the Greeks. The lesson is twofold: fate is not a given, it is, at this stage, more alike to a postulate of practical reason. It follows that not everyone has a fate and most certainly the Jews do not; the particularity of their situation can only be described as fatelessness.<sup>215</sup> The Jewish "great tragedy" amounts to nothing more than to a mere reiteration of the parochial meaning of the word insofar it lies with an external objective force that abolishes all self-determination and leaves the subject motionless and awestruck against life's machinations. *Macbeth* most suitably represents the same fatelessness, the subjugation of life to an empty form of unbearable objectivity, being deeply immersed in his subjectivity which slowly takes a horrendous objective form in Banquo's ghost. The second inference is that in Hegel's attempt to mediate the generic conditions of tragedy with the notion of fate we come across a quintessentially Greek idea of the tragic which constitutes a form of knowledge. Fate is elevated to a *sine qua non* qualification of tragedy and can only be found actualized in the Greek worldview, thus, the tragic perspective provides us with a vista of collective experience, which, for the time being, is confined within

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<sup>215</sup> Hegel makes a distinction between the two prevalent meanings of fate; *fatum* refers to blind necessity whereas *Schicksal* is associated with Greek tragedy and represents a form of justice. The spirit of Judaism is determined by *fatum* which in this context can only be conceived as the absence of fate. This is further underlined if one considers the difference between Greek *Schicksal* and the externality of the three witches in *Macbeth*. It should be noted that Hegel had not yet developed his later interpretation of them as inherently internal to *Macbeth*'s subjectivity, that is, as a projection that reflects his own willing.

the Greek world. This is not to say that Macbeth is not a tragedy; it endures as such on dramatic grounds but does not offer us the higher perspective provided by Greek tragedy. The last point of discussion that we can draw from the above condensed passage is whether the idea of the tragic is unequivocally dependent on the particular fate and the beautiful worldview of the Greeks, or if it is conceivably contingent on a different appropriation of fate in an altogether distinct worldview. Fate was found to be akin to a postulate of practical reason and insofar one dwells to fulfil its holistic and unifying requirements then an approximation to the idea of the tragic might be possible for a different worldview. A corollary of this would be a profoundly reconciliatory idea of the tragic based on an idealized understanding of the Greeks. The validity of this claim determines how we approach and understand the potentially reconciliatory role he ascribes to tragedy, whether it stems from Hegel's affinity towards the Greek *exemplum*, or, if he is superimposing Christian elements on ancient drama and by extension to the idea of the tragic. The answer lies with the different meanings associated with reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) both as a process and as an end. This issue will be examined as we proceed to Hegel's quasi-tragic apprehension of Jesus in the main *corpus* of the text.

Having exalted the primacy of the Greek spirit against the Jewish, we would expect Hegel to proceed further on the Greek path, yet he abruptly shifts his focus to Christianity. This is indicative of his gradual disentanglement from the romantic idolization of the Greeks and attests to a darkening of his understanding of the Greek experience, which, under the light of the emerging historization of his understanding of the forms of thought, is now disabused of its static ideality and acquires a dynamic connotation. The return to the modern paradise of Greek antiquity might be a *contradictio in adjecto* but that does not prevent us from exploiting its potential for the present and this is exactly what Hegel intends to do here. His argument follows the successive exposition of different forms of religious consciousness in their progressive integration of the previous form through the fulfilment of their latent potentialities for greater degrees of unity and fullness of being. This movement is encapsulated in Hegel's proto-dialectical concept of *pleroma* which forms the underlying apparatus of the successive

sublations of the oppositions governing each ethical-religious stage.<sup>216</sup> The final stage is represented by the question of whether the incipient religion of love espoused by Christ in its Greek reformulation could provide us with an answer to the shortcomings of modernity.

Having already engaged with the positivity of both Judaism and Christianity under the dogma of the Church, Hegel turns his attention to Kant's categorical imperative and the implicit duality behind it:

“For the particular... the universal is necessarily and always something alien and objective. There remains a residuum of indestructible positivity which finally shocks us because the content which the universal command of duty acquires, a specific duty, contains the contradiction of being restricted and universal at the same time and makes the most stubborn claims for its one-sidedness, i.e., on the strength of possessing universality of form.”<sup>217</sup>

Kant's moral theory and rational faith represent an advance over the two prior stages of religious consciousness but nevertheless remain indubitably encumbered by their inability to fend off the dominant imperatives prescribed by practical reason and reconcile the sensible aspects of being with the demands of morality. The submission to an external authority distinctive to Judaism is now internalized in the form of the unconditional validity of the practical law.<sup>218</sup> The need to come up with a principle able to overcome the apparent divisions in both religious and ethical spheres led him back to the concept of love as promulgated by the teachings of Jesus as yet unsullied by their subsequent distortions. In this context, love is understood as a primarily ethical and not as an aesthetic or sentimental concept. Hegel's reasoning begins with a religion-orientated reformulation of the rather Schillerian notion of apprehending the law as an inclination,<sup>219</sup> a gesture he finds already propagated by Jesus'

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<sup>216</sup> For an overall overview of the concept of *pleroma* in Hegel's thought see Hamacher's seminal reading (1998; in relation to the *SC* esp. pp. 47-53, 93-108).

<sup>217</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 211-2).

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.* (211).

<sup>219</sup> Schiller dwells on this in *Über Anmut und Würde*, cf. “Firmly persuaded as I am — and just because I am persuaded — that the part played by inclination in a free action demonstrates nothing about the purely dutiful nature of this action, I believe I can conclude from this that the ethical perfection of the human being can only

Sermon on the Mount.<sup>220</sup> The *desideratum* here is to show how the all-pervading concept of love, and by extension forgiveness, as the *pleroma* of ethics dissolves the force of law and duty into a vanishing moment *qua* inclination and thus represents a possible alternative to the abstract universality of law's authority.<sup>221</sup> However, his severe criticism of the social forms which Christianity undertook from its very beginnings prohibits this hermeneutic reappropriation from taking place within the framework of Christian religion and that is why he introduces the Greeks under the guise of fate, as guarantors of the actual possibility of a society based on *Vernunft*.<sup>222</sup>

The inquiry is posited as a comparison between two different models of punishment, namely, between Judeo-Kantian law and Greek fate (*Schicksal*). Hegel's ulterior motive is to find the adequate ethical structure that can affirm and sustain an holistic and supra-individual self-understanding of the ethical subject by reconciling it to its very own being, to its life, and thus, being able to overcome and alleviate the underlying alienation and the sense of the fragmentary nature of its experience in the modern world. The first paradigm is flatly rejected on the grounds of its insurmountable one-sidedness, as it clings on the universal demands of justice with disregard to the fate of the transgressor, and as a result, it fails to bring about his reconciliation with life. In other words, it appears that the notion of punishment in the Judeo-Kantian context of practical reason does not mediate the sphere of subjectivity but proceeds according to a typology of formal objectivity.<sup>223</sup> Inescapably, the logic behind such an understanding repeats the archaic an eye for eye predicament. Therefore, if the transgression of the law involves the severance of life from the perspective of the particular towards the universal, law as a form of

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become clear precisely because of the part played by the inclination in moral actions. The human being is not destined to perform individual ethical actions but to be an ethical being. Virtue is prescribed for him, rather than virtues, and virtue is nothing other than "an inclination for duty." (2005: 149).

<sup>220</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 214-6).

<sup>221</sup> The underlying *ratio* in Hegel's reading is to eradicate any trace of positivity in practical reason.

<sup>222</sup> This is the meaning of Habermas' suggestion that the Hegelian enterprise, at this point, *presupposes* an 'ethical totality' of non-modern, i.e. unaffected by positivity, origins (1985: 31).

<sup>223</sup> The logic behind this typology is evident in Kant's "Table of the categories of freedom in regard to concepts of good and evil" in his second *Critique* (2002: §66).

punishment repeats the same process from the opposite perspective.<sup>224</sup> The circularity of this pattern cannot be broken insofar as the second movement remains intrinsically external to the ethical subject and if it does not bring into the subject's consciousness the realization that his action is at the same time an action against himself and thus leading it to the sublation of its disjunction from the world back to it.<sup>225</sup> It follows that if life is severed, i.e. that of the transgressor, the subject cannot find its way back to life through the empty content of punishment.<sup>226</sup>

Punishment in the form of law is contentless because it does not and cannot extend beyond the inherent premises of identity thinking that hover behind the concept of law.<sup>227</sup> In this context, law remains inadvertently within the premises of formal reciprocity and cannot apprehend the relationship between subject and punishment outside the mechanistic *quid pro quo* nexus. The result of this formalism exhibited by reason is that the subject is reduced to a mere component in an oversimplified equation. As such, it is stripped of all its essential qualities, but most importantly of its sociality, rendering it a monad devoid of content.<sup>228</sup> This process of the objectification of the subject is one of the key moments of the phenomenon of positivity which gave rise to the recurring theme of social alienation (*Entfremdung*) that began with the downfall of the Greeks and the emergence of the legalistic Roman Empire and still was

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<sup>224</sup> Cf. "This form of law (and the law's content) is the direct opposite of life because it signalizes the destruction of life." Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 225).

<sup>225</sup> A similar reading can be found in Miller's account of the notion of forgiveness in the context of *The spirit of Christianity and its fate* (2014: 157-8). Cf. Hannah Arendt's account of forgiveness in the *Human Condition* (1998: Chapter 33).

<sup>226</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 225-7).

<sup>227</sup> Cf. "The antinomial character of the Kantian doctrine of freedom is exacerbated to the point where the moral law seems to be regarded as directly rational and as not rational-as rational, because it is reduced to pure logical reason without content, and as not rational because it must be accepted as given and cannot be further analyzed, because every attempt at analysis is anathema. This antinomial character should not be laid at the philosopher's door: the pure logic of consistency, its compliance with self-preservation without self-reflection, is unreasonable and deluded in itself. The ratio turns into an irrational authority." Adorno (1973: 261)

<sup>228</sup> Cf. "Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities," Arendt (1998: 237).

a salient problem of his era.<sup>229</sup> Unable to solve the conundrum of law in the newly emerged civil society, Hegel concedes that “Law and punishment cannot be reconciled, but they can be transcended if fate can be reconciled.”<sup>230</sup>

In the absence of a content that could restore a genuine reconciliation between the subject and the world, Hegel turns to the Greeks. The content of fate consists of the results of Greek ethicality viewed from the perspective provided by tragedy; a worldview yet untainted by the ramifications of positivity wherein life reigns as the supreme unitary concept which guarantees the wholeness and harmony of being. By the results of Greek ethicality I mean that Hegel is not focusing on its conditions but he merely takes as a *factum* the overarching sense of reconciliation governing their worldview. It follows that he is not orchestrating a surreptitious return to the Greek moment but rather he is actually borrowing the outcome of their ethical life and supplanting it on Christian premises in order to make do with the latter’s deficiencies. Punishment as fate is nothing more than the primordial form of the act of consciousness becoming self-consciousness and thus grasping its unity in difference. The transgressing consciousness disturbs the characteristic solemnity of the ethical totality by injuring another life. His act conjures the alienated form of life that has now taken a hostile guise and appears as an enemy in the form of fate. By recognising it and willingly submitting to it, he is at the same time recognising himself as part of the ethical and religious totality whose harmony he initially disturbed. This recognition affirms to him that his act was in fact also an act against himself. He submits to it willingly because he found his essence as adhering to the very thing that now is turning against him. It is only through this double act of recognition and willing submission that his reconciliation with himself and the world can take place.<sup>231</sup> It should be underlined that by no means does fate as a form of punishment nullifies the severity of the transgression or proceeds with disregard to it. Fate vis-à-vis the law is an altogether more life encompassing mediation between the subject and the social order that allows the former to remain within the

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<sup>229</sup> This schematism corresponds to the passage from Greek *Sittlichkeit* that was discussed in the preceding two sub-sections (A & B) to C. “The state of legality” (§§477-483) in chapter VI (Spirit) in the *Phenomenology*.

<sup>230</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 228).

<sup>231</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 228-231).

latter not as an outcast or worst, stripped of its identity in his isolation from the world, but provides him with the opportunity to supersede himself as a moment of negativity and work his way back society. Greek tragedy is extremely suggestive in illustrating the above point as the *Oresteia*, and in particular the *Eumenides*, as well as *Oedipus at Colonus* – both of which had significant influence among absolute idealists – represent in fairly different manner the same subject-matter, namely the integration of a transgressor back to the social fabric.

This is the first connotation of the tragic strand of the Hegelian dialectic.<sup>232</sup> Apart from the obvious fact that the overall pattern of fate *qua* punishment is borrowed from ancient Greek tragedy, Hegel analysis is embedded in a generalizing understanding of the *Eumenides* and the figure of Oedipus. The inherent circularity governing the logic of practical law is also present in the notion of revenge represented by the Furies. The *ad aeternum* repetition of this characteristic blindness can only further severe life and the exodus from this standstill requires a higher perspective. In the case of the *Eumenides* the Areopagus represents at once both the frontiers of the jurisdiction of the primordial natural law of vengeance and its sublation and integration in a wholly different context. The outcome of the clash between Athena, as a goddess and as the incarnation of the spirit of the *polis*, and the Furies, does not restore the old equilibrium but points to a new stage of ethical life where their prior difference becomes a vanishing moment in their reconciliation. This is the meaning of the often quoted catch phrase “And life can heal its wounds again.”<sup>233</sup> The clarification ‘again’ is important and it underlines that this holistic understanding of reconciliation is characteristically Greek. It is not only individual life, Orestes, but ethical life *in toto*, that makes amends with itself once again. The unity and beauty associated with the Greek worldview is a constant striving that is undertaken actively by the ones occupying the domain under its sky. If there is resignation, conformity, or even passivity, in our hearts, if we refuse to confront our fate in fear of being overwhelmed or tainted by the essence of reality, can we truly rise to the height of the agonistic perspective dictated by tragedy and experience an actual reconciliation with and in life?

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<sup>232</sup> See also: Szondi (2002: 17-8).

<sup>233</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 230).



There are two ostensible answers to this dilemma. The Greek answer seems to be provided by a conjoined understanding of Oedipus and Orestes:

“If a man fights for what is in danger, he has not lost what he is struggling for; but by facing danger he has subjected himself to fate, for he enters on the battlefield of might against might and ventures to oppose his adversary.”<sup>234</sup>

Greek tragedy brings us almost unbearably close to the lesson that to claim and assert one's fate is tantamount to undertaking a struggle against life in order to return to it. Hegel discerns two complementary moments in ancient Greek tragedy that together exemplify the *pleroma* of fate in Greek antiquity. The first moment is represented by Oedipus as the archetypal man of action who sets himself wholeheartedly in the task of unfurling his fate. Action, as we saw earlier, is a prerequisite of the activation of fate. *Oedipus Tyrannus* exemplifies that the sort of action that sets fate in motion can only emerge in an agonistic understanding of one's dwelling in the world which puts forth an active engagement with it. If we conceive the drama of fate as a tripartite movement which begins with an initial disruption of ethical harmony and is then followed by a counter-action of the agent against the hostility of fate, *Oedipus Tyrannus* occupies the second movement. Having already established that fate has a profoundly reconciliatory meaning, Hegel is obliged to seek his third and closing movement in a tragedy of such connotations. Well aware of the possible metaphysical undercurrents of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Hegel shifts his focus from Oedipus to Orestes. This is the second moment of the *pleroma* of fate in ancient Greek tragedy and in a way supersedes the former as we move from the perspective of the subject (Oedipus) to the collective perspective of the *polis*. Here the struggle of the individual consciousness (Orestes) for right cannot reach by itself the necessary higher perspective which absolves it from its entanglement with the opposite right claimed by the Furies. His acquittal requires that both parties resign from their respective demands and entrust the collective voice of the *polis*. The arrangement of the verdict is the establishment of a new form of ethical life. The experience of the transgressing subject under fate is the narrative of tragic life as it moves towards greater

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<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.* (233-4).

degrees of understanding and fullness of being. The apex of this movement is the newly emerged form of self-consciousness we are left with when Athena casts the final vote. When Oedipus began his journey, we had a valiant, albeit wonderfully arrogant and ignorant, consciousness striving for self-knowledge. Yet, being inexorably one-sided and unwilling to entrust anything non-identical with his still eluding and shapeless identity, he could only attain an insight to his fate in his demise. As we proceed to the *Eumenides*, tragic consciousness matures into something enduring as its form of knowledge becomes an experience of a collective perspective, of a concrete unity which can accommodate conflict and division without necessitating the fall of the tragic hero. The movement from Oedipus to Orestes signifies the Greek path from consciousness to self-consciousness.

The second possible answer to the dilemma takes us back to the origins of Christianity and its early days under Jesus' religion of love. Its critical exegesis is embedded in its comparison with the Greek answer. The question thus becomes: is the religion of love preached by Jesus able to provide us with an active reconciliation with life and an adequate ethical structure that can accommodate his teachings? In other words, is the fate of a tragic Jesus an imaginable and feasible alternative for modernity? To begin with, Hegel apprehends love as an advance from the rigidity of Kantian law and as a stage of higher unity than the one we found in the Greeks. Religion *qua* love is a form of life than integrates all the previous shapes of ethical and religious consciousness and thus it is the *pleroma* of ethics.<sup>235</sup> Notwithstanding its potential, the concept of love was never fully actualized as it never left the domain of subjectivity and the fate of Christianity remained nothing more than an unfulfilled promise. The reasons behind its failure are epitomized in the different meaning of reconciliation espoused by Christianity. Whereas tragic reconciliation proceeds actively to the recognition and subsequently to the acceptance and affirmation of what it encounters, i.e. life in its hostility, the Christian form of reconciliation could not overcome its negative and passive relation to life, alas, rendering the latter as something intrinsically foreign to the life of the individual.<sup>236</sup> The outcome of this resignation,

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.* (253). Hegel never explains the process of this integration. We are thus bereft of any indication of how love signifies a progress to a greater degree of rationality in comparison to Kantian morality.

<sup>236</sup> Hardimon offers a detailed analysis of the various forms of reconciliation in Hegel (1994: 84-118).

as a departure from life in order to salvage life in its purity, inescapably falls prey to the dangers of positivism which soon reveals itself in the forms of sectarianism and dogmatism.<sup>237</sup> It follows that the sacrifice of Jesus – an act of the positive negation of the negation of life (death) – for the salvation of mankind does not actually fulfil the fate of Christianity but only manages, if only briefly, to delay its logical development to its inherent positivity. His struggle was a fight to avoid the determination of fate and this is the peculiar, yet on no account tragic, fate he bestowed to his people.<sup>238</sup> Whereas his sacrifice and ascension ought to have had a cathartic effect vindicating Christianity from its positive elements, in fact, they led to their doubling as the first act was performed in the knowledge of the safe passage to the hands of God while the second reaffirmed the inherent dualism behind the Christian worldview.

Both answers were found inadequate in the task of overcoming the stalemate of positivity governing the newly emerged civil society. The Greeks provided us with the tragic form of fate and set the formal qualifications for any forthcoming ethical structure *qua* religion that would aspire to approximate their ideality. As the actual content of their ethicality was irretrievably a thing of the past, Hegel turned to the proto-Christian concept of love and examined whether it could supplant the Greek content without affecting the unity and harmony it actualized. The hybrid of Greek fate and Christian love could not flourish as the distinctive tragic character of the former was found incompatible with the reclusive spirit of the latter; a tragic form of Christianity was an impossibility.

## II. The tragedy of the ethical

### *The essay on Natural Law*

In January of 1801, at Schelling's invitation, Hegel moved from Frankfurt to Jena and was assigned as a *Privatdozent* in the university. This change also marks an important shift in Hegel's order of thinking, as he decisively abandons the long-lasting prominence he ascribed to religion (1793-1800) as a possible answer to the socio-political problems of his era and gradually

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<sup>237</sup> The circularity of the overall project of the *Spirit of Christianity*, the effort to sublimate the positivity of civil society through a reappropriation of a fundamentally positive religion, is aptly discussed by Lukács (1975: 181-4).

<sup>238</sup> Hegel (1798-1800/1961: 281).

moves towards a more systematic and speculative approach. Let us now point out some key developments in his thought that may ease our way to the *Natural Law* essay (1802-3). When examining the *Spirit of Christianity* we saw the notion of *pleroma* operating as a dialectical apparatus in the progressive process of the succession and sublation of different forms of religious-ethical consciousness. The last and higher stage we encountered was a Greek reappropriation of early Christianity in modernity that had at its very centre the dialectical concept of love, which, in its turn, was found incapable of showing the way forward in an holistic and harmonious rejuvenation of modernity in the image of a quasi-Greek Jesus. This *impasse* led Hegel to seek a more inclusive and broader concept that could sustain the antinomies and differentiations of civil society which he found in the concept of life. Thus, in the *Fragment of a System* (1800) Hegel supplants the concept of love as the unity of oppositions with the concept of life although he still remains within the domain of a theologically-based inquiry.<sup>239</sup> It was only when he moved to Jena and the *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's Systems of Philosophy* (1801) that his thinking acquired its definitive philosophical orientation. By then, life had been sublated by his Schellingian conception of identity as the unity of opposites in the form of the absolute, apprehended as the highest conceptual structure of thought, yet it retained an important role in his thought as it provides us with the impetus for thinking while at the same time sets the objectives for it: "When the might of union vanishes from the life of men and the antitheses lose their living connection and reciprocity and gain independence, the need of philosophy arises."<sup>240</sup> However, it is important not to overestimate Schelling's influence. Hegel will begin formulating his idea of the absolute in *Faith and Knowledge* (1802) and the *Natural Law* essay, both of which were published in the *Kritische Journal der Philosophie* which he co-edited with Schelling. Despite the formidable intellectual radiance of his friend, Hegel's thought was all too scholastic to succumb to the generalizing tendencies underlying the former's apprehension of the absolute and the fact that his idea of identity in difference *qua* absolute draws its origin from the concept of life, further

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<sup>239</sup> Hegel (1800/1961: 309). On the concept of life in Hegel's early theological writings, see: Marcuse (1955: 37-40).

<sup>240</sup> Hegel (1801/1977: 91).

differentiated his conception from Schelling's. Additionally, there seems to be an obvious contrast between them during 1800-2 regarding the form of knowledge through which we gain insight into the absolute; whilst Schelling in his *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800) was ascribing to art supra-philosophical prominence, Hegel had already advocated its irrevocable pastness:

“Such few attempts as there have been on behalf of the cultural whole against more recent culture, like the more significant beautiful embodiments of far away or long ago, have only been able to arouse that modicum of attention which remains possible when the more profound, serious connection of living art [to culture as a living whole] can no longer be understood. The entire system of relations constituting life has become detached from art, and thus the concept of art's all-embracing coherence has been lost, and transformed into the concept either of superstition or of entertainment.”<sup>241</sup>

The passage also helps us anticipate possible misinterpretations of the role he ascribes to tragedy in relation to the absolute in the essay on *Natural Law*. Furthermore, Hegel's distancing from Kant's and Fichte's *Reflexionsphilosophie* as expressed in the *Spirit of Christianity* had by now acquired a polemical perspective:

“Enlightened Reason won a glorious victory over what it believed, in its limited conception of religion, to be faith as opposed to Reason. Yet seen in a clear light the victory comes to no more than this: the positive element with which Reason busied itself to do battle, is no longer religion, and victorious Reason is no longer Reason... Philosophy has made itself the handmaid of a faith once more.”<sup>242</sup>

Lastly, the collapse of the *ancien régime* had opposite results in France and Germany. Whereas in the former it led to the upheaval of the revolution, in the latter, it accelerated the gradual

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<sup>241</sup> Hegel (1801/1977: 92). Schelling's change of heart regarding the pre-eminence of art against philosophy lasted less than three years, as in his *Vorlesung über die Philosophie der Kunst* (1802/3) he re-adopted his thesis on the primacy of philosophy.

<sup>242</sup> Hegel (1802/1977: 55-6).

downfall of the federal-state model and in light of the *Terreur*, transformed the demands for radical social change into an inquiry into the possibilities for a milder, constitutional, reformation. The task occupied Hegel for at least three years and resulted in *The German Constitution* published in 1802. The questions he poses and the line of thinking he pursues during his first years in Jena take their cue from these developments and form the theoretical counterpart to the pressing practical problems of post-revolutionary Germany. These few remarks touch upon the absolutely necessary propaedeutic issues that form the background of the *Natural Law* essay.

Hegel sets out to examine the most prevalent surveys on the topic of natural law, which, broadly speaking, rested on making sense of the mediation between the individual subject and the state. He discerns two distinctive forms which emerged against the metaphysical conceptions of natural law that can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas, Hugo Grotius, and the School of Salamanca. The first is represented by the British constellation of empiricists, primarily by Hobbes and Locke, whereas the second explicitly refers to the transcendental idealism of Kant and Fichte. The first two parts of the essay remain within the nexus of criticism, while the following two introduce us to Hegel's proposal and represent the first sketches of his developing systematic philosophical project. The ultimate goal of his investigation is to establish an organic whole (the absolute) on the basis of an all-encompassing nexus of relationships (the unity of opposites) which guarantees the freedom and unity (absolute idea of ethical life or absolute ethicality) of the involved particularities (multiplicity) in their adherence to the mediation of the universality of the state (unity). Put succinctly, the knowledge of the absolute consists in the representation of the unity of opposites as they reveal themselves within the relationship between unity and multiplicity which is apprehended in terms of its absolute ethicality which in turn guarantees the actuality of freedom within society.

Before he proceeds to his own distinctive counter-proposal to natural law he sets to examine the reasons behind its inability to provide us with a sustainable account of the mediation between the subject (individuality) and the state (totality). The empirical alternative is rejected due to its inability to unify the multiplicity of the phenomena under a scientific totality by conflating the plurality of its observations with scientific truth. In the absence of a

methodological organizing principle the diversity of the material it encounters is united in an arbitrary manner creating an illusionary totality. It follows that the outcome of its analysis cannot but be an overtly subjective distortion of the subject under consideration. Its idiomatic deficiency is that it is overtly content-orientated with disregard to the overall methodological principles governing the analysis it performs.<sup>243</sup> In other words, empiricists succumb to a form of Kantian subreption by mistakenly elevating a *posteriori* observations to a *a priori* status.<sup>244</sup> The transcendental or formal alternative represents an advance over the empirical form of natural law, but also fails to provide the required mediation between form and content. Hegel's endeavour in the *Natural Law essay* seeks to leave the self-enclosed system of Kant and Fichte and move to the realm of objective spirit, i.e. social, political, and cultural institutions, wherein he may test the fallibility of their thesis. Within this context Hegel's criticism of Kant and Fichte leads to two important conclusions: first, inasmuch as Kantian practical reason does not perform a mediation *qua* unity between the moral law and its finite content (phenomena), while mistakenly apprehending the latter in an absolutizing manner, then it is unable to provide us with a law of actual content;<sup>245</sup> secondly, and consequently, "the ethical sphere divides itself into morality and legality"<sup>246</sup> and as such, it does not meet the requirements of the concept of absolute ethicality as it remains restricted by its all too formal approach in its "non-substantial abstraction" without being able to guarantee the actual freedom of the individual;<sup>247</sup> on the contrary, we end up with a purely negative notion of freedom that expresses itself in terms of subjection to the externality of the law and amounts to nothing more than a regulative ideal.<sup>248</sup> The all too abstract approach of both Kant and Fichte does not allow them to penetrate to the intricate complexities governing the inner world of the newly emerged bourgeois society of his era and thus prevents them from giving us a faithful account of the modern subjectivity.

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<sup>243</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1975: 64).

<sup>244</sup> Cf. Rose (1981: 52-3).

<sup>245</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1975: 76).

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.* (84).

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.* (90).

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.* (89-90).

The question of natural law is crippled by the fact that it cannot present us with a true unity that incorporates and sustains the difference of opposites. Having ascertained the fallibility of both versions of natural law Hegel discards its possibility for modernity. Contrary to the subjectivism of the *Reflexionsphilosophie* and the political economy of the era, Hegel begins his theorising with an ethical-political community, a *people*, wherein he finds actualized the mediations of absolute ethical life.<sup>249</sup> His point of departure is once again of Greek origin and provides him with a model of unity in difference. In the ancient Greek context, individuality can prove its unity with the universality of the state only by negating its difference to it, and does so, by risking its life for the sake of the community.<sup>250</sup> In speculative terms, this moment of self-sacrifice is apprehended as an instance of negativity. It is a formative and essential moment for it guarantees the absolute character of ethical life as an *exemplum* of unity in difference and the dynamic self-expression of the absolute as a process in constant development.<sup>251</sup> The ethical totality he describes broadly corresponds to Plato's *Republic* as attested by the tripartite class structure he refers to. In the Platonic paradigm the prerogatives of freedom are enjoyed by both philosophers/kings (first class) and by the ordinary citizens/warriors which comprise the second. These are ensured by the self-sacrifice of the latter class at the altar of the necessity of war, whereas legislating and ruling, i.e. the sovereignty of the political, is preserved solely for the first class.

At this point, Hegel draws an analogy between the ancient Greek paradigm and the ethical reality of modern civil society on the basis of the respective function carried out by negativity. Hegel diagnosed the potentially devastating effects behind the juxtaposition of the spirit of individualism with the sphere of economy and thus set himself the task of finding a way to mitigate the precepts of modern political economy by integrating them in an ethical

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<sup>249</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1975: 92). This move puts him at odds with the typical portrait of him as an apologetic philosopher of the *status quo*, while, at the same time, it inaugurates a modern understanding of the social world in terms of intersubjectivity, see: Honneth (1996: Chapter 2).

<sup>250</sup> Here we find Hegel's first explicit formulation of the relationship between freedom and war that he will further develop in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821). Furthermore, in the *Natural Law* essay we first encounter Hegel's conception of the decisive role that negativity plays in the scientific understanding of the formation and development of ethical life.

<sup>251</sup> Hegel develops his reasoning in contrast to Kant's notion of perpetual peace, *Ibid.* (93).



totality which formally resembles the Greek one. He envisages an absolute ethicality which consists of three classes with each one corresponding respectively to nature (working class), individuality (ordinary citizens), and freedom (ruling class). The first is peripheral to his concerns, the second is consumed by its interest in property and economic prosperity, whereas the last is whole-heartedly focused on the commons. The absolute ethicality of the whole rests on the harmonious relationship between all three. The equilibrium is endangered by the unhindered activity of the second which seeks to become autonomous and thus raises the need to bring it under the mediation of the totality *qua* absolute ethicality: “Ethical organization can remain pure in the real world only if the negative is prevented from spreading all through it.”<sup>252</sup>

Hegel understood that in modernity we are inescapably thrown in a world wherein economic individualism is a necessary evil. If we aspire to an organic ethical totality we ought to prioritise its demands for unity and political freedom but at the same time we must recognize that these demands presuppose a moment of necessity, the inorganic element which we identify with the sphere of economy. In other words, the absolute identity of the whole presupposes a relative identity between the inferior moment of economy and the superior moment of ethical organization (politics). The recognition of this necessity is a tragic recognition as it is apprehended in terms of sacrifice and reconciliation:

“This reconciliation lies precisely in the knowledge of necessity, and in the right which ethical life concedes to its inorganic nature, and to the subterranean powers by making over and sacrificing to them one part of itself. For the force of the sacrifice lies in facing and objectifying the involvement with the inorganic. This involvement is dissolved by being faced; the inorganic is separated and, recognized for what it is, is itself taken up into indifference while the living, by placing into the inorganic what it knows to be a part of itself and surrendering it

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<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.* (99). In this context, the ‘negative’ refers to the threatening activity of economic and property relationships and should not be misapprehended as the work of the negativity.

to death, has all at once recognized the right of the inorganic and cleansed itself of it.”<sup>253</sup>

The vocabulary is telling: subterranean powers, sacrifice, death, reconciliation; we are *en route* to the territory of tragedy:

“This is nothing else but the performance, on the ethical plane, of the tragedy which the Absolute eternally enacts with itself, by eternally giving birth to itself into objectivity, submitting in this objective form to suffering and death, and rising from its ashes into glory.”<sup>254</sup>

Hegel’s resort to the poetological model of tragedy can be interpreted in two plausible ways. Let us begin with a general interpretation of the first passage, which, for the time being, let us call ‘modern paradigm’, and then turn to the second, ‘tragic paradigm’. Hegel is describing a quintessentially modern situation that owes its distinctive character, economic individualism, to the advent of civil society in the aftermath of the collapse of the *ancien régime*. He develops his reasoning against the grain by criticizing the ‘mechanical’ function of the state of his era and envisages another, on the basis of an organic absolute ethicality that reinvents the positive elements<sup>255</sup> of Greek ethicality in modern context. The state (organic) perceives its actuality in its reciprocal relation to economy (inorganic) and thus lessens its absolute standing in order to make way for regulated economic activity. Each sphere owes its existence in the recognition of the relative validity of the other and that is what renders the recognition inescapable.<sup>256</sup> Evidently, the meaning remains unaltered if we strip the passage from its tragic connotations. Then why the interpolation of the tragic vocabulary? A possible answer could be that Hegel is still bewildered over the specificities of the problems posed by civil society<sup>257</sup> and thus makes

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<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.* (104).

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> Positive as in good and affirmative, not in the technical Hegelian sense.

<sup>256</sup> De Boer argues that both spheres are entangled in their opposition in such a way that renders their reconciliation, if they are not to perish, unavoidable. It follows that reconciliation is presupposed in this ‘tragic’ entanglement in a manner of *petitio principii* and thus we end up with a very particular understanding of the category of the tragic (2010: 11-17).

<sup>257</sup> Riedel (1984: 115-7).

use of the general applicability of a poetological model in order to illustrate the broader direction towards the solution without discussing its particularities. From this perspective, tragedy represents a historical moment raised to the level of speculative thinking in order to demonstrate the capability of us moderns to overcome the plights of our divisive situation. This line of interpretation would be plausible if Hegel did not identify – “this is nothing else” – the ‘modern paradigm’ with the ‘tragic paradigm’.<sup>258</sup> The first and concretely historical process is conceptually sublated by the tragedy of ethicality. We are transposed to the metaphysical plane of the eternal performance of the Absolute as it proceeds to its self-sacrifice *ad infinitum*. Inasmuch as the Absolute consists in the knowledge of the constantly developing absolute ethicality, their relationship could be perceived as being perpetually in motion. When examining the conditions of absolute ethicality we learned that both in antiquity and modernity the involved totality must concede/sacrifice a part of it so that it can accommodate and integrate the particularity that takes the guise of the negative and threatens to subvert the unity of the whole. The emergence of the moment of the negative/inorganic is apprehended as a fate (*Schicksal*) as it represents the unavoidable self-division of the ethical sphere.<sup>259</sup> The submission of the Absolute to death and suffering is nothing else than the recognition of the necessity of this sacrifice in order to sublimate what emerges and is apprehended as a negative moment.<sup>260</sup> However, to proclaim that the formal conditions of absolute ethicality remain unchanged in

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<sup>258</sup> One could object and argue that Hegel grapples with these particularities in the final section of the essay (108-133) but that would overlook the fact that there he is only expanding on the perspective opened up by the Absolute *qua* tragedy of ethicality. If he does so, it is only in his distancing from the historical distinctiveness of the problems and the prioritising of his conceptual formulation of the absolute in order to revisit them once he has secured a concrete absolute standpoint, i.e. in the *Phenomenology*.

<sup>259</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1975: 105).

<sup>260</sup> Cf. “But the pure concept or infinity as the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed, must signify the infinite grief [of the finite] purely as a moment of the supreme Idea, and no more than a moment. Formerly, the infinite grief only existed historically in the formative process of culture. It existed as the feeling that “God Himself is dead,” upon which the religion of more recent times rests; the same feeling that Pascal expressed in so to speak sheerly empirical form: “la nature est telle qu’elle *marque* partout un Dieu *perdu* et dans l’homme et hors de l’homme.” [Nature is such that it signifies everywhere a lost God both within and outside many. By marking this feeling as a moment of the supreme Idea, the pure concept must give philosophical existence to what used to be either the moral precept that we must sacrifice the empirical being (*Wesen*), or the concept of formal abstraction [e.g., the categorical imperative]. Thereby it must re-establish for philosophy the Idea of absolute freedom and along with it the absolute Passion, the speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday.” (1802/1977: 190-1).

history and thus are contingent on the *eternal* re-enactment of the self-sacrifice of the Absolute amounts to a rather unhistorical approximation of the formation of its moments.

“Tragedy consists in this, that ethical nature segregates its inorganic nature (in order not to become embroiled in it), as a fate, and places it outside itself; and by acknowledging this fate in the struggle against it, ethical nature is reconciled with the Divine being as the unity of both.”<sup>261</sup>

The divine is the standpoint of the Absolute in which we find actualized the absolute ethicality according to the tragic paradigm. Insofar as ethical life is destined to exhibit a negative moment which can only be apprehended and sublated by this idiomatic tragic process then we are approaching the idea of tragic metaphysics. This ‘eternal’ interplay between the Absolute and its finite, objective, forms gives way to a tragic apprehension of history wherein the discrepancy between them takes the form an endless cycle of approximation/actualization – death – rebirth.<sup>262</sup> Interestingly enough, the historical manifestations of this scheme are less than sporadic.

The Greek tragic paradigm is mapped on to the *Eumenides* and the clash between Orestes and the Furies.<sup>263</sup> Hegel differentiates between two modes of ethical organization which broadly correspond to absolute and relative ethicality. The second is represented by the people of Athens as a legal body in the constitutional form of the *Areopagus*. The limit of its perspective is the relative identity between the two opposing forces as evidenced by the outcome of the casting of the votes. The tie can only be superseded by the first mode of ethical organization and the higher perspective of absolute ethicality which we find incarnated in Athena. The acquittal of Orestes and the dialectical integration of the ‘subterranean’, inorganic powers of the Furies, is the outcome of the process of tragic negativity insofar it brings about a reconciliation of the moment of the negative (Furies) with the whole (the city of Athens) within the ethical sphere. Notwithstanding the divinity of Athena, it would be mistaken to understand the above process

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<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* (104). See: Hyppolite (1996: 58-9).

<sup>263</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1975: 105).

as enacted on the premises of a *deus ex machina*. Athena also represents the collective and communal idea of the people of Athens, and, as such, is a preeminently ethical force. She expresses a yet to be achieved ethical perspective that is incipient in the people of Athens and consequentially, what we observe is nothing else than the sublation and reconciliation of ethicality to absolute ethicality. This is the performance enacted by the absolute and represented by tragedy.

What we need to bear in mind is that Greek tragedy is apprehended as an absolute condition on our way to the deep places of recognition in modernity. Of course, Hegel's selective appropriation of the tragic as an essentially reconciliatory determination, *prima facie* denotes a certain simplification of the conflictual nature of tragedy. We might be able to shed light on his view by examining his remarks on comedy, as the 'other side' of the perspective of the absolute.

Hegel discerns two different types of comedy, divine and modern, which share the absence of the determination of fate. The first draws its potency from Dante's *Commedia* and characterizes the totality of the pre-modern condition. It refers to a particular grounding of the absolute's self-positing according to which negativity is altogether excluded rendering any opposition insubstantial and superficial. Put differently, despite the perennial endurance of forces that threaten to subvert the order of the cosmos its grounding is such that it can withstand any attack without a flinch. However, it should be noted, that its grounding is provided in the absence of any concrete mediation within the absolute, or the very least if it exists it lies in God's invisible hand; in other words, it is completely external to the actual web that comprises the objective spirit. Hegel here is adopting the theistic perspective underlying the *Commedia* in an anachronistic reading in order to reveal the *naiveté* of its reasoning. A similar thesis had been put forward by Plato regarding the stature of the *polis*.<sup>264</sup> Indeed, as Hegel remarks, individuals like the tragedians, lyric poets, and philosophers, had been unable to subvert the concrete norms of the *polis*; to expect that they would have done otherwise would be folly. However, the implicit common thread running from the emergence of lyric poetry with Archilochus, to the trials and

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<sup>264</sup> Cf. "Α πόλις [city] is amazingly strong by nature." *Statesman* (302a).

tribulations of Greek tragedy, up to the figure of Socrates, the gradual formation of the principle of individuality, eventually overtook the self-assured form of consciousness of the *polis* and led to its demise. The spirit of conflict and contradiction evident in Greek tragedy was necessarily integrated by the social structure of the city and what before in the spirit of comic understanding appeared as ‘mere shadows of conflict’ eventually took the form of an ‘overpowering fate’.<sup>265</sup> We could describe this phenomenon as the theoretical misapprehension of the absence of fate according to which a certain set of beliefs and social norms becomes overpowered to the extent that it falls prey to an overestimation of its irreproachability and thus ignores the warning bells of its contemporaneous critique and eventually succumbs to what had been most close to it. It is a form of false certainty of the totality that underestimates the unmediated force of particularity.

The second and predominantly modern form of comedy could be aptly described as the theoretical illusion of the absolute. In contrast to the first form of artificial absolute normativity, here we encounter the explicit recognition of the absence of fate that leads to the necessity of its overcoming by conceptual means, which in turn seek a reattainment of our centre in its absence. It is akin to the Faustian adventures of subjectivity as it produces false ideas of its mastery over the haunting void left by fate. The agonizing need to fulfil this blankness leads to a perpetual striving for unity and meaningful coherence but in its *tout comprendre* affliction it ends up with distorted images of the absolute in question. Here we attest the false certainty of subjectivity with regards to its identity and actualization:

“In both cases the ethical urge, which seeks an absolute infinity in these finite things, merely performs the farce of its faith and its undying illusion (which is darkest where it is brightest), it being already lost and in the wrong when it imagines itself to be resting in the arms of justice, trustworthiness, and pleasure.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1975: 106-7).

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.* (107-8).

By describing the modern standpoint as a farce Hegel seems to be distancing himself from it insofar as he identifies it with the false perspective of Kantian and Fichtean *Reflexionsphilosophie*. Despite his criticism of both forms of comedy, implicit in the former, explicit in the latter, Hegel does not reject their relative insight for each one represents a particular stage of consciousness that informs our higher understanding of the absolute which incorporates these past forms:

“The comedy so separates the two zones of the ethical that it allows each to proceed entirely on its own, so that in the one the conflicts and the finite are shadows without substance, while in the other the Absolute is an illusion. But the true and absolute relation is that the one really does illumine the other; each has a living bearing on the other, and each is the other's serious fate. The absolute relation, then, is set forth in tragedy.”<sup>267</sup>

The lesson of comedy with regard to tragedy was that in light of a theistic or reflective perspective its conflicts and contradictions can be viewed as superficial insofar as both forms of comedy provide us with a reconciliatory understanding of history wherein their respective formulation of the absolute transmutes any difference into its insubstantiality. However, they were bound to the blindness of their vision and thus were found promulgating a falsely apprehended idea of the absolute; the first was found lacking mediation and substantial conflict and thus objective reality whereas the second was irrevocably lost in the subjectivism of its content. In the aftermath of this ascertainment, the model of tragedy regained its validity as its general truth, conflict and contradiction as moments of the inherent negativity of the absolute, reigns supreme amidst the tremulous trajectories of the modern condition. At this moment, it would be wholly plausible to argue against Hegel and set against him the very critique he addresses to both the theistic and the *Reflexionsphilosophie* theorists, namely, if his conception of the absolute is predetermined to dialectically sublimate every negative moment that might emerge, then, isn't his tragic absolute essentially comic in nature? Aren't the conflicts,

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<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.* (108).

contradictions, the very dialectical struggle in the centre of the unfolding of history, a comic hypostatization of a tragic form?<sup>268</sup> The answer lies with our understanding of the Hegelian absolute and in particular of its preeminent characteristic of unity in difference. It is, however, still early dawn in the appearance of the Hegelian absolute and a definitive answer should derive its assumptions from the *Phenomenology*.<sup>269</sup>

### *En route to the Phenomenology*

The essay on *Natural Law* exhibited a chasm between the practical nature of the problems which precipitated it and Hegel's distancing from their respective specificities as attested by his distinctively speculative approach in his meditations on the absolute. Indeed, there appears to be an internal discord in his thought regarding the relationship between the speculative and the practical, a vacillation over the appropriate form of mediation governing their dialectic. Between 1802 and 1806 we can discern Hegel's gradual disentangling of the political from the absolute in the explicit prioritization of conceptual thought against the immediate and practical approximations to the questions of his age.<sup>270</sup> As we proceed from the *Spirit of Christianity* all the way up to the *Phenomenology* we can observe that his key dialectical concepts which form either the internal apparatus of the movement towards a state of rational unity and fullness of being, or the all-encompassing concept that permeates the totality of its relations, grow successively abstract and speculative. These characteristics do not denote indifference to the particularities of life, on the contrary, they represent a movement towards higher levels of conceptual complexity, density, and clarity. This is evident as we move from the concept of love to life, from life to being and finally to the absolute. It could be argued that Hegel's retreat from the immediacy of the political to a 'recluse' form of conceptual thought is

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<sup>268</sup> Cf. White (1973: 117-31).

<sup>269</sup> The answer is embedded in the assessment of the place of the *Phenomenology* in the Hegelian *corpus* and concurrently, in the extent to which one perceives tragedy and the concept of the absolute as inextricably intertwined. In this context, if one adheres to the view that it is not until Hegel reaches the perspective of the *Science of Logic* that we can talk about the absolute in all its clarity and force, and then proceeds to a highly speculative understanding of tragedy by discerning tragic patterns in the unfolding and structure of the *Logic*, then we are led to the interesting, yet deeply idiosyncratic, reading of Hegel's system as a supreme instance of tragic dialectics, see: De Boer (2010).

<sup>270</sup> Cf. Hamacher (1978: 188).



not atypical in his era. Schiller's resort to the realm of the aesthetic is indicative. If the impact of the *Terreur* demolished any concrete hopes for the practical actualization of freedom then what was left and had to be safeguarded by any means was the conceptual space of freedom. The forms and structures of the absolute became the bulwark against the levelling of freedom in the immediate aftermath of the revolution.

Perhaps this vacillation between the political and the speculative is most evident in the *System of Ethical Life* (1802-3) that was completed immediately after the *Natural Law* essay. Although the issues raised here have no obvious and immediate import to our understanding of his appropriation of tragedy and the tragic, I wish to isolate three of his conclusions that will prove germane to our subject. First, the *System of Ethical Life* represents a unique moment in his Jena writings as he proceeds to a synthesis between the speculative, by further expanding on the premises of the absolute as formulated on the essay on *Natural Law*, and the practical, by examining and proposing a contemporary political model that dwells on the particularities of civil society.<sup>271</sup> The outcome of this venture on the political and speculative level is an authoritarian state based on the system of discipline in "universal morality, the [social] order, training for war, and the testing of the reliability of the single individual in war."<sup>272</sup> Although here, he is thinking instantaneously of both the ideality of the absolute and the actuality of the state, we are in fact presented with an intimation of the form of mediation between generality and particularity found in the *Phenomenology* where he eventually dissociates the absolute from its immediate political implications. His growing political conservatism will survive – in the absence of a concrete historical-political mediation in the *Phenomenology* – in the form of the primacy of the concept of totality. Secondly, the eternal performance of the Absolute *qua* self-

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<sup>271</sup> See: Harris in Hegel (1802-3/1979: 64).

<sup>272</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1979: 176, translation altered). Cf. "In the concrete universal, the subject as universal maintains a primacy over the subject as individual. For the sphere of the ethical, the outcome of this logic is the primacy of the higher-level subjectivity of the state over the subjective freedom of the individual." Dieter Henrich has called this the "emphatic institutionalism" of the Hegelian philosophy of right: "The individual will, which Hegel calls subjective, is totally bound to the institutional order and only justified at all to the extent that the institutions are one with it." Habermas (1985: 40).

sacrifice that we encountered earlier, now takes a concrete historical form as an alternation between creative and destructive periods:

“Thus culture alternates with destruction in human history. When culture has demolished inorganic nature long enough and has given determinacy in every respect to its formlessness, then the crushed indeterminacy bursts loose, and the barbarism of destruction falls on culture, carries it away, and makes everything level, free, and equal.”<sup>273</sup>

It follows that sacrifice as an instance of negativity is embedded in the systematic scheme that produces and renders intelligible this quasi-tragic teleology of history. Lastly, Hegel assigns to death a preeminent role in the dialectics of intersubjective recognition<sup>274</sup> and consequently, in the mediation of freedom within the absolute.<sup>275</sup>

The exodus from the double bind of the *System of Ethical Life* signalled the prevalence of the absolute, that is, the unquestionable primacy of the concept over the association between truth and the state. Consideration of the texts that immediately followed verifies this move towards the provinces of the absolute. In the lectures of Part III of the *System of Speculative Philosophy* (1803-4) entitled *First Philosophy of Spirit (Realphilosophie I)* we find a first approximation of the internal dialectic of the absolute<sup>276</sup> which serves as a propaedeutic exposition of the more elaborate lectures on the *Philosophy of Spirit* (1805-6) (*Realphilosophie II*). In the latter text we find a most telling passage regarding the inherent negativity dwelling in human beings:

“The human being is this Night, this empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity -a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occur to it directly, and none of which are not present. This [is] the Night, the interior of [human] nature, existing here-pure Self-[and] in phantasmagoric

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<sup>273</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1979: 133).

<sup>274</sup> According to Harris we are presented with an intimation of the master-slave relationship that we find in the *Phenomenology*, in Hegel (1802-3/1979: 41).

<sup>275</sup> Hegel (1802-3/1979: 129-141).

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.* (240-2).

representations it is night everywhere: here a bloody head suddenly shoots up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly. We see this Night when we look a human being in the eye, looking into a Night which turns terrifying. [For from his eyes] the night of the world hangs out toward us.”<sup>277</sup>

One ought not to be overwhelmed by the rhetoric in play. The setting is that of pre-reflective subjectivity in all its existential immediateness, the pure self in its primordial negativity towards the world.<sup>278</sup> The passage alludes to the formative and creative power of negativity as man confronts a world that has not yet conformed to his understanding (*Verstand*).<sup>279</sup> It is exactly in the space between the recognition of our disclosing capabilities and the unknowability of the world where negativity emerges as our guiding force. Until the gap is conceptually reconciled we are bound to experience the horror of the disparity governing the negative in general.<sup>280</sup> However, it would be crass to suggest that we are inescapably thrown in a Sisyphean effort to actualize the identity of our being with the world. I am only making the minimal claim that until the need for their systematic conceptual reconciliation arose concretely and explicitly with Socrates, man was enveloped in the night Hegel succinctly described and it would not be an

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<sup>277</sup> Hegel (1805-6/1983: 87).

<sup>278</sup> The context of the setting is aptly described by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right* “In the same way, ‘I’ is the transition from undifferentiated indeterminacy to *differentiation, determination*, and the *positing* of a determinacy as a content and object. – This content may further be given by nature, or generated by the concept of spirit. Through this positing of itself as something *determinate*, ‘I’ steps into existence [*Dasein*] in general – the absolute moment of the *finitude* or *particularization* of the ‘I.’” (1821/1991: §6).

<sup>279</sup> The passage obviously anticipates Hegel’s seminal presentation of the negative in the *Preface* of the *Phenomenology* (§32). Notwithstanding their undeniable similarity, I disagree with Žižek’s view that here also we are witnessing the “negative power of Understanding” (2012: 354). The phenomena appear here in a process of continuous *phantasmagoria*, they come and go and cannot “be held fast” by this pre-reflective form of reason. On the contrary, “the tremendous power the negative” lies exactly on the ability of understanding to isolate and retain “the accidental as such, detached from its surroundings, that what is bound and is actual only in its connection with other things, *attains a Being-there of its own* and a separate freedom”, Hegel (1807/2018: §32, emphasis added). Accordingly, I am closer to Bataille’s existential reading (1955: 10-11) that follows Kojève (1980: 38), despite the fact that he as well tends to read the *Preface* back into the earlier passage.

<sup>280</sup> Cf. “The disparity which exists in consciousness between the ‘I’ and the substance which is its object is the distinction between them, *the negative in general*. This can be regarded as the defect of both, though it is their soul, or that which moves them. That is why some of the ancients conceived the void as the principle of motion, for they rightly saw the moving principle as the negative, though they did not as yet grasp that the negative is the self.”, Hegel (1807/2018: §37, emphasis added). In this context, the *phantasmagoria* could be perceived as the production of evanescent images on the behalf of a pre-reflective consciousness much alike to the Epicureans that apprehended the void as a moving principle. See also: Hegel (1821: 1991: §5) and (1812-16/2010: §147).

exaggeration to conceive it as the tragic night of spirit. The tragic grounding of spirit gave way to successive efforts that attempted to bring about this reconciliation with questionable results. In Hegel's time, the monstrosities that followed the French revolution underwrite the profound schism between Enlightenment aspirations based on the false premises of identity thinking and its actual objectification in the absolute freedom of the *Terreur*, and thus signify a relapse in the tragic condition, in the domain of the negative in general, inasmuch as reason is unable to account for the destructive results of his actuality. Rebecca Comay's description echoes most dramatically the Hegelian night of the post-revolutionary landscape:

“Among the many paradoxes of the guillotine is that it simultaneously enforces and erodes the distinction between dying and living: the moment of death becomes at once precise, punctual, identifiable, and indeterminate—both measurable and endlessly uncertain. [...] The obsessive fantasies of survival entertained by the popular imaginary of the guillotine, and that preoccupied both literature and medical science from the 1790s, are but the inversion and confirmation of the living death to which life had seemingly been reduced—thus the proliferation of blushing heads, talking heads, suffering heads, heads that dreamed, screamed, returned the gaze, the disembodied body parts, detached writing hands, the ghosts and ghouls and zombies that would fill the pages of gothic novels throughout Europe.”<sup>281</sup>

This second appearance of the tragic night of spirit should be discerned from the first as it manifests itself as the outcome of a collective and reflective form of self-consciousness, i.e. of the Enlightenment. The tragic affinity between the two moments of spirit lies in the distinctive horror that results from their inability to apprehend the world in a systematic and cohesive way. The first, existential, paradigm enters the tragic perspective in the absence of the necessary conceptual tools to do so, whereas the latter regresses to it in the breakdown of its conceptual apparatus in the dreadful experience of the disjunction between its intentions and results. As

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<sup>281</sup> (2004: 386).

German idealists strived to regain an orientating centre amidst the nauseating post-revolutionary landscape, the demand for systematicity became synonymous with a new conception of philosophizing that could potentially re-establish a rational sense of our belonging in the world.<sup>282</sup> In a surviving lecture fragment of 1806 on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Logic* under the provisional title “The Absolute...” Hegel emphatically announces the coming of this new era for philosophy:

“We find ourselves in an important epoch, a fermentation, in which Spirit has made a move, has developed beyond its preceding shape, and wins a new shape. The whole mass of previous representations, concepts, the bonds of the world, are dissolved and collapse inwardly like a dream image. A new progression of Spirit is in the making.”<sup>283</sup>

### III. The Phenomenology of Spirit

#### a. ‘The ethical world. Human and divine law: man and woman’

As we approach the *Phenomenology* with regard to the question of tragedy and the tragic we find ourselves confronted by the following hermeneutic dilemma: is our interpretative horizon enclosed within the premises of the passages wherein we find the explicit discussion of the topic under consideration, or, by virtue of the overarching systematicity of the work, are we obliged to expand our perspective and mediate his particular insights with his larger systematic claims? Each approach corresponds to a very specific apprehension of the internal coherence of the work and intentionally or not, imposes its distinctive understanding – or the lack thereof – of the larger methodological issues at play on the questions relevant to tragedy. The problem raised is definitely not one of austere pedanticism as the tendency to eschew the underlying apparatus and the overarching aims of the *Phenomenology* is partially responsible for serious

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<sup>282</sup> On the philosophical demands of systematicity underlining post-Kantian thought, see: Franks (2005: 1-12, Chapters 1 & 2).

<sup>283</sup> Hegel (1806/1998: 611).

misinterpretations that still hold *instar omnium*.<sup>284</sup> Notwithstanding, I am not claiming that an understanding of Hegel's remarks on tragedy presupposes the complete traversal of 'the Golgotha of absolute spirit' or a scrupulous assessment of the methodological and systematic premises of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>285</sup> I am merely suggesting that any interpretation that aspires to abstain from the consolation of oversimplification should proceed by having these issues in mind.

The original title of the work in 1807 read *System of Science: Part One, Science of the Experience of Consciousness* and was intended to be the first part of a twofold system of science that would be comprised of the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*. The initial plan was that after the completion of the system he would proceed to the second part of the overall philosophical scheme that would examine metaphysics under the heading of philosophy of nature, and conclude with a third part, that of the philosophy of spirit. As Hegel was coming closer to the perspective of the *Science of Logic* in 1812, he discarded the original title and amended the original subtitle and replaced it with the following as the final title of the work: *Science of the*

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<sup>284</sup> A characteristic example is the recurring criticism on Hegel's counterbalancing interpretation of Creon and Antigone. Hegel supposedly cancels out the Antigone's paradigmatic importance as a radical figure of uncompromising values that takes a stand against the authoritarian state, patriarchy, and the *status quo* and thus simultaneously, equates the perspective of a much admired heroine of world literature with that of an autocratic cold-blooded tyrant. This line of interpretation bases itself on the conviction that Hegel aims at and proceeds to a factual – strictly textual – interpretation of the *Antigone* and either unintentionally misapprehends Sophocles, or, he is in fact intentionally projecting his own conception of the mediation between the state and the individual on the relationship between Creon and Antigone. The second alternative derives its assumptions from an anachronistic reading of the *Philosophy of Right* (1821) and Hegel's caricature image as an apologist of the Prussian state back into the *Phenomenology*. Despite the utmost importance of these issues that Hegel sidesteps or deliberately misconstrues, it is important to understand the internal logic of his reasoning that led him to do so. Hegel's primary interest is not that of literary theory and philological meticulousness. On the contrary, given the fact that the very structure of the *Phenomenology* is based preeminently on logical, and not historical, progression, the *Antigone* is hand-picked among other tragedies by virtue of its potential interpretation as a tragedy between equally one-sided apprehensions of the law, in order to demonstrate and elucidate a particular *impasse* and stage in the formation and development of spirit. In other words, the overall design of the *Phenomenology* required a very specific appropriation of the *Antigone* that would conform and correspond to the logical unfolding of spirit at that precise stage. This simple yet often overlooked acknowledgement renders obsolete the line of criticism that focuses on his allegedly highly subjective interpretation of Antigone as if he was oblivious to the excellence of her character. Put succinctly, Hegel has to step outside the delicate intricacies at the heart of the tragic play in order to incorporate it into the life of spirit. See: Kaufmann (1992: 201), Shklar (1976: 82-3).

<sup>285</sup> An excellent extensive overview is provided by Forster (1998: Chapters 1-4); Siep offers an insightful summary (2014: 52-71). See Heidegger's elucidating discussion of the science of the *Phenomenology* (1988: 1-44). On the method of the *Phenomenology*, see: Westphal (1989: Chapters 6-11).

*Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>286</sup> Among the many important consequences that this change has for the overall unity and systematicity of the Hegelian *oeuvre*, I only wish to underline one, namely that one ought not to succumb to the generalizing interpretations of his theorising that try to disentangle it from its actual historical and social mediations which are most appropriately enveloped in his distinctive appropriation of the concept of experience. In the concluding paragraphs of *Introduction* to the *Phenomenology*, written before the completion of the work but nonetheless retained in his 1830 drafts for the second edition, we read:

“In virtue of this necessity, the path to science is itself already science and hence, in keeping with its content, science of the experience of consciousness.

The experience which consciousness has of itself can, in accordance with the concept of experience, comprehend within itself nothing less than the whole system of consciousness, or the whole realm of the truth of spirit, in such a way that the moments of this truth present themselves in this peculiar determinacy: they are not abstract, pure moments, but as they are for consciousness, or as consciousness itself emerges in its relation to them. This is why the moments of the whole are shapes of consciousness. In pressing on to its true existence, consciousness will reach a point at which it sheds its semblance of being burdened with alien material that is only for it and as an other, a point where the appearance becomes equal to the essence, where consequently its presentation coincides with just this point in the authentic science of spirit; and finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself.”<sup>287</sup>

Here we find in a nutshell some key clarifications regarding the experience of consciousness *qua* spirit. To begin with, Merleau-Ponty gives a concise account of the concept of experience in the *Phenomenology*:

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<sup>286</sup> On the change that occurs in Hegel’s thought with the transition from the perspective of the *Phenomenology* to that of the *Science of Logic* and on their respective relation, see: Forster (1998: Chapters 13-17).

<sup>287</sup> Hegel (1807/2018: §§88-9, 41-42).

“Experience here no longer simply means our entirely contemplative contact with the sensible world as it did in Kant; the word reassumes the tragic resonance it has in ordinary language when a man speaks of what he has lived through. It is no longer a laboratory test but is a *trial of life*.”<sup>288</sup>

It would not be wholly implausible to suggest that the mainspring of the work was the standstill of Kantian epistemology and the need to come up with a more holistic and world-encompassing perspective regarding the cognitive relationship between consciousness and the world, a relationship that here amalgamated in the concept of spirit. These qualifications are purportedly met at the end of spirit’s laborious journey to self-knowledge. This process follows the progressive unfolding of consciousness, from its nascent beginnings in its self-relational activity (Chapter I-V), to the reflective ‘sociality of reason’ in the spheres of spirit and religion (Chapters VI-VII), and its climax in the form of absolute knowledge (Chapter VIII). The necessity underlying the development of spirit is logical inasmuch as each form of consciousness it encounters represents – from the perspective of spirit – a higher form of rationality, i.e. more inclusive, than the former. The ‘moving principle’ behind the dialectic of spirit is none other than negativity perceived as the cardinal instantiation of the “labour of the concept” (§70). The expression of negativity, especially in the chapters relevant to tragedy, is grounded on concrete historical and social context and as such reflects the inarguably conflictual terrain it has to traverse in order to reach the more blissful stages that follow.

Tragedy and the tragic appear in the *Phenomenology* under three different contexts, although never by name, with the exception of two explicit references to the person of Antigone (§437, §470). The notion of the tragic can be potentially surmised in the discussion of negativity in the *Preface* as an inherent characteristic of the life of spirit and depending on the *gravitas* one ascribes to its interpretation it can either have far reaching consequences on our understanding of the work in its entirety or none whatsoever.<sup>289</sup> I will return to the *Preface* at the end of our

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<sup>288</sup> (1993: 428, emphasis added).

<sup>289</sup> The two extremes can be categorized under the headings of pantragicism and panlogism; the distinction is attributed to Hermann Glockner, editor of Hegel’s *Sämtliche Werke* (1927-30). The first thesis has found supporters mostly amongst quasi-existentialists following Kojève (1980) and Hyppolite (1974) while its influence



discussion of the main body of the text. The two extensive discussions of tragedy take place in Chapter VI (Spirit), under Section A. 'The true spirit, the ethical order' and in Chapter VII (Religion), under Section B. 'Religion of art'. In both contexts tragedy represents a moment of unavoidable crisis and necessary transition to a reflectively mediated stage of consciousness (shape of the world).

Interestingly enough, the first explicit reference to Greek tragedy occurs at the very end of Chapter V (Certainty and Truth of Reason) immediately before the transition to Chapter VI (Spirit). The very nature of this transition has been the focal point of discussions regarding the unity and systematicity of the work.<sup>290</sup> The first five chapters of the *Phenomenology* take place outside the domain of history and therefore we remain restricted to a specific observational perspective of spirit in the development and succession of different forms of consciousness. The shift occurs in Chapter VI where we are transferred from the standpoint of Kantian morality (Chapter V) to the dynamic domain of Spirit, i.e. the conceptual space of the 'sociality of reason', wherein consciousness is examined in its historical manifestations and its concrete social mediations. An important difference between the two different contexts is that in the latter, spirit becomes 'world-constituting' and thus we advance from the presentation of shapes of consciousness to the one of shapes of a world.<sup>291</sup> Evidently, the transition from Kantian morality to Sophocles, historically, signifies a step backwards, yet from the perspective of reason it represents an important logical advancement; it is only on the shoulders of Kant that we can apprehend the Greek ethical paradigm as a step forward. This process is indicative of spirit's ability to sublimate each form of consciousness it encounters as it proceeds to the next.

Bearing these considerations in mind, we can now return and examine the first appearance of a direct reference to Greek tragedy. Hegel quotes Antigone's famous invocation of the unwritten law and the unknowability of its provenance (lines 456f.) in order to elucidate

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is usually evident in interpretations that tend to identify his dialectic method with a specific appropriation of the tragic, see: Szondi (2002: 15-22).

<sup>290</sup> Pippin (1993: 63-80), Harris (1997: 125-135), Siep (2014: 161-7). On an understanding of the transition in the context of a 'literary turn' within the *Phenomenology*, see: Speight (2001: 20-41).

<sup>291</sup> Hegel (1807/2018: §441, 175). All references to the *Phenomenology* (1807/2018) are to Michael Inwood's translation except when noted. Inwood retains A. V. Miller's paragraph numbering practice, whereas Pinkard's translation differs in paragraph numbering as it is decreased by one from §402 until §541.

two points of different order. First, he brings full circle the discussion he began in §347 regarding consciousness' realization that it can only bring about its actualization within a world of ethical substance<sup>292</sup> and thus prepares the ground for the transition to Spirit. The various intermediate stages, including Kantian morality, were lessons *in concreto* that individual consciousness must overcome the one-sidedness of its perspective in its effort to dialectically engage with the world and find its truth in the context of ethicality and communality:

“The absolute consciousness, by contrast, has sublated itself as singular consciousness, this mediation is accomplished, and only through its accomplishment, is this consciousness immediate self-consciousness of the ethical substance.”<sup>293</sup>

Secondly, and in light of the former observation, he immediately brings our attention to the distinctive deficiency of this new form of consciousness, namely, its immediateness. This becomes evident in Antigone's reasoning whereby she completely and unreflectively identifies with the ethical substance partially represented by the law of the gods. Partially, because earlier we saw the self-division of ethical substance to masses, i.e. “determinate laws” (§420), which anticipates the later division between human and divine law (§445ff.). The combination of immediacy with the absence of reflection, i.e. the ability for determination, negation, and relational thinking, and consequently, with the inability to grasp the ethical substance as a whole, sets the general ground for our passage to the discussion of the tragedy in the context of Spirit wherein consciousness and the world come together in an unmediated unity.

To enter the realm of Spirit means that reason has become spirit and thus recognizes the world as a product of its activity. However, this recognition remains impartial insofar it is not the outcome of self-conscious reflectivity but on the contrary, it is attained by virtue of the immediacy of its identification with it (§438). In other words, we have reached the peculiar stage in which reason has become spirit but cannot recognize himself as such. The particular content of this recognition, its essence, is what Hegel refers to as ethical substance, namely, the collective

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<sup>292</sup> In §350 Hegel's seems to be alluding to the Greek *polis* as the particular example of actualized ethical substance.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.* (§436, 172).

experience of Greek ethical life in its harmonious equilibrium (§439). Consequently, spirit is identified with the “ethical life of a people insofar as spirit is the immediate truth; the individual that is a world.” (§441). The identity is not absolute but relative as it is not conceptually mediated and herein arises the distinctive blindness surrounding Hegel’s favourite tragic characters. A corollary of this discrepancy is that the absolute certainty of the aforementioned identity is not based on reflective knowledge but subsists mostly on an aesthetic conception of reason idiomatic to the Greek world. This characteristic deficiency can potentially account for Hegel’s choice to map the particular stage in the development of consciousness onto Greek tragedy. This view can be further supported if we consider tragedy’s applicability in representing a quintessentially Greek shape of the word (§441) and in particular, the *Antigone* as the embodiment of Greek ethicality, whereas, more specifically, the person of Antigone is the hero *par excellence* of antiquity that comes closer to what Hegel describes as an “individual that is a world” (§441).

As his analysis of tragedy in Chapter VI takes place in the context of ethical life perhaps it should be noted that although Hegel brings in several elements we encountered in the *Natural Law* essay, the overall argument is quite different in its aim. The most pertinent difference in the context of our discussion is that, whereas in the former text, the tragedy of ethicality is conceived as perennial and recurring symptom in the formation of the absolute, here, the relation between tragedy and ethical life is stripped of the metaphysical nuances we previously discerned and is most properly posited as a stage in the development of spirit, with no unique standing among the others insofar it is subject to the common fate of all interim stages before reaching the final standpoint of absolute knowledge, namely, to be sublated by its successor. Furthermore, this structural change entails a different understanding of the reconciliation involved which corresponds to Hegel’s replacement of the *Eumenides* with the *Antigone* as the exemplary tragedy of ethical life. In the essay on the *Natural Law* the objective was to come up with a sense of genuine and positive reconciliation that does not necessitate the annulment of life because that would subvert the absolute grounding of the absolute. Put differently, the absolute is such by virtue of its ability to integrate and sustain the moment of negativity rendering its characteristic unity, unity in difference. As the mediation of this process was

completely in the hands of the tragedy of ethicality, the positive outcome of this internal reconciliation was implicitly preconditioned and thus required a tragedy of such connotations. In the *Phenomenology* this mediation is expanded in the whole life and development of spirit and thus needs not to resort to a model of immediate reconciliation insofar it is actualized at the very end of the journey of spirit through successive contradictions and reconciliations. It follows, that although the *Antigone* in Hegel's view represents a very specific notion of speculative reconciliation, its pre-eminent importance lies in its conflictual essence and thereby encapsulates most succinctly the essence of the dialectic of the *Phenomenology* as "the labour of the negative" (§33). This conclusion reflects Hegel's prioritisation of systematic concerns over factual interpretation when we come to tragedy and is infamously expressed in his symmetrical analysis of Creon and Antigone; his centre of interest is not the hero but the clash. Therefore, in this context, Hegel's interest in tragedy lies primarily on its ability to sharpen consciousness in the razor of social contradictions as it exhibits the *impasse* of a certain mode of ethical life that has its essential truth in the idiosyncratic Greek world.

The discussion of tragedy in Chapter VI is divided under two subsections which broadly correspond to a presentation and analysis of the relationships encompassing Greek ethicality in the state of its equilibrium (a. The ethical world. Human and divine law: man and woman) and the subsequent disruption of this harmony via the paradigmatic tragic action (b. The ethical action. Human and divine knowledge. Guilt and destiny). This destabilization sets in motion the gradual demise of the Greek worldview. Consequently, under the burden of its insoluble contradiction, the *polis* is led to its gradual collapse, signalling the end of the exemplary status of the Greeks and the transition to the world of Roman legality and abstract individuality (c. The state of right). The discussion is formulated primarily on the basis of the *Antigone* although Hegel also recurses to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the *Eumenides*, and the *Seven against Thebes*. Notwithstanding the historical approach he adopts, the overall orientation of the examination remains systematic and conforms to the overarching hermeneutic bias imposed by a specific alignment of spirit with the demands of reason, resembling to a certain degree, albeit anachronistically while performing a different function, Hegel's notorious notion of the cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*).

In subsection a. we observe the presentation of Greek ethicality in its illustrious ideality. The exposition follows the coming together of a series of structurally opposing ethical moments in the formation of the dialectical unity of ethical substance, i.e. the totality of the sphere of normativity. However, the actuality of this unity is precarious due to the fact that it is not mediated conceptually and thus the people who identify with it cannot apprehend it in its uniformity. As a result, ethical substance appears self-differentiated within society into two distinct yet equally valid instances, namely, as human and divine law. Each one bears exactly the opposite features of the other; as a result, the former is man-made and thus aspires to be rational, it is “well-known”, refers to the “prevailing ethical custom”, and belongs most properly to the open, to “the light of day” (§448); whereas the latter, comes to us from time immemorial, implying a God-given origin, it is unwritten, therefore ambiguous, not widely followed<sup>294</sup> and lastly, being associated with the gods of the nether-world it occupies a darker darkness than that of the night. The first has its actuality in the people of the *polis* and its *distinctive* form of consciousness in the citizen that is represented by man. Respectively, the second finds its concrete existence in the family wherein it is the woman who represents its corresponding form of consciousness. Man under the heading of the human law is assigned to the political sphere and particularly, in the government, whereas woman as a representative of the divine law is entrusted with the totality of the issues that fall within the familial sphere.

This is the static image of the structurally perfect register of Greek ethicality. As soon as the ethical totality is seen in its internal movement this perfect division and equilibrium between universality (state) and particularity (family) betrays its dialectical and incipiently contradictory character. Each law along with its respective instantiations is established on its abstract antithesis to the other, leading to a state of implicit opposition. The state not only has its manifest truth in the social order, but as Hegel implies, it shall not tolerate anything that

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<sup>294</sup> In the aftermath of Cleisthenes’ reforms in 508 BCE the tribal classification on the basis of kinship was replaced by the impersonal citizen body of the *demes*. Hegel suggests that the *Antigone*, written about sixty years later, most probably alludes to the fact that although the laws deriving from blood-ties, and in extent based on the unwritten laws of the gods, had not disappeared from the broader *ethos* of the *polis*, they were certainly not dominant.

subverts or questions its actuality and authority, it *prevails*, no matter what (§447).<sup>295</sup> Similarly, the divine law opposes the power of the state, representing the unconscious, unmediated by the ethical actuality, precepts of the family (§§449-50). In the absence of self-reflectivity and lacking a fully formed notion of individuality,<sup>296</sup> the characteristic form of the identity of each sex with its assigned role is that of immediacy. The outcome of this deficiency is that both are blind to their dialectical entanglement and concurrently, to the complementary nature of the particularity of their truth which they conflate with the totality of the ethical substance. On one hand, the state is contingent on the family for the latter provides it with its future citizens, but most importantly, with the necessary warriors for its perseverance, while, on the other hand, the family can only overcome its natural and simple immediacy and demonstrate its involvement in the ethical essence only by performing a mediation that prevents the regress of the ethical actuality to a stage of natural barbarism.<sup>297</sup>

The ethicality of this action can only be found in the act of burial (§451). The death of an individual signifies his transition from concrete spiritual individuality to abstract natural negativity. In other words, from a recognized member of a self-conscious community he becomes a mere “unreal [unactual] shadow without any core”<sup>298</sup> that is unable to find reconciliation in the beyond. Through burial this abstract negativity is negated to universal individuality as he is reintegrated into the social sphere both practically, as he is salvaged from

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<sup>295</sup> Pinkard’s translation is equally telling: “is validly in force” (§446). Inarguably, I might be possibly reading into the passage connotations that will only appear later in the text, however, given Hegel’s symmetrical reading and exposition and due to the fact that immediately after concluding the presentation of the human law (§§447-8) when he turns to the divine, the first characteristic he underlines is its opposition to the former, I hold that it is not wholly implausible to suggest so. On the contrary, the description reflects Hegel’s apprehension of the state in the *System of Ethicality*, specifically with regard to the notion of obedience, which, respectively, has a paramount role in Creon’s rhetoric, *Antigone* (639-47, 659-80, 686-95, 709-34).

<sup>296</sup> See: “Of the Greeks in the first and genuine form of their Freedom, we may assert, that they had no conscience”, Hegel (1823-6/2011: 271).

<sup>297</sup> Cf. “We observe that all nations, barbarous as well as civilized, though separately founded because remote from each other in time and space, keep these three human customs: all have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, all bury their dead. And in no nation, however savage and crude, are any human actions performed with more elaborate ceremonies and more sacred solemnity than the rites of religion, marriage, and burial. For, by the axiom that “uniform ideas, born among peoples unknown to each other, must have a common ground of truth”, it must have been dictated to all nations that from these three institutions humanity began among them all, and therefore they must be most devoutly guarded by them all, so that the world should not again become a bestial wilderness” Vico (1984: 97).

<sup>298</sup> Hegel (1807/2018: §450, 259, Pinkard).

the perils of nature, and spiritually, as he is reconciled with the gods of the nether-world and thus restored to a community which, albeit different, recognizes in him its very own essence and contains both the remembrance and the potentially destructive activation of pure natural negativity (§452). In light of these observations, Hegel will call the act of burial the “last duty thus constitutes the consummate divine law, or it constitutes the positive ethical action vis-à-vis the singular individual”.<sup>299</sup> Hegel calls it the last duty, but in fact, it is the only action through which the family, and in particular woman, can rise to the level of true ethicality amidst a society that retains this determination solely for its male members. It offers the possibility for a true reconciliation with the ethical substance. It is a paradigmatic example of his thesis that “each of the opposite ways in which the ethical substance exists contains the entire substance”<sup>300</sup> as in this particular instance the consciousness that identifies with the sphere of the family proceeds to a mediation that also affects, and in fact positively, the state. The discrepancy between the blind certainty of individual consciousness and the actuality of the ethical substance will be revealed later when the particular duty of burial is considered by both Creon and Antigone from their respective dead angle.

The division of the subterranean realm in the domain of the dead *qua* spirit and that of primordial nature and bestiality establishes the spiritual community of the dead as the guardians of the community from forces repulsed to the outer regions of collective memory. The disturbance of its solemnity, either in the act of trespassing the sanctity of inviolable blood-ties as in the case of Orestes and Oedipus, or in the negligence of its ceremonial conventions as in the case of Polyneices, has potentially adverse results for the community and the trespasser as evidenced by the Furies, the plague of Thebes, and the alternative reading of the ending of the *Antigone*, which is the one that Hegel adopts, according to which the *epigonoi* (the descendants) of the seven generals that took arms against Thebes swore vengeance for the desecration of the bodies of their forefathers and laid waste to the city.

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<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.* (§452, 261, Pinkard).

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.* (§450, 177).

Earlier we saw that the tension underlying the totality of Greek ethicality takes the form of instantiations of the overarching relationship between universality and particularity. Much in agreement with his thesis on the essay on *Natural Law* the vitality and well-being of this relationship cannot subsist in perpetual peace. Accordingly, the government exercises its war prerogative in order to reinsert into its citizens the sense of its absolute authority and the unity it entails by means of exposing them to the actuality of death. It follows that the state has its last and most essential method of self-authentication in its exact opposite, “in the essence of the divine law and in the realm of the nether world.”<sup>301</sup> Hegel’s symmetric reading simplifies and conceals the fact that whereas the state apprehends death in its instrumentality, as a medium for its own actualization, the opposite realm of the nether world *ipso facto* has a necessary connection to death which is primarily of spiritual affinity. It follows that the “genuine power” of the state is its authority upon the whole domain of death. This becomes evident both in Antigone’s death-penalty and its orchestration as a slow and agonizing death in the womb of the earth, but most importantly, in the outright prohibition of any form of burial so that the body of Polyneices will be consumed by the natural forces and devoured by the animals. The state spitefully manipulates the form of death and its authority extends beyond the facticity of death.

We have reached the stage of what could be called the general exposition of Greek ethicality in repose (§§446-55). The remaining part of subsection a. remains within the premises of ideality but acquires its orientation from the distinctiveness of the brother-sister relationship we find in the *Antigone* and therefore cannot be counted as typical of Greek ethicality as a whole. Whereas his analysis up to now broadly corresponded to the broader lines of Greek tragedy and the *Antigone* in particular, the following part draws its implications directly from the Sophoclean text. If we rule out biographical inferences<sup>302</sup> Hegel’s inarguably dubious treatment

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<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.* (§455, 180).

<sup>302</sup> Kaufmann is overall dismissive of Hegel’s project in the *Phenomenology* and only hints at, but does not argue for, their possibility in the interpretation of the brother-sister relationship (1978: 126). Derrida proceeds to a quasi-psychoanalytic reading of his relationship with his sister in *Glas* (1986).



of the relationship between Antigone and Polyneices can only make sense on the premises of the internal logic underlying the systematic structural dialectic of the chapter.

Having discerned in the burial the paradigmatic action of the divine law, that is, its most appropriate form, Hegel turns to the examination of its content. Inquiring in familial relationships he seeks the purest possible ethical form untainted by desire, self-interest, and sentimentality (§456). Put succinctly, he requires one that is not established on the premises of naturalness and immediacy, as these determinations undermine the purity of the ethical bond, and eventually finds it in the brother-sister relationship. He offers four basic arguments in support of his thesis, namely, the absence of sexual desire, “the supreme presentiment of the ethical essence”<sup>303</sup> by the female in the form of the sister, the irreplaceability of the loss of the brother,<sup>304</sup> and lastly, their symmetrical relationship (§457). Indeed, there is no evident reason to confuse love, even if expressed in *pathos*, with sexual desire, and imply an incestuous relation between them. After all, not long ago, Antigone had returned from Colonus absolutely shattered by the death of her father, by whose side she stood by the long years after his exile from Thebes wandering the countryside like *émigrés*; she learned in suffering the consequences of incest. The second point refers to a sort of knowledge that Antigone has of the ethical essence. We have seen that the actuality of the ethical substance is an interrelated nexus of seemingly opposed determinations, to the dialectical intricacies of which the participating agents remain stubbornly oblivious. Yet Hegel points out that she manages, if only unconsciously, to touch upon the mediation between particularity and universality in the mode of an internal, unactualized, feeling. In other words, he is suggesting that Antigone’s reverence for her brother is simultaneously a quasi-rational feeling that comes closer to the true form of ethical essence. Of course, it would be crass to suggest that amidst the turmoil of the events she does so knowledgeably. Hegel is only re-reading her intuitive stance back into the structure of ethicality and thus rendering her unconscious intuition of the rational as a moment of exemplary pre-reflective understanding of the underlying substratum of Greek ethicality. This line of argument

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<sup>303</sup> Hegel (1807/1998: §457, 181)

<sup>304</sup> See *Antigone* (502-4, 906-14).

is correlative to the next two conclusions regarding the irreplaceability of the brother and the symmetry of the positions to which we shall turn now.

The first step towards the formation of this rational meditation is the brother's exodus from the natural immediacy underwriting the particularity of the ethical life of the family to the realm of the political that establishes him as a citizen of the community partaking in the "consciousness of the universality" (§458). Hegel describes their relationship as the limit between the two spheres of the state and the family because of the interdependency of their respective roles and function in both realms. Although the brother abandons the family and joins the ethical community of the *polis*, he still occupies a place in it, if only in the consciousness of his sister, and thus opens the possibility for her recognition by and reconciliation with the ethical essence of the community. In her brother she sees her unactualized connection with the self-conscious community of the *polis*, which, even if it remains practically unactualized it still offers her a deep consolation and a sense of greater belonging; that is not nothing. However, with the death of her brother there arises the possibility of its actualization. By burying him she practically validates his membership of the community of the family and also escapes her absolute confinement in the family by participating in the ethical essence of the *polis*. Consequently, the practical and conceptual mediation of the interrelated spheres of the state and the family is actualized only in this double action that involves both brother and sister, which, as such, explicates, on the one hand, the irreplaceability of the brother, and on the other hand, attests to the symmetry of their positions (§§459-60). Their relationship takes place on the limit between the two spheres because it investigates and most succinctly reflects their inextricable entanglement and the inherent limits of Greek ethical life as a whole. Therein lies the mainspring of interpretations that identify the *Antigone* with Greek ethicality *in toto*. From this perspective, Hegel has made of the *Antigone* something at once lesser and greater than the text explicitly dictated. Indeed, one cannot turn a blind eye to the hermeneutic bias he subjects the drama to, yet, at the same time, by doing so he elevates it to a supreme moment in the development of spirit and history in general. The acknowledgment of the Janus-faced facet of his interpretation can only advance our understanding of its merits and shortcomings.

This concludes Hegel's examination of the beautiful equilibrium of Greek ethical life, which, from the perspective of spirit, integrates and actualizes all previous shapes of consciousness (§461).<sup>305</sup> However, the dynamic development of spirit precludes the fixity of the positions it assumes and thus as we move from the perspective of the observational standpoint of spirit to its active unfolding we thereby encounter the disruption of the aesthetic unity of Greek ethicality. It is important to underline that the emergence of the negative moment that threatens the life of the universal is vital in the progress and vitality of spirit. As each stage in the life of spirit is a distinct living entity, in the prospect of its potential sundering and dissolution it promptly seeks to restore its initial status in order to safeguard its existence. The characteristic Greek form that guarantees and preserves the unity and universality of its world is justice. At this point, Hegel extends his understanding of Greek ethical life in the image of the *Antigone* so as to incorporate the lesson of the *Eumenides* regarding the nature of divine justice. Hegel discerns two types of justice, namely, human and divine. The first is external and issued by the state and the government when individuals forgo their identity to the whole and follow an off-centre course, while the second is internal to the consciousness of the individual and assumes the form of the Erinyes. Much alike to his later interpretation in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* of the three witches as internal to the Macbeth's consciousness,<sup>306</sup> Hegel disposes of the externality of the Erinyes by internalizing them as endemic to singular individual consciousness.<sup>307</sup> It is perhaps in his discussion on the conditions surrounding the emergence of the moment of negativity that destabilizes the whole and invokes the mechanisms of justice that we find a paradigmatic instance of what Dieter Henrich called Hegel's "emphatic institutionalism";<sup>308</sup> the relevant passage reads as follows:

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<sup>305</sup> Cf. §440.

<sup>306</sup> (1835/1975: 585).

<sup>307</sup> Inwood and Pinkard incorporate this insight in their respective translations, the former by rendering the Erinyes in the singular as Erinyes and the latter by emphasising their uniqueness to Orestes "his Erinyes".

<sup>308</sup> Henrich in Hegel (1819-1820: 31). In defence of Hegel, Gadamer argues: "This doctrine of the spirit objectified in institutions is not concerned with defending the existing institutions in their unchangeable correctness. Hegel defended institutions not in a wholesale fashion but against the pretense of knowing better on the part of the individual. With his overpowering spiritual force, he showed the limitations of moralism in social life and the untenability of a purely inward morality that is not made manifest in the objective structures of life that hold

“The wrong which can be inflicted on the singular in the ethical realm is simply this, that something purely and simply happens to him. The power which inflicts this wrong on the consciousness, which makes him into a mere thing, is nature, it is the universality not of the commonwealth, but the abstract universality of Being; and the singularity, in resolving the wrong suffered, does not turn against the commonwealth, for it is not at its hands that it has suffered, but against Being.”<sup>309</sup>

Indeed, in the absence of a concrete mediation of nature in the stage of Greek ethical life, every affliction that befalls the individual is apprehended as merely accidental in nature, an *accidens* of his ontological determination in a world of “abstract universality”. Be that as it may, although Hegel is in fact describing the limited perspective of the agent involved in such a scenario, his syllogism come forward as corresponding to the actual and essential truth of consciousness at this particular stage. Therefore, his conclusion might certainly pertain to Orestes and the *Eumenides* but on no account does it hold for the *Antigone*. Hegel refrains from expressing the explicit prioritisation of universality *qua* commonwealth against the particularity of the family and nature when discussing the *Antigone*, but nonetheless by holding the side of nature as responsible for the impartiality of its meditation with the state, reflects an evident, if implicit, structural predisposition in his dialectic regarding the outcome of its unfolding. This becomes clear in the symmetric reading of Creon and Antigone he performs in the second part to which we now turn.

*b. ‘The ethical action. Human and divine knowledge. Guilt and destiny’*

Hegel sets out to examine Greek ethical life under its inherent contradictions. The previous static ideality gives place to the dynamic interplay between its constitutive moments and the emphasis shifts to the investigation of the limits of Greek ethicality and consequentially, of the Greek world as a whole. The opposing ethical moments, the universal will of the state and

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human beings together. So in fact he was able to show what kind of discrepancies, not to say what sorts of injustices, as well as what kind of dialectic of unrighteousness, is connected with abstract moralism” (1988: 30).

<sup>309</sup> Hegel (1807/2018: §462, 183).

the natural ties of the family, are set in motion by an action which activates “the eternal necessity of the dreadful destiny”<sup>310</sup> of Greek ethical life. The outcome of their opposition is the symmetrical downfall of their respective laws, human and divine, and anticipates the collapse of the Greek world. In describing both the necessity and the *telos* of the Greek paradigm in terms of metaphysical nuances, Hegel underlines the immanent inescapability of their situation.

His insight is further attested if we try to adopt an internal perspective to the Greek world. Indeed, there seems to be a characteristic blindness governing the Greek worldview with regard to the apprehension of its underlying antinomies that takes the form of successive acts of repression.<sup>311</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant has persuasively argued that Greek tragedy refrains from taking a position on the internal matters of the *polis* and distances itself from contemporaneous issues.<sup>312</sup> Correspondingly, Nicole Loraux has suggested that tragedies of reconciliatory ending take place in Athens, as the *polis par excellence* of the Greek world, whereas when the sense of their ending can be broadly characterized as bearing negative connotations, its localisation is exiled outside the premises of the *polis*.<sup>313</sup> Furthermore, she has conclusively demonstrated that the Athenians went to great lengths in order to dispel any overarching sense of division, enmity, and internal conflict surrounding their collective memory.<sup>314</sup> Their respective insights can be found in an incipient, negative, form in Plato, where, however, due to the severity of their import, they remain unutterable. The eulogy of the strength of the *polis*<sup>315</sup> and the banishment of poetry<sup>316</sup> attest to the exact opposite of what Plato set out to show, namely, the precarious grounding of the city-states, and most importantly of Athens, in the immediate aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, and the intimation that tragedy offers us regarding the instability of the ethical relationships of Greek ethical life and thus of the *polis*. In the *Preface* to his *Philosophy*

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<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.* (§464, 184).

<sup>311</sup> I retain the customary translation of *Verdrängung*, however, in this context, both alternatives, repulsion and displacement, reflect better the active sense under which this action is performed.

<sup>312</sup> Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988: 242-7).

<sup>313</sup> (2006: 148). Segal specifies her suggestion by arguing for Thebes as the pre-eminent counter-example of Athens, as the paradigmatic divided city (1981: 362). Cf. Vidal-Naquet’s reading of *Oedipus at Colonus*, in Vernant & Vidal-Naquet (1988: 329-360).

<sup>314</sup> (2006).

<sup>315</sup> *Statesman* (302a).

<sup>316</sup> *Republic* (595-608b).

of *Right* Hegel refers to Plato's *Republic* as "the embodiment of Greek ethics"<sup>317</sup> and immediately clarifies:

"Plato, aware that the ethics of his time were being penetrated by a deeper principle which, within this context, could appear immediately only as an as yet unsatisfied longing and hence only as a destructive force"<sup>318</sup>

Plato's intimation of the emergence of the principle of individuality, which he had observed first-hand in the figure of Socrates, and its potentially destructive consequences for the sustainability of the model of the *polis*, along with tragedy's aesthetic representation of its inherent contradictions, could not be sustained under the conception of his ideal city that emerged as an answer *in abstracto* to the all too near dangers threatening the actuality of the *polis*. By refusing to establish a dialogue with the negative moments lurking in the background of Greek ethical life, he most evidently aligns with its inherent one-sidedness. Therefore, Hegel's identification of the *Republic* with Greek ethics implicitly ascribes to the former's systematic aspirations the particular blindness of the latter. Both conceptually and practically, the Greek paradigm was confined to a stage that could only be overcome by its downfall.

The first line of the Sophoclean play sets the tone and context for Hegel's analysis. Ὡ κοινὸν ἀντάδελφον Ἰσμήνης κάρα utters Antigone and considerable difficulties in interpretation arise.<sup>319</sup> These words have been discussed *ad nauseam* and irrespective of the thoughtful insights that followed, in the present context it should suffice to underline a common thread among them, namely, that the space and content occupied by the *κοινὸν* in the Greek world, is of unstable, fleeting, and even contradictory, nature. Its meaning and web of connotations is subject to a continuous re-arrangement contingent on the different positions each individual consciousness assumes within the ethical whole. It is in the absence of a common ground, of an agreement to what constitutes the essence of the *κοινὸν*, whereby Antigone meets her demise

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<sup>317</sup> (1821/1991: 20).

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>319</sup> On the opening lines of the *Antigone* see Steiner's magisterial reading: (1984: 208-10).

and Creon his misery. It is a crisis of commonality and the commons, a limiting case denoting the standstill of Greek social reason.<sup>320</sup>

The first step towards the exposition of the *impasse* of Greek ethical life is precipitated by an action of the ethical agent that draws its distinctive orientation from what he perceives as his absolute identification with one side of the opposing ethical moments that results from the internal differentiation of the ethical substance into polarities. The immediacy governing the ethical relationships of the whole in combination with the absence of reflectivity in the agents, restricts them to an idiosyncratic perspective, which is at once limited, in the view of spirit, and universal therefore non-contradictory, according to them. These determinations of unmediated identity and false-certainty constitute the guiding form and perspective of the ethical action that is apprehended as duty (§465).

Whereas in its state of repose Greek ethicality exhibited a dialectic movement between its parts, this interrelational activity now comes to a halt due to the unwavering one-sidedness of each individual consciousness. Both Antigone and Creon stick fast to their positions and any obstacle that prevents the actualization of their respective duty is perceived as an anomaly in the sphere of law, as a lawless and erratic opposition lacking substantial grounding. As in the eyes of both each opposing perspective has no ethical justification, it takes the form of a characteristic non-conformity with what they apprehend as the essence of the ethical substance that manifests itself as violence in the case of the human law and as disobedience in the divine (§466). It follows that in light of the intractability of their positions a discrepancy arises between their delimited standpoint and its actual validity. This problem is articulated in terms of an opposition between “the known and the not-known”, between knowledge and ignorance. Both agents *are* literally their respective duties inasmuch as their very own being is identical to the content and actualization of them; their ethical and ontological determinations converge (§467).

In order to elucidate this discrepancy idiomatic to Greek tragedy, Hegel expands his apparatus to the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In the slide between the actualization of one’s deed and his

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<sup>320</sup> See also Goldhill (2012: 243-6).

partial knowledge of what it consists in, arises an interpretational space regarding the contextualization of his action. Oedipus, being oblivious to the totality of the mediations permeating his action, is inadvertently posited in an unbridgeable relationship between intention and actuality. In light of this recognition, the outcome of his action violates the opposite ethical moment and incurs guilt (§468), whereas, from the perspective of the *polis* it is apprehended as a crime. However, we ought to refrain from our customary understanding of these categories of moral responsibility. It has been pointed out that ancient Greece lacked the principle of modern individuality. This brings us to the paradox of innocent guilt that draws its assumptions from the peculiarity surrounding the notion of the self in Greek antiquity. As Hegel remarks, it would be vain to identify the outcome of the action with the agent *per se*, as his self-understanding knows no inner self, no individualized self-consciousness; the furthest we can reach is the outer shell of one's generic image according to the part of the bifurcated ethical substance he represents (§468). It is on these grounds that Oedipus is finally absolved from his crimes and is eventually reconciled both with himself and the world in Colonus.<sup>321</sup>

Notwithstanding, the one-sidedness of the agent's action, resulting from its entanglement in the known-not-known dichotomy, sets into motion the mechanism of justice.<sup>322</sup> Hegel seems to imply that in the context of tragedy any form of transgressing action is bound to inflict guilt (§469). This implicit generalization is based on the premise of the irreconcilability between intention and deed and although it may be true for Oedipus, it does not hold for Antigone.<sup>323</sup> Hegel's conclusion takes its cue from what we encountered earlier as the implicit prioritisation of universality against particularity. The latter, irrespective of the specificity of the conditions, is held responsible for the emergence of the negative moment and

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<sup>321</sup> Hegel will expand his thoughts on the issue of tragic responsibility in his *Lectures on Fine Art* and the *Philosophy of Right*, see: (1835/1975: 1187-8) and (1821/1991: §117A, §118R).

<sup>322</sup> At this point Hegel alludes to Furies of the *Eumenides* as "hostile vengeance-seeking essence" but the context remains that of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Inasmuch as vengeance is the archetype of archaic justice we ought not to read into his verbalism a change of paradigm.

<sup>323</sup> It would be nonsensical to hold Antigone and Creon accountable in terms of an innocent guilt when in fact they are clearly on the side of a clear-cut recognition of the consequences of their actions and indeed Hegel clarifies the issue in the next paragraph (§470).



thus, in a specific sense, what we observe is nothing other than the inherent structural guilt of the particular.

This brings us to the passage that perhaps has been the fundamental point of dissension in Hegel's analysis of the *Antigone*. Bearing in mind our previous remarks on the underlying force of systematicity in the *Phenomenology* and its distinctive instantiation in the relationship between universality and particularity we can easier approach the riddle of his interpretation. Apparently Hegel overreads or misreads line 926: *παθόντες ἄν ξυγγοῖμεν ἡμαρτηκότες*, usually rendered as "because we suffer we acknowledge we have erred"<sup>324</sup> (*Weil wir leiden, anerkennen wir, daß wir gefehlt*). Given Hegel's long-lasting fascination with the *Antigone* that goes back to 1788 and his efforts in translating passages of the play in Tübingen, most probably under the influence of Hölderlin,<sup>325</sup> we can rule out the second alternative with relative certainty. Furthermore, we can also reject the possibility that his translation is in fact borrowed from Hölderlin as in the final version of the latter's *Antigone* (1804) the line reads: *So leiden wir und bitten ab, was wir Gesündiget*<sup>326</sup> (Then we shall suffer and do penance, for the way we have sinned).<sup>327</sup>

It follows that we are left with the first alternative, namely that Hegel is deliberately misconstruing the actual meaning of the text by supplanting it with a cognitive undertone that is absent from the original. At first glance, one could suggest that Hegel proceeds to a strong reading of Aristotle's connection between *anagnorisis* (recognition), i.e. the transition from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge, and self-knowledge,<sup>328</sup> much in the spirit of the preceding paragraph (§469). Indeed, in the case of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, self-knowledge is obtained retrospectively, after the actualization of the deed, and only then arises the prospect of

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<sup>324</sup> Cf. The following translations of the Greek text: "then I through suffering would know within myself that I did wrong" Segal & Gibbons (2003), "I should forgive them for what I have suffered, since I have done wrong" Lloyd-Jones (1994), "once I suffer I will know that I was wrong" Fagles (1982), "When I am dead I shall discern my fault" Kitto (1962), "in suffering I'll see my error clear" Wyckoff (1954).

<sup>325</sup> Harris (1972: 48 n.1).

<sup>326</sup> (1992: Bd. 5: 243). According to Jurist's reading the two translations are also set apart due to the different connotations of *Abbitten* and *Anerkennen*, the former underlying a religious aspect in her speech while the latter a cognitive, (1986: 148 n. 9).

<sup>327</sup> Krell (2005: 368, n. 12).

<sup>328</sup> *Poetics* (1452a).

tragic recognition. The process of this recognition consists in taking responsibility for one's own actions, the consequences of which extended far beyond the initial intentionality, and in light of this discrepancy that takes the form of the contrast between what is known from the agent's part and unknown in the actuality of his action, emerges the determination of guilt with regard to the agent's initial persistent ignorance. It exemplifies the tragic contours of the dialectic of knowledge and serves as a prime example of Hegel's educational account of tragedy in the life of spirit. The problem with this line of interpretation<sup>329</sup> is that as we proceed from the overtly archaic world of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (§469) to the evidently more mediated of the *Antigone* (§470), the category of guilt is no longer valid and is replaced by an unflinching acceptance of the deed from the very beginning. It conflates the first form of moral responsibility (guilt) with the latter (tragic responsibility); the acceptance and identification with one's action is not tantamount to the acceptance of guilt.<sup>330</sup> We ought to differentiate between the identity of the agent with his action that only comes retrospectively and the self-conscious identification of one's self with his deed. The change from the first paradigm to the second signifies an advance in a higher stage of rationality. From the nebulous conditions surrounding Oedipus' self-knowledge we encounter Antigone's firm standing from the outset. We are thus left with the option either to ascribe to Hegel a glaring misappropriation or to try and contextualize his move in his own terms.

Hegel does not proceed to this differentiation because he wants to transfer intact the overarching lesson he found in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* into the *Antigone*, namely that tragic knowledge is a form of knowledge that can play a formative role in the life of spirit. Yet that does not entail that he is reading into the *Antigone* Aristotle's theory of tragedy; he is only retaining the latter's assumption regarding its educational import. For Hegel this is tantamount to proving the existence of a substantial core of rationality at the centre of tragedy. Thus, when we encounter the oxymoron "ethical consciousness is more complete, its guilt more pure, if it knows beforehand the law and the power it confronts" (§470), we ought to read into the purity

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<sup>329</sup> See Jurist (1986: 143-50). On Hegel's appropriation and reframing of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, see: Zerba (2014: 44-77).

<sup>330</sup> See Butler (2000: 6-7).

of the guilt its inherent yet incipient rationality. This also makes sense with Hegel's overall schematic understanding of the development of spirit according to which each stage that is more complete – from the perspective of spirit – is also more rational. Again, the relative completeness of the ethical consciousness he discerns in Antigone is a sign of rationality. Lastly, one cannot sidestep, and at the same time should not get carried away by, the obvious affinity between the phrase “what is ethical must be actual” and Hegel's *Doppelsatz* in the *Philosophy of Right*.<sup>331</sup>

Consequently, Hegel's controversial translation of the line is imposed by a double sense of closure that he is forced to put forward due to the systematic premises of the *Phenomenology*. On the one hand, by ascribing to her suffering cognitive undertones he is alluding to the Aeschylean *πάθει μάθος* (knowledge in suffering)<sup>332</sup> that underlines the paedetic and ontological experience of Greek tragedy, which, on the other hand, viewed from the systematic perspective of the *Phenomenology*, acquires the form of a nascent rationality and unveils the limits of tragic reason, while simultaneously, provides us with an intimation of the imminent downfall of the Greek world. To conclude, I believe that if one wishes to salvage a meaningful sense of his interpretation of the *Antigone* and at the same time preserve tragedy's role in overall systematic and logic development of spirit, then one ought to try and bring in the determinations and conclusions pertinent to the second objective and integrate them to the

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<sup>331</sup> “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational” (1821/1991: Preface, 20). Of course, Hegel has not yet reached the perspective of the *Science of Logic* that he later transcribed in the form of objective spirit, but nevertheless, the category of actuality in the *Phenomenology* always pertains to rationality. Interestingly enough, Hegel's discussion of actuality in the *Science of Logic* presents an overwhelming affinity with the stage we currently find ourselves in the *Phenomenology*: “Real actuality is *as such* at first the thing of many properties, the concretely existing world; but it is not the concrete existence that dissolves into appearance but, as actuality, it is at the same time an in-itself and immanent reflection; it preserves itself in the manifoldness of mere concrete existence; its externality is an inner relating only to itself. What is actual can *act*; something announces its actuality *by what it produces*. Its relating to another is the manifestation *of itself*, and this manifestation is neither a transition (the immediate something refers to the other in this way) nor an appearing (in this way the thing only is *in relation* to an other); it is a self-subsistent which has its immanent reflection, its determinate essentiality, in another self-subsistent.” (1812-16/2010: 482).

<sup>332</sup> *Agamemnon* (177).

first. Unfortunately, this move does not come without a cost<sup>333</sup> and that becomes apparent in his reading of Creon and Antigone.

The moment of the recognition signifies the self-negation of the agent insofar as therein appears the breakdown of his one-sidedness and his transition to a uniform understanding of the ethical substance. The recognition amounts to a conceptual return to the ethical community but it cannot be practically actualized in the same terms that led to its demise. Given the fact that her ethical determination is at the same her ontological determination, the actuality of the recognition cannot be maintained by Antigone and is thus given only in death:

“the ethical individuality is immediately and in itself one with its universal, it has its existence in it alone, and is unable to survive the destruction which this ethical power suffers at the hands of the opposite power.”<sup>334</sup>

Death emerges as the constitutive horizon in the process of the sublation of the delimited perspective of individual consciousness echoing the similar role of negativity in the development and formation of spirit. In order to safeguard the rationality of this movement the process by which it is actualized ought to be symmetrical. This requirement corresponds to the inherently bifurcated and unmediated structure of Greek ethical life and precipitates the downfall of the equally one-sided and essential opposing individual consciousness (Creon). Although in the play the opposition is stated in terms of the state *contra* family, we encounter the paradox that by the end of it, it is not the opposing consciousness in the face of Creon that perishes but his family. However, as soon as we are reminded of the fact that the opposition is not focused on the particular individuals *per se* but on the part of the ethical substance they represent, the double movement of the collapse is rendered clear. In her final moments while she is taken away outside the city walls she cries out: “Behold me, princes of Thebes, the *last* daughter of the house of your kings” (940-2),<sup>335</sup> signalling on her behalf the end of the

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<sup>333</sup> Cf. “the question of reconciling tragedy and morality [...] logically this could be achieved, but only by stepping outside the experience of tragic art so as to view the perspective of tragedy as merely partial, to do which, I suggested, is to break faith with the experience of tragedy, to fail to give it its due.” Gardner (2002: 243).

<sup>334</sup> Hegel (1807/2018: §471, 187).

<sup>335</sup> Jebb’s translation (2010, emphasis added). Cf. “Look!—you rulers of Thebes — On the last, solitary Member of the royal House” Segal & Gibbons (2003), “You princes of Thebes, O look upon me, The last that remain of a line

Labdacids, and concurrently, from the higher perspective of spirit, the *telos* of the archaic form of family. Respectively, the portrait of a shattered to the core Creon that we encounter towards the end when he is informed of the suicides of both his wife and son, does not correspond to the typical image of an all-ruling king. His emotional breakdown is succeeded by his completion of the two-part recognition of their inherent one-sidedness. The actuality of death as a correlative to the act of recognition does not afflict Creon *per se* but his ethical determination in the state. This is alluded to in Teiresias words “and a tumult of hatred against thee stirs all the cities, whose mangled sons had the burial-rite from dogs, or from wild beasts, or from some winged bird that bore a polluting breath to each city that contains the hearths of the dead” (1080-4),<sup>336</sup> which bring into the picture Hegel’s complementary ending to the *Antigone*, namely the story of the *Epigonoï* and the sacking of Thebes,<sup>337</sup> thereby bringing full circle the double closure of Greek ethical life.

The necessity of the determination of symmetry is thus posited both internally, in Antigone’s appeal to the gods for equal retribution of justice (927-8), and externally, from the systematic premises of the *Phenomenology*, clearing the path “to the equilibrium of the two” (§472) and thus leading to:

“the equal subjugation of both sides is absolute right accomplished, and the ethical substance as the negative power which devours both sides, or all-powerful and righteous destiny, has entered the scene”<sup>338</sup>

We have already encountered Hegel’s conception of Greek ethical life in terms of “eternal justice”<sup>339</sup> and “dreadful destiny” in the opening paragraph of subsection b. (§464), yet here he

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of kings!” Kitto (1962). With regard to the evident exclusion of Ismene from the house of Labdacus, Jebb remarks in his scholia: “not in bitterness (cp. on 559), but because she feels that, in spirit at least, she herself is indeed the last of the race” (2010: 168).

<sup>336</sup> (1888/2010).

<sup>337</sup> See §474.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.* (§472, 188). Cf. Pinkard’s translation: “It is in the equal subjection of both sides that absolute right is first achieved, and ethical substance, as the negative power that devours both sides has emerged. That is, fate, *omnipotent* and *just*, has come on the scene.” (§471, emphasis added).

<sup>339</sup> Cf. “Above mere fear and tragic sympathy there stands that sense of reconciliation which the tragedy affords by the glimpse of eternal justice. In its absolute way this justice overrides the relative justification of one-sided

offers us a further insight by describing destiny as conforming to justice. In light of this remark the teleological elements in his thought come to the fore. In his 1827 lectures on the *Philosophy of Religion* we find some important clarifications:

“Each of these two sides actualizes only one of the two, has only one side as its content. That is the one-sidedness, and the meaning of eternal justice is that both are in the wrong because they are one-sided, but both are also in the right. In the unclouded course of ethical life, both are acknowledged; here each has its validity, but one counterbalanced by the other's validity. In this way the conclusion of the tragedy is reconciliation, not blind necessity but rational necessity, the necessity that here begins to be [rationally] fulfilled.”<sup>340</sup>

“Fate [Fatum] is what cannot be conceptualized; it is where justice and injustice disappear in abstraction; in contrast, in tragedy destiny [Schicksal] falls within the sphere of ethical justice. We find the most sublime [expressions] of this in the tragedies of Sophocles. Both destiny and necessity are spoken of in them; the destiny of the [tragic] individuals is portrayed as something incomprehensible, but the necessity is not blind; on the contrary, it is recognized as authentic justice. This is what makes these tragedies such immortal spiritual products of ethical understanding and comprehension. Blind destiny is an unsatisfying thing. In these tragedies, justice is comprehended.”<sup>341</sup>

The import of these observations attest to and validate the underlying theme of rationality governing the world of tragedy which now manifests itself in the form of justice. It represents the particularisation of reason in Greek tragedy and the teleological horizon of its contradictions in the sphere of right *qua* law (§472).

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aims and passions because it cannot suffer the conflict and contradiction of ethical powers which according to their concept must be unified to be victorious and permanent in true actuality.” Hegel (1835/1975: 1198).

<sup>340</sup> (1827/1988: 353).

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.* (353, n. 428).

In the initial exposition of the overall scheme of Greek ethical life we discerned a cardinal flaw at the heart of its formation, namely the absence of a real mediation between ethicality and nature. From the perspective of spirit this particular problem is of the highest order as it exemplifies a contradiction at the most fundamental level in the formation of ethical life. In order to illustrate this point Hegel brings into the discussion the *Seven against Thebes*. Therein we find the inherent antinomies governing the Greek world framed in an opposition between the social order of the state (self-consciousness) and that of nature (unconscious). The hereditary curse upon the house of Labdacus most tellingly exemplifies the horrid consequences of active nature in its immediacy as attested by the incestuous marriage between Oedipus and Jocasta. The results of this unmediated union form the background and setting of the Aeschylean play. On the one hand, the two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, as the product of this union, represent in their opposition the perspective of nature, whereas on the other hand, the city of Thebes is assigned that of human order. In the ensuing clash both meet their end because of their resolute and unreflective allegiance with the immediacy of nature that took the form of sheer violence. In the case of Eteocles this is attested by his decision to remove his brother from his lawful position as a co-ruler of Thebes and send him to exile, whereas in the case of Polyneices, by his unrelenting determination to lay waste to the city that bore him. Both of them act in absolute defiance of the ethical order, either by ignoring the law of inheritance, or by threatening it with destruction. However, Eteocles did not afflict the commonwealth as such but only an individual, on the contrary, Polyneices, if he would have won, there would be no commonwealth. Therein lies Creon's logic of equal retribution as the relative difference of their one-sidedness results in the different stance of the government towards them after their death. An unburied body represents one of the most despicable acts of desecration in antiquity and is concomitant to the plain devaluation of the individual, to an act of his degradation to absolute inessentiality (§473).

The distinctive problem with Creon's reasoning is that in fact he is not retaliating as the city never fell; it follows that his decree and indictment of Antigone are the outcome of the overall formalism underlying his logic. As his judgment is clouded by *pathos*, he is caught in the vicious circle of revenge and he further extends it by enacting upon the premises of a grave

misconception. By doing so, he immediately posits both himself and the commonwealth in a state of war against the divine law and its subsidiary moments. The unavoidable forthcoming collision is necessarily also performed according to the logic of vengeance. The desecration of the dead bodies of Polyneices' generals inflicts an irrecoverable wound at the realm of the divine law which leads the communities of the deceased to unite and take arms against Thebes. The price to pay is the one inflicted upon those who departed ungracefully and without honour, namely total annihilation.<sup>342</sup> The *Seven against Thebes* is a perfect example of the inescapability of the antinomies ensuing from ethicality's entanglement in unmediated nature. It most aptly demonstrates the naïve superiority of any ethical moment that misapprehends its relative validity for concrete actuality, learning in its demise that eventually it had its truth, i.e. its complementary moment, from the outset in the very opposite position it aspired to negate.

As we are reaching the end of Hegel's treatment of tragedy under A. 'True Spirit' he proceeds to a restatement of the general idea expounded in the essay on *Natural Law* regarding the self-differentiation of ethical life according to which therein emerges a moment of negativity which is then sublated and reintegrated by absolute ethicality. However, as in the *Phenomenology* Greek ethical life represents only a stage *en route* to the absolute, the content of the negative moment in this mediation acquires a distinctive singularity in the figure of the woman:

“Since the commonwealth only gets its subsistence through the breakdown of domestic happiness and the dissolution of the self-consciousness into universal self-consciousness, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it, in womankind in general, its *internal enemy*.

Womankind—the *eternal irony of the commonwealth*—changes by intrigue the

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<sup>342</sup> An interesting point that deserves attention but cannot be pursued in our context is that when the clash is generalized and posited in terms of city versus city as in the *Epigoni*, then the outcome bears striking similarities with the devastating commandments upon which the battles take place in the *Old Testament*, cf. Numbers (21:2-3), Deuteronomy (20:17), Samuel (1: 15), Joshua (6:17, 21). In all examples we encounter mass killing much alike to genocide, but perhaps what is more disturbing is the conscious objective to reduce the enemy to the point of nothingness, so no memory or trace of his existence shall survive him. This conclusion can only be surmised from Hegel's symmetrical reading as unfortunately only but a few fragments survive.



universal purpose of the government into a private purpose, transforms its universal activity into a work of this determinate individual, and perverts the universal property of the State into a possession and ornament for the family. [...] The commonwealth, however, *can only maintain itself by suppressing this spirit of singularity*, and, because it is an essential moment, it all the same creates it and, moreover, creates it by its repressive attitude towards it as a hostile principle.”<sup>343</sup>

Hegel’s indelicate euphemisms of the feminine reproduce the *status quo* of long-lasting patriarchal conventions and have rightly been in the spotlight in voluminous discussions.<sup>344</sup> Notwithstanding, we shall not pursue this line of thought at the present as it deviates from our prioritisation of the question of why Hegel does proceed to such appropriations – as it was also the case with Antigone’s alleged acceptance of her guilt – which hopefully might offer us an insight to conclusions that go amiss if one isolates his remarks from the general background of the *Phenomenology*. The most striking difference with his earlier treatment of the internal dialectic of the ethical is that now he explicitly hand-picks a negative moment idiomatic to a specific crisis and stage of ethical life and elevates it to the status of universal negativity. Whereas in the *Natural Law* essay we can discern his evident discomfort, and rightful according to left-wing Hegelians, with economic individualism in civil society, it is indeed hard to find contemporaneous and substantial reasons in his era that can justify the besmirching of the feminine *in aeternum*.

We have already seen that the moment of negativity has a cardinal role to play in the interrelated functions of maintenance, defence, and development of the ethical whole. These aspects of the work of negativity correspond to three interdependent narratives. First, it ensures the vitality of the ethical whole as it threatens to subvert its self-subsistence and thus precipitates its exposure to war. Second, it provides it with the means to do war by supplying it with citizens, and lastly, by virtue of its incommensurability and unassimilated nature it forces spirit to

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<sup>343</sup> Hegel (1807/2018: §475, 189-90).

<sup>344</sup> Notable interpretations are: Irigaray (1985: 214-226), Benhabib (1991: 129-145), Mills (1996: 243-271), Butler (2000).

further differentiate and thus develop. For the time being we can discard the second function of negativity *qua* feminine due to its overtly instrumental understanding of woman and respectively, we can make do without apprehending the destabilization of the whole solely in terms of war. We are thus led to a more general schematisation of the work of negativity according to which it represents the perennial otherness to the *status quo* and by virtue of its absolute necessity in the ethical whole it obliges it to engage with it in a dialectic relationship that can only but advance both of them to a higher stage in the development of spirit and potentially absolve the moment of universality from its priority against the particularity of the feminine. If this is actually possible on Hegelian premises it entails a discussion and evaluation of the conundrums of his teleology which far exceeds our scope.

As the specific conditions surrounding the form of negativity differ from stage to stage, so does our understanding and evaluation of it. There is an evident change in tone as we move from “enemy” to “irony” attesting to this conclusion.<sup>345</sup> The first reflects an evidently archaic and unreflective understanding that can only apprehend content in terms of extreme polarities, whereas the second, milder characterisation, corresponds to a yet to be sublated moment of ethical negativity. The very notion of irony entails a doubleness of meaning, an ambiguity with regards to something that is at once internal and external to absolute self-certainty, and thus it paradigmatically illustrates Antigone’s distortion of the fixity of the social and sexual roles in the play. When examining the *Natural Law* essay we saw that Hegel whilst in a state of *aporia* with regards to the internal mechanisms governing the economic *substratum* of civil society does not actually grapple with the specificities of political economy and transposes the central problem of modern society to the abstract dialectic between absolute ethicality and ethicality. Put succinctly, he internalizes the actuality of the problem to its formal conditions, the ramifications of which are to be solved in the speculative domain of thought. What Hegel does is that he transforms the historical paradigm of modernity into an abstract determination of the human condition. Similarly but reversely, he begins by discerning a historical fact, namely the portrait of woman in antiquity as an *other*, excluded from citizenship and isolated to the sphere

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<sup>345</sup> Cf. Steiner (1984: 40-2).

of family, but at the same time as potentially destabilizing element in the community, and unable to formulate a new contextualization and conceptualization corresponding to the emancipating changes brought on by the French Revolution and reflected in the 1791 *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, he transforms the historical specificity of the ancient paradigm to a transhistorical determination of the negative. By doing so he avoids being pinned down on a definitive reading of the alternating place of woman in modernity and thus retains open the outcome of her determination in modernity but confining her to the the speculative dialectics of ethical life. Indeed, Hegel was unable to see past his historical horizon,<sup>346</sup> but at the same time he ascribes to the feminine, especially to Antigone, a *sine qua non* role in the formation of spirit.

On these grounds it would be an overstatement to suggest that “Antigone finally has no place in the dialectical advancement of universality”,<sup>347</sup> on the contrary, there would be no dialectical movement in general if it was not for Antigone.<sup>348</sup> Hopefully, this has already been rendered clear and evident in the discussion of her all-important involvement in the collapse of the Greek worldview. It is interesting, however, that Antigone bears all the features that Hegel ascribes to world-historical individuals, namely, she acts in defiance and against the *status quo*, she scorns the blissfulness of a ‘quiet life’ and ignores the promises of happiness, while finally

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<sup>346</sup> Hegel concedes the limits of speculative thinking in the Preface to his *Philosophy of Right* “thus philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts. It is just foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as than an individual can overleap his own time.” (1821/1991: 21-2).

<sup>347</sup> Butler (2000: 88). Butler attributes the conclusion to Benhabib (1992: 242-259) but she is clearly in agreement with her (88-9). It is not implausible to suggest that they are reading the *Philosophy of Right* and the universality of the state back into Creon’s position vis-à-vis Antigone’s. The implicit supposition underlying their reading is that in the *Phenomenology* the concluding form of universality *qua* absolute knowledge is, in a way, dissociated from specific moments of spirit; in other words, they proceed to an internal division between the contents of each stage in the life of spirit, and suggest that the dialectic proceeds selectively and discriminatorily with regards to them. This line of thinking ignores the logical structure of the *Phenomenology* but has a potential validity in his philosophy of history.

<sup>348</sup> Butler’s and Benhabib’s conclusion seems to imply that whereas Antigone does not contribute to the advancement of universality, Creon most evidently does. This would amount to a misunderstanding of the internal logic in the unfolding of spirit in the *Phenomenology* according to which, first, specifically in subsections a. and b. under Spirit, he explicitly underlines the fact that in order to proceed, i.e. animate the inherent contradictions of this stage, we are in need of *two* resolute consciousnesses, secondly, the determinate content of each succeeding stage consists in the sublation of the former’s contradictions, therefore to read into the process of the development of spirit a surviving element of Creon’s one-sidedness would be tantamount to undermining the inherent rationality of spirit.

she meets her end in martyrdom. True, the content of her action was not that of the inchoate spirit of the era to come, yet she definitely accelerated the process towards it. It is a moot point to argue for the solitary advancement of universality in thought and history; the lesser claim, namely to what extent the prioritisation of the moment of universality affects that of particularity in Hegel's interpretation of negativity in the unfolding of history, in other words, whether his philosophy of history conforms to a pantragism of form and a panlogism of content, seems more germane to the idiomatic character of his dialectic.

#### IV. Tragic meditations on an 'untragic' history?

In reflecting upon the historical and social conditions around 1800 Lukács would describe Hegel's era as "the last great tragic period of bourgeois development".<sup>349</sup> He locates the tragic denouement in the inherent social antinomies permeating the totality of civil society which resulted in the further estrangement of the individual from a genuine sense of belonging in the world. The form of this alienation idiomatic to modernity is reflected in the *impasse* of the mediation between the universal and the particular. The epistemological program of the *Phenomenology* could be apprehended as corresponding to this specific need of man's self-understanding in modernity, as a speculative reconciliation of the actual gap separating him from his actualization. In typical Hegelian fashion,<sup>350</sup> the genesis of his distinctively contemporaneous appropriation of the dialectic coincided with the emergence of the insoluble contradictions at the core of civil society. As a result, his formulation of the dialectic method most properly corresponds and reflects a reading of the historical development that could sustain and explicate the conflictual and antinomical nature of the present. Despite the elective affinity between the conditions that precipitated the Hegelian dialectic and the unfurling of the contradictions of civil society, perhaps what strikes us immediately upon our encounter with his method is its inarguable resemblance to the phenomenon of tragedy.

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<sup>349</sup> (1835/1975: 566).

<sup>350</sup> Cf. "We must remain convinced that it is the nature of the true to win through when its time has come, and that it appears only when its time has come" (1807/2018: §71).

In the *Preface* to the *Phenomenology*, written after the completion of the main *corpus* of the work, Hegel reiterates the scientific and epistemological premises governing his investigation. Although he explicitly rejects the disclosing capabilities of both myth and poetry to address the question of truth by themselves, he seems to imply that their philosophical appropriation is not necessarily discardable (§71).<sup>351</sup> In other words, despite the formal deficiencies of the poetic modes of thought, the insight they carry can be of use if sublated in philosophical idiom and form. We already observed how he integrated the Greek tragedies into his interpretation of Greek ethical life. Now we turn our focus on the methodological affinity between tragedy and the dialectic. It will become clear that a recognition of their compatibility also entails an expansion of our understanding from their formal semblance to the reciprocal determination of their respective content. Put succinctly, if we accept the supposition that tragedy and the dialectic share structural analogies, then we are at once reading into one another elements and determinations of their content. Consequently, our preliminary understanding and interpretation of the dialectic dictates a specific reading of tragedy and vice versa. This would be the interpretational axis of the evaluation of theorisations that have their basis in the conundrum of the relationship between tragedy and the dialectic, between history and philosophy, in Hegelian thought.

The fundamental grounding of the hypothesis regarding their connection lies in Hegel's key epistemological thesis that "In my view, which must be justified by the exposition of the system itself, everything hangs on grasping and expressing the true not just as substance but just as much as subject",<sup>352</sup> by which he confers to the overall mediation of the project an anthropological nuance.<sup>353</sup> Insofar as the experience of spirit in the *Phenomenology* is viewed as a trial of life,<sup>354</sup> the perspective opened up by its apprehension also *as subject* allows its conceptualisation as a performance of the subject's self-positing in the world. By inserting this

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<sup>351</sup> Speight argues that Hegel's skepticism regarding the necessity of the literary form is resolved in the *Galerie von Bildern* (gallery of images) of §808 wherein we find the conception of thinking as *Er-innerung* (recollection), (2001: 15). For an in-depth reading of the imagery of the *Phenomenology*, see: Verene (1985).

<sup>352</sup> Hegel (1807:2018, §17, 12, Pinkard).

<sup>353</sup> Bataille (1955: 12).

<sup>354</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1993: 428)

epistemological premise Hegel opened the way for the dramatisation of spirit's journey to the absolute. In order to make sense of the tragic character underlying this process we ought to consider its characteristic mainspring:

“The circle that remains self-enclosed and, as substance, holds its moments, is the immediate relationship and therefore arouses no astonishment. But that the accidental as such, detached from its surroundings, that what is bound and is actual only in its connection with other things, attains a Being-there of its own and a separate freedom—this is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thinking, of the pure I. Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is the most dreadful thing, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest force. Beauty without force hates the understanding because the understanding expects this of her when she cannot do it. But the life of the spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps clear of devastation;—it is the life that endures death and preserves itself in it. Spirit gains its truth only when, in absolute disintegration, it finds itself. It is this power, not as the positive which averts its eyes from the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or false, and then, finished with it, turn away and pass on to something else; spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and by dwelling on it. Dwelling on the negative is the magic force that converts it into Being.—This force is the very thing that we earlier called the subject, the subject which, by giving in its own element Being-there to determinacy, sublates abstract immediacy, i.e. the immediacy which simply is in general, and is thereby genuine substance: the Being or immediacy that does not have mediation outside it but which is this mediation itself.”<sup>355</sup>

The principle at work behind spirit's thinking activity is negativity. It represents the embodiment of consciousness in pure thought and its ability of understanding, i.e. the

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<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.* (§32, 16-7).

breakdown of substance to its constitutive moments, leading to their subsequent negation *qua* sublation (*Aufhebung*) in a higher form. To the extent that it does not posit any content it could be apprehended as a negative form of self-critical rationality. Consequently, its essence consists in a simultaneously creative and destructive appropriation of the contents it encounters, as it proceeds to the negation of a particular content which it concurrently preserves by “holding fast to it”. Death is nothing else than these “dead abstractions of the understanding” that are to be sublated.<sup>356</sup> It follows that we ought not to cringe in the face of death, on the contrary, insofar as our path to self-knowledge presupposes our encounter with him,<sup>357</sup> we must adopt an agonistic stance and rise to the occasion. Although the recognition of death as the constitutive horizon of our finitude and as a necessary mediation in our self-understanding is dissociated from the satisfactions of our natural being, it has a cardinal place in our affirmation as spiritual beings, i.e. thinking subjects, and in the actualization of our essential determinations like freedom and autonomy.

The modality of death endemic to the life of spirit is (self) sacrifice<sup>358</sup> and is represented by the successive concrete negations it performs as it proceeds from one shape of consciousness to the next, from the shape of the world of spirit to that of absolute knowledge. Therefore, it would not be an overstatement to argue that Hegel integrates sacrifice to the epistemological premises of his system: “Spirit gains its truth only when, in absolute disintegration, it finds itself” (§32). This supposition seems to be in agreement with Hegel’s subsequent determination of the true, i.e. the whole movement and process of the *Phenomenology* concluding in absolute knowledge, as “Bacchanalian frenzy” (§47).

Spirit, in a general understanding of its polysemy as the activity mediating the collective “self-reflection of human thought”, undergoes the successive determinations of negativity and the perils they entail almost completely unscathed: “The wounds of the spirit heal, and leave no scars behind” (§669). A problem arises as soon as we adopt the *as subject* perspective, namely

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<sup>356</sup> For an insightful interpretation of the role of death in the *Phenomenology* that proceeds along existential lines, see: Kojève (1973: 114-156).

<sup>357</sup> Hegel (1807/2018: §194, 80).

<sup>358</sup> See “Knowledge is aware not only of itself but also of the negative of itself, or its limit. To know one’s limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself.” *Ibid.* (§807, 320).

that death in its actuality can neither be endured nor preserved by the subject but only in consciousness. As a result, what we are seeking is a metaphor of the twofold essence of negativity, death and reconciliation, in a form that can sustain and represent as faithfully as possible this activity. By virtue of its evident affinities to the preceding exposition of the characteristics of negativity and especially due to the primacy it ascribes to action that most tellingly resembles the dynamic course of spirit, this form is none other than tragedy.<sup>359</sup>

Spirit can be conceived as tragic insofar as by the principle of negativity *qua* death in the agonistic world of the *Phenomenology* it brings about the end of that which has reached its limits within it and thus paves the way for its transition to a new stage. This distinctive appropriation of the tragic corresponds to a pre-eminently reconciliatory interpretation of tragedy wherein death never has the final word, it only is a passage to higher form of understanding.<sup>360</sup> Despite their apparent similarity in their effort to grapple with negativity, a subtle difference emerges if we consider the outcome of their respective processes. In the case of spirit the negation is succeeded by the indifference of reason with regard to the content and the particularities it sublates, whereas in tragedy, it concludes with the emotional response of *catharsis*. The difference might seem ostensibly insignificant yet it underlines the fact that the negation is succeeded by its remembrance, in other words, that no sacrifice took place with disregard to the content it negated. Their difference indicates something exceeding the formal justification of the sacrifice performed and touches upon the presence of suffering in the aftermath of its sublation. The import of this observation will be rendered clear when we enter the domain of history where suffering acquires a palpable and actual shape.

We saw that as we came closer to thinking about negativity it gradually converged with the idea of the tragic leading to a conceptualisation of the life of spirit along the lines of a speculative tragedy. However, it is important not to ignore the primacy of the concept with

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<sup>359</sup> It is important to underline that this is not a necessary conclusion. Tragedy comes to the fore because it can concretely illustrate what would remain in consciousness an abstract schematization. Therefore, although it is wholly plausible to suggest and underwrite the connection between the dialectic, negativity, and tragedy, the necessity of their interrelatedness depends on what we earlier called the interpretational axis of their relationship.

<sup>360</sup> Although the Christian connotations might be evident, hopefully our argumentation in the preceding chapters has demonstrated that Hegel's primary grounds for reconciliation adhere to the requirements of unity, fullness of being, organicity and conceptual mediation, and thus are mainly of Greek and Spinozistic origins.



regard to the manifestations of spirit *qua* tragic. The movement and development of spirit adheres to a logical progression towards higher stages of self-understanding and rationality which comes to a completion in the realm of absolute knowledge. Therefore, the tragic element consists in a distinctive appropriation of tragedy as a model of the unfolding of spirit in the world and not in its emphasis on the inescapability of suffering. Insofar as Hegel's epistemological program in the *Phenomenology* contains an incipient form a disguised philosophy of history and thus both the method of development and the teleological premises of the former are to be found also in the latter, we can surmise that tragedy can also serve as a model in thinking about history.

If we follow Hegel's line of thinking and apprehend the whole history of philosophy as a disclosing development in the self-understanding of spirit which eventually reaches its absolute perspective in the position of absolute knowledge, and bearing in mind that only by virtue of its end can we make sense of its beginning, we are bound to concur with him that the moving and governing principle of history is reason.<sup>361</sup> It is thus no wonder that one of the few surviving materials on the philosophy of history written by his own hand, namely the *Introduction* of 1830 to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, is subtitled "Reason in History". World history according to Hegel consists in the progressive self-actualization of absolute spirit in the process of attaining absolute self-knowledge.<sup>362</sup> The moving principle of this process is reason and the substance of its self-actualization, i.e. its concrete manifestation, is freedom.<sup>363</sup> The unmistakable similarity between the movements of spirit and history is due to the underlying historicism that we find in his epistemology, as well as in the opposite appropriation, in his act of superimposing the epistemological premises of his system to history.

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<sup>361</sup> In a manner similar to that of the epistemological premise of the *Phenomenology* that the true is disclosed and attained only retrospectively, i.e. after spirit has traversed its long road to the absolute, Hegel remarks with regard to the movement of spirit in history: "The concept of the spirit involves a return upon itself, whereby it makes itself its own object; progress, therefore, is not an indeterminate advance ad infinitum, for it has a definite aim—namely that of returning upon itself. Thus, it also involves a kind of cyclic movement as the spirit attempts to discover itself." (1975/1830: 149).

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.* (62-5).

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.* (55).

The answer to the question regarding the possibility of a tragic understanding of history draws its conclusions from the latter ascertainment.

Before examining the aforementioned question we should note that despite Hegel's epistemological appropriation of history and the consequences ensuing from this move, he is cautious to stress the fact that the determinations of progress and rationality underlying the historical movement are neither universal nor of perennial potency.<sup>364</sup> It follows that in the course of history we are not witnessing a linear narrative of the omnipotence of reason, but on the contrary, it is comprised as a mosaic of seemingly unrelated patterns, the inner logic of which can only be rendered clear if we adopt the unifying perspective of reason. This is what distinguishes the philosophical perspective of history from all the other ways we look upon history.<sup>365</sup>

Notwithstanding his reservations, his understanding of absolute spirit *qua* the concept of history, as the relationship between universality and particularity, reveals an evident prioritisation of the former moment as an embodiment of the essential determinations of the overarching perspective of the absolute spirit.<sup>366</sup>

Hegel's portrait of world history reflects the sincere yet uncompromisingly arrogant perspective of reason as it examines the actualization of the dictates of absolute spirit.<sup>367</sup> These do not preclude the possibility of evil and suffering in history, they only render them tangential to its universal purpose of a reconciling knowledge.<sup>368</sup> The philosophy of history is not a consolation in the face of the negative but rather an understanding of its necessity.<sup>369</sup> The discrimination of the particular in the unfolding of history is evidenced as by the fact that it is

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<sup>364</sup> This is evident in his analysis of the asynchronous development of different societies with regard to freedom, Hegel (1823-6/2011: 121-8).

<sup>365</sup> Hegel (1975/1830: 11-24).

<sup>366</sup> See: "The right of the world spirit transcends all particular rights; it shares in the latter itself, but only to a limited extent, for although these lesser rights may partake of its substance, they are at the same time fraught with particularity." *Ibid.* (92).

<sup>367</sup> See: "For in world history, the sole authority is the right of the absolute spirit, and the only relations which matter are those in which a higher spiritual principle asserts itself." *Ibid.* (124).

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.* (43).

<sup>369</sup> See: "The particular has its own interests in world history; it is of a finite nature, and as such, it must perish." *Ibid.* (89).

perceived as merely incidental and contingent suffering and restricted to the domain of feeling, to a contemplative state of sadness that dissipates as soon the overall rational theodicy is laid bare.<sup>370</sup> The caption of the “ruins of excellence” of world history reads: *pereat mundus, fiat philosophia*. Before the unquestionable right of absolute spirit to impose its universal demands upon people and individuals,<sup>371</sup> in a manner that outwardly reflects the instrumentality of reason in its historical manifestation,<sup>372</sup> “the slaughter bench” of history is reduced to the status of collateral damage.<sup>373</sup> What is perhaps the most disturbing and contradictory moment in Hegel’s philosophy of history is the absence of self-reflection in the moment of the negative, put differently, the sublation of the particular takes place in total disregard to its self-worth, adhering to a form of immediacy notably absent from Hegelian dialectics:

“We are dealing here with the category of the negative, as already mentioned, and we cannot fail to notice how all that is finest and noblest in the history of the world is immolated upon its altar. Reason *cannot stop to consider* the injuries sustained by single individuals, for particular ends are submerged in the universal end.”<sup>374</sup>

The Hegelian counter-argument is that the particularity of their purposes is both explicitly extraneous and implicitly subservient to the goals of world history via the cunning of reason, yet one cannot but ponder on the question of the unassailability of reason. The justification of the sacrifice of the people and individuals rests on the precarious hypothesis of the validity of his epistemological premises. Hegel’s line of thinking reveals its inherent limits as a form of identity thinking inasmuch as in the face of suffering in history the only reconciling knowledge it can provide is the conceptual necessity of what it perceives as the negativity of the particular, transforming thus the actuality of the experience of suffering to a demand of reason. It is neither

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<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.* (32)

<sup>371</sup> Hegel reiterates through the lectures the sovereignty of (absolute) spirit in history, see: *Ibid.* (92, 124, 198).

<sup>372</sup> See: “For it is not the universal Idea which enters into opposition, conflict, and danger; it keeps itself in the background, untouched and unharmed, and *sends forth* the particular interests of passion to fight and wear themselves out in its stead.” *Ibid.* (89, emphasis added).

<sup>373</sup> Hegel (1823-6/2011: 35).

<sup>374</sup> Hegel (1975/1830: 43).

the scarcity of the blank pages of happiness in the course of history,<sup>375</sup> nor the perennial presence of the negative, which potentially render Hegel's philosophy of history tragic, but the unreflective sublation which amounts to the unmediatedness of the moment of particularity.

Tragedy by virtue of recognizing the presence of the negative and responding to its call most dramatically encapsulates the experience of spirit in its progress through the conflictual territory of world history. Respectively, the aesthetisation of history in the form of tragedy along Hegelian lines entails a reconciliatory reading of the latter according to which suffering is nothing more but a vanishing moment in the dialectic of spirit. However, it is immediately evident that if we adopt the Hegelian variation of the tragic we are reversing the priority of suffering in its relation to its *telos*. In other words, irrespectively as to whether a specific tragedy ends in reconciliation or not, it usually pays its dues – *it stops to consider* – the experience of the negative. By thinking about history in speculative terms of a rational theodicy we are at once distancing ourselves from the real presence of the negative. To aestheticize the disjunction between the moments of universality and particularity amounts to the doubling of this distance. The grandeur of the Hegelian tragic is acquired at the expense of its essentiality. It maintains a general applicability only retrospectively and strictly in the domain of the speculative, while its real presence is safely confined to the irrevocable past. Yet this distant past underwrites the fragility of the present. Hegel remarked that while the Persian Wars were raging the “the interest of the World's History hung trembling in the balance”,<sup>376</sup> thereby diagnosing that even within a rational theodicy there are world-defining moments of crisis. However, in the face of the atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the nebulous future lying ahead, the presence of the negative prohibits its assimilation to Hegel's conception of tragedy; it is all too real and near to be sublated. Respectively, disregarding it in the consolation of the premise that the balance of the world will always fall to the side of reason is at the very least promiscuous and arrogantly naïve towards the potential turns of history; unfortunately and not rarely, as is the case, we have witnessed the opposite.

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<sup>375</sup> Hegel (1823-6/2011: 41).

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.* (276).

Hegel's influence on thinking about tragedy in terms of oppositions cannot be understated. Even among classicists who strongly argued against the speculative and generalising interpretations of tragedy like Jean-Pierre Vernant or among others who used the conceptual apparatus of critical theory in their approach to Greek tragedy like Charles Segal, Hegelian themes are omnipresent. Furthermore, despite predetermining the resolution of the dialectic between negativity and universality in the reconciliation of the former with the latter, his implicit suggestion of apprehending the tragic as moment of negativity retains utmost importance for future interpretations and conceptualisations of tragedy. Thinking against Hegel through him, the tragic as a speculative moment manages to salvage the remembrance of the negative in spirit's *Er-innerung* (recollection) by virtue of mediating the universal and the particular and thus preserves the potentiality of the negative and the particular against forms of universality that become increasingly conceptually monolithic and politically repressive. It thus retains, against all odds, an important theoretical and practical import to modernity's self-understanding in perilous times by suggesting an appropriation of suffering in the persistence of negativity.

## Chapter IV. Friedrich Hölderlin

### Introduction

In less than two decades (1787-1805) Hölderlin accomplished more than most writers and thinkers, if not all, could aspire to do in a lifetime.<sup>377</sup> As a poet and translator he represents the summit of the possibilities of German lyric and the inaugurator of the modern lineage of German poetry that runs from him to George, Rilke, and Celan. As a philosopher he played a cardinal role in the formation of absolute idealism and anticipated conceptual developments that would take a definitive form only much later in the works of his fellow *Tübinger Stiftler*.<sup>378</sup> Notwithstanding the duality of his creative output, he considered himself first and foremost a poet and despite the fundamental significance he ascribes to philosophy in the education of

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<sup>377</sup> This was the period that Hölderlin was at the peak of his creative powers. In September of 1806 he was admitted to a mental clinic in Tübingen. A few months later he was taken in by Ernst Zimmer, a carpenter by trade, with whom he lived the remaining thirty-six years of his life in a state of obvious mental instability, almost completely abandoned by both friends and family.

<sup>378</sup> The positive appreciation of his philosophical work has neither been unequivocal nor unanimous. The turning point was the discovery of the philosophical fragment *Urtheil und Seyn* (1795) in 1960 and its publication the following year, and Dieter Henrich's concurrent *Konstellationsforschung* project that revived interest in the lesser figures of German idealism. Manfred Frank's research can be seen as a continuation of the same line of thinking, especially his work on early German romanticism (1997). The evaluation of Hölderlin's contribution to the development of German idealism is usually assessed in relation to his influence on Schelling and Hegel between 1791 and 1800; for an overall overview see: Henrich (1997: 13-140), on Hölderlin and Hegel, see: Jamme (1986: 359-377), on Hölderlin and Schelling, see: Frank (1995: 61-70).

man, he personally thought of it as a sanctuary for his fragile spirit and a sober objective force wherein he could soothe his artistic flame.<sup>379</sup>

It is at the crossroads of philosophy and poetry that the question of tragedy will arise for Hölderlin. Indeed, both inhibit his thought in such a way that to disentangle them from each other would cancel the inner dialectic of his eccentric thinking. One can make sense of this Gordian knot if he apprehends it as a double paradox. On the one hand, although his theoretical meditations take their cue from his contemporaneous philosophical constellation which consists primarily of Kant, Schiller, and Fichte, and to a lesser extent of Niethammer, Sinclair, and Reinhold, his response to the issues they raise takes the form of a conceptual appropriation of themes he has already touched upon in his poetry; a translation of the aesthetic in philosophical idiom. On the other hand, we come across the odd observation that although tragedy is indigenous to his vocation as a poet, the road to it is revealed to him in the elucidations of speculative thought. In other words, first he encounters elements of the tragic in his theoretical endeavours, and then, when he eventually engages with tragedy in the autumn of 1798, he does so after having undergone a “tragic education”. This process is most evident in and partly responsible for, the three uncompleted drafts of his *Empedokles* (1798-9), the idiomatic translations of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the *Antigone* (1803-4), and the *Remarks* that accompanied the translations of the two Sophoclean tragedies.

It follows that the question of tragedy implicitly permeates the totality of his *oeuvre*. Provided its immanent presence in his thought, for the sake of clarity and in order to demonstrate the inner continuity of his reasoning, the present chapter is divided into three subsections. In the first I examine the philosophical background that forms the conceptual apparatus of the tragic wherein he establishes the primacy of the aesthetic against philosophy. Correspondingly, I trace the gradual development of notions that will eventually become relevant to our investigation as they acquire significantly tragic undertones. In this context, I

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<sup>379</sup> On the absolute importance of philosophy, see his letter to his brother, October 13, 1796 (*KSA*, 6: 234-6). On his preference of poetry to philosophy, see his letter to Neuffer, November 12, 1798 (*KSA*, 6: 310-3). All references to Hölderlin's works are by volume and page number to his *Sämtliche Werke: Kleine Stuttgarter Ausgabe in 6 Bänden* (*KSA*), ed. by Friedrich Beißner (Berlin: Cotta, 1944-1962), while their respective translations are quoted from Pfau (1988) or Adler and Louth (2009) followed by page number, except where stated.

consider his novel *Hyperion* (1792-96)<sup>380</sup> along with some key philosophical texts such as *Urtheil und Seyn* (1795).<sup>381</sup> In the second, I explore his unfinished drama, *Der Tod des Empedokles* and his poetological works up to 1800. The date is not arbitrarily chosen as it demarcates the beginning of the period of his late hymns, the end of his affair with Susette Gontard which had devastating effects on him, and the transition from an inchoate philosophy of tragedy to the poetics of the tragic. In the third and last subsection I examine the all-important letter to his friend Casimir Böhlendorf (1801) which sets the tone for our subsequent inquiry into the *Remarks on Oedipus and Antigone* (1803-4); the poems of his late period are also brought in when they can elucidate the often cryptic and elusive meaning of the texts. Here, the emphasis shifts from the abstract conceptualisation of the tragic to its concrete instantiation in language as it discloses to us its immanent structure of temporality, namely finitude, proposing a different understanding of our being in the world according to a tragicopoetical dwelling.<sup>382</sup>

### **I. Philosophical background: The eccentric path to tragedy**

During the period between 1793 and 1800 Hölderlin had his eyes fixed on the latest philosophical developments in Germany. He immediately saw the possibilities opened up by Kant's third *Critique* (1790)<sup>383</sup> and Schiller's aesthetisation of the Kantian limits of knowledge in the *Kallias Briefe* (1793), in his claim that beauty is freedom in appearance.<sup>384</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>380</sup> *Hyperion* was completed around May of 1796 but was eventually published in two volumes in 1797 and 1799.

<sup>381</sup> I am thus in agreement with Dilthey's understanding of *Hyperion* as a philosophical novel (1985: 350) and Beiser's respective characterization of *Empedokles* as a philosophical drama (2002: 377).

<sup>382</sup> My reading of Hölderlin's implicit suggestion for a poetical dwelling is heavily indebted to Heidegger's university lectures on Hölderlin collected in *Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung* (1937) and *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (1944), and his subsequent lectures *Wozu Dichter?* (1946) and *Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch* (1951).

<sup>383</sup> On the influence of Kant's third *Critique* on young Hölderlin, see: Ribugent (2018: 329-32).

<sup>384</sup> Insofar Schiller ascribed to beauty a regulative status he remained within the Kantian limits. This is the most common line of interpretation of his move, see: Beiser (2005: 63). In a letter to Neuffer on October 1794, he explicitly criticises Schiller for stopping too soon and states his intent to proceed further: "though he has ventured a step less beyond the Kantian borderline than he should have done in my opinion. Don't smile! I may be wrong; but I've checked, and checked again and again at the cost of much effort." (KSA, 6: 150; 2009: 72). It is important to bear in mind that Hölderlin's double check alludes to his allegiance, for the time being, to the Kantian limits of knowledge. This will prove to be important later on when we examine his appropriation of the notion of intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*).



he attended and was deeply influenced by Fichte's Jena lectures (1794-5)<sup>385</sup> which resulted in the first version of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, while at the same time he was somewhat of a peripheral figure in Niethammer's circle.<sup>386</sup> Notwithstanding, Hölderlin's restless spirit prevented him from compromising with any of the positions expounded by the aforementioned theorists. His thinking was a constant work in progress that collected the facets of each theory it found germane to its interests and discarded the broader epistemological apparatus in which they were elaborated. This was partly due to the fact that already by late 1794 he had reached the conclusion that the sphere of the aesthetic had primacy over philosophy and the latter's systematic demands; and additionally, because his creative energies between 1792 and the first half of 1796 were directed to the completion of his novel *Hyperion, or the hermit in Greece*. Before we turn our focus there and try to extract the underlying philosophical themes that govern the novel let us first examine how within a few months he managed to break faith with both Kant and Fichte and see how this move brings him one step closer, albeit with many more to come, to the aesthetic and thus tragic (?) perspective.

The whole process took place between October 1794 and May 1795 and consists of three interrelated moments: i) the need to go beyond the Kantian epistemological limits of knowledge ii) his criticism of Fichte's absolute ego iii) the primacy of being (*Seyn*) over thought. The first is acknowledged in a letter to Neuffer dated October 10, 1794, where he is adamant that we ought to proceed beyond Schiller's regulative understanding of beauty, tacitly suggesting that we ought to confer it with constitutive status. This can be surmised from what he says but he is also quick to point out that he has thought it, i.e. the consequences of his suggestion, over and over again.<sup>387</sup> In fact, when reflecting back to these months (preceding April 1795), he seems sceptical and unsure on how to overcome the Kantian perspective without relapsing into dogmatic metaphysics: "At the beginning of the winter, before I had

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<sup>385</sup> See: "Fichte's new philosophy now absorbs me entirely. I go to his lectures and nobody else's." (KSA, 6: 155; 2009: 94).

<sup>386</sup> See his letter to Neuffer, November 1794 (KSA, 6: 151-3). On Niethammer's circle, see: Ameriks (2000: 64-6) and on its influence on Hölderlin, see: Henrich (1991: 137-170); Niethammer's influence is recognised in his letters to Schiller and Niethammer (KSA, 6: 196-7, 218-20), and on his pivotal role in presenting Reinhold's insights to Hölderlin and thus contributing to the latter's critique of Fichte, see: Frank: (2004: 97-102).

<sup>387</sup> (KSA, 6: 150; 2009: 72).

worked my way into it, the whole thing sometimes gave me a bit of a headache, especially as my study of Kant's philosophy had given me the habit of testing everything before accepting it."<sup>388</sup> Indeed, this first moment of the whole process is not yet actualised, it only takes the form of a general declaration regarding the orientation of his thought. The second moment is hinted in his letter to Hegel, dated January 26, 1795, where he holds Fichte accountable for dogmatism. Here we have condensed his criticism of Fichte's absolute ego, which, in Hölderlin's view, amounts to the subjectification of Spinoza's substance insofar as the ego in its absolute standing and positing remains a consciousness that has no object and thus misses the requirement of reflectivity, the ability to posit something outside itself as an object, rendering his ego devoid of content and thus a non-consciousness. Notwithstanding his negative tone, he remains undecided towards the "reciprocal determination of the "I" (ego) and the "Non-I" (non-ego)," and his "idea of striving";<sup>389</sup> later we shall see that he actually makes use of both of these Fichtean themes. He will bring the objections he raised in his letter to Hegel into his counter-argument to Fichte's absolute ego in the short text, yet profoundly influential for the course of absolute idealism, of *Urtheil und Seyn* (1795).<sup>390</sup>

In the fragment *Hermokrates an Cephalus* (1795), written only a few months before *Urtheil und Seyn*, we are offered a contextualisation of Hölderlin's stratagem. Hölderlin gives to the platonic Hermokrates Niethammer's voice, as he expounds his critique of Fichte's foundationalism. This position was prevalent among Reinhold's students and had found advocates in Niethammer's circle. The essay was supposed to be published in Niethammer's *Philosophisches Journal* but remained incomplete. Hölderlin via Niethammer and Reinhold

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<sup>388</sup> (KSA: 6: 169; 2009: 103).

<sup>389</sup> (KSA: 6: 169).

<sup>390</sup> The text was given the provisional title *Urtheil und Seyn* (Judgment and Being) by the editor of the Stuttgart Edition of Hölderlin's *Sämtliche Werke* Friedrich Beißner. Subsequent editors, including Sattler of the *Frankfurter Hölderlin-Ausgabe* (1975-2008) and Schmidt (1992-3), have proceeded to an emendation of Beißner's sequence of the fragments comprising the text, from Judgment-Modality-Being to Being-Judgment-Modality. Although I understand and agree with the reasoning behind the emendation as it underlines Hölderlin's interpretation of the priority of being over judgment, in the text I retain Beißner's original title in order not to confuse the reader. A short summary of the editorial adventures of the text along with a concise presentation of its argument is provided by Frank (2004: 102-8). Henrich's seminal *Der Grund im Bewußtsein: Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794-1795)* published in 1992, remains the most elaborate interpretation of Hölderlin's thinking.

flatly rejects the aspirations of *Reflexionsphilosophie* and discards the possibility for a science of knowledge, i.e. a system of knowledge, as mere “scientific quietism”.<sup>391</sup> The conclusions of the fragment elucidate Hölderlin’s intentions that not only did he aspire to go beyond the Kantian/Fichteian limits of knowledge but he also believed that their ideal of knowledge and its epistemological premises were nothing more than an illusory belief in the infallibility of reason.

*Urtheil und Seyn* was written around April or May of 1795. There Hölderlin reiterates his critique of Fichte’s absolute ego along the lines of his letter to Hegel but now he complements his criticism with his own formulation of the absolute. His argument unfolds as follows: i) to speak of a subject (self-consciousness) entails a relationship between consciousness and an object ii) this relationship presupposes the possibility of consciousness and the object, which, according to Hölderlin, is given through the act of an original separation; he names this act *Urtheil* (Judgment) and derives it etymologically from the word *Ur-Teilung* that connotes the meaning original (*Ur-*) partition (*Teilung*, from *Teil* which means part) iii) to the extent that the perspective of self-consciousness cannot transcend the ground of its original separation, it cannot give an account of itself, leading us to surmise that there must be something preceding and establishing the act of judgment iv) the act of original separation (judgment) implies an original ground where subject (consciousness) and object were initially undifferentiated and united; Hölderlin will find this required *Urgrund* in what he calls Being v) however, insofar as we remain within the perspective of self-consciousness we have no access to this original union; in other words, the conceptual knowledge deriving from the act of judgment is unable to account for the form of knowledge governing the preceding stage, thus, Hölderlin is led to the conclusion that the initial undifferentiated union of subject and object is given only in a different form of knowledge, in intellectual intuition.<sup>392</sup>

As the overall implications of *Urtheil und Seyn* go far beyond the scope of our research, I will only state some preliminary conclusions that we can draw from the text. First, Hölderlin underlines the fact that although he describes his absolute (Being) ostensibly in terms of

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<sup>391</sup> (KSA, 4: 222).

<sup>392</sup> (KSA, 4: 226).

identity we should be careful not to apprehend it at such, on the contrary, inasmuch as it is unconditioned, undifferentiated, and exists in a state wherein separation and opposition are notably absent, “Being must not be confused with identity.”<sup>393</sup> He stresses this fact because the underlying intention of the text was to overcome all forms of dualisms that Kant and his immediate interlocutors had bestowed upon the post-Kantian generation.

The same need had precipitated Hölderlin’s turn to Spinoza via Jacobi. In fact, the delineation of the absolute as pure union, i.e. as simple and unmediated, owes much to the latter’s apprehension of the former’s immanent ensoph as pure and simple.<sup>394</sup> While at Tübingen, Hölderlin along with his friends, Hegel and Schelling, had been engulfed by the reverberations of the pantheism controversy that took place in the mid 1780’s.<sup>395</sup> Lessing’s *hen kai pan*, a catch-phrase supposedly connoting the *summum bonum* of Spinoza’s philosophy, had been somewhat of rallying-cry for all three of them. Notwithstanding, Hölderlin’s allegiance to Spinoza is tactical and not uncritical and it would be a severe misconception to interpret his move as a return to Spinozistic metaphysics. For Hölderlin, Spinoza and Fichte represent two extremes that are equally dogmatic; in the case of the Dutch philosopher all reality is enclosed in the object qua substance, whereas in the other, it is wholly posited by the subject. In contrast to both of these accounts, Hölderlin’s absolute is simultaneously subjective and objective without being neither. In *Urtheil und Seyn* he ascribes logical precedence and ontological priority to being over thought but at the same time through a contestable deduction of the former he tries to account for the emergence of the latter. However, we are never offered a hint as to why and how this original separation occurs nor does he dwell on the epistemological conditions surrounding self-consciousness’ *cogito*. Returning to the question regarding his Spinozistic allegiances, it is easy to understand his natural affinity for Spinoza’s cosmos if one thinks of the implications of Fichte’s absolute ego in his conception of nature. It should suffice to underline that insofar as the whole of reality is given in the absolute ego’s self-

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<sup>393</sup> (KSA, 4: 226; 1988: 37).

<sup>394</sup> The point is raised by Beiser (2002: 389) who is following Henrich (1992: 48-92).

<sup>395</sup> During late 1790 and 1791 Hölderlin kept notes on Jacobi’s *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), see: (KSA, 4: 216-9).

positing, nature is stripped of its autonomy and degraded to an otherness that must be sublated into the ego's infinite striving. A corollary of his position was that natural inclinations and passions were also subject to the same fate.<sup>396</sup> Consequently, the turn to Spinoza should be apprehended as a distancing from Fichte's instrumental conception of nature and sensibility as a means to moral ends. However, this does not imply that he identified with the abstract and mechanistic Spinozistic universe. It was its underlying conditions to which Hölderlin was drawn, its unity and primordial harmony; an unpopulated, lost paradise.

The second conclusion pertinent to our investigation is Hölderlin's postulation of Being in intellectual intuition. Hölderlin had already expressed his intention to venture beyond Schiller's perspective and in a letter to Schiller dated, September 4, 1795, he further clarifies his thoughts:

“Dissatisfaction with myself and my circumstances has driven me into the realm of the abstract. I am attempting to work out for myself the idea of an infinite progress in philosophy by showing that the unremitting demand that must be made of any system, the union of subject and object in an absolute... *I* or whatever one wants to call it, *though possible aesthetically*, in an act of intellectual intuition, is theoretically possible *only* through endless approximation.”<sup>397</sup>

Hölderlin, is again cautious to underline that although in intellectual intuition qua aesthetic intuition we gain insight to the absolute he does not confer to the status of this insight constitutive, i.e. theoretical, validity. The actual knowledge of the absolute remains an act of perpetual striving. However, irrespectively of our knowledge of the absolute, given its logical and ontological priority over thought, and most importantly because of its aesthetic nuances, what is of paramount importance is the fact that the aesthetic as an image of being-in-unity is elevated to a guiding sign for discursive thought in its constant striving for the recuperation of

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<sup>396</sup> Thus we read in a lecture delivered in Jena during the summer of 1793 and later published under *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (1794) “The skill in question is in part the skill to *suppress* and *eradicate* those erroneous inclinations which originate in us prior to the awakening of our reason and the sense of our own spontaneity, and in part it is the skill to modify and alter external things in accordance with our concepts. The acquisition of this skill is called “culture”, Fichte (1794/1993: 150, emphasis added).

<sup>397</sup> (KSA, 6: 196-7; 2009: 133, emphasis added).

the irretrievable primordial unity. What Hölderlin is implying is nothing else than that behind our speculative drive for unity lies our unfulfilled longing for beauty. He will take the last step towards that direction in a letter to Niethammer during the winter of 1796:

“In the philosophical letters, I want to discover the principle which explains to me the divisions in which we think and exist, yet which is also capable of dispelling the conflict between subject and object, between our self and the world, yes, also between reason and revelation, *theoretically*, in intellectual intuition, *without our practical reason having to come to our aid*. For this we need an aesthetic sense, and I will call my philosophical letters “New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man.” Also, I will move in [these letters] from philosophy to poetry and religion.”<sup>398</sup>

With this move Hölderlin brings full circle the twofold objective we discerned earlier, namely, to take a step beyond (and above) *Reflexionsphilosophie* and establish the priority of aesthetic sense over discursive reason. Spinoza’s paradise was finally populated, and its name was beauty.<sup>399</sup> He now ascribes theoretical validity to the aesthetic insight and most evidently, transgresses the Kantian limits of knowledge. Hölderlin’s plans for a post-Schillerian account of beauty remained unfulfilled as he never elaborated further on its premises. Nonetheless, he

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<sup>398</sup> (KSA, 6: 219; 1988: 131-2).

<sup>399</sup> Hölderlin’s suggestions echoes Kant’s intellectual interest in the beauty of nature and his connection between natural teleology and aesthetics. Cf. “But since it also interests reason that the ideas (for which it produces an immediate interest in the moral feeling) also have objective reality, i.e., that nature should at least show some trace or give a sign that it contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction that is independent of all interest (which we recognize *a priori* as a law valid for everyone, without being able to ground this on proofs), reason must take an interest in every manifestation in nature of a correspondence similar to this; consequently the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it [...] It will be said that this explanation of aesthetic judgments in terms of their affinity with moral feeling looks much too studied to be taken as the true interpretation of the cipher by means of which nature figuratively speaks to us in its beautiful forms. But, first, this immediate interest in the beautiful in nature is not actually common, but belongs only to those whose thinking is either already trained to the good or especially receptive to such training; and then, even without clear, subtle, and deliberate reflection, the analogy between the pure judgment of taste, which, without depending on any sort of interest, allows a pleasure to be felt and at the same time to be represented *a priori* as proper for mankind in general, and the moral judgment, which does the same thing on the basis of concepts, leads to an equally immediate interest in the object of the former as in that of the latter – only the former is a free interest, the latter one grounded on objective laws.” (1790/2000: 180).

never refuted the metaphysical and ontological status of beauty and the disclosing capabilities of art. This is important to remember as his later remarks on poetry put forward a view of language according to which it should not be apprehended as producing mere metaphors or symbols of the true but is charged with the task of revealing us with an essential truth about being. Now, in order to get a further understanding of his Platonic reinterpretation of Spinoza<sup>400</sup> and thus of beauty qua Being, we ought to turn our focus on his novel, *Hyperion, or the hermit in Greece*.

Hölderlin began working on *Hyperion* in 1792 while still a student in the *Tübinger Stift* and continued doing so for the next four consecutive years until mid-1796. During these years the various drafts he produced most tellingly reflect his intellectual development as he translated his philosophical influences into the work.<sup>401</sup> The novel explores the themes of beauty, love, joy, and fullness of being, in their juxtaposition with the ones of nostalgia, separation, sorrow, and death, as they come together in an ambitious narrative that seeks to reflect upon the conditions which confer meaning upon life.

The novel could be described as standing between a *Bildungsroman* and a *memoir*. It takes the form of a series of letters to his dear friend Bellarmin wherein he describes the “eccentric course” of his life as a process of self-development. The setting of the dramatic time is an island somewhere at the west coast of the Aegean Sea, at the shores of which Hyperion now stands and reminisces. Central episodes of the narrative are his inextinguishable love for Diotima, his involvement in the 1770’s uprising of the Greeks with the help of the Russians against the Turks, his calling as political and educational reformer, and lastly, his idealisation of the Greeks and the state of unity and harmony in which they lived. However, in the opening of the work most of the significant events of his life have already taken place; he has returned from Germany utterly disillusioned with its cultural and political life, his love, Diotima, lies dead, and the revolt of the Greeks against the Turks has ended in catastrophe. The feelings of social

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<sup>400</sup> The plan for his *New Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* was initially conceived in autumn of 1794. He writes to Neuffer: “Perhaps I’ll be able to send you an essay on aesthetic ideas; as it can be considered a commentary on Plato’s *Phaedrus*” (KSA, 6: 149; 2009: 88).

<sup>401</sup> See Nauen’s insightful parallel reading between the drafts and the intellectual and political developments which preoccupied Hölderlin during those years (1971: 50-68).

estrangement and spiritual isolation are only amplified by the surrounding desolate landscape of the island as he wonders among the ruins of what might have been a glorious city in ancient Greek times. He recalls his early days of blissful happiness in the arms of nature and despises everything that divides and deepens the schism between man and nature. His bitterness is further heightened by the false hopes of his revolutionary aspirations as blind violence once again prevailed against reason. However, he still retains his hope; even if Diotima is gone, the almost transcendent moments he shared with her in love were more than enough to prove to him that life is worth living. Having traversed this long road of experience Hyperion's hopes now lie with the future and the possibility that through his role as an educator he might be able to instill his vision of the world to the people.

As the novel touches upon a multiplicity of themes and issues I will restrict our investigation to the ones of beauty and unity as they are central to all drafts and will also form our conceptual bridge to the next stage of Hölderlin's thought. Although in the course of the novel the Greeks cast an almost overwhelming shadow over Hyperion, especially in the early drafts, it should be noted that he is most properly a child of his own time.<sup>402</sup> Hölderlin's novel should be apprehended in the same manner that we understood Schiller's retreat to the aesthetic, that is, as a step backwards in order to salvage and safeguard the possibility of freedom in the face of the precarious and possibly threatening post-revolutionary landscape. An exception to Hölderlin's dynamic understanding of man's role amidst historical turbulence can be found in the so called *Thalia-Fragment*, published by Schiller in his *Neuer Thalia* in November 1794, where Hölderlin, profoundly disenchanted with the developments in France, has Hyperion reject any form of activity that threatens to subvert our sense of unity with the world (*hen kai pan*). As a result, Hyperion's stance seems to advocate a rather stoic perseverance in passivity as he remains cut off from a genuine, i.e. dialectic, relationship with the world. It follows that an actual sense of unity is notably absent as it takes a distorted solipsistic form.

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<sup>402</sup> An exception to this is the so called *Thalia-Fragment*, published by Schiller in his *Neuer Thalia* in November 1794, where Hölderlin, profoundly disenchanted with the developments in France, rejects any form activity and life that threatens to subvert our sense of unity with the world (*hen kai pan*). The outcome of his thesis is a rather stoic perseverance in passivity.



Moving on to the next draft entitled *Hyperion's Jugend* (Hyperion's Youth) we immediately come across a change of spirit in Hyperion. Hölderlin wrote this version after having attended Fichte's Jena lectures and creatively incorporates his teaching of the reciprocal determination between subject and object, freedom and nature, as he attempts to reconcile the two opposites. Here, Hyperion has learned the lesson of intersubjectivity and tries to find a balance between the Fichtean notion of self-development and the Spinozistic unity with nature. Hölderlin had yet to reach the standpoint of *Urtheil und Seyn* and thus Hyperion is torn between these two extremes. Consequently, unable to find consolation in an harmonious belonging in the world, Hyperion turns his eyes to the past lamenting the irretrievable moment of ancient Greece. Hyperion's vacillation will come to an end when he understands that the answer does not lie with one of them but in their combination. Therefore, in the *Preface* to the final version written around late summer of 1795, after having written *Urtheil und Seyn*, we read:

“He who merely inhales the scent of my plant does not know it, and he who plucks it merely in order to learn from it does not know it either. The resolution of dissonances in a particular character is neither for mere reflection nor for empty pleasure.”<sup>403</sup>

In the earlier fragments Hyperion found in love a momentarily feeling of a fullness of being that was most notably absent from the fragmented world of his present. The fleeting nature of this unity made him revolt against the reality of his condition and led him either to nostalgia or to outright despair. Now Hyperion's journey of self-development seems to approximate a much firmer perspective of the world. We can attest to this if we follow the contours of beauty in the text. He begins by acknowledging that behind all worldly phenomena, the one and all (*hen kai pan*), is beauty which he later identifies with nature while describing her in terms of the absolute, as she “suffers no loss as she suffers no addition.”<sup>404</sup> He then presents us with an image

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<sup>403</sup> (KSA, 3: 5; 1990: 1).

<sup>404</sup> (KSA, 3: 32; 1990: 26)

of man's original separation from nature and the process of his self-development in the endless striving for unity:

“Men began and grew from the happiness of the plant, grew until they ripened; from that time on they have been in ceaseless ferment, inwardly and outwardly, until now mankind lies there like a Chaos, utterly disintegrated, so that all who can still feel and see are dizzied; but Beauty forsakes the life of men, it flees upward into Spirit; the Ideal becomes what Nature was, and even though the tree is dried out and weatherworn below, a fresh crown has still sprung from it and flourishes green in the sunlight as the trunk did once in days of youth; the Ideal is what Nature was.”<sup>405</sup>

He locates the fulfilment of this endless striving in love. Yet now, contrary to the earlier drafts, love is not apprehended as a departure from the in-the-world dwelling into a state of pure blissfulness but involves a counter-action, a resistance:

“The unchecked power struggles impatiently against its fetters, and the spirit longs to return to the unclouded aether. But there is indeed something in us that prefers to keep the chains; for were the divine within us not constrained by any *resistance*, we would feel neither ourselves nor others.”<sup>406</sup>

This seemingly unimportant change in the determination of the divine (absolute) qua love alters drastically our understanding of Hölderlin's absolute. Whereas up to now it was conceived as simple and undifferentiated, by positing a moment of negativity within it, it immediately takes the form of unity in difference. This becomes clear when he explicitly describes it along Heraclitean lines:

“I am close upon them,” I said. “The great saying, the *εν διαφέρον εαυτώ* (the one differentiated in itself) of Heraclitus, could be found only by a Greek, for it is the very being of Beauty, and before that was found there was no philosophy.”<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> (KSA, 3: 55; 1990: 51).

<sup>406</sup> (KSA, 3: 66; 1990: 62, emphasis added).

<sup>407</sup> (KSA, 3: 70; 1990: 67).

The contradictions permeating our worldly existence are no longer regarded as obstacles to our progressive union with the absolute. Insofar as the ontological structure of the world involves differentiation, what we earlier perceived as the inherent insurmountable negativity of the world is now rendered necessary and logical in our striving and consists of meaningful moments. The absolute division between man and nature is now reconciled in a worldview that is essentially agonistic. It seems that we are approximating the transition to the world of tragedy. Towards the end of the work Diotima's words echo this sentiment by offering an intimation of *Empedokles'* fate:

“Go wherever you think it worth going to yield up your soul. The world must yet have one battlefield, one place of sacrifice, where you can free yourself. It would be a shame if all these goodly powers but vanished like a dream. But however you find your end, you return to the gods, return into the sacred, free, youthful life of Nature, whence you came, and that is your desire as it is mine.”<sup>408</sup>

Interestingly enough, Hyperion's dubious last words are open to such an interpretation:

“The arteries separate and return to the heart and all is one eternal glowing life.’  
So I thought. More soon.”<sup>409</sup>

Hyperion reiterates one the basic themes underwriting the novel, namely that in the end of our struggles we return to the warming and eternal embrace of nature. Yet the cryptic phrase, “So I thought. More soon.” reflects an uncertainty regarding the last horizon of our existence and a conviction that the last word on the matter had not been said.

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<sup>408</sup> (KSA, 3: 112; 1990: 109).

<sup>409</sup> (KSA, 3: 136; 1990: 133).

## Epilogue

The meditations of German idealists on Greek tragedy represent a unique moment in the history of philosophy as they were the first to integrate in their thinking the inherently negative moment represented in the tragic. This seemingly insignificant gesture dislocated philosophy from the serene and disinterested perspective of pure reason and precipitated the necessity to think with and against the negative.<sup>410</sup> Furthermore, they must be accredited for transmuting the blind worshiping of ancient Greece to a forward looking relationship between antiquity and modernity; a development which altered radically the perspective from which we look at antiquity. But perhaps their cardinal importance for us today lies in their exemplary speculative resistance against the reifying forms of thought governing their era. To the extent that the negativity of their thought was cultivated and inspired by, or even occasionally went hand in hand with, tragedy and the tragic, renders their respective meditations as warning signals against identity thinking.

It is a strange thing, ever since the emergence of the tragic in Schelling's tenth letter of the *Briefe* (1795) up to Jaspers' *Über das Tragische* (1947), the notion has occupied an important place in German philosophical thinking. Furthermore, what perplexes even more the contours of its reception is that, with the notable exception of Nietzsche, although it usually occupies an insignificant space in the *corpus* of their works, at the same time, it seems to permeate their thinking in such a way that it manages to bring upon it the characterisation of the tragic. Although they cannot be considered part of the prevailing interpretations of Hegel, attempts have been made to read into his dialectic a tragic kernel. Similarly, Heidegger's account of finitude in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), as well as his post-*Kehre* period, especially his late thoughts on language, have also been read through the lens of the tragic. Tragedy's remarkable presence over roughly one and a half centuries in speculative thought vanishes in the same unexpected fashion that it first appeared. The reasons behind tragedy's real absence are correlative to our understanding of the role of art and thinking in the post-Auschwitz era and in the

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<sup>410</sup> Inarguably, a definitive answer to this suggestion would require the demonstration of the presence of tragedy and the tragic in Schelling's late work and in Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Readings in the line of thought suggested have been attempted with regards to Schelling by Krell (2005) and with regards to Hegel by de Boer (2010).

unquestionable prerogative of the *status quo* to present the subjectivity of its perspective as the objectivity of reality and thus stripping negativity of its ability to question the dominant structures of thought.

In an era enamoured with endings yet surprisingly oblivious to the self-reflection of its own path, Hegel's thesis of the end of art in the *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (1835) and Steiner's proclamation of *The death of tragedy* (1961), acquire a certain *gravitas*. Not in the literal sense that art does not play a central role in our intellectual life and thus that tragedy no longer speaks to us, but in the sense that they cannot provide us with a genuine mediation of our worldview. Paradoxically, whereas both of their theses are usually understood as the utterings of deep-seated traditionalists in their respective fields, I hold that insofar as their readings deny to art and tragedy the possibility of a reconciliation with the cultural forms of the *status quo*, then they might rise up to the notoriously difficult challenge of retaining their negativity in a historical period that demands the eradication of everything that resists assimilation. With that in mind, I believe that future responses to the question of tragedy and the tragic might benefit from thinking on the intersections of Adorno's *Negative Dialektik* (1966) and *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970), Agamben's notion of bare life in *Homo Sacer* (1995), and Honig's call for an agonistic humanism as explored in *Antigone, Interrupted* (2013).

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