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HEGEL'S THEORY OF COMEDY IN THE CONTEXT OF HEGELIAN AND MODERN REFLECTIONS ON COMEDY

Mark W. ROCHE

Few contemporary critics discuss Hegel's theory of comedy. (1) Yet Hegel's theory invites our attention for at least four reasons. First, Hegel offers two major insights into comedy, the importance of subjectivity and particularity as the dominant categories of the genre and recognition of comedy as the negation of negativity or the mockery of an untenable position. Second, unlike his theory of tragedy, which offers a historical division into ancient and modern tragedy, Hegel presents a transhistorical, if albeit brief, discussion of types of comedy. His typology, though suggestive, is at odds with his system and so offers us an example of the tension that sometimes surfaces in Hegel between macro- and microstructures. Third, comedy occupies a central position in Hegel's *Aesthetics*. In all the lecture notes on Hegel's *Aesthetics*, comedy has the last word; with comedy the discussion of art concludes. Moreover, two of the most important aesthetic categories in the immediate post-Hegelian period were the ugly and the comic, concepts that for the Hegelians were closely linked. Hegel's immediate successors, attuned to systematic aspects of the Hegelian system, knew the centrality of these concepts both for Hegel's system and for the viability of idealist aesthetics in modernity; my paper

(1) In contrast, Hegel's theory of tragedy has received more attention. Not only is it considered, next to Aristotle's and ahead of Nietzsche's, the second most important theory of tragedy in the Western world, it is even employed by critics who disparage Hegel and everything Hegelian and are simultaneously unaware of their source (Moss).

A detailed evaluation of Hegel's theory of both genres, with a fuller account of the secondary literature, is available in my book *Tragedy and Comedy: A Systematic Study and a Critique of Hegel* (Albany: SUNY, 1998).

draws, therefore, on these often overlooked thinkers. Finally, Hegel's theory can be productively related to modern reflections on comedy. Hegel elevates a moment of comedy that seems to be lost in much of modern comedy, lightness of spirit; either Hegel's theory did not keep pace with the times, or modern comedy does not satisfy certain ingredients of outstanding comedy. Nonetheless, Hegel's discussion of comedy, with its stress on subjectivity and the negation of negativity, has particular resonance for our age.

I

The greatest strength of Hegel's discussion of comedy is his insight into subjectivity and particularity as the distinguishing features of the genre: "What is comical [...] is the subjectivity that makes its own actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing" (15:552; A 1220, translation modified; cf. 15:528-29, 15:534, 15:552-55, and 15:572-74).⁽²⁾ By subjectivity Hegel means an elevation of the self

(2) Most of my references are to the edition of the *Aesthetics* edited by Hotho. The new critical edition of Hegel's philosophy of art, while very valuable, will not replace this edition. The critical edition represents only one person's lecture notes of one lecture, namely, Hotho's own notes of the 1823 lecture, and is thus very modest in range and detail vis-à-vis the *Aesthetics*, which draws on far more material. Hegel lectured on aesthetics in Heidelberg in 1818 and in Berlin in 1820/21, 1823, 1826, and 1828/29. Hotho based his compilation on HEGEL's *Hefte zur Ästhetik*, which he developed for his Heidelberg lecture and then for his first Berlin lecture and which contained an array of later notes, all of which, save for a small number of notes, is now lost; HOTHO's *Vorlesungsnachschriften* of 1823 and 1826 (the latter of which has been lost); three other *Vorlesungsnachschriften* of the 1826 lecture (of which two have been lost); and five *Vorlesungsnachschriften* of the 1828/29 lecture (of which four have been lost). Hotho manipulated these materials without having the benefit of today's standards for historical-critical editions. In this sense it would not be unjust to refer to the larger *Aesthetics* as the work of Hegel and Hotho. If one's primary interest is historical, this information is indeed notable; if one's primary interest is the validity of the arguments, the information is far less significant. In addition, Gethmann-Siefert, the editor of the new edition, overemphasizes some of the differences between the lecture notes and the Hotho compilation. Drawing on her own writings and citing them in more than 50 of the introduction's 170 notes, she argues that the lecture notes indicate that Hegel judges artworks according to their historical function, not their aesthetic quality (civ; cf. cxi, cxxxvii, cxxxix); that Hegel was more interested in the phenomenological richness of art than in creating a system that could comprehend this richness (cvi-cvii; cf. cxxxvii); and that he did not elevate classical art (xxvi; cf. cvii and cxxxvii). While some of these claims have moments of truth, they are also overstated. Even though Hegel is very interested in the function of art, he also reflects in the lecture notes on aesthetic quality (30,

and of self-consciousness in contradistinction to objectivity (or naive adherence to the traditional norms of society) and to intersubjectivity (or the spheres of friendship, love, and community). The comic self focuses his energies on himself and his private interests and desires. Preoccupation with one's own particularity is comic insofar as it is viewed in contrast to the world and the substantial sphere such particularity tends to overlook.

Hegel was not the first to recognize the link between subjectivity and comedy,⁽³⁾ but his reflections supersede earlier insights, insofar as he discusses subjectivity in its most philosophical and overarching aspects. Nonetheless, Hegel's theory has gaps, and the elevation of comedy among Hegelians such as Heinrich Theodor Röttscher, Christian Weiße, Arnold Ruge, August Wilhelm Bohtz, and Friedrich Theodor Vischer can be partially explained as an attempt to fill these lacunae without overlooking Hegel's initial insight.

In a work dedicated to Hegel, Röttscher, for example, analyzes Aristophanic comedy by way of the transition from objectivity to subjectivity, from the reliance on tradition and objective values to its dissolution. Röttscher describes the subject matter of Aristophanic

65ff, 272ff, 298, 300, 305, 306); throughout he makes manifest his interest in both the phenomenological richness of art and systematic conceptions of art and of the development of art; and while he praises a variety of artistic styles and recognizes very specific ways in which the romantic transcends the classical, Hegel's praise of classical art also contains some very strong language, even in the lecture notes (36-37, 179, 306). It may well be that some studies of Hegel's aesthetics that are based on the Hotho compilation occasionally capture Hotho more than Hegel; of particular note, for example, is Gethmann-Siefert's discussion of Hegel's and Hotho's differing evaluations of Goethe and Schiller (cxc-ccxiv). However, a good number of these studies remain insightful even though Gethmann-Siefert ignores them in her introduction of more than 200 pages. Given that much of what Hegel left behind and much of what Hotho had available to him are forever lost, the ideal situation, it seems to me, would be, on the one hand, continued attention to the current *Aesthetics* as the work of Hegel and Hotho, a version whose richness is unparalleled by other documents, and, on the other hand, a critical edition that would offer us not a single set of notes on one lecture, as in the current version, but at least one set of notes per lecture, where available, with supplementary materials from the other lecture notes of the same year in an apparatus along with all of the extant notes from Hegel. Such a complex manuscript situation might best be addressed in a hypertextual format. Of great importance for the current essay, there is nothing in my reading of Hegel that is contradicted by the materials of the new edition.

(3) Vico, for example, noted that New Comedy is built around private and fictitious personages, who could be fictitious precisely because they were private. This privatization of the genre also explains the elimination of the chorus, whose task was to serve as a civic entity commenting on public matters (Vico 332).

comedy as a battle between, on the one hand, “simple moral custom, shame before the law, in short unreflected obedience that recognizes the law and moral custom as ultimate and decisive without needing another authority” and, on the other hand, a “subjectivity for which moral custom and law are no longer the highest authority and which instead draws determination from its own thinking and imagining” (47, my translation). He continues: “Belief in gods, laws, and moral customs are thereby robbed of their former strength and power, since they must first be brought before the forum of reflection and thought in order to receive validation. This battle can thus be characterized abstractly as the opposition of simple moral substance and its objectivity, in which the individual is immersed, and free subjectivity, which renounces the same. This subjectivity dethrones objectivity as such, i.e., as what is immediately valid and decisive [...] and exercises its judgment on it internally” (47-48, my translation).

For Rötischer the essence of Aristophanes is the development of a subjectivity that reasons and questions and thereby dissolves the objectivity and stability of tradition and state. This reason is not yet associated with freedom, but is influenced by nature and the private and arbitrary desires of the self. It is a formal capacity of reason and individual will: “The purely formal nature of will, which we call caprice, can choose the lowest as well as the highest, the most moral as well as the most repugnant; it casts its lot with one or the other according to the contingent constitution of the subject” (48, my translation). Aristophanes attacks the various intellectual destroyers of the state, Euripides, the Sophists, and Cleon, who exhibit subjective passions and offer rhetorical defenses of the same. *The Clouds*, for example, mocks the subjectivity of the Sophists, including Socrates. Scientific speculation calls into question religious traditions, and rhetoric undermines the previously accepted givens of tradition, including its moral precepts. Socrates, the individual and eccentric thinker, upsets the commonality of Greek ethical life. Not tradition, but man, indeed the cleverest man, becomes the measure of all things; not validity, but victory, determines truth.

Beyond his general reflections on subjectivity and particularity, Hegel elaborates the central role of contradictions and the need for a comic resolution. In a sense comedy functions as an aesthetic analogue to Hegel’s practice of immanent critique, by which the philosopher seeks to unveil self-contradictory and thus self-canceling

positions. Hegel writes concerning this Socratic technique: "All dialectic allows that which should have value to have value, as if it had value, allows the dissolution inherent in it to come to pass" (18:460; HP 1:400, translation modified). Hegel applies the structure directly to the comic: "The comic is to show a person or a thing as it dissolves itself internally in its very gloating. If the thing is not itself its contradiction, the comic element is superficial and groundless" (18:483; HP 1:427-28, translation modified). Ruge develops Hegel's insight when he opens his commentary on the comic by discussing the value of error in the formulation of truth. The comic work takes the hero's position seriously, accepts it, and follows it to the point where it reveals its own absurdity and so destroys itself. According to Ruge, the object of comic negation "cancels itself, it is the negative in and for itself, the self-canceling" (179, my translation). Comedy is "immanent negation" (179, my translation). What, according to Hegel, is most commonly negated or canceled in comedy is the false elevation of subjectivity or particularity.

II

Hegel's typology of comedy is, if briefer, more complex than his typology of tragedy. Hegel discusses three types of comic action. He begins: "On the one hand, *first*, the characters and their aims are entirely without substance and contradictory and therefore they cannot succeed" (15:528; A 1200, translation modified). Hegel elaborates using the example of greed: both the goal and the means to achieve it are "inherently null" (15:528; A 1200). The hero takes the empty abstraction of wealth as the ultimate reality and excludes every other form of contentment. The hero fails to reach his goal but recognizes the untenability of his claims, and so the play ends on a harmonic note. Since the failure stems from worthless values, nothing is lost. The protagonist deserves to fail and in failing recognizes the stupidity of his claims: "Therefore there is more of the comic in a situation where petty and futile aims are to be brought about with a show of great seriousness and elaborate preparations, but where, precisely because what the subject wanted was something inherently trivial, nothing in fact is ruined when his purpose fails; indeed, he can surmount this disaster with undisturbed cheerfulness" (15:529; A 1201,

translation modified). Though Hegel doesn't offer an illustration, a good example might be the innkeeper in Goethe's *The Accomplices*. If we widen the scope of the hero's aims to include anything evil — though the aims remain thwarted — we might think of works such as Molière's *Tartuffe*, Goldoni's *The Liar*, or Kleist's *The Broken Jug*. For purposes of reference let's call this the comedy of negation.

In Hegel's second form of comedy the hero's goal is valid, the means, however, limited: "Second, the converse situation occurs when individuals plume themselves on their *substantial* characters and aims, but as instruments for accomplishing something substantial, they, as individuals, are the precise opposite of what is required" (15:529; A 1201, translation modified). In this way the hero reduces the substantial to the appearance of what is substantial. The individual is incapable of fully realizing his legitimate goals. The contradiction lies between the noble intention and the insignificant individual who tries to bring this intention to fruition. Hegel names as an example Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*. Examples from the post-Hegelian era might include Schnitzler's *Anatol*, Brecht's *Master Puntilla and His Servant Matti*, and Christopher Hampton's *The Philanthropist*. For purposes of reference let's call this the comedy of reduction.

A third form of comedy emphasizes the role of chance in bringing about a harmonic conclusion: "A *third* type, in addition to the first two, is based on the use of external contingencies. Through their various and peculiar complications situations arise in which aims and their accomplishment, inner character and external circumstances, are placed in comic contrast with one another and then they lead to an equally comic solution" (15:529-30; A 1201, translation modified). Evident in the works of Menander, this form of comedy is also apparent in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Holberg's *The Masquerades*. Let's call this third Hegelian form the comedy of coincidence.

Hegel begins his typology with a subgenre in which negativity is especially prominent; it might thus be considered more of an anti-theatrical genre.⁽⁴⁾ With this in mind I would reverse Hegel's first and

(4) American Hegel critics commonly contest that the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model has anything to do with Hegel. See, for example, MUELLER, KAUFMANN, "Hegel: Contribution" 165-68 and *Hegel* 167-75, and Allen Wood xxvii and xxxii. Whether or not Hegel used precisely these terms, a glance at Hegel's use of triadic structures on the microlevel — as in the finite, the bad infinite, and the true infinite — or on the macrolevel

second forms. Hegel's third form, moreover, is hardly synthetic. It appears to involve an erasure of subjectivity, rather than a synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity; expressed in different terms, the harmony is one of chance, not reason. Hegel's third form should be the first. In comedy, therefore, we begin with a lack of consciousness; the hero, knowing little, follows his own particular desires and, led by coincidence and fortune, reaches the good. This is the comedy of coincidence: the hero achieves harmony through nature and chance, not consciousness.

This comedy, the comic equivalent of objectivity, passes over into a series of antithetical subgenres, in which subjectivity predominates: to Hegel's comedies of reduction and negation I would add what I call the comedy of withdrawal. In the comedy of reduction the hero has an intuitive grasp of harmony and truth but is unable to reach his goals owing to his own ineptitude and deficiencies. The hero follows his desires, much like the hero of coincidence, though these desires lead not to the good but to a reduction of the good. The hero of the next form, the comedy of negation, recognizes that a reduced goal is a false goal and so freely seeks evil, albeit with strong (and clever) means. The hero of the comedy of withdrawal attempts to confront evil but recognizes only the content of truth, not its means of success. Molière's *The Misanthrope*, Schnitzler's *Professor Bernhardt*, and Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* would be good examples. The hero of withdrawal fails mainly because of the inadequacies of society, but also because of the hero's unwillingness to grant objectivity, as deficient as it is, its moment of truth. These antithetical forms present us with a bow of sorts. The bow represents movement away from truth with its reduction, reaching its outer distance from truth in the case of negation, and returning toward truth with the attempt, unsuccessful though it is, of resisting this negation of truth.

The hero of the synthetic genre, finally, unites in himself the objectivity of a valid goal with awareness of the means necessary to reach

— as in the logic, the philosophy of nature, and the philosophy of spirit — should convince the reader that this tendency in Hegel criticism misses the mark. It has been justly criticized by Merlan, and the importance of the triad is underscored by Hegel's programmatic analysis of the dialectic in paragraphs 79-82 of the *Encyclopedia* and his philosophical and methodological elevation of the triad in the concluding section of the *Science of Logic*, "The Absolute Idea" (6:553-73). One should note, however, that the antithesis is never added arbitrarily to the thesis but is an extension of the thesis, its self-cancellation or truth.

that goal. I call this form the comedy of intersubjectivity: the hero overcomes contradictions and reaches the intersubjective sphere by virtue of his own reflection rather than mere chance. As examples consider Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, or Raimund's *The King of the Alps and the Misanthrope*.

As in all dialectical progressions, the thesis and the synthesis contain the primary moment, the antithesis the secondary moment: the primary moment in comedy is reconciliation; the antithetical moment is the elevation of subjectivity. Recognizing comedy as an antithetical genre, Hegel comments at length on the antithetical elevation of subjectivity. His typological analysis, however, elevates the primary moment, reconciliation. Modern comedies and modern comic theory tend to see the secondary moment as dominant, thus the wealth of modern comedies that fit the antithetical patterns and push them to their limits.

Let's look more closely at one of Hegel's subgenres to show how we could expand it further using Hegelian insights. In comedies of coincidence the protagonists imagine themselves to be the agents of action, but their subjectivity is revealed to be illusory: not the subject, but chance and natural causes are at play. Antirealism and images of nature tend to predominate in works of this kind. Consider Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Woody Allen's *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*. The audience tends not to take these protagonists very seriously. The multiplicity of marriages with which such works frequently conclude mocks any unnecessary stress on the uniqueness of the individual and exhibits the importance of the overarching order. The broad sphere, what is common not what is particular, is highlighted. What appears contingent and accidental is not the institution of marriage but the subjects entering into it. Institutions have ontological independence; they transcend individuals and generations. The references to procreation, which are frequent in such works, suggest that the individual exists not only for itself but also for the continuation of the species.

At its best the comedy of coincidence is not an insignificant or superficial genre; instead, it contains a highly speculative structure and can be understood in the context of Hegel's philosophy of history, which is often brought to bear on his theory of tragedy, but is normally not viewed as a source of insight into comedy. In fact comedies of

coincidence are generally regarded as the weakest and most superficial comedies — even by Hegelians. Vischer, to take one example, strongly favors comedies of character over comedies that stress coincidence or intrigue (6:333-35); he sees in the former a deeper comic element [“eine tiefere Komik”] (6:334). The comedy of coincidence, however, is often deep. Coincidence shows how the seemingly contingent can be integrated to serve a higher necessity. There is a pattern to comic coincidence, just as there is reason in world history (12:22). The reason is not the reason of the individual subject — his or her desires after all are often thwarted — but rather a transcendent reason. The genre is in its metastructure ironic: it appears to be an innocuous piece about what is insignificant, yet it is at its core serious and substantial. The larger harmonic goal may result not from the realization of private pursuits but from the thwarting and redirection of these pursuits. One could almost speak of a “cunning of the genre.” The pursuit of the various particular interests of the characters taken together forms a comic whole. This is generally true thematically, and it is also true in terms of form: one thinks of the *commedia dell'arte*, wherein the collective pursuit of individual parts creates a coherent form.

I would also like to comment briefly on the two subgenres Hegel does not introduce. In what I call the comedy of withdrawal one figure arises to protest the inadequacies of a corrupt reality. The hero is justified but not yet strong enough that he can have the impact on society he desires. Here the subject fails not because he has inadequate means to a true goal, as in reduction, or invalid goals, as in negation, but because the subject, who is more or less correct in his views, cannot accomplish his goals in a world in which invalid goals reign. Protagonists of withdrawal fail in part owing to their virtues. The form thus borders on tragedy. (Hamlet has great affinities to this structure, as does Grillparzer's *A Fraternal Quarrel in Hapsburg*.)

From a more substantial perspective, however, we can argue that the comic structure remains insofar as we recognize a contingent weakness in the subject, specifically a weakness in the form of his actions. The means the protagonist of withdrawal employs to realize the good are insufficient not only because of the difficult situation but also because of particular contingencies on the part of the protagonist; this is comic. A further comic dimension is apparent when the hero of withdrawal exhibits the need to be acknowledged by what he negates. Consistently pointing out to others his independence, the hero only

affirms his dependence (on the views of others). The hero pretends to withdraw from the world even as he insists on its recognition; he cannot do without the very sphere he negates. Where the tragic hero pursues an end consistently, sacrificing his life for it, the comic hero remains inconsistent, wanting success but neither fully sacrificing himself for it nor recognizing the means necessary for its realization.

The Misanthrope illustrates the ambiguities of this subgenre: the hero is in practice justified, in principle, however, not. Alceste's high moral standards lead to his failure in society; he cannot possibly deal with those who are selfish, unjust, and hypocritical. Alceste both seeks and demands a symmetry of inner and outer self. His demand for symmetry in the sense of a one-to-one correspondence in his relationship with C  lim  ne leads to his private unhappiness. Alceste will not compromise. He is in many respects a hero. Yet, Alceste lacks tact and with this success, and so he is nonetheless the object of our laughter. Alceste must be candid and outspoken when he might have been elusive or silent. Moreover, Alceste revels too greatly in his martyrdom; the play parodies, as much as identifies with, the hero's suffering. A fascinating structure of Alceste's misanthropy is that if he loses in his efforts to reform humanity, he can justify his pessimism. To have success would be to deny his position (as misanthrope); there is thus an existential desire for him to fail and so keep his identity intact.

In the synthetic form of comedy, the comedy of intersubjectivity, the subject begins with an untenable stance but alters his position in the course of the play. This differs from the comedy of coincidence. Coincidence is a subordinate genre precisely because of the individual's lack of autonomy: subjectivity is philosophically a higher category than chance or luck. The harmony of coincidence also lacks stability: the individuals are not knowledgeable; thus, they could easily be led astray. The harmony of coincidence is, in Hegelian terms, only abstractly positive. It is a harmony of unreflected na  vet   that has yet to differentiate the negative from the positive and so cannot resist the powers of negativity. Its optimism is not, as later in intersubjectivity, earned by way of the refutation of alternatives. Intersubjectivity argues that nature may follow a rational plan, as in coincidence, but that spirit is higher than nature insofar as it *knows* this plan and knows of plans that transcend nature. Chance plays a lesser role in spirit than in nature. Just as in the Hegelian system the purpose of nature is to bring forth spirit, so — in comedy — is the

truth of coincidence the higher structure of intersubjectivity. The subject develops truth and harmony out of itself, knows it, and acknowledges its validity. Because the development in intersubjectivity is more than coincidental, the plot tends to be organic rather than episodic — another dimension in which the later form supersedes the earlier one. The comedy of intersubjectivity is superior not only to the thesis but also to the antithesis, for it overcomes and integrates negativity.

This review and critique of Hegel's typology of comedy suggests that Hegel did not discuss the full variety of forms available to the genre. Indeed, he overlooks the genre most characterized by subjectivity and contradiction, withdrawal, and the genre most characteristic of synthesis, intersubjectivity. In addition, because his reflections on the subgenres are so brief, it is possible to expand what is only implicit in Hegel's discussion. Most importantly, Hegel's typology does not follow any coherent sequence, and it places on the level of the synthesis a genre better characterized as *thetic*.

III

We might expect a hierarchy of dramatic forms to mirror social convention; thus tragedy with its elevated heroes supersedes comedy with its low characters. Surprisingly, Hegel turns this hierarchy on its head. Tragedy with its affirmation of the substantive is a *thetic* genre; comedy, in its negation of tragedy, is an antithetical genre and in this sense more advanced. Yet the erroneous claim that Hegel views tragedy as the highest of dramatic forms remains widespread. Consider, for example, Clayton Koelb, who asserts, "tragedy is in Hegel's view the highest form of drama" (72); Werner Koepsel, who calls tragedy "the highest genre in Hegel" (216, my translation); Leon Rosenstein, who writes that for Hegel tragedy is "the highest form of art" (521); or Werner Schultz, who asserts that "tragedy" is for Hegel "the highest artform" (96, my translation).⁽⁵⁾ For Hegel, however,

(5) See also Gearhart 76; Henry Paolucci 201; Anne and Henry Paolucci, "Introduction" xxiv; Axelos 655-56; and Nicolai Hartmann, *Die Philosophie* 376. The error appears to be a modern one. The superiority of comedy within the Hegelian system was clear to nineteenth-century thinkers attuned to Hegel's dialectic, even those who were decidedly anti-Hegelian, as, for example, Eduard von Hartmann 1:418.

comedy is philosophically (and also historically) a later genre than tragedy. ⁽⁶⁾

Vischer likewise recognizes at least one sense in which comedy is more advanced than tragedy; it is more reflexive and in that sense more expansive: “That first of all comedy is in a certain sense higher follows for us in principle from the most inner essence of the comic [...] The comic has shown itself to be an act of the pure freedom of self-consciousness, which engenders and dissolves in infinite play the contradiction with which everything sublime is afflicted. It therefore contains in itself the absolutely great, which is the tragic, as a moment of its process, has thus more, is beyond it [...] Comedy thus belongs to the later age of human ripeness, which developed calm and serenity out of storm, is brought out of balance by no power of experience and with clear and cheerful insight grasps the great and small as the inseparable sides of one world essence [als die ungetrennten Seiten Eines Weltwesens]” (6:345-46, my translation)⁽⁷⁾.

Hegel also alludes to a third form of drama (“the deeper mediation of tragic and comic conception”): “Instead of acting with comical perversity, the subjectivity is filled with the seriousness of solid relations and strong characters, while the tragic consistency of will and the depth of the collisions are so far mollified and smoothed out, that there can emerge a reconciliation of interests and a harmonious unification of individuals and their aims” (15:532; A 1203, translation

Hegel elevates tragedy in such a way as to make it appear superior only in his Jena essay on natural law where he defines comedy as either a plot without a conflict or a plot without substance and elevates tragedy for containing both: “the absolute relationship is put forth in tragedy” (2:499, my translation). In the *Phenomenology* and the *Aesthetics* comedy has an unambiguously later (and superior) position. Though Hegel may have had a stronger emotional attachment to tragedy, the systematic position of the two genres is beyond question.

(6) A variety of moments comes into play here. First, tragedies, originally presented as trilogies, were normally followed by a satyr play. Second, comedy did not receive official standing in Greece until 486 B.C., almost fifty years after tragedy. Third, if Hegel is to be believed, comedy, not unlike philosophy, reaches its peak in periods of social dissolution (15:555).

(7) Vischer — Hegelian that he is — notes also that every advance comes at a price: “But progress is also loss; levity and freedom themselves become on closer inspection one-sided [...] Comedy contains the sublime, the tragic in itself, but only in order to grasp it in its one-sidedness before it develops and to transform it with a sudden reversal into its opposite [...] The levity is therefore bought at the price of taking too lightly what forms the great content of serious drama” (6:346, my translation).

modified). Hegel mentions in this context Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* as well as Goethe's *Iphigenia*. Unfortunately, Hegel never fully develops his brief discussion of the drama of reconciliation, and when he does return to it his comments are as frequently derogatory as they are laudatory. On the one hand, the drama of reconciliation appears to be the third genre, following tragedy as thesis and comedy as antithesis (see especially 15:521); on the other hand, Hegel's *Aesthetics* closes not with the drama of reconciliation but with comedy.

We can relate Hegel's limited and ambivalent reflections on the drama of reconciliation to his view of comedy and in turn to his philosophy of subjectivity. Hegel presents three historical phases of art: symbolic, classical, and romantic. The romantic is characterized by subjectivity, and with comedy, the genre of subjectivity, Hegel's *aesthetics* closes. In his concluding discussion of drama, Hegel treats the genres in the sequence tragedy, drama of reconciliation, comedy (15:555-74). The fact that comedy is free to turn any chance event into art means for Hegel the near dissolution of art (14:220-22 and 15:572-73). The arbitrary content of comedy no longer serves truth. Hegel's view reveals — at least at this point of his lecture — a failure fully to appreciate comedy as the negation of the negation, a point on which the Hegelians scored better than Hegel himself. If comedy is the negation of a negation, the first negation must include as its possibility all forms of particularity. Only when the second negation fails is art, which requires a moment of truth, dissolved. As is sometimes the case elsewhere (Hösle), Hegel's *Realphilosophie* is here determined by a logic of subjectivity. The drama of reconciliation, the drama most characterized by intersubjectivity, is, like the comedy of intersubjectivity, left silent, when comedy, as the ultimate genre of subjectivity, leaves the stage.⁽⁸⁾ We see then in Hegel's discussion of comedy positions not fully developed or resolved and moments at tension with the larger principles of the Hegelian system.

(8) The drama of reconciliation is the overlooked genre of drama, neglected by dramatists and theorists alike. The early Hegelians are among the few theorists ever to address the topic. See Roche 247-279.

IV

The most consistently challenged aspect of Hegel's theory of tragedy has been the assertion that tragedy includes a moment of reconciliation. His theory of comedy, being less well-known, has not suffered the same level of critique. Yet a parallel moment in his theory of comedy is at odds with the development of modern comedy and most theories about it: the related claims that comedy include an element of lightness, that the comic hero not suffer real pain, and that he be beyond his situation, able to laugh at himself and his foibles (15.518; 15.552; 15.569).⁽⁹⁾ With the widespread transformation of modern comedy into satire and the grotesque, comedy has become as dark vis-à-vis Hegel's theory of comedy as modern tragedy has become vis-à-vis his theory of that genre.

Hegel does not stand isolated in the tradition. In the fifth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle views the comic defect as "not painful or destructive" (5.1) and adds that "the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain" (5.1). Despite shifts within comic theater, a number of modern theorists share this Aristotelian-Hegelian view. Nicolai Hartmann, for example, writes: "obviously comedy stops where serious suffering and bitter pain begin" (*Aesthetik* 422, my translation). A danger of modern comedy is that the comic heroes' foibles and transgressions become so severe as to surpass the limits of the comic: pain and suffering are indeed evident; even murder is not beyond the bounds of modern comedy. There may be a metacomedy in the audience's disinterest in such works. The objectivity of the audience takes its revenge on the illicit intentions of the authors who are so preoccupied with transgressing generic boundaries. No country has developed this dark comic tradition greater than Germany, and no country has more difficulties convincing world audiences of the value

(9) Insofar as he elevates cheerfulness of spirit, Hegel demands not only that the comic hero be in a position to laugh at himself (15:552; 15:569), but also that he be without self-doubt, that is, that he embody an unabashed confidence of subjectivity or a "naive personal self-assurance, no matter how things go" (15:554; A 1222). Many comedies have one of these elements: for the former one thinks of Woody Allen's characters; for the latter Don Quixote comes to mind, as Hegel himself emphasizes (14:218). Rare, however, above all in modernity, is the comic figure who integrates both moments; one might consider certain figures in Nestroy or Thomas Mann's Felix Krull.

of its comic tradition.⁽¹⁰⁾ The differences between Hegel's theory and modern comedy need not refute Hegel; the true Hegelian may well assert, "so much the worse for the plays."

Modern drama often focuses on despair, which can arise from a substantive conflict and be portrayed as tragic. Despair, however, can also arise from a focus on the self and its particularity. Dwelling on our own dolorous finitude as a pretext for ignoring more substantial issues is from a Hegelian perspective comic. Though some forms of Angst and despair may belong in tragedy (we could despair, for example, of seeing the good but being unable to realize it), most forms, particularly those that relate to the contingent weaknesses of the subject, would be better treated in comedy than in the serious and somber literature of despair. For an age preoccupied with its own subjectivity, an age that reduces norms to issues of particularity and power, comedy may be the most appropriate genre. For comedy calls into question these various manifestations of finitude. Comedy evokes via negation the values sketched in tragedy, as the unspoken standards against which we measure the comic hero's follies. Hegel writes insightfully that in comedy the reduced reality "is brought into por-

(10) There are surely many reasons why Germany has a less developed and less successful comic tradition than, say, France, Italy, or Spain. First, when Germany initially developed a national theater, it was not yet a single nation, and (unlike tragedy) comedy usually presupposes a highly developed societal structure. Second, at the time of German *Klassik*, drama was above all a moral institution (in the words of Schiller's famous essay), and tragedy and the drama of reconciliation appeared to the authors of that age to be more edifying than comedy, which was viewed as a lesser genre. Third and related, German literature has often sought to compete with philosophy, and comedy may have appeared in this context as too light. Interestingly, the Austrians, who were less influenced by these philosophical pretensions, have been rather successful in comedy. Austria of course is, like France, Spain, and Italy, a Catholic country. In Catholicism the concept of the universal is predominant, and the individual as individual is hardly stressed. Protestantism, which in contrast places subjectivity at the fore, is less oriented toward comedy (one need only think of the Scandinavian authors, such as Strindberg and Ibsen, where comedy is virtually absent). In short, Catholicism, with its delimiting of subjectivity, is more fertile ground for comedy than Protestantism. The unusual situation of England can be explained by specific aspects of the British tradition: the emphasis on what is common, including common sense; and Anglicanism's unusual position within the Protestant faiths. Not insignificant in this context is the possibility that Shakespeare may have been Catholic or at least Catholic-leaning (Raffel). Also relevant is the fact that the greatest comedic writers in the English language after Shakespeare have been Anglo-Irish — from Congreve, Goldsmith, and Sheridan to Wilde and Shaw. Though not Catholic, they were immersed in an overwhelmingly Catholic culture.

trayal in *such* a way that it destroys itself from within, so that precisely in this self-destruction of the right element, the true can display itself in this reflection as a fixed, abiding power, and the face of madness and unreason is not left with the power of directly contradicting what is inherently true" (14:120; A 511, translation modified) Seemingly lost values are recognized after we pass through their negation. Comedy makes explicit for the audience, it objectifies, the errors of the age and so helps society's efforts to transcend them. The comic negation of the various forms of negativity — indulgence, nonmeaning, frivolity, brutality, monotony — leads to truth. Knowledge of error as error frees us from the compulsion to continue to err.

The view that comedy negates negativity, which was clearly recognized by Hegelians such as Christian Weiße, Arnold Ruge, and Karl Rosenkranz, has been forgotten or denied in most modern theories of comedy. ⁽¹¹⁾ The Hegelians went to great lengths to show that comedy integrates negativity, but only by sublating it. Weiße, one of the first German critics to address the related concept of the ugly, speaks of comedy as "*superseded ugliness, [die aufgehobene Häßlichkeit] or [...] the reconstitution of beauty out of its absolute negativity, which is the ugly*" (1:210, my translation). Rosenkranz, in his *Aesthetics of the Ugly*, likewise views the ugly, the aesthetic counterpart to evil, as a necessary, but subordinate, moment that is ultimately sublating in comedy: "The ugly contrasts with the beautiful and contradicts it, while the comic can be at the same time beautiful, beautiful not in the sense of simple, positive beauty, but in the sense of aesthetic harmony, the return from contradiction to unity. In the comic, ugliness is posited as the negation of the beautiful, which, however, it negates in turn" (53, my translation). The ugly, according to Vischer (1:362), is an appearance in opposition to an idea (we could say an act of reduction, negation, or withdrawal). The comic then is the formal treatment of

(11) Completely independent of the Hegelian tradition, one astute twentieth-century literary critic does define comedy along the lines of a double negation: "*Comedy, then, consists in the indirect affirmation of the ideal logical order by means of the derogation of the limited orders of actuality*" (FEIBLEMAN, *In Praise of Comedy* 178-79). Feibleman's work was first published in the late 1930s and does not appear to have had much impact, especially on recent, postmodern theories of comedy. For further elaboration of the definition, see FEIBLEMAN, *Aesthetics* 81-98. An interesting facet of the similarity with the Hegelian school is that Feibleman, an antiidealist, also views comedy as a progressive and revolutionary genre.

the ugly in such a way as to present it as a nullity. To view the matter in a related but different way we can say with Weißé that what is immediately beautiful can never be comic; comedy requires negation (2:344).

As these critics demonstrate, classical aesthetics can deal with the ugly, the disjointed, and the asymmetrical; in fact, it deals with these negative categories more consistently than many modern and contemporary aesthetic theories by dealing with them as negative. The comic, in short, is not the negation of substance but the negation of the negation of substance or the negation of the ugly as the reduction of truth. In comedy we laugh at contradictory positions; we don't take them as the final truth. Showing the nullity of that which is null and nugatory, comedy does not cancel what is substantial. Rosenkranz treats obscenities, for example, as belonging to the sphere of the comic (235-46); a function of the comic is to present them in their absurdity and as such negate them: "This whole sphere of sexual vulgarity can only be aesthetically freed through the comic" (246, my translation). The presentation of obscenities indirectly serves a moral purpose. This is the case with Aristophanes and Ben Jonson, for example, who are masters of the *reductio ad absurdum*. We recognize in their portrayals the mere appearance of freedom, that is, the negative freedom of libertinage, and the mere appearance of true subjectivity, that is, self-assertion without true intersubjectivity. As Weißé suggests, the focus on audience reception, its recognition of the negation of a negation, reintegrates true subjectivity into the ideal, even as false subjectivity, or the mere appearance of true subjectivity, is ridiculed and erased (1:227).

Insofar as comedy is a negation of negativity, it may leave viewers with no firm orientation, no articulation of norms (merely a mockery of their present positions); it is, therefore, particularly destabilizing: once subjectivity has been reached, one cannot return to the simplicity of objectivity. Röttscher uncovers this principle as the paradox of Aristophanes' comedies, which mock the subjectivity that has freed itself from objective *Sittlichkeit* and which seek in the viewer a consciousness of this transition; thus, comedy presupposes what it endeavors to negate, subjectivity (365-77; cf. Hegel 15:555). In a sense this paradox renders the greatest comic artist, Aristophanes, a tragic figure. Recognition of the enemy as enemy presupposes defeat of the naive ethos.

Despite the danger of disorientation, comedy may be appropriate for some audiences and superior to tragedy, which may be incomprehensible to an audience that has abandoned normative values. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the antithetical comic genres exhibits for the audience the absurdity of an immersion in finitude, particularity, and negativity. If, however, a comedy of intersubjectivity contains moments of the earlier, more explicitly negative subgenres, it, too, may be capable of reaching a contemporary audience and would in many ways be preferable, for it leaves the audience with speculative affirmation, not just the dialectical negation of negativity.

Although I support, on the one hand, Hegel's elevation of the complexly positive, I would like to recognize, on the other hand, that in modernity there is a development that does not surface with Hegel, but which contains a moment of truth. In modernity comedy is viewed as liberation from an oppressive objectivity, as we see in Henri Bergson and above all in Mikhail Bakhtin. Hegel, who prefers Aristophanes, elevates the restoration of a traditional objectivity, but we cannot forget that comedy can also free us from the constraints of a false objectivity — and not only a false subjectivity. What is traditional and common may be further removed from truth than the creative imagination of the individual subject. The target of comedy will differ by time and place. In his theory of comedy Hegel offers many insights that are superior to the competing claims of the present. This does not, however, imply that Hegel's theory cannot be enhanced by immanent critique and complemented by more modern reflections.

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