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HITCHCOCK AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF TRAGEDY: *I CONFESS* AS SPECULATIVE ART

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This essay attempts a close reading of Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953) and recognizes in the film significant formal strengths as well as a number of outstanding philosophical, religious, and psychological structures. A major focus of the analysis is genre, specifically Hitchcock's transcendence of tragedy—or his portrayal of the speculative—a form of art best understood with the help of Hegel.

I

In the introductory sections of his *Lesser Logic*, Hegel argues that there are three moments to each category investigated in the logic (8.168-79). First, the either-or level of *Verstand*, or understanding, which assumes unbridgeable differences between categories: the finite versus the infinite, unity versus multiplicity, etc. Second, the sphere of the dialectical, or what Hegel calls negative reason, wherein the one-sidedness of individual categories is recognized, and seemingly stable terms pass over into their opposites. Finally, Hegel introduces a third moment, the speculative, or what he calls positive reason; here oppositions are reconciled in a higher unity.

It does not take a great deal of imagination to see in the first two moments logical corollaries to the literary structures of tragedy, with its opposition of two absolute

positions, each affirming its own validity and failing to recognize its own one-sidedness, and of comedy, with the dissolution of individual terms and positions, the quick shifts between perspectives, and the laughter of negation. Hegel's own theory of drama (he would not have known that film, which unites the sensuousness of the spatial and temporal arts with the intellectual content of literature, is in principle an even higher aesthetic form) focuses on tragedy and comedy and barely touches on a third genre, what Hegel calls the *Versöhnungs-drama*, or drama of reconciliation (15.520-74), a form I would like to rename speculative art.

The importance of this genre corresponds to Hegel's argument that one should not remain at the level of what is merely dialectical; one should also recognize the speculative, that is, the positive moment behind negativity. Tragedy, with its portrayal of the eclipse of one-sided, if substantive, positions, and comedy, with its negation of one-sided and clearly untenable positions, are genres that point toward the positive: in the case of tragedy, the absolute that is preserved as the one-sided hero passes away; in the case of comedy, the positive position that follows from the negation of negativity or the mockery of an untenable position. There is a common thread in Hegel's theories of tragedy and comedy, and it is not surprising that Hegel offers one

of his most lucid definitions of tragedy when criticizing contemporary notions of comedy (7.277-86). Hegel argues that the essence of tragedy is triumph of the good, not destruction. The truth of comedy meanwhile is not negation as such but the negation of an untenable stance and thus movement toward a positive position. In speculative art, this positive moment becomes explicit.¹ If tragedy designates an organic relation between greatness and suffering and comedy the incongruous relation between particularity and substance, speculative art shows a developmental relation between negativity and synthesis.²

Examples of speculative art might include such works as Aeschylus' *Eumenides*; Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*; Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, and *The Winter's Tale*; Calderon's *Life is a Dream*; Corneille's *The Cid* and *Cinna*; Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*; Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Faust II*; Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*; Kleist's *Prince Friedrich of Homburg*; Hofmannsthal's *Everyman*; and Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

The genre is also evident in film, as, for example, in Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*; Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story*;³ Curtiz' *Casablanca*; Chaplin's *Limelight*; Allen's *Zelig*; and Wenders' *Wings of Desire*.

II

Alfred Hitchcock almost always presents a gesture towards synthesis; one thinks of a variety of works ranging from *Murder!*

and *Young and Innocent* over *Spellbound* and *The Paradine Case* to *North by Northwest* and *Marnie*. Indeed, one might view Hitchcock as the twentieth-century's master of speculative art. His film *I Confess* is, I think, one of the greatest religious works of this century. Not only technically and formally outstanding, it is also a work with many speculative structures. The hero of the film, Father Logan (Montgomery Clift), suffers a Hegelian tragedy of collision: the divine justice of preserving the inviolability of confession versus the earthly justice of apprehending and sentencing a self-confessed murderer. Logan



Ruth (Anne Baxter) and Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift) in Ruth's flashback intended to clear Father Logan of murder charges; her best efforts backfired.

hears the confession of his sacristan, Keller (O. E. Hasse), who had murdered Villet, a man who, unbeknownst to Keller, was attempting to blackmail Logan. The collision overlaps with a tragedy of self-sacrifice: Logan himself is tried for the murder, and he is resolved to act according to the good, even though he knows that he will suffer, and may die, for his actions.

Logan is not without temptation. In two adjoining scenes he imagines the police apprehending Keller, and he contemplates a mannequin's wardrobe, weighing perhaps the possibility of disguise and escape. But Logan does persevere: he returns to Larue's office and adheres to the confidentiality of confession. During the trial the Crown Prosecutor (Brian Aherne) accuses Logan of being unable to control his passions (and thus capable of murder); the film audience, unlike the courtroom audience, ironically knows that Logan's reticence derives precisely from his

controlled passions. At his most majestic moment of self-sacrifice and adherence to virtue, the crowd taunts Logan most strongly. The courtroom hisses after he is declared not guilty. Voices cry out in scorn: "Take off that collar!" and "Preach us a sermon, Logan!" Eventually, intellectual ridicule shifts to physical abuse.

In Aristotelean terms, or more precisely in terms derived from Hegel's revision of Aristotle (15.524-26), we sympathize with Logan to the extent that his position is valid; Logan adheres to the good. In identifying

with Logan, we also fear the revenge of ethical substance, for Logan has also transgressed against a good, namely, secular justice, which, at least for a substantial part of the film, appears destined to reap revenge on its transgressor. Logan is only incidentally the victim of Keller; more substantially, he is the victim of a tragic collision that derives from his own one-sidedness. Logan's collision,

a conflict of two goods, leads us to recognize that the film presents more than mere self-sacrifice. Because Logan is unwilling to betray the sacrament of confession, Ruth (Anne Baxter) feels compelled to reveal her love for Logan (hoping, unsuccessfully, to give Logan an alibi) and must then bear the biting jabs of the Crown Prosecutor. In conflict throughout the film are claims of secular justice and the demands of professional and religious confidentiality. The collision reaches its deepest point when not only Logan's life but also the lives of others are in danger. Keller kills his wife and then in

flight kills a hotel worker. Knowing that Inspector Larue (Karl Malden) has given orders that the police not shoot (Larue wants above all to know the truth about Villet's murder and so wants to capture Keller alive), the priest still refuses to betray the sacrament of confession. The one-sidedness of Logan's position is reinforced when it is necessary for earthly justice (the police) to shoot Keller and so save the priest's life. The higher principle may be divine justice, but the divine needs the assistance of the earthly powers.

Just before Keller is shot, he draws a comparison between himself and Logan: both are isolated and alone. The parallel, reinforced by the two characters' mistaken identities, invites further reflection. Logan has been associated with Christ: he has willingly agreed to suffer in order to pay for the sins of another, and he has been taunted by a crowd unaware of his holiness. A series of beautiful shots reinforce this association: the early

portrait of Logan looking for Keller, in which Logan emerges from an altar of the crucified Christ; the shadow on Logan's forehead in the shape of a cross during Keller's confession; the powerful shot of Logan down below on the street and behind a silhouette of Christ carrying the cross; and finally, the close-up of Logan as he is testifying, which includes a symbolic icon of Christ on the left of the screen. Logan suffers the solitude of holiness. His isolation might be viewed as an extreme case of what belongs intrinsically to his vocation as priest, though there is a difference. Logan's misdeeds appear so



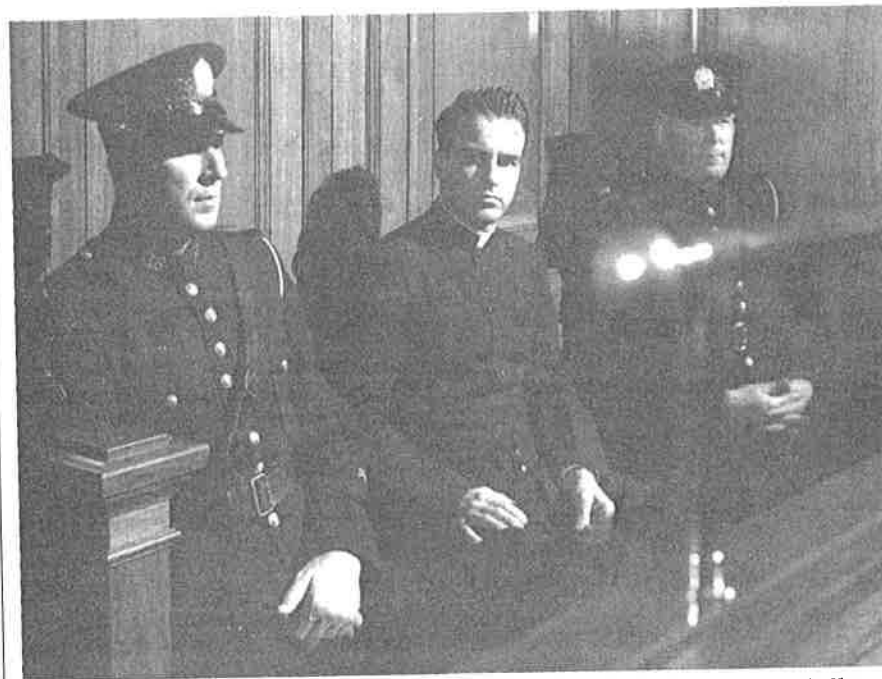
Otto Keller (O. E. Hasse) whispers into Father Logan's ear the temptations of the devil. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

great that he can no longer cloak himself in the holiness and righteousness the office of priest might normally grant him. Indeed, Logan's holiness, even when Logan is viewed as a false priest, tells us, as Lesley Brill insightfully suggests, that it is not the institution that protects the individual from evil but the individual who protects the institution (108).

Keller is Logan's counterpart, even to the point of his association with the devil. When the cameras show Keller whispering into Logan's ear, it is as if they were capturing the temptations of the devil. Keller imagines that Logan will tell the police of his crime: "You told them about me . . . You are a coward after all. You are frightened . . . Perhaps you'll tell them." Keller's provocation is symbolic of the devil's temptation of Christ (Matthew 4 and Luke 4), which Logan, like Christ, is able to resist without himself turning to deception.⁴ Reinforcing the association with the devil, the name "Keller" means "cellar" or "basement," and the film offers a series of shots that visualizes Keller's posi-

tion below Logan (for example, when Logan observes Keller walking below his window, when Logan confronts the kneeling Keller before the initial confession, or when Logan looks down on Keller from a ladder).

Not only a theological but a psychological structure is at work in Keller's relationship to Logan. The greater Logan becomes in the eyes of Keller, the more diabolical Keller acts. The devil is driven crazy by the holiness of Christ's servant. Beginning with their very first conversation, Keller is obsessed with Logan's goodness. For his own survival, Keller does not want Logan to betray the sacrament. Yet the priest's infinite goodness appears to make Keller wish that he would speak. Keller wants the priest to fail, to share in his own mediocrity. Like the mob, but even more so, Keller wants to bring Logan down to his level. A consensus of criminality would make his own crime more bearable. If the priest betrays his secret, a standard or norm of justice will blur or disappear. Keller is directed



Father Logan stands trial for the murder confessed to him by his sacristan Keller.

by a kind of resentment. He wants to view himself as equal with the person he values, Logan. His consciousness of self-value derives from comparison, and he recognizes that he is not as good as Logan. Rather than aspiring to elevate himself to Logan's position, Keller would erase his inferior value by leveling out the value-difference in a negative way, by dragging Logan down to his level. This explains Keller's continuous suspicion, and hidden desire, that Logan



Father Logan and Inspector Larue (Karl Malden) approach Keller just before he admits his murder; Keller wrongly assumed Logan had weakened and betrayed the sanctity of confession.

has turned him in. Perversely, though with an inner logic, Keller would prefer to equal Logan's values (by seeing Logan weakened) than to see himself a free man, a figure whose values and integrity society does not question.⁵ In the end Keller admits his crime, assuming, in a wishful way, that the priest has weakened: "So, the priest talked . . . How kindly he hears my confession. And then, a little shame, a little violence, that's all it takes to make him talk. It was too much for you . . . You are a coward like all other people, aren't you? A hypocrite." Like Logan, Keller is also isolated, but Keller

suffers the isolation of evil. In Plato's *Symposium* Alcibades makes the suggestion that those whom we love most, we also hate (216b-c). It is those we love before whom we are most easily ashamed, and there is an inner desire to remove the source of that shame.⁶ The devil hates God in part because of his love for him. At the film's conclusion, Keller's underlying love for Logan, the devil's recognition of God, is stressed. As his wife did earlier, Keller asks the priest's forgiveness: "Oh Father, help me . . . Vergib . . ." Logan has redeemed Keller. The devil recognizes God and is so reintegrated into the holy. It is an early Christian teaching to which Hitchcock here returns,⁷ a teaching one also finds at the beautiful conclusion of Carl Orff's contemporaneous *Comoedia de Christi Resurrectione*. The reconciliation Hitchcock portrays is a consummation not only of Keller's hidden longing but of the priest's holiness, for Logan's position is not self-righteously exclusive or condemning, but spiritually inclusive and forgiving.

The film is structured such that Logan's self-sacrifice and collision are not final. Given the inherent superiority of intersubjectivity over subjectivity, it is important that the priest's deed be recognized, that the crowd be sparked by his heroism. We see this very nicely through the figure of Ruth, who initially enacts a non-tragic drama of suffering; that is, she suffers not of her greatness but of her weakness. Ruth is introduced to us—in her own words—as "selfish," unfair to her husband and unable to recognize Logan's vocation. Her description of Logan's departure for war illustrates this self-directedness: "I was selfish even then. . . . It was our last night together. . . . I thought the world was coming

to an end. I suppose there were millions of people feeling the same way that night. You don't think of millions of people. You think of yourself and the one you're in love with." Ruth's self-centeredness persists until she finally recognizes in the nobility of Logan's act, the priest's self-denial and nonbetrayal of the sacrament, that his vocation is indeed sacred. Her simple and subtle departure with Pierre ("Pierre, take me home.") represents recognition of Logan even as she now binds herself in a new way to her loving husband.⁸ Ruth is ennobled by Logan, just as Keller's wife is earlier. Likewise, Larue is ennobled. His first gaze at Logan is directed downward from Villette's window, and, as the camera suggests, it is the vision of one eye only, a merely partial perspective (Brill 100). Larue's final gaze is upward, and it is one of admiration and clarity.

While the film portrays at its two poles Logan and Keller, the middle

is occupied by the mediocrity of the crowd. Like a wealth of other Hitchcock films,⁹ *I Confess* suggests the untenability of a consensus theory of truth.¹⁰ The crowd is mediocre in its opinions and attitude vis-à-vis Logan. It does not want to be humbled before a hero. Its callousness is particularly evident in the extraordinary shot of the woman onlooker who eats an apple as she watches Logan being abused. That we as film spectators are asked to identify with the crowd as much as with Logan is less an affront than a challenge to our consciousness. At the upper end of the crowd is Ruth, always attracted to Logan but unable to

recognize the legitimacy of his vocation. If Ruth represents the best, Alma Keller represents, until her final confession, the crowd's worst potential. As Ruth humbles herself in an attempt to free Logan, Alma long remains silent. During the investigation and trial, the forces of evil predominate. The skewed shots of churches leaning and almost falling illustrate this, as does the contrast between high angle, distanced shots of Logan, minimizing his power, and low angle shots of Keller, as his face dominates the



Father Logan stands isolated as he risks his life, trying to convince Keller to surrender peaceably.

screen. The film's conclusion, however, does not leave us with this negativity. Alma overcomes a temporary collision (protecting an unjust husband vis-à-vis an innocent other), and she, like her husband, eventually asks forgiveness. Confession had earlier been a means of escape for Keller and the catalyst for Logan's suffering; this institution, whose sacredness Logan has preserved, becomes

at the film's conclusion a tool of salvation. Keller's confession both opens and closes the film, but this symmetry is representative less of a static circle than a progressive spiral, a movement from darkness (the church confessional) to light (the hotel room where Keller asks forgiveness).¹¹ Where at the film's opening Keller asserts, "No one can help me," the film closes with a genuine plea for Logan's help.

Confession as a valid institution is preserved, as is the consistency of Father Logan's character. Logan acts out the consequences of his emotional and intellectual commitment to the office of priest. In this

sense *I Confess* provides a positive counter-model to both *Rope* and *Strangers on a Train*. *Rope* exhibits the consequences of a philosophical position beyond good and evil, according to which superior individuals may claim the right to destroy weaker individuals. *Strangers on a Train* argues that the mere thought that one would like to be rid of another can have consequences beyond one's own intentions. The issue from a larger vantage-point is not whether one should act according to a principle or an emotion but which principle, which sentiments, should be selected and privileged.

The film is a good illustration of the ways in which a formally successful artwork ruled by speculative categories can convey in its reception the privileged emotions of sympathy, admiration, and joy. Like Ruth, the audience is to be ennobled. The film avoids sentimentality, first, by its clear account of negativity (the reconciliation is earned), and second, by its inclusion of brief comic structures, for example, the repetitively falling bike of Father Benoit.¹²

It is a telling truth that Hitchcock can in the contemporary world still create speculative art. It is even more telling that the film has always been underrated.¹³ Yet, in Father Logan we see a remarkable character, a figure before whom the self-absorbed heroes of most contemporary literature pale. Indeed, many of our contemporary heroes would scarcely reach beyond the level of Ruth at the beginning of the film.¹⁴ If literature has for the most part abandoned substantive tragedy and speculative art, such structures can perhaps be found in art's newest medium, film, and in the works of a director known above all for suspense, but whose insights into negativity are so great that they also allow him to recognize hidden harmonies.

Notes

¹One might think that harmony should not be portrayed in art—it is too direct and overbearing. But a complex harmony tran-

scends a complex negativity by virtue of the logical and ontological superiority of the positive—a position Hegel defends throughout his *Logic*. Moreover, a negative work can be as direct, and as a result just as unaesthetic, as a work that depicts a false harmony. Clara Park, one of the few contemporary critics to embrace something like speculative art, makes a strong case for the validity of what she calls "earned happy ends" (61) and disparages thereby the almost automatic tendency in contemporary letters toward final negativity.

²Though speculative art unifies tragedy and comedy, it does so not in the same way as modern tragicomedy. Speculative art does not consist of a double plot, one serious and the other comic, nor is it an ambivalent work that seems simultaneously comic and tragic, nor can it be a humorous work that ends tragically. It is rather a serious (and thus potentially tragic) conflict that ends harmonically.

³The genre Cavell calls "the Hollywood comedy of remarriage," of which *The Philadelphia Story* is perhaps the greatest example, is itself a subform of speculative art.

⁴The association is wittily reinforced by the fact that Logan skips his breakfast the morning after Villet's murder and turns himself in to Larue without having eaten lunch. Logan does not succumb to the devil's temptations to satisfy his hunger.

⁵Nevertheless, the fact that Keller would compare himself with Logan and not with common man represents an intuitive desire on Keller's part for greatness, indeed for goodness.

⁶In his interview with Truffaut, Hitchcock refers to this idea as well, citing as his source Oscar Wilde. Commenting on a somewhat different scenario in *Shadow of a Doubt*, Hitchcock states: "You destroy the thing you love" (111).

⁷I'm thinking above all of Origen's concept of *apokatastasis panton*, a final consummation or restoration of all, including earlier negativity and evil; according to Origen, even Satan will freely acknowledge God's excellence and so return to Him. See espe-

cially I.6.1-4 and III.6.1-9. The doctrine, also espoused by St. Gregory of Nyssa, Didymus the Blind and Evagrius Ponticus, but much opposed in the later development of Christian thought, was in fact condemned by Anastasius at the turn of the fourth century and by Vigilius and Emperor Justinian at the Council of Constantinople II in 553. For one of the most prominent examples of opposition, written between the two papal declarations of heresy, see Augustine 21.17.

⁸The beauty of this scene is missed by Wood, who writes: "Anne Baxter's final withdrawal with her husband, leaving the man she loved in a situation of extreme peril, showing neither concern nor interest, is very awkward and indeterminate in aim" (39-40).

⁹See *The Lodger, Murder!, The 39 Steps, Young and Innocent, The Lady Vanishes, Foreign Correspondent, Saboteur, Spellbound, Rear Window, To Catch a Thief, The Wrong Man, North by Northwest*, and *Frenzy*.

¹⁰The predicament of the hero who knows or wishes to uncover truth, despite the consensus against him/her, is one of Hitchcock's two major themes, the other being the difficulties of achieving absolute certainty in intersubjective relations. For the latter moment see *Secret Agent, Rebecca, Suspicion, Shadow of a Doubt, Lifeboat*, and *Stage Fright* come immediately to mind, though the structure is visible in virtually all of Hitchcock's works.

¹¹On the film's circular structure see Spoto 223. During the first confession, the grated slats of the confessional give Keller the appearance of being behind bars or in prison. This suggests that where confession should mean release (the unveiling of one's own false subjectivity in an intersubjective forum), Keller is here abusing the sacrament and thus imprisoning, rather than freeing, himself. Nonetheless, Keller's intuition, represented as the need for confession or intersubjectivity, is valid, even if it is here reduced.

¹²Hitchcock himself spoke of the film's regrettable "lack of humor" (Truffaut 149). The film may have fewer comic moments than other serious Hitchcock films, but it is not entirely without humor.

¹³Of the almost two dozen Hitchcock

critics who have commented on the theme of *I Confess*, only two offer substantially positive comments: Rothman, who sees the film's depiction of courage and despair in the face of persecution and scorn as "a thinly veiled allegory of McCarthyism and the blacklist" (248); and Brill, who argues that the film clarifies "the analogies between the secular films and Christian doctrine" (97). The film's formal technique has been given somewhat better reviews.

¹⁴Hitchcock was not unaware that his admiration of Logan's courageous adherence to an absolute would cast him against the grain of secular modernism. This is symbolized in Hitchcock's cameo appearance: at the film's opening Hitchcock confidently walks across the screen as one-way traffic signs point in the opposite direction.

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