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

MARK W. ROCHE

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 Logic, Hegel argues that there are three moments to each category investigated in the logic (b:16b-79). First, the either-or level of Verstand, or understanding, which assumes undeniable 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 was not without its known 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 Verfassungsbegriff, or drama of social alienation (S.S.153-74), 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 collapse of one-sided, if substantively, positions, and comedy, with its negation of one-sided and clearly unsustainable position, are genres that point toward the positive in the case of tragedy, the absolute that is preserved as the one-sidedness has passed away; in the case of comedy, the positive position that follows from the negation of negativity or the mockery of an unacceptable 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 (S.277-80). 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 unsustainable stance and thus movement toward a positive position. In speculative art, this positive moment becomes explicit.

If tragedy designates an organic relation between greatness and suffering, and comedy the inconsequential relation between particularity and substance, speculative art shows a developmental relation between negativity and synthesis.

Examples of speculative art might include such works as Aeschylus’ Erechtheum, 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 Chiche; Lessing’s Nathan the Wise; Goethe’s Faust I and Faust II; Shil- ler’s The Life of a painter; which is why I would like to rename speculative art.

II

Alfred Hitchcock almost always presents a gesture towards syncretic combinations of a variety of works ranging from Murder! and Wrong 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 tragic anomaly of collision: the divine justice of preserving the inviolability of confession versus the earthly justice of apprehending and sentencing a self-confessed murderer. Logan bears the confession of a murder, Keller (O. E. Hasse), who had murdered Villet, a man who, unbeknownst to Keller, was attempting to blackmail Logan. The collisions overlap with a tragedy of self-sacrifice: Logan himself is tried for the murder, and in the Fever, 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. Instead of claiming innocence, he imagines the police apprehending Keller, and he contemplates a .44 Magnum, weighing perhaps the possibility of disarming and escaping. But Logan does persevere; he returns to Lumen’s office and ad- here 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 court- room 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 “Punch us a sermon, Logan!” Eventually, intellectual ridicule shifts to physical abuse.

In Aristotelian terms, or more precisely in terms derived from Hegel’s revision of Aristotle (15:526-526), we sympathize with Logan to the extent that his postures are valid. Logan adheres to the good. In identifying with Logan, we also fear the re-venge 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 vengeance on transgressors. Logan is only incidentally the victim of Keller; more substantively, he is the victim of a tragic collision that derives from his own one-sidedness. Logan’s exaltation, a conflict of good and evil, leads us to recognize that the film presents more than mere self-sacrifice. Because Logan is unwilling to betray the sacrament of communion, Ruth (Anna Paquin) feels compelled to reveal her love for Logan (hoping, unsuccessfully, to give Logan an alibi) and must then bear the hideous trials of the Crown Prosecutor. In contrast 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 Larse (Karl Malden) has given orders that the police not shoot Gittes wants above all to know the truth about Vibe’s murder and so wants to capture Keller alive, the priest still returns to portray the sacrament of communion. The core wisdom of Logan’s position is reinforced when it is necessary for earthly justice (the police) to shoot Keller and save the priest’s life. The higher principle may be the earthly justice, but the divine needs the assistance of the earthly powers.

Just before Keller is shot, he draws a comparison between Logan and 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 final portrait of Logan looking up as 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 image 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 musings mirror a prayer below Logan (for example, when Logan observes Keller walking below his window, when Logan confesses the knowing 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 domineering Keller acts. The devil is driven crazy by the holiness of Christ’s servant. Beginning with their first confrontation, 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 he could speak. Keller wants the priest to fall, to share in his own godlessness. Like the mob, but even more so, Keller wants to bring Logan down to his level. A conscious of criminality would make his own crime more bearable. If the priest betrays his secret, a standard of normality will blur or disappear. Keller instructed
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 inferiority values 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 suffers the isolation of evil. In Plato’s Symposium Alcibiades makes the suggestion that those whom we love most, we also hate (216e-3). It is there we love them whom we are most easily ashamed, and there is an inner desire to remove the source of that shame.5 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 dies earlier, Keller asks the priests’ forgiveness: “Oh Father, help me...Vergilius...” Logan has redeemed Keller. The devil recognizes God and is so reintegrated into the holy. It is an early Christian teaching to which Hitchcock has returned,6 a teaching one also finds at the beautiful conclusion of Carl Orff’s contemporary opera Condemned to Christ Resurrection. The reconciliation. Hitchcock portrays as 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, in turn, the middle is occupied by the mediocrity of the crowd. Like a wealth of other Hitchcock films, 7 Confusio suggests the unreliability of a consensus theory of truth.8 The crowd is mediocre in its opinions and attitude vis-à-vis Logan. It is not worth to be humbled before a hero. Its callousness is particularly evident in the extraordinary shot of the woman 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 humbils herself in an attempt to free Logan, Alma long remains silent. During the investigation and trial, the forces of evil predominate. The staredown shots of churches leaning and almost falling, illustrate this, as does the contrast between high angle, distant shots of Logan, minimizing his power, and low angle shots of Keller, as his face dominates the 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, also, 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 confession) to light (the trial, where Keller asks forgiveness).9 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 Rape and Strangers on a Train. Rape exhibits the consequences of a philosophically opposed goad 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 whether one should act according to a principle or an instinct but which principle, which sentiments, should be selected and privileged.

The film is a good illustration of the ways in which a formally successful art-work 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 ensured), and second, by its inclusion of brief comic structures, for example, the repetitively falling bike of Father Bennet. It is a telling truth that Hitchcockian can in the contemporary world still create speculative art. It is even more telling that the film has always been underread. Yet, in Peter 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. 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, whose insights into negativity are so great that they also allow him to recognize hidden harmonies.

Notes
1. One might think that harmony should not be portrayed in art—it is too direct and overwhelming. But a complex harmony transcends 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 “some happy ends” (61) and dispenses thereby the almost automatic tendency in contemporary letters toward final negativity.

2. Though speculative art unifies tragedy and comedy, it does not so in the same way as modern tragicomedies. 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 harmoniously.

The goner Cavell calls “the Hollywood comedy of remarriage,” of which The Philanthropist is perhaps the greatest example, is itself a subform of speculative art.

3. The association is weakly reinforced by the fact that Logan skips his breakfast, then, mooring after Villier’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.

4. Nevertheless, the fact that Keller cannot compare himself with Logan and not with common man represents an intuitive defense of Keller’s part for greatness, indeed for goodness.

5. On his interview with Truffaut, Hitchcock offers 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).

6. I’m thinking above all of Origen’s concept of gastrastaticie panta, a final consumption 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 especially L. 1:4 and III 1:9. The doctrine, also espoused by St. Gregory of Nyssa, Didyusm the Blind, and Evagrius Penticus, 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.

7. The beauty of this scene is missed by Wood, who writes: “Anne Baxter’s final withdrawal her husband, leaving the man she loved in a situation of heartache, seeming neither concern nor interest, is very awkward and indeterminate in aim” (90-91).


9. The predicament of the hero who wishes 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 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.

10. In the film’s circular structure we see. Spots 233. During the first conclusion, the giant slate of the confessional give Keller the appearance of being dead or in prison. This suggests that where confession should mean release (for unveling one’s own truth subectivity in an intersubjective forum), Keller is here abusing the sacrament and thus imposing, rather than freeing, himself. Nonetheless, Keller’s intuition, represented as the need for confession or intersubjectivity, is valid, even if it is here reduced.

11. Hitchcock 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.

12. 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” (258); and Buli, 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.

13. Hitchcock was not unaware that his admiration of Logan’s courageous adherence to an absolute would cast him against the grain of modernism. This 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.

Works Cited