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Introduction

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Introduction: Tragedy... Comedy

**Frank Ruda &
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Ancient tragedy has been depicted as presenting us with a bewildering type of conflict. It is bewildering because this conflict often has only a fundamentally puzzling (non-)resolution. The type of conflict specific to these tragedies is one that confronts the individual with a specific type of contradiction, a contradiction that one could read as an early proof of or insight into the fact that there is no metalanguage, to conjure this Lacanian adage. When two (or potentially more) systems of (normative) orientation enter into a collision, say two systems of laws, and both are considered to be binding, as some of the most famous tragic cases demonstrate, there is no higher (norm or) orientation that would be able to resolve this conflict.¹ This is why the contradiction or conflict leads to a collision. We encounter here an essential feature of the ancient tragic structure: all laws are binding but in case of a conflict of laws, there is no law to decide what to do. The ancient tragic subject then represents the focal point of this collision. The tragic individual is subjectivized by the contradictory summoning of two orders – at least in some famous cases – think: Antigone – and this means: the individual is subjectivized by being confronted with an undecidable choice (and all real choices are obviously undecidable). The structure of ancient tragedy thereby does not only give us an insight into the intricacies of subjectivization, but also into a paradoxical feature constitutive of freedom: tragic freedom is a freedom to choose one's own fate, the freedom to choose one's (symbolic or bodily) death, since it is a freedom to choose without having much of a choice (one cannot not choose). This meant for the tragic heroine to choose her own disappearance as the paradigmatic way of realizing her freedom. The ancient tragedy therefore ends with the overcoming of the contradiction in the disappearance of the tragic subject.

Hegel has pointed out that the ancient tragic subject, even though embodying what seems like a type of abyssal freedom – an act that has no unambiguous normative status, has no coverage in any “big Other”, so to speak –, at the same time still lacks the capacity to distance themselves from the normative orders.² Being able to establish a minimal distance (a standpoint of reflection) is constitutive (only) of modern (tragic) subjects. Antigone, to use Hegel's own paradigmatic case study of ancient tragedy, therefore opts to bury her brother for the sole reason that he is her brother, in short: because of what he *is* and in disregard of what he has done in his life. Antigone – and for Hegel, this is her ultimate limitation – treats her dead brother as if he was always already dead (and has never been acting). But from this limitation two different paths open up. The first leads from the ancient tragic structure to the tragic structure of modernity. The modern subject – and this is for Hegel an

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1 For an analysis of this structure, cf. Menke 1996.

2 See his discussion of Antigone in Hegel 2019.

effect of the Reformation and of the French Revolution – is determined not only by being self-conscious of its capacity to (reflectively) relate to the norms it takes as binding (this type of reflection is brought about by the Reformation) – and to not take anything as binding which it does not believe to be so –, but also by the insight that it is able to undo and remake systems of norms. The modern subject is free and knows that it is (this becomes historically manifest in the French Revolution). But this twofold modern structure does not – as some have argued – leave behind or overcome the tragic constitution. It rather universalizes it. Because there is still no meta-normative framework that would allow for the modern subject to know which norms it ought to accept as binding, a conflictual situation can potentially arise all the time. Modernity in this perspective is the epoch of the universal denaturalization of all norms. But this also means that we move from tragedy – ununderstood, so to speak – to the general insight into tragedy as an insurmountable universal subjective condition in modernity. The first path leads thus from tragedy to a universalization of tragedy...

The second path that one can trace from ancient tragedy, as Hegel notes, leads to comedy.³ Ancient tragedy ended with a reconstitution of the world after the death of the tragic hero(ine) as if unshattered – and this undoing of tragedy was a crucial element of what made tragedy tragic in the first place. Comedy now introduces a peculiar feature. As G.K. Chesterton remarked – before this has been more systematically elaborated by contemporary theorists of comedy⁴: “In all great comic literature... we feel the characters are deathless people in an endless tale.”⁵ If tragedy ends in death, comedy operates with a form of deathlessness, with an impossibility to die that makes its characters go on endlessly as if invincible. Hegel remarked – as Slavoj Žižek pointed out somewhere – that the transition from tragedy to comedy already takes place in the ancient tragic structure (paradigmatically - once more - in Sophocles’ *Antigone*): it appears precisely when Antigone after her act starts commenting on its eternal meaning and the status she will have after her death (for the coming generations) in history. Antigone’s act – in Antigone’s view – is an act never to be forgotten, an act that will not stop being written and spoken about. The move from ancient comedy to modern comedy will – analogous to the move from ancient tragedy to modern tragedy – imply that such deathlessness does become a feature of every subject (and potentially all proper subjective acts - which is why they might at the same time be rather rare). The second path thus leads from tragedy to comedy...

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3 Cf. for example Hegel 1975, p. 1093ff.

4 One cannot but here think of for example: Zupancic 2008 and Heller 2005.

5 Chesterton 1986, p. 94.

However we might be tempted to systematically elucidate (or rearticulate or criticize or even rebuke) these sequences of tragedy-tragedy and tragedy-comedy – maybe one can even risk to identify another more complex one in the sequence that moves from (ancient) tragedy to (ancient) comedy to (modern) comedy (and maybe this now takes places under modern tragic conditions)–, they have tempted some to see in them templates and tools that help to understand historical development and thus are instructive for an analysis of history. That we can move from one to the other seems to point to an inner porosity of the genres. Tragedy does open up to and potentially transforms itself or parts of itself into comedy. This does not mean that the relation between both – if it is one – can best be understood against the background of a larger mixed genre, the tragic-comic. Rather it indicates that the relationship between the tragic and the comic itself deserves to be examined. Is the way, the direction, so to speak, in which we pass from one to the other always determined in advance (we can only move from tragedy to another form of tragedy or to comedy) or are there possibilities for a (re)turn (from comedy to tragedy)? What is the tragic after the comic has taken over? Does it ever take over entirely or does it only come in segments or fragments or sequences? Some, and Karl Marx may be one of the most prominent thinkers to have stated so, added to the above sequence another one, notably one that moves from tragedy to farce... Where does this sit in relation to the link between tragedy and comedy? How do we get from the grandeur of tragedy to the debasement of farce?

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* addresses these questions and brings together contributions that either discuss the porosity of these two genres, the question of their sequencing or the potential of these (and other) sequences for historical analysis or for an analysis of our present. It seeks to do so from a variety of different possible angles and disciplines and, as always, it allows for each of our contributors not to speak as a representative, neither of a genre nor of a discipline, but in her and his own voice. What you are about to read through are thus singular reflections on tragedy... comedy....

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