

# Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

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‘Why do you particularly suppose I pointed out to you the mixture of pain and pleasure in comedy?’

Socrates, in *Philebus*, 50c.

## The Privilege of the Tragic in Post-Kantian Philosophy

One version of the post-Kantian settlement in philosophy is that the critical dismantling of the claims of dogmatic metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason* has the consequence that questions concerning the ultimate meaning and value of human life pass from the category of the religious to that of the aesthetic. Kant bequeaths a problem to his idealist, romantic, and even Marxist inheritors in the European tradition, a problem that he grapples with in the *Critique of Judgment*, where he attempts to throw a bridge between the faculties of Understanding [epistemology] and Reason [ethics] through a critique of the faculty of Judgment, where the latter mediates between the domains of nature and freedom and harmonizes the elements of the critical project.

This problem might be restated in the following way: the Kantian critique of metaphysics, if justified, achieves the remarkable feat of both showing the *cognitive* meaninglessness of the traditional claims of speculative, dogmatic metaphysics, while establishing the regulative *moral* necessity for the primacy of practical reason, that is, the concept of freedom. Yet, this raises the following question: how is freedom to be instantiated or to take effect in the world of nature, if the latter is governed by causality and mechanistically determined by scientifically established natural laws? How is the causality of the natural world reconcilable with what Kant calls the causality of freedom?<sup>1</sup> How, to allude to Emerson alluding to the language of Kant’s Third Critique, is genius to be transformed into practical power?<sup>2</sup> Does Kant not leave human beings in what Hegel might have called the *amphibious* position of being both freely subject to the moral law and determined by an objective world of nature that has been stripped of any value and which stands over against human beings as a world of alienation?

Thus, the task of a critique of aesthetic and teleological judgment is to build a bridge between the realms of pure and practical reason, nature and freedom, epistemology and ethics, which Kant had laid asunder. Laying to one side the important

matter of teleological judgment, one can see the consequences of this enormous privileging of the category of the aesthetic in post-Kantian philosophy, in, say, Schiller's letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). More particularly, for the concerns of this essay, the privileging of the aesthetic can be seen in Schelling's "Identity Philosophy," the young Hegel, and, of course, Hölderlin. For each of these thinkers, in decisively different ways in relation to their related but often opposed estimations of the possibilities of art in modernity, the highest exemplar of the aesthetic is dramatic art. And the model for dramatic art, even when it is, as in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, subordinated to comedy, is ancient tragedy, in particular Sophoclean tragedy. Schelling discusses *Oedipus Rex* briefly in the last of his *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, written in 1795, and again in more detail in the 1802–3 lectures on *The Philosophy of Art*. Hegel famously interprets the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), although tragedy is also central to the *Jena-Schriften*, especially the 1803 essay on "Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law." Also in 1803, Hölderlin wrote his remarks on both *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, although the tragic is the central theme of the earlier *Grund zum Empedocles* and *Über das Werden im Vergehen* (both 1798–1800), and the ever-incomplete tragedy *Death of Empedocles*.

To summarize rather violently, if the aesthetic is, in Schelling's formulation in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, "the keystone in (the) entire arch"<sup>3</sup> that will span the regions of pure and practical reason that Kant had divorced, then ancient tragedy is the determining exemplar of the aesthetic – even when, as Hegel insists, art is judged to be a thing of the past, or when Schelling rather desperately attempts to interpret Calderón as "the southern, perhaps Catholic, Shakespeare."<sup>4</sup> The privileging of tragedy as the aesthetic form that would reconcile the freedom of the subject and the necessity of nature, can be most clearly seen in the version given by Schelling in *The Philosophy of Art*:

The essence of *tragedy* is thus an actual and objective conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other, a conflict that does not end such that one or the other succumbs, but rather such that both are manifested in perfect indifference as simultaneously victorious and vanquished.<sup>5</sup>

What begins with Schelling is not so much a poetics of tragedy as what Peter Szondi calls a *philosophy of the tragic*, which has an almost uncanny persistence in the German intellectual tradition.<sup>6</sup> In Hegel, tragedy is employed to illustrate what he calls *die Tragödie im Sittlichen*, the tragic condition of modern ethical life. Against the alleged formalism of Kant and Fichte, the model of tragedy allows Hegel to diagnose the *amphibious* character of modernity, the diremption or, better, the self-diremption (*Selbstentzweiung*) of the individual subject from the substantiality of Spirit.<sup>7</sup> This tragic paradigm is most obviously evident in Nietzsche's early 1871 account of the birth of tragedy with its desire for a rebirth of tragedy through the music of Wagner, a desire self-criticized as an "artist's

metaphysics” by the later Nietzsche, although he maintains to the end the idea of art as a tragic affirmation.<sup>8</sup> However, this massive privileging of the tragic can also be found elsewhere in the nineteenth century, in the work of Solger, Schopenhauer, Hebbel, and, in a more complex way, in Kierkegaard, where the latter shows how the tragic must be overcome through humor, irony, and, finally, the leap of faith.<sup>9</sup>

## Two Paradigms and the Question of Finitude (Heidegger)

Moving from the German to the French context, I would like to focus on how this tragic paradigm is continued in Lacanian psychoanalysis, at least in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–60).<sup>10</sup> I think it is justified to say that, for Lacan, Antigone becomes the tragic heroine of psychoanalysis: she who does not give way on her desire, she who follows the law of desire, which is what Hegel would call “the law of heaven,” and follows that law all the way to her death.<sup>11</sup> We might say that Lacan is the psychoanalytic extension of the German philosophy of the tragic, and that he extends the tragic paradigm through his choice of Antigone as the heroine of psychoanalysis, as she who embodies the ethical imperative of psychoanalysis: *ne pas céder sur votre désir*.

If I am right in my suggestion that there is a tragic paradigm in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and I will try and make good on this claim below, then the critical question that follows for me is very simple: *what about the comic?* Is there not an Oedipus complex in post-Kantian philosophy, or an Antigone complex – at the least a Sophocles complex – that has the consequence of subordinating the comic to the tragic and hence marginalizing the phenomena of jokes, humor, and laughter?

But what is at stake in this question? The following, I think: returning to my opening sentence, if the post-Kantian settlement in philosophy has the consequence that questions concerning the ultimate meaning and value of human life pass from the category of the religious to that of the aesthetic – which initiates the philosophy of the tragic – then what is presupposed in this passage is the recognition of the essential *finitude* of the human being. That is, the question of the meaning and value of human life becomes a matter of what *sense* can be *made* from the fact of finitude. Given the collapse of the possibility – at least for “we moderns” – of traditional religious belief, it is a question of what forms of aesthetic production and creation might begin to fill the void left by the historical self-consciousness of the death of God.<sup>12</sup>

The critical hypothesis that I would like to explore is that the tragic paradigm in post-Kantian philosophy outlined above provides a way for thinking through the question of finitude, a thinking through which, moreover, *disfigures* finitude by making the human being *heroic*. This is a large claim and I can only hope to begin to substantiate it within the limitations of this essay. Furthermore, I would not want to advance this claim against all the authors mentioned above:

Kierkegaard stands as an obvious exception, not to mention the complexity of the treatment of the tragic in Hölderlin and its critical or, better, *zeitdiagnostisch* employment in Hegel and in the tradition inspired by him, for example in Simmel. My modest ambition here is to begin to develop this critical hypothesis by using the example of Lacan's Ethics seminar.

Simply as a heuristic device, I would like to propose two paradigms for thinking through the question of finitude: *the tragic-heroic paradigm* and *the comic anti-heroic paradigm*. As I have intimated, this tragic-heroic paradigm can be traced back through Heidegger and Nietzsche to elements within German idealism and romanticism. Let me try to clarify this in Heideggerian terms. In relation to Heidegger, the question of the tragic-heroic paradigm turns on whether death can be conceived as a *possibility* of the human being, of *Dasein*. In the Second Division of *Being and Time*, the condition of possibility for getting the totality of *Dasein*'s existence in our grasp, which is, in turn, the condition of possibility for authenticity, is that *Dasein* should be able to comprehend its end, that is, its death – *Sein-zum-Ende* is *Sein-zum-Tode*.<sup>13</sup> As Heidegger writes in the introduction to Division Two, “Das ‘Ende’ des In-der-Welt-seins ist der Tod” (“The ‘end’ of Being-in-the-world is death,” (234/276–77)). To be able to comprehend my death means that *Dasein* conceives of death as its own-most possibility, what Heidegger calls “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*” (250/294). When *Dasein* relates to the possibility of its death in the mode of anticipation (*das Vorlaufen*), then it is *free* insofar as *Dasein* has been released from the illusions of the Platonic cave of *das Man*. Freedom is “*Freiheit zum Tode*” (266/311). As Heidegger makes clear in the crucial later paragraph 74 on “The Basic Constitution of Historicity,” “Only being-free for death [*Freisein für den Tod*] ... brings *Dasein* into the simplicity of its fate [*seines Schicksals*]” (384/435). In terms that curiously recall the above quotation from Schelling's *Philosophy of Art*, through an anticipatory relation to its death, *Dasein* can freely assume its fate, its historicity, and achieve the individual union of freedom and necessity. Such is, as Schelling writes, the essence of tragedy and the core experience of the tragic hero, whether Oedipus or Lear. Furthermore, this fateful freedom, this “shattering itself against death” (385/437) as the basis for an understanding of historicity, is also the condition of possibility for a co-historicizing (*Mitgeschehen*) and for the determination of the community of the people (*das Volk*) as a destiny (*als Geschick* (384/436)). Of course, it is only a small step from paragraph 74 of *Sein und Zeit* to Heidegger's Promethean (mis)understanding of the relation between philosophy and politics some years later.

As such, authentically historical *Dasein* can “choose its hero”; that is, either choose itself as a tragic hero, a freely fateful being holding itself out into the nothingness of death, or choose *das Man* and hence fall back into inauthenticity (371/422, 385/437). These tragic-heroic thematics of authenticity are powerfully at work in Heidegger's above-mentioned and even more Promethean interpretation of the *Antigone*, an interpretation which seems to have influenced Lacan, as

we shall see presently.<sup>14</sup> For Heidegger, the second stasimon from the *Antigone* provides not only the “authentic Greek definition of the human being,” but also the basic trait of human essence, namely to be the uncanniest one (“*das Unheimlichste zu sein, ist der Grundzug des Menschenwesens*” (116/151)). Greek tragedy understands human essence as *to deinotaton*, as that which throws itself out into the uncanny, leaving behind the ground of history in the *polis* and becoming *upsipolis* or *apolis*. The tragic hero – and this is a word which is at the center of Lacan’s reading of the *Antigone*, where it is used to describe her transgressive splendor – is possessed by *ate*, the violent drive for truth that leads to what Heidegger calls “ruin, disaster” (“*der Verderb, das Unheil*” (116/152)). But the violent transgression of the tragic hero is also, for Heidegger, a *necessity* or *need* (*Notwendigkeit, die Not* (124/162–63)) insofar as it is only by opposing the inauthentic historical ground of the *polis* that *Dasein* can become authentically historical. Through the ruin of the tragic hero, history is literally *made* as the confirmation or verification of Being (*Als Geschichte bestätigt sich werkhafte das Überwältigende, das Sein* (125/164)). But, to return to the question of finitude, such tragic violence confronts one thing:

All this violence (*Gewalt-tätigkeit*) shatters against one thing. That is death. Death up-ends all consummation, it out-limits all limits (*Er über-endet alle Vollendung, er über-grenzt alle Grenzen*). ... Insofar as the human being is, it stands in the issuelessness (*Ausweglosigkeit*) of death. (121/158)

So much for the tragic-heroic paradigm. Having set up the latter, I would like to oppose it with a *comic anti-heroic* paradigm. As I will try to show, this second paradigm is based in the recognition not of the possibility of death, but of its impossibility. Against Heidegger and with Blanchot and Levinas, death is conceived as the impossibility of possibility: death is that in the face of which the subject is not *able to be able*. On such a view, finitude is not something that can be heroically assumed in a free fatefulness, but is rather something radically ungraspable, a weaker and ever-weakening conception of finitude. My intuition is that laughter, a certain sort of laughter, opens up this ungraspable and ever-weakening relation to finitude.

### Freud’s sense of humor and two senses of laughter

Playing off Freud against Lacan, the importance of the phenomena of jokes, laughter, and the comic is obviously something central to Freudian psychoanalysis, most obviously in his 1905 *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, a work which significantly influenced Lacan because of its extended attention to language.<sup>15</sup> If there is an Antigone complex in post-Kantian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis, then as a *Gegengift* we might recall Freud’s little aside in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud writes,

Once when the *Antigone* was produced in Berlin, the critics complained that the production was lacking in the proper character of antiquity. Berlin wit made the criticism its own in the following words: *Antik? Oh, nee*.

An analogous dividing-up joke is at home in medical circles. If one inquires from a youthful patient whether he has ever had anything to do with masturbation, the answer is sure to be: *O na nie*.<sup>16</sup>

The *Antigone* becomes “*Antik? Oh, nee*,” and then in the next paragraph “*O na, nie*,” onanism. Freud resolves the tragic-heroic paradigm into a wanking joke.

But more seriously, the importance of the comic is something that Freud recognizes even more acutely in his brilliant but brief late essay called “Der Humor” (1927), where he analyzes humor not from the economical point of view that prevailed in the 1905 Jokebook, but also from the perspective of what one might call a phenomenology of *Gefühl*, of feeling.<sup>17</sup> In the space of a few pages, and with the telegraphic conciseness of his late style, Freud shows how the phenomenon of humor is the contribution made to the comic by the superego. That is to say, in humor, the superego observes the ego from an inflated position, which makes the ego itself look tiny and trivial. As well as unwittingly recalling Jean Paul’s idea of the comic as that which opposes the sublimity of the tragic with “das unendliche Kleine,”<sup>18</sup> what should be stressed is that Freud’s remarks on humor constitute an unexpectedly positive development of the internal logic of narcissism which finally finds a positive place for the superego. Freud’s comic example in “Der Humor” is of a criminal who is being led out to the gallows to be hanged, and who remarks, “*Na, die Woche fängt gut an*” (253/161). In Freudian terms, the humor here is generated by the superego observing the ego, which produces a black humor that is not depressing but rather liberating and elevating. Freud concludes, “Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children – just worth making a jest about” (258/166). Hence, the narcissistic splitting of the ego not only produces the alternating pathologies of melancholia and mania, what Freud calls the endless “*Abwechslung von Melancolie und Manie*” (257/165), but rather produces humor – dark, sardonic, wicked humor. In this sense, I would argue, humor recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic affirmation but comic *acknowledgment*, not heroic authenticity but a laughable inauthenticity.

So, my question is the following: what might comedy tell us about the question of finitude? That is, might not our relation to finitude be transformed if we learned to laugh, and – crucially – not to laugh the golden Nietzschean laughter of tragic affirmation that so influenced Bataille, but a weaker Freudian laughter, a laughter that recognizes that finitude is not something to be affirmed, but acknowledged. For there is laughter and *laughter*. What I mean is that, on the one hand, there is the laughter of eternal return, laughter as eternal return, the golden Nietzschean laughter of tragic affirmation, which laughs in the face of a firing squad. A laughter that I always suspect of emanating from the mountain tops, a

*manic* laughter: solitary, hysterical, verging on sobbing. This is the ego bloated and triumphant in empty solitude. As Beckett quips in his *Proust*, “‘Live dangerously,’ that victorious hiccough in vacuo, as the national anthem of the true ego exiled in habit.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, there is the laughter of someone like Laurence Sterne or Samuel Beckett, but equally the English comic genius of a Frankie Howerd or a Tommy Cooper, which is more sardonic and sarcastic, and which arises out of a palpable sense of inability, inauthenticity, impotence, impossibility. Tommy Cooper was the magician that couldn’t perform a trick; Frankie Howerd was the comedian who couldn’t tell a joke. But – for me at least, but there is no accounting for taste – it is this second laughter that is more joyful (not to mention being a lot funnier), and also more tragic. As Beckett’s Malone remarks, paralyzed in his deathbed, “If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought.” Or as Stephen Daedalus remarks with what Joyce calls “saturnine spleen,” “Death is the highest form of life. Ba!” Provisionally – and doubtless rashly – one might say that the problem with the tragic-heroic paradigm is that it is not tragic enough and that only comedy is truly tragic.

*Contra* Lacan, to anticipate my conclusion, to live between two deaths is not to live tragically, but is perhaps the life of comedy, where finitude is not something to be affirmed by the tragic hero, but comically acknowledged. Antigone? *O na nie!*

### Acting in conformity with your desire – tragedy in Lacan

Let me now try and specify this all too huge a topic by turning to Lacan’s *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* and in particular to the final *séance* of Seminar VII, “The paradoxes of ethics ou as-tu agi en conformité avec ton désir.”

Lacan defines an ethics as a judgment on an action (is an action good or bad?). Now, if there is an ethics of psychoanalysis, then it is only to the extent that it provides a *measure* (an Aristotelian *metron*) for our action, a measure that would be able to guide judgment, some sort of criterion. It is clear that for Lacan this measure is desire, unconscious sexual desire in the Freudian sense. The imperative implied by this ethical measure – although I am simplifying the logic of Lacan’s text at this point – is *ne pas céder sur votre désir*. I think this explains Lacan’s anti-Hegelian closing comment in Seminar VII, that “The laws of heaven in question are the laws of desire” (325/375), namely that the laws of heaven for psychoanalysis, which provide a measure for ethical judgment, are the laws of desire.

Looking back over the course of the seminar, Lacan says that he asked his auditors to enter into a thought experiment by adopting the standpoint of the Last Judgment, namely to ask oneself the question, “Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?” (362/314) That is to say, the question of ethics is raised as a matter of the relation of action to unconscious desire. It is therefore a

question of what form or forms of action would be appropriate to desire. Which forms of action would be ethical? Of course, the rather circular answer to this question has already been given insofar as the only form of action that is ethical is the following: *not to act in such a way that you give way on your desire*. Now it would be something of an understatement to say that the precise normative consequences of this imperative are not exactly clear, although Alain Badiou has made some significant advances in this direction, as I discuss elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

In order to explain the relation between action and desire, Lacan has recourse to tragedy; namely, that tragic action might be an index for ethical action that would conform to one's desire. The ethics of psychoanalysis entails a relation to "the reality of the human condition" (351/303). This can be expressed with what Lacan calls "the tragic sense of life." Such a tragic sense of life has, for Lacan, nothing to do with what he calls "speculation about prescriptions for, or the regulation of, what I have called the service of goods" (362/314). The notion of "service of goods" is the position that Lacan also describes as that of "traditional ethics" (362/314), and is represented – dubiously, I think – by the person of Creon.<sup>21</sup>

With these precisions in mind, I can now turn to the passage I want to discuss. I quote at length,

It is in the tragic dimension that actions are inscribed and we are called to take our bearing with regard to values. Moreover, this is also the case with the comic dimension and when I began to speak to you about the formations of the unconscious, it was, as you know, the comic that I had in mind.

Let us say as a first approximation that the relation of action to the desire which inhabits it in the tragic dimension functions in the sense of a triumph of death. I taught you to rectify the latter as triumph of being-towards-death (*triomphe de l'être-pour-la-mort*), that is formulated in Oedipus's *me phunai*, where this *me* figures, the negation that is identical to the entrance of the subject supported by the signifier. This is the fundamental character of all tragic action.

In the comic dimension, as a first approximation, it is less a question of triumph as of a futile and derisory play of vision. *However little I have up to now tried to approach the comic with you* [my emphasis], you have been able to see there too the relation of action to desire, and of the fundamental failure of the former to catch up with the latter.

The comic dimension is created by the presence at its center of a hidden signifier, but which, in the Old Comedy, is there in person – the phallus. Who cares if it is subsequently whisked away? One must simply remember that what satisfies us in comedy, what makes us laugh, what makes us appreciate it in its full human dimension, not excluding the unconscious, is not so much the triumph of life as its flight, the fact that life slides away, steals away, flees, escapes all those barriers that oppose it, and precisely those that are most essential, those that are constituted by the agency of the signifier.

The phallus is nothing other than a signifier, the signifier of this flight. Life goes

by, triumphs all the same, whatever happens. When the comic hero trips up and falls in the soup, the little fellow still survives.

The pathetic side of this dimension is, you see, exactly the opposite, the counterpart of tragedy. They are not incompatible, since the tragic-comic exists. That is where the experience of human action resides, and it is because we know better than those who have gone before how to recognize the nature of desire that is at the heart of this experience, that an ethical revision is possible, that an ethical judgment is possible, that represents this question with its value of the Last Judgment – have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you? (361–62/313–14)

This is an extremely suggestive passage that would merit much commentary, but let me just attempt some provisional remarks both with and against the grain of the text. To understand the relation between action and desire, Lacan has recourse to tragedy. Now, Lacan goes on to make the extremely Heideggerian claim that the relation between action and desire in the space of tragedy functions in the direction of being a triumph of being-towards-death, *une triomphe de l'être-pour-la-mort*, which is simply the French rendering of *Sein-zum-Tode*. This reading of tragedy finds confirmation in an earlier series of allusions to Oedipus, where the words *me phunai* are interpreted in terms that recall Nietzsche's use of the wisdom of Silenus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, namely "plutot, ne pas être" (306/353) – the best thing is not to be born, the second best is to die soon. Thus, Lacan's thesis here would seem to be that tragedy provides an exemplary model of ethical action in conformity with one's desire, insofar as desire is bound up in a relation to death. Thus, the appropriate ethical comportment in the face of death is being-towards-death, where we act in such a way that we do not give way on our desire. Thus, one way of understanding the ethics of psychoanalysis is in terms of the aspiration to a Schellingian-Heideggerian correspondence between free ethical action and fateful deathly desire, that the subject should pursue the *Freiheit-zum-Tode* that is the core of tragic experience and the tragic-heroic paradigm for thinking finitude.

This line of thought is also connected to what Lacan says at the beginning of the penultimate *séance* about helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*, 351/303–4), where helplessness describes our fundamental relation to finitude. But helplessness is not described, as it was for Freud in the *Entwurf*, as the signal of anxiety. Interestingly, Lacan says that such a relation to finitude is "not so much *Abwarten* as *Erwartung*," that is, not so much the helplessness of waiting, but rather the passive openness of expectation or anticipation, something perhaps much closer to Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*. Thus, tragic experience is one of "absolute disarray" (361/304), where the tragic hero – Lear as much as Oedipus – finds himself "alone and betrayed" (353/305), cast out from the *polis* to become *upsipolis*, the uncanniest one who, in breaking with all familiarity, makes history. For Lacan, in this tragic ruination of the hero, a certain catharsis of desire is achieved. Tragic action achieves a purification of desire in relation to its object, namely death.

## Spectres of (Harpo) Marx – Lacan's sense of humor

I have chosen to analyze the passage above because it is one of the few places in Seminar VII where Lacan acknowledges and analyzes the comic. In contradistinction to tragedy, comedy is not the triumph of life, but "life's flight," "a futile and derisory play of vision." If the lesson of tragedy for psychoanalysis is that one should act in conformity with one's desire, aspiring to the fateful freedom of an anticipatory relation to death, then comedy *shows the failure of action to keep up with desire*. Comedy is the permanent suspension, postponement, or parody of catharsis, where all attempts at lofty, solitary heroism collapse into anti-heroic mirth – think of *Hamlet* performed by the National Theatre of Brent, or Peter Sellers's rendition of the Beatles's "A Hard Day's Night" in the guise of Lawrence Olivier playing a very hammy Richard III. Comedy is the eruption of materiality into the spiritual purity of tragic action and desire. In comedy, Antigone would break wind on the way to her death; feeling the flames about to consume him, the Cathar would suddenly see the point of St Augustine's refutation of Manicheism; Freud's condemned man would get a fearful erection on the gallows. The body, in all its dreadful fallibility, is the site of the comic. However, the revealing remark in the above passage is when Lacan admits, "However little up to now I have tried to approach the comic with you." Why so little time? Although one must obviously acknowledge the extraordinary difficulty of writing anything interesting, let alone funny, about comedy, might one not wonder why this is the case?

*Contra* Lacan, is it not rather that comedy opens a different relation to finitude, where, to use Lacan's own words, what makes us laugh is not the triumph of life, whatever that might be, but its flight, that life slips away, runs off, dissipates? The very phallus worn by the satyr in the old comedy is not some sort of patriarchal affirmation of male domination, but the signifier of flight, a sign of weakness, of the dis-possession of the phallus. The very comic exaggeration of the body, which one can find in the whole tradition of clowning, is what recalls the very weakness and vulnerability of the body. Rather than being overawed with the Promethean, monstrous magnitude of the tragic hero, in comedy we are presented with "the infinitely small," *the petit bonhomme* – Harpo, Chaplin, Keaton, Monsieur Hulot, Mr. Bean – who keeps tripping up and falling in the soup.

Let us recall the words with which Lacan concludes his central discussion of *das Ding*:

It is enough to evoke a figure which will be living to everyone of you, that of the terrible mute of the four Marx Brothers – Harpo. Is there anything which can pose a more present (*présente*), more pressing (*pressante*), more captivating (*prenante*), more disruptive, more nauseating, more calculated to throw into the abyss and nothingness everything that takes place before us, than the figure of Harpo Marx, marked with that smile of which one does not know whether it is that of the most extreme perversity or foolishness. This mute on his own is sufficient to sustain the atmosphere of placing in question and radical annihilation that is the stuff of the

formidable farce of the Marx Brothers, of the uninterrupted play of *jokes* (in English in original) that makes their activity so valuable (67–69/54–55).

As I said above, what Lacan is at the point of admitting here is that the relation to *das Ding*, as that relation with an inassimilable alterity that resists comprehension and which is constitutive of subjectivity and ethicality, opens in the experience of *jokes*, in the comic. Thus, if there is, as I believe there is, a tragic-heroic paradigm at work in Lacan's Ethics seminar, then there are also some resources for thinking against this paradigm within his own text.

What about Harpo? What or who is he? He is a fool. And what is a fool? A fool is a thing – an uncanny mixture of perversity and simplicity, of wisdom and stupidity, of familiarity and strangeness – who speaks the truth, often by remaining mute, *un mot muet qui fait mouche*, to recall Lacan's words. The fool is that thing that speaks the truth to power, that speaks in refusing the protocols of everyday, polite language: "Do you believe in the life to come?," "Mine was always that"; "Have you lived in Blackpool all your life?," "Not yet?"; "Do you want to use a pen?," "I can't write," "That's okay, there wasn't any ink in it anyway"; "I could dance with you until the cows come home," "Yes?," "On second thoughts I'd rather dance with the cows until you come home"; "Why, I've never been so insulted in my life," "Well it's early yet." And so on. The fool is that thing who does not speak to please the king, but who says, like Hamlet in his folly, "The King is a thing." In speaking thus, the fool says the truth. Of course, as Lacan realized, such is the topsy-turvy logic of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, and the traditions of both the folly of the cross and the divine fool that one can also find in Anselm's so-called "ontological proof" of the existence of God.<sup>22</sup>

Staying with Shakespeare, think also of Lear, an example all too briefly discussed by Lacan (352–53/305), who approaches truth through his folly in his nonsensically raving dialogue with his Fool in the famous storm scene. And note the figure of Cordelia in *King Lear*, an obvious, if more ambiguous, analogue to Antigone, who says "Nothing my lord," who refuses to speak, who says nothing *as* the truth, for to say more would be to lie. Of course, there is a venerable tradition within Shakespearean scholarship that identifies Cordelia with the Fool. The justification for such an identification is that the two characters never appear on stage at the same time, and therefore could be played by the same actor. But the tie that binds Cordelia to the Fool is perhaps even stronger and more macabre insofar as when Lear says, "And my poor fool is hung," the instrument of death is *la corde*, the rope.<sup>23</sup>

In relation to psychoanalytic practice, we might also think about the relative dumbness of the analyst, of the analyst as a fool: "Why do you like being an analyst?," "Because I can spend so much time looking out of the window." Or again, think of the comic silence of the analyst as anonymously related in the following anecdote about Lacan: a patient wanted to terminate his analysis with Lacan because it clearly wasn't working. But Lacan refused to have any of it,

insisting that the patient keep seeing him. Eventually, the patient decided, after several attempts to confront Lacan, to tell him he was leaving and simply get up and go. The patient left, descended the short staircase and walked out through the courtyard. Quickly glancing up to the window of Lacan's room, the patient saw him with a pot plant in his hand, which Lacan then threw at the patient; the pot narrowly missed him and shattered on the ground. In Jean Allouche's book, *52 bon mots pour Jacques Lacan*, the anecdote has an appropriate English title: *say it with flowers*.<sup>24</sup>

So Harpo is dumb, and yet in his muteness a word is articulated that hits the bull's eye – *il fait mouche en faisant mot*. And Lacan has a strong point here, namely that Harpo's wide-eyed dumb grin is extremely ambiguous, particularly with regard to its sexual intent. He is that impish, foolish mixture of perversity and simplicity, particularly if one thinks of his scenes with women in the various Marx Brothers movies, where his child-like innocence seems to be the veneer for a ravenous guile, a rapacious and probably perverse sexual desire. Thus, it is Harpo's ambiguity, his mixture of perversity and simplicity, hostility and familiarity, or vulnerability and menace, that corresponds to the structure of the *Nebenmensch* complex in Freudian terms. Harpo's face is a void that the subject cannot avoid, an abyss in which all attempts at comprehension or judgment are annihilated. Harpo stands over against the subject *als Ding*, his muteness blocks the subject's attempts at judgment and comprehension. In the endlessly surrealist play of the Marx Brothers, in the sheer calling into question of the subject who still laughs in a recognition that destroys recognition, an identification that annihilates identity, a relation to *das Ding* is opened. At the heart of laughter's complicity is hidden a relation of ethical *Fremdheit* that radically calls the subject into question.

## The Punchline

Let me conclude with some general reflections on laughter and comedy. Laughter is an acknowledgment of finitude, precisely not as a manic affirmation of finitude in the solitary, Nietzschean laughter of the mountain tops, but as an affirmation that finitude cannot be affirmed because it cannot be grasped. Laughter returns us to the limited condition of our finitude, the shabby and degenerating state of our upper and lower bodily strata, and it is here that the comic allows the windows to fly open onto our tragic condition. Tragedy is insufficiently tragic because it is too heroic. Only comedy is truly tragic. And it is tragic by not being a tragedy.

Pushing this a little further – maybe too far – I would even go so far as to claim that the sardonic laughter that resounds within the ribs of the person moved by what they find funny can be a site of resistance to the alleged total administration of society, a node of non-identity in the idealizing rage of commodification that returns us not to a fully integrated and harmonious *Lebenswelt* but lights up the comic feebleness of our embodiment. Laughter might here be approached as a

form of resistance, of critique, of the sudden feeling of solidarity that follows the eruption of laughter in a bus queue, watching a party political broadcast in a pub, or when someone farts in a lift. As an Italian street slogan expresses it, *una risata vi seppellira* (a laugh will bury you). Laughter is a convulsive movement, it is like sobbing or like an orgasm, it is involuntary, it sometimes even hurts.<sup>25</sup> It is contagious and solidaristic – think of the intersubjective dimensions of giggling, particularly when it concerns something obscene. In this way, perhaps, we might say that laughter in its solidaristic dimension has an ethical function insofar as the simple sharing of a joke recalls what is shared in our lifeworld practices, not in a heroic way, but more quietly and discreetly. One might begin to speak of laughter here with Shaftesbury as a minimal form of *sensus communis*. The extraordinary thing about comedy is that it returns us to the very ordinariness of the ordinary, it returns us to the familiar by making it fantastic, it returns us to the real by making it surreal. Comedy might be said to provide us with *an oblique phenomenology of the ordinary*. At its most powerful, say in those insanely punning dialogues between Groucho and Chico, comedy is a paradoxical form of speech and action that defeats our expectations, producing laughter with its unexpected verbal inversions, contortions, and explosions, a refusal of everyday speech that lights up the everyday: estranged, indigent and distorted, “as it will appear one day in the messianic light.”<sup>26</sup>

Let me return to my starting point in Kant. In one of those fascinating by-ways of the Third Critique, Kant writes, rightly, “Voltaire said that heaven has given us two things to compensate for the many miseries of life, *hope* and *sleep*. He might have added *laughter* to the list.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Kant might have added orgasm to the list, but the point is well made. However, if laughter compensates for the miseries of life, then it is not simply because it allows us to escape them, to compensate or *economize* upon the expenditure of affect as Freud claimed in his Jokebook. Laughter does not *just* economize upon expenditure of affect, it also indicates obliquely the source of that affect, as Freud was also well aware. If psychoanalysis shows us one Thing, it is that the It, the *Es*, the *Id*, speaks where there is pain. And maybe it only hurts when you laugh.

#### NOTES

1. *The Critique of Judgment*, tr. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 37.

2. Emerson, “Experience” in *Selected Essays*, ed. L. Ziff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 311.

3. *System of Transcendental Idealism*, tr. P. Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 12.

4. *Philosophy of Art*, tr. D.W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 273.

5. *Ibid.*, 251.

6. For Szondi’s definitive historical account of the philosophy of the tragic, which I follow here, see his *Versuch über das Tragische*, in *Schriften I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1978),

149–260, see esp. 151–210. See also Jacques Taminiaux's fascinating *Le théâtre des philosophes* (Grenoble: Millon, 1995), which begins, "De Schelling à Heidegger les lectures germaniques de la Grèce ont attribué une importance extrême à la tragédie." Taminiaux's thesis is to show how the German privileging of tragedy remains, with the sole exception of Hölderlin, determined by the Platonic subordination of *praxis* to *poesis*.

7. In this regard, see Christoph Menke's *Tragödie im Sittlichen. Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996).

8. For Nietzsche's reference to his earlier Schopenhauerian "Artist's Metaphysics," see his 1886 Preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, "An Attempt at Self-Criticism," tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 18–27.

9. For discussions of these authors, see Szondi, *Versuch über das Tragische*, 174–93.

10. *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, Livre VII, ed. J-A Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1986). *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Book VII, 1959–60, tr. Dennis Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 76. Subsequent page references given to original and translation in the text. Cited passages from the Ethics seminar have been retranslated. My reading of Lacan is restricted to Seminar VII. Although this seminar held a special place in Lacan's work – as is clear from the opening remarks of the Encore seminar, "It came to pass that I did not publish *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*" (*Encore*, Livre XX (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 9) – my interpretation could at the very least be complicated with reference to other texts of Lacan, perhaps most obviously Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, where the question of ethics is also discussed but with a different inflection. This essay is a first and limited attempt to understand these questions.

11. I borrow freely here from Philippe Van Haute's "Antigone: Heroine of Psychoanalysis?" (unpublished typescript, 1997). For discussions of Lacan's interpretation of the *Antigone*, see the contributions of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Françoise Durox, Nicole Loraux, Samuel Weber, and Patrick Guyomard in *Lacan avec les philosophes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991). See also Guyomard's more extended critical treatment of Lacan's *Antigone* interpretation in *La jouissance du tragique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992 [1998]).

12. This claim is analyzed in much more detail in relation to the theme of nihilism in my *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

13. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 15e (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984), 245; tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 289. All subsequent page references to original and translation given in the text.

14. *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 2e (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1958), 112–26; *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, tr. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 146–65. Further page references given in the text.

15. For a fascinating detailed reading of Freud's Jokebook, which is particularly interesting on the complexity of the Jewish dimension of Freud's examples of jokes, see Sarah Kofman *Pourquoi rit-on. Freud et le mot d'esprit* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).

16. *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1992 [1905]), 47. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Vol. 6 Penguin Freud (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 64.

17. "Der Humor" in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, 253–58; "Humour," tr. J. Riviere, Standard Edition, Vol. 21, 161–66. Subsequent page references to original and translation given in the text.

18. Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, 1804 & 1813 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1990), 105.

19. Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: Calder, 1949), 8–9.

20. See Badiou's, *L'éthique. Essai sur la conscience du Mal* (Paris: Hatier, 1993). See my "How not to give way on your desire. Notes on Alain Badiou's Ethics," in *Parallax* 6 (1998): 97–100.

21. As something of a provocation, might one not ask: is not Creon the true tragic hero rather than Antigone? For is it not Creon who, through the mediation of Teiresias, recognizes his error and turns himself around to freely confront his fate, thereby fulfilling the Aristotelian criteria for the tragic hero? Why, with the notable exception of Hegel, is the tragic role of Creon so systematically ignored in the Antigone complex of post-Kantian philosophy?

22. Lacan performs an *imitatio* of Erasmus in “La chose freudienne,” in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 408–11; “The Freudian Thing,” in *Écrits. A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977), 121–23.

23. See Lacan’s short, but extremely illuminating, discussion of the figure of the fool in Chaucer and Shakespeare (214–15/192–83).

24. (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

25. I here borrow here from Helmuth Plessner’s *Lachen und Weinen* (Bern: Francke, 1961).

26. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, tr. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 247.

27. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, 20.