

Oneself as an Enemy: Tragedy and the Dialectic

Alberto Toscano

Abstract: This article explores the speculative, historical and political relationship between tragic form and dialectical thought first by revisiting Peter Szondi's interpretation of the German Idealist invention of the tragic, and then by surveying the multiple articulations of tragedy in the writings of Henri Lefebvre. It proposes that a complex figure of self-enmity, individual and collective, defines tragedy's post-revolutionary dialectic, by contrast with the progressive politics of innocence and immediacy that bedevils much Leftist thought.

Keywords: dialectic – G.W.F. Hegel – Henri Lefebvre – Peter Szondi – tragedy

1. An army of negations

The modern, which is to say the *post-revolutionary* dialectic, is born of a confrontation with the *form* and the *idea* of the tragic – a confrontation known by shorthand as 'German Idealism'.¹

In his wonderfully economical and incisive *An Essay on the Tragic* (1961), the German theorist of literature and drama Peter Szondi, explicated how, ever since his earliest writings on natural law, ethical life and Christianity, the young Hegel had forged his comprehension of negation's dynamics through a powerful and multi-layered recoding of Ancient Greek tragedies.² Here, he was anticipated by his former roommates at the Tübingen seminary, Schelling and Hölderlin. In his 1795 *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, the twenty-year-old Schelling had advanced a bold and superbly anachronistic interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* as the drama of free will revealed in the throes of transgression (the anachronism was anatomised by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his essay on the intimations of the will in Greek tragedy³). For Schelling, the speculative lesson of Greek tragedy, crystallised and modelled by the arc of Oedipus' downfall, lay in what he termed 'the conflict of human freedom with the power of the objective world'.⁴ This conflict was mediated by a Christianised conception of *crime* and *guilt*; tragedy's sublimity came to be figured in a protagonist, a *subject* able to 'willingly endure punishment even for an *unavoidable* crime, so as to prove [his] freedom precisely through the loss of this freedom and perish

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1 It may be noted that the Platonic dialectic was in its own way shaped by a fantasised deportation of the tragic poets. The latter appear as rivals to philosophy's political-pedagogical project, purveyors of myths of conflict and spectacles of lamentation that could not but divide the city, the *polis* – as Nicole Loraux has magisterially demonstrated in Loraux 2002.

2 I have explored Hegel's appropriation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in his early theory of natural law in Toscano 2015.

3 Vernant 1988.

4 Schelling, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 7.

with a declaration of free will'. Where Schelling indicated in the assertion of freedom antagonised by fate the modern lesson of ancient drama, in the remarks that Hölderlin appended to his translations of Sophocles one encounters instead a speculative if enigmatic attention to the play of division itself. As he wrote:

The presentation of the tragic rests primarily on the following: that the terrible and the monstrous – how the god and man mate and how the power of nature and man's innermost depths boundlessly become one in wrath – is understood by this boundless union purifying itself through boundless separation.⁵

While in both Schelling and Hölderlin ancient tragic form anticipates the figures of modern, post-revolutionary negativity, their interpretations of tragedy in terms of the notions of *indifference* and *caesura* respectively keep themselves at a remove from the *historicization* of tragedy – a historicization mediated by the Passion of the Cross – which is arguably the precondition for the convergence of tragedy and the dialectic.

It should be noted that the extraction of a tragedy qua philosophical model is of enormous significance here, and that the young Hegel's use of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* is redolent with consequences: the taming of the nomadic and matriarchal form of justice embodied in the Furies and their patriation to Athens, in a mythical act of political foundation, plants the seeds of the state into this figure of negation.

It is thus in the shape Christian fate (so alien to Greek *Ananke* or necessity), that the young Hegel imagines modern tragedy. This fate, tellingly contrasted to Jewish Law, is 'nothing foreign like punishment' but rather, in an unsurpassable formulation, a veritable antidote to any progressive politics of innocence, 'consciousness of oneself, yet as something hostile'.⁶ It is striking that this crucial figure of 'oneself as an enemy' remains shadowed by the question of criminality and guilt. As Szondi highlights, it is with reference to a modern tragedy, namely Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, that Hegel develops this dark insight. 'After murdering Banquo, Macbeth is not confronted with an alien law existing independently of him', writes Szondi, 'rather, in the form of Banquo's ghost, he faces injured life itself, which is nothing foreign, but his "own forfeited life"'. And quoting from Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity*:

It is now for the first time that injured life appears as a hostile power against the criminal and mistreats him, just as he has mistreated others. Hence, punishment as fate is the equal reaction

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5 Hölderlin, quoted in Szondi 2002, pp. 12-13.

6 Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 17.

of the criminal's own deed, of a power that he himself has armed, of an enemy that he himself has created.⁷

The deep ambivalence of this dialectic is already in effect: on the one hand, a vital intuition of the non-identity of the subject, on the other, its inoculation by means of a super-egoic mechanism that presages the interiorisation of the state, the law, punishment – *you are punishing yourself, in the last instance*. In Hegel's cycling through the historical and aesthetic forms of the tragic, this inner, spectral enmity will be coupled with the more overtly political and frontal antagonism modelled after the clash of Creon and Antigone, anachronistic figures of the modern State and the modern Family. As he writes in the *Aesthetics* (in a passage that resonates with the treatment of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*):

The original essence of the tragic consists then in the fact that within such a collision each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*; on the other hand, each side can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and infringing upon the equally justified power of the other. Therefore, each side – in its ethical life, and because of it – is equally involved in *guilt*.⁸

Viewed from this Sophoclean vantage point, what is the dialectic? It is the speculative and historical effort to overcome the tragic, immanently; in other words, to pacify the *civil war in the domain of ethical life* which is the very matter of tragedy – not least in the fraternal carnage that plagues and pollutes the city of Thebes in the *Antigone*. To pacify, but not to neutralise, since, like the Furies-turned-Kindly Ones in the *Oresteia*, the energies of antagonism need to be captured and mobilised by the dialectical, which is to say, the conquering *polis*.

It is not too much of a stretch to couple the further adventures of the dialectic to the rediscoveries, revitalisations, and reprisals of tragic form, all keyed to different post-revolutionary conjunctures. Friedrich Engels's narrative of the prophetic defeat of Thomas Müntzer's theological communism in *The Peasant War in Germany*; Georg Lukács's wrestling with the metaphysics of the tragic across his conflicted conversion to communism; C.L.R. James writing and re-writing the

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7 Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 18. As Szondi notes, Hegel's figural and historical operations around tragedy make for disturbing short circuits, as in this passage from *The Spirit of Christianity*: 'The fate of the Jewish people is the fate of Macbeth, who stepped out of nature itself, clung to foreign beings, and thus in their service had to trample and slay everything holy in human nature, had at last to be forsaken by his gods (for they were objects and he their slave), and be crushed to pieces on his faith itself.' Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 21.

8 Hegel, quoted in Szondi 2002, p. 19.

Haitian revolution, in history and drama, between the 1930s and 1960s,⁹ as both the tragedy of Toussaint and the irruption of the mass chorus of the 'Black sansculottes'¹⁰ into history (while also creatively reviving the Hegelian legacy in his *Notes on Dialectics*¹¹); Aimé Césaire tracing the tragedies of decolonisation in the figures of King Christophe and Patrice Lumumba. The examples – or rather the critical models that tragedy provides for thinking dialectically the shifting forms of collective politics – could be greatly expanded. Through these models, one can sketch a dialectical-historical excavation of tragic form that locates its antagonisms (within the individual; between normative orders, classes, sexes, racialised groups) in different conjunctures of crisis. Among its defining elements are:

1. The attention, inaugurated by Aristotle's own poetics of tragedy, to *reversals* and *catastrophes*, now thought in the register of collective action: *how do revolutionaries become their own enemies?* How, to borrow from Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, does human praxis, diverted and ossified by its engagement with natural and social materiality, turn into a kind of *anti-praxis*?

2. The staging of seemingly intractable conflict, of *stasis*, of civil war.

3. The identification of the historical *transition* between political or normative orders as tragic form's generative force-field, as in C.L.R. James's annotation from 'Notes on *Hamlet*': 'It was Shakespeare's good fortune to live in an age when the whole economic and social structure was in the throes of revolutionary change on a colossal scale'¹² (this is an insight that matches many classicist's understanding of Ancient Greek tragedy as a product of crisis and transition in Ancient Athens itself¹³). The idea of tragedy as the political genre of transition, can also be conceived in terms of an art of the emancipatory aftermath, rather than the revolutionary event. As Aimé Césaire remarked in a 1969 interview around his play *The Tragedy of King Christophe*, 'liberation is epic, its tomorrows are tragic' (*La libération c'est épique, mais les lendemains sont tragiques*).¹⁴ What tragedy mobilises and nourishes, to borrow now from Suzanne Césaire's '1943: Surrealism and Us', is the 'massive

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9 Douglas 2019.

10 James 1984.

11 James 1980.

12 James 1992, p. 236.

13 See Meier 1993.

14 Quoted in Frost and Tavárez 2020.

army of negations' catalysed by the politics and poetics of anti-colonial insurgency.¹⁵

4. The effort to think through the figures taken by *fate* and *necessity* in modern capitalism: from Hegel's uncanny coupling of Aeschylus's Furies and the emergent forces of the market in his 1802 *Natural Law* essay¹⁶ to Max Weber's delineation of capitalist modernisation as a mighty coercive 'cosmos' determining the destiny of every individual born into its mechanism 'until the day that the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed'.¹⁷

2. Henri Lefebvre, theorist of tragedy

In what remains, I want to expand on these elements, widely if incompletely explored in the literature on tragic modernities, to touch on an author whose contribution to our conception of the dialectic destinations and limits of tragedy has been largely ignored, Henri Lefebvre. To the aforementioned elements, Lefebvre adds three interesting and important dimensions, which I want merely to enumerate here. First, an engagement with the powerful strand of modern anti-dialectical thinking about tragedy, in his 1939 book on *Nietzsche*. Second, a historical materialist analysis of the way in which the frozen dualism of a tragic vision can be the product of specific class trajectories, as elaborated in his 1953 treatment of *Pascal*. Third, the proposal that we may find in revolutionary practice itself, and namely in the festivals of the Paris Commune, a model of tragedy irreducible to the bleak dialectic of crime, guilt, debt and their interiorisation.

A. *Nietzsche, or the tragic dialectic*

Whether in his anti-colonial and anti-racist appropriation in the metaphysics of *négritude*, or his rediscovery as an anti-dialectical war machine in the early 1960s by Foucault and Deleuze, Nietzsche has often been seen to provide the most powerful antidote to the Hegelian and Marxist lineage that transfigures tragedy into the dialectic, ethical conflict into political revolution. Lefebvre's 1939 *Nietzsche* intervened into the debate on Nietzsche and fascism with striking sympathy and nuance, combining a conjunctural diagnosis of Nietzsche's tragic impasse with an effort to salvage the creative and disruptive dimensions of his thought. For Lefebvre, Nietzsche's effort to recover the Dionysian origins of a tragedy buried under the moralism and rationalism of a Socratic,

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¹⁵ Césaire 2012, p. 37.

¹⁶ Toscano 2015.

¹⁷ Weber 2002, pp. 120-1.

Christian, and now 'socialist' history was a product of the inability to live with the uneven, motley interregnum in which he was condemned to exist, after the compromised failure of the 1848 revolutions. Resonating with Ernst Bloch's contemporaneous analyses of proto-Nazi consciousness in *Heritage of Our Times*, Lefebvre painted a Germany unable to work through and overcome its past, buried in toxic psychic and social *survivals*, and dominated by an unholy alliance of feudalism and finance. An unjustifiable present thus goaded Nietzsche into the doomed effort to recover tragedy not as a spectacle but as an *act* and a *myth*. It also pushed him to try to attain a kind of purity – identified by Lefebvre as the tragic quality par excellence. The great weakness of the tragic philosopher is that he will be vanquished by everything he has left behind to attain this purity, and that this purity will be tainted by a nostalgic inability to traverse the present. As Lefebvre writes of Nietzsche:

His desire to fight the baseness and 'motley' character of Bismarckian society finds refuge first in the survivals of a patriarchal epoch, then in the memories of the Renaissance and Greece, then in the anarchism of Wagnerian aesthetes worshiping art for art's sake and the solitary genius, and, finally in the confused idea of a culture to come.¹⁸

As this philosophy of tragedy consolidates its anti-democratic insight that Greek culture was founded on slavery and domination, engendering a purified conception of violence, it also, according to Lefebvre, 'already expresses an emerging imperialism and unconsciously searches for a style for this imperialism'. But Nietzsche also intuited a tragic dialectic that could allow one to correct what Lefebvre deems the all-too satisfied speculative plenitude proper to Hegel with the experience of the 'irrational, inhuman moments of existence: struggle, risk, voluptuousness, conquest and death'. But this tragic dialectic always falls back with Nietzsche into the purifying affirmation of the irrational moment, the inability to give concrete form to a 'Third' able to transcend and transmute the tragic duality ('Dionysus the philosopher', 'Socrates the musician'). This impasse can ultimately be chalked up to Nietzsche's refusal to confront the fact that tragedy's singularity and force can only be truly appreciated if one is sensitive to its character as an art and form of *transition*, which, as Lefebvre notes (here echoing the contemporaneous comments by C.L.R. James on Shakespeare), presupposes the dynamic clash of historical worlds, the tension and anxiety thrown up by social forces in conflict. This tragic dialectic, though disavowed in his regressive fantasies of transvaluation, was grasped by Nietzsche in his lessons on the pre-Socratics, where he wrote of Empedocles that:

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¹⁸ Lefebvre 1939, p. 50.

In him two epochs fight one another, the epoch of myths, tragedy, the orgiastic – and that of the democratic statesman, the orator, the scientist.¹⁹

B. Pascal, or, the limits of tragic consciousness

Though somewhat more constrained by methodological orthodoxy than his *Nietzsche* (as we may suspect from the occasional footnote referencing Zhdanov or Stalin), the second volume of Lefebvre's *Pascal* reprises the method and orientation of the 1939 book. Pascal both discovers and betrays a tragic dialectic, ossifying it into an ideological, mystifying dualism. Critically sparring with Lucien Goldmann's contemporaneous study of Pascal and Racine, *The Hidden God*, Lefebvre rejects the idea of a 'tragic worldview' in which the individual thinker and his class (in Pascal's case, the so-called *noblesse de robe*) would communicate without remainder. This would be to lose the temporal unevenness without which both historical materialism and tragedy itself become unthinkable. By ossifying the abyssal juxtaposition of self and world, we

eliminate the conflicts, the contradictions, the deep (historical) reasons of 'tragic consciousness' (*conscience tragique*). We eliminate the terms that are opposed to the isolation of the 'private' individual, as well as the efforts at a resolution of conflicts. Archaisms, feudal feelings issuing from the clan or the family, feelings and values emerging from the old agrarian and urban communities – 'values' born from the competition and deployment of individual energy – social relations born from this competition – action of superstructures and the state – moral or aesthetic 'values' destined to throw a bridge over the abyss between the 'private' individual and the world or society – this vast and moving ensemble disappears. The individual is reduced to a kind of desperate void, a negative essence; and life, to some tragic instants.²⁰

A bad historical method is thus complicit with Pascal's own aestheticized ethics of human abasement, a mystified 'pseudo-dialectic' that traduces the philosopher's own scientific and proto-materialist insights into mathematical infinity the better to subordinate them to an inscrutable and all-powerful theological infinity, making of the human being a 'speculative monster' torn by contradiction, beyond, *or rather beneath*, any dialectical movement – in Lefebvre's own words, 'a broken infinite, at

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19 Nietzsche, quoted in Lefebvre 1939, p. 156.

20 Lefebvre 1953, p. 51.

war with itself'.²¹ In the final analysis, for Lefebvre, Pascal's tragic vision sees man *from the point of view of death* – whence the juxtaposition of two mottos. First, Pascal's: 'consider perishable things as perishable and even already perished'. Now, Lefebvre's: 'consider things being born as growing and even already grown'.²²

C. *The Commune, or, the tragic festival of the people*

Could this second motto be applied to the concern *par excellence* of modern tragedy, namely revolts and revolutions? That may be seen as a methodological principle behind Lefebvre's 1965 book on the Paris Commune (*La proclamation de la Commune. 26 mars 1871*), but only if we also incorporate into our thinking of emancipation the negativity, the suffering that accompanies this 'growth'. After all, Lefebvre chose as an epigram from *La proclamation* a speech by Herakles from Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, in which the hero speaks of his wasted body, caught in a net woven by the Furies, captive to unutterable bonds (in the French translation: *Venez, regardez, contemplez ce corps de misère...*). It is in a captivating discussion of the *style* of the Commune that Lefebvre introduces the theme of tragedy in a radically different key than the one applied to the philosophical and individual dramas of Pascal and Nietzsche, namely with relation to the character of the Commune as a grandiose collective festival (note that the criticism of Pascal and Nietzsche's undialectical philosophies of tragedy hinged on the way their *style* was a false resolution of real contradictions).

Tragedy here names the profound ambivalence of this festival, the festival of *community* becoming *communion*, as it mutates into a *spectacle*. Here we should note first, that this text was an object of polemical denunciation by Debord, whose own *Society of the Spectacle* came out two years later; second, and more significantly, that Lefebvre is creatively transposing the crucial insight of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, namely the latter's origins in collective popular ritual. By way of commentary of Karl Liebknecht's dictum regarding 'the horrible and grandiose tragedy of the Commune', Lefebvre produces a capsular theory of collective tragedy – one with fascinating resonances with Furio Jesi's study of the symbology of another defeated uprising, Liebknecht's own Spartacus rebellion of 1919.²³ As he writes:

We know that Tragedy and Drama are bloody festivals, during which are accomplished the defeat, sacrifice and death of the superhuman hero who has defied fate. Misfortune mutates into

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²¹ Lefebvre 1953, p. 117.

²² Lefebvre 1953, p. 221.

²³ Jesi 2013.

greatness and defeat leaves behind a lesson of force and hope in the heart purified from cowardly fears. ... Those who fought crying *Liberty or Death* prefer death to capitulation and the certainty of subjection. They continue to fight, desperately, madly, with boundless courage; then they light with their own hands the bonfire on which they want to be consumed and disappear. Tragedy ends in a conflagration and disaster worthy of it. ... Following to its very end and bringing to its ultimate consequences its titanic defiance, the people of Paris envisages the end of Paris and wants to die with that which is for it more than a stage-set [*décor*] or a frame: its city, its body. Thus the Festival becomes drama and tragedy, absolute tragedy, Promethean drama played without any hint of frivolous play, a tragedy in which the protagonist, the chorus and the audience coincide in a singular fashion. But, from the beginning, the Festival harboured the drama: a real and collective festival, a festival lived by the people and for the people, a colossal festival accompanied by the voluntary sacrifice of the principle actors in the course of its defeat, tragedy.²⁴

Coda: Catharsis

If the modern dialectic – be it Hegel’s, Marx’s, or that of their heretical heirs – can be seen to originate from a recombination and traversal of the elements of tragedy, we can also, following Lefebvre, trace the reverse trajectory, as the revolutionary dialectic comes to confront the new, *collective* dramas that follow upon its epic realisations. In his prison notes, Antonio Gramsci refunctioned a critical component of the Aristotelian poetics of tragedy, *catharsis*, to think the collective conversion of necessity into freedom.²⁵ As he details in the *Prison Notebooks*:

Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the ‘cathartic’ moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis, and the cathartic process coincides with the chain of syntheses which have resulted from the evolution of the dialectic.²⁶

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24 Lefebvre 2019, pp. 28-9. For a more detailed treatment of Lefebvre’s interpretation of the Commune as a ‘tragic festival’, see Toscano 2021.

25 Thomas 2009.

26 Gramsci 1971, pp. 366-7.

It is striking that in a late book on the problem of representation, *La presence et l'absence*, published in 1980, Lefebvre would also turn to this exquisitely complex, even enigmatic term in the arsenal of tragic thought, to define the liberating, demystifying potential that lies in viewing politics in a tragic key – shifting tragedy from the register of spectacular defeat, and of collective *sacrifice*, to that of patient critique. As asked himself whether all tragedies are not in the end fictions of power that 'show its failures and falls, its limits and contradictions ... Catharsis would then stem from the fact that that tragedy frees us from power, that is from the power of representations and the representations of power'.²⁷ It is fitting, to conclude, that this definition of catharsis could double as a précis of the dialectic, evoking the relentless sapping of the foundations of political illusion and the disclosure of our own complicities with power, our own hostility to freedom, even as we struggle towards emancipation. 'Among the enemies' names / write your own too.'²⁸

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²⁷ Lefebvre 1980, p. 73.

²⁸ Fortini 1978, p. 252.

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