

# **The Manoeuvres of Seriousness: Expelling Comedy from Philosophy and Politics**

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\*“serious” and “seriousness” here stand for the German word “Ernst”. Actually, the English “earnest” is more closely related to the German “ernst”, as will be seen below. But the English “serious” is much closer to the German word usage of “ernst” in literature, philosophy and politics.

**Abstract:** There is in modernity in philosophy, politics and literature an intense desire for seriousness, for a turn or return to seriousness, as if the old idea of the world as theater and comedy were also its reality. The home of seriousness is world history. But in modernity it too seems threatened by “edification” (Hegel) or laughter, as Napoleon’s words “Du sublime au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas” indicate. Hegel therefore demands to “get serious about recognizing the ways of Providence (...) in history.” Or Nietzsche announces in “Die fröhliche Wissenschaft” the “great seriousness” of the tragic for the coming time. Ernst is linguistic-historically a synonym of fight, duel, death. This philosophical and political seriousness is opposed to all varieties of irony, laughter, poetry, the comic, happiness, but also to the dispute of words, peace. So how serious are prominent thinkers of the 20th century, Adorno, Heidegger, Carl Schmitt or Ernst Jünger, about seriousness?

**Keywords:** seriousness, manoeuvre, world history, laughter, polemos, comic, ridicule.

## I

If there were that universal-historically educated ear of which Nietzsche spoke, the fine ear that listens at the “heart chamber of the will of the world”<sup>1</sup>, it would not hear any laughter of the will scattered and gathered again in the times and spaces. No laughter from the world history of the “res gestas”, the campaigns and battles, conquests and state actions, the revolutions and political murders would reach this ear; and just as little would any cheerful laughter reach the ears of the historians and philosophers of the “historia rerum gestarum”. At best, it is seriousness itself that laughs: bitter or hostile or tragic laughter, as Nietzsche tells of the wise Silen of the Greek folk tale, who, to the question of King Midas as to what is the very best thing for a human being, answers with raucous laughter that the very best thing is not to be born.<sup>2</sup> From the history of the world, Livius (XXX, 44), for example, reports that Carthage’s commander Hannibal, after his defeat by the Romans, reacted to the heavy tributes that the peace treaty cost with a laugh that, according to his explanation, came from a “heart almost insane from the shock of misfortune”.<sup>3</sup> Emperor Caligula explained his laughing fit differently, but similarly mad, according to Suetonius’s account<sup>4</sup> to two consuls who were his guests: All he had to do was nod briefly and they would both have their necks snapped.

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1 Nietzsche 1980, t. 1, p. 135.

2 *ibid.*, p. 35

3 “*prope amentis malis cordis (...) increpatis*”

4 Suetonius: *De vita Caesarum*. Vita Gai. 32: “*effusus subito in cachinnos...*”

In the 30 or so laughter scenes of the Old Testament, too, signs of hostility come almost exclusively from the mouths.<sup>5</sup>

In the world history of all three registers, of deeds, reports and thoughts, seriousness reigns. Leaf through the Histories of Herodotus, the war report of Thucydides, the Annals of Tacitus, Plutarch, Livius, Diodorus, Orosius, Otto von Freising, Gibbon, Michelet, Ranke, Mommsen, Burckhardt: kings, dictators, presidents, ecclesiastical and secular rulers come and go, but seriousness is the immortal sovereign of great history. All the more so in the *philosophy of history*, of which Hegel says that it has to “get serious about recognising the ways of Providence (...) in history.”<sup>6</sup>

If modern philosophy is serious about knowledge, then seriousness is not only the will to recognise the seriousness that prevails in the world; it has to deal with a world and history where seriousness is constantly threatened by comedy, irony, wit and ambiguity.

The threat of laughter comes from realisation. At some point, the thinkers opened their eyes and no longer saw any difference between the theatre and a real or political world. Subliminally, the old Platonism continued to run along, according to which the real world is only an untrue double of the realm of ideas, or, as it says in Platon's *Nomoi*, that people are puppets of the will of the gods, hanging by the strings of their urges (*Nomoi* 644b). But it was something new. Detached from Platonism, the metaphor of the world theatre, the “*theatrum mundi*”, experienced an astonishing career from the early modern period onwards, ultimately serving as a concept for the *representation of* almost all forms of knowledge. In the process, the theatrical metaphor sometimes dissolved its rhetorical structure, in that it was intended to mark not only the similarity, but above all the difference between false appearance and true reality.

But how can you show that something is not a pretence? Can one *show that* something is pure seriousness and not a game? Can anything at all be erased from the world, which is after all a theatre, or as Nietzsche thinks: a play for entertainment, for the “*g o l d e n laughter*” of the gods? Or has the image of the world as theatre long since contaminated the world to such an extent that it can no longer recover from it? More strongly than all utopias that wish for a world of equality and brotherhood, a world of justice, of perpetual peace, a classless world republic, modernity pursues the desire to have a serious world purified of everything theatrical. This desire for the world immersed in complete seriousness or rising in glorious seriousness is obviously a European dream that defines our modern history more deeply and powerfully, more seriously and more violently than any other political dream.

Literature knows many such dream scenes and bears witness to

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5 Cf. Roেকেlein 2002, p. 100f.

6 Hegel 1969-1970, t.12, p. 26 (my transl.)

them. One example is Jules Michelet's 1847 preface to his *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. The preface begins with Michelet's account of a scene that recurs every year. After the end of his lectures in July, the historian, as he writes, stops to think about himself. He questions the spirit of the Revolution about the work he is writing, and to give space to this contemplation, he walks through the quiet summer streets of Paris, his footsteps echoing on the pavement next to the Panthéon, his destination the Field of Mars. There he sits lonely on the dry grass at the edge of the great scene and immerses himself in the spirit of the revolution. He breathes deeply *le grand souffle*, the great blowing that passes over the deserted field: wind, emptiness, midday light and the lonely historian form this scene of remembrance.

“The revolution is inside us, in our hearts; outside it has no monument. [...] The Field of Mars is the only monument left by the Revolution. The Empire has its Column and, moreover, almost to itself, the Arc de Triomphe; royalty has its Louvre and the Invalides; the feudal church of 1200 is still enthroned in Notre-Dame; even the Romans have their Thermae of Caesar. And the Revolution has for a monument - the void.»

«Et la Révolution a pour monument... le vide...»<sup>7</sup>

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A scene opens up around the past revolution that shows only emptiness and that has left a palpable residue only in the *grand souffle* of the summer wind. Michelet has described the French Revolution as a vast unique spectacle, as a series of dramatic scenes, tragedies, comedies that replaced each other in rapid succession. Again and again, he sharpened the events between 1789 and 1796 into *scènes, spectacles, tragédies*. They are immensely comic and sublime. But it is not without paradoxes, for ambiguity lurks in all the great scenes. Michelet asks about the convocation of the Estates General in the spring of 1789: “What did Necker want? Two things at once: to be seen a lot and to do little”. But this mischievousness and cunning of Necker's smothered in bloody seriousness. The revolution passed over the stage of world history in scenes that repeatedly turned play into seriousness. Staging and comic failure, theatre and de-theatricalisation followed each other and devoured each other.

Here, in the summer of 1847, the historian once again immerses himself in the emptiness of the place and celebrates it as the monument of the completed revolution. It has left behind only emptiness. It has destroyed the traces of itself, nothing but spirit remains of it. The triumph of the revolution is shown in the fact that it has closed the theatre. It has ended a terrible laughter. Still in the first volume of his history,

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7 Michelet 1952, p. 1. (my transl.)

Michelet traces a memorable scene. He recalls the pathetic victims who, in ancient Rome, had to carry an egg through the arena past the teeth of hungry wild beasts for the amusement of the spectators in the Colosseum. In the figures of this “farce sublime et terrible”, which accompanied the terrible laughter of the audience, he recognises at the same time his fathers and brothers, Voltaire, Molière, Rabelais, who carried “la Liberté, la Justice, la Vérité, la Raison” past the cruel laughing enemies to the seriousness of the new age.

However, this triumph is endangered, Michelet continues the scene of memory, because contemporaries abuse the sacred field of Mars, where the mighty spirit of history blows, as a theatre of their amusements. And so the historian sets about enlivening this void with the ghosts and spectres of the Revolution. His book opens and closes once again this unique spectacle whose actors had set out and failed to put an end to all theatre, to all political theatre, and to impose definitive seriousness on the world.

This seriousness, this will to be serious, the sometimes radical will to be serious, goes as far as Michelet implies and dreams: to the triumph of emptiness, to the complete de-staging of the old world theatre. The French Revolution was not only serious in his eyes, serious with the destruction of the world theatre, with the de-comedialisation. What remained was only emptiness, only wind, this delusion of perfect unambiguity: becoming pure, unmediated presence. Of course, it is no coincidence that this moment takes place on the field of Mars, because the talk of seriousness is a *manoeuvre*.

## II

But what does “*serious*” or “*emergency*” mean? The German words “Ernst” and “Ernstfall” carry within themselves the semantic memory of the enemy. Linguistic history shows that the Old High German word *ernust* and subsequently the Middle High German *ernest* as well as the Anglo-Saxon *eornest*, which in turn gave rise to the English *earnest*, had the original meaning of “fight”, “death struggle”. The Old Norse word *orrusta* (battle) can also be traced back to a common linguistic root with *ernust* and *eornest*, but it developed different semantics than the English and German words. All the lexical entries for *ernust* draw the same trace in the history of language, namely the shift from the meaning “fight”, “duel”, “war”, “battle” to *ernust* as the *characteristic* of such fights.<sup>8</sup> Seriousness (Ernst) passes through this metonymy because it belongs to the decision of life and death. Seriousness (Ernst) opens up the bloody future arena, a Martian field where a decision is in the offing. So it is only from this punctual moment of decision, of a duel, that seriousness

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8 Cf. the article „Ernst” in the *Deutschen Wörterbuch von Jakob und Wilhelm Grimm*, t. 3, col. 923.

draws its semantic potential, namely to mark a moment, a discourse in such a way that it absorbs all ambiguity, all ambiguity, everything that provokes laughter. The *serious* duel in the sense of “Ernst” itself forms a scene where two parties demand unambiguity, where the dispute is decided as a problem of two. As one of two claims remains, the speech of seriousness results from the desambiguation, the self-presentation of seriousness results. Seriousness, the announcement of seriousness, indicates a discursive manoeuvre that desires to strip away the ambiguous, the non-committal, in the end even the linguistic itself.

The metonymic turn in the semantic fate of the German word “Ernst” became apparent early on. The history of language already provides corresponding evidence from Old High German times (before 1100). *Serious* means the real, the true, what is meant this way and not otherwise, the unambiguous, the opposite of joking and fun. With this semantic career, the old basic meaning was gradually lost. It could therefore be seen as a revision of this process, the metonymisation of *seriousness*, that the word *Ernstfall* was incorporated into the German lexicon in the 19th century. It is military experts who distinguish seriousness from exercise, from manoeuvre or, as an early record in the *Allgemeine Militär-Zeitung* from 1833 emphasises, from parades.<sup>9</sup> Now that *seriousness* (Ernst) has ceded its old semantic potential to the distinction of play, from joking, to the end of laughter, the new word *Ernstfall* again indicates the danger of decision and the proximity of death.

This brief linguistic-historical reminder reveals why the *Field of Mars* is a place of seriousness, the place where the end of all play is indicated. The Field of Mars in Paris, as we know, was laid out as a copy of the Roman Field of Mars, where this preparatory seriousness took place. The Field of Mars was used for exercise and manoeuvre. The two fields of Mars in Rome and Paris were therefore not places of decision, but of military exercises preparing for the real thing.

Now one could say: the talk of seriousness is a language game. It brings about a clarification in the world about the world and nothing more. It is a language game that indicates the termination of language games. The discourse of seriousness indicates that the enemy has no ontological foundation; rather, it is the result of a sudden transformation when one remembers that the enemy is, linguistically speaking, a former friend as indicated by the words *inimicus*, *ennemi*, *enemy*. Transforming the enemy back into a friend is also an easy manoeuvre. “Oh, mes ennemis”, Michelet had the spirit of the French Revolution lament in 1846, “il n’y a plus d’ennemis”. The seriousness is gone, because the enemies are gone.

There are more Martian field scenes. In Christian Dietrich Grabbe’s drama *Napoleon or the Hundred Days*, completed in 1831, there is no talk of anything but seriousness. The hundred days from the landing

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9 *Allgemeine Militär-Zeitung* No. 41 (22 May 1833), p. 324

at Cannes on 1 March to the defeat at Waterloo on 18 June run in the sequence: theatre, seriousness, theatre. Shortly before Napoleon arrives in Paris on 20 March 1815, the playwright once again calls all the parties of the revolution to the stage, the whole spectacle of the years after 1789 is *repeated*, and thus all those involved regard themselves and the others as comedians until Napoleon once again has the Constitution invoked on the Field of Mars on 1 May 1815 with the additional charter. Then battle scenes follow in which armies parade across the stage. In the fifth act, Wellington's entire army fills and overflows the stage, artillery and cavalry appear in formation, the general stands on the heights of Mont Saint Jean, and incessantly, as the stage directions state, French cannonballs *smash* into the huge army piles. This scene is not empty, but full. Then the drama is over. Napoleon has lost the battle and declares that now the seriousness is over. There are no more enemies for him either:

“Instead of the golden [age] there will come an earthen, crumbling one, full of half-measures, silly lugs and folly, - of course one will hear nothing of mighty deeds of battle and heroes, all the more of diplomatic assemblages, convent visits of high chiefs, of comedians, violinists and opera whores - - until the spirit of the world arises, touches the floodgates behind which the waves of revolution and my imperialism lurk [...]”<sup>10</sup>

Everyday political life, the comedy of the political, the theatre of diplomacy and the play of the media, theatre, music and opera, take their place. But a new apocalyptic seriousness, the seriousness of the apocalyptic announces itself in Napoleon's words. Grabbe puts a preview of the July Revolution of 1830 on the tongue of the beaten man. Napoleon speaks as the supreme authority of the world's seriousness, on which both art and politics hang. The seriousness will always return.

### III

But when did it start, the political laughter that is otherwise hardly to be heard in world history? When does this laughter begin to haunt politics and history? When does the old image of the world theatre become ambiguous and not stop wavering between tragedy and comedy?

Perhaps Emperor Napoleon provides the appropriate cue. When he got serious in 1812 and went to Warsaw to prepare for his long-planned Russian campaign, he talked to the ambassador there, Dominique Georges Frédérique du Pratt, who recorded the conversation. Du Pratt noted his observations about the emperor's excessive need to talk and his habit of repeatedly inserting certain phrases into his endless

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<sup>10</sup> Grabbe 1960ff., t. 2, p. 457f. (my transl.)

monologues. As if he suspected that he had just invented a catchphrase, the Emperor repeated the sentence “Du sublime au ridicule il n’y a qu’un pas” more than five times in his explanation.<sup>11</sup>

Napoleon was convinced that one had to know the ancient and modern tragedian poets in order to play a role in world history. He had memorised entire tragedies himself and liked to quote them. According to Talleyrand’s testimony, he explained the motive for this study to his visitor Goethe: “Une bonne tragédie doit être regardée comme l’école la plus digne des hommes supérieures!”<sup>12</sup> And therefore the emperor was inevitably a follower of Charles Batteux’s theory of tragedy, according to which what mattered in tragedy was the *height of the fall*: Only *hommes supérieurs*, rulers and heroes, were suitable as illustrations and examples of tragic fate and the absence of laughter. They alone guaranteed the cathartic effect of falling from the summits of power into the depths, as Batteux explained: “Le degré d’élévation où ils sont, donne plus d’éclat à leur chute.”<sup>13</sup> But this no longer seemed to apply when Napoleon, in the staccato of his sentences on the *sublime* in Warsaw, reduced the tragic fall from the sublime to the ridiculous to a single step. Once the depth of a well was considered the measure to trigger the anti-sublime impulse, for the primal scene of laughter at the fall of a great man is the fall of the philosopher Thales of Miletus, who had fallen into a well amidst the laughter of a maid. Since then, falling has been the paradigm for the laughter-inducing comic. Thus Hobbes writes in his *Elements of Law*, “To see another fall, disposition to laugh.”<sup>14</sup> The example of a dignitary who falls eliciting laughter is immortal and is also cited by Artur Koestler<sup>15</sup>, Elias Canetti or Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps a tragedy should only be performed once. In the modern age, the word about the tiny gap between the sublime and the ridiculous seems to come true in such reprises. Is this perhaps where the intellectual effort to expel the comic begins? In his *Lectures on the philosophy of history*, Hegel still believed that the upheavals of the state in world history were justified by repetition.<sup>17</sup> Recall Grabbe’s Napoleon drama, where a parody of 14 July 1789 is performed once more before the return of the exile on Elba. Marx, on the other hand, indirectly echoed

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11 du Pratt 1816, p. 215ff.

12 *Mémoires du prince de Talleyrand*. Publiées avec une préface par le duc de Broglie de l’Académie française. Vol. I (1754-1808). Paris 1891, p. 442.

13 Batteux 1764, p. 71.

14 Hobbes 1889, p. 48

15 Koestler 1964, p. 48.

16 cf. Friedrich 1999, p. 142 seq.

17 Hegel 1969-1970, (note 6), t. 12, p. 380.

Napoleon's oft-repeated aphorism in Warsaw, when he added to Hegel's words with regard to Louis Napoleon's coup d'état in 1851, according to which these repetitions were played once as tragedy and once as farce.<sup>18</sup> Now Napoleon had studied Plutarch's parallel biographies, in which Rome's great men are portrayed as doubles of the Greek heroes, and he himself regarded his appearances in world history as a renewal and completion of Caesar's mission. He also planned his Russian campaign as the fulfilment of a plan that Caesar was no longer able to realise. But that could go wrong.

The laughter about his fall resounded to Napoleon after his last defeat, especially from English caricatures. When he landed on St Helena in 1815 and it subsequently became known that his modest accommodation at Longwood was full of rats, this was used to ridicule the fallen emperor. An English caricature shows him riding a cat, with a group of frightened rats in front of him. The speech bubble has him declare: "Inhabitants of St. Helena, let's be friends. I declare you a free people. I give you as a pledge this faithful servant whom I have with me."<sup>19</sup>

#### IV

In the history of philosophy and politics, the manoeuvre of becoming serious, the turn to seriousness, has been repeated everywhere. René Descartes was perhaps the first to make such a turn in theory in his *Méditations* (1641). As he reported in the *Discours de la méthode*, he had exposed himself for years to all the temptations of doubt, ambiguity, literature, the world and all the "comédies qui s'y jouent"<sup>20</sup> in order to know in the end: There are universals that withstand doubt and all sensory illusions. Whether I am fooled by a dream or whether I pursue my activity of thinking while awake, through both worlds the figures of geometry and the laws of arithmetic do not change their shape. Whether I am dreaming or awake: two plus three is five.<sup>21</sup> This is an early turn of seriousness in the philosophy of modern times. Cartesian doubt ventured daringly into the world comedies, into the polysemy of signs, into the susceptibility of the senses to ghosts and chimeras, but doubt did this only to assure itself of the certainty of seriousness. The generalities, the forms of geometry, numbers, God, establish and secure the realm of a seriousness withdrawn from all doubt. Seriousness is the common elementary structure that encompasses all departments of the *res cogitans*.

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18 Marx 1985, p. 96-189, p. 96.

19 <https://shannonselin.com/2016/09/caricatures-napoleon-st-helena/>

20 Descartes 1953, p. 145

21 Ibid., (Note 19), p. 270.

The weariness of scholasticism and its language dispute that drove Descartes into doubt also dictated to Thomas Hobbes the charge that the gibberish of terms such as “hypostatic”, “transubstantial”, “consubstantial” or misleading ambiguous words only led to strife, turmoil and hatred.<sup>22</sup> Hobbes was also a bitter enemy of laughter. In *Leviathan* and the treatise *On Man*, he discovered laughter to be a sign of a lower affect: “*Sudden Glory*, is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called LAUGHTER”.<sup>23</sup> Since the 17th century, many intellectuals regarded laughter as contemptible. La Rochefoucauld boasted in his self-description of 1659 that he had been seen laughing no more than three times in the previous two years. And so Hobbes also expressed himself disparagingly about this affect. He counts laughter among the signs and sounds of the state of nature.<sup>24</sup>

Mars fields and civil wars are the sites of the state of nature. And the polysemes that trigger quarrels make them grow. War forces decision and unambiguity. Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel continues this thought in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There he attacks, among other things, contemporary theology and its idea that the divine work is a *game*:

“The life of God and divine knowledge may thus be pronounced as a game love play with itself; this idea sinks to edification and even to blandness if the seriousness, the pain, the patience and labour of the negative are lacking in it.”<sup>25</sup>

This turn from love to seriousness, which is the life of God, allows Hegel’s speech about the “seriousness of the concept”<sup>26</sup> to be recognised at the same time as a variety of those philosophical manoeuvres that announce seriousness as the negativity and the overcoming of all edifying words and thoughts that have become corrosive through the influence of time. The “seriousness of the concept” likewise strides “smashing” over the heroes in tragedy and saves him from all laughter.<sup>27</sup> His polemic against the edifying ideas of Eternal Peace also shows their warlike will in the famous addition to § 324 of the *Philosophy of Right*. There it reads:

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22 Hobbes 1981, p. 116f.

23 Ibid., (note 22), p. 125.

24 Hobbes 1991, p. 114.

25 Hegel 1969-1970 (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in: *Werke* (note 6), t. 3.), p. 24. (my transl.)

26 *ibid.*, p. 14

27 *ibid.*, p. 535.

“One hears so much talk in pulpits about the insecurity, vanity and unsteadiness of temporal things, but everyone thinks, however touched he is, I will still keep what is mine. But when this insecurity really comes up in the form of hussars with bare sabres, and if it is serious, then that touched edification which foretold everything turns to pronouncing curses on the conquerors.”<sup>28</sup>

There is, Hegel explains, the speech of the uncertainty or change of things. But it remains stuck in ambiguity, in ambiguity, because something quite different is its “coming into speech”. This “coming to speech” ends all language games. The soldiers with the bare sabres translate the edifying speech into bloody seriousness. Philosophy is the manoeuvre of this seriousness that will spread over the world.

The definitive seriousness is the end of history. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a scene comes to an end where, on Golgotha’s hill of the dead, the definitive earnestness of spirit closes all manoeuvres of certainty, consciousness and self-consciousness. End of art, end of unseriousness, end of all manoeuvres. Golgotha is Hegel’s field of Mars, above which le *grand souffle* of the spirit comes to rest.

With a similar trombone blast of programmatic, self-explanatory seriousness, Friedrich Nietzsche concluded the “Preface to Richard Wagner” to the *Birth of Tragedy in 1871*. He had gathered the thoughts of this book in the “horrors and sublimities of the war that had just broken out.”<sup>29</sup> And to the address of a public still edified by the ambiguity of cheerful art and serious life, Nietzsche declares that for him there is no problem *more serious* than that of art. The gesture of the tragedy writing can be entirely rewritten according to this manoeuvre, that it is about tearing the veils of appearance and letting the seriousness of the world appear. But all this would remain only a game if it were only a game of irony and seriousness, as Karl-Heinz Bohrer said.<sup>30</sup> It is not Romantic irony but the political seriousness of a Hölderlin, a Kleist and the philosophical seriousness of Hegel that set the tone. Kleist’s suicide, Hölderlin’s madness, the anti-Napoleonic furore give expression in this epoch to the seriousness that no longer wants to be a manoeuvre. The young Schiller reader Friedrich Staps, who tried to kill Napoleon at Schönbrunn in 1809, refused to obtain Napoleon’s mercy through a theatre of regret and preferred to be shot.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the student Karl Ludwig Sand stabbed

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28 Hegel 1969-1970 (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, in: *Werke* (note 6), t. 7,) p. 492f. (my transl.)

29 Nietzsche 1980, (note. 1), p. 23.

30 Bohrer 2000.

31 Ernst Borkowsky: Das Schönbrunner Attentat im Jahre 1809; mit Benutzung der geh. Police Files of the Franz. National Archives in Paris, Naumburg an der Saale o.J.

the comic poet August von Kotzebue to death in March 1819. In his 1872 lectures on the *future of our educational institutions*, Nietzsche still described this assassination as the “tragically serious and only instructive attempt” to open up the “dark flashing, fertilising, blessing cloud” of the “true German spirit”.<sup>32</sup> Ten years later, Nietzsche announced an even truer, downright *inhuman* spirit in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, which would dismiss everything “that had hitherto been called holy, good, untouchable, divine” as a *game*. The previous earthly seriousness would then only appear as a parody. For then “the great seriousness” would begin and the tragedy would begin.<sup>33</sup> With a view to his coming philosophy, Nietzsche could also announce the *Superseriousness* (“Überenst”). Nietzsche, on the other hand, hears the “inhuman spirit” of the gods laughing in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. He has no doubt that the gods know how to laugh in a “superhuman and new way - and at the expense of all serious things!”<sup>34</sup> The expulsion of laughter is followed by the expulsion of the old earth-seriousness. Nietzsche is thus far ahead of his contemporary exorcists of play, laughter and comedy.

## V

In *Negative Dialectics* of 1966, Adorno writes: “Philosophy is the most serious thing, but not that serious.” Previously, with a view to Hegel, he had determined the paradox of how little thought approaches what is thought “and yet must speak as if it had it all. This approaches it to clownery”.<sup>35</sup> Thinking must always allow itself to be asked how serious it is. Thinking must allow itself to be asked whether it is play or merely manoeuvre. Walter Benjamin reports on such a courtroom scene in his notes from his 1934 holiday in Svendborg with Bertolt Brecht. In it, he records a statement by the playwright that allows a glimpse into Brecht’s inner conscience. The poet speaks there:

“I often think of a tribunal before which I would be questioned: ‘How’s that? Are you actually serious?’ I would then have to acknowledge: I’m not completely serious. I also think of too many artistic things, things that benefit the theatre, for me to be completely serious.”<sup>36</sup>

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32 Nietzsche 1980 (*Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten. Fünfte Rede*, in: *Sämtliche Werke* (note 1), t. 1) p. 732f.

33 *Ibid.*, (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in: *Sämtliche Werke* (note 1), t. 3.) p. 635.

34 *Ibid.* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in: *Sämtliche Werke* (note 1), t. 5.) p. 236.

35 Adorno 1975, p. 26.

36 Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rudolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Theodor W. Adorno u. Gershom Scholem, Frankfurt am Main 1974ff, t. VI, p. 524f. (my transl.)

This non-seriousness of his art, the conversation continues, distinguishes Brecht from the so-called substance poets, who are quite serious: Kafka, Kleist, Grabbe, Büchner, whom, however, he regards as failures. Now, in 1934, however, this own unseriousness or half-seriousness will prevent him, Brecht fears, from speaking *seriously*. He lets it be known that his lack of seriousness has disqualified him for seriousness. He admits that we no longer believe his seriousness. Benjamin Brecht goes on to record that the same effect would have occurred if Confucius had written a tragedy or Lenin a novel. Literature, literary manoeuvres of language, would have ruined the speech of these men; they would no longer have been able to perform the great decisive turns of seriousness that are otherwise associated with their names. That is the point of this comparison. Once Brecht and never again Lenin. Before Walter Benjamin's court, Brecht admits that he was never entirely serious. So his speech, as would be necessary now that Hitler has become serious, now that Hitler's seriousness has turned Germany into a field of Mars, can no longer take itself seriously. The game, the literary game, the word game, can literally gamble away the seriousness. Whoever wants to make a revolution, whoever wants to declare a war, must not have first disempowered his speech through irony and play. Even if play can always turn into seriousness, non-seriousness can lead to the impotence of law. In fact, Hitler, who disavowed parliamentarism as ridiculous theatre and instead, as Volker Ackermann has shown<sup>37</sup>, elevated the funeral ceremony to the centre of political representation, brought the serious, the serious speakers and serious thinkers to his side: Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger.

Seriousness, to say this here against all misunderstandings, the duel (Ernst) of seriousness, is not a fascist thing, it is not politically or morally disavowed. On the contrary, seriousness is probably the deep, enigmatic, infinite secret of modernity. This is shown by the exemplary scene that is called up in Horkheimer/Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the fall of reason and analysed as the distant founding moment of fascism. It is the moment when reason, in an act of violence, detached itself from the power of nature and from the embrace of myth, where it set itself as difference and entered into violent opposition to the mythical powers.<sup>38</sup> This was the process of disenchantment. The displacement of myth led to its violent return. Fascism, the hitherto singular combination of technology, violence and myth, abandoned this great terrible legacy. Adorno now finds the beginning of this story inscribed in the narrative of the encounter of Odysseus and the Sirens.

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37 Ackermann 1990

38 Horkheimer & Adorno 1988.

For Adorno, the encounter between Odysseus and the Sirens is a primal scene. Here, a hero gifted with reason and the most tenacious will to survive escapes the power of nature. He escapes from seriousness because he escapes from decision. The sirens are, after all, nothing but an embodiment of the powers of nature, the beautiful, violent powers of nature. The powers of nature, Adorno thinks, have a claim to the duel. But what takes place is a duel without a fight. Reason does not fight, but outwits. But the victory of reason without a fight, Adorno thinks, will be a Pyrrhic victory. Odysseus, chained to the mast, who can only force the enjoyment of nature through the duel that has been transferred to his inner self, through the violent peace of reason, is the symbol of this separation. It is the “foreboding allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment”.<sup>39</sup> The domination of nature is the violence of the will to live. It sacrifices pleasure and escapes danger, for in the rational exchange death is exchanged only for the fullness of life. The sacrifice is erased from thought.

But what about art? “Since Odysseus’ happy-miserable encounter with the Sirens, all songs have been diseased, and all Western music is labouring under the contradiction of song and civilisation (...)”.<sup>40</sup> This is the unserious theatre. Song is no longer an event, but a game framed by the will to enjoyment. For the sirens, their singing is their profession, their nature, their seriousness, their reality. But because the artifice and the medium of contemplation interpose themselves between this song and its addressee, who can actually only participate in this seriousness through his death, this song is diseased. It is the disease of art, which alone is still play. You could call it manoeuvre sickness. The sirens of the harmony of the spheres sing as well as the moirs because this is the sound of the world. Song was once the *grand soufflé* of the winds or the roar of the sea.

## VI

This reading of the *Odyssey* in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the unjust, fatal, cunning, pacifist avoidance of the struggle with the forces of nature imagined there, shows a very obvious closeness to the turns of seriousness in the thinking of the German theorists of war, seriousness and the enemy: Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger. Admittedly, these three authors have quite different enemies in mind. And yet a common enemy schema can be discerned that carries their discourse. A first example that suggests itself here is Martin Heidegger’s *Parmenides Lecture* from the winter semester of 1942/43. The lecture

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39 *ibid.*, p. 69.

40 *ibid.*, p. 67.

turns against modern thought, or as Heidegger puts it: against the “immuring of *alātheia* in the Romanesque bulwark of *veritas*, *rectitudo* and *iustitia*”.<sup>41</sup> Heidegger presents the history of metaphysics here as the worldwide seizure of power by the legal Roman distinction between true and false. This Roman *verum* and its opposite, the *falsum*, encircled the original Greek terms *alāthās* and *pseudos* in imperial form and reversed their essence. The Roman encirclement of *alāthās* took place through the adoption and falsification of Greek word usage. Heidegger’s example is the Livius phrase “*fallit hostis incedens*” (unnoticed the enemy approaches). The Roman understanding, however, inverts “unnoticed” in the sense of “hidden”, into “deceiving” or “going behind”.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the ambiguous Greek word pair *hidden / unhidden is* reinterpreted into the unambiguous Latin relation of *true / false*. The Livius example of the hidden enemy stands as a model for the whole line of thought in the *Parmenides Lecture*. Heidegger’s polemic against the metaphysics of the world-encompassing *iustitia* of a mundial *pax* is thus a war against entrenchment, against the denial, depolemisation of truth. The lecture of 1942/43 repeats the war that is always effective in the *alātheia* itself. For in § 2 of the lecture, there had previously been talk of the fact that the essence of truth, in itself, *is polemos*: dispute. The Heraclitean dictum of war as the “father of all things” means, with Heidegger: “The *polemos* is the clearing (“*Lichtung*”)”.<sup>43</sup> Truth is serious, truth is the inner strife of concealing and unconcealing. Here Heidegger also suggests that this strife belongs to the agonal of Greek culture rediscovered by Burckhardt and Nietzsche. The quarrel, the war and, one may add: the seriousness of Greek truth are based on the contradiction of concealment and unconcealment, as a struggle of forgetting and reflection.

In Heidegger’s *Parmenides Lecture*, the term “seriousness” is not used, even though “seriousness” is mentioned several times. But it would require an explanation that goes too far to find this Heideggerian seriousness in the context developed here. It is rather significant that behind this very figure of the enemy or enemies there is hidden a particular enemy, an actual enemy, which for its part has an inverted figure. The enemy called *falsum*, whose name is followed by other pseudonyms such as “truth”, “justice”, “technology”, falsity is the result of a process in world history where the empire of truth has developed from the dispute (*polemos*). Heidegger describes here a seizure of power that is structurally similar to the process described by Horkheimer and Adorno. Whereas in the analysis of the siren episode in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* it was the violent closure of the agon between nature and man, the becoming of the

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41 Heidegger 1992, t. 54, p. 72.

42 *ibid.*, p. 61f.

43 Heidegger 1954, p. 249-274, p. 269.

object of art, the enthralling of art, Heidegger analyses the enthralling of the *polemos* and the becoming of the object of truth as *verum*.

It is now inevitable that the *serious case* (Ernstfall) that Carl Schmitt develops in his 1932 treatise *The Concept of the Political will* also come up. Heidegger's and Schmitt's thoughts go in the same direction. Both inherit the turns towards seriousness that are prominently associated with the names of Hegel or even Kierkegaard. Schmitt's whole effort in 1932, as is well known, amounts to tying the political to the presupposition of the opposition of friend and foe. The political cannot go back behind this opposition, nor can it abolish it without abolishing itself. Therefore, as Schmitt writes, it is a matter of holding on to the "reality in terms of being and real possibility" of this distinction. The distinction is supposed to lead into the real, concrete, being-like this side of an otherwise "completely moralised and ethicised world".<sup>44</sup> Although a world without this elementary difference is also conceivable for Schmitt, it would be a world without politics. Perhaps it would be a comic world? The by no means simple proof of this thesis then leads via a series of linguistic findings, including the word family of Latin *hostis* and Greek *echthros*. Even more important to Schmitt is the proof that all political concepts, ideas and words have a "polemical sense". War is already rooted in the lexicon of the political; all political semantics presupposes this opposition of friend and foe. As truth is for Heidegger, for Schmitt the political is at its core divisiveness and seriousness.

Schmitt's reflections are, of course, too complex to be presented here in extenso. They are, after all, largely known. Schmitt's readers know and recognise from their own seriousness that the polemical sense, which according to Schmitt constitutes the political, also pervades his treatise. The "concrete and being" reality does not alone constitute the political world that the treatise sets its sights on; rather, the writing itself participates in the manoeuvre it describes. The treatise and representation of the polemic, of killing and being killed, the grounding of the political in discourse, carries out this polemic itself. Schmitt's serious war aims to secure the possibility of war. This is what his axiomatic sentence says: "political, in any case, is always the grouping that is oriented towards the serious".<sup>45</sup> The enemy that appears in Carl Schmitt's polemical manoeuvring field is the collective name of all tempters who seek to steer the world into the perspective of a universal peace, a universal legal order. Nothing is more hateful to Ernst than the thought, or rather the thinker, of such a peace. Peace is for him, as Grabbe's Napoleon already said, a comedy, when the seriousness is war. One might think that it is the hostile figure of a political theory; but

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44 Schmitt 1963, p.

45 *ibid.*, p. 39.

this seriousness is determined by an enemy who strives to eliminate the seriousness and with it the political itself. But if this is so, where does the friend appear in this configuration? Is friendship, then, comedy? Who else but the speaker, the writer, the tongue that lets words slip into the world in the first place, are the friend? Jacques Derrida has posed this question about the equivalence and logical uniformity of the two members of Schmitt's divided friend/enemy pairing.<sup>46</sup> The aporia of this treatise, which itself wants to be a *serious case*, becomes apparent at another point. For the serious case of the serious case, which fills the whole world, is the exceptional case (Ausnahmefall). But the exception, and this problem encompasses the entire doctrine of sovereignty, is rare; as Schmitt himself explains, it is becoming increasingly rare. It is only in this rarity that Schmitt sees the "particularly decisive and revealing core significance" of the exception.<sup>47</sup> The rarer, the more significant. Here too, as with Heidegger, an earnestness/seriousness that tends to elude history or even teleology is preserved with a universally polemical gesture. In war, something discloses itself, something reveals itself, and the possibility of this revelation must be secured. The war of the treatise is about preserving the seriousness, and the seriousness of the treatise steps in for this. Otherwise the world would turn into an unreal second deceptive spectacle. That would be the world of peace (of comedies).

Paradoxically, Schmitt wants to save this type of serious in order to ward off another type of *polemos*, the odious conflicts of absolute enmity. They form, as he perhaps clairvoyantly recognises, the flip side, the future polemic flip side of an order that encompasses the world and depoliticises, depolemises the world, of a "pacified globe". This would be, says Schmitt, a world without anthropological ground, it would be a fictitious unreal world. Without the intensification of opposites to the point of friend and foe, there will be no politics, there will be no bloodshed, no killing, there will be no more seriousness. The forces that come into play seem much more dangerous, as Schmitt's treatise on the partisan will later show.

In these fragmentary remarks, then, the aim was to make the turn to seriousness recognisable as a modern gesture in philosophy, art and politics. These proofs and very shorthand analyses leave open the question of to what force, indeed perhaps to what seriousness, this stereotypical movement can be attributed. Similar to Georg Büchner's Danton's question, "What is that in us that hurts, steals and lies?" similar to Danton's question about the anthropological substrate of the false or evil, the question about the nature of seriousness could follow here: What is it that demands the turns of seriousness in us moderns? Is there perhaps a desire for seriousness that masks something else? With this

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46 Derrida 1994 (. )

47 Schmitt 1963 (note 44), p. 28.

question, one should go back the way to psychoanalysis, admittedly not out of revisionism (how can one revise seriousness?), but in order to make progress. Especially since the question was posed by the seriousness theorists themselves as an anthropological question. With the psychoanalyst and jurist Pierre Legendre, the responsibility for this question can be reclaimed: The anthropological ground is the theatre.<sup>48</sup> The desire for seriousness, the desire for seriousness that not only unsettles modernity but literally drives it into wars and elevates the experience of war to the highest, only certainty of *seriousness*, this desire for the *Great Seriousness* is not content with securing the unambiguousness of speech, with bringing language back into naming, with peeling language out of the medial, out of polysemy, out of deception, with definitively strangling the eternal *as if* in the duel of seriousness. The deep desire of seriousness is silence. Michelet's commemoration on the Field of Mars stages such a silence. Silence spreads over Hegel's Golgotha. The end of philosophy, as Heidegger announced it, is silence. The fire that reduced books and the Reichstag to ashes in 1933 wanted silence. Silence is the end, the goal, the moment of seriousness. Silence gives the certainty that there is no theater. Here is a short passage from the essay of an author who himself bears the first name Ernst. It is Ernst Jünger's essay *Feuer und Blut* (*Fire and Blood*), which, according to the *works*, first appeared in 1925. Here the author gives a diary-like account of a battle in 1914 on about 100 pages, and the account does not differ much from similar texts in *Stahlgewittern* or *Wäldchen 125*. The context is also irrelevant, because the reflection is so general that it could appear anywhere in Jünger, in the younger Jünger. The short meditation belongs to the preliminaries of a battle and constitutes an attempt to put the impending seriousness into a historical, ontogenetic, phylogenetic and cosmic perspective:

“Every time has its tasks, duties and pleasures, and every time also has its adventures. And every time also has a youth that knows its hour and loves adventure, in which the child's colourful play is given meaning by masculine seriousness. That is where the real meaning of life must lie, in the movement through a space filled with a thousand dangers, as it takes place in every drop of water, where light-green and crystal-clear bodies draw their ever-threatened courses under the same vibration that moves us.

Certainly, it is bitterly serious. But the adventure is the splendour that lies above the threat. The task is life, but the adventure is poetry.”<sup>49</sup>

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48 Legendre 1994 (Leçons III).

49 Ernst Jünger: *Feuer und Blut*, in: E.J.: *Werke*. Stuttgart o. J., t. 1. Tagebücher 1, p. 477seq.

This perspective is Nietzschean, in any case it is radically aesthetic. According to Jünger, seriousness is the male, adult version of childlike play. Play forms the preparation, play is the school of seriousness. Play is the manoeuvre. Seriousness, on the other hand, is the essence, the poetry of life. All turns of seriousness, all talk of the serious call up the absolute aesthetic. This absolute aesthetic pursues nothing but the solemn restoration of the world as original. The more serious the self-declaration of seriousness, the stronger the pathos of reference, the more radical the language game that announces the end of all language games, the clearer the disgust at a second-hand world, at the mediality of experience, at a language that has become insipid, at a discourse that loses itself in polysemy. Jünger's poetry, however, does not want to be literature, but an element of life itself. Literary poetry even forms an opposition, the hostile opposition to the poetry of action. In his essay *The Struggle as an Inner Experience* ("Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis"), Ernst Jünger evokes a veritable catharsis of words in war. There it says: "the fine, the intricate, the ever more sharply honed nuance, the sophisticated fragmentation of pleasure evaporated in the spraying crater of drives thought to have sunk."<sup>50</sup> This poetry of poetry-lessness, of poetry-ending, of silence repeats once again the gesture that introduces all turns of seriousness. Its secret meaning is the revision of becoming human itself, for it leads into the inauthenticity of language and play. The speaking subject is never with itself. The radical alterity recognised by psychoanalysis, which captures the subject in an image, its mirage and in the language of the other, is reversed in the duel of seriousness to appearances. However, to note this now at the end, the talk of it remains a manoeuvre.

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50 Ernst Jünger: *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, in E.J.: *Werke*, (note 49), t. 5, p.38.

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