Beyond Historical Tragedy: The Frankfurt School and Judeo-Christian Messianism

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In his text *Antigones*, George Steiner argues that the figure of Antigone, as presented in the tragic play written by Sophocles in the fourth century before Christ, had an inestimable influence in European intellectual life in the years after the French Revolution.[1] It is an influence, moreover, which has lasted beyond the turn of the twentieth century. According to Steiner, classical Greek tragedy represented and continues to represent a formidable political challenge, pointing beyond simplistic and traditional visions of the meaning of social existence. He concurs with F.W.J. von Schelling, who argued at the turn of the nineteenth century that, "The high morality, the absolute purity of the works of Sophocles has been the object of wonder throughout the ages" (Steiner, 3). Tragedy, rather than the epic myth which was more popular before the nineteenth century, assumes primary place in intellectual culture after the French Revolution: "The major philosophic systems since the French Revolution have been tragic systems. They have metaphorized the theological premises of the fall of man".[2]

And among all of the tragedies that have survived to the modern period, it is *Antigone* that assumes a primary place for nineteenth-century European intellectual culture, and for Steiner she still holds the pride of that place. *Antigone*, in Steiner's reading, functions as a metaphoric and dramatic prism for all of the crucial political and religious dilemmas of the modern world, and remains the ideal model for political activity in

[1] George Steiner, *Antigones* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
[2] Steiner, 2.

the future. Steiner draws heavily on a Hegelian and dialectical perspective in his reading, demonstrating among other things how much Hegel's dialectics was influenced by Sophocles and especially Antigone, who was for Hegel, "The most resplendent figure ever to have appeared on earth."[3]

This essay will very briefly explore the question of the role of fate in history for Hegel and for tragedy, and how this idea relates to the idea of history as it appears in the work of the 'first generation' of the Frankfurt School: Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Benjamin. I argue that the Frankfurt School's response to the problem of fate is unlike Hegel's: it has moved beyond the universe of tragedy, and in this it is more comparable to a Judeo-Christian perspective than to the classical-tragic one. It would not be inaccurate to assert that Hegel has made the essence of tragedy as clear as anyone ever has. But in this, Hegel's perspective, as internally differentiated as it may be, remains essentially within the orbit of tragedy, within the dialectical oscillations that mark a character like Antigone. To the degree that Hegel identifies history with tragedy I will argue that he remains constrained by a formulation of history as fate, one that is challenged by the scriptural tradition of the Hebrew people and with particular vehemence by the followers of one particular Hebrew teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

Tragedy, Aristotle and Modernity

At first glance, the ideas of Hegel, a seminal thinker of the impulse of modernity, of the progress and development of modern institutions, might not appear to fit well within the much older world of classical tragedy, and especially that of Antigone, the defender of customary and divine law. Indeed, the general image of Greek tragedy and its

[3] Quoted in Steiner, 40.

surrounding culture that has dominated European history is a conservative one that could be called 'traditional-Aristotelian.' According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the tragic hero is someone unquestionably excellent in almost every possible way. Every way, that is, except in self-knowledge. The *hamartia* or mistake of the tragic hero is his blindness, his inability to perceive the consequences of his hubris, the fate that his heroic bravura brings by necessity. Otherwise admirable, the hero lacks self-awareness. His own heroism blinds him to the possibility of error, and he errs fatally. The law of the gods always triumphs over that of a humbled mankind in the end.

And just as Aristotelian reason as Thomas Aquinas interpreted it became the dominant philosophy of medieval Catholicism, one can easily imagine a Christian adaptation of, and, to Aristotle's understanding of tragedy. The tragic hero, we might say, is guilty of the sin of pride, as damnable in the eyes of the God of the Bible as he was in the eyes of Father Zeus. A tragic hero like Oedipus richly deserves his fate because of his sin of pride – and this is not even to mention the sins of murder and incest. Oedipus could be read as a Christian morality play with an unfortunate but instructive ending.

How does this image fit at all with Hegel and Steiner's vision of tragedy as an emblem of dynamic progress and modernity? As a prelude to answering that question directly, we can note a deep moral ambiguity that troubles the Aristotelian vision. In fact, in the story as Sophocles presents it, *there is nothing Oedipus could have done to avoid his fate*. It is precisely in being the best, in being most excellent, that he goes too far. How can excellence become a flaw? How could Oedipus be considered guilty if he had no choice, if, as Aristotle affirms, he lacked self-knowledge? Such a paradoxical turn is non-admissible for Aristotle, for whom the first principle is that of identity: a thing must be what it is.

So Aristotle settles on what is in fact an act of philosophical sleight of hand: what the hero of tragedy is always lacking is what only wisdom can provide, which is true knowledge. True wisdom would have shown the hero where moderation, the golden mean, should have taken the place of excess. But this only displaces the problem of how to acquire that true wisdom in the first place.

There has, of course, been a simple and popular way of resolving this paradox. We simply focus on the hero's mistake. We assume that 'he just should have known.' The hero was too proud, too full of himself, and the great divine power will, as always, set him straight. Oedipus, so puffed up after solving the Sphinx's riddle, becomes a target for Zeus' angry revenge. He rose too far above his proper place. This interpretation is influential at least because it resonates with the moral content of what the choruses of tragic plays often sing at their conclusion. In Antigone, for example, the chorus concludes with the following humble wisdom:

> Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,
> and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.
> The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
> with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
> those blows will teach us wisdom.[4]

According to the popular interpretation, the message here is simple: know your place in the great plan of fate, or you will suffer. Furthermore, you may suffer anyway: don't complain.

Interpreters of tragedy since Aristotle perhaps ought to be forgiven for this rather shallow interpretation of the meaning of tragedy, because Aristotle's own argument leads inevitably to it. The idea that the hero is 'admirable in every possible way' is inherently self-contradictory, because his admirability in precisely what makes him a danger to himself

[4] Sophocles, Robert Fagles trans., *The Three Theban Plays* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 128.

and others. If we search for a non-contradictory way out of this paradox, if we attempt to sift out and set straight this confusion of greatness and sin, we must conclude that the tragic hero is simply flawed, that he deserves his fate. Anyone, we could go further, must learn this lesson from tragedy: that stepping beyond one's proper bounds in life, that challenging the place one is fated to, is wrong, is the sin of pride that tragedy counsels against. Aristotle will therefore conclude that it is not right for a person to ask for a condition unsuited to their nature. A citizen, in this view, has a role natural to him; it would be a fatal error to believe that anyone who is not a citizen ought to share in that role, any more than it would be right for a citizen to take on the role of a god. The law of identity proclaims the truth of this social order: 'we are who we are.'

It goes without saying that since Aquinas, this Aristotelian closure has found Christian expressions as well. It has even arguably been the dominant understanding of the Christian message in history. The avenging Christian God simply stands in the place of all-powerful Zeus, now all the more unquestionable because He is entirely pure and beneficent, and it is only we mortals who are prideful sinners. We, or they: those of other religions who have heard our message of universal salvation, who know full well and still refuse to repent, are guilty of refusing to acknowledge the rightful order of things ordained by God. The Christian message, so the story goes, will include a clause for a 'new-world-order,' and by its sign Emperor Constantine will have his victory. For the sake of reference, I will call this Aristotelian attitude 'identitarian Christianity.'

Tragedy, Dialectics and History

In *Antigones*, Steiner insists, standing on Hegel's shoulders, against such a simplified vision of tragedy. According to a simplistic Aristotelian view, we must interpret Creon as the single and flawed protagonist of Antigone, defending the city like Oedipus before him, and like Oedipus fatefully unaware of the demands of the gods. He forgets the importance of the woman's role as caretaker of the dead, which is subordinate, but still sacred. Woman is caretaker of everything private and within the house, and Creon must be forcefully reminded that the gods have mandated woman her own proper place, just as they have made men the leaders of the polis. All Creon needed, according to this interpretation, was to be more cautious, more careful, to have more foresight and be more respectful of tradition.

However, Steiner indicates, drawing from the mainsprings of nineteenth-century European intellectual culture, that *Antigone* poses serious problems for Aristotle's complacent and conservative interpretation. It is no wonder that Aristotle felt *Antigone* was inferior to *Oedipus the King*, because *Antigone* exposes the weakness of the Aristotelian interpretation more clearly than *Oedipus*. In *Antigone*, we really have not one, but *two* tragic heroes, both extremely admirable and both flawed. Antigone is as far from playing the proper part of woman as her father Oedipus is from playing the proper role of the son. Just as Creon oversteps the bounds of the polis and intrudes into the world of the dead, Antigone extends excessively far the claims of divine law, the world of religion, all the way into the polis. While her sister offers to help her sister carry out the forbidden burial in secret, within the properly private and closed world of rites for dead family members, Antigone

insists, "Dear god, shout it from the rooftops. I'll hate you all the more for silence – tell the world."[5]

And yet with all her faults, Antigone was deeply admirable to nineteenth-century intellectual culture. Percy Shelly rhapsodizes: "Some of us have in a prior existence been in love with an Antigone, and that makes us find no full content in any mortal tie".[6] Antigone is often compared with Christ, or with other Christian saints, as being a model of altruism and self-sacrifice. In Jean Anouilh's 1943 interpretation of the drama, she embodies the spirit of resistance against the collaborationist Vichy government; Creon is for his part figured as the cynical enforcer of an unavoidable fascist law of state.[7]

George Steiner, following faithfully in Hegel's dialectical path, lays out the truth of Antigone's dual character. It is Hegel and more liberal-minded progressives like him, and not Aristotelian conservatives or Christian romantics, who have perceived the real meaning of tragedy and of *Antigone*. For Creon's impious human law, Hegel reminds us in his masterful *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is no less admirable nor necessary than Antigone's divine law. The problem with Antigone is that she is too devoted to the particular, to her own family relation. Creon does not forget the good and stability of the polis, which is universal: "The content of the ethical action must be substantial or whole and universal; therefore it can only be related to the whole individual or to the individual qua universal."[8] The Family, the divine laws and customs which Hegel calls the *element* of the Nation, does not *in itself* consciously embody the political ethics of community. It remains mired in particularity, and ignores the necessities of war and peace. The

[5] Sophocles, Robert Fagles trans., *The Three Theban Plays* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 64.
[6] Steiner, 4.
[7] Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (London: Methuen, 2000).
[8] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 269.

government, in the interest of surviving war, must intrude on the private rights of families.

And yet in all of this, for Hegel the overwhelming imperative *on both sides* is to accept and understand the reality of fate and death, and it is Antigone, and not Creon, who most clearly represents and responds to this demand in the play. In fact, it is divine law that recognizes the irreplaceable particularity of the individuality and the full meaning of his sacrifice, one demanded by human law. Hegel sees the full weight of ambiguity, the catch-22 at work in tragedy:

> Neither of the two is by itself absolutely valid; human law proceeds in its living process from the divine, the law valid on earth from that of the nether world, the conscious from the unconscious, mediation from immediacy – and equally returns whence it came.[9]

The full force of tragedy lies in the fact that we cannot decide between Creon and Antigone. It is not divine punishment in itself, but the *confrontation between* traditional religious perspectives and modern liberal capitalism that is fated and unavoidable. As Steiner notes, "The result is an ambiguity of necessary guilt".[10] The only difference that exists, at the beginning of the play, is that Antigone "possesses an insight into the quality of her own guilt which is denied to Creon".[11] This universal context of guilt, this heavy fate, of course becomes vibrantly clear to Creon and to the audience at the conclusion of the play, as his own family is now dead, and the political future of Thebes itself is uncertain.

For Hegel, according to Steiner, Antigone's "response to her doom is altogether higher"[12] than that of Socrates, and even – as pointed out for

[9] Hegel, 276.
[10] Steiner, 29.
[11] Steiner, 36.
[12] Steiner, 40.

Steiner by Walter Kaufmann – than that of Jesus. The crux of Hegelian reason is that, above and beyond the visions of beautiful souls, romantic visions of a future without fear, lies the recognition of necessity, that is, of fate in a most tragic sense. This is not a simple return to Aristotle; Hegel's dialectical fate is not simply *submitting* to the force of fate. Historical progress is real; we are emancipated from irrational servitude, we become self-determining beings following rational norms. But progress and rationalization are necessarily achieved through an ongoing process of agonic conflict and war. There is a "necessary voyage through alienation and self-division"[13] that is resolved and preserved both in Hegel's philosophy and in the continuing political actions of States. These necessitate both upholding and compromising dreams of future peace, love and unity.

Dialectics, for Hegel, moves beyond the fate of traditional religion and social conservatism, but in no way does it move beyond the greater fate of the tragedy of history. It is destined, according to the well-known metaphor of Minerva's Owl, to fly after that history. The greatness of Hegelian philosophy is that it is in itself tragic, where Aristotle is merely pedantic. What Freud would later call 'repression', the turning against oneself in the heart of one's deepest and earliest wishes and hopes, cannot be simply rationalized away in the philosopher's eudaimonic happiness; for Hegel it is and will remain a necessary part of the attainment of maturity. What Hegel recognizes brilliantly is that we are not fated to live out predetermined customary rules, in fear of the consequences of transgression. Rather, we must attain universality, the ethical life, in *living consciously in that fear*. There is no question of historically transcending that fear, which would amount for Hegel to trying to evade the fear of death and necessity itself. It would be to

[13] Steiner, 15.

succumb to unacceptable romanticism. Antigone must always die for the sake of the city, if only to remind the city and its leaders of its limits. Haemon and Eurydice will follow her. Tragic philosophy recognizes that liberation from this cyclic violence at the intersection of religion and the political can only come in the repetition of that same violence. We can transcend traditional custom and divine law, but we cannot avoid 'the labour of the negative,' nor the dialectical process of historical development that allows us to continue to transcend our particular, parochial, merely customary and natural lives:

> The Spirit of universal assembly and association is the simple and negative essence of those systems which tend to isolate themselves. In order to not let them become rooted and set in this isolation, thereby breaking up the whole and letting the communal spirit evaporate, government has from time to time to shake them to their core by war. By this means the government upsets the established order, and violates their right to independence, while the individuals who, absorbed in their own way of life, break loose from the whole and strive after the inviolable independence and security of the person, are made to feel in the task laid on them their lord and master, death.[14]

Liberation from traditional and customary law, the achievement of true universality and equality, comes at a price: we must always be ready for war. There is no way, for Hegel, other than the violence of war to make the passage from customary cultural rules and obligations to the relatively unlimited individual freedoms of modern life. The fear of death is the great master. In other words, there is no way beyond our current historical predicament. We are fated to a future of war, one that will no doubt be penetrated by gleams of great philosophical insight,

[14] Hegel, 273.

characterized by many tragic and noble sacrifices. But our aim of enlightening the earth will be shadowed, must be shadowed, by the ongoing necessity of war. Without death, the great motivator, humanity will only lapse into primitive and really contemptible social forms, and in doing so only confront the power of death in a worse form. Our attempt to escape from this fate will surely, so the story goes, only seal it. And so, by an ironic dialectical short-circuit we *have* returned, against our best intentions, to the land of something very much like Aristotelian conservatism: the will to simply preserve what exists. Precisely the will toward change and progress requires, as its constitutive limit, that kind of absolute conservatism imposed by the universal threat of war.

Messianism and the Frankfurt School

I can only briefly indicate here the extent to which the Frankfurt School differs from this tragic world-view[15], but as a beginning I will suggest that in its concept of history, Frankfurt draws more inspiration from Jerusalem than from Athens. George Steiner, for his part, unfavourably contrasts Abraham's posterity with tragic fate:

> His monotheism is alienation and the blind acceptance of dictates whose moral imperative and rationale is wholly, inaccessibly external to himself…. [His] is a destiny which comports the pathos of sterile alienation, not the essential fruitfulness of tragedy.[16]

The exile of the Jewish people and their covenant with God – the promise that exile will end! – would never have been called 'sterile alienation' by the members of the Frankfurt School. Steiner's argument about traditional Judaic monotheism does, however, come close to

[15] I would add that this tragic view remains influential in, and perhaps even dominates contemporary reflections on the meaning of tragedy. See, for example, Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
[16] Steiner, 24.

Critical Theory when he notes that Judaism represents “the antithesis to the Greek ideal of ‘unison with life’” (Steiner, 24). God’s covenant with Abraham applies to the chosen people, not to everyone. Furthermore, with its strict law it imposes something we might compare with ‘tragic repression’: human desire is marked by the Satanic, by a radical, out of control evil that we must fear.

The historic relation of Christ to Judaism could be identified in saying that the repressive content of the Old Testament was now simply to be evangelized for humanity in general. It is, of course, precisely in its urge for repressive universality that Christianity found itself unable to tolerate those Jewish people who did not accept Christ as messiah. This is the legacy of identitarian Christianity. But what needs to be remembered through this history of sacrificial violence is that Christ’s message was also a messianic message, that is to say, the rejection of history as self-identical. Almost two thousand years before the coming of Walter Benjamin, Jesus already shattered homogeneous empty time. The cross can also be a “sign of a Messianic cessation of happening.”[17] His life represents one possible consummation of the longstanding search in Judaism for a way to transcend a fate demanded and reinforced by sacrifice. Christ came, first and foremost, to liberate his followers from fear, and to give them eternal life – which, if we have really given up mythological thinking, we can see means freedom from fate.[18] Death does not disappear, but it no longer holds sway as it does in myth.

I want to argue that at the root of the most important Christian teachings is this deeply non-identitarian message. We must live with death and with paradox, but not with the universal and tragic paradox that we must kill and die in ‘politics continued by other means.’ The

[17] Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 263.
[18] Although she does not appear to have been inspired by the Frankfurt School, Margaret Visser promotes this aspect of Christianity to a place of high importance in her text, *Beyond Fate* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2002).

deep meaning of Christian sacrifice, what makes it a revolutionary reform of the Judaic tradition, is that the sacrificial identity of life and death it dramatizes is not necessary.

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