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An Examination of the Tragic and the Comedic in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*

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Within the works of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* the pseudonym authors of the texts rely heavily upon a series of aesthetic categories in their examination of ethical systems. Whereas it appears that the intent of Kierkegaard was to utilize these categories as illustrative or allegorical representations of the manners in which peoples have lived and found meaning in living (that is, ethics), I feel that an examination of those aesthetic categories as aesthetic categories in themselves is a worthwhile endeavor. It is this that I presume myself capable of examining. More precisely, I desire to deal with two principle categories that Kierkegaard's aesthetes favor in their arguments: comedy and tragedy.

Throughout both of his texts Kierkegaard draws upon the classics, be they the plays of Sophocles or the writings of Aristotle. Tragedy appears in both texts and in two different forms, the Ancient Tragedy of Greece and the Modern Tragedy. In *Either/Or* the author of the text, known only as A, deals directly with the two categories, clearly constituting a classical conception of the tragic for Ancient Tragedy and illustrating Modern Tragedy with his own revisioning of *Antigone*. In *Fear and Trembling*, Silentio muddles the two, and their best correlation is that Ancient Tragedy becomes the Tragic Hero, who acts but does not reflect, and the Modern Tragedy becomes the Knight of Faith, who reflects and acts. *Comedy*, an exercise in the Ugliness of characters, only reflects and so the Aesthete's find irony in the combination of reflection and action within the Modern Tragedy and comedy within the resignation of the Knight of Infinite Resignation. Moreover, while the pseudonyms of Kierkegaard's works find praise for living the life of the Knight of Infinite Resignation as an

aesthetical category it falls short of the much-maligned Tragic Hero or the praised Knight of Faith. Rather, the portrayal of the Knight of Infinite Resignation as anything but comic, that is, any attempt to vault the Knight of Infinite Resignation into the realm of Tragedy makes him but a laughable, pathetic man.

Part I: Early Conception of the Poet

The aesthete in “Diapsalmata” combines the relationships in either/or structures. Each of the segments reflecting a situation presented as two opposites that ultimately reduce to the same consequence. He begins with the description of the poet (notably different from *Fear and Trembling’s* Silentio) as a man bereft of happiness that “hides deep anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that when the sign and cry pass through them, it sounds like lovely music.” (43). The poet of the Diapsalmata is trapped by the inability to communicate and yet it is the poet’s skills at communication that are praised. Ironic contradiction defines the modern who recognizes Ancient Tragedy not as tragedy at all, but that in so far as the poet cannot communicate he is being ironic and so the Modern laughs at the poet’s fate. Hence, comedy.

Each segment thereafter presents another contradiction that reduces to the same: reproduction/death, sin/salvation, and sorrow/comfort. Within each, the aesthete recognizes an inevitable loss. In each, fate steps in to deliver death and sorrow regardless of the choice. The proposition Either/or is itself ironic since it never is a real choice: “if you hang yourself, you will regret it; if you do not hang yourself, you will regret it; if you hang yourself or you do not hang yourself, you will regret both; whether you hang yourself or you do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This, gentleman, is the sum of all practical wisdom” (Either/Or 54). The aesthete acknowledges that both sides of the Either/or are not contradictions but rather opposing manners of viewing the expression and so introduces the aesthete’s ultimate Either/Or: tragedy or comedy. In both, they are the same. However, the modern has no time for tragedy. It will become comedy based on modern presumptions just as the tragedy relies upon older presumptions.

Whereas the “Diapsalmata” introduces us to the irony in the tragic, it in “Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern” that A reveals the relationship between the Tragic and Comedic in modernity. In this essay concerning the relations of Greek

tragedy he details how ancient and Modern Tragedy differ even though “the concept of the tragic nevertheless remains essentially unchanged, just as weeping still comes no less naturally to man” (139). Yet, if tragedy is that which invokes weeping than comedy must be its opposite: laughter. Either the narrative should cause us to laugh or it should cause us to weep and yet “the tendency of the whole age is rather towards comedy” (Either/Or 140). The terms, Tragic and Comic, are broad enough to encompass each other. When we consider the historical aspect of comedy: what we laugh at changes from one generation to the next and even within a generation we would need to recall “how many different the things can be that make people laugh, one is quickly apprised of the criterion’s colossal scope” (Either/Or 140). The same, argues A, may be said of Tragedy. What one generation weeps at is different from the next, and so the Modern Tragedy will necessarily be different from the Ancient Tragedy – such difference may be so vast that “the bodily expression of laughter might be weeping” (Either/Or 140).

Part II: Aesthete and Classical Aesthetics

Adorno, in the essay “Construction of the Aesthetic,” states that Kierkegaard’s aesthetes serve to “play off Hegel’s material aesthetics against the formal aesthetic tradition” (17). In the context of “The Immediate Erotic Stages,” the aesthete reveals this distinction quite soundly when he emphasizes the difference between form and content.

To paraphrase the entirety of “The Immediate Erotic Stages:” let us say that man poses before me and I compose a sculpture of him such that it represents him perfectly in posture and proportion. He then sits before another sculptor who likewise composes a sculpture identical to mine. We would refer to these sculptures as separate pieces: my sculpture and his sculpture. We would recognize that although the idea was the same, the medium the same, and all appearance the same we would say they are two separate pieces because the efficient cause of the works is not the same. Yet, if I was to compose a piece of music and another musician composed the same piece, we would call the two songs the same. In such a case, the efficient cause no longer concerns us but rather we call the piece the same by expression alone and not origin. In this way music, approaches language and we may see the same effect in the spoken or written word. Should both another and I compose identical essays we would say they are the

same essay. We would never call them separate works, but the same. Hence, the aesthete recognizes and judges a work by the formal cause not the efficient.

This notion of finding the unrepeatable piece that characterizes the essence so closely that to replicate it exactly would be to create it again emphasizes the formalism in the aesthete's aesthetic. He seeks to find an artwork that so encapsulates the essential that it must become the eternal sublime beauty of the classical aesthetic. Immortality of the piece can only arise when the work is, as Adorno states, "temporally invariant . . . *universalia post rem*, achieved through the exclusion of historically specific elements" (21). Mozart enters the "immortal band of men whose names, whose works, time will not forget, for they are remembered in eternity," is not due to any influence of themselves or influence upon culture (Either/Or 70). Rather, only because he stumbled upon a work so encompassing of the essence of music in itself that to forget and rediscover the song again would be to rediscover the *same thing*. The form of Mozart's work that A so highly praises in "The Immediate Erotic Stages," is the form of music. The content of that form he separates and distinguishes as unimportant in so far as having or not having subject matter irrelevant:

If one tries to base a classification on it by seeing the absence of subject-matter or its presence as a help or a hindrance to the productive subject, one goes adrift . . . by trying to call on the difference, and thus stress that in some directions the formative activity is creative to the degree that it also creates the subject-matter while in others it receives it, here again, even though we think we are talking about the formative activity, we are really talking about the subject matter and in fact using that as the basis of our classification (66).

The flaw in highlighting the formal activity over the form itself is that "this kind could only sustain itself for a definite time, that is for as long as no one was aware that time mocked it and its classic works" (66). Mozart is not immortal in so far as culture and history will recount him forever but that "this eternity is really only the eternal instant which every true work of art possesses, not that full-bodied eternity in the midst of the vicissitudes of the times" (67). The work moves beyond the historical and in recognizing the essence of music, itself connects to the sublime. In this, A begins to sound increasingly like the Roman aestheticist Longinus who argued that it was by the

sublime that was “the source of the distinction of the very greatest poets and prose writers and the means by which they have given eternal life to their own fame” (135). The sublime, thus, is an appeal to the universal that transcends the times. However, had Kierkegaard known of Longinus prior to his composition I am unaware, so I shall drop further inquiry into such a relationship.

Hence, the aesthete is, at heart, an idealist attempting to recognize the form of tragedy as far as it is the tragedy of the ancients, which he appears to uphold as the true form of tragedy. In attempting to acquire the essence of the piece, that is to find the one piece that best represents its form by being so close to the ideal that it can have no variance – the aesthete hopes to find the ideal tragedy much as he has found the ideal song. He takes as formal and ideal the Aristotelian notion of tragedy transforming it not into an observation of the material but as a lost ideal.

Part III: A and Aristotelian Tragedy

A, in “Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern” reveals an Aristotelian affection in so far as he introduces focuses upon Aristotle’s *Poetics* in order to differentiate the Ancient Tragedy from the modern. He proposes that the basic concept of tragedy is unchanged. Yet, what leads us to laughter and tears changes from one generation to the next. Hence, while we may still hold to a simple concept of tragedy as that which makes us weep – the epic tragedy no longer leads us to tears but laughter. It is best then, for us to return to the source and examine Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and perhaps from that glean why A takes such a particular interest in tragedy over other aesthetical concepts.

While Aristotle’s *Poetics* deals principally with tragedy and not with comedy, whose treatment history has lost, it does contain Aristotle’s working definition of comedy:

As for Comedy, it is, as has been observed an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without

causing pain. (630).

Comedy, if it is a form of the Ugly cannot be a form of the sublime since the sublime is timeless beauty. Regarding poetic comedy this ugliness cannot be a form of visual deformity (although, the mask may represent such) but a narrative deformity or a flaw in the character itself that lends his actions to ridiculousness. The audience is free to laugh at this ridiculousness because it incites no sorrow in them. They are, as A examines in “Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern,” free from feeling sorrow for the ridiculous man because they have a “more clear conception of guilt.” The spectator of a comedy thus understands that it was because of the protagonist’s ridiculousness that ill befalls him, and so, while they may wince at his pain they do not weep for it because they see that he and he alone, brought it upon himself.

Contrast Aristotle’s Comedy against the Tragedy and we find a second definition that at first appears to be the negation of the first:

A Tragedy then is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions. (631)

Comedy deals with characters and deals principally with ethics, that is, the manners in which the characters live and the consequences of these manners. Tragedy, however, deals with action. The characters become unimportant, not because they are not necessary, but because Tragedy concerns itself with the actions of the characters and not any inherent quality about them: “Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. . . . Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse” (632). Similarly, the emotional response of comedy and tragedy appear to conflict: comedy incites laughter; tragedy arouses pity, fear and catharsis.

Today, we still recognize these two broad overarching categories in art. Comedy is all those things that end happily and excite us to laughter. Tragedy is all those things that incite weeping. If we looked at the scope of the western cannon, we would find many tragedies and yet comedy dominates the modern generations: “the whole age,” says A, “tends toward comedy” (140). A disputes that while we still accept these

definitions and while Ancient Tragedy is still Tragedy, what incites us to weep changes from generation to generation just as

Each generation finds laughable, we will readily be convinced that this unchanging criterion of comedy – that it gives rise to laughter – embraces a high degree of changeableness respecting how the world consciousness conceives the laughable, yet without the differences being so far-reaching that the bodily expression of laughter might be weeping. (140).

As the world consciousness, a decidedly Hegelian concept, unfolded since the Ancients comedy has changed in so far as what incited laughter has changed. Likewise, as the world consciousness unfolded, what we weep for changed. The criterion for tragedy and comedy remain unchanged – we still point to what causes us to weep and say that it is tragic; we still point to what causes us to laugh and say that it is comic. Nevertheless, we can no longer point to the Ancient Tragedy and find the same cathartic relief that the ancient Greeks found. While we retain the concept of the Tragic, we have lost the ability to appreciate the true aesthetic sorrow – we replaced it with ethical outrage at perceived guilt.

Karsten Friis Johansen in his essay “Kierkegaard on ‘the Tragic’” suggests that the generational-shift argument should not be taken seriously as it is overall out of the character of A and is spoken “in a strongly pejorative sense; to study ‘world history’ seems to be almost as deplorable an occupation as the study of veterinary science” (109). Indeed, the view that modernity has moved beyond the need for Ancient Tragedy and that our laughter at what once was tragic is a sign of progress would fall into the role of the ethical, not the aesthetic. I believe that we will find, as we progress in A’s papers, that Johansen is correct in this assertion. A proposes this disparity between the concept at the modern practice only to assert that it is the modern who has lost the ideal true tragedy. Recall the classicist aesthetics of “The Immediate Erotic Stages,” and A’s appeal to the sublime which asserts that beauty is always an appeal to the universal or “something that happens not only to me, but to the whole world” (61). In “Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern,” he reinstates this principle by “connecting the emotions of the hero with the emotions of the spectator (Johansen 120).

Johansen continues to argue that we would best view the historical aspect

of Tragedy as “bound up with the *engagement* of an existing subject. History has to mean something (the idea) and it has to mean something to *you*” (110). A is not so much interested in history as it happened, but history as a reflection of the present that is acting in dialogue with the perception of the past. Thus, Ancient Tragedy is not something that is gone and past; it is the present perception of the past engaged with the present perception of the present. It is in this dialogue that A attempts to rediscover the lost ideal tragedy by “incorporate[ing] the ancient in the modern, so that the true tragic will appear” (Johansson 115).

Returning now to Aristotle, he says concerning tragedy and history that “a poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary” (655). Aristotle differentiates history from the work of the poet. The poet works with fiction even when tragedies “still adhere to the historic names and for this reason: what convinces is the possible; now whereas we are not yet sure as to the possibility of that which has not happened, that which has happened is manifestly possible, else it would not have come to pass” (636). The poet takes from history and reworks it into his verse and in so doing is not beholden only to “universals, whereas those of history are singulars” (Aristotle 636). Hence, the Ancient Tragedy creates a world in which the historical incidents “occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another; there is more of the marvelous in them than if they happened of themselves or by mere chance. Even matters of chance seem most marvelous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them” (Aristotle 637). The Ancient Tragedy thus relies upon fate or some greater organization of the plot that stands outside of the characters creating order and arbitrary suffering since “the wrath of the gods has no ethical character, but aesthetic ambiguity” (Either/Or 149).

If we were then to take the fictitious history of the poet, which only relates to us the universal suffering of the human condition, and ascribe to it the factuality of history than we would fail to recognize the difference between poetry and history. A harkens to Aristotle precisely to prove this point to the ethical – when we lose sight of the true tragic we lose sight of the ideal universal privilege that the poet speaks of and instead receive only a false sense of order or individual control over a chaotic system of chance.

Moreover, Aristotle's concept of the Peripety relates directly to A's Either/or sequences found in the Diapsalmata. Aristotle defines a Peripety as "the change of the kind described from one state of things within the play to its opposite." More closely examined concerning tragedy the Peripety occurs when the desired outcome, for example happiness, is replaced by its opposite despite the intentions of the action – thus in Oedipus "the opposite state of things is produced by the messenger, who, coming to gladden Oedipus and to remove his fears as to his mother, reveals the secret of his birth" (638). The change of ignorance to knowledge we typically associate with happiness thus becomes the maker of sorrow. The messenger wills one thing (happiness) and performs the correct ethical movements and yet receives the very opposite of what he wants and deserves. It is Peripety and Discovery that lead to Aristotle's Suffering: "an action of a destructive or painful nature such as murders on the stage, tortures, wounding, and the like" (638). Here I return to the opening of the Diapsalmata and the definition of a poet. The poet, according to A, suffers the ability to communicate his subjectivity, his ideas to those around him. When he desires to communicate his sorrow the world interprets him as presenting beauty. For A's poet, all action returns the opposite of what he desired, and so any instance of his Either/or become an example of tragedy.

Now contrasts the Ancient Tragedy of Aristotle against what A perceives as the Modern Tragedy. A devises from Aristotle's *Poetics* a scale between Sorrow and Pain where Pain is our empathy towards the suffering of the character, and Sorrow is our understanding for the justifications of the actions that bring about this Pain. The precise placement of a society within this scale between absolute Sorrow and absolute Pain – that is, understanding of action without empathy versus empathy without understanding, varies from one society or place in history to the next. Thus, most societies fall within an ambiguous middle ground, much like Aristotle's ethically ambiguous protagonists who are "pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment" (640). A similarly wishes to keep this ambiguity alive in his conception of the tragic. Sorrow and Pain A borrows from Hegel remarking that "Pain always indicates a reflection on suffering which sorrow does not know," whereas Sorrow or true tragic pity which aligns with Aristotle's arousing of pity and fear arises only when

the spectators feel “sympathy at the same time with the sufferer’s justification” (146). Pain then is the demon of the modern era and when the scale tilts too far towards Pain over Suffering then the tragedy will fall into comedy as the spectators no longer suffer with the protagonist but instead transcend the character to a higher ethical level from whence they judge him guilty and deserving of his consequences. Such Pain contains “guilt’s total transparency, but just because of this transparency it has no aesthetic interest” (Either/Or 147). Yet, should we tilt the scale entirely towards Sorrow we still would find no tragedy but a remark on metaphysics since “an absolute action and an absolute suffering is beyond the powers of aesthetics and belongs to metaphysics” (Either/Or 148). Such a work would be a testament of God, not a discourse on human existence. Tragedy only appears in the mixture of guilt and innocence where the protagonist shares guilt with fate through both his actions and by the demands of what A calls the “substantial categories, on state, family, and destiny” (142).

The Ancient Tragedy arises in the conflict between substantial categories and the actions of the character. Antigone, in the Ancient Tragedy, faces the disparity between appealing to the ethical found in the state and the singular virtuous act of burying her brother. Her choice, to bury her brother, reflects a commitment to the singular virtuous act in defiance of the universal. In this act, the spectators sympathize with her pain both in seeing her brother left unburied and her unjust punishment for defiance, but they also pity her since they understand the justification for the act. The Ancient Tragedy, thus, serves as an illustration of the inherent conflict between the singular and universal. The author places the Antigone character within a situation in which the singular and universal conflict and no truly righteous act may satisfy both.

The Modern Tragedy has no such substantial categories on which to share guilt and so the modern tragic protagonist must accept all the responsibility for his acts and hence all the guilt. In the Antigone story this produces a problem that reduces the entire work into comic irony since no one, approaching the work purely from the modernist view could leave the theatre in anything but laughter since Antigone would become just another amongst the “isolated individuals [who] always become comic by asserting their own accidental individuality in the face of evolutionary necessity” (142). If we assume the ethical is supreme, than Antigone’s defiance of the universal expressed in the state would earn nothing more than condemnation. Her justification

for an exception based upon the singular virtue of the act could never surmount the supremacy of the state in dictating the ethical choice. As A states: “One turns a deaf ear on the hero’s past life, one throws his whole life upon his shoulders as his own doing, makes him accountable for everything; but in so doing one also transforms his aesthetic guilt into an ethical guilt. The tragic hero thus becomes bad. Evil becomes the real object of tragedy” (143). Her defiance reveals her ethical guilt and her punishment can be nothing less than just.

Alternatively, and more often in the present times we see the tragedy take up a different plot all together. In these latter works, Antigone never buries her brother and so never receives punishment. Rather, she cowardly obeys the universal and laments her weakness to go against it. The crushing blow and the pain the spectator’s feel reflects entirely internally within the heroine. The spectators, however, never suffer since they never feel justification in her laments. They want her to go bury the body. Instead of receiving the epic hero who defies the universal and receives punishment for it, they receive a pathetic human uninteresting since “Modern Tragedy has no epic foreground, no epic heritage. The hero stands and falls entirely on his own deeds” (Either/Or 143). By placing all responsibility upon the protagonist’s shoulders, those flaws that in the ancient sense we would deem hubris appear more akin to Aristotle’s Ridiculous. Antigone becomes ugly because she lacks the courage to move against the Universal.

How unified is the Modern Tragedy with the comedy? John D. Glenn in “Kierkegaard on the Unity of Comedy and Tragedy,” suggests that the poet’s laughter at the Modern Tragedy is itself a source of irony:

So the young aesthete laughs. But his laughter is hollow and despairing, as he himself seems, at least partially, to realize and acknowledge . . .

It indicates, moreover, that this unity is a unity in the direction of the tragic – i.e., that the comic is subsumable under the tragic rather than the converse (45).

When the modern laughs at the tragedy, it is because he has come to realize how it compares to the melancholy of his own life. The laughter is bitter; a weeping sadness that he must bear his own responsibility and may never again set the tragic happenings of life at the foot of the Gods. Moreover, when we look upon the Ancient Tragedy, we must weep as well knowing that our movements look ridiculous before the graceful epic

might of the Greek ideal. The tragic hero never suffered fate. If he acted individually, accepted responsibility, and realized his mode in the modern sense then he never suffered fate unwillingly but chose the tragic end. How can anyone, willfully choosing to inflict tragedy upon themselves ever be anything more than ridiculous? To say that the tragic protagonist is both absolutely guilty and deserving of his pain is laughable since it implies a willful choice. Yet, as Glenn remarks it is “laughable for man to claim an immediate identity with the eternal and the infinite, an *absolute* transcendence of the temporal and the finite. The young aesthete does *not*, I think, have the laugh on his side; the gods laugh not *with* him, but *at* him” (48). The aesthete longs for the Ancient Tragedy, but like the modern has transcended it, recognized its irony and so discovered “the essential *nullity* of love and, indeed, of all passion, immediacy, and finite actuality” (Glenn 47). It seems then, that the very problem that the modern (representational of the ethical) that the aesthete recognizes is itself a problem that the aesthete faces. The ancient tragic in the form of the tragic hero is what the poet seeks, but poet is himself unable to realize the synthesis of ancient and modern poetry. For that, Joseph C. McLelland states in “Doxology as Suspension of the Tragic,” requires a movement beyond the aesthetic and ethical levels to the religious, but this movement is best found in *Fear and Trembling*.

Before moving onward, permit me to summarize A's position between the Ancient and Modern tragedies. First, both ancient and modern tragedies and comedies share with each other the same concept: Tragedy is that which evokes weeping, Comedy, laughter. Yet, the difference lies in the details. Ancient Tragedy differs from Comedy in that Comedy deals with the Ridiculousness of characters whereas Tragedy deals principally with Action in order to arouse pity and fear. This action A keeps separate from history as it appeals to some infinite trait beyond the mere historical substantial categories. These substantial categories create the conflict of the Ancient Tragedy as the tragic hero chooses to defy the substantial categories even though such defiance is impossible. Thus, the tragic hero acts upon a Peripety, doing the singular good that will result, on accordance with the universal, in the opposite of his desires. The spectators see his singular act as justified and so feel sorrow for him. This is due to the ambiguity of his guilt wherein it splits between the substantial, who administer punishment unjustly, and him for having chosen poorly. The Modern Tragedy differs

in that the hero appears evil for combating the Universal or Ridiculous for succumbing to it. The spectators may feel the pain of the protagonist but will never accept his justifications for action. In this, guilt is never ambiguous but lands squarely upon the protagonist who will always receive what he deserves since it is he who is responsible for all that should come to him. The tragic, Adorno explains is “the finite that comes into conflict with the infinite and measured according to it, is judged by the measure of the infinite; the comic is the infinite that is entangled in the finite and falls to the mercy of the determinations of finitude” (16).

Part IV: The Tragic Hero

Kierkegaard begins *Fear and Trembling* with the tale of Silentio who Had learned as a child that beautiful tale of how God tried Abraham, how he withstood the test, kept his faith and for the second time received a son against every expectation. . . What he yearned for was to accompany them on the three-day journey, when Abraham rode with grief before him and Isaac by his side. (8)

Thus begins the narration of a much different poet. Whereas the Poet of *Either/Or* expresses himself a weeper who the world laughs at – the Poet of *Fear and Trembling* is a man who earnestly desires to go beyond the Tragic Hero and cast himself into the position of the religious. The poet is the speechmaker who “can only admire, love, take pleasure in the hero. . . for the hero is so to speak the better nature of his in which he is enamored” (14). This new Poet is the one who sings praises for the universal found in the Knight of Faith, and this Poet becomes a necessity for the expression of the hero. “No one who was great will be forgotten: and however long it takes, even if a cloud of misunderstanding should take the hero away, his lover still comes, and the more time goes by the more faithfully he sticks by him” (15). The Poet then is a necessity for the hero, without the praise of the Poet; he will never become propelled into the aesthetic realms of the sublime where all great things are eternal in their beauty. The connection to the classic aesthetics goes deeper when the new Poet declares “everyone in proportion to the greatness of what *he loved*. For he who loved himself became great in himself, and he who loved others became great through his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all” (15). This sentiment returns to the proposition of the

Tragic/Comedy combination when the new Poet proposes that the lover of others (the Poet) is a lover of the possible while the lover of God is a lover of the impossible (15). The categories of possible and impossible relate back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. The possible is that which relates to Tragedy, since it deals with actions that can happen. Whereas it is the impossible, that relates to comedy, which deals purely in the Ridiculousness of characters and not the consequence of action. Thus, the new Poet of *Fear and Trembling* appears not to relate purely to the love of Ancient Tragedy (aesthetic) or Modern Tragedy (universal) but appears to have discovered some third potential in the Religious. The common thread between the two is that they are both in the end are Tragic, as far as they both pursue an ideal that they cannot justify nor reach.

It is in the case of *Fear and Trembling* that the religious option, not found in the writings of A, takes form. In the case of the new Poet, the aesthetic despairs from self-reflection that realizes the impossibility of becoming the one that he desires. The Ethical, as Joseph McLelland identifies in "Doxology as Suspension of the Tragic," becomes a movement towards "purging by humor," that relieves the ethical from despair by identifying with social bonds. The ethical becomes the necessary step towards the religious in so far as it recognizes some meaning and allows the ethical to move into a true comedy in which the Religious recognizes the divine joke of existence by gaining "access to a positive humor that sees even moral striving as a bad joke when it tries to *earn* what is finally a *gift*" (McLelland 118). This movement, McLelland says, is made possible by moving the reflection from being self-reflective to reflecting in relationship to a God. The self-reflection of the aesthetic leads to isolation and tragedy, whereas comedy renounces isolation in favor of unity. In the relation of the Modern Tragedy, it is the inversion of Glenn's scale that the Poet places Tragedy before Comedy. In the religious, the two remain the same, but the ironic weeping that the people laugh at is not weeping at all but a laughing with the Gods rather than being laugh at by the Gods.

. I should note the variety of heroes and knight's presented in *Fear and Trembling*. The Poet of *Fear and Trembling* proposes a series of heroes upon which a poet may laude praise. The Poet's praise for tragedy in *Either/Or* transforms the Tragic Hero into one of the lower elements in *Fear and Trembling*. The Tragic Hero stands beneath the comic action of the Modern Tragedy (found in the Knight of Infinite Resignation) and

he is unable to rise anywhere close to the Poet's new hero found in the Knight of Faith. The Poet illustrates these heroes by their responses to common themes in chivalrous tales of knighthood – the unrequited love or courtly love: “A young lad falls in love with a princess, the content of his whole life lies in this love, and yet the relationship is one that cannot possibly be brought to fruition” (46). The none-hero renounces such love. Such a response is uncomely, and unworthy of the hero who would grace the tales of knighthood for he “lacks this concentration, this focus, his soul is disintegrated from the start, and then he will never come to make the movement, he will act prudently in life like those capitalists who invest their capital in every kind of security so as to gain on the one what they lose on the other – in short, he is not a knight” (48). Rather, the first knight is the Knight of Infinite Resignation who “does not renounce the love, not for all the glory in the world,” and when this Knight realizes the impossibility of capturing that, which enraptures him he will

. . . concentrate the whole of his life's content and the meaning of reality in a single wish. . . So the knight makes the movement, but what movement? Does he want to forget the whole thing? Because in that too there is a kind of concentration. No! for the knight does not contradict himself, and it is a contradiction to forget the whole of one's life's content and still be the same. He has no inclination to become another, seeing nothing at all great in that prospect. Only lower natures forget themselves and become something new. Thus the butterfly has altogether forgotten that it was a caterpillar, perhaps it can so completely forget in turn that it was a butterfly that it can become a fish. Deeper natures never forget themselves and never become something other than they were. So the knight will remember everything; but the memory is precisely the pain, and yet in his infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence. His love for the princess would take on for him the expression of an eternal love, would acquire a religious character, be transfigured into a love for the eternal being which, although it denied fulfillment, still reconciled him once more in the eternal consciousness of his love's validity in an eternal form that no reality can take from him. (50)

The Knight of Infinite Resignation steps beyond the prudent capitalist and continues to hold to his whimsies of ego despite those substantial categories acting against him. The result is that he pits his deeper nature against those universals. Finding that he can never reconcile his love with the Universal, that is, he can neither have the princesses nor do so with respect to the ethics of his society, he buries himself within himself and carries his deeper sentiments with him through life, neither renouncing his love nor violating the Universal. The moment he renounces love in order to continue life undisturbed by suffering he becomes only a prudent man. The moment he renounces the substantial categories to grasp for his love, he becomes either the villain or the Knight of Faith. For this, the Knight of Infinite Resignation is the modern comedy for he is all character and no action. “Irony and humor reflect also upon themselves and so belong in the sphere of infinite resignation, they owe their resilience to the individual’s incommensurability with reality,” writes the Poet in *Fear and Trembling* (59). The Knight of Infinite Resignation is purely reflective. He studies himself and carries on his irony in that neither his will nor the Universal ever wins out. Tragedy requires action.

The Knight of Infinite Resignation cannot become the Knight of Faith until he moves beyond reflection towards action. The tragic occurs when he steps beyond the ironic self-reflection to grasp at the finite that he has transformed into an eternal, only then will he suddenly discover his mistake and so be crushed by the Universal. Tragedy, hence, never succeeds at faith in the manner of the Knight of Faith: “The tragic hero stays within the ethical. He lets an expression of the ethical have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical; he reduces the ethical relation between father and son, or daughter and father, to a sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of the ethical life” (Fear 68). The Universal, or using the poet’s language the ethical, will overcome the Tragic Hero’s attempts to grasp at the infinite. If he should pursue the princess, it would be in vain. He pits himself against the Universal and fails.

The Knight of Faith steps beyond the categories of comedy and tragedy and into the level of the absurd. For whereas the Knight of Infinite Resignation becomes a comedy in so far as he becomes ridiculous – reflecting upon himself but never moving beyond reflection. The Tragic Hero becomes tragic as far as he performs the actions but never achieves his desired results; the Knight of Faith performs all the actions of the Tragic but somehow overcomes the Universal. He “renounces the claim

to love which is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain; but then comes the marvel, he makes one more movement, more wonderful than anything else, for he says: 'I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible.'" (Fear 52). Unlike the Tragic hero, who moves on thinking the impossible is the improbable and so tragically discovers this to be untrue. The Knight of Faith renounces his love as the Knight of Infinite Resignation does. For both the possibility of winning the princesses is an impossibility. It is not improbable that he should win. It is impossible that he should win. The Knight of Faith "admits the impossibility and at the same time believes the absurd; for were he to suppose that he had faith without recognizing the impossibility with all the passion of his soul and with all his heart, he would be deceiving himself, and his testimony would carry weight nowhere, since he would not even have come as far as infinite resignation" (Fear 53).

The poet of *Fear and Trembling* illustrates these differences between the tragic hero and the Knight of Faith in the tales of Agamemnon and Abraham. Both must sacrifice a child. The former does so with knowing that the Universal calls for her death (the demand of God Artemis and his duty unto the gathered armies of Greece who await favorable winds to sail to Troy) and expects to receive nothing but the Universal in return. Agamemnon is tragic in so far as he pits himself against the Universal found in Artemis and yet falls. He murders his daughter and so becomes the tragic hero. Likewise, with Abraham the Universal demands the sacrifice of a son. And while he reconciles himself to the impossibility of his son's return, as far as he knows that, it is absurd to kill him and receive him. He, Abraham, still believes that he will receive his son again.

Part V: The Modern Tragedy

I see no necessity that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms should agree. Simply because A and the Poet are aesthetes does not entail that their hierarchies, vocabulary and ideas will be the same. Instead of recycling old pseudonyms, Kierkegaard differentiates A from the Poet of *Fear and Trembling*. That two different writers purportedly author each text should support the idea that the two texts may read as stemming from two different thinkers. Thus, A cherishes and deifies Ancient Tragedy while renouncing the

Modern Tragedy as a hollow mockery of the Tragic and the Poet places the Tragic Hero on the bottom of his scale of greatness while the Knight of Faith, who in a moment I shall show represents Modern Tragedy, rises to the highest most point of his praise.

It is the error of compounding the two pseudonyms together that Sestigiani makes in his essay "A Danish Antigone: The Legacy of Ancient Greek Consciousness in the Fragmentation of Modern Tragedy." Nevertheless, as an analysis of A's revision of the Antigone story, Sestigiani's essay paints a very thorough picture of what we see in the Modern Tragedy. Within A's Antigone narrative he follows the Greek Tragedy up to a point: "Oedipus has killed the sphinx, liberated Thebes; he has murdered his father, married his mother, and Antigone is the fruit of that marriage" (152). Thereafter he departs from the classical tale and fixates upon a secret known only by Antigone, the realization that she is the product of incest. She reflects upon this and so anxiety consumes her, as she knows not whether to reveal this secret unto her father or hold it to herself.

Sestigiani points out that A's Antigone narrative "derives from a mixture of the characteristics of ancient and modern dramas. His Antigone incarnates the peculiarities of both: necessity of action and self-subjectivity" (60). That is, the Antigone narrative that A examines contains within it both Tragedy (action) and Comedy (reflection), as far as the Ridiculous implies a recognition of the subjectivity of the character. Therefore in the Modern Tragedy we will see a hero who

acts on his own, asserting his independence from his history. He performs acrobatics without a safety net. If he falls, no family, no state and no *fatum* will offer him any consoling embrace. The modern hero ethically reflects on his own deeds and takes responsibility for them.

The hero becomes a character, an individual that creates his own fate.

(Sestigiani 62)

Sestigiani insists that A is horrified at the level of isolation that this independence from history creates. Without the substantial categories and with an insistence that the character and character alone is the cause of fate then tragedy is an impossibility since "character' seems to be entirely separated from 'fate:' the tragic moves toward the comic instead" (Sestigiani 63).

It is in the Modern Tragedy that we discover guilt, because we find guilt only

once fate falters we discover “the chance that the action could have been different . . . Hence, the hero is responsible for the action” (Sestigiani 64). When A attempts to portray a Modern Tragedy he attempts to create the modern guilt within the Antigone character in such a manner that the context leaves the Antigone heroine fulfilling the ethical role of the Greek Antigone. Hence while the Greek Antigone is willing to “sacrifice ‘for the well being of the whole’ – that is to respect a common ideal of loyalty towards family bonds. . . the tragic (ethical) heroine Antigone is not in the religious sphere, she does not conceive a dimension beyond the earthly, where she could hope to regain what she gave up” (Sestigiani 66). A’s Antigone thus rises to the challenge of fulfilling the religious role. She will conform to both the ancient tragedies demands for recognition of the substantial categories and will do so while recognizing the guilt of her role. The modern Antigone’s “subjectivity shifts from external to inward . . . Antigone becomes an internal and self-reflective character, moving from fatalism to auto-determinism . . . Yet, she does not give up entirely her trail of Greek consciousness. In fact, she embodies the idea of the tragic of both ancient and modern dramas for her experiencing both sorrow and pain” (Sestigiani 68).

Where Sestigiani goes wrong is in his insistence that the tragic heroine of Antigone aligns with the tragic hero of *Fear and Trembling*. He fails to recognize that the Tragic Hero of *Fear and Trembling* derives from classical works (the Agamemnon tale) and so relates closer to Ancient rather than Modern Tragedies, whereas the heroine of the revised Antigone tale is clearly a modern revisioning of the Ancient into the Modern. Indeed, A insists that it is such: “This name I retain from the Ancient Tragedy, which in general I shall follow, except that everything will be modern” (152). The label of Tragic Hero, which Sestigiani relates to the various Knights of *Fear and Trembling*, appears only once the Poet addresses the classical narratives. Prior, he refers only to various Knights and never does he directly combine the Knight of Faith or the Knight of Infinite Resignation with the Tragic Hero. Since A has multiple forms of the Tragic within his writings and the Poet only one, it is necessary for us to look elsewhere within *Fear and Trembling* for the Missing element of the Modern Tragedy. Hence, I ask of which Knight do we find both self-reflection and action? The Tragic Hero aligns with the Ancient Tragedies. He is all action, but with no success since the Universal will always overcome him. The Knight of Infinite Resignation is all self-subjectivity,

but without the act of grasping for his love he can do nothing but reflect. Hence, the Knight of Infinite Resignation can be nothing more than comedic. The Knight of Faith, however, both reflects upon the impossibility of his goals and he acts. It would seem then that the Knight of Faith most closely resembles the Modern Tragedy.

Nevertheless, while both reflecting and acting make the Knight of Faith an element of the modern these alone do not necessitate that the Knight of Faith arouse pity or fear. For that we must return to Silentio's original Knight of Faith, Abraham. If we turn to the original story of Abraham we find a character who initially differs little from Agamemnon. God commands Abraham to take his "only son, Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me" (Good News Bible, Gen 22.2). The request then is the same, to take something loved and to sacrifice it to a god. Yet, the difference is in the results. Whereas Agamemnon sacrifices unwillingly and receives the reward of favorable wind, Abraham sacrifices willingly for the reception of nothing more than what he already has. One is an act of utility brought out by the demands of the ethical, the other an act of faith that there can be nothing ill that would come from following the commandments of God. The progression of the Abraham myth is thus thoroughly horrific to consider in each of its individual steps: Abraham takes two servants with him, he makes Isaac carry the instruments of his death to the top of the hill, and then binds his son atop the wood and draws the knife to kill him. God only steps in to end the madness once Abraham has proven his willingness to fully complete the task. How horrifying such an incident must be for the boy.

Does this invoke pity or fear? Certainly there is pity for Isaac, who must live knowing his father would likely kill him for nothing and certainly, there is fear that God will not step in and end this madness. Silentio in his "Attunement," fills in these gaps in the otherwise short biblical narration. He offers a retelling of the tale in which he interprets and envisions the silences between the verses and, like A's *Antigone* story, creates three modern revisions of the original. In the first, Abraham tells the boy of his intentions but when Isaac pleads for his life Abraham explains God's irrational will as his own desire that Isaac should "better believe I am a monster than that he lose faith in Thee [God]" (Fear 10). In the second, Abraham performs the act, but Abraham's "eye was darkened, he saw joy no more" (Fear 11). In the third, Abraham holds to the

ethical, recognizes the madness of the act and travels alone to the mountain. And in the last, Isaac loses all faith when he sees the hesitation of his father. In all but the third these revisions are possible; the biblical story is silent on these items. But, what I find most interesting is the silence in the final verse of the Abraham: “Abraham went back to his servants, and they went together to Beersheba, where Abraham settled” (Gen 22.19). After the sacrifice Isaac disappears from the Genesis narrative for some time. Abraham comes down the mountain. There is no mention that Isaac comes down from the mountain with him. It is the quality of the Modern Tragedy that it may appear both Tragic and Comedic. In this final silence that propels the original Abraham myth into these vague realm of both. As a narrative of faith and the relationship of Abraham to God the Abraham story is a comedy. The story ends with an affirmation that God provides and that Abraham is faithful. Such a story ends well, and presents us with the notion that it would have been ridiculous to suppose that God would do anything less than good. Our fears abated we step over and ignore the personal level: what of Isaac? For, if we read the story not as a depiction of Abraham and God but Abraham and the duty of fatherhood, that is the relationship of Abraham and Isaac, than the story can be nothing more than tragic. While Abraham praises God for providing, Isaac is silent. While Abraham comes down from the mountain, Isaac is not there. It is not hard than to view the narrative from the revisions of Silentio. Isaac either loses faith in God or his father. I find it hard to imagine that he keeps both.

I do not believe that it would be unfortuitous to examine of Tragedy within our own contemporary society. For, while the art-connoisseurs of the day feast upon what they purport to be tragedies the masses clamor for one comedy after another – relentlessly feasting upon an endless supply of laugh inducing rubbish or melodramatic action films that never hint of the once resounding tradition of the epic. Yet, even if we were to examine the tragedies of the art-connoisseurs, we would rarely find a tragedy in the mix worthy of grouping alongside that of Agamemnon or Sophocles’s *Antigone*. Instead, we would most often find the modern tragedies characterized by A’s adaptation of the Antigone tale.

I say that such a tale is common, and the Ancient Tragedy has become quite scarce. The Ancient Tragedy watches the strong fall by hubris. The Modern Tragedy watches the incompetents perish by their own ineptitude. The protagonists perish by

anxiety. They foresee themselves as unable to overcome the universal and so resign themselves to whatever meager role that the world brings them to – the Knight of Faith is rather, never seen for we would label such nonsense as wish fulfillments. To watch the protagonist step up and become the Tragic Hero, that is, to become a Knight of Faith who acts upon the absurd, yet regains nothing. That would be tragic.

Thus, I ask another question – is it not necessary in composing the tragic for that force to whence the protagonist struggles to be overwhelming? It is in modern art that we look to it as whining when the tragic hero falls to forces easily overcome merely because they lack the willpower to choose and so surrender their choosing to the universal and so suffer from it. The tragic only arises when the hero retains the illusion of choice. He chooses virtuously, or he chooses as best that he can. However, the best choice is overwhelmed by a greater will. Had the character made no choice, or if the character was ever aware that there was no meaning to the choice then we, the audience, could only laugh at the pointlessness of the display. I find no compassion for such a fool and in such a tale, no pity arises only ethical justification that he has received justly what he deserved and he deserves such for he acts with no rational motivation.

As a narrative tool the Modern Tragedy fails for too often it presents us with such fools whose actions we cannot relate to ourselves. If the Modern protagonist becomes the Knight of Infinite Resignation, then the protagonist refuses to act to acquire happiness and so receives pain. Such characters deserves the pain they acquire, and hence I feel no sorrow. If the Modern protagonist becomes the Knight of Faith, then the motivation for the protagonist becomes incomprehensible for he acts on faith, an internal affair understood only by himself -- to the rest of us, it looks little better than madness and so his acts bespeak a sense of Ridiculousness in so far as he expects and receives the impossible. But in the Ancient Tragedy we see the protagonist choose, and choose wisely yet suffer anyways. Then I am tormented with despair. Such tales move me to tears.

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