Chapter Seven

The Tragedy of Misrecognition—The Desire for a Catholic Shakespeare and Hegel’s Hamlet

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One version of the post-Kantian settlement in philosophy is that the critical dismantling of the claims of dogmatic metaphysics in the *Critique of Pure Reason* has the consequence that questions concerning the ultimate value of human life pass from the domain of religion to that of art. Kant’s critique of metaphysics achieves the remarkable feat of showing both the cognitive meaninglessness of the claims of traditional philosophy to know the supersensible, while establishing the moral necessity for the primacy of practical reason, that is, freedom. Yet, the question that this raises is how can freedom take hold or manifest itself in the world of nature if that world is governed by causality and mechanistically determined by scientifically established natural laws? Doesn’t Kant leave human beings in what Hegel would call the *amphibious* position of being both freely subject to the moral law and determined by an objective world of nature that has been stripped of any value and which stands over against me as a world of alienation?

The philosophical task after Kant was how to achieve a reconciliation of the dualisms of nature and freedom or pure and practical reason. The view that is adumbrated in Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment and announced with increasing conviction in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and incipient romantic and idealist trends in the Germanophone 1790s, is that the artwork is the vehicle for such reconciliation. The artwork provides a *sensuous image of freedom* and brings into harmony the domains of pure and practical reason. In the breathtaking 1796 single folio fragment, ‘The Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism’, the authors (the text is variously attributed to the erstwhile college chums, Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling, although it usually thought to best represent the ideas of the latter, who was in his early 20s at the time) write, ‘The highest act of reason, which embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that *truth and goodness* are brothers *only in beauty*. As Schelling declares in 1800, ‘art is the organon of philosophy’ or ‘the keystone in the
entire arch’ that will span the regions of nature and freedom that Kant had divorced.

But what is meant by ‘art’ here? For Schelling, the highest exemplar of art is drama and the highest manifestation of drama is tragedy, in particular Sophoclean tragedy. As Peter Szondi has convincingly shown, what begins with Schelling is a philosophy of the tragic (das Tragische), which has an almost uncanny persistence in the Germanophone intellectual tradition. In his 1802–3 lectures, Philosophy of Art, Schelling writes, and the Kantian echoes in this formulation resound,

The essence of tragedy is thus an actual and objective conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand and necessity on the other, a conflict that does not end such that one or the other succumbs, but rather such that both are manifested in perfect indifference as simultaneously victorious and vanquished.¹

For Schelling, it was precisely this sort of equilibrium between freedom and necessity that the Greeks—by which he means Sophocles' Oedipus the King, where this play weirdly but not untypically figures as a synecdoche for an entire culture—achieved in tragedy.

The Greeks sought in their tragedies this kind of equilibrium between justice and humanity, necessity and freedom, a balance without which they could not satisfy their moral sensibility, just as the highest morality itself is expressed in this balance. Precisely this equilibrium is the ultimate concern of tragedy. It is not tragic that a premeditated, free transgression is punished. That a guiltless person unavoidably becomes increasingly guilty through fate itself, as remarked earlier, is the greatest conceivable misfortune. But that this guiltless guilty person (dieser schuldloser Schuldige) accepts punishment voluntarily—this is the sublimity of tragedy (das Erhabene in der Tragödie); thereby alone does freedom transfigure itself into the highest identity with necessity.²

Tragedy is the keystone in the arch that unites freedom and necessity, practical reason and pure reason. In other words, the tragic is the completion of philosophy after Kant. And it is philosophy’s completion in a sublime act. Namely, that Schelling’s claim above is that what the Greeks sought in their tragedies was an equilibrium between ‘justice and humanity, freedom and necessity’, and this equilibrium is what finds expression

¹ Schelling 1989, 251.
² Schelling 1989, 255.