

Serious Comedy

*The Philosophical and Theological Significance
of Tragic and Comic Writing
in the Western Tradition*

Patrick Downey

“Well,” I said, “since we brought up the subject of poetry again, let it be our apology that it was then fitting for us to send it away from the city on account of its character. The argument determined us. Let us further say to it, lest it convict us for a certain harshness and rusticity, that there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry.”

—Plato, *The Republic*

Art—to say it in advance, for I shall return to this subject at greater length—art, in which precisely the lie is sanctified and the will to deception has a good conscience, is much more fundamentally sensed by Plato, the greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced.

Plato versus Homer: that is the complete, the genuine antagonism!

—Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

*Both the traditional and current interpretations of Plato may be said to bring out the tragic element in Plato’s thought, but they neglect the comic element except were it hits one in the face. Many reasons can be given for this failure. I mention only one. Modern research on Plato originated in Germany, the country without comedy. To indicate why this element of comedy is of crucial importance in Plato I read to you a few lines from the only Platonist I know of who had an appreciation of this element, Sir Thomas More. I quote: “For to prove that this life is no laughing time, but rather the time of weeping we find that our savior himself wept twice or thrice, but never find that he laughed so much as once....” (*Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* chap. 13). If we compare what More said about Jesus with what Plato tells us about Socrates, we find that “Socrates laughed twice or thrice, but never find we that he wept as much as once.” A slight bias in favor of laughing and against weeping seems to be essential to philosophy. For the beginning of philosophy as the philosophers understood it is not the fear of the Lord, but wonder. Its spirit is not hope and fear and trembling, but serenity on the basis of resignation. To that serenity, laughing is a little more akin than weeping. Whether the Bible or philosophy is right is of course the only question that ultimately matters. But in order to understand that question one must first see philosophy as it is. One must not see it from the outset through Biblical glasses. Wherever each of us may stand, no respectable purpose is served by trying to prove that we eat the cake and have it.*

—Leo Strauss, “On the Euthyphron”

But then my soul is also gripped with new amazement— indeed, it is filled with adoration, for it certainly would have been odd if it had been a human poem. Presumably it could occur to a human being to poetize himself in the likeness of the god or the god in the likeness of himself, but not to petition that the god poetized himself in the likeness of a human being.... And since we both are now standing before this wonder, whose solemn silence cannot be disturbed by human wrangling about what is mine and what is yours, whose awe-inspiring words infinitely drown out human quarreling about mine and thine, forgive me my curious mistaken notion of having composed it myself. It was a mistaken notion, and the poem was so different from every human poem that it was no poem at all but the wonder.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*

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Patrick Downey
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DONORS

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I: INTRODUCTION

“I divine,” he said, “that you’re considering whether we’ll admit tragedy and comedy into the city or not.”

“Perhaps,” I said, “and perhaps something still more than this.”

—Plato, *Republic*, 394d

THE LAST thing the world needs is another book on the difference between comedy and tragedy. A theory of genres that sorts and categorizes various works of literature, bending a little here and accounting for an exception there, is of little interest to me or, I expect, to most readers. Instead, what I am interested in are certain fundamental questions about the way things are and how we should live, questions that usually find their home under the rubric of philosophy or theology. In pursuing these questions, however, I discovered that the issue of comedy and tragedy, in either their opposition or complementarity, would keep appearing again and again. Why is that? Why is it that Plato kicked the tragic poets out of his city in speech? Why is it that he spoke of an ancient quarrel between the poets and philosophers? Why is it that seriousness and playfulness are paired as ways of living a life just as tragedy and comedy are paired as ways of writing a story? Questions like these turned out to be crucial in following the subtleties and ironies of Plato’s philosophical writings. Yet when I turned to more modern thinkers such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, “comedy” and “tragedy” became, if anything, even more pronounced in their use to explain what these writers were up to. What is it about the dramatic paradigms of stage and audience, with happy or sad endings and laughter or tears, that provided these thinkers with a central image to understand themselves and their undertakings as both philosophers and poets of their own works?

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What follows is an attempt to answer some of those questions. Yet, because my interest is not in comedy and tragedy *per se* but rather the philosophical and theological questions that find themselves intimately attached to these terms, what follows is a sort of tracking, if you will, of the trajectory of certain pivotal questions through the Western philosophical and theological tradition. Starting with Plato's "quarrel between the philosophers and poets," certain questions keep coming up in our philosophical tradition that revolve around the tension between living life and writing about it, between the unmade and unfinished project that is our life and the finished and rounded off artifice of writing and reading a narrative, dialogue, treatise or poem. From Plato's *Phaedrus* we get this tension as that between "life" and "writing;" but lives can be playful or serious, just as writings can be either comic or tragic; so Plato's other dialogues will refine this tension in its various permutations and implications.

In our own day, however, the major writing with a claim to be taken seriously is the Bible. Following upon Plato's questions, the philosophical questions it poses for us are twofold. First and foremost is whether the life of faith in the God of the Bible or the life of the philosopher is the right or best way to live. As one influential philosopher puts it, "Whether the Bible or philosophy is right is of course the only question that ultimately matters." The centrality of the Bible in the West has raised anew for us the quarrel between the philosophers and the poets, and yet it also forces our attention on the role of the poet in a way profoundly different than Plato's quarrel with the tragedians. This comes out in the question of whether the Bible should be read as a comedy or a tragedy. If the Bible is indeed a comedy, as I will argue it is, then it may stand in an entirely different relation to the life of the philosopher than what Plato calls the "lie" of the tragic poets. In addition, if this most influential of books is a comedy rather than the more politically influential tragedies of Plato and Aristotle's day, then something profoundly different may have been wrought in our own political scene that must be understood if we are to understand how we differ from the world of the past.

For this reason, just as we must pursue the question of "poets or philosophers," and the "Bible or philosophy," so too must we pursue the "quarrel between the ancients and moderns" if we are to understand ourselves in our often polemical relation to both philosophy *and* the Bible. Not only was one of major founders of modernity a writer of comedies (Machiavelli), but

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what he deliberately rejected in turning toward the new was the older comedies of Plato and the Bible that spoke of “cities that never were” in a fairy-tale like fashion. Instead of these romantic comedies, what was needed was the hard-boiled technique of the comic poet applied to everyday life, bringing about through manipulation and deceit what was usually only achieved in the poet’s fiction.

“Modernity,” however, proved a ferocious business, with an ever renewed need to build upon the death of the old. Before long the “old man” proved to be modernity itself, so the later moderns sought to understand their destructive and critical habits in light of tragedy rather than comedy, for in this way the self-consuming criticism of modern comedy might afford a seriousness lacking in its deliberately youthful self. Modernity “come of age,” so to speak, considers itself a “tragic philosophy” because it cannot return to an ancient understanding of philosophy or the Bible without transforming or reinventing both by putting them up on the stage of its own self-conscious artifice.

The crucial question facing late-modernity remains whether or not it can truly take itself seriously, so all the attempts to regain a second naïveté or “re-enchant” the world revolve around the question of taking seriously its own tragedy. Yet because modernity is a quarrel or a question with the ancients rather than a resolution or answer, the possibility still remains of siding with the comedy of the Bible and Plato rather than succumbing to the ferocious comedy of the moderns. If this is to be a live option, however, it requires us to distinguish again between life and writing, and ask whether one can indeed live a serious life while writing comically, as seems to be the case in Plato; or, in the case of the Christian faith, actually live one’s life in terms of the serious comedy of the Bible. The questions remain open for us; the point of this investigation is merely to focus these questions a bit by tracking why comedy and tragedy reappear again and again in accounting for why and what we must decide between.

Nevertheless, this investigation is not without some claims of its own. As already mentioned, one of its burdens will be to argue that the Bible is indeed a comedy rather than a tragedy. To give this claim its proper significance, however, we must start with the claim that Plato’s dialogues are self-consciously written as comedies, and this is to be expected from a serious philosopher. Part and parcel of Plato’s comedies, moreover, is an account of tragedy; a comic account, if you will, that is comic precisely in its exposure of

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the “lie” that tragedy must keep hidden if it is to retain the political power it has traditionally wielded. The argument of Plato, seconded by Aristotle, is that tragic narrative functions as a mimetic scapegoat essential to founding and maintaining a political unity in the midst of private individual desires and fears. Tragedy accomplishes this feat as long as it obscures its artificial character, which is to say, it must divert us from the presence of the inevitable tragic poet. Comedy, on the other hand, puts its poet front and center, thereby revealing its artifice and raising the philosophical question of nature by way of contrast. The “nature” revealed through this process, however, is the very need to be lied to we find in tragedy, so the “outing” of the tragic poet is much more the “outing” of the tragic audience as the violent heart of human politics. Exposure, however, is no cure, and Plato’s comedies are no more capable of curing the political problem than are tragedies; but there does remain the private consolation of a theoretical life lived pursuing knowledge of the nature covered over in tragedy.

When it comes to the Bible, the claims I make here are at once more radical and more traditional than my arguments about Plato. What makes comedy what it is, is the revealed artifice of the poet. If the Bible is to be a comedy, then, we should find front and center the poet whose revelation makes it a comedy. In modern higher criticism, these poets are the various communities, interests, or cultures that expressed themselves in this collection of writings. All of these poets, however, are hidden and require the trained technique of the critic to expose them and bring them to light. Such a Bible is a tragedy requiring the modern critical comedy to bring its deceptions to light. Such a reading, I will argue, must read against the grain of the text, for it brings to bear the heterogeneous method of critical analysis that must remake for itself the only object that can be known in this way. To know is to make, so the de facto poets here are the critics; and whatever tragic text remains is undermined by the comic technique used to arrive at it.

What this method leaves out is the manifest comedy of the Bible itself, a comedy that from first to last announces the making of its creative poet who is both main character in the plot and ultimate author responsible for its writing. Until we get to the New Testament, whatever human authors lie behind the text are (with a few exceptions) completely obscured in the light of the main character who is the divine poet of everything. When in the gospels this character in his role as divine creative logos and human is described four different times and ways by named human authors, the “story” of the Author

as plot allows various different “tellings” with no harm to its comic theme. Nevertheless, tragedy is still present, for an overall theme tied in with the “deep” and “sea” is an attempt to reveal the lie found at the heart of human politics that hides us from each other even as it allows us to live in relative peace. The Bible will both reveal and use this “lie” until the end of all things and the beginning of the new, wherein the “sea” will be no more. The scapegoat function of tragedy is here center stage with a scapegoated God, but the scapegoat who reveals the ignorance of his accusers is also the comic poet who reveals the ignorance of his own characters of the very plot of which they are a part.

To read this Bible as do modern critics, is to replace one sort of comedy (the unique and specific comedy of the Bible with its unique and specific claims about its comic poet) with another (the more generic comedy of modernity with its human-all-too-human authors). Nevertheless, this possibility of counter-reading the Bible seems to have been opened up by the Bible itself. For what we have in the Bible is the first truly effective political comedy, and this fact seems to have inspired poets to write comically with tragic political aspirations. Dante, I will argue, was the start of this, but its full flowering in Machiavelli and his political heirs led to the comic and critical turn of mind inherited from the early Enlightenment. What was hid in tragedy is revealed on the political stage of political theater, and technique itself will manage the now manifest violence and selfishness of human desires with a Prospero-like “invisible hand” bringing all alike to a happy end.

That the political and critical methods and techniques of modernity are comic will be argued, but what may need little argument is that they are comic in quite another sense. For all the devices and desires of modernity in its quest after power and protection, the joke is that all of us must die, violently or not, keeping nothing of what we have gained. Cesare Borgia, prime exemplar and model for Machiavelli’s new technique, *would* have succeeded had he not gotten sick and died at just the wrong time. Descartes’ method will prove its worth by a true test, allowing us to live forever! Modern comedy proves a universal solvent, dissolving even its own claims when its own tools are inevitably turned against itself.

How does one escape this reflexive movement of comedy that inevitably laughs at the past that it puts up on stage, even while finding itself laughed at when that past turns out to be only a stage within a stage of the present? Perhaps there is some final audience that can take itself seriously and bring

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to a halt the modern comic history that devours the old even as it waits to be devoured in turn. Such, I think, is the attempt of Hegel in his tragic theater of the Absolute. If destruction and violence within comedy can only be mock beatings and boastful ignorance, putting them on stage and watching them from without in their entirety should transform them into a serious “speculative Good Friday” and “Golgotha of absolute Spirit” that retains all the gravity of the historical Good Friday while submitting to no other poet than the audience itself. In other words, since death renders all the endeavors of the early Enlightenment comic and ridiculous, Hegel must provide a serious resurrection to this otherwise merely comic Calvary, and this resurrection is a corporate absolute that in tragic fashion provides a unity by putting violence on stage and leaving behind a stilled and unified audience of spectators. Unfortunately, Hegel is no tragic poet. As a philosopher he cannot help but tell us what he is doing, and tragedy seems only to work if it happens behind our backs. Can the Spirit take seriously what it has made, without forgetting or lying to itself that it is always a Georg, Johann, or Friedrich who is in fact doing that making?

Such, I think, is the discovery of Nietzsche. Lying, self-deception, and forgetfulness are essential to taking oneself seriously à la Hegel, but how can this happen when one’s clever individual self has found this out and so cannot do the very thing it must? Nietzsche’s first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, sees this problem even as it seeks to re-do Hegel in Schopenhauerian style, but the later Nietzsche sees more clearly that the entire attempt is a head-on competition with the Christian God to create a comedy that one could take with tragic seriousness. Probity demanded that an individual who does not seek to forget or annihilate himself in his demands for created meaning must take on the prerogatives of a creator-god in direct rivalry with the creator God of the Bible. Hence Nietzsche’s “Anti-Christ,” who is at the same time “Dionysus,” the god of both comedy *and* tragedy. Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence of the same” is his attempt to become the individual god who is not subject to the ridicule of the self-loathing corporate audience of “last-men” who cannot take themselves seriously unless they forget they had individual selves to begin with. Attaining a tragic vision and a true “tragic philosophy” is no easy thing in a modern world of unceasing and unbridled laughter. Can we ever “pronounce holy” this laughter and playfulness and believe ourselves? Such are the problems we are left with if we stay on the road of the moderns and can no longer consider turning back.

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In Kierkegaard, however, we have another situation. As a self-styled modern Socrates, Kierkegaard provokes us to recollect both the serious life of the philosopher and the serious comedy of the Bible. By reintroducing the distinction between “life” and “writing” in terms of the comic and tragic, Kierkegaard’s writings function as Plato’s philosophical comedies—only now a serious existence or life must reckon with the presence of the comic writing of the Bible and the paradoxical challenge that presents to a serious life. Like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard sees the tragic and comic situation inherited from Hegel and the moderns; unlike him, Kierkegaard would bring back to mind that we are not gods but mortals and so remind us of the human predicament of death and limitation embodied in a serious life that cannot fully express itself in anything written. By reminding us of what is the sole prerogative of a creator God rather than us mortals, Kierkegaard also reminds us of the scandalous claim of the Bible that can only be taken seriously if God is indeed its poet and that God has also lived and died among us in a history of his own, rather than our, making.

By the end of this trajectory, three options seem to present themselves. We can lead serious lives but not take writing or what we make seriously—as seems to be the case in the ancient philosophers. Or we can live our lives in the writing and “writer” of the Bible—lives of faith in the poet of the serious comedy of the Bible. Or we can attempt to live in the writings of our own making, taking *them* seriously, while struggling to take seriously our lives apart from them. Such is the comic predicament of modernity. Because of the Bible we inherit the expectation that we can live serious lives in writing; but because we no longer believe in the one divine poet who could make this possible, the joke is always on us for we can no longer take our own comedies seriously.

Perhaps if we were in the position of Plato and Aristotle surrounded by the lies of tragic writing, the situation would be different. But lying and scape-goating have been revealed for what they are along with the outing of the tragic poet and audience. Plato himself, along with the sustained polemic against idolatry in the Bible, would seem to be responsible for this. Can we return, then, to the serious life of a pagan philosopher when the “writing” essential to who we are in the West is no longer a tragedy but a comedy? Perhaps something has unalterably happened to us. Perhaps we are characters in a comedy not of our own making, where we must either get in on the joke or be forever the butt of it. However hard we may laugh or secretly take

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ourselves seriously, the suspicion remains that the laughter is no longer on our side.

In what follows, these questions and claims will be taken up in three parts. Part I begins with a chapter on Aristotle's account of tragic catharsis in terms of pity and fear. Using Aristotle's *Poetics* is a rather standard starting point for this sort of investigation, but the substance of my argument goes against the grain of the dominant understanding of tragic catharsis and retroactively opens us up to the full political impact of Plato's account of comic and tragic writing. The next three chapters try to tease out this account, primarily through a reading of Plato's major poetic dialogues, the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium*, along with a few other dialogues. The sixth chapter on "Violence and the Tragic Scapegoat" brings together the account of tragedy in Plato and Aristotle and relates it to the more contemporary arguments of René Girard, Northrop Frye, and Paul Ricoeur. Chapters 7 and 8 give a relatively summary account of tragedy and comedy, so if the reader is looking for the closest thing to a generic definition, these would be the chapters to begin with.

Part II has to do with the Bible. Chapter 9 argues that there is such a thing, that it has a unity, and that that unity can be understood as either comic or tragic. Help in this endeavor comes from Erich Auerbach and Hans Frei, particularly in their understanding of narrative and figural interpretation. The issue of higher criticism is dealt with here, along with the question of history and "realism" in narrative. The tenth chapter begins with Meir Sternberg's account in his *Poetics of the Biblical Narrative* of how the Bible demands to be read, an account I consider the best of its kind. Nevertheless, Sternberg's "Bible" is only the Hebrew Scriptures, so his arguments must be both extended and criticized if they are to apply to the Christian Old and New Testaments. Chapter 11 is a reading of the Bible as a comedy; a reading that is at once figural and argumentative. This reading seeks to bring out the narrative argument implicit in the Bible's type and antitype structure; an argument that elucidates the nature and need for tragedy even as it subordinates and finally does away with that need in an overarching comedy. This reading is perhaps most idiosyncratically "my own" in this entire book, but if there is any "proof" in the pudding of my arguments throughout, it will be found in this chapter. The twelfth and final chapter of Part II is the most strictly theological, for it looks at Aquinas' arguments at the beginning of his *Summa* on the

relation between the Scripture and philosophy. This chapter deals most explicitly with the question of the “Bible or philosophy” by seeing how Aquinas related these two; but it is also a back-handed confirmation that this question has been properly asked in terms of comic and tragic writing, for it corresponds to the way Aquinas sets up the question at the beginning of his own inquiries. In addition, Aquinas’ understanding of the four senses of Scripture in terms of God’s authorship of the Bible confirms the central role of the poet in making the Bible a comedy.

Part III tracks comedy and tragedy as it is discussed in modern thought. The first chapter of this part, Chapter 13, argues a transition from the more “ancient” understanding of comedy and tragedy, to what I call the “technological comedy of modernity,” by looking at Dante and Machiavelli. Dante points from Aquinas to the moderns, while Machiavelli effects this transition in his *Prince* and *Mandragola*. The fourteenth chapter, on Hegel’s “tragic theater,” deals with the culmination of a reaction against early modern comedy, wherein Hegel retells and reinvents modernity and Christianity in terms of tragedy. Chapter 15 deals with Nietzsche and his attempt to reincorporate comedy into his tragic philosophy, while the sixteenth and final chapter concludes with Kierkegaard and his return to both the insights of Plato on writing and the comedy of the Bible. All three of these thinkers, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, use the categories of comedy and tragedy manifestly and in the forefront of their writings, so quite often we find definitions of tragedy and comedy that either diverge or converge with my own. Overall, however, the positions one can take up relative to each narrative form remains constant, and the patterns elucidated by Plato confirm once again the claim that there is very little found in later philosophy that is not a footnote to a position or character found in one of his dialogues. Although this book could very well have started with Kierkegaard, Hegel, or Nietzsche, such a beginning would obscure the fact that a philosophical account of tragedy arose from an ex-tragic poet in a world of thriving tragic poetry—even while it ends in a world filled with little tragic poetry and plenty of “tragic” philosophers. Somewhere along the way, a serious comedy seems to have changed everything.