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From *Hamartia* to “Nothingness”: Tragedy, Comedy, and Luther’s “*Humilitas*”

Is the Reformation an event? Do we need to understand what happened at its inception in order to understand our contemporary debates? Can such a reconstruction perhaps give us conceptual tools for trying to understand what we might mean by “suspension of the law” or by the idea of a comic subjectivity beyond the comic as carnevalesque, understood simply as a reversal of the given symbolic order? The following study argues that in Martin Luther’s reformatory breakthrough a site appears in which the subject is shown to be irreconcilably split due to its constitution through language. In this very split a potentiality appears – not of reconciliation or of reuniting opposites in a new or higher unity or One, but of a kind of suspension. Without taking this site into account, any attempt to try to reconstruct the emergence of such a possibility will fail – whether it applies the purely formal analysis of a “Pauline” subjectivity of truth, as does Alain Badiou, or whether it tries to inscribe this site into the emergence of a comic subjectivity, e.g., in Dante, as does Giorgio Agamben. If one wants to understand and engage in contemporary discussions of subjectivity, universality, or of the problem of exception; or, relating to both philosophy proper as well as to the cultural field, issues such as undeadness or *hauntology*, it will prove to be necessary to reconstruct and engage the Reformation as a genuine event, a site where a potentiality emerges which needs to be re-constructed. The following study is part of a larger project which attempts to affirm that there is a break in the history and thought of the West that bears the name of the Reformation. Having the heritage not just of the Jewish tradition, as does Paul, but also of the Aristotelian-Christian tradition as its point of departure, it does not simply count as a repetition, more or less successful, of the Pauline moment. It is a genuine site, which needs to be taken into account.

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Martin Luther conceived of *humilitas* as “nothingness”, I will discuss this conception with reference to Giorgio Agamben’s essay “Comedy”. At stake in this dialogue is the question of whether it might be necessary to introduce a “Protestant” understanding of the “nothingness” of the subject. “Nothingness”

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is the state effected in the subject by a repetition of its constitution, a state that enables the move from tragic subjectivity to comic subjectivity. At stake, then, is also the nature of the insistence of the tragic in the comic – an insistence connected to the Greek term *hamartia*, in both its Aristotelian usage in the *Poetics* as the “great mistake” which introduces the tragic trajectory, and in its New Testament usage referring to “sin”. I will affirm, alongside Agamben, not only that the tragic insists in the comic, but that this insistence can and should be related to *hamartia* in its dual heritage in tragedy and theology.¹ The argument will move from a discussion of the relation between *hamartia* in Greek tragedy and in the New Testament, towards charting its implications for the conception of original sin. The move from tragedy to comedy will be further developed through the concept of *kerygma*. *Kerygma* in its modern theological use refers usually to Jesus’ injunction to preach his good news. Here it will be used as another conceptual mode for the constitution of the subject, in both tragedy and in St. Paul. A Thomist anthropology of the kind Agamben endorses is superseded by Luther’s thought. Such a step produces the principle of the *totus homo* (the whole man) in which the totality of man is taken with sin and justification as necessary for a new kind of subjectivity. Finally, I will show in Luther’s exegesis of the *Magnificat* the outlines of a subjectivity of nothingness on the horizon of the comic.

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Since I refer later to Jacques Lacan’s conception of the space “between two deaths” which he introduces in his reading of Antigone, I should mention here that he disavows such a relation between that space and *hamartia*. “*Ate* is not *hamartia*; it has nothing to do with doing something stupid”, Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. by Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 277. However, he also refers in passing to the fact that what brings into play the *ektos atas*, the “going beyond the limits of *ate*”, i.e. into the space between two deaths, is the *kerygma* of Kreon, the sovereign revelation of power. Lacan himself points out that this term, *kerygma*, will play an “important role in modern Protestant theology as a dimension of the revelation”, p. 273. He thus points in the direction this paper will take in order to realign *ate* and *hamartia*.

I. Tragedy and Heteronomy

1. The Question Regarding a Christian Conception of Tragic Guilt

A conception of guilt that is certainly tragic is present in Christianity through the doctrine of original sin and the distinction between *natura* and *persona*, natural guilt and personal guilt, which the theologians elaborated and justified.²

This claim by Agamben in his essay "Comedy" is made in critical reference to the work of Kurt von Fritz, who has argued regarding the history of the interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of *hamartia* that:

the fact that Aristotle talks about *hamartia* immediately after his remarks about the necessary imperfection of the tragic hero has had the consequence that the vast majority of interpreters have equated the imperfection of the hero with his *hamartia*, or at least have considered the latter as the necessary cause of the former.³

Von Fritz proposes a different reading of *hamartia*, one which strictly distinguishes between, on the one hand, the character of the hero and his imperfection and, on the other, the *hamartia* that objectively – not subjectively – renders the tragic events tragic. He argues that *hamartia* should not be read as an internal flaw within the subject, but as an outside force that is productive of tragedy. He thus wants to strengthen the view that:

the tragic situation always comes, is given, from outside, that is, it does not emerge with necessity from the character of the hero. Character only plays a role to the extent that the individual has to be receptive, so to say, to the situation given from outside.⁴

In order to clarify this thought, von Fritz points to the example in Sophocles' tragedy of the very different reactions of the sisters Antigone and Ismene to Kreon's "announcement", his *kerygma*, prohibiting the burial of Polynices. Here,

² Giorgio Agamben, "Comedy" in *End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*. Trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 1–22, here p. 11.

³ Kurt von Fritz, *Antike und Moderne Tragödie* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1962), p. 32. One can qualify von Fritz's argument by pointing out that he goes on to say that reading *hamartia* as a determination of finitude is at least "misleading", which is certainly not the same as false.

⁴ K. von Fritz, *Antike und Moderne Tragödie*, p. 15.

von Fritz argues that *hamartia* actually suggests that the concretely heteronomous – what von Fritz calls “the situation given from *outside*” – has to be able to encounter a prepared situation, a readiness. The condition of tragedy in *Antigone* is the relation between an external *kerygma* and a readiness for its reception. Von Fritz concludes from this that “an essential presupposition of Greek tragedy” is “that not only physical but also moral suffering is possible without attributable – or at least without fully attributable – subjective moral guilt”⁵. Von Fritz, therefore, explicitly objects to the idea of a family resemblance between Aristotelian *hamartia* and Christian original sin:

the *hamartia* that Aristotle talks about certainly belongs, as an always open possibility, to the fundamental condition of human existence. As *hamartia*, however, it is something entirely concrete and has [...] not the slightest thing to do [...] with Christian original sin.⁶

2. Heteronomy and Original Sin

In “Comedy” – and in contradiction to von Fritz – Giorgio Agamben connects the “heteronomous” structure of *hamartia* with original sin. Because Agamben understands original sin as natural and not as subjective – *naturaliter*, not *personaliter* – he can talk about a “Christian experience” of tragic guilt. Before he does this, however, Agamben once again draws attention to the problem that the tragic (and the comic) presents in Christian thought. With reference to an inference of Dante – if after the Fall the language or speech of every individual begins with “Woe!”, then before the Fall it must have begun with a cry of joy – Agamben claims that “after the Fall, human language cannot be tragic; before the Fall, it cannot be comic.”⁷ His reasoning is that whoever starts with “Woe!” cannot fall into the transformation (*anagoresis*) of recognizing a tragic involvement. Likewise, whoever starts with joy cannot be, and has no need to be, relieved of guilt. The subject, under Christianity, is always locked into an either pre- or post-lapsarian state. This precludes the transformation in the subject necessary for comedy or tragedy. Agamben solves this problem by post-Adamicly reading *hamartia* as original sin, that is, sin *naturaliter* – which accordingly carries no subjective guilt. Consequently, the heteronomy that opens up “concupiscence”

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⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷ Agamben, “Comedy”, p. 10.

– i.e. the sublation in nature of a sexuality once submitted to the power of a will that conforms to God – makes it possible to define a “Christian conception of tragic guilt.” Concomitantly, it also opens up the “comic possibility opened to man by Christ’s Passion”. This notion of the Christian subject as perennially under heteronomous authority creates the possibility of both tragic and comic guilt, providing the outside condition against which the subject will arrive at knowledge.

Agamben establishes here a relationship analogous to that which – from Augustine to Luther and Kierkegaard, and above all within Protestant theology and philosophy – has enjoyed a central significance. This is the necessity of the experience of the *lex* (law) as a propaedeutic to the experience of grace through the Passion of Christ. These are the two sides of the immutable Word: it is unchangeable in itself, but it also makes possible two modes of reception. The Word can be *lex*, or, it can produce the other work, the *opus alienum* of Grace. This binary constituted the final separation between Judaism and Christianity, at least in Paul’s letters. The thought of the Reformation, with its emphasis on the infusion of grace granted by the Word, invariably favoured the Word over *lex* as a mode to achieve grace or redemption. (One only needs to think here of Martin Luther’s confrontation with Agricola and the Antinomians.)⁸ The problem with the erasure of *lex* that occurs in Reformation theology is that it then becomes impossible to understand Christ’s *kerygma* as borne of Grace, and thus comically transforming *lex*.

Agamben maintains this binarised idea of *lex* for the present because he needs to maintain a relationship of tension between the two poles in order to think through the transformation from tragic subjectivity to comic subjectivity. He wants to forge a separation between the guilt that tragedy introduces for the present *into* comedy and the justification *through* comedy. Bearing tragic inheritance, one pole is – and remains – heteronomous to the other. Or, rather, and more precisely, one pole preserves a remembrance of its heteronomy. It conveys its “history”, we might say, not as reminiscence⁹ but instead as remembrance: of

⁸ See, for example, Luther’s “Contra Antinomios”, in *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883). Vol. 39 I, pp. 342–347. All references to the critical edition are abbreviated as WA followed by the number of the volume in numerals and the page number.

⁹ With the term reminiscence, what should be understood here is Kierkegaard’s critique of

the relationship of man to something absolutely heteronomous, of his positioning with respect to an absolute, non-subjectivizable difference. This implants in the subject – as *lex* – a “core” that is certainly active and effective, but which does not simply belong to it subjectively. In the terminology of Lacan, it is an “extimate” core. For the purposes of the argument here it can be read as the activity or *insistence* which can be transformed through the Passion of Christ, the *opus alienum*. It is precisely by traversing the path of the Word, into the repetitive *kerygma* of this Passion that the comic subject is created. This is a transformation or reversal from objective guilt *naturaliter* – which cannot be ascribed subjectively *personaliter* – to subjective guilt that is, however, justified *personaliter*. The structure and consequences of *hamartia* as original sin *naturaliter* are preserved in this movement, because justification occurs here precisely as *personaliter*, not as *naturaliter*, i.e. objective guilt *insists* in the place of its justification. This also preserves desire or *concupiscentia* in its full Augustinian-Protestant meaning as a force that preserves sexual desire and its consequent resistance to the “higher” faculties.

II. The Tragedy in Comedy: The Insistence of the Heteronomous

1. Kerygma: An Aspect of Revelation and a “Message” that Repeats Constitution

Kerygma is the message of the herald, the *kerux*, its content and its act. The rule or power (“*kratos*”) of Kreon (873)¹⁰ is originally communicated as a “*kerygma*” (8) to Antigone. The Pauline pronouncement of soteriological grace, the *opus alienum* of the Passion of Christ, is also called a “*kerygma*” (*First I Cor.* 2, 4).¹¹ The power that makes possible the reception of this *kerygma* – a reception that, in a

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Hegel’s concept of “*Erinnerung*” as developed in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, as well as the earlier understanding of Jacques Lacan of the Symbolic. See, for example, “The Freudian Thing”, in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton 2002), p. 133: “Indeed, the laws of remembering and symbolic recognition are different in their essence and manifestation from the laws of imaginary reminiscence – that is, from the echo of feeling or instinctual imprinting – even if the elements organized by the former as signifiers are borrowed from the material to which the latter gives signification.”

¹⁰ All reference to *Antigone* are to *Sophocles, With an English Translation*, trans. by F. Storr. Vol. 1, *Antigone* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962) Line numbers will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ “For I determined not to know any thing [*ti eidenai*] among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling [*asthenei kai en phobo kai en tromo*] and my speech and my *preaching* was not with enticing words of man’s

certain sense, is the *kerygma* itself – is not autonomous, but instead emerges out of the power of God (“*dynamei theou*”) or, in the case of *Antigone*, the *kratos d’, hoto kratos melei* (873), the “powers who hold by might the sway”. The creative power, the efficacy of what remains from the *kerygma* is certainly *in* the subject, but it is not *of* the subject. While the *kerygma* or rather the *kratos d’, hoto kratos melei* – sustaining it (or, in the Pauline case, the *dynamei theou*) remains, as such, immutable, its nature demands a productive reception subject to change. This reception is localized in the subject. It is *extimate*, like the efficacy of the word in the mode of reception of the *lex*. In Martin Luther’s interpretation of the *Magnificat*, this same process is indirectly described as follows:

As he has created in the inception of all creatures the world out of nothing, for which he is named creator and omnipotent, so he remains immutable in this mode of efficacy. And all of his works till the end of the world are done in this mode, that he will make from what is nothing, low, contemptible, suffering, dying, something delicious, honest, blessed, alive. Then again he makes everything that is delicious, honest, blessed, alive into nothing, into what is low, contemptible, suffering, dying. No creature can be effective [i.e., no creature can create] in this way, it does not have capacity to make something out of nothing.¹²

It is important to note here the terms Luther uses in his German: in the expression “*aus nicht zu machen icht*” one can hear “*ich*” (“I” or “ego”) as much as “*icht*” (“*etwas*” or something). While there is no etymological root sustaining this association, it clearly functions in the hearing process of the logic of the sig-

wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the *power of God* [*kai hologos mou kai to kerygma mou ouk en pethois sophias logois [...] sophia anthropon [...] all en dynamei theou*].” [Italics added]. King James Bible.

¹² My translation. “Denn so wie er im Anfang aller Kreaturen die Welt aus nichts schuf, wovon er Schöpfer und allmächtig heisst, so bleib er bei solcher Art zu wirken unverwandelt. Und es sind noch all seine Werke bis ans Ende der Welt also getan, dass er aus dem, was nichts, gering, verachtet, elend, tot ist, etwas Köstliches, Ehrliches, Seliges, Lebendiges macht. Wiederum alles, was etwas Köstliches, Ehrliches, Seliges, Lebendiges ist, macht er zunichte, gering, verachtet, elend und sterbend. Auf diese Weise kann keine Kreatur wirken, vermag es nicht, aus nicht zu machen icht. (Etwas).” In Luther, Martin, “Das Magnificat verdeutscht undausgelegt” (1521), in Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Schriften*. Ed. by Karin Bornekamm and Gerhard Ebeling (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1982), p. 119. I am using this edition instead of WA since it has been transferred into contemporary German. The old usage of “*icht*” for “*etwas*” or “something” was referenced by the editors of this edition also. For the “Magnificat” in WA, see Vol. 7, pp. 504–604.

nifier. This holds particularly for a listener of Luther's time, as well as today. Luther's aim was to show the privative or derivative way in which the world, its things, and its carrier appear from nothing. Also, we can observe that the state of "nothing" is addressed adverbially, while the state of something is addressed with substantialized adjectives. From here we can draw the inference that what is at stake is symbolic ascription or the inscription of a creative act. Although God preliminarily creates through the Word, he also "remains" in this, "then again" (*Wiederum*), "unchangeable", as Luther says a few lines earlier. This "then again" is the repetition of the unchangeable as *kerygma*, which works to destroy worldly identities and render them as "nothing, low, contemptible, suffering and dying". The condition that relativizes the symbolic order and the attributions and identities that support it is that the destructive entry into the sphere "between the two deaths"¹³ is, at the same time, a creative, living power that makes it possible to act. This creativity does not entail, however, the possibility of objectively turning away from the heteronomous source in order – by one's own powers alone – to "make something out of nothing", *aus nicht zu machen icht*. The reason is that in itself the Word is unchangeable, just as God in himself is unchangeable. One cannot turn to the one side and *simultaneously* turn away from the other. The "changeable" God – and the changeable Word – only emerges in the mode of reception. *Ita credunt, ut habent*, as they believe him, so they have him, as Luther writes in his Large Catechism.

In the process followed here, there appears – in Agamben's sense – a kind of "thingness" of the world precisely at the locus where the efficacy of the Word "makes into nothing" or annihilates – "desymbolizes", so to say – symbolic identities and the things mediated by them. The *kerygma* of the "then again", of the repetition, potentially "desublimates" the world into its "thingness" – a concept that, in *The Coming Community*, Agamben relates to things in the thusness "of the world."¹⁴ In this way, these things are not dissolved "philanthropically" – in the sense employed in Aristotle's poetics – into fantasy. In the manner described, then, the *kerygma*, the "message" that is repeated, runs up against the level of the "irreparable". Lacan has pointed out the connection between *kerygma* and the position from which Antigone acts, a position in the zone of the *ate*. He has de-

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¹³ Compare here Jacques Lacan's introduction of the term "between the two deaths" in his *Seminar VII*, particularly session XXI, "Antigone Between the Two Deaths."

¹⁴ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 88.

scribed this topos as that "between the two deaths". In this topos, an insertion into the existing *kratos*, and the maintenance of the symbolic identities that it mediates and guarantees, is no longer possible. It is possible – and this is exactly what Ismene does in *Antigone* – *not to hear* this "message". After being asked whether she has heard the *kerygma*, she replies: "To me, Antigone, no word [*mythos*] of friends [*philon*]/ Has come, glad or grievous." (11-12) Antigone is asking here whether Ismene has also been "traumatized" by the *kerygma*, and Ismene immediately answers with precisely the word that Aristotle will later make into an essential component of tragedy. Almost imperceptibly she changes *kerygma* into *mythos*, the traumatic message of the Other into a present or absent element of a comprehensible narrative: "No *mythos* of our friends." That "word" – a felicitous translation of *mythos* here, in the context of our argument – which does not acknowledge the consequence of "communicative action" that does not "exist", i.e. that is not representable, is repressed or disavowed. Ismene *does not hear* the antagonism that the question aims at – namely, that, by means of the announcement, the *kerygma*, the friend has become an enemy in a kind of negative recognition or *anagnoresis* (a "Gestalt-switch" has taken place).¹⁵ Already in the first lines of the play, Antigone makes it clear that she has heard the military leader's *kerygma*; but Ismene, reasoning on the basis of the suffering that has already befallen her, wants to remain in the world that she knows or, above all, to persist in the way that she knows it. By referring to past suffering, she indirectly points to the repetitive character of *kerygma*. But she persists, we might say, in melancholy, hears neither "glad [n]or grievous" word (12-13). At the same time, she reproaches Antigone for wanting the "impossible" (90 and 92)¹⁶ by insisting on an answer and reaction outside the existing order, outside the given possibilities. What she wants is an impossibility because it has no imaginable, ascribable, or nameable place in the existing "processual-order" (Blumenberg) of *philoï*, of "friends", Ismene wants a "philanthropic" comportment

¹⁵ It would be interesting to discuss the extent to which "*anagnoresis*" can also be understood in this context: as a moment of sudden change, of a Gestalt-switch, that does not create "new facts", but instead new "ways of seeing". In this sense, the Fall is the "*anagnoresis*" par excellence.

¹⁶ Ismene says "*ei kai dynesei g' all' amechanon eras*" (90). And in l. 92. "*archen de theran ou prepei tamechana*". Storr's translation has here for l. 90: "If thou succeed; but thou art doomed to fail." And l. 92: "But if the venture is hopeless, why essay." While capturing Ismenes mood, he fails to indicate the relationship between "*amechanon*" and "*tamaechana*" both indicating the realm of what in Paul is called the *me onta*, the non-existent or impossible. It is precisely this "impossibility", that which is not within the existing symbolic order, which is the realm of causality. It is the activation or subjectivation of what insists in the subject, of the tragic insistence.

towards the “*kerygma*”, which means ignoring its traumatic and repetitive potentiality. On the contrary, *kerygma* forces Antigone up against the impossible – and beyond. In this sense, the attitude and experience of Antigone is “creative” *in-deed*, “*durch die Tat*”, as Hegel will point out. She asserts and creates an attitude that – speaking anachronistically, in scholastic-nominalistic terms – has no place in the world of the *potentia dei ordinata*, in the *already existing symbolic order* or “*processual order*” (*Prozessordnung*), as Hans Blumenberg has so aptly translated this scholastic term. In this sense it is creative, and can be creative, from the place “between the two deaths” – the place between symbolic death and material, bodily death that opens up through the *kerygma*’s banning-effect. But this ban still withholds something. In the very act of individualizing, there is also something amiss.¹⁷

I only want to mention in passing here that it is precisely the defence of such a *potentia dei ordinata* of a teleologically organized world that Aristotle uses to exclude the “terrible”, the “impure”, the *miaros*, from the possible fund of tragic “myths.” The employment of such “material” would not be “philanthropic”. Aristotle excludes here – and this is precisely the employment of von Fritz’s insight that Agamben wants to retain – something that indirectly re-enters through *hamartia*, the “great flaw”. He excludes the presupposition of the tragic occurrence, which is the *mythos* that domesticates the excluded *miaros*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Tragedy shows that the “hero is himself the speaker, and the performance displays to the audience – who are also spectators – *self-conscious* human beings who *know* their rights and purposes, the power and the will of their specific nature and know how to *assert* them. They are artists, who do not express with unconscious naturalness and naivety the *external* aspect of their resolves and enterprises, as happens in the language accompanying ordinary actions in actual life; on the contrary, they give utterance to the inner essence, they prove the rightness of their action, and the ‘pathos’ which moves them is soberly asserted and definitely expressed in its universal individuality, free from the accidents of circumstance and personal idiosyncrasies. Lastly, these characters *exist* as actual human beings who impersonate the heroes and portray them, not in the form of a narrative, but in the actual speech of the actors themselves. Just as it is essential for the statue to be the work of human hands, so is the actor essential to his mask – not as an external condition from which artistically considered we must abstract; *or, so far as we do have to make abstraction from it, we admit just this, that Art does not yet contain in it the true and proper self.*” [Italics added]. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 444.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*. Trans. by S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover, 1997), p. 22: “It follows plainly, in the first place, that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks

Because Aristotle is obliged, according to the terms of his world-view, to link together the elements of action according to "probability or possibility", he constitutively excludes such a creative act, one that fundamentally transforms the symbolic order. That is, he goes no further than the first, material death. At the same time, however – by means of the initial *hamartia* that the *kerygma* gives rise to – an *aporia* is described: a world that is ordered in such a way must inevitably run up against its own presuppositions. It is not only that the world is not full of friends; symbolic identities – and the *kratos*, the power, that supports them and by means of which they are reproduced – do not completely redeem or sublimate the heteronomous structure of their own presuppositions. Something always remains "outside" – which, as extimate to/in the subject is also inside. This extimate core is exposed in *Antigone* through traumatic repetition by way of the occasion of the *kerygma*. This is what Lacan means when he points out that at the end of the play *Antigone* is described by the chorus as "*autognothos*" (someone possessing self-knowledge) – Lacan wants to read this together with the "*gnothi seauton*" (to know thyself) of the Delphic oracle. A *remainder* insists in and through the invocation; and it is either fantasmatically held at a distance in the "philanthropic" world of friends – this is what happens with Ismene – or assumed, realized, and made one's own, as is the case with Antigone. Nonetheless, it always remains "enigmatic". It cannot be dialectically dissolved or incorporated as an intelligible object of knowledge that guides action. Instead, it can only be assumed by means of a specific form of self-knowledge, that is, by means of the attempt to put oneself, through action, in the position of the impossible. In psychoanalytic terminology, this would be to subjectivize the cause. And, as Lacan's reference to the oracle once again makes clear, this is certainly not something that sublimes heteronomy.

In tragedy, as *Antigone* shows, someone being *autognothos* leads to disaster. In the play, immediately prior to the use of this expression, the chorus once again conveys the alternative attitude: "Yet is it ill to disobey/ the powers who hold by might the sway/ Thou hast withstood authority/ A self-willed rebel, thou must die" (872–5).¹⁹ If one reads this passage together with the debate between Agam-

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us [*touto alla miaron estin*]." *Miaron* is a word which well designates the locus of reversal, of "nothingness", which will be discussed later. It is an abject word.

¹⁹ This formulation needs to be stronger: No matter who is in control of state-power, it is never conceivable – precisely within the "processual order" of the world according to the *potentia ordinata* – to transgress it.

ben and von Fritz I presented above, one can draw the following conclusion: to be *autognothos*, arises out of one's own drive, not as a subjective, but as an "objective" factor caused by a constitution from outside. Paradoxically, it follows that what exists is in and of itself. *Autognothos* is not subjectively attributable, but it is only the realized deed. Whoever responds to the *kerygma* that repeats heteronomy with a *passage à l'acte*²⁰, is not of this world. The *kerygma* that repeats itself leads to objectively guiltless symbolic death, while the *passage à l'acte* leads to material death. Antigone is trapped by the necessity to go from one to the other. This trap or this necessity emerges or is instated precisely because she did not understand the message of power as materially reproducing the *kratos*, the existing "symbolic world", and thus as an "order." Instead, she understands this message as the "object-cause" of "self-will" of being *autognothos*,²¹ and this is exactly what makes the tragedy a tragedy. Tragedy is necessary as long as this heteronomous object-cause is understood to lie outside our own responsibility, while still being the cause of one's being *autognothos*, or *Eigensinn*, one's own drive. In a reversal, the *passage à l'acte* turns out to be an acting out.²² It only remains to observe that this *passage à l'acte* is then entirely bound up with a specific pleasure, a "surplus-jouissance", as opposed to the enjoyment of the "processual-order" or the "order of friends". Thus, Antigone can say: "I will suffer nothing so bad that it would not be beautiful to die." Storr's translation speaks of an "honorable death", which misses the point. Antigone is certain of the surplus enjoyment.

2. Anthropology: From the Qualities of the Soul to the Sin of Reflexivity

Agamben is concerned in "Comedy" with the genre categorization of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which was written in the fourteenth century, so he discusses con-

²⁰ In his Seminar on "Anxiety", Lacan splits the Freudian term "agieren" describing the symptomatic behaviour of the neurotic for the benefit of the Other into two: he translates it as the English *acting-out*, where it describes behaviour that is actually an attempt to get the Other to interpret or to look at the subject as "worthy", as containing an "*agalma*". But he uses the French *passage à l'acte* to describe behaviour which is no longer staged for the Other, but actually leaves that stage completely, cutting the ties to the Other that sustains the existing symbolic order.

²¹ The German translation of Norbert Zink (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982) has an even more felicitous translation: "*eigensinnig*", which makes one think of Hegel's "*Eigensinn*" or Wilhelm Küchenmüller's "*eigner Drang*", one's "own drive".

²² Again, this is not the place to go into this differentiation in more detail. A good place to start is Lacan's *Seminar on Anxiety, Seminar X*.

ceptions of original sin by Catholic – that is, pre-Protestant – theologians. In *The Coming Community* there is a related discussion, but one that refers more particularly to Protestant theology. Here, Agamben is again concerned with the irreducible immanence of existence. This is an immanence that can sublimate neither the division of the subject nor the heteronomy of the efficacy of this division. The name Agamben gives to the *topos* of the irreducibility of this divided immanence is “the irreparable”. In his gloss on this concept, he claims:

This is why those who try to make the world and life sacred again are just as impious as those who despair about profanation. This is why Protestant theology, which clearly separates the profane world from the divine, is both wrong and right: right because the world has been consigned irrevocably by revelation (by language) to the profane sphere; wrong because it will be saved precisely insofar as it is profane.²³

The repetitive experience of *kerygma* – the dimension of revelation as language and of language as revelation – is accordingly to be found in the thought of Protestant theology. But it is this same theology that then goes wrong when it in turn reifies the heteronomy that it describes as a transcendent *deus absconditus* (a hidden god) and “final cause” – and precisely through this allocates to language itself the dimension of the “sublimation” of the world. When God is transcendent, he returns to the world as a sublimating power.

In “Comedy”, Agamben rightly points out that it is precisely the *topos* of original sin which allows for a thought that makes possible a total determination of human beings: “For Adam’s sin was not only *personal*; in him human *nature* itself sinned, thus falling away from the natural justice that had been assigned to it by God.”²⁴ He proceeds, however, to obfuscate once again this total determination by means of a reference to the anthropological determinations of Thomism. Agamben holds the door open for the idea that these “natural sins” only encapsulate particular qualities of particular faculties, that is, that they do not determine the whole of man.

Luther also ascribes original sin to nature, and can therefore say that – in contrast to actual sins – these are objective determinations. That is, we can also ob-

²³ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 89.

²⁴ Agamben, “Comedy”, p. 11.

serve in Luther – and *precisely* in Luther – the workings of a “Christian conception of tragic guilt.” In the *Lectures on Romans*, for example, he says about original sin or *peccatum originale*:

One could say that sin is something other than transgression, since sin is retained in a state of being accused [*reatus manet*], while transgression, on the other hand, passes with the act. Thus everyone has sinned, not by an actual deed, but in this sense of being in a state of accusation. Adam alone sinned in the sense of a deed and at the same time of being in a state of accusation, for here we are dealing with the first sin.²⁵

This “sin” is heteronomously determined, it is not a quality of human beings (this is why it cannot be “cleansed” as such), but instead comes from outside: “But this sin enters into them and they do not commit it, but suffer it.”²⁶ The medium of this “suffering” is language or – in specific reference to sin – the Word in its mode of *lex*. And this objective guiltiness is transmitted *naturaliter*, by means of sexual reproduction. It is important to keep in mind that “*concupiscentia*”, as the “*naturaliter*” path of reproduction, is precisely not just sex. It is sexuality which always already is inscribed and inscribing: “Thus you, too, are a sinner, because you are the son of a sinner. But a sinner can only father another sinner, who is just like him.”²⁷

Luther draws a further, more radical conclusion from this determination of *naturaliter* sin. He certainly thinks that this determination corrupts the will, and that the *kerygma* of the Passion of Christ must correspondingly “cleanse” it. This does not occur, however, through a new determination of its quality. Instead, a

²⁵ WA 56, p. 316 (Scholia to 5, 14). “Quasi aliud sit peccatum et preuaricatio, quia peccatum vt reatus manet, preuaricatio autem vt actus transit. Ergo peccauerunt omnes non actu, Sed reatu eodem, Solus autem Adam actu et reatu simul quoad primum peccatum.”

²⁶ WA 56, p. 314 (Scholia to 5, 12). “Sed hoc peccatum Intrat ad eos et non agunt, Sed patiuntur ipsum.”

²⁷ WA 56, p. 315 (scholia to *Romans*, 5, 12). “Ergo et tu peccator, quia filius peccatoris; peccator autem non nisi peccatorem sibi similem generare potest.” It can be noted that a doubling of “*generare*” is implied here and in Luther’s whole discussion. A doubling between the reproductive aspect of “*fathering*” and the reference which establishes sexuality in its broader than reproductive scope, referred to in Luther as “*concupiscentia*”. One may think here of Piere Legendre and his conception of the “absolute reference” which has to situate the “father” of reproduction. Yet, the conception of a “comic” subjectivity is precisely a project which suspends the “absoluteness” of this absolute.

“knowledge” is effected in human beings that “sees” this will differently. Against this conception, he sees the scholastic-Aristotelian error of ascribing what is *naturaliter* as a subjective attribute:

What then is original sin? First, according to the subtle distinctions of the scholastic theologians, it is the privation or lack of original justification. But, according to their view, justification is present in the will *subjectively* and thus also has privation as its opposite. This is the way it is in the category of quality according to Logic and Metaphysics.²⁸

If we translate this into the problematic that concerns us here, we can say that Luther is of the opinion that it is precisely the retention of Aristotelian anthropological determinations that makes a “Christian conception of tragic guilt” impossible. For these determinations are *compelled* to understand original sin as a subjective loss or transformation of qualities, and not as an objective “tendency” for which the person as such cannot be made responsible. By contrast, a “Christian conception of tragic guilt” once again becomes thinkable in the context of Luther’s own – or *secundum Apostolum* – answer to the question of original sin. Here, original sin is

not only the privation of a quality in the will, not even only the privation of the light of reason or the power of memory, but a total [or “universal”] privation of all rectitude and the potency of all the powers of the body and the soul, of the whole inner and outer human being. And above this, there is a tendency towards what is bad, a nausea relating to the good, a fickleness towards the light and wisdom, and delight in error and darkness, a flight from and horror of good works, and a race towards the bad [or evil].²⁹

²⁸ WA 56, p. 312 (Scholia to *Romans*, 5, 14). “Quid ergo nunc est peccatum originale? Primo secundum subtilitates Scolasticorum theologorum Est priuatio seu carentia Iustitie originalis. Iustitia autem secundum eos Est in voluntate tantum subiectiue, ergo et priuatio eius opposita. Quia scil(icet) est in predicamento qualitatis secundum Logicam et metaphysicam.”

²⁹ WA 56, p. 312 (Scholia to *Romans*, 5, 14). Original sin is “non tantum priuatio qualitatis in voluntate, immo nec tantum priuatio lucis in intellectu, virtutis in memoria, Sed prorsus priuatio vniuerse rectitudinis et potentie omnium virium tam corporis quam anime ac totius hominis interioris et exterioris. Insuper et pronitas ipsa ad malum, Nausea ad bonum, fastidium lucis et sapientie, dilectio autem erroris ac tenebrarum, fuga et abominatio bonorum operum, Cursus autem ad malum.”

This race towards evil, the *pronitas ad mallum* – described elsewhere by Luther as the tendency of human beings to be *curvatus in se*, a self-inclination – is here reflexively related to itself and shown to be at heart the tendency to posit oneself as one’s own principle. Rudolf Malter has rightly pointed out that, according to the *Lectures on Romans*, this race is fundamentally identical to original sin.³⁰ The autonomy that is enacted *curvatus in se* is fantasmatic, its movement or tendency (*pronitas*) is in fact a product of heteronomy, to which the subject does not open itself adequately:

All of this [these good gifts of God], I say human beings bend back on themselves, seeking with it their advantage and – what a horror – fashioning idols out of it, which are conflated with the true god, by not relating these gifts to God, and by not being content when they are taken away. Thus they only let them [these gifts] reluctantly, when they are deprived of them or stripped of them.³¹

In Luther, then, objective guiltlessness is also to be understood *naturaliter*. This is shown by the fact that original sin is not sinful in itself, but only as a tendency towards an enactment of reflexivity. It is only in false “knowledge” that it is inevitably capable of subjective attribution, that is, precisely as “knowledge”, not as a realization by means of a *peccatum actuale* (an actual sin). It is precisely as “knowledge” that it grasps the whole of man beyond grace (*extra gratia*), not only as a set of the particular qualities of a particular capacity. This whole cannot be grasped, however, through the employment of a capacity that belongs to the subject, but instead only from a place entirely inaccessible to it. That place is the “nothingness” of “*humilitas*”. From this perspective, “objective guiltlessness” turns into a justified – that is, an always-becoming-justified – guilt. One consequence of this is that this “sin” can only be first recognized as such by means of its justification. The justification in the knowledge of human beings has to first posit its own presupposition, but which is identified precisely as the repetitive effect of heteronomy, not as the autonomous realization of human ca-

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³⁰ Rudolf Malter, *Das reformatorische Denken und die Philosophie: Luthers Entwurf einer transzendental-praktischen Metaphysik* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1980), particularly pp. 24ff., i.e. the section titled “Der Ich-Charakter des *peccatum originale*”. I am indebted to this book in my reading of Luther.

³¹ WA 56, S. 362 (Scholia to Romans, 8, 7). “Hec, inquam, omnia sibi inflectit, suum bonum in iis querit et horribiliter idola ex eis sibi conflat pro Deo vero, dum ea non in Deum refert nec contentus est, si he,c auferantur sibi. Ideo omnibus iis spoliabitur et nudabitur Inuitus.”

pacities. Kierkegaard describes this in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, when he rewrites the famous Pauline formula – “sin came into the world through the law” – as “sin came into the world through sin”. That is, sin is a product of the *kerygma* that repeats itself. It does not emerge out of the reciprocal determination of the two modes of the Word, the *lex* and the *kerygma* or *grace*, which then, as a second determination would be inceptive of grace. Precisely as repetition they are in some sense identical and as such not determinative of each other, not consequently acting upon each other. Sin comes through – and in a certain sense is – an “announcement of existence”.

The limitations of Agamben’s reversion to the anthropological determinations of Thomism become apparent at this point. These determinations leave the subject justified through the faith of the Passion of Christ in the “objectively guilty” (*naturaliter*), whilst still allowing the subject to orientate its will purposefully towards the good. It is understandable that Agamben wants to claim this with respect to Dante, the immediate object of his inquiry, but in broadening his conclusions this becomes insufficient. Agamben also says:

We can even say that precisely in its attempt to explain the paradox of guilt that is transmitted independently of individual responsibility through the distinction of natural sin and personal sin, Christian theology laid the foundations for the categories through which modern culture was to interpret tragic conflict.³²

Agamben’s description of human beings with regard to *comedia* is not restricted to *The Divine Comedy*. In discussing comedy, he also wants to carry out a critique of the kind of moral subject who, like “the tragic actor”, “wholly identifies with his mask”³³. However, it is only possible to criticize this “wholeness” when the human being can also, as in Protestant anthropology, be grasped as a “whole”. This is why Agamben’s reference to the Thomist conception of the human, which holds that humans certainly cannot dissolve their objectively guilty nature by recovering a pre-Adamic state, but can participate with their “wills” in the orientation towards the good – is, at the very least, misleading.³⁴ If we are still to comprehend the insistence of the tragic in the comic, thus saving Agamben’s in-

³² Agamben, “Comedy”, p. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

sight for a broader theory of subjectivity, this must be seen to occur in a different and opposing way: the “thingness” of the things in the world, their profane character – and this is the opposite of reification, which always relies upon a mystifying, sublimating, “fetishistic” attitude – can only be experienced by means of the desubstantialization that follows from the determination of the “*totus homo*”, the whole man, in “nothingness”.

Luther fundamentally criticizes the tendency of human beings to posit themselves as a principle, the “ego-like character”³⁵ of “concupiscence or the race towards evil and the difficulty towards the good”³⁶. This goes together with the fact that Luther no longer conceives of concupiscence as a partial capacity that always has to be actualized, but instead as precisely this *pronitas* or race as a whole. It is “materially identical with *peccatum originale*”, as Rodolf Malter says.³⁷ The conflict in the interpretation of Luther about whether concupiscence is to be essentially understood as sexual desire³⁸ or, as in Malter, structurally, as “ego-like understanding” or “knowledge”, can perhaps be overcome if we make visible the dimension of the *remainder* of heteronomy. *Concupiscentia* remains – even in the “comic possibility opened up to man by the Passion of Christ” – unsublatable in its existence, but precisely as a determination of the “whole man”, not only as a partial capacity. It is precisely this that constitutes the “Christian conception of tragic guilt”, which also continues to insist in its overcoming – not its sublation – by means of the “comic possibility”. The *remainder*, the extimate core, is the *movens*, it is that which emerges as cause, as that which moves; it can be understood as a sexuality that encompasses the whole of man. In the repetitive experience of the constitutive moment, however, this *remainder* is, at the same time, the source, the support or movement, of an “other knowledge”. This “knowledge” does not appropriate the repetitive *kerygma*, then, by means of a *passage à l’acte* – which, as with Antigone, would turn out to be an *Agieren*, acting-out – that is, by means of an identification of itself with this *remainder*.

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What is decisive here is that, when Luther is talking about the fact that the whole of man is subject to original sin, just as the whole of man is subject to justifica-

³⁵ Malter, *Das reformatorische Denken und die Philosophie*, p. 24.

³⁶ WA 56, p. 271 “concupiscentia siue pronitas ad malum et difficultas ad bonum.”

³⁷ Malter, *Das reformatorische Denken und die Philosophie*, p. 257, note 8.

³⁸ See Heinrich Denifle, *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung* (Mainz: F. Kirchheim, 1906), p. 438.

tion – his *totus-homo* principle – it is not the critique of “free will” that is primary, but instead its presupposition: its determination through a kind of *knowledge*. This knowledge is either an objectively correct self-knowledge, which owes its existence to repetitive heteronomy by means of a passively accepting relationship to it, in which case the will is not free; or it is “*autognothos*”, a “knowledge” that – as reflexive self-consciousness – “knows” and “says” its “right” and its “purpose”, its “power” and its “will”, as Hegel says about the tragic actor.³⁹ Seen from the first standpoint, this is, of course, a false “knowledge”. In the employment of “knowledge” as an interpretative tool in Luther’s thought – an employment that has the virtue of combining particular conceptualities – I follow here Rudolf Malter. At another decisive point, however, Malter reaches an incorrect conclusion. He says that “nothingness” – understood as a place of “spiritual” knowledge, a knowledge that is aware of its own irreducible egoicity, inaccessible to autonomous means – does not also imply a “loss of the individual self”⁴⁰. The reason is that the precise result of an “accepting” confrontation with the reality of heteronomy is a loss of the whole idea of “individuality” – of every conceivable, symbolically mediated identity and “proper” self. And I would like to conclude by showing that this *is* the meaning of “nothingness” in Luther. For Luther, this determination of place – which is also a giving of place, a *locum dare* – turns around the transformation of *humilitas* into “nothingness” on the basis of the development of the anthropological *totus-homo* principle.⁴¹ This principle deter-

³⁹ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 444.

⁴⁰ Malter, *Das reformatorische Denken und die Philosophie*, p. 258, note 1.

⁴¹ Again, there is not enough space to show this in detail, but it should be mentioned that this “anthropology” by its very articulation ends all possible anthropology. Once it is accepted that the core of subjectivity, while insistent, is empty, what anthropology worthy of this name could remain? There is a question in Luther scholarship concerning the extent to which Luther discarded this conceptuality of a “theology of humility.” See, for example, Rudolf Damerau, *Die Demut in der Theologie Luthers* (Giessen: Wilhelm Schmitz, 1967); Wilhelm Maurer, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen: Zwei Untersuchungen zu Luthers Reformationsschriften 1520/21* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949), pp. 90 ff.; and, Enrico De Negri, *Offenbarung und Dialektik*. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), p. 40. This is worthy of discussion, but precisely in connection with asking if Luther could have followed the consequences through to the end. On the other side of the spectrum Ernst Bizer claims that the whole of Reformation theology only began after a phase in which Luther supported a theology of “*humilitas*”. See his *Fides ex auditu: Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 3rd ed.). It remains to be examined whether this difference cannot be better described as precisely a kind of “retreat from the real” within Protestant thought. In his book on Luther, Malter argues that it is impossible to establish such

mines, in its rejection of the medieval idea of *synteresis*,⁴² that the whole of man is “corrupted” in its totality. It follows from this idea of totality that it is only possible to know the “true” nature of human beings – and things – from a position that lies outside it, whilst still belonging to it *naturaliter*.

3. Nothingness

We can now determine the relationship between Luther’s *humilitas* and the question of tragedy and comedy.

On November 20, 1520, exactly one month before he publicly burns the papal bull, Luther begins to translate and commentate upon the *Magnificat*. The anthropology described above – which had grown in the *Lectures on Romans* and other texts – finally comes here to fruition.

In this text, and with reference to Mary, Luther translates *humilitas* – which before him had been treated as a virtue – as “nothingness”. With this he wants to make perfectly clear that self-activity, and the knowledge of human beings that is bound up with it, can contribute nothing to the attainment of the correct “spirit”, that is, that every contribution can only produce the opposite. Luther refers to Paul, who says that we must become “fools” to the world in order to receive the message of Christ, because God has chosen “things which are not [*meonta*] to bring to naught things that are.” (1 *Cor.* 1, 27–8) Luther comments:

a difference. There is instead, he claims, merely a “change” in the conceptuality used to comprehend the thing of “humilitas” as “nothingness”. (*Das reformatorische Denken und die Philosophie*, p. 337, note 11).

⁴² In scholasticism – and going back, above all, to its Platonic and Neoplatonic roots – *synteresis* designates a shadowy remainder of knowledge in human beings, a kind of “remainder of participation” in the *nous* of God. Emmanuel Hirsch calls it an “original knowledge of God” and finds this meaning in the early sermons of Luther. See his *Luthersstudien* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1954), Vol. 1, p. 111. In the debate about “free will” with Erasmus, at the very latest, this meaning – if we ascribe to knowledge an always potential action-guiding function – has disappeared absolutely. In the *Lectures on Romans*, even though the concept is employed, it can also no longer be intended in such a way. It remains to be examined in another place whether the transformation of this “knowledge” into “conscience” is the only track down which we can follow Luther’s reformatory breakthrough. This is what Lennart Pinomaa claims when he says that the “rejection of *synteresis*” is the “fundamental insight of the Reformation”. See his *Der Zorn Gottes in der Theologie Luthers: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Einheit des Gottesbildes bei Luther* (Helsinki: Akateeminen Kirjakauppa, 1938), p. 50.

And thus he makes the world into a folly with all its wisdom and abilities and gives another wisdom and other abilities. Since it is his way to look into the abyss and to see abject things, I have translated the little word "humilitas" into German as "nothingness" or "abject being".⁴³

The "abject", which possesses no symbolic existence, is the active substance that comes to life through heteronomy. It is the "nothing", the excluded place, out of which "another knowledge", "another capacity", is activated. A "knowledge" that, precisely as excluded, can speak the truth about the "world." It is obviously directed against every "philanthropic" domestication of the *remainder* that is experienced by means of the repetition of constitution. But it is directed just as much against every construction of an "autonomous" self that identifies with the abject in a sublimating way – and against every realization of this self in a tragic *passage à l'acte* or, rather, acting-out. The difference consists in the fact that this place does not forget its dependence on heteronomy – the heteronomy that effects its own constitution. As a result of the theological context, it is obvious that, even if this heteronomy is described as language, the consequences are not fully assumed. The inherent possibility of thinking of this heteronomy as immanence is not realized. But the anthropology of the "whole man", the *totus homo* principle, certainly opens this possibility up.

The insistence of tragic experience – which belongs to constitution because of the heteronomy of language – is not sublated, but instead, from the position of "nothingness", no longer "taken into account". This is because the "subject" as "self" is sublated in the enactment of "nothingness" or, as Luther says with reference to Mary, "she becomes another". This is the "cleansed" spirit that the *kerygma* of the Passion of Christ produces. Luther says about this "whole spirit":

Peace comes from nothing other than teaching that no word, no outward act, but only faith – i.e. good trust in the invisible grace of God promised us – will make us pious, just and blessed. [...] And where there is no faith, there will have to be works, from which follows strife and tension, since no God will remain there. This is why Paul is

⁴³ "Und damit macht er die Welt zur Narrheit mit all ihrer Weisheit und ihrem Können und gibt eine andere Weisheit und ein anderes Können. Weil es denn nun seine Art ist, in die Tiefe und unansehnliche Dinge zu sehen, hab ich das Wörtlein 'humilitas' verdeutscht mit 'Nichtigkeit' oder 'unansehnlich Wesen'," Martin Luther's "Das Magnificat verdeutscht undausgelegt". Luther, "Das Magnificat", p. 138.

not content to say: “that your spirit, that your soul”, but he says: that your whole spirit, on which everything depends.⁴⁴

From the place of non ego-like knowledge – which emerges in the same topos “between the two deaths” as the tragically sublimating identification and the tragic act that realizes the abject – it is possible to recognize the relativity of the symbolic order and the work that constitutes it.

This “whole spirit” is not realized: it is the “inversion”, the subversion, of the symbolic order – “He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree” (Luke 1, 52). This is where Luther repeats his insistence on “nothingness.” What the King James Bible renders simply as “low degree”, Luther renders as those “who are low and nothing” (*die da niedrig und nichts sind*). The concreteness of the tragic situation is preserved in the concreteness of “humility” – in the knowledge concerning the belonging of one’s self, and one’s symbolically mediated identities, to the *me onta*, the non-being. It is not realized, however, by means of concrete, one-sided activity. Instead, it is active in a “universalistic” attitude, and without the still properly tragic division between “mask” and “actor”, “role” and “self” – a division that precisely results from the sublimating identification with the abject. This difference makes clear that the tragic subject’s putative “oneness” or “being-one” with his role collapses.⁴⁵ Because this position of “nothingness” is unrepresentable, because it *exists* in the assumption of the heteronomous structure of language, it also does not know itself – in contrast to the “*autognothos*” tragic subject, which can “know” and “say” itself.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ “Der Frieden kommt von nichts anderem, als davon, dass man lehrt, dass kein Wort, keine äusserliche Weise, sondern nur der Glaube – das ist gute Zuversicht in die unsichtbare Gnade Gottes, die uns versprochen ist – fromm, gerecht und selig mache... Und wo der Glaube nicht ist, da müssen viele Werke sein, woraus Unfriede und Uneinigkeit folgt als kein Gott mehr da bleibt. Darum begnügte sich Paulus nicht damit, zu sagen: ‘Dass euer Geist, das eure Seele,’ sondern er sagt: dass euer ganzer Geist, an dem alles liegt”. Luther, “Das Magnificat”, p. 139.

⁴⁵ “Convincing as this fusion-in-representation, might be, it still remains exactly that: a fusion of the two, an individual representation of the universal, without reaching the point where one of the two terms would generate the other from within itself, and become this other. To put it more precisely: we are dealing with the classical mode of representation, a constellation of two elements in which one represents the other.” Alenka Zupančič reverts to Hegel in “The Concrete Universal and What Comedy Can Tell us About It”, in *Lacan: The Silent Patners*. Ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 186.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 444.

Thus it is not things, but us that have to be changed in our nature [*Gemüt*, also disposition] and orientation [*Sinn*, also direction and meaning]. Then it will be a matter of course to despise high things and to flee them and to acknowledge low things and to seek them. In this, nothingness [*Demut*, humility, which Luther above has translated as “nothingness” and “abject being”] is fundamentally good [*grundgut*] and remains reliable [*beständig*] on all sides, while nevertheless never recognizing itself [*gewahr werden*]. This happens with enjoyment [*Lust*]. Yet the heart remains one and identical with itself, however things change, high or low, big or small.⁴⁷

Seen this way, the place of nothingness is a place in which a “comic” subjectivity is constituted – a subjectivity that succeeds in the passage from guilt to “happy life” and justification. But the tragic insists in this “comic” subjectivity by means of the *remainder* that every subjectivation leaves behind. The comic position of Lutheran *humilitas* – a position of “nothingness” – consists in not attempting to avoid this remainder by means of either tragic action (the passion for the real) or the fantasmatic flight into “philanthropy”, the identification with the symbolic order. It assumes instead that true self-knowledge only occurs outside of subjective reflexivity, through the practice of “the universal at work”⁴⁸. This position is productive, it works and creates outside of those teleological determinations that would allow for a judgment of good and bad from beyond the sphere of practice. It is in a field of means without ends.

Those truly humble [or truly confronted with their “empty core”, their nothingness] do not look to what is the end [or effect] of humility, but with a simple heart they look to the things that are low, like to handle them, and never recognize themselves as humble. Then the water will well up from the font.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ “So müssen nicht die Dinge, sondern wir verwandelt werden in Gemüt und Sinn. Dann wird sich’s von selbst lehren, hohe Dinge zu verachten und zu fliehen, niedrige Dinge zu achten und zu suchen. Da ist die Demut grundgut und beständig auf allen Seiten und *wird ihrer selbst doch niemals gewahr*. Das geht mit Lust zu. Und das Herz bleibt gleich und eins, wie die Dinge sich auch wandeln oder geben, hoch oder niedrig, gross oder klein.” Luther, “Das Magnificat.” p. 142.

⁴⁸ Zupančič, “The Concrete Universal”, p. 180.

⁴⁹ “Die wahren Demütigen sehen nicht auf die Folge der Demut, sondern mit einfältigem Herzen sehens sie in die niedrigen Dinge, gehn gern damit um und werden selbst niemals gewahr, dass sie demütig sind. Da quillt das Wasser aus dem Brunnen.” Luther, “Das Magnificat”, p. 140.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding concerning the heteronomy that insists in this “spirit”, Luther talks about the “whole spirit”, the concept that in Christian-Greek usage implies the “cleansed” spirit – the spirit reconstructed by the *kerygma* of the Passion of Christ:

This is why St. Paul is not content with saying: “your spirit, your soul”, but he says: “your whole spirit”. He uses a fine word here in the Greek language: *to olokleron pneuma emon*, that is: your spirit, which possesses the whole inheritance. As if he wanted to say: Do not be led astray by any doctrine of works, the faithful spirit alone has it all in all [*gar und ganz*]. It depends only on the faith of the spirit. [...] Wherever this “whole-inheritance-possessing” spirit is sustained, there soul and body too can remain without error and evil works.⁵⁰

By breaking *to olokleron*, wholeness, down into its component parts, Luther creates a remembrance of the fact that the trace of heteronomy can be found precisely in the “comic spirit”, that is, the universal spirit which he calls “whole” not because it identifies with the whole of the imaginary symbolic (“*philanthropy*”), but precisely because it is immune to every identification with the symbolic and the identities it supports – in the spirit that is not in danger of realizing the place of its inception, the place “between the two deaths”, in a tragic *passage à l’acte* or acting out. By splitting apart the words, Luther draws attention to the meanings of *kleros*. It does not only mean “inheritance”, but also “lot”, as in casting lots to make a decision. We can certainly detect here the Lutheran origin of Nietzsche’s *amor fati*. What Luther is referring to is the purely external – in itself “dead” – determination of ourselves by means of something heteronomous that nonetheless belongs to us: an inheritance or, more archaically, a “lot”. “The spirit that owns the whole inheritance” is the spirit that “assumes” and “inherits” its constitution through the Other and the surplus that goes together with it. The “dead” element refers, however, to the fact that this thought already contains the

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⁵⁰ “Darum begnügt sich hier St. Paulus nicht, zu sagen: ‘dass euer Geist’, eure Seele, sonder er sagt: ‘Euer ganzer Geist’. Er gebraucht hier ein feines Wort in griechischer Sprache: *to olokleron pneuma emon*, das ist: euer Geist, der das ganze Erbe besitzt. Als wollte er sagen: Lasset euch durch keine Lehre von Werken irremachen, der gläubige Geist hats allein gar und ganz. Es liegt nur am Glauben des Geistes. [...] wenn nur solcher ‘ganzerbbsitzende Geist’ erhalten wird, können danach auch die Seele und der Leib ohne Irrtum und böse Werke bleiben”. Luther, “Das Magnificat.” p. 139.

"death of the Other."⁵¹ The spirit described here can endure the heteronomy that insists because it does not attempt to totalize the world that creates it, to force it under a logic and judgment existing outside of practice. The logic of the symbolic order does not possess any permanence – it is subjected to the higher logic of "nothingness". This logic is higher precisely because it can speak in renunciation of "the expressible" and "the doable" – in renunciation of the orientation towards the "consequences", the truth of the expressible, the doable and logical consistency. This is an eminently comic position, in which the tragic insists by means of the trace of heteronomy.

⁵¹ The question whether it follows from this that the dead "Other" knows about its death will have to be postponed for now. Again, surpassing the scope of this paper, here the question arises – if anachronistically – how this "spirit that owns the whole inheritance" is related to the psychoanalytic problem of assuming one's cause, or of "filiation" and its relation to the "dead man". I believe that considered together, this Lutheran and Pauline "inheritance" can open the door to a theory of subjectivity, which can conceptualize the double task of retaining the law while not falling prey to representation.