

## The Rhetoric of Humility: Persuasive Artistry between Old Comedy and Ethical Crime

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*Sermo humilis* – the lowly or humble style – modeled in the Incarnation, it's what made the Holy Scriptures so accessible, bringing sublime mystery within reach of ordinary people. But *humilis* and its colleagues – *pedester*, *trivialis*, *quotidianus* – are not easy styles to appreciate, as Augustine well notes, recalling his early encounter with biblical texts:

They seemed to me unworthy to be compared with the majesty of Cicero. My conceit was repelled by their simplicity, and I had not the mind to penetrate into their depths. They were indeed of a nature to grow in Your little ones. But I could not bear to be a little one.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, laying oneself low remains a powerful persuasive technique, though not one scholars are often eager to discuss. From two Testaments to Church Fathers to Medieval literati to modern moral philosophies, nothing seems nastier than strategic humility. Consider, for instance, Dickens' famous character Uriah Heep—self-centered, hypocritical, and above all “so very ’umble.” If ever there were a rhetoric of humility, it is well captured in Heep's confession to David Copperfield:

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'When I was quite a young boy,' said Uriah, 'I got to know what umbleness did, and I took to it. I ate umble pie with an appetite. I stopped at the umble point of my learning, and says I, "Hold hard!" When you offered to teach me Latin, I knew better. "People like to be above you," says father, "keep yourself down." I am very umble to the present moment, Master Copperfield, but I've got a little power!'<sup>2</sup>

In the face of mid-nineteenth century moral uplift, Heep would rather remain below the Law, if only to exploit it more thoroughly for his own purposes.

Recall as well Immanuel Kant's run in with the Law. With the 1793 publication of his *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant began a conflict with Prussian authorities that culminated in a 1 October 1794 letter of reproach from Friedrich Wilhelm II:

Our most high person has long observed with great displeasure how you misuse your philosophy to distort and disparage many of the cardinal and foundational teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity; how you have done this specifically in your book, "Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone," and similarly in other shorter treatises. We expect better of you, since you yourself must see how irresponsibly you have acted against our sovereign purposes, of which you are well aware [*wie unverantwort(ich) Ihr dadurch gegen Eure Pflicht als Lehrer der Jugend, u. gegen Unsre Euch sehr wohl bekannte landesväterliche Absichten handelt*]. We demand that you immediately give a conscientious vindication of your actions, and we expect that in the future, to avoid our highest disfavor, you will be guilty of no such fault, but rather, in keeping with your duty [*Pflicht*], apply your authority and your talents to the

progressive realization of our sovereign purpose. Failing this, you must expect unpleasant measures for your continuing obstinacy [*fortgesetzter Renitenz*].<sup>1</sup>

Kant's 12 October "account of himself" was simple and submissive:

I find that, as Your Majesty's loyal subject, in order not to fall under suspicion, it will be the surest course for me to abstain entirely from all public lectures on religious topics, whether on natural or revealed religion, and not only from lectures but also from publications. I hereby promise this.

Whether it was cowardly or irresponsible, or even an expression of indifference, the King &c. couldn't have been happier with this response.

What's most striking about this exchange of letters is that Kant published it in 1798 in the preface of his *Conflict of the Faculties*, which in many ways picks-up where his book on *Religion* left off. Had his earlier promise been broken? No, says Kant in a footnote to the preface, insisting that his letter promised to avoid offending only "Your Majesty's" paternal will in future lectures and publications. "This expression, too, I chose carefully, so that I would not renounce my freedom to judge in this religious suit forever, but only during His Majesty's lifetime." Not surprisingly, Friedrich Wilhelm had recently died.

Kant's individuation of "Your Majesty" was the condition of possibility for his reemergence as an author of religious texts. But let's make no mistake: this rhetoric of personalization is a function, not a forerunner, of the 1798 publication of his correspondence. Like all origins, that of *The Conflict* is elective, belonging more to the interests of the present than to the actualities of the past. Kant's preface brought with it an opportunity to publicize his correspondence with the king and, in so doing, to retroactively inscribe the 1794 exchange as an intimate affair that, when

thrown into the light of public appearance, could at once explain and conclude a four-year bout of silence in his philosophical theology.

Miss the staginess of this publication, and we miss the mode of critique for which it stands. It is easy to appear humble among intimates when we see ourselves as actors in a public performance. Whether strategy or second thought conditioned the “rhetoric” of Kant’s humility, it’s his capacity as a *witness* that makes artistry of this sort possible, as adherents to figures from Shabbetai Zevi to Cool Hand Luke well indicate.<sup>2</sup>

At stake in this coupling of action and testimony, apparent humility and reputed cunning, is a mode of conduct that augments, expands, and adds to the fullness of moral law, even as it intervenes, interferes, stands between, and defers the authority on which moral law depends.<sup>3</sup> In this brief essay, I would like to isolate and magnify each of these motives. Each, as we shall see, is a unique reflection of weights and wonders characteristic of democratic public culture. For legitimation, I offer a return to the pre-biblical genre of Old Comedy; for obstruction, a statement on the anti-modern technique of ethical crime. By way of a conclusion, I suggest how an interface between these Old Comedy and ethical crime might enable us to recover the rhetoric of humility as a resource for social and moral protest.

#### *Old Comedy, or Irreverent Respect*

In calling it “the mirror of life,” fifth century BC Athenians understood Old Comedy as a medium in which to contemplate the overtly political from fantastic heights.<sup>4</sup> Gods, artists, and politicians alike came together in amusing portrayals of what was then a serious struggle to manage the *dēmos*. Where restrictive codes of Athenian citizenship were crossed with visions of panhellenic unity, Old Comedy used nostalgic and hopeful images of social harmony to identify politically moderate leadership with the established families of Athens. For Eupolis, Kratinos, and Aristophanes, the oligarchies

of the past were not to be reinstated; but neither was the existing citizenry to envision a political future apart from the Athens of the early- or mid-410s. The wisdom of an earlier generation was not to be lost on existing democratic institutions. Kant would have understood this motive well enough.

In this economy of amusement and nostalgia, Old Comedy continually employed a rhetoric of “festive ridicule” for purposes of social catharsis and control. Fifth century comic poets routinely used the burlesque performance of gossip, malice, and complaint as an opportunity to publicize the norms and values of the *dēmos*. The superficial and hyperbolic form of these conventions in turn allowed for the release of pent-up civic tensions.<sup>5</sup> The victims of this comic abuse were often members of the community who were, or who could be, suspected of getting away with something at the expense of the entire city. Aristophanes’ spiteful refiguring of Callias Hipponikou as Callias Hippobinou (“Super Fucker”) in the *Frogs* song (416-430) is a case in point. Callias was widely known to have avoided political service while the city was fighting for its survival, choosing instead to use his wealth to satisfy various appetites. Although misbehavior of this sort was not punishable by law, citizens expected it to find justice in the open air of Attic comic drama. Cruelty was festive, and festivity was coercive, in the genre of Old Comedy.

Practices that were likely to offend accepted modes of conduct were systematically purged in the spectacular of Attic comic drama. “Comedy was produced by democracy as an antidote to its own overdose of liberty,” writes Werner Jaeger, “thereby out doing its own excesses, and extending *parrhesia*, its vaunted freedom of speech, to subjects which are usually tabu even in a free political system.”<sup>6</sup> In *Clouds*, for instance, Aristophanes links Socrates to the misbehaviors of the “new learning” (then popular among young speakers), and in so doing converts the manner of *philosophia* into an

exaggerated mannerism for purposes of public ridicule. At least three other comic poets followed suit, not the least of which was Eupolis: “I hate Socrates too, that beggarly chatterer, who has thought of everything except where his next meal is coming from.”<sup>7</sup> Ridicule such as this – however playful – doubled as a powerful reminder of moral conventions that audience members were expected to share. Hegel knew as much: because his work in no way threatens or probes basic belief Aristophanes is less a crier than a symptom of the moral decline he so feared.<sup>8</sup> That he satirized the democratic Assembly in *Akharnians*, *Horsemen*, and *Women at the Assembly* should not be misunderstood as an argument to abolish the Greek Assembly.<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Burke playfully points us to the heart of the matter: “Impropriety can provoke laughter only because at one remove it reaffirms the very propriety it violates.”<sup>9</sup> Indecency must suffer exposure in order for civic solidarity to thrive – or so the argument goes.

Amusement with the publication of another’s misbehavior presupposes a general acknowledgment of certain values within a community. Enjoying the false freedom and subsequent punishment of a fellow citizen acting in spite of moral law requires that we suspend our ability to evaluate and discuss the relative worth of the moral precepts in violation. Here is the carnivalesque logic of Attic comic drama (and perhaps the darkest side of participatory rationality): festive ridicule requires that a coherent sense of normalcy precede as well as outlive its practice. In its irreverent respect for moral law, Old Comedy is “a book of etiquette in reverse.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Ethical Crime, or Reverent Disrespect*

Socrates’ musings at the end of the *Symposium* offer tragedy as a likely correlate for Old Comedy.<sup>11</sup> What is of interest here, in our dialectic of motives, however, is not tragedy, but its ultimate horizon: ethical crime. Old Comedy is the realm in which nostalgic and anticipatory images of natural harmony legitimate a structured set of moral norms; ethical crime is

the theater of pain in which insurgent motives promise individual citizens a more authentic relation to Natural Law.<sup>12</sup> The Marquis de Sade adds captions to this idea:

The primary and most beautiful of Nature's qualities is motion, which agitates her at all times, but this motion is simply a perpetual consequence of crimes; she conserves it by means of crime only; the person who most nearly resembles her, and therefore the most perfect being, necessarily will be the one whose most active agitation will become the cause of many crimes.<sup>13</sup>

Because shared convention is maladjusted to Natural Law, all paths to nature eventually pass through criminality.<sup>14</sup>

If "unconscious error" is the precondition of tragic wreckage, "conscious cunning" emerges from the rubble as a resource for criminality. With only ruins to build upon, cunning consciousness obscures and finally loses all together its ancestral tie to the pride and misjudgment of tragedy. In its stead, a jagged structure of forgetfulness, guilt, rebellion, and punishment. Provoking punishment from authority through rebellion becomes a means of expiating feelings of guilt associated with having forgotten what is thought to be an earlier transgression. Freud's "moral masochism" well captures this point: underwriting the lust for pain and torture is the hope that suffering-from-without will alleviate pangs-of-conscience-within.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche's "pale criminal" seems to have known as much: it takes two to make suffering go right.

You do not want to kill, O judges and sacrificers, until the animal has nodded? Behold, the pale criminal has nodded: out of his eyes speaks the great contempt. There is no redemption for one who suffers so of himself, except a quick death.<sup>16</sup>

That it attempts to reopen tragic flaw to the world of appearances suggests that criminality may be a redemptive and (thus) ethical act, more just even than conforming to moral law. From Russian novelists (e.g., Dostoevsky), to thoughtful Roman Catholics (e.g., Bernanos, Mauriac, and Greene), to inverted men of faith (e.g., de Sade, Rimbaux, Genet),<sup>17</sup> the criminal sensibility not only compels us to offer the left cheek to those who strike the right, but also turns on our willingness (and desire) to hold-out a cheek wherever the chance of being struck exists. Contemporaries of Kant such as Blake and Shelley took this moral sensibility in a similar direction, celebrating the spectacle of the French Revolution by memorializing Satan as a heroic sacrifice to the tradition and authority of that evil tyrant, God. Follow this logic of revolt further and *voilà!* we have the old liberal trick of transcendence downwards: performing vice becomes a lodestar for the achievement of virtue.<sup>18</sup> "Evil, be thou my good!"

Atoning for the passage of an earlier crime into concealment (roll over, Aristophanes!) means regaining not only what is forgotten but also the act of forgetting itself. When something slips away from us, forgetting itself slips into concealment, taking with it our relation to what is forgotten, and by extension, ourselves.<sup>19</sup> Here we have what Coleridge might call the "absolute motive" of the ethical crime, "under which all other motives from within and from without must be either subordinated or crushed."<sup>20</sup> Performing the criminal ethic means recovering the site of decline and loss in which the will to criminality first arises (tragic catastrophe), transfiguring it as a resource for self-revelation in spite of moral law. Ethical crime is a line of conduct in which knowing thyself has been fastened to the task of luring oblivion back into the open. That the wheel of causality rolls between forgetting and exhibition makes obscurity an essential feature of the criminal ethic. Hence the muted brightness of Milton's Satan:

As when the Sun new-ris'n

Looks through the Horizontal misty Air

Shorn of his Beams, or from behind the Moon

In dim Eclipse disastrous twilight sheds.<sup>21</sup>

As Kant's 1798 emergence from political darkness suggests, the discomforts of oblivion and the pleasures of self-display are mutually inclined: everything that is must appear before the outer world of life, and everything that appears must have first slipped into the darkness of sheltered existence.

The cost of criminality is a bona fide subjectivity, the loss of which is a condition of self-revelation, and with it freedom from conscience. "I decided to be what crime made of me," Genet explains, "I went to theft as to a liberation."<sup>22</sup> De Sade takes the argument up a notch:

The truly intelligent person is he who...lashes out against the social contract, he violates it as much and as often as he is able, full certain that what he will gain from these ruptures will always be more important than what he will lose if he happens to be a member of the weaker class; for such he was when he respected the treaty; by breaking it he may become one of the stronger.<sup>23</sup>

Such is the pathology of Nietzsche's pale criminal: "his soul wanted blood, not robbery; he thirsted after the bliss of the knife."<sup>24</sup> Suffering banishment from the realm of appearance (personal loss) ensures the release of inner liberation from the vortex of forgetting (self-revelation). Citizenship must perish for sovereignty to thrive: "Far from the world," Byron concludes, "in regions of her own."<sup>25</sup> Building on a reverent disrespect for moral law, ethical crime is the art of luminous self-concealing.

*The Rhetoric of Humility*

The rhetoric of humility mediates Old Comedy and Ethical Crime, infiltrating social order with dissent and self-assertion even as it openly performs the joyous marriage of “You must” and “I will.” In adopting the moral law with an all-too-perfect attention to detail, strategically humble citizens neither celebrate nor undermine executive power. Instead, by freely placing themselves within its range, they manage to deprive moral law of its autonomy, stripping it of all mystical advantage. That power means not having to act enables even the slightest gesture toward its executive potential to be taken as a decline in status and authority.<sup>26</sup> Endangering oneself illuminates the repressive apparatus, depriving it of moral legitimacy. “Loud, heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughters low!” Smiles remain morbid, but recognizable nonetheless.

As actors in the theater of humility, we grant power and responsibility to masters other than ourselves. As deviants in search of liberty, we steal the consequences of our gift out from under their field of vision, structuring the field of possible conduct. Under the cover of humility, where deceit remains an available means of self-defense, it is the clever schizophrenic, more than proprietary power, who determines what form their contribution to destiny will take, goading authority into executive posture and then withdrawing into silence and concealment before it can perform its proper function. The display of power, which always stands in need of a people or group, is in this way denied access to the exercise of violence, whose instrumental character can of course manage without a constituency. With the potential for violence goes the unquestioning obedience that only the barrel of a gun can command.

Strategically humble citizens at once publicly invite the consequences of their actions and secretly steal the freedom of response from the powers that be. That moral law remains bound by its very visibility is precisely

what enables this hiding-in-the-light. That Kant should be reproached for writing on religion was not completely within the ability of his highness to decide. In the spirit of strategic humility, he flirts with criminality, knowingly provoking the censors in Berlin with his book on *Religion*, and then, when Friedrich Wilhelm is pressed into action, avoids incurring more extreme punishment with what audiences would later *witness* as a performance of humility. Kant knew what veterans of the civil rights movement continue to teach us: a scarred body lends more credibility to future acts of moral menacing than a dead one. Self-sacrifice is not the final testament to the intensity of one's belief. It is the survivor's presence more than the victim's cry that motivates the rhetoric of humility. Endurance still matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Friedrich Wilhelm II to Immanuel Kant, 1 October 1794, *Immanuel Kant: Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 485-486.

<sup>3</sup>This argument is developed more fully in Samuel McCormick, *Letters to Power: Public Advocacy Without Public Intellectuals* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), Ch. 4.

<sup>4</sup> This analytic follows Robert Hariman's interpretation of Derrida's revision of Rousseau's concept of the "supplement." See Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 172-173.

<sup>5</sup> Scholarly comment suggests that "Old Comedy" is an ancient but inexact term roughly covering the comic drama of the fifth century BC, specifically the comic output occurring during eighty-odd years between the institutionalization of comedy in Athens (486) and the end of the Peloponnesian War (404). Although it is tempting to identify the genre of Old Comedy with the eleven extant plays of Aristophanes, recent scholarship indicates that only the first nine and his earliest, lost plays belong in this period. Moreover, while Aristophanes was clearly an innovative figure in this period, his work between 427 and 405 was hardly the only constitutive force of Attic comic drama. That

Aristophanes designed his plays to compete with the work of rival playwrights in major civic festivals is indicated not only by his routine dramatic assault of these rivals (e.g. Aristophanes' comments on Cratinus, Eupolis, and the like in *Knights* 507-550 and *Clouds* 518-562), but also by the surviving fragments of comic poets who were his opponents and contemporaries. These arguments are developed more fully in M. S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Greek Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 6-14 and 48-53; and, more thoroughly, John Wilkins and David Harvey (Eds.), *The Rival of Aristophanes: Studies in Athenian Old Comedy* (London: Duckworth, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Useful treatments of this well-worn topic may be found in Jeffrey Henderson, "The *Dēmos* and the Comic Competition," *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes*, ed. Erich Segal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 65-116, specifically 88-93; and, more recently, "Dēmos, Demagogue, Tyrant in Attic Old Comedy," *Sovereignty and its Discontents in Ancient Greece: Popular Tyranny*, ed. Kathryn A. Morgan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003): 155-179. An illuminating discussion of the "burlesque" style may be found in Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1937; Berkeley: University of California press, 1959): 52-56.

<sup>7</sup> Jaeger, 364. The concept of *parrhesia* is more fully developed in Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Frag. 352. As quoted in F. H. Sandbach, *The Comic Theatre of Greece and Rome* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977): 44.

<sup>9</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1920): §IV, 330. See also, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972): 356-358; and, more recently, Konstan, 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950): 226.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Symbolic of Motives* (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Michael Joyce, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 223d. That Attic tragedy and comedy (e.g., the works of Euripides and Aristophanes) are mutually inclined is a point

on which Silk is particularly adamant: “The traditional, Aristotelian or Aristotelian-based, assumption that tragedy and comedy are opposites is false and, for reasons that will become clear, pernicious” (55 and, more generally, 42-97).

<sup>12</sup> The concept of a “theater of pain” is developed more fully in James Patrick McDaniel, “Snarls of Civility, Liberal Legacies from Ben Franklin’s Theater of Pain to Terror’s Unruliest of Children” (unpublished manuscript). See also James Patrick McDaniel, “Speaking Like a State: Listening to Benjamin Franklin in Times of Terror,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2 (2005): 324-50.

<sup>13</sup> As quoted in David Allison, “Transgression and its Itinerary,” *Must We Burn Sade?* ed. Deepak Narang Sawhney (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999): 201-227, specifically 215.

<sup>14</sup> See Simone de Beauvoir, *Must We Burn de Sade?* trans. Annette Michelson (London: Peter Nevill Ltd, 1953): 61ff.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Economic Problem in Masochism” (1924), *Collected Papers*, Vol. II, trans. Joan Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1950): 255-268.

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1966): 37-38. See also de Beauvoir, 40-41.

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Philip Rieff for this insightful list of pale criminals.

<sup>18</sup> See Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 95.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, “*Aletheia*” (1954), *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Rowe, Publishers, 1975): 102-123, specifically 108.

<sup>20</sup> See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual* (1816), *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853).

<sup>21</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667; rev. 1674), ed. Christopher Ricks (1968; New York: Penguin Books, 1982): Book I, lines 594-597.

<sup>22</sup> As quoted in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (1952), trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1963): 49 and 402.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Allison, 213-214.

<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche, 38-39.

<sup>25</sup> Byron, line 350.

<sup>26</sup> This argument is developed more fully in McCormick, *Letters to Power*, Ch. 6.