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## The Story of Dialectics and the Trickster of History

Drawing on Hegel's interpretation of narrative and Lyotard's rejection of "grand" dialectical narratives, this paper addresses the relationship between emancipatory dialectics and narrative form. It begins by establishing the intimate connection between dialectical thought and narration. On this basis, the paper argues that varying conceptions of dialectics can be associated with varying structures of narrating history. Finally, the paper makes the case for identifying a specific narrative form adequate to the radical re-readings of Hegel that have replaced the perspective of the master (the subject privileged by a given system of historicity) with the perspective of the slave (who, while excluded from historicity, struggles against this exclusion). This narrative form corresponds to none of the classical Greek genres; it is best described as a trickster tale.

Keywords: Hegel, narrative theory, philosophy of history, Master-Slave Dialectic, tricksters

*A long time ago, there were no stories on the earth, because all the stories belonged to Nyame, the god of the sky. So Anansi the spider went up into the sky.*

It is telling that one of the harshest critiques ever made against Hegelian dialectics was a critique of narrative. When Jean-François Lyotard declared that the grand narratives of the modern age had lost credibility (Lyotard 1984), this was widely understood as an indictment of the historical dialectic that had been so grandly narrated by Hegel. But the critique did not stop with Hegel and his compelling story of Spirit on its journey to self-consciousness and realization in history. Lyotard questioned the continued efficacy of all those types of stories that, over the years, had been inspired by Hegel's: stories of humanity gaining liberty through scientific knowledge, of the oppressed people winning democratic self-government, of the working class overcoming the contradictions of capitalism. Although Lyotard himself paid some attention to the differences between such stories, the simplified idea of the end of grand narratives concealed something else about the dialectical tradition: the fact that dialectical narratives come in many forms.

Recognition of the plurality of dialectical forms should complicate the received picture of young, energetic, small non-dialectical narratives fighting it out with big, senescent dialectics. While this account became, perhaps against the intentions of writers associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism Lyotard's own intentions (e.g. Lyotard and Thébaud 1985; Derrida 1986; Barnett 1998; White 2014), a kind of popularized meta-narrative of the postmodern age, I would argue not only that dialectics survived the alleged end of grand narratives, but that all narratives are dialectical. In light of this, the challenge posed by Lyotard can be reframed. The issue is not whether the dialectic can offer a legitimate story of emancipation, but what kinds of dialectical stories of emancipation can be told.

Hegel, like any good storyteller, inspired others to retell his story. Each reader of Hegel also became a re-teller, and in the course of retelling, the story changed. New narrators have pointed to flaws, gaps, and contradictions in Hegel's own story; they have brought new heroes into the narrative, drawing attention to the hero's position, to the prospects and temporality of the hero's success, to the relationship between the story of one hero and the stories of others, Spirit or Man, masters or slaves, imperial states or peoples without history. The hero may come from within a society, embody that society, and lead it to victory. Or the hero may be an uncouth outcast who, lacking power, mobilizes wit and guile to break down the barriers to freedom.

Some of these narrative forms have been given names by Hegel and his later readers: history has been told as comedy, as tragedy, or as epic. I, as a reader of Hegel's readers, call attention to another narrative form, one that has already taken shape in proletarian and anticolonial readings of the dialectic, but which has not yet received a proper name.

*Nyame, the god of the sky, said to Anansi, "I tell stories for kings when they come issuing decrees. I tell stories for merchants who offer me all the wealth and pleasures of their cities. I tell stories for warriors who come beating their breasts and raising their spears. I tell stories for the Python and the Leopard and the Tiger and all the Hornets of the world. How can I spare a story for you?"*

### Narrativity vs. Dialectics?

In spite of the significant interest in narrative theory expressed during the postmodern period (which I will define as the period dominated by the questioning of grand narratives), it is striking that many of the approaches that emerged then were rather anti-narrative. Authors like Derrida and Deleuze drew attention to indeterminate successions of ruptures and events that punctuated any possible linear development and seemed to render inoperative any consistent semantic structures (Derrida 1978; Deleuze 1988). But while one strand of thought refused to narrate history as a coherent story, another invoked narrativity as a way of emphasizing history's contingency. So while Lyotard recognized the Hegelian dialectic as a narrative, he also relativized it, presenting it as just one narrative among many. Earlier, Hayden White had made a similar move, raising the question of how history was narrated and, thus, suggesting the arbitrariness of Hegel's narrative in comparison to other historical narratives (White 2014).

Even this turn to narrativity, however, represented a turn away from what has been traditionally considered good storytelling. While Lyotard, for example, described grand narratives in terms typical of storytelling, he hardly said anything about the structure of small narratives. To grand narratives he attributed beginnings (conditions of domination or ignorance), rising tension (historical struggles for progress), and ends (in which tension is resolved and consciousness or emancipation is achieved), but when discussing small narratives he largely abandoned narrative terminology and wrote instead of "games" (Lyotard 1984, chap. 14; Lyotard and Thébaud 1985), as if to suggest that in small narratives plot structure is less important than the unpredictable results of play. Lyotard

remained interested in the fact that stories were narrated, but he was much less interested in the structure of narration.

The cumulative effect of such critiques was to discredit singularity (the idea that there might be only one grand narrative), linearity (that a narrative might proceed without setbacks or interruption), and structure (that a narrative might be interpreted within an internally coherent system of meaning). Narrative survived, but largely bereft of form. As these non-narrative or para-narrative features came to be associated with narrativity, narrative could be invoked to suggest contingency. In order to say that some course of events could not be explained by inevitable progress or universal laws of history, it could be said that that it was just another story, unfolding however the narrator chose to tell it.

The trouble with this understanding of narrative—which, though not the only understanding to emerge in the postmodern period, became widespread—is that this is not how stories actually operate. In stories, events do not arbitrarily follow one another. A new episode does not mark a radical rupture from the preceding episode. A new event may mark a reversal or twist, but its effect has everything to do with what came before. The power of stories derives from the fact that, although we never know just what might happen next, what happens next still has to satisfy the demands aroused in the audience by the preceding narrative.

The turn to small narratives drew attention to a moment of contingency—or, more precisely, underdetermination—contained in all effective stories. And if dialectics are also stories, they too contain this underdetermined moment. If every detail of the path of history were known in advance, it would involve neither narrative tension nor dialectical contradiction. Yet this underdetermination cannot be pure contingency, because good stories are not free to develop just *any* way. Even the smallest narratives need to go somewhere if they are to become compelling stories. A story whose audience wants to hear it finished and might want to retell it—a story that has a chance of becoming a socially generalizable way of perceiving events—has to set up narrative tension and adequately respond to that tension. History is dialectical only if each historical conjuncture holds us in suspense by generating expectation and pointing to specific possible outcomes, even if we do not know which outcome will be realized, and even if we might be surprised by a development that defies expectations and yet, once it comes, appears fully adequate to the overlooked clues that foreshadowed it.

The outcome of dialectical history is neither predetermined nor fully contingent; not every story will find an audience. Some might be told,

but ignored. Some might be so implausible that they are never told. Yet there is always more than one story that has a chance of succeeding, satisfying the audience with the right mix of necessity and surprise. This creates an inevitable moment of narrative decision. If the postmodern critique brought valuable attention to the narrative dimension of dialectics and the multiplicity of possible narratives, the Hegelian tradition can remind us, once again, how the structure of dialectical contradiction shapes understandings of emancipation that will be adopted by movements that tell their own stories and place themselves in history.

*Anansi said to Nyame, "I will beat all those beasts of the earth, and you can give their stories to me."*

### Dialectics as Narrativity

Hegel, in developing his notion of dialectics, offered a method for understanding how humans narratively shape understanding. He accomplished this not only by situating concepts in history, pointing to how they develop over time, but more importantly by showing how the temporal development of concepts is shaped by tension between opposing principles, as concepts are pushed into a changing future by the pressure to resolve tension. In this respect, the principle of dialectical contradiction is coterminous with the principle of narrative tension. Dialectics come into play when human perception of tension and temporality comes into play, when humans perceive contradiction as something that calls for resolution, when they act and understand the actions of others as attempts to push contradictory situations toward resolution. In other words, social experience first became dialectical when humans first began weaving moments of life together as series of entanglements and disentanglements, suspense and resolution—that is, when they began telling their lives and histories as stories.<sup>1</sup>

1 It is true that Hegel applied this approach not only to human affairs, but also to the nature of the world. He was able to make this logical move because he placed the whole world within the realm of unfolding consciousness. Since Hegel's world was a grand storyteller, the world appeared to really operate according to the principles of stories. Insofar as the world becomes Spirit, the world moves the way human Spirit narrates its moving. When Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*, argued against Engels that dialectics cannot be found purely in nature, but only where there is human subjectivity in history (Lukács 1971a, 3), this was a logical consequence of renouncing Hegel's identification of Spirit and world. If there is a natural world distinct from Spirit, then it only becomes dia-

Hegel was by no means the first to bring together dialectical and narrative thought. When philosophy first emerged, it mobilized the narrative principles of traditional storytelling, even if it did not yet explicitly reflect on narration. Philosophy took the principle of contradiction, which had been embedded in narrative thinking, and reflected on it independently and abstractly, turning it into a contradiction between established opinion and philosophical truth (as it was for Parmenides and Plato) or turning it into a principle of reality itself (as it was for Heraclitus and, in China, for Zou Yan and his elaboration of yin and yang). Philosophy thus turned from myth to ontology, from stories about an anthropomorphized world to stories about the interaction of abstract principles. From this perspective, Aristotle's *Poetics* appears as one of the first major works that not only employed dialectical thought, but directly described and analyzed its principles, and in this respect it may be as important as his *Metaphysics* as an antecedent to modern dialectics.

Hegel's innovation was to apply narrative principles consistently to the investigation of knowledge about being. This is somewhat obscured by the order in which Hegel presented his ideas, which might give the impression that he first developed a set of metaphysical principles and later applied them to history and narrative art. Yet from a logical perspective, it could be said that it was the narrative principles that took priority. In effect, Hegel asked what might happen if we looked on existence as a story. His work stands out as an attempt to bring these modes of theory together, synthesizing the principles of narrative and dialectics with the principles that govern the known world (as dialectically narrated).

If concepts develop according to principles of contradiction and the push toward resolution—that is to say, if they develop as stories—then different kinds of stories make for different kinds of concepts. My purpose, then, is not to pinpoint which narrative form Hegel most consistently employs, but to explore how Hegel's narration opened up the question of form, inspiring multiple interpretations and alternatives. The stakes are high, because if Hegel was right that dialectics not only capture the development of consciousness, but also encompass the development of history on its path toward freedom, then the narrative form of dialectics is also a structure emancipatory practice.

Exploring the relationship between narrative form and emancipatory practice it becomes all the more pressing at moments like the present,

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lectical when it finds a subject that confronts it and narrates its historical motion.

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when older narratives have lost their position of dominance. After modern grand narratives were called into question in the postmodern period, now the postmodern story of proliferating small narratives has also lost its erstwhile hold on the public imagination. But new narratives are only beginning to take shape. The old heroes of dialectics have been declared dead, and no birth certificate has yet been issued for the heroes who keep being born.

*Anansi the spider went down to earth and into the forest of the Python. He cut down a branch of palm and a length of stringy vine, and as he walked he said,*

*“I bet Python isn’t even as long as this little branch.” The Python overheard him.*

*“What’s that?” the Python said. “I’m as long as ten palm branches!”*

*But no, Anansi said, “I don’t believe you.”*

*So the Python stretched himself out beside the branch, closed his eyes and stretched and stretched until his head reached past one end of the branch and his tail reached past the other. “Keep stretching,” Anansi said. “Maybe you really are long after all! How was a little spider to know?” The Python kept stretching, and Anansi tied him up with his length of vine and carried him up to the god of the sky.*

## Hegel’s Genres

### According to a character in Brecht’s *Refugee Conversations*, Hegel’s *Greater Logic*

talks about the life of concepts, those slippery, unstable, irresponsible existences; the way they insult each other and draw their knives on each other and then sit down to dinner together as if nothing had happened. They appear in couples, so to speak—each is married to its opposite. (Brecht 2020, 63)

Like in a classical comedy, the characters of dialectics clash and then reconcile, ending in marriage. But this was not an entirely original observation on Brecht’s part. Hegel himself seemed to suggest that dialectics could be understood as a grand, universal comedy (White 2014; Hamacher 1998; Zupančič 2008; Speight 2021).

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel begins his reflections on poetic form with a consideration of epic and lyric poetry.<sup>2</sup> But as he defines them, each

<sup>2</sup> Hegel covers some of the same ground in the *Phenomenology*, in the section on “Religion in the Form of Art,” but there he places much less emphasis on narrativity and historicity.

If concepts develop according to principles of contradiction and the push toward resolution—that is to say, if they develop as stories—then different kinds of stories make for different kinds of concepts. (...) The stakes are high, because if Hegel was right that dialectics not only capture the development of consciousness, but also encompass the development of history on its path toward freedom, then the narrative form of dialectics is also a structure emancipatory practice.

is only one-sided in its expression of spirit: epic is the genre of exteriority, while lyric is the domain of interiority. Epic objectively portrays deeds and events from the perspective of a given whole; lyric subjectively portrays the inner world of the speaker. The one-sidedness of each genre is overcome, then, in dramatic poetry, which brings multiple subjects together in their dramatic deeds, developing the relationship between their inner spirit and their outer world (Hegel 1975 [2], 1037–1038). Within drama, then, Hegel distinguishes tragedy from comedy, and here it is tragedy that appears one-sided. This time the issue is one of historical perspective. Tragedy depicts how, in a given epoch and within a given ethical order, conflicting intentions and claims prove impossible to reconcile: “For although the characters have a purpose which is valid in itself, they can carry it out in tragedy only by pursuing it one-sidedly and so contradicting and infringing someone else’s purpose” (Hegel 1975 [2], 1197). Although Hegel still states that the tragic denouement involves a supersession of the particular aims of the tragic characters, it would seem that the principle that supersedes these aims—the principle of desired harmony and shared freedom that survives the irreconcilable conflict (Hegel 1975 [2], 1197)—exists *beyond* the narrative world of the tragedy itself and appears in tragedy only negatively, by revealing the one-sidedness of the struggles portrayed. Only with comedy, then, does the whole appear directly as the principle of reconciliation. In comedy the hero is not destroyed by conflict, but rises “above his own inner contradiction” with “an infinite light-heartedness and confidence” (Hegel 1975 [2], 1200). The comic hero overcomes any particular failures, even outlasts the work of art itself, recognizing “a loftier principle” and becoming “the overlord of whatever appears in the real world” (Hegel 1975 [2], 1202).

Hayden White reads Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* much the way Hegel, in the *Aesthetics*, reads himself. In the *Philosophy of History*, White observes, tragedy structures the history of specific individuals or peoples, but comedy is the form taken by Universal History. Individual heroes struggle and fail. Peoples and their civilizations rise and fall. They have all been able to express only particular moments in the development of Spirit, and they are unable to overcome their own internal contradictions without unmaking themselves.

Each of these Tragic defeats, however, is an epiphany of the *law* that governs the whole sequence. (...) It is (...) the law of history, which is the law of freedom that is figured in every human project culminating in a Tragic resolution. And this law figures the ultimately Comic outcome of the whole succession of forms



which is immediately apprehended under the aspect of Tragedy. (White 2014, 116–117)

Each individual or people contributes to Universal History by failing in particular history (see also Heneghan 2021); but taken together, these separate failed attempts to assert freedom point toward a resolution in which freedom prevails, a final wedding of Spirit and world, subject and object, freedom and law.

There is no doubt significant subversive potential in the Hegelian comedy (Zupančič 2008). Taken as a whole, it is a story in which successive ethical orders fail to fully realize the principle of freedom, and are overthrown. On the way to the story's happy ending, each partial order comes to appear laughable. (And perhaps this is part of what Marx had in mind when he famously remarked that when world-historical facts repeat themselves—if a new order has not yet replaced the old—they turn from tragedy to farce; Marx 1978, 594.) Nevertheless, it is also easy to see how the comedy of history could appeal to Hegel's notoriously conservative defensive of the state. In spite of the transformative feat of reconciliation that comedy accomplishes, turning adversaries into allies and friends, the classical form of the genre also respects a principle of stasis, according to which the balance of forces that prevailed at the outset is reinstated at the end. For the duration of the narrative, the world may be turned upside-down; mistaken identity may follow mistaken identity, men may become women, women men, slaves masters and masters slaves—but in the moment of resolution the masters return to being masters, slaves become slaves once more, and everyone returns to her or his proper station. Everyone has a good laugh and goes back to life as before, perhaps wiser and happier about a reality that has been revealed as better than it had previously seemed before. For Hegel, there was no contradiction in seeing progress in stasis, because for him the principle of change was already contained in the narrative world at the start. Although much can be said of the social transformations that Hegel recounted in his actual narration of history, the classical comic plot narrates these transformations first and foremost as changes of consciousness, in which the higher principle that allows reconciliation is recognized, allowing the already-present seed of harmony to grow and finally bear fruit.

The radicals of the nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the most ardent standard-bearers of the Hegelian tradition, amended the more conservative interpretation of the dialectic as a comedy of reconciliation. They expected something more substantially new to emerge

at the end of their stories, something that pointed beyond what was present in the story at the start. They also expected that, in order to reach that end, the leading characters would have to engage in heroic struggle, from which some would emerge victorious, while the others would be vanquished. One way of narrating this history—and this was implicit in much romantic revolutionary thought—was to emphasize the tragic moment over the comic. As Jason M. Yonover (2021) has argued, the revolutionary plays an important role in Hegel's historical understanding, and in spite of Hegel's ambivalence toward revolution, there is room for a revolutionary Hegelian narration of history as a succession of tragic rebellions. Although the revolutionary pursues a purpose that is incompatible with an established order, and in the clash between incompatible purposes the rebel appears doomed to failure, a broader view of history reveals that even in failure, revolutionaries can recognize and establish principles that *will become universal* (Yonover 2021, 254). History's revolutionary tragedies give progressive content to the non-tragic narrative frame. Freedom can be advanced in history thanks to heroes who repeatedly push against ethical orders that threaten to hold history in place (Yonover 2021, 256).

But another narrative revision took the Hegelian frame in another direction. When revolutionary movements believed in the possibility (and sometimes inevitability) of their own ultimate victory, they gradually developed a narrative that could be called epic. Because epic deals with exteriority, the fundamental change that comes about in an epic story is not a change of consciousness, but a change of conditions. The state of the narrative world at the end is not yet given at the start. The hero sets out into a world that is only beginning to be constituted, and in the course of the story the hero can come to embody a whole people or ideal or movement. The story may end in victory or defeat, but not in nuptials. Even if the hero dies, the transformation of the narrative world is completed, and the embodied object lives on, having revealed something essential about its character or fate. The affronted Achaeans, in battling Troy, become Hellenes, pointing toward future greatness, even if their greatest epic ends before the battle has been won. Ilya Muromets becomes the people of Rus by stopping invaders from abroad and exposing the cowardice and cupidity of the country's rulers. And these heroes can be replaced by the forgotten poor, the oppressed nation, or the humble worker who rises from misery to rid the land of exploiters; and only the preliminary telling of the story's eventual end may give the heroes confidence that they—or at least their children or grandchildren—will not die trying.

At the same time, the characters of this epic are flatter, and the plotline is straighter, than in the dialectic of classical comedy. The characters' internal complexity is not expressed on the level of narrative form. They are not beset by moral dilemmas or laughable inner contradictions. They are not rendered immobile by the difficulty of decision or the hopelessness of fate. In the narrative that emerges, the heroes are given goals to pursue, goals external to their own being, and their story is the pursuit of these external goals. This story lacks an elaborate web of tragic scheming or comic plot twists and reversals. The characters stoically struggle to complete their tasks, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing, sometimes making rapid progress, sometimes faltering, sometimes engaging in great, apocalyptic battles, sometimes slogging along in a slow and gradual process that points to the same goal.

Each of these genres, comic, tragic, and epic, has contributed to the narrative tradition of emancipation that we have at our disposal today. Yet I think there is another genre, implied by another tradition of reading Hegel, that conforms to none of these forms.

*Where did Anansi get the idea to trick the Python? Naturally, it was his wife Aso's idea.*

## The Hero of Dialectics

In the classical genres that captured Hegel's attention, varied as they are, one thing about the hero remains relatively unchanged: the hero begins and ends the story at the center of the narrative world. The tragic hero is a great man or woman, the power of whose story derives from the fact that even in this greatness he or she cannot transcend given conditions and is destined to fall. The comic hero, by contrast, begins as a lesser person but transcends conditions thanks to her or his privileged position at the center of a story that propels the imperfect hero toward a happy fate. The epic hero is already born to be great—a prince, perhaps a lost heir—and rises to become a king. In the epic telling of the Hegelian story, the hero can be Spirit, the State, the nation, the working class, or liberal democracy. The hero sets out already posited as the rightful representative of the whole, and through the dialectical process the hero comes to claim its due. The subject rises, realizes its potential, and affirms what it always already essentially was. This is a kind of history told from a position of immanence within the whole that will be claimed. The hero begins as a positive subject that negates its world. Through this

negation, the hero is transformed from potentiality to actuality, and the world becomes the hero's world.

But there is another tradition of dialectical narration that tells of a differently positioned hero. There, where the hero's existence is negative from the start, the transformation it undergoes is more radical. When it accomplishes its task by negating *itself*, abolishing the essence that had defined it been before, a different kind of story takes shape. This is the story of a hero excluded from the mechanisms that empower subjects to take control of the course of events, who then struggles against this exclusion, accomplishing a kind of transformation that the insider to erstwhile history was unable to bring about. This subject does not only negate the world, but also negates the mechanisms that prevented other subjects from negating the world. Instead of accomplishing a task already given by history, it makes history possible—history as the underdetermined result of the hero's actions.

Oedipus is given tasks by fate, and the genre of his story condemns him to fail. Achilles is given tasks that his genre requires him to fulfill. Odysseus is thrown by fate in the direction of a different genre.

Achilles, son of a goddess and champion of an army, is tasked with defending his slighted honor and fighting against Troy. Never straying from the martial world where he is at home, he completes both tasks, raging against his comrades when they slight him, but then turning the tide of their war.

Odysseus, son of mortals, but with a trickster god for a grandfather, is blown off his course into an unfamiliar world. With cunning more than brawn, he makes his long journey home, a foreigner everywhere along the way, and on every island he has to break the local rules.

Odysseus is still part-warrior, and the *Odyssey* is still part-epic, but already it enters new territory. What happens to the dialectic when it is retold as a trickster tale?

*Anansi travelled from forest to forest and country to country. He heaped praise on the Tiger, the Leopard, and the Hornets, who were strong, and deadly, and vain. The Tiger had sharp claws, but he couldn't use them when he fell asleep and Anansi tied his hair to a kola nut tree. The Leopard had swift feet, but they didn't help him when he ran into a trap that Anansi had dug in the ground. The Hornets stung with poison, but their poison didn't keep them from being lured into Anansi's gourd. Anansi strung them all together with a vine. With the help of his wife Aro he carried them up to the god of the sky.*

## Master and Slave, In and Out of History

Hegel was somewhat more ambivalent in the positioning of his protagonists than his overt choice of genres suggests. For the most part his heroes are internal to the world they inhabit and appropriate. Since “the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development” (Hegel 1979, 11), it seems that Spirit’s path of development should be already contained within the character at the start. The Subject-becoming-itself seems to contain the whole within itself and seems to be contained within the whole. But at a crucial turning point in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel famously tells us that the Subject can only realize itself as self-consciousness “*in another self-consciousness*” (Hegel 1979, 110), and suddenly the hero’s path is not as clearly marked as it first appeared. The path leads Spirit to another character, called the master, who stands in for Spirit, and then to yet another character, whom Hegel calls the master’s “bondsman” or “slave.” The master, the comfortable inhabitant of the pre-established whole, can only achieve self-consciousness by becoming aware of and being recognized by someone who, at the outset, was excluded from the system’s consciousness. The master’s consciousness must be confronted; its incompleteness and dependency must be revealed. The non-absoluteness of what posed as absolute must be overcome.

The *Phenomenology* thus depicts an outsider character who counters the inside-position of the initial hero. The outsider, on a superficial reading, would seem to play only a minor part. But a whole counter-current in dialectical thought would come to retell the dialectical narrative with the slave as its hero. The young Marx, Lukács, Beauvoir, Fanon, and postcolonial theorists would all draw attention to this position both inside and outside of history that grants the slave a specific kind of dialectical power, not only because she can influence the course of events that depend on her activity and, thus, can force history to recognize her historicity, but also because, located outside the positions of power and privilege of her historical moment’s, she can call the entirety of the system into question. And when the slave becomes a dialectical subject, the narrative structure of dialectics changes too. Although the character of the slave was already contained in Hegel’s system, the story of dialectics is not the same when the slave becomes its main character.

This retelling of the story also entailed some revision of Hegel’s understanding of the slave. Hegel’s depicted the slave as directly subordinate to the master, while he excluded large parts of the exploited world

from this dialectically important position. In *The Philosophy of History*, he notoriously described sub-Saharan Africa as a place “shut up (...) within itself” (Hegel 2001, 109), its people unable to attain adequate consciousness of “humanity” and, thus, incapable of influencing world-historical events. On this basis, he summarily dismisses Africa from his pages in order to enter “the real theatre of History” (Hegel 2001, 117).

Yet Hegel also reveals that in fact this excluded place is not outside history at all: “The only essential connection that has existed and continued between the Negroes and the Europeans,” he writes, “is that of slavery” (Hegel 2001, 116). “Only” slavery connects Africans with Europeans—at a historical moment when slavery formed the very basis of Europe’s economic and political domination of the world. Many Africans never played the restricted role of the slave as depicted in the *Phenomenology*. But an expanded understanding of the character (implicit in anticolonial and postcolonial readings) recognizes that the system of slavery stretches beyond the direct relationship between each master and each slave, encompassing the many people who struggling to avoid or escape slavery or to resist it from one or another position that is both inside the system and outside. When this expanded notion of the slave becomes a hero of the dialectic, a thoroughly different narration of history emerges.

The modernist epic had little place for the rebellious outsider. It recast its outsiders as insiders, asserting that its chosen hero—the liberal state, the nation, the working class—was the most genuine representative of the people as a whole on its march toward progress.<sup>3</sup>

Tragedy leaves more room for the insider-outsider, too frustrated by history to accept it without a fight, but too enmeshed in the contradictions of the moment to be capable of resolving them without provoking catastrophe.

Comedy, if told right, brings us closer to a story in which history’s outsiders have a fighting chance of coming out on top. But a good deal rides on what kind of comic tale we tell.

Much of narrative theory, and especially narrative-theoretical con-

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3 Lukács, in his pre-Marxist *Theory of the Novel* (Lukács 1971b), found narrative space for the outsider by declaring that the novel had become the epic of a modern society where everyone had become an outsider. But the novel’s hero, the alienated, “transcendentally homeless” individual, is unable to effectively change the course of history, and finds momentary transcendence only in the world of literary representation. (When Lukács later turned to the proletariat, a more socially transformative hero [Lukács 1971a], he no longer specified which narrative genre might best capture this unfolding of dialectics in history.)

sideration of Hegel, has limited its range to the genres of classical Greece and their adjusted modern counterparts. But when we look at the narrative that came out of re-reading Hegel from the perspective of the slave, we might characterize it best by turning to another genre, one present throughout the world, but which entered widespread theoretical reflection only in the course of comparative anthropological research (e.g. Radin 1956; Lévi-Strauss 1963), and which is especially well developed among the rebellious slaves of the Caribbean that impressed Hegel (Buck-Morss 2009), and in the regions of West Africa that Hegel dismissed from the theater of History.

*The world is still full of pythons, tigers, leopards, and hornets. But it is also full of spiders.*

### The Trickster of History

The trickster tale is comic, but it is not a classically structured comedy. Tricksters are not blessed by fate like the heroes of classical comedies, who are saved from their blundering by good fortune or the favor of the gods or the whims of a *deus ex machine*; tricksters survive by forcing others, more powerful than they, to blunder. Tricksters may sometimes be lesser gods, like the Greek Prometheus or the Polynesian Maui, in worlds populated by other gods, but unlike classical comic heroes they are almost never kings ruling over women and men.<sup>4</sup> The trickster tale, like a classical comedy, elicits laughter by inverting social norms, but unlike the comedy it does not conclude by turning the norms right-side-up again. Their stories do not end in marriage as a final reconciliation. Often, the trickster is a culture hero, whose inventions, inversions, and expropriations have permanently changed the world, but the culture hero comes at the beginning, not the end, of history. The trickster's rebellions do not put an end to struggle, but set the stage for further struggle.

<sup>4</sup> Odysseus, an exception to this rule, bears the marks of a generically composite character. The story, told in heroic meter and traditionally classified as an epic, begins after a war and ends with a warrior king reclaiming his throne. But all along the voyage home, the hero is a trickster—in terms of rank, he is little more than a pirate captain—who employs guile to defeat powerful monsters and sorceresses and to sneak into his old home so that when he emerges as a warrior, he can take his rivals by surprise. ([or?] The trickster's task is to bring the hero home.) The warrior's task is to place him on the throne.

The trickster dialectic does not have a unique beginning or definitive end. It comes in cycles of stories, as the trickster hero faces repeated problems (the lack of fire, the domination of kings and gods and beasts), solves them through unexpected devices and designs, brings innovations to the world, brings new, once-excluded characters into the story, and then goes back to prepare for the next episode.

When Prometheus, Marx's favorite god, stole fire from his divine king and gave it to humanity, he was not permitted to sit quietly around the hearth with the people he had liberated from the cold. The guardian of the old order imprisoned him on a mountain and gave a jar full of troubles to the world. Humanity has been fighting back against its oppressors ever since—but this was also the moment when humans became characters in the story.

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Alenka Zupančič, in her study of Hegel and comedy, identifies many of these qualities of the trickster tale in what she calls "comedy." While she acknowledges that "false" comedy can be conservative in its effects, "true" comedy, she argues, is subversive. In "false" comedy, an ordinary man might believe he is a king, or a king might be shown in amusing light as an ordinary man, but the work concludes by affirming the ridiculousness of placing a deluded subject on the throne, and by reaffirming the humanity of the king in his role as king. Yet in true comedy, she says, the king is shown to be ridiculous precisely because he is a king, while the comic subject accedes to the position of universality by laughing at kings. True comedy, in this view, reveals how laughable were the falsely universal claims of gods and morals and institutions, before



they were confronted by the particularity of comic subjects, before this confrontation forced the abstract-universal to change places with the concrete subjects, who rise to a truer universality (Zupančič 2008, 30–32). The trickster is a master of what Zupančič attributes to true comedy, which “exposes to laughter, one after another, all the figures of the universal essence and its powers” (Zupančič 2008, 27). But the trickster accomplishes this, *pace* Zupančič, in a narrative structure that differs from the form classically known as comedy. The trickster’s tale does not end with what Hegel, in the *Phenomenology*, considers the culmination of comedy, “a state of spiritual well-being and or repose” (Hegel 1979, 453) where the audience feels “completely at home” (Hegel 1979, 452).

Even if Lévi-Strauss was right when, in his seminal work on trickster myths, he argued that tricksters operate as mediators between opposing principles, their role in dialectics is not one of definitively resolving tension and enabling spiritual repose. It may be true that “mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 224), but when tricksters serve as mediators, this resolution is only temporary. In spite of Lévi-Strauss’s avowed commitment to synchronic analysis, tricksters play the role of setting structures *in motion*. Lévi-Strauss takes as examples the Native North American raven and coyote characters who, as carrion-eaters, mediate between herbivores and carnivores (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 224–225); he could have analyzed the West Africa and Caribbean tales of Anansi the spider and seen the spider as a mediator between the animals of the earth and the god of the sky. But this mediation does not reconcile herbivores and carnivores or a heavenly god with dangerous mundane beasts. Mythological mediation, according to Lévi-Strauss, is a technique for organizing experience (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 225), for categorizing the perceived world; but the mediation of one set of oppositions only leads to new oppositions: “two opposite terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third one as a mediator; then one of the polar terms and the mediator become replaced by a new triad, and so on” (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 224).

Lévi-Strauss also recognizes other mediating figures, whom he calls “messiahs,” who point to reconciliation by “uniting” opposite terms (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 223). But messiahs belong to a different, more epic type of tale. Tricksters come into play when messiahs fail (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 226–227; 1976, 160).

From a temporal perspective, insofar as trickster myths can be applied to an understanding of historical change, what tricksters mediate are

not only synchronically coexisting structural oppositions—the carnivorous and herbivorous, the earth and sky—but also diachronically arranged structures. They mediate between one state of affairs where the carnivorous could freely devour the herbivorous and another state of affairs where the carnivorous are humiliated. They mediate between a state of affairs where all the stories are held in the vaults of the sky, and another state of affairs where the stories have been brought down to earth and told against the overly powerful creatures there. When the trickster is a culture hero, there is no going back. The change has been effected in a distant past, and we all live with it today. But because new oppositions continue to emerge, the trickster keeps tricking and inviting others to join in. For example, as Anansi the spider does, by appropriating the means of telling stories.

Because tricksters are outsiders, they are often wanderers. If the episodes about their tricks are woven together into an overarching narrative frame, sometimes it is a story like Odysseus's, the struggle to return home. Other times, as with Maui in Polynesia, the story begins at home and proceeds outward, as a narrative affirmation that the trickster has no place in the old world—in this case, a primordial land of spirits and gods, which Maui leaves in order to create a world fit for women and men (in his ensuing adventures, he lifts up the sky to make room between the heavens and earth, he fishes up the islands from the ocean floor, he slows down the sun to give people time to live in the daylight). These two types of story could be read as two points in the same dialectical process. With Maui, we see an originary rejection of an abstractly universal world where gods have not yet been confronted by people. Maui presses forward with a necessary estrangement that might allow later heroes to embark on their own *Odysseys*, to find their way home, now, to a world where people have known gods but must learn to live without them.

This is the role of the trickster of history. Standing outside the apparent system of historicity, the trickster asserts the incompleteness of this system. The trickster, by rejecting the given ontological or ethical order, shows that this order was stagnant, and not fully integrated. The trickster reveals itself as heterogeneity, which becomes alienated from the given order, and sets in motion a process of transformation. This is no longer the same story that Hegel set out to tell. But Hegel helped give later tellers the narrative tools to tell it.

*Anansi showed his captives to Nyame, the god of the sky. Nyame said, "They're all tied up, the beasts I was saving my stories for! Let the stories be yours."*

## Tales of Tales

Anyone, of course, can try their hand at playing tricks. There is no guarantee that any single rebellion against morality will be carried out in the name of a better, more universal morality. Trickster, sometimes, pull dirty tricks.

Are we faced, then, with the kind of “paganism” described by Lyotard, in which every god or spirit, or at least everyone that accedes to the role of the trickster, operates by its own moral rules? With the notion of paganism, Lyotard attempted to link the problem of multiple narratives to the possibility of universally valid judgment. Even if every narrative implies its own parallel moral logic (its own paralogism; Lyotard 1984, chap. 14), narratives can be embedded within one another, “the gods can become, like human beings, like Ulysses, the heroes of numerous, almost innumerable narratives, all set into each other,” with heroes exchanging functions, names, and masks, which—Lyotard is careful to add in a dig against Hegel—“bars the way to the very notion of a subject identical to itself through the peripeteia of its history” (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985, 40). The stories intermingle, and somewhere in this mess, which offers neither definitive resolution nor definitive criteria for judgment, one must nevertheless pass judgment, “one must decide” (Lyotard and Thébaud 1985, 17).

Lyotard invokes the trickster tale with the name Ulysses, but he does not consider its significance. Yet the trickster tale offers a different approach to the process of bringing disparate moral logics together. Without needing the final peripeteia that brings classical tragedies and comedies to a close, trickster tales come together in something more clearly structured than “innumerable narratives, all set into each other.” Although most trickster tales remain open ended, with every episode’s peripeteia opening space for another episode, the episodes nonetheless are grouped together. Like folk epics, they concatenate around what folklorist Wilhelm Radloff calls “epic centers,” striking themes, events, locations, and especially characters that offer points of narrative convergence (Radloff 1990, 78). Narrative fragments circulate as oblique reference, side comments, quotations, shared cultural knowledge. Fragments then gather into complete episodes, episodes into cycles. Sometimes, a single episode takes on such imaginative power that it becomes the frame for other stories, as in the *1001 Nights*, where Shahrazad deploys her own storytelling as a trick to foil the plans of a murderous king.<sup>5</sup> Some cycles of

5 Tellingly, the frame story of Shahrazad does not end in marriage, but *begins*

tales, especially when given overarching frames, crystalize into cohesive written texts or performances with clear beginnings and ends. From there they return to shared cultural knowledge, and then they circulate again, waiting for new moments of narrative realization. The narrative structure enables the joining of universals and particulars, gods and humans, frame and episode, moral rules and anti-moral rebellion; the achieved synthesis can then be disrupted at the right moment by a new retelling. The trickster dialectic does not generate an identical subject-object of history, but rather a non-identical insider-outsider who, in spite of this ambivalent and disruptive role, points toward the universal by turning history inside-out.

A single episode about a single trickster does not make universal history. It only reveals the non-universality of history told before. As more episodes come together, the story they tell gains in breadth. Then multiple cycles can come together, with multiple tricksters, as the sharing of stories reaches global scale, as social movements interact, as the narrators of history confront the commonality of masters with commonality of slaves. And at a certain moment a protagonist might step forward who, in revealing the inadequacy of the master's narrative, becomes the bearer of the universal principle of emancipation from the rule of masters. This position, this juncture of history and exclusion from history, can serve as a point where these different narratives entwine and, together, tend toward something that might be worthy of the name of World History that Hegel had put forth. The end of this story is not yet determined. The story unfolds in fits and starts, in a cycle of tale after tale and tale within tale.

The trickster cycle is an imperfect narrative structure in the sense that its form enables the incorporation of a diverse range of content. But because the folk trickster cycle necessarily circulates in shared cultural consciousness (as do some remarkable novels, especially those like *Don Quixote* or *The Good Soldier Švejk* that mimic the form of episodic trickster cycles), it is open to incorporating new material and expanding its narrative scope. As a culturally shared referent, it is also readily available for application beyond the bounds of fiction, in the historical motion of emancipatory practice.

The masterful stories of the march of civilization can then be met by other stories, like the stories of Anansi, who inverted the masters' inverted morality until the whole story could be overturned (Levine 1977, 102–133). The slave, in this retelling of the historical dialectic,

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with it. Marriage to a monarch is not the solution, but the problem.

does not play the role of noble epic warrior. Still less of the tragic king condemned by fate or the comic bumbler blessed by it. This slave is a wandering trickster who subverts the world, and in the process rebuilds it. If these genres coexist today, as in so many other times, this is because no society is fully in harmony with itself and capable of telling only a single story. Every Achilles calls forth his Odysseus, and every powerful beast is met by an Anansi. The master hungers after someone to recognize his honor. The trickster finds honor in tricking the masters.

*Nyame, the god of the sky, gave the stories to Anansi and Aro in a giant basket. Only the basket had a hole, and as the two climbed back down to earth, stories spilled out everywhere.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is my retelling of a tale many times retold. See, e.g. Rattray (1930, 55–59).

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**Tytuł:** Opowieść o dialektyce i tricksterze historii

**Abstrakt:** Opierając się na heglowskiej interpretacji narracji i odrzuceniu przez Lyotarda „wielkich” narracji dialektycznych, niniejszy artykuł dotyczy relacji pomiędzy dialektyką emancypacyjną a formą narracji. Rozpoczyna się od zbadania bliskiego związku między myślą dialektyczną a teorią narracji. Na tej podstawie artykuł dowodzi, że różne koncepcje dialektyki dają się powiązać z różnymi strukturami opowiadania historii. Wreszcie w konkluzji, tekst poszukuje formy narracyjnej adekwatnej dla radykalnego odczytania Hegła, w której perspektywa pana (podmiotu uprzywilejowanego przez dany system historyczności) zostałaby zastąpiona perspektywą niewolnika (który, będąc wykluczonym z historyczności, walczy przeciwko temu wykluczeniu). Ta forma narracyjna nie odpowiada żadnemu z klasycznych, greckich gatunków literackich, a najbardziej odpowiadałby jej opowieść o tricksterze.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Hegel, teoria narracji, filozofia historii, dialektyka Pana i Niewolnika, trickster