Mechthild Nagel

Masking the abject: A genealogy of play

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Mechthild Nagel's *Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play* has both a broad historical scope and a narrow thematic focus. Her genealogy stretches from the Greek presocratic philosophers to Hegel, but its coverage is highly selective. Besides the presocratics and Hegel, the work considers Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and, briefly, Schiller. Play, a notoriously inclusive term, is here also narrowly defined. Her subject is not the play found in children's mimicry or carnivalesque mockery, and certainly not the play of organized sports. Rather, Nagel's concern is the way philosophers have theorized play in its relationship to reason and other types of normative value. She views the separation of play and work, play and moral seriousness, as one of the symptoms, if not one of the causes, of the failed modernity which is exemplified by bourgeois culture. Invoking the Nietzsche of The Birth of Tragedy, she argues that this separation occurs when "Apollonian (logocentric)" forces overwhelm "Dionysian (tragic, Bacchanalian)" forces and subordinate Dionysian energies to Apollonian norms. She hopes that by redressing this imbalance, we might discover alternatives to the "warrior mentality" fostered by the acquisitive individualism of contemporary society.

The plot of Nagel's genealogy will be familiar to students of Heidegger's philosophy and, beyond that, to those acquainted with certain Romantic theories of history. According to this narrative, many presocratic philosophers accorded play as a disruptive force a parity with other values. She credits Homer with a mutlifaceted view of play which remains open to Dionysian energies and thus contrasts with the more orderly Apollonian view of play found in Hesiod and Aristophanes. Standing between these disparate camps is Heraclitus, whose "cunning play exemplifies his dialectical strategy of the unity of opposites—and it is this unresolved tension in his thought, the interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian, which captivates later play theorists as diverse as Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Fink" (23).

Beginning with Aristotle, however, classical Greek philosophy denigrated play by subordinating it to reason and treating it as reason's other. This "malediction" of play, as Nagel describes it, remained the norm for Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant and Schiller, but was eventually overturned by Hegel, whose philosophy, Nagel argues, anticipates the postmetaphysical thinking of Heidegger and Derrida. Hegel's philosophy is thus credited with recovering the ancient wisdom of Heraclitus, a wisdom suppressed during the misadventure of Enlightenment metaphysics.

Nagel's genealogy modifies the standard narrative of fall and recovery in two significant ways. She wants to defend both Plato and Hegel from charges that they endorse metaphysical standards

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of value which devalue play. Against Derrida and others, she argues that in Plato, play "does not get maligned as mere play in order to be contrasted with serious activities," noting that "several dialogues seem to attest to the conflation of these opposites" (43). Plato may wish to affirm an Apollonian standard, she admits, but Dionysian energies lurk behind the masks assumed by his interlocutors. In a similar way, Nagel defends Hegel against those who have reproached him for his totalizing metaphysical system. While some, like Giles Deleuze, have presented Hegel as representative of a dark philosophical will to power, Nagel presents him as a comic trickster who has been greatly influenced with the spirit of Heraclitus. Her Hegel presents not systematic philosophy, but a mockery of the same: "In fact, in his comedy, the farcical play, also known as 'The Phenomenology of Spirit,' Hegel masters par excellence the art of cunning and catches his opponents off guard—with lime twigs" (83). Nagel finds some of her strongest evidence of this trickster Hegel in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where the historical development of the Notion is compared to a Bacchanalian Revel. Here Hegel seems to be claiming that there is a Dionysian energy at the very heart of history's dialectic. Nagel glosses this passage with the help of Slovoj Zizek's commentary on Hegel. In Zizek's revisionary reading, the Hegelian subject participates in the Absolute not in virtue of its self-knowledge, but in virtue of its self-ignorance; it must constantly attempt to find itself in the external world but without a chance of ever succeeding. The subject's inability to find itself confirms rather than denies its identity with the Absolute by revealing a fracture in the Absolute itself and the ultimate incompleteness or failure of the dialectic. Thus, for Nagel, Hegel's philosophy is a comic response of a self that can never realize itself caught in a history that will never complete itself. Play is engendered by the perpetual negativity of a "torn" Dionysian consciousness.

The chapters which defend Plato and Hegel against charges of metaphysical seriousness are the strongest in the book. They reveal Nagel's sensitivity to the ambiguities and contradictions in these canonical texts; she clearly enjoys reading them against the grain. By contrast, the chapters on Aristotle and Kant seem cursory and oddly lacking the playful patience that characterize the rest of the book. Here Nagel is so anxious to convict Aristotle and Kant of maligning play that she rushes the reader to judgment before their cases have been properly heard. Even more rushed is her three-page treatment of Schiller's work on play. No other philosophical work has done more than his *Aesthetical Letters* to promote the revaluation of play. Even though she finds Schiller's account of play lacking because it valorizes "ideal play" and rejects play that "collides with the ideal," she might say more about the moral and political liabilities of this quintessentially Enlightenment vision. The treatments of Aristotle and Kant invite similar criticisms. The reader may or may not agree with Nagel's final verdict on these philosopher's treatments of play, but she or he will most likely wonder if her standards are adequate to the richness of the material. Used as a heuristic device, the distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian play may be serviceable enough in a broad historical study, but to use this binary contrast to size up Aristotle on tragedy and Kant on imagination seems inadequate

Nagel's argument moves more or less gracefully between the discourses of German classical philology and contemporary critical theory. She is obviously at home in both of these idioms, although her discussion would have profited from the inclusion of some recent Anglo-American scholarship, particularly in the sections dealing with Kant and Hegel.

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Nagel's book concludes with a series of questions that point to the paradoxes implicit in her project. She asks if we "can or should . . . conceptualize a play which occurs for it own sake" (109). To do so would seem to reinforce the notion that we might isolate pure play as kind of aesthetic ideal that is independent of any moral or political considerations. However, those who deny that play has an autotelic dimension risk subordinating play to serious Apollonian standards, revolutionary those may be. Nagel imagines overcoming this impasse with a "materialist feminist play which uses the analytic tools of the Marxist tradition" and avoids "casting play and work as opposites" (109). This, she admits, is a project which demands another book.

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