

Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks and Us*, London: Profile Books, 2019, £16.99

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Unlike most philosophical studies of ancient Greek theatre, *Tragedy, The Greeks and Us* is not about *the tragic* understood as a philosophical idea. Rather, it is about *tragedy*, a historically specific form of art. The book, Critchley tells us, is an invitation to ‘think with tragedy’, to ‘become part of a “we” … that is summoned and called into question by ancient tragedy’ (8). While it begins with twelve theses on tragedy, what follows is a concentrated study of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, interlaced with new interpretations of philosophy’s relation to sophism, tragedy’s relation to comedy, Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, coupled with an inverted Nietzschean account of tragedy’s development in which Euripides emerges as the most incisive of the three great tragedians. The book rapidly cuts between genres, theses and themes, bearing a stichomythic rhythm of its own that breaks with conventional philosophy not just in content but also in form.

In the lengthy introduction, Critchley stakes twelve theses to the well-guarded door of philosophy’s obsession with tragedy. Tragedy, he declares, cannot be theorised. As an artistic genre, it embodies a philosophical outlook of its own, one that is temporally prior to and conceptually distinct from the elevated position adopted by Plato and continued by his student Aristotle. Taking up the historical-linguistic method of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Critchley rejects philosophically inflected attempts to encase tragedy in theory, which claim to see *through* the action on stage to some inner essence. Tragedy is indeed a form of imitation, as Aristotle teaches us, and what we see mirrored on stage has everything to do with action. Yet in contrast to Aristotle, Critchley claims that the action of tragedy interrupts theorising. It confronts us with the unknown forces that move human being and doing in the basic activities of life, including love, war, worship and grief. Tragedy is ‘thinking *in* action, thinking *upon* action, *for the sake of* action’ (5). Refusing to leave his seat in the theatre for a speculative vantage, Critchley examines the heart of tragedy as ‘a deepened sense of the self and its utter dependency on others’ (3). Tragedy applies the emergency break to our unquenchable drive for progress. It confronts us with a chaotic order of dissonant energies where multiple claims on our lives have reason on their side. The result is not *resignation* but rather *disorientation*, expressed in one ‘bewildered and frequently repeated question: *What shall I do?*’ (4).

Here Critchley introduces a striking methodological conviction that guides his study. Tragedy, he states, is an *invitation*. Despite the historical distance that separates us from the ancient Greeks, tragedy offers the same invitation to us as it did to its original audience: to discover ‘how little we know and how little we will ever know’ (5). The staging of epistemic derailment is thus ‘an invitation to visit another sense of who we are and who we might become’ (6). The notion of invitation cuts through any death of tragedy thesis, which conveniently holds the dissonant forces of the attic world at arm’s length. Indeed, Critchley joins a small group of scholars including Raymond Williams to argue that tragedy is very much alive. To accept the invitation, however, requires a sacrifice on our part. The Greeks come to life only when fed with our own blood. This is to say that taking up the invitation is to make a costly wager that we are ‘the extreme contemporaries of … those other realists, the attic tragedians’ (70). That the wager is costly is due to the buffered sense of self we inherit from a technologized modernity that must be cracked and exposed if we are to take up the invitation. Tragedy

comes to life only when we take our seat in the theatre and see reflected on stage the dissonant energies that move us, and discover therein a shared sense of the fragility of our lives under the sun.

Critchley's contention is thus that the divide between the Greeks and us is not defined by years or ontological divides. It is defined simply by our willingness to consider what it would be like to inhabit a world in which we can both know and not know at the same time, a world in which fate requires our freedom to work out its ends. The invitation offered to us by tragedy is not a new piece of information to devour, or a new philosophical argument to contemplate. It is an opportunity to adopt a new standpoint from which to view the epistemic situation. The reader willing to take up Critchley's wager, and adopt a theatrical standpoint, enters a 'life of skepticism', a moral orientation to the world that emerges not from some new insight into practical reason but from 'the *disorientation* of not knowing what to do' (6). Here it is important to emphasise that tragedy for Critchley is not anti-rational. Indeed, reason is front and centre. Yet in the tragedies, reason does not operate against an ontological background in which morality harmonises with nature. It is not a tool that can stabilise the contradictions of experience. It is rather a political mode of asking for and giving account of action in the *polis*, a sphere devoid of any guarantees of success or progress. Tragedy shows us that 'reasoning is always a two-sided process of fragile negotiation in a world of constitutive ... violence' (26). Given the precarity of our political sphere today, Critchley's invitation to reconsider tragedy is timely indeed.

Critchley's take on tragedy's relation to philosophy, however, raises several questions that were unresolved in the study. From the outset of the book he proposes to join Nietzsche in reading tragedy to 'defend a form of philosophy that is destroyed by philosophy' (11). This form 'challenges the authority of philosophy by giving voice to what is contradictory about us' (9). In his ninth thesis, Critchley states that tragedy is neither progressive (Hegel, Marx) nor regressive (Heidegger) (34). Rather, tragedy retains an 'ambiguity that philosophy, in the person of Socrates and all the way to Husserl and Heidegger, cannot bear' (50). Yet is philosophy as homogenous as is often suggested in the book? Granted, Critchley is clear that he is not against philosophy as such but rather 'a certain *style* of philosophy that ... originates with Plato' (91). This style presupposes 'the intelligibility of being', and aspires to regulate our affect according to an idealized world picture. Yet it quickly becomes clear that in Critchley's account, philosophical prose following Aristotle is almost entirely complicit with Plato's attempt to pair the ontological with the moral, giving the impression that philosophy, as a genre, is inherently antipolitical and antirhetorical. Critchley lists 'Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel' as equally committed to Plato's antipolitical philosophy. The 'choice between philosophy and sophistry', he states, 'is a choice between the divine and the human' (127). Gorgias is the preeminent sophist for drawing politics *into* his mode of presentation, and thereby attempts to live with contradiction (104).

Critchley's interpretation of Gorgias is one of the highlights of the book. His paring of Gorgias with Euripides is immensely thought provoking, demonstrating how philosophy, reimagined through sophism, might think with tragedy. However, Critchley's portrayal of philosophy slides back into the theoretical framing it aims to overcome, serving not simply to invite his reader to a new mode of philosophizing but also to elevate her above the philosophical tradition to a position from which to observe a single sequence of unreflective Platonism. 'The philosophical measure', Critchley insists, 'is the divine' (126). Tragedy, in contrast, shows us that the world is 'entirely without the capacity for redemption' (267). Philosophy is 'committed to the idea of a noncontradictory life' (167), tragedy reveals a world of 'irreducible violence' (26). At times I felt that these were not simply remarks about genre but ontological claims.

Critchley's argument is, of course, polemical. And it is polemical for the very reason that the tradition of philosophy has crafted an image of itself in contrast to sophism. Elsewhere Critchley offers rich accounts of the glimmers of finitude found within the philosophical tradition (Derrida, Levinas, etc.), as well as in other sources (his sublime reading of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis* in *The Faith of the Faithless*). But I'd like to consider for a moment an alternative view of tragedy's relation to philosophy, something akin to Walter Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book. For Benjamin, tragedy and philosophy are historically specific genres energised by a moment of clarity between two equally fixed views, one in which the gods are too close for action to be ambiguous, the other in which the gods have departed and the claims of the suffering hero fall on deaf ears. Tragedy for Benjamin is an intermediary position, not a denial of redemption but rather a cry for integration framed within a dramatic genre in which no finalized totality can be made present. Mikhail Bakhtin builds on this idea when he describes the effect of tragedy as, anticipating Critchley, a feeling of aliveness. Yet in contrast to Critchley, this feeling of aliveness is not *in spite of* suffering but rather a recognition of suffering's *contingency*: 'nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.' On this view, what tragedy reveals is that the solipsistic use of reason – to redeem existence *or* to unveil ontological violence – is complicit with the hero's suffering. For Benjamin and Bakhtin, the effect of tragedy is to decentre us and turn us outward, to our neighbour and her best possibilities. Thus conceived, a philosophy that can think with tragedy would reflect on *anthropos* as fragmentary, full of grief, a problem, and yet hold the pieces together in a mode of presentation that does not finalise inquiry but rather orients the reader to a question that must be thought together: what should *we* do? Following the City Dionysia, the Athenian audience, including the sophists and tragedians, would return to the agora, where they would have to offer reasons for their views on foreign policy and trade regulations. Yet after their experience in the theatre, perhaps with a new sensitivity to the fragility of the *polis*.

Here I agree with Critchley that philosophy can stand in solidarity with tragedy. Yet I suggest that philosophy *as a genre* is far more mutable than he makes out. Take Kant's stumbling across the limits of reason in the *Critique*. Does he not delimit cognition to the anthropological frame, and thereby begin to free theoretical philosophy from the divine and relocate the process of giving and receiving reasons in a sphere of common sense? And if so, does not the *genre* of philosophy shift permanently after him? Does not Hegel shift it a little more by locating reason in the world? Could we not read pragmatism as an attempt to remove thinking from its encasement in theory? Of course, in each of these examples the glimpse is partial. Kant smuggles in the divine via the back door. Hegel's dialectic anticipates its overcoming. And pragmatism serves the naturalised conception of the human Critchley wants to challenge. But what genre is Critchley's book, if not continuous with Kantian critique? It might endorse sophism, but it is not itself a sophistic work.

Critchley's book invites us not just to think with tragedy, but also to think with tragedy from within the philosophical tradition. It invites us to consider how philosophy's failure to stabilise the world can (and *has*) prompt(ed) thinkers in specific times and places to experiment with new genres of philosophy to express what it means to think and act in the fractured world we encounter so vividly in the tragedies. It invites us to consider how acknowledging *our* complicity with the tradition, *our* attempt to write philosophical prose while holding our grief at a theorized distance, might change the way we write, think and teach. Of course, as Critchley shows us, neither life nor philosophy can be tragic. Tragedy is not an idea, an insight into the essence of life. It is

simply a mode of presentation, a genre that by its very nature delimits theoretical finality. Yet Critchley's rejection of tragedy's supposed death invites us to return to the tradition of philosophy in search of truly political ways of thinking, wherein the gods are distanced enough to feel life's ambiguity, yet not far enough to warrant a claim that violence goes all the way down.

This invitation is modelled for us in Critchley's subversive reading of Aristotle's terminology in the *Poetics*. Placing the tragedies in dialogue with Aristotle's attempt to theorise them, Critchley argues that Aristotelean *katharsis* is not purgation but discharge (200). Thus conceived, *harmartia* is not a fatal flaw but 'a basic human vulnerability that involves human beings in actions that lead them to profound suffering' (211). Discovering our share in *harmartia* 'does not comfort our fever like a warm blanket; it inflames that fever and the fire begins to burn' (259). Aristotle's error is not simply that he reifies the action of the tragedies but also that he 'pragmatizes' it to serve his greater philosophical concern (205). By searching within Aristotle for the tools with which to engage in a dissonant world, Critchley warns against any philosophical style that is defined by an 'utterly self-confident rationality' (247). In this regard Critchley's book can be seen as a rewriting of the *Poetics* by someone profoundly troubled by the art he examines.

Tragedy, The Greeks, and Us offers an alternative lens through which to view our times, 'diagnosing the seemingly intractable conflicts that define the present and finding reflective resources for thinking beyond them' (28). It reminds us, following Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, that tragedy politicises language that has become encased in theory. Yet Critchley's book does more, for it makes the case that tragedy disrupts our solipsistic reasoning and reorients us instead to our shared dependency. The highlight of the book is Critchley's penetrating analysis of the tragedies, complicating any theory of tragedy 'by the more turbulent logic of the plays themselves' (249). Perhaps the highest praise one could give is that it sparks one's desire to return to the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, with greater attunement to the invitation they offer.