



Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 336 pages

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Simon Critchley's newest book *The Greeks, Tragedy, and Us* is as much a reflection on the work of classic Greek tragedians as it is an engagement with the contemporary world. As a hermeneutician, he does the painful work of reminding us of what we clearly so wish to forget: that no meaning is independent of another or one another. Early in the book he makes a claim for which any humanist will express gratitude. Through tragedy's philosophy, he seeks to 'extend an invitation to you to become part of a "we," the "we" that is summoned and called into question by ancient tragedy [...] each generation has to reinvent the classics [...] it is the responsibility of every generation to engage in this reinvention.'¹ It is a powerful directive and this book does the work to offer a compelling argument in its favor. Despite this pleasure, there are potential concerns one might have of this text, to be outlined at the end of this review. In the interest of full disclosure, I was a graduate student with Simon Critchley at the New School for Social Research where I took his Being & Time seminar in the spring of 2015. We have not remained in contact since that time. In forging on, there are three major concepts that, to my mind, stand as the most helpful indicators of the larger claims Critchley would like to make about the classics in general and tragedy in particular: contextuality, mimesis, and peripeteia.

The call to reinvent the tradition is as subtle an injunction as it is powerful, which is precisely why it is good for the current age. Were I to rephrase, I might say that the world is already too embroiled in poor use of language, an uncaring maneuvering of meaning, and a blatant disregard for the networks of context to which we are indebted. Contextuality is the backdrop against which any meaning may rise or fall, be brought

¹ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 8.

forth or swept away. Its study is of insurmountable importance where it is threatened by a cacophonous babel that is the real result of a world mediated by mediation. To be clear, this review isn't slated to become an ode to semantics or a lamentation on society's slowly dissolving grip on grammar (though, to be honest, it has a hint of that, too). In a word, the political (one might also substitute here: social, economic, or simply even *human*) struggles of the present can be characterized as a *war on context*. It is the struggle over which meanings may be brought to light and given legitimacy in our world. At an atomized level, the same can be said about tragedy: to think about tragedy is to engage with its critiques. With this in mind, Critchley moves from an account of what tragedy says about itself to an exposition of what is said about tragedy by major figures of the Western canon. The what-is-said about and against tragedy holds significant influence on the modern worldview.

One way to gather a better sense of that worldview, on Critchley's account, is our relation to the mythologized archetype of "the hero." The archetype is itself indebted to the work of the ancients – which is not without its own deep systemic problematics. He makes note of this lineage in chapter 32 as part of his study of Plato's *Republic*. There, Socrates ventures so far to claim that tragedy ought to be excluded from the walls of the Polis and the education of the philosopher-kings. At the root of this claim is Socrates' awareness of the power of *mimesis*, of imitation and repetition, especially within an educational context.² As mimetic beings, the presence of contingency in the weighing of decisions is deeply unsettling. Platonic (Socratic?)³ education, founded on the development of character and self-mastery, requires a close study of those virtues which lead to self-mastery (e.g., discipline and moderation). Such an education, Critchley might say, would demand that Art show us how-to-be in the presence of one another – it favors an imbalance between description and proscription with a certain favor granted to the later. In particular, Art should demonstrate those virtues which we are to embody in the well-governed city. The silent promise of conformity is the rewards of a joyous afterlife (both in the *Republic* and the Bible).

Critchley reminds us that the focus of tragic works are not individual characters and the virtues that they embody. Rather, tragedies focus on the *actions* of their characters, the unrecognizable forces that brought them to the juncture of an action (fate), and the unforeseeable consequences of their choices (destiny). Socrates points to tragic characters as examples of who we should not become. But, Critchley says, that was

² Ibidem, 148.

³ As a reader, it is difficult to distinguish between them in this text: Critchley was commenting on Socrates' dialogue with Adeimantus in the *Republic*. Such commentary is housed, in the text, within a larger exposition on the Platonic view of tragedy.

never the goal of tragedy. They should remind us of what may happen to us, to *what does happen* to us. Done correctly, tragic plays have the capacity to leave us feeling morally devastated and totally helpless. Such excessive emotion (or really any form of excess within the city walls) causes a doubling-over within the self, a form of identity confusion which spurns doubt towards the city itself, and places into jeopardy the city's very foundation.⁴

Indeed, it is for this reason that Socrates finds the tragic poets to be dangerous and worthy of censorship. This is to say that our fixation on the 'hero' of a story is anti-contextual. It allows us to dwell within the belief that history, Art, the World, and, therefore, ourselves, are housed within an organic unity. Our common expectation is that, at the end of every event, is a neatly packaged prize warranted merely by the magnitude of our efforts. However, a close reading of the tragic plays reveals that this desire for an organic unity is misplaced. Within this world-view, we lose a great portion of the world. It becomes stripped of all its emotional intensity, moral ambiguity, and political complexity. This stripping of the non-idealized components of our lives is infantilizing; it limits our capacity to approach murky situations with an imaginative vulnerability.

Tragedy delivers context back to us through the mechanism of *mechane*, which Critchley reinvisions as "*deliberately deployed* artifice that is designed to frustrate and forestall any organicist conception of tragedy."⁵ This is what discloses to the audience the 'actual' way of things. More precisely, it is the interruptions in plot, the lack of a closed, unitary rationality that allows tragic plays to do the work for which they are intended. As an example, Critchley draws our attention to the moment of revelation in Euripides' play, *Helen*. Namely, that Helen spent the entire Trojan War in Egypt, that she had never gone to Troy, that someone with her likeness was sent there instead.⁶ The entire war was fought over a false image. In this way, tragedy shows the limits of relying merely on one's intentions as a source of legitimacy. Your intentions might be well, but they do nothing to contain the impact of your actions or determine their value. Sometimes, we work ourselves to death, engage in horrifying acts of war, just to learn that it was all for nothing.

⁴ Critchley, *The Greeks, Tragedy, and Us*, 154.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 224; this interpretation is made contra Aristotle who, in the *Poetics*, describes the *Deus ex machina* (Greek: *mechane*) as "any artificial means of contrivance that is extraneous to the *rationality of the plot* (p. 223 of the same text). All italics are my own.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 226.

The presence of *mechane* has two major plot motivators as offspring (as we remember from Aristotle's *Poetics*): recognition and reversal. In fact, the most poignant of tragedies are the ones which incorporate both simultaneously (think here of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*). If tragedies are powerful for their ability to mimic the real circumstances of life, which they are on Critchley's account, then we must remember that both recognition and reversal are circumstancing factors in life insofar as they call attention back to our situatedness in the world. Of the two, it's perhaps more critical to study the idea of reversal. The etymology of the Greek word for reversal, *peripeteia*, gives way to a slightly different understanding, as a *shift in the state of affairs*.⁷ This gives us a way to understand Critchley's choice to follow the study of context in tragedies rather than its disguise in the valorization of the characters. Movement, the guarantee of a shift, is a constant that exists beyond the control of humanity or the long reach of history. The field of play is always shifting and is the circumstance in which we, as living beings in the world, find ourselves. Shifting our value system from the hero narrative that dominates much of Western culture, to another which humbly accepts the contingency of all human thought and civilization, seems to be one of the key moves in learning to heed the world's address.

Contextualized in the present moment, Critchley's reading of tragedy has several less than subtle implications. Indeed his reading is reminiscent of the common critique of cinema and television produced by the United States as being too easy, too saccharine, for always giving the hero a clear path to triumph. A reintroduction of tragedy into our reflective conversations holds the potential to cast us back into ourselves and relieves us of the impression that simply being a kind person is a sufficient means of addressing our current social and political circumstances. Its harrowing injunction reminds us that fate is very real, that the impact of our actions are oftentimes awesome and horrifying, and that, sometimes, there is no rational explanation for how things came to be or how they might end up.

If one follows closely Critchley's account, one could, quite reasonably, feel hopeless and immobilized by the terrifying introduction of this worldview. In my opinion, it's probably for the best that we take a moment to sit in the shock of contingency's existence being dropped on our doorstep. But, from there, what discloses itself to us is the infinitely promising capacity *to adjust, to change*. Although, we cannot live in the guarantee of an afterlife, nor hope that every action we take will have an opportunity for forgiveness, what we can do is move. This is, to my mind, another key point to Critchley's study of tragedy. On the one hand, it seems that Critchley and the Greek poets want to remind us we

⁷ *Ibidem*, 209.

ought not rest our hope in many of those things which we usually do. On the other hand, and perhaps this is a liberty I take with Critchley's work, we are freed from the tyranny of a false hope and given the chance to ground ourselves in something new.

For many, philosophy can be a massively unapproachable subject. The resulting temptation can be to turn to the most contemporary philosophers with the hope that they've done their homework on the classics (and have hopefully done it well). The assumption being that the living would know more about our life than those who came before us. With the deftness of an experienced educator, Critchley calls into question this very habit, and, in so doing, performs for us a dual service. On one side, he delivers humble, exegetical readings of classic thinkers. Oftentimes, he'll admit where neither he nor the tradition knows the correct way to approach a text, say if history has been unable to preserve the answers orally or through the necessary documentation. On the other, he offers elevated interpretations which comprise dozens of tragic plays and classical texts. It carries the tone of a friend offering the broader points of an ongoing conversation such that you might feel inclined to, and capable of, a contribution. Critchley is of the belief that philosophy can be made clear, but it won't be easy. His writing has style and wit, yet forgoes pretense. The result is a book which simultaneously challenges the scholar without leaving the layperson behind.

Those who read this text might find frustration in its conclusion. In many ways, we have come to expect literary critics and philosophers to give us programmatic answers and prescriptive interpretations. One will not find such things here. However, this might precisely be the point. Critchley sets us, as readers of great literature or citizens of the modern Polis (a distinction that I'd like to think is superficial) to the task of reinterpreting the classics, of, as Critchley puts it, "giving our blood to the ancients," of pouring our own experiences into them in order to see what might return.⁸ Upon completion of the text, we are dropped back into the linguistic and communicative swamp that is the context of modern life. Where we turn next depends on our ability to heed the lessons of those before us that we may better understand the voices emerging around us.

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⁸ *Ibidem*, 3.