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## Our confrontation with tragedy\*



**Simon Critchley**

*Professor of Philosophy at The European Graduate School/ EGS, Switzerland,*

*Email: [critchls@newschool.edu](mailto:critchls@newschool.edu)*

### **Abstract**

This article attempts to illustrate our confrontation with tragedy in contemporary situation, That is why we are discussing this here in seven issues (Feeding the Ancients with Our Own Blood/ Philosophy's Tragedy and the Dangerous Perhaps/Knowing and Not Knowing: How Oedipus Brings Down Fate/ Rage, Grief, and War/ Gorgias: Tragedy Is a Deception That Leaves the Deceived Wiser/Than the Nondeceived/Justice as Conflict (for Polytheism)/Tragedy as a Dialectical Mode of Experience). Finally, this article seeks to show that tragedy is a way of experience in our life today.

**Key words:** tragedy, philosophy, Greek.

*He was neither profound of thought, nor anything.  
Just an ordinary, silly man.  
He assumed a Greek name, he dressed like a Greek,  
Taught himself to behave—more or less—like a Greek;  
And trembled in his soul lest  
He mar the tolerable impression  
By speaking Greek with dreadful barbarisms,  
And have the Alexandrians poke fun at him,  
As is their habit—awful people.  
And for this reason, he confined himself to a few words,  
Fearfully paying attention to the declensions and the  
accent;  
And he got bored, no end, having  
So many things to say piled up inside him.*

—C. P. Cavafy,  
*The Potentate from Western Libya*

### **1. Feeding the Ancients with Our Own Blood**

Tragedy shows what is perishable, what is fragile, and what is slow moving about us. In a world defined by relentless speed and the unending acceleration of information flows that cultivate amnesia and an endless thirst for the short-term future allegedly guaranteed through worship of the new prosthetic gods of technology, tragedy is a way of applying the emergency brake.

Tragedy slows things down by confronting us with what we do not know about ourselves: an unknown force that unleashes violent effects on us on a daily, indeed often minute-by-minute basis. Such is the sometimes terrifying resonance of the past that we might seek to disavow but that will have its victory in the end, if only in the form of our mortality. We might think we are through with the past, but the past isn't through with us. Through its sudden reversals of fortune and rageful recognition of the truth of our origins, tragedy permits us to come face-to-face with what we do *not* know about ourselves but what makes those selves the things they are. Tragedy provokes what snags in our being, the snares and booby traps of the past that we blindly trip over in our relentless, stumbling, forward movement. This is what the ancients called "fate," and it requires our complicity in order to come down on us.

Yet, the fruit of a consideration of tragedy is not a sense of life's hopelessness or moral resignation, as Schopenhauer thought, but—I think—a deepened sense of the self in its utter dependency on others. It is a question of the self's vulnerable exposure to apparently familiar and familial patterns of kinship (although it sometimes turns out that, like Oedipus, you don't know who your parents are, but if you do know who your parents are, you still don't know *who* they are). One of the most salient but enigmatic features of Greek tragedy is its constant negotiation with the other, especially the enemy other, the foreign other, the "barbaric" other. The oldest extant piece of theater that we possess, Aeschylus's *The Persians*, from 472 BCE, depicts the defeated enemy not with triumph but with sympathy and with an anticipation of the possible humiliation that might face the Athenians should they repeat the *hybris* of the

Persians by invading Greece and desecrating the altars of the enemy's gods. Sadly, the Athenians did not heed Aeschylus' lesson, and the brief period of Athenian imperial hegemony in the central decades of the fifth century BCE ended in the humiliating defeat of the Peloponnesian Wars. There is perhaps a moral to be drawn here for our time and place, where the empire knows its heyday is over and we live in a constant state of war. The first rule of war is sympathy with the enemy. This is something that can be seen in the tragedies of Euripides, especially those that deal with the bloody end of the Trojan War, in plays like *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*.

As Aristotle put it perspicuously and somewhat blithely nearly a century after the zenith of Greek drama in the second half of the fifth century BCE, tragedy is the imitation of action, *mimesis praxeos*. But what exactly is meant by action? It is far from clear. In play after play of the three great tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides), what we see are characters who are utterly disoriented by the situation in which they find themselves. They do not know *how* to act. We find human beings somehow compelled to follow a path of suffering that allows them to raise questions that admit of no easy answer: What will happen to me? How can I choose the right path of action? The overwhelming experience of tragedy is a *disorientation* expressed in one bewildered and frequently repeated question: *What shall I do?*

Tragedy is not about the metaphysical cultivation of the *bios theoretikos*, the contemplative life that is the supposed fruit of philosophy in Aristotle's *Ethics*, or in Epicurus and the other Hellenistic schools. Nor is it about the cultivation of the life of the gods or divine life, *ho bios theois*, which is also the constant promise of philosophy from Plato onward, as we will see. No, tragedy is thinking *in* action, thinking *upon* action, *for the sake of* action, where the action takes place offstage and is often described to us indirectly through the character of a messenger. But this thinking takes the form of a radical questioning: How do I act? What shall I do? If tragedy is *mimesis praxeos*, then it is action that is called into question through tragedy, divided and sliced open. What the experience of tragedy invites is neither the blind impulsiveness of action, nor some retreat into a solitary life of contemplation, but the *difficulty* and *uncertainty* of action in a world defined by ambiguity, where right always seems to be on both sides. Hegel is right to insist that tragedy is the collision between opposed yet mutually justified claims to what is right. But if both sides are right, then what on earth do we do?

Part of the joy of wandering into the ancient world and dealing with seemingly remote phenomena like Attic tragedy (and I will use the adjectives Attic, Athenian, and Greek interchangeably to name the same phenomenon) is how little we know and how little we will ever know. Of the many things we *don't* know about ancient tragedy, the most important and most enigmatic is some

sense of what the spectator was expected to take away from these spectacles. The ancient Greek word for "spectator" was *theoros*, from which we get the word *theoria*, theory. *Theoria* is linked to the verb "to see," *theorein*, which takes place in a theater, a *theatron*, to name the act of spectating. If tragedy is the imitation of action, of *praxis*, although the nature of action remains deeply

enigmatic, then *praxis* is something seen from a theoretical perspective. Or, better said perhaps, the question of theory and practice, or the *gap* between theory and practice, first opens *in* theater and *as* theater. Theater is always theoretical, and theory is a theater, where we are spectators on a drama that unfolds: *our* drama. In theater, human action, human *praxis*, is called into question theoretically. Otherwise said, *praxis* is internally divided or questioned by *theoria* in the space of the theater, where the empty space of the theater is a way of calling into question the spaces we inhabit and subverting the divisions that constitute social and political space.

Now, aside from a fragment by the great Sophist Gorgias that we will look at in a little while—and Gorgias is one of the heroes of this book—and Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, where he stages a debate between Euripides and Aeschylus as to who is the best tragedian that I will discuss and it is the only spectator reports on tragedy that we possess come from Plato and Aristotle, who had various axes to grind. In the case of Plato, it is a little like basing your view of the Vikings on the reports of the Christian monks whose monasteries they ransacked. Aristotle appears more benevolent, but appearances can be deceptive. Despite some wonderful and important historical, philological, and archeological work, we have little idea how tragedy was *seen* and what the audience *thought*. We have no online reviews, no blogs, and no tweets. Nor do we even know for sure who attended the plays. For example, we cannot be certain whether any women attended the festivals where the tragedies were performed with such an abundance of female characters (Goldhill 1997: 62-66). But, in my view, far from being a vice, this epistemic deficit, this lack of knowledge is, I think, a virtue. Tragedy, for me, is the life of skepticism, where the latter is the index for a certain moral orientation in the world, an orientation that seems to emerge from the *disorientation* of not knowing what to do.

In a lecture delivered in Oxford in 1908, Wilamowitz—Nietzsche's nemesis, who savaged some of the questionable philological claims of *The Birth of Tragedy*—said,

The tradition yields us only ruins. The more closely we test and examine them, the more clearly we see how ruinous they are; and out of the ruins no whole can be built. The tradition is dead; our task is to revivify life that has passed away. We know that ghosts cannot speak until they have drunk blood; and the spirits which we evoke demand the blood of our hearts. We give it to them gladly (Moellendorff 1908: 25).

Of course, the irony here is that Nietzsche says the same thing, namely that it is our blood that makes the ancients speak to us. Without wanting to piggyback on the dizzying recent success of vampire fiction, the latter's portion of truth is that the ancients need a little of our true blood in order to speak to us.

When revived, we will notice that when the ancients speak, they do not merely tell us about themselves. They tell us about us. But who is that "us" that might still be claimed and compelled by these ancient texts, by these ruins? And here is both the beauty and strangeness of this thought: This "us" is not necessarily existent.

It is us, but in some new way, some alien manner. It is us, but not as we have seen ourselves before, turned inside out and upside down.

Another way of putting this is to say that the “we” that we find in tragedy is *invitational* (I borrow this thought from Bernard Williams’s *Shame and Necessity*), an invitation to visit another sense of who we are and who we might become. The idea of invitation has been interestingly developed by Raymond Geuss in the eponymous, final chapter of his *A World without Why* as a kind of procedure, if not a method. For Geuss, one is invited to look at two or more things placed in conjunction without necessarily asking the question why this is the case or seeking for a cause. A pile of dead bodies in a ditch in Iraq is placed alongside the prime minister of the United Kingdom speaking oleaginously in the House of Commons (Geuss 2014: 234). Here, the idea of invitation can produce an unexpected juxtaposition or disjunction that provokes thinking. In my view, tragedy invites its audience to look at such disjunctions between two or more claims to truth, justice, or whatever without immediately seeking a unifying ground or reconciling the phenomena into a higher unity.

My concern in thinking about tragedy and what I will call “tragedy’s philosophy” is to extend an invitation to you to become part of a “we,” the “we” that is summoned and called into question by ancient tragedy. More simply stated, every generation has to reinvent the classics. I think it is the responsibility of every generation to engage in this reinvention. And it is the very opposite of any and all kinds of cultural conservatism. If we don’t accept this invitation, then we risk becoming even more stupefied by the present and endless onrush of the future. The nice thing is that stupefaction can be really easily avoided by nothing more difficult than reading, and most of the plays are not even that long, which is one reason why I like reading plays. Indeed, although this might sound pompous, I see this as the responsibility of each generation: to pass on something of the deep and unknown past in a way that will speak to the present and arrest us momentarily from the irresistible pull of the future. If the disavowal of the past through the endless production of the new is the very formula for ideology in our societies, then tragedy provides enduring resources for a critique of that ideology that might at least allow for the imagination of a different range of human possibilities. First, however, we need to reach for the emergency brake: STOP!

## **2. Philosophy’s Tragedy and the Dangerous Perhaps**

“Tragedy’s philosophy” is opposed to “philosophy’s tragedy.” The thought here is that philosophy as a discursive invention, beginning with the *Republic*, but extending along the millennia into the present, is premised upon the exclusion of tragedy and the exclusion of a range of experiences that we can call tragic, particularly the emotion of grief and the phenomenon of lamentation, which is at the center of so many tragedies, from Aeschylus’s *The Persians* onward. I want to suggest that this exclusion of tragedy is, itself, tragic, and this is arguably philosophy’s tragedy. I want to defend tragedy against philosophy, or, perhaps better said, that tragedy articulates a philosophical view that challenges the authority of philosophy by giving voice to what is contradictory about us, what is constricted about us, what is precarious about us, and what is



limited about us. Philosophy, once again beginning in Plato, appears to be committed to the idea and ideal of a noncontradictory psychic life. Tragedy does not share this commitment. And nor do I. Tragedy is about what Anne Carson calls “that hot bacon smell of pure contradiction” (Carson 2001:134). One of the axes I will be grinding in this book is a critique of the very idea of moral psychology and the attempted *moralization* of the psyche that is at work in philosophy and in much else besides, especially Christianity.

Tragedy gives voice to what suffers in us and in others, and how we might become cognizant of that suffering, and work with that suffering, where suffering is that pathos that we undergo, where tragic passion is both something undergone and partially overtaken in action (I want to emphasize the word “*partially*”—agency in tragedy is ever partial). In reading tragedy, we might learn to appreciate both the precariousness of existence and what Judith Butler would call its “grievability” (Butler 2009). At the source of tragedy is grief and the extreme passions of mourning and lamentation. There are at least thirteen nouns in Attic Greek for words describing grief, lamentation, and mourning. In fact, there are probably many more. Our lack of vocabulary when it comes to the phenomenon of death speaks volumes about who *we* are and what is so impoverished about us.

Now, it is precisely this grief and lamentation that Socrates wants to exclude from the education and life of the philosopher and, most importantly, from the philosophically well-ordered city, regime, or *politeia* described in Plato’s *Republic*, which is at once psychic and political or is based on the intended analogy of the psychic and the political: the city and the soul are mirrors of each other. Philosophy is, on this view, a regime that imagines an intense regulation of affect, in particular the affect of grief in the construction of the soul. My larger story, which I will only hint at here but which is developed in detail in Part 4, tracks the exclusion of the tragic poets in Plato in Books II, III, and X of the *Republic* and questions the metaphysical and moral motivation for that exclusion. The mannered ferocity of Plato’s denunciation of tragedy seems to conceal a deeper worry about the nature of the philosophical perspective that tragedy seems to embody and its relation to what is, all too simplistically, called “sophistry.” There is much to say here: the supposed stability of the distinction between philosophy and sophistry is one of the things I want to press at in order to recover the persuasive force and power of a certain sophistry against the assertions of Socrates and against the reassertion of Platonism that one finds in contemporary philosophers like Alain Badiou. To put it crudely, tragedy’s philosophy is sophistry.

My general question could be stated in the following way: What if we took seriously the form of thinking that we find in tragedy, and the experience of partial agency, limited autonomy, deep traumatic affect, agonistic conflict, gender confusion, political complexity, and moral ambiguity that it presents? How that change the way we think might and the way we think about thinking? Might that be tragedy’s philosophy as an alternative to philosophy’s tragedy? Might that be what Nietzsche meant when he described himself as the first “tragic philosopher” and called for “philosophers of the dangerous perhaps”? (Nietzsche 1966:11). To put it a little obtusely, we might say that Nietzsche

reads tragedy in order to defend a form of philosophy that is destroyed by philosophy. I want to join Nietzsche in this defense of a tragic philosophy.

### **3. Knowing and Not Knowing: How Oedipus Brings Down Fate**

As a first step, we might consider the most famous of the Athenian tragedies, the one that has been, since the time of Aristotle's *Poetics*, held up as the highest exemplar of tragedy: *Oedipus the King* (*Oidipous Tyrannos*—*Oedipus the Tyrant*). In this infernal, unstoppable, machine of a play, where each line, each word, bristles and bubbles with painful irony and ambiguity, the king is exposed as a tyrant and deposed as a monster and a pollution by the very city that made him king in the first place. But let's back up for a moment and begin at the beginning.

We usually think of tragedy as a misfortune that simply befalls a person (an accident, a fatal disease) or a polity (a natural disaster, like a tsunami, or a terrorist attack like 9/11) and that is outside their control. But if "tragedy" is understood as misfortune, then this is a significant misunderstanding of tragedy. What the thirty-one extant Greek tragedies enact over and over again is not a misfortune that is outside our control. Rather, they show the way in which we collude, seemingly unknowingly, with the calamity that befalls us.

Tragedy requires some degree of complicity on our part in the disaster that destroys us. It is not simply a question of the malevolent activity of fate, a dark prophecy that flows from the inscrutable but often questionable will of the gods. Tragedy requires our collusion with that fate. In other words, it requires no small measure of freedom. It is in this way that we can understand the tragedy of Oedipus. With merciless irony (the first two syllables of the name Oedipus, "swollen-foot," also mean "I know," *oída*), we watch someone move from a position of seeming knowledge—"I, Oedipus, whom all men call great. I solve riddles; now, Citizens, what seems to be the problem?" (I paraphrase)—to a deeper truth that it would appear that Oedipus knew nothing about: he is a parricide and a perpetrator of incest. On this reading, which Aristotle endorses, the tragedy of Oedipus consists in the recognition that allows him to pass from ignorance to knowledge.

But things are more complex than that as there's a backstory that needs to be recalled. Oedipus turned up in Thebes and solved the Sphinx's riddle after refusing to return to what he believed was his native Corinth because he had just been told the prophecy about himself by the oracle at Pytho, namely that he would kill his father and have sex with his mother.

Oedipus *knew* his curse. And, of course, it is on the way back from the oracle that he meets an older man who actually looks a lot like him, as Jocasta inadvertently and almost comically admits later in the play (line 742), who refuses to give way at a crossroads and whom he kills in a fine example of ancient road rage. One might have thought that, given the awful news from the oracle, and given his uncertainty about the identity of his father (Oedipus is called a bastard by a drunk at a banquet in Corinth, which is what first infects his mind with doubt), he might have exercised caution before deciding to kill an older man who seems to have resembled him.

One lesson of tragedy, then, is that we conspire with our fate. That is, fate requires our freedom in order to bring our destiny down upon us. The core contradiction of tragedy is that *we both know and we don't know at one and the same time and are destroyed in the process*.

Such is the complex function of *prophecy* in tragedy. In the tragedy of Oedipus, we watch someone who believes they possess an unencumbered sense of freedom become undone and destroyed by the force of fate. What is so delicate in Oedipus's experience is that his being is not simply causally determined by fate, by necessity. No, fate requires Oedipus's partially conscious complicity in order to bring about its truth. Characters in tragedy are not robots or preprogrammed puppets. In its movement from a delusional self-knowledge and the fantasy of an unencumbered freedom to an experience of an insight into truth that costs us our eyes, tragedy gives voice to an experience of agency that is partial and very often painful. It shows the limits of our attempted self-sufficiency and what we might think of as our autonomy. It shows our heteronomy, our profound dependency. Tragedy gives voice to the complex relations between freedom and necessity that define our being. Our freedom is constantly compromised by that which catches us in the nets of the past, in the determination of our past and future being by fate. Tragedy enacts that which snags at our being and pulls us back to a past that we disavow in our constant thirst for the short-term future. Such is the weight of the past that entangles the tragic protagonist (and us) in its meshes. As Rita Felski says, "The weight of what has gone before bears down ineluctably on what is yet to come." (Felski 2008:2). To disavow the past is to be destroyed by it—such is tragedy's instruction.

In tragedy, time is out of joint and the linear conception of time as a teleological flow from the past to the future is thrown into reverse. The past is not past, the future folds back upon itself, and the present is shot through with fluxions of past and future that destabilize it. Time flexes and twists in tragedy. Its script is you and me, as David Bowie said. Tragedy is the art form of between times, usually between an old world that is passing away and a new world that is coming into being. This is true of Greek tragedy, of Elizabethan tragedy, and perhaps the tragedy of our times. In tragedy, time is always out of joint. Its conjunction is disjunction.

Tragedy has a kind of boomerang structure where the action that we throw out into the world returns to us with a potentially fatal velocity. Oedipus, the solver of riddles, becomes the riddle himself. Sophocles' play shows him engaged in a relentless inquiry into the pollution that is destroying the political order, poisoning the wells, and producing infant mortality. But he is that pollution.

The deeper truth is that Oedipus knows something of this from the get-go, but he refuses to see and hear what is said to him. Very early in the play, blind Tiresias tells him to his face that he is the perpetrator of the pollution that he seeks to eradicate. But Oedipus just doesn't hear Tiresias. This is one way of interpreting the word "tyrant" in Sophocles' original Greek title: *Oidipous Tyrannos*. The tyrant doesn't *hear* what is said to him and doesn't see what is in front of his eyes.



But we are tyrants too. We look, but we see nothing. Someone speaks to us, but we hear nothing. And we go on in our endlessly narcissistic self-justification, adding Facebook updates and posting on Instagram. Tragedy is about many things, but it is centrally concerned with the conditions for actually seeing and actually hearing. In making us blind, we might finally achieve insight, unblock our ears, and stop the droning surf of the endless song of ourselves: me, me, me, this is all for me (really?).

There is a wonderful Greek expression recalled by Anne Carson, “Shame lies on the eyelids” (Euripides 2006: 311). The point is that the tyrant (and we could list many recent examples) experiences no shame. But we also have no shame. We are also little, shameless tyrants, especially when it comes to our relations to those we think of as our parents and our children. I think of Walter White from *Breaking Bad*, who insisted until almost the end of the final episode of that long show that he did everything, *everything*, for his family and not for himself. This is tyranny and this is perversion. Finally, his wife gets him to admit that he also became the meth king of New Mexico, the Heisenberg of the southwestern United States, because he enjoyed it. That’s a start. At least he is acknowledging a desire, a perverse desire.

Greek tragedy provides lessons in shame. When we learn that lesson and finally achieve some insight, as Oedipus does, then it might cost us our sight and we might pluck out our eyes—for shame. The political world is stuffed overfull with sham shame, ham humility, and carefully staged tearful apologies: I’m so sorry; I’m so, so sorry. But true shame is something else.

#### **4. Rage, Grief, and War**

Anne Carson, in *Grief Lessons*—her extraordinarily bold translations of Euripides—writes, “Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.” (Carson 2006: 7) This is absolutely right. Antigone rages because she is full of grief for her brother Polynices, who is refused burial rites by the leader of the city, Creon. Clytemnestra rages at Agamemnon because of her grief for her daughter Iphigenia, slaughtered like a young foal in order to ensure favorable winds in the sails of the Greek ships on their way to Troy. Hecuba rages at the murder of her daughter Polyxena, only to discover that all her other children have been killed as well. Hecuba’s grief seems to know no bounds. In the afterlife, she is told, she will be turned into a dog<sup>1</sup>.

We might add a further question to Carson’s list: If tragedy is the rage that follows from grief, then why is one full of grief? Because we are full of war and people have been killed. Tragedy might be defined as a grief-stricken rage that flows from war. We live in a world whose frame is war and where justice seems to be endlessly divided between claim and counterclaim, right and left, conservative and progressive, believer and nonbeliever, freedom fighter and terrorist, or whatever. Each side believes unswervingly in the rightness of its position and the wrongness or, as is usually said, *evil* of the enemy. Such a belief legitimates violence, a destructive violence that unleashes counterviolence in return. We seem trapped in a cycle of bloody revenge and locked into vicious circles of grief and rage caused by war.

Such is what often seems to pass for international politics in our world. This is where, I think, a reflection on Greek tragedy might at the very least illuminate our current predicament and tell us something about our present.

The history of Greek tragedy is the history of war, from the war with the Persians in the early fifth century BCE to the Peloponnesian Wars that rumbled on until that century's end; from the emergence of Athenian imperial hegemony to its dissolution and humiliation at the hands of Sparta. In 472 BCE, Aeschylus's *The Persians* deals with the aftermath of the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. It was therefore a good deal closer to the Athenians than 9/11, say, is to us. More than half of our surviving tragedies were composed after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian Wars in 431 BCE. *Oedipus the King* was first performed in 429 BCE, two years after the beginning of the war, during a time of plague that is estimated to have killed one-quarter of the Athenian population. The plague that established the entire environment of Sophocles' play is not some idle musing. It was very real indeed. It killed Pericles, the leader of Athens, in the autumn of that very same year, 429 BCE. The frame of tragedy is war and its devastating effects on human life.

Greek tragedy, particularly with its obsessive focus on the aftermath of the Trojan War, especially in the delightful excessiveness of Euripides, is largely *about* combat veterans. But it was also performed *by* combat veterans. Actors were not flimsy thespians who had majored in performance studies with an abstract interest in social engagement, but soldiers who had seen combat. Tragedy was played before an audience that either participated directly in war or that was indirectly implicated in war. All were traumatized by it and everyone felt its effects. War was the life of the city and its pride, as Pericles argued. But war was also the city's fall and undoing.

Yet, Greek tragedy is a war story without a John Wayne figure, without a swaggering individualist who is the sole source of good in a world gone bad. On the contrary, in Greek tragedy, the hero is not the solution to the problem, but the problem itself. The hero is the source of the plague that is killing the city. This is one reason why Sophocles' tragedy is called *Oedipus Tyrannos*. The king is a tyrant who is polluting the city, and the only resolution to the drama is Oedipus's expulsion and exile. This is the great virtue—the realism—of ancient tragedy, as opposed to the idealized violence, empty empathy, and hollow sentimentality of many contemporary war fictions. If tragedy is a drama performed by war veterans before an audience of veterans, then it pictures a world without heroes and without tyrannical leaders who delude and goad the people into making war.

How might we respond to the contemporary situation of war? It might seem that the easiest and noblest thing to do is to speak of peace. Yet, as Raymond Williams says in his still hugely relevant book from 1966, *Modern Tragedy*, "To say peace when there is no peace" is to say nothing (Williams 1966: 105). To which the obvious response is: *say war*. But that would be peremptory. The danger of easy pacifism is that it is inert and self-regarding. It is always too pleased with itself. But the alternative is not a justification of war. It is rather the attempt to understand the complex tragic dialectics of political situations, particularly apparently revolutionary ones.

Williams goes on to claim, “We expect men brutally exploited and intolerably poor to rest and be patient in their misery, because if they act to end their condition it will involve the rest of us, and threatens our convenience or our lives” (Ibid). Often, we simply want violence and war to go away because it is an inconvenience to us and to our lovely lives. As such, we do not only fail to see our implication in such violence and war, we completely disavow it.

The virtue of Greek tragedy is that it makes such disavowal more difficult by confronting us with a situation of grief-stricken rage and disorder. The virtue of seeing the bloody events of the contemporary world in a tragic light is that it exposes us to a disorder that is not just *their* disorder. It is ours too. *Our* war, our rage, our (disavowed) grief. To see political events tragically is always to accept our complicity in the disaster that is unfolding. We are the audience in the theater of war, and we too are responsible. As such, tragedy can enable us to begin to comprehend a situation of war, violence, and grief, without simply condemning it or mouthing empty words of peace. More difficult still is imagining the resolution of such a situation, but a tragic worldview has to be the starting point for any such aspiration.

### **5. Gorgias: Tragedy Is a Deception That Leaves the Deceived Wiser Than the Nondeceived**

This article has a motto from Gorgias, the Sicilian rhetorician who introduced much of the teaching of oratory to Athens in the latter half of the fifth century BCE, and who seems to have been directly influential even on the writing of tragedy, as in Helen’s amazing speech in her defense in Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. We possess an undated fragment preserved in Plutarch that gives us our earliest “theoretical” response to Attic tragedy, that is, some sense of what the *theoros*, the spectator, saw in the spectacle of tragedy. Gorgias writes,

Tragedy, by means of legends and emotions, creates a deception in which the deceiver is more honest than the nondeceiver, and the deceived is wiser than the non-deceived (Freeman 1983: 138).

The Greek word that is doing all the work in this passage is *apate*, which Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* tells me means cheating, trickery, fraud, guile, deceit, and cunning (Liddell & Scott 1996: 181). It also connotes a stratagem in war. Altogether, it’s a pretty bad thing.

But consider the logic of the fragment: tragedy is a deception or an act of fraud or trickery, in which the deceiver is more honest than the nondeceiver and the deceived is wiser than the nondeceived. What Gorgias seems to describe, perhaps even celebrate, is precisely that which Socrates sees as the great danger of tragedy. This is the danger of deception, the power of persuasion to induce the affective effects of imitation, of *mimesis*, which Socrates subjects to a corrosive metaphysical and moral critique in the Republic. The metaphysical critique concerns the nature of *mimesis* and its threefold removal from the world of forms. The moral critique concerns the allegedly pernicious effects of excessive emotions, like lamentation—in the case of tragedy—and laughter—in the case of comedy. This is how philosophy begins.

By contrast, Gorgias would appear to be suggesting that tragedy (and a fortiori all art) is the acquisition of wisdom through deception, through an emotionally psychotropic experience that generates a powerful emotion. As Stephen Halliwell points out in a fascinating paper on this topic, Gorgias's view would appear to be confirmed by a fragment from Timocles' lost play, *Women Celebrating the Dionysia* (which I would have loved to have seen!). Here tragedy is described as a *parapsyche*, an emotional consolation, cooling or coping with life's troubles, but also as a *psychagogia*, an enthralling persuasion that can also denote a conjuring of souls from the nether world (Halliwell 2005: 394-95).

In other words, the wisdom of tragedy flows not just from deception, but from a kind of necromancy, the conjuring of ghostly illusion. Thinking once again of our oldest extant play, *The Persians*, the drama ends with the conjuring of the ghost of Darius the Great, who admonishes his son, Xerxes, before warning the Greeks not to engage in *hybris*. Tragedy is full of ghosts, ancient and modern, and the line separating the living from the dead is continually blurred. This means that in tragedy *the dead don't stay dead and the living are not fully alive*. What tragedy renders unstable is the line that separates the living from the dead, enlivening the dead and deadening the living.

So, what kind of *parapsyche* does tragedy provide? Where is the cooling consolation in all this hauntology? We might say that tragedy consoles through an imaginative enthrallment with an almost trancelike, otherworldly state that is linked, for Timocles and Aristotle and us, to pleasure, *hedone*. As Horatio calls out to the Ghost early in *Hamlet*, "Stay, Illusion!" This, of course, raises the perplexing question as to the nature of tragic pleasure. What kind of hedonism is the pleasure we take in tragedy, which depicts not just suffering and death, but the ghostly porosity of the frontier separating the living from the dead? Is the greatest aesthetic pleasure the theatrically distanced experience of pain? And what exactly is the pleasure we take in spectacles of pain? I would like to let these questions resonate for us awkwardly, thinking of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Bataille's holy disgust, Herman Nitsche's blood orgies, the extremity of Sarah Kane's theater, and perhaps the movies of Lars von Trier.

What Plato sees as the great danger of tragedy is celebrated by Gorgias as revealing the power of persuasion and the affective effects of imitation. For Socrates, tragedy and the other mimetic arts can lead us to have sympathy for morally suspect characters. For Socrates, it is an awful danger, the danger of deception and fiction, the danger of a vicious ordering of political life on the basis of a lie (and, as usual, Socrates has a point). We should never forget that the festival of the Great Dionysia was first instituted around 532 BCE under the leadership—indeed the apparently benevolent tyranny—of Pisistratus and his growing political ambition. Also, according to Plutarch, the famous lawgiver Solon left one of the first dramatic representations in disgust because he saw, like Rousseau a couple of millennia later, that theater would lead to the degradation and sickness of the body politic—Socrates makes this point at the end of Book VIII of the *Republic*, as we will see below. There is an implicit connection between democracy and theater as public institutions in the city, conspiring with each other to lead to tyranny. This is why, for Plato, the tragic poets must be excluded. What obsesses Socrates in the *Republic* is the question

of tyranny and the link between democracy and theater, where *demokratia* is what Plato calls in the *Laws* a *theatrokratia* (701a), a theatrical regime of power, what we might call a society of the spectacle, that will always leave the door open to tyranny. This is why, for Plato, the only true antidote to *theatrokratia* is *philosophia*.<sup>2</sup>

The vast question that Gorgia's fragment raises is that of the necessity and indeed moral and political productivity of deception, of fiction, of fraud, of illusion. Does, as Nietzsche will suggest, our firstly Platonic and subsequently Christian will to truth blind us to the power of art in general and tragedy in particular? By contrast, can we assert with the young Nietzsche that it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world is truly justified? Might the wisdom of tragedy, a deception where the deceived is wiser than the nondeceived, begin to emancipate us from that Platonic and Christian moralization at the core of truth? Is deception both the undoing of truth and the truth of truth? Such are some of the questions at stake in the relation between philosophy and tragedy, in tragedy's philosophy as a riposte to philosophy's tragedy. As can perhaps be surmised, the stakes here are pretty high.

## **6. Justice as Conflict (for Polytheism)**

Let's think about Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, our one complete extant tragic trilogy, and a possibly unique example of one story being spread over three plays. What we witness in the bloodbath of the *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers* (*Choephoroi*) is the history of violence upon which the apparently pacific political order rests. We see characters completely caught up in cycles of revenge where there is seemingly no end to the violence and no end to its dogmatic justification by its perpetrators. "Behold, a masterpiece of justice" (*Agamemnon*, lines 1403–05) declares Clytemnestra as she exhibits in a macabre tableau the murdered corpses of her husband, Agamemnon, and his concubine, Cassandra. Orestes claims justice as he slaughters his mother, Clytemnestra, and the chorus comments, "Justice turns the wheel" (*Libation Bearers*, line 315). If justice is on both sides, then what exactly is justice? As Aeschylus says in *Prometheus Bound*, "The wheel turns" (line 515).

What the goddess Athena attempts in the final play in the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, is to use reasoning and persuasion (*peitbo*) in order to arrest the cycle of violence and find some way of stopping the bloodshed and finding a settlement. The first thing one notices is that in tragedy *justice is conflict*. It is a fight between opposed parties who are prepared to act violently in its name. The second thing one notices is that, as a counterbalance to violence, there is the activity of what we might call, following Stuart Hampshire, "adversary reasoning" or "adversarial reasoning" in tragedy, where we think from the adversary's position and use reason in order to *audi alteram partem*, to hear the other side (Hampshire 1999: 21-23). In tragedy, this adversarial reasoning takes place very often either in a law court, as is the case in the *Eumenides*, or it is staged as a legal dispute, as in the debate between Hecuba and Helen in *The Trojan Women*. Very often, at the core of tragedy is the law, and we should not forget that the law court is also a theater and remains such to this day.



If one were optimistically inclined, one might see tragedy as providing an object lesson in resolving conflicts reasonably in a world of overwhelming enmity. I am unsure whether I am so optimistic, because what we also see in tragedy is the weakness of rational argumentation in the presence of violence (in Greek, *Bia*, who is actually a mute dramatic presence onstage in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*) and the persistence of forms of arbitrary decision making. In *The Trojan Women*, Menelaus is the judge between Hecuba and Helen, but although he is persuaded by the strength of Hecuba's arguments, he still refuses to put Helen to death for her betrayal and for causing the Trojan War. The force of the stronger argument is sometimes ignored and due process replaced by an arbitrary decision.

Yet, what is common to the optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of the use of reason (given that the opposition between optimism and pessimism is questionable anyhow) in tragedy is the following: any strong monolithic conception of reason, capital R, must be abandoned and we must accept that reasoning is always a two-sided process of fragile negotiation in a world of constitutive and irreducible violence. This also means accepting that reason is essential, but essentially limited in its power, that it requires the use of rhetoric and persuasion, and that it can surely fail. What kind of reasonable settlement can enforce a bond in a conflict where there are passionate but utterly opposed claims to justice on both sides? Such is one of the questions that tragedy seeks to explore and is arguably a description of the world that we inhabit and have always inhabited.

What is preferable about the world of Greek tragedy is that it is a *polytheistic* world with a diversity of conflicting and deeply flawed gods and rival conceptions of the good. It is my conviction, following Hampshire, that the lesson of the adversarial reasoning of tragedy is that it is prudent to abandon *any* notion of monotheism, whether it is either of the three Abrahamic monotheisms, a Platonic monotheism rooted in the metaphysical primacy of the Good, or indeed the secular monotheism of liberal democracy and human rights that still circles around a weak, deistic conception of God. The motto on the back of the dollar bill might be slightly improved if it read *In Gods we trust (and sometimes distrust)*. Admittedly, this is not very catchy.

Tragedy's philosophy begins from the irreducible *facticity* of violence and the fragile necessity of reasoning in a world of conflictual force, a polytheistic world that continues to think of itself as monotheistic. If the acceptance of tragedy's philosophy entails the abandonment of modern theological shibboleths like faith in progress, which is underpinned by a linear conception of time and history that tragedy twists out of joint, then it might also possess the virtue of a modest political realism that has to begin where philosophy should begin, in my view, with disappointment. But although philosophy might begin in disappointment, it does not end there. On the contrary, disappointment is the graveyard of those philosophies and worldviews that insist manically upon affirmation, vitality, wonder, and creation.

## 7. Tragedy as a Dialectical Mode of Experience

Is tragedy something that is available to us in the contemporary world? Far from claiming, with someone like George Steiner, that tragedy is dead, I would argue, with Raymond Williams, that it offers the most powerful template for diagnosing the seemingly intractable conflicts that define the present and finding reflective resources for thinking beyond them (Steiner 1996). It is in this spirit, I think, that we could and should approach the struggles of our time. A tragic sensibility obliges us to see our implication within the conflicts of the present and our responsibility for them. If the present is defined by disaster, then tragedy shows us our complicity with it.

The question of tragedy should not be confined to its existence (or nonexistence) as a dramatic genre that might or might not exist in the theater. Rather it is a *mode of experience* that can be found well outside the theater, in film, in TV, in politics, and—most powerfully perhaps—in our domestic lives, our familial relations and kinship structures. Furthermore, tragedy is a *dialectical mode of experience*. Specifically, it is a mode of reversal, inversion, and negation where we are implicated at each step. Tragedy is an object lesson in *dialectical* thinking. It is a staging of dialectics, which is why Hegel, following on from his friend Hölderlin, had such a profound grasp of tragedy, even if the former sometimes confined it within the horizon of reconciliation on the one hand, and dissolution on the other. Perhaps tragedy is neither and both. What is perhaps new in my thinking with its focus on tragedy's philosophy is this dialectical turn. In opposition to forms of vapidly hopeful idealism that leads only to despair, I see tragedy's philosophy as offering a bracing, skeptical realism that heavily qualifies what we think of as hope, but perhaps also deepens it into a form of courage.

### Notes

1. For a contemporary defense of the ancient Greeks that begins from the theme of rage, see Emily Katz Anhalt, *Enraged: Why Violent Times Need Ancient Greek Myths* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). Katz's final chapter is a discussion of Euripides' Hecuba, pp.149–83
2. And see Plato, *Republic* 595b, "For you will not betray me to the tragic poets and all other imitators (*mimetikous*)—that kind of art seems to be a corruption of the mind of all listeners who do not possess, as an antidote (*pharmakon*), a knowledge of its real nature (*τὸ εἰδέναι αὐτὰ ὅσα τοῦ γένους ὄντα*)."

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