Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us

Simon Critchley

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD

www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States of America in 2019 by
Pantheon Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 147 3
eISBN 978 1 78283 490 8

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

Contents

PART IV PLATO

PART V ARISTOTLE

PART I

Introduction

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 presence 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 theatre 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's 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 theatre, 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* theatre and *as* theatre.

Theatre is always theoretical, and theory is a theatre, where we are spectators on a drama that unfolds: *our* drama. In theatre, human action, human *praxis,* is called into question theoretically. Otherwise said, *praxis* is internally divided or questioned by *theoria* in the space of the theatre, where the empty space of the theatre 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 in Part 5, 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.[1] 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. I hope to make good on this thought as we move through the following chapters.

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.[2]

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*, an invitation to visit another sense of who we are and who we might become. I borrow this thought from Bernard Williams's *Shame and Necessity,* to which I will return in the following chapter. 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.[3] 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, to propose 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."[1] 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."[2] 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 might that change the way we think 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"?[3] 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.