

**Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard, eds.** *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*. Oxford University Press 2015. 392 pp. \$125.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198727798).

What does tragedy mean to us moderns? Billings and Leonard's edited volume, *Tragedy and the Idea of Modernity*, is motivated by this question. While the reader will find no definitive answer, the book's value lies in how it demonstrates tragedy's place in defining our own age. The focus is specifically on Greek tragedy, and the contributions push and pull in different directions as they grapple with its bearing on the modern philosophical tradition. Most discussions concern German Idealism, but some consider the writings of Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, and others. Together they show that Greek tragedy weighs heavily on the very foundations of philosophical thought, affecting discussions on metaphysics, ethics, politics, and religion, amongst other topics. The meaning of (Greek) tragedy for us moderns, then, is at the heart of our philosophy, and the book demonstrates that our relation to it can tell us something about ourselves and our own age.

Under this approach the volume simultaneously draws us close to and separates us from Antiquity; it recognizes our cultural and intellectual debt to Ancient Greece, but also the distance between our way(s) of being and thinking and theirs. This juxtaposition proves to be the point on which the different ideas of modernity pivot, because it exposes the problem of understanding where, when, and how modernity arose as something different to Antiquity. It might be, by way of example, with the advent of Platonism, as the chapters on Heidegger and Williams argue, or with the Counter-Reformation, as one chapter on Benjamin discusses. Some contributions show that tragedy is used to construct an idea of modernity, as with Heidegger and Hegel; others show that the question of the possibility of tragedy (or, alternatively, what tragedy can be) in an idea of modernity is important for understanding further what it is.

One can perhaps tell at this point that the volume encompasses a great range of diverging and opposed arguments, which makes it difficult to discern a common thread beyond the subject of modernity and tragedy. In this respect the editors' introduction is an important part of the book in its own right, because it addresses in general terms what the contributions discuss under particular horizons. The introduction consolidates them, to some degree, under a general movement in the modern philosophical tradition that, as the editors argue (1-3), conjoins tragedy with the issue of identity. Such a determination fits some contributions better than others, but it is broad enough to include them all. While it can be argued that ancient philosophy, too, compounded identity with tragedy, the reader may well desire that the editors had untangled from the contributions a deeper pattern of how tragedy has fuelled conceptions of modernity- such as whether modernity is constructed out of a consideration on tragedy, or whether tragedy affects an idea of modernity. The volume's three divisions (Tragic Poetics; Tragic Cultures; Tragic Canons) arise out of the above determination and are orientated to exposing particular aesthetics and cultural facets of it. However, the contributions under each heading have little in common with each other, and instead one finds that those which draw on common philosophical ground, often in different divisions, complement and expand on each other. The volume contains pathways for understanding modernity that have yet to be mapped onto any coherent plan for understanding tragedy's complex place in the philosophical tradition.

A consequence of the both breadth and depth of the volume's contributions is that it is impossible to offer here assessments of all fifteen chapters. Instead, I have chosen several that, I believe, provide an indication of the general ethos of the book and of the variance between its chapters. Limiting myself to these particular contributions is not, I must stress, to favour them over others; the

reader will certainly find that each chapter has something of value to say on the relationship between Greek tragedy and modernity.

In 'The Aesthetic of Tragedy: Romantic Perspectives,' Christopher Menke comes to show how the concept of tragic irony arose. It is used as a tool to facilitate the Romantic notion of aesthetic autonomy (the transformation of an object into a work of art) with the form of tragedy (defined as art in itself through its own content); the irony, centering on the tragedy's language, is that both the tragedian and character's voice are heard in the same speech. The dichotomy of knowledge and ignorance in the one instance provides the aesthetic transformation the Romantics required of tragedy. Menke goes on to show how the formal structure of tragedy is repeated in its own aesthetic presentation (52), and then questions the very concept of tragic irony in respect of meta-theatre. An enlightening study on what has been considered a core concept of tragedy, it is particularly relevant for classical philologists explicating the origin of tragic irony and what it means for our understanding of what tragedy is.

Samuel Weber's study on Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* works to elucidate its argument that tragedy cannot exist today. Benjamin's is an historicist approach, arguing that Greek tragedy, the only true tragedy, was a unique historical moment in which the hero, through silence, broke with the traditions and institutions of myth. The *Trauerspiel*, by contrast, is shown to perpetuate guilt which links it to ancient myth. This is because it forms part of the counter-reformation's loss of the catholic soteriological narrative. Weber shows that Benjamin understands modernity as a continuation of that loss and so a preoccupation with the creation myth from which it never breaks (102). In this way, authentic tragedy, with its necessary silence of resistance, is limited to Greek tragedy and has not occurred in modernity.

Terry Pinkard analyses Hegel's theory of tragedy in relation to the order of the world in Greek ethical thinking. He questions whether tragedy is possible in modernity, because Greek ethical life, according to Hegel, was framed by a belief that the world was self-harmonising. The tragic-collision, as Bradley termed it, is that self-righting of world-order. It is in this particular world-view that Greek tragedy owes its form (153). Modern tragedy is differentiated from Greek tragedy on the point of ethical outlook where our tragic heroes, as Pinkard shows in Hegel's writings, must keep the faith *against* the onslaught of the world. It is an understanding of tragedy that is tied to the ethics of a culture.

Katie Fleming considers Heidegger's use of the Greeks in constructing his idea of modernity. Drawing mainly on his *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, she attempts to show that Heidegger sought to return to the Greeks in order to think an authentic ethics and politics in modernity. The chapter is a useful commentary on the *Einführung*, but one might feel that the equation of 'Greek' with authenticity (*cf.* 181; 195) does not do full justice to Heidegger's perception of the relation between modernity and the Greeks. Heidegger wanted modern Germans to think in a manner *more* Greek than the Greek themselves in order to live authentically. This is developed at greater length in his analysis of *Der Ister*, a text that Fleming does turn to, but is already suggested in the opening discussion of the *Einführung*. The Greeks alone, in Heidegger's writings, cannot provide modernity with an authentic way of Being; it is something that can only be accessed through the Greeks and established by ourselves in a new tradition. For this reason, Fleming's critique of Heidegger idealising the Greeks 'to the point of non-existence' loses its force; the Greeks were closer to an authentic understanding of Being than us, but were not themselves authentic.

Robert Pippin shows the debt Williams' *Shame and Necessity* owed to Nietzsche (particularly his *Zur Genealogie der Moral*). Both critique Christian morality's focus on guilt and strive to find in archaic Greece an alternative attitude to responsibility, intentionality, and action. Pippin comes to determine, however, that Williams' effort to find in tragedy and epic the tools for an alternative morality falls short (295). Williams' understanding of Greek shame as incorporating responsibility for unintended actions strays into Christian waters and comes to involve the notion of self-deceit. Nietzsche, Pippin argues, was probably aware of this, and this is why Nietzsche drew out of the Greeks a picture of morality that had the doer in the deed rather than invented afterwards (297). Tragedy becomes an issue over autonomy of action.

The final contribution is an epilogue by Michael Silk. It deals only with the introduction, which again points to the extreme variance of the contributions. Silk's essay is a critical assessment of the editors' arguments for the importance of tragedy in the modern philosophical tradition. He raises the issue of tragedy's absence from key writings, and the discussion comes to focus on tragedy's exclusion or replacement by another genre. It is a point that is perhaps worth pursuing further than Silk does here to enlighten more tragedy's place in modernity. Silk moves quickly on to discuss the lack of any determined discussion of modern tragedy, and how considerations of it would have more fully embraced the philosophical tradition's engagement with tragedy. Tragedy is, after all, still being written if only in name.

This is a volume that is valuable for how it explores tragedy's place in the philosophical tradition. It puts into perspective the different ways in which the Greek tragedy has been appropriated into formulations of modernity. The result is a mosaic of conceptions, interpretations, and theories. This is as it should be; modernity itself has never been fastened to any definition. It is no surprise, then, that in looking for ourselves in our philosophical tradition's use of tragedy, we find a fractured mirror.

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