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## Book Review

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*Philosophy and Tragedy*. Edited by Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 246 pp.

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The neoclassicism of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy largely defines the questions we take seriously in "continental" philosophy today. German Idealism and post-Idealism is above all the beginning of a dialogue between the Ancient and the Modern world. Although Kant, perhaps, was not as fascinated by the Ancients as were his close friend Hamann and his contemporary Goethe, the philosophical tradition that develops after Kant—in the work of Hegel, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Heidegger, et al—is dominated by the ideas and problems of ancient Greek literature and philosophy. We should not be surprised, then, to see in Hegel, and the philosophers following, a fascination with and a sustained discussion of *tragedy*, that most Greek of the arts.

What does surprise, however, is the relative poverty of critical studies of philosophy and tragedy in the literature on German Idealism and post-Idealism, particularly in English. Walter Kaufmann's (1969) *Tragedy and Philosophy* remains perhaps the best-known work on the subject, despite the fact that it is deliberately general and introductory, and by now out-of-date both with scholarship on the modern philosophy he addresses and with the (recently, very good) scholarship on ancient Greek tragedy. That such varied figures as Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Heidegger considered an understanding of tragedy to be essential to their own philosophical projects makes the scholarly silence on philosophy and tragedy particularly, well, *awkward*.

*Philosophy and Tragedy*, edited by Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks, ends this silence by engaging us in a variety of fascinating conversations about what they call "the tragic turning within philosophy"(1). *Philosophy and Tragedy* is the latest offering from Routledge's Warwick Studies in European Philosophy, an excellent series guided by the sure hand of general editor Andrew Benjamin (*Philosophy and Tragedy* is the fifteenth book in the series). The book began at a conference 'On Tragedy' held at the University of Warwick in 1995, and consists of eleven essays grouped according to the five figures they take as their primary objects: Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Benjamin. An introduction by Beistegui and Sparks locates the collection within its properly Kantian aesthetic context.

A tradition exists, Beistegui and Sparks argue, "anchored in the German thought of the end of the eighteenth century, which takes tragedy—and particularly Greek tragedy—as its theme"(1). It is this turn toward the tragic that the collection addresses, and it does so with over-all success. Before looking at several ideas in the essays themselves, however, I should note that the book is not as balanced as it might have been. There are, for example, four essays on Hölderlin, while Hegel and

Nietzsche merit only two, and Heidegger and Benjamin one a piece. The essays on Hölderlin are excellent, and I read them with pleasure; but I wished for an essay on Schopenhauer's view of tragedy, and again for an essay on Kierkegaard, whose analyses of Greek tragedies in *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling* and elsewhere are among the best the 19<sup>th</sup> century has to offer.

But a book cannot address everything, and this one succeeds in covering a lot of philosophical ground. The opening essay by Beistegui and Sparks sets the stage: the new interest in tragedy at the close of the 18th century, they contend, is a response to "the horizon opened by the critical philosophy" and Kant's attempt "to construct a passage from theoretical to practical reason"(7). It is a "reopening of the space of the poetical," which may offer a bridge between the knowable limits of reason and the otherwise unknowable presuppositions of experience. Beistegui continues this argument in his essay "Hegel: or the tragedy of thinking," where he argues that the Hegelian dialectic is fundamentally tragic in its structure. For Hegel, tragedy, like the dialectic, is analyzed "in terms of contradictions whose solution is as necessary as the conflict itself"(11). (One wonders if Hegel inherits this idea from Goethe, who famously misunderstood Aristotle's notion of *katharsis* as the structural resolution of a tragic drama.) Thus the development of the dialectic is a tragic one, and "Hegelian philosophy has no choice but to be tragic since life itself is tragic, be it as subjective, objective or absolute spirit"(34). But existence is not damned as tragic (as it is, for example, in Schopenhauer); rather, the negativity that drives the dialectic of thought and history "elevates itself to the heights of thinking"(ibid.) and provides for human spiritual progress. We become philosophers, for Hegel, as we transcend the tragic.

In his "Self-dissolving seriousness: on the comic in the Hegelian concept of tragedy," Rodolphe Gasche' responds to Bestegui's argument, contending that structural aspects of comedy (as Hegel understood it) "suggest a principal priority of the comic over the tragic for the understanding of both tragedy and dialectics"(41). This is a line of argument to which I am myself deeply sympathetic: we see similar comic "redemptions" of tragedy in Kierkegaard's idea of the comic-religious, and in Nietzsche's idea of an artist-philosopher who dances and laughs, who is, as Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, a "buffoon"(we learn more about Nietzsche and laughter in Walter Brogan's essay on Zarathustra a bit later in the book). But I had not previously seen the idea associated with Hegel, and was excited by Gasche' s observation that for Hegel the dramatis personae in tragedy are characterized by "mutual hostility," as opposed to "their inward self-dissolution in comedy"(43). The comic, Gasche' argues, "is the kind of dramatic art that most urgently calls for a resolution"(49), and so it comes much closer to the kind of dialectical movement Hegel sees in thought. The "comic character exemplifies a dissolution of finitude and one-sidedness"(52), and it does so with a "light-hearted readiness for self-dissolution"(53): it views the whole matter with good humor. If Gasche' is right, then, he gives us a laughing Hegel who is diametrically opposed to the dour Schopenhauer (and perhaps we can better understand why the former was so much more popular with his students than the latter).

The four Hölderlin essays, "Of tragic metaphor" by Jean-François Courtine, "Tragedy and speculation" by Françoise Dastur, "A small number of houses in a universe of tragedy" by the irrepressible and always delightful David Farrell Krell, and "Hölderlin's theatre" by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, constitute collectively a significant new contribution to the literature on the great German poet, and will doubtless be anthologized elsewhere. There are too many insights here for me to catalogue, so I will mention only one that I found particularly provocative. In Courtine's

piece he argues that the fundamental problem driving Hölderlin's poetry "is the possibility for the whole to be felt"(69). This is a Kantian problem: "How can intellectual intuition become sensuous, make itself tangible to itself and thus become *aesthetic intuition*"(ibid.). For Courtine, Hölderlin understand tragedy as the presentation of the impossibility of solving the problem: "Thus tragedy is a metaphor in the very specific sense in which it properly presents the passage of god, that transport in which god shows himself, but as *nothing*"(74). Tragedy shows us that the whole can never be felt, that as best we can experience "the tearing and wrenching"(ibid.) of time and our existence within it. In Hölderlin's analysis of tragedy, then, we see the first poetry of modernity, as the impossibility of human reconciliation with truth and the divine is announced.

Günter Figal's "Aesthetically limited reason" analyzes the metaphysical commitments of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, arguing that "Through the cunning of aesthetic presentation the essence of presentation in general first appears"(149). For Figal Nietzsche's famous proclamation in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "only as an aesthetic phenomenon can existence be justified" means not that life should be reduced to art, but that art gives us a model for understanding the metaphysics of life. So, "one should not grasp [Nietzsche's] orientation to the paradigm of art as an exclusive generalization of art, but should find in it the realization that all life compartments are compartments of presentation"(ibid.). This is ethically significant because the aesthetic process is not passive or solitary, it is rather active, creative and communicative. An artist has an artwork and an audience, and the audience comes to know the artist through the artwork. So all presentation becomes a kind of communication, and Figal concludes that "In a thinking which carries its own quality of presentation within it, the trace of the other is preserved"(150). The aesthetic attitude, then, rather than losing itself in a self-reflective attitude that loses consciousness of the ethical significance of others (as Kierkegaard attacked the German Romantic aestheticization of life), in fact presupposes the other and demands that recognition. An artwork becomes the presentation of human value in the world.

In his "Zarathustra: the tragic figure of the last philosopher," Walter Brogan gives us a Zarathustra very much akin to the Hegel of Gasche's earlier essay on the dialectic and comedy. Brogan notes that, for Nietzsche, "philosophers should be ranked according to *laughter*"(153), and he argues that Zarathustra is the tragic Dionysian philosopher who will show the philosophers of the future how to laugh. Zarathustra himself is a tragic-comic figure, like the god Dionysus: he dies so that others may be born. Therefore he has no positive doctrines, at best he has jokes (in a subjunctive parenthesis Brogan suggests tentatively--and I think helpfully--that "the doctrine of eternal recurrence is not a redemption from nausea but the ultimate philosophical joke"(164)). So in the end "we are also left, as is the ending of *Zarathustra* itself, with only signs that the children of Zarathustra are at hand"(165). The question of what those children do next is of course the problem for Nietzsche and his interpreters alike: without any positive doctrines, Zarathustra leaves us at best confused, at worst entitled to our own idiosyncratic and potentially destructive vision of the world. But this is a problem familiar to all of us Nietzsche scholars, and it would not be fair to ask Brogan to solve it for us (and it might put us out of work).

Brogan locates Zarathustra squarely at that turning-point which will be picked up in Simon Sparks' essay on Benjamin: the moment when "Dionysus, the god of tragedy, becomes a philosopher"(Brogan, 152). I will finish with a word or two on Sparks' piece, regretfully neglecting both Will McNeil's "A 'scarcely pondered word.' The place of tragedy: Heidegger, Aristotle,

Sophocles" and Marc Froment-Meurice's concluding "Aphasia: or the last word".

In one of the best essays in the collection, Simon Sparks gives us a brilliant analysis of Benjamin's understanding of tragedy. His "Fatalities: freedom and the question of language in Walter Benjamin's reading of tragedy" is one of the nicer essays on Walter Benjamin yet to appear (the essay is chiefly concerned with Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*). The central thesis of the argument is one that Benjamin takes from Nietzsche: that tragedy marks a turning place in thought from the mythical to the philosophical. Crucially, myth is a different way of understanding the meaning of existence: it does not divide the world into the categories of the "true" and the "false." Myth and "the daimonic"(195) understand existence always and only in terms of ambiguity; with the tragic, however, concepts like "paradox"(ibid.) and truth emerge. With the appearance of Socrates, the transformation is complete. Sparks quotes Benjamin: "Socrates: that is the sacrifice of philosophy to the gods of myth, who demand human sacrifice"(198). Socrates' death marks the death of myth and the birth of philosophy, and tragedy too falls with myth, "Socratism standing triumphant over the bleeding corpse of tragedy"(199). And yet, as Sparks insists, and unlike Nietzsche, Benjamin "refuses to see the death of tragedy as a tragic one. ... To Benjamin's mind, the death of tragedy is a far meaner affair than Nietzsche could possibly have imagined"(200). Now, Benjamin believes, the possibilities for authentic expression have narrowed considerably, as language itself takes on the new and limited framework of Socratic-Platonic thinking. That thinking and the dialectical method it introduces depends on a language of "opposition and conflict"(212), which does not promote growth but controls and even destroys it. Mythical expression, on the other hand, and its departing flourish in the art of tragedy, is a language of "tension and excess"(ibid.), which depends on struggle and growth in much the way life depends on struggle and growth. Myth and tragedy promote the truly human; philosophy destroys it.

Such a position, however, seems to commit Benjamin to a strong version of irrationalism, and it is unfortunate that Sparks does not address that problem. He speaks of it only as a "wound," asking "Has it healed?" We might ask: Can it heal? Or has Benjamin cut too deeply? If Benjamin is a rightful heir to the tragic heritage of Hegel and Nietzsche, and if that inheritance leaves him (and us) only wounded, do we welcome that birthright? Or are we threatened by the ethical nihilism that Lukaćs and others have seen in the post-Idealist anti-rationalist tradition? I for one think that Lukaćs is wrong, and that we can find a positive ethic in thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (and their various philosophical progeny, such as Benjamin and Bataille). But having brought us so far, Sparks could have given us a word or two about the dangers of Benjamin's valorization of mythic and tragic modes of thinking, and possible responses to those dangers.

In conclusion, with *Philosophy and Tragedy* Beistegui and Sparks have put together an outstanding collection of essays, all written by well-known and widely respected experts in their fields. I expect that it will serve as a standard collection for students and scholars of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century continental aesthetics, and I hope that it will stimulate further scholarly discussion of this fascinating area in post-Kantian continental philosophy.

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