

Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities*,  
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*Tragic Modernities* by Miriam Leonard is a comprehensive and incisive study that focuses on issues of tragedy and modernity, as well as their indelible correlations throughout the history of philosophy and culture. The main objective of the book is to revitalise and revalue tragedy and the tragic in contemporary thought in all their different and disparate guises. In order to do so, Leonard emphasises the crucial role of ancient tragedy in history of political discourse and raises issues about its ample power in shaping modern political theory. Considering the notion of the universal humanist truths that reside in tragedy, ones that are deeply questioned in recent scholarships, Leonard examines these truths in a contemporary post-humanist context and highlights new possibilities given by tragedy. As Miriam Leonard remarks, *Tragic Modernities* examines a dual process; on one hand, the ways tragedy influenced the shaping of modernist ideas and preoccupations, and on the other, the ways modernity interpreted and vitalized classical texts in new philosophical contexts. Miriam Leonard points out one of the central claims of the book to be the idea that modernity forges a link between tragedy and revolution; she tries to trace that link and to follow its varied and disparate torrents throughout the history of philosophy, literature and modern thought.

The study begins with the famous debate between George Steiner (*The Death of Tragedy*) and Raymond Williams (*Modern tragedy*) in the 1960's. While Steiner claims that tragic art is culturally specific and part of a particular western and Greek tradition, therefore impossible in modernity, Williams argues that modernity is itself tragic. These two arguments build the main scope of *Tragic Modernities* and we can assume, as the title entails, that Miriam Leonard's opinion corresponds with Raymond's and that the tragic modernity should be untangled from contemporary discourses. The second key argument of the monograph is the revelation of the new political power that resides as a possibility in classical tragic texts and their different interpretative guises.

*Tragic Modernities* consists of five chapters in which tragedy is confronted with the following themes: revolution, metaphysics, history, gender and subjectivity. We may query whether this partition and consequences of its research are the best solution for examining tragedy and the tragic. Namely, since the study lacks a more comprehensive and exact evaluation and determination of concepts of tragedy and the tragic, shifting from different

historical or philosophical contexts leaves a lot of space for questions. Also, it could be seen as a lack of precise methodological procedure. All three concepts of modernity, tragedy and the tragic are changeable, fluctuating and depending on different contexts from which they originated. Therefore, this book should primarily be seen as an attempt of mapping these relations and an inspiration for further examination and study.

Leonard follows a specific tradition in this book: to be a modern subject is to be a tragic subject, regardless of whether it is in our experience of gender, our relation to history or our idea of political agency. Leonard traces the philosophy of the tragic in Schelling, Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Benjamin, Heidegger, Schmitt, and Arendt. „*Tragic Modernities* purposefully juxtaposes these different historical moments as its aim is to emphasize the continuities in the preoccupation with tragedy across disparate philosophies of European modernity.“(26). Philosophical methods and approaches to tragedy may offer unexploited spaces and alternatives for political readings. One of Leonard’s principal objectives is to use theoretical texts she explores to invite us to read tragedy otherwise; to push us to read tragedy politically, as she claims.

In the section *Tragedy and Revolution*, Miriam Leonard questions the relations between tragedy and modern political theory, ending the section with the dialogue between tragedy and the leftist thought and practice. According to Hannah Arendt, revolution, as a specific political concept, is a distinctive modern quality which has an ambivalent relationship to tragedy. „There is no revolution without tragedy, Arendt seems to imply, but the revolutionary power of tragedy also lies in its association with action, in its ability to move beyond the nihilism of Silenus“ (42). Leonard argues that even though Marx eschews both tragic content and form from his concept of revolution, at the same time addresses its ability to transform the modernity. At the end of the chapter, following Raymond Williams, Leonard offers an alternative leftist reading of tragedy that is seen as an essential condition for self-critical leftist practice: by recognizing tragedy in both life and revolution, Williams unveils tragedy as an important lived experience.

Chapter *Tragedy and Metaphysics* contributes significantly to the organization of the political argument of the book by demonstrating „how the conception of the tragic gave new voice to the metaphysical paradox of freedom and necessity,

and gave this ontological problem a decidedly political inflection“ (42). Besides, Leonard points out that using tragic in the critique of metaphysics does not indicate the end of the political but instead produces possibilities for different politics. She follows these arguments from *The earliest System-Programme of German Idealism* (manifesto that is believed to be written by Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin), and work of Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger. While Schelling sees Oedipus as an autonomous subject that depicts the contradictions between Greek reason and tragic point of view (the conflict between freedom and necessity), Hegel makes him a synonym of the origin of philosophy (the coming into being of consciousness is the birth of philosophy). But both these reflections incorporate the awareness of the limits of subjectivity which is in Hegel crucially linked to political freedom. Nietzsche, on the other hand, unveils the metaphysical truth of tragedy in Dionysiac disintegration and dissolution of the subject. Nevertheless, Leonard shows that in *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche remains in the metaphysical realm and his reading acts both as the ultimate challenge and the closing of the idealist interpretation of ancient tragedy. Martin Heidegger continues with the questioning of the idea of metaphysics itself, proclaiming that experience of the beings in their Being is tragic. „For Schelling and for Hegel just as for Nietzsche and Heidegger, tragedy would need to enter the vocabulary of existence before it could become the vehicle for an exploration and ultimately a critique of metaphysics“ (70).

The problem with metaphysics and its possible culmination in aestheticization is the danger of depoliticisation. In section *Tragedy and History*, Leonard offers an insight about the profound link between tragedy and history, analyzing and confronting Schmitt’s, Benjamin’s, Hölderlin’s and Hegel’s means of resolving historical and philosophical aspects of the tragic. By doing this, she implicitly answers to both questions: is tragedy possible in modernity, as well as how that possibility contours modernity. By comparing Carl Schmitt’s and Walter Benjamin’s claims on history, tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, this book gives credit to historical impact on tragedy and confronts the autonomous realm of (tragic) art. This is the first and only time that the author takes into account tragedy that isn’t an ancient tragedy (Shakespeare’s Hamlet), which can be seen as a weak or poorly articulated methodological aspect of the book, mainly because she leaves the procedure without justification. Hölderlin’s ideas are taken into consideration because he formulates one of the

most important questions about the possibility of writing a modern tragedy. „How can tragedy be written in an era in which the prerequisites for tragedy are missing?“ (90). His quest ends in his translation of Sophocles since modernity lacks an authentic sense. Leonard continues with Hegel, demonstrating the ways in which we can see the tragedy becoming a mechanism that reveals the history, his philosophy a tragic philosophy and the famous Preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit* a specific manifesto of the tragic. She therefore concludes that it is tragedy that has produced a new philosophy of history.

Chapter *Tragedy and Gender* brings us to psycho-analytical revisions of tragedy and its further interpretations in the later feminist critique of Freud regarding the problem of gender and putting it in tragic terms. As Leonard addresses, in this section she explores the dialogue between universal tendencies of humanism and antihumanism in the contemporary theory. Leonard argues that the nineteenth-century philosophical reading of tragedy provided the conceptual tool for Freud's reconciliation between universalism and subjectivity in his interpretation of Oedipus. But that construct isn't a simple model of identity or identification. Again, through Freud and Nietzsche, Oedipus is the main character, yet this time in a form of mockery which reveals the limitations of self-knowledge that were the basis of universal humanism. „Both Freud and Nietzsche present us with an antihumanist Oedipus, but both nevertheless resist a nihilistic interpretation of tragedy“ (122). Still, Freud's Oedipus has its own gender limitations. That is why Judith Butler, amongst other feminist writers, in her work *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, following Lacan offers a new reading of *Antigone* and delivers a new kind of humanism in which the tragic is seen as an universal condition (based on mortality and vulnerability) which marks a shift from politics to ethics. Miriam Leonard calls this new specific configuration of tragedy, humanism and universalism insurmountable in feminist post-Freudian interpretations and emphasizes that it is the same configuration Freud inherited from the above mentioned philosophy of tragic.

Miriam Leonard finishes her book with the section *Tragedy and Subjectivity* in which she analyses the links between contemporary experience of subjectivity and the tragic. „The conditions of isolation and fragmentation we experience in late capitalism are key to understanding the renewed significance of tragedy in modernity“ (131).

In her analysis, she relates the discourse of tragic individualism with the tradition of Aristotelian individualistic reading of tragedy that didn't give enough weight to the role of chorus. Yet, as Leonard argues German idealist readings could and should be seen as a site for exploring the paradoxes of individualism and further on as a site for politization of these questions. For example, Hegel depicts Greek tragedy as the sacrifice of individual freedom for the stability of the state but in his arguments tragedy nevertheless functions „as the aesthetic manifestation of the metaphysics of the subject“ (144). Nietzsche, as mentioned, explores the paradoxes of the dissolution and reconstruction of the subject, but Dionysiac he defines is always expressed as collective. He sees the essence of tragedy in self-annihilation of the individual and this idea, Leonard notes, has its clear political, even post-political utopian aspect. Further on, Leonard illuminates the nexus of ideas from Nietzsche's Dionysiac to Freud's death drive and Lacan's interpretation of *Oedipus at Colonus* (where Freud's unconscious becomes the misapprehended, unknown and opaque aspect of the subject to the ego). In Lacan's reading, Leonard highlights the identity of a subject through its own negation. „Far from investing in tragedy as a celebration of individualism, modern thinkers have turned to ancient drama to explore the problems of individuation. „Rather than finding a prototype for liberal individualism, modernity uncovered a model of radical intersubjectivity“ (159). One of the most important issues raised the question that transcends the realms of literature and scholar examinations of these topics and is related to the conclusion of this chapter. The question is not whether Lacan, Butler, Nietzsche and Freud presented the tragic identity as a divided identity, but rather did they not do so at the expense of the political self. Leonard quotes Bonnie Honig when she asks if action is „not the price modernity pays for its critique of sovereignty“ (159). Miriam Leonard offers an answer to this question regarding the problem of tragedy and takes us back to the beginning of her book: to the idea of collective revolutionary action. She convinces us that tragedy is a stage on which the paradoxes of the political are repeatedly reenacted.

In the *Epilogue* of the study Leonard encourages us to view the tragic as an explanatory structure and framework for the paradoxes of action and the modern philosophy for the fate of a subject immersed in collectivity. However, she is well aware of the arguments given by Nietzsche, Marx, Vernan and Honig about how tragic can become

an obstacle for thought and action and for that reason Leonard highlights how important it is that the tragic conversely questions tragedy. She ends the book with important, perspicacious (engaged) and pressing questions and claims. „Tragedy maps these revolving temporalities in which we make history but not in circumstances of our own choosing. Although today we are not in the French, nor the Industrial revolution, we are in some kind of unspecified global revolution that dares not speak its name. Perhaps it is because our present revolution does not claim its revolutionariness that we find ourselves turning repeatedly to tragedy and the philosophy of tragic?“(167).

Classicist scholars that are already acquainted with modern interpretations of tragedy will

become familiar with radical intersubjectivity and post-political utopia that can be rendered from it. This acknowledgment goes the other way around as well. Modern political theory and contemporary philosophy have a lot to gain in dialogue with tragedy and the tragic. Arguments of the book are clear, understandable and well-organized, and they make a lot of contribution on the topic. One of the best aspects of *Tragic Modernities* is a thorough and well-researched study that creates a fruitful dialogue between all major ideas about the tragic and contemporary scholarships and literature on this subject. *Tragic Modernities* is a big recommendation for both classicist and philosophers, and everybody interested in the relations between tragedy and modernity.