Felicities and Infelicities of a Model: Tragedy and the Present


The renewed interest in the question of tragedy that emerges in German philosophy after Kant is not the simple rediscovery of a theme that had been extensively discussed in ancient philosophy and that subsequently became marginalized. This interest is first of all one in Greece itself. But the return to Greece in Idealist philosophy—one to which the question of tragedy is central—takes place specifically following Kant’s critical inquiry into the limits of philosophy as metaphysics, when it became clear that philosophy could no longer keep doing business as usual. The rediscovery of tragedy concurs with the post-Enlightenment realization in Germany that philosophy as metaphysics has come to an end. Therefore, the return to Greece that philosophy undergoes at the end of the eighteenth century corresponds to nothing less than a return to philosophy’s origin in what is not yet philosophy, before it shapes itself as metaphysics. It is this concern with the beginnings of philosophy that explains the Idealist interest in Greek forms of art. The increased attention devoted to tragedy, however, does not initially occur as the rediscovery of one specific Greek art form, but rather as the rediscovery of art’s significance for philosophy as such. Given their assumption that tragic art is the climactic destination of all art, it is not so much the genre of tragedy as the idea of tragedy or, more precisely, the idea of the tragic that becomes the central concern of the Idealist philosophers. As these post-Kantian thinkers strive to reconceive of philosophy at the moment when the limits of metaphysical thought can no longer be ignored, ancient Greece comes to bear on their efforts in the shape of the tragic. Consequently, the Idealist reflection on the arts, and in particular on the tragic, coincides with a reflection on what constitutes philosophy itself.

This crucial reconfiguration in German though of what it means to philosophize, which began at the turn of the nineteenth century and has shaped philosophy in Germany up to the present, is at the center of Dennis J. Schmidt’s latest work, *On Germans and Other Greeks*. Schmidt’s opening commentaries on Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s...
Poetics are conducted in the light of what happened to philosophy in and around German Idealism and set the stage for understanding what exactly it is that Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin rediscover in their turn to Greece. In his eloquent and elegantly-wrought close readings of Plato’s and Aristotle’s reflections on poetic praxis—readings in which attention to the literary and stylistic aspects of the Greek texts intertwines effectively with a philosophical analysis of the arguments—Schmidt shows that the ancient philosophers did not view tragedy as one form of art among others. Rather, both Plato and Aristotle singled out tragedy as exemplary of artwork, and of art in general, because they viewed all art as striving toward and culminating in tragedy—a destination that is intimately linked to what they considered to be art’s mimetic character. It is in tragic art in particular that the mimetic principle of all art reveals its meaning. If Plato finds mimesis so problematic, it is of course because for him the mimetic principles have no allegiance to truth and because these principles appeal to the irrational powers of the soul. But Schmidt points out that Socrates, in the Republic, also sees mimetic art as a threat to the polis on the basis of the fact that it depicts love and death; that is, it portrays the individual’s passionate attachment to the other, and the ensuing vulnerability of the soul to the loss of that other. Given his emphasis on the need for the soul to be one with itself, and his understanding of community as based on the law of the common, Plato sees tragic art as fostering the separateness of individuals, and destabilizing the whole structure of the polis by jeopardizing the individual’s ability to serve as a member. If Plato criticizes the tragic work, that is, the summit of the potential of the work of art, it is above all because tragedy does not meet his ethical imperative. It fails to do so because its description of and reflection on death and shared life, as questions that mortals must learn to answer, show tragic art to be linked to a concern with others of which Plato does not approve. The substance of this being with others is revealed in Plato’s reworking in the Republic of the portion of the Odyssey entitled “A Gathering of Shades” in the “Myth of Er.” Plato here completely ignores Odysseus’ insight that the only “justice (dike) that mortals can give one another comes ultimately in the form of mourning.” He passes over this understanding of being with in silence, precisely because it “undermines the project of the Republic to institute and preserve the law of the common” (41). Yet it is with this particular justice between mortals that tragic art is concerned, to the extent that it is mimetic.