

*Impossible Objects:
Interviews*
by Simon Critchley, Carl Cederström and Todd
Kesselman

Cambridge: Polity, 2012
(ISBN: 978-0745653211). 180pp.

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English philosopher Simon Critchley made his name as an expert on the so-called deconstructive tradition; his new book – the aptly-titled, *Impossible Objects* – shows how deep these roots run. The book is a collection of interviews spanning Critchley’s career, and it is therefore fitting that Carl Cederström and Todd Kesselman should use their editorial introduction to reflect on the powerlessness of the philosopher as interviewee – a powerlessness which lays all of his best plans to waste before the brute immediacy of live communication. By a very Freudian turn, Cederström and Kesselman take this as a major plus point; the interview is not a theoretical supplement they claim, but an unparalleled chance to catch the philosopher in his natural environment, to see him squirm and stress and stutter under the weight of his contemplative obligation. I could hardly agree more: if the text of *Impossible Objects* teaches us anything at all, it is surely that the good, thoughtful philosopher will and should always feel the pressure of the interview format. This is how Derrida, who Critchley admiringly and crucially refers to as ‘the philosopher’ (p.59), would perhaps have seen it: there is never enough time or knowledge to justify the philosopher’s speech; and yet, he is always being asked, by the very definition of his position, to stand up and speak.

Impossible Objects can surely be well-read as a demonstration of this paradox. Take the first interview by way of example: Critchley talks openly there about the motivations behind his first book, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, which he pitches as a direct response to the Heidegger and de Man controversies of the late eighties (p.8). These controversies grew out of revelations that both Heidegger and de Man had had personal/professional connections to the Third Reich; connections which – at least for

some – were enough to justify the denunciation of all forms of deconstructive thought.

Cue Critchley's intervention:

[...] the idea was that we can save [...deconstruction] from what looked like an empty formalism, which was the Hegelian critique of Derrida by people like Jay Bernstein and Gillian Rose at that time in the UK [...] so that was the specific *agenda* [my emphasis] for writing *The Ethics of Deconstruction* and that was there from very early on. (pp.7-8)

This is an interesting admission, because it cuts so deeply against the grain of popular opinion. The philosopher, by convention at least, is supposed to be devoid of agenda; lying back in his armchair, *waiting* for the world to appear. Indeed, there are elements of this idealistic iconology throughout the book: in the sixth interview for example, Critchley calls on philosophers to be *repetitively* and thoroughly anti-dogmatic. However, the real clue here is in the emphasis: the philosopher has to keep *re-starting* his rail against dogmatism, because dogmatism (i.e. *blind faith*) is for Critchley an essential condition of all speech/action. This means that the philosopher is permanently caught between idealism and dogmatism; not stale or thoughtless dogmatism, but the kind which is attached to language itself – language as the unavoidable mutilation of its object.

This is why we should commend Critchley's announcement of his first-book agenda: it sheds so much light on the dogmatic biases/assumptions which haunt the philosopher's every word. It also raises the question of politics in Critchley's work. How can we justify political action, keeping in mind the breadth and depth of its impact, if all speech/action is ultimately groundless? Critchley's answer is an admirable one:

We need to cultivate a disposition of passivity and action [...] we live in a world where there is a relentless imperative to act – to act now – and what we need is reflection and thought, sure [...] *but that shouldn't lead to paralysis* [my emphasis]. (pp.130-131)

Translation: we need to act. *We must*. We live in a world of inequality and suffering – a world of brutal disappointment – and the only useful way to philosophize in such a world is to try and respond to its sickness. That our response will be premature and unjustified (Derrida 1990, p.967) is a given. But such prematurity need not rule out a

certain spark; a moment of genuine openness which lends *value* (to use Bataille's word; Surya 2010, p.432) to our otherwise unjustifiable act. Does such a moment really exist? Can it ever exist? Critchley has always been optimistic on this front: from *The Ethics of Deconstruction* on, he has held open the possibility of a bridge between, on the one hand, ethical passivity and, on the other hand, political action (1992, pp.188-241). However, if there is one weakness to *Impossible Objects* (and perhaps this is non-remediable) it is that this ethics-to-politics bridge never quite gets built. There are hints, for sure: Gramsci is oft-referenced, and there's a lengthy engagement with Anarchism as an essentially de-sedimented Marxism. But what we never quite get is a real, practical sense of *how* to proceed, and it's hard not to be a little disappointed by that lack.

Is this a fatal flaw for Critchley's book? Not at all. Rather, it reinforces the seemingly chronic character of the philosopher's headache: the interminable tension between passivity and action (i.e. ethics and politics) which throws his discourse repeatedly out of whack. In this light, perhaps *Impossible Objects* is best read as a straightforward, personal affair. This is certainly how I see it – as a frank encounter with the philosophical mind; an encounter which, although brief, gives us a beautiful sense of how things work at the sharp end of the intellectual spectrum. So for any budding philosophy student curious about what their discipline might actually entail, Critchley's book is well worth a read. The more impatient reader may be frustrated, but that's okay. Frustration is good. Frustration, to cut to the heart of it all, is where faith stops and philosophy *begins*.

Bibliography

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