**Simon Critchley. ABC of Impossibility. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-937-56149-9**

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It is difficult to begin an assessment of a text like *ABC of Impossibility.* Billed as a "para-philosophy" that deals with a series of concepts, physical locations, moods, and people to name only a few topics, the text is as disparate as it is confronting. Central to this undertaking is a focus on fragmentary writing and thinking, which may account for some of the complexity involved in assessing this project. Simon Critchley's numerous philosophical publications prior to the *ABC of Impossibility* offer some guidance, yet the text's predominant parting effect is a sense of something being withheld, not offered.

Critchley offers some guidance in the Introduction regarding his overarching intentions for the book's contents and structure, but is exceptionally vague on its thematic foci:

> What I was trying to imagine was a book that was an open-ended series of short chapters, like encyclopaedia entries, but of an utterly idiosyncratic kind. As such, the book would move from absurdity to depth, from philosophy to frivolity. What would unify the book and make it mine would be its voice: serious, pathetic, absurd, poetic, cynical, turn and turn about (3).

The rest of the introduction does not offer a set justification or process for

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this declaration, and the title is revealed to be almost arbitrary, not assisted by the fact that the sections to follow appear in subjective rather than alphabetical order. Critchley states: “I am withholding a number of complete and incomplete fragments because they are too embarrassing, too stupid for words, or too intimate. Maybe, when senility takes over, I will let them go” (4). The room for subtle control and subversive intentions behind the publication, circulation, and creation of fragmentary texts is teasingly hinted, but never explored in detail. Theorists who inspired this move are listed, but their ideas are not teased out for the reader. Critchley’s task is to leap between ideas, instead of filling in the gaps, as is often the case in fragmentary texts.

It is the professed poetic angle of this collection that first caught my attention, but there are shattered pieces of pretty much everything in this book. Critchley’s text reads more like motley musings and notes across a disparate range of topics, unlike the consolidated creative treatise on the nature of such texts that the title suggests. Critchley’s subjectivity is prioritised throughout the text over a more objective voice, emphasising the importance of individual assessment in creating histories and analyses. However, these analyses themselves tend to be surprisingly brief. An example of this is the section titled “Life,” the entirety of which is quoted here:

> Life is movement. It is the feeling of movement or what the Greeks called *kinesis* whose counter-thrust is lethargy, the slowing down of existence into a lassitude and languor. But life as movement can be the sheer restlessness of anxiety, the shape of a becoming that is too tightly bound to its terminus in death, a death that casts too long a shadow over life. Living in death’s shadow grants both individuality and morbidity, individuality *as* morbidity. The trick, if it is a trick, is to dwell between movement and lethargy, to try and balance at the mid-point between them. This is very difficult. It means learning to become a tightrope walker. I have a terrible sense of balance (21).

This approach is relatively uniform across Critchley’s text: a series of statements and assumptions are presented, along with brief, occasionally intertextual links in logic, and an overarching personal connection is made. There is a sense of wry, self-depreciating humour throughout the text. Overall though, the *ABC of Impossibility* reads more like a personal notebook of brief reflections or musings than a critical treatise or creative project. This is ultimately one of the most appealing, if occasionally frustrating aspects of this text: it is accessible and easily interpreted, balancing the personal with the critical, and presented in cleanly logical progressions of thought. But at the same time, serious readers of philosophy may be dis-

appointed to find relatively little close analysis of individual topics or theories have been selected for comment or the ways in which they have been assessed. Ultimately this has been shaped by the fragmentary structure nominated for the project at the outset, but does this structure complement or frustrate the rest of the text?

Fragmentary texts are far from simple. In this instance, Critchley has consciously fragmented a series of thoughts and assessments, offering only partial analyses. Unlike other fragmentary writers, this breakage process has been intentional and does not detract from an original, whole document. This *lacunae*-filled text has been created with these spaces as intrinsic; nothing is incidental. When added to the frequently first-person references throughout the *ABC*, this becomes a more overt exercise in control and exclusion; only the bare bones of Critchley's voice are given. The rest of the text is given over to the reader's own questioning, rendering this a text for further consideration for the reader, not a clear treatise of the writer's own thoughts and conclusions. Subjectivity is of supreme importance in both thematic and structural considerations throughout the *ABC of Impossibility.*

Critchley's philosophical examples and citations tend towards Eurocentric and masculine; that an extended version of this text with broader representation and reflections would be welcomed. While this could stem from the personal nature of the text, it is not wholly clear for what reasons these exclusions (conscious or not) have been made. For example, in the "Fragments" section, Critchley cites:

> . . . various mighty precedents for fragmentary writing, from Pascal to [de] La Rochefoucauld, through to Chamfort who was the inspiration for the early German Romantics, like Friedrich Schlegel, who mastered both the practice and the theory of the fragment and passed on the art to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and many others . . . (7).

A number of sources are cited, but these could have been more varied. To write of fragments and not to engage with one of the most famous fragmentary writers, Sappho of Lesbos, is a surprising choice, particularly in light of Critchley's frequent references to ancient Greek thinking and writing. The politics of fragmentation have historically been complex, especially with regards to female writers. There is, of course, no obligation for writers to be completely representative in their engagements, but some kind of acknowledgement as to why this has been the case could have been given. The text is not entirely homogenous in its examination of writers and their origins, but it could definitely be improved upon in this regard.

In a section titled "Critchley," anxieties about racism and lingering postcolonial damages are highlighted:

> The man who asks the question is then introduced as Dean Critchley, a black Barbadian. I begin to dissolve inwardly. Critchley is obviously this man's slave name. Now, Critchley is a place name, and a relatively small place name, from Lancashire, the corner of some hamlet between Bolton and Preston. It is therefore highly likely that one of my ancestors or near ancestors was a plantation owner or some minion in Barbados. The room begins to fill with blood (43).

Assumptions of connection and responsibility are aired, pairing historical cringe with a strong focus on the self. To "dissolve" is to become fragmented; Critchley's voice and identity are broken down into composite parts and etymologies, but the overall impact is self-oriented. There is no conversation with the introduced figure, only self-referential flagellation. Critchley is conscious of this issue, acknowledged in room "fill[ed] with blood," but in this fragmentary state is unable to make amends or unpack the repercussions or implications of this theorised link any further. Again, the structure of the text and its restrictions interfere with discussion.

Critchley's *ABC of Impossibility* is a pastiche of ideas and engagements that demand further questioning, instead of simply offering up ready-made answers. The tone is as assumptive as it is welcoming, theoretical and imaginary, based in memories and musings alike. The reader may struggle to follow down every single path it treads. The personal and fragmentary nature of the text render it assessable and accessible from a number of angles, but the nature of this style and Critchley's occasionally homogenous theoretical underpinnings also set up conflicts and exclusions for certain readers due to the inherent restrictions of this model. Rather than presenting itself as an entire text, the *ABC of Impossibility* hints at being part of a larger, broken work that has not yet been recovered or constructed. To engage with the text is to want more, but to find only threads that must be taken on individually and in other directions.

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