EXILE AND RETURN: THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND THE DRAMATIC IMAGINATION

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This paper grew out of a seminar I co-taught with a colleague in the philosophy department at Baruch College, City University of New York last spring entitled: Exile and Return: Philosophy and the Dramatic Imagination. The seminar was part of a larger freshman year interdisciplinary project using the performing arts to examine the experience of diaspora. My earlier training and career as well as my doctorate was in theater so my role in the seminar was to teach the dramatic works we selected and apply them to the philosophy readings assigned by my colleague. While looking for plays to include on the course syllabus, I was struck at the pervasiveness of the theme of exile and return in the classics of western drama. The plays we finally selected were Oedipus the King, Hamlet, The Importance of Being Earnest, Mother Courage, and A Streetcar Named Desire. But along with these titles we could easily have chosen from every extant Greek tragedy, including Aeschylus’ Oresteia, Euripides’ Medea, Hippolytus, The Trojan Women, and The Bacchae; Shakespeare’s King Lear, The Taming of the Shrew, Henry IV, and Henry V; Calderon’s Life is a Dream, Voltaire’s Candide, Schiller’s Mary Stuart, almost any Ibsen play, Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard and The Three Sisters, Ansky’s The Dybbuk, Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, Durrenmatt’s The Visit, and Pinter’s The Homecoming. The list goes on and on.

Since I also work as a psychoanalyst, I inevitably found myself drawing on psychoanalytic perspectives during class discussion. The deeper we got into the course material the more amazed we were at the degree to which the disciplines of philosophy, drama, and psychoanalysis intersected. Since their beginnings, both philosophy and psychoanalysis have looked to theater for its capacity to function as a transformative vehicle for exploring deep truths about the human condition. In particular, by dramatizing the experience of “Exile and Return,” authors, actors, and audiences through the ages have endeavored to journey together to arrive at some deeper understanding of being and knowing. Philosophy addresses question of ontology and epistemology directly, while the great works of drama address these questions indirectly. As psychoanalysts, we often meet patients who come to us looking for relief, for a change in their experience of being but resist the process of knowing. Such patients may

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1 Chase Seminar (PHI 1500), co-taught with Thomas Teufel at Baruch College, City University of New York, Spring 2011
turn to treatment modalities that focus less on knowing and more on being without doing the depth work that leads to knowing. With psychoanalysis, the journey requires an integration of the two.

In Book 7 of The Republic, Plato explores humanity’s resistance to knowing in his famous Simile of the Cave. In this dialogue, Plato describes a world in which we all experience life as prisoners to our subterranean existence, believing the distortions projected on a wall in front of us to be reality. He challenges us to break our chains and emerge into the daylight outside the cave to see beyond the reflections and the darkness. Yet few among us dare venture outside the prison of our distorted perceptions.

Works of drama make their “points” (whatever they may be) on an emotional, often visceral level (through on-stage performances by flesh-and-blood actors, presenting sympathetic or vile characters in extreme—often extremely tragic or extremely funny situations). But they usually do so without ever having to say explicitly what the play is “about.” Works of philosophy, by contrast, seek to engage our rational minds through logically sound and valid argument. They are, so to speak, all message—the less drama, it seems, the better. Psychoanalysis shares some of the methodologies of both as it bridges theory and practice. Both theater and psychoanalysis explore unconscious motivations, the presentation of the self, object relations, attachment, separation, abandonment, and rapprochement. All three disciplines seek to better understand our strivings for power, for freedom, autonomy, love, and immortality.

On closer inspection, theater, philosophy, and psychoanalysis have even more in common. All three have surprisingly similar goals, especially when contrasted with the sciences: they seek to get at deep truths about the human condition that cannot be tested in a lab. Each, moreover, share related methodologies. Psychoanalysis uses case studies and process dialogue to “dramatize” its theories and illustrate its findings. Just think how many theatrical elements are contained within the psychoanalytic frame: we have a deliberately conceived “set,” (the office arranged just so), the waiting room—our equivalent of a theater lobby, ambient lighting, sound design (the white noise machine, our voices), designated roles (a dialectic between performer and audience), rules of engagement, an admission fee and payment collection, set “performance” times, and the recitation of lines, plot, characters we learn about—a deliberate, even if not fully pre-determined as-if construction, one that unfolds through a collaborative, creative process between performer and audience, usually with surprise endings. Secrets are shared. Both are voyeuristic. Both analyst and theater audience serve as confidants. Entrances and exits represent a kind of exile and return with each dramatic scene, with each analytic session. How much of our analytic exploration focuses on comings and goings, exile and return, the energy that propels action forward to an inexorable end, attachment and separation?

Trauma, repetition, doubling, splitting, fragmentation and integration—these are all devices encountered both in drama and in psychoanalysis. Dramatic protagonists attempt to master trauma through repetition with comic or tragic results. Characters in drama engage in denial and disavowal

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that is unsustainable, leading to a tragic ending, madness or death. Consider how the ending of each analytic session or act in a drama unfolds in a way that cannot be predicted at the outset.

As I discovered at the IFPE 2012 22nd Annual Interdisciplinary Conference, with its theme of “Return,” 3 psychoanalysis is indeed an art, an art arguably most akin to drama. Like the theater, psychoanalysis is a hybrid art drawing on elements of verbal, auditory, and visual representation. And most important of all, both rely on symbolic thinking and language. Both theater and psychoanalysis cease to function when the participant reverts to primary process thinking. Through both we enter into altered states of consciousness, the world of dreams, unconscious thought, and enactment. Both explore aggression, libido, degradation and the sublime (or should I say “sublimation”?) And, of course, what would psychoanalysis be without Aristotle and his discussion of anagnorisis or recognition, and especially catharsis—an experience closely related to the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and countertransference. 4 Actor and audience, analyst and patient enter into a collaborative “as if” relationship in order to undergo a mutative experience. The theater audience serves as a kind of silent analyst. Drama, like psychoanalysis, unfolds in time. Both are associative as well as linear processes, weaving back and forth through a seemingly random yet also highly structured linear progression, uncovering and revealing what was at first unknown through a shared process.

So, how do the intersections and interdependencies between these disciplines apply to the theme of exile and return? I use the term “exile” here loosely, not only in the strict sense of the experience of having been driven out one from one’s home but also to include the experience of self-imposed exile or departure for whatever reason. This is true of the larger social and demographic phenomenon of diaspora. In the uprooted world we live in, the diasporic experience is a common one. But the great literature of diaspora, of exile and return, comes to us originally through the writings of the 2 great diasporic cultures upon which our western heritage is based—the Greek and the Judeo-Christian. For the greatest epics in the western tradition are tales of exile and return as befits these diasporic peoples. The Homeric epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey; and the Hebraic Old Testament, are stories of exile and return. So it no longer seems so remarkable that western drama would contain such a profusion of works that also deal with exile and return. This paper was originally presented at the IFPE 2012 conference on Veterans Day, and by happenstance the theme was quite apt, as so many dramas of exile and return have to do with the experience of war.

How does philosophy intersect with theater? Plato was famously critical of art and artists and had little use for either (with a few exceptions) and excluded them from his ideal state. 5 He cautioned against the artifice of the artistic endeavor as taking us further from discovering truth. According to Plato, what the artist shares is thrice removed from truth, nothing more than a representation of a representation of a representation. 6 His objections bear some resemblance to contemporary attacks on psychoanalysis as

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3 November 11-13, 2011 IFPE conference “Return,” Fort Lauderdale, FL.
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being unproveable, unscientific and therefore without validity. But Aristotle rescues drama from Plato’s attacks. In his Poetics, Aristotle laid out his observations of what makes for effective drama. Moreover, he discussed what makes drama have the effect it does and what that effect can be. It is Aristotle who introduces us to the concept of catharsis—cousin to the psychoanalytic notions of transference and countertransference. The power of the great tragedies on the spectator was not only that of empathy but of some essential identification with the protagonist’s dilemma. And when Aristotle refers to pity and terror, he is referring to what the audience experiences, not what the character experiences. The “great fall” in the greatest tragedies, (adopted as a central motif, felix culpa, later on in Christianity) Aristotle tells us, are those brought on not by external circumstances or the evils outside us (for that would be melodrama), but by those that come from within ourselves, the hamartia or tragic flaw, what we psychoanalysis would call a character pathology.

If we look at Oedipus, as Aristotle did, and Oedipus’s realization that he had killed his father and slept with his mother, that he was the pollution plaguing Thebes, we analysts might wonder how we might have helped him to avoid acting out, blinding himself. In discovering his blindness to the truth of his family of origin and the cause of his transgression, Oedipus symbolized that blindness with a concrete act. We might have worked with him to help him to act less impulsively and self-destructively, to question the extent of his feelings of guilt and help him realize that his unconscious actions were part of the legacy of trauma he suffered at a young age—having been tortured and abandoned in infancy. Even before Oedipus appears on the scene, his father Laius, who was an abuser, abducted and raped the son of his benefactor. We might wish to help Oedipus see that mutilating himself might not be the only or best response to his pain and suffering. Maybe his rage more appropriately could have been worked through in other ways. But, of course, being who he was, Oedipus would not have sought out help!

The theater spectator sees some essential potential or aspect of herself in Oedipus and is able to feel the counter-transference aroused within herself, draw on her observing ego, and leave the theater having shared in and perhaps gained some insight into the human experience and psyche, including her own.

All theater uses lies to arrive at truth, if that is the aim, as it is with all serious theater. Acting is a lie, the lighting and sets are a lie, the entire mise-en-scene is a lie, one that creates an “as if” experience for the spectator (with or without a fourth wall) as a means of arriving at a greater truth. Yet even Plato, who condemned the theater, wrote his philosophical treatises as theatrical dialogues. (Plato, who disdained the artifice of the theater, was said to have turned to philosophy out of envy once he failed to win a prize for playwriting). For example, The Symposium could be and has been performed as a play script.

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Aristotle seemed to grasp the value of the artistic endeavor, that of finding truth through illusion, through a transferential replication.  

Plato has had adherents through the ages who argued whether the theater (if it should exist at all), should serve a corrective function in its search for truth and be a cognitive experience for the audience, one that would shake the audience out of its delusions and distortions and confront them head on in order to serve some didactic purpose.  

Bread and circuses only takes the audience further away from truth seeking. Similarly, we encounter the patient who wants medication to anaesthetize himself, to reinforce his defenses, to alter his state of being without deepening his knowing.

But on the opposite end of the spectrum were the spiritual descendants of Aristotle, playwrights and theorists who argued that insight and truth could only be reached indirectly, experientially, affectively.  

There is hardly a philosopher or playwright since then who has not weighed in on the debate. 

The big questions all three disciplines continue to ask are, how can we really know ourselves? Know others and the world around us? We know the world only through our sensory perceptions. How can we trust these? Can any real truth come through them? Our sensory apparatus and our minds function only as mediating structures—always at least once removed from things as they are. We analysts can never really know the experience of our patients. We can use all our intellect and all our senses to assemble a construction that will provide some greater knowledge and hope that through this knowledge and the emotions aroused in the process, some measure of transformation comes about.

Theater artists also attempt to piece together a construction based on knowing as much as they can about the characters, their conflicts, and their emotional experiences. Actors try to know their characters and while portraying them attempt to reconstruct them, embody their being as much as possible, and in doing so may have insight into the character in a way that the character himself does not. Similarly, the audience member may know the character better than the character knows himself.

At last, we come to the intersections as they relate to exile and return. Philosophy, drama, and psychoanalysis each examine exile and return in the grand scheme of the life cycle—exile from the womb, from symbiosis with mother, from motherland, but also from our own reason and passions. Each explore return through rapprochement, restoration, reconciliation, reintegration of a split self, and even ultimately through dying and death. When we look at the dramas of return, what do our protagonists find? What does Hamlet find when he is called back to court after the death of his father? What does Blanche duBois find when she leaves Belle Reve for Elysian Fields? Is there an idealized fantasy of return? How does the fantasy meet with the reality? Can one ever go home again? The aforementioned are well-known tragic returns.

What about comedic returns? Are there any? What about the reunion of Jack Worthing with his long lost mother, Lady Bracknell? or that of Shakespeare’s shrewish Kate to her father’s house? or Candide’s

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10 Of course, Aristotle never used this term but *The Poetics* describes a process closely resembling transference.

11 These would include most French theorists and playwrights, Brecht, and Miller.

12 These would include Artaud, Grotowski, and Brook.
return to Westphalia? Philosophy and psychoanalysis both use the Socratic method; while psychoanalysis and theater use enactment to peel away the layers of distortion but only to reveal more layers. The more we explore, the more questions arise. Self-imposed exile is usually a metaphor for the journey of self-discovery, toward autonomy and self-empowerment—to explore the forbidden, unacceptabel, and transgressive parts of ourselves, our sexuality, our will to power, our hidden identities. When successful, we have comedy; when unsuccessful or successful but at too great a cost, we have tragedy. Moreover, the dramas of exile and return on stage and in our offices are inevitably family dramas. We long for return to find a loving, attentive parent, child, or spouse; to return to a safe and familiar space, to a time long gone.

Just as often, exile is the by-product of some trauma, of some empathic failure that leads to flight, but also to return, through repetition, to an inexorable conclusion unless, through some mediating assistance, some other outcome can occur. For the characters in these dramas, for our patients, the journey starts alone, often in shame and envy. If the outcome is to be a transformative one, our protagonist must be joined by someone who can travel the full distance with them. We may all long for a deus ex machina, a coup de theatre that will provide a magical rescue, but philosophy, drama, and psychoanalysis help us to struggle through without them. Neuroscience can and should help us along the way but those who vilify the contributions of philosophy, drama, and psychoanalysis as outdated do so at their own peril and destroy a rich legacy that continues to inform and transform our self-knowledge and our state of existence.

Bibliography


