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REVIEW

**AT THE CROSSROADS:
 IRONY IN THE WORKS OF ADAM PHILLIPS AND JONATHAN LEAR**

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Abstract: An extended meditation on the role of irony in Adam Phillips's *Missing Out* and Jonathan Lear's *A Case for Irony*.

Jonathan Lear, the University of Chicago classicist and analyst, and Adam Phillips, the British analyst and essayist, are two of the most compelling post-Freudian voices writing today. In their different approaches to the psychoanalytic conception of irony lie not only competing – even seemingly incommensurable – perspectives on irony, but also different conceptions of knowledge informing it. Outlining the implicit debate between the two thinkers helps to explore the question of whether ‘knowing’ ultimately enables the psychoanalytic enterprise or stands as an impediment to it. If psychoanalysis, as well as contemporary epistemology, is at a crossroads, then the divergent paths set out by Lear and Phillips provide signposts to very different futures. To articulate the conflict between the conceptions of irony delineated by Lear and Phillips, I take an unlikely starting point, Joss Whedon’s film version of *The Avengers* (US, 2012).

Towards the end of *The Avengers*, a thankful New York City expresses gratitude to the coalition of super heroes who have saved their city. But in the mock television interviews that end the film, following the conflict that nearly destroys Manhattan, New Yorkers wonder whether the group of transformed misfits who make up the Avengers – all victims of trauma and loss – may themselves have been responsible for the damage. With those doubts cast, the

movie's end finds the collection of heroes gathered together and celebrated in Central Park. It's almost as if Aeschylus's *Oresteia* has been transferred to 21st century Manhattan. With the ambiguity surrounding violence here, Whedon's film implicitly asks: are the Avengers agents of justice, or just vehicles for anger? 'I am always angry,' Bruce Banner *aka* the Incredible Hulk confesses. The Furies in the ancient trilogy are transformed into the Eumenides, or 'kindly ones,' their violence domesticated, rendered suitable for the polis. With that, they can be installed at the seat of justice, the Areopagus, their involvement in the traumatic history of Athens finally acknowledged as the necessary origin for the founding of the just city. The seemingly random and uncontrollable anger of the Hulk is transformed and directed outward to the enemies, the *real* aliens, of New York City.¹ In the end, the movie sublimates violence subordinating trauma to the needs of the modern polis: the Avengers, no longer the city's enemies, become its protectors.

Though the work of the philosopher-turned-Freudian, Jonathan Lear, may be most often associated with Sophocles' *Oedipus*, his work also shows affinities with the worldview of Aeschylus, namely, the desire to assimilate what seems unassimilable, to bring the strangers at the gates – violence and desire – into the city.² Lear's *A Case for Irony*, delivered originally as the Tanner Lectures at Harvard, makes a case for psychoanalysis to philosophers, attempting to convince a philosophical community that their conceptions of agency, autonomy and reflection may obfuscate the self rather than express it; that further psychoanalysis provides a needed resource for philosophy so that it may acknowledge the 'unconscious emotions or fantasies' (2011 57) at the root of the self. Citing Hans Loewald, Lear links what he calls the 'experience of irony' (2011 42) – the eruption of 'erotic uncanniness' – to the analytical process of transference. The experience of the familiar as something strange informs the experience of irony – one that allows the self both to acknowledge and express its own hidden resources and commitments. 'The resolution of the transference neurosis in the analytic process,' Loewald writes, is 'due to the *blood of recognition*, which the patient's unconscious is given to taste so that the old ghosts reawaken to life'. Those ghosts, Loewald writes, 'imprisoned by defences but haunting the patient in the dark of his defences and symptoms, are allowed to taste blood, and are let loose'. In the 'daylight of analysis,' however, the 'ghosts of the unconscious are laid to rest as ancestors' whose power informs and makes possible 'a newer intensity of present life' (2011 190 n. 27). For Loewald, trauma and blood are acknowledged and claimed for the psyche and the city, with

Lear inflecting psychoanalysis as both a personal and political ethos. What had seemed like sources of disruption, are in fact, for Lear, the resources of integration. The ‘unfamiliarity’ brought about through the experience of irony has ‘a weird sense of familiarity,’ through which Lear argues, ‘we can recognize’ that what is experienced as most strange is also the basis for more conscious and articulated moral commitments (2011 25). The disparate voices of the psyche, especially those once repressed and brought to light through the eruption of the erotic uncanny, ultimately elaborate the future moral and ethical commitments of the soul.

In *A Case for Irony*, Lear relegates Loewald to a footnote, but the uncanny eroticism that he locates in the mechanism of transference being described here is at the centre of his ‘case:’ a powerful disruptive transformation of the psyche. The taste for blood reminiscent of Aeschylus’ Furies in their desire to take revenge for Clytemnestra in *The Oresteia* is unleashed; the violence that they represent and continue to embody safeguards the city, giving ‘intensity’ to present life. The desire for ‘raw brutal cups,’ revenging those defending the matricide of Clytemnestra, to be drawn by the Furies from ‘living marrow’ at the traumatic beginning of Athens, transform and permit the red-robed Eumenides, the aliens given special resident status, to guard the city. In Lear’s argument, these ‘aliens’ must be acknowledged as the Dionysian forces of the unconscious, which have been given their place by Apollonian philosopher Kings. In Lear’s dialogue with moral philosophers, the disruptive forces of irony enable psychic unity, allowing for forms of knowledge otherwise repressed, filling out the account of ethical action that contemporary normative philosophical accounts obscure.

In the name of ‘rational agency’ and ‘practical identity,’ Lear writes to one of his respondents in the volume, Christiane Korsgaard, a professor of moral philosophy at Harvard, that within philosophical discourses a ‘vibrant organizing part of the self is ignored’ (2011: 64). Ironic disruption is the beginning of a possibility of unity, its only possibility, undoing the ‘ersatz unities’ (2011: 60) nurtured even by, or for Lear, *especially* by philosophers. Lear’s case for irony attempts to enact the unity it imagines, bringing together the disciplines. He shows himself trying not to scoff or condescend (the experience of ‘reflective distance’ is not he replies to Korsgaard, that of the ‘experience of irony’ (2011: 94), but Lear does play the perhaps unrewarding role of the Freudian explaining to philosophers that their virtues are not what they had thought. An ostensibly ‘reflectively judged act,’ Lear writes, ‘split off from the potentially unifying energies’ of ‘one’s irrational emotional life,’ would be ‘treated by Plato (as well as

Freud) as mere appearance' (2011: 64). Notwithstanding the parenthetical subordination, the reading here is undoubtedly Freudian, with the nod to Plato Lear's attempt to have philosophers take Freud *and* his own Freudian commitments more seriously. Freudians may be willing to see Freud as a philosopher, Lear's own *Freud* helping make this possible;³ though the responses to Lear included in the volume as well as his guarded rhetoric – a *Case for Irony* offers little new in the development of Lear's thought – testifies that philosophers are more reluctant to accept psychoanalysis into its precincts.⁴ Lear adopts his philosophical lexicon here, and indeed virtue, fidelity, commitment, and human excellence are part of it, but not as a precedent philosophical traditions have imagined them. Lear takes the traditional philosophical virtues and renders them Freudian, arguing for the need to qualify them all with irony: 'it is only,' after all, 'ironic existence that is a human virtue' (2011: 119). For Lear, the cultivation of the virtue of irony and the accompanying Freudian critique of Kant has implications for the polis as well. To advocate for a 'version of the Kingdom of ends,' in which each person 'has been able to reflect on his or her identity and perform a reflective-endorsement test that conforms to the categorical imperative,' would most likely, Lear affirms, invoking the Kantian social ideal, bring dystopian consequences. For 'splitting off a vibrant part of themselves – treating a deeply rooted source of psychic unity as though it were a mere disruption' – is to disavow, in the name of the self as reflective unified agent, the only set of energies that would enable a possible integration of the psychic and the social (2011: 66). Lear casts doubt on the unity of 'practical identity' espoused by philosophers, and while advocating the 'human open-endedness' that irony cultivates, underscores the 'unconscious unifying principle' that has, he writes, 'great organizing power' (2011: 45, 46). Whatever 'unity is genuinely available to us,' Lear writes, is marked by the 'disruption and division' enabled through irony (2010: 43).

Lear thus distinguishes his irony from that of the non-engaged contemporary ironist 'who is detached from the (vulgarity) of commitment,' the less sophisticated relative of Richard Rorty's ironist who is 'metaphysically detached as she investigates the myriad cultural forms in which others have found a path to commitment' (2011: 119-20). Irony can be as 'affirming as it is negating'; the 'elenchic questioning of Socrates,' for example, 'does not pull him out of social practices,' (2011: 33) but allows him to be more immersed in them. Irony is not, for Lear, opposed to or external to ethical commitment, but integral to it, and makes possible some form of integration for both psyche and polis. In the paradoxical formulation: 'ironic existence –

considered as a human excellence – does not single-mindedly take up the cause of irony, but finds healthy and life-affirming ways of embracing the inevitable resistance to it’ (2011: 163). Irony, and the knowledge it engenders, is internal to a commitment which naturally resists it, not an external and corrosive scepticism, amounting to an impediment to any form of social or ethical engagement.

Adam Phillips’s *Missing Out* announces itself in its first sentence – ‘the unexamined life is surely worth living’ (2012: xi) – as advocating a non-Socratic, non-philosophical version of Freudian irony, a rejoinder to a psychoanalysis based upon knowledge. Though Phillips and Lear are two of the major post-Freudians writing today, both advocating irony, their worldviews give the appearance of being antithetical. Indeed, it is difficult not to see Phillips’s opening as an assault upon the psychoanalytic endeavour as Lear imagines it, the former’s stance an extreme version of the Rortian position that Lear denounces. ‘One definition of a psychoanalytic cure,’ Phillips writes, ‘might be a new-found freedom to ironize *any* description of oneself’ (2011: 60; emphasis added). For Phillips, irony is not part of the project of knowing, it is against any presumption of knowing, certainly the complicity involved in forms of knowledge ostensibly shared. True for Lear, as well, irony comes to undermine pretence, but it does not exclude, as he quotes Kierkegaard, ‘earnestness’. Phillips’s irony, by contrast, cultivates a form of ‘detachment,’ not the ‘socially embedded irony’ (2010: 19) Lear advocates.

A Case for Irony, a plea for a disciplinary unity, reflects Lear’s commitment to psychoanalysis as both personal and social ethos made possible through sublimation, while Phillips, to Lear’s Aeschylus, is something like the Euripidean outsider, mocking Athenians from his cave, writing not about the city, but the lone individual, not about homecoming, but exile, not of the intertwining of diverse stories into the polis, but the excess and singularity of the individual psyche, as in especially *Medea*, what remains unassimilable. Lear’s account of the psyche depends upon shared narratives and knowledge, so the Furies are reconciled to Athens through the shared stories of the polis, bringing them home. Phillips, like Euripides, whose chorus in the *Medea* calls the old poets ‘both stupid and lacking foresight’ for trying to accommodate and ‘cure’ grief, finds that narratives of acknowledgment do violence to the otherness they attempt to accommodate. *Medea*’s ‘fury’ remains unassimilable, ineluctable, her own. Lear elaborates a psychoanalytic response to trauma – both individual and social; Phillips,

by contrast, elaborates a psychoanalysis that provides neither cure nor transformation, but instead permits the discovery of desire.

For Phillips transference is also at the heart of the psychoanalytic treatment. But the irony informing what he guardedly calls ‘the question of cure’ functions differently than the integrating irony of which Lear writes (2012: 60). The ‘aim of psychoanalytic treatment,’ Phillips suggests, is not to increase the person’s understanding of herself, but rather ‘to free her to desire’ (2012: 60). ‘Psychoanalysis is,’ Phillips writes, ‘the treatment that weans people from their compulsion to understand and be understood’ (2012: 63). The resolution of the transference for Phillips only means ‘releasing the patient from the project ... of knowing and being known’ (2012: 75). Though Lear acknowledges the pretences of the wrong kind of knowledge – the practical wisdom, for example, that dooms Oedipus, and by extension contemporary philosophy – Phillips wants to undermine a psychoanalysis defined by the need to fully know. One can move on from trauma, but there is no need to rationalise or domesticate it. The ‘desire to understand’ – the subtitle of Lear’s 1988 book on Aristotle, and perhaps retroactively distilling his philosophical Freud – reads in Phillips’s work as a ‘retreat,’ a form of ‘avoidance’ (2012: 57, 61). For understanding, Phillips suggests, does not ‘in William James’s words, ‘allow for novelty and possibility’. ‘Is the good life,’ Phillips asks, in a rhetorical pose rejecting the Aristotelian virtues, ‘one in which I get it – get to some extent, what’s going on inside me and in others, get who I am – or one in which I don’t need to, one in which the examined life is unliveable?’ (2012: 60).

Lear embraces Freudian virtues; Phillips finds the project that the virtues entail an impediment to the authenticity of desire. Lear frames ironic disruptions as a mechanism to modify the stories we tell; Phillips wants us to stop telling the kinds of stories that are based upon the need for recognition and knowledge. ‘Psychoanalysis,’ Phillips writes, ‘is an opportunity to recover the freedom *not* to know or be known’ (2012: 75; emphasis added). Phillips elaborates an analytical process that works against what he calls ‘fantasies of understanding’ as he advocates for ‘*not* getting it’ (2012: 63) – with *Missing Out* informed not by the Socratic injunction ‘Know thyself,’ but rather the question ‘Can we learn how not to know?’ (2012: 81). If versions of Aristotelian *anagnorisis* or recognition are central to Western and Hebraic traditions – King Lear and Cordelia, Jacob and Joseph – Phillips wonders about the freedom that might be entailed ‘in not understanding and in not being understood’ (2012: 62).

The commitment and aspirations for community at the heart of Lear's project are rejected by Phillips; for the latter, 'wanting to be an accomplice' no longer takes 'precedence over making up one's own mind' (2012: 56). For the 'supposed achievement' of what Phillips calls 'getting it' may in actuality entail 'an avoidance' of our 'solitariness or singularity or our unhostile interest and uninterest in other people' (2012: 57). So instead of getting it, Phillips advocates 'a determined tenacious ignorance,' (2012: 58) not an ironic disruption in the service of cure or unity, but an undermining or ironizing of all form of knowledge of commitment. Knowledge turns us into conspirators or accomplices. Phillips advocates a sensibility that cultivates not the pursuit of knowing but an appeal to whatever knowledge conspires to conceal.

Robert A. Paul, the lone non-philosopher responding to Lear, describes the analytical process as a '*via negativa*' (2010: 170) – though it is possibly *Missing Out* that most represents psychoanalysis as a kind of negative way, the negation of attributes not of the divine, but of desire. For Phillips, that desire is beyond knowledge, an almost mystical, certainly non-discursive experience, approximating Kant's sublime. Phillips invokes and then – ironically – undermines the categories he uses to describe it. Where, for example, in *On Balance* of 2010, Phillips laments how ways of religious thinking entail 'a plot against satisfaction,' without which 'there can be no aliveness, no point,' in the ironizing move of the more recent work, it is the persistent search for satisfaction that 'deprives us of desire' (2010: 174, 140). Lear has been an advocate of a rapprochement between psychoanalysis and theological as well as social commitment. Phillips, by contrast consistently views narratives of religious faith, as well as the secular stories of salvation modelled after them, as wish-fulfilment fantasies, and therefore ultimately mechanisms of avoidance.⁵ But in *Missing Out*, Phillips figures himself as a kind of mystic of otherness, and the Rortian call to irony a means to affirm that the other – particularly her desire – can be at best acknowledged, though never known.

There are those, Phillips writes, who 'want to be with somebody who gets' them, who prefers 'collusion to desire, safety to excitement' who are prey to 'our most violent form of nostalgia,' that is, 'wanting to be understood' (2012: 59). Freed from this need, no longer 'bewitched' by conceptions of otherness lies the presence of the other, beyond concept, beyond language, to which Phillips' persistent, even ruthless ironizing is committed not so much to recognize, but testify (2012: 57). Anxiety – the unpredictable Medea makes Athenian men anxious, because they think they know her but she refuses to accede to the categories of

masculine reason – at least forces an awareness of the other. The constant need for satisfaction and knowledge, in Phillips’s reading in *Missing Out* of Shakespearean tragedy, especially *Othello*, is an attempt to retreat from or find refuge from the irreducible anxiety that the other causes. The very belief in consensual objects of desire (Phillips does not say ‘love’) conceals an anxiety about ‘the unfathomable idiosyncrasy of desiring, or the anxiety about there not being any objects of desire’ (2012: 58). The need to know ‘other people,’ indeed claiming to know them, may serve as ‘a defence against acknowledging their actual existence’ (2012: 74). Thus lovers insistently exchanging ‘I love you,’ are in fact testifying to their anxious loneliness, their uncertainty about the mutual love they explicitly affirm.

Fantasies of knowing, Phillips writes, are finally attempts to ‘solve the problem that other people actually exist, and we are utterly dependent on them as actually existing, separate other people whom we need’ (2012: 72). Though Phillips reads Shakespearean tragedy, sometimes through the lens of Stanley Cavell’s ‘The Avoidance of Love,’ it is the acknowledgement not of love, but desire and what Phillips calls ‘sex,’ as a non-linguistic refusal of knowledge, that is the central aspiration of *Missing Out*.⁶ What ‘psychoanalysts know most about sex is the strange ineffectuality of most of their knowledge’ (2012: 79). To ‘reparate sex from knowing,’ Phillips writes, might be a means of finding ‘out what people might do together instead’ in the absence of the craving of knowledge, complicity and reciprocity (what Lear might call love) (2012: 75).⁷ Phillips thus laments that that the ‘dream of like-mindedness’ is a ‘dream about a group of people or a couple, in which the possibility of not getting it – indeed the whole issue of not getting it – has disappeared’ (2012: 54). For Phillips, ‘sex,’ the province of an authenticity that knowledge will always miss through trying to grasp it, is decidedly anti-social, indeed always missed out by those seeking like-mindedness. Lear’s irony is placed in the service of commitment; while that of Phillips obviates it.

The fate of New York at the end of *The Avengers* rests on the traumatic victim, Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo), the abused child who, climactically transforming into the Incredible Hulk, focuses his punishing wrath on the invaders from another world. There is a lacuna, however, in the narrative progress of the film, especially as it reaches its resolution. The Hulk – with the profile as a kind of Id incarnate – had previously lashed out without discrimination. Yet the film does not address why the Hulk now focuses his energy on behalf of New York City, and does not turn, as he had earlier, randomly, violently, on his fellow superhero, the Black Widow,

Scarlett Johansen.⁸ The gap raises questions that a post-Aristotelian post-modern sensibility might – and justifiably – ask: can knowledge serve as an integrating force in the soul? Can the stories we tell unify the psyche? Can trauma be transformed, cured? Are the old narratives – Aeschylan, Aristotelian, even Modernist – really durable in the face of the traumatic grief and loss that refuse closure? And how, and by what mechanism, does the idiosyncratic otherness present in the soul and even the polis transform? For Phillips, by contrast, whose vision of psychoanalysis provides an indirect testimony to the idiosyncratic otherness of the soul, other questions, also justifiably, emerge: does the cultivation of the singular, of the tenacious not-knowing of self and other really just reveal a soul that is, as Phillips calls her, ‘uninterested’?

The unsatisfyingly artificial ending to *The Avengers* may suggest a contemporary (and still abiding) Aeschylan fantasy for narrative closure. This fantasy, however, may parallel an idealism in Phillips’ Euripidean and post-modern project of ‘resepating’ sex from knowledge. The implicit belief that the energies of the individual unrestrained (like those of Bruce Banner) render a self merely ‘uninterested’ and ‘unhostile,’ may entail a similarly resilient Western fantasy. Might not trauma instead lead to a self, akin to the Hulk, whose violence is uncontrolled and random, whose antecedent is the ancient figure of excess, *Medea*, singular, idiosyncratic, unknowable, maybe even murderous?

Though finally, perhaps ironically, it is the shortfalls of the competing accounts of Lear and Phillips that make them both compelling, indispensable. The balance of the two approaches in their parallel almost symmetrical weaknesses, as well as in their apparent irreconcilability, shows Phillips and Lear providing complementary readings that give a more exhaustive sense of the complexity of both Freud and the notion of ‘irony’. Although remaining unacknowledged in the other’s work, Lear and Phillips each provide the adversarial starting point for each other’s arguments.⁹ Lear’s case for irony thematizes the deficiencies of knowledge and the *ersatz* unities which *Missing Out* condemns (though Phillips would undoubtedly class the unity espoused by Lear as one of them); while Phillips himself acknowledges that knowing and affiliation may be the pre-requisites for the kind of tenacious unknowing he advocates.

We may be today, if still engaged with Freud (and these two books suggest we ought to be), caught between the excess of desire and an understanding allowing for the possibility of the integration of both self and city. That is, between the excess to which *Missing Out* testifies, the individual, even stoic authenticity that refuses conceptualization, especially in terms of the

social, and the desire to know, the philosophically-inflected psychoanalytic project of *A Case for Irony*, to confront the ghosts of the past and transform them into guardians of the self and city. Oedipus at the crossroads was forced to choose a single path. We today, confronting the choice between radically different visions of irony, may, however, have no choice but to follow both.

Notes

¹ On Bruce Banner's childhood trauma in his Marvel comic origins, see [http://marvel.com/universe/Hulk_\(Bruce_Banner\)](http://marvel.com/universe/Hulk_(Bruce_Banner)).

² See most notably Lear (1988).

³ See Lear's *Freud* (2005) as part of the 'Routledge Philosophers' series.

⁴ On Lear's extensive treatment of irony in therapeutic contexts, see Lear (2003).

⁵ See, for example, Phillips (2007: 50-54).

⁶ See Stanley Cavell (1969).

⁷ See especially Lear (1999).

⁸ In an intermediate scene, Bruce Banner, after having hurtled from a spacecraft to the earth, encounters a security guard played by Henry Dean Stanton. The latter asks Banner, 'you are not one of those aliens?' to which Banner responds, emphatically: 'no.' Joss Whedon, the director, who had originally conceived a longer conversation between Ruffalo and Stanton, may have imagined this scene – Banner denying that he is an alien so he can confront the *real* aliens – as a way of allowing for the transition of the movie's conclusion.

⁹ For Phillips's earlier engagement with Lear, see Phillips (1999).

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[http://marvel.com/universe/Hulk_\(Bruce_Banner\)](http://marvel.com/universe/Hulk_(Bruce_Banner))

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