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## CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYSIS

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### Catricide, Matricide, and Magic: The Artist as Chimera

Francis Levy 

While psychoanalytic insights have influenced artistic creation, artists copyright their own inner lives and are resistant to having these inner worlds interpreted.

PSYCHOANALYSIS IS ITS OWN WORST ENEMY, not because of its in-effectuality or the paucity, ineffectiveness, or irrelevance of its insights, but by virtue of the resistance it creates to those self-same insights. As the body rejects an organ transplant, so the Adamic longing for innocence produces antibodies to the concept of childhood sexuality. This resistance is the *sine qua non* of the analytic predicament. It is what creates and defines analysis, but it is particularly aggravated with respect to artists who copyright their inner lives and are consequently notoriously proprietary when it comes to the lode that provides the source of their wealth.

After producing one of the great autobiographical novels of all time, **Proust (1909)** wrote an essay titled “Contre Saint-Beuve” in which he challenged a critic whose reputation rested on his advocacy of the autobiographical interpretation of literature. Eliot, whose poems are loaded with personal allusions to the crisis of the life he led with his emotionally fragile wife, wrote his famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), in which he argued for the impersonality of the artist.

To say that artists are immune from the influence of analysis would be like saying that mythology is the province of only the gods whose story it tells. In its championing of the idea of an invisible world that holds enormous power over everyday reality, analysis has as much influence over art as Einstein's theory of relativity has had over science. Analysis is the palette of literary art as literature is the palette of analysis, and yet in this

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one area—the integrity of the artist's self—analysis remains silent. **Freud (1928)** himself collaborated in discouraging psychoanalysis as a mode of understanding the artist when he wrote that in the face of the problem of the creative artist “analysis must, alas, lay down its arms.” I am reminded of the case of a well-known poet famous for the oedipal dramas of her autobiographical poems who steadfastly denied that personal trauma could provide any understanding of the roots of her artistic drive.

Besides being a writer, I am also the Co-Director of an organization called The Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of Imagination. We host roundtables and film panels, and fund research into matters involving neuroscience and psychoanalysis insofar as they relate to creativity and innovation. Many visual and literary artists have attended panels at the Center on subjects as varied as “The Impulse to Abstraction,” “Psychoanalysis and Literature,” “Free Will,” and “Memory and the Writer's Search for Immortality.” Invariably it is the name of the Center that causes the most consternation and controversy at these gatherings. Why have we named a center after Philoctetes, the wounded hero whose mythology was appropriated by Edmund **Wilson (1941)**, in his famous book of essays, *The Wound and the Bow*. Philoctetes becomes an exile because of his wound, and it is only his special powers as the inheritor of the bow of Heracles that cause his fellow Greeks to plead forgiveness from someone they had once spurned. The naming of the center makes an association between trauma and insight—something that is plainly an anathema even to those artists who have made traumatic experiences of a sometimes autobiographical nature the subject of their work. When Ing-mar Bergman was asked about treatment, he said something like, “If you take away my demons, you take away my genius.” Perhaps the raw pain of disturbance itself is seen as a source of power. Indeed, some of the artists who visit the Center respond to psychoanalysis in a way that is reminiscent of the Wicked Witch of the West's reaction to water. I have not found it helpful to mention to them that one of the greatest modernist talents of all time, Samuel Beckett, sought out analytic treatment without any lessening of his artistic powers or drive.

I am, of course, another story. For one thing my analyst, whom I, perhaps ominously, refer to as Dr. K, saved my life, something for which I have repaid him many times over by my insistence on proving how immune I can make myself to his powers of observation. He also occupied a house on 92nd Street, another dark reference—in this case to a ring of German spies who occupied a house (actually on 93rd Street) that became

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the subject of the FBI thriller *The House on 92nd Street*. My analyst is a Viennese refugee who immigrated to the United States when he was five years old and is hardly spy material. But the joking, with its hint of nefarious forces, results from analysis' being dark and infernal, in that it brings up aspects of human character that at first seem frightening and eventually, in the process of treatment, take on a right-sizedness that makes them merely humorous and human.

When I began my analysis I was mortified by what I had done to a cat with which I had had a sadomasochistic relationship. Now, nearing the end of my analysis, I am still mortified by my own capacity to torture, to inflict harm on a creature I was not able to help. Cats and humans are usually thought to be a reciprocal source of solace, but this cat peed on my *New York Review of Books* and I had my

revenge by periodically wringing her neck.

How to integrate the cat and how I treated my mother as she was dying with Parkinson's disease with the desire to write things that people liked to read? Either I could anticipate the discovery of my own evil by repelling my audience before they ever got the chance to know me or somehow become the cat/mother/man who craved the company of his fellow men and desired to be a source of pleasure even before he was capable of giving pain. I chose Philoctetes as the name for the center I founded with Dr. Edward Nersessian because I identify with the myth. I hated myself. I had not been bitten by anything (outside of a childhood memory I have of walking into a beehive and getting stung all over), but I was the bearer of a noxious wound that made me repugnant to all but a select group of fellow sufferers. I was eaten up with hatred, and I hated myself. I came pretty close to killing myself by drinking too much and disinhibiting myself enough to give someone else a crack at performing the deed. I used to call this pleasure and having a good time.

Analysis disabused me of this notion, but having begun to see the light, Dr. K helped me to build a case. He was my advocate. I was innocent of matricide and catricide—although I did have a difficult relationship with the chronically ill mother I had adored as a child, and I was not good with cats who suffered from urinary infections and confused *The New York Review of Books* with litter. In addition, I was innocent of murder in general. I had had murderous thoughts, but thoughts were not deeds, and the constitution of the United States articulates the notion of “prior restraint.” I may think something, but if I have not done it or caused others to do it, or made a blueprint that might be considered a conspiracy, then I have not done

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anything wrong. Rape, murder, and pillaging were all acts of imagination as long as they remained in the imagination. I was free. There was no one epiphanic moment, when suddenly I walked down the steps of the House on 92nd Street and smelled the metaphoric flowers. But gradually, over time, the weight was lifted from my back, and I was able to get on with the project of figuring out what I was going to do with all these thoughts.

Having pulled down the lever in the yes column in answer to the question, “Has psychoanalysis provided you with crucial insights?” I still, like my aforementioned colleagues, find myself fighting back when my works rather than my self become the subject of the inquiry. I have never in all my years of analysis ever shown Dr. K any of my writing. We discuss my writing the way we discuss my everyday encounters with the world or the way we discuss dreams, but the work itself is a virgin when it comes to psychoanalytic interpretation. I still maintain the quasi-magical notion that understanding is a little like Kryptonite when it comes to character and plot. I have imitated the analytic discipline in my writing regime. I write every day of the week at the same time and for approximately the same length of time. I am having an ongoing conversation with myself that has similarities with the one I had with Dr. K—the single most important difference being that the one I have with myself will only end with my death and that with Dr. K, pending the resolution of our termination problems, will end some time before. But to be precise I do not like to introduce the analytic method into the birthing experience.

For me, writing is a kind of rite where I strive for a high level of un-knowingness. I imitate primitive tribal rituals, building myself up into a state of delirium, burning fires late into the night, exorcising demons, and drawing energy from a war dance of my own creation. Magical thinking is one of the things an analyst might try to disabuse a patient of in the course of the work, but magic, to my mind, is at the heart of artistic production. As far as creativity is concerned, I am a bit like a medicine man, and my possessive attitude about the sources of my own creative drive derives from my being both fearful and ashamed of being caught in the act. I court civilization as a patient even as I try to explore my darkest instincts. But as a writer, I am interested in something totally different, a feeling of estrangement, in which the commonplace becomes a mystery and I am able to look at everyday events—things I might otherwise have taken for granted—as if I were seeing them for the first time.

Every day I work on these two levels, reason and unreasonableness, trying to get better, trying to dispel the irrational urges that supposedly get

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in the way of my so-called happiness, my ability to empathize and understand others, while, at the same time, like the sociopath and career criminal that I am, encouraging the very maladaptive behavior that I rightly or wrongly believe fuels my productivity. For years Dr. K has gotten this wrong. He has thought that my provocativeness and recidivism is about my wish to show my independence from him. If I were to get better, I would have to acknowledge my debt—something that would make me feel vulnerable and dependent. He is not totally wrong as far as analysis is concerned, but what he does not understand is that the provocations have less to do with him than with the artist/animal within me.

Anyone who has ever spent a good deal of time around artists or writers knows that they are like chimeras, half-human, half-beast. They are vain, selfish creatures, who, preying on their fellow humans, eviscerate experience, like a vulture his carrion. Picasso, to my mind, was one of the great vivisectionists of all time, a serial adulterer, who discarded lovers for the sake of his art. One of the greatest disappointments I ever had was coming to New York after graduate school and expecting the literary world to be a humanistic place. I was fortunate to meet a number of well-known writers because of my work as a critic, and I was surprised to learn that the ability to write profoundly about the human predicament has little to do with employing these self-same insights in *life*. In this regard a writer or artist represents an exaggeration of the conflict between instinct and consciousness that is found in most people, in that the artist represents a highly developed consciousness that is a slave to an inordinate animal drive.

What constitutes this drive is the subject of another discussion. I will, however, say that it is not explained by ambition; the desire for fame or money; narcissism; or even the psychoanalytic concept of sublimation. From my own experience, it has to do with architecture. I

want to make a certain kind of world and spend a good deal of my time inhabiting it. I am not surprised by the addictive quality of these multifaceted new video games like *Spore*, which enable a player to create his or her own world. I am a misanthrope and cynic who plays the role of the spurned lover when it comes to life in the real world; but when it comes to the things I write, I am a Utopian, who defies the derivation of the word (the dictionary definition of Utopia being *that which does not exist*). After all these years of rejection and failure, I am happiest when I am able to inhabit my perfect community free from the wiles and worries of human beings. My compromise formation, the dark secret of my years of analysis, is that

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I finally found happiness in a place that represents my ego and libido and is at bottom freed from both their humanity and constraints.

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