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Revelment in Theatre and Therapy

This paper employs a phenomenological description of the processes which take place to reveal meaning in the contexts of both theatre and therapy. I will explore the notion of reality as a construction, and look at processes of revealment in the following contexts: the therapeutic situation, theatre generally and with specific reference to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Zeller's play, *The Father*, which at the time of publication is playing in London.

Realism as a theatrical genre is a highly constructed form, involving the layering of elements upon and beside one another to create an illusion of reality for the audience members. While the impression created is one of effortlessness, realism is in fact one of the most laborious and difficult façade's to create and sustain in a form believable to the audience. It is within this genre particularly, where we have been lured into believing that we are already experiencing the real, that the notion of revealment is especially interesting.

The elements in play in the dramatic situation can be considered in relation to an idea introduced by the mathematician Henri Poincaré in 1914, the 'selected fact' – a concept developed by the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion. It is an idea that clarifies the relationship between meaning and coherence. This is how Poincaré stated it originally:

"If a new result is to have any value, it must unite elements long since known, but till then scattered and seemingly foreign to each other, and suddenly introduce order where the appearance of disorder reigned. Then it enables us to see at a glance each of these elements in the place it occupies in the whole. Not only is the new fact valuable on its own account, but it alone gives a value to the old facts it unites. The only facts worthy of our attention are those which introduce order into this complexity and so make it accessible to us".

"Bion (1962) considered the element serving such a function in giving unexpected coherence of meaning is itself an emotional experience." (Mawson, 2015). His daughter, Parthenope, put it succinctly as follows: "The thinking individual recognizes as unexpectedly harmonizing all the other scattered facts – it is one of them, but it allows the thinker to 'see'

the meaning which had previously not been visible” (Bion Talamo, 1981).

The apprehension of an element serving dramatically the function of a ‘selected fact’ in the sense just described, can produce an insight that surfaces from amidst a melee of thoughts and feelings, one which having once been experienced is known immediately to be undeniably true. Not only can this insight *not* be concealed again once it has surfaced, but it shines a light upon other aspects of being which force the individual to reconsider the more fixed notions of self. Indeed, once the selected fact has been revealed it then becomes impossible to view ones experiences in the same way as before. It is here that we can begin to see a possible parallel process in theatre to that experienced in therapy.

The term revealment is defined in the OED as: “The act of revealing; disclosure, revelation” it hints at both process and phenomena. In order to contextualise its meaning more usefully and apply it to both theatrical and therapeutic processes it is necessary to go back to the ancient Greeks, and specifically to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (Aristotle, 2006). It is in this short text that the notion of *catharsis* is fully explored and has become the paradigm for literary and dramatic scholars of tragedy. Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, as pity and fear, is expressed in terms of the processes which bring them about; in the case of drama, through *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *peripetia* (reversal).

These terms refer specifically to Aristotle’s model for the ideal Greek tragedy, where characters’ actions are lived according to their true nature, but from whom complete knowledge of how they became so remains concealed, while at the same time driving their actions. In the case of Sophocles’ Oedipus, he lives and acts regally, is driven to finding out the cause of the plague upon Thebes to free his people, and makes strong vows of punishment and exile which, ultimately, he keeps. His rise to fame and fortune have reached a pinnacle at the opening of the play, and it is at this point that his character is most revered. Yet as the events of the play lead to the revealing of concealed knowledge, the construction of the real Oedipus as the person he believes himself to be is gradually challenged through the process of revealment. At the height of the drama there is the moment of recognition, when what is revealed affects and destroys the idea of the ‘real’ (constructed) self, and at this point the drama goes into reversal; this means that his fortunes are

reversed and he lives an existence true to the one which would have ensued, had concealment not taken place.

The idea of concealment is explored in existential philosophy and specifically referred to in Heidegger's notion of *The Clearing* in relation to revealment. In psychoanalysis the notions of concealment and revealment are linked to a desire for truthful communication:

In the long run the desire to reveal, to tell, overrides the desire to conceal. The talking therapies exist only by virtue of this universal desire. If we require an inexorable drive in our theorizing about human nature, talk, as the "organ of revealment" qualifies. (Kovar, 1994)

In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* he refers specifically to the notion of concealment in Sophocles' plays, and also to what he describes as 'revelation'. The shared etymology of the terms revelation and revealment is clearly evident, but what is interesting is the notion of agency. In Sophocles' plays, the drive for revelation is what Kierkegaard describes as ethical. He argues: "Aesthetics required concealment and rewarded it, ethics required revelation and punished concealment". (p.79)

He goes on to say:

The ethical idea contradicts itself as soon as it must be carried out in reality, hence ethics requires revelation... as a tragic hero... ethics loves him precisely because he expresses the universal. (p.79)

We can see from the example given in Sophocles' *Oedipus* how Oedipus' agency is the ethical action which brings about his very downfall. On the level of metaphor, however, while we as an audience are reduced to pity and fear as we recognise in Oedipus our own frailty, we admire Oedipus' pursuit of truth as a way of ending the plague (the consequence of concealed truths). As Kierkegaard reminds us: *The tragic hero who is the favourite of ethics is the purely human and him I can understand, and all he does is in the light of the revealed (ibid, pp. 80)*

In the therapeutic situation the client presents as a real person, in many cases with a sense of a fixed self, an essence. In our work as existential

therapists we provide a space and a relationship where this construction can become more fluid through containment, empathy and challenge. This transformation takes place through a process of revealment, where the idea of the 'real person' is gradually deconstructed. Through the development of the relationship, concealed parts of the self are allowed to emerge and the therapist receives them openly and without judgement. As a result of this process of revealment, aspects of self can be accounted for, integrated and the client becomes more able to acknowledge his frailty and subsequent freedoms and responsibilities. Once the idea of the 'real self' has been deconstructed, the individual is no longer required to be lived by his image or the expectations that come from it.

Once the concealed has emerged through the process of revealment it is interesting to ask to what extent one might therefore hold hope for our clients for an agency that is *ethical*. While Kierkegaard may recommend this I am suggesting rather, that through a shared catharsis, the client and therapist have experienced a level of revealment which makes anything other than authentic relating feel false and therefore difficult to accept, thereafter. With this increased awareness comes the agency to act towards and out of a notion of a self that is 'becoming' rather than a fixed construction.

Different therapeutic modalities have various models or theories for understanding this process of concealment and revealment. What is interesting is the universality of experience regardless of whether one views concealment as a defence, denial, the unconscious or bad faith. In theatre, the act of catharsis is a shared experience where the individual and the group are interchangeable, and all share the pity and fear that are fundamental to the human condition.

Last month I saw ***The Father***, a new play by Florian Zeller at the Tricycle Theatre, London. What struck me particularly while experiencing this piece was its parallels to therapy, as processes within which *revealment* occurred, creating a level of catharsis in its audience that cut through ideas of certainty and reveal the unstable construction of reality.

The piece explores the impact on a father and daughter's relationship as his mind deteriorates through the onset of Alzheimer's. On the night I attended, audience members of all ages began to cry aloud with the protagonist as the final scene played out its tragic conclusion. Left alone, confused and bereft, in a heart wrenching scene in his bed in a residential care home, he reaches out for his nurse to hold him, crying

“Where am I? Who are you? - Mummy, I want my mummy”

This scene, known in dramatic terms as the *denouement* or climax of the play, brought about in its audience a catharsis, as the concealed becomes revealed - not just in the character or, indeed, the play as a whole, but also in its audience members.

In the play, the character of the father Andre, undergoes a gradual and unsettling transformation which the audience is invited to share by experiencing the world of the play in his shoes. He becomes more confused as the play progresses, up to the point of his aforementioned final speech, where in finally expressing his vulnerability and acute anxiety, he resembles an eighty year old toddler.

Of particular interest is the *content* of the play, in that the onset of dementia in some ways creates a release of repressed material, which has been concealed for various reasons. Through the liberation of these feelings it is not that the initial trauma is necessarily revealed, but that parts of the personality and more importantly drives and instincts which might usually be deemed unacceptable to either the individual or society are. It is as if the superego is no longer reigning over the ego. Obviously in the case of dementia, this is brought about in a way in which the individual has no agency and therefore no power, adding subsequently to the feelings of terror and impotence felt by the sufferer, and experienced by the audience.

Having a profound emotional impact on me and other members of the audience, it put us in touch with one another and the existential frailty that unites us as human beings – an awareness of the temporality of not just our existence but our unstable construction of reality. To elucidate this point further, the form of the play reflected the content, as the gradual deconstruction of the set throughout the play (from a fully furnished living room to four bare white walls with a bed centre stage) served to symbolise not only the deterioration of Andre’s mind, but an actual breaking through of the layers of reality.

Fundamentally, it is the willingness to stay open to concealed aspects of the self through relationship, that allow this process of revealment to take place in both therapy and theatre. To do so one has to trust that what may be revealed can be understood and shared in, as an experience of humanity by its witness(es).

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Theatre Productions:

Zeller, F. Transl. Hampton, C. *The Father* (June 19th 2015) Tricycle Theatre London