

Martin Puchner

The Theater of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy.

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Puchner's first aim is to show that Plato's goal was to attain "a careful balancing act between matter and form" (35), between materialism and idealism in our engagement with the world, so as to "dislodge the materiality of the theater, turning that materiality into something much more detached, removed, mediated, and unstable" (33). The result, on Puchner's reading, is a theater practice that "hovers uneasily between the physical, on which it draws, and the metaphysical, to which it points" (33). The explanation of what he calls "dramatic Platonism" is pretty interesting. But Puchner is not satisfied with that; instead he hopes to show that Plato's aim in his dramatic representations of Socrates can illuminate both modern theater and modern philosophy.

The first three chapters are concerned with the influence of Plato's philosophy on theater. In the first chapter, Puchner presents an analysis of Plato's dramaturgy. In the second, he traces a history of particular theatrical productions of Plato's dialogues or of works based upon them. In the third, he broadens the scope of the discussion to argue that elements of Plato's dramaturgy can be found to underlay modernist theater.

The next two chapters deal with the influence of Plato's theater on philosophy. The philosophers Puchner chooses to discuss are some who have had a direct influence in the literary arts and literary theory. In the fourth chapter, for example, he discusses Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Burke, and Deleuze, while in the fifth he primarily discusses Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Badiou. This, so far, is not a complaint. I mention it here only to sketch part of the terrain Puchner has in view when he sets forth to demonstrate Plato's "influence on philosophy."

The book is full of interesting and provocative ideas. And that seems to be much of the point. So I will be unable to do justice to the book's richness.

The main line is derived from this: Puchner takes seriously the idea of Plato as a dramatist. He argues it is neither an accident nor an incidental matter that Plato wrote dialogues. Therefore, he claims, "Plato must be rescued from the friends and enemies of theater alike" (7) who have held that the attacks on theater in Plato are either right or deeply prejudicial and that the dialogue form was for Plato either a merely rhetorical feature of his more centrally philosophical concerns or that it was an unconscious admission that he was wrong. He suggests this rescue can be effected if we understand why the tradition of "the Socratic play" has within it the means for understanding both "the modern theater of ideas" and even modern philosophy itself (8). His analysis of key dialogues supports his claim that Plato employed and sought to transform the classical theatrical genres of tragedy, comedy, and satyr play.

In his analysis of Plato's dramaturgy, Puchner attempts to demonstrate two things: first that Plato deployed three key dramaturgical categories—character, action, and the relation to audience; and second that in deploying them he transformed each. "Character is important because it is the site of moral choice... [while] at the same time, character is also the bearer of cognitive insight", Puchner asserts (21–2). By making the unlikely and unlikable Socrates the only serious character of his dramas, Plato began to transform drama itself. This is in part because of the character of Plato's Socrates and in part because Plato also transformed the expectation of action; in his Socratic dramas the "single unifying principle... is not action, but argument" (25). The result is a kind of play of character and ideas against action, a theme to which Puchner returns at several points in his argument.

Puchner has discovered, I believe, a history of theatrical productions of what he calls "the Socrates play" that permeates, or better punctuates, the history of theater from at least the time of the Renaissance. These plays present both Socrates' "thoughts as well as his actions" (40) and use both Plato and others—e.g., Xenophon—as sources of their material. Exposition of the knowledge an author can be shown to have of her predecessors is what normally forms the justification for identifying any sequence of plays as a tradition. Because the authors of these plays rarely had knowledge of each other, Puchner argues in Chapter 2, the "history of the Socrates play does not proceed in a linear fashion, with each writer knowing and deliberately revising the works inherited from predecessors" (41).

Moreover, and although this is not the center of Puchner's attention, it is worth noting that this same lack of knowledge may contribute to the "sheer diversity" of plays in this form. That is, the diversity of the "Socrates plays" may be the result of the fact that each author reached all the way back to Socrates, rather to her more immediate precursors, to explain or justify her own views about contemporaneous events. Certainly, as Puchner shows us, diversity of outlook is a feature of most, if not all, of the Socrates plays. Depending on the time and place of the author, and his political or social position, Socrates is made into a devoted husband, a celebrant of homoerotic love, a defender of democracy, a critic of "mob rule," a Christian hero, a pre-Christian hero, a self-proclaimed poet, and so forth.

What does interest Puchner in Chapter 2, it seems to this reader, is simply the wonderful detail that emerges in the various projects he describes. A more systematic discussion takes place in the third chapter. While acknowledging the familiar claim that modern theater is "anti-Aristotelian," Puchner is among the few who have also claimed it is also best understood as Platonic. The key elements of Platonism he finds in modernist drama are its opposition to "the harsh worldview of tragedy," its commitment to a "theater of ideas," and its use of metatheatrical—if not anti-theatrical—techniques to develop a critical style that employs ideas derived directly from Plato. The reason this Platonist tendency in modernist drama has not been visible is that the dominant histories of modern drama have been committed to materialism rather than Platonic idealism (73–4). That said, and whereas an oppositional strategy might be expected, emphasizing idealism against the dominant materialism, Puchner aims instead to question this "polarization" itself and propose to read modernist theater in terms of "dramatic Platonism," aiming "at the unsettling combination of idealist aspiration and material practice that characterize Plato's dialogues" (74). The strategy he claims to employ is that of "focusing on the ways [modernist] playwrights fundamentally rethink the status of materiality in drama and

theater” (75). This rethinking, he believes, is inevitable if one worries about the status of ideas in theater.

Some playwrights who are a pretty natural fit for this approach are Strindberg, Kaiser, Wilde, Pirandello, and Stoppard, all of whom Puchner discusses. But the centerpiece of the chapter is the discussion of Brecht, his uneasy relationship with Walter Benjamin, and especially the *Messingkauf* dialogues (107—12) whose central character is called, simply, “the philosopher.” In the *Messingkauf* dialogues Brecht explicitly sets forth the outlines, themes, and arguments for the anti-Aristotelian theater he championed. But is this work really therefore Platonist? Of course not, if “Platonist” is to mean “idealist.” For, as Puchner rightly notes, Brecht was famous for “dedication to historical materialism” (111). But, since his idea of “dramatic Platonism” is likewise not idealist in spirit, but tries to maintain a “balancing act” between the matter from which it is made and the ideas it points to, Puchner thinks he has demonstrated that a not-purely materialist reading of *Messingkauf* is possible.

These, however, are slippery terms and one would like to have seen something a bit more concrete by way of examples from the dialogues, or even from the plays, to justify—indeed even to explain—the application of the terms Puchner employs here. Unfortunately, none is given. Worse, however, one might think that his idea of “dramatic Platonism,” with its commitment to maintaining a “balancing act” between the matter from which it is made and the ideas it points to is not actually all that distinguishable from Aristotle’s actual metaphysical positions, in which forms (ideas) come into being only enmeshed in matter.

I suspect the problem is this: Brecht’s anti-Aristotelianism is targeted at Aristotle’s pronouncements and arguments in the *Poetics*, not at his metaphysics. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle clearly recommended plotted theater, and gave an account of good plot structure as requiring a noble figure, a causal story, and the appearance of the inevitability of tragic fate. The connection between Aristotle’s views in the *Poetics* and his physics, metaphysics and moral and political theories are complex matters, of course. But the fact is that, except for the primacy of causation in explanation, the detailed non-Platonist metaphysics that Aristotle developed is not much in evidence in the *Poetics*. In contrast, Brecht spent little time thinking through Aristotelian metaphysics but, instead, took the *Poetics* more or less at face value. And he disagreed with some, but not all, of it. In particular, Brecht did not disagree with causal stories. Much of his own theater is aimed at getting audiences to confront and contest the stories they are usually presented so as to arrive at a more accurate and useable story about the real social causes of the behavior of characters. Puchner is, however, interested in broadly metaphysical themes. And in order to corral Brecht into the fold of “dramatic Platonism” Puchner must present Brecht as interested in, challenged by, and responding to Aristotelian and (a revised version of) Platonic metaphysics. There may be something in this. But my first guess is that it is a mistake.

In the last two chapters, Puchner tells us, he “approaches the conjunction of drama and philosophy from side of philosophy” (121). It is fairly telling, I think, that he focuses primarily on those philosophers who have used the dialogue form of writing and, among those, only those who wrote their dialogues “with the theater in mind” (121). As a result, the list of people about whom Puchner comments is constrained to those who worried, along Platonic and non-Platonic lines, about the role of performance in the presentation of philosophical ideas.

Only the three philosophers discussed in Chapter Five have any direct connection to traditions of philosophy that focus without embarrassment on truth. And only those three have any serious commitments to empirical methods in the investigations of life. Nevertheless, even these do not find the Humean tradition of empirical investigation comfortable, or not entirely so. In contrast, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Marx come in for only some ten short comments combined; while no mention is made at all, for example, of Galileo, Newton, Berkeley, Mill, Frege, Tarski, Gödel, Ramsey, Davidson, Quine, or Rawls. Wittgenstein is represented, but only by his more gnomonic and obscure statements.

One must constrain the list of targets somehow, I suppose. And it is Puchner's book, after all. So it may seem uncharitable to quibble over this point. But given Plato's views on matter and ideas, on how to discover the truth about how to live, and on the nature of character—in short, given Plato's *ideas*—Puchner's seems at best an arbitrary way to cut the pie. At worst it is a deliberate attempt to privilege the form of the writing over its content. Plato, like many of the philosophers I listed above who are omitted here, was deeply interested in trying to figure out what makes a judgment on any topic reliable and, so, what makes a judgment about how to live reliable. Indeed, he was led to some of the very positions Puchner discusses by this particular interest. And my guess is that, if there is a Platonic legacy in modern philosophy, it lies in this direction, not in the preoccupation with theatricalizing philosophy.

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