CODA: PERFORMING CONVERSION IN AN EARLY MODERN FUTURE

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My thoughts turn to the *moriscos* as I take my first sip of espresso and look over a damp copy of the morning’s *New York Times*. In the foreground of the cover photo, a handful of human figures stand with their backs to the camera, looking toward a stout, grey building that sits commandingly at the end of a sandy courtyard. The women in the photo all wear colourful headscarves and long jackets that extend past their knees. One of them has her head slightly tilted, gold necklace sparkling in the sunlight. Another holds a clamshell cell phone to her ear. A boy on the right has his arms folded across his chest, revealing a skinny elbow that peeks out from a saffron-coloured polo shirt. Near the centre of the photo, the Chinese national flag flies above the building’s entrance, providing a splash of colour to match a pair of messages emblazoned in red across the building’s facade. Looking closer, I notice that the message on the left is in Mandarin and the message on the right is in Arabic. The headline provides further details. ‘Anti-Islam Detention Camps in China. Minority Swept Up in Biggest Internment Program Since Mao Era’.1

The article underneath explains that the building is a centre for conversion.2 Over the past year, the Chinese government has built a number of similar facilities throughout the Xinjiang region for the express purpose of turning hundreds of thousands of Chinese Muslims into model Chinese citizens. As detainees enter, the gigantic red messages in Mandarin and Arabic command them to ‘Learn the language, study law and acquire job skills’.3 Once inside, they must adjust to a life stripped of beards, headscarves and prayer mats and
work through a daily regimen of lectures, patriotic hymns and exercises in self-criticism. A former detainee reports that, after two months in the facility, he certified his new identity by publicly renouncing his former life, an obligatory performance managed in spite of seething private resentment.

I wonder if the detainee’s resentment makes any difference. My first thought is that, as long as he speaks, dresses, eats, writes and sings according to script, the authorities will consider his conversion a fait accompli. But if the primary objective is outward conformity, why bother with the prolonged lecturing and self-examination?

I reach into my pocket for my phone and forward the article to my friend Stephanie. ‘Hey there. Just saw this article in the Sunday paper and thought it might be of interest. Hope all is well’. Stephanie is a historian of early modern Spain. Her scholarship focuses on legal and political documents pertaining to the moriscos, a socially distinct group that emerged in the early sixteenth century following the introduction of laws forcing hundreds of thousands of Spanish Muslims to convert to Catholicism. Like their twenty-first-century counterparts in China, the moriscos found themselves obliged to perform according to the script for a dramatically new identity. With the threat of mortal consequence constantly hanging overhead, they systematically adapted to new codes of behaviour, new cuisine, new apparel, new books, new songs, new prayers and a new god. Their story does not have a happy ending. Following a century of assimilative policy, the Spanish government eventually concluded that the converts were not performing as expected. Between 1609 and 1614, approximately 300,000 moriscos left Spain on threat of death, abandoning properties they had inhabited for generations. In a contemporary painting of the port at Dénia, Vicente Mostre depicts Spanish Christians triumphantly dancing, wrestling and enjoying other festivities while hundreds of Morisco families board ships bound for North Africa, victims of what was at that point, in the words of historian Matthew Carr, the largest ‘ethnic-cleansing’ campaign in European history.

Readers of Don Quixote may recall Cervantes’ characteristically sensitive, but politically cautious, treatment of the moriscos in a brief episode from Part II, Chapter LIV, where Sancho Panza encounters his old neighbour Ricote, an exiled morisco who has returned to Spain in disguise to recover a stash of buried gold. After treating Sancho to a picnic of caviar and a half dozen botas of wine, Ricote delivers a surprising defence of the expulsion, candidly admitting that he was never much of a Christian, but not really a Moor either. As a counterpoint to this justification, however, he also offers a sympathetic description of his wife and daughter, who were sincere Christians, and have had difficulty adapting to life among the Moors in Algiers. ‘It is not a good idea to nurture a snake in your bosom or shelter enemies in your house’, he tells Sancho.
In short, it was just and reasonable for us to be chastised with the punishment of exile: lenient and mild, according to some, but for us it was the most terrible we could have received. No matter where we are we weep for Spain, for, after all, we were born here and it is our native country.8

The story of the moriscos is historically significant because it signals the arrival of an era where conversion became a world-making phenomenon, an era invigorated by the theory that the innermost dimension of selfhood could undergo radical, categorical change. When historians attempt to describe early modernity from a wide-angle perspective, they typically list developments such as the discovery of the New World, the growth of cities and states, new networks for trade, growing interaction between peoples and cultures, and other advancements toward a global marketplace. In addition to these broad structural features, however, one might also note the emergence of another, more conceptual, marketplace, a space that made the free-flowing exchange of identities, faiths and allegiances seem readily possible. Operating under the affordances of this new regime, the people of early modernity converted at an unprecedented rate, sometimes by the thousands, but also on an individual basis, sometimes by force, but also as a result of volition or persuasion. As the conversion camps in Xinjiang and myriad similar examples demonstrate, the influence of early modern conversional theory continues to resonate in our own age.

Laying my newspaper aside, I lean back and focus on bringing my thoughts into order. At some point in the twenty-first century, an Islamic detainee at the Xinjiang conversion centre proclaimed his commitment to a wholly new identity, secretly burning with resentment, perhaps making a conscious effort to avoid clenching his fists or grinding his teeth. At another point approximately 500 years and 7,000 kilometres away, moriscos such as Cervantes’ Ricote endeavoured to reinvent themselves as Christians, only to face expulsion to a society where their new identity was a damning liability. What patterns emerge when one considers the conversions of the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries side by side?

Three ideas come immediately to mind. My first observation is that conversion is always political. Whether it is sincere or feigned, forced or volitional, conversional change will always involve a turn away from one social category toward another, and will play out in terms of alliances, schisms, recruitment, defection, persuasion, coercion, sovereignty, subjugation, loyalty and betrayal. Second, because it can only become manifest in modes of self-presentation, conversion is always performative. Saul of Tarsus and Cassius Clay both got a new name. The detainee in Xinjiang shaved his beard and learned new songs. The moriscos ate ham. Augustine abandoned his mistress. Whatever form they may take, articulations along these lines are constitutive of conversional
performance. They are the ground that makes the figure of conversion knowable for others and oneself.

However, conversion is never really knowable, at least not from the outside. A convert who appears to have become a model Chinese citizen may in fact be a deep well of resentment, framed by a model citizen-shaped outline. One can never really know for sure. Thus, my third and most important observation is that, although conversion is always political and always performative, it is only nominally interior. A key similarity between Ricote and the Xinjiang detainee is that, while both were able to successfully perform according to script, neither was in fact sincere. Conversion is putatively about a change on the inside, somewhere deep in the heart, or the soul, or the mind, but an interior change does not actually have to occur in order for a conversional performance to be effective. Rather, it merely has to seem as though it has occurred. Performance trumps spiritual sincerity.

I should note that I have been using the term ‘performance’ as it pertains to practices of identity and self-presentation. Writing in a similar mode, Judith Butler famously argued that gender is performative because it inheres in practices of acculturation, and is therefore distinct from anatomy, which has a purely biological basis. In order to bring the legacy of early modern conversional culture into better focus, I want to draw a line connecting this notion of ‘performance’ to the sort of performance that takes place in a theatre, that is to say, the sort of performance that an actor delivers by conveying a representational artwork through the medium of a body to a group of other bodies gathered around a stage.

The early modern conversional marketplace arose on the crest of a tremendous outpouring of cultural production, drama in particular. In music, philosophy, literature and the visual arts, thinkers and makers of all stripes applied their talents to the subject of conversion for purposes of persuasion, but also for purposes of critical enquiry, providing a rich seedbed where conversional tropes, norms, images, attitudes and ideas could proliferate and evolve. Above all other media, drama was uniquely able to bring the dynamics of conversion into focus because it could replicate the subtle nuances of conversional performance in fine-grained, bodily detail.

In the theatre, one could examine a living example of conversion from various angles, compare it against similar examples and evaluate it in terms of veracity and sincerity. For example, consider Shakespeare’s masterpiece of conversional drama, The Merchant of Venice, which invites spectators to consider the forced conversion of the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, alongside the voluntary conversion of his daughter, Jessica. Representations of a similar nature abound in the drama of early modernity. Notably, in even the simplest examples, a theatrical conversion will force an implicitly critical perspective. After all, if an actor on a stage can convincingly simulate the outward signs
of conversational experience, then it must be possible to simulate conversion in other contexts as well. Even the most passionate, credible convert could be a secret dissembler, like Ricote or the Xinjiang detainee. One can never really know for sure.

In what follows, I will track the legacy of early modern conversational theory through the lens of twenty-first-century dramatic performance. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive summary, but, more modestly, to simply observe the great variety of conversions in the present age, and to assert the continued centrality of dramatic and social performance to the ongoing evolution of conversational phenomena. I have three examples.

1.

A solitary man sits on a chair on a stage, hands folded between his legs. He glances to the side and smiles sheepishly into the light, accentuating a dimple on his upper right cheekbone.

Yeah . . . Um, I guess the first thing I want to tell you is, my name’s not Nick. It’s Dave. And I don’t work at Office Depot. I work at a gay-friendly newspaper on Capitol Hill. And I frequently have sex with other men. I lied because when I first started coming here, I had no idea how much I wanted to open up to you guys. I mean, I heard your stories about the desperate gay lifestyle, and how your homosexuality resulted from abandonment by your father, and I was threatened. I mean, you guys saw me . . . coming in here, and arguing, and intellectualizing everything. Uggh! All my life, my intellect has gotten in the way of my happiness, but now I know it is time to give myself to something bigger than intellect. And that something is Jesus Christ.¹⁰

Hands still folded, he bows his head and closes his eyes. ‘Does anybody have any chips?’¹¹

The moment comes at a critical juncture approximately halfway through David Schmader’s one-man show, *Straight: A Conversion Comedy*, which premiered in Seattle in 1999. Alone on a stage with a desk and a few chairs, Schmader narrates and re-enacts his experiences as an undercover journalist in the nebulous world of conversion therapy. Frustrated by his inability to present himself ‘as both rational queer and would-be former homosexual’, he eventually arrives at the realisation that in order to genuinely understand the subjects of his investigation, he will have to drop his combative posture, swallow his pride and play the conversion game according to script.¹² ‘I would have to take the plunge’, he explains. ‘Or, at least, you know . . . at least look like I was taking the plunge, which meant acting.’¹³

His investigation ultimately leads him to the True Hope Retreat in Arlington, Texas, where he spends a weekend immersed in counselling and testimonial
lectures by putative converts. Included amongst the speakers is ‘Ex-Gay Phil’, a character who claims to have transitioned to a heterosexual identity over a period of five years, during which time he has remained completely celibate. Adopting a peppy Texan drawl, Schmader re-creates Phil’s lecture with a strained intensity, bringing the horror and humour of conversion therapy into stark relief. ‘Our gender is not an accident’, Phil proclaims:

God planned our gender before we were born. To become whole, we must answer the call of gender, without fear. Men, read the sports page! When I spend time on the sports page, I feel more informed about what other men are talking about. And when I sense their approval and enjoyment of being around me, I feel affirmed as a man. I feel more masculine. Women, indulge your feminine side, take pride in your appearance, and feminine clothes, and combining colors and accessories. And all of you, thank God every day for making you who you are. Stand before the mirror and say it. Say it out loud: God, thank you for making me a man! God, thank you for making me a woman!14

As Phil’s lecture suggests, the upshot of Straight is that conversion therapy amounts to nothing more than conditioning subjects to perform in accordance with social conventions that gradually distort almost every aspect of their personal and public lives, including their behaviour, choice of reading materials, style of dress and leisure activities. Like Schmader himself, Phil has simply been playing the conversion game according to script, but for a much longer time, and at the cost of profound personal sacrifice. At the end of the play, spectators must evaluate a blunt accusation of abuse, and acknowledge the possibility that any success the treatment may achieve is simply the result of repression, rather than genuine transformation. ‘Yeah, it works’, Schmader says. ‘If you make it work. There’s no cure, just sacrifice, day after day, after day, after day, for the rest of your life.’15

In Psychoanalysis and Male Homosexuality, Kenneth Lewes tracks the origins of conversion therapy to the late nineteenth century, the same period when psychologists coined the term ‘homosexual’ and began to view same-sex attraction as an innate aspect of personhood, rather than mere deviancy. His research shows that, as the twentieth century progressed, ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ became prominent categories for organising human identity, and a long series of methods for making gay people straight correspondingly emerged.16 Freud experimented with a treatment based in hypnosis, but ultimately concluded that his efforts were futile and mistaken.17 Various other attempts ranged from psychotherapy and spiritual counselling, to ice-pick lobotomisation, chemical castration, electroshock therapy and testicle transplant surgery.18

Schmader’s pioneering work for Straight seems especially relevant twenty
years later. Following the release of two conversion therapy films and a major study from the UCLA School of Law, the prospect of reversing sexual preference has become the subject of widespread discussion and condemnation in the public sphere. At the same time, however, organisations such as True Hope continue to operate unabated. Despite legal restrictions in select jurisdictions and numerous denouncements from politicians and mental health professionals, any of the scenes presented in Straight could happen today. In the study from UCLA, researchers estimate that 20,000 LGBTQ youths between the ages of 13 and 17 will receive conversion therapy from a licensed health care professional before they turn 18, while an additional 57,000 will receive the treatment from a religious adviser. The report also estimates that 698,000 LGBTQ Americans between the ages of 18 and 59 have undergone conversion therapy at some point in their lives. Of that group, 350,000 subjects received the therapy during adolescence.

Schmader’s investigation corresponded to a moment when the notion of a ‘cure’ for same-sex attraction was making a bold push into the mainstream. In 1998, a coalition of religious organisations known as ‘Exodus International’ spent $600,000 to place full-page conversion therapy ads in The New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times and other publications, an effort Robert Knight of the Family Research Council described as ‘the Normandy landing in the culture war’. In a description of this moment, Schmader recalls that, like many others, he initially regarded the Exodus ad blitz as a joke, and assumed it would only appeal to a slim minority of gullible hopefuls within the LGBTQ community. His assessment changed, however, when he began to consider the larger impact on public discourse. ‘A very smart friend pointed out that gullible queers weren’t the problem’, he says.

Gullible straight people were the problem, because the basic message of these ads was that, thanks to the miracle of conversion therapy, gays no longer have to exist, which is a short jump from saying gays shouldn’t exist. And, if people think we shouldn’t exist, then what’s to stop anyone from denying our existence, either in the voting booth or by beating us to death with tire irons?

In a Washington Post editorial, entitled ‘Why We Still Haven’t Banished Conversion Therapy in 2018’, Seth Anderson echoes Schmader’s argument and makes an important connection between the prospect of a ‘cure’ and the rights of American citizenship. Mid-twentieth-century conversion therapy advocates insisted that a person could in fact modify his or her sexual orientation – which offered a justification for the state to extend benefits to heterosexuals while
denying them to so-called sexual deviants. Even today, as LGBTQ Americans have made significant strides toward equality, the idea that therapy can change a homosexual orientation or gender identity to mirror heterosexual ideals lingers on, with a toxic impact on the lives of thousands of LGBTQ people.  

By his own admission, Schmader was not the first person to think of infiltrating the conversion movement. ‘After the Exodus boom, every gay magazine on the rack had an Exodus exposé’, he says. ‘But exposing the conversionists as merely deluded freaks is nothing, and no different than the conversionists exposing gays as merely promiscuous sociopaths.’ In an effort to rise beyond mere caricature, Schmader set out to engage with his subjects as fellow human beings, with as much emotional honesty as possible.

A similar attention to human particularity guided the approach he adopted for *Straight*. In addition to Ex-Gay Phil, Schmader’s dramatic adaptation of his experiences features a colourful ensemble of characters, each one sketched with a few carefully chosen strokes of personal detail. Dr Craft is a stocky therapist with white hair, a white beard and a ‘soulful gaze’. In a curt conversation, he explains that same-sex desire derives from irregular glandular secretions, which he claims he can correct with yoga. ‘Never-Gay Ted’ is Schmader’s heterosexual mentor at True Hope. Talkative and hopelessly dense, he provides a model of generic masculinity and a steady stream of tone-deaf encouragement. ‘Buddy, what you are doing is very brave, and I love you for it.’ Allison is a lesbian attendee at True Hope, and one of the only proto-converts who seems ‘normal’ to Schmader. In a candid conversation following Ex-Gay Phil’s lecture, she confesses that she knows in her heart that she will never lose her desire for women, which she regards as a ‘cross to bear’. In her view, voluntary repression is the ‘sacrifice’ she must make in order to enter ‘the kingdom of heaven’.

Of course, there is also a good deal of mockery. *Straight* is *A Conversion Comedy*, after all. But Schmader is equally unsparing in his self-deprecating, hyper-awareness of his own absurdity. In addition to democratising the humour, his over-thinking, neurotic persona enables him to represent the genuine complexity of a subject that requires feeling engagement and attention to human detail. His various performances – and performances of performances – bring the social dimension of conversion into a critical perspective, demonstrating the unique power of drama to make conversion visible.

2.

Two men with umbrellas stand onstage at the Aldwych Theatre in London’s West End. A violent storm is raging. The men have to shout in order to make themselves heard above the wind and rumbling thunder.
MAHLER
What will I lose? Being a Jew means nothing to me.

SIEGFRIED
You say that just to reassure yourself.

Thunder and lightning.

It’s not true –

MAHLER
What? I didn’t hear –

Another terrific thunderclap.

SIEGFRIED
Just imagine that your very being is in some dark and arcane way the product of a million years of –

Another thunderclap but not as close.

What if your creativity will slowly wither? What if the few drops of holy water on the crown of your head drowns your genius?

Nothing from Mahler. They fall silent. The storm is moving away.

Thunder again, but further off.

SIEGFRIED
Gustav, listen carefully to what I have to say. We must never betray who we are.\footnote{34}

The scene occurs near the beginning of Mahler’s Conversion, a drama in two acts by Ronald Harwood. As its title suggests, the play presents a semi-biographical portrait of Austro-Bohemian composer, Gustav Mahler, with particular focus on his decision to convert from Judaism to Catholicism in 1897, a move that facilitated an appointment to the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera. It opened at the Aldwych in October 2001, with Anthony Sher as Mahler and Nickolas Grace as his friend, Siegfried Lipiner. The director was Gregory Doran.

Mahler was a natural subject for Harwood, whose drama for the stage and screen has repeatedly engaged with issues pertaining to Jewishness and the lives of artists, especially musicians. Important works in a similar mode include The Dresser, Taking Sides, Another Time, The Quartet, Collaboration and The Pianist, which won the 2003 Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. There are also some general affinities between the dramatist and the composer in terms of biographical detail. Most notably, they both grew up in relatively humble Jewish families, and they both became artists. Although he didn’t ever convert, Harwood did feel compelled to modify his original surname, Horwitz, when he moved from Cape Town to London in pursuit of a theatrical career.\footnote{35}

On a similar note, the actor who played Mahler, Anthony Sher, was South African, Jewish and also gay. In a Guardian interview for Mahler’s Conversion, he explained how issues of identity and repression factored into
his own struggle to establish an artistic career, drawing explicit connections to Mahler’s biography. ‘This is not a biopic in the Hollywood tradition’, Sher explained.36

It’s not the historical Mahler. It’s Ronnie Harwood’s Mahler. It’s about an artist struggling with questions of identity, with the conflict between ambition and personal integrity. It’s a personal play, both for Ronnie and for me, and that’s why I’m doing it.37

To Harwood’s great disappointment, Mahler’s Conversion failed to impress the critics and the public at large.38 Judging from the reviews, a certain measure of the dissatisfaction derived from the dramatist’s unconventional approach to presenting conversion narratives. Writing for The London Theatre Guide, Darren Dalglish complained,

The lack of any characters to try and persuade [Mahler] not to convert leaves us with no effective drama. He abandons Judaism with little resistance from his own conscience or from his closest friends. There is some debate but it contains very little drama! In fact, the drama comes in the second act in short swift scenes outlining the composer’s problems in marriage, with infidelities and with his impotence! But this also adds to the shallowness of the play, as we are not fully conversed on any reasons or underlying causes to these problems.39

To be fair, I should note that the opening act of Mahler’s Conversion does in fact feature a few scenes where friends and other advisors endeavour to dissuade the composer from abandoning Judaism. But Dalglish’s more general observation is correct. In contrast to conventional conversion narratives, the decision to convert is not a matter of interpersonal conflict or psychological struggle, at least not in the first act. What Dalglish fails to acknowledge, however, is that the lack of conflict is precisely the point. Harwood’s Mahler does not perform according to the script of traditional conversion narratives. His conversion is a matter of mere formality and professional convenience. Judaism and Catholicism both mean very little to him, so there is very little in the way of dramatic conflict. He shifts from one category to another as though he is replacing an old pair of shoes.

For these reasons, it may be helpful to think of Mahler’s Conversion as an anti-conversion narrative. Harwood turns the traditional conversion narrative inside out, revealing an inverse view of the structures that make conversion work. Lightning and thunder notwithstanding, the scene excerpted above is in fact the exact opposite of Saul’s experience of blinding transformation on the road to Damascus, or Augustine’s sequence of bibliomancy and epiphany in the garden, or Luther’s moment of revelation in the storm. Mahler actually makes this exact point himself in a scene with his prospective convertor, Father Swider.
FATHER SWIDER
And may I ask your reasons for wanting to become a Catholic?
MAHLER
Was all this not explained to you?
FATHER SWIDER
No. I’m afraid not. So, I should like to know have you, over the years,
from childhood perhaps, been in search of the truth which has finally led
you to our Lord Jesus Christ? Your ‘Resurrection’ Symphony seems to
suggest that was the path you followed.
Mahler hesitates.
MAHLER
Not exactly.
FATHER SWIDER
Excellent. Then it must have been a sudden moment of inspiration, like
St Paul blinded on the road to Damascus.
Mahler hesitates again.
MAHLER
Not exactly.
FATHER SWIDER
What then?
MAHLER
I want to be honest with you, Father.
FATHER SWIDER
I very much hope so.
After a moment:
MAHLER
There is a movement afoot to have me appointed to the Court Opera in
Vienna.
FATHER SWIDER
Splendid, congratulations – (then, realising) Oh, I see.
MAHLER
It is likely that first I will be invited only as a conductor, and later, be
confirmed as director. I have no guarantees but as you know better than
I, such a position can only be filled by a Catholic.
FATHER SWIDER
Dr. Mahler, this is not a good reason for conversion.40

As the scene continues, Swider asks Mahler, point-blank, if he believes in
God. Rather than answering directly, Mahler haltingly describes an oblique
‘Creator’ along the same lines of the impersonal creative force proposed by
Einstein and Spinoza.41 Horrified, Swider ‘puts a hand to his head as if in
pain’, and brings the interview to a swift conclusion.42 As he exits, he makes
a candid admission of shock and consternation, and offers to put Mahler in contact with a Jesuit priest in Vienna who ‘does nothing but convert Jews, rather quickly, I believe’.43

Crucially, Swider’s shock is a reaction, not only to Mahler’s tacit admission of religious disbelief, but also to his frank indifference and disinclination to perform according to script. As the priest’s leading questions suggest, there are certain things converts must do and say in order to make an interior change plausible, and Mahler is unwilling to do or say any of them. By offering an image of what conversion does not look like, Harwood puts the performative dimension of conversional experience in sharp relief.

In a recent study entitled Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion, Susan Jacoby sets out to de-mystify conversional experience by highlighting the ordinary, human motivations that play into a survey of conversion stories from the past 2,000 years. In case after case, she demonstrates how factors such as convenience, ambition, mortal necessity, a desire to escape, a desire for acceptance or a desire to recover from an addiction might direct a person toward conversional performance, sincere or otherwise. Gustav Mahler does not figure among the converts in Jacoby’s survey, but he certainly would have fit comfortably within the theory of conversion she develops. Although the composer’s attitude toward his conversion is fundamentally unknowable, anecdotal evidence suggests that he embraced Catholicism perfunctorily, as a means to an end, and did not regard the decision as a matter of profound seriousness or spiritual awakening.44

Harwood’s Mahler is similar, but also different. Tracing the same arc as tragic protagonists such as Macbeth, Dr Faustus and Michael Corleone, he gets what he wants, only to discover that the price he paid for his success has robbed him of a quality essential to his humanity. In a psychoanalytical scene with no less an analyst than Sigmund Freud himself, Mahler expresses a fear that his conversion has had a spiritual profundity that he had somehow failed to realise.

FREUD
I must warn you that in the short time available to us this afternoon, I cannot possibly effect anything like a cure. At best, I may be able to guide you on the right path, but little more than that.
Silence.
MAHLER
I have become impotent.
Silence.
My wife is having an affair. A young man. An architect.
Silence.
In the last three years, my entire life has collapsed. First, there was a
vicious anti-Semitic press campaign against me and I was forced to resign from the Court Opera. Then – (Fights tears). I had two children. Daughters. But the elder one, my beautiful little Maria, died of diphtheria. Not yet five years old. We called her Putzi – (Cries recovers). Such a beautiful, loving child. That same month, July 1907, the doctors found I had this serious heart complaint.

Silence.
I’m lost to the world.

Silence.
I cannot rid myself of the feeling that I’m being punished.

FREUD.
By whom?

Silence.

MAHLER
Jehovah.45

In this moment, Mahler’s Conversion suddenly seems as though it might end up on the path of traditional conversion narratives after all. Like the Prodigal Son, Mahler has hit bottom, recognised the error of his ways, and now seems penitent and ready to reaffirm his authentic identity. But Harwood is unremitting in his commitments. Freud responds to the composer’s admission as follows:

FREUD
All religion is an illusion, Dr. Mahler. All religion suppresses the universal essence of humanity. But being a Jew has nothing to do with religious belief. Being a Jew is to possess a common mental construction, radical rather than religious. Which is why, in your case, for example, your conversion of convenience, as one might call it, has not, cannot change your essential Jewishness, which is the inheritance of all the obstinacy, defiance and passion with which our ancestors defended their temple. In your case, your conversion was essentially dishonest. The society in which you lived unfairly demanded that you deny your origins and beliefs in order to rise through its ranks. And you succumbed to what must have seemed to you an intolerable pressure, as great as though you were being raped. Your conversion was psychopathological, a neurotic impulse bordering on the hysterical. Hysterical, because you, like so many other patients of this kind, were made to feel ashamed of being a Jew, then ashamed of being ashamed, and as a result reacted to this mass suggestion of your unjust society and allowed it to seduce you. But the common mental construction of the Jews is immutable and that is why you suffer guilt.46
The interview draws to a close after this diagnosis, and the play itself ends soon thereafter. In the final scene, Mahler is on his deathbed, still struggling with uncertainty and regret, a victim of repression and internalised anti-Semitism, not unlike the self-sacrificing ‘converts’ described by David Schmader. The ending is tragic. There is no redemption. The fictional Freud’s quasi-mystical theory of an immutable ‘mental construction’ hangs in the air as the curtain closes.47

I do not think the point of the ending is that Mahler’s conversion led to his downfall. Harwood has not set out to warn his audience about the moral dangers of betrayal, artistic ambition or religious indifference. Rather, his play is about the psychology of hatred, particularly anti-Semitic hatred, and how the systemic pressures of a prejudiced society can slowly grind a human being into nothing. On this point, it is important to note that the play depicts turn-of-the-century Vienna from a vantage point of 100 years, with the horrors of the Holocaust looming menacingly on the horizon. Ultimately, the culture that obliged Mahler to convert did not really want Jews to become Catholics. The goal was for Jews to become nothing at all. For comparison, consider David Schmader’s observance on the argument implicit in the rhetoric of conversion therapy: if gays (or Jews) can convert, then there is no reason for them to exist, nor is there any reason to acknowledge their claim to the legal rights of citizenship. In certain cases, the politics of conversion is also a politics of erasure.

3.

A young woman stands onstage at Factory Theatre, Toronto, delivering an oral report for an aboriginal studies course. She is wringing her hands compulsively.

JOSIE

Stats Canada figures indicate our country’s Aboriginal population experiences life expectancies five years shorter than all other Canadians. The United Nations definition of genocide: ‘killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to . . . ’ Did I already . . . ?

Beat.

Assimilate: ‘to absorb; to make part of oneself; to be absorbed’. I’m not feeling well. This is not who I am. I get As. But am I . . . What if I’m the successful product of this?48

Josie’s question – ‘What if I’m the successful product of this?’ – strikes the keynote for A Very Polite Genocide or The Girl Who Fell to Earth, a 2006 play by Melanie J. Murray that assesses the impact of residential schools on Canadian Aboriginals. Falen Johnson played Josie. The director was Yvette Nolan.
The term ‘residential schools’ refers to a national system of church-run institutions set up by the Canadian government for the express purpose of converting Aboriginal children to Christianity and assimilating them into mainstream Canadian society. Over the course of an era that lasted from the 1880s until the 1980s, the government forcibly removed some 150,000 children from their families and resituated them in residential schools across the country. The rudimentary education they received focused primarily on manual labour and service industry training.

Upon arrival at a residential school, incoming students received a haircut, a uniform and in many cases a new name, or a number instead of a name. Contact with their families was minimal, if not entirely off-limits. The same was true for any practices or behaviours deriving from Aboriginal culture. Language rules were especially strict. Students could receive a severe beating or even a needle through the tongue as punishment for speaking their native language, even if it was the only language they knew. In addition to these threats, the schools also subjected students to sexual abuse, malnutrition, unsanitary living conditions and coercive sterilisation. ‘We had to stand like soldiers while singing the national anthem, otherwise, we would be beaten up’, recalled Sue Caribou, a residential school survivor who entered the Guy Hill institution in Manitoba at age seven. ‘I was thrown into a cold shower every night, sometimes after being raped.’

In 2005, the Canadian government announced a $1.9 billion compensation package for survivors of the residential school system. To receive payment, claimants had to sign settlement agreements by the end of 2006, the same year A Very Polite Genocide premiered. The compensation package ultimately paid $1.62 billion to 78,750 former students, the largest class action settlement in Canadian history. It also provided funds to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission mandated to collect testimonies and other documentation. In a six-volume report, investigators for the commission found that at least 3,201 students died in Canadian residential schools, primarily as a result of disease. The true number of deaths is likely much higher, however, because the government stopped collecting statistics in the 1920s. Conservative estimates put the total death toll at somewhere around 6,000.

The report also connected the schools to endemic trauma, poverty, incarceration, alcoholism, drug abuse and domestic abuse among Aboriginal people. In the executive summary, investigators concluded that the residential school programme amounted to ‘cultural genocide’, a careful turn of phrase that prompted widespread reproof from critics, who argued that ‘genocide proper’, without qualifications, would have been more accurate.

On 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper invited five Indigenous leaders and six residential school survivors to the House of Commons,
where he delivered the following public apology on behalf of the Canadian government:

Two primary objectives of the residential school system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, ‘to kill the Indian in the child’. Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.62

The government’s handling of issues related to residential schools received widespread criticism. In a 2013 article for the C2C Journal, Paul Bunner, a former speechwriter in the Prime Minister’s Office, wrote that the response was an exercise in damage control and public relations, rather than a genuine gesture of remorse and reparation. ‘The best that can be said of Harper’s apology is that it was a strategic attempt to kill the story and move on to a better relationship between Natives and Non-Natives’, he wrote.63 ‘Unfortunately, it only appears to have deepened the conviction that Church and State conspired not only to “kill the Indian in the child”, but also to physically exterminate the whole race’.64

Other critics protested that the government response had gone much too far, rather than not far enough. In a speech to the Senate in 2013, Senator Lynn Beyak insisted that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report unfairly tarnished the reputations of residential school administrators. ‘I want to present a somewhat different side of the residential school story’, she said.65

I speak partly for the record, but mostly in memory of the kindly and well-intentioned men and women and their descendants – perhaps some of us here in this chamber – whose remarkable works, good deeds and historical tales in the residential schools go unacknowledged.66

In A Very Polite Genocide, Melanie J. Murray stepped directly into the middle of the residential school debate. As one might surmise from the title, she does not shy away from making her position abundantly clear. But despite a strong clarity of purpose, the drama itself develops a nuanced and morally complex perspective on the issue, rather than focusing on polemics or accusations. Consider the following scene from the beginning of the play, which flashes back to the 1950s to show the moment that Josie’s grandmother, Mary, gave over custody of her son and daughter (Josie’s mother) to a residential school official.
GERTRUDE
They’ll be taken care of, which is every mother’s want. You want the best for your children, so you’re agreeing to their care. It’s a gift. You’re giving them a gift!

MARY
Do you have children, Mrs. Lett?

GERTRUDE
How is that relevant?

MARY
You come here like you’re omnipotent – which the church teaches belongs only to God – and tell me what my wishes are. You say nothing of my rights should I not fit in the tidy package of what your form dictates ‘my’ wishes to be. That’s how it’s relevant.

GERTRUDE
Whether it’s relevant or not, it’s none of your business. It’s personal.

MARY
It’s been personal for me from the start! You come into my home. I’m here, making lace I learned to make at the government school so I can decorate my baby’s clothes the way your people’s ancestors admired. In return, I’m asking you to spare me the courtesy. I want to know if you’re a woman or a machine, so please be so kind as to tell me, personally, what you think of this situation? Then – then – we can talk.

GERTRUDE
I’m a mother, I am. All right? I walk in here, and think, ‘Is this what you would want?’ I would never want my child to set foot in this. My children? All children! I want to keep all children a million miles away from this life.

MARY
This life?

GERTRUDE
This life. You have no family. I stepped over animal or human waste just down the hallway from your apartment. It’s the circumstances, dear. No one would blame you for leaving this life behind. Sign here. Then I’ll go. Here! Would you like help to write it? If you would prefer, you’re free to mark an ‘x’. Mark an ‘x’, please. That’s simple. Here – on this line. This line. Right here. Please. Or if you aren’t able then let me. Let me do it for you. Let me help you. Help them. Here.

She marks an ‘x’.
There. There!\footnote{Murray’s artful rendering of this exchange shows how a more-or-less well-intentioned impulse to convert and educate can work in alignment with}
systemic white supremacy and processes of ‘very polite’ erasure. In a similarly even-handed manner, the dramatist also invites spectators to consider the relative success that residential schools may have potentially achieved, if any. A substantial part of the play focuses on documenting the violence experienced by Josie’s family, but Josie’s own story is different. Her life would have likely been entirely different if her mother had not attended a residential school. She is a university student. She gets good grades. She has integrated herself into mainstream society. By all appearances, she is a walking advertisement for the benefits of conversional policy. The horror of this realisation creeps up on her during her presentation for her aboriginal studies class, and underlies the question quoted above: ‘What if I’m the successful product of this?’ As she struggles to move forward, the horror becomes overwhelming:

JOSIE
If I’m one of them, not one of us, and they don’t sit in these classrooms, do I belong here? When I’m lost in it? What if . . . What if all this is an equation, that’s logically solved . . . that all adds up . . . to me? She starts over. My project’s title is ‘The Devastation of the Metis: A Very Polite Genocide’. The United Nations definition of genocide: ‘the following acts committed with . . . with . . . with . . .’ She falls to the floor in a full-fledged seizure.

The second part of Murray’s title, ‘The Girl Who Fell to Earth’, refers to Josie’s seizure-inducing realisation. It also hints at a connection to the 1976 David Bowie film, The Man Who Fell to Earth, a cult classic about an alien who integrates himself into human society following an unexpected crash-landing in New Mexico. Although he is able to use his superior technological skill to acquire tremendous wealth and all the trappings of a successful life, the alien ultimately succumbs to an all-consuming depression, unable to forget the people he left behind on his home planet. Josie’s situation has a similar quality. She cannot separate the comfort of her life from the sacrifices that made it possible. She feels isolated, as though she is marooned on a foreign planet, not a fully-fledged member of mainstream society, but not entirely Aboriginal either.

This unsettling sense of stuck-in-betweeness appears repeatedly in stories of conversion. The Xinjiang detainee performed a public declaration of conversion despite private resentment and a lingering commitment to Islam. Ricote the morisco told Sancho that he was never much of a Christian, but not really a Moor either. Ex-Gay Phil foreswore romantic relationships with men, but was also unable to have romantic relationships with women. Gustav Mahler became a Catholic in order to rise in a society that would always condemn him for his Judaic origins. Josie felt like an alien in a society that created her through a long process of erasure.

In all these scenarios, tension arises from an incomplete transition from
one identity to another. ‘Ex-gay’ is not quite the same thing as ‘straight’, just as ‘converted Jew’ is not quite the same thing as ‘Catholic’, and ‘assimilated Aboriginal’ is not quite the same thing as ‘white Canadian’. Every convert is a palimpsest. Every conversion implicitly points toward a former identity. Every conversional performance falls short of interior proof. Drama has a profound capacity to bring these dynamics into relief. For more than 500 years, the special affordances of theatre have made the political and performative dimensions of conversion uniquely visible, and have helped to cultivate a culture of conversion that has had a tremendous influence on how we conceptualise identity in the present age.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. For information on the scholarship of Stephanie Cavanaugh, see <http://early-modernconversions.com/people/postdoctoral-fellows/stephanie-cavanaugh> (last accessed 17 July 2020).
5. For an accessible introduction to the historical context surrounding the expulsion of the moriscos, see Carr, Blood and Faith, pp. 1–3.
6. The number of moriscos expelled from Spain is a matter of scholarly debate. For further background, see the essays by Tueller, ‘The Moriscos Who Stayed Behind or Returned’; and Vincent, ‘The Geography of the Morisco Expulsion’.
7. Carr, Blood and Faith, contends that ‘The removal of moriscos contains many of the ingredients that we have come to associate with the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing’, p. 9.
8. Cervantes, Don Quixote, p. 131.
10. Schmader, Straight (transcribed by author from video recording).
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. See Lewes, Psychoanalysis, especially pp. 3–11.
18. Day, ‘He was bad, so they put an ice pick in his brain . . .’, reports that the neurologist Walter Freeman Haldeman performed more than 3,000 ice-pick lobotomies for the purposes of sexual conversion. For reviews of other therapies see Haldeman, ‘Sexual Orientation Conversion Therapy for Gay Men and Lesbians’, pp. 149–56; Anderson, ‘Why We Still Haven’t Banned Conversion Therapy in 2018’, paragraphs 3–5; Mallory et al., Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth, pp. 1–2.
19. Mallory et al., Conversion Therapy and LGBT Youth, pp. 1–2.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid., paragraph 3.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. In an interview for *The Jewish Chronicle*, Harwood told John Nathan that the failure of *Mahler’s Conversion* ‘was a crushing moment for me’ (Nathan, ‘Interview’, paragraph 14). For examples of the play’s critical reception, see the reviews by Wolf, ‘Mahler’s Conversion’, Spencer, ‘Theatre Review Mahler’s Conversion Aldwych’ and Dalglish, ‘Mahler’s Conversion’.
41. Ibid., pp. 29–31.
42. Ibid., p. 30.
43. Ibid., pp. 31–2.
44. Carr, *Mahler*, p. 84.
46. Ibid., pp. 77–8.
47. Ibid., p. 77.
51. Ibid., paragraph 8.
52. Ibid., paragraph 7.
53. Ibid., paragraph 10.
56. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., p. 1.
64. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
68. Ibid., p. 256.
69. Ibid., p. 263.

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*The Man Who Fell to Earth*, film, directed by Nicholas Roeg (British Lion Film Corporation and Cinema 5, 1976).


