

*Non sine causa sed sine fine: Cicero's Compulsion to Repeat his Consulate*

In *On the Shortness of Life* Seneca offers Cicero's political career as an illustration of the vagaries of human fate (*Brev. vit.* 5.2): 'how many times does he curse that very consulate of his, which he had praised, not without reason, but without end!' Seneca distills the problem that this article addresses: Cicero's seemingly compulsive need to praise repeatedly, and have others praise, his consulate, that event which was uncannily both his greatest accomplishment and the cause of his humiliating exile of 58 BCE. I examine Cicero's recurrent desire to have his consulate represented in idealized narratives in light of Freud's ideas about the compulsion to repeat in response to trauma. My analysis focuses on Cicero's letter to his friend, the historian Lucius Luceius (*Fam.* 5.12), a text that provides our clearest evidence for how Cicero attempts to salvage his consular legacy in the wake of his catastrophic exile.

The center of Freud's discussion of the compulsion to repeat (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) is the game that he observed his grandchild playing: young Ernst repeatedly threw a spool, during which he said "fort!" ('gone'), and retrieved it with a string while saying "da!" ('here'). Freud interprets the game as the boy's re-enactment of his recent separation from his mother. The child thus repeatedly plays out the drama of the most traumatic experience of his short life to achieve a symbolic mastery over this irrecoverable loss.

Likewise, Cicero's repeated requests for others to create narratives of his consulate, and, when these failed, his similarly repetitious self-penned versions of these events, reflect his attempt to gain control over incidents of cardinal importance to his self-understanding and prestige. Writing to Luceius, Cicero expresses his desire to have

his account fixed in an authoritative literary version. Cicero's pitch to Luceius emphasizes the narrative's self-containment: 'the story from the beginning of the conspiracy to our return is able to be fashioned as reasonably-sized body of work [*corpus*]' (*Fam.* 5.12.4). He then comments upon the delights of narrative closure: a self-contained narrative of the trials and triumphs of a hero, especially if it is 'concluded with a remarkable ending,' affords greater satisfaction than annalistic history (*Fam.* 5.12.5). From a Freudian perspective, Cicero's casting his experience as a comprehensible and aesthetically satisfying whole is an effort to achieve mastery over traumatic events by tidying up his jarring, fragmentary experiences into an integrated "body." Like Freud's grandson who "compensates" for the loss of his mother through his *fort/da* game, thus "himself staging the disappearance and return" (Freud [1920] 1955: 15), Cicero achieves control over his own traumatic loss: that of his self and his prestige. In his repeated refashioning of his story Cicero essentially plays a *fort/da* game with his self: casting it off into exile while also staging its return. This return constitutes the recovery of the self formed by his consulate, and thus redeems and validates the consulate by integrating it within a triumphal narrative of wrongful exile engineered by wicked adversaries that concludes with our hero's just return to his former glory.

I conclude by showing how reading the Luceius letter in light of Freud's views of the compulsion to repeat resolves a crux within this text. As a model of satisfying narrative Cicero presents the story of Themistocles (*Fam.* 5.12.5): *cuius studium in legendo non erectum Themistocli fuga †redituque† retinetur?* Editors generally athetize *reditu* or emend it to *interitu*, since Themistocles never returned from exile. Niall Rudd (1992: 219 n. 8) isolates the problem: in order for Cicero's *exemplum* to be on point, it

should involve a story of someone, like himself, who is exiled and is later recalled. Rudd then posits that a corruption of *interitu* to *reditu* may be “due to the scribe’s awareness of this point.”

I suggest that, instead of a scribe, Cicero himself rewrote Themistocles’ story to have it conclude with a homecoming. The necessity of a *reditus* for Cicero’s story to reach a satisfactory conclusion combines with the similarities, in general outline, between Cicero’s and Themistocles’ careers (non-aristocratic heroes whose intelligence saved their nations, but were subsequently exiled), to set the stage for Cicero to fall into a *lapsus calami*. Cicero’s rewriting Themistocles’ history by writing *reditu* highlights how much his own desires for closure in his narrative dominate this text, and how the distinction between Cicero’s self and others could dissolve under the pressures of wish fulfillment.

Works cited:

Freud, S. [1920] 1955. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In J. Strachey ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18:1-61. London.

Rudd, N. 1992. “Strategems of Vanity: Cicero, *Ad Familiares* 5.12 and Pliny’s letters.” In T. Woodman and J. Powell, eds. *Author and Audience in Latin Literature*: 18-32. Cambridge.