

Enjoying *Equus*: *Jouissance* in Shaffer's Play

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In the middle of Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, the psychiatrist Dysart discusses his vacation plans. Distraught with the sterility and "worshipless" nature of contemporary existence, he speaks of his desire to take a receptive partner to Greece, for the purpose of standing "in front of certain shrines and sacred streams" (62), where he plans to deliver the following lecture:

Look! Life is only comprehensible through a thousand local Gods. And not just the old dead ones ... but living Geniuses of Place and Person! And not just Greece but modern England! Spirits of certain trees, certain curves of brick wall, certain chip shops, if you like, and slate roofs—just as of certain frowns in people and slouches ... I'd say to them—Worship as many as you can see—and more will appear! (62)

Such a speech may sound inspiring from one's theatre seat, but we can easily imagine how *stressful* it would be to go on this vacation with Dysart. His would-be companion is enjoined to find something sacred and mind-blowing in every crevice of life, to absorb from every mundane feature something spiritual and magical. Dysart proposes this vacation as offering Passion, Life, God, against the tragic aridity of a despiritualized world; yet we might suspect that an arid world would itself come as something of a vacation from this demand for total Worship, and from the *guilt* of having failed (inevitably) to honour a small fraction of these "thousand" Gods. (What precisely might an appropriate Worship of these Gods entail?)

Of course, we might also ask why Dysart would need to travel to Greece if such divinity is omnipresent in his own English backyard. Is he not secretly grateful that the requirements of his job make it impossible for him to find time for such demanding forays into the divine heart of Life?

This reference to a "thousand local Gods" stands in revealing contrast to the phrase with which the psychiatrist opens both of the play's acts: "With *one particular horse*, called Nugget, he embraces" (17, 75). Dysart refers here to his teenaged patient Alan Strang, who has constructed for himself a mythic fantasy-world of transcendent passions, ruled by a horse-god named "Equus" in whose honour he conducts ecstatic night-time rituals. While Dysart sees in the intensity and primitive passion of Alan's Worship something tragically missing from his all-too-concrete, secular reality, we might ask: would not the condensation of one's Worship in a particular, nameable object come as a tremendous *relief* from the incredible pressure of having to honour "a thousand local Gods"? Would not a single God, safely contained in the dark space behind the eye of a horse (kept locked away in its owner's stall, accessible for worship only once every three weeks) come as a real holiday from the urgent, ever-increasing demands of Dysart's god, a divinity that spills out, proliferating exponentially?

Gene A. Plunka argues—and the bulk of critical opinion affirms—that what Shaffer's play dramatizes is Alan's desperate resistance to a contemporary world "replete with oppression" (156), a valiant clinging to sublimity and ecstasy in an era that seeks to squelch it. As Dysart insists, we have succumbed today to the repressive authority of the "Normal," a regime of restrictions and conventions from which true passionate Enjoyment, or what Lacan might call *jouissance*, has been forcibly evicted. Yet what if the "postmodern discontent" embodied in Dysart finds its primary source not in the suppression of worshipful Enjoyment, but rather in its *saturation* of our world, its omnipresence as *injunction*—a stressful, urgent obligation to respond

to life with sufficient Passion, to experience with adequate force the divine elements around us? As Slavoj Žižek puts it (taking his cue from Lacan), Enjoyment itself has achieved today the status of a superego imperative, following us relentlessly: “we are bombarded from all sides by different versions of the injunction ‘Enjoy!’, from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in professional achievement or in spiritual awakening” (*Lacan* 104).¹ This overwhelming pressure to find Enjoyment in all aspects of ourselves and our reality—this transformation of Enjoyment to the status of a strange “ethical duty”—finds its natural correlative in pervasive *guilt*: we feel guilty today not so much for violating prohibitions or moral regulations as for our persistent failure to experience full Enjoyment. Needless to say, this combination of pressure and guilt is the surest way to render Enjoyment impossible.²

For all Dysart’s talk of the rigid, prohibitive “Gods of the Normal” who command him to squelch *jouissance*, a close look at Shaffer’s play reveals the lurking presence of a different, contrary God, one commanding *jouissance* itself. We find this God’s imperative expressed succinctly in the familiar words of Alan’s first line: “Double your pleasure, Double your fun” (22), a direct injunction to increase our Enjoyment. Mr. Dalton, the owner of the stables where Alan works, puts it even more explicitly: “the main rule is: enjoy yourself” (56). It rears its head once more in what Dysart calls “The Accusation” (82)—this sinister, threatening gaze that confronts him with the insufficiency of his Passion (“Do you fuck her? ... I bet you don’t” [59–60]), penetrating his most private places and rendering him blameworthy (“like being accused. Violently accused” [26]) for the very lack of Enjoyment it finds there. And what is the crisis that precipitates Alan’s breakdown—i.e., his impotence when a pretty female co-worker offers him sex for the first time—if not a traumatic *failure to Enjoy*?

In the wake of Thea Sharrock’s recent re-mounting of this play, a host of reviewers have been quick to note how forcefully it still speaks to us, how the decades since its debut have rendered its issues only more pressing. In the program, Sharrock herself cited the play’s acute contemporary relevance as the primary source of her attraction to it: “For such a hugely iconic play, it felt as if it could have been written yesterday.” I agree that *Equus* still has plenty to teach us, yet I argue that its most forceful lessons come to light when we engage with it as an “anamorphic” entity, looking upon it “awry.” If, in standard readings, this play offers a relatively explicit Oedipal drama, staging the subject’s resistance to the Paternal-Symbolic order which regiments and delineates reality, I will explore how a Žižekian-Lacanian lens enables us to glimpse another dimension, something in the play “more than itself.” While Dysart fixates on what is *lost* to our contemporary reality, *suffocated* by what he calls the “Normal,” I argue that Shaffer’s play encourages us to invert its own psychiatrist’s diagnosis, observing the different modes in which the Normal is itself derailed and suffocated today by an excessive *presence*, an uncanny *thing* which has gotten *too close* to us. What Dysart’s analysis misses is the way in which the very concreteness and authority of the Normal is increasingly, in Žižek’s words, “losing its performative efficiency” (*Ticklish* 334).

This investigation of Enjoyment *in* the play will also prompt us to “look awry” upon our own enjoyment of this play, the remarkable and enduring popularity of which is evidenced through the success of Sharrock’s re-mounting. If for critics such as Dennis Klein, the play’s attraction resides in its passionate indictment of Symbolic authority—an indictment whose appeal “is so deep that one does not respond with polite applause, but with glee” (121)—I argue that what *Equus* offers us, most fundamentally, is relief from the anxiety correlative to Symbolic *disintegration*. And while I agree with Una Chaudhuri’s insistence that any investigation of the play’s impact must engage with it as a live, theatrical performance (52), I will consider this impact through a very different psychoanalytic lens than employed in her influential discussion.

If for commentators such as Chaudhuri, the dynamic of *Equus* functions to invoke the force of something that dwells deep within us, lurking below the surface of our (“Normal”) subjective reality, my analysis accentuates the force of a Thing which, as we enter the theatre, is *already* too close to us, permeating the Normal with its obscene, oppressive presence.

For those familiar with traditional understandings of Lacan, the assertion that the decline of Enjoyment is correlative to a *disintegration* of Symbolic rigidity may sound counterintuitive. Would not the proper Lacanian position suggest exactly the opposite? Indeed, *Equus* would appear to align itself with the more usual Lacanian emphasis on the division and alienation associated with Symbolic Law, its fundamental prohibition of unmitigated *jouissance*. Alan’s narrative of an early-childhood horse-ride on the beach evokes the Lacanian pre-symbolic plenitude, a blissful domain beyond language, a wholeness with the (m)Other which is interrupted and shattered by the paternal “No!” The prohibitive function of Alan’s father, Frank, is established early in the play as he intervenes in his son’s equestrian pleasures, cutting him off from *jouissance*: “Then suddenly I was on the ground, where Dad pulled me. I could have bashed him” (48). An initial state of harmony and oneness is thus sundered by the Law, which instates the Symbolic Order (of language and convention), replacing (killing) the maternal “Thing” with the *Word*. Shaffer seems to go out of his way to accentuate this connection. Frank’s characteristic refrain—“receive my meaning” (27)—reflects directly the function of the Lacanian Master Signifier, through which all the other signifiers literally receive their meaning. As owner of a print shop, Frank is explicitly associated with the pre-eminence of the word, to which he consigns his son, forcing him to read books while prohibiting the direct immersion offered by film and television. Revealingly, Alan’s first word to Dysart (upon emerging from his television jingles) is “Dad!” (27)—a word which comes as *answer* to the psychiatrist’s previous question, “Who prohibits?” Frank is here the embodiment of paternal Law and Prohibition. Alienation in the signifier and a correlative loss of primordial *jouissance* is the price Alan must pay for entrance into socio-symbolic relations.

Throughout the play, what Alan calls the “chinkle-chankle” (67) (the mouth-piece restraining and subjugating the horse) serves as Prohibition’s material correlative. His dialogue with the horse is marked by a terrible desire to remove this chinkle-chankle—“I’ll take it out for you” (66), he says, longing for the *unbridled* Enjoyment he believes would be possible in its absence. But if the chinkle-chankle “never comes out,” Alan’s “Equus” preserves the place of what Lacan would call the *objet a*, a “remainder/reminder” of lost *jouissance*. The sublime dimension the boy discerns behind the horse’s eyes (into which he stares mesmerized “for ages” [90]) is a reminder of the fullness he experienced prior to Symbolic subjugation, and a remainder of that which Symbolic authority cannot entirely squelch. This fantasy of noncastration is reflected in Alan’s idealized memory of the “Horseman”—a figure immune to Symbolic Law, who makes the Symbolic father appear a “stupid fart” (42), riding away and simply ignoring his *word*—as well as in his fantasmatic identification with cowboys, the only ones who “understand” (Enjoyment) (49), who are “free” from Symbolic regulations: “I bet all cowboys are *orphans!*”, i.e., not subject to paternal authority. Alan’s highly sexualized late-night rides in the field (“I’m stiff! Stiff in the wind! ... Feel me on you! ... I want to be *in* you!” [74]) bring these fantasies together: his ritual combines a “hysterical” abandonment of “the tight ‘reins’ of his father’s authority” (Plunka 155) with the ecstasy of primordial fullness, an orgasmic union with the sublime Equus.

In standard readings, what the final, climactic scene of the play dramatizes is the trauma of Paternal-Symbolic authority’s ultimate inescapability, its tragic victory over *jouissance*. Equus,

formerly a source of passionate Enjoyment, is replaced here by an Oedipal, castrating figure, a manifestation of paternal Prohibition, and Alan's failure to have sex with Jill in the barn is attributable to the pressure of this controlling agency. Plunka explains: "Alan is frigid because Equus, Alan's conscience, appearing in the form of his father's watchful eyes, is bothering him" (160). The trauma of this event provokes Alan's violent and horrifying attack on the horses. After Jill leaves, he brutally stabs out their eyes, crying "Thou – God – Seest – NOTHING!" (105). What is the boy bludgeoning here if not the inescapable gaze of his father, whose "godlike control" (Plunka 154) hovers over all he does, constantly constraining him: "Always! Everywhere! Forever!" (Shaffer 105)?

What such approaches to the play overlook is the radical *destabilization* of paternal Law that directly precipitates Alan's crisis in the barn. A close examination reveals that the boy's traumatic sexual failure is immediately preceded by the exposed *inadequacy* and contingent nature of Law, the forceful contestation of its "godlike" dimension. When Alan and Jill are discovered by his father at the (paternally prohibited) adult movie theatre, the boy initially expresses terror appropriate to a subjugated Symbolic subject: "God! ... Dad! ... He saw me! ... Oh God!" (92). But on this night, the terror at having violated Prohibition is soon transformed, as the bearer of Symbolic Law reveals his own weakness and illegitimacy. Rather than pronouncing condemnation from the firm place of authority, Frank exposes his own intense discomfiture at having been seen at the movie house, and what follows is a highly embarrassing scene in which the Father is on the defensive, "scared" of Alan himself and anxiously retreating (94). In formal terms, what this scene functions to expose is the *gap* between symbolic place and its human occupant, a gap on account of which the occupant appears impotent and utterly ridiculous. Alan recognizes that the seeming substantiality of Paternal Law was an illusion: "all those airs he put on!" (95). He particularly mocks his father's trademark phrase, "Receive my meaning" (95), now cognizant that the Master Signifier, which would regiment the Symbolic Order, is an imposter, a *fake*, an empty signifier.³ "Father" is "nothing special" (96)—and the boy is quick to universalize these conclusions, noting that all the "men coming out of pubs" are no more than "people with pricks."

Far from being shackled by his father's "godlike control," Alan is now, for the first time, "free to do anything" (97). If all men have their little secrets which (by a seemingly universal unwritten law) they go off to Enjoy in the dark—"they all do it! All of them!" (96)—then is not Equus himself *permissible*? The boy's ritual is simply one among myriad modes of nightly transgression. With the dissolution of Symbolic Law's efficiency, transgression itself becomes Normal.

What, then, is Alan bludgeoning in the barn? Perhaps the key to boy's crisis is to be found in a vital detail of the beach scene. If the horse is eventually a vehicle for Enjoyment, recall that, initially, the young Alan is nearly *run over* by it, trampled between its pounding hooves. The horse emerges "*charging fast ... straight at Alan*" (39). If not for the restraint of the Horseman's Word ("*Whoa!*"), the child (and the little "sandcastle" he was erecting on the beach) would have been utterly overwhelmed by the animal's relentless forward motion: "they just swerved in time!" Notably, the horse takes on a decidedly *devouring* aspect in Alan's recollection, manifest in his emphasis on the creature's abyssal mouth: "When the horse first appeared, I looked up into his mouth. It was huge" (48). What is eventually identified with Enjoyment is primarily a *monstrous* force, threatening to trample and engulf.

Approached in this way, Shaffer's beach scene encourages the very "dialectic reversal" accomplished by Lacan apropos the subject's relation to *jouissance*. The notion of a "pre-symbolic bliss" correlative to a harmonious union with the (m)Other is supplemented in his later

work with an inversion—an emphasis on the “lack/desire in the (m)Other,” her *jouissance* as an excessive, invasive presence, a lethal abyss which threatens to swallow the subject.⁴ Indeed, what Laplanche refers to as the fundamental fact of the psychoanalytic universe is precisely this abyss, this “unfathomable Otherness” correlative to the mother’s desire.⁵ Exposure to the latter is the source of traumatic anxiety for the child, who is overwhelmed both by the enigma of what his mother wants, and by his realization that he is only a partial stand-in for the totality of her desire, a seeming vortex that he cannot possibly prove adequate to. As Žižek puts it:

The trademark of misleading ‘introductions to Lacan’ is to conceive of the ensuing symbolic paternal function as the intruder that disturbs the imaginary symbiotic bliss of the mother-child dyad, introducing into it the order of (symbolic) prohibitions (i.e., order as such). Against this misperception, one should insist that ‘father’ is, for Lacan, not the name of a traumatic intrusion but the *solution* to the deadlock of such an intrusion.

(*Organs* 101)

If the narrative of the beach episode appears aligned with traditional “Oedipal” approaches, it also enables us to grasp this Lacanian reversal, dramatizing the *pacifying* function of paternal Law, the latter’s emergence as resolution to a *prior* state of traumatic division and antagonism. Following the Horseman’s “*Whoa!*” Alan finds that the “huge” open mouth is literally linked, by means of the chinkle-chankle, to the paternal figure controlling it. There is “cream” dripping from the orifice (66) because the Horseman has pulled this chain, which is inserted into the opening, “taming” it. A scene of potential emasculation and engulfment is thereby transformed into one of safety and affirmation. “That’s a terrific sandcastle” (39), says the Horseman, “*looking down*” on the boy from his place of dominance, the reins firmly in his grip. It is only *now* (with chinkle-chankle in effect) that Alan is able to pursue Enjoyment.

Of course, what Lacan seeks to examine here is not reducible to the cloying tendencies of mothers. We can understand the value of this re-conceived narrative by considering the differing senses in which the Other, for Lacan, is experienced as “lacking,” rent with an internal division or incompleteness. Lacan’s *Che Vuoi?* (“What do you want?”) gestures to a state of traumatic uncertainty as to our significance for the Other (*Écrits* 690). We are clearly the addressee of an Other’s gestures and signifiers, we feel most acutely that we *are* desired, *intensely*, yet for *what?* We can derive no definite call, no clear symbolic place or identity—the lack/desire of the Other is here correlative to the anxiety-inducing deadlock of what I am for the Other. And what Symbolic Law (with its assignment of symbolic mandates and identities) functions to resolve is precisely this impasse. Or from another angle: what is the source of traumatic division for the child if not its exposure to the innately lacking or “non-all” character of signification itself? To claim, as Lacan does, that “there is nothing outside the Symbolic” is to suggest that the child is always-already addressed by the Other as order of signifiers; yet this Symbolic Other cannot initially create a complete, self-sufficient reality, since language is not, ultimately, a full circuit but an incomplete series, prevented by its own inherent *lack* from achieving totality. It is only through the instatement of a Master Signifier—the role of which is to provide an anchor for language, to regiment its signifying chains, to pull it together as a unified Order—that the Symbolic Other’s internal lack is covered over. To be exposed to a fundamentally “barred” Symbolic Other—the Other as rent by its own internal negativity—is to confront a *voracious, devouring* lack whose concealment or transposition is the condition of our reality’s very consistency.⁶

Is it not in direct relation to this “lack/desire in the (m)Other” that we can best understand the crisis in the barn, which, as emphasized, is immediately precipitated by the *dissolution* of Symbolic authority at the movie house? With the exposure of paternal Law’s illegitimacy, the lacking (m)Other resurges and its unfathomable desire threatens again—as Harari puts it, “A

dimension of devouring is manifested" (227). What is the Equus who emerges through the doors if not this sinister threat of re-absorption? Its call—"Mine! ... You're mine! ... I am yours and you are mine!" (105)—is not an invitation to a blissful, pre-symbolic unity but rather the revelation of a traumatic, threatening antagonism against which Alan must desperately defend. In absence of the Horseman's "Whoa!" and the pacifying chinkle-chankle, the horses no longer "halt at the rail, but invade the square" and "trample at him" (106).

If this analysis of the play would seem predominantly textual, we can explore the dynamic at stake here in an even more revealing way apropos the peculiarities of its staging. Let us begin with a closer look at these horses which Alan so passionately worships. Shaffer specifies that they be played by actors in track-suits, standing upright at all times, their costume consisting of "light strutted hooves ... set on metal horse-shoes" (15) and a type of wire horse mask. The costume is not intended to conceal the performers—they are the visible bearers of a symbolic semblance, supported through movements which signal horse-ness without literally depicting a horse. Indeed, the performance methodically displays the constituents of this horse-illusion: the masks are visible upon the stage before the play even begins, and Shaffer insists that they be put on and off in direct view of the audience. Yet if we have here the ingredients of Brechtian distantiation (and its exposure of the theatrical mechanism), what characterizes our actual experience might best be evoked through Mannoni's famous phrase, "Je sais bien, mais quand même ...". "I know very well" that there is nothing before me but an actor with a metal contraption on his shoulders, "but all the same," it really *does* seem to me—at times most forcefully—that I am in the actual presence of a horse. While fully aware of the entity's theatricality, I often cannot resist the impression that this constructed semblance is the bearer of some unfathomable equine Life. Notably, the force of this effect is not simply a matter of our "willing suspension of disbelief," our willingness to pretend the thing is a horse and to get caught up in that fiction. Most uncanny is how this "something more" amidst the theatrical components can emerge *against our will*, in spite of clear-headed engagement with the theatrical representation.

At stake in this example is something more than the basic idea that symbolic suggestion can be "even more effective" in conjuring the image of horse than naturalistic reconstruction. To draw upon Žižek's terms, perhaps the force of this theatrical spectacle consists not simply in its capacity to make horse appear, but to make horse *appear to appear* (*Parallax* 29). This dynamic can be vividly rendered apropos John Napier's design, which reflects Shaffer's specification that the horse-mask, extending *above* the performer's own head, is to consist of "alternating bands of silver wire and leather" (15). The mask is not solid—the bands function to evoke the contours of the head, outlining its dimensions, while leaving exposed from all angles the empty space at its centre. The mask thus is built around—and *builds*—a central void. And as viewers of the play are likely to attest, the transparency of this mask is by no means equivalent to an exposure of theatrical illusion, a reminder that the horse is just a constructed display with no substantial density at its core. Does not the reverse effect take place? Is it not precisely this interior "nothingness", this open space, this absence of specularly *beyond* the surface contours, that most forcefully ensnares our gaze in live performance? Framed in this way—and by the lighting and choric effects which likewise circulate around it as the play's action builds—this "mere" void or empty space becomes forcefully *substantialized*, transformed into an enigmatic depth permeating the theatrical creature.

What is at stake here is not simply an imaginative "bringing to life" of the referent in our minds. To use Žižek's terms, the enactment effects a type of "short circuit" between imagined referent and the void at the centre of this mask, such that this non-specular dimension, this

absence of the visible, becomes a property or quality of the enacted horse, *internal to* it. This void at the heart of the mask is not simply filled out by the imagined referent but reflected *into* it, actively infusing our imaginative experience of it with an otherness. Horse *appears to appear* in the sense that this mask, as a symbolic frame through which horse emerges, ultimately makes of horse *itself* a frame, a frame for something *beyond* its own appearances.

In this light, the Brechtian attributes of Shaffer's horse, far from exclusively undermining the efficiency of the illusion, may function paradoxically to further ensnare our gaze, making reverberate within our own experience this unfathomable dimension correlative to Alan's "Equus," this something in horse "more-than-horse-itself." Yet from a Žižekian-Lacanian angle it is in *this* sense that the on-stage dynamics of Shaffer's play enable such a powerful exposure of the mechanisms (and theatrics) at work in its central theme: the enigma of desire. Desire is ignited, for Žižek and Lacan, precisely via this "short circuit" between an everyday object (horse) and a *void*, an "originally empty" space (*Metastases* 94). It is this dynamic on account of which the desired object becomes sublime, infused with an "unfathomable X" irreducible to its given properties. As Žižek takes pains to remind us, what Lacan calls the *objet a* designates no existent noumenal fullness beyond appearances and signification, a Thing we once had or experienced—it is an eminent *effect* of those structures it appears to exceed, a kind of "black hole" endowed with fascinating depth and magnetic force by virtue of the way it is structured vis-à-vis the subject's gaze. Like the interior of this horse mask, it presents us with the mystery of a thing which is "objectively" nothing: "if we cast a direct glance at it we see nothing, a mere void", yet "viewed from a certain perspective, it assumes the shape of 'something'" (*Looking* 12). Like the non-specular "something more" in these horses, appearing at times to exceed the dimensions of their theatrical materiality—as though these wire and leather bands were bonds restraining it—the fullness resonating through the *objet a* (the *jouissance* of which it is a "remainder/reminder") is an effect of its *framing*, the way its "place is encircled" (*Metastases* 95).

If we could argue that the force of *Equus* in live production has much to do with the theatrical medium's unique capacity to create such Open Spaces,⁷ both Žižekian psychoanalysis and Shaffer's play itself encourage us to take a further step here. The fundamental dynamic of our engagement with this spectacle—our relation to a *non-specular* dimension, a thing generated in its intensity by that which circulates around it, structuring it, registering its contours—is a dynamic absolutely central to "normal" subjectivity. Not only the subject's Enjoyment but indeed the very consistency of its Symbolic reality hinges upon its relation to such a dimension, a void introduced in the midst of our visual field. Reality itself, asserts Žižek, "is constituted by means of the withdrawal of *objet a*" (*Metastases* 76).

For all the hysterical intensity of Alan's rituals, is there not a vital sense in which his very attachment to this Sacred Place, this fantasy-space of *jouissance* beyond all Paternal-Symbolic limits, functions ultimately as that order's own ("ex-timate") support? At home, the boy accepts the authority and structures of Paternal Law on the grounds that he may, "without his father's knowledge" (31), "slip off in the afternoons" to watch prohibited television at the neighbours' house—indulging in *fantasies* of Enjoyment (movies *about* Cowboys) in the spaces left open by Law.⁸ And if the boy permits himself some night-time liberties with his employer's horses, he is simultaneously (indeed concomitantly) a "bloody good" worker, going "way over the call of duty" (46). The very moderation, caution and secrecy with which his transgressions are conducted testifies to—and preserves—the Law's *structural* efficiency. At work here is a type of counter-balance: the subject accepts (with relief) the pacifying Paternal Law, the security provided by Symbolic regulation and identity, yet both subjectivity and the Symbolic itself are

sustained through the subject's (fantasmatic) resistance to full acquiescence, its clinging to a remainder/reminder of *jouissance* via the *objet a*.

The even more pointed lesson here is to be drawn from the play's own ("speculative") *identification* of the *objet a* (Equus as empty space for fantasies) with the "lack/desire in the (m)Other" (Equus as unbearable, devouring presence). From a Žižekian angle, we should fully accept the play's presentation of these two apparently opposed entities as two sides of the same coin. This is to say, it is via the *fantasy* of Equus as unmitigated fullness beyond Symbolic restraint that the Symbolic itself *transposes, mediates, covers over* the Real of Equus as lack/desire in the (m)Other. At stake in the dynamic of *objet a* is precisely the extraction ("withdrawal") of Equus as voracious negativity, the transposition of invasive *jouissance* into Equus as unattainable fantasy-space, a space in relation to which the subject's desire—and indeed its very reality—is structured. Or from the inverse angle, the devouring Equus-*jouissance* that resurges in the barn is precisely that which the *fantasy* of blissful union with Equus ("I want to be in you! I want to BE you forever and ever!" [74]) had helped to cover over.

In this light, the barn scene illustrates *par excellence* the dynamic of an *objet a* which, in Žižek's terms, *falls back into reality*: Equus as fantasy-space, a *je ne sais quoi* behind the eyes, falls back into reality as Equus the unbearable *presence*, suffocating the Open Space constitutive of Symbolic existence. As Alan attempts to engage in sex, the space behind the walls ceases to *be* a space and becomes filled with an over-proximate *thing*. As Žižek would put it, "the *objet a* is no longer extracted, it acquires full presence" (*Metastases* 77). Alan's impotence, in this circumstance, would come as no surprise to Lacan, for whom such a *lack of the lack*—i.e., a lack of the empty Space afforded by the *objet a*'s extraction—is the very definition of *anxiety*.⁹

In his emphasis on the tragic opposition between passionate fantasy and an increasingly authoritative, all-too concrete Normal reality, Dysart misses the fundamental lesson of his patient's crisis. What is deprived of substantiality and efficacy is not simply Alan's divine fantasy-realm, the space of passionate Worship beyond Normal reality, but *Normal reality itself*. The key problem is not that a Paternal-Symbolic reality threatens to crush Alan's Enjoyment, but that the delicate balance *between* reality and the *objet a* (which serves as its constitutive, "ex-timate" support) is radically disrupted. Insofar as this empty Space is a necessary condition of the subject's relation *to* reality, its *appearance* in reality is correlative to the latter's dissolution: "if this void becomes visible 'as such', reality disintegrates" (*Totalitarianism* 149). We find here one definition of *psychosis* in psychoanalysis: "In psychosis *a* is not excluded from reality; it does not function as the void of its formal frame" (*Metastases* 76), and the result of this over-proximity is the very "'de-realization' of reality itself".

It is with this psychotic de-realization—which arises not "when something is missing in reality, but, on the contrary, when there is *too much* of a Thing in reality" (*Metastases* 77)—that violence breaks out. The desperate subject resorts to what Lacan calls a *passage à l'acte*. We can understand Alan's violent assault on the horses precisely in terms of this psychotic *passage à l'acte*—a "desperate attempt of the subject to evict *objet a* from reality by force, and thus gain access to reality" (77).

Is it not here—in the dynamic of something no longer extracted from but *fallen into* reality—that we can locate the most significant parallel between patient and analyst? Amidst his talk of absence and emptiness, of lost Worship and Divinity, we find in Dysart a man conspicuously harassed by uncanny *presences*. His world is strangely saturated with "palpable," "unsettling" intrusions which, like the shadow of the giant horse-head creeping across his desk, seep into his Normal operations and derail their smooth functioning (76).

On one hand, the psychiatrist rails against the authoritative self-evidence of our contemporary world, whose concreteness eliminates the space for imagination and wonder. Yet for all this apparent banality, Dysart's is a reality conspicuously plagued with *enigma*, intrusions of the "unknowable" (18), of that which cannot be reached, grasped, "accounted for" through his own language. This everyday, diurnal reality is by no means transparent and unproblematic—it is saturated with seemingly impenetrable blind-spots, sites of pregnant *darkness* opposing all interpretation. What becomes apparent from the opening monologue is that these sites of enigma are by no means *Enjoyable*. While claiming a passionate openness to the depths of our world, he finds in them no inviting complexity—they hold none of the alluring fullness of some Real beyond the known. The enigmatic is here "intolerable" (18), *impelling* from him a "desperate" questioning. It takes on a decidedly monstrous aspect—enigma as a glaring, encroaching stain that confronts and provokes him, "mocking" him (104) with the inertia of its own horrifying *non-meaning*: "Account for me ... account for Me!" (76). We find in Dysart a man bombarded with "nonsensical things" (17) which he compulsively "keeps thinking about," enigmas which strike at him "*fundamentally*" (76), blind-spots which, despite their acknowledged impenetrability, he feels obliged to symbolize and integrate—"Totally, infallibly, inevitably" (75).

If, as hysteric, he opposes himself to an imprisoning Symbolic Other which shackles him with its mandates and its rigid delineation of reality, what seems most to enslave Dysart in this play are precisely such *blots* in the field of meaning, these *stains* obscuring the clear, stable picture that Symbolic reality would purport to offer, threatening to throw the very circuit of signification off-kilter. His condition of compulsive questioning, harassment by (*voracious*) enigmas from which he can achieve no distance, is directly concomitant to an increasing intuition of internal *lack* in his Symbolic order (specifically in the Master's Knowledge, the discourse of psychological science). It is the *failure* of this Order to substantiate itself, to provide a full image—its inability effectively to orchestrate or transpose its own fundamental lack—that appears most to traumatize him, leaving him in a state of anxiety-ridden "Displacement" (76). And insofar as Equus is Dysart's *name* for this derailing stain of non-meaning, we find here again the dynamic of an *objet a* fallen back *into* reality—Equus as mysterious, fascinating, seductive place beyond signification finds its speculative correlative in Equus as over-proximate enigma, a voracious *darkness* which invades the level of meaning itself. Indeed, the final question of the play—"What dark is this?" (109)—directly converts darkness to a palpable, positively-given *thing*, intolerable in its proximity.

For all his lamentations of lost primordially, Dysart's condition here reflects the very "primordial" state of confrontation with the lack/desire/enigma in the Other. This condition demonstrates vividly the way in which our rational, "post-metaphysical" regime—in its very eradication of "ideological" Master Signifiers—may itself be haunted by an acute, anxiety-ridden *apoplexia philosophica*, a state of virtual enslavement to what Eric Santner calls "hypercathected enigmas" (22), insoluble *stains* around which we revolve compulsively and implacably. Is not this dynamic, as Santner contends, particularly (and increasingly) reflective of a contemporary academic lifestyle, which, far from being *Enjoyable* (characterized by fascination, mystery and wonder) may frequently take on the character of a "repetitive and insatiable, even vampire-like pursuit" (18)? For a great many, and in a great many senses, what characterizes contemporary life is not its "mindlessness," the dull, regulated circuitry of which Dysart speaks, but rather the very frenetic intellection and mental urgency we find in Dysart himself.

If these "symptoms" reflect Dysart's confrontation with a fundamentally lacking Other, we should observe how what appears to be a passionate "hysterical" resistance to Symbolic authority in fact works *defensively*, operating to buttress a reality deprived of sturdy supports. Let us take,

for instance, the dream described in Act I, in which Dysart serves as executioner of children. The psychiatrist is here an unwitting agent of the “Gods of the Normal”, or as Žižek would put it, an object-instrument of big Other’s sadistic Will (*Enjoy* 231). In a basic sense, Dysart’s role in the dream reflects Symbolic “castration”—the pile of vitals lying beside his altar represents all that must be cut away in order for the subject to enter the Symbolic community. As Chaudhuri writes, the dream’s meaning “is as obvious to Dysart as it is to us: it symbolizes his growing professional scepticism and increasing sense of guilt at performing what he fears may be a form of spirit murder” (57).

A closer examination of this dream compels us to supplement this “obvious” interpretation with an anamorphic shift. Rather than simply reflecting the monstrous suppressed truth of Dysart’s social mandate, does it not (also) offer a paradoxical *escape* from truth—specifically, from a traumatic confrontation with the ultimate *impotence* and illegitimacy of the big Other? Simply put, the Normal is *not* governed by gods, is *not* a regime supported by anything other than one’s recognition of its call in interpellation—or in Lacan’s words, there is no Other of the Other. If the dream seems to reflect the inescapable nature of Dysart’s Symbolic mandate—his horror at having no choice but to comply with the demands of his gods—might we not interpret it as a *fantasy* of such inescapability, a fantasy *of* such an Other of the Other that would endow a groundless Symbolic order with inescapable authority? While manifesting Dysart’s inner resistance to duty, the dream reflects simultaneously a perverse desire to feel himself forcibly compelled, reduced to the status of a mere “object-instrument”, and thereby relieved of anxiety as to what he *is* for the Other (not to mention, *responsibility* for his role).¹⁰ In Žižek’s terms, we find here the “deadly loop” between hysteria and perversion: insofar as perverse self-objectivization offers *relief* from a state of traumatic derailment (i.e., from the anxiety of a *fundamental* hysteria, the question of what I am for the Other), our contemporary resistance to Symbolic mandates is accompanied with fantasies staging the desire for Law itself.

“There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain,” states Dysart in the play’s final line, “And it never comes out” (109). Rather than an expression of our contemporary tragedy—the horror of our situation as victims of the Normal, enchained and subservient—we might consider this line as expressing how, for Žižek, we *avert* the true horror of our condition. What we have here is not primarily the veiled truth of our Normal life but a “fundamental” fantasy designed to *make possible* and sustain our Normal existence. “This utter passivity is the foreclosed fantasy that sustains our conscious experience as active, self-positing subjects—it is the ultimate perverse fantasy: the notion that, in our innermost being, we are instruments of the Other’s *jouissance*” (*Welcome* 96).

To propose what may seem an incongruous extension, is it not in this very light—apropos the “deadly loop” of hysteria and perversion, correlative to an increasing intuition of *lack* in the Other—that we can understand the dynamic of Alan’s own “primordial” Worship? If the ritual enacts a flagrant defiance of socio-symbolic regulations, is it not also (or indeed fundamentally) a fantasy *of* restriction, *of* a rigid Symbolic authority which would prohibit Equus and demand adherence to a social mandate? Is not the primary fantasmatic element of this ritual its active *apotheosis* of socio-symbolic regulations, their transformation from “dead” signifiers (Hoover, Remington, Jodpur) into powerful “foes” and oppressive “Hosts” (73)? The boy’s Worship of Equus, correlatively, entails an elaborately codified submission, its perverse forms ranging from self-flagellation, to fantasies of being “in chains” for sins (66), to wilful subjugation to the violent caprices of “Straw Law” (67)—forms of subjugation in which the boy becomes an “object-instrument of the Other’s *jouissance*.” If such ritualized self-objectivization appears “primitive,” Žižek’s analysis encourages us to recognize the ways in which our own “normal” relationship

with Enjoyment is regulated and sustained today by myriad forms of perversion, sexual and otherwise. Such perversions can be understood as a welcome *escape* from the destabilization and radical incertitude that accompany a dissolution of restriction—I conjure new Masters, I “voluntarily take refuge in servitude” (*Tarrying* 235), to forestall the Equus that resurges with the *weakening* of Symbolic authority.

From another angle, while Alan’s late-night rides represent for Dysart something so wildly foreign to our Normal world, we could argue that today’s “late-capitalist” society is itself increasingly *defined* by products which enable such solipsistic, masturbatory *jouissance*, vehicles which function, like Alan’s Equus, to facilitate an unmitigated projection of fantasy. Crucial here is Žižek’s assertion that the success of these forms, best exemplified in the growing range of virtual or cyber-sex options, comes about not because they offer *more* than Normal sex, which has simply become boring (“worshipless”), but because of what they enable us to omit or evade. We should here conceive the “lack/desire of the Other” in a very literal way, that is, in terms of an unmediated confrontation with a desiring human being. What most distinguishes Alan’s encounter in the barn from his previous sexual experiences is that, in Jill, the *desirable* suddenly manifests itself as *desiring*.¹¹ If it is easy to assume that sex with an attractive human being like Jill would be “naturally” pleasurable, requiring far less *fantasy* than a relationship with a horse, Alan’s impotence reflects Lacan’s insistence on the inherently *traumatic* dimension of our encounter with the Other’s desire—desire as an impenetrable, over-proximate *presence*, which, if unmitigated by the shield of fantasy, is a source of overwhelming anxiety.¹² Like our contemporary vehicles for Enjoyment, what Equus offers is an ideal mirror for the projection of fantasies—a mirror in which the traumatic abyss of an (actual, human) Other’s desire is entirely omitted.

Finally, and to return to our discussion of the contemporary superego, we should note the way Alan’s ritual reflects the radically *intersubjective* nature of fantasy and desire. “Dysart understands that Alan has created his own sense of worship,” writes Plunka—“free from the influence of others” (161). Yet on close inspection, we see that what appears to be an intensely personal, mystical Enjoyment is performed under the pressure of a vigilant Third gaze: “Cowboys are watching! ... They’re admiring us!” (73). The boy’s fantasy is quite explicitly a fantasy of being *seen* to Enjoy. These fantasmatic voyeurs “Take off their Stetsons” in affirmation and validation of the Enjoyment that is successfully being had here, and in fact the sexual consummation is sought specifically for their benefit: “Come on now—show them!” As Lacan insists, our fantasies are not exclusively (or primarily) of fulfilling desire but of desiring and enjoying in a way that fulfills an Other’s expectations. We can recall here Freud’s description of his daughter’s fantasy of eating Strawberry cake. The “crucial feature” of the fantasy, as Žižek explains, resides in the presence of her approving parents, who appear “deeply satisfied by the spectacle” (*Plague* 9). What such a fantasy is really about is the child’s “attempt to form an identity,” one that would satisfy this imagined Other, making her the object of its desire. If Alan’s night-time ride is premised as a hysterical defiance and transcendence of imposed Symbolic identities, it is simultaneously a fantasy of escaping *into* an identification, of being approved of and interpellated, granted a defined place: “They know who we are” (73). And need I point out that the Other whose gaze Alan fantasizes about satisfying is one that has been created for him by the television set? “[L]ike most of the population” (27), he is obeying injunctions and Ego-Ideals sold to him through the system itself. This “hysterical” ritual is a powerful testimony to the fact that the Symbolic “big Other” is at work even (or indeed especially) in our most ecstatic-transgressive moments.

If *Equus* is most often approached in the context of a Real that “returns,” what is at stake in this “defensive” functioning of fantasy, we could say, is a Real that is *staged*. And it is with this dynamic in mind that we should reconsider the question of our own attraction to, and *Enjoyment* of, Shaffer’s play.

Una Chaudhuri examines the play as a “curious complicity” between Brechtian and Artaudian elements (59), the “distanced” intellection associated with the former operating (paradoxically) to set the stage for an eruption of that *archetypal and dangerous reality* which Artaud considers the true object of theatrical performance. In Alan’s horse-god we encounter “an image of man’s participation in prerational, preverbal forces,” an image that “gathers within it a host of psychological associations, developed over the course of historical human experience” (56). Central here of course is the work of Carl Jung, who argues that horse myths, common to all human civilizations, “attribute properties to the horse which psychologically belong to the unconscious of man” (qtd. in Chaudhuri 55). The visual, auditory, experiential force of equine elements on stage resonates deeply with a dimension that dwells in our Unconscious, understood here as a “storehouse of irreducible, unfathomable images, images that defy domestication by any causal analysis” (54). The theatrical encounter opens us up to the spontaneity of these primordial images and urges which exist deep within us, forming the hidden foundation of our being.

Chaudhuri here extends upon analyses of the play that stress its capacity to enact a form of secular ritual, communicating non-verbally with the audience, penetrating into what Dysart calls the “black cave of the Psyche” (75). In Plunka’s words: “As the audience is assaulted with the *Equus* noise and a rhythmic incantation against the foes of the godhead, the set begins to rotate. The increased speed of the turntable, the change of lighting, and the rhythmic dialogue all serve to create a terror that cuts directly through the skin to the bone” (170)—“the humming, thumping, and stamping produce vibratory sensations that work through the skin as well as on our minds” (169). Through this deployment of Artaudian “Total Theatre” the play “covertly affects our inner drives,” tapping into unconscious urges and libidinal impulses, producing an acute “sense of terror” (170).

Yet if these intense theatrical elements can be understood to accentuate and impart directly the libidinal primordality of Alan’s ride, we might also consider them in light of Lacan’s insistence that the sexual act must be supplemented with fantasy. Simply put, is not the very *filter* provided by this visual and auditory barrage the only way in which this scene could be rendered *tolerable* to a theatre audience? We are well aware from our experiences with popular cinema how even “normal” sexual exchanges must be filtered on screen through music, lighting, camera effects, visual symbolism, etc.—aesthetic elements which function (in Žižek’s words) as a “phantasmatic screen” to mediate the Real of the sexual act (*Lacan* 50). Rather than simply enhancing our experience of the sexual act’s intensity, they serve in a crucial way to “dematerialize” that act, to “rid us of the weight of its presence.” At stake here is not simply a prudish distaste for vulgar displays. As Žižek argues, even if we are accustomed to the content of hard-core pornography, the presence of an unadorned, unmediated sexual act is a structural impossibility within the frame of a regular Hollywood movie—it would utterly derail the manner of our engagement with the unfolding narrative; it would constitute an intrusion of the Real from which the fictional life of the film could never recover (*Looking* 111).

How much more is such “dematerialization” required in a live production of *Equus*? One need only visualize an unadorned rendering of Alan’s ritual: silent auditorium, stage cast in the everyday light of a psychiatrist’s office, we sit with our theatre colleagues as a hypnotized boy strips his clothes and proceeds to mimic the seductive mounting of an invisible horse, groaning, gasping, working himself to a climax before us and screaming out in prolonged ecstasy as he jolts

his way across the office rug. (What might Daniel Radcliffe’s agent have said about the star’s participation in such a project?) At stake here is not only the unusual nature of the act itself, nor the youthful age of the subject enjoying it, but the specifics of our relationship to it in the theatre space: our proximity to the actor’s body, our presence within the social environment of erudite, canonized theatre, our intense awareness of other spectators around us (accentuated, in this instance, through their and/or our placement upon the stage itself). In its very intensity, the theatrical barrage with which we are assailed in live production provides a vital *distance* from the act, a necessary aesthetic *defence* against a direct encounter with this live, naked boy, so shamelessly immersed in the throes of his *jouissance*.

To think of this another way, if the force of *Equus* in live performance is often linked to its “ritualistic” theatrical techniques, most essential is the way in which Alan’s scenes of Enjoyment *cannot* be equated with primitive, exotic rituals as we “normally” perceive and experience them. What distinguishes *Equus*, in this regard, is not that it fails to replicate the Real of those fascinating “primordial” dances and elaborate rituals we associate with the “non-socialized” ethnic Other, and which we may voyeuristically experience on television or while vacationing in exotic faraway places. Crucial in the theatre is the inherent obstacle that *prevents* Alan’s display from equating with our experience of the latter. For all the play’s archetypal and dangerous accoutrements, it simply cannot sublimate the all-too proximate, English-speaking white kid writhing on the stage before us, enjoying what appears to be an extraordinarily forceful orgasm. To supplement Plunka and Chaudhuri, perhaps the spectacle of Alan’s night-time ride has such an unusual and disturbing force not simply because the theatrical assault penetrates so deeply into the Unconscious, but because, ultimately, the full gamut of theatrical sights and sounds employed here is not sufficient to *cover over*, provide distance from, the anxiety-provoking (or in Lacan’s terms, traumatic) dimension of the Other’s *jouissance*.

At stake here, however, is not a simple dismissal of the Unconscious in our theatrical experience. Indeed, to grasp these arguments in their full scope would be to recognize the intricate ways in which this spectacle of the intensely Enjoying, Worshiping subject is imbricated with the Unconscious as *reconceived* in Lacan and Žižek—the Unconscious as “outside.” While this re-conception is notoriously complex, we can get a sense of the dynamic at work here through a simple inversion of Dysart’s repeated complaint. If we look closely at our “postmodern” relation to Worship, argues Žižek, we realize that what is most definitive about it is not simply our cynicism and passionlessness, the fact that we don’t seriously Worship (or “believe”) anymore, but rather our intense fixation on the image of an Other who *does*. Most distinctive about Normal contemporary existence is not simply the “worshipless” nature of our own enjoyments but the paradoxical *jouissance* we derive from our preoccupation with this “subject supposed to Enjoy” (Lacan’s terms), this Other who abandons himself in passionate devotion to a *Thing*, a *Cause*, worshipping with an intensity we cannot fathom: we obtain satisfaction “by means of the very supposition that the Other enjoys [and worships] in a way inaccessible to us” (*Tarrying* 206).

Crucially, this relationship with the “subject supposed to Enjoy” is *not* to be conceived in terms of a mere vicarious escape from ordinary life. Klein argues: “the spectators deeply desire to be Alan—that is, to allow themselves to live on an instinctual and primitive level, free from societal restrictions” (121). What this reading misses is the way(s) in which the Enjoyment we derive in relation to the “subject supposed to Enjoy” is directly implicated with *loss*. At stake here is not simply our imaginative participation in Enjoyment but the paradoxical *jouissance* (pleasure-in-pain) derived from our fixation on an Enjoyment *taken* from us. To go a step further, the dynamic of our relation to these Enjoying subjects in fact *inverts* normal notions of vicarious

enjoyment. What they offer is not, primarily, a means of imaginatively escaping our Normal reality—what Dysart’s diagnosis misses is how the Normal is itself held together via this fantasy of unmitigated fullness (tragically *lost* to us), how the latter serves as the “ex-timate” support of our reality, in all its normalcy. Žižek’s analysis prompts us to consider the vital ways in which our relation to a *lost* Enjoyment, and our fetishization of the Other who embodies it, can serve as the very structuring principle of our Normal reality.

What is “unconscious” here is not, as for Chaudhuri, a collection of forces and urges deep within us, lurking and quaking beneath our subjective experience of Normal reality, but the way in which we ourselves structure this reality via the fascinating *fantasy* of an Enjoyment beyond all Symbolic restraint, a Worship we *stage* for ourselves through the Other. In this light, the disturbing force (the “terror”) of Alan’s ritualistic Worship in the theatre derives not from its penetration to a deeper, archaic level *within* us; rather, in Alan’s display of Enjoyment we risk coming too close to something which must exist and be maintained *out there*—on the level of fantasy—in order for our Symbolic reality to function normally. To use our former terms, the anxiety at work in these scenes—an anxiety from which, I argue, the theatrical assault of visual and auditory elements functions to offer us partial relief—is correlative to an *objet a* that threatens to fall back into reality. “Enjoyment is good,” as Žižek puts it, “on condition that it not be too close to us” (*Tarrying* 212)—which is also to say that Enjoyment must be properly *staged*.

In this light it is tempting to interpret these elaborate theatrical accoutrements in a very *literal* way, i.e., as reflecting how Dysart himself *stages* the Other’s Enjoyment for his own gaze. We should note, throughout this play, the subtle yet forceful ways in which the psychiatrist’s derailing encounter with Alan is simultaneously an intricate stage-managing of Enjoyment, a theatrical constructing of the “subject supposed to Enjoy”. To return to the execution dream: if the “manifest content” here is an image of severance and evisceration, the dream’s most fundamental gesture—and its most powerful fantasmatic element—can be found in its *staging* of a virtually infinite Enjoyment, a seemingly never-ending stream of subjects supposed to Enjoy: “stretching away in a long queue, right across the plain of Argos ...” (24). Dysart’s vision of brutal evisceration is simultaneously a *fantasy* of an ineradicable succession of Others enjoying in a way inaccessible to us, an Enjoyment that is infinitized in precise coincidence with its suppression.

Crucial to this paradoxical dynamic is Dysart’s manner of *casting* himself in the show he is staging for us. “Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?” (80), he asks us, formulating his relations with the boy in terms of a most vicious severance. Yet is not this insistence, i.e., that he himself, as Symbolic agent, must eliminate Equus, put an end to the boy’s Enjoyment, “*take it away*,” a rather peculiar melodramatization in light of the critical events that have *already* occurred? Is it not clear from the moment the boy stands before us that he is *already* irretrievably separated from his god? Alan’s very presence in the psychiatrist’s office is vivid testimony to the fact that his Worship was always-already internally divided, a complex response (as I have argued) to a thoroughly contemporary crisis. To frame the situation in terms of a Worship forcibly evicted from and by the dominant Order is to elevate into a homogeneous purity what never existed as such. Dysart’s scalpels, in this light, far from eradicating Alan’s “primordial” purity of experience, operate to sanctify it as such, to bestow retroactively this status upon it. As Žižek writes of melancholy, in its persistent attachment to the Real of an object once possessed then lost, it allows us paradoxically to attain what we never possessed, possessing it in the very mode of loss (*Totalitarianism* 143). The intensity of Dysart’s fixation *on* loss functions to obfuscate the fact that the lost object is lacking

from the very beginning, that this object is ultimately “*nothing but* the positivization of a void/lack, a purely anamorphic entity.”

At stake here, thus, is how the dynamic of Napier’s horse-mask is *redoubled*, reflected on a fundamental level of our experience with the play as a whole—that is, how *Equus* itself operates to construct and to “positivize” an open Place in our field of view, enacting and substantializing this Place through the manner in which it revolves, hums, and stamps around it, raising it and tilting it under the light.

To put this another way, perhaps the play’s most attractive feature is not the way it *resurrects* *Equus*, allowing him temporarily to surge back into our woefully “concrete” world, but rather the way it *kills* him, stages his *death*. In our contemporary context, what may be the most striking and rare feature of this play is the very *traumatic intensity* with which it proclaims, circulates around, unabashedly fetishizes, the *loss as such*. This is to say, what is lost to us these days is not simply Alan’s *Equus*, the experience of pure Worship and Enjoyment, but rather, as Žižek puts it, “the organic-immediate experience of the loss itself” (*Totalitarianism* 145). What we *reclaim* through *Equus* is not an element of passionate Enjoyment missing from our mundane world; what we reclaim is precisely the *loss* of that Enjoyment, a loss vividly *constructed* for us by the play.

Let us clarify this by turning for a final time to the psychiatrist’s vacation plans. Toward the end of the play Dysart fantasizes once again about visiting Greece, supposedly to supplement his sterilized, “plastic” existence with the experience of a place still infused with Divinity. Yet revealingly, in this articulation of the trip, the specific object of Dysart’s fantasy is itself a site of *loss*: “There’s a sea—a great sea—I love ... It’s where the Gods used to go to bathe. ... The old ones. Before they died” (87). What he seeks to recapture in this vacation is not the Gods *per se*, but the sea that marks their *death*—not Worship *per se* but an object that embodies and evokes its *loss*. Such a trip might indeed come as a much-needed vacation, though not primarily from a neutralized, complacent existence, a world of absence. Is it not all-too evident by this point in the play that what Dysart needs a vacation from is precisely the obscene, oppressive *presence* of *Equus* himself—a world of uncanny, harassing intrusions, of violent superego Accusations, of palpable, derailing *darknesses* that crush in upon him? What he clings to in the image of this sea is precisely the *death* of the Gods. What he seeks to escape into, we could say, is a world in which the Gods are *more dead*.

We should ask how much of the enduring attraction of Shaffer’s play, its powerful appeal for contemporary audiences, consists in its capacity to offer a similar vacation.

NOTES

1. Žižek’s analysis of the superego injunction to enjoy extends upon Lacan’s discussion in *Seminar XX*: “The superego is the imperative of jouissance—Enjoy!” (3).
2. The author of this article recently received a letter from his credit card company stating: “The time has come to start enjoying thoughts of summer,” i.e., *enjoining* him immediately to commence enjoying, and indeed holding him accountable for his tardiness! On the same day, the church across the street from his residence was displaying the following daunting pronouncement: “God is here to be enjoyed!”
3. See for instance Chapter VI of Lacan’s *Seminar XVII*, “The castrated master.”
4. See for instance the final page of *Seminar XI*, as well as Žižek’s discussion in *Plague*, 81, and Chiesa, 69-71.
5. See Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
6. For Lacan’s discussion of the “barred” Other, see for instance *Seminar XX*, 28, 81, and 131.

7. Is it not precisely this Open Space that is missing from Sydney Lumet's film version? To draw upon Lacan's terms, what the filmic medium lacks in this instance, for all its vivid visual and auditory capacities, is precisely the lack itself. What is missing is precisely the *nothingness* so fundamental to the appearance of *Equus*.
8. As Žižek writes, "Father cannot see [Enjoyment] since he is dead, whereby the possibility is open to me to enjoy not only *outside* his knowledge, i.e., unbeknownst to him, but also *in his very ignorance*" (*Enjoy* 125).
9. See *Seminar X*.
10. In Žižek's words, "a pervert's conduct is unethical insofar as he shifts the responsibility for it to the big Other ... and claims to act merely as its instrument" (*Indivisible* 170). Also relevant here is the Kantian insight that "*the very need for an external master is a deceptive lure: man needs a master in order to conceal from himself the deadlock of his own difficult freedom and self-responsibility*" (*Parallax* 90)
11. See Harari's analysis, 226-7.
12. See Chapter I of Lacan's *Seminar XX*, "On *Jouissance*."

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