Encounters with the Real:  
A Žižekian Approach to the Sublime and the Fantastic  
in Contemporary Drama

by

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Abstract

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This study brings the insights of Slavoj Žižek’s Lacan-inspired approach to bear upon a series of influential 20th century plays and their engagement with what Lacan calls the Real. The plays to be explored share a focus on experiences, events or encounters which transcend, exceed, disrupt, and in some cases shatter characters’ normal, familiar realities. Examined through the lens of Žižek, these confrontations with the sublime and the fantastic reveal a crucial relation to the plays’ contemporary contexts, prompting us to “look awry” upon the dynamics of our own symbolically-regulated reality and the ever-changing and precarious nature of our relation to it. Similarly crucial is the relation of the Lacanian Real to our theatrical forms and modes of perception in the theatre. In staging “encounters with the Real,” these plays prompt us simultaneously to explore the ways in which the Real operates—and “appears”—in our own theatrical experience, ensnaring our gaze and the force of our desire. The study offers a Žižekian approach to works including Peter Shaffer’s Equus, John Milton’s Possible Worlds, S. An-sky’s The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds, Caryl Churchill’s The Skriker, Tony Kushner’s The Illusion, and Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt’s Enigma Variations.
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In this dissertation I have used the following abbreviations to designate the following books by Slavoj Žižek:

CH Contingency, Hegemony, Universality
DS Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?
ES Enjoy Your Symptom!
FT For They Know Not What They Do.
FA The Fragile Absolute
GV Gaze and Voice as Love Objects
HL How to Read Lacan
IR The Indivisible Remainder
LA Looking Awry
LC In Defence of Lost Causes
ME The Metastases of Enjoyment
MI Mapping Ideology
OB On Belief
OD Opera’s Second Death
PV The Parallax View
PF The Plague of Fantasies
PD The Puppet and the Dwarf
SO The Sublime Object of Ideology
TN Tarrying With the Negative
TS The Ticklish Subject
WD Welcome to the Desert of the Real
V Violence
Introduction

Encounters with the Real … on the Stage

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. … The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. (4.1.204-214)

- Bottom, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Since long before Bottom ever appeared on the stage, theatre has aimed to offer up the “rare visions” of which he speaks—to provoke imagination beyond its customary limits, to gesture toward worlds yet unseen, or as the duke Theseus puts it in the same play, to body forth “the forms of things unknown” (5.1.15). Bottom himself recognizes that his extraordinary experiences in the forest, so vastly outstretching the power of regular discursive language, are best to be conveyed through a theatrical artwork: “I will get Peter Quince to write a ballet of this dream: it shall be called Bottom’s Dream, because it hath no bottom” (4.1.214-216).

Of course, in the days since this play’s conception, theatre’s passion for things exceeding the scope of our worldly reality has often been subject to hefty critical resistance, a resistance anticipated by the sceptical Theseus in his dismissal of such “antic fables” and “fairy toys” as the lunatic products of “seething brains”—fantasies to be opposed and dismantled by “cool reason” (5.1.3-6). Brecht, famously, was adamant that the theatre must divest itself of the magical and the supernatural. An emphasis on such enchantments and otherworldly possibilities gravely underestimates and interferes with the theatre’s potential as
a medium for social transformation, reducing it to “mere” entertainment, an idle fancy with which (as Theseus puts it) to “ease the anguish of a torturing hour” (5.1.37). Yet even in our cynical “postmodern” times the theatre has not abandoned its engagement with things magical and fantastical, nor has it ceased to contemplate sublime Beyonds. However critically it may interrogate the illusions to which we cling, it can be equally critical of our passive submission to what Freud calls the “reality principle,” prompting—even now, at the “end of History”—a subversion and interrogation of assumed realities. Indeed, as this study will aim to show, contemporary theatre is often at its most subversive precisely when it seeks the sublime, the fantastical, the transcendent—or in Bottom’s terms, when it goes in search of that which hath no bottom.

Bottom’s Dream is, first and foremost, a dream of bottomless bliss, an absolute fullness of Enjoyment beyond all normal, symbolic conceptions—what Jacques Lacan calls jouissance. He has spent the night with the divine Titania, Queen of Fairies, who, whilst under the spell of Puck, believed herself to be utterly in love with this lowly mortal and lavished upon him the full extent of her charms. This midsummer night’s encounter with the sublime Woman is an experience infinitely exceeding anything this “rude mechanical” could ever have envisaged within the scope of his normal reality—and against which, surely, all subsequent earthly objects will appear the most meagre of substitutes.

And if Bottom’s Dream is sublime, his framing of it in this speech gives us a sense of that term’s full complexity. “Sublime,” as Immanuel Kant took pains to explain in his Critique of Judgment, is not simply another way of saying “really, really beautiful”—it is indeed opposed (most violently) to the formal balance and aesthetic harmony associated with “beauty.” Implicit in the very comedy of Bottom’s failure to stretch language far enough, to force it fully to capture its object and express the inexpressible, is a painful testimony to the
finitude and ultimate inadequacy of symbolic representations. The mechanical’s famous verbal convolutions (“The eye of man hath not heard . . .”) reflect a *violence* done to linguistic formations, a short-circuiting of our powers of representation in their attempt to contain the bottomless.

From another angle, if the experiences of this midsummer’s night are something about which Bottom will always dream (bottomlessly), if he spends the rest of his life fantasizing that he could once more regain that bliss beyond the confines of reality, is it not precisely this insistence on casting the encounter *as* a dream that enables him to preserve his reality *as such*, to *hold it together* in the wake of that night’s events? For Bottom, this experience in the forest is properly “fantastic” in the senses applied to that word by literary theory: “In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know . . . there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world” (Todorov 25). What Bottom has encountered is something that simply does not fit within the framework of meanings that had until now constituted his world. It violates the rules of a reality on which his very sense of identity had depended—transforming him quite literally into an ass. Flouting all that we think we know, destabilizing the very ground on which we stand, such fantastic encounters take the bottom out of reality itself.

Indeed, for all its bliss—and for all the despair with which the divine Woman’s sudden vanishing must inevitably be lamented—is there not a sense in which such encounters are ultimately far *safer* when staged as a “ballet,” as an aesthetic spectacle which one can contemplate at a certain secure distance? As Bottom well knows, this experience which so exceeds his representational faculties, however attractive, is also overwhelming, dizzying, potentially threatening to one’s basic sense of self-possession. In all its wonder it possesses an intensity of power correlative to what Kant calls the *dynamical* sublime—an experience of
something against which we are utterly powerless, a force which would subdue us absolutely
(“Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no …” [3.2.153]). Bottom’s experience in the
forest, after all, is an experience of falling. To love in this forest is to fall hopelessly under a
consuming spell which quite literally deprives one of one’s own head. The bottomlessness of
which he speaks here evokes all the vertigo correlative to a prospective free fall, the dizzying
intensity of which (like Kant’s waterfall and violent storms) can be experienced pleasurable
when contemplated from a safe, “aesthetic” vantage point.

Yet if the impact of such fantastic, sublime encounters, so exceeding normal
conceptions and symbolic restrictions, can threaten entirely to destabilize our existing reality,
are there not important ways in which the stuff of such dreams provides the necessary support
for our reality, sustaining it in all its regular normalcy? That which, when perceived head-on,
opens a bottomlessness within our world, when looked upon “awry” may serve precisely to
plug a hole in it. Simply put, there is a strong possibility that Bottom’s momentary glimpse of
the transcendent will serve him as a fantasy that enables and supports a passive acceptance of
his lot as a “rude mechanical.” Held within his heart as a secret treasure, raised, in Lacan’s
terms, “to the dignity of the Thing,” this rare vision of his will enable him to endure and
sustain the limiting conditions of his socially determined existence—he will tolerate without
argument the inequities of his social role, fortified by the belief that the true kernel of his
being lies elsewhere. In crucial ways, the very solidity of our social reality is indebted to such
bottomless fantasies—“bottomless” in the sense that they hath no substantial density, serving
their function precisely as fantasmatic.

As the work of contemporary psychoanalytic philosopher Slavoj Žižek is intent to
make clear, it is precisely in its combination of these diverging (and indeed opposing)
variations on the “bottomless” that we can locate the key feature of what Lacan calls the Real.
Bottom’s is an encounter with the Real of desire, of a *jouissance* exceeding all symbolic limits; the Real of an elusive kernel around which all attempts at symbolization ultimately fail; the Real of an overwhelming Thing which threatens to consume us; the Real as that which reveals holes in the structure of our normal, symbolically-regulated reality, destabilizing it; the Real as that which can serve (simultaneously) as a fundamental *support* to our symbolic reality and sense of identity.

It is precisely the role of this Real, our relation to it and above all its mutable, “anamorphic” character in contemporary times, that forms the focus of Žižek’s extensive engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis and the products of contemporary culture. Over the past two decades, Žižek has emerged as one of the central figures not only in psychoanalytic thought, but in contemporary cultural studies, critical theory and ideology, bringing the insights of Lacan and Freud into revealing and often spectacular collisions with the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Schelling and others, including contemporaries from Deleuze to Agamben. The success and alacrity with which Žižek has applied his insights to film, literature, music and art has vigorously upended those contentions that “psychoanalytic” approaches have had their day. And critical to these prolific forays has been the theorist’s deep investment in things sublime and fantastic. As his work continues to reveal, far from mere fantasies to be opposed and dismantled by “cool reason,” the “antic fables” that so haunt the landscape of 20th century artistic creation—our own midnight encounters with the Real, the lunatic products of our own “seething brains”—have a vast amount to teach us about the changing dynamics of symbolic reality and our relation to it.

In this study I seek to bring the insights of a Žižekian-Lacanian approach to bear upon a series of important and influential 20th century plays and the “encounters with the Real” that they stage. The plays I examine share a focus on experiences, events or encounters which
transcend, exceed, disrupt, and in some cases shatter characters’ normal, familiar realities. They dramatize confrontations with things which cannot be incorporated into the symbolic framework of characters’ regular worlds. They take as their object that which hath no bottom—things sublime, things fantastic, and above all, human desire. In all cases, these engagements with the Real reveal a crucial relation to the plays’ contemporary contexts, prompting us to “look awry” upon the dynamics of our symbolic reality and the ever-changing (and indeed precarious) nature of our relation to it. Similarly crucial, as we shall see, is the relation of this Real to our theatrical forms and modes of perception in the theatre. In exploring encounters with the Real upon the stage, these works prompt us simultaneously to explore the ways in which the Real operates—and appears—in our own theatrical experience, ensnaring our gaze and the force of our desire.

What quickly emerges as we begin working with Žižek is the extraordinary extent of the theorist’s interests and preoccupations, and correlatively, the differing lights his approach enables us to shed on the issues, prospects, and questions these plays present to us and circulate around. For Žižek, considerations of the Real in its various modes are always intricately imbricated with issues of religion, political ideology, Enjoyment in contemporary life, and above all, sexuality and gender. This study will frequently invoke the Lacanian dynamics of “sexuation,” returning repeatedly to topics such as female hysteria, feminine jouissance, and the notion of a feminine mode of subversion as it emerges in Žižek.

Yet if the scope of a Žižekian approach is considerable, we can begin by locating a crucial feature of it in the paradoxical duality and interplay that defines the theorist’s relation to things sublime and fantastic—the ways in which, for Žižek, the “illusion of the Real” is always supplemented with the “Real of the illusion.” If, in our “enlightened” times, we believe that we have vanquished those fantasies, illusions and spectral apparitions that haunted
previous ages, reconciling ourselves to reality “as such,” a Žižekian approach begins from the perspective that regular reality is itself a most remarkable and elaborate fantasmatic achievement. Our most normal, mundane, “self-evident” reality is itself a (symbolic) fantasy, sustained as such by an intricate relation to the spectral. Against the common contemporary refrain (in its various guises) that “there is no Real,” i.e., that the notion of some substantial Thing beyond symbolic or phenomenal appearances is merely a fantasy or illusion, Žižek’s work is intent to reveal how the operations of fantasy are themselves integral to the most normal state of reality—how what we experience as “real” is deeply imbricated with the fantasmatic, the non-specular, and indeed the sublime.

In this regard, if central to a Žižekian analysis is an “extraneation” of things sublime—i.e., an exposure of the mechanisms and dynamics that underlie desire and sublimation, giving rise to the illusion of their Real—the aim of this extraneation is never simply to dispel the Real and compel our return to mundane phenomenal appearances. What Žižek, following Lacan, refers to as a “traversal of the fantasy” amounts not simply to a dissolution of sublime and fantastical things but an overcoming of the illusion of our mundane, normal world. Since the apparent solidity and substantial density of the latter is itself a fantasy, to “traverse the fantasy” would constitute not a simple restoration of regular reality but indeed a truly transformative, “fantastic” encounter. To think of this another way, what the Žižekian approach seeks through “extraneation” is not (simply) to dissolve or to dispel fantastical, sublime appearances, revealing that behind them there is ultimately no Real, but indeed conversely, to make the Real itself appear. At stake in the “Real of the illusion” is the ways in which acknowledged illusions may nonetheless exert a very real, material effect upon our actions, i.e., the ways in which they continue (“unconsciously”) to supplement and reinforce the fundamental structure of our reality. In this regard, a truly fantastic “encounter with the
“Real” consists in an encounter with the very spectral, fantastic supports of our mundane world. Through such an encounter, we traverse the fantasy that we have traversed fantasies. We can also approach this from the inverse direction. On one hand, central to Žižek’s engagement with things fantastic is an emphasis on the Real that is correlative to the “impossible” creatures and apparitions that we encounter in contemporary fictions, i.e., a Real (beyond illusory symbolic formations) that “returns” in their monstrous manifestations. What may appear an entirely “illusory” thing, belonging in no way to our normal reality, nevertheless reflects something powerfully substantial—a return of repressed desire, for instance, the Real of a horrifying, inadmissible thing erupting into normal reality and destabilizing it. Yet Žižek’s analysis compels us also to consider the inverse. Such monstrous “returns of the Real” reflect not simply the eruption of fantasy into reality. Insofar as the latter is held together through a constitutive relation to the spectral, what such horrifying “returns” may reflect is the Real of a reality deprived of its necessary fantasmatic dimensions, a reality that has lost the support of its constitutive spectres.

I suggest that it is precisely through this paradoxical dual emphasis that a Žižekian approach is particularly relevant to an investigation of “encounters with the Real” in contemporary theatre. While contemplating sublime possibilities and exploring imaginative realms beyond our normal (ideologically mediated) reality, the plays in this study simultaneously encourage us to engage critically with the mechanisms underlying sublimation and desire, to “extraneate” the complicated (and potentially ideological) dynamics that undergird our contemporary fantasies, and to explore the defensive roles such fantasies may play. This is to say, while staging fantasies, these plays seek also a “traversal of the fantasy”—yet a traversal which, far from simply returning us to reality as such, would open up new possibilities beyond it. As we will explore, this duality is particularly applicable to our
experience of theatre as a live medium. On one hand, these plays reflect the contemporary theatre’s predisposition to thematize, interrogate, and reveal its own status as illusory, exposing the constituents and mechanisms of its own magic (we should note that the term “extraneation” is in fact derived from Brecht). Yet as in Žižek, this revelation that “there is no Real” behind the theatrical appearance is supplemented with a passion for making the Real appear. If such theatre reveals the Real as illusion, it also revels in the Real of the illusion.

Ultimately, I seek in this study to investigate these plays not simply as staging an encounter with the Real, but as responding to one. They explore and attempt to grapple with the very “crisis of sublimation” around which so much of Žižek’s own work circulates, a crisis correlative not simply to the loss or absence of the Real in contemporary times, but to the inability of our symbolic reality—increasingly deprived of its constitutive spectral supports—to keep the Real at bay. Perhaps what these plays most share with each other, and with Žižek, is their attempt to confront, contend with and somehow respond to a most daunting deadlock in the Real. Their fantastic resurgences and their sublime encounters, destabilizing the smooth circuit of reality, reflect a theatrical response to a reality that is already destabilized, whose smooth circuit is already thrown out of joint. The Real of the desire they stage, a “bottomless” desire bursting past symbolic, bodily and indeed earthly restraints, reflects an attempt to grapple with the crisis of a destabilized symbolic reality, a crisis with serious consequences for desire itself.

And if a Žižekian approach is intent on engaging in a critical way with the sublimity to which these plays are so passionately attached, by no means is its central thrust toward a simple desublimation, a dismissal of sublimity per se, nor is it correlative to a simple dissolution of spectral things. To draw upon clinical parlance, our stubborn attachment to sublime objects and the Real beyond appearance is not merely a “symptom” to be dissolved
through verbalization, as though its analytic interpretation would permit us to be properly (re)integrated into normal symbolic reality. If such symptoms, as Žižek argues, are not simply aberrations of symbolic existence but indeed the latter’s fundamental support—if it is our very passionate attachment to the symptom that holds us together—then what a psychoanalytic intervention seeks is rather a reconfiguration of this relationship, a new way of staging the sublime and the fantastic.

Before I sketch the trajectory of the chapters that follow, some further words are in order concerning my use here of the term “Žižekian.” As is already apparent, a Žižekian approach is, also, a Lacanian approach. A number of concepts already introduced, notably the “Real” and the “traversal of the fantasy,” are concepts that Žižek has derived from Lacan, as are a great many others that we will explore over the next five chapters. *Jouissance*, the objet a, lamella, the “formulae of sexuation,” the big Other and the “barred” Other—these concepts are at the very heart of the discussion, and they are “Lacanian” concepts. If I have spoken of this study as Žižekian, I emphasize here, as I will repeat throughout, that “Žižekian” involves an engagement with and a thorough investigation of the “Lacanian.” In fact this study itself will at times seem to leave Žižek entirely out of the mix and work exclusively with Lacan’s own writings—I draw upon ideas and assertions in Lacan that Žižek himself has not drawn upon; and there are numerous places where I call upon Žižek simply to help clarify or offer an example for a difficult Lacanian notion. We might clear up, or side-step, the issue by simply referring to the approach taken here as both Žižekian and Lacanian. Yet if taking a Žižekian approach means engaging with Lacanian notions, there are also numerous important senses in which Žižekian is not “simply” Lacanian.
Since a complete investigation of the complex interplay between the Žižekian and the Lacanian could absorb a whole study, I will raise below only some key aspects of the issue as they relate to the present study:

- In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek refers to a longstanding temptation “to write a kind of negative introduction to Lacan, taking as the starting point a false cliché about him, and then describing his actual position through its rectification” (289). As I will explore throughout this study, even when Žižek is drawing directly upon the works of Lacan, he is often doing so in a way that diverges considerably from—or indeed “dialectically inverts”—what much literary theory has set forward as a standard “Lacanian” reading. Central here is his focus upon lesser known Lacanian works, particularly the later seminars, as well as his emphasis on reading the earlier or more recognized writings of Lacan through the lens of these later developments. Simply put, if Žižek is highly Lacanian, what we find in his work may radically oppose what we perceive as a “proper” Lacanian position. At the heart of his Lacanian investigations is an attempt to complicate or re-conceive what “Lacanian” has come to mean in certain academic circles and literary departments. The distinction is also one of emphasis. A number of concepts which literary theory has often placed at the forefront of a Lacanian approach—the “mirror stage,” for instance, or the notion that the “unconscious is structured like a language”—appear relatively infrequently in Žižek.

- It is the very comprehensiveness of Žižek’s reading of Lacan that infuses his discussion of particular concepts and ideas with a dimension that may be absent (or muted) not only in “traditional” approaches but in the “original” Lacanian writings themselves. His broad-ranging engagement permits him to bring together concepts and ideas from very different places and phases of Lacan’s teaching, enabling them to circulate around each other, often
generating connections, shades of meanings, or implications that do not emerge within Lacan’s own direct engagement with them. My discussion of lamella in Chapter Four provides a strong example. After introducing this fascinating, enigmatic creature in *Seminar XI*, Lacan (perversely) dedicates only a handful of paragraphs to it; yet through Žižek’s development of the concept, his explorations of it in the context of popular culture, and his reading of it through a range of previous and subsequent developments in Lacan, lamella becomes a lever for critical investigation, enabling us to examine and re-conceive the dynamics of a highly complex dramatic work. At such times, while drawing upon a Lacanian concept, my work is nevertheless decidedly “Žižekian” in the sense that it reflects the latter theorist’s manner of engagement with Lacan.

- In the introduction to *Organs Without Bodies*, we find a key distinction between a “dialogue” and a philosophical *encounter*. The latter, characterized by an act of “productive misreading,” constitutes for Žižek the true source of philosophy’s own most crucial developments:

  Aristotle misunderstood Plato, Thomas Aquinas misunderstood Aristotle, Hegel misunderstood Kant and Schelling, Marx misunderstood Hegel, Nietzsche misunderstood Christ … Precisely when one philosopher exerted a key influence upon another, this influence was without exception grounded in a productive misreading—did not the entirety of analytic philosophy emerge from misreading the early Wittgenstein?” (*DC* ix)

Žižek himself would admit—indeed proclaim—that his work is often an *encounter* with Lacan rather than a simple dialogue, wilfully susceptible to the sorts of miscommunication that a *straight* reading would seek assiduously to eliminate. Later in the same book he speaks of the “philosophical practice of buggery” (*DC* 46), a metaphor he derives from
Deleuze, and one which aptly describes his own predilection for taking Lacan “from behind.”

At times Žižek himself is not a direct participant in the act, adopting rather “the position of a perverse observer who stages the spectacle of buggery and then watches for what the outcome will be” (DC 48). Žižek serves as the director of these spectacles, bringing Lacan into forced copulation with some highly unexpected and seemingly incompatible partners. The “monstrous offspring” produced by these encounters—offspring which neither parent would eagerly lay claim to—can be rightly consigned (if by default) to the custody of Žižek.

We should note the irony that, in thus staging the “buggery” of Lacan, Žižek is at his most Lacanian. Lacan himself was notable for such “perverse” predilections, delighting, for instance, in the monstrous offspring of “Kant avec Sade.” Moreover, as Žižek asks, is not Lacan himself a most notorious self-buggerer?

Is he not permanently changing his position, so that when, in his great negative statement, he pathetically proclaims that ‘there is no Other of the Other,’ and so forth, the question to be asked is But who was the poor idiot who claimed that there is an ‘Other of the Other’ in the first place? The answer is always Lacan himself a couple of years ago. (DC 49)

Žižek’s “buggery” of Lacan may thus be understood as a natural extension of the latter’s own dearest perversions—a staging of “Lacan avec Lacan,” in hopes of fascinating, illegitimate offspring.

- And of course, there are simply a great many concepts—or perspectives, or advancements, or “speculative twists”—which, although inevitably influenced by the theorist’s exploration of other thinkers, would nonetheless seem safely and legitimately
accredited to Žižek. Yet to go a step further, the “originality” of Žižek is clearly not reducible to his advancement of particular concepts. So much of what constitutes a Žižekian approach consists in the manner and style of the theorist’s engagement with issues, the peculiar energy he brings to tired debates, his delight in staging interplays between the popular-mainstream and the densely theoretical, his predilection for “anamorphic shifts,” his tendency to circulate repeatedly (in a manner resembling the “stuckness” of the psychoanalytic drive) around a particular kernel, producing through this very repetition a sublime by-product. While I make no claims to replicate the style or idiosyncratic energy that makes Žižek’s writing what it is, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the influence of a certain Žižekian spirit animating my own engagement with Lacanian things.

- With this in mind, there are many ways in which the approach taken in this study seeks not to replicate the style and manner of Žižek’s philosophizing but to penetrate it. In “applying” Žižek I am also attempting to interpret and understand him, and to present his ideas in a manner accessible to admirers of the theatre who do not know his work. Given the broad range of his philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic concerns, and the vast and often (seemingly) desultory character of writings, a key challenge is posed by the basic task of distilling from them a sufficiently clear and systematic development of key ideas, placing his claims and preoccupations within a larger theoretical edifice. A second challenge consists in bringing these insights together into a framework that will serve as an effective means for approaching dramatic artworks.

The most notable way in which this study diverges from Žižek is in its sustained focus upon individual works. Each of my chapters focuses on a single play. While Žižek deals with hundreds of artworks, he rarely spends more than a page or two upon a particular work
before shifting to something else; and even his longer investigations of specific writers and artists frequently diverge from the work itself for prolonged periods, using the work as a springboard for widely varying philosophical or political concerns.

Yet while I aim in this study to “put the plays first,” drawing upon Žižek to illuminate them (resisting or at least tempering his own unabashed proclivity for utilizing artworks as philosophical vehicles), I proceed from the conviction that a Žižekian approach is at its best—and most Žižekian—when it stages not simply a dialogue but an encounter. A proper staging of “Žižek avec works of contemporary theatre” should be open to the productive misreadings and the potentially monstrous offspring that such encounters are inclined to generate. It is also my conviction that “Žižek avec contemporary theatre” can offer an illumination, and expansion, and indeed a vital re-envisioning of the very Žižekian notions with which we are working.

Finally, I should note that while Žižek and Lacan are my primary references, I draw frequently upon a number of others who have emerged in recent years as key thinkers of psychoanalytic theory. Notable among these are Renata Salecl, Mladen Dolar, Eric Santner, and especially Alenka Zupančič, whose writings on the sublime and comedy form a particularly important part of my final chapter. To refer to these thinkers as part of some Žižekian establishment would be drastically to minimize the vitality of their own significant and varied contributions (and also to overlook the important influence that they themselves have had upon Žižek). Yet it is nonetheless true that they share with Žižek some distinguishing theoretical preoccupations and predispositions, and that we find in them a similar determination to interrogate the Real. I draw also upon other noted Lacanian theorists, including Roberto Harari, Bruce Fink, and Lorenzo Chiesa, primarily for the purposes of explicating Lacanian concepts. I do this because these theorists have engaged
with a number of Lacanian writings which remain unpublished or untranslated. In Chapters One and Three, for instance, I draw upon Harari and Chiesa to elucidate crucial elements of Lacan’s *Seminar X*, still unavailable in English.

My first chapter takes a new look at Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*, a play which, as its recent remounting in London and New York would attest, remains as popular among audiences today as it was in the 1970s. Few plays engage so directly with the contemporary “crisis of sublimation” as *Equus* does. Its central character, the middle-aged psychiatrist Dysart, confronts the realization that the teenaged patient whose “madness” he seeks to cure is in touch with a world of fantasy, passion and mythic wonder vastly exceeding anything we experience in our normal, “enlightened” reality. I seek to explore the dynamics of this play and its commentary on the fate of Enjoyment through an examination of the Lacanian *objet a* and its relation to contemporary subjectivity. Looking closely at the encounter that *Equus* stages between *jouissance* and paternal-symbolic authority, and drawing upon Žižek’s analysis of such concepts as the contemporary superego and the “subject supposed to Enjoy,” the chapter ultimately brings into question the psychiatrist’s own diagnosis of the discontent afflicting our “post-Sacred” universe. In doing so, it attempts to re-conceive the nature of our own enduring attraction to the play and the enjoyment we derive from it in live performance.

Next I examine *Possible Worlds*, a highly successful work by Canadian playwright John Mighton. As its title suggests, this play explores the prospect of alternate lives, its protagonist faced with the predicament of existing in an infinite number of worlds at the same time. Through this character’s adventures Mighton raises before us the simultaneously fascinating and daunting prospects of modern science, investigating the fate of desire, sublimation, and imagination in an increasingly virtualized world. This chapter examines
further the dynamics of the objet à and its relation to symbolic reality, extending the
discussion through an investigation of psychosis, hainamoration, the gaze, and what Hegel
calls the “night of the world.” My Žižekian approach works toward a re-assessment of the
“traversal of the fantasy” that this play stages for us, revealing how Mighton’s conclusion
gestures towards a “feminine” reconfiguration of sublimity.

Chapter Three takes us back to a highly important and influential play by the Russian
Jewish ethnographer S. An-sky. Set in a deeply Hasidic world of mystery and mysticism, The
Dybbuk stages one of the most memorable fantastic encounters in all of drama. Its protagonist,
a young yeshiva student named Khonen, succeeds in transubstantiating himself into a spirit or
“dybbuk” in order to possess the body of his beloved. I explore this play’s fantastical
protagonist and the sublimity of its culminating Liebestod in relation to what psychoanalysis
calls the “death drive.” A close consideration of this concept, which Žižek himself has claimed
as the profoundest preoccupation of his encounter with psychoanalytic philosophy (Daly &
Žižek 61), encourages us both to re-conceive the “subversive” aspects associated with the play
and to complicate existing “hysterical” readings of it.

In the penultimate chapter I draw upon a range of concepts explored and developed
previously in order to shed new light on Caryl Churchill’s notoriously evasive play, The
Skriker. What could be called the play’s plot centres around the mischief and mutations of a
mysterious “shape-shifter,” an enigmatic other-worldly creature which insinuates itself into
the lives of two young London women, assuming endless guises in order to ensnare their
desire and lure them to its Underworld. Defying conventions of space and time, mixing the
naturalistic with ever-proliferating dimensions of fantasy, the play has often met with
significant resistance, leaving audience members baffled and mystified as to its intent. Much
of the critical response to the play focuses on the very question of interpretation and its
relation to enjoyment in theatrical experience, a question I seek to probe further in this chapter. My analysis draws upon the Lacanian lamella—and upon Žižek’s insightful analyses of this enigmatic, shape-shifting concept—to re-conceive both the play’s formal dynamic and the jouissance at work in our own interpretative experience. At stake in this analysis is the “sexuation” of interpretation itself.

The final chapter stages what may initially appear an unexpected shift into the realms of comedy. From many angles, comedy would seem to have as little relation to the sublime as it does to the fantastic creatures and monstrous prospects so prevalent in the other sections of this thesis. Far from stretching beyond or shaking the foundations of our immediate reality, is not comedy typically associated with a radical desublimation, with an insistence on stubborn material finitude, a reconciliation to the fact that we are, ultimately, “only human”? Yet with the assistance of Žižek and Lacan, as well as Alenka Zupančič’s recent Lacan-inspired theorizations of comedy, I aim to make clear why this unexpected “reversion” to the comic is indeed the most apt of culminations to the preceding analysis. Looking at two recent plays—Tony Kushner’s The Illusion (a free adaptation of Corneille’s L’Illusion Comique) and French playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt’s Enigma Variations—I explore the relation of comedy to the Lacanian Real, particularly apropos its engagement with love and desire. Both plays stage a “traversal of the fantasy” which, in its very comedy, gestures toward new modes of configuring the sublime and encountering the Real.

It is my hope that these five chapters will help to demonstrate the potentials of a Žižekian approach to contemporary drama, while simultaneously exploring how contemporary drama’s engagement with the Real can contribute to a study of Žižek.
Chapter One

Enjoying *Equus: Žižek avec Shaffer*

In the wake of Thea Sharrock’s recent re-mounting of *Equus*, a host of reviewers have been quick to note how forcefully Peter Shaffer’s play still speaks to us, how the decades since its debut have rendered its issues only more pressing and its insights more acute. Audiences are still eager to identify with the central crisis of this play, in which the horrifying dangers of irrational passion are juxtaposed with the vapidity and sterility of “civilized” society. The psychiatrist Dysart knows he needs to help heal and socialize his teenaged patient Alan—who, immersed in a mythic fantasy world of gods and transcendent passions, has brutally blinded several horses—yet he spends the play lamenting the comparatively “worshipless” nature of his own reality (62). For Dysart, we have succumbed today to the repressive authority of the “Normal,” an objectively delineated world deprived of imaginative scope and sublime visions, a regime of conventions and mandates from which true Enjoyment, or what Lacan would call *jouissance*, has been forcibly evacuated. Today’s existence, denied the painful intensity with which Worship stretches for its divine object, is a complacent, sterilized, all-too orderly state, reducing us to mere “ghosts” (107) sleepwalking through the repetitive circuit of our “plastic,” “concrete” lives. Yet if this insight is a highly despairing one, its articulation in the play, writes Dennis Klein, “touches the spectators at their most basic level of emotions. However sophisticated, the audience applauds the speech in which Dysart finds it ironic—ridiculous—that he, a passionless man, should be curing Alan, who knows ecstasy” (121). Shaffer “completely wins the audience over to Dysart’s point of view,” and indeed, the appeal of the play’s indictment of contemporary Normality “is so deep that one does not respond with polite applause, but with glee.”
It is strong testimony to Shaffer’s insight and sensitivity that his play continues to speak so directly and resonantly, offering such a revealing perspective on our contemporary “crisis of sublimation,” even as the latter escalates and takes on new dimensions. Yet just how eager should we be to accept Dysart’s diagnosis of this crisis? If we are still so far from accommodating ourselves to the holes in our “post-Sacred” universe, have we not come some way in grappling with and theorising this deadlock and the dynamics underlying it? A great many thinkers in the decades since the play’s debut have not been content with the paralysis of the psychiatrist’s final tableau, instead making his questions and perplexities the subject of a continued and rigorous analysis. In revisiting this play today, are we not in a position to take Dysart’s own investigation much further, interrogating in a new light his patient’s crisis and indeed re-conceiving the psychiatrist’s own relation to jouissance? I contend that the play not only is susceptible to such an analysis but actively invites it, opening up the possibility of a radically different psychoanalytic reading, one with powerful significance for the fate of Enjoyment in our contemporary (“North-Western”) world.

Let us take as a point of departure one of the psychiatrist’s own prominent “symptoms.” On one hand, the focus of his despair is contemporary lack. He fixates on that which is missing from or lost to today’s “adult” reality, that which is repressed and squelched by incorporation into Normal society. Yet amidst all his talk of absences and emptiness, of lost Worship, Passion, and Divinity, we find in Dysart a man conspicuously harassed by uncanny presences. If contemporary life is characterized by lack, his world seems 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). Such darknesses are not, for Dysart, mere points of absence or obscurity. They are swelling, encroaching stains in his field of vision which, more and more, refuse the status of
vacancies and “stare” back at him (75), “violently accusing” him (26), confronting and demanding something of him though he knows not what. Indeed, the final question of the play—“What dark is this?” (109)—directly converts mere lack or absence into an enigmatic presence, darkness as positively-given, “intolerable” (18) in its palpability and nearness. Repudiating the comforting label of “God” yet asserting itself with an equivalent metaphysical urgency, this over-proximate, anxiety-provoking presence is something which, in Dysart’s world, must be assiduously kept at bay, defended against.

Of course, Alan too has an intense relationship with dark spaces, particularly those at the back of the eyes. Yet the boy’s relationship with these spaces functions differently. If Dysart’s is an overly present darkness, a darkness that pushes, swells, intrudes, and from which he seeks escape, for Alan, the dark space behind the horse’s eye—a space of mystery, fascination and fantasy into which he stares mesmerized “for ages” (90)—is the darkness of an infinite depth, a great well of possibility which the boy is free to fill with all the creations and projections of his imagination and desire. And is it not precisely when this space, this darkness, ceases to function as an open stage for fantasies, an inviting, seductive place of possibility, becoming instead a swelling presence which intrudes into and saturates his field of vision, that the play’s crisis occurs?

If Equus emphasizes the loss and the lack that afflicts contemporary reality, it also prompts us to supplement this emphasis with the idea of an over-proximity, an uncanny thing which, in contemporary times, has gotten too close to us. And it is precisely via this sort of “dialectic reversal” that Slavoj Žižek’s Lacan-inspired approach seeks to re-conceive our contemporary crisis of sublimation. What if the “postmodern discontent” embodied in the figure of Dysart finds its primary source not in the loss of jouissance but in its uncanny resurrection—its horrifying proximity and excessive presence? If Dysart emphasizes the
jouissance-eradicating function of the Normal’s regime, a Žižekian analysis will reveal how Shaffer’s play in fact reflects the obverse dynamic—that is, how the Normal itself is being suffocated by this resurrected jouissance.

A similar logic will lead us to problematize Dysart’s distinction between Alan’s sacred universe, wherein unfathomable gods still reign and roam, and the psychiatrist’s own rational, godless world. “The theological lesson of postmodernism,” as Žižek explains, is not that God is absent, leaving in his vacant place a deficit, an emptiness, but rather that “God is too present” (LA 146). In the context of Equus we shall examine further this curious contention, i.e., that ours is not a world of absence, but conversely “a world in which God—who up to now had held himself at an assured distance—has gotten too close to us.” As I will show, the boy’s breakdown in the barn reflects anxiety in the specifically Lacanian sense—not an anxiety that something is lost or missing, “not the loss of the incestuous object but, on the contrary, its very proximity” (LA 146). The boy suffers a devastating (and guilt-provoking) inability to Enjoy, not because his god is absent, but because this god is too close, transformed into an “obscene, revolting presence” that pushes against the thin walls, seeping through and intruding into the space of symbolic relations. A Žižekian analysis will reveal how it is precisely here, at the point where Alan’s world seems furthest from our own, that it sheds the most light on the dynamics of Enjoyment in our contemporary culture.

If the arguments introduced above would seem to lend themselves to a predominantly text-based approach to the play, our investigation of Enjoyment in the play will also prompt us to consider our own Enjoyment of the play, our engagement with it as a live, theatrical performance. This issue is of particular importance here in light of the contention made by many commentators that the play’s remarkable and enduring success is largely attributable to
its on-stage dimensions and potentialities. As Una Chaudhuri puts it, what the play says to us should not be isolated from what it does to us (52).

On one hand, Equus would appear devised to encourage a predominantly intellectual and analytical mode of engagement. The stage gives the effect of a “dissecting theatre” (13), with members of the audience seated upon it in full view. We are addressed by Dysart as though observers of a laboratory experiment. Stage directions take on a decidedly Brechtian tone, particularly apropos these horses around which the play’s world revolves. What we see on stage is by no means a naturalistic representation of “horse,” but a conspicuously theatrical form of signification that exposes and indeed gestures toward its own constructedness. The horses, ultimately, are actors in track-suits, standing upright at all times, their costume consisting of “light struted hooves” (15) upon their feet (“about four inches high, set on metal horse-shoes”), and a type of wire horse mask extending into space beyond their own heads. The costume is not intended to cover or conceal the performers (“no attempt should be made to conceal them”). The performers are here the visible bearers of a symbolic semblance, carried upon their shoulders, supported through movements and gestures which signal horse-ness without literally depicting a horse. Indeed, the performance methodically displays the constituent parts of this horse-illusion, assembling it before our eyes: 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 in the theatre might best be evoked through Octave Mannoni’s famous phrase, “Je sais bien, mais quand même …”. This is to say, “I know very well” that there is nothing before me but an actor supporting a metal contraption on his shoulders and wearing horseshoes, “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. As it begins to move beneath the stage lights I find myself struck by the uncanny force of a “something more” appearing in and through the theatrical appearance, something in it “more than itself,” irreducible to the entity’s theatrical constituents. Notably, the force of this effect is by no means a simple matter of our “willing suspension of disbelief,” our willingness to pretend the thing is a horse and to allow ourselves 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 distantiation and clear-headed consideration of the theatrical representation.

We can extend this paradox of the performance through a closer look at the dynamic of this conspicuously theatrical horse-mask. John Napier’s design for the play’s original mounting, resurrected for the Sharrock production (and for a great many in the interim), reflects Shaffer’s specification that the mask, extending above the performer’s own head, is to consist of “alternating bands of silver wire and leather” (15), with eyes “outlined by leather blinkers.” The mask is not solid—the wire and leather bands function to evoke the contours of the head, outlining its dimensions, while leaving exposed from all angles the void of its interior. The mask thus is built around—and builds—a central void, its bands circulating around and framing the empty space at its centre. And as any viewer of the play is likely to attest, the transparency of this mask is by no means equivalent to a simple exposure of the nothingness behind theatrical illusion, a revelation and reminder that the horse is actually 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” of the mask, this absence of specularity, this opening beyond the visible, that most forcefully ensnares our gaze in live performance?
Framed in this way—and by the lighting and choric effects (the “Equus noise”) which likewise circulate around it as the play’s action builds—this “mere” void or empty space at the heart of the enactment becomes forcefully substantialized, transformed into the space of something uncannily present in this horse-appearance, an enigmatic depth permeating the theatrical creature, a thing within in it “more than itself.”

Significantly, what is at stake here is not simply an imaginative “filling out” of the spaces left open by the theatrical representation, the “bringing to life” of the referent in our minds. The point here is not reducible to the suggestion that symbolic configurations on stage can be even more effective in conjuring the image of horse than a naturalistic reconstruction, compelling from us the force of imaginative investment. Central to our experience of this horse is the “short circuit” occurring here between imagined referent and the void at the centre of this mask—the way this non-specular dimension, this absence of the visible at the core of the enactment, becomes a property or quality of the enacted horse, internal to the horse we imaginatively experience in the theatre. This compelling void at the heart of the mask is not simply filled out by the imagined referent but reflected into, actively infusing and permeating our imaginative experience of it with an otherness. 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.3 The 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 it “more than itself.”

Of course, it is also in this sense that the live theatrical dimensions of the play so deeply resonate and collaborate with our experience of its fictional narrative. What Alan calls “Equus” designates precisely this element in horse more-than-horse-itself, this non-specular dimension “shining through” the surface appearance. Equus, the boy asserts, is not horse per
se, but an irreducible “Something else” (48) that lives in horses, transcendent to the physical object, an unfathomable and sublime space beyond all specularity. We find here an exemplary demonstration of what Lacan calls the objet a, the evocation of an “unfathomable X” in the desired object, a thing “which can never be pinned down to any of its particular properties” (PV 18), a “je ne sais quoi which lies beyond the eyes” (Chiesa 227) and by virtue of which an ordinary object (horse) is “transubstantiated” into a sublime object of desire.4

Yet if the Brechtian attributes of Shaffer’s horse, far from exclusively undermining the efficiency of the illusion and imposing upon us a distanced, intellectual consideration of the issues at stake, may function paradoxically to further ensnare our gaze, increasing the intensity of our engagement with the theatrical fiction (indeed making reverberate in our own experience the very enigmatic depth of this mysterious horse-god beyond appearance), this is not to say that the operations here do not open up a highly revealing “extraneation” of the workings of Enjoyment in the play’s universe and our own. As we will see, the fundamental dynamic at work in our engagement with this spectacle—our relation to an Open Space in the visible, a thing generated in its intensity by that which circulates around it, structuring it, registering its contours—is a dynamic absolutely central to the Lacanian-Žižekian understanding of subjectivity and Enjoyment. As Shaffer’s play itself directly demonstrates, not only the subject’s Enjoyment but indeed the very consistency of its Symbolic reality hinges upon its relation to such a non-specular dimension, a void introduced in the midst of our visual field.

It is with this dynamic in mind that we can begin to explore how the play complicates or indeed dialectically inverts its own psychiatrist’s diagnosis, permitting us to conceive anew the operations of contemporary lack.
For Dysart, as we have seen, what takes control today, in the absence of gods worthy of our passion, is the repressive authority of the “Normal,” a regime of Symbolic restrictions, conventions and mandates from which jouissance is evacuated. As Gene A. Plunka writes, and as the bulk of critical opinion affirms, what the play dramatizes is Alan’s desperate resistance to a world “replete with oppression” (156). Yet while the psychiatrist rails against this oppressive regime—of which he serves as unwitting agent—the play itself encourages us to emphasize Žižek’s and Lacan’s insistence that contemporary society is marked by a decline of Symbolic authority, an erosion of the rigidity and prohibitive agency associated with the Symbolic Order. In fact, it is precisely in the context of this decline that we can understand the contemporary deadlock of Enjoyment reflected in Alan’s breakdown.

For those familiar with traditional understandings of Lacan, the assertion that an erosion of Symbolic rigidity results in a decline of Enjoyment 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 interference with Enjoyment. 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 as he intervenes in his son’s equestrian pleasures, cutting him off from jouissance, violently yanking him onto solid ground. An initial state of harmony and blissful 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. Indeed, 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, 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 the thus embodiment of paternal Law. The loss of jouissance and
alienation in the signifier is the price Alan must pay for entrance into socio-symbolic relations.

In the play, prohibition finds its material correlative in the “chinkle-chankle” (67)
which literally links the horse (and the Enjoyment it represents) to paternal restraint,
subordinating it. Alan’s encounter 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 that he believes would be possible in its absence. The chinkle-chankle, however,
“never comes out” (66), and this expression, repeated by the jouissance-deprived Dysart in the
play’s closing line, would appear to affirm a definitive opposition between a quest for “true”
Enjoyment and the subjugating, alienating impact of Symbolic restrictions.

In this light, Alan’s late-night rides in the field reflect a valiant “hysterical” disavowal
of interpellation,5 a desperate attempt, as Plunka argues, at “abandoning the tight ‘reins’ of his
father’s authority” (155). What Alan calls “Equus”—the objet a that he discovers in horses,
the intense Schein of something in them “more than themselves”—is here precisely a
“remainder/reminder” of a lost jouissance—a reminder of a fullness he experienced prior to
Symbolic subjugation, and a remainder of that jouissance which, for all its rigidity, Symbolic
authority cannot entirely squelch. If only for brief moments, the boy succeeds in freeing
himself from the excessive discipline associated with the superego (understood here as a force
of internalized social repression that impedes jouissance\(^6\), making contact with the bliss of a primordial fullness beyond restriction, enacting an imagined refusal of Symbolic castration.

In both Freudian psychoanalysis\(^7\) and Shaffer’s play, this attempted refusal finds expression in the figure of the Father-Enjoyment—the sole man exempt from the phallic function. As Bruce Fink puts it, this figure “is not subject to the law: he is his own law” (110). The Horseman, idealized in Alan’s memory, is immune to Symbolic Law—he exercises a right to “trample on ordinary people” (42), he encourages Frank to report him to the police, and he makes the Symbolic father appear a “stupid fart,” riding away and simply ignoring his word. This image recurs in Alan’s obsession (and fantasmatic identification) with cowboys—the only ones who “understand” (Enjoyment) (49), who are “free” from Symbolic regulations. “I bet all cowboys are orphans!”, says the boy—that is, they are not subject to paternal authority. Here we have the Father-Enjoyment as a promise of fullness beyond restriction, the “ideal of noncastration … of knowing no boundaries, no limitations” (Fink 111)—an image of what would be possible if not for Symbolic prohibition.

Yet if it is Alan’s clinging to this ideal that so fascinates the Symbolically-subjugated, Normalized Dysart, what is ultimately obfuscated in the intensity of Dysart’s fixation on the boy’s ecstasy is the way such “sublime” transgression depends upon an eminently Symbolic fantasy, operating within (and indeed working to sustain) those very structures which it apparently exceeds. If Alan’s ritual—and to a large extent Equus itself—has the appearance of a valiant opposition to restrictive, prohibitive structures and conventions, a close reading through the lens Žižek and the later Lacan reveals that it is precisely insofar as Symbolic structures retain their semblance of authority in the boy’s universe that he (unlike Dysart) is able to Enjoy in such an ecstatic way.
In a simple sense, we should note that the ecstatic-transgressive *jouissance* of the boy’s night-time rides is possible precisely insofar as the chinkle-chankle remains operative. Without it, Alan simply wouldn’t be able to ride at all. But more importantly, without this impediment, Alan wouldn’t be able to develop (and preserve) such a rapturous *fantasy* of what might be attainable in its absence. Is not his very *notion* of an “unbridled” *jouissance*, in honour of which these rides are staged, directly dependent on the chinkle-chankle which obstructs (bridles) it? As Žižek puts it, “external hindrances that thwart our access to the object ... create the illusion that without them, the object would be directly accessible” (ME 94). Indeed, “the Object of desire itself coincides with the force that prevents its attainment” (96). This idea—that unmitigated *jouissance* is a fantasmatic *effect* of its own perceived obstruction—becomes increasingly prominent in Lacan’s later writings, applying *a fortiori* to the notion of a pre-symbolic bliss. Just as the chinkle-chankle sustains the very notion of a *jouissance* beyond it, so the Oedipal Father, as the agent prohibiting access to the incestuous object, sustains the illusion of what could be obtained in his absence.8

In this sense, the on-stage dynamics of Shaffer’s theatrical horse, as examined above, serve as quite an ideal “extraneation” of the operations at work in what Lacan calls the *objet a*. The latter, as becomes increasingly clear in Lacan’s later work, denotes no substantial thing that is (or could be) lost. Like the interior of this horse mask that so compels our gaze, it is fundamentally *spectral*, an originally empty place, endowed with fascinating depth and magnetic force by virtue of the way it is structured vis-à-vis the desiring subject.9 Like the intensity of this interior Place beyond the wire and leather bands, the very “primordial” fullness resonating through the *objet a*—and of which it is a “remainder/reminder”—is ultimately a retroactive product, its substantiality a precise effect of its *framing*. Like the non-specular “something more” in these horses before us on the stage, appearing at times to exceed
the dimensions of their theatrical materiality—as though these wire and leather bands were bonds restraining it—the objet a is ultimately not an existent noumenal fullness beyond appearances and signification but an eminent effect of those structures it exceeds, an empty space produced correlative to the order of representation itself.

So: the chinkle-chankle remains in because it generates the very space of an Enjoyment beyond it, a space around which fantasy and desire circulate. Yet there is another very good reason to leave the chinkle-chankle in—or indeed, if necessary, to conjure new ones into existence. As Alan’s description of the beach scene makes clear, this impediment serves as the very salvation of the subject, preserving it from utter obliteration. Recall that, initially, the boy is nearly run over by the horse, trampled between its pounding hooves. If not for the restraint of the Horseman’s Word (“Whoa!”), the child (and also the little “sandcastle” he was erecting on the beach) would have been utterly overwhelmed by the animal’s relentless forward motion (39). Notably, this traumatic encounter with the force of a terrifying, unrestrained jouissance takes on a decidedly devouring aspect in this scene, manifest in Alan’s emphasis on the creature’s abyssal mouth: “When the horse first appeared, I looked up into his mouth. It was huge” (48). If the horse is eventually a vehicle for Enjoyment, it is primarily a monstrous force that threatens to trample and engulf.

In Equus, as in the later Lacan, it is from this monstrous threat that paternal Law itself offers escape. Far from (simply) severing the subject from a harmonious bliss with the (m)Other, the Law pacifies. 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, dominating, restricting, “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. Affirmed and interpellated, with sandcastle intact, Alan is now in a position to pursue fantasies of Enjoyment.

For Žižek, it is precisely this dynamic—emphasizing the pacifying and Enjoyment-promoting function of the Law, its emergence as a welcome resolution to a prior (“primordial”) state of traumatic division and threatening antagonism—that emerges most prominently in Lacan’s later teachings. What we have here is a dialectic reversal of the usual (“Lacanian”) conception of Symbolic Law, i.e., as that which throws a world of completion and self-enclosure out of joint. And what is perhaps most important for our purposes is to note how such “primordial” theorizing, far from escaping into elusive metaphysical hypotheses, is in fact eminently materialist. Indeed we can understand it in direct relation to language. What is the source of traumatic division or antagonism 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, for Lacan, cannot initially create a complete, self-sufficient (Symbolic) reality, since language is not, in itself, a full circuit but an incomplete series, prevented by its own inherent lack from achieving or conveying totality. It is only through the instatement of Symbolic Law and what Lacan calls 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 own internal lack is concealed. And what is being suggested with the notion of a “primordial” antagonism is that the subject’s exposure to a fundamentally “barred” Symbolic Other—the Other experienced as rent by its own internal negativity—is a state of profound destabilization.
If the notion of a “barred” Other is a complicated one, we can gain a sense of what is at stake by imagining this pre-Oedipal “lack” as a traumatic presence afflicting the universe of the subject—as Žižek puts it, a “lack with regard to an excess” (DC 97). Far from a “mere” lack, it is a negativity that takes on a voracious, devouring aspect. This is illustrated most vividly by bringing together Lacan’s “lack in the Other” with his notion (developed especially in the unpublished Seminar X) of the desiring mother—“lack in the (m)Other.” Indeed, what Laplanche refers to as the fundamental fact of the psychoanalytic universe is the confrontation with the abyss of this “unfathomable Otherness” of desire, exposure to which is the source of traumatic anxiety for the child, who is overwhelmed both in his attempts to penetrate the enigma of what his mother wants, and also in 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. The Desire-of-the-Mother—perceived as an engulfing force, a “lethal abyss which swallows the subject” (PF 81)—is one of Lacan’s names for the fundamental negativity—negativity as an intrusive, derailing presence—which must be covered over and concealed by Symbolic fantasy in order for reality to assume consistency.

Going back to the chinkle-chankle, we note the irony that this structural feature which functions to preserve the subject (from a voracious negativity) and make possible some semblance of Enjoyment is lamented by Alan, under the illusion that without it there would be an absolute fullness to experience. This is how the objet a works: lack as overwhelming traumatic presence is hereby converted into a lack of a different kind: an “empty frame that provides the space for the articulation of desire” (ME 76). Paternal Law enables subjectivity, organizing the elements of the subject’s experience into a coherent reality, precisely by extracting the negativity, “taming” a traumatic, threatening lack by localizing it, transposing it via the objet a. Thus, it is not only that the objet a’s fascinating force is ultimately a direct
correlative of Symbolic structures—it is precisely by organizing this place and orchestrating the subject’s relation to it, i.e., through the notion of an Enjoyment to be obtained beyond Paternal Law, that the Symbolic order functions. The subject’s (endless) search for the fullness it lacks is precisely the dynamic established by the Symbolic, as captured in the Lacanian formula $<>a$, which designates a relationship between the subject as “split” or lacking, and a metonymically deferred object, the objet a.

A significant implication to be noted here is that, far from representing an attack on or provoking a dissolution of Symbolic Law, indulgence in visions of non-castration may in fact serve as its (“ex-timate”) support. The subject accepts with relief the pacifying Paternal Function, the safety provided by Symbolic regulation and identity, yet both subjectivity and the Symbolic Order itself are sustained through the subject’s (fantasmatic) resistance to full acquiescence, its clinging to a “remainder/reminder” of jouissance via the objet a. As a simple example, Alan accepts the authority and structures of paternal Law on the grounds that he may nonetheless, “without his father’s knowledge” (31), “slip off in the afternoons” to watch Prohibited television at the neighbours’—indulging in fantasies of Enjoyment (movies about Cowboys) in the spaces left open by Law. And if the boy permits himself some night-time liberties with his employer’s horses, he is simultaneously (and concomitantly) a “bloody good” worker (46), going “way over the call of duty.” The very moderation, caution and secrecy with which his transgressions are conducted testifies to—and preserves—the Law’s structural efficiency.

The Symbolic thus operates via a type of circuit or counterbalance: if the subject (and indeed his reality itself) is constituted insofar as an empty space for his fantasies is created and sustained “outside” of Symbolic Law, it is only insofar as these Symbolic structures continue to reign that such (“phallic”) Enjoyment becomes possible. As Žižek puts it, the frame of
prohibitions is, ironically, “the only frame within which we can enjoy pagan pleasures” (PD 57).

To what are we to attribute Alan’s frenzied stabbing of the horses’ eyes, as dramatized in the climactic scene of the play? For many commentators, what Alan is bludgeoning here is nothing other than the inescapable, haunting gaze of his father, whose authority and “godlike control” follows him everywhere (Plunka 154). The god Equus, formerly a source of passionate pleasure, has been transformed into an Oedipal, castrating figure, a reflection of paternal Prohibition, and Alan’s failure to have sex with Jill is attributable to the pressure of this controlling agency. “Alan is frigid because Equus, Alan’s conscience, appearing in the form of his father’s watchful eyes, is bothering him” (160). His violent attack on the horses represents a desperate attempt to abandon “the tight ‘reins’ of his father’s authority” (155).

As I have stated, contemporary society, for both Žižek and Lacan, is marked by an erosion of the rigidity and prohibitive agency associated with the Symbolic order. “Today,” Žižek asserts, “it is the very symbolic function of the father which is … losing its performative efficiency” (TS 334). Insofar as it is Law as such that “prevents the subject from being invaded by the Real” (Chiesa 108), this decline has significant consequences both for Enjoyment and for the stability of our reality itself. If it is the continued efficiency of Symbolic structures that facilitates Alan’s Enjoyment (and assures the psychic stability of his world), the trauma he experiences on the night of his date with Jill (whose own “Daddy disappeared … ran off. No one ever saw him again” [89]) reflects clearly the consequences of Symbolic authority’s dissolution.

When Alan is discovered by his father at the (paternally prohibited) adult movie theatre, he expresses terror appropriate to the Symbolic subject’s subjugation to Law: “God!


… Dad! … He saw me! … Oh God!” (92). Yet on this night, the terror at having violated the Prohibition is soon transformed, as the bearer of Symbolic Law reveals his own weakness and illegitimacy. Rather than pronouncing condemnation (“castration”) 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” (94) of Alan himself and anxiously retreating. In formal terms, what this scene functions to expose is the very gap between symbolic place and its human occupant, a gap on account of which the occupant appears impotent and utterly ridiculous.\(^{14}\) Alan recognizes that the seeming substantiality of Paternal Law was artificial: “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 guarantee the consistency of the Symbolic Order, is an imposter, a fake, an empty signifier.\(^{15}\) “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.” The phallic figure has lost its Symbolic dimension.

The dissolution of Prohibition leaves Alan with no obstacles to Enjoyment. Yet as our discussion has suggested, what is threatened with the decline of Symbolic authority—“the only frame for pagan freedom”—is Enjoyment as such. If Alan’s fantasy is recognized as one among myriad modes of nightly transgression (“they all do it! All of them!” [96]), if all men have their little secrets which (by a seemingly universal unwritten law) they go off to Enjoy in the dark, then is not Equus himself permissible? Since Alan is now “free to do anything” (97), the absolute darkness and forbidden quality of his fantasy is itself threatened by the Normal. The Father-Enjoyment, once “active clandestinely” (\(ME\) 81), now “pervades the entire social field” (206). Transgression is Normal.
As my analysis has suggested, the consequences of this breakdown in Symbolic structure are not limited to a “mere” decline in individual Enjoyment, since the breakdown fundamentally alters the dynamic on which our very Symbolic reality depends. Reality itself, as Žižek explains, “is constituted by means of the withdrawal of objet a” (ME 76), and without the firm support provided by Symbolic structures, what threatens is a resurgence of that which, by necessity, had been extracted. The lack in the Other—lack as excess, as a traumatic, overburdening presence—is no longer contained and transposed via the objet a, but “falls back into reality.” As Lacan puts it in Seminar X, the lack lacks.

The climax of Shaffer’s play forcefully illustrates the dynamic of this conversion. The uncanny resurgence of the lack in the Other finds its formal correlative in the movement from Equus as a je ne sais quoi behind the eyes, an empty space for fantasies (“ex-timate” to Law), to Equus as vortex, lack as an unbearable, massive presence, pervading the very space of social relations. As Alan attempts to engage in sex, the space behind the doors ceases to be a space and becomes filled with overburdening presence. Appropriately, when Jill asks him what’s back there that he’s afraid of, he answers “Nothing!” (101)—what threatens is quite literally the void as such, as presence, a void which has become “materialized” in self-consciousness, filling in the empty space (constitutive of Symbolic reality) with its suffocating over-proximity. Alan’s impotence, in this circumstance, would come as no surprise to Lacan, for whom such a lack of the lack is the very definition of anxiety.

To put this in terms of the (m)Other’s desire, if the Paternal Law transposes the voracious lack into the unattainable space of “Equus,” with the breakdown of this Law, the lacking (m)Other resurges and its unfathomable desire threatens again: “A dimension of devouring is manifested” (Harari, Anxiety 227). And 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 return to the blissful unity of a pre-
symbolic harmony, but rather the revelation of a traumatic, threatening antagonism against
which Alan must desperately defend. Without the security of the Horseman’s “Whoa!”,
without the pacifying chinkle-chankle, the horses no longer “halt at the rail, but invade the
square” and “trample at him” (106).

We should note a crucial detail of this scene, easy to overlook in the script yet
conspicuous in live production—the fact that the horses themselves (and their fascinating
masks) literally leave the stage during Alan’s attempt to have sex with Jill. “The horses on the
circle retire out of sight on either side” (99). Even Nugget “retreats up the tunnel, standing
where he can just be glimpsed in the dimness” (100). Alan’s sense of an unbearable, massive
presence crushing in upon him is here directly correlative to the absence of the “non-specular”
dimension that these horses had introduced and supported within the field of vision. This
space—of fascination and mystery—has literally retreated from view. Significantly, when the
horses do return to the stage, they no longer bear the Napier mask. In these “dreadful
creatures out of a nightmare” (106), the entrancing “non-specular” dimension of the original
mask is replaced by an accentuation of voracious orifices: “eyes flare,” “nostrils flare,”
“mouths flare” (106).

It is vital to note how the dynamic at stake here diverges from (and in fact inverts)
established understandings of the uncanny in terms of a “return of the repressed.” We should
not consider the monstrous Equus as the Real of our fantasy intruding into the Normal,
unsettling its stable structures, but rather the Real of an antagonism, a negativity, that re-
emerges when the structures of the Normal have already lost efficiency, that is to say, when
the Normal is deprived of the fantasies on which its operations depend. What is “repressed” by
the Symbolic, and what resurges with its breakdown, is the very internal lack of the Symbolic
itself. The monstrous Equus does nothing but materialize this inherent negativity. As Žižek puts it, such “nightmarish” apparitions, rather than sheer “fantasies,” are rather “that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy” (PF 66).

As such, the Equus that huffs and puffs behind the thin walls, interfering with Enjoyment and threatening to provoke a collapse of Symbolic space, offers a highly evocative example of what Žižek would consider the all-too prevalent if not defining apparition of our times. “Such monstrous apparitions are ‘returns in the Real’ of the failed symbolic authority” (FA 75). And for Žižek, it is the contemporary necessity to keep this monstrous jouissance at bay—an exertion that draws voraciously upon our psychic energies—that makes Enjoyment such a tragic impossibility, ensuring that we, like Alan, “Forever and ever … fail!” (105).

Or worse. As Žižek explains, the ultimate consequence of this overproximity of objet a, “which suffocates the activity of symbolic fiction,” is psychosis—the very “de-realization” of reality itself” (ME 76). When the necessarily extracted element appears, when “this void becomes visible ‘as such’, reality disintegrates” (DS 149). And it is with this psychotic de-realization, resulting from the absence of a fantasy that would effectively conceal the threatening lack, 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 a l’acte—a “desperate attempt of the subject to evict objet a from reality by force, and thus gain access to reality” (ME 77).17

As will become increasingly apparent, this discussion of the potentially grave “consequences” related to paternal-symbolic authority’s erosion in contemporary times should by no means encourage the conclusion that this authority is something we should seek to reinstate or return to. Nor should it compel us to assume that there is no Enjoyment beyond
that which phallic structuring enables. To put succinctly what we will explore in greater depth throughout this study, the issue is not how to buttress or reinforce a failing paternal-symbolic order (since the latter is that which secures our Enjoyment), but rather to recognize the myriad ways in which our contemporary lifestyle is already characterized by such desperate attempts at reinforcement. What is at stake is the way in which we compulsively support the lacking Symbolic order by, in effect, providing it with the supplements it needs. It is this desperate, compulsive effort to “buttress” our reality against the threat of an encroaching “lack of the lack” that makes Enjoyment so difficult.

In what particular senses might our contemporary lifestyle be understood in terms of a compulsive defensiveness against a “lack of the lack”? Shaffer’s play provides us with several different ways of understanding how what might appear to be an abstract logic (after all, where is this objet a that has supposedly “fallen back into reality”?) is indeed potently manifest in the concrete stuff of our daily world.

We can begin by considering the formal dynamic discussed above more specifically in the context of the sexual relationship. Again, Shaffer’s play enables a revealing exploration. A “traditional” psychoanalytic view might link Alan’s difficulties to the repressed Real of an inadmissible desire—a desire beyond ordinary Symbolic limits—that suddenly and traumatically “returns,” erupting into the social space. But what if the problem in the encounter with Jill is not, fundamentally, the intrusion of desire’s fantasy into normal (Symbolic) relations, but rather the very absence of fantasy—a fantasy that would effectively support normal sex? We should supplement the seemingly obvious assumption that it is the extremity of Alan’s investiture in fantasy that interferes with his engagement in normal human sex, by noting Lacan’s insistence that normal human sex is itself utterly dependent on fantasy. And we should supplement the image of a traumatic “return” that disrupts a normal sexual
encounter with Lacan’s insistence that there is something inherently traumatic about the sexual encounter itself.

This is what Lacan has in mind with his (in)famous assertion that “there is no sexual relationship”—that is, no “natural,” first-order sexual encounter. Our most basic exposure to the intimate presence of a real, flesh-and-blood other, unless supported by fantasy, is not “naturally” pleasurable but a source of profound, destabilizing anxiety. And one way to understand this is by conceiving the “lack/desire of the Other” in quite a literal way, that is, in terms of an unadorned confrontation with a desiring human Other. What is the inherent stumbling block of the sexual relationship for Lacan if not the void of the other’s desire—the abyss of radical, unfathomable Otherness at the heart of our confrontation with another human being? Unlike Alan’s previous sexual experiences, in Jill, the desirable manifests itself as desiring, and Lacan’s point is that our direct exposure to this terrifying abyss, the Other’s desire as an impenetrable, over-proximate presence, if unconcealed and unmitigated by the shield of fantasy, is a source of overwhelming anxiety.

Normally speaking, the Symbolic order structures relations between human beings in a way that enables the “gentrification” of this traumatic dimension—for instance, via typical phallic fantasies facilitated by the objet a. Such fantasies “veil” the flesh-and-blood, desiring Other, who (as objet a) “functions as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal” (ME 90). It is these fantasies on which phallic (Symbolically-regulated) jouissance “gets off.” Yet as we have seen, with the erosion of its rigid structures the Symbolic order is increasingly less efficient at organizing our relationship to an objet a. And as Alan discovers in the barn, without the defence of fantasy, without the objet a to “extract” the lack, “the desire of the Other turns back, ungovernable, towards the subject” (Harari, Anxiety 226).
If it is natural to assume that a sexual encounter with an attractive human being like Jill would be much easier, requiring a far less elaborate fantasmatic dimension than a relationship with a horse, we should argue instead that it is precisely insofar as this horse offers itself as a perfect mirror for the projection of fantasies—a mirror in which the abyss of an Other’s desire is entirely omitted—that it lends itself so well to Enjoyment, serving as an ideal vehicle for the boy’s objet a. In this regard, we should note how such an apparently “primitive” ritual is in fact highly reflective of contemporary trends. Is not today’s “late-capitalist” society marked by the proliferation of such vehicles, which, in their ever-expanding forms, function specifically to enable such solipsistic, masturbatory jouissance, working, like Alan’s Equus, to facilitate an unmitigated projection of narcissistic fantasy? The success of these forms, best exemplified in the growing range of virtual or cyber-sex options, relies on their assurance of complete safety from the traumatic desire of an (actual, living, human) Other. The proliferation of these forms comes about not because they offer more than Normal sex, which, by comparison, has simply become boring (or “worshipless” [62], as Dysart puts it). It is rather that they offer an escape from, or defence against, an excess, an over-proximity of jouissance, that we are increasingly less efficient at masking.

This is to say, we can understand something of the defensive quality that characterizes our own contemporary lifestyle in relation to Alan’s “primitive” Worship itself, considered not in terms of a radical break from the existing system, but as part of an accommodation to an already perceived weakening of those structures—a preliminary response to the monstrous Equus which threatens to resurge, in its different modes, when Symbolic authority becomes a “stupid fart.” This response, both for Alan and for us, abounds with strategies to actively reinforce an underlying “phallic” dynamic whose ability to regulate jouissance is under increasing threat.
Žižek notes, for instance, that with the decline of those structures that regulate our relationship to an objet a, our contemporary lifestyles are increasingly organized around an active installation of obstacles to Enjoyment—we perversely install or conjure restrictions and impediments in order to make sure that the Sacred Place (of the objet a) takes place (FA 31). Alan’s hystericization of Symbolic restrictions is notably a simultaneous fetishization of impediments, such as the “Manbit” (71), installed in the ritual “So’s it won’t happen too quick” (i.e., so’s it will happen at all). The horse is eroticized as “naked in his chinkle-chankle” (72), as though the latter were lingerie. Such factitious obstacles become “Sacred” (71), linked fantasmatically with the very Enjoyment they defer. Indeed, if the ritual enacts a flagrant defiance of socio-symbolic regulations, is it not also, and perhaps more fundamentally, a fantasy of restriction, of a rigid Symbolic authority which would prohibit Enjoyment 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 mere “dead” signifiers (Hoover, Remington, Jodpur) into powerful “foes” and oppressive “Hosts” (73)? In these senses the “hysterical” ritual engages a highly phallic dynamic through an active buttressing of Law itself.

Perhaps most reflective of our contemporary dynamic is the way the ritual combines an unconstrained pursuit of Enjoyment with severe perversion. Alan’s Enjoyment, by no means a pure reversal of castration, 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, in Lacan’s terms, an “object-instrument of the Other’s jouissance.” And if such self-objectivization appears radical and “primitive,” Žižek’s analysis encourages us to recognize the ways in which our own Normal relationship with Enjoyment is itself regulated.
and sustained today by myriad forms of perversion, sexual and otherwise—and indeed, how indulgence in these forms provides a “surplus” jouissance of its own. Such perversions can be understood as offering 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” (TN 235), to forestall and defend against what threatens with the weakening of authority. Dysart’s awe and jealousy in the face of Alan’s Worship tends to obfuscate the way such hysterical pursuits of the Real are caught in a “deadly loop” (TS 291) with perversion highly reflective of own contemporary dynamic, holding together our Symbolic order against a Real of another kind.

Finally, we should note the way in which the 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 may appear to be an intensely personal, mystical Enjoyment is explicitly performed under the pressure of a vigilant Third gaze: “Cowboys are watching! … They’re admiring us!” (73). The boy’s fantasy is quite conspicuously a fantasy of being seen to Enjoy, of effectively Enjoying on behalf of an Other’s gaze. These fantasmatic voyeurs “Take off their Stetsons” in affirmation and validation of the Enjoyment that is successfully being had here, and indeed the sexual consummation is sought specifically for their benefit: “Come on now—show them!” As Lacan insists, our fantasies are not exclusively (or even 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” (PF 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 through an ecstatic immersion in
jouissance—via which, supposedly, all symbolic links and mandates are suspended—it is also
and 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 impressing and satisfying is one that has been
created for him by the television set? If the boy’s midnight rides present themselves as
radically hysterical, he is simultaneously (“like most of the population” [27]) obeying
injunctions and Ego-Ideals sold to him through the system itself. Is not this ritual a powerful
testimony to the fact that the Symbolic “big Other” is at work even (or indeed especially) in
our most ecstatic-transgressive moments?

It is in light of the elements of phallic fantasy and defensiveness inherent in such
modes of hysterical resistance that Žižek urges us “today more than ever,” to reject “the
seductive celebration of the ecstatic transgressive experience, the experience of going to (and
beyond) the limits, as the ultimate, authentic human experience” (OD 133). If the boy’s
ecstatic union with Equus the god appears to be a passionate denunciation of Symbolic
restriction and convention, a journey into the Real of Enjoyment beyond their confines, we can
also see how the operations inherent in such modes of resistance can function to buttress an
underlying phallic dynamic, defending the stability of our Symbolic universe, supporting it
against the Real of a traumatic, derailing Equus.

Is it not also in this light that we can understand the deadlock of Dysart’s own
relationship to jouissance? On close inspection, this melancholic figure who so laments
contemporary loss is the site of a complex “speculative” dynamic: the vision of Equus as
something evicted from, utterly lost to, a structured and restrictive Normal regime—the vision of a passionate jouissance tragically absent from Symbolically-regulated reality—finds its “speculative correlative” in the Equus that invades the psychiatrist’s own Symbolic Order, an intrusive, over-proximate presence that, in its different guises, derails the balanced circuit of Normal operations and Enjoyment.20

Several times during the play, Dysart expresses his desire to take a vacation from the lifeless world he finds himself in, and we can understand something very important about his relation to Enjoyment through a look at these plans. Toward the end of the first Act, he speaks at length 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 (and “true”) from one’s theatre seat, but it is all too easy to imagine how incredibly stressful it would be to go on this vacation with Dysart. He presents Worship here as an explicit and urgent injunction—his would-be companion is enjoined to find in every crevice of life a (sacred, mind-blowing) Enjoyment, to absorb from every mundane regularity something spiritual and magical. Dysart proposes this vacation as offering Worship, Life, God, against the tragic aridity of a desublimated, despiritualized world; yet is it not rather the case that an arid world would itself come as something of a
vacation—i.e., from this demand for total Worship, and from the guilt of having (inevitably) failed to honour a small fraction of these “thousand local Gods”? (What precisely might an appropriate Worship of these Gods entail?) And of course, we might ask why it would be necessary to take this trip to Greece in the first place, if such divinity is omnipresent in his own English backyard. Is not Dysart secretly grateful that the requirements of his Symbolic mandate make it impossible for him to find time for such demanding forays into the divine heart of Life?

It is revealing to compare this reference to “a thousand local Gods” with the phrase with which Dysart opens both of the play’s Acts: “With one particular horse …” (17, 75). 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 worship “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 a 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 and multiplies, proliferating exponentially?

With Žižek’s analysis in mind, this passage offers a highly revealing glimpse of the dynamic underlying the apparently “worshipless” nature of contemporary life. Perhaps the problem lies not in the eradication of the source of passionate Worship within us, nor in the absence of things to Worship passionately, but rather in the anxiety-inducing presence in our world of Worship as injunction—not in the rigid, prohibitive “Gods of the Normal” (which have squelched jouissance, reducing existence to an arid and lifeless routine), but rather in the very saturation of our world with enjoined Worship, a stressful, urgent obligation to respond to life with sufficient Passion, to experience with adequate force the divine elements around us.
To put this another way, rather than locating the impediment to passionate Enjoyment in the internalized discipline and social repression associated with the superego, we might rather, following Lacan and Žižek, re-conceive the status of Enjoyment itself as a superego imperative, an imperative that, in contemporary times, follows us relentlessly. The problem today (in our “late-capitalist” world) is not that Normalcy’s rules and rigid conventions have suppressed or outlawed passionate Enjoyment, but conversely that “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” (*HL* 104).21 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 and inevitable) failure to experience full Enjoyment. Needless to say, this combination of pressure and guilt is the surest way to impede Enjoyment, to render it impossible.22

We might note specifically, in the context of *Equus*, the myriad ways in which we are urged and enjoined, in today’s psychological climate, toward the attainment and development of a specifically child-like Enjoyment. Are we not confronted today, both in the media and in the psychiatric clinic (not to mention Hollywood films), with a proliferation of exhortations, guidelines and recommendations for actualizing our “inner child”? Has not the adequate expression of this child-like wonder and imaginative awe—the Alan Strang within us—become a virtual injunction today?

A close look at Shaffer’s play reveals this contemporary superego lurking in many corners. We find it most perfectly expressed in the succinct and familiar words of Alan’s first line: “Double your pleasure, Double your fun” (22)—an explicit injunction to increase our
Enjoyment. Is it not also vividly reflected in what Dysart calls “The Accusation” (82)—this sinister, threatening gaze that confronts him with the insufficiency of his Enjoyment (“Do you fuck her? … I bet you don’t” [59-60]), this terrible, anxiety-inducing presence which intrudes into his experience, as though penetrating his most private places, rendering him intolerably guilty, blameworthy (“like being accused. Violently accused” [26]) for the very lack of Enjoyment it finds there? Alan’s stare, we might say, hypostasizes for Dysart this superegoic Accusation that is itself the cause of Enjoyment’s impossibility.

And in this light we can understand the scene of abreaction, in which Dysart guides Alan through a re-enactment of his traumatic failure to Enjoy, as a highly personal articulation of the psychiatrist’s own relationship with the contemporary superego. For all of Dysart’s tirades against the prohibitive, castrating “gods of the Normal,” he gives acute expression here to the dynamic of this superego, the paradoxical way in which it constrains us—i.e., not through direct Prohibition, but by combining the liberty and indeed the pressure to Enjoy with an inevitable Accusation of failure: “Kiss anyone and I will see … Lie with anyone and I will see … and you will FAIL!” (105). Notably, Alan is not directly forbidden to seek Enjoyment here, nor is he denied the prospects or the tools. As Dysart expresses it, he is permitted, even encouraged—enjoined—to “Kiss anyone … Lie with anyone”—yet under the condition that his attempts will be rigorously assessed, observed and judged by a ubiquitous gaze: “I see you. Always! Everywhere! Forever!” As Žižek puts it, the superego figure, “who can see me where I enjoy, completely obstructs my access to enjoyment” (ME 206). The terror and power of its gaze resides precisely (perhaps exclusively) in its capacity to mirror and reflect back at us the woeful inadequacy of our attempts at Enjoyment. In its very terror, like the horrifying figure which closes in on Alan, it is a “laughing” gaze (“superego figures inextricably mix obscene ferocity and clownish comedy” [DC 8]), “mocking” us for the very sickly, flaccid character of
our Enjoyment—guaranteeing, in doing so, the very impotence it mocks. We can see here how
the superego is in effect split into two parts (PD 105): it wants us to try, wants and indeed
encourages us to do everything in our power to seek Enjoyment (and in fact “violently
Accuses” us when we do not)—yet its “secret message” is: “I know you will not be able to
achieve it, so I desire you to fail and to gloat in your failure!” (DC 8). Alan’s “punishment”—
a punishment which, we might suggest, simply replicates Dysart’s own contemporary
predicament—is not to be deprived of jouissance, but rather to be shackled to it.

If Equus as objet a, as site of passionate Worship, has lost its Sacred Place in Dysart’s
world, it has not simply vanished. We can locate its monstrous resurgence, its “speculative
correlative,” precisely in this superegoic gaze. We find here again the dynamic of an objet a
fallen back into reality. With the deterioration of Symbolic Law (which would orchestrate our
relation to the objet a, extracting the lack), we experience the object-cause of desire in its
suffocating proximity, its intrusive presence. It is thus that the elevation of Enjoyment into the
norm results not in more Enjoyment but rather in intense anxiety, a deadlock from which we,
like Dysart, seek escape.

With Dysart in mind, let us consider the problem of Enjoyment from a slightly
different angle, in relation to enigma. In much of Dysart’s theorizing, the problem with our
contemporary reality, in contrast with Alan’s world of ecstatic fantasy, is that it is too known,
all-too self-evident, tragically self-sufficient. Its very knowability deprives it of magical
possibility, denying us prospects of Sacred Beyonds and transcendent Causes that could
inspire true passionate Worship. We cannot Enjoy like Alan because our Order is simply too
complete, self-contained, eliminating the space and need for things transcendent and sublime,
and indeed for imagination itself. Yet for all this apparent banality, Dysart’s is a reality
conspicuously plagued with insoluble 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, unproblematic—indeed 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 unknowability in Dysart’s reality are by no means Enjoyable. Though claiming a passionate openness to the depths of our world, he finds in these enigmas no inviting, intriguing complexity—they hold none of the fascination and seduction, none of the alluring fullness of some Real beyond the known. The enigmatic is here “intolerable” (18), impelling from him a “desperate” questioning—“What dark is this?” (109). Indeed 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 and harassed by “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 account for—“Totally, infallibly, inevitably” (75).

This condition of compulsive, traumatic questioning, harassment by (voracious) enigmas from which he can achieve no distance, is concomitant here to an increasing intuition of internal lack in his Symbolic order (specifically in the Master’s Knowledge, the discourse of psychological science). While Dysart hystericizes the prohibitive rigidity of the Order that frames and determines his reality, it is precisely 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 “desperate,” anxiety-ridden “Displacement” (76). If, as hysteric, he opposes himself to an imprisoning Symbolic Other that purports rigidly to delineate reality, what seems most to enslave him 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. And insofar as Equus is Dysart’s *name* for this derailing stain of non-meaning, we can see here again the dynamic of an *objet a* fallen back *into* reality—Equus as mysterious, fascinating, seductive place beyond signification finds its precise speculative correlative in Equus as over-proximate enigma, an “intolerable” *darkness* which invades the level of meaning itself.

From a Lacanian perspective, what is perhaps most notable about *Equus*’s presentation of this contemporary condition is the way in which it is *sexualized*, deeply imbricated with the dimension of the Other’s abyssal *desire*. After all, what are Dysart’s monologues about, what is the specific “intolerable” enigma they circulate around, if not the ultimate enigma of *desire*? Here, Equus as (monstrous) point of lack in Dysart’s Symbolic order coincides precisely with Equus as “unknowable” *jouissance*, that impenetrable abyss in the Other (subject) from which desire originates, that enigmatic Otherness-within-the-Other by virtue of which the “chain” of its “Passion” is “magnetized” (76). The play itself effects a correspondence between the two registers via their place of lack—a coincidence of the “*dark*” that stains the Symbolic Other with the impenetrable blind-spot of the Other’s *jouissance*. Of such enigmas, says Dysart: “weirdly often now with me the feeling is that *they* are staring at *us*—that in some quite palpable way they precede us. Meaningless, but unsettling” (75-6). From a Lacanian perspective, such intolerable enigmatic lacks do “precede us.” What is the child’s exposure to the inexplicable “*desire of the (m)Other*” if not a state of “thrownness” amidst enigmatic signifiers, traumatic points of non-sense which derail the circuit of the subject’s world, making impossible a coherent, unified reality?23 What is the “pre-Oedipal” antagonism if not a state of profound “Displacement” in the face of the enigma of this Other’s desire, a radical uncertainty
of what I am for this Other? And following Lacan we might also suggest that such enigmatic stains do stare back at us. It is precisely this disturbing intrusion of non-meaning, this appearance within Symbolic reality of an absence of a signified that constitutes the Lacanian “gaze.” For all his lamentations of a lost primordiality, Dysart’s condition here reflects the very “primordial” state of confrontation with the lack/desire/enigma in the Other, a threatening, devouring lack that intrudes without the successful intervention of a Master Signifier and the structural efficacy of Symbolic Law.

Can we not locate a fundamental impediment to Enjoyment today in this very state of compulsive, traumatic questioning and preoccupation with enigma—a state that accompanies an increasing recognition of lack, inadequacy in the Order that would regiment our Symbolic reality? For a great many, and in a great many senses, what characterizes contemporary life is not the dull regulated circuitry of a “mindless” existence but rather the very frenetic intellection and mental urgency we find in Dysart. The psychiatrist’s intellectual hauntedness 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 our own professional intellectual endeavours, which, far from being Enjoyable (far from being characterized by fascination, mystery and wonder), may all-too often take on the character of a “repetitive and insatiable, even vampire-like pursuit” (18)? Do we not find in Dysart—in his fixation on “intolerable” paradoxes, his compulsion to answer unanswerable questions, his desperate desire to resolve or dispel points of haunting contradiction which
seem to threaten the very integrity of his reality and his place within it—do we not find here an all-too reflective image of a contemporary academic lifestyle?

It is significant, and appropriate, that the final lines of the play establish the impenetrable *darkness* haunting Dysart’s world as a type of speculative correlative of the Divine itself: a *dark* he cannot quite call “ordained of God” (109), yet which disturbs his Normal world with a seemingly metaphysical urgency, compelling from him an equivalent “homage.” Is it not precisely this pregnant *namelessness*, and a corresponding inability to “call it” something, that lies at the heart of Dysart’s condition? As Santner puts it, “when you lose a concept [such as “God”] you also lose the capacity to name what has been lost” (44). Such “designification” results not (merely) in the absence of some (fascinating, mysterious) signified, but in the *presence*, the infusing, permeating experience, of what Santner terms *nameless loss*. In the absence of such regulating Master Signifiers, we find ourselves “in the midst of a loss we cannot even really name.”

If we can discern in the psychiatrist’s condition the dynamic of a confrontation with a fundamentally *lacking* Other, we may also note, on close inspection, the ways in which the specific character of his response to this confrontation works *defensively*, operating in various senses to buttress or reinforce a reality deprived of sturdy Symbolic supports. As in our discussion of Alan, we can find reflected in the apparently hysterical figure of the psychiatrist many of our own contemporary strategies, our fantasmatic modes of *defence* against an encroaching deadlock of negativity.

We have made note of the psychiatrist’s frequent references to the “Gods” that preside over and enforce the Normal, Gods whose relentless, implacable Will he is obliged to endorse and to placate. In the dream described in Act I, in which he serves as executioner of children, he is presented as an unwitting agent of these Gods’ demand for sacrifice, a reluctant
instrument of their caprices, or as Žižek would put it, “an object-victim, at the mercy of the ‘sadistic’ Will of the big Other” (ES 231). In a basic sense, we have here the dynamic of “Symbolic castration,” the fundamental operation of which is severance, division, dismemberment. The pile of vitals lying beside Dysart’s altar represents all that must be lost, sacrificed, 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). In its extremity this dream captures what he feels to be the tragic truth of his condition, a truth against which he rebels. He relays it to Hester in the context of hysterical resistance—resistance to his social mandate and to the social regime on behalf of which he “cures” his subjects.

Yet a closer examination of this dream compels us to subject this “obvious” interpretation to an anamorphic shift. Rather than a vivid reflection of the monstrous truth of his situation, a traumatic truth normally suppressed, does not this fantasy-image offer a paradoxical escape from truth—specifically, from a traumatic confrontation with the ultimate impotence and illegitimacy of the big Other? This is to say, the Normal is not governed by gods, is not a regime supported by anything other than one’s recognition of its call in interpellation—in Lacan’s words, there is no Other of the Other. If the dream, on first impression, would seem to reflect the merciless, 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? If the dream manifests an inner resistance to his duty, does it not reflect also a perverse desire to feel himself forcibly compelled to his duty, 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)?

It is thus that hysteria and perversion enter a “deadly loop”: “the subject avoids its constitutive splitting by positing itself directly as the instrument of the Other’s Will” (PD 29). Insofar as perverse self-objectivization offers relief from a state of traumatic derailment, an escape from the anxiety of a fundamental hysteria (i.e., 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. In this light we can also reconsider the function of the play’s final line. “There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain,” states Dysart, “And it never comes out” (109). Rather than an expression of our contemporary tragedy, of the true horror of our situation as victims of the Normal—enchained and subservient, shackled by interpellation—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, a traumatic truth we overlook, but precisely a fantasy, 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” (WD 96).

If Equus is most often approached in the context of a Real that “returns,” we could say that what is at stake in this “defensive” functioning of fantasy is a Real that is staged. And it is with this dynamic in mind that we can bring the discussion of the characters’ Enjoyment to bear more closely upon our own relation to this play, particularly apropos its staging. If the present approach has sought to demonstrate what Equus has to reveal about our contemporary
Enjoyment, it can also cast important light upon our enjoyment of *Equus* itself, offering insight into the nature and underlying dynamics of its impact upon us.

As a number of critics have been keen to point out, the often intense response of audiences to this play, and the enduring attraction it would seem to hold, constitutes something of a mystery, appearing significantly to transcend the level of its intellectual content and themes. In her influential analysis, Una Chaudhuri argues that the play’s capacity to provoke forceful responses and intense admiration from its audiences must be approached through a closer consideration of the play as live experience in the theatre, i.e., not simply in terms of what it *says* to us but what it *does* to us. “Although it may appear, from what they say about the play, that spectators value primarily the so-called ‘ideas’ they have ‘discovered’ in it, a critical study of spectator-response quickly reveals this response to be other than intellectual” (52). In pursuit of this non-intellectual dimension, Chaudhuri investigates the play as a “curious complicity” (59) between Brechtian and Artaudian elements, the “distanced” intellection associated with the former operating (if paradoxically) to set the stage for an eruption of that *archetypal and dangerous reality* which Artaud considers the true object of theatrical performance. In this way Chaudhuri extends upon those analyses of the play that stress its capacity, in the manner of Artaudian “Theatre of Cruelty,” to enact a form of secular ritual, communicating intuitively and non-verbally with the audience, penetrating into what Dysart calls the “black cave of the Psyche” (75). In Gene Plunka’s description, through its ritualistic elements the play “goes beyond the verbal level to provide symbolic communication between the actors and the audience through a release of our latent drives and instincts” (169).

If, through the Brechtian elements of its staging, the play addresses us in a manner that seems to solicit a reasoned, objective analysis of the issues Dysart presents, we are addressed on a very different level by other voices in the play, the “Equus noise,” for instance, as it
pulsates to a feverish intensity throughout the play’s key scenes. As Plunka argues, “the humming, thumping, and stamping produce vibratory sensations that work through the skin as well as on our minds” (169). Is not the sphere of intellection left far behind as Alan’s ecstatic ride upon Nugget brings the first Act to its culmination? “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” (Plunka 170). For Plunka, as for Chaudhuri, it is through this deployment of an Artaudian “Total Theatre” that the play “covertly affects our inner drives, impulses, and archetypes” (169), tapping into unconscious urges and libidinal impulses, producing within us an acute “sense of terror” (170).

Before considering more closely this notion of the play’s direct engagement with things Unconscious, should we not, in light of the arguments developed over the course of this chapter, seek to supplement this assessment of Equus’s penetrating ritualistic immediacy with a type of inversion? If on one hand these intense theatrical elements can be understood to accentuate and impart directly to us the libidinal-Dionysian primordiality of Alan’s ride, do they not, on the other hand, provide a very apt demonstration of the way in which 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 own frequent experiences with popular cinema how even “normal” sexual exchanges must be supplemented and filtered on screen through music, lighting, camera effects, the integration of visual symbolism, etc.—aesthetic elements which function as a “phantasmatic screen” to mediate the Real of the sexual act. 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” (HL 50). 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 (“unaestheticized”) 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 fictional world and the unfolding narrative (LA 111). It would constitute an intrusion of the Real from which the fictional life of the film could never recover.

How much more is such “dematerialization” required in a live production of Equus? One need only attempt to visualize an unadorned rendering of the Nugget scene: upon a barren stage, cast in the everyday light of a psychiatrist’s office, a hypnotized boy strips his clothes and proceeds to mimic the seductive mounting and riding of an invisible horse, groaning and working himself progressively to a climax before the theatre audience, screaming out in prolonged sexual ecstasy as he jolts his way across the office rug. (What might Daniel Radcliffe’s agent have had to say about the star’s participation in such a project?) At stake here, of course, 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 intense awareness of the presence of the other spectators around us (accentuated, in this instance, through their—and/or our—placement upon the stage itself), our specific sense of our own presence within the social environment of erudite, canonized theatre, not to mention our developing relation to the fictional characters and their fictional world as such. In its very intensity, the theatrical barrage with which we are assailed here provides us with 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 own uncontrollable jouissance.
With this in mind, should we not subject the emphases of Plunka and Chaudhuri to a somewhat counterintuitive reversal? This is to say, perhaps the spectacle of Alan’s night-time ride has such an unusual and disturbing force in the theatre not simply because the theatrical assault with which it is accompanied strikes us so directly, penetrating so deeply into the Unconscious, but because, ultimately, the full gamut of theatrical sights and sounds employed here, for all their “archetypal” power, is not sufficient to cover over the traumatic dimension of our confrontation with the desiring Other. What is at stake is not (simply) the way we are rattled and penetrated by the power of theatrical affect, but also and perhaps primarily, the ultimate inability of this intense theatrical affect to fully sublate, mask, provide distance from, the “hazardous encounter with the Other’s desire” (HL 47).

To think of this another way, if the force of Equus in live performance is often linked to its deployment of “ritualistic” theatrical techniques, perhaps what is most essential to observe is the way in which Alan’s scenes cannot be equated with primitive, exotic rituals as we “normally” perceive and experience them. What distinguishes Equus, in this regard, is not that it lacks or 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 to our experience in the theatre is the inherent obstacle that prevents Alan’s display from truly equating with our experience of the latter. For all the play’s “archetypal” accoutrements, it simply cannot sublate the all-too proximate, English-speaking white kid writhing on the stage before us, enjoying what appears to be an extraordinarily forceful orgasm. In this light, perhaps what is most interesting about the Nugget scene is not simply its replication of a primitive, ritualistic Real, but its inability (refusal?) to offer the full abstraction correlative to
our experience of the latter—the inability of its primitive, ritualistic elements to overcome a Real of another kind.

To grasp these arguments in their full scope, we must recognize that what is at stake in this encounter is not simply the necessity of adapting sexual enjoyment for mainstream theatrical consumption. If on one hand the trouble with Alan is that his unmitigated Enjoyment is so “out of joint” with a socialized evening at the theatre, in another highly important sense his displays and practices (including also his prostrate prayers, his ecstatic self-flagellation …) are unheimlich in a more radical sense. This spectacle of the intensely desiring, Enjoying, Worshipping subject, utterly immersed in his own masturbatory jouissance, is capable of producing a very strong reaction in us precisely because it touches on something so close to us, “giving body” to a thing that already occupies a central fantasmatic position in our symbolic economy.

If we look closely at our “postmodern” attitude toward Worship, Žižek argues, we realize that what is most definitive about it is not simply our cynicism and distance, the fact that we ourselves don’t seriously Worship (or “believe”) anymore, but rather our intense fixation on and persistent preoccupation with the image of an Other who does. We are fascinated by the notion of an Other who fully Worships, without distance, without resistance, who abandons himself in passionate devotion to a Thing, a Cause, i.e. who Worships with an intensity we cannot fathom. This fully Worshipping subject is a variation of what Lacan refers to as the “subject supposed to Enjoy.” To supplement Dysart’s diatribes, most distinctive about normal contemporary existence is not simply the “worshipless” nature of our own enjoyments but the highly privileged position granted to the Other’s Enjoyment. Crucial here is the “radical ambiguity” of our relationship to this Other. On the one hand we seek to hold his jouissance at a distance, insofar as it embodies something that does not belong within our
Symbolic universe—something naïve, irrational, and also excessive, overbearing, potentially horrifying in its unbridled form. Yet on the other, in its purity and absoluteness this Worship and Enjoyment is honoured, raised to a sanctified place in our imaginations, indeed *fetishized*. As Žižek puts it, “Enjoyment is good, on condition that it not be too close to us” (*TN* 212)—which is also to say, Enjoyment must be effectively *staged*.

At stake here is the issue of what Žižek calls *interpassivity*, the paradoxical way in which our own Enjoyment is supported and sustained *through* the figure of this Other. We obtain satisfaction “by means of the very supposition that the Other enjoys [and worships] in a way inaccessible to us” (*TN* 206)—we find a paradoxical Enjoyment precisely “in fantasizing about the Other’s.” Through an unconscious “operation of substitution” (*PF* 109), interpassivity entails the externalization of our own most intimate feelings, beliefs, and enjoyments—the way in which we can literally “laugh and cry through another,” or in the present context, the way we can “defer” our own Enjoyment to the Other, who Enjoys (and Worships) *for* us, in our place.

One way of clarifying our “unconscious” engagement with this “subject supposed to Enjoy” is by considering it vis-à-vis the unconscious as it operates in Chaudhuri’s analysis of our theatrical experience. When Chaudhuri contends that the true source of the play’s impact lies in a “hidden response-structure” existing beneath the “rationalistic, analytical terms of the surface structure” (55), she is speaking largely of the play’s engagement with the power of archetypes, conjured in performance through “ubiquitous” images and “semantic fields” (57). This “archetypal paradigm” at work in the play—most prominently through the figure of Equus itself—is to be understood “not merely as a theme or an explanatory mechanism, but as something directing the spectator’s *experience*” (55), operating immediately upon the audience, drawing them into the black cave of their own Psyche. Our analytic activity in the
theatre “is frequently interrupted by the eruption on stage of Equus, an image of man’s participation in prerational, preverbal forces. This image 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 argued that horse myths, common to all human civilizations, “attribute properties to the horse which psychologically belong to the unconscious of man” (in Chaudhuri 55). The horse is, among other things, “the animal component in man,” “the libido which has passed into the world.” The visual, auditory, experiential force of the horse-god Equus, the “number and manner of its appearances on stage” (particularly its association with clairvoyance), resonate 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 archaic, primordial images, forces, and urges deep within us, forming the hidden foundation of our being.

Žižek’s divergence from this understanding of the Unconscious could not be made more clear than in the claim with which he opens *The Plague of Fantasies*: “The Unconscious is outside, not hidden in any unfathomable depths—or, to quote the *X Files* motto: ‘The truth is out there’” (3). To put this in the context of the play, we find the Unconscious not in the way Alan’s Worship “taps in” to something existing deep within us, below the surface of our normal reality, but in the way the latter (and our relationship to it) is held together, structured, insofar as Alan’s Worship operates for us—is staged for our gaze—“out there.” What is Unconscious is not that which lurks and quakes beneath our subjective experience, but the way in which this subjective experience is itself structured via our relation to this fascinating image of the Enjoying Other, an image which “gives a body to our own innermost split, to what is ‘in us more than ourselves’” (*TN* 206). This image exerts such a powerful fascination
not because it stirs up primordial images and impulses deep within, but because it is through this archaic, primordial Worship, “out there,” that we stage for ourselves “our own innermost relationship toward enjoyment.”

If the full scope of Žižek’s argument concerning “interpassivity” and this “subject supposed to Enjoy” is not easily captured within the contours of this chapter, we can clarify a crucial thrust by recalling here the subject’s relation to the objet a, a fantasy space which must, as we have seen, exist and be maintained “out there” in order for the subject’s very Symbolic reality to hold. Can we not understand something of the “terror” aroused in us by these scenes of Alan’s Enjoyment, the unnerving anxiety of our encounter in the theatre with this intensely Enjoying Other, through the dynamic of an objet a fallen “back into reality”? This is to say, part of the reason that our over-proximity to this Enjoying Other is a potentially “traumatic” experience is because of the absolutely vital function this Other serves on the level of fantasy. It is not that this display penetrates to a deeper, archaic level within us, but that, in it, we encounter a thing already operating for us “out there,” a thing which remains operative insofar as it functions at a distance.

But in what sense can this Enjoying Other be considered a “fantasy-construct,” staged for our own gaze? A close look at Dysart’s engagement with Alan reveals the “anamorphic” status of the Other’s Worship, the way in which the latter can become, ultimately, our own creation, its very absoluteness an effect of the place it occupies and the role it plays in our psychic economy. The status it is granted—that of a “primordial” purity of experience no longer accessible in the psychiatrist’s own world—has the effect of obfuscating its own internal tensions and complex pragmatics. The very intensity of Dysart’s engagement with it as “real,” “instinctual,” “a fantastic surrender to the primitive” (82), functions to obscure the ways in which it may serve, as I have argued, as an express adaptation to a thoroughly
contemporary crisis, Alan’s own (“desperate”) means of orchestrating a relationship to lack and securing the stability of his reality. We should note, in particular, how the status of this Worship is a direct effect of the psychiatrist’s passionate insistence on formulating his relations with the boy in terms of a most vicious, merciless severance: “Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?” (80). Is not this very lament—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 his Worship is already irreparably damaged, that he is already irretrievably separated from his god? Is not Alan’s very presence in the psychiatrist’s office a vivid testimony to the fact that his Worship was always-already internally divided, troubled by its own inherent self-division? 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. In this light, Dysart’s scalpels, far from eradicating Alan’s “primitive,” “primordial” purity of experience, operate precisely to sanctify it as such, to bestow retroactively this status upon it. In Hegel’s terms, it comes to be through being left behind.

We should note that if the “manifest content” of the psychiatrist’s dream is an image of a horrifying severance and evisceration, its most fundamental gesture, its most powerful fantasmatic element, is 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). The vision of severance, 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. Žižek’s analysis, in both specific and larger senses, encourages us to consider how such Enjoying Others, apparent
reflections of that which has been tragically lost or cut away from our own contemporary world, are a retroactive construct of the contemporary itself, how they come to be as the contemporary Normal’s own fantasmatic supplement: “the paradox to be fully accepted is that when a certain historical moment is (mis)perceived as the moment of loss of some quality, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the lost quality emerged only at this very moment of its alleged loss” (PF 12-13).

To put this another way, is there not a powerful fantasmatic operation at work in the very melancholy that infuses Dysart’s stance? The “deception” inherent to melancholy (in this case, for a lost Enjoyment, for a Worship taken away, for Gods who have died …) is found in the way in which, through the very intensity of its fixation on loss, it conceals the fact that what is lost “never existed in the first place” (PF 196). In its persistent attachment to the Real of an object once possessed then lost, it functions to obfuscate “the fact that the object is lacking from the very beginning … that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void/lack” (DS 143). In Dysart’s fixation on an irredeemably lost Worship, in his presentation of it as a thing once vividly alive then killed, stabbed to death as though with a pick, he paradoxically attains what was never possessed, possessing it in the very mode of loss.

If the dynamics of our relation to the “subject supposed to Enjoy” are complex and varied, we can grasp its significance as a fantasy-construct by recognizing the way in which, as Žižek puts it, such lost objects are never “simply absent” but absences which can “positively determine” our reality, holding it together in its very Normality (PF 175). To draw upon our previous terms, what must be recognized is how this paradoxical gesture of positivization effects a transposition of the Equus that invades the psychiatrist’s own Symbolic order, re-conceiving this over-proximate, voracious lack, this thing which is traumatically present in his reality, recasting it in terms of an exclusion or deprival, the loss of a positive
entity. At stake here is the conversion of a fundamental lack—lack as an intrusive deadlock of negativity which, in its different guises, derails the balanced circuit of Normal operations and Enjoyment—into a contingent absence, the absence of a thing that could have been obtained, in its intact fullness, if not for certain obstructions in his Symbolic universe. As “subject supposed to Enjoy,” Alan testifies to the fact (as Žižek puts it) that “somewhere there is full, unconstrained enjoyment” (FA 75). This unmitigated fullness “out there” is a fantasy which mediates, covers over, defends against, the invasive presence of a lack which has come “too close.”

What should also be clear here is why our relationship with the “subject supposed to Enjoy” is not to be conceived in terms of a mere imaginary fulfillment of our own desires, an escape from ordinary life into a wish-fulfilling fantasy realm. (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 these “fantasy-constructs” primarily effect is not an imaginary escape from the numbing circuit of a complacent, sterilized, all-too balanced reality. What they effect is not the re-infusion of an arid, empty Normal with the fullness of a Real that it has lost contact with, but rather, via the operation of loss, a much-needed (fantasmatic) distance from an over-proximate Real, the Real of a negativity that infuses our Symbolic universe.

To return to Chaudhuri, if for the latter the dynamic of Equus functions to invoke the force of some Thing that dwells deep within us, lurking below the surface of our subjective experience of 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. It is the anxiety correlative to this over-proximate Equus that the play both engages with and ultimately offers release from, mediating it via the dynamic of a lost object, an object
whose Sacred Place it works so actively to construct and irradiate. To turn once again to the image with which this chapter began, we should observe how the very dynamic of Napier’s horse-mask is here *reduced*, reflected on a fundamental level of our experience with the play as a whole—that is, how *Equus* itself operates to construct and to *stage* an open Place in our field of view, enacting and substantializing this Place (“out there”) through the manner in which it revolves, hums, and stamps around it, raising it and tilting it under the light.

For all its visual and auditory intensity, what the play most fundamentally succeeds in staging for us is not the Real of Alan’s passion, the power of his world of gods and Enjoyment and Worship. What the play offers us—and what we respond to most powerfully—is not an opportunity to retrieve this organic-immediate passion which no longer seems possible in our era. What we are lacking, in our contemporary world, is not simply what Alan represents, but the very force, urgency and passion with which the play laments and enacts this loss as such. In our contemporary context, what may be the most striking and rare feature of this play—its most *attractive* feature—is the very *traumatic intensity* with which it proclaims, circulates around—unabashedly fetishizes—the loss. As Adorno writes apropos the conductor Furtwängler (a highly Dysartian figure in his own right), what we find in *Equus* is the very “excessive exertion involved in an invocation for which what the invocation seeks is no longer purely and immediately present” (in *DS* 145). What we *reclaim* through *Equus* is not, as we might suppose, the vision of Enjoyment and the Real, the “organic-immediate” experience of that Divine element missing from our mundane, orderly world; what we reclaim is precisely the *loss* of that Enjoyment, of that Divinity, a loss vividly *constructed* for us by the play. Insofar as it is via the dynamic of a *lost* Enjoyment that our Symbolic reality holds itself together, what attracts us so forcefully to this play is not the organic immediacy of a pure Real
that we have lost, but rather, as Žižek puts it, “the organic-immediate experience of the loss itself that is no longer accessible to us” (*DS* 145).

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” contemporary existence with the organic-immediate 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). That which 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, revolting *presence*” of Equus himself—from a world of uncanny, harassing intrusions, of violent Accusations, of palpable, derailing *darknesses* that crush in upon him—a world in which, as Žižek puts it, God has come “too close”? We might say that 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 to contemporary audiences, consists precisely in its capacity to offer us a similar escape, a similar vacation. If a Žižekian analysis prompts us to reconsider the relationship of *Equus*’s protagonists to Enjoyment, it also demands that we turn this interrogation upon ourselves, subjecting our Enjoyment of *Equus* to the same analysis.
We can understand the approach taken throughout this analysis in relation to what Žižek (following Brecht) calls _extraneation_. Through Shaffer’s play we extraneate the complex dynamic of our Symbolic reality, its operations and relations, the tensions and antagonisms that threaten its precarious hold today, the mechanisms by virtue of which it keeps itself together. A central feature of this approach is found in what I have referred to as the “anamorphic” shift. For instance, against Dysart’s apparently commonsense view of a Normal that has vanquished fantasies, I examine the ways in which the operations of fantasy are integral to the most “natural” and balanced state of reality. If, for Dysart, what is primarily at stake in contemporary society is the Real—a Real embodied in Alan’s Equus, a Worship-enabling fantasy struggling to be sustained against the repressiveness of Normal reality—my approach seeks to read the play from the perspective that the Normal is itself a most remarkable and elaborate fantasmatic achievement, a (Symbolic) fantasy we struggle somehow to sustain against the Real of Equus himself.

Implicit within this approach is a critique and a re-conception of “subversion.” The preceding analysis compels us to locate the subversive potential of such drama not primarily in its attempted hystericization of the dominant Order, nor in its melancholic insistence on this Order’s tragic _loss_, nor in the jarring confrontation it creates with Alan as radical Otherness, a disturbing intrusion of the Real that troubles the smooth surface of our reality. Indeed the analysis has insisted on a certain powerful defensiveness at work in Dysart’s hysteria, as well as in the dynamic of our relation with loss and with the “subject supposed to Enjoy.” If _Equus_ is “subversive” today, we might locate its subversive strength in the way it permits us to expose and examine the dynamics of our existing Symbolic order and our relation to it, revealing the ways in which we _support_ that order by, in a sense, providing it with the supplements it needs.
1 See Zupančič’s *The Shortest Shadow*, 72-85.
3 “Things do not simply appear, they appear to appear … once things (start to) appear, they do not only appear as what they are not, creating an illusion; they can also appear to just appear, concealing the fact that they are what they appear to be” (*PV* 29-30).
4 The concept of the objet a is developed in a variety of different places in Lacan’s work, though my discussion of it in this chapter is most directly related to his explication of its dynamics in *Seminar X*. Since this seminar is still unpublished in English, I frequently refer to studies of its concepts by Žižek, Harari and Chiesa.
5 For a more elaborate discussion of Žižek’s and Lacan’s engagement with the “hysterical,” see Chapter III of this dissertation.
6 See, for instance, Žižek’s discussion in *FT* 9.
7 See Freud’s discussion of the primal Father in *Totem and Taboo*.
8 See Žižek’s discussion in *TS* 315.
9 See *ME* 94.
10 See for instance, the final page of *Seminar XI*, as well as Žižek’s *TS* 289.
11 For Lacan’s discussion of the “barred” Other, see, for instance, *Seminar XX*, 28, 81, and 131.
13 See also Chiesa’s discussion, 69-71.
14 See *TS* 316.
15 See, for instance, Chapter VI of Lacan’s *Seminar XVII*, “The castrated master.” Also, *FA* 114.
16 See *ES* 125.
17 Žižek invites us to consider this apropos Malevich and Rothko: “The ‘reality’ (white background surface, the ‘liberated nothingness,’ the open space in which object can appear) obtains its consistency only by means of the ‘black hole’ in its centre (the Lacanian das Ding, the Thing that gives body to the substance of enjoyment), i.e., by the exclusion of the real, by the change of the status of the real into that of a central lack. All late Rothko paintings are manifestations of a struggle to save the barrier separating the real from reality, that is, to prevent the real (the central black square) from overflowing the entire field, to preserve the distance between the square and what must at any cost whatsoever remain its background. If the square occupies the whole field, if the difference between the figure and its background is lost, a psychotic autism is produced” (*LA* 19).
20 The dynamic of “speculative” identity is something that Žižek develops in his work on Hegelian paradoxes such as “the Spirit is a bone.” See for instance *FT* chapter III.
21 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)
22 The author of this dissertation 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!”
23 “Lacan’s name for the enigmatic message is the desire of the mother” (*DC* 101).
24 See also *TS* 291.
25 For a much closer exploration of this concept of the gaze in Lacan and Žižek, see my discussion of *Possible Worlds* in this dissertation. See also Copjec 34.
26 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” (*IR* 170).
The protagonist of John Mighton’s *Possible Worlds* is a love-sick brain-in-a-vat who, unaware of his predicament, believes himself to exist simultaneously in an endless number of different worlds. While predominantly naturalistic in tone, the play shifts fluidly and subtly between numerous levels of reality. In one world (the “real” one), detectives Berkley and Wilson struggle to solve the seemingly insoluble mystery of George’s missing brain. Extracted from his body by an unscrupulous Scientist (presumably to aid the latter’s research into human imagination), this brain is eventually rediscovered within the depths of a private laboratory, encased in glass and hooked up to a single light whose intermittent flashing testifies to the presence of mental activity. The scenes staging this investigation are interspersed with others depicting the worlds through which George, entirely deprived of sensory contact with (“objective”) reality, imagines himself to be travelling. These subjective worlds—wholly real to George himself, and presented to us as though no less factual than the world of the police investigation—are marked by their subtle yet significant divergences from one another, each centring around a different variation of George’s true love, Joyce. At the heart of the play is thus a compelling “trans-world” romance, its disembodied protagonist shifting from one possible world to the next in search of the woman he has tragically lost.

If the merits of Mighton’s plays are many and diverse, one of their most attractive features is their capacity to engage us intellectually, to confront us with paradoxes and possibilities that set the mind spinning and stretch the imagination in new and enjoyable ways. Works such as *Possible Worlds*—described by Richard Ouzounian as a “double espresso for the mind”—invite and indeed compel us to philosophize and to speculate, filled as they are
with open-ended questions and hypotheses, propositions intended to be explored and extrapolated upon, played with. One feels that, in doing so, one is not taking liberties with the work or leaving it behind (in favour of philosophical speculation), but participating in its own engagement with ideas, accepting its offer to be a partner in thought and imagination.

The Joyces that George encounters as he shifts from world to world would seem, in most normal senses, to be different people. They have different jobs, different hometowns, different priorities, different affections—indeed their variability is “infinite” (23). Yet for George they are each fundamentally Joyce, “the only one” (58), the one he’s “always loved” (65)—infinitely. The play prompts us to ask what it would mean to be the “same” person in utterly different realities. In what sense can Joyce be said to remain Joyce, in spite of this infinite variability in her positively-given features? What is this distinguishing Quality, this Joyce-within-the-Joyce, that George finds “in every world” (58), whilst everything else about her is subject to radical change?

In posing these questions Possible Worlds leaps directly into its eponymous branch of philosophy, where we find a lively and varied theoretical debate concerning the issues raised by such trans-world prospects for a philosophy of language. In insisting on the identity of the various Joyces that he encounters in each of these “counterfactual” situations, George unwittingly enters the squabble between “descriptivist” and “antidescriptivist” stances, particularly apropos the notion of “intentionality.” For descriptivism, a noun or a name can be understood as intending a certain cluster of features, subsequently referring to objects in reality only insofar as they exhibit the descriptive properties contained in this cluster. The word’s “extension” (the set of objects it can refer to) corresponds to its “intention” (the cluster of properties comprised in its meaning). For thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, insofar as the name “Moses” intends the man who led his people out of Egypt, a Moses in another possible
world who had not done so would not be the same person—this Moses would be somebody else. Similarly, if “Joyce” intends a certain woman with certain qualities and properties—born in Novar, an excellent swimmer who went to high school with George and fell in love with him there—then another woman who fails to comport with the features in this descriptive cluster cannot also be understood as the referent of this name. She is somebody else. Indeed, one of George’s Joyces upholds this view herself, maintaining that even a slightly modified version of oneself would simply not be oneself: “If I wasn’t so busy I’d be a different person” (31).

On the other hand, we might expect George’s faith in Joyce’s “trans-world identity” to meet with greater sympathy among proponents of antidescriptivism, a stance identified primarily with Saul Kripke. Against intentionality, antidescriptivism contends that a name’s meaning is not reducible to the set of descriptive features that may be associated with it. Kripke uses the term “rigid designation” to evoke the functioning of words such as proper names whose designation operates independently of the different qualities attributable to their referents. George’s “Joyce”—insofar as it posits the identity of its object beyond the cluster of its descriptive features, denoting the same object in all possible worlds and all counterfactual situations—operates as a “rigid designator.”

Of course, rigid designation, as a term of modal logic, is not an affirmation of (or even a proposition about) the existence of other possible worlds beyond our own. “A possible world isn’t a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope,” as Kripke famously puts it: “Possible worlds are stipulated, not discovered by powerful telescopes” (46). The concept, moreover, would seem to have even less to offer on the topic of trans-world love. To argue that we may use a name as though it referred to the same person in all possible worlds, regardless of particular variations in that person’s descriptive features, is far from
claiming that these varied versions would or could still inspire the singular force of our love, as had the original. However valid it may be to argue that my loved one’s name would still technically “designate” her in another world, even if she lacked any of the particular qualities that make her the person I know her to be, it seems reasonable to insist that love requires at least some minimal consistency in its object, the recurrence of certain essential properties that characterize the loved one as such.

On the other hand, is it not also true that love would not be love if its object were particular properties \textit{per se}? What love aims at, we are inclined to believe—and Lacanian psychoanalysis, in its own way, is intent to assure us—is never reducible to some particular feature or set of nameable, definable qualities in the other, since, after all, if the aspect in the other that I love could be named and defined, it could also be located elsewhere, replicated in any number of other individuals. It is for this reason, says Žižek, that “our sense of common decency finds it repulsive to enumerate the reasons we love somebody. The moment I can say ‘I love this person for the following reasons …,’ it is clear beyond any doubt that this is not love proper” (\textit{TN} 125-6). We can, of course, name things we “love” about another person without considering ourselves “repulsive,” yet Žižek’s statement draws attention to the mysterious way in which love \textit{exceeds} the features of its object, finding its true target in something \textit{beyond or behind} the series of definable, observable properties. As Renata Salecl puts it (drawing upon Lacan’s terminology), “The truth about love is that the other has to love you because of something that is in you more than yourself” (204).

And from this angle, we can note that the very antidescriptive nature of the rigid designator—the way in which it aims at or posits something in its object irreducible to any specific, definable quality or set of properties, something beyond any particular cluster of descriptive features—is highly evocative of love’s engagement with the \textit{incorporeal}, the
“something more” that we find in the other. We might say that the very “problem” confronting antidescriptivism—that is, the question of the rigid designator’s “objective correlative,” the surplus which remains consistent in all possible worlds and counterfactual situations—is evocative of love’s own “problem,” the very ineffability of its object.² And while “possible worlds” as a branch of theoretical philosophy is generally very careful to keep its equations free from the derailing influence of love, Mighton’s Possible Worlds, in provoking us to think the two together, permits revealing light to be shed on the operations at stake in both.

It is in this regard that Žižek’s Lacan-inspired approach offers such a worthy vessel for navigating the fantastical universe of Mighton’s play, exploring the paradoxes of desire and the complexities of love and sublimation that arise amidst its shifting worlds. For Žižek, such paradoxes and complexities are always deeply interwoven with symbolic operations, and indeed, it is precisely through examining this confluence and interplay that we can glean the most from Possible Worlds about our own desire. Such an approach thus emphasizes one of Žižek’s favourite Freudian theses, i.e., that “the ‘pathological’ provides the key to the ‘normal’” (PF 142). This is to say, examined through the lens of Žižek, the metaphysical particularities of George’s predicament do not merely add a fantastical twist to love and desire but offer a highly effective means of revealing and illuminating the fantastical (indeed pathological) operations at their very heart.

The full thrust of this investigation, however, resides in accomplishing yet a further step. George’s universe offers insight not only into desire and sublimation as they are found in normal reality, but simultaneously into the deep and complex interrelation of the latter and the former—that is, how (“normal”) reality itself, in its very solidity and substantial density, is deeply imbricated with the dynamic of desire and the operations inherent to sublimation. It is also in this regard, as we shall see, that the sort of theorizing adumbrated above, far from
leading into abstraction and “mere” semantics, helps to reveal the full extent of the play’s relevance and force for our contemporary world. If much “possible worlds” philosophizing seems marked by its patent abstraction from reality—often directly proclaiming itself as a strictly theoretical excursion into realms of acknowledged “stipulations,” largely if not systematically disconnected from the stuff of our daily world—a Žižekian approach undertakes such philosophizing with the express purpose of explicating the operations integral to our actual world, i.e., how the latter is held together as such, and indeed, as we shall see, how its very solidity is intertwined with “stipulations.”

With this in mind, after demonstrating how Žižek’s approach to desire and sublimation encourages us to “look awry” upon the dynamic of George’s trans-world romance, my analysis will undertake to bring the play’s insights to bear upon the complexities (and precariousness) of desire and sublimity in our contemporary times. Of especial interest will be the unique light that Mighton’s play sheds upon the escalating role of virtual experience in our reality. And finally, if my analysis of the play reveals its troubling and indeed threatening prognostications for the future of desire and sublimity, the concluding section will seek to explore its highly constructive engagement with our predicament, its intimations of a new way of approaching and grappling with our contemporary crisis of sublimation. Specifically, if this play appears to focus on George and the (“masculine”) dynamic of his passion, I will argue that the strength of its conclusion lies precisely in its articulation of a “feminine” approach to sublimity.

Over the course of the play we encounter at least four or five different Joyces. The woman in Scenes Two and Six, with whom George sits and converses in a crowded restaurant, is studying Neurology at the local University, “looking for ways to increase intelligence” (29).
Reserved and solitary, she strikes a sharp contrast with the Joyce from Scene Four, a flirty stockbroker who approaches George in a bar, inviting him home for the night. Subsequent scenes depict later developments in George’s relationship with each of these women—his ardent attempts to remain attached to them, and his violent reaction when one of them breaks up with him (“I’ve met someone …” [58]). The Joyce whom George approaches on a beach in Scene Fifteen, if sharing certain attributes with one of her predecessors (she too is a Neurologist), appears to be a distinct person and becomes increasingly anxious as George asserts a prior connection between them. There is also the “actual” Joyce inhabiting the “objective” world of detectives Wilson and Berkley—we meet her briefly in Scene Seventeen, during which Berkley informs her of her husband’s condition—as well as a final Joyce with whom George gazes out to sea in Scene Eighteen, a character who reflects the others (particularly the first and fourth) without necessarily being continuous with either of them. Yet if we meet five different Joyces in the play, we are informed that there are plenty more in George’s universe, “A lot more” (23), perhaps “Billions” (24). “There are so many worlds” (67), and each of them contains a different Joyce.

What is this thing, this Joyce-within-the-Joyce, that George finds again and again in every world, whilst everything else is subject to radical change? Perhaps a suitable starting point for this question can be found in the characteristic Žižekian move of “tarrying with the negative,” grasping it in its positive dimension. Beyond any postulated essence, over and above any positive-substantial Quality corresponding to the name “Joyce,” the one element tangibly and conspicuously shared by each of George’s multiple worlds is loss. What unites them is the profound sense of what is (tragically) missing from and lost to them: “My wife died three years ago. … She was swimming in the ocean and must have gone out too far” (40); “She died several years ago … An accident” (30). As Jenn Stephenson asserts, George’s
repeated references to the early and tragic death (in some other distant world) of his young wife would seem to operate as an inscription of the loss he has incurred “in the real,” i.e., when the Scientist extracted his brain. This dead Joyce, apparently a victim of drowning, inscribes the loss of “the actual Joyce who is George’s wife—who had been lost in the wrenching transition across worlds when George’s brain was transferred from his body to the vat” (Stephenson 86). What thus persists in every world, most fundamentally, is the tangible sense of *amputation*, the “pulsating” awareness (Mighton 58) of a thing from which one has been severed, a thing just beyond reach, “out too far.” Every encountered Joyce is set against the background of this tangible loss.

Do we not find here—in George’s trans-world pursuit of the “lost object”—the basic dynamic of Lacanian sublimation? Each newly-encountered Joyce is irradiated with the splendour of that Thing for which she “stands in,” taking on the sanctity of the Place she occupies in George’s symbolic economy. And what is this perceived Quality in the Joyces, irrespective of variations in their positively-given features, if not the Lacanian *objet a*? The latter can be understood as Lacan’s name for the *spectral* dimension that emerges when newly-encountered Joyces are “raised to the dignity” of that sublime Thing which George has traumatically lost, a dimension *in excess* of what they are in reality, irradiating and transforming the actuality of their given properties. Simply put, the dynamic of Lacanian sublimation encourages us to turn the “descriptivist” objection on its head—if, for the latter stance, any notion of a (fundamental, essential) *Joyceness* inherent to all these Joyce-variations is entirely fantasmatic, is it not precisely such a fantasmatic dimension that accounts for the very real attachment that George feels to each new Joyce, by virtue of which she is the object of his desire, “the only one … in every world” (58)?
Yet if the role of the objet a and the dynamic of sublimation are clearly important here, we should be careful not to miss the opportunities offered by Mighton’s universe for a far more elaborate investigation. The apparent simplicity of Lacan’s formula (whereby an object is “raised to the dignity of the Thing”) can be deceptive and should not blind us to the need for a close consideration of the complicated (and multidirectional) operations at work in sublimation. Nor should we overlook here the deep and complex way in which sublimation is imbricated with symbolization.

We can begin to explore these complexities by tackling sublimation from another angle. Let us do so by resisting momentarily this seemingly natural elision of the dead Joyce (to whom George repeatedly refers amidst his travels) with the “real” Joyce (who, after all, is not dead, did not drown while swimming out into the sea—she is still alive in the world from which George has been wrenched). Let us work instead—“naïvely”—within the terms and suppositions of George’s own metaphysics (“Each of us exists in an infinite number of possible worlds …” [23]). What we ultimately have in this multidimensional universe is a series of different Joyces, none with greater claim to ontological priority than any other. On George’s own terms, the lost Joyce—the Joyce who died while swimming—is no more Joyce than any of the other Joyces; her ontological status as Joyce is no different from or greater than theirs, since like them she is merely one possibility among billions, just another variation, another appearance. We might ask (“naïvely”): if the situation is as George describes it, why must Joyce be considered lost at all? And why should the reality of this one particular “lost” Joyce be granted exceptional status amongst this series of (ontologically equivalent) realities?

Perhaps the best approach to this question—and the approach that sheds the most light upon the complexities of our own desire—is to be suggested through a simple inversion of its basic terms. That is to say, this gesture of exception is itself constitutive of these realities,
correlative to their very ontological heft. Succinctly put, it is the (spectral) presence among them of an impossible world (the inaccessible, unattainable Real of a lost Joyce) that makes these possible worlds worlds.

We can clarify the stakes of this argument by placing it in the context of trauma. George’s severance from “actual” reality appears especially traumatic insofar as it entails the tragic loss of his true love. Yet a Žižekian approach should complicate this basic assessment by revealing the “short circuit” at work between these two losses. That is to say, if the loss of Joyce is on the one hand a central element of the trauma experienced by George, we should note also the way in which this (sublime) “lost object” operates as a paradoxical support—a support for George’s subjectivity amidst the utter dissolusion of his reality’s solidity, a means of instating some semblance of reality amidst the Hegelian “night of the world” with which he is faced.4 Surely the fundamental trauma is to be located in the radical sundering of the subject’s relation to a consistent, stable reality, the total loss of Symbolic moorings and the consequent threat of “subjective destitution,” reflected so vividly in those “in-between” phases described by George: “I feel my properties melting, everything I’ve ever known or felt … nothing holds … it’s terrible” (40). To put it simply, we should supplement our consideration of Joyce’s consistency—i.e., the question of what it is in Joyce that remains the same (thereby causing George’s desire)—by stressing how George’s own (endlessly reconstituted) desire enables him to retain a degree of consistency, eluding or forestalling the trauma of “subjective destitution” that threatens so imminently upon his placement in the vat.

In Scene Thirteen, George offers the metaphor of a man who continues to feel the pain of an amputated arm, repeatedly reaching for things with it, overwhelmed by the pulsating presence of this thing which has been severed from him. If on one hand, such perceived amputation is reflective of George’s “pathological” condition (he has, after all, undergone
amputation of the most extreme kind), we should note the paradoxical way in which his choice of metaphor illuminates the (constitutive) dynamic of “normal” subjectivity. Is it not precisely as such—i.e., as deprived of self-completion and perpetually separated from something for which one grasps in vain—that the Lacanian subject is a subject, attains its mode of being as subject? Lacan’s formula, $<>a$, implies that the subject is directly correlative to that which escapes it, a (prohibited, lost, unattainable) thing which resists subjectivization.

Paradoxically, George’s “pathological” state of tumbling from one world to the next in search of his desired object reflects (par excellence) the metonymic dynamic by virtue of which the subject-of-desire’s very reality is constituted and sustained. In Lacanian fashion, George “realizes” his desire not through satiating it, definitively reacquiring the lost Joyce, but precisely through an infinite deferral, in this case quite literally from one world to the next.

And in Lacanian fashion, it is this structure of desire that enables him to evade the complete dissolution of his Symbolic reality and the correlative trauma of his own non-existence.

To return to our “naive” standpoint, why—insofar as there are infinite possible Georges, insofar as he is not anchored in one world but shifts fluidly through this spectrum of possibilities—is George always that George? Why is he always (fundamentally) tied to the world of Joyce’s tragic death, why is he always (fundamentally) the George for whom Joyce has died tragically? Again, the best answer to this question can be found by inverting its terms. George is able to remain George, able to sustain a degree of consistency and identity in spite of the radically fractured and groundless “night of the world” into which he is thrown, insofar as he is situated in relation to a lost Joyce—insofar as he repeats this loss “in every world.”

Do we not find a fundamental thrust of psychoanalysis in its determination to explore the ways in which our own (“normal”) subjectivity is buttressed by such “masochistic” returns? Does not what Freud calls the “death drive”—designating the most fundamental
tendency in human beings (“beyond the pleasure principle”)—refer precisely to such a “compulsion to repeat,” i.e., to return again and again to a painful experience, as though one were possessed by a perverse need to re-experience it? More generally, we can locate a central objective of Žižek’s work in his effort to reveal how the various “sublime objects” to which we attach ourselves function to mediate against the instability and dizzying multiplicity that characterizes our own contemporary existence. The issue, for us as for George, is not simply how our successive “passionate attachments” reflect the Real of a lost object, but how the Real of this object emerges as a necessary supplement amidst a fractured, dis-unified flux of experience.

To take things a step further, we can bring this discussion of sublimation into closer relation to symbolization by observing how the interplay of George’s Joyces mirrors (if like a funhouse) the basic dynamic of Lacan’s “logic of the signifier”—adapted here to the rigours of a trans-world application. A signifier, as Lacan states famously in his Écrits, “is that which represents the subject to another signifier” (694). In George’s metaphysics (taken, again, naïvely), we have a series of differentially-related Joyces, each of which, in Lacan’s terminology, can “represent the subject” to another Joyce, i.e., fill out the void of this Joyce’s possible absence, hold the place of her possible lack. In the fourth scene of the play, while talking to one Joyce in a bar, George enumerates such a differential series, a string of Joyces who “represent the subject” for the Joyce to whom he’s talking: “In one world I’m talking to you right now but your arm is a little to the left, in another world you’re interested in that man over there with the glasses, in another you stood me up two days ago …” (23). Since the number of possible worlds is “infinite,” one can theoretically ascribe to this Joyce (the Joyce in the bar) “a never-ending series of ‘equivalences’” (FT 23), an indefinite succession of substitutes which would represent for her the void of her place of inscription. And
theoretically this is true for any of the Joyces—i.e., any of them can be the Joyce for which another “represents the subject.” If in Scene Four, the enumerated Joyces represent the subject for the Joyce to whom George is speaking, this Joyce herself can be said to represent the subject (i.e., the void of its place of inscription) for the Joyce we met in Scene Two—and so on ad infinitum.

The chief point to emphasize here is the (Hegelian) “bad infinity” of this multidirectional proliferation of substitutions and distortions. The differential succession of Joyces, as a “never-ending series of ‘equivalences’,” is not here a totalized “set”—these Joyces are not “one-ified” as Joyces, but constitute an inconsistent, heterogeneous multitude in which appearances distort and fracture without relating as particulars to any Universal that would unify them. It is against the background of this non-totalized multitude that we can understand Žižek’s emphasis on the Lacanian point de capiton or “quilting point”: “The only possible way out of this impasse”—i.e., of a heterogeneous, dis-unified bad infinity of Joyces—“is that we simply reverse the series of equivalences and ascribe to one [Joyce] the function of representing the subject (the place of inscription) for all the others (which thereby become ‘all’—that is, are totalized)” (FT 23). If the Joyce who died while swimming is on the one hand merely one in an infinite number of differentially-related worlds, she simultaneously represents the Joyce, Joyce as such. We find here the point at which, as Žižek expresses it, “the Universal comes across itself within its particularities” (45), operating “as one of its own elements” (43), an element which, “according to the order of classification, should be just a subordinated part” (45). And it is through this “quilting” operation, such that one Joyce represents the subject to all the other Joyces, that we move from an inconsistent, disparate field into a coherent totality, a set of particulars totalized and unified in/as Joyce.
To put this in experiential terms, does not this subtle ("anamorphic") shift mark the very difference between the *reality* of George’s passionate quest and the discontinuous fracturing and fragmentation of the “night of the world”—its disorienting plurality, its dizzying, ever-changing flux of experience? Without the operation of symbolic “quilting,” we have not an ardent and yearning trans-world pursuit of some *Real*, but rather an *unheimlich* charade of diverging simulacra, a grotesque phantasmagoria—the *membra disjecta* of imagination ungrounded in and unsupported by a stable symbolic frame. Thequilting operation is the difference here between the *reality* of George’s possible worlds and a total *loss* of reality. To return to our initial thesis, this logic reveals how the gesture of exception (whereby one of the Joyces, the dead one, is granted exceptional status) is *constitutive* of these multiple realities, *correlative* to their very substantiality. The (*spectral*) presence among them of an *impossible* (unattainable) world makes these possible worlds *worlds*.

Is it not also here that we can locate Žižek’s fundamental position on rigid designation? His Lacanian reading reveals how the latter functions precisely via such a “short-circuit” between the signifier and its particular objects. The paradox of a rigid designator is that it is “always-already *part of itself*, comprised within its own elements” (*FT* 46). Its objective-correlative—the *unsymbolizable* X among the named particulars, irreducible to the particular object’s contingent qualities (its point of sameness amidst all counterfactual manifestations)—marks precisely the point where “the signifier ‘falls into’ the signified” (*TN* 148), “comes across itself” among the signified.

Crucial to this perspective is the way in which it extends or indeed reconfigures the dynamic of sublimity itself. This “quilting point” is not to be conceived in terms of some preceding, substantial Real, “stood in for” by its substitutes, who are thus irradiated by its splendour. In saying that the excepted element “represents the subject” to all the other
elements, we must recall here that “subject,” for Lacan, designates precisely an “empty” element, a definitive absence (of positively-given properties or qualities). It is thus that “subject” in Lacan is designated by the matheme $, the “crossed out” or “barred” signifier. Correspondingly, the element that “quilts” the set of particulars (and in which the Whole “comes across itself”), functions not as a fullness that infuses the others with its prior Quality/Substance, but precisely as a negativity. Žižek draws here upon the Hegelian “absolute negativity”—the paradoxical presence of a negativity in relation to all the other elements, an element that marks the “empty set” within the set. In the terms of the “logic of the signifier,” the oneness of the (infinite) series of Joyces reflects the quilting operation as a “negative synthesis of a pure ‘One’ which excludes (relates negatively to) all positive properties” (FA 51).

In our initial articulation, the sublime splendour of each newly-encountered Joyce was something added to her positively-given qualities, correlative to a substantial Real preceding and infusing her particular properties. Conversely, the quilting operation (as a “negative synthesis”) unifies the particulars—and simultaneously opens up their sublime dimension—through a type of subtraction, or as Žižek would put it, by digging a hole in them (PD 70). The effect here is that every given Joyce—her phenomenal array of attributes, her tangible features and properties—is “punctured” by symbolization, such that these attributes and features (in their positively-given presence) take on the character of mere appearances, appearances of something—something more. To “dig a hole” in the positively-given is to open up the intimation that it is masking something further, something “in it more than itself.”

The challenge posed here is in conceiving the Real of this mysterious-elusive Joyceness as something arising in this chaos of realities as an effect of symbolic operations, “posited or ‘produced’ by symbolization itself” (TN 36), that is, a positivization
(ontologization) of the “hole” dug into the Joyces via their “quilting.” And with this reversal in mind, we can here propose another response to our governing question by (once again) rearranging its basic terms. What is this enigmatic Property to which “Joyce” corresponds, what is this enigmatic thing in Joyce beyond all particular and variable qualities, if not enigma itself? What makes each Joyce Joyce (and what binds them together in identity) is precisely the introduction of an enigmatic opacity, the evocation in the appearance of an impenetrability, an X evading all determination. The “quality” that appears to elude any specific predicate is itself “nothing but this impossibility of predicates” (FT 36). What makes each Joyce Joyce is this very point of enigma.

In searching for Joyce, we seem to have arrived at a version of Lacan’s (infamous) statement that “There is no Woman.” Of course, such a statement could well come as a shock to the actress performing the role, as well as to audiences of the play, for whom the performance of the lead actress is often a most memorable feature. There is, after all, something which recurs in each of the Joyces, a (“positively-given”) thing underlying all the appearances and undergirding their divergences. Mighton’s ontologically distinct possible worlds are ultimately grounded in the world of the production itself, unified in the theatrical medium which supports them, and however varied the Joyces may be, they are ultimately different appearances of a single actress playing the part. Is not George’s assurance that the different Joyces possess an integral unity reflected in our own relationship to the theatrical performer, who “remains the same” beneath or within her varying appearances?

“In every single performance,” writes Erika Fischer-Lichte, a particular tension arises between the phenomenal and the semiotic body” (“Reality and Fiction” 85); or in Stanton Garner’s terms, the actor’s givenness, his or her “material, physiological facticity,” inserts a
“fundamental and intrusive actuality into the field of dramatic representation … a rootedness in the biological present that always, to some extent, escapes transformation into the virtual realm” (44). Oscillation and ambiguity—or what Bert States calls “binocular vision”—are in this sense characteristic or indeed constitutive of our experiences with theatre, the latter’s “order of representation” entering an uncanny circuitry with its “order of presence” (Fischer-Lichte 88). Spectators, of course, arriving with the expectation that theatre will provide them with dramatic characters in narrative structures, and armed with their perceptual-cognitive story-constructing strategies, will generally “tune” their perception to facilitate the order of representation: “The process of perception is guided in order to let a dramatic figure come into existence” (88). Yet strategies such as cross-casting or double-casting—and a fortiori the idiosyncratic multiple-casting that we find in Possible Worlds—are inclined to make our phenomenal awareness of the physically-present performer a particularly forceful element of our experience in the theatre.

How does this phenomenal “givenness” of the actress, her “being-in-the-world” in excess of theatrical semioticity, inform and complicate the dynamic explored above apropos the “logic of the signifier”? Is not our forceful experience of this actress—who, in her “physiological irreducibility,” constitutes a corporeally present Ground in which the ontologically distinct Joyces have their being—in explicit tension with the notion of Joyceness as a symbolic product, an effect of symbolic operations? Is she not a substantial thing appearing in and through the varying appearances? Yet perhaps the previous argument encourages us to supplement the “phenomenological” assessment with an inversion. To use our former terms, is there not a vital sense in which our awareness of the actor’s continuity—an awareness or recognition that names her “as such,” designating these differing appearances as the same thing—functions precisely to dig a hole in these appearances, opening within
them, in the manner described apropos George’s “Joyce,” a spectral depth that exceeds the positively-given? Just as the gesture of naming, in the logic of the signifier, “opens up visible/present reality toward the dimension of the immaterial/unseen” (PD 70), so our (implicit) “naming” of these divergent theatrical appearances, rather than simply pointing to or designating that which is given or present to us in them, evokes within these appearances a dimension that is precisely not reducible to what is given or present.

To clarify, when we encounter in Scene Fifteen of Possible Worlds what appears to be a fourth distinct manifestation of the same actress, the force with which her performance compels our gaze here is simply not correlative to the elements and attributes present to us, positively-given in this performance. Viewed in isolation, or without this kind of doubling at play around it, the performance of this particular Joyce might be considered powerful or effective or compelling in its own right, yet it would not engage us in the same enigmatic way, it would not resonate with the same mysterious depth as it does when recognized (“named”) as the same thing that has differently appeared to us thrice before. What compels us here is not (primarily) some quality of the recurring actress, a positively-given feature of her corporeal presence. Naming this thing as such introduces into each of the diverging appearances an enigmatic dimension, an evocation of something in it “more than itself,” a dimension corresponding to no positively-given feature in our phenomenal experience. Or to consider another example, to what should we attribute the uncanny force of the character “Jocelyn” who appears in Scene Eight, the instructor of detective Wilson’s course on “Consciousness Revolution,” who, as Mighton stipulates, is to be “played by Joyce” (36)? Our recognition that in Jocelyn we are perceiving the same thing as in the Joyces who preceded her functions to introduce a “something more” into our experience of this role. That is, there appears in our
perception of this scene a dimension that would be altogether lacking if we did not recognize (“name”) the actress as recurring in the part.

This dynamic is perhaps best illustrated in the experience of sudden recognition that occurs in our experience of a particular performer, i.e., when we suddenly realize, or are suddenly informed, that the actor we are currently watching is the very same as an actor we have seen in a previous scene or performance (“Wait a minute—isn’t that the guy from Six Feet Under?!” “Wait a minute—isn’t Jocelyn Joyce?!”). What is most notable about such instances of recognition (i.e., of “naming” the varying appearances as the same thing) is the potent way in which the entity appearing before us becomes suddenly enigmatic, uncannily different from what it has been, infused with a mysterious self-difference. Though it is empirically identical to what it was a moment previously, it now draws our gaze in a very different way, its phenomenal presence infused with—disturbed by—a “something more” which has appeared in it. Importantly, we are not simply astonished by the differences between the different appearances (or by the sheer variety of ways in which the performer appears). What most marks our experience is the way in which, upon the recognition that they are the same (as each other), these appearances begin to differ from themselves. Neither is the same as what it was—neither directly “coincides” with itself any longer. And is it not precisely in such enigmatic self-difference that we can locate the feature of the Joyces that so forcefully ensnares our gaze in performance?

We should note that this “non-specular” dimension—this difference in a perceived object which corresponds to no empirical element, this “something more” which cannot be pinned directly to any positively-given attribute—is precisely what Lacan designates by the term objet a.
To take a final step here, could we not understand *Possible Worlds* itself as an illuminating microcosm of our own obsessive “trans-world” pursuit of actors? Is not our experience of actors quite literally that of single entities which reappear, in somewhat modified form, in a variety of different “worlds,” ever-changing yet always somehow fundamentally *themselves*? As spectators do we not “follow” certain actors from world to world, fixated upon some *thing* which they possess, raising them indeed “to the dignity of the Thing”? On the one hand, what attracts us, what makes us return to their plays or their films again and again, is of course the recurrence of particular qualities and identifiable attributes (beauty? humour? style?) which infuse and unify their divergent roles. Yet in attempting to *name* the specific feature in a particular performer which so distinguishes him or her from other (beautiful, funny, stylish) performers, and which so forcefully compels our *desire*, do we not always come up against the Lacanian *objet a*—that is, an element that is precisely *not* reducible to any positively-given, nameable feature, a “something more” in the performer which *exceeds* any identifiable property? We may of course speak (particularly in the context of live theatre) of the actor’s arresting *presence*. As Fischer-Lichte puts it, “Through specific processes of embodiment, the actor can bring forth his phenomenal body in a way that enables him to command both space and the audience’s attention”—we “sense that the actor is present in an unusually intense way, granting [us] in turn an intense sensation of [ourselves] as present” (*Transformative* 96). Yet is it not also—or perhaps, in many cases, predominantly—through the forceful evocation of something *inaccessible* to us, a dimension of something precisely *not* present to us but *hidden behind the curtain*, that the actor most powerfully ensnares our desire? To draw upon our former terms, what is this enigmatic recurring element in the actor which so compels the force of our gaze if not the appearance of *enigma itself*?
This discussion of the actress as a Real beneath appearances prompts us to bring the preceding analysis of sublimation into closer association with issues of gender in Possible Worlds. Mighton’s female lead, after all, is charged quite literally with the task of staging different embodiments of a male fantasy, presenting women who are directly filtered through a male gaze. To approach this in a more specific way, do we not find evoked in the preceding discussion the basic contours of two central Lacanian engagements with the “feminine,” i.e., female hysteria and “femininity as masquerade,” or more specifically, the differing dynamics they establish with the masculine gaze? The male “dread” said to be associated with female hysteria arises precisely in the confrontation with inconsistency, the encounter with the feminine other as a *bricolage* of heterogeneous fragments rather than a cohesive self, a collection of varying, contradictory appearances with no stable, discernable agency “pulling the strings”: “Behind the multiple layers is nothing” (*OD* 192). The “horror” of hysterical inconsistency (from the perspective of the male gaze) thus resides in its “bad infinity” of appearances, appearances which, to use Lacan’s terms, are horrifying insofar as they are “non-all.” They are “all there is,” yet they do not add up to a totality, they do not form a Whole.

Do we not find in George’s pursuit, conversely, a sort of trans-world variation on the dynamic of “femininity as masquerade”? Here again, what the (“masculine”) subject is confronted with, rather than a single, unified Person, is an inconsistent, contradictory array of performances and variations. Yet these heterogeneous manifestations ensnare the (male) gaze precisely insofar as they appear (are interpreted or perceived) as a succession of masks concealing/distorting some (enigmatic, elusive, unattainable) *thing* that exists beyond them, a *thing* whose substantial density and power of fascination arises in direct relation to the masquerade. Žižek develops this dynamic apropos the “illusion of opacity” (*PV* 220)—“an illusion which, precisely, lures us into thinking that what we see directly is just an illusory
surface concealing some opaque depth.” The symbolic operations at work in George’s possible worlds, via which an inconsistent *bricolage* of appearances is “quilted” as *Joyce*, generates a similar illusion, a properly *symbolic* illusion, an “*illusion of illusion itself*.”

Referring to Mighton’s work in the context of “post-Newtonian dramaturgical structures,” the epilogue of Ric Knowles’ *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies* cites N. Katherine Hayles’ observation that efforts toward a “quantum” theatre, for all their potentially liberatory developments, remain traditionally gendered. Most plays in this vein are written by men and preoccupied with the actions of males, “admitting the feminine as an abstract principle but excluding actual women” (in Knowles 218). If *Possible Worlds* would appear to *revolve* around a woman, is it not precisely in the play’s extraneation of Woman as “abstract” that we can locate its feminine potential?

Of course, this notion of Woman as symbolic *effect* is only part of the story. What of the Lacanian emphasis on locating the subversive strength of the feminine precisely in its *irreducibility* to the Symbolic? Do we not find the feminine in that which cannot be fully “*gentrified*,” in that which is “not submitted to the phallic function”? A more careful consideration of this side of the equation will be held in reserve for my discussion of the play’s conclusion, yet in the meantime it is vital to note the way in which this talk of Woman as symbolic *effect*, far from reducing the feminine to a “mere” fantasy vis-à-vis the solidity and necessity of paternal-symbolic reality, accentuates how the latter (in its very solidity and necessity) is *itself* a fantasy-effect, precariously held together through its reliance on fantasmatic supplements.

This is to say, just as George’s very sense of reality is dependent upon (the positing of) such an “exception”—“a mysterious part of a woman outside the symbolic” (*PD* 68)—so the
(apparent) solidity and density of normal (paternal-symbolic) reality is itself directly related to that which is “not submitted to the phallic function.” If, in an “ontological” context, the Real evokes the underlying substantial density of our perceived reality, the inaccessible hard core beneath the array of phenomenally-given appearances, is it not a type of “lost object” par excellence? Does it not refer precisely, as Žižek puts it, to “that which remains the same in all possible (symbolic) universes” (LC 127), i.e., the ground or substrate of which the multitude of different appearances are (“mere”) appearances? Linked to this is a traditional “Lacanian” view of the Symbolic, i.e., as covering over or replacing the (lost-inaccessible) Thing with the word. Yet in “a second move,” we turn this dynamic around: “this very hard core is purely virtual, actually non-existant, an X which can be reconstructed only retroactively, from the multitude of symbolic formations which are ‘all that there actually is.’” And the crucial point to emphasize here is that while this Real is itself a symbolic effect or appearance, it is nonetheless an appearance vital to the very reality of our reality.

In this light, we can think of own perceptual universe as a type of Hegelian “night of the world” which we negotiate via the dimension of the Real. Confronted (fundamentally) with a dizzying, fractured, dis-unified “plurality of phenomena,” a “disorienting flux of ever-changing fragments of experience,” subjectivity establishes “a degree of cohesive stability by grounding it via the invocation of an underlying non-phenomenal foundation” (Johnston 245). What we experience as reality is disclosed against the background of this inaccessible “lost Thing” which itself “emerges in the very gesture of its loss” (TN 37)—an “unsymbolizable” point correlative to the operations of symbolization itself.

We can thus understand most clearly how desire and sublimation are supportive of the very substantial density and consistency of the subject’s Symbolic reality by recognizing how the constitution of our “normal” (paternal-symbolic) reality itself “pertains to the paradoxical
logic of desire” (TN 37). Indeed, what Lacan refers to as the “gaze” — a concept whose specific relations to Mighton’s play will be developed over the next two sections—reflects precisely this convergence of desire and the “ontological.” On one level this gaze is to be understood in terms of its immediate desirous associations, i.e., as a gaze of passion, an ardent, penetrating fixation on its object. Yet this same locution functions in Lacan to address our relationship with the “substance” of mundane reality, indicating how its basic objects are constituted as such via the place of the (signifying) subject within them. The strength of this concept, I would argue, arises precisely through the seeming incongruity of this juxtaposition, from the way it informs (and transforms) in both directions. The desirous associations of the gaze evoke how the most mundane constituents of reality are not simply self-given, external elements of experience; they are constituted through the very intimacy of our engagement with them (insofar as they are invested with our gaze, permeated with a “thing from the subject”). And from the other direction, the gaze expresses the very direct way in which our sublimations and passionate desires are not simply illusory additions to reality but its vital supplements.16

Conceived another way: the duality inherent to the Lacanian gaze reveals that if our sublime attachments, for all their dire intensity and unequivocal substantiality, are ultimately founded in symbolic illusion, then so is our reality itself.

How better to explore the implications for our own reality of the intimacy between desire and the “ontological” than through this play’s engagement with the looming prospects of virtual reality? The latter, writes Žižek, confronts us with the “prospect of casting off our ‘ordinary’ bodies, turning into a virtual entity which travels from one virtual space to another” (PF 130). George’s experience gestures toward virtual possibilities beyond the constraints of the physical body, to worlds divested of human finitude in its inertia. The possible worlds of
**Possible Worlds** are thus diachronic as well as synchronic, impressing upon us the scope of future possibilities, asking us to imagine not only possible futures but also what these may open up for imagination itself. Even the relatively short span of time since the play’s debut has seen a rapid acceleration toward the virtual and the increasing intermingling of the latter with the stuff of our daily world. Amidst this trend, has not the image of a brain-in-a-vat emerged increasingly as a trope for our impending existence? As Žižek emphasizes, the escalating efficiency of virtual reality’s implements—to the degree where, ultimately, “the signals of virtual reality will directly reach our brain, bypassing our sensory organs” (*OB* 50)—will “effectively reduce us to ‘brains in the vat,’ cutting us off from any direct perception of reality,” enabling an absolute purity of virtualized experience.

Mighton’s play, in its exploration of desire’s relation to the Real, confronts simultaneously the paradox of the virtual as the very Real of Enjoyment. Joyce’s discussion of neurologically-based advances, which will soon give rise to a realm of pure Enjoyment—enabling people to “dial and focus” their experience (29), offering liberation from their normal constraints and finally giving them “what they want”—is presented in conspicuous parallel with George’s description of his own newfound liberty, his ability to go “everywhere” (15), to “know everything” (22), to have “all the money” he wants, not to mention “billions” of lovers. We have here the very “omnipotence” correlative to virtual reality, the ability “to change from one to another reality by the mere power of our thoughts” (*OB* 51), the freedom to be “everybody” (Mighton 22), overcoming the rigidity of Symbolic identities and mandates.

For George, of course, this experience is far from a purity of Enjoyment, reflecting rather a tragic distortion of virtual reality’s potential for liberation and fulfillment. This failure would seem conspicuously connected to the fact that his fantasy worlds are ultimately *impure*, still messily infused with “unsublated” remainders, painful memories which obsess him, losses
and traumas which derail him. The problem is that George’s is not a truly virtual reality, since
it fails to completely “sublate” these troubling kernels. His is a traumatized virtual, not yet
fully liberated, requiring further virtualization, perhaps via some of those neurological
interventions that Joyce describes, an erasure of those “unpleasant memories” (29) which
hinder total Enjoyment.

The George we encounter in Scene Four, sitting sadly in a bar, offers an apt picture of
melancholy according to the usual understanding, a fixation on the lost object, the inability to
extricate oneself from its hold, and the consequent devaluation of and disengagement from all
other (present) prospects. Yet looked upon “awry,” does not this scene encourage us to invert
the normal conception of melancholy? That is to say, what if the melancholic, as Žižek puts it,
“is not primarily the subject fixated on the lost object,” but rather “the subject who possesses
the object, but has lost his desire for it, because the cause that made him desire this object has
retreated and lost its efficiency” (HL 67-8)? Might we not understand the melancholy of this
scene as reflecting a symptom of virtualization, that is, not primarily as a fixation on what has
been traumatically lost but as a traumatic consequence of the very saturation that threatens
with the virtual, i.e., the melancholy inherent to the (over-)accessibility of the desired object?
We might ask just how many of George’s “billions” of lovers have been Joyce “herself”? Just
how many times has she already agreed to go home with him? (A billion?)

If Mighton’s play evokes the trauma of loss, it also invites us to contemplate the
sickening tedium and indeed the horror of having been everywhere and everybody, of knowing
everything, and of sleeping with a billion people a billion times. In the face of Joyce’s
enthusiasm for the prospects of virtualization (in its capacity to overwrite the traumatic), it
prompts us to consider the trauma of a virtualized reality, and to ask, as Žižek does, “will this
still be experienced as ‘reality’?” (OB 50). Here we might contemplate the Hegelian “night of
the world” from yet another angle. The multiplicity of George’s free-floating existence is at constant risk of tipping into a vapid, groundless insubstantiality, reflecting the virtual as “an insipid and shallow game in which events have a kind of ethereal pseudo-existence” (IR 53). Insofar as reality itself is “ontologically defined through the minimum of resistance” (OB 51), the utter accessibility inherent to a virtual realm (of “pure Enjoyment”) saps it of its very substance; life is here reduced, in Adrian Johnson’s words, to “a puppet theatre of dematerialized, shadowy pseudo-things deprived of genuine ontological heft” (237).

Yet it is precisely here that the preceding analysis introduces such a vital complication. If on the one hand the possible worlds opened up by the virtual are correlative to a “dematerialization” of reality and its deprival of “ontological heft,” we should resist the temptation to attribute this lack to the omission of some substantial Real, some primary density, some solid core of “true, hard, external reality” prior to illusion. The trauma of this “puppet theatre” is not to be found in its lack of “flesh-and-blood” substantiality—instead, the threat inherent to virtual reality is to be conceived vis-à-vis the erosion of the very virtual dimension upon which the solidity of our reality depends—that is to say, vis-à-vis the loss of the dimension of loss, the omission of the very spectral point of inaccessibility correlative to what we call the “flesh-and-blood.”

To put this another way (and with our previous discussion in mind), we should reflect that the Joyce lost by George “in the Real”—the “original” and “actual” Joyce—was herself never reducible to some tangible, flesh-and-blood entity. This lost Joyce, as Žižek would put it, was always-already “spectralized”; this Joyce was Joyce (for George) insofar as a spectral dimension emerged within her, a dimension correlative to (i.e., posited by) George’s passionate desire. In Lacanian terms, to love is to open up such a “gap” in the love-object, “a gap between the object’s positive properties and the agalma, the mysterious core of the
beloved” (PV 356). Love itself, in this sense, is like a type of rigid designation, “falling into” its own object: “the excess in the beloved, what, in the beloved, eludes my grasp, is the very place of the inscription of my own desire into the beloved object.” The “hard core” in the other to which love corresponds is a thing “reflexively posited by love itself,” and it is precisely through this non-symbolizable dimension in the other that love is so deeply imbricated with the symbolic (and with symbolic tensions). As Salecl puts it, “Love addresses that point in speech where the word fails” (192)—it targets that point in the other consubstantial with the “gap” opened up by the signifier. And it is in this dimension—a virtual dimension—that the substantial density of the “original” Joyce had, for George, subsisted.

This is to say, virtuality’s replacement of “actual” people with “spectral apparitions” must be understood vis-à-vis the virtualization that is always active in (and indeed constitutive of) our experience of the Other (person). And it is in this light that we can understand something of Žižek’s curious assertion that the key “problem” posed by virtuality is not that it replaces the real with the spectral, but rather that it is “not spectral enough” (PF 155). At stake here is a recognition of how the very substantial density of reality prior to virtualization was not innate to it (correlative to some fundamental hard core)—this “‘reality’ with which we were dealing always-already was virtualized” (IR 194), its density hinging (paradoxically) upon delicate symbolic mechanisms. If the Real of this “hard core,” in its very “beyond” of symbolization, is precisely a symbolic product, generated or intimated via the Symbolic itself, then what makes the virtual “unreal” is precisely the dissolution of this dimension, the “dimension of virtuality consubstantial with the symbolic order.”

To put this in the context of my initial thesis—and to put the latter in the context of virtual reality—what needs to be recognized is how the “unsublated” in George’s virtualized realm, far from undermining the pure pleasure that would be possible if not for trauma, is all
that enables George to evade trauma, that is, the trauma of a fully virtualized reality as “night
of the world.” The consummate irony consists in the fact that the erosion or “supervening” of
Symbolic rigidity, far from enabling a full actualization of desire, is correlative to an
elimination of that very spectral dimension which makes desire desire. The “saturation” of
which I have spoken is thus to be understood not simply in terms of the (over-)abundance of
opportunities for Enjoyment, but as a “saturation of the virtual space of symbolic fiction” (IR
190), i.e., of the space of fantasy on which our reality depends. (Recall here Chapter One’s
analysis of the “lack of the lack” and its consequences for the very stability of our
symbolically-regulated reality). We might ask, is not the true challenge which faces George in
this realm “between two deaths” the very enigma confronting desire amidst an increasingly
virtualized reality—that is, how to “succeed in reintroducing lack and scarcity into this
saturation” (IR 190)?

Yet we must be very careful here not to reduce the contention that reality is dependent
upon the dimension that eludes our grasp to a simple equation of desire with “not enjoying.”
The subtler point concerns the precise relationship between enjoyment and symbolic
fictions/effects—how the very enjoyment we derive from the objects of our desire is
intertwined with fantasies that are operative, producing the conditions for enjoyment, precisely
insofar as they remain fantasies, preserving a “minimal distance” from the reality they infuse.
To draw upon (and extend) the terms of Kripke, we could say that possible worlds are
operative within our own “normal” universe, infusing it with desire and making possible
enjoyment, precisely insofar as these possible worlds remain stipulated.

Scene Four of Mighton’s play provides an excellent example of this delicate infusion
of stipulated fantasies. Here, the flirtatious Joyce approaches George in a bar, and as they talk
over drinks George explains to her the metaphysics of his reality, asserting in direct language
that the two of them have numerous “other lives,” inhabiting simultaneously “an infinite number of possible worlds” (23). The interest of this scene lies in the nature of Joyce’s engagement with these worlds. She understands them in the Kripkean sense, as “stipulated”; for her they reflect language’s ability to evoke possible (imaginative) variations on present, actual reality. She is unaware that George’s language is positing the existence of its referent, that these other worlds are indeed for George (in Kripke’s terms) a type of existent “foreign country,” and that, in speaking of them he is also peering into them “as though through a telescope.” Yet as the scene aptly illustrates, it would be misleading to reduce the matter to a clear black and white opposition between the reality and the falsity of possible worlds.

George’s propositions and the language of this discussion ultimately produce a very real response in Joyce. Her engagement with these “stipulated” prospects generates fantasies which themselves determine the course and nature of her “actual” reality, arousing her to the extent that she instantly goes home with this new man.

The key point for Žižek is that enjoyment is rendered possible through a necessary fantasmatic support—it is reliant upon fantasies which are operative precisely insofar as they are stipulated. In this light, we can supplement Kripke’s somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term—i.e., for Kripke, to “stipulate” is to entertain in the imagination without asserting the real existence of a thing—with the more usual, dictionary definition of the term, to “demand or specify as part of a bargain or agreement” (OED). In Žižek’s framework, possible worlds are stipulated in both senses. They are a necessary ingredient of the sexual relationship, a constitutive part of the bargain. Yet these fantasies are also “stipulated” in the sense that they are operative strictly insofar as they are not actualized in the real, insofar as they remain fantasies. (Is it not revealing that George’s commerce with these possible worlds is linked to the onset of “puberty”?)
Joyce is clearly aroused by the fantasy of George’s inestimable sexual experience with “billions” of lovers, a fantasy which she can indulge in precisely insofar as all this talk is perceived as an imaginative excursion. George’s discussion also functions indirectly to de-realize and de-substantialize their present, actual situation, treating as fantasmatic its own sense of solidity and necessity. If his talk of possible worlds is on the one hand “mere talk,” it is nonetheless strongly performative, insofar as it announces (to her) a willingness to suspend the very reality of their situation, converting the “ontologically given” into something that one can easily fade in and out of. It is only partially true to say that she plays along because she thinks he is not serious—the very seriousness and intensity with which he posits the substantiality of these prospects is a necessary condition of their efficacy for this Joyce, insofar as it is interpreted as a serious commitment to the primacy of “stipulating.” Yet Joyce’s freedom to indulge in such stipulating, and to extract enjoyment from it, is juxtaposed with the postulated “real” of an actual, non-stipulated world. She can find enjoyment in daydreaming (“all the time”) and “forgetting herself” (40) on the condition that such daydreams are daydreams, fantasy-excursions against the background of a reliably sturdy Symbolic Other. The moment that George’s assertions cease to be interpretable as playful fantasies, held at a “minimal distance” from reality, they lose all their efficacy for Joyce: “Look that story was funny last night but …” (40).

From the inverse angle, we might speculate that much of the attraction of George’s talk consists precisely, for this Joyce, in the “perverse” fantasy of subjugation that it offers. Is not the metaphysical situation that he describes tantamount to a form of absolute penetration, that is, Joyce’s complete subjection to an omniscient gaze, positing access to her beyond the limitations of finite perception, a “pan-opticon” viewpoint which encapsulates the entirety of her possible permutations? Žižek is intent to point out how such fantasies offer a vital spectral
supplement vis-à-vis the destabilization that accompanies Joyce’s “late-capitalist” world, “selling things you can’t see or touch” (Mighton 39). Yet here again, indeed *a fortiori*, the efficacy of the fantasmatic is utterly dependent upon its “minimal distance.” Scene Thirteen of the play reveals how the very sorts of fantasies which may have functioned as a support for enjoyment become invasive impositions, horrifying derailments, when asserted “in the real.” George’s claim that his “infinite” love embraces her “in every world” (58), stripped now of its “stipulated” character, is perceived as a violent attack from which Joyce must flee: “Look, you’re scaring me. If you don’t get out, I’ll call the police” (59). Any (“perverse”) attraction that she may have found in the fantasy of being reduced to the object of George’s all-penetrating gaze dissolves instantly when this fantasy is brought onto the same plane as reality. To phrase this in Hegelian terms, the fantasy is operative as long as it remains “In-itself,” i.e., a merely stipulated, “disavowed” dimension of the attraction. In Scene Thirteen the formerly stipulated shifts to the level of “For-itself,” thereby negating its potential for arousal.

This same dynamic can of course be turned back on George himself. What better example is there of the efficacy of fantasies as stipulated than the infamous “male” fantasy of unrestricted potency and infinite sexual access, of having “billions” of lovers—a fantasy which the masculine subject must avoid actualizing, precisely in order to evade its hidden truth, i.e., the traumatic recognition that, in Lacan’s terms, “there is no sexual relationship.” As Žižek has repeatedly argued (particularly apropos pornography), the fantasy of unmitigated sexual access is also—indeed *primarily*—a fantasy of desiring such access, i.e., not simply the fantasy of *achieving it* but the fantasy of truly desiring *to* achieve it.19 The state of affairs articulated by George may easily serve as a fundamental male fantasy, the stipulated prospect of which increases (or makes possible) the subject’s enjoyment—yet does not the melancholia
we have observed in him (“The whole world could have disappeared and you would have just sat there” [39]) testify forcefully to the necessity of maintaining this fantasy as such?

For Žižek, it is precisely this shift—of the “In-itself” to the level of the “For-itself”—that threatens so imminently with the rise of virtual reality. Here, “the virtualization which was previously ‘in-itself’, a mechanism which operated implicitly, as the hidden foundation of our lives, now becomes explicit, is posited as such, with crucial consequences for ‘reality’ itself” (IR 195). Virtual reality’s tendency to “realize on the textual surface, the underlying fantasy—that is, to fill in the gap which separates the symbolic surface texture from its underlying fantasy” (PF 155)—deprives reality of its fundamental virtual dimension.20

In George, the complexity of whose behaviour and emotional response increases as the play nears its end, we can find an apt commentary on the ultimate effects of virtualization on the dynamic of desire, that is, how the latter is disrupted, derailed, transformed with the erosion of (symbolically-regulated) reality’s delicate balance. Looking closely at this character, what seems most unusual about him is the peculiar way in which “great intensity” (13) is paired with what appears to be an utterly detached reaction to his situation, indeed verging at times on indifference—the peculiar way in which the excessive George, the George whose passionate attachment to the object of his desire can rise to violence, oscillates with—or indeed shares the stage with—the disengaged George. We can find this peculiar combination directly reflected in Joyce’s seemingly contradictory reasons for breaking up with him. Interestingly, she objects simultaneously to the intensity of his preoccupation with her and to his seeming disengagement. The relationship involves both an overburdening sense of presence (“too claustrophobic” [57]) and lack (“always something missing”). George is too close and too far: “when you smile it’s aimed a million miles behind me.” His is a gaze that
simultaneously pushes too deeply into her, as though seeking directly to lay hold of that something in her “more than herself,” and a gaze that forever looks through her, as though not fully engaging with what’s there.

As the preceding discussion has explored, even regular (“non-pathological”) forms of love and desire involve (necessarily) a certain minimal distance or gap between the object at which love aims (the “something more” in the loved one) and the loved one as such—a distance which is correlative to the Symbolic and the minimal gap it asserts between occupant and Place. The gaze of love must exceed the (finite, particular) loved one, aiming at and embracing that something “in you more than yourself.” And we can add that this feature of the love-gaze is precisely what makes it desirable to the beloved. It is George’s gaze that Joyce comments upon as the spark of her own attraction to him, the “look” he gives her, the way in which he’s been “staring” (23) in the bar, a “desire-inspiring look” (Fink 92) which arouses passion precisely insofar as it reaches beyond the surface of Joyce as finite-material object, positing that “something more,” that “object-within-the-object,” “the unfathomable X in me that causes love” (HL 44).

Yet here again—and a fortiori—we must observe the delicate balance of “In-itself” and “For-itself,” correlative to attraction and repulsion. If the gaze can inspire our own desire insofar as it posits this “X” within us, it may also incite the opposite response insofar as it seeks to reify this kernel, to seize upon it directly. That is to say, if on the one hand we delight in the (stipulated) fantasy of this “something more” in us deserving of love, this desirable kernel correlative to and implied by the love-gaze as its object, on the other hand we may recoil from this same gaze insofar as it directly objectifies, reifies this kernel of our being, that is, insofar as it attempts directly to seize upon this thing within us—as though it were an entity to be attained. Here, the objet a is no longer an effect that accompanies us, not something that
is reflected in us, glimpsed as Schein; not a thing to be enjoyed as it emerges through congress with us, but a reified object to be grasped and extracted from us. The collapse of this “minimal distance” between ourselves and this object posited in us, the conflation of loved one and objet a, is what Lacan aims at with the term hainamoration, memorably phrased in this way: “I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than yourself—the objet petit a—I mutilate you” (XI 263). As Žižek explains, “If the beloved person detains the object, that can be a very perilous situation indeed” (HL 44). It is in this context “that finding oneself in the position of the beloved is so violent a discovery, even traumatic”—as though “something obscene, intrusive is being forced upon us.”

In Scene Fifteen, George terrifies the new Joyce whom he approaches upon a solitary beach by insisting that the two of them were “married once” (64), and when this Joyce resists the identity he attempts to thrust upon her—i.e., when she resists being Joyce—he violently grabs hold of her, indifferent to her screams for help. It is here that George’s love for Joyce shifts to hainamoration, and through this scene we can also understand the way in which hainamoration reflects a “psychotic” dynamic. As Žižek explains, drawing upon Lacan’s Seminar III, the basic gesture of psychosis is its conflation of the word and the thing it names: “a psychotic treats ‘words as things’; in his universe, words fall into things” (IR 196). What is George’s hainamoration if not a psychotic collapsing of the distance between the woman on the beach and her symbolic Place, a “short circuit” between signifier and thing? Here, the signifier (“Joyce”) falls into the thing; the symbolic Place falls into its occupant, as though it were a thing “detained” within the woman, a thing he might forcibly extract.

Yet if the assault on the Joyce at the beach reflects the intensity of George’s psychotic conflation, his behaviour in this part of the play would also seem, paradoxically, to reflect a peak of disengagement. One of the most unusual features of this character is the seeming
casual ease he displays prior to the violence (recalling anecdotes about the brain, etc.). And how are we to reconcile the violent passion of the beach episode with his highly detached treatment of it only moments later? “It’s not very important” (67), he tells the Doctor who questions him. “Have you ever imagined killing someone? It’s about as important as that.” Carrying his metaphysics to its natural conclusion, George treats his present reality as a merely “possible” world, not the world, not a world where actions have any kind of lasting, decisive significance. Its status is on par with that of a (“mere”) symbolic narrative.

Is not this detachment strangely inconsistent with the intensity of his attachment to the object-Joyce only moments previously? Indeed—yet as Žižek emphasizes, it is precisely this duality that defines psychosis. That is, we find psychosis precisely in the odd pairing of, on the one hand, a tendency toward conflation of the Symbolic and the Real, and on the other, what may seem its “inherent obverse” (IR 196), a suspension of Symbolic engagement, a distancing of the subject from the reality normally consubstantial with the Symbolic. Psychosis “involves the external distance the subject maintains towards the symbolic order”—in it, “the subject is confronted with an ‘inert’ signifying chain, one that does not seize him performatively and does not affect his subjective position of enunciation: towards this chain, the subject maintains a ‘relation of exteriority’.” We find in George an acute demonstration of this psychotic interrelation (indeed, interdependence) between passionate attachment and detachment. The violence of Scene Fourteen epitomizes the intensity of an absolute reification of Joyce’s “agalma” (i.e., of the kernel of being correlative to the signifier “Joyce”), while his sudden indifference to the event in Scene Fifteen accentuates a disconnection from any substantiability, a suspension of engagement with any solid, authoritative Symbolic Other in which his acts are registered.
The deeper point to be made here concerns the relationship between this psychotic
dynamic and the impending virtualization of reality. The psychosis we have identified in
George comports precisely with what Žižek considers the two interdependent features of our
response to virtual reality, the way it couples “direct immersion” with “disengagement.” On
the one hand, the virtualized worlds into which we travel are utterly unimportant, unreal and
inconsequential, compelling from us no Symbolic commitment: the “subject maintains
towards the computerized virtual universe the distance which suspends the dimension of
performativity, of symbolic engagement, of being obliged by one’s word” (IR 195). Yet this
disengagement is paradoxically paired with its seeming obverse: “The other side of distance is
thus a kind of direct immersion into the ‘virtual’ universe” (IR 196), an extreme intensity of
investiture in experiences more “real” than anything I can experience “in the real.”

We can bring this section to a conclusion by emphasizing the radical opposition this
perspective establishes with a dominant “post-humanist” thrust in contemporary cyberspace
theorizing, an opposition that we find set up and illuminated by George’s own adventures.
“When I believed I had a soul, I was imprisoned in myself” (66), he explains to the Doctor
toward the play’s end. “I felt I had to be consistent among my lives. But now I realize they’re
all different and I can enjoy them all. If there’s a unity that makes them all me, I don’t know
what it is” (66-7). This passage subtly evokes the position taken by many cyberspace theorists
in recent years—most notably, N. Katherine Hayles in How We Became Posthuman—
emphasizing the virtual’s capacity to erode symbolic restrictions, mandates and identities. We
have here, as Žižek puts it, a “‘deconstructionist’ deployment of the liberating potentials of
cyberspace” (OB 34), that is, its ability to “render palpable in our everyday experience the
deconstructionist ‘decentred subject’” (OB 25). The very fluidity and multiplicity
characteristic of George’s experience reflects a highly desirable “blurring of the limits of the Cartesian ego, its … attachment to the biological body” (OB 34). According to this view:

[O]ne should endorse the ‘dissemination’ of the unique Self into a multiplicity of competing agents, … a plurality of self-images without a global coordinating centre, which is operative in cyberspace, and disconnect it from pathological trauma—playing in virtual spaces enables me to discover new aspects of ‘me’, a wealth of shifting identities, of masks without a ‘real’ person behind, and thus to experience the ideological mechanism of the production of Self, the immanent violence and arbitrariness of this production/construction. (OB 25)

Yet interestingly, directly after endorsing the multiplicity proffered by a virtualized universe, the protagonist of Mighton’s play “starts to cry” (67), his tears flowing in perfect synch with the water that begins to run down the walls of the room—an evocation of the trauma that encroaches with the threatened dissolution of a stable Symbolic Other. George’s claim of enhanced Enjoyment, if not already so patently incongruous in this character marked by desperation, melancholy and acute suffering, is directly belied by the sobbing. Yet furthermore, has not the play aptly illustrated how the virtual’s supposed liberation from “Cartesian” constraints never comes off without a remainder, i.e., how it finds its “speculative correlative” in the subject’s forceful (indeed violent) attachment to a posited Real, the substantial density of which would appear to rise in direct relation to the increasing immaterial, insubstantial quality of his reality? Do not George’s professions of liberation from the (Symbolically-regulated) Self only accentuate his patent lack of liberty, that is, the fact that he seems incapable of experimenting with a multiplicity of lives, the fact that, amidst this universe of infinite possibility he is indeed all the more locked into a single obsessive fixation, a passionate attachment which, as I have argued, has the effect of forcefully substantializing a
particular root-self, grounding him all the more insistently in one world? Is not the trauma (as opposed to freedom and enjoyment) correlative to the virtual’s “supervening” of Symbolic limits and identities most vividly reflected in George’s death-driven insistence on returning to and perpetually repeating a traumatic loss?²³

With this in mind, and before turning our attention to the play’s conclusion, we might risk yet another “anamorphic shift,” this time concerning our own enduring and indeed escalating fascination with this notion of brains-in-vats. Has not the brain-in-a-vat become, in its various formations and reconfigurations (from Mighton’s play to films such as The Matrix, eXistenZ, Total Recall, Vanilla Sky, etc.) one of the fundamental fantasies of the cyberspace era? The relevance of the notion seems obvious. With the expansion of science and technology, the idea of keeping a human being “alive” (in some manner) despite the perishing of its bodily support seems an increasingly plausible prospect. In another sense, as our virtual technologies move closer and closer to eliminating the distinctions between virtuality and reality, we find increasingly compelling the notion that our “real” reality could itself be a virtual illusion, that we could already be mere brains-in-vats, “dreaming” our reality from a laboratory shelf. Are not the speculations of detective Wilson most descriptive of our own reaction to this play: “What if we were in a tank like that? We’d never know it” (33).

Yet as our attraction to such science-fictions escalates, a Žižekian analysis prompts us to “look awry” at the operations of this fantasy and its dynamic within our contemporary reality. What is meant in Žižek (as in Lacan) by a “fundamental” fantasy is not simply a prevalent and popular image or scenario, an imaginative extension of our “normal” reality, but a fantasy that serves in some sense as the very underpinning of that reality. Speaking in reference to the The Matrix, Žižek concludes one of his seminal works on popular culture
(Enjoy Your Symptom!) by proposing a fascinating (if bewildering) “dialectical reversal” of the film’s ontological dynamic:

We are not dreaming in VR that we are free agents in our everyday common reality, while we are actually passive prisoners in the prenatal fluid exploited by the matrix; it is rather that our reality is that of the free agents in the social world we know, but in order to sustain this situation, we have to supplement it with the disavowed, terrible, impending fantasy of being passive prisoners in the prenatal fluid exploited by the matrix. (ES 231)

A re-phrasing of this inversion à la Mighton’s play might go something like this: the “truth” of Possible Worlds is not that George is an aching, inert, subjugated pound of flesh, merely dreaming the multiplicity and infinite scope of his existence from within the confines of a scientific beaker. It is not that the ever-shifting flux confronting his perception is merely an illusory dream-world concealing the traumatic Real, i.e., the fact that the true kernel of his being lies elsewhere, traumatically severed from him, lingering painfully as an encased and utterly passive object-instrument of the (scientific) Other. The “truth,” for Žižek, is to be found in the way the very fantasy of the latter operates as a fundamental support for the reality that is the former. This is to say, existence amidst the multiplicity and ever-shifting flux of experience that increasingly constitutes our own “normal” reality (with its increasing virtualization and erosion of Symbolic regulation) can be sustained only if supplemented by the very (monstrous, traumatic) fantasy of such a Real.

If a full explication of this reversal and its implications is beyond the scope of the present analysis, we can easily note here the echo of our previous discussion: in opposition to the notion of the Symbolic as cutting us off from the Real, and of Symbolic fantasy as an “illusion” covering over the trauma of this separation/loss, what is emphasized is rather the
way in which this image—i.e., of a thing *from which* I have been cut off, and in (re)union with
which I would (re)discover the true kernel of my being—serves as a fundamental *support* of
the Symbolic fantasy, establishing the dynamic through which it holds itself together. In a
more specific sense, this re-conception emphasizes the ways in which, for Žižek, the
increasing “liberty” (from Cartesian constraints, from Symbolic identities and mandates)
associated with our “postmodern,” “post-human” condition, is always and necessarily
supported by its “speculative correlative”—I can maintain my existence amidst the
destabilization accompanying a dissolution of stable Symbolic orders precisely insofar as this
liberty is counterbalanced with its *perverse* inversion (in which I see myself reduced to base
matter, “an utter instrumentalized passivity” [*ES* 231])—a fantasy which, insofar as it
buttresses the existing order of being, ultimately *prevents* me from achieving liberation in any
real sense.

Or to put this in yet another light, this grotesque centrepiece of Mighton’s play (and
George’s universe), this excremental lump of mute, oozing matter in the dish, loathsome in its
fleshy putrescence, attracting flies—this glob presents us with the necessary and inevitable
obverse of a totally virtualized *cogito*. Žižek is fond of developing this point through reference
to Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*:

[I]n a high-class restaurant, the waiter recommends to his customers the best
suggestions from the daily menu (‘Today, our tournedos is really special!’, etc.),
yet what the customers get when they have made their choice is a dazzling colour
photo of the meal on a stand above the plate, and on the plate itself a loathsome
excremental paste-like lump. That is the central antinomy of our ‘postmodern’
experience of reality: the virtualization of reality always produces an excremental
remainder of the real which resists virtualization. (*IR* 197)
Crucial here is the specification of this eminently real substance, which, in the visceral force of its material presence, resists sublation by the virtual, as a product of the latter. What is perhaps most important for our purposes here, and what I will develop further in the following sections and subsequent chapters, is how such an inversion reflects a crucial aspect of the Lacanian and Žižekian “traversal” of fantasy. What if the true awakening consists not (simply) in the dissolution of fantasies or appearances, their exposure as mere illusion concealing the Real beneath, but rather in the inverse, in the exposure of the “Real beneath” as fantasy, a fantasmatic dimension that sustains our existence within the reality of appearances?

Before exploring further the Lacanian-Žižekian “traversal,” we should note how the preceding analysis of Possible World’s engagement with virtualization, specifically the latter’s erosion of distinct orders and Symbolic rigidity, can help us to position the play in relation to other contemporary discussions of “transformative” experience in the theatre. Erika Fischer-Lichte, in The Transformative Power of Performance, identifies the theatrical medium’s capacity to thrust its live audiences into a state of experiential “crisis” as a crucial transformative gesture in contemporary times. Now, “at the turn of the twenty-first century,” amidst an “ever growing aestheticization of one’s daily surroundings,” a predominantly naturalistic theatre is increasingly less adapted to the task of radically transforming its subjects (195). We should look instead to forms that effect the rupture and discontinuity she associates with “perceptual multistability”—theatrical experiences placing the perceiving subject upon “the threshold between two modes of perception” (89), creating a state of liminality and instability, a situation of “betwixt and between” (148)—“in a nutshell, inducing a state of crisis” (95). Such forms, through the “collision of frames and the destabilization of perception and self,” are “much more appropriate” in enabling the subject to “re-create him- or herself
anew.” We can find Fischer-Lichte’s emphasis on such “ruptures” reflected in key contemporary theorists of aesthetics and politics such as Jacques Rancière, who speaks of a “recasting of the distribution of the sensible” (63) correlative to a truly radical art. Transformation is no longer to be effected through “the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world”—we must seek it instead in art that reconfigures our “given perceptual forms,” rupturing “the sensible framework defined by a network of meanings.”

To experience Possible Worlds is to find oneself frequently “betwixt and between,” oscillating not simply between different worlds and realities within the dramatic fiction but also, and more fundamentally, between “orders of representation” and “orders of presence.” Drawing upon David Bordwell’s terms, if spectatorial perception of narrative-based artworks can be thought of in terms of ongoing hypothesis-formation and testing, Mighton’s play demands that these cognitive-perceptual activities be extended to the level of the medium itself. Encountering theatrical phenomena that do not comport readily with our existing schemata, we are compelled continually to evaluate and reformulate our hypotheses about the basic relations between fiction/illusion and reality/presence at work here. Like the detective Berkley, we must “consider every possibility” (27), and as the play continues to thwart our cognitive-perceptual impulses—directed toward envisioning what we are given in terms of an ontologically consistent world, unified by causal and temporal principles—we are susceptible to a “crisis” not unlike Berkley’s own (the detective comes close to a break-down in the face of phenomena that simply don’t comport with his symbolic conceptions).

A brief analysis of Scene Four will attest to this liminal positioning of the spectator. This scene, in which Joyce, appearing for the second time in our experience, approaches George in a crowded bar, begins by violating a most basic spectatorial assumption, i.e., that a
character will maintain his or her identity from one appearance to the next. While we perceive here the very same actress that we met in Scene Two, all of the play’s signifying elements work actively to confound an identification of her first and second appearances. Unlike the reserved, resistant, and somewhat prudish Joyce from Scene Two, the woman we meet here is flirty and assertive; she sells stocks, whereas the woman we know as Joyce is a committed neurologist; and while George had seemed extremely interested in the Joyce from Scene Two, he initially appears indifferent to the woman in Scene Four. Knowing nothing (at this point) of George’s metaphysical predicament or of Joyce’s trans-world multiplicity, and unable thus to explain why the “same” woman whom we met in Scene Two seems here an entirely different person, we must search for a way to resolve the perceptual “crisis.” To this end we may draw upon our cognitive schemata (developed through previous experiences with contemporary theatre) and hypothesize that the convention of double-casting is at work here. Yet the very moment we feel assured in confirming this hypothesis, George himself impugns it by asserting the character’s continuity (“What’s my name?”—“Joyce”), prompting us to hypothesize some new explanation of the precise relation between theatrical medium and fictional narrative. The destabilizing impact of this scene is linked to the “speculative” twist it accomplishes apropos the medium. It surprises us first by seemingly excluding the actress’s ontological continuity from the representational level, encouraging us to regard it as an extra-diegetic element, only to suddenly and incongruously assert the signifying value of this element, taking it to the letter, enacting the consistency of the entity beneath the appearances. Elements which, in our traditional schemata for double-casting, are to be relegated to the dimension of enactment, are here reflected into the enacted, rendered a property of the actress’s “distinct” fictional referents, signifying something on account of which they are not fully separable from one another. In short, if in Bert States’s terms theatrical perception is
always “binocular”—one eye seeing semiotically and the other phenomenally—Mighton’s play seems intent at times to make us go cross-eyed.

In this light, George’s susceptibility to trans-world migration offers a strong analogy for the state of liminality induced by experiences of “perceptual multistability” in the theatre. “There’s a moment, when my consciousness shifts,” he explains, “but after a few moments I become adjusted … I take on that new life” (40). His shifting here reflects the spectator’s own status as “a wanderer between two worlds” (Fischer-Lichte 88), oscillating between competing orders of perception, temporarily “stabilizing” one or the other through cognitive-perceptual focus. And as George begins losing his ability to “tune” himself to a single world at a time—as occurs when his Joyces commence shifting identities in mid-scene (like in Scene Eleven), and when settings becomes incongruously infused with elements from other realms (most strikingly in Scene Sixteen, when the water from the “real-world” tank “starts to run down the walls of the room” [67])—his experience reflects our own “crisis” amidst increasing perceptual rupture and discontinuity, our inability to stabilize a given order. As Fischer-Lichte explains, though the spectator may “try repeatedly to adjust his perception anew,” he will soon “notice that the shift happens to him regardless of his intentions and that he is thrust into a state between the two orders without wanting it or being able to prevent it” (88-9). Most potently, just as George’s increasing and uncontrolled shifting between domains is accompanied by the erosion of rules and norms guiding his conduct, so the “crisis” of the theatrical spectator, for Fischer-Lichte, transfers him or her to a state “between all fixed rules, norms and orders” (95). We find here a crucial “transformative” dimension of contemporary theatre. Insofar as those structures which determine and maintain the rigidity of our Symbolic realities “serve as regulators for our behaviour and actions,” their erosion or collapse results in
a productive “destabilization of our perception of the world, ourselves and others,” and a
correlative “shattering of the norms and rules that guide our behaviour” (95).

Yet if the collision and oscillation of frames is clearly central to our experience of
Possible Worlds, is it really in this destabilization of strict orders, and in the crisis induced
through “perceptual multistability,” that we can find the play’s last word on transformation?
Indeed, does not the preceding analysis of George’s predicament, apropos the supposed
“liberation” correlative to virtualization’s erosion of rigidity, prompt us also to interrogate,
complicate or in fact re-conceive the dynamic of aesthetic “crisis” vis-à-vis contemporary
subjectivity? Is not our “late-capitalist” universe itself increasingly characterized by such a
state of “crisis,” and if so, is not the true “transformative” gesture to be found in an
extraneation of the ways in which we support and sustain our Symbolic reality amidst such an
erosion of regimenting frames? Acknowledging that a full consideration of theatre’s
transformative capacities in contemporary times would require a much more careful analysis
(Fischer-Lichte’s work in particular is deserving of far more comprehensive scrutiny than the
dimensions of this chapter allow), I will now turn to the final scenes of Possible Worlds in
order to explore how the “traversal of fantasy” staged here can help us re-conceive the
dynamics at stake in transformation—as well as the role of love and desire therein.

From the perspective of “perceptual multistability,” do these scenes not appear to
shrink away from the “crises” which the preceding theatrical experience has so often provoked
and played upon, re-establishing (to a large degree) a coherent relationship between orders of
reality and fantasy, presence and representation? Do they not ultimately dispel our sense of
liminal instability, permitting us retroactively to order the play’s appearances within defined
and reliable frames? In the penultimate scene, in which the detectives Berkley and Wilson
have finally solved the mystery of the missing brain, we are able to confirm that the previous
scenes between George and Joyce were indeed fantasies conceived from the interior of George’s vat, “mere” illusions in contrast with the reality to which we believe ourselves to have returned. We are here introduced to the “actual” Joyce, not merely a variation in George’s imagination but the “thing itself,” of which the preceding Joyces had been variations. Then again, our perceptual experience in this scene is by no means straightforward. The actress playing Joyce is here charged with the strange task of making appear the Real beyond her former appearances, and the paradox of our experience in the theatre, of course, is that this “thing itself” is ontologically identical to the former Joyce-appearances. When the real Joyce at last comes on stage to be told of her husband’s condition, what appears before us is fundamentally the very same thing that we beheld in all the other (“virtual”) scenes.

This ontological identity in the theatre between the appearances and the “thing itself” (beyond appearances) serves to illuminate something vital about the “traversal” at stake here. Rather than a movement from phenomenal appearance to a deeper level of the Real (a substantial density beneath), what this theatrical moment demonstrates, we could say, is rather a loss of the latter dimension. What dissolves is not, primarily, the dimension of appearance/fantasy which had concealed (distorted, substituted for) the Real, but the very appearance of such a Real (beyond appearances). This is to say, what distinguishes this incarnation of Joyce is that the appearance it supports is no longer defined by (divided from itself by) a negativity. What the actress primarily “stands in” for in this scene is something which has ceased to “stand in” for something.27 In Žižek’s terms, she is here an object that has “fallen out” of the Symbolic economy, a “leftover” that persists outside George’s fantasy-frame—we get precisely the same object, yet what is missing is the Symbolic dynamic which had introduced into the appearance a dimension more than appearance.28 To draw upon the Hegelian term, is not the peculiar quality of this moment intimately linked to a “double
negation”? What is negated, in this Joyce, is precisely the negative dimension which had come to define the other Joyces—the way in which, through George’s Symbolic economy, they had “appeared to appear.”

Crucially, what is at stake here is by no means a simple return to “reality,” that is, to a regular, “actual” Joyce in a regular, “actual” world. What needs to be understood, as Žižek emphasizes, is how such a remainder (which “falls out” of the fantasy-frame) “materializes the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other” (ES 8)—i.e., how the dissolution of a Real beyond appearances corresponds to an exposure of the gap inherent to reality, its contingency and inconsistency, its “non-all” status.

To explore this inversion more precisely, and to understand its implications apropos love and desire, we can look to the play’s final scene. If, as the present analysis has asserted, *Possible Worlds* engages with and explores some troubling prognostications for future possible worlds, what are we to make of this scene, in which George and Joyce are enjoying some peaceful moments together on a beach, talking quietly in each others’ arms of present happiness and fulfilment to come? How does this seeming reunion and reconciliation with the love-object resonate and signify within the context of our discussion of desire and sublimation?

Perhaps the key to this scene is to be sought in its most fascinating and memorable feature, the enigmatic flashing light that appears to the characters, “Out there [in the sea] … blinking on and off” (74). The appearance of this simple light on the horizon comes infused with intimations. The brains in the Scientist’s collections had each been hooked up to a small light, the occasional flashing of which was supposed to represent an attempt at communication by the subject, an expression of some desire. When the brain of George is recovered from among the Scientist’s things, it too is attached to a light: “There’s a light that flashes
“occasionally,” describes Berkley, “but we don’t know what it means” (70). What thus makes the light in the final scene of the play so enigmatic is its direct correspondence to George’s own light, the light which, in the absence of all identifying features, testifies to or “represents” the subject-George within this mute encased mass, “signifying” his desire as such. Here again, those upon the beach who look upon the blinking light “don’t know what it means,” and though it temporarily subsides, it reappears as darkness begins to fall on the play: “Far away, in the darkness, a small light blinks on and off ...” (76).

If there are many ways to interpret this blinking light and many symbolic meanings to attribute to it, we should note first how its very formal dynamic condenses much of what we’ve been speaking about throughout this analysis. Specifically, we find in this scene a quite perfect presentation of the Lacanian dialectic of view and gaze. This obscure spot in the picture, this impenetrable blink within George’s field of vision, is also George himself. It is an enigmatic point within the subject’s frame—a point of absolute strangeness and non-transparency—which is nonetheless directly correlative to the subject; its appearance (within this world) establishes an “impossible” dynamic in which George, so to speak, is inscribed within the very picture he looks upon—comes across himself, his own objective-correlative. And it is precisely in this uncanny point where the picture, so to speak “looks back at me,” that we find the Lacanian gaze.30

The basic formal dynamic at work here—whereby the frame itself is attached to a particular point or element within its own content, and whereby, through “a kind of abyssal inversion, the envelope itself is encased by its interior” (ES 15)—recalls the “short circuit” between frame and content discussed earlier apropos the “logic of the signifier,” where the signifier “falls into” the signified. And more generally, I have emphasized throughout this discussion the paradoxical interdependent relationship between the subject’s reality and this
point within its field of vision to which the subject itself is correlative. Yet how precisely are we to understand this dynamic in the context of the final scene? What light does this point of light shed on this dynamic, and what are we to make of George’s relation to this place of the “gaze” within the picture?

Perhaps what makes this final scene so striking is its contrast with our previous encounter with George, his conversation with the Doctor following his assault on Joyce. That scene, as we have discussed, had seemed to mark the protagonist’s traumatic awakening to the “truth” of his situation (i.e., that “There is only one world” [67], a world in which his brain is “in a case”), his recognition of the fantasmatic status of these possible worlds and the commencement of the literal dissolution of this fantasy realm (“Water starts to run down the walls of the room”). In this context, the final scene might violate our expectations by failing to show us what we anticipate, i.e., the full repercussions of this revelation. Does it not appear as something of a reversion, a return to some point of stability prior to the fantasy’s dissolution, a perhaps momentary escape into the comforts of memory or imagination—a fantasized harmony, protecting against the truth of George’s actual condition? Yet if on first glance it has the appearance of a reversion to fantasy, a comforting intervention of fantasy in the final moments of George’s life, we might also read it as staging (in Lacan’s terms) a traversal of the fantasy, extending rather than shrinking back from the processes initiated in the previous scene.

Specifically, this scene effects a “traversal of the fantasy” insofar as it stages what Lacan would term a loss of the loss. If on one hand, George (fantasmatically) “regains” Joyce in this scene, his imagination permitting him to escape into a peaceful finale with her on the beach, it also stages the loss of the lost Joyce—that is, the loss of Joyce as lost. The dead version of Joyce, as George has repeatedly reminded us, met her early and tragic end (thereby
becoming for George a fantasy of the “lost object”) by swimming out too far in the sea. George’s repeated and pregnant references to this particular beach on which the final scene takes place, his peculiar fixation upon it and his desire throughout the play to return to it (“It’s not easy to get there. You have to climb out over some rocks …” [50]), function to link it directly with this tragic loss of his loved one. And does not this final scene stage a reversal of that loss? Here, Joyce does not swim out to the light (“out too far”), is not lost, does not become an inaccessible spectre but remains on the beach with George. And the crucial correlative of this loss of the loss is the fact that the very gap or void in George’s Symbolic reality is no longer “plugged,” covered over by the sublime “lost object.” This blinking light—this enigmatic “stain” obscuring the picture, this point within it which “makes no sense”—is correlative to the point of lack in the Other (his Symbolic reality), a lack previously concealed by the fantasy-object’s fascinating presence. This scene marks George’s exposure to this lack or gap, revealed and opened up when the fantasy concealing it is “traversed.”

To return to the terms of our previous discussion, we can understand the formal dynamic at stake here in reference to the “feminine” mode in Lacanian sexuation—and it is also here that we can begin to understand Lacan’s assertion, developed especially in Seminar XX, that the feminine, far from denoting some substantiality resistant to or exceeding the (masculine-paternal) Symbolic order, undermines it precisely insofar as it is “submitted to the phallic function.” If we find the masculine dynamic in George’s persistent “passionate attachment” to (and ontologization of) a Beyond of the phenomenally given, a sublime Real exceeding symbolization and irradiating its stand-ins—an attachment which, as my analysis has demonstrated, functions precisely to preserve George’s reality and Symbolic identity—this final scene, conversely, presents a “feminine” dynamic, in which the place (of inconsistency, gap or limit) usually filled in by the mirage of a substantial Real, is exposed in
its emptiness. In this enigmatic stain, George is exposed to the gap customarily concealed by this mirage, the void of which the sublime Thing, in its “elevated glitter, Schein, is a mere secondary positivization” (TN 38). We encounter the “feminine,” as Žižek explains, precisely in “this structure of the limit that precedes what may or may not lie in its Beyond” (ME 151)—that is, not in some mysterious part of Woman that resists integration into the Symbolic, but precisely in the relinquishing of this reference to a substantial Outside or Beyond of the Symbolic.³²

Yet if the final scene of Mighton’s play, rather than a fantasized escape from the horror of George’s impending death, reflects rather a type of “second death”—that is, a relinquishing of the very (Symbolic) fantasy that had held George’s being together beyond the death of his physical body—it also renders clear the positive (indeed sublime) aspect of such a “traversal.” If it is true that the Symbolic fantasy itself is what holds the subject together, affording it a degree of reality and consistency against the backdrop of the “night of the world,” we must emphasize, on the other hand, that “traversing the fantasy” is precisely an end-goal of psychoanalysis, a positive outcome of the psychoanalytic cure. To traverse the fantasmatic support that had structured and lent stability to our reality is also to open the possibility of reconfiguring the very coordinates of that reality. The play, in my reading of it, has revealed above all else the illusory character of the supposed freedom and possibility awaiting George in his multiform realm, identifying “fantasy” with that which prevents him, ultimately, from ever really travelling somewhere new; it is “fantasy” on account of which George’s worlds have remained fundamentally the same. We find here the supreme irony that only the traversal of fantasy can really open the space of possibility—that is, of possible worlds beyond the present order of being. “Traversing the fantasy,” in this light, does not eliminate the sense of
possibility usually associated with “fantasy”; rather, as the play’s closing line asserts, it is this traversal alone that opens the possibility of truly going “Everywhere” (76). 

If Possible Worlds has accentuated “sublime” things, things beyond grasp and indeed beyond what the structure of our brain is capable of handling—things for which (as Berkley puts it) it “can’t even form the right kind of thoughts” (60)—its final scene does indeed represent a “desublimation,” reverting to the simplest of images, two people sharing a moment at seaside. Yet is there not something sublime to be found, paradoxically, in this very gesture of desublimation? We have in this scene what Žižek has called a “downward synthesis”: a “reduction of the representative content to the lowest imaginable level” (TN 50). The power of such a gesture resides not (simply) in its accentuation of those sublime things which preceded, i.e., in the contrast (the “ridiculous, extreme discord”) it effects between the infinite, the astonishing, the otherworldly, and the finite, the regular, the daily. More fundamentally, at stake here is a “change in the logic of the Sublime” (TN 51). Downward synthesis evokes the way in which the sublime dimension beyond symbolization and symbolic conception finds its objective-correlative in the very self-division of this mundane picture. Here, the division between the mundane and the sublime Beyond is reflected into the mundane as its own point of self-difference or non-coincidence. We find sublimity here not in the reference to some Beyond of the image, some unfathomable other to which the image gestures, but in the rendering of the “gap itself” (TN 51), that by virtue of which the picture is “non-all.” This blinking light in George’s horizon of vision marks the point where the very difference or tension between “normal” (symbolically-regulated) reality and the infinite Beyond of possible worlds—the substantial infinity beyond the phenomenal appearance—is reflected into his phenomenal realm.
And as this scene aptly illustrates, such a traversal is by no means an elimination of love in its sublime dimension, a reduction of the loved one to her “mere” appearances, an acceptance of these mundane appearances as “all there really is.” If on the one hand, George’s traversal involves a desublimation of the love-object (a displacement of Joyce from the “dignity of the Thing”), we should recognize here what Žižek considers Lacan’s “ultimate lesson” concerning sublimation: “in a way, true sublimation is exactly the same as desublimation” (OB 41). If Mighton’s final scene illustrates a “traversal of the fantasy,” it also accomplishes a shift in the logic of sublimity in love—a shift we will continue to examine in the chapters ahead. What this scene gestures to is the difference between a “masculine” mode—that is, love as a “bad infinity” of metonymic desire, propelling us on an infinite search from world to world, obsessed with that which lies behind appearances—and a “feminine” mode, in which the infinity of “possible worlds” is made to appear—rendered accessible—through love itself.

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1 For Žižek’s discussion of the descriptivism/antidescriptivism debate, see SO 89-98, and LA 103.
2 As Žižek puts it, “is not love itself the supreme example of the ‘enigmatic term’? It refers by definition to an unknowable X, to the je ne sais quoi that makes me fall in love …” (PD 73)
3 For a discussion of this understanding of sublimation, see for instance Chapter VIII of Lacan’s Seminar VII, “The object and the thing.”
4 Apropos this “night of the world,” Žižek is fond of quoting the following passage from Hegel:
   The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful. (in TS 29-30)
See also TS 154: the “night of the world” is “the self-withdrawal, the absolute contraction of subjectivity, the severing of its links with ‘reality’.”
5 Is there not a certain irony in this speech about the arm? If on one level the passage gestures to the utter unreality of George’s condition, his present subsistence within an illusory dream-world, deprived both of his bodily reality and of reality itself, is it not here that George experiences his own “reality” in a most vivid, profound way? Is it not at this moment of acutely experiencing his division and
incompletion (in pain, wrought with loss, “sitting down and holding his head”)—that George’s experience is most real?

6 See also Žižek’s discussion in FA 28.

7 The “essential dimension of desire,” states Lacan in Seminar VII, is to be found in the fact that “it is always desire in the second degree, desire of desire” (14). Here again, the reversal consists in grasping the negative in its positive dimension, that is, in recognizing “in what first appeared as a ‘condition of impossibility’”—i.e., as an obstacle to the subject’s completion—the very “condition of possibility of our ontological consistency” (FT 70).

8 To conceive the dynamic from this angle is not to imply, of course, that there was no “real” Joyce prior to George’s submersion in this universe of endless reappearances, but rather to emphasize how the lost object always assumes its precise contours retroactively, how the specific Joyce of this Joyce emerges après-coup, constituted as such in the very gesture of loss—or as Hegel would put it, how she “comes to be by being left behind.”

9 For a more thorough examination of the notion of the death drive, and Žižek’s particular perspective on it, see the third and fifth chapters of this dissertation.

10 Here, the basic lesson of Lacanian sublimation—i.e., regarding the objet a as “mere” appearance, not a substantial Property but a spectral effect beyond what an entity is “in reality,” an effect generated when the entity assumes the place of the Real—is to be supplemented with its seeming obverse, that is, the paradox of the Real itself as appearance, a spectral dimension constitutive of (“mere”) phenomenal realities.

11 As is apparent here, “represent the subject” takes on for Lacan a different sense than what we might expect from these terms in common usage. Žižek’s discussion in FT 21-27 (from which I draw here) provides excellent clarification: “a signifier (S1) represents for another signifier (S2) its absence, its lack $, which is the subject. The crucial point here is that in a signifier’s dyad, a signifier is never a direct complement to its opposite but always represents (gives body to) its possible absence: the two signifiers enter a ‘differential’ relationship only via the third term, the void of their possible absence—to say that signifier is differential means that there is no signifier which does not represent the subject” (FT 22-3).

12 In Johnston’s terms, “the voiding of phenomena is a subsequent result produced out of and in reaction to an initial excessiveness of phenomena. The supersensible world is fabricated in an effort to tame and domesticate the instability of the sensible world” (160).

13 To draw upon terms employed in Chapter One, we could say that these Joyces “appear to appear. i.e. It is not simply that the women George meets appear to be Joyce, when in fact this identity is simply an illusion. Rather, they are Joyce insofar as their appearances prompt an act of reaching beyond the curtain.

14 See Lacan’s “The Signification of the Phallus,” in Écrits, especially 582-584. Also, IR 162.

15 Lacan’s concept of the “gaze” is developed particularly in Seminar XI, Chapters 6-9.

16 “In this precise sense, fantasy itself is for Lacan a semblance: it is not primarily the mask that conceals the Real beneath, but, rather, the fantasy of what is hidden behind the mask. So, for instance, the fundamental male fantasy of the woman is not her seductive appearance, but the idea that this dazzling appearance conceals some imponderable mystery” (HL 114).

17 Or more pointedly: “Reality is ultimately that which resists” (ES 226), “that which is not totally malleable to the caprices of our imagination” (OB 51). We should note that Žižek’s argument here is an extension of the Freudian contention that the subject-to-be is forced to acknowledge an outer reality (external to its narcissistic-omnipotent auto-eroticism) only when its needs and desires are thwarted. See also Johnston, 151.

18 And as is hopefully clear, this perspective is by no means a simple dismissal of the reality of our realities (i.e., “our reality was always just an illusion of sorts, and so the virtual is really no different”). “Real presence” is “inherently spectral not in the sense that it is a “mere” illusion, but insofar as our experience of it is deeply imbricated with the symbolic; it is vis-à-vis the symbolic that we experience the “real” in the other beyond “mere” appearance.
See for instance IR 184: “this daydreaming is a screen which provides a misleading image of myself—not only of my capacities, but also of my true desires.”

Here, to use the terms from Chapter One, the lack lacks—the objet a, the necessarily extracted element, falls “back into reality.”

It is thus precisely the objet a which “prevents us from sliding into psychosis. Such is the effect of the symbolic order on the gaze. The emergence of language opens up a hold in reality, and this hole shifts the axis of our gaze. Language redoubles ‘reality’ into itself and the void of the Thing that can be filled out only by an anamorphic gaze from aside” (LA 13)

See also PD 76.

Or conceived another way: “Far from containing any kind of subversive potentials, the dispersed, plural, constructed subject hailed by postmodern theory (the subject prone to particular, inconsistent modes of enjoyment, etc.) simply designates the form of subjectivity that corresponds to late capitalism … the epoch in which the traditional fixity of ideological positions (patriarchal authority, fixed sexual roles, etc.) becomes an obstacle to the unbridled commodification of everyday life” (TN 216).

It is in this light that we can distinguish Žižek’s position from the (relatively common) observation that virtualization finds its counterpart in a compulsive “return” to bodily immediacy and physical-material density. Žižek acknowledges this dynamic, this “violent return to the passion for the Real” (WD 10) and illustrates it apropos the phenomenon of “cutting”—this “desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body” is “strictly parallel to the virtualization of our environment.” Yet ultimately, he contends, the issue “cannot be reduced to the rather elementary fact that the virtualization of our daily lives, the experience that we are living more and more in an artificially constructed universe, gives rise to an irresistible urge to ‘return to the Real’, to regain firm ground in some ‘real reality’. The Real which returns has the status of a(nother) semblance” (WD 19, emphasis mine).

It is also in this light that we can problematize Fischer-Lichte’s engagement with corporeal reality in performance art as “a reaction to an increasing mediatisation of culture” (2008, 92). “Theatre and performance art,” she argues, “deliberately confront the resulting fantasies of the virtual body or the technologically reproducible astral body by proposing an alternative version of its bodily being-in-the-world conjoined with an embodied mind. … The performer’s body here retrieves its aura” (F2 92-3).

Žižek’s position prompts us to ask, to what extent is this “return” to the aura of the body a mode of resistance to virtualization, and to what extent does it constitute a supplementary fantasy of the latter?

As Bordwell puts it, “We construct the characters within their narrative world as persons, and it seems to me that we employ a schematic prototype for personhood. A person possesses a body, presumed to be unified and singular …” (113)

What Lacan calls the objet a is precisely the name for such a difference which corresponds to no empirical element.

In other terms, the Joyce that remains upon the stage marks a “short circuit” between appearing entity and the very “empty set” which had transubstantiated the inconsistent multitude of particulars into a unified Whole. In Hegelian language, we pass here from Substance to Subject, i.e., from Joyce as correlative to that substantial density beneath appearances and undergirding them, to a “pure Nothingness” which marks the hole, the gap, in substantial reality itself.

The Lacanian subject is directly correlative to “the very void which remains when the phantasmonic space is emptied of its content—when, that is, to paraphrase Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés, nothing takes place but the place itself” (IR 167).

The feminine is “fully submitted to the phallic function,” yet not in the sense that it is entirely dominated by the Symbolic, but rather in the sense that, in traversing the exception to the Symbolic, it
renders visible the “non-all” character, the inherent inconsistency and incompletion of the Symbolic itself.

As is hopefully clear, we can apply this dynamic also to the relation between appearances (the phenomenally-given) and the substantial density behind them. The feminine “non-all” is found in the revelation of (and exposure to) the fact that, “although there is no object given to us in intuition which does not belong to the phenomenal field, this field is never ‘all,’ never complete” (TN 55). And far from implying “that something lies beyond or outside this field,” this “non-all” of the appearance accentuates “the field’s inherent inconsistency: phenomena are never ‘all,’ yet for all that there is no exception, nothing outside them” (TN 250-1).

33 In other words, “this moment marks the intrusion of a radical openness in which every ideal support of our existence is suspended” (ES 8). And it is in this light that we can understand why, for Žižek and Lacan, the renunciation of the dimension “beyond” the Symbolic (a renunciation correlative to a “feminine” mode), is by no means commensurate with an elimination of transcendence, a reluctant and practical acceptance that “this is all there is,” nor an abandoning of sublimity per se.
Chapter Three

Love and Desire “Between Two Deaths”: Žižek avec An-sky

_The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds_, stages one of theatre’s most memorable encounters between religious Tradition and the derailing force of passionate desire. Written between 1914 and 1919 by the Russian Jewish ethnographer S. An-sky,¹ and performed to great success under the direction of Evgeny Vakhtangov in the 1920s and 30s, the play tells the story of a yeshiva student named Khonen who, upon discovering that his soul-mate Leah has been betrothed to another man, succeeds in uniting with her by different means. Through devoted study of mystical Jewish texts he effects his own transubstantiation, entering the body of his loved one as a spirit or “dybbuk.” The play’s action culminates in a dramatic exorcism, and although the community’s Rabbi succeeds in expelling the dybbuk from Leah’s body, the two young lovers come together again in a passionate Liebestod or “love-death,” achieving union beyond bodily and earthly restrictions. Steeped in Hasidic mysticism, reflecting a fantastic cosmology wherein supernatural forces are real and close at hand, the play has proven an enduring success among audiences worldwide. It has inspired films, operas, and ballets, as well as numerous contemporary adaptations (including a recent work by Tony Kushner).

The multitude of legends, stories, rituals and superstitions that the play interweaves were derived from An-sky’s famous “ethnographic expeditions,” conducted to explore and document the unique, deeply-rooted Hasidic tradition in Western Russia. Yet while the dybbuk itself is an entity conjured from the utmost depths of traditional folklore, we should note that this particular type of dybbuk—a lovesick dybbuk, possessing its desired object in hopes of a final erotic union with her—is not itself grounded in tradition but rather a product
of An-sky’s own modern imagination. In returning to a deeply Hasidic world, the play thus pits the very system that determines and structures that world against the force of the new. What is this dybbuk, asks Seth Wolitz, if not “the ‘Western virus’ of romantic love” and its “concomitant individualism” (187), the “invasive” force of autonomous desire, threatening Judaic patriarchal authority and the “culture of sacred collectivity”?

In this way *The Dybbuk* reflects An-sky’s own status as “between two worlds,” divided between a committed love for his ethnic-religious roots and a forceful desire to break into the modern world. Indeed, rather than a straightforward tension, *The Dybbuk* reflects a revealing “short circuit” between these two worlds. Saturated as it is with the mystical and the magical, this play was conceived by An-sky—a critical intellectual and professed secularist—as a means of enhancing the position of the Jewish people in Russia and eastern Europe. He believed that the play’s exploration of Hasidic beliefs, metaphysical propositions and superstitions would serve to increase their ethnic solidity, advancing their standing as a legitimate *culture* and thereby facilitating their integration into the developing social community. We find here the paradox that it is insofar as Tradition is brought forward in its full scope, resplendent with all its mystical-metaphysical accoutrements, that its associated ethnic culture can achieve legitimate status in the *modern* world.

Of course, in this paradoxical creature “between two worlds”—marking an uncanny convergence of the living and the dead, the religious and the aesthetic, the ancient and the modern—we also encounter a strange and provocative liminality between the masculine and the feminine. The dybbuk, after all, is a male spirit *performed* by a female actor, who must, in a highly paradoxical way, give body to the very usurpation of her body. The resulting phenomenological complexities, so much a part of any live performance, are deeply imbricated with the issues of female hysteria which inevitably haunt An-sky’s drama. What
appears to be a “fantastic” story of a mystical, undead spirit is also, when looked upon awry, a revealing depiction of the “modern” hysteria which, as Žižek puts it, “so deeply branded the zeitgeist at the turn of the century” and indeed “marked the birthplace of psychoanalysis” (OD 192). A number of critical approaches to the play have been keen to emphasize that what functions on one level as a masculine possession of a female body can simultaneously be understood as Leah’s hysterical protest against patriarchal norms and imposed mandates, her refusal to serve as an object of exchange within the masculine economy. As Irene Eynat-Confino argues, “The young woman’s covert rebellion is an act of sedition against higher patriarchal authorities (familial and religious)” (20), a “stratagem to escape the forced marriage” (19). And as Tony Kushner puts it, “by taking on the persona of a man” she resists inclusion within the masculine economy and “turns the natural order upside down” (in Goldstein 59).

This emphasis on “feminine” subversion is echoed in Ira Konigsberg’s analysis of the play, which encourages us to supplement hysterical approaches with a psychoanalytic exploration of desire—“desire for fusion and oneness … a desire inherent in the human psyche” (36). Konigsberg develops a fascinating link between psychoanalytic thought and Jewish yihudim: an impulse “to make two into one, to unify, fuse, and make whole” (36). Leah and Khonen “are two parts of a single whole seeking to come together” (35), their journey of love reflecting an innate human impulse toward “a loss of the individual and isolated self through fusion with the other” (36). Their unification, first through the dybbuk and ultimately in the transcendence of Liebestod, reflects an eminently feminine challenge to a patriarchal world. Eroding distinctions and boundaries—“between the self and the external world, between the ego and objects, between male and female”—it subverts the rigidity that
characterizes the realm of paternal authority and traditional Law, gesturing toward a higher reconciliation of the patriarchal Jewish God with its traditionally excluded feminine element.

Following the lead of these theorists, this chapter seeks to probe deeper into the subversive dynamic of the lovers’ fantastical union and the erotic transcendence of their final Liebestod. Yet in drawing upon psychoanalysis, it aims ultimately to present a very different view of the play than we find reflected in Konigsberg, and in the process, to significantly complicate a prevalent emphasis in much contemporary psychoanalytic criticism. In the wake of Rosemary Jackson’s seminal work on the “fantastic” mode (Fantasy: Literature of Subversion), influential analyses have frequently explored the creatures of the fantastic in terms of this impulse toward “undifferentiation,” a yearning for primordial Oneness which Jackson links directly to the Freudian “death drive.” The latter—which Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle identifies as the most fundamental drive in human beings—is understood here in terms of an “entropic pull” (Jackson 73), a thrust to return to a primal state of “inorganicism” (72). Creatures of the fantastic evoke powerfully this original homeostatic Oneness before it was ruptured, divided, “gentrified” by the Symbolic order or “big Other” (the “social order constructed by discrete units of meaning, by a network of signifiers” [90] and to which as speaking beings we are subjected).² Liminal, amorphous, androgynous, these creatures repudiate the restrictions of imposed identity, undermining the division and rigid structuring that characterizes the realm of Symbolic authority and determines our social existence.³

It is perhaps not surprising that this Freudian death drive, in its yearning for a fullness of unity beyond Symbolic divisions, is evoked frequently in contemporary analyses of passionate love. If the fantastic’s monstrous creatures may seem to occupy a domain contrary to the bliss of love, we can recall here the androgyne from Plato’s Symposium, a highly
“fantastic” creature in its own right. According to this narrative, there existed in primal times a being that was simultaneously man and woman, the two dimensions supplementing each other in a state of completion. The gods punished the creature by imposing separation upon it, with the result that all sexed beings are plagued by a passionate longing to reconstitute that lost androgynous unity. Does not the **Liebestod**, as Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon argue in a recent work on opera (*The Art of Dying*), reflect the ideal fulfillment of this haunting, primordial yearning? For Hutcheon and Hutcheon, the “eroticized ecstasy” (67) of **Liebestod** captures precisely the Freudian death drive as an innate “drive toward a return to the inanimate” (51). Attaining its exemplary expression in Wagnerian opera, the **Liebestod** gives body to the dissolution of all boundaries between self and other, masculine and feminine, reconciling the divided elements in a state of undifferentiated inorganicism. The endless yearning inherent to the Symbolically-subjugated human being “at last finds its long-awaited and ‘radiant’ resolution” (68).

I contend that an exploration of An-sky’s play through the lens of Slavoj Žižek and his engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis enables us significantly to complicate these critical approaches to the death drive, and to re-evaluate what *The Dybbuk* reveals about the relationship between subversion, the feminine, and the hysterical. The Žižekian approach, carefully investigating Lacan’s ideas as they developed in the later years of his teaching, seeks to “extranlate” the dynamics which underlie the **Liebestod** and the sublimity of its “ecstatic self-annihilation” (*PV* 62), exposing the intimate relationship between such erotic fantasies and the instability of Symbolic identity correlative to early modernity. As this approach will reveal, it is precisely through the “erotic ecstasy” of the **Liebestod** and the sublime transcendence it represents that An-sky’s play covers over—and offers aesthetic release from—the truly “traumatic” dimension signalled in hysteria. *The Dybbuk* enables us to
extraneous how its own fantastical transgression constitutes neither a culmination of hysterical resistance nor a “feminine” subversion of the existing order, but a fundamentally defensive, masculine response to the crisis of being caught “between two worlds.” In this light, a Žižekian approach will show us why existing “hysterical” approaches to The Dybbuk are ultimately not hysterical enough.

Let us begin by considering An-sky’s fantastic protagonist in light of the “dialectical inversion” to which Žižek subjects the concept of death drive. To put things as succinctly as possible, Žižek argues that a close reading of Freud and Lacan encourages us to understand the term as a type of “Orwellian misnomer.” “Death is Freud’s name for the very opposite of what the term would seem to signify” (OD 107). Against the more traditional conception as outlined above, we should locate the death drive in the very failure or inability to die, in the “strange, immortal, indestructible life” which renders an organism “undead” (TS 294). This drive is precisely not a thrust toward the dissolution of the self in undifferentiation, an “entropic” tendency toward a state of homeostatic inorganicism, the ultimate reduction of all tensions; indeed it must be conceived in “radical opposition” to such a tendency. What “death drive” indicates is conversely a dimension of immortality with which we are afflicted, an inescapable impulsion that prevents us from ever achieving a state of full homeostasis. It is the name for “an uncanny excess of life, for an ‘undead’ urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death” (PV 62). It is that on account of which the undead cannot die.

We can begin to understand this notion of an undead, “immortal” life by considering the difference between “goal” and “aim” in Lacan’s understanding of drive, as expressed in Seminar XI. If we tend to associate the word “drive” with the propulsion toward a certain goal, the Lacanian explication stresses not the satisfaction of ultimately fulfilling that goal (the
satisfaction of acquiring, consuming, or incorporating the targeted object) but that which is
generated by and correlative to the very pursuit. This satisfaction constitutes the “aim” of
drive, and in Lacan, drive is precisely an overriding of “goal” by “aim,” a privileging of the
circular route around the object—the “itinerary,” the “way taken” (179)—over the
incorporation of the object as such. Drive, as Žižek puts it, goes round in circles, and the
“aim” of drive lies in “the endless continuation of this circulation as such” (PV 61). We thus
find it, so to speak, in a type of perpetuated failure, and the key is to grasp this failure “in its
positive dimension” (ES 48), that is, to recognize in it a form of jouissance, “a sort of perverse
satisfaction in this displeasure itself, in the never-ending, repeated circulation around the
unattainable, always missed object.”

Important light is shed on this notion of drive by recognizing that the jouissance spoken
of here is in many senses the very opposite of “pleasure,” if we understand the latter as
correlative to the smooth circuit of instinctual gratification, the filling in of a lack and the
reduction of tension. Drive is indeed a “‘distortion’ of the natural instinct which finds
satisfaction in a direct consumption of its object” (IR 173-4), a derailment of the movement
toward fulfillment. Jouissance, here, is that which throws this pleasurable circuit “out of
joint.” The Lacanian conception of drive is in this sense a reversal of what we find in Jackson
and Hutcheon, for whom the death drive suggests the “highest realization” of the pleasure
principle, a definitive eradication of lack and an ultimate healing of the wound correlative to
Symbolic subjugation. Conversely, is not the death drive itself a wound that persists unhealed,
perpetually re-opened, the wound of a derailing jouissance by virtue of which an organism is
“eternalized”? Jouissance here is not that which comes as an end to striving, but that by virtue
of which the drive has no end.
Do we not find in An-sky’s dybbuk an ideal “incarnation” of this very dynamic? By definition, the dybbuk is not a force that consumes or incorporates its object. Khonen’s spectral congress with Leah is not, ultimately, an absorption of her, an annihilation of her distinction from him. Rather, in his very appropriation of her body, she remains a non-metabolized kernel, a non-integrated remainder resisting full sublation. This is to say, if she were to be entirely absorbed or united with, brought together with his spirit in an undifferentiated union, we would no longer have a dybbuk. Like the drive, the dybbuk is (nothing but) a repeated circulation around this non-sublated kernel—its very substance consists in this repeated, eternalized, “undead” encircling; and its host, we might say, is its own “internal limit,” a central impossibility which is simultaneously its condition of possibility. The dybbuk thus gives body to an endlessly repeated *failure*. Or more specifically, the dybbuk is the very (“obscene,” inescapable) *jouissance* found in this repetition, this “self-propelling vicious circle” (*IR* 148) around an unattained object. We find the drive precisely in this *in-sistence*, this “stuckness” (in *jouissance*) which prevents Khonen from dying.

We can take a further step here by considering how *The Dybbuk* brings the notion of “undeadness” into relation with the psychoanalytic notion of “sublimation.” If Lacanian sublimation, wherein an entity is “raised to the dignity of the Thing,” becoming the centre-point around which our desire circulates, would seem most immediately applicable here, the first Act of An-sky’s play encourages us to begin rather with the Freudian conception, from which Lacan takes his lead. While speaking with a fellow student, Khonen himself offers an apt description of the dynamic articulated by Freud. The two students are discussing how to deal with the sin of “lust,” and Khonen shocks his companion by arguing that rather than “waging war” against this sinful passion, “we should simply try to ameliorate it” (14). We can “purify sin,” even the “vilest” sin of lust, by “tempering” it—“like a goldsmith tempering gold
in an intense fire.” The passion inherent to lust is thus not to be squelched but rather “purified,” transubstantiated into “the most exalted holiness” (15). We have here the basic logic expressed in Freudian sublimation, whereby an unsatisfied or inappropriate “pathological” longing or impulse may be refined, spiritualized, by being channelled away from its earthly, instinctual object and towards some heightened pursuit. Poetry and the arts are, for Freud, a chief means of sublimation, and similarly, Khonen offers “The Song of Songs” as an exemplary demonstration of lust’s transformation into “exalted holiness.”

Significantly, this same dynamic of sublimation finds an almost precise parallel in Jewish thought concerning the “animal soul” and the ascension to “devekut.” As Wolitz explains, this ascent is brought about not simply through a disavowal or elimination of man’s “animal” passions, i.e., the part of him disposed to yield to lustful urges. This element must rather be “tamed and then transformed into holiness” (194): “Thus the vitality of evil transformed into good, with its intense love of God, brings the divine soul and the animal soul to higher ascent in devekut.” The problem in The Dybbuk, as Wolitz sees it, is that Khonen’s sublimation is ultimately failed or impure. The “animal” energies are not effectively channelled (sublimated) into religious passion and love of God, but rather the obverse takes place: religious powers, devotions and practices are ultimately channelled toward a “pathological” goal, used in the service of obtaining an erotic object and satiating animal lust. The “animal soul” ultimately wins out over the higher dimensions in man.

Yet if religious and erotic pursuits are intuitively conceived as contrasting with one another, perhaps what is most revealing about Khonen’s romantic campaign is the way it problematizes any straightforward opposition between “pathological” ends and higher, spiritualized dimensions—the way it brings sexual desire and the erotic into convergence with the religious. The rituals, ordeals, and sacrifices he subjects himself to in pursuit of his
sublime Woman are deeply imbricated with his religious devotions and explorations. It is through fasting, self-mortification, “doing penance, wandering in exile,” and constant “ritual cleansings” (9) that he seeks to effect his union with Leah. It is through his passionate study of mystical religious texts that he ultimately brings about his fantastic impregnation of her. And we can understand a crucial dimension of the drive by recognizing the paradoxical “short circuit” effected between these two worlds—the erotic and the religious.

Set in the unusual context of painful religious renunciations, does not Khonen’s erotic pursuit bring forward something of the sexualisation inherent to passionate worship itself? If the “goal” of religious devotion is its higher spiritual Cause, for which one is ready to renounce all enjoyments, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis encourages us to recognize the jouissance implicit in this very pursuit, that is, how the asceticism, the sacrifice and indeed the pain involved in devotion to a transcendent object can itself become eroticized, generating a surplus-jouissance of its own. Žižek offers the example of “the ascetic who flagellates in order to resist temptation,” and who nonetheless extracts jouissance (as painful pleasure) “in this very act of inflicting wounds on himself” (TS 254). We encounter the paradox that radical renunciation of the sort exemplified in Khonen “not only does not deprive the subject of jouissance, but even amplifies it (the ascetic mystic has an access to jouissance that is much more intense than the usual standard sexual pleasure” (298). More routinely, we should note how the very rituals and renunciations designed to suppress our “animal” urges may themselves become “the source of libidinal satisfaction” (261). It is in the in-sistence of such a (traumatic/painful) enjoyment, a jouissance which even religious strivings (toward purified, spiritualized goals) cannot get rid of, that we find the dynamic of death drive.

Yet if drive is what sexualizes even the most elevated of pursuits, we must recognize too the complementary obverse—that is, the way in which drive deprives sexual desire of its
very “animal soul.” To problematize Wolitz’s assessment, we find the death drive precisely in that which prevents human sexual passion from ever equating with a strictly animal impulse, removing it from the domain of pre-symbolic instincts and urges, and indeed dissociating it from the “pleasure principle.”

A rat experiment described in one of Lacan’s unpublished seminars can help to clarify. In the first phase of this experiment, a rat was placed in a labyrinth where some desired object—a particular food or a sexual partner—could be easily obtained. The arrangement of the labyrinth was then changed such that the rat could see the place of the desired object, but could not access it, being offered instead a selection of inferior objects. The experimenters observed that the rat would initially try to seek out the “true” object, but after determining that it was definitively beyond reach, would renounce it and accept the inferior substitutes. Next to come was a deplorable surgical operation, in which the experimenters tampered with the creature’s brain. What concerns us is the outcome of these modifications. This time, when returned to its labyrinth, the rat refused to relinquish the “true” object, persisting to strive for it, unable to reconcile itself to the loss. As Žižek comments, “the rat, in a sense was humanized,” its instinctual rhythms and responses transformed into an unconditional, insatiable, “eternalized” demand (IR 219). And the point to be stressed is that this “quasi-humanization” was produced through a “biological mutilation.”

Far from an accession to the “animal soul,” does not Khonen’s pursuit accentuate human passion as a mutilation of the instinctual circuit of animal pursuits and bodily impulses, regulated as they are by natural rhythms? If we tend to think of sex as epitomizing pleasure, the unconditional character of Khonen’s fixation on Leah could hardly contradict more forcefully the “pleasure principle” with its emphasis on the avoidance of pain and achievement of satisfying balance. The extreme renunciation and self-mortification to which he subjects
himself—to the point of the actual death of his physical body—draws our attention to the way in which the passionate attachment in human beings is utterly incommensurate with pleasure and indeed our very well-being, disrupting the body’s instinctual rhythm and derailing our psychic equilibrium (ES 182). Like a type of dybbuk, the “pleasure-in-pain” which propels (“eternalizes”) such attachments ultimately “disregards the proper needs of the living body and simply battens on it” (PF 31). Death drive consists precisely in this inherent excess which disturbs “normal” balanced functioning, undeadening our natural circuits.9

From Wolitz’s angle, Khonen’s theorizing on the topic of lust cannot but seem a patent contradiction. The student begins by decrying the weakness, sinfulness and lack of religious integrity which characterizes his society: “people keep growing weaker and weaker, and sins keep growing stronger and stronger, and saints keep growing scarcer and scarcer” (14). And Wolitz is certainly justified in observing that abandonment to erotic pursuits hardly seems a logical solution to the problems that Khonen himself has identified. Yet we can understand something more of the death drive in Žižek—and particularly its ethical significance—by considering the way in which, through a Lacanian lens, Khonen’s actions are not mere contradiction but indeed a consistent development of his own theory. To begin, what if we locate the reversion to the “pleasure principle” not in Khonen’s attachment to the erotic object, but by contrast (and if surprisingly), in the very Symbolic circuit of the community that surrounds him?

If the Symbolic order defining existence in this patriarchal Hasidic community would seem incongruous with the reign of pleasure, we should note that it is clearly oriented toward the preservation of equilibrium, An-sky’s depiction foregrounding the smooth circuit and balanced routine of life within the Shtetl, its reassuringly predictable rituals. And if the Holy books are always central to life here, this focus need not exclude a balanced array of sensual
indulgences. An-sky highlights the correspondence between religious observances and financial and/or gastronomic compensation; and indeed, the celebrations dominating the first two Acts of the play reinforce the central place of pleasure in this community. In a larger sense, the emphasis on religious Law would generally seem less a restrictive imposition than a welcome means of regulating and understanding life. Notable is the characters’ appreciation for (and avid evocation of) the symmetry, formal balance and aesthetic qualities of their Biblical texts and ritual exchanges. This Shtetl would seem, predominantly, a world of balance and pleasurable tradition, a community seeking preservation from unsettling derailments.

As we explored in Chapter One of this dissertation, if the Symbolic order in Lacan is usually understood in terms of violent severance vis-à-vis a prior unity and homeostasis (to which the death drive seeks a return), Žižek’s perspective emphasizes the “dialectic reversal” emerging in the later Lacan. Rather than conceiving existence in the Symbolic order in terms of division and dismemberment (in contrast with a Wholeness that has been disrupted), what if we conceive the Symbolic itself as that by virtue of which a comparative balance and homeostasis is achieved? For the later Lacan, as Žižek repeatedly asserts, the “pleasure principle” is not opposed to the Symbolic but indeed correlative to the very balanced equilibrium it instates: “One should never forget that, for Lacan … paternal Law is ultimately in the service of the ‘pleasure principle’” (TS 289), bringing about the conditions for pleasure, promoting a “homeostatic stability of pleasures protected from the stressful shocks of excessive jouissance” (PV 182).

In this light it becomes possible to understand the sense in which Žižek’s death drive is deeply imbricated with the ethical, and how this very derailing jouissance (which “afflicts” us and of which we cannot “get rid”) harbours also a liberating potential. This excess “which ‘disrupts’ the harmony of a balanced Whole” (ME 97), introducing a radical disequilibrium
into a realm of homeostatic balance, opens the door to a radical break from the existing Symbolic order. Its (irrational) passionate attachment, its “stuckness,’’ its “absolutization” of a particular element (in Khonen’s case, Leah), introduces the space for alternatives to the existing system. As Žižek asks, do we not find the very “origin of our ethical commitment” precisely in such “excessive” attachment, such “readiness to break the balance of the ordinary flow of life, and to put everything at stake for the Cause to which we adhere” (PV 103)?

To think of this another way, what if we understand the “weakness” that Khonen speaks of, and with which he charges his religious community, not simply in terms of a reversion to the lower side of man, but rather as a dissolution of the very capacity for sublimation, a *loss of sublimatory force*? What if the reversion in question is not a reversion from higher, abstract sights to “animal” goals, but a reversion from sublimation *per se*, a dissolution of intense and passionate attachments to Causes for which we are willing to give everything, in favour of a formulaic, homeostatic circuit, religion as an “empty” symbolic procedure? Can we not understand Khonen’s proposed “remedy” precisely as a reinvigoration of this very sublimatory force—an opening to the violent gesture of privileging an object or cause “beyond the pleasure principle,” a *derailing* gesture vis-à-vis the homeostatic Symbolic order?

To be clear, the emphasis here is not on codified religion’s suppression of bodily pleasure, i.e., the typical argument that moral tenets, laws, etc. should be reconciled with an appreciation for passionate bodily contact as something perfectly natural and indeed “spiritual” in its own right. What the reduction of Khonen’s pursuit to “pleasure” misses is “the violent nature of love itself,” love as an *unnatural* element, a “ruthless privileging of one object at the expense of all others which puts the lover in a kind of emergency state” (SP 247). What is at stake here is not the “naturalizing” of religion through a recognition and
incorporation of the bodily, but indeed the very “‘religious’ status of sexual passion, beyond the pleasure principle” (PD 64).

It is in this context that we can shed light on Žižek’s paradoxical emphasis on the “diabolical” foundation of the Good. This is to say, from the perspective of the homeostatic community (ultimately resistant to the disequilibrium and derailing force of sublimation’s “passionate attachments”), Khonen’s pursuit does indeed appear as the very height of evil, yet not simply in the sense of violating some specific ordinance. This dybbuk is “evil” precisely because of a passion that insists so vehemently, that is, because it exhibits a truly religious passion (more religious than religion itself). Such “evil” is “good” for Žižek insofar as it gives value to what the existing order does not. Indeed, is it not in this sense that we can understand the Messenger’s assertion, in the play’s final line, that “the lowest fall contains the upward flight” (52)? The very “irrational” passion of sublimation, as Alenka Zupančič puts it, “creates a space in which it is possible to challenge the given criteria of morality, and eventually to formulate new, different ones” (Shadow 78).12

If we have begun to delineate the contours of a Žižekian approach to this death-driven dybbuk, to curtail the discussion at this point would be to overlook a crucial dimension of both Žižek’s work and An-sky’s play. This dimension pertains to the “short circuit” between the death drive and what Lacan refers to as the “barred” Symbolic order. If in theorists such as Jackson and Hutcheon, the death drive (as “highest realization of the pleasure principle”) is defined as stretching beyond the Symbolic, striving to heal a wound or lack correlative to the regimenting order and division it imposes upon prior wholeness—and if Jackson’s creatures accentuate the movement toward an undifferentiated state prior to this radical disruption—a Žižekian approach by contrast is keen to point out the way in which the “undeadness” of
which we are speaking is precisely correlative to a lack, an inherent imbalance, a fundamental
disruption in the Symbolic itself. We must complicate the preceding analysis (of Žižek and of
*The Dybbuk*) by recognizing the important way in which the death drive is itself correlative to
the Symbolic’s own internal failure.

In a first step, we should observe that the relationship in this play between paternal-
symbolic Law and passionate desire is far more complex than it may first appear. If on one
hand An-sky depicts a confrontation between the “invasive” force of the dybbuk and the Law
which determines life in the community, on the other he dramatizes the patriarchal order’s
confrontation with its own encroaching weakness and inadequacy. This degeneration is
registered most profoundly in the Rabbi himself, who is introduced to us in a state of extreme
hesitation about his power and authority. “I’m as tiny and feeble as a baby,” he weeps (the link
with phallic impotence being hard to overlook in this rendering): “I have no strength. … I
can’t! … I can’t anymore!” (36). At stake here is the very substance of what he represents—
the substance behind his *Name*. In Lacanian terms, he reveals himself precisely as an “empty
signifier”: “my ‘me,’ my ‘I,’ does not exist” (35). If the world believes in his authority, it is
then a “blind world”—“If they weren’t blind, they wouldn’t come to me,” or, as Lacan would
put it, they would see that behind the “glimmer” of the Master Signifier there is *nothing to
see*. At stake in this play is thus the inadequacy internal to the Symbolic order, a system
increasingly less capable of disguising its own lack and regulating existence in the
community.

Yet to go a step further we should observe the direct “short circuit” between the
dybbuk and this internal inadequacy. We learn as the play progresses that Khonen and Leah’s
insistence on being “destined” for one another is not simply an expression of their autonomous
desire (exceeding Symbolic dictates). Ironically, the lovers’ intuitive connection and
indissoluble attraction is here direct testimony to a *paternally* prescribed mandate. It reflects a binding symbolic pact made prior to their births, a declaration by their fathers (Nissin and Sender) that the two would one day be wed. After the death of Nissin, Sender had lost all contact with the latter’s family, and his decision, at the beginning of the play, to arrange Leah’s marriage to another man is made in ignorance of Khonen’s existence. Yet if the initial contract is considered to be dissolved, it remains forcefully *inscribed* in the big Other, registered in the lovers’ potent awareness of being marked for one another: “the heavenly palaces accepted the agreement … they planted in the heart of Nissin’s son the thought that Sender’s daughter was his destined bride” (46). Even more explicitly, this contract registers itself through the voice of Nissin which literally returns from beyond the grave to assert his paternal claim. What arises here is thus a deadlock within the order of Law and paternal institutions, a rift or rupture to which the dybbuk “gives body.” In Lacanian terms, the creature emerges as a symptom of the fact that the big Other is fundamentally “barred,”15 the fact that, as Adrian Johnston explains, “contradictions can and do arise between its various injunctions, that it doesn’t always speak with one voice” (112). The Rabbi’s attempts to bring symbolic resolution to the situation (Sender is ordered to “donate half his wealth to the poor” and “recite the Kaddish” on the anniversary of Khonen’s death [46]) cannot fully cover over the exposed rift to which the dybbuk testifies.

Crucial here is a shift apropos passion’s relation to the Symbolic. The image of Khonen’s desire for Leah as a disruptive “return of the repressed,” opposing the constraints of patriarchal Law, bursting beyond the bounds of regimented identity and derailing the orderly system, must here be supplemented with an inversion. Ironically, the very intensity of Khonen and Leah’s passion is directly correlative to the exposed *lack* in the Symbolic order, its *incapacity* to successfully orchestrate social existence and determine identity. Passionate
desire is not simply that which throws them out of joint with their “proper” place in the Symbolic—in its derailing force it is here a symptom of the fact that the very system which would determine proper places is out of joint with itself.

What are the “living dead,” asks Žižek, if not a reflection of such a fundamental disjunction within the Symbolic? What “undeadens” them if not a breach in the Symbolic itself, the persistence of a Symbolic debt beyond their physical expiration (LA 23)? In a significant way, the drive “incarnated” by such creatures is not directly a drive to explode beyond and overcome the Symbolic’s rigid hold (such that they might re-attain the fullness of some pre-symbolic unity); it is primarily correlative to the fact that the Symbolic circuit which regulates existence and identity is revealed as incomplete (“non-all”), derailed by a fundamental “flaw.” In this sense, fulfillment or resolution for these creatures would be brought about not when a rigid, regimenting Symbolic order is finally surpassed, its constraints definitively broken, but indeed when the broken circuit is restored, when symbolic equilibrium is re-established. We see the death drive here as a jouissance from which symbolization and proper Symbolic inscription could offer (a degree of) release.16

To think of this another way—and recalling here the image of An-sky himself, teetering on the cusp between substantial Tradition and early-modern secular individualism—if on one hand what the dybbuk represents is a passionate opposition to Symbolic subjugation, on the other it most forcefully incarnates the horror and vertigo of existence without a firm and regimenting order, the traumatic disintegration of Symbolic identity and support. If Khonen is “between two worlds,” he is also, in Lacan’s terms, “between two deaths”—a realm defined (as Žižek explains) by the “erasure of the Symbolic network that defines the subject’s identity,” a dissolution of “all the links that anchor the subject in its symbolic substance” (FA 30). As a dybbuk he finds himself “fallen out” from any socio-symbolic space in which his
being could be properly inscribed: “There is Heaven, and there is earth, and there are worlds beyond number throughout the cosmos, but there is no place for me anywhere in the universe” (38). This lack of appropriateSymbolic inscription is revealed as profoundly traumatic—“I have nowhere to go! … evil spirits lurk on all sides, waiting to grab me.” And indeed, we see here that the very intensity of Khonen’s passion for his sublime Woman corresponds directly to this horror. Union with her is all that will save him amidst the traumatic dissolution of fixed Symbolic structures and identities.

It is in this light that Žižek’s analysis encourages us to consider very carefully the “other side” of the death drive, particularly apropos the notion of subversion. If figures such as the dybbuk—“outside the scope of paternal authority, nomadic, with no fixed abode” (PV 118)—are perceived as horrifying and traumatic from within the Symbolic order (i.e., insofar as they “incarnate” a jouissance unstructured and unorganized by Symbolic formations), we should also note here the horror of the death-driven, that is, the horror to which the movement of the death drive itself constitutes a response. Lacking Symbolic identity or inscription, Khonen “is” (has existence) only insofar as he continues to circulate thus. We see here how the incessant undead repetition of the death drive, its endless circulation, its eternalized “passionate attachments,” its “stuckness,” are correlative to the threat of “subjective destitution.”

“With dybbuks, it’s always women, have you noticed? … hysterical women”
- Tony Kushner’s The Dybbuk (65)

It is with the complex dynamics of the death drive in mind that we can begin to examine the other side of An-sky’s dybbuk. A number of commentators would be quick to point out the irony in making Khonen the focus of an analysis of subversion, reducing Leah to
the role of his “sublime object,” when Khonen himself disappears from the stage at the end of the first Act. After all, surely the progressive intellectual An-sky was not “really” trying to suggest that an actual spirit had taken control of his heroine. What appears to be a “fantastic” story of a wandering undead dybbuk is rather, when looked upon awry, a revealing depiction of hysterical female resistance in the face of paternal demands and a masculine economy. A number of readings have encouraged us to conceive the heroine in a more active role, her symptoms, as strange as they may be, reflecting a form of agency, a resistance to a patriarchal system and its imposed mandates. Irene Eynat-Confino’s insistence that Leah’s possession functions as a “covert rebellion,” an “act of sedition against higher patriarchal authorities (familial and religious)” (20), reflects the notion of hysteria as “a protest of woman’s ‘body language’ against male domination”: “by means of hysterical symptoms, the (feminine) subject signals her refusal to act as the empty screen or medium for the male monologue” (IR 163). Such is the view that Hélène Cixous takes of Freud’s Dora, who refuses to play the role of passive object in a circle of exchange, and with whom, in this light, Leah can be understood to have key parallels.

Indeed, it is Eynat-Confino’s contention that an emphasis on the play’s fantastic dimension obscures An-sky’s higher aims, overlooking or minimizing its potent engagement with feminine resistance. Stressing the fantastic leaves us with a passive Leah, infused with and dominated by a (male) dybbuk, whereas a “hysterical” reading reveals Leah as a fully active and self-assertive agent of resistance. Yet perhaps one of the most interesting features of An-sky’s play is the way it brings the fantastical and the hysterical into direct confluence, literally embodying them in a single paradoxical entity. Perhaps the undecideability between Leah and her unnatural usurper—an undecideability that emerges forcefully in performance, insofar as the dybbuk is something quite literally produced by the female on stage—is most
illuminating precisely insofar as it is not resolved. This is to say, what if the hysteric and the death-driven dybbuk are not exclusive entities but rather two mutually illuminating sides of a single unusual coin?

In a basic sense, is not the dybbuk a most appropriate reflection of the very “horror” correlative to hysteria itself, this “unnatural monstrosity” which traumatized the phallic regime and which, as Žižek notes, “marked the birthplace of psychoanalysis” (OD 192)? We should observe that this horrifying, “traumatic” dimension of feminine jouissance is presaged even prior to the dybbuk’s arrival, reflected in the very comedy of Menashe, Leah’s intended bridegroom. This lamentable suitor, “scared,” “terrified,” and “frightened,” would rather “hide out in some nook” than face the woman: “Rebbe! Most of all, I’m terrified of her … the girl!” (30). And is not Menashe’s “mystical fear”—which, however comical, forcefully registers the “male dread of woman which so deeply branded the Zeitgeist at the turn of the century” (OD 192)—revealed here in its complete legitimacy? Is not the arrival of the dybbuk, only moments later, a most apt incarnation of Menashe’s terror?

Yet perhaps it is in the experiential dynamics of performance itself that we can find the play’s most illuminating insights into the subtle operations of hysteria. With the notion of a “barred” Other in mind, let us consider carefully the complex theatrical dimensions of Ansky’s dybbuk—a male spirit performed by a female actor, who, in a highly paradoxical way, must give body to the very usurpation of her body, enabling a masculine presence to live and speak through it. As Vladislav Ivanov describes it, the female figure before us undergoes a sudden “estrangement and deformation,” “ceases to be herself,” “cries out in another’s voice” (262). The phenomenological complexities of this transformation, and of the scenes that follow, are a vital part of any live production.
Of course, there are many ways to handle these scenes, yet for the present discussion let us presume a skilled actress who attempts to “conjure” Khonen through her performance. On a phenomenological level—particularly apropos the voice—the intense exchanges between the Rabbi and the dybbuk in Acts III and IV are apt to provoke something of the experiential asymmetry captured in Octave Mannoni’s famous phrase, “Je sais bien, mais quand même …”. This is to say, in watching the performance, I know very well that the actress before me is simply imitating (the actor playing) Khonen, that the “alien voice” (37) emanating from her is simply an effect of performance and not some impossible foreign agency invading her from beyond. But all the same, it really does seem to me that Khonen is speaking from inside her, that the body of this actress before me has been somehow usurped by a foreign thing. We can draw productive parallels here with ventriloquism, in which, similarly, a voice emerges out of nowhere, appearing where it does not belong. Yet in many ways the dynamic of The Dybbuk constitutes an inversion of what we experience in ventriloquism. In the latter, I know very well that the entity before me (the ventriloquist’s puppet) is not the source of its voice, yet all the same I react as though the entity itself were truly speaking. In An-sky’s play, conversely, I know very well that this entity before me is speaking, is the source of the voice that I hear, but all the same it seems to me as though that voice has emerged from something entirely other, from a completely different source.

Yet is there not a more radical dimension to this inversion? The effect of ventriloquism arises from the fact that, although I know very well that the entity before me is just a dummy with no vocal chords, a lifeless puppet with no subjectivity of its own, I nonetheless find myself reacting to the spectacle as though this (“dead”) entity were somehow endowed with impossible life. The uncanny arises in the voice’s animation and “subjectivization” of the lifeless dummy. Conversely, in a production of The Dybbuk, the site of a “real subjectivity”
appears to me as though it were *no more than* a puppet—I know very well that there is a talented and well-trained actress on the stage before me, drawing upon the full extent of her powers to put on an extraordinary performance, but all the same I cannot escape the impression of this female body as utterly evacuated, a flesh dummy, its animation strictly an effect of an external subjectivity speaking and moving through it.

This is to say, perhaps the peculiar power of these possession scenes can be found in the way the uncanny strikes from two directions. We find it most immediately in this voice which erupts into the theatrical appearance, having no place within it, no source upon the stage—the voice of Khonen leaping into the female actress. Yet one of the most “magical” aspects of this play in live performance is the way in which Khonen’s impossible appearance here, this life of an other “shining through” the enactment, can begin to take on a “life of its own.” For all its utter incongruity with its human vehicle, Khonen’s voice takes. This is to say, I know very well that neither Khonen nor the actor playing him is even present here, but all the same I am watching a dialogue between Khonen and the Rabbi. Indeed, the true *coup de théâtre* consists here in the way that Khonen’s *appearance* in our theatrical experience becomes itself a reality disturbed and derailed by the uncanny residue of the female, this *thing* which remains incongruously on the stage before us, utterly out of place in her own performance. Paradoxically, a highly skilled performance will not only make the male voice emerge where it does not belong, troubling the female body, but inversely, will make of the female itself an inert *leftover*, a *remainder* which does not belong in the picture, an “excrescence” unintegrated into the performance and by virtue of which that performance is disturbingly out of joint, *with itself*.

Of course, there is an important sense in which *all* theatre is “out of joint with itself,” its fictional realm (its “order of representation”) always in tension with the material bodies it
attempts to possess. In Stanton Garner’s terms, “The elements of performance may be caught in the imagined, the performed, the make-believe, but ‘the thing itself’ remains as a reminder of the actuality on which the imaginary plays” (40). Yet if theatrical perception is in fact constitutionally “bifurcated,” characterized by a certain “irreducible oscillation between perceptual levels” (41), particular theatrical devices or circumstances are peculiarly inclined to induce what Erika Fischer-Lichte terms “perceptual multistability.” In such instances, our normal tuning processes are thrown into confusion by the assertiveness of competing orders and we find ourselves in “a state of betwixt and between” (Transformative 89)—between two worlds—struggling to negotiate competing modes of perception. The female actress’s performance in The Dybbuk generates a particularly complex and potent instance of such “perceptual multistability.” In this instance, it is not simply that the corporeal performer “escapes transformation into the virtual realm” (Garner 44). The actress’s corporeality constitutes not simply a reminder of actuality but a Real that is actively redoubled by the dynamic of the play itself. To borrow a term from Michael Chion, we can think of this in terms of interposition. As the transubstantiated Khonen emerges as an experiential reality for the spectator, the actress’s female corporeality—accentuated, conjured, through the frame of Leah—becomes a thing interposed between the audience’s gaze and its “proper” object (Khonen); it appears as a disturbing stain in the field of vision, disrupting communication between gaze and object. The female has here the status of a troubling leftover disjointed from any given place in the dialogic frame, and by virtue of which the theatrical spectacle—this exchange between men—is disturbingly and conspicuously out of joint.

Analyses such as Eynat-Confino’s which attempt to transfer Leah from a passive to an active position, displacing Khonen as the true protagonist of these exorcism scenes, resonate with a well-established psychosemiotic critique of theatre’s “male gaze.” As Sue-Ellen Case
summarizes, “gender is the crucial encoding of the subject that has made it historically a position unavailable for women to inhabit. The traditional subject has been the male subject, with whom everyone must identify” (121), and theatre has correlatively promoted the assumption “that the male is the subject of the dramatic action” (119), excluding women from that role. Women “become fixed in the position of object of the gaze, rather than as the subject directing it” (120)—“their desire is not symbolised in the patriarchal culture. Nor do the dynamics of their desire operate within the theatrical experience.” Eynat-Confino’s objection to a “naturalistic” portrayal of The Dybbuk’s possession would seek to resist both this diegetic passivity—i.e., the character Leah’s dominance by an actual male dybbuk—and more radically, the female actress’s performance of her own de-subjectivization, the direct enactment of her utter relinquishing of her body to a male subjectivity. To play Leah as “actually” possessed is not simply to refer to a passive woman—the actress finds herself in a highly paradoxical position wherein she must summon the full extent of her talents to strip her own body of its feminine agency, to evacuate it and enact its usurpation. Eynat-Confino’s argument that Leah be understood—and performed—as though conspicuously “putting on an act” would seek to transform the play into a powerful vehicle for extraneating the “male gaze” as Case describes it, i.e., confronting us with our assumption that the male figure (Khonen) occupies the position of subject in the drama, while vividly dis-covering the locus of subjectivity in what we would take for the female object. The actress’s distantiation from the role would accentuate the resistance of a feminine agency, the defiance of that which is “not submitted to the phallic function.”

If, as Case explains, “The subject in semiotics is that which controls the field of signs” (121), my description of the actress’s female presence in terms of a “leftover” or “remainder” on the stage might seem to accentuate the absolute elimination of the female as subject. Yet
what is at stake here is rather a re-conceiving of the subject position. As Žižek is intent to remind us, from “the Lacanian perspective,” what is called the subject is indeed “strictly correlative” to such a *stain* in the picture, “disturbing its harmony” (*ES* 8). It is precisely this stain in the visual field that “materializes” the subject as the *lack* in the Other, as the point of inadequacy or self-division of the Symbolic order framing reality. This is to say, if on the one hand the play enacts the female body’s reduction to a subject-less screen for the male voice, a material medium for the masculine economy, on the other hand we can find the subject “as such” precisely in the mute *ineradicability of this female presence persisting before us, the inert *in-sistence* of this uncanny remainder which the male monologue, whilst literally “taking the stage,” can nonetheless not *get rid of*.

Put another way, from the perspective of the male gaze, is not the “traumatic” dimension of female hysteria (“which so deeply branded the zeitgeist at the turn of the century”) precisely correlative to such a stain obscuring the picture, a remainder “out of joint” with any proper place, a derailing leftover which the circuit of Symbolic operations and institutions cannot “get rid of”? The hysteric’s fundamental question, “Why am I what you say I am?”, marks a radical displacement from any proffered Symbolic identity. And as Žižek puts it, what needs to be understood is how this remainder materializes “the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other” (*ES* 8), i.e., exposing the gap inherent to Symbolically-regulated reality, its fundamental contingency and inconsistency.

We should note the paradox here that the female subject as this disturbing leftover, this uncanny remainder in its *in-sistence* upon the stage, is a thing *produced* by the actress’s forceful identification with her role as “possessed.” In contrast with Brechtian distantiation, it is here her full “submission” to the part—i.e., the enactment of her own usurpation by a male voice—that yields this uncanny by-product. Does not this theatrical dynamic extraneate what
Žižek has in mind with his notion of “overidentification” as a (feminine) form of subversion? If traditional Lacanian approaches would seek to locate the subversive strength of the feminine in that which is “not submitted to the phallic function,” a common refrain in Žižek is the notion that “overidentification” may reveal and indeed forcefully accentuate the Symbolic regime’s own division, making appear the leftover/remainder that is correlative to its internal dislocation and inadequacy. And insofar as it is precisely this disturbing leftover (of symbolic operations) which this regime would seek to distract from or “cover over,” might we not (as does Lacan in Seminar XX) locate the feminine subversion precisely in that which is fully submitted to the phallic function?23

We should observe that, in drawing here from the work of theorists such as Garner and Fischer-Lichte, my analysis of The Dybbuk’s “perceptual multistability” ultimately points in a very different direction than the Merleau-Ponty-inspired phenomenology that informs these theorists’ examination of theatrical bodies. This observation is particularly important since some of the key terms employed here—specifically, my description of the actress’s female corporeality as “materializing” the subject on stage—might seem to find an echo in those of Fischer-Lichte, who emphasizes “embodied subjectivity,” “corporeal presence,” and the “performative generation of materiality.”24 Indeed, the contours of the type of Lacanian perspective I am emphasizing here might be most precisely delineated by juxtaposing it with “embodiment theory” as developed in Merleau-Ponty and thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz who have engaged with his phenomenology. (Lacan himself develops his concept of the “gaze” in Seminar XI through a conversation with Merleau-Ponty’s The Visible and the Invisible, ultimately diverging in significant ways from the positions and emphases of the latter.25) But if an extended comparison of these approaches would be out of place in this chapter, it is perhaps not difficult to see how the “lived body” of phenomenological
“embodiment theory,” with its emphasis on greater symbiotic fusion between subject and corporeality, mind and body, might contrast with the profound non-rapport between jouissance and finite, corporeal existence that is the death drive.

If this undead dybbuk is correlative to female hysteria as a “stain” in the Symbolic frame, an unintegrated remainder disturbing the harmony of the (masculine) picture, we should observe too the highly “psychoanalytic” interpretative treatment with which this symptom is greeted by the Jewish patriarchy. Most notable here is the governing impulse to symbolize, reflecting a prominent psychoanalytic understanding of the symptom as a type of signifying formation, a kind of coded message—an appeal to the big Other, or more specifically its representative, the analyst, the “subject supposed to know,” who will help the analysand to confer upon it its true meaning. The verbalization of the symptom is posited to result in its automatic dissolution, and the aim of psychoanalysis, in this light, is to assist in the achievement of this verbalization, helping to “re-establish the broken network of communication” (SO 73). The Dybbuk’s exorcism, notably, is supplemented by a full-fledged trial staged by Symbolic Law, in which what is at stake is precisely such a symbolization of this disturbance in the big Other to which the dybbuk-as-symptom “gives body.” The dybbuk is expected to leave just as a symptom is expected to dissolve, i.e., subsequent to its full symbolic interpretation as elicited by the Rabbi/analyst, an interpretation that relies upon a thorough “narrativization” in which the missing pieces of the analysand’s story are restored. Exorcism is here directly concomitant to the resolution of a Symbolic crisis—it occurs when the disturbance in the Symbolic texture is set right, when the symptom’s hidden meaning is articulated and reintegrated within the field of the big Other. (The symptom here quite literally invokes from the big Other its meaning, in the form of Nissen, Khonen’s dead father who
returns from the Beyond to testify at the trial.) Of course, this parallel also evokes the way in which such (psychoanalytic) “treatment” of the symptom proffers a cure not only for the patient but also for the paternal-symbolic order itself—a means for the latter to cope with or domesticate the monstrosity of a traumatic breach.

And if this exorcism sheds light on the early psychoanalytic response to hysteria, we might also note the inverse, that is, how psychoanalytic treatment of hysteria was itself akin to exorcism, hysteria cast as a type of demon to be expelled. One thinks most immediately of Charcot’s clinical séances (photographs of which bear an uncanny resemblance to those of the first production of An-sky’s play). And indeed we can take the comparison a step further, noting the theatrical dimension of the psychoanalytic clinic itself in the days of its inception: “The demonstration at the famous leçons du mardi,” as Muriel Dimen writes, “were immensely successful spectacles, at least for the professional men who, like Freud, crowded into Charcot’s clinic to gaze, with some of the master’s own scoptophilia, at the coached performances of his specimen hysterics” (7).

With these considerations in mind, might we not find in Eynat-Confino’s objection—i.e., that an indulgence in the “fantastic” dimension of this dybbuk obscures the play’s true hysterical element—a dynamic aptly illustrated by the play itself? Is it not precisely by (so elaborately) symbolizing the confrontation in these (“fantastic”) terms that the Jewish patriarchal community is able to evade the trauma of hysteria? If Eynat-Confino’s reading encourages us to hypothesize that Leah might be “putting on an act,” we might productively extend this hypothesizing to the patriarchal community itself—is not their own elaborate response to this dybbuk’s incursion a highly performative gesture, maintaining the appearance of a shared belief in order to conceal or distract from a much more horrifying encounter with feminine hysteria as such? This is to say, belief in the dybbuk (or rather, symbolization of the
event in terms of dybbuks) effects an occlusion of antagonism, covering over a breach in the Symbolic order via a formally balanced narrative. (We should note that dybbuks, while invasive, “unlawful” usurpers, have nonetheless a status internal to Judaic thought.)

Of course, what An-sky’s play ultimately stages is a failure of this symbolic process, despite its thoroughness and the intensity of the community’s investment in it. The symptom/dybbuk does not simply dissolve once it has been correctly interpreted, put into meanings that can be integrated into the Symbolic universe—instead the heroine continues to cling to it (even to her death). We have here a key problem confronted by Lacanian psychoanalysis: why does the symptom persist in spite of its interpretation? In this light, Leah’s symptom reflects the passage from “coded message” susceptible to (and indeed soliciting) interpretation, to what the later Lacan calls a sinthome, “a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment” (SO 75). The sinthome is a “mute” formation to which the subject attaches itself—it does not “stand in” for anything (in the sense of being susceptible to interpretation and thus integration into the big Other) but constitutes rather a locus around which the subject circulates in a manner resembling the “stuckness” of the drive, its “acephalous” pulsation, its self-perpetuating rhythm. Indeed it is here that we find drive at its “purest.”

Yet it is also here that the link between the death drive and the hysterical encourages us to complicate the analysis with yet another step. What this link, established formally in the figure of the dybbuk, allows us most forcefully to grasp is the “anamorphic” and indeed radically ambiguous status of hysterical jouissance. In this light, a properly “hysterical” approach to the play is not simply one which emphasizes a jouissance unintegrated into the Symbolic frame, but one which acknowledges jouissance itself as “that which is properly undecidable” (Žižek, GV 118).
A close consideration of the dynamic at work in Leah’s symptom reveals it as a site of competing meanings. Though critics such as Konigsberg downplay the role of sexual desire in the heroine (she is marked by “asexuality” and “infantilism” [36], existing “in a world beyond gender and physical touch” [38]), it is very hard to overlook the sexual suggestivity of the young woman’s symptoms. As Yoram Bilu states in his thorough analysis of dybbuk possession and hysteria, “One need not be a devoted Freudian to single out sexual wishes as a major motivating force behind this type of possession” (5-6). The “congruence between symbol and referent” is here “pronounced” (both involve “an act of penetration”), and indeed, as Bilu points out, “in Jewish mystical texts the residence of a spirit in a human being was designated ‘impregnation’ (ibbur)” (6). On the other hand, if dybbuk possession offers an idiom for the “acting out of sexual urges” (11), the direct equation of Leah’s symptoms with a form of sexual fantasizing would clearly seem problematic, since in the play’s context these symptoms function directly to help evade or forestall an actual sexual encounter, or indeed the sexual encounter per se. Her wedding-day antics operate as a refusal of (real) sexual relations, and in this light they might easily be associated with frigidity, a rejection of the phallus. Then again, as a “stratagem” for refusing male domination, this symptom is highly paradoxical insofar as it directly stages the usurpation of the girl’s body by a masculine force, reducing her to passivity. Significantly, the critical field itself tends to counterbalance readings of Leah as an active hysterical with interpretations of her possession as a form of rape, “both mental and physical” (Wolitz 467). We thus have a highly ambiguous hysteria. If the dybbuk-as-symptom is here a means of resisting objectification, it is also a markedly perverse fantasy, in which the female subject conjures the image of bodily invasion and violation, of being dominated and subdued by force.
Confronted with the multiple levels of suggestivity in Leah’s symptom, we would do well to remember the lessons of dream interpretation as initially propounded by Freud. We do not have a simple opposition between “dream-text” (the surface appearance of the dream) and “dream-thought” (the “unconscious” meaning it conveys). Rather, as Žižek clarifies, “the true focus of a dream, its ‘unconscious desire,’ is not the dream-thought, but something that, paradoxically, inscribes itself into a dream-text through the very mechanisms of the transposition of the dream-thought into the dream-text” (LC 72). The “true core” of the dream is something that “inscribes itself only through and in this very process of masking, so the very moment we retranslate the dream-content back into the dream-thought expressed in it, we lose the ‘true motif force’ of the dream” (LC 73). In the “dream-text” of The Dybbuk, we do not have a simple contrast between the “surface content” of Leah’s dybbuk possession and its “deeper meaning” (i.e., a hysterical resistance to paternal authority, a refusal to be reduced to a mere object of exchange). What such a reading misses is the truth of the “mask” itself—that is, the very (perverse) desire that manifests itself in the transposition of this “latent dream-thought” (a desire to resist paternal control) into a scene of utter subjugation. In short, the “underlying message” of resistance to paternal authority needs to be thought through the very lens of the desire inscribed into its fantastical mask.

We can go some way toward understanding the paradoxical interplay of these apparently contradictory desires—a resistance to or evasion of the sexual encounter which takes the form of symptoms which themselves bespeak a desire not only for penetration but indeed perverse submission—by considering further the Lacanian understanding of hysteria. Specifically, apropos the hysteric’s refusal of the phallus, Lacan’s approach is to problematize the very nature of this refusal, and here he effects one of his characteristically dizzying reversals: “the refusal of the hysteric is not directed at the penis but rather at its
detumescence” (Harari, Anxiety 55). The implication is that we can understand the hysteric’s resistance to “normal” intercourse not as a simple and categorical opposition to the phallic regime, but indeed as an attempt to evade a (traumatic) recognition of phallic lack—“the moment of detumescence is the moment when it can be seen that the penis is not the phallus” (55-6). Insofar as this detumescence “implies outstanding proof of the inexistence of the phallus as something totalizing … always erect” (56), the hysteric’s evasion of sex is, in this regard, ultimately “about sustaining the unmovable phallus.” Can we not understand the paradoxes of Leah’s resistance in the same light? That is to say, what her hysterical gesture effectively accomplishes is not a straightforward refusal of the phallus—rather, in replacing (countering) an actual sexual relationship (sex with a finite, limited man, inevitably subject to flaccidity) with this dybbuk (in its eternalized in-sistence), what she enables herself to evade is precisely a confrontation with the lack in the Other. In Lacan’s words, she renounces jouissance in order to obtain an ever-present tumescence.

The point here, of course, is not to clinically diagnose Leah, treating a fictional construct as a full-fledged psyche, but rather to recognize in the dynamic of her gesture the “radically ambiguous” nature of hysteria itself as we find it in Lacan and Žižek. As the latter insists, what must be recognized is the way in which hysterical “resistance” also and simultaneously harbours an attempt to cope with or avert the trauma of encountering the big Other’s (fundamental) inconsistency and illegitimacy: “Hysteria has to be comprehended in the complexity of its strategy, as a radically ambiguous protest against the Master’s interpellation which simultaneously bears witness to the fact that the hysterical subject needs a Master, cannot do without a Master, so that there is no simple and direct way out” (IR 163-4). If, on the one hand, the outbreak of hysteria is a reaction to Paternal Law, a resistance to assigned Symbolic mandates and identifications, on the other hand it implies a hidden call for
a phallic presence that will “live up to its name”; it is not simply a resistance to the symbolic Other, but a simultaneous invocation of an Other without lack. Is it not revealing that Leah’s possession—i.e., her symptomal infusion with a phallus that resists detumescence—coincides precisely with the appearance of the “terrified” Menashe, this hopelessly flaccid representative of the phallic order? If The Dybbuk would appear to be a play about hysterical resistance in a community over-determined by patriarchal constraints and definitions, we can understand Leah’s symptom (also) in terms of a defensive response to the degeneration of that patriarchal system, to the fact that, as Khonen puts it, “Men keep growing weaker and weaker” (14). (We should also note here the link with Chapter One’s discussion of Equus in terms of a decline in Symbolic rigidity and a “deadly loop” between hysteria and perversion.)

It is also in this sense that we can understand more fully the implications of the Lacanian sinthome. Whereas the symptom, as coded message, presumes “the field of the big Other as consistent, complete” (SO 74), i.e., implying a solid symbolic Other into which it can be integrated, symptom as sinthome bears witness conversely to an intuition that “the big Other does not exist,” that it has no substantial legitimacy, that it is fundamentally inconsistent and unable fully to ground itself. In the face of this non-existence of the Other (the absence of the firm coordinates it provides), the sinthome is “literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being” (SO 75). Its dissolution, far from resulting in one’s successful re-incorporation into a stable Symbolic regime, is tantamount to one’s own dissolution. This is why, as Lacan puts it, the subject “loves his sinthome more than himself”—it is only through clinging to the sinthome that he evades the terrifying abyss that is the subject deprived of its Symbolic supports.

The horror of the dybbuk, as argued, is correlative to a horror for the dybbuk, caught “between two deaths,” threatened with the dissolution of all Symbolic identity: “a swarm of
demons surround me, gnashing their teeth, lying in wait for me to leave, so they can tear me to pieces” (421). Similarly, if the hysteric’s subversive force resides in the horror posed to the Symbolic order by a jouissance “undomesticated” by its structures, a truly “hysterical” approach must also take stock of the necessary inversion, that is, the horror correlative to hysteria, i.e., to the state of finding oneself “out of joint” with any firm Place—hysteria itself as a “terrifying deadlock,” “dread at its most terrifying” (PV 89), a state of radical derailment and disequilibrium from which one seeks relief and escape.

Is not this revelation of hysteria’s “radical ambiguity” a rather discouraging insight, insofar as it throws into question the very subversive potential of such resistance, indeed implicating the hysterical with the very defence against Symbolic dissolution? Yet as Žižek emphasizes, it is precisely in exposing the dynamics upon which the Symbolic fantasy hinges, revealing the spectral supports of our identity and reality, that a true “traversal” becomes possible. Indeed, a Žižekian approach to things “fantastic” consists precisely in this extraneation of such hidden dynamics.

A close look at the trial at the centre of The Dybbuk reveals the operations of this Žižekian approach par excellence. At stake in this scene is obviously the opposition between the word of Symbolic Law and its spectral-uncanny other, the derailing jouissance of a voice (the dybbuk’s) which it must expel, cover over, repress. Yet perhaps the key to the scene is to be found in the decisive role played by yet another uncanny voice, one internal to the Law’s own operations. As becomes evident during the exorcism, the word of the Law on its own is not enough to expel the dybbuk. The latter will be moved only when this word is supplemented with the sound of the “Shofar,” the Jewish ceremonial horn, noted for its emission of a “painfully low and uninterrupted trumpeting” (IR 149), a “horrifyingly turgid
and leaden drone” (IR 150). “Blow the horns! Blow tekiah,” shouts the Rabbi, and the dybbuk “Jumps away, thrashes, screams”: “Stop it! Stop pulling me!” (47). The final defeat of this uncanny intruder is brought about as the men “blast teruah on the rams’ horns” (48). Only through the supplement of this voice do the Rabbi’s formal phrases and invocations—the “dead” letter of the Law—carry true authority and force.

What is the significance of this Shofar blast? Interestingly, this is a question to which psychoanalytic thought has often applied itself in the past century. In Jewish tradition, the sound of the Shofar recalls the thunder heard upon the mountain when God handed Moses the tablets of the Ten Commandments, and as such it recalls the establishment of the symbolic Covenant between God and the Jewish people. Theodor Reik’s influential analysis explored further this dynamic in relation to the Freudian narrative (in Totem and Taboo) of the primordial parricide, the murder of the obscene “Father of Enjoyment” who alone had full access to all the women in the tribe. The “primordial crime” of the murder of this figure is correlative to the repression of the pre-symbolic fullness he represents—or more precisely, of his conversion from primordial-substantial Real to symbolic agency, the Name-of-the-Father, the Master Signifier orchestrating the Symbolic order. In Reik’s analysis, the uncanny sound of the Shofar can be understood as a kind of death-song of this dying father, a residue of his Enjoyment, a last vestige of this repressed Real, a dying scream.

The point in this analysis of such significance for Lacan and for Žižek concerns the co-dependence here of the Symbolic Law and this residue of a “repressed” Real, this uncanny “trace” haunting the Symbolic realm. Rather than a straightforward opposition between the Symbolic and the Real which it evicts or covers over, what we find reflected in the Shofar is a dynamic whereby the Symbolic is dependent (for its very stability and authority) upon such uncanny resurrections, upon the “haunting” presence of such a resurgent voice. As Žižek puts
it, “symbolic authority is by definition the authority of the dead father, the Name-of-the-Father; but if this very authority is to become effective, it has to rely on a (phantasmic) remainder” (IR 154), a spectre of the Real serving as its “irreducible supplement” (153). The ritual of exorcism in An-sky’s play most aptly illustrates how the Symbolic can maintain itself and exercise its authority, evicting/resisting the voice of its symptomal outsiders, only “by enlisting the services of another, even more traumatic voice” (154). Rather than a direct opposition between the word and the Real it seeks to banish, the exorcism is ultimately a confrontation between two “undead” spectres. Or as Mladen Dolar puts it, Symbolic repression becomes a battle of “the voice against the voice” (Voice 27).

A central point to be emphasized here concerns how this dynamic supplements and complicates the sort of psychoanalytic model of the fantastic that we find in Jackson and others. What we might call the Žižekian fantastic is marked by an investigation of the way in which our very (Symbolic) reality is itself held together through the operations of certain spectres and fantasy supplements, of the vital interdependence (or in Lacan’s terms, extimacy) between our reality and its apparent Outsiders, the ways in which the two are “co-dependent in their very incompatibility” (MI 121). It is revealing that in a live production of An-sky’s play, the very screams of the dybbuk and its final dying voice coincide with the blasts of the Shofar (47-48), the two voices intermingling or indeed becoming momentarily undecidable. A Žižekian approach encourages us to examine how, through an “anamorphic” shift, such apparently distinct spectres reveal themselves to be “the front and the back of one and the same entity, that is, one and the same entity inscribed onto the two surfaces of a Moebius strip” (PV 122).

It is with this dynamic in mind that we can tackle the question of the play’s culminating Liebestod. To recall, it is in the latter, for theorists such as Hutcheon, that we find the highest
culmination of the death drive, the ultimate fulfillment of a longing that pushes past all
Symbolic restrictions in search of the *jouissance* of undifferentiated Oneness. And it is
precisely in this impulse that it represents, for commentators such as Konigsberg, an elevation
of the “feminine” against the rigid structuring of the patriarchal regime of laws and norms. Its
transcendent union reflects a movement toward reconciliation between feminine and
masculine principles, an undermining or disruption of those paternal-symbolic structures
which would seek to suppress that which is “not submitted to the phallic function.” For
Konigsberg the undifferentiation captured in *Liebestod* presents an eminently “feminine”
challenge to the patriarchal concept of God associated with Jewish tradition, pushing toward a
higher reconciliation with Shekhina, its traditionally excluded feminine element. The ecstatic
merging of Leah and Khonen represents a “first step of unification, of the two parts forming
one” (37).

Applying the arguments developed over the course of this chapter, we can understand
why the “eroticized ecstasy” of *Liebestod* constitutes for Žižek not a culmination of the death
drive, nor a radical “hystericization” of Symbolic structures, nor a reconciliation of masculine
with feminine principles, but indeed a means of buttressing and sustaining the existing phallic
framework amidst the threat of disintegration, a *defensive* response to the Symbolic’s own
encroaching instability. Does not An-sky’s play demonstrate—both at the level of content and
at the level of formal-aesthetic experience—the way in which the image of *Liebestod*
functions to *resolve* a derailing “out of joint-ness,” converting the female subject as a *stain* in
the masculine picture—woman as “the pure nonsubstantial excess of subjectivity itself” (*OD*
192), correlative to the very *lack* in the phallic-symbolic universe—to *Woman* as a
phantasmatic figure which “covers over” or “plugs” this lack?
Perhaps the clearest way to illustrate this logic is by simply taking a “hysterical” reading of Leah to the letter. Empirically speaking, when the patriarchal representatives return to the Rabbi’s house at the close of the play, what awaits them there is quite literally a disturbing feminine remainder “fallen out” from the Symbolic frame—Leah lying dead outside the place circumscribed for her, out of joint with the circle which the Rabbi had drawn around her on the ground. Yet what we see—what is staged for us—is not a dead hysteric, the disturbing remains of an apparent suicide reflecting a traumatically incomprehensible feminine jouissance. The performance of a beautiful union with Woman beyond all Symbolic boundaries quite literally “covers over” and completely distracts from that remainder. “A giant light is pouring all around us,” chimes Leah as she revolves with her lover to the rhythm of wedding music: “We’ll float together, higher, higher, higher, higher …” (52). The Liebestod that is staged for us—and also, we should note, for the phallic regime’s own gaze—evades or covers over the disturbing remainder precisely by transposing it into Woman as site of a sublime Thing beyond all Symbolic limitations. The blissful fullness of undifferentiated union with her is a fantasy which functions to conceal the stain in the picture.

Central to Žižek’s reading of the Liebestod is Lacan’s (in)famous assertion that “there is no sexual relationship.”32 As Žižek insists, Lacan could not be further from the notion of male and female as two halves of a prior Whole (ME 159), two aspects of an undifferentiated homogeneity that was sundered with Symbolic castration and to which the death drive yearns to return. The sexual relationship’s “impossibility” is not merely contingent, the effect of (externally-imposed) Symbolic structures that interfere with the jouissance of a primordial Wholeness (which could otherwise be regained)—it is strictly inherent, correlative to a fundamental division which Symbolic structures and sexuated identities are themselves an attempt to mediate. Rather than the source of division, sexuated identities (“masculine” and
“feminine” positions) might instead be conceived as two “modalities” of coping with or mediating the deadlock of jouissance that “is” the death drive. To put this another way, if An-sky’s dybbuk reflects for Konigsberg a thrust to return to a unity of masculine and feminine, we might understand it rather as that which the positions of “male” and “female,” in their different modalities, seek to structure, organize, cover over. What is this dybbuk—as the (endlessly repeated) failure defining the drive in its negativity, the (inescapable) jouissance correlative to this derailed, “eternalized” movement around the object—if not an embodiment of Lacan’s “il n’y a pas”? And what if sexuated identities, rather than constituting the obstacle, the source of the impossibility, are precisely a means of concealing the trauma of its recognition?

To bring this discussion back to the level of our aesthetic experience in the theatre, we can note that the formally satisfying resolution of the concluding Liebestod is itself made possible by the intervention of Symbolic Law and its imposition of sexuated identities. The latter is what resolves the disturbing phenomenological antagonism which had preceded, an antagonism provoked by—and internal to—the enactment of this Leah-Khonen figure, that is, the figure of drive. The play’s exorcism, conducted by Symbolic Law, is simultaneously an eviction of the uncanny leftover which disturbs the smooth phenomenological surface of the theatrical appearance. Only by first effecting a transposition of this antagonism, “covering over” this derailment through the very division between masculine and feminine, can the play itself present a formally satisfying Liebestod, a fantasy in which the lovers appear to “fuse” (52).

If Lacan’s “formulae of sexuation” are notoriously complex, the crucial point for our purposes is that Woman, as that with which a “full sexual relationship” would be possible, is not simply a “counterpart” of man (the yang for his yin), something severed from him in his
fall from Wholeness to difference and partiality. One of the reasons the sexual relationship is fundamentally impossible is that the very opposition between man and the sublime Woman he seeks is an opposition *internal* to the dynamic of masculine sexuation itself. To say, as Lacan does, that Woman is not *outside* the phallic order but “ex-timate” to it is to say that the fullness that union with her would render possible—the notion of an ecstatic-transgressive bliss *beyond* Symbolic restraints—is a “masculine” fantasy *par excellence*, a fantasy *internal* to the paternal-Symbolic order. (It is for this very reason that “Woman,” in Lacan, corresponds to no actual woman or empirical “feminine”). Those postulating an ecstatic love-union as something dissolving all Symbolic boundaries, a step toward reunification of masculine and feminine principles, overlook the way in which Woman—that is, the fantasy-figure of Woman (with whom one unites in the *Liebestod*)—serves as “the necessary phantasmic support of the patriarchal universe” (*PF* 161), functioning to conceal its own traumatic inconsistency and to preserve the homeostatic balance it effects.

To put this another way, recalling our discussion of the Shofar, we should note Žižek’s insistence that Woman is herself “one of the nominations of the excess called ‘primordial father’” (*IR* 156). “The phantasmic figure of Woman is thus a kind of ‘return of the repressed’, of the Father-Enjoyment removed by means of the primordial crime of parricide” (155), an idealized mask beneath which we find his operations. This is to say, a close reading of Lacan reveals that the “phantasmic figure of Woman” (with whom one unites in the *Liebestod*) has ultimately the very *same status* as the roar of the Shofar. The realm of pre-Symbolic plenitude to which she promises return is the very fantasy that “fills out” or covers over the Symbolic order’s own traumatic lack or inconsistency. To return to our former terms, the Shofar and the *Liebestod*, if apparently opposed, are ultimately “one and the same entity inscribed onto the two surfaces of a Moebius strip” (*PV* 122).35
If An-sky’s *Liebestod* is directly complicit in this “masculine” cover-up, its specific features enable us, through close examination, to extraneeate the very dynamics that underlie this operation. When looked upon awry, does not this scene of apparent ecstatic-transgressive unity—comparable, for Wolitz, to the climax of *Tristan and Isolde*, an “image of pure passion fulfilled in death” (183)—reveal simultaneously an almost comical contrast between the sexes? We first have Khonen revelling in the phallic sublimity of his conquest: “I smashed all barriers, I conquered death, I flouted all the laws of time and space. I wrestled with the powerful, the ruthless …” (51). A truly Romantic *Liebestod* would seem the only fitting culmination to such an epic pursuit. However, what we find in Leah’s song—for Wolitz “a Wagnerian song celebrating the lovers’ death” (183)—could hardly be further from such an explosion of jouissance. Here we shift suddenly to a most domesticated prospect. The heroine begins to sing of the darning of clothes and the tending of children: “in dreams at night we’ll cradle our unborn babies. We’ll sew shirts for them, we’ll sing lullabies to them …” (51). Far from a self-obliterating immersion in the abyss of primordial jouissance, the fulfillment of their love will consist in an eternity of this shared domestic vision.

Is not the play’s most “fantastic” transformation that whereby such traditional domesticity is raised (in Lacan’s terms) “to the dignity of the Thing”? The sublime ecstatic-transgressive union coincides here with a most mundane scenario of family life, the bearing of children and the repairing of clothes—a scenario which, we should not forget, marks a precise fulfillment of a paternal prescription. This scene of radical transgression, of “pure desire” beyond Symbolic bounds, is simultaneously the direct fulfilment of a patriarchal impulse, an acquiescence to an interpellative call issued by the fathers of the children before their birth. This *Liebestod* effects a sublimation of that which, if not for the forgotten paternal order,
would have been a routine transaction, and indeed, considering the personalities of Leah and Khonen, a most restrictive and suffocating arrangement. One wonders how the restless Khonen could ever have accommodated his passion for the “fiery lightening” of the “endless infinite” (13) to the dimensions of this proposed nursery room. One can only conclude he would have found its conditions “far too narrow” (37), sustaining himself through enhanced forays into transgressive Kabala, or going off again in search of “new paths.” And how could the imaginative, provocative Leah have resigned herself to a dictated existence, bound to a life with her father’s friend’s pedantic, anemic son? Perhaps through fantasies of Menashe, this wealthy and aloof stranger from out of town …

Yet what we have here is not a simple dialectic of desire and prohibition, as though the mundane object is raised to sublime dignity simply because it is forbidden, its appeal enhanced by the sense of transgression accompanying it. This is the old Freudian logic, whereby “the psychical value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy” (ME 94). What we find here is a more complex reconfiguration of Enjoyment. Specifically, the union between Khonen and Leah, rather than a final leap into Enjoyment, is quite explicitly based in not Enjoying, that is, in the vision of a lost Enjoyment, an Enjoyment that was stolen from them. They are bound together through the vision of an Enjoyment that they could have had, if not for the (contingent) obstacles placed in their way. Leah “weeps” for this stolen Enjoyment as she “sings tearfully”:

Weep, oh weep, my babies sweet,
No cradle for you and no sheet.
Babies dead and never born,
Babies lost in time, forlorn. (51)
Far from a dissolution in the abyss of pure jouissance, this Liebestod effects an endless revolution around Enjoyment as an abstracted idea, framed as inaccessible, irretrievable. This operation enables the preservation of the fantasy of Enjoyment precisely by casting it as a thing that would have been possible in its intact fullness if not for certain obstructions, certain conditions of their Symbolic order. We see here a subtle yet vital anamorphic shift wherein, as Žižek puts it, the impossible changes into the prohibited. The paradox “consists of course in the fact that, as soon as it is conceived as prohibited, the real-impossible changes into something possible” (TN 116). The full sexual relationship is in a sense attained by Khonen and Leah, its illusion preserved, insofar as it is posited as off-limits, a thing prohibited to them by external impediments. The obstacles preventing its realization ultimately allow them to conceal and evade its inherent impossibility—it retains its absolute character (it evades detumescence) precisely by becoming forever barred to them.

And Žižek’s ultimate point, concerning the Liebestod, is that this underlying dynamic is integral to the operations of Symbolic reality itself, enabling it to hold its sway. This is to say, the Symbolic order is operative insofar as it creates the effect that without it, the full sexual relationship would have been possible (thereby disguising an inherent impossibility) (OD 114). We find in An-sky’s Liebestod not simply the sublimity of ecstatic transgression but a quite perfect demonstration of how such transgression may serve as a fundamental fantasmatic support of mundane life and acquiescence to Symbolic mandates. It is precisely through the support provided by such fantasies (beyond the phallus) that the existing way of life can maintain a degree of consistency. The couple will be able to go on sewing those shirts and tending those children for all eternity, sustained by the very fantasy of a Wholeness prohibited to them, and by the jouissance extracted from its loss.
This approach to the conclusion thus encourages us to further complicate what would seem a primary opposition in this play—the opposition between Symbolic Law and the “Western ‘virus’ of romantic love” (Wolitz 187). For Wolitz, the latter is the highest symbolization of a modern individualism and autonomy which, embodied in Khonen and Leah, infiltrates and shakes this Shtetl, subverting “the culture of sacred collectivity.” Against the notion of romantic love as a force resisting Symbolic inscription, bursting beyond assigned places and mandates, does not this play also bring forward the inverse side of the coin, i.e., the forceful *interpellation* correlative to romantic love itself, its (re-)invocation of a substantial Other determining one’s place? What “hysterical” approaches to this play would seem to minimize is the way in which the lovers’ love is itself a conjuration of and submission to a potently existent Other in which one’s mandate and destiny are inscribed: “I am her destined bridegroom” (37).

Of course, romantic love always appears a free choice in contrast with the arranged marriages and patriarchal prerogatives of Tradition, yet is there not an important sense in which the very attraction of such love relates to a radical *disavowal* of one’s freedom? As Mladen Dolar puts it, one “chooses” in romantic love “only by recognizing that the choice has already been made” ("First Sight," 130). Love, in a sense, is always something that has “happened” to one, as though inscribed for one in the big Other of fate, and “freedom” consists solely in the power to “endorse and corroborate the decision of the Other,” accepting it as one’s own “inner essence.” If *The Dybbuk* reveals the shattering, “invasive” force of Western romantic love, it reveals also how the attraction of such love resides in its “narrativization” of contingency, its retroactive imposition of meaning and necessity upon the bric-a-brac of modern existence. Such retroactivity is most acutely captured in the structure of Leah’s own reminiscences: “My heart was drawn to a radiant star. … In hushed nights, I shed
sweet tears and I kept dreaming about someone. … Was that you?” (51). We have here the operation whereby an unspecified longing is interpreted, after the fact, as having been (always-already) a desire for a specific individual. The desired object becomes sublime by giving a name to our desire, i.e., by having been that for which we longed when we longed. “Radiant star,” in its very ethereal ambiguity, captures precisely the magic of what Lacan terms the objet a—the place in our symbolic economy which the loved one comes to occupy.38 As Žižek puts it, though any object can technically occupy this place, the love-object’s sublimity is achieved “only by means of the illusion that it was always already there, i.e. that it was not placed there by us but found there as an ‘answer of the real’” (LA 35). Through this formal conversion, an external contingency of our experience is “‘internalized,’ symbolized, provided with Meaning” (IR 94).

Indeed, Khonen’s pursuit of Leah is swollen with and fuelled by such “answers of the real,” the frequency of which is paralleled by his determination to adduce proof that his union with her is registered in some immutable Other. Significantly, the very procedures of mystical Kabala—originally connected with the search for insight into the Divine—are here transferred to the love relationship, notable for instance in Khonen’s fixation on the number thirty-six. “I keep running into that number all the time,” he remarks, assured that it somehow “contains the essence of the truth” (11). Only moments later he is staggered to discover that the letters in “Leah” in fact add up to thirty-six. His love is fed upon such “answers of the real” attesting to the pre-determined status of their union, its prior inscription in a book of destiny and fate. We find here an apt demonstration of the way in which, for Lacan and Žižek, “Woman” is one of the Names of the Father—“the function she performs is exactly homologous,” insofar as “she renders it possible for the subject to locate himself again within the texture of symbolic fate” (ES 168).39
In a larger sense, at stake in this reversal is a complication of what we could call the genesis of the “modern” subject. On the surface, *The Dybbuk* would appear to reflect a direct “hystericization” of the pre-modern predicament. As Žižek puts it, “the traditional individual is embedded in the framework of Destiny, his place is preordained by the power of Tradition, and his tragedy resides in the obligation to repay the debt he contracted with no active participation on his part, but by his mere place of inscription in the network of family relations” (*IR* 114). The modern subject, conversely, is marked by the hysterical question: “Why am I what you say that I am?” He resists this “burden of Tradition” and “asserts himself as a self-responsible and autonomous master of his fate.” Yet is this passage from the pre-modern to modern autonomy really so direct? Against the conflation of the hysterical with the “invasive” force of autonomous desire, what if the very opposition between romantic love and Symbolic authority functions instead to “cover over” the truly traumatic dimension signalled by hysteria itself? What if we relocate the hysterical precisely in that which this “Western” import offers release *from*, i.e., the “hysterical disquiet” (*IR* 118) correlative to a loss of sturdy Symbolic coordinates, the vertigo and derailment accompanying what Eric Santner terms the modern subject’s “undeadening drama of legitimation” (43)? In my exploration of *The Dybbuk*, this “Western” romantic love infusing the play’s world and reaching culmination in the passion of *Liebestod*, reveals itself not primarily as a threat to Symbolic rigidity and the shackles of Tradition, but as a defence *against*, an escape *from*, the hysterical impasse that *is* the modern subject.40

To conceive this dynamic from a final angle, let us consider a revealing irony on the level of the play’s formal construction. As discussed, the material for this play was derived from An-sky’s ethnographic expeditions, undertaken in the spirit of a return to Jewish ethnic roots, with the aim of affirming a “legitimating” Jewish culture. *The Dybbuk* was one way of
uniting into a single work what was otherwise a welter of fragments, an almost overwhelming accumulation of historical, cultural, and theological snippets, resistant to unification and indeed often contradictory. The play comprises dozens of folkloric fragments, stories, beliefs, maxims, superstitions, rituals and practices, some claiming connection with authoritative sources, others deriving from oral tradition—a veritable “postmodern collage” (Neugroschel xiv). An-sky’s integration of this desultory bric-a-brac of cultural texts into a single coherent play was clearly an imaginative feat, and if the end-result has been criticized on the grounds of structural weakness, we might easily, following Žižek, recognize how such formal “weakness” can “function as the index of a fundamental historical truth” (TN 257), i.e., as an index of the radical inconsistency inherent to the very culture which the play examines. Yet to take this a step further, we should emphasize the irony that it is the very “invasive” force of modern love, this destabilizing, derailing “poison” threatening the stability of Tradition—that serves as the formal means of unifying this inconsistent, heterogeneous bricolage of fragments. The “Western” romantic love and the impulse toward “eroticized ecstasy” embodied in An-sky’s dybbuk—which, in its lovesickness, is an entity not grounded in Jewish folklore but rather a product of the playwright’s own modern imagination—is the very thing which brings unity and formal harmony to this welter of cultural texts, serving as the binding force of the play’s plot, bringing its myriad bits and pieces into a satisfying aesthetic Whole. The play’s own formal construction reveals how modernity’s shift from direct immersion in religious Tradition to individualism, secularism, and a distanced relation to one’s “culture,” is directly supplemented with the metaphysics of sublime love, directly supported by the fantastic spectre of the “full sexual relationship” which Liebestod epitomizes.
To draw upon the subtitle of An-sky’s play, the governing strategy of this analysis has been to retain the status of a thing “between two worlds.” In a type of dialectic movement, it has shifted repeatedly from an accentuation of the derailing force of death-driven *jouissance* to the seeming antithesis, i.e., an emphasis on the ways in which *jouissance* serves as a paradoxical support of Symbolic reality. Yet the key to this approach is found precisely in its complication of “dialecticism” as a straightforward counterbalancing of thesis with antithesis. To exist “between two worlds,” in this context, is not simply to oscillate between the (apparently) subversive and its reactionary complement, nor is it simply to show how the latter is inherent to the former, thereby negating its force, cancelling it out. Simply put, the properly dialectic movement consists here in recognizing how the truly subversive gesture consists in the *extraneation* of that which appears to subvert. The truly “hysterical” gesture consists not in that which exceeds the Symbolic frame (“not fully submitted to the phallic function”) but in the very hystericization of the latter—just as the death drive emerges most fully not in the ecstatic culmination of *Liebestod* but in the very undermining of this fantasmatic transcendence. It is also in the dynamic of such extraneation that we can locate a crucial feature of the Lacanian “traversal of the fantasy.” As Žižek puts it, to traverse is to “‘unhook’ *jouissance* from its phantasmatic frame and acknowledge it as that which is properly *undecidable*, as the *indivisible remainder* that is neither inherently ‘reactionary,’ the support of historical inertia, nor the liberating force that enables us to undermine the constraint of the existing order” (*GV* 118). The “subversive” consists here in the recognition and exposure of *jouissance* itself in its anamorphic status, an uncanny thing “between two worlds.”
S. An-sky is the penname of Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport.

As Žižek defines it: “existence in terms of the ‘big Other’, the predominant structure of the socio-symbolic space” (TS 262).

In Frankenstein’s monster, for instance, we find a reflection of Frankenstein’s own pre-symbolic existence: “The monster is Frankenstein’s lost selves, pieces of himself from which he has been severed, and with which he seeks re-unification” (100).

We can find similar emphases in recent critical writing, particularly in approaches influenced by the Jungian school, with its focus on counterparts (animus and anima, etc.) and its conception of sexuation as “the loss of the other sex” (TS 271), a division of two sides once “joined in a complete human being.”

 Succinctly put, “the circular movement which finds satisfaction in failing again and again to attain the object, the movement whose true aim coincides therefore with its very path toward the goal, is the Freudian drive” (ES 48).

For a discussion of this understanding of sublimation, see for instance Chapter VIII of Lacan’s Seminar VII, “The object and the thing.”

“Pathological” is used here in the Kantian sense—“pathological” goals are contrasted with higher moral and ethical purposes.

Since this seminar is unpublished, I rely here upon Žižek’s analysis in IR 219-220. This analysis is in turn reliant upon Jacques-Alain Miller’s comments on the seminar.

As Alenka Zupančič notes: “Human sexuality is not sexual simply because it includes the sexual organs (or organs of reproduction). Rather, there is something in the very constitution of human nature that, so to speak, sexualizes sexual activity itself, endows it with a surplus-investment … This point might seem paradoxical, but if we think of what distinguishes human sexuality from, let us say, animal or vegetable sexuality—is it not precisely the fact that human sexuality is sexualized …?” (The Odd One In 206).

We find the death drive precisely in such a “gesture of ontological ‘derailment’” which throws the Symbolic order out of joint—it names precisely the excess “through which the Real disturbs the homeostasis of life” (PV 182).

As Zupančič puts it, “Nothing could be further from psychoanalysis than the simplistic claim that sexuality has its natural place in human life, that this place should be acknowledged, and sexuality given a proper consideration alongside other human activities” (The Odd One In 207).

It is in this sense that “sublimation is related to ethics,” and it is here that we can understand Žižek’s insistence that “creative sublimation and the death drive are strictly correlative” (FA 30).

For more on the relationship of sublimation to ethics, see Zupančič’s The Shortest Shadow, 77-79.

See, for instance, Chapter VI of Lacan’s Seminar XVII, “The castrated master.”

Significantly, the passages in which the Rabbi expresses these doubts were cut from Joseph Chaikin’s New York staging of the play in the late 1970’s, a production stressing the dybbuk as a figure that shatters imposed divisions. See for instance Oscar Giner’s review, “Mark Me: The Dybbuk.” Theatre. 9.2 (Spring 1978): 149-151.

See, for instance, Lacan’s Seminar XX, 28, 81, and 131.

To put this another way, if Jackson understands the creatures of the fantastic as reflecting a desire to exceed the symbolic (as that in which we are caught, by which have been colonized), overcoming its constraints in favour of a jouissance beyond restriction (beyond all symbolically-regimented satisfactions), Žižek’s take on the death drive emphasizes the ways in which these creatures “between two deaths” are themselves caught within and “colonized” by a jouissance correlative to displacement, to a lack of support or organization by symbolic structures.

As Žižek puts it, “the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition” (LA 23).

In Adrian Johnson’s valuable distillation: the death drive appears in our “excessive contraction into isolated elements of existence, an overinvestment in disproportionately privileged elements that come to serve as operators of subjectification” (194).

20 While the use of lip-synching and/or voice modulation is an option in contemporary times, productions of An-sky’s play—and of its adaptations—have generally relied upon the actress’s own vocal powers. Of course, a number of twists have been attempted. In Joseph Chaikin’s production, Khonen appeared at the side of the stage during the exorcism scenes, speaking the dybbuk’s lines in unison with Leah.

21 Conversely, or perhaps simultaneously, a production experimenting with mechanically projected voices might produce the supplementary paradox: I know very well that the actress is not speaking, that she is just mouthing the words spoken by the actor playing Khonen, which are being projected through a microphone, but all the same I react to the spectacle as though the voice is truly arising from within this female performer’s body, as though it is something uncannily internal to it.

22 For more on this approach to hysteria, see LA 131. Žižek here elaborates on Lacan’s “discourse of the hysterical”: “It’s basic constituent is the question addressed to the master: ‘Why am I what you are saying that I am?’ This question arises as the hysterical’s reaction to what Lacan, in the early ‘50s, called the ‘founding word,’ the act of conferring a symbolic mandate that, by naming me, defines, establishes my place in the symbolic network: ‘You are my master (my wife, my king …).’ Apropos of this ‘founding word,’ the question always arises ‘What is it in me that makes me the master (the wife, the king)?’ In other words, the hysterical question articulates the experience of a fissure, of an irreducible gap between the signifier that represents me (the symbolic mandate that determines my place in the social network) and the nonsymbolized surplus of my being-there. There is an abyss separating them: the symbolic mandate can never be founded in, accounted for by my ‘effective properties’ insofar as its status is by definition that of a ‘performative.’ The hysterical embodies this ‘question of being’: his/her basic problem is how to justify, how to account for his/her existence (in the eyes of the big Other)” (LA 131).

23 Put another way, it is “precisely as nonexisting, i.e., at the moment at which, through hysterical breakdown, [woman] assumes her nonexistence, she constitutes herself as ‘subject’: what is waiting for her beyond hystericization is the death drive in its purest” (LA 65)—we find here “the dimension of the pure subject fully assuming the death drive” (66).


26 See Žižek’s discussion, SO 73.

27 Lacan’s concept of the sinthome is explored in his Seminar XXIII. As this Seminar has not yet been published in English translation, I rely here upon Žižek’s descriptions and analyses.

28 Lacan discusses this issue in his Seminar X. As this Seminar has not yet been published in English translation, I rely here upon Harari’s helpful explication.

29 See also Salecl 199.


31 Once again, I rely on Žižek’s analysis (and extension) of a discussion in Lacan’s untranslated Seminar X.


34 “… the apparition of Woman, of the woman who could fill out the lack in man, the ideal partner with whom the sexual relationship would finally be possible, in short, The Women who, according to Lacanian theory, precisely does not exist” (LA 80).

35 For further consideration, we should observe the way(s) in which Judaic Law has always been supported by such fantasmatic supplements: “Does the split between the ‘official’ texts of the Law with their abstract legal asexual character (Torah – the Old Testament – Mishna – the formulation of the Laws – and Talmud – the commentary of the Laws – all of them supposed to be part of the Divine
Revelation on Mount Sinai), and Kabbalah (this set of deeply sexualized obscure insights to be kept secret – recall the notorious passages about vaginal juices) not reproduce within Judaism the tension between the pure symbolic Law and its superego supplement, the secret initiate knowledge?” (OB 141). Žižek here draws attention to Kabbalah’s status as Judaic Law’s “necessary and inherent obscene supplement”—“something about which one does not talk in public, something that one prefers shamefully to avoid, and which, nonetheless, on that very account provides the phantasmic core of the Jewish identity” (141-2).

36 Recall here the dynamic of the “subject supposed to Enjoy,” as discussed apropos Equus in Chapter One. In both cases, the defensive gesture consists in a transformation of inherent impossibility into a contingent absence or loss.

37 In the context of Khonen, particularly relevant is Žižek’s reference to “the medieval notion that the melancholic is unable to reach the domain of the spiritual/incorporeal: instead of merely contemplating the suprasensuous object, he wants to embrace it in lust. Although he is denied access to the suprasensible domain of ideal symbolic forms, the melancholic still displays a metaphysical yearning for another absolute reality beyond our ordinary reality subjected to temporal decay and corruption; the only way out of this predicament is thus to take an ordinary sensual, material object (say, the beloved woman) and elevate it into the Absolute. The melancholic subject thus elevates the object of his longing into an inconsistent composite of a corporeal Absolute; however, since this object is subject to decay, one can possess it unconditionally only insofar as it is lost, in its loss. … For this reason, melancholy is not simply attachment to the lost object, but attachment to the very original gesture of its loss” (DS 144-5).

38 See for instance the second section of Lacan’s Seminar XI.

39 We have here again the undecidability of the Real: if it is that which “erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives,” it “serves at the same time as a support of this very balance” (LA 29); “The real functions here not as something that resists symbolization, as a meaningless leftover that cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe, but, on the contrary, as its last support” (31).

40 Put another way, if on one hand we conceive hysteria as “a reaction against interpellation” (IR 164), a “rejection of the identity imposed on the subject” (165), what is at stake here is hysteria as a “primary” state—a “radical, constitutive uncertainty as to what, as an object, I am for the other,” a state of fundamental vertigo and derailment which imposed Symbolic identities are themselves an attempt to evade or “gentrify.”
In “Moses and Michelangelo,” Freud speaks of his bafflement before certain works of art, and of his difficulty in understanding the nature of their aesthetic impact:

This has occasioned me, when I have been contemplating such things, to spend a long time before them trying to apprehend them in my own way, i.e. to explain to myself what their effect is due to. Wherever I cannot do this … I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me. (253)

We might easily admonish the “analytic” Freud for this (perhaps characteristic) predilection toward mastery, and for an inability to take pleasure in artworks he cannot fully “apprehend.” Yet for all this, his assertion of a relationship in aesthetic experience between (“rationalistic”) understanding and “pleasure” would seem a valid one. Long before him, Kant was keen to point out how we experience pleasure in that which lends itself to the ordering of our categories of understanding. And is not the role of “rationalistic” apprehension particularly relevant to theatrical experience, the power of which often derives from the meanings communicated to us by the representation? Simply put, our inability to “apprehend” a play and its operations is frequently correlative to a reduction in the pleasure we take from our night at the show.

Writing about Caryl Churchill’s The Skriker, Ann Wilson addresses directly this relationship between pleasure and “mastery” in the theatre. “My contention,” she states, “is that the key to understanding an audience’s theatrical pleasure is tied to the sense of mastery”
Specifically, pleasure is dependent on the ability “to identify with, and translate, the action on stage, to make meaning of it” (178). And as Wilson observes, the displeasure evident in much of the initial critical response to *The Skriker* seems closely tied to difficulties in apprehension. The play begins with “a giant riding on a piglike man, throwing stones” (9), an image foreshadowing the proliferating phantasmagoria that populates the dramatic landscape: a Kelpie, a Green Lady, a creature by the name of Rawheadandbloodybones, a Passerby who never stops dancing, a man who repeatedly spreads a sheet on the stage and positions a bucket atop it, etc. The obscurity of these creatures’ symbolic significance is exceeded only in the Skriker itself, whose ten-minute introductory monologue (“Slit slat slut. That bitch a botch an itch in my shoulder blood …”) is a strong contender for the most incomprehensible speech in all of drama. This eponymous entity, described tersely by Churchill as “a shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged” (9), latches alternately onto the play’s central characters, two young women named Josie and Lily, the former of whom has killed her own baby for reasons that are never explained. What could be called the play’s “action” proceeds from there. Unsurprisingly, initial reviews the play expressed bewilderment.

If pleasure in the theatre requires “dramatic action which accommodates the audience’s need to create a coherent narrative” (Wilson 186), Wilson boldly queries whether Churchill’s play may not in fact be termed a failure. *The Skriker* is not only difficult to apprehend—it “seems intently to refuse the audience creating an explanatory narrative” (184). Yet for Wilson, far from a mere failure, *The Skriker*’s is a highly productive failure, indeed deliberate and calculated, designed to extraneate the very notion of mastery. The human impulse to explain and interpret, to create coherent narratives, is something directly thematized within the play itself, which forcefully impresses upon us an awareness of our habitual perceptual and cognitive tendencies, defamiliarizing their mastering bent. Such extraneation is especially
potent, insists Wilson, since the mastery in question is never limited to theatrical experience: “interpretative mastery is compatible with other modes of mastery. It is a mode of social regulation and containment based on relations of power which are, by definition, hierarchical and potentially oppressive” (187). Wilson’s analysis is here aligned with a number of other commentators who find in Churchill’s use of “non-realistic forms of representation,” “fragmentation of narrative, and frustration of closure,” a means of confronting audiences “with their own expectations that participation in the theatre ritual will result in the unity of coherence and a catharsis of terrors” (Kritzer 159). Such strategies, in “preventing the audience from automatically assuming its usual ‘role,’” move its members “towards confronting their own presence and modes of participation in the theatre—and, by implication, in the broader cultural/political system” (160).

With the image of Freud still fresh in mind, we might question whether psychoanalysis itself is not the epitome of this impulse toward mastery. Is not its quintessential gesture that of bestowing symbolic meaning upon otherwise obscure and resistant formations, dis-covering and putting into language the latent narratives that it presumes to dwell below desultory appearances, constructing frameworks of meaning to subdue the baffling? Indeed, the habitually impenetrable Skriker is quite explicit in its own disdain for those psychoanalytic models which would seek to contain it: “Haven’t I … scoffed your chocolate screams, your Jung men and Freud eggs?” (38). Yet critically, Wilson’s own approach is by no means a rejection of psychoanalysis as a strategy for approaching such plays—psychoanalysis indeed provides the very foundation for her analysis both of Churchill’s play and of theatrical pleasure. She employs it to examine how The Skriker, in its resistance to interpretation in general and psychoanalytic interpretation a fortiori, valuably extraneates the impulse toward mastery with which psychoanalysis has been historically complicit.
Central here is the psychoanalytic model of language’s relation to repression. Freud’s understanding of his grandson’s game of “fort/da” (“here/there”) as a means of rehearsing the mother’s absence (the child “masters” the absence through symbolization, in this way displacing it), accentuates the impulse toward mastery at the heart of language—i.e., how its symbolizations work by deferring or displacing through substitutions the traumatic absence correlative to an “initial experience of loss” (Wilson 179). The Skriker, as a creature evoking that “absolute absence which haunts language but which language cannot render” (186), reveals that which symbolic mastery would seek to repress. It reminds us that “the mastering narratives which an audience, which indeed any social subject, creates through language, are ruses inasmuch as the explanation banishes the repressed, the absence which informs all symbolic acts” (186).

Yet it is also here that we should supplement Wilson’s appraisal of theatrical pleasure with a type of inversion. If it seems true that a dimension of pleasure is tied to our sense of “mastery” over the dramatic representation, is it not also true that much of theatre’s profound effect upon us (and indeed our enjoyment of it) is intimately related to that in it which eludes us, confounding our attempts at mastery? Is it not theatre’s capacity to evoke what defies representation, its intimation of things beyond us, things surpassing our schemas and categories of understanding, that most forcefully ensnares our desire? Is not the paradox of Churchill’s play, and specifically its eponymous character, the fact that it is, or can be, enjoyable to watch in spite of (or indeed because of) its insistence on remaining so defiantly enigmatic?

To return to Freud’s description, we should note that his professed inability to derive from these artworks the pleasure correlative to “rationalistic” comprehension is by no means a denial of their “effect” upon him. Does not his prolonged contemplation testify to the
(paradoxical) role in the aesthetic experience of a certain powerful jouissance—the jouissance (as “pleasure-in-pain”) of a confrontation with something which persistently eludes him? Indeed, might we not suggest that the very forceful effect of these artworks upon him is itself deeply related to the intimation within them of a thing exceeding his existing symbolic formations?

If the dynamic of mastery is itself thematized within Churchill’s play, cannot the same be said for the dynamic of our attraction to (and enjoyment in) the unmasterable, the unrepresentable? In a crucial scene of the play, in which Josie makes the decision to give herself over to the Skriker and go where it takes her, Churchill is intent on evoking both the enigma of desire and desire’s relation to the enigmatic. Neither what the Skriker desires of Josie, nor what Josie desires of the Skriker, is rendered clear:

Josie: What do you want?
Skriker: I want a lot but so do you. We could both have it.

It is not simply that the characters’ desires remain enigmatic to the audience (who fail to uncover or “master” the substance of the exchange). Josie’s forceful attraction to the Skriker and the intensity of her desire is itself a product of this enigma. We find here, in its multiple senses, Lacan’s notion of desire as “desire of the Other”\(^1\): Josie’s is both a desire for the enigmatic Other, and a desire spurred by the enigma of the Other’s desire. The true object of Josie’s desire remains thoroughly enigmatic not only to the audience but to Josie herself—she must go with the Skriker, she tells us, because otherwise “you’ve lost your chance and it could be the only chance ever in my life to—” (34). It is insofar as what the Skriker embodies remains utterly mysterious and ungraspable to Josie herself that it so forcefully ensnares her desire.
To take this a step further, if the play examines the relationship between theatrical pleasure and language—i.e., as that which seeks mastery via symbolization and narrativization, controlling and ordering what resists us—does it not also explore language’s own *ex-timate* relationship with this “unrepresentable” exception? This is to say, if language masters and orders, does it not also (in its very *inadequacy*) impress upon us (enjoyably) the force of something which exceeds it? We find an excellent example in the scene where the Skriker attempts to understand the functioning of the TV. Appearing as a middle-aged American woman in a bar, the Skriker forces Lily to provide a verbal explanation of the television image, i.e., to put into *words* the process whereby the depicted objects appear on the screen. The scene is marked by the dramatic *impotence* of Lily’s language to master the phenomenon in question, i.e., to provide a coherent explanatory narrative of the image’s journey to the screen. Yet Lily’s horribly failed description, which, in its desperation, sends language off in all directions, notably amplifies the Skriker’s *desire*. The very incapacity of her words to capture their object produces the impression of all kinds of *secrets*, as though the verbal description were concealing some hidden kernel, some fascinating *thing* beyond itself: “You’re holding out on me” (21), insists the Skriker. Ultimately, no adequate explanatory narrative is provided—the television image is left unsymbolized—yet if this scene fails to offer the pleasure concomitant to an orderly account, its wonder consists in the *success* of Lily’s failure, i.e., in the way it opens up a depth of mystery in this all-too mundane TV image, making of it a strange, foreign, impossible entity, almost threatening. The lengthy silence which follows (“No big deal. We can just watch what comes over”), if marked by a dissatisfaction, is also a very *enjoyable* moment, its swollenness impressing upon us the highly enigmatic and indeed *uncanny* quality of this entity which only moments previously had done nothing to capture the gaze.
Insofar as it is language itself that awakens in this mundane entity a depth beyond symbolization, do we not find here a type of “speculative correlative” to the Skriker as a “return” of that which no symbolization can master? Put another way, if the Skriker as “beyond” the Symbolic, not submitted to the phallic function, gives body to that absence which haunts symbolization and which the latter seeks perpetually to defer and cover over, does not Churchill’s play also showcase the reverse dynamic, that is, the uncanny surplus correlative to language itself?

To risk yet another “anamorphic” shift, if symbolization is associated with the attempt to master, and if that which confounds symbolization functions to expose the “ruse” of symbolic mastery, should we not, with the previous chapters of this dissertation in mind, emphasize what may appear to be the obverse—that is, how what we call the Symbolic order or phallic regime is itself reliant upon the intimation of that which exceeds it, how the very thing which escapes containment may indeed serve as the Symbolic’s own constitutive supplement? To put this in a more directly political sense, if (as Wilson and Kritzer assert) interpretative mastery is compatible with and reflective of “other modes” of domination and hegemony, we should emphasize also how such modes of mastery may exert their subjugating force precisely through the evocation of what exceeds meaning and resists symbolization. Recall here Kafka’s tale of the “Man from the Country” who, confronted with the Door of the Law, waits immobilized, utterly enslaved by the enigma behind it, a “secret” which, he eventually discovers, existed for his gaze alone. Does not ideological mastery rely precisely upon such fascinating, elusive bearers of enigmatic meaning, signifiers which, in their very impenetrability, ensnare our gaze and compel the force of our desire? If mastery involves the attempt to contain and reduce via language, we should also note that the peculiar power of those Master-Signifiers which support the phallic-symbolic regime resides in their structural
irreducibility to specific signifieds, the ultimate (and definitive) obscurity of their content.

“Enigmatic term,” as Žižek reminds us, “fits exactly what Lacan calls the Master-Signifier (the phallus as signifier), the ‘empty’ signifier without a signified” (PD 71).

Following Wilson’s lead, we should assert that the subversive force of Churchill’s play is to be found in its capacity to extraneous our relations to Symbolic mechanisms and enjoyment. Yet we should also be conscious of the way in which this interrogation of “mastery” would seem to give rise to something of an interpretative deadlock. That is to say, within this context there would seem the implication that almost any attempt to “read” the play could constitute a potential violation of its own internal spirit and emphasis. Any attempt to use language to say things about its ideas, themes, etc., risks reducing and shackling (submitting to the phallic function) a thing which resiliently asserts its un-masterable status (just as Josie defies any attempt to have an explanation imposed on her crime). In this light, my purpose here is to suggest a “third way,” that is, how we can understand the play as inviting new ways of speaking about it while simultaneously avoiding the interpretative “trap.” Thus I propose not simply an alternate reading of the play—for instance, that it is not, after all, a play about mastery but something else instead; yet nor is the intention simply to propose a supplementary inversion of previous analyses, emphasizing how their unspoken other is also true in its own way. I assert that what the play offers us, even more fundamentally, is a potent encounter with this dynamic of inversion itself. Perhaps what is most fundamental is the way it encourages and impresses upon us the “anamorphic” shifting demonstrated above—its capacity to render acutely, and in multiple ways, this very dynamic of anamorphosis. To put this another way, my approach seeks the Real of Churchill’s play not in yet another meaning hidden below the surface of its images and lines—it investigates rather what Žižek calls the “parallax of the Real”: “ultimately, the status of the Real is purely
parallactic and, as such, insubstantial: it has no substantial density in itself, it is just a gap between two points of perspective, perceptible only in the shift from the one to the other” (*PV* 26).

Those commentators who have attempted to extricate from Churchill’s play a central message or meaning have predominately focussed on the issue of “damage.” The Skriker is introduced to us in the text as a “death portent, ancient and damaged” (9), and one of Churchill’s rare comments on the play’s intention suggests that it deals with “damage to nature and damage to people” (in Kritzer 168). Katherine Perrault’s analysis is one of number that, in light of Churchill’s frequent engagement with issues pertaining to women, suggest we understand the play in terms of the damaged feminine:

> Viewed as the essence of that which is woman, the Skriker is deformed and corrupted by years of her own ensnarement: her dysfunctionality results from succumbing to the hegemonic practice of defining herself by her reflection in the patriarchal mirror—which Churchill manifests in the Skriker’s subversion, seduction, and eventual domination of Josie and Lily. (50)

What is perhaps most striking about this argument is its curious duality. On the one hand Perrault suggests that the Skriker represents woman as “damaged” by patriarchal hegemony—the creature registers the damage that results from “the impairing patterns and destructive cycles of hegemonic constraint” (52). On the other, she suggests that this very constraining domination is represented in Josie’s and Lily’s subjugation by the Skriker itself, the latter shifting here from subject of hegemonic constraint to its representative. The Skriker is first the subjugated/damaged (and resurging) feminine, and then the subjugating/damaging paternal hegemony.
Geraldine Cousin understands the play in terms of ecological damage. It is “a cautionary tale, a forceful and timely reminder of the ecological disaster that may await our descendants in the near future if we fail to learn to use the Earth’s resources more wisely” (189). “They poison me in my rivers of blood poisoning” (12), cries the Skriker, who, in its damaged condition, registers the effects of pollution and humanity’s mistreatment of the planet. Yet if the Skriker is the poisoned and damaged planet, it is also, as much critical writing asserts, the poison itself, the source of this damage. Kritzer points out that this creature, according to Northern English folklore, is a malevolent spirit known for drowning children (169). If babies “represent the future” (170), then the Skriker, “as the killer of children, threatens the future. The continual references, throughout the play, to killing and eating children point to an ages-old human pattern of destroying the future and feeding the present on its dead body” (170). For Kritzer, the Skriker thus represents the “patterns of behaviour” (171) which have characterized humanity’s past, “a kind of original poison” which, however “ancient,” still persists and results in damage that poses an imminent threat to our planet.

We can thus understand this figure of the Skriker as “hegemony” and “patterns of the past,” damaging the feminine, damaging the natural, and we can understand it as the damaged. It is both the cause of damage and damage as effect. Put another way, the Skriker is Death and the Skriker is Life. As the patterns which damage nature, as the poison of the existing system which is doing the repressing and the destroying, the Skriker is Death against Life. As the poisoned, and as the “vengeance” of that which has been damaged or repressed by the existing system, the Skriker is Life, a damaged Life, a resurging Life against Death. What is most revealing here is how the Skriker’s own shapeshifting is reflected on an interpretative level. It
is a thing which appears in different places, in different forms, indeed doing so within the 

*same* interpretative equation.

Yet what is at stake here is not simply an acknowledgement of the entity’s interpretative multivalence, i.e., the idea that there are different and indeed contradictory ways of reading the same theatrical figure. The Skriker’s peculiar manner of shapeshifting encourages us not simply to note alternate readings but to experience the complex “speculative” relationship between seeming dialectical opposites—the “short circuit” between positions, their status as two sides of the same Moebius strip. It encourages us to find the Real precisely in what emerges in the shift from one perspective to the other.

I propose we approach this “speculative” relationship—between damaged and damaging, Life and Death, feminine and paternal—through what may initially seem a consummately gesture of mastery. I propose we name Churchill’s creature with a concept—*lamella*. The latter is a neologism of Lacan’s, and he invites us, if we want to stress “its jokey side” (*XI* 197), to call it *hommelette*—a Skrikerian term if there ever was one, combining as it does the French “homme” or “man” with “omelette,” and also evoking “manlet.”

What is lamella? Lacan raises the notion in *Seminar XI*, but the brevity of his discussion here, and the infrequency with which he returns to it, renders intimidating a careful exploration of the topic. Yet Žižek is keen to emphasize its central importance in understanding critical thrusts in psychoanalysis, revealing the way it serves to elucidate and to interconnect a range of Lacan’s concepts. His own discussions tend to emphasize two main (and related) attributes of the Lacanian creature: first, its “undeadness”—lamella is indestructible and immortal—and second, its amorphous, ever-shifting nature—lamella as “the terrifying formless thing” (*HL* 66), “a multiplicity of appearances” (62). He frequently draws upon the Lacanian lamella in reference to such creatures as the alien in Ridley Scott’s movie
by the same name, with its horrifying indestructible life. We find in Churchill’s creation a most forceful reflection of the way this undeadness (“I am hundreds of years old … I have been around through all the stuff you would call history” [23]) is combined with an infinite mutability. Her shapeshifter, like the lamella, incessantly morphs from one incarnation to another, assuming numerous appearances throughout the play and even transposing itself into different media (sounds, for instance) and inanimate objects such as a sofa.5

Clearly, and indeed by definition, lamella is a difficult entity to get a hold of, and thus an even trickier thing to fruitfully “apply” in a critical context. To take a first step, accepting Žižek’s parallel with the alien, let us consider this Skriker in terms of its devouring, vampiric aspect. In Kritzer’s terms, the creature manifests “a voracious hunger that consumes” (170), preying upon human beings and deriving sustenance from them. “They need us you know,” says Josie of the Skriker and its kin: “They drink your blood” (42). (Suitably, in the play’s premiere the Skriker’s initial appearance was that of “a huge, spider-like creature with wings like a bat’s” [Kritzer 168].) Such a creature, if on the one hand to be identified with the “feminine,”6 simultaneously “inverts mother-like traits, feeding herself off the young women and their offspring, rather than nurturing them” (Kritzer 170).

Earlier in this discussion we introduced the Freudian fort/da and its relation to psychoanalytic models of language. We can understand a crucial thrust in Lacan’s lamella by considering this game from a different angle. If in Freud’s articulation, the aim of the play between these signifiers is to master a loss (i.e., through signification to cope with and cover over the absence of a primordial jouissance experienced in union with the mother), Žižek emphasizes how a properly Lacanian reading of this game should “invert the standard constellation” (PD 59).7 What if signification functions not (primarily) to master a lack (i.e., of the mother, of jouissance), but to open up and sustain a lack, that is, to introduce the space of
a lack against an excess? What if the true anxiety arises not from the mother’s absence, but from her excessive proximity, from the state of being trapped, suffocated, by her jouissance? As Žižek puts it, “it is not that, anxious about losing my mother, I try to master her departure/arrival; it is that, anxious about her overwhelming presence, I try desperately to carve out a space where I can gain a distance toward her” (59-60). (Recall here the first chapter of this dissertation, wherein we explored anxiety’s relation to the over-proximity of the incestuous object.) The da, in this sense, is not (primarily) an accommodation to a lack, but the latter’s introduction—a symbolic facilitation of the distance the child requires from a jouissance that comes too close.

What is the basic “plot” of Churchill’s play if not an extended game of fort/da understood in this way, i.e., not as a “playful exchange” but rather “a desperate oscillation between the two poles, neither of which brings satisfaction” (PD 60)? If (in a gesture of da) Josie initially distances herself from the Skriker, setting her onto Lily instead—“I wish you’d have her instead of me” (17)—she instantly regrets the decision: “Wait. I don’t mind you any more … Oh but I’ll miss you now.” As she later puts it, “When you feel her after you it’s … But when you’ve lost her you want her back” (34). Josie does everything in her power—even facing almost certain death—to escape confinement in the Skriker’s “Underworld,” yet once she has achieved sufficient distance from this realm she is instantly torn apart by a terrible sense of loss: “Everything’s flat here [in the “real” world] like a video … I’m never going to be alright” (43).

What Lacan’s lamella accentuates, in this light, is the complicated and paradoxical shapeshifting of jouissance itself—the “short circuit” between its appearance as a fullness (of Enjoyment) beyond Symbolic boundaries and this horrible, monstrous Enjoyment which preys upon us—jouissance as a sublime thing traumatically lost to us, and the (traumatic) presence
of a thing that comes too close to us and from which we cannot escape. The Skriker, as something exceeding all symbolization and finite restrictions, proffers an illimitable fulfillment (“I’ll give you a wish” [17]; “I can give you heart’s desire” [28])—it is the promise of something which would satiate a desire for that which exceeds all conceptions and formulations—yet it is also and simultaneously a monstrous encroachment which must be evicted from reality, its insidious presence the source of ultimate anxiety. This is to say, we find in it the very duality of Lacanian jouissance, which “simultaneously attracts and repels us—which divides our desire” (SO 180).

To return to our former terms, the Skriker as lamella complicates the simple opposition between the Life-substance as something escaping the Symbolic, and the Death correlative to the latter. The Skriker is their paradoxical conjunction, the Death correlative to this Life-substance, jouissance as that which preys upon the living.8

In another act of shapeshifting, do we not find a direct mirror-image of this fort/da in Josie’s relation to her own child? Whatever the precise reason for Josie’s actions, the murdering of her baby demonstrates the formal dynamic sketched above: the baby’s status as excess is directly evoked in her references to a “changeling,” intruding from undead realms, something that literally doesn’t belong in this reality and must be forcibly evicted so the latter can function normally: “You put the changeling on a shovel and put it in the fire” (44). For Josie, the Life usually associated with (and symbolized by) a baby is subjected to a horrifying twist, becoming an invasive, undead Life, something that seethes through the cracks of reality, literally feeding upon the living. Notably, this relationship is the formal inverse of the dynamic we find in Lily, whose baby takes on the structuring role of objet a, operating as a type of sublime centre-point to reality, around which everything circulates, a place-holder of Meaning onto which all value can be projected and by virtue of which everything else derives its
significance: “Every thing’s shifted round so she’s in the middle. … [I]f she wasn’t all right it’d be a waste, wouldn’t it” (43). As examined in my chapters on Equus and Possible Worlds, this “anamorphic” shift—from an excess of jouissance, or jouissance as excess, to the objet a (as an “empty frame that provides the space for the articulation of desire” [ME 76])—is the very condition of a subject’s relation to Symbolic reality.

Yet to fully understand how Lacan’s lamella informs the dynamic of Churchill’s play we should explore it more directly in the context of temporality. Lacan’s own account states quite explicitly that the lamella is “related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality” (XI 197)—“It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction” (198). The entrance into sexuality is to be understood here as a decisive break from the realm of “scissiparous” reproduction (“like the amoeba”). Reproduction in the latter mode, wherein for instance a microorganism divides itself into two equal cells, is “immortal”: “Here,” as Harari clarifies, “there is no death of the individual or of the species,” whereas sexuality, which requires “coupling in order to attain by that means the production of a new being,” involves an inevitable loss: the new being’s emergence “is at the cost of the disappearance, sooner or later, of the being of the former generation” (Four Concepts 240). It is in this sense that the establishment of sexuality implicates death. “With sexuality something is lost, something is left behind” (241), and Lacan’s “immortal” lamella represents the sexed being’s loss, an initial loss that “irremissibly condemns him to disappearance.”

Do we not find the temporality of the lamella—“cut off from the living body caught in sexual difference”—vividly reflected in the Skriker’s Underworld, this realm of horrible undead Life? We should first note that this realm is staged specifically for the gaze of Josie, whose destruction of her own offspring is also, in the Lacanian sense, an attempted rejection
of the very finitude concomitant to sexuated reproduction. The initial focal point of this scene—the Hag, searching for the various pieces of her own body, chopped up and stewed by the Underworld’s innumerable inhabitants—is an acute reflection of this temporality “between two deaths.” Severed into seemingly endless pieces—“Where’s my head? where’s my heart? where’s my arm? where’s my leg? is that my finger? that’s my eye” (35)—the Hag nonetheless lives on, persisting. She is a creature which, like the Lacanian lamella, “survives any division, any scissiparous intervention” (XI 197). Is not the true horror of such creatures (rather than deriving simply from the violence they have suffered) their seeming imperviousness to severance and division, the way in which they can be cut into infinite pieces yet still shamble on? (Do we not find here also a variation of the Sadean “sublime body,” capable of withstanding infinite torture: “an ‘undead’ victim of torture who can sustain endless pain, without having the escape into death at his or her disposal” [PD 76]?). Notably, the Underworld itself “feeds” on this immortal body, this corps morcelé, and Josie’s own decision to eat from it inculcates her into the undead Life of this realm, opposed as it is to that of the normal sexed beings in the world “above,” victim to temporality. The Skriker’s warning that Josie will die if she drinks from the fountain, though seemingly disproven, is technically accurate, insofar as doing so returns Josie to the realm of sexual reproduction and its correlative finitude.

The temporality at stake here is accentuated by Churchill through this Underworld’s vivid juxtaposition with the play’s final scene, which stages Lily’s own attempted descent. Anticipating an experience similar to Josie’s, she is subjected instead to a dialectic inversion. Willing to enter the undead realm (outside of sexuation) on the condition that her own (Symbolic) reality—defined for her by her relation to her offspring—remain on pause and preserved as such, Lily is confronted instead with a nightmare of sexual reproduction and its
correlative temporality. As she journeys decades into the future, the succession of her offspring—“my child’s child’s child’s” (56)—is set vividly beside sexuality’s concomitant death, its inevitable loss: “Lost and gone for everybody was dead years and tears ago, it was another cemetery,” the Skriker’s pun aptly merging “cemetery” with the symbolic place of “century.” Here, Lily’s eating of the food—a “mortel morsel”—far from endowing her with undead Life, turns her instantly to “dustbin” (57), with its appropriate evocation of the past-tense (“been”). We thus see in the juxtaposition of Josie and Lily how the temporality of lamella complicates the relationship of Life and Death, accentuating sexuated Life as Death, while revealing also the horrifying Life correlative to the Symbolic Death of the Skriker’s realm. Notably, both temporalities “designate a properly monstrous dimension” (PV 121).

Yet just how monstrous is this thing before us on the stage? With Žižek’s reference to Alien in mind, our first impulse might be to assert that live theatre simply cannot represent lamella with the same power as a medium like film. The latter’s superiority in evoking the horror of this Life-substance in its inescapable immediacy would seem affirmed by the relative infrequency in contemporary times with which we encounter aliens, monsters, and the “undead” upon the stage (at least in theatre for “adults”). Perhaps this circumstance is not simply a result of the medium’s inadequacy. Even (or especially) the most astonishing theatrical representations of such creatures and entities (“beyond representation”) may have the paradoxical effect of accentuating their own theatricality—the more impressive the theatrical incarnation of undeadness, the more we recognize the theatrical feat. Or the supplementary paradox: the more real the alien entity upon the stage, the more it derails the theatrical fiction, thrown “out of joint” with the order of representation by virtue of its intense and immediate substantiality.
In many senses Churchill’s Underworld seems a rather explicit concession to these paradoxes. What is, on the level of enunciated content, a descent into the realm “between two deaths,” a confrontation with horrible undead Life beyond Symbolically-regulated appearances, is presented as explicitly—indeed excessively—theatrical. Churchill states that our “first impression” of the set, upon which the full cast of her phantasmagoria (Yallery Brown, Nellie Longarms, Black Dog, The Radiant Boy …) is assembled for Josie’s arrival, should be that of a “palace” (35), complete with the Skriker as “a fairy queen, dressed grandiosely.” The whole of the feast (described above) is underscored with music, the characters frequently singing together. Though the initial splendour is to be offset with certain uncanny flourishes—“some of the food is twigs, leaves, beetles … some of the beautiful people have a claw hand or hideous face” (34-5)—this undead realm hardly seems to aim at an embodiment of the monstrous Real, and we might say it goes conspicuously out of its way not to try. For critics of the first London run of the show, this Underworld, replete with the conventions and excesses of highly commercialized theatre and verging indeed on parody, was a particular failing of the production, incomprehensible, garish, and “out-of-joint with the rest of the play” (Wilson 177).

Is there any way to redeem this Underworld? Could we suggest that its explicit artificiality, repeatedly reasserted through “lapses” (35)—“It looks wonderful except that it is all glamour, and here and there it’s not working” (34)—signals a revealing failure of representation to ever adequately capture that which lies outside the Symbolic order? Is there not a way in which this representation (à la the Kantian sublime) evokes its object precisely through its own explicit inadequacy? Yet with the dynamic of our previous inversions in mind, perhaps what is most revealing here is not the absolute divide but rather the undecidability established between enactment and enacted. Does not this conjoining of monstrous Life-
substance (beyond all representations) with cheap theatricality accentuate an important
dimension of the referent itself, evoking a dimension correlative to this Real? If what Lacan
calls the realm “between two deaths” is on one hand the site of monstrous, seething Life, it is
marked on the other hand by an (uncanny) absence of ontological heft. Is there not an
important sense in which undeadness, in its very infinitude, is closely akin to the Saturday-
morning cartoon realm of endless reconstitution, a realm whose coyotes and Elmer Fudds
survive even more graphic assaults and dismemberments than Churchill’s “scissiparous” Hag?
For all the material density of its monstrous Life, does not the very deathlessness of this Real
(beyond mortal finitude and appearances) render it simultaneously a type of immaterial
puppet-theatre, or in the Skriker’s own terms, a realm of “sham pain” (35)? In this light we
can find in Churchill’s highly theatricalised presentation of this domain a revealing reflection
of lamella’s own paradoxical (indeed constitutive) conjugation of Real and irréel.

To supplement this with a mirror-inversion, perhaps the key to lamella in its full
complexity is to be found precisely in the “short circuit” effected in theatrical production, i.e.,
the way the monstrous Real beyond theatrical appearance (always exceeding its flimsy
insubstantiality) directly coincides with an excess of theatre, an overwhelming surplus or “too-
muchness” of theatrical proliferation which, as critics have been keen to point out, doesn’t
belong here, lacks a proper place in the theatrical spectacle, throwing the latter out of joint
with itself (“out-of-joint with the rest of the play”). What this scene gives us is not simply a
theatrical representation of monstrous undead Life; as it progresses, the representing
medium—in its “semioticity”—becomes increasingly derailed by its own excess. The
Underworld “fails,” we could say, because it is derailed by a surplus of theatrical jouissance,
as though the theatrical were itself possessed (“undeadened”) by a Life not adapted to the
measure of its own dimensions. At the scene’s climax: “One by one the spirits get up and
dance, and Josie and the Skriker too, increasing frenzy. Some of them fly into the air. In the confusion the feast disintegrates ...” (37). The theatrical medium here quite literally flies out of control, its semioticity almost completely overwhelmed by the immediacy of its own proliferating Life. If on one hand the scene reflects a failure of the theatrical medium to adequately “represent” the monstrous undead Life-substance correlative to what Lacan calls lamella, on the other hand, we can find a crucial dimension of this lamella evoked in the very “short circuit” between the former and the latter, the medium and the referent.14

To put this another way, if in a first step, we understand lamella by reflecting the Death correlative to symbolic representation into pre-symbolic Life—this Life as horribly “undead” and preying upon the living—in a second step we reflect this very monstrous, palpitating undeadness into the stuff of symbolic appearance itself.

We can find the dynamic of this inversion most vividly rendered—in Churchill as in the later Lacan—directly apropos the signifier. In the first half of the play, the Skriker makes its most direct impact on Josie and Lily by targeting their speech, yet for each girl it employs a different strategy. As the Skriker’s victim, Josie finds that her speech is literally overrun with toads: “What? uh uh I’m sick, what, it’s alive, it’s—it’s toads is it, where from, me is it, what?” (26), and indeed, “As she speaks toads come out of her mouth.” What are these toads, spewing out amidst the signifier, if not language’s own “return of the repressed,” the mucous slime of a pre-symbolic Life-substance which the word would seek to “kill,” i.e., that which must be lost/repressed in order for the signifier to establish its mastery. We can think of the toads as that Real which Josie’s words cannot adequately master, the remainder of this Real not fully gentrified by language.

This episode with the toads would seem related to Josie’s attempted rejection of the Skriker, whereas Lily, having accepted and welcomed it, finds her speech affected in a very
different way. “I can give you heart’s desire” (28), the Skriker tells her, whereupon Lily’s speech is accompanied by a flow of money. Coins attach themselves to her signifiers, falling out of her mouth the more she speaks, naturally prompting the girl to continue talking as much as possible. Yet if Lily is spared the horrible Life of the toads, we should note here a Real of another kind. Lily’s speech is likewise incapable of full “mastery”—yet what escapes it, in this case, is its own product. This is to say, speech is here eternalized insofar as its attachment to money evokes an absolute Value that can never be reached—no amount of speaking will produce completion, since there is always more money to be had. If for Josie, the signifier is derailed by that remainder of a prior Real which escapes it (which it cannot cover over), Lily reveals how (in Žižek’s terms) “symbolization itself engenders the surplus which escapes it” (TN 180). We have here the Real of an immortalized spectral Life correlative to signification itself:

…singing thinging counting saying the alphabetter than nothing telling stories more stories boring sore throat saw no end to it fuckit buckets and buckets of bloodmoney is the root of evil eye nose the smell hell the taste waste of money got honey to swallow to please ease the sore throat so could keep on talking taking aching waking all night to reach retch wrench more and more and more on the floor. (19)

If Lily’s episode is understood as a reward (in opposition to Josie’s punishment), it is surely a paradoxical reward, indeed traumatic, plaguing Lily to the point where she is dying to be freed from it (i.e., from the “bad infinity” of her own speech): “another wish it would stop stop talking now and sleep at last fast asleep” (19). (Here, “another wish” is directly intermingled with “wish it would stop”—two sides of the same coin.) What we have, rather than the Real as something covered over, “mortified” by the signifier, is the Real of an undead
Life correlative to (produced by) symbolic mechanisms. As Žižek argues, “it is language itself which pushes our desire beyond proper limits, transforming it into a ‘desire that contains the infinite,’ elevating it into an absolute striving that cannot ever be satisfied” (V 65). In a properly “speculative” inversion, the “living dead”—“the monstrous life-substance which persists in the Real outside the Symbolic)—finds its counterpoint in the eternal, undeadening Life correlative to the Symbolic itself, “language as a dead entity which ‘behaves as if it possesses a life of its own’” (PV 121).

If lamella has been defined as a “non-castrated remainder,” this example encourages us to think about it not (simply) in the sense of some initial (pre-symbolic) Life-substance which survives the imposition of the signifier (escaping castration), a Real which Symbolic operations fail fully to subdue and which returns through the Symbolic’s cracks. What we have is not, most fundamentally, a chronological movement from the undead Life of lamella to the Death of Symbolically-regulated sexuality, the former’s temporality replaced (covered over) by that of sexuated reproduction; rather, the very undead Life of lamella emerges concomitantly with the cut of the signifier, as its “positive obverse” (HL 65). To put this another way, if the Skriker evokes the absence correlative to symbolic castration—in Wilson’s terms, the “absolute absence which haunts language but which language cannot render” (186)—what must also be understood is how this “absence” is correlative to an excess. Standing both for something irretrievably lost to us, relegated as we are to the domain of sexual reproduction and its Death, and for an excess Life that “battens on” to us (an immortality which afflicts us), the shapeshifting Skriker confronts us with the “parallactic” dynamic of jouissance itself: “that which we can never reach, attain, and that which we can never get rid of” (PV 115).
We can approach this from a different direction by exploring another “speculative” correlation central to *The Skriker*. If, in its monstrous, devouring aspect the Skriker recalls the horrifying Life-substance of Scott’s alien, we find in Churchill’s play yet another mode of alien horror. If the Skriker “in the Real” is an entity totally different from human beings (“a huge, spider-like creature with wings like a bat’s” [Kritzer 168]), for most of the play this creature assumes human form, appearing virtually indistinguishable from normal humanity (and indeed, as a human actor, *is* the appearance it assumes). Its alien horror, here, consists not in the degree to which it departs from or deranges the human form. We have a dynamic more akin to the alien element in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—aliens that appear almost identical to normal humans, betraying their non-humanity through some tiny, almost imperceptible nuance. We find the Real here not as an obscene, all-devouring Life-substance but as correlative to this very “minimal difference,” an otherness that is difficult to pin down to any specific observable detail, an aspect “that has no substantial consistency” (*HL* 69). We have here the Lacanian *objet a* as a “mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable ‘something’ that introduces a self-division into an ordinary object” (*OB* 82). This is to say, if on one hand the Skriker is an “unrepresentable” Life-substance beyond or in excess of Symbolic coordinates, on the other, the Skriker is directly correlative to this “unfathomable X” by virtue of which these humans are somehow self-divided, *not fully themselves*—by virtue of which their human appearance, which is “all there is,” is nonetheless “non-all.” The Skriker is here correlative to the “unrepresentable” feature which prevents the human being from being “fully human.”

Yet to go a step further, we can find a key to lamella precisely in the simultaneity of these two perspectives. That is, the key is to understand the monstrous undead Life of lamella as directly correlative to this point of self-division, this inherent obstacle in the human circuit,
the “bone in the throat” by virtue of which the human being is never “fully human.”

Monstrous undead Life (which appears in finite existence) is correlative to the fact that the human being as such, subjected inevitably to the cut of the signifier, does not fully coincide with itself, does not achieve a complete circuit. To “be” a human being is to be undeadened by the cut of castration, thrown out of joint by “an inherent difference, the difference between the human and the inhuman excess that is inherent to being-human” (PV 123). In this light, lamella, the undead partial object, is a “remainder” of castration not in the sense of a thing which somehow evaded castration, but as a wound which persists, remaining “inscribed” upon the body: “the wound, the disfiguration/distortion, inflicted upon the body when the body is colonized by the symbolic order.”

This inversion encourages us to subject the theme of “damage” to yet another twist. Shapeshifting between damag ed (Life) and damag in ing (Death), the Skriker also confronts us with a monstrous, undead Life concomitant to damage. This is to say, it is not simply that the Skriker as Life is dying due to “damage,” nor simply that the undead Life of the Skriker causes damage, preying upon the living. From another angle, the Skriker’s damage is the wound by virtue of which it cannot die. The creature prompts us to consider an undead jouissance that is itself directly correlative to a “damage” or fundamental disruption—a Life that arises insofar as the circuit is “not working” (Churchill 34), its smooth-functioning derailed and thrown out of joint. We can think here of the boy in Kafka’s “Country Doctor,” or Wagner’s Amfortas—characters plagued by an “undead” wound which, while parasitizing on the body, prevents them from dying.19

With this in mind, we can bring this section to a close by taking note of two crucial features of Churchill’s world. If damage and death, in the critical arguments referred to above, are associated with “hegemonic constraints,” what is perhaps most conspicuous about the
world of the play is the *absence* of the Paternal and its Law. This is a realm in which the Symbolic Father is literally lacking. The fathers of both Josie’s and Lily’s children are missing, not even referred to (*named*). And Josie’s own remarks on the complete lack of consequences for her crime (“Licence to kill, seems to me” [15]) cast Symbolic Law as ineffectual. Second, we should note the peculiar way in which Josie is “fed upon” in this realm. She is not simply desiccated, sapped *of* Life, but afflicted *with* it. Put another way, it is precisely in her capacity of *Enjoying* that Josie is used and preyed upon by the Skriker.

Churchill’s Underworld feeds on human beings not by stifling them, sucking away or repressing the Life in them, but precisely by making them *Enjoy*, pushing food and drink upon them (to excess), compelling them to consume and to sing and to dance without cease: “Don’t you want to feel global warm and happy ever after? … Look at the colourful, smell the tasty. Won’t you drink a toasty with me” (36). Enjoyment, far from something which must be repressed, is here itself the “forced choice” (“You might as well say yes. You can’t get rid of me” [24]), an *imperative*, something which, however blatantly *substanceless* (“It’s glamour. It’s blood and dirt and water”), Josie cannot stop herself from partaking of, undeadened by her very consumption of it.

Placing these two features side-by-side, do we not find here a vivid expression of the contemporary dynamic described in Chapter One of this study, a shift from Symbolic Law to superego, i.e., from Enjoyment as prohibited to Enjoyment as *injunction*? Against a direct opposition between the Death correlative to the subjugating, hegemonic system, and the Life which it damages or represses, what is at stake here is (also) a system that “masters” its subjects precisely by *undeadening* them. The damage and Death correlative to “hegemonic constraint” finds its speculative inversion in the undead Life correlative to a damaged (lacking) Symbolic order, i.e., a system which, as *inherently* out of joint, *fundamentally* self-
divided, compels and is fuelled by the very (excessive) jouissance of its subjects. If Josie is not guilty for murdering her child, in this realm of superego she is (like us) guilty in a more radical sense, and she must pay by perpetually enjoying.

This discussion begins to suggest how lamella, whilst seemingly most illuminating on the level of individual subjectivity, is intricately related with the socio-political. And what is perhaps most notable about Churchill’s play is its complex doubling (and redoubling) of its interplay with the Real on social and political levels. If the Skriker is correlative to that by virtue of which the human being is out of joint with itself, not “fully human,” it is also, in a very conspicuous way, the self-difference of the social body. It manifests itself in a nomadic succession of the placeless, the disenfranchised—a homeless woman, a male tramp, a nameless abandoned child, a mental patient. The Skriker’s upperworldly manifestations are “out of joint” with any determinate place, lacking consistency in nationality and gender, denied identity in the structured Symbolic network. We have here what Žižek, referencing Rancière, terms “the part with no-part”: “those who (in terms of the existing order) are displaced, and float freely, lacking work-and-residence, but also cultural or sexual, identity and registration” (PD 64). The “no-part” constitutes a supernumerary or surplus element, belonging to society yet lacking a distinctive, defined place.

Like lamella, the no-part is a thing “cut off from the living body” (HR 65), “incorporeal” in the sense that it is unintegrated into the organic Whole—an “excessive element which wanders around, lacking its ‘proper’ place.” And in Churchill’s play, the direct correlation between this no-part and the undead Skriker reveals it in its monstrous dimension, i.e., as a threatening resurgence of that which is excluded (and “damaged”) by the Symbolic regime, returning through its cracks—“Ready or not here we come quick or dead of night”
Yet here again, we are encouraged to consider the Real of lamella from another angle, keeping in mind, as we do so, the consummate theatricality of Churchill’s pre-symbolic. This is to say, what if the status of this no-part as monstrous Real outside of Symbolic restraints, as the pulsating, devouring Thing that threatens to seethe through the cracks in the Symbolic fantasy, is itself the ultimate fantasy-formation, a fantasy internal to the Symbolic regime? Put another way, what if such a monstrous, resurging Life-substance, far from threatening the Symbolic with the Real, is precisely a means of avoiding it—i.e., a staged fantasy covering over the Real of a self-difference that is inherent to the Symbolic?

To clarify this shift we can refer to the anti-Semitic vision of the Jew. Was it not precisely as a monstrous Thing, a rapacious, all-consuming alien-creature, that the figure of the Jew served as the very support of the existing hegemony in Nazi Germany? For the latter, as Žižek argues, the monstrosity of the Jew was not, fundamentally, an outside threat to the order, but rather a “fantasy-construct” covering over that order’s inherent impediment—a fantasy to account for the failure to establish “society as a harmonious, organic whole” (ES 89-90). The Jew is here a spectre that enables the hegemonic regime to mask its fundamental deadlock, preserving the notion of a Totality that could be achieved if not for this derailing thing with which we’re stuck. The monstrous Real of the Jew is society’s own self-division evicted, the displacement of its inherent antagonism: “by transposing onto the Jew the role of foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society qua consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible” (90).

This is one way in which we can understand Žižek’s frequent injunction that the “terrifying vortex” of the monstrous Real be recognized as “a lure destined to distract us from the true traumatic cut” (FA 73), a lesson increasingly relevant today (“when we are confronted with an image of that deep horror which underlies our well-ordered surface, we should never
forget that the images of this horrible vortex are ultimately a lure, a trap to make us forget where the true horror lies.”) Here we encounter from a different angle the status of lamella as irréel. This monstrous, undead Life-substance that we find evoked in the Skriker is “incorporeal” both as that seething excess cut off from a (symbolically- or politically-subjugated) body, and as that which exists in a strictly immaterial way, in this case, as fantasy. And in this regard we should recognize the truth inherent to Churchill’s rendering of this Real as an explicitly theatrical semblance, an ultimately flimsy, illusory pretence. What emerges upon the stage (in a manner peculiar to theatre itself) is the radical “undecideability” of jouissance—the monstrous Real as simultaneously irréel, a consummate theatrical effect, an orchestrated appearance with no substance behind it.

We can consider further this “ex-timate” dynamic apropos the strange and grotesque phantasmagoria of (highly theatrical) apparitions which, throughout the play, seethes into the space of Josie and Lily’s urban England—Kelpies and Bogles lingering in the background, Rawheadandbloodybones, Brownies, Spriggans and Green Ladies sharing the stage with the two women’s Symbolic reality. Do we not find here a Real that “returns” in symptomal intrusions, a destabilizing resurgence of that which had to be repressed in order for the Symbolic to function and maintain itself? Perhaps the key to approaching these enigmatic apparitions is to be found in taking them first on the level of their most immediate, phenomenological functioning in the theatre. That is, what are they if not a type of “filler,” a theatrical “stuff” that fills out the spaces in between the play’s scenes? These appearances are directly correlative to the gaps in the narrative sequence as it unravels on the stage—they quite literally take the place of a void, insofar as their appearance prevents or makes unnecessary the blackouts or curtains that would otherwise be required (especially given the Skriker’s need for frequent costume changes). This “filling” is spatial as well as temporal, the appearances
forming a sort of “unconscious” background of the focal action, populating the edges and interstices of the theatrical world, filling in the void that would otherwise loom behind Josie and Lily. However strange, and if resistant to symbolic interpretation, do they not bring together the pieces of the play into something fluid and organic—do they not constitute a type of theatrical substance for its unravelling? (This function is perhaps exemplified in the “Passerby,” who never leaves the stage or ceases to dance in spite of multiple shifts in time, location, and ontology, holding the place of a consistent Ground in which the production has its being.)

This is to say, the “return of the repressed” is to be supplemented with Žižek’s insistence on the “structural necessity of ghosts” (CH 235) (and “‘undead’ entities in general”), the way in which the inherent gaps in normal reality are “filled out with phantasmagorias” (ES 136)—the way in which the “non-all” of experience is “covered over” precisely by such spectral proliferations. We should observe here, once again, the “ex-timate” relationship of “immortal” Life to the Symbolic and its Death, i.e., how it is the very finitude of the symbolically-constituted subject, and of transcendentally-constituted reality itself (the fact that, as Kant observes, experiential reality is always necessarily incomplete), that gives rise to this infinitude, this space where spectres and undead ghosts multiply exponentially. If in Wilson’s terms we have here a resurgence of the “absence” that the Symbolic would seek to defer, on the other hand, what is lamella itself if not “a formation that stands for and fills the ontological Void” (TS 163)?

Moreover, the conspicuously theatrical status of this phantasmagoria in Churchill—and the way in which, in the theatre, it is placed upon the same ontological plane as the rest of the play’s “reality”—impresses upon us its ex-timity with symbolic construction. Put differently, we should observe how, in Churchill’s production, this phantasmagoria as
correlative to an unsymbolizable Real, in *excess* of Symbolic reality, coincides with a
constructed plethora of symbols, a staged symbolic *profusion*. What Lacan calls lamella can be
understood precisely in terms of this *shapeshifting*, i.e., from the Real of a non-symbolic
excess which the Symbolic fails fully to “cover over,” to this (irréél) profusion of symbolic
“stuff,” this fantasmatic filler covering over the (Real of a) fundamental *gap* in the Symbolic
fantasy.22

The parallel with the logic of anti-Semitism, taken a step further, may reveal
something crucial about this play’s engagement with ideology. We have noted the incredible
difficulty of “interpreting” the Skriker, insofar as it would seem to “stand for” such a great
many things. How are we to distil from this play a particular ideological stance or critique, in
the midst of this overwhelming potential to signify? In addition to those things the creature
literally embodies—homelessness and disenfranchisement, abandonment and baby-killing,
mental illness—it indicates a vast multitude of fears and horrors to which we are susceptible:
“Earthquakes. Volcanoes. Drought. Apocalyptic meteorological phenomena. The increase of
sickness” (48). It both relishes and seems implicated with the proliferation of “snuff movies”
(49), attempts at suicide (54), “the kind of war we’re having lately” (49), and motorway
pileups on foggy days (53). It is not only multivalent but contradictory, a figure lacking
positive ontological consistency—it is both the effects of humankind upon nature and the
unruliness of nature beyond our control, both the horrifying apocalypse and the horrors posed
by fanatical apocalyptic thinking, etc.

Here we might recall the story of the factory worker suspected of stealing.23 Each day
as he left for home, his wheelbarrow was carefully inspected, yet each day it was discovered to
contain no stolen goods. Eventually the truth became clear—he was stealing the wheelbarrows
themselves. What if our thorough search for an elusive meaning contained in the figure of the
Skriker blinds us to the container as such? This is to say, what if the primary “ideological significance” of the Skriker is to be found not in any of its particular meanings or in any combination of these divergent things for which it “stands,” but in the very formal gesture whereby such a multitude of fears, issues, horrors, etc., are “transubstantiated” into manifestations of the same ground?

If, as Kritzer states, “the Skriker manifests a primal and inexplicable evil that poisons every human society” (168), we could argue that a central element of any ideological field is its introduction of such a “negative magnitude”: “the positivization of the opposing force of ‘evil’” (PF 76). Insofar as an “ideological edifice gains consistency from organizing its heterogeneous ‘raw material’ into a coherent narrative” (FT 18), this “negative magnitude” serves as what Lacan would call le point de caption or “quilting point,” an entity which, in its consummamate shapeshifting, provides a “container” for a society’s divergent and indeed inconsistent fears, “anchoring them, ‘reifying’ them” (TN 149). This poison, this “evil,” this additional fear—in its fascinating presence—has the paradoxical effect of blocking all other terrors, out-screaming them. We can think here of Racine’s “I fear God … and have no other fear”—in this instance, “God” literally annuls the other fears by occupying their place. And we can discern the same operation in anti-Semitism: “the Jew is Hitler’s point de caption … the entity called ‘Jew’ is a device enabling us to unify in a single large narrative the experiences of economic crisis, ‘moral decadence’ and loss of values, political frustration and ‘national humiliation’, and so on” (FT 18).

Perhaps what the Skriker “symbolizes,” most fundamentally, is precisely this eminently ideological gesture of formal conversion; and perhaps the true “evil” or “damage” is to be found precisely within this gesture as such. Is this not the lesson of Lily’s final “sacrifice” (her willingness to let the Skriker take her into the Underworld)? However selfless,
her gesture demonstrates *par excellence* this symbolic transubstantiation of the multitude of fears and horrors with which the play has presented us into a single entity whose neutralization would provide deliverance? (“You’ll leave everyone else alone if I do that” [55], she says to the Skriker). And can we not find a primary strength of Churchill’s play precisely in its *extraneation* of this gesture? That is to say, in searching for the substance or “meaning” of the Skriker amidst these multiple associations and significations, we are confronted with the fact that the Skriker *is* precisely the attempt to ground this vast array of fears, horrors and evils in a particular substance or meaning. And in this light, is not the Skriker *itself* the consummate gesture of “mastery”?24

We should note how this extraneation implies an inversion of the symbolic logic at work in critics such as Wilson. If for the latter, the Skriker can be understood as that which exceeds all symbolization, as that which resists the phallic function (i.e., which no language can fully name), what is emphasized here is how the naming *itself* introduces an ungraspable depth into the symbolized content. It is *as name* that the Skriker “digs a hole” in these divergent phenomena; being called the Skriker—“It is the Skriker” (17)—opens up within them a dimension of the unseen, the space of a unifying *ground* of which they are all (mere) manifestations. And insofar as it is precisely this ground (*beyond* symbolization yet its very *effect*) that constitutes a primary support of the hegemonic phallic regime, is not the properly “feminine” gesture to be located precisely in that which is “submitted to the phallic function,” that is, in a dropping of this reference to the Beyond of symbolization?

Examining the paradoxical relationship between pleasure and mastery from a final angle will permit us to consider larger ways in which these Žižekian-Lacanian dynamics can contribute to a theorization of critical interpretation. If it is true that through (symbolic)
interpretation we seek to master what a play presents us with, perhaps what Churchill’s play extraneates, just as forcefully, is our desire for the play to master us. “Clearly,” says Kritzer of *The Skriker*, “this work is meant to deliver a strong warning, but the substance of the warning may be difficult to discern through the haze of masque-like effects and twisted verbiage” (171). As this comment makes clear, to watch Churchill’s play is not simply to experience bafflement but simultaneously to feel ourselves powerfully addressed. The experiential conflict in this play arises insofar as, in the midst of its often impenetrable strangeness, we feel ourselves forcefully hailed by it. There is a strong sense that it desires something from or in us. This is especially potent in light of our expectation that Churchill, as a renowned, socially-conscious playwright whose works consistently raise pressing concerns facing the contemporary world, will want us to do something, see something, recognize some injustice, respond to some call. It is precisely such an experience, in which we feel confronted by a “validity in excess of meaning,”25 potently addressed by a voice from which we can derive no definite call, no symbolic place or identity, that Lacan terms the *Che Vuoi?* (“What do you want?”) (*Écrits* 690). We are clearly the addressee of an Other’s signifiers, but those signifiers fail to satisfy our demand for a definite interpellation. More precisely, the issue here is not simply an absence of interpellation but rather, as Žižek puts it, “interpellation without identification” (*TN* 275). We feel most acutely that we are being called, yet for what?

The trauma of this *Che Vuoi?,* this “validity in excess of meaning,” is directly related in Lacan to the traumatic dimension of the (m)Other’s *jouissance*,26 and crucially, as the previous reading of the *fort/da* game has implied, what “resolves” the deadlock is precisely the introduction into this excess of a certain lack, embodied here in an “empty” signifier. The da, in a Lacanian reading, does not function to “cover over” or defer an absence (i.e., a loss of some substantial Real); the child’s game functions by *introducing* and maintaining the space
of an absence, assuring that the latter appear. Paternal-symbolic intervention permits the subject’s own structuring precisely via such an opening amidst intrusive excess; it makes possible the subject as “subject of desire” precisely by opening the space for something which exceeds grasp, receding behind appearances. On this fundamental level, the “masculine” dynamic (as developed by Lacan in Seminar XX) consists not primarily in an attempt to subdue a resistant substance which exceeds it, but precisely in the evocation of something beyond the phallic domain: “all x are submitted to the phallic function” insofar as “there is at least one x which is exempted from the phallic function.”

Is there not an important sense in which our pleasure, as theatrical spectators, is rendered possible precisely insofar as we are able to situate ourselves vis-à-vis the space of a certain lack in the play-text that confronts us? Let us consider this inversion specifically apropos the Skriker and its passionate direct-address of the audience, the jouissance of this endless verbal profusion with which we are assailed in the theatre. No doubt the Skriker here evades mastery—its signifying chains are often, in performance, nearly impossible to follow let alone “interpret,” denying us the identification and understanding (and correlative pleasure) normally elicited by theatrical characters. Yet on the other hand, should we not also recognize that the very interest and attraction—and indeed the substantiality—of “normal” characters, as presented to us in “normal” drama, is highly dependent upon their own evasion of mastery, the presence within them of an elusive dimension resistant to meaning, exceeding representation, irreducible to what they say and do on stage? Is it not true that such characters ensnare our desire, and indeed become most forcefully “real” to us, via the resonance of something beyond their words and actions, never fully accessible to us? (They’re saying this, but what do they really mean by it? what do they really desire from it?)
Is it not precisely this dimension (the *open space* of something *exceeding* meaning and representation) that is obfuscated in the Skriker’s speech? What is perhaps most notable about the creature’s language is the way its “bare” statements are excessively *flushed out*, supplemented and interwoven with a seemingly interminable wealth of their own unconscious associations and extensions. The *space* of possible meaning beyond the given, usually repressed in normal speech and normal characters (i.e., present as *absent*), is here saturated, filled in—we get *too much* meaning, eliminating the very *lack* on which our sense of the other’s reality depends. The Skriker’s speech is over-presence, a torrential flow of meaning that congests the normal “non-all” quality of communicative language. If in Wilson’s articulation, the Skriker’s repugnance derives from its imbrication with absence (an absence we seek constantly, through language, to defer, and which here is exposed), is it not precisely in relation to the absence of an absence, the lack of a lack (upon which symbolic meaning, and indeed our relation to other human subjects, normally depends) that we can understand the unnerving *anxiety* its speeches create? Žižek has used the term “*informational anorexia*” to describe our reaction to such an “excessive filling-in of the voids”: “the desperate refusal to accept information, insofar as it occludes the presence of the Real” (PF 155).

We can put this another way apropos the notion of a “divided” subject in Lacan. What is perhaps most notable in much of the Skriker’s speech is the curious way in which a single word or phrase can be divided between two meanings (and two symbolic positions), as in the following: “wrap her in a blanket out, have a sandwich one would you like?” (57). Here, the phrase “wrap her in a blanket” overlaps with “blank it out,” just as “have a sandwich” overlaps with “which one would you like?” Do we not have in these articulations an exemplary “divided” subject, i.e., a subject that is saying two diverging things simultaneously, a subject split between two utterances? Such explosions disturb the unified wholeness that
constitutes the speech of a substantial subject; they prevent the Skriker’s signifiers from adding up to the whole of a Person, a coherent Self. Yet a more precise consideration of the Lacanian subject should supplement this position with its “speculative” inversion. Perhaps the peculiarly unnerving quality of the Skriker’s speech arises precisely because what Lacan would call the “divided” subject is missing or occluded here. This is to say, it is not (simply) that the Skriker-as-subject is split between two utterances, eroding the unity characteristic of a normal subject; it is rather that the very split or division that defines normal subjectivity does not here take place.

We should recall here Lacan’s distinction between the “subject of the utterance” and the “subject of enunciation.” If the former, expressed in a simplified way, consists in the “stuff of the ‘I’” (for instance, the Skriker’s use of the pronoun ‘I,’ its attribution of certain qualities to itself, its linguistic expression of itself as an entity), what is the “subject of enunciation” for Lacan if not a contrast with its own utterance, an otherness from this utterance? The paradox of the subject of enunciation, as demonstrated in Lacan’s “graph of desire,” is the way it emerges retroactively, an effect of the completed signifying chain. As Johnston clarifies, the uttered signifiers retroactively generate “a subject proper ($) by instituting an unsuturable ‘cut’” between an intention-to-signify, “prior to the articulation of the utterance,” and the utterance itself (257). This is to say, a completed utterance generates the effect of the subject precisely as divided from the unity of that utterance, i.e., as the place of a thing misrepresented by the utterance, “inadequately rendered by the signifiers actually spoken.” From this angle, in the Skriker’s explosive speech, language fails to “quilt” the space of the subject as such. The very moment when this retroactive operation would take place is disrupted, forestalling the effect of the subject as this contrast ($). In this regard, Churchill’s creature is so unnerving not (simply) because there is something in it which exceeds our grasp and comprehension, but
precisely because its utterances are without the very depth or impenetrability that defines someone as a person. What is lacking from them is precisely the lack itself, the elusive space of something which does not appear, receding behind representation and symbolic proliferation.

From a Lacanian perspective there is of course much more that could be said about Churchill’s fantastical play with language in the Skriker’s monologues (do we not have here an exemplary demonstration of what Lacan calls “lalangue,” and its correlative jouis-sense [enjoyment-in meaning]? Yet what this exploration seeks to accentuate is how our pleasure—as spectators, as critics—hinges not simply upon the act of determining and “fixing” what the Skriker (and The Skriker) has said, submitting the latter to the “phallic function,” but perhaps even more fundamentally, upon a gesture which introduces into this experiential superabundance (this “too-muchness”) the space of a certain lack—a lack in relation to which we can position ourselves and achieve a Symbolic identity. We find the pleasure of symbolic intervention not simply in a linguistic “mastery” of the play but in the way language opens up a depth within it, converting this “inhuman partner,” in its overwhelming jouissance, into an Other with whom extended dialogue becomes possible, constructing space for the critic’s own desire. Pleasure resides here not most fundamentally in the fulfillment of desire, i.e., of our desire for final significance, the catching and decisive fixing of something in the play which had continued to slip behind symbolic formations and evade meaning. Rather, flooded initially with an overwhelming surplus of symbolic formations and potential meaning, does not our pleasure as critics arise precisely from the openness, the seemingly infinite space created in the play by our own act of interpretative intervention? “When I first approached this play it just seemed baffling, virtually inaccessible,
though I now feel as though I could fill an entire book writing about it and still never quite get to the bottom . . .”

We should recall here the later Lacan’s specification of the Master Signifier as a “signifier without signified.” The phallus (as “paternal metaphor”) does not ultimately interpret the Che Vuoi?—it does not, as Žižek puts it, “provide an explanation for the enigma of the mother’s desire, it is not its signified (it does not tell us ‘what the mother really wants’), it simply designates the impenetrable space of her desire” (PD 72). Has the present analysis not revealed how “damage,” as an interpretative Master Signifier, functions par excellence as a “signifier without signified”? This is not to say that “damage” is a meaningless term, but rather to emphasize how, in functioning to designate a symbolic space whose precise meaning is indeterminate and always “filled out” retroactively, it introduces an openness into the play-text that enables us, as critics, to enter an extended dialogue with it, positioning ourselves as Symbolic subjects in relation to Churchill’s call.

If the present study is complicit to a degree in the pleasure correlative to such modes of symbolic intervention, its claim to transcend the restrictions of “masculine” interpretative dynamics can be understood with reference to Lacan’s “formulae of sexuation” as developed in Seminar XX. What has been termed a “parallactic” Real—the anamorphic dynamic repeated above, with its emphasis on a Real that emerges in the shift between two perspectives—finds its parallel in the shift between the “masculine” and “feminine” formulae in Lacan. The masculine dynamic, as we have seen, hinges upon an exception to symbolic subjugation: “all x are submitted to the phallic function” insofar as “there is at least one x which is exempted from the phallic function.” The feminine dynamic is thus the dropping of an exception to the phallic function: “there is no x which could be exempted from the phallic function.” Yet crucially, this gesture is by no means equivalent to an assertion that “there is no Real,” i.e.,
only symbolic formulations and fictions (stretching on to a “bad infinity”). The “unmasterable” exception (constitutive of the masculine dynamic) finds its “speculative correlative” in the second half of the feminine formula: no $x$ can be exempted insofar as “not-all $x$ are submitted to the phallic function.” This is to say, the shift from the “masculine” to the “feminine” formula is a shift from a Real beyond symbolic formulations to a Real correlative to the Symbolic order as “non-all.” We find, as Žižek puts it, “a shift from the notion of woman as a substantial content beyond male representations to the notion of woman qua pure topological cut” (IR 161)—from “an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network” to “the fissure within the symbolic network itself” (HR 72). The dynamic employed throughout this chapter suggests a mode of interpretation which makes of this very split a primary object of investigation—and it locates a primary strength of Churchill’s play in its capacity to extraneate this split.

As is hopefully apparent from this analysis, exploring the play in terms of this dynamic, while seeking to evade the interpretative “trap” (and its correlative “mastery”), is simultaneously a way of seeing new dimensions and movements and possibilities in the play-text, and indeed of providing enjoyment. The relationship between this Real and enjoyment (in terms of a feminine mode) is something I will explore in a more thorough way in the chapter that follows, in which this very “feminine” dynamic will be considered apropos two highly enjoyable topics: love and comedy.

1 See Seminar XI, 115.
2 See Žižek’s discussion of this story, PD 78 and FT 108.
3 See also PD 78-9: “The site of truth is not the way ‘things really are in themselves,’ beyond their perspectival distortions, but the very gap, passage, that separates one perspective from another, the gap … that makes the two perspectives radically incommensurable.”
4 Do we not find a similar dynamic internal to the psychoanalytic discourse in Wilson’s approach? This is to say, on the one hand the “repressed” is the fullness of a jouissance experienced prior to symbolic intervention, a fullness repressed or “covered over” by the symbolic. Yet on the other, the repressed is
absence itself—the metonymic functioning of language seeks, via deferral, to “cover over” the absence at its very heart.

5 Žižek asks us to “imagine a ‘something’ that is first heard as a shrill sound, and then pops up as a monstrously distorted body”—an apt description of Josie’s escort into the underworld.

6 Writes Žižek, lamella is the “formless maternal substance beneath symbolic semblances” (PF 199).

7 Lacan himself discusses the fort/da game in his Seminar XI, yet Žižek makes an important contribution here by bringing ideas increasingly emphasized by the later Lacan to bear on this analysis.

8 We should note that this paradoxical convergence of Life and Death is something central to even early Lacanian conceptions. The mirror identification, for instance, produces a mode of being which is “both dead and incapable of dying, immortal” (II 238). Identification with an image is a mode of transcendence over temporal corruption and decay. Yet it is precisely this relation to one’s own body as an image that enables one to contemplate one’s own death. See also Johnston, Chapter 5.

9 This is to say, the living being’s entrance into the (sexually differentiated) symbolic regime, via which it becomes a symbolic subject, necessarily involves a loss, and lamella is an entity that embodies this loss. As “indestructible partial object,” it is “the part of the subject that the subject had to renounce to subjectivize itself, to emerge as subject” (DC 175). Or: “what is lost when the pre-symbolic substance is symbolized” (PF199).

10 As Johnston clarifies, “the individual rebels against being reduced to ‘a mere link in a chain,’ that is, to the mortal vessel of a seemingly immortal genetic material” (51).

11 We should note the ironic inversions apropos the apple which here brings not a dissolution of Edenic paradise but the very immortality of “undead” existence, and the fountain which brings not youth but rather a reinstatement of sexual temporality.

12 “Symbolic Death,” as discussed in Chapter Three, indicates here the dissolution of the Symbolic order that regiments a subject’s reality (as opposed, for instance, to a death that is “merely” symbolic, not real).

13 We should note that this “monstrous” dimension correlative to the realm of sexual reproduction (i.e., its deep imbrication with Death) was remarked upon by Freud, who contemplated a possible relation between the sexual difficulties of neurotics and the Death tied up with sex itself. See Johnston’s analysis (51).

14 Perhaps it is precisely in the “short circuit” effected between diegetic and phenomenological realities, in the acute anamorphic inversions between these realms, that we can find the theatre’s peculiar strength in approaching lamella. Churchill’s play, I argue, encourages us to search for a Real that emerges precisely in such anamorphic shifts.

15 Is not this what Lacan is getting at with his enigmatic statement, in “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” that “it is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable” (Écrits 681)? As Johnston clarifies, “In being articulated by signifiers, desire becomes a mysterious, ineffable je ne sais quoi, an enigmatic X incapable of being pinned down in relation to specific desired object-contents as stable referents” (284).

16 More explicitly: “the very symbolic machine which ‘mortifies’ the living body produces by the same token the opposite of mortification, the immortal desire, the Real of ‘pure life’ which eludes symbolization” (TN 179).

17 See Johnston 51-2 and PF 89.

18 See Žižek’s own discussion of this film in HR 67.

19 See PV 120 and TN 182.

20 See also HL 74: “Anti-Semitism ‘reifies’ (by embodying it in a particular group of people) the antagonism inherent in society: it treats Jewishness as the Thing that, from outside, intrudes into the social body and disturbs its balance.”

21 See also Johnston 37.

22 What is at stake here is how the “truth” of certain enigmas is to be found not in some meaning to be discovered, a thing contained within them (i.e., in something which these mysterious creatures “symbolize” or “signify”). As Žižek puts it, “the mystery of an enigmatic apparition is to be sought not
beyond its appearance but in the very appearance of mystery” (FT 107). We have here again the contours of a “transcendental illusion”—in Zupančič’s words, “Behind this illusion there is no real object—there is only nothing, the lack of an object. The illusion consists of ‘something’ in the place of ‘nothing’” (Shadow 172). Or as Johnston puts it, the abyssal vortex of the hole in the Other generates “a proliferation of significations to compensate for and conceal the eternal, irremediable absence of any firm signification whatsoever (akin to Freud’s dream examples, wherein castration, as the absence of the phallus, is masked behind its opposite, namely, a thriving plethora of phallic symbols)” (38-9).

23 See V.

24 As Žižek writes of the shark in Jaws, we find here the Lacanian point de caption: the emergence of the shark as symbol does not add any new meaning, it simply reorganizes meanings which were already there by binding them to the same signifier—ideology is at work in this purely symbolic gesture, in the addition of a signifier which ‘quilts’ the floating plurality of anxieties” (ES 134).

25 See Santner, Chapter Two.

26 Žižek writes, “the encounter with the mother’s desire, with its enigma (che vuoi?, what does she want?) is the primordial encounter with the opacity of the Other” (PD 72). Yet as he makes clear, we need not consider this che vuoi strictly apropos the infant’s experience of the mother—it is likewise the “central mystery of the big Other” (HL 41). To understand this in the context of Lacan’s shift to a “barred Other,” see also DC 101.

27 See also LA 91: “This is the way Lacan defines the phallic signifier, as a ‘signifier without signified’ which, as such, renders possible the effects of the signified: the ‘phallic’ element of a picture … opens up the abyss of the search for a meaning—nothing is what it seems to be, everything is to be interpreted, everything is supposed to possess some supplementary meaning. … this very lack compels us to produce ever new ‘hidden meanings’: it is a driving force of endless compulsion. The oscillation between lack and surplus meaning constitutes the proper dimension of subjectivity.”

28 Or similarly: “Ready or not here we come quick or dead of night night sleep tightarse” (12).

29 See “Subversion of the subject and dialectic of desire,” Écrits, or Žižek’s lucid exposition and commentary in SO 100-105.

30 See ES 135.

31 As Dolar writes, Lacan’s “graph was, among other things, constructed to demonstrate that the minimal signifying operation necessarily yields the subject as a purely negative entity that is produced in the retroactive vector, an entity gliding along the chain since it doesn’t posses a signifier of its own … it is a lack, an empty space necessarily implied by the nature of the signifier—such was for Lacan, as it is well known, the nature of the subject that can be assigned to structure” (Voice 11).

32 Referring to Lacan’s Seminar XXIII, Žižek explains lalangue in terms of “language as the space of illicit pleasures that defy normativity: the chaotic multitude of homonymies, word-plays, ‘irregular’ metaphoric links and resonances” (HL 71). See also Mladen Dolar’s discussion in A Voice and Nothing More, 139-151. The sonority of words, “in the form of contingent and senseless co-sonance, unexpectedly runs amok and produces nonsense, which in the second step turns out to be endowed with an unexpected sense emerging from it …” (141); “the sound conflation functions as the break of signification and at the same time the source of another signification, their amalgamation serving as the point of their divergence” (144).

33 And after all, perhaps the ultimate point of Lacan is not to abandon desire, but to reconfigure it. As Chiesa writes in Lacan: The Silent Partners, “If desire is the desire of the Other … ‘do not compromise your desire’ also means ‘do not give up the Other’!, do not give up the dimension of the sociolinguistic, symbolic Other which is made possible only by desiring … ‘Change it, but do not give it up!’ … The desire of the Other, which we are qua parietre, also corresponds to the desire to remain within the Other. Active subjectivation is possible only in the intersubjective Symbolic after we have temporarily suspended it and ‘reshaped’ it through the imposition of a new Master-Signifer and the emergence of a new (partly subjectivized) jouissance connected to it” (347).

34 I rely upon Žižek for these translations of the formulae in Lacan’s Seminar XX. See TN Chapter Two.
In *Seminar XI*, Lacan makes reference to the tale of Zeuxis and Parrahasios, two Greek artists engaged in a contest with each other. Zeuxis initially appears to have the upper hand in the contest, having made representations of grapes so compelling that “even the eye of the birds was taken in” (103). Yet Parrahasios ultimately triumphs “by having painted on the wall a veil, a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis, turning towards him, said, *Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it.*”

Appearances deceive, things are not what they may seem to be—a lesson emphasized by both of the Greeks in their different ways. In Zeuxis, what we may take for something true and substantial is revealed to be a flimsy surface, an illusory effect with nothing behind it. Parrahasios’ gesture likewise consists in playing with the nothingness behind appearances—here again we are left with only the base material elements of paint and surface; all else is mere illusion. Yet on closer inspection the fundamental dynamic of this gesture is very different than what we find in Zeuxis’, and the distinction would appear to have critical light to shed on what Lacan calls the Real. How can we formulate this distinction, and what precisely is at stake here?

Though we come across this anecdote in the midst of some characteristically dense and sophisticated Lacanian psychoanalytic philosophizing, it is hard to overlook the *comedy* implicit in it. We can easily visualize how the contest and its characters might serve as material for a silent film scene or theatrical sketch. And perhaps it is by considering the two artists’ strategies in terms of the different modes of comedy at work in them that we can understand most vividly how the story pertains to the Real. Moreover, perhaps it is through a
consideration of this engagement with the Real that we can grasp something vital about
comedy itself.

Let us first consider the two strategies in regards to the differing subjects for whom
their illusions are staged. Zeuxis’s strategy works insofar as it ensnares the gaze of the birds,
whose naivety and desire lead them to take a nip at the grapes. They expect the Real of the
grapes in all their juicy substance yet are left instead with a beak-ful of dry paint. Do we not
find here a procedure highly typical of comedy, with its perpetual delight in false facades and
deceptive disguises? Or to go a step further, we might consider comedy’s longstanding joust
with the “sublime”—its predilection for undermining the latter wherever it appears, exposing
the banality of the lofty and the insubstantiality of the dazzling, joyfully depriving the emperor
of his clothes. If we are dealing with mere grapes here, the enacted dynamic is nonetheless one
of “desublimation,” a vivid reduction of the fascinating entity’s substance to the base materials
and mechanisms of art(ifice), an exposure of the mundane substrates of illusion. As Alenka
Zupančič puts it, a central gesture of comedy has always been this “act of taking a (sublime)
Thing and showing the public that this Thing is, in fact, nothing more than a poor and
altogether banal object” (Shadow 168), revealing the paint and papier-mâché that support the
effect of the Real.

In a famous essay, Henri Bergson termed “corrective” the laughter we associate with
such comic exposures, its force stemming from a recognition of misperception. Though if the
dynamic at work here bespeaks a valid “lesson” concerning the artifice of sublime
appearances, is there not always a certain cynical element at work in the laughter such
desublimations provoke? These birds know nothing of the mechanisms of artifice, simply
adhering on faith to the immediate appearance of things. Even if they happen to be the most
presumptuous, self-satisfied of birds (blue jays, perhaps), laughter at such discomfiture still
involves a certain cynical scorn or mockery. Perhaps the cynicism emerges not simply insofar as the laughter targets the naïve, but insofar as it derides the “something more” beyond the surface of appearances, a “more” in which the birds had placed their faith. Even the most refreshing of such desublimations, we might say, are always minimally cynical insofar as they take joy in the exposure of a nothingness—in the revelation that “there is no Real.”

If Zeuxis’ gesture targets the naïve, who is the intended subject of Parrahasios’ illusion if not Zeuxis himself—Zeuxis the cynical? This enlightened artist has come here to look upon an acknowledged illusion, a “mere” appearance (behind which he knows there is nothing). He is here with a cynical eye, knowing very well that “there is no Real” since he is all-too familiar with the mechanisms and tricks of the art. He cannot be duped, since he is himself the duper, the ensnarer of gazes. The comedy in this second half of the tale lies in the fact that the cynic himself, familiar with all the various tricks and mechanisms, is nonetheless fooled, exposed in his unwitting faith in the other side of the appearance. To draw upon Octave Mannoni’s famous phrase, “Je sais bien, mais quand même …”, Zeuxis “knows very well” how illusions work, yet “all the same” he finds himself going beyond the surface of the image. And though the reversal that takes place here is once again imbricated with the nothingness behind appearances (i.e., Zeuxis errs like the birds in positing a beyond of the phenomenal surface), the dynamic and its engagement with the Real is profoundly different. If the first part of the tale involves a cynical exposure, we might call the second ironic. Its accent is not on the mere reduction of appearances to nothing, but on how, despite our (cynical) belief in the nothing, indeed precisely in knowing there’s nothing, we nonetheless err. This is to say, what is revealed here is not (primarily) the nothing behind appearances, but the way the Real appears (and functions) in spite of the man’s cynicism and enlightened knowledge. What is at stake here is a Real that “gets us” in our presumed immunity to it.
We can consider this distinction further in regards to the subversive bent associated with comedy. If it is frequently the latter’s cynicism (i.e., its willingness to expose the nothingness behind appearances) that is considered the fire behind its subversive thrust, we should note the way the ironic gesture exemplified in Parrahiasios can function as a powerful mode of “extraneation,” subverting conceptions not simply by revealing illusion as such but rather, as Lacan puts it, by exposing “how the non-duped err.”

As an example, let us consider Tony Kushner’s angel in Angels in America, a highly comic figure in its own right. In an interview, Kushner discusses the play in terms of an “illusion-reality paradigm”: “The best thing about the theatre is that when the angel comes through at the end of Millennium you see the wires … and that’s the magic of the theatre that I think speaks most powerfully to our current political conundrum, in that capitalism always seeks to erase the work behind the commodity form, … the human labour that produced the effect” (in Vorlicky 214-15). The theatre’s ability to unmask its devices makes it potently political: “For five seconds, you are actually watching this thing swing down and saying, ‘It’s an angel! I’m seeing an angel!’ Then you’re saying, ‘It’s a woman in a silly wig and fly wires,’ and that doubleness is the kind of consciousness that citizens of capitalism need to survive, and are constantly being winnowed away from” (215). The sublime appearance of the commodity serves to blind us to the mechanisms of its production, and instances of self-revealing theatrical magic provide a compelling means of illustrating this concealed logic. The theatre confronts us and says: “Commodities may seem to be magical objects, possessed of special powers, but this sublime appearance is merely a constructed illusion.”

Žižek reminds us, however, of the necessity of inverting this paradigm. In our “cynical,” “enlightened” late-capitalist society, we must keep in mind “Marx’s famous warning that the ‘commodity-fetishism’ persists in actual life even after its logic is
theoretically revealed” (TN 89). In contemporary times, the proper Marxist rebuke is one that accentuates the “objectively subjective.” i.e. “You may think that the commodity appears to you as a simple embodiment of social relations … but this is not how things really seem to you—in your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers” (PF 120). What is at stake here is “the paradoxical notion of objective semblance,” of “how things really seem to me” even if they don’t seem that way.

The context of Angels permits us to consider this paradox also on the level of the “transcendent.” For Kushner, the theatre says to us, “Angels (and other divinities) may seem to you to be magical, transcendent entities endowed with special powers, but look, they are really illusions constructed and supported by ideological mechanisms.” Yet in today’s cynical “postmodern” times, what is required here is a dialectical reversal: “You may think that angels appear to you as anachronistic symbols of a debunked metaphysical mythology, but this is not how things really seem to you—in your social reality, by means of your actions and your behaviour, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that an angel really does appear to you as a magical object endowed with special powers.” In terms of the “objectively subjective,” the angel serves here as a sign for what we do not believe that we believe. As Simon Crichtley puts it, “We know very well that our lives are structured by fantasies, but we still believe in those fantasies” (xiv)—our reality itself is structured “by a faith in fantasy that we know to be a fantasy yet we believe nonetheless” (xv).

If on the one hand, theatre’s subversive force is to be found in its capacity to lay bare the mechanisms that give rise to and support the illusions to which we are subject, Žižek’s reversal encourages us to supplement this perspective with its inverse—that is, how theatrical illusion, like other forms, “can lay its cards on the table, reveal the secret of its functioning,
and still continue to function” (IR 200). Perhaps theatre’s greatest capacity for subversion lies not simply in its power to expose, but in its demonstration of the mechanics underlying an illusion that persists (remains efficacious) in spite of our absolute awareness of the strings and wires supporting it—the way in which theatre, as Žižek would put it, “can afford to reveal the secret of its functioning … without in the least affecting its efficiency” (201).

To return to the language of comedy, what is really funny here is not (simply) that we mistake illusions for something real, but how, amidst our perpetual (cynical) laughter at illusions, amidst the endless fun we poke at those enslaved by them, we are nevertheless taken by them, indeed all the more so for our laughter. There is a way in which the real deception lies precisely in our supposed distance from the illusion, a deception which the “ironic” approach is intent to make appear. If the cynic operates from the correct premise that there is no substantial density behind the illusory and the fictional, he is nonetheless mistaken in concluding that such illusions and fictions do not function (IR 201)—he errs in overlooking the practical role of these illusions on the structuring of our behaviour. Les non-dupes errent insofar as it is precisely those who are not duped by such illusions, and who indeed publically expose and deride them, that are most in error, enslaved all the more forcefully by virtue of their distance. Correlatively, if comedy is intent to undermine appearances and poke fun at those enslaved by the falsity of impressions, it also delights in accentuating the inverse “mistake.” This is to say, the comic insistence that the sublime Thing is merely an element of illusion, some glitter on a flimsy surface to be dispelled through its procedures, is counterbalanced with a necessary “ironic” supplement. And insofar as it is our very (apparent) distance which may prevent us from extraneating the truth of our relationship to illusion, it is this “ironic” element of comedy, vis-à-vis the cynical, which may indeed prove far more effective in unbinding “the nodal points that hold the symbolic universe together” (IR 206).
We might also suggest that it is in this sense that psychoanalysis finds itself so profoundly reflected in the procedures of comedy. “A common notion of psychoanalysis,” as Žižek explains, “makes it almost an epitome of cynicism as an interpretative attitude”—after all, “does not psychoanalytic interpretation involve, in its very essence, the act of discerning ‘lower’ motivations (sexual lust, unacknowledged aggression) behind the apparently ‘noble’ gestures of spiritual elevation of the beloved, heroic self-sacrifice, and so on?” (IR 206-7).

That is, is not psychoanalysis itself a most notorious desublimation, exposing our sublime deeds and ideal strivings as mere illusory surfaces and performances, thinly covering over the base mechanisms at work behind them? “Perhaps, however, this notion is somewhat too glib; perhaps the original enigma that psychoanalysis endeavours to explain is exactly the opposite.” This is to say, is not the “deeper” goal of psychoanalytic theorizing to investigate—and make appear—the very substantiality of illusions as such, i.e., how certain illusions may be fully exposed and recognized as illusions (and indeed laughed at) while nonetheless continuing to serve as the very heart of our world—how sublimities, Ideals, Universals, and illusions of all kinds continue to function, retaining their structural efficiency and force, in spite of the often radical “deconstruction” to which we subject them? We might consider as an example Žižek’s reference to the contemporary psychoanalytic scene, wherein the “free association” of subjects on the psychoanalytic couch has itself come more and more to resemble psychoanalytic theorizing, consisting largely of the subject’s tossing over of various psychoanalytic models, “Oedipal” theories, notions of unconscious motivations, etc.³ This is to say, the subject may “know very well” the mechanisms that underlie his or her symptoms and the false, illusory beliefs that structure his or her behaviours, yet (all the same) remain powerless in the face of them. Indeed, this very act of (perpetually) exposing and
deconstructing may itself serve (ironically) as a fetish by means of which the subject evades any real transformation.

We can extend this analysis to a more precise investigation of comedy’s engagement with the Real by combining this Žižekian approach with some key concepts emerging in the recent work of Alenka Zupančič (to whom the preceding is already much indebted). A crucial emphasis in both *The Shortest Shadow* and *The Odd One In* is upon comedy’s capacity not simply to dissolve the Real behind appearances or expose its emptiness—such that “the Real turns out to be just another appearance” (*Shadow* 168)—but conversely, as she puts it, to make the Real appear. To say this, as we will see, is not to suggest that the procedures of comedy somehow give us something of the Real in its substantial density, “a glimpse of the mysterious Thing that lies somewhere beyond representation” (173). What Zupančič has in mind is not a recovery but a re-conceiving or inversion of the Real, a shift accomplished from a Real behind or beyond appearances to the Real in or as appearance. And as we shall see, it is in regards to this shift that we can understand comedy not simply in terms of a descending from sublime heights but as a re-conceiving of sublimity itself.

In the space that follows I propose to investigate these dynamics in relation to two plays. *The Illusion* is another work by Tony Kushner, a (very) free adaptation of Corneille’s *L’Illusion Comique*. *Enigma Variations* is a recent play by the highly successful French playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt. Crucial to each of these plays, as we will see, is the relationship between the “traversal of the fantasy” that they stage and the Real at work in our own theatrical experience.

Before beginning, we should acknowledge that in drawing upon the terms “comedy” and the “comic,” this study is does not attempt to offer a systematic analysis of comedy’s different modes, styles and historical divisions, nor of the gamut of differing theoretical
approaches to theatrical comedy. “Comedy” and the “comic” are indeed very broad terms, “frequently used,” as Zupančič notes, “as a general name for (almost) everything that is funny” (Odd One 9), and we should acknowledge that an overly liberal application of such terms runs the risk of rendering them diffuse. Yet while the analysis that follows does not attempt a full-scale division of the “comic” into its different modes or theorizations, what grounds it is an emphasis on internal division—comedy as an internal tension or antagonism between Zeuxisian and Parrahasiosian tendencies, between the Real as appearance and a Real that appears. At stake in this discussion, we could say, is the comedy that is correlative to this division. Even more specifically, at stake here is comedy’s relation to an internal division within its very object—the human being.

Let us take as our starting point the perceptual reversal accomplished by The Illusion and toward which the whole of the play develops. In this play, Pridamant, a father long estranged from his son, whose absence has transformed him into an object of intense desire, visits the magician Alcandre in hopes of discovering this lost son’s whereabouts and being reunited with him. The magician conjures a series of images from the son’s life, which, presented on the stage for us and for Pridamant, depict the boy’s gradual progress through several phases of love, beginning with initial infatuation and culminating with disaffection and betrayal. Despite their often melodramatic tone and their conspicuous theatrical flair, and despite certain inconsistencies that tend to creep in (the boy seems to go by different names at different times), we are led with Pridamant to read the scenes presented to us as an honest representation of his son’s existence, a reduplication of a really-existing (and intensely desired) referent. However, once the boy’s story has been brought to a conclusion, both we and Pridamant are informed by Alcandre that the spectacle presented to us was merely a
patchwork of theatrical scenes performed by Pridamant’s son—the boy is himself a professional actor, and what Alcandre has conjured for us were nothing other than desultory scenes from the various plays he has been starring in.

Is not this revelation, for Pridamant, akin to that experienced by Zeuxis’ birds, for whom the impression of a substantial Real beyond the appearance (of the grapes) turns out to be the mere effect of the mechanisms of art? What we have here would seem, on the one hand, to amount to a dissolution of the Real initially evoked and its replacement with mere artifice. Yet the reversal effected here involves a dynamic of a different and more complex sort, and as before, we can find the difference reflected in the nature of the comedy (and the laughter) involved.

For those of us in the audience, the revelation means that what we were witnessing on a phenomenological level is the very thing that the play was presenting to us on a diegetic or referential level. What we perceived and understood to be part of an enactment (an actor, playing Pridamant’s son, wearing a costume and standing before us on a stage, reciting scripted lines) actually belonged to the enacted, the represented content (Pridamant’s son himself is wearing a costume, standing on a stage, reciting scripted lines). In this light, the gesture of Kushner’s play mirrors the basic structure of the classic Marx Brothers’ joke: “Look at this guy: he looks like an idiot, he behaves like an idiot—but don’t let yourself be deceived, he is an idiot!” The Illusion says to us, “This looks like an actor in a play, he behaves and talks like an actor in a play—but don’t be deceived, he is an actor in a play!” The theatrical representation “deceives” us precisely by pretending to deceive—that is, by pretending to be a (“mere”) theatrical representation (i.e., of some represented, referential content) when in fact this very “theatrical” dimension (experienced on a phenomenal level) is a property of the referent, of the “thing itself.” We have here a demonstration of Žižek’s assertion that “the
properly human way to deceive a man is to imitate the dissimulation of reality” (SO 196). The “deception” lies in the intimation that what is positively-given to us is “merely” an appearance, not the “thing itself,” when in fact this appearance is precisely it. Such an image “does not feign to tell the truth when it is lying, it feigns to lie when it is actually telling the truth” (197)—i.e., it feigns to be a “mere” theatrical representation.

To consider this from another angle, The Illusion’s reversal offers us a vivid illumination of a dynamic central to much Žižekian thinking—the Hegelian dynamic of “determining reflection.” What is ultimately at stake in both Kushner and Hegel is not simply an opposition between the Real and a “mere” appearance (with which we are left when the artifice of the Real is revealed). Such an opposition is correlative to what Hegel calls “external reflection”—it posits the space of a Real that is “external” to the phenomenal appearance. At stake in the shift to determining reflection is rather a “redoubling of the gap or antagonism” (PV 106), that is, a revelation of how the very distance or division between the two (apparently) opposed moments (the appearance and the Real beyond the appearance) is itself inherent to one of the sides. In The Illusion’s reversal, the very distance between the theatrical enactment (the material, textual, performant elements employed before us) and its corresponding enacted (the referent, the Real of the son’s world) is reflected into the latter. That is to say, the referent itself is rent from within by the same division that separates enactment and enacted—the “thing itself” (the Real of this semblance, the world of the son) is itself divided between semblance and Real.

Yet crucial to note here is the inverse, that is, how the very difference between Real and appearance is reflected into appearance itself, that is, how the division between theatrical enactment and enacted is captured or made to appear within the enactment as such, i.e., the play as a phenomenally experienced entity. To draw upon a key idea in Zupančič, The Illusion
effects this “speculative” reversal by means of a *montage*—a “*montage* of two semblances” (*Shadow* 175). It gives us first a (“mere”) enactment or image that gestures to a Real beyond itself (i.e., an actor on a stage, aided by theatrical accoutrements, who “stands in” for a Real); and second (through Alcandre’s revelation) it brings this first semblance into montage with another, i.e., with an image or enactment of such enactment. What we experience is thus an enacted image of the very tension or division between enactment and the Real of its enacted. Through the montage of these two semblances we witness the other of the appearance (the Real to which it gestures beyond itself) rendered “concrete.”

To clarify what is at work here, do we not find a similar dynamic at the heart of Parrahasios? In a first step, we begin with what is perceived to be a curtain, a surface covering over some fascinating content. All we see is the curtain, yet this phenomenal appearance registers *per negativum* some Real which exceeds it, a Beyond imprinted in the very *strain* of the curtain, through the very tensions and inflections of this surface. In a second step, we are confronted with this curtain as *image*, an acknowledged surface concealing no beyond—the phenomenal appearance of the curtain is *all there is*. Yet the key to the effect of the painter’s trick (and also its commentary on the sublime) is in recognizing how the *montage* effected here complicates the very alternative between the Real of a substantial “more” beyond appearances, and appearance as *all*, subjecting this alternative to a “speculative” twist. The very tension or division between the phenomenal appearance (the curtain) and its Beyond (the Real that is provoking the strain) is, via montage, made to *appear* within appearance itself. The montage, we could say, renders *concrete* this internal split of appearance, its *self*-difference.

In Kushner’s *Illusion*, we never get the “thing itself” (Pridamant’s “actual” son), only two semblances—yet through their montage we capture the Real as the gap dividing the
appearance itself. Or to put this another way, rather than a simple exposure of the fact that “appearance is all” (i.e., that there is no Real, no “something more” beyond appearance), what such a comic inversion makes appear is a Real correlative to the “non-all” of appearance itself. What is perceived, via this montage, is how the appearance is indeed “all there is” and yet for all that, it is still “non-all.”

One may well stop us here with an objection: if such theorizing (as with much of a “Lacanian” bent) carries force on paper, is it not far too abstract and abstruse to find real correspondence in the experience of theatrical comedy, which is (perhaps by definition) momentary and non-analytical? How can the theoretical logic of this “non-all”—so paradoxical and indeed bewildering, even when carefully considered—apply in the live context of a comical moment? We might respond by simply turning this objection on its head. It is precisely as paradoxical and indeed bewildering that the “non-all” of appearance, when acutely rendered as an object of theatrical experience, is decidedly funny.

Yet what is most important here is how the “speculative” dynamic in question—this manner of engaging with the Real—extends beyond a single (and quite irregular) comic reversal like Kushner’s, indeed informing (or transforming) the way we conceive comedy’s most fundamental thrusts. Let us take, for instance, the comic character and the status of the human being in comedy. A traditional view sees comedy as presenting us with the human being in all his or her worldly, limited humanity, celebrating the endearing foibles correlative to our physical-material limitations, inviting and indeed encouraging us to “accept the fact that we are finite beings,” “only human” (Odd One 47). Yet what most interests Zupančič is how comedy effects a complication of this very division between the finite and the infinite or transcendent; how, through the same sort of “speculative” inversion examined above, it reflects this division into one of the two sides of the equation. What if the “object” of comedy
is not, most fundamentally, the finite human being, but precisely the point where the infinite falls into the finite, the inhuman into the human (49)? This is to say, comedy often finds its motor in expressly contradicting or problematizing this assertion of finitude as our fundamental condition, indeed thriving upon the fact, as Zupančič puts it, that human finitude “is always-already a failed finitude” (52)—“a finitude with a flaw” (53). Just as the Real, in the example above, is reflected into the appearance, rendered correlative to its own internal difference or self-division, so, apropos the comic character, the infinite is made to appear in the very “non-all” of human finitude.⁵

I suggest that the comic dynamic of the characters in Kushner’s Illusion offers a vivid demonstration of the reversal at stake here. This comedy takes as its central object the “flaw” afflicting human finitude, confronting us with Zupančič’s Lacanian paradox: “Not only are we not infinite, we are not even finite” (Odd One 53). A careful examination of these comic characters will enable us, in the section that follows, to consider more closely the role of theatrical experience itself in addressing this paradoxical “failed finitude” that constitutes the human subject.

“I have seen a most splendid vision” (7), says the character Calisto in his first words of the play, calling to mind the famous speech from Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream—“I have had a most rare vision”—wherein the comic character Bottom speaks of his “bottomless dream,” so-called because “it hath no bottom.” We find here an apt frame for Kushner’s characters, who, in their very finitude and eminent humanness, appear afflicted with the infinity of such a “bottomlessness.” The play presents us with a succession of characters propelled by visions of an absolute sublimity taking often the form of an ultimate Romantic Wholeness, a blissful, ecstatic unity with the love-object which would put their
yearning to final rest. “You are the answer to my every need” (22), says Calisto to his love, in union with whom he hopes for an ultimate equilibrium: “I’ll keep you warm, you’ll save me from burning.” Adraste evokes the Platonic-Jungian metaphysics of lost unity in his declaration to Isabelle: “I loved you long before we ever met; we two are torn halves of one whole that existed in some earlier, better world than this” (29). The “infinity” at the centre of human desire, the ultimate object of which would appear to exceed anything the finite realm could possibly provide, is likewise captured in the figure of Matamore, professional pursuer of incredible, impossible dreams, who, having “scaled the loftiest pinnacles of glory” (25), cannot rest for the prospect of visions more grand, his desire stretching beyond the earth to the moon.

In their “bottomless” dreaming, these characters express potently the subject’s relation to what Lacan calls the *objet a*. Pridamant, to whom we are introduced in the play’s opening moments, appears driven by an insatiable lack—plagued by a “void” (81), a “cold and haunted emptiness,” wherein everything is “sucked dry” (6). In Lacan’s terms he has raised his lost son “to the dignity of the Thing,” making him the very lynchpin of his world, around which his entire existence has come to circulate, the entity which could at last make him complete and endow his life with substantial meaning. And with all the dexterity characteristic of the *objet a*, this desired object perpetually evades him. Repeatedly he is “led to a blank, tall, doorless wall through which he seems to have slipped. As if by magic” (5).

Melibea, the woman on whom Calisto’s own passion is fixated, eludes him just as he eludes his father, and like his father he has made the object of his search into a priceless treasure. Without it, source of the very purpose and life-blood of his existence, Calisto is suitably freezing and at risk of death, described as a “leper” (by definition an “incomplete” man). Yet, as his “waking dream” (7), Melibea reflects both the splendour of the *objet a* and
its ultimately *illusory* quality. “This garden wall encircles paradise” (8), he says, describing both the sublime wonder of the *objet a* and the unattainability which is its condition. It is the very nature of the *objet a* that if it were ever to be obtained, the illusory quality of its sublimity would reveal itself, leaving us with only a mundane, regular object, and it is thus that desire obeys a *metonymic* dynamic, aptly illustrated in Calisto’s story of the hawk. Having caught the bird, rather than eating it and satiating himself, he releases it so that it might fly to Melibea, thus deferring satisfaction and transferring desire from one object to the next. And indeed, no sooner does Calisto attain a hint of Melibea’s affection for him (and thus her accessibility) than his own desire shifts in the direction of her maid.

As its title suggests, this comedy is indeed intent to expose the *illusory* status of the sublime visions pursued by these characters. “Love, love, what does love mean? Nothing! Anything can be called love” (58). Time and time again their longed-for conjunctions reveal, with comic desublimation, the all-too mundane character of the obtained object once deprived of its transcendent *Schein*. After all, the union of fire and ice produces not, as Calisto hopes, an ecstatic eternal bliss but something more akin to a lukewarm bath which one is eager to get out of. And one could hardly find a better example of the *objet a*’s illusory character than Matamore’s Sea of “Tranquility” (55), located upon the moon, a seemingly other-worldly consummation to one’s yearnings which, however attractive from a distance, becomes increasingly vacuous upon approach, eventually disappearing altogether, leaving its seeker in the void of a lifeless crater.

At the same time, however, the play is also intent to present the *irony* of its title, i.e., the way in which illusions are, nonetheless, *the* most substantial of entities, “more mineral, more dense … more weighty than the earth’s profoundest matter” (81). What the play exposes and asserts, amidst its world of illusions, is precisely the “real *of* the Illusion.” Yet crucially,
what is meant by this phrase, as it appears in psychoanalytic theorizing, is something more than the basic idea that illusions can seem very real. To use our previous terminology, what is at stake is the “speculative” relationship between such visions, such absolutes, and the human subject as (inherently) self-divided. If the objet a is ultimately an illusory splendour (a “waking dream”), what Kushner’s characters reveal is the highly intimate relationship of desire and the very substantial density of the subject’s own reality. “The earth spins round an ache” (18), proclaims Calisto, “I want, therefore it spins”—an eminently Lacanian depiction of desire, capturing forcefully the way in which the subject’s very world is strictly correlative to an elusive kernel, a surplus which forever escapes it and resists subjectivization. And what Zupančič has in mind with the notion of a “failed finitude” is precisely this speculative dynamic whereby the very division between the sublime-transcendent-infinite and the human-material-finite is reflected into the latter, as correlative to its own (inherent) self-division.

To recall our discussion of the death drive (in Chapter 3 of this dissertation), these finite, limited creatures that we encounter in The Illusion nonetheless give body to an infinite, eternalized longing, their physical-material selves derailed by undeadening “passionate attachments.” We find this rendered most acutely in Theogenes, the final incarnation of Pridamant’s son: “I’ve spent my life in love, and love is all I am” (74), he exclaims towards the play’s end: “if I cease to love, I cease to be; I dream of love; I eat love … over and over and over again” (75). If love is merely his “dream,” it is a dream upon which he endlessly feeds, paradoxically deriving sustenance from its inevitable failure to fully assuage him. Such characters would seem to prove the Lacanian thesis that what desire desires, most fundamentally, is to preserve itself as desire, to eternalize itself, just as what drives the drive is precisely its (endless) failure ever to fully sublate its object. Rather than simply dissolving as illusory the products of bottomless dreaming, leaving us with only a human being (as though
“finite” existence might now simply “go on,” divested of such dreams), Kushner’s comedy exposes here the direct correspondence between this bottomless dreaming and an inherent “hole” in our finitude, a hole on account of which, as Zupančič puts it, “man is never just a man,” corroded as he is “by a passion which is precisely not cut to the measure of man” (Odd One 49). And is it not this very immortal dimension that itself becomes the “comic object” in this play? We might ask, what is the “blood-red heart of the world” of which Alcandre speaks if not Lacanian jouissance—the only substance acknowledged by psychoanalysis?

To think of this another way, does the true comedy of Matamore (this self-professedly “sublime” conqueror) reside in the “desublimation” to which he is eventually subjected, i.e., in seeing this indestructible, awe-inspiring Thing exposed as finite and weak—as with the lofty aristocrat who slips on a banana peel, reduced to his limited and vulnerable finite form? Or do we find it, instead, in a speculative inversion of this dynamic—i.e., the way that, whilst his fallibility, impotence, and physical-material limitations are so vividly exposed, what remains intact is the very indestructibility at the heart of his dreaming and envisioning. What such comedy makes “appear” is not what’s left of the human being once things Infinite and Absolute are stripped away, but precisely this infinite, indestructible element of the human being, a thing which, in Zupančič’s words, “persists, keeps reasserting itself and won’t go away” (49). If comedy as “desublimation” would appear to bring the absolute-infinite (e.g. pure and ideal “emperor-ness”) into contrast with the woefully flawed reality (Matamore), what Zupančič’s conception highlights is the way in which the absolute-infinite is itself correlative to an inherent human “flaw.” This means not simply that humans are “wrong” to believe in and be fixated upon such absolutes (when really they should just let them go and “accept their finitude”)—this “flaw” is precisely a flaw in human finitude, a failure on account of which the human circuit is (constitutively) incomplete, non-all.
What particularly distinguishes Kushner’s play is the way it both demonstrates and
directly thematizes this “failed finitude,” exploring (through its very comic enactment) what
Lyse refers to as the “raw wound” of the human being, for which there is “no healing” (52)—a
wound, a gap, a constitutive split, on account of which a human is never only human.

Yet the play also takes matters a step further. In its final moments, in which Matamore
returns to the stage, asking “the way to the Moon” (83) and the Sea of Tranquility he has
glimpsed there, the Amanuensis responds by gesturing toward the heights of the theatre, where
a “huge white moon and stars appear, floating in space.” Can we imagine, after this play’s
depiction of “bottomless” human desire and its engagement with illusion, that such an ending
really proposes its referent, a state or place (an otherworldly Beyond) wherein Matamore’s
desire would be fulfilled? Perhaps we would do better to read this moment from a
phenomenological angle. That is to say, in response to Matamore’s inquiry, the servant
provides him (and us) with a most eminent theatrical display, a vision reflecting the extensive
“magical” powers of theatrical art. In a strong production, the wonder and aesthetic Schein of
this moon would stand as testimony to theatre’s own “transcendent” force, evoking awe in
even the most cynical amongst us. To put it more directly, what is the Amanuensis pointing at
here if not theatre itself? Is not Kushner proposing theatre itself as the object which might
offer salve for the “raw wound” that is the human being?

In this light, the play thematizes not only the deadlock of human desire but the role of
theatre itself in addressing or responding to this deadlock. We should note that the
fundamental dynamic staged for us in this play is that of a desiring spectator witnessing
scenes—Pridamant, himself an infinitely lacking being in search of that impossible object
which would at last make him whole, reflects something vital about our own engagement with
the theatrical spectacle. The play thus turns the desire of its characters back upon the theatrical
medium: what can theatre provide to us who, like these characters, come seeking that wholeness and ultimate resolution that eludes us in our daily lives, yearning to grasp in some tangible form a sublimity equivalent to our transcendent passion?

Yet before exploring further how Kushner’s theatre might offer a response to Matamore’s desire and our own, we should be careful to note precisely what is at stake in this proposition. If theatre itself is the proffered object, what this character seeks at this point, rather than an object equivalent to his desire, is precisely an escape from desire—from desire as such. The play’s characters, by this point, would seem to have abandoned any real belief in an ultimate fulfilment—they know very well (je sais bien) that such sublimity is an illusion, that behind the curtain there is ultimately nothing, and yet—“mais quand même”—they pursue it all the same. And it is precisely this quand même that Matamore seeks escape from. He is “sick of desire” (55), of “this life of love and violence” (54), that is to say, love as violence, love as this “raw wound” of the human being that resists all healing. Do we not find here an exemplary instance of the inversion described above? i.e. It is not simply that Matamore’s ideal and otherworldly visions are brought into comical contrast with the finite, limited humanity from which he cannot escape. What he cannot escape is not, primarily, his finitude but precisely that element which punctures a “hole” in this finitude, the very indestructible element of himself to which these ideal visions are themselves directly correlative. Paradoxically, he desires to escape earth in order to escape his desire for more than earth. This is to say, what Matamore is searching for—a search for which theatre itself is the object Kushner proffers—is not an enjoyment equal to desire but precisely a place where he no longer has to enjoy, where he is free to enjoy less.

If it seems the height of irony to suggest that theatrical comedy—a genre that aims to entertain (i.e., provide enjoyment)—should find its true role in the capacity to offer such a
space, we should note thus its true affinity with Žižek’s understanding of contemporary
psychoanalysis: “the only discourse in which you are allowed not to enjoy—not forbidden to
enjoy, just relieved of the pressure to do so” (HL 104).

In what senses, if any, does Alcandre’s magic offer “healing for this raw wound” (52)
of the desiring human being, infected with a passion that so exceeds and derails his material
form? And in what senses, if any, does a live production of Kushner’s play allow its audiences
to participate in this magic?

On first appearances (and indeed, by his own assertion), the culmination of the
magician’s work would appear to coincide with the cathartic experience he evokes in
Pridamant upon confronting him with the scene of his son’s death. In a metatheatrical speech,
Alcandre as “director” of these illusions draws attention to the Real of the tear he has
produced from the theatrical appearances and “gumstuck machinery” (79) at his disposal. This
tear, “so hard fought for, so hard won,” is solidified into a crystal, raised up and extolled as a
substantial “jewel” amidst this world of mere appearances. The crowning achievement of the
magician’s efforts and arts is thus the evocation of emotion that this tear reflects: “to see your
granite heart soften, just a bit.” Yet the qualification is proven apt, given Pridamant’s
reluctance to follow up on his displayed emotions once the whereabouts of his son (who is still
very much alive—his death was only theatrical) are revealed to him, and in this regard the
conclusion seems to be acknowledging the partiality of theatre’s redemptive effect. If
anything, the sought-for reconciliation between father and son seems even less likely at the
play’s close than ever before.

Perhaps the sights of both Alcandre and Kushner himself aim higher in their
estimation of theatre’s potential for transformation than this partial softening—and indeed we
might ask whether this play was ever really about the “granite-heartedness” of Pridamant, who comes to Alcandre already utterly overwhelmed by emotion, if not thriving upon it. And after all, this play is a comedy, whereas cathartic tears might seem to fall more within the purview of tragedy or melodrama. Perhaps our focus should rather fall upon the final scene of the play, this “traversal of the fantasy” wherein Alcandre reveals to Pridamant the truth about his son, the performer of these images. As subject, the father is made to confront the fact that his desired object is not the (brave, adventurous, dashing) figure he appeared to be in the magician’s conjuring, but a mere actor, his sublime Schein no more than an illusory appearance. Just as Kushner’s Angel brings about a recognition of sublimity’s illusory status (by virtue of the exposed wires and costuming), so Pridamant experiences an inversion apropos of the fantasy-object, its apparently innate wonder revealed as an appearance covering the reality of its finite and all-too commonplace status.

Yet if the inversion staged here can be understood to effect a “cure” of sorts, the true strength of Kushner’s conclusion is that it enables us to examine more closely the precise dynamic at work in what Lacan calls “traversing the fantasy”—both as it relates to Pridamant and as it applies in our own theatrical experience. Crucially this “traversal,” as an end-goal of psychoanalysis, is never simply equivalent to desublimating an object of fascination. After all, if on first glance Pridamant’s reluctance to follow through and unite with his son appears a consequence of the revelation that the latter is not a sublime figure but a mere actor, we might ask whether the father’s desire for reunion was ever truly a product of the son’s perceived accomplishments or character. Indeed he has appeared indifferent to the boy’s actual, positively-given features (good or bad), his desire entirely exceeding such objective qualities and aiming at an eternally elusive “something more” within him. Pridamant would appear to know that there is nothing particularly exceptional about his son. What Lacan calls the
“traversal of the fantasy” is not simply a revelation of the desired object in its “objective” appearances, since after all, I may know very well (je sais bien) that the object to which I am passionately attached is just a normal, mundane entity, yet this “objective” knowledge may do nothing at all to disrupt the love-object’s structural effect. We should thus look for the “traversal of the fantasy” in a more radical extraneation, a process of baring the mechanism that produced love itself, making the latter (as Žižek puts it) “appear as a symptom” (GV 149).

To explore how Alcandre’s magic reflects this approach to Lacan’s “traversal,” we should look first to the most fundamental feature of its structural dynamic. What the play’s reversal deprives Pridamant of is not (simply) the son in his sublime grandeur. What Pridamant loses, more directly, is the very loss of this son. What this traversal stages is Pridamant’s loss of his son as lost. Or to put this another way, if in one light Alcandre’s revelation amounts to a positive offering, restoring to Pridamant a thing he believed himself to lack, perhaps the true magic is that by virtue of which Pridamant (to draw upon the Biblical phrase) “loses what he never had.”

Despite the professed ardour of his search, could we not argue that what has defined Pridamant has never been, most fundamentally, a desire for reconciliation with the lost object but rather the attraction to and preservation of this object as lost? Does not the play encourage us, from his first appearance on the stage, to question the apparent simplicity of his stated aim and the genuineness of this professedly elaborate search? Is there not a rather conspicuous libidinal element, an enjoyment (pleasure-in-pain) in Pridamant’s anguished descriptions of the narrow misses and uncanny resistances that mark his desperate pursuit? Or to put it another way, is not this character comic precisely insofar as we detect, all the more so in performance, a certain excess in his desperate talk of loss? Ultimately we learn that the boy is not far away, has been at the same place for years (in the capital city), and, far from “slipping
behind walls,” has been exposed to the public nightly on the stage. Had the father’s ardent pursuit been half so thorough as he claims (and as his resources would surely have permitted), can we believe it would have come up so perpetually empty-handed? Are we not encouraged to question whether Pridamant’s true object has not been, all along, loss itself?

Of course, we can hardly make such claims without inciting accusations of the very sort of cynicism with which psychoanalytic theorizing is often charged. Do we not have here the notorious predilection of psychoanalysis for perpetually reducing even our noble and beautiful impulses to something base, revealing the perversities and psychoses that undergird the seemingly ingenuous? Yet crucially, what is at stake in such an extraneation is not merely a revelation of the falsity of Pridamant’s love. Psychoanalysis, after all, seeks to effect a “cure.” Perhaps it is not a matter of replacing the noble and beautiful with the perverse, but of asking why, when one has the option of living a peaceful and happy life, one rather seeks actively (perversely) to orchestrate one’s own confoundedness: “Why does a person who is free to ‘enjoy life’ engage in a systematic ‘pursuit of unhappiness’, methodically organizing his or her failures?” (IR 206). Why does one systematically introduce obstacles to reconciliation, inventing (and actively buttressing) walls behind which the “lost” object of one’s passion supposedly continues to slip?

With this in mind, let us propose what may seem an even more cynical assessment. Perhaps the magician’s magic, rather than simply shattering Pridamant’s fantasy-version of his son, consists precisely in enacting a fantasy of another kind, a disavowed fantasy that fundamentally sustains the father’s identity. At many points in a live production of this play it is tempting to regard Alcandre’s stage not simply as a window on the outer world but as a screen for the projection of the viewer’s own fantasies. Does not the play itself encourage us to problematize any absolute division between spectator and spectacle, generating uncertainty
as to whether the transpiring action is the *cause* of Pridamant’s gaze or its *effect*? Specifically, in a live production it is often difficult to discern whether Pridamant’s “commentaries” on the unfolding action do not, in fact, precede and determine that action (“Thrust! Thrust! Parry, hah!” [48-9]). And could we not argue that this liminality applies *a fortiori* to the dramatic death-scene? After all, the father’s language has frequently gestured toward such visions, supplementing his professed desire for his son with a desire for this love-object’s destruction: “I loved him so much I wanted to strangle him. I wanted to snap his spine sometimes in a ferocious embrace,” he claims at the beginning of the play, prompting Alcandre to ask directly, “You murdered your son?” (5). (“I might have.”) What if Alcandre’s “magic” consists precisely in confronting Pridamant, through the culminating images of Theogenes’ demise, with his very “fundamental fantasy”?

Once again, if such a claim seems to flirt with the heights of cynicism, we should observe that the wager here is not (simply) that Pridamant, despite his professed love for his son, is secretly animated by perverse and morbid aims. Nor is this an attempt to (mis)treat a fictional character as a candidate for full-fledged clinical analysis. To say that in this dramatic scene of loss Pridamant reveals his own “fundamental fantasy” is to draw attention not to the falsity of his love but to the way in which the very dynamic of such love, *in its very intensity*, is deeply imbricated with posited loss and inaccessibility.

To put this another way, if in the death of Theogenes, Pridamant would appear to experience a horrible and tragic severance from the object that he holds most dear, is it not precisely in the definitive *loss* of this sublime object that he would *gain* it most truly? What Alcandre appears to know is that, given the nature of Pridamant’s desire, such an object as irretrievably lost (in death) would itself take on the character of a “crystal pendant” (79), hardening into the true kernel of the father’s psychic economy (a thing to be worn around his
neck and carried everywhere). The death of his son would permit Pridamant to attain him precisely in the way he has always desired him, i.e., as illusion—an illusion of the ultimate fullness (of happiness, of unity, of self) that could have been gained if not for certain contingent obstacles to its realization. What Alcandre appears to know—and what his “magic” seems intent to extraneate—is the way in which “what the subject does not have is not simply absent, but is an absence which positively determines his life” (PF 195).9

In this light, we can re-interpret the crystallized kernel which this magician raises and extols as the triumph of his work. We should note that it is not simply something generated in his audience (Pridamant), but something that he “plucks” from him (78), deprives him of. Rather than a process of generating emotion for the object through an experience of its loss, Alcandre’s magic succeeds in extracting (“plucking”) from the subject the very jouissance of a loss with which this object was always-already imbricated. Is it not in this sense that the magician’s methods most resemble those of the analyst: “by driving him towards knowledge about his desire, the analyst wants effectively to steal from [the subject] his most intimate treasure, the kernel of his enjoyment” (SO 69).10

Can we not locate in this very gesture a key way in which theatre itself can respond to or intervene in our own “failed finitude,” confronting us with our “fundamental fantasies,” i.e., the fantasies which—precisely as disavowed—function as a fundamental support for our existing Symbolic reality, preserving our relation to it as such, preventing the possibility of any true transformation?

Of course, Kushner’s truly comic gesture occurs when the fantasy is retracted, i.e., when, after this dramatic culmination, Pridamant is informed that the death of his son was just part of a play, that his son has not been irrevocably severed from him, that the boy is alive and well and can be accessed with the greatest of ease.11 From our angle, Kushner’s true coup de
théâtre consists here in the way in which this revelation (this “traversal”), far from simply amounting to a restoration of reality (in its mundane simplicity and unproblematic nature, freed from fictions and sublimities and fantasies) is indeed tantamount to the latter’s disintegration. And is not this traversal something in which we ourselves, as members of the theatre audience, directly share? The “loss of the loss” effected by the magician coincides with a sudden recognition that everything which has appeared upon Alcandre’s stage—a spectacle which we ourselves had taken as a unified and consistent world, an ontologically grounded whole, governed and held together by necessary relations—was indeed a collection of disconnected bits and pieces, fragments of scenes, glimpses of theatrical roles, a patchwork of speeches and performances. i.e. What appeared as the reality of Pridamant’s son was just a series of snippets from plays enacted by his son. What appeared to Pridamant—and to us—as an essentially homogeneous reality is revealed to have been an artificial composite of heterogeneous fragments.

We could hardly ask for a better demonstration of Lacan’s traversal in its full scope. We see here that what is “traversed” in a traversal of the fantasy is (ultimately) the fantasy of reality itself, i.e., our reality as a consistent, self-grounded solidity. What appears here is how the very solidity of reality is an illusion of our own making. Kushner’s gesture exposes vividly what Lacan would call the coincidence of the lack in the subject with the lack in the Other. We realize, in reflecting upon our own experience of the play until this point, how the object of Pridamant’s pursuit, in its fascinating splendour, had served to cover over the (radical) inconsistency and inadequacy of reality as it had appeared in both Pridamant’s and our own field of vision. The objet a, as an “ontologized” thing beneath his son’s phenomenal appearances is quite literally that by virtue of which an otherwise heterogeneous dis-unity had achieved its stability and coherence. Such a “traversal,” far from simply dissolving the illusion
and returning us to the mundane, constitutes a revelation of the very “short circuit” between them. (And it is important to note the retroactivity at work here—i.e., it is not simply that the sublime Schein of the fascinating object covers over the lack in the Other; it is because the Other is lacking that the object must Schein.)

The laughter inevitably provoked by Alcandre’s revelation is not (simply) a laughter at Pridamant (i.e., at his realization of being duped). Crucially, this traversal is not limited to Pridamant but forms a direct part of our own experience in the theatre (since we ourselves, in spite of ourselves, have likely been duped too). Our laughter is directly correlative to our own encounter with the “Real of the Illusion.”

To take this further, we might here consider Alcandre’s own fundamental contention, i.e., that illusion itself constitutes the “blood-red heart of the world,” in relation to the notion of “transcendental imagination,” a concept derived from Kant. The premise here (as Žižek develops it) is that “what we ‘spontaneously’ apprehend as the reality which exists ‘out there’, independently of our experience of it … is effectively the result of our (the perceiving subject’s) contribution” (IR 110-11). What we call our “normal” reality is indebted to the “imaginative” operation whereby the disparate elements of our base empirical experience are totalized, forged into a coherent unity. It is only by virtue of an imaginative dimension that the “bric-a-brac of senseless fragments” can take on the character of a unified field.12 It is helpful to draw here upon Adrian Johnston, whose valuable formulation of this concept reflects something of the operations at work in our own experience of Kushner’s play: “by both filling in the holes of the fabric of experience (by mentally furnishing missing bits of information implied by partial experiential pieces) and by maintaining the continuity of experience over time … imagination binds together what would otherwise be an incomprehensible, fractured chaos, a totally disorganized, broken-up mess” (191).13
What is most funny, in Kushner’s conclusion, is precisely the appearance within our view of this imaginary element, this dimension in which we come across ourselves in our own field of vision. The laughter here is not a laughter at sublimity’s transcendent dimension, at the “something more” beyond appearances which has been made to dissolve. We laugh because we have encountered something more within the appearance itself, something more than we expected to find there—something we ourselves had placed there. And once again, is it not precisely in this sense that the procedures of comedy most reflect those of psychoanalysis? Like the subject of analysis, we are confronted in this play with our “own act of presupposing the Other” (FT 109).

Of course, in any production of this play there will undoubtedly be those who “see through” Alcandre’s trick, concluding in advance that Pridamant’s son is not in fact a single, ontologically-unified entity but a collection of diverging fragments, and that what is depicted on Alcandre’s stage is not a single, solid, consistent world but a heterogeneous assemblage. Yet is not the true comedy to be found here, as Lacan puts it, in how the “non-duped err”? This is to say, in concluding so readily that this “son” is not a single person but a bric-a-brac of roles and appearances, what the “non-duped” viewer (comically) overlooks is the way in which “actual” people are similarly constituted, i.e., the way in which “normal” people are in fact a bric-a-brac of roles and appearances, their ontological consistency emerging through our own perceptual-imaginative engagement. And if what we have in this play is not a unified reality but a collection of appearances, should not the same be said of reality as such? As Alcandre puts it, “Expect nothing from these visions you can’t expect from life” (30).

We can conclude this section with a brief return to Kushner’s Angel. Kushner’s own comments draw attention to the relation between the Angel’s apparent sublime-transcendence and the smoothness, the self-effacing nature, of the machinery that gives rise to and supports
this illusion. The splendour of such Angels emerges and takes hold of us in direct relation to
the perfection of their machinery—i.e., the Angel’s sublime wonder is correlative to the
effacement or concealment of the mechanisms behind it. Thus, it is through confronting us
with an “incomplete” theatrical display—one which reveals the wires and devices that hold
aloft the illusion—that we (like Zeuxis’ birds) are disabused, made to recognize the
constructedness of those sublimities and transcendent wonders that so enchant us, alerting us
to the those ideological mechanisms at work behind the splendour of the illusions they
construct. Yet if this extraneation is powerful in its own right, we should supplement this
dynamic with the inverse procedure as revealed in *The Illusion*. What Alcandre’s magic
reveals is not (most fundamentally) how an apparent sublimity is an illusion brought about by
flawless machinery and consummate, self-effacing artifice, but more directly, the
correspondence between illusion and the lack in the machinery, the fact that it is *not*
smooth-functioning but indeed fundamentally “non-all”—i.e., how such spectral apparitions are
directly correlative to the imperfection of its circuit, emerging as a necessary supplement to its
own lack. The (comic) gesture here is not chiefly the exposure of the sublime illusion’s
mundane substrates, but rather the extraneation of the very spectral/illusory dimensions that
support mundane reality *as such*, reality as (apparently) *divested* of all transcendence. And if,
in Kushner’s initial argument, we find the strength of the theatre in its capacity to expose the
constructedness of illusions and make them dissolve, we should supplement this with a
necessary inverse—that is, theatre’s capacity to make the illusion *appear* where we did not
expect to find it.
Yet what remains of *love itself* in the context of these comic “traversals”? As stressed, the point of Zupančič’s engagement with love and comedy is by no means simply to demonstrate how the latter extraneates the sublimity of the former. We can understand what is at stake for Zupančič, on a higher level, in relation to the paradoxical inversion accomplished by Lacan (and repeatedly emphasized by Žižek) apropos sublimity—the contention that, ultimately, true sublimity is *exactly the same as* desublimation. If on one hand comedy can expose the dynamic of the sublime, on the other, Zupančič is intent to reveal how love’s own highest sublimity is itself a comic dynamic. That is to say, far from simply divesting love of its sublimity, effecting a reversion from the sublime to the comic, the true comic gesture may consist in the paradoxical “short circuit” of the former and the latter—love is sublime *insofar as* it is comic. Here we can turn to the highly successful French playwright Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt, whose *Enigma Variations* offers an excellent way to explore this “short circuit.”

In this play Schmitt subjects us to a dizzying series of inversions, delighting in both the deception of Zeuxis and the irony of Parrahasios. It takes place in the home of Nobel Prize-winning novelist Abel Znorko, who, having isolated himself from the world in order to live for his art, dwells on an island in the Norwegian Sea. Erik Larson, a journalist for a modest paper, has come to the island to interview Abel about his most recent book, *Unconfessed Love*. Erik’s primary question concerns whether the book, which takes the form of a series of letters between two separated lovers, stems from anything in Abel’s own past experience. This is to say, he postulates a Real behind its appearances, a preceding substantiality of which all the writings are reflective; and he is particularly interested in the “HM” to whom the book is dedicated, querying whether this dedication refers to an actual woman with whom Abel was corresponding. Abel first insists that the book is sheer fiction, a “mere” appearance with no Real behind it. Yet in time, he divulges to Erik that the book is indeed a collection of actual
letters exchanged (over the past twelve years) between himself and a real woman named Helen Metternach (“HM”), with whom he was passionately in love. This initial reversal exposes that
the real appearance was that there was no Real—i.e., that the book was a “mere” fiction
concealing nothing beyond its own pages, and that Abel himself was a man divorced from the
Real of love, engaging with the world only through such fictions.

In a further step, however, what is revealed as a mere appearance is that Erik Larson is
a journalist who had come to this island in search of the Real behind the appearances. This
very search for the Real was itself an appearance, its thoroughness and intensity concealing the
fact that he had known all along that there was indeed a Real behind the appearances, i.e., that
HM was an actual woman with whom Abel had had an affair and subsequently corresponded.
In yet another step, Erik reveals to Abel that Helen, whilst exchanging these letters with him
(letters which presupposed her absolute love for him), had long since been married to Erik.
This is to say, what is revealed to Abel is that what he understood as the Real behind the
appearances (a Real which he himself had initially affected to be a “mere” appearance), was
itself a mere appearance to Abel. The Real of Helen and Abel’s absolute love (a Real which he
believed himself to be concealing as fiction in the book) now appears to Abel as nothing more
than a fiction, one among many performances that Helen had put on, a pretence existing for
his gaze alone:

I was being more truthful than I thought when I told you that my book was pure
fiction. Actually, I was pretty near the mark. That woman has come entirely out of
my own head, she never existed. (He throws the book into the fireplace.) It’s the
most imaginative novel I’ve ever written, and I didn’t even know it. (175)

In a “speculative” twist, the very distance/difference between the appearance (the novel as
fiction) and the Real behind it (the actual love-exchange which constituted it) is here reflected
back into the Real as its own self-difference—Abel is forced to regard the Helen with whom he believed himself to have shared the Real of love as merely a fiction, an appearance.

It is in this context that the play’s title becomes especially significant. Elgar’s “‘Enigma’ Variations,” a favourite record of Helen’s and one which the characters put on at several instances during the play, becomes evocative of Helen herself: “Fourteen ways of hearing an absent melody,” fourteen variations “on a theme that one never hears,” explains Abel. “Elgar claimed that it was a well-known theme, but no one has ever really identified it. A hidden melody, which one senses, the shadow of which comes and goes” (174). The piece, in this light, is defined by a central inaccessibility, its “original theme” having the status of a “thing in itself” beyond the phenomenally-given manifestations, never fully captured by or revealed in them. For the devastated Abel, this dynamic reflects the very ungraspability of the love-object: “Whom do you love when you love? We never really know.”

It is only Erik’s announcement that Helen has died that softens Abel’s bitterness, changing it to confused, disillusioned lament. Yet the twists are not over. In an even more tumultuous reversal, Erik reveals to Abel that Helen has in fact been dead for over ten years, the implication being, of course, that the past ten years of letter-writing between Abel and Helen was itself a consummate appearance—Helen’s letters, these passionate declarations of a love real and true (and of which the “fictional” work, *Unconfessed Love*, consists) had been written by none other than Erik himself, who, in his grief at his wife’s passing, had found in this occupation a strange means of sustaining a sense of contact with her.

Do we not find in this progression of revelations and reversals a rather radical desublimation of the Real to which Abel had clung, its cynical reduction to a consummate illusory effect, a process that ultimately leaves us with nothing but fictions and appearances? Not only is Helen’s devotion to Abel revealed as one of many roles she played, but indeed her
very existence over the past ten years is recognized as a fiction. Yet if there would seem something truly horrible or indeed tragic in this procedure, what a good live production of this play is sure to demonstrate is the genuinely comic dimension at work here. And I would argue that it is precisely through the nature of its engagement with the Real—and through the nature of the Real that appears here—that we can understand this play as a comedy. Just as the play is not reducible to a stripping away of the Real, so its laughter extends far beyond the cynical variety.

A good place to start is by considering the comedy at work within the Real of love itself—not in the sense that the notion of such a Real is a mere joke, something to be scoffed at, but rather in the sense of the highly comic dimension upon which real love relies. As Abel himself describes it, the dawning of his love for Helen had the character of something from the realms of comedy. His recollection of its onset is something that immediately provokes laughter in him: “We met fifteen years ago. (He laughs …)” (158). The love-encounter is conveyed as something quite hilarious in its astounding unexpectedness—a falling almost tantamount to that of the proverbial banana peel. Upon first meeting Helen at a conference while she was still a graduate student, he had found utterly laughable the very idea of her as an object of desire. “‘That poor girl,’ I thought over and over again, ‘has every imaginable quality apart from the ability to make a man fall for her.’ I thought of her naked and I began to laugh” (159). His initial impression of her is of a thing so pitiable that he assumes his colleague’s decision to invite her to dinner is prompted by a cynical desire “to make fun of her” (159). Abel’s own first “date” with Helen is merely a reaction to this colleague’s presumed impropriety, an attempt to save her from his “weaselly maraudings” (160), and it appears in Abel’s mind as more of a theatrical farce than an actual date: “That evening, I had fun dolling myself up as if it were for a real date.” Even seducing her was initially nothing more than “a
good turn, offering her something that no other man would.” The overwhelming and utterly destabilizing passion that he suddenly finds himself experiencing for her is nothing short of funny. Indeed, the whole story of this falling has the structure of a joke, ending with a punch line (and inevitably provoking the audience’s own laughter): “So beware of ugly women, they’re completely irresistible . . .”

We can illuminate this comic dimension of love’s “falling” with reference to the parallel Zupančič draws between the love-encounter and jokes. The love-encounter is “structured like a good joke” (Odd One 133), she argues, in the sense that its satisfaction “always surprises us, since it necessarily takes place ‘elsewhere’ than where we expected it, or intended it, to take place; it takes place, so to speak, along ‘other lines.’ We look in one direction and it comes from the other” (134). Consider, for instance, the dynamic at work in the following well-known joke:

A man comes home from an exhausting day at work, plops down on the couch in front of the television, and tells his wife, ‘Get me a beer before it starts.’ The wife sighs and gets him a beer. Fifteen minutes later, he says, ‘Get me another beer before it starts.’ She looks cross, but fetches another beer and slams it down next to him. He finishes that beer and a few minutes later says, ‘Quick, get me another beer, it’s going to start any minute.’ The wife is furious. She yells at him, ‘Is that all you’re going to do tonight? Drink beer and sit in front of that TV? You’re nothing but a lazy, drunken, fat slob, and furthermore. . . .’ The man sighs and says, ‘It’s started . . .’ (133)

Of course, at the level of content this joke would hardly seem to recommend itself as an exemplary reference for the operations of a love-encounter, yet what is at stake in Zupančič’s analysis is the way in which a “something” (in this case, an “it”) appears precisely
where it was not expected, illustrated here on a topological level. In the punch-line of the joke, the “it” (which is about to start) appears not on the man’s television screen where we expect it, but elsewhere and in an altogether unexpected way. As Lacan himself puts it in Seminar V, such jokes involve the “double (although identical) aspect of surprise and pleasure—the pleasure in surprise and the surprise in pleasure” (in Odd One, 132). Zupančič’s contention, here, is that the “falling” of love, likewise, “always involves a dimension of an unexpected and surprising satisfaction” (134), a satisfaction “produced somewhere else than where we expect it or await it” (132). This is not simply to say that we’re surprised by whom we fall in love with—crucially, what is at stake is the way in which the “falling” of love is correlative to a satisfaction of some other kind than we were searching for: “it satisfies something in ourselves that we didn’t even demand to be satisfied” (134), “some other demand than the ones we have already had the opportunity to formulate.” Abel’s own description of his “falling” reflects the comic dimension of this unexpected satisfaction, or to use Zupančič’s terms, the fact that love is a “funny miracle” (Shadow 174).

What is so revealing in Abel’s love, we might say, is the way in which it undergoes (almost immediately) a transformation in genre. “With her I discovered everything that is painful in love” (161), he states, and as his love-narrative abruptly shifts into a tragic mode, so we move from a Real that appeared to the Real of an inaccessible kernel in the other, beyond and in excess of all appearances. The tragedy here is a tragedy of the sexual relationship’s inherent impossibility. This is to say, the very passion and intensity of their relationship (“we made love night and day … we made love for hours, furiously … if we couldn’t touch each other, I’d scream with rage, I’d beat the walls”) only accentuates the tragic partiality of sexual congress per se. “Do you think that touching makes us closer? It separates us,” Abel agonizes: “you think you’re caressing a body, but in fact you’re opening up a wound” (162)—or as
Harari puts it, “what appears to be the region of contact is precisely what causes an obstacle to there being a full relation, a union in the strict sense” (Anxiety 223). The novelist’s desire “to be annihilated in each other, to forge one being in a final fusion,” was traumatically in vain: “I remained the visitor, she the host. I stayed me, she stayed her” (162).

With Zupančič’s arguments in mind, what is most interesting here is how the dynamic of Abel’s “sublime” passion transposes what was first an utterly surprising (and funny) satisfaction—something which (comically) appeared where it was not even sought and brought with it a satisfaction that responded to no previous demand—into the logic of desire with its “impossible” (tragic) relation to an unattainable jouissance. Any love-encounter, Zupančič explains, carries with it a strong “temptation to reinscribe the surprising, accidental and bonus-like dimension” of its satisfaction by “retrospectively formulating the demand to which this surprisingly produced satisfaction was supposed to reply” (Odd One 134). Via the dynamic of desire, that which had appeared unexpectedly for Abel, in “that moment when I believed I’d lost myself” (162), undergoes a conversion into something within the loved one, beyond all surface appearances, a “something more” in her that can never be fully seized. “Sublime” desire, in disavowing the “element of discontinuity” so crucial to the love-encounter, disavows likewise the comedy of love’s “falling.”

In this light, if seemingly radical, Abel’s decision and willingness to impose a permanent distance between himself and Helen—so that their love would retain its sublime status and never condescend to the mundane—can be understood simply as a logical realization of desire’s underlying dynamic. Such “sublime” love, writes Zupančič, “necessitates and generates a radical inaccessibility of the other” (Shadow 174). To draw upon Žižek’s (Lacan-inspired) terms, what occurs here is a conversion of “the impossible that happens” (i.e., the fact that miracles like love do occur), into “impossible to happen” (OB 84).
Abel forcibly transposes the “falling” of their love into the distant past, making of it an object which can never be fully regained, something that can exist only for reflection: as he puts it, “a melancholy heady memory as bitter as magnolia on a summer’s evening” (162). Through this kind of dynamic, as Zupančič explains, “love is locked up in the eternal past, it can be lived only as a nostalgic memory” (*Odd One* 135).

Subsequent to Erik’s revelation, Abel recounts with bitterness the day that Helen had given him Elgar’s record; the “Variations” become a gloomy, indeed brutal symbol of that which cannot be touched, reached, united with in the other: “as soon as we think we’ve touched something—it vanishes” (189). Yet is not the real (and highly cynical) joke to be found in the way in which Abel (as Lacan puts it) receives his own message back in inverse form? The very substance of his relationship with Helen has consisted in the reassertion (indeed preservation) of such an impenetrability, a Romantic “positivization” of the impossible. “I used to think,” says Abel—with “a painful laugh”—“that when I died, the veils would be lifted just for an instant—the beautiful, thick veils, like underskirts—and for that instant I should see unadorned truth with its naked thighs” (189). What is the “unadorned truth” if not Abel’s own fetishization of these veils themselves, i.e., as the obstacle preventing access to the sublime Thing he has posited behind them?

Yet if the trajectory of Abel’s love effects this transformation in genre, the true thrust of Schmitt’s play can be found in the way its action seeks to overturn this dynamic. The arrival of Erik in Abel’s world will ultimately effect a return to comedy—yet in doing so, it will also transform Abel’s own definition of this genre.

Erik is, from the very start, an eminently comic figure in the eyes of Abel. His comedy consists in the fact that he is, for the latter, a ludicrous fool, utterly ridiculous, and that he embodies humanity completely divested of any transcendent dimension. To Abel the notion
that such a mundane human being could be married to his Helen is a consummate joke: “No, it’s a joke! It has to be … Very humorous” (166). As Abel’s distress and bafflement rises, the things for which he castigates Erik are the very things with which the gesture of comedy is typically associated—he accuses him of disavowing the sublime, resigning himself to things mundane and accepting “mere” appearances divested of any Real posited beyond them: “it’s only when you don’t love the sublime that you get bogged down in real life” (170). (What is comedy if not such a bogging down, a reconciliation to the bog as such?) Yet crucially, while through Erik the play critiques the “sublime” love that we find in Abel, what is at stake in it—and in this “traversal of the fantasy” which Abel undergoes—is by no means tantamount to a dissolution or rejection of sublimity. Ultimately, the comedy resides here not in any simple (and cynical) exposure of the nothingness behind the wondrous appearance, a hilarious debunking of the Real one expected there. The return to comedy is a return from a Real beyond all appearance to a Real that appears.

In what sense does the Real appear here? We might do well to follow Schmitt’s lead and draw further upon the dynamic of absent melodies. Robert Schumann’s *Humoresque*, a favourite work of Žižek’s (and whose name might easily serve as an alternate title for Schmitt’s play), provides an exemplary parallel for Abel and Erik’s own duet. In this piece we encounter “a song without the vocal line, with the vocal line reduced to silence, so that all we actually hear is the piano accompaniment” (*PV* 365). Specifically, what becomes apparent in the piece is that the right-hand and left-hand piano lines “do not relate to each other directly,” and thus, “in order to account for their interconnection,” we are “compelled to (re)construct a third, ‘virtual’ intermediate level (melodic line).” The song’s melody is never directly experienced, is never vocalized, yet it appears (most forcefully) in the sense that it must be presumed, retroactively posited, in order to account for the relation of these inherently non-
relating lines. In a strange inversion, the absent Helen appears most forcefully as that “vanishing mediator” which must be presumed in order to account for the interchange of Abel and Erik, who, on their own, do not reflect one another. “Can you hear? (Pause.) I’ve the feeling she’s here,” says Erik. “Here with us. For the first time” (179).

Funnily enough, in the midst of this progressively radical stripping of the Real toward which Abel’s passion had stretched, in the midst of this utter dissolution of any substantial Helen behind the appearances and fictions, she nonetheless appears in a very real way, in this place where we and the characters themselves would not have expected to find her. What we have here, we could say, is a shift in the nature of enigma itself. We move from Helen as an enigmatic (substantial) thing which cannot be fully grasped, and of which one can access only “mere” (distorting, partial) appearances, to the enigma of something that emerges precisely through the exchange, this “virtual” object by virtue of which the non-relating lines relate.

If it is in this dynamic that Schumann’s piece is “humoresque,” is not Elgar’s piece, as Abel seems intent to maintain, tragically Romantic, defined by that which eludes it, that which it registers in a strictly negative mode? Earlier in this study, we examined comedy’s relation to the Real apropos the Hegelian passage from “external” to “determining” reflection—and perhaps we can understand Schmitt’s play as ultimately submitting Elgar’s Variations to this same shift. If we find the dynamic of “external” reflection in the notion of this “original theme”—i.e., as an inaccessible, a priori Real, a “thing-in-itself” of which the fourteen variations offer distorted appearances—in what then consists the passage to “determining” reflection? We can understand the latter via the type of “speculative” dynamic illuminated earlier, whereby the very difference or division between the two sides of the equation—in this case, between the Variations (as appearances) and the “original theme” (as the Real of the “thing itself”)—is reflected into one of these sides.
To consider this dynamic we could do worse than to draw upon Žižek’s beloved Hegelian assertion that “the secrets of the Ancient Egyptians were secrets for the Ancient Egyptians.” In the context of Elgar, this does not imply that there was no Real, i.e., no actually-existing “original theme,” or that Elgar himself did not know what piece he was varying. To suggest that the enigma was an enigma for Elgar is to suggest that his Variations are an attempt to respond to an enigma, i.e., the enigma of or in—posed by—the “original theme.” “Enigma Variations” does not “cover over” some true kernel, concealing it from our gaze; “Enigma Variations,” we might say, does not know what the answer to the enigma is. It is itself rather a series of attempts to resolve an enigma, fourteen attempted resolutions to the internal division or self-difference of this “original theme.”

To cast this in an inverse light, were we ever to determine what Elgar’s “original theme” actually was, we would not arrive (simply) at the “answer” to the enigma. What would appear, more directly, would be the enigma of this “original theme” itself, the “original theme” as enigma. This “simple” melody (which “everybody knows”) would instantly cease to be “identical to itself,” becoming utterly strange, an entity of multiple enigmatic dimensions. We would realize that we had never truly known it. (And furthermore: would not this experience be funny?)

This is to say, perhaps the relationship between “Helen” and “Enigma Variations” consists not in the notion of an ultimately inaccessible kernel at the heart of each, nor in the fact that in both cases you get “nothing but” appearances and never the true fundamental substance. What if Helen’s various appearances are themselves perceived as a succession of attempts to resolve an enigma?17 Or from the inverse angle, “Helen” is neither the Real beyond appearances, nor is she nothing but these (“mere”) appearances—“Helen” is rather correlative
to that by virtue of which the appearances, while “all there is,” are nonetheless “non-all,” self-
different.”

Do we not arrive, via this logic, at the very dynamic of Lacan’s feminine formula of
sexuation (the feminine as “non-all”)? We should note here the irony that it is with the very
loss of the (sublime) Woman that this dynamic emerges. Indeed, it is precisely here that we
can understand something of Lacan’s curious insistence that “true” sublimation is exactly the
same as de-sublimation. To put this in terms of the drive, is not this “appearing Real,” as it
occurs in the love relationship, directly correlative to drive’s privileging of “aim” over “goal”?
Is not the shift from a Real beyond appearance to a Real that appears in the love-relationship
correlative to a shift from the objet a of desire to the “bonus-jouissance” of the drive, i.e., the
satisfaction obtained—and the sublimity generated—in the very pursuit? Do we not find in
Elgar’s “Variations” an exemplary illustration of this shift? That is to say, we shift from the
objet a as an inaccessible “original theme” beyond all grasp, to the objet a as this sublime
music itself, as that which is produced in the very pursuit of an enigma, the sublime by-
product of repeated circulations around an enigma.

In this light, what are we to make of the play’s final twist, in which—hilariously—the
two men agree to continue writing to each other, preserving the former correspondence in the
acknowledged absence of Helen’s own voice? As Erik is on the verge of leaving, Abel calls
him back for the play’s final line: “I just wanted to say … I’ll … I’ll write …” (191). These
writings will have an identical appearance to those which preceded, yet they will lack the Real
of Helen, the true kernel of Abel’s passion—just as the curtain, for Zeuxis, is divested of the
substantial Beyond which had attracted his gaze. Our first response might be to think of this
writing as an empty procedure, lacking the “thing itself” and simply ignoring its absence. (Is
not the comedy here similar to the famous finale of Some Like it Hot, in which the aging
millionaire so breezily accepts Tony Curtis as his bride, unfazed by the revelation that there is no Woman behind his appearances? Or worse, is not the writing of these letters in Helen’s absence a usurpation of the woman as such, wilfully reducing her to a strictly imaginary entity? Yet crucially, rather than an absence from this correspondence of Helen (and thus the writing’s reduction to “mere” appearance or fiction), what will be absent here, for Abel, is precisely the absence itself. As Erik’s (eminently Lacanian) diagnosis had stated, “It’s not Helen’s presence you need, but her absence. Not the Helen that is, but the Helen that you don’t have” (164). What the letters will thus be divested of is not primarily Helen but more directly, the fundamental inaccessibility they had previously posited (and sought to preserve)—a “sublime” inaccessibility which, in its very splendour, had had the paradoxical effect of blinding Abel to the love-object itself. Like the analyst, what Erik enables Abel to lose is precisely the loss—what he “takes” from Abel, and what their future correspondence will lack, is not Helen but the very structuring absence she had held the place of.

Does not this inversion find a precise echo in the final comic gesture of Schumann’s Humoresque? As Žižek writes, “Schumann brings this procedure of absent melody to an apparently absurd self-reference when, later in the same fragment of ‘Humoresque,’ he repeats the same two actually played melodic lines, yet this time the score contains no third absent melodic line, no inner voice” (PV 366). What is omitted here is precisely the absence as such, the absent melody. As with the writings of Abel and Erik, the “actually played notes are deprived only of what is not there, of their constitutive lack.”

We thus find in Schmitt a dynamic very similar to what we encountered in The Illusion. Like Pridamant, Abel is subjected to a traversal of the fantasy, effected through a loss of the loss that had sustained his relation to Symbolic reality. Yet is there not an important sense in which Enigma Variations takes matters a step further? Crucially, what is
accomplished in the two men’s decision to consciously perpetuate this letter-writing (in the absence of the absence) is a Hegelian shift from “In-itself” to “For-itself,” a shift wherein the objet a, formerly the inaccessible “goal” of the process, now becomes that which is generated in the process itself (as “aim”). What is gestured to here is an engagement with a Real appearing beyond the fantasy, after its traversal. What the play proposes is an intersubjective exchange sustained by a sublime dimension correlative to the very lack in the characters’ Symbolic reality. The letters know that they are “all there is,” yet for all that, they are “non-all”—they do not presume substantial contact with some “original theme,” but funnily enough, in continuing to play around its enigma, they give rise along the way to an eminently sublime by-product.

And if on one hand this letter-writing would seem tantamount to an elimination of the female subject, is it not, on the other hand, an encounter with—and an openness to—the subject as such? Put differently, far from a disavowal of Helen, is there not a most forceful sense in which this sustained appearance, perceived and enacted “For-itself,” is ultimately most faithful to her? Does it not faithfully replicate the dynamic of Elgar’s piece, understood as a succession of attempts to resolve an enigma, a succession that cherishes (and is sustained by) the very sublimity which emerges through these attempts?

The play’s final twist is something which inevitably provokes laughter in the theatre, yet notably, this is laughter of a highly uplifting variety—why? It is funny that these two incredibly different men will keep writing to each other, and moreover, it is funny that they can keep writing. But to accomplish a further step: they can keep writing insofar as it is funny. Against the “cynical” laughter accompanying the desublimation of love and the dissolution of its illusions, the comedy here consists not in the fact that they carry on immune to the “falsity”
of the procedure. Rather, their writing can continue because *love itself* is funny. Their decision to write reflects and affirms this sublimity of love’s own comedy.

Does not the present study, in bringing itself to conclusion through this discussion of Schmitt’s play, reflect the dynamic described earlier as a “downward synthesis”? We move from works featuring encounters with the fantastical, the monstrous, and the otherworldly (with their correlative theatrical accoutrements, structural gymnastics and perceptual multistabilities), to a bare minimum of theatrical exchange, two people in a room before us, conversing. Yet far from an elimination of sublime dimensions, far from a simple dissolution of the Real, we encounter here a Real of a different kind—a Real correlative to the *non-all* of that which appears before us.

Yet is there not an even further dimension to Schmitt’s reversal? The true irony, of course, is that in this “hilarious” and unusual arrangement which Abel and Erik have agreed to sustain, we “come across ourselves” in the field of our own vision—i.e., we encounter the very *intersubjective* circuitry defining the theatrical exchange in which we ourselves have been participating. Erik has agreed to enact a role, to stage a character for Abel’s gaze, and Abel will accept this role and respond to it—a relationship to be sustained (between utterly different and otherwise incompatible people) with full acknowledgement on each side that the appearance is not the Thing, that the circuitry involves a constitutive *lack*, or in Lacan’s terms, that there is no Other of the Other. And crucial in Schmitt’s rendering is its presentation of this circuit as an intersubjective *relation to enigma*. In the theatre, as Hegel would put it, the secrets of the Ancient Egyptians are always secrets *for* the Ancient Egyptians—as part of an audience I try to penetrate, fathom, and respond to the enigma of this thing which hath appeared before me, an appearance which is *itself* the attempt of an Other (or Others) to penetrate, fathom and respond to an enigma. Drawing once more upon the dynamic of drive, if
the “goal” of theatrical performance is a Real that is ultimately never reached, never 
actualized, never fully attained (i.e., we never get the “thing itself,” only appearances), what 
ultimately constitutes the theatrical exchange is the Real appearing through this circuit, a Real 
correlative to the “aim” that sustains it. It is in the very sublimity of that which emerges 
through this intersubjective encounter that we discover the objet a of the theatrical relationship 

2 For this juxtaposition of cynicism and irony I draw upon IR 203-208. 
3 See Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 112: “Today, the formations of the 
unconscious (from dreams to hysterical symptoms) have definitely lost their innocence and are 
thoroughly reflexivized: the ‘free associations’ of a typical educated analysand consist for the most part 
of attempts to provide a psychoanalytic explanation of their disturbances, so that one is quite justified 
in saying that we have not only Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian, and so on, interpretations of the 
symptoms, but symptoms themselves that are Jungian, Kleinian, Lacanian, and so on … The 
unfortunate result of this global reflexivization of interpretation (everything becomes interpretation, the 
unconscious interprets itself) is that the analyst’s interpretation itself loses its performative ‘symbolic 
efficiency’ and leaves the symptom intact in the immediacy of its idiotic jouissance.” 
4 Žižek is here referring to an idea in Lacan’s “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of 
Desire.” Lacan observes that animals can feign (for instance, play dead), “But an animal does not feign 
feigning” (Écrits 683). 
5 Žižek clarifies this Lacanian emphasis on the “inhuman” dimension of the human being with 
reference to the Hegelian “infinite judgement,” the affirmation of a non-predicate. “‘He is not human’ 
means simply that he is external to humanity, animal or divine, while ‘he is inhuman’ means something 
thoroughly different, namely the fact that he is neither human nor inhuman, but marked by a terrifying 
excess which, although it negates what we understand as humanity, is inherent to being human” (HL 
47) 
6 One should of course acknowledge the way in which the “humour” we derive from such characters 
and their ardent professions is related to the fact that this play is an adaptation of a work from a 
previous era of theatre. i.e. We are enjoying not only the characters but the interplay that Kushner 
establishes with an earlier era, the fun that he pokes at its theatrical conventions and its excesses. Yet in 
making this observation, we should note also its supplementary inversion—our cynical laughter at the 
“silliness” of previous theatrical styles involves a certain irony. Perhaps what is most funny about 
love—in our own, contemporary era—is the way its victims would themselves (if momentarily) appear 
to belong to a by-gone age, reverting to a language and emotional excess that seems “out of place” in 
our day and age … 
7 As Zupančič puts it, “if there is one fundamental lesson of psychoanalysis, it is precisely that of 
recognizing excess at the very core of humanity”—the way in which desire (“in its radical negativity”) 
and drive (“with its always excessive, ‘surplus’ nature”), “necessarily complicate the story of accepting 
one’s finitude, since they introduce (or point to) a fundamental contradiction in this finitude itself”. 
“For human beings there is no such thing as an unproblematic finitude (which, for some mysterious 
reason, they would refuse to accept). … humankind would be more than happy to be able to live 
peacefully in its finitude, but that there is something that gnaws away at this finitude from within, 
erodes it, puts it into question” (52). 
8 See Chapter VI of Lacan’s Seminar XX, as well as SO 68 and TN 202.
9 In Lacan’s terms: “It is certainly true that the satisfaction of a wish does give pleasure but, as is well known, the dreamer … does not have a simple and unambiguous relationship to his wish …” (Seminar VII 14).

10 Is it not also in this sense that we can understand Alcandre’s “psychoanalytic” cure? His magic effects a “reconciliation” in the precise Hegelian sense: “not as an immediate synthesis or reconciliation of opposites, but as the redoubling of the gap or antagonism—the two opposed moments are ‘reconciled’ when the gap that separates them is posited as inherent to one of the terms” (PV 106). If we expect a “reconciliation” between father and son (the subject and the object of its desire), what we get instead is a “speculative” inversion whereby the very division between the two is reflected into the former, as its own self-division, a division rendered “concrete” by this comedy.

11 As Žižek puts it, “the moment the subject is bereft of external obstacles which can be blamed for his failure, his subjective position will collapse on account of its inherent inauthenticity” (TN 143). The very lack which serves as the central structuring dynamic of the subject’s being is suspended: “since the object is in itself inconsistent, since what allows it to retain the appearance of consistency is the very external hindrance which allegedly restrains its inner potentials, the most effective way to destroy it, to bring about its collapse, is precisely to … remove all hindrances and to ‘let it be,’ i.e. to leave the field open for the free deployment of its potentials” (TN 143).

12 As Župančič puts it, “‘Transcendental illusion’ is the name for something that appears where there should be nothing. It is not the illusion of something; it is not a false or distorted representation of a real object. Behind this illusion there is no real object—there is only nothing, the lack of an object. The illusion consists of ‘something’ in the place of ‘nothing.’ It involves deception by the simple fact that it is, that it appears” (Shadow 172).

13 Put another way, does not Kushner’s reversal here reflect (what Žižek emphasizes as) the fundamental passage from Kant to Hegel, i.e., such that the “contradictions and inconsistencies” in our knowledge of the object are “simultaneously the limitation of the very object of our knowledge,” internal to that object: “the gaps and voids in our knowledge of reality are simultaneously the gaps and voids in the ‘real’ ontological edifice itself” (TS 55)? Do we not find here a demonstration of “essence” as the “self-fissure”/“self-rupture” of appearance?—i.e., the Thing as “nothing but the ontologization of the inconsistency between phenomena” (PD 66)? (See also Johnston 130, 142.)

14 We should recall here the discussion of the Lacanian gaze: “The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze” (XI 105). Also, in keeping with the theme of curtains, we should note here Hegel’s own famous remark: “It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen” (in Dolar’s Voice, 196).

15 To go a step further, we could clarify the distinction between Kant and Lacanian fantasy by returning here to the “seemingly hair-splitting” distinction between the “objectively subjective” and the “subjectively objective” distinction between the “objectively subjective” and the “subjectively objective”: “the Kantian transcendentally constituted reality is subjectively objective (it stands for objectivity which is subjectively constituted/mediated), while fantasy is objectively subjective (it designates an innermost subjective content, a product of fantasizing, which, paradoxically, is ‘desubjectivized’, rendered inaccessible to the subject’s immediate experience” (PF 121).

16 The traversal is consubstantial with “the crumbling of the Other,” its appearance “in its utter unfoundedness” (GV 149). To “traverse” the fantasy object, to make it “appear in its very contingency,” is simultaneously to expose how this contingent object “has up to then covered ‘the lack in the Other’,” how its fascinating presence serves to mask an emptiness on account of which the symbolic order is perforated, “non-all.”

17 Žižek reminds us, “the subject ‘as such’ is the name for a certain radical displacement, a certain wound, cut, in the texture of the universe, and all its identifications are ultimately just so many failed attempts to heal this wound” (FT xvi).
This is to say, the shift here is from the difference between two Helens to a pure difference. See PV 18, and also 7: “the Lacanian Real has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between the multitude of perspectives on it.”

We should note the way in which this very logic, for Žižek, illuminates the heart of Hegel’s movement toward “absolute knowing”. “What is Phenomenology of Spirit ultimately if not the presentation of a series of aborted attempts by the subject to define the Absolute and thus arrive at the longed-for synchronism of subject and object? This is why its final outcome (‘absolute knowledge’) does not bring about a finally found harmony but rather entails a kind of reflective inversion: it confronts the subject with the fact that the true Absolute is nothing but the logical disposition of its previous failed attempts to conceive the Absolute—that is, with the vertiginous experience that Truth itself coincides with the path towards Truth” (FT 99-100).

And do we not find here a kind of inversion of Brechtian “defamiliarization”? i.e., Instead of making a familiar situation strange, Abel will accept as familiar a highly unusual state of affairs—in spite of the extraneation that has been effected. See also LA 32-34.
“The measure of the true love for a philosopher,” writes Žižek in the opening sentence of *Organs Without Bodies*, “is that one recognizes traces of his concepts all around in one’s daily experience” (*DC* 3). The statement is made in honour of Deleuze, whom Žižek begins to “recognize” in an otherwise inconsequential feature of an Eisenstein film he happens to be watching. In the present context, we can quickly observe that what can be said of philosophers can be said of our love for a play or a playwright. How replete the world seems with Wildean paradoxes in the days following a good production of *Earnest*; and how forcefully a resistant boot or an over-dry vegetable can resound with the human condition following a night of Beckettian tragicomedy. As Wilde himself has famously put it, “Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.”

Of course, it was this very proclivity for so voraciously “recognizing” its own concepts everywhere that earned “psychoanalytic interpretation” such a bad reputation some decades ago—a reputation that continues to dog it, prompting opponents to “recognize” in even the most progressive psychoanalytical approaches the proclivities of older models. Interestingly, the opposition that psychoanalytic criticism inspires often resembles a psychoanalytic diagnosis—the discourse is itself perceived as a victim of its own death-driven compulsion to repeat, “doomed,” as Maud Ellmann writes, “to rediscover its own myths grotesquely multiplied throughout the course of literature” (3). Opponents of contemporary psychoanalytic approaches return compulsively to such criticisms—even when these approaches are themselves centrally preoccupied with the very notion of retroactivity, more attentive than any other discourse to those *après-coup* effects of our own gaze. Phobia for “psychoanalytic” analysis of drama remains acute, even when such analysis has long since abjured diagnosing
playwrights, when it perversely ignores their absent fathers and their early psychosexual traumas, when it no longer privileges a rampant search for phallic symbols over a careful analysis of formal dynamics and construction, when it generally has a thousand other things on its mind besides maternal wombs.

Žižek’s own writings make abundantly clear that nothing is more crucial to him than to “avoid the danger of the so-called ‘psychoanalytic interpretation of art’” (ES 119), repudiating, interrogating or reconfiguring those proclivities with which the latter mode of criticism has historically been charged. Yet for all the ways in which his work may succeed in reinvigorating psychoanalysis as a framework for approaching fictional artworks, are we not compelled to acknowledge that Žižek himself is conspicuously, unabashedly, obscenely guilty of finding Lacan everywhere, discovering his traces in the most unlikely and incongruous of places? Does he not, as though possessed by his own “compulsion to repeat,” return again and again to his beloved Lacanian objects and themes and dynamics, miraculously producing them in everything from beer commercials to Stalinism? Is not the same true for the artworks whose traces he manages to recognize all around him? (Is there anything that does not remind Žižek of Vertigo? Is there anything that cannot be compared to Chaplin or Wagner?) As a quick web search reveals, these proclivities have indeed begun to inspire an appropriately prolific array of farcical imitations—an honour rarely granted to living philosophers.¹

Of course, what the very cynicism of this delightful mockery may obscure is the comedy correlative to the ironic, i.e., the way in which Žižek’s compulsive returns, for all their humorous regularity, do in fact produce such unexpected and delightful insights. What is truly funny is that Žižek’s repeated references to Vertigo do so forcefully compel our fascination, prompting us to read on, buy more books …
In a recent article, Leigh Claire La Berge goes so far as to equate Žižek’s “prolific, repetitive, regularized oeuvre” (11) with the verbal outpourings of the analysand, to which Žižek’s collective readership, cast in the role of analyst, must appropriately respond in order to assist this (albeit intelligent and highly articulate) subject in overcoming his “repetition compulsion” (18). What is the fantasy that sustains this analysand, driving him to publish these books so “desperately and impulsively” (16), and how can the critical response to Žižek enable the theorist to accomplish the requisite “traversal”?

If such criticism runs the risk of reverting to a “characterological” attack, what is most misrepresentative in this portrait of Žižek is, of course, its failure to properly supplement itself with a “dialectical reversal.” This is to say, is the nature of Žižek’s engagement with Lacanian ideas and the products of culture indicative of the fact that he has yet to successfully “traverse the fantasy,” or does it reflect the very reverse—i.e., a mode of engaging with the world that is correlative to such a traversal?

In a recent interview, Kaja Silverman explores from her own angle a dynamic that Lacan refers to as the “passion of the signifier”: “When we are passionate about the signifier, we do not merely savour each new object in its specificity, we also connect it to ever new memories and perceptions; we create an associational field around it” (35). She draws here upon Proust’s Swann’s Way to illustrate the concept:

In the third part of that novel, Swann, the central character, meets Odette, a woman who is not his type. However, because he often hears a cherished piece of music when she is present, he nevertheless is able to make her his new love object; the music arouses in him a desire which he is able to direct toward her. Until now Swann’s libidinal investments have been short-lived; one working woman has replaced another in a seemingly endless succession. But Odette
succeeds where the previous women have failed; she becomes Swann’s wife and
the mother of his child. This is because, once Swann falls in love with Odette, he
begins to expand her associational field on the basis of other similarities and
proximities. Before long, he has connected her to a particular Botticelli painting;
to a valuable variety of orchids; to an exquisite tea-ceremony; etc. In this case,
Swann does not so much displace away from Odette, as displace around from her.
I am interested in this kind of displacement not only because of its power to
augment and expand the value of a love object, but also for its capacity to figure
what might be called a “mobile fidelity”. One comes back over and over again to
a particular love object, but that love object’s field of meaning is constantly
shifting.

With the preceding discussions in mind, we can recognize here a movement from
desire’s metonymic deferral (a “seemingly endless succession”) to a particular mode of the
circular movement which defines the psychoanalytic drive (“comes back over and over
again”). This movement, as we have seen in Chapter Five’s analysis of Enigma Variations, is
correlative to a transformation in the status of the objet a, i.e., from a hidden (and inaccessible)
kernel posited within the love-object (and thus necessarily deferred) to that which is
correlative to the aim of drive, a (sublime) by-product generated via the circuit of one’s
engagement with the love-object. My larger argument, of course, is that we find in Swann’s
circuit with this love-object—his seeing of Odette in everything around him, and in his
“displacing around from her”—something crucial in Žižek’s own method of engaging with his
beloved concepts and artworks. If the “goal” of his writing is to advance certain arguments, its
aim (and sublime effect) is in its “power to augment and expand the value” of its objects—of
the artworks it engages with, and simultaneously, the very concepts it is faithfully coming
back to. This “compulsive returning,” far from a debilitating “stuckness,” demonstrates (and is indeed driven by) a “mobile fidelity” which accommodates and indeed initiates transformations in the object’s field of meaning. Silverman’s description intimates how the circuitry of a psychoanalytic engagement, far from “depleting” and “impoverishing” its objects (as was Susan Sontag’s criticism in her classic essay), may open up an enduring love affair with them, discovering sublimity even in (or especially in) a relationship with those objects that are not initially our type. For Silverman, the power of such circuitry is by no means limited to specifically academic enterprises—it is indeed “the only way that we can be open to the world.”

Perhaps what is crucial in Žižek is not simply what he says about our contemporary “crisis of sublimation,” i.e., what his approach can tell us or reveal to us about this crisis. Crucial is how the very manner of his approach—to philosophy, to artworks, to everything and sundry—simultaneously offers and reflects a response to this crisis of sublimation. Crucial is Žižek’s writing as sublimation, the way its manner of engagement models a sublimating relation with its objects, with the contemporary world, with the ideas around which it circulates. Perhaps the “truth of Žižek” is in the aim that perpetuates these prolific returns, the sublimating impact of this circuitry itself. Similarly, at stake in the present study is not simply what the plays under examination can say to us about our contemporary crisis, not simply a criticism of their engagement with this crisis—what is at stake is the sublimation correlative to a critical psychoanalytic engagement with these plays. To be clear, this is not to say we seek to raise them “to the dignity of the Thing,” as though they were objects of overwhelming magnificence, as though they possessed within them the sublime goal of our endless search. Such is the sublimity correlative to desire in its “masculine” mode, sustained by the structure of fantasy. At stake, rather, is the sublimity correlative to the aim of our engagement with
these plays and the “encounters with the Real” that they stage. And perhaps the true test of the value of a Žižekian approach for theatre is its capacity to make the Real of this dimension appear.

1 See, for instance Evan Johnston’s piece entitled “Noted Post-Marxist Sociologist, Philosopher, and Cultural Critic Slavoj Žižek Welcomes You to the Gym”: http://mcsweeney's.net/2008/11/14johnston.html


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