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

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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 though 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 a famous series of “ethnographic expeditions” conducted by An-sky to explore and document the rich, 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, as Seth Wolitz writes, if not “the ‘Western virus’ of romantic love” and its “concomitant individualism” (Wolitz 2006: 187), autonomous desire as an “invasive” force subverting paternal-symbolic authority and Judaic Law? In this way the play 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.

If this dybbuk represents the derailing force of “Western” romantic love, it is also deeply imbricated with the “modern” hysteria which, as Slavoj Žižek notes, “so deeply branded the zeitgeist at the turn of the century” and indeed “marked the birthplace of psychoanalysis” (Žižek 2002: 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)” (Eynat-Confino 2000: 20), a “stratagem to escape the forced marriage” (19). This emphasis on “feminine” subversion is echoed in Ira Konigsberg’s analysis of the play, which encourages us to supplement hysterical emphases with a psychoanalytic exploration of desire—“desire for fusion and oneness ... a desire inherent in the human psyche” (Konigsberg 1997: 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 symbolic authority and paternal Law, gesturing toward a higher reconciliation of the patriarchal Jewish God with its traditionally excluded feminine element.

Following the lead of these theorists, this article 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 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, influential analyses have frequently explored its creatures in terms of this impulse toward “undifferentiation,” a yearning for primordial Oneness prior to the imposition of the Symbolic order or “big Other” (the “social order constructed by discrete units of meaning, by a network of

signifiers" [Jackson 1998: 90]). Liminal, amorphous, androgynous, these creatures repudiate the restrictions of imposed identity, undermining the division and rigid structuring that characterizes the realm of Symbolic authority. Significantly, we find a similar thrust in much contemporary discussion of the *Liebestod*. Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon's recent work on opera (*The Art of Dying*) locates in the "eroticized ecstasy" (Hutcheon & Hutcheon 2004: 67) of *Liebestod* an ultimate fulfillment of the Freudian "death drive," understood here as a longing that pushes past all Symbolic restrictions in search of an absolute union between self and other, masculine and feminine. The *Liebestod*, which attains its exemplary expression in Wagnerian opera, gives body to a reconciliation of Eros and Thanatos wherein 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 this play through the lens of Slavoj Žižek and his engagement with Lacanian psychoanalysis enables us greatly to complicate these perspectives, re-evaluating 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 "extraneate" the dynamics which underlie the *Liebestod* and the sublimity of its "ecstatic self-annihilation" (Žižek 2006: 62), exposing the intimate relationship between such erotic fantasies and the Symbolic instability correlative to 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 extraneate 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 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 rigid 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!" (An-sky 2000: 36).² At stake here is the very substance of what he represents—the substance behind his *Name*. In Lacanian terms, he reveals himself 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*.³ 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.⁴

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 to one another 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 dissolved, it remains forcefully *inscribed* in the big Other, registered in the lovers’ potent awareness of being marked for each other: “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 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,”⁵ 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” (Johnston 2008: 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 desire’s relation to the Symbolic. The image of passionate desire 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. 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*.

To think of this another way—and recalling here the image of An-sky himself, teetering on the cusp between substantial Tradition and 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” (Žižek 2000: 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 appropriate Symbolic 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.

Before exploring more closely the implications of this inversion, let us consider how this notion of a “barred” paternal-symbolic order relates to our aesthetic experience of An-sky’s dybbuk in the theatre. The dybbuk, after all, is a male spirit *performed* by a female actor, who, in a highly paradoxical way, must give body to the usurpation of her body, enabling Khonen to live and speak through it. The figure of Leah, as Vladislav Ivanov describes it, undergoes before us a sudden “estrangement and deformation,” “ceases to be herself,” “cries out in another’s voice” (Ivanov 2006: 262). The phenomenological complexities of these possession scenes, so much a part of any live performance, are deeply imbricated with the issues of female hysteria inevitably haunting An-sky’s drama.

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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*. 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” (Garner 1994: 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” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 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 1994: 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 unnervingly 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" (Case 2008: 121), and theatre has correlatively promoted the assumption "that the male is the subject of the dramatic action" (119). 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 distanciation 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" (Case 2008: 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" (Žižek 2001: 8). It is precisely this stain in the visual field that "materializes" the subject as correlative to the *lack* in the Other, the

point of inherent self-division of the Symbolic order framing reality. We can find the subject “as such” in the very mute *ineradicability* of this female presence persisting before us, the inert *insistence* of this uncanny remainder which the male monologue, whilst literally “taking the stage,” can nonetheless not *get rid of*.

We can put this another way apropos Lacan’s “discourse of the hysteric.” As Žižek clarifies, what is at stake in the fundamental hysterical question—“Why am I what you are saying that I am?”—is a radical displacement from any proffered Symbolic identity: “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” (Žižek 1992: 131). 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 an encounter with this surplus, i.e., subjectivity as an excess “out of joint” with any proper place, a derailing remainder which the circuit of Symbolic operations and institutions cannot fully sublate? 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” (Žižek 2001: 8), i.e., exposing the gap inherent to Symbolically-regulated reality, its fundamental contingency and inconsistency.⁸

And if approaches such as Eynat-Confino’s would seek to accentuate An-sky’s woman as an active subject, a self-assertive agent of resistance who “hystericizes” the existing Symbolic order, central to a Žižekian approach is the exposure of how Woman ultimately functions in this play to *cover over* the lack in the Symbolic, concealing or distracting from the gap to which the subject *as such* is directly correlative. But before moving to an analysis of the play’s *Liebestod*, let us extend these Žižekian-Lacanian dynamics through a more careful consideration of this dybbuk as hysterical “symptom.” A close look at this 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” [Konigsberg 1997: 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” (Bilu 1985: 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 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 tends to counterbalance readings of Leah as an active hysteric with interpretations of her possession as a form of rape, “both mental and physical” (Wolitz 2006: 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.

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 perverse submission—by considering further the Lacanian understanding of hysteria. Specifically, apropos the hysteric’s refusal of the phallus, Lacan’s approach in *Seminar X* is to problematize the very nature of this refusal, and here he effects one of his characteristically dizzying reversals. As Roberto Harari puts it (in his illuminating explication of this unpublished Seminar), “*the refusal of the hysteric is not directed at the penis but rather at its detumescence*” (Harari 2001: 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 or 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. To use Lacan’s terms, she renounces *jouissance* in order to obtain an ever-present tumescence.

The point here 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” may also and simultaneously harbour 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” (Žižek 1996: 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. It is revealing that Leah’s possession—i.e., her symptomatic infusion with a phallus that resists detumescence—coincides precisely with the appearance of her “scared,” “terrified,” and “frightened” fiancé Menashe (30), this hopelessly flaccid representative of the phallic order who would rather “hide out in some nook” than rise to the demands of his symbolic role. 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).

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 completeness and consistency of the big Other, 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” (Žižek 1989: 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 above, is correlative to a horror *for* the dybbuk, caught “between two deaths,” threatened with the dissolution of all Symbolic identity. 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 to this play 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” (Žižek 2006: 89), a (primary) 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, potentially implicating the hysterical with the very *defence* against Symbolic dissolution? Yet as Žižek’s work 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” of that fantasy becomes possible. A close look at the trial at the centre of *The Dybbuk* reveals the operations of this Žižekian dynamic *par excellence*. At stake in this scene is, of course, the opposition between the *word* of Symbolic Law and its uncanny other, the derailing *jouissance* of a voice (the dybbuk’s) which the word 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 is not enough, on its own, to expel the dybbuk. The latter will be banished 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" (Žižek 1996: 149), a "horribly turgid and leaden drone" (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 marks 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 (or dying scream) of this repressed Real.⁹

The point in this analysis of such significance 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 a 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" (Žižek 1996: 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 symptomatic 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*" (Dolar 2006: 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 *ex-timacy*) between our reality and its apparent Outsiders, the ways in which the two are “co-dependent in their very incompatibility” (Žižek 1994: 121). Revealingly, in a live production of An-sky’s play, the very screams of the dybbuk and its final dying voice seem directly to *coincide* with the blasts of the Shofar (47-48), the two voices intermingling, becoming momentarily *undecideable*. 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” (Žižek 2006: 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” (Konigsberg 1997: 37).

Applying the arguments developed over the course of this article, 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” (Žižek 2002: 192), correlative to the very *lack* in the phallic-symbolic universe—to *Woman* as a phantasmatic figure which covers over or “plugs” this lack?

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 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."¹⁰ As Žižek insists, Lacan could not be further from the notion of male and female as two halves of a prior Whole (Žižek 2005: 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) can instead be conceived as two modalities of coping with or mediating the deadlock of *jouissance* that "is" the death drive.¹¹ 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, the (inescapable) *jouissance* correlative to a 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 effected, *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. 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,¹² 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” (Žižek 1997: 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’” (Žižek 1996: 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” (Žižek 2006: 122).¹³

Yet if An-sky’s *Liebestod* is directly complicit in this “masculine” cover-up, its specific features enable us, through close examination, to extraneate 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” (Wolitz 2006: 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” (Wolitz 2006: 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” (Žižek 2005: 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 the lovers' 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*" (Žižek 1993: 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 a thing 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) (Žižek 2002: 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 2006: 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” (Dolar 1996: 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 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.¹⁴ 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’*” (Žižek 1992: 35). Through this formal conversion, an external contingency of our experience is “‘internalized,’ symbolized, provided with Meaning” (Žižek 1996: 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” 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” (Žižek 2001: 168).¹⁵

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” (Žižek 1996: 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” (Žižek 1996: 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” (Santner 2001: 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.¹⁶

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 “legitimizing” 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 2000: 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” (Žižek 1993: 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.

1 Notes

- 1 S. An-sky is the penname of Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport.
- 2 All subsequent quotations from An-sky's play are taken from this printing of Neurgroschel's translation.
- 3 See, for instance, Chapter VI of Lacan's *Seminar XVII*, "The castrated master."
- 4 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, (1978) "Mark Me: *The Dybbuk*," *Theatre*, 9.2: 149-151.
- 5 See, for instance, Lacan's *Seminar XX*, pages 28, 81, and 131.
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 We should note the paradox here that the female subject, as this disturbing leftover in its *insistence* upon the stage, is a thing *produced* by the actress's forceful identification with her role as "possessed." In contrast with Brechtian distanciation, 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 help to extraneate what Žižek has in mind with his notion of "overidentification" as a (feminine) form of subversion? If the subversive strength of the feminine is more traditionally located 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?
- 9 See Žižek's illuminating discussion of Riek's text in *The Indivisible Remainder*.
- 10 See Chapter I of Lacan's *Seminar XX*, "On *Jouissance*."
- 11 See Chapter VII of Lacan's *Seminar XX*, "A Love Letter."
- 12 See Žižek (1992: 80): "... 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."
- 13 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?" (Žižek 2001b: 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).
- 14 See for instance the second section of Lacan's *Seminar XI*.
- 15 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" (Žižek 1992: 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).

- 16 Put another way, if on one hand we conceive hysteria as “a reaction against interpellation” (Žižek 1996:164), 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.

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