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NORMAND CHAURETTE'S *FRAGMENTS D'UNE LETTRE D'ADIEU LUS PAR DES GÉOLOGUES* AND THE ŽIŽEKIAN DEATH DRIVE

Quebecois playwright Normand Charette's *Fragments d'une lettre d'adieu lus par des géologues* is, like much of Charette's theatre, preoccupied with the mystery of death. Five geologists are called before a commission to account for the failure of their expedition in Cambodia and the unexpected death of their leader Toni van Saikin. The causes of Van Saikin's death (a suicide?) will ultimately remain beyond the limits of knowledge, since the incessant rain that plagued the mission destroyed all but a few enigmatic fragments of his writing and reduced his corpse to mere bones. In this article I seek to supplement existing analyses of Charette's play by drawing on Slavoj Žižek's surprising reconfiguration of the "death drive." I argue that Žižek's conception, a reworking of Freud through the lens of Jacques Lacan's later writings, can bring to light what most distinguishes Charette's engagement with human finitude, enabling us to reconceive the very relationship between symbolization and death in *Fragments*. Ultimately, this approach will locate a radical dimension of Charette's theatre in its capacity to stage the *undead* supplements of a contemporary reality increasingly deprived (like the Geologists' mission) of solid ground and stable structures.

La plupart des pièces du dramaturge québécois Normand Charette s'intéressent au mystère de la mort. C'est le cas de Fragments d'une lettre d'adieu lus par des géologues, pièce dans laquelle cinq géologues sont appelés à se prononcer devant une commission sur l'échec de leur expédition au Cambodge et le décès inattendu de leur chef Toni van Saikin. La cause du décès de Van Saikin (un suicide?) restera un mystère, puisque la pluie incessante qui tourmente la mission a tout détruit sauf quelques fragments énigmatiques de ses écrits et n'a laissé de son cadavre qu'un simple amas d'os. Dans cet article, Wolfe cherche à compléter des analyses antérieures de la pièce en se servant du concept de « pulsion de mort » tel qu'il a été repensé par Slavoj Žižek. Wolfe fait valoir que le concept de Žižek, une relecture étonnante de Freud sous l'angle des écrits de Jacques Lacan, met en lumière le rapport de Charette à la finitude de l'être humain et nous permet de voir autrement le rapport même entre la symbolisation et la mort dans Fragments. En bout de ligne, cette approche fait voir une dimension plus radicale du théâtre de Charette, capable de mettre en scène les aspects morts vivants d'une réalité contemporaine qui est de plus en plus privée (comme la mission des géologues) d'un sol ferme et de structures stables.



Quand vous lirez ces lignes, dans cet endroit perdu du monde ...
Quand vous lirez ces lignes, sur ce rivage loin de tous les repères ...
Quand vous aurez parcouru ces lignes ...

—Toni van Saikin

The art of theatre,” writes Howard Barker, “is a rehearsal for death but more, a confession of ignorance, of the limits of knowledge” (31, emphasis in original). The theatre of French Canadian playwright Normand Chaurette peers insistently toward these limits, toward that secret named death. His earliest success, *Provincetown Playhouse, juillet 1919, j’avais 19 ans*, directly explores the collision of theatre and death. Its protagonist is a playwright forever traumatized by the memory of an actual dead body that found its way into a production of one of his plays. The recent *Le Petit Köchel* stages an elaborate ritual performed by four women to commemorate the suicide of their “son,” an obscure, cannibalistic figure who dwelt in their basement. Between these works lies *Fragments d’une lettre d’adieu lus par des géologues*, a play preoccupied with a most unusual death. Five geologists are called before a commission to account for the failure of their expedition in Cambodia and the mysterious death of their leader Toni van Saikin. One by one they recount the challenges (floods, malfunctioning equipment, etc.) that beset this expedition, the goal of which was to test a system of water purification for tropical regions. The causes of Van Saikin’s death (a suicide?) will ultimately remain beyond the limits of knowledge, since the incessant rain that plagued the mission destroyed all but a few enigmatic fragments of his writing and reduced his corpse to mere bones before assistance arrived. Offering no definitive answers, Chaurette evokes a realm where symbolization breaks down, where time dissolves, and where a yearning for death coincides with ecstasy.

In approaching such daunting realms, a theatre scholar can take a certain comfort in the existing range of pertinent theoretical formulations, from Bataille’s work on transgression and the “sacred” to Blanchot’s writings on “limit experiences” to Kristeva’s analysis of “abjection.” Recent volumes such as *Eroticism and Death in Theatre and Performance* (edited by Karoline Gritzner) testify to a rejuvenation of interest in the intimacy of theatre’s relationship with death, suggesting how this confrontation might be explored from philosophical and theoretical angles. In this

article I seek to supplement these investigations by drawing on Slavoj Žižek's surprising reconfiguration of the "death drive." I explore how Žižek's conception, a reworking of Freud through the lens of Jacques Lacan's later writings, can bring to light what most distinguishes Charette's engagement with human finitude and those ineffable domains "*loin de tous les repères*" (15).¹

Commentators such as Pascal Riendeau have emphasized *Fragment's* interrogation of scientific discourse and its impulse toward totalization. Charette's dramaturgy demonstrates "*l'incapacité du métarécit de la rationalité scientifique à donner un sens à ce qui nous entoure*" (98-99), death above all. Riendeau locates in Charette a postmodern "*déplacement des conditions de vérité*" (99) and a privileging of multiple, incompatible perspectives ("*plusieurs interprétations partielles plutôt qu'à une certitude absolue*" [99]). Stéphanie Nutting likewise emphasizes the play's capacity to question Western symbolic frameworks, yet, drawing on Pierre Nepveu's "ecologies of the real," she demonstrates that *Fragments* aims to surpass the deadlock of "poststructuralist" relativism and communicational entropy (959). To explore Charette *avec* Žižek is to share Nutting's impulse to push beyond the poststructuralist interplay with absences and irrepresentability, but it is also to reconceive the very relationship between symbolization and death in *Fragments*. Ultimately, this approach will locate a more radical dimension of Charette's theatre in its capacity to stage the *undead* supplements of a contemporary reality increasingly deprived (like the Geologists' mission) of solid ground and stable structures.

Žižek's death drive is intimately imbricated with what Lacan calls the Real, and we can begin to understand the affinities between this drive and Charette's engagement with death by considering how the play dramatizes the Real's different modalities or vicissitudes. In a first step, to speak of van Saikin's experience as an encounter with the Real is to link it with a range of other literary and dramatic journeys into hearts of darkness. As Žižek notes, the Real, understood as a horrifying confrontation with what exceeds and disintegrates symbolic formations, is "well known in literature in its multiple guises, from Poe's maelstrom and Kurtz's 'horror' at the end of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to Pip from Melville's *Moby-Dick* who, cast to the bottom of the ocean, experiences the demon God [. . .] 'the unwarped primal world'" (*Puppet* 66). Žižek's description of this Real, "the terrifying primordial abyss that swallows everything, dissolving all identities" (66), seems most

apt for Chaurette's play. The heart of darkness into which van Saikin and the Geologists travel is a place of incessant, primordial deluge—"pluies tellement continuelles qu'on pense être dans une autre vie," as Lenowski puts it (35).² This is a realm that dissolves the very ground beneath one's feet—"aucune terre, aucun sol ferme" (35)³—obliterating symbolic distinctions. The noise of water absorbs and confuses all other sounds—"ils prennent le sens des bruits d'ailleurs"—pulling everything (like Poe's maelstrom) toward a state of primordial entropy and inorganicism, "une seule grande vie qui se noie" (94).⁴ This Mallarméan *neutralité identique du gouffre*, wherein "[l]e corps et l'intelligence ne fonctionnent pas de la même manière," defies any attempt at symbolization: "On ne peut pas nous interroger sur notre façon d'avoir vécu ces pluies" (35).⁵ It also defies integration into what Lacan calls the Symbolic order or "big Other," embodied here in the committee.

Central to the inquiry is van Saikin's apparent death drive. As the Geologists repeatedly insist, "nous avons affaire à un homme qui avait résolu de mourir" (19).⁶ What the inquiry cannot resolve is why. The Geologists are unable (or unwilling) to offer insight into van Saikin's character; he remains ultimately "bizarre" (58) and his death inexplicable. But if his reasons for seeking death are never clarified, the image of his corpse—dissolving progressively in the deluge and carried into the ocean—reflects *par excellence* the Freudian death drive as traditionally understood. Rosemary Jackson explains that the death drive—the most fundamental impulse in human beings—reflects a "desire for undifferentiation" (72), a dissolution of all boundaries between self and other: "Freud sees it as the most radical form of the pleasure principle, a longing for Nirvana, where all tensions are reduced. This condition he termed a state of *entropy*, and the desire for undifferentiation he termed an *entropic pull*" (73).

Chaurette's play demonstrates not only a drive toward death but a paradoxical interfusion of *thanatos* (life-denial) and *eros* (life-assertion). The horror of the Real is paradoxically imbricated with intense attraction—indeed, the image of van Saikin gestures to an ecstatic enjoyment beyond all limits, "une jouissance infinie déclenchée par l'ombre de la finitude" (Nutting 952). Xu Sojen's account of the corpse emphasizes this erotic dimension: "Je vis qu'il avait connu un état de jouissance à la toute fin. Son pénis était demeuré en érection" (102).⁷ In Žižek's terms, we have here the Real as "the subject's disappearance-immersion [. . .] in the abyss of primordial *jouissance*" (Parallax 96).

In this light, to Conrad, Poe, and Melville we could add Wagner, for whom the journey to the bottom of the night, as Linda and Michael Hutcheon explain in *The Art of Dying*, is frequently correlative to intense erotic fulfillment: in Tristan, for instance, the human being's endless yearning "at last finds its long-awaited and 'radiant' resolution" in eroticized death (68). It is in this light that we can understand Sojen's paradoxical insistence that van Saikin's death reflects an intense resolution "*de vivre*" (104). And how not to think of Georges Bataille, the philosopher *par excellence* of this paradoxical short-circuiting of life and death? Heiner Zimmermann (writing about Barker's theatre) could be speaking of van Saikin when he describes how, for Bataille, "ecstatic encounters with death" are "nothing other than paroxysms of life":

Living to the full only becomes possible by virtue of the experience of death, which enables the finite individual to immerse him/herself in the infinite continuity of not-being. This leads to a reunion with nature in a mystical experience of ecstasy akin to an excess of being in a moment outside the dimension of time. (214)

Of course, if this transgressive "passion for the Real" (to borrow Alain Badiou's phrase) is a central subject of Chaurette's play, *Fragments* is by no means an attempt to directly *stage* such a Real. What it presents in the theatre is simply some characters debating around a table, piles of written records before them. Unlike plays such as Barker's that confront audiences with spectacles of death and *jouissance*, Chaurette's play might be considered a retreat from such immediacy, and indeed directors have struggled with the static quality of his scenario ("*Les personnages restent en scène, assis, pendant toute la durée de la pièce*" [9]⁸). Yet Chaurette notes an irony: "*Cette pièce, qui est un défi à la scène—la situation unique proposée par le texte est très statique, antithéâtrale [. . .]—est curieusement celle qui est le plus souvent montée*" (qtd. in Sadowska-Guillon 26). The play seems to exert strong attraction and derive peculiar force from its very immersion in speech and the correlative intensity of its offstage spaces.

If this question of staging (to which I will return) is a vital one, I would suggest that rather than merely filtering the Real (through speech and narrative), Chaurette's peculiar engagement with it compels a consideration of its multiple modes. Here we can take our cue directly from Freud's dream of "Irma's injection."

If the first part of this dream, in which Freud confronts the horrifying interior of Irma's infected throat, is best-known, Žižek is keen to point out what immediately follows. As the dream shifts to the scientists' jargon-laden attempt to explain Irma's condition, the Real as "the abyss of the primordial Life-Thing" (exceeding the symbolic) is supplemented with another, inverse kind: "the signifier itself transformed into the Real of a meaningless letter/formula" (*Belief* 82). Chaurette's play offers a comparable dynamic. Throughout, the Geologists bombard the inquiry (and the audience) with formulae and scientific jargon, climaxing in their attempt to explicate van Saikin via an abstruse compendium of physical attributes: "*Taille: cinq pieds onze pouces. Pression artérielle: cent vingt de systolique, quatre-vingt de diastolique. Cholestérol: quatre-vingt-huit virgule quatre. Hémoglobines: douze. Ossature: ectomorphe [. . .]*" (49).⁹ Here, as in Žižek's account, the first Real is supplemented with its obverse, "the Real of modern science," "the signifier reduced to a senseless formula [. . .] which can no longer be translated back into—or related to—the everyday experience of our life-world" (*Belief* 82). *Fragments* makes clear that the second Real is a deluge in its own right, dissolving van Saikin in a flood of scientific signifiers.

But it is Chaurette's engagement with a third mode of the Real that will lead us to reassess the play's key dynamic. Ostwald, the committee's president, is right to accuse the Geologists of tautology insofar as they attribute van Saikin's suicide (if suicide it was) to a resolution to die ("*Il avait résolu de mourir*" [48]). Their invocation of a death drive, in such instances, is open to the criticism that Jonathan Lear has made of Freud: "death drive" is ultimately a pseudo-concept, a seductively enigmatic yet meaningless term distracting from the aporia in Freud's account.¹⁰ But for all the enigma surrounding van Saikin, one thing the Geologists *do* make eminently clear is that he was a man in the throes of a symbolic deadlock: "*Mais imaginez l'homme qui pendant des mois met plus de vingt pages à recommencer la même phrase [. . .]*" (36); "*Il la recommençait, sans cesse [. . .]*" (64).¹¹ The apparent desire for death is intricately combined in van Saikin with an undeadening impulse to write and re-write incessantly—an impulse on account of which he *cannot* find peace in death. At stake here is the same inversion we find in Žižek's peculiar take on the death drive, which he understands as "the Freudian name for its very opposite," the "obverse of dying," the "antipode" of an obscure craving for inorganicism (*In Defense* 395). We should look for the death drive in a subject *unable* to dissolve, afflicted

with an eternalized urge correlative to symbolic incompleteness. We should look for it in the Geologists' own (anamorphic) shift of focus—from van Saikin's desire for self-obliteration to an inherent obstacle on account of which his letter is always somehow incomplete, "*un mot qui ne voulait pas venir*" (65).¹²

Is there not a way in which all human subjects are defined by their relation to a missing "letter"? In Žižek's own terms, "the letter which has each of us as its infallible addressee, is death. We can say that we live only in so far as a certain letter [. . .] still wanders around, looking for us" (*Enjoy* 21). In a far from metaphorical way, Lacan insists that this particular letter is not only delayed; its contents are irreparably missing from the order of the symbolic—death is the "quintessential unnameable" (*Seminar II* 211), a signifier without a signified. What Žižek calls the death drive is by no means a drive to directly experience this unnameable state: it pertains rather to the way we are undeadened by the breach, the irreparable gap afflicting the symbolic. Put differently, it pertains to the paradox that a human subject can never truly bid itself "farewell." One can never occupy the position from which one could write one's life as complete, since at that moment—the moment of death—there would be no one to do the writing. Death itself is here the fundamental obstacle to total symbolization, an impediment on account of which *all* letters are mere fragments.

Macurdy says of van Saikin's writing, "*il la recommençait, donc il ne la finissait jamais. Mais [. . .] ce qu'il lui importait de finir, tout compte fait, c'était sa vie*" (66).¹³ The symbolic act is here linked with the act of "finishing," and as in Beckett's *Endgame*, *finir* is both to end, dissolve, disintegrate (in entropy) *and* to make whole, all, totalized. The Žižekian death drive can be understood as the short circuit between these two *finirs*: an inability to finish (end, dissolve) on account of an inability to finish (make whole). Van Saikin cannot die, find peace in death, because of a compulsion to *repeat* a letter, which remains traumatically incomplete: "*il la retravaillait sans cesse*" (33).

"*Est-ce qu'on pourrait dire alors,*" ponders Peterson, "*que... s'il avait terminé sa lettre d'adieu... il... il n'aurait pas eu à...*" (66). These conjectures exhibit a surprising departure from traditional scientific perspectives on language as a tool to document and classify an *a priori* physical reality. Peterson's suggestion—that if van Saikin had finished the letter, he would not have had to die—inverts causality. The situation is not simply that van Saikin has to die and then strives to put this matter into a letter, explaining the

causes. The body here testifies to his encounter with the impossibility of a certain letter—as though dying were an attempted escape from the symbolic deadlock itself.

The dead persist, suggests Žižek, because proper inscription eludes them, because of “a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization” (*Looking* 23). Indeed, his articulation of drive as “an ‘undead’ urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption” (*In Defense* 395), could hardly find more vivid expression than in Charette’s protagonist, who complicates the very distinction between life and death, inhabiting a realm for which Lacan coined the term “between two deaths.” Following bodily death he remains in the deluge, unburied for an unspecified time, “assis dans le limon, le dos appuyé contre un des pylônes de la construction” (101).¹⁴ His soul “*toujours prisonnière de son cadavre*” (102), he appears still to live, arms outstretched, eyes wide open, and trying to *speak*:

*Un moment [describes Sojen], David et moi avons eu le même sursaut. On aurait juré que le mort allait dire quelque chose, et nous avons eu peur. Vrai, sa mâchoire avait bougé. [. . .] Il voulait peut-être [. . .] nous révéler un fait qu’il jugeait important qu’on sache, qui sait? (103)*¹⁵

This image—of a body disturbed by an undead urge to symbolize, an urge persisting beyond biological degeneration—offers a vastly different impression of the death drive’s “object” than Bataille’s undifferentiation and the eroticized ecstasy of *release* from symbolic constraints. This body is a physical-material entity literally undeadened by a certain “bone in the throat,” a voice which cannot articulate itself but remains stuck at the brink of the mouth. Charette’s play—concerning the return to origins and primordial states—provides here a vivid image of what Žižek terms the human subject at its purest: the subject *as* this unsayability, this voice “stuck in the throat,” this letter which cannot be written, the Real of a symbolic deadlock that undeadens physical-material existence, perpetually forestalling homeostasis.

My purpose, however, is not simply to analyse how Charette’s play illustrates Žižekian concepts. This consideration of the death drive provokes a thorough re-conceiving of the play’s critique of contemporary symbolic orders. We can begin by looking awry at the dynamic of Xu Sojen’s intervention in the final part of the play, particularly the manner in which he *frames* van Saikin’s corpse.

For Sojen, the fundamental feature of this remainder is its gaze—“*yeux qui semblaient vouloir mourir en dernier*” (102)¹⁶—a gaze in which van Saikin somehow remains as his body decays: “*Son âme s’était blottie là, décidée qu’elle était de demeurer le plus longtemps possible dans ce corps toujours en train d’en finir*” (102).¹⁷ On close inspection, this gaze reveals the complex dynamic that Lacan associates with that term and with what he calls the fundamental fantasy. This gaze is an impossible point from which van Saikin observes his own disintegration: “*De là où elle se logeait, cette âme devait regarder les membres, ces jambes étendues, à moitié enfoncées dans la vase et dans leurs propres résidus, et dont la peau, en s’enlevant de l’os, suivait la saignée jusque dans le fleuve et l’océan*” (102-3).¹⁸ And if Van Saikin is a witness to the return of his physical-material being to the stuff of the earth, his gaze simultaneously precedes his existence, looking upon that which predated his life as such: “*Le cerveau de l’ingénieur regardait la mer à l’infini, diffuse et chaotique, là depuis avant l’éclosion de l’homme et de son cerveau*” (103).¹⁹ Žižek’s understanding of the fundamental fantasy is vividly evoked in this configuration of a pure gaze contemplating its own non-being. Stripped of all positively-given features, I am “paradoxically entitled to observe the world in which I do not exist” (*Tarrying* 64)—I am present both *after* bodily death (e.g. “the fantasy of witnessing my own funeral” [64]) and *prior* to life (“like, say, the fantasy of parental coitus where I am reduced to a gaze which observes my own conception, prior to my actual existence” [64]).

Indeed, Charette’s van Saikin, surrounded on all sides by deluge, contemplating “*la mer à l’infini*,” effects a vivid connection between this fundamental fantasy and Freud’s “oceanic feeling”—a sense of being unable to “fall out of this world” (2). The primary work accomplished by this fundamental fantasy concerns a filling in of those irreparable blank spaces at the edges of the subject’s universe, “effectively serving to plug them up and thereby establish a false sense of reality’s unsurpassable, unruffled plenitude” (Johnston 43).

Sojen’s monologue can thus be understood as completing van Saikin’s work for him, offering a letter that can fill in the gaps and cover over the deadlock testified to in van Saikin’s death-driven pursuit. It is here that Riendeau’s analysis of the play’s postmodern “rupturing” of symbolic totalization must be supplemented with an inversion. For Riendeau, “*l’ultime témoignage du Cambodgien propose une fin ouverte qui s’oppose à la totalisation du drame*” (98). As in numerous postmodern texts, the symbolic regime which

purports to dictate truth (science as a “*métarécit*,” objectively rendering reality) is punctured, opening the door for a multitude of interpretations. But far from simply opening or rupturing the symbolic order, Sojen’s conclusion, as explored above, demonstrates a complex *filling in* of inherent gaps or breaches in symbolic reality; it *generates* an illusion of totalization.

It is in relation to this inversion that the dynamic of staging is far from irrelevant in spite of the minimal spectacle and physical action called for by Chaurette. If the Geologists’ encounters are only evoked through narrative (what we get on stage is people sitting around a table, narrating events and debating), this indirect evocation does not simply strip the Real of its immediacy and force; it helps reveal the forceful dynamic of the big Other’s own constitutive relation to “offstage” spaces, their imbrication with the very stability of symbolic reality. What is the fundamental fantasy, after all, if not a “filling in” (with spectral gazes) of those definitively offstage areas, those blank voids at the edges of the phenomenally-given world?

In the first (Bataille) version of the Real, something normally forced offstage refuses containment behind the scenes, threatening to disrupt the smooth run of the staged illusion (the “fiction” of symbolically-regimented reality). Žižek emphasizes the inverse: how the rational, orderly scene of contemporary Western existence is itself sustained by the very fantasy of such offstage Reals. Does not the fascinating quality of Sojen’s van Saikin—in the grip of unspeakable, transgressive ecstasy—reflect an increasing (Western) fascination with the intensity of the Other’s enjoyment, an enjoyment inaccessible to us in daily “civilized” life, posited as occurring offstage? At stake in what Žižek calls the “subject supposed to enjoy” (*Parallax* 188) is the paradoxical *jouissance* we obtain from “the very supposition that the Other enjoys in a way inaccessible to us” (*Tarrying* 206). In a manner akin to the fundamental fantasy, the definitively offstage fantasy-construct of this fully-Enjoying Other—a figure guaranteeing “that *somewhere there is full, unconstrained enjoyment*” (*Fragile* 75)—may serve to “plug the holes” in a contemporary reality which (like the Geologists’) is characterized by an increasing erosion of symbolic moorings. For Žižek, it is the very fantasy of such unconstrained Enjoyment (experienced elsewhere, offstage, beyond all symbolic limits) that can bind us most forcefully to our present stage.

It is also with this dynamic in mind that we should problematize both Riendeau’s and Nutting’s emphasis on the radical poten-

tials of Sojen's "Asiatic" intervention into the Westerners' predicament. Nutting is right when she argues, "*Si l'on attribue souvent la science à la civilisation occidentale et la métaphysique à la civilisation orientale, il faut prendre soin de bien nuancer, car l'intérêt de la pièce découle, justement, de leur co-existence*" (958). From a Žižekian angle, however, the interest of the piece lies not simply in the way it envisions or pushes toward a possible coexistence of Eastern and Western modalities (beyond the crises afflicting Western symbolic reality). It prompts us rather to consider the fetishistic dynamic of today's anti-Cartesian postmodern ethos—the way a postmodern Western reality fills in its own gaps, holds itself together, through ever-increasing importations of "Asiatic" philosophy and mysticism. To reveal how Sojen's "l'âme" reflects the fundamental fantasy is also to accentuate the way in which New Age spirituality, for instance, may serve as the fantasmatic support of a contemporary Western symbolic order—not an antidote but a fetishistic supplement to the maelstrom of our increasingly destabilized late-capitalist reality. If this "l'âme" reflects the dynamic of the fantasy-gaze, we should note how the latter "corresponds perfectly" to the Cartesian *cogito* (Tarrying 64).

The properly subversive dynamic of theatre, in this light, may consist not in directly confronting us with that which supposedly exceeds or transgresses symbolic regulation, but in exhibiting the spectral supplements of the symbolic scene.

A close look reveals Chaurette's subtle engagement with the "extimate" relationships between onstage and offstage realms,²⁰ between what is directly staged for the big Other's gaze and what is apparently behind the scenes. After the guarded, formal talk of the inquiry—which constantly evokes *per negativum* the spectre of a more "real" version beyond the official presentation—the play's second and third parts offer intimate perspectives on two characters not directly implicated in the proceedings. In Carla van Saikin and Sojen we have the impression of a pure, personal, spontaneous expression of feelings and memories unmediated by reference to the big Other. Yet a crucial feature in performance is the undecideable status of these sections. Carla van Saikin, seated on stage from the beginning, is directly addressed by the committee during the first part, leading us to wonder if her lengthy speech in the second part is rightly a soliloquy or something spoken *for* the committee members (who remain on stage yet do not respond). Sojen's address would at first seem a soliloquy, an expression of private thoughts and not an official declaration, but at its close he surprisingly re-invokes the inquiry

as such: “*Monsieur le président, messieurs les géologues, madame, je vous remercie de votre attention*” (105). Should we take these as “official” speeches addressed to the big Other (embodied in the committee) or have we been granted backstage access to spontaneous feelings and private experiences? Žižek’s logic helps clarify the truth of this ambiguity as such. What if the most potent ideological illusion in contemporary times is precisely that of a “backstage” space, outside the purview of the big Other? What if the subversive gesture today consists in revealing the Symbolic order’s extimity with supposedly offstage regions, the ways in which apparently backstage dimensions of our lives are implicated with—inadvertently staged for—the big Other’s gaze?

Perhaps the most compelling insight of Charette’s *Fragments* is to be located in an additional twist on this extimate dynamic: the play reveals how the very gesture of concealing something from the big Other’s gaze may be performed, paradoxically, in the big Other’s service. The Geologists, we are told, had risked everything for a mission which turns out to be completely hopeless, its leader impotent, everything falling apart. One after another, they confess having known from the outset that “*cette expédition serait de toute façon un échec*” (33). *Everyone* was convinced of this—“*N’importe qui, excepté Toni van Saikin*” (59).²¹ In this light the Geologists’ defining feature is not their insistent adherence to scientific discourse (guaranteeing a totalized picture of life) but their own irrational persistence and devotion to *enacting* the mission in spite of what their objective understanding tells them to be true. They no longer believe in the Cause but they keep up their daily operations, performing an *appearance* of belief for the gaze of van Saikin, the “*idéaliste*” (23). This dynamic reaches its apogee in a realm “between two deaths”:

*Quand j’ai voulu leur annoncer que Toni était mort, [says Lenowski,] j’ai compris que tous le savaient. [. . .] Tout le monde le savait, monsieur le président, tout le monde l’avait vu mais personne encore ne l’avait dit. Et un homme a beau être mort, il ne l’est jamais définitivement que lorsque quelqu’un peut le dire. Autrement, ça ne compte pas. Je crois qu’ils essayaient de prolonger sa vie en ne disant pas qu’il était mort. (82)*²²

If an analogy with the Freudian dream of the father who doesn’t know he is dead seems obvious here, Žižek’s logic reveals how this dynamic is duplicated on an eminently ideological level. Žižek could be describing the Geologists’ relationship with van

Saikin when he speaks of the “undead” persistence of socialist regimes in Europe:

The question to be asked here is simply: if nobody ‘really believed,’ and if everybody knew that nobody believed, *what* was then the agency, the gaze for whom the spectacle of belief was staged? It is here that we encounter the function of the ‘big Other’ at its purest. [. . .] [W]hat must be kept from the big Other (incarnated in the gaze of the leader) is the simple fact that he is dead. (*Enjoy* 40)

If Chauréte’s play is often described as a critique of (Western) over-reliance on scientific discourse,²³ at stake here is also the paradox expressed so well by Octave Mannoni: *Je sais bien, mais quand même* ... i.e. We may know very well that according to science things are crumbling, but all the same, we perform an appearance of stability. Our knowledge is not reflected in a fundamental transformation of existing practices equivalent to the drastic nature of our situation as indicated by science.

More fundamentally, this logic encourages a complication of Nutting’s argument that Chauréte’s play ultimately counters postmodern entropy (“*au sens de désintégration du sens, d’incertitude croissante*” [950]) with *enigma* (“*au sens de secret que l’on peut mettre à jour, dont la solution est éventuellement visible*” [949-50]). For Nutting, the play emphasizes the Geologists’ tragic inability to discern meaning in van Saikin (“*l’inaptitude des géologues [nous] à conférer à sa mort une valeur quelconque*” [959]). What this overlooks is the more crucial dynamic of how their own activity (and symbolic reality) is sustained as such, amidst the apparent *dissolution* of structures and meaning, by the gaze of a “subject supposed *not* to know” (i.e. that the big Other is dead). They can persist (and indeed indulge) in a realm of symbolic erosion, in which even temporality and spatiality dissolve, insofar as van Saikin serves as a symbolic stand-in (for meaning as such)—a gaze *for whom* there is meaning, for whom their actions are part of a purposive narrative. In this light, rather than productively countering “*dissolution ambiante*” with “*un intérieur (sens) profond*” (Nutting 959), Sojen inadvertently reveals the ex-timate relationship between the two, the fetishistic dynamic inherent to a postmodern ethos. It is this ex-timate dynamic that Žižek has in mind when he insists that, “today, we believe more than ever: the most skeptical attitude, that of deconstruction, relies on the figure of an Other who ‘really believes’” (*Puppet* 6).

If Chaurette's theatre circulates around death, what this analysis of *Fragments* reveals is its critical preoccupation with the *undead*. To explore Chaurette *avec* Žižek is to consider theatre not only as a site where the living rehearse death, but perhaps more radically, where undeadness itself is caught in the act. ❁

Notes

- 1 All quotations in the body of this paper are taken from the original text. The corresponding passages from Linda Gaboriau's English translation are contained in the endnotes: "*beyond all landmarks*" (11).
- 2 "rains so continuous you think you're in another life" (30).
- 3 "no ground, no solid ground" (30).
- 4 "a single, great life that's drowning" (84).
- 5 "The mind and the body no longer work the same way" (29-30); "It is impossible to interrogate us about what it was like living through those rains" (30); Mallarmé's phrase is taken from his poem, "*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard.*"
- 6 "We were also dealing with a man who had decided to die" (15).
- 7 "I saw that he had experienced an orgasm at the very end. His penis was still erect" (92).
- 8 The performers "remain on stage, seated, throughout the whole play" (8).
- 9 "Height: five foot eleven. B.P.: 120 over 80. Cholesterol: eighty-eight point four. Hemoglobin: twelve. Body type: ectomorph" (44).
- 10 See Lear.
- 11 "But just imagine the man who, over a period of months, takes more than twenty pages to rewrite the same sentence over and over" (31); "He began it over and over again" (58)
- 12 Gaboriau's translation omits this line.
- 13 "he was always starting it over, so he never got around to finishing it. [. . .] But what he really cared about finishing, when you get right down to it, was his life" (58).
- 14 Gaboriau omits much of the complexity of this speech in her translation: "It was either his letter or his life" (59).
- 15 "sitting in the silt, leaning against one of the structure's pylons" (90).
- 16 "For a moment, David and I had the same startled jolt. One would have sworn that the dead man was about to say something and we were frightened. True, his jaw had moved. [. . .] Perhaps he wanted to ask us a favour, or maybe he wanted to reveal some fact he felt it was important for us to know, who knows?" (93).
- 17 "eyes which seemed to want to be the last to die" (92).

- 18 “huddling there in his gaze, determined to stay as long as possible in this body still caught up in dying” (92).
- 19 “From its vantage point, that soul must have been looking at the members, those legs stretched out, half buried in the mud and in their own residue, with the skin that, as it detached itself from the bones, trickled in rivulets till it reached the river and the sea” (92).
- 20 “The engineer’s brain was watching the diffuse and chaotic infinity of the sea, there since before the genesis of man and his brain” (93).
- 21 For more on the concept of “extimacy,” see Lacan, *Seminar VII* 139.
- 22 “the expedition was bound to fail no matter what” (15); “Everyone except Toni van Saikin” (46).
- 23 “When I went to tell them Toni was dead, I realized that they all knew it. No surprise, no panic, just embarrassed looks. Everyone knew it, Mr. Chairman, everyone had seen him, but no one had said it yet. And a man can be dead, but he is never definitely dead until someone can say it. Otherwise, it doesn’t count. I think they were trying to prolong his life by not saying that he was dead” (72).
- 24 See, for instance, Wagner.

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