BIG CHEAP MYSTICISM: POSTMODERNISM AND THEOLOGY IN ERIK EHN’S
THE SAINT PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

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The work of playwright, Erik Ehn, author of the collection, *The Saint Plays*, engages the intersection of theatre, postmodernism, and religion. In an attempt to better understand Ehn’s contribution to postmodern theatre, and his engagement with one of theatre’s current challenges (i.e., to make room for religious discourse), this study undertakes a close reading of three of Ehn’s plays in light of his self-declared theology, “Big Cheap Mysticism.”

In my thesis I, taking Ehn at his word, explore the possible meanings and presence of the three descriptives, “Big,” “Cheap,” and “Mysticism” in a selection of representative plays from *The Saint Plays*. In chapter 1, I focus on Ehn’s notion of “Big” by way of a close reading of *Tree of Life, Keep Firm*. In like manner, in chapter 2 I situate the play, *Incide* as an exemplar of the concept of “Cheap.” Then, in chapter 3, I discuss *Wholly Joan’s* as representative of the core of Ehn’s theology, “Mysticism.”

In my conclusion, I summarize Ehn’s theology as it can be understood from the reading of “Big,” “Cheap,” and “Mysticism” through the representative scripts. Most importantly however, I consider how Ehn’s theology functions within the larger context of postmodern Christian theology in an attempt to answer the question, “What do artists seeking to represent Christian tradition, narrative or the Divine on the contemporary stage have to gain from Ehn’s work?”
For my parents, Dutt and Rukhsana.

Thank you for teaching me to live for more than what I can see,

or understand, or even imagine.
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At times, this thesis seemed little more than a succession of crises, which, it turns out, is alright. During the months I worked on this thesis, I have learnt that crises can precipitate change, growth, and learning. And so, it was a wonderful day when I finally looked up from my computer screen and realized that after all the months of reading, writing, editing, thinking, and agonizing over this work, the pieces did come together; my speculations and musings had amounted to something. The marvelous thing is that my advisor and mentor, Dr. Jonathan Chambers, seemed to know this all along. I could go on at length about his wisdom and insight and about how a ten-minute conversation with him would give me hours of clarity and a fresh perspective, but the truth is that Dr. Chambers’ faith in me and in this study is what I am most grateful for. My heart-felt thanks to him for his generosity, advice and encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

“Must we indeed roar like the Atrides before
the Eternal God will reveal himself in our life?”

— Maurice Maeterlinck, “The Tragical in Everyday Life” (99)

After nearly two hours of song, dance and parables set in a subway-level coffee shop, I knew that Godspell was drawing to a close when Jesus, his crucifixion complete, trudged across the stage draped from head to foot in a heavy black cloak. I had been on the edge since the beginning of the show, slightly nervous and almost embarrassed. My nervousness and embarrassment had nothing to do with the quality of the show; the production values were excellent. Neither did it have anything to do with the dramatic arc of the play; that is, I knew this story would end with a return to stasis that would involve the triumph of righteousness peppered with no small amount of poetic justice. Instead, and although I was unable to articulate it at the time, I somehow knew that my discomfort had something to do with the subject matter of the performance: that is, religion on stage, or, more precisely, Christ on stage.

The music was solemn, and the lights were dark as the draped Jesus walked far upstage. “Ah, his three days of wandering in hell. Good, symbolic,” I muse in an attempt at flippancy, all the while, keenly aware of the eeriness and sorrow emanating from the storied performance. Jesus turns away and stands with his back to the audience. Alone. Rejected. Hell. Then suddenly, the music lightens, the cloak drops revealing…nothing, Jesus is gone. He bursts through an entrance high above, almost upon the audience. His friends rush to him singing and I watch — for holiness, for glory, for a “see, I came back, just as I said I would”— but all I see is relief and joy at being returned. Jesus is
amazed. He’s like a child who falls and gets up, surprised and confused to see that he is not hurt, exulting in life. Jesus is human. And in that moment, I experienced the face of the Divine on stage.

As a theatre student and practitioner, I left that performance wondering what could make a group of artists approach that indefinable realm of religion and prepare it for the stage. I also wondered why the artist in me was, for lack of a better word, embarrassed at such an explicit expression of a faith. In the course of my theatre scholarship since that incident, I have encountered theory, criticism and historical accounts that have quite often suggested that Judeo-Christian doctrinal faith systems have lost any sense of legitimacy in the scholarly study of theatre; partly because faith is the anti-thesis of logic and academia, but mostly because theatre theory and discourse of the past century, apart from specialized journals and focus groups at conferences, has placed divinity further and further away from the realm of the artist-scholar. While this inclination may be traced back to the works of Euripides (who often infused his scripts with no small amount of religious skepticism), it may be argued that this trend began gaining considerable traction in the mid-19th century.

Beginning in the 1850s the “modernist century” witnessed a revolutionary cultural and social turn. The social and institutional forces of secularization, industrialization and bureaucratization evolved into “modernity” which, defined by Charles Jencks, was a “secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings” (Vanhoozer 7). Embodying the Enlightenment and humanist ideals of rationality and individual autonomy, modernism saw the influence of philosophers and writers for whom the demise of God
was not enough; indeed, the very shadow of God needed to be vanquished (Ingraffia 19). In turn, post-Nietzschean nihilism made its mark on the works of many artists and artistic movements — most notably the Dadaists and Absurdist — arguably reaching its apex post-World War II. Following this, postmodernism declared that the center would not hold, and all meta-narratives were brought under suspicion and questioned — principle among them, religious belief (Hutcheon 13). These tropes found their apogee in plays such as *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Mueller and the cool detachment and radical stagings of The Wooster Group. It would seem, in light of the perceivably important theatre theories and practices of the past century, that the theatre environment has proven itself rather unaccommodating to the sincere representation of religion, specifically Christianity. However, just as postmodernism was a reaction against and extension of modernism and modernity, within these two movements themselves, there were artists and thinkers who rejected the prevailing ideas of their day, including ideas regarding the inefficacy of faith and religion.

For literary and artistic modernism, it was the rise of Symbolism — a necessary reaction to the exteriority and materialism of modernist realism and naturalism — which was developed and utilized by artists such as W. B. Yeats and Maurice Maeterlinck (Kolocotroni 135). Rejecting the principles of complete rationality and descaralization, these artists advocated and practiced a return to the indefinable: the soul, the sacred, the mystical, and even God. In turn, postmodern theories, influenced in large part by Nietzsche’s skepticism and nihilism, deconstructed the nature, place, and attributes of God. With this deconstruction came the promise of even greater freedom. However, now (at least) 20-25 years removed from the advent of postmodernism, the
consequences of postmodern nihilism as well as the constant fracturing and the absence of “the center” is, I believe, beginning to be felt in the negative undercurrents to art, film, theatre and society at large. The Symbolists’ quest for the spiritual is reflected 120 years later in the post-secular thinking of postmodernism.

Critic and chronicler of the postmodern age, Bonnie Marranca suggests that the re-appearance of the spiritual tropes (over or alongside the social and psychological) in postmodern drama may be related to a shift towards the formal and rhetorical styles of poetry. Utilized by dramatists such as Shelley Berc, Reza Abdoh, and Rachel Rosenthaal, the lyrical freedom and “literary wisdom” of poetry allows for nuance and ambiguity that lends immanence to metaphysical and theological questions of sin, redemption, and grace (Marranca xii). While undeniably postmodern in their self-reflexivity and parodying of classics, the very language of these playwrights is charged with spiritual longing and hope that is contrary to the nihilism, coolness, and pessimism normally associated with postmodernism.

In reading the works of some of the postmodern post-secular dramatists listed above, I found that even though Jesus, God, the saints, and holy beings feature prominently (and effectively) in the work of these, there still existed a paradox that postmodernism “drags” messianic religion into. On one had there is the “incredulity towards meta narratives,” which are foundational to the Judeo-Christian faiths; and on the other, a recovery of erstwhile neglected religious forms, specifically, the prophetic and the mystical (Vanhoozer 9-17). This paradox, I believe, serves as further testament to the multiplicity and freedoms of postmodernism.
Whether in reaction to the decentralization and fracturing resultant of postmodernity, or in appropriation of the freedoms of postmodernism, many contemporary theatre artists have undertaken writing and performance that engages themes of Judeo-Christian religion and spirituality. The significance of this is undeniable. After nearly 120 years of what has sometimes appeared to be hostility, the academic and literary theatre community is slowly mobilizing itself to allow for religious discourse in the study and practice of theatre. One of the artists whose work engages the intersection of theatre and religion is the playwright Erik Ehn, author of the collection, *The Saint Plays*.

At first glance, *The Saint Plays* would appear to immediately serve the religious side of the dialogue, being, as they are, based on the lives of the Catholic saints. However, Ehn’s approach to the subject matter is, in “good” postmodernist style, not black and white, but instead — playfully, and sometimes problematically — situated in the gray areas in between. Although he acknowledges his life-long Catholic faith as his source of inspiration, Ehn’s rhetorical style, image-charged language and lyrical expression results in texts that are baffling, beautiful and unexpected (Bickerstaff). I consider Ehn’s work to be a clear reflection of postmodernism’s liberties, but one that replaces nihilism with the hope-filled quest for the infinite, the invisible and, possibly, the Divine.

In the preface to his collection *The Saint Plays*, Ehn declares his theology to be “Big Cheap Mysticism” (Ehn x). In an attempt to better understand Ehn’s contribution to postmodern theatre, and his engagement with one of academic theatre’s current challenges (i.e., to make room for religious discourse), in this study I undertake a close
reading of three of Ehn’s plays (from *The Saint Plays* collection) in light of his self-declared theology. It warrants mentioning, however, that while Ehn offers this phrase “Big Cheap Mysticism” as an apt descriptor of his aesthetic, he provides only a brief explanation of what he means by Big and Cheap — “Big” is past the reach of discourse; cannot be reified; unstoppable, while “Cheap” is common, public, complicit, evoking St. Gertrude’s quote: ‘Property, the more common it is, the more holy it is’— and says nothing about “Mysticism” (Ehn xi). As such, it falls to me to piece together usable and detailed formations of these illusive concepts. In this study, I will, taking Ehn at his word, explore the presence of the three parts of this descriptive—‘Big’ ‘Cheap’ and ‘Mysticism’—in a selection of representative plays from *The Saint Plays*.

More precisely, in Chapter One, I explore Ehn’s notion of Big through an analysis of *Tree of Life, Keep Firm*, a play about the Annunciation of Mary. Starting with the definition provided by Ehn, that Big is “past the reach of discourse” and “unstoppable,” I engage the question of “discourse” in opposition to “discursivity.” I also draw on theories of the Grotesque, as articulated by Vsevolod Meyerhold and Mikhail Bakhtin, to assimilate the thick visual imagery that Ehn weaves into his plays.

Chapter two focuses on my analysis of the concept of Cheap, such as it is expressed in the script, *Incide*. Based on the story of Judas Iscariot, *Incide* is abundant in themes of value, wealth, success and failure. Using Ehn’s brief description of Cheap (“common, public, complicit”) as a starting point, I explore how socialist ideals of common property are applied to non-material entities in Ehn’s plays. I use the idea of common property, as well as the social activity and beliefs of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, as a stepping stone to further explore contemporary cultural theories of
economy, value and loss (*a la* Georges Bataille), and note how these ideas generate an alternate value system on which Ehn’s plays function.

Chapter three begins with a summary of Christian mysticism, followed by a close reading of *Wholly Joan’s*. I should, at this point, note that an understanding of the Christian mystical practice is key to comprehending Ehn’s appropriation and illustration of the canonized and uncanonized saints in his plays. I mention this because mysticism is so far removed from the contemporary practice of Christianity and is a subject of much conflict within contemporary Protestant doctrine because of the blurred line between Biblical and pagan practice. Nonetheless, the very “mystery” that mystics approach involves a spiritual revelation of truths that can neither be dissected by reason, nor completely understood (Macquarrie 2). This allowance for incomprehension is a trait of mysticism that is reflected, with surprising clarity, in postmodernism and, by extension, in the work of Ehn. In this chapter I suggest that the play is not only about a mystic (i.e., Joan), but that the structure of the script embodies the qualities of mysticism. Also central to my argument here is the idea that Mysticism is the heart of Ehn’s theology. As such, Big and Cheap are merely adjectives used to describe the mysticism Ehn aspires to. Finally, I attempt to describe what Ehn’s mystical theology entails.

In my conclusion, I summarize Ehn’s theology as it can be understood from the reading of “Big,” “Cheap,” and “Mysticism” through the representative scripts. Drawing from David Tracy and Kevin Vanhoozer, I also summarize what it means to do theology in a postmodern condition. Most importantly however, I consider how Ehn’s theology functions within the larger context of postmodern Christian theology in an attempt to
answer the question, “what do artists seeking to represent Christian tradition, narrative or the Divine on the contemporary stage have to gain from Ehn’s work?”

Fundamental to the study as a whole is the introductory scholarship on Christian mysticism and postmodernism, especially how it is manifested in theatre. The writings of Thomas Merton and Evelyn Underhill’s classic, Mysticism, serve as my guides to the traditions of Christian mysticism. Michel de Certeau’s writings (“Mysticism” and Heterologies) lend theoretical footholds as I explore the position of mysticism within “rational” discourse. My foundational source on postmodern theory such as it applies to literature and theatre is A Poetics of Postmodernism by Linda Hutcheon, with Fredric Jameson’s essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” providing further grounds on which to explore how Ehn draws postmodern tropes into his plays.

Discovering a varied palette of theories, ideas and concepts (the Grotesque, Schizophrenia, Divine Union, inter-textuality, the Gift etc.) across the immense breadth of these tiny (short) plays, I draw from a plethora of philosophers, writers, mystics, theologians, and theatre practitioners in an attempt to compose an understanding (from innumerable possibilities) of what Big Cheap Mysticism could possibly entail. Meyerhold, Bakhtin, Bataille and Augustine are just a few of whose writing provides insight into assimilating Ehn’s plays.

Although all the above contribute to my study either in an area of postmodernity, religion or theatre, none consider all three realms together. In fact, there is very little work which regards theology (in the postmodern condition) within a theatrical context. The only other published writing I’ve found on Erik Ehn’s plays is a thesis by Ivan Charles Klousia entitled “Poetry in Motion,” which examines the language and dramatic
action in Ehn’s play, “Wolf at the Door.” Even though Klousia’s work is a useful guide to understanding how Ehn uses poetry in his plays, I believe my study will provide a guide to the playwright’s theology and its position within the larger realm of Christian representation for the stage.

As noted above, I provide focused readings of Tree of Hope, Incide and Wholly Joan’s, such as those scripts serve to illustrate the concepts “Big,” “Cheap,” and “Mysticism”. My analyses of Ehn’s plays do not extend to an evaluation of their dramatic potential. Neither do I critique Ehn’s utilization of theology in his plays: whether his representations stay true to any particular Christian doctrine or not. I do, in some instances however, attempt to depict how and where he draws from scriptural and liturgical texts or icons. Additionally, although all three plays I focus on in this study have been produced by various theatre companies, my study is limited to what Ehn has presented the reader with (i.e., the script). As such, first person accounts of the playwright’s intentions, goals, or his staging of the plays¹ (apart from what has been provide in the stage directions) are not featured in my study.

I think it is imperative for me to admit that I have found these scripts elusive and, at times, frustrating to read, assimilate, and understand. Ehn describes the stories as “the means by which self is overmastered by acts of imagination, acts of faith” (Ehn ix). This overmastery by imagination and faith, it would seem, is not limited to the characters but extends to the readers as well. Confronting the intangible activity of imagination and faith, and attempting to draw them into theoretical discourse is a great challenge; but in a sense, it is also illicit. Ehn’s brief definition of “Big” as “past the reach of discourse, cannot be reified, unstoppable” begins to read as a warning against any

¹ Incidentally, each of the plays chosen for this study was directed by the playwright in its first production.
attempt to concretize possible meaning, action, or even the idea of origin in his scripts. The task I have undertaken (i.e. to explore Ehn’s theology of Big Cheap Mysticism through his scripts), however, requires that I walk the ‘forbidden’ ground of theorizing that which is beyond the limits of discourse. I have observed that Ehn’s writing is elusive. As I proceeded in my study of his work, it became more and more apparent that my reading and writing on his scripts too could not be anything but insubstantial: ideas, suggestions and possibilities. In the spirit of Ehn’s mystical plays, I have decided to view my entire study as an act of discovery, unraveling his mysteries one at a time. As such, my writing embodies this process of discovery and I withhold certain revelations and changes I have experienced along the course of my study till my conclusion.

As noted earlier, my experience of Godspell awakened me to the unease I felt at watching religion represented on stage. Being raised in the Christian church and having experienced numerous accounts of bad church drama might, in part, be to blame for my trepidation. However, I also admit that despite my personal stance as believer and practitioner of the Christian faith, I never allowed for the experience of the Divine within the already powerful medium of theatre. In other words, I was not ready to see the face of Divine on stage. Since that day, I have not stopped wondering how such a phenomenon occurs and how, as a theatre artist, I might bring it to pass. Maurice Maeterlinck, in his essay “The Tragical in Everyday Life,” questions, “Must we indeed roar like the Atrides before the Eternal God will reveal himself in our lives?” (Maeterlinck 99). My version of this question is, what do we do before “the Eternal God will reveal himself” on our stages? Is there anything to be done? In Ehn’s plays I see an answer.
Even while being strictly limited to the written text in my study of Ehn’s plays, I am confronted with images of beauty, love and divinity that hinted at what Maeterlinck called the “mysterious chant of the Infinite, the ominous silence of the soul and of God, the murmurs of Eternity on the horizon.” (Maeterlinck 95). The postmodern world raises many questions about the nature of God and humanity, much of it very dark. And yet, the very kaleidoscopic, ever-changing nature of postmodernism allows for hope and allows faith. The difficult question of how theatre and faith work artistically and effectively together is, I believe, a question for this time. In his unapologetic play with images, poetry and the saints, Ehn produces what I consider to be small but beautiful gems of postmodern drama, and in doing so creates a space for the revelation of the Divine on the postmodern stage.
CHAPTER ONE: ‘BIG’ AND TREE OF HOPE, KEEP FIRM

“Go over there and say something…Say, “Emmanuel,” “God with us.” Tell her something bigger than her or me. Tell her I’m Gabriel”

— Erik Ehn, The Saint Plays (102)

In my reading of Tree of Hope, Keep Firm, guided as it is by my desire to explore Ehn’s concept of Bigness (“past the reach of discourse, cannot be reified, unstoppable”), I will focus on how Ehn displaces text as a meaning-making enterprise and instead, uses rhetoric to evoke imagery. In doing so, I argue that he creates the potential for individual and varying responses that are discursive and mobile — and thus contingent— and thereby, beyond discourse. Another way I perceive Ehn’s advancement of ‘Bigness’ in Tree of Life, Keep Firm is through the alteration— indeed, subversion— of traditional readings of a key (or “Big”) Biblical events and characters. Ehn takes these notable events from the Bible and Christian tradition and explodes them (not destructively, but critically, in different directions). Ehn’s manipulation of these traditions and scriptures is neither hesitant nor subtle; Ehn’s aesthetic-theology is Big simply by not being delicate.

In a very basic and literal sense, Tree of Hope is a play about the Annunciation of Mary. The annunciation is an unquestionably big event in the Christian tradition: it is celebrated as feast day (March 25) by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican traditions and is even cited in the Quran. Narrated in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the annunciation is the revelation to Mary, by the angel Gabriel, that she would conceive and bear a child who would be the son of God:

1 Tree of Hope, Keep Firm was first performed in 1993 at Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco.
The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High"… "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God…"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (The NIV Bible, Luke 1.28-38)

An exhaustive exegesis into the passage is not necessary to assimilate Mary’s response to the revelation and the enormity of the task handed to her: she anxious at first, puzzled even, but humbly accepts, calling herself the “Lord’s servant.” That Mary is excited at the news becomes apparent from her actions after the revelation. She “hurried” to her cousin Elizabeth who greeted her with joy, commending Mary for her faith and calling her “blessed among women.” Mary’s response is to sing— what is now known as the Magnificat — a song of worship and praise to God (Luke 1.39-55). Ehn’s version of the Annunciation bears little of the joy of Biblical account. Instead, his play is fraught with anxiety, fear, despair and even whispers of blasphemy.

The play begins with Young Mary, learning to read in a tower with her mother, Anne while another, grown-up Mary hides in a lake, trembling and wet. The grown-up Mary is Mary at the time of the annunciation and she’s hiding from Gabriel while Young
Mary is reading from the scriptures, “Behold, a Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and shall call his name” (Ehn 101). Gabriel a “boy angel” arrives on the scene searching for Mary. Young Mary sees Mary hiding in the lake and, abandoning her reading and her mother, runs to her elder version. Together they attempt to elude, not just the messenger, Gabriel, but the message he brings.

Mary: Mary my hope.
Young Mary: You’re going to be taken.
Mary: We’ve been found. That’s all he needs.
Young Mary: Don’t listen,
Mary: We’re listening already. (Ehn 101)

Mary’s task in Ehn’s play is not to receive Gabriel’s message and God’s command, but instead she attempts to protect Young Mary and herself from the foretelling of Christ’s birth. In other words, Mary is out to thwart the fulfillment of a prophecy.

Ehn defines Big as “unstoppable” and he begins this inexorability in Tree of Hope, Keep Firm with Mary herself. When the play opens, there are nine incarnations of Mary on stage. Seven of the incarnations are clay figures placed about the stage, the eighth, a “live Mary,” is meant to be Mary of the Annunciation, and the ninth is the Young Mary sitting with her mother. Sustaining the “explosion” of the familiar and faithful Biblical Mary, Ehn then draws the characters into the haze of non-linear time and space. First of all, Young Mary and Mary exist simultaneously, and on a dramatic plane that disregards any historical landscape. In other words, the annunciation unfolds, and its main “players” interact in an anachronistic setting. Furthermore, both Young Mary and Mary have a foreknowledge of her imminent fate:
Mary: Mary my hope

Young Mary: You’re going to be taken...

Mary: There’s more time than you think. (Ehn 101)

Young Mary also reads a Bible passage, which is technically about herself:

Anne: Put the letters together. Sound it out.

Young Mary: (reading) Behold, a Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son and shall call his name— (Struggling with a word). (Ehn 101)

Mary calls Young Mary’s mother “our mother,” highlighting the fact that the two of them (Young Mary and Mary) are the same person. Thus, in the first pages of the script, Ehn has broken conventions of linear time, bifurcated characters, and defied a two thousand year faith in a venerated saint— Mary, Mother of God, God’s chosen vessel— to give us a girl, hiding from a divine prophecy.

The reversals, defiances and down-right contrariness that Ehn weaves through Tree of Hope, Keep Firm evolve throughout the play, moving beyond mere subversion of the Biblical account towards the creation of an unfamiliar, unstable illustration of a big event as seen from a drastically different perspective. I would argue that Ehn manipulates the events of the annunciation, the characters and actions of Mary and Gabriel into the realm of the Grotesque, and in doing so he achieves Bigness.

Following in the footsteps of Horace and his foundational treatise The Art of Poetry, numerous philosophers and theoreticians have written on the concept of the grotesque and the various ways in which it is used in art and literature. While a review of these numerous articulations would certainly be fascinating, such an overview of the grotesque is beyond the scope of my study. Instead, I turn to Vsevelod Meyerhold’s
principles to help illuminate Ehn’s use of the grotesque as a means to achieve Bigness. Although Meyerhold used the grotesque primarily in the process of staging, I believe his overarching aesthetic to be applicable to writing for the stage, and consequently a useful tool for examining Ehn’s script.

Meyerhold’s principal ideas on the grotesque were inspired by sixteen different artists who all incorporated ideas of the grotesque into their work. Of these sixteen, three—symbolist poet Aleksander Blok, 19th century fantasy writer E. T. A. Hoffman, and Spanish modernist painter Francis Goya—are the most prominent (Pitch 62). Meyerhold particularly delighted in the work of Hoffman. Hoffman’s writing interwove dream and reality to conjure startling images. It is this power of imagery that Meyerhold invokes because it stretches the director’s, and consequently the audience’s, imaginations to the limit, empowering the imagination. Collectively, the artists Meyerhold drew from lead him to the construction of a theatre of the grotesque and of surprise. ‘Contradiction’ is at the heart of Meyerhold’s structuring of the grotesque, however, it comes with a clear goal: to upset predictability. It can be achieved through the mixing of opposites—tragedy with comedy, the ugly with the beautiful, hope and despair—celebration of incongruities, borrowing from different sources, and always contains a sense of mischief, satire or even diabolicism. Meyerhold’s grotesque reveled in fantasy and constant transformation—of landscapes, objects, figures and atmospheres (61-62). Thus, the grotesque is beyond comprehension, it defies predictability and constantly surprises, and, in evoking images, it empowers the imagination which is individual to all readers and viewers. In these ways, the grotesque is Big, “past the reach of discourse, unstoppable.”
As already established, predictable characters and events are denied in *Tree of Hope*, most obviously in the bifurcated character of Mary. Additionally, instead of calm and acceptance, Ehn scripts a moment of frantic anxiety and refusal. He turns the annunciation— the long awaited moment when God breaks silence with his creation— into a dreaded announcement of an inevitability where Mary will be “taken.” Realizing that they have been found out, Mary sends Young Mary to steal clothes off of a neighbour’s clothesline while she diverts Gabriel, singing and dancing with him. We see Ehn begin to add opposites to incongruities: a dancing and necessarily devious Mary (instead of an angel-awe-struck young girl) whose song to Gabriel begins with acquiescence and servility (“I am your maiden/Handmaiden/ Maiden of God/ I live to serve…”) and then, just when it looks like she has stopped running and returned to “the script” given to us in the Bible, Mary becomes demanding, despondent and a little morbid:

I want to know where the money goes
I want to see my Suffering
I want to go where I can think
In a corset of plaster
Orchard of bone (Ehn 102)

Here, the opposites of freedom and bondage are thrown into stark relief. Mary, by becoming the mother of Christ, would give birth to the Emmanuel, the savior and liberator of humankind. But Ehn painfully mixes the announcement of salvation, with terms of bondage: “corset of plaster.”
“Corset of plaster” is, first of all, a direct reference to the artist Frida Kahlo, from whose body of work Ehn derives inspiration for the title of this play. Suffering severe injuries to her vertebral column due to an automobile accident at the age of 18, Kahlo was immobilized in a plaster corset for several months following the accident. Kahlo suffered life long pain and fatigue as a result of her injuries (Amigo et al 780). In one of her self-portraits, *The Broken Column*, Kahlo depicts her naked body encased in the plaster corset, tiny nails piercing her flesh. A fissure runs up the length of her torso revealing, not her backbone, but a cracked ionic column, and while tears run down her cheeks, the expression on her face is painfully stoic. The nails in her flesh and the tears pouring from her eyes convey a trauma that is both emotional and physical. While the painting is evidently about a particular individual's suffering (i.e., Kahlo’s), in referencing Kahlo’s painting, Ehn extends this double (physical and emotional) trauma to his Mary as well; Mary is in a “corset of plaster” of her own.

The very mention of corsets evokes themes of female restriction and submission. Corsets are generally used to change the shape of a woman’s body, to cinch in her waist and enhance her bosom. The corset Mary is about to wear will do the opposite. In becoming pregnant with the son of God, Mary loses her shape, loses her body to a predestined plan of salvation. Married to a carpenter, Joseph, Mary was a Jewish woman of humble origin. In all probability, had she not been the chosen one among women, she would have never even been named or known two thousand years later. However, in being chosen to birth the saviour, Mary is forever attached to a divine

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2 Ehn writes, in the preface to *The Saint Plays*, “Tree of Hope is built on a list of works Frida Kahlo made for an exhibition” (Ehn xi). As such, images ghosting the paintings of Kahlo are scattered throughout the play. While I am aware of them, it is not my intent here to expound or speculate on the appropriation of all of these images by Ehn.
entity, and her life necessarily changes forever. On a very human level, she enters a period of catastrophe. Pregnant, she faces the loss of her new husband, Joseph, and her reputation. Joseph, being a “righteous man” planned to divorce Mary quietly to save her “public disgrace.” (The NIV Bible, Matt. 1.19). The corset being “plaster” adds another dimension to her bondage, a sense that she is broken or going to be broken and needs a plaster cast.

Awareness of the imminent pain and desolation leads Ehn’s Mary to seek obscurity. She wants none of the glory or blessedness of being chosen by God. She fears not only for herself, but also for her husband Joseph, and begs Gabriel to leave her alone, saying, “I’m newly married to Joseph. He’s looking for me. His heart is breaking” (Ehn 104). Once again, Ehn foregrounding of human brokenness—Joseph’s sorrow over what he supposes is Mary’s betrayal and consequent pregnancy—is thrust against the fulfillment of a divine prophecy. Ehn’s juxtaposition of (prophetic) fulfillment and (human) brokenness reflects another feature of the grotesque—ambivalence. Discussed as an underlying feature of grotesque, “ambivalence” according to Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, features an unresolved mixture of opposites. This mixture—indeed, the entire concept of the grotesque3— is specifically oriented within a comedic realm (Shepherd 87). It will not serve my study to enter into a discussion of laughter a la Bakhtin, but suffice to say that laughter in Ehn’s play is not necessarily of a joyous variety. The surprises contained in his writing produces a humour that is more in line with the “diabolic or satiric impulse” that Meyerhold

3 According to both, Meyerhold and Bakhtin.
describes. One of the foremost examples of this wry humour in *Tree of Hope*, is Mary’s
determination to get drunk in an attempt to keep Gabriel and his message at bay.

Beginning with despondence, Mary proceeds into defiance in her next song,
which she sings and dances with Young Mary. This time, instead of the vestal Holy
Virgin, Mary enters in a beautiful dress, ready for a night out and looking “to get drunk.”
Young Mary warns her, “Don’t say anything you’ll regret” but Mary is rash and snide,
abusing Gabriel as “less than” herself before she sings:

I will get drunk tonight
See if I don’t
Lightning jumps from the sun tonight
See if I don’t
I will turn the suitor back tonight
See if I don’t
The moon outshines the sun tonight
See if I don’t. (Ehn 103)

Although this song of Mary and her declaration to get drunk troubles the traditional idea
of a demure, chaste, young girl meekly accepting her fate, it is nothing when compared
to the blasphemy she utters when Gabriel finally delivers his message:

Gabriel: He shall be great, and shall be called Son of the Highest; and the
Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David.

Mary (to Young Mary): Because I will marry God, I am greater than the
angels. Because I translate God to earth, I am greater than Christ.
Because God desires me, I am greater than God. (105)
The satiric or “diabolic” impulse of Meyerholdian grotesque seems to brim over into Bakhtinian carnivalesque with these words. “Social” orders are over-turned as Mary transcends the angels, transcends Christ, and eventually transcends God himself. The grotesque comes full circle however, as Ehn immediately follows this startling declaration with a relapse into the Biblical “script,” as manifest in Mary’s quiet question, “How shall this be, since I know not a man?” (105). Thus order is restored. Gabriel and Mary, having run around each other to this point— one in pursuit, one in flight— conduct this scene, in laughably prosaic terms; robotically, verbatim from Biblical scriptures. After her disturbingly irregular behavior, the announcement of a virgin conception seems perfectly normal, her acquiescence brings relief, and finally Mary begins the Magnificat. This reprieve into tradition does not last long however. Mary sprouts wings, dances with Gabriel, and, in turn, overpowers the arch angel.

I have, thus far, mentioned Gabriel only with regards to his actions, noting specifically what he says and what he does. However, even the angle, God’s divine messenger, is not beyond the reach of Ehn’s grotesque incongruities. As already noted, Mary overpowers the angle when singing and dancing to the Magnificat, but Gabriel’s diminution starts at the top of the play. Instead of the terrifying celestial messenger, Ehn gives us a “boy angel” searching for the recipient of his message. The first time he meets Mary, he is deliberately denied a chance to speak. Young Mary urges Mary to “say something” to prevent Gabriel from speaking. Mary, with what seems to be the calm of experience, responds, “It takes a long time to listen, I’m going to get drunk tonight. See if I don’t” (101). True to her word, when Gabriel approaches Mary as she leaves her hiding place in the lake, she hastens into her first song, not giving Gabriel a
chance to speak. Gabriel will not be “listened to” for a large part of the play as Mary and Young Mary continue to evade him. In this (first) instance, Gabriel is left to “back out” while Mary changes her wet clothes behind a curtain.

He returns as a young boy herding a gaggle of ducks to the lake. Whether to give Mary her privacy, or out of a loss of confidence, Gabriel second approach is indirect. In a hilarious monologue, beset with the mischievous impulse of the grotesque, he tries to get a duck to deliver the message:

   Gabriel: Go over there and say something. Hey like this. (He moves his mouth carefully.) Say words like I'm saying now. Say, “Emmanuel,” “God with us.” Tell her something bigger than her or me. Tell her I'm Gabriel, and I've taken a ruler to the night and can give her the final number. (102)

Gabriel's coaxing is laughably reminiscent of a hopeful admirer urging his friend to say good things about him to a love interest. Humorous as the incident is, it does not inspire confidence in the celestial messenger or the heaven he represents. Humour soon gives way to desperation as Mary, taking advantage of a Gabriel’s distraction, runs away again leaving Gabriel struggling to “stay calm” when he finds only Young Mary behind the curtain. Gabriel’s message is a burden to him. Although he begins as a menace to Mary and Young Mary, Gabriel task is to deliver the messenger, to be listened to, and as he fails again and again, his search takes on frantic dimensions, reducing him to young boy flailing against his failures. Ehn surprises us again with the sheer unpredictability of the arch angel and the unusual difficulty of his task.

   The grotesque also draws from several and “unlikely” sources and Ehn draws on them as well (Pitches 61). One of the foremost of borrowed sources is the title of the
play which is attributed to Frieda Kahlo’s painting of the same name. This retrospective glance at the creation story and the Garden of Eden is in itself, an unlikely other source (i.e. it draws an Old Testament reference to the center of this New Testament event, evoking an Edenic reference to the Tree of Life). Eden is also recalled at the top of the play when Mary hides from Gabriel in the reeds of the lake, and the message he brings. In essence, like Adam and Eve ashamed at their nakedness, Mary hides from God. The significance of the Tree of Life is a little more obscure until one follows the evolution of knowledge in the play.

The Tree of Life in Genesis imparted knowledge to Adam and Eve, but it came at a great price: the loss of innocence, and a near irrevocable breach between God and his creation. Knowledge is thus a sinister force in this play. It is what Mary and Young Mary hide from: the revelation will end their innocence. They do not want this knowledge and that is why they do not want to listen to Gabriel. The menace of knowledge is brought to the forefront when Gabriel discovers— another echoing of a Kahlo painting— Young Mary as a “fawn shot with arrows”:

Young Mary: I am full of arrows. Flint points hunt their knowledge in me, I am what the arrows need to know. I am persuasive of stone-in-air. I am still. Therefore smarter than the woods. (Ehn 103)

Young Mary is the conduit of knowledge in this play. She begins as a child learning to read the scriptures and by the end, she has witnessed the annunciation. Even Mary says to her, “Don’t go home. You know too much now” (106).

The concept of knowledge as destructive is another fascinating feature of the grotesque. In On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature,
Geoffrey Galt Harpham posits that the grotesque leads to discovery and "disorder is the price one pays for enlargement of the mind" (191). This certainly is the case for Young Mary. Knowledge has distorted her, enlarged her, and, in a sense, it has made her Big. She is lost to her mother who calls for her in vain. As Young Mary’s last words – “I am Mary, I am Mary”— are read, it becomes clear that Young Mary has lost her innocence, she cannot return to childhood or normalcy. Young Mary stays in the tree, with the branches and tightening around her, rocking her. It would be a scene of complete despair, until it is remembered that Young Mary is called “my hope” by Mary. Perhaps it is Young Mary’s remaining in the tree that makes it the ‘Tree of Hope’. Thus, even in the final moments of despair and inevitability, Ehn insists on the presence of hope, providing yet another expression of grotesque ambivalence.

I mentioned earlier that grotesque inter-textuality is manifested in the very title of the play, incorporating a reference to Kahlo’s painting, as well as summoning the Book of Genesis to mind. Ehn’s references to the creation story do not stop at the title. In fact, more grotesque than this titular inter-textuality is the incongruity or ‘strangeness’ of having Creation images—and consequently, references to the temptation of Eve, and the “Fall of Man”— inscribed into a play about the coming of Christ. The annunciation, which is traditionally an event of joy and the fulfillment of a promise, is overshadowed by a history of temptation and falleness. Furthermore, not only does Ehn scatter creation and Edenic images throughout the play, but he also references End Times prophecies, as recorded in the Book of Revelations. Ehn has scripted into a play heralding the first coming of Christ, an over arching eschatological timeline: he brings in elements of the.

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4 "a strangeness born of mixing things in unusual ways" (Pitch 64).
creation and also impresses vivid end-time prophetic images on the script. In doing so, he facilitates a grotesque mixing of Biblical events, prophecies and the fulfillment of prophecies along a vast (Genesis to Revelation) timeline. The creation of such a timeline within the play is in itself ‘Big.’ However, the Genesis-Revelation imagery in this play is also a means to exploring yet another way Ehn strives towards ‘Bigness’ in *Tree of Hope*.

Thus far I have focused on grotesque as it is manifested thematically in the play, considering primarily the ways in which such themes are imparted by way of the spoken word. However, I find it vital to Ehn’s aesthetic of Bigness to consider the grotesque as it is represented purely in written imagery. Before I explicate my reading of the Genesis-Revelation imagery in the play, it will be helpful first to consider how image facilitates and propounds Bigness.

Linda Hutcheon, in her defense of the postmodernist problematization of history, theory and fiction, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, explains how the advent of the postmodern condition brought with it an attempt to re-signify *parole*. Significantly, this move to re-signify the parole ascribes meaning making power to individual speech acts (as opposed to an overarching langue), and positions the act of utterance as a *process*. In so doing, it counters analytic-referential discourse, the prevailing theoretical model that has organized ideas regarding language and its functions since the 17th century. By displacing analytic-referential discourse (which is “underpinned by a drive towards totalization and finite closed knowledge”) and putting in its place the discursive activity of enunciation, communication becomes flexible, multiple, complex and contextualized (Hutcheon 74-75).
The significance of enunciation is that the creation of meaning does not rest solely in the hands of the artist, or the reader, but in the process, or production of the individual speech acts:

The art of enunciation always includes an enunciating producer as well as a receiver of the utterance, and thus their interrelations are a relevant part of the discursive context. (Hutcheon 75)

As such, the discursive model of enunciation “turn[s] the reader into collaborator instead of consumer,” which is what Hutcheon calls the “revenge of the parole” (80).

Furthermore, Hutcheon, citing Roland Barthes, points out that enunciation does not allow for a temporally fixed meaning:

Barthes contests this notion of original and originating author, the source of fixed meaning in the past and substitutes for it the idea of a textual Scriptor or what I would prefer to call a “producer” who exists only in the time of the text and its reading: “there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.” (76)

Postmodern artists like Ehn work to contest the implied innate authority of analytico-referential discourse, and instead revel in the messiness of discursive activity.

Ehn, in particular follows this discursive model through his use of written imagery. In replacing dialogue with image, Ehn leads the audience/reader to continuously interpret (for themselves) what is seen, thus involving them in creation of meaning, with minimum authorial manipulation.5 His written images (through the use of stage directions and poetic language) are enunciative acts, still needing to be received and interpreted, and

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5 But even those interpretations are not free – they move and combine with other impulses and subjects in the act of enunciation.
as such, “turn the reader into collaborator.” Furthermore, in using imagery, Ehn
disposes of the stable system of language to create meaning. Meaning in Ehn’s plays is
derived instead from the interpretation of images, and as such, is in action or in process,
being produced by the audience and subject to context. In sharing this meaning-making
process with the audience, Ehn exposes his plays to a plethora of possible meanings.
Images being enunciative acts, his text is “eternally written here and now,” and
therefore, “unstoppable” and immensely Big.

*Tree of Hope,* is particularly abundant in written imagery. I would argue that he
even replaces dialogue— as a meaning-making or plot-forwarding constructs— with
images. In doing so, Ehn compels the reader/audience to interpret visions. In the
following paragraphs, I offer my interpretations of what I consider two of the most vivid,
discursive, and grotesque images in the play. My interpretations of the images are
informed by my acquaintance with the Bible, often mere memories from Sunday School
that are dredged up on reading Ehn’s images, and might bear little or no resemblance to
another’s interpretation. For example, the image of Mary hiding in the Lake may or may
not be reminiscent of Adam and Eve hiding from God in the Garden of Eden, based on
a reader’s awareness of that Biblical event.

The first image (and interpretation) centers on the physical body of Mary. The
female body has been, since Medieval times, a principle site of grotesquerie— by
misogynistic thought, undoubtedly— but also for the “woman’s affiliation with the
quintessentially grotesque events” of pregnancy and child birth (Miles 88). Bakhtin
writes that the “grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished,
ever completed; it is continually built, continually created; and builds and creates
another body” (Bakhtin 317). As such, Mary’s body would be grotesque simply by virtue of being a woman’s body, and also in anticipation of her pregnancy. However, Ehn furthers the potency of this image in his stage directions, generating a picture of Mary transforming— an “in process” body— and in doing so, he gives us an image that is both horrific and mesmerizing. The transformation begins at the foot of the tree, where Gabriel finally catches Mary:

Young Mary climbs the tree. She’s surprised by the boy angel’s winged head, which flies into the tree beside her. He has a third eye in the middle of his forehead, and the lids move like lips…

Mary: The rain’s opening my wound like fruit.

She opens her blouse, In between her breast hangs a fruit like those in the trees, She opens the fruits and inside is Gabriel’s three-eyed face. The small face speaks.

This image, reminiscent of Roman Catholic representations of ‘Blessed Virgin Mary displaying her Immaculate heart,’ is grotesque in its weirdness, nakedness and allegory to birthing as Mary literally bears fruit in her breasts. However, this image is more than just an expression of grotesquerie. The fruit, the drops of red on a white blouse, standing at the foot of a tree which “we see above and below ground,” all these images collectively bring Eve to mind; the first woman and the first sin is ghosted in Mary, the soon-to-be mother of God. In melding Mary and Eve in this scenic moment, Ehn summons the genesis of humanity and the so-called “Fall of Man,” and juxtaposes that memory with the promise of redemption.
Ehn follows this Genesis echo with a Revelation image which unfolds after the annunciation is complete. Mary sprouts golden wings, a ruby halo appears on her head, cheetahs appear under her feet, and bright green birds flock about her (105). At first glance, the image seems Edenic. However, the halo and subjugated wild beasts hint at a more exalted circumstance— John’s vision of ‘The Woman and the Dragon’ from Revelations 12:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth…The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. (The NIV Bible, Rev. 12. 1-13)

Once again, the annunciation is denied autonomy as a segregate Biblical event. Here, the anxieties and agony of the end-times is evoked, as a reminder that the birth of Mary’s child is merely a chapter— albeit a significant one— in the larger (Christian) Divine narrative. The annunciation is neither the beginning, nor the end.

Here again, as throughout Tree of Hope, Ehn calls upon the larger picture, he facilitates a Bigger understanding of his play and of the Biblical events they are based on. Ehn use of the grotesques challenges conventional perceptions of not only the annunciation, but the very nature of a beloved and venerated person— Mary, the mother of Christ. Ehn’s use of imagery, on the other hand, is the apotheosis of his endeavour towards that which is Big. While the perceived simplicity of Biblical narratives
have to be reconsidered when looked through the lens of the grotesque, Ehn’s use of imagery forwards the possibility of multiple meanings and complexity. His provision advances a theology that questions continuously, interprets continuously and allows no easy, limiting answers— truly “beyond the reach of discourse,” and thus, Big.
CHAPTER TWO: “CHEAP” AND INCIDE

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”

-- Matt. 5.3, The NIV Bible

Poverty, earth, brokenness and blood all come together in Incide, where Ehn unquestioningly posits Judas Iscariot—former disciple, and betrayer of Jesus Christ—as a saint, ending this devastatingly Big play with the petition, “St. Judas pray for us” (Ehn 152). Unstoppable as the poetry and images in this play are, it is Ehn’s thematic strain of “Cheap” which runs through Incide. As noted in my introduction, Ehn defines Cheapness such as it applies to his aesthetic as that which is “common, public, complicit” (Ehn x). In this chapter I will explicate Ehn’s masterful manipulation of Cheap on three different levels: economic notions of wealth, theoretical perceptions of value, and the spiritual grounds of that which is “common, public,” and, therefore, priceless. More precisely, I will argue that all three manifestations of Cheap are palpably present in Incide.

Themes of monetary value, coinage, numbers and wealth run rampant through this short play. Judas is paid in silver, the Potter’s Field is bought, earth is called the “Judas purse,” and the stars at night are the thirty pieces of silver Judas flings at the sky. Yet, despite all these references to monetary value, Ehn works to trouble such categorical and traditional notions of worth by filling the play with celebrations of (and, indeed, honouring of) loss, grieving and ultimately, death. This subversion of value and

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1 Incide was first performed in 1994 at the Annex Theatre in Seattle.
wealth is the very basis of Cheap as defined by Ehn. As such, in *Incide* Cheap—as opposed to expense, or costliness—becomes a desirable quality.

Ehn’s attitude towards monetary currency is introduced before the play in a proper sense even begins: it is a belief, as stated in the preface, that loss is potentially more powerful than wealth, a notion he supports with a reference to St. Gertrude’s maxim, “property, the more common it is, the more holy it is” (Ehn x). In calling on St. Gertrude’s praising of the power of shared wealth, Ehn also quotes a more recent, un-canonized “saint”—social reformer, Dorothy Day. Day appears to be a role model of Ehn’s; he uses her words and example in his editorial written for *Theatre*, “Towards Big Cheap Theatre,” where he explains his aesthetic as a model for American theatre (not to be confused with his theology, Big Cheap Mysticism):²

> The merits of voluntary poverty (in Dorothy Day’s sense, in Tolstoy’s sense) are clearer [than the merits of de facto poverty]. I know some good poor theatres, but I know more good broke ones, the latter are without money by design; they pursue a spiritual poverty by exploring broke-ness as a value—a freedom, a witness. (Ehn, *Theatre* 6)

Even though Ehn forwards a practical expression of his belief in Cheap in this editorial (i.e., the business of running a theatre company), it is the metaphoric concept of “broke-ness as a value,” and the notion of loss as a means to gain, that resounds in many of his plays, including *Incide*. The above quote also indicates that Ehn’s emphasis is not only on loss but also on the method of loss. He specifically valorizes voluntary poverty. In other words, he seems to highlight the process of loss, noting specifically how one is

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² Ehn’s aesthetic, Big Cheap Theatre, while intrinsic to his theology, Big Cheap Mysticism, is not to be considered synonymous to it.
brought to a point of poverty and, in turn, embraces that condition as invaluable. *Incide* is divided into three parts; part one, “To the Stars,” is an almost systematic dissolution of all that is traditionally valuable, gradually resulting in a state of complete loss.

The play begins with two old women praying in a church for a companion who has cancer; their brief dialogue conveys the toll the medication is taking on their friend’s body. Asked where she sends her prayers, one of the women replies “to the stars.” Simultaneously, an old man kneels in prayer, his hands covered in clay. When Judas enters the scene, the old women, the old man, and Judas “read” the betrayal scene from the Passion like a mass being read aloud from missals, with Judas quoting his lines from “memory.” Judas then washes a clay-covered hand, crosses himself with the water from the same bowl, and then turns to kiss “a phantom” Jesus. Upon completing this act, a policeman makes his way to Judas to pay him thirty pieces of silver; Judas cannot count it. The policeman briefly narrates the story of the crucifixion, which is depicted as a twelve-year old-boy running across the stage and being shot in the back. Seeing what his actions have created, Judas tries to refuse the money but the policeman cannot take back blood money. Frustrated, Judas flings the money skyward and the coins burn holes in the sky, where their “light” gets stuck. The dull, lusterless coins fall back to the earth and the priests gather them to buy the potter’s field. As the first scene draws to a close, it is revealed that Judas hung “himself from a tree as Christ was hung from a tree,” a new kind of crucifix, hung from only “one-point.” The old man finally receives a partial answer to his question (“Where do you send your prayers?”) via Judas:
You cannot pray to the stars because they are Judas silver. [...] When we look to heaven we are praying to heavy Judas Swinging across his silver.

(Ehn 147)

Throughout the first section, Ehn presents instances of wealth or worth which are gradually but unfailingly cancelled out by some detrimental force. In this way, Ehn establishes a dynamic pattern of prospective gain that is systematically negated by instances of loss. That this "system" is not merely nihilistic can be inferred from Ehn’s recognition and belief in the “anti-capitalist” principles of Dorothy Day. Day, in her writings on poverty, exhorted the “rich to become poor and the poor to become holy.” Contained in her statement is a tacit claim that there is gain to be had from poverty. Ehn also reflects this sentiment in his own philosophy when he extols the virtues of the theatres who purse “poverty by exploring broke-ness as a value— a freedom, a witness” (Ehn, Theatre 6). The economic principles of Day (and Ehn) are grounded in a faith-based system of living and serving, which Day establishes in her essay, “Catholic Worker Positions”:

The general aim of the Catholic Worker Movement is to realize in the individual and in society the expressed and implied teachings of Christ. It must, therefore, begin with an analysis of our present society to determine whether we already have an order that meets with the requirements of justice and charity of Christ. (Day)

Apart from the faith-based principles of Day and Ehn, however, there are a slough of contemporary writers and theoreticians— such as Luce Irigaray, Samuel Beckett, Jaques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard— who have addressed cultural notions of value,
economies of loss, and the negation of capitalist value systems. A foremost member of this group is Georges Bataille.

A librarian by profession, Bataille considered classical economics to be a restrictive framework for the nature of economic movement. Bataille’s theories of general economy, of the notion of “the gift,” and of sacrifice all exhibit a tendency to emphasize the irrational over the rational and thus contest the tenets of classical economics. Steven Connor, summarizing Bataille’s “The Notion of Expenditure,” Visions of Excess, and Accursed Share, writes, “[Bataille’s work] promotes loss, waste, excess, refuse and excrement, along with everything else that stands against bourgeois utility” (Connor 71). It is the subversion of “bourgeois utility” which is the key to understanding Bataille’s commitment to the value of pure and non-productive expenditure. While Bataille’s arguments are complex and expansive, for the purposes of my argument I need only summarize his notion of sovereignty which underlies Absolute Expenditure.

Within a rational economic framework, all goods, products and even persons fulfill a need that eventually leads to growth. As such, all these elements are part of an order, they have a function to serve (i.e., they are essentially utilitarian). However, when an item or person is chosen as a sacrifice they are removed from what is usable and valuable, for the sole purpose of being consumed without any hope of profit. In other words, they are destroyed and their ascribed value is negated. However, in being set aside for destruction, the sacrifice is also set free from the system of utility and growth. It attains freedom from servitude and achieves what Bataille calls “sovereignty,” the attributes of which are recognizability set apart from an economic system and freed

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3 Bataille’s theories on sacrifice and ‘the gift’ (potlatch) are based on the ceremonial practices of the Aztecs and native tribes of the Northwest coast of North America (Connor 72).
from utilitarian domination (Bataille 58-59). According to Bataille, art and literature similarly find their way in this position of sovereignty by virtue of their being item of luxury and thus sans any practical value or worth. Their creation entails economic loss but their value (sovereignty) is immeasurable. Bataille describes this as “creation by mean of loss,” and declares that it is “evidence of a fundamental drive towards non-productive expenditure of energy and goods in human life” (Connor 72). Whether regarded as “the gift,” sacrifice, or— by Ehn’s terminology— “broke-ness as a value,” Bataille provides a theoretical framework for comprehending, or even seeking, the value that is latent in destruction and loss. It is helpful to keep this framework in mind while reading Incide, specifically while examining the aforementioned pattern of value negated by loss in section one, “To the Stars.”

The play opens with the first account: two women, kneel at prayer and discuss and absent woman who is dying of cancer:

Woman One: The medicine is breaking her brain.

Woman Two: On account of the cancer.

Woman One: She’s losing her weight. (Ehn 145)

This passage indicates that the very source of what should be the Woman’s remedy—her medicine—is in fact a menace. Instead of being healed, the cancerous woman is being broken further by the very thing that should bring benefit. Likewise, in a scene fraught with numerals and mathematical values, Judas and the Policeman make a monetary exchange:

Policeman: Count it.

Judas: I can’t count.
Policeman: You can count to twelve, you can count to thirty.

Judas: I can minus one from twelve. I can minus thirty from thirty.

And a little later:

Policeman: We killed him at twelve.

Judas: You don"t know. It took him days to die.

Policeman: We killed him at twelve, since that"s the number he likes. At twelve years old. He"s the moment. He"s all ages every second. (Ehn 146)

Here, calling on the language of numbers and coins, Ehn illustrates the monetary exchange Judas makes. The repetition of the numbers “twelve” and "thirty" become annoyingly redundant, but are specifically placed to indicate the exchanges taking place. “Minus one from twelve” signals Judas’ exchange of discipleship for money, but in following it with the subtraction of “thirty from thirty,” he betrays an awareness of the futility of his actions. 4 Thirty pieces of silver will not profit him in the long run— in fact, it will ultimately destroy him— and that is foreshadowed in this exchange and his professed inability to count the coins:

Policeman: Count it.

Judas: I can’t count. (Ehn 146)

That Judas “can’t count” implicates a priceless entity in this exchange. The limitedness of thirty pieces of silver is not what poses a dilemma; there is a value-less subject associated in this exchange. Perhaps it is the magnitude of his betrayal, or it could be the immensity of the discipleship and friendship that is relinquished in his betrayal; either way, it is significant that both subjects lie beyond the scope of monetary signifiers,

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4 He was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus.
and it doing so become, not value-less, but above the traditional system of values. In other words, they become priceless. The futility of this exchange is further underscored when Judas, regretting his actions, attempts to return the money to the Pharisees. When they refuse, he flings the money at the temple wall and leaves. At this point, Judas is in a state of complete and utter deprivation.

Another significant image of loss is contained in the simple practicality of Judas washing his hands in preparation for the last supper:

*(Judas Iscariot crosses through the grass carrying a bowl of water. He kneels center and washes a hand. The others produce missals and read.)*

Women and Man: “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me is the one who will betray me.”

Judas: *(quoting from memory)* “Surely, it is not I, Rabbi.” (Ehn 145)

Ceremonial washing before meals is narrated several times in the New Testament, the most memorable being Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper and the woman “who had lived a sinful life” anointing Jesus with expensive perfume and then proceeding to wash his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair *(The NIV Bible, Luke 7.36-38).* In both these stories and in Biblical tradition in general, washing the feet of visitors was a sign of hospitality. Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet was an act of service, and the woman washing Jesus’ feet was an act of love and confession. There is immense significance and intimacy associated with washing before meals.

Also related to displays of intimacy is the kiss on the cheek, which conveyed love and friendship and is a tradition still practiced in parts of the world. For Judas, however,

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5 Narrated in John 13.
these deeds take on a sinister aspect. Judas washes his hands to eat with Jesus and kisses his cheek to "greet" him, but instead of friendship, there is treachery latent in his actions. The purpose of kissing and washing (i.e., intimacy) is negated by their intention and actions behind them (i.e., betrayal). It is significant that Ehn ends the section with a direct reference to this loss:

Judas: Our history, our small bagful, has been thrown out and has burned vents for God's hate. Our washing for eating, and our kissing, our two greatest intimacies with the world, have been bought too and thrown away. (Ehn 147)

The process of loss in an attempt towards gain, increase, or betterment is repeated throughout the first part of Incide: the sick woman is broken by her medicine, and Judas betrays his savior for money that he then no longer wants. Even a moment of wonder and triumph in the life of Christ—his reading the temple scriptures at the age of twelve—is stained with his crucifixion in the same moment:

Policeman: We killed him at twelve.
Judas: You don't know. It took him days to die.
Policeman: We killed him at twelve, since that's a number he likes. At twelve years old. He's the moment. He's all ages at every second. We killed him as he was when he was a twelve-year-old boy. (A twelve-year-old boy runs across, is shot, falls.) (Ehn 146)

Throughout, every action is undermined, resulting in fruitlessness. In the hands of Ehn, even prayer is subject to bankruptcy. Indeed, it is the loss of prayer that is the most distressing reversal. Turning to Divinity through the act of prayer is the ultimate
reach for power. It is the calling upon a divine power that is above and beyond earthly capabilities. In this scene, however, the women who pray to the heavens find their way barred by vestiges of betrayal: the light of the coins and— that which is the “dark matter between”— Judas himself: “You cannot pray to the stars because they are Judas silver” (Ehn 147). Here, Ehn’s concept of spiritual poverty takes on a drastic new perspective. The beatitude of the poor (“Blessed are the poor in spirit for is the kingdom of heaven”) is a spiritual comfort for the earthly poor: it is a promise of heavenly care and reward (The NIV Bible, Matt 5.3). In this case, however, the method of communication to that very heaven, prayer, is denied them. It is not “broke-ness” that the spiritually poor face, but in having their prayers turned from the stars, they face actual broken-ness. At the end of “To the Stars,” Ehn leaves the reader at this disturbing and desolate point of complete loss. Significantly, however, Ehn’s notion of complete loss is categorically different than notions of loss poeticized by the likes of Samuel Beckett or Heiner Muller. That is, unlike his nihilistic, modern and postmodern predecessors, Ehn does not allow his play to end on that note.

This difference in world views becomes apparent at the beginning of the second scene. Finding Judas hanging across the heavens in this second scene, the old women turn their prayers “To the Earth.” In this scene, earth is variously configured: as clay, as a means to raise a living, and as a grave site, for Judas and for humanity writ large. The old man with hands covered in clay is re-introduced as Simon Iscariot, Judas’ father, and as a widower. As the scene pushes forward, the mass begins again, this time with the words, “Then all disciples left and fled.” Judas is seen running across the stage and

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6 “pursue a spiritual poverty by exploring broke-ness as a value,” see page 32.
he is shot in the back; out of the darkness of the night Simon says, “He was my son.”

Suddenly, it is dawn. Judas forsakes his task as a fisherman, saying instead that “wants to be a farmer now.” He buys the potter’s field with the thirty silver coins. Simon narrates his son’s actions; he ploughs the fields and sows seeds while Judas’ wife watches form the porch, knowing that nothing would grow:

Woman One: Judas opened the earth.
Woman Two: And the earth would not take his seeds
Woman One: Judas hated to repair the nets.
Wife: Hated more to plow the clay.
Simon: He fell across his plow and his insides opened out. (Ehn 149)

The earth is declared to be the “Judas purse,” its contents scattered across the heaven, empty of all but the “cold and dead, sinner.” “To the Earth” like “To the Stars” is also steeped in unresolved loss. Prayers are once again futile, being sent into the grave, “the planet’s mummified fetish,” instead of to heaven (Ehn 148 -150). However, Ehn’s portrayal of the death of Judas (again), his use of anachronism, and the fractured narrative are all clues that suggest that a postmodern reading will reveal an understanding of the deliberately de-centered and contradictory nature of the play. In the following pages, I will focus more fully on Ehn’s uses of various postmodern tropes in this play, and explicate how they contribute to the desired quality of Cheapness.

One of the most pointed postmodern tropes revolves around Ehn’s presentation of the death of Judas. Judas dies three times in this play. Each death is an event isolated from any of the other death events. In other words, Ehn makes no attempt to explain an account of Judas’s death in reference to a previous or pending account. In
this manner, time is collapsed, chronology is disposed of, and historicity is fragmented. Ehn’s treatment of Judas’s death is more than a stylistic conceit and cannot be brushed off as “typically postmodern.” In fact, I would argue that in presenting the multiple deaths of Judas in Incide, Ehn elevates the play to the desirable position of Cheapness. Frederic Jameson, in his writings on postmodernism, capitalism, and consumer culture, attempts to explain postmodernism’s manipulation of space and time. In what is often regarded as an unsympathetic critique of postmodern culture, Jameson defines a characteristic that directly or indirectly (negatively) affects the value of postmodern culture, and consequently its art—schizophrenia. By expounding on the significance of Judas’ (multiple) deaths in part two of Incide, I will attempt to elucidate how schizophrenia in the hands of Ehn becomes a desirable quality and, specifically, how it serves his notion of Cheap.

Jameson’s concept of schizophrenia is intrinsically tied to temporality: the loss of temporal continuity signifies the present more intensely; historicity is replaced by historicism and the past becomes depthless (Homer 105-6). Jameson goes on to explain that these “schizophrenic” characteristics, when applied to postmodernism’s traits, result in an experience of “isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence” (Foster 119). However, in losing this coherent sense of time and historicity, the reader gains an intense experience of the present; that is, he or she no longer merely receives “the outside world” but is forced to engage with it in order to select and focus perceptions. When applied to language, this schizophrenic experience, pleasurable as it may be in its new-found intensity, is also

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7 i.e., empty of profundity or truth, without politics.
accompanied by a loss: unreality and loss of meaning (120). In the play, Ehn crafts the multiple deaths of Judas into a “schizophrenic experience” such as this for the reader.

The first Judas death, in part one of *Incide*, is in accordance with the account given in the book of Matthew:

"I have sinned," [Judas] said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. (*The NIV Bible*, Matt 27.5-8)

True to this account, Ehn’s Judas “threw the silver against the wall of the temple,” and then hung himself on a tree. Judas’s death in “Part Two” follows the account given in the book of Acts:

With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.

Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language *Akeldama*, that is, Field of Blood. (Acts 1.18)

In like manner, Ehn’s Judas in this section falls across his plough and his “insides fell out” (Ehn 149). In *Incide*, the death scenarios are not offered as “alternate endings”; they *both* happen. Ehn takes the inconsistent narrative of the original source, the Biblical accounts and, with no attempt to repair the fractured narrative, signifies both
equally. The first death leaves Judas hanging across the sky, a barrier between the
women’s prayers and the heavens; the second death taints the earth, making it a grave,
so that the women cannot turn their prayers to the earth either. There a Judas death,
however, which occurs between the two Biblically based renditions; here, Judas, fleeing
with the disciples, is shot in the back.

Of the four gospel accounts of Jesus’ arrest, Matthew and Mark are the two
which specifically recall the prophecy that the messiah would be arrested and be
deserted by his disciples. The incident occurs immediately after what is probably the
most infamous kiss in history, Judas’ identification of Jesus with a greeting and a kiss:

“Am I leading a rebellion,” said Jesus, “that you have come out with
swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in
the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be
fulfilled.” Then everyone deserted him and fled. (Mark 14.48-50)

Here, Judas’ death is not physical. Instead, Ehn seems to draw attention not to a
physical termination of life, but a spiritual death pending the desertion of Jesus. All the
disciples flee, but Judas’s flight follows a betrayal; in this sense, Judas dies when he
betrays Jesus.

Judas’ life and death within the play assume a cyclic nature: Judas strives to gain
something; instead, he loses it and dies. Not only is death no longer a temporal entity in
the continuum of life, but it acquires the schizophrenic significance of image. Jameson,
in explaining the temporal discontinuity experiments of the Language Poets argues that
even though it “does not seems quite right” to define schizophrenic writing as material
signifiers minus their signified, there is admittedly a sense of movement, “meaning
The materiality of words takes precedence over their meaning, and "a signifier that has lost its signified has thereby been transformed into an image" (120). Once again, the value of meaning or Truth is displaced, and in its place is the potential for multiple meanings that is associated with image. Here, death has become an image. Judas dies, again and again, until his death no longer "means" death. He also fails continuously. He fails as a fisherman:

Judas and Simon: I am looking for a quiet place
Judas: I want to be a farmer now.
Landowner: You stink like fish.
Judas: I want a farm. My fingers aren’t right for making the knots in the nets. (Ehn 148)

However, even abandoning fishing to be a farmer doesn’t alter Judas’ fruitfulness. Despite his labour on the farm, nothing grows. Judas’ father Simon says, “His wife watched form the porch arms folded, knowing only one man, knowing nothing would grow from their labour.” A similar idea is expressed later:

Woman one: Judas opened up the earth
Woman Two: and the earth would not take his seeds
Woman One: Judas hated to repair the nets
Wife: Hated more to plow the clay. (Ehn 149)

In part three, Judas also seems to fail as a husband in not giving his wife children (“The moon is hung, a Eucharist, and I labour under its large exile. Nothing grows, sown at

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8 See Chapter 1.
night. My wife can bear no children” [Ehn 151]). Judas fails as fisherman, a farmer, and a husband, and he fails Jesus. His continuous failings no longer indicate personal failure but gradually take on an image of loss, and inevitable negation of effort. In deposing absolute Truth and replacing it instead with images that abound with multiple meanings, Ehn forwards the postmodern trope of schizophrenia.

Another postmodern trope is the appropriation of multiple texts and a borrowing from other sources. While the texts from which Ehn draws in this play are all Biblical books (e.g., Psalms, Acts, and Matthew), he nonetheless takes great liberties with those texts, sometimes quoting scripture out of its Biblical context and creating a new context for it within the play. In this way, Ehn destroys original meaning and contexts, and replaces one possible Truth with various options and possibilities for interpretation. One example of this occurs in “To the Earth”:

Judas: I got money (Judas pays the landowner thirty pieces of silver.)

Women and Simon: “Lord of all, you hand us over like sheep to be slaughtered, scatter us among the nations. Dear God you sell your people for nothing.”

Simon: He wanted a safe place. He had a wife. He was my son. The new farmer scattered his seed like a child […] (Ehn 149)

The passage the women and Simon quote is a psalm, “You gave us up to be devoured like sheep, and have scattered us among the nations. You sold your people for pittance, gaining nothing from their sale” (The NIV Bible, Psalm 44.11). Although the two versions are textually very similar, they are presented in two different contexts which inevitably influence interpretation.
Ehn’s presentation of this verse seems to be a meditative extension on the word and act of being “scattered”: the Israelites are scattered in the same way that Judas scattered seeds upon his newly bought field of clay, and its context, as noted above, relates a sense of hopelessness, fruitlessness and abandonment, perhaps as punishment for Judas’ crimes (i.e., Judas is being scattered, or sent away, in retribution for his betrayal). Conversely, the interpretation drawn from the Biblical context suggests that no such punishment is warranted.

The passage in its original context is part of a psalm of lament. The Israelite community seems to have been abandoned by God and allowed to face humiliation and defeat. At first glance it would appear that the Israelites have fallen out of God’s favour, as they often did, and are being punished for their disobedience. However, the psalmist makes it clear in verse 17 of the same psalm that the Israelites have been abandoned, not as a result of their disobedience and consequent punishment, but simply because God had “hidden his face” from them. Judas’ guilt, then, would appear to be in stark contrast to the Israelite’s blamelessness (in this particular psalm). Ehn, however, makes no excuse or attempt at explaining context; instead, he appropriates the passage to foreshadow Judas’ failure, fruitlessness, and isolation.

In part three of Incide, “To Judas,” the character of Judas dies one last time. The stage directions read, “He lies down and dies. His wife strips his shirt off. She puts candles on his back and lights them” (Ehn 151). Judas becomes an altar. In a long, sorrowful monologue, Judas’ wife narrates Judas’ past years: his desolation, fruitless labour, and physical pain. As the characters turn their prayers to Judas, asking him to intercede on their behalf, they gather at the altar of Judas both literally (i.e., his body, lit
with candles) and metaphorically (i.e., a place to go to lay your prayers) as Judas is made their intercessor. It is here that another aspect of Ehn’s Cheap is made visible—that which is “common, complicit.” Judas’ wife begins this part of the play with her eulogy, evoking a new sensation in the familiar and tragic story of Judas Iscariot: compassion.

I remember his coming home at night, the darkest-before-the-dawn time, as sore as could be. He sows at night under the Eucharist, which is hung amid the coins that purchased it. He comes in tired […] Judas has arthritis and I trap heat over his sore muscle. But when he dies, he dies as clay, in moonlight old as he is cold. (Ehn 151)

In very literal terms, Judas’ wife bears witness to Judas’ life and death—she shares his story. However, in this monologue, Ehn also calls the reader to bear witness and to share in the life and tragedy of a man who ended his days in anguish, unfruitful and supposedly unforgiven. Whether by hanging or falling on his plow, the Biblical Judas met his end violently but quickly. Ehn’s “final” Judas lives out his days toiling and tired beneath God’s “thirty eyes, all full of rage.” The final Judas story begins to look familiar (common) as Ehn, through the voice of Judas’ wife, applies first-person plurality to a list of offenses:

We have done too much and our children have done too much. We have killed our children and the graves of the children poison the soil. And it is all done under the sky so the sky knows. (151)

By the use of “we” and “our,” Ehn ascribes the above transgressions to a more universal begetter, not just Judas, and in doing so he forces a comprehension of a communal
experience—the realization of shared culpability. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), approaching this commonality of the human race from a more positive view, wrote about this as a “call to compassion,” (Merton 114).

Merton, a modern day Catholic mystic and writer, believed in and lived a life of contemplative spirituality that overflowed into a spirituality of compassion (15). In the following chapter, I will discuss at length the characteristics and goals of Christian mysticism, but for now, it will suffice to say that according to Merton, an understanding of God and union with the divine was achieved through love of God and love of humankind:

I cannot treat other men as men unless I have compassion for them. I must have at least enough compassion to realize that when they suffer they feel somewhat as I do when I suffer. [...] Compassion teaches me that my brother and I are one. That if I love my brother, my love benefits my own life as well. And if I hate my brother and seek to destroy him, I seek to destroy myself as well. (114)

Although Merton’s spirituality of compassion and his leitmotif, “We Are One,” were the basis of his ecumenical beliefs, they were also intrinsic to his concern for social justice and economic justice as well. His letters to Dorothy Day, recorded in The Hidden Ground of Love, are a testament to this. Writing to Day in the fall of 1960, he deplores how he contributes to society’s guilt and injustices:

We (society at large) have lost our sense of values and vision. We despise everything that Christ loves. Everything marked with his compassion. We love fatness, health, bursting smiles, the radiance of satisfied bodies and
properly fed and rested […] I can’t help sharing [society’s] guilt, its illusions. (Hidden Ground 138)

Merton’s call to compassion, “We Are One,” begins to resound in the closing passages of Incide as two objects of compassion arise and bring with them the weight of shared responsibility.

The first is Judas. Judas is raised from his position as arch-villain and his humanity is brought to a forefront as his wife talks about his arthritis and sore muscles. He is no longer to be seen as betrayer, but as a broken human, with human faults. As I mentioned earlier, the final Judas story begins to look familiar. I would argue that Judas’ ordeal is the ordeal of every sinner. Whether for the betrayer of Jesus or for a child who, breaking his mother favourite vase, hides the pieces under his bed, the process of anguish is the same: the abjection, the endeavour to redeem oneself, and the hopelessness. The call to compassion here is not just for the sake of mere sympathy, but for the empathy that comes from a shared experience.

The second object of compassion is a more global situation: war, injustice and suffering (“We have done too much and our children have done too much. We have killed our children and the graves of the children poison the soil”). Brief and cryptic, this line contains the burden of violence carried out against nameless, faceless peoples, and suggests that — whether by action or inaction — all are culpable. “We” are no better than what Judas was, sharing his same vices and failures such as greed and unfaithfulness. This is underscored in the final lines of the play, spoken by Judas’ wife, “There is a field of blood between the kneelers. We pray on the floor of Akeldama,” (Ehn 152). “Akeldama,” Aramaic for “field of blood,” is the name given to the field that Judas
purchased “with the reward he got for his wickedness,” the same place where he fell, burst open and died (*The NIV Bible, Acts 1.18*). However, Ehn clearly places the universal community on the *same ground* as Judas—all people pray to God from the same blood-flooded field that is Earth.

Perhaps it is this common fallen-ness that makes Judas the one to whom prayers are turned to in the end:

Simon: All human prayers reach heaven through Saint Judas

Women: Saint Judas, pray for us…

Wife: We would kill our lover to fix a parking ticket.

Women, Simon: Saint Judas pray for us. (Ehn 152)

Even at the end, there is no complete restoration for Judas or for the people at prayer. The inheritance of the poor in spirit—the kingdom of God—must be waited for because what Ehn ends with is continued spiritual poverty and a stream of prayers. However, Cheapness is achieved on several levels throughout *Incide*: as cultural and economic valorization of loss, the postmodern de-signification of meaning, and by underscoring the commonality of humanity, especially in the eyes of God.
CHAPTER THREE: “MYSTICISM” AND WHOLLY JOAN’S

“I know what it feels like to be in the dead center with you. Not in the center of anything else—just pure center. The only thing.”

-- Erik Ehn, *The Saint Plays* (3)

*Wholly Joan’s* is, chronologically, the first of Ehn’s plays on the saints. Barely four pages long, the play, which is divided into three brief sections —“The Capture,” “The Defense” and “The Burning” — is based on the story of Joan of Arc, and is about mysteries, the journey to communion with God, and above all, love.1

In the first section, Joan is hiding, not from human captors, but from God. She admits her love for him, recognizes that she “can’t resist” him, and then at last she relents. An Angel gives her the order, “Jumpin’ Jesus says to fight,” and then the human arms of the guards reach in and drag her away (4). In section two, Joan is in chains, imprisoned while crowds outside her cell chant for her release. The guards say they need to kill her because she’s a nuisance and must be dealt with, but Joan knows better and tells them, “You’re killing me because something loves me more than you know how” (5). The Angel appears with swords. Then Joan, her shackles popping off, fights the guards and, together with the Angel, defeats them. In the final scene, however, she is revealed in full armour, tied to a stake, and on fire. After Joan dies, the guards find a large, heart-shaped, cherry-red piece of fabric downstage: Joan’s heart, which would not burn “BECAUSE HER HEART WAS HOTTER THAN THE FIRE” (6).

While this play encapsulates the essence of Big Cheap Mysticism, it is the features of love, mystery, and union with the Divine that make *Wholly Joan’s* a

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1 *Wholly Joan’s* was first performed in 1988 at the Manhattan Class Company.
representative script of the foundation of Ehn’s theology — Mysticism. In a sense, “Big” and “Cheap” are merely adjectives used to describe the kind of mysticism that Ehn ascribes to, leaving Mysticism itself at the heart of his theology. Furthermore, in my study of mysticism à la Ehn, I found there to be several unifying features between mysticism and Bigness. In fact, mysticism is immediately Big by virtue of its being “beyond the reach of discourse.” It also shares some attributes of the grotesque — surprise, unpredictability, disorderliness — which contribute to a fundamental feature of mysticism, mystery. I will expound on this shortly.

As noted in the introduction, of the three descriptive adjectives Ehn uses to describe his theology, “Mysticism” is the only one on which he does not elaborate. According to The Encarta Dictionary, mysticism is defined as “the belief that personal communication or union with the divine is achieved through intuition, faith, ecstasy, or sudden insight rather than through rational thought” (“Mysticism”). The defiance of rational thought as grounds for mystical discourse (or for the discursive activity of mysticism) is foundational to mysticism and particularly crucial when considering Ehn’s plays.² In fact, the Greek root of the word “mysticism,” “to conceal,” and the early Christian usage of this word to denote “hidden-ness” serve as intimations of a deliberate obscurity, of intended mystery (“Mysticism,” Stanford Encyclopedia). In this chapter I will summarize the basic tenets of Christian mysticism, specifically as they are represented in Ehn’s script. I will also explicate how mystery, the journey to union with the Divine, and, above all, love are not only key tropes in this script, but are all also characteristics

² See chapter 1 for the discussion on the contrasting features of “discourse” and “discursive.”
of Christian mysticism writ large, thereby placing Ehn’s script within the realm of mysticism (mystical writing) itself.

Raymond Bailey, writing on the mystical theology of Trappist monk, prolific writer and twentieth-century mystic Thomas Merton, observes that most mystical literature is autobiographical. Bailey suggests that “the mystical writer does not attempt to draw a map for another, but only to describe his or her own journey” (23). Therefore, the metaphysical reality that mysticism presupposes cannot be rationally comprehended. The implications of this are that mystical experiences and information are largely individual and subjective, and do not lend themselves to empirical analysis. Post-structuralist scholars such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Michel de Certeau, however, approach the analysis and discussion of mysticism via a new critical practice. De Certeau, in particular, proffers a postmodern lens through which to regard mysticism as a valid source of epistemological inquiry, asserting that the essence of (medieval) mysticism lay in discursive textual and bodily styles of practice rather than in a body of doctrine: a “new space with new mechanisms” (Heterologies 81). Comprehending this model, this “new mechanism” is important because it can be used to understand Ehn’s mysticism, not only the mystical activity of his characters but, moreover, the mystical experience Ehn creates through his writing of the plays. I find it significant that Ehn calls his plays “poor and little vanishing acts,” in other words, acts of mystery. I would argue that even in his writing the stories of mystics and saints, Ehn is essentially creating a portal to mystical experience (for the reader/audience member).

I have, throughout the preceding chapters, described Ehn’s work as ephemeral, fleeting, inexorable, and intangible— all traits that make Ehn’s plays as frustrating to me
as they are fascinating. In Ehn’s hands the familiarity and perceived simplicity of the Biblical scriptures and historic biographies suddenly become obscure and complex, while, simultaneously, the prayers spoken by his saints make the transcendent personages painfully immanent (think of Joan asking for guarantees or her confession of love, or her declaration, “Happy Valentine’s day, God Almighty. You get my heart.” [Ehn 6]). Traits of Ehn’s writing seem to embody de Certeau’s notion of the mystical experience:

The mystical, then, appears in paradoxical forms. It seems to drift from one extreme to the other. In one of its aspects it is on the side of the abnormal, rhetoric of the strange; in the other, it is on the side of the essential […] two contraries coincide in the expression “mystical phenomena”: what is “phenomenal” appears and is visible; what is “mystical” remains secret and invisible. (de Certeau, “Mysticism” 16)

Furthermore, when discussing the psychosomatic nature of mystical “events,” de Certeau uses the term “surprise,” which “produces strangeness but also liberates,” a concept which resonates with the grotesque and Bigness (17). Bailey, citing R. E. Welsh, also points out the disruptive nature of mysticism, disruptive not only to academic discourse, but to religion as well:

As an intensely personal, mysterious communication with the Divine, mysticism bypasses the intermediary structure of hierarchical church or papal organization, pursuing a “direct way up to the High and Holy One. He sought immediate awareness of the spirit above clear thinking.” (18)

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3 See chapter 1.
Thus, mysticism defies human constructs and systems.

Similarly, Ehn’s constructions of his plays break the “organizations” of dramatic structure, theological dogma, and scriptural verisimilitude; they remain elusive and mysterious, and, in a sense, intentionally incomplete. As I mentioned in chapter 1, by writing “thick” images, Ehn releases interpretive authority to the reader/viewer, creating the potential for an individual, “mysterious” comprehension of each play. While he cannot induce a mystical experience, he provides a means to such an experience. In breaking organized structure, Ehn opens the doors for a fundamental features of mysticism—mystery.

Gerorgia Harkness, in *Mysticism: Its Meaning and Message*, warns that this obscurity or mystery is not to be confused with things “misty,” such as clairvoyance, the occult, fortune-telling or astrology, and she completely shies away from using “mystery” in relation to mysticism in order to avoid confusion (7). However, despite her anxieties over the term, “mystery” as a realm of obscurity is foundational to the understanding and practice of mysticism. This line of analysis is expounded on by William Johnston in *The Inner Eye of Love: Mysticism and Religion*.

Johnston writes about the *Mystica Theologica* and its anonymous author, a fifth-century Syrian monk who went by the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite (17). Dionysius exhorts the mystic to relinquish a dependence on the sense and “operations of the intellect,” and instead rely on transcending the material world on “the ray of divine darkness that surpasseth all being” (qtd. in Johnston 18). For Dionysius, “mysticism” retains its original meaning of secrecy; however, for him, it is a secrecy of the mind and a willing commitment to obscurity and darkness. It will not serve my purposes here to go
into details about the rival merits of kataphatic and apophatic theology, but it will suffice to say that, according to Dionysius, sublime (more perfect) knowledge of God is acquired through knowing God by “unknowing” or knowing God in the darkness (Johnston 18). After all, if the exact “face” of God is hidden from humankind (as when, in Dionysius’s example, Mt. Sinai was covered with a cloud of darkness when God met Moses on the mountain) then it follows that communion with God, while allowing for moments of revelation and glimpses of the Divine, is not without mystery. Therefore, I will begin my study on the mysticism of Wholly Joan’s by pointing out the mysteries contained with the play, and how Ehn uses mystery as a motif throughout.

The story of Joan of Arc itself defies rational explanation. Indeed, the idea that an uneducated teenage girl in fifteenth-century France was allowed to lead the French armies, following her declaration that she had received visions from God, is a mystery in itself. Historian Stephen Richey, writing on Joan’s military accomplishments and appeal to the people of France, attempts to explain this phenomenon:

> When the Dauphin Charles granted Joan’s urgent request to be equipped for war and placed at the head of his army, his decision must have been based in large part on the knowledge that every orthodox, every rational, option had been tried and had failed. Only a regime in the final straits of desperation would pay any heed to an illiterate farm girl who claimed that the voice of God was instructing her to take charge of her country’s army and lead it to victory.

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Kataphatic theology uses concept to affirm truths about God whereas apophatic theology, a theology of negation, acquires an understanding of God through what he is not (Johnston 18).
However, *Wholly Joan*’s is not a historical narrative of the visions or the military and political endeavours of the posthumously canonized French peasant girl, but is the story of a reluctant mystic in commune with her God. Unlike other theatrical adaptations of the trial of Joan of Arc, Joan’s interlocutors throughout Ehn’s play are not her human captors (although she does address a few sentences to them) but God. And while Joan is captured by guards in the first section, she is primarily hiding from God and his voice. God, represented in the first scene as a “circle of light like plate steel” at the center of a dark stage, drags at her. She resists being pulled into the circle, saying, “You want me to love to hear you, but you can’t make me” (Ehn 3). In the end, she gives in and collapses at the center of the circle and the voice of God comes to her as Angel. As described in the stage directions, the angel is made up of three women:

> The first woman is the body of the Angel, the second the wings, the third and tallest holds her hands forward in an “o” for the halo […] They walk towards Joan in unison; we are not sure whether they mean to help or hurt Joan. (4)

In representing the Angel as three people, Ehn is visually evoking one of the biggest mysteries in the Christian tradition: the Trinity.

Leonardo Boff, a noted writer on Latin American Liberation theology, captures the bewilderment that accompanies discourse on the Trinity, saying, “For many Christians it is simply a mystery in logic. How can one God exist in three Persons? How can the Trinity of Persons form the unity of one God?” (qtd. in McGrath 121). Augustine includes in his discussion of the Trinity the prayer, “he who we wish to understand

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5 Other, contrasting plays include, for example, Bertolt Brecht’s *St. Joan of the Stockyards* and George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*. 
would help us in doing so,” thus establishing that it is not for us to understand God, but for God to reveal himself (100). On the other hand, the noted medieval writer Thomas á Kempis reprimanded those who were engaged in intellectual speculations on the nature of God, instead exhorting them to obey and love of God as a means to knowledge of God (114).

Ehn not only broaches the mystery of the nature of God, but, in portraying the Angel as three people, he makes physical the mystery of a Triune God. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the celestial being approaching Joan is a sinister or a benevolent force: “They walk towards Joan in unison; we are not sure whether they mean to help or hurt Joan” (Ehn 4). While the New Testament largely illustrates God as gracious, loving and merciful, especially in his incarnation and salvation through Jesus Christ, it would be unwise to dismiss the vengeful, demanding, and jealous nature of God as described in the Old Testament. The multidimensionality of God’s nature is as mysterious as his changelessness, and so Ehn never fully resolves the nature of God in Wholly Joan’s.

Section two, “The Defense,” furthers the mysteries on the nature of God with the incomprehensibilities of God’s love and, cliché as the phrase may seem, the mysterious ways in which he works. Joan declares that she’s being killed because she is loved beyond comprehension (“Something loves me more than you know how” [Ehn 5]). Moreover, she is feared because she is in God’s love, a love that is beyond “normal” or rational understanding. In short, she is mysteriously loved and therefore a mystery herself. The mysteries Joan speaks of are compounded further by the reappearance of the triune angel. Armed with swords, the angel’s sudden appearance in Joan’s jail cell would betoken divine intervention and a rescue on Joan’s behalf; however, although
Joan and the Angel overpower the guards, Joan does not escape. The victory turns out to be on a spiritual, not physical, level, and thus is an example of the mysterious workings of the Divine.

In a historical context, Joan’s execution made political sense: the British wanted her out of the way. Considered religiously, however, one cannot help wondering why a Divine being who revealed himself so directly and so closely to her through visions would, in the end, abandon her to an excruciating death. Joan’s execution at age nineteen, however, made her more than a saint; it made her a martyr. It is Joan’s martyrdom that, in Ehn’s words, made her “the most powerful woman on the face of the earth,” not by virtue of her life, but the force of her death — an indirect victory (Ehn 5).

In the penultimate scene of the play, Ehn writes:

Joan: Think about the Columbia River. Think of all the steam buried in Wyoming. Think of all those distant natural mysteries you’re afraid of. (Ehn 5)

Here, Ehn adroitly showcases indirect divine forces in terms of the “natural mysteries,” by referencing the hydroelectric energy sources of the Columbia River and the marvels of the hot water geysers of Yellowstone. Joan aligns herself with the Columbia River and the geysers of Yellowstone— both wonders of the transformational potential of water, the former of which can be tapped into to produce hydroelectric energy— and in doing so, succinctly sums up the incomprehensibility of natural and spiritual forces at work in the world. Ehn’s Joan seems to exhibit an awareness of the power her death might bring, or at least awareness of an indirect “other” purpose working through her, as she challenges her captors, “I want you to try and stop me. I’m on a tear. I want you to
try and dam me up. To cap me. Want my electricity released‖ (Ehn 5). The scene ends
with this jubilant challenge, and then Joan turns to face her death.

The manner of Joan’s death made her a martyr, and her posthumous
canonization made her a saint; however, Joan— Ehn’s Joan in particular— was also a
mystic. Ehn’s Joan secures the title of “mystic” not only by virtue of her having had
visions (i.e. her direct communion with the Divine), but because of the way she achieves
union with God, a journey that can be traced in Ehn’s play. Joan's journey is in some
ways reminiscent of Joseph Campbell's “The Hero's Journey”; however, the deep
spiritual nature of her struggle and victory can be read more completely as the “Mystic
Way,” as described in Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual
Consciousness, Evelyn Underhill's classic and preeminent study upon the subject. The
“Mystic Way” is not a set of rules but a “paradigm of investigation” that can be used to
study the mystical ascent to complete consciousness of the Divine (Bailey 21). In the
following paragraphs, I will summarize this paradigm and trace how Ehn’s Joan makes
this ascent.

The “Mystic Way,” as plotted by Underhill, is comprised of five stages. The first is
“the awakening of Self to consciousness of Divine reality.” The second state, Purgation,
is the Self’s realization of its own imperfections and limits, but also extends to an active
effort to eliminating “all that stands in the way of its progress to union with God.” Once
the Self has, through Purgation, detached itself from the material world, it transcends to
a state of joy and consciousness. Underhill describes this third phase in terms of illusion
and reality (i.e. having passed from the “Cave of Illusion” to the “knowledge of Reality,”
a state called Illumination) (Underhill 169). Illumination is a joyous detachment from the
old Self and world, but does not yet involve complete “integration into the One” (Bailey 22). Underhill mentions that most mystics never make it beyond this stage, as the joy and light of Illumination is replaced by dread and alienation of what John of the Cross called the “dark night of the soul”. Also called mystic death, this fourth phase, a time of “spiritual crucifixion,” purification and extinction of any personal desire for happiness, is accompanied by Divine Absence. The great desolation of this part of the journey is not without purpose:

[The self learns] to dissociate the personal satisfaction of mystical vision from the reality of mystical life [...] The Self now surrenders itself, its individuality, and its will, completely. It desires nothing, it asks nothing, it is utterly passive and thus prepared for. (Underhill 170)

Underhill actually leaves the sentence unfinished and begins the next sentence, the final phase of the “Mystic Way” with “Union: the true goal of the mystic quest.” A plateau of peace and tranquility, detached from any human self of happiness, this phase is also accompanied by enhancement of spiritual powers, ecstasies and enjoyment of “Divine Vision” (170).

In the four pages that comprise Wholly Joan’s, Joan makes this mystic ascent, albeit an abbreviated version of the journey. I believe Joan’s initiation into the “Mystic Way,” or what might be called her awakening, takes place before the action of the play. She has already had visions and heard God’s voice. They have brought her thus far, where we see her at the beginning of the play: a reluctant mystic, aware of the sensation and implications of God’s voice and force acting upon her:
Joan: I know what it feels like. Don’t rub it in. I know my skin gets warm and my eyes open, my joints get flexible. My hands get smart. I know what it feels like to be in the dead center with you. Not in the center of anything else— just pure center. The only thing (Ehn 3)

While Joan’s words convey a comprehension of Union, being “just pure center” with God, she nonetheless remains hiding outside of the “circle of light,” resisting its pull. And though her monologue describes sensual awareness – the warmth of her skin, her joints getting flexible, her hands getting “smart”— the very intensity and focused awareness of her physical sensations is an embodiment of her underlying spiritual awareness. There is in this scene a sense of desolation and incompleteness akin to the mystic’s experience of Purgation. Jerrold Seigel, discussing Michel de Certeau’s writings on mysticism, points out that mystical practice, according to de Certeau, taught a sense of incompleteness or numbness that propelled the mystic into a perpetual quest for “something beyond here and now,” a dissatisfaction for earthly institutions and the Self:

The person is a mystic who cannot cease to move on and who in certitude of what he lacks knows about every place and every object that this is not it, that one cannot reside here or content oneself with this. (Seigel 407)

Ehn introduces this sense of restlessness in Joan’s monologue, but his stage directions also illustrate a physical image of the ceaseless trudging of the mystic. Throughout the scene, Joan “delivers and retrieves weight, resisting the circle’s pull” around the beam of light, until finally she collapses in it (Ehn 3). That Joan is passing through this stage of
Purgation is further underlined by her words (to God) subsequent to her release into the Divine will:

Joan: If I could throw myself out to you, your voice — If I could throw myself away in your voice, without being caught... If you worked with guarantees... Then it wouldn't be work at all, and I’d get no wage. Okay. My God. I’m a lover. Jesus, I love you. Holly Ghost I can’t resist. (She collapses into the light) (Ehn 4)

Joan’s attempt to bargain with God conveys a sense of struggle that is characteristic of Purgation. Bailey says of this stage:

This second stage of self-analysis, purgation or even annihilation seems to be the really difficult one to get past. For some it becomes an end rather than the means. A society such as ours, dedicated to self-satisfaction and “fulfillment,” is repulsed by self-denial as barbaric, Puritan or at least, anti-American. (22)

Joan seems to give into what Bailey would refer to as American, as she tries to win a “guarantee” from God, an assurance of fulfillment, of protection. However, she eventually confesses her love for God, literally falling into him as she stops resisting, and thus passes into the third stage, Illumination.

Illumination, the stage of “joyous detachment” from the social world, also includes features of mystic contemplation such as visions and “adventures of the soul.” Underhill goes so far as to describe it as looking “upon the sun” (169). Ehn presents his Joan in the detachment of this stage waiting, completely unperturbed, to be executed:

First Guard: Shut them up.
Second Guard: I can’t concentrate
Joan: It’s overrated.
First Guard: Love everything you’re ever going to love all of a sudden, honey, because you’ve come to the end of the line.
Joan: That’s the old line. (4)

Not only is Joan calmly unconcerned that she’s at the end of her “line,” she is perfectly assured that it’s a past life, and that she has something more to look forwards to.

The rest of the scene catapults the readers into an experience of the ecstasy that Joan is reveling in as part of this stage. She is exultant, and she fearlessly declares the unfathomable Love that she is in, as she invokes natural mysteries:

Joan: Think about Columbia River. Think of all the steam buried in Wyoming. Think of all those distant natural mysteries you’re afraid of. (She knocks the Guards down, and trades the point of the sword between their two necks.) I want you to try and stop me, I’m on a tear, I want you to dam me up. To try and cap me. Want my electricity released. Try and stop me, and I’ll become the most powerful woman on the face of the earth. (5)

One of the outcomes of passing into the stage of Illumination is experiencing what Teresa of Avila calls “adventures of the soul,” a phrase that suddenly abounds with clarity when considered through Joan’s monologue (qtd. in Underhill 169). In this moment, Joan is jubilant and pioneering, a source of potential energy asking to be tapped into. Immediately after this, however, the voice of God in the form of the three-person Angel leaves her with the guards.
In the final scene, Joan faces her death alone. She is tied to a stake in full armour. There are no angels to comfort her or bring her messages commending her faithfulness. Instead, in this the final section of Wholly Joan’s, “The Burning,” Joan experiences the fourth phase of mysticism, Divine Absence. The complexity and intertextuality of Ehn’s writing surfaces once again as Joan’s death scene echoes the crucifixion narrative of the ultimate martyr and saint, Jesus Christ.

Nailed to a wooden cross, Christ was, according to Christian tradition, temporarily — albeit completely — sundered from God when he underwent the crucifixion. The Gospels of both Matthew and Mark attest to this abandonment; Mark’s account being, “at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’— which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (The NIV Bible, Mark 15.34). However, Christ does not curse God or lament his isolation, but, with his final breath, commits his soul to God\(^6\) — an act that is closely echoed by Ehn’s Joan as she dies.

Joan, passing through the fourth stage (Divine Absence) of “Mystical Ascent,” turns her face to God, even in the darkness. This is significant because the “dark night of the soul,” desolate and lonely as it may be, is meant to be a stage of complete surrender. Joan faces her physical and mystic death with words of devotion to a God who is not even at her side:

Joan: You don’t look away when I look at you. You don’t stop when I refuse you. You don’t refuse me. You are always moving towards me, and are moving me towards you, and you are always clear light, with the feel

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\(^6\) “Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Father into your hands I commit my Spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.” (The NIV Bible, Luke 23.46)
of cool water. As fierce as any burning gets you are always cool and moving. Happy Valentine’s day, God Almighty. You get my heart. (Ehn 6).

If the mystic’s ultimate goal is *Union*, then Joan demonstrates her purposeful far-sightedness, even as she undergoes compete alienation, in this monologue. She does not focus on her abandonment, but on her integration into the Divine (“You are always moving towards me, and are moving me towards you”). In keeping with the mysteries both of Ehn’s writing and of Mysticism, the final stage of Joan’s mystic journey is hidden from view. Ehn leaves the reader, not with the complete *knowledge* of Joan’s ascent, but with a clue that she has transcended:

*(The light switches grips and discovers a large cloth heart downstage, flat and cherry red. The Guards enter and whisper)*

First Guard: Her heart wouldn’t burn. The body’s gone — the heart’s still here. Why wouldn’t her heart burn with the rest of the body? (Ehn 6)

The Second Guard’s somewhat cryptic response to this is that the heart wouldn’t burn because it is “hotter than the fire.” Nonetheless, the reader now knows that Joan’s *body* is gone. The heart left on stage is not an anatomical heart but a “flat, cherry red” heart — like a child’s Valentine’s Day cut-out. Joan, in a sense, abandons her earthly body to destruction, but gives her heart to God (“Happy Valentine’s day, God Almighty”). Whether this heart represents her soul, her spirit or her love, this entity could not be burned but has transcended human and natural influences. The heart, as a symbol of love, also aptly represents “Mystical Marriage,” another term used by Underhill to describe the fifth stage of the “Mystic Way” as union with the Divine (170). Eclipsing
human love and marriage in magnitude, “Mystical Marriage” is nevertheless about love — God’s love.

I have suggested that Wholly Joan’s is about love, and as such, it is about mysticism. While the early Christian mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite exhorted the mystic to remain in the darkness and to denounce intellectual knowledge, mysticism as it developed in the Middle Ages — notably, the mystical theology of Julian of Norwich, Thomas Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux and Augustine — was completely grounded in the idea of God’s love, and indeed, the mystical experience became synonymous to love. Johnston summarizes the theological framework of this foundational belief:

God who is love infuses his gift of love into the soul. When man responds to this he receives the Holy Spirit who is love personified [...] The Spirit who is love brings the gift of wisdom which is the special characteristic of the mystical life. (21-22)

Joan’s declaration at the end of the play is a perfect example of Love as the core of mysticism. Joan’s love is particularly reminiscent of the poetry and mysticism of St. John of the Cross, the Spanish Carmelite monk who inherited the love-based mystical traditions of the Middle Ages. The poet-mystic describes Divine Love as the “living flame of love that tenderly wounds [the] soul,” expressing the paradoxical verity of life in the Spirit: pain and joy, strength and sorrow. St. John would later declare that by “living flame” he meant the Holy Spirit. From this, Johnston concludes his summary of mysticism and love with “The flame is a person: divine love is personal; mysticism is a love affair and a romance” (22). Joan, tied to the stake, is the very epitome of this indwelling Spirit; the flame of love is a source of pain as well as great joy for herself as
she stands, alone and empty of everything but her love for God. In the end, Ehn, speaking through his character Joan, conveys the heart of Mysticism— and thus, his theology— as obscure, broken, and wholly inscribed in love:

   Joan: You get my heart God Almighty. You get my heart. I have nothing— no troops, no luck. Nothing to give you but a heart that listens. No love is stronger. No heart more abandoned. (6)
CONCLUSION

“What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it…but we do not see its arrangement and relationship” – Michel de Montaigne, “Of a Monstrous Child”

I began this study with an immense question: How can the Christian divine be represented on the postmodern stage? What Christian theologies or doctrines could possibly stand up to the postmodern imperative, “Thou shalt not believe in absolutes,” with enough tenacity and authority to be translated to the stage? I had hoped that my venture into the postmodern plays of Ehn would posit an example of how one artist succeeded in tackling the perplexities of religious authority in conflict with postmodern “lawlessness.” While my hopes for Ehn to provide an example of Christian representation for the postmodern stage are indeed brought to full fruition in The Saint Plays, and the theology contained therein, Big Cheap Mysticism, I find that perhaps, I was asking the wrong questions. My assumption was that in entering the postmodern arena (academically and theatrically) Christianity would face solely the onslaught of postmodern disbelief and rebellion. I had not allowed for the multiplicity of postmodernism which actually strengthens the claim of religion within the postmodern condition.

In the opening chapter of the Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology, author and professor of theology, Kevin Vanhoozer asks (and answers) the question, “How does postmodernity ‘condition’ theology?>:</p>
For some, it is a means that theology need no longer do its work under the conditions of modernity. On this view, the postmodern condition results in the liberation of theology. For others, it means that theology must work under a new set of conditions, some of which may be as constraining or impossible as their modern precursors. (Vanhoozer 5)

The tendency to focus on the threats posed by postmodernism against Christian theology is strong, particularly the loss of faith in grand narratives, and consequently the belief in what Vanhoozer calls the “God’s eye point of view” (10). However, postmodernism also consists of the return of the repressed and acceptance of erstwhile “othered” entities. Vanhoozer states that the return of “messianic” religion is foremost among ideas suppressed by modernism:

One candidate for “most repressed other” in modernity is religion […] In particular the postmodern condition has enabled the recovery of two neglected forms of religious discourse— the prophetic and the mystical. (17)

Not only is “messianic” religion liberated by postmodernism, but Derrida and Caputo argue that the impossibility of theological concepts such “the gift” and justice is a gesture, not towards nihilistic despair, but towards faith. It is this gesture toward faith that results in the “messianic turn” of postmodern deconstruction. Vanhoozer explains this as the desire for what is yet to come, an acknowledgement of something beyond the world’s systems of order, and a desire for the unknown. In short, “postmodernity abolishes conceptual idolatry to make room for faith,” (18).
Vanhoozer proceeds to explicate Derrida’s notion of “messianic” and how it is tantamount to the postmodern condition:

The messianic is a structure of experience, apparently universal, that opens us to an unknown future [...] The messianic is the unforeseeable, the beyond that is desired but never attained. On this view, the postmodern condition is essentially, that is, structurally, messianic: constitutionally open to the coming of the other and the different. Faith, not reason [...] is thus endemic to the postmodern condition. (18)

Specific to the Christian theology in a postmodern condition is Vanhoozer’s description of theology’s “recovery” from legitimizing tendencies of modernism. Citing David Tracy’s On God, Hermeneutics and the Church, Vanhoozer states that modern interpretive schema suppressed the “reality of God with the logos of modernity,” creating theological systems that achieved “academic respectability and cultural plausibility.” Theology was done according to a modernist agenda, where modern culture asked the questions, and theology attempted to answer them (19). Tracy concludes his article, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity” with the assertion that serious Christian theology will continue to involve inter-religious dialogue, cross-cultural awareness and the embrace of the repressed — specifically, the prophetic and meditative (mystical):

Theology will never again be tameable by a system — any system — modern or premodern or postmodern. For theology does not bespeak a totality. Christian theology, at its best, is the voice of the Other through all
those others who have tasted, prophetically and meditatively, the Infinity disclosed in the kenotic reality of Jesus Christ. (Tracy 114)

In light of the above, the question of Christian representation for the postmodern stage should not be in the challenging spirit of “how can it be done,” but in a spirit of freedom and possibilities which asks, “How should the Christian divine be represented in the “new found” liberties of the postmodern condition?” What needs to be done to liberate theology and thus, (Christian) theatre from the totalizing logos of modern theology and representation? During the course of my study and analyses of Ehn’s plays, I became keenly aware of this different stance. The effortlessness, surprises, and unabashed contrariness of Ehn’s writing contains the freedom of postmodernity without any sense of nihilism, despair, or mourning of the loss of a grand narrative. Big Cheap Mysticism reveals itself to be both, messianic and, “the voice of the Other through those who have tasted…the Infinity.” I find these key features to be resultant of what I consider the heart of Big Cheap Mysticism— the grotesque and mysticism.

My understanding of the significance of mysticism as a theology for the postmodern stage is simple and easily explained. (I should, at this point, reiterate that mysticism is the foundation of Ehn’s theology; “Big” and “Cheap” are primarily adjectives describing his theology of Mysticism.) As explicated in chapter three, mysticism (especially how it is used in Ehn’s plays) is about union with God, and a Love which is transgressive, beyond reason, and all encompassing. To my estimation of the theological significance of mysticism, Tracy adds a component of postmodern relevancy with the assertion that meditative traditions are gaining authority as an option for contemporary thought. In fact, Tracy claims that, “the recovery of mystical readings of
the prophetic core of Judaism and Christianity is one of the surest signs of a postmodern sensibility” and that the prophetic and the meditative are actually the most basic forms of religion in the Bible (113). Ehn’s theology then, appears (and in my opinion, proves itself) to be an ideal theology for this age. The place of the grotesque as key to understanding theology and theatre for the postmodern stage is slightly more oblique.

While chapters one and two explore various manifestations of Ehn’s notions of Big and Cheap respectively, the central feature of both these descriptives is the disruption of norms, and the allowance of the Other. Big, as I have described, is essentially grotesque. Cheap, even while being “common, public, complicit,” defies traditional systems of value, capitalism, and meaning, and in doing so signals a disorderliness and contradictoriness which is symptomatic of the grotesque. While the grotesque stands apart from the general permissiveness of postmodernity, Bakhtin and Harpham both suggest that the grotesque is a means to understanding that there is something beyond the world in which we function, thus situating the grotesque within Derrida’s notion of the messianic (Yates 22, 35). 2 Bakhtin says that the grotesque “discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order,” thus making this world, its systems and “truths” alien (Bakhtin, Rabelais 40). Ehn’s use of the grotesque permits these other worlds—darkness, weirdness, ugliness and all— and in doing so allows for the immensity of the Divine which is beyond any logo-centric understanding of God.

2“The messianic is a structure of experience, apparently universal, that opens us to an unknown future…The messianic is the unforeseeable, the beyond that is desired but never attained” (Tracy 18).
The emancipation of theology from modernist tendencies — such as the drive to put God in neatly labeled boxes — requires that artists venturing into the representation of Judeo-Christian traditions be ready to embrace obscurity. Representing the Divine means representing that which is infinite and beyond this world. Representing the biblical narrative also involves embracing the fogginess of the prophetic and mystical traditions of the Bible. A sincere effort (or even, attempt) at representing the infinites and mysteries of the Christian faith requires the artist to relinquish power— whether it be power over interpretation, plot, or even the “message” contained in a script or a play. I mentioned in chapter one that in using images Ehn releases interpretative power into the hands of the viewer. However, the very same act of release can be seen from another (faith-based) point of view — as making way for the Infinite, allowing the “Eternal God to reveal himself” on our stages, apart from religious doctrines, dogmas or systems. As such, Ehn’s Big Cheap Mysticism is a model theology for such an artistic endeavour.
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