Pieces of the Body, Shards of the Soul: the Martyrs of Erik Ehn

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ABSTRACT

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Pieces of the Body, Shards of the Soul: Erik Ehn's Martyrs

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This dissertation demonstrates that theatre has had a longstanding interest in the possibility of one object changing into another through miraculous means. Transubstantiation through art has occupied Western theatre from its roots in the medieval period. Contemporary theatre holds on to many deep-rooted assumptions about the performing body derived from medieval religious influence, both consciously and unconsciously. This influence is more pronounced in certain writers and artists, but it manifests itself as a lingering belief that the body (living and dead) is a source of power. This dissertation finds religious influence and an interest in the performing body’s power in the martyr plays of Erik Ehn.

According to theologians like Andrew Greeley and art scholars like Eleanor Heartney, artists associated with the Catholic Church show an especially keen fascination with the body as a sacred object. This is one aspect of the trend they call the Catholic Imagination or the Analogical Imagination. The Analogical Imagination, according to Greeley, “tends to emphasize the metaphorical nature of creation… everything in creation… discloses something about God and, in doing so, brings God among us” (Greeley 6). From an Analogical perspective, the body not only suggests the possibility of miraculous transformation, it is both “material” and “sacred” in the same moment. It is continuously and miraculously transforming. The first two chapters of the dissertation
address the continuing influence of medieval ideas on contemporary theatre practice and criticism. It then turns to a more specific case study, focusing on the work of Erik Ehn to further illuminate the influence of these ideas in contemporary practice.

Playwright Erik Ehn’s *The Saint Plays* offer fertile ground for an exploration of transubstantiation. *The Saint Plays* is a published collection of short plays that manifest many qualities of the Analogical Imagination in its exploration of Catholic saints. This dissertation addresses six of those plays: *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*, *Locus (John the Baptist)*, *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)*, *The Freak (George)*, *Radio Elephant (Barbara)*, and *Pain (Eulalia)*. The last four chapters explore the power of desire, the permeability of “material” and “spiritual” realities, the concept of liminality and the fractured body as factors in transubstantiation as these six plays depict it.

Ehn’s medieval-influenced paradigms in *The Saint Plays* make use of contemporary ideas and tactics seamlessly. His ease in integrating contemporary ideas in his Analogical work exposes the relationship between the Analogical Imagination and current theatre concepts like “ghosting” and “doubling.” This fusion calls into question the assumed distance between contemporary and medieval ideas.
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INTRODUCTION

“The” relationship between mysticism and the modern and postmodern theatre is conflicted. Twentieth-century theatre adopted the language of psychology and the social sciences to describe performance. While this adoption led to changes in discussing performance, much of theatre's critical engagement retains echoes of spirituality and mysticism. Some playwrights and scholars underplay or subvert these residual echoes, but others choose to utilize the traces of mysticism threaded throughout theatre history in their work.

The specific mystical act that concerns this dissertation is transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is the moment in Catholic practice where wine and bread are miraculously transformed into the body of Christ. This dissertation appropriates the term and expands it to include all miraculous transformation. It argues that theatre’s interest in the possibility of one object changing into another is an important part of its fascination. Transubstantiation through art has occupied Western theatre from its roots in the medieval period. Contemporary theatre holds on to many deep-rooted assumptions about the performing body derived from medieval religious influence, both consciously and unconsciously. This influence is more pronounced in certain writers and artists, but it manifests itself as a lingering belief that the body (living and dead) is a source of power. This dissertation focuses on Erik Ehn, a playwright who acknowledges the influence of his religious leanings in his plays.

Erik Ehn is a living playwright with a large body of work produced in theatres across the United States. He has organized much of that work into two continuing play cycles: Soulographie and the Saint Cycle. He has worked with theatres such as 7 Stages
(Atlanta), Force/Collision (Washington D.C.), and LaMaMa (New York) in his career (Ehn and Gener). He has written a number of independent works outside his play cycles including *Beginner*, *Wolf at the Door*, *Book of Tink*, and an adaptation of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. He earned his MFA from Yale in 1983 and became Berkley Rep’s literary manager in 1990. In addition to his playwriting practice, Ehn is a professor and has taught at many institutions, including the University of Iowa and the University of San Francisco. He has served as CalArts’ School of Theater dean beginning in 2005, and then replaced Paula Vogel as Brown University’s Head of Playwriting in 2009 (Goodman).

The fifty-seven-year-old playwright credits his experiences while growing up near Croton-on-Hudson, New York, for his aesthetic development. He stated in an interview, “Being raised Catholic, there’s something traumatizing in the best sense in the stories of the saint… you’re invited at the right time in your life to see the world as more than the world.” Parallel experiences in summer theatre and a place of worship he described as “not a well-built building and very small—it led to a kind of home-made quality” (Personal Interview 2). These influences can be seen in Ehn’s *Saint Cycle* as well as his cycle of plays addressing genocide: *Soulographie*. *Soulographie* includes the plays *Shape* and *Maria Kizito*.

Before examining any specific plays, it is important to draw a map of theatre history that traces a relationship between the mystical and theatrical performance. This foundational work shows that contemporary theatre has inherited paradigms of the body in performance from prior generations and that theatre still echoes with the metaphysical. Echoes are a common preoccupation of the theatre. Many people are concerned with the
distance between the actors and the audience, the distance between the actors and other actors, and the distance separating the actors from their characters in the theatre. They want to know whether the gaps between these elements result in something more than the sum of their parts. For example, when an actor performs a role, does s/he achieve something more profound than the actor alone or the character alone? This concern resonates differently in theatre than in some other forms of art because of theatre's resemblance to life. As Bert O. States notes in his book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, “we tend generally to undervalue the elementary fact that theatre--unlike fiction, painting, sculpture, and film--is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that are what they seem to be” (20). One does not consider the present agency of a sculpture or even a film. Those forms are read as replicas of some moment long dead. But the world of the theatre is often discussed as though it is *dying at the moment it is created*. In the words of Ehn,

> The world of theatre is as phenomenal as the world itself. The world in order to continue creating, to refresh its meaning, has to constantly break. That is where Zen or spirit or God is. It’s in the breaks, the fractures. Meaning—the unknowable thing—is in the moment of breaking. The way the world and art play together is that they smash into each other and the smashing itself is a higher identity than either alone can attain. Art is here to smash the world open. ("Art as Spiritual Practice" 29)

For Ehn the fractures between life and art reveal a glimpse of meaning. While other terms are used to elaborate on the importance of theatre’s reflection of the phenomenal world, "excess" will be used for this phenomenon in my argument. "Excess"
acknowledges a feeling that a staged object (or any object set aside for contemplation) produces more than the sum of its parts. In theatre specifically it is the sensation of a performance exceeding the limits of the stage or a character exceeding the limits of the body. What that “Excess” might be (if anything at all) has taken a prominent place in the imaginations of some twentieth- and twenty-first century theatre theorists. This dissertation looks at the continued mystical language of theatre and considers the concept of excess as a product of theatre history. It then considers how a mystical perception of performance is utilized in some of Erik Ehn’s plays.

Interrogating this “excess” has become a popular topic in theatre criticism. Scholars and artists including Marvin Carlson, Alice Rayner, Andrew Sofer and Antonin Artaud, have investigated the role of memory in the theatre from their differing perspectives. Theatre is an art form preoccupied by its presence, while at the same time dependent upon memory and repetition. These writers that address memory’s role in the theatre adopt supernatural language to aid their arguments even in their titles. For example, Marvin Carlson’s book is titled *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine*, and Alice Rayner’s book is titled *Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of the Theatre.*

When discussing the doubling potential of the body, Artaud refers to a “specter” (Artaud 134, 141). He calls the excess of his ideal performance shadows on the brink of liberation: “Every real effigy has a shadow which is its double; and art must falter and fail from the moment the sculptor believes he has liberated the kind of shadow whose very existence will destroy his repose” (Artaud 12). In *The Haunted Stage*, Carlson argues that what he calls “ghosting” is important to theatre because, “Unlike the reception
operations of genre… in which audience members encounter a new but distinctly different example of a type of artistic product they have encountered before, ghosting presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context” (Carlson, 7). Alice Rayner’s book takes a more abstract approach to the subject of memory, linking it to a spiritual inheritance in the theatre when she writes, “At issue is the refusal in the deep sense of theatre to consent to the idea that invisible, immaterial, or abstract forces are illusions, that the spirits of the dead are imaginary, or that the division between matter and spirit is absolute” (Rayner, xi). She calls these invisible forces “ghosts.”

The core principles of their arguments use terms such as ghost, haunting, and specter. Scholars, such as Andrew Sofer, have taken a broader approach to this “excess” of performance. His recent book titled, Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance, explores how different elements of performance create what he calls the “dark matter” of the theatre. According to Sofer, theatre scholars and other writers are intrigued by the relationship between the visible and the invisible elements of theatre. This intrigue originates from what was there but now is not (such as previous performances of the same text or by the same actor), what was never visible to begin with (such as characters that are never given a body or a knife penetrating a body), and what is called into being through the ambiguous relationship between performance and reality (such as speech acts) (12-15).

Writers interested in the possibility of this excess in the theatre tend to address secular performances or secular readings of religious performance. In order to broaden the discussion, this dissertation includes alternative readings of the body in performance
that are explicitly and unselfconsciously metaphysical. This dissertation includes a Catholic perspective that assumes (as a core principle of its doctrine) that the human body can transform into something other than simple flesh and blood. This possibility complicates the conversation about theatre’s “excess in regard to secular performance practice. If the performing body is viewed as a transubstantiated body, the doubling is immediately multiplied by the presence of the former and future states, along with the ambiguous intermediary stage of transubstantiation. Though religious ritual and theatrical performance are distinctly different events, it is constructive to view a theatrical performance through the lens of religious practice because of their practical parallels, most evidently the overlapping tools they use: narrative, language, and human bodies.

**Erik Ehn’s *The Saint Plays***

Because the body of literature touching upon ghosts, specters, returns, and hauntings is vast and the number of plays that could illuminate this idea is limitless, the parameters need to be narrowed for the purpose of this study. This dissertation uses a series of collected short plays by Erik Ehn which he calls the *Saint Cycle* as a case study. This particular branch of Ehn’s work brings a contemporary Catholic perspective to the lives of the saints. Stylistically, Ehn’s body of work can be categorized at postmodern in structure because of its eclectic, collaged, participatory and referential characteristics. These qualities are especially evident in his *Saint Plays*.

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1 Even so, both Carlson and Rayner examine Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in their investigation of ghosting and ghosts (respectively) and Sofer delivered a talk at the Free University of Berlin titled “*Hamlet’s Dark Matter*” (Boston College).
Postmodern aesthetics are typified by ritualization and creation without the structural aid of mythology or a sense of external order (Perniola 81). According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern aesthetics privileges self-awareness and self-reflexivity and utilize reassembled cultural images to achieve that self-reflexivity (Fortier 175-177). *The Saint Plays* acknowledge an external mythology in their subject matter, as they are written about Catholic saints. At the same time postmodernism, in the vein of Jean-Francois Lyotard, rejects mythologies and privileges ritual that are severed from master narratives. Ehn’s plays utilize postmodern tactics, but they are used to illuminate ethical and metaphysical aspects of his plays and establish a master narrative. *The Saint Plays* are invested in a sense of absolute truth and unwavering morality, which is a theme often omitted from descriptions of postmodernism. This dissertation intends to reconcile the characteristics of Ehn’s *Saint Plays* (postmodernism and mysticism) that are seemingly “at odds” with one another.

Though these plays are very much of the twentieth-century in which they were written, the foundation upon which they were constructed is centuries old. Any discussion of a contemporary approach to Catholic saints must address the intertwined history of Western drama and Western European Christianity. Therefore “Pieces of the Body, Shards of the Soul” begins with a discussion of theatre concepts as filtered through a religious or non-secular lens. The discussion continues through by examining several of Ehn’s plays in light of those concepts.

*The Saint Plays* are a published collection of short works, as well as a continuing project for Erik Ehn. *The Saint Plays* are published selections from Ehn’s *Saint Cycle*, which is the term he uses to describe all of the plays he has written about Catholic saints.
The full *Saint Cycle* includes over a hundred plays (Goodman). Each piece focuses on one saint for which the play is named. The plays in *The Saint Plays* collection were premiered at different theatres and at different times from the late 1980s through the 1990s. Manhattan Class Company, Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco, the Undermain Theatre in Dallas, BACA in Brooklyn, and Sledgehammer Theatre in San Diego are some of the theatres involved in workshopping and producing these plays. This collection of fifteen plays was gathered into a single book published in 2000. The *Saint Cycle* is an extensive project that spans most of Ehn’s career as a playwright. The first of *The Saint Plays* were performed in 1988, and the volume also includes three plays that were unproduced at the time of publication. Ehn continues to write new plays for his *Saint Cycle* today.

Ehn describes the genre of these plays as “explored biography,” which he characterizes as “the means by which the self is overmastered by acts of the imagination, by acts of faith” (*Saint Plays* ix). Ehn calls his aesthetic “Big Cheap Theatre.” The plays are intimate (cheap), yet expansive (big). They slide through definition and flow beyond discourse. They are built upon the common ground of flesh but then fly out into the distant corners of the imagination. Ehn explains that his aesthetic of Big Cheap Theatre results in pieces that “are gestural, close to the actor’s body. The language aspires to breath-gesture. Language wants to be spectacle, [a] hypnotic trigger” (*Saint Plays* x).

When discussing his other play cycle, *Soulographie: Our Genocide* with writer and theatre critic Mark Lowry, Ehn explained why he believed a series of plays is necessary when addressing important subjects:
The first two or three [plays] came out of interest in the subject matter, but then after that it became a purposeful decision to link them up. There's so much that you can't say in one play; you start thinking in series, that you're going to have to write an infinite string to get anywhere.

The same thing happened to me in the Saint Plays. When I started writing about religious issues, there was enough complexity in it that I had to change my life in order to write the plays. I had to commit to writing the plays for the rest of my life. (quoted in Lowry)

This response shows a consistent vision in Ehn’s work. According to Ehn, a worthy subject for art may take a lifetime to address. Dedication to a single purpose emphasized in the quote above underlines a belief that a playwright may take on a subject with which s/he intentionally avoids narrative closure. This avoidance of narrative closure becomes a key aspect of Ehn’s writing, and this distancing from narrative closure and the implications of that distancing is taken up in the next chapter.

For Ehn, a single play is in conversation with the other plays that make up his cycles. This consistency of vision extends beyond the cycles themselves. There is also crossover in the subjects of the *Soulographie: Our Genocide* project and *The Saint Plays*. Both investigate stories drowned in violence. It is the inquiries into the human potential for violence and their effect on the audience that tie them together and drive their form and function.
Playing the Saint

In some contemporary theatre trends the transubstantiation from bloody corpse to saint is never fully realized because the terror that some past violent act has left is suppressed or misplaced. ² But in the Catholic tradition the saint is fully realized, because the saint is always in the present. Because the saint is always at the moment of death while at the moment of victory, the violence is foregrounded and therefore can be dealt with. The Analogical Imagination posits that all physical objects have the potential to be sacred, regardless of how carnal or base they might appear, because all objects are made by God. This implies that all physical objects have the potential to be set aside for contemplation and spiritual fulfillment. The Analogical Imagination is less analogous and more revelatory. The material world can reveal to the mortal aspects of God’s design and therefore God’s character. While the Analogical Imagination makes room for permeability between acts of the body to become sacred, the Dialectical Imagination dictates the material and spiritual remain separate. For the Analogical Imagination, the sacred physical is especially true of the human body. This inclination is typically attributed to the prominence of transubstantiation in the Catholic tradition. While the Analogical Imagination depends on the body and the material to reveal God, the Dialectical Imagination depends on language to reveal God (Heartney 14).

An investigation into the Analogical Imagination depends heavily on Andrew Greeley for its theoretical foundation and on Eleanor Heartney’s book Postmodern Heretics for a perspective on how the Analogical Imagination can be seen in contemporary art. Theoretical work that separates the Analogical Imagination as a

² In the second chapter this is exemplified by the genre of “Trauma Drama.”
distinct entity from the Dialectical (Protestant) Imagination is fairly recent. The concept was formally introduced to the field of theology by David Tracy in his book *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (1981) and later to visual and performance art by Eleanor Heartney in 2004. At this time there is still little scholarship investigating the Analogical Imagination in general and none looking into drama exclusively. “Pieces of the Body, Shards of the Soul” tests the possibilities of the Analogical Imagination as a framework for contemporary playwrights with some Catholic background.

According to Alison Elliot Goddard’s book *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*, modern historians struggle with hagiography because the medieval mind has a different concept of history’s construction. For the medieval mind the legends of the saints teach ethics and promote a lifestyle through exemplars, but the saints were also sacred objects. From a Dialectical point of view, history functions under the confines of chronological time. It is dependent on the creation of narrative (and therefore narrative logic) through chronological progression. History lines up one event upon the next and searches for meaning. But from an Analogical point of view saints are detached from material interaction with time early in their narrative. Therefore an understanding of saints through the gaze of their believers cannot depend on historiographical techniques to create narratives. Even though in many ways Erik Ehn’s *Saint Plays* reflect contemporary trends like “Trauma Drama” (see page 71) they also wrestle with the insistent presence of the saint found in Catholic ideas.

The life of a saint as seen within the long history of Catholicism is complicated and many of its aspects appear contradictory. According to Catholic tradition, an
encounter with a saint through prayer or relics is enigmatic and unearthly. This encounter is often described as a mystical and mysterious experience. The process of Catholic canonization, however, is highly regulated and documented. In his book *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, Kenneth Woodward argues that, though many religions have saints or saint-like figures, the Roman Catholic Church is unique in its process of documenting sainthood. An extensive bureaucracy is essential to the process of transforming a fatality into a martyr. At the same time the strength of a saint’s legend and its persistence in religious practice pushes a potential saint toward becoming a legitimatized saint. Catholic saints grow and change through popularity and mystical experience (miracles, visions, etc.), but they are canonized through law. These are the Janus-like aspects that comprise the legitimacy of a saint. Much like the theatre, a saint is realized through both the text and the experience of those that take on the script and shape it.

**Postmodern Tactics in a Medieval World**

“Pieces of the Body, Shards of the Soul” looks for traces of postmodern ideologies layered over a medieval worldview. The Catholic worldview, centered on transubstantiation, is born through the mortification of the flesh. Erik Ehn’s cycle of *Saint Plays* toys with this idea and infuses the premise with contemporary structures and frameworks. This approach reflects an interest in history as well as a concern for contemporary moral issues. The *Saint Cycle* takes postmodern tactics and imposes them on a medieval worldview by applying Roland Barthes’ death of the author as it is defined in his book *Image, Music, Text*: “We now know that the text is not a line of words
releasing a single theological meaning (the ‘message’ of an Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of the original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (Barthes 146). Ehn uses the tactics of clashing, blending texts within his plays, but those tactics do not result in the thinning out of meaning that Barthes proposes. Instead they are used in service to a higher moral order. Ehn uses this blended approach to address topics around the “ultimate” Author-God of the Catholic Church to see what other kinds of narratives Catholic saints might bring forward.

A challenge in this dissertation lies in the nature of Saint Plays themselves. It may seem to the reader as if this commentary skims over large sections of the plays, but in fact “Pieces of the Body, Shards of the Soul” addresses almost every single line of Ehn’s text. These plays do not have clear plot points upon which a reader can cling. Below is an example taken from Radio Elephant (Barbara), the subject of fifth chapter. It demonstrates the texture of Ehn’s language.

Memorize a vowel
Head blown out
Hair the great eastern wind
Teeth bite waves
I hide my blood in the mountain
I repose my soul in the trees (Saint Plays, 113)

This selection of text underscores the the lyric quality of Ehn’s writing.

In Ehn’s Saint Plays, the most tangible signpost is the saints themselves. In each of these plays, Ehn keeps a saint isolated in his or her own world. Though all of the Saint
Cycle plays are meant to be read in conversation with one another, familiar characters like John and Salome do not appear in, for example, Radio Elephant (Barbara). Each saint’s body is set apart as a site of contemplation. All other attempts at narrative closure are idolatrous (or, not in the spirit of the plays), and therefore banished from this project (Saint Plays 21). Therefore, a more constructive approach to experiencing Ehn’s work, as well as this dissertation, would be to look outside traditional narrative for critical engagement.

Organization

In the next six chapters the relationships excess between, the Analogical Imagination, and Erik Ehn’s saints are elucidated. Alongside these relationships is an exploration of the relationship between spirituality and the visceral that makes up the life of the saint (especially in the theatre). This dissertation explores six of playwright Erik Ehn’s works from his collection, The Saint Plays, through different lenses. Before discussing the plays themselves, the first two chapters lay a foundation of ideas to help approach these full and complicated works.

The first chapter establishes a history of the relationship between material objects and spiritual realities according to the Christian faith in a Western European Catholic tradition. It establishes how a relationship between physical objects and invisible spirituality are central to Catholicism from a formative point in its history. The material objects taken from the lives of the saints are a crucial part of the Christian faith, since Early Christianity. Notably, the rising connection between physical objects and Christianity in Western Europe in the early Middle Ages coincides with early medieval
European theatre. Early medieval theatre lay a foundation for European theatre practice as it is experienced today. Though the philosophical impulses of performance practice changed radically between the early medieval mind and the contemporary mind, the theatre retains residual characteristics that can be traced back to its inception. The dissertation then offers the *Saint Cycle* of Erik Ehn as a possible inheritor of that parallel artistic and religious heritage.

The second chapter connects the development of Catholic performance and Western theatre to a more contemporary idea that this dissertation calls the Analogical Imagination (sometimes called the Catholic Imagination) in the United States. It relates the Analogical Imagination to modern ideas about the theatre, with reference to the concept of excess (doubling, ghosting, repetition and representations of death) in the theatre. The notion of excess in the theatre holds that performance is composed of elements that are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time—the core principle in Freud’s concept of the uncanny. In the theatre, ghosts can be a bodied return (such as the ghost in *Hamlet*) or an absent but forceful one (such as the father in *Hedda Gabler*). This obsession with return connects the ghost-saints of this dissertation with a long line of dramatic history.

These first two chapters propose a critical approach to theatre that highlights a residual spirituality in the way theatre is discussed. The remaining four chapters explore some of Ehn’s *Saint Plays* as a case study. The parameters of this dissertation are dictated by the six of Ehn’s plays discussed here; however, when it comes to saints and the sacred, the field of references, theories, and histories that are viable access points is vast. The most obvious wealth of material is the history of the saints themselves along
with the religious practice that supports them. Saints like Joan of Arc have inspired a large amount of material from which to draw for research.

In order to narrow the parameters of this study, this dissertation focuses on critical works preoccupied with excess. The theoretical approaches have been filtered by their usefulness and relatability to the six Saint Plays discussed in this dissertation. Similarly the volumes of writing regarding the development of Catholic traditions and theologies have been narrowed to a small selection of relevant texts. This dissertation pulls most extensively from Greeley’s thoughts regarding the Analogical Imagination, because Greeley offers a paradigm through which material objects (especially the human body) extend beyond representation. This is a common thread through many kinds of Catholic heritages, including the unique one found in Ehn’s Saint Plays. The first two chapters raise questions about transubstantiation through death from a variety of perspectives. These broad questions are brought from an abstract discussion to more specific examples in the next four chapters.

The third chapter focuses on the plays Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) and Locus (John the Baptist). These plays are valuable works to start with because they actually produce physical objects on stage that are parts of the body, so the abstract issues very quickly manifest themselves through material aspects of the plays. These parts, a heart in Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) and a head in Locus (John the Baptist), remain after the rest of the martyr’s body has disappeared. This commonality opens a conversation about what remains after death when the body is viewed as sacred, and how those parts not only represent the whole, but also retain qualities of that whole. In Ehn’s plays, parts of the body are not passive objects, but active forces.
These plays also explore time and space from a particular point of view, and that view is especially apparent in *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* and *Locus (John the Baptist)*. Ehn’s construction of time and space is permeable, often invisible, and associated with moments of significance. Although the ramifications of passing through time and space unfettered by one’s own physical body may be difficult to see, such a passage can often hold serious consequences for the character that experiences them. This depiction of space and time is amplified by the perceived ambiguity of the stage. The exploration of this fluid construction of time on the equally fluid space of the stage supports claims of this dissertation regarding the shared heritage of Western drama and the Analogical Imagination. The third chapter assesses how Ehn’s depiction of time and space reflects a contemporary paradigm, as well as the points it reflects a more medieval frame of mind.

The fourth chapter explores two more of Erik Ehn’s plays titled *The Freak (George)* and *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)*. *The Freak (George)* furthers previous arguments regarding the body’s status as an object and as a sacred force, by reversing the process found in *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* and *Locus (John the Baptist)*. In *The Freak (George)*, the character Gunna is at first a handcrafted object, but she becomes flesh when she enters a dream—when she crosses a permeable border between times and spaces. Gunna transforms from a revered object into a mortal one, while George moves from a mortal being into a revered saint. Their encounter with one another powers their transubstantiations in this play. *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)* complicates these crossings by having multiple characters transitioning in and out of one another’s timeline. In *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* and *Locus (John the Baptist)*, the characters have been on a solitary journey that often leads them out of time altogether. They are isolated by it. In
16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe), the characters cross over boundaries of time into one another’s space through shared experience. Instead of the distance passing out of material time creates for Joan and John, 16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe) is an example of how passing out of time might create connections between people who otherwise would have no contact.

The final two chapters explore two Saint Plays entitled Pain (Eulalia) and Radio Elephant (Barbara). The characters in Pain (Eulalia) and Radio Elephant (Barbara) are striving toward crossings with the saint. The characters are searching for answers, but in the process of that search transforms into something else entirely. In Pain (Eulalia) this transubstantiation is represented by the distance between Maggie and Dad, while in Radio Elephant (Barbara) it is shown through the closeness of Barbara and the Narrator. Both Pain (Eulalia) and Radio Elephant (Barbara) are centered on transitions and the ways saints can play a part in those transitions. Eulalia and Barbara are young girls when they are struck down as a direct result of the actions of characters doing evil that surround them. Characters in these two plays reach out to the saint through language and story in order to grasp a lost moment of exceeding brutality. In Pain (Eulalia) the lost moment is the death of a child through senseless violence. In Radio Elephant (Barbara) that moment is the generations of systematic violence against women that the Narrator has not experienced herself but still feels the weight of its inheritance.

This dissertation contributes to scholarship by expanding on two scholarly conversations. The first conversation is the position and effect of religion or spirituality in contemporary theatre. Though some theatre has a spiritual worldview at its heart, theatre scholars tend to overlook the influence of personal religious experience of
playwrights, especially if those playwrights are not vocal regarding that connection. The second conversation is the scholarly one that surrounds Ehn’s work. There is a lack of critical response to Ehn’s body of work as a whole, and *The Saint Plays* in particular. There are less than a dozen reviews that address any of these plays with any sustained critique. Regarding scholarship, there are two master’s theses that look at one of the works discussed here (*Wholly Joan’s* (*Joan of Arc*)), but no scholarly articles that focus on *The Saint Plays* at length. The scholarship and reviews focus on his full-length works and his *Soulographie* (such as *Maria Kizito*) but not his short plays. For example, *Theatre Journal* recently featured an article in their October 2014 issue by Emma Willis titled “Emancipated Spectatorship and Subjective Drift: Understanding the Work of the Spectator in Erik Ehn’s *Soulographie,*” and in 2009, Laura Edmonson wrote an article for *Theatre Journal* titled “Genocide Unbound: Erik Ehn, Rwanda, and the Aesthetics of Discomfort.” Willis’ article contributed to her 2014 book *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship.* Most of the writing about Erik Ehn is written by Ehn himself. What few reviews there are avoid engaging with specific moments or characters in the plays. Critics tend to label Ehn’s plays as “enigmatic” and “postmodern” and bypass conversing with them because they are focused on the playwright more than a specific play. However, the socially motivated content of Ehn’s plays implies that initiating such a conversation is the part of their purpose. *The Saint Plays* deserve to be studied, and it is the intention of this dissertation to open up a conversation about Ehn’s significant body of work.

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5 Examples include Cecilia Wren and Kevin Westmore.
For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

I Corinthians 15:22.

This chapter establishes the contexts in which this dissertation explores Ehn’s martyr plays. The primary focus is on the possibility of transubstantiation (miraculous transformation) in each of these contexts. First, this chapter addresses mysterious transformation in contemporary Catholicism. Second, it explores the possibility of transubstantiation according to Ehn’s mystical approach and practices. Third, this chapter expands on relevant trends in contemporary theatre that address death and the possibility of transubstantiation. In all of these contexts, this chapter focuses on the possibility of transforming from something dead to something living and from something performed to something real. These are often contrasting positions: someone is either living or s/he is dead. But the concept of transubstantiation is closely tied to transformation and the creation of changed life from that transformation in all of these contexts. This chapter highlights the performing body, both living and dead, as a crossroads of Catholic tradition, Ehn’s plays, and contemporary trends in theatre.

The artifice of performance meets reality through the flesh. An actor is both a subject and a piece of art at the same moment. According to some theatre scholars discussed in the introduction, the staged body flickers between fiction and life in the audience’s imagination, producing an ambiguity for viewers that can be pleasurable in its paradox. In the theatre, the character breathes, speaks, and struts like a person, while at the same time the character occupies a different space in our imagination than the
performer. They are separate, yet require the same body to share their double life. The moment where performance begins and performer ends slips beyond our grasp.

**Transubstantiation in Contemporary Catholicism**

Regina Barreca writes about the temptations to equate life with art, and she reminds the audience how to avoid this temptation: “Just in case you thought there was no distinction between representation and reality, there is death” (175). The line that separates art and life is important but often overlooked in art. No matter how convincing a performance might be, we assume that in the end the fiction will be undone and the actor will rise to take her bows. The actor is separate from the character, and the fiction remains quarantined on the stage. While performance may elicit change, it is not of itself an act of transubstantiation.

Though a strong skepticism regarding the possibility of transubstantiation is common in modern Western theatre, this perspective is not exclusively true of all Western performance paradigms. For some audiences witnessing some kinds of performance, a work of art (or any object set aside for consideration) shares properties with what it intends to represent. The work of art has the capacity to transfer qualities from the original object or person it represents onto a performer, an artist, or an audience. One example of an object set aside for consideration that shares properties with what it represents is the sacred position of relics in Catholicism. The example of relics is especially valuable in my argument because both relics and theatrical performances are made of human bodies. This chapter addresses how the dramatic and artistic elements of Catholic spiritual practice approach the body in such a way as to make the body an
imperative part of spiritual transcendence. By addressing such spiritual practices, this chapter lays the foundations for examining how Ehn uses the body in his *Saint Plays*.

Some examples of the power of the body in performance are prominent in the centuries-old, yet commonly held, traditions of Catholicism. One example is the display of and reverence for relics. Relics are most often objects that were once possessions of a saint, such as clothing and personal items. The most common revered objects are parts of the body (such as bones or organs). These parts can be transformed into works of art in their own right, highlighting the sense of awe they are meant to elicit. For example the bones of Saint Munditia’s in St. Peter’s Church in Munich have been encrusted in precious stones (see Figure 1). She has also been given false eyes that give her a conscious quality. The jewels do not serve to disguise her decaying state, but to celebrate it. This celebration of the macabre is reinforced by her hagiography, as she is believed to have been beheaded with a hatchet (Grundhauser).
In the example of saints and their relics, death does not definitively mark the line between reality and art. While more contemporary artistic traditions might treat death with anxiety and confusion, or just erase the dead altogether, Catholic traditions extend experience beyond the point of death. According to this paradigm, the seemingly inert objects (the bones of St. Munditia) have power and some semblance of an external will. The craftsmanship grafted to her decaying body expresses a belief in (and fascination with) the power of the part to stand in place of the essence of the whole.
Even if one does not believe in the potential of a relic to assert itself in the physical world, these objects still have undeniable political power. For centuries relics have drawn crowds searching for their power. With these crowds came coveted wealth and influence for those who controlled them. Objects like the relics of Saint Francis of Assisi continue to draw faithful followers to small corners of the world. The recent return of Christian Orthodox relics by the Catholic Church as a sign of respect demonstrates the continued power that relics have as political tools in contemporary life (Dositheos). In the case of a saint, the body also connects to a spiritual reality, bringing spirituality, art, and physical reality into multilateral interplay.

Beyond the power of relics (both religious and political) there are many other examples of the central position of transubstantiation in the Catholic Church. The most commonly practiced and widely recognized example of miraculous transformation is the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the performance of a physically transformative event through which bread becomes the flesh of Christ through transubstantiation. On this subject, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the bishops in 2003, stating:

The Second Vatican Council rightly proclaimed that the Eucharistic sacrifice is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” “For the most holy Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth: Christ himself, our Passover and living bread. Through his own flesh, now made living and life-giving by the Holy Spirit, he offers life to men.” Consequently the gaze of the Church is constantly turned to her Lord, present in the Sacrament of the Altar, in which she discovers the full manifestation of his boundless love. (John Paul II 1)
The performance of the priest, in which his body is an indispensable factor, has the power to transform bread into pieces of another body. The sacred performing body exists within the realms of everyday life, art, and a transcendent “spiritual reality.” As a result the body becomes a portal through which all three can exist in a performance space. I argue that viewing the body as a portal is an important concept in contemporary theatre, and theatre shares this view with the Analogical (Catholic) Imagination. The connections between spiritual and material reality in performance are especially evident in the presence of death (both real and imagined).

The remnants of the dead lingering in paradigms of contemporary theatre theory and practice are foregrounded in the poetic works of Erik Ehn. *The Saint Plays* exploit the connections between contemporary sensibilities and their mystic influences. Ehn’s *Saint Plays* that feature martyrs are most relevant to explore the limits of representation. Martyrs’ lives are necessarily depicted in art alongside the shadow of their death. The very status of martyrdom becomes their identity; therefore, their power as saints are tied to their deaths. The death of the martyr, often overwhelming in its violence, is what defines the martyr. As a result, the body of the performer is a ghost of the dismembered, burnt, and in all other imaginable ways torn body, of the martyr. The martyrs have received a second life because of the nature of their own deaths. Ehn’s martyr plays explore paradigms that interrogate and present the possibility of transubstantiation through death.
Mysticism and Transubstantiation in Ehn’s Plays

Though *The Saint Plays* are built upon thousands of years of accumulating Catholic doctrines, Ehn brings his own aesthetic, moral and philosophical perspective to his plays. In the preface to his collection of works titled *The Saint Plays*, Ehn explains how he views saints: “A saint is a human mandala—a life in a ritual shape held up as a focus for contemplation. The symbolic and literal are conflated to produce what Lorca calls the *hecho poetico*—the poetic fact—an irreducible image that is a source of meaning rather than a restatement of it” (ix). In an interview with *American Theater*’s Cecelia Wren, Ehn added, “Figures slip death to be always becoming; we are invited to project ourselves into their metahistorical uproar, their irresolvable complexity… narrative closure is idolatrous” (quoted in Wren 18). Ehn’s plays reflect this statement of aesthetic values. Ehn’s plays are difficult to break into a traditional Aristotelian dramatic structure, and they do not apologize for their complexity. Kevin Westmore, editor of *Catholic Theatre and Drama*, describes his response to Ehn’s plays: “Ehn’s plays are not easily comprehended, not easily understood—they are in some ways the onstage embodiment of mysticism. They are not so much understood as experienced” (10). Ehn chooses his creative approaches according to their ability to achieve his intended ends. In “Art as Spiritual Practice,” Ehn writes that:

> to achieve in art ecstatic and mystical states I rely on paradox, trance, bliss, and derangement; music, rhyme, circular or open-ended narrative, and any means of abusing time and space. I like narrative that celebrates its own purposelessness. Rather than achieving any kind of closure, it trails off and collapses back on itself.

(30)
Instead of giving neatly wrapped narrative closure with clear moral guidelines, Ehn purposefully denies the audience cathartic release and closure. Ehn intends his works to be compact sites of contemplation, beckoning the audience toward the dark, strange, and often severe places within themselves—just for a visit or perhaps to rearrange the spiritual furniture. Editor and writer Randy Gener sought to create an intellectual and creative lineage for Ehn: “His conception of drama, which is not to everyone’s taste, owes more to Gertrude Stein, Mac Wellman, the Abstract Expressionists and the tradition of Catholic mysticism (as practiced by Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Ávila) than it does to Broadway’s boulevard entertainment” (1).

It is important to note that Ehn celebrates the purposelessness of narrative, but not of life. Ehn privileges theatre that inspires thought and leads to action. An artistic methodology that includes narrative purposelessness avoids a fantasy of catharsis where narrative closure might inspire complacency. In an interview with *Brown Alumni Magazine*’s Lawrence Goodman, Ehn gave an example of his playwriting philosophy:

I'm working on a project in Brooklyn right now with the Foundry Theatre that invites theater artists to give food away to a community service organization… To me that's playwriting. It is social collaboration. It is focused on an idea, which is charity. It is in the moment. Item for item it is made of the same stuff that any theatrical performance is made of: how can we be together and give of ourselves? That's the essential question in theater. (as quoted in Goodman)

For Ehn the theatre and the Church are both social events in which one can evaluate and reassess ethical practices. Or, in his words, “The mission of drama is to change the polis” (Personal Interview 2).
Ehn attempts to put his intentions into practice through the creation of artist communities interested in social change. For example the “Arts in the One World” conference held annually brings artists together in order to discuss how the arts can make an impact on the world. Ehn also founded the RATs movement (Regional Alternative Theatre movement), which was a loose association of theatres that supported new kinds of theatre and collaboration originating in regional theatre groups (Mondello).

The themes repeated throughout the Saint Cycle are reflected in Ehn’s practice as a theatre artist. Shirle Gottlieb wrote in a review of Cal Rep at the Armory’s 2008 production of The Saint Plays, “At the core of the play, the question seems to be: Regardless of when and where they lived, how did the saints justify the cruel atrocities of the real world (sin, injustice, and brutality) with their concepts of faith, devotion, redemption, salvation and free will” (Gottlieb). Although the word “justify” does not seem appropriate, the sense that Ehn’s saints are in conflict with the world’s injustice (and by extension in conflict with the world itself) recurs often. Even though many of the Saint Cycle plays focus on the power of the individual rebel against systems of oppression, Ehn’s work is also interested in more collective approaches to creation. Ehn’s projects demonstrate a keen interest in using artistic collectives, created through grassroots movements, as a means to change local and global injustices.
One example of this is the Tenderloin Opera Company Ehn founded to engage with his local community. The Tenderloin hosts writing projects focused on creating original musical theatre with homeless and formerly homeless community members in Providence, Rhode Island (“Erik Ehn”). The project utilizes community services in the area, such as the Speakers’ Bureau and Mathewson St. Church, to contribute important artistic outlets (“Tenderloin Opera”). According to Ehn’s biography from the Engaged
Scholars Initiative website, “Erik Ehn believes that art has tremendous potential to create community and address trauma. Ehn founded the Tenderloin Opera Company in the hopes of building community among the homeless and their advocates” (“Erik Ehn”). The Tenderloin Opera Company, alongside the “Arts in the One World” conference, shows the global and local concern of Ehn’s writing. The dedication to the creation of new works that address social issues on the global and local level reinforces a belief in the power of the arts to enlighten and change communities: to transform.

At the heart of Ehn’s writing is a quest for faith. Religious performance and religious art stand apart from secular forms, primarily based on perceived purpose. Sacred art does not seek to become “art for art’s sake.” The idea of autonomy is discarded, and in its place, purposefulness holds fast, reflecting a medieval (or at least pre-Kantian) mindset. Sacred art is believed to be a site of illumination, or a portal into a mysterious reality more vital than the physical realm. At the same time, religious art presents the sacred as physical, tangible, and corporeal: the presence of the divine weaves throughout the fabric of the world. Sacred art foregrounds the paradoxical relationship between the mysterious and the corporeal. The rock, pigment, of flesh or which it is comprised are all residents of this physical world. Sacred art purports to cover the mysterious—the mystical—with the mundane. Ehn foregrounds this relationship in his *Saint Plays*. Mundane objects litter his worlds, but they are given mystical importance. Objects like radios, dashboard ornaments, and cicadas become totems imbued with symbolic as well as the divine power of transubstantiation.

In the case of saints, whether in traditional Catholic ideas of performance or in Ehn’s plays, the most important physical, mundane object is the body itself. Flesh is as
familiar as it is fragile. It is easily broken and undone. The body is also the very center of Christian doctrine. The myth of bodily self-sacrifice fulfills the promise of salvation. It is through the broken body that a bridge to the divine is built. Those who believe the remains of the saint to be sacred see the promise of that act played out in these holy bones of the fully human (if sainted) subject. In an interview with Erik Ehn, I asked why there are so many freed limbs in the martyr plays. He replied that this was to allow “a part to be a part for a whole without having to be a whole” (Personal Interview 1). A similar sentiment can be found in Ehn’s biography on the Engaged Scholars website: “Erik Ehn wonders if a broken world might need a broken art—an art that is patient, and as full of space as a ruin. He specializes in memorial writing, theatrical projects that provide space for reflection on graves subject matter…” (“Erik Ehn”). Ehn’s work reflects in its structure as well as in its content the broken, colliding, flowing world his art reflects. There is generosity in recognizing the valid broken subject without requiring that subject to become whole.

Transubstantiation in Contemporary Theatre Scholarship

In some paradigms, there is beauty in the broken and incomplete. Those beautifully broken things can take on sacred qualities when paradigms align spiritual access with bodily disassembly/reassembly. There is a potential for holiness in all human bodies when a “part” can be seen as sacred even without its “whole.” With this sacred potential, some performance practices can take on new meanings. One can compare treatments of the detached “piece of a whole” in postmodernism to that of the Analogical Imagination. From a postmodern perspective, the piece may be treated as an object of
importance, even while detached from its originally assumed context. This is an aspect that the Analogical Imagination shares with a postmodern perspective in practice.

Theologian Michael P. Murphy connects the Analogical (Catholic) Imagination in its contemporary iteration to postmodernism, and he proposes that the dismissal of duality is the crossing between postmodernism and the Analogical Imagination (24). Though the tearing apart (or, to borrow a more postmodern term, deconstruction) of the body and of the singularity of narrative might seem to put the Analogical Imagination at odds with postmodernism, Murphy argues that the Analogical Imagination is an extension of deconstruction and that the process of faith depends on subjectivity. In his words, “any cleavage between the theological imagination and postmodernity boils down to faith, which, in turn is largely a matter of grammar” (9). Murphy believes postmodernism and the Analogical Imagination have common characteristics. Their differences depend on one’s perspective and initial acceptance of the divine.

Ehn’s appropriation of postmodernist tactics to express detachment of the piece from the whole can seem chaotic and counter to the Catholic Imagination’s paradigm. But this is not necessarily the case. There is a strong tradition in Western drama (not to mention Western aesthetics at large) to elevate pieces of flesh without attachment to a singular whole. The language around Western drama has left open the possibility that a broken piece can exceed the sum of its parts. Though the body in secular theatre is not considered sacred, it is shrouded in language borrowed from the sacred. Ambiguity regarding the limits of the body and its effect on an audience has concerned theatre scholars for centuries. The descriptions of the presence of the actor’s essence continue to exceed the confines of a character, especially among scholars with a phenomenological
perspective. Erika Fischer-Lichte explores dual readings of the body in contemporary performance practice. She finds that these readings fall into two camps: the semiotic and the phenomenal. In *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, she opens by describing a performance of *Electra* by Gertrud Eysoldt in 1910 that shocked its audience. In that performance, Eysoldt moved around constantly and put such a strain on her body that the audience felt strained along with her. This performance directly contradicted a tradition of acting that praised signs and gestures but dismissed the corporeal presence as inferior mechanics. She describes the previously dominant approach to performance through the words of the philosopher and director Johann Jakob Engel found in his 1785-1786 book *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (translated as “Ideas on Mimesis”). There he forbids a form of acting which draws the attention of the spectators to their bodies by doing violence to them as in the case of “falling” or “plunging,” “as if they wanted to shatter their skulls.” Such acting would make the spectator concerned for the physical integrity of the actor. And “such a concern, inevitably, disrupts the illusion; we should only sympathize with the character and we start sympathizing with him.” (quoted in *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 4)

By breaking with this tradition, Eysoldt questions the value of maintaining this illusion of bodilessness. She does not agree that creating distance from the body in the eyes of the audience as a central pillar of good performance. The reaction to her performance foregrounds the precarious position of the body on display and the dynamic relationship between the audience and the actor’s body (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 5).

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7 Fischer-Lichte details evidence to support this claim through descriptions and reactions of critics present at the performance. The evidence need not be addressed for the progress of this dissertation.
In *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Fischer-Lichte looks to Marina Abramovic, a contemporary performance artist, to better understand the relationship between the semiotic and phenomenal body in critical writing. The Guggenheim Collections’ online artist biographies section describes Abramovic’s work in sacred terms. According to The Guggenheim, Abramovic tests the “physical and mental limits of her being.” In her performance “she has withstood pain, exhaustion, and danger in the quest for emotional and spiritual transformation” (Spector). In Marina Abramovic’s *Lips of Thomas*, the artist performed a series of tasks, including breaking a crystal glass in her hand, whipping herself, cutting a star into her stomach, and laying on a block of ice in the shape of a cross. After half an hour, members of the audience could no longer simply watch her performance and they removed her from the block of ice. Though Abramovic is not creating overtly sacred performance, the language around her intentions borrows heavily from sacred performance. Those aspirations toward transubstantiation, according to Spector, are dependent upon bodily injury. It is also clear from Fischer-Lichte’s description of this first performance that bodily injury elicits strong response from the audience. Though the content of this response would be impossible to predict, the dependence on audience reactions to the body in some form is essential to Abramovic’s work as an artist.

According to Fischer-Lichte, this performance redefined the established relationship between actor and spectator by forcing the spectator to take unprompted and unfiltered action upon the performer. The cause of this intrusion was not a result of the audience’s negative reaction to the message (the symbolic expression) of the performance, but to their intolerance of the pain her corporeal body was enduring. *The*
*Lips of Thomas*, though filled with symbolic gestures readily evident at the time of performance, denies contemplation in the presence of the artist as the acts are not representation, but experienced. In that moment, it is impossible to simply contemplate cerebrally, as the body involved demands trans-lingual response. Fischer-Lichte reflects on the performance by commenting, “It can be assumed that affects that were triggered—obviously strong enough to move individual spectators to intervention—by far transcended the possibility and the effort to reflect, to constitute meaning, and to interpret events” (*Transformative Power* 16). The line between the symbolic and the material reading of the body became intertwined and irreconcilable. This does not equate Abramavic’s treatment of the body in performance and Ehn’s treatment of the body in performance. It simply offers evidence to the importance of (and complicated nature of) the body in art and how it is used to blur lines between the symbolic and the material.

This attempt to dissolve the perceived distance between the symbolic and the material is a hallmark of twentieth-century performance, and it has been a prominent site of exploration in performance art. In that same vein, Ehn describes his plays as *hecho poetico* (the poetic fact) (*Saint Plays* ix). The image is proclaimed to defy simplification brought about by clear explanations. The images in *The Saint Plays*, Ehn proposes, cannot be overtaken and explained by analysis that exposes all mysteries as yet undiscovered natural phenomenon. One reading of “poetry” and “image” leads to the realm of the symbolic: the realm of language as representation. The juxtaposition of these terms implies Ehn’s intentions are neither primarily symbolic nor primarily material. At the same time these saints, Ehn believes, are irreducible. If a signified is irreducible, it does not reflect a strictly semiotic reading. As this chapter details, Ehn’s
aesthetic and ethical preoccupations with transubstantiation and spiritual excess respond to the shared heritage of Catholic tradition and Western drama. Ehn borrows prominent structures and tactics from the twentieth-century and applies them to the values of the Catholic Imagination. This synthesis creates a landscape that pushes audiences into an intentional abstract space of contemplation. Ehn’s work capitalizes on the response an audience might have toward a broken body. This response is built upon a long history of viewing the body as having the potential to transcend and transform.
CHAPTER 2: SACRED FLESH IN THEOLOGY AND THEATRE

The previous chapter focused on the possibility of transubstantiation in theatre, theory, and Catholicism. This chapter expands on this idea by observing how some Western theatre practice, scholarship, and Catholic aesthetics approach simulation and the image especially around the subject of death. Theories and concepts that highlight the continuing relationship between theatre’s approach to the image and Catholicism’s approach to the image comprises the content of this chapter. Both contemporary theatre and Catholicism are often ambiguous when drawing lines between reality and simulation in art.

This chapter first explores the Catholic/Analogical Imagination in depth, focusing on its reading of the image. It then looks at the shared medieval ideological inheritance of Western theatre practice and Catholicism. This chapter then looks for a shared ideological inheritance in contemporary critical theory and contemporary theatre scholarship. The concept of excess in theatre is evidence of this ambiguous inheritance. In his *Saint Plays*, especially those featuring martyrs, Ehn is depending upon the crossings of theatre’s excess and the aesthetic principles of the Analogical Imagination to create his Big Cheap Theatre. In order to appreciate the complex and intertwined relationship between contemporary theatre and the Analogical Imagination’s perception of the image, this chapter discusses some ideas of Slavoj Zizek, Spencer Golub, Elizabeth Brofen, Sara Webster Goodwin, and Alice Rayner. These theorists consider the gray area between what is real and what is not especially in the presence of death.
The Analogical Imagination in Depth

As explored in the introduction, the Analogical Imagination posits that all physical objects have the potential to be sacred, regardless of how carnal or base they might appear, because all objects are made by God. Theologian David Tracy proposes that the Analogical Imagination (also called the Catholic Imagination) is an alternative worldview to the Dialectical Imagination (also called the Protestant Imagination). While the terms “Protestant” and “Catholic” describe the theological sects with which the paradigms are associated, the terms “Dialectical” and “Analogical” describe how they function. For both David Tracy and Andrew Greeley, the Dialectical (Protestant) Imagination tends to emphasize a distance between the physical and the spiritual, because of fears that objects will become idols for believers. According to the Dialectical Imagination, religious practice should be confined to cerebral activity. Therefore in this paradigm all spirituality is abstracted and quarantined outside the physical world. The Dialectical Imagination sees the body as simply a vessel of the spirit, and not as an object of spiritual significance in itself (Greeley 5-7). While Greeley calls this perspective the Protestant Imagination, Tracy calls it the Dialectical Imagination because of its tendency to separate the spiritual and the physical into two opposing camps.

The Catholic Imagination, according to Greeley, “…tends to emphasize the metaphorical nature of creation… everything in creation, from exploding cosmos to the whirling, dancing, and utterly mysterious quantum particles, discloses something about God and, in doing so, brings God among us” (Greeley 6). This perspective echoes the writing attributed to seventh-century saint, John of Damascus:
In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. (107)

For John of Damascus, the moment God became flesh is a turning point in history. After the birth of Christ a believer’s relationship with God and the representation of God changed. Once God was “seen” in the body, He was connected to all matter. For Greeley, the lessons of creation are more than metaphorical. In the Analogical Imagination, the hierarchical structures of Modernism find little traction, as the boundaries between “high” and “low” mean little to nothing in a paradigm that concedes sacred potential in all objects and all parts.

Michael P. Murphy proposes that the Catholic Imagination is a collection of scholarship that currently lacks coherence, but it owes a great deal to the aesthetic philosophy of Hans Urs von Balthasar, an important figure in twentieth-century Christian theology. Murphy describes the Catholic Imagination as “an imagination, theologically speaking, that sees Christ as the revelatory key to the cosmos and figures aesthetics in terms of the Incarnation as axial miracle of history, an existential, as continually Eucharistic” (Murphy 7). According to Murphy, the broken body of Christ is the axis point of all cosmic drama. The content of this mysterious drama is revealed through the possibility of beauty (Murphy 9).

Murphy is not the only scholar to connect the Catholic Imagination so closely to artistic expression. In Eleanor Heartney’s application of the Catholic Imagination to the
Culture Wars, she finds many of the artists at the center of controversy were raised in Catholic environments or practicing Catholics at the time they created their artworks. These artists include Chris Ofili, Martin Scorcese, Andre Serrano, David Wojnarowicz, and Robert Mapplethorpe. The Culture Wars, according to Roger Chapman’s exhaustive reference text titled *Culture Wars: an Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, is a term used to describe a chasm in American politics. The term became prominent in the 1980s as complicated moral and religious perspectives became more tied to political factions. As a result, postmodern artists (seen to be the territory of the political Left) tackling Christian icons (seen to be the territory of the political Right) ignited especially heated debate as it pointed out the inconsistencies of the Culture Wars’ rhetoric.

Heartney describes the depth of this ideological divide, and how the dismissal of the corporeal body as a sacred subject in the Dialectical/Protestant Imagination affects the content and reception of art. Heartney calls these controversial artists “postmodern heretics” (which is also the title of her book on this subject) (23).

Greeley offers an example of the difference between these two perspectives (Analogical and Dialectical) and how they greatly alter simple and fundamental perceptions. In his introduction he explains to the reader how he uses certain terms:

In this essay I use the words “analogy” and “metaphor” interchangeably… When one says that God is love, meaning like human love only more powerful and passionate, one is using a metaphor. When one goes a step further and says that human love is an analogy for God, one says that there is a reality in God which human love is like and in which in some fashion human love participates. Can there be a metaphorical discourse about God which is not analogical? (Greeley 7)
The Analogical Imagination parallels the discursive tendencies of theatre generally in its crossings between analogous language and the language of reality, and Ehn’s construction of the poetic fact in theatre specifically. However, the consciously religious work of Ehn’s *Saint Plays* takes a different approach to the relationship between the word and the body than secular works tend to attempt. Even though, like Abramovic’s and Eysoldt’s work, there is an abundance of symbolic objects and language in Ehn’s text, a third characteristic colors *The Saint Plays*. Ehn’s plays are intended to produce a spiritual encounter: a piercing through the lingual and the primordial straight to the soul.

**Reflections of Catholic Tradition in Theatre**

The Analogical Imagination stems from a long inheritance of Catholic drama reaching back to medieval Europe. The roots of Ehn’s aesthetics can be traced to this medieval tradition. While the Analogical treatment of the body can be traced back to the codification of the Catholic faith, medieval drama has also left traces on the tradition of secular Western drama. Therefore it could be argued that Ehn is exposing the connections between twentieth-century thinkers such as Antonin Artaud and Pope John Paul II. Even though Balthasar does not explicitly align his ideas with the Catholic Imagination, he writes in volume one of *Theo-Logic*,

> The essence of worldly things consists so truly in their imagining God, and this image itself is so transparent, that God seems to shine forth immediately [immediate] from it. There is then, a form of “intuition” specific to symbolic cognition, which consists in a psychologically immediate transcendence of the ontological sign…, though without removing it at any time. (Balthasar 235)
Word choices like “essence” and “transcendence” can be found in theatre and theological writing. The complicated dual ideological heritage Ehn employs in his writing are referenced and examined throughout the dissertation.

In Catholic sacred theater, the body becomes the central physical object around which contemplation of the hecho poetico (poetic fact) occurs. Tracing the tradition of sacred Christian drama back to medieval Europe, Fischer-Lichte, in her book the History of European Drama and Theatre, describes a conflation of the real and the performed that she proposes is inherent in viewing all performance. In medieval religious performance, that reality is not limited to the corporeal body, in the paradigm of its participants. It is only covered (hidden) by the flesh and masked by language. Reality is the truth, and truth is what lies underneath the façade of the physical. She notes that the audience of medieval sacred performance viewed the event as a doubled one. On the surface, the performance is an act of remembrance: a reminder of what has come before, and an inspiration for future choices. Beneath this intention is a coinciding eternal drama that continues in the mysterious unseen. Its hidden nature does not detract from its power. The act of replicating certain characters and figures in a sacred drama was believed to potentially pierce the veil between mundane recitation and the spiritual realm, bringing metaphysical consequences to the daily lives of its actors. One example of this is the common belief during the medieval period that performance could have lasting effects on the performers (36-37). Fischer-Lichte notes that “… actors playing the devils might have ended their days in poverty, on the gallows or suicidal, as was reported in many legends. It was with good reason that Geroh von Reichersberg … tried to forbid clerics from taking part in the plays because he was afraid that those who played the devil or the
Antichrist would thereby become actual servants of Satan” (The History of European Drama 38). In medieval religious ceremony and in religious drama, the line between performance and lived consequence becomes ambiguous.

This ambiguity is similarly reflected in the practice of medieval visual art. In William J. Diebold’s book Word and Image: An Introduction to Early Medieval Art, he recounts a legend where Bishop Gregory of Tours uses evidence of the irreducibility of the image:

After a Jew had often looked at an image of this sort that had been painted on a panel and attached to the wall of a church, he said: “Behold the seducer, who has humbled me and my people!” So, coming in at night, he stabbed the image with a dagger, pried it from the wall, concealed it under his clothes, carried it home, and prepared to burn it in a fire. But a marvelous event took place that without doubt was a result of the power of God. For blood flowed from the wound where the image had been stabbed. This wicked assassin was so obsessed with rage that he did not notice the blood. But after he had made his way through the darkness of a cloudy night to his house, he brought a light and realized that he was completely covered with blood. At dawn the Christians came to the house of God. When they did not find the icon, they were upset and asked what had happened. Then they noticed the trail of blood. They followed it and came to the house of the Jew. They searched carefully for the panel and found it in a corner of a small room belonging to the Jew. They restored the panel to the church; they crushed the thief beneath stones. (Gregory of Tours quoted in Diabold 40)
The physical response of the icon reflects the response one would anticipate from the flesh of Christ.

If the work of art so closely mimics the body, then the position of the artist becomes ambiguous. The artist moves into the realm of creator. At the very least this implies an artist/artisan is the vessel of divine inspiration. It is no wonder iconoclasts grew out of such a religious climate where power is so readily available to the hands of mortals. Ehn brings this mentality to his own work. He explains the power he sees in this approach:

Paintings like the Christ icon are illusionistic: They are meant to resemble the things they depict. The purpose of pagan funerary portraits and Christian icons was to keep present those who were dead and gone. Illusionistic art depends on establishing confusion between the representation, the painting or the sculpture, and the thing it represents. This confusion is the magic of this kind of art. (Saint Plays 13)

The remnants of these beliefs can be seen in the Analogical Imagination. For Greeley, a metaphor (such as an icon) has the potential to, not just share traits with the sacred, but be wrapped up in the sacred. A sacred metaphor overlaps with the concept or figure it intends to represent becoming anological. Therefore the position of “metaphor-maker” is a locus of creation. A metaphor-maker in the Catholic tradition is a sacred employment. If that status is extended to all artists creating work in a Catholic tradition, then this status gives a particularly powerful authority to the playwright who takes on sacred content. The narratives used in medieval drama were well-known to its audience; therefore the power was not in the revelation of new information. The perceived power
was found in transforming what is already known into flesh. The capacity to write those ancient characters upon the body of a performer and connect the sacred with the physical one is a serious responsibility. According to this worldview, the playwright participates in the rendering of “truth,” and has the sober task of using his or her skill to recall something long dead onto a stage through ritual performance.

From the Analogical Imagination’s perspective, the real drama occurs outside the confines of history. Therefore while the audience is contemplating a particular moment in history, the audience is also witnessing a present act (Greeley 33). Assuming this paradigm, the saint is not only true, it is now—and the audience is witness. As Murphy explains, “It is an imagination, theologically speaking, that sees Christ as the revelatory key to the cosmos and figures aesthetics in terms of the Incarnation as axial miracle of history, as existential, as continually Eucharistic, and as locus of (and reason for) community” (Murphy 6-7).

This collapse of physical matter and the sacred through art is vast and complicated. In order to confine this dissertation to a particular kind of collision between the material and the sacred, this dissertation focuses on sacred objects associated with pain and death in Ehn’s plays. This focus is adopted because of the primary position pain and death take in Christian beliefs and rituals along with the similar interest that contemporary theatre has in pain and death (as previously discussed). For the Saint Cycle of Erik Ehn, an intersection between the mystical, the physical, and imminent death is plainly displayed on the opaque flesh of the actor.
The Body, Death and the Image in Critical Theory

Though there are significant similarities between an Analogical Imagination treatment of the body and a critical theory treatment of the body, there are also many examples that call this inheritance of Catholic ideas discussed in the previous section (for example the body as the central physical object around which contemplation occurs) into question. There are many alternative philosophical approaches to what Ehn calls the “metahistorical uproar.” Contemporary psychoanalysis acknowledges what it sees as ahistorical human conditions that have been disregarded by some other contemporary schools of thought and therefore makes a useful comparison to the paradigm investigated in this dissertation (*Saint Plays* 5). To give one example, the Analogical Imagination stands in contrast to the materially based view Slavoj Zizek gives us in the tradition of Kant. In the introduction to his book *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jaques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Zizek notes the split between a cynical outlook and the continued adherence to a moral code, citing Lacan:

> The ideological attitude opened up by this split, of course, is that of cynicism, of cynical distance which pertains to the very notion of Enlightenment and which today seems to have reached its apogee: although officially undermined, devalorized, authority returns through the sidedoor—“we know there is no truth in authority, yet we continue to play its game and to obey it in order not to disturb the usual run of things…” Truth is suspended in the name of efficiency: the ultimate legitimization of the system is that it works. (Zizek x)

This approach to morality is distinct from the one in Ehn’s *Saint Plays* because of its internal source of legitimization. The participant individuals or community determine
whether the system is functioning, but without a clear picture of what defines a working social, political, or philosophical approach. *The Saint Plays’ refusal to accept this moral and ethical system puts them at odds with most modernist thinkers. This aspect does not necessarily put *The Saint Plays at odds with most postmodernist thought. Ehn’s *Saint Plays are especially interested in questioning systems of authority and are filled with outsiders who challenge what “works” in the eyes of more politically affluent characters. The martyrs in Ehn’s *Saint Plays do not ascribe to moralities that are justified through function. That would require narrative closure. Narrative closure offers a kind of evidence that supposedly reveals what “works.” The martyrs in *The Saint Plays question a need for a proven performance record for the construction of a paradigm. That questioning then undermines the relevance of proving how a system of authority works in order to call it legitimate.

In contrast to the system of logic Lacan is referring to, sacred drama does not concern itself with efficiency. If the performed worldview needed legitimization through presentation of its efficacy, there would be need of a moralized conclusion (i.e. this system led to a *good outcome; this authority led to a *bad result). Though this positive reward for “moral” behavior can often be found in the stories of the Judeo-Christian tradition (as in many other religions) it is not necessary to support the worldview. Moral behavior does not always coincide with a positive reward. The lack of a positive reward for moral behavior is especially evident in the stories of the saints. In this case, any positive reward that proves the system is “working” does not include survival.

Not only do the saints’ brutal demises often resound with injustice, the process by which a martyr is chosen also deviates from a system humming with efficiency. There is
not a comprehensible logic behind who is fit for martyrdom. For example, in Graham Greene’s novel, *The Power and the Glory*, the sainted priest is a drunkard and a coward: poor material to make a saint (Greeley 39). This contemporary example reflects the long history of inefficient sacred narrative. Because the medieval drama does not need to propose and then prove a certain structure of authority, the production of meaning emerges with different intentions.

Jean Baudrillard also provides a critical theory perspective on representation and its relationship with authority. In contrast to the Analogical Imagination, Baudrillard proposed a different relationship between relics and the idea of God. In his exploration of hyperreality, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard asks

> But what becomes of the divinity when it is multiplied by simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination—the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? (Baudrillard 4)

According to Baudrillard, at some point the simulated power of the relics and icons can no longer be distinguished from the power of its source. From this paradigm, there is a potential loss when the singular image of God is divided. The images take on that power, for all intents and purposes. At the same time as power is transferred to the visible machinery, it exposes the idea of God to volatile circumstances. This exposure is because of the distribution and dissolution of that power across the map of the hyperreal. Baudrillard expands on the consequences of such a situation:
All Western Faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. (Baudrillard 5)

I propose that the lack of narrative closure and mystical language in Ehn’s *Saint Cycle* is a response to (or a precaution against) the creation of a complete simulation. A complete simulation runs the risk of becoming fully simulacrum. The mysterious tone and lack of narrative closure in the *Saint Cycle* pushes against a system that, once fully realized as a convincing simulacrum, runs the risk of exchanging itself without circumference.

These examples are a few of the multitude of ideological narratives that question the conscious and unconscious sacred undercurrents in contemporary culture. It would be difficult to argue that postmodernity has erased the cultural tendency toward metaphysical resolution. Emerging from a postmodern tradition but responding to a medieval one, Ehn invents characters that exist inside (and speak from) a merging of worldviews: the postmodern disregard for the tyrannical narrative of progress alongside the medieval erasure of historical distance collides upon the staged body. Ehn’s plays use postmodern tactics in a way that questions postmodernity, while simultaneously exposing political and social contradictions in the closed religious societies. These contradictions form the backbone of the plays’ structure. To a certain extent, Ehn refutes
Greeley’s statement that “Religion is story before it is anything else and after it is everything else” (Greeley 35). Instead he proposes that religion is *mystery* before it is anything else and after it is everything else. That mystery centers on the irreducible, yet easily permeable nature of the displayed body. In this way, Ehn de-emphasizes the narrative aspects of Christianity and the Catholic Imagination, and privileges the differed mystery: an aspect that distantly echoes Derridean ideas about “surplus” and “excess” (Murphy 54-55).

**Excess and the Uncanny**

Ehn’s interest in a mysterious excess (the sense that an object is suspended in multiple states in the same moment) is reflection of contemporary theatre’s preoccupation with it, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The term “excess” connects the “uncanny” to the more specific terms used in theatre such as ghosting. Spencer Golub relates a fear of extending beyond the limits of the stage to the sensations of performance in his meditative book *(Infinity) Stage:* “Fear of falling is the subtext of performance—(the) inspired choice or chance of going too far—and going too far, *exceeding the stage,* is an imperative of theatrical foresight” (Golub 2). The body of the actor never permanently disappears. The audience expects it to rise from the dead continue life outside of the stage. Still the fall did occur. It was witnessed. But as true believers in conditioned praxis, the audience expects the actor to rise from the dead on cue. However, Spencer Golub’s excess leaves open the possibility that somewhere in the recesses of the mind the actor may not rise. As a witness to this simulation so like the reality, we cannot

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8 Emphasis mine
completely dismiss such a possibility. The moment of suspense in which the audience knows the actor will rise but acknowledges the possibility they might not produces a sensation of excess. In this way, Baudrillard’s simulation is connected to the uncanny’s sense of doubling. Using this expanded definition of the uncanny in conversation with Spencer Golub’s comments regarding a fear of excess associated with the stage, suggests Ehn’s school of Big Cheap Theater is a vehicle for producing the uncanny. Exploring different facets of an uncanny doubling is a recurring theme in Ehn’s *Saint Plays*. Ehn depends upon the largeness of the unknown mystery to give expanse and awe to his worlds, regardless of how small the spectacle might be.

A body of theater scholarship has endeavored to understand the effect ghosts have on the audience that witness them. In Alice Rayner’s book *Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of the Theatre*, she proposes that the phenomenon of ghosts is integral to an audience’s relationship with theatre. Rayner proposes that the past intertwines with the staged present in the eyes of the audience, giving a sense of uncanny pleasure to the viewing audience. By calling this sensation ghosts, Rayner points to a larger questions the theater asks: “In theatre since the time of Plato and Aristotle, the double has been connected to discussion of mimesis and imitation: What is original or authentic, what is real, what is false? What is the image, what is the real ‘thing’?” (Rayner x) In this paradigm, the fine threads that tie together what we know to be real are connected to a series of possibilities we see as unreal. Onstage those threads are loosened, and the unreal slips past. The mysterious makes a fleeting appearance. Similarly, Elin Diamond notes in her introduction to the book *Performance and Cultural Politics* that the
presentation or recycling of ideas is a part of theatrical traditions to such an extent that it has made its way into the terminology with which we discuss the art form:

While a performance embeds traces of other performances, it also produces an experience whose interpretation only partially depends on previous experience. Hence the terminology of “re” in discussion of performance, as in remember, reinscribe, reconfigure, reiterate, restore. “Re” acknowledges the pre-existing discursive field, the repetition within the performative present, but “figure,” “script,” and “iterate” assert the possibility of something that exceeds our knowledge, that alters the shape of sites and imagines new unsuspected subject positions. (2)

Diamond points out that performance is always something entirely new as well as something repeated. The terminology used to describe performance exposes this position, and implies excess.

The connective tissue between theatre and saints is their reliance on real bodies to imply power to an intended audience. An audience still believes that a body is real and important. According to theatre scholars interested in excess (for example Erika Fischer-Lichte and Spencer Golub) theatrical performance can produce an uncanny experience. The audience can view the performance through dual lenses in which the symbolic value and the physical power of a body collide in a highly presentational space. Like the dual language used to describe the body of the saint (which is seen as both physically and spiritually active) theatre uses dual language when describing the body performer (which is seen as both physically and symbolically active). Though well-documented in theatre history, the relationship between Catholic values of the sacred body and the Western
theatrical tradition are often underplayed in contemporary dramatic scholarship. Ehn is writing plays that feature the sacred body. As a result, Ehn’s work is an interesting exploration of the connections between Catholic ideas of the sacred body and its influence on the performing body in the theatre.

Within a paradigm that makes room for theatre excess, the uncanny resonance of the ghost asks the audience to question assumptions of the image. When faced with something made by human hands, art asks us to take a second look at the nature of imitation. If an image can wring from our bodies such a range of responses, from love to envy; and from action to lethargy, what else is it capable of? The idea of excess offers the audience some uncertain thing that is not at all the sum of its parts, and this potential makes art an instrument of sacred practices in a unique way. In the introduction to their collection of essays titled *Death and Representation*, Elisabeth Brofen and Sara Webster Goodwin summarize Maurice Blanchot’s positioning of the corpse in relationship to the image. According to Brofen and Goodwin,

Maurice Blanchot posits an analogy between corpse and image: both the corpse and the representation are “uncanny” in that they suspend stable categories of reference and position in time and space. The cadaverous presence is such that it simultaneously occupies two places, the here and the nowhere. Neither of this world nor entirely absent from it, the cadaver thus mediates between these two incompatible positions. Uncanniness emerges because the corpse, resembling itself, is in a sense its own double. (Brofen and Goodwin 12)

For sacred art, the nowhere space that the corpse occupies is a sacred, metaphysical one. The corpse is suspended between the “here” and the “nowhere,” becoming a spiritual
bridge between both locations. As these performance theorists exemplify, the ghosts and the corpses of the theatre continue to elude expulsion from art and theory therefore excess continues to inspire more writing. In some ways the idea of excess reflects a fundamental issue of the stage. The stage space can also be viewed as a “here” and a “nowhere,” with the bodies of actors bridging between them instead of corpses. Ehn’s *Saint Plays* take full advantage of all of these ghostly doublings that occupy the theatrical imagination unapologetically.

Modern Christian theologians also utilize the ghost as an apt metaphor to stand in for a mysterious excess of experience. In Christianity, this excess is sometimes called the *numinous*.\(^{10}\) This concept of excess is so important to twentieth-century ideas about religion that the numinous is often cited as foundational to the faith. Twentieth-century apologist C.S. Lewis creates a famous allegory to define numinous in *Problem of Pain*:

Suppose you were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told “There is a ghost in the next room,” and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him; but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is “uncanny” rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous. (Lewis 6)

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Like writers searching for a language to describe the experience of the theatre, Lewis uses ghosts to approximate the idea of the numinous. In Lewis’ story, the main component of experiencing an uncanny fear is belief. In the theatre, the ghosts are just offshore or behind the scenery. But the ghosts are not constructed of belief, they are constructed of previous experiences. While secular theatre stops at the gates of the ghosts, Lewis continues on with his story:

Now suppose that you were told simply “There is a mighty spirit in the room,” and believed it. Your feelings would then be even less like the mere fear of danger: but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking – a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it—an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare’s words “Under it my genius is rebuked.” (Lewis 6)

This sense of shrinking is one intention of sacred drama. Under these conditions, the theatre, along with the sacred it addresses, grows larger. As Golub said, performance tends to exceed the stage. From the perspective of sacred dramatists, after the excesses of the theatre has overwhelmed the audience, there might be a sensation of vastness so profound that it changes—well—everything.

Excess is also a recurring interest in the theatre because theatre has an ambiguous relationship with the passage of time. This quality is not unique to religious drama. The necessarily repetitive aspects of the theatre make it impossible to locate an original performance. The concept of the original is diluted if not erased by conflicts between the permanence of the text, and the existence of previous performances. The staged event revives those half-forgotten performances and brings them to the immediate present. But
those moments slip past, elusive and inconclusive. Rayner writes, “Whatever meanings one may assign to a particular theatrical event in order to trap its significance, the event itself, the performance, is a consciousness materially displaying its own absent past, its historicity, and its self-awareness of its own repetition by appearing not-to-be” (xvii). In this way, the performed act is one of distance and loss. It is a self-aware illusion its power (be it emotional or spiritual) is believed to lie in the elsewhere. From this perspective, theater is an act of absence constructed through ephemeral materials. Ephemerality defines the discipline. At the same time, theater contradicts itself through a remarkable similarity to reality. Bert O. States explains it this way in his book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*: “…we tend generally to undervalue the elementary fact that theatre--unlike fiction, painting, sculpture, and film--is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that are what they seem to be” (20). This logic extends to the bodies of actors. Those bodies also are what they seem to be. The flesh is flesh in the theater.

In order to ground this hypothetical discussion in more concrete examples, *The Saint Plays* themselves elucidate how mystery is central to Ehn’s writing. The thematic dominance of mystery in Ehn’s work is particularly clear in the saint play titled *Locus (John the Baptist)*, which expands on the theme of mystery through the martyred Saint John the Baptist. In *Locus (John the Baptist)*, Saint John is a bridge between the “here” and the “nowhere.” While attempting to explain this mystery to Salome John says, “I don’t even know if I am here. Sure don’t feel like Palestine. I got prophet-head. Can’t stay in one time-frame” (*Saint Plays* 66). His inability to express what he feels and what he knows emerges out of a conflict between a historical consciousness and a
consciousness that operates from an alternative framework, or understanding, which connects events. The character is viewing time through the axial point of Christ’s death and resurrection. In other words, John the Baptist’s death is not only true it is now happening alongside the death of Christ as an extension of that moment. For John the Baptist, events do not follow one another sequentially, but instead collide along unseen threads that connect them. He describes one such collision when prophesying his own death: “I have this picture though, that I should tell you about, of me losing my head in dying, when [Herod] gets tired of things I say about him. At the same moment in spiritual time as I make my neck long for the sword, a man named Nathan in an Arizona diner says…” (Saint Plays 69).

Ehn suffuses this sense of prophet-head throughout The Saint Plays, making its exploration a central theme. Steven Leigh Morris’ review in the LA Weekly describing his experience viewing a collection of Saint Plays as “an extended fantasia and meditation on love, faith, and our quest to believe in something immortal, if not to be immortal ourselves”. According to Morris, Ehn’s plays investigate immortality (Morris). This statement implies some sense of immortality exists just beyond our grasp. Prophet-head and spiritual time are the names John the Baptist gives to this collision. But Greeley would call it a manifestation of the Analogical Imagination, and Rayner might call it ghosts.

The concept of “prophet-head” continues to expand the notion that Ehn’s sacred dramas align with twentieth-century theatre scholarship. Theatre practitioner and philosopher Antonin Artaud’s book Theatre and Its Double (1938) continues to resonate with contemporary theatre writers like Alice Rayner. For Antonin Artaud (1896-1948),
performance is uniquely suited to shifting between the visible, physical world and a mysterious, hidden one. He proposed a theatre that brought the audience beyond language influenced by Symbolism and Surrealism. In The Theatre and Its Double, Artaud writes, “Like all magic cultures expressed by appropriate hieroglyphs, the true theater has its shadows too, and of all languages and all arts, the theater is the only one left whose shadows have shattered their limitations. From the beginning, one might say its shadows did not tolerate limitations” (Artaud 12). Artaud believes these shadows linger alongside the real flesh of the theatre, as a performance is built upon the body of the actor. This body glides between our understanding of the illusion and our inability to dismiss its lived experience beyond the illusion. The body may have scars, a limp that speaks to experience beyond the confines of the stage, and its constant reminder that both the past and the present can be housed in the same vessel.

**Contemporary Dramatic Trends ("Trauma Drama")**

Ehn’s work reflects trends in contemporary theatre noted by scholars who study violence in drama. Because of the continued interest in violence found in Ehn’s work, there is an argument to be made for locating his work in the genre of “Trauma Drama” as proposed by Christina Wald. She discusses Trauma Drama in her book *Hysteria, Trauma and Melancholia: Performative Maladies in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*, which investigates contemporary theatre tropes. Others scholars have taken up this trend and try to give shape to the nimbus concept of Trauma Drama. Judith Herman defines the experience of trauma as one in which “memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the new form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman 38).
Andrew Sofer gives a thoughtful analysis of Trauma Drama, and in this subgenre he includes playwrights like Sarah Kane and Anna Deavere Smith (12-14). The defining feature of this genre is a displacement of trauma just beyond the characters’ reach. This displacement is often artistically depicted as a void in some way. This void can be a character that never arrives or a past moment that cannot be located. Trauma Drama has roots in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, but the mechanisms depicting trauma in plays transitions in the middle of the twentieth-century. In place of overwhelming violence onstage assaulting the senses of the audience (an approach exemplified by Artaud’s theories) an uncanny black hole appears. This black hole, which lurks in the corners of the stage, changes the relationship between trauma and the audience. Andrew Sofer proposes this relationship shifted when Edward Bond penned Saved in 1965 (Sofer 122).

There is a void that marks the traumatic lost violence found in plays labeled as Trauma Drama. Instead of focusing on the violence itself, Trauma Drama focuses on what remains in the aftermath. Many of these playwrights surround the black hole of violence with phrases and images borrowed from Christianity. The title of Edward Bond’s Saved evokes this connection. Another example is Martin Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life, in which the unseen but constantly referenced character, Anne, is the central figure in a contemporary passion play (Sofer 141). Trauma Drama is often in a state of despair. It describes the horrors of humanity, but lacks the tools to address those horrors head-on. Because there is no sense of reconciliation in Trauma Drama, Erik Ehn’s plays do not entirely fit into this genre, as they are marked by a keen interest in creating an environment for transubstantiation. For this reason, the ideals, structures, and values of contemporary drama practice do not suffice for Ehn’s dramatic practice.
Addressing Death as Absence in Scholarship

The thin line between being a viewer and being a witness might blur for the audience when the subject is the Analogically presented sacred. But this position gives us a kind of power: one we share. Don DeLillo writes in his 1985 novel *White Noise*: “The power of the dead is that we think they see us all the time…Perhaps we are what they dream” (DeLillo 97). The moment of death is a uniquely witnessed event. We cannot imagine it without the projecting onto that moment some semblance of consciousness. Strictly speaking, one cannot experience death, as, by definition, the moment of death is the point where a person no longer experiences anything. If that is the case, then to whom does this experience belong? Who can claim death as a part of their reality? Writer and filmmaker Jalal Toufic responds to these questions: “This is true, but not because death is the extinction of life and hence cannot be experienced by another, by the one who replaces one there, the double, hence by another character/ other characters. That is, even when undeath happens to the one who died, it is in the form of spectacle, of which s/he is the spectator” (Toufic 174). Therefore the event of death is only experienced as an act of spectation. A theater is then an excellent model for replicating the event of death, because it can bear all the external (and knowable) markers of death.

The saint is an exception to this rule of only being able to experience death as an observer. In Catholicism, the saint becomes the site of transcendence: the messenger bringing knowledge of that vast and mysterious moment across the stage. It returns as a form of wisdom and power. In many ways the saint stands in the face of Regina
Barreca’s clever insight from “Writing and Voodoo,” mentioned in the introduction: “Just in case you thought there was no distinction between representation and reality, there is death” (175). The paradox of the saint is to be both representation and reality. Theatre, though squarely in the sphere of representation, is an art form that accumulates bodies. Therefore, it is also an art form built at the crossroads of representation and reality. The act of witnessing a theatrical representation and performance in general confers a different sense of authenticity to the narrative that can be difficult to shake, regardless of the reality of the events at hand. Elaine Scarry writes,

> When some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population’s belief—either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation—the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of a “realness” and “certainty.” (14)

Scarry’s book is more interested in the relationship between pain and political power, especially in the use of torture as a form of writing power on the body, but this statement resonates between Ehn’s work on saints and his plays focused on genocide. In his previously mentioned interview with Randy Gener, Ehn explains, “My interest is in populations at risk, or responding to violence or to kinds of brokenness: people farming the extreme edges of spirituality…Those are the kind of situations that demand a play” (quoted in Gener 2). The accumulation of bodies in both plays offer authority and weight to their subjects. Here we once again see the Analogical Imagination at work, complicating the position of the actor and the body in Ehn’s martyrs.
The narrative process Ehn’s martyrs undergo is especially complicated when set alongside critique of disciplines like psychoanalysis, which take pains to separate the symbolic from the real with such care. Zizek proposes that once something becomes so close that we are forced to see it frankly and must answer questions about whether it is worthy of the abstract emotions we have thrust upon it, our encounter changes. Zizek tells us, “This moment is the moment of death and sublimation: when the subject’s presence is exposed outside the symbolic support, he ‘dies’ as a member of the symbolic community, his being is no longer determined by a place in the symbolic network, it materializes the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void of the Other…” (8) The simple act of embodying the abstracted symbolic position of the saint brings us close, and the array of references and unfamiliar circumstances in Ehn’s plays brings about a small death to the symbolic order. Therefore, from this logic, Ehn kills his martyrs again, asking his audience to judge their position in the symbolic order while keeping its fragile frame intact.

This chapter has traced the theatrical inheritance upon which Erik Ehn’s *Saint Plays* are built. Ehn’s plays pull from twentieth and now twenty-first-century theatre practice as well as Christian theological tradition, and they utilize the interconnected legacies of contemporary theatre and Christian theology in their structure. The intellectual legacy of psychoanalysis and hyperreality alongside more specific performance theory of excess inform the structure and content of Ehn’s plays. Christian theology also informs these plays through their use of an ahistorical paradigm that embraces the mystical aspects of the Analogical Imagination. These abstract intellectual histories collide in the bodies presented onstage in the form of the actors as well as the
body parts presented in the form of props. These bodies are torn apart and contemplated at the moment of their tearing, which increases the audience’s experience of the saints as flesh first. Christian tradition and theatre collide at the moment of death, and the language scholars use to address death in art continues to adopt mystical tendencies even into the twenty-first century. The contentious role of the body in art, regardless of the artist’s intention or limitations, continues to intrigue. Ehn’s *Saint Plays* offer sites of contemplation for the audience (the witness) to sit with death in all of its chaos and mystery.
CHAPTER 3: THE OBFUSCATION OF TIME AND PLACE BY
DISMEMBERMENT: JOAN OF ARC AND JOHN THE BAPTIST

This chapter explores Ehn’s plays *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* and *Locus (John the Baptist)*. Both plays feature saints experiencing a personal, intense relationship with the Divine. As the title characters grow closer to God, they develop new ways of seeing the world around them and of seeing themselves. This chapter focuses on the saints’ status as visionaries within the plays and also looks for correlating philosophical and theological thoughts that align with their visions. This status, derived from the intensity of their relationship with God, leads to the saints’ social isolation and their martyrdom. More than in any of the other martyr plays, *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* and *Locus (John the Baptist)* connect closeness with the Divine to the tearing apart of the material body.

Because these plays explore important themes in Ehn’s work in very similar ways, the chapter is divided according to the themes, instead of according to the plays themselves. This chapter addresses John the Baptist and Joan of Arc as Ehn paints them alongside one another. It first looks at the role of desire in *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* and desert modernism in *Locus (John the Baptist)*. It then considers both desire and desert modernism as aspects of excess and Ehn’s concept of “prophet-head.” This chapter first introduces *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*’s content and central themes. This background includes relevant historical information on Joan of Arc. It then turns to the content and central themes of *Locus (John the Baptist)*. The chapter proceeds to find commonalities between *Locus (John the Baptist)*, *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*, and scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari and Joseph Masco. It finally ties those ideas to the Analogical Imagination through Ehn’s plays.
Joan of Arc and the Search for Wholeness

The first play of The Saint Plays cycle to be produced was Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc). It was performed in 1988 at the Manhattan Class Company under the artistic direction of Bernard Telsey and Robert Lupone. The title character, Saint Joan of Arc, has likely received more attention by playwrights of the twentieth century than any other saint. Some examples of this attention include Maxwell Anderson’s Joan of Lorrain in 1946, George Bernard Shaw’s Saint Joan in 1923, Lillian Hellman’s The Lark in 1955, Bertolt Brecht’s Saint Joan of the Stockyards in 1929, Carolyn Gage’s The Second Coming of Joan of Arc in 1987, and Virginia Scott’s Bogus Joan in 1992. Joan of Arc is an apt cipher for artists interested in subjects like courage, passion, gender, and politics, so it seems appropriate that she should be the first of Ehn’s saints.

Ehn’s Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) is one of his most popular Saint Plays with a higher number of productions than many of its peers. It has been produced by the Trap Door Theatre in 1995 and Factory 449 in 2010, as well as a number of college and university productions. Reviewing the 2010 production at Factory 449, which included five other Ehn plays, Celia Wren wrote that Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) was “the most affecting play (also the shortest and most straightforward)” (Wren C02). Wren’s comment reinforces previous claims that Ehn’s Saint Plays are often not straightforward. The accessibility of Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) may be the reason it is performed far more often than some other Saint Plays. According to another review, the Factory 449 production took advantage of the open and unspecified landscape of Ehn’s writing by using Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) as a vehicle to examine the “don’t ask, don’t tell”
policy of gays in the military (Ramanathan WE39). Factory 449 used the story of Joan’s courage to illuminate a more contemporary and specific political and moral topic.

Figure 3: Rowena Johnson plays Joan of Arc in Cal Rep at the Armory’s production of Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) in 2008 directed by Anne Justine D’Zmura. The Angel is played by Beth Forehlich, Anne Popozilio, and Deborah Lazor. Source: “The Saint Plays,” CalRep.org

Joan of Arc has fascinated modern and contemporary writers. One reason might be the story’s emphasis on the potential of the individual. Joan of Arc rejected social norms, and refused to adhere to gender roles. Perhaps this fascination is related to the availability of information about her life. She is a rebellious spirit with a clearly articulated cause. Often the rebellious and non-normative voices throughout history are
buried by their times, but this fate did not befall Joan. Joan’s strong, clear voice combined with her passionate idealism, has made her an attractive subject for artists.

Erik Ehn’s martyr play about Saint Joan of Arc bears the possessive title *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*. In this play, something belongs to Joan, and that ownership is complete (whole). Contemporary theatre does not tend to depict the kind of finality wholeness implies, nor does it perceive wholeness as a goal. On the other hand, the Christian religion is invested in a search for wholeness. The way wholeness is defined or achieved varies drastically from theology to theology. The body of the saint opens interesting questions on the meaning of wholeness in the Analogical Imagination because the body is often in pieces. Even so, the body of the saint is a site of spiritual wholeness. Physical incompleteness is often easier to see than spiritual incompleteness. Repairing physical distress requires the reunification of those lost parts. But spiritual wholeness cannot be marked by a defined missing piece; there are no apparent missing gears or leaky faucets. If Joan is found to be spiritually incomplete or disjointed, lost pieces will do her no good. If Joan is to be whole, she requires transfiguration.

*Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* opens with a darkened stage. The only sound is Joan’s “steady tred” (*Saint Plays 3*). For the audience, she is already in pieces; we cannot see her and visually determine her physical completeness. We only learn about her character through the sound of her steps. She moves across the stage, undeterred by the blinding darkness that would, in most, inspire caution. Next, an intensely bright light bores a hole through the stage floor. Ehn’s stage directions read “A circle of light falls like plate steel”. A paradoxical “heavy light” occupies the center of the stage and the center of the audience’s vision. Joan, now slightly visible to the audience, resists the
draw of that light. She pushes away from its allure. The further away she moves, the less of her is visible. As she moves closer, we see more parts of her appear. The shape of her nose, the details of her fingers, or the sharpness of her chin are all made more clear and angular in the heavy light. Joan, according to the stage directions seems to resist becoming a “whole” image by fully entering the light (Saint Plays 3). But she cannot resist the pull, no matter the consequences.

Joan enters the light and collapses, and for the first time we see her fully. The typical markers that comprise her identity become evident to the audience. She is a soldier, a youth, and a woman, all in one moment. Our understanding of her appears to multiply now that she is visible: visibly whole. At this moment, the character Joan experiences an internal illumination that parallels the stage image. The character spiritually communes with God at the same moment the audience sees her fall into the light. The internal, spiritual reality is mirrored by the external stage elements. They work in tandem.

The light’s gift to the audience is a sense of completeness with her body. According to the dramatic narrative light also gives Joan a wholeness of the soul. She touches a profound presence, and gains knowledge through that connection. This knowledge is so overwhelming for Joan that the knowledge throws her to the floor. The audience’s growing understanding of Joan is made insignificant, when compared to the vast weight of understanding Joan receives in the light. That knowledge is not given to the audience. A veil obscures knowledge from the uninitiated: those who have not stepped into the light. The audience can only witness Joan’s behavior as a reflection of her deeper spiritual experience. This section of the play reflects the ideas of Hans Urs
von Balthasar, who proposed that the only way to gain knowledge of the divine is through first accepting the divine (Murphy 5-9). While this direct knowledge (or special knowledge) is denied, the audience is offered the irreducible image of an angel.

An angel comes to Joan in pieces. The character of the angel is played by three actors: one is the body, one is the wings, and one is the halo (Saint Plays 4). Through this casting, the character of the angel transcends the specificity of any one body and becomes the sum of its parts. Each of the actors’ bodies represents an aspect of one divine persona. This doubling (here a tripling) could imply that the ethereal existence of the angel is greater than the body of a single individual can contain. The angel bursts through the confines of a single skin to occupy a larger community of bodies. The angel here, and the angels in Ehn’s Saint Plays in general, often act as portals to secret knowledge and secret access across time and space. In this way, it could be read that a host of bodies (or body parts) can be brought together in a number of different forms to connect the physical world to the spiritual world. On the other hand, doubling could also imply that the ethereal existence is much smaller than that of a single individual, able to be shared and dispersed. By turning internal communications outward (by sharing a consciousness between bodies), the character loses its shifting and mysterious internality. The character becomes exposed, external, and shared. The parts form a unit, each performing a function to complement the whole. The contradictions between pieces and wholeness in Ehn’s plays align with the Analogical Imagination’s assumption that pieces can be complete in their subjectivity detached from the whole.
Joan of Arc in History

Ehn’s writing often reflects the historical and hagiographic information surrounding the life and death of his chosen saints. In the case of Joan of Arc, there is an extensive historical record, and even direct transcripts from her trial. There is more historical detail on Joan of Arc than is often found with saints. Therefore the historical record of the saint often finds its way into the fictional representation of Saint Joan. The distinction between fact, fiction and the sacred is muddied with her. All images of the saint become tied up in her history as well as her hagiography. For example, Ehn’s three-part angel has roots in the historical record of Joan’s trial (*The Trial of Joan* 28). Joan confesses she hears voices, and it is those voices that instruct her to become a political and military leader. In her trial, Saint Joan of Arc identifies the voices of the three individuals.

The first metaphysical being she hears is Saint Michael the archangel. Saint Michael was a favored saint in France of the fifteenth century, and his popularity made him an unofficial patron saint, deposing, Saint Denis. Michael was revered by the Valois kings and his likeness was also painted on French standards in 1419. He was also the patron saint of the Barrois, which is Joan’s mother’s birthplace. Michael was even a favorite saint of the Dauphin (Lucie-Smith 18). Michael (along with another saint in this dissertation, Saint George) is more associated with war than many other figures in the Christian legacy. In this climate of reverence, a visit from Saint Michael was a logical messenger to call for the defense of France.

Joan’s other two spirit councilors were Saint Margaret of Antioch and Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Both of these saints are virgin martyrs. Virgin martyrs have a
very different status than Saint Michael, as they are not often associated with battle. Catherine is often called the bride of Christ, and this title gives her a prestigious and personal connection to Christ. Claiming Saint Catherine gives added legitimacy to Joan’s visions because of her proximity to Christ. Catherine was also the name of Joan’s sister, who died around the time her visions began. (Lucie-Smith 18). The saints that appear to Joan become narratively prophetic. She will follow a warrior’s path like Saint Michael. This path will lead her to a virgin martyr’s death like Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret. Through Ehn’s angel, Joan’s three councilors are represented in the bodies of the actors. But because they are a single angel they represent a single will: the will of God.

At her trial Joan is sure of the task she was given to free France, but when her interrogators press, she cannot recall the physical features of her councilors. Joan claims to see Michael’s whole body, but she cannot describe what he is wearing. Joan’s passion for her mission supersedes her ability to see the messenger, and she is flustered that her interrogators would badger her with such trivialities. The physical manifestation of the messengers is entirely secondary to the vessel’s function as God’s will. Unlike Michael, Saint Margaret and Saint Catherine come to Joan as floating heads, shining and heavily adorned with jewels. As Joan’s concentration wavers, her vision of her counselors falls in and out of focus. For Joan, the body is secondary to the force behind it. That force is powerful enough to split open worlds and flow between its layers. That force can bring Joan and Saint Michael into the same moment. In her visions the violence of martyrdom fades from Margaret and Catherine, leaving behind only their glory. All the same, that glory comes in the shape of a part, not a whole. In one of her interrogations, Joan comments that Michael is beautiful, even though she does not know whether he is
clothed. Joan believes the power of God’s love is evident in the physical beauty of her counselors (Lucie-Smith 19-20). The messenger reflects attributes of God in a materially legible way.

Desire in Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)

The message of Ehn’s angel in Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) is singular and overpowering in its fullness, but the tactics used to depict this angel have postmodern tendencies. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the “body without organs” (also referred to as the BwO) is a useful tool for interrogating this mythic creature of the angel. By giving a single consciousness to a body that transcends its own skin, the angel exemplifies a creature of flows and intensities. The stratification of the body built on function breaks down when it is repeated. Instead the flows between bodies become essential to the angel’s character. In their book, A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari explain that the body without organs “is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate” (4). In Anti-Oedipus, they describe the body without organs as a space of resistance. BwO is described as a “smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface as barrier. In order to resist linked, connected, and interrupted flows, it sets up a counterflow of amorphous, undifferentiated fluid” (9). Deleuze and Guattari set the desiring-machine against the BwO. Desiring machines are binary, syphoning off from another machine what they require, and then returning that flow to another or the same machine. The process of production is continual and instant. As a machine produces, it is instantly consumed. Deleuze and Guattari oppose the constant flows of the desiring-machine in Anti-Oedipus:
Desiring-machines make us an organism; but at the very heart of this production, within the very production of this production, the body suffers from being organized in this way, from not having some other sort of organization, or no organization at all… The automata stop dead and set free of the unorganized mass they once served to articulate. The full body without organs is the unproductive, the sterile, the unengendered, the unconsumable… The death instinct: that is its name… (8)

The BwO is produced in the excess at the moment when the machines break down: when the processes of binary construction no longer stand in for wholeness. But the BwO cannot be God, as that position is part of the organization mechanisms of machines. However, Deleuze and Guattari note that “…the energy that sweeps through it is divine, when it attracts to itself the entire process of production and serves as its miraculate, enchanted surface, inscribing it in each and every one of its disjunctions” (Anti-Oedipus, 13). The divinity of the BwO is not related to religion, but to complete transformation (or transubstantiation). In Ehn’s Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc) the angel floats across the stage rejecting the process of production by rejecting organization as a single organism. The angel tells Joan “Send my roots rain…Jumpin Jesus says to fight” (Saint Plays 4). The angel is repeating a message from another source. The angel is a recording, not a production. It/They bring no process, they simply iterate transcription. Joan hears them, and immediately enters new action into circulation, producing and desiring according to her own surface. If the angel is aligned with the body without organs, then Joan is the ultimate desiring-machine, bent on consumption.
The intensity of Saint Joan’s drive is written in every part of her hagiography. The legend of Saint Joan of Arc pulls part of its myth from the extraordinary way Joan chose to live. Unlike the typical image of the feminine servant of God epitomized in Mary, the mother of Christ (an image of humility and modesty), Joan makes choices that confounded male authority in her life. She was a young woman from a financially and politically secure family and she was promised to a young man but refused to marry. When her voices told her to “go into France” she left without seeking permission of her father. She then stalked the Count Robert de Baudricourt until he sent her to the Dauphin Charles VII. Even in the presence of royalty, an ultimate distillation of earthly authority for Joan, she refused to call the Dauphin “king” until he performed the proper ceremonies. He eventually consented to do so, with Joan of Arc at his side. In addition to these remarkable decisions, Joan was known to wear men’s clothing instead of the demure red dresses of the region of her youth. Her garments were also incredibly vibrant and rich even by the standards of the Dauphin’s court. Strangely enough, it was not her military exploits, outspoken nature, nor masculine appearance which finally led her to the stake; it was her choice of clothing. Part of her reconciliation with the English required her to wear women’s clothing. When she returned to men’s clothes within the week, she was burned before she was even nineteen years old (Lucie-Smith 23). Joan found the voices in her head irresistible. She followed their direction in every way because she believed they would draw her closer to God. Even the threat of death would not abate her desire. She intended to be wholly God’s, and in return God would be wholly hers.

Though Joan of Arc was throwing off cultural expectations, her behavior does not necessarily imply that she supported an overturning of the political, cultural, and social
hierarchies she saw in place around her in France at large. After all, her mission was to install the king of France back into supreme rule. Her biographer, Edward Lucie-Smith, comments that Joan of Arc believed she was, in all things, an exception to the standards of the day because she held God’s special favor (20). God is wholly Joan’s. This belief is reflected in the play through lines such as “You’re killing me because something loves me more than you know how. I got a lover with a cleaner eye and a longer stride than all your tech can crank” (5). Here Joan is alone in the possession of her lover. What she experiences is not a kind of universal passion between God and his creation but an intimate love between two souls. Lucie-Smith notes that Joan reacts negatively to her English inquisitors as they try to pry into the content of her visions. She treats their intrusion as an invasion of her privacy. It is as though the inquisitors are asking her to describe her relationship with a lover, and she regards their crass intrusion with disdain (20-21). Joan’s intense passion makes it impossible for her to recant her special status before the courts. Joan’s body is burned away in Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc), but a prop-version of her heart remains after the flames have died, unable to be burned. While her body is consumed by the flames of her desire, destroying the organism in the most forceful way possible, her heart remains intact. Through this piece of the body, her desires continue to produce and consume, without any signs of relenting.

John the Baptist

Locus (John the Baptist) is another of Ehn’s plays that features desire and consumption. It was performed by the Undermain Theatre in 1994 during Dallas’s Chimera Festival, where it was directed by Ivan Klousia (Saint Plays 64). Locus (John
the Baptist) was also part of Factory 449’s 2010 production of *Saint Plays*. Reviewer Celia Wren wrote that the production was “a set of phantasmagorical mini-dramas…Ehn writes whimsical meditations that are powered by dream logic and rarified mystical argument” (Wren C02).

Ehn’s John the Baptist has a close relationship with Salome from the beginning of the play. They argue over Salome’s intense need to please Herod. John wants Salome to read poetry for Herod’s birthday party, but Salome changes her mind at the last minute and decides to dance instead. She believes Herod will like this better, but John thinks she is demeaning herself by dancing in a majorette costume instead of reciting poetry. He recounts several dreams he had in the desert to Salome even though she does not want to hear them. These dreams feature American icons such as athlete Jim Thorpe and singers Sleepy Labeef, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly.

Salome runs away from John’s prophecies and dances for Herod as she intends to. He offers a reward for her dance and she asks for John’s head on a platter. In order to capture John, Salome is chained to a stake as bait. John comes as expected. Herod boils his head, then decapitates him. Hunter Styles’ review of Factory 449’s production of *The Saint Plays* comments on the moment John the Baptist’s head flies off. He claims this production, “developed a sizable collection of interesting images and low-budget special effects. At times these tricks earn their moment to thrill. The decapitated head of John the Baptist (Sun King Davis) comes to mind, isolated atop the rippling glow of the coals in a Webber grill” (Styles).

John the Baptist’s hagiography is very different from the glorious force that is Joan of Arc. John was the kind of prophet who anoints leaders, more than a leader
himself. He is different from Joan, who is more interested in accomplishment and action.

The content of John the Baptist’s play, *Locus (John the Baptist)*, reflects this difference through its structure. Instead of swords and grand declarations of love, *Locus (John the Baptist)* is full of wanderings and dreams.

While Joan’s complicated connections with the sacred were represented physically through the action of stepping into the light, John struggles to put the highly abstracted experience of his transcendence into words. While Joan resents the intrusion of others into her fiercely protected relationship, John longs to make his inexpressible knowledge understood by others who need it. John is in a consciousness outside of time; his awareness is detached from his body, and the inevitable dismemberment of that body simply reflects the *hecho poetico*—the poetic fact of this transcendence. John describes to Salome the moment of transcendence. He tells her it is a moment beyond the understanding of those whose heads are bound too tightly to their bodies. John sees his future occurring in the flows between realities of the physical and the spiritual: “I have this picture though, that I should tell you about, of me losing my head in dying, when [Herod] gets tired of the things I say about him. At the same moment in spiritual time as I make my neck long for the sword, a man named Nathan in an Arizona diner says: *(Nathan enters and sits at a diner counter)*” *(Saint Plays 69).*

John’s death is such a profoundly powerful moment that it pulls other fellow wanderers (kindred spirits) across space and time. He views their deaths as merged with his own. They are the same, while being overwhelmingly different in act and context. A thread links them to the memory/prophecy of John the Baptist, as though these events were reacting to quantum entanglement, performing a haunted repetition. This haunted
repetition becomes a larger theme of the collection, explored in multiple plays. In the play *Pain (Eulalia)* (the subject of the fourth chapter) the protagonist Maggie describes a transcended consciousness in this way: “My visions will come as they come, not recollected—but through a world that’s become transparent to me” (*Saint Plays* 83). The traditional mechanisms of experience do not function here.

A stage space is an ideal location to investigate overlapping realities that create a single experience. In Alice Rayner’s previously discussed book, *Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of the Theatre*, she proposes the act of viewing performance as an act that binds the audience together. The audience is brought together by viewing the unique recitation of theater: “As an event, the play carries the enigma of otherness within participatory sameness, seeking from the audience a recognition of the enigma of the otherness of time from within its own historical losses…” (25). Rayner believes the audience experiences distance and loss together, and that loss is traumatic. Ehn produces bodies in *Locus (John the Baptist)* that are part of the traumatic past of the audience, such as the tragic death of Buddy Holly. By including Holly, Ehn associates for the audience the future of John and the future of the character Buddy Holly. This reminder elicits a sense of inevitability and dread. These lives are questions the audience knows answers to, but repeatedly revisit in search of new and deeper understanding. This repetition is a mirror of the theatre at large.

In the modern and postmodern Western theatre, the stage is imagined as an empty space: a blank canvas. It is a paradox of permanence and erasure. The space is physical, visceral, real. It is permanent as a structure. Meanwhile the function of the space is to lend itself to forgetfulness. On the stage one world disappears at the moment another
emerges on the horizon. The lights go down; the lights come up, and what has passed leaves little trace.

**Desert Modernism**

The setting of Ehn’s *Locus (John the Baptist)* takes advantage of the precarious relationship between memory and loss on the stage by incorporating what Joseph Masco calls *desert modernism* into the play. For Masco, desert modernism is especially reflective of how the American southwest exists in the imagination, which is where *Locus (John the Baptist)* is set. More specifically, the stage directions point us to “a cramped mobile home high in the Albuquerque hills” (63). Masco proposes that the American southwest is still imagined to be an untamed wilderness with a vast, homogenous purity.

This status, however, is hard-fought in an America littered with the footprints of human civilization. Masco believes, “This ability to re-inscribe desert ‘purity’ requires constant effort, as the pursuit of utopian potential is predicated on a continual emptying-out of dystopian realities—in this case, those of nuclear weapons, waste, and war” (1). The result is a kind of self-regulated amnesia that reinforces a cosmology of progress.

Amnesia is necessary to force the desert into a uniform history of progress. It is part of the doctrine of progress, which requires uniformity in the construction of desert purity. Therefore “the cosmology of the desert modernist requires a constant patrolling of the cognitive field to prevent ambiguity from taking root” (2).

This cosmology is evident in John’s world. In a dream, John recounts Jim Thorpe saying, “I see red in the stream and I see my life flowing away. Because of power plant pollution? Because of a corruption in the land? I think, no, I think because water flows
downhill, and I am red…” (70). The land is corrupted, and the land moves on. It erases its past at every moment. A perfect desert modernism is not possible, and the lack of purity in the desert needles at these desert prophets. But the questioning spirit John brings to the desert is older than the impact of power plant pollution. He looks beyond it, and the desert moves again.

One reason maintaining desert modernism is such a difficult task is that the desert does not lend itself easily to such a single-minded cosmology. We can see this in the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who often use the language of the desert to describe their concept of the body without organs. The BwO is a layer of forces that cannot be incorporated into a system of signification, but often serve as a record of signification. Deleuze and Guattari often lean on the language of geography to explain their concepts, especially the body without organs. John the Baptist’s conflict with the desert originates in his inability to articulate it. The desert BwO undermines the legitimacy of language, and John cannot make Salome understand its importance. His desire to save Salome (to bring her to transubstantiation) is what pulls him into Herod’s trap.

**The Excess of “Prophet-Head”**

John the Baptist has always already lost his head in his own consciousness because he is always thinking beyond the confines of time. All the events of history, including his own death, occur simultaneously. John refers to this state as “prophet-head,” but it reflects a Christian worldview. The *Saint Plays* are intended to speak as a community of voices in conversation with each other. It is not surprising to see themes
like “prophet-head” visited in multiple works. Ehn’s Joan of Arc hints at her own keen awareness of this worldview as she responds to a guard’s advice. He tries to tell her how to use her final hours on Earth. The First Guard tells her, “Love everything you’re ever going to love all of a sudden, honey, because you’ve come to the end of the line.” Joan replies, “That’s the old line” (*Saint Plays* 4). In the play Joan has moved from the linear existence that would end in death (the severing of the line). She has sidestepped onto a new line within which the eve of her death is of little or no consequence. This moment echoes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s description of the rhizome in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*: “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines or on new ones” (9). Joan has transcended from her material vantage point and can see herself on the surface of multiplicities. Not only does she express her position, she pronounces her transubstantiation with a calm assurance. She is not upset or afraid to become something that demands the obliteration of her ego. All that remains of Joan is passion and action: motion.

Once detached from her “old line” Joan of Arc accesses knowledge detached from her lifetime or geography. When a second angel appears, Joan’s shackles pop off and together they overpower the guards. Joan says to them, “Think about the Columbia River. Think of all the steam buried in Wyoming. Think of all those distant natural mysteries you’re afraid of” (*Saint Plays* 5). Joan wants to explain herself (or to proclaim herself) to those at the wrong end of her sword. Those declarations fall upon deaf ears. The intended audience (the guards) is disconnected from her knowledge because they are still on the “old line.” The guards do not know of these natural wonders, and therefore do not even know what they are afraid of—or that they are afraid at all. At most, their fear
is a dark, drifting, ill-formed thing detached from the guards’ consciousness. Joan is so disconnected from “the old line” that, like John, she no longer sees the old limitations of her joy or her fear.

It may be useful to look to Deleuze and Guattari once again for insight into these fears that plague the worlds of John and Joan. Their book *A Thousand Plateaus* is divided into fairly independent sections called plateaus. In the plateau titled “1914: One or Several Wolves?” they explore Freud’s distinction between neurosis and psychosis, which they believe is a difference of multitudes. When faced with a pack of wolves by the subject called the Wolf-Man, Freud must manipulate the vision until there is only one signifying Wolf. Deleuze and Guattari believe that for Freud, “…it is always a question of bringing back the unity or identity of the person or allegedly lost object. The wolves will have to be purged of their multiplicity” (28). But, Deleuze and Guattari protest, one cannot have a single wolf. There is always a crowd. There is always a pack. In “1914: One or Several Wolves?” they recount a dream:

There is a desert. Again, it wouldn’t make any sense to say that I am in the desert. It’s only a desert because of its ocher color and its blazing, shadowless sun. There is a teeming crowd in it, a swarm of bees, a rumble of soccer players, or a group of Tuareg. I am on the edge of the crowd, at the periphery; but I belong to it, I am attached to it by one of my extremities, a hand or foot. I know that the periphery is the only place I can be, that I would die if I let myself be drawn into the center of the fray, but just as certainly if I let go of the crowd. This is not an easy position to stay in, it is even very difficult to hold, for these beings are in constant motion and their movements are unpredictable and follow no
rhythm. They swirl, go north, then suddenly east; none of the individuals in the
crowd remains in the same place in relation to the others. So I too am in perpetual
motion; all this demands a high level of tension, but it gives a feeling so violent,
almost vertiginous happiness. (Deleuze and Guattari, 29)

In short, “The desert is populous” (Deleuze and Guattari, 30). The tendency of ideas to
multiply rapidly draws out questions about the relationship between the person and the
image that dominates traditional psychoanalysis. Instead they propose that “The wolf,
wolves, are intensities, speeds, temperatures, non-decomposable variable distances”
(Deleuze and Guattari, 32).

In *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*, the guards cannot contemplate the images Joan
gives them. They reflect speeds, intensities, and temperatures more than single, stable
references. To truly contemplate the “steam buried in Wyoming” would mean to
consider the complexity of a powerful and intricate system writhing beneath the surface
of the Earth. It would require the guards to contemplate the mysterious intensities that
occur beneath the flesh. The steam has more in common with the million tiny mouths
across our pores that indicate psychosis, than the lone wolf of neurosis. Perhaps the most
terrifying characteristic of these images is their combination of power and
purposelessness. They do not require a destination, a meaning, or an explanation to be a
force. They simply are. Joan wants her guards to make room for the multiplicity as John
wants Salome to make room for the desert. Their association with intensities only serves
to drive them closer to death.

While Joan experiences fullness once she steps into the light, John is already
overfull. He is spilling over with the knowledge and understanding, and he feels
compelled to foist that understanding upon Salome. Meanwhile, Salome would prefer to see the universe as a much smaller place without such metaphysical complications.

Because Joan’s connection to the divine is rooted in her heart, her heart is the relic she leaves behind on the stage. The final image in Locus (John the Baptist) also involves a relic. The final stage direction reads: “Last light fades from JOHN’s flying head” (Saint Plays 76). The head, which had been the root of John’s connection to the divine, remains as physical evidence of his life and his faith. Like Joan’s heart, it is either too hot or just too full to burn. The duality of the saints’ body (that it is both sinful and an access point to God) melts away into the singular purpose. That which was weak has dissolved, leaving a more pure conduit. As it flies across the stage, there is a sort of power attached to motion. The dismembered parts of John and Joan’s bodies still have the ability to move, and self-propelled motion implies will. In Postmodern Heretics, Heartney addresses how the body was viewed by medieval theology as

far from being separate and separable entities, body and soul are inextricably linked. The elevation of saints to heaven is not complete until their souls are joined by their bodies, and until then, the bodies they leave behind are imbued with special powers which reflect the exaltation of their souls. Meanwhile, living bodies and their senses can become doorways to the divine through mystical experiences which involve real pleasure and pain. (12)

In Ehn’s plays, the doorway opens into a multitude of intensities, and it is a dangerous door to open.

In Ehn’s plays, acknowledging mystery (multitudes) means potentially transcending into the realm of the saint, which can be quite dangerous to one’s bodily
well-being. Even with the dangers, transubstantiation is central to the daily practice of Catholicism. The dead often returns to life.\textsuperscript{11} Inert objects are suspended between life and the afterlife. What was once humming with the movement of their masters, now lies still. The stillness of the relic reminds the faithful that once there was motion—once there was action and passion—there could be again. In the case of the saint, however, the relic transforms memory into reality. The object continues to hum like a tuning fork or a dowsing rod.

Though they appear in different plays, Joan and John have a shared kind of “prophet-head.” “Prophet-head” results from an unavoidable pull toward a destiny for the sainted. The audience can see Joan is drawn to the light, but can only experience that draw by proxy. The light, in and of itself, is mundane. Entering a light would not illicit the response we are witnessing in Joan under non-staged circumstances. As Joan burns at the stake, she describes how she experiences God: “You are always moving towards me, and are moving me towards you, and you are always clear light, with the feel of cool water” (Saint Plays 6).

\textsuperscript{11}Author Paul Auster writes in the second part of his memoir The Invention of Solitude, “There is nothing more terrible, I learned, than having to face the objects of a dead man. Things are inert: they have meaning only in function of the life that makes use of them. When that life ends, the things change, even though they remain the same. They are there and yet not there: tangible ghosts condemned to survive in the world they no longer belong to” (Auster 88).
For Joan, the experience of transcendence is unstable as she is in constant motion. There is no solid object upon which her love can center. Her lover and her love are chaotic, infinite and insatiable. The audience is offered access to this intense desire only through the presence of an intangible light. As previously quoted in the introduction, Bert O. States notes that “…we tend generally to undervalue the elementary fact that theatre—unlike fiction, painting, sculpture, and film—is really a language whose words consist to an unusual degree of things that are what they seem to be” (20). To a certain extent this description is also true of our experience of light. Although it is composed of waves that have their own presence in the physical world, the way we experience light is composed of other things that are a certain substance inside and outside the envelope of light. The builders of medieval European cathedrals also sought out light as a component
of their architecture. The presence of light has often been associated with the divine. Ehn builds upon that tradition while capitalizing on its contemporary associations with pure motion.

The experience of “pure” light is impossible without the illuminated surface. Light, as we perceive it, is always in search of an object to illuminate. Like “knowledge” and “understanding,” two common abstract ideas associated with the word “illumination,” light takes on the shape of that which occupies it. By giving this unfulfilled shaft of light a central focus onstage, the mundane aspects of it convert into a shared desire. Because of the typical conventions of theatrical staging, the audience is denied access to this light. What keeps the audience from approaching the light are the social inhibitions regarding appropriate theatre behavior. Even though the light is a purely symbolic stage direction, the symbolic order that keeps the audience from it is entirely real. But in the end there is a flatness to the light: it reveals, and is not revealed. Instead of a similarly mundane object entering our field of vision, we are at that moment offered the body of the actor, flatly displayed in all of its contradictions and mysteries.

Joan expresses the mysterious transaction she experiences within the illumination to her fellow characters. She uses images they cannot understand, but that might offer an excess of revelation. Her images offer them hints of what it is possible to know and love. Joan believes this difficult, secret understanding rushes her to an early death. She tells the guards “You’re killing me because something loves me more than you know how. I got a lover with a cleaner eye and a longer stride than all your tech can crank” (Saint Plays 5). Though the verbal expression of her relationship is wrapped in the familiar language of love, she claims her death is a result of others’ inability to comprehend the
extent—the limits (or lack thereof)—of this encounter. Though the light falls fully on Joan, the reflections of that light must bounce across those near her. The other characters have no choice in the matter. Joan’s baffled enemies, represented here by the Guards, respond by killing the source of that reflection in hopes of avoiding the mystery of the unfulfilled light: the mystery of pure, flowing love. Of course, when such love is known—when it is realized by the recipient—it must be returned. This return is the source of fear. Ehn describes the call to return this love in his preface to *The Saint Plays*, “We are all charged with the task of turning into saints ourselves, with a responsibility to lose location and enter into a love so radical that identity surrenders to the condition of the metaphor. To live in poetic oscillation with God is to live a poetry free of poetry or a drama free of drama” (ix). As Joan burns to death, she speaks her last line “Nothing to give you but a heart that listens. No love is stronger. No heart more abandoned” (6).

**The Contested Value of Spiritual Pursuits**

Perhaps the most obvious omission from the play *Locus (John the Baptist)* are references to Christ. John the Baptist’s story is closely aligned with the story of Christ, as they are considered contemporaries of one another and are believed to have been raised together. Their relationship is especially evident in the European art tradition (consider Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous painting *Madonna on the Rocks*). But Ehn’s play leaves Christ outside the stage un-bodied. In *Locus (John the Baptist)*, Salome is the only character to mention John the Baptist’s relationship with Christ. She uses it to exemplify her exasperation with John. She tells him, “You did what you came to do. Everybody got all hepped up about the whole untouchable cycle of paradoxes, and you been a
baptizing fool. Baptized that one big fellow who’s still living with his mother and blowing the miters on expensive cherry wood frames with a back saw he doesn’t know how to sharpen in the only shop in town that’ll have him, his dad’s.” Salome views this blundering carpenter as incompetent and devalues John’s “untouchable cycle of paradoxes” as a waste of time (Saint Plays 66). It appears to her these concerns lead nowhere, and she has somewhere to go.

The distance between John and Salome is distilled in the characters’ differing opinions of Salome’s artistic work. John wants Salome to perform a poem for her father as she originally intended. Salome replies that she could not think of one, and will be dancing instead. John eventually concedes to her decision, but asks that she “don’t dance his way. For him. It’s embarrassing. At least dance your way” (67). John’s prefers a cerebral, textually driven art. He prefers the work Salome produces through contemplation. Salome is interested in this kind of work, but decides her audience will not like it. She settles on a highly physical activity that she is comfortable with and, more importantly, she knows her audience (Herod) is comfortable with. Once she decides to dance, Salome attempts to leave John’s trailer, but John knows her departure will lead to John’s death. John takes his cue from Scheherazade and attempts to convince Salome to stay in the trailer with him. He does so by telling her his dreams. These dreams are perfect examples of the “untouchable cycle of paradoxes” (Saint Plays 67). Paradoxes are something Salome does not respect.
John’s plan does not go as he hoped. Instead Salome slips out of the trailer while John is in the middle of telling his dreams. She runs to Herod where she does not have to listen to John speak of “the end of things.” However, her rush from knowledge only speeds them toward the “end of things” from which she seeks ignorance. It is Salome who narrates the end of things when they come to pass: “The lanterns are ripening bright; one sways over John, and one sways over Salome, who is pinned to the stake. John remembers Salome” (*Saint Plays*, 76).

At the end of the play, their mobility has shifted. John’s head flies across the stage full of energy, while Salome is tied to a stake like an animal. His body transcends embodiment; she becomes complicit in her body’s enslavement. It is as though John’s head is repelled from the earth, and Salome’s body is attracted to it. Like a polarized
magnet, it looms above now that it has been cut from the body that grounded it. Jim
Thorpe’s spirit guide explains that his head is moving in a similar way to John’s. She
tells him that “your head is nowhere in the world—the head is impossible. Go away to
the source of the stream and the belly button of loss” (70).

The physical, material aspects of the world make the soulful abundance of
Jim/John’s head an impossibility. They search for knowledge in the desert, only to find
that knowledge ultimately unhinges them from a wholly material consciousness. When
John’s head is severed from his body by Herod all of the energy of transcendence is
released. At that moment John knows “there is a gap to elsewhere through hunger in
wind.” His desires lead him to that gap in the smooth desert space, beyond the surface.
As Jim Thorpe puts it: “The world wishes me elsewhere… I live not on the ground but in
the wish of the world. There is no justice here” (Saint Plays 70-71).

While John’s “prophet-head” and Locus (John the Baptist)’s concurrent timelines
reflect a medieval worldview, Ehn’s play also utilizes postmodern interests in ritual,
performance, and repetition to underscore the relationship between characters afflicted
with “prophet-head.” John recounts his dream of Buddy Holly, Sleepy LaBeef, and Elvis
Presley. The crash of Buddy Holly’s plane opens the play. Holly fell into the desert
space that John the Baptist occupies, further conflating the physical realm of the play
with the “prophet-head” of the drama. In the dream, Buddy Holly is a kind of disciple to
Elvis, as Elvis passes on his knowledge to Holly. Holly learns by mimicking Elvis.
Holly repeats phrases and movements as Elvis performs them. Midway through Sleepy’s
story about his first encounter with Elvis, Holly and Elvis begin performing Holly’s
“Heartbeat” alongside one another. Through ritual some transfer of knowledge has
occurred. The content of that transfer is hidden from the audience, like a magician and an apprentice guarding their secrets. The transfer appears to take place beyond the possibilities of that space in the gap between words and movements, like the real work of sleight of hand takes place in the gap behind the distracting assistant. The audience blinked, and missed it. The excess this gap implies calls to mind Eric Bentley’s definition of theatre in his book, *The Life of Drama*. Bentley states that the essence of theatre is when A impersonates B for C$^2$ (Bentley 150). For Bentley theatre is the impersonation of someone or something that results in an experience that is exponentially larger than the sum of its parts. The transfer of knowledge from Elvis to Holly reflects contemporary mythologies surrounding the process of theatre ritual as well as religious ritual.

Sleepy LaBeef then gives voice to that excess by describing Elvis’ remarkable temperament: “There was nobody or nothing strong enough to break the strings in Elvis, he was that fierce a guitar. He tried to get Jesus and the martial arts to break them, but they couldn’t do it. Some men get their strings broke and never get a hit. Some men die trying to break the strings.” Like John and Joan something remarkable within Elvis drew him toward physical destruction and death. All of the characters in John’s dreams (which he calls “heroes”) find themselves cut off and cut down in the conclusion of those dreams. Narratively they die right at the moment John loses his head. Buddy Holly dies in a plane crash, and his head becomes the backside of the moon, while Jim Thorpe “is cut down by the wind-sword from the mesa. Kissed to oblivion by a breeze.” Elvis Presley joins them in that moment, and he is simply “blown away” (70-73). Even with all of these dire prophecies at his side, no words of the end of things can keep Salome in
the desert trailer: a location without a place. She runs to her father and the familiarity of his tyrannous, malignant desire.

**Malevolent Consumption**

The tyranny of Herod’s desire is the underlying source of John’s disapproval. Salome only sees the symptom of this consumptive desire, Herod’s marriage, as worthy of disapproval. She tells the audience that “Herod marries Herodias. Names too close, for one thing. Then she’s one brother’s niece, and another brother’s wife, and I’m a daughter with five species of relationship to my parents and who cares because there it is.” Even though Salome clearly disapproves of the situation, she greets it with begrudging acceptance. She views this state of affairs as static, final, and irrevocable. John, however, reaches beyond the symptom for something more. “That’s not the problem.” He tells Salome “That’s what people latch onto. But it’s more about his whole desire to pull everything into him and pull nothing out. The kinship business, that’s the tip of the iceberg, that’s nothing” (*Saint Plays* 67). It is Herod’s desire to consume everything without producing anything that John takes issue and collides with.

The consumptive nature of Herod is emphasized by the way he is presented onstage. The stage directions tell that Herod’s first line is to be spoken “Through speakers, like at a drive-up fast food window.” This stage direction sets a tone for the character through association. At this moment, Herod offers a reward to Salome for her dancing. Herod’s offer to Salome is a superficially generous act, but his offer is delivered so casually that it denies the sincere attention that marks generosity. He promises her “Half my kingdom and all that’s in it?” as a question: an uncertain,
incomplete promise so shallow in comparison to her humiliating and self-denying dance offered in exchange. What’s more, Herod’s voice is filtered through speakers, depersonalizing their conversation. Ehn includes a reference to a drive-up window in the stage directions in order to lead the sound designer or reader to a distinct sound quality, recalling for the audience a very specific and often familiar reference point. The association plays up the consumptive aspects of the transaction. The relationship with the drive-up window can be ambiguous. The customer parts with some amount of money in return for life-sustaining food: the relationship then appears to be mutually beneficial. However, popular opinions regarding the quality of the food and the capitalist self-interest fueling such a transaction quickly dissolves any thoughts of benevolence. Through the drive-up window, customers trades their livelihoods for not-quite-so life-sustaining mystery food that could contain undisclosed malevolent ingredients, resulting in unforeseen consequences. By paralleling the drive-up window with Herod’s offerings, the audience might immediately be suspicious of this vague “half-kingdom.” Perhaps what is offered comes with its own undisclosed malevolence (74).

Salome sees the insincerity and does not grasp at this false promise for power. Instead she has come to make a demand of Herod. Interestingly, she hesitates right at the edge of her request. It is Herodias that prompts her request for John the Baptist’s head on a silver platter. Herodias’ involvement emphasizes how closed and controlled Salome’s sphere of influence is. Herod and Herodias are closely associated, as though they have a single will. Herod and Herodias have already been aligned in Salome’s description of them. Herodias’ urging of Salome is the only line in the play given to her character that
does not follow and echo a line by Herod. After John is captured, Herod and Herodias taunt him.

HEROD. Welcome to our picnic, John.

HERODIAS. Yes, John, yes.

HEROD. Are you hungry?

HERODIAS. Are you hungry, yes?

HEROD. You don’t eat.

HERODIAS. Eat, eat. (75)

Herod and Herodias express a single mind and a single will that is dominated by Herod. When one reflects on Herod’s promise of half a kingdom it becomes apparent that their wills are one. Herodias not only knows what Salome will ask, but is a driving force behind it. So this request could be simplified to “Herod is asking Herod to deliver John’s head on a silver platter,” using his family members as vessels of his will. John knows and understands too much about Herod’s power and its structure, and this knowledge gives John a kind of power over Herod. Therefore Herod must bring this outlier under his control in order to solidify his position. Herod must restore order to his universe, and his full control can only occur once John is contained. Herod prefaces the death of John by asking, “Who baptizes you?” He does not wait for an answer but continues, “I have a talent in that area. I baptize thee, in the name of all that’s mine.” Herod’s baptism is a vain attempt to possess John’s power through imitating ritual. Herod attempts to corral John’s rogue desires under his control by claiming the right to baptize the baptizer. Regardless of Herod’s attempts to destroy John’s power through violence, the flying head continues its transfiguration into the “trout in the air in the hand of the bear,” knocked by
the forces of wind and water (*Saint Plays* 75). Instead of destroying John’s power, Herod’s violence has relocated it into a new form.

**Fluidity in the Analogical Imagination and Deleuze and Guattari**

Deleuze and Guattari have much to say about the relationship between desire and destruction. For them, desire is a kind of force that moves under the surface of the body without organs. The philosophical recognition of the BwO is central to their “Capitalism and Schizophrenia” project, but in the sixth plateau of their work *A Thousand Plateaus* “November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs,” they caution against certain practices and approaches they deem destructive. One may become a body without organs by drug addiction: stretching out in a cold, unfeeling repose untouchable by sensations. One may see the plane of consistencies through the intense pain of the masochist, converting the system into a monolithic existence. Both masochism and drug addiction as pathways to the BwO are frowned upon by Deleuze and Guattari. They explain that the BwO is opposed not to the organs but that organization of the organs called the organism” (158). To become the BwO is not to destroy oneself, but to open oneself up to different connections and passages. One must “distinguish the BwO from its doubles: empty, vitreous bodies, cancerous bodies, totalitarian and fascist” (165). The energy of that desire is not moving anywhere: it does not extend toward a climax. It finds new lines of flight, and follows them.

Some aspects of John and Joan’s transubstantiation into saints reflects Deleuze and Guattari’s description of transubstantiation into the BwO. John is clearly making new connections and lines of flight through his dreams. While his dreams yield to some
attempts at signification, some parts remain enigmatic. John continues to express these connections, experimenting with their possible limits. Instead attempting to confine his dreams through interpretation, he lines them all up and links them together through vague interpretations. John continues to question the surface of the water as it flows through his fingers, led by his dreams. Joan is pulled by her desire into a plane of consistency. Her language ceases to reflect the stratification demanded of her by her world. She no longer organizes her body. Both John and Joan try to lead others in the practices that led to their post-organs’ transformation. Deleuze and Guattari warn what the consequences of dismantling the strata might be. Elements of the strata try to convince the body:

You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you’re just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted—otherwise you’re just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement—otherwise you’re just a tramp. (159)

John and Joan encounter this resistance from Joan’s guards, Salome, and Herod. This resistance leads eventually to the moment of their deaths. The BwO is the hive inside, and such a force is dealt with distrustfully by those attached to signification and representation. The hive cannot be ignored, and so it is eventually destroyed.

When John is lured into Herod’s camp by Salome tied to a stake, Salome is the head John can’t resist, and his desire to baptize all that he can in order to broadcast justice turns on him. Herod knows John’s desire always dictates his actions regardless of the consequences, and Herod uses this knowledge to his advantage. He is willing to trade the dignity of his daughter. As John approaches the head he is compelled to baptize, he is
empty-handed. He reaches behind his back and says “You know, when I reach my hand out, I find water” (75). Though he is stopped before he can produce the water and baptize Salome, her question is answered. The water is coming from him. His search for the source and then the “other place” where the wind knocked Jim has transformed him into the water’s source.

Instead of following the doctrinal story of John’s head simply being severed, Herod first boils his head in a cauldron while he is still alive. He then dies before the sword is even brought to his neck. Salome describes this moment: “John’s blind head is pulled from the corn-water, squiggling like a balloon let go as his last breath escapes him” (76). The water pouring from his hand becomes the boiling water under which his head is submerged. What had cooled his throat in the desert now scars it. The water had once flowed, but in Herod’s pot it swirls with a different kind of heat and energy, transformed from water to weapon, and from life to violence.

Like Joan, John’s dreams and visions often revolved around water. Joan used the Columbia River and the steam under Wyoming as manifestations of her passionate relationship with God. These images feature impossibly vast quantities of water containing unimaginable force. These images overwhelm and propel her to also defy containment. John’s waters are much smaller in quantity, but are still a powerful force. Joan is swept away by them, while John is compelled to locate, collect, and distribute them. The selflessness of this need to distribute such a valuable resource in the desert is what drives Herod’s hate. Herod hates what he cannot comprehend and control.

Water is a central feature of John’s dreams. The scarcity of water in this desert is pointed out by Salome. She asks John “Where do you find water in a desert to baptize
with, anyway?” (66). By pointing out its scarcity, the audience is alerted to the precious nature of this resource in the world of the play. By noting the impossibility of finding water enough to baptize, Salome also relates baptism with the “untouchable cycle of paradoxes” that make up the core of John’s preaching. The impossible and extravagant act of baptizing in the desert brings out a thirst.

John brings Jim Thorpe into the world of the play through the power of his dreams, and when he does the first thing Jim does is take a drink. He is kneeling by a lake in a vulnerable position. His thirst has overcome any wariness he might have and he “drinks like a deer” (67). John’s description implies he has lowered his face to the surface of the water, exposing his neck to the hillside, making it long for the sword. He does not see men walking up behind him. These strangers identify themselves as the Validation Committee and hit him over the head with a baseball bat, taking his medals. This moment reproduces the most tragic moment in Thorpe’s public life. In 1912 Thorpe won Olympic gold medals in the pentathlon and the decathlon, making him one of the great all-around athletes of his day. He also participated at the professional level in multiple sports, which only adds to that legacy. Because Thorpe participated in a semi-professional baseball league before he went to the Olympics, his medals were taken away. As a character with this level of athletic ability, he should be capable of defending himself, but in his quest to satisfy his thirst, he risks taking the posture of a victim. Drinking opens up an opportunity for the Validation Committee to take what he would not have willingly parted with. By taking his medals away, they have taken his material

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12 The act of drinking out of a river with one’s face touching the surface of the water is significant to Christians as well as other religions. In Judges Chapter Seven, the judge Gideon thins the ranks of his army by having them drink from a river. Those who drank with their faces in the river were sent home, while those who drank from cupped hands stayed to fight.
goods as well as his honor, labeling him a cheater and a fraud. In reality many of his peers played semi-professional ball, but Thorpe was an honest man who believed in justice, and so he spoke truthfully about his past. His honesty led directly to his punishment.

Even after his humiliation, Jim continues to follow the water. He seeks to satisfy his thirst as an old man. He follows the route of a small spring toward its source. He shuns food in order to search the mesa for his spirit guide. John tells us that “He’s the master of his tongue and belly. He gives it all away.” This is a trait prophets like John and Jim share. For the prophet nothing can be kept or contained within the confines of the body. Instead it spills out like water. Prophets are searchers and pilgrims. Jim looks through the flowing surface of the water to “The red bottom of the stream is the hidden message behind the sign.” As he looks, the illusion of the stream falls away leaving the message behind the sign. This takes the form of a bear: his spirit guide. Like Jim, bears are creatures who find sustenance from the waters. The bear points Jim to the edge of the mesa, where he is knocked by the wind. In John’s words “Jim Thorpe is cut by wind-sword from the mesa. Kissed to oblivion by a breeze.” This process is phrased more succinctly by Herod, who describes John’s mirrored impulses as he seeks to baptize Salome: “He can’t resist the most precious head of the girl. The one he is compelled to baptize; compelled by dryness to find water, compelled by water to find the source, compelled by the source to find the other place” (70-74).

Ehn’s vision of Saint John and Saint Joan reflect the mysteries of the Analogical Imagination and how existing within that paradigm might influence the way one interacts with other people who do not view the world through that paradigm. Within the
perspective of the Analogical Imagination, John and Joan are able to transition
seamlessly between a plane of higher consciousness and the material world. The fluidity
Ehn depicts reflects the postmodern thought of Deleuze and Guattari while remaining
true to the Analogical Imagination. The metaphysical plane is expansive and
overwhelming, and these traits make it difficult for John and Joan to express in language
what they experience. This difficulty leads to frustration. A makeshift solution then
presents itself. Both characters depend on expansive visions of overwhelming natural
landscapes to approximate the unseen plane they access. Even though the metaphysical
plane eludes characters like Salome and Joan’s Guards, the vast landscapes experienced
in a state of “prophet-head” are populous. Enigmatic figures such as Michael the
Archangel and Jim Thorpe wander in and out of their prophets’ landscapes, leading them
forward.

The figures populating the metaphysical plane lead the characters experiencing
“prophet-head” toward their gruesome death. The dismemberment of their physical
bodies becomes an external expression of what is already true internally. Though John
and Joan forsee the violent results of their choices, they find those actions irresistible. At
their deaths, John and Joan transform into portals between both realms they inhabit. The
heart and the head (relics of the saints) keep the expansive spirit of the saint anchored in
the physical world.
In Ehn’s plays featuring *Saint John* and *Saint Joan*, God moves toward the saints. That movement draws John and Joan into a more Analogical world that they struggle to explain to others. The Analogical world has little tolerance for stasis and static borders: a trait it shares with a Body without Organs. In their plays, John and Joan abandon worldviews that limit location through the structures of time and space. This “prophet-head” moves them toward their own death. As Joan grows in passion, she loses all regard for her own physical well-being. John’s need to baptize overwhelms his knowledge that Salome will bring him to his death. These relationships burn white hot and demand absolute assimilation from their human participants.

These martyrdoms, however, are the exception to a typical life of spiritual practice, not the rule. Religions are mostly composed of followers who desire a divine encounter that leads to transcendence but look to avoid the spilling of their own blood to get it. For those who do not possess such connections to a divine passion, and do not have the voice of the archangel Michael to guide them, the lives of the saints can be important totems that guide those in search of answers. In the plays *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)*, *Pain (Eulalia)*, *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* and *The Freak (George)*, Ehn explores the complicated relationship between saints and those who seek after their totemic powers. These four plays occupy the next two chapters. This chapter addresses *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)* and *The Freak (George)* because they focus on the non-saint’s encounter with the saint.
This chapter notes how the shift in perspective from the saint to the non-saint influences the plays. Many of the notable trends in *Locus (John the Baptist)* and *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)* are inverted in *The Freak (George)*. This chapter explores those differences and speculates on how those differences comment on other *Saint Plays*. *The Freak (George)* offers interesting insights into the status of the object in Ehn’s *Saint Plays* and the role objects play in the Analogical Imagination. Both *The Freak (George)* and *16670 (Maxmilian Mary Kolbe)* take advantage of the stage’s easy transition from one time and place to another in order to highlight Analogical views of time/space. They also highlight the exchange between the saint and the non-saint, especially focusing on the sacrifices required of the non-saint in order for the saint to accumulate power.

**The Perspective of the Saint and the Non-Saint**

Within the plays *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)*, *Pain (Eulalia)*, *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* and *The Freak (George)*, saints are presented as characters embodied on the stage. This aspect is consistent with the way they are presented in the previous plays discussed: *Locus (John the Baptist)* and *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*. However, in *16670 (Maxmilian Mary Kolbe)*, *Pain (Eulalia)*, *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* and *The Freak (George)* Ehn’s focus shifts to non-sainted characters who encounter the saints for which the plays are named. Although the saints continue to play an important role in the plays, the narrative is no longer driven by their biography (or hagiography) alone. Instead the saint serves as a vehicle of exploration for the non-sainted character. The non-sainted character uses the saint to move through a crisis of faith into a different consciousness. Now the protagonists are everyday people in search of extraordinary answers.
Even though characters from other time periods were embodied in *Locus (John the Baptist)* (such as Buddy Holly, Sleepy LaBeef, and Elvis Presley), those characters were quarantined within John’s mind. Though other characters (like Salome in this example) might feel the presence of these apparitions, the characters are still in the realm of the dream. In *Locus (John the Baptist)*, John and Jim may have shared a fate with one another, but they had no direct impact on the development of one another’s fate. They could not influence one another’s narrative, and were therefore just parallel pilgrims walking the same path. In other words, even though John knew well the faces of his prophecies, they did not regard him.

In the four plays that occupy these two chapters, the protagonists are people reaching out and accessing the hagiography of the saint. This change in directionality is a tremendous shift while viewing these plays with the concept of *hecho poetico* (the poetic fact) in mind. In *Locus (John the Baptist)* and *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*, the site of contemplation is the life and death of the saint exclusively. The play is a kind of icon that emphasizes internal, solitary confrontation with the saint. By altering our access point to an ordinary person who is encountering the mysterious aspects of the saint alongside the audience, a new mediator is presented. The emphasis is shifted away from the internal life of the saint and toward those seeking access to the world of the saint and the influence of the saint on everyday life.

This chapter addresses two previously mentioned plays: *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)* and *The Freak (George)*. These plays focus on the saint’s influence upon the consciousness of the non-saint. Here exposure to the saint changes the way a non-saint understands the world (s)he lives in. A non-saint’s path is interrupted and drastically
altered by the entrance of the saint. Not only is the path altered, but the presence of the saint permanently alters the perception of that path. There are several motifs that reappear in these plays with notable variations. The most apparent in *16670 (Maxmilian Mary Kolbe)* and *The Freak (George)* is the distance between the saint and the non-saint marked by thresholds in the physical space of the stage. These thresholds must be crossed in order for characters to transcend into different ways of seeing the world. These bridges lead characters into different states of consciousness and worldviews more aligned with the permeable states of Joan and John. These states are also more in line with a medieval Catholic worldview as described in the first and second chapters, and reflect an Analogical worldview.

While the previous chapter explored the implications of living in an Analogical perspective, *16670 (Maxmilian Mary Kolbe)* and *The Freak (George)* trace the journey one takes to arrive at that state of consciousness. Here exposure begins with the narrative instead of hearing the voice of God as Paul did on the road to Damascus and Joan does in her plate of light. The non-saint must hear the hagiography. In short, the saint speaks first. This first contact opens a dialogue, but *16670 (Maxmilian Mary Kolbe)* and *The Freak (George)* concentrate on the saint’s side of the conversation.

**Objects in The Freak (George)**

*The Freak (George)* focuses on the relationship between the iconic Saint George (most famous for slaying a dragon) and a young girl from Stockholm named Gunna. She helps George become the saint he wishes to be, but her efforts cause her to lose a significant and unique part of herself. It was first performed in March, 1991, at BACA
Downtown in Brooklyn under the direction of Friz Ertl among thirteen other *Saint Plays* (Guernsey 399). It was also produced by Cal Rep at the Armory in 2008 and has received several college workshops and productions.¹³

*The Freak (George)* explores the role of objects (props) in theatre as well as the role of relics in the Analogical Imagination. *The Freak (George)* retells the story of Saint George and his dragon, but it begins with a girl named Gunna born in Stockholm in 1957 with her own pair of wings. Her wings are a small piece of magic that symbolically and physically distinguishes her from those around her. It is a miraculous attribute, and other characters regard the wings with awe. This physical aspect soon becomes a sign of her innate spiritual powers. Her body becomes precious to her peers, and tactile connection to her is in high demand. The Narrator tells us, “The other boys and girls would try to touch her, or even a piece of her clothing when she was in these ecstasies, hoping that they would wake up the next day with the same abilities” (119). The children in Gunna’s classroom treat her with the same reverence that they would a saint. They search for access to a higher plane of existence by touching Gunna as one would a relic. Pilgrims expect relics to take on the sacred nature of their former owner. The hope is that proximity influences the nature of someone or something: that touching the physical manifestation of spiritual powers transfers that power. This reflects the Analogical Imagination’s assumption that the physical world retains aspects of the spiritual world it clothes.

The script dictates Gunna is played by a puppet at the moment in *The Freak (George)* where Gunna’s peers are trying to touch her. Like any other prop, a puppet is

¹³ There are no significant reviews addressing *The Freak (George)* specifically. See Shirlie Gottlieb’s review of the Cal Rep production on page 36.
also impervious to the damage that plagues flesh. A puppet does not need to worry about
the quick decay of old age: its composition will most likely outlast that of its maker. It
does not need to worry about being taken apart or losing a piece. It can be reassembled
without any loss. In this way the play signals Gunna has not yet become human,
because she has not yet become mortal. Like the relic, the staged puppet is given
characteristics and traits accepted by its audience as believable attributes of a human-
made object.

Figure 6: Betsy Rosen and Allyson Harkey in Factory 449’s 2010 production of The
Saint Plays.
Source: C Stanley Photography

14 Here I am referring to the general approach the West has toward puppetry, not to puppetry traditions that
ascribe religious status to these objects.
Gunna’s wings become a marker of her youth as well as a symbol of her innocence and curious independence. The Narrator describes Gunna’s thirst for knowledge. She tells the audience: “Life held so many possibilities for her that she wanted to know all about it: about its past, present, and future, about teeth and sins and towns. She would stay up all hours drinking espresso coffee and shifting hats on her head, talking rapidly with her parents on the highest plane” (119). This thirst goes beyond the energy, curiosity, and innocence associated with children on a broad scale. It is uniquely possessed by Gunna. Other children she encounters wish for wings of their own, but cannot gain them for themselves. Gunna was born with wings. The distance between Gunna’s physical and spiritual composition and the composition of those around her is great. In the play, this distance is shown by the choice to use non-human objects to represent the infant and child forms of Gunna.

As the Narrator describes Gunna’s birth, the script dictates that a light is projected on the upstage wall with the shadow of a moth flying inside it (119). Here the important image is a shadow, or a void. Gunna’s birth is represented by a lack: a ghost. This is reminiscent of the work of Ana Mendieta, who took photographs of the impression her body left behind in different settings. Instead of focusing on the elements that comprise the image, the mind is drawn to movement and action. One views where life has been and left its mark. The shadow flutters in front of the audience, flickering with energy and motion.

In addition to its position as a lack or a ghost, the image of the infant Gunna is further removed from the physical realm because it is a two-dimensional illusion like a Pepper’s ghost. It is ephemeral by nature. Any attempt to touch the moth in the light
would be futile. The audience can only watch at a distance, noting the presence of the character even through the absence of the body. Even though Gunna is not a saint, Ehn is using many common characteristics of saints to represent Gunna as a child. It is as though she undergoes the process of sainthood in reverse. Before she is a body, she is an image. Meanwhile the saint is first a body, then an image. Typically a non-saint first experiences the sainted body through an image, and that image (as discussed in the first chapter) is capable of action, even if that action is uncommon. Gunna’s character shares other similarities with her sainted counterparts. She has a presence that remains consistent even though it appears in multiple vessels. Some are flesh and others are crafted by humans. The moth’s shadow, the puppet, and the actors all represent Gunna at different points in the play, just as multiple relics can represent a saint in the Catholic tradition. She is also separate in temperament from her peers. She is born philosophizing on the highest plane. Her position is raised physically through her power of flight and mentally through her power of conversation.

But, does her temperament ill equip her to survive in the world in which she has been placed? This is a question that can be asked about several of the characters in The Saint Plays. The previously discussed Saint Joan of Arc and the yet-to-be discussed Saint Barbara are also disconnected from the world in which they live. When Gunna is ten years old, the character is portrayed by a puppet with large white wings. While still more substantial than the presence of the shadow, the crafted lightness of the puppet flies easily next to heavy, thick human flesh. Gunna is relieved of all the trappings that accompany the human condition like distrust, cynicism, failure, and hopelessness. Her
firm and constant skin is immune to soft bruising. She circles above her classmates undaunted and unbound. Her form only changes as Gunna enters her dream.

**Embodiment in the Dream**

Once Gunna enters the dream, she is no longer played by a puppet. The puppet is replaced by an actor. The character of Gunna becomes grounded in the familiar vessel of the body. Before Gunna soared above, her conversation and education had been abstract. She asked questions and learned information without the need to touch the Earth. In other words, she learned through language, not experience. In her dream, Gunna comes face-to-face with history. She becomes involved in the workings of this world. In the dream-state, Gunna is faced with hard decisions and the potential for great loss. Slowly her saintly status has changed. She is experiencing an inverted trajectory from the canonical saints like Joan, John, and Eulalia. She began as an image: fleeting and abstract. She was an impression composed only of light. As she grew she became an icon: a work of art with some human characteristics. As she enters the dream she is blood and bones, just like her classmates. The only remnants of her former status are her wings.

In her dream Gunna meets a knight who wants to be a saint, but who is locked in a dungeon. Here the knight is actively seeking religious status. He puts great importance on titles, and he is keenly aware of the steps needed to achieve such a status. The young man’s expectation of (and entitlement to) sainthood colors the way he responds to Gunna. In their plays, John and Joan do not mention sainthood. The distinction is given to them, but they do not seek it out. Sainthood is a byproduct of their desires, not a desire in itself.
When Gunna enters she finds the forlorn young man in chains, and he mistakes her for an angel. Instead of reverence, the young man offers scorn. “You’re too late” he tells Gunna. “I died a long time ago” Gunna asks him what it is he wants, to which he replies “I want to be a saint.” The Knight does not share the awe of Gunna’s classmates. The sense of wonder expected when in the presence of a/the miraculous body has been abandoned. The Knight knows the rules, but not the power of divine passion. Gunna’s innocence leads her to ask “Do you deserve to be [a saint].” The knight avoids the question by replying “I have been very virtuous. It would mean so much to me” (120). Gunna interprets this as an honest reply in the affirmative, and offers to help.

**Saint George**

Gunna eventually discovers that the young man is Saint George. At this point in the play, she does not know his name and simply thinks of him as the Knight. Unlike any of the other martyr examined in this dissertation, the title saint of *The Freak (George)* looks to the non-sainted Gunna as a point of supernatural authority. The distance between *The Freak (George)* and the other *Saint Plays* reveals itself in other aspects of the play. Gunna comes to him while he is in prayer, like messenger from God. Even though he sees her as an angel, the Knight (George) misunderstands the intention of prayer in Christianity, and he treats Gunna as a servant sent to fulfill his wishes. Instead of desiring the will of God, George wants the title. In the other *Saint Plays* examined in this dissertation the saints have no interest in earthly titles, but the very existence of such a saint calls into question the motivations those the other plays have revered by its association. George has an eye on his legacy, and a firm grasp on the bureaucracy that
controls it. Insight into why Saint George is as devious and, in a word, “un-saintly” may be found in the long and controversial history of his canonization.

According to *The Passion and Miracles of the Great Martyr and Victorious Wonderworker Saint George*, an account of his legend from a Russian menologion that especially amplifies the miracles of Saint George, George was a Roman soldier from Cappadocia who served under Diocletian. His father was killed for being a Christian and his widowed mother returned to her home in Palestine. George is said to be a handsome and brave young man who earned the rank of trophy-bearer to the Emperor (2). The author of *The Passion and Miracles of the Great Martyr and Victorious Wonderworker Saint George* explains, “When Diocletian cruelly decided to destroy the Christians, St. George was attached to his suite… he decided that the time for the salvation of his soul had come. Saint George at once divided all his riches, gold, silver and costly clothing among the poor and set at liberty the slaves who were with him…” (3). Such is the life of Saint George as it has passed down into legend. The story becomes more colorful as George approaches his death. After admonishing Diocletian for proposing genocide, George is bound to the rim of a spiked wheel and then thrown into a lime pit for three days. He then endures iron sandals with spikes strapped to his feet, remains un-phased through beatings, is forced to drink poison, and finally is beheaded. While experiencing these trials, George performs many miracles including raising oxen from the dead. Even more astonishing, according to his legend he raises a man from the dead who had been entombed for hundreds of years.

The tortures of Saint George are extremely gruesome (and also quite creative), but they do not appear to cause him any physical harm. His mere survival adds to his
miracles. He truly earns his title of “Victorious Wonderworker.” Even with the extent of his legend, George was not always assured a position as a saint. Some scholars have noted that the overwhelming nature of his supernatural prowess has stood as evidence against his existence for many church officials. According to Jonathan Good’s investigation into the growth of Saint George’s popularity in England titled The Cult of Saint George, there is little documentation of George’s life and he remained obscure until the sixth century, long after his presumed death (21). Most of George’s legend is occupied by his tortures and his eventual death, and lack of information about his life has stood against him. There is no solid grounding in historical evidence. Still, saints with extreme narratives have often been popular with many Christian populations even while they were not always respected by the clergy. In a document that establishes a canon of saints credited to Pope Gelasius (492-496) called the Decretum Gelasianum, there is a cynical tone toward awarding martyrs like George the status of sainthood. In response to the question of why some legends are not read to the community as a part of official doctrine, the author writes,

According to ancient customs and with singular wariness, however, certain legends are not read, because even the names of those who wrote them are not known, and other legends… are thought to have been written by unbelievers or idiots, such as those of a certain Cyricus and Julietta, and George, and others.

(Good 26)

But George’s popularity continued to grow unabated. The details of George’s martyrdom were changed in order to make it more believable in the seventh and eighth centuries.
Most notably, in the newer versions George only dies once (Good 27). George becomes the patron saint of a variety of categories including agriculture, crusading, and chivalry. Perhaps it is the unrelenting assent of Saint George that inspires Ehn’s unflattering portrait. Even though George’s story is sensational, and his authenticity has been openly questioned from the early medieval church on, his legacy comes to represent a powerful nation. If his legacy were given sentience (as it has been given in Ehn’s play), it would be reasonable to imagine his consciousness would be ambitious. Ambition does not appear to be a quality Ehn admires. This is evidenced by Ehn privileging less-celebrated saints in some instances. For example Ehn chooses the less renowned Saint Eulalia of Merida over the much more celebrated Eulalia of Barcelona to be title figure in his play *Pain (Eulalia)*. These two saints are often thought to be the same person, but like George, Eulalia of Barcelona has a more theatrical martyrdom than her double from Merida. Ehn chose the more humble, naturalistic legend for his play.

According to the Analogical Imagination, the relics left by the saint are imbued with aspect of that saint. It is possible from an Analogical perspective to infer that Saint George, who has attained celebrity status against all odds, might have left that ambitious aspect of his personality behind in his bones. Ehn capitalizes on this possibility in *The Freak (George)*. The many miracles attributed to his relics and the wealth of effigies carved after his image also stands as evidence to the tenacity of George’s legend. It is also possible that the finally violent portrait of Saint George in Ehn’s *The Freak (George)* could be related to the areas of life for which George is a patron. Some examples of these are the concepts of chivalry and the historical events of the Crusades. If the sanctified and empowered spirit of Saint George has associations with the Crusades (even
though his patronage is for a more general concept of “crusading”), then that spirit shares responsibility for the crusaders’ actions which were violent. Such aggression does not fit well with the Ehn’s depictions of other saints in this collection. In *The Saint Plays*, violence may lead to glory, but it is not glorified.

**Rituals and Relics**

In *The Freak (George)*, Gunna finds the saint in her dreams. Before entering her dream, Gunna has not experienced treachery first-hand. She has only learned about it abstractly through questions. Gunna realizes that history and cultural events have shaped the content of her life. At the same time she had so far been fortunate enough to avoid experiencing treachery or evil herself. Without this personal experience she has a lessened understanding as to how history shapes the way others see her as well as the way she sees herself. She perceives herself living in a bubble beyond the reach of evil. From this perspective she is more than willing to take the Knight at his word. Gunna, with the selflessness of a saint, offers to help the Knight achieve his desires. The Knight tells Gunna that in order to be a saint he must first be baptized. Gunna offers to take his shoe and perform the ceremony herself: “I can baptize you right now” (*Saint Plays*120). She is ready and willing to do what the Knight asks, but she does not understand the bureaucracy needed to complete the ritual.

Religious bureaucracies are dependent upon their relationship with ritual to maintain power. By controlling access to rituals, a group of people within a religion can control access to the divine. In his book *Sacred Places in Modern Western Culture*, Paul Post defines ritual as “more or less a repeatable sequence of actions which take on a
symbolic dimension through formalization, stylization, and their situation in place and
time” (7). Baptism is a formalized ritual, like many approaches to accessing the divine
such as prayer. Unlike prayer, baptism is intended as an action performed for the
community: it is exclusively a public profession. While prayer is a private act of
communication, baptism is a public act of dedication and it is a sacrament. The
sacraments are a regulated aspect of Catholicism.

When George asks Gunna if she is qualified perform the sacraments herself,
Gunna replies “Won’t it be good enough? I have a jackknife” (Saint Plays 121). This
line exemplifies the distance between Gunna’s idea of a baptism ritual and George’s.
Even though Gunna is willing, she has not been ordained by her community to administer
the sacrament of baptism, Saint George, who knows all of the rules, rejects her offer in
favor of the more traditional mechanisms of the Church. Paul Post expands on his
definition of ritual by adding, “On the one hand individuals and groups express their
ideas and ideals, their mentalities and identities through these rituals, and, on the other
hand, the ritual actions shape, foster, and transform these ideas, mentalities, and
identities” (8). George and Gunna have widely differing ideas on how the ritual of
baptism needs to be performed, and this difference expresses what they each believe is
the ritual’s intention. Gunna’s reality begins to transform, when she decides to baptize
George’s shoe in the way he believes it should be done instead of the way she believes it
should be done. His mentality toward the spiritual begins to overwhelm hers as soon as
she believes the form of his ritual is appropriate and her own is less appropriate. Gunna
no longer sees herself as a proper administer of grace, and her status as a master of her
own rituals is diminished.
Once the decision is made, Gunna must take possession of the Knight’s shoe. The crossing of the shoe from the Knight’s hand into Gunna’s is marked by a loud pop. The Narrator describes this moment: “The article made it through the invisible pane of time and appeared in Gunna’s present” (Saint Plays 121). This transaction is marked physically by the passing of the shoe and the invasive presence of a particularly sudden sound. John and Joan along with yet-to-be-discussed characters like Maggie and Liz slip between times and planes without any sounds to mark that passage. For these characters time ebbs and flows inconsistently, until all the times blend into one. Unlike the characters themselves, Saint George’s shoe is inert and lifeless. The shoe travels from one subject to another with no will of its own. It must be pushed into a new role. Hence the palpable pop: the sound of that transubstantiation. Once pushed into life, it takes on new meaning and significance. The shoe, like any relic, is imbued with some part of Saint George that is now the material representation of him to the world. It carries enough of him that it can stand in for baptizing all of him. The management of ritual by authorities is central to The Freak (George). It is managed through theatrical and performance traditions. Those traditions bring life to Analogical objects.

Ritual Authority

Alice Rayner describes the passage from life into death as an enigmatic moment. Death crosses paths with life imperceptibly, as one is replaced with the other:

Simply because one has to take notice of the death of the other, that notice cannot coincide with the moment of death, which in any case is not a single moment but
a slower leave-taking that has no absolute point in time, only a before and an
after, which are representations of the moments surrounding death. (Rayner 10)

Hauntings of this non-moment echo throughout Ehn’s *Saint Plays*. The inability to
pinpoint the exact moment when change happens swirls at the heart of many of the
mysterious and poetic aspects of the plays. Processes that are common and mundane
become explosions of uncertainty as characters struggle to tie their moment to a chair and
force it to produce its secrets. In previous plays, the text has surrounded the “no absolute
point in time” that is death. The text has viewed death from the inside out with John and
Joan narrating the moment of their own martyrdom. They knew what the moment of
death was, though they struggled to express that non-moment to those deeply rooted in
the earth beneath their still-living toes.

There is a different kind of moment (but with a similar “no absolute point in
time”) between Gunna and the Knight. The moment Gunna and the Knight share is a
ritual. The shoe’s ownership and representative status is ambiguous as it passes from one
to the other. There is a “pop” as the hermeneutically sealed bubble of time is broken.
The audience watches the boot arrive in Gunna’s hand, seeing only the still waters, while
there is a whirlpool brewing underneath or perhaps a more appropriate image for George
would be a dragon stirring in its depths. The journey of the shoe is experienced
externally. Like death, its fluidity is only understood by those experiencing it, not by
those witnessing it. When the time comes, the moment is just out of reach; just beyond
comprehension. Connecting back to the first chapter, writer and filmmaker Jalal Toufic
maintains in his essay (*Vampires*: *An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*) that death is
experienced by a witness at a distance:
not because death is the extinction of life and hence cannot be experienced, but because it is stolen, experienced by another, by the one who replaces one there, the double, hence by another character/other characters. That is, even when undeath happens to the one who died, it is in the form of spectacle, of which s/he is the spectator. And it is then the most difficult to accept to be a spectator. Maybe it is in death that we can experience the death of another, becoming the spectator of the spectator. (Toufic 174)

As Gunna spectates the passing of the shoe in order to baptize it in her blood (testing her own life upon it) she foreshadows her own passing. She understands the possibility of her own transubstantiation. By standing as witness to the shattering of the invisible pane, she becomes aware that passage is possible. The door between Gunna and the Knight is unlocked because ritual practice made Gunna aware that the door is unlocked. She is no longer protected in the safety of her bubble. At that moment it becomes possible for her to be carried (along with the shoe) back through the pane, into the Knight’s hands. The illusion of the seal is broken.

The Knight’s heavy shoe becomes Gunna’s burden, and her quest. It becomes her relic. The Knight (who Gunna has still not learned at this point is Saint George) has given her an object that is attached to some part of his soul so that he might gain immortality. In Locus (John the Baptist) and Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc), relics are representative of their connection to otherworldly existences. Their relics are what was left behind after the corruption of the world had been violently torn away. What was left were parts of their body too pure to be destroyed by the hands of human agents. These relics are symbols of sacrifice. In The Freak (George), the Knight thrusts an object of
defense and of war through history and into Gunna’s waiting hands. It is not flesh. When she possesses it, a certain knowledge seeps through with it, trapped and transported by its former owner.

Before she enters the dream, Gunna flies with a beautiful purposelessness. Ehn describes her undaunted flights around the heads of other schoolchildren as “ecstasies” (“Saint Plays” 119). She flies to the Pope carrying the Knight’s shoe with purpose and direction. She takes the time to decorate her wings with gold before presenting herself to the Pope. She no longer believes that wings alone are impressive enough, as the audience might assume. When she arrives the Pope agrees. The Pope is not in awe of a girl with wings. He gives her an audience in spite of his archbishop’s reservations about her fame, but when she leaves, the Pope comments “They look on her as on an angel. But she is just a girl with wings. The freak!” (“Saint Plays” 122). If Gunna wanted to gain favor with the Pope, hiding her wings would be a better choice. Instead she chooses to celebrate them with golden adornments, misunderstanding the reaction her wings would elicit.

When I asked Ehn why the portrait of Saint George and the Pope are so scathing, he told me, “Another task of The Saint Plays is to question the Church” (Personal Interview 2). This scene between the Pope and Gunna is reminiscent of the way Saint Joan of Arc has sometimes been depicted in art. In George Bernard Shaw’s play Saint Joan (1923), Cauchon, the Bishop of Beauvais, explains how Joan’s “heresy” will lead to the downfall of the Church. Cauchon’s anger develops into a monologue that condemns her because:

She acts as if she herself were The Church… Let me tell you that the writing of such letters was the practice of the accursed Mahomet, the anti-Christ. Has she
ever in all her utterances said one word of The Church? Never. It is always God and herself… What will the world be like when The Church’s accumulated wisdom and knowledge and experience, its councils of learned, venerable pious men, are thrust into the kennel by every ignorant laborer or dairy-maid whom the devil can puff up with the monstrous self-conceit of being directly inspired from heaven? (Shaw 103)

Gunna’s great sin is that she believes she can baptize a saint, just as Joan’s great sin is to anoint a king. They innocently claim ritual rights that belong to the Church. In Shaw’s *Saint Joan* the threat of her claim to power is dire for the Church as an institution, as the implications of that threat instantaneously extend into the political realm. All divisions of spiritual authority threaten the foundations of the politicized church. One characteristic that Gunna, Mahomet, and Joan all share is their recipient status. In Shaw’s play Cauchon compares the character of Joan to the figure of Mahomet because they both claim to be vessels chosen by God to receive instruction. That status overrides the authority of the institutionalized Church. Cauchon rails, “[Mahomet] had his voices from the angel Gabriel: she has her voices from St Catherine and St Margaret and the Blessed Michael” (Shaw 104). The saint comes to the Church with special knowledge. The Church is then outside the chain of dispensation. The Church no longer holds a monopoly on special knowledge: the key source of power that holds the institution up as a political body.

In all practicality, the ritual of baptism performed at this point in the play is not that different from the one Gunna proposes to the Knight. When she eventually makes her way to the Pope, she uses her blood drawn with her jackknife to bless the shoe. The
only difference is the atmosphere. She bathes George’s shoe in the midst of all the
ceremony that surrounds the Pope. This difference requires a great deal from Gunna to
see it accomplished. In order to complete the ritual she must fly a great distance, request
an audience, plead George’s case, and fly back to her bed. In addition, she believes she
must present herself in a state of grandeur, gilding her wings (Saint Plays 121).

The Price of Secret Knowledge

When Gunna returns to her dream, she finds the Knight very ill. He tells her that
he is on the edge of death because of a wound he received in battle while she was away
with the Pope. This is a strange turn because George is still locked in his cell and on her
previous visit, George claimed she was too late and he was already dead. This
disjunction in time distinguishes Gunna’s present interaction with George from her
previous one. In their last encounter George existed beyond the hermetic seal of time,
and therefore in the past tense. In their previous encounter he was already dead. But
Gunna has given her blood and her body to this mission; therefore she has been fully
immersed in the story. He is now alive and taking action in the present.

This is not the only change in Gunna’s interactions. Now that she is existing in
the present tense of the story, fully immersed and with her own flesh at stake, she can
interact with the Narrator. When the Narrator opens “Scene Five,” Gunna silences her.
Gunna is too concerned with the sickly Knight to worry about the Narrator. She disrupts
the story with her compassion. George demands his shoe, which Gunna returns to him
with effort. It is difficult to transfer the boot, now transubstantiated by her blood, back
into the Knight’s hands. Once George forces the bloody shoe onto his foot, Gunna
begins to see him in a different way. She tells him, “Wearing that shoe gives you a horrible expression. You look like an old man”. The Knight confesses “There is a civil war outside. I was called to combat while you were out” (122).

This shift is very notable because it directly conflicts with the legend of Saint George. As previously mentioned, George was a handsome and accomplished young soldier, far from the old man that Gunna meets imprisoned in a cell. This young man fits well with the legend of George who suffers his tortures under Diocletian. The legend does not mention a civil war battle that George must fight. This new information calls into question the nature of George’s imprisonment. Once the baptized shoe is on George’s foot, George is revealed, if not transformed. The “true” George appears before Gunna and the audience. This George is dying of a wound received in battle. He earned this fatal wound as a direct result of his desire to become a saint. In this play his death is caused by a combination of greed and vanity. When Gunna asks about an arrow she finds in the straw, the Knight tells her, “It’s poisoned. They shot me in the heel. I wasn’t running away. They were all around us. I’m dying now” (122). If George had been properly armed, he would not be injured. But because he wanted his sainthood so desperately he gave his shoe to Gunna. Even at his death, George is still trying to manipulate his image. He defends his injury and claims it was bravely gotten so that he can achieve his desired status.

This new vision of the Knight is so different from the first that the consequences of the “pane of time” between Gunna and the Knight needs to be examined. Before, the “pane of time” not only separates Gunna and the Knight physically, but also disguises the Knight so that he is perceived as his legend depicts him. All non-canonical attributes are
shadowed when he is viewed through the lens of history and legend. Now, fully in the present with Gunna, that romanticized historical distance dissolves. The man no longer resembles the young, handsome, impressive, almost deified statues of Saint George goring his mythical dragon. This moment reflects the kind of “true-sight” or “prophet-head” John the Baptist experiences in his prophecy and which Maggie from Pain (Eulalia) experiences as “visions will come as they come, not recollected—but through a world that’s become transparent to me” (Saint Plays 83).

But Gunna still believes George will be made a saint when he dies, because she has seen to the baptism as he requested. She still wants to believe in his words without any guile. At this moment George confesses his unworthiness to be a saint. In the same breath, he makes Gunna aware of the trap she has fallen into. He tells her, “I’ve had an unremarkable life. With no conquests. Do you know where you are now? …Since your blood is on the shoe, you’re on my side of the time pane for as long as the dream lasts” (123). Gunna has given not just her energy, not just her spirit, but also her body. She gave the sacred gift of her blood: her life; and once that gift is bestowed the confines of material time fall away, and she is in the presence of the body and the will of another.

The tone of their dialogue changes once Gunna realizes this. Gunna’s desire to help George (the knight who would be a saint) and give of herself willingly to what she believes is a worthy cause disintegrates and it is replaced by a desperate negotiation. Gunna offers to ride into battle with George as a sign from God. George rejects this through more confession. He tells her, “The honor of the moment would be conferred on you, unless I carried the day. And I’m not feeling very well. Speaking plainly, I am not an especially good knight” (123). At this point it becomes clear that the man standing
before Gunna has absolutely no qualities that would recommend him to sainthood. All of the acts that would help him achieve sainthood must involve the use of more ritual blood. Again the reversal is reinforced. George must depend on Gunna’s sacred body to transform him into the great Saint George: victorious wonderworker.

Once the Knight tells Gunna of his lack of abilities or attributes that would recommend him for sainthood, he tells her of his plot for a false conquest. Gunna proposes he should slay a dragon, but the only thing he sees to slay is Gunna the girl with wings. Like all of his other assertions, the Knight believes the wings of a girl and those of a dragon will shimmer and conflate when seen through the “pane of time.” Gunna’s insistence that her wings are too beautiful to be from a dragon—that they do not hold the spirit of a dragon—falls unheeded. Gunna’s wings are a particularly pointed example of the analogical body’s doubling of blood and beauty. Gunna’s wings are both functional as a part of her body and symbolic of her imaginative freedom. They disclose some of who Gunna is and share in her essence. But the Knight insists the relic (Gunna’s wings) would transubstantiate into what the Knight needed through Gunna’s sacrifice. The violence of the act would cover over the illusion of it. When Gunna protests “These wings are beautiful. They won’t believe they’re from a dragon.” The Knight replies “They’ll be covered in blood. Terrible” (123). The overwhelming presence of the body in distress and dismemberment overwhelms human capacity to constitute meaning and interpret events. Reminiscent of Gunna’s baptism of George’s shoe, blood will cover a false act and a false heart in a way no other material is capable. So when the Knight tells Gunna “The wings are mine when I take them” (123). His possession goes beyond the
physical. He intends to take more than her wings. He takes that part of her essence that resides, Analogically, within them.

After the Knight takes the wings, the Narrator reveals that she is actually Gunna reflecting on her childhood. Once her wings and the power they give her are gone. Gunna sees the world differently. The Narrator explains:

When my wings were lopped, I was suddenly able to remember a thousand conversations that took place on the edge of my hearing—I didn’t know I had heard these things until they all rushed at me at once. Pious speculations and outright hate. The pope’s word, “Freak,” finally made its way to my ears. (124)

Once Gunna’s wings are lopped off she also loses her innocence. When Gunna is subjected to a violent act at the hands of another, the pane of time that kept her from all evil disappears. As a child, Gunna is able to ask questions and find pleasing answers. Her encounter with the Knight calls all of her previous answers into question. Now she is aware of the gray world of adulthood where paradoxes can turn on you. Gunna succumbs to her fate the way that Saint John walks toward his death. For the Analogical Imagination, these fates cannot be avoided with the will of the individual because they are part of a larger narrative that is already determined. According to the Analogical Imagination the Christian Church has only been one story. All other plots are illuminations of that story or, more than mere representatives of that story, participants contributing to it. Through that lens these sacrifices are not entirely negative. The participation in this grand narrative does not diminish the painful and tragic aspects of martyrdom, but it is no longer senseless. Along with pain the martyr receives the coveted gift of understanding. Understanding is a primary goal of all historical events and
material objects from an Analogical perspective. This encounter shows the power of legend and story in Gunna’s life. She bows to her fate, because the forces against her are too great. Her individual sacred status is stolen in the service of some larger political organization that claims her power for another use. Much is lost and much is gained. But what is gained does not lessen Gunna’s mourning for what was lost.

16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)

While Gunna’s encounter with the saint took something sacred away from her, Ehn’s play about Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe is a story in which saints bring the sacred to the non-saint, whether the non-saint wants it or not. 16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe) was first performed at the Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco in 1993, where it was directed by the playwright under the artistic direction of Paul Codiga. It was also given a reading by Division 13 in Brooklyn in 2005. There are no significant reviews of either event.

16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe) follows the story of Saint Maximilian Mary Kolbe. The hagiography of Kolbe is distinct from the other martyrs appearing in this dissertation because the documentation surrounding him is very different. Kolbe is a twentieth-century saint whose actions and ideas are well-documented by himself as well as by eye witnesses. There is a wealth of information about Kolbe, in comparison to the other saints discussed in this dissertation, because he wrote often and publicly. The stability of those documents is much more dependable in the eyes of a secular audience because a chronologically close proximity to the source of the hagiography gives it a feeling of validity not as readily given to Roman martyrs. Therefore the conversation
around Kolbe is less one of proving his existence than one of interpreting his life. That interpretation is not always positive, as some of his writings have been viewed as anti-Semitic. This increased access to biography gives to the non-saint a very personal and complicated biography to explore. Kolbe’s life is complicated and contradictory. It denies singular interpretations. The Roman-era saints often have no visible weaknesses of spirit in their stories. They are solid and impassive in their consistency—like stone. Their consistency can sometimes make them feel superficial and distanced. But Kolbe is a saint who was given a mission by God, in spite of (or, from an Analogical perspective possibly because of) all the trappings of his flesh.

Kolbe was born in the Poland in 1894 and was given the name Raymund. He took the name Maximilian Mary Kolbe in honor of a dream he had as a boy in which the Virgin Mary offered him two crowns: a white one representing a celibate life and a red one representing martyrdom. When she asked Kolbe which he would take, he told her both. This dream eventually became prophecy when he was murdered in Auschwitz in 1941. He traveled to Japan and India under the Franciscan order, but he spent most of his adult life in Poland where he published a religious magazine. Kolbe is controversial because of some anti-Semitic language in his writings, but he is mostly remembered for volunteering to die in the place of Franciszek Gajowniczek in Auschwitz (America 184).

**Permeable Borders in Analogical Space/Time**

*16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)* opens with two scenes occurring alongside one another in the same theatre space. A non-saint character named Zymunt is sleeping, but he is interrupted by an alarm clock. He awakes, stops the alarm, and looks around. After
taking in his surroundings he decides “Nope. Not my play” (Saint Plays 17). This immediately raises questions. If this is not Zymunt’s play, then whose is it and what is Zymunt doing here? Of course from the audience’s perspective he is wrong (and unreliable), as the characters that appear in the play belong to the play, and Zymunt is one of them. Therefore Zymunt reveals himself to be instantly untrustworthy. There is a need for reconciliation between the character and the play he occupies. That reconciliation might make him aware that he is of the world of the play. Otherwise, his denial will continue to promote distrust from the audience. His statement also sets up an unusual awareness for the character. He is aware that he exists within some kind of play far enough to determine at a glance whether it is his play or someone else’s play. At the same time his participation is unwilling. Here Zymunt’s rejection of the play gives a Pirandello-esque feeling of being enclosed in the trappings of the play despite the knowledge that it (and they) are fiction.

Alongside Zymunt, another non-sainted character named Gajowniczek occupies the stage, but Ehn adds to the stage directions that he is “Elsewhere,” drawing a temporal line between them through the physical stage. Where Zymunt is first revealed in the process of satisfying his body’s needs (in this case, sleep) and responding bluntly and practically to an interruption of that process, Gajowniczek opens with poetic language through which he denies the possibility of satisfaction through the body. He begins “But the moon was shone by one angel and the light was conveyed by another… And there was no sleep.” As Gajowniczek speaks, the two angels he describes enter the stage, but instead of appearing on Gajowniczek’s side of elsewhere, they appear above Zymunt. The angels ignore Zymunt’s demands to “Let me sleep.” Instead, one of the angels
“reveals the light of the moon, and the other presents the light to him” just as Gojowniczek said they would. When Gojowniczek speaks, his words either are describing a scene that is already underway or are calling that scene to come to pass. Either way, the words spoken on Gojowniczek’s side of “elsewhere” carry a great deal of power across the temporal barriers. He is a witness with a message and that message has power here. But Zymunt’s sleeping state also affects the way Gojowniczek is viewed. The stage directions propose that Gojowniczek might be wearing pajamas, reinforcing his statement that “there was no sleep” (17). Regardless of how separate these worlds might appear to be, they are permeable and fluid, like Deleuze and Guattari’s Body without Organs.

A third temporal sphere is established downstage. Kolbe appears working over a desk. He is in a moment of his life in which he works on his Polish newspaper. Kolbe tells the audience that he is living in Niepokalanow, “the City of the Immaculate.” He is calculating the cost of his newspaper business but, no matter which set of numbers he calculates, the result is always 16670. Kolbe attempts to reason out why he arrives at these numbers. He considers that they might be “Hairs on my head? Stumbles in a year? Varieties of laughter after a stumble?” All of the possibilities he considers are inconsequential numbers, even pleasant. Then Gojowniczek enters Kolbe’s space downstage. At the crossing of that bridge through the pane of time, Gojowniczek’s pajamas become prison clothes. The status of this material object shifts as it passes over that bridge to elsewhere and into new meaning. The objects are transubstantiated. Gojowniczek informs Kolbe of his situation. He is no longer counting laughter in Niepokalanow. “They’ve confiscated your city…You live in Auschwitz.” Gojowniczek
rolls back Kolbe’s sleeve, revealing the number 16670 written on his arm. Gojowniczek brings reality with him into Kolbe’s dream of Niepokalanow. The number was already there in Kolbe’s consciousness and on his body. The number was unavoidable. But Gojowniczek brought the knowledge of that destiny into Kolbe’s dream, stripping away the cloud of fantasies and memories and leaving only the cold inevitability of his death. Kolbe’s childhood prophetic dream that promised him a martyr’s death has come true. Gojowniczek brings that truth. He prepares Kolbe by shaving his head and dressing him in a uniform like his own. Kolbe and Gojowniczek are now on their way to Kolbe’s martyrdom. Meanwhile on his own side of time’s pane, Zymunt is still sleeping (*Saint Plays* 17-18).

Zymunt is still surrounded by the angels Gojowniczek conjured into his room. The first angel describes the night’s cold wind as it gets into every gap in Zymunt’s bedroom. But this does not wake Zymunt. The temperature of the world changes, but he remains unchanged. Mary appears in the form of Zymunt’s cat, Myrrh, and sits on his chest. Mary, the saint for which Kolbe took his name and whom he saw in a vision as a boy, now comes to Kolbe. Even though Mary appears in order to aid Kolbe, she is on Zymunt’s side of the pane of time. This is because Kolbe needs the power of those who would later hear his story so he can draw enough strength to finish the story in the first place. Mary is with Zymunt to ensure Kolbe’s strength. Mary, in the shape of Myrrh the cat, sits on the chest of the still-sleeping Zymunt and steals his breath. She then “breathes it back out over the scene,” referring to the scene across the stage in which Gojowniczek is shaving Kolbe’s head simultaneously. Zymunt awakes once the cat and the angels are gone, vaguely aware that even in sleep he is participating in a larger drama he cannot
Zymunt experiences the eerie feeling of not knowing what is at the end of one’s bed. This event is considered a sensation of the numinous according to Christian apologist C.S. Lewis. It appears in multiple biblical stories. The story of the prophet Samuel is one example. When Samuel is a child, he hears a voice while he is sleeping but does not recognize it as supernatural. He believes his teacher is calling his name.\textsuperscript{16} The numinous experience in \textit{Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)} shines like the sun and covers like an avalanche, but here it is as small as a cat’s tongue. Regardless of the scale of this event, once the numinous is encountered something changes.

Despite Zymunt’s protests and his attempt to sleep through the play, he has been dragged into it by Myrrh (Mary) the cat. She has traversed across the “elsewhere” following the trail that angels left and has taken from Zymnut his breath: his life. Kolbe and Zymunt speak together the last line of the opening scene. They say “The fire I am witnessing. The fire I am in” (\textit{Saint Plays} 18). Zymunt, now fully awake, has already given of his body to the scene without his knowledge. He has crossed the threshold of Kolbe’s martyrdom through the gift of his breath. The lines between witness and martyr have begun to disappear.

After this moment in which Zymunt and Kolbe double their language, Zymunt is removed from his own scene and placed within Kolbe’s. Even though he does not want to acknowledge it, he has been taken against his will from the complacent comfort of his bed to the sharp cold of Kolbe and Gajowniczek’s Auschwitz. Kolbe’s reluctance is an

\textsuperscript{16} This story can be found in I Samuel 3.
example of a trend seen in many of *The Saint Plays*. For these saints, willingness is not a necessary precursor to a numinous experience. Saints do not need to lead a long, exemplary life filled with wisdom in order to be pulled into the presence of the sacred. In the case of Zymunt especially, the holy comes looking for him.

Zymunt attempts to deny his new circumstance. He sits at Kolbe’s table as though it were his own. He goes through his morning routine, drinking coffee and reading the paper. A morning routine at the table is the same locus of calm Kolbe had experienced in the previous scene. The breakfast table is where Kolbe and Zymunt both find a sliver of the mundane to hide within. The space of the table was invaded once before, so the bridge to Auschwitz has already been built. While Zymunt drinks his coffee, Kolbe and Gajowniczek are in the elsewhere hard at work. Kolbe is pulled ever toward his death by his guide, Gajowniczek. Kolbe believes he is stacking logs for a summer solstice festival. Again, he draws a happy conclusion from his labor. It is festive and frivolous. He feels the warmth of summer on his back. But Gajowniczek corrects him: it is only spring and they are moving “the bodies of the starved.” instead of logs. For the second time Kolbe had disappeared into a happy memory only to be pulled back by Gajowniczek. Gajowniczek tells Kolbe his confusion is because “The guards have just injected the phenol into your neck. These are visions you’re having while dying” (19).

Like the “pop” of the barrier between George and Gunna, this realization is accompanied by a humming. Unlike the pop found in *The Freak (George)*, the humming sound is attached to a very specific physical object: the snapping of a rope. Here the sound is a sensory memory that pulls from something already within Kolbe’s mind to
push him across a threshold. Theatre often makes full use of sound in its creation of staged worlds. Often those sounds conjure up objects that are already known. Andrew Sofer notes in his book *Dark Matter* that in a performance, “An offstage siren indexes the police are, for instance, just as smoke indexes fire or a knock on the door a visitor” (3). A siren becomes the representative of and a replacement for the bodies of the police. In this case, the sound is not attached to a specific object that moves around the periphery of the stage. Instead, the sound marks a metaphysical crossing in which objects and sounds are only connected through their association in the mind and through their Analogical relationship.

Once the threshold separating one side of time’s pane from another is crossed, Kolbe connects the moment of his own death to the moment of his father’s and mother’s. The barriers that had separated one death from another fall away to leave the remnants of a single narrative in which they all, Analogically, participate. The stolen moment of death is returned, as the witness becomes the participant. Those events separated on time’s map arrive at one another’s side and their connections become clear. Kolbe’s path to martyrdom is initiated in blood: the blood of his parents. In the shedding of that blood, his sense of order is stripped away. Kolbe is surrounded by sounds that add up to no logic. He hears the hum of a threshold crossed and the snap of a rope that takes his father’s life as the same. Kolbe says, “Music’s a math, a counting—but this sound is a counting to no quantity. The sounds are the components of words in a jumble, words that’ll never be found.” The sound of the rope snapping as his father is hanged has pushed Kolbe into a new consciousness, and in this new space the words that he spent his life pouring onto a newspaper page have lost their meaning. His attempts at simple math
fail to address the snapping sound that propels him. But this impossible jumble did not keep Kolbe from the words themselves. Instead he “ground his sheets for newsprint” *(Saint Plays 19)*.

Once Kolbe recognizes his imminent death, he moves back to the pivotal moment in his life where he was set on a path toward martyrdom. Like Gunna, Kolbe meets his fate in a dream. In the play Ehn’s cat-like Mary gives Kolbe the choice between a white and a red wreath, which directly reflects Kolbe’s hagiography. Kolbe chooses both wreaths. The white symbolizes his sainthood, and the red symbolizes his martyrdom. Ehn’s version reflects Kolbe’s hagiography in that the decisions of a ten-year-old boy lead to the “*long road toward the blue-walled City of Mary*” *(Saint Plays 20)*. He takes the name of his new mother, Mary, as his own. He aligns himself with her, overcoming her warnings that she has killed people and that she is not to be trusted lightly *(Saint Plays 20)*.

**The Saint Takes from the Non-Saint**

Blood opens up the path to new blood. When Ehn returns to Zymunt after this interlude from Kolbe’s childhood, Zymunt notices his hand is bleeding. His body, already linked by his breath to the power of the saint, continues to participate in Kolbe’s drama even though Zymunt still calmly drinks his coffee spiked with vodka at the table. Gajowniczek is with him, holding the alarm clock that disrupts Zymunt’s sleep. As his hand bleeds, Zymunt adopts a more poetic way of speaking that aligns him with the other characters in *16670 (Maxmilian Mary Kolbe)*. If poetic language is another sign of spiritual awareness, then this could be another sign that Zymunt is growing in his
conscious connections to Kolbe, Mary, and Gajowniczek. He speaks in three verses: the first is a contemplation on silence. Zymunt contemplates that “silence is a school… A man’s sense is in his mind, not his senses.” He has turned inward, away from the stimulation of the body through sleep, caffeine, and alcohol. He professes that his physical senses become secondary to what he senses with his mind and his spirit. The second verse uses that inward turn to reflect on the futility of material goods. Zymunt says that “When your cattle jump over your fences/ Your mild and your meat jump too/ Without what you are with, what are you?/ You are passed as if there were a race on” (Saint Plays 20). In the midst of the silence, stripped of the value of any accrued wealth, Zymunt arrives at an existential question. He has reached a tipping point: another threshold.

The exchanges and flows between these permeable scenes reflect a key principle of the Analogical Imagination. The directionality of the exchanges may shift, but the more crossings occur, the more characters and objects converge. As with Gunna, once the passage is marked with blood the characters transform into new kinds of creatures. Zymunt’s adoption of new language signals that transubstantiation. Like with the realization of the numinous, transubstantiation is accompanied by special knowledge. For Gunna and Zymunt, that special knowledge is unwelcome. The structure and effectiveness of this play depends on the audience’s understanding and accepting of flows and connections as they are revealed without a sense of modern logic. The audience must accept the consequences Zymunt faces standing at the edge of a threshold.

Zymunt stares at the clock. The clock has been pushing him toward the saint from the moment it woke him. But even though he has arrived at his threshold, he still
cannot will himself through the pane of time. The cat-like Mary stands behind the clock, and continues to take breath from Zymunt. She breaths in, and Gajowniczek narrates that Zymunt is “Sucked, sucked further, now through the face of the clock.” At which point, Zymunt “lurches forward; his head drains into the clock-face.” Like Gunna’s blood on George’s shoe pulling her through the pane of time, Zymunt’s breath is sacrificed at the door, and his blood builds a bridge across time’s map. Even at this moment, he is pulled against his will. What Gunna willingly gave, Zymunt laments. As he lurches forward, he comments “As if it weren’t enough to wake up in the morning” (21). The clock, Gajowniczek, and Mary all disagree with Zymunt on this point. It is not enough just to wake up every morning. The saint requires more.

Zymunt still attempts his old tactics of avoidance. He hopes to find safety in his newspaper. As he scans it he reads the story of Kolbe’s death. He is unable to escape his own knowledge. Kolbe takes the red wreath when he offers his life in the place of Gajowniczek. Gajowniczek and Kolbe are both prisoners in Auschwitz, and when one other prisoner escapes, Gajowniczek is chosen to be one of the ten starved to death in the escapee’s place. Though Zymunt has worked hard to avoid the martyr, the truth has arrived with presence and authority like a train. The audience sees Gajowniczek and Kolbe acting out the final choice that began with Kolbe’s dream as a child. Kolbe says “I am a Catholic priest. I wish to die for that man” (Saint Plays 22). The sentence that began when Kolbe was ten years old is completed.
Analogical Logic

16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe) is a play of pieces disassembled and reassembled in the hopes of constructing a whole. Zymunt intends to leave the pieces scattered in order to avoid any sense of meaning, while Kolbe intends to put the pieces together to arrive at a sense of meaning. But from an Analogical perspective, meaning is always-already inherent in the pieces themselves. Even though the choice has already been made and Zymunt’s knowledge of it is irrevocable, he still attempts to avoid it. In the next scene, Zymunt describes how all of his tactics to avoid the proddings of his clock’s face have turned against him. He sleeps less in order to induce a stupor, and alcohol is used to disrupt his nerves. While Zymunt is looking for ways to turn off his mind, Kolbe is looking for a way to put the pieces together.

Throughout the play there is a tension between material logic and events that deny logic. The tension is represented in numbers. Kolbe attempts to create new, clean numbers through a variety of combinations. He takes pleasure in the exactness of this process. But Kolbe keeps returning to the same number: 16670. When Kolbe asks Gajowniczek for his name, Gajowniczek looks first to the number tattooed on his arm for the answer. When trying to understand the mountain of dead in Auschwitz, Kolbe explains “One plus six plus six plus seven plus zero equals one,” and “10 into 18 equals one” (Saint Plays 24-25). No matter what combination he tries, the answer is the same because any combination leads to the same final result. The truth of his fate, sealed by a red wreath, cannot be undone by logic. The elegance of numbers that sounds so clean is undermined by the chaotic brutality of the lived reality. The two cannot meet, no matter how much Kolbe might try to make them.
Gajowniczek is then suddenly in 1975 at a memorial in Krakow. Next to him is one of his daughters and she is wearing bone-hand earrings. Kolbe asks “Who listens…Who accepts me into their prayers?” Kolbe attempts an answer through numbers, then Kolbe and Zymunt decide the alphabet is also a jumble that fails to arrive at its destination. The prayers cannot ride on the backs of the letters of the alphabet. But when Gajowniczek touches the bones, Mary in the form of his daughter tells them, “I listen.” The content of this logic-less universe travels through the bones of the dead to the ears of Mary. She does more than hear. She listens. The “authenticity” of these bones is irrelevant. It is insignificant to know whether these bones may or may not have once been at the ends of Kolbe’s wrists or even belong to the hands of Mary. Gajowniczek says of Kolbe “Your hands are hanging Spanish from the ears of Gajowniczek’s daughter. Anniversary. Your hands have gone through earth, come up bone, are ornament now.” Gajowniczek proposes that these bone hands are true.

Scientific, mathematical authenticity lives on a different plane. Authenticity is made of numbers and letters. Truth is made of carved bones. Zymunt explains it thus: “Flesh is the zero envelope. The jumble hole. Is shape around the lack of—is shape against which sorrow showers” (Saint Plays 24-25). While Zymunt drinks his coffee and reads his paper, Kolbe dies. While for Zymunt, a bad day is a day at work, the same moment holds Kolbe so thin Mary can play him like a flute. While these moments are entirely independent, Ehn has connected mundane tasks to extraordinary events across the smooth surface of the Analogical Imagination.
Mary in 16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)

Mary’s position in this play is atypical of her depictions in art. Unlike the typical figure of motherly love and comfort, she is the agent of Kolbe’s physical destruction. She is present at every moment and across all the timelines in this play, and she possesses the power to take and give breath. In *The Catholic Imagination*, Andrew Greeley writes about “the function of the Mary metaphor in the Catholic imagination: she represents the Mother Love of God, the generous and loving, life-giving power of God, the tenderness of God, the fertility of God, the nurturing of God” (Greeley 90). This version of Mary can be found in Eugene O’Neill’s classic play *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* in lines spoken by the mother of the family also named Mary:

> some day when the Blessed Virgin Mary forgive me and gives me back the faith in Her love and pity I used to have in my convent days, and I can pray to Her again—when She sees no one in the world can believe in me even for a moment any more, then She will believe in me, and with Her help it will be so easy.

(O’Neill 94)

The Blessed Virgin, according to this quote, is the comforter of lost souls when all other rivers of pity and kindness dry up.

In *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)* it appears that Zymunt’s Mary contradicts this image of tenderness typically associated with her legacy. At first glance, Mary appears to be the bringer of death. But even though death is imminent, Mary remains that loving figure Greeley describes. Just because Mary appears alongside violence, does not make her a contributing factor to violence. She is simply steadfast. Long after all other allies have disappeared, Mary remains. She echoes the story for which she is most noted.
Mary’s story shows her at her son’s side from birth to death. In *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)* she walks beside Kolbe from childhood to death as well. Once Kolbe makes his choice and starts down the road to martyrdom, Mary finds the resources he needs to complete the task. She finds him breathe and finally pierces his neck with a sword. She brings to Kolbe the fulfillment of a promise, it just happens that the promise is death. In the Catholic story, Mary is the one who stays with her son through his death to carry the body to its resting place. Mary endures. She is there, still nurturing, still tender, in the midst of pain. Mary’s last lines in the play express this. She says

> Mary Myrrh, cat and middle name, resembles conversation in a room where all are dying, where all good speech gathers to an act of lifting. Myrrh anoints your action, cat carries it back and forth through time, and Mary hides coins for you in words, because you will die last. She saves your labor. She prays for you to the Lord our God. (27)

Mary is the one who collects all that is needed and brings them into a prayer fit for sacred ears. Mary bridges all the gaps between Kolbe and Zymunt. Her sacred transforms into multiple bodies. Those forms reach out and connect the worlds of the play through breath and blood. But taking from Zymunt, Mary give Kolbe the strength he needs.

**Zymunt and Gunna**

*16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)* and *The Freak (George)* are both plays that feature saints seeking out the non-saint. For Gunna and Zymunt, the saints find access to them in their dreams. While dreaming, the fabric that divides the physical from the spiritual is ruptured, and because of this rupture, a saint’s sacred hand slips through the
threshold and grabs hold of the non-saint. To a certain extent this is similar to John’s experience in the desert. But in the desert John floats about his visions. He recognizes them as real and consequential, but they are beyond his influence. Gunna and Zymunt, however, experience real loss upon their encounter with the saint in the dream. Gunna loses her wings while Zymunt loses his breath. They both also gain from their encounters. They gain knowledge and with knowledge comes the ability to see the world Analogically. They can fully embrace the flows and connections across the surface of their worlds.

Mary, Kolbe, and George demonstrate that the relationship between the saint and the non-saint goes two ways. The non-saint may look to the saint as a bridge to the mystical, but the saint equally needs the non-saint’s faith to give them power. It is through communion with one another across time and space, accompanied by violence, that the power to see vast mystical landscapes beyond the confines of time is achieved.
CHAPTER 5: THE SAINT AS THE LIMINAL: BARBARA

One of the most visible and prevalent rituals that connect the saint and the parishioner is prayer. In his preface to *The Saint Plays*, Ehn argues,

The prayer is that which God and the saint are not—the distance and its potential. The passionate gap is represented on time’s map (when characters reach to each other across eras) or, again, on rhetoric’s landscape (when difference is a question of language and tone. The pattern, the saint, and the prayer trip each other up (up and forward), hopefully break one another hopefully advertise rest. (xi)

Ehn proposes that prayer is an active engagement in which the sacred and the material are reaching out for one another over the obstacles that impede them. Or there is a map: a mysterious route that allows for this access. There is something to be crossed: rhetoric’s landscape. There is also a direction vaguely set down as “forward.” The saint and the believer are on their way forward somewhere hand-in-hand, and the physicality of this process is expressed through staging in Ehn’s plays *Pain (Eulalia)* and *Radio Elephant (Barbara)*. The process of prayer and the forward motion it produces in Ehn’s work is the subject of this chapter (which focuses on *Radio Elephant (Barbara)*) and the next chapter (which focuses on *Pain (Eulalia)*). This chapter establishes the importance of language and storytelling as a source transubstantiating power in Catholicism stretching back to Christianity’s inception. That power is then reflected in more contemporary philosophical and critical writings by Regina Barecca, Michel de Certeau, Victor Turner, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze.
Language in the Analogical Imagination

The process of prayer is, ideally, a conversation. The relationship between language and the Christian faith is rooted in its origins. Perhaps the most remembered expression of the relationship between language and Christianity comes from the opening lines of the Gospel of Saint John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (New International Version John 1.1). For Christians “the Word” came typologically to represent Christ. The Christian’s journey forward involves discovering truth through language. Knowing that truth leads to internal peace and understanding. In his book on drama and representation in religious life of the early Middle Ages, Michal Kobialka describes the intentions of monastic culture of the early medieval period:

The self’s task was to uncover—rather than to create, order, correct, or command—the language (the Word) with which God had endowed the earth. The self’s reality was not described by new words, but was enunciated through the expression of the sacred already present in everything created, though not entirely visible. (113)

This approach precedes what was laid down in the first chapter as the process of the Analogical Imagination, but what Kobialka describes is a clear precursor to the Analogical. Kobialka proceeds to address where these previously created contemplations should come from for the early medieval mind. He tells us:

the theological self needed to realize his/her presence in the homogenous space of the transcendent God. This involved the process of remembering or recollection
that happened beyond the confines of material time and space—a merger between

cogo (to collect, bring together, assemble) and cogito (to know). (114)

Kobialka speculates the appearance of more prayers appealing to particular saints during the time he is addressing (the eleventh century) is a response to this new need to gather more information in order to transcend to greater knowledge. In other words, the rise in prayers to the saints arose from the need to transform cogo to cogito.

Kobialka adds that during this era monastic life in France and England began to attach more specific purpose to verbal processes--possibly the same purpose Ehn alludes to in his contemplation on prayer. For the monk, confession leads to self-knowledge. The thoughts and internal life of the monk needed to be turned outward and examined in order to finally produce truth (Kobialka 64-66). Radio Elephant (Barbara) explores the power of the saints’ stories. It investigates how language shapes the world and how narratives can have transubstantiative consequences for those trying to understand them. In Radio Elephant (Barbara) it is the contemplation of the saint that changes the non-saint. The non-saint reaches out to Saint Barbara by reciting her story until it makes sense to her, and through the construction of narrative they connect.

Though conversation is a communicative process that seeks to create bonds across consciousness, it is (in many ways) the presentation of difference. The process of conversation exposes the distance between different lived experiences simply by trying to connect them together. From this perspective, the process of confession and prayer can mark out distances on a map or differences on a landscape so the performer of that prayer might find some direction they can identify as “forward.”
Borders and Crossings in *Radio Elephant (Barbara) and Pain (Eulalia)*

According to Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau’s influential book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the building of borders necessarily implies the possibility and construction of bridges. In the section of *The Practice of Everyday Life* titled “Spatial Stories,” much of the creation of boundaries is accomplished through the compilation of fragmented narratives (Certeau 122). Through prayer, the distance between the world of the saints (along with the sacred they represent), and world of the non-saint (who are reaching out for the sacred), is laid out in language. Language gives this process form and shape. The saint and the prayer are given purpose in the lives of the non-saints. The saints, through prayer, become the bridge between living and the non-living. They point the way cross vast and murky world of the mystical.

Ehn’s plays *Pain (Eulalia)* and *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* are both plays that use an expression of prayer to layer the saint on top of the life of the non-saint. In *Pain (Eulalia)*, the protagonist witnesses an act of such tremendous violence that her mind cannot conceive of it. Prayer becomes a way for her to access and process that violence by shielding it with the body and the language of the saint. Only then can she face the violence in a coherent manner. Only through accessing the story of the saint is she able to access her own story. There are a number of other methods and implements that aid non-saints in reaching the divine through the millennia. Some examples are meditation, pilgrimage, relics, and church hierarchy. Many of these are addressed in Ehn’s *Saint Plays* and in the plays *Pain (Eulalia)* and *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* specifically. These tactics work in tandem with one another, pushing the non-saint up and forward. But in
Catholicism and Christianity in general, language has always been a key feature of religious practice.

Saint Eulalia and Saint Barbara expand into the lives of those seeking to connect with them, filling in the gaps between story and reality with their multiplying bodies and flowing blood. But the interactions of the protagonists of *Pain (Eulalia)* and *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* (named Maggie and Narrator respectively) with their saints do not fall into the more traditional interactions with saints. They are not dominantly instructive. The saints in *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* and *Pain (Eulalia)* are not held to any height to be inspected and observed from afar; they are too close to see clearly. Their uncanny presence exceeds the stage and spills over Maggie and the Narrator. It is in this excess that Maggie and the Narrator make discoveries. The ever-fluid space of life shifts as new connections are made. This image runs parallel to the important relationship between an artist and a saint in which the saint becomes the very means of expression. In *Radio Elephant (Barbara)*, the connection across metaphysical boundaries is made by the narrative of the saint. The Narrator uses Saint Barbara as a roadmap to navigate a transitional moment in her own life as she moves from a childlike understanding of the world to a harsher, more adult understanding of the world.

**Radio Elephant (Barbara)**

*Radio Elephant (Barbara)* was first performed in June, 1992 at San Diego’s Sledgehammer Theatre, and it included songs and incidental music by Christian Hertzog. It was directed by Scott Feldsher alongside six other Saint Plays including *Songs for the Bone Orchard (Cecilia)*, *Una Carrrona (Rose of Lima)*, and *Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc)*.
Nancy Churnin wrote in her *Los Angeles Times* review that the performance was both electrifying and exhausting for the audience. Churnin notes “the excesses of the company's methods have sometimes drowned out its message, which happens occasionally in the course of this dense 2-hour-and-45-minute production of ‘The Saint Plays.’ But more often, ‘The Saint Plays’ is so strong that the company's exciting and vibrant methods electrify the meaning” (“The Saint Plays”). *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* was also performed as part of Cal Rep’s 2008 production of *Saint Plays*.

The play loosely follows the story of Saint Barbara. Saint Barbara does not have a history built on a solid historical foundation as Maxmilian Mary Kolbe did. Much like Saint George, Barbara grew in veneration long after she was thought to have been martyred. Her legend was more commonly acknowledged and venerated by the seventh century. Barbara’s story tells of a rich man name Dioscorus who kept his daughter Barbara locked in a tower in order to keep her safe from the world. Even through this isolation, Barbara converted to Christianity without her father’s knowledge. She rejected an offer of marriage her father brought to her and soon after confessed her faith to him. Barbara’s father had her dragged before Martinianus, the prefect of their province. Martinianus had Barbara tortured and then sentenced to death by beheading. The sentence was carried out by her father’s hands. Soon after her death Barbara’s father was struck by lightning. This is often interpreted as his punishment for the crime against his own flesh (Williams 157).

Ehn’s play concerning Saint Barbara opens with an enigmatic monologue from the title saint. Though this play evades traditional landscapes of narrative logic, Barbara seems to be exploring her body for mechanisms of meaning in this monologue. She tells
the audience, “My eyes closed seeing my eyes open. Head making head. All head and head. Head buried in the field.” Barbara seems to be speaking from the afterlife remembering her head as it is cut off. Similar to the violence in *Locus (John the Baptist)* the great act of violence in *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* splits apart the body creating a hydra-like doubling. Barbara’s head exceeds itself into another head that watches the first and responds to it as though the two were conversing in search of an external truth. Barbara arrives at self-awareness. She tells the audience “I am signal” (*Saint Plays* 109). As her heads replicate and exceed the confines of the body, they transform into an Analogical metaphor that is both symbolic and vibrating with its own matter.

In *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* Ehn offers a narrator similar to the one found in *The Freak (George)*. Another similarity between the two plays is the strong presence of the narrator within the story itself. These characters are not detached figures floating above the action, incapable of intervention. In a way the intrusion of the narrator into the thickest parts of the play reflects the larger thematic investigation of the saints themselves. The way narrators are often handled in the theatre relates more to how the Dialectical Imagination relegates saints to the position of viewers. They are not agents capable of action, because the symbol holds no part of the original. Through the saints lessons can be learned, but that is the extent of their agency. In the Analogical Imagination all the characters maintain their will and their power in a very real and tangible way regardless of their position on a side of time’s pane. Like the saints, Ehn’s narrators begin with the story, but end with their own physical presence occupying space alongside the other characters. First they are made of words, but through the repetition/incantation of those words the saints are then made of matter.
After Barbara’s brief speech, the lights rise on the young narrator in a Catholic schoolgirl’s uniform. Her first lines echo the stage directions given just before: “A desk, a cup of tea, a notebook, a radio and the Big Picture Book of Saints.” The girl is taking stock through language of her physical surroundings. It is difficult to say whether these items exist because they were already truly there, or if she calls them into being by naming them. She tells the audience, “I say what I see, and what you see…” (*Saint Plays* 109). For the Narrator, the objects before her vision are simple enough to be described by their very names. Like Gunna when she had wings, the Narrator lives in a reality where riddles all have answers, before the torture of uncertainty begins. As Barbara and her father appear before her and the audience, the Narrator tells us that “I have read these things. And everything I know through reading is true” (109).

The Narrator’s statement is particularly important because it highlights a key issue raised in this play. As previously stated, Barbara’s narrative is considered to be less reliable than many of the other martyrs and she is certainly below the standards of reliability according to historical scholarship. So it is significant that the Narrator is expressing a belief in the story she is reading. She does not question the narrative; the telltale sign of innocence’s loss. At the same time the Narrator’s trust in what she reads does not deter her from creatively approaching Barbara and freely finding the multiplicity of “truths” behind the words she reads. In short, she does not feel limited by the burden of history, but feels free to recreate Barbara in her own image in order to test out potential scenarios and see which ones lead to Barbara’s bloody end.
Liminality

Radio Elephant (Barbara) reflects some elements of Victor Turner’s writings on liminality. In his essay “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology,” Turner discussed a social state that is “betwixt-and-between” more solid societal circumstances. He calls these moments liminal or liminoid and associates these broad terms with the more specific event of a rite of passage (58).

According to anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, a rite of passage begins with separation from the community. This separation marks out the ritual subject, removing that subject from secular space/time and into sacred space/time. The ritual subject is floating in an unknown space in which material objects disappear or at the very least their meaning is overturned. Objects in the liminal become something new and unrecognizable. After separation, van Gennep describes a journey of transition (also called the “margin” or the “threshold”) (58). The world of transition is distorted and ambiguous. The ritual subject (liminal initiad) is now without history or identity, and so previous expenditures of energy become meaningless here. Turner believes that in this process:

in many societies the liminal initiad are often considered to be dark, invisible, like a planet in eclipse or the moon between phases; they are stripped of names and clothing, smeared with the common earth, rendered indistinguishable from animals. They are also associated with life and death, male and female, food and excrement, simultaneously, since they are at once dying from or dead to their former status and life, and being born and growing into new ones. (Turner 58)

Marginality creates a moment of liminality. Through liminality the ritual subject transitions from one status to another. Common transitions are from the status of single
to married, from childhood to adulthood, and from the secular to the sacred. Anthropology is not the only discipline to take note of liminal status. These transitional spaces and liminal figures are often found in literature.

Regina Barecca takes note of a trend in the fictional works written by women she has studied. Barecca believes characters in liminal positions appear at first to be powerless (and may be powerless when viewed through the traditional political and social models within which they are confined), but they then tap into power through the desperation, injustice and pain created by this powerless position: “These figures are able to catalyze the liminality of their inscription within the larger social order to draw upon forces and mechanisms outside the orthodox belief systems” (177). Barecca connects the perception of the liminal in Turner’s anthropological work to the imagination of nineteenth-and twentieth-century literature written by women. This connection asserts that the potential metaphysical power of the liminal subject continues to shape our imagination.

Liminal separations and transitions occur in many of The Saint Plays. For example, Saint John’s desert wanderings reflect a removal of social anchors and material goods that signal community status. Saint Joan casts off traditional gender roles in order to fulfill God’s demands. It is hard to participate in society once John is in the desert and Joan is in the light. These characters are caught in the perpetually liminal space of “prophet-head” where the voice of God can be most clearly heard. In the final play this dissertation discusses, Pain (Eulalia), the character Maggie’s trips on the subway are a void space of transition: a moment of eclipse.
Radio Elephant (Barbara), though also a part of the more general trend of liminality noted in these plays, addresses a more specific rite of passage. Turner proposes that liminality is typically intended to move an initiad from one socially stable position to another, but there is danger and opportunity in the between space. The moment of transition is an opportunity for counter-structural thinking because it is an astructural moment. Through transitions,

the bizarre becomes normal, and through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic and unnatural shapes, the novices are induced to think (and think hard) about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted. The novices are taught that they did not know what they thought they knew. Beneath the surface structure of custom was a deep structure, whose rules they had to learn, through paradox and shock. (73)

Here again are connections between liminal spaces and the plays previously discussed. In The Freak (George), Gunna learns the deeply imbedded structures that hold up her world “through paradox and shock” once she crosses into the Knight’s space/time. Even though Gunna was full of abstract knowledge before her journey, she had never questioned the structures in which she lived. Gunna enters liminal space through the pane of time. She offers a blood sacrifice that unwittingly pulls her across the threshold of the liminal. While separation into the liminal space is thrust upon Gunna, the Narrator of Radio Elephant (Barbara) appears to be taking full advantage of the opportunity liminal spaces provide. She scrambles Saint Barbara until the paradoxes come to rest and reveal to her the structures underneath.
Connecting to the Liminal

After the Narrator has introduced Saint Barbara, the Narrator opens a scene between Barbara and the Jesuit. The Jesuit is an addition of the Narrator’s imagination that fills in the cracks of Barbara’s story, giving her flesh. The Jesuit is the manifested answer to a basic question in Barbara’s story: how does Barbara learn about the Christian faith? How does Barbara become a Christian if she is locked in a tower away from human contact? The Narrator gives Barbara something familiar to the Narrator’s experience but outside the possibilities of Barbara’s history. The Narrator moves a figure she associates with religious contemplation effortlessly into Barbara’s time/space, creating continuity and paradox simultaneously.

The Narrator performs these acts of invention in a manner transparent to the audience. In the midst of telling her story, the Narrator pauses: “But Barbara wanted to become a saint. So she smuggled in religious sages. How (Looks up) How did they get in there? How did she ever get what she needed? (She makes corrections).” In the moment the Narrator effortlessly shifts the stage objects with simple alterations. Here Ehn marks them as “corrections,” not changes. Even the stage directions reflect the Narrator’s intentions. She is making the story “right” and for her this means telling a story without gaps or unanswered questions(Saint Plays 110). This process is an example of the processes Certeau describes as “marking out boundaries.” In The Practice of Everyday Life he writes,

These “operations of marking out boundaries,” consisting in narrative contracts and compilations of stories, are composed of fragments drawn from earlier stories
and fitted together in makeshift fashion (*bricole*). In this sense, they shed light on the formation of myths, since they also have the function of founding and articulating spaces. (122-23)

The Narrator is filling in Barbara’s story by drawing fragments from stories with which she is familiar. Her initial corrections emphasize the fairytale qualities that float on the surface of Barbara’s story. She uses fairytales to fill in the gaps. The Narrator corrects, “Barbara was very beautiful, and was locked in a tower. She saved all her dinner napkins and made a rope ladder…” (*Saint Plays* 110). By using the fairytale solution of a napkin ladder, the Narrator is able to bring Barbara the knowledge of Christianity she needs to complete the narrative.

Within the story the Narrator is weaving, Barbara and the Jesuit have arrived at their own unnamed paradox through their conversations. Whatever they discussed before the scene began has ignited Barbara’s insatiable imagination while it has frustrated the Jesuit. He tells her, “The headaches are very bad. I don’t know why you ask me these questions…I can’t go on” (*Saint Plays* 109). The subject of their conversation has so baffled the Jesuit’s paradigm that the mental shifts are manifesting as pain in his body. For Barbara, these questions cause no discomfort. She feels the paradox turn the way she feels the turning of the Earth. Like the Narrator, she greets them without fear.

Barbara is experiencing her own rite of passage: her own moment of liminality. The connection between Barbara’s liminal state and the act of creating narratives is reflected in Certeau’s “Spatial Stories.” He writes on the subject of the role stories play in creating spaces: “By considering the role of stories in delimitation, one can see that the primary function is to authorize the establishment, displacement or transcendence of
limits” (Certeau 123). As a liminal subject, difficult questions are the foundations of the landscape. Barbara reflects the Narrator. The Jesuit, though willing to engage Barbara’s questions, is unable to follow her because he is no longer in a transitional phase. He already has a title instead of a name.

Barbara lowers her rope of dinner napkins, but instead of Barbara climbing down, Bob Arrington climbs up. He helps Barbara build a radio. Even with this new presence the Narrator insists Barbara needs no human contact. This conflict tips the Narrator into another set of corrections. In her first attempt, the story became a fairytale that had been stripped of its darkness. There is a beautiful princess in a tower awaiting salvation, involved in civil debates, and receiving her dinners on fine china accompanied by dinner napkins. This is a static, lifeless image. Its sterility stands little chance of survival in this place “smeared with the common earth” (Saint Plays 109). The pounding fist of Barbara’s father on the tower door interrupts this version of the story. His presence is a reminder of what is to come, and it is not a happy end befitting a fairytale princess.

Other characters continue to intrude upon the Narrator’s process and demand to be dealt with, so the Narrator changes her story to better fit these characters. The second version of the story is much more in tune with Barbara’s inevitable martyrdom. One sign of this is a greater focus on Barbara’s body and how it can weave into the story. The more fairytale reason for a father to lock away his daughter, beauty, is replaced with a much more specific and mystical connection between Barbara’s body and earth. The Narrator proposes that Barbara is originally locked away “when she had her first period. Her father believed that if she were grounded, if she were on the ground and her blood was allowed to enter the earth, that she would conduct electricity, that she would attract
powerful forces” (Saint Plays 110). Here the transitional rite of passage between childhood and adulthood that had previously been presumed becomes explicit. Barbara’s blood takes on metaphoric and real power within the Narrator’s story. Not just any blood holds the power to attract powerful forces. It is the dawning of Barbara’s womanhood that terrifies her father and that he seeks to control. It is also interesting to note that the nature of these powerful forces remains mysterious. The ambiguity leaves the possibility that these forces might be positive, but Barbara’s father is unwilling to take that chance. If one takes concepts regarding the potential of liminality and extends it to Barbara’s world her father is beyond the liminal. Because he is beyond the liminal, he is not as open to change.

In Ehn’s play, the body of Saint Barbara transforms to manifest spiritual needs through the physical. When Barbara’s body is “suspended between heaven and earth”, it responds by stretching out to what it longs to touch. The elegant cloth dinner napkin ladder is gone. It is replaced by Barbara’s hair. Though still in the realm of fairytales (in this case, Rapunzel), Barbara’s body takes on more magical qualities and her hair grows mysteriously fast, allowing her access to the outside world. Instead of inviting a handsome Prince into her tower, Barbara lowers her hair in order to “[learn] genius from secret women. From Jo Arrington, the wife of the Indian who built the world’s first radio in Barbara’s tower” (Saint Plays110).

Jo is the embodiment of feminine wisdom and mysticism. There are many possibilities for what Jo’s secrets might be. One option might be found in Regina Barreca’s essay “Writing as Voodoo: Sorcery, Hysteria, and Art.” Barreca comments that literature written by women in the nineteenth- and twentieth- centuries exhibits
certain trends. She notices that “women tend to write about death as if the lives of their characters are positions always in relation to a final moment.” She sees this occurring especially in female characters who have been denied any other power in their lives. Like martyrs, these fictional women tend to breed metaphysical power (what she calls voodoo) through pain and in light of the moment of their death. Barreca writes,

the power behind the woman’s curse or prophecy is substantial. Her curse is given substance by the ways the world sees women as themselves cursed—by bleeding, by giving birth in pain, by weeping, women have earned the right to give body to their desires. It is as if they can mortgage their own deaths in order to give pain to others. (175)

Though Barreca is referring to women finding revenge for injustice, the principle remains the same. The suffering of martyrs in general is amplified in Barbara by the suffering associated with the transformation from a girl into a woman. Like the women in Barreca’s fiction, Barbara receives incredible spiritual power to call down revenge on her father from the heavens by trading her death.

The Narrator also exhibits some of the supernatural power Barreca notices women gain in fiction. For the Narrator, this power is found in language: the power to bless and to curse as well as to write words that transform into action. Though Barbara is writing her story from a final moment backwards (the moment of death from which she derives the power to write in the first place) the story also bends as the Narrator speaks it into being. Barreca writes that this ability is not as often possessed in literature by men as by women. Instead,
Where a man might have thought a promise was merely a ritual assurance, to be given lightly and without considering the currency behind the words, a woman will have conferred upon the words a different value. For him the language is disembodied. For her the language constitutes not simple conversation but an event, and an event of considerable significance. These writings indicate that when women become the producers of signs, instead of merely themselves signs offered as exchange between two men, their signs will do more than represent. A woman uses language differently from the way a man uses it. Whoever she is; she has a different relation to the word. (176)

In the play, Jo brings secret knowledge to Barbara at the moment of her initiation into womanhood. It is possible she is revealing to Barbara (and through Barbara to the Narrator) how language has a different relation to her in her newly-established womanhood. Barbara learns the transfigurative power of her words.

**Transubstantiation**

Transubstantiation continues to be a strong theme throughout *Radio Elephant* (Barbara) along with the creation of a mysterious excess Sofer would call “dark matter.” The use of the term “mysterious” here is reminiscent of the “mysteries of transfiguration” in the Eucharist, which also creates an excess, neither purely the literal flesh of Christ from the moment of his death, nor the bread initially given. So too, Barbara moves from childhood to adulthood, but is not purely either. Along the way her experiences in this liminal space are transforming her into a something neither completely an adult nor
completely a child. Along her path, she is pushed toward this third thing, called a saint, through repetition and the constant access to mechanisms that produce knowledge.

For example, while within the liminal space, Barbara hears the radio. At first the radio is babble to Barbara. She cannot decipher it. But her senses respond to the noise. She can see the radio waves with her own eyes and feel them buzzing under her skin like the wings of a dragonfly. What appears at first to be abstraction becomes physical to Barbara’s ready and tuned body. Though invisible, the radio waves inflict real alterations to Barbara’s body. She is transformed by them. As she grows in understanding, her ears become larger until she has ears like an elephant (*Saint Plays* 111).

The Narrator proposes that these physical changes elicit fear from Barbara. In the fairytale version of Barbara’s story, she and the Jesuit engage in the cerebral. Barbara had nothing to fear from abstract speculation on the metaphysical construction of the universe. But now the words they discussed have penetrated and transubstantiated her. She has become something new and hybrid: something outside of nature but still in the middle of it. Now the story is real and overpowering like all the steam buried in Wyoming. Fear is a reasonable response.

**Experimentation in the Liminal**

At this point the Narrator’s story is exceeding her control. The plot branches into alternative directions seeking for the path that will lead to Barbara’s death at her father’s hands. The Narrator offers the audience three different versions of Barbara’s father in rapid succession. The father is first depicted full of concern for his daughter. He is the father of whitewashed children’s fiction. He knocks gently on the door and warns
Barbara against a threat he has no control over: “They’ve put a warrant out for your arrest, dear. If it comes to trial they’ll have your head.” But this version of the father cannot account for the whole story in which he is the one who beheads Barbara. The father tries again: “You’re under arrest. I’ve come to behead you dear. You don’t listen” (111). The tone remains consistent with his previous attempt, but now his dialogue better matches the conclusion. The result, however, is disconcerting and bizarre. Something is still out of place. The Narrator is still searching for a father that could behead his own child.

The father tries a third time. He is down on his knees from the weight of his internal conflict. His tone transitions into weightiness and his words emphasize inevitability in their mutually unfortunate plight. Instead of looking for reasons and motivations, the father spouts the blunt assurance of prophecy as though it has already come to pass. He references a mysterious and brutal “ancient justice” that supersedes all other intention. He tells Barbara, “You come up against me with these things you’ve learned. You die. But this is not your conclusion. The one step further: I die for killing you” (Saints Plays 112). Their conflict is intimate as well as ancient. It is the line they both must follow, and the Narrator cannot give a cause that both satisfies her paradigms regarding parenthood and leads to the same end. But it has happened. It is. There is a relationship between Barbara’s father and a particularly complicated father found in the Torah. The father of Isaac, Abraham, set out to sacrifice his son on a mountaintop. In that story, Abraham’s motivation for killing his son is not anger or hatred, but obedience. From Abraham’s perspective, he feels he must commit this heinous act in order to repay a debt and show his faithfulness (Genesis 22). Another example of this might be the
famous King David from the Bible who is, according to reports from a prophet: the mouth of God. Even so King David is still responsible for the death of his son (II Samuel 12). In both of these examples, the fathers are instruments in a larger story that reflects consequences of their actions beyond their control. Like John and Joan, they are subject to the invisible influence of that larger Analogical story.

The Narrator continues to advance the pace of her alternative scenarios. The story that was being carefully tested by the Narrator one element at a time begins to come all at once. The possibilities flow together in a single idea. The Narrator says, “She never escapes the tower but is allowed to leave with Bob when he proposes. She leaves after her first period and lives as a celibate. She never leaves the tower and wastes away to nothing. She escapes and is tracked down” (Saint Plays 112). The first attempt in this spiral depicts a docile and happy ending. The second depicts a lonely but possibly long life. The third depicts an unhappy exile but is devoid of violence’s brutality. The last sentence is the story as it appears in the Big Book of Saints. This is the sentence that cannot be divided from Barbara’s sainthood. She could not exist without it. The Narrator finds it unavoidable. The childhood fantasy transforms into a violent act of possession.

**Shifting Subjectivity in the Liminal**

The hagiographic ending comes first in the words of the Narrator and then becomes fully embodied by the actors onstage who perform this conclusion. As Barbara runs from her father and the sword alongside Jo, she encounters Dryads in the forest. The Dryads form a kind of chorus and sing with Barbara. Their song repeats:
I hide my blood in the mountains
I repose my soul in the trees (*Saint Plays* 113)

At the moment the chorus enters the world of the story, so does the Narrator. She becomes a part of the tale she is adapting. When the Narrator crosses over the pane of fiction into Barbara’s story, Barbara begins to take hold of her own narrative. She seems more aware of how her body exists within the linear confines of the story once she and the Narrator are united on one side of the pane of time. In “Spatial Stories,” Certeau points out,

> in the obscurity of their unlimitedness, bodies can be distinguished only where the “contacts” (“*touches*”) or amorous or hostile struggles are inscribed on them. This is a paradox of the frontier: created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points. (127)

As the Narrator reaches out for Barbara, the borders that define them begin to disappear, resulting in a smooth space where their flesh used to hit against one another. This is a reflection of the Analogical Imagination’s core premise that there is only one story, and the borders between them are illusion. Barbara tells the audience or the Dryads (or both), “Sometimes my body hides in the trees and my soul runs ahead to find a safe place. Sometimes my father is chasing only my body” (*Saint Plays* 119). The line between history and the present, as well as the line between the Narrator and Barbara’s story disintegrate. This disintegration could be read as reflecting on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, discussed in the second chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*. For Deleuze and Guattari, “A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its own lines or on new ones” (9). Barbara’s exploration
continues to expand across the stage unabated, but also without a clear destination. The
flows just start and stop because that is what flows do. Her mind wanders because when
set loose, minds tend to wander.

Saint Barbara’s story has expanded now to take up the whole of the play. The
Narrator is no longer safely tucked away in another part of history with her *Big Book of
Saints*. As the two separate spaces swallow one another, they exceed the stage. It is
difficult to tell which world is invading the other as the Narrator and Barbara say their
next line together. “He is confused in the circus of possibilities. The head on my body is
of such monstrousness now that he doesn’t know how to approach it” (*Saint Plays* 113).
The Narrator transitions from discussing Barbara in the third person (using the pronoun
“She”) to incorporating herself in Barbara’s story (using the pronoun “Our”). With their
soul (formerly Barbara’s soul) disentangled from their body (formerly Barbara’s body)
the story gets away from her/them and runs ahead with her/their body beyond the reach
of the soul. “Our visions have stolen our tongues and are working them now” (*Saint
Plays* 114). This sliding subjectivity is often a part of Ehn’s writing. In his play
collection, *Soulographie*, Ehn writes that the idea of “self is now an organized set of
fragments… So rather than being people, per se, we are what we piece together from
what was ourselves and what was someone else’s” (9). The Narrator’s selfhood exceeds
her body and accumulates fragments from Saint Barbara. They become indiscernible
from one another.

The Narrator’s soul is now at a distance from her body. She, as a consciousness,
is disconnected from her body. It has been set aside to perform wonders, and she
becomes both the center of a mystery as well as an observer of a mystery. In the clarity
that distance brings, the Narrator navigates a path through which all the requirements of
the story can come to fruition. Only through Barbara and the Narrator’s connection with
each other do they become keys to the divine. When the Father hesitates in pursuing
Barbara/ the Narrator, the Narrator offers him the map she has been working from. He is
given the instructions to his fated end. But the father must take action himself. The
Narrator tells him that “Three separate openings into eternity. Use them in a story so that
one leads to another. Your sword, our blood, the lightning. Line them up, and you’ll
have your path through to the end” (*Saint Plays* 114).

The father tries a scenario in which Barbara dies from a lightning strike, but the
Narrator reminds him that it must be “Your sword, our blood” that opens up eternity.
The father tries two more scenarios that distance him from the sword. They are rejected.
Finally the father lands upon a story that follows the Narrator’s requirements: “I took my
daughter to a cave, when she made her protest against the menstrual laws that confine
women to huts poled up so they will ride between heaven and earth through the first year
of the cycle. I knew she would be killed for this, and I didn’t want her to die at the hands
of a stranger” (*Saint Plays* 114-115). The expansive rhizome has evaporated, leaving
only one story: only one play.

Finally in this scenario, his sword took her blood. The Narrator has finally made
all the story’s elements align. She is a playwright with a finished work on her hands.
The liminal has begun to disappear and societal norms return. Though Barbara is free to
contemplate and innovate within the confines of her tower, there are still solid and often
violent structures outside the tower regulating how those ideas are put into practice. As
Turner reminds us, while in the liminal “…The novices are taught that they did not know
what they thought they knew. Beneath the surface structure of custom was a deep
structure, whose rules they learn, through paradox and shock” (Turner 72). Through her
experimentation, the Narrator exposes a paradox. On the other side of fairytales (things
she thought she knew) is oppression kept in power through swords bringing forth blood.
But in this story, acts of such shocking violence still carry great consequences. The
blood of the murdered Barbara conducts electricity, which tears apart a mountain and
leaves the Father dead.

Barreca, Turner, and Certeau describe the power of creating narratives. Barreca
notes that it is access to the production of language that inspires women to create stories
of dark magical power (176). In these stories, women’s words transfigure into great
mysterious power: voodoo. Turner is hopeful that the liminal spaces he describes create
spaces for contemplating social change. A liminal figure can question established and
assumed constructs, and once those questions have been asked they cannot be forgotten
(72-74). Under the right circumstances they might lead to miraculous social
transformation. Certeau writes that the role of the story is to “[open] a legitimate theater
for practical actions. It creates a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social
actions” (Certeau 125). Certeau advocates that all borders are thresholds where bridges
can be built. Once a bridge is laid across a threshold, the nature of what was held within
those previous borders changes irrevocably. All of these writers are commenting on the
possibility of creation through testing the limits of established narratives. The right story
is the key to unlocking new realms and ideas. The right words or the right questions have
transfigurative power.
In *Radio Elephant (Barbara)*, once Barbara’s head is removed from her body by the sword, it spirals into eternity. It has been transformed, and now it has the power to translate infinite radio waves. This head is similarly sacred and powerful like John’s head and Joan’s heart. Barbara spreads across a plane outside of space and time, now doubling as both body and sacred object. She becomes the promised key the Narrator needed the story of Barbara become. The Narrator has been reading the story in the quiet darkness of a girl’s room long after she was meant to be asleep. In that space outside of time, with the accompaniment of Fiona Ritchie on the radio, the Narrator finds a secret piece of the liminal. She discovers for herself what paradoxes the story of Barbara holds. Those paradoxes have transfigured her, though she may not yet realize it. The transformative power now belongs to her, if she can only stretch out her hand far enough to grab hold of it. The Narrator tells us that in that moment, “I reach for my high Barbara” (*Saint Plays* 116).
CHAPTER 6: THE SAINT AS A CIPHER: EULALIA

Though both *Pain (Eulalia)* and *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* feature protagonists earnestly seeking after a saint, the search is different in each of the plays. In *Pain (Eulalia)* the protagonist is much older and she has already experienced life’s cruelty by the time the play begins. She is not transitioning through a stage of liminality as Victor Turner imagined it. Where the Narrator in *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* is trying to put the pieces together in the liminal to better understand the painfully paradoxical world around her, Maggie, the protagonist in *Pain (Eulalia)*, has already experienced the worst life has to offer. In Ehn’s play she struggles to understand what violence means to her and to her family. Even though she is not in the same kind of liminality as *Radio Elephant (Barbara)*’s Narrator, Maggie is transforming. Like the Narrator she transubstantiates into something new through her encounter with the saint. This “new Maggie” is able to face the cruelest violence imaginable (the murder of her daughter) without looking away. In order to become the “new Maggie” who can face this violence (even if she cannot understand it), she needs the help of Saint Eulalia of Merida. Maggie uses Saint Eulalia as a cipher. Once she decodes Eulalia she can reflect on her own pain.

*Pain (Eulalia)* was first performed in Brooklyn in 1991 at BACA under the direction of Jennifer McDowall. Celia Wren notes this production’s significance in an essay on Ehn’s work: “BACA Downtown shut its doors in the early 1990s, and its final offering was a selection of Ehn's saints plays, remarkable pieces of ‘exploded biography’ (as their author puts it) that range widely in length, historical specificity and crypticness” (18). The play follows a couple who have lost their child to a violent and senseless murder. Maggie and her daughter’s father (in the play he is called Dad) search for their
lost daughter, Liz, across New York City. Maggie prays to Saint Eulalia, another girl who experienced horrific violence, for answers and comfort. While vainly searching the New York subway for her daughter, Maggie stumbles upon fourth-century Merida, Spain and witnesses the martyrdom of Saint Eulalia. Maggie’s search eventually takes her to Prospect Park, where she finds the burned body of Liz hung upon a tree.

**Saint Eulalia**

St. Eulalia of Merida was, according to her hagiography, martyred for her faith during the reign of Emperor Diocletian near the end of the third century or the beginning of the fourth century. According to her vita, Eulalia refused to worship the Roman gods Diocletian ordered her to revere. Not only did Eulalia disregard Diocletian’s ruling, she took her complaint to a judge named Dacian. She publicly proclaimed her privately held beliefs and announced her faith in Christ (Prudentius 145).

Eulalia’s actions align with those of the other five martyrs discussed in this dissertation. A rebellious spirit threads through all of *The Saint Plays*. All of *The Saint Plays* discussed in this dissertation celebrate individuals who oppose authorities that forbid expression of their beliefs. This trend continues to be true for Eulalia. Instead of heeding to Eulalia’s argument, Dacian ordered her flesh torn apart by hooks and the wounds be increased by fire. The hagiography states that Eulalia of Merida’s hair caught on fire in the process and that she died of asphyxiation while being burned at the stake. All during this excruciating experience, Eulalia of Merida refuted and even taunted her torturers, proclaiming herself a Christian in the face of death. St. Eulalia holds the status of a virgin martyr, and is said to have died at the age of twelve (Prudentius 144-146).
Though St. Eulalia of Merida’s story is horrifically violent, her sister-saint (Eulalia of Barcelona)’s tortures were much worse. She is said to have endured thirteen tortures, one for every year of her life, in order to inspire recantation. She was martyred under the direction of the local governor said to also be named Dacian. The first torture was flogging, and then her feet were burned. At this point, the tortures turned from persuasive to sadistic. Saint Eulalia’s breasts were cut off. Her torturers poured hot oil and hot lead on her body before throwing her into a pit of quicklime. The torture most associated with Saint Eulalia of Barcelona occurs toward the end her story. Her hagiography says she was locked in a barrel full of sharp objects and rolled down a hill thirteen times. She was then locked in a stable full of fleas and was paraded around the city naked. Significantly, a miraculous snowfall descended while Saint Eulalia of Barcelona was paraded around the city. The snow covered her naked body and this snowfall is often interpreted as God protecting Eulalia’s innocence (Sturzaker). Finally Saint Eulalia of Barcelona was crucified on an x-shaped cross (“Saint Eulalia”).

Because of the similarities between Eulalia of Merida and Eulalia of Barcelona, they are sometimes thought to be the same person, even though they are revered separately. They share the same age, the same country, the same governor/judge, and a similar death. Of the two, Eulalia of Barcelona is the more famous. For this reason it is notable that Maggie is brought to Merida, not Barcelona, in Ehn’s play. Saint Eulalia of Merida dies without great ceremony and is unaccompanied by fantastic miracles. No snow falls for Eulalia of Merida, only Eulalia of Barcelona. She refuses to deny her faith under great duress, but she dies at the point another non-sainted person would. In short, Eulalia of Merida is human, and Eulalia of Barcelona is not. It could be read that the
saint’s quiet humanity that draws her to the scene of Eulalia of Merida’s great trial, because it better reflects her own agony and that of her daughter, Liz.

The Space of Pain

Pain (Eulalia) explores the saint’s suffering as a moment of physical and spiritual transformation. While physical transformation and spiritual transformation have occurred in tandem in all six Saint Plays discussed, Pain (Eulalia) makes pain incitement for transubstantiation. Suffering becomes a liminal state. In Pain (Eulalia), liminality arrives in the shape of the New York subway system. While Dad remains at home, swept up by the shadows of loss, Maggie rides the subway clinging to hope that her daughter may return. She rides under the city streets, and that momentum propels her prayers. Once again, Ehn uses an image that is defined by its constant motion. The train is a transcendent image-on-the-move. In Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc), Joan experienced illumination in the “light,” which occupies the spaces between objects, filling them up. In Locus (John the Baptist), John comes in contact with water in the desert. Even though it is eventually boiling water that takes his life, the flowing and filling water also grants him access to prophet-head. A subway train moves between places, while it claims no particular place as its own. A subway train journeys in secret underneath the ground. It rumbles the earth for a moment as it passes, pushing air and heat to the surface, and then it is gone. It leaves little behind, and the traveler must trust in its return. A train will eventually arrive at its destination. The mundane, counter-symbolic nature of this fact is ripe with potential consequences, and its potential thunders on regardless of what those
might be. It shakes the foundations of the visible city, but its work is something of a mystery.

A train is often used as an image of movement between the material and the mystical. Maggie rides it, searching for answers. As she travels she wonders at this mystical contraption: “F train, J, M, D, R, 9, 4, A. Pulse and stop. How did I get to Bush Terminal? Pulse and stop. How did I get to the Terminal Bar across the street from Van Cortland Park in the Bronx? Why am I drinking green beer? Back, pulse, and stop” (Saint Plays 79). It transports her to different locations across the city, unhinging her from the trappings of a calendar and a map. She moves in all directions. Saint Patrick’s Day comes and goes as a shadow of a memory, but without conscious recognition.

Maggie’s vehicle glides between places, then slips between times, carrying her through the space of her pain—enclosing her within it—enclosed within the cocoon of her torture. Similar to speculations and descriptions of death, overwhelming pain is a difficult subject to put into language. In her book, The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry describes how the overwhelming position of the tortured reshapes the way one views and experiences the world. While describing the difficulty of transferring the experience of pain into artistic representation for the twentieth-century British artist Francis Bacon, Scarry notes, “The solitary figure in the typical canvas of Francis Bacon is… mercilessly exposed to us, not merely because he is undressed, unshielded by any material or clothing, but because his melting body is turned inside out, revealing the most inward and secret parts of him” (53). Like the flat, singular background Francis Bacon often chooses

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17 One example can be found in Ray Bradbury’s novel Something Wicked This Way Comes. He writes “Those trains and their grieving sounds were lost forever between stations, not remembering where they had been, not guessing where they might go, exhaling their last pale breaths over the horizon, gone. So it was with all trains, ever” (, 49).
for his paintings, the enclosure of the subway is monotonous and uniform. It is also a
highly public space in which private, solitary activities take place such as reading,
introspection, and sleeping. This inversion is paralleled in Ehn’s depiction of Maggie.
She feels the private knowledge of her pain is turned inside out and creeps up the walls
onto the claustrophobic space of the subway. As the panic over her lost daughter rises, it
overwhelms the material content of the subway and repaints it with her fear. Pain could
be argued as a contemporary universal truth. Unlike death or post-death, pain is shared
by all.

Later in her description of the aspects of torture, Scarry notes the qualities of pain
under torture. She writes,

Almost as obsessively narrow and repetitive as the pain on which it models itself,
torture can be more easily seen because it has dimension and depth, a space that
can be walked around in, though not walked out of. Here there is nothing audible
or visible, there is nothing that can be touched, or tasted, or smelled that is not the
palpable manifestation of the prisoner’s pain. (55)

As the material aspects of Maggie’s reality deteriorate, the subway becomes the
overwhelming structure of her private torture. Instead of arriving at the hazy yet still
familiar locations at which the train has stopped previously, the conductor announces that
they have arrived at the “Fourth Century, everybody off.” Merida is a palpable
manifestation of Maggie’s pain. In Merida her prayers and her pain open the subway
doors on fourth century Merida, Spain, on the day Saint Eulalia is martyred (Saint Plays
80-81). Maggie has been searching New York City for her stolen daughter, Liz, but what
she finds running through the subway tunnels is Saint Eulalia’s gruesome death.
Multiple Eulalias

Throughout *Pain (Eulalia)* characters are faced with their doubles. This process of losing individual identity through ghostly refractions is integral to transubstantiation in *Pain (Eulalia)* as it was in *Radio Elephant (Barbara)*. As Maggie travels through her pain, Liz and Eulalia begin to merge. As we have already seen, Liz and Eulalia are not the only doubles in this story. Eulalia herself already has a doubled hagiography. With two Eulalias it is impossible to tell which one is the reflection—the illusion. The two Spanish Eulalias compete with one another for validity. The reality of their scarred flesh disintegrates under their doubling. This double vision undermines their sense of “authenticity.” They are not unique and that somehow makes them appear less real in modernity. At the same time those stories are so covered in violence, the double-vision races back to the singularity of bodies. This cycle creates a kind of flickering between the overwhelming presence of torture and the dissolution of the individual body because it is doubled.

In his book *Seduction*, cultural theorist Baudrillard observes the significance of seeing the other self. He proposes this vision of the other self is a sign of inevitable death: “The double is an imaginary figure that, like the soul or one’s shadow, or one’s image in a mirror, haunts the subject with a faint death that has to be constantly warded off. If it materializes, death is imminent” (168). Doubling is not only a state, it is an ominous sign. It appears at the moment when the body’s singularity is called into question, and the apparition (the reflection) brings to light the ever-presence of mortality.
In *Pain (Eulalia)*, the double brings Maggie closer to an Analogical understanding of death. Death is always imminent for the Analogical.

For Eulalia, her double is her sister martyr of Barcelona. Eulalia’s death is always imminent from a paradigm that includes the homogeneous space of the transcendent God that Michael Kobialka describes (99). In other words, from a medieval paradigm, Baudrillard’s assertion regarding the double is affirmed and then expanded, because from a medieval paradigm the doubled Eulalias are always both dying and already dead. The double Eulalias refract against one another, and through those shards Maggie catches glimpses of her daughter, Liz. In *Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomena of the Theatre*, Rayner comments,

> Unlike a metaphor, which also joins two unlike entities in a single image, a ghostly double involves secrets and a return. Ghosts hover where secrets are held in time: the secrets of what has been unspoken, unacknowledged; the secrets of the past, the secrets of the dead. Ghosts wait for the secrets to be released into time. (Rayner x)

Maggie is looking for a key in these doubles. She is looking for a key that will unlock the secret knowledge of the dead. The double (or the ghost) can return that knowledge to her, but it is fragile. It moves by mechanisms unseen. A direct, unblinking gaze will send it scuttling back to the shadows. Maggie cannot face Liz’s death directly. She needs Eulalia to filter that knowledge for her: to be the specter that stands between them. Like all things uncanny, a double is best seen from the corner of one’s eye.

Because Maggie is unable to witness her daughter’s torture, she turns to a victim, instead of a witness, for insight. In his essay “Coldness and Cruelty,” Deleuze describes
Maggie’s predicament when explaining “Only the victim can describe torture; the torturer necessarily uses the hypocritical language of established order and power” (17). Though Maggie is not a torturer herself, she does stand outside the space of Liz’s physical pain. According to Deleuze, any attempt to impress logic and reason onto torture becomes an attempt to re-inscribe order and power. This language is necessarily dishonest because the process of pain is an overwhelming expression of the body that overwrites attempted explanation. For Rayner, the distrust of language is also a central conceit of theatre practice. She states, “The artfulness of theatre needs to raise the hackles of doubt and produce the pleasurable pain of tension between what is and what is not comprehensible, what is and is not living” (xxvi). The tension that arises in the shared presence of the living and the dead alongside one another onstage supersedes language, giving a small, tepid taste of Maggie’s tension. She proliferates doubles and mirror images from her mind, increasing both the borders of the bodies onstage as well as their crossing.  

**Maggie Reaches for the Saint**

For Maggie all attempts at interpretation fall short. Introspection, grieving, and communication fail her. This resistance to interpretation is reminiscent of a previous discussion in the second chapter regarding Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Body without Organs. In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus* the BwO “is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or

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18 A more theological perspective on the shortcomings of language to describe human experience can be found in the writings of Kierkegaard. He agrees “When everything has stalled, when thought is immobilized, when language is silent, when explanation returns home to despair—then there has to be a thunderstorm” (30).
circulate” (Deleuze and Guattari 4). The border crossing found in all six of the plays discussed here multiply and strip the characters of history’s distance. The characters face pain and death in the most extreme way possible, and these experiences of the body dismantle the organism. Though the organism is in the process of being dismantled, the characters are not able to shake off their desires. Instead the process of production increases as the flesh splits. Through this cycle, the relationship between desire and the anti-order of the BwO continues to pull the plays in different directions. The doubling of characters in *Pain (Eulalia)* dissolves the organism, but desire continues to drive those characters toward some distant purpose. They continue to want. Maggie flickers between the dissolution of the organism brought on by pain and her need to find Liz. The only way to live in the tension this creates is through the body of Eulalia.

Maggie is the witness (or the audience) to Liz’s death but, like Marina Abramovic’s audience witnessing her first performance of *The Lips of Thomas*, the urge to intervene dissolves any illusions of interpreted meaning. Erika Fischer-Lichte’s conclusions about the audience’s relationship with Abramovic explored in the first chapter take on new meaning here. Fischer-Lichte claims during that performance, “It can be assumed that affects that were triggered—obviously strong enough to move individual spectators to intervention—by far transcended the possibility and the effort to reflect, to constitute meaning, and to interpret events” (*Transformative Power* 16). Fischer-Lichte is discussing an event that broke the cycle of art consumption by triggering a more basic bodily response in the audience. While Ehn’s play continues to promote art’s illusion, in this play, Ehn is exploring how that transcendence might appear in the theatre. Instead of an external audience, the audience that is moved to intervention
is Maggie. Maggie, as a follower of the saints, begins in adoration, but soon finds that
will not suffice. Like Abramovic’s audience, she is then moved to intervention. When
faced with such violence, Maggie encounters the body of the martyr, torn and
inexplicable in its dismemberment. But as she approaches Eulalia, the characters she
encounters discourage or actively impede Maggie’s progress toward her. The man
Maggie asks for information tells her to “…go back home. You don’t speak the
language” (Saint Plays 81). The crowd in Merida is frozen in place under Maggie’s gaze.
They cannot or will not perform the martyrdom while she can see them. But even while
so many are working against her, Maggie begins to double with Eulalia. Eulalia speaks
in unison with Maggie. Their pain pierces through the borders of their flesh. Eulalia and
Maggie reflect Ehn’s character developments in Soulographie that the “self is now an
organized set of fragments… So rather than being people, per se, we are what we piece
together from what was ourselves and what was someone else’s” (9). Both characters ask
“Where are they taking the cake?” at the same time (Saint Plays 81). In that moment
they are mirroring each other. They reach out and connect.

Even so, Maggie continues to be pushed out. The man covers Maggie’s eyes,
telling her to “Get back in your own story” (Saint Plays 81). Once Maggie is thrust back
to a distance and her vision removed, the crowd becomes unfrozen. Maggie can hear
their shuffling, murmuring presence, and she can know the narrative progress of Eulalia’s
martyrdom, but the significant use of vision is denied her. At this point in her journey
she is overcome by the distance of time and the doubling pushes her back. She has yet to
achieve the mysterious access to the language of pain. Without it she cannot see.
Maggie continues to strive after her daughter through Eulalia.
Liz’s father has chosen a different way of dealing with his daughter’s disappearance. While Maggie runs through the subways in panic, Dad stays locked inside his home. He watches cartoons and is deadened to his wife’s experience as he is to his own. He descends into the flat simulations of life represented here as cartoons. Maggie tries to explain the horror she is furiously running toward, but he cannot take it into himself. Dad sits absentmindedly in front of the television and repeats Maggie’s words without comprehension. “What’s that you say? They plucked her flesh with fishhooks and she refused to renounce her faith? Who is this now? (He is lit by the light of cartoons from a TV. He laughs low and steady.” Ehn’s stage directions further emphasize Dad’s detachment. Dad is experiencing his own doubling in contrast with Maggie’s. His doubling brings the empty, shallow pleasure of entertainment. His echo of life brings narrative satisfaction. Maggie’s doubling brings her closer to the edge of “authentic” experience beyond language. The cartoons Dad watches are not visible to the audience. The stage directions dictate that only the harsh light reflected from his face is visible. The remnants of the cartoons are refracted and lack the power of specificity. In contrast, the embodied Eulalia stands before the audience and graphically describes her death in detail:

The first thing to catch fire is my hair, and it becomes so beautiful I cry... Blades open holes in my skin and I press seeds in and the pain squirts like bean roots in wet tissue paper left on the window sill in bio class. Cool translucent growing pain. The tendons expand and contract... I am, finally, a grin. (Saint Plays 82). Dad continues to repeat his question “Who is this now?”, but Maggie’s answers bounce off the protective shield he has constructed around himself. As Dad drifts in one
direction, Maggie continues to merge with Eulalia, hoping to see through the saint to her daughter. After Eulalia graphically describes being cooked in a bread oven, Maggie tells her husband that “I have to wrap myself in a wet blanket to keep my skin from cracking to pieces, cracked as crusted bread.” The signs of martyrdom manifest on Maggie’s flesh. Not only their language merged, their pain is merging as well. Maggie can feel the suffering of the tortured. Maggie says, “Eulalia and I have become plain bread. My eyes are used to the dark now… My visions will come as they come, not recollected—but through a world that’s become transparent to me” (Saint Plays 83). Maggie reflects Rayner’s insight: “Ghosts are not objects to be pointed at. They appeared only as a consequence of a certain manner of attention, and everything reasonable says to pay attention” (47). Unlike Dad, Maggie is paying attention. Once the world becomes transparent (once Maggie sees through the eyes of the saint), she finds her daughter dead in Prospect Park, a sacrifice to hungry gods.

Throughout Pain (Eulalia), Eulalia, Liz, and Maggie are moved in and out of one another’s spheres. Unlike the permeable membranes between 16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe) and The Freak (George)’s worlds, the characters in Pain (Eulalia) leap in and out like two flailing hands seeking to clasp one another. Eulalia and Liz remain distinct in their separate bodies, but they are hanging from the same tree. The sharpness and violence of their experience keeps them isolated. They cannot merge into the body of a single actor. In the second scene, Eulalia lies dead, and Maggie covers her body with the precious blanket she needs to keep from crumbling. Though this body is within her reach, she finishes the scene crying “I want Liz. I want Liz, I want Liz” (Saint Plays 83). Maggie seems unsure. Is this her daughter or is it not? She cannot tell the difference
between Liz and Eulalia at this point. In Scene Three, Liz and Eulalia are together. They have been hung from a tree in Prospect Park without their skins. They are together again. They are almost one.

A grotesque villain stands near the tree covered in blood and holding their skins in his hand. He has the head of Porky Pig, and like the cartoon he wears no pants. However this Porky Pig is rendered with his oversized genitals protruding from the bottom of his shirt (Saint Plays 83). In this image the phantoms of the play collide with one another. The unseen cartoons of Dad appear as the sinister cause of both Liz and Eulalia’s death. The masking of pain that Dad drapes over his shoulder becomes the source of violence. There is an implication here that turning away from violence makes one complicit in that violence.

At the moment of death, Liz and Eulalia sing together. As their bodies then hang limp in the new silence of death after the raucous noise of dying, Merida collides with Prospect Park. Maggie’s practiced habit of attention has made the membrane between the past and the present become more porous. As a result, two Meridan musicians enter Prospect Park. The first states matter-of-factly, “It doesn’t snow in Merida.” He or she is addressing the inverted nature of the vignette placed before them. The musicians enter, notice Eulalia’s vulnerable body stripped of its skin, but also of its context, and decide to take action. Eulalia’s body seems somehow more grotesque to the musicians when viewed here in Prospect Park than it would in Merida. The Second Musician proposes that they “take Eulalia back. For decency’s sake” (Saint Plays 84). They take Eulalia down as Maggie and Dad enter, leaving a vacant place next to Liz’s body, which (absent of her doubles) leaves her isolated in her silence.
The musicians’ comments on the presence or absence of snow refer back to the dual legends of Saint Eulalia of Merida and Saint Eulalia of Barcelona. In Barcelona, Eulalia’s naked and tortured body was covered by the snow when she was driven through the streets. This miraculous snowfall in Barcelona is an image that returns to Eulalia a sense of dignity. Her virginity (often used as a synonym for innocence in Catholicism) is revealed through the miracles to be of greater value than her life. That is, God would send a miracle to cover her body, but not save it. Because God sent snow to cover Eulalia of Barcelona, all of her decisions are justified even before her death. Eulalia has the satisfaction of witnessing a miracle sent on her behalf. Through this she knows she has made the right decision by standing against Diocletian. There is no such satisfaction for Eulalia of Merida. Her flesh is torn and burned, then she dies a predictable death of asphyxiation. Eulalia of Merida is not given a great sign to bolster her faith. She must rely on faith alone, not miracles from heaven.

Maggie does have snow, however, in Prospect Park. The miracle is not in the snow for Maggie. The miracle is the collision of Merida and Prospect Park. That is Maggie’s miracle. Maggie climbs into the tree and joins her daughter’s body. She can now fulfill her desire to be with Liz. There she tells the audience and Dad that Liz is “Burnt, made one and perfect by the snow” (*Saint Plays* 84). Maggie walks into this holy space in order to cloth herself in snow as well. According to Maggie, Dad cannot follow because, “I came to the park, dear, to learn how to be snow-buried after burning. This is a perilous circle. Guarded by burning bushes. You can’t enter here” (84). Within that circle, Maggie warns, there is a great danger. Learning how to burn and be covered by
snow is a double-edged sword. She knows how to do it only because she has lived it, and she knows how to live it because the saint showed her the way to Liz’s tree.

Interestingly the lack of miracles has an effect on the musicians. The realization that does not fall in Merida prompts them to cover and remove her body “for decency’s sake.” They cannot depend on a startling miracle to return decency to her. They must act themselves. They are moved to intercede. This decision of these two casual passers-by to honor the body of the saint through an act of respect reinforces the reciprocal relationship between the saint and the non-saint. Eulalia, stripped of her virtue, requires the non-saint to cloth her with honor. The non-saint is turned to action when faced with such undeniable brutality of which they (humans) are capable. Like Abramovic’s audience, the non-saint takes part when the saint’s flesh is torn.

Maggie’s work to train her attention to see ghosts serves her at the end of the play, as she can plainly see the body of Liz in the tree.
Dad’s preparation to avoid seeing bodies through immersion in simulation also continues to serve his purposes, as he is unable to see the body of Liz. Dad can only see a glimpse: a reflection of the Body of Liz through Maggie’s transformed face. He asks Maggie, “Honey, where are you going? Your face is changing. You’re in another dimension” (*Saint Plays* 82). But Dad has transformed the way he relates to the world in order to block his vision, and so he cannot see where Maggie and his daughter are going, nor can he follow them.
Maggie’s encounter with the saint is complicated. Maggie looks to Eulalia to see the Body of Liz, but only after experiencing some small piece of suffering herself. The Analogical world is consistent in its demand for the blood of the innocent to be poured on the ground. In the end of *Pain (Eulalia)*, it is Eulalia’s blood that brings Maggie fully into the presence of her daughter’s death. In the final stage image of *Pain (Eulalia)*, it becomes difficult to tell whether Eulalia is in Liz’s story or whether Liz is in Eulalia’s. These doublings of girls multiply when they stand so close to one another. Their multiple stories have transformed into a single spilling of innocent blood. There is now only one story. Maggie’s encounter with the saint has a profound impact on the core and tender points of their lives. Once the saint is let in, she transforms the soul.
CONCLUSION

In George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Saint Joan* (1923), The Archbishop of Rheims tells La Tremouille, “A miracle, my friend, is an event which creates faith. That is the purpose and nature of miracles. They may seem very wonderful to the people who witness them, and very simple to those who perform them. That does not matter: if they confirm or create faith they are true miracles” (79). The right play might fall within this definition of a miracle. A play might become a simple performance that appears wondrous to those who witness it, creating faith.

There is something simple and yet wondrous about Ehn’s *Saint Plays*. Erik Ehn’s philosophy of “Big Cheap Theatre” stipulates that very little is required in the way of sets or costumes. The wondrous aspects of these plays come from the language Ehn uses, the images they produce, and the tales they tell. Ehn’s dependence on language to conjure vast landscapes in our imagination is reminiscent of the Western dramatic tradition as seen in the prologue of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. The stage trusts language can transform something entirely ordinary into something extraordinary. This sentiment reflects a theological tradition that extends back to the Gospel of John. In that letter, the writer states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*NIV Life Application* John 1.1). For theatre and Christian theology alike, there is a mysterious, transformative relationship that joins the W/word to the object with which it is associated. The singularity of the word and the object is not to be trusted.

These key principles create a foundation upon which Western drama stands, but the contemporary playwright has his or her own ideas about what the transforming
process of theatre should be. As seen in the example of Trauma Drama, that transubstantiation can be prompted by acts of extreme violence. Ehn’s *Saint Plays* are no exception. *Locus (John the Baptist), Wholly Joan’s (Joan of Arc), 16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe), The Freak (George), Radio Elephant (Barbara), and Pain (Eulalia)* explode with dismembered bodies and charred remains. At the same time, these objects do not overwhelm the audience in the way that Artaud sought to overwhelm his. The plays set the remains aside quietly for contemplation. Though the images may be gruesome, they are meant to be intensely looked at, not looked away from.

The bodies in Ehn’s plays are sought after. They are searched. At the same time those bodies are also seeking—reaching out. An intense questioning permeates all of these plays, but the content of those questions changes according to the character’s needs and experiences. Their journeys are not marked by slaying dragons or by winning the hand of the prince. They are journeys focused on understanding humanity’s place in the universe. The Narrator in *Radio Elephant (Barbara)* reads between the lines of Saint Barbara’s story in order to comprehend how a father could take a sword to his own daughter. When she understands this, the Narrator is transformed. She moves through a liminal stage and into adulthood at the moment she knows Barbara’s story can never be a fairytale. In *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)*, Gajowniczek comes to understand that he cannot hide from the terrible circumstances that allowed him to experience the mundane acts of daily life. This realization is so powerful that Gajowniczek becomes a source of Kolbe’s strength in the distant past when Kolbe is most in need of it. Through understanding he is transformed into a blessing of strength for one in need.
Arguably the most difficult transmission of knowledge in these martyr plays is explored in the third chapter. John the Baptist and Joan of Arc wrestle with how to manage special knowledge once it has been attained and how that knowledge changes the direction of their lives. They are both frustrated by people around them who lack the willingness to see the vast multiplying landscapes that dominate Joan and John’s minds. The knowledge they possess is reminiscent of the curse of Cassandra. Like Cassandra, John the Baptist and Joan of Arc can see their fate laid at their feet but have no ability to divert it.

Through these plays there is a consistent relationship between facing death and understanding life. The price for receiving special knowledge of the mystical is to face death. Maggie must face the death of her daughter through Eulalia in *Pain (Eulalia)*, and Kolbe must face the red wreath he took from Mary in *16670 (Maximilian Mary Kolbe)*. The ability to confront mortality and turn it over like a precious object in one’s mind tears down the paradigmic houses built on fallacies of immortality. Characters like the Dad in *Pain (Eulalia)* and George in *The Freak (George)* have taken shelter in these fallacies. Only facing death as an object to be studded with jewels like the skeleton of Saint Munditia can undo such grievous self-deception.

This dissertation asserts that the theatre is an especially apt arena for exploring and exposing death. Theatre has a long history of double vision, and therefore it offers an opportunity for the audience to view life in light of death. Alice Rayner explained theatre’s capacity for double vision as, “the refusal in the… theatre to consent to the idea that invisible, immaterial, or abstract forces are illusions, that the spirits of the dead are imaginary, or that the division between matter and spirit is absolute” (xi). Theatre is built
on the premise that the actor is present but also erased. Conversely, in the theatre the character is illusion but also embodied. The fascination generated by performance in general occurs in the oscillation between the actor and the character. One is always disappearing and consuming the other. The inability to find closure in this process (to fully separate the character from the body of the actor) questions the achievement of narrative closure under any circumstances. In addition to the bodies themselves, theatre is filled with objects that take on a life of their own. Andrew Sofer notes in his book *The Stage Life of Props*, “From a semiotic perspective, it is hard to draw a firm distinction between subjects and objects onstage, since subject and object alike function as volatile theatrical signs” (6). Much like the saints Ehn addresses in his plays, the distinction between subjects and objects is veiled because of their shared position as signs.

The Analogical Imagination believes all physical objects have the potential to be sacred, regardless of how carnal or base they might appear. This is because all objects are made by God. The implication of such a system is that all physical objects have the potential to be set aside for contemplation and spiritual access. In Catholicism, these objects are called relics. For the Analogical Imagination, the sacred physical is especially possible for the human body. This inclination is typically attributed to the prominence of transubstantiation in the Catholic tradition.

Like the oscillation Sofer describes in the theatre, the potential for all objects to be sacred for the Analogical Imagination results in a kind of double-vision. In both cases the audience is aware of the body-as-is and its potential to become something else—for example to become dead. Of course the content and purpose of that transubstantiation is quite different in the theatre and Catholicism. At the same time, a complete line between
the two views of the body is difficult to put into practice. Real life rarely features such
definite distinctions in perception. Therefore the residue of religious language is often
scattered across the theatre stage. Erik Ehn exposes the ambiguity of this line in his *Saint
Plays*. He depends on the audience’s recollection of this residue (or excess) for his “Big
Cheap Theatre” to have a significant impact and inspire the audience to adopt new beliefs
and behaviors.

Aligning with Erik Ehn’s philosophy, there is no closure to be found anywhere in
this project. The bodies of the martyrs burst and fragment, opening an overwhelming
number of pathways. They open across the smooth surface of the desert. But this
splitting and moving is the truth of the body. The body is not a singular object. It
constantly splits and moves. It constantly moves toward its own destruction. Unfettered
by the burdens of a logical narrative in which each word follows another, Ehn’s *Saint
Plays* require the audience to actively engage in the act of creation. The opaque nature of
the flesh demands to be observed up close by this failure of language to create a false
sense of secure meaning. But the closer one magnifies and inspects that flesh, the more
multiplicitous it becomes. The preoccupation of this dissertation has been that moment
when a consciousness gets so close to death and is overwhelmed by such an infinite
potential that Kant might call this moment sublime, and C.S. Lewis might call this
moment the numinous, but the Christian term that I think most closely aligns with this
moment is awe. At the threshold of awe, transubstantiation becomes possible. The
consequences of this transubstantiation can be seen in Gunna’s changing vision of
George, Maggie’s inability to connect with Liz’s father, or Joan’s inability to relate the
love she feels. The bodily consequences of this can be seen through Gunna’s lost wings
or Barbara’s changing physiognomy. Ehn’s Big Cheap Theatre is only “cheap” when it comes to material goods. For all of these characters that mysticism that is prompted by awe costs quite a lot. But, at least in these plays, it is always worth the price.
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