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PERFORMING RELIGIOUSLY BETWEEN PASSION AND RESISTANCE

The question creates.
— Edmond Jabès

It's my job to ask the questions.
— Peter Shaffer

How to practice, or perform, pedagogy?

With passion and resistance. Passion and resistance, bound together, mark pedagogical scenes. This affective double bind activates dynamics and episodes of learning that entwine texts, teachers, and students. I am passionate about learning, about asking the next question, about odysseys of discovery in and through a range of materials and my experiences of and with them. Often I am impassioned by and passionate about particular materials—texts, broadly construed—because of their styles, their textures, their ways of weaving words together, their ideas and insights, the insights they engender in and for me. Sometimes my passion is short-lived, either fading or giving way to resistance, as initial enamoring morphs into critical questioning or even sincere resisting. Sometimes my resistance, initial or gradual, is passionate.

So, sometimes, is my students'. Sometimes, believe it or not, students resist my passion about a text or an idea. My passion encounters their resistance; these forces engage; occasionally they remain in a stalemate, though frequently they affect one another, as their resistance gives way to and perhaps partakes in my passion, or my passion recognizes and shares in their resistance. In either case, learning happens. Sometimes we are passionate together, or resist together a particular text or idea. Sometimes a text resists us and our attempts to ensnare it in our own passionate bonds. On occasion, I resist students' passionate bonds, especially in a religious

studies classroom in which those bonds are often unquestioned, unreflected attachments to religious convictions—convictions that regularly come under analytic scrutiny in the work of religious studies. That is, I resist their resistance to critique, or to complexity, or to abiding in impossible conundrums and irresolvable questions. Sometimes I resist passionately—personally or pedagogically or both.

Passion and resistance, bound together, also animatingly mark Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, a play that compellingly performs these affective dynamics: between its protagonists, Alan Strang and Martin Dysart, and between religious commitments and praxes. *Equus* is a play about passion and resistance, about religion(s) and critiques of it or them, and about transformation—a transformation at the heart of performative and pedagogical practices. *Equus* enacts a performance that can remarkably and insightfully teach its spectators and readers about passion and resistance, about pedagogy, and about religion and the study of it.

Already, and in a manner that performs a pedagogical orientation or operation, I proceed by way of questions.

Why passion and resistance?

Because they are bound to one another and to practical enactments of performance and analysis.

Passion is extreme; it is a limit-experience, an experience of and at an experiential limit. This limit might be psychological, corporeal, sexual, linguistic, existential, mortal, ethical, ontological, or a combination of these (as well as other) possible limits. A passionate limit-experience might be subjective or intersubjective. Regardless, it is subjecting: passion subjects. Its etymology underscores its subjecting effects, as its precursors, the Greek verb *paskhō* and the Latin verb *pati*, can mean “to suffer,” “to be affected,” “to receive an impression from without.” Passion affects, impresses upon, in an experience that its subject must suffer, passively enduring—for such a subjecting passion entails subjective passivity. This passivity occurs, moreover, at a limit, as a limit-experience.

Passion, entwining extremity and passivity, takes place in two movements. The first involves a displacing exposure to a limit, one whose contours might include those of history, love, responsibility, finitude, or pain. The second involves a subjective binding to that limit, at the edges of experience, which a passionate subject must suffer and where a passionate subject must passionately abide. Passion thus entails what Jacques Derrida describes as “the endurance of an indeterminable or undecidable limit,” where a passionate subject “must bear or endure everything, *suffer everything precisely because it is not itself*.”¹ (Examples of such passionate

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 28. Derrida originally delivered this text at a 1995 conference entitled “Passions of Literature.”

experiences might include transformative ritual, mystical ecstasy, collective effervescence, or physical torture.) Therein lies a paradox of passion; passion binds its subject—one subject to passion—to a limit, but enduring at that limit entails a subjective dis-integration or deformation, thanks to which this subject is no longer himself or herself and, therefore, no longer fully self-knowing or self-determining.

Hence passion is aporetic. It involves a tie that binds, binding a subject to a limit and an experience of that limit, but this binding tie ultimately unbinds. This unbinding occurs in a passionate subject's self-difference, which this subject must endure. Consequently, enduring passion's binding to a limit also involves enduring passion's subjective unbinding, the unbinding of a subject that passion effects—an unbinding through which a passionate subject is unbound from himself or herself. Passion, whose subjective binding affects, finally effects a subjective unbinding.

This passionate aporia discloses a resistance to binding that inheres in passion's binds. It discloses that passion involves a double operation, of binding and unbinding, in which binding and unbinding are, however aporetically, bound to one another as passion's enlaced operations. Hence a knot of passion, as Jean-Luc Nancy explains, "in being tied, ceaselessly makes the inside pass outside, each into (or by way of) the other, the outside inside."² Phrased differently, a binding-unbinding knot of passion is one entwining passion and resistance.

If *différance* is, as Derrida suggests, "another name for 'passion,'" then analysis might be another name for the resistance bound in and to passion.³ Analysis, of whatever sort, is a practice of unbinding. Analysis, Derrida suggests, is a "methodological operation of unknotting and technique of untying."⁴ This "technique of untying" takes place whenever analysis occurs, regardless of the analytic subject (which might include a text, a cultural artifact, a performance, a person) or setting (which might include a classroom or a psychoanalyst's office). No matter the analytic subject or setting, analysis (of which deconstruction stands as an example) is, Derrida writes, "always a matter of undoing, desedimenting, decomposing, deconstituting"—in a word, untying.⁵

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 111. Nancy continues: "the tying is nothing, no thing, nothing but the putting in relation that supposes at once proximity and distance, attachment and detachment." In *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Derrida describes "a matter of an absolute inherence of the other or of the outside at the heart of the internal and auto-affective tension" (26) and avows that "the possibility of unbinding is also, of course, the only condition of possibility for binding in general" (33).

³ Derrida, *Demeure*, 27.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

⁵ Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, 27.

But this untying that analysis effects can only ever be partial, provisional, incomplete, incompletable because the difference and distance on which analysis depends can never become absolute difference or infinite distance. Some relational trace remains, and that trace tethers. An analyst of ritual, for example, might be able to differentiate and distance himself or herself sufficiently to analyze a particular ritual. But he or she remains bound to that ritual, even if by the unbinding bond of analysis. Moreover, he or she is bound to other rituals, on which language, culture, society, history, and other institutions depend. For this ritual analyst, then, the boundary between actor and analyst remains porous. This boundary, Derrida adds, “must even be crossed at some point,” so that analysis, like passion, involves passage.⁶

(I note in passing that this porosity also applies to, and ties together, performance and analysis. As Richard Schechner insists, “performative thinking must be seen as a means of cultural analysis.”⁷ Performance is thus a means of analysis—performance *as* analysis—just as analysis entails an analytic performance.)

Passion and resistance remain bound, in a knotted crossing of proximity and passage that (recalling Nancy’s words) “in being tied, ceaselessly makes the inside pass outside, each into (or by way of) the other.” Where there is passion, there is resistance, though this resistance is never exterior to passion. Resistance inheres in passion as, following Michel Foucault, “the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior.”⁸ (His description might easily be of classroom dynamics, particularly those galvanized by binds of passion and resistance.) These knots of resistance inhere in the knots of passion—and in the knots that bind passion and resistance—performing their mobilizations and inflamings as tactical operations that, as Michel de Certeau describes, insinuate themselves in a space “fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance,” and create surprises that “produce a

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering,’” ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, 3, in *On the Name*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3–31.

⁷ Richard Schechner, “Performance Studies: The Broad Spectrum Approach,” 5, in *TDR* 32.3 (Autumn 1988): 4–6. I unfold a fuller sense of performance in what follows. For a corollary point to Schechner’s, though with specific attention to embodiment, see Nathan Stucky, “Deep Embodiment: The Epistemology of Natural Performance,” in *Teaching Performance Studies*, ed. Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 131–44, esp. 139–42.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 96. My previous sentence iteratively adapts Foucault’s assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). Reading Foucault in terms of a double bind, particularly one of passion and resistance, would suggestively reiterate that where there is resistance, there is passion, thereby avoiding a one-sided sense (or implicit valorization) of resistance that might emphasize opposition over a potential transformation. An acknowledgment and embrace of passion along with resistance might reveal that (*vis-à-vis* strategy and tactic) even while resistance opposes strategies of power, passion tactically makes way for potential transformation in any instance of resistance. I thank Wilson Dickinson for this point.

flash shedding a different light” on a particular scene.⁹ (Again, Certeau’s description seems particularly pedagogically apt, as a transposed description of teaching practices and learning experiences.) Resistance operates tactically – as do passions, binding and unbinding themselves, each other, and their subjects in complex double movements.

Passion and resistance thus remain bound together – doubly, for the tie that binds them is a double bind.¹⁰ In a double bind, practices of untying (such as critique, analysis, resistance) themselves retie the knot(s), as untying one knot requires pulling on another knot, making it tighter. In a double bind, a movement of unbinding is a movement of rebinding (and vice versa). Resistance therefore rebinds, just as passion ultimately unbinds. Passion and resistance are each double binds, which are doubly bound together. These doubly bound double binds reiterate the real, embodied double bind of intellection and affection that infuses pedagogical performances and classroom dynamics. When the double binds of passion and resistance bind and unbind students’ and my relations to particular texts or ideas, to critical practices, and/or to one another (individually or collectively), they are tying and untying and retying us in a weave whose warp and woof are intellectual and affective. This weaving reiterates that pedagogical scenes are affective ones. Affects can therefore become reflexive, pedagogical tactics for navigating classroom spaces and the relational nexuses that performatively vivify them.¹¹

So can a double bind. A double bind, particularly one of passion and resistance, can serve as a pedagogical tool. Practically, it can mean, as Derrida explains, that “instead of opposing critique to non-critique, instead of choosing or deciding between critique and non-critique, objectivity

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix, 37. Though I cannot expound on it here, Certeau’s interlaced web of strategy and tactic seems to translate remarkably well into pedagogical practices.

¹⁰ The complex figure of the double bind appears throughout Derrida’s oeuvre, most markedly in *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), and *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. 259, 389–91, 393–94, 396n6, and 501n4. For helpful readings of the double bind in Derrida’s texts, see Christopher Johnson, *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. 126–32, and Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (New York: Routledge, 1998), esp. 161–69. For a very different approach to the double bind, one that Derrida and others mention, see Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), esp. 206–12 and 271–78.

¹¹ I tread lightly here, since I do not want to graft intellectual and affective onto critical and non-critical, which I mention in the following paragraph. These ties are much more complex, as affect theory and pedagogical research indicate. Among the recent surge of affect theory, see particularly Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Denise Riley, *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

and its contrary, it would be necessary, then, both to mark the differences between critiques and to situate the noncritical in a place which would no longer be opposed to, nor even perhaps exterior to, critique."¹² A double bind pedagogy is one of "and ... and" and of *between*, of critique and non-critique, passion and resistance, performatively knotted together. A double bind can imbue, or incite, compelling pedagogical performances.

Why performance? Why not ritual, or another seemingly analogous term?

Because performance is a double bind, knotting together (among other strands) ritual and theater, stagecraft and everyday life, practice and play, iteration and event, passion and resistance—*in actu*—and, in doing so, activating interdisciplinary paths, particularly between performance studies and religious studies.

This entwining doubling binding of ritual and theater disrupts entrenched and implicitly hierarchical valuations of ritual over theater—and, with them, of authenticity over simulation. These valuations are deeply ensconced in religious studies as (along with anthropology) the disciplinary location of ritual studies. This devaluation of theater has roots in Plato's derision of poetic *mimēsis* as mere imitation, and therefore distant from truth, but it receives more recent reiteration by Émile Durkheim, whose *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* examines precisely that: forms of religious life in their most "elementary" manifestations. Durkheim analytically disentangles this broad category of religion into beliefs and rituals, the latter of which he unravels into ascetic, sacrificial, mimetic, commemorative, and piacular kinds. Presentations of this penultimate sub-sub-category of commemorative rites reveal, Durkheim writes, "an important element of religion: its recreational and aesthetic element."¹³ These rituals, he explains, "are closely akin to dramatic representations" insofar as they "not only ... use the same techniques as drama, but they have the same sort of goal," namely, "they entertain."¹⁴

¹² Derrida, "Passions," 4; see also "Et Cetera," trans. Geoffrey Bennington, 283, in *Deconstructions: A User's Manual*, ed. Nicholas Royle (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 282–305, where Derrida describes "this indecidability and/or this *double bind* between X and X: there is X and X ... *bind* signifies a liaison, a conjunction, like 'and.' A *double bind* always takes the form of a double obligation: and ... and."

¹³ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 383, 375–77. Perhaps Plato's most pointed criticisms of *mimēsis* come in his *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), esp. 393c–399e and 595a–605b.

¹⁴ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 383–84. Durkheim's remarks here point toward conceptions and dynamics of play, which according to Derrida "is the disruption of presence." See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 292. These conceptions and dynamics have a rich history, one that I cannot expound upon here. Among many significant treatments of play, see particularly Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Free Press, 1961); David L. Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); André Droogers, "Methodological Ludism: Beyond Religionism and Reductionism," in *Conflicts in Social Science*, ed. Anton van Harskamp (New York: Routledge, 1996), 44–67; and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Subsequent treatments of ritual in religious studies habilitate Durkheim's assumption of dramatic theater's aims and methods by or into ritual, thereby valuing ritual more than theater, as if to say that theater entertains – and through ritual, religion does that too, though it does so much more. Catherine Bell, for example, follows Durkheim's lead as she initially discredits performance vis-à-vis ritual by reducing the former to an analogy. This analogy's function, she describes, "rests of course on the slippery implications of an extended metaphor, specifically the analogy between ritual activities and the acts of performing and dramatizing" – and so is "gravely disadvantaged" as a paradigm or model.¹⁵

But over time, Bell seems to change her mind about this near-dismissal of performance, as she becomes more amenable to approaches oriented around performance rather than (strictly) ritual. These approaches include performance theory as well as ritual-like performances and performativity. This shift becomes most palpable in her contribution to *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, entitled "Performance," a moniker under whose methodological umbrella she now positions ritual practice and even ritualization. She explains that "performance approaches seek to explore how activities create culture, authority, transcendence, and whatever forms of holistic ordering are required for people to act in meaningful and effective ways" and that such approaches are particularly adept "at conveying the multiple ways in which such activities are meant and experienced."¹⁶ Bell's "performative turn" thus involves a shift from focusing on

¹⁵ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42 (my emphasis); see also 38, where she writes that this analogy of performance signals "in its own way ... a strong dissatisfaction with the traditional categories brought to the study of ritual" despite its apparent involvement in "very traditional types of relationships and categories." For another, genealogical treatment of ritual as an analytic category, see Talal Asad, "Toward a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 55–79. For more recent treatments, see *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (New York: Routledge, 2004); *Ritual and Event: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Franko (New York: Routledge, 2007); and *Understanding Religious Ritual: Theoretical Approaches and Innovations*, ed. John P. Hoffmann (New York: Routledge, 2012). For a very different approach to ritual, see Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), esp. 228–65. For an explicit treatment of ritual and theater together, see Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

¹⁶ Catherine Bell, "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 208, 218; see also 209, where Bell writes that "performance theory is more likely to eschew concerns with how ritual molds people to maintain the status quo, looking instead at how individuals fashion rituals that shape their world[s]." She concludes her essay by suggesting that "performance theory – broadly conceived, flexible, hospitable to difference and experimentation – needs to resist becoming a formula with which to process the data of difference into some premature vision of universal humanity" (220). If performance theory manages to avoid this danger, if (she writes) "performance terminology can evoke this type of open stage as well as it has evoked the dramatic fullness of human action, it will continue to be a vital asset in modern discourse on religion" (221) – and, I think, in contemporary discourses on pedagogy. See also Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 72–83 and 159–69.

acting “in meaningful and effective ways” to investigating what makes such acting possible. Correlatively, approaches focusing on performance attend to how activities—performances—are *creative*, and creative of “culture, authority, transcendence,” and related ways of acting meaningfully and interpreting such acting as meaningful. In other words, performance approaches focus not only on meaningful actions (e.g., a ritual) but also on what makes meaningful action possible, on the *ways* that engender possibilities of acting meaningfully. These ways, moreover, spread beyond sites designated as ritual or theatrical places, disseminating into spaces of everyday life (which include, for me and many others, classrooms) and, in the process, disengaging themselves from scripts and exposing themselves, more thoroughly and more unconditionally, to the play of events and to the doubly bound dynamics of passion and resistance.¹⁷

Performance, then, occupies a precarious position. As a double bind, performance is *between* ritual and theater, stagecraft and everyday life, practice and play, iteration and event.¹⁸ Performance is also semiotically *before* them, charting ways that enable meanings and interpretations of them, and disciplinarily *beyond* them, entwining their insights to weave an interdisciplinary fabric. This fabric is also *between*, as Schechner avows when he locates, or dislocates, studies of performance as “ ‘inter’ –in between ... inherently ‘in between.’ ”¹⁹ (This *between* is not a space of liminality, à la Arnold Van Gennep or Victor Turner, but of a double bind, particularly since *inter* also marks a crossing, a passage.) This inherent *inter*-ness of performance comes perhaps because performance offers a prior (*before*) and broader (*beyond*) analytic frame than ritual or theater. Thus Schechner advocates a “broad spectrum approach” to performance and studies of it, one that cannot but be interdisciplinary. He insists that performance includes “at the very least the performing arts, rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life” (the last of which involves enactments of

¹⁷ Resonating with this dissemination are Schechner’s statements that “a performance is called theater or ritual because of where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances” (hence the importance of context) and that “a tentative definition of performance may be: ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play,” in *Performance Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 130, 99. For a recent and helpful account of “performance,” see Catherine Larson, “What Do We Mean When We Talk About Performance?: A Metacritical Overview of an Evolving Concept,” *Latin American Theatre Review* 45.1 (Fall 2011): 23–44. For an overview of resistance in and as performance, see Elizabeth Bell and Stacy Holman Jones, “Performing Resistance,” in *Theories of Performance* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 199–231.

¹⁸ Jon McKenzie assures that “theater and ritual have in no way been left behind,” since “the field of cultural performance and the paradigm of performance studies cannot be thought without citing theater and ritual.” See Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 49. On a related score, see Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Reconceptualizing Theater and Ritual,” in *Theater, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17–45. For a genealogical account of what has become performance studies, see Shannon Jackson, “Professing Performance: Disciplinary Genealogies,” *TDR* 45.1 (Spring 2001): 84–95.

¹⁹ Richard Schechner, “What Is Performance Studies Anyway?” ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, in *The Ends of Performance*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 357–62.

social, professional, gender, sexual, racial, and class roles)—and, I would add, pedagogy.²⁰ Pedagogical practice is also *between*, for (at least, I think, at its best) while it partakes of elements from ritual and theater, it is neither ritual nor theater. But it is performance.

OK, so not ritual. But why performance?

Because performance performs; because a performance is performative.

Because performance is a *per-form-ance*: it forms, reforms, transforms.

Performance, Jon McKenzie declares, “will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge,” for performance “produces a new subject of knowledge.”²¹ This declaration might signify the production of “a new *subject* of knowledge” or “a new subject of *knowledge*”: a new style of subjectivation or a new kind of knowledge, a new *askēsis* or a new *epistēmē*—a new way of existing or a new way of knowing.²² It might signal both: a new subject of knowledge *and* a new subject of knowledge. In any case, performance produces something. In short, performance is performative.

Performativity acts, and its actions enact, affecting and effecting discrete performances and their effects. As Derrida describes, a performative “produces or transforms a situation it effects” through a web of iteration and invention, repetition and difference.²³ Performativity is, therefore, a matter of effects.²⁴ Those effects enact, and that effecting enactment engenders transformation, which Judith Butler reiterates in affirming that Derrida’s formulation of

²⁰ Schechner, “Performance Studies: The Broad Spectrum Approach,” 4. See also Richard Schechner, “Fundamentals of Performance Studies,” in *Teaching Performance Studies*, ix–xii. For recent engagements, assessments, and extensions of Schechner’s influential approach, see *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner’s Broad Spectrum*, ed. James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Schechner also collaborated with anthropologist Victor Turner, as is particularly evident in Turner’s *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1988), where he discusses *homo performans*, and in Turner’s remark that “I like to think of ritually essentially as performance, as enactment,” in “Social Dramas and Stories about Them,” 155–56, in *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 137–64.

²¹ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 18.

²² Foucault names *askēsis* as “an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” in *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 9; see also 72–77 as well as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2006), 319–20.

²³ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, 13, in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–23. See also Derrida’s figure of the perperformative in, for example, *The Post Card*. For a helpful discussion of the complex contours of performativity, from J.L. Austin and John Searle through Derrida and Butler to performance studies, see James Loxley, *Performativity* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

²⁴ On performativity as effect, see Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 19.

performativity “offers a way to think performativity in relation to transformation.”²⁵ Such performative transformation occurs in a double movement that recites (an operation of iteration) and alters (a movement of invention), effecting change as it recalls a prior situation or context via an implicit “from ... to.” A performative is, then, *trans-formative* – that is a crossing, a passage, “from ... to.”

A performative is also *trans-formative*. So is pedagogy, insofar as pedagogy names a way, a praxis, of formation: of a *subject* of knowledge and a subject of *knowledge*. Formation, though, innately involves reformation and transformation or, à la Derrida, iteration and invention, citation and innovation. Pedagogical praxes, of whatever sort, enact instances of *askēsis* (broadly conceived), itself a performative scene that stages a subjective reforming that is ultimately transforming. These praxes, or praxial performances, might be academic, or religious, or therapeutic, or some combination of them (or even manifestly one and latently another). In any event, such practical activities and active practices enact pedagogical formations in which learning occurs – by all performing participants – effecting transformations of perspectives, of practices (such as reading, thinking, and writing), even of persons as ones in and for whom “a new subject of knowledge” materializes, performatively. A practical pedagogy of transformation (rather than one primarily of transmission) *is* performative: it is effecting and affecting; it effects transforming reformations. It is also a performance, experientially enacting Schechner’s description of performance as “an active situation, a continuous, turbulent process of transformation” – one that Marvin Carlson insists “must be understood as a praxis.”²⁶

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 151. Butler also creatively invokes performativity, particularly in discussions of gender and sexuality, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), esp. 241, where she writes (apropos of Derrida) that “performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a ‘pure’ opposition, a ‘transcendence’ of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.” Here, she responds to Derrida’s contention in “Signature, Event, Context” that iterability or citationality, a requisite feature of any performative, means that “a successful performative is necessarily an ‘impure’ performative” (17). Related to this contention and to Butler’s deployment of it is Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s suggestion that a performative “has thus been from its inception already infected with queerness,” in their introduction to *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5. For a discussion of performance and performativity with particular attention to transformation, see Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), esp. 11–37. For a consideration of transformation in the context of religious studies, see Bruce Lawrence, “Transformation,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, 334–48.

²⁶ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 157; Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 193. For a keen reflection on performance and performativity in terms of pedagogy, see Jill Dolan, “Geographies of Learning: Theatre Studies, Performance, and the ‘Performative,’” *Theatre Journal* 45.4 (Dec. 1993): 417–41.

Fine. Why Equus?

Because *Equus* works pedagogically, in practice, in and for religious studies—precisely because *Equus* is a performance.

I have taught *Equus* in a variety of pedagogical scenes, which have ranged, over seven years and at two universities, from interdisciplinary first-year writing seminars to introductory courses in religious studies to a capstone seminar in disciplinary theories and methods taken by advanced undergraduate religious studies majors—and I am once again teaching *Equus* this semester. Though these courses' pedagogical aims correlatively ranged, *Equus* compellingly engaged each of these groups.

At *Equus*'s heart is Alan Strang, a notably unlettered teenager with a passion for horses. But this passion seems to turn on itself when one night he violently blinds six horses—including Nugget, his favorite horse—with a hoof-pick at the stable where he works. This destructive act lands him in the justice system and then, thanks to magistrate Hesther Salomon's pleading, in a psychiatric hospital under the care of Dr. Martin Dysart. The play, narrated by Dysart, dramatically unfolds as a series of flashbacks within flashbacks (in which what is recounted is performatively reenacted) as Dysart works to comprehend and then treat Alan.²⁷ This transforming treatment process reveals both characters' family dynamics (Alan's with his parents, Marxist-atheist Frank and intensely Christian Dora, and Dysart's with his wife, Margaret) as well as their private worlds of disturbing devotions and dreams and desires, of passions and resistances to them.²⁸

Equus works pedagogically as a performance, with all of the aforementioned complexities. Performance refers, Schechner asserts (in a suggestive and felicitous phrase), to "the whole event," to "the whole constellation of events, most of them passing unnoticed, that takes place in/among both performers and audience."²⁹ Shaffer reiterates Schechner's assertion in his

²⁷ These performative reenactments are at once narrative, dramatic, and therapeutic devices, the last of which involves abreaction, a psychoanalytic method of reliving an experience to purge it of its emotive weight and achieve *katharsis* (which reiterates the narrative and dramatic elements, particularly vis-à-vis Aristotle's *Poetics*).

²⁸ A précis of *Equus*'s production history: its first performance, by the National Theatre, took place on 26 July 1973 at the Old Vic Theatre in London. It opened on Broadway at New York's Plymouth Theater on 14 October 1974 and ran (there and then at the Helen Hayes Theater) for three years. It garnered a host of awards in 1975, including a Tony Award, a Theater World Award, three Outer Critics Circle Awards, and seven Drama Desk Awards. It appeared in a film adaptation in 1977, earning nominations for Academy and Golden Globe Awards. Its first stage revival came in 1979 at Baltimore's Lovegrove Alley Theater. It was subsequently revived at London's Gielgud Theater in 2007 and then at Broadway's Broadhurst Theater in 2008—productions in which Daniel Radcliffe, of Harry Potter fame, somewhat controversially played Alan—again earning Tony and Drama Desk Award nominations.

²⁹ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 87, 71.

prefatory note to the printed version of *Equus*, in which he describes *Equus* as a performance that engenders an experience composed “not only merely of the words they [the spectators—as well as the performers] heard, but the gestures they saw, and the lighting, and the look of the thing.”³⁰ The text evinces Shaffer’s commitment by including separate, detailed descriptions of the setting (a minimal wooden square set above a wooden circle, around which it can rotate, with railing on three sides and five benches), the costuming and department of the horses (actors wearing chestnut velvet tracks suits and see-through masks of wire and leather), and the choral function and *Equus* Noise the horses make (“composed of humming, thumping, and stamping—though never of neighing or whinnying” and meant to herald or illustrate “the presence of *Equus* the god”).³¹ Moreover, the stage directions, running throughout the text and including lighting and sound cues as well as actions performed without speaking, reiterate that *Equus* is a performance, or what Marco De Marinis calls a performance text.³²

Equus demands to be engaged as such, calling for a hermeneutic receptivity that takes account of its embodied, material, and affective elements (such as stage directions, acting, gestures, lighting, scenery, and “the look of the thing,” of “the whole event”) and the sense of performance implicit in them—its sense of performance. This sense resists any facile attempt to simply overlay an exogenous theory of “performance” onto a staid object. Instead, it raises interpretive and pedagogical questions like “how does *Equus* disturb existing theories of performance?” and “in what ways is *Equus*, or can *Equus* be read as, a theory of performance, or as a performance of religion?”

My most recent pedagogical scene involving *Equus* instantiated these considerations and their implications. It occurred in a small, upper-level, cooperatively designed seminar, in which I (before the course began) selected its texts and students (in the course’s first week) collectively determined its assignments. For their assignment concerning *Equus*, they chose to do a single,

³⁰ Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York: Scribner, 2005), vii.

³¹ Shaffer, *Equus*, 7; see also 3 and 5.

³² De Marinis describes (reproducing his grapheme) a “/performance text/” as “a theatrical performance, considered as an unordered (though complete and coherent) ensemble of textual units (expressions), of various length, which invoke different codes, dissimilar to each other and often unspecific (or at least not always specific), through which communication strategies are played out, also depending on the context of their production and reception” and specifies that reception is finally what qualifies or disqualifies a performance text as such, so that “any performance can be considered a performance text when the interpretive cooperation of the addressee desires (and is able) to ‘construct’ it as such.” See Marco De Marinis, “The Performance Text,” 280–81, in *The Performance Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2007), 280–99. Along a related trajectory, see W.B. Worthen, “Disciplines of the Text/Sites of Performance,” *TDR* 39.1 (Spring 1995): 13–28, where Worthen writes that “to engage the text textually, to think of the text as a production of the work, is to attribute to the text (and to its performance as reading) the functions of performance” (18) and that “both texts and performances are materially unstable registers of signification, producing ‘meaning’ intertextually in ways that deconstruct notions of intention, fidelity, authority, present meaning” (23). Echoing in the background (though not very far) is Derrida’s treatment of text, performance, and performativity in, especially, “Signature Event Context.”

group production. What they did pleasantly surprised me: each of the seven students selected a performance element (such as lighting, sound, costumes, casting, etc.) and presented how and why he or she would stage this particular element, complete with audio and visual materials—including a horse mask, which a student beautifully constructed using wire and paper. Then they together articulated how and why these stagings, taken together, affected the play as a performance of religion and as a performative theory of religion. Their first-rate presentation demonstrated their thoughtful, creative decisions, individually and collectively, and provocatively reiterated that *Equus* is a performance text, in and for which performance matters.

Pedagogically, then, *Equus* stages an opportunity to think through performance and religion, doubly bound, by exploring *Equus* as a complex instance of religious performance, or performative religion, or religion as performance, or performance as religion. *Equus* dramatically enacts a performance of religion (with all the ambiguity of this double genitive), as it includes and complexly entwines rituals, mythologies, and theologies—all in the plural, making it an inherently comparative performance, or a performance of comparison. Likewise, it offers Marxist and psychoanalytic critiques of religion, thereby interweaving religious passions and resistances to them.³³ *Equus* binds these strands so intricately that it resolutely resists attempts to unbind them by analytically untangling only one strand (e.g., ritual).

Moreover, each of these knotted strands is thoroughly performative, staging iteration and invention in an effecting enactment. Some of these stagings are relatively straightforward reiterations—of, for example, a range of theological positions, from mother Dora’s and son Alan’s exclusive, though different, monotheisms to Dr. Dysart’s ever-proliferating polytheism (“Life is only comprehensible through a thousand local Gods ... Worship as many as you can see—and more will appear!”) to father Frank’s intractable atheism.³⁴ These theologies compete in and through the performance’s dynamics, which mounts contests between Dora’s Christian god and Frank’s absent god; between Dora’s Christian god and Alan’s equine god; between Alan’s personal god, *Equus*, and Dysart’s professional god, The Normal (“the indispensable, murderous God of Health”); and among Dysart’s professional god, personal gods, and dead gods (“The old ones. Before they died”).³⁵ Other religiously reiterative scenes occur in terms of ritual, as when Dysart dreams of his disturbing and telling reenactment of an ancient Greek sacrifice of children done for divinatory purposes, casting himself as chief priest:

As each child steps forward, they [the two assistant priests] grab it from behind and throw it over the stone. Then, with a surgical skill which amazes even me, I fit in the knife and slice elegantly down to the navel, just like a seamstress following a pattern. I part the flaps, sever the inner tubes, yank them out and throw them hot

³³ Elsewhere I explore in greater detail the comparative dynamics of *Equus* and their pedagogical implications for teaching comparison in religious studies.

³⁴ Shaffer, *Equus*, 58–59.

³⁵ Shaffer, *Equus*, 62, 86; see also 22, 27–28, 39–40, 44, 47, 58–59, 82, 92, and 102–10.

and steaming on to the floor. The other two then study the pattern they make, as if they were reading hieroglyphics.³⁶

But *Equus*'s premier performance of religion happens in and through Alan's Equus religion, which *performs* religion by inventively reiterating, or reiteratively inventing, a web of theology, mythology, and ritual. Engendering this religious performativity is a displacement of images, when in a fit of anger Frank tears down Alan's beloved poster of Jesus on his way to Calvary (one that even Dora admits "was a little extreme. The Christ was loaded down with chains, and the centurions were really laying on the stripes") and, after Alan cries hysterically for days, puts in its place a photograph of a horse (one that is, Dora recounts, "absolutely head on ... It comes out all eyes").³⁷ Alan's mythology follows suit, reiterating yet transposing fragments from biblical passages that Dora read to him, such as genealogical lineages ("those Begats" and, in a different register, "Equus, my only begotten son"), a Holy of Holies, an Ark of the Manbit, and a Last Supper with atonement overtones ("Take my sins. Eat them for my sake").³⁸ Alan's Equus religion also has a ritual calendar and a set of ritual practices, including 1) a masochistic ritual of acting as a horse that involves Alan's fashioning a bridle from string, placing it in his mouth, and thrashing himself with a wooden coat hanger; and 2) an ecstatic ritual in which Alan, following precise preparations, nakedly rides Nugget—who incarnates Equus—into his sacred Field of Ha Ha, leading to their mystical and sexual union as Alan screams to his beloved god, "I want to be *in* you! I want to BE you forever and ever!—*Equus, I love you!* Now!—Bear me away! Make us One Person! ... AMEN!"³⁹

In these and related ways, Alan *performs* religion. His performance of his reiterative-inventive Equus religion enacts it, doubly, entwining performance and performativity in his religious enactment. Moreover, Alan *performs* religion passionately: he effects it, and it affects him, reforming and transforming him. Alan's performance of religion is a performance of passion—which is also to say, of resistance.

Alan's passion is palpable in the aforementioned scenes of religious devotion—to spectators or readers of this performance text and to Dysart, who acknowledges this passion's intensity ("that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life") and

³⁶ Shaffer, *Equus*, 17. This dream perhaps makes a bit more sense after learning that Dysart spends his evenings sitting opposite his wife and "turning the pages of art books on ancient Greece," wishing that there were "one person in my life I could show. One instinctive, absolutely unbrisk person I could take to Greece, and stand in front of certain shrines and sacred streams and say 'Look!'" (58) and that Dysart feels himself in the midst of "professional menopause" (18) and existential crisis as he wonders whether his psychological treatments—which are, he thinks, "ultimate things," "irreversible, terminal things" (110) of his young patients—are more beneficial or more harmful.

³⁷ Shaffer, *Equus*, 39, 40.

³⁸ Shaffer, *Equus*, 46, 69; see also 63–68.

³⁹ Shaffer, *Equus*, 71–72; see also 46–47. Alan's complexly religious performances also perform a correspondingly complex dynamic of power, one involving sadistic and masochistic aspects, so that Alan and Equus alternately play the role of "Godslave" (70).

extremity, recognizing that “extremity’s the point.”⁴⁰ This intensity and extremity recall the description of passion as a knot binding together experiential strands of eroticism, love, passivity, and suffering and as an experience that takes place at a limit, where a subject (restating Derrida’s words) “must bear or endure everything, *suffer everything precisely because it is not itself.*”⁴¹ Alan’s religious passion drives him to and then binds him to that limit, one at the edges of madness and unendurable pain. There, he is no longer himself, no longer a discernible subject but only subject to this exclusive, passionate binding to Equus, under whose jealous, watchful gaze Alan permanently remains: “The Lord Thy God is a Jealous God. He sees you. He sees you forever and ever, Alan. He sees you!”⁴²

Ultimately, this extreme passion activates the resistance that inheres in it, as Alan violently resists this passionate, subjugating limit-experience. Staged in his Holy of Holies, the stable, Alan’s enacted resistance begins with his quiet resolution “No more. No more, Equus,” after which Alan takes a hoof-pick, moves toward and gently pets Nugget, saying “Equus ... Noble Equus ... Faithful and True ... God-slave ... Thou – God – Seest – NOTHING!” and stabs out Nugget’s eyes.⁴³ In the next few moments, he desperately blinds five other horses who trample at him, until he succumbs to this knot of passion and resistance, (according to the stage directions) “yelling in hysteria as he collapses on the ground – stabbing at his own eyes” with the hoof-pick, to which he implores, “Find me! ... Find me! ... KILL ME! ... KILL ME!”⁴⁴ In the end, Alan finally and passionately resists the bind of passion at whose limit he can no longer endure.

This resistance conversely (re)enacts Alan’s earlier resistance to Dysart’s attempts at a therapeutic pedagogy aimed at transforming Alan. Much of the play’s performative dynamism owes to these therapeutic scenes, in which Dysart analytically attempts to untie Alan’s passion and Alan, in turn, resists Dysart’s resistance to Alan’s religious passion. On a cursory reading, then, *Equus* seems to manifest a double bind analogically: of passion and resistance and of Alan and Dysart, so that Dysart enacts resistance in response to Alan’s passion. But as the trajectory of Alan’s passion indicates, both characters experience and perform this double bind of passion and resistance on their own, even as they remain doubly bound to one another by strands of passion and resistance.

Pedagogically, this complex of knots, these doubly bound double binds, perform the correlatively complex imbrications of religious passions and critical resistances to them. It weaves a deconstructive texture that entwines passions and resistances of religion.

⁴⁰ Shaffer, *Equus*, 80, 79.

⁴¹ Derrida, *Demeure*, 28 (cited above).

⁴² Shaffer, *Equus*, 106.

⁴³ Shaffer, *Equus*, 106 (ellipses in the original).

⁴⁴ Shaffer, *Equus*, 107 (ellipses in the original).

Dysart, like Alan, undergoes a double bind of passion and resistance. His professional duty is therapeutically pedagogic: *formative*, reformative and/or transformative. This duty, however, does not simply entail a critical resistance to religion, since it, too, is religious, for Dysart is a priest of The Normal, that “indispensable, murderous God of Health,” in whose service he performs, by way of therapy, sacrifices in which he says, “I have cut from them [his patients] parts of individuality repugnant to this God” – though these parts are, he acknowledges, “sacred to rarer and more wonderful Gods.”⁴⁵ But as his therapeutic treatment of Alan progresses, Dysart comes to (personally) resist – passionately – his (professional) resistance, in the service of his religious bond to the Normal, to Alan’s passion for *Equus*. He finally admits his impassioned jealousy of Alan’s passion and his reluctance to reform it: “Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?”⁴⁶ But after witnessing Alan’s excruciating, unbearable, disintegrating pain, Dysart relents, crying, “All right! I’ll take it away! He’ll be delivered from madness.”⁴⁷ He does so with great ambivalence, resisting his resistance to his own analytic resistance, knowing that Alan’s therapeutic reformation will excise his passionate capacity. For passion, he admits, “can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created.”⁴⁸

But passion can be and is performed in and by *Equus*, doubly bound to resistance, with both knotted to religion. *Equus* performs religion, effectively, affectively, and dramatically. In doing so, it stages pedagogical possibilities for religious studies, ones that are potentially transformative and *transformative* for analytic practices and pedagogical performances – and performers. For example, one such pedagogical possibility might consider how and why *Equus* performs a theory of religion that figures religion in terms of passion and resistance and whose analytic categories might not be theology, mythology, ritual, etc. – or even belief and practice – but, perhaps, reiteration, invention, animality, ecstasy, transgression, transformation (with emphasis on both operations: *trans* and *formation*).⁴⁹

Next question ...

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⁴⁵ Shaffer, *Equus*, 62.

⁴⁶ Shaffer, *Equus*, 79.

⁴⁷ Shaffer, *Equus*, 108.

⁴⁸ Shaffer, *Equus*, 109.

⁴⁹ I owe a debt of gratitude to literally hundreds of undergraduate students who have (in many courses over many years) read and discussed *Equus* with me. I dedicate this essay to these students, since it emerges from the real, pedagogical moments of critical engagement that we shared with one another and with *Equus*.