

OF & GODS AND MONSTERS

How Peter Shaffer's Play, *Equus*, Taught Me to Worship Life Itself

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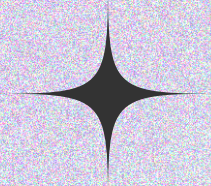
Peter Shaffer's 1973 play, *Equus*, is a story about one boy's literal apotheosis of horses. Indeed, the theatrical work—which was subsequently made into a film by director Sidney Lumet in 1997—is about a great many things. But at its core, it is a call to find life's meaning, its ecstasy, in the act of living itself (sordid though this life thing may be).

The drama tells the tale of Alan Strang—a boy whose bubbling fascination with horses has sublimated into the realm of the religious and the pathological all at once—and his relationship with and effect on Martin Dysart, the psychiatrist charged with casting Alan out of the bridle of lunacy and liberating him into the fetters of normalcy. Alan has found primordial passion in the creation of a deity, *Equus*; a god-figure that takes on the incarnation of the equine. It is Dysart's duty to exorcise Alan of this passion; of this god turned monster. "But at what cost?" the tragedy questions.

Equus is a play about passion and the crimes thereof. It is an exegesis of religion at its purest and its most perverse. It is a paeon to the illusion of sanity and the reality of madness. It is a staging of sex and sexuality pitted against a discussion about righteousness. It is a tug of war between the Apollonian ideals of restraint and harmony and the Dionysian traits of delicious excess and irrepressible fervor.

Yet, for the play's complex root-hair entanglement of themes, one quote from Shaffer's masterpiece germinates into the indelible lesson I have learnt from this work:

*"... life is only
comprehensible through
a thousand local gods...
spirits of certain trees, of
certain curves of brick
walls, of certain fish and
chip shops if you like.
And slate roofs, and
frowns in people, and
slouches... I'd say to them,
"Worship all you can see,
and more will appear..."*



These words, spoken by Dysart, are certainly open to interpretation, as all poetry (or poetry veiled as drama) is. But, in my world and Weltanschauung, they have come to represent a singular attitude to and understanding of life that has grown into my own religion, so to speak: that divinity dwells wherever one seeks it. And the more I practice finding what filmmaker Werner Herzog terms as “the ecstatic flash” in the earthly, the more celestial everything appears.

After all, is a life lacking in worship (where worship is synonymous with passion) one worth living? And why seek that “ecstatic flash” only in the esoteric, when there is so much beauty to be found in the quotidian.

“Worship all that you see”: an exhortation to excavate magnificence from the mundane because, when you think of it, isn’t everything a miracle? These pages and our being able to transduce them into thought, for instance: is this apprehension not angelic?

“Worship all you can see”: find as much passion in the remarkability of seeing the Milky Way—if even for a brief moment—in a cup of stygian tea as it is first cleaved by a stream of alabaster cream, as you may in pondering the very Milky Way itself.

French poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire famously had a motto: “J’émervaille!” which translates to “I marvel!” I once bought a white mug emblazoned with black letters that spell out this aphorism from the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris. It’s a simple mug. Still, I often marvel not only at its message, but at the idea of a mug (or any chalice at all) and of course at the idea that Paris was someone’s idea. Could it really be that simple? “Worship all you see, and more will appear”: look for beauty everywhere, and everywhere you will find truth; everywhere you will see that life itself—its curves, its corners, its clay and its concrete, its chartreuse tennis balls, its light filtering through leaves, its love inexhaustible—is the object worthiest of our devotion.