

Madness isn't the Only Option: On Zizek's Resignation to Narcissistic Politics
by
William Earnest

[The following paper is relatively long, 25 pages, and some readers may find it more convenient to download the .pdf file here. The paper stands on its own, but will eventually tie in with other work on this site, and I've included a link to a short paper on the film "The Wizard of Oz" that illustrates some of the following ideas. I alert the reader to my inclusion of fairly long quotations from others' work, particularly case descriptions, the longest of which I've highlighted in blue font so they can be more easily followed. I believe that long quotations are advisable because they offer a better feel for the personality dynamics, and the person, the author is trying to make sense of, and help to ground the theoretical discussion.]

In his writings Zizek addresses an array of themes, and does so with an erudite enthusiasm that is both refreshing and dizzying. Psychoanalytic categories alternately collaborate with and elbow those of philosophy, with philosophy at times either on the couch or questioning psychoanalysis about its frail subjectivist presuppositions. As part of this conceptual stew – often exhilarating in its mix of levels of analysis and related experience that other writers usually sequester off into disconnected disciplines – Zizek's exposition of psychoanalytic concepts tends to be abbreviated; in particular, his arguments are rarely framed with references to case material.¹

In the following I present extended case examples to remedy this lack. Once his universal, or metapsychological, statements are embodied in accounts of the lives of analysands who represent the psychodynamics he refers to, serious questions arise about both the validity of his generalizations and their relevance to radical politics. I do so from a perspective that criticizes an unacknowledged and surprising emphasis on narcissistic dynamics that leads Zizek, drawing on Lacan, to endorse a modification of psychoanalysis that greatly diminishes its critical potential. This emphasis on narcissistic dynamics appears to be related to Zizek's pessimistic analysis of contemporary capitalism's ability to captivate those living under it; narcissism appears to Zizek as a psychology resistant to captivation.

Limiting Self-Contentment

As a point of departure I begin with a passage in The Ticklish Subject where Zizek does refer to a clinical case. Before citing the case, he considers

the radical dimension of the death drive - the fact that the excess of the Will over a mere self-contented satisfaction is always mediated by the 'nihilistic' stubborn attachment to Nothingness. The death drive is not merely a direct nihilistic opposition to any life-asserting attachment; rather, it is the very formal structure of the reference to Nothingness that enables us to overcome the stupid self-contented life-rhythm, in order to become 'passionately attached' to some Cause - be it love, art, knowledge or politics - for which we are ready to risk everything. In this precise sense, it is meaningless to talk about the sublimation of drives, since drive as such involves the structure of sublimation: we pass from instinct to drive when, *instead of aiming directly at the goal that would satisfy us,*

¹ I would like to thank Mark Cooper, Julio Nunez, Irene Padavic, and Tod Sloan for their comments and encouragement. The author can be contacted at earnest@tallynet.com

satisfaction is brought about by circulating around the void, by repeatedly missing the object which is the stand-in for the central void. So, when a subject desires a series of positive objects, the thing to do is to distinguish between objects which are actually desired as particular objects, and the object which is desired as the stand-in for Nothingness...² [emphasis added]

In this passage Zizek enlists the death drive to break up the embrace of conformity, but with an important moderation. Writers from Freud to Ogden regard the death drive as disruptive not only of object attachments that might make up a “stupid self-contented life rhythm,” but also disruptive of the subject’s *tolerance of their own desires as well*.³ Zizek offers the death drive in mediated form: *it does not lead to a Nothingness of drivelessness*, but a desperate attraction to an object that “stands-in for Nothingness” and forestalls direct experience of its horror.



Dorothy and her group succumb to the Witch’s poppies. The Wizard of Oz offers a useful analogy for the themes considered here. An essay is linked.

The Kris Case

To show the form this might take in terms closer to psychological experience, Zizek introduces Lacan’s discussion of an analysis presented by Ernst Kris:

As for this Nietzschean difference between 'willing nothing (not willing anything at all)' and 'willing Nothingness itself', one should read it against the background of Lacan's distinction, elaborated apropos of Ernst Kris's case of 'pathological' self-accusation of plagiarism, between 'stealing nothing (in the simple sense of "not stealing anything")' and 'stealing Nothingness itself': when the patient - an intellectual obsessed with the notion that he is constantly stealing ideas from his colleagues - is proved by the analyst (Kris) not, in reality, to have stolen anything, this does not yet prove that he is simply innocent. What the patient is actually stealing is 'nothing' itself, just as an anorexic is not simply eating nothing (in the sense of 'not eating anything') but, rather, eating Nothingness itself. What, exactly, do these passages, so often referred to, mean? Darian Leader linked this case to another in which a patient evokes the anecdote of a man suspected by his employer of stealing something: as he leaves the factory where he works every evening, his wheelbarrow is searched systematically - nothing is found, until at last it is understood that he is stealing wheelbarrows themselves. . . . Along the same lines, as Lacan emphasizes, when Kris's patient displays his obsession with the 'pathological' feeling of plagiarizing, the crucial point is not to take this self-accusation at face value, and endeavour to prove to the patient that in reality he is not stealing anything from his colleagues - what the patient (as well as his analyst) fails to see is that 'the real plagiarism is in the form of the object itself, in the fact that for this man something can only have a value if it belongs to someone else': the patient's apprehension that everything he

² Zizek, S. The Ticklish Subject, Verso: New York, 1999. p. 108

³ For example, Ogden views the death drive as a mobilization of primitive, in-born “fight-flight” reactions against the subject’s instincts themselves, a fundamental assault on the experience of need and its representation. Thomas Ogden, The Matrix of the Mind, Aronson: New York, 1993, ch. 2. This is in line with the frequent observation that psychotic episodes centrally reflect a subject’s terror, and that one way to reduce this terror is to eliminate a sense of being impelled towards anything that one might need, because therein lies danger. See, for example, Karon, Bert. (1992). “The Fear of Understanding Schizophrenia.” *Psychoanalytic Psychology*., 09:191-211.

possesses is stolen conceals the profound satisfaction— jouissance - he derives from the very fact of not having anything that truly belongs to him - that is truly 'his'.⁴

Zizek does not give a citation for the Kris case. However, a literature search indicates that Kris discussed an analysis troubled by self-accusations of plagiarism in two papers, one published in 1939, the other in 1951.⁵ In both, what Kris tells us of the analysis differs significantly from Lacan's rendering cited by Zizek. From the second paper:

At the time of his second analysis a patient, who was a young scientist in his early thirties, successfully filled a respected academic position without being able to advance to higher rank because he was unable to publish any of his extensive researches. This, his chief complaint, led him to seek further analysis. He remembered with gratitude the previous treatment which had improved his potency, diminished social inhibitions, producing a marked change in his life, and he was anxious that his resumption of analysis should not come to the notice of his previous analyst (a woman) lest she feel in any way hurt by his not returning to her; but he was convinced that after a lapse of years he should now be analyzed by a man.

He had learned in his first analysis that fear and guilt prevented him from being productive, that he 'always wanted to take, to steal, as he had done in puberty'. He was under constant pressure of an impulse to use somebody else's ideas—frequently those of a distinguished young scholar, his intimate friend, whose office was adjacent to his own and with whom he engaged daily in long conversations.

Soon, a concrete plan for work and publication was about to materialize, when one day the patient reported he had just discovered in the library a treatise published years ago in which the same basic idea was developed. It was a treatise with which he had been familiar, since he had glanced at it some time ago. His paradoxical tone of satisfaction and excitement led me to inquire in very great detail about the text he was afraid to plagiarize. In a process of extended scrutiny it turned out that the old publication contained useful support of his thesis but no hint of the thesis itself. The patient had made the author say what he wanted to say himself. Once this clue was secured the whole problem of plagiarism appeared in a new light. The eminent colleague, it transpired, had repeatedly taken the patient's ideas, embellished and repeated them without acknowledgment. The patient was under the impression he was hearing for the first time a productive idea without which he could not hope to master his own subject, an idea which he felt he could not use because it was his colleague's property.

Among the factors determining the patient's inhibitions in his work, identification with his father played an important part. Unlike the grandfather, a distinguished scientist, the father had failed to leave his mark in his field of endeavor. The patient's striving to find sponsors, to borrow ideas, only to find that they were either unsuitable or could only be plagiarized, reproduced conflicts of his earlier relationship with his father. The projection of ideas to paternal figures was in part determined by the wish for a great and

⁴ Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 108.

⁵ Kris, E, 1939, "On Inspiration – Preliminary Notes on Emotional Conditions in Creative States," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 20: 377-89 and 1951, "Ego Psychology and Interpretation in Psychoanalytic Therapy," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 20: 15-30.

successful father (a grandfather). In a dream the Oedipal conflict with the father was represented as a battle in which books were weapons and conquered books were swallowed during combat. This was interpreted as the wish to incorporate the father's penis. It could be related to a definite phase of infancy when, aged four and five, the little boy was first taken as father's companion on fishing trips. 'The wish for the bigger fish', the memory of exchanging and comparing fishes, was recalled with many details. The tendency to take, to bite, to steal was traced through many ramifications and disguises during latency and adolescence until it could be pointed out one day that the decisive displacement was to ideas. Only the ideas of others were truly interesting, only ideas one could take; hence the taking had to be engineered. At this point of the interpretation I was waiting for the patient's reaction. The patient was silent and the very length of the silence had a special significance. Then, as if reporting a sudden insight, he said: 'Every noon, when I leave here, before luncheon, and before returning to my office, I walk through X Street [a street well known for its small but attractive restaurants] and I look at the menus in the windows. In one of the restaurants I usually find my preferred dish—fresh brains.'

Kris is not the superficial, normalizing counselor Lacan makes him out to be. Where Žižek's retelling implies that Kris aimed to convince his patient that he had not stolen anything, Kris' own narrative plainly shows that he did not limit his intervention to supportive therapy. Kris did not aim to reassure by bolstering the analysand's grasp of his real innocence. Rather, he involved his analysand in an effort to understand the unconscious impetus for his plagiarization fear. The fear of plagiarization developed out of an impulse to steal, linked to the patient's wish to have for himself the ideas/brains/phallus⁶ of a fantasized father, in contrast to his real (as experienced by the analysand) father, who was not successful or phallicly potent. Beyond this basic framework, Kris found significant nuances; for example, the analysand would at times "set up" with his own ideas the person he feared he might plagiarize.

As reported by Žižek, Lacan's dismissive summary of Kris' work expresses Lacan's argument with ego-psychological psychoanalysis in all of its tendentiousness. I will have more to say about that dispute elsewhere, but relevant here is Lacan's belief that ego-psychological psychoanalysis was naïve in its orientation to the ego. That is, Lacan believed that ego-psychological psychoanalysis gave too much emphasis to improving the ego's capacity for reality testing, and ignored how the ego rested on, and in a sense is *composed of*, identifications that must be called into question (just how much to be questioned will be discussed below).

I don't wish to completely deny the validity of that objection. But, unfortunately, in their haste to convince the reader that ego-psychological psychoanalysis cannot carry out a satisfactory analysis of unconscious psychological processes, Žižek/Lacan⁷ characterize ego-psychological psychoanalysis as promoting a simple-minded non-psychoanalytic affirmation of reality: "You don't need to feel guilty, you're innocent!" They effectively conflate it with – to refer to current psychological theories – cognitive-behavioral therapy, which ignores (or ontologically rules out)

⁶ Throughout this paper I will distinguish between penis and phallus. The former refers to the male sex organ, the latter to a representation of a male sex organ that is *idealized* and experienced as powerful and conferring power on its possessor. Other psychoanalytic writers effectively argue that female sexual characteristics can be similarly endowed both with magical power and a sense of being impossibly out of reach. The emphasis in this paper on the penis/phallus distinction follows from Žižek's choice of referents.

⁷ I will occasionally conjoin Žižek and Lacan's names when Žižek relies upon Lacan's position.

unconscious meaning in favor of reality assessment. Instead of considering whether the analysand imbues objects with unconscious meaning, cognitive-behavioral therapy examines whether the analysand's inferences about themselves and others are skewed, for example, whether they are "catastrophizing" when a catastrophe is highly unlikely. This mischaracterization of Kris' work is very different from criticizing ego-psychological psychoanalysis for truncating the scope of analysis and thereby placing the basic structure of the ego above psychoanalytic scrutiny.

By pitting the interpretations actually offered by Kris against Zizek/Lacan's interpretation, we can draw out differences between the two positions. Zizek continues:

On the level of desire, this attitude of stealing means that desire is always the desire of the Other, never immediately 'mine' (I desire an object only in so far as it is desired by the Other) - so the only way for me authentically to 'desire' is to reject all positive objects of desire, and desire Nothingness itself (again, in all the senses of this term, up to desiring that specific form of Nothingness which is desire itself - for this reason, human desire is always desire to desire, desire to be the object of the Other's desire). Again, we can easily see the homology with Nietzsche: a Will can be a 'Will to Will', a willing which wants willing itself, only in so far as it is a Will which actively wills Nothingness. (Another well-known form of this reversal is the characterization of Romantic lovers as actually being in love not with the beloved person, but with Love itself.) Crucial here is the self-reflexive turn by means of which the (symbolic) form itself is counted among its elements: to Will the Will itself is to Will nothing, just as to steal the wheelbarrow itself (the very form-container of stolen goods) is to steal Nothingness itself (the void which potentially contains stolen goods). This 'nothing' ultimately stands for the subject itself - that is, it is the empty signifier without signified, which represents the subject. Thus the subject is not directly included in the symbolic order: it is included as the very point at which signification breaks down.

Kris focused his central line of interpretation on conflicts surrounding the analysand's aim to build his father up into a man whose power he could appropriate. The wish for the phallus (understood as a representation of idealized paternal power) was displaced onto ideas; in turn, ideas become substance in the form of brains and the act of brain-eating. Zizek/Lacan argue instead that by effectively committing himself to be in the position of having to steal, the analysand is committing himself to 'not having,' i.e. to be "one who needs to steal to fulfill their Desire (that which is desired by the other)." They do not regard this as an ascetic renunciation, but rather, paralleling Nietzsche's "Will to Will," a desire to remain in a state of desire. They see Kris' analysand as not actually wanting to incorporate/possess the phallus, but instead to remain in a state of desiring it. (Again, this is far different from an orientation informed by the death drive that would extinguish desire.)

At this point Zizek's argument takes an unacknowledged turn. If he had presented Kris' account more adequately, the depth of Kris' analysis would have obliged Zizek to offer an alternative psychodynamic formulation explaining why the conflicted analysand would seek to remain a plagiarist instead of an author. Instead, Zizek offers this interpretation - "the only way for me [the analysand] authentically to 'desire' is to reject all positive objects of desire, and desire Nothingness itself." That serves as a formulation of the *decision* made by the analysand, and

indeed potentially *every* analysand, to strive for authenticity.⁸ Zizek thereby implicitly concludes that we have arrived at a *psychoanalytic terminus*, a point where meaning becomes simple and unified; in this context, it is a place where Will triumphs over the conflicting motives that push it into a “decision.” He then moves on to set out examples purportedly resonant with the idea of authentically wanting Nothing in order to continue wanting, including a tale of wheelbarrow theft that is both beguiling and beguiled – he seems to accept the thief’s claim that he really was stealing nothing.

Let’s pause before we accept this foreclosure of further analytic investigation. Instead, we will consider a feasible psychoanalytic assessment of what may be driving the analysand’s commitment to Nothingness or, to put it in the more tangible symbolic terms of the analysand, a commitment to perpetually seek to steal, but not have, the phallus. Simply, if one is listening to an analysand elaborate a standpoint that involves renunciation of the fantasied powerful phallus, it is reasonable to consider the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that this standpoint represents the analysand’s way of managing highly charged and conflicted motives. If this is so, *then the analysand has a considerable stake in experiencing their way of containing the conflict as a “done deal,” and won’t want to stir things up. In this way, when Zizek brings the analytic effort to a stop he colludes with the analysand’s defensive effort.*

Restless Desire: Autonomy or Subordination?

Where can we find examples of analysands facing a similar dilemma and analysts continuing to analyze? Very relevant is the work of psychoanalysts treating analysands experiencing penis envy. In “The Significance of Penis Envy in Women,” Maria Torok began as follows:

It is none the less true that in analysis, the woman's desire to have a penis (that is to say, to be a man) reveals itself as a subterfuge, because of its envious character. *A desire can be satisfied, envy never can.* Envy can bring about only more envy and destruction. *Pseudo-desire, promulgated by envy, achieves a semblance of satisfaction, as shown in the phallic attitudes of some women, who are immersed in imitation of the other sex, or at least of the image they have of it.* The fragile structure which they build shelters only feelings of inner void, anxiety, and frustration.⁹ [emphasis added]

Here Torok distinguishes between desire and envy, between satisfaction and its semblance. Zizek does not, reflecting his idea that there is no desire that is authentic since all desire flows from the ego’s misidentifications. What I will show is that because he overlooks this distinction, he is effectively oblivious to the discrete character of narcissistic desire, and the *fixated destructiveness* that is part of it.

⁸ Pursuing this resonance with existentialism would be tangential here. However, Lacan’s selection of case material intended to show the authenticity of a willful commitment to being a thief, counterposed to a somnolent life of bourgeois self-satisfaction, strongly evokes Sartre’s analysis of Jean Genet in *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. It is intriguing to consider whether Zizek/Lacan interrupt psychoanalytic questioning to accept this as a valid commitment because of the influence of Sartre’s powerful work, in which psychoanalysis was subordinated to existentialism. I would also note that the Kris case was published at the same time as Sartre’s book, suggesting at least the possibility of Lacan considering them simultaneously.

⁹ Maria Torok, “The Significance of Penis Envy in Women,” in Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, ed. *Female Sexuality: New Psychoanalytic Views*, Karnac: London 1970, pps. 135 – 170.

Torok continues:

The problem of analysis is precisely to bring back into the open the authentic but repressed desire which, disguised as envy, has remained hidden. *Here, as with other fantasies, if one took the patient's protestations literally one would preclude analysis. A sure way of doing this would be to legitimize woman's penis envy through accepting an alleged castration as her lot, for which phylogenesis would bear the responsibility.... For the analyst who dares face up to this impasse in treatment—namely penis envy—the first step is to clarify the nature of the conflict which produced such a desperate solution.* He should not underestimate the advantages which it unfailingly provides, and he should utilize in treatment the painful contradictions in which it inevitably locks the patient... *Penis envy is the symptom, not of an illness, but of a certain state of unfulfilled desire – unfulfilled because of conflicting needs.*¹⁰ [emphasis added]

Torok investigated a form of envy in female analysands that serves to imprison them in a state of desire for something they cannot have. Torok refused to accept this as a “bedrock” condition¹¹ of the female sex, and also notes that “patients of both sexes” can become trapped in this position. Agreeing with Torok, I will argue this is useful in understanding Kris’ male patient.

Torok quotes two of her analysands:

"I don't know why I have this feeling," says Agnes, "as it corresponds to nothing in reality but it has always been like this for me. As though, only man was fit to fulfill himself, to have opinions, to mature, to go always further. And everything to him is so naturally easy . . . nothing, nothing can stop him he is a force that can stop anything if he wants to. Me, I am getting nowhere, hesitating, there's a kind of wall in front of me. ... I always had the feeling I wasn't finished. Like a statue waiting for the sculptor to decide at last to model its arms. ..."

A little girl, Yvonne, always thought that boys "could at once succeed in doing anything . . . they instantly speak all languages . . . they could go into a church and take all the candles and nobody would stop them. If ever they find some thing in the way, they would naturally jump over it." These are eloquent descriptions of an idealized penis. It is obvious that this always means: "the thing whatever it is that one doesn't have oneself." Yet such a vital defect could not be a natural one, but could only be the effect of a deprivation or a renunciation.

She then offers this formulation, which I will quote at length:

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 135-138, passim.

¹¹ The term “bedrock condition” refers to the notion that “not having a penis” is an essential fact of being a woman, and that analysis of a woman’s conflicts over this fact would basically aim at helping her adjust to it. This idea was challenged by writers such as Horney and Jones in the 1930s, and then effectively debunked by another wave of criticism in the 1970s. For examples of the latter see Torok, op cit; Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, (1976), “Freud and Female Sexuality—The Consideration of Some Blind Spots in the Exploration of the 'Dark Continent.'” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis.*, 57:275-286; William I. Grossman, M.D. and Walter A. Stewart, M.D. (1976) “Penis Envy: From Childhood Wish To Developmental Metaphor.” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.*, 24S:193-212. For a useful summary of those criticisms, see Shahla Chehrizi, (1986) *Female Psychology: A Review.*” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.*, 34:141-162.

“A complex, unconscious speech is concentrated in "penis envy," and this speech is addressed to the maternal imago [the analysand's psychological representation of her mother]. One could expound it by the following propositions:

1) "You see, it is in a thing and not in myself that I am looking for what I am deprived of."

2) "I am searching in vain, because this thing can never be mine. The obvious vanity of my search must be a guarantee of the definitive renunciation of those desires you disapproved in me."

3) "I shall insist on the value of this inaccessible thing so that you may realize the greatness of my sacrifice in letting myself be deprived of my desire."

4) "I should accuse you and, in turn, deprive you, but that is precisely what I want to avoid, deny, and ignore, because I need your love."

"In short, idealizing the penis, in order to envy it more, is reassuring you by showing you that this [my sexual desires not distorted through penis envy] will never come between us, and that consequently I shall never be reunified, I shall never fulfill myself. I tell you, it would be just as impossible as changing bodies."

"Penis envy" marks this oath of fidelity... One can now see that it is not the "thing" itself that the patient is coveting, but the acts which allow one to master "things" in general. Coveting a thing is precisely the same as demonstrating to the imago the renunciation of an act... To conclude, we are led to consider that not only the repression of anal-pregenital conflicts underlies penis envy, but also a specific, total or partial, inhibition of masturbation, of orgasm, and of their concomitant fantasy activities. Penis envy appears now to be a disguised claim—not for the organ and the attributes of the other sex—but for one's own desires for maturation and development by means of the encounter with oneself in conjunction with orgiastic experience and sexual identification.”¹²

Coveting what one can never have replaces action based on desire. This resonates strongly with Kris' analysand, the plagiarist who, instead of simply stealing and getting, unconsciously fronts the plagiarized with his own work, then moves to desire it, and then feels ambivalently – excited, yet guilty – trapped in the position of thief. Regardless that he has a *penis*, he has established a symbolic lack, like the women experiencing penis envy, that he cannot overcome, and he thereby maintains a dependent tie to the parent whose *phallus* he needs. But in the same stance, he also expresses the claim to that potency, transgressively framed as an act of stealing. The affective ensemble of excitement and guilt that Kris saw in his analysand expresses both the thrill of possibly acquiring phallic potency and a countervailing assertion acknowledging the transgression involved; via guilt the potency of the paternal position is additionally represented as the call of conscience.

What keeps the analysand in this position? One component Torok highlights is the forestalled identification with mother:

¹² Torok, pps. 140-141.

... the little girl possessed a means by which she could have indirectly recovered what she had been deprived of, namely identification with the Mother, sovereign of her powers. But one notices that penis envy testifies to a total lack of identification. To conclude, we are led to consider that not only the repression of anal-pregenital conflicts that underlies penis envy, but also a specific, total or partial, inhibition of masturbation, of orgasm, and of their concomitant fantasy activities. Penis envy appears now to be a disguised claim—not for the organ and the attributes of the other sex—but for one's own desires for maturation and development by means of the encounter with oneself in conjunction with orgiastic experience and sexual identification.¹³ [emphasis added]

Here what Zizek calls authenticity looks like arrested development. Because it is organized around renunciation of identification with adults, this notion of authenticity remains mired in the child's understanding of herself-with-her-parents. Not willful authenticity, but rather ambivalent dependence prevails. Kris' analysand, like those of Torok, does not follow through on the transitions associated with the Oedipal passage. Instead of identifying with father and simultaneously renouncing his current claims for the father's potency even as he prospectively claims *his own* in the future, as a child Kris' analysand-to-be settles into a *counter*-identification as a never-to-be-successful thief of the father's potency. In this bargain, the analysand trades the prospective possession of the capacities and joys of adulthood (necessarily mundane and conformist?) for the thrills Zizek associates with *jouissance*. Here I would stress that – *when we consider the full clinical presentation of analysands who are in this position* – it appears to unavoidably carry with it confusion, guilt and a sense, like Torok's analysands, of narcissistic deficit.

Once we are able to take up the details of a case and to consider a more complete psychoanalytic rendering, or embodiment, of Zizek's metapsychological propositions, the escape from stupid contentment to restless authenticity ends in a bog of illusory fascination and anguish. Instead of somehow harnessing the disattaching function of the death drive to achieve authenticity, these analysands remain in infantilized positions wherein the mundane exercise of adult capacities, including sexuality, is distorted and blocked through unconscious idealization and anxiety-limiting avoidance.

The Sinthome over the Symptome: Madness-*jouissance* for All

Other passages in Zizek's writings help in understanding how he arrives at a conception of authenticity consistent with Kris' analysand's fixation on a lack of/stealing the phallus. Following his reading of Lacan, a basic revision of psychoanalytic goals is necessary:

The aim of psychoanalysis is to reestablish the broken network of communication by allowing the patient to verbalize the meaning of his symptom: through this verbalization, the symptom is automatically dissolved...In its very constitution, the symptom implies the field of the big Other, as consistent, complete, because its very formation is an appeal to the Other which contains its meanings....why, in spite of its interpretation, does the symptom not dissolve itself?...The Lacanian answer is, of course, enjoyment. ...

¹³ *ibid*, 142.

In this way we can also articulate two stages of the psychoanalysis process: interpretation of symptoms – going through fantasy. When we are confronted with the patient’s symptoms, we must first interpret them and penetrate through them to the fundamental fantasy as the kernel of enjoyment which is blocking the further movement of interpretation; then we must accomplish the crucial step of going through the fantasy, of obtaining distance from it, of experiencing how the fantasy-formation just masks, fills out a certain void, lack, empty place in the Other. But here again another problem arose: how do we account for patients who have...gone through their fantasy...but whose key symptoms persist?...What do we do with a symptom, with this pathological formation which persists not only beyond its interpretation but even beyond fantasy? Lacan tried to answer this challenge with the concept of *sinthome*...Symptom as *sinthome* is a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment: it is a signifier as a bearer of *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense.

What we must bear in mind here is the radical ontological status of symptom: symptom, conceived as *sinthome*, is literally our only substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. In other words, symptom is the way we – the subjects – “avoid madness,” the way we ‘choose something (the symptom formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe)’ through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world.¹⁴

These passages effectively reformulate the goals of psychoanalysis: the ground of the distressing symptoms of the analysand is the *sinthome*, which is *psychostructurally essential in avoiding madness*. Analysands sense this, and will not give up the *jouissance*, the enjoyment that saves them from insanity. This means that

If the symptom in this radical dimension is unbound, it means literally “the end of the world” – the only alternative to the symptom is nothing: pure autism, a psychic suicide...that is why the final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic process is *identification with the symptom*. The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being.¹⁵

However, does the *sinthome*/madness binary really describe both the ontological and psychoanalytic options facing Kris and Torok and their analysands? Or, is the traditional psychoanalytic goal of the interpretive dissolution of symptoms yet relevant?¹⁶ Consider Martha, analyzed by Torok:

¹⁴ Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, New York: Verso, 1989. Pps. 73-75 passim.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 75.

¹⁶ The psychoanalytic process inevitably involves more than symptom interpretation. Much of the current debate within psychoanalysis is over the extent to which processes set in motion by the analytic relationship – for example, the analysand feeling approved/loved by the relatively tolerant analyst – should be somehow formally incorporated and drawn upon as part of the process, as opposed to accepted as an inevitable, hopefully useful, accompaniment. For example, see Busch, F. (1995). Do Actions Speak Louder Than Words? A Query Into An Enigma In Analytic Theory And Technique. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.*, 43:61-82; Novick, J. and Novick, K. K. (2000). Love in the Therapeutic Alliance. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.*, 48:189-218; Hanly, C. (1994). Reflections on the Place of the Therapeutic Alliance in Psychoanalysis. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis.*, 75:457-467.

During several sessions Martha has violent bursts of crying or laughing. Slowly, her emotions regain a meaning; when a little girl, she met some boys in the swimming pool. Since then she often repeats the same phrase: "I cannot live like this."

It was this phrase which came up, during her analysis, in moments of deep depression. Consciously, "this" means "being deprived of a penis." But we must also understand that, on that occasion, she "squeezed her thighs together," "rolled up a little bit of swimsuit inside" and felt a kind of "sensitive shiver." The laughter mixed with tears (mingled joy and guilt) reflected her idea: if I am made "this" way (feeling this shiver) then, "at home, will they want me?" At puberty, the same patient had such a feeling of guilt toward her mother that she kept her periods — the sign of her genital maturity — a secret from her mother for a whole year. Her own sexuality, far from being ignored, was a constant but latent, preoccupation; in those days, the need to please her mother was greater than orgasmic pleasure. During the sessions she expressed the desire for an orgasm, through the fits of laughter but repressed it through penis envy itself. First of all there had been an indescribable joy, "an immense hope." Then, she does not know why, she was convinced that "something infinitely desirable exists, not in me but over there, not in my body but in an object, an absolutely inaccessible object." One can see the contradiction: the sensitive "shiver of infinite goodness" makes the little girl lose her feeling of being good for the sake of her family. The penis is then felt, as we shall see, to be the "good" sex which gives the possessor pleasure without guilt; this pleasure is not tied up with masturbatory or internalized guilt. It has all the conditions of a perfect harmony: pleasure for oneself and harmony with others. Feeling the "shiver" is aggressive, wicked to others. So all that is "good" is abandoned and an external object substituted — the idealized penis. The void thus created in the patient is filled by sadness, bitterness, jealousy. But this smoldering aggression can never be a substitute for what she has missed, the growing and voluptuous awakenings of maturity. Only analysis can arouse those feelings by loosening up machinery, as it were.¹⁷

Instead of the abstract condition of "madness," or "radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe," the most disorganized experiences of Martha in her sessions involved a dizzying confluence of emotions. She felt joy, anxiety, hope, guilt, and anger that reflected the run of psychological states associated with intense conflicts over her emerging sexuality. As they developed in sessions these states might feel "crazy," but they do not develop into psychosis. Prior to analysis, the idea that she lacked a penis served to organize these states within a depressive container that in its core contained an impossible idealization: the penis/phallus that represents a wondrous resolution of all the conflicts in her "real" life. Psychoanalysis of this symptom/*sinthome* did not lead to madness, but to recovery of both sexual and relationship capacities, organized around an experience of herself as an adult woman.

If *sinthomes* need not be maintained as an alternative to madness for everyone, are there some people for whom this model might apply? One area of psychoanalytic treatment at times described as addressing symptoms serving to forestall madness (psychosis) is the treatment of perversions. By this term, so often used in a cruel and pejorative manner, I am not referring to whether or not a person's sexuality varies from the heterosexual norm. Instead, I refer to the

¹⁷ Torok, p. 143.

way in which perverse sexuality is compulsive and rigidly organized to contain humiliation and hatred. Louise Kaplan puts it this way:

None of us is ever entirely free of the conflicts or anxieties associated with sexual intercourse. Every person who engages in sexual intercourse invents a fantasy that serves directly or indirectly to alleviate anxiety, enhance self-esteem, and heighten sexual pleasure. Activities that are commonly regarded as perverse—cunnilingus, fellatio, wearing erotic undergarments, enacting bondage scenarios, watching the sexual partner undress or masturbate—could be aspects of any run-of-the-mill sexual relationship. However, the sexual pervert behaves very differently from the countless men and women who evoke erotic fantasies, and sometimes enact them to heighten their sexual pleasure. The pervert is not making love; he is making hate. The pervert has no choice. His sexual performance is obligatory, compulsive, fixated, and rigid.¹⁸

Analysts who argue for a *consistent* link between perversion and psychosis are a minority. Reflecting the understanding prevailing in 1932, Edward Glover wrote:

But we must now add that *certain perversions are the negative of certain psychotic formations and certain others the negative of transitional psychoses*. Indeed, following Ferenczi and considering the mixed clinical pictures of psychosis, perversion and neurosis one so frequently observes, it is worth inquiring whether a perversion is not in many cases a symptomatic formation in obverse or the sequela or antecedent of a symptom as the case may be—a prophylactic or a curative device?¹⁹ [emphasis added]

To the extent that it is necessary, the “prophylactic” quality of the perversion lies in the way that it forestalls the powerful disorganization associated with psychosis. How do we understand this? In her report of a brief analysis of a young man Chasseguet-Smirgel describes him as carrying out a “destruction of reality,” suffused with the hatred Kaplan underlines:

At the beginning of his analysis (it was his second attempt) he dreamed about the favorite subject of his erotic fantasies, i.e., capital punishment. A young girl, dressed in white, was to be guillotined at dawn. At the beginning, the dreamer did not know very clearly what was afoot. There were preparations, whisperings; it was still dark. Everything took place very slowly, and his excitement reached its peak when he understood what was going to take place. Guards seized the girl; her head was cut off by the executioner in a great flood of blood, and this was accompanied by a strange murmuring. I could perceive through the detailed account of this dream that it was in fact a primal scene: whisperings, mysterious preparations, strange murmurs, the spectacular nature of the execution, everything combined to make the victim and the executioner the representatives of the parents during coitus....

The hypothesis of a hatred of mother concealed behind adoration was not to be rejected, but did not explain the particular way in which it manifested itself. Then the patient revealed that his father was an ear, nose, and throat surgeon, and told of operations on the throats of patients and on the analysand himself: removal of tonsils, lancing of abscesses.

¹⁸ Louise Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Emma Bovary*, New York: Doubleday, 1991, p. 40.

¹⁹ Edward Glover, Glover, E. (1933). “The Relation of Perversion-Formation to the Development of Reality-Sense.” *Int. J. Psycho-Analysis* 14, p. 496.

It became clear that it was easier for the little boy to imagine that his father was cutting his mother's throat during sexual intercourse than to accept the idea that he penetrated her with his penis. Besides, he himself had played at being a doctor with a little neighbor girl. On returning home, he had found a baby brother. It may be said that playing doctor is a variation of playing Mommy and Daddy. It is easy indeed for a little boy to play that game, but it cannot be said that it is easy for a little boy to cut his mother's throat. This is the prerogative of the executioner, recruited for his strength and his vigor...

Another dream occurred which clarified the problem. The patient was on a train. It passed the station of a town where, in reality, an execution had taken place which had been of passionate interest to the patient. In the dream the patient knew he was the inventor of a process for making chocolate truffles. This process would bring him a fortune; it utilized a small metallic circle that narrowed to allow molding of the chocolate. He feared his precious and marvelous secret would be stolen. In other words, the manufacture of chocolate truffles, in which it is easy to recognize the action of the anal sphincter, became mixed up with the hangman's axe or the guillotine which severs the head from the trunk. The guillotine scene, identified with the primal scene, is simply a transposition of the dividing of feces by the anal sphincter. The father thus does not do anything to the mother that the little boy of the anal phase cannot do...

My account of this case ends here. Soon after, the patient told me, with embarrassment, that as a student he had taken care of an old gentleman, in return for which he received a small sum of money. Twice a day he was required to give him medicine in the form of drops. He found the old man and the work particularly boring. One day "by error," he measured out a very strong dose of the medicine, and the old man died. The patient said he was very happy to have been able to tell me this. I was dumbfounded and said nothing. The patient never returned.

If perversion consists of the eradication of the adult paternal world, assassination of the father (or his substitute) is fortunately not always enacted in the external world. On the contrary, it is most likely a failure of perversion, a gradual slipping into a borderline organization or psychosis, which transforms sadism into pure violence with, in addition, loss of the ability to symbolize. Of course this does not mean that perverse acts are not frequently directed at the mother (or her substitute). Once the anal-sadistic dimension is established it becomes a matter of brandishing a whip rather than of genital penetration, or inflicting pain, that is, of using a fecal penis which sullies and poisons rather than of giving pleasure with a penis which satisfies, nourishes, and repairs; of ruining, humiliating, and castrating rather than of engendering a baby who will grow and develop. At the same time, sexuality becomes a tool of vengeance.²⁰

In Chasseguet-Smirgel's report, the potential for psychosis stems from a destruction of reality carried out through:

- the little boy's substitution of his own anal (chocolate truffle) sexuality for the procreative sexuality of the parents,

²⁰ Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1991, "Sadomasochism and the Perversions: Some Thoughts on the Destruction of Reality," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 39:pps. 405-6.

- the denial of the existence of siblings that are both evidence of parental intercourse and competitors for his mother's attention,
- efforts to cover up and manage the narcissistic rage that threaten both the analysand's objects and his necessary relationships to them.

I stress here that psychosis does not loom simply because the analysand drifts into an "alternative reality" that hides his parents' relationship, their genitals, or his siblings produced by his parents. These alterations of reality awareness are inextricably linked with the way he handles emotions that are connected to those relationships. Central is the horrifying prospect of a loss of all relationships if he fails to control the murderous hatred that he has contained, in part, by his fascination with executions. If the perverse organization fails, a nightmare of fantasies of rageful attacks and counterattacks would immediately ensue. Once this terror prevails, the analysand's capacity for symbolic representation would be contaminated with a potential for violence that leaves the analysand crippled in the ability to use symbols.²¹ In other words, the violent hatreds that the perverse organization held in check become so salient that they pervade his thinking and psychosis represents the only way of quelling them.

Joyce McDougall offers a more detailed report of her work with a less severely disturbed analysand for whom analysis was both possible and helpful; her evocative presentation makes extensive quotation worthwhile. From the outset, she underlines the effort of "Professor K" to maintain a "playful" indifference to his life:²²

"LIFE! It's a game and I know all the rules. Whether I win or lose, I don't give a damn. Let's say I find life amusing." Listening to this patient I was struck by his dry, serious tone of voice, his stiff carriage, and the expression on his face, tight with anxiety, and showing no trace of the amusement that life supposedly brought him. Why such a denial of life's importance, and indeed of his own? There was something distinctly defiant about his statements but to whom were they directed, and why? Looking back on this first meeting with Professor K., I can now answer that question in part. His idea that life was a game which he knew how to play, even if he did not get much out of it, was a desperate attempt to give some meaning to his life. We were to discover subsequently that he felt it had none, that the necessary sign posts were missing, and that he often wished he could put an end to his miserable game. But there was no way out of his compulsive existence. In a sense he was saying,

I have to live my life as though it were a futile game otherwise I shall not be allowed to go on living.

Towards the end of this first interview he replied,

You ask what would happen if I should take myself seriously. Let's suppose I really finished this book I've pretended to work on for years—well, I feel I would

²¹ Both popular and clinical accounts of psychosis frequently omit reference to the role of a fear of unmanageable aggression in its onset. Again, see Karon, Bert. (1992). "The Fear of Understanding Schizophrenia." *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 09:191-211. Portions of his article are available at this website.

²² The following quotations are from Joyce McDougall, 1974, "The Anonymous Spectator—A Clinical Study of Sexual Perversion." *Contemp. Psychoanal.*, 10:289-310.

be taking a senseless risk. It sounds crazy, but if the book were a success that would be the end of everything.

We were to discover that this *modus vivendi* touched every aspect of his life—his friendships, his work, his beliefs, his sexuality. He did nothing "really," and was ironic about those who did, including analysts. The illusion that nothing he did was serious or quite real allowed him in fact to begin his analysis. In his first session, after a few desultory remarks upon the oddness of the situation, he stopped abruptly:

I say, am I playing it well, this psychoanalytical game?

Behind the playful camouflage K. was able to reveal glimpses of another reality.

My life is a continual degradation. My intellectual work suffers. Everything I do is accomplished under pressure at the last possible minute. In front of my public I have the constant impression that I'm cheating, fooling them. ... I live in dread of being unmasked one day and condemned forever. By the way, perhaps I should tell you about some of my little sexual obsessions—that is, if it interests you.

In the sessions that followed, this theme was employed like a tantalizing game as K. let fall here and there a veiled hint relating to his sex life, stopping from time to time to ask if I had "understood." His sexual practice, in fact, consisted in beating his girlfriend on the buttocks with a whip, in a highly detailed and ritualistic scene.

There you are. Now I've shown you my sexual degradation, something which is beyond my own understanding. Oh but don't imagine that I want to do away with it. These are my favorite games.

Instead of being one who must steal to have and thus doesn't have, K psychologically engineers his triumphs so that they disintegrate into a depressive feeling that he was only playing, or fooling the Other. Initially, the symptoms that were most distressing for K were related to work, where professional successes repeatedly disintegrated:

Yet in attempting to render intelligible his anxiety regarding his work problems he succeeded in revealing that they too were closely connected with his sexual inhibitions. Talking of his difficulty in taking his work seriously he used imagery evocative of disquieting sexual fantasies:

I seem incapable of penetrating, of really getting inside my work. It's as though I dare not go right to the end. I never reach the bottom. Even to get started I have to plunge in with my eyes closed. Nevertheless I get there somehow or other, at least with the bare essentials, but it's a terrible strain. I have a stack of little tricks to help me. First of all I put myself into a position where I can't back out. I have to go through with it then, because that's what's expected. ... It's the fact that others are always watching which obliges me to produce. In front of a public I always perform well!

K.'s "stack of little tricks" for overcoming his work inhibitions found their counterpart in the whips and ritual clothing of his theatrical fetishist scenes, but "the others who were always watching" were less easy to identify. These anonymous others were often referred to as though they were a single individual. "I constantly have my eye on the Other," K. would say. This "Other" became an ever-present and important personage in K.'s analytic discourse. Thanks to his watchful presence K.'s painfully accomplished professional tasks became brilliant "performances" which brought him some renown and a feeling of having triumphed over terrible odds. But his triumphs were also accompanied by the nagging feeling of having fooled "the Other." Although he described his public success as "an orgasmic moment," the more so since he took nothing seriously as "well-intentioned folk" did, his tenuous feeling of superiority invariably gave way to depression and the feeling that nothing he did was quite real...

But what was his secret? My patient was far from being able to pin it down except to say that he played "the game" and was fully aware of what he was doing. He did not fool himself like "the others." Nevertheless it was never clear what the game in question really was. Claparède's definition of play as "a free pursuit of fictitious goals" would have met K.'s approval and indeed seemed to characterize his philosophy of life. He was constrained to present all his life goals as fictitious and it seemed doubtful that he could ever permit himself to act as though they were real. His playing-at-living carried an element of conjurer's magic which implied the someone who was always watching. This "someone," in contradistinction to himself, had to believe, had to be fooled, as the child is fooled by the adult. In this fashion K. projected upon others his own confusion with the result that he, the "adult" played while "the others," mystified and serious, watched him.

As the analysis proceeds, the diffuse and confused experiences – reality-as-game, having to fool the watching Others, the depressive tilt into meaninglessness and suicidal thinking – begin to come together in his relationship with McDougall:

The anonymous onlooker rapidly worked his way into the transference situation and became installed there as a powerful source of resistance.

You, you watch me all the time, and seated where I can't see you. Who are you anyway? Who am I really talking to? ... If this goes on I shall be obliged to take you seriously. The idea horrifies me. ... I hope you understand, I no longer find this very amusing!

I said, "What will happen if your psychoanalysis no longer amuses you, is no longer a game?"

Words like abyss, chasm, and void come to my mind. I no longer see anything. I'm frightened.

K., who never admitted to anxiety or fright, caught himself up quickly and added, "But don't worry, I can stand any amount of fear."

Could we say you turn fear itself into a game?

K. said, "Have I ever done anything else but that? All my procrastination, my balancing tricks to put off everything to the last possible moment, till I can no longer draw back. ... I'm like a man playing with death."

McDougall's question allows K to sample the anxiety associated with his unconscious beliefs covered by his "playful" discounting of reality. He encounters a Void that represents the dispersal of experience, a vacuum created by intense and sustained defensive operations warding off conscious experience of the components of severe conflict.²³ And in this Void K feels there is death.

What was K struggling with? His presentation of his childhood left McDougall believing that he was the only child of a lonely mother; for two years she was unsure whether his father was dead or alive, or whether he had siblings. When he did finally bring him up, K presented his father as marginal, overshadowed by mother's father:

In my pastel colored trousers, long after the normal age, I was still her little Prince Charming. We were as one against the world.

"There was no one else in this world?" I asked.

K. said, "Well, yes, the rest; in a way we formed a couple against my father I suppose. ... She always used to tell me I was a real little man. ... She was very ambitious for me. Her dearest desire was that I should one day resemble her own father. He had been a writer and she held him in boundless admiration. Tall, strong—quite the opposite of my own father. ... You say my father is totally absent whenever I talk of my childhood. But it's true, he simply didn't count. Sure, he was always there, but like a continual absence. I have no clear picture of my grandfather either, except through the eyes of my mother. There was one story about him that I loved. She would tell it over and over for me. One day grandfather chased her with a whip in his hand, and she fled into the toilet at the bottom of the garden. I see myself as a little boy sitting in grandfather's garden, imagining the scene. I used to spend hours like that.

I was to learn later that K., at the age of nine, daydreaming in his grandfather's garden had already constructed, down to the tiniest details, the erotic fantasies which, thirty years later, were still the cornerstone of his sexual edifice.

Drawing on his mother's own fascination with the story, K eventually composed a sadomasochistic ritual with his lovers in which he takes on the role of the mother's father. The fantasies of K and his mother intertwine, excluding K's father, who was away at war and who, in K's telling at least, failed in comparison to mother's father. Yet the father is always in the background:

²³ Along with other analysts, Lucy Lafarge regards a feeling of emptiness as often linked to defenses against rage. Lafarge, L. (1989). "Emptiness as Defense in Severe Regressive States." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.*, 37:965-995

Hidden behind his partner's complicity, contained in the varied beating fantasies, or concealed in his masturbation rituals in front of the mirror, there was always the fantasy of the unknown Other, or Others, who watched.

This spectator, whoever he is, is the culminating point of my excitement—and also of my anxiety. I am terrified of his gaze.

In the session following this remark, K. brought one of his rare dreams.

I was in the home of my childhood, and you were with me in the bed. You said 'Those spots on the sheets are all my fault. Someone might see them.' Then you added in a solemn voice 'We're anxious, both of us.' It was exciting and terrifying at the same time, waiting for the other person to come and catch us.

In his spontaneous associations to the dream, K. said the bedroom recalled his mother's room in which, in the past, she had often shared confidences with him in respect to disputes and disagreements she had with his father. Among the different possible interpretations of the dream it seemed to reveal an appeal to the Oedipal father, and the mother having been replaced by the analyst as the object of sexual desire. The mother's guilt is also underlined. The whole scene is anxiety-arousing in that the father might castrate the incestuous son, but at the same time exciting because the son has triumphed over him.

As the analysis continues, the Void gradually becomes populated with people and emotions. In tandem, the Big Other becomes a father representation, binding the counterbalancing fear of being discovered with the mother and a more covert appeal to the father to bring the scene to an end.

But why to an end? K was at first puzzled by the feelings of hatred for his mother, evident in the beating fantasy, and yet cloaked behind the notion that she really wanted to be beaten by her father.²⁴

K. slowly came to discover, as though for the first time, feelings of intense anger towards his mother.

²⁴ Freud argued that beating fantasies were a common permutation of a child's sexual wishes towards their parents. See Freud, S. 1919 "A Child is Being Beaten": A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions" Standard Edition XVII. Some child analysts, while questioning how often beating fantasies are salient organizers of a child's sexual fantasies, have concurred in seeing a connection between beating fantasies and sexuality: "In treatment, many children played school games or hospital games, in which the therapist was asked to personify, for example, 'Miss Mary who smacks the baby', or the cruel doctors who mistreat their child patients; cowboys chasing and shooting Indians and policemen capturing robbers appeared often. In these games, the children alternated between active and passive roles, playing both attacker and victim. Diffuse sexual excitement and masturbation usually accompanied or followed the games. Freud (1919), (1924) talked about the necessary factor in both beating fantasies and masochistic perversions that the victim not be really injured; children playing a game reassure themselves that 'it's only pretend'. In this way drive gratifications are made acceptable.... In the roles assigned in the games it seemed immaterial whether the beater was male or female, because women were still regularly conceived of as phallic. For example, one child described intercourse as 'Daddy spansks Mummy and she spansks him back'." Novick, J. and Novick, K. K. (1972). "Beating Fantasies in Children." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 53:238.

Always talking about her wonderful father ... the man I was supposed to emulate. Actually it was she who wanted to be exactly like him. She told me she had always wanted to be a boy. Well I was supposed to be that boy—not for myself but for her. My grandfather's death must have affected us both, and yet I can hardly remember anything around that period of my life. Let's see, I know I must have been six when it happened. I remember that when my grandfather died my little brother was just learning to walk.

After a short silence he continued,

"Really I don't understand this hatred I feel for my mother. After all she only wanted the very best for me. If she wanted to keep me all to herself it was only because she loved me so much. The fact that she prevented any possibility of a real relationship between me and my father is not sufficient to explain the hatred I feel."

I repeated, "When my grandfather died my little brother was just learning to walk."

What do you mean?

"You tell me your mother adored you, and wanted you all to herself, " I said.

Sure! And I said it isn't a good enough reason to explain all this hatred!

"Perhaps it is not the sole or even the true reason for your hatred, " I said. "It could be that you resented your mother because she desired other people besides yourself. When her adored father died (and he must certainly have been a rival for her love) her baby, who was just learning to walk, was already beginning to take his place. And this little brother, how does he fit into the idea that your parents had no sexual relationship as far as you were aware? By the way, this is the first time you ever mentioned the existence of a little brother."

"Oh, " said K. lamely, "I guess I never mentioned it. I'm the oldest of four."

"So she was pretty unfaithful to you one way and another?" I said.

The fatal childhood dates—six years, nine years—which marked the setting up of K.'s sexual system also marked the birth of two of the rival brothers, but by a powerful act of disavowal (for he was well aware of their existence) these cataclysmic events in the life of the little mother-fixated boy had been rendered totally meaningless and thus his illusion was protected. The whip, fictitious phallus, grandfather's idealized penis, became the chosen object of maternal desire, the sole object able to excite his own.

As the analysis proceeded, K came to see his sexual theater as resting on a precariously maintained illusion. Instead of being his mother's Little Prince, he was only a stand-in for her father, and could not prevent her from having more sons who threatened him with replacement. The significance-draining, "it's all a game" stance that overlay the Void of anxiety in turn covered a warded-off, depressive experience of being "just a boy" or "just another son." The

effort to maintain a magical, counter-depressive *jouissance* sucked the meaning out of all around it and left K further encased in an ongoing bout with significant levels of paranoia and anxiety. This was organized around the fantasied gaze of the Other who, as with Kris' plagiarizer, ultimately held a *fantasied and foresworn greater phallic power that K, in his reified position of the usurper Prince, could never hope to have for himself*. The ecstatic, transcendent element of *jouissance* that Zizek seeks to elevate appears as an ephemeral, passing instance in a run of experience that leaves the analysand troubled and cut off from his fellows, *not because he is a stigmatized "pervert," but because of the alienating conflicts that the perverse practice contains and secures from exposure, exposure either in the form of near-psychotic terror or in a form open to development beyond his deadlock*.

The Sinthome in Everyday Life?

I've questioned Zizek's claim regarding the widespread experience of intense conflicts associated with a potential for psychosis. At the same time, others have described *more limited* conflicts – in the sense that their containment does not become such a life-organizing preoccupation – that are associated with delusions. For example, Shengold regards "delusions of everyday life" as ubiquitous. The following quotation is useful because he sketches a continuum Zizek doesn't consider:

Because we all retain a considerable degree of narcissism, alongside and beneath later developments, it follows that we all have some degree and variety of narcissistic delusion. A delusion is, according to Webster, "in psychiatry, a false, persistent belief not substantiated by sensory evidence". (To make this a more satisfactory definition one should emphasize the "persistent" and add the tremendous emotional intensity that characterizes the conviction in the "belief") There is a most complicated spectrum of delusion, ranging from psychotic delusions, in which almost no doubt in the belief is allowed; through delusions in which the reality can be given lip service without disturbing the false belief, as if these were in two different compartments of the mind which cannot connect (I have called these quasi-delusions); to transient insistent beliefs in which conviction and doubt are both present, one alongside the other, yet able to intermix, as it were, without canceling one another out. Each individual would have his own dynamic stock and variety (all along the spectrum) of narcissistic delusions, even including what might be called psychotic ones. The differences between the so-called normal (that is, the neurotic) and the psychotic individual are probably mostly quantitative, having to do with preponderances, although the latter can be present in such measure as to present the effect of qualitative diversity, and also there can be true qualitative differences having to do with specific delusional content and related emotions and impulses.²⁵

Like Zizek, Shengold notes that analysands resist giving up their delusions:

... these delusions and quasi-delusions are very difficult to analyze; they are frequently not conscious, existing as unconscious or at least not responsibly acknowledged assumptions and expectations and as associated affects (again, involving promise and dread) that are disconnected from responsible consciousness. And the delusions result in

²⁵ Shengold, L. *Delusions of Everyday Life*, Yale: New Haven, 1995. p. 19.

resistances to change in life and therefore give rise to stubborn resistances by the patient in therapy. In order to deal with the resistances, the analyst must recognize the delusional or near-delusional (remember, there is a spectrum here) qualities and convey these to the patient. Patients often have to struggle to see and especially to own, to become responsible for, these sometimes but not always subtle breaks with reality and reason. They often must learn (some already know) how much they want to hold on to the promise of intense gratification and the protection of powerful infantile defenses against intense bad feeling (together with the ties to the godlike parents of infancy, with whom these feelings are so implicated).

However, unlike Zizek, he doesn't concede the notion that the proper goal of psychoanalysis is "passing through fantasy," i.e. recognizing and accepting the delusion as an essential part of psychological structure that protects the analyst from an autistic withdrawal from reality. Instead, the multiple limitations to which the delusion contributes argue for its dissolution:

Dr. B's conscious preoccupations featured denial of his parents', especially of his mother's, mortality more than denial of his own. For the most part his mother (and at first his analyst) was perfect. About me, on whom he had transferred his mother (or perhaps projected her as part of himself would be more accurate), he said,

I know that the mystical, ideal feelings I have about you as perfect are crazy—my brain tells me that. It's all there for me: the idea that you will never get old, that I will always have you. But my heart tells me it is true all the same. Only at moments do I see you as a separate real person and that I am not under your control nor you under mine.

But this kind of delusional conviction of the other's perfection was much harder to maintain about his mother, for long since she was subject to recurrent irrational rages. He could watch her direct these at other people, especially strangers, with relative equanimity, but they were repetitively also aimed at him in the form of vicious verbal assaults. It was difficult to treat such attacks, and the counter rages they evoked in the patient, as not having happened, but after a while Dr. B was able to manage it. His mind was divided into nonconnecting compartments, vertical splits which could contain completely separate, contradictory ideas, feelings, and ways of functioning. For much of the time this form of maintaining delusion and idealization ("my perfect mommy") could work because he allowed no integration. After one vituperative, recriminatory outburst attributed (as was frequent) by his mother to her son's neglect of her, he reported,

For a while I was in a rage with her. I still am. I suppose. But I can't bear it. [He begins to cry.] When I get that angry I feel that mother is dead, dead!

[This is the delusional mode and intensity.]

But if I think about it, when I can think about it, I suppose it means that in my rage I feel that it is as if my mother could die, that I could really lose her.

[Here the delusional quality begins to fade; the infant is becoming an adult again, an adult who can at least hypothetically accept death and loss.]

But, you know, that last thought, that "as if," is intellectual. And I begin to get frightened when I feel she really could die. Don't you understand? She really could. I just refuse to accept it!

So the delusion, or quasi-delusion, returns. Following the session it sets in beneath the surface, the as-if surface, where what appears to be the predominantly adult functioning of Dr. B can fool not only the observer but, above all, Dr. B himself.

... Dr. B had been spoiled ... by frightened and overindulgent parents who had difficulty refusing their children anything. In the psychic universe transmitted by these dependent and childlike parents to their sons, any "no" was equated with death, the great negation of life, and so "no" became intolerable, evoking terror and rage. Instead, the world these parents helped construct for their children was full of the Promise, that unfulfillable, false promise, of continual narcissistic bliss. [As Dr. B grew up and was] inevitably exposed to the insistent demands of the external world and the terrifying dangers attendant on their own unchecked instinctual wishes, [he] needed to cling desperately to the delusion of [his] own and [his] parents' power and immortality. To lose the idealized self-image mirrored in the parental eyes (Narcissus gazing at his reflection in the spring) was and remained an unbearable loss that could be denied only by delusion. Whenever this delusion was challenged, there arose a dreadful, intense rage—paradoxically, a murderous rage directed toward the indispensable parents and their false promises; this of course only intensified the danger of loss. The rage was ineffectually expressed in tantrums, which the parents found intolerable and usually tried to smother with indulgence rather than handle with discipline. The child (mirroring the childlike parents) was in the trap that all of us are caught in to some extent: the urge to kill those one cannot live without. But the intensity of their entrapment, appropriate to early infancy, had, disguised and sequestered, been fully retained in adult life. Most of us are able to modify (but never to eliminate) the vicious cycle—a modification that can be lost regressively if the conditions of life make old dangers return...

When threatened or offended, patient C would resort to a fantasy of transforming himself into a Greek god. Although this also had the connotation for him of being infinitely handsome and lovable (another quasi-delusional belief), it was the god's magical power to command changes in reality, especially to get rid of people who were obstacles to his wishes and whims, that he was calling upon. He thought of himself as Zeus or Poseidon (or Jupiter or Neptune—the Romans, having defeated the Greeks, made these the preferred names) wielding thunderbolts. All this was voiced in a manner that usually sounded jovial enough, but the intensity of need underlying the appearance of playfulness frequently showed through in an isolated, near hysterical tone; more rarely he would say, directly and convincingly, "I really mean this!" — again, with an obvious split in conscious awareness. (This kind of split was described by Freud in a note added to *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1909: "I was astonished to hear a highly intelligent boy of ten remark after the sudden death of his father: I know father's dead, but what I can't understand is why he doesn't come home to supper" [1900, 254].)

As a child, C's claim to the assumption of godlike power had been admired and, apparently, even acceded to whenever possible by his parents, especially his father. But

this had frightened C; the son required his father to keep the godlike power in order to protect him if his own magic failed. This unresolvable dilemma complicated C's oedipal development: taking his father's place and powers was at once too easy (not made less so by a seductive mother) and too terrifying. One way this conflicted godlike claim showed itself in his current life was that C, a prosperous businessman, repeatedly allowed his now almost indigent father to pay for the meals they frequently had together in expensive restaurants. The knowledge that the father couldn't afford the expense was put aside by both parties in deference to their mutual need to maintain the delusion of infinite parental resources with which the father could endow the son. There must be no limit, no contravening of the child's desires. This made for a powerful, entrapping bond between parent and child that had many levels of meaning and served to distance as well as to preserve the terrifying, murderous implications for both.

A concomitant delusional aspect of omnipotence and immortality is the claim to perfection, most often felt as intolerance for any defect, limitation, contingency, or postponement. For Dr. B, the pathologist whose relations with people were so unsatisfactory and superficial—other people were always, he felt, disappointing him—perfection was in the realm of things. Only with things could complete control be at least approached. He was a model of anal defensiveness: fastidious in his dress and appearance, a collector and putter of things in order, a classifier and labeler. Things, as lifeless as the cadavers he dissected, were, in his view, the least likely to age or change.²⁶

For all of these analysands, the madness-*jouissance* couplet that Zizek discusses arguably captures some elements of their *immediate experience* of their condition. However, given the demonstrated possibility of helpful analytic intervention – illustrated by the psychoanalytic cases described above – the Lacanian revision “interpretation of symptoms – going through fantasy” involves a premature concession to the analysand’s fears and evasion of them. For example, aside from the unreal, delusional quality of the idea of being a Greek god, if we properly understand that omnipotent idea as acting to paper over a profound fear of weakness, the belief’s tremendous liabilities are evident.

Summary and Conclusion

Zizek draws on psychoanalytic theory to describe a form of desire that is resistant to normalization, open-ended, and insistent. We have considered two formulations. First, in The Ticklish Subject he argues that subjects pursue positive objects that serve to cover over the death drive, yielding a paradoxical attachment to an object – perhaps better understood as a fantasy embodied in an object – that mediates the force promoting disattachment, the death drive. Second, in The Sublime Object of Ideology he argues for a psychological force fueled by the more immediate goad of avoiding madness, the enticing lure of a *jouissance* that entails the conversion of the threat of madness into a form of ecstasy.

When we consider these metapsychological formulations in light of psychoanalytic case material, both proposals fall apart. The Kris case material he cites as pertinent to the death drive formulation does indeed reflect forms of ongoing dissatisfaction and, in a sense, *desired*

²⁶ Shengold, op cit, pps. 25-41, passim.

dissatisfaction. But examination of the case material points to clinical syndromes involving forms of penis envy or, to use a more apt current term, *phallic narcissism* or, in Judith Kestenberg's terminology, *outer-genital narcissism*.²⁷ Analysis of that syndrome reveals subjects to be trapped in postures of renunciation of a fantasized phallic object, and that they are doing so – as explicitly interpreted by Torok, and as potentially interpreted by Kris – to both ward off Oedipal conflicts and maintain fantasied dependent relationships. Contrary to what one would expect if the death drive were as powerfully involved as Zizek suggests, these syndromes are subject to analytic resolution. Such a resolution involves an escape from fantasy constructs that, to put it generally, leave the subject subordinated to a parental imago and plagued with depression and anxiety over aggressive impulses. Indeed, in a strong sense a resolution is possible precisely because the analysand is not in the grip of a death drive derivative, but rather of a terrible psychological quandary organized in terms of relations with others, and the emotions that accompany them. *That* definition of a problem implies the possibility of a solution via transformed fantasies about relationships and thus relationships themselves. Simply, once analysands work through the narcissistic insults and outrage they are preoccupied with, they can live more fully. While it can be argued that this escape does not *necessarily* lead to authenticity, it is much, much less plausible to argue that phallic narcissism represents an authentic way of life. Psychoanalytic case material suggests the opposite.

We question Zizek's madness-*jouissance* couplet in much the same terms. Again, taking the madness-*jouissance* structure as a guide for selecting relevant psychoanalytic case material, it is very doubtful that the power Zizek attributes to this psychological structure is universally experienced. Instead of madness representing a universal possibility that must be forestalled by *jouissance*, the most relevant psychoanalytic case literature suggests that madness-*jouissance* are psychological options for subjects suffering from serious narcissistic injury, and who have fabricated a solution to this injury that is heavily reliant on the mobilization of sexual feelings. This solution (in McDougall's useful innovation, a *neosexuality*²⁸) can be questioned not as a *deviation* from the heterosexual norm, but because it rigidly *freezes the subject in their history*, warding off rage and depression associated with childhood insufficiency and helplessness. In this state, relationships with others tend to be relationships with props in the subject's never-ending narcissistic drama.²⁹ Once more, this cannot plausibly be regarded as an authentic way of life. When we consider the more common circumscribed "delusions of everyday life" described by Shengold, in which *jouissance* is not strongly organized around sexuality and transpires with less complex omnipotent renderings of self and other, our conclusions are the same.

²⁷ Kestenberg, J., *Children and Parents*. New York: Aronson, 1975.

²⁸ McDougall, J. (1986). "Identifications, Neoneeds and Neosexualities." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 67:19-30

²⁹ Among psychoanalysts, Thomas Ogden's work is noteworthy for explicitly addressing the reified, ahistorical quality of representations of self and other that are part of serious disturbance, and for doing so with reference to the desirability of resuming a dialectical, historical process of representation. See Ogden, *op cit*, 208-214, *passim*.