

FROM PASSION TO CYNICISM IN PETER SHAFFER'S *EQUUS*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to offer an overview of Dixon's *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* and Pugmire's *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions*, emphasizing the historical evolution and descent of emotions into abstract secularization and the nature of emotional vices, respectively. The theoretical background provided will serve as methodological framework for the second part of this paper that will revolve around Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* (1973) and the passions and affections, as well as disillusionment, cynicism and resignation displayed by the two main characters: a young boy named Alan Strang and his middle-aged psychiatrist Martin Dysart.

Keywords: emotions, passion, cynicism, Peter Shaffer, *Equus*

Résumé

Le présent document vise à offrir une synthèse de « *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* », écrit par Dixon et « *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions* » écrit par Pugmire, en soulignant l'évolution historique et l'origine des émotions dans une sécularisation abstraite et la nature des vices émotionnels. Le contexte théorique prévu servira comme cadre méthodologique de la seconde partie de ce document qui tournera autour de la pièce de théâtre « *Equus* » écrite par Peter Shaffer (1973) et les passions et affections, aussi bien que désillusion, cynisme et résignation affichés par les deux protagonistes : un jeune garçon nommé Alan Strang et son psychiatre d'un âge moyen, Martin Dysart.

Mots-clés: émotions, passion, cynisme, Peter Shaffer, *Equus*

1. Introduction

Passions, affections, appetites, feelings and sentiments are all theoretical projections that bear witness to the manifold and intricate nature of mental states often cluttered under the single, over-inclusive term *emotions*. The awareness of the wide range of human psychological experience that has

traditionally been undermined and overshadowed by its more ‘enlightened’ and alleged counterpart, *reason*, has rekindled the interest of scholars over the last few decades. What are these emotions and how can they be accounted for? Are they causes or effects, passive or active, virtuous or vicious? Thomas Dixon and David Pugmire are among the particularly influential theorists that have tackled such issues and brought valuable contributions to the growing field of emotion study.

The present paper aims to offer an overview of Dixon’s *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* and Pugmire’s *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions*, emphasizing the historical evolution and descent of emotions into abstract secularization and the nature of emotional vices, respectively. The theoretical background provided will serve as methodological framework for the second part of this paper that will revolve around Peter Shaffer’s play *Equus* (1973) and the passions and affections, as well as disillusionment, cynicism and resignation displayed by the two main characters: a young boy named Alan Strang and his middle-aged psychiatrist Martin Dysart.

2. Thomas Dixon’s *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*

Thomas Dixon approaches the study of emotions from an intellectual-historical stance, exploring the changes in worldview that have led to the creation and consolidation of this psychological category. To him, the secularization of psychology was the prime reason for the eighteenth and nineteenth century vocabulary changes regarding human feelings: the religiously infused ‘passions and affections of the soul’ came to be referred to as emotions and subsequently triggered confusion, ambiguity and misunderstanding. *From Passions to Emotions* sheds light upon the importance of constructing a history of emotions based on narrowing down the term ‘emotion’ – in order to differentiate between separate, sometimes opposing mental phenomena – and on expanding the understanding of ‘psychology’ beyond the scientific world, so as to include theology. For this reason, Dixon warns against the danger of *presentism* – of researchers being too emerged in their contemporary perspective on emotions to acknowledge that studies in this field did not start with Charles Darwin or William James, have not always been linear and scientific, and have not always envisioned emotions as non-cognitive, involuntary states that are morally and religiously independent.

The writings of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas provide significant insight into the nature of Christian psychology, as they separate human beings into an outer (lower) dimension and an inner (higher) plane, subsequently distinguishing passions from affections. While the former

represent symptoms of the fall and can be defined as “inappropriate passions of the lower appetite directed towards worldly objects” (Dixon, 2003: 29) that require the exercise of control through reason; the latter are “appropriate affections, or movements of the will, directed towards goodness, truth and, ultimately God”. (Dixon, 2003: 29) Passions are the source of disorder, as they are unruly, involuntary, deficient, passive works of the ‘bad love’ and are attributed to the vegetative and sensitive parts of the soul, but affections are ordered, voluntary and active movements, associated with the intellectual soul – a characteristic only shared with angels and God. It follows that the intellect should be used to dominate and suppress concupiscent passions, proving man’s superiority to animals.

A first shift towards anthropocentrism can be noted in the eighteenth century in the value system of British moralists, among whom Joseph Butler, who differed from Christian revivalists in that they proposed a more moderate form of Christianity that erased the premise of the fallen man and implicitly the paramount importance of the will in moving the soul away from sin. Not only did they balance passions and affections, but they also detached them from understanding and will, giving shape to an independent, third faculty of the soul: *the faculty of feel* – that would later be replaced with emotions and finally with the body. Moralists’ *design theology* further diminished the role of the Maker and turned affections from love of God into “rational or cool self-love”, (Dixon, 2003: 84) necessary tools of the machine of the human mind. An even more decisive step towards the secularization and passivization of emotions is taken by the nineteenth century Scottish focus on the ‘science of the mind’. Thomas Brown separated emotions from their religious implications by creating analogies between mental states and products of mechanical and chemical laws. Brown’s positive epistemology implies an objective stance that necessarily eliminates the role of human will - no longer are emotions active powers, but merely passive, automatic, “non-cognitive feelings arising in a law-like way from precedent thoughts and sensations” (Dixon, 2003: 126) that cannot be modified by the will.

Based on the same materialistic principle, emotions are reduced to bodily functions in the late nineteenth century by means of an autonomous *physicalist psychology*. This perspective was based on agnostic monism (the inherently unknown reality has an objective as well as a subjective side) and man-animal continuism (man is no longer superior, central to the creation). Drawing on Brownian positivism, Charles Darwin replaced design theology with an evolutionary worldview and theological discourse with a purely physicalist understanding of emotions that relied on “physiological reflexes or . . . inherited animal survival mechanisms”. (Dixon, 2003: 136) Emotions came to be merely “the mental ‘side’ of what was really and objectively and activity of the central nervous system” (Dixon, 2003: 144) and agency could

only be attributed to the laws of the evolution of the species. Darwin's determinism (all actions are determined either by habits, genes, education or chance) is coupled with the idea that human emotions are forms of inherited behaviours that have lost their original function and can only be perceived as useless, vestigial.

Finally, William James brings Darwin's theory of emotions to a radical point, where the visceral disturbance (not the brain, much less the soul) is responsible for the emotions. The line between expression and emotion melts away, rendering passions, affections and moods mere bodily changes that one would associate with the effect of emotional experience. But James' theory fails to account for bodily disturbances that are not emotions, feelings that do not have a specific outward manifestation or emotions that share the same expression. Moreover, a distinctive line is drawn between emotions as passive mental feelings and cognition, so that "anything that [is] not primarily constituted by visceral or behavioural disturbance [is] by definition not an emotion but a cognition". (Dixon, 2003: 209)

Overall, Thomas Dixon proposes a wider, enriched history of emotions that would counter researchers' proneness towards presentism by exposing the overly flexible boundaries of the term 'emotion', along with the excessively rigid construction of psychology. Dixon offers a moderate, balanced perspective upon the impact of theology on the contemporary understanding of emotions, maintaining that the psychological category was sometimes negatively and sometimes positively influenced by Christianity. He makes use of intellectual history to objectively prove that the gradual transition from the specificity of terms such as passions, affections, appetites, feelings and sentiments to the more abstract concept of emotions is tightly linked to the undeniable secularization of society and the subsequent changes in the worldview of theorists. While the loss of the peculiar multiplicity that lies behind 'emotions' may be lamentable, what is not offered is the way in which acknowledgement of this truth would help retrieve it and disentangle the misunderstanding that hovers around it by making it work in a secular context.

3. David Pugmire's *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions*

Turning away from Dixon's empirical, historical account of theories of emotions, David Pugmire's work *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions* takes the reader onto philosophical ground, where emotion is the prime category relevant to moral life and the responsibility for emotional integrity falls on the individual who must learn to manage this side of life. Moreover, *feelings* are the core of emotive valuation and are rather responses to appraisals than appraisals in themselves. Moreover, relativism is avoided because the relationship emotion-valuation is not arbitrary. "Where emotions

are epistemic of values, they are adequate or not to these values (which they do not create); whereas emotions that are constitutive of values are adequate or not to *other* properties of their objects which are affectively poignant”. (Pugmire, 2005: 20-21)

Without this stable ground, there could be no discussion of well or ill-grounded emotions because they would all be dependent on individual creation. But when people “find and acknowledge values”, (Pugmire, 2005: 20) do they not automatically modify them in order to familiarize, understand and appropriate them? Even if this were not the case, the respective values would still be representative of certain systems in accordance to which they were subjectively created in the first place. Yet the author rightfully asserts that there must be a certain autonomous side to our values – one that goes beyond feeling – to keep us from descending into sheer chaos.

Mentioning the mandatory conditions for building well-constructed mental states, David Pugmire stresses the role of *integrity* to the soundness of emotions. This property can be understood in a normative way (in relation to a certain character, action or attitude), as well as in a structural sense (in terms of wholeness). Another essential condition is that of *profundity*, which is not an outburst or a dispositional status, but a particularly useful tool for checking the validity of the connection between the inner and outer worlds. In order for profundity to be reached, it needs to be built in relation to belief, wholeness of mind and harmony. In other words, a person must take the factors that evoke the respective emotion as true, not possible or imagined and judge them according to how they are and how they matter. Furthermore, he or she should completely engage in the emotional response and also create a harmonious picture in which mind and world, attributed and real significance are not conflicting. However, instead of focusing on the virtues brought about by emotional integrity and profundity, David Pugmire gives the stage to vicious properties that emotions can acquire, such as: narcissism, sentimentality and cynicism, which should not be understood as pathologies.

Narcissism presupposes an inward turn that maximizes *self-concern* in such a way that the original object of an emotion is lost to an attitude that primarily involves the self, forming second-order emotions: “one can worry about one’s worry, be disappointed at one’s anger, desire to be charmed by a particular thing”. (Pugmire, 2005: 107) There is also a degree of misunderstanding because the narcissist objectifies *personal momentousness*, feeling that the emotion matters in itself only because it matters to him or her. Hence, because self-reflection lies at the heart of emotional experience and the subject’s emotion becomes the object of concern in itself, there is an inevitable tendency to withdraw from the outer world into the personal realm of imagination – isolation that would render communication highly difficult, interaction almost futile and ritualistic

behaviour meaningless. As opposed to the pathological narcissist who is in constant need of others' attention and approval, the humdrum narcissist (the type considered by Pugmire) is not dependent on other people, but actually hopes for a sort of detachment that would make him a self-contained individual and allow for self-nurturing.

Sentimentality is another foible of emotional life because it is based on *dishonesty* towards the world and the self. Whether it involves disregard of the true theme of an emotion or misinterpretation and misleading of the self and of others, sentimentality remains a vice because it does not create profound feelings. As intense as they may be, emotions induced by sentimentality are fundamentally insincere and do not observe the principle of wholeness of mind. A sentimental portrayal relies on manipulating the truth in the direction of the desired emotional effect and succumbing the real theme to incompatible, sometimes contrary properties purposefully used to invite a specific (artificially aroused) emotional response. There is often narcissistic motivation behind sentimentality because "the primary effort is to make [something] as affecting as possible (as distinct from as affecting as it is)". (Pugmire, 2005: 138) This way, the resulting emotion is only important in that it moves the subject towards feeling something.

Cynicism is *apparently* the opposite of sentimentality because instead of being a corruptive dramatization and exaggeration of emotional experience, it encourages a colder, seemingly emotionless attitude. Yet one can argue that sentimentality is indifferent or cynical about the way it employs and uses emotion and even the fact that it is based on dishonesty is likely to generate disbelief and cynicism. As for the way in which this attitude affects emotions, it should be considered that cynicism can be an emotional strategy – it is "inimical to hope, enthusiasm and admiration . . . a fertile source of wry disdain." (Pugmire, 2005: 147) It also goes beyond skepticism and embraces an 'inverted faith' policy, since the adopted stance is that of disbelief irrespective of the absence or presence of evidence. Furthermore, Pugmire paints the cynic as more bitter and unforgiving than the disillusioned person, yet still emotional enough to continue to care and be disappointed, angered by the situation; in contrast, the resigned subject is satisfied with whatever is offered, while the nihilist is utterly disinterested. Like narcissism, cynicism pushes people towards detachment and self-isolation, locking them "in a lonely citadel of discriminating judgment", (Pugmire, 2005: 154) where pride and fear of being hurt or proven wrong take over the ounce of trust necessary for emotional growth.

If the 'complicitous cynic' can be associated to the resigned individual in that they are both reconciled and indifferent to or even satisfied with their sorrowful situation, having lost their bitterness (peculiar property of the high cynic), the 'rueful' cynic's attitude is that of disillusionment, as he or she is

not fully emotionally detached, but still painfully disappointed. Pugmire cites Peter Sloterdijk in creating a portrayal of the modern, integrated rueful cynic. According to the latter, this type of cynicism is the norm in contemporary culture, where people no longer believe in what they are doing, they are disoriented and lack a creed to replace the lost system with, so they continue with their activities in a cynical way. Almost melancholic and asocial, they act mechanically and consider themselves victims, hiding their profound unhappiness underneath a hard façade.

David Pugmire's philosophic account of emotions presupposes a realist basis that rejects constructivism. Without having objective standards, an emotion would be just as virtuous or vicious as any other and its integrity too slippery to grasp. Thus, Pugmire creates a set of conditions of profundity that emotions must abide by in order to be well constructed and not sink into narcissistic, sentimental or cynical attitudes. An important note is that emotional vices are not opposing defects, but actually aspects of one another and all imply a certain degree of detachment and desensitivity in relation to the world. But questions still remain. Are these vices part of our construction or can we change them? In what way, by which means and to what extent could self-management make a difference? If "people do not *need* treatment for cynicism" (Pugmire, 2005: 23) and if nothing can be done to mend the situation, I would either argue that Pugmire is a cynic himself or that these attitudes should not be considered vices, but merely unsuppressible parts of our personality.

Both Thomas Dixon's and David Pugmire's account of emotions proves useful to the analysis of Peter Shaffer's 1973 play *Equus* that reveals the painful inadequacy of religious affection in the scientific environment of a secularized society in which people have become bitter and disillusioned with their meager existence, as well as doubtful and cynical with respect to anything that transcends physicality. When theology is overshadowed by consumerism and spirituality fades in the face of medicine, to be "normal" is to be safe, rational and cynical, free of intense emotions that threaten to possess one entirely.

4. Peter Shaffer's *Equus* – Is meaningful pain desirable to meaningless bliss?

Alan Strang, the protagonist of *Equus*, is a seventeen year old boy, who is very quiet, docile and harmless on the surface, but deep down he fosters wild emotions and agonizing twinges of conscience. On a night like any other, while working as a groomer in a stable, the boy apparently goes into a fit of rage and inexplicably blinds six horses with a metal spike. In order to understand and subsequently find a cure for Alan's unnatural behavior, for his "strange[x] stare", (Shaffer, 1993: 9) child psychiatrist Martin Dysart

agrees to take him in at his mental institution and treat him there. However, the difficulty in establishing an accurate diagnosis is augmented by the fact that the patient is deeply immersed in a theological system based on a sexual and spiritual fascination with horses, bound to remain impenetrable by professional medicine. Trying to grasp Srang's emotional instability, the doctor proves Thomas Dixon's theory about the overly-permissive nature of the concept of "emotion" coupled with the too-strict apprehension of psychology.

First of all, in Martin Dysart's understanding, emotion is a term that incorporates both passion and affection, breaking down the wall that separates what St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas believed to be two fundamentally different attitudes that either distance or draw man closer to God. The typical contemporary confusion that revolves around these two notions is evident when Martin takes the boy's attraction towards horses as merely representative of his 'ferocious passion'. In reality, perhaps due to his mother's account of the beginnings of Christianity in the West, Strang takes his admiration for horses to the level of religious worshiping. After hearing that "when Christian cavalry first appeared in the New World, the pagans thought horse and rider was one person. . . . Actually, they though it must be a god.", (Shaffer, 1993: 15) Alan begins to believe he is one with the horse as well: "His neck comes out of my body", (Shaffer, 1993: 57) "Make us One Person!". (Shaffer, 1993: 58)

Although Strang infallibly takes a particular horse, Nugget, on an orgasmic ride performed naked and bareback every Saturday, the motivation behind it is not to indulge in worldly passion, but on the contrary, to show his profound affection for his God, Equus, whom he thought resided in the spirit of every horse. The intimate atmosphere he created was not necessarily (solely) the result of sexual deviance, but it was representative of a ritualistic experience founded upon the essential desire of all religious feeling: that of eventually being united with God: "*My mane, stiff in the wind! My flanks! My hooves! Mane on my legs, on my flanks, like whips! Raw! Raw! I'm raw! Raw! Feel me on you! On you! On you! On you! 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!*". (Shaffer, 1993: 58)

While it is true that passions are easily associated with the flesh, it does not follow that sexual feeling cannot be intertwined with religious affection, as long as it is directed towards godly love and not worldly satisfaction. This seems to be Alan's line of reasoning, since he is incapable of performing any type of sexual activity outside his rituals because he perceives it as unbearably sinful. When he has the chance to sleep with a girl his age in the stable, he fights to control his unruly, lower appetite and counter it with feelings of love and affection (albeit sexual) for Equus – this is the only way

he can restrain from committing a sin of the flesh. “Every time I kissed her – *He* was in the way. . . . When I touched her, I felt *Him*. Under me. . . . His side, waiting for my hand . . . His flanks. When I shut my eyes, I saw *Him* at once. . . . I couldn’t feel *her* flesh at all! I wanted the foam off his neck. His sweaty hide. Not flesh. Hide! Horse-Hide!” (Shaffer, 1993: 87)

Hence, Alan clearly differentiates between intensely religious sexual experience that leads to holy affection and sinful acts of lust brought about by passion that must be kept in check. After he almost sleeps with the girl, he is immediately remorseful: “*Equus* the Kind . . . The Merciful . . . Forgive me! . . . Take me back again! Please! . . . PLEASE!” (Shaffer, 1993: 89) and subsequently blinds all the horses in the stable in a desperate attempt to hide from the judgmental stare of his God: “*Equus* . . . Thou – God – Seest – NOTHING!” (Shaffer, 1993: 90)

Furthermore, what appears to Martin Dysart (as representative of the modern world) to be a crass descent into passionate irrationality is in reality neither uncontrollable outburst, nor chaotic or disorderly behavior. In fact, Alan’s system of values is coherent, his rituals carefully conducted and his actions deeply infused with religious significance. Having been raised by a devout Christian and an authoritative atheist and having the religious figure in his room replaced by the photograph of a horse, young Alan came to create a theological structure that blended pagan imagery with Christian themes. However, the hybrid nature of his religion does not imply inconsistency, but allows for the formulation of clearly defined religious elements: *Equus* stands for God, his stable is the temple where he must be worshipped while kneeling, the metal bar in his mouth represents Jesus’ chains that he must wear “for the sins of the world” (Shaffer, 1993: 51) and his metaphorical blinding is symbolic of his inevitable crucifixion. (Hay, 1977) Before mounting *Equus*, Alan makes sure to bite on a “sacred stick” (Shaffer, 1993: 55) in solidarity, “kiss [his sandals] devoutly and give him a lump of sugar as his Last Supper, so he should absolve the boy of his sins: “Take my sins. Eat them for my sake. . . . He always does.” (Shaffer, 1993: 56) Hence, because Martin does not make the fundamental distinction that Alan makes between passion and affection, he attributes his patient’s actions to a strong *passion* for horses, for the world, for life in general and he sees the boy as emotionally disturbed, not as rigorously devout.

Moreover, engaging in presentism, the doctor is too emerged in his professional system to expand the limits of the medical and psychological world beyond the material and be able to relate to Alan’s theology. The two main characters cannot fully understand each other because they embrace two different worldviews and implicitly two emotional attitudes: one is religious, the other secular, one deeply spiritual and the other merely scientific. Therefore, in order to treat Alan Strang, Martin must first translate the boy’s

affection into clinical pathology and his religion into mental illness or psychic abnormality that can eventually be cured with the use of proper medicine. Equus cannot survive in Martin's world where worship is reserved to the 'God of Health' and anyone who does not kneel to him is either naïve, sick or abnormal and must be therefore cured or put to death. Dysart understands that his job as a psychiatrist makes him complicitous with the God of Health, who alone establishes all rules for normalcy: "The Normal is the indispensable, murderous God of Health and I am his Priest". (Shaffer, 1993: 49)

The doctor even seems to go so far as to adopt William James' physicalist perspective on emotions when he states: "When Equus leaves – if he leaves at all – it will be with your intestines in his teeth". (Shaffer, 1993: 92) The underlying assumption of this statement is that Alan's emotions are directed by the movements of the viscera and if he is to part from Equus, he will become devoid of his strongest feelings, losing an essential part of himself. This point is reinforced by Martin's subconscious, since his recurring nightmare is that of being a masked priest and participating in a mysterious ritual of disemboweling children: "With a surgical skill which amazes even me, I fit in the knife and slice elegantly down the navel, just like a seamstress following a pattern. I part the flaps, sever the inner tubes, yank them out and throw them hot and steamy on the floor. . . . I redouble my efforts to look professional – cutting and snipping. . . . the damn mask begins to slip". (Shaffer, 1993: 8-9)

It is not incidental that he mentions children and professional behavior, since that is exactly what his job is: to routinely analyze children according to a clearly established practice and meddle with their emotions, look for abnormalities and neatly extract them. In Alan's case, this violent, murderous intrusion would result in his emotional death, so new questions and doubts start to emerge from behind the priest's mask in relation to what is normal and what is desirable emotional attitude. These thoughts bring about a self-reflective stance that allows the reader to glimpse into Martin's vicious emotional life.

As opposed to Alan who finds freedom and satisfaction in his rituals, the psychiatrist ironically sees himself not as a doctor, but as a priest whose rituals are not only uncomfortable and painful, but also performed in a mechanical way, more in an inertial manner than with true conviction. Martin Dysart is at the threshold between David Pugmire's 'cynic' and Peter Sloterdijk's 'rueful' cynic (the disillusioned subject). He is profoundly unhappy with both his job, as he admits going through "professional menopause" (Shaffer, 1993: 9) and his family life, as he is stuck in a childless marriage next to an emotionless wife who doesn't understand him – the result of their being "brisk in [their] wooing, brisk in [their] wedding, brisk in [their] disappointment". (Shaffer, 1993: 45) Martin is obviously bitter and far

from being pleased with his existence, but instead of reaching the indifference characteristic of the resigned individual, he still cares enough to be upset and lament his situation, as well as start to envy Alan Strang. “That boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it. . . . That’s what his stare has been saying to me all this time. At least I galloped! When did you? . . . I am jealous . . . jealous of Alan Strang”. (Shaffer, 1993: 67)

The reason for which Martin is envious of his patient is that even though the boy believes in something most people would consider naïve or insane, at least his religion makes perfect sense to him and he believes in his God with all his being, whereas the doctor’s ‘inverted faith’ strips him of the courage to believe in anything and, which makes him carry on with his daily life feeling empty and misunderstood, hiding behind a mask and pretending to know what he is doing and why. The façade Dysart puts on creates the illusion of a self-assured person who is in control of his emotions, who is perfectly integrated in society and in observance with its internal laws. However, in reality, the psychiatrist is fearful that the mask will fall off and everyone will see that he is a cynic at heart, disappointed of his not being able to believe in the righteousness of his profession and the integrity of his family, fostering a constant doubt about the supremacy of the God of Health or any other God. He sees himself as a victim of his culture (much like the children in his dream) and realizes that while Alan finds a pillar of support in “Equus the Godslave, Faithful and True”, (Shaffer, 1993: 57) he is completely disoriented, disenchanting and faithless, characterized by “the disappearance of belief in general guiding ideals.” (Pugmire, 2005: 158)

Who then is the normal one and who in need of cure, Strang or Dysart? They are both dislocated, both suffering, but at least Alan’s pain is “His pain. His own. He made it.” (Shaffer, 1993: 66) and as Martin finally understands, “to go through life and call it yours – *your life* – you first have to get your own pain. Pain that’s unique to you”. (Shaffer, 1993: 66) Alan embraces his pain and channels his anger and guilt in self-flagellation, but Martin suppresses his and refuses to let it show. Compared to the boy, Martin does not only fail to live his life, but he also detaches himself from it and contemplates it in *narcissistic isolation*, projecting everything he finds out about Alan onto himself and appropriating his emotions and his condition, so that they become his own: “I am wearing that horse’s head myself”. (Shaffer, 1993: 2) While the doctor lacks vitality and passively fantasizes about other times, losing himself in books about ancient Greece, the young man rides Equus every week, burning with desire and affection for his God.

Nonetheless, Martin Dysart is aware that it is in his power to drug the boy and use medicine to rid him of his ‘inappropriate’ emotions, but before he does it, he ponders upon the morality of the whole process: “Can you

think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?”, (Shaffer, 1993: 65) as well as its irreversibility: “Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created.” (Shaffer, 1993: 93) Is meaningful pain desirable to meaningless bliss? The apparent paradox is that although the psychiatrist seems to conclude that Alan’s life, be it seemingly irrational and incompatible with contemporary society is much more worth living than his, he still proceeds in killing Equus. This decision is in fact understandable because as a ‘rueful’ cynic, Martin’s actions are due to “the force of circumstance and the instinct for self-preservation”. (Pugmire, 2005: 158) Just as his disturbing dream implies, he must conclude his ritual even though he neither believes nor agrees with it; he is bound to do it purely out of inertial forces that he cannot explain.

Martin Dysart takes away Alan’s nightmares and erases his pain; he takes away Equus and his field and gives the boy “Normal places for his ecstasy” (Shaffer, 1993: 93) instead. With the help of drugs, he promises to rob the boy of his deeply meaningful affection by making him forget all about galloping. The cynical doctor seems to have lost all hope and draws ever closer to resignation, dragging Alan with him, in a bleak and faithless world, where horses are treated ‘properly’, just like other animals “made extinct, or put into servitude”, (Shaffer, 1993: 92) condemning him to “a life that is episodic, blissfully solitary, well appointed, anodyne and long”. (Pugmire, 2005: 8)

5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, using Thomas Dixon’s *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* and David Pugmire’s *Sound Sentiments: Integrity in the Emotions*, I have discussed the emotional backgrounds, attitudes and systems of belief attributed to Alan Strang and Martin Dysart, the two central characters of Peter Shaffer’s play *Equus*. Alan’s anachronistic religious affection is translated by his psychiatrist as passion – a misdiagnosis rooted in the discrepancy between the religious and scientific worldviews. The secularization of emotional theories and the presentism displayed by Martin prevent him from differentiating between passion and affection and thus from truly understanding the basis of Alan’s pain. Although he is the self-proclaimed priest of the murderous ‘God of Health’, Dysart performs his ritual based on the ‘emotional disemboweling’ of his patients (symbolic of a physicalist perspective on emotions) without really believing in it, but solely as a mechanical process that is stripped of its meaning, yet has to be done.

Martin Dysart is presented as a disillusioned individual, a ‘rueful’ cynic who is deeply dissatisfied with his dry existence, but still finds the power to be angry and envy Alan for his vitality and emotional strength, to mourn the

loss of meaning that turns people into cultural victims. By the end of the play, however, the glimmer of hope evaporates, as the doctor turns into a detached cynic and eventually into a resigned subject whose negativity and lack of vision keep him from being inspired by Strang. He manages to take away the boy's pain, make him forget about his rituals, but he implicitly takes away his object of worship, rendering him just as 'unaccounted for' and disoriented as he is.

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