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# Sam Shepard

Between the Margin and the Centre (2)

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**SAM SHEPARD**

**BETWEEN THE MARGIN AND  
THE CENTRE (2)**

*In memory of my father (1924–1996)*

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## *Curse of the Starving Class* and the Logic of Destruction

William E. Kleb

This paper looks closely at the formal structure and linguistic texture of *Curse of the Starving Class*, attempting to demonstrate that the text itself is engaged in the same (self-destructive) struggle expressed at the end by the figure of the eagle and the cat. The analysis, focusing on Shepard's stage directions ("the performance text"), suggests a "psychoanalytic" reading based on key concepts from Lacan and Kristeva: The hunger (desire) for wholeness, stability, "phallic" identity which drives the work forward (at the level of "realism") is continually challenged, and finally defeated by structural tropes of destruction, division, deferral, and abjection (at the level of action and metaphor). However, this internal logic of destruction releases again and again an eruption of poetic language (verbal and non-verbal) which finally threatens to reconstitute *Curse* as a play of "semiotic" forces, situated outside the symbolic order, on the edge of the real.

KEY WORDS: Abjection (Kristeva), Father (failed), Performance art, Real Performance text (Lacan), Stage directions (as countertext), Symbolic Order (Lacan).

When Sam Shepard's *Curse of the Starving Class* was originally produced, first in London (1977) and then in New York (1978), it was received by some reviewers as an anomaly—America's foremost experimental playwright had written a *realistic* play about a dysfunctional family living on the edge of poverty in Southern California. At the time, realism was having a major revival in the arts in America, and a number of playwrights (David Mamet and Lanford Wilson chief among them) were engaged in revitalizing the form which had been central to the development of serious American drama since the 1920s. Also, it was obvious that Shepard was not totally abandoning his non-realist roots: reviewers noted that *Curse* was filled with startling visual images and abrupt transformations (in tone and character)—features of the Shepard style from the

beginning. Nevertheless, despite its predictable idiosyncracies, Shepard's new play struck some at least as a reversion—a turn (however tenuous) to the dramatic traditions (and values) of the past—as much as a reinvention of those traditions. In the 1960s and 1970s, the predominant influences on Shepard's plays were generally located in popular culture—music (rock and roll, then jazz), beat poetry, pop art, comics, movies; now critics began to point to O'Neill, Miller, Odets, Caldwell, Steinbeck, and, of course, to what seemed to be the major (albeit non-American) source, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this evocation of a realist patrimony was simply a reflection of the “neo-conservative” spirit of the time—post-bicentennial, and on the verge of a sharp ideological swing to the right. In any case, the validity of this lineage seemed to be confirmed by Shepard's subsequent work. Today, *Curse of the Starving Class* is generally written about as the first of a major sequence of five “realistic” plays, addressing, as Robert Coe puts it, “the traditional theme of American drama, the theme of O'Neill and Miller's greatest work: the disintegration of the American family” (1980:58).<sup>2</sup>

To consider Shepard's play from this perspective is not invalid. Surely it looks forward to *Buried Child* and *True West*, and just as surely it displays the symptoms (some might say poison) of its dramatic inheritance. There is, however, another way to view it—one which recognizes the realistic elements in Shepard's text (both in style and theme) and at the same time calls them into question. I propose to make a move in this direction: to offer an alternative reading of what I consider to be one of Shepard's most interesting plays; to reconnect this play to the moment in Shepard's career when it was written, and to a dominant concern in Shepard's work up to that moment—the struggle to create, control, and sustain an image of the (masculine) self.

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<sup>1</sup> The London and New York productions were conceptually very different and this influenced the critical response. Meckler's staging at the Royal Court tended towards a kind of lyric realism, and as a result many of the London reviews responded to the play in terms of the American realist tradition. Woodruff's staging at the New York Shakespeare Festival went to the opposite extreme (partly in response to the failure of the London production), developing an absurdist or surreal style. Here, then, the play was seen less as a failed attempt at realism than as an example of stylistic grafting: “John Steinbeck's Ookies seen by Donald Barthelme” (Kauffmann), “*The Cherry Orchard* returning as farce” (Fox). In any case, Shepard's use of the trappings of realism was recognized and noted with some surprise on both sides of the Atlantic. For a summary of this response and selected references, see my critical bibliography (1989:396–397).

<sup>2</sup> See for example Bigsby (1985:239–240), Cohn (1982:183–184) and Hart (1987:68–75). Demastes's argument that Shepard's use of a “controlling metaphor” (starvation) turns the play into an example of “new realism” requires further amplification (1988:104–105). The success in 1986 in New York of a strongly naturalistic production of *Curse* demonstrates the currency of this critical point of view (Rehm, 1986:218–219).

*Curse of the Starving Class* was apparently written some time in the winter of 1975–76.<sup>3</sup> Between that time and its London premiere (April 21, 1977), Shepard produced four plays—*Angel City*, *Suicide in B-Flat*, *The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill*, and *Inacoma*—none noted for its realism. In an unusual move, *Curse* was published prior to production in a volume of Shepard’s plays which included *Angel City* and six earlier works. This was the context in which I first encountered it, and I was much less conscious of radical differences in the text than of similarities. It seemed less connected to a realistic play like *Cowboy Mouth* than to *Rock Garden* or *Action* (all three plays followed *Curse* in this volume). As far as outside influences were concerned, I was struck by one, to me at least, obvious connection. In January 1976, a series of four performances took place at 80 Langton Street, San Francisco’s most important venue for performance art. Created collaboratively by sculptor Jock Reynolds and Motion, at that time a well-known Bay-Area women’s theatre “collective” (comprised of Suzanne Hellmuth, Joya Cory and Nina Wise), each performance was different but each evolved from the same structural premise. Reynolds provided objects and environments, unknown to the performers before they entered the performance space; they then improvised with these materials (using both words and movement) for an indeterminate length of time. Reynolds altered the environment as they interacted with it. I can still remember the extraordinary images and inventions that evolved and dissolved during these strange, dreamlike events. One piece, *Hospital*, began with a table surrounded by and piled high with sawdust and freshly cut pieces of wood; at the opposite end of the darkened space, there was a small square chamber defined by four Venetian blinds that contained another table and two chairs; on the table was a steaming tea kettle on a lighted gas stove. Or *Whitebread*: this piece returned again and again to the theme of suicide and featured an old, empty, white refrigerator and a huge pile of packages of Wonder Bread. At one point, Wise stuffed the empty refrigerator with empty white cardboard cartons; at another, Hellmuth locked herself inside while Wise tore open the packages of bread and ate it ravenously, until her mouth was stuffed to overflowing and she was surrounded by scraps and crusts (Kleb, 1976:4–5). There were also many long, slow passages, punctuated by looks and stares, as the three performers explored their materials and each other’s bodies. I remember the radical disjunctions of time, space, pace, as short scenes developed, only to be quickly broken off; the continual movement towards impasse; the overlapping stories, memories, fantasies; the silences; the gradual accumulation of beautiful debris. The work seemed always to be

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<sup>3</sup> Joe Papp commissioned a “family play” from Shepard while Shepard was on the Rolling Thunder Tour with Bob Dylan in the fall of 1975. Shepard saw the New York opening of *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (12 Dec. 1975) and returned immediately to California (Shewey, 1985:109–118). On 22 February 1976, Shepard wrote to his agent that *Curse* was a “big” three act play and that he could not afford to have it photocopied (Shepard, Cole Archives).

exploding and imploding. At the time, I recognized its sources in the principles of Gestalt psychology (techniques, in fact, which the performers used in rehearsal); today, I would probably call it “at play in the fields of the semiotic” (to borrow a term from Julia Kristeva), or exercises in “abjection” (to borrow another).<sup>4</sup>

My journal notes from this period indicate that Shepard attended at least one of these performances, and I know that several weeks later he invited Reynolds to design the set for the world premiere of *Angel City* at the Magic Theatre, an invitation Reynolds declined, preferring to do another collaboration with Motion (this appeared at the Magic Theatre in 1977).<sup>5</sup> However, the “anxiety of influence” is not at issue here; stylistic and thematic contiguity is. Drawing an aesthetic connection between these performances and *Curse of the Starving Class* seemed, to me, inevitable at the time and, as a result, I entered the play less through character and plot than through image, metaphor, symbol, and movement. I read it less as a dramatic action than as a kind of performance, and I would like to propose such an entry (or re-entry) here. The place to begin, I suggest, is not with Shepard’s dialogue, but with his extraordinary stage directions.

Stage directions are a playwright’s buried children—discounted, dismissed, denied, ignored, cut up, cut out, cut off without a moment’s hesitation by directors, designers, actors, even critics. These did not issue from the playwright, one argument goes; they were conceived in production; they are really the work of the director, the designer. Or, if they do reflect the playwright’s vision, they are an inessential part of that vision: if it is not in the dialogue, it is not legitimate. Playwrights are “craftsmen of words” (meaning the words that the characters speak), not “scenic activity”, Richard Schechner explained to Shepard during their famous debate over a production of *The Tooth of Crime* (1973: 236–238). Shepard clearly sees the matter differently. His process may begin with the voices of characters in his head, but it clearly includes the visualization of action and image within the three-dimensional stage as well. And this visualization is an essential part of the text, its meaning. Published before any production (its stage directions unaltered in any subsequent edition), *Curse of the Starving Class* provides an especially vivid example of this.

What, then, do Shepard’s stage directions contribute to this text, and how do they work? At the simplest level, one common feature stands out: Shepard seems to be much more interested in movement, in action (or the lack of it), in pose and

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Leonard Wilcox’s penetrating analysis of *Red Cross* for alerting me to Kristeva’s concept of “abjection”. This concept is just as applicable to *Curse* (in particular to the maternal, “semiotic” drives released by Weston’s failure and associated with Ella) as it seems, in retrospect, to the improvisational work by the women of Motion inside Reynolds’s “symbolic” environments.

<sup>5</sup> The performance done at the Magic Theatre (in its new space at Fort Mason) was also called *Hospital*, but it was very different in style and tone from the pieces done at 80 Langton Street, and, to me, much less effective. It was not improvised, used other performers in addition to Motion, and employed a musical score.

presence, than he is in telling the actor what a character thinks or feels. Ella enters “*sleepily*” in Act I (57), Wesley stares “*blankly*” at one point in Act III (109) and “*coldly*” at another (110). When Emma tells Weston that Taylor is the name of the lawyer Ella “went with”, he “*stares at her drunkenly, trying to fathom it*” (85). There are few other psychological pointers in this play, and while many of Shepard’s directions for movement gain meaning from their context, that meaning often seems to reflect back on itself, to turn inward, or to slip away towards ambiguity and impasse. Again and again the action stops (“*pause*” is a favourite word in this text) while characters look and stare and watch. At such moments, the gaze seems to become an open signifier, self-cancelling, uneasily lodged in the narrative, or at an angle to it. Often it seems to draw a blank. Communication stalls. At other times, a look or a stare will open up a kind of gap in the conscious movement of the plot through which a deeper “truth” may emerge: a fantasy, a monologue, or simply an irony, a joke or a pun. Characters seem to look at other characters as if they were objects, or at objects as if they were characters. Emma looks into the empty refrigerator and speaks to it, promising that soon it will “get some company” – “little eggs tucked into your sides and some yellow margarine tucked into your little drawers”—but then she is reminded of her lost chicken: “(*pause*) You haven’t seen my chicken have you? You mother fucker! *She slams the door to refrigerator and turns away. She sees Taylor standing there. They stare at each other. Taylor smiles.* TAYLOR: Your mother here?” (71). The joke, and its subtextual implications, should be obvious (*Curse* is littered with self-conscious plays on words, many of them sexual). Or consider the following from late in Act I (76–77):

*Taylor and Ella exit. Wesley stands there for a while. He turns and looks at the lamb.*

WESLEY: (*staring at lamb*) Eat American Lamb. Twenty million coyotes can’t be wrong.

*He crosses to refrigerator and opens it. He stares into it.*

WESLEY: You’re out of luck. Santa Claus hasn’t come yet.

*He slams refrigerator door and turns to lamb. He stares at lamb.*

Out of this stare comes Wesley’s remarkable meditation on the raw and the cooked—the difference between being a starving lamb in a “civilized household”, and being a starving lamb tied to a log in the mud in the rain outside a cardboard shack in Korea: “Someone’s hungry. And his hunger takes him outside with a knife and slits your throat and eats you raw. His hunger eats you and you’re starving. *Loud crash of garbage cans being knocked over offstage right*” (76–77). This is the cue for the entrance of Weston, Wesley’s father. He appears as it were through the space in the action opened up by this internal monologue and introduced by an extraordinary series of ambiguous looks and stares, a series he himself continues and amplifies.

In traditional realism, the meaning of the dramatic action is subtly encoded in the material world of the play—the behaviour of the characters, the architecture of the set, the furniture and the objects, the costumes. The real and the symbolic fuse, signifier and signified become “one whole thing” (118). Shepard’s repeated use of the pause and the gaze does the opposite: it divides, forcing the symbolic subtext (the dreamlife of realism) to the surface (to consciousness) while focusing attention on the object and the actor (on presence, being, the real). At one point, the signifier, overdetermined and blatantly inscribed, explodes with meaning; at another (or at the same time), isolated and dispossessed, it escapes meaning and frees itself from representation. In between, realism disappears. The lamb is an obvious example. At first it stands for the farm and agriculture (Taylor says, “It’s a shame to see agriculture being pushed into the background”, and seconds later Wesley places the lamb “*up center stage*” [74]). But soon it also stands for innocence, need, disease, starvation, salvation, castration, rebirth, sacrifice, the Lamb of God, afterbirth, loss, death, meat, the civilized (inside), the uncivilized (outside)—and throughout, of course, for Wesley and his relationship with his father. Probably more. It is also a *live* lamb on a stage in front of a live audience, and Shepard (the connection with his name need hardly be pointed out) even directs that the “*lamb is heard ‘baaing’ in the dark*” at the beginning of Act III (101). This may be real, but according to the aesthetics of realism it is suicide. The most infamous example is Wesley’s pissing scene (which should be performed, Shepard directs, “*facing front*”). Wesley’s penis, his claim to manhood, is a major issue in this scene (both his mother and his sister look at it, and Ella even compares the circumcision favourably to her father’s), and here he uses it to perform an especially anarchic gesture. Not only does he destroy Emma’s charts (her link to the social world outside the house), and turn the kitchen into a toilet, he shatters the illusion of character as well. Ella and Emma may be looking at Wesley’s “pecker”, we are looking at the actor’s (63).

If the lamb and Wesley’s body (he also appears “*completely naked*” [107] in Act III) shatter the representational frame, moving outward into “the real” (Lacan), the world inside that frame seems similarly divided.<sup>6</sup> *Curse* takes place in a farmhouse kitchen, but Shepard’s directions refer only to a stage. He locates outside on stage right and inside (the interior of the house) on stage left, but he makes it clear that the kitchen has no walls, nor any doors (57). Visually, the line between inside and outside does not exist. Down left is a working refrigerator and a small gas stove, “*set right up next to each other*”. Centre stage, a table

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<sup>6</sup> As an interpretive point of reference, my reading of *Curse of the Starving Class* makes use (in a generalized and non-programmatic way) of Lacan’s revision of Freud’s topography of the mind into three interacting “orders”: the symbolic, the imaginary, the real. Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986:81) define these three orders briefly as follows: “The Imaginary Order includes the field of phantasies and images [...] The prototype of the typical imaginary relationship is the infant before the mirror fascinated with his image. [...] The Imaginary also seems to include pre-verbal structures, for example, the various

with “*four mismatched chairs*”. The isolation of these mundane objects within an open field focuses attention on their reality, their being as objects disconnected from any environmental context. The separate actions which open Act I and Act II stress the point. The lights go up in Act I on Wesley (who as yet has no firm identity as a character) picking up pieces of wooden debris and throwing them into a wheelbarrow: “*This*”, Shepard directs, “*goes on for a while*” (57). Act II opens with Emma making a new set of charts and Wesley building a new door centre stage. “*Hammers, nails, saw and wood lying around, sawdust on floor.*” The stage direction concludes: “*They each continue working at their separate tasks in silence, each of them totally concentrated. Wesley measures wood with a tape measure and then cuts it on one of the chairs with the saw. He nails pieces together. After a while they begin talking but concentrate on their work*” (80–81). In short, Shepard isolates each action, lifts it out of context, insists that it be looked at simply as a task, its meaning for a moment erased.

Once the dramatic action begins, however, Shepard’s set becomes charged with meaning. The four mismatched chairs clearly stand for the four mismatched Tates, while the “*very plain breakfast table*” gets transformed into a bed, and a stage. The most significant objects are the stove and the refrigerator. Along with a cluster of images connoting orderly, analytical (*i.e.* civilized) behaviour, each act begins with food actually being cooked on the stove (an action which also escapes into the real). Later in each act, the cooking stops (as destructive tropes take over the action and the stage), and the focus shifts to the refrigerator, symbolically the most loaded object in the play, after the lamb, despite the fact that its chief connotations are hunger (desire) and absence. Finally, kitchen and stage complete each act littered with debris—a “*dunghheap*” Emerson calls the space at the end of Act III (116). Thus, like Shepard’s use of the pause and the gaze, the visual landscape he creates profoundly decentres our experience of the play. It reminds us of the real (inaccessible, lost, retreat from signification), even as it assembles a dynamic dreamscape, highly condensed, overdetermined, its constantly shifting images caught in a recurrent rhythm of disorder and destruction.

What I am suggesting is that Shepard’s stage directions be considered a kind of performance text, non-realistic, irrational, unstable, within which the dramatic text is embedded and with which it contends for control and definition. At one

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primitive phantasies uncovered by the psychoanalytic treatment of children, psychotics and perverse patients. [...] The Symbolic Order is concerned with the functions of symbols and symbolic systems, including social and cultural symbolism. Language belongs to the Symbolic Order. [...] it is through language that the subject can represent desires and feelings, so it is through the Symbolic Order that the subject can be represented or constituted. The Real Order [...] is linked to the dimension of death and sexuality. [...] it seems to be the domain outside the subject. The Real Order, is ‘out there’; it is what the subject keeps ‘bumping up against’, and it sometimes seems to refer to that domain outside symbolization”.

level, the plot of *Curse of the Starving Class* concerns the sale of a house and the farm that surrounds it. This is the stuff of traditional, well-made melodrama. The father, an alcoholic, amusing but violent, has gone deeply into debt. Without telling his estranged wife, he decides to sell the place to the owner of his favourite bar and move to Mexico. His wife, meanwhile, has decided to have her husband declared incompetent and to sell their property with the help of a shady lawyer who specializes in land development; she wants to move to Europe and offers to take her adolescent son and daughter with her. The son opposes them both (this is the root conflict), telling his father about his mother's plans, at the same time trying to convince him to stay on the land and to work the farm. The climax comes at the end of Act II when both deals collapse and the house and the money paid for it by the bar owner are lost. In Act III, the father runs off to Mexico, and the gangsters to whom he owes the money blow up his daughter my mistake. Mother and son are left alone, distracted and dispossessed. Wesley, the son, carries the moral weight in this plot and he analyses the situation from time to time in social realist terms ("So it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country" [83]). He also attempts to control the forward thrust of the action, bringing the other characters back to the subject of the sale whenever they lose interest and slip away into stories of their own. The major dramatic question is simply stated: will Wesley (the hero) succeed in saving first the farm and then the father? Whenever this question controls the action, the style of Shepard's play moves in the direction of realism. The tone may be comic, behaviour bizarre (a word Shepard has used to describe his own family [Coe: 58]), but the action connects itself to the psychology of character, structure becomes causal, the dialogue approximates the way that such people might actually speak. Shepard's stage directions propose, in effect, a challenge to this realistic text, subverting its authority and eventually dismantling it. Just as the realistic text is connected to Wesley, this countertext is connected to Weston, his father.

Wesley's story, the story of the sale of the house, is not the only story in *Curse*. The play is made up of many stories; it is, in fact, a web of competing fantasies, delusions, borrowed narratives, and submerged myths. Connected to the sale of the house, for instance, is the story of the return of the absent father. Like Orestes or Telemachus, Wesley at times longs for his father to come back, a god of vengeance, laying down the law, killing his mother's suitor (and, perhaps, even his mother), restoring order to the hearth and health to the land. Weston undermines this myth in Act I (he plans to sell the house himself), and it collapses totally in Act II when Wesley reveals Ella's duplicity: drunk and enraged, Weston erupts with threats of revenge and murder that sound like a scenario for a horror film; then, lying prone on the kitchen table, he passes out. Throughout the rest of the act, as the plot of the sale of the house rises to a noisy climax around him, he remains there, motionless, displayed, corpse-like, "*unconscious*" (there and not there), a powerful visual counterpoint to Wesley's plot, a signifier pointing in another direction. Shepard uses one word only to describe Weston in this scene, and he uses it four separate times—"*unconscious*"

(89, 91, 95). Thereby he points to another story, one which encompasses the others and provides a structural framework for the play.

According to this story, Weston is not simply the absent father, distracted by his encounter with life, but the *failed* father. His alcoholism, his irresponsibility, his sale of the house (behaviour which connects him to Wesley's story and with which Wesley attempts to cope in a realistic way) are symptomatic of a deeper failure—the failure, in psychoanalytic terms, of the ego to enter fully into the symbolic order.<sup>7</sup> Ensnared by the unconscious, on the edge of psychosis, Weston turns (the word Shepard uses again and again to describe his movements) from one delusion to another.<sup>8</sup> His entrance at the end of Act I is emblematic. His appearance is startling; his behaviour disoriented and violent. He destabilizes the space. He talks to himself. He yells at the house. He empties a bag of desert artichokes into the refrigerator and shouts that he is “MR. SLAVE LABOR HIMSELF COME HOME TO REPLENISH THE EMPTY LARDER!” (77–78). In Lacan's revision, the Freudian unconscious is structured like a language, one in which the signified evades the signifier, where meaning multiplies, fades, and evaporates. The voice of the unconscious is thus “interrogative”—an unending asking of questions without answers (Lacan, 1977:295):

*He takes a few steps and stops cold when he sees the lamb. He just stares at the lamb for a minute, then crosses to the table and sets the bag of groceries and the laundry on the table. He crosses to the center and looks at the lamb inside the fence.*

WESTON: *(to lamb)* What in the hell are you doin' in here? *(He looks around the space, to himself)* Is this the inside or the outside? This is the inside, right? This is the inside of the house. Even with the door out it's still the inside. *(to lamb)* Right? *(to himself)* Right. *(to lamb)* So what the hell are you doing in here, if this is the inside? *(he chuckles to himself)* That's not funny. (77)

The nature of Weston's failure rewrites Wesley's story, translating the son's attempt to save the house and the family (to replace the father) into the ego's

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<sup>7</sup> Lee (1990:65) summarizes Lacan's position on the failed father as follows: “It is the failure of the real father fully to live up to ‘the symbolic value crystalized in his function’ that is ‘the source of the effects of the Oedipus Complex which are not at all moralizing, but most often pathogenic’. Thus it is the *béance* between the symbolic and the real that is at the root of the neuroses (and even psychoses) with which the psychoanalyst is confronted”.

<sup>8</sup> In his definition of the Freudian unconscious, Eagleton (1983:157) stresses its “radical otherness”: “[It] is a place and a non-place, which is completely indifferent to reality, which knows no logic or negation or causality or contradiction, wholly given over as it is to the instinctual play of the drives and the search for pleasure”.

attempt to escape from the power of the unconscious, to achieve self-identification (or subjectification). At the level of the realistic text, at the level of consciousness, Weston seems pathetic, a joke, his violent threats simply a refraction of his incompetence. Shepard's stage directions, what I am calling the performance text, reveal his true power: They enact the drives he represents as a figure of the unconscious, and they allow those drives to redirect the movement of the play, even when he is not on stage; they function as structural markers, signaling radical shifts in tone and subject, where cohesion collapses and meaning misfires; they interrupt the surface of the ego/text exposing the dreamlife of the action—Wesley's incestuous relationship with his mother, his murderous rivalry with Emma, and, in particular, Emma's profound identification with her father. (From this perspective, Emma's mythic ride through the Alibi Club becomes a symbolic act, a displacement of her hostility towards Wesley and his plans; in this she is simply her father's emissary, a projection of his power.) Finally, they permit what Kristeva calls "the abject" to gain control of the space and to ensnare its inhabitants, releasing the power of the maternal (Ella), and disturbing "identity, system and order" (Kristeva, 1982:4).<sup>9</sup> In short, the true West(on) speaks through this text (this is his language in the play—surreal, irrational, fragmented, explosive, entropic, abjected, and radically other), and again and again, at its most articulated moments, his name is invoked. An obvious irony: the Name of the Father expressed as the Law of Desire.<sup>10</sup>

This is the power that Wesley faces in *Curse*, and in the final act it takes control of the stage. Throughout the second half of Act II, Weston lies on the kitchen table speechless, then at the beginning of Act III he explodes with words. In a transformation scene worthy of a Christmas pantomime, surrounded by a vision of wholeness and harmony (all the key images of the play are brought

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<sup>9</sup> In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva suggests that subjectivity within a patriarchal society requires the "abjection" of the mother-her identification at a pre-symbolic, "semiotic" level with figures of profound ambiguity, the confusion of self and not-self, inside and outside, excrement, blood (especially menstrual blood), corpses, incest, ultimately death. Entry into the symbolic order requires the repression of these abjected images (a process, ironically, initiated by the mother and bound up with her body), either within the (culturally reinforced) site of the family or, "where patrilinear power is poorly secured" (1982:77), through the use of pollution rituals. The power of the abject controls the world of the play in Act I of *Curse*, released by Weston's failure. (Ella, the mother, turns Emma's menstruation from a sign of regeneration into a sign for death and disease; she allows her son to urinate on stage without protest; she attempts to link her son's penis to her lineage, implying at the same time an incestuous subtext, and, finally, she destroys the unity of the family by trying to sell the house and move to Europe without the father.) This same power controls the stage at the end of the play as well.

<sup>10</sup> "It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (Lacan, 1977:67).

together and stabilized—a new door is in place, coffee heats on the stove, the refrigerator is filled with groceries, even the lamb, now cured, can be required to “baa” on cue), Weston delivers two verbal arias, reinventing himself twice, as the hero of the two great myths of consciousness—castration and resurrection. In Act II, Weston becomes a threatening object (the living dead); now, in Act III, he seizes the subject position—upright, centred, in control of language, narrative, myth, the world of the play. In short, he is the Lacanian “Phallus”, the symbolic order enshrined and in place.<sup>11</sup> Shepard’s stage directions reflect this shift. Throughout this opening scene, up to the point when he goes offstage (outside) to look for Wesley, Weston is simply directed to fold laundry and to cook breakfast, and these actions are never isolated or destabilized in any way: there are no discordant, divided moments for Weston here, no dissonances, no pauses, no ambiguous looks or stares. He has, it seems, shed the language of the unconscious (the performance text) as easily as he has shed his clothes. In Act III, Weston speaks more than all of the other characters combined; here, then, he stands for the Word.

When Wesley enters, however, at the end of the first of Weston’s arias, he seems to have lost the will and the power to speak. Face and hands bloody, his language reduced to monosyllabic words and simple sentences, Wesley demands that Weston complete the story of the eagle and the lamb testes (102). Weston refuses. Wesley then completes his own story: “He [Ellis] ran off with your money. And he’s got the house too” (103). Weston dismisses the news as irrelevant. At this point, Wesley’s abstracted behaviour might be read realistically—shock and despair at the failure of his “superobjective”; the psychology of shame, grief, and repressed rage. Shepard clearly has something more in mind, and once again his stage directions provide a clue to the underlying “truth” of the action. While Weston, in his new role as the domesticated male, unafraid to cook and clean (at the same time!) begins to preach the gospel of rebirth and family connectedness, “*Wesley crosses slowly to the stove and looks at the coffee*” (103). This move inaugurates a sequence of looks and stares by Wesley alone (first at the coffee, then into the refrigerator) which intervene silently in Weston’s talk, contradict his cooking, and reestablish the rhythm of text and countertext. Here the countertext, the language of the unconscious, belongs entirely to Wesley. In short, Shepard completes a radical reversal of roles: now *Wesley* stands for loss of control, disorder, disconnection, appetite, and the unconscious. Before he puts on his father’s clothes, Wesley puts on his language.

This reversal, it turns out, is an illusion; the play has become, in fact, a hall of mirrors. When Wesley attempts to repeat Weston’s ritual of rebirth, the “remedy” (113) fails; the transformation is a mirage, a masquerade, the latest and

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<sup>11</sup> “The Phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire” (Lacan, 1977:287).

the grandest of Weston's delusory dreams—a dream which has now taken over the stage.<sup>12</sup> At this point, Wesley begins a series of ritual actions of his own. Instead of an illusion of wholeness, however, these actions rewrite the space in terms (again) of the radically decentred countertext; and finally they deconstruct his father. The decisive moment, the seismic shift, occurs as a naked Wesley picks up the live lamb and, ominously, removes it—and the real—from the stage (107–108). Shepard's stage directions make it clear that these actions are not meant to be seen as part of a conscious process: Wesley “wanders” through these performances “dazed” and distracted (107). Rather, he has been forced to move outside the realistic narrative that he has attempted (and failed) to construct, to shed his precarious ego-identity (by this point it has virtually collapsed) and to enter, shaman-like, the very landscape of the un-real. As if to stress that Wesley's actions from here on, and Weston's reactions, should also be read symbolically, as a kind of dreamtext, Ella (the threat of abjection) is present throughout, lying on the kitchen table, *asleep* (108). (Shepard only uses the word “asleep”, or a variant, to describe her condition here, never “unconscious”.)

When Wesley reappears on stage, he has slaughtered the lamb (“we need some food”) and put on his father's discarded clothes (“they fit me”) (109). Weston cannot “fathom” either action, but both, of course, are stuffed with meaning (in contrast to Weston's “empty” words).<sup>13</sup> The slaughtered lamb recalls immediately Wesley's earlier definition of the uncivilized (the raw), while the blood on his arms (a displacement of the earlier menstrual blood) (113) and his costume (“some old bum's clothes that've been thrown-up in, pissed in, and God knows what all in” [109]) suggest a kind of pollution ritual, and a sacrifice—Wesley's final attempt to sever his connection to the (failed) father, and thus to release (perhaps to destroy) the self. At this moment in the text, Wesley begins “pulling all kinds of food” out of the refrigerator and “eating it ravenously”. According to Kristeva, when food appears in pollution rituals, it does so only in relation to its “orality”, to the mouth as a “boundary of the self's clean and proper body [...], a border between [...] nature and culture, between the human and the non-human” (1977: 75). Here, Wesley stands at that border.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “[T]he art of the analyst must be to suspend the subject's certainties until their last mirages have been consumed” (Lacan: 43).

<sup>13</sup> See Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986:84–85) for a lucid summary of Lacan's distinction between empty speech (“the imaginary empty speech which takes its orders from the ego”) and full speech (“concealed unconscious, purposive ideas”).

<sup>14</sup> This moment might also be read as a none-too-subtle re-enactment of Freud's oral stage of infant development, and a further demonstration (if one were needed) of Wesley's retreat from self-hood.

<sup>15</sup> Kristeva (1982:4) extends the figure of abjection to include moral and political hypocrisy: “the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior [...]”.

Finally, Wesley's physical appearance holds up a mirror to Weston, exposing his father's new, "Phallic" identity for the abject delusion it is,<sup>15</sup> forcing him to recognize his own "lack", and then driving him from the stage.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a second sacrifice occurs: Wesley's insistence that "they're going to kill you", projects his own intention (110). As Weston delivers a series of confessional speeches (which sound suspiciously like ideological evasions), Wesley watches him "coldly", and repeatedly urges him to go (110–113). There is no equivocation on Wesley's part, no hope. The scene is an exorcism: As B.Traven, Emma's favourite author, knew so well, Mexico equals death (70).

The unconscious is that discourse of the Other by which the Subject receives, in an inverted form, his own forgotten message. (Lacan qtd. in Felman, 1987:124)

The mirroring relationship set up in Act III works two ways. As Weston, looking at Wesley, sees himself, so Wesley, looking at Weston, is faced with an image of himself fused with his father. This is the climax of the countertext, when all the looking, staring, and watching in *Curse* reaches at last a point of insight—the "forgotten message" of the unconscious: the possibility (indeed the profound anxiety which animates this play) that there may be no escape. That wholeness, subjectivity, the unitary self, Phallic identity, may be ultimately all an illusion. Emma's death delivers this message, as does the return to the stage of the lamb, now a skinned carcass, by Emerson and Slater (115). In her final scene, Emma tries to transform herself into a criminal, an icon of escape, a law unto herself, outside society, family, even gender. And then she gets blown up by her father's enemies while trying to steal her mother's car.<sup>17</sup> This "little reminder", as Emerson puts it (115), is followed immediately by Slater's ironic reference to the lamb ("Looks like somebody's afterbirth to me"). Throughout these two scenes, Wesley continues to regress ("How come I'm going backwards?" [147]), while his mother, awake but still dreaming, confuses him with his father ("Get them out of here, Weston!" [116]).

In Act I, when Weston first enters, Shepard's stage directions say that Wesley "*bolts off stage left*" (into the interior of the house); then, a few minutes later, he returns from "*stage right*" (the outside) (77–78). Perhaps this is just a

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<sup>16</sup> "We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification [...] the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan, 1977:2). This moment clearly suggests what Lacan calls the mirror stage of infant development, when the child moves away from a narcissistic identification with the mother's image (the imaginary) into an understanding of his own difference in the world. It is the first stage in ego formation and instills in the subject a deep sense of loss and alienation; the mirror image is that ideal of wholeness and unity which must always be desired and never achieved. For a summary, see Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986:55). This is what might be called Wesley's "objective" in this reading of *Curse*, but in Act III, his movement is "backwards" (114) into the "imaginary", or perhaps into what Kristeva calls "abjection".

stage-directorial slip of the tongue. Or perhaps it is meant to mirror the confusion between inside and outside experienced at the same moment by Weston as he looks for the first time at the lamb. In any case, it is an early example, at the level of the performance text, of the deeper bond that exists between the two. This bond is not simply a matter of genetics, some poison in the blood or “tiny little swimming things [...] Plotting in the womb” (93). These, Shepard suggests, are part of the fiction of realism (the plot of the house and the family): an “alibi”. (In fact, the Alibi Club, where Weston goes to escape his family, is named for the first time at the end of Weston’s heredity lesson to Wesley [88], while Ellis, whom Shepard identifies in the stage direction as “*the owner of the ‘Alibi Club’*”, enters immediately after Ella’s “curse” speech [93].) This is a bond that goes deeper and has little to do with familial eccentricity. It concerns the syntax of our separate lives.

The final tableau reiterates this point. All movement has stopped. Mother and son are left alone together on the littered stage, and Ella now calls Wesley by his own name; but the image they create together is divided, split apart: Ella faces downstage, “*staring at the lamb carcass in the pen*”, Wesley, his back to her, faces “*upstage*” and “*looks out*”. Then Ella remembers “that story your father used to tell about that eagle”. As the play ends, they tell the end of Weston’s story:

WESLEY: And the eagle’s being torn apart in midair. The eagle’s trying to free himself from the cat, and the cat won’t let go.

ELLA: And they come crashing down to earth. Both of them come crashing down. Like one whole thing.(116–118)

Visually, this moment repeats the basic structural unit of what I have been calling the performance text in Shepard’s play (or, to stress its opposition to the realistic plot, the countertext)—the divided signifier, split between the real (lost,

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<sup>17</sup> Emma begins the play working within the system (making charts for a 4-H demonstration); she ends it “going into crime”—“No credentials. No diplomas. No overhead. No upkeep” (114). In between, she tells stories and dreams of her escape, and each of these narratives involves destruction in some way. Her desire to be a mechanic/magician ends in the mud (“I was just a hunk of meat tied to a big animal. Being pulled” [70]). Her talk with the refrigerator finally reminds her of her “boiled” chicken (71). She attempts to frighten Taylor off with the story of nitroglycerine in the blood, a story which prefigures the nitrogelignite explosion which finally kills her, as does the story about the peacock which her father “blasted to smithereens” (83). Even her dream of cheating Taylor and Ella when their car breaks down in Mexico is essentially a destructive fantasy involving the loss of her identity as Emma (“They don’t recognize me [...] I’ve lost the knack of English by now” [82]), and it foreshadows her final dream of escape into an identity-less life of crime. Emma does not understand it, but she is almost totally out of touch with reality, and her final speech urging her brother to “look ahead”, to see the “writing on the wall”, to “read” what is “behind” the eyes makes this clear. When Wesley asks her, “What are you?”, she replies, “I’m gone! I’m gone! Never to return” (114). And, of course, she is right.

dead) and the symbolic (exploded, “gone” [114]). Through this gap, the spirit of Weston enters once again (evoked, Ella says, “just from looking at this lamb” [117]), an urge, a memory, his ironic story of wholeness as appetite and self-destruction *reconnecting* mother and son. Thus, at the end of *Curse*, the countertext controls the stage.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship of Shepard’s stage directions to non-realist performance (especially the type I have described with roots in dada and surrealism), which provoked this reading (this psychoanalytic story), suggests a further act of subversion (perhaps unconscious) on the author’s part—a move against the theatre itself, that (abject) space where traditionally in the West the writer of plays has attempted to construct (in public) an identity for the ego, the family, the culture. From this perspective, the text is engaged in the same (self-destructive) struggle expressed metaphorically at the end by the figure of the eagle and the cat. The hunger for wholeness, identity, stability, the Phallus, (a place in the canon) which drives the work forward (at the level of realism), is recurrently challenged and frustrated by structural tropes of destruction, division, deferral, and abjection (at the level of action and metaphor).<sup>19</sup> These interruptions threaten to reconstitute *Curse* as a play of “semiotic” forces (Kristeva) situated outside the symbolic order, on the edge of the real.<sup>20</sup> This internal logic of destruction, activated by Weston, is what ultimately accounts for the astounding energy and vitality of Shepard’s play (its claim to the poetic), even as it stands, like Wesley, “*looking out*” at nothing.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This movement, then, represents a return to the (abject) relationship that begins Shepard’s play: the son bound to the mother (the imaginary) by the self-destructive narrative of the failed father. According to Lacan (and Freud for that matter), Wesley’s quest was futile to begin with, a Cartesian illusion. That, it might be said, is the “curse” of being. “In any case, man cannot aim at being whole (the ‘total personality’ is another of the deviant premises of modern psychotherapy), while even the play of displacement and condensation to which he is doomed in the exercise of his functions marks his relation as a subject to the signifier” (Lacan, 1977:287).

<sup>19</sup> Lyons (1990:32) recognizes the juxtaposition in this play between techniques of realism and non-realism, but finally he suggests a psychoanalytic reading in terms of the author’s relationship to his own father and family—“as an act that attempts to articulate the processes of exorcising the presence of the father and assimilating the energy of the patriarch by appropriating both dramatic and archetypic paradigms self-consciously”. My reading positions this struggle existentially and uses the Oedipus narrative as a metaphor.

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva argues in *Revolution in Poetic Language* that in addition to the music of poetry, avant-garde writing uses innovative grammars that loosen the linguistic constraints on the repressed semiotic. Revolutionary language speaks the “Unconscious” (Oliver, 1993:99).

<sup>21</sup> My thinking about the “destructive” elements in Shepard’s writing and their relationship to “its claim to the poetic” have also been influenced by Bataille’s “notion of expenditure” (Bataille, 1985:118–120).