

**IDENTITY, CHOICE AND PERFORMANCE RITUALS  
IN JOHN BARTH'S "LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE"  
AND SAM SHEPARD'S "ACTION" AND "COWBOY MOUTH"**

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Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* presents a world in which "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful".<sup>1</sup> This absurd tragedy, depicting the human condition as a mere waiting for something or someone to give man the sense of identity he lacks, was very well comprehended by the prisoners of San Quentin penitentiary during the performance there, November 19, 1957. A teacher at the prison said, "They know what is meant by waiting... and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be a disappointment".<sup>2</sup> However, the play is appealing not only to inmates but to any kind of "prisoners" as well.

More than a decade after Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the novelist-story-writer John Barth and playwright (poet- movie star) Sam Shepard are still trying to find answers to the same questions Beckett was struggling with. Mr. Barth in his short story "Lost in the Funhouse", and Mr. Shepard in his plays *Action* and *Cowboy Mouth*, for examples, are dealing with the most fundamental issue of twentieth-century arts and literature-the quest for self, the search for identity.

Mr. Barth's main concern in "Lost in the Funhouse" (also the title to the collection of short stories in which "Funhouse" appeared) as well as in most of his novels, is the dilemma of the modern man when confronted with the endless alternatives of reality. In *End of the Road* (1958), Jacob Horner is faced with a multitude of possibilities for selecting a role. He does not know which one role to choose, thinking that the one he chooses will be inferior to the others. He finds reasons for not doing anything. However, he cannot concentrate on any one action. He cannot take a stance. Thus, he ends in immobility. Ironically and metaphorically, at the train station, he cannot decide whe-

re to go, but there on the bench, experiences a catatonic immobility, which he himself calls cosmopsis: cosmic neutrality. He starts seeing doctors in order to be able to attain some kind of motivation in life. One of the doctors advises him to move and to take a "role". He attempts to cure Jacob's immobility through "mythotherapy." This activity, known as "role-playing" to psychologists, is especially emphasized by J.L. Moreno, the forerunner of modern psychodrama. Through mythotherapeutic methods the doctor tries to make Jacob see that no one role is inferior to the others, or, as Ebezener says in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, "All roads are fine roads".

The dilemma Mr. Barth presents to the reader is the overwhelming question, "whether there is such a thing as self aside from those organized appearances made possible by rules and roles".<sup>3</sup> Since there are no arrows in life showing which way is the right way, how can man choose the "right role" for himself? Moreover, to choose means to define, and definition becomes restriction. But no choice brings forth no contour, and therefore, no identity.

The nightmare of non-identity, of no form, is a recurrent one. On the other hand, any one adopted armature which will contain and give shape and definition to the jelly or clay is at the same time felt to be an imprisoning deathly constriction.<sup>4</sup>

Such a dilemma brings to mind the words of a social critic who once compared America to "a rocking chair, always in motion but going nowhere".<sup>5</sup> The rocking chair image aptly illustrates the situation in which postmodernist man finds himself, and which both Shepard and Barth feel the necessity to deal with.

"Lost in the Funhouse" is as disturbing as Muriel Spark's psychological "thriller" *Not to Disturb*. "Funhouse" leaves the reader with the same sense of chaos as John Fowles' *The Magus*. However, since Barth creates possibilities for more than one ending to the story, he forces the reader to choose the ending which seems most likely to him, whereas, the end of *The Magus*, leaves the reader with no choices, and beyond that, it purifies the frightening credibility of the incredible.

In "Lost in the Funhouse", a fiction within fiction within fiction, the funhouse is life itself. It is guarded by Fat May, possibly one of the Fates, as is the mechanical fortune teller, and the ticket lady. May, also reminds one of Maya, the world of illusions, and Maya,

the mother of the god, Mercury. The hero is a thirteen-year-old boy, Ambrose: a boy in puberty. He is neither a man nor a child, obsessed with sexuality. The story is rife with sex symbols: matches and matchboxes, pennies and slot machines, cigars and cigar boxes, diving and sea, bananas, towers and Magda, German U-Boats, torpedoes and ships. Ambrose is the perfect embodiment of the impotent twentieth-century man obsessed with alternatives, and who only imagines doing things but never does them. At times he is like J. Alfred Prufrock (in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock") who cannot face the overwhelming questions of life. Unlike Nicholas, hero of *The Magus*, who is metaphorically "lost" in the "magician's" metatheatrical realities, Ambrose may not be lost in the funhouse; it is not clear. Is he really lost or is Mr. Barth writing various endings to the same story creating a literary funhouse of his own? It is ambiguous whether Ambrose himself is thinking what the possible endings would be if he were lost, or whether he is indeed lost and is trying to preserve his sanity through telling stories. Perhaps adult Ambrose is talking about an adolescent adventure, or maybe adolescent Ambrose is dreaming of such an adventure. Likewise, what happened in the toolshed with Magda is not clear. Perhaps, both old and young Ambrose and Barth are imagining how getting lost in a funhouse could be, and how the story could be written.

One possibility is that Ambrose dies telling stories lost in the dark funhouse. He cannot move because he does not know which way to go. The god Mercury is not there to lead him, not are there any "phosphorescent arrows or any other signs".<sup>6</sup> The countless passages baffle him. Too many possibilities cause his immobility or catatonia. Moreover, at one point, he is not even sure of himself whether he is making up this story or whether he is really lost. Besides, he is aware that any kind of choice will bring a new set of ambiguities.

Martin Esslin in "JEAN GENET: A hall of mirrors" says that the image that expresses the essence of Genet's theatre is:

The image of man caught in a maze of mirrors, trapped by his own distorted reflections... man caught in the hall of mirrors of the human condition, inexorably trapped by an endless progression of images that are merely his own distorted reflection-lies covering lies, fantasies battering upon fantasies, nightmares nourished by nightmares within nightmares.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the most important symbolism in "Funhouse" is created through mirrors. Ambrose sees the distorted images of himself in the mirrors, becomes confused and frightened. At the sight of these seemingly real unreal realities, he cannot decide whether he himself or the reflections are the real Ambrose. In a sense, the funhouse is also the self, or personality, and Ambrose is "lost" in his "unknowableness", in the labyrinth of his own "psyche".

"Lost in the Funhouse" is a story about story telling as well as a story within a story within a story like a "storied" house of mirrors. Mr. Barth seems to lecture on how a conventional story or novel should be written. However, this lecturing becomes an indispensable part of the story itself. He mocks conventional writing through a juxtaposition of his own or anti-conventional story-writing and the rules of traditional writing. He disregards the rules of chronology and exposition, introduction of the conflict, rising action, complication, or development of the conflict, climax, turn of the action, the denouement, or resolution of the conflict. While showing the relativity and polyphony of reality which Ambrose confronts in the funhouse, he also shows that there is no one way of writing a story. He protests against obeying the impositions of tradition. However, he seems to ignore the fact that he himself can be imprisoned in his own creation. Yet, Mr. Barth seems to be ready to confront the ambiguities and problems that will arise after his choice. He chooses to be the master, rather than the slave. Like the "magician" in *The Magus*, Mr. Barth makes his literary aim clear when one of his characters in *The Sot-Weed Factor* says,

If you'd live in the world, my friend, you must dance to some other fellow's tune or call your own and try to make the whole world step to't.<sup>8</sup>

Both John Barth and Sam Shepard portray modern man and the writer at various times as "jelly", other times as "frozen". Both Barth's and Shepard's characters experience the feeling of being controlled by a secret force. Ambrose decides to create and design his own funhouse while Willie in *The Unseen Hand* realizes that freedom is just a feeling, it is coming from inside. Cody in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* verbalizes what Shepard himself as an artist feels. As artists and modern men, Sam Shepard and Cody face the same dilemma of being controlled by cosmic powers or enslaved by other men. Sometimes Shepard's characters try to find their "identities" or "roles" th-

rough doubling or role-reversals as in *True West*, *The Tooth of Crime*, and *Curse of the Starving Class*. Compared to Barth's "jelly", "frozen", or "frozen jelly"-like characters, Shepard's characters act like wild cats "on a hot tin toof". They are violent like Jimmy Porter of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Yet, unlike most Barth characters, they do not need doctors to cure their paralysis, schizophrenic catatonia, despair, or anger. Most Shepard characters are aware that they should quit being "existences" and start being "beings". However, Shepard shares Barth's idea that identity is only provisional, which Strindberg asserts in *Queen Christina*. Queen Christina can become any one at any time she wishes. She has a wardrobe full of costumes and masks for innumerable roles. Tony Tanner, when he writes about *The Sot-Weed Factor*, expresses the opinion that there can be no one fixed identity for man.

The existentialist wardrobe is all before (man) to choose from, and the emphasis given to dressing up in various kinds of clothes in (life) is a way of underlining the idea that a man is only the robes he chooses, the mask he dons.<sup>9</sup>

In Sam Shepard's plays, the characters, in order to break the ice cubes in which they seem to be imprisoned, perform a series of rituals. These performance rituals are: role-playing (transformation), story-telling, music-making, eating, and projection-identification. Of these rituals there are three in *Cowboys 2*. The first one is the transformation ritual, in which Chet and Stu become Clem and Mel, two old desert-rats. Leaving the mythic and historical landscape behind, Chet and Stu try to find some kind of activity to perform in the middle of the violence acting upon and imprisoning them. They are striving to get out of their imprisoning shells. Chet and Stu fearing both mobility and immobility, pathetically go on performing their nonsensical rituals. They want to belong somewhere or to something, so when the rain comes, they see it as a chance to join nature in one of her rituals. They get over-excited, even hysterical, dancing in the rain and rolling in the mud. The last ritual can be described as story-telling, or a type of "stream of consciousness". It also reminds one of *Waiting for Godot* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Stu's free associations (beginning with nice air leading to people, peacocks, bird of paradise, turtles, ending in chickens) indicate decay, death, and corruption. Metaphorically, he is speaking of himself and Chet as the "clucking chickens", too weak and sick to move out of their own filth. Contrary

to this flow of disgusting images, Chet interrupts with visions of typically delicious American breakfasts. The play ends with Stu's death. Stu's fantasies become reality, and he gets entrapped in the pure artifice of their own creating as does Claire in Jean Genet's *The Maids*.

In some of Shepard's plays, the characters are too impotent or helpless to create their own roles. Such disastrous helplessness and the inability to perform are depicted in *Angel City*. At one point while Tympani conveys the complexity of man's creating a role for himself, the two movie makers show their difficulty in designing an image model for man to follow. Miss Scoons describes the fragmentation of identity when a spineless character cannot choose on a role for his own "movie" of life:

I look at the screen and I am the screen, I'm not me. I don't know who I am. I look at the movie and I am the movie. I am the star. I am the star in the movie. For days I am the star and I'm not me. I'm me being the star. I look a my life when I come down. I look and I hate my life, When I come down.<sup>10</sup>

The *Tooth of Crime* opens with the song "The Way Things Are" sung by Hoss, the aging rock-and-roll king. "Here's another fantasy/ About the ways things seem to be to me" are the last lines of this song. The hero is lamenting the sad "truth" that reality is relative. Hoss has created a vision of himself, which is now being shattered ("Now everything I do goes down in doubt"). However, there still is "a little light... that keeps (him) rockin".<sup>11</sup> Similarly, *Action* (or rather "In-action") opens with Jeep saying, "I'm looking forward to my life. I'm looking forward to uh-me. The way I picture me... I had a picture of me sitting on a jeep with a gun in one hand".<sup>12</sup> Contrary to this active image he has created for himself, he is caught in an imprisoning cell of inaction. And he is aware of this.

The two men of the quartet cannot adjust to the claustrophobia and agoraphobia they are experiencing, unlike the women (who are satisfied in domestic activity). In the violence of cabin fever they act like wild cats in a cage, and smash chairs. Since they cannot find the "fish" that would lead them to the right path, they go through three consequent performance rituals. As everything is limiting, binding, and imprisoning them (even their skin), they role-play, eat, and tell stories. In the role-playing sequence, Shooter and Jeep respectively act like trained bears.

Eating, which is another ritual, becomes more important than role-playing since it not only creates activity, but also gives a sense of community feeling long forgotten. Thus, Shooter regrets his decision not to move or eat with them after minutes of sitting in the chair. However, thinking that he should be faithful to his decision, he does not move. Thus, he faces the common predicament of becoming imprisoned in one's own choice. Tony Tanner laments this dilemma in his book *City of Words*,

That which defines you at the same time confines you. It is possible to become imprisoned in a system of your own choosing as well as in a system of another's imposing.<sup>13</sup>

While Shooter is trying to fight off this immobility, Jeep asks him to show him "some reason" to move. Jacob Horner in *End of the Road* asks the same question. In a world in which the "unseen hand" is always at work (p. 128), it seems impossible to create an identity. Lupe expresses this concern:

I mean while I was doing it-while I was in the middle of actually doing it- I didn't particularly feel like talking about it. I mean it made me feel funny. You know what I mean. It was like somebody was watching me. Judging me. Sort of making an evaluation. Chalking up points. I mean especially the references to all those stars. You know. I mean I know. I'm not as good as Judy Garland. But so what? I wasn't trying to be as good as Judy Garland. It started off like it was just for fun you know. And then it turned into murder. It was like being murdered (pp. 129-30).

Story-telling is the last resort for Lupe, Liza, Shooter and Jeep. The story, which they want to read but cannot remember where they left off, can be their own story taking place some time in the future, or in post-apocalyptic era. Like the Biblical Noah, are they lone survivors on a sea of isolation? On their return from their wrecked time-ship, they do not remember what happened in their past. Like J. Alfred Prufrock, Cody and Slim, they can relate "nothing to nothing". The play ends without their being able to find their place in the story. However, there are four stories that are narrated in the play: three by Shooter and one by Jeep. Shooter's first story (p. 133) is a reflection on their claustrophobic and agoraphobic experience. His third story (p. 140), about the moths and the flame, is a variation of the first one, yet with more insight. The proverbial moth-attracted-to-light story

conveys the Freudian death-wish (Thanatos) and sexual drive (Eros), and loneliness. As well, it seems to say that no matter what the end of one's choice may be, one has to take a "road". The insect image is not only avant-gardists' favourite metaphor for man, but it also reminds one of T.S. Eliot's lines, "sprawling on a pin... pinned and wriggling on the wall", in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."<sup>14</sup> Shooter's second story is about "a guy... who was about to take a bath" (p. 137). His fear of taking a bath supposedly arose from his terror of the disturbed appearance of his body under the water. Was it his body under the water he wondered, or was it really his body which was so distorted? This image of water as an image-distorting factor echoes the mirrors that are distorting Ambrose's images in the funhouse. The lens-mirror imagery in both Barth and Shepard is a source of horror because it not only implies that man's sight of reality is limited -his senses are fallible, especially sight, but also that there exists an unseen internal distortion, an unknown psychic depth.

This nightmarish play, reminiscent of Beckett's and Pinter's plays, does not end with hope, but with a pessimistic and climactic last story. Jeep objectifies his subjective "daydream", implying (like Hoss in his song in *The Tooth of Crime* that man is a sleep-walker. He is a prisoner of himself as well as of others. There is no escape from this situation because he perceives that the walls of the cell come "closer and closer". Moreover, it is not likely that Jeep, as modern man, will ever quit being a sleep-walker under the quilt of Maya. The Captain in August Strindberg's *The Father* expresses:

Yet you and I and all the other men and women in the world have gone on living, as innocently as children, living on fancies, ideals and illusions. And then we awoke. Yes, we awoke, but with out feet on the pillow, and he who awoke us was himself a sleepwalker<sup>15</sup>.

The performance rituals are eating, role-playing, music-making, and projection-identification (vicarious existence) in *Cowboy Mouth*. Cavale has kidnapped Slim to attain her identity through making him a rock-and-roll king and saviour. The doctor in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, the city rulers in *Angel City*, and Cavale in *Cowboy Mouth* have to find an "identity". They themselves do not have the potentials to create. Therefore, they must find a vicarious identity by controlling the artists: Cody, Tympani, Rabbit, Miss Scoons, and Slim. Cavale says people need "somebody to get off on when they can't get

off on themselves" (p. 207). While Shepard is making the artists victims, he is sharing Barth's anxiety that artists, like modern man, are prisoners. The Romantic poet John Keats on his "Ode to a Nightingale" called this projection-identification "inscape", a concept later shared by A.E. Houseman. Cavale, apart from Slim, identifies with a bird as did Keats and Houseman. While Houseman and Keats' birds are romantic, vital, and inspiring, Cavale's raven is black, sinister, and dead. Shepard, by choosing a dead raven and an impotent musician for Cavale, not only shows the sterility of the twentieth century, but also implies that there may not ever be any hope for man to find his identity. However, Cavale does not give up and continues to look for new heroes.

Eating, role-playing, music-making, and projection-identification rituals all save Shepard's characters from being stuck and rigidified in their ice cubes.

CAVALE goes through a million changes. Plays dead. Rebels. Puts on a bunch of feathers and shit to look alluring. Rebels. Motion like SHE's gonna bash the amps with a hammer. Hides in a corner. Then, shaping up, SHE grabs her. 45. (p. 206).

While Cavale is playing dead, the food comes. When Cavale and Slim do not like the season, they just change it by pretending that it is Fall. Cavale wants a new red pair of tapping shoes. Pretending that they are at the shoe store Slim "prefers" to break the window and steal them although they "have" money.

In *Cowboy Mouth* story-telling and music-making are the most important performance rituals. Cavale is the story-teller. Slim forces her to tell him stories, and through the stories they both take shelter under the shade of illusion. Story-telling is another "dream" they are "playing". They both admire Johnny Ace's courage in the first story Cavale tells. Similarly, they admire the new religion of Villon and Genet extolling anti-social behaviour and elevating criminals to saints. Genet in his life time asserted that there are no "good" or "bad" roles, but only roles (in J.P. Sartre's *Saint Genet*). However, Slim and Cavale in their final stories express their frustration and inability to perform their choice of roles (pp. 209-10).

Disillusioned, Cavale and Slim find the escape from harsh reality by playing the coyote and the crow. Likewise, Jimmy and Alison

in *Look Back in Anger* play the bear and the squirrel. Jimmy plays his jazz trumpet when he wishes to escape into illusion. Music-making, to Slim and Cavale is not only escape, a kind of sublimation, a creative way to identity. Cavale forces Slim to be a "rock-and-roll Jesus with a cowboy mouth" (p. 28) so that not only they themselves may begin to "live", but also that other wraith-like people will find a life and meaning in this new religion through vicarious enjoyment.

The song "Loose Ends" that Cavale sings communicates the essence of the play. Like Ambrose in "Lost in the Funhouse", Cavale is lost among many alternatives, she does not know what to do; where to turn; to whom to belong. However, she is aware that she has to have some kind of a "hero" to hold on to in order to bear this insufferable unreality when Slim proves to be a failure. Now, in Nerval's ghost she will try to make the Lobster Man a hero.

J.L. Moreno once said that "Roles do not emerge from the self but the self may emerge from roles".<sup>16</sup> In Moreno's psychodrama role-playing and story-telling are most important in creating an identity. Psychodrama, through these performance rituals, offers "an excellent vehicle for exploring one's self images."<sup>17</sup> According to Soren Kierkegaard, self-deception and despair form the basis for man's negative self-image, and he like Sartre, holds man responsible for lacking decision, will power, and identity. Despair is sin, he asserts; possibilities are the only saving remedies. Similarly, Moreno says that role-playing gives man the flexibility he needs to adjust to the many possibilities life presents. He and Freud share the view of man as a universe packed in one. Identity, freedom, and will power are important concepts to Freud as is the exploration of the inner landscape.

Both Shepard and Barth, in the plays and the story discussed, deal with what Freud calls Eros and Thanatos, images of creative and destructive energies. Their characters are powerless to either destroy or create (choice) and for their lack of decision are caught in frames. Their sublimation attempts or performance rituals lack the artist's total commitment to Eros (creative processes). As a result, their inability to choose inevitably leaves them frozen half-way between Eros and Thanatos, and they lead their lives as "non-people".

Adversely, the writers Barth (and Ambrose who is imagining the stories) and Shepard, in their literary and physical expressions

of psychic states and abstract qualities, are leading towards creation. Having committed themselves to Eros they, as modern men and artists, are creatively dealing with the unconscious in an effort to exercise decision. Yet, an artist such as Witkacy (S.I. Witkiewicz) is not as lucky as one such as Strindberg. Witkacy, after having tried every kind of "road", and having realized that sublimation is only a temporary escape from inertia, ended in complete destruction (suicide). Strindberg, on the other hand, continued to strive after experiencing endless disillusionments.

No matter how eclectic Shepard and Barth are, they share the fears and anxieties of previous centuries as well as their own time. Sometimes helplessly, other times with hope they call, upon modern man and the artist to risk failure by commitment to creation, and to exercise decisions.

### Notes

- 1 Martin Esslin, "Samuel Beckett: The search for the self" in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, 1961, p. 41.
  - 2 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
  - 3 Tony Tanner, "What is the Case?" in *City of Words*, New York, 1971, p. 238.
  - 4 Tony Tanner, "Introduction" to *City of Words*, pp. 9—19.
  - 5 Abraham J. Tannenbaum, "A Background and Forwards Glance at the Gifted" in *The National Elementary Principal*, New York, 1972, p. 1.
  - 6 John Barth, "Lost in the Funhouse" in *Lost in the Funhouse*, New York, 1973, p. 87.
  - 7 Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, pp. 282—3.
  - 8 Tony Tanner, "What is the Case?", *City of Words*, p. 243.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 244.
  - 10 Sam Shepard, *Angel City* in *Angel City, Curse of the Starving Class and Other Plays*, New York, 1981, p. 21.
  - 11 Sam Shepard, *The Tooth of Crime* in *Four Two-Act Plays*, New York, 1980, pp. 64—65.
  - 12 Sam Shepard, *Action* in *Angel City, Curse of the Starving Class and Other Plays*, New York, 1981, p. 126.
  - 13 Tony Tanner, Introduction to *City of Words*, p. 17.
  - 14 T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in *World Masterpieces*, ed. by Maynard Mach, New York, 1973, p. 1700.
  - 15 Michael Meyer (trans.), *The Father* in *The Plays of Strindberg Volume I*, New York, 1964, p. 69.
  - 16 Elle Mae Shearon, "Aspects of Persuasion in Psychodrama" in *Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama and Sociometry* Vol. XXXI, 1978, ed. by Zerka T. Moreno, p. 99.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- The self images according to Moreno are: 1. What I believe I am, 2. What I would like to be, 3. What I would like to appear to be, 4. What others project on me, 5. What others would like to be me, 6. What others produce or evoke in me, 7. What I can become -self- ideal.

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