

"A Face Like a Mask":  
Themes of Identity and Theatricality in Selected Works of Sam Shepard and Bob Dylan

by


Sandra Wynands


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to the required standard

  
Dr. Stephen A. C. Scobie, Supervisor (Department of English)

  
Dr. Sheila M. Rabillard, Departmental Member (Department of English)

  
Dr. Martin Collis, Outside Member (Department of Physical Education)

  
Dr. Lianne M. McLarty, External Examiner (Department of History in Art)

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University of Victoria

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Supervisor: Dr. Stephen Scobie


ABSTRACT


This study ("A Face Like a Mask': Themes of Identity and Theatricality in Selected Works of Sam Shepard and Bob Dylan") investigates the use of literal and figurative masks in selected works by Sam Shepard that are seen in relation to Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue tour. Of interest are collaborations and aesthetic intersections between the two artists. In a series of investigations identity is shown not to be based in a fixed origin but to be a performance of the self. The two authors' deliberate stagings of the self (both on the level of fictional character and biographical self) render the boundary between the private and the public, the true and the false, the face and the mask meaningless. Identity emerges as a fluid concept; the face and the mask become inseparable and interchangeable. Personal and national identity appear as interlaced concerns. This is reflected in the two writers' treatment of American national myths with their contribution to national identity formation. In the authors' re-written versions of American myths these myths appear as simultaneously deconstructed and empowered.

Examiners:

  
Dr. Stephen A. C. Scobie, Supervisor (Department of English)

  
Dr. Sheila M. Rabillard, Departmental Member (Department of English)

  
Dr. Martin Collis, Outside Member (Department of Physical Education)

  
Dr. Lianne M. McLarty, External Examiner (Department of History in Art)

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### List of Abbreviations

- TC Sam Shepard. 1974. *The Tooth of Crime* (201-51) in: *Seven Plays*. London: Faber (1985).
- BC Sam Shepard. 1979. *Buried Child* (61-107) in: *Seven Plays*. London: Faber (1985).
- C Sam Shepard. 1976. *The Curse of the Starving Class* (133-200) in: *Seven Plays*. London: Faber (1985).
- FL Sam Shepard. 1984. *Fool for Love*. London: Faber.
- L Bob Dylan. 1985. *Lyrics 1962-1985*. New York: Knopf.
- MC Sam Shepard. 1982. *Motel Chronicles*. San Francisco: City Lights.
- RTL Sam Shepard. 1978. *The Rolling Thunder Logbook*. London: Penguin.
- TD Sam Shepard. 1987. "True Dylan" (59-68) in: *Esquire* July 1987.
- TW Sam Shepard. 1981. *True West* (1-59) in: *Seven Plays*. London: Faber (1985).

Relentless driving. Driving until the body disappears, the legs fall off, the eyes bleed, the hands go numb, the mind shuts down, and then, suddenly, something new begins to appear.

SAM SHEPARD

We're going all the way, till the wheels fall off and burn.

BOB DYLAN

## 1. Introduction

Bob Dylan and Sam Shepard have both cultivated the instability of identity as part of their public personae. Shepard came to New York in 1963 after having toured America as an actor with a small repertory company, The Bishop's Players, for half a year. Acting provided no more than the ticket out of California: as soon as the troupe arrived in New York he jumped ship and became a bus-boy at a nightclub in the hope of eventually making a new (creative) life for himself in New York, as far away from his family in California as possible.

A conscious act of (re-) naming went with the new self-definition: to escape the burdensome impression of having no identity at all separate from what was determined by the origin, from what his family handed down to him, he changed his name from Samuel Shepard Rogers VII to Sam Shepard: "My name came down through seven generations of men with the same name, each naming the first son the same name as the father then the mothers nicknaming the sons so as not to confuse them with the fathers" (MC: 49) he writes in *Motel Chronicles*, itself a complex act of self-invention. However, as he was well aware, the new name did not identify him beyond doubt, either: he then shared it with the alleged murderer Dr. Sam Sheppard and it prompted further confusions with the astronaut Allan Shepard.<sup>1</sup>

He preferred a break with his past to being traceable to a fixed origin. The potential confusions created by the new name only helped in obscuring this origin which used to be held before him through the unbroken chain of ancestors with identical names. Thus, Sam Shepard was the name that appeared on the double bill of Shepard's first two plays (which followed fruitless attempts at writing poetry), *The Rock Garden* and *Cowboys*, produced by Theatre Genesis at St. Mark's In-the-Bowery.

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<sup>1</sup>cf. *Rolling Thunder Logbook*: "'Shepard? Shepard who? Are you the one who killed his wife?' 'No, I'm the astronaut'" (RTL 3). While it is irrelevant whether this is a verbatim transcription of an actual conversation it nonetheless shows that Shepard was well aware that the change of name did not result in a situation in which mistaken identity was no longer possible. Shepard maneuvered himself from one ambivalent situation into the next.

While in Shepard's case the changing of the name appears as a comparatively simple procedure, Dylan's arrival in New York ushers in a more complex and more radical break with his own history. Shepard brought about a break with his past in order to *assert* his identity as an autonomous entity: his new name betrays its predecessor: Sam Shepard is recognizably derivative of Samuel Shepard Rogers. Dylan, on the other hand, changed his name to *deny* his past, origin and identity. Before settling on "Bob Dylan" as a substitute for the bourgeois "Robert Zimmerman", he went through a series of pseudonyms, sometimes accompanied by fictional biographical anecdotes that seemed interesting enough to fit the image he wanted to project.

When Dylan started out in the Folk and Blues community of Greenwich Village, it seemed essential to appear steeped in tradition and wise beyond one's years. He therefore claimed to have spent time with Blues musicians of the South. Another of these autobiographical inventions involved time spent in a travelling carnival after having been orphaned at too early an age to remember his parents. Without exception, these stories mystified rather than clarified. After a while several fabricated stories were competing with one another in their claim to offer the one legitimate explanation. Some of these stories have made their way into canonicity: they have become part of Dylan-lore and tend to be presented as apocrypha, together with what seems to be the most probable version.

Both Shepard and Dylan, despite all differences, have in common the fact that both kept their given names and altered their last names, the name of the father. Their positions therefore imply not only a break with tradition and the origin, but also a subversion of the symbolic order. The source of absolute authority in the social system is questioned. On a textual level the apparent certainty of absolute signification beyond discourse is subverted: there is no pure signifier. In Dylan's and Shepard's works the reader enters into systems without certainty that are deliberately provocative and subversive of conventional structures.

With the artists' personal lives as a starting point, the concern with identity finds its way into the works. Identity emerges as a fluid concept rather than a fixed set of characteristics. Characters are fragmented and undergo sudden transformations. They draw their identities from a polarity based on a fragile and fluid concept of what the others are not. Eventually, the autobiographical flows into the fictional work, thus blurring the boundaries between "fact" and "fiction," revealing what is generally considered the truth behind the mask to be as much a construction as the overtly fictional. Yet interestingly, populist writing about Dylan and Shepard still turns towards the works as a key to the essence and innermost feelings of these two fiercely private men.

This concern with identity continues on a national level. Shepard and Dylan have investigated critically what "being American" implies and how Americans define their national identity on the basis of their (constructed and fictionalized) history. National myths<sup>2</sup> such as the Frontier and the West are important in terms of their identity-forming potential. Roland Barthes defines myth as "depoliticized speech" (1972: 142). This is where the argument returns to the traditional definition of myth: myth restores security to, in this case, the conception a nation has of itself by eliminating the aspect of fabrication from it. It gives it unquestionable justification in presenting it as fact.

Extrapolating from the level of personal identity, I will investigate how far the two artists still see these national myths as viable carriers of the nation's self-image and how far they treat them ironically. National identity-founding myths are re-written with both subversive and affirmative effects: like identity on a more general level they lose their

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<sup>2</sup>This paper will adopt a Barthesian approach to myth — a term so ubiquitous and yet so ill-defined in Shepard criticism. The traditional definition of the term "myth" is a narrative intended to make sense of a mysterious phenomenon, in order to re-establish the security of the world order. With this basic definition as a starting point, myth will be treated here as any cultural phenomenon to which significance beyond its immediate context is ascribed and which is utilized in a definition of what is thought to be American. Thus everything — even such mundane items as a "cowboy" hat, a pair of jeans, or a political and social phenomenon like the Vietnam war — can take on mythological characteristics in suddenly being laden with "social *usage* which is added to pure matter" (Barthes 1972: 109): "Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things" (ibid.).

absolute status by being revealed in their constructedness, yet they are not discarded. Inherent in their deconstruction is a new authority.

The first part of this study will be devoted to Shepard's plays. First of all, I will show the instability of identity in *Fool for Love*, conveyed very fundamentally in the instability of the linguistic sign. This instability is brought to a complete role reversal between the two characters in *True West*. The discussion of *The Tooth of Crime* shows the play to abandon every idea of identity as rooted in character (identity becomes a *bricolage*) and, with one eye on the upcoming discussion of Bob Dylan, it will also point towards the importance of music and rhythm in Shepard's work. Finally, "True Dylan" drives home the point the discussion has been leading up to: identity is performance.

Ushered in by "True Dylan" the second part of this work will be concerned largely with Bob Dylan. I will show the fragmentation of character and identity in some of Dylan's songs and then investigate the use of theatrical masks in this game of identity. *Renaldo & Clara* carries further the idea of the staging of the self: the face and the mask become inseparable and interchangeable. Finally this is tied in with questions of national identity formation, before being wrapped up in a short discussion of the two writers' last collaboration to date.

The selection and order of the discussed works is guided by the argument to be developed. The order is not chronological and this study does not attempt an overview of the two authors' major works. Many works that also lend themselves to the same investigation had to be left out due to limitations of space and time.

## 2. "I'll believe in the truth. It's less confusing." — Identity and the Instability of the Sign in *Fool for Love*

Of all Shepard's plays, *Fool for Love* is most obviously concerned with identity and the relativity that is the result of a fluid conception of identity. *Fool for Love* thematizes insecure and unstable identity to the point that even the linguistic sign's capacity to signify is seen as unreliable. Character traits and behavioural patterns travel back and forth between the two central characters, Eddie and May, making their roles to a degree interchangeable. Analogous to this, on the linguistic level phrases, syntactic and semantic patterns are repeated throughout the play, locating meaning always beyond the sign itself, in an unstable system of differences and deferences.

"*This play is to be performed relentlessly without a break*" the stage directions read (FL 13), and indeed the play is the closest Shepard gets to physically assaulting his audience (cf. Putzel 1987: 155). The sensation of being physically unsafe — (directly) by the noise on and off stage, and (indirectly) by the hostile world hovering outside the motel room door — is continued on the intellectual level. The audience attempt to make sense both of what is happening on stage in front of them, and of the characters' pasts (which could provide clues to how the confusing situation on stage was brought about). The spectator tries to reach safe ground by piecing together bits of information offered in the course of the play. This active construction of meaning is both encouraged and frustrated. An elaborate distribution of information makes any finite ascription of meaning impossible, while at the same time keeping the viewer from plunging into complete confusion and lethargy (which would run counter to the play's strategy: enough relevant information has to be volunteered to have the audience keep trying, futilely, relentlessly, as the above quoted stage directions insinuate).

It takes the reader 45 pages to figure out the basic relation(ship) between May and Eddie. By that time the play is near its end. More than 80% of the play has been devoted to clouding in mystery the past that May and Eddie share. In the first scenes the

impression of a long-term off-and-on relationship between a man and an extremely jealous, disappointed woman is evoked ("MAY: Your fingers smell. EDDIE: Horses. MAY: Pussy" [FL 18]; "I'm gonna' kill her...." [FL 20]), and the audience holds on to the idea until it becomes too obvious that there is more to their relationship: "We'll always be connected. That was decided a long time ago" (FL 34). After a row of hints suggesting an unusually long and deep connection ("You'll never replace me..." [FL 35]; "...the same crap you laid on me in High School" [FL 40]) a blood relation is suggested for the first time: "You can introduce me to him as your brother or something. Well — maybe not your brother. MAY: Maybe not" (FL 42). This clue (which the audience may or may not have picked up on) is confirmed by the Old Man just seven pages later: "I don't recognize myself in either one a' you" (FL 49); and finally, fourteen pages before the end of the play, Eddie confesses to Martin, "She's my sister" (FL 61).

Shepard is far from preparing for easy closure with this late turn. In fact, just as the audience see their constant groping for stability permanently rewarded, the play's mystery solved, he confronts them with more far-reaching uncertainties. Caught in a claustrophobic motel-room with Martin as a catalyst, Eddie and May start to systematically unravel the past — or so it seems. In story-telling duels reminiscent of Hoss's and Crow's verbal fights in *The Tooth of Crime* (or, for that matter, Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*), Eddie and May compete for the ultimate version of what happened in the past. Each version is embellished with detail. The stage directions require the lights in the theatre to be dimmed and it is easy for the audience to let a film version of the stories roll before their inner eye. The stories sound believable, as each character presents his or her own construction of the past. In each case the version is cut short by another character's objections to the content and status of the presented version. Each time the respective character then accuses the others of lying and announces the "true" version ("None of it's true, Martin. [...] I know it just exactly the way it happened", [FL67-70] ; "Boy, is she ever off the wall with this one. [...] Tell her the way it happened", [FL72-3]).

The film version of *Fool For Love* (1985) introduces yet another uncertainty: it uses the stories (which appear as voice-overs) for flashbacks that seem to visualize the content of the story being told<sup>1</sup>. But more often than not the narrative and the images on screen diverge slightly but noticeably. Long before viewers are able to place these divergences as consistent strategies (the second part of the film makes persistent use of them during the extensive monologues) the pattern is introduced during the Old Man's story about the late night encounter with the cows.

Wisely or not, the film introduces as a minor sub-plot the activities of an overly bourgeois family (that makes no appearance in the play) in the room adjacent to May's. The family is used primarily for ironic contrast.<sup>2</sup> The Old Man's story about the night

<sup>1</sup>Apparently Shepard himself has criticized Altman for his approach to the movie. From Steve Bottoms' comment in his book *The Theatre of Sam Shepard* (1998) it can be inferred that this criticism extended to his use of the flashbacks, which were Altman's artistic decision. Supposedly they were intended to adapt the play to the screen and to a film audience's viewing habits, which require more action than simply an extended closeup of a character's head while s/he delivers a monologue. Bottoms writes, "Shepard himself, who played Eddie, has bitterly criticized [Altman] for his off-hand approach, which is evident in the inadequate direction of the actors, and the way in which key moments of dialogue are lost underneath irrelevant visual business" (1998: 215). Even if Shepard had no influence on the use of the flashbacks, they nonetheless add an interesting extension to the investigation of the construction of history. For the play's integrity's sake, though, simple closeups would have been preferable: the flashbacks become tedious after the viewer has seen through their strategy.

<sup>2</sup>The film version, through added effects that the play cannot imitate, makes extensive use of an ironic perspective. It has often been criticized for opening up the setting of the play and thus sacrificing the claustrophobic intensity of the motel room (cf. Podol 1989: 156; Bottoms 1998: 215), achieved by the confined setting, the booming doors and the actors' slamming into walls, to an ineffectual running back and forth between May's room and Eddie's horse trailer. Yet the film version adds as well as takes away. Eddie's intense jealousy of Martin as an exact mirror image of May's is hardly amusing in a setting in which Eddie ropes the bedposts of the bed on which May is sitting with a lasso. In the movie-version on the other hand the suffocating claustrophobia is gone and Eddie ropes not the bedposts, but a juke-box that answers to each of his infallible hits with a fragment of turgid, sultry 1950's style Country and Western music. When he drags it across the room so that it leaves no way out for May but to end up trapped in his arms, her reaction to the oncoming jukebox is so much the cliched, helpless female that elements of slapstick are securely part of the scene. Shepard's acting style (as Eddie) is so self-conscious that it is difficult to take the threats emanating from his behaviour seriously.

Shepard is well-known for his extensive use of music on stage. *Fool for Love* as a play makes only peripheral use of music. In the film, though, it plays a crucial role: music is the prime means by which irony is created. Apart from various bits and pieces by other artists, the soundtrack was written and performed by Shepard's sister Sandy Rogers specifically for the film (1986). In isolation the songs are of minimal musical value, but in conjunction with the visual they are indispensable to the movie's extended periods without dialogue. An extremely stylized, ballet-like seduction scene early in the film, for instance, is funny only because the actors' sheepish style is complemented by the music.

Later, the Old Man, who has been shown all along to be keen on alcohol of all varieties, is shown stealing a bottle of beer from the ice-box to the up-beat sounds of "Rosa". This then blurs into a tango-style piece of Spanish music to the sound of which Eddie transforms the courtyard of the motel into a bullring and presents himself as the matador. Yet instead of throwing a rose to the lady he admires he proudly puts his Tequila bottle at her feet—a gesture which is being commented on ironically by a fanfare on the audio-track. The show he then puts on to win his lady's approval resembles a cowboy-act more than

drive with his own family (which results in the encounter with the cows) is prefaced by the neighbouring family's preparations for a late night drive. While the story is told, it is this particular family that is being shown, performing all the activities that are being mentioned, except for selective discrepancies: while the audio has the daughter asleep (FL 36), for instance, the visual shows her wide awake and in the back seat, rather than the front. The same goes for the mother, who has been talking and kissing her husband when suddenly the narrative mentions that she is being woken up by the daughter's crying (ibid.).

Later, Eddie talks about walking in the fields late at night with his father: "And I remember it was just plowed and our feet sank down in the powder and the dirt came up over the tops of my shoes..." (FL 65). Yet, while Eddie continues his story about pitch black darkness and owls swooping down, the young Eddie and his father are clearly shown walking down a well-lit city street.

Some of these divergences can be explained as being technically necessary in order to be able to still present the viewer with coherent pictures: the visual can cover just part of the story in detail while the narrative gives a summary of the events. Yet overlaps and divergences occur with systematic persistence even in places where they would not have been necessary. While the play has to restrict its multiperspectivity to the different versions told by different characters, thus cradling the audience in the safety of the universal validity of one version at least while it is still in the process of being related, the film version adds yet another perspective, which induces doubt of the story's validity at the very moment it is being told.

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a bullfight, but the lasso tricks are performed on a garbage can, which in the process distributes the relics of modern civilization evenly throughout the arena of Eddie's self-presentation. Apparently, the days of the True West of the real cowboys are dead — these days one has to make do with garbage cans rather than cows. Everything, including the mythic West, is merely a shadow of itself, a simulacrum; just as the Mayflower, the ultimate symbol of American freedom, on the hood of the Old Man's car is merely a plastic replica of the "real" Mayflower: "You remember that Plymouth? Had a white plastic hood ornament on it. Replica of the Mayflower I think it was. Some kinda' ship" (FL 36). Defining myths such as the Mayflower or the West lose their power as identity-forming and -preserving symbolic complexes — an idea that resurfaces extensively in the Rolling Thunder tour.

For a number of reasons it is important that the play is to be performed without a break. One of them is to make sure that the audience remembers previous scenes in detail; sometimes the exact wording of individual lines has to be remembered for the play to work its effect. Depending on the audience's level of previous exposure to Shepard's work (themes of incest are a recurring pattern), Eddie's remark about being introduced to Martin as May's brother (FL 42) acquires a funny meaning only in retrospect, when nineteen pages later the audience comes to the realization that Eddie is indeed May's brother. Since the reception process of a play is fundamentally different from that of a novel (the former to be experienced in a singular event, the latter to be reread) the two instances must not appear too far from each other on a temporal axis.

When the connection between the two is made, the latter statement undergoes a change in meaning. Its significance changes from a casual remark to a statement of much greater significance than originally ascribed to it. The audience is left with two interpretations of the same sentence. The unity of the meaning of the sign had been taken for granted and was disrupted.

A related pattern of deferred signification is developed through a network of identical or almost identical sentences and phrases that recur throughout the play, each time spoken by different characters in different contexts.<sup>3</sup> Again, the play has to move quickly in order to guarantee the audience's *déjà vu*. Repeated occurrences of the same phrase deprive the "original" occurrence of its absolute status. Instead, each occurrence evokes all previous ones. The meaning of the respective sentence is no longer brought

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<sup>3</sup>EDDIE: Have you balled him yet? (FL 40)

MAY: Have you balled her yet? (FL 47)

MAY: I know it just exactly the way it happened. (FL 70)

THE OLD MAN: [...] Tell her the way it happened. (FL 73)

EDDIE: We've got a pact. (FL 33)

THE OLD MAN: [...] We've got a pact. (FL 73)

MAY: [...] then you'll be gone. (FL 35)

EDDIE: I'll be gone. (FL 35)

EDDIE: You were gone. (FL 73, 74)

THE OLD MAN: [...] That's right, I was gone! (FL 74)

MAY: He's gone. (FL 77)

about by the unchanging unity of the sign, not by the sign's being one with itself: not by identity, but by difference.

But repetitions do not stop here. At times these parallel utterances occur in almost parallel, or at least very similar, situations with *reversed* constellations — the play's foremost source of humour. In the opening scene May is introduced as an overreacting woman whose fits of angry jealousy are counterbalanced by Eddie's detached, patronising attitude. The reason for May's jealousy is Eddie's (real or imagined) affair with the (real or imagined) Countess: "I'm gonna' kill her and then I'm gonna' kill you. Systematically." (FL 20) May says. When Eddie learns about Martin's existence as a potential rival, he adopts the same jealous behaviour with the same uncontrollable fits of (physically violent) rage and even echoes May's previous statement in content and syntax: "I'm gonna nail his ass to the floor. Directly" (FL 41). Eddie becomes the mirror image of May in earlier scenes, and an extremely funny one, as the audience contrast his present self with his previous one, which seemed to be so much in control — of May and of his own emotions.

In fact, then, May and Eddie toss back and forth not only isolated utterings ("Have you balled [her/him] yet?" [FL 20/41]), but complete patterns of behaviour, becoming mirror images of each other, thus depriving the other one of individuality and identity. It is impossible to ascribe consistent psychological motivations to any of the characters' actions, as the pattern may well be reversed in the next scene. May and Eddie seem to be determined by more or less arbitrary, diametrically opposed polarizations of behaviour: one adopts whatever strategy causes friction with the other. Like Lee and Austin in *True West*, May and Eddie, despite their differences, blur into one, become interchangeable by having inhabited either side of the binary constellation.

In *Fool for Love* hardly anything at all — including the "plot" itself — is singular. The play's action itself is repetitive or cyclical: at least five times in the first 15 pages (FL

18; 25; 26; 28; 29) of the play the conversation centres around leaving or staying.<sup>4</sup> Eddie's perpetual coming and going, intensified in the film version by the fuss involved in leading the horses on and off the truck, finds its counterpart in the play's overarching structure: Eddie re-appears out of nowhere in May's life (the film version shows his arrival and the commotion that even his imminent arrival causes in May's life) and then disappears after a while, leaving the motel wrecked and May's modest but dearly earned existence as a short-order cook in tatters. May anticipates this development, apparently on the basis of previous evidence: "It'll be the same thing over and over again. We'll be together for a little while and then you'll be gone" (FL 35). The same thing has happened many times in the past and another *Fool for Love* could, with slight variations, always happen again.

Everything recurs, reappears with slight alterations of context, nothing is original or unique. Truth, the ultimate transcendental signified, is dethroned: "It was supposed to have been true every time before. Every other time. Now it's true again" (FL 50) May says as Eddie professes to do anything for her. The distinctive last part of the play, formally set off from the rest by its long monologues, drives home the point the play has been investigating all along: the blurred dichotomy between reality and fantasy. Reality does not exist in any conventional sense of the word, as hard facts, things beyond individual interpretation. Instead, it exists in multiple forms, all of which are individuals' constructions. Therefore the characters can indeed be convinced that they are each one telling the truth, "just exactly the way it happened" (FL 70) — they are all telling their individual truths. The binary oppositions of reality and fantasy, objective and subjective, true and false dissolve. Eventually, there is no such thing as the Truth anymore, even though the play constantly invokes its authority.<sup>5</sup> The scene in which the Old Man shows Eddie his "picture" of Barbara Mandrell sets the theme:

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<sup>4</sup>The characters change their minds quickly; they seem not to know what they want: "MAY: I don't need you! [...] Don't go!" (FL 18). Again, this must be interpreted as unstable or split identities.

<sup>5</sup>"You go from true to false like that, in a second?" (FL 68)

"I know it just exactly the way it happened." (FL 70)

THE OLD MAN: Take a look at the picture on the wall over there. (*He points at wall stage right. There is no picture, but EDDIE stares at the wall.*) Ya' see that? Take a good look at that. Ya' see it?

EDDIE: (*staring at wall*) Yeah.

THE OLD MAN: Ya' know who that is?

EDDIE: I'm not sure.

THE OLD MAN: Barbara Mandrell. That's who that is. Barbara Mandrell. You heard a' her?

EDDIE: Sure.

THE OLD MAN: Would you believe me if I told ya' I was married to her?

EDDIE: (*pause*) No.

THE OLD MAN: Well, see, that's the difference right there. That's realism. I am actually married to Barbara Mandrell in my mind. Can you understand that?

EDDIE: Sure.

THE OLD MAN: Good. I'm glad we have an understanding. (FL 27)

The viewer is left to wonder how far-reaching this understanding is. Did Eddie just agree with the general premises the Old Man was postulating, namely that imagined events are real insofar as they are real in their consequences and should therefore be treated as factual events, or did he indeed see the picture, maybe because the Old Man's view-point imposed its own reality on him in an act of god-like omnipotence which might suggest that the Old Man is in fact imagining the action on stage? The stage directions declare the Old Man to be existent "*only in the minds of MAY and EDDIE*" (FL 15). This different level of existence for the Old Man is visualized by way of a separate platform in front of the proscenium stage, from which he observes the action (cf. FL 14), and by way of light changes whenever the Old Man makes an appearance. Yet an audience in the theatre will

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"Tell her the way it happened." (FL 73)

not be familiar with the stage direction confining the Old Man to the imaginations of the two central characters. To them it might seem as if it is in fact he who is imagining the entire action of the play from the comfort of his arm-chair. As Steve Bottoms observes, such an interpretation is suggested particularly in the closing passages of the play, when the Old Man

moves onto the main part of the stage and begins interacting with the lovers as an autonomous entity: [...] Moreover, while he is still not an actual character in the "realistic" frame of the play (Martin remains completely oblivious him [sic]), he remains onstage even after May and Eddie exit (rather than disappearing in a puff of memory).... (Bottoms 1998: 210)

The audience is made aware of the fact that the play breaks with conventional concepts of reality and realism and their distinctiveness from fantasy: the world on stage functions according to principles the audience cannot be part of: shortly before the Barbara Mandrell scene quoted above, the Old Man, himself possibly a figment of Eddie's imagination, first criticizes Eddie for being a fantasist ("I thought you were supposed to be a fantasist, right? [...] You dream things up. Isn't that true?" [FL 26]), then proposes to show him something real ("I wanna 'show you somethin'. Somethin' real, okay? Somethin' actual" [FL 26-7]), which in fact turns out to be the (from the audience's perspective) non-existent picture of Barbara Mandrell, and then elaborates on an imagined marriage with her. Such a line of argument follows no discernable logic and the audience plunges further into the confusion of the "real" and the "imagined". What is imagined is declared to be real and what is "real" the audience is no longer sure.

In the characters' discursive realm individual history, and thereby individual identity, dissolves in the general muddle of fact and fiction and the interpretive embellishment of fact. Barbara Mandrell serves as a perfect example: as a public persona she has no ascertainable identity other than the publicly constructed one. Her identity as a person is irrelevant (and unknown) behind the screen of the artificially constructed and

media-maintained mask of public imagination. Public figures become mirrors of the self and foils for projection (or they take part in the construction, as Shepard himself does to great effect). The film version of the play puts an empty frame in the place of mere "space" (FL 77) to indicate the location of the picture of Barbara Mandrell — an arrangement that emphasizes the room to be filled by the viewer's own dreams — unlimited in possibilities but unreciprocated, too: "That's the woman of my dreams. That's who that is. And she's mine. She's all mine. Forever" (ibid.).

The public takes possession of its heroes: in a voyeuristic fashion it claims, for example, the site of James Dean's tragic death as the birthplace for its nascent mythologies. By way of well-publicized photographs in newspapers and magazines the spot has become instantly identifiable to almost an entire generation of the culturally aware public in the Western world. The pictures as such have become icons of James Dean lore as a whole. An early, tragic death makes the motif of the questing hero in this contemporary fairytale complete: "It's like that place made James Dean who he is" (TD 60), Bob poses, as if as a working hypothesis, at the beginning of a one-act play entitled "True Dylan" (1987), which, amongst other things, investigates this very question: by what processes are the masks created that are assumed to constitute the celebrity's "identity" in the public's eyes? Shepard has returned to these questions repeatedly, not only in "True Dylan," but also in *True West* and *The Tooth of Crime*.

### 3. *True West* — Identity goes National

*True West* offers a multilayered treatment of notions of identity, both personal and national, as well as originality and genius. In a straight role-switch between the two central characters, rather than the perpetual transformations May and Eddie go through, Shepard once again illustrates a fluid notion of identity. In order to question ideas of identity as to what is authentic and originary, he weaves into this investigation a self-referential commentary on the Western notion of the author or playwright as the origin of the work of art. Via this detour the play then circles back to themes of identity, but this time on a national level: using the example of the mythical West, patterns of national identity formation are investigated.

*True West* is the third in a row of quasi-realistic plays (following *The Curse of the Starving Class* [1976] and *Buried Child* [1979]) that were henceforth to be labelled Shepard's family trilogy. Shepard was welcomed enthusiastically into the tradition of American family plays by the critical community and heralded as the legitimate successor to Eugene O'Neill's throne as king of 20th century drama. This ready comparison may have been because Shepard is "among the most subtle and sympathetic chroniclers of characters' emotional states since O'Neill" (Rosen 1993: 1), but it also indicates the amount of relief with which it was acknowledged that Shepard had, seemingly, finally moved away from avant-garde experimentalism and embraced the naturalist tradition of "serious" drama: Shepard himself has remarked with a fair amount of irony that *Buried Child* strikes him as the typical Pulitzer Prize winning play. It was the first of Shepard's plays to run on Broadway.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite the apparent naturalism of the family plays, fundamental paradigms of the naturalist tradition — a coherent, believable plot-line, psychologically motivated and consistent characters and finally an internally convincing,

<sup>1</sup>Yet, it, too, was premiered at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco — as far away from Broadway and New York City as was possible without leaving the mainland U.S.. After Shepard's three-year, rather unfocused interlude in London, the collaboration with the Magic Theatre, which also put on *True West* under Robert Woodruff's direction, proved extremely fruitful (and, as it turned out, longlasting) and provided yet another reason for leaving New York City behind, which for Shepard had begun to epitomize what he perceived as post-1960's cultural decline.

mimetic illusion on stage — are being broken with: Shepard did not embrace tradition quite as wholeheartedly as it seemed.

The set for *True West* (1981) is a proto-type instance of kitchen sink drama realism: Shepard includes an unusual amount of what could be perceived as pedantic detail and a separate note warning directors not to fiddle with the set: it "*should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions , shapes, objects or colors*" (TW 3). Partially the realistic tenor makes the play's story-line and its fundamental outline reminiscent of Bernard Malamud's *The Tenants* (1971). Like *The Tenants* the play chronicles a potentially fruitful collaboration being frustrated, but it is to be doubted that this echo is a conscious one on Shepard's part. A story about two diametrically opposed yet complementary characters had weighed on Shepard's mind for a long time. The names of Lee and Austin and some others appear "in a seemingly endless series of permutations in unfinished 'two guys' manuscripts dating throughout the 1970s" (Bottoms 1998: 193). According to Shepard himself the aim was to "write a play about double nature. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided" (Coe 1980: 122).

Shepard seems uncharacteristically straightforward about his intentions: in scene seven, right after the role-swap has been completed, Austin in his drunken stupor says to his brother: "Here's a thought. Saul Kimmer— [...] He thinks we're the same person" (TW 36-7). Indeed, in a number of psychoanalytic readings Austin and Lee have been perceived as a split character. In these readings Lee is understood as the repressed part of Austin's psyche trying to gain access to his conscious mind (Orbison 1984: 515). The motif is well established in the arts and in literature, the most explicit example being Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but the same pattern reappears in Laurel and Hardy or Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon. All function according to the same pattern summarized by the angel in "The War in Heaven": "I have a partner / the partner /is me / the partner / has a partner / in me" (1984a: 171).

A purely psychoanalytic reading nonetheless seems excessively one-sided and reductive in the face of the play's complexities that go far beyond the relationship between the two brothers. These can only be integrated into such a reading by grouping various argumentative strands under the umbrella-term of myth-hunting. It may be a more integrative approach to take the brothers as symptomatic of various kinds of stability that are undermined in the play.

*True West*'s central plot idea is the role swapping between the two brothers that is neatly prepared for and finally completed in scene seven — in fact the role-reversal is so neatly prepared for and executed that the audience may feel cheated for having been tricked into going along with the play's mechanisms: the beginning of scene seven is an exact mirror image of scene one, including the lighting (the stage is lit by candlelight in both cases) and stage props, notably the typewriter and bottles of alcohol. The contrast is so stark that scene seven in its perversion strikes the viewer as a straightforward parody of the orderly, naturalist first. In comparison with the real world, the inversion seems contrived; on the other hand the play has been following such a logical progression and the audience has had so much fun with the characters that it is accepted as an inevitable development. A closer look at the play's humour can be argued to reveal accusations of contrivance to be beside the point:

On the other hand, *True West* is extremely funny. Its improbabilities, its characters and its humour owe something to vaudeville and situation comedy, while the mayhem which develops, as one brother savages a type-writer with a golf club and the other lines up a score of stolen toasters and feeds them with sliced bread, is an ironic rendering of the chaos which threatens throughout his work, transposed, now, into the style of a silent comedy. (Biggsby 1985: 246)

Vaudeville, as a genre designed to produce scenic effect rather than problematize and discuss, is by definition contrived: proceedings on stage have to move smoothly but

steadily at a quick pace and highlights must not be too loosely interspersed in the framing action. In *True West* this is reflected in the basic logic of the development: although no link in the chain is missing, individual steps seem improbable — which, in turn, puts the play's naturalism under substantial pressure: why was Saul "amazed" by Lee's story (TW 32)? Has he been claimed by Hollywood's hype to such a large extent that he has begun to believe it? Why has he given Lee the golf clubs, his personal property, as a sign of his commitment? Based on previous experience with Lee, the audience is inclined to go along with Austin's scepticism ("You must've done something. Threatened him or something." [TW 31]), yet in the following scene Saul confirms Lee's version of events.

These incongruities violate the audience's trust in their understanding of the world on stage. Slowly the audience comes to the realization that there are differences between the world as they experience it and the world they are exposed to on stage. This waning confidence is accompanied by a growing destruction of the stage space. By the time the audience is faced with the familiar sight of Austin at the table writing for the second time, the stage has been transformed from a petty.bourgeois middle-class kitchen into a complete wasteland. The cozy candlelight that dominated the first scene is replaced by glaring yellow light, and Austin's impeccable cardigan outfit has disintegrated: "*...the stage is ravaged; bottles, toasters, smashed typewriter, ripped out telephone, etc. All the debris from previous scene is now starkly visible in intense yellow light...*" (TW 50). Hit by the yellow light the audience is made starkly aware of the enormity of the transformation that has happened in such small steps as to render the change almost unnoticeable in its fluidity.

The growing chaos on stage and the concomitant movement away from dramatic realism is no end in itself. The ravaged stage (just like the destruction at the end of *Fool for Love*) must be understood as an externalization of the characters' inner worlds. At the outset of the play Lee and Austin are almost stereotypical diametrical opposites, coming

from entirely different perspectives on the world around them<sup>2</sup> and each one denying aspects of the other in himself. Austin values a conservative, cultured appearance, lives in the city and makes money by the workings of his brain; Lee wears a torn t-shirt and is just returning from a life on the desert, where he leads an existence as a small-time thief on the fringe of civilization. Austin feels threatened by Lee's presence and wants to ban him from his life just as much as Lee sees Austin as alien to his own existence. In the further course of the action the two characters then become increasingly tolerant of each other and admit dominant characteristics of the other to be latently present in themselves.<sup>3</sup> After their role reversal is completed, they are downright proud of having temporarily adopted the other one's existence: "I'm a screenwriter now! I'm legitimate" (TW 37) Lee says, and Austin remarks: "Now I'm the intruder! Now I'm the one who's invading your precious privacy" (TW 38).

But the growing tolerance also brings with it greater instability: for Lee and Austin giving way to otherwise repressed characteristics does not lead to a less neurotic existence, as classic psychoanalysis would have it — quite the contrary: their formerly stable identities begin to dissolve in the other one's presence. In both *True West* and *Fool for Love* the dissolution of stable identity is mirrored directly by the disappearance of order on stage.

In *Fool for Love* the final destruction takes place offstage, which adds an ironic note to a play that is about mere simulacra of presence: the tension-resolving moment, the catastrophe, is banned to an offstage area where, even then, the effects do not actually take place but are simulated by way of sound effects produced by the nightly replay of a tape.

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<sup>2</sup>While Austin with his cultured life-style and his Ivy League diploma perceives the LA suburb in which his mother's house is located as "built up" (TW 11), in other words as an improvement on the natural state, Lee sees it as a perversion: "Wiped out is more like it" (ibid.).

<sup>3</sup>LEE: [...] I always wondered what'd be like to be you.

[...]

AUSTIN: ... I always used to picture you somewhere. [...] And I used to say to myself, "Lee's got the right idea [...]" (TW 26)

In *True West* the "cathartic" moments are very much on stage. If John Malkovich's intense physical involvement in his part as Lee in the Steppenwolf production of *True West* is anything to go by, it can be assumed that the play can even have a very literal purifying effect on actors and audience. In the "*intense yellow light [...] the coolness of the preceding scenes is totally obliterated*" (TW 50). In the meantime the audience have witnessed the destruction of a typewriter with a golf-club, the ripping-out of the wall-telephone, the emptying of drawers onto the floor. Both Lee and Austin are completely drunk and pouring with sweat. The rigid, orderly framework of the binary opposites Lee and Austin represent has disintegrated.<sup>4</sup>

The starkest mechanism illustrating the substantial move away from conventional realism is Mom's reappearance in the final moments of the play. She returns early from her holiday in Alaska (the last Frontier) because she started to miss her plants, whose death nonetheless produces nothing more than a laconic "Oh well, one less thing to take care of I guess" (TW 54). She acknowledges the destruction of her home with dismay ("Well it's one hell of a mess in here isn't it?" [ibid.]) but not with the shock and outrage that would have been appropriate to the enormity of the chaos. Even the potentially imminent death of her own son produces nothing more passionate than a "calm" "[y]ou're not killing him are you?" (TW 57). The utterly middle-class mother with her matching clothes and luggage comes back to the middle-class home in LA suburbia that used to be an extension of herself only to find it "worse than being homeless" (TW 58). While her appearance would have been taken for granted at the beginning of the play, suddenly, in the wasteland the brothers have created indoors, the normal and bourgeois becomes shockingly surreal — even more so because of the inappropriateness of Mom's reactions — by means of "the traumatic experience of one plane of reality suddenly juxtaposed to

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<sup>4</sup>The play works with a whole catalogue of other binary oppositions that hinge on Austin and Lee and which, are also implicitly commented on through the progressive dismantling of the fixity of their positions: culture / nature (through the central characters' respective homes), male / female (through their stereotypical division of labour), civilization / wilderness, city / desert, reality / fiction, old west / contemporary west.

another" (DeRose 1993: 139). In the light of day, facilitated by Mom's appearance, the audience is made acutely aware of the fact that they have inadvertently allowed Shepard to lure them into his world — in the same way the pets are lured away from their homes by cunning coyotes.

Gradually, what seemed certain has been turned around: at the end of the play the desert ("*blazing heat*"; "*intense yellow light*" [TW 50]) is inside the kitchen, and civilization, in the form of Mom, comes in from outside. The importance of the desert / city dichotomy is reflected in the play's title. The desert is the site of the real and the imaginary West. Thus the question of whether one defines oneself (and by extension the entire nation) as urban or rural in the context of the play bears implications for the American self-image. By way of the screenplay for a Western that is to be written and the discussions of what is real and what is not, the play turns into a statement on the construction of American myths that determine the nation's construction of national identity.

For Austin the question whether to live in a suburb of Los Angeles or in the Mojave desert represents the decision of whether one defines oneself as a conscientious part of society or not. Living in suburbia with all its conveniences and disadvantages equals being in touch with the world's harsh realities, whereas life in the desert represents flight into cloud-cuckoo-land<sup>5</sup>: "I drive on the freeway every day. I swallow the smog. I watch the news in color. I shop in the Safeway. I'm the one who's in touch! Not him!" (TW 35). Notably, it is not major achievements but the little hassles of everyday life anybody would rather live without, such as traffic congestion, air pollution and crowded supermarkets, that deserve a mention in Austin's list of civilization's defining characteristics. Tellingly then, the play is not set in Wyoming or Arizona — places that would be closer to the stereotypical image of the West — but in southern California.

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<sup>5</sup>Note again the blurring dichotomy between reality and fantasy.

California is not only home to Silicon Valley and the megacity Los Angeles, both of which are figureheads of the most progressive, future-oriented and therefore (in the terms of the progressivism Austin invokes) advanced civilization in all of North America; it is also home to the Hollywood dream machine, which by definition upsets Austin's clear-cut distinction between reality and fantasy. The brothers themselves are writing for Hollywood because this is where money is to be made, while at the same time to a certain extent enacting the script as they go along. Lee's summary of his two protagonists' predicament at the end of Act one bears striking parallels to the two brothers' relationship to each other: "Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going" (TW 27). By the end of the play it seems as if the very script they were writing has turned into reality.

Hollywood with its hype and perversions, and its deliberate blurring of reality and fantasy, brings to the fore the obsessive qualities of southern Californian civilization and points out that there is no reason to go along with Austin's postulation of Los Angeles as "the real thing." Finally, Austin himself realizes that he was tricked into believing himself to be an enlightened human being just because he can cope with the little intricacies of contemporary urban life: "There's nothing real down here, Lee! Least of all me!" (TW 49). Suddenly the desert, the West, is hailed as authentic and the road to the discovery of the authentic self.<sup>6</sup> Still, it appears mostly as snippets from Westerns — hardly authentic, objective assessments of the life in the West. It is hardly a coincidence that even the stage directions for the final scene stress the resemblance of the stage to a "*desert junkyard at*

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<sup>6</sup>The Beat poets' idealization of the land, the West as the gateway to self-fulfillment and individual freedom (cf. Kerouac's *On the Road*) is echoed in Austin's desire for an "authentic" life on the desert. They in turn draw their inspirations from the American self-perception as a fundamentally agricultural rather than urban nation (cf. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, an intensely identity-forming text in American history). Shepard utilizes both aspects of American self-definition here.

*high noon*" (TW 50). The only semblance of the West the brothers can muster evokes the title of a Western film of cult status.

In a chapter on Los Angeles, Jean Baudrillard calls the US "utopia achieved" (1989: 77) — a society that takes its simulations at face value and passes them off as unshakable reality. The city is contrasted with the land ("This is the last time I try to live with people, boy!" [TW 46]) that remains unchanged. Particularly Austin, with his intellectual aspirations of finding his true self by living in symbiosis with the land, thinks he can separate it from whatever ideological phantasmata are imposed on it. Juxtaposed with the "true west" (if there is one) as understood by Lee with his warped but firm sense of value, the city, and particularly Hollywood, represents a loss of values. Even the coyotes are bastardized, inauthentic kinds that are adapted to the city and corrupted by it: "They don't yap like that on the desert. They howl. These are city coyotes here" (TW 10).<sup>7</sup> In a way Lee, who out of naive, unreflective gut feeling falls victim to Hollywood's constructions of the West, is more acutely aware of the fact that there is no such thing as the West that promises freedom and self-fulfillment than Austin, whose intellectual idealism makes him want to believe in such sanctuaries away from societal superficialities: "Hey, do you think I chose to live out there in the middle a' nowhere?" Lee asks when his brother pressures him about allowing him to accompany him to the desert. "Ya' think it's some kinda' philosophical decision I took or somethin'? I'm livin' out there 'cause I can't make it here!" (TW 49).<sup>8</sup>

Saul Kimmer stereotypically epitomizes the decadence and hollowness of this environment that caters to fads. Saul's reaction to learning of Lee's life on the desert summarizes this perversion: for him, as for millions of other Americans, the desert has

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<sup>7</sup>Yet, as if to make the reader aware that any view of the West is also a construction rather than a reflection of an unchanging status quo, Shepard adds to the preliminaries the note: "*In any case, these Coyotes never make the long, mournful, solitary howl of the Hollywood stereotype*" (TW 4). Note that the play ends with just this long, mournful, stereotypical Hollywood howl. The distinction between stereotype and reality has been blurred beyond recognition.

<sup>8</sup>The play draws part of its tension from the possibility of Lee's violence accumulating to overload. The desert, the Frontier, provides this Turnerian safety valve for minimizing aggression that the rigid norms of society ("Kinda' place that sorta kills ya inside" [TW 12]) denies.

become synonymous with Palm Springs — that artificial, continually resuscitated civilizational cell in the middle of what is perceived as a void, which aims to eradicate all "negativity" ranging from mere rain through poverty to death itself in order to live in perpetual happiness. If, for inexplicable reasons, one wants to live in the desert (Saul finds nothing to say about it except a commonplace: "The air is wonderful." [TW 16]), it would have to be what seems to be Hollywood's prototypical village.

Yet Saul in all his stereotypy is not a caricature. He is instantly recognizable to anyone who has sat in a business meeting designed to come up with sales strategies or listened to media spokespersons' justifications for why it was necessary to terminate an (almost inevitably commercially disastrous) programme of cultural merit. Saul embodies the winning streak of the lowest common denominator against minority interests: art is plotted against commercial objectives.

Austin and Lee's endeavors to write their respective screenplays are determined by what can be sold. If Austin wants to earn his living by writing for the movie industry he has to cater to majority tastes and forget his own aspirations. *True West* was written around the same time Shepard's own exposure to and involvement in the movie industry began. In 1978 he made his movie acting debut in Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven*, which was followed almost consistently by a further movie appearance yearly, culminating in Shepard's widely publicized role of the test pilot Chuck Yaeger in *The Right Stuff* (1983).

It is likely that the inspiration for *True West* came partly from its author's firsthand experiences with the mechanisms of Hollywood movie production. It can be read as Shepard's coming to terms with his own role as a serious author and part of the Hollywood machinery — two easily conflicting occupations. Despite his frequently ironic criticisms of the business, none of his observations has stopped him from working in it. At the same time, though, he has never volunteered any of his own work as a writer for

Hollywood productions. Shepard has significantly widened his spectrum as a writer by working in film — far away from Hollywood.<sup>9</sup>

The audience spend a considerable amount of time watching Lee and Austin write a screenplay: *True West* makes the writing process one of its themes. It therefore exhibits the same basic self-referential structure as "True Dylan", if not in an equally pronounced fashion.<sup>10</sup> Since the screenplay that is to be written is a Western (a fact that directly pertains to the play's title), themes of writing and of American mythology are tangled.

The Enlightenment with its emphasis on human reason put the potential of the human mind at the centre of its universe. The inspired author, as the peak of self-propelled human creativity, was assigned outstanding importance. Ideally, the reader should be unwittingly abducted into the world of the author's creation without his or her explicit presence making itself felt. The author's genius should in other words be in the work, oozing from its every pore, as it were, yet without a deliberate influence, didactic or otherwise, making itself felt. This is particularly true of the author of dramatic works, who in the Western mimetic tradition is meant to recede into the background behind the presence of his characters whom s/he brings to life. The artistic creations are supposed to take on lives of their own and exist as autonomous beings that are recognizable to spectators as believable personalities from the world around them.

Yet, the mimetic tradition of Western naturalist drama is also dominated by the author, who produces the script to be reproduced — re-presented — literatim by the actors on stage. While on the one hand, then, the author dominated the stage in a godlike fashion as creator of his own universe (an idea taken up ironically by Shepard in the coyotes-analogy), s/he is on the other hand invisible in having created a realistic world in which s/he dissolves in the characters: the impression is to be evoked that the world is presented

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. *Paris, Texas*, for which he wrote the screenplay, as well as *Silent Tongue* and *Far North*, which are entirely his own works: he wrote and directed both.

<sup>10</sup>"True Dylan" makes its own constructedness its only focus, whereas *True West*, not least due to differences in length, is much more complex and has a broader objective.

exactly the way it is — a feat that should not involve particular artifice. Thus the author is at the same time omnipotent and subservient to mimetic representation.

Although at the outset of the play Shepard appears to be working within the naturalist tradition, he breaks with the authorial invisibility conventions of naturalist drama in a metadiscursive way by constantly reminding the audience of the author's plight and presence. Austin is a professional writer who in the course of the play is trying to write a screenplay; first his own and then his brother's. As in "True Dylan," authenticity is at the centre of their pursuits. Their product should have "the ring of truth" (TW 35) about it. Saul wants "[s]omething about the real West" (ibid.), a "true-to-life Western" (TW 19). Such statements imply that there is such a thing as the real West. The existence of such a concept is exactly what the play thematizes.

Ironically (since he deals in stereotypes and clichés), Lee's image of himself is precisely the traditional picture of the inspired artist. He sees himself as the source of the story. Austin functions merely as a medium that transmits the meaning from Lee's mind into the world:

LEE: I never said that! And even if I did, that's where yer supposed to come in. That's where yer supposed to change it to somethin' better.

AUSTIN: Well how am I supposed to do that and write down what you say at the same time?

LEE: Ya' just do, that's all! You hear a stupid line you change it. That's yer job. (TW 51)

Austin's skepticism seems quite justified, and it is, after all, he whose confidence in language's capacity to signify unambiguously wanes in the course of the play: not even the Greeks believed in the same amount of transparency as Lee. Speech was rated higher than writing in classical Greek philosophy because it was believed to reflect thought in its formation. It was believed to be an exact mirror of the mind, whereas writing was merely

a mediated version thereof. In writing the authenticity of the thought itself was already lost.

Lee shares with the Greeks the belief of being able to reduce thought to an origin, to a fixed point of presence within his head. In one of his few essays, entitled "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library," Shepard has expressed similar sentiments in describing the mechanisms at work in the process of writing as he experiences it: Shepard feels as if his conscious mind is merely "taking notes in as much detail as possible on an event that's happening somewhere inside me. The extent to which I can actually follow the picture and not intervene with my own two-cents worth is where inspiration and craftsmanship hold their real meaning" (1981a: 215). Later in the same essay he rephrases the same sentiment:<sup>11</sup>

From time to time I've practiced Jack Kerouac's discovery of jazz-sketching with words. Following the exact same principles as a musician does when he's jamming. After periods of this kind of practice, I begin to get the haunting sense that something in me writes but it's not necessarily me. (Shepard 1981a: 217)

This kind of automatic writing is designed to put the writer in touch with the authenticity of the thought itself without interference from the conscious mind. But while such techniques are meant to ensure immediacy and presence, there is also quite often a definite sense of slippage and frustration, as is reflected in unfinished drafts held in the Boston University Mugar Memorial Library's Shepard archive.

Take, for example, the self-recriminations which end many of the numerous unfinished (often barely begun) typescripts dating from the mid- to late 1970s. One such, titled "White Slavery," ends after just one page and one line of typed dialogue, beneath which, in handwriting that gets steadily more rapid

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<sup>11</sup>The jazz analogy will be of interest in a separate section on Shepard and music.

and illegible, are five repetitions of the same frustrated phrase: "writing's not fast enough." (Bottoms 1998: 7)

The writer hopes to tap into a universal subconscious language, something resembling a system of Jungian archetypes, that through the immediacy of the work will be understood by the reader with the same intensity and immediacy with which it hit the writer's mind. The dramatic creation will no longer re(-)present something outside itself, but will become pure presentation — it will, as Shepard puts it, "become its own animal" (Rosen 1993: 3). As the passage quoted above illustrates, such a moment is not always achieved, though: instead of absolute presence the writer finds himself chasing after an inkling of such presence that keeps receding in front of him and is never really present in the way it was hoped to be.

While this attempted immediacy can be understood, particularly because of the theological overtones of the concept of having something else write inside oneself, as the "being-present-to-itself of the absolute logos" (Derrida 1978: 237), it can also be the breakdown of such a system that allows itself to be governed from afar and become "the unfolding of a volume, a multidimensional milieu, an experience which produces its own space" (ibid.). And while Shepard more often than not achieves just this multidimensional milieu, there remains a nostalgia in his work for absolute certainty. In "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library" Shepard writes longingly about Native American poetry, which in his view derives its power from "a religious belief in the word itself" (1981a: 216); confidence, in other words, in the power of the word to signify. The longer Austin spends writing the scenepay for Lee, the more he doubts the representational qualities of language. Can it reflect reality, or in this case the West, as it is? Can it signify? Austin's diction grows increasingly slangy, increasingly less precise, increasingly frustrated with being caught in language in the first place.

A comparison with David Mamet, notorious for the four-letter-word diction of his characters and a professed neo-naturalist, seems obvious. Mamet's characters react to their

inability to reach other human beings through language (as he perceives it in the contemporary world) with excessive swearing. Unable to get language to signify and to communicate their frustration they are nonetheless stuck in it, and for lack of a way out of this dead-end flee into angry speechlessness: their swearing does vent their frustration, but it does not further communication. Their swearing remains inarticulate.

Shepard also starts out from within the mimetic, representational structures of naturalism, but creates havoc within its boundaries as naturalism's propositions gradually reveal themselves to be absurd. If, as seems to emerge, *True West* comments both on the form of naturalist drama itself and on the assumptions inherent in its existence (such as the concept of the author-god ruling the stage), the closest Shepard came to a dismantling of such structures was during his involvement in Bob Dylan's *Rolling Thunder Revue* tour and the making of the film that accompanied it, *Renaldo and Clara*. The Revue enacted something closely resembling a theatre for the senses, dominated by the actor rather than suffocated by the omnipotence of the playwright.

The 'old man,' Lee and Austin's nameless father, is another instance of an absent presence (resembling, on a different level, that of the author). The father never makes an appearance on stage, yet he dominates the relationship of the brothers from afar. He is the cause of many of the conflicts between them, and has presumably shaped their existences in many ways the play does not make explicit. The same idea is made more explicit in *Fool for Love*, where the Old Man could indeed be interpreted as the mastermind behind the action on stage. Certainly he dominates the existing conflicts between the two central characters Eddie and May.

Eventually, though, the text of *True West* is firmly-rooted in the intertextuality of popular culture. It presents a collection of set pieces from the West as it inhabits American popular imagination: "horse culture," as Shepard himself calls it, Hollywood movies, sitcoms. The "true" West is fragments of the construction of the West as it is filtered through the media. The contemporary Western of which Lee relates the climax to Saul is

not Shepard's invention, but *Lonely are the Brave*, a popular movie his audience is likely to be familiar with. Shepard is able to draw on a rich reservoir of intertextuality produced by concepts that have been grafted on the West, from Frederic Jackson Turner's theory of the West as a safety valve to American civilization to the present time.

Typically, historically correct phenomena such as the rather large number of Black people employed to do the gruelling job of the cowboy do not appear in Lee's version of the West. Although Shepard clearly acknowledges the constructedness of the West as a mythological concept in the American imagination, he is not overtly critical of such constructions that are clearly the product of a dominating class's aspirations to erase from the popular picture groups that they do not wish to figure prominently in U.S. history. Rather, he celebrates the constructions as elements that have shaped American national identity. As Tucker Orbison points out,

Shepard would agree with Thoreau's conception of the ideal West: 'The *great west* and *north west* stretching infinitely far and grand and wild, qualifying all our thoughts. That is the only America I know. I prize this western reserve chiefly for its intellectual value. That is the road to new life and freedom.' (qtd in Orbison 1984: 509)

An interesting apparent contradiction emerges: while Shepard obviously draws "new life and freedom" from American myths such as the West, they also receive a consistently ironic treatment in *True West* (as in other works). Yet, it can be argued that this simultaneous celebration and ironization is a contradiction only at first glance: Shepard is aware of the myths' constructedness and is self-conscious about his utilization of them, yet it is precisely this self-referential loop from which they draw new authority. By using, as it were, the deconstructed versions of the myths Shepard takes the wind out of critics' sails and re-institutes himself as an authority. His use of myth thus goes one step beyond the simple subversion produced by irony: ironically, the myths and Shepard as an author

emerge, paradoxically, as an even stronger authority from this self-conscious subversion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>I thank Sheila Rabillard for an enlightening discussion of these issues.

#### 4. Identity as *bricolage* in *The Tooth of Crime*

*The Tooth of Crime* pushes notions of authenticity and rootedness in an origin to their limit. Identity becomes a perpetual transformation exercise. A complete dissolution of character in its naturalist sense takes place as the actors playing Hoss and Crow switch from one style and from one element in the bricolage to the next. At the same time it will be seen how *Tooth*, as a "rock play" points towards the aesthetic similarities between Dylan and Shepard, regardless of their different media of expression. Music establishes itself as an inherent characteristic of Shepard's theatre.

In her essay "Lighting Out for the Territory Within: Field Notes on Shepard's Expressionist Vision" (1993), Sherrill Grace sees Shepard as reflecting expressionist principles. Shepard's works, although very different from one another, are always sensory assaults of a very subjective kind, as is typical of expressionist art. As a counter-movement to naturalism and its disregard for the human condition it is the objective of expressionist art to give expression to individual human suffering and to come across general human 'truths' in the process. The principle underlying expressionist art is in Sherrill Grace's definition "[...] that the individual human being (often the artist herself/himself) has an essential Soul or Self that can be expressed [...] and that in the expressive act the artist articulates something of more than merely personal, private value or consequence" (Grace 1993: 181).

These presentations of universal human "truths" take the form of subjective, symbolic or allegorical images that juxtapose intense feelings in an unmediated form. Thus, the fenced-in lamb in the kitchen in *Curse of the Starving Class*, removed from the chain of signification, can be seen as an expressionist metaphor of the family's inner state. Its direct presence intensifies the physical reality on stage. Crow's debut appearance in *The Tooth of Crime* at the beginning of the second act fulfills the same purpose, although

it is outside the chain of signification only insofar as it appears at the beginning of a new act.<sup>1</sup> Expressionist drama gains in vertical density in comparison to the naturalist tradition.

This contrasting of images, whose grotesque exaggeration is typical of expressionist drama, results in a fragmented, non-linear plot development and an open dramatic structure. No logically developed plot-structure is presented — the point is to show that the world cannot be explained and mastered with pure rationalism.

Wolfram Pietzcker writes: "The grotesque work of art inspires in the reader the expectation of being able to interpret what is going to be presented to him with the help of specific categories and then frustrates this expectation" (1971: 92; translation mine<sup>2</sup>). This has an ambivalent effect on the audience. On the one hand "the ego, previously sustained by an authority, is filled with horror because it is unfamiliarly expected to master reality without protection" (1971: 97; translation mine<sup>3</sup>) on the other hand it distances itself "in anarchic glee from an authority it at least partly used to accept and respect" (96; translation mine<sup>4</sup>). The spectator is torn between a pleasurable grin and a shudder. It also becomes evident how intrinsic the element of surprise is to the grotesque (Kayser 1957: 44). Only through suddenness can the whole absurdity of the fictional world be experienced in all its intensity. Any kind of introduction would imply the audience's adaptation to the new circumstances.

*The Tooth of Crime* ceaselessly evokes this confusion. Whenever the audience has managed to learn, via exposure to it, how this new world works and adapt to it, other, even more outrageous elements are introduced: While the discourse emanating from Hoss is initially difficult to understand, he appears tame and easy in comparison with what Crow has to offer upon his first appearance at the beginning of the second act. Just when

<sup>1</sup>Provided the spectator is able and willing to follow the learning process instigated by the play and follows the new discourses s/he is exposed to. Otherwise nothing in *The Tooth of Crime* could be justifiably claimed to be in a signifiatory chain or conventional plot structure.

<sup>2</sup>"Das groteske Werk weckt im Leser die Erwartung, er werde das, was sich ihm bietet, mit Hilfe bestimmter Kategorien deuten können und enttäuscht diese Erwartung" (1971: 92).

<sup>3</sup>"[d]as bisher durch Autorität gestützte Ich entwickelt Grauen, weil es sich ungewohnt darauf verwiesen sieht, die Realität ohne Schutz zu bewältigen" (1971: 97).

<sup>4</sup>"in anarchischer Lust von einer Autorität, die es bisher zumindest teilweise noch anerkannte" (96).

safety seemed certain it is destroyed yet again. Any attempt by the audience at a lasting construction of meaning is systematically frustrated through the introduction of disparate elements with which the spectator is basically familiar but which appear isolated from their conventional context. Shepard constructs "an unheard-of tongue" (Shepard 1981a: 217) pieced together from a variety of different sources. The language of *The Tooth of Crime* is not Anthony Burgess's in *Clockwork Orange*, although the learning process to which the audience is subjected is similar: Burgess invents new words the meaning of which have to be understood while learning how to function in the new world. Shepard places more emphasis on an initial sense of familiarity: the audience is familiar with most of the words used by Hoss and Crow, but their context seems shockingly perverted.

The first impression of this perversion hits the audience right at the beginning of the play. Hoss comes on stage and sings a song entitled "The Way Things Are."<sup>5</sup> It is pointed out to the audience that what is going to be presented to them is designed to be based on subjectivity rather than rationality: it is to be about "the way things seem" not the way they are, as the title of the song initially proclaims. Right from the start the spectator is promised something s/he knows, the familiar world in mimetic description, and is given the exact opposite. The initial image, intense and symbolically charged, achieves an illustration of this perversion of the familiar: in a world of violence and corruption Hoss "*caresses the guns*" (TC 205) that are lined up in front of him, on a velvet sheet, looking "*really beautiful and clean*" (204). Affection is here no longer distributed to living beings but to things — and instruments of violence at that.

Initially the consistent impression of a rock musician's milieu is evoked: Hoss enters the stage in a black leather outfit that should be identifiable as "*rocker gear*" accompanied by sounds reminiscent of the Velvet Underground<sup>6</sup>, and starts to sing a song (TC 203).

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<sup>5</sup>"So here's another illusion to add to your confusion / Of the way things are" (TC 203). The song ends in the words: "Now everything I do goes down in doubt / But sometimes in the blackest night I can see a little light / That's the only thing that keeps me rockin' — keeps me rockin' / So here's another fantasy / About the way things seem to be [...]." (TC 203-4)

<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that, although the impression is consistent at the outset, the play is never less than confronting: the sound, according to Shepard's stage direction should evoke the Velvet Underground's

The guns, which are brought on stage right afterwards, are kept in "*old country-doctor bags*" (TC 204), a fact that intensifies the impression of moral perversion. Hoss's occupation with them appears completely out of context: they belong to the milieu of a contract killer, rather than a rock star. Yet Hoss is able to handle them "*like a pro*" (ibid.). It is consistent with Shepard's technique that they are not the topic of the first dialogue, either: without a word of transition Hoss asks his assistant Becky about a Maserati automobile, on which he is able to elaborate with the same degree of expertise. Idiosyncratically, the car-talk introduced by the mention of the Maserati immediately mingles with a terminology that has its roots in the presence of the objects of violence on stage. The audience then learn that the car was driven by a man by the exotic name of Cheyenne, yet the route he took for the test-drive was the Ventura Freeway. Shepard does not permit complete immersion in the fantastic world: the large majority of audience members is going to be familiar with the factual existence of the Ventura Freeway in the Greater Los Angeles area.

Beyond the confusion of these early scenes, fusions, mergings and mixtures of different codes and discourses characterize *The Tooth of Crime*. After the audience has come to terms with the idea of being confronted with a sort of rock 'n' roll-Western, these fusions present ironic commentary. The audience member may consider Hoss's concern about his position in the "charts" (presumably an institution like the Top 100, but it is part of the play's strategic play with different codes that the term could also refer to astrological charts) and his waning success of little consequence. Rock music still suffers from the undifferentiated reputation of providing superficial, naive entertainment for adolescents. Shepard caricatures the quick business with the hits as a ruthless rat-race whose vortex even traditionalists like Hoss, who play the game but no longer believe in it, cannot escape. What the business boils down to is not innocent entertainment but warfare: "I'll

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"Heroin" (TC 203) — it is extremely violent and nerve-racking. The audience is tense to the point of teeth-gnashing as a very physical response to the sound that strains their ears at the outset of a play that sizzles with violence.

get a fleet together and wipe him out" (TC 206); "I was ready to take Nevada" (TC 210). Interspersed in the military terminology are expressions from the world of sports, which is also concerned with victory or defeat: "You have to consult a ref for the rules"; "I can't afford a penalty now. I need every point" (ibid.). The equipment with which one competes in the fight is of major importance. It is a status symbol, a way of intimidating the opponent before the fight has even begun, and what is better suited as a status symbol than a car. Thus the idiolect of car racing is integrated into the compilation: "Drivin' a hot Merc, dual cams" (ibid.). The result is a parody of particular groups' sociolects that are employed for the purpose of distinguishing one's own group from others. Because of the author's excellent feeling for rhythm, the switch from one code to the next happens almost unnoticeably, making the bizarre fusion of codes even more effective: "How're you gonna cop an immortal shot if you give up soloing and go into gang war. [...] Sure, you'll have a few moments of global glow, maybe even an interplanetary flash, but it won't last [...]" (TC 206).

From time to time the characters slip in their respective roles — slips that make their adopted roles even more ridiculous and turn the characters into parodies of themselves, as it becomes obvious that it takes some effort to maintain the image. Hoss for instance speaks of his "Pa" (TC 207) in an emotionally shaken moment, although an expression like "my old man" would have been more consistent with the impression the audience has gained of the character. Crow is also concerned about maintaining his image and "*darts back to the chair as though he's never moved*" (TC 228) when he hears Hoss return to the room in which he has just meticulously practised Hoss's walk — another piece in his *bricolage* of contextless elements. The audience does not gain insights into the characters' respective psyches which would allow them to extrapolate and predict behavioural patterns for hypothetical future situations and thus construct a psychological outline for them. All that can be said is that some unexpected turns are out of character with the adopted role. (The implication of such slips seems to be that there is a true self that is simply glossed

over and only shows through occasionally when the character lets his guard down. This has far-reaching consequences for the interpretation of the whole play, as will be seen later.)

Crow's appearance at the start of the second act is maybe no less an expressionist image of an inner state, evoking a strong emotional response from the audience, than Hoss's initial rendezvous with his meticulously polished chrome darlings at the beginning of the first. Crow personifies the play's theme: the loss of traditional, spiritual values in favour of soul-less, quick transactions whose only objective is financial gain and prestige. The coldblooded master adapter combines all outward attributes of the rock music milieu (TC 224) and obviously does not personify reliability or inspire confidence. His outfit is complemented by perpetual chain-twirling. *"He exudes violent arrogance and cruises the stage with true contempt"* (TC 227). On stage with him are still the guns and knives as well as the abused dummy, still covered in blood. Again, the confrontation with this image provokes the contrary impulses of laughing and shuddering. The individual elements that make up Crow's outer appearance are mimetically reproduced (Crow is supposed to look *"just like Keith Richard [sic]"* [TC 227]). Only through their cumulation a hyperreal reproduction is achieved, which overcharacterizes individual traits and turns them into caricatural distortions (cf. Allemann 1956: 45).

Shepard succeeds in extending this caricatural impression to Crow's language: it is an artificial language that is difficult to understand, composed of slang terms, (pseudo-) idiomatic phrases and predicate-less half-sentences ("Razor, Leathers. Very razor. [...] You vision what's sittin'. Very razor to cop z's sussin' me to the far end of the spectrum" [TC 227]). Crow consists exclusively of masks and hardly lets one slip. When he slips inadvertently he immediately provokes comments of surprise: "HOSS: There! Why'd you slip right then? Why'd you suddenly talk like a person?" (TC 230). It can be assumed that Hoss does not expect to have been offered a glimpse of Crow's true self. He hopes to have observed an error in his opponent's perfect front, but suspects that the slip was

simply a sign of the diversity of Crow's repertoire ("You're into a wider scope than I thought" [ibid.]).

Crow is the embodiment of Shepard's social critique in *The Tooth of Crime*. But rather than grant a simple laugh about the exaggeration of a secure world order by degrading him to a harmlessly ridiculous caricature of the notoriously inflated ego of a rock-musician, he gives him the characteristics of the lunatic, who epitomizes a threat to the established world order.

The bricolage is continued on the level of recognizable intertextual references. Before the backdrop of post-structuralist literary theory, which defines 'text' as a sign system in the broadest sense and therefore the whole world as text with nothing outside the text, it is reductive to define intertextuality solely as the influences of literary works or different authors on one another. This would narrow intertextuality down to literary source hunting — a practice that perverts the concept beyond recognition. The decentering of meaning must rather comprise all sign systems, not just literature. In the final analysis this means one must perceive every text, every cultural product, as intertext:

Every text is a new network of old quotations. Parts of Codes, formulas, rhythmic patterns, fragments of sociolects and so on find their way into the text and are re-distributed in it, because before the text and around the text there have always been languages. Intertextuality, the precondition of every text, cannot be reduced to the question of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulas whose origin can hardly ever be localised; unconscious or automatic quotations that are quoted without quotation marks. (Barthes 1968: 1015; translation mine)

As has been seen, *The Tooth of Crime* in general and Crow's language in particular illustrate such a conception of intertextuality. The play's central concern is language and the way identity is constructed and conveyed through it.

In the second act the two protagonists Hoss and Crow fight each other in a series of fierce duels — an allusion to gunfighter showdowns in Western movies — during which they attack one another with words ("[Crow] spit words that became his weapons" [Shepard 1981a: 217]). Although the play is so violently charged that the audience expects a disruptive discharge all along, the only explicit acts of violence towards human beings are Hoss's shooting the referee and his eventual suicide. Contrary to the audience's expectation the opponents' fight is not fought with physical weapons but with words, the implication being that there are far subtler means of cruelty, far more effective than physical violence if surrounded by a dense atmosphere. The oppressive presence of weapons on stage all through the play is extended to the language just as the violence towards the dummy is transferred to actual humans.

Hoss's musical heroes ("Dylan, Jagger, Townsend" [TC 207]) have their origins in the culture of the 1950's and 60's and represent values that are, in his opinion, increasingly neglected in the contemporary world ("There's no sense of tradition in the game no more" [TC 216]). In the first round of the duel his opponent Crow offers him his own ironic collage of the identity forming elements of his time, the 1950's. According to his rewriting of the era, the rebellious youth of the 1950's is a romantic construction. He presents a version of violent intensity ("Shame kid.<sup>7</sup> [...] Beatin' meat to the face in the mirror. [...] Hidin' dirty pictures. [...] Long line a' losers." [TC 235]) that Hoss can counter only with weak excuses: "Missed the whole era. Never touched the back seat" (TC 236). Crow's "Round 1" (TC 235-6) is a tight collection of intertextual allusions to protagonists of the youth-culture scene ("Beboppin' to the Fat Man" [TC 236]); the self image of the youth of the 1950's and its representation in the media, particularly the movies ("Lonely in a bedroom. Dyin' for attention" [ibid.]; and songtitles or lyrics ("Rollin' over Beethoven" [ibid.]). Crow once again reveals himself as the master adapter. The meaning of his monologues cannot be traced to a fixed origin of meaning — they are

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<sup>7</sup>This is also a pun on the "Shane kid," Joey, in George Stevens' *Shane* (1953). Again, the intertext of Westerns and gunfighters is evoked.

collages of disparate elements, but in such tight construction and in such a densely rhythmic pattern that Hoss can hardly get a word in. Crow represents the unconditional decentering of meaning, in which all elements enter the endless play of signifiers. He is a challenge to Hoss and the modernist conceptions of genius and origin he invokes<sup>8</sup> ("you miss the origins" [TC 239]).

As was to be expected, Hoss, convinced of an irreversible loss of value, launches a counterattack in the next "round" (TC 238): he impersonates an old Mississippi delta blues singer, traces the origins of rock music back to the east-African home of the slaves deported to America ("That's somethin' sunk on another continent and I don't mean Atlantis." [TC 238]) and narrates the stations of the history of jazz. The referee interrupts him: "Somethin's outa whack here" (TC 240). Indeed, Hoss is no more authentic than his opponent Crow and has therefore no more right to claim a legitimate position for himself as a continuation of the tradition than Crow, whom within the framework of his delta blues persona he calls "milk face" (TC 239): Hoss is not Black, either, and neither does he live in the South, but in California — the state within the US that is most forward oriented, least rooted in tradition. When Crow beats him in the third round, suicide is the only gesture of authenticity that is left to Hoss. It is the only thing whose presence cannot be deferred in the endless play of signifiers: "The mark of a lifetime. A true mark that won't ever cheat on itself 'cause it's the last of its kind. It can't be taught or copied or stolen or sold" (TC 249).

The audience is left with the unpleasant victory of "a totally lethal human with no reason or justification for tracing how he got that way" (Shepard 1981: 217). What remains after the conflict is over, is the wish for a higher authority with the power to stop the monster Crow — by far the more interesting of the two protagonists but by no means an entity that "deserves" a moral victory: Hoss is the carrier of the audience's sympathies.

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<sup>8</sup>cf. Leonard Wilcox. 1987. "Modernism vs. Postmodernism: Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* and the Discourses of Popular Culture" (560-73) in: *Modern Drama* 30. Wilcox follows similar ideas to the ones outlined here.

Such an authority could be a universally binding moral code ("Without a code it's just a crime" [TC 216]), but where can the rules for such a code come from if all there is is a system of differences without positive terms? Such a code would be a transcendental signified in Jacques Derrida's sense, which controls the system as a point of reference outside the system and puts an end to the endless play of signifiers. Sherrill Grace calls such a search for a transcendental truth "the expressive fallacy" (1993: 181) and describes with this the attempt to transcend the direct reality that is experienced as repressive and spiritually bankrupt in the expression of an inner essence and thus reach the level of an ultimate truth.

But there is no transcendental signified. Hoss and Crow are equally unable to give form to this hypothetical, authoritative presence. Although Crow himself invokes a higher presence whose moral code he superstitiously fears to have violated ("I've called the bluff in God's own face / Now keep me from my fate [TC 251]) everything is in a state of perpetual flow ("Keep me rollin' down" [ibid.]). Even the myths of popular culture that Hoss conjures up to give his life substance and tradition are eventually just substitutes for myths in their traditional use: they are unable to give life meaning beyond doubt.

Shepard repeatedly articulates a nostalgia for transcendental values that are beyond questioning. As has been seen earlier, he perceives his own writing process as a mechanism through which a creation that came into being somewhere else seeks an outlet through him as a medium. There are hints in *The Tooth of Crime* that indicate an essential hidden core of Being that is simply swamped by the pretense and make-believe of the society that surrounds the characters and in which they are forced to function. But the search has no end: "God turns out to be a rock and roll Jesus with a cowboy mouth" (Wilcox 1987: 572). Yet, Shepard's yearning is understandable: the abandoning of such a "presence" may be understood as the attempt to rid literature of its social relevance. The abandonment of presence is at once the revolutionary liberation and the philosophical dead-end inherent in the deconstructionist viewpoint. How is ethical behaviour to be

conceived of if its norms no longer depend on universal rules? Even a Sartrean ethics, even though it hands all responsibility to the individual, depends for the basis of these individual-based decisions on rules that have their origin in the society surrounding the individual. Thus Shepard in *The Tooth of Crime* emerges as a reluctant post-modernist: wishing for authority that gives direction to individual existence but unsure where such authority should come from.

#### 4.1 *The Tooth of Crime* and Music

In a paper that deals partly with a poet whose mode of expression is rock music, *Tooth's* rock music aesthetic and its extensive use of music has to be mentioned. Shepard always wanted to be a musician ("I much prefer music to theatre..." [Chubb 1981: 200]), has played in a band as a drummer and even moved to London for three years (1971-74) in the hope of forging an alternative career as a musician for himself, but slipping into the local legendary rock music scene turned out to be more difficult than anticipated and eventually did not work. Although he is happy to have writing as a means of "[shuffling] experience [...] back into another form" (Rosen 1993: 11), he has in a way always been a reluctant writer, a writer against his own will, whose work in theatre resulted partly from the lack of a viable alternative: "... nothing communicates emotions better than music, not even the greatest play in the world" (Chubb 1981: 201).

Shepard has revealed himself to be very much in touch with whatever musical scene surrounds him and catches his interest. From his early years in New York, which were dominated by the jazz circles surrounding Charles Mingus III and the legendary musicians performing night after night at the Village Gate, giving him a free course in the history of jazz, he has been interested in various styles ranging from rock to country and western music.

In his essay "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library," which is largely concerned with the writing process, Shepard himself has drawn parallels between the

product of writing — poeticized language — and music. The process of writing, according to Shepard's perception, involves a similar abandonment of intellectual defenses. Shepard feels like tapping into a creative energy that flows independently and automatically once he allows it a way out. The characters emerge fully-formed from the unconscious without intervention from the conscious mind:

Language can explode from the tiniest impulse. If I'm right inside the character in the moment, I can catch what he smells, sees, feels and touches. [...] When you're writing inside of a character like this, you aren't pausing every ten seconds to figure out what it all means. (Shepard 1981a: 217)

In Shepard's view, such moments happen most easily when strategies from jazz improvisation are applied to the writing process ("jazz-sketching with words" [ibid.]), resulting in a sort of spontaneous, automatic writing:

After periods of this kind of practice, I begin to get the haunting sense that something in me writes but it's not necessarily me. At least it's not the 'me' that takes credit for it. This identical experience happened to me once when I was playing drums with The Holy Modal Rounders, and it scared the shit out of me. (ibid.)

Intense immediacy is what he aims to achieve in theatre, an immediacy which puts the audience in a similar situation of defenselessness as he himself experiences in writing. His favourite term in describing this sense of immediacy is "emotional territory." The emotionally charged images that pervade his plays and his trademark monologues that transcend the reality of the play and put the audience in touch with a different plane of consciousness<sup>9</sup> are the lifeblood of his theatre. Sherrill Grace finds these images expressionistic and the expressionist presupposition of a transcendent human truth that finds expression in emotionally confronting images, is in line with Shepard's perception

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<sup>9</sup> "... you can be watching this thing happening with actors and costumes and light and set and language, and even plot, and something emerges from beyond that, and that's the image part that I'm looking for, that's the sort of added dimension" (Shepard in Chubb 1981: 201).

of the writing process. They are the closest he can be to musical expression in theatre without actually using music (which Shepard has also often done — in, amongst other plays, *The Tooth of Crime* ).

Apart from very musical, rhythmic monologue, actual music is used in *The Tooth of Crime*, both as commentary on the spoken word and in the form of fully-formed songs. The songs function primarily as distancing devices. The play derives from them an alienation effect, partly in Brecht's sense and partly diametrically opposed to it. The songs momentarily catapult the spectator out of the immediacy of the play to a plane that eases the tension and offers the opportunity to come to terms with the emotional turmoil created by the play, but contrary to Brecht's intentions these reactions are again emotional rather than intellectual. Because of Shepard's ironic perspective in virtually all of his plays, his audiences are never the emotionally ravaged mass of individuals, rows of "in einen eigentümlichen Rauschzustand versetzter, völlig passiver, in sich versunkener Menschen" whose "Schweißausbrüche beweisen ihre Erschöpfung durch solche Exzesse" (Brecht 1993: 249). Even though Shepard's is an emotionally charged theatre it never presents the illusionistic visions Brecht criticizes. Just as much as Shepard's humour reflects his own ironic perspective on his creations, the audience is in the ambivalent position of immersing themselves in the play while at the same time being aware of its constructedness: most of Shepard's plays are undeniably funny in a way that creates a distancing from the characters without diminishing their intensity.

Part of this ambivalence is reflected in the songs' lyrics. "The Way Things Are" and "Rollin' Down" present cliché after cliché of the rock lyric genre ("ridin' in your radio or walkin' through the late / late show ain't it a drag to know you just don't know" [TC 203]; "Keep me in a state a' grace / Just keep me rollin' down" [TC 250]). Bruce Powe senses a Rolling Stones put-on in "Poison" (1987: 180), and the same assessment can go for the other songs as well. The songs sound like parodies of existing rock-songs. Thus, the "longing to find another reality" that Lanier hears in "The Way Things Are" and which he

describes as a "switched-on, electrified Bob Dylan" (1993: 51) is far from a psychedelic, flower-power escape to a different, more pleasureable level of consciousness. What Lanier hears as a, presumably drug-induced, "escape to another world" (ibid.) comes closer to the claustrophobia of an inescapable heroin addiction. An electrified Bob Dylan, even an electric Dylan under the influence of amphetamines, has nothing in common with the Velvet Underground's nerve-racking sound, as is demonstrated on albums such as *Blonde on Blonde*. In "The Way Things Are" the confronting sound of the music in combination with the clichéd lyrics prevents unreflected identification or uncomplicated emotional reactions. The music produces distance, the lyrics produce irony in reproducing the much publicized one-dimensional side of the rock music milieu.

Yet, at the same time, the basic structure and instrumentation of rock music speaks directly to the senses — in its early days it caused such an uproar with the conservative forces in society not least because of the erotic undercurrent of strong rhythm sections producing energetic, repetitive patterns. This erotic seduction can, of course, easily tip over into rape: "... since rock 'n' roll is *rape*, seduction through the release of energy and rhythm, it increases the tension in a volatile scene" (Powe 1987: 179) — an important aspect in a play as violently charged as *The Tooth of Crime*.

This is the main function of the music accompanying the rounds of the duel — it creates energy in an emotionally and violently charged situation. The characters "*Begin their assaults just talking the words in rhythmic patterns sometimes going with the music, sometimes counterpointing it*" (TC 234). As the stage directions imply, the word duels hardly need music to accompany them in order to convey a sense of rhythm. Hoss and Crow conjure up different musical styles through language.<sup>10</sup> In other plays Shepard

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<sup>10</sup>In his first round of the duel Crow moves through a fast passage with regular, frequent beats in order to score points and not allow Hoss to fight back. Due to its fast pace and the frequent 2/4 beats the passage sounds like rap (years before rap as a musical style became popular). It is reminiscent of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues." The rhythm of lines like "Pants down. The moon show. Ass out the window. Belt lash. Whip lash. Side slash to the kid with a lisp" (TC 235) sound like part of an additional verse for Bob Dylan's recital at breakneck speed. Later in the same passage the beat switches to a consistent 4/4 time, as Powe points out (1987: 184).

produces rhythmic speech patterns to distinguish them from others. This is where Shepard's much written about ear for the speech patterns of the American colloquial idiom has its origin. Steve Bottoms notes that observers in rehearsals have referred to Shepard's obsessive concern with the tone and the rhythm of the performed words. While generally he is notorious for the little amount of guidance he provides for his actors as a director, he imposes a strong guiding hand when the performance is to work up to a moment of rhythmic climax (Bottoms 1998: 219). A writer as aware of and as obsessed with the rhythm of language will inevitably listen closely to the sounds of the world around him: "He is, I believe, a writer conscious of — or, perhaps, more accurately, thoroughly imbued with — the tempo and the tones and talk of his time; in short, like most important artists, he expresses his age," Powe writes (1987: 176).

A term borrowed from jazz would be a more accurate analogy than the term aria in order to describe the musicality of Shepard's monologues. Such a passage usually develops its own rhythmic and melodic dynamics, mostly quite distinct from the tone that had previously dominated the action. Even though the performed text is, of course, scripted beforehand, its development is unpredictable to the audience who have to let themselves be carried along by its twists and turns. Shepard summarizes the process of writing such a passage in a way that is strongly reminiscent of different instruments taking turns in improvisation, receding into the background and taking centre stage as the piece moves along: "You could throw yourself into the passage, and then you could calm down, then you could ride this thing and then you could throw yourself in again. You could move into all these emotional territories, and you could do it with passion" (Hamill 1983,

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Crow's performance closes with a row of orgasmic repetitions ("Just get down on my thing boy! Just get down! Get on down! Get on down! Get down! Get down! Get down! Come on!" [TC 236]) — a prominent feature of rock music. The round closes on this moment of climax without Hoss's having had a chance to break the rhythm of Crow's tightly structured presentation.

Hoss reduces the speed of this "lectric machine gun music" (TC 238) and slips into the persona of a Blues musician: "I hear you boys hook up in the toilet and play to da mirror all thru the night. [...] It come down a long way. It come down by every damn black side street you can move sideways through." (ibid.). The different musical styles reflect the personae the characters move through.

quoted in Bottoms 1998: 36; note Shepard's use of the term "emotional territory" in this context).

The jazz musician Max Roach noted the close proximity between Shepard's writing and music, particularly rhythm, after his extensive exposure to Shepard's work in a retrospective at La Mama Theatre. "'I had no idea of the profundity of the man,' Roach told the *New York Daily News* : 'He thinks like a drummer'" (qtd in: Bottoms 1998: 34). And *The Tooth of Crime* more than anything reveals to what extent Roach is right.

Powe also points out the natural proximity of the (colloquial) spoken word, Shepard's medium, and the idiom of rock music:

We should also note that rock 'n' roll is the music of the spoken word, of idiomatic speech; rock 'n' roll comes closer to the way we speak than any other form of music. Listen to Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" or the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil," and hear how a vigorously colloquial speech is employed in the singing. (Powe 1987: 183)

There is no doubt that songs like "Desolation Row" use colloquial language vigorously and creatively and in a way that is quite similar to Shepard's own oscillation between the slangy and the lyrical, the flippant and the precise, the emotional and the austere. Yet it is interesting to note an important difference between Bob Dylan's writing and Shepard's: while Shepard's rhythmic passages reveal their rhythm directly, in mere silent reading of the printed play, Dylan's writing is rarely rhythmic on the page. While both artists' work is aimed at performance and comes to life in it, Dylan's depends mostly on performance by one particular artist — himself. Lines that appear utterly unremarkable in the printed form develop unsuspected qualities in performance: Dylan's idiosyncratic enunciation and delivery make rhythm and rhyme appear where on the printed page there are none. The (at best) moderate artistic quality of cover versions of Dylan's songs done by other artists is one proof of this interdependence of the artist and the work. While

Shepard's work can be brought to life by any good theatre company, Dylan, it seems, can only bring it to life himself: as a performing artist.

### 5. Identity as Performance: Sam Shepard's "True Dylan"

The bricolage of *The Tooth of Crime* emerges through roleplay with different masks. The one-act play "True Dylan" looks more specifically at image. A celebrity interview is staged as a play: Identity is performed. The celebrity's identity behind the mask of stardom is another mask. "True Dylan" was published in *Esquire* in 1987. It stages a (hypothetical) celebrity interview<sup>1</sup> between two characters named "Sam" and "Bob" that bear perplexing and not coincidental similarities to Sam Shepard and Bob Dylan. It is likely to have come out of a period of close contact with Dylan, initiated by Shepard's collaboration on the song "Brownsville Girl", released in 1986 on Dylan's album *Knocked Out Loaded*.

Shepard has repeatedly investigated different aspects of stardom and celebrity. *Fool for Love* uses Barbara Mandrell as an example of how the public fills the space a celebrity provides with their own projections. The theme recurs in a different guise in *The Tooth of Crime* as the hero being defeated by another, "hipper" successor. *Tooth* borrows its imagery from Westerns, Hollywood and the music business. In *Motel Chronicles* (1982), as in *True West*, whose title "True Dylan" invokes, Shepard reveals himself to be concerned specifically with the Hollywood dream machine: "and it made me suddenly re-ashamed / of being an actor in a movie / at all / and provoking such stupid illusions" (MC 41).

His own career as an actor and screenwriter for (Hollywood) films had by that time securely taken off. Although Shepard continues to work in the business, he has always viewed the Hollywood machinery with bemusement and suspicion. Maybe these factors were enough of a motivation to deal once again with questions of self- and media-propelled image- and identity constructions, authenticity and the self-referentiality of systems within the context of a play. "True Dylan" reveals an obvious convergence with the ideas postulated in *Fool for Love* but in its self-referentiality takes them a radical step

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<sup>1</sup>*Esquire* did indeed commission an interview with Dylan. Yet what was intended by *Esquire* as a straightforward interview emerged as a surreal one-act-play.

beyond the textuality of the earlier play. Shepard now uses James Dean to trigger his contemplations:

BOB: Oh, you know where I just was?

SAM: Where?

BOB: Paso Robles. You know, on that highway where James Dean got killed?

SAM: Oh yeah?

BOB: I was at the spot. On the spot. A windy kinda place.

SAM: They got a statue or monument to him in that town, don't they?

BOB: Yeah, but I was on the curve where he had the accident. Outsida town. And this place is incredible. I mean, the place where he died is as powerful as the place he lived. (TD 60)

What is the attraction that lures aficionados to such "windy," inhospitable places? Why is it so important to be "at the spot," or more precisely, "on the spot" itself? Obviously, what Bob was looking for was the essence of James Dean; he hoped to feel by means of the immediacy of the place at which Dean died what he was in life; the place itself turned into a signifier of "Dean-ness," or that, which through elaborate marketing and image campaigns the public has come to know as Dean-ness and has appropriated for itself. What is important, though, is that the "spot" must first be identified as such: the location has to be publicized and thereby marked, otherwise it would be unspectacular<sup>2</sup> and certainly never associated with James Dean. The "symbolic complex" that emerges from the process of being marked<sup>3</sup> will interest us later. By being marked the thing itself and the experience of it are mediated: "authenticity is a sign-relation" Jonathan Culler says

<sup>2</sup>"It's on this broad expanse of land" (TD 60) seems like a euphemistic way of insinuating its complete lack of redeeming features, albeit heavily coloured by the idea of James Dean as the archetypal American pioneer as rebel through the close association of the rebel nature commonly ascribed to Dean with landscape imagery associated with the frontier.

<sup>3</sup>The emergence of the symbolic complex is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' concept of myth in which "objects become the prey of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear, others take their place and attain the status of myth" (Barthes 1972: 110).

in his article "The Semiotics of Tourism" (1988: 161). Culler's split of the tourist attraction into marker and sight is parallel to the structure of the linguistic sign, and marker and sight are as inseparable as signifier and signified, as he amply illustrates, because markers create sights (Culler 1988: 160). The sign itself is used as a substitute for the referent whenever the referent itself cannot be present: "when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. [...] The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence" (Derrida 1986: 9). But this, according to any conventional definition of authenticity, is a contradiction in terms. It is a dilemma, since the claim of the authentic is to be unmediated, direct, present. "True Dylan," it becomes obvious, begins with an image of authenticity that is not quite as stable as it seems.

The other pertinent aspect of Dean's death is, of course, the fact that a premature death, particularly of the tragic variety, seems to create or at least significantly enhance the "symbolic complex," in Culler's words, of the respective celebrity. The individual in question can be remembered in the prime of his or her youth; the public's eye, trained to find every virtue in youth, is spared the decay and (ostensible) decline of old age; the individual is not seen venturing forth (and potentially blundering) into unknown territories and can safely be celebrated on the basis of his or her outstanding efforts to date; the artist, consumed with his own art and burning himself out for it, attains almost messianic proportions and is henceforth assigned a symbolic value.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a poster of James Dean — a marker in Culler's terminology — is evocative not only of the person and the various silver screen personae he adopted, but also of a romanticized version of the rebellious bourgeois youth of the 1950s.

Dylan himself came close to attaining this mythic status when he fell off his motorcycle on July 29, 1966. After an immensely creative period through the course of which he had been aided by excessive use of drugs of various kinds, the motorcycle

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<sup>4</sup> One is reminded of John Keats, as the ultimate Romantic poet, burning himself out for his art and dying young. Maybe it is significant, then, that a play that toys with and perverts Enlightenment notions of Reason and truth and falsehood, consistently evokes the Romantic image of the artist.

accident, which turned out to be minor, provided a good opportunity to withdraw from the public eye and settle down into a quieter lifestyle temporarily. The media jumped the bandwagon on the lookout for a new James Dean and rumours circulated according to which Dylan was dead or badly disfigured (Shelton 1986: 374). Characteristically, Dylan himself said very little about the incident, neither to elucidate nor to mystify. In fact, journalists seem so starved for information, that even the words of a fictional character within the context of a play are claimed as fact: Clinton Heylin, in the nonetheless best work on Dylan's life to date, quotes extensively from "True Dylan" (1991: 174-75), which he refers to as an "interview" with Sam Shepard.<sup>5</sup>

No active participation from Dylan's side was required for the incident to nonetheless become thoroughly mystified, as if conscious retreat from public view is inescapably interpreted as elusiveness and spurs the public and the journalistic profession into (very literal) constructive action: the motorcycle accident has become one of the central events in Dylan's chronology (partly because of the radical change in musical style that seemed to be ushered in by it) and it still inspires hypotheses in biographers who claim to bring to light the ultimate truth about Dylan's life: a 1988 biography by Bob Spitz — in many ways a wildly speculative book — claims that the entire accident was put on for show; a hoax enacted by Dylan to provide him with an excuse to withdraw from the limelight and undergo detoxification treatment. While Dylan has at other times taken an active part in his own mystification, his only activity in this case was the strategic decision not to take part in it, no doubt in full awareness that stories and speculations would flourish.

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<sup>5</sup>"[Dylan's] most extensive answer was given to Sam Shepard in an 'interview' for *Esquire* in 1987" (Heylin 1991: 174-5). The source is listed as "Shepard, Sam, *Esquire*, July 1987." (Heylin 1991: 501) under the heading "Interviews with Bob Dylan used in this book" (Heylin 1991: 500). It seems to me that Heylin intentionally avoids mentioning the title of the "interview". While it is likely that Shepard and Dylan discussed private matters during their collaboration, such an assumption does not suffice as a justification for invoking as authority a work of fiction that is marked as such and which, moreover, deliberately plays with ideas of authorship and authenticity.

As if to be in accordance with the accident's exalted position in Dylan-lore, Shepard gives Bob's account of it a prominent position in the play by placing it at the end. The action is therefore framed by reminiscences, occurrences and accounts of traffic accidents: after the characters' conversation about James Dean's accident, which opens the play, sounds of an actual crash can be heard coming from offstage (TD 60), but neither of the characters takes any notice. This lack of reaction to events that demand instant action, or responses that seem inordinate in relation to their trigger, or simply inappropriate reactions, are common devices in Shepard's plays in order to let the action slip into the surreal<sup>6</sup> (or, as David DeRose argues, in order to transcend the real in favour of the "superreal" [141]).

Maybe more important than the move towards a less naturalistic setting, though, is a reversal of commonly acknowledged priorities, a favouring of the imagination over "reality," an idea already familiar from *Fool for Love*. The incident that is relived in the imagination of the characters and that is assigned high cultural significance (Dean's is, after all, the ultimate car crash) is of higher priority than the actual car crash on the street.<sup>7</sup> In this reversal the "real" crash appears as a weak copy of the one that has achieved mythic proportions in popular lore. It is merely a repetition — the effect is similar to that created by Andy Warhol's electric chair or car crash series: repetition robs the individual event of its shocking singularity. In Warhol's case even the "original" work of art is impossible to identify by means of a screen printing technique that produces a whole row of virtually identical prints of the same image. With Warhol, even the painting, to this day hailed as a bulwark of modernist notions of authenticity,<sup>8</sup> had become subject to technical reproduction.

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<sup>6</sup>Compare the family's failure to acknowledge Vince's presence in *Buried Child* or Mom's completely inordinate response to the quasi-fratricide occurring in front of her eyes in *True West*.

<sup>7</sup>Another possible interpretation is a "spilling-over" of the imagined into the real in which aspects of the fantastic are being physically felt in the "real world". In both cases a blurring of reality and fantasy occurs.

<sup>8</sup>cf. the cult surrounding Leonardo da Vinci's genius and the Mona Lisa.

Shepard places Bob's account of his own accident in a position which — significantly — reflects the first one and suggests Dylan's accident as a (somewhat distorted) mirror image of Dean's. Dylan's accident is elevated to an equally "mythic" level and in the mirror, which the play constitutes, the eye/I beholds its Other. Dean had particular significance for the adolescent Robert Zimmerman, as he is likely to have had for many members of Dylan's and Shepard's generation. Many confrontations between the young Robert Zimmerman and his father, which were leading up to the former's departure for St. Paul, involved Dean and the "symbolic complex" for which he stands. Dean functioned as a liberating force in circumstances that were experienced as suffocatingly narrow. One memorable incident climaxed in father Abraham's ripping a poster of Dean off the wall in his son's room (Shelton 24).

Years later, Dylan paid a tribute to his old hero by echoing a well-known publicity shot of Dean on the cover of his album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (1963): Dylan assumes the same hunched-up posture with his hands deep inside his pockets. His girlfriend Suze Rotolo has linked arms with him — Dean was by himself; but the car-lined street in the background is almost identical. While the photographer, Don Hunstein, says that he (Hunstein) was not aware of the Dean connection (MacBeath 1994: 57), it is difficult to imagine that Dylan was not, particularly in view of his earlier statement on the so-called "Minnesota Tape", according to which he thought he looked like "Marlon Brando, James Dean or someone" (cf. MacBeath 1994: 56). Dylan's eldest son even shares Dean's middle name and thereby his initials, JBD: Jesse Byron Dylan. Quite consciously, then, Dylan himself had mirrored Dean, years before Shepard positioned the two as mirror images in "True Dylan".

Bob's elaboration on his motorcycle accident is part of the "interview" Sam conducts with him, as the entire play is ostensibly a faithful transcription of events as they unfolded: "as it really happened one afternoon in California" (TD 59) the subtitle proclaims. It is obvious that this is hardly the case. The playwright has added a range of

theatrical effects that turn what may have started out as a conversation in real life into an artistic construct. But his guiding hand can also be felt in more subtle ways than extravagant, outrageous theatrical effects such as car crashes.

In any interview the information volunteered can never be attributed solely to the interviewee: it is always the interviewer who directs the flow of the conversation, selects questions s/he considers to be of interest and thus contributes significantly to the media-mediated construction of the subject as it (seemingly) presents *itself*. Sam directs the conversation towards incidents in Dylan's biography that mark important stages and turning-points in his career: incidents, in other words, that have been selected in the attempt to turn the intricacies and dead ends in a person's life into an inescapable linear development. In Dylan's case these consist of his various incarnations and what has been rationalized as acceptable links between them. Thus Sam wants Bob to talk about his "meetings" with his own early hero, the folk-singer and union-activist Woody Guthrie (TD 64), which took place not long after his arrival in New York in the early 1960's—meetings that mark Dylan's own growing establishment in the folk-scene of the day. Some sources emphasize, with whatever accuracy, Guthrie's appreciation of Dylan, so that in effect Dylan-lore celebrates the incidents as the master handing down the torch to a worthy successor.

The motorcycle accident evokes connotations of both Dylan's wildly experimental phase of the album *Blonde on Blonde* with its aggressively confronting musical style and its symbolist lyrics, and his quietly devoted life as a family man after his retreat from the public eye. Inevitably, this "interview," in its endeavours to imitate the genre, has to conjure up Dylan's beginnings in Hibbing: the hero has to be put in relation to his origins while simultaneously revealing his transgressive genius: he cannot be explained entirely in terms of origins. As if to ironize this compulsive search for "authentic" indicators, Shepard has Bob exposed to polka music (TD 62) — no doubt a likely answer, given the Zimmermans' eastern European, Ashkenazic background and community, but a highly

unsatisfactory one in the search for a rock star's early musical influences, which would, according to popular conception, preferably be found in the Deep South, since the origins of rock itself are in the South. Early Polka influences suggest a radical change in style along the way, no linear progression, and therefore no satisfactory reduction to a traceable origin.

Shepard stresses the conglomerational, fragmented nature of the public's perception of a celebrity: having made several phonecalls, Bob re-enters *"wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, black jeans, and motorcycle boots with brass buckles. He carries a beat-up old acoustic guitar strung around his neck with an old piece of rope"* (TD 62). To the devotee the former is instantly recognizable as Dylan's preferred outfit on stage and in publicity shots around the time of the writing of the play; the latter is reminiscent of the old acoustic guitar that appeared as his constant companion in the early 1960's. As soon as Bob steps into the public arena, then, by way of giving an interview, he mutates from the rather ordinary *"short , skinny guy [...] dressed in nothing but a pair of light -green boxer shorts"* (TD 59) into a hybrid of several of his public incarnations. This transformation is reminiscent of Shepard's observations upon meeting Dylan for the first time, which reflect his own difficulties in keeping the person and the public persona separate: "He's known through his photographs to anyone who meets him. But faced with him in the flesh, I have a hard time shaking loose of the photographs and just seeing him. All I'm seeing are album covers for about six minutes straight. Then slowly he comes into focus" (RTL 13).

As the play starts out it gives the impression of wanting to escape all of the constructivist pitfalls of the conventional celebrity interview which it exposes, by being even more authentic than its model. It seems as if it hopes to save itself from falling prey to the same dynamics by leaving all the mishaps, false starts and incidentals in that would be edited out of the conventional finished product. As the subtitle announces, what is to follow claims to be a minute record and transcription of events and words. Thus, Bob

announces the necessity to make phonecalls and then leaves the "stage" five times before the interview can take its course without major interruptions.

Further into the reading of the play (and it would ideally be read in this particular case, as will become clear below) the reader is initiated into a number of significant uncertainties, which accompany the making of the "authentic" product, and which seriously undermine the claim of absolute truthfulness to the events. As the play approaches its end Sam checks the cassette recorder that was meant to preserve the conversation and finds that the interview, for reasons unexplained, may not be on the tape, at least not in its entirety. On his first few attempts all he finds is piano music. Bob, who seems to be much more comfortable with the blurred edges of reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, fails to attribute the same urgency to the situation ("Don't matter" [TD 66]) and encourages Sam to reconstruct it from memory: "Make it up" (*ibid.*). The tape recorder — normally much more reliable and accurate than hand-written notes (which from the very start are subject to a subjective selection process) has apparently failed to do its job (and in keeping with the play's ubiquitous play with uncertainties and ambiguities the reader never finds out how much of the interview is lost, if anything). Shepard, in other words, tellingly situates the main source of unreliability in the play in the very piece of equipment that is generally used as a guarantee for authenticity: the tape recorder.

Bob's "[m]ake it up" echoes almost identical words from Sam's mouth earlier in the play. A second layer of significant instability is introduced: the answers given by Bob to the questions posed by Sam were not necessarily "true" either: to alleviate Bob's doubts about his own role in the process of making the interview, Sam suggests simply making up the answers: "What if I don't have the answers? — SAM: Make it up" (TD 60). Apart from the preselection process effected through the interviewer selecting questions depending on his own preconceptions, intentions and expectations, the answers constitute another subjective level. They are not tested on a truth/falsehood scale, either, and the subject can invent or add material *ad lib*.

The reader, then, is confronted with what claims to be an authentic celebrity interview full of potentially invented answers in the construction of which the subject has been aided and which have then been reconstructed from memory. And as if these aspects were not enough to cast doubt on the finished product, Bob draws attention to the instability of meaning in language itself.

The dethroning of objectivity and rationality in recent philosophy, with its concomitant emphasis on the subject as cognitive entity, has led to increasing scepticism towards conventional communication models consisting of sender, message and receiver. The idea of an independent message that remains unchanged on its way from one cognitive system to the other is being supplanted by an emphasis on the individual's part in the (social) construction of meaning. With verbal language as the prime means of communication, it is, of course, first and foremost language that is affected by this shift: words are no longer seen as having a fixed meaning, but as acquiring meaning by being part of a contrastive system: language is a system of differences without positive terms, Saussure pointed out. If then, as post-structuralism has it, the binary oppositions on which this differential system is based are dissolved, this may result in the impression that language has lost its ability to communicate: "Words have lost their meaning," Bob regrets. "They mean a million different things" (TD 68). Words no longer communicate a constant, fixed meaning, but acquire different meanings according to context: *Fool for Love's* elaborate toying with recurring patterns is evoked.

The instability of language is as much a factor in the production of the "interview" as it is in its reception. This is the last and most fundamental instability the reader has to contend with: whatever "objective truth" there may be left in it may yet be destroyed by the reader's own subjectivity on the basic level of ascribing meaning to the words. Reception will most likely take place in written form. As if to stay true to the genre it imitates, "True Dylan" was never formally staged and performed, but published solely in *Esquire* magazine — one of the conventional loci for real celebrity interviews. At a glance this

seems to give some minimal justification to Clinton Heylin's practise of treating the play like an interview. The question might be asked why, unless it is a work of non-fiction, the play was never published as part of any of Shepard's regular collections of plays.

As has been shown here, Shepard's central concerns in "True Dylan" are the various levels of instability involved in the production and reception of this particular interview and by extension interviews as a genre with their idiosyncratic claim of authenticity. By claiming absolute authenticity and then progressively qualifying this claim, Shepard makes readers reflect on the genesis of the product in front of them. Publishing it in a forum that is common for the genre further intensifies this self-referential aspect: suddenly the work opens up a meta-discourse not only on itself, but on the entire genre, and it is potentially read by the latter's readership. Mimetic and diegetic elements are mixed and readers enter into a cyclical process of reading and being thrown back upon the work through reading, which makes them reflect on the illusions created by the conventional interview. In a compilation of plays the work's subversive aspect as a piece of writing that questions the very premises of the organ in which it is published would be lost.

By giving the hypothetical "interview" the form of a play Shepard not only does justice to the profession he is most well known for, but he also stresses the fact that an interview is never a casual revelation of the subject's innermost self but a deliberate staging of what the subject and the interviewer would like to emerge as the subject's self. With a crude ironic note, then, the piece's title drives the point home to those who even after reading the play still believe that they are being presented with a verbatim transcription of an interview.<sup>9</sup>

"True Dylan" is treated as an interview with surprising frequency and regularity and objections to this practise more often than not are either dismissed or met by disappointment and a dismissal of the work for what is perceived as inaccuracy.

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<sup>9</sup>According to several sources, *Esquire* was responsible for the title, most likely used as an evocation of *True West*, Shepard's most well known and in its surface structure most accessible play. What was simply intended as an unsubtle hint ironically became an intrinsic part of the play's framework.

Interviews are read in order to gain insights into the subject's being that otherwise remain hidden. Readers who approach "True Dylan" with this objective in mind have done what was to be expected, but they have also walked into Shepard's trap — for while the work is almost certainly based on a de-facto meeting that may even have involved a formal interview, Shepard renders it unquotable to the truth-hunters by presenting it as a work of fiction with such an elaborate self-referential framework as is outlined above. It is this very "inaccuracy" that makes the play a worthwhile addition to Shepard's works: a run-of-the-mill interview would have disappeared into oblivion before too long as an unprofessional attempt by a playwright to branch out into other genres. As it is, Shepard has created a multi-layered commentary on identity, authenticity, originality, truth and genius — values of unsurpassed importance in the post-Enlightenment West. Dylan investigates similar issues in his film *Renaldo & Clara*, which also takes its cue from the constructedness of Bob Dylan's public image.

## 6. "Deferred Presence": Origin and Authenticity in Dylan's Performance Art

It can be argued, as Bruce Powe does, that the affinity between the language of Shepard's plays and the rhythms of rock 'n' roll can be extended to a shared theatricality between Shepard and rock music: "Shepard seems to have learned a great deal from rock 'n' roll stars, in fact, about how to stage an event" (1987: 182). Indeed, Shepard's work is more visual and more oriented towards spectacle than many other forms of drama, particularly of the naturalist tradition. The naturalist tradition focuses more on problem-solving than on involving the audience in a primarily sensual experience. Naturalism is most successful when it imitates the familiar principles of the world that surrounds the audience in real life. It does not aim to present a world of provocative unfamiliarity. *True West* with its many pauses inserted into the dramatic text is one example from Shepard's later period<sup>1</sup> illustrating the freedom for interpretation in Shepard's work. Shepard's stage directions are notoriously sparse: the text gives no indication how the actors are meant to bridge these gaps. They are left to their own devices in finding convincing strategies.<sup>2</sup>

In performance, Dylan makes full use of the freedom for improvisation that Powe points out in the rock concert setting. No two renderings of the same song are identical. Within the rock music framework substantial responsibility for the musical part of the performance is delegated to individual musicians who react to changes on the spur of the moment or initiate them and thus invite the rest of the band to go along with them. Yet, arguably the most idiosyncratic part of Dylan's performances is the vocal. In the *Rolling*

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<sup>1</sup>His early dramatic works are more rooted in the Off-Off-Broadway movement emerging at that time and are hence even more prone to spontaneity than his later, less experimental but more focussed and structurally denser works. He has nonetheless never abandoned drawing on techniques that had their origin in Off-Off-Broadway, such as the Living Theatre's transformation exercises and Chaikin's work with the Open Theatre.

<sup>2</sup>How much John Malkovich in the Steppenwolf production of *True West* empathized with his part as Lee is evident in details such as his spontaneous turning the correct pronunciation of "Mojave" into an Anglicized version substituting a palatoalveolar voiced affricate for the glottal h.

*Thunder Logbook* Shepard acknowledges Dylan's capacity to alter not just the lyrics<sup>3</sup> or the melody but (most importantly for Shepard because of his interest in the rhythm of language) the phrasing. A new phrasing of a familiar line alters the rhythm, shifts emphasis, and creates tension by working against the audience's expectation and against the music. This tension is captured in Shepard's description: "Then Dylan in white face messing with the phrasing of 'It Ain't Me', twisting up the rhythm structure, elongating the lines to the point where you think he'll never make it. He'll never fit the thing into the music. Then, at the last minute, it all slides together" (RTL 74).

When reading from his own work to an audience, Shepard places the same emphasis on improvised interpretation. He captures the atmosphere of the piece through tone, intonation, use of different voices, emphasis, and last but not least rhythm. There is a strong sense of witnessing a performance rather than a reading — an actor reading. Shepard enters into a similar personal union of writer and performer that Dylan continually experiences on stage. Particularly the collaborations with Joseph Chaikin rely on an actor's performance for effect. Pieces like "Tongues" or "Savage/Love" (1981) are performance poetry and were originally performed by the two artists themselves. "Tongues" involved percussion music "to make temporary environments for the voice to live in" (Chaikin/Shepard 1981: 75), as Shepard puts it in his introductory note to the work.

When Shepard was asked in 1975 to join Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue on a tour across the North Eastern United States and South Eastern Canada, an opportunity presented itself to him to witness firsthand how a rock 'n' roll event is staged. Although he had had musician friends (among them Keith Richards); he had never observed a band on tour for any extended period of time.

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<sup>3</sup>Over the past ten to fifteen years lyric changes have not been a prominent feature of Dylan's work. He now tends to limit himself to minor changes or even faithful reproductions of the recorded versions (in terms of lyrics).

Dylan had toyed with the basic idea for the tour for a long time. Ever since the mid-1960's he had casually mentioned to friends the fantasy to call into being what resembled a travelling road show more than an organized concert tour designed to make a profit. The romantic ideal of a nomadic, supportive, bohemian community that grants limitless freedom for self-expression within its entirely self-sufficient network may go back even further in Dylan's personal history: in his early days in the Village he had veiled his personal past and identity by claiming to have belonged to such a temporary environment as a travelling carnival. In so doing Dylan simultaneously veiled his origin in mystery, and placed himself both on the fringe of society and within an idealist tradition of American nomadic lifestyles beginning with the early settlers of the West, whose lives were idealized in the interest of myth, and carried on much later by the Beat poets of the 1950's. Shepard remarks not inappropriately at the start of the *Logbook*: "I used to think the only place to write was on a train. Perfect temporary environment" (5).

Finally, then, in putting together a troupe for the tour, Dylan had his own travelling vaudeville show. Musician friends and acquaintances would join the Revue along the way for a few days or weeks and then disappear and pursue their own projects. The way the tour was originally conceived, it was supposed to keep itself alive indefinitely by virtue of this mechanism. Ideally Dylan himself would have been able to withdraw from the tour for a while, while it was being kept in working order by other artists (he saw Eric Clapton as a possible substitute headliner). History shows that this did not work. The first Rolling Thunder Revue toured the country for a period of six weeks in late 1975, initially stopping at small venues off the beaten track. After a period of about three weeks bigger venues were added, culminating in a concert for the boxer Rubin Carter, at Madison Square Garden. An artistic statement was to be made, not money, but the filming of *Renaldo & Clara* turned out to be more expensive than anticipated and larger venues were intended to provide the financial backup so that the project could continue. The larger venues do not appear to have affected the tour's innovative air: Shepard's *Logbook* reports inspired

shows (the excitement of which can still be relived by listening to surviving audience recordings from the period) and small, appreciative audiences.

The mid-70's were arguably the most artistically innovative time of Dylan's career: the tour was boosted by exceptional new material from two albums, *Blood on the Tracks*, just released in January of the same year, and *Desire*, about to be released in January 1976. The second leg of the tour, added in 1976 largely for commercial reasons, lacked the spirit, innovation and idealism of the first. *Renaldo & Clara* was shot exclusively during the first leg. The second one is not as well documented by visual material and will be neglected here.

After successful collaborations (Dylan's first collaborations ever) on some of the songs recorded on *Desire*, notably "Oh Sister," "Isis," and the better known "Hurricane," Jacques Levy became the stage director for the new show. Dylan had met Levy at the Other End club in Greenwich Village and his approach to "Isis," the first song fragments of which Dylan had presented to Levy (Heylin 1991: 260), had complemented his own so well that they had decided to collaborate on material for an entire album. Levy had collaborated on songs before (notably Roger McGuinn's "Chestnut Mare") but he derives his reputation primarily from his involvement as a director in the Off-Off-Broadway movement. "Hurricane" is the most well-known of his collaborations with Dylan, and although by no means the best, it nonetheless makes evident how the two writers complemented one another. Levy's deliberate approach focused Dylan's inspirational writing and his involvement in theatre added a cinematographic narrative to the song. "Hurricane" derives its relative popularity from having been released as a single intended to further the cause of helping the unjustly imprisoned boxer Hurricane Carter to justice.

In his capacity as director Levy had also been responsible for the premieres of two of Shepard's earlier plays, *Red Cross* and *La Turista* in 1966 and '67 respectively. According to Levy, the revue was rehearsed like a piece for the theatre:

We rehearsed the show in New York for almost two weeks. Again we had this enormous pile of material, and it had to be arranged and worked out and staged. And the idea was that it should not look staged. [...] The thing was to make it appear like it was a spontaneous evening [...] like a vaudeville show or a travelling circus. (qtd in Heylin 1991: 274)

Dylan was aiming for a show of about four hours in length in which different performers would have their own short sets, all of which were to be played with roughly the same band. But the concerts involved other genres, too: there were occasional poetry readings, notably by Allen Ginsberg. Theatrical props and accessories such as carpets and make-up were used and a huge screen to be lowered from the ceiling announced "Rolling Thunder Revue" in the style of an Old West travelling road show (while the Crew T-Shirts also featured Dylan's name as an attention drawing device).

There was a film to be made along the way, for which Sam Shepard was hired to write the screenplay. The suggestion for hiring Shepard may have come from poet and musician Patti Smith, who knew Dylan (and joined up with the Rolling Thunder Revue, too, though not as a performer) and was a friend and sometime lover of Shepard's. In terms of a definitive conception of the film, Shepard knew what he was up against upon his first contact with Dylan's representatives on the phone before he had even left for New York City to join the Revue: "Then comes a long vagueness about a projected film with me somehow providing dialogue on the spot for all the heavies" (RTL 4).

There turned out to be little need for a screenplay. If the shows themselves were to be improvised around a fixed scaffolding structure, as envisaged by Dylan and Levy, the film ended up relying even more heavily on improvisation. Shepard found his field of influence much less rigidly defined than originally planned. He outlined scenes to be used in filming and contributed his acting and general input, both of which went into the conception of the show and the movie, and wrote his own fragmented account of the tour, the *Rolling Thunder Logbook* (maybe his most valuable contribution to the Rolling

Thunder phenomenon) but generally found himself far less useful than he would have been comfortable with:

Feel myself nosediving into negativity. Just wanna go back home. [...] Everything's at the mercy of random energy. Ideas flying every which way but no plan. Meetings up the ass. Meetings in oval-shaped, U.N.-style conference rooms, so that the sense of self-importance permeates you beyond control. [...] My disinterest is killing me. Why aren't I blasting off with them to hear all that great music? I've heard it already. But it's not that. It's not having an ax. Being a backstage parasite. (RTL 135)

Dylan had the following to say about Shepard's usefulness in making the film: "*Renaldo and Clara* was originally intended as a more structured film. I hired playwright Sam Shepard to provide dialogue but we didn't use much of his stuff because of a conflict of ideas" (qtd in Heylin 1991: 277). It is not specified what the basis for this conflict of ideas was.<sup>4</sup>

Despite conflicting views on the genesis of the film, the *Logbook* nonetheless communicates that the Revue was a rewarding experience for Shepard. Dylan has been one of Shepard's personal heroes. The affinity between (Dylan's) rock writing and Shepard's own dramatic writing as well as their similar aesthetics has already been pointed out. Most importantly, Dylan's concerns in his mid-70's work mirror Shepard's own. In his recorded work, the theatricality of the shows and in the structure of the film Dylan toys with concepts of identity in ways that are similar to Shepard's own concerns with questions of identity and origin.

Two striking parallels in the overall approach of the two authors to their work seem relevant and should not be overlooked, before a detailed look at the material Dylan produced in the mid-70's will lead the way to further comparisons: both authors seem to

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<sup>4</sup>However serious these conflicts might have been, they did not keep the two from collaborating again around ten years later, in 1986, on the song *Brownsville Girl*, which they co-wrote and which was released on Dylan's album *Knocked Out Loaded*.

have relied heavily on intuition in their writing, especially in the early stages of their careers, and both evoke parallels with the visual arts in their work and in describing it to outsiders in interviews.

During their early years in New York City, both Shepard and Dylan were extremely prolific writers. Charles Mingus Jr. remembers instances of Shepard disappearing into a room and re-emerging a few hours later with a whole play finished in the box that used to contain the blank sheets of writing paper. Dylan is reported to have written straightforward, simple songs such as "Blowin' in the Wind" within ten minutes. He is notorious for finishing the writing of material that is to be recorded in the pressure situation of the recording studio. Much of the material for *Blonde on Blonde* (1966), a surreal and associative work, was generated spontaneously in the studio with the musicians bridging Dylan's writing time by playing cards. Daniel Lanois, the producer of Dylan's 1989 album *Oh Mercy*, reports a similar, if more diligent writing style.

Many observers, including Lanois, have mentioned Dylan's low boredom threshold, necessitating quick, spontaneous and somewhat undisciplined writing with notes being scribbled on any portable surface. Leonard Cohen recalls an incident that pointed out the differences between Cohen's own meticulous approach to language and writing and Dylan's spontaneity. After Cohen had admitted to a two-year-period in which his song "Hallelujah" consistently neared completion, Dylan reported a fifteen-minute writing time for "I & I," itself among his major achievements (Cohen 1991: 30). Cohen's memories can be argued to verify earlier statements, such as the one on "Blowing in the Wind" cited above. Shepard's writing process resembles automatic writing techniques (as discussed earlier). Particularly in the early stages of their creative development, then<sup>5</sup>, both artists seem to have trusted their intuition in writing. Dylan described this period as writing down "what I unconsciously felt" (qtd in Heylin 1991: 245).

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<sup>5</sup>Yet the aborted play entitled "White Slavery", which ends in the repetition of the frustrated phrase "writing is too slow" originated in the second half of the 1970's. Shepard was following an automatic writing technique at various stages of his career and has certainly never completely abandoned it.

For him, a new period of artistic creation began after his 1966 motorcycle accident, which ended a period of fast living and writing aided by the consumption of large quantities of chemical substances. A new technique was needed that did not depend on drugs for the production and recording of visions that were either hallucinatory in origin or emerging from the unconscious, or both. On the lookout for new directions and inspirations Dylan began to take lessons in painting from an art teacher named Norman Raeben, who turned out to have a profound effect on him and his creative output in areas very different from painting. Dylan has repeatedly mentioned that although he was taking painting lessons, Raeben not only taught him how to paint, but that his influence extended beyond simple practicality.

[Norman Raeben] taught me how to see ... in a way that allowed me to do consciously what I unconsciously felt. And I didn't know how to pull it off. I wasn't sure it could be done in songs because I'd never written a song like that. But when I started doing it, the first album I made was *Blood on the Tracks*. Everybody agrees that that was pretty different, and what's different about it is that there's a code in the lyrics and also there's no sense of time. (Heylin 1991: 245)<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere Dylan has described the mechanism as "putting head, mind and eye together" (Heylin 1991: 244). For Dylan, being in control of putting the head, mind and eye together opened up new, rewarding perspectives: with *Blood on the Tracks* he emerged from a creative trough and launched a series of remarkable works that established him as a mature writer with a conscious approach to his output. With Raeben's help he had, to an extent, managed to free himself from the whims of his muse that had begun to torment him as the spontaneous steady flow of inspired work that had been characteristic of the 1960's began to subside.

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<sup>6</sup>Although writers' (and especially Dylan's) own comments on their work are generally to be treated with suspicion and detract from rather than add to a fruitful discussion, Dylan's comments on *Renaldo & Clara* seem useful, substantial and informed. For once, Dylan is trying to elucidate rather than to mystify.

Shepard, too, expressed frustration with his automatic writing technique at various stages of his career. He, too, sometimes wished to be able to exert more control over the process of artistic creation and to plan it more. Once again Steve Bottoms refers to a revealing note to be found in the Shepard Archive at Boston University, written just months after "White Slavery" (the desperate attempt to speed up writing): "improvisation" Shepard sarcastically defines as "in my case — trying to find music through stumbling around. I need more head — I need to bring my head into it more" (Bottoms 1998: 10). Shepard has changed direction frequently throughout his career, and his later works, originating at about the same time as Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* and the movie *Renaldo & Clara*, reveal a much denser structure than his early Off-Off-Broadway work which sometimes neglected vertical density for the sake of experimentation. In the mid-seventies Shepard, too, poured more thought into conscious construction of his work. Yet there is no indication of a trailblazing experience such as Dylan's acquaintance with Raeben that would have brought about a radical change in outlook and technique. Yet, maybe Shepard has never been as much at the mercy of his creative energies as Dylan and has never suffered as much from the whims of an unreliable muse. Both writers' moves towards a more "conscious" writing technique are of particular importance here, as they can be read to mirror growing scepticism of an inspirational approach that implies the originary formation of ideas in the writer's head. The new technique indicates a movement away from the belief in a unified origin towards difference.

At this point the second parallel between Shepard's and Dylan's mid-70's work emerges. Under Raeben's influence Dylan applies techniques that draw on the visual arts specifically to his own work in songwriting. He transposed principles of painting and visual art reception to the construction of songs. In viewing a painting one can remain close to the canvas and study details that appear out of context under such a scrutinizing gaze, yet one can also step away from the picture and view the artwork as a whole from a distance, which allows the details to fall into place — the eye puts them together into a

unified whole. Particularly for his song "Tangled Up in Blue" Dylan explicitly establishes this analogy: he wanted the song to work like a painting (Heylin 1991: 245). In Shepard's imagination, too, the visual and the verbal are inextricably intertwined. This is partly due to the fact that he writes for the theatre — a genre that depends on the visual. The strong visual impact of his theatre has been described in detail in previous sections. It has emerged from these discussions that Shepard builds on the visual to a far greater extent than is determined by the genre. This leaning of his theatre towards visuality, sensuality and spectacle will again become relevant in connection with the theatricality of the Rolling Thunder shows.

"Tangled Up in Blue" (1975) is the primary example used as much by critics as by Dylan himself (who was unusually open to the media when his film *Renaldo & Clara* was to be publicized) to illustrate his new approach to song-writing. Initially the song seems to prepare for telling a causally linked story. It begins with the speaker's waking up in bed in the morning: the expectation of a balladesque telling of the events of that particular day, chronologically organized from dawn to dusk is evoked:

Early one mornin' the sun was shinin',  
 I was layin' in bed  
 Wondrin' if she'd changed at all  
 If her hair was still red.  
 Her folks they said our lives together  
 Sure was gonna be rough (L 357)

But this balladesque introduction is deceptive: none of the expectations evoked by it is fulfilled. The narrative is far from chronological. One is reminded of *Ulysses*, which also relates the events of just 24 hours but abandons all principles such an undertaking would conventionally adhere to. Right after the first four lines of the song Dylan makes his listeners abandon all expectations they normally bring to the genre.

In music and particularly in song the passing of time is most noticeable. Music moves through time in a linear fashion — it is even measured in time. This is far more pronounced than it is in the process of reading a novel. In novels the reader can lose herself: subjectively time can stand still while one is absorbed in a book. One can skip pages and re-read passages, and one rejoins the measured arrow of time later upon emerging from the fictional world. This is more difficult in music: the mere fact of soundwaves travelling through space draws one's attention back to what is interpreted by humans as linear movement through time. Dylan asks his listeners to abandon this concept of linearity in music, and he does so in a song which in the first few lines appears to be a ballad — a form determined by its narrative, hence linear structure.

In the first stanza of the song a class conflict is established ("Her folks they said our lives together / Sure was gonna be rough / They never did like mama's homemade dress / Papa's bankbook wasn't big enough" [L 357]). This turns out to be irrelevant to the narrative structure of the song. It is at no point returned to later. What seems to be an expositional stanza, determining the fundamental assumptions the song works from, turns out to be merely a snapshot. This is just one example for the song's strategic distribution of information that turns out to be of no consequence.

To confuse narrative progression even further, Dylan goes on to develop an intricate network of pronouns in the course of the song that have no or more than one referent. Reference is never unambiguous. The song alternates between the speaker talking about himself in the first as well as the third person. This is mixed in with the presence of a woman (or several women?) referred to as "she." It is never clarified, whether the woman the speaker met when she was still married is identical with the one in the bar, or indeed, whether there is a causal relationship between the fourth and the fifth stanza: did the woman in the bar take the speaker home to show him the book of poems? John Herdman (1981: 55) reports a change of mind on his part from a conviction that "the song describes a single obsessive relationship" to the opinion that "only the 'she's of the first and last

verses are the same" (ibid.). Even though he regards his initial view to be mistaken, he also points out that it is one the listener is led into (ibid.). Thus Herdman comes to the conclusion that Dylan intentionally evokes the impression of linear progression through "the use of the word 'she' to refer to all the women he tells us of" (56), but the pronouns can never be integrated into a logical narrative.<sup>7</sup>

This play with referents becomes particularly pronounced in the penultimate stanza. The speaker announces that "*I* lived with *them* on Montague Street" when "*he* started into dealing with slaves" and "*She* had to sell everything she owned" (L 358; emphasis mine). Who are they, he and she, or, for that matter, I? It is part of the song's strategy that these questions are never answered. The listeners' attempts to construct a chronological or causal storyline are frustrated methodically until they realize that the point is not a story but the atmospheric impressions evoked by the descriptions. In an episodic fashion seemingly unrelated events are told; yet from an overall perspective "Tangled Up in Blue" achieves a consistent impression. It seems complete although it consists not of a unified whole but bits and pieces.

This mirrors Dylan's elaborations on the act of viewing a painting. One can see a detail or the picture in its entirety; one can appreciate Van Gogh's intricate dotted colour patterns or see how the dots combine to make up a flowery meadow. Each of the stanzaic miniature paintings (for each of the descriptions evokes vivid pictures in the listener's mind) complements the overall impression. While causal or temporal chronology dissolves, the individual descriptions seem instead to happen simultaneously in different corners of Dylan's audio painting, but the relation of one to the other (not a causal but rather a sensual one) is revealed only when one steps back from the painting.

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<sup>7</sup>In fact, Herdman sees as the central disorienting device a continuous evocation and frustration of expectation through references that can be interpreted towards a storyline. Thus the speaker's staring at the side of the woman's face in the bar ("I just kept looking at the side of her face / In the spotlight so clear" [L 358]) is meant to insinuate recognition on the speaker's part, whereas the motivation is simply physical attraction (Herdman 1981: 57).

Fragmentation is, of course, a household device in postmodern art, notably in the postmodern novel. As a genre the novel has traditionally worked less with the effects produced by gaps and blanks than other genres such as poems have, which due to the extreme density of their presentation rely on 'holes' to be filled by the reader. Fragmentation marks the decisive shift from presentation to production; from the readerly to the writerly.

It has been seen that in Shepard's theatre fragmentation makes itself felt particularly in the presentation of the characters. While the later plays present reasonably coherent plots, the characters themselves lack this coherence and psychological motivation. Almost a standard device in Shepard's plays is the role reversal between two characters (as seen for instance in *May and Eddie*, and in an even more pronounced fashion in *Austin and Lee*) or complete transformations of characters without any conceivable reason or motivation (Vince in *Buried Child*) that are reminiscent of (and no doubt inspired by) the Living Theatre's transformation exercises (rooted in improvisation rather than the author-dominated tradition of Western theatre). In "Tangled Up in Blue" fragmentation of character goes so far as to make character as such a superfluous concept. Dylan's play with pronouns makes it a fruitless undertaking to look for connections or motivations. Indeed, all the "characters" are interchangeable; they could all be aspects of the same individual from a variety of perspectives, or impossible to unify at all.

As an artist whose primary *métier* is performance, Dylan depends on a writerly audience response and in the context in which he works, the rock concert, audience response is expected and part of the process of artistic presentation: the audience jeer or cheer, clap or whistle as spontaneous reactions to what is happening on stage. In contrast to a conventional theatre performance, where audience reaction is limited to particular moments, such as the end of an act, interaction between stage and auditorium in a rock concert is immediate and lively.<sup>8</sup> One reason for audience reaction to be livelier in a rock

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<sup>8</sup>One of the adventurous aspects of the Tom Waits / Burroughs collaboration *Black Rider*, for instance, is the carrying of rock concert conventions into the theatre without making concessions in content.

concert is the knowledge that their opinion could conceivably change the course of the performance. A rock concert's success depends on improvisation within predetermined boundaries. The audience may request a song, for example, and if it fits the overall scheme the band have the freedom to diverge from their original course<sup>9</sup>. The author-dominated theatre tradition is less flexible. Since the actors enact the author's will, there tends to be no content variation at all — variation, if any, is limited to mood and atmosphere.

As a dramatist, one of Shepard's interests in the Rolling Thunder Revue tour was its theatricality (which extended far beyond the rock concert setting and will be discussed in detail later). All of Shepard's better-known work, not just his later work, clearly follows the Western author-dominated theatre tradition, but in terms of visceral impact it leans towards the spontaneity of a rock concert. Rolling Thunder comes a fair way in Shepard's direction by being — due to Levy's influence — significantly more staged and theatrical than the average rock concert. With its small, interactive, ensemble-oriented performances Off-Off-Broadway (Levy's primary field of influence) sought alternatives to the author-dominated, naturalist, proscenium-stage tradition. But even though Joseph Chaikin saw Shepard as one of the writers for the Open Theatre, Shepard himself says he always felt out of place there. Clearly he has never seen himself as working for an ensemble whose concerns are rated higher than his own and has thus never fully embraced the troupe's ambitions, but the improvisational techniques developed by Chaikin's Open Theatre have nonetheless influenced his aesthetics and outlook and made him likely to diverge from conventional, naturalist theatre and its assumptions.

In Dylan's concerts the audience faces more improvisation or divergence from the artist's recorded output than it would at other rock concerts. Dylan is known to make radical changes to instrumentation and arrangement as well as lyrics when he is performing his material live. In terms of live performance Rolling Thunder ranks as one of

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<sup>9</sup>While Dylan rarely grants audience requests, there is nonetheless significantly more variation from one performance of a particular song to the next than there is in concerts by other artists.

Dylan's most adventurous and innovative periods. Most versions he presented to his listeners were radically different from what audiences were familiar with on record — Shepard's comment on Dylan's twisting up the rhythm structure of "It Ain't Me, Babe" almost beyond recognition reflects a general characteristic of Dylan's work that was exceptionally pronounced on this tour. Often the space of live performance is used for experimentation — sometimes with disastrous effects, but often with unsurpassed visceral intensity. Paul Williams writes

... the movie *Renaldo & Clara* and the Rolling Thunder tour and Dylan's performances during the tour reflect and express an aesthetic that starts, perhaps, with the ability to appreciate 'People Get Ready.' Here is a performance full of garbled, slurred and forgotten words, a performance joined in progress by drums, bass, and eventually guitar [...]. A recording almost drowned out by chatter at the beginning, focussed on a vocal that comes on with astonishing power for a few words and then dies away. (Williams 1992: 64)

This version of "People Get Ready" is a recording of uncertain origin ( it probably came into existence during the rehearsals for Rolling Thunder) that appears only on the soundtrack for *Renaldo & Clara*. Dylan never recorded it on any of his own albums, yet it is a performance of stunning intensity that would remain hidden to the listener who focuses merely on Dylan's studio albums. In Dylan's performing art a studio recording does not possess the status of a perfected version that may be the result of a diligent effort consisting of a large number of takes that the artist does not hope to surpass but rather to reproduce on stage.<sup>10</sup> Recordings that appear on Dylan's studio albums are often results

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. Philip Auslander (1992): The recorded version, rather than the live performance that takes place in the flesh and blood and is therefore far more 'real', has come to be perceived as the 'original' performance of a song: "...the mediatized performance has become the referent of, and sets the standard for, the live one" (36). The live concert is used only as a means to authenticate the 'original,' but it is not the frame of reference (Auslander 37). In this framework a live performance is best when it recreates exactly the familiar, mediatized version (36). Dylan destabilizes this hierarchy by refusing to reproduce recorded work in performance. The absolute status of the recording is 'devalued.' It becomes another phenotype of a more abstract genotype.

of a limited number of takes. Even though the widespread conception that Dylan often works with just a single take seems to be a romantic overstatement designed to mythologize Dylan's genius (as for instance the surfacing of a large number of "Like a Rolling Stone" outtakes reveals), Dylan is nonetheless an unusually fast worker in the studio and his working process is quite different from the tedious reiteration of the same song common in the production of the commercial hit. The "Like a Rolling Stone" outtakes reveal radical reworkings of the arrangement, for instance: the song was tried with different instrumentation and as a waltz. An album is therefore to be understood as a snapshot of an ongoing process in which the artist produces (live) versions of a song that complement one another. Any new version enters a network of existing ones and evokes those old versions, which in turn colour the audience's reception of the new one.

Again, "Tangled Up in Blue" provides an example. Dylan has repeatedly rewritten the song and altered the arrangement and rhythmic flow of the long lines dominated by a quick succession of syllables. Most striking are the lyrical changes the song undergoes from one version to the next. While in the version included in *Renaldo & Clara* the song is only subtly different from the version on *Blood on the Tracks* (the smirk on Dylan's face at the start indicates that he is expecting audience recognition and the cheer produced by the first line proves him right), the lyrics have undergone dramatic changes by the time Dylan performs the song live in 1984.<sup>11</sup> In fact, some of the new lines seem to comment (sometimes ironically) on the original release. In this reworked version the skeleton structure of the stanzas is maintained in every case (even if sometimes the familiarity hinges on just a single word: "I had a job in the great north woods" (357) becomes "He had a steady job and a pretty face"). The listener meets all the beacons familiar from the previous version (the early morning,<sup>12</sup> the married woman, the man with a job, the bar and the flat on Montague Street), but the space leading from one such beacon to the next is

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<sup>11</sup>The version can be found on the album *Real Live*.

<sup>12</sup>In fact, except for additional play with pronouns, the first stanzas are identical up until the last two lines, thus leaving no doubt of the framework within which the listener is moving.

filled differently yet with reference to the familiar version. This is most obvious in the final stanza, where Dylan works with a straight reversal in order to make his strategy apparent to even the most unperceptive listener just before the song closes. Instead of

All the people we used to know  
 They're an illusion to me now.  
 Some are mathematicians  
 Some are carpenter's wives. [...]  
 But me I'm still on the road  
 Headin' for another joint  
 We always did feel the same,  
 We just saw it from a different point of view, (L 359)

the listener hears:

I gotta find some among the women and men  
 Whose destiny is unclear  
 Some are masters of illusion  
 Some are ministers of the trade [...]  
 Me, I'm still heading towards the sun  
 Trying to stay out of the joint  
 We always did love the very same one  
 We just saw her from a different point of view (Dylan 1984)

Countless other juxtapositions derive their humour and/or effect from the same principle: "She was standing there in back of my chair / Said to me, 'Don't I know your name?'" (L 358) becomes "She was standing there right beside my chair / Saying, 'What's that you've got up your sleeve?'" (Dylan 1984). "I heard her say over my shoulder, / 'We'll meet again someday on the avenue,' / Tangled up in blue." (L 157) is turned into "She turned around to look at him [...] / Saying, 'I wish I could tell you all the things / That I never learned how to say.' / He said, 'It's alright, babe, I love you, too. /

But we were tangled up in blue" (Dylan 1984). Here Dylan himself establishes a conscious connection between two versions and builds for effect on the audience's familiarity with the released one on *Blood on the Tracks*. And although he has said that he considers the version released on *Real Live* the ultimate, perfected version of the song, in subsequent performances he has always gone back to the 'original' lyrics (with minor alterations) as found on *Blood on the Tracks*, thus qualifying the self-proclaimed absolute status of the *Real Live* version significantly. The listener gains more from regarding "Tangled Up in Blue" as an abstract concept — made up of all existing versions.

"Tangled Up in Blue" has been part of Dylan's live repertoire for many years and a long list of other versions survive on audience tapes. Any new version enters this existing network. But even if the listener in a live concert has no access to audience recordings from previous years, the authority of the released version is immediately undermined by the one s/he is presented with in concert: Dylan refuses to authenticate the recorded version by reproducing it live (cf. Auslander 1992: 37) — a process that would result in an ever increasing perpetuation of its absolute status. Thus no rendering of a song is ever present only in itself and identical only with itself. Its presence is continually deferred to other elements in the network. Jacques Derrida describes such a process in his notion of the trace:

... each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element .... (Derrida 1986: 13)

Thus, by virtue of its nature as a performing art, Dylan's corpus of work has no centre and no origin. There is no single version of a song that could claim authority of being the ultimate version that would be "the mark of a lifetime" (TC 249), beyond deferral in absolute presence. (It will be seen that in *Renaldo & Clara*, which utilizes many

of the new techniques Dylan had applied in songwriting, this idea of deferred presence is transferred to the level of identity.)

This notion of centrelessness is, of course, inherent in all performing arts. A printed dramatic text is always merely a "makeshift"<sup>13</sup>-device intended to make the play accessible to a larger audience beyond select theatre audiences. A dramatic work is fully realized only in performance. It exists in the entirety of all productions of the play and is in this respect centreless in a way similar to Dylan's work: no production will reproduce exactly a previous production. Like Dylan's music and all performed art a play is of a transient nature — not fixed in its original singularity like a painting, for instance. Shepard's theatre is different from Dylan's "performed literature"<sup>14</sup> insofar as Dylan is his own master on stage and can make changes to his work at will whereas the actors playing in a Shepard play are bound by the authority of the text (as discussed in detail in the section on *True West*).

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<sup>13</sup>The word has overtones of temporariness inappropriate in this context.

<sup>14</sup>"Performed Literature" is the title of a PhD dissertation (later published as a book) on Dylan as a performing artist that focuses in detail on his idiosyncratic inflection, enunciation and delivery and the rhythm they produce: Betsy Bowden. 1982. *Performed Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.

### 7. "I had to re-arrange their faces...": *Renaldo & Clara* and its intertext

Clinton Heylin remarks that for *Blood on the Tracks* Dylan has transferred visual concepts to song-writing so well that it would be difficult to re-appropriate the material to a visual medium: "'Tangled Up in Blue' in particular would take an entire full-length movie to disentangle visually, and even then the results would be unsatisfactory compared with the five-minute song" (Heylin 1991: 245). The movie format presents problems similar to those of music but it does so in a far more pronounced way: human perception is generally dominated by the visual. Because of the visual succession of different frames on the screen, the viewer is even more aware of the passing of time on a linear axis than is the case in listening to music. Film in this respect resembles music more closely than painting, despite the seemingly close affiliation between film and painting due to their shared visuality.

Heylin's verdict thus holds true for the conventional movie format, but not for Dylan's approach.<sup>1</sup> When Dylan went about editing the copious film material shot on the tour (a process that took him over a year) he utilized much the same painterly techniques he had used to such effect in *Blood on the Tracks*, but for this undertaking to be successful, the limitations of the film genre — the linear movement through time that is almost inherent in the format — had to be overcome. In breaking with the linear plot-structure of the conventional film Dylan managed to establish a tight network of references in which, similar to Shepard's approach in *Fool for Love*, the sign is never present in itself. Every element defers presence beyond itself and becomes part of a system of differences. The postmodern concern with breaking up linear form in order to deconstruct its philosophical implications has of course also spread to film-making, but because a non-linear plot and the linear progression of a reel of film seem irreconcilable concepts, the practice has remained widespread only among avant-garde filmmakers.

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<sup>1</sup>Dylan, of course, did not explicitly set out to put "Tangled Up in Blue" on film. The film merely reveals a similar approach to structure and time.

*Renaldo & Clara's* length is one aspect that complicates the reception process. The final credits start rolling after approximately four hours, yet unlike film audiences in India, for instance, Western cinema-goers are not used to focusing on a film for longer than a maximum of 120 minutes (the recent fad of exceptionally long films having already elongated the average attention span).

Another shortcoming is that some important aspects of its construction can only be gathered from background information on the film, not from the film's presentation itself. It takes considerable creativity, for instance, to gather from Renaldo's disappearance into a room (towards the end of the film), a shot of him lying on his back on the floor, and the subsequent excerpt from the song "In the Morning" by a cabaret entertainer, that the whole film was supposed to have taken place in Renaldo's dream. In this particular instance this potentially missing piece of information only insignificantly alters the viewer's reception,<sup>2</sup> but other instances are more important. Stephen Scobie mentions the fact that Ramon is supposed to be the ghost of "Mrs. Dylan's" dead lover without there being anything in the film indicating this (1991: 102).

The film turned into a commercial and critical failure and Dylan withdrew it from the public. Since then, not many audiences have had the chance to see *Renaldo & Clara*, even though it clearly constitutes an important part of Dylan's work. It is his only attempt at working with film in the function of the director and he spent a long time in search of a mode of expression that would overcome both the limitations of song and film: "I'm ... doing this ... to put forth a certain vision which I carry around and can't express on any other canvas" (Heylin 1991: 304) he said — and resorts to a painterly terminology to describe the film's mode of presentation. *Renaldo & Clara* to him is a moving painting.

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<sup>2</sup>The film has dreamlike qualities anyway, but without explicit knowledge of its actually being a dream, the status of David Blue's monologue is altered. Blue seems to appear in the centreless construct of the film as an authoritative voice relating the past (the early days in Greenwich Village) "as it really was," giving an "objective" account and thus giving stability to the construct. A sceptical mind will doubt the objectivity of the account anyway, but explicit awareness of Blue's existence only in Renaldo's head would relativize his absolute status even to those who see him as a source of "truth."

It makes use of overarching abstract themes, intertextual references, recurring motifs and colour patterns (not surprisingly, given the preoccupation with painting). To organize the material Dylan used a cross-referential system based on a collection of index cards. Allen Ginsberg, in his thoughtful and supportive criticism of the film describes the structural ideas in detail. According to him, Dylan had about 110 hours of material, which he organized according to central themes, ideas, images (such as God, music, poetry, marriage, death, women, Bob Dylan, Native Americans) colour patterns (notably red and blue), and characters. Later he would cross-reference the material and re-arrange it according to these new structural patterns (cf. Ginsberg, qtd in Heylin 1991: 303-4). "So it's compositional, and the idea was not to have a plot, but to have a composition of these themes" (ibid.). The sometimes subtle thematic links between the scenes characteristically open up only after repeated viewings — an audience in a movie theatre would have to be unusually perceptive and attentive (for an exceptionally long period of time) to be able to filter all the important information out in a single viewing.

Even when the viewer has grasped the structural principles of the film, it is still difficult — due to the habitual workings of the Western mind — not to impose chronological order on it. The film consists of a limited number of sequences that were cut during the editing process and rearranged. In the sequence about trading the woman for the horse (as in many others) it is obvious what the chronology of the original sequence was and the mind cannot help putting the pieces in order. Explicit awareness of the dream status of the film would assist the viewer in refraining from this practice: dreams adhere to principles alien to the conscious waking mind, which subsequently imposes its own logic on them. Audiences that are more accepting of the lack of causality or chronology will find it easier to look for other links.

Again, as on *Blood on the Tracks*, the impression evoked by the lack of causality and chronology<sup>3</sup> is one of simultaneity and timelessness. All through the film shots of

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<sup>3</sup>According to Shepard's *Rolling Thunder Logbook* the first information he received about Dylan's vision for the film presented itself in the ambiguous words: "We don't have to make any connections" (RTL 11),

moving trains, trucks and busses recur. Every time one of these motifs occurs, one is, by a mechanism of recognition, tempted to "take stock" of what has happened in the intervening time since the previous occurrence. But the film is not moving forward: all sense of time dissolves; there is no indication of whether the film is nearing its end or still in the middle. Since a conventional plot is non-existent, the viewer has no guideline in terms of time and a concomitant plot-resolution. The recurring theme of moving vehicles induces a sense of linear movement towards a destination that is constantly refuted by the movement of the film itself.

This destinationless movement of vehicles is complemented by yet another device that frustrates expectations: throughout the film introductory speeches, announcements, promises to the viewer, are cut off prior to fulfillment. Thus, a reading by Allen Ginsberg is announced, for instance, yet the viewer does not see Ginsberg perform until at least an hour later. Throughout the film viewers are reminded in different ways of the discrepancy between their own viewing habits, in this case the linear movement towards a terminal point, and what *Renaldo & Clara* confronts them with.

In his usual enthusiastically elliptical way Paul Williams gives a good — yet unfortunately inaccurate — example of the connections the film establishes, once the viewer has picked up on them and goes along with the flow:

[...] (in the deli: 'She said, "Tell him I love him anyway!" bam! we cut to 'It Ain't Me Babe') (in the coffee shop: Clara: 'Are you sure we can trust you?' Truckdriver: 'Don't I have an honest face?' He leers, there's a beat, and we join Dylan singing 'Isis,' starting *in medias res* with the verse that says, 'When I took up his offer I must have been mad.' [...]) (Williams 1992: 103)

These connections are in fact not executed with such precision as Williams describes. The film does cut to "Isis," but the viewer joins the performance on stage much

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referring to the chronological or causal structure of mainstream cinema. Dylan then quoted *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Marcel Carné, 1945), itself of exceptional length (193 minutes), as coming close to what he had in mind for what was to become *Renaldo & Clara*.

earlier in the song. The connection Williams establishes is a brilliant one and it is unfortunate that Dylan himself did not think of it (although this would have implied the loss of the bigger part of one of the most intense performances in the film).

There is nonetheless ample material to illustrate Dylan's cutting technique: one scene shows Clara / Sara in a booth conducting a phone call, yet the next one has the phone ring in the CBS offices, where the first words spoken into the receiver are, "I am with Bob." Another scene shows Dylan driving his camper while the soundtrack plays an uptempo version of "I Want You" (which contains the line "the gypsy undertaker sighs") that complements the landscape sweeping past in the windows of the car. This, in turn (if unintended by Dylan) establishes a connection with the entry entitled "Gypsy" in Shepard's *Rolling Thunder Logbook* in which he refers to Dylan's persistence in maintaining his independence of hotels: "In front of every fancy hotel we stay in, Dylan's big green-and-white camper is parked conspicuously, transforming whatever place it is into a funky kind of trailer-camp atmosphere. He seems determined to maintain his gypsy status at all cost" (RTL 134). Yet another scene ends in the words "Stand and bear yourself like a cross and I'll receive you" followed by a cut and a succession of images of crosses.

Present in the scene improvised by Sara Dylan and the truckdriver, referred to at the beginning of the last paragraph, is a red flower, one of the central motifs in the film. The red flower is "played" sometimes by a rose and sometimes by a carnation: hardly anything or anybody in the film appears as identical only with themselves. Stephen Scobie points out that doubling is the central structural idea in the film (1991: 104), an observation that will be discussed in detail later on. The red flower also provides transitions by re-occurring throughout different scenes. It travels from one person (i.e. woman, thus supposedly epitomizing a "female" principle) to the next.

The other dominant motif is a hat of a bluish-grey colour. Potentially symbolizing a crown, it is by some critics seen as the "male" principle in opposition to the female. It

provides the transitions in the first few scenes: the hat is linked with Renaldo, who is wearing it (and playing a blues rhythm on the guitar). It then re-occurs at the start of the next scene, ownerless, lying on a table. Linked, as it is, to Renaldo, the hat is nonetheless also used in a game of mistaken identity: A CBC reporter is told to identify Dylan by his hat, yet the next person to enter wearing a hat is Ronnie Hawkins (who happens to play Bob Dylan in the film *Renaldo & Clara*) whom she as a result takes to be Bob Dylan and begins to interview.

These two central motifs introduce the dominant colour patterns of the film, which are, again, in opposition: the warm red defines the bordello scenes, for instance (which are dominated by women), while the blue of the hat dominates some of the song sequences on stage (notably that of *Tangled Up in Blue*), defined by Dylan/Renaldo. (But these oppositional colour schemes do not always correspond to the male/female dichotomy allegedly symbolized by the two items [cf. Ginsberg 1990: 106], the hat and the flower: the sequence in which the camera follows Clara through the station is a blue scene, although Clara is the only character appearing in it.)

Colour patterns are another structural device in the film. Given the comparatively small television screen and the comparatively poor quality of the copies of *Renaldo & Clara* that are in circulation amongst collectors, they cannot be analyzed to satisfactory results. The red and blue colour combinations are pronounced enough to be perceptible under these conditions. Stephen Scobie sees a political statement implied in the choice of the two colours, which in combination with Renaldo's white face paint make up the American national colours. Scobie makes this observation in passing (1991: 105): in terms of the film's commentary on national myths (to be discussed later) it is interesting to let it stand for what it is worth.

These organizational principles are examples for strategies that are used in order to establish a network of references, deconstructing the conventional linear film-structure. The referential web works simultaneously in all directions. Every appearance of the

flower, for instance, evokes all others and its meaning is complemented by these appearances. Every element is part of a system of differences in which no meaning is ever fixed. There is no element in the structure whose meaning is predetermined and resting entirely in itself. In terms of its absolute value such an element would be situated outside the structure, governing it as a whole from this position. Even Dylan's presence as a dominating factor outside the structure of the film (as a film maker; as an entity "about" which the film "is"<sup>4</sup>) loses its absolute status through his simultaneous "presence" inside it — in double form: as the actor behind the mask of Renaldo and as the mask worn by Ronnie Hawkins, who plays Bob Dylan. Thus "Dylan" himself enters the referential network and is never identical with himself. Dylan himself observes this deferral of presence in the interview on *Renaldo & Clara* that Allen Ginsberg conducted with him: to the question "Who's Bob Dylan?" Dylan replies: "Nobody's Bob Dylan. Bobby Dylan's long gone" (Ginsberg 1991: 122).<sup>5</sup>

Such a network, as Derrida points out, necessarily goes along with the dissolution of the Western perception of time. According to Derrida (1986: 13) the interval that separates the present from future and past also has to divide the present, as otherwise no system of differences would be possible: since the present itself cannot be divided temporally (being already present), Derrida imagines this division spatially. This division in which the present may differ from itself necessarily has to take place in space and Derrida sees in it an analogy to the way meaning is constituted in writing by a simultaneous, spatial rather than temporal system of differences. Dylan's analogy with painting captures a similar idea: every element co-exists with others on a spatial rather than temporal scale. Since this process can be continued infinitely, the present ends up not existing as anything other than a spatial division between past and future. Thus Dylan manages not only to overthrow the conventions of the genre within which he was working

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<sup>4</sup>One of the criticisms levelled at the film was that in limitless egomania it presented nothing but Bob Dylan himself.

<sup>5</sup>The strategy evokes Shepard's in *Fool for Love*.

but to question at the same time the Western convention of valuing origin above difference.

References in *Renaldo & Clara* do not remain limited to the "intratextual" structural references immanent in the work itself, such as the hat or the flower or the colour patterns. (Although universal symbolic values can be assigned to them and in this respect they go beyond an immanent significance, but they do not establish explicit intertextual references to other Bob Dylan works.) The referential network goes far beyond this: the music in the film institutes the whole of Dylan's body of work as an intertextual field with which Dylan can play and to which he can make explicit reference, since he can count on his audience's familiarity with the body of his work. Hardly any other work has such a rich intertextual field to work with.

Shepard's continual reinvestigation of a number of central ideas sometimes evokes an impression that resembles this: the ineffectual men in his film *Far North*, for instance, evoke all the other ineffectual men, particularly fathers, in Shepard's other plays: The father in *True West*, Dodge in *Buried Child*, Weston in *The Curse of the Starving Class*, to name just a few. The recurring question in *Far North*, 'Where are all the men?' posed by different characters throughout the film, seems almost like a conscious invocation of *Buried Child*, in which Halie asks the same rhetorical question in the final moments of the film while being surrounded by the chaos brought about by the ineffectual men she would like to see substituted by 'real' ones. Shepard presents subtle reworkings of recurring themes. Like the make-believe detective in *Simpatico*, who evokes his relative in the *Cruising Paradise* story "Thin Skin," (or vice versa) these themes do not recur as fixed entities with a set symbolic value but with differences. Given the many facets of Shepard's work a genre-crossing network is established.

Dylan has even more far-reaching possibilities. The film format of *Renaldo & Clara* makes it possible to work with the video and the audiotrack in a synthetic or antithetic way: songs are either cut into the action of a scene or appear on the soundtrack only. They

provide commentary on, affirmation or negation of the acted scene and thus establish a dialogue. Moreover, songs are used strategically so as to evoke pieces of well-known Dylan-lore, and thus establish a further step in the intertextual referential chain. Of particular interest here are references aimed at mystifying the self or the staging thereof.

As pointed out above, critics perceived in *Renaldo & Clara* a pervasive egomania: Dylan not only directed the film, but he also acted in it, had himself filmed on stage during concerts and had another character in the film appear under the name of Bob Dylan. Although this appears as a severe misjudgement, towards the end of the film there is indeed a deliberate staging of the self, but it is not done in such an unquestioning way as the critics imply. The sequence in question is the triangular scene among the Woman in White, played by Joan Baez, Clara (Sara Dylan) and Renaldo (Dylan himself).

The scene deliberately and inevitably catapults viewers into the ambivalent position of the voyeur: the crisis in Dylan's marriage around the time of the Rolling Thunder Revue was/is a well-known fact. Dylan's appearance on stage with Joan Baez for the first time in over ten years inspired rumours of a romantic reunion. As if to kindle the flames of rumour, Dylan stages a confrontation between himself, his old lover and his current one — albeit behind the masks of fictional characters.<sup>6</sup> Thus he can always retreat behind the mask of fiction. Although he is very much on record, he cannot be held responsible for whatever is said or done. Viewers find themselves in a similar situation: the voyeuristic gaze is legitimized under the cloak of fictionality. Dylan toys with this response: the scene is the first and only one in which the names of the fictional characters, Renaldo and Clara, are explicitly mentioned, thus situating the scene explicitly in the fictional realm. Yet, at almost exactly the same moment in which Clara addresses Renaldo by name, the camera zooms in on a newspaper article she is holding in her hands, which features a photo of Dylan and Baez performing side by side. In the article's headline Dylan's name is clearly legible. Later in the scene an extended collage of shots of Clara is accompanied by a

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<sup>6</sup>I will return later to Dylan's use of *Les Enfants du Paradis* as intertext to this triangular scene and its contribution to the scene's "fictionalization."

version of "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" on the soundtrack (a 1966 song that took up an entire side on Dylan's double LP *Blonde on Blonde*<sup>7</sup>). In "Sara," Dylan claims to have written the song for his wife. The viewer's attention is directed away from the fictional persona, towards Sara's/Clara's nonfictional identity by means of an intertextual reference produced by the sounding of "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands." The same mechanism is produced by the discrepancy between the fictional name and the non-fictional newspaper.

The simple equation in "Sara" of Sara with the sad-eyed lady is a self-conscious gesture in itself, given the amount of speculation that surrounded the lady's identity upon the song's release. Since Sara's existence and relation to Dylan was little known at the time, the lady was assumed to be Joan Baez. Around the time of the writing of the song Dylan was leaving Joan Baez, who appears as the third party in the scene, for Sara. Ironically, the scene in *Renaldo & Clara* is cut to make room for a duet between Baez and Dylan of "Never Let Me Go." A staging of the private under the veil of the fictional is used to thematize the construction of the private through the eye of the public persona.

An almost parallel process can be observed in Shepard's work, and it takes its cue from the same song: the title of Shepard's play *Cowboy Mouth* (1971) alludes to a line from "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands": "And your cowboy mouth and your curfew plugs, / Who among them do you think could resist you?" (Dylan 1985: 630/2). The play was co-authored by Patti Smith, with whom Shepard shared a love-relationship at the time. The play's autobiographical overtones refer to their time as residents at the Chelsea Hotel (where, incidentally, Dylan claims to have written "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," while it is certain that it was not written there) while Shepard had temporarily left his wife and son to live with Smith. Allegedly, Shepard terminated his own appearance as an actor in the play after a few nights because it became too excruciating to expose himself through the play night after night (Shewey 1997: 73). Yet none of the "information" about Shepard's and Smith's private lives can be taken at face value because

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<sup>7</sup>*Blonde on Blonde* was also the first double LP in the history of rock music.

it is disclosed behind the veil of fictionality. Similarly, Shepard is almost certainly working from "non-fictional," documented raw-material in "True Dylan," but because of the play's surreal and self-referential set-up whatever "documentary" material there was loses its authority.

## 8. Masks in the Construction and Deconstruction of the Public and the Private

Celebrity biographies, which set out to reveal the "true" self of their subject to the reader, call the play *Cowboy Mouth* "frankly autobiographic" (Oumano 1987: 146). The inordinate authority ascribed to such autobiographic references in the work of an artist has its origin in the impression that behind the public mask the author puts on in his work the true self is revealed. Western culture adheres to a strict distinction between a person's public image (supposedly put on just for show and therefore all "lies") and the private (hence "true" and "authentic"), hidden by the public mask, glimpses of which can be caught despite the mask, and must therefore be cherished as particularly precious. Dylan and Shepard reveal the so-called "private" to be just another mask.

Shepard and Dylan share the reputation of being elusive and reclusive. Both are very selective in their contact with the media. Upon contact with it, both cultivate an image of dark and silent mystery (note Dylan's absent presence throughout *Renaldo & Clara*) and have thus fanned the flames of rumour and construction. Once Dylan had overcome the initial phase of mystifying himself by telling wildly inventive stories about his background, a phase of strategic acts of public presentation began: in 1965 he arrived at the airport in London carrying a huge lightbulb ("Keep a good head and always carry a lightbulb") and started on a series of exceptionally eloquent, witty press-conferences and interviews that earned him the reputation of ruthlessly dismantling the fragile egos behind what seemed to him to be intellectual pretentiousness — a reputation he once again shares with Shepard. Dylan's rant at the *Time* journalist in *Don't Look Back* (Dylan 1967), a chronicle of the 1965 English tour filmed by D.A. Pennebaker, brings to mind an interview with a French journalist and a New York intellectual functioning as interpreter that was aborted by Shepard with the words, "Fine thing to watch, that, a man who can't stand bullshit."<sup>1</sup> Both artists' presentation of themselves is consciously anti-intellectual.

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<sup>1</sup>This instance is quoted by Duncan Webster in his essay "Sam Shepard's cowboy mouth: representing masculinity" (1988: 85)

Dylan's work nonetheless reveals that he has read widely; Shepard, too, reveals a thorough knowledge of theatre and film and the culture that surrounds him. In Shepard's case this strategic anti-intellectualism clashes with the strong dominance of institutionally acquired intellectualism in the American dramatic tradition (Shepard is one of very few dramatists without a university education) and it is integrated into his overall public presentation, which seems meticulously staged.

He consistently presents himself as a man of the country rather than the city. On publicity-shots he is rarely seen without a full denim outfit complete with cowboy boots and hat. Despite his insistence on privacy, his life on his Minnesota ranch, including his close connection to what he calls "horse-culture" is well publicized. This cowboy image is complemented by a large amount of what appears to be autobiographical detail in his writing.<sup>2</sup> Particularly in his short story collections it is hard not to notice aspects that are familiar from Shepard's life and background. Lynda Hart, who criticizes Shepard for the macho-image he (supposedly) projects and who, in the face of his non-existent political correctness demands a reassessment of his value as a dramatist (1988: 82), finds there is

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<sup>2</sup>*Motel Chronicles* in particular seems to be a collection of autobiographical sketches complemented by photographs that seem like snapshots from a family album. It contains a prose fragment that mirrors the information distributed within the first act of *Buried Child* in striking detail:

My Grandpa sits exactly as he's always sat — in a hole of his sofa wrapped in crocheted blankets facing the T.V. He's like a skeleton now. [...] Sometimes he coughs so violently that his whole body doubles over and he can't catch his breath for a long long time. His world is circumscribed around the sofa. Everything he needs is within a three-foot reach. The T.V. is only on for the baseball. When the game ends my Grandmother comes in and turns it off. [...] When everyone's asleep I wander around in the room upstairs staring at all the photographs of my Uncles. The Uncle who died in a motel room on his wedding night. His wife who dies with him. The Uncle who has lost a leg at the age of ten. The Uncle who married into the Chicago Mafia. [...] All the Uncles who carry the bones of my Grandpa's face. (MC 45-6)

Yet, genre definitions for *Motel Chronicles* are not as easy as it seems: although at the first glance the reappearance of "characters" from plays within the framework of *Motel Chronicles* seems to be a straightforward merging of fact and fiction, a closer look reveals that the strikingly autobiographical fragments must not be taken at face value. Ann Wilson points out that *Motel Chronicles* is mentioned by Shepard as his only attempt at the production of a novel (Wilson 1993: 109) — not an autobiography. Therefore, the work cannot be trusted to faithfully reproduce the past as it presents itself in the reconstructions of Shepard's memory. It may contain conscious fictionalizations of events. Shepard's father, the alcoholic who moved out into the desert because "he doesn't fit with people" (1982: 56; note the echo in Lee, who moved to the desert because he was unable to "make it" in the city [TW 49]: "This is the last time I try to live with people, boy!" [TW 46]) makes appearances in both *Motel Chronicles* and *Cruising Paradise*. The list could be extended infinitely.

hardly a distinction between the public image Shepard projects of himself and the characters he invents:

Despite the critical currency about the death of the author, it really doesn't matter much whether we are talking about Shepard himself or his characters — they have blended into one like it or not. Shepard the legend, Shepard the 'actor, playwright, man-in-love,' Shepard the true American original, Shepard the 'inkblot of the 80s.' Is that Shepard or Eddie on the cover of *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *Newsweek* and *American Theatre*? [...] Certainly he has done nothing to discredit the public image of himself as a 'cowboy,' a Lee, an Eddie, a Jake, or a Travis. (Hart 1988: 73)

The image Shepard projects has indeed become another fictional character. A distinct blurring between the way the author presents himself and his work is taking place — a blurring that can no longer be called one of fact and fiction or of life and work, since Shepard reveals nothing but a carefully constructed persona. He stages himself in much the same way Dylan stages his private life (or what the public perceives as such) at the end of *Renaldo & Clara*.

What Hart ignores for the sake of her argument is the ironic component in Shepard's presentation of his characters — an irony that extends to the composition of his own public image. Shepard's male "heroes" are never merely straight presentations of the world of the macho cowboy as it inhabits populist imagination. The humour involved in his depiction of Eddie and Lee, for instance (two of Hart's examples) is amply illustrated in other sections. Shepard never simply reproduces conventions, but by means of an ironic viewpoint implicitly questions the production of these conventions within the cultural imagination that is responsible for them.

Shepard agreed to be photographed by Annie Leibovitz in 1984 — the product of the meeting shows him in full cowboy regalia leaning against a horse. Seen by itself, the photo already achieves the impression of ironic overstatement (Leibovitz's reputation rests

not insignificantly on the self-ironic poses in which she photographs her subjects) — but in order to unmistakably make its point the photo is juxtaposed with a smaller one that shows a rather dishevelled Shepard blinded by the sun and squinting into the camera. The soft-focus lens used for the main picture is gone. While both pictures are equally staged, the smaller one gives the — culturally predetermined — impression of showing the "real" Shepard behind the disguise of the cowboy outfit and the mask of the soft-focus lens. Like the photos that illustrate *Motel Chronicles* it seems to stand for truth and authenticity, but while in *Motel Chronicles* they are employed to lend the same amount of autobiographical authenticity to the prose fragments, the conscious juxtaposition of the "authentic" picture with an obviously staged one draws attention to the *per definitionem* staged character of photographs. Shepard manages the dismantling of his own image by ironically undermining the absolute status that could still be attributed to each of the photographs individually: "[...O]ne might [...] profitably look at his self-consciousness about images, with Shepard reflecting on American myths and performing them rather than embodying them" Duncan Webster (1988: 87-8) remarks, and his statement can be read as a poignant reply to Hart.

Thus, even though the image of traditional masculinity is consciously upheld,<sup>3</sup> Shepard is equally aware of the constructedness of such notions. His self-presentation simultaneously stresses his own inadequacy in the face of such constructions. In so doing it exhibits the same self-mocking irony as does his best work. Duncan Webster makes the following statement about Shepard's plays, but the same goes for his public image: "He *does* present a theatre of masculinity but with attention to the roles and masks involved rather than using naturalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity" (1988: 91). At the same time, his self-conscious awareness of the cultural determinations of the concepts of masculinity with which he works, can again be seen as a perpetuation of these notions. The mechanism is identical to Shepard's treatment of American myths in *True West*: he

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<sup>3</sup>Shepard made sure that his picture (together with, by now, everything it stands for) would appear on all editions of his plays.

deflates criticism by revealing himself to be aware of the explosive nature of the ideas, yet uses them in a circular process of celebration and undermining that eventually perpetuates them.

Yet, other examples show that the mechanism can stop short of perpetuation as well. Shepard's first major success as an actor, for instance, was brought about by his playing the test-pilot Chuck Yeager in Philip Kaufman's film *The Right Stuff*. Despite his well-publicized fear of flying<sup>4</sup> Shepard plays Yeager with an aura of stoic masculinity which merges with his own image as a cowboy: in one scene Yeager is seen all alone, riding out on horseback to the plane with which he was later to break the sound barrier. Yet the image of Shepard/Yeager as the self-reliant loner — Yeager as a man of action rather than words and of an integrity that does not dissolve in the team spirit of the astronaut-crew who fall for NASA's manipulations — is undercut by the viewer's awareness that Shepard would not even board a passenger plane, let alone emerge heroically from the vicinity of a burning wreck.

If one takes for granted the blurring of information about Shepard's "private" life with his work and understands his public image as an additional performance, many of his public moves gain an ironic note. In a way not unlike Shepard's, Dylan uses *Renaldo & Clara* for a conscious construction and deconstruction of his own image.

In staging "Bob Dylan" as an individual, public and medial construct, he thematizes identity construction and in simultaneously taking part in it becomes self-referential. "Bob Dylan," as what would appear to be the film's central concern, appears in several guises. First of all, the film was made by Bob Dylan during a tour that starred Bob Dylan as its main attraction<sup>5</sup>. Dylan then stars in his own film, but not as "Bob Dylan" but as a

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<sup>4</sup>His fear of flying is such a well-known Shepard-quirk that in the recent volume of short-stories, *Cruising Paradise*, references to not flying are invariably used as self-conscious autobiographical hints: "They chuckle to each other slyly, and one of them says: 'Of course, the whole thing would be a lot easier on all of us if you flew.'

'I don't,' I say." (Shepard 1997: 166). A piece entitled "Gary Cooper or the landscape" begins with the following words: "Why don't you fly? I find that so fascinating?

I don't know. I just don't." (1997: 174).

<sup>5</sup>Contrary to Dylan's intention the Revue never became centreless to the degree he envisioned it.

fictional character named Renaldo. Already there is a doubling of fictionality: "Bob Dylan" was/is a mask used by Robert Zimmerman as an opportunity to "ma[k]e himself up from scratch" (RTL 100), which is now complemented/substituted by the mask of Renaldo. The split achieved this way is part of the film's strategy, and very similar to the doubling effect deplored by Lynda Hart, who is no longer sure whether she is seeing Eddie or Shepard on the cover of *Newsweek*. In *Renaldo & Clara* viewers cannot help seeing Dylan and have to remind themselves that he is acting — but the Dylan behind the mask of Renaldo is as much a fictional character as the Shepard who plays Eddie in the film-version of *Fool for Love*. The part of "Bob Dylan," now vacant since Dylan personifies Renaldo, is played by Ronnie Hawkins, who in a memorable scene rises to the occasion when a clueless CBC reporter intends to interview Bob Dylan. Hawkins plays Bob Dylan in *Renaldo & Clara*, and he wears a hat, which is the characteristic by which the reporter has been told to be able to identify Dylan. The hat itself re-appears in a different guise (it is no longer blue but of an off-white colour) in a game of mistaken identity.

The same mechanism of doubling is extended to the other central characters: "Mrs. Dylan" is played by Ronee Blakly, while the real Sara Dylan plays the role of Clara, who appears in a couple constellation with Renaldo — again evocative of "real life." According to the credits, The Woman in White is played by Joan Baez — yet towards the end of the film alternately Sara Dylan and Joan Baez, both clad in unmistakable white, are seen riding in a horse-drawn carriage.

Paul Williams suggests that Rodeo, played by Sam Shepard in a scene with Sara Dylan, can be read as another one of Dylan's aliases in the film (1992: 101), thus extending the game of doubling to yet another character. The dialogue between Rodeo and Clara revolves around an imminent separation, and while Williams may be tempted to read too much biographical detail into a fictional scene (Dylan was, after all, on the verge of separating from his wife when *Renaldo & Clara* was filmed), it is clearly part of the

film's play with different levels of perceived reality to hear echoes of Dylan in Rodeo's plea for Clara to stay with him as otherwise he fears he would be unable to deliver:

'I need you to perform certain magical things with me' — she looks for a moment as though perhaps he's surprised her and said something loving, but immediately she realizes that he's talking about his superstition, his mama-stuff, his fear of riding the bull or going out on stage without her incantations. (ibid.)

At the same time the scene is recognizably Shepardian and it would be reductive to see Rodeo merely as a stand-in for Dylan. (Particularly the turn the conversation takes towards the transience of trailer parks is a familiar motif from other works and will be discussed in more detail later.)

This pervasive technique of doubling is hinted at in the opening moments of the film. *Renaldo & Clara* opens on Dylan/Renaldo on stage performing "When I Paint My Masterpiece."<sup>6</sup> The song contains the line "You can almost think that you're seeing double" in its first stanza. The film obliquely announces its strategy. The audience (the film audience even more so than the concert audience<sup>7</sup>) does in fact see double at the time: Dylan is wearing a plastic mask throughout the song. Accounts differ on whether this was a Bob Dylan or a Richard Nixon mask (in his *Rolling Thunder Logbook* Shepard treats it as a Bob Dylan mask). To a degree, this is irrelevant: importantly, the mask is translucent. It therefore does not completely hide the face underneath it.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it distorts its features;

<sup>6</sup>Motif considerations left aside for a moment, it seems to be a revealing and certainly not accidental gesture to put a song about *painting* a masterpiece at the beginning of an explicitly painterly film. The hint could be taken as an indication of how to approach the film — namely, in a similar way as one would *Blood on the Tracks*. The artist tells his audience to look at the film in the same way they would at a canvas and thus abandon all preconceptions of what a film should be. (Implicitly, then, if the title of the song is to be read as a comment on the film, the artist also points to the value the finished product has to him: if *Renaldo & Clara* is Dylan's masterpiece, the world did not notice.)

<sup>7</sup>The film audience also has the persona of Renaldo to contend with, of whom the concert audience know nothing.

<sup>8</sup>Stephen Scobie also points out the intertextual reference established by the wearing of the mask (1991: 107): the concert in question took place on Halloween 1975 and thus can be seen as an allusion to a famous concert, widely circulated amongst collectors, which took place on Halloween 1964 and in which Dylan remarked on wearing his Bob Dylan mask for the occasion. Scobie also indicates the confusion this produces for the viewer of the film (ibid.): the fictional character Renaldo (whom Dylan is meant to be playing throughout the film) nonetheless assumes the biographical background of Bob Dylan.

it alters its expression, but this transformation works from the raw material provided by the face it covers. The translucent plastic mask cannot exist independently of the face: it is the face that gives meaning to it by providing the outline of a mouth, a nose, a pair of eyes and the colour of skin. Thus the face gives expression to the mask while the mask gives (an altered) expression to the face. The mask does not hide the true identity, but neither does it reveal it. Similar to the function of the mask that the fictional character of Renaldo constitutes in the "autobiographical" scene with Clara and the Woman in White, the translucent mask draws the audience into an ambivalent game: the face (and more importantly the voice) of Bob Dylan seem to be recognizable underneath the mask, but one can no longer be certain.

By way of a mechanism that resembles a Brechtian alienation effect, easy identification with what the audience expected to find on stage is made impossible. The audience is caught in its voyeurism and

stupefied. A kind of panic-stricken hush falls over the place. 'Has he had another accident? Plastic surgery?' Or is this some kind of mammoth hoax? [...] He tries to play [harmonica] through the mask but it won't work, so he rips it off and throws it back into the floodlights. There he is in the flesh and blood! The real thing! [...] It's a frightening act even if it's not calculated for those reasons. The audience is totally bewildered and still wondering whether this is actually him or not. (RTL 114)

While in the scene with the Woman in White the distanciation achieved by the mask results in an uneasy legitimization of the voyeuristic gaze, the plastic mask on stage results in a straight alienation effect. The audience is made aware of the play with masks. Simple immersion in the stage events is impossible. The audience cannot wallow in the illusion of being allowed a peek of the "real self" of Bob Dylan "in the flesh and blood," with all the legendary material attached to it.

The effect is that of a hall of mirrors or Russian dolls: in the sequence devoted to the confrontation between Renaldo, Clara and the Woman in White, one sees Renaldo, who is a mask worn by Bob Dylan, who in turn is an invention of Robert Zimmerman, put on white face-paint (in other words a mask) in front of a mirror (which doubles the image yet again). There is nothing to be revealed by removing a mask; rather there are only masks devoid of essence. *Renaldo & Clara* is a perpetual *mise-en-abyme*. "Renaldo & Clara cannot have a center in the traditional manner," Stephen Scobie writes: "Any center is immediately split and doubled, and consigned to the play of doubles that forms the texture of the movie; it is both Renaldo and Bob, I and I" (1991: 115). Identity can no longer be taken to be a self-evident fact, beyond doubt and beyond free play.

Shepard's *Logbook* includes an ambivalent passage about Robert Zimmerman's willful construction of a new identity:

Dylan has invented himself. He's made himself up from scratch. That is, from the things he had around him and inside him. [...] The point isn't to figure him out but to take him in. He gets into you anyway, so why not just take him in? He's not the first to have invented himself, but he's the first to have invented Dylan. [...] What happens when someone invents something outside himself like an airplane or a freight train? The thing is seen for what it is. [...] [People] don't stand around trying to figure out what it isn't, forever. They use it as a means to adventure. (RTL 100)

The entry is partly fan mail, of course: Shepard was mesmerized by Dylan's stage presence and thus likely to simply "take in" what "presents itself" (in a Derridean sense) in an unreflected, unmediated way. The phrase "They don't stand around trying to figure out what it isn't" (and one might add, *ex negativo*, what it is) is reminiscent of Shepard's description of writing in "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library": "When you're writing inside of a character like this, you aren't pausing every ten seconds to figure out what it all means" (1981a: 215), he says about Crow. In other words, the freight train,

Dylan and the character are "seen for what [they are]" — again an essence is suggested that reveals itself in the presence of genius and in the moment of inspiration, which, it has been shown, is in Shepard's conception similar to the revelation of genius: a fully-formed character that emerges out of a void is as much a self-legitimizing presence, an origin in itself, as genius, that is not to be questioned, but simply to be taken in.

At the same time Shepard acknowledges the *Zimmermann's* status as a *bricoleur* in the construction of Bob Dylan: "He's made himself up [...] from the things he had around him and inside him" (RTL 100). The alternative interpretation of Shepard's entry would be that simple acceptance of the surface phenomenon does not probe the origins. David Blue in one of his memorable monologues that pervade *Renaldo & Clara* gives expression to the same contradiction by saying that Bob Dylan is "a myth. And you know what a myth is — it's a myth!" while a few minutes later elaborating on the "ridiculous" irreconcilable split between Dylan's public status as a living legend and his private life as a family man. Blue's statement on the one hand reflects the possible double interpretation of the word myth in its original sense (as a construct designed to explain the inexplicable) and its colloquial sense (as something that is imaginary, fictitious or invented).<sup>9</sup> In terms of grammatical structure alone the statement is tautological. A tautology by definition rests only in itself, explains itself by virtue of its structure; its logic cannot be refuted. A tautological structure defers nothing beyond itself. Blue's historical voice seems to be as much present in itself as the tautology he invokes. He seems to look behind the public mask and provide facts of Dylan's origins back in the early days in the Village. Yet, his reminiscences are filtered through perception (which cannot be transcended) and the further "distortion" of hindsight. Partly his contributions are recapitulations of Dylan-lore, partly they are his own personal memories — in either case they contribute to the construction of the myth rather than to the dismantling of it. Significantly, Blue is playing a game of pinball all through his reminiscences. Pinball is largely a game of chance — the

<sup>9</sup>In *Renaldo & Clara's* perpetual game of doubling, then, even the word myth appears in a double meaning.

element of randomness in the make-up of his recollections is emphasized. Also, he tends to manipulate the machine to give the ball the desired direction. He tilts the ball in the machine as much as the stories he relates to give them just the right spin.

Despite his apparently objective and absolute status as the historical voice, Blue enters into the polyphony of different voices, becomes just one viewpoint of many. If one is to see the film as Renaldo's dream, he is even reduced to a figment of Renaldo's imagination, who in turn would acquire god-like proportions as an entity who can give rise to an entire fictional world. As such Dylan's/Renaldo's position would mirror that of the traditional dramatist, which receives critical treatment in Shepard's *True West*. Yet, as Stephen Scobie points out (1991: 115), Dylan frees himself from the position of a transcendental signified by doubling himself, thus being simultaneously inside and outside the structure.

Standing at Jack Kerouac's grave Dylan<sup>10</sup> states that he would like to be buried in an unmarked grave. An unmarked grave puts an end to the succession of masks on the run from a traceable origin while still denying the origin. In Dylan's and Shepard's cases the name as a marker of origin and authenticity was turned into a mask. Both changed their names — just like Kerouac himself, who was born Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac. The plaque on his grave states his name as "Ti Jean' John L. Kerouac". Neither the name he used when he was alive, nor the one on his grave is his original name. What is conventionally viewed as the final mark of authenticity is turned into yet another mask. Yet, a change of name is an act of finality insofar as it represents the conscious decision to deny one's origins (hence the effectiveness of the last line of "Just Space": "Please don't change your name. — It's just temporary, Mama." [Shepard 1997: 108]).

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<sup>10</sup>Dylan, rather than Renaldo, because the scene between Ginsberg and Dylan at Kerouac's grave is seen here as documentary footage of the tour, as opposed to an improvised scene. It is obvious that such footage is nonetheless equally staged.

## 9. *Commedia to Cruelty: Traces of Theatrical Antecedents in Rolling Thunder*

Shepard's fascination with *Rolling Thunder* was partly due to the half-way point produced by his own leaning towards rock music complemented by Dylan's new concern with stage presentation and Jacques Levy's involvement in the tour. Dylan's exploration of the instability of identity that dominates *Renaldo & Clara* reappears as a concern with the stage event, which constituted part of the raw-material for the film. Shepard shares both the concern with identity and the theatrical inclination. Alternative theatre movements (such as Off-Off-Broadway) have always utilized other, older, theatre forms to open up established structures.

The most conspicuous visual characteristic of the *Rolling Thunder* shows is no doubt Dylan's extensive use of white face-paint and the other musicians' use of make-up and other masks. Make-up pervaded the tour in an almost obsessive fashion. Dylan is likely to have drawn the inspiration for the white face-paint from at least one specific source, acknowledged by Shepard in the *Rolling Thunder Logbook*. According to Shepard, Dylan explicitly mentioned *Les Enfants du Paradis* as a possible model for his own film (RTL 13). The same reference re-appears later in the interview Allen Ginsberg conducted with Dylan, when Dylan singles out *Les Enfants du Paradis* as the only film, other than his own, that ever stopped time (Ginsberg 1991: 108).

Clearly Dylan took more from Carné's film than simply the inspiration for a character who appears on stage in white face-paint. First of all, Carné's film begins with a street carnival scene — potentially one of the many manifestations Dylan might have been aware of that instigated him to start his own carnival. The movie then follows the white-face character (a mime) in his pursuits on and off stage. Most of the film's plot is set in a theatre and extensive passages of actual stage performance are filmed and integrated into the work's metanarrative structure. The case in point of a metafictional set-up is made particularly explicit when in a rehearsal situation various "audience members" comment on

what is being presented to them on stage. They receive comments back from the actors on stage, while, of course, all along being part of the overarching structure of the film itself. Like *Renaldo & Clara*, the film blurs the boundaries between the different orders of fictional distantiating. The viewer mixes the stage persona and the character of the film's narrative, but by diegetically commenting on the stage proceedings, the "audience members" in the film foreground the film's constructive strategies. The viewer is made aware of moving within a fictional framework and the mimetic plane of the work is destroyed.

The same mechanism is at work in *Renaldo & Clara*, which works with similar split levels of presentation (the concert footage, the improvised scenes and the "documentary" parts). Because Dylan's face has culturally determined meaning beyond the film itself, because he is, in other words, already a character of mythic proportions outside the structure of the film, the mixing of the different fictional levels is even more pronounced: the viewer is never sure whether the white-face character on stage is to be seen for what he would be generally, namely "Bob Dylan" as a semiotic sign with all its connotations, or as the fictional character Renaldo, and/or as a separate level of narrative, designed to point out the fictionality of the film itself in a self-referential, metafictional manner. It is, of course, the film's strategy that all of these levels are being evoked simultaneously, thus destabilizing any reliable production of meaning. Metafictional structures inevitably prompt an ironic perspective since the work does no longer grant the comforting singularity of the mimetic.

*Les Enfants du Paradis'* most noticeable commentary on the conventions of its own genre happens towards the end when the viewer is given the impression that no time at all has passed since the beginning of the film three hours ago. The viewer sees the same carnival in the streets. With, amongst other things, three intervening decades in the history of film-making, Dylan's approach to plot and time in *Renaldo & Clara* can be more radical: where Carné's epic has a coherent story-line and guides the viewer along a (thin)

plot, Dylan takes up the inspiration of stopping time and abandons even the alibi-convention of storyline.

Dylan appears to have had one eye on his famous precursor even when it comes to individual scenes, notably the triangular scene between Renaldo, Clara and the Woman in White towards the end of the film. Dylan clearly lifted the overall conception of his scene from a similar one towards the end of *Les Enfants du Paradis*, which also features an intrusion by a second woman into a room that already holds the white-face character and his wife. As in *Renaldo & Clara* the two women first perceive each other as rivals before they then bond against the male character as they discover similarities in their personal histories and in his treatment of them: "Six years I've lived with him," says one to the other, who replies "So have I." Parallel to this, Clara counters Renaldo's remark according to which Clara does not know the Woman in White with "We're like sisters." Strikingly, Dylan's scene even copies specific, memorable camera angles for individual shots. The second woman's entering and leaving the house as well as her entering the room are filmed from identical perspectives in both movies.

The scene in *Renaldo & Clara* occupies a special position because of its exceptional length, its relative coherence and because it seems to summarize many of *Renaldo & Clara*'s central concerns, such as the doubling and splitting of identity and, importantly, the staging of the self. It is generally perceived to be one of the most autobiographical scenes in the film and the inescapably voyeuristic gaze it invites seems to confirm this, yet this very scene is modelled *explicitly* (Dylan's awareness of *Les Enfants du Paradis* is confirmed by various sources) on an existing scene in another film. Again — this time in a different context — Dylan toys with the documentary character of the footage: what seems to record reality in fact uses a work of fiction as its intertext and thereby emphasizes its own constructedness. The result is a split perspective: although much of the dialogue that takes place after the two women's bonding seems indeed to be autobiographical, the viewer's tendency to perceive it as such is ironically undercut by the viewer's and Dylan's

knowledge of its constructedness. This effect is not dissimilar to the one achieved in "True Dylan," which also uses the conventional perception of the interview as a medium for the presentation of recorded reality (a verbatim exchange) to draw attention to its own constructedness and, by extension, to the pitfalls of the genre as a whole.

Carné's film thus provides some crucial insights into what Dylan's model for the film was. In the triangular scene it becomes a subtext to *Renaldo & Clara* and Dylan establishes references to it by way of the white-face, the metafictional patterns and the overall division of the material into stage and "off-stage" material.

The accessories of Dylan's stage persona as a whole consisted of the ubiquitous blue hat with a bouquet of flowers tucked in behind the hatband, a black vest worn over a white shirt and the white face-paint. With these he situates himself in a number of different discourses, all of a similar leaning: the vest suggests a bohemian context, while in combination with the flowery hat emphasis is shifted towards the travelling carnival or the archetypal band of gypsies. The stage persona evokes figures associated with these transient societies: like the medieval court-jester, who could legitimately hold up a mirror to the mighty, travelling theatre troupes and carnivals that would perform on public gathering places such as markets were able to temporarily bond with the people against the powers that be before moving on. Thus the social setting the Revue evokes is one of subversion: the prominent feature of the idiosyncratic Rolling Thunder sound is Scarlett Rivera's violin. During the shows Rivera is always at Dylan's side with an instrument traditionally associated with the devil.<sup>1</sup>

One such tradition of travelling theatre troupes that Dylan utilizes in the conception of the Rolling Thunder Revue is the Italian Commedia dell'arte, whose most obvious parallel with Rolling Thunder is its usage of masks. Commedia dell'arte is a theatre that depends for effect on the audience's familiarity with a limited number of fixed types,

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<sup>1</sup>The devil is often envisioned as the master fiddler (one example being the Walpurgisnacht in *Faust*) and to learn how to play equals selling one's soul to him. The violin is also associated with gypsies, who developed idiosyncratic styles. In popular imagination they were as a result seen as the devil's associates. (cf. Leach 1998: 1157)

identified through masks, which are then explored through improvisation within limits set by the type. It does not explore, as the naturalist tradition of Western theatre does, the psychological make-up and motivations of characters. It is not a theatre whose central concern is that of raising and solving problems, but one that lives through visual spectacle rather than mimetic imitation of the familiar and psychological plausibility of the characters. Emphasis is on visual effect.

In the traditional *Commedia dell'arte*, plot was either non-existent or contrived; its primary purpose was to transport the action on stage from one comic situation to the next. Thus, for some experts, the comic-buffoonesque and the visually spectacular emerge as the *Commedia's* most important characteristics (cf. Krömer 1976: 11-2). Such definitions neglect the improvisational aspect that distinguishes *Commedia dell'arte* from other theatre forms. Drawing on the *Commedia* tradition enabled Dylan not only to further his games with identity, but also to use familiar signs such as Harlequin's white face to establish an intertextual reference, as it were, to an entire theatrical tradition — the empowering of which implies a harsh verdict on the established theatrical tradition and its conventions of originality and, last but not least, identity. This is, presumably, where Rolling Thunder's power for Shepard lay: it provided an arena for experimentation with the means with which he was familiar, but provided a radically different setting, which worked with assumptions that alternative and avant-garde theatre fought hard to attain, but which came natural to the rock concert setting since it did not operate from within the history and conventions of theatre.

The Rolling Thunder Revue, as implied by the genre specification in the name, draws on a loose succession of "scenes" constructed to achieve maximum visual effect. Like the *Commedia dell'arte*, it is improvised around a framework (set by Levy), but, as is common in a rock music context, it is left to the individual performers to improvise around points fixed in advance. The band worked with the same core material every night, yet transformed it into something "different, spontaneous and of the moment" (Heylin

1991: 282) as the individual performance took shape. Scarlett Rivera observed the unusually free, egalitarian atmosphere that pervaded the performances, which allowed her to give a form to whatever emotion or impulse the moment gave rise to (ibid.). This is a conception of artistic creation that seems to go beyond even the improvisational play around a fixed skeletal structure common in rock concerts, which is acknowledged by Powe. While the conventional rock concert tends towards catering to popular taste in order to satisfy nostalgia on the audience's part, Rolling Thunder broke with the reproduction of the familiar. Much of the material was new, even unreleased, and presented in radically different arrangements from what the audience was familiar with.

In his book on the Commedia dell'arte's relevancy for contemporary theatre, John Rudlin laments the petrifying structures of author-dominated Western theatre and points out that new directions in theatre have to emerge from a shift in emphasis towards greater autonomy of the performer through improvisation (1994: 1). This is, of course, not a new insight; many contemporary theatre movements, including Off-Off-Broadway (which *post mortem* bestowed due credit on, amongst others, the work of Antonin Artaud), aimed at breaking the continued hegemony of the playwright, and to an extent that of the director. Coinciding with and emerging from Off-Off-Broadway, Shepard's work represents a turn against the conventions of naturalist theatre insofar as his characters lack the psychological motivation directed by the author-god. Their identities emerge as fluid concepts, as snippets or snapshots without necessary links. Yet, in the creation of his work Shepard has always put his own concerns as a writer above those of the ensemble. Despite notoriously sparse instructions when directing and although the make-up of his plays owes to techniques developed by the Living Theatre and the Open Theatre, he has at no point abandoned his position of power to give free rein to his actors.

The Rolling Thunder shows and particularly *Renaldo & Clara* go further in bestowing autonomy on the actor: the film is based almost entirely on improvisation that was built around a few central words. The individual pieces were eventually assembled by

the man who gives his name to lend authority to the work, but his function, again, is that of the bricoleur rather than that of the author. In the formation of the scenes the actors did not lend themselves to becoming tools in a word-perfect reproduction of the author's intention. On stage the success of the ensemble, as it were, was put ahead of the presentation of its central star, and the Revue's original conception was such that Dylan's publicity-drawing presence would at a future point be superfluous.

Shepard's texts are similar to the extent that the emphasis is moved almost entirely toward the performative aspect and stresses the transience of the dramatic text. In not being fixed and dominated by the overpowering figure of the author to quite the same extent as the naturalist tradition, novel or works belonging to other non-performing arts are, Shepard's plays can be likened to Dylan's entirely performance oriented work: "meaning is primarily conveyed in performance when 'spectacle' is physicalized along with spoken text" Laura Graham (1995) states. This emphasis on spectacle, reflected both in Rolling Thunder and in the Commedia dell'arte, goes hand in hand with the idiosyncratic rhythms of Shepard's language. Although they are so pronounced that they reveal themselves even in silent reading on the page they cannot unfold to their full potential until they are spoken aloud. Shepard's dramatic writing integrates into the dramatic tradition of an author writing for an ensemble of actors (which he is most likely not to be part of) insofar as it does not depend on one particular artist's idiosyncratic delivery, but it depends on performance more than, say, dialogue written by Lillian Hellman. Dylan's work draws its strength from performance *by him*. It loses in effect dramatically when performed by another artist and completely when encountered on the page.

Shepard approached the Rolling Thunder Shows very much with the audience in mind. Ironically, although the invisible fourth wall of the proscenium stage impresses its presence to a far lesser degree on a rock concert setting than on a theatre play, making communication between stage and auditorium easier and more varied, rock musicians

nonetheless operate less with a particular effect on the audience in mind. Rolling Thunder, then, combines both worlds: the open rock concert setting with a strong awareness of the dramatic effect of the shows on the audience. Again and again the *Rolling Thunder Logbook* records thoughts on the audience and the audience's part in the concerts' success as an artistic undertaking. Shepard seems to ascribe particular importance to the audience's relative activity when contrasted with the average theatre piece. The passage on the Thanksgiving concert in a small venue in Maine has the following to say about the artist/audience relationship:

This is definitely where the tour makes sense. A communal giving of spirit energy through music. No big promotional scams. No tense preparations for putting the show over the top. Just incredible music received by incredible small audiences who take it all in. It's Thanksgiving to boot. A snowstorm outside is making the inside seem even more on fire. Almost like a ritual. If electric rock and roll has "evolved" to a state of hero worship and blind adulation in some spheres, then Rolling Thunder is the antidote. (RTL 146)

It seems most important that paraphernalia of the contemporary rock tour that impede the direct exchange between artist and audience (such as large venues and promotional strategies) are abandoned in favour of intimate settings that reduce the experience to its necessary constituents and produce an intensity that is difficult to achieve in a commercial set-up.

Although Shepard emerged from the Off-Off-Broadway movement, he has never radically challenged theatrical conventions like the proscenium stage: He attacked Richard Schechner's production of *The Tooth of Crime* for transposing the play to an environment for which it was not made, and has generally criticized developments like environment theatre:

An audience can sit in chairs and be watching something in front of them, and can be actively participating in the thing that's confronting them [...]. And it

doesn't necessarily mean that if an audience walks into the building and people are swinging from the rafters and spaghetti's thrown all over them, or whatever the environment might be, that their participation in the play is going to be any closer. In fact it might very well be less so, because of the defenses that are put up as soon as that happens. (Chubb 1981: 202-3)

Interaction between stage and auditorium in a Shepard play is, as a result, going to be far more conventionalized than Rolling Thunder shows are, yet the intensity Shepard records as characteristic of Rolling Thunder is also typical of his own theatre. His trademark of visually confronting and provocative images that psychologically assault the spectator, as it were, and make him or her abandon the position of the detached observer, are complemented by other devices that tend towards physical assault with a potentially violent impact. On the set for the *Fool for Love* production at the Magic Theatre, which he directed, speakers were installed beneath the audience's seats, that amplified the sound of the slammed doors and resonating walls. Such a device is employed deliberately to force audience members out of their reservation and into the action on stage. "This play is to be performed relentlessly without a break" (FL 13) — by the end of the play the audience have endured a perpetual onslaught of visual, aural and emotional rogueries. In his own plays, then, the audience is exposed to the entire intensity of the play, and even though their physical integrity is sometimes violated, they are not expected to participate (in the sense of becoming actors) in whatever unfolds in front of them. No Shepard play abandons the (however loose) separation between the stage and the auditorium, so that the audience is left with a physical refuge, even though the emotional impact of the play is virtually inescapable. Importantly, violence is never used as an end in itself, but as an intensification of the stage experience.

Peter Podol sees in Shepard's work the most successful attempt undertaken by an American dramatist to "combin[e] an innovative and stimulating use of language with a number of Artaudian elements of production" (1989: 149). Antonin Artaud postulated "a

theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces" (Artaud 1958: 82-3). "It is in order to attack the spectator's sensibility on all sides," Artaud continues, "that we advocate a revolving spectacle which, instead of making the stage and the auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators" (86).

Artaud, although he stressed cruelty as an integral part of the theatrical experience, did, of course, not (necessarily) imply physical violence. His aim was the violation of convention, audience expectation and passive comfort. In this sense, violence can reach the audience on many levels: it can dominate language, the action, the style of presentation, as well as the technical presentation as such, especially sound or light effects. The physical violence, or the threat thereof, that permeates plays like *True West* or *Fool for Love*, then, does its part towards turning the respective play into a relentless experience, but it is merely one aspect of a whole design that does not let the audience come to a comfortable rest: characters that go through sudden transformations are another way of shaking up the familiar order of the play.

Dylan achieves the same effect by presenting his audience with radically different musical styles and thus violating their expectations. Obvious better-known examples are the Newport '65 and Manchester '66 concerts during which the audience was provoked by the new sound of Dylan's music as well as physically assaulted by the deafening volume. On a more immediate level he goes through the same process, though, every time he chooses an unfamiliar inflection or subjects an audience favourite to the more radical ordeal of being dismantled in front of their very ears.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>A good example, once again, comes from the Manchester 1966 concert. Notable is Dylan's extreme elongation of individual syllables throughout the acoustic set, thus destroying the flow of the song.

### 10. "Some kinda' ship" : (American) Myths Revisited

The Rolling Thunder tour had a more ambitious agenda than touring America's rural areas as a travelling carnival. Particularly by way of its movie *Renaldo & Clara* it gives its commentary on the status and relevance of American identity-founding myths — a topic that, as has emerged in previous sections, is also one of Shepard's major concerns. Like Shepard, Dylan sees himself as part of a counter-perspective to the dominant discourse, but does not adopt the same ironic, yet eventually affirmative point of view.

The name itself, Rolling Thunder, evokes Native American mythology and history as, amongst other things, a counter-perspective to white settlement. Apart from thunder's central position in Native American mythology in general, the closest connotation suggested by it is that of the legendary Nez Perce leader, Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt (1840-1904), who became known in white historiography as Chief Joseph and whose name is generally translated as "Thunder Rolling Down the Mountain." Although he was not known as a man of war among his people, his surrender speech given at Bears Paw on October 5, 1877, immortalizes him as the leader of an important stand against white domination.<sup>1</sup>

Again the tour's subversive character is confirmed: it takes the side of the oppressed and the marginalized.<sup>2</sup> Amongst other things, it situates itself in the Native American cultures' rich mythology that is determined by a tight connection with the land in which it originated and diametrically opposed to the transposed nature of European culture, uprooted and determined to grow new roots in the new world (to evoke Hector St. John

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<sup>1</sup>His speech ends in the famous words: "I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever" (Brown 1967: 407).

<sup>2</sup>This situation on the margin may be facilitated (and is rendered more intriguing) by the fact that Dylan (and Ginsberg), being Jewish, come from a marginalized perspective in American society anyway. Shepard thinks to perceive elements in their approach that he cannot relate to on the grounds of not being Jewish ("...it feels close to being volcanic. Something of generations, of mothers, of being Jewish, of being raised Jewish, of *Kaddish*, of prayer, of America even, of poets and language, and least of all Dylan, who created in himself a character somehow outside the religion he was born into. Who made a vagabond minstrel in his own skin and now sits facing his very own beginnings." [RTL 28]) and Ginsberg himself situates all of *Desire* in a Semitic mode (cf. liner notes Dylan 1976).

de Crèvecoeur's rhetoric, who might be said to represent the other — white — side of the early stages of American identity-forming mythology).

In Native American mythologies thunder is often personified as Thunderbird, a huge bird that produces loud noise by flapping its wings. Often these birds are creator figures (Gill 1992: 302). In his essay entitled "The Psychology of the Trickster-Figure" C.G. Jung establishes the connection between the Native American Trickster, also a creator, related phenomena in European medieval ecclesiastic culture from which the carnival with its reversal of the hierarchy takes its cue, and the *Commedia dell'arte*:

These medieval customs demonstrate the role of the trickster to perfection, and, when they vanished from the precincts of the Church, they appeared again on the profane level of Italian theatricals, as those comic types who, often adorned with enormous ithyphallic emblems, entertained the far from prudish public with ribaldries in true Rabelaisian style. Callot's engravings have preserved these classical figures for posterity—the Pulcinellas, Cucorognas, Chico Sgarra, and the like. (Jung 260)

Dylan's stage persona during the Rolling Thunder Revue tour draws on the same conglomerate Jung evokes in his essay: a connection opens up between the *Commedia dell'arte* inspired white-face character Dylan embodies on stage, the subversion of power structures inherent in it, their connection to the trickster and the mythological investments of the tour. Renaldo/Dylan emerges as a trickster figure.

Stephen Scobie points out Renaldo's likening to a God or Christ Figure ("At the beginning of the film, in scene 4, Renaldo had responded to the question, 'You running from the law?' by claiming, 'I am the Law.'" [1991: 109]) typical of a trickster, who is at once superhuman and animal: the trickster "frequently identifies a character with anomalous and contradictory roles. Trickster is at once a figure elevated above human beings and a grossly erotic, gluttonous figure that seems to celebrate the most base human needs" (Gill 1992: 308). Although no one would call Renaldo's/Dylan's presence on stage

"grossly erotic," in principle the contrary elements are nonetheless present. Dylan/Renaldo appears a man possessed in performance on stage, notably during the version of "Isis" at the beginning and "Just Like a Woman" towards the end of the film. On stage, Dylan and the character he embodies turn into a Mephistopheles, the demonic seducer. Once again, note has to be made of the white-face mask as a ubiquitous characteristic of these performances. One is reminded of Gustaf Gründgens' memorable performances as Goethe's Mephisto in white-face. Gründgens makes an even tighter connection between the subversive characteristics of the carnival and the devil figure he plays. In the prologue of *Faust* the devil appears not as an angel fallen from grace but as a legitimate contender to God's grand design ("Von Zeit zu Zeit seh' ich den Alten gern") who inspires God to a bet on Faust's moral virtue with the latter's soul at stake. The sinister aspect evoked by the white mask has its origin in its close affiliation with a mortuary mask: every mask implicitly evokes death (even Harlequin was originally head of a 'troop of the dead' [Leach 1998: 192; Welsford 1961: 291-2]) and the white face does so more explicitly in a more literal evocation of the pale, bloodless faces of the dead.

Shepard ascribes shamanic characteristics to Dylan on stage and "[t]here is something of the trickster in the character of the shaman and medicine-man" because of his simultaneous playing of "malicious jokes on people" and his "approximation to the saviour" that is a direct consequence of "the 'making of a medicine-man'." Jung deduces the simultaneous approximation to the saviour from "the mythological truth that the wounded wounder is the agent of healing, and that the sufferer takes away suffering"<sup>3</sup> (Jung 256). Again, what is captured in the concept of the trickster is double nature, a central theme in Shepard's work, though not necessarily determined by a Western, dualistic way of thinking. Shepard himself has been called a shaman by one of the pioneer

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<sup>3</sup>It is doubtful that what Jung claims to be a "mythological truth", the wounded wounder and the sufferer taking away suffering, is really a universal constant in cultures all over the world rather than an imposition of Western religious thought on North America's indigenous cultures. To an extent the Trickster itself, as a category, is a construct of the Western academy and used in order to be able to analyze phenomena as diverse and paradoxical as the different figures subsumed under its theoretical umbrella-term.

Shepard critics, Jack Gelber, himself a playwright.<sup>4</sup> Gelber's attention is captured particularly by the incantatory quality of Shepard's monologues (1981:47). More often than not these monologues go together with stage action of a ritualistic nature, that transcends the immediate action on stage (an aspect that is essential, it should be noted, also in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty).

It is the same tendency that fascinates Shepard in the Rolling Thunder shows: "...it suddenly flashes on me" Shepard remarks, "that this thing is way beyond pop music. This is ancient ritual" (RTL 74). Again, such statements are at least partly due to Shepard's own mesmerism with the performance rather than theatrical innovation, although Dylan's stage intensity and the theatrical props make sure that the ordinary rock concert setting is transcended. In every case, Shepard clearly subscribed to the tour's mythological investments: "Dylan creates a mythic atmosphere out of the land around us. The land we walk on every day and never see until someone shows it to us" (RTL 62). His statement resonates with Rolling Thunder's conducive atmosphere that allowed for investigations of American myths to arise spontaneously from the setting. Allen Ginsberg approached the tour with the Bicentennial in mind and saw it as an evocation and re-writing of American identity-forming myths, notably the history of white settlement and the pushing westward of the Frontier.

The Rolling Thunder Revue toured the north-eastern United States and parts of Canada. At least symbolically if not in a historically accurate succession, some of the locations of the pilgrims' and first settlers' dwelling places were visited and their historical significance incorporated into the tour's self-presentation as a re-writing of American history. By visiting places such as Plymouth and Jack Kerouac's grave, Dylan inscribes himself into a discourse on the American past and offers a perspective defined by the intertextual beacons established by these places. Plymouth is, of course, inescapably linked with the Pilgrim Fathers and with them to white settlement of the North-American

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<sup>4</sup>cf. Jack Gelber. 1981. "The Playwright as Shaman" (45-8) in: Bonnie Marranca (ed.) *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*. New York: PAJ.

continent. "Plymouth is a donut of a town," Shepard writes, and his perspective reflects where Rolling Thunder situates itself in the discourse on the American past: " Even from the point of view of 'historical significance,' it sucks" (RTL 24).

Instead of subscribing uncritically to the dominant discourse and celebrating the glory of the American past, the Rolling Thunder Revue typically reveals its allegiance to a counter-movement. It is here that another major connotation of the tour's name gains significance: Rolling Thunder was, of course, also the name of an operation within the Vietnam War. Vietnam itself brought about an altered attitude towards the American past and the utilization of its myths for the purpose of self-adulation. Yet, it in turn grew to the status of national myth. Since its occurrence it has had its part in defining what constitutes being American — it has its irrevocable position in the nation's (and not only the nation's) way of ascribing meaning to the world. Like Plymouth or the Mayflower, the evocation of Vietnam triggers a series of connotations that has, from a specific generation onward, modified the way Americans see themselves.

Dylan and Ginsberg, two figures not completely without significance in the definition of what is considered American, visit and sing on Jack Kerouac's grave, another counter-movement icon. According to Patti Smith (Miles 1990: 95) it was Shepard who insisted on visiting the grave. The driving force behind the excursion to the grave is, of course, on purely hypothetical grounds, equally likely to have been Allen Ginsberg. If Smith is right in her recollection, Ginsberg and Dylan had found very much of a kindred spirit in Shepard, whose affiliations with the Beat poets and related artistic movements have been pointed out earlier. The scene at Kerouac's grave, including related sequences documenting the time spent in Lowell cemetery, take up a significant amount of running time of *Renaldo & Clara*, thus clearly indicating the tradition in which it situates itself.

Beat was a counter-movement to the self-satisfied post-war materialism of the 1950's. It drew on the American past for a tradition of living and thinking that was seen as specifically American and hailed as a source of freedom and inspiration. Freedom of mind

and body from the conformist confines of bourgeois life was to be found in travelling the land in the Frontier spirit of the settlement of the West. Like the Rolling Thunder Revue, the Beats saw themselves in the tradition of the rural ideal of the American Farmer rather than that of the claustrophobia of the "urban" centres of the the east-coast settlers. In his fragment entitled "Pilgrim Fear" Shepard writes: "They build forts and walls and haul in cannon. [...] Everything's full of possible danger. They don't trust a soul. Even their own kind are burned as witches. They lynch Indians at the drop of a hat. They fire wildly into the night. They jump at shadows. They don't play after dark" (RTL 103). Again, the paranoid confines the urban settlers create around themselves are contrasted with the free roaming evoked by the passages on Kerouac (cf. the fragment title "On the Road to Lowell"); the east coast urban centres are contrasted with the rural West.

*Renaldo & Clara* is very much a road-movie; its raw material was a band on the road. The pervading theme of moving vehicles without any obvious destination is integrated into a road-movie aesthetic fuelled by American myths that sees itself in the tradition of counter-movements such as Beat. Maybe the lack of a destination for these vehicles can in this context be read as an ironic comment on the dominant progressivist view of America as heading towards an invariably brighter future — such a view usually draws on American myths to illustrate the determination and superior quality of the "raw material" from which the American people derives.<sup>5</sup>

The *Rolling Thunder Logbook* in one of its beginning fragments quotes Dylan as advising the camera crew to deliberately shoot rivers and trains of all varieties (RTL 23). Apart from their structural function outlined above, they once again bring with them a large number of associations with different stages of American history. Trains were instrumental in the settlement of the West in providing a link with civilization and the centres of the east. Later they were indispensable to the trade and "processing" of cattle

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<sup>5</sup>cf. Shepard's ironic treatment of such an attitude in *States of Shock*: "We can't forget that we were generated from the bravest stock. The Pioneer. The Mountain Man. The Plainsman. The Texas Ranger. The Lone Ranger. My son. These have not left us to wallow in various stages of insanity and self-abuse. We have a legacy to continue..." (Shepard 1993: 24).

and thereby to all of the so highly romanticized cowboy culture. They also evoke the freedom conveyed by the Beats, but more important in Dylan's case is a slightly earlier step in American history: the travels and ramblings of the Hobos of the 1930's, who used trains as their prime means of long-distance transportation as illicit travellers on axles, underneath floorboards and on roofs of freightcars.

Hobos establish the connection with the life of Dylan's early hero Woody Guthrie, who travelled the country as a Hobo himself, as a dust-bowl refugee looking for work in the West and becoming a potent force in the union movement in the process. Guthrie's involvement in the union movement, then, leads the way into Dylan's own beginnings as a protest singer of the early 1960's, who was seen by the likes of Pete Seeger as a legitimate heir to Woody Guthrie's throne and in direct descent from union activists like Guthrie or himself. In an oblique fashion, then, the trains eventually not only evoke American national myths, but also also point the way to the making of Bob Dylan's own.

Before he even joined the rest of the troupe Shepard was confronted with a train, since he travelled to the Revue's starting point, New York City, by train across the entire country.<sup>6</sup> And he, too, evokes the train's mythic stance in American history: with the words "Now I'm really on it. The Iron Horse heading East," (RTL 5) he lets his encounter with Dylan's travelling carnival begin. East is, of course, opposed to the direction the Iron Horse took originally, and maybe this reversal once again is indicative of the tour's and Shepard's own approach to the integrity of American myths. He does not convey respect for the integrity of defining American myths, such as tracks and trains: "Best place to hear the tracks is when the toilet flushes and that stained aluminum pan at the bottom opens up and yawns at the bare earth" (ibid.), he states sardonically in the same fragment. Again, irony emerges as a central characteristic of Shepard's approach.

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<sup>6</sup>And again, Shepard establishes another humorous beacon of his well-known fear of "falling without end" (Shepard 1996: 155): "I don't fly either. I only take trains. Haven't flown since Mexico, 1963" (RTL 4). "Mexico, 1963" is not, as Shepard attempts to insinuate, the buzzword to activate ubiquitous memories of a shattering event that rocked the world, but merely the date of his last, exceptionally turbulent, flight back from a vacation in Mexico (during which *La Turista* originated).

Trains, with their numerous connotations, stand for a peculiarly American restlessness. American society is an extremely mobile one. "I used to think the only place to write was on a train," Shepard writes: "Perfect temporary environment" (RTL 5). Dylan is aiming to evoke a romanticized version of a society in transience, populated by gypsies and the bohemian atmosphere of traveling carnivals. Shepard, on the other hand, shares the obsession with transience but approaches it from a different angle. His preface to *The Unseen Hand* contains a remarkable passage detailing his feelings about his own hometown, Duarte, and its neighboring town of Azusa, in California, which provides the setting for the play:

Azusa is a real place. A real town. About forty miles outside Los Angeles just off the San Bernadino Freeway. Its real slogan is 'Everything from A to Z in the USA' and it's just like that. A collection of junk. Mostly people. It's the neighboring town of Duarte where I grew up, more or less. These towns are obsessions of mine because of their accidentalness. Nobody set out to start a town called AZUSA or DUARTE. They just happened. They grew out of nothing and nowhere. Originally the valley was covered in citrus groves. [...] Eventually Los Angeles had a population kick back. People who couldn't make it in the big city just drove away from it. They got so far and just quit the road. Maybe they just ran out of gas. Anyhow they began to nest in these little valleys. Lots of them lived in trailer camps. [...] It was a temporary society that became permanent. Everybody still had the itch to get on to something better for themselves but found themselves stuck. It was a car culture for the young. For the old it was just a dead end. (Shepard 1995: [iii] N. pag.)

Most of Shepard's work is concerned with such dead ends that happened accidentally. If the Los Angeles suburb that has Austin and Lee stranded is what is left of the True West, the ambitious scope of the play with its commentary on American (popular) mythology could make possible the deduction that all of American urban

civilization happened with this very accidentalness. In the scene with Sara Dylan in *Renaldo & Clara*, Shepard, as a character named Rodeo, elaborates on the "tru[ly] American" nature of mobile homes. The scene revolves around the life of a rodeo rider: life in transience; an existence of permanent risk-taking without manifest or metaphysical securities in which every round presents immediate physical dangers. These uncertainties are met in a very traditional way: by countering them in ritual: "I need you to perform certain magical things with me, that's all. [...] Because I'm afraid that if I go out there on a bull without that, I'm gonna die" (Dylan 1977). Yet, these myths and rituals are no longer able to ground existence in certainty: Rodeo's great statement on the American-ness of trailer-parks ends in an anti-climax of frustration.

Ordinary everyday phenomena such as trailer-parks are turned into myths in the Barthesian sense by being lifted out of obscurity. They are appropriated by society through a continuous process of reference to them which results in a symbolic complex inscribed in them. The symbolic complex is constituted by the entire network of references. Azusa has become such a myth in Shepard's body of works. More than ten years later, Shepard and Dylan return to another, more universally American myth, and investigate its constructedness: a Western constitutes the intertext for their most recent collaboration to date.

## 11. "Brownsville Girl" — A Conclusion

Shepard left the Rolling Thunder Revue tour prematurely — a departure apparently brought about jointly by commitments of his own (*Geography of a Horse Dreamer* was nearing its premiere in New York) and by frustration with the way the project was developing. His *Rolling Thunder Logbook* is strewn with indications that he did not appreciate the direction (or lack thereof) with which the film was progressing or the panaceas conjured up to "save" it (RTL 126). Patti Smith suspects artistic disagreements between Dylan and Shepard, but she is not precise about their content. She attributes Shepard's premature termination of the collaboration to them: "So Sam split. I couldn't believe Sam split. Dylan's not used to having people walk out on him. He didn't like it" (Miles 1990: 95). Judging by his own account in the *Rolling Thunder Logbook* Shepard's dissatisfaction was due more to the tour's dynamics spiralling out of control, leaving him, as it seemed, with no "ax" (cf. "Conneticut Blues", RTL 135).

Almost exactly ten years later their creative paths crossed again. For Dylan, the creative crop of the collaboration was a song entitled "Brownsville Girl," released on the album *Knocked Out Loaded*, while Shepard presented *Esquire* with the bizarre one-act play "True Dylan" rather than the straight interview the magazine had requested. In conclusion to the preceding chapters, a few thoughts will now be devoted to the song, which reiterates many of the familiar thematic complexes in an intriguing merging of styles.

On the album the lyrics for "Brownsville Girl" are credited to Dylan and Shepard.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to speculate who wrote which lines: the listener witnesses a complete stylistic fusion. While the rugged poetry of the lines and the natural flow of their rhythm are reminiscent of Shepard's fine ear for the patterns of everyday speech, Dylan's idiosyncratic delivery situates the song securely in the realm of his own work. Shepard's

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<sup>1</sup>There is an earlier version of "Brownsville Girl," entitled "New Danville Girl." It is generally believed that the earlier version was co-written by Shepard and Dylan and that Shepard had no input into the few changes Dylan made to the song when he recorded it under the title "Brownsville Girl."

rhythmic prose naturally lends itself to being used in a song. "Brownsville Girl" evokes scenes from both "Simple Twist of Fate" and *Paris, Texas*, indicating a fusion on the aesthetic level as well.

It is impossible to give a plot summary. The individual lines seem to suggest a number of disparate narratives, each one painting a fleeting sketch of what could have been developed into a fully-fledged story in its own right — the technique is reminiscent of Dylan's painting with words of the mid-70's, illustrated earlier in "Tangled Up in Blue." Again, the approach is atmospheric, rather than coherently narrative. The listener is uncertain even of the temporal frame of the song: the car the protagonists use suggests a contemporary setting, while lines like "you went out to find a doctor and you never came back. / I would have gone on after you but I didn't feel like letting my head get blown off" (BG) suggest the wild west, a simulacrum of which is suggested by the framing action: the narrator stands in line to see a Gregory Peck Western. As a unifying element, the song periodically returns to this. The listener is confronted with the myth of the Old West as it appears within the iconography of the Western.

As a means of emphasizing the communal constructedness of this myth, the listener is made uncertain of whether the narrator simply reminisces about the film, or whether he actually participated in its production ("But I can't remember why I was in it or what part I was supposed to play"). The boundaries between the different fictional levels are never clear-cut. One is reminded of the blurring of reality and fantasy in *Fool for Love* and of the different levels of "reality" the Old Man inhabits.

Does the narrator appear in a fictional construct (a song) that investigates the constructedness of the popular myths surrounding celebrity and the West, or does he actually participate in the construction of the work he appears to deconstruct? This self-referential element (familiar from *True West*) is made explicit when the narrator, seemingly without connection, remarks: "If there's an original thought out there, I could

use it right now." Like *True West*, the narrative acknowledges its own constructedness in explicitly referring to the writing process.

Elements of the film spill over into the events of the narrator's life to the degree that the two are at times indistinguishable. The result is a contemporized version of the West(ern) in which the established patterns do not hold: instead of the lone, self-sufficient, male hero of the Western, "Brownsville Girl" presents as its hero a character who "didn't know whether to duck or to run, so I ran" and who is later saved by a woman who commits perjury for him. Established myths are re-written to fit contemporary needs where the old ones appear inadequate.

The film comes out of the Hollywood dream machine, responsible in no small part for the production and perpetuation of myths. Yet Hollywood, too, is no longer the same: Gregory Peck inhabited a Hollywood before "the stars were torn down". "He's got a new one out now — you know they just don't look the same, but I'll see him in anything..." "New Danville Girl" proclaims as an important variant. From a contemporary perspective it seems as if Hollywood has lost its innocence, as if it has demystified itself.

One reason why it may well look as if it has, is Shepard's own involvement in it, providing him with an inside view. Again and again he is moved to rethink his own position in "provoking such stupid illusions" (MC 41), notably in *True West*, *Angel City*, parts of *Motel Chronicles* and *Cruising Paradise* — and, of course, *The Tooth of Crime*. In its idiosyncratic way *Tooth* fuses imagery from the two major concerns of "Brownsville Girl": Celebrity and its masks and the Western iconography and its myths.

The Gregory Peck movie evoked throughout "Brownsville Girl" is *The Gunfighter* (1950), directed by Henry King: the movie's moment of catastrophe, the gunfighter's death, is accurately summarized in the song. *The Gunfighter* took as its model the story surrounding the historical Johnny Ringo, who died a mysterious death, ambushed by someone who later bragged about his deed. Fame could be gained simply by claiming to be the man who shot a notorious gunfighter and thus staking one's own claim to the title.

The gunfighter, in turn, has to be presented as a man who is pushed by society into the marginal role of the contract killer, but who nonetheless adheres to a strict moral code: "To live outside the law you must be honest." His challenger, on the other hand, has to be outside this unwritten law, wilfully ignoring the moral code. The pattern is "drawn from the contemporary worlds of sports and movie celebrity. [...] To be champion was ... to become the mark of perpetual challenges" (Slotkin 1997: 385).

Obvious parallels with the dueling opponents in *The Tooth of Crime* emerge. In the play, Hoss, the old star, is challenged and substituted by his lawbreaking rival Crow. Richard Slotkin, in his book about the representation of the Frontier in Westerns (1997), points out the parallel between the gunfighter and the making and the decline of stars, be they in the rock 'n' roll business, as in *Tooth*, marketed by the Hollywood industry, like Gregory Peck, or to a degree self-propelled, independent of big marketing strategies, yet mediatized as much of Dylan's and Shepard's public image appears.

Shepard's is similar to Peck's. He personifies a similar combination of masculinity and detached, world-weary wisdom. In it he utilizes the idealized idea of the cowboy in Jimmy Ringo style familiar from Westerns, yet does so in an ironic fashion. Once again the result is a self-referential, circular structure: the myths, this time those representing a certain type of masculinity, are deconstructed, yet imbued with new, less questionable authority in the process.

Western iconography and his film persona/e merge/s with the overall image he projects. (In this sense one might hear Shepard behind the line "and everything he [Gregory Peck] did reminded me of me" in "New Danville Girl.") The boundary between the public and the private, fantasy put on for show and the reality behind it, disappears. Identity is a fluid construction. There is no face to be revealed behind the mask: it is all performance.

This is the point made by "True Dylan," which reduces *ad absurdum* the *raison d'être* of celebrity interviews by thematizing within the framework of a fictionalized

interview all the constructions and uncertainties of its production. Eventually, the "interview" is presented as a play, a work of fiction. Its self-referentiality comes full circle by being published in *Esquire*, one of the organs of publication for the real celebrity interview.

The slap in the face of *Esquire* magazine is that Shepard implicitly claims to have found a more adequate form of discourse about the "ultimate mask maker" (Stephen Scobie) Bob Dylan than one that claims to uncover the essence of its subject. Dylan has "made himself up" (RTL 100) to the point that he, like Crow, exists entirely in masks. He cannot be pinned down and therefore needs to be presented through a medium that is equally elusive: "True Dylan" is unquotable to the hunters for Bob Dylan's essence.

Dylan's, like Shepard's, process of perpetual re-inventions was ushered in by a change of name. "The only thing we knew for sure about Henry Porter is that his name wasn't Henry Porter," "Brownsville Girl" reads,<sup>2</sup> and despite numerous efforts to write his life into the form of a biography — the close relative of the celebrity interview — it still seems as if the statement goes for Bob Dylan as well.

In *Renaldo & Clara* he toys with the tendency to interpret as unshakeable Truth what is banned on celluloid. What appears to be autobiographical, documentary footage (if under a thin veil of fictionality), turns out to be modelled on a fictional predecessor. The same characters appear in different guises, with different names, and on different levels of fictionality, wearing literal and figurative masks: the Bob Dylan outside the movie is another performance. Identity is always elusive, never one with itself, always already split at the origin.

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<sup>2</sup>The line gains an interesting note when read to refer to the American short-story writer William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), who used the pseudonym O. Henry, but nonetheless appears to be most recognizable as Henry Porter, although he never used the name in this combination.

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VITA

Surname: Wynands

Given Name: Sandra

Place of Birth: Essen, Germany

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1997 to 1998
Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn (Bonn University), Germany	1993 to 1997
Universität zu Köln (University of Cologne), Germany	1992 to 1993

Degrees Awarded:

Honours and Awards:

University of Victoria Graduate Teaching Fellowship

Publications:

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