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Effacing Myths and Mystification of Power: Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell*

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Abstract. Sam Shepard's *The God of Hell* dramatizes an initiation process that leaves the domain of the personal and familial and widens into a national rite of passage within which a nation—metonymically represented by the Wisconsin farmers Frank and Emma—is forced to leave behind the illusory cultural myth of a "normal, rural America" (Sarah Palin) and recognize a culture of war whose violence, in lack of an identifiable enemy, turns upon itself and destroys its own. The play, read in the conceptual framework of Victor Turner's theories on ritual and liminality and Michel Foucault's "The Subject and Power," effaces the mechanism and strategies of a power that subjects individuals into servitude.

Keywords: Sam Shepard, culture of violence, Michel Foucault, power relations, Victor Turner, ritual, liminality

Hell is empty,
All the devils are here.
Shakespeare: The Tempest

Sarah Palin, the Republican nominee for the vice-presidency in the 2008 elections, used as a slogan of her campaign speeches an intended return to the "true, normal America." She defined the veritable American as the farmer, populating the backlands, living according to the values and among the

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circumstances of small-scale family farms. She built her political discourse on an image of the United States and of its citizens that has long disappeared, if it ever existed at all.[1] Family farms have been replaced by "agribusiness," and the farmer—just as the iconic cowboy—has survived only in MGM and Warner Brothers productions, on the silver screen, and—apparently—in Ms. Palin's propagandistic rhetoric.

Her speeches opened up the Pandora-box of scrutiny and satire on all fronts. In the twenty-first century, when cable TV and cyber-media have taken over the job of the satirist, and people's lives are saturated with the media's continuous focus on politics, politicians, and their every word, it has become problematic for authors other than journalists to find effective means to tackle political issues in their respective arts. Shepard, however, found the appropriate tools and format to bring political satire back onto the stage without sounding propagandistic by transplanting wide-ranging global issues and international conflict onto an idealized and myth-imbued surrounding. America's Diary-land becomes an anachronistic pastoral landscape which big-time politics invades and destroys.

The God of Hell opened in New York in October 2004 just before the presidential election. Most reviewers and critics dismissed the play for its obvious political commitment and immediate aims.[2] Shepard, however, calls it a comedy and uses within its naturalistic set and character development elements of Beckettian farce that together with vaudeville and dark humor, and the complex way he effaces the mechanisms and strategies of a power that subjugates individuals into servitude by the most horrendous means of objectification, keep the play from turning into simplistic agitprop.

[1] For an insightful discussion of how the United States transformed from a rural into a mostly suburban and urban society and from European-style small-scale farming to large enterprise agriculture, see for example Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror. A History of Multicultural America.*

[2] Several reviewers of both the original production at the Actors Studio Drama School theater in New York and its subsequent premieres in San Francisco and London have criticized Shepard for his political commitment explicit in the play that transforms it, according to his critics, into propaganda. They reject the play for its abundant symbols relating to the current political climate (Connema), reading it as "a curious throwback to Brechtian times when theater tried to browbeat or terrify audiences into a new political awareness" (Hodgins), stating that Shepard only manages to create a cartoonish hell (Fisher). They argue that even though politically committed, art has to be great and has to "make everything more beautiful in order to fulfil its most essential function, that of seizing and holding the viewer's attention" (Teachout) and that Shepard failed to do so in his new play. The 2007 collection of essays edited by Johan Callens on Shepard's body of work phrases a harshly critical paragraph on the play, asserting that "*The God of Hell* (2004) comes across as a somewhat disappointing combination of earlier ventures . . . Every Bush may deserve his Gulf War, but Shepard's riposte to the second one pales in comparison to his first, despite the added urgency of the nation's paranoid war on terror, following the attacks on New York's World Trade Center in September 2001. True, Shepard now parodies the icons used before in a more nostalgic fashion (the flag, the farm, the sturdiness of the American heartland, etc.), but his dystopian fantasy on both sides of the Atlantic was perceived as preaching to the choir" (33).

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The playwright has also referred to *The God of Hell* as a satire on Republican fascism. One of the play's central issues evolves around the Iraq War and its effects on American culture and mentality. But Shepard manages to re-create the genre of the satirical play by mocking both the advertisement-driven overt patriotism and paranoia dominating the American mind since 9/11, and the entirely unrealistic image of an innocent and uncorrupted rural America that—according to leading politicians of the day—the country must and shall return to once the "enemy" is destroyed. Johan Callens mockingly asserts that "it is as if Shepard had set *States of Shock* in the living room of *Buried Child* and brushed aside his earlier caution concerning political didacticism" (33). In contrast, I argue that Shepard has always been a politically involved playwright responding to both the country's involvement in international affairs, and its internal social and economic changes that transformed the "metanarratives" (Lyotard's term) of the American dream, of endless frontiers, and of the unalienable rights of any individual to freedom and happiness, into mere anachronistic illusions. His plays focus on the possibilities of identity construction, imposed or chosen subjectivity, and human interaction in a society and culture built upon violence and the false ideal of a Manifest Destiny of invasion and subjugation.

The God of Hell abounds in historic and political references and its ideological mindset is powerfully emphatic. Rather than recreate a historic reading, I will focus in this chapter on how the protagonists of the play are forced to transit from their isolated, eventless, and ignorant rural existence to a subject position imposed upon them by the invading "culture of war."[3] In this process the myths of this culture are called into question and proven deficient by Shepard's exaggerating and parodying some of their elements. Power is exercised through violent mechanisms and strategies in order to force its subjects into the positions adequate to accept and sustain the status quo.

In analyzing this transition from the "never-never land" of "open-door-policy" rural Wisconsin idyll to its sacrification on the altar of manifest patriotism, and the farmers' "subjection"—in the Foucauldian sense—into positions of servitude alien to them so far, I resort to Turner's concepts of liminality and neophyte status. I also rely on Foucault's discussion of the interplay of power and freedom in order to better illuminate how Shepard employs this horrific rite of passage to show the

[3] Katherine Weiss argues that for Shepard war plays a crucial role in the making of America, and in the process the American male is sacrificed. In "Cultural Memory and War Trauma in Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*, *States of Shock*, and *The Late Henry Moss*," she discusses Shepard's three plays as fundamentally different works that embody a discourse which reveals the playwright's concerns regarding an American culture deeply infested with a rage and violence that manifest in all of his male characters and that are rooted in a trauma of war that men cannot overcome. Thus these male figures become unable to connect and communicate with their families and communities. This incommunicable trauma and the violence fuelled by this frustration destroy the community and the culture in which the consciousness of war goes back as far as the frontier days.

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danger inherent in obscure power relations: A society where power is impossible to locate or even name, and where forms of resistance have been numbed by passivity, credulity, and ignorance, the manifestations of power can and will easily turn into strategies of domination and physical determination.

The God of Hell returns to the familiar Shepard territory of the American Midwest where Frank and Emma lead a seemingly perfect bucolic life on their dairy farm. This almost flawless embodiment of what Senator Palin later calls "the normal America" is exposed as a grandiose anachronism: the only family enterprise left after the invasion of the rural landscape by big corporations and government intervention. The farmer's subject position as small-scale producer has been abolished by state-grants for non-production. The shift from an economy of production to one of commerce and monetary interaction has long ago taken place, now everything needs to be advertised, bargained for, and sold, even the land—metonymy of country.

Shepard has always been the nostalgic dramatist of the disappearing rural America, finding and dramatizing the fantastic in farming families' lives and mourning the tragic decay of the myth of the self-sustaining, nature-bound, truly manly American.[4] *The God of Hell* laments the decay of old myths and traditional life-style; but, at the same time, it mocks the ignorance of those who fall prey to manipulative subjection into non-existent stereotypical positions as that of the old-time farmer, the cowboy, the Patriot.

The familiar archetypes of rural life are destroyed by the new myths and new perceptions of a culture of fear and paranoia, looking for an enemy that here is elusive and obscure. The lack of a viable future for traditional farm-existence is also symbolized by the protagonist couple's childlessness. (Sophie Watkins interprets the houseplants that Emma obsessively overwaters and Frank's heifers as substitute children.) By act three Frank has been persuaded to sell his cows that "are going to contribute to the future security of this nation" (36), and as lights start to dim at the end of the play, Emma's plants illuminate the stage. They emanate increasingly intense blue flashes—just as Haynes and Frank— becoming thus symbols of the radical contamination of this rural environment and the lethal transformation that the invasion results in.

The play opens in medias res, the morning after Haynes' arrival. Like Agnes and Tobias who in Albee's *A Delicate Balance* received their panicking friends into their home, the couple in *The God of Hell* offers shelter to Frank's fugitive old

[4] Such Shepardian farming families are, for example, the Tates in *Curse of the Starving Class* whose avocado farm is threatened by the "zombie invasion" of developers; or the traumatized family in *Buried Child* on their land left barren for decades hiding the corpse of the murdered child; the image of the debilitated —once virile and capable— traumatized male appears also in the figure of Eddie in *Fool for Love* who only fantasizes about buying a farm and settling down, or the either deadly violent or utterly "impotent" male characters in *A Lie of the Mind.*

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friend even though Emma has a deep-rooted sense of danger that makes her question the identity and affiliations of their guest.[5]

Frank and Emma perform their morning routines while discoursing about the uninvited, long-lost friend they had put up in their basement.[6] The set as envisioned by Shepard creates a comfortable but somewhat outdated atmosphere of old-timey farm world and a sense of isolation and distance from society. The modest living room with an exterior door leading to a small mudroom and porch that separates the interior from the "*distant vague, snowbound pastures*" (5) and the small kitchen with "*usual . . . appliances, cupboards, and sink—all dating from the fifties*" (5) remind one of the "not-exactly Norman Rockwell" home in *Buried Child.* Ayres-Frederick in his review asserts that Shepard must like kitchens as they constitute the focal point of almost all of his family plays' sets. The reviewer reasons that "maybe they [kitchens] represent the heart and hearth of America where people can express their true hungers and needs and get those hungers fulfilled and needs met" (1). On the contrary: kitchens in Shepard's sets become the site of frustration—often equipped with the Shepardian iconic empty refrigerator—and the sites of erupting violence. They function as stages upon which characters play out their envisioned, invoked, or wished-for subjectivities and where they witness and suffer the destruction of these illusory identities.

In *The God of Hell* the shabby living room and kitchen with its smell of burnt bacon and coffee represent a way of life that seems to have been ripped out of the chronological flow of time.[7] Emma's family has lived here for generations, she was born and raised in the house that has looked the same for decades (as the kitchen appliances dating from the fifties suggest). The old-fashioned and worn-down set mirrors and symbolizes the owners' life that reproduces the lives of generations before them. This—ideally warm and cozy—shelter becomes part of Shepard's satire: the lack of alteration gives birth to decay rather than nostalgia, while in a

[5] This inexplicable sense of danger appears as a specifically feminine trait in both Shepard's and Albee's works—see, for example, Ann in *Peter and Jerry*. Their female characters instinctively identify menacing situations, or when they fail to do so or ignore their feeling—as Stevie does in *The Goat*—their destruction is inevitable. This subconscious female knowledge, just as Conchalla's mysterious goddess-like features in *The Late Henry Moss*, or Woman's wise insights into human behavior and interactions in *The Play about the Baby* —posit women in the two playwrights' works in the subject position of the Other.

[6] Frank is oiling his boots before going out to feed his "replacement heifers" and Emma is watering her plants methodically crossing the stage from the kitchen sink to the plants lined along the walls—as Shepard specifies—"*arranged without any sense of design or order*" (5) that are already dripping from overwatering.

[7] Involving the audience's sense of smell in the theatrical experience is a hallmark feature of Shepard's work resurfacing in several of his plays: the toast popping out of the stolen toasters in *True West*; Esteban's menudo cooked on stage so that its smell fills the auditorium in *The Late Henry Moss.*

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Turnerian reading, the house turns into the "segregation site" where neophytes undergo their liminal trials.

Frank and Emma live out of touch with the world, as if stranded on an island in the middle of the icy landscape, frozen in time and space; fossils of an earlier lifestyle and culture prone to be lethally wounded once the outside world comes knocking and invades their territory. The set becomes the locus of Frank's forced rite of passage with the representative of power Welch in the role of the ritual elder, Haynes used as an aid for instruction along with Welch's patriotic paraphernalia as dominant symbols, while the heifers and plants are sacrificed as remnants of the left-behind state of existence. In Foucauldian terms, on the stage of *The God of Hell* we witness the necessary conflict of power and freedom, the strategies Welch employs "to structure the [other characters'] possible field of action" (221), and the "modes of objectification" (208) that transform Welch's neophytes into a new type of subservient and weakened subjects.

Turner defines liminality as a period meant to offer neophytes the space, time, and means to acquire all the knowledge and skills necessary for them to function efficaciously in the community they are about to enter and to fulfill the new subject position(s) they are to appropriate within the power relations of their society. Within the three-fold ritual structure, liminality cannot be described in terms of power-relations due to the fact that in this phase of any rite, the initiands are stripped of any insignia and all their affiliations that would connect them to their earlier status or community. They are deprived of their will and freedom to act, and are perceived by the social structure as being ritually unclean, polluting, in a sense dead. Among such conditions, according to Foucault, one cannot talk about power relations because if there is no freedom, "power [is] equivalent to physical determination" (221) for "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (221). Power always implies freedom, and thus, different forms of resistance.

Accordingly, Emma remains the one character who manifests resistance and thus evades liminal subjection and the horrid rite of passage. From the start, she takes on the role of the interrogator: in her first scene with Frank, when she keeps asking questions regarding Haynes' identity, occupation, origin, and reasons for fleeing, in the hopes of getting "a kernel of information that will later prove to be essential to the plot" (Ayres-Frederick 1).

Her instinctual feminine sense of danger proves to have been right with the arrival of Welch, for whom her ambiance represents effortlessly conquerable territory. For, despite her presentiment, Emma and her husband live according to the open-door policy of America's Dairyland: "EMMA The door was open because this is Wisconsin and we all leave our doors open in Wisconsin! It's the open-door policy" (27-28). Welch ironically acknowledges this as a "charming custom" (28), a statement that pushes Emma onto the defensive and awakens her resistance

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towards the intruder who would make fun of the traditions that define her: "It's not a custom, it's a trust" (28). Whether it is a custom or a trust, further events prove that a subject position built on unaltered heritage and outdated traditions has become unsustainable. Their ignorance about the workings of the world outside their isolation, their lack of strategic knowledge and forms of resistance, make Frank and Emma vulnerable and guilty in their own downfall. For—as Foucault phrases it—"the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence" (222). The "fundamental phenomena of 'domination'" (Foucault 226) surface simultaneously with ignorance and passivity. Emma and Frank's apparent naivety and dutiful polite hospitality opens up their hermetic little universe to the violence and fear-fuelled anger of a power that—without the control mechanism of resistance—will subjugate and destroy anything different, that does not march to the common rhythm.

Emma, however, remains the rather simple-minded, but lucid and down-to-earth voice of reason throughout Haynes' re-initiation and Frank's "conversion" under the violent guidance of the demonic ritual elder Welch. She tries to remain in control of her space, the kitchen—traditionally a feminine area—and follow her routines. She ritualizes ordinary events and secular elements of her eventless life in order to add an emotional and spiritual intensity and dimension to it that the frozen winter Wisconsin existence does not possess. Through overwatering the flowers and burning the bacon she proves to herself that she is in control and has the freedom to choose among a set of activities as well as among a variety of methods of performing these. In her seclusion from the world she cannot help but develop such habits, for winters "cause behavior like this . . . You get into these habits. These trains of thought. If I—if I didn't water like this, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. There would be a horrible gap. I might fall in" (23). Her routines help her hold on to a sense of self. She thus endures being cut off from social interaction. But the basic human need to communicate still resides in her with a force that makes her open up even to the stranger Haynes who emanates "blue flashes."

She "comes to her senses" only when facing Welch's sly intimidating techniques. Once she leaves the kitchen to ring the bell and call for Frank, Welch immediately invades her space stapling strings of American flags all over her cupboards. Emma, however, trained through routines in exercising her freedom against the numbing void of the frozen and lifeless Dairyland, resists.[8] She remains suspicious of the vicious menacing power that Welch represents, confused and

[8] Scene three opens with her standing on the kitchen counter taking down the strings of lags; she even tries to convince Frank to confront Welch and get the heifers back, thus appearing as the defender of their traditional rural lifestyle, mentality, and morality.

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frightened by the ability of this devilish force to infiltrate and transform her husband and their lives in such a radical manner.

She remains outside the liminal area created by Welch, as Frank suggests, "lost in the ocean of ice and snow" (35). As a woman, she is left out of the military patriotic preparation of the males around her for which she is supposed to create and ensure the appropriately manifest patriotic ambiance. Her inherent sense of danger alarms her and raises her resistance, even though her change of policy from the tradition of the "open door" to her assertion that "[w]e are closing our doors to the outside world" (36) comes too late. Her world has been contaminated as the light-emanating plants demonstrate. The final scene of Emma ringing the bell in distress like a tocsin and calling out her husband's name into the wide frozen landscape recalls the final image of *A Lie of the Mind*: the visual metaphor of the fire in the snow, set by women as a warning and a symbol of their resistance to and apparent "liberation" from the grip of the violent males, echoed here by the bell's aural call of warning and the houseplants' ghostly light creating a hallmark Shepardian collage of theatrical effects.

Emma thus evades Welch's brainwashing technique; her resistance is not crushed by the power scheming to force its subjects into mindless servitude. Frank, on the other hand, falls victim to the new, mechanized, and horrific ritual of initiation that uses such accessories as remote-controlled electric teasers to recruit new adapts. The archetypal farmer Frank, involved in real physical work and representing a traditional attitude and way of thinking, undergoes a process of mental and physical transformation process. His new blue suit, tie, and attaché case make him seem oddly out-of-place in his own home and within his own environment. His funny walk betrays the fact that his "initiation" involved not only friendly persuasion and bargaining on the price of heifers, but torture as well that literally "got him by the balls," a method of "conversion" that apparently makes initiands emanate blue flashes of light. For—as Welsh declares—people have become vulnerable to such drastic processes of conditioning because they have lost their memory of the past, they have no connection with their history that still demanded people's involvement in the shaping of their personal and national fate: "There's no memory any more. That's the problem. No memory at all. Pearl Harbor. The Alamo. The Bataan Death March. All gone. Vanished like they never even happened" (32). People have lost, or rather given up their freedom or what Foucault calls their "duty" of analyzing and questioning the power relations of their society. They are involved solely with their immediate interests, such as the heifers in Frank's case, and their social sensitivity has withered away and has been reduced to a concern for such cultural icons as Krispy Kremes, Mallomars, and comic books, the items Haynes hopes to still retain after his re-initiation. People subject themselves to voluntary servitude to a power they do not see and do not understand, as the resistant Emma's desperate words demonstrate:

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FRANK He's [Welch] from the government!
EMMA What government?
FRANK Our government.
EMMA I don't know what our government is anymore. Do you? What does that mean, "our government"? (35)

As a veritable subject/neophyte of such a subjugating power, the fugitive Haynes displays the features of a Turnerian initiand. Throughout the play he remains the terrified victim of a power he is running from and feels closing in on him. Even though Emma tries to calm him down reassuring him that "Wisconsin is the perfect getaway" (22) where nothing ever happens, his very presence along with Welch's appearance imbue the atmosphere with a tension and mysterious menace that justify Emma's suspicions.

Haynes, the first messenger of this threat, appears somewhat cartoonish and robotic jumping up and reacting in violent terror every time his hosts question him about his affiliations or the blue flashes his fingers emanate whenever he touches something. He refuses the doctor Emma suggests should check the blue flashes that "are not normal" (24), thus categorizing her guest as the "Other," different, implicitly dangerous. Haynes, however, refutes such a categorization and subjection: he resorts to scientific explanation and—as "normally" people do—appeals to Emma's trust: "Why don't you believe me?" (24).[9]

He reacts similarly terrified whenever the name Rocky Buttes is mentioned, as Welch discloses later, the site of a "minor nuclear leakage" that Haynes was hired to mend. The name also pinpoints a feature of the power Haynes is running from: by alluding to Rocky Flats, the nuclear power site near Denver, Shepard posits power in secret military activities, a politics and economics that is not deterred even from using mechanisms and materials that could cause total annihilation. The fear of possible pollution or destruction that already the name induces is intensified by the strange blue flashes and the "lecture" Haynes delivers on plutonium, after swearing Frank to secrecy.[10] From the question of replacement heifers and

[9] He accounts for the blue flashes as being nothing but "static shock" (24).

[10] HAYNES Do you know what plutonium is named after, Frank?
FRANK What? Plutonium?
HAYNES Yes.
FRANK No—what?
HAYNES Pluto—the god of hell.
FRANK Oh—I thought he was a cartoon.
HAYNES Do you know how long it remains radioactive and biologically dangerous once it's released into the atmosphere?
FRANK Plutonium?
HAYNES Yes.
FRANK No, I don't know anything about it.
HAYNES Five hundred thousand years.

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breeding, Haynes jumps to the topic that has been terrifying the American conscience for decades and has kept the country in paranoic despair: nuclear power. His presentation on plutonium's carcinogenic nature and its effects on the genes of the reproductive cells causing mutations, in other words, "abnormalities," its ability to spread through space and time as a "tasteless, odorless, and invisible" (20) deadly substance can also be read as a symbolic description of the power he is trying to escape: polluting, undetectable and undefinable, infiltrating everything right down to the genes and destroying them from inside out. At the same time, this "lecture" also offers a possible interpretation of the play's title: the Latin mythological god of hell, Pluto represents the mysterious power whose workings are meant to achieve not the redemption but the destruction of mankind. Frank and Haynes' discussion takes on an atmosphere of universal threat and crisis where personal and world issues become undistinguishable: "FRANK Are we talking about a world situation or something personal, Graig? HAYNES What's the difference?" (19).

Haynes' secretiveness, his involvement with some secret state organization with undecodable abbreviations as its name, and his affiliation to such dangerous and polluting materials as plutonium, his strange physical and mental state differentiate him radically from his hosts. He represents the "mysterious Other" who imposes upon those whose world he invades an imminent and deadly threat. Both Frank and Emma recognize him as the depository of knowledge that they lack but towards which they also seem to be ignorant. They only start thinking of him as the "carrier" of pollution after Welch describes him as such:

> You're contaminated. You're a carrier. What're we going to do about that? We can't have you free-ranging all over the American countryside like some kind of headless chicken, can we? You've already endangered the lives of your friends here, not to mention the Midwest at large. Now, that was pretty selfish of you, wasn't it? Poisoning the Heartland? (30)

FRANK That's a long time.
HAYNES It is. The most carcinogenic substance known to man. It causes mutations in the genes of the reproductive cells. The eggs and the sperm. Major mutations. A kind of random compulsory genetic engineering that goes on and on and on and on.
FRANK That would probably affect my heifers then, wouldn't it?
HAYNES Yes, it would, Frank. It definitely would affect your heifers. It would affect every heifer within six hundred miles of here. It would penetrate the food chain and bio-accumulate thousands of times over, lasting generation after generation. Tasteless, odorless, and invisible. (20).
The question of genetic engineering that in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* appeared as the desired height of scientific achievements that Nick the young biologist wanted to claim as his own, here appear as accidental consequences of imprudent human action that will affect the environment and future generations (not only of cows) beyond our limited imagination.

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Thus, in Frank's perception, Haynes is transformed into the "dangerous Other"who is initiated into some secret knowledge and skills that he is able to conceal in order to mislead and contaminate the innocent. In Frank's mind, his friend turns into the disciple of some horrific powerful god, sent on a mission to exploit his confidence and loyalty, deceive him and "contaminate" him beyond salvation: "He's [Haynes] a carrier. He was sent here to do us in . . . He's a traitor! He's betrayed us all. A pretender. They look like us. They act like us. But underneath they're deadly" (36).

Turner defines liminal personae as necessarily ambiguous since they elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions within social and cultural settings. Frank and Emma's inability and ultimately their uninterest in fixing Haynes in a subject position, locates Haynes as liminal, different, and thus dangerous. He himself verbalizes his betwixt-and-between state, emerging from the dead—as Frank believed he was—when, almost crazed by fear, he denies his own existence, snapping out at Emma: "You don't know me. I don't exist" (27). His "abnormal" status also materializes in the staging of the play: he is put up in the basement, underneath and separate from the "normal" living area from where he rises from time to time as ghost.

Initiands are also perceived by the social structure as ritually unclean and polluting; therefore, the necessity of their seclusion possesses an immediate urgency.[11] Still, the idea of Haynes as the carrier of contamination—versus the mysterious power represented by Welch—is underscored and ironically scrutinized by the banality of the scene that dramatizes this "contamination" and need for cleansing: "EMMA [talking about the sofa Haynes has stained with coffee] Oh, don't worry about that. It's beyond ruin. It's seen way worse than coffee spills. Premature calves. Afterbirth. Blood all over the place. You can't wreck it" (22-23). Accordingly, Haynes proves to be everything but the horrible source of contamination and embodiment of evil as Welch describes him. In Emma's down-to-earth and logic-dominated perception, Haynes appears basically incapable of wrecking even a sofa, much less a whole country and way of life.

Destructive power does, however, reside in the second intruder, Welch. As the agents in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Welch appears at the house and invites himself in. He barges into Frank and Emma's mid-American ambiance like the "zombie invasion" Wesley talks about in *Curse of the Starving Class*. And while in the earlier play the violence that erupts within the family makes them vulnerable to the danger coming from the outside, Emma's "open-door policy" and their inability

[11] See Mary Douglas' discussion of the theme of ritual pollution and cleansing in *Purity and Danger*.

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to resist efficaciously turns this farmhouse into an easy target for any intruding power.[12]

Welch arrives as the familiar not-too-welcome know-it-all and persuasive salesman with an arrogant can-do attitude that quickly turns into a violent routine of interrogation. As a modern-day representation of the anachronistic door-to-door salesperson, he invades the house with an abundance of patriotic paraphernalia selling them—with an apostolic air and discourse—like the latest must-have commodity. But he soon proves to be totally different from a more successful version of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. With his pathetic and disapproving rhetoric he reproaches Emma for her lack of any manifestation of their loyalty and devotion to the country:

> WELCH Well, Emma, this is Wisconsin, isn't it? I'm not in Bulgaria or Turkistan or somewhere lost in the Balkans. I'm in Wisconsin. Taxidermy and cheese! Part of the U.S. of A. You told me that yourself.
> EMMA What are you driving at?
> WELCH You'd think there would be a flag up or something to that effect. Some sign. Some indication of loyalty and pride.
> EMMA Loyalty? To Wisconsin? (12)

Welch manifests himself as the agent of a power that is effaced here as demanding total and manifest approval and devotion from its subjects, the Foucauldian "new form of pastoral power" (208) that invades the "pastoral" landscape of Wisconsin and imposes on people a "matrix of individualization" (Foucault 215) within which one gains subjectivity if one parades his/her adherence to the group, otherwise risking confrontation, expulsion, even annihilation. And the shrewd Welch is selling the ultimate patriotic armor necessary for showcasing this adherence: the "starter kit" of flags and cookies from which the buyer can move up to the "Proud Patriot package"—an alliterative play on words Shepard uses to sharpen the irony in saleable patriotism.

Welch is also selling his image as the twenty-first century equivalent of Lewis and Clark, this time travelling across the country from West to East. The ritualistic journey of Shepard's male characters to an ideal West—that ultimately always proves an illusion—is transformed into its opposite. This trip backwards, to origins, however, also implies a reinvigoration of a culture of conquering and violence, of confrontations with and destruction of people (Natives) and nature that would

[12] In *Curse of the Starving Class* the door broken down by the father that the son tries in vain to mend symbolizes their vulnerability caused by the "curse" of violence ("nitroglycerin in the blood") that they carry within.

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oppose such an expansion. Thus Welch is un-masked as the menacing executive "hand" demonstrating the force of a power that cannot be pinpointed: "the department" that "keeps [him] on [his] toes" (9).

Charles Donelan affirms that "Welch incarnates the devil himself, or at least a contemporary flag-waving version of the title's god of hell" (1), while Paul Hodgins argues that Welch can only be seen as the simple instrument of evil, a flat caricature-like character the workings of whose mind remain hidden. In my reading, Welch needs to be a robotic, emotionless, highly intelligent, detached, and sarcastic character in order to be a believable representative and a terrifying model of a power and culture of dominance that denies individuality except that of militant patriotism, that fascistically rejects anything and anybody other or different. He stands in for a power that aims and is able to manipulate and deceive its subjects into accepting and thus sustaining its unquestioned and incontestable authority.

This power authorizes Welch, the robotic parody of a salesman/secret agent/warrior patriot to recruit new subjects and to function as ritual elder in their initiation. He possesses knowledge and skills, as well as the right information to give him the upper hand in the situation and locate him as initiator. He holds and handles the necessary symbolic objects (his "Patriot package" and money) with which to "instruct" new recruits; the grotesque "abnormality" of Haynes to demonstrate the workings of the power structure and the consequences of resisting the exercise of this power; as well as the technological insight and equipment to capture, efface, and punish such treason. Within the world of the frozen Wisconsin landscape, this technology and what it is capable of appear as something menacing and destructive, abused by a power that assumes no responsibility for the effects of its actions (for example, the "minor nuclear leakage") and feels absolutely no obligation towards its subjects. Welch defines this power position in a well-articulated and terrifying image that conveys the parameters of a totalitarian regime:

> We can do whatever we want, boddy-boy. That should be clear by now. We're in the driver's seat. Haven't you noticed? There's no more of that nonsense of checks and balances. All that red tape. All that hanging around in limbo, waiting for decisions from committees and tired-out lobbies. We're in absolute command now. We don't have to answer to a soul, least of all a couple of Wisconsin dairy farmers. (31)

The modus operandi of this power involves sly interrogation, persuasive branding and self-marketing, and technology-assisted physical torture. As Welch ironically puts it, those uninitiated into these technological marvels are unable even to see the danger: "It's extraordinary how blind the naked eye is. No wonder people have so

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much trouble accepting the truth these days" (30). His sarcastic remark doubles in meaning: while Frank is unable to detect the danger he brings upon himself and Emma by accepting Haynes into their house, he is also blinded by Welch, not noticing how he himself is drawn into the horrific military and patriotic conversion and initiation process conducted by the intruder. He is mesmerized by Welch's powerful discourse, the embodiment of the ideal of a masculine power and of the capable fertile male. In his looks—thus, first in his appearance—he becomes the mirror image of this demonic initiator.

In a media- and image-dominated world where immediate and first-hand observation has been replaced by images of a technologically and virtually created reality, and where inter-personal conversation has been replaced by the flood of discourses that are always and necessarily ideological and propagandistic, the truth has become elusive and deceptive. People are being blinded by the multitude of images, facets, and perspectives of reality and interpretations of the world that they are exposed to and that are imposed upon their own thinking. Pinpointing the enemy and identifying the source of contamination has become problematic; thus in such a world of elusive truths, shifting images, and simulacra, and in a culture of disbelief and suspicion, the one who knows the enemy holds control. Playing upon the paranoia and fear that he himself awakens in Frank and that epidemically takes hold of the new victim, Welch depicts Haynes as the embodiment of evil that infiltrates and infests America.

The persuasive Welch, as the depository of all truths, beyond being able to identify the source of pollution, appears to be selling also the means of ritual cleansing. His militant patriotism, his arrogant and sly interrogation techniques and torture methods, however, prove to carry another, more destructive type of contamination threat. He recruits his new adapts by literally "gripping them by the balls," he subjects them to a physical and mental "training" that seems to be a reinvented version of Pavlovian conditioning and brainwashing that transforms men into zombie-like automatons. He pre-signals the violent nature of his initiation methods when he mockingly plays around with picking words that would rhyme with Haynes' name such as pains, shames, and blames, words that seem to have been chosen from the register of subjugation, totalitarianism, enslavement:

> Well, well, well—Mr. 'Haynes,' is that it? Mr. Haynes? Very inventive. Deceptively simple. Almost poetic. 'Haynes'—rhymes with 'pains,' or is it 'shames'? Possibly. Could even be 'blames.' The choices are endless. Well, not exactly endless. Everything has its limits, I suppose. Everything runs into a brick wall sooner or later. Even the most heroic ideas. . . sooner or later it would come down to just a finite number of possibilities, wouldn't it, Haynes? Brains, maims, flames, chains. Which is it? What's it going to be? (29-30)

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By scene three the verbal mockery turns into deadly serious methods of convincing threateningly mentioned at the end of the previous scene: "What would happen to your body now if you had to undergo the same ordeal? The same stress to your appendages? . . . The pain to your penis, for instance?" (32). The aural image of the torture going on in the basement created by the sounds of yelling, of "piercing," and "sharp screams" (37), materializes in the horrifying picture of Welch dragging onto stage the heavily breathing and yelling Haynes pulled by an electrical cord that "*runs directly into the fly of Haynes's* [*sic!*] *pants*" (39). The button on the other end of the cord enables Welch to deliver remote-controlled electric shocks to his captive. This visual metaphor echoes Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* with Pozzo tugging Lucky as the ultimate image of humanity trapped in an eternal battle fighting for positions of dominance, an image a variation of which Shepard has already created in *A Lie of the Mind*.[13] In *The God of Hell* Shepard pushes the boundaries of menace further to achieve the effect of a vaudeville nightmare with Welch in the role of the "demon clown" (Shepard quoted in Shewey 75). The torture is explicit and cruel, and the grotesque events represented on stage dramatize effectively how fragile power relations are and how power once escaped from its interplay with and continuous provocation by freedom will at any moment turn into totalitarianism.

Shepard's harsh criticism is directed against any totalitarian regime and against any kind of torture.[14] At the same time, he also criticizes the ignorance with which people accept the status quo and fall captive to serving a power that denies their right to freedom and which ultimately destroys them. He attacks that lazy passivity with which Americans rest and hope "to get a free ride on the back of Democracy" (42). Controversially, the playwright puts these words into the mouth of the most devilish character, Welch, representative of a power that gains its force from the passivity, ignorance, and servitude of citizens. The air of sarcasm and irony that Welch adds to the words "[w]hat have you done to deserve such rampant freedom? Such total lack of responsibility . . . Sooner or later the price has to be paid" (42) suggests a power that is aware of how easily people can be manipulated and is consciously exploiting its subjects' inability or unwillingness to act or resist in any form.

The final scene of the play presents the transformation process of Frank into a brainwashed slave of Welch's cause. He and Emma are expected to display a show-your-colors mentality and total transparency towards the invading power. Together with Welch images and simulacra of a rampant patriotism flood the house

[13] In the earlier Shepard play, Mike drags onto stage the bound Jake who is holding an American flag between his teeth, another element linking the two works.

[14] "EMMA You're not torturing him, are you? What're you doing? WELCH Torturing? Torturing! We're not in a Third World nation here, Emma. This isn't some dark corner of the Congo" (38). "EMMA . . . This is absolute torture! I don't care what country we're in" (39).

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which turns into a battleground where the forces of a fear-driven warrior patriotism that has nothing to do with the land any longer and that treats the country itself as a commodity, collide with and easily extinguish resistance weakened by passivity, ignorance, and isolation.

Frank and Haynes subjugated and subjected into the position of neophytes, also face a liminal challenge. They are sent on a journey towards the west with the heifers, an ironic doubling of the old time cowboy movies with Haynes and Frank heading back west "[a]t night. By train. Across the Great Plains" (41), towards Rocky Buttes that Welch depicts as a "[w]hole different landscape. Wide open. Just like the Wild, Wild West. Not a tree in sight. Endlessly flat and lifeless" (42). This reads like a set description from the script of an old Hollywood western. Frank's task of reaching the desert and taking his beloved heifers to their destruction at the contaminated site of Rocky Buttes represents a test of loyalty. At the same time, in the universe of Shepard's plays the desert represents the site of eternal liminality and marginalization, cut off from human contact, outside chronological time and social structure. Welch ironically defines the test as being "delivered to your Manifest Destiny" (42): a destiny of being eternally trapped in the hold of the power that deprives its subjects of freedom and thrives as there exist no strategies of resistance. Emma remains the sole free individual protected by her femininity. But her escape also means her dismissal from the community of men. She becomes now the dangerous Other, the enemy, who resists the subject positions offered by the network of domination. Meanwhile, she has also been deprived of all the myths, traditions, customs, in her own words "trust[s]" that she defined herself by. Therefore, she also is forced into the betwixt-and-between liminal position of ambiguity and neither dead nor alive state where the possibility of resistance is eliminated.

Terrified by physical torture and the idea of an invisible enemy closing up on them from every direction, left in ambiguity after all their beliefs and grand narratives have been discarded as nonsense or sacrificed for the sake of the "cause," Frank and Emma are subjugated and subjected to a power that operates through concealment and mystification. They are truly blinded and fail to recognize the threat coming from within, and to resist an imploding structure that feeds on itself in a cannibalistic and self-destructive manner, a culture of schizophrenic paranoia and of insatiable hunger for dominance.

The initiation process dramatized in *The God of Hell* leaves the domain of the personal and familial and widens into a national rite of passage within which a nation is forced to leave behind the illusory cultural myth of Ms. Palin's "normal, rural America" and recognize a culture of war whose violence—confronted by an unidentifiable enemy—will turn upon itself and destroy its own. Such a horrific picture makes Frank deliver one of Shepard's hallmark poetic soliloquies culminating in a bitterly ironic punch line:

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FRANK (*Out to audience again.*) It's times like this you remember the world was perfect once. Absolutely perfect. Powder blue skies. Hawks circling over the bottom fields. The rich smell of fresh-cut alfalfa laying in lazy wind rows. The gentle bawling of spring calves calling to their mothers. I miss the cold War so much. (39-40)

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