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[The Borderline Dilemma in Paris, Texas: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Sam Shepard](#) by Donald L. Carveth

The preoccupation with the personal and interpersonal dilemmas of the contemporary disordered self that typifies the work of the American playwright, Sam Shepard, is clearly reflected in the central themes of the film, *Paris, Texas*. Directed by Wim Wenders who collaborated with Shepard on the screenplay, the film was awarded the Palme d'Or for 1984 at Cannes. This essay in comparative psychoanalysis considers this work from the standpoint of each of two contrasting psychoanalytic approaches to the origins of pathological narcissism. One, employing a broadly oedipal perspective and following certain ideas of Marcuse and Lacan, locates its roots in the breakdown of paternal authority in society and the family. The other, utilizing various object-relational and self-psychological perspectives, traces it to a failure of the holding or containing function, not merely of the early (maternal and paternal) selfobjects, but of the wider culture as well.

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author info:

[Donald Carveth](#)

dcarveth@yorku.ca

Glendon College
York University

Toronto, Ontario
M4N 3M6 CANADA

**[The Borderline Dilemma in Paris, Texas:
Psychoanalytic Approaches to Sam Shepard](#)**
[Donald L. Carveth](#)

As early as the 1950's, psychoanalysts began to report significant changes in the forms of psychopathology that appear to have emerged in response to a sociocultural situation characterized by Buber (1938) as one of metaphysical homelessness and by Berger (1969) and other sociological descendants of Durkheim (1897) as one of an increasingly pervasive anomie. In contrast to the intrapsychic or neurotic conflicts of the relatively structured personality of an earlier era, the variety of psychic suffering typical of our postmodern condition takes the form of the sense of fragmentation, estrangement and emptiness characteristic of what Lasch (1979) has called "the narcissistic personality of our time."

The preoccupation with the personal and interpersonal dilemmas of the contemporary disordered self that typifies the work of the American playwright, Sam Shepard, is clearly reflected in the central themes of *Paris, Texas*. Directed by Wim Wenders who collaborated with Shepard on the screenplay, the film was awarded the Palme d'Or for 1984 at Cannes. In the following essay in comparative psychoanalysis, I will view this work from the standpoint of each of two contrasting psychoanalytic approaches to the origins of pathological narcissism: one which, employing a broadly oedipal perspective and following certain ideas of Marcuse (1970) and Lacan (1977), locates its roots in the breakdown of paternal authority in society and the family; and the other which, utilizing various object-relational and self-psychological perspectives, traces it to a failure of the holding (Winnicott, 1965) or containing (Bion, 1962; Meltzer, 1978) function, not merely of the early (maternal and paternal) selfobjects, but of the wider culture as well. Just as some caretakers are more successful than others in enabling children to develop basic trust (Erikson, 1950), ontological security (Laing, 1960), or a cohesive self (Kohut, 1971; 1977), so some societies are better able than others to provide their members with a coherent world-view, a sense of confidence and belonging, and an integrated system of meaning and value as the foundation of both personal identity and social order. Under conditions of rapid social change and resulting widespread sociocultural dislocation and anomie, a society's capacity to integrate,

socialize and provide its members with a meaningful identity (that is, its capacity to fulfill a selfobject function) is impaired; in such a situation numbers of individuals are forced to endure a condition of identity diffusion (Erikson, 1959) characterized by a sense of isolation, meaninglessness, fragmentation, diffuse anxiety and emptiness depression.

It is a commonplace of that stream of classical social theory summarized, for example, in Nisbet's (1966) *The Sociological Tradition*, that since the rise of both capitalism and science caused the break-up of the tradition-directed (Riesman et al., 1961) medieval agrarian social order, such large-scale social processes as rationalization of production, industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization have inexorably undermined the social basis of the religious world-view--Berger's (1969) sacred canopy--which had hitherto provided the foundation of both social integration and personal identity. In this view, despite continuing religious revivals which attempt to stem the wider tide of disbelief, the overall direction of modernization has entailed what Weber (1953) viewed as the increasing "disenchantment of the world." Although a few visionary nineteenth-century artists and thinkers, such as Nietzsche (1882), were able to anticipate "the coming of European nihilism," for most people in the West this recognition was long obscured by the apparent continued viability of Judeo-Christian values, albeit cut loose from their transcendent foundation, and by confidence in the capacity of human reason, science, industry and technology to fill the gap left by an apparently absent or non-existent deity.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries communities and families could continue to live, as it were, off the borrowed capital of a religious world-view increasingly regarded as outmoded. Despite increasing secularization, a degree of social integration was nevertheless maintained on the basis of common values (which appeared, at least for a time, to stand despite the loss of their transcendent foundation), on belief in the "Protestant ethic" of virtuous achievement, and on faith in the inevitability of both social progress and individual advancement through industry and science. Riesman's (1961) so-called inner-directed personality with its firmly internalized values and goals was the product of a normatively integrated family life sustained by a social order still confident in the virtue and viability of its essentially materialistic vision. According to Marcuse, it was in this social and psychological context that Freud created psychoanalysis as the psychology of the inner-directed bourgeois character, with its rationally calculating ego endeavoring to work out practical compromises between the pressures of external reality, the demands of its firmly internalized superego, and its energetic and unruly id.

As such observers of the Western "encounter with nothingness" as Barrett (1958) and Steiner (1974) have pointed out, in the course of the present century our secular substitute faith in progress through science and technology has been severely shaken, not only by the evidence of human irrationality provided by the spectacle of two world wars of unparalleled destructiveness and by growing doubt concerning our capacity to control our own inventions, but also by "the encounter with finitude" arising from developments within the most advanced of Western sciences, physics and mathematics, which "have in our time become paradoxical: that is, they have arrived at the state where they breed paradoxes for reason itself" (Barrett, 1958, p.37). Faced with these challenges to our surrogate faith, as well as by the continued socially disintegrating effects of secularization and modernization, the coherent identity, confidence and inner-direction of the bourgeois individual increasingly gives way to the identity diffusion and other-direction characteristic of the contemporary narcissistic or schizoid character and to what Steiner (1974) perceives as a widespread "nostalgia for the absolute." In this perspective, the central psychic difficulty of the postmodern personality is less that of containing the conflicting elements of a structured self than of maintaining any sense of a coherent or integrated identity at all.

In its focus upon conflict, repression and neurosis, classical psychoanalysis amounts to what Kohut (1977) described as a psychology of "Guilty Man." It accurately reflects the society in which it arose, a society with sufficient normative integration to sustain a family life with enough coherence and stability to permit its offspring to develop the relatively well-structured or cohesive self and the internalized superego, ego-ideal and ego-identity characteristic of the inner-directed personality of Freudian theory. Among those who perceive a relative decline of this type and the emergence of the unstructured personality, some seek to explain these changes in terms of the diminution of paternal authority in both the family and society at large; that is, they offer an explanation in terms of what Lacan (1977) would see as a relative failure of "the paternal function" to normatively structure the personality in accordance with the social law.

Marcuse (1970), for example, argues that due to sociohistorical changes in the structure of the nuclear family in post-industrial societies which have significantly undermined the authority of the father as an object of identification, "the 'individual' as the embodiment of id, ego, and superego has become obsolescent in the social reality" (p.44) and a new personality type has emerged whose ego-identity is diffuse and shifting due to its lack of inner support from internalized values and ideals. In this situation, the "mediation between the self and the other gives way to immediate identification" while "the ego shrinks to such an extent that it seems no longer capable of sustaining itself, as a self, in distinction from id and superego" (p.47). In a society characterized by what Mitscherlich (1970) sees as a condition of fatherlessness, the inner-directed character formed in the struggle against and identification with the father gives way to an other-directed personality; this character-type is oriented less by the "gyroscope" constituted by internalized values and goals than by a wish to achieve a positive self-image in the mirror constituted by significant others and by a radar-like sensitivity to their expectations and responses.

Whereas Marcuse locates the social roots of identity diffusion in a condition of fatherlessness, writers in the traditions of object-relations theory and self psychology--such as Balint (1968), Bowlby (1953;1969-80), Fairbairn (1952), Guntrip (1969), Kohut (1971;1977), Mahler (1975), Suttie (1935) and Winnicott (1965)--offer an account which emphasizes not merely the father's emotional absence, but that of the mother as well. In these perspectives, it is the empathic unavailability or unattunement of the early caretakers and of the selfobject milieu in general which constitutes the psychological basis of the disordered self, the "Tragic Man" of Kohut's self psychology. Kohut (1977, pp.267-80) himself suggests that whereas the more extended and integrated family of the nineteenth and early

twentieth century may have overstimulated children and promoted the structural conflicts that are the focus of the classical psychoanalytic understanding of neurosis, the modern nuclear family--isolated from wider kinship ties, subject to social and geographical mobility, pressed by the need for two incomes and by the desire of both parents for careers outside the home, and faced with the threat of separation and divorce--may well provide an environment in which children are understimulated and deprived of the emotional responsiveness essential for the formation of a cohesive self. The themes of homelessness, anomie, interpersonal disconnection and personal disintegration, as well as of deprivation of fathering and mothering, are richly developed in *Paris, Texas*. The film opens upon a scene of Devil's Graveyard, Big Bend, Texas, "a fissured, empty, almost lunar" (p.7)² desert landscape. (Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to the published screenplay, Shepard and Wenders, 1984.) Through this desert, Travis, a strange, derelict figure, trudges toward a settlement just over the Mexican border in Texas. Having regained consciousness after collapsing in a cantina, this broken, in some ways Christ-like character who has emerged on bandaged feet from the desert wilderness, remains silent in the face of a physician's interrogation regarding his identity and the causes of his mysterious injuries. Travis's younger brother Walt, an average, middle-class businessman living in Los Angeles with his French wife Anne and their adopted son Hunter, is notified, but just before Walt arrives to fetch him, Travis wanders off into the desert again. Walt manages to catch up with him as he marches determinedly into the nothingness of the desert landscape and, despite his resistance to being touched, finally succeeds in getting him into the car and takes him to a motel. When Walt leaves briefly to buy him some new clothes, Travis prepares to have a shower but, catching a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror, he heads straight out the door and back into the desert. Once again, Walt catches up with him and persuades him to return.

For some time during the drive through the Mohave desert to Los Angeles, Travis continues to refuse to speak, but finally, in the face of Walt's impatience, he utters the word "Paris" from the back seat of the car. He asks Walt if he has ever been to Paris and could they go there now. Walt naturally thinks he means Paris, France, but Travis, smiling to himself, traces the location of Paris, Texas on a road map. Soon, having "returned to the land of the living" by resuming speaking and eating, but not yet sleeping, Travis is permitted to drive while Walt sleeps, but he turns off the main highway (in search of Paris, Texas?) and they wind up in the middle of nowhere.

It turns out that Travis has been missing for four years. His wife Jane had also disappeared around the same time. Their four-year-old son Hunter had been dropped at the door of Walt and Anne's who had cared for him as their own ever since. Every month Jane had been depositing varying amounts of money in a Houston bank account in the name of her son. Now four years later, Travis is introduced to Hunter as his real father, but he is initially unable to evoke any recognition or acceptance from his son. Partly as a result of a viewing of a home movie Walt had taken some five years earlier depicting an ecstatically happy vacation by the sea in which Travis, Jane and Hunter seemed happily united, and partly as a result of Travis's efforts to master the father role, the father-son relationship is reestablished, much to the regret of the boy's surrogate mother Anne who fears her marriage to Walt may disintegrate if they lose Hunter.

Having set out together to contact Jane when she makes her monthly deposit in Houston, Travis has Hunter telephone Anne and then hang up on her, leaving her distraught. Spotting Jane at the bank, father and son follow her to her workplace, the Keyhole Club, where, downstairs, the customers are able to hold private conversations via one-way mirrors and intercoms with women of their choice in fantasy booths of various types ("Hotel," "Poolside," etc.). After talking to Jane and, without revealing his identity, attempting to establish whether or not she is willing to meet her customers outside the Club, Travis leaves and, with Hunter, drives to a bar where he proceeds to get drunk. Father and son wind up for the night in the sitting room of a laundromat. While his eight-year-old son sits behind him in a big leather chair, Travis reclines on a couch and proceeds to "freely associate" (in an ironic allusion to psychoanalysis?) about his shy and sensitive mother who was embarrassed by her husband's jokes about her being "a fancy woman" from Paris.

The next day, Travis returns to the Club, this time telling Jane the story of their life together in a way that gradually leads her to recognize him. It is not until the concluding monologues that we learn that Travis's paranoid jealousy and possessiveness had led him constantly to quit his jobs to be with his much younger wife; that Jane had felt trapped by the arrival of her child; and that by the end Travis had taken to tying a cow-bell to her ankle to prevent her from escaping from their trailer-home while he slept. One night she did manage to sneak away, but Travis caught her and dragged her back and tied her to a stove. Falling asleep despite her screams and those of their child, Travis later awakened to find the trailer on fire. Stumbling through the flames "toward the only two people he loved," Travis, finding them gone, ran into the wilderness "until every sign of man had disappeared" (p.92). At the film's conclusion, Travis arranges a meeting between Hunter and Jane but, as he explains in a tape he leaves for Hunter, he cannot participate in this reunion and, instead, drives off alone into the night. From its opening scenes of desert wasteland, this film is pervaded by images of absence, anonymity, geographical and mental vacancy, interpersonal disconnection and personal isolation. As a speechless, identityless derelict trudging through a parched and barren landscape, Travis is the ultimate symbol of human brokenness in general and of the particular predicament of the postmodern individual who, in what Buber (1938) viewed as our current epoch of homelessness, "lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent" (p.157). A man without language, memory or identity, Travis is in search of his lost origin, the point at which he understands he might have been conceived, but having turned off the main highway somewhere that "didn't have a name," he ends up in a place where "the emptiness is broken only by some randomly dumped, rusty car wrecks" (pp.28-9).

In marked contrast to the historical tradition and the rich cultural heritage of the "old world" (Paris, France), is the "new world" (Paris, Texas) created by modernization, a world symbolized here by a vacant lot in the middle of the desert, by miles of highway dotted with tacky motels and hamburger joints, and by rusted car wrecks signifying the dead-end of a materialistic, technological society. Reminiscent of Nietzsche's (1882) madman who enters the marketplace and proclaims the death of god, Travis encounters a psychotic on a bridge over a freeway shouting into the void below his prophetic warnings to the socially adjusted who have blinded themselves to the nothingness he sees at the centre of

being:

You will all be caught with your diapers down. I promise you that.... They will invade you in your beds, they will snap you from your hot-tubs, they will pluck you right out from your fancy sports cars. There is nowhere, absolutely nowhere in this godforsaken valley. My voice is reaching you from here where I'm standing to clear out into the goddamn Mohave desert and through this Vale of Tears all the way to Arizona.... Not one square foot of that will still be a safety zone. There will be no more safety zone. I can guarantee you: the safety zone will be eliminated. Eradicated. You will all be extradicted to the land of no return. You'll be flying blind to nowhere (pp.54-5).

As a number of the critical essays collected by Marranca (1981) suggest, much of Sam Shepard's dramatic work can be read as an account of the failure of the American Dream. Certainly, *Paris, Texas* can be viewed as a critique of the alienation and anomie characterizing an uprooted and traditionless commercial technological society which falsifies experience through advertising and media images and reduces human relations to essentially anonymous encounters mediated by a cash nexus: Walt is a manufacturer of advertising billboards which cover the natural landscape; it is implied that the images of happy family life in the film within the film are about as real as those of Hollywood (since at the time the home movie was made relations between Travis and Jane had been severely strained for years); the father image is something one finds in a magazine and practices before a mirror; the mother-child contact is maintained through cash transfers and their reunion is initiated at a computerized drive-in bank; the mother is employed in a porno-palace catering to voyeuristic fantasies (the film industry?) in Houston, space capital of America, the point from which the technological society will launch its nothingness into the emptiness of space.

At the same time, as members of Riesman's (1961) "lonely crowd," Travis and Jane are representative of the growing numbers of those who, in the face of the disintegrating forces of contemporary social life, are able to sustain neither relationship nor identity, let alone a stable family life capable of adequately nurturing children. In Travis we see someone whose inner emptiness renders him unable to tolerate any separation from Jane. As the indispensable, albeit archaic, selfobject support for his disintegrating self, he attempts to keep her in a state of literal bondage, an act that ultimately results in the type of explosion and conflagration that not infrequently marks the desperate finale of such primitive, sadomasochistic relationships.

The attempt on the part of Travis and Jane to overcome their inner emptiness through what, in a Mahlerian framework, would be viewed as a pathological fusion or symbiosis would be seen, in Lacanian theory, as symptomatic of fixation in the narcissistic or Imaginary realm originating in "the mirror stage" due to regression from, or "foreclosure" of accession to, the more differentiated order of the Symbolic. In the perspective of the early Kohut (1971) this would be seen as an "archaic merger" and in current selfobject theory as a primitive type of self-selfobject bond. Such longings are beautifully conveyed in the film in a shot which shows Travis's reflection superimposed upon the image of Jane's face seen through the one-way mirror in such a way that "his features are reflected in hers" (p.93) and the two images fuse into one. In keeping with Lacanian ideas, it would seem that the only way they can sustain a symbolic space between them, a space in which they can remain separate enough to speak to one another, is by turning their backs to each other, as if the separation by the one-way mirror and intercom are not enough to resist the lure of a regressive merger. This longing for merger (or, more accurately, for mirroring and empathic selfobject responsiveness) is again expressed in the scene of reunion between Hunter and Jane at the Meridien Hotel: not only are their images mirrored in the floor to ceiling glass windows, but they appear as mirror-images of one another: as they turn, face to face, in one another's arms, recapitulating the scene of joyous dancing by the sea in the film within the film, their similarity in appearance, colouring and dress makes them seem almost indistinguishable.

At the root of the relational difficulties of characters such as Travis and Jane is what the British School describes as a schizoid condition, one which Kohut conceives as a fundamental deficiency in the cohesion of the self, and Mahler attributes to impairment in the area of self and object constancy. Travis, for example, speaks of an inner gap that cannot be healed. As he explains in the tape he leaves for Hunter (communication, typically, occurring at one remove): "But I can't stay with you. I could never heal up what happened. That's just the way it is. I can't even hardly remember what happened. It's like a gap. But it left me alone in a way that I haven't gotten over" (p.86). Earlier in the film, while looking at the family photograph album together, Hunter asks Travis whether, after his father died, he could still feel him "walking around and talking some place" (p.49). In the next shot, the two examine a photograph of an arc of water issuing from a garden hose in which the ordinarily invisible gaps separating the intermittent streams of water are clearly visible (p.50). Similarly, Jane explains that she had to give Hunter up because "I didn't have what I knew he needed. And I didn't want to use him to fill up all my emptiness" (p.94). For a long period after their separation, Jane remained inwardly involved with Travis, until one day his image seemed to disappear from her psychological universe altogether: "You just... disappeared. And now I'm working here. I hear your voice all the time. Every man has your voice" (p.95; ellipses his). Due to her own inner emptiness, human contact for Jane must either assume the archaic, symbiotic form of the relationship she shared with Travis, or that of the impersonal pseudo-relationships she has with anonymous men safely distanced from her by the barrier of a one-way mirror.

In Lacanian theory this haunting sense of inner emptiness and the regressive longings for merger to which it gives rise would signify a failure of oedipalization resulting in insufficient recognition and acceptance of the inevitable gap separating subject and object in normal mental functioning. In contrast to this view of the sense of inner absence as an intensification of the socialized individual's normal sense of "lack" arising from an inability to master separation, current object-relations theory and self psychology would regard it as evidence of a failure to establish the confident sense of inner connection that makes normal self-regulation possible (and, hence, separation tolerable) due to early environmental failure and the child's resulting inability to internalize what Bacal (1985) describes as an "optimally responsive" selfobject. The film provides evidence supporting both theories: the former which locates the causes of identity diffusion in the decline of paternal authority (the condition of fatherlessness) and consequent failures in

differentiation or oedipalization; and the latter which traces it to a more fundamental failure on the part of the early selfobjects (both fathers and mothers) to demonstrate the "response-ability" essential for the child's development of faith in the ultimate reliability or fidelity of the Other and of Being itself as the essential foundation for confidence in the integrity, value and viability of the self. Despite what many regard as the obvious structural weaknesses of his plays, which frequently seem fragmentary, unfinished and inconclusive, Sam Shepard is often considered one of the most significant American playwrights of his generation, a situation which leads us to try to account for the enormous appeal of his work. This appeal derives, at least in part, I believe, from the fact that, through his characters with their disintegrated selves and torturous relationships and even through the fragmentary structure of his drama itself, Shepard has succeeded in representing the predominant forms in which the psychopathology of our time, as opposed to Freud's, finds its characteristic expression.

In his popular biography of Shepard, Shewey (1985) draws attention to the collaborative nature of this film. Wenders had been wanting to work with Shepard for some time and felt that the latter's *Motel Chronicles* (1982) could serve as the basis for a film, but instead of adapting this work, they decided to start the story from scratch and worked together on the screenplay: "Although the script was complete before Shepard left ... Wenders started changing it almost as soon as shooting began. He brought in screenwriter Kit Carson to help with daily re-writing Toward the end Shepard started phoning in ... with new scenes, including the crucial last scenes of the movie" (Shewey, 1985, p.182).

This type of collective production, which is rather the rule than the exception in film-making, causes difficulty for those who would apply to the analysis of film one of the major strategies of psychoanalytic literary criticism, namely the psychobiographic method of viewing the creative product as a reflection of its author's psyche, analogous to one of his dreams or symptoms, a view which justifies decoding the text in light of the author's personality, his typical conflicts, obsessions and the like. The trouble is that a film like *Paris, Texas* emanates from the interaction of several psyches (Shepard's, Wenders's and Carson's, among others) so that to see it exclusively in the context of Shepard's previous work or his personality is problematic. Despite these reservations, however, I think we can clearly detect in this film the major themes that have tended to characterize much of Shepard's work: the absent or defective father; the precarious, artificial, insubstantial and divided nature of the self; the problematic nature of language and communication; the obsessive exploration of symbiotic and sadomasochistically enmeshed relationships.

Like Shepard's play *Fool For Love*, *Paris, Texas* concerns a father who leaves. Around the time when he was working with Wenders on the film, Shepard also reestablished contact with his father through a visit to New Mexico that Shewey thinks probably formed the basis of a moving father-son encounter described in *Motel Chronicles* (pp.91-2). In that work, Shepard (1982) wrote: "My dad lives alone on the desert. He says he doesn't fit with people" (p.56). In *Paris, Texas*, Travis (who has lived alone on the desert and doesn't fit with people) says: "I am looking for the father.... just a father. Any father.... I just need one" (p.45).

The theme of father-son reunion between Travis and Hunter in *Paris, Texas* would appear to echo these preoccupations of Shepard's, especially the scenes in which an emotionally wounded man struggles to assume the paternal role for his son, and those in which, in a reversal of roles, the son performs the paternal function for his drunken or disoriented father. Such themes are reminiscent of Marcuse's notion that the decline of paternal authority is at the root of the contemporary problem of identity, as well as of Lacan's idea that the paternal function performed by the symbolic father (the father) is essential to the formation of social identity and that the failure of this function leaves the subject enmeshed in a narcissistic state of fusional identification with the mother and with mirror images of the self.

The theme of the absent or defective father in Shepard's plays is closely associated with another of his major preoccupations: the elusive, shifting, contradictory and fabricated nature of personal identity.

Shepard was born on 5 November 1943, while his father was with the U.S. Army in Italy. Named Samuel Shepard Rogers III, he was called Steve. Having spent the first years of his life with his father absent, and after his return enduring a stormy relationship with him, Steve Rogers would later abandon the Name-of-the-Father (which, in Lacanian theory, as *le-nom-du-pere* is homophonic with *le non-du-pere*, the No--i.e., the Law--of the father). Shewey quotes from an interview with Shepard: "I always thought Rogers was a corny name.... But Samuel Shepard Rogers was kind of a long handle. So, I just dropped the Rogers part of it. That had gone on for generations, that name, seven generations of it. It kind of shocked my grandparents more than anybody, I think, 'cause they kind of hoped I would carry it on. Then I called my kid Jesse, so that blew it entirely. Now in a way I kind of regret it. But it was, you know, one of those reactions to your background" (pp.30-1). To the extent that the name we derive from our fathers (in our patriarchal and patrilineal culture) is central to personal identity, Shepard's rejection of the paternal name offers, beyond its obvious oedipal significance, a clue to his preoccupation with the elusive nature of personal identity.

"In Shepard's early plays," writes Shewey, "the characters change a lot, play different roles... and go through different moods...." It has been suggested that from the Open Theatre, Shepard picked up the technique of "transformations" in which actors were asked to switch immediately to a new scene and therefore to wholly new characters. However, "Shepard carried the idea of transformations much farther ... by actually writing them into his texts ... [so that] characters became wholly different in abrupt movements within the course of the work..." (p.51). Shewey reports that in the 60's in New York, "Some found it disturbing the way Shepard could switch personalities from one moment to the next" (p.38). Regarding his play *True West*, Shewey quotes Shepard as follows: "I wanted to write a play about double nature ... one that wouldn't be symbolic or metaphorical or any of that stuff. I just wanted to give a taste of what it feels like to be two-sided. It's a real thing, double nature. I think we're split in a much more devastating way than psychology can ever reveal. It's not so cute. Not some little thing we can get over. It's something we've got to live with" (p.141).

Perhaps of all Shepard's works, *Paris, Texas* most explicitly and dramatically represents the problem of identity. Initially without language, memory or a name, in the course of the film Travis recovers each of these, but in a way that dramatizes Shepard's sense of the artificial and socially constructed nature of human identity--the father, for example, being an image one takes from a magazine and a role one assumes before a mirror, coached in its proper performance by others, a matter of costume and bearing, a persona that, at the end of the film, Travis may be in the process of discarding as, I at least imagine, he heads back to the desert.

Both in his conviction regarding our "double-nature" or intrinsic two-sidedness and in his view of identity as a range of artificially and socially fabricated images, Shepard is in agreement with Lacan who viewed the split between the "subject" and the "ego" as an inevitable feature of the "decentred self," the "ego" or "specular image" itself being regarded as a product of the subject's misidentification with its mirror-image and the images of others in "the mirror stage." In various object-relational and self-psychological perspectives, however, the divided or contradictory quality of the self, as well as the sense of its imaginary, artificial or fabricated nature, is seen as symptomatic of schizoid or self pathology. Although at times Lacan's "ego" and "subject" appear to resemble Winnicott's "false self" and "true self" respectively, whereas Winnicott, like Fairbairn and Guntrip, regarded the splitting of the psyche entailed in false-self development as a sign of psychopathology (at least when it went beyond the necessary evolution of a socially functional persona), Lacan universalizes this splitting as an inevitable feature of the human condition. And while Lacan regarded mirroring as central to the development of the "ego" (Winnicott's "false self"), Kohut, like his British precursors Suttie, Fairbairn, Balint and Winnicott, drew attention to the importance of empathic mirroring and recognition by its significant others for the child's development of its "true self," as well as the splitting and fragmentation resulting from significant empathic failure on the part of the early selfobjects.

The debate between those, in object-relations theory and self psychology, who regard the divided self as a manifestation of schizoid pathology relative to particular environmental failures and those, like Lacan (and Shepard himself), who regard our "double-nature" as a universal feature of our "broken" human condition, is a reflection in psychoanalytic theory of the wider philosophical disagreement between historical or sociological as opposed to ontological theories of the sources of human suffering and evil. Traditionally, those psychoanalysts, like Freud and Melanie Klein, who have opted for the ontological side of this debate (while admitting that the universal flaw is exacerbated by unfavourable environmental conditions) have done so on the basis of a questionable biological reductionism that finds the root of the corruption in human nature in somatically-based, anti-social instinctual drives of sex and aggression or Eros and Thanatos. In so doing, they diverge in a fundamentally gnostic or Manichean direction from the Judeo-Christian understanding of our "fallen" nature as arising not from the drives of our bodies which, as a part of the Creation, are good, but rather from our uniquely human capacity for self-centredness--that is, from what in psychoanalysis is regarded as our narcissism. In the biblical view, the problem of human nature arises not in connection with our animal selves (the Freudian "id"), but rather from what Lacan called the specular "ego" or self-image which forms the basis of an idolatry of the self which estranges us from the Other. In bringing the psychoanalytic understanding of the human predicament into congruence with the biblical critique of the "original sin" of pride, Lacanian theory can meaningfully be read as the Catholicization of psychoanalysis in the process of its belated assimilation into the French intellectual milieu.

Aside from his personal decision to change his name, Shepard's drama also reflects his sense of the artificiality and inauthenticity of words. Shewey observes that Shepard speaks of language as "a veil hiding demons and angels which the characters are always out of touch with" (p.14). Especially in his early works, Shepard seems to struggle to find a direct, spontaneous and authentic mode of speech capable of capturing the immediacy of experience without falsifying it. This suspicion of words and language was characteristic of the antinomianism of the youth culture of the 1960's which shaped Shepard's sensibility; it was expressed in longings to break through the screen of language and of the personal selfhood constructed by it in order to reach some deeper and more authentic self somehow existing in a state of unity or harmony with the whole of nature. This suspicion of language went hand in hand with the longing to shed a separate identity in favour of ecstatic fusional experiences sought through meditation, drugs, orgiastic sex or frank psychosis. From a Lacanian perspective, such longings would be seen as symptomatic of a failure of oedipalization and a consequent narcissistic regression from the Symbolic to the preverbal or Imaginary level of experience. From the perspective of contemporary selfobject theory, however, such wishes would seem rather to be distorted expressions of the desperate hunger of a disordered and fragmenting self for recognition, holding and mirroring by an empathically responsive and harmoniously attuned selfobject.

In Lacanian theory, it is precisely through the child's entry into the Symbolic order, through the learning of language and the internalization of the Name-of-the-Father as the medium of the patriarchal law against incest, that the subject is liberated through the oedipalization process from its illusory fusion with its mirror-image and the images of others, as well as from the binary oppositions, envy and sado-masochism which characterize experience in the Imaginary. Hence, it is only to be expected that a preoccupation with fatherlessness, the elusiveness of personal identity, and fixation upon symbiotic relationships, would be accompanied by a sense of the problematic nature of language and communication. For Lacan, these themes reflect different elements of a single psychic complex in that the failure of oedipalization--that is, the failure to internalize the Name-of-the-Father--is at the same time a failure of symbolization resulting in the subject's inability to transcend both the identity confusion characteristic of the Imaginary ego and the extremities of the all-or-nothing thinking which underlies the symbiotic and sado-masochistically enmeshed relationship.

In his later work, Shepard's focus appears to shift from the problem of the domination of experience by language to "the very difficulty of finding a language of social communication and a means to express feeling" (Shewey, 1985, p.98). The problem now is not that language obscures communication, but rather that communication is distorted or blocked due to the absence of a common language. In *A Lie of the Mind*, for example, one of the central characters is aphasic, having suffered brain damage as a result of a beating by her husband, and she struggles, very like Travis, to remember the words for things and to make herself understood. People misunderstand and talk over, around or past

one another. Whereas in *Paris, Texas* communication is at one remove, distanced by technological devices like telephones, tape recorders, walkie-talkies, intercoms and one-way mirrors, or interfered with by verbal ambiguity of various types (Paris, France or Paris, Texas?), in *A Lie of the Mind* the message often fails to get through altogether.

In play after play, Shepard returns to the theme of the symbiotic and sado-masochistically enmeshed relationship, the couple who can neither live with nor without one another, whose relationship embodies the need/fear dilemma or approach/avoidance conflict characteristic of the disordered self. In such "borderline" personalities, painful states of inner isolation, disintegration and emptiness drive the subject into a binding attachment to another who, as an archaic selfobject, supports its fragmenting self. Paradoxically, however, even while sustaining the self on the one hand, sooner or later (if not from the outset) this selfobject comes, on the other hand, to be experienced (due to transference distortion or actual repetition) as a representative of the original bad or persecutory object and, hence, appears to threaten re-traumatization and self-annihilation. Threatened with the fragmentation of the self--either through the absence of response or through the presence of the wrong responses--and being unable, owing to the repetition compulsion, to obtain the essential empathic attunement--or even, often enough, to recognize or make use of it when it is available--the disordered self is truly caught in a double-bind. Either the good object (selfobject) is unavailable, or being available inevitably turns out to be bad: in no case, short of successful therapy, is a good self-selfobject relationship attainable.

Perhaps this pattern is most clearly delineated in *Fool for Love* where the incestuous pair seem fated endlessly to repeat their pattern of reunion and explosive separation, their pathological version of the *fort! da!* game of disappearance and return that Freud (1920) observed in his little grandson, a version of the early peek-a-boo game enjoyed by mothers and their infants. Here, however, rather than a game lovingly and voluntarily engaged in, we witness a violent and compulsive repetition. On the one hand, Shepard's text supports a Lacanian reading: it is the repeated abandonment of both children and their mothers by the Old Man (that is, the failure of the paternal function) that appears to lie at the root of their incestuous entanglement. On the other hand, self and object-relations theories would tend to view this failure on the part of the father (Kohut's idealized selfobject) as simply exacerbating or failing to compensate for an earlier narcissistic injury in the relationship with the mother (the mirroring selfobject). In these perspectives, a fundamental failure to internalize an empathically attuned and responsive primary caretaker as the basis for both secure attachment and a cohesive and positive sense of self has led to a hostile, sado-masochistic dependency upon external objects as sustainers of identity and self-esteem. Such objects are needed far too much to be genuinely loved and because, in the transference repetition, they inevitably come to represent the original bad objects, they must be perpetually destroyed and then, in the face of intolerable separation and annihilation anxiety, brought to life again. This pattern of hostile dependency is clearly evident in *Paris, Texas* in the symbiotic or archaic self-selfobject relationship between Travis and Jane. At the outset, Travis, the archetypal borderline personality, wanders out of the desert, the land "without language or streets" (p.92), into a border town called Terlinqua, the land of language, where, after asking him if he knows which side of the border he is on, a doctor searches in vain for any clue to his name or identity. In the course of the film, Travis experiences a type of resurrection, rebirth or resocialization, a re-entry into the Symbolic order after an existential or psychic catastrophe--a sort of crucifixion--has led to a profound regression to a preverbal level of experience tantamount to psychological or spiritual death. In accordance with Lacanian theory (and for that matter with Kohutian theory as well)--and at this point one begins to suspect that Wenders, if not Shepard, has been consciously influenced by Lacan--the initial phase of the development of identity involves the process of mirroring. It is his encounter with his mirror image in the bathroom of the first motel that sends Travis back into the desert, as if this reminder of the problem and burden of identity is simply too much for him to bear. Throughout the film, there is repetitive recourse to mirror images and images of mirrors: the mirror in the bathroom of the first motel; the one in the second motel room; the recurrent shots of Walt and Travis in the rear-view mirror of the car; the mirror held up to Walt, Anne, Travis and Hunter by the film within the film; the mirror before which Travis rehearses the father role; the one-way mirrors in the Keyhole Club; the mirrors constituted by the windows in the Meridien Hotel which mirror Hunter and Jane even as they mirror one another.

Once again, in keeping with Lacanian theory, Travis's reintegration into the Symbolic order involves the gradual relinquishment of his mutism and his initial use of words. Significantly, and in keeping with semiotic theories as well as with the nature of psychotic speech disturbances, Travis is fascinated by verbal ambiguity, puns and double meanings. Echoing his father's joke, Travis speaks of Paris and is amused by Walt's misunderstanding. There is further miscommunication regarding whether Travis had purchased a photograph of an empty lot or the land itself. While both enjoying and being frustrated by the polysemy of language, Travis is unable to accept that automobiles, like verbal signifiers, are substitutable for one another: as far as he is concerned, the car, like Winnicott's "transitional object," is unique and non-transferable: "We need the same car, Walt. How are we going to go in another car?" (p.24).

Whereas the automobile is a transitional object, the shoes and boots Travis collects, shines, and arranges one morning, seem to have a phallic significance evident both in Travis's comparison of the size of his boots with Walt's, who at this moment represents more of a father than a younger brother, and in his desire to switch boots with him, representing the son's desire to fill his father's shoes, so to speak. At this point in the film, there is a redistribution of roles. Hunter now represents the son in an idealizing relation to Travis who struggles to represent a suitable father figure and an appropriate paternal ego-ideal. Travis's initial overture toward his son is rejected. This setback necessitates that he study up on the father role by looking in a magazine (that cultural reservoir) for suitable paternal imagery. In keeping with the Lacanian theory of the paternal metaphor, it is evident that in order for a son to be successfully oedipalized a viable father-image, a symbolic father, must be internalized. Travis's own vulnerability to narcissistic regression might suggest, to a Lacanian at least, a relative failure of the oedipalization process in his case.

Travis rehearses the father role before a mirror. The maid informs him that there are only two kinds of fathers, rich ones and poor ones--that is, phallic fathers and castrated ones, those capable of performing the paternal function for

their sons and those who are not. And what is the paternal function? Again, in keeping with Lacanian theory, the film makes clear that the (symbolic) father's mission is to break into and disrupt the symbiotic connection between mother and child. Anne senses this and reproaches Walt for encouraging "this father-and-son business between them," but in keeping with Shepard's valorization of biological paternity, Walt argues in favour of the inviolability of the natural tie between father and son: "It's no business! Travis IS his father! And Hunter IS his son!" (p.51). Anne's worst fears are soon realized. Having succeeded in attracting Hunter into a mirroring and idealizing relationship with him (witness their mutual imitation and mimicry on the walk home from school), and having introduced him to his patrilineage through the medium of the photograph album, Travis takes Hunter on a quest for his biological mother. In a scene heavy with symbolism, Travis has Hunter telephone Anne and when the message has been delivered instructs him to "Just ... hang up!" on her (p.63; ellipses his), which he does, figuratively breaking the psychological umbilical cord connecting him to one mother, even as they set out to reestablish the link to another.

On the one hand, the film's depiction of the father's disruption of the mother-child symbiosis is congruent with the Lacanian (1977, pp.179-225) theory of psychosis as arising from a failure of this (oedipalization) process and a consequent "foreclosure" of the gap normally opened up between subject and object by the primal "castration" inscribed in the Name-of-the-Father. In addition, such themes as that of the quest to reestablish the connection between Hunter and Jane, Travis's intense archaic selfobject transference wishes, and his reminiscences of and displaced longings for his mother, are congruent with the Lacanian idea that the failure of oedipalization results in fixation upon the narcissistic quest to be the "phallus" for the mother--that is, to be the object of her desire, that which satisfies her "lack." On the other hand, contra Lacan, theorists working within a self and object-relations framework would tend to view such intense narcissistic longings, whether directed toward the father or the mother, as symptoms, not of any failure of differentiation per se (that is, of failure of the paternal function), but rather of an inability to consolidate a separate self due to insufficient phase-appropriate empathic responsiveness on the part of the early mirroring and idealized selfobjects.

According to Kohut (1977), the very intensity of the need for a paternal identification may be a symptom of the child's earlier failure to consolidate a cohesive self through empathic mirroring by the mother. In turning to an idealizing relationship with the father, the child may not primarily be attempting to escape what Lacan views as a universal, pre-oedipal narcissistic enmeshment with the mother but, rather, seeking to remedy the defects in the self arising from maternal selfobject failure. In seeming to suggest that the psychological basis of the relational difficulties of characters such as Travis and Jane lies in a failure in the area of self and object constancy, the film conveys an understanding of the borderline dilemma that, I believe, is superior to Lacan's; for the need/fear conflict arises as much from a failure to establish a confident inner sense of ongoing human connection as from any "foreclosure" of differentiation or separation--that is, from any lack of an inner sense of "lack." In actuality, the profound longings for and rage toward the mother which characterize both borderline and narcissistic personalities (the latter merely employing a manic or grandiose defence against identical deficits and conflicts) do not simply reflect the normal pre-oedipal child's desire to be the object of the mother's desire, only pathologically retained due to failure of the paternal function. On the contrary, such longings represent the pathological intensification of the normal desire for "merger" or selfobject responsiveness arising precisely from the failure to establish in childhood the necessary confidence that one was, in fact, the "apple of the mother's eye."

Indications of a profound fixation on the mother are prevalent in the film. The theme of the quest for identity as a quest for one's origin, which is ultimately a quest for the mother, is clearly evident, supplementing the theme of identification with the father. Having been permitted to drive while Walt sleeps on their return home through the desert, Travis turns off the main highway, apparently in search of Paris, Texas ("where I began. Me, Travis Clay Henderson. They named me that" [p.30]); for Paris is where he was told his parents first made love and where, he supposes, he might have been conceived and, therefore, where he might somehow refind and reinscribe himself in the Symbolic order, the land of language and streets.

Yet again, in keeping with the idea of the family romance as a search for one's true identity through the discovery of one's authentic origins, Travis and Hunter set out in search of Jane, Hunter's mother, who at the same time symbolically represents that of Travis as well. Just prior to taking Hunter in quest of the mother, Travis is seen standing on a scaffold adjacent to one of Walt's billboards depicting a reclining female figure with the mid-section missing creating a gap where the womb should be. Travis, whose middle name is Clay, is afraid to leave the ground, Mother Earth, in an airplane--just as, according to Shewey (p.13), Shepard is afraid of flying. As they drive toward Houston, the point from which man is launched away from earth into space, Hunter (who is hunting for his mother) lectures his father over a walkie-talkie from the back of their pick-up truck about the arcane mysteries of the origins of the universe. At the conclusion, as Hunter and Jane recapitulate the scene of joyous dancing by the sea in the home movie, their similarity in appearance, colouring and dress makes them seem almost indistinguishable. It would seem that Travis has succeeded in reestablishing a blissful mother-child reunion mirroring that earlier scene of harmony which turns out to have been imaginary. However, even as the film now portrays an ecstatic reunion, it simultaneously depicts its opposite: the exclusion and isolation of Travis as he drives into the night alone.

While I think it would be a mistake to view this mother-fixation in predominantly oedipal terms, certain classically oedipal themes are clearly evident in the film. For example, echoing the Freudian concept of the family romance, Hunter discovers that Walt and Anne are merely surrogate parents and, having reunited with his actual father, together they embark on a quest for the mother. They finally locate her in a quasi-brothel where she is initially confused with Nurse Bibs (a pregenital mother imago?) and where her sexual morality is, to say the least, in question: is she a madonna or a whore? Travis's oedipally-tinged anxieties regarding Jane's fidelity echo his father's jealous delusions regarding his wife who, despite her shyness, he accused of being "a fancy woman." Yet while the father only joked about marrying a woman from Paris, his son Walt enacts the fantasy: his French wife Anne is thus a transference representation of the mother. Far from suggesting that these oedipal themes outweigh narcissistic issues of identity or the self, I would argue that the former are themselves manifestations of the latter; the pseudo-sexual

longing for instinctual gratification from the mother is frequently, if not always, profoundly infiltrated by a more fundamental longing for recognition, harmony, holding and empathic mirroring by the maternal selfobject.

Compounding the conflict reflected in the film regarding the paternal versus the maternal bond is a wider ambivalence regarding the respective value of apparently normalized or oedipalized relationships, such as that of Walt and Anne, as opposed to regressive, sado-masochistic bonds such as that which unites Travis and Jane. On one hand, in contrast to the biological parents, Walt and Anne are represented as realistic, protective and responsible caretakers; yet their marriage is depicted as both conventional and literally barren, tenuously held together as a triangle by the presence of Hunter as a third. On the other hand, the arrival of Hunter as the third disrupting the dual union of Travis and Jane only adds to the latter's sense of entrapment and intensifies her need for escape. And what Travis and Jane possess in the way of intensity of involvement is offset by their irresponsibility and incapacity for realistic and mature modes of relatedness.

If any third alternative is represented in the film, it is only that of the nothingness of the land of no return, the void or gap allegedly existing at the centre of being or of the self, figuratively represented by the desert from which Travis emerges at the outset and of which he and we are reminded by the psychotic on the freeway overpass who shouts his prophetic warnings to the socially adjusted passers-by who have, at least temporarily, managed to deny it. Whether ultimate reality truly amounts to a void (a "devil's graveyard"), or rather a plenitude mistaken for a void, or even in some mysterious way both plenitude and void, or something transcending these binary categories altogether--these are questions we may certainly wish to raise in response to Shepard's essentially nihilistic vision. In the world of *Paris, Texas*, however, the only alternatives to the nothingness of the desert or of space are, on the one hand, a socially adjusted but devalitized life reminiscent of what McDougall (1980, pp.463-486) has called "pathological normalcy" and, on the other, one of intense but destructive relationships lived on the margins of both society and sanity. Either one relates to no object at all; or one engages in conventional, but somewhat superficial and dispassionate object relations; or one experiences passionate but narcissistic and sado-masochistic pseudo-relations with bad objects. In no case is there an authentically good self-selfobject relationship.

On the social-historical plane, Buber (1938) observed that in epochs of homelessness in which the social order fails to function as a psychic container for its members, they are torn by a range of apparently insoluble existential conflicts and dilemmas (subject/object, mind/body, good/evil, masculine/feminine, etc). Likewise, the experience of the subject estranged from the empathic responsiveness of its selfobject milieu (interpersonal, communal and metaphysical) is fragmented or split into a range of opposing psychic and emotional states and enmeshed in a paralysing ambivalence. Perhaps the historical and ontological understandings of human suffering can be reconciled after all. If salvation from the crucifying contradictions of our nature requires a kind of containment or holding of the self by others (or by the Other)--a healing response through which we may be resurrected from deadening conflict to creative life--it is also true that such grace appears to be mediated by historically situated social institutions and conditions. If we are largely dependent upon the containing or selfobject function of the social surround for access to the "safety zone"--the middle ground or "transitional area", the "area of faith" or "field of Being" that exists between, beneath or beyond the polar opposites (that is, the Cross)--then it is the significant failure of this function in contemporary culture that gives rise to the dilemmas of the fragmented self in a society in which the development of a cohesive personal identity and stable interpersonal relationships has become increasingly problematic.

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NOTES

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