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The Rise and Fall of the Horse Dreamer in Sam Shepard's Drama

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Whereas several theatrical works show Sam Shepard's longstanding fascination with horses, none of them until the premiere at the Abbey Theatre in 2007 of *Kicking a Dead Horse* had brought a dead equine to the stage. The striking stage image of the cadaver of a horse dominating the stark setting and the figure of the horsekicker is critically assessed in this article, establishing a comparison with its kindred predecessor, the dreamer of horses in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974). Beyond the most obvious connection between these plays, the fact that actor Stephen Rea played the main role in them both, their evolving representation of the animal and the characters' engagement with it all deserve critical attention as they become a metaphor which reveals the transformations in Shepard's latest style of theatre. The trope of the horse dreamer is associated with creative freedom. The dramatization of the loss of American dreams in both plays reveals their divergent stance on human imaginative potential and also on the creative process, as the "style of dreaming" is closely related to the style of writing.

Keywords: Sam Shepard; horses; dreams; imagination; animal studies

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El ascenso y la caída del soñador de caballos en el teatro de Sam Shepard

Varias obras teatrales escritas por Sam Shepard muestran la fascinación del dramaturgo por los caballos. Sin embargo, en ninguna de ellas hasta el estreno de *Kicking a Dead Horse* en el Abbey Theatre en 2007, había aparecido el cadáver de un caballo como el que domina la austera escenografía de este monólogo teatral. La impactante imagen teatral del caballo y de la figura del pateador son analizadas en este artículo comparándolas con aquella otra figura clave en la obra de Shepard a la que remiten, el soñador de caballos de

Geography of a Horse Dreamer (1974). Más allá de la conexión más explícita entre estas dos obras, el hecho de que en ambos estrenos Stephen Rea interpretara el papel protagonista, la transformación en la representación del animal y en el modo en el que el personaje se relaciona con éste merecen atención crítica, pues se erigen en una metáfora de cómo ha evolucionado el estilo teatral de Shepard desde los setenta hasta el siglo XXI. El tropo del soñador de caballos está asociado a la libertad creativa en la obra de Shepard y, por ello, la pérdida de los sueños americanos que ambas obras dramatizan revela posiciones divergentes frente a la imaginación humana y frente al proceso creativo, pues el estilo de soñar refleja estilos diferentes de escritura.

Palabras clave: Sam Shepard; caballos; sueños; imaginación; estudios críticos de animales

1. Introduction

> Of all the damn things—all the things you can think of—the preparations—endless lists. All the little details, right down to the can-opener and the hunk of dental floss you throw in just for the heck of it—All the forever thinking about it night and day—weighing the pros and cons—Last thing in the world that occurs to you is that the fucking horse is going to up and die on you!
>
> (Sam Shepard, *Kicking a Dead Horse*)

The very first words uttered by Hobart Struther in Sam Shepard's dramatic monologue *Kicking a Dead Horse*—"Fucking Horse. Goddamn" (2007, 10)—set the tone of what, at the beginning of the performance, looks like a ferocious and uncontrollable rant delivered in an emotionally extreme situation. These words, however, do something else: they place an animal at the centre of the dramatic conflict. The magnificent creature's blunt presence alongside the play's protagonist unmistakably reinforces this perception. Several theatre works—*Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974), *True West* (1980), *Simpatico* (1994)—and the 1988 film *Far North* had previously shown the American playwright's longstanding fascination with horses, but none of them until the opening in 2007 of *Kicking a Dead Horse* had brought a dead equine to the stage. Lying bare amidst a light giving the effect of "a distant, endless horizon in flatlands" (Shepard 2007, 9), the body of the dead animal, laid out on its side and with "all four legs pointed stiffly towards the upstage wall" (9), dominates the stark setting originally designed by Brian Vahey, and becomes a privileged nodal point within the scenic field. The fallen horse, the man in his mid-sixties and the huge dark pit downstage centre with mounds of fresh earth on either side of it compose a powerful stage image whose impact acquires an extraordinary relevance in Shepard's *oeuvre*.

Kicking a Dead Horse was first performed on the Peacock Stage of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in March 2007. Whereas the interpretative talent of the Irish actor playing the role of Hobart Struther, Stephen Rea, was unanimously celebrated after his performances in Dublin and those following at London's Almeida and New York's Public Theatre, the play's dramatic potential was, on the contrary, questioned from its premiere onwards. The play builds up much of its strength from its opening tableau, but "nothing in the play really improves upon that starkly eloquent initial image" (Isherwood 2008, n.p.). The horse cadaver and the cowboy-turned-gravedigger were considered by theatre critics too literal a metaphor for the death of the American West. As Miriam Felton-Dansky noted in her review for *Theatre Journal*, meaning, which had been buried in the best of Shepard's work "often literally, under layers of dirt or in America's forgotten backyards", was here "no longer oblique but deliberately transparent" (2009, 107).

In spite of the straightforwardness of the symbolism associated with this theatrical image, what animal life brings to the stage in *Kicking a Dead Horse* deserves further examination. As I will argue in this article, the evolving representation of horsemanship in Sam Shepard's drama becomes a crucial trope signalling a profound transformation in the playwright's latest style in the theatre. The dead animal inevitably embodies a demise and acts as the catalyst for a deeply felt elegy. But what the elegy is ultimately for might not actually be the loss of the "particularly contested space" (Kollin 2007, xi) of the American West and the shifting meanings associated with it, but rather the loss of the ability to keep *dreaming* of it. The dead weight of the horse annihilates the fulfilment of the envisaged adventure of "setting out like Lewis and Clark across the wild unknown" (Shepard 2007, 19) that had caught Hobart Struther's imagination in the planning stage of his trip. However, despite his initial rage towards it, it is not the horse's passing that is eventually condemned by the protagonist as the reason for his failure, but his own image-making ability: his condition as "fantasist," to use a Shepardian term (Shepard 1984, 27). Within Shepardian poetics, the body of the dead horse has an added dimension, for it wipes out and brings to an end what for decades had constituted an enduring concern and exploration for Shepard: the envisioning of American dreams, an enterprise as delusive as it was full of potential in its heuristic force. As Michael Billington hinted in his review of the production at the Almeida Theatre, "superbly performed by Stephen Rea, the piece may not tell us anything radically new about Shepard, but it feels like the end of a lifetime's journey" (2008, n.p.).

Relying on the critical paradigm of zooësis, which studies the full array of animal representational practices, Una Chaudhuri suggests that despite its looming large and literal on the stage, the horse cadaver in *Kicking* is a powerful presence, one that contributes to a key program of zoontology: challenging the anthropocentric structures that dominate both Western thought and theatrical practice (Chaudhuri 2009, 522). Like those in Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* ([2002] 2004) and Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* ([2001] 2003) the human/animal relation presented in Shepard's play manages to produce what Calarco (2008, 118) calls an "interruptive encounter" (quoted in Chaudhuri 2009, 522), that is, a relationship or an engagement going beyond the ordinary. Indeed, the death of the Other might be the most interruptive event we could be faced with. In Shepard's play the passing of the animal both interrupts and impossibilitates the dreamed "quest for AUTHENTICITY" (Shepard 2007, 12) that Struther had envisaged. According to Chaudhuri, the death of the horse eventually "propels, the living human who confronts it into a self-examination in which the contours of personality give way to those of ideology" (Chaudhuri 2009, 523) and she also convincingly argues that the animal Hobart Struther contends with also "activates in him an unexpected animality of his own" (523). The unexpectedness of this particular engagement with the animal will be the starting point of the investigation presented here, though what will be addressed directly are the implications within Shepardian poetics of

conceiving a character who is defined primarily as a horse kicker, and who must be thus inevitably associated with its kindred predecessor, the horse dreamer in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*.

Many are the connections between the two plays and their protagonists: despite their deep concern with American imagery and myths, both *Geography* and *Kicking a Dead Horse* were conceived to be first performed outside the United States, in London and in Dublin respectively; but it is, above all, the casting of Irish actor Stephen Rea, who played both the role of Cody in the production of *Geography* at the Theatre Upstairs space of the Royal Court in 1974 and the part of Hobart Struther in *Kicking* that creates the strongest connection between these dramatic works. *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007) was in fact written for and dedicated to Rea, and with it, thirty-three years after the premiere of *Geography*, Shepard was deliberately turning the once visionary transatlantic dreamer of horses into a hopeless and marooned abuser, and radically reconsidering and dismantling the imagery that had once defined his theatre. As simple as it may appear, the engagement with the horse becomes in both plays a more complex trope than it appears at first sight, for it is deeply associated with human imaginative potential. In order to understand the significance and the implications of the connection established by Shepard between horse dreaming, horse kicking, imaginative freedom and loss of inspiration, I propose an analysis that, in its intent to critically assess the relationship between the animal and the human that these plays pose, is grounded within the critical frame of Animal Studies and relies deeply on the cultural meanings attributed to horses, especially in American culture. On the other hand, given the metacreative discourse these related works contain, I also build upon certain philosophical and literary conceptualizations of dreams. The combination of these critical perspectives, prompted by the texts themselves, offers a deeper understanding of these works' complexities and a fresh perspective upon Shepard's evolution as a playwright, for one's style of dreaming, these plays suggest, is intimately connected to one's style of writing.

2. The Art of Horse Dreaming and its Loss

> For the wild horse is, in a sense, a domestic invention, giving us a way of imagining what it would be like to be free and to wander with the herd in the field of our dreams.
>
> (J. Edward Chamberlin, *Horse*)

> A poem of dreams is a poem of loss. (Herschel Farbman, *The Other Night*)

Given the metaphorical potential of the theatrical medium, either the evocation of horses or their stage presence acquires a powerful symbolical meaning. A majestic creature, the horse has always held a special position in the hierarchy of the animal

kingdom. The spirit of horses, Chamberlin (2006) has argued, is a spirit that haunted human imagination thousands of years before they were valued for their speed and strength, as the Paleolithic paintings and carvings in the caves of Lescaux, Niaux, Pech Merle, Cosquer and Cougnac demonstrate. Until the twentieth century, the horse was central in almost all human occupations: hunting, agriculture, transportation, commerce and warfare. But despite its demise as a workforce when the whole world changed in the early twentieth century, the perception of this animal's extraordinary sturdiness has remained. The physical alliance of man and horse "extends to a special symbolical relationship for, in mastering the art of equitation, man invests himself with precisely those attributes of grace and power for which horses are known" (De Montebello 1984, 7).

In 1998 Kevin Sessums asked Shepard about his passion for horses and the playwright explained that "if you get up on a horse and see what kind of ground you can cover and all the rest of it, you'll see that there is a completely different feeling from being earthbound. There's just an amazing sense—not so much of power, but you are just in a different relationship to the earth" (Sessums 1998, 76). In his cultural history of how the horse has shaped civilization, Chamberlin suggests that maybe our fascination with horses began with what comes "naturally to them, like finding their way home in the dark" (2006, 252), a skill that has something to do with their eyes but also with something more mysterious, comparable to migrating birds finding their way home across continents and oceans every year, "[o]r did we become fascinated with horses when they fulfilled one of our oldest dreams, flying in the air even as they remained earthbound, just like us?" the author insists (Chamberlin 2006, 252). The feeling of flying while remaining close to the ground is precisely what makes Kevin Sessums compare Shepards' plays to a sort of Pegasus, as they are, he believes, "[s]weaty animals with nostrils and flanks, yet they seem to be able to sprout wings and take off. They contain a hooved spirituality" (Sessums 1998, 78). While this reading could be applied also to most Shepardian male characters, the identification of imaginative flight with a horse running in search of home was only fully articulated in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (Shepard [1974] 1984). In it the act of dreaming was for the first time quirkily professionalized and romantically identified with genius. In making horses the object of dreaming, thus delineating a specific object of the dream, and in connecting imagining, horse riding and creative freedom, the play was also spatially mapping out the potential powers derived from freely riding the imagination with the vast territory that can be covered on horseback, and moreover, culturally marking this activity as a truly American enterprise.

The theatre of Sam Shepard has been, from the beginning of his career as a playwright in the 1960s, populated by daydreamers and fantasists: Stu and Chet playing cowboys and indians in the unpublished *Cowboys* (1964) and in *Cowboys#2* (1967); Stu in *Chicago* (1964), sheltered in a bath tub yet reveling freely in an

imagined pool of water full of exuberant and ominous marine life; the apocalyptic visionaries transforming fireworks into an out of control nuclear spectacle in *Icarus's Mother* (1965); or Kosmo and Yahoodi in *The Mad Dog Blues* (1971) bringing to the stage their pop-culture visions, to name a few examples. Experimenting under the freedom provided by New York's Off-Off-Broadway scene, the playwright let his characters fantasize on stage, making them simply narrate, at the beginning, what they imagined and envisioned. With this simple strategy he intuitively found an ideal resort to opening an unlimited space in which to depart from the dissatisfaction of the familiar, to pursue adventure and experiment with form. The performance of these bizarre characters was often infantile musing but it was found appealing by young audiences and, crucially, by several theatre critics such as Michael Smith, Elinor Lester and Elizabeth Hardwick. Most importantly, their frenzied reveries enabled these fragmented characters to enact, at least temporarily, the "imaginative ideal" (Klinkowitz 1980, viii) that characterized the *zeitgeist* of the era and to affirm the demands that so characterized the mid-sixties counterculture: achieving a sense of possibility against the givenness of things and getting out on the edges of the only frontier left in America, a person's own mind and senses.

In the early seventies Shepard moved to London and premiered three major plays as playwright in residence at the Royal Court Theatre between 1971 and 1974: *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Action* (1974) and *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* (1974). The latter has been generally considered the minor of the three, a naive metaphor for the conflict of the artist caught "between personal vision and social exploitation" (Wetzsteon 1984, 14). Yet, regardless of its nature as a work playing for "more modest stakes" (Chubb [1974] 1981, 199) than *The Tooth of Crime*, as the playwright recognized, with it Shepard fashioned a compelling character, the horse dreamer, whose symbolic resonance is captivating. Like other expansive characters of American literature, it was a character bathed in the myths of American history, carrying, in Richard Poirier's words, "the metaphoric burden of a great dream of freedom—of the expansion of the national consciousness into the vast spaces of a continent and the absorption of those spaces in ourselves" (1966, 3).

Described in the published edition as a "mystery in two acts" (Shepard [1974] 1984, 277) and fantasizing a "melodramatic *film noir* scenario" (Callens 2007, 227), *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* deals with Cody, an American man named after Buffalo Bill and gifted with the ability to predict the outcome of horse races, an artistry so valuable and precious as to become an unmatchable source for profit, potentially worth "a quarter of million bucks in a day" (Shepard [1974] 1984, 281). Kidnapped by a gang of British gamblers, the professional dreamer is held blindfolded and with his arms and legs handcuffed to the bedposts of a hotel bed in some unidentified place in Great Britain. In the first act, "The Slump," Cody's natural gift as a horse dreamer has faded and the impatience of his bodyguards, Beaujo and Santee, who receive orders from the mysterious and absent Fingers, grows and grows as they seem

unable to find a way for Cody's inspiration to come back. It is only when the captive attunes himself to his new surrounding environment that he manages to dream again the winners: this time, however, they are greyhounds competing at London tracks.

The play has generally been read as a clear theatrical translation of the playwright's biographical circumstances at the end of his English sojourn, "a thinly disguised metaphor for Shepard's frustration" (Bottoms 1998, 98) lacking the allusive richness of his best work. For DeRose, it put forward a transparent stage allegory: "Cody represents Shepard, the artistic cowboy genius who wishes to return to his old home and ways but who has been kidnapped by commercial entrepreneurship and forced into creative slavery" (1993, 60). *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* is indeed, after *Melodrama Play* (1968) and *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), a further variation on the theme of their creator under the pressure exerted by the market. But if it can be read as a fictional fantasy reflecting the author's anxieties, the strong cultural self-awareness Shepard derived from being an expatriate in Europe also produced an acute meta-theatrical awareness at whose centre stands the complexity of dreaming things. Shepard's subject is also, as Brenda Murphy notes, the artist's imagination and "the danger of 'messing with it'" (2002, 126). Against limited biographical interpretations, the latter shift in emphasis in the critical perception of the work draws attention to the play's unprecedented concern with and yearning to understand the writer's imagination and its process.

That Shepard should conceive a dreamer of horses in order to explore the artist's imagination is of utmost importance. Not the least of the play's achievements was to intuitively conflate a conception of dream as movement with the evoked image of galloping horses, as the spirit of a horse is also "embodied in movement" (Chamberlin 2006, 33). Horses, the longed for object of Cody's revelatory dreams, are never seen on the theatrical space. Shepard relies instead on his predilection to use words as "living incantations," that is, on language's capacity "to evoke visions in the eye of the audience" (Shepard 1977, 53) to summon them as dreamed entities. Before the opening "in the darkness the sound of horses galloping at a distance is heard" (Shepard [1974] 1984, 279), stage directions indicate. After that, "a slow motion color film clip of a horse race is projected just above Cody's head on the rear wall" (279), which lasts for a short time until the protagonist wakes up with a yell and the action starts.

The play is from the very beginning a lament for a loss, identified primarily as a loss of the internal space "where the dream comes" (Shepard [1974] 1984, 283) and the animal once emerged: "a huge blue space", as Beaujo, one of the bodyguards, explains, where "in the distance you'll see'em approaching the quarter mile pole. The thunder of hooves. Whips flying. The clubhouse turn" (288). This space, as Cody argues, "It's gotta be created [. . .] It's very delicate work, dreaming a winner. You can't just close your eyes and bingo! It's there in front of you. It takes certain special conditions. A certain internal environment" (285). The plot seems to suggest that the external environment plays also an essential role as a source of inspiration, and

that the limitations imposed upon Cody's physical mobility and a shabby immediate environment are accountable for the loss of the dreamer's gift as they fail to provide a proper housing for expanded states of consciousness.

Cody's rare gift for visionary revelation in night dreams is naively perceived by his captors as a holy gift. While divination in sleep was already regarded by Aristotle as something to be neither lightly dismissed with contempt, nor given confidence, the Greek "philosopher, however, stressed" the "unreasonableness" of combining the idea that "the sender of such dreams should be God with the fact that those to whom he sends them are not the best and wisest, but merely people at random" (Barnes 1984, 736). For all the seeming ingenuity found in *Geography*—derived from conceptualizing the experience of the dreamer and connecting it firstly with divination and secondly with the nineteenth-century Romantic conception of genius, described in the text as his being "capable of living in several worlds at the same time" (Shepard [1974] 1984, 305)—the correlation established in the play between the loss of dreams with the loss of artistic inspiration is concomitant with twentieth-century dream theories associating dreaming with a kind of writing—from Freud's description of the dream as a "pictographic script" ([1899] 1953, 277) to Maurice Blanchot's conceptualization of the space of the dream as "the *other* night" ([1955] 1989, 163-170; emphasis in the original). Interestingly, in a letter dated 1972, Shepard wrote to Joseph Chaikin: "I've come down to the understanding that what I've done up 'til now has been in sleep. All my writing seems to have the same value as any product from any sleeping person" (Daniels 1989, 5). Standing in opposition to the figure of the sleeper, the fact that the writer should rather choose a dreamer to raise a deeper awareness of the creative process endorses Blanchot's understanding of the dream as a kind of nocturnal waking and an extreme restlessness, "in the heart of oblivion [. . .] memory without rest" ([1955] 1989, 164), or, as Herschel Farbman explains, "a resistance to sleep in the very heart of sleep" (2008, 3), thus ultimately and essentially, a deferral of death.[1] The uneasiness of the loss of the dream, a dream that will never be witnessed by any other person, also becomes a perfect expression of the anxiety of the writer, since only fiction, Farbman (2008) argues, can represent the space that opens up behind the closed eyes of the sleeper, the space where her/his heart wakes.

[1] Complete sleep would be death. Farbman explains, in his interpretation of Blanchot's conception of the dream, that "the impossibility of complete sleep thus defines sleep in opposition to death, which it closely resembles. The dream is the very image of this impossibility" (2008, 3). If, as he further argues, the *1001 Nights* in which Scherezade's stories "keep the sultan awake and the storyteller alive, can be read as an allegory of the death-deferring function that dreaming performs every night, for everyone" (Farbman 2008, 3), in Shepard's *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* Cody's loss of the desired dream space is precisely what provokes a death threat for him.

3. The Horse Kicker

> But maybe all it ever is, is blinded by the dreaming of what may have become.
> (Sam Shepard, *Kicking a Dead Horse*)

Both the title of *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and the explicit violence exerted repeatedly upon the body of the animal on the stage by Stephen Rea as Hobart Struther seem in direct opposition to his performance as the romanticized figure of Cody in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*. As different as their engagement with horses seems to be at first in these plays, the disparity between the two characters is only deceptive: both pieces in fact dramatize, albeit in different ways, their protagonists' collapse as dreamers. In both cases horse dreaming and its loss articulates a deeper meditation on the creative force of imagination and its equally delusive potential. This confirms Gerry McCarthy's perception that Sam Shepard is a stage dramatist with an extraordinary instinct for the imaginative modalities of the theatre: not as a visionary, for he is not, but because he is concerned "with ways of seeing and being within theatrical space and time" (1993, 58) and, to no lesser degree, with the visionary ideal of American culture. In both works—confirming Chamberlin's insight that the wild horse might be a domestic invention giving us a way of *imagining* what it would be like to be free and wander with the herd in the field of our dreams—the idealized space of a dream where a horse emerges is evoked as preceding and determining the stage action, which dramatizes instead the effects of the loss of that dream (2006).

Both protagonists, bereft of their dreams of galloping across the Great Plains, develop, as suggested by Una Chaudhuri (2009), an intriguing animality of their own. In the second act of *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, despite the initial comforting relief derived from the recovered gift for prediction—which guarantees Cody more liberty from his captors who now allow him to freely move around a fancier hotel room—the switchover from his own "style a' dreaming" (Shepard [1974] 1984, 288) to a completely different one has eventually shocking consequences. As Stephen Bottoms (1998) remarks, the shift from horse dreaming to dog dreaming is a debasement of sorts despite Shepard's enthusiasm for his new English hobby of greyhound racing.[2] This is evident "in the way Cody's speech patterns shift from a dreamy, romantic tone when envisioning horses, toward the hard-nosed commercialism of his captors when discussing dogs" (Bottoms 1998, 99). The danger of interfering in the creative process, what has already been hinted at in the first act, is radicalized in the second one through Cody's transformation: while, at the beginning, he is actually capable of distinguishing future winners among the competing greyhounds, he gradually loses control both of the situation and of his own mind until he finally ends up behaving

[2] While living in Hampstead, Shepard, fascinated by the world of dog racing, actually bred his own greyhound, Keywall Spectre, an Irish dog bought for £200 (Shewey 1997, 86).

like a scared dog himself. There is something brutally painful in the violence with which this transformation occurs, as we see him moving frantically across the stage escaping from the newcomers, "crashing over furniture and smashing into the walls" (Shepard 1984, 299) and then whimpering in a corner, yapping "like a dog who's being whipped" (Shepard 1984, 302).

Cody's canine metamorphosis in *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* is the symbolical result of his fellow humans' exertion of physical force and psychological intimidation, and thus quite different from Struther's "animality" in kicking the inert body of a horse in the subsequent play. As striking as his aggressive behaviour at the beginning of the play is, it proves ultimately to be a harmless reaction produced by his frustration.[3]

Unlike the invisible yet potentially liberating dream of horses, the body of the animal in *Kicking a Dead Horse*—asserting what Stanton Garner refers to as "a powerful materiality and a density both semiotic and phenomenal" (1998, 56), as befitting objects on a stage—bears an unquestionable burden of signification. As a stage prop, unlike the symbolic, stylized and disturbing equine figures in Peter Shaffer's controversial *Equus* (1973), Shepard states that his horse is meant to be "as realistic as possible with no attempt to stylise or cartoon him in any way. In fact it should be a real horse" (Shepard 2007, 9).[4] In its rigid materiality, this horse unambiguously embodies, albeit unexpectedly, what Struther was in search of, a literal actuality. Its immobility will elicit the paralysis the incapacitated rider will be forced to confront. And if the cadaver becomes the very embodiment of Struther's failure, it also asserts the implacable gulf between the real and the imagined: its presence highlighting the precariousness and instability of images in the human mind, reaffirming, then, a perception of imagination as a repertory of the potential, of the hypothetical, of what is not, has not been and maybe won't ever be, but could have been. Struther exclaims, as he commences his monologue: "You ask yourself, how did this come to be? How is it possible? What wild and woolly part of the imagination dropped me here? Makes you wonder" (Shepard 2007, 11). In the unfolding and relentless act of self-interrogation that follows, the emerging answer to that question seems to be nothing other than nostalgia.

Struther is described in the stage directions as a man in his mid-sixties wearing "rumpled white shirt, no tie, sleeves rolled up, no hat, baggy dark slacks, plain boots for riding but not cowboy boots" (Shepard 2007, 10), and the author insists that rather than making him look like a cowboy, he should appear as more of an "urban

[3] Like in *Far North* where Bertrum, for all his desire to be avenged (Shepard [1988] 1993, 57), is eventually incapable of shooting Mel—the old horse that caused him to fall off his buckboard and end up in hospital—in *Kicking a Dead Horse*, Hobart Struther also demonstrates that, in his own words, he is not that callous, and "can't just leave [the horse] out here to rot in the ragged wind. Let the coyotes and vultures rip him to ribbons" (Shepard 2007, 18).

[4] In *Equus*, stage directions specify: "Any literalism which could suggest the cosy familiarity of a domestic animal—or worse, a pantomime horse—should be avoided" (Shaffer 1973,14).

businessman who has suddenly decided to rough it" (Shepard 2007, 10). Struther, in fact, he soon tells us "in the somewhat florid style of the classic narrative" (14), made a fortune as an art dealer raiding "every damn saloon, barn and attic west of the Missouri—north and south; took semi-load of booty out of that country before anyone even began to take notice" (17). He had become, "quite the big shot on the block" (14), but despite the ecstasy of power, the thrill of the kill had finally eluded him, making him engage in a "constant hankering for actuality" (14), for a sense of being inside his own skin. And as his "little conundrum mounted slowly into a frantic state of crisis" (Shepard 2007, 16) prompted by the sudden feeling of indomitable aging and, awareness of birthdays flying by, he estimated that he had "ten years left to still throw a leg over a horse, like I used to; still fish waist-deep in a western river; still sleep out in the open on a flat ground under the starry canopy—like I used to" (Shepard 2007, 16).

Johan Callens (2007) has convincingly argued that *Geography*, conceived during Shepard's four-year stay in London, bears ample evidence of nostalgia, a feeling that rather simply defined expresses a yearning for the past, but when reinvented as a function of present needs, and further molded by the hope of fulfilling those needs, makes reality "infused with a two-faced utopianism (past and future directed)" (2007, 217). In both *Geography* and *Kicking* the longing for a dreamed of American West stands as the clearest sign of this utopianism, for it is a dream of an escape into a literal *u-topos*. Shepard's, however, is at best "neither a monolithic nor naive but a divided, self-conscious and critical nostalgia" (219). This is the case in *Kicking a Dead Horse*, where Struther's monologue starts as a familiar jeremiad, but turns into a monologue of split-personae, whose self-deprecating, divided voices relentlessly enact both a sharp self-indictment and a cultural critique: a "distinctly masculinist lament for the robust values and healthy pleasures of a mythic American past of freedom and natural living" (Chaudhuri 2009, 523). The conflation of personal remorse with a collective national guilt elicits, eventually, a dismantlement of the pastoral dream towards the recognition instead of the devastating effects of the imperialist colonization and commodification of the West:

> We closed the frontier in 1890-something, didn't we? Didn't we already accomplish that? The Iron Horse—coast to coast. Blasted all the buffalo out here. An ocean of bones from Sea to Shining Sea. Trails of tears. Chased the heathen redman down to Florida. Paid the niggers off in mules and rich black dirt. Whupped the Chinese and strung them up with their own damn ponytails. Decapitated the Mexicans. Erected steel walls to keep the riff-raff out. Sucked this hills barren of gold. Ripped the top soil as far as the eye can see. Drained the aquifers. Dammed up all rivers and flooded the valleys for recreational purposes! Run off all the pathetic small farmers and transformed agriculture into 'agribusiness!' Destroyed education. Turned our children into criminals. Demolished art! Invaded sovereign nations! What more can we possibly hope to accomplish? (Shepard 2007, 43)

Yet, the audience's assessment, in hindsight, of Struther's utopian journey as an enterprise inevitably doomed to fail is more harshly censured as an act of individual responsibility than as an effect of the surreptitious influence of collective mythologies regarding the conquest of the West. Shepard had already begun the ideological unravelling of these mythologies, especially those promoted by Hollywood westerns, in *True West* (1980) and in the film script for Wim Wender's *Paris, Texas* (1984). In *Kicking* this process is brought to an end when Struther, in his unforeseen role as gravedigger, eventually finds himself digging down into himself to reveal what had made him believe that his adventure and quest for authenticity would have ended otherwise. Interestingly, in the typically Shepardian intertwining of a male character's existential crisis with the playwright's longstanding "preoccupation with the power of delusive representations" (Callens 2007, 172), the first act of criticism is articulated through allusion to those nineteenth-century artists who first shaped the picture of the West with "rugged cowboys, hard-riding bronco busters, fierce Indian warriors and devil-may-care cavalry men" (Watkins 2008, 232), which was later appropriated by television producers and Hollywood filmmakers: Frederic Remington (1861-1909) and Charles Marion Russell (1864-1926).

Struther would never have realized, he confesses, how their "old masterpieces would become like demons" (Shepard 2007, 17). The character's account of his ordeal in being haunted by the paintings of his collection of Western American art is hilarious—especially when he recalls hurling valuable objects of art out the window "into the lush canyon of Park Avenue: Frederic Remingtons wrapped around the lamp posts, for instance; Charlie Russells impaled on bus stops signs, crushed by maniacal yellow taxis" (Shepard 2007, 17). The art dealer's torment seems to attest to the endurance of the crucial cultural impact achieved by these artists in blending history and myth into an iconic image, which bestows value to their art beyond their aesthetic appeal. Yet the persistent captivating force of these series of paintings can only be ironic considering that Remington's and Russell's depictions of the American West were already recognized, at the time of their composition, as being filled with nostalgic longing and regret for a past that might have never existed, a morally flawed real West that they made heroic and time-suspended. Art critic William A. Coffin (1892, 348) wrote that "it is a fact that admits of no question that Eastern people have formed their conceptions of what the Far Western life is like, more from what they have seen in Mr. Remington's pictures than from any other source" (quoted in Watkins 2008, 233). A century later, it is hard to believe that anyone setting out for the West in modern times would hope to find anything close to what is portrayed in those hundred year old pictures showing "nostrils flaring, Colt revolvers blazing away" (Shepard 2007, 18).

However romantic and ingenuous this belief might be, the cultural references contained in the text of *Kicking a Dead Horse* are particularly successful in evoking the collectively shared images of valiant horsemanship, against which backdrop the

ominous, immobile body of the horse on the stage is contrasted. For instance, the big action in a wide space portrayed in Frederic Remigton's well known *A Dash for the Timber* (1889), the oil on canvas now held at Amon Carter Museum (Fort Worth, Texas), depicting a group of cowboys pursued by Indians galloping toward the viewer across a dusty plain (see Figure 1). The magnificently portrayed cavalry featuring in Russell's and Remington's paintings converges in Struther's imagination with the dream of his old horse, "this horse right here" (Shepard 2007,18), which is in fact the colt he had left behind before his success trading paintings of the American West. At a certain point, we learn that in fact Struther had started dreaming of his old colt of which, he reveals, "[k]ept visiting me night after night. Just appearing in the dark—standing there with all his tack on—waiting—beckoning with his big brown eyes" (Shepard 2007, 18). Although the protagonist admits he took the dream as a kind of omen, he would have reconsidered his whole adventure had he known "how short he was going to last" (Shepard 2007,18). He might have also given it a second thought, moreover, had he foreseen that the imagined landscape of the prairie would have actually become the depleted, Beckettian desert void in which he eventually finds himself.

Figure 1. Frederic Remington, *A Dash for the Timber* (oil on canvas, 1889) in Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Forth Worth (Texas)[5]

[5] http://www.cartermuseum.org/remington-and-russell/artworks/261 [Accessed online on May 13, 2016]

The physical and emotionally extreme situation in which Struther is placed in *Kicking a Dead Horse* eventually elicits an unprecedented indictment of human imagining in the Shepardian *oeuvre*. At first, Struther's meditation that "maybe all it ever is, is blinded by the dreaming of what might become" (Shepard 2007, 19) still bears a ring of self-indulgence, but soon the censure of human imagining is uttered with an unusual harshness:

> All this—space. What were they thinking? Just movement. Migration. But me—what about me? I'd get out of here, on my own, miles from nowhere, and somehow feel miraculously at peace? One with the wilderness? Suddenly, just from being here, I'd become what? What? Whole? After a whole life of being fractured, busted up, I'd suddenly become whole? The imagination is a terrible thing. (Shepard 2007, 22)

4. Conclusion: Dreams, Imagination and the Literary Style

The reinterpretation and eventual dismissal of the trope of the horse dreamer in the play written for Stephen Rea and the Abbey Theatre in 2007 must be reconsidered in line with its implications within Shepardian poetics. The clear correspondence that the play establishes between the visibility of the horse's corpse on the stage with an unambiguous rejection of the belief in the liberating promise of the imaginative enterprise confirms a close intertwining in Sam Shepard's drama of the evolving representation of the engagement with horses with a meditation on the role of dreams and imagination. With this unprecedented censure of horse dreaming it seems that the playwright was also bringing to and end a whole style of playwriting.

In *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* ([1974] 1984) Cody's captors believed that his powers as a dreamer were contained within a "dream bone" that the ominous and grotesque character of the Doctor wanted thus to remove from the prisoner's skull. The unexpected strategy devised to lead the play to its conclusion—as Cody's "bone" is about to be removed from his head—was a *deus ex machina* which brings Cody's brothers to the stage to rescue him: a *coup de théâtre* destabilizing the previous situation by opening up a territory for the actual entrance of the dream. Cody's brothers, Jasper and Jason, who are both about six foot five and 250 lbs. each, are described as wearing Wyoming cowboy gear with dust covering them from head to foot, and carrying double-barrelled twelve gauge shotguns and side guns on their waists (Shepard [1974] 1984, 306). Despite the impact of their arrival, the play has an ambiguous finale. Cody's last words convey such despair, in their failure of recognizing a home that they cast into doubt the very success of the dreamt rescue. In their underlying sadness, his words cannot hide that the theatrical release might be just a desperate, ephemeral and evanescent way out of an otherwise inexorable fate, seeing dying as the only way out of a dark geographical and visionary limbo:

> CODY: (*standing*) In a sacred way. This way. Sacred. I was walking in my dream. A great circle. I was walking and I stopped. Even after the smoke cleared I couldn't see my home. Not even a familiar rock. You could tell me it was anywhere and I'd believe ya. You could tell me it was any old where. (Shepard [1974] 1984, 306)

The blurring of clear vision under an unrecognized 'any old where' in Cody's last dream is telling. In spite of this, the theatrical impact produced by the physical irruption of the dream embodied in the larger-than-life Wyoming cowboys cannot be overlooked, given its implicit acknowledgment of the redeeming potential of dreams. Even more than the meditation throughout the play on the creative process, Cody's brothers' last minute arrival becomes a stunning way of materializing in the theatre the possibility of living in several worlds at the same time. Jason and Jasper's real presence on the stage is a fact regardless of their ontological status: whether or not they sprout from Cody's mind, whether or not they are pure products of the imagination, they embody on the stage, for a moment, the actual theatrical happening of the possible.

The dramatic action of *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007) forecloses any possibility to an imaginative escape such as that opened up in the conclusion of *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*. When Hobart Struther engages in the ritual of tossing all the now unnecessary tack into the pit he has dug—including the saddle, bridle, hand-made Garcia spurs and the Quadruple X Beaver hat he is so reluctant to give away—after a while, a Young Woman dressed in a sheer slip is seen emerging slowly from deep in the pit and gently putting the hat back on Struther's head, only to disappear immediately afterwards back into the hole. Struther, absorbed in singing the traditional folk song "Oh, Didn't he ramble" remains unaware throughout of this spirit's brief appearance, which is only perceived by the audience. Apart from this dainty poetic license, the play eschews any further imaginative flights like those that had for years been defining of Shepard's unique style in the theatre of the United States.

"America is a poem in our eyes [. . .] its ample geography dazzles the imagination" wrote Emerson in "The Poet" ([1844] 2003, 1190). As Richard Poirier argues, "to take possession of America in the eye, as an Artist, is a way of preserving imaginatively those dreams about the continent that were systematically betrayed by the possession of it for economic and political aggrandizement" (1966, 51). Sam Shepard built his originality as a playwright in the 1960s by demanding that audiences engage in the visionary possession of America and imagine the poetic Americanness of the US through his characters' reveries, dreams and imaginative flights, an ability as flawed as it was full of potential. *Geography of a Horse Dreamer* dramatizes, at a time of creative introspection, the authors' anxieties produced by the fear of losing a "style of dreaming" of America which, for all its instabilities and inherent delusions, had created a writing driven by a utopic yearning in its exploration of the horizons and outer limits of what can be imagined, and as such represented on the stage. The

invisibility of the horses in Cody's dreams bears an implicit recognition that the freedom associated with the American West might only be dreamed of, but the play leaves an opening for the persistence of the dream: in *Kicking a Dead Horse* this is completely abandoned. The latter play is a staged adieu to the once pursued belief in the dream of a land to be freely ridden across on horseback. If it can be read as Shepard's own attempt at creating a stage metaphor to put an end to a style of dreaming and writing no longer acceptable to him as a writer, ironically, the symbolic ritual necessary to accomplish it, the burial of the dead horse that had made Struther dream of the Great Plains, for all the character's efforts to do it, is finally impossible. Instead, Struther is the one to eventually end up buried by his own horse.

Despite the play's sought-for elegiac tone, *Kicking a Dead Horse* is finally a play much infused with a Beckettian spirit, and Hobart Struther a character still bearing the features of the dramatic characters of the twentieth-century tragicomic tradition. After a day and a night's survival in the middle of nowhere, as he wakes up to a bright day, he finds the horse still in his belly-up position and his hat in the hole. When he climbs down the pit to get the hat back and disappears, "the dead horse slams forward, this time downstage, with a mighty boom accompanied by bass tympani offstage, dust billowing up, filling the stage" (Shepard 2007, 45), stage directions indicate. As the hole is not wide enough to accommodate the entire horse, when lights slowly fade to black, Hobart's voice is heard from deep in the pit singing again "Didn't He Ramble."

The animal's resistance to being buried is compelling and it might represent the play's major triumph in its displacement of the performances of anthropocentrism as it mutely, yet comically, buries the excess of human imagining while simultaneously begging the audience that the old dream of horses should not be completely buried.

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