[The Return of Silent Tongue: Sam Shepard's Feminist, Gothic Western]

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[Abstract] *In his screenplay/film Silent Tongue (1992), Sam Shepard appears to synthesize the elements of multiple genres from the modern literary repertoire of his American and European precursors (Poe, O'Neill, Williams, Beckett), including facets of expressionism, magic realism, surrealism, the gothic, science fiction, the absurd, etc. And yet, it also appears that his work does not exactly belong to "any literary or theatrical tradition at all" but emerges from the subversion of "all such traditions" in America (Gilman, Sam Shepard xiii), thus paradoxically endorsing an original form of drama that reflects the complexity of his generation in the Vietnam era and after.*

[Keywords] *Western; nightmare; Kiowa; buffalo; frontier; dystopia; tonic; cowboy; rape; revenge*

[1] Introduction

In a diary entry dated January 1892, the Norwegian painter Edward Munch wrote of “an infinite scream passing through nature”¹ when describing his painting *Der Schrei der Natur* (*The Scream of Nature*).² If one had to search for a performative version of this theme of modern Western art reflecting an inarticulate cruelty of existence seeking redress, then Sam Shepard's dystopian Western, *Silent Tongue*, set in New Mexico in 1873 (and produced a century afterwards in 1994), would perhaps fulfil that need while also endorsing a feminist, magical realist and modern gothic vision.

Shepard's iconic image on the modern American stage and on celluloid media, as a “primitivist without peer” (Wade 153) and as a visionary who is poised at the edge of American civilization in the Vietnam War era, has accorded to his works a complex *Weltanschauung* and character. His essays, plays and films relate closely with a post-modern energy to the multiple traditions of the absurd, the gothic, the magic realist, the surreal and science-fiction genres. Following his initiation in drama from the sixties onwards, reaching a peak with *Tooth of Crime* (1972), *Buried Child* (1978) and *True West* (1980), Shepard moved into every aspect of the celluloid world of Hollywood – acting, directing, writing screenplays – in collaboration with directors like Michelangelo Antonioni in *Zabriskie Point* (1970), which concluded with the heroine's counter-culture vision of an earth-shattering apocalypse. Richard Gilman (the editor of Shepard's *Seven Plays*) praises the mercilessly bare, Beckettian settings of Antonioni's films, seeing in them the “ennui, extremity, anguish, abandoned searches” (63). He sees the movies as belonging to the highest level, comparable to drama, creating “visual equivalents of our experience” and enjoying “a freedom and an authority that the stage has almost lost” (65). Without abandoning the vital attributes and spirit of theatre, Shepard takes recourse to the medium of film to expand his horizons.

Emma Creedon has observed how Shepard's play *Angel City* (1976), drawing upon the tenets of surrealism, has embodied “normative theatrical semiotics in the language of cinema.” (Creedon 79). She contextualizes Shepard's play against Bunuel's and Dali's famous surreal film *Un Chien Andalou* (*The Andalusian Dog*, 1929). Shepard admitted in an interview with Michael Almereyda that Bunuel was one of his favourite film directors. Christopher Bigsby has also pointed out the surreal influence of Garcia Lorca's *El Paseo de Buster Keaton* (1928) on Shepard, comparing it with the latter's essay “The Escapes of Buster Keaton” (1973), which in a surreal vein dissolves the line between the onlooker and the performance, as if inducing an Alice to enter the looking glass: “Then you can take part in narrating an escape” (“Escapes” 87). He thereby dissolves the distinction between the body and the objective space the protagonist occupies while making a bid to escape. This stretches the limits of human action beyond the palpable and the linear: “You notice the body performing more things than a body and sometimes less and for that reason becoming something more than a body. You see the face not worried about the body and the body not worried about the face and then he escapes” (Shepard, “Escapes” 87). It anticipates a visual language that celluloid could execute in terms of meta-

physical or gothic modes, as his film *Silent Tongue* would embody two decades later, in the Nineties. Both Lorca and Shepard have eulogized the powerful cinematic influence of Bunuel's modernist film *Un Chien Andalou*, which combined in surreal terms a narrative with startling images. And yet each of them has devised individual artistic dimensions and voices of their own.

Though Shepard can be contextualized among his American precursors like O'Neill and Williams, he seems to have emerged, as Richard Gilman has observed, "out of no literary or theatrical tradition at all but precisely from the breakdown or absence... of all such traditions in America" ("Introduction", *Seven Plays* xiii). This paper will examine, through Shepard's screenplay *Silent Tongue* (1994), his unique status as the foremost American playwright of his generation who over the years has graduated into the more expansive and flexible dimension of cinematography, thus attesting to the intertextual significance of these two dimensions of creative expression in modern times. In Eric Bentley's observations about the intertextual relationship of the theatre and the cinema, he notes that playwrights ought to "unlearn realism, revive poetic drama or create new styles for the new settings" (51). Shepard intuitively seems to be appropriating such advice in his oeuvre by 'unlearning' realism – not only on the stage, but in the realm of cinema as well.

[2] The Advent of Sam Shepard in the Sixties

For Shepard, being an American media icon has also implied a readiness to incorporate the reality and wonder of the paradigms of diverse civilizations or clans. In a post-modern dimension of aesthetic cognition, his literary attitude often endorses an interweaving of traditions and genres in order to measure reality and the unforeseen prospects of the future. Significantly, he is often included in anthologies of different movements or groups – the Off-Off Broadway Theatre, the 'Underground Theatre', the Open Theatre, and also Hollywood. These factions individually manifest the anomalies of the Vietnam era through "a heightened awareness of the bizarre" and by means of the "underground school of manic monologue", which in the Sixties included figures such as Joseph Chaikin, Lanford Wilson, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Rochelle Owens and Maria Irene Fornes, among others. The new theatre's non-conformist impulse was essentially radical in nature. It sprang, as Robert Schroeder observes, from "a commitment to non-commitment and a determined courting of indeterminacy that comprises quite as revolutionary an anti-doctrine as the post-Renaissance Western mind can conceive" (Schroeder viii). Playwrights like Shepard acquire a modern relevance in the bohemian American context, which tends to refract theatrical and political influences into diverse branches. In his 'Note to the Actors', a preface to his play *Angel City* (1976), he replaces the idea of a "whole character" with the concept of "a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme" (Hayman 174) – a view that recalls Strindberg's directions, in his Preface to *Miss Julie* (1889), that his "souls" or characters are "conglomerations from various stages of culture, past and present, walking scrapbooks, shreds of human lives" (Strindberg 394).

Shepard's vision, invested in myth, has been "chiefly retrospective," observes Leslie Wade (156). Such a vision in the history of world literature has always made concessions to the continuous focusing and readjustments of historical linearity, of slices of time and sensibility in a post-colonial world. When the purpose of re-assembling the reality of the American past is recalled, the license of 'Reconstruction' becomes presumptuous, yet at the same time creative and replete with energy and mystery. Shepard's emergence as an original playwright and film enthusiast, seeking to enhance the trope of the Western frontier that Frederick Jackson Turner spoke about optimistically in 1897, unleashed a modern American imagery akin to a landscape and an ethos of relentless self-enquiry. He contributes to the genre of the 'Western' – which J. B. Priestley has also related to science fiction such as *The Phantom Empire*, *Deep Range* by Arthur C. Clarke, or *The Haunted Mesa* by Louis L'Amour. His contribution also includes a process of demythologizing the Western genre. With screenplays like *Silent Tongue*, Shepard steps out into another hybrid domain. He features in the expanding league of mythopoeic writers such as Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 1985) and Suzette Haden Elgin (*Native Tongue*,³ 1984), who create and vindicate a feminist mythology of their own to highlight the predicament of the universal woman fighting against all odds, those in subjugation, striving toward final independence. Shepard's Native American, female protagonist upholds such a cause through the medium of cinema.

Since the early years of his career in the Sixties, Shepard has revealed his penchant for dramatic narratives exploring the iconography of the archetypal cowboy in fantastical settings and plots bordering on science fiction, gothic romance and the absurd – *Geography of a Horse Dreamer*, *Voices from the Dead*, *Transported Man*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and *Sea Sleep*. And he seems to be at the crossroads of influences by James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, Eugene O'Neill, Samuel Beckett and an emerging American brand of magic realism. He appears to be deeply immersed in the performative reconstruction of mythopoesis. His realism, as William W. Demestes observes, cannot be like O'Neill's, "but his attempts to fathom the depths are prompted by the same ghosts" (Demestes 247). A contingent vocabulary of the Western frontier emerges, finely blending the natural and the metaphysical with authorial impunity. His *Voices from the Dead* (1969) is a gothic narrative monologue in line with Poe's *Ms. Found in a Bottle* (1833)⁴ or *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (1841). In it, a rodeo bull-rider describes in the first person his last ride on a bull called "the Twister," who did "just that," as if "he was dancin' on a dime" (Shepard, "Voices" 88). The account concludes with his destruction ("He's got me this time, and he knows it" [89]), including his transportation in a big black Cadillac hearse and his final burial in ground that "tastes like earth" (89). In a science fiction-like monologue in "Voices from the Dead: Transported Man," the hero sets off all the way from New York to China via an electronic, Star Trek-like 'beamer' after being de-atomized, but he reacts adversely to the reality of forfeiting his body's palpable, muscular substance. In this horror of a living death, Shepard lays the seeds of dread, the central, existential imagery of Munch's screaming mortal transposed in *Silent Tongue*, signifying the impotence of an individual to protest in the course of his/her own unprecedented violation: "I searched

for my voice but nothing was there. *I tried to scream and nothing came out. No one was there to hear me or see me. I was absolutely alone.*" (91; italics mine). At such points of human violation, gender becomes immaterial. The gender of the figure in Munch's *The Scream*, for instance, eludes classification. The ashen figure projects the lineaments of neither male nor female, but perhaps both.

In the history of the 'Western' film genre, the conflicts between the white man and the Native American have usually been resolved at the expense of the latter. Initially, native characters were hardly attributed any importance in the scheme of social development at the frontier; and even if they were present in the landscape, they would be faceless or invested with cunning and villainy. But since the 1950s, there has been a gradual change in the pattern of priorities. In *Broken Arrow* (1950), the Apache heroine Sonseeahray, daring to look beyond her comfort zone, falls in love with the white hero Jeffords (James Stewart), who, at risk to himself, has taken the initiative to build a bridge between the two races. The notorious Apache chief Chochise is likewise persuaded by Jeffords to reciprocate with his support. Scepticism and opposition prevail on both sides. The couple's romantic bond is based on an instinctive trust, and it leads to marriage and a brief idyllic honeymoon, but this comes at a price. Sonseeahray, the girl, dies in her innocence, caught in a crossfire involving both groups. Yet despite this tragic loss, Jeffords and Chochise stick to their hopes of peace in the land. In Robert Aldrich's *Apache* (1954), a formidable Native American protagonist, Massai (played by Burt Lancaster) is introduced for the first time; and in *The Stalking Moon* (1968), Salvaje is a faceless and dangerous Apache warrior who appears at the end of the film to encounter the hero Sam (Gregory Peck) and face defeat.

Shepard's *Silent Tongue* is perhaps the first modified American 'Western' film to feature a native Kiowa Indian woman, a totally speechless central protagonist, as the title indicates with a note of gothic irony. She is victimized by both her own people and white society, and she is later reunited with the former. Yet Shepard does not seem to be overtly anxious about the larger political conflicts between the two factions. He tackles the conflicts at individual and psychological levels, sustaining a note of skepticism or cyclical absurdity. His attitude is more impressionistic, incorporating both natural and supernatural perspectives. The Kiowa tribe – to which *Silent Tongue* belongs, is punished by and is later reunited with – reawakens the question of her lost honour, and finally becomes the agency of her offender's retribution. Eamon, her Irish mountebank husband and erstwhile rapist, is punished for his misdeed individually, and he does not necessarily symbolize the white man's sins of the past. His son Reeves returns to the camp. Prescott and Talbot survive their trauma and move on. Having won their prize, the Kiowa – along with the female victim who watches from high astride a horse – seem content about the justice delivered. The play concludes with the passage of a nameless 'Lone Man', in Beckettian style, pushing a wheelbarrow towards the horizon.

Shepard's gothic propensities relate him to precursors such as Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner and Eugene O'Neill. In an early prose piece, "The Curse of Raven's Black Feather" (1973), Shepard fashions an indigenous gothic idiom along the lines of Edgar

Allan Poe that will re-surface in his subsequent works. He uses the latter's favourite symbol of the raven⁵ while combining facets of the gothic and science fiction modes, set in the familiar landscape of the American highway and its indispensable technological attribute, the automobile – which metaphorically is seen to parallel the trajectory of a human being's journey from birth to death. The protagonist, driving north to Canada to celebrate his idol Jack Kerouac's death anniversary (and his canonical novel *On the Road*, 1935), closely identifies with the latter. In the vein of science fiction, he has "visions" (Shepard, *Silent Tongue* 47) of an automobile graveyard, in a seemingly post-apocalyptic world featuring innumerable scattered vehicles and rusting machine parts. He is directed to visit such a graveyard in Noir, Louisiana by the supernatural voice of a dead raven his car has crashed into after he stops to pluck one black feather from its body as a decorative piece. Thereby he inadvertently solicits Death to enter his fold and lead him into oblivion. The proverbially cursed hero, he cannot escape his fate in a gothic dimension of unceasing anxiety: "The feather speaks! I'm sure of it. It has a voice. Its own peculiar voice. More like a Myna bird than a Raven. No, more like a 'Nevermore' Edgar Allan Poe Raven voice" (Shepard, "Curse" 48). The voice instructs him to locate a rusty black 1936 Pontiac inside which he has to compose seven feathers together (including the single one he is holding) and then depart on his way. After he does this, he turns the ignition key of the derelict car. It starts with a bark as if reborn. He moves out onto the highway heading directly northwards: "I've been driving for years like that. Just North. Always going North and getting nowhere. Never stopping for gas or food or sleep or friendship. Just driving North" (Shepard 50). His predicament echoes the condition of the denizens of Dante in Purgatory or of the ghost ship the Flying Dutchman – like a phantom Jack Kerouac in the American Western landscape, doomed to wander forever on the road that he cherished as a life's principle.

Shepard's Pulitzer-winning play *Buried Child* (1978) highlights the reality of family alienation as a gothic attribute which in the Nineties would be further developed in his film *Silent Tongue*. In the former, Dodge, the main figure, highlights the total abdication of a paternal role that is replaced by rampant alcoholism and emotional apathy for many years, endorsing a self-destructive emasculation at the centre of the disjointed family. A child born of incest, killed by him and buried in the courtyard long ago, 'emerges' as a corpse at the end of the play in the hands of Tilden, who has dug it up. Dodge anticipates the character of the decadent Eamon McCree from *Silent Tongue*, who is breathless without his constant supply of alcohol and maintains the false bravado of the white man's frontier. The fallen father, a walking ghostly figure returning to reclaim a lost status, is a familiar gothic figure. Shepard's *The Holy Ghostly*, *Fool for Love*, *The Late Henry Moss*, *Buried Child* – all include a fallen father who has gone over the edge, yet persists in his cloying attachments of desire. The inclusion of such a fallen character is "one of Shepard's most important Gothic devices" (Lee 5). Shepard uses Tilden, Dodge's elder son, to "create a gothic sense of mystery and suspense," and the gothic motifs of burial and resurrection make Poe's story of Usher "a useful comparison for *Buried Child*" (Lee 175).

The coordinates of drama and cinema meet throughout Shepard's entire oeuvre, affirming their individual traits of technique and tradition while also sharing a common basis in his mind and experience. This can be seen in the gothic and rhetorical significance of the titles of his play *Buried Child* (1978) and his film *Silent Tongue* (1994). Each title uses an adjective ("buried"/"silent") with a touch of irony, suggesting the expectation of its opposite condition – the return of a dead child, or the articulation, metaphorically and literally, of a hitherto silenced mode of speech, the 'tongue' that no longer exists. And in each case, the measured rejuvenation is what is expected to take shape through the resources of drama or cinema. Shepard's recourse to the metaphor of an unwarranted or equivocal 'burial' of the living or the dead, and the consequences thereof, can be contextualized in the genesis of Western literature and drama from the Classical Greek times of Homer and Sophocles to that of the modern age of Ibsen, Strindberg and O'Neill.

The notion of the 'buried child' symbolically corresponds with the tragic idea of the premature death of potential youth.⁶ In *Buried Child*, the logistics of burial is linked to the guilt and shame of incest and murder, which needs to be faced and exorcised by the main protagonists concerned – Tilden, Dodge, Halie and Vince – in a necessary and parallel acknowledgment of the cyclical decimation and rebirth of the American Dream. In *Silent Tongue*, the death of Awbonnie is caused by giving birth to a stillborn child; neither she nor her deceased child solicit a return to mortality. And even as a ghost, she has to struggle to release herself from her context of temporality. The cathartic question of her liberation is dramatized by Shepard in cinematic terms.

[3] The Plot of the Screenplay *Silent Tongue*

In the plot of *Silent Tongue*, Shepard presents the interweaving of three main groups of characters at the frontier. The first is the dreaded Kiowa Indian tribe, rarely visible in the landscape. One of their women, Silent Tongue, is subjected to misogyny both inside and outside her community. The second group is Eamon McCree's present family, which includes the American Indian woman he raped and subsequently married, their two half-breed daughters Awbonnie and Velada, and his adult son Reeves from Eamon's previous marriage to a white woman. However, Silent Tongue is no longer around with her family; she has chosen to return to her native Kiowa tribe in the hope of exacting revenge and justice. The third group comprises Prescott Roe, a seasoned sixty-year-old cowboy (played by the veteran actor Richard Harris) who attempts to find a new wife for his distraught, recently widowed son, Talbot.

The screenplay/film *Silent Tongue* begins on a warped elegiac note, with the young Talbot Roe unreconciled to the recent demise of his half-breed wife Awbonnie, who died trying to deliver a stillborn child. Orpheus-like,⁷ the distraught young man refuses to forfeit her forever. Shepard's plays, in the wake of his antecedents Ibsen, Strindberg and O'Neill, often display the incongruity of unwanted and disposed-of progeny, as well as the consequences of such disposal and alienation. Infanticide features as a significant trait in modern Western drama and in gothic literature. Death has given Awbonnie the

chance to exit from an unhappy and loveless relationship; however, her husband Talbot prevents her liberation by opposing her funeral rites. He guards the corpse against any man, vulture or coyote in a bleak, Beckettian landscape, averse to the idea of her absolute freedom without him. At the frontier where white and coloured interests clash, the plot emerges through the tensions of a complicated and shameful marriage on one side and the improbable prospect of a new marriage on the other, employing the same coordinates of human resources. The action is contextualized in a mythic violation of a native woman bereft of the means of speech, a violation which demands expiation at any cost in the present.

The resulting tension between the living and the dead in *Silent Tongue* is manifested in the appearance of Awbonnie's ghost, asserting her freedom from the untenable bondage to her husband. Talbot's acutely misanthropic mental condition prompts his anxious but resourceful father Prescott to attempt a new marriage proposal with Eamon's remaining daughter, Velada, at a suitable bride-price of three horses and gold, in the hope of his son's timely mental recuperation; the old man believes she would be able to cure the young man's neurotic condition with her vital presence. He therefore rides to Eamon's camp to make the deal, quite aware of the latter's incorrigible, covetous nature. Yet despite the temptation, Eamon is reluctant to go ahead with the idea of relinquishing his second daughter, since she is the main asset in his current medicine show. Every day her stunning equestrian performance attracts the rural folk who are the potential customers for his wonder tonic that is supposed to cure all diseases. Reeves too is angry about forfeiting another sister in the same manner as before, especially as he knows that Awbonnie has "passed" into oblivion. The despairing Prescott has no alternative but to kidnap the girl by force, before returning to his son's bivouac site on the plains. The plot concludes with Velada getting the better of her abductor; she is left free to choose between returning to her stepbrother Reeves, or staying with her new husband Talbot. Strangely enough, her mother Silent Tongue does not intervene in the latest (post-Eamon) configuration. Velada, it is assumed, initiates a new cycle.

Shepard's feminist point of view in this screenplay depicts the bold girl's newfound economic and social independence, which enables her not to succumb to the patriarchy any more. Yet before that happens, an acute exorcism has taken place stretching across decades. At the centre of the plot of *Silent Tongue* is the primal, barbaric act⁸ of the double violation of a Native American woman, Silent Tongue, at the hands of patriarchal cruelty, and the consequences thereof within the fragmented frontier reality. A Kiowa tribal chief's punishment for a woman of his clan for lying to him is to cut out her tongue so she is silent forever. This metaphorically signifies the mythic, Philomela-like deprivation of the female voice of its necessary articulation and protest. In the Greek myth, King Tereus, after raping his wife's sister Philomela, proceeds to cut out of the latter's tongue so that she might not divulge his deed. However, the gods change the sisters into birds – a swallow and a nightingale – and Philomela's tragic tale becomes immortalized through song.

Shepard manifests expressionistically (in monochrome) Eamon's deep-rooted guilt through a nightmare-flashback of the rape while she gathers the white bones of slaugh-

tered buffaloes on the prairie. His own little son, Reeves, accompanying him, is forcibly made a witness to the horrid crime in order to toughen him, in a perverse frontier code of masculinity. Metaphorically, the significance of the two 'rapes' are linked together – that of a native woman and that of the buffalo, as a mythic resource of sustenance for the indigenous people; both assaults are selfishly executed by the white man. The buffalo constitutes one of the main images identified with Native American civilization, subject to near extinction by the machinations of buffalo hunters, men like Buffalo Bill Cody, satirized in Arthur Kopit's play *Indians* (1969). The buffalo origin myth⁹ is part of the long saga of the emergence of the Native American people. The archetypal buffalo is a part of the frontier myth that modern American drama (in the repertoire of Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, or David Mamet¹⁰) has symbolically foregrounded in its conflicts.

Like many of Shepard's unstable, gothic fathers, Eamon drinks heavily to alleviate his fears; he knows his retribution is near at hand. Psychologically, his gothic nightmare constitutes an act of self-confession, albeit late in the day. Velada's abduction in the present induces her father and stepbrother to go in search of her into the hostile territory of the warriors, where her mother now lives and awaits justice. The play concludes with the dissolution of false hopes of healing, as life comes back in a circle to the original sin of Silent Tongue's rape and her long-pending revenge on the perpetrator of the evil act. In the vast prairie, Eamon is stripped of the white man's vanity and power. And as he is prodded to his bloody death, his actions are accounted for and exorcized universally.

[4] Shepard's Experiments with Form in *Silent Tongue*

Shepard's celluloid gothic Western *Silent Tongue* begins by showing the predicament of Talbot Roe¹¹ following the recent death of his wife Awbonnie in childbirth. The plot does not reveal the context of his initial knowledge of and conjugal alignment with her. Nor does it bring out his attitude and feelings towards the picaresque career of his father-in-law Eamon McCree, since his own father, Prescott, seems to have been the mediator between the two far-flung families from the start. Eamon's son Reeves is from his first marriage to a white Irish woman, and Reeves does not share his father's decadent bent of mind. But both Eamon's daughters, Awbonnie and Velada, are born to a Native American woman called Silent Tongue, whom Eamon raped long before marrying her in an attempt at redress. He still does not hesitate to show his racist prejudice for white over coloured people when he tells Reeves "Just thank your stars you weren't born a half-breed like yer demon sisters" (164), forgetting his own authorship of that demonism. Eamon's materialistic reluctance to part with the 'asset' of his younger daughter (who draws in the crowds) prompts the desperate Prescott to wait no further and to kidnap her by force. In the same breath he tries to persuade her to submit wilfully to his proposal, with temptations of acquiring several horses, gold, as well as her personal, economic freedom from a repressive and insensitive father. Apologizing for his violent act of coercion, he appeals

to her to assist in healing his mentally infirm son through marriage: "I was wrong to steal you against your will, but you must help me. I have no one else" (169).

The feminist mode of *Silent Tongue* explores the relationship between gender identity, body, and desire. As with the mythic case of Philomela, Silent Tongue's rape does not remain an end in itself, but rather progresses inevitably in its implications through a metamorphosis of suffering, self-realization and poetic justice. Eamon's past violation of Silent Tongue is finally accounted for by his nemesis outside his carnivalesque atmosphere of folk entertainment and charlatan medicinal practice. He responds half-heartedly to the conjugal destinies of his two daughters. Ironically, the unfortunate misalliance in each case establishes the existential ground of Eamon's subsequent 'trial' in strangely dramatic terms. He has committed sins at other people's expense, and he is answerable to them, to society and to nature. The fortuitous link between the cause and the consequence of poetic justice is through the apparently central figure of Silent Tongue, who nevertheless remains absent throughout the entire film.

We do not discover Silent Tongue brooding over her fate or chanting vengefully in a Kiowa village for two decades. Nor is there any objective reference to Eamon's crime by her or her tribe,¹² which is mainly represented vicariously. We do not witness a linear course of accountability between Eamon's crime and the agenda of punishment or revenge that is executed by the Kiowa tribe at the end, when Silent Tongue's unstated demand for retribution moves from the personal to a universal plane. The gap between the two poles of crime and punishment is unique, and it could be perceived in the vein of magic realism or science fiction. It is characterized by the surreal drama of a dead woman's ghost demanding its necessary funeral rites. Between Awbonnie and her mother, the *heroine manqué*¹³ Silent Tongue, Shepard demonstrates the itineraries of literal and metaphorical ghosts as feminist tropes demanding identity, voice and visibility in a patriarchal world of fraudulent healing and opportunism. By setting in motion a process of frontier retribution in the context of Eamon's erstwhile decadence and prevailing capitulation, Shepard avails himself of the contemporary American resources of cinema to resolve the evils of a colonizing ethos. Yet it is rare to find in the Western genre a culpable white man being answerable to Native American justice. Historically, Custer and his men did fall to Cheyenne and Sioux fury at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. In John Huston's film *The Unforgiven* (1960), a native Kiowa girl, named Rachel by the white family that has adopted her in childhood, realizes her true heritage and decides to return to her native roots, which are claiming her back. However, generally speaking, starting from John Fenimore Cooper, it has been rare to find the Native American being accorded a degree of equality or superiority in the dimensions of literature and cinema. In *Silent Tongue*, the very question of a hierarchy of racial cultures is difficult to resolve, as they move backward and forward inconsistently. Shepard leaves the question ambiguous.

The drama of unsolicited confrontations in the West between native cultures and foreign settlers often presented a range of American Indian tribes – the Navajo, Chuwaukeee, Modoc, Apache, Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne, and others – all of whom were displaced from their natural habitat by the white man, the 'blanco'. *Silent Tongue* draws

upon the magic realist interactions of the natural and the supernatural on Earth, with the same ease in the modern age as that which prevails in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, a balance of sorts being sought between the two dimensions. It may be observed that the dominant metaphor of healing emerges ironically in the course of Shepard's dramatic vision in *Silent Tongue*. Using a hyperbolic rhetoric of frontier salesmanship before uneducated rural folk, Eamon promises to 'cure' any temporal malaise with his knowledge of medical science, in the form of an elixir bottled for a dollar each. He poses as a benefactor of the masses who has "miracles to perform" in a diseased world: "The whole prairie is festering for our remedy" (Shepard, *Silent Tongue* 137). He claims to have learnt its secret formula from the mysteries of the Kiowa tribe while he was their prisoner in adolescence. Yet his hedonistic violation of *Silent Tongue* in his youth makes his current agenda of healing a hypocritical one. He is himself a part of the disease that he claims to cure. On another front, Prescott believes Velada is the only living 'medicine' that will cure his son's impossible condition of psychological attachment to his dead wife. Both these premises and hopeful solutions turn out to be faulty and ineffectual in terms of healing. The very word becomes a misnomer in the vocabulary of the frontier.

McCree's Dr. Eamon Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show evolves as an ironic extension of this legacy of presumptuous healing that is being solicited in a land of disease, failure, and sin. It is an old story of survival at the expense of gullible folk, elevated to grotesque scams such as those of the Duke and Dauphin in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or the tall tales of Baron Munchausen in Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* magazine. While Twain, through comedy, embodied the grotesque and racist aspects of the colonization of the frontier, Shepard, a century later, underscored its gothic and surreal tensions via cinema. Eamon is a fake messiah and medicine man who profits from pseudo-tribal healing secrets into which he was ostensibly initiated during his kidnapped childhood: "We have tonic to sell," he tells his son, "miracles to perform. The whole prairie is festering for our remedy!" (137). He creates a pseudo-myth of American-Indian tribal knowledge of healing to legitimize his pedigree as a doctor: "I've grown accustomed to the primitive for some time. In fact, I prefer it by now. It's the primitive that feeds my livelihood" (143). This secret potion is euphemistically referred to as a tonic; it has a base content of alcohol, without which Eamon's inordinate thirst cannot be appeased. Their central programme is their vaudeville act of selling the sham tonic through the performance of the whole family and a grotesque band of low, bathetic performers – clowns, a Tap Dancer, a Petrified Man, an Acrobat, etc. – who could well be denizens of a P.T. Barnum circus repertoire of the 1870s.¹⁴ And every morning, the group performance gets underway with the practiced Irish rhetoric of father and son in a histrionic routine of limericks, crude jokes and loud endorsement of their all-purpose, pseudo-magical tonic. However, Velada, Eamon's bi-racial daughter, is an exception. She plays an important visual, performative role, as she mesmerizes the rural audience with her equestrian feats of power, finesse, and speed, fused into a ball of exquisite motion. She performs with a pure innocence, de-contextualized for a while from a history of sin and violence. She embodies an original female power that could counterpoint the exploitative American patriarchy of the

past and the present. Her dangerous riding act complements the rhetoric of the 'magic' tonic that Eamon foists on the dumb folk. Her furious and impersonal (albeit sensual) act is a part of the 'medicinal' content that the people are ready to swallow without questioning. Paradoxically, this enforced potential of 'healing' in Velada is the outcome of the sexual and enforced 'silence' that her mother underwent in her youth when she, a tongue-less woman, was raped on the prairie with the patriarchal assumption that such a woman could never protest, as King Tereus had thought about Philomela after violating her. Velada on her own would also be the untutored feminist force able to turn the tables on the unsuspecting veteran cowboy after being solicited by him to restore his son (Talbot) to life with the grace of her feminine humanism and "some affection" (176). She is caught between the two ends: the white man/father who may barter her without pity for her body, and the spirit in the shape of her sister's ghost that considers her "to be lower than the father who sold us!" (183), as Velada is betraying their mother by her ambitious plans for upward social mobility and even contemplating the option of replacing Awbonnie as Talbot's mate. In a horrifying gothic scene, the ghost grabs Velada by her hair and pulls her tongue; holding a knife over it, the ghost threatens that it will repeat the same punishment as their mother had to bear a generation before – the excising of her tongue – to remind her of her roots and the woman who gave birth to her and paid the heavy price of forfeiting speech forever.

Awbonnie's ghost makes it quite clear that it is Talbot who is obstructing her path of liberation: "It's you that must release me!" (151). However, Prescott, Talbot's father, feels that Talbot is losing his mind and would surely die without help and renewal through the company of a second wife, preferably from the same family stock. Prescott's accelerated plans for familial reconstruction through Velada ("you must replace her. It's his only chance" [170]) are suspect. She realizes, both on her own as well as through her ghostly sister's reprimand, that Prescott's efforts at rebuilding the order of nature are in fact at the expense of nature and the ritualistic funerary norms of the underworld. Those must first be fulfilled before a second marriage can take place.¹⁵ With modern myth-makers like Sam Shepard, Margaret Atwood and Jean Giradoux,¹⁶ we can see an attempt to explore the relationship between mythopoesis, magic realism and "a feminist discourse that is attempting to conceptualize issues of difference" (Melzer 1) in a male-oriented world where women too need to recover their lost identities with honour. Both Atwood and Giradoux lend their authorial voices to wronged and marginalized characters from the patriarchal, epic setting of Homer's *Odyssey*. *The Penelopiad* upholds the charge of injustice inflicted on the hero's wife Penelope's twelve maids (who were unjustly executed by King Odysseus on his return to his kingdom Ithaca after the Trojan War, having allegedly betrayed him to the suitors) and Elpenor (an ordinary sailor on Odysseus's homebound ship, who in a drowsy state, on being summoned to report for duty, walked off a roof and fell to an ignoble death; he wishes not only to retrieve his dignity through proper funeral rites, but also demands a status equivalent to the foremost of epic heroes while moving centripetally from the margins to the centre). Shepard's Awbonnie demands no less in her predicament of bondage, of having her dead body withheld and denied burial by her own husband.

Shepard attempts to show new criteria of gender differences initiated by conscious female protagonists who are contextualized at one discordant point in frontier history.¹⁷ Both Prescott and his son neglect this basic priority with impunity, thus earning the ghost's extreme wrath. This implies an antagonism which is also rooted in the larger universal agenda of a wronged mother, Silent Tongue, avenging her victimization. Velada tells Prescott that Awbonnie's ghost has become an active projection of their long-invisible mother, slowly fulfilling the power of the feminine tongue that had been categorically silenced: "She is my mother's weapon! She is moving on you now with vengeance!" (173). Velada too, as a self-reliant woman with Kiowa blood in her, is not easily subdued. Even after being kidnapped, she escapes and gets the better of the veteran Prescott, whom she leaves stranded as she gallops away with all his horses. This virtual extension of Silent Tongue's agenda of subversive feminist articulation and revenge through her two daughters (without actually having communicated with them in the political or social sphere) indicates the subtle expediting of justice through the ubiquitous levels of modern drama and magic realism.

Ironically, Prescott's immediate assertion of the normalcy of his son's rejuvenation implies the volitional and impersonal consent of a nubile Native American woman. Velada cannot immediately be used for the crucial investment of life that Prescott wants. Her voice, conjoined with the proxy voice of Silent Tongue, must be aligned with a long-delayed affirmation of justice for women dishonoured, before it can be euphemistically used to counter the tantrums of a spoilt son. Awbonnie's candid rejection of her skewed marriage context ("I am not your life!" [150]) thus becomes the projection of a much greater anger, going beyond even Silent Tongue's rape to the violation of universal woman, whose pain might be expressed in an abstract, metaphysical world such as that portrayed symbolically in Edward Munch's painting "The Scream". This link between disparate needs for rejuvenation, brought together in the dialectic of male and female, white and coloured, is achieved through Shepard's acknowledgment of the potential of magic realism or gothic discourse endorsing the path of poetic justice. Prescott is knocked to the ground by Velada's sudden surge of energy. He is left alone without his assets of horses or his bag of gold coins, in a symbolic emasculation of traditional male superiority. But neither of them, young or old, is in a relenting mood. This emerging tension is vital to the momentum of the film, because it marks the anti-climax when Prescott had thought he could bring back with him the solution to his son's malaise. At that very point, the resourcefulness of a young, part-Native woman overcomes that of the seasoned cowboy, something that her own mother could not attain a generation ago. The circumstances and the equations are, of course, different now in the social framework. Shepard directs an empowered feminist reply to the past narrative of male/white hegemony.

Science fiction (SF) often manifests an inner symbiosis of evolutionary forms of life in the terms of visible images – what Patricia Melzer termed "alien constructions" and "hybridity" in her book on feminist science fiction. At times they are physical and metaphysical extensions/projections of each other, and they are thus represented in a hybrid form of mundane reality. This is a phenomenon that is clearly apparent in all

mythologies of the world which exhibit these binary forms of identifiable energy and value – like centaurs, satyrs, mermaids, sirens, minotaurs, humanoid animals and birds speaking in Greek, Latin or Hebrew, mutants, and hypothetical cyborgs – who nurture the paradoxical fate of the mortal and the immortal simultaneously. SF, like all languages, was born from the tensions of cultural hybridity across the physical and metaphysical worlds that human civilization had become acquainted with – and Shepard often mediates such metamorphic changes using an American idiom. In *Silent Tongue*, the incongruous and protracted relationship between the white man and the Native American provides the metaphorical ground – for instance inter-racial marriage – for a redefinition of justice and retribution.

Ostensibly, in Greek classical myth the Titan Prometheus began this trend when, completely unsolicited, he stole the fire of the Gods to illuminate the darkness of human ignorance. He was, perhaps, the first SF auteur, using his divinely unsanctioned fennel stalk as an incendiary pen to write an unprecedented rebel story of creation and scientific progress for the future of mankind. This was a narrative which was starkly different from regular scriptures, because the new discourse implied a democratic era of creative powers that would be anathema to the gods who had monopolized them so far. In *Silent Tongue* we also witness such a gradual reversal taking place, with the agency of metamorphosis reaching the fortuitous abstractions of SF as it emerges from a dystopian nightmare of mythic guilt. In modern drama and literature, we often come across such 'alien constructions', symbolic hybridity or polarity expressed through language and imagery, just as in Renaissance paintings we often see centaurs, satyrs and their symbolic, human counterparts invading civil congregations in order to abduct helpless women on their shoulders for purposes of intimidation, pleasure, or procreation. Sam Shepard, like several other modern American playwrights and poets, achieves the synchronization of hybrid forms visually through images, or poetically through words. These hybrid images can help establish a neutral or uncharted ground or atmosphere conducive to the birth of pristine visual or semantic forms – like the techniques used by Bertolt Brecht to distance (or alienate) the spectator from the subject at hand so as to generate a fresh, untutored insight. Shepard's extensive use of surreal, SF and gothic imagery, and his facility with rock music, are geared to stimulate new dimensions of interpretation.

For instance, we emblematically discover a visual suggestion of the mythic 'centaur' in Prescott Roe, the veteran cowboy, described as "*an absolute extension of his horses*", his eyes possessing "*the kind of inner stillness that comes from dealing with nature and horses and not with human beings*" (127, italics mine). He is also described as the 'Horse Swapper', the one who barter horses for brides for his incorrigibly melancholy son, as an antidote to death (136). Velada's figure as she rides her horse, deftly changing her positions at will, also seems to be graphically conjoined with the outline of her horse. Her torso is perfectly synchronized with the body and limbs of the animal in a complete silhouette which, viewed as a whole, appears like a centaur in ecstatic frenzy mesmerizing the audience with various acrobatic tricks. She is a skilled Native American horse rider whom white colonial culture cannot fully appropriate on its terms at all times. Such a buoyant inde-

pendence is briefly displaced by Prescott's act of kidnapping her. Shepard's description of Prescott condones the graphic, centaur-like amalgamation of man and horse due to his vital affinity with them and the fact that he essentially deals with nature and horses, and "not with human beings" (127).

In contrast to such a visual synthesis of human and animal (horse) in a mythic sense of primal oneness, we see the opposite state of physical and psychological alienation from nature in Eamon's coveting of horses for monetary profit (as he is ready to barter his daughters for horses and gold) and his killing of them for self-protection. He thrives at their expense in every way in order to survive, until in the end the noose of justice circles his own neck. He nonchalantly declares: "We ate his horses outside Omaha" (136). After shooting his own packhorse without a second thought in order to use its carcass to provide protection from Kiowa arrows, he instructs his son Reeves to do the same: "Shoot yer mount and bury yourself!" (186). It is not surprising that Eamon's alienation from nature is reflected in his alienation from horses. In two crucial scenes he is, in a manner of speaking, de-horsed and forced to walk, left alone first by Velada and later by Reeves. He staggers along the dusty trail, under the prodding of the Kiowa warriors' lances and clubs. Shepard's 'human-horse' visual construct becomes an index of the frontier and other motifs of a gothic consciousness. They constitute potent, alien or incongruous forms of organic life that have always existed or are hypothetically anticipated to be born. SF and/or magic realism may dwell on such metamorphic transitions which move up or down the 'evolutionary' ladder. Abandoned by his son Reeves and bereft of his horse and gun in the vast landscape, Eamon is "vulnerable and pathetically alone" (162), dispossessed of his colonizer's identity as his son deliberately abandons him in preference for his bi-racial sister, whom he loves and seeks to "reclaim" (179) from unsanctioned hands.

Shepard does not hesitate to employ the simple and dramatic symbols of the Western genre that inspires him in his quest. The rawhide lariat is one of the popular power symbols of the genre – besides the six-shooter Colt, the Sharp repeater rifle and the Bowie knife. It projects the idea of subjugating and taming the explosive energy of nature in a simple, non-mechanical and absolute way, prior to the advance of the destructive technology of wars that produced guns, explosives and missiles – and later also tanks and bombers. The lariat, in its horizontal trajectory, captures the object of pursuit, but it does not kill – unless it is used vertically as a noose to hang living bodies. The veteran cowboy Prescott Roe is a master of using the lariat, and significantly, he does so around the naturally related bodies of Velada and the horse in one complete composition of outline: "The leather rope slashes around her face and snares her around the waist, also encircling the paint's neck" (153). Both bodies seem to be expressionistically unified into one, under the jurisdiction of the cowboy's rope. In this composite encircling of girl-rider and horse with one single lariat, as if it was one body being caught on an artist's canvas, Shepard reiterates the imagery of the centaur in a gesture that contributes to the atmosphere of science fiction, in which alien bodies are often imaginatively composed of the mixed physical attributes of humans and animals.

Shepard has further recourse to the expressionistic projection of Eamon's guilt through the latter's harrowing nightmare of that memory in a parenthetical 'black and white' sequence¹⁸ while tackling the issue of Velada's abduction in the present. The contrasting monochromatic view signifies the part of his alienated self that is still grappling for moorings. Yet this is not a sin that can be undone through tears, either in or outside time and space – like the virtual bloodstains on Lady Macbeth's hands which even all the perfumes of Arabia cannot wipe clean. Prescott's 'guerilla invasion' of Eamon's camp, and his swift (albeit apologetically conducted) operation, recalls other mythic assaults – the abduction of Persephone by Pluto and that of the Sabine women¹⁹ by the Romans: all justified by the crucial necessity of the continuation of the species, even though the end does not justify the means.²⁰ Prescott tells the captured girl sitting trussed up on her horse: "I am very sorry about this. I truly am. There was no other way to get it done" (155).

Such an accelerated and arbitrary manner of reaching one's goal implies a heightened sense of history and metabolism in modern or mythic terms. Such acts express the demonic, guilt-ridden extremities of the human impulse that Freud, Jung and gothic literature discovered in the human subconscious. Neither Persephone, Silent Tongue nor Velada would have met their respective husbands on their own impetus, nor would they have decided to stay on as partners without being imposed upon by external conditions of temptation, desire, and inducement such as the indispensable pomegranate in Hades or the gold offered in the wilderness. They are appropriated through violence or gold or by the far-reaching lariat. Nobler forms of persuasion are rare. And they all counterpoint on their own terms and language in human or supernatural or mythic ways. How does she, alienated from her tribe, bring about a critical operation of justice from her historical point of view? Shepard does not care to elaborate on the logistical connection between the act of violation perpetrated on Silent Tongue and the execution of justice on Eamon by the Kiowa warriors. This is where cinematic montage helps to move beyond a linear development of a plot in a dynamic or expressionistic way. The necessity and execution of justice for a primal crime becomes a universal rather than an individual concern, as is seen to happen in Greek tragedy.

The surreal atmosphere created by Shepard through his simultaneous linking of Velada's abduction by Prescott in the present with the brutal rape of her mother by Eamon in the past is conceptualized through Eamon's unexpected nightmare at this turning-point in the drama. Both the living and the spectral seem to be part of the collective unconscious flitting across the inhospitable prairie. The nightmare constitutes an interlude of deep moral anxiety – and the irony is that expiation will finally be achieved at the hands of the 'heathens' Eamon has always despised and spat upon.

Eamon's last walk, under the prodding of spears, may (or may not) be a grotesque parody of Christ's last journey before his crucifixion on Calvary. Eamon (or mankind) becomes the cause of Silent Tongue's unmitigated and soundless scream of agony in the wilderness. He too wakes up from his nightmare, projecting that scream in his wishful justification of his deed, the condescending fact that he married her after all: "I made her my legitimate wife! Don't forget that! Don't ever forget that!" (159). But the irony

is that his Native American wife is no longer around to hear his boast. She has left him forever and is abating the process of his punishment. The word “legitimate” resonates in the air. The corresponding images of past and present screaming mortals – Persephone, Munch’s and Shepard’s protagonists – are brought together in our minds with a touch of hyperbole, a touch of the violation that awaits the grace of forgiveness.

Eamon: Remarkable, isn’t it? How things come true. I had invented this little fable. This very one I’m now living. Conjured it out of my own imagination. It was my sales pitch. Infallible. It worked every time. It was my very livelihood. (197)

Is this a modern instance of Aristotle’s *anagnorises* or self-realization on the part of Eamon at the threshold of death? Is the white colonizer, like Joseph Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, coming to terms with his inordinate greed in the face of hell fire? The sentiments expressed echo those of Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, who acknowledges the consequences of his own presumptuous machinations in society after becoming a part of the ensuing destruction, ultimately a victim of his own experiment.

In *Silent Tongue*, Sam Shepard uses his film script to rediscover the inner tensions of the concept of the Western frontier, the basic idea of civilization at the crossroads. Moreover, women who are pushed to the wall also feature in secret, empowered ways at the centre of the action, the scene of crimes and the operation of *nemesis*. As with Arthur Kopit’s play *Indians* (1968), *Silent Tongue*, in a far more sombre fashion, rewrites the text of America’s guilt and accountability towards the displacement and decimation of the natives of the land, leading into a future of a stark, intimidating, gothic consciousness.²¹ In *Silent Tongue*, Shepard has expressed the terminal guilt of an incorrigible patriarchal society through the timely self-assertions of female protagonists who until then were playing a secondary role.

The severe and unreasonable expectations of Talbot for the return of his deceased wife from the threshold of death recalls the Greek myth of Orpheus in its futile conclusion about a reunion. Yet Shepard’s Orpheus moves in a self-centred, hateful way. Here the myth is imbued with a discord that is deeper, less forgivable. Significantly, Talbot carries a shotgun in place of the Orphic lyre or a Spanish guitar; he employs anger, abusive language and bullets to make his presence felt in death’s arena, and not the blissful music that turned the heart of Persephone and the whole of Nature to agree upon the return of Eurydice to the upper world. The elements do not fall in love with Talbot in the same way as they did with the mythic hero. The ghost of Awbonnie thus rejects her earthly husband’s narcissistic endearment of her body at the expense of her soul, his false profession of love as a mask of colonial male-centric hegemony. Magic realism (or science fiction) may open the doors of the romantic expectation of a continuity of life after death, especially where the limitations of mortality are imposed too quickly and awkwardly. Orpheus and Eurydice, in a mythic context, would almost have achieved a reunion had it not been for the former’s impatience. It is that anxiety or alienation between lovers that speculative literature leaves open-ended. In *Silent Tongue*, the misalliance of Awbonnie and Talbot can only be resolved through a violent, feminist-induced and definitive separation of power.

But thankfully, this quest by Talbot and his father Prescott to challenge nature, to dominate their women for personal, egotistic ends, does not succeed. The woman in each case prevails, in life or in death. Awbonnie's ghost tells Talbot that she died in childbirth ("I died giving birth to your child!" [168]) and not for any other exotic reason. She had "never wanted" a child from their union in the first place, as there was no real bonding between them. The colonized subject consciously rejects the hope of a harmonious, pro-creative history, despite the chance union which, after all, denies a worthy legacy of trust and honour. She has already witnessed the alienating results of a bi-racial marriage in the case of her own parents, whose conjugal record was a misalliance based on shame. She asks for her own 'freedom' at a metaphysical level, which only the likes of him can perhaps expedite by submitting her body to the flames, or by allowing nature to do the necessary through the animals and birds of prey that he has so far kept at bay with his shotgun. Yet he is averse to the idea. He will not let her body out of sight, for he anticipates his absolute emasculation by the sacrifice of an apparently perfect bond which does not exist. His perverse insistence of physically 'preserving' the dead – as in *Buried Child* – constitutes a grotesque parody of the idea of immortality within the literary parameters of the American gothic tradition. It may also signify a tongue-in-cheek parody of the American Dream.

[5] In the Wake of Shepard's Precursors

Shepard's originality does not entirely preclude the influences of several Western precursors. The expressionistic, gothic, absurd and other experimental devices of Western precursors, such as Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, attest to the multiple levels of reality that take shape in the landscape that Shepard traverses. When O'Neill's black protagonist Brutus Jones decides to relinquish his island empire in *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and flee through the dark primeval forest, he comes across the ghosts of his past crimes, which include two instances of murder. Each time the ghosts confront him, he falters and blasts at them with his revolver until a single silver bullet is left... for himself. For a fleeting moment in *Silent Tongue*, the ghost of Awbonnie prompts her living husband to commit suicide with the gun barrel in his mouth: "He pulls the shotgun out of his mouth and with the obvious fear of annihilation, points it at the ghost, emptying both barrels" (169), as she vanishes. The expressionistic attributes of the supernatural, found in the dramas of Strindberg (*Dance of Death*) and O'Neill (*Desire Under the Elms*), move aggressively into Shepard's cinematic dystopia in *Silent Tongue*, to give substance to forgotten causes. In the absence of any living concern for justice in retribution for past violations in the cases of Awbonnie and her late mother, Shepard foregrounds both causes in the film through Prescott's oblique agenda of equanimity for his crazed son. In the conclusion, the woman *Silent Tongue* is revealed not in a photograph or a narrative or a nightmarish dream, but in person, as the figure of a nemesis who, without a word or a sign, mediates in the terms of magic realism between crime and punishment for a parturient nature.

Ironically, Prescott's pleading for Velada's humanist, feminine care for his son ("All he needs is a voice. A kindness." [176]) undercuts the general subtext of nineteenth-century misogyny and sparks a conflict in her. Prescott realizes he cannot dictate to a woman that she must be kind and gracious, even though he can lasso her into temporary subjugation. This attitude distinguishes the characters of Prescott and Eamon, the two father figures in the script. And it is complemented by the position that Eamon's son Reeves also adopts in anxious support of his two sisters, in a total rejection of his chauvinist father, the "Wizard of the Plains!", whose heritage he condemns: "It shames me to be the son of a pig" (164). To Eamon, his daughter Velada, being half-Kiowa, was "born to suffer!" And in pronouncing all three of his children "Heathen!" (172), he acknowledges his own demonism.

While Prescott is bent on bringing back a new wife for his son at any cost, his mission is rudely interrupted by both the living and the phantom sisters. Velada gets the upper hand over the veteran cowboy when she reacts with a primal, "animal scream" on hearing from him about the death of Awbonnie; she gallops away with his horses, forcing him to walk alone on the vast prairie (161). Her sudden fury, and the strength rooted in her anger, signifies the rebirth of the cornered woman into a new species who can survive at the expense of brutal men. Yet Velada pities Prescott and his predicament, returning to see his pathetic condition. Finally, in full control, she strikes a bargain with him to buy her own freedom from the clutches of her soulless father. Her pragmatic rather than her feminist side gets the better of her. She chooses liberty as an individual who has the upper hand for the while. Her sister's ghost accuses her accordingly of betraying the cause of their mother: "You are lower than the father who sold us" (183). And finally, Silent Tongue appears sitting "astride a black pony, set against the horizon, wrapped up in a buffalo robe," as her "black eyes burn out into the distance" of the landscape (198). She oversees the grim fate of her offender and master Eamon as he is led away by the nameless Kiowa warriors who appear like the *erinyes*, spirits of vengeance who do not fail in their appointed task. Thus, Shepard's brand of feminist/gothic Western, poised on the brink of a new generation of frontier enterprise, operates on multiple levels of affirmation within the genre. The buffalo robe on Silent Tongue's shoulder is symbolic of the honour she has regained through nature, her imposed silence from the past which now takes on a rejuvenated meaning of peace.

As the film script proceeds, the two plots – about the exploitation of women and nature's reaction to that injustice – come closer to each other and ultimately fuse, with Silent Tongue at their centre; the world of innocence and experience strive to reach a balance. In the wake of O'Neill's *oeuvre*, Shepard employs expressionistic devices that correspond with gothic imagery and magic realism. At night, as Prescott approaches Talbot and the female corpse under his overt protection, a lone fire burns next to the tree. The ghost of Awbonnie is seen "running furiously across the prairie with both arms stretched high above her streaming hair" (173), like a discontented banshee. She attacks the old man by using a form of Voodoo – a supernatural practice said to employ spirits of the dead to resolve conflicts – through the body of a wolf, which she stabs with two knives. The act

and pain of the stabbing are transmitted immediately to Prescott's body by the ghost. He writhes in pain on the ground as Velada helps to extract the knives from his back. The camera also closes on the knives, which hurtle through black space "and suddenly vanish" (173). She explains to him that her sister, Awbonnie, has become the vengeful extension of their mother toward an unjust world. Velada is equipped to interpret the demonic images of the shooting knives as expressions of her sister's anger at him for promoting his son at the expense of her salvation: "My sister is sending you her thoughts!" Prescott still undercuts the supernatural connotation, rationalizing, "it was just a pain" and that her sister was "dead" (173). Velada refutes his narrow scepticism:

Velada: She is my mother's weapon! She's moving on you now with vengeance.

Prescott: We must get to my son! We got to get to him fast.

Velada: I cannot move against my sister.

Prescott: Your sister is dead! She's gone!

Velada: She is more alive than you. (174)

The choice is between the volatile interests of the natural and the supernatural world orders. Prescott reminds Velada that they have made a bargain about the attempt to heal the broken life of Talbot, and Velada concedes this. However, at the end of the film, after the corpse of Awbonnie has undergone its cherished funeral rites, we do not see Velada next to Talbot, as was planned in the deal. She does not seem to be bound by her obligation to restore a man, her brother-in-law, from the brink of despair. It is only the father and son who walk together towards the horizon on the prairie. The script reveals a larger context of good and evil that Eamon has tried to bury in the self-justifying drama of a marriage. It is a cloistered evil that has resurfaced – like the murdered infant in Shepard's *Buried Child* – and that has to be paid for with his own life. This payment will be brought about as retribution through the agency of the victim's sentient consciousness. Revenge is not only a personal agenda; it is a part of the necessary restoration of nature. In *Silent Tongue*, perhaps, more than in the Western *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the potential of travelling 'back to the future' is dramatically achieved at a deeper and darker level of retribution, with both victim and victimizer mutually defining the basis of evil that needs to be exorcised in a new language of suffering.

[6] Conclusion

Eamon's alienation from the source of his fictitious medicinal knowledge, which he profits from commercially, is symbolized in his estrangement from his wife Silent Tongue, who has left him to return to her people after bearing him two daughters. His spurious practice of Kiowa medicine on the one hand implies an opportunistic gathering of tribal healing secrets meant to fool gullible country folk. However, on the other hand the inception of that study of tribal healing practices was marked by three acts of violence in which he was involved: first, his own childhood kidnapping ("captured at a very young and tender age and taken into the hands of the dreaded Kiowa/Comanche" [138]), during which

time he was “cast into the eye of... a terrible fever”; second, during his youth his rape of Silent Tongue and his continuing condescension toward the Kiowa natives (“I wasn’t descended from proud Irish chieftains in order to have my hide stripped away by heathens!” [180]); and third, as he himself admits in a macabre rhetoric of fiction, the fact that he had “stolen” the sacred and “ancient Sagwa Serum” (141) to share with everyone, thus making them party to the violation of knowledge he committed. Shepard shows through his dramatic irony that in the original Western ethos of discovery, liberty and scientific knowledge at grassroots level, the institution of marriage, and the humanism it was supposed to symbolize, have become a lie. The creative evolutionary progress of life has been inverted and subjected to desecration. Both Eamon and Prescott undermine their own professed humanist goals because of their ruthless and self-righteous colonizing instincts of exploitation of nature’s resources, without any respect for those resources. Shepard’s perspective here, as in many of his earlier plays, is one of scepticism through psychological tumult, combined with an acknowledgment of the absurd.

In *Silent Tongue*, Shepard’s gothic, dystopian speculations about the future are ultimately impressionistic, Beckettian portrayals of elemental dispossession in a selfish and cruel world, the condition of “unaccommodated man”, the “poor, bare forked animal” of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (III, iv, 109), on a lonely heath but de-contextualized from the grandeur of tragedy and political events. At the conclusion, the nameless, disoriented ‘Lone Man’ – visually recalling Lucky from *Waiting for Godot* – heads west to find “Land”. He pushes a small wooden wheelbarrow across the prairie, having no clear destination in mind but instead “heading determinedly toward oblivion” (167). He could be a lost pioneer, a disenchanted Natty Bumppo or Huckleberry Finn, dispensing with civilization and heading to the horizon. The much-abused horse, a transporter in a colonized land, has vanished. At the conclusion of the play, far from the materialistic world, the lone man, seemingly disconnected from the plot of the film, encounters the exhausted pair of father and son, Prescott and Talbot (202), who do not reply to his simple query “Where to?” as they pass him by, for they too have no particular destination in mind except the one of elemental human survival.

The trajectory of modern American drama may well have found an original footing in O’Neill’s imaginative tradition in the 1920s, with the latter’s acute consciousness of “the force behind”, which he elaborated as “Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it – Mystery certainly.”²² This implied the pursuit of a ‘big subject’, primarily an epic concern that was inherited from the American Renaissance, from Cooper and Melville and the pages of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* as well as from Carl Sandburg’s *Chicago*. It involved the overwhelming energy of the spirit of discovery, cultivation, harvesting across the endless vistas of land, but at the ground level of democracy and freedom. The invocation of freedom at grass-roots level accords Shepard the unprecedented paradigm of the new American Indian female protagonist on the path to liberation beyond her Philomela-like predicament of imposed and absolute silence. In the 1920s, Eugene O’Neill had ushered in a new spirit of confrontation with reality in naturalist and tragic terms, in the wake of the chaos and disruption of the First World

War. Four decades later, Sam Shepard repeated this act, relating the contemporary attributes of drama and cinema into a reconfigured, symbiotic discourse in his repertory that sought to confront the alienating shadows of the Vietnam era with the hopes and convictions that moved beyond the forced silencing of tongues of sons and daughters who had been buried in an untimely manner, denied their cherished homecoming.

[Notes]

- 1 Edward Munch writing about his original inspiration in the painting “The Scream of Nature”, 1893. Quoted by Dr. Noelle Paulson in “Munch, the Scream”.
- 2 In 2012, Munch’s “The Scream” sold at a Sotheby’s auction in London for \$120 million.
- 3 Suzette Elgin’s *Native Tongue* (1984), set in a future dystopian American society in which women have been stripped of their civil rights; a group of women linguists creates a new language for women as an act of protest.
- 4 Poe’s protagonist describes death in the first person: “Oh, horror upon horror! – the ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles... the ship is quivering—oh God! – and going down!” (Edgar Allan Poe, *Ms. Found in a Bottle*); usf.edu/lit2go/147/the-works-of-edgar-allan-poe/5379/ms-found-in-a-bottle/.
- 5 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven” (1845). Shepard seems to be referring directly to Poe’s poem.
- 6 Like Marcellus, the heir apparent/nephew of Emperor Augustus Caesar, found in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*; or the unfair and unnatural denial of burial rites to the dead body of Polyneices, the son of Oedipus, at the behest of King Creon, as punishment for betraying his city of Thebes; and the simultaneous and wrongful ‘burial’ of Antigone in a cave while she is still alive.
- 7 I elaborate on this imagery later in the essay.
- 8 As it was in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*.
- 9 In “How the World was Made: Cheyenne”, *American Indian Mythology*, ed. Alice Marriott & Carol K. Rachlin, Mentor, 1968, p. 43. In Cheyenne mythology, the following is noted regarding the original plan of their creator: “At last Maheo thought to his Power, Why, one animal can take the place of all the others put together, and then he made the buffalo” (43).
- 10 Arthur Kopit, *Indians* (1968); David Mamet, *American Buffalo* (1975).
- 11 Played by the popular musician-actor River Phoenix in his last role before he died in the same year.
- 12 In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, the Chorus and later Clytemnestra refer to Agamemnon’s past act of sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia on the eve of the Trojan War, on the basis of which memory his wife will justify her own act of revenge.

- 13 Literally, the 'heroine who does not exist'.
- 14 It's a coincidence that the Barnum and Bailey Circus was founded in 1871, corresponding with the setting of *Silent Tongue* in 1873.
- 15 We are reminded of one aspect of Greco-Roman epic poems in which the heroes would have to break their journeys to fulfill the funerary obligations of even the most minor characters like Elpenor before proceeding onward to their destinations.
- 16 Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Giradoux's *Elpenor* (1958) foregrounds the power of classical mythopoesis in modern literature. Shepard invests in a mythology of the American frontier.
- 17 Joanna Russ elaborates on the 'difference' that SF explores, basically "anything that is about conditions of life or existence different from either what typically is, or what typically was. SF is about the possible-but-not-real". "Reflections on Science Fiction", in *Building Feminist Theory* (New York: Longman, 1987, 243).
- 18 Reminiscent of the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's SF classic film *The Sacrifice* (1986), which switches from technicolor to monochrome, briefly suggesting a sudden sombre interiority in the protagonist Alexander's dystopic vision of the nuclear holocaust geared to exterminate mankind, including his infant son, "Little Man".
- 19 Nicolas Poussin's painting *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (1634) depicts the legitimization of female abduction by the Romans in their anxiety for the perpetuation of their race.
- 20 Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, was forcibly abducted by Pluto to be his consort in Hades, but he had to compromise with her and accept her staying with him for only half of the year.
- 21 Reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*.
- 22 In O'Neill's letter from Bermuda to Arthur Hobson Quinn, dated April 3, 1925, in *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988, p. 195.

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