

**Sam Shepard's *States of Shock*:
Nihilism in Political Drama**

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"What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism" (Nietzsche 3). Such was Nietzsche's prophecy in *The Will to Power*. According to him, nihilism means the highest values devaluating themselves; aim is lacking and "Why?" finds no answer.

The term nihilism, which, in the beginning, carried basically political connotations, came into prominent use in 1862 with the publication of Turgenev's novel, *Fathers and Sons*. In this novel, Turgenev presented the nihilist to the general reading public as a type of Russian intellectual. The hero of the novel, Bazarov, is a nihilist, "a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in." He claims that "we act by virtue of what we recognize as beneficial . . . At the present time, negation is the most beneficial of all--and we deny Š everything." When his uncle comments, "You deny everything, but one must construct, too, you know," Bazarov answers: "That's not our business now Š The ground wants clearing first" (131). This statement becomes the catch-phrase of the nihilist outlook. At a metaphorical level, "clearing the ground" amounts to questioning, attacking, destroying and sweeping away principles, ideals, beliefs and values which have so far been adopted by faith. According to Nietzsche, "the faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism; we have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world" (13).

Commenting on the German philosopher's nihilistic point of view, Ihab Hassan states that

Nietzsche's perceptions of our moment are nearly preternatural. He recognizes the nihilism in our knowledge, politics, arts; he sees its evidence in vice, addiction, sickness, celibacy, hysteria, anarchy; and he understands how we narcotize ourselves with spite, resignation, fanaticism, even with mysticism or science. (197)

Presenting nihilism as the consequence of a radical disenchantment, the price humanity must pay for its feeble dreams and delusions, for its wishful thinking and hyperbolic naiveté, Nietzsche's thought becomes the key to any reflection on postmodern discourse. He is the father of the dictum, that appears intolerable to many, that nothing has intrinsic value unless one makes sense of it, unless one invests it with meaning. If one fails to do so, one is captive in the hands of that destructive force of modern times--nihilism!

Manifesting itself in various realms (political, moral, cosmic and existential), nihilism may refer either to a well-constructed system of thought or philosophy, or merely to a certain mood, to feelings. In the domain of literature, it is the latter that is usually the case. Sam Shepard, one of the most prominent playwrights of the contemporary American theater, has managed, however, to join together both references of nihilism, the intellectual and the emotional, in his political play *States of Shock*, staged in 1991. The play is actually a product of the Sam Shepard-Joseph Chaikin collaboration, as explained below.

In a letter he sent to Chaikin in 1983, Shepard wrote that he had been pondering the idea of "being lost, of one's identity being shattered under severe personal circumstances--in a state of crisis where everything I've previously identified within myself suddenly falls away." This Pirandellian condition, Shepard called a "shock-state" (qtd. in Day 133). Working together, Chaikin and Shepard dramatized this particular state of the human psyche in all its horror in *The War in Heaven*--a poetic monologue about an angel who dies on the day he is born and who, drifting aimlessly in the afterlife, has lost all sense of personal order and destiny:

I died
the day I was born
and became an Angel
on that day

Since then
there are no days
there is no time
I am here
by mistake
(*The War in Heaven* 155)

The War in Heaven focuses not on the trauma or shock itself but on the "resulting emptiness or aloneness" (Day 133) which ensues. It is based on an extremely personal concept of a "shock-state." The mood that emanates from the misty atmosphere of *The War in Heaven* is a mood of moral, cosmic and existential nihilism. Individual lives as well as the cosmos are utterly devoid of value and meaning. Reminiscent of Schopenhauer's view of the universe as nihilistic, Shepard

and Chaikin speak of the world as a kind of penal colony, or place of punishment and expiation for the crime of being born. Naturally, once the world is seen in this way, the hope of happiness is given up as futile.

In 1991, Shepard and Chaikin came together again to rework *The War in Heaven* for its New York premiere. This time, however, the political climate in the United States was so tense and heated that they must have felt obliged to widen the scope of the personal "shock-state" recounted in that play, to be able to speak for all of postmodern, post-Vietnam America, suddenly at war again. The result was a different and newly inspired reading of *The War in Heaven* by Chaikin at the American Place Theatre and an entirely new play by Sam Shepard. This was the period of the Gulf Crisis; the US had sent its troops to the Persian Gulf and its forces were now bombing Iraq. These current events contributed largely to the creation of *States of Shock*--a topical political play dominated by a nihilistic mood of despair. Similar to what Turgenev does through Bazarov, Shepard "clears the ground" in *States of Shock*. The ground belongs to the United States at the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century.

At the outset, *States of Shock* is a political and philosophical reaction to the American government's military involvement in the Gulf and its invasion of Iraq; it is at the same time a reaction to the American public's complacent attitude towards these events. The play goes on to strip American democracy of its glamour, to present--in all their nakedness--the values on which it is founded.

The play is based on the relationship between an elderly man and a young man who is eventually revealed as his son. As the plot unfolds, the two protagonists assume socio-political dimensions and mythic proportions. The father is a colonel, the archetypal military man. He is a firm believer in the noble myths of war perpetuated by men such as himself. Stubbs, the young man, is a disabled veteran, a martyr figure. The play explores the fragmented nature of reality. According to the story related by the Colonel, Stubbs is a war hero. He tried valiantly to protect the Colonel's son by shielding him with his own body against enemy fire, but the missile went straight through him to kill the son. Stubbs is now partially paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair. The play takes place in a family café. The Colonel brings Stubbs from the hospital for a treat on the anniversary of his son's death. The truth, which is gradually revealed by Stubbs, differs drastically, however, from the Colonel's account. Stubbs is actually the Colonel's son whom he repudiated to protect his own honor. The young man was shot by his own countrymen as he tried to flee from battle, and was abandoned on the field.

Both father and son are victims--victims of the American political system. The father clings tightly to the patriarchal, pre-Vietnam myth of a righteous American military. He cannot bring himself to acknowledge the bankruptcy of those time-worn myths, although the shattered young veteran living the post-Vietnam reality of horror and trauma is his own son. Through his characters, Shepard presents--in a

Nietzschean frame of reference--the hollow core of American socio-politics in the post-Vietnam era and the "narcotizing" dreams or ideals propagated by the "fathers":

Stubbs:

Keep thinking of home. That's the way to pull through this. Fix a picture in your mind. A backyard. A tree house. A better time. Truman, maybe. Straight-Talkin' Harry. Think of station wagons! Country Fairs! Ferris Wheels! Think of canned goods and cotton candy! Home economics. Production lines! The Great Northern Railroad! Think of what we've achieved!

...

It's endless! A River of Victory in all directions! Flooding the Plains! Hold to an image! Lock onto a picture of glorious, unending expansion! Don't let yourself slip into doubt!!! Don't let it happen! You'll be swallowed whole! (38)

States of Shock demonstrates that the teachings of the American "fathers" and the American government present a false picture of things. The Vietnam generation of "sons" (the generation to which Shepard belongs), has lived through the inglorious war and its brutal aftermath. During the Gulf War, however, the horrors of war are carefully avoided by media coverage of the events. In the play, a natural consequence of such an attitude is the indifference of American youth, unequipped to cope with the war. The young waitress in the play, Glory Bee, provides a good example of the innocence of American youth:

The thing I can't get over is, it never occurred to me that Danny's could be invaded. I always thought we were invulnerable to attack. The landscaping. The lightning. The parking lot. All the pretty bushes. Who could touch us? Who would dare?

...

When the first wave of missiles hit us, I kept studying the menu. I thought the menu would save me somehow. The pretty colored photographs of all our specials. The Catfish Dinner. The Chicken-Fried Steak. I worshipped the menu. (41)

As if to awaken the myopic American media and the insensitive public, Stubbs, the disabled veteran, wheels himself first to the white couple sitting in the café, then to the audience, trying to explain himself:

When I was hit there was no sound.

...

I was hit in silence.

...

The middle of me is all dead.

The core. I'm eighty percent mutilated.

The part of me that goes on living has no memory of the parts that are all dead. They've been separated for all time. They'll never have a partner. You're lucky to have a partner. (15)

When Stubbs recalls the battlefield before he was shot, its foreignness is defined in terms of being non-American. Therefore, it was impossible there, in such an alien setting, to hold on to an image of home to "narcotize" oneself:

I was here. Facing the green sea. I was smelling it. Through the smoke. It didn't smell American to me. It smelled like a foreign sea. The birds were not American birds. I wanted to have a feeling for home but nothing called me back. I wanted to have a memory. I prayed for a memory. But nothing came but smoke and the smell of dead fish.

...

America had disappeared. (19, 20)

When Scrubbs screams at the world with all his might: "My thing hangs like dead meat," he is not only referring to his physical impotence but also to the hollow core inside him. The mood is existentially nihilistic: human existence is pointless and absurd; life is riddled with disappointment, frustration and pain.

Stubbs' mood is reminiscent of the lament Shakespeare put on Macbeth's lips:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V)

It is a tone very similar to that of Macbeth's soliloquy, striking a note of existential nihilism and presenting life as utterly devoid of sense and meaning, that permeates *States of Shock*. The Colonel tries desperately to "narcotize" himself with various illusions in order not to fall prey to nihilistic despair. His resolution to proclaim Stubbs as his son, and the happy future he imagines, are all attempts at avoiding the truth:

Stubbs? Are you there? Are you still there? Don't run out on me now. As soon as this is over, I'll take you back. I promise you. I will. I'll make it official. Lock, stock and barrel. It's not too late for that. I'll proclaim it in public. Stubbs? Are you listening? You haven't left me yet? You haven't disappeared? Stubbs! - If you're very good, Stubbs - if you're very very good - I'll buy you two desserts. Anything you want. Hot fudge. Milky Ways. Anything your heart desires. I'll take you to the movies. How 'bout that ? I'll take you to the park. We'll swing. We'll slide. Anything your heart desires. Stubbs? (46)

What creates the situation of existential nihilism in *States of Shock* is the unrelievable tension between the human being's craving to feel at home in the world, on the one hand, and the world's strangeness and bitterness, on the other. Stubbs represents reality in all its strangeness, bitterness and ruthlessness, while all the other characters--the young waitress, the Colonel and the white couple--represent in different ways the desperate attempt to cope with the world. Each is "narcotized" in his/her way to avoid nihilistic despair. The Colonel holds on to

illusions and myths of the past; the waitress is shielded in her naiveté in the sanctuary of Danny's; and finally, the anemic white couple, reverting to extreme egoism and insensitivity to the outside world, confine themselves in their own private cocoon.

The cosmos in *States of Shock* is a godless one, and indifferent or even inimical to human concerns. As Stubbs tries to recall how he was shot, he clearly remembers the absence of God at a time when he needed Him most. His memories take him back to the time before he was shot, when he and a comrade were on the battlefield during intensive bombing around them:

I could feel his spine trembling on my spine. There was nothing we could do about fear. We couldn't talk ourselves out of it. Neither one of us knew how to pray. We had no idea who God was. Who was God? (31)

The Colonel has no ready answer to this question. Saying "we can reconstruct this later" (31), he manages to avoid the intolerable thought that there may indeed be no God. The "non-existence" of God has frequently been associated with nihilism. In *The Specter of the Absurd*, for example, Donald Crosby discusses how often atheism and nihilism come down to the same thing--that the only alternative to belief in God and adherence to traditional Western religious teachings is nihilistic despair (4). A necessary connection between belief in God and the meaning of life is assumed in the same way by Kirillov, a character in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*: "I can't understand how an atheist could know that there is no God and not kill himself on the spot" (582). This is implied as well by Stepan Trofimovitch, another character in the same novel:

The one essential condition of human existence is that man should always be able to bow down before something infinitely great. If men are deprived of the infinitely great, they will not go on living and will die of despair. The Infinite and the Eternal are as essential for man as the little planet on which he dwells. (624)

As already indicated, the cosmos of *States of Shock* is definitely bereft of a God, of an Infinite and Eternal power before whom man can "bow down." If there were indeed such a power, would the universe still be a jumble of discordant events that exhibit no underlying unity, pattern or significance? This is the question the play forces into the mind. In a godless world, in any case, forlorn, abandoned individuals seem to suffer both physically and mentally. It is impossible that human lives--so vulnerable to devastating shocks, sorrows, disappointments and pains--can have any meaning in Shepard's world. He clears the ground of all illusions and "imported" meanings, to use Nietzsche's terminology (327).

Frank Day calls *States of Shock* a play of "nonconclusion" (133). There is indeed no conclusion to the loose plot. The play ends with a song; rhyme, rhythm and music

become an attempt to fill the void. Stubbs, wearing a gas mask, is at one corner of the stage, mumbling: "Long live the enemy!!!" (46). The others are singing:

Sometimes I live in the country
Sometimes I live in the town
Sometimes I have a great notion
To jump into the river and drown
Irene, good night
Irene, good night
Good night, Irene
Good night, Irene
I'll see you in my dreams (46)

This lullaby dulls the spectators' senses, and they are invited to enter that trance-like state of death in life. Shepard's nihilistic rage is directed at this human scene. The prologue he attaches to the play takes on a wider meaning when reread after the play:

You might come here Sunday on a whim. Say your life broke down. You walk these streets laid out by the insane, past hotels that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try of local drivers to accelerate their lives. Only churches are kept up. The jail turned 70 this year. The only prisoner is always in, not knowing what he's done. The principal supporting business now is rage.

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