

Identity and Memory on Both Sides of Claude/Hosanna's Body

Rosanna Vitale
University of Windsor

Rien d'humain ne m'est étranger
Montaigne

To Montaigne's observation that nothing human is strange to him we may add that in modern times nothing on the stage is strange to us. The modern audience is invited to stand in with the actors in identifying with the characters and the dramatic action. We, the spectators, play a vital role as presentiators of the drama. The modern stage has raised the audience's awareness of itself as an essential player in the making of theatre. Association and recall are two of the most efficient tools the audience uses to concretize their sense of identity with that of the characters; characters whose irrepressible past, much like our own, prolongs itself in the present and extends itself into the future¹. Identity as a function of memory is the base upon which this relationship lies.

The question of identity is a multi-faceted, problematic query which is immediately related to the body. The first inkling of a person's identity is knowable through that person's body. A person's history is externalized through the body. We cannot identify a person without identifying that person's body. As Merleau-Ponty points out, we perceive through our bodies. Our senses awaken memory and, as Bergson claims, it is memory that fashions our perception. Our past experiences condition our awareness of the things around us. Because our perception is momentary and because those moments are not devoid of memory, it is not inconceivable that in some circumstances memory might create an illusive present. And, as our body is the carrier of the self, we costume our body to resemble this illusive reality². Because the body is the vehicle that carries our reality, it is therefore vital to identity. The body is also the background against which we play our drama.

The body as representative of the self, whose identity is shaded with memory and present and future time, may and usually does present a dilemma. The character who best embodies the travails of this journey is the protagonist of Michel Tremblay's homonymous play, *Hosanna*. In effect, he manages three identities: as Claude (when he dresses as a man), his habitual identity, he is a homosexual hairdresser by day; in the evening he dons the apparel of Hosanna (as the cabaret singer, woman), fancying herself a femme fatale of sorts³; and finally he plays Elizabeth Taylor/Cleopatra (a projection or unfolding of Hosanna). The climax of Hosanna's comedy of masques occurs one particular evening when she attends a soirée in the guise of Elizabeth Taylor in the role of Cleopatra⁴.

The body's role as signifier of the self is able to render one performance at a time. Tremblay's Hosanna, much like Pirandello's Enrico IV and Lorca's Director/Enrique⁵, demonstrates how the body and the self are not always exact mirror images. These characters adapt their bodies to their selves. They seek to express themselves through their bodies not only as they wish others to see them, but, more importantly, how they must see themselves.

Our bodies are pivotal in the world. We know the existence of other objects because we can walk around them, contemplate them with our bodies. If our bodies are in any way altered or masqued, this relationship we have with the things of the world is also modified. In other words, the world makes us aware of our difference. As we shall see, refuge behind the masque can be futile as the masque is an agent of both camouflage and disclosure.

Hosanna, Enrico IV, and the Director fashion their bodies to accommodate their alternate identities. This fashioning gives rise to the ambiguity between their *habitual* bodies and their *present* bodies. The body, the vessel of the self, is no longer an integral unit. Hosanna reveals the fragmentation that is inherent in the confusion of the identity of the body as self when the self, forced to live in contradiction to the habitual body and assaulted by memory, is now a divided entity. The result is an irresolvable juxtaposition between the internal self and the external body.

While the chasm between the internal identity and the external body may be wide, the two are not divorced from each other. The habitual body and the present body are rooted in the same quagmire of experience. It must be noted that the present body does not proceed from the habitual body. It is rather another expression of its coveted identity. In our context, the present body incarnates the alter ego.

In Tremblay's play, the character Claude/Hosanna is very aware of the dialectical relationship between what he is and what he seems and the chiasmus between his self and his alter ego. The self is aware of the presence of the other. The two are interwoven, taking from or encroaching on each other. Claude and Hosanna, the self and the other, the habitual body and the present body are unlikely bedfellows, however. Their co-existence is faulty, unevenly woven. Claude's present body (Hosanna) inspires ridicule for his habitual body. In other words, masqued as Hosanna, Claude does not fit well into her world. He fails at concretizing Hosanna.

The ultimate attempt at becoming and not just seeming female lies in Claude's insistence on being addressed as Hosanna⁶. To Claude the name Hosanna affirms his present self, the identity he has chosen. The

habitual body does not disappear behind the present **body**. As the apparel itself, the name remains on the outside, much as a prop. The invocation of the feminine name is not sufficient to **bridge** the existential distance between Claude and his other. The name **much** like the identity is not inscribed in Claude's flesh. It remains separate; it is never assimilated. The name Hosanna is a sign of the irreversible in Claude, of the otherness that will always remain objectified.

Characters seek visibility, to be seen and to see: to **witness** their audience seeing them, perceiving and believing in **their external identity** as the embodiment of their reality. The audience's acceptance of this exterior reinforces the characters' identity with their **appearance**. Characters and audience must co-exist. The theatre, Bruce Wilshire claims, is: "*The art of involvement and standing in, (it) involves us most intensely and enduringly when it deals explicitly with problems of standing in or involvement*⁷." That we, the audience, enable the character to stand in for us in the drama is a very intimidating state of **affairs** as it results in our forcibly gaining insight into our own identity **and** the shocking realization that our masque, as that of the characters, is a refuge from the reality we cannot live and consequently attempt to hide not only from our own audience but, more pertinently, from ourselves. "Woe to him who doesn't know how to wear his masque, be he king or Pope," cautions Pirandello in the voice of Enrico IV.

Claude is uncomfortable under his masque. He does not convince his audience/friends at the soirée. They mock him refusing his masque as monstrous in its transparency. Claude fools no one, not even himself. Hosanna is not strong enough a character to cause the audience to suspend disbelief, to identify with her, to accept her as a viable reality.

In order for the body to successfully perform the other, it must not view it as an object. The body must subjectify the other and fully integrate it into itself as subject. The body itself does not suffer change. It remains constant. Claude can never integrate Hosanna's identity into his own. Being Hosanna has become an object of his desire. Hosanna remains on the outside. The chiasmus between Hosanna and Claude is woven from the threads of Claude's homosexuality and those of Hosanna's feminine guiles in attracting males⁸. These are two elements of Claude's reality that engender the conflict in the **tragicomedy** that is his life.

Claude's disjointed sense of identity has been long entrenched in his memory. A small-town misfit who sees in Montréal the possibility of realizing his dreams, Claude lives in two realities, better said, two solitudes⁹. The homosexual Claude who was singled out in the small town fails again as Hosanna when she faces the crowd as she is scrutinized on stage during the soirée. Her performance of Cleopatra is

not convincing just as Claude's performance of Hosanna is taunted by his lover, Cuirette. Claude's every attempt at reinventing his body results in appearing grotesque. He is a misfit among misfits. Each memory evoked through the donning of his masque recalls the past and plunges him into the same experience that he is ill-prepared to face but from which he is disempowered to disengage himself. Caught in this existential impasse, Hosanna seeks to obliterate the *real world* and fabricate for herself a magical reality. Magic as a mode of existence is deficient and therefore causes Hosanna's "world of papier mâché" to collapse.

Pirandello cautions that the human character does not possess the "consistency, coherence and knowability" it has always thought to be an integral part of itself. The unreliable, piecemeal nature of memory is partly to blame for the self's inconsistencies. As Jean Gebser points out, memory provides the ego with awareness and this is part of what gives us our sense of identity. As memory is time-bound it freezes certain settings and replays them continuously, providing a false sense of concretion. The search for identity that Tremblay's, Lorca's and Pirandello's characters undertake is at once accessible and obfuscated through memory. Their body memory is an unreliable source for their identity.

Tremblay's Hosanna is the most effective exponent of the dilemma of body as self. Hosanna is skewered between her male body and her feminine identity. As Claude, she possesses a male body which every evening is made to "appear" as a female body always retaining evidence of its contrasting identity. At a very poignant moment in the play, after returning from her ill-fated evening as Cleopatra, Hosanna is at her make-up table, the altar where the transubstantiation fails to take place. Her make-up is still intact, but she has lowered her gown half way down her body revealing her masculine attributes. Hosanna's body makes her appear laughable, distorted¹⁰. It is the beginning of the end. And Hosanna is painfully aware of this. No longer feasible, her make-believe world is succumbing to the light of quotidian reality. Hosanna has begun to reflect upon herself and what she sees is the fading away of her alter ego.

Dramatic tension escalates as Hosanna vents her rage about her false friends deriding her during what she expected to be her moment of glory. The tragedy of her appearance is further intensified when Hosanna must admit to herself that her audience were all more convincing Cleopatras in their more beautiful and convincing costumes and make-up. Ignored at the entrance to the partyroom she felt as though she were falling through a black hole. Her investment in the evening left her bankrupt. Now Hosanna, the woman, the present body, is floating in nothingness. The

habitual body, Claude, rises to the rescue and reclaims his identity. This marks a turning point in the play. The character is bursting through the masque of his alter ego. It is precisely on the stage that Hosanna stops seeming and becomes a man anew. The following speech reveals the conscious decision Hosanna made to regain herself:

...j'me sus dit: 'Cleopatre est un gros tas de marde! Elisabeth Taylor est un gros tas de marde! Tu l'as voulu, ton gros tas de marde Hosanna-de-Saint-Eustache, ben le v'là, ton gros tas de marde!...'j'étais pus Cleopatre, cibole, j'étais Samson! Oui, Samson! Pis j'ai toute démolie mes décors en papier mâché! J'savais pas que vous m'haissiez tant que ça...Chus t'un homme, Cuirette! Si j'me sus sauvée, Cuirette, c'est parce que chus pas une femme...Va falloir que tu t'habitues à ça, aussi...¹¹
(Act II)

The present body, the masque, didn't hold. Samson, the symbol of virility and vulnerability, (the male), won the day as he tore down the pillars that supported Hosanna's ephemeral world. It was not the woman Hosanna, the illusion, who saved Claude from the nihilism of her existence. It was Claude, the man, the habitual body who rescued himself from the ravages of the illusion.

The tragedy of characters like Hosanna, Enrico IV, and the Director¹² lies in their attempt to concretise what is in continuous flux. Their roles are forever changing: a way of coping with the unliveable realities stored in their memory. We, the audience, learn through these characters that the masques we devise for ourselves are temporary and fleeting as reality itself. "Masks, masks... A puff of wind and they ¹³pass and make way for others." Pirandello's wisdom seems the only feasible reality.

The masque is a reasoned accommodation to a situation where truth, albeit its relative nature, is not a possibility. Our memory, where our "truths" are lodged, does not supply us with the mechanisms necessary to create the veneer under which we may hide our unliveable reality. Modern theatre dissects this phenomenon. The age-old adage that the world is a stage is sublimated into our collective memory, making it quasi-automatic for us to find refuge in performance. The fragmented nature of our memory and the uneasy alliance between our habitual body and our present body vitiate our performance, however. Our efforts in concretising and expressing ourselves fold themselves into our memory and so the process becomes part of the result making us both the creators and the main characters of our own mythology.

References

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Endnotes

1. Bergson's idea of *durée* surfaces here.
2. As does Pirandello's *Enrico IV*. Once awakened from his "madness" he consciously dons the robes of the king in order to "fit" into his present illusion.
3. Hosanna refers to herself in the feminine throughout the play.
4. It is important to note that Hosanna wishes to imitate Elizabeth Taylor imitating Cleopatra. This event illustrates that here we are dealing with mimesis and not becoming. What impedes Claude in becoming Hosanna (and thus Elizabeth Taylor) is his body which cannot become female regardless of the efficacy of the masque in creating the illusion.
5. Of course, we refer to Pirandello's *Enrico IV* and Lorca's *The Public*.
6. While Claude is still disguised as Hosanna, his lover, Cuirette, mistakingly addresses him by his masculine name. Claude's retort is very poignant: "J'm'appelle Hosanna".
7. Bruce Wilshire. *Role Playing and Identity*. p.43.
8. Hosanna's coquettish nature brings her ridicule and reprimand from Cuirette.
9. Here one can easily draw a comparison between Canada (the habitual body) unable to accommodate Québec (the present body) who is the object of desire. As such, it is placed opposite the subject and, consequently, can never be assimilated.
10. Symbolically, Hosanna is struggling to get out of her gown and her dead-end situation. She finds her appearance as part man and part woman ridiculous. Her speech is a very succinct summary of the two identities which assail her.
"Chus ridicule quand chus deguisée en homme...Puis chus ridicule quand chus poignée comme ça entre les deux, avec ma tête de femme, pis mon corps...."
(I am ridiculous when I am disguised as a man...And I am ridiculous when I am skewered like this between the two, with my female head and my body....) My translation.
11. "I told myself: 'Cleopatra is a big heap of shit. Elizabeth Taylor is a big heap of shit. You wanted it your big heap of shit, Hosanna-from-Saint-Eustache, well, there you have it your big heap of shit...I was no longer Cleopatra, damn it, I was Samson! Yes, Samson! And I took down all my decors in papier mâché. All of you have

demolished my papier mâché life! I didn't know you all hated me so much...I'm a man...If I have saved myself, Cuirette, it's because I am not a woman. You're going to have to get used to that, too.... (My translation.)

^{12.} Enrico IV and the Director/Enrique both reach the conclusion that it is impossible to carry an illusive identity convincingly at all times. At one point the masque becomes too heavy an ordeal. The present body is not integral or concrete enough to withstand the efforts of the habitual body to regain itself.

¹³