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Tennessee Williams' "Plastic Theatre": an
examination of contradiction

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PhD

January 2013

Keele University

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a new reading of Tennessee Williams which enables his work to be seen as a cohesive dramaturgy which challenges realist and liberal notions of dramatic space, identity, and time. It examines the biographical and historical origins of 'plastic theatre', and the aesthetic and philosophical implications of this crucial term. This thesis analyses the development and hardening of Williams' reputation during the 1940s and 1950s as a realist (or 'failed' realist) playwright through an examination of contemporary reviews and the work of literary critics such as Raymond Williams and Christopher Bigsby. The thesis argues that the critical reception of Williams during these decades was inflected by biographical readings which pathologised Williams and his work from the perspective of 'straight' realism. It considers more recent critical re-evaluations of Williams' work: including those of David Savran, Annette Saddik and Linda Dorff. These re-evaluations, and Williams' work as a whole, are seen in the cultural, political and historical contexts of the 1950s and 1960s, which saw the development of the notion that the 'personal is political' and a major shift in the 'structure of feeling'. The thesis goes on to develop a new theoretical perspective on Williams' work which draws on the philosophical work of G.W.R. Hegel's views on contradiction and his analysis of the master/slave relationship, W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of veiling and Malcolm Bull's theories of hiddenness. This new perspective is employed in extended close readings of early successful plays (*The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*) as well as the more problematic later plays (*Camino Real*, *The Two Character Play*, *The Remarkable-Rooming House of Mme Le*

Monde, I Can't Imagine Tomorrow and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*). The final chapter makes use of Gérard Genette's theories of narratology to explore the plasticity of time in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*.

List of Abbreviations

<i>CCQ</i>	David Savran, <i>Communists, Cowboys, and Queers</i>
<i>CIT2</i>	C.W.E. Bigsby, <i>A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama</i> , Volume 2
<i>CS</i>	Raymond Williams, <i>Culture and Society</i>
<i>DIB</i>	Raymond Williams, <i>Drama from Ibsen to Brecht</i>
<i>Enc</i>	G.W.R. Hegel, <i>Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences</i>
<i>LR</i>	Raymond Williams, <i>The Long Revolution</i>
<i>MAD</i>	Raymond Williams, <i>Modern American Drama</i>
<i>Met</i>	Aristotle, <i>The Metaphysics</i>
<i>MT</i>	Raymond Williams, <i>Modern Tragedy</i>
<i>PL</i>	Raymond Williams, <i>Politics and Letters</i>
<i>PR</i>	Annette Saddik, <i>The Politics of Reputation</i>
<i>RRH</i>	Tennessee Williams, <i>The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme Le Monde</i>
<i>TTW</i>	Tennessee Williams, <i>The Theatre of Tennessee Williams</i>
<i>ToT</i>	Kenneth Tynan, <i>Tynan on Theatre</i>
<i>WT</i>	Eric Bentley, <i>What is Theatre?</i>

Introduction

In the last twenty years there has been a resurgence of interest in Tennessee Williams' work which has prompted a re-examination not only of the earlier and more well-known plays but also of later work including, in some cases, his prose writings. Though Williams' plays have been consistently performed since the success of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, it has been productions of his successful early plays that have predominated. Gunn lists over 300 productions of Williams' plays from his earliest work until 1990.¹ However, just seven plays, written during Williams' most successful period, from a repertoire of over 70, account for nearly half of these productions: *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), 46 productions; *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1945), 31 productions; *Summer and Smoke* (1947), 17 productions; *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), 13 productions; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), 16 productions; *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1956), 13 productions; and *The Night of The Iguana* (1959), 10 productions. Williams' later work (from the early 1960s through to the 1980s) was poorly received and largely ignored by literary critics before 1990.

Those critics who did write about Williams during this period, such as Roger Boxhill and Christopher Bigsby, tended to concentrate on examining Williams' earlier successes rather

¹ In *Tennessee Williams: A Bibliography*, Gunn chronicles in detail the major productions, and many less obvious ones, but his list is not exhaustive, and does not include productions after 1990.

than his current work.² Those critics who did comment on Williams' later output written after 1960 were largely negative.³ After the Broadway production of *Night of the Iguana* (1959), Williams' plays were performed in smaller, more avant-garde theatres on Off- and Off-Off- Broadway – yet even here his work failed to make a mark. Williams' early success, and the view of him as a realist playwright that followed from that success, dominated critical analysis until the 1990s. However, as I shall argue, critics such as Boxhill and Bigsby, who see Williams' plays as realistic or romantic, do not merely place Williams in inappropriate genres, but offer fundamental and symptomatic mis-readings of Williams' innovative 'plastic' theatre, the rationale and purpose of which is set out in the Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Though Williams only directly refers to 'plastic' theatre on a couple of occasions, the aspirations, motivation and techniques set out in the Production Notes inform his entire dramaturgy. In challenging the reading of Williams as a realistic dramatist I have examined the nature of plastic theatre, its philosophical underpinnings in the work of Hegel, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Malcolm Bull and in Hans Hofmann's aesthetic notions of plasticity. In so doing I have developed a new interpretive model which views Williams' work as a cohesive canon.

After 1990, however, attitudes towards Williams and his work changed. In the US, his work is now celebrated at several festivals, most notably at the Tennessee Williams Festival in

² Steven Stanton's *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1977) exceptionally contains several essays which deal with later and lesser known works.

³ Henry Hewes, reviewing *Small Craft Warnings*, in the *Saturday Review* (22 April 1972) described it as 'a play about small people, who, unlike the impressive sailfish mounted over the bar, have never sailed an inch in their lives'. Julius Novick described *The Two-Character Play* as 'an annoying, pretentious, slightly maudlin piece of work, but I found it impossible to dismiss it entirely: there is something haunting about it' (*Village Voice*, 8 March 1973).

New Orleans, which began in 1986, and the Tennessee Williams Provincetown Festival, which began in 2006.⁴ In the UK the National Theatre produced *The Night of the Iguana* (1992), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1994), *Not About Nightingales* (1998) and *The Rose Tattoo* (2007) and the Royal Shakespeare Company produced *Camino Real* (1998). In the last few years there have been a number of productions of Williams in the UK, in both mainstream and fringe theatre: as well as *The Rose Tattoo*, *The Glass Menagerie* (three productions), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (two productions), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (two productions including one with an all-black cast), and *Suddenly Last Summer*, there have also been productions of the lesser known *Period of Adjustment*, *Small Craft Warnings*, *Spring Storm*, *Moonies Kids Don't Cry*, *This Property is Condemned*, *Auto Da Fé*, *Kingdom of Earth* and *The Two-Character Play*.

The interest in performing Tennessee Williams' plays has been matched by considerable critical interest in his work. This criticism is notable for its focus on Williams' lesser-known plays and other writing, and for introducing new perspectives on his work. In 1992 David Savran published *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* in which he examined notions of masculinity in Williams' plays and prose writing. Savran's cultural and sexual focus represents a major critical departure from the realistic or romantic readings of earlier critics. In 1999, Annette Saddik – *The Politics of Reputation* – and Linda Dorff – 'Theatricalist Cartoons: Tennessee Williams' Late "Outrageous" Plays' – placed Williams' late plays within a European

⁴ Of these two major festivals, only Provincetown emphasises performing Williams' plays, including little known work. New Orleans has become a broader based literary festival and its few productions of Williams' plays concentrate on the better-known works.

theatrical context, tracing in particular similarities with expressionism.⁵ Developing the work of these later critics, I argue that the ‘private’ tragedies of Tennessee Williams’ characters – Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tom, Laura and Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, Maggie and Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* – are the tragedies of individuals repressed in roles determined by society for the benefit of its dominant members, and are not ‘private’ tragedies at all but political ones.

The post-1990 critical reaction and particularly the publication of Savran’s work has extended the parameters within which we view Tennessee Williams and in this thesis I have built on this work to reassess Williams’ plastic theatre. I have explored the provenance of plasticity and the early literary influences on Williams’ career and the importance of both to Williams’ dramaturgy. I have used this analysis of plasticity and its philosophical origins to develop a new interpretive model that explores the plastic concepts of contradiction and duality in Williams’ plays, particularly as they relate to notions of identity.

This thesis is structured somewhat differently from the traditional format in that it has no one chapter devoted to a literature review, but rather traces the chronology of critical assessment in relation to Williams’ developing dramaturgy over several chapters. The choice of plays is also designed to show the breadth and development of Williams’ plays, albeit with an emphasis on the later, lesser known, works. *The Glass Menagerie* is a necessary starting point in

⁵ Williams’ publishers, New Directions, recognised the renewed interest and in 2005 published a collection of Williams’ early plays, *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays*, edited by Nicholas Moschovakis and David Roessel. In 2008 they issued a collection of previously unpublished late plays, *The Travelling Companion and Other Plays*, edited by Annette Saddik, and also the 1982 play, *The House Not Meant to Stand*.

understanding both Williams' rationale of plastic theatre and how that was distorted by the play's original production. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is probably Williams' best-known play, and is included in order to demonstrate its hitherto unacknowledged plastic elements. The other plays that I discuss represent a range of neglected later work, chosen because they demonstrate Williams' differing handling of plastic themes and the corresponding differing use of aspects of plastic technique.

In Section One I examine the origins of 'plastic theatre' and its relation to avant-garde art and Hegelian concepts of plasticity. I follow with a detailed analysis of *The Glass Menagerie* in which I challenge the established view of the play and examine the previously ignored anti-realism of its plastic elements. I then discuss how early productions and the theatrical reviewers of those productions cast Williams as a 'realistic dramatist', which led to a fundamental misreading of Williams. I conclude this section by analysing and challenging the work of critics of this approach. In Section Two, I consider the work of later critics engaged in major re-evaluations of Williams' work and the cultural and historical context of those re-evaluations. I then propose a new perspective on Williams' drama and develop an interpretive model that examines the role of contradiction, duality and hiddenness in plastic theatre, drawing on the work of philosophers such as Hegel, W.E.B. Du Bois and Malcolm Bull. I conclude this section with a re-evaluation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that uses this new model to examine issues of identity in that play. In the final section of the thesis, Section Three, I use my new interpretive model in a series of close readings of plays from 1953 to 1982. *Camino Real* is the first of the later plays, despite being written in 1953, and shows Williams' early use of sustained anti-

realism. *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* (1966) is an unusually delicate play, which nonetheless deals with familiar Williams' themes demonstrating yet another aspect of plastic theatre. *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) with its artistic references brings us full circle to Hofmann's notions of plasticity and is an advanced example of plastic staging. *The Two-Character Play* (1975), with its sustained metatheatricality, is one of Williams' most plastic, and consequently, most difficult plays. *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1979) and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980) both explore the plasticity of time in their challenge to conventional notions of sequential chronologies, and here I use Gérard Genette's narratological theory in order to analyse Williams' manipulation and deconstruction of time. *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde* (1982) is a rare example of Williams' comedy, and having been written for a select audience, shows Williams working in a freer, more playful mode.

The plays selected for detailed analysis, both in Section Three and earlier, were chosen not to demonstrate a chronologically linear development of Williams' dramaturgy, for I will argue that there is no straight trajectory of development in his work. Rather they were chosen to illustrate and illuminate the idea that the concepts of plasticity, duality and contradiction are entwined and present in work from all periods of Williams' writing

Section One

Influences, Perceptions and Prejudices: The Forming of a Reputation

1940-1960

Chapter 1

Provincetown: The Beginnings of Plastic Theatre and Tennessee Williams' Anti-realism

Williams first play – *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* – was produced in 1935, in a back garden in Memphis, but his first major success was *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). This heralded a new departure in American drama and contained the following production notes:

Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent, or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.⁶

This was Williams' professional manifesto and the most comprehensive statement of intent and method in the development of plastic theatre. Williams rarely used the term 'plastic theatre', but the plastic elements mentioned here are seen not only in *The Glass Menagerie* but are developed in his subsequent work as well, including, as I will argue, those deemed his most 'realistic'.⁷ The production notes therefore merit close attention in order to understand the complexity of what Williams sought to achieve and how he attempted to realise those aspirations in the productions of his plays. I shall first explore the influences underlying 'plastic' theatre, placing Williams' unique term within an intellectual and historical framework.

⁶ Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, p. 131.

⁷ Williams refers to 'plastic theater' in his essay 'Person – to – Person' in *Where I Live*, p. 78.

In 1940, Tennessee Williams enrolled in Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research in New York and the following summer went to Provincetown for the first time. This was to prove a pivotal point in Williams' artistic and personal development. Both experiences were artistically significant, providing exposure to the avant-garde of 1930s and 1940s art and theatre. Also it was in Provincetown that Williams experienced the pleasures and pain of his first real love affair. Erwin Piscator – an influential figure in theatre who had been Brecht's mentor in Germany – believed in a theatre devoted to economic, political and social themes. Williams came into conflict with him in 1942, when Piscator was considering staging *Battle of Angels* (1940). Piscator described it as:

a Fascist play – all your characters are selfishly pursuing their little personal ends and aims in life with a ruthless disregard for the wrongs and sufferings of the world about them.⁸

In *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopaedia*, Michael Paller writes that Piscator demanded that Williams rewrite the play as epic theatre, 'depicting the South as a fascist state and the protagonists as freedom fighters'.⁹ After an initial attempt, Williams refused to alter the play further, commenting to Audrey Wood: 'A man that lacking in humor is not for me to deal with' (p. 77). The clash of personality and artistic ideology was inevitable given how Williams' thinking on plastic theatre was to develop and Piscator's belief in the supremacy of the director's vision, which, as Leverich describes, 'relegated the playwright to the status of

⁸ David Kaplan quotes this in *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown* (see p. 76) from a letter from Williams to his agent, Audrey Wood. The relevant letter is not included in *The Selected Letters* so it is Kaplan's reference that is given here.

⁹ *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopaedia*, p. 193.

any other theatre craftsperson'.¹⁰ Williams did however assist on Piscator's 1942 production of *War and Peace*, in which Piscator used projected images and film clips in an innovative cinematic style of theatre, devices and techniques that Williams later used in *The Glass Menagerie*. According to Paller, Piscator later claimed that his approach influenced Williams to abandon the traditional three-act drama for a more 'fluid form of construction'.¹¹

The New School also provided Williams with a rich vein of theatrical influence.¹² Audrey Wood had encouraged him to enrol in the Playwrights' Seminar, arranging \$1000 funding from a Rockefeller grant to enable him to do so. The seminar ran under the auspices of Piscator's Dramatic Workshop sponsored by such people as Eddie Dowling, who later directed and starred in *Glass Menagerie*, and Elmer Rice, who pioneered the use of 'flashback' on stage in *On Trial* (1914) and was as well known and respected as O'Neill in the 1920s and 1930s. Arthur Miller also enrolled for the Playwright Seminar and Dowling and Rice, along with playwrights such as S.N. Behrman, Clifford Odets, Marc Connelly and Robert E. Sherwood all gave master classes and workshops during this period. Theresa Helburn, a producer with The Theatre Guild, chaired the seminar and was later involved in the Guild's ill-fated production of *Battle of Angels* (December 1940), which closed early to disastrous reviews, prompting the Guild to write to its subscribers apologising for including the play in its schedules. Helburn and Lawrence Langner, founder of the Guild, make an unflattering appearance as Celeste and Maurice Fiddler in Williams' 1979 play, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, which is set in the

¹⁰ Leverich, Tom: *The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, p. 346.

¹¹ *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopaedia*, p. 193.

¹² I am indebted for information on the New School both to Kaplan's *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown* and Kramer's entry in *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopaedia*.

summer of 1940. John Gassner also ran seminars at New School and Williams wrote to him for advice about possible revisions to *Battle of Angels*. Gassner was later to teach Marlon Brando, who subsequently became Williams' actor of choice. Williams left New School to spend the summer of 1940 in Provincetown, where he would work on the script of *Battle of Angels* as well as on other plays. Williams describes the need for a new and radical approach to theatre using the unique term and concept of 'plastic theatre'. It has its roots, however, in the Provincetown-based art movement that Williams encountered in 1940. In "'The Sculptural Drama': Tennessee Williams' Plastic Theatre', Richard E. Kramer describes Williams' involvement with the artistic community of Provincetown.¹³ Amongst Williams' friends and acquaintances were the artists Jackson Pollock and his wife Lee Krasner, but a more significant influence on the development of 'plastic theatre', was Hans Hofmann, who ran a summer art school where Williams' lover, Kip Kiernan, modelled. Kramer argues that it was Hofmann's theory of plasticity in art that prompted Williams to develop the concept of plastic theatre.

Hans Hofmann uses the term 'plastic' in 'The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts' (1948) to describe his attempts to develop an art form that was capable of portraying a reality that conventional art was failing to do.¹⁴ Hofmann's theory of plasticity is itself a development of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, a term adopted by Mondrian at the turn of the century to describe his new art. In 'Neo-Plasticism in Pictorial Art', Mondrian explains plastic art as follows:

¹³ Kramer, "'The Sculptural Drama': Tennessee Williams's Plastic Theatre', *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, 5 (2002), <http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org>

¹⁴ Hans Hofmann, 'The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts', *Search for The Real*.

As a pure representation of the human mind, art will express itself in an aesthetically purified, that is to say, abstract form [...] the new plastic idea cannot therefore take the form of a natural or concrete representation [...] this new plastic idea will ignore the particulars of appearance, that is to say, natural form and colour.¹⁵

Yet the concept of 'plasticity' extends beyond Hofmann's concept of the visual arts and its meaning as a malleable form and an abstract entity is older than his use. In *The Future of Hegel*, Catherine Malabou explains that the word derives from the Greek 'to model' or 'mould', and the substantive French and English terms "'plasticity" and *plasticité* and their German equivalent, *Plastizität*, entered the language in the eighteenth century'.¹⁶ Malabou states that 'Plasticity's native land is the field of art' and Hegel uses the term frequently in his discussions of art in his *Aesthetics* (1835), particularly in relation to sculpture, which he defines as 'the plastic art par excellence'.¹⁷ Hegel relates his idea of plasticity not only to art but to individual personality and philosophy as well. He describes certain 'exemplary' and 'substantial' figures in Greek history as 'plastic characters', who 'are great, and free, grown independently on the soil of their own inherently substantial personality, self-made, and developing into what they (essentially) were and wanted to be' (*Aesthetics* II, p. 719). This description has much in common with Williams' 'fugitive' and outsider characters, such as Val in *Orpheus Descending*, Kilroy in *Camino Real*, Mark in *In the Bar of A Tokyo Hotel*, and even Tom in *Glass Menagerie*. Malabou also argues that Hegel's idea of 'plasticity' is fundamental

¹⁵ This quotation is taken from the definition of Neo-Plasticism in Tate Online, <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition>. Mondrian's essay was originally published in the first eleven issues of *De Stijl*. (1917-1918).

¹⁶ Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Volume 2, p. 709.

to his philosophy, demanding and describing an innovative flexibility in philosophical argument:

Only a philosophical exposition that rigidly excludes the usual way of relating the parts of a proposition could achieve the goal of plasticity.¹⁸

Hegel's insistence that the philosophical search for truth is dependent on rejecting the usual form of argument in favour of plasticity is reflected in Williams' rejection of 'the theatre of realistic conventions' in the Production Notes (p. 131). This is the same idea which underpins Williams' belief that conventional ways of seeing and portraying reality obscure a deeper reality. Hegel's concepts of 'plastic' and 'plasticity', embracing as they do, art, identity and the search for truth (philosophy), are closer to Williams' concept of plastic theatre than Hofmann's more limited use of the idea in relation to art.

The concept of plasticity representing an abstraction beyond reality predates and probably influenced Hofmann's use of the term. Despite this, I have been unable to trace a direct reference to Hegel, or other users of 'plasticity', by Williams beyond that mentioned in *The Parade* (see later in this chapter).¹⁹ As Kramer argues, it seems probable that it was primarily through Hofmann that Williams encountered the concept of plasticity, going on to develop it and apply it to theatre. Although Hofmann describes plasticity specifically in terms of the visual arts, there are several points where Hofmann's thoughts resonate with Williams' own thinking:

¹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 39.

¹⁹ I return to the significance of Hegel in Williams' work in greater detail in Chapter 7. My point here is merely to trace the evolution of 'plasticity' as a term and Williams' exposure to it.

A thought that has found plastic expression must continue to expand in keeping with its own plastic idiom. A plastic idea must be expressed with plastic means just as a musical idea is expressed with musical means, or a literary idea with verbal means.²⁰

Hofmann's concept is translated and reflected in Williams' multimedia approach to his drama and his refusal to limit the dramatic expression of his themes to mere dialogue or action. His attempts to incorporate music, lighting, movement and paratextual devices, (for example, the screen devices in *Glass Menagerie*) are all designed to preserve and promote the plasticity of the drama and move it beyond the conventional expressions of reality. Williams' view of the importance of these elements is made clear in a letter written in July 1948 to Eric Bentley, in which Williams takes issue with the critic's failure to understand the plastic elements of his plays. Williams criticises Bentley's

lack of respect for the extra verbal or non-literary elements of the theatre, the various plastic elements, the purely visual things such as light and movement and color and design, which play, for example, such a tremendously important part in theatre such as Lorca's and which are as much a native part of drama as words and ideas are. I don't believe you are guilty of this but I have read criticism in which the use of transparencies and music, subtle lighting effects, which are often as meaningful as pages of dialogue, were dismissed as 'cheap tricks and devices'. Actually all of these plastic things are as valid instruments of expression in the theatre as words, and needless to say, they add immeasurably to the general appeal.²¹

This letter is a rare example of Williams returning to discuss the concept of plastic theatre and amplifies and reinforces the ideas expressed in the production notes to *The Glass*

²⁰ Hofmann, 'Search for the Real', p. 40.

²¹ Williams, *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*, Volume 2, p. 203.

Menagerie. Here Williams defends his own use of plastic elements and links the devices of plastic theatre to European drama in his reference to Lorca.²²

In *Search for the Real* Hofmann defines the surreal in art as a force whose 'nature is something beyond physical reality' (p. 40), a phrase which echoes Williams' 'other forms than those which merely present in appearance'.²³ It is this ability to transcend the physical that Hofmann identifies as enabling surrealism and plasticity to portray a deeper reality:

The relative meaning of two physical facts in an emotionally controlled relation always creates the phenomenon of a third fact of a higher order, just as two musical sounds, heard simultaneously create the phenomenon of a third, fourth or fifth [...] Each such phenomenon always overshadows the material qualities and the limited meaning of the basic factors from which it has sprung. For this reason Art expresses the highest quality of the spirit when it is surreal in nature; or, in terms of the visual arts, when it is of a surreal plastic nature. (p. 41)²⁴

In other words, plasticity in art reveals a hidden dimension, Hofmann's 'third fact of a higher order', by the imaginative juxtaposition of mere 'physical facts'. I would argue that this applies not only to the narrow definition of visual arts but also to the term in its wider application, including drama. For Hofmann this surrealism introduces a spiritual quality that non-plastic art lacks. Hofmann's focus on surreal elements and spirituality is reflected in Williams' desire to portray 'reality [...] through changing [it] into other forms than those which

²² Federico Garcia Lorca, a significant figures in modern Spanish literature, is best known for his trilogy *Bodas de sangre*, *YERMA*, and *La Casa de Bernardo Alba*, experimental plays that were deliberate counters to realist drama. He was executed by Nationalist partisans in 1936.

²³ Williams, The Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, p. 131.

²⁴ I have marked my ellipses and insertions in quotations throughout within[...]. Ellipses and insertions in the original text quoted are left as in the original.

were merely present in appearance'.²⁵ For both Hofmann and Williams, art has a magic element, a quality that transcends the mundane:

Art is magic. So say the surrealists. But how is it magic? In its metaphysical development? Or does some final transformation culminate in a magic reality? In truth, the latter is impossible without the former. If creation is not magic the outcome cannot be magic. To worship the product and ignore its development leads to dilettantism and reaction. Art cannot result from sophisticated, frivolous or superficial effects.²⁶

The importance of the relation between magic, illusion and reality is also signalled at the beginning of *The Glass Menagerie* when Tom Wingfield, the autobiographically-based narrator, states:

Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. (p. 144)

Both Hofmann and Williams see the magic of the creative process as a challenging business whose purpose is to reveal greater truth and understanding. The point of plastic art and theatre is to achieve this with greater success and honesty than the realistic representations that preceded them. This theme permeates Williams' drama in both form and content, from the lighting of *The Glass Menagerie* to the anguished creativity of Mark in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (see Chapter 11), a character based on Jackson Pollock and Hofmann, both friends from Provincetown.

²⁵ Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, p. 131.

²⁶ Hofmann, 'Search for the Real', p. 40.

I shall argue later that Williams shares an Hegelian perspective on the creative process with Hofmann, who describes the artistic process as an ‘emotionally controlled relation’ of conflicting and opposing forces’ – a ‘*push and pull*’. (‘Search for the Real’, p. 44) He sees this process as essential to artistic, and particularly plastic, creativity. I return to the significance of Hegel to Tennessee Williams’ work in Chapter 7, but we should note here that Hofmann’s description of this fundamental tension, and its significance to the process of artistic development is an example of Hegelian dialectic.

[T]he phenomenon of *push and pull* [is] necessary to plastic creation. *Push and pull* are expanding and contracting forces which are activated by carriers in visual motion. (p. 44)

Linked to this, and similarly Hegelian in its conceptualisation, is Hofmann’s ready acceptance of a fundamental and inherent contradiction in art. Like Hegel, Hofmann accepts the concept of co-existing contradiction:

The more the work progresses the more it becomes defined or qualified. It increasingly limits itself. Expansion, paradoxically, becomes contraction. Expansion and contraction in a simultaneous existence is a characteristic of space. (p. 42)

As I shall argue later, this ability to accept co-existing contradiction is a fundamental characteristic of Williams’ plastic theatre. Williams’ and Hofmann’s ideas and use of the plasticity of space are similar: Williams in particular used unoccupied space in both plays and novels to push beyond the boundaries of conventional realism. In *Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis?* (1969), Louise describes plastic space as ‘like the spaces between objects in a

painting. They give to the painting its composition like the vacant spaces on my table give to the articles on the table its arrangement'.²⁷ In *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975) the eponymous heroine says:

Now this is space. And the space is plastic. Which means that it is as vibrantly alive as the dabs of paint applied so carefully to it. Space is alive, not empty and dead, not at all just a background. It's as much a part of the living canvas as the bits of color. As the student of Han Hoffmann [*sic*], this mystery is made clear, the meaning and the importance of plastic space.²⁸

Even if we ignore the reference to Hofmann, there is a close identification of ideas here between Hofmann and Williams. This is not to say, and I would certainly not wish to suggest, that Williams' plastic theatre was merely a derivative of Hofmann's ideas. Rather, it points to a commonality of thought that extends beyond terminology and embraces similar conceptual frameworks. Such a perspective places Williams' development of plastic theatre within an artistic context and shows it to be part of a, then, new movement that was to shape more than American post-war drama.

In *The Parade* Williams makes his only reference to Hegel. This play, an early version of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, was written in July and August of 1940 and is based on events of that summer. According to David Kaplan, Williams abandoned the text as the events he was describing unravelled, tearing the pages from his notebook.²⁹ In his review of the play, Randy Gener describes how Joe Hazan, Williams' roommate in Provincetown, rescued these

²⁷ Although written in 1969, *Mr. Merriwether* was not published until 2008 when it was included in *The Travelling Companion and Other Plays*.

²⁸ Williams, *Moise and the World of Reason*, p. 136.

²⁹ Kaplan, *Tennessee Williams in Provincetown*, p. 27.

pages and later gave them to Andreas Brown in 1962.³⁰ In the play the central character, Don, based on Williams, says:

I have an ordinary mind honey. I couldn't read this: Hegel. What is Hegel to me and what am I to Hegel? (*tosses the book off the platform*) Kant? Couldn't read the first sentence without washing down a couple of aspirins with a double shot of booze.³¹

This suggests that Williams was exposed to German philosophy (and not just through Hofmann) as well as German influences in experimental drama and avant-garde art during the summer of 1940. Williams' dismissal of Hegel – 'What is Hegel to me and what am I to Hegel?' – has a decidedly reflective and philosophical turn of phrase, which despite its playfulness, mimics the Hegelian dialectic structure and thus belies the denial of influence.

The Production Notes – published as an introduction to *The Glass Menagerie* in March 1944 following the play's first production in December of that year – are an early statement of Williams' views on conventional, realistic theatre and of the aims of non-realistic theatre. But what was the realistic theatre that Williams wanted to transcend? It is important to recognise that American realism was itself a relatively recent, innovative form of drama and also, that in many ways Williams' drama is a development of those innovations. But Williams does not ignore the European tradition of realism or naturalism (associated dramatically with Ibsen and Chekov) as can be seen from his reworking of Chekov's *The Seagull* in *The Notebook of*

³⁰ *The Parade* was premiered at the 2006 Williams Festival in Provincetown.

³¹ Tennessee Williams, *The Parade*, p. 178.

Trigorin. Gerald Berkowitz explains how American realism grew out of the experience of the Depression:

Whatever perspective hindsight has allowed since then, at the time the Depression did not seem like a natural, if extreme, part of a business cycle that would eventually correct itself. It had a cataclysmic, end-of-the-world quality that could be interpreted as the irreversible failure of capitalism and the breakdown of the American economy.³²

This was not simply an issue of economic security and well-being: the scale of uncertainty challenged the viability of the American Dream:

Not since the Civil War had the continued existence of America as a concept been so threatened. These were not the idle musings of philosophers; it was neither accident nor disloyalty that led a generation of young idealists to consider socialism or even Soviet-style communism as an alternative to an apparently dying system. (Berkowitz, pp. 43-4)

As Berkowitz points out, social and historical events were barely mentioned in drama prior to this: the First World War featured in only a 'handful of plays' whilst representation of the social upheavals of the 1920s was 'limited to jokes about flappers and wild youth in escapist comedies' (p. 44). The effect of the Depression was such that by 1945 'the dominant natural voice of American drama was realism – realistic, contemporary, middle-class, domestic melodrama or comedy' (p. 44). American realism's innovative contribution was its attempt to deal with the large issues of the day as they affected the ordinary person in an ordinary, real, domestic context:

³²

Berkowitz, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, p. 43. Further references are given in the text.

Domestic realism, which had shown itself capable of illuminating individual experience through psychological analysis, had seemed to Eugene O'Neill and some of his contemporaries ill-suited to the depiction of whole cultures or the exploration of metaphysical questions. The discovery by Clifford Odets and others that the great national traumas of the Depression and the war could be dramatized through their effects on a small group of people in their domestic setting meant that American dramatists did not have to wrestle with epic theatre or other non-realistic modes, but could present their observations in a theatrical form familiar to their audiences. (p. 44)

Although the Depression inspired and fuelled the new realism, not all the realist dramatists were as political as Odets and several used realism as an end in itself, updating the local colour plays of pre-war drama to a 1930s context. Berkowitz describes Louis Weitzenkorn's *Five Star Final* (1930) and Sidney Kingsley's *Men in White* (1938) as examples of such 'melodramatic plots' set 'against almost documentary backgrounds, respectively a newspaper office and a hospital' (p. 51). It may well be this type of realism that Williams has in mind when he speaks disparagingly of 'the straight realist play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes' (Production Notes, p. 229).

In his Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams asserts that in writing a non-realistic drama the author does not escape 'the responsibility of dealing with reality' but instead is challenged by the non-realistic form to produce 'a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are' (p. 131). This is the *sine qua non* of plastic theatre and fundamental to Williams' view of all art. He saw the figurative painting, the photographic likeness, the 'Frigidaire' realism of post-war drama as irrevocably superficial. More significantly, he believed that this 'realism' obscured a deeper truth than could be seen in mere appearance. The artist and his poetic imagination were needed to transform the

appearance of the everyday – to reproduce instead something that more accurately reflected the hidden ‘truth, life or reality’ that the everyday obscured. This was the purpose of art, it was Tennessee Williams’ purpose, and plastic theatre was his means to achieve it. Williams regarded realistic theatre as a spent force which had failed in its primary function of revealing the greater truth. It is clear that from the outset, plastic theatre would be non-realistic, but we shall see that as Williams developed plastic theatre it becomes, not just non-realistic, but anti-realistic.

The techniques and devices that constitute plastic theatre are outlined in the Production Notes in three sections: namely, the screen devices, the music and the lighting, which I discuss later in relation to the individual plays. However, the cinematic-style screen devices described here are reminiscent of Piscator’s production of *War and Peace*, as is the emphasis Williams gives to the extra-literary components of production, namely music and lighting. Directors sometimes complain that Williams leaves them ‘nothing to play with’ in specifying these aspects of production so precisely, but that is to miss the point of plastic theatre. Williams’ vision encompasses all aspects of the play’s production: how it is lit, what and when the music plays, its staging and design is as crucial to what he is presenting to his audience as the script. Indeed, I seek to demonstrate in my discussions of individual plays that the paratext is as vital as the text itself and that this comprehensive conception of the production is a crucial differentiation between plastic theatre and the rest.³³

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By the term ‘paratext’ I am referring to all those aspects of the text which are not dialogue, namely set descriptions and stage directions, and which directors generally feel free to adapt or ignore as they wish.

Chapter 2

The Glass Menagerie: A Dramatic Vision and its Early Reception

Although Williams had used non-realistic devices and techniques in earlier plays, *The Glass Menagerie* was the play in which he defined his concept of a new 'plastic theatre'. *The Glass Menagerie* occupies a unique position as the first deliberate and consciously plastic play, with the Production Notes to the play expounding Williams' rationale and philosophy of plastic theatre. However there are two distinct extant versions of the play: the Acting Edition and the Reading Edition. The Acting Edition, published by the Dramatists Play Service, is based on Eddie Dowling's original 1944 production. The Reading Edition, published by New Directions, is the version that Williams approved for publication. Dowling, who both directed and starred in the original production, removed many of the experimental aspects of the play – notably the screen legends – and it is this version of the play that is largely responsible for its original perception as realist drama. Sadly the Acting Version is most often used in performance, and only recently have directors turned to Williams' preferred edition, reinstating some of the crucial plastic elements. Geoffrey Borny is one director who has specifically chosen to produce the play from the Reading Edition:

I don't contest that the Acting Edition may be more lifelike – more realistic or that the version was well received by audiences. What I do contest is the assumption that dramatic art is better the closer it gets to verisimilitude. More precisely it seems to me that the harder one pushes Williams' play towards

realism the more one confuses art with life and falsifies the vision of reality that he wished to dramatize.³⁴

It is my contention that the paratext of Williams' plays is as important as the text, and that *The Glass Menagerie* is a case in point. I am using the Williams-approved Reading Edition in my discussion of the play. The almost universal preference for the Acting Edition is one of the reasons that Williams' plays have suffered so badly in the hands of various film and theatre directors, who have failed to appreciate the full significance of Williams' stage directions in particular, regarding them as unnecessary incursions into the director's territory. The excision of plastic elements was performed not only by commercially oriented directors like Kazan, but also by such exponents of expressionism as Erwin Piscator. In 'The Two *Glass Menageries*' Geoffrey Borny describes the impact this has on an appreciation of the true nature of Williams' plastic theatre:

One of the most enduring and least endearing, critical standpoints that has guided generations of readers into seeing the play from a point of view different from that intended and created by the playwright has been the almost constant, and often unquestioned, assumption that Williams' strength lies in his ability to depict realistic characters and situations. Not surprisingly this same standpoint leads to a devaluation of the 'plastic' or 'expressionistic' elements of his play writing. (p. 30)

The text of *The Glass Menagerie* begins with a lengthy stage direction that, following the Production Notes, sets out how the principles of plastic theatre should be realised in this

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Borny, 'The Two *Glass Menageries*: An Examination of the Effects of Meaning That Result From Directing the Reading Edition as Opposed to the Acting Edition of the Play', p. 35.

play.³⁵ But these opening stage directions do more than merely set the stage: they contain social comment, references to the underlying philosophy of plastic theatre and an explicit commitment to poetic romanticism as an alternative to mimetic realism. They should be seen as an extension and elaboration of the Production Notes and merit close and detailed attention. The first paragraph of the stage directions is ostensibly a description of the Wingfield's apartment's immediate environment, but rapidly becomes a social and political critique.

The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower like warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism. (p. 143)

Williams' use of socialist concepts of class and economic enslavement demonstrate an awareness of social context and issues that was, and is, largely ignored by critics. These are not isolated references: Tom as narrator explicitly reminds us in his first speech of the larger social context – 'this is the social background of the play' – and implicitly in his references to the failing economy, the Spanish Civil War and the political tensions in Europe (p. 145). This opening paragraph, reinforced later by Tom's narration, encourages us to see the Wingfields' personal drama, not as one of isolated angst, but as a reflection of a larger social reality – to see *The Glass Menagerie* as a personalisation of the political.

³⁵

All references are to *The Glass Menagerie* in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, Volume 1, unless otherwise stated.

There are hints in this opening speech of the underlying philosophy of plastic theatre in the description of American society's impulse 'to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist as one interfused mass of automatism' (p. 143). Williams is here juxtaposing essential elements of plasticity – 'fluidity and differentiation' – and contrasting them with a concept of unity that denies identity – 'interfused mass of automatism'. These are fundamental themes that run through this play and also through Williams' drama as a whole. These directions make it clear that *The Glass Menagerie* is not a realistic play, but an alternative to realism:

The scene is memory and is therefore non-realistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. (p. 143)

Here Williams establishes the non-realism of the play as poetic and emotional with re-ordered priorities that are romantic – 'exaggerated according to the emotional value' – and anti-rational – 'seated predominantly in the heart' (as opposed to the head). This is 'non-realistic' drama that moves beyond evoking pure memory and needs to be seen in the context of the Production Notes. *The Glass Menagerie* should be viewed not just as a memory play, where the action is filtered through the subjectivity of Tom's memory, but as a consciously plastic play. The memory format, though innovative, provided the theatre audiences of 1944 with a relatively accessible introduction to non-realistic theatre.³⁶ The re-ordered priorities of

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Thornton Wilder had also used a narrator who doubles as a player in the earlier *Our Town* (1938).

The Glass Menagerie are dictated less by the memory format than by the demands of plastic theatre and reflect Williams' belief:

that truth, life, reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. (p. 131)

This view of theatre is reiterated in Tom's opening speech, 'I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion' (p. 144), and Williams metatheatrical insistence on non-realistic elements foregrounds the 'disguise of illusion'. If we consider how the stage directions affect the actual staging of the play, we see several examples of plasticity as Williams uses it to express anti-realistic principles.

Williams' use of lighting is typically bold and imaginative and a hallmark of his drama, and in this relatively early play light conveys meaning beyond mere illumination. Williams states that the lighting should be 'not realistic' and that it should be 'used in contradistinction' to the centre of action. He insists the light should 'have a peculiar pristine clarity' as used in religious paintings and suggests that its 'free, imaginative use' will give the play a 'mobile, plastic quality' (pp. 133-4). In keeping with these sentiments, the play opens on the 'dark grim rear wall of the Wingfield tenement', which is initially lit only from the front, so that it appears opaque to the audience (p. 143). During Tom's opening speech, lighting comes up slowly behind this screen wall to illuminate the interior, but does so only dimly. Although the wall is now transparent, it remains in place, obscuring much of what lies behind, then lifts gradually as the scene progresses. The stage direction 'during this revealing scene [Scene One] [...] the

fourth wall slowly ascends, out of sight' (p. 144), implies that the scene is played with the screen wall lit from behind, only disappearing completely as it slowly lifts towards the end of the scene.³⁷ For most of the scene the audience views the action *through* the wall and that what is revealed initially as the interior lights go up remains partially obscured.

This use of the fourth wall achieves several things. First, by making the fourth wall tangible it subverts a key convention of realistic drama: that the fourth wall should be invisible and unacknowledged so that the audience is drawn into the production and identifies with the action on stage. Conversely, Williams' tangible wall boldly asserts drama over reality. Secondly, and subtly, it establishes both distance and intimacy: distance because the wall keeps the audience outside and apart from the play, but intimacy because the wall's subsequent transparency allows us to view what was previously hidden. This contraction of contradictory elements into a single element of *distant intimacy* creates a tension that contributes to the destabilisation of any suggestion of realism. Lastly, it introduces the concepts of subjective truth and 'hiddenness' which I argue later are fundamental themes in Williams' drama (see Chapter 7) and which only his concept of plastic theatre could portray. The fourth wall also represents Tom's memory, and by illuminating it, Williams reveals Tom's truth, but hides others. The persistence of the wall through Scene One emphasises that the processes of revelation and hiding are co-existent: the process of hiding contains the potential for revelation, yet it is only through revelation that we become aware of something hidden.

³⁷

It is rare for a production to follow this direction to the letter simply because it creates difficulty at the outset with engaging the audience.

The play begins with Tom, dressed as a merchant sailor, speaking directly to the audience. The contradictions inherent in Tom's position are shown by his sailor suit: it represents his desire to escape but in its evocation of rolling oceans in landlocked St Louis (a city as far from the coast as it is possible to be in America) it introduces an element of irony that undermines simple notions of escape. Tom wears the sailor suit throughout the performance, even when he moves into the action to portray the pre-sailor self of his memory. In Scene Three, Tom, participating in the play's action, struggles to cover his sailor clothes with an overcoat from the apartment, and as he throws it aside in a gesture replete with symbolism, smashes Laura's glass menagerie. In Scene Five while Tom is in the action he remains dressed in a stripped down version of the sailor outfit – a white shirt and trousers. The image is further layered in the cultural reference to homosexuality that the sailor suit represents. This introduces the notion of a sexual freedom that is circumscribed and which exists for Tom only by being hidden behind subterfuge and deception. The opening direct address to the audience positions the play *as* a play with an audience from the outset. Williams proceeds to deliberately abandon any suggestion of realism as Tom says, 'Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve' (p. 144). Tom's role as narrator is pivotal, for he is 'an undisguised convention of the play', whom Williams grants 'whatever license with dramatic convention is convenient to his purposes' (p. 144). This speech is one of the most important in the play, for it lays before the audience the conventions of Williams' new drama.

Tom's statement, 'But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion in the appearance of truth' is Williams' critique of realistic theatre, and 'I give you truth in the

pleasant disguise of illusion' reiterates the description of Williams' plastic theatre in the Production Notes (p. 144). The speech continues by detailing the play's departures from conventional realistic theatre: 'To begin with, I turn back time' (p. 145). This bald statement of manipulation does more than set the action at an earlier period; it establishes that control of the action rests with Tom and asserts his authority over what is to be seen, denying any suggestion of objectivity and subverting yet another convention of realism. Tom's control over what is to be seen is further reinforced by his description of America's middle class as 'matriculating in a school for the blind'. The quotation continues:

Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy'. (p. 145)

This destabilises the audience's confidence in what they are seeing. First he suggests that their collective sight is failing, but then he suggests that it may be that their sight is functioning properly, but that the failure lies in their inability to understand what it is they are seeing. The subsequent imagery increases the audience's discomfort as Tom relates this collective blindness and incomprehension to the economic depression of the thirties. He conjures up images of damnation – 'fiery' – and suggests a universally disabled culture – 'Braille' – compounded by the childish immaturity implicit in his use of 'alphabet' and sets all this against a backdrop of shifting insecurity and impermanence – 'dissolving economy' – for unlike Odets, the depression prompts Williams to move away from realism, not towards it. This social comment is subtly linked into the Wingfields' personal drama as the 'fiery Braille

alphabet' reminds us of Laura's typewriter keyboard chart on the wall in the living room and the agonies of exposure it represents. Williams pushes the audience to see the Wingfields' personal situation as representative of a wider social malaise. Tom describes events in Europe, contrasting them with events at home in America:

In Spain there was revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion. In Spain there was Guernica. Here there were disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis ... This is the social background of the play. (p. 145)

The Glass Menagerie was first performed in December 1944 during the final stages of the Second World War and the audience's context for the play was not just the social context outlined by Tom, but also that of America's recently abandoned isolationism and somewhat tardy involvement in global politics. Tom's suggestion of blindness and culpable inaction in response to world events undermine any feeling of complacency the audience may have about America as the saviour of the western civilization. Williams thus destabilises not only notions of dramatic realism but questions fundamental tenets of American identity.

Tom's speech moves from the starkness of his previous remarks to a discussion of memory and realism in the play accompanied by music:

The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything happens to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings. (p. 145)

Tom is echoing the sentiments of the Production Notes and the opening stage directions: things are revealed but remain hidden; the dim lighting only partially illuminates what we see and serves to make us aware that something remains hidden; 'It is sentimental, it is not realistic'; what we are to see is driven not by the head, but by the heart. What is significant about the events is their emotion not their logic – as Williams again contrasts poetic sensibility with realism. 'In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings.' The music, which begins at the start of Tom's remarks on the nature of memory, continues and underscores the remainder of the speech. Tom's reference to it is metatheatrical, but in associating remembered events and music it invites both nostalgia and a sensory free-association akin to synaesthesia. Tom is not implying that the music is specific to a particular memory (though Williams does use music thematically later in the play in the association of circus music with Laura's menagerie). Rather, Tom is asserting that it is in the nature of memory to draw more extensively on the senses than factual mimetic realism could do, precisely because of its poetic sensibility. The 'fiddle' – a disembodied instrument rather than a fiddler – in the wings is freed of association with person or place and becomes a universal accompaniment to remembered events. Music is an essential element of plasticity, representing a freer, more discursive and poetic form of association than conventional nostalgic reminiscence. Tom's speech continues by describing the structure of the play: 'I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it' (p. 145). This establishes his role as narrator: the thread that runs through and controls the play, distinguishing it from a more conventional scene-setting prologue. Williams establishes Tom's duality as both in and

apart from the action. This is no doubling of roles with quick costume changes to differentiate character: this is a deliberate duality that Williams forces the audience to recognise by a series of devices, including costume, gesture, intonation and stage positioning, all of which continually assert the two coexisting roles. Williams uses the continuing roll-call of characters to again contrast poetic imagination and realism, using Tom's comment to privilege symbolism over realism:

But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character [the gentleman caller] also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for. (p. 145)

Williams sets before us a concept of reality that, despite its juxtaposition with the world of Wingfield fantasy, is already compromised by the knowledge that it is to be filtered through the sentimentality of Tom's memory. It is further destabilised as Tom explains the gentleman caller's significance; ironically he is not a symbol of reality, but instead a symbol of 'the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for': the Wingfields' collective escapist fantasies. The final element of Tom's speech gives additional substance to this fantasy and introduces a further duality. The fifth character is 'a larger-than-life-size photograph' of Tom's father – the one that got away. 'He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town' (p. 145). Tom's father never appears: it is his representation, the photograph, that is the fifth character. The youthful, smiling, photograph in 'a doughboy's First World War cap' renders him forever young, making him the man that never was. His eternal youth places him

outside fatherhood and outside even Tom's sentimental memory: he has 'skipped' from any semblance of reality to become Tom's symbolic fantasy of escape. The irony and duality of this symbol become clear as we understand that Tom's entrapment results from shouldering the family burden his father abandoned, a duality embodied in his final communication to his family, a post card from Mexico saying simply "Hello – Goodbye!" (p. 145).

The screens are the most startling and contentious element of plastic theatre that Williams describes in the Production Notes. They are unique to *The Glass Menagerie* and I know of no other play in which Williams used them.³⁸ The screen, as Williams explains, is used to display a series of images and legends:

These images and legends, projected from behind, were cast on a section of wall between the front-room and the dining-room area, which should be indistinguishable from the rest when not in use.

The purpose of this will probably be apparent. It is to give accent to certain values in each scene. Each scene contains a particular point (or several) which is structurally the most important. In an episodic play, such as this, the basic structure or narrative line may be obscured from the audience; the effect may seem fragmentary rather than architectural. This may not be the fault of the play so much as a lack of attention in the audience. The legend or image on screen will strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing and allow the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines. Aside from this structural value, I think the screen will have a definite emotional appeal, less definable but just as important. (p. 132)

³⁸

Since unpublished plays by Williams continue to emerge, it would be dangerous to state Williams *never* used screens elsewhere.

Apart from the information that the screen presents, the screen itself is explicitly non-realistic and establishes the non-realistic status of the play. Williams describes the screen as cinematic and this introduces a further layer: not only are we looking at a 'screen', what we see there are 'images' and 'legends'. The term 'legend' has cinematic overtones referencing not only the intertitles of silent films, but also suggesting a Hollywood-style manufactured mythology rooted in romanticism, and one that Williams exploits in the development of Amanda's character.

The positioning of the screen within the living space does more than merely display the images and quotations as it is intermittently illuminated as needed during the action. It appears on the wall between the front-room and the dining-room areas, spaces that we associate with Laura and Amanda respectively. To the left of the archway that separates the two rooms hangs the photograph of the father in First World War uniform. The text describes this photograph as being of 'the father', yet it predates fatherhood and is more accurately described as the beau who married and abandoned Amanda. Also on that wall are Laura's typewriter chart and shorthand diagram. The majority of the screens in the play relate to 'gentleman callers' in some way, and it is that character who, in his symbolic role, unites the Wingfields in their frustrated desires, but who as 'an emissary from a world of reality' divides the two women in their differing success in sexual conquest. The screen's information juxtaposes the external reality that will crush Laura and the definitive rejection that once crushed Amanda's romantic hopes. The gentleman caller is a pivotal character and many of the images and legends feature the dramatic thread that he represents, and the screen that

depicts these images is juxtaposed with the three images – father, typewriter and shorthand – of the Wingfields’ frustrated desires.

The Glass Menagerie was originally called *The Gentleman Caller*, based on a short story of the same name. The change in the title marks a shift in emphasis from a reference to an external element to a symbol of internal fragility, but the gentleman caller remains a significant character within the play, as Tom explains:

I am the narrator of the play and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother, Amanda, my sister, Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes. He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from the world of reality that we were somehow set apart from. But since I have the poet’s weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for. (p. 145)

Tom’s dual role as narrator and participant is described baldly in a single sentence, Amanda and Laura are merely listed as characters, but the gentleman caller warrants five lines of explanation. Despite the title change and the shift in emphasis from external reality to internal psychological fragility, Tom’s description of the gentleman caller qualifies the simple binary opposition implicit in Williams’ consideration of both titles. Tom’s speech defines the style and reach of the play and establishes the duality of the gentleman caller’s dramatic function, drawing attention to a specifically non-realistic assessment of the role. In this speech of Tom’s the gentleman caller is both representative of the external, and externalised, reality that besieges the Wingfields, and also of the internalised desire of their unrealised hopes and expectations. These opening lines set up the external/internal binary opposition that is then

developed through the play. Though I do not intend to discuss the development of this particular aspect in relation to this play here, this dramatic dichotomy is referenced in Williams' stage sets, directions and costuming. Williams uses the screens to develop the character of the gentleman caller and support the actor's performance, but he also uses the screen images to enhance and promote the dramatic direction and tensions of the play that centre on and surround the gentleman caller. Of the forty-three screens in *Menagerie*, twenty-three relate directly or indirectly to the gentleman caller, with Williams using a mixture of images and statements, or 'legends' to develop and emphasise the complex dramatic functions of this character. As Borny states:

What Williams' non-realistic stage techniques help an audience to see is that there is no one single absolute reality to which characters can adjust [...] Williams is presenting an action that is making a universal statement about what he sees as the human condition. (p. 43)

The screens depict an essential characteristic of Williams' plasticity: the complex interplay of symbols and 'realistic' elements, shifting and undercutting each other in an intriguing dance that confounds and destabilises the conventional expectations of mimetic realism. In particular, the screens are used to depict the dual function of the gentleman caller: his grounding in the external 'real' world, and his function as a symbol of aspiration. But, as so often in Williams, this is not a juxtaposition of clear contrasting values. The gentleman caller appears on the screens as archetype – a symbolic representation (as in, 'Amanda as a girl on the porch greeting callers', Scene One) – and as a specific 'realistic' character (as in 'Jim as the high school hero bearing a silver cup', Scene Two). The archetype 'callers' of Amanda's

memory screen function mimetically as well as symbolically: they are a sample, albeit nameless, group of callers – a small section of the body of admirers who attended Amanda in her youth.³⁹ In this role they are a ‘realistic’ representation of Amanda’s past, but it is in their namelessness that they take on an archetypal role, transcending their historic personas to represent idealised romanticism and the lost values of Southern manners. This symbolic role is strengthened by the layering of memory that flows from Tom’s function as narrator. At first it is easy to see the ‘girl on the porch’ screen as simply Amanda’s memory:

Amanda: Girls in those days *knew* how to talk, I can tell you.

Tom: Yes?

(*Image on screen*: Amanda as a girl on a porch, greeting callers.)

Amanda: They knew how to entertain their gentlemen callers. It wasn’t enough for a girl to be possessed of a pretty face and a graceful figure –although I wasn’t slighted in either respect. She also needed to have a nimble wit and a tongue to meet all occasions. (p. 148)

The screen image and Amanda’s recollection encourage us to see this as Amanda’s memory, but Tom’s staccato interjection – ‘Yes?’ – act as anchors to Amanda’s flights of nostalgic fantasy and reasserts his control, reminding us that it is still his memory. The image of Amanda as a young girl, however, is not grounded in Tom’s memory: it is a memory fiction, predating anything Tom could have experienced directly. Here, then, is a memory of a reported memory that is in turn portrayed as a fictional image. This image is therefore presented via a layered series of subjective references each a little further from the reality of the event that they purport to depict. This layering of representation effectively mythologises

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This is of course really Tom’s memory of Amanda’s memory, but notwithstanding the complexity of that layering, the point I make here is the same.

Amanda's youth, the gentlemen callers and the South they both represent. The screen effectively compresses reality and mythology into a single image, thus again combining opposing elements within the same entity, creating a dramatic yet subtle tension in the complex symbolism that Williams goes on to develop. As I argue throughout this thesis, this combining of opposites within a single entity is a fundamental element of plasticity. When we look more closely at the ostensibly mimetically realistic images, they too become layered and complex. For example, the screen of Jim as the high school hero which appears during a conversation between Amanda and Laura:

Amanda: [...] Haven't you ever liked some boy?

Laura: Yes. I liked one once. (*She rises.*) I came across his picture a while ago.

Amanda (*with some interest*): He gave you his picture?

Laura: No, it's in the yearbook.

Amanda (*disappointed*): Oh – a high school boy.

(*Screen Image: Jim as the high school hero bearing a silver cup.*)

Laura: Yes. His name was Jim. (*She lifts the heavy annual from the claw-foot table.*) Here he is in *The Pirates of Penzance*. (p. 156)

The screen is, of course, a visual image, but Williams' description – 'the high school hero' – is loaded with both romance and irony. The image is a comment on Amanda's disappointment and a backdrop to Laura's memories of romantic if unrequited love. The full irony is not revealed until later when we learn that Jim's future has turned out to be considerably less heroic than this image promises. As Borny points out:

The first important thing that I noticed in production was that the metafictional elements and expressionistic stage devices paradoxically allowed the actors to play their own roles totally realistically. They had no need to supply any ironic

comments on their own behaviour as these were supplied by the narrator and his bag of tricks. (p. 38)

Williams' irony is humorous and subversive: Amanda, whose dreams fuel the romanticised mythology of gentlemen callers, inadvertently articulates the reality of this particular gentleman caller's future in her disappointment at his only being 'a high school boy' with only high school achievements, ridiculing both her own romanticism and his. This is a subtle reversal of the obvious characterisation and the opposing binaries they represent: Amanda cannot be relied upon to represent romanticised nostalgia and as the play progresses her perspective is increasingly shot through with a thread of harsh reality. But the irony is not confined to personal dreams: the social and historical context that Tom outlines as narrator makes the 'heroism' of winning the high school cup for debating an ironic comment on American aspirations and dreams generally, underlining their irrelevance in the face of world events like Guernica.

The screens also portray the reality/fantasy binary opposition that the gentleman caller encapsulates more explicitly. In Scene Six the images of the 'The high school hero' and 'The Clerk' punctuate Tom's description of Jim's career in and after high school. They build on the disappointment of the earlier 'high school hero' image and we are tempted to interpret this realistically as a transition from the unrealised aspirations of youth to the more mature realistic achievements of adulthood. However, later in Scene Six, the image 'Executive at his desk' depicting Jim's current aspirations is a direct counter to the earlier image of 'The Clerk'. This juxtaposition of anticipated desire and current reality reasserts the internal/external

binary oppositions of Tom's opening narrative, and is further displayed in the alternating solidity and transparency of the set's dividing walls, as well as in Tom's alternating subjective involvement and quasi-objective commentary on the play's action. Though I am concentrating here on Williams' use of the screens, I mention these other expressions of plasticity lest we forget that plastic theatre encompassed many dramatic innovations.

Williams also uses the screens to build dramatic tension and drive the action of the play forward. The screens in Scene One establish the generic importance of 'gentlemen callers' – the archetype nurtured in Amanda's reminiscences. Borny argues that:

In this scene the screen legend has a humorous deflating function allowing an audience to see the pathetically romantic pretentiousness of Amanda as Tom remembers her. 'Ou sont les neiges d'antan?' is a cliché of Romanticism and is intentionally "over-the-top".⁴⁰

But these screens are not just ironic and humorous; they also establish the gentleman caller as an absent but potent force. This is subtly done by quoting 'Ou sont les neiges d'antan?' from *The Ballad of Dead Ladies* by François Villon.⁴¹ The full significance of the screen legend is apparent from the title of Villon's poem; the roll-call of dead ladies listed there – women of significant power and influence, whether sexual or political or both – is ironically echoed in the banality of Amanda's list of dead gentlemen callers. Set against

⁴⁰ Borny, 'The Two *Glass Menageries*: An Examination of the Effects of Meaning that Result from Directing the Reading Edition as Opposed to the Acting Edition of the Play', p. 39.

⁴¹ Villon, 'The Ballad of Dead Ladies,' translated by Rossetti. It is not clear how obvious this fifteenth century poem would be to the play's initial audience, though the quotation itself is well enough known, as is the refrain of *The Ballad of Dead Ladies* translated by Rossetti, as 'Where are the snows of yesteryear?' (http://www.poetryarchive.com/v/the_ballad_of_dead_ladies.html)

Sophocles' mistress, Archippa, we have 'Champ Laughlin, who later became President of the Delta Planters Bank'. Where Villon laments the classic love affair of Héloïse and Abelard, Amanda offers us Bates Cutrere, who 'shot it out on the floor of the Moon Lake Casino' and, despite being married to someone else, 'carried my picture with him on the night he died!' But 'Où sont les neiges d'antan?' (Where are the snows of yesteryear) works even when it stands alone for it draws attention to the passing of time, and the sense of melancholy and regret that inevitably accompanies memories of lost youth and beauty. These key themes of Williams' are ironically expressed in Amanda's character, overlaid with the cinematic references and an overtly sentimental romanticism.

Audience awareness of the gentleman caller's absence builds during the scene as Williams deliberately increases the emotional involvement of the audience through the use of the screens. The vanished snows of yesteryear are Amanda's erstwhile beaux, but it is clear from what follows that absent gentlemen callers are a live issue in the Wingfield household:

Amanda: Resume your seat little sister – I want you to stay fresh and pretty – for gentlemen callers!

Laura [*sitting down*]: I'm not expecting any gentlemen callers.

Amanda [*crossing out to the kitchenette, airily*]: Sometimes they come when they are least expected! Why I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – . (p. 147)

The two other screens in this scene – the image of Amanda's gentlemen and the quotation 'Où sont les neiges d'antan?' – reinforce the dramatic significance of the gentlemen callers and the ironic humour of Amanda's over-played romanticism while building the audience's sense of anticipation and expectation surrounding the absent but awaited

gentlemen callers. Although the emphasis in the dialogue quoted here is on Amanda's reminiscence, building on the nostalgia implicit in the three screens, Williams nonetheless subtly extends the reach of the gentleman caller to encompass Laura. Amanda's airily delivered 'Sometimes they come when they are least expected!' is at odds with her state of continual readiness and constant reminiscences, but subtly refers back to Tom's earlier narrative comment, 'he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for' (p. 145). The screens in Scene Two introduce 'Jim' the specific and particular 'gentleman caller' in the image of 'the high school hero bearing a silver cup', and underline his earlier relationship to Laura in another screen – "'Blue Roses'". Both of these refer to real events – Jim's skill as a high school debater and Laura's illness – producing a layer of specific characterisation over the generic images of Scene One. Here this would seem to be asserting the 'real' over the symbolic, an encouragement to see Jim and Laura as part of the Southern tradition of romance beloved of Amanda. The screens of Scenes Three and Five, however, revert to generic archetypal representations: 'A young man at the door of a house with flowers' and 'A caller with a bouquet'. In his Armidale production, Borney used identical screens in these scenes, showing Jim as the caller with flowers.⁴² But I think this treatment misses the point. Williams chose to describe the two screens differently, and *not* to place Jim in the frame. This was deliberately done: these screens depict archetypes and symbols, and represent the ritual of Southern courtship and all that this represents within the play. The screens are not about 'Jim'. They remind us of the symbolism outlined at the beginning and reassert Amanda's

⁴² This production was at The Arts Theatre, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, 1980.

relationship to these images. When Williams draws Laura into the ‘gentleman caller’ scenario, he does not do so in order to exclude Amanda: as the play progresses, the growing sense of anticipation that surrounds the gentleman caller is keenly felt by both women – by Amanda with pleasure and excitement, by Laura with fear. Amanda remains in thrall to the romantic desire of the ‘long-awaited’, and the dramatic development of the play depends on it, as we see in what follows the screen legend “‘Annunciation’” in Scene Five:⁴³

Amanda: I remember suggesting that it would be nice for your sister if you brought home some nice young man from the warehouse. I think I made that suggestion more than once.

Tom: Yes, you have made it repeatedly.

Amanda: Well?

Tom: We are going to have one.

Amanda: *What?*

Tom: A gentleman caller!

(The annunciation is celebrated with music.)

(Amanda rises.)

(Image on screen: A caller with a bouquet.)

It is Amanda not Laura who rises to greet the announcement, and Tom’s news is of a family visitor, collectively anticipated and desired. This is not a visit from Laura’s erstwhile high-school crush – it is the coming of the Wingfields’ ‘long-delayed but always expected something that [they] live for’, and the screen depicts a generic not a specific caller.

The screens develop the symbolism of Jim and gentlemen callers in distinct ways. In Scene One they function as a cinematic opening title, with Amanda’s lilting Southern voice as the film’s theme music. The juxtaposition of visual screen with a voice-off ties Amanda to the

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There is an obvious religious reference in the term ‘annunciation’ which serves to heighten the expectations surrounding ‘the long awaited gentleman caller’.

title screen. The disjointed elements force a conscious recognition of the unrealistic nature of the action whilst alerting the audience to the possibility of a Hollywood-style heroine, evoking Scarlett O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind*, the film released some five years earlier. The cinematic references are further reinforced by Amanda's telephone call (Scene Three) where she refers to Margaret Mitchell's novel:

You remember how *Gone with the Wind* took everybody by storm? You simply couldn't go out if you hadn't read it. All everybody talked was Scarlett O'Hara. (p. 160)

Later the screens operate increasingly as a form of cinematic trailer, building the audience's sense of anticipation by repeatedly reminding us of what the Wingfields hope is to come. But this insistent repetition operates in a very plastic way: it explicitly asserts and emphasises the anticipation and excitement felt by the Wingfields, while simultaneously and subliminally prompting a similar emotional response from the audience itself.

By Scene Six, the screens are rapid and relentless, emphasising the complex layering of this crucially symbolic character while developing an atmosphere of feverish anticipation and panic. The screens depict four key elements dealing with the relationship of reality and illusion, underpinning the climactic action and maintaining the audience's focus on the symbolic: they reflect the disparity of expectations and achievements; the ever-present anticipated but unfulfilled desires; the fragility of desire exposed to reality; and the inevitably frustrated attempts to manipulate the conflicts of reality and illusion in an effort to accommodate and encompass both within the emotion of desire. In the penultimate scene

Jim's feet of clay are revealed in the juxtaposition of the dialogue with the three screens that chart his personal history. We move through the illustration of past success that hints at future promise, to the harsh reality of the present, both ridiculed and made bearable by the illusion, in Jim's case, of achieving executive status. The images of the school hero, the clerk, and the executive form a series that charts a declining reality against a rising illusion. The other elements are interwoven around Amanda and Laura's responses to Jim's coming in a complex web of cross-reference and contradiction: 'Accent of a coming foot' and 'Terror!' reflect anticipation and panic respectively and unambiguously; "'A pretty trap'" and "'This is my sister: Celebrate her with strings!'" manage to convey the opposing emotions of Amanda's ecstatic anticipation and Laura's panic in the same phrases. Although the 'trap' is designed to snare the gentleman caller, it is Laura who is cornered, and while the 'strings' are meant to celebrate a potential romance, they evoke images of entrapment and constraint. These screens remind the audience of Amanda's manipulative hand in these events. The "'pretty trap'" relies on 'gay deceivers', the strings suggest puppetry as well as restraint, and yet another image of Amanda as a girl, juxtaposed this time on the acting out of her daughter's doomed courtship, ties her to these images and exposes her 'romantic pretentiousness' as the motivation that drives the doomed sequence of events.

The plasticity of the play's devices draws the audience into the emotional climate of the play as the action develops. This is a very different experience of involvement in the traditional realistic conventions of, for example, the fourth wall. Involvement in plastic theatre is decidedly more unsettling than mimetic realism. In this scene, the audience is bombarded

with a rising crescendo of images that force their attention back in time via the memories of real and romanticised events and then forward in the collective anticipation of a gentleman caller. This apparently random juxtaposition in the narrative of prolepsis and analepsis is a controlled manipulation of the audience's attention designed to destabilise the audience, involving them in the emotions on stage, for plastic theatre involves far more than removing the fourth wall.⁴⁴ Remembering his first experience of *Camino Real*, John Guare describes plastic theatre's ability to envelop the audience:

Camino needed to tell its truth so urgently that it had to break the fourth wall between stage and us out there in the audience. It spoke with a rage and joy. It was so funny. The live music wouldn't let you sit still.⁴⁵

In the earlier *The Glass Menagerie* Williams achieves a similar metatheatrical transposition of the characters' destabilised emotions, by evoking a matching destabilisation in the audience. It is Williams' particular skill to achieve this whilst also conveying information and crucial character development: in its complex layering and juxtaposition of opposing themes this is an essentially plastic technique, crucially dependent on the unique qualities of plastic theatre.

Williams had two aims in formulating a plastic theatre: to develop a form of drama that could 'achieve a closer approach to truth' and one that would 'take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions [so as] to resume vitality as a part of our culture.' Plastic

⁴⁴ I am using Genette's terms in *Narrative Discourse* (see Chapter 11). *Prolepsis* describes narrative which evokes an event yet to occur, *analepsis*, narrative that evokes an event that has already occurred.

⁴⁵ John Guare, 'An Introduction in Nineteen Blocks', p. xii.

theatre achieves this by deliberately destabilising and subverting reality and the conventions of mimetic realism. But more importantly, the fluidity and shifting nature of the expressionist and non-realistic devices of plastic theatre – its ‘plasticity’ – enables Williams to experiment with the portrayal of contradictory, hidden truths: it is only in plastic theatre that these co-existing opposites can be effectively expressed and allow Williams to portray the reality that ‘the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance’ (*The Glass Menagerie*, p. 131). I discuss the more developed and sophisticated expressions of plasticity in Williams’ later plays in Section Three, but before that I examine how Dowling’s decision to eliminate the non-realistic elements determined the course of the critical assessment of Williams.

Chapter 3

Realism and Plasticity: Theatrical Reviews

How Williams was seen as a dramatist was largely determined in the early years of his success and was dominated by the prevalent critical discourse of realism and naturalism. The perception of Williams as a realist playwright distorted and obscured understanding of plastic theatre, and the complexity of the concepts of realism and naturalism also masked cultural assumptions and sexual prejudices. To understand how this perception affected Williams' critical reception, I look at the contemporary reviews of his plays from the production of *Battle of Angels* in 1940 to that of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. The selection of plays and reviews is not meant to be exhaustive, but to show how Williams' reputation developed during this period: *Battle of Angels* (1940) is included because it is his first major production; *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) are included because they were undeniably the biggest successes; *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *Rose Tattoo* (1951) and *Camino Real* (1953) represent lesser works from the period which nonetheless prompted interesting critical reactions. The reviews are drawn from a number of sources, but concentrate on four major critics of the time: Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times*, Harold Clurman of *Nation* and *New Republic*, Eric Bentley also of *New Republic*, and Kenneth Tynan of the *New Yorker* and *The Observer*.

Williams' first play to attract significant attention was *Battle of Angels* (1940), later to become *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and the film *The Fugitive Kind* (1960). *Battle of Angels* was

intended to be a prestigious production by the Theatre Guild directed by Margaret Webster at the Wilbur Theatre, Boston, but poor reviews meant that it ran for less than two weeks from 30 December 1940 to 11 January 1941. The play, which depicts a small Mississippi town where the arrival of an itinerant artist exposes the repressed sexuality, hypocrisy and latent violence of the townsfolk, was dismissed by critics and outraged the city burghers, one of whom demanded its closure without having seen a performance. It was reviewed anonymously in the *Boston Post* on both 31 December and 7 January. The first review muses with heavy irony on the possibility that the play was the result of New Year excesses, describing it as:

the aftermath of the glorious celebration in the imaginative brain of a genius who celebrated gaily but a little too well and was removed for quiet to that famous ward at the Bellevue Hospital.⁴⁶

The review continues in this vein of ridicule, although it does praise the leading actors Miriam Hopkins and Wesley Addy as ‘charming’ and ‘gifted’. The plot is described in less glowing terms:

For 120 minutes furies pursued Miss Hopkins, and when they were not chasing her up and down a steep flight of stairs into a mysterious backroom, the three ugly old fates sat by, placing the evil sign on her white forehead. (*Critical Response*, p. 1)

⁴⁶

‘Miriam Hopkins at Wilbur: *Battle of Angels* Is Full of Exciting Episodes’, *Boston Post*, 31 December 1940, reprinted in *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*, p. 1.

The reviewer goes on to describe it as ‘the maddest night of melodrama’, made up of ‘hysterical, fantastic moments [in which] the play sinks to amateurishness’. The second review, ‘Play Must Have Lines Taken Out: *Battle of Angels* Cut After Council Demands Probe – Denial by Miriam Hopkins of Offence’, also anonymous, appeared a week later and is given over to reporting the reaction of the City Council.⁴⁷ Councillor Michael J. Ward, who hadn’t seen the play, is reported as describing it as ‘putrid’ (p. 3). His opinion, based on six complaints from members of the public, was that the play should be closed down and ‘the police should arrest the persons responsible for bringing shows of this type to the town’ (p. 3). The Assistant City Censor, Joseph Mikolajewski, accompanied by Police Commissioner Timilty, duly went to see the play and their decision to edit out some offending lines gave rise to the review’s headline. The Theatre Guild announced it was to take the play off following the review. To compound Williams’ misery, Miriam Hopkins attempted to rebut the criticism that it was ‘a dirty play’, saying ‘I wouldn’t be in it if it were a dirty play. I haven’t got to the point where I have to appear in dirty plays’. She continued:

that the play was a disappointment to her from the dramatic point of view, but that it had seemed brilliant on reading. ‘If the police close it,’ she said, ‘I’ll be glad I don’t have to play it any more. But it’s not a dirty play’. (p. 3)

Williams’ reaction was one of stoical dismay:

⁴⁷ ‘Play Must Have Lines Taken Out: *Battle of Angels* Cut After Council Demands Probe – Denial by Miriam Hopkins of Offence’, *Boston Post*, 7 January 1941, reprinted in *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*, pp. 2-3.

The bright angels were pretty badly beaten in Boston – we are closing after the two weeks engagement for re-casting, re-writing and re-everything. Holiday crowds wouldn't listen to poetic tragedy and the sexuality shocked the pants off the first-nighters and the critics who said they were 'dunked in mire'. Unfortunately all the first-string critics went to Gertrude Lawrence's show which opened the same night and we got a bunch of prissy old maids to write our notices.⁴⁸

Margaret Bradham Thornton attributes the reference to 'dunked in mire' to the review that appeared in the *Boston Globe* on 31 December.⁴⁹ Thornton also says that the Guild itself was heavily criticised for putting on *Battle of Angels*. The leading drama critic, George Jean Nathan, commented in *Esquire* April 1943:

The Theatre Guild has rejected Sean O'Casey's *Purple Dust*, to say nothing of the same author's *Within The Gates*, *The Star Turns Red*, and his latest, *Red Roses for Me*, and has highly admired and produced instead Tennessee Williams' cheap sex-shocker, *Battle of Angels*.⁵⁰

The prudish tone of the criticism of *Angels* was in part due to the sexual climate of the time, but was also a cultural expression of aspects of realism and naturalism. Whilst these concepts are closely related, their genesis and development has given rise to different uses creating confusing and overlapping complexities, which I discuss later in the chapter. By the 1940s and 1950s naturalism in particular had for many become a pejorative term, synonymous with human degradation and sexual perversion. Even this early, *Battle of Angels* was criticised from within a realist perspective. Not surprisingly, *Battle of Angels* did not transfer to

⁴⁸ Letter to Joe Hazan, 2 January 1941, *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*, Volume 1, p. 297.

⁴⁹ *Tennessee William's Notebooks*, p. 217.

⁵⁰ *Tennessee William's Notebooks*, n. 565, p. 360.

Broadway, but was, over the years, substantially re-written to become *Orpheus*

Descending, which premiered in 1957 to better but far from ecstatic reviews. The original

Battle of Angels was produced in New York in 1974. Mel Gussow described it as ‘an evening of renewal and reclamation’, a play well able to stand on its own merits despite the more well-known later versions, *Orpheus* and *The Fugitive Kind*:

The tone is wistful and lyrical, in contrast to the portentous symbolism of *Orpheus*. This is a play of atmosphere and mood, despite its melodramatic ending ... The first play, less ambitious and bold than later Williams, has a redeeming sweetness and sensitivity. In it we can see the threads and tones that have sustained the author’s career – from the ironic humor of the small-town gossips to the moth-into-the flame compulsiveness of his heroines ... Wisely, the script – reworked by Williams – has omitted the published prologue and epilogue and also the conflagration that apparently helped to devastate the original Boston production. All this would have added a false note of portent to a wispy, realistic play.⁵¹

The reaction to *Battle of Angels* raises two points: first, the audiences and reviewers couldn’t see the play for the sex, and given the prevailing attitudes concerning overt sexuality in 1940 and 1941, that is not surprising; second, the ‘shocking’ sex sits alongside Williams’ lyrically poetic dialogue (as can be seen in the later review, though it was unrecognised earlier) and this complicates any implied identification of the play as naturalist. Gussow approves of the omission of the prologue and epilogue in this later production as he sees any device that undercuts the realism of the play as ‘false’. But Williams had not abandoned these elements, and as in the publication of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams reinstated these deleted sections

⁵¹ Gussow, ‘Stage: Battle of Angels’, *New York Times*, 4 November 1974, reprinted in *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*, p. 5.

when *Battle of Angels* was published in 1971 in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*.

In both cases Williams' decision to reinstate the original text indicates the importance he attached to the deleted passages and his commitment to experimental techniques.⁵² In *Battle of Angels* the prologue and epilogue are set in the period after the action of the play, placing the present – the action of the play – within its future context. At this future point the store – the setting for the play – is a commercial museum memorialising the tragedy that takes place in the play. Prologue and epilogue frame the action of the play, setting it in a context with wider social, moral and economic references, transforming it from present action to flashback in a deliberate, non-realistic, cinematic-style structure. Even with the hindsight that the 1970s afforded, Gussow failed to see the experimental nature of Williams' play, continuing to interpret Williams drama as realistic which has been a major feature of Williams' criticism until recently.

You Touched Me (1943) – a romantic comedy based on a story by D.H. Lawrence – was a collaboration between Williams and Donald Windham. After try-outs in Cleveland and Pasadena, the play moved to Broadway in September 1945, after the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, and suffered critically from comparison with the later play. Rosamund Gilder welcomed it as the 'first play to break the deadlock of inanity in which the theatre has been gripped since last spring' but felt the plot was 'halting and occasionally flat'. Gilder felt:

⁵²

The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, Volume 1.

[Williams'] second play [suffers] from comparisons with his first, a possibly unjust but quite inevitable experience. Since the second is actually the first, the situation becomes slightly involved.⁵³

The play closed just before Christmas and, like other critics, James Fisher 'felt that the Williams-Windham collaboration was a decided backward step.'⁵⁴

The Glass Menagerie was Williams' first major success and it opened at the Civic Theatre, Chicago on 26 December 1944, to a mixed response. Thornton describes the initial public response as 'lukewarm' and notes that the producers were considering closing by the second week (*Notebooks*, p. 433). Unusually, given the poor audiences, the play received rave reviews, notably from Claudia Cassidy of the *Chicago Tribune*, and she is credited with attracting the attention of other critics, including Lloyd Lewis who reviewed the production for the *New York Times*, and for the subsequent capacity audiences that ensured the play's success. Cassidy described the play as:

Vividly written, and in the main superbly acted. Paradoxically, it is a dream in the dusk and a tough little play that knows people and how they tick. Etched in the shadows of a man's memory, it comes alive in theater terms of words [sic], motion, lighting, and music. If it is your play, as it is mine, it reaches out tentacles, first tentative, then gripping, and you are caught in its spell.⁵⁵

Cassidy praises Eddie Dowling's production and the cast, especially Laurette Taylor who played Amanda. Indeed, the reviews and the production were dominated by Taylor's

⁵³ Gilder, 'Poetry Passion and Politics, *Broadway in Review*', *Theatre Arts*, November 1945.

⁵⁴ Fisher, 'You Touched Me', entry in *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopaedia*, p. 318.

⁵⁵ Cassidy, 'Fragile Drama Holds Theater in Tight Spell', *Chicago Tribune*, 27 December 1944, reprinted in *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*, pp. 16-17.

performance. Lloyd Lewis, who reviewed the original Chicago production for the *New York Times*, devotes six of his seven paragraphs to her performance and the character of Amanda. For Lewis it is Amanda's play:

In 'The Glass Menagerie', which is a tenuous and moody tragedy from the pen of Tennessee Williams, she plays a decaying Delta belle overfond of haranguing her two children, one a warehouse worker (Mr. Dowling) and the other a morbidly bashful maiden (Julie Haydon), upon their duty to rise above the drabness of life in a St. Louis alley flat. Fumbling around the dolorous precincts of her home in a slipshod Mother Hubbard,⁵⁶ she is forever reciting the plantation glories of her youth, how seventeen young gentlemen callers were forever complimenting her among the magnolias, and how she could have had this or that grandson instead of the captivating plebeian drunk who took her only to desert her and leave her to her current St. Louis Blues.⁵⁷

Louis Kronenberger, reviewing the New York production, describes Laurette Taylor as:

giving in it one of the most remarkable and fascinating performances in many seasons. She has always been one of the few really distinguished actresses we have; she has never offered more convincing proof of her distinction. The play which she dominates and enlarges is in essence a fairly simple portrait of a family, though in effect rather a pastiche of dramaturgical styles.⁵⁸

Kronenberger was less impressed with the play itself, believing it had 'a great deal wrong with it'. He describes Williams as 'capable, when he remains relatively straightforward, of very good dialogue'. He is less impressed with the more experimental aspects of the play.

⁵⁶ A 'Mother Hubbard' is a loose fitting full-length dress with long sleeves and a high neck.

⁵⁷ Lewis, 'Memo From Chicago', *New York Times*, 14 January 1945, from New York Times on The Web, www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/31/specials/Williams-glass.html

⁵⁸ Kronenberger, 'A Triumph for Miss Taylor', *New York Newspaper PM*, 2 April 1945, reprinted in *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams* pp.17-19.

But Mr. Williams has fancied things up in other ways, has rather jumbled his technique and forced his tone. Eddie Dowling commutes between being the son in the play and a narrator who stands outside it: the second role seems to me to be pretty otiose and pretty arty ... [the] play is conceived as "memory"; and it is further projected as a memory by much use of atmosphere music and dim lights. All this may make, here and there, for unusual theatre, but beyond the fact that Mr. Williams isn't really master of his rather showy (and derived) devices. I think he has asked oddity to do work that simple artistry can do far better. (*Critical Response*, pp. 17-19)

Kronenberger's review typifies the critical response to *The Glass Menagerie* and later plays in that the experimental, expressionist elements of the play are rejected as trivial, irritating and unnecessary obfuscations to the action. The tone and language, – 'fancied things up', 'pretty arty' – is both patronising and dismissive. Kronenberger's preference for 'simple artistry' over the 'oddity' of Williams' dramatic devices is a preference for unified coherence over complexity, and is an attempt to contain Williams' drama within known comfort zones. Whilst Kronenberger recognised, with a muted degree of acceptance, that Williams was attempting something different, Williams' efforts were misunderstood and seen as derivative rather than truly innovative. Kronenberger continues:

If *The Glass Menagerie* aims (rightly in my opinion) at something different from straight realism, at becoming a kind of mood play, then the mood and tone must be begotten from within it, not built up all around it [...] For in its mingled pathos and comedy, its mingled naturalistic detail and gauzy atmosphere, its preoccupation with 'memory', its tissue of forlorn hopes and backward looks and languishing self-pities, *The Glass Menagerie* is more than a little Chekopian. (*Critical Response*, pp. 18-19)

Kronenberger's language here is telling. His acknowledgement that here is 'something different from straight realism' is grudging. By qualifying 'realism' with 'straight' he is

immediately establishing a notion of degrees, if not a hierarchy, of realism, and thereby implicitly setting parameters to what is an acceptable degree of deviation from 'straight' realism, parameters beyond which Williams' play quite clearly strays. Kronenberger contrasts 'straight realism' with a 'mood play', the direct with the elusive, the strong with the ephemeral. When he later writes of the 'naturalistic detail', 'gauzy atmosphere', 'tissue of forlorn hopes', and 'languishing self-pities', he is building a picture of a feyness, a lack of substance that is also implicitly morally suspect. The language of these polarised descriptions reveals implicit sexual connotations: 'straightness', whether referring to theatrical realism or sexuality is equated with moral rectitude; the reference to ephemeral – gauzy atmosphere – and effete qualities – languishing self-pity – implicitly recalls the 'degeneracy' of effeminate homosexuality. Kronenberger's assessment of *The Glass Menagerie* places it as naturalistic where naturalism is seen as sexually degenerate – a criticism that is echoed more explicitly in later assessments of Williams. The labelling of his plays as exercises in 'personal angst' expresses the critical view of naturalism that saw naturalism as excessively self-indulgent and marks one aspect of the divide between the social realism of Odets, for example, and the more psychologically focussed work of O'Neill and Williams. Whilst some critics – Kenneth Tynan for instance – embraced the deeper insights of the psychological drama others saw only decadence. Raymond Williams (see Chapter 4) was one of many critics to dismiss Williams' work in this way, but ironically it is he who, in *Keywords*, points out that 'naturalism' itself is laden with complex meaning. Kronenberger contrasts rather than links it to realism, focussing on human frailty and debased moral values. Naturalism is used here and elsewhere as a

pejorative term reflecting at best the weakness and self-indulgences of humanity, and at worst its corrupt and sordid bestial impulses.

Reviewing *The Glass Menagerie* for *The Nation*, Joseph Wood Krutch details the rapturous response the play received on Broadway where the audience called for the author at the final curtain, a rare event indeed. Krutch praises the strength of Williams' writing and recognises that the power of Laurette Taylor's performance owed much to Williams' skilful characterisation. But he too was unhappy with the duality of Tom's role:

The action begins with a pretentious and inflated speech delivered in front of a blank wall by Eddie Dowling, who is several times in the course of the play to step out of his role to act as a, usually unnecessary, 'narrator'.⁵⁹

The memory format was almost universally misread. While acknowledging that the play's action represented Tom's memory, such acknowledgement was grudgingly given – as in Kronenberger's phrase, 'conceived as "memory"' – but none of the reviewers considered what this meant for point of view and voice. Laurette Taylor's performance was clearly outstanding: even those reviewing subsequent productions, such as Howard Taubman some twenty years later, refer back to that first portrayal:

If you first encountered her [Amanda] two decades ago in the magical performance of Laurette Taylor, you probably thought, as I did, that no one would ever dare the role again.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Krutch, 'Drama,' *Nation*, 14 April 1945, reprinted in *Critical Response*, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁰ Taubman, 'Diverse Unique Amanda', *New York Times*, 16 May 1965, reprinted in *Critical Response* pp. 22-24.

Several factors conspired to obscure the extent of Williams' experimentation and innovation and produce the contemporary reaction to *The Glass Menagerie*. Eddie Dowling's direction, which omitted the expressionist, cinematic-style screens pulled the play into a more realistic format than Williams had intended. The removal of the screens in particular shifts and simplifies the focus of the play, reducing the significance of the gentleman caller and his symbolic role in the play. Dowling's rejection of the expressionist elements unifies the disparate and conflicting elements of Tom's memory and establishes a single dramatic focus for the play. Laurette Taylor's virtuoso performance compounded this process of unification; she made the play not only hers, but Amanda's. Her performance shifted the dramatic centre of gravity from Tom to Amanda, from memory to history and from expressionism to realism, hiding the significance of Tom's dual role and the ambivalence that this inevitably meant in terms of voice and point of view. This shift in dramatic focus, exacerbated by the critical response, determined Williams' reputation for generations of theatre-goers, reviewers and critics. It shaped the public perception of the play so that Williams' complex innovative drama depicting an ambivalent memory of intertwining emotional needs and dependencies became a play about 'a decaying Delta belle', and not Tom's but Amanda's play. Taylor's performance was so dominant that it effectively obliterated the fact that *Menagerie* is a memory play, and the long shadow that her performance casts means the play is still seen as realistic.

You Touched Me followed *The Glass Menagerie* onto Broadway and was not well received, running for only three months. Williams' third Broadway play was an entirely

different matter. *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on 3 December 1947 to considerable acclaim. Reviewing the opening night Brooks Atkinson wrote:

Tennessee Williams has brought us a superb drama [...] Jessica Tandy gives a superb performance as a rueful heroine whose misery Mr. Williams is tenderly recording [...] Like *The Glass Menagerie*, the new play is a quietly woven study of intangibles. But to this observer it shows deeper insight and represents a great step forward toward clarity.⁶¹

Atkinson recognised that Williams was breaking new ground dramatically, writing in new, less structured ways, but saw these as problematic rather than innovative:

Since he is no literal dramatist and writes in none of the conventional forms, he presents the theatre with many problems. Under Elia Kazan's sensitive but concrete direction, the theatre has solved them admirably. (*NY Times*, 4 December)

The contrast between the 'study of intangibles' and the 'concrete direction' would be recognised by present day critics as a deliberate juxtaposition creating a significant dramatic tension, but Atkinson sees Kazan's direction as a solution to a problem. Atkinson's unspoken assumption is that Williams' flighty prose and unconventional devices need anchoring and containing – that his excursions from realism needed to be controlled. Atkinson reviewed the play again ten days later, remarking that by 'common consent' it was 'the finest new play on the boards', and this second viewing of the play gives rise to a deeper examination of the

⁶¹ Atkinson, 'First Night at the Theatre', *New York Times*, 4 December 1947 from *New York Times on the Web*, www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/31/specials/williams-streetcar.html

play's structure and Williams' innovative style. Atkinson describes the structure – 'It has no plot, at least in the familiar usage of the word' – and examines Williams' language – 'He is an incomparably beautiful writer, not because the words are lustrous, but because the dialogue is revealing and sets up overtones'.⁶² This positioning of plot versus poetry set the tone for much of the later critical assessment of Williams' plays, both favourable and hostile. Like others, Atkinson saw the magic of Williams' poetry, but failed to see its resonance and larger social significance:

There is no purpose in *Streetcar*. It solves no problems; it arrives at no general moral conclusions. It is the rueful character portrait of one person, Blanche Du Bois of Mississippi and New Orleans ... Out of nothing more esoteric than interest in human beings, Mr. Williams has looked steadily and wholly into the private agony of one lost person. (*Critical Response*, p. 52)

Joseph Wood Krutch, who had been critical of *Glass Menagerie's* 'fanciful manner', was considerably more impressed with *Streetcar*:

Gone are all the distracting bits of ineffectual preciousness, all the pseudo-poetic phrases, and all those occasions when the author seemed about to lose his grip upon the very story itself ... He may or may not have much to say, and it is quite possible that sickness and failure are the only themes he can treat. But there is no longer any doubt of his originality, or of his power within the limits of what he has undertaken.⁶³

Krutch had clearly disliked the non-realistic elements in *The Glass Menagerie*, singling out for criticism its unreal characters – Laura – and devices, such as Tom as narrator. Krutch

⁶² Brooks Atkinson, 'Streetcar Tragedy: Mr. Williams' Report on Life in New Orleans', *New York Times*, 14 December 1947, reprinted in *Critical Response* pp. 52-54.

⁶³ Joseph Wood Krutch, 'Drama', *Nation*, December 20 1947, reprinted in *Critical Response* pp. 54-6.

approved of *A Streetcar Named Desire* largely because these elements were missing.

Although the plasticity in *Streetcar* is more subtle, it is every bit as present as in *The Glass Menagerie* (See Chapter 8). The popular perception at the time however, shared by Krutch, was that *Streetcar* was more straightforward and realistic, albeit about intense and very personal emotions. Krutch's review continues:

The difference in merit between the two [plays] seems to be almost entirely the result of the author's vastly increased mastery of a method which is neither that of simple realism nor of frank fantasy. Obviously Mr. Williams is a highly subjective playwright. His stories [...] enable him to communicate emotions which have a special, personal significance [...] To go one step farther in the direction of subjectivity would inevitably be to reach 'expressionism' or some other form of non-representational art. But though there is [...] a certain haunting dreamlike or rather nightmarish quality, the break with reality is never quite made, and nothing ever happens which might not be an actual event. (p. 56)

Krutch clearly sees *Streetcar* as a form of 'realistic' theatre despite the subjective nature of the poetry and lyricism of the work. But, prefiguring reactions to Williams' later plays, Krutch warns that any lessening of the tenuous link to dramatic realism, any move towards greater subjectivity or 'expressionism' would be a mistake. This echoes the desire to contain and control of Atkinson's reviews. Krutch's talk of 'simple realism' – as opposed to Williams' exploration of the complex interplay of contradictory forces – and the pejorative use of 'expressionism' expose a reluctance to engage with the more experimental aspects of Williams' drama. The extolling of simplicity here – and in Kronenberger's 'simple artistry' – exemplifies the general attempt to contain Williams' plays within the consensus model of realism then extant. The contemporary theatre critics are here defending the established

conventions, or in Raymond Williams' terms (see Chapter 4), the current 'structure of feeling' against the artistic innovations that herald a new cultural era.

After the success of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams had a further nine productions on Broadway: *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Something Unspoken* (1958), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), *Period of Adjustment* (1960), and finally, *Night of the Iguana* (1961). With the exception of *Camino Real*, these plays were all commercial and critical successes to a degree, with *The Glass Menagerie* and *Night of the Iguana* receiving New York Drama Critics Awards, while *Streetcar* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* earned both Pulitzer Prizes and Drama Critics Awards. This period of acclaim, culminating in the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarding Williams a lifetime fellowship in 1962, established Williams' work as a drama of personal angst and marginalised characters, and attempts by Williams to move into other, bolder dramatic forms were met with dismay and rejection.

Summer And Smoke opened on Broadway in October 1948 – a year after *A Streetcar Named Desire* and while the earlier play was continuing its successful run. Inevitably, the new play was compared to *Streetcar*, and for some, found wanting:

The naturalistic details of portraiture in *Streetcar* are so right that the audience accepts and enjoys them on their own terms whether or not they follow the author's ideological intention, which to begin with, is intuitive rather than analytic. In *Summer and Smoke* so much time is given to a conscious exposition

of a theme that Williams loses the specific sense of his people and to a dangerous extent our concern as spectators.⁶⁴

Conversely, Brooks Atkinson described it as the only play that season which had yielded ‘the imagination and quality of a work of art’. Atkinson’s review typifies the view of Williams that was beginning to dominate critical assessment of his work: namely the focus on personal angst (‘desperately lonely’, ‘private anguish’); the poetic handling of dialogue; and the lack of a conventional dramatic structure:

It is the chronicle of a desperately lonely woman and it seems to have been written out of the loneliness of the author [...] But Mr. Williams is not governed by social or political ideas. He does not fit into any convenient category. He writes out of the free world of the poet: he looks about him at ordinary people, wonders about their private anguish but knows of no way to relieve it [...] It is almost completely untheatrical – no plot worth thinking about, no events of great pith and moment, no big scenes, no trenchant speeches and only a handful of characters [...] There is not much in fact to recommend “Summer and Smoke” except the incandescence of its search into the private agonies of a human being and the unostentatious beauty of the dialogue.⁶⁵

This is again the language of containment, albeit expressed more sympathetically: Williams is ‘not governed’ by concerns of the real world, nor does he ‘fit any convenient category’, but works instead ‘out of the free world of the poet’. This increasing focus on personal angst highlighted the view that the introspective nature of Williams’ drama – the portrayal of the intensely private world of his characters – was rendered acceptable by virtue of his poetic dialogue. Williams unsettling treatment of the marginalised people of his plays

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Clurman, ‘Theatre: Man with a Problem, *New Republic*, 25 October 1948.

Atkinson, ‘Work of Art’, *New York Times*, 17 October 1948.

was muted and rendered safe by his containment within the category of 'poet'.

Reviewers and critics implicitly saw personal and social or political concerns as mutually exclusive, and as Williams was clearly portraying the former, he could not be saying anything of significance about the latter. The personal precluded the political just as the focus on individual concerns precluded universal messages. By asserting these comfortable dichotomies, critics were able to resist acknowledging the challenge to the wider cultural mores that Williams' work posed.

Four years later, Atkinson reviewed another production of *Summer and Smoke*, comparing it to *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

But to some of us it remains the finer piece of work. It contains one violent episode when the senior Dr. Buchman is fatally shot by a drunken gambler. That is a harrowing and gratuitous episode which vividly epitomizes the carelessness and injustice of the universe. It reverses the twin themes of the drama. But in contrast with the people of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the chief characters of *Summer and Smoke* are gentler and more aware. Although they are unable to change the course of history, they know what is happening to them. They are helpless, but they are also intelligent and perceptive.⁶⁶

Despite the reference to Dr. Buchman's death as an expression of universal themes of indifference and injustice, Atkinson consistently viewed the personal struggles of Williams' characters as a development of realism, and he saw them as individual concerns rather than the experimental attempts to depict on stage the complex contradictions of his characters that they were: even here Williams is contained within the established dramatic consensus view of realism.

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Atkinson, 'Second Chance, *Summer and Smoke* Put On in Sheridan Square', *New York Times*, 4 May 1952.

The Rose Tattoo, Williams' first comedy, followed in 1951 and was generally greeted with approval, though it attracted less fervent admiration than either *The Glass Menagerie* or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Brooks Atkinson described it as 'original, imaginative and tender' and was particularly pleased that Williams had moved into a new area of drama, fearing, with unconscious irony given the attempts to contain Williams within 'realistic theatre', that he may have been 'imprisoned in a formula':

As sheer writing it is one of the finest things Mr. Williams has done. Forget the sprawling workmanship of the play as a whole. The respect for the character and quality of the writing are Mr. Williams at the top of his form.⁶⁷

Other reviewers were less reticent, clearly disliking or misunderstanding Williams' attempts to move away from the conventional forms and structures of the established theatre. William H. Beyer, writing in *School and Society*, said of the play:

It opens in an aimless and awkward manner, most insecure and unskilled, swings suddenly into a compelling sequence, and achieves form and impact when the plight of the characters automatically brings the much belaboured Aristotelian unities into the play, then bogs down in the climatic last-act scene of the telephone, resolving itself into an unnecessarily gauche note in conclusion.⁶⁸

However, worse was to come: *Camino Real* opened on Broadway in March 1953 and closed two months later having received mostly negative notices. Walter Kerr called it 'the

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Atkinson, 'Theater: *Rose Tattoo*', *New York Times*, 5 February 1951.

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Beyer, '*The Rose Tattoo*', *School and Society*, 24 March 1951, reprinted in *Critical Response*, p. 86.

worst play written by the best playwright of his generation'.⁶⁹ Williams wrote to Kerr following this review, hurt and bemused as he had felt that he 'would only get two good notices, but that one of them would be Kerr's'.⁷⁰ Kerr replied that he felt *Camino Real* had failed:

[Not because] people are appalled at what is actually in the play; but [...] people are simply not able to get through it to your intention at all [...] What terrifies me about 'Camino Real' is not what you want to say but the direction in which you, as an artist, are moving. You're heading toward the cerebral; don't do it. What makes you an artist of the first rank is your intuitive gift for penetrating reality, without junking reality in the process; an intuitive artist starts with the recognizable surface of things and burrows *in*. Don't swap this for the conscious rational processes of the analyst, the symbolist, the abstract thinker.⁷¹

Kerr is clearly distressed at a promising playwright losing his way: a way that for Kerr definitely had to stay within the realm of reality. Williams could use his 'intuitive gift [to] penetrate reality' but not to move towards the abstract or symbolic. Kerr's notion of reality eschews rational analysis and implicitly embraces the 'personal angst' view of Williams' drama within a version of realism that is easily confused and conflated with naturalism. This view accepts the frailty of human nature and the power of things psychological, but does not see any significance beyond the personal, remaining blind to the wider social and dramatic implications of the play. This psychologically based concept of realism is a long way from the realism of 1930s American social drama, exemplified by Odets, and of the 'Frigidaire' realism

⁶⁹ Kerr, 'Camino Real', *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 March 1953.

⁷⁰ Letter to Kerr, 31 March 1953, *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*, Volume 2 p. 463.

⁷¹ Letter to Williams from Kerr, 13 April 1953, quoted in *Tennessee Williams' Notebooks* p. 565.

rejected in the Production Notes, yet it again attempts to curtail and contain

Williams' work within a concept of realism and established dramatic conventions.

Harold Clurman regarded *Camino Real* as a piece of juvenilia and was 'irritated' by its immaturity, despite recognising in it the 'seed thoughts, impulses and ambitions' of a significant playwright.

Williams also hankers for an unfettered theatre, a theatre free of the bonds of workaday naturalism, a theatre where the poet in him can speak more personally and with a greater degree of self-revelation than the usual prosy play permits. Thus *Camino Real* discards the routine props of logic, exposition and straight story line. Though there is a certain juvenile impatience in this, I can embrace Williams on this count too. His crimes have a healthy source.⁷²

Like Atkinson, Clurman's support for Williams' experimental writing is dependent on it being poetic: despite the liberal language – 'unfettered', 'free of the bonds' – Williams' drama is only acceptable when it is contained and boxed as 'poetry', and *Camino Real* transcends such comfortable descriptions. Clurman felt the play failed in its attempts to be a 'surrealist phantasmagoria', that it was 'too literal', its poetry 'too blunt' and that it lacked the subtlety and complexity of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Clurman felt that Broadway, with its 'machinery of investment, real estate Broadway brokerage and competition for reputation' was not the place for plays like *Camino Real*, but that they should be produced elsewhere:

with modest means in a small theatre where it would be quietly seen, enjoyed, and judged for what it is – a fallible minor work of a young artist of important talent. (*Nation*, 4 April)

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Clurman, 'Theater', *Nation*, 4 April 1953.

This exceptionally patronising statement with the dismissive ‘where it would be quietly seen’ borders on the offensive. But this is a review from an avowed fan of Williams and similar to Kerr’s dismayed plea for Williams to change direction. Clurman is also deeply uneasy about the direction this ‘important talent’ is taking and his tone – that of a disappointed mentor – is an attempt to pull Williams back within the fold.

Brooks Atkinson, by now one of Williams’ most ardent supporters, wrote a more perceptive review of *Camino Real*. Williams did not expect Atkinson to like the play, feeling ‘that Brooks, although he’s scrupulously fair toward anything he reviews, would be appalled by the episodes of decadence and brutality’.⁷³ Atkinson was indeed appalled by much of *Camino*, but he didn’t dismiss it as an immature piece, but saw it rather as a disturbingly dark vision of the world, by a writer who had moved beyond personal angst – ‘melancholy’ – and realism, into a ‘cosmic fantasy’ of ‘psychotic bitterness’:

Looking into the corners of his heart, Tennessee Williams has written a strange and disturbing drama [...] Since ‘Camino Real’ is a kind of cosmic fantasy, one must not interpret it literally. But [...] it seems to be the mirror of Mr. Williams’s concept of life – a dark mirror, full of black and appalling images [...] Mr. Williams’s pessimism is frightening. ‘Camino Real’ goes beyond melancholy into melancholia. For the fantasies that boil through the central plaza of the play have a psychotic bitterness to them. [...] Breaking with the realistic theatre entirely, he has now written a long incantation with a long cast of characters and a constant flow of mood and experience and the great mass of it is lucid and pertinent [...] As theatre ‘Camino Real’ is as eloquent and rhythmic as a piece of music [...] As a writer, Mr. Williams has unlocked his mind and told his version of the truth about human destiny. Although it is horrifying, it is also pathetic. For it is a world surrounded with death and inhumanity, and decked

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Letter to Kerr, 31 March 1953, *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams* Volume 2 p. 464.

with the flowers of evil. Even the people who respect Mr. Williams's courage and recognize his talent are likely to be aghast at what he has to say.⁷⁴

Atkinson, though somewhat alienated by the play, was closer than other critics to understanding what Williams was trying to achieve. In the letter to Kerr, Williams attempts to explain the play and, eloquent as ever, expresses his agitation and frustration in consciously chaotic and staccato syntax:

Don't you see that this play – as a concentrate, a distillation of the world and time we live in – surely you don't think it better than a night-mare?! – is a clear and honest picture? Two: don't you also recognize it as a very earnest plea for certain fundamental, simply Christian, attributes of the human heart, through which we might still survive?⁷⁵

Camino Real was a turning point in Williams' relationship with the critics. Although he went on to have further successes – a considerable one in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* – *Camino Real* was, for many critics, a troubling departure from the dramatist they thought they knew. Despite epithets of 'immaturity' and 'youthful inexperience' designed to excuse the play as an aberrant minor work, they could never look at him in quite the same way again. *Camino Real* defied containment within any notion of realism and it discomfited and unsettled critics, exposed by the inadequacy of critical language to deal with something genuinely innovative.

Williams returned to Broadway in March 1955 with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, a play that was to prove both controversial and successful. Some found the underlying theme of homosexuality disturbing whereas others objected to the profane language. Williams

⁷⁴ Atkinson, 'Theatre: *Camino Real*', *New York Times*, 20 March 1953.

⁷⁵ Letter to Kerr, 31 March 1953, *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*, Volume 2 p. 464.

apparently made changes to the script to tone down Big Daddy's language as he explained in an interview with Arthur B. Waters:

I would regret it very much if this new play had to rely, even in a minor degree, on the public's appetite for salaciousness. In fact I feel so strongly on the subject that I suggested we take out most of the four-letter words that were in the original script. I conscientiously believed they helped establish some of the characters, most of all the crude and uncouth Big Daddy. I still feel that a number of these were quite in character and, to my mind, unobjectionable. But when I heard that word was getting around that we had a dirty show filled with dirty dialogue, I strongly advised their removal.⁷⁶

Despite these cuts, the play remained controversial and was initially banned in England, the Lord Chamberlain objecting to its homosexual content. The first British production was not until Peter Hall's private-club production at the Comedy Theatre three years later in January 1958.⁷⁷ For Williams, the combination of accusations of profanity and civil censorship must have seemed eerily reminiscent of the reaction to *Battle of Angels*.

Walter Kerr, reviewing the original Broadway production, found some of the language objectionable and unnecessary:

Some of the calculated profanity that pours from Mr. Ives [Burl Ives played Big Daddy] is gratuitous, incorporated by the playwright for shock value; most of it has the steamy odor of a long tough life that has actually been lived.⁷⁸

There is a not-so-gentle irony, and one that Williams must have found frustrating, in the fact that following the inaccessible, un-commercial and heavily criticised *Camino Real*, he

⁷⁶ Waters, 'Tennessee Williams: Ten Years Later', *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* p. 34.

⁷⁷ Kolin, *Tennessee Williams: A Guide to Research and Performance*, p. 119.

⁷⁸ Kerr, 'A Secret is Half-Told in a Fountain of Words', *New York Herald Tribune*, 3 April 1955.

was now criticised for deliberately writing a sensational 'dirty' play to ensure good audiences. This controversy continued through to the publication of *Cat on a Hot tin Roof*, when New Directions, at Williams' request, published two versions of Act Three: Kazan's Broadway version and Williams' own. Critics were divided as to which was the better, and those that preferred Williams' text accused him of selling out to the commercialism of Broadway in acceding to Kazan's alterations. Kerr also took issue with the ambiguity of Brick's sexuality, 'Is he a homosexual? At one moment he is denouncing "queers", at another describing the way he clasped his friend's hand going to bed at night'. Williams explicitly denied that Brick was a homosexual in the interview with Waters, but fuelled the ambiguity by adding 'although I do suggest that, at least at some time in his life, there have been unrealized abnormal tendencies'.⁷⁹ For Kerr this lack of explicitness weakens the play:

He is, dramatically speaking, a wholly possible figure. If our interest in him wanes as the evening rages on, if he becomes more and more an impenetrable surface and less and less an unfolding reality, if *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* gradually acquires an elusive and ambiguous quality that is crippling in its own way, it is not because the tormented Brick cannot read his own heart: it is because we cannot read it ... Listening, we work at the play in an earnest effort to unlock its ultimate dramatic meaning. But the key has been mislaid, or deliberately hidden. (*Tribune*, 3 April)

Kerr's irritation with Williams' deliberate equivocation over Brick's sexuality displays critical unease developing into a need to contain and codify the themes and dramatic tensions of Williams' plays. Kerr's liberal acceptance of homosexuality is circumscribed with caveats: it's all right to feature homosexual characters, but let's be clear about what we're dealing with.

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Waters, 'Tennessee Williams: Ten Years Later', *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, p. 35

This need for clarity is rooted in a desire to be able to identify the abnormal, the sick, the 'other' so that it, and its ability to contaminate, can be contained. It is also rooted in the desire for the simplicity of the unified and whole and the rejection of the complex and contradictory, because of its unsettling nature. Kerr's review continues:

He has failed – or refused – to isolate the cause of the corruption in *Brick*, and the play, so far from placing one man's torment in an intelligible relationship to the universe about him, simply catches something of his sickness. The performance is superb, the language stinging, the substance of the play disturbingly secretive.

Williams, in naming his sexually ambiguous character 'Brick', deliberately uses the hard edged straightness of the implied imagery to subtly develop the ambiguity of his theme – that of the contrast, and consequent complexity, of appearance and hidden truth. Kerr desires the dramatic exposition of homosexuality to be clear and defined, to 'isolate the cause' and place it 'in an intelligible relationship to the universe' – to contain it within an established framework of ideas. Williams, however, is attempting something completely different and altogether more challenging: the dramatic depiction of the ambiguity of human nature and his interweaving of conflict and contradiction exposes the human complexity that 'straight realism' denies.

In later chapters I discuss Williams' use of both hiddenness and ambiguity in detail, but here Kerr singles out these issues as being in conflict with his concept of reality and meaning, and I argue later that Williams' refusal to give comfortable answers to ambiguous characters or easy resolutions to contradictory emotions lies at the heart of his rejection of realism as an

effective exposition of the world. It was fundamental to plastic drama that ambiguity and contradiction should be exposed and that it should disturb the audience. Brooks Atkinson, unlike Kerr, greeted *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with undisguised relief and elation:

For Tennessee Williams and the rest of us, the news could hardly be better this morning. For 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof', which opened at the Morosco last evening, is a stunning drama.⁸⁰

Atkinson is clearly relieved to have Williams back on what he perceives as familiar territory, but one where Williams had developed his themes, avoided formulaic treatment and matured as a 'gifted craftsman' and observer of people:

To say that it is the drama of people who refuse to face the truth of life is to suggest a whole school of problem dramatists. But one of the great achievements is the honesty and simplicity of the craftsmanship. It seems not to have been written. It is the quintessence of life. It is the basic truth. Always a seeker after honesty in his writing, Mr. Williams has not only found a solid part of the truth of life: it is the absolute truth of the theatre (*New York Times*, 25 March)

Atkinson's repeated extolling of the 'truth' in *Cat* comes across as a grateful homage to Williams' perceived return to more realistic, naturalistic drama. This is the 'realism' of soul searching, of personal angst, where the fallibility of humanity is explored and exposed, where 'basic truths' are uncovered and displayed with a fearless honesty. Again the language is one of uncomplicated unified notions – 'simplicity', 'honesty', 'basic truth', 'absolute truth'. What unease the audience may feel at the character's behaviour is justified by its honesty, by

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Atkinson, 'Theatre: Tennessee Williams's *'Cat'*', *New York Times*, 25 March 1955.

Williams' adherence to telling it like it is, to being 'true to nature'. The polarised views of Atkinson and Kerr reflect the confusion that surrounds the various uses of 'realism'. Atkinson embraces the personal angst of Williams' drama and thus a more 'naturalistic' view of dramatic reality, whilst for Kerr, 'personal angst' is a pejorative term which embodies the criticism of naturalism, where the 'sordid' is a step too far.

There is a distinction between reviewers and literary critics. The comments I have been considering so far are those of theatre reviewers, and hence of particular live performances. Literary critics on the other hand study the text, and tend to come to that some time after the event, and indeed it was some time before Williams' work attracted serious critical attention. Thomas P. Adler in his essay 'Critical Reception' discusses this distinction and its impact on Williams' reputation:

Each director's interpretation of a playscript is, in a sense, an exercise in critical analysis, and the drama as realized in its initial production thus becomes the first instance of the interpretive criticism of the play. Reviewers, then, are commenting not on the text itself as a literary entity but on a single version that is but one of many potential realizations of the text.⁸¹

The critical assessment of Williams' work generally stands apart from particular performances, though the towering performances of Laurette Taylor, in *The Glass Menagerie*, and Jessica Tandy and Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, contributed significantly to the success of those two plays and influenced to varying degrees the subsequent literary criticism. Laurette Taylor's performance in particular shaped the critical assessment of *The*

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Adler, 'Critical Reception', in *The Critical Response*, pp. 64-9.

Glass Menagerie as the dominance she gave to the role of Amanda has carried over into decades of critical analysis of the text. Generally however the roles of reviewer and critic are distinct, with the responsibility for detailed considered assessment of the work being left to the literary critic. However the two reviewers I now consider manage to bridge the divide between reviewer and literary critic by their ability to assess productions within a larger dramatic context. They are Eric Bentley and Kenneth Tynan. Bentley was hugely influential, for as well as writing for *The New Republic* he was Professor of Dramatic Literature at Columbia University until 1969. Kenneth Tynan reviewed Broadway productions during the 1950s for *The Observer* in the UK, and also for *The New Yorker*. Both were robust and entertaining reviewers of individual productions, but their writing was marked by an overarching sense of the dramatic tempo of the period, and how individual productions figured in the general development of drama. Consequently their reviews had more of the flavour and feel of literary criticism. The categorisation of Williams as a 'realistic' dramatist was formed early, but it developed and gained critical purchase with contemporary reviewers and subsequently the majority of literary critics.

Bentley, for example, recognised the move from earlier styles of social realism to the psychological dramas of a more naturalistic realism. Reviewing John van Druten's *I've Got Sixpence* (1952) he identifies, without necessarily welcoming, the move from political polemic to psychological examination in American drama, and cites Williams as its prime exponent:

Today it is not Marx but Freud who turns in his grave every time a Drama of Ideas opens on Broadway or the West End. The theatre which Shaw berated for its hedonism now lectures us on the sex problems of adolescents and the

complexes of old maids. The “master-drama” of this generation is *A Streetcar Named Desire*.⁸²

Conversely, in ‘American Blues: the Plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams’ (1954), Tynan gives a more detailed contextual analysis. Referring to Miller’s description of American drama as ‘a year by year documentation of the frustration of man’, Tynan relates the work of Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Irwin Shaw and Lillian Hellman back to O’Neill and forward to Miller and Williams. He comments on their plays:

They devoted themselves to dramatizing the protests of minorities; it was thus that they ploughed the land cleared for them by O’Neill, the solitary pioneer bulldozer. For his long-sightedness they substituted an absorption in immediate reality [...] during the war their batteries ran out: since 1945 none of them has written a first-rate play. The mission of martyrology has been taken up by the younger generation, by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.⁸³

There is a hint here that Bentley and Tynan valued different things in Williams’ drama. Bentley, unusually for the time, recognised and admired Williams’ comedic talent, while Tynan appreciated, like others, Williams’ lyricism. Crucially both saw Williams as a ‘realistic’ playwright, conforming to the view shared by all the major critics of the time, and one that crossed over and persisted in academic assessments until recently. But what they meant by realism was not always the same. Bentley’s and Tynan’s assessments of Williams’ realism are

⁸² Eric Bentley, ‘I have a Bright Idea’, *What is Theatre? 1944-1967*, p. 48. All subsequent quotations are from this collection, unless indicated otherwise and will be cited as *WT* with review title and page reference only. Unfortunately these reviews are not individually dated. However, *I’ve Got Sixpence* ran from 2-20 December 1952, following van Druten’s more successful *I Am A Camera*, and this review would have most likely appeared during early December 1952.

⁸³ ‘American Blues: The Plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams’, *Tynan on Theatre*, p. 140. All subsequent references to this work will be cited as *TonT*, with the review title and page reference only.

different and more useful than those of most reviewers in that they give a fuller understanding of the various, then current, meanings of this vexed and difficult term. In the preface to the section on American Theatre in *Tynan on Theatre* (written in the early 1960s) Tynan says of American theatre in the early fifties 'it bowled me over'. He identifies links with European theatre but regarded Broadway theatre as the cutting edge of drama, within the realist tradition.

It seemed to own the best young actors and actresses (Marlon Brando, Julie Harris, Uta Hagen, Kim Stanley and their multitudinous like), the most exciting directors (among them Joshua Logan and Elia Kazan), and unquestionably the finest playwrights in the English-speaking theatre – Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. It had the most highly developed tradition of realism in the Western world [...] America alone had built on the foundations of realism laid down by Stanislavsky and Chekov.⁸⁴

Tynan reiterates the importance of realism in drama making clear that for him realism means the broader more 'naturalistic' view that incorporates psychological issues:

As far as I was concerned, thirteen years ago the mainstream was realism (i.e. the psychological exploration of contemporary reality). In Russia it had dried up for want of playwrights and the inheritors – the commanders of the fountainhead – were American. (p. 128)

His earlier view of 'realism' was more mainstream. In a 1958 review of Ionesco's plays he wrote:

Now the broad definition of a realistic play is that its characters and events have traceable roots in life. Gorky and Chekov, Arthur Miller and Tennessee

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Tynan, *TonT*, p. 128.

Williams, Brecht and O'Casey, Osborne and Sartre have all written such plays. They express one man's view of the world in terms of people we can all recognise [...] I have been careful not to except Brecht, who employed stylised production techniques to set off essentially realistic characters.⁸⁵

This was much closer to the more usual understanding of 'realism' as expressed by Bentley, who defined 'realism' in Williams' drama as follows:

The genuine element in Tennessee Williams had always seemed to me to reside in his realism: his ability to make eloquent and expressive dialogue out of the real speech of men and his gift for portraiture, especially of unhappy women.⁸⁶

On the basis of these quotations, 'realism' for Tynan was, at least latterly, an exploration of the modern psyche, whereas for Bentley it was a mimetic representation of contemporary behaviour. Though Tynan's element of psychology is echoed in Bentley's use of 'unhappy' in relation to Williams' women, these two perspectives on 'realism' are profoundly different. Tynan's 'psychological exploration of contemporary reality' encompasses a much larger canvas than Bentley's 'portraiture, especially of unhappy women'. Tynan's concept of realism extends beyond the representation of an individual character's misery and opens up the world that those characters inhabit to psychological examination. Tynan's understanding of the term, in the later essay at least, is closer to Williams' avowed purpose of laying bare the truth below surface appearance – the obfuscating 'Frigidaire' realism that Williams castigates in the Production Notes. Bentley, on the other hand, despite recognising Williams' lyrical recasting of 'real' speech, manages to read into Williams' plays a strand of 'realism' that is

⁸⁵ Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, p. 189.

⁸⁶ Bentley, 'Camino Unreal', *WT* p. 75.

dependent on mimetic accuracy and the audience's ability to recognise what is portrayed as familiar.

This disparity in meaning and understanding of the term 'realism' is by no means unusual. Raymond Williams explains the inherent difficulty in defining 'realism' in terms of its complex linguistic genesis. Williams points out that the distinction between appearance and reality that constitutes one modern expression of the term is related to the Platonic notion of an absolute, objective 'reality' independent of and hidden by everyday appearances:

The old doctrine of Realism was an assertion of the absolute and objective existence of universals, in the Platonic sense. These universal Forms or Ideas were held to either exist independently of the objects in which they were perceived, or to exist in such objects as their constituting properties.⁸⁷

This resonates with Tennessee Williams' view expressed in the Production Notes. The alternative and equally well used and understood meaning of 'real' – as opposed to 'imaginary' – denotes something tangible, not a 'reality' lying behind appearances, but a thing of substance, a concrete 'reality'. This meaning is closer to Bentley's understanding, where to be real is to be rooted in the recognisable. These two well-used, well-understood meanings are contradictory and the source of potential confusion. To confound us further, critics, as we have seen, have used both meanings in relation to Tennessee Williams, sometimes within the same review. It would therefore be useful to conclude this chapter by reviewing the terms 'realism' and 'naturalism' and how they relate Tennessee Williams' plastic theatre.

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Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, pp. 257-62.

Realism as a dramatic movement originated in the late nineteenth-century as a reaction to the melodramas and romances that preceded such writers as Ibsen and Chekov – the acknowledged as the fathers of twentieth-century drama. The Penguin *Dictionary of the Theatre* defines realism as the rejection of ‘the artificial conventions of subject matter, plot, and dialogue then prevailing [...] in favour of a more faithful depiction of real-life characters and situations’. Writers other than Chekov and Ibsen experimented at that time with a more realistic approach to theatre: In *The Theatre*, Phyllis Hartnoll says of A.W. Pinero and H. A. Jones, two English playwrights of the period:

Both men thought themselves realists and social critics, but both suffered from a tendency to run away from the issues they had raised, and their characters behaved more in accordance with the conventions of the theatre than those of real life.⁸⁸

This realism, known as ‘cup-and-saucer’ drama, consisted largely of rejecting the techniques and mannerisms of earlier, more stylised theatre. The staging, if not plot, of ‘cup-and-saucer’ dramas was mimetic. Thin plots made them significantly lesser dramas than those of later playwrights such as Odets. These early ‘realistic’ dramas made new and sweeping demands on both actors and staging as Hartnell explains:

The heavy delivery and broad gestures of earlier days were superseded by a quieter and more natural style of acting. The colourful but often irrelevant décors inherited from melodrama were replaced by somewhat more realistic furniture and settings. (p. 208)

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Hartnoll, *The Theatre: A Concise History*, p. 209.

Realism in drama was seen as mimetic, defined by its ability to reproduce faithfully real-life situations and recognisable characters. The development of theatrical realism can be seen as a linear progression from the mimetic style of cup-and-saucer drama, to Odets' social realism and then through naturalism to the psychological plays of O'Neill. Whereas social realists saw the early realists as failing to grapple with the 'real' issues of the day, they also saw naturalism and its associated psychological themes as wallowing in indulgent self-pity and similarly failing to deal with 'real' issues. At its inception 'realistic drama' was contrasted with melodrama and romance, but by the post-war period in which Williams was writing, 'realism' was being contrasted with, and challenged by, the European expressionist movement. But here again the lines are not clearly drawn. *The Dictionary of the Theatre* defines expressionism as: 'What is seen on stage is generally a representation of the hero's inner life, rather than any outer reality, and frequently has a dreamlike or nightmarish aspect' (p. 199). This definition of expressionism would sit comfortably with Tynan's 1960s description of realism as 'a psychological exploration' and as a description of *The Glass Menagerie*, despite the critical view of that play, expressed here by Bentley:

Today, [1954] when Ibsen's plays seem to many a trifle too 'well-made', it is *The Glass Menagerie* and *Member of the Wedding* [by Carson McCullers] that are considered utterly real.⁸⁹

The contrast with melodrama and romance is relatively straightforward, but the distinction between 'realism' and 'expressionism' is less clear-cut, particularly in relation to

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Bentley, 'The Ill-made Play', *WT*, p. 127.

Williams' plays. Bentley, whilst placing Williams' work within realist drama, sees a trend to expressionism in his plays. In his review of *Camino Real*, Bentley discusses the collaboration between Williams and Kazan, identifying Kazan's influence as rooting Williams' plays in 'reality', whilst also being largely responsible for the non-realistic element:

There is no doubt that Mr. Kazan has found his own way of lifting a performance above the trivial and naturalistic. Conversely, when the action tends towards the artifice of dance or ceremony, he knows how to keep it anchored in everyday reality [...] even when confronted with 'realistic' plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Death of Salesman*, he gave us phantasmagoria.⁹⁰

Bentley's use of 'phantasmagoria' refers here to the expressionist use of lighting and music to represent and echo Blanche's mental state. Bentley attributes this to Kazan's direction, but it is in Williams' original stage directions (we can only speculate what difference this might have made to Bentley's assessment of Williams as a 'realist' dramatist had he known that). The term 'phantasmagoria' carries notions of 'otherness', spiritualism, and mysticism, and is decidedly 'unreal' – a clear contrast not only with 'realistic' in this quotation, but also with Bentley's use of 'naturalism' earlier in the same review. In 'The Family 1954' Bentley uses 'naturalism' very differently:

As things are, I am going to retort that, though life may consist in an attempt not to get stuck in the mud, I do not think the aim of art should be to go back to the bog and wallow in it. Nor can I be conciliated by any talk of inoculation, a hair of the dog that bit me, or fighting fire with fire. The petty recording of

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Bentley, 'Camino Unreal' *WT*, p. 76-8.

naturalism has got to be transformed and transcended either by a larger realism or by poetic fantasy.⁹¹

The term here is clearly pejorative, and contrasted unfavourably with 'larger realism'. Yet Bentley's concept of 'naturalism' shifts: in his review of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, he is back using it as an almost acceptable development of realism:

The general scheme is that not only of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but also of *Death of a Salesman*: an exterior that is also an interior – but, more important, a view of *man's* exterior that is also a view of his interior, the habitat of his body and the country of his memories and dreams. A theatre historian would probably call this world a combination of naturalism and expressionism, yet one has no impression that it was arrived at by a mixture, or even by choice of styles: it is a by-product, or perhaps end product, of a certain sort of work which has its own history and identity. It is one of the distinctive creations of American theatre ... He has departed further from naturalism: just as there is less furniture and less scenery, so there is a less natural handling of actors, a more conscious concern with stagecraft, with pattern, with form.⁹²

Bentley's ambivalent and conflicting uses of 'naturalistic' highlight the difficulty in pinning down how the word is being used. Like realism, it is a term of considerable complexity and I need to briefly review its linguistic development in order to unravel its different uses.

Raymond Williams explains that the term was originally contrasted with things spiritual or Godly, and described things of this world as opposed to the supernatural.⁹³ The focus on human frailty and a 'natural' determinism led to a pejorative use of the term, where naturalism was perceived as eschewing the higher virtues and spiritual aspirations,

⁹¹ Bentley, 'The Family 1954', *WT*, p. 183

⁹² Bentley, 'Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan', *WT*, pp. 224-5.

⁹³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, pp. 216-9.

concentrating instead on the sordid and 'bestial' aspects of humanity. Naturalism in the theatre began as a development of realism that interpreted reality – particularly human behaviour – within its environmental context based on a deterministic concept of nature. Characters and situations were depicted using the analytic sciences of sociology, psychology and evolutionary biology, and tended to deal with previously ignored and 'shocking' themes such as divorce, sexuality, and social alienation. Though 'naturalism' was, and is still, used occasionally in its original sense, it is in the latter, pejorative sense that Bentley – 'the petty recording of naturalism' – and other critics most often use the term. The confused usage of both 'realism' and 'naturalism' reflects the sense of critical discomfort with work that refused to sit comfortably within accepted categories. It was not that critics were necessarily rejecting expressionism or even dramatic experimentation, but that the desire to define, to comprehend within an accepted framework, dominated the critical response. The ambiguities and contradictions essential to Williams' drama were too unsettling for the cultural context: the plays pushed too hard at the limits of what Raymond Williams called 'the structure of feeling', and the plasticity of Williams' drama, which was consciously rejecting realism, was ignored, or re-interpreted.

After the success of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Tennessee Williams' reputation as a realist playwright was set in stone. The weight of critical opinion expressed in the theatre reviews was considerable; experimental and expressionist elements of his plays were deleted by directors, dismissed, or ignored by reviewers, and generally excised from both critical and public perception, so that the resulting view of his plays could be comfortably contained

within the concept of 'realist' drama. *Camino Real*, which defied all efforts to be recast as 'realistic' attracted some of the most vituperative comments of all his plays during this period. The big successes, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* continued to dominate the public's view of Williams' work and were performed regularly, reaching an even wider audience with their film versions. The films made crucial changes to the original script that only reinforced the effect of the stage edits, pushing public and critical perception even further from Williams' plastic vision towards a more comfortable realism. The view of Williams as a realist also informed the literary criticism of Williams for many years, obscuring the nature of plastic theatre and the extent of Williams' innovation and achievement, and it is this that I discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Private Tragedy: The Hardening of a Reputation

Despite being widely regarded as one of the three greatest American playwrights, Tennessee Williams did not impress Raymond Williams as a significant dramatist. Although Raymond Williams acknowledged that Williams' work 'was intensely influential in the theatre', he merits only half page in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1964) and little more than a page in *Modern Tragedy* (1966).⁹⁴ Raymond Williams sees Williams as a 'dramatist of the casebook', a writer locked in introspective portrayal of personal angst who doesn't comment or elucidate in his plays, but 'simply demonstrates'.⁹⁵ It was Raymond Williams who first used the much-quoted description of Williams' characters as 'beings who desire and eat and fight alone' (*MT*, p. 119). He saw Williams' plays as peculiarly personal tragedies that revolved around a struggle between sex and death. To Williams – a Marxist cultural critic – this was an abdication of social responsibility, and ultimately dehumanising:

The turning away from the social dimension is also, and inevitably, a turning away from persons. It is an attempt to create the individual person without *any* relationships. (*MT* p. 138)

Underlying the different perspectives of Williams the critic and Williams the dramatist are profoundly different views of society and the individual, of integration and wholeness. If Tennessee Williams had a romantic view of the individual, Raymond Williams had a romantic

⁹⁴ Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, p. 267. Further references are given in the text as *DIB*.

⁹⁵ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, pp. 119-120. Further references are given in the text as *MT*.

view of society. Raymond Williams clearly felt that Tennessee Williams romanticised the self in his focus on the separateness of the individual rather than his relationship to the society that surrounded him. Raymond Williams' assumptions of social wholeness are equally romantic and ultimately lead him to a narrow and historically insensitive reading of Tennessee Williams' work. In particular Raymond Williams, though writing in the 1960s, does not seem to have detected the challenges and shifts in the structure of feeling associated with that decade (see Chapter 5). Raymond Williams was embedded in an earlier structure of feeling based on Marxist notions of the individual, society and history, and for him Tennessee Williams' plays represented the final stage in a negative process of theatrical experiment that served only to divert the mainstream of drama into a cultural dead-end at odds with his concept of society:

The tragedy of individual persons, which began in the struggles of the aspiring mind, ends as the fierce animal struggle and relapse: in the single act of sex, where there is a communication in which mind has tragically failed; an act of life and death, in the same rhythms, the tense and cruel struggle consummated at last in relapse. The end of the sex, the fierce humping life-struggle, is death. (*MT*, p. 120)

Because of this Raymond Williams' brief assessment of Williams' drama fails to recognise the significance and political import of Williams and the contribution he makes to the dramatic tradition.

Raymond Williams developed the concepts and terms that enabled the move from a narrow, elitist concept of 'art as culture' to the broader, now widely accepted understanding of the place of art within a complex social, cultural and historical context. His examination of the term 'convention' and his concept of 'the structure of feeling' were key elements in that

process and are relevant to my re-evaluation Tennessee Williams' drama. In the Introduction to *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* Williams discusses the meaning of 'convention' and its relationship to drama, highlighting the ambiguity that underlies our use of the term: 'convention covers both *tacit consent* and *accepted standards*, and it is easy to see that the latter has often been understood as a formal set of rules' (p. 13). In creating new forms of drama the artist transgresses both definitions of convention: the artist's challenge to the 'conventional' trespasses on the tacit agreement between author and audience that is the dramatic convention as it pushes at the boundaries of the familiar forms of art. It is the combination of these actions by the artist that produces the tension that surrounds 'new' work:

But it is unfortunate that *convention* and *conventional* should have been so heavily compromised. For an artist only leaves one convention to follow or create another; this is the whole basis of his communication [...] In the actual practice of drama, the convention in any particular case, is simply the terms upon which author, performers and audience agree to meet. (p.13)

Williams recognises that one of the artist's primary roles in social and cultural development is to reveal hidden or unacknowledged realities through challenging and innovative forms.

Arthur Miller in the *Plays: One* describes his creative impetus thus:

These plays, in one sense, are my response to what was 'in the air,' they are one man's way of saying to his fellow men, 'This is what you see every day, or think or feel; now I will show you what you really know but have not had the time, or the disinterestedness, or the insight, or the information to understand consciously'. (p. 11)

But in presenting the audience with a new perspective on their lives, the artist is often at odds with the convention of the time. The unacknowledged reality that Miller, and others, seek to bring to the fore is often not immediately embraced by the audience and can be further from the surface of public consciousness than the artist both desires and expects. There is therefore a crucial tension in drama between working within the, usually tacitly, agreed compact between audience and dramatist about what is acceptable representation and the artist's desire to forge new perspectives and modes of expression. It is in this space of cultural tension that Williams crafted his drama and where Raymond Williams in his attempt to understand the nature of this tension develops his concept of 'structure of feeling'.⁹⁶ But Raymond Williams was unable to share or even apprehend the convention within which Tennessee Williams was working and the possibilities of change to the structure of feeling that it implied.

Williams introduces the term 'structure of feeling' in the Introduction to *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, developing it further in *Modern Tragedy* in his examination of the historical development of tragedy. The concept is relevant to understanding not only Williams' reaction but also the general reaction of contemporary reviewers and more recent critics to Tennessee Williams, particularly in respect of the later plays (see Section 3). The concept of structure of feeling explains why we are now better placed to re-evaluate those late plays.

Raymond Williams' structure of feeling describes the relationship of the creative and distinctive output of the individual dramatist to the general period or style:

⁹⁶ Although Williams first uses the term 'structure of feeling' in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1952), a fuller explanation is given in *The Long Revolution* (1961) pp. 64-67.

It is to explore this essential relationship that I use the term 'structure of feeling'. What I am seeking to describe is the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period. (*DIB*, p. 17)

Williams' describes the organic nature of the continuity of experience and explains that the thread that binds a work to its cultural context is not solely 'artistic' experience, but rests on his wider definition of culture as 'not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work [...] but a whole way of life'.⁹⁷ The structure of feeling should be seen more as a cultural matrix, a complex of diffuse but related influences rather than a simple set of readily discernible influencing factors.

[The structure of feeling] is a way of responding to a particular world which in practice is not felt as one way amongst others – a conscious 'way' – but is, in experience, the only way possible. Its means, its elements, are not propositions or techniques; they are embodied related feelings. (*DIB*, p. 18)

In the structure of feeling the feelings and responses are embedded in each other and the fabric of the period, leaving no space for partial analysis or response but instead operate as a complex organic whole. This sense of 'wholeness' is characteristic of Williams and reverberates through his work on drama, culture and society. He recognises that the wholeness of the structure of feeling hinders a 'conscious' response or objective evaluation of it, acknowledging the difficulty in distinguishing or describing current structures of feeling:

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Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. xvi. Further references will be given in the text as CS.

But then it follows, from the whole emphasis of the term, that it is precisely the structure of feeling which is most difficult to distinguish while it is still being lived. (*DIB*, p. 18)

But I argue that it is not only difficult to distinguish the operating structure of feeling – it is also difficult to discern the significance of changes developing within that structure heralding the emergence of new structures of feeling. This hindered Raymond Williams' own assessment of Tennessee Williams' importance.

The structure of feeling, made up as it is of 'material life, the general social organization and [...] the dominant ideas' is not a static or settled entity, but is in a constant dynamic of development, dominance, challenge and eclipse (*DIB*, p. 17). Raymond Williams' structure of feeling implies an iterative process, evident though not explicit in Williams' *Modern Tragedy* as he describes the move from one tragic form to another against a background of the changing cultural context. The development of a new structure of feeling comes about as a process of challenge to the established order that then becomes established and achieves dominance in its turn. It is then itself vulnerable to challenge from new ideas outside the established conventions and values. These challenges come from all parts of the structure – social, political, artistic, and economic – at different times and in different ways. There is no homogeneity or consciousness about this; it is part, if you will, of the dynamic of the social and historical process, with all the confusion, uncertainty and contradictions which that implies. As Williams points out, in the challenging of established orders a new idea is seen as 'a deep *personal* feeling' which to the particular writer seems 'unique, almost incommunicable, and lonely' (p. 18). But these formative ideas don't operate in isolation,

though it may seem so at the time when their significance is obscured by the dominance of the current structure of feeling.

Yet again and again, when that structure of feeling has been absorbed, it is the connections, the correspondences, even the period similarities, which spring most readily to the eye. (*DIB*, p. 18)

The isolated 'deep *personal* feeling' of new ideas that Williams identifies is immediately socialised by being incorporated as part of the developing structure of feeling. The new structure emerges despite the criticism and rejection of the new ideas by the established forms, as a growing number of people respond to and identify with the voice of the new ideas. Williams sees this process of identification coming precisely from the intensity and personal nature of the artist's ideas.

He will seem to be speaking to them, for their own deepest sense of life, just because he was speaking for himself. (*DIB*, p. 19)

In this the artist clearly has a pivotal contribution to make in the development of the structure of feeling: it is the artist who explores and experiments at the boundaries of the structure, challenging the people and the times to resonate to his vision. It is my contention, from the perspective of some forty years later, that Raymond Williams was as much a captive of the structure of feeling of the 1950s and 1960s as previous generations had been. The strength of Williams' personal commitment to his politics coupled with the Marxist dominance of the Left during this period helped obscure the fact that this structure of feeling was ultimately as vulnerable as any other to challenge. When Raymond Williams encounters the

personal, he encapsulates it in a social context, because it is from his sense of the wholeness of society, its organic indestructibility, that he finds meaning. But ironically, it is only by understanding and using Raymond Williams' concept of structure of feeling that we can understand and re-evaluate the 'difficult' plays of writers like Tennessee Williams. Not only is it the instinct of the dominant culture, expressed in the current structure of feeling, to reject overtly critical ideas, but new ideas are often incomprehensible when viewed in the terms, as inevitably they must be, of the dominant structure. It is therefore almost impossible to distinguish from the mass of new thought and artistic endeavour that which will survive to form part of a new structure of feeling. It is not surprising then that it is often only from the later perspective of a new structure of feeling that the 'incomprehensible' makes sense. This explains Raymond Williams' perspective on Tennessee Williams and why he didn't recognise the importance of the challenge to the current conventions of drama, but saw instead only an isolated private tragedy.

In *Modern Tragedy* Raymond Williams' notion of 'private tragedy' is based primarily on the drama of Strindberg, with 'the significant line' in American drama after Strindberg running from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams (p. 115). Raymond Williams, from within a pre-1960s structure of feeling, sees Ibsen's and Miller's liberal tragedy, with the socially alienated victim-hero, as part of the historical mainstream of theatre. Drama that pitted the individual against a hostile or repressive society was more compatible with Marxist notions of a dialectical process than one in which Williams felt there was no discernible sense of society at all. Consequently, he views the 'private' tragedy of O'Neill and Tennessee Williams as a self-

willed abandonment of society and relationships. Williams places Tennessee

Williams at the end of this unproductive line of drama, as a 'dramatist of the case-book', a mere demonstrator – not even an elucidator or dramatic philosopher that he allows O'Neill to be – unable to see the political dimension to 'private' tragedy. Instead Raymond Williams sees a stultifying nihilistic view of society in 'private tragedy' which traps the individual in a dead-end of inevitable self-destruction. Tragedy comes, not from a particular history, character weakness or malign Fate as in classic drama, but from the process of living itself:

The storm of living does not have to be raised by any personal action; it begins when we are born, and our exposure to it is absolute. (*MT*, p. 106)

These are tragedies that do not end, but begin with man 'bare and unaccommodated', and 'all primary energy is centred in this isolated creature who desires and eats and fights alone' (*MT*, p. 106). Tragedy no longer falls on some, but all. It is endemic, inherent in the isolated situation of each being – 'a tragedy that has got into the bloodstream' (*MT*, p. 114). The dynamics of these private tragedies are worked out in the struggles of isolated creatures, one with another and in the frustration of their desires – desires which include self-destruction and death. There is 'no justice, no external law; but there is hurt and revenge, exposure and hatred' (*MT*, p. 110). Private tragedy depicts the human condition as hopelessly locked in a struggle that is doomed from birth. The outcome is inevitable and leads beyond even deadlock to stalemate. There is no hope or energy in the struggle of existence. Private tragedy is instead a denial of any useful social structure and eradicates any hope or scope for individual or collective growth or change. It is no wonder that the Marxist Raymond Williams found such a

vision unacceptable. This is not only a conflict of hope and pessimism, but of public and private. Growth and self-fulfilment come, for Raymond Williams, through the network of relationships that make 'society', through being part of a greater 'whole', and he believes the notion of the isolated individual of private tragedy to be inaccurate, unhelpful and leaving drama, and society, nowhere to go.

In order to understand Raymond Williams' dismissal of Tennessee Williams we need to understand Williams' commitment to his notion of society. In *The Long Revolution* Williams describes the ways individuals and societies relate, but he sees a relationship between the individual and society as both inescapable and dynamic. Because Raymond Williams was deeply embedded in the Marxist dominated structure of feeling experienced by many 1950s intellectuals, he cannot conceptualise the non-society he sees portrayed in personal tragedy – his instinct is always to socialise the personal. Nor can he conceive of a structure without rights or responsibilities or condone those who would deny such rights and responsibilities within it. Drawing on Erich Fromm's concept of 'social character', Williams sees the individual both shaped by and shaping the social context in which he/she lives. He also argues that the 'abstract individual', who is at the heart of private tragedy, is 'a product of a particular social and historical situation rather than a correct reading of the general human condition'⁹⁸ where the self-contained creature 'desires, eats and drinks alone' (*MT*, p. 119). Reworking the isolated creature of private tragedy into an aberrant product of society is an example of Williams' desire to encapsulate the private in the social. It pushes private tragedy to one side,

⁹⁸

Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 98. Further references will be cited in the text as *LR*.

leaving Williams' assessment of Tennessee Williams' characters intact and unchallenged. It is a crucial step for Raymond Williams which defuses the threat to his belief in the wholeness of society, and to the structure of feeling in which his thinking was embedded. But something was happening to the structure of feeling even as Williams was writing which now enables us to reassess Tennessee Williams' work.

The post-war period from the 1950s through to the early 1970s saw a seismic shift in thinking in the West, and the 1960s were a pivotal point in that change. The structure of feeling current when Raymond Williams was writing and *A Streetcar Named Desire* was being performed, namely one that revolved around the 'big idea' of Marxism and its challenge to (American) capitalism, was itself already being challenged and out of this emerged the recognition of the political in the personal (see chapter 5). The radical intellectual contribution of this shift in thinking was to enable the issues of identity, gender, race and sexuality, to be seen as socially and politically determined and constructed – a perspective that transforms the 'private' tragedies of Tennessee Williams' plays into political dramas.

Other critics writing before 1990 took a more kindly view of Williams' work, but even they did not appreciate the full import of plastic theatre, tending to see Williams' plays within the parameters set by reviewers, focussing on the major successes and dismissing the later works as failed experiments or inadequate attempts at Williams' old realism. In *Tennessee Williams* (1987) Roger Boxhill devotes seven of the ten chapters to plays before 1961 and only one deals with the last twenty years of Williams' work from 1962-1981. Though Boxhill recognises the experimental nature of some of the later plays, he gives them scant attention,

eager to identify traces of the 'old' Williams, and readily relapsing into biographical interpretations:

A few plays from the early and middle 1960s, such as *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, venture into the theatre of the absurd. Their black humour illustrates the new bitterness. Their anti-naturalism, however, is continuous with the willingness to experiment to be found in early one-act plays and short stories twenty years before them. Williams's more characteristic mode of lyric naturalism returns in the late 1960s and early 1970s with plays such as *Kingdom of Earth* and *Small Craft Warnings*. His final works, such as *Kirche, Kutchen und Kinder* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, gravitate toward the autobiographical material out of which his earliest had begun.⁹⁹

Christopher Bigsby's contribution to the critical perception of Williams is significant, not least because of the quantity of his comment on Williams and his work. Bigsby has been writing on Williams for more than 30 years, and unlike Williams' contemporary reviewers and critics, Bigsby has never been tempted to see him as a realist playwright: in *Modern American Drama* he states that: 'Williams was never interested in realism. Like O'Neill before him he was hostile to an art of surfaces'.¹⁰⁰ This view echoes Williams' own in the Production Notes, but Bigsby's reading of Williams does not examine or recognise the challenging aspects of plastic theatre. Although amongst the first to recognise the social element to Williams' early plays – *Candle in the Sun* (1935), *Fugitive Kind* (1937) and *Not About Nightingales* (1938) – his fundamental position has been that Williams work was 'romantic' rather than 'realistic': 'His aim was to create a lyric theatre, a poetic theatre in which, as with a poetic image, opposites

⁹⁹ Boxhill, *Tennessee Williams*, p. 146.

¹⁰⁰ Bigsby, *Modern American Drama*, p. 35. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text, prefaced with *MAD* where necessary.

could be yoked together'.¹⁰¹ The concept of Williams as an embattled romantic emerges early in *Confrontation and Commitment* where Bigsby writes of Williams as 'concentrating on the plight of the romantic in an unromantic world'.¹⁰² The alienation described here develops into a more comprehensive criticism of Williams as a private rather than public individual, which has much in common with Raymond Williams' 'private tragedy' described earlier;

His radicalism was neither Marxist, nor liberal. In a way, indeed, it was profoundly conservative. What he wanted above all was for the individual to be left alone, insulated from the pressure of public events. (pp. 35-6)

Though Bigsby rejects the view of those who would see Williams only as 'a southern gothicist, or the mordant poet of dissolution and despair' (*MAD* p. 35), he incorporates these qualities into his concept of romanticism. Bigsby describes a morbid paranoia in Williams later writing, particularly in his treatment of time and ageing, identifying it as a defining theme in Williams' drama, and again, sharing with Raymond Williams the view that Tennessee Williams' characters are self-obsessed, marginalised and irrelevant to the public and social issues of the 'real' world. But where Raymond Williams, having identified Williams' characters' self-obsession and lack of social relevance, dismisses Williams' 'private tragedy' as a dramatic dead end, Bigsby – although largely sharing the same concerns – gives them a dramatic relevance by defining them as romantic. He contrasts this to his concept of realism – which does encompass

¹⁰¹ Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* Volume 2, p. 46-7. Subsequent page references to this volume will be made in the text, and where necessary prefaced *CIT2*.

¹⁰² Bigsby, *Confrontation and Commitment, A Study of Contemporary American Drama 1959-66*, p. 20.

social concerns – establishing a key binary opposition in his reading of Williams.

Bigsby's assessment of Williams throughout is couched in terms of conflicting choices – binary juxtapositions that demand resolution: public versus private; internalised versus external; real versus imaginative; logic versus ambiguity; clarity versus uncertainty. This insistent need to clarify and resolve is fundamentally at odds with Williams' view that the truth is complex and conflicted. It places Williams and Bigsby on opposite sides of an emotional and intellectual divide.

In *Confrontation and Commitment* (1967), Bigsby writes of a period of American Drama after Williams' most successful plays and concentrates on writers like Albee, Baldwin and Hansberry and deals with Williams only in passing. However the themes that emerge in more detail in Bigsby's later criticism first appear here where we can see the context of their genesis. Although Bigsby sees strong links between Williams and O'Neill in their 'compassionate justification of illusion', in 1967 he compares O'Neill and Williams unfavourably with later dramatists (p. 18): 'Where Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neil had given a qualified blessing to pipe dreams this new generation of dramatists [Albee, Gerber and late Miller] sees little purpose in pretence' (p. 24). Bigsby's preference for the concrete over the imaginative is shown in the dismissive 'pipe-dreams' and 'pretence' which also implicitly link a pejorative notion of illusion and fantasy to his concept of romanticism. Bigsby's notion of romanticism is a fundamentally negative concept, but one that he renders acceptable by boxing it as 'poetic'. *Confrontation and Commitment* was written during Williams' period of dramatic experimentation in the 1960s when his work was either largely reviled or ignored

entirely. Notwithstanding the view of Williams at the time, Bigsby's criticisms seem particularly harsh, describing 'the grotesquely trite symbolism which we associate with Tennessee Williams' (p. 65) and his expressionist staging as 'strewing his stage with any number of highly significant objects. The result, however, is less to generate genuine dramatic effect than it is to simulate the appearance of a 42nd street junk store' (p. 89). We also see the beginnings of Bigsby's assessment of Williams as morbidly paranoid in his description of O'Neill and Williams 'recoiling in terror and fear' at the contemplation of man's metaphysical situation (p. xvi). A more sustained analysis of Williams appears in Bigsby's *Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, Volume 2.

Bigsby's categorisation of Williams as 'romantic' rather than 'realistic' needs clarification. 'Romantic' is a difficult and elusive word, and to understand how Bigsby really sees Williams it is necessary to pin down what he means by the term. Raymond Williams analyses the development of 'romantic' from its sixteenth century origins – meaning 'characterized by a freedom of imagination' incorporating an element of sentimentality and extravagance – to its nineteenth century use as a literary term where the concept of a liberated imagination is joined by the idea of a similar liberation from convention, both literary and social.¹⁰³ It is when 'romantic' becomes a literary description that it also embodies notions of authenticity. This idea of authenticity resonates with Williams' assertion that theatre should provide a 'more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are'.¹⁰⁴ Bigsby's notion of 'romantic' as he applies it to Williams crucially does not encompass ideas of authenticity, but is

¹⁰³ Williams, *Keywords*, p. 275-6.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, p. 131.

closer to the somewhat pejorative views of romanticism of Granville Hicks

described in Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*: 'But this is the purest romanticism, this writing about what ought to be rather than what is!'¹⁰⁵ For Bigsby, the authentic is inextricably linked to the real, tangible world, not the romantic imagination he sees in Williams' idea of truth:

To him the word 'truth' refers to a level of authenticity denied by the very conditions of social existence. The lies which Blanche clings to and which Stella must finally endorse are necessary gestures forced on them by the exigencies of life. (*CIT2*, p. 67)

This is a significant difference in the understanding of 'authentic' and 'truth' between Williams and Bigsby: the 'truth' that Williams is attempting to reveal through plastic theatre is merely a fabric of 'lies' to Bigsby. Truth is an external commodity for Bigsby, one that exists in the real world and is both capable of definition and validation: to view it as a mutable entity hidden by appearances, containing contradictory elements and shifting with circumstance and perspective, is to have lost a sense of reality and to inhabit a world of illusion. Bigsby sees the depiction of alternative realities as psychologically suspect rather than an exposure of a more authentic 'reality':

His figures desperately reshape the world they inhabit, and it is the gulf between this factitious world and the one that threatens to pull them into its coercive influence which generates the anxious energy of his work – an energy the more compelling because its residue is a disturbance of the very idea of an equable norm [...] those characters that survive the trauma of the play's action stare into a future drained of moral content. (*CIT2*, p. 18-19)

¹⁰⁵

Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 13.

Williams' characters' not only display mental instability – 'the disturbance of [...] an equable norm' – but by inserting 'the very idea' into the phrase, Bigsby is subtly suggesting a further layer of corrosion to their actions: they not only damage their own normality, the 'very idea' of normality is damaged by them and their corrosive influence extends into the wider social fabric. This assumption of social corrosiveness is never explicitly articulated or examined by Bigsby, but it underpins the moralising, judgmental tone of much of his criticism of Williams' drama. Bigsby's imposition of judgmental comment on Williams' characters is at odds with the deliberately non-judgmental dramatic stance that is an integral element of Williams' portrayal of complex and contradictory identities. However, Bigsby is uncomfortable with Williams' fundamental proposition that 'realistic' drama obscures rather than reveals truth and 'that truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest [...] only through transformation'. He consistently favours certainty over ambiguity, and the concrete over the imagined, rejecting any notion of an imaginative truth as is evident when he compares Miller and Williams:

Where Miller responded directly to historical process, seeing this as an assertion of the causality on which moral behaviour is based, Williams wished to deny history. For Miller, the past contained the clue to present behaviour. In many ways it was the source of guilt but equally of a claim exerted on the conscience. If the link with the past was cut, the chord which bound individual to individual and each individual to responsibility for his own actions would also be severed. For Williams, the past plays a different role because he sees truth as being more problematic, more generously defined; for him, as for his characters, illusions are no less true than the realities they are invented to deny. (*CIT2*, p. 30)

Williams' idea of truth that underlies perceived reality is here dismissed as an 'illusion' and placed in opposition to a notion of reality more readily acceptable to Bigsby. Although he is here talking about the way both writers deal with the abstract concept of time, the linear logic of Miller with its clear and definite steps is clearly more attractive to Bigsby than Williams' complex and ambiguous depiction of the past. Bigsby's language is indicative of his unspoken preference: Miller's past 'contains' information, whereas Williams' past 'plays a role'; one uses language of the tangible and real – 'history', logic and explanation – the other denies reality in the artifice of play and pipe-dreams; Miller's understanding of the past has a moral dimension – explaining, and judging behaviour – binding 'each individual to responsibility for his own actions'; Williams' characters' self-induced illusions 'deny reality' and refuse to explain, or pass judgement on their actions. Bigsby identifies a social dimension to Miller's concept of the past, 'the chord which bound individual to individual' – a clear link with the 'real' world of social interaction. This is in clear contrast to Williams' characters' 'illusions' and alienated existence. The elusiveness and ambiguities of Williams' drama are described by Bigsby in language – 'problematic', 'generously defined' – that reduces it to marginalised, albeit skilful, artifice divorced from reality, whereas Miller is described in definitive, concrete terms – 'historical process', 'causality', 'responsibility', 'bound' – which place him at the heart of the world as it is currently perceived: a world that Bigsby feels comfortable in and one in tune with the current structure of feeling. Bigsby, like Raymond Williams, views the failure to connect with society as both weak and morally suspect, 'These are not people who play their part in the great commercial enterprise of America' (*CIT2*, p. 4).

For Bigsby *the* defining feature of romanticism is its retreat from reality and this definitive binary opposition is the ultimate contrast that neatly boxes any challenge to accepted norms as irrelevant. He sees Williams' early social issue plays – *Not about Nightingales* (1938), *Fugitive Kind* (1937), *Candles to The Sun* (1935) – not as political or anti-capitalist, but 'a romantic's reaction against the modern' (*CIT2*, p. 33). Bigsby describes Tom's recourse to poetry in *The Glass Menagerie* as 'a familiar strategy of romanticism' where 'the self becomes its own source of authority against an imprisoning world' (p. 44). In identifying this reflexive self-validation as romantic Bigsby strengthens the implicit link he has made between romanticism and alienation, but also categorises all attempts at self-definition inhabiting a world of paranoia. The traits that Bigsby sees in Williams' work and characters – lyricism, paranoia, self-obsession, alienation – are not just closely linked to his concept of romanticism, they *are* his concept of romanticism, and in distinct contrast to any notion of authenticity normally associated with the literary use of romantic.

Just as Bigsby opposes romanticism to reality, he avoids any consideration of authenticity based on Williams' shifting imaginative constructs, preferring the more comfortable linear logic of 'reality', and uses the lyricism and poetry in Williams to contain more profound notions of identity. Whilst acknowledging the power of Williams' lyricism – 'a striking blend of prosaic literalness and poetic yearning, half pathos and half genuine lyricism' – he fails to acknowledge significant themes underlying and informing Williams' style, preferring to contain uncomfortable challenges to accepted thinking in easily dismissed boxes labelled 'poetic' or 'paranoid'. Writing of Williams' period of commercial and critical success –

'that brief but brilliant decade and a half between the mid 1940s and the late 1950s' (*CIT2*, p. 19) – he implicitly aligns himself with those reviewers, like Walter Kerr (see Chapter 3), who greeted what they saw as Williams' decline more in sorrow than in anger. The tone of this critical analysis, based as it is on an implied betrayal of a personal relationship between critic and writer is patronising and the sense of hurt disappointment lacks critical objectivity. It is often, as in Bigsby's case, accompanied by biographical references describing Williams' lyricism as fuelled by a personal destructive tendency:

His own destructive tensions were transformed into powerful images of alienation and despair, and when his private search for self-definition was forged into a poetic rhetoric whose incompletions were an expression of a faltering language of the dispossessed. (*CIT2*, p. 19)

The concepts of identity and self-definition are key to Williams' plastic theatre and warrant more than dismissal as a purely personal, if poetic, neurosis. Whilst I would not deny the significance of Williams' personal situation to his dramaturgy, I do take issue with Bigsby's recourse to biographical detail as a form of analysis – to paraphrase D.H. Lawrence, it's not the artist, it's the tale that should be the focus of our critical attention.¹⁰⁶ It is a moot point whether Bigsby's focus on Williams' personal life obscures, for him, the more profound themes underlying the characterisation, or whether he uses personal detail to avoid, however unconsciously, the challenges to the status quo that Williams' drama poses. Bigsby marginalises two crucial themes in Williams: the question of identity is safely contained within

¹⁰⁶ 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.' D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, p. 8.

the concept of the poetic, and the problems of contradiction are anaesthetised as incoherent neurotic ramblings.

Bigsby's reading of Williams' treatment of time is particularly coloured by reference to Williams' personal history:

This concern with time is deeply rooted in a personal neurosis about mortality, which took Williams to the psychiatrist's couch and to the physician's office. (*CIT2*, p. 49)

Time is an important theme in Williams: his concern with ageing appears frequently in his plays, but Williams' characters' desire to manipulate time is an expression of anti-realism that reflects more than a purely personal fear of death. Bigsby continually reminds us of Williams' uncertain mental history and there is an implicit criticism embodied in these comments that sees such neuroses as both weak and self-inflicted. He describes Williams' characters as being threatened not by forces 'external to their actions and their moral sensibilities' but by something within them. He cannot resist extending this psychological analysis to Williams himself: 'They have lost their grasp in their lives and their obsessive concern, like that of their creator, is with mortality' (*CIT2*, p. 110). I do not deny that both Williams and his characters at times display signs of mental instability: what I am objecting to is the conflation of the two being offered up as a literary analysis without further consideration of wider significances. Bigsby is overly conscious of Williams' mental history and his view that Williams' characters 'were one means of filling the void [for Williams] if only by pluralising himself' pushes Bigsby

irrevocably towards a reading of Williams as a dramatist of personal angst and negligible social relevance. This is, of course, a view he shares with Raymond Williams.

The blurring of artist and work is most evident in Bigsby's sustained and extensive examination of personal angst in Williams. His view is succinctly expressed in the following comparison with Scott Fitzgerald:

Self-justification mixes with self-accusation as, like Scott Fitzgerald, Williams tries to trace the origins of personal collapse. And, increasingly, it becomes apparent that his work emerges from precisely that paranoia which had typified his life [...] Both men tended to see the vocation of writer as essentially a romantic one. (CIT2, p. 15)

Here the key elements in Bigsby's reading of Williams and the intimate relationships between them are laid bare: self-obsession develops from mental instability which then becomes paranoiac and consequently, and finally, defines both writers and their works as romantic. Mental and moral weakness is implicit in Bigsby's notion of romanticism. He identifies a tendency to self-obsession developing after the successes of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, particularly in the much-criticised plays of the mid-to-late 1960s. He describes the alienated self-absorption which he sees in them as a corruption of Williams' former lyricism:

The allusiveness of language in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* gives way to the empty rhetoric and self-regarding complaints of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* and *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*. His sympathy for the spiritually and materially dispossessed degrades into a coy celebration of the deviant, the emotionally incomplete and the wilfully perverse. (CIT2, p.16)

Bigsby's criticism of the 'self-obsessed', 'alienated individuals' is developed in *Modern American Drama*. The title of the chapter on Williams, 'The Theatricalising Self' is indicative of both tone and content, for 'theatricalising' is full of layered meaning: it refers most obviously to the performance within the performance that Bigsby sees as defining Williams' characters – their self-dramatisation through memory, lies and illusion; but it also carries an implicit suggestion of mental and moral weakness in the self-obsession of the 'drama-queen'. I use this latter term advisedly, for though Bigsby doesn't use it, Williams' homosexuality haunts Bigsby and is implicit in his description of Williams as choosing 'to dramatise himself as an alienated romantic'. Bigsby draws attention to the historical and political context of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* and its impact on dramatists' notions and depiction of identity:

Certainly American notions of the autonomous self, secure and morally inviolable seemed suddenly more difficult to sustain. The enemy was no longer simple modernity, the inhuman scale, the mechanical rhythms against which Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice, Sidney Kingsley and the young Miller and Williams had railed. It was the flaw in the sensibility that made betrayal seem a natural impulse and the self complicit in its own annihilation. It was no longer a case of pitching an integral self against anonymity and social despair for now that self is presented as fragmented and insecure. (*MAD*, p. 31)

Bigsby identifies the important shift from integrated to fragmented identity in Williams' drama, but despite the reference to historical context and American notions of self, he internalises the fragmented identity in his description as 'a flaw in the sensibility', regarding the individual as responsible for their 'own annihilation' (p. 31). In so doing, he removes responsibility for the fragmentation out of the social and political arena, and the issue of

identity morphs from being one caused by the upheaval of the Second World War, to being a fault-line in the individual's psychological make-up. It is unclear how or why something caused by external events, and operating in the hard-edged 'real' world of war, becomes internalised as personal weakness, where the individual is to blame. The juxtaposition of the external and internal appears frequently in Bigsby's analysis, where the external is synonymous with strength and certainty and the internal with weakness and ambivalence. This binary opposition is reflected in Bigsby's treatment of self and identity, where the integrated self operates successfully in the world of external reality, but the fractured self retreats to an internalised illusion of reality. The notion of fractured identity underpins Bigsby's term 'theatricalising' and imbues it with the psychological weakness that Bigsby sees in an identity without integrity. For Bigsby, to be other than whole is to be less than whole, a view with impressive antecedents (see Chapter 7), but one that was not shared by Williams. Bigsby argues that it is through theatricalising that Williams and his characters build an identity that enables them to survive. He sees this is an overlay of a fictive, but ostensibly whole identity over the fractured weakness of the 'real' one – the complex identities of Williams' characters are reduced to weak personas hiding behind performance. Bigsby links the romanticism in Williams' drama to Williams' decision to 'present himself' as a 'romantic in an unromantic world' thus enabling him to recast the 'failed enterprise that is life with nothing more than language and the imagination'. Romanticism becomes a device of alienation that Williams and his characters choose in order to remove themselves from a world they can't cope with and to reconstruct a more palatable alternative from the

imagination. It is thus linked to issues of identity, and this self-regarding, self-determined alienated individual, who withdraws from social interaction and responsibility is precisely what Raymond Williams finds objectionable but Bigsby, by categorising it as poetic, renders it more acceptable.

Bigsby's notion of romanticism is founded on notions of paranoia and mental instability, of a retreat from the 'real', a self-obsessed, self-centric view of the world. Williams' characters' attempts to survive in a hostile world become acts of desperation that try to reshape and reinvent their worlds – acts that Bigsby sees as 'the essence of their romanticism' and evidence of mental instability and the romantic's fragile hold on reality, rather than, as I perceive them to be, attempts at self-definition by marginalized individuals rejecting the identities imposed by a dominant culture (*CIT2*, p. 15). Bigsby sees attempts at self-definition as removed from any external reference point and therefore suspect. He operates uncritically from within the dominant culture, accepting its governing principles of wholeness, unity, integrated identities, culturally accepted norms and unambiguous values, and he privileges external validation over internalized insight. Consequently the current cultural constructs, inevitably validated by numerous external references, constitute the 'real' for Bigsby and he regards challenges to those constructs as both perverse and illusory. He marginalizes Williams' dramatic innovations as poetic and romantic, self-obsessed and paranoid, effectively emasculating them, whilst failing to recognize the cultural criticisms they represent.

Williams' plastic theatre challenged the theatrical realism of the time but was initially not recognized because of Dowling's decisions as director of the original production of *The*

Glass Menagerie. This influenced reviewers and audiences alike who both tended to see the subsequent plays – *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Rose Tattoo* and *Night of the Iguana* – as yet more examples of realist drama, and to dismiss the more problematic ones – *Orpheus Descending*, *Camino Real* and everything after 1962 – as failures. But when Williams' work attracted the attention of literary critics, his reputation for realism was distilled in analyses that failed to recognize the nature of plastic theatre, or Williams as the significant dramatist that he is now acknowledged as. These analyses limit understanding, particularly of the later plays and attempt to contain Williams' innovations within the constraints of the older tradition of drama. Raymond Williams finds Tennessee Williams essentially too nihilistic to be able to contemplate his drama as socially relevant, dismissing him as an unproductive aside to the main thrust of dramatic trends, while Christopher Bigsby compartmentalizes the uncomfortable within the guise of the 'tortured poet', boxing Williams in a definition of doomed romantic.

Such views have been challenged by a new generation of critics, and in the next section I shall briefly discuss the cultural context of this revival in interest in Williams before examining some of the more significant new perspectives to emerge as a result.

Section 2

An Emerging Structure of Feeling: The Sixties and After

Chapter 5

Cultural Politics and Cultural Criticism: The Transformation of a Reputation

Since 1990 there has been a new generation of critics writing whose work is characterised by their rejection of the earlier 'realist drama' account of Williams' work and who place Williams' drama within a cultural or theatrical context. The next two chapters are a synopsis of this work on Williams, rather than a systematic and sustained critique of the various readings that are proposed. There are two reasons for this: first, there is a need to evaluate where the criticism of Williams now stands; and second, the new wave of criticism is qualitatively different from earlier work in that it largely avoids the distortions of earlier assessments. Much of the criticism of the last twenty years concentrates on examining individual works, and interesting though that can be, I shall concentrate on work that attempts to contextualize Williams, offering new perspectives and addressing the larger task of formulating a radical reassessment of Williams' work as a whole. The most significant contributions in that respect have come from David Savran, Annette Saddik, Linda Dorff (though she published little before her untimely death) and Allean Hale.

But first I want to place these reassessments of Williams in context, for in the period of the late 1960s through to the 1990s, a significant change in the structure of feeling occurred which is mirrored in the changing assessment of Williams' work. In my earlier discussion of Raymond Williams' assessment of Tennessee Williams' work, I referred to Williams' concept of

‘the structure of feeling’ in which he describes a cultural climate that shapes thinking in all aspects of cultural activity (and by ‘cultural’ he encompasses ‘a total human order’).¹⁰⁷

This was the area of interaction between the official consciousness of an epoch – codified in its doctrines and legislation – and the whole process of actually living its consequences [...] it was a structure in the sense that that you could perceive it operating in one work after another which weren’t otherwise connected – people weren’t learning from each other; yet it was one of feeling much more than thought – a pattern of impulses, restraints, tones, for which the best evidence was often the actual conventions of literary or dramatic writing. (*PL*, p. 159)

The concept of a structure of feeling is particularly relevant to understanding the context that gave rise to the new assessments of Tennessee Williams and to my own reading.

The period of the late 1960s is a prime example of a challenge to an established structure of feeling – the Cold War ethos that had dominated the 1950s – and it represented a ‘perfect storm’ of cultural forces that raged through the cultural conservatism and sexual repressiveness of the 1950s, sweeping aside the accepted mores of Cold War culture to introduce a more progressive and permissive era. This was more than Raymond Williams’ ‘new generation’ responding to ‘the unique world it inherited’; the generation that were responsible for the new structure of feeling in the late 1960s rejected rather than responded to the inherited world, and sought to remake it as something entirely new.¹⁰⁸ The radical movements that exemplified the cultural spirit of the 60s – the Civil Rights Movement, the

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 154. Future references will be given in the text as *PL*.

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *PL*, p. 157.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the New Left, Students for a Democratic Society, Black Power, the hippie Counter Culture, the Women's Movement and latterly the Gay Movement, redefined the perception of politics and society. The members of these various movements politicised a generation. They believed in the power of the individual to make a difference, taking politics in a new direction and placing a new emphasis on the person. Wini Breines, a privileged spectator of these events, comments about the New Left apply to the other movements as well:¹⁰⁹

One aspect of the New Left that distinguished it from the Old Left and traditional politics of all kinds was an effort to link political issues with personal life. Activists recognized that personal life was deeply influenced by the organization of power, by economics and by culture.¹¹⁰

Though the utopian dreams of a progressive new order may have faded, the distinction between the public political sphere and a personal, implicitly private, existence was convincingly eradicated, enabling substantial reassessments of all aspects of culture, including literature and the arts. Work previously dismissed as autobiographical or 'a dramatization of intensely private and destructive passion' is now seen as politically and socially relevant.¹¹¹

Breines sums it up thus:

Our lives and our politics are really inseparable. 'The personal is political' became an influential notion, particularly in the late sixties with the development of the women's movement. It meant that all aspects of one's life

¹⁰⁹ Breines was active in the New Left, anti-war and women's movements in both Wisconsin and Boston. She is now Professor Emeritus at Northeastern University, Boston and has written extensively on the period.

¹¹⁰ Breines, 'The New Left and the Student Movement', pp.27-8.

¹¹¹ Williams, *DIB* p. 267.

including personal problems, behaviour and needs, had a political dimension and explanation.¹¹²

The recognition of the personal as political established an entirely new cultural perspective that enabled the radical reassessment of Tennessee Williams' work – a reassessment that began with David Savran.

Savran was particularly important in overturning the established view of Williams and of providing a richer perspective on his work. *Communists, Cowboys and Queers* is genuinely innovative: Savran was the first to place Williams' homosexuality and drama within a cultural and historical context. He rejected the conventional view of Williams as a realistic dramatist, seeing him instead as a revolutionary and radical writer – 'Here was a writer who called himself a revolutionary and meant it, a playwright who produced new and radical theatre that challenged and undermined the Cold War order' (p. ix) – and more surrealistic than realistic:

[*The Glass Menagerie*] seems far more closely allied to the techniques of surrealism as developed in France in the 1920s and 1930s. During these extraordinarily turbulent years, the surrealists attempted to foment ontological, erotic, and political revolution by launching an assault on logic, grammar and the pieties and conveniences of bourgeois culture and art. (p. 94

Crucially, Savran links Williams' revolutionary potential to his sexuality and the challenge that depicting that in his writing posed to drama and, more profoundly, to the structure of feeling of Cold War America. Savran undertakes a comparative analysis of Williams and Arthur Miller, in which he examines the received view of these two writers –

¹¹²

Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left*, p. 44.

Miller as 'the exemplary intellectual, leftist playwright' and Williams as 'the apolitical poet of passion and the flesh'. But for Savran, the two playwrights express a more profoundly political dichotomy: Miller represents 'an oppressive masculinist sexual politics' while Williams represents 'the (admittedly remote) possibility of an egalitarian, antihomophobic, and emancipated body politic and body sexual' (p. x). The notions of masculinity that these two writers represent articulate the heterosexual cultural masculine norm and the subversive sexual subtext of homosexuality:

Miller and Williams not only provided a voice for the many discontented American men and women living under the postwar settlement, but also – both in their writing and in their lives – vividly illuminated the pressures and anxieties circulating around the normative constructions of masculinity and femininity. (pp. 8-9)

Savran places Williams' homosexuality at the centre of his work and identifies Williams' revolutionary potential in his ability to suggest antihomophobic alternatives to the cultural status quo. He sees this ability expressed through the innovative dramatic techniques and discursive language of Williams' theatre, rooted in the homosexual experience of Cold War America and entirely bound up with the challenge to Cold War norms of masculinity that homosexuality undoubtedly constituted:

Williams' work [...] by offering subtly subversive models of gender and sexuality that, I believe, suggest[s] a way beyond the American domestic *imaginaire*. (p. 9)

Savran was also the first critic to see the political dimension to Williams' sexuality and its implications for his drama. He sees Williams' radicalism as 'more complex and vigorous than Bigsby makes it out to be', suggesting that it 'destabilizes mid-century notions of gendered subjectivity' (p. 80). In comparing Miller and Williams, Savran exposes the inherent conflict and tension between the text and subtext of gendered identity:

Masculinity in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as in *Death of a Salesman*, is a site of division and instability. Yet, unlike Miller, who attempts desperately to conceal these rifts, Williams flaunts and magnifies the contradictions on which masculinity, and patriarchal relations generally, are founded. Homosexual desire is cast not as masculinity's anathema but as that which always inheres inside the male subject (like a cancer). Homosexuality and homosociality are no longer represented as unmediated opposites, but as fluid and complicitous states of desire. (p. 101)

Savran places Williams' sexuality – and the attendant tensions and contradictions – firmly within the cultural context of the Cold War, examining that culture from the perspective of current gender politics. He is particularly critical of the 'Albertine strategy' of criticism, so called after Proust. This interpretative strategy is exemplified in the work of Nancy Tischler, who argues that 'puritanical, idealistic, confused females' throughout Williams' work 'are really only female impersonators'.¹¹³ Tischler attempted to reconcile the contradictions and defuse the subversiveness of Williams' often obscure and oblique language by recasting his heroines not as women but as homosexuals in drag. This removes the tensions of heterosexual relationships from a culturally central position to the margins of society inhabited by 'deviants' who could be safely ignored (p. 115). Williams emphatically rejected this assessment of his

¹¹³

Tischler, *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan*, p. 213.

female characters, remarking that if he'd wanted to write about homosexuals in drag, he would have done and, after Savran, this is now a discredited view.¹¹⁴

Unlike Tischler and other earlier critics, Savran sees the hegemony of defined sex roles and the binary opposition of femininity and masculinity as a crucial underpinning of Cold War policy: the gender divisions of activity and behaviour 'facilitated an unprecedented level of social control' which fuelled and supported an expanding consumerism and American economic imperialism (p. 9). It was a revolutionary departure to place Williams so decisively within such a radical political context. Savran also recognises the impact that the New Left, feminist and gay politics had on the perception of sexuality and gender as they challenged the idea of biology-as-destiny and prescribed sex roles. Savran reiterates feminist thinking that gender is a cultural construct rather than biologically determined and innate. He draws on the work of Joan Riviere, Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler, particularly on the Lacanian notion that femininity is a performance of 'womanly impersonation of the Phallus', suggesting there is a corresponding impersonation involved in the assertion of masculinity. As Savran explains, despite the masculine assertion of dominance, the essential inability of the penis to be synonymous with the Phallus undermines and compromises the basis of this concept of masculinity and thus makes both masculinity and femininity exercises in masquerade:

Like 'womanliness' for Riviere, this performative masculinity dissolves the distinction between the genuine and the masquerade. It is always a display, a sham, a mask of power articulated by what Butler describes as the Lacanian 'comedy of sexual positions'. (p. 16)

¹¹⁴

I have no textual reference for this, but Williams' comment was quoted by Michael Paller (*Gentlemen Callers*) at the Scholars Conference, New Orleans, 2010.

The notion of gender as masquerade and performance that Savran and Riviere share is far-reaching: it is not a question of certain persons or behaviours adopting, either consciously or otherwise, a performative sexual identity, and others being genuinely 'womanly' – all are caught up in the masquerade. Savran quotes Riviere:

The reader may ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. (p. 15)¹¹⁵

The 'normal' binary gender distinction between masculine and feminine does not rest on an immutable biology, but is culturally determined and mutable. As Savran points out, though the concept of masculinity is 'a construction central to the operation of all patriarchal cultures, it is, like womanliness, constantly subject to the vicissitudes of history' (pp. 16-17). The social structure of the Cold War period depended heavily on the unquestioning acceptance of these gender distinctions, and the social roles and identities they implied. Consequently, the performative nature of gender has profound implications for our understanding of identity, which becomes clear as we consider the nature of camp.

Savran uses Susan Sontag's work on camp to illustrate and elaborate his comments on Williams' language. Sontag describes camp as:

A 'way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon', a celebration of artifice and extravagance, an epicene style whose theatricalization of social

¹¹⁵

Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', in *Formation of Fantasy*, p. 38.

roles' doesn't reverse things' but instead offers a 'different – a supplementary – set of standards'. (p. 118)¹¹⁶

Sontag's observations in 'Notes on Camp' (1964) inform my consideration of performance and identity: First, camp is essentially about artifice and performance and, crucially, the recognition of that artifice – Sontag says that 'to perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role' (p. 280). Second, camp is distinctively a celebration of artifice – 'a love of the exaggerated' – and of a stylized intensity (p. 279). These two characteristics produce what Sontag calls 'instant character':

Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one very intense thing. This attitude is a key element in the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility. (p. 286)

If we dissect these statements of Sontag's and examine how they interact we expose a crucial and definitive contradiction. Here we have a situation where the camp sensibility celebrates a unity – 'one very intense thing' – that is also definitively acknowledged as performance – that is, a layer of artifice over a necessary but obscured reality. The essential duality that underpins artifice – and camp sensibility cannot exist without the underlying reality – is reduced to a shadow, relegated to a state of inconsequentiality. In camp, artifice takes on a life of its own, consciously disassociated from the entities, both physical and psychological, that gave it being. Sontag explains that camp does acknowledge a duality, but it is not this fundamental one:

¹¹⁶

Savran is quoting from Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', p. 277 and 286.

The Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not then familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice. (p. 281)

Sontag sees this duality as applying to ‘some things’ whereas I argue the duality is a universal and necessary, but ignored, factor of camp. Camp is the ultimate artifice – the quintessential performance – because its self-conscious, self-reflexive nature enables it to cut free from its roots. Nonetheless, the duality remains – for without it, it would not be artifice – and therein lies the creativity, tension and energy which fuels camp sensibility. But this is qualitatively different from Riviere’s discussion of the sexual masquerade discussed earlier. Those culturally determined gender roles differ from camp in two crucial aspects: they are neither chosen by those performing them, nor are they recognised for the most part as performance. When expressed as an identity, the camp sensibility allows both choice and duality, in other words a fragmentation that can be viewed positively. Camp challenges the notion that only a unified identity is good and offers an alternative perspective on fragmentation that enables us to see it as other than destructive and diseased.

Homosexuality and camp are not co-terminate: camp is a narrow focus of sensibility and Savran rightly sees larger issues emanating from Williams’ sexuality. Savran identifies a vital and energetic crosscurrent in Williams’ drama: one which destabilises hegemonic notions of sex-roles and produces a ‘constant movement between the political and the sexual’ that defies characterisation as a simple binary opposition of cultural norms, ‘the political to the

sexual, the public to the private, center to margin' (p. 80). Savran places Williams' sexuality at the heart of his drama, and central to his world-view and critique of the cultural status quo:

I believe that the work of Tennessee Williams offers an urgent challenge to the stubborn antitheses between the political and the sexual, and between the public and the private, binarisms so crucial for the normative constructions of gender during the 1940s and 1950s. Unlike Arthur Miller who attempts tirelessly to police these binarisms, Williams insistently delights in their precariousness. Williams' destabilization of mid-century notions of masculinity and femininity is accomplished, in part, by his ability to both expose the often murderous violence that accompanies the exercise of male authority and to valorize female power and female sexual desire. (p. 80)

Williams' 'delight in the precariousness' is an essential element of his plastic theatre and underpins the dramatic structure of his plays and expressed in the fluidity of form and language. Savran's insight was to identify Williams' love of the 'precarious' with his sexuality: to examine the fact that to be a homosexual during the Cold War was to be inevitably and essentially precarious, to inhabit the margins ignored and denied by the 'stubborn antitheses' that support 'normative constructions of gender'. Savran describes how Williams' dramatic style and structure reflect the experience of Cold War homosexuality and his primary focus is not on the content of the plays, as in earlier critics' preoccupation with, for example, Brick's ambivalent sexuality, but on Williams' use of a layered dramatic structure and coded language:

Williams' theater comprises a double spectacle, one (the 'heterosexual') occurring on a bright screen while the other (the 'homosexual', the more vibrant and productive of the two) takes place in the gloomy, subtextual private galleries [...] It is a theater of metaphor and metonymy, in which images and objects and words are continually and unexpectedly discovered to be

contiguous with each other, a surrealist theater of extravagant and polymorphous desires. (p. 78)

Despite Savran's description of the contiguous nature of Williams' 'images, objects and words' his analysis rests more on the concept of disintegration, on Williams' treatment of 'space' – using that term in its widest sense, in which space translates into a series of both omissions and potentialities. The gaps in fragmented identities, the pause in understanding caused by antithetical juxtapositions, for example, the contradictory expression of eroticism and desire as both liberating and destructive, opens for Savran a space in which the reconciliation and resolution of such contradictions can occur, a state that he implicitly sees as desirable:

Eroticism remained as pivotal to Williams as to the surrealists: the source of a transgressive and liberating energy that could shatter the individual subject, and the most likely site for the reconciliation of contraries. (p. 96)

But it is in the spaces in language – 'the gap between text and subtext' – that Savran identifies Williams' unique contribution. Savran describes Williams' language, previously applauded by earlier critics as 'poetic', as radical and subversive. He recognises that the politics of Williams' theatre are not those of the conventional revolutionary or social activist, but of the quiet and insistent challenge that the marginal and obscure present to the centre and the known: it is quintessentially homosexual, not in its portrayal of sexuality but in its 'distinctive and elusive style':

Throughout his work for the theater of the 1940s and 1950s, homosexuality appears – ever obliquely – as a distinctive and elusive style, in every word and no word, as a play of signs and images, of text and subtext, of metaphorical elaboration and substitution, of disclosure and concealment – in short, as textuality itself. (p. 84)

These shifting and discursive meanings – what I would describe in terms of plasticity – are not merely a deliberate choice but an essential one. For Savran, referring to Teresa De Lauretis identifies this as a challenge to cultural narratives and an attempt to provide a different construction of gender that gives, in de Lauretis' terms, 'a view from "elsewhere"':

For that "elsewhere" is not some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: it is the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations. I think of it as spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses'.¹¹⁷

It is only in these unconstructed, amorphous, shifting spaces of language and discourse that radical and alternative notions of gender can begin to be articulated. Such spaces are typical of Williams' plastic theatre and radically challenge not only the weary renditions of 'Frigidaire realism' that Williams rejects in the Production Notes, but also the notions of gender that underpin the Cold War social structure. Referring to the Williams short story, *Mysteries of the Joy Rio*, Savran says:

The Joy Rio and the activities that take place therein provide an astonishingly apt and prescient metaphor for Tennessee Williams' project as a playwright: recolonizing an old-fashioned theater and turning it into an enigmatic, if slightly queer, site of resistance. (pp. 77-8)

¹¹⁷

De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, p. 25.

When Savran talks of transvestite readings of Williams' plays, which he regards as not merely reversing but deconstructing the binary system of sex-gender identification, he highlights an important aspect of his approach to how issues of gender and sexuality are manifested in and shape Williams' use of language:

For [a 'transvestite reading'] to be effective in teasing out the contradictions in Williams' work that accumulate around gender (rather than simply reinscribing despotic binarisms) the interpretation must recognize the coexistence – and even codependency – of different modes of writing and reading, of the 'gross' and the 'indirect' of the 'camp' and the 'straight', of the reversal and the radical subversion of gender. For the knowing reader, it is less a question of choosing among the different modes than of noting how these various strategies play themselves out simultaneously in Williams's plays, and what contradictions they engender. (pp. 119-20)

Savran sees in Williams' language a coded duality that reflects the duality of camp sensibility, but which incorporates that duality in a way that camp does not. Contradictions 'accumulate' in Williams' work yet, unlike camp, it is not a question of choosing between the different modes, but allowing the contradictions to emerge as the conflicting 'strategies play themselves out'. Clearly, Savran sees the contradictions arising as a result of Williams' style and use of different modes of discourse. Conversely, I argue that Williams' style is designed to express contradiction: that it is the consequence, not the begetter, of contradiction. This is a fundamental point of difference between Savran and myself – how we see the significance of duality and contradiction in Williams. Savran identifies two distinct 'modes of address' in Williams: the first is a linear narrative that focuses on characters' dialogue and actions, developing in a structurally conventional manner; the second is more indirect, consisting of

diegetic prose – on-stage commentary of mimetic action, as in *The Glass Menagerie*

– stage directions or visual images, often referencing in oblique or coded terms things outside the mimetic action. This second mode of address is inherently unstable. Savran describes this second mode of address as follows:

It is the force that pulverizes the plot by drawing the reader or spectator's attention to a detail, an image, a metaphor or a charged moment of silence. These disruptions, or moments of fascination that suspend time, produce a radically discontinuous narrative and simultaneously articulate inchoate and unspeakable desires that [...] may be positively hazardous to the safety and integrity of the desiring subject of the narrative and to the reader who, enjoying danger, allows himself to be interpellated into the text. (p. 159)

Savran goes on to codify these two modes of address as 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' respectively:

For the sake of convenience, the first mode of address could be labelled 'heterosexual', because of both its cultural orthodoxy and the way that it (en)genders erotic relationships [...] The second mode could be labelled 'homosexual', not because all (or sometimes any) of the longings represented are same-sex desires, but because, in their penchant for transgression, for the suspension of norms, they function as a structural equivalent to homosexual desire. (p. 160)

Savran's terminology effectively privileges the experience of homosexuality as formative in particular modes of writing:

I am deliberately analogizing certain male homosexual practices with literary and theoretical texts, in the belief that the furtiveness and improvisatory quality of these practices, their historical status as an insurrection on the cultural

margins, is deeply inscribed in certain acts of writing that have little or nothing to do with sexuality. (p. 166)

Though Savran is at pains to point out that both terms function beyond the realms of sexual desire, they seem to me to be inevitably and uncomfortably limited by their overriding sexual connotations. This is particularly so in terms of the second mode of address. Though homosexuality is undoubtedly a radical site of transgression and destabilisation, it is not the only one and, as I argue in Chapter 7, it is important to recognise other experiences as having the potential to both challenge and destabilise cultural norms, for if we fail to do so, we risk underestimating Williams' critique and limiting his relevance. Savran sees the two modes of address as coexisting 'simultaneously in every Williams' work', where Williams deploys them in tandem: the 'heterosexual' mode addresses its audience in a manner that reaffirms a polarised, binary distinction between the sexes, while the 'homosexual' mode 'radically undermines the mobilization of these same rigorously gendered identifications' (p. 160). Savran describes an essentially fluid situation in which although one mode may dominate, the other is insistently and persistently asserting itself. The coexistence of the two is a source of conflict and tension where:

The linear and the fragmentary, the real and the surreal, the straight and the camp, the normative and the polymorphous [constitute] a constant source of structural and semantic tension. (p. 160)

Savran links this to the tension implicit in a performative identity discussed earlier:

Because the individual is continually being articulated by an ideological apparatus that is contradictory and riddled with cracks, he or she is always constituted not as a seamless whole but as a radically divided or fragmented subject. (p. 14)

Somewhat surprisingly, Savran sees this fragmentation as negative and indicative of something destructive, diseased and un(whole)some, which suggests that his assessment of the fragmented identity is implicitly based on a typically liberal notion of the unified and whole as good: a notion that is reiterated in Savran's assessment of Williams' characters:

The never quite whole subject that commandeers Williams' work is unable to claim the position of 'hero' or even 'protagonist'. Instead it is constantly decentered and dispossessed, stumbling through a dramatic structure that is similarly decentered and unstable. (p. 98)

In his discussion of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Savran describes Williams' characters as either 'subhuman' or 'so radically fragmented, diseased or wounded as to be barely recognisable as human', seeing fragmentation as reductive and debilitating (p. 106). This is at odds with his description of how Williams uses gender and sexuality in the play:

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as throughout Williams' work, genders and sexualities are not set in opposition but are dispersed and plural, constantly in circulation. (p. 108)

Here Savran views the fragmentation (described less negatively as ‘dispersed and plural’) as a more radical act, one that ‘cunningly destabilizes normative constructions of sexuality’ (p. 109), a view I find more persuasive.¹¹⁸

Savran describes ‘an insistent and radical fragmentation of discourse, character and plot’ that is particularly marked in the language of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. There Savran describes the truncated and fragmented dialogue as ‘almost grotesquely overdetermined’. Its meanings ‘change insistently from scene to scene’, and shift through an unsettling series of contradictory interpretations which deny any sense of linear logic or conventional character development. Referring to Barthes’ description of the hierarchical nature of completed sentences, Savran sees this fragmented discourse as not only indicative of ‘a deep disruption in personal relationships’ and a ‘staggering inability to communicate’, but also as betraying ‘a sympathy with the rebels, by its overthrow of both hierarchy and subjection and its questioning the mastery granted to “someone who finishes his [sic] sentences”’ (p. 135).¹¹⁹ Savran also sees the gaps in the fragmentary discourse revealing an intensity of forbidden desire, ‘a longing so inadmissible and unfathomable that it can be represented only by an absence of discourse’ (p. 136) – a view which has clear references to homosexual desire, which is unobjectionable in itself, but leads Savran into a somewhat limited and biographical assessment of this aspect of the later plays. While agreeing with earlier critics, such as Bigsby, that drug abuse may have played a part in Williams’ writing, Savran rejects as ‘patently unsatisfactory’ the view that the experimental later plays were marred due ‘solely to chemical

¹¹⁸ For a positive perspective on fragmented identities, see Chapter 7.

¹¹⁹ The reference to Barthes is to *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 50.

dependency'. Savran here sees 'the fragmentation and incoherence' in a more positive light as a 'calculated and adept usage of a complex theatrical and literary design' (p. 136). He does, however, see this fragmentation in biographical terms, pursuing the argument that the Williams' plays changed as a result of his coming out. Savran argues that though Williams' homosexuality was an open secret, the climate of the 1960s represented a significant change when homosexuality was more openly acknowledged and consequently written about more explicitly:

With an increasing public awareness of and dialogue about 'homosexual drama' Williams found himself suddenly outflanked. The language of 'obscurity' and 'indirection' on which he had relied for thirty years was abruptly outmoded [...] Suddenly allowed to discourse about all that had been forbidden, Williams' much praised 'eloquence' ground to a halt... He had to invent a new language of 'obscurity or indirection', a new discourse of concealment and disclosure that simultaneously could bear the imprint, even in the revolutionary climate of the 1960s, of articulating the most revolutionary of desires. Finally empowered to speak directly after so many years of (self)-censorship, he could only stutter, only hammer out a broken and lacerated speech. (pp. 136-7)

The implicit assumption underlying this assessment – that Williams' eloquence, his language of 'obscurity' and 'indirection' was nothing more than the language of the closeted homosexual and that his plays were merely coded dramas about homosexuality – is one that I profoundly disagree with, and which seems at odds with Savran's earlier assessment of Williams' drama. Whilst the 1960s clearly presented a challenging environment for Williams and others, I reject the view that the language of the later plays, *Tokyo Hotel*, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* and more besides, is merely a 'stuttering' and 'broken' attempt to find a voice in a new era of openness and acceptance. I regard Williams' later plays as a further

development of plastic theatre: radical and experimental attempts to reveal a truth hidden by surface 'realities' whose significance extends far beyond the 'obscurity' of the Cold War homosexual experience.

Following Savran's *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers*, a number of critics looked at Williams' work from the perspective of gay politics. Like Savran, several pay serious attention to Williams' short stories, particularly those that dealt openly with homosexuality: work which had previously been regarded as merely a testing ground for ideas that Williams would later re-work in his plays. Writers such as Robert Vorlicky, John Clum, Nicholas de Jongh and Michael Paller tend to focus on Williams' representation of homosexuality, whether overt or coded, and explore its relevance to his place in gay politics. As a group their contribution to Williams' scholarship is significant: they have drawn attention to Williams' prose and poetry as well as developing a queer theory perspective on Williams' work as a whole. I do not intend in this thesis, however, to comment further on the lively debate that surrounds the developing queer reading of Williams' work beyond two aspects that enlarge on Savran's analysis and impinge on my own reading of Williams.

Robert J. Corber's chapter on Williams – 'Williams and the Politics of the Closet' – in *Homosexuality in Cold War America* discusses the significance of secrecy in homosexual behaviour. Corber describes the homosexual experience in the 1950s as a series of coded contradictions that layered the lives and behaviour of gay men:

The structures of secrecy and disclosure that organize male experience lead them to scrutinize constantly the behaviour of other men for signs of

homosexuality [...] But gay men do not just consume signs, they also produce them. To mark their identities, they appropriate a variety of signifiers from the dominant culture (leather jackets, blue jeans, flannel shirts, key rings), which they invest with new meanings by redeploying them in a homosexual context.¹²⁰

The need to both hide and advertise one's sexuality produces this layering of behaviour – the performance that can hide the reality for the straight population, but whose very nature advertises to those who know the code the reality that it obscures. This is similar to Savran's commentary on camp and goes to the heart of the nature of hiddenness (see Chapter 7). But Corber also relates the secrecy and closet experience of homosexual existence to the structure and nature of identity:

Because gay men must survive in the interstices of the dominant culture, they do not enjoy the luxury of having unified and coherent selves but must construct their identities from an atomized historical experience. (p. 114)

There are two points to make here: first, Corber implicitly privileges a unified identity over the multiple identity of the homosexual – 'they do not enjoy the luxury of having unified and coherent selves'; second, he sees the homosexual identity as being (re-)constructed from a broken – 'atomized' – experience. I take issue with both these interpretations of identity (see Chapter 7). Finally I would mention the work of the critic and theatre reviewer, Daniel Mendelsohn. Mendelsohn reviewed the 2005 Broadway productions of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, identifying in both plays a complex layering and a series of

¹²⁰

Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, p. 109.

tensions created by contradiction.¹²¹ These are themes that have been explored by Savran and Corber, but Mendelsohn's emphasis extends these earlier analyses into new territory. In his review of *The Glass Menagerie* – 'Victims on Broadway I' – he analyses the conflicting and contradictory elements in Williams' complex female characters implicitly highlighting the political nature of the characterisations:

Like Euripides he exploited personal and cultural notions of the feminine (soft, poetic, silly, emotional, prone to madness and vengeance, cunning) to create female characters who transcended them...Williams's women and girls manage to be both memorably, even frighteningly, extreme and sympathetic at the same time. Even when they do repellent things these characters successfully gain our sympathy by their ability to articulate, or in some way represent, everything that has been left out of the worldview of the men with whom they come into conflict onstage: delicacy of feeling, spirituality, nostalgia, fantasy, and of course, art. (p. 32)

Mendelsohn recognises that Williams' characterisation of women 'is as much a part of his distinctive style as is his idiosyncratic poetic language', thus placing contradiction and sexual politics at the heart of Williams' style and content. In his review of *A Streetcar Named Desire* – 'Victims on Broadway II' – Mendelsohn is even more insistent on the central importance of Blanche's contradictory character:

Blanche DuBois was meant to be an amalgam in one character of both female leads in the earlier play: the manic, yearning woman who trades in destructive illusions and the tragic passive victim of those illusions [...] as a figure who represents both desire and death, who embodies the typical Williamsesque grasping at beauty and the equally typical failure to seize hold of it, Blanche

¹²¹ These reviews originally appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, 26 May and 9 June 2005. They are both now available in a collection of Mendelsohn's essays, *How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can Be Broken*. Quotations from the reviews refer to the published collection rather than the original reviews.

fuses within herself the confused, frenetically 'desiring' Amanda Wingfield with the almost marmoreally passive and funereal figure of the futile Laura [...] for the play to evoke the idiosyncratic quality that is so important to Williams's sensibility, the tragic allure of broken beauty, the way in which illusions can be lovely and destructive simultaneously – Blanche must be convincing as both a monster and a victim. (p. 44)

The most important word in this is 'fuses', for Mendelsohn is not here describing a vacillating personality that fluctuates between a public persona and a private reality as in camp, but one comprising mutually coexisting contradictions: a fragmented identity that possesses a coherence which transcends camp. Like Corber, Mendelsohn is here touching on the issues of identity in relation to homosexuality and which I discuss in Chapter 7. Though my conclusions differ from theirs, I am indebted to these writers and their perspective of gay politics for the initial recognition of these important themes.

Savran and others in the group of postmodern gay-politics critics have significantly altered the tone and scope of Williams' scholarship, bringing a positive analysis to Williams sexuality and its relation to his dramaturgy. They comprehensively reject the description of Williams as a 'realist' dramatist and look beyond the well-known plays to Williams' prose and more challenging later works. They have radically expanded how we view Williams' language and cultural significance, forcing us to see the artistic and cultural significance of Williams' sexuality.

Chapter 6

Placing Williams' Drama in an International Context

Other critics writing after 1990 have placed Williams' work in an international dramatic context. The foremost contribution in this area is Annette Saddik's *The Politics of Reputation* (1999). Saddik looks primarily at Williams' later plays (1960 and after) in which he is deliberately attempting something different from his earlier work:

During the 1960s Williams claimed he was deliberately moving away from what the critical establishment saw as the essentially realistic dramatic forms that had established his career to what Lillian Hellman called 'the theater of the imagination' – a more antirealistic, fragmented type of drama characteristic of the new movements of the time. (p. 11)¹²²

Saddik, if not the first, was certainly one of the earliest critics to examine Williams as an 'antirealist'. She challenges the conventional wisdom that dismissed the post-*Night of the Iguana* (1961) plays as the product of failing creativity, drug and alcohol abuse, and shows that this supposed failure of creativity 'is actually a conscious departure from the early dramaturgy that had established Williams' reputation' (p. 12). Saddik looks beyond the obsession with Williams' lifestyle that distorted earlier critics' assessment of the late plays and concentrates instead on the text. She argues that Williams' later work 'deserves a place in American experimental drama' and that a proper understanding of these plays casts a new and

¹²² Saddik, *The Politics of Reputation*. Future references will appear in the text as *PR*. The reference to Hellman is from *Conversations with Lillian Hellman*, p. 115.

informative light on his entire body of work: 'Yet while I argue that these early plays embraced the codes of realism, especially when compared to the more experimental later works, I do address Williams' resistance to formal realism during the early years of his career' (p. 12). Though Saddik recognises and acknowledges a realistic dimension in Williams' early plays, it is an 'ambiguous relationship with realism'. Saddik sees in the minimalism of Williams' later plays – expressed in the language, characterisation and action – a direct challenge to the whole idea of realistic presentation:

In these later works, Williams was depending less and less on realism's desire for referential language and conventional plot to express accurately and directly an intangible truth, as he moved from a type of drama which centered on causal narrative structures, a realistic portrayal of character, and long, poetic speeches to a more minimalistic forms which undermined orthodox functions of plot and character development and focused on the silences and gaps in language. (p. 13)

Saddik explores the links between Williams' plays and European drama, particularly expressionism, rehabilitating the late plays as deliberate exercises in experimental theatre, transforming and enlarging Williams' reputation as an internationally relevant dramatist. Williams was very familiar with the European expressionists, and Saddik identifies their influence in his work. As Williams was writing *Camino Real*, Beckett, Ionesco and Genet were writing plays that shattered realistic conventions, experimenting with different modes of expression and representation of language and dramatic form 'in an attempt to express the experience of metaphysical anguish in the face of an absurd and fragmented human condition' (p. 75). Williams was excited and attracted to this new style, and very much a part of what, in

Raymond Williams' terms, was an emerging structure of feeling – Williams' own 'plastic theatre' was already experimenting in very similar ways in its use of anti-realistic devices and forms. He felt that writers such as Beckett, Gelber, Albee and Pinter were breaking new ground in their efforts to reveal hidden aspects of the human experience, and, as he put it in an interview with Lewis Funke and John E. Booth, 'exploring the subtleties of human relationships that haven't been explored'.¹²³ Discussing Pinter's *The Caretaker*, Williams describes it as:

A fabulous work. To me the play is about the thing that I've always pushed in my writing – that I've always felt was needed to be said over and over – that human relationships are terrifyingly ambiguous. If you write a character that isn't ambiguous you are writing a false character, not a true one. (p. 98)

Like Savran, Saddik views the fragmentation of character expressed in the dialogue and structure of Williams' later work in relatively negative terms. But Williams is excited by expressionism's ability to represent ambiguity in individuals, and I argue that this is an altogether more positive view of fragmented contradictory identities than Saddik's. Williams saw in this new wave of playwrights a rejection of the certainties that characterised dramatic realism. In the same interview, Williams describes the form and style of these playwrights as 'provocatively allusive', and 'much truer' – language that is altogether more positive than Saddik's (*Conversations*, p. 98). In contrast Saddik emphasises the nihilist aspects of expressionism:

¹²³

Conversations with Tennessee Williams, p. 98.

These new playwrights sought to confront and represent directly the meaninglessness of the human condition through the abandonment of traditional narrative plot and discursive language in favor of strikingly nonrational structures and a more minimalistic style of dialogue. (PR, p. 76)

This is an important point of difference, and one that goes to the heart of my argument. Both Saddik and Savran, like others, see the fragmentation of expressionist and absurdist drama as essentially negative: an expression of the hopelessness of the human condition and the sickness of individuals and society. This implicitly pathologises the characters in these dramas. But here we see Williams describing ambiguity, and by implication, contradiction, in individuals as ‘terrifying’, but ‘true’. The tone is quite different and suggests an altogether more positive and hopeful view of humanity, one in which we can see an element of excitement, rather than fear, in this ‘terrifying’ knowledge.

Saddik contrasts the characters in Williams’ ‘realistic’ plays with those in the later plays, emphasising the minimalism of the later characterisations:

While Williams’ realistic plays sought to portray characters as complex human beings (‘ordinary people’) who attempt to express their thoughts and feelings regarding difficult life situations, characters in the later antirealistic plays are not characters in the realistic sense of the word, but often are themselves representations of a particular idea, emotion, or theme, following a more subjective point of view. (p. 79)

Saddik recognises that the characterisation that was a large part of the successful plays was notably absent in the later ones. Instead she identifies the dramatic focus in *I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow* (1966, 1970), *In The Bar of A Tokyo Hotel* (1969) and *The Two-Character*

Play (1967) – prime examples of Williams' later work – as a self-consciousness of dramatic form and language:

These later plays draw attention to a consciousness of performance and emphasise the ambiguity resulting from a language which inadequately expresses ideas and emotions. They do not seek to reproduce the illusionistic drama of closure/(dis)closure and the reestablishment of order that realism embraces. (p. 79)

Here Saddik echoes Savran's concerns about camp and performance in relation to Williams' language. But whereas Savran's view of Williams' language placed it firmly as a stylistic expression of homosexuality – 'a play of signs and images, of text and subtext, of metaphorical elaboration and substitution, of disclosure and concealment' (CCQ, p. 83) – Saddik sees it as a minimalistic device designed to destabilise concepts of logic, temporality, linearity and objectivity and thus conventional notions of reality itself. In other words, where Savran sees Williams' language as an expression of a cultural history, Saddik sees it as indicative of a literary genre:

Williams' later works present and deconstruct the contradictions inherent in our constructed realities by prioritizing linguistic play over direct communication and exhibiting a focus on interiority which explores how the mind reinvents the past and translates experience into meaning. (p. 78)

For Saddik, language in these plays ceases to be reliable and can no longer be trusted to express or reveal truth. Instead the focus of attention shifts from what is said to what is unsaid: to the gaps, pauses and silences that now structure discourse rather than the words

that have been drained of meaning. Savran's radical spaces in which to reconstruct gender are, for Saddik, an expression of the limits of language:

Williams' later plays make use of a dialogue which focuses on the subtleties of linguistic play and punning language, creating gaps in the attempts to communicate meaning as, simultaneously, these gaps become the meaning. In his later years Williams remained a 'poet' of the theatre, but his poetry lay more in the incompleteness of communication than in the direct expression. (p. 81)

Williams believed that poetry was not inextricably linked to words, but that 'it can be situations, it can be silences'.¹²⁴ Both Savran and Saddik comment on the ambiguity of Williams' language, but differently: Savran sees Williams' ambiguity as 'elusive', 'equivocal' expressions of the 'contradictory ground' that Williams inhabited as a homosexual, and part of the textuality of a homosexual mode of writing; Saddik sees it as an aspect of Williams' expressionism and a representation of the individual's failure to communicate or express truth:

In the best of Williams' later plays, meaning is not located or pinned down; while fragmented sentences and staccato dialogue contribute to the lack of a single, stable meaning, simultaneously the language is deliberately overdetermined (often through puns or layered meanings) in order to emphasize its inherent ambiguity and inadequacy at expressing truth (p. 82).

In this Saddik's view is significantly different from my own. Saddik sees 'inherent ambiguity' as an expression of meaninglessness, a linguistic representation of expressionism's

¹²⁴

Conversations with Tennessee Williams, p. 99.

nihilism. I, on the other hand, take a view more akin to Savran's, but argue that the language is not just a homosexual mode of writing, but one that reflects the experience of the unemancipated. I also argue that Williams' view is more positive than Saddik's, and that the later plays portray ambiguity and contradiction so as to acknowledge and encourage acceptance of these aspects in humanity. It is my view that these plays are not about the meaninglessness of existence, but about the multiplicity inherent in modern identity. Unlike Savran, Saddik does not place Williams' plays within a social or cultural context, seeing them as individual expressions of the personal angst and private despair that characterises aspects of European expressionism, a view of Williams which echoes the analysis, if not the conclusions, of Raymond Williams:

All three of these later plays [*I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*, *Tokyo Hotel*, *Two-Character Play*] represent an emotion – predominantly fear – rather than a social situation. In his later work Williams sought to represent this intangible emotion which had plagued him throughout his career. The fear of confinement, of insanity, of loneliness, and of the artist losing himself in his own creation mirror Williams' own fears which were presented strongly as *themes* in his earlier work, but not represented directly in the *mise-en-scène* and the form of the dialogue. (p. 80)

This view is very different from Savran's, and indeed mine, for it implicitly rejects the link that Savran explored between personal sexuality and the cultural context. It ignores the social and political dimension to Williams' work, which I argue is at least as significant an influence as that of the European expressionists.

Linda Dorff also places Williams within an international dramatic context.¹²⁵

She explores what she sees as an evolutionary development of Williams' dramaturgy, and identifies expressionist influences in Williams' plays and also experimental, meta-theatrical aspects of his drama:

In the 1960s, '70s, and early 80s, Williams borrowed metadramatic techniques from Pirandello, Jean Genet, Bertholt Brecht and Peter Handke, but redefined them in his own theatricalist vocabularies.¹²⁶

Dorff examines the self-reflexive nature of his working of meta-drama, which she sees manifest in Williams' treatment of 'doubleness': a concept she identifies in two distinct manifestations; the layering involved in the parody and camp sensibility of what she calls the 'outrageous' plays and the double exposure of overlapping time frames in plays such as *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. In 'Theatricalist Cartoons; Tennessee Williams's "Outrageous" Late Plays' (1999), Dorff re-examines some of the most contentious and reviled of Williams' late plays, such as *The Gnädiges Fräulein* (1965), and *Kirche, Küche, und Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage* (1979) – a group of plays she terms 'outrageous' in that they all 'attack various aspects of traditional theatre through an

¹²⁵ I have only been able to find two essays by Dorff: 'Theatricalist Cartoons: Tennessee Williams's "Outrageous Late Plays"' (1999) and ' "All Very [Not!] Pirandello": Radical Theatrics in the Evolution of *Vieux Carré*' (2000), both published in the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*. Despite references by other commentators to a book on Williams she was working on, this was apparently not completed before she died suddenly in 2000.

¹²⁶ Dorff, "All very [not!] Pirandello": Radical Theatrics in the Evolution of *Vieux Carré*, p. 8.

unconventional, fantastic mode'.¹²⁷ Dorff rejects the conventional assessment of these plays seeing in their outrageousness a disciplined critique of contemporary theatre:

The outrageous late plays are bawdy, over the top farces that appropriate systems of metadrama and the aesthetics of the cartoon to parody the state of contemporary theatre, foregrounding its corruption through farcical renderings of actors, scripts, sets playwrights, producers and critics. The outrageous qualities of these plays are too often interpreted as uncontrolled, autobiographical excesses on Williams's part, ignoring the voice of outrage, or violent critique, that underlies the notion of the outrageous. (p. 13)

For Dorff, the late plays represent a critique of the state of theatre, and by extension the experience of the artist and society at large. They are 'a gradual *evolution* of dramaturgic elements' that had existed in Williams' work from the outset and that had now become 'the outrageous [that] is articulated diversely through the forms of parody, parable and farce all of which function on a level of *meta*-mimesis' (p. 14). This echoes Williams' desire to develop a theatre that expressed a reality obscured by conventional drama, though here it is articulated with a black humour that characterizes the comic grotesque:

They take as their subject a pre-existing dramatic form, convention or maxim that claims to mimetically represent a condition in the "real" world and, through the superimposition of a metatheatrical level that emphasizes doubleness, create an "ironic...repetition with a difference", which establishes the subject of meta-mimesis as drama *about* mimetic representation. (p. 14)

Dorff's exploration of doubleness, which she identifies in the parodic elements in these plays, is significant. She establishes the camp dimension to the meta-mimetic aspect of these

¹²⁷

Dorff, 'Theatricalist Cartoons; Tennessee Williams's Late "Outrageous" Plays', p. 13.

plays – engaged as it is with ‘self-conscious play with representations that already exist’ – and the doubling that the performative nature of camp involves. Though this echoes Savran’s comments on camp, Dorff sees such elements in an altogether wider cultural context:

The meta-mimetic project of the outrageous plays demands that the spectators be able to recognize the doubled codes and substitutions through which this revaluation takes place, in order to understand the critique of contemporary theatre which they present. (p. 15)

This camp performative doubling is an important element in how Williams uses the comic and grotesque and Dorff sees it both as a reaction against ‘familiar forms of rationalism’ and ‘distinctly postmodern’ in its appropriation of cartoon imagery. Writing of *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, Dorff describes the cartoonish characters of Polly, a gossip columnist, and Molly, the proprietor of ‘the big dormitory’. On one level, these characters represent theatrical reviewers and producers respectively, but as Dorff points out they also function as a ‘metadramatic audience’, sitting ‘in rockers on a porch smoking marijuana’ commenting on the performance of the other characters (p. 18).

[Polly’s and Molly’s] stoned vision – similar to Rimbaud’s ‘calculated disordering of the senses’ – permits them to enter into a camp mode of viewing, giving them an ironic distance and allowing them to interpret the Fräulein’s performance as a meta-mimetic commentary on the life of a performer. (p. 19)

The camp mode’s ironic distance privileges Polly and Molly’s interpretation of the performance of the other characters and, for those able to access the coded language and doubling of camp, places the critique it represents within a wider context. This is a further

layering of representation: the inversion of values that camp represents becomes not a further mimetic step from reality, but a step closer to the hidden realities encoded in the language of camp – a language that I argue articulates the world of the disenfranchised. I explore the role of emancipation in this context in Chapter 7, but I mean by these terms those groups within a culture who lack the power to define their roles and identities and are instead defined by culturally dominant groups. There are also expressions of anti-realism embedded in the description above that impinge upon concepts of fragmentation, unity and identity which are central to my argument. Polly and Molly's 'stoned vision', which Dorff likens to Rimbaud's 'calculated disordering of the senses', delivers a fragmented view of the objects of their commentary. This fragmentation of perspective is different from, but echoed and emphasized in, the description of the Gnädiges Fräulein herself, where, in the language of the cartoon 'her pearly whites flew from her mouth like popcorn out of a popper' and who is systematically physically disfigured in a series of attacks.¹²⁸ The layering here is complex: Polly and Molly see things with a camp sensibility, their 'stoned vision' transforming the scene around them into a series of grotesque and outrageous performances; but those performances are themselves grotesque as Williams' stage directions make clear. This fragmented perspective, which because of its grotesque and cartoon elements is also a very camp perspective, is one that allows for a reconfiguring of how things and people are seen. Thus we have a camp perspective on a camp performance – itself a conscious and coded destabilising of realistic norms. I argue that the extremes of emotion and existence, that are normally rejected as sick

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Williams, *Gnädiges Fräulein*, p. 257

or perverted and which characterise the pejorative view of fragmentation, are now recast and elevated. We are not invited to pity the Gnädiges Fräulein, but rather to wonder at her spirit and style as she maintains her sense of self as a disintegrating individual. As I argued earlier, the fragmentation that underlies camp performance is altogether more positive than the conventional view of fragmentation where the 'whole' is viewed as the 'good'. And so it is here: though Dorff does not argue for the positive reading of fragmentation that I have set out above, I see it as implicit in the camp mode of viewing that she identifies.

In “‘All very [not!] Pirandello”: Radical Theatrics in the Evolution of *Vieux Carré*”, Dorff examines the development of Williams’ dramaturgy through the various incarnations of *Vieux Carré*, which was first produced in 1977 and published in 1979.¹²⁹ Dorff traces both plot and style elements back to unpublished drafts written as early as 1939 (*Dead Planet, the Moon!*) and 1941 (*The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*), describing Williams as moving stylistically from modernism to poststructuralism. Williams repeatedly reworked previous material, both published and unpublished, the style and treatment changing in the process. However, I do not see these changes as representing such a clear linear evolution of Williams’ dramaturgy as does Dorff. She sees the process and the texts as ‘destructuring’, which is a more positive way of describing fragmentation:

Williams’ s cannibalistic process fed upon and recycled writing – his own and others – into his texts, a process that is analogous to various descriptions of postmodern artistic processes. Hal Foster, for instance describes a postmodern anti-aesthetic in which art functions as “a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them”. Williams’s work certainly

¹²⁹

Dorff, ‘ “All very [not!] Pirandello”: Radical Theatrics in the Evolution of *Vieux Carré*’, pp. 2-20

‘destructures’, breaking apart his own life experiences and the work of other writers in order to ‘reinscribe’ it in theatricalist art. (p. 2)

Though Dorff is referring to the process and textual structure of Williams’ plays, her comments apply equally to Williams’ representation of identity. The fragmentation or destructuring is variously reinscribed as a doubling; in *Gnädiges Fräulein* it is reinscribed as camp sensibility and meta-theatrics; here, in *Vieux Carré*, it appears as a compression and overlay of time that Dorff describes as a ‘double negative’. She describes the last two versions of *Vieux Carré*, the penultimate version of which ‘reinvents’ Pirandello as the actors stage two plays within a play. One of these plays within a play is contemporary with the main play; the other is set in 1939. The final version, produced in New York and London in 1977 and 1978 respectively, abandoned the Pirandellian format, ‘blending’ the two subsidiary plays together in the 1939 period:

While this final stage seems like a compromise that returns to a ‘memory play’ format (like that of the *Glass Menagerie*), the mixing of two time frames anticipates the ‘double negative’ memory technique employed in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981). (p. 3)

Dorff’s description of this dramatic technique as ‘double negative’ is used in its photographic sense, where images are overlaid on one another but neither is eradicated or totally obscured. In this sense it is closely related to the doubling and layering of camp, where the reference to the underlying but rejected values is implicit. A similar relationship can be seen in the alternative linguistic meaning of double negative, where a second denial negates the initial negative. In this linguistic use the layering of negative on negative re-inscribes it as a

positive entity, thus what was initially denied is paradoxically validated by the later denial. I explore this concept in Chapter 7 when I discuss the philosophies of Hegel and Bull in relation to hiddenness and contradiction in Williams.

Dorff sees Williams' later plays as postmodernist, a view she shares with Savran. Experience indicates that attempts to label Williams' drama are fraught with difficulty and 'postmodern' is a particularly problematic term. Postmodernism does not address or explore all that I would wish to, but it does raise issues relevant to my analysis. Dorff's view of Williams as postmodernist relates to both identity and fragmentation – key issues in my reassessment of Williams' term 'plastic theatre':

While modernist metadramas frame problematics of fragmented identity, fragmentation is not such a problem to postmodernism, as it is generally accepted in late twentieth century philosophy that character/identity is a construction or a performance. (p. 9)

This links postmodernist drama to developments in contemporary philosophy, echoes the performative aspect of camp discussed earlier, and anticipates the work of Malcolm Bull which I discuss later. Dorff sees the anti-realism of Williams' 'quotation theatrics' – a device that articulates the stage directions in order to reveal interior thoughts and dialogue – as unbinding and disrupting 'modernist valuations of identity, textuality and performance' (p. 12). But the duality here is inherently contradictory:

But Williams's theatrics not only reveal characters' interior monologues, but those of the actors as well, so that spectators see and hear these contradictory thoughts and comments emanating from the same person. (p. 12)

Dorff's work on Williams' later plays exposes two important elements in Williams' drama: first there is the doubling implicit in the layering of the camp sensibility of the 'outrageous' plays, and the contradictions inherent in that doubling and in the 'double exposure' of the time overlay plays; second, her analysis of the outrageous plays in particular contains an implicit rejection of the enlightenment notion of the 'whole' as necessarily 'good' that flows from the recognition that fragmentation is part of the positive process of re-inscribing experience and making it one's own.

Allean Hale also contributes to a broader understanding of Williams' dramaturgy and his international influences. Like Saddik and Dorff, Hale recognises that Williams' plays of the 1960s and later experimented with more abstract themes than previously and were populated 'with characters who were more the embodiment of an idea than real people'.¹³⁰ While recognising, like others, the European influence in Williams' later plays, Hale, who studied Japanese drama, was alone in recognising the Japanese influence in Williams' drama. Williams visited Japan in 1959, where he had befriended the Japanese novelist, Yukio Mishima, who introduced him to Kabuki theatre and Noh drama. On his return to the US, Williams apparently referred in an interview to working on what he called 'an occidental Noh play' – *The Day on Which a Man Died* (1960), which was an early version of the later play, *In the Bar of A Tokyo Hotel* (1969). Hale appears to be the only critic to follow up this reference to track down the as then unpublished and unperformed script at the University of California-LA and her knowledge

¹³⁰

Hale, 'Confronting the Late Plays' p. 2.

of Japanese theatre gave a new perspective to Williams' experimental drama.¹³¹ It was through the lens of Japanese theatre that she saw in the script of *The Day on Which a Man Died* a different way of viewing the unfinished sentences that characterised many of Williams' late plays:

In Noh plays the dialogue is like an oratorio or duet where one person introduces a line or theme, and the other completes it. As in Japanese painting, where the empty spaces have as much meaning as the obvious design, the play's silences have significance equal to the sounds. (p. 4)

This oriental understanding and use of space echoes that of Hans Hofmann's paintings and is referred to in Williams' *Moise and the World of Reason*. In '*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel: Breaking the Code*', Hale highlights the essentially contradictory nature of an 'occidental Noh play':

We need to understand that Noh is the opposite of Western Drama, so an 'occidental Noh play' is a contradiction in terms. Influenced by Zen, Noh plays are philosophical lessons on the folly of human passions. The principal character may be the abstract embodiment of some passion [...] there is little plot development of the sort we see in Western drama. Both action and speech are highly stylized.¹³²

The dramatic conflict and tensions inherent in attempting to marry two such contrasting dramaturgies are explored in my discussion of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (see Chapter 11), but the stylistic elements of Noh theatre that Hale lists are evident in many of

¹³¹ *The Day on Which a Man Died* is now published in *Travelling Companion & Other Plays*. A production of the play, directed by David Kaplan, has been performed in both Chicago and Provincetown in 2009.

¹³² Hale, '*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel: Breaking the Code*' in *Magical Muse*, p.150

Williams later plays. Indeed, they may be seen as a checklist of what contemporary reviewers found both incomprehensible and frustrating. Hale is important in that she offers us a new perspective, and one that takes account of Williams' desire to experiment with dramatic forms that extend beyond those established and accepted in American drama and the conventional norms of Western culture.

The critics I have been discussing significantly altered the tone and scope of Williams scholarship. Their work, as I have said, looks beyond the conventional description of Williams as 'realistic' or 'romantic', and is marked by a willingness to see Williams work in a larger context, though emphases and contexts differ. These critics relish engaging with the lesser-known, more challenging works and share a detailed and analytic approach to Williams' language and structure. Savran and the group of postmodern, gay-politics critics have radically expanded how we view Williams' language and cultural significance, forcing us to see a cultural relevance in Williams' sexuality. This group is also largely responsible for the literary analysis of Williams' short stories. Saddik, Dorff and Hale have liberated Williams from the confines of 1950s American drama to place his work in an international context and consequently established a broader relevance for his drama. Saddik and Dorff in particular have rehabilitated the later plays, emphasising Williams' relevance and place in the experimental drama of the late twentieth century. They have also, coincidentally, been responsible for bringing Williams' many one-act plays to public and critical attention, thus opening up a vast body of Williams' work that was previously ignored or simply unknown.

Chapter 7

Identity, Unity and Contradiction

It is with Aristotle that we see the genesis of concepts that are challenged by Williams' drama. These stem from Aristotle's innovative analytic approach –reflected in areas as diverse as logic, psychology, metaphysics and drama. In this chapter I explore Aristotle's concepts of unity, the soul and identity as they impinge on my re-assessment of Williams' work. But first a word on Aristotle's innovative thinking, for it is his analytic mode of thought that I argue is fundamentally challenged by Williams' experimental drama. As the father of classic logic and scientific thought, Aristotle established a structured method of interrogating the world radically different from the elegant elusiveness of Plato's forms. Integral to this was a belief in exclusive oppositions, expressed in Aristotle's view that a thing could not both *be* and *not-be*:

Here, indeed, we have our securest of all principles [...] no one can believe that the same thing both is and is-not [...] It is then, not possible for opposites to be in the same subject at the same time [...] for if one were to fall into such an error, it would amount to the simultaneous holding of opposite beliefs with regard to that object. And that is why this principle is the ultimate root of all demonstration – it is its very nature to be the principle of all other axioms.¹³³

To understand this, we need to understand the inviolable nature of Aristotle's axioms. As Jonathan Barnes explains:

By the term 'axiom' Aristotle probably means to designate those primary truths which are common to all sciences ('all men use them'): thus the principle of non-contradiction, in particular, and the laws of logic, in general are axioms and

¹³³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, p. 88. It is customary in quoting Aristotle to cite the Immanuel Bekker reference, which in this case is *Metaphysics* (or *Met*) 1005b. However, as these references do not always prove useful guides in more modern versions of the texts, I shall use the page references of the modern edition quoted. Future references will be made in the text.

are indifferent to any particular subject matter. That is to say, axioms hold of absolutely everything – and so are studied by metaphysics.¹³⁴

In *The Metaphysics* Aristotle rejected the possibility of contradiction or the simultaneous co-presence of *is* and *is-not* and he held the principle of non-contradiction to be axiomatic: this concept was fundamental to his view of the nature of things. Aristotle's analytic approach proceeds in a very structured way, via the process of syllogistic logic to eliminate 'false' ideas and arrive at a truth. D. J. O'Connor, quoting from Smith and Ross, writes that '[Aristotle's] definition of 'syllogism' in the *Prior Analytics* is "discourse in which certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so"'.¹³⁵ This systematic working from known facts (or accepted propositions as expressed in logic) to a conclusion of inescapable truth is typically Aristotelian: this mode of thinking works in a linear progression towards a single incontrovertible conclusion and in so doing rejects the possibility of contradiction – a concept that, conversely, Hegel, Du Bois and Williams embrace.

Although Aristotle's thinking depended on the binary difference between *is* and *is-not*, this also needs to be seen as part of Aristotle's insistence on unity, which he regarded as fundamental and discusses in *Metaphysics*. He believed unity or oneness was a fundamental characteristic of existence, but his concept of unity is itself a complex one. He describes four basic types of unity: 'such, then, is the diversity of accounts of unity: the continuous-by-nature, the whole, the particular and the universal. The reason why all these things are unities

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Barnes, 'Metaphysics', from *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* p. 71.

¹³⁵

O'Connor, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, p. 39.

is indivisibility' (*Met*, p. 286). Aristotle then goes on to equate unity with indivisibility, and to relate that to the basic unit or measure of each kind of thing.

Hence the what-it-was-to-be-that-thing for unity is the what-it-was-to-be-that-thing for indivisibility [...] Most of all, however, it is the what-it-was-to-be-that-thing of the primary measure for each kind and most fundamentally the primary measure of quantity [...] In all cases what is required as a measure is something single and indivisible. (*Met*, pp. 286-8)

But Aristotle then implies a relativity or hierarchy within the concept of unity:

And in cases where it is not possible either to subtract or to add, the measure is most exact. And so it is in the case of number that the measure is most exact, given that the unit is stipulated to be indivisible in every respect. Other cases approximate to this. (p. 288)

Of the various types of unity, the numerical unit is the purest, and other types of unity less so.

Lawson-Tancred states the problem in his Introduction to *Metaphysics*:

The problem that Aristotle confronts is that a definition seems to be necessarily something involving parts. To define A just is to say that A is (by definition) B with features C and D...The problem is that of how A can be a unity if it is really B and C, how can man be a unity if it is really animal and, say, two-footed. (p. xxxiv)

The issue revolves around the relationship between the notions of wholeness, parts and divisibility, and the uncertainty here in Aristotle is reflected in later thinkers such as Hegel and Du Bois. Aristotle resolves the point, in part, by arguing that the unity of the thing depends on whether the parts of the whole can be understood independently of the whole or

if an understanding of the whole is necessary before its parts can make sense. In the latter case the unity of the thing is unaffected, and it remains indivisible. Using the example of a circle, Aristotle explains that to understand the concept of diameter or segment, we must first understand the concept of circle: just because a thing has parts, does not mean it is divisible – a unity can therefore have parts.¹³⁶ This aspect of Aristotle's concept of unity has a direct bearing on his concept of the soul, particularly in his analysis of the master/slave relationship.

Aristotle's description of the soul and identity primarily occurs in *De Anima*. This is not a simple task: in Aristotle's own words, 'In general and in all ways, it is one of the hardest of things to gain conviction about the soul'.¹³⁷ *De Anima* is credited with being the first attempt at a science of psychology, but it also contains Aristotle's account of 'all those activities which are characteristic of living things'.¹³⁸ So when Aristotle speaks of the *psuché*, or his own term '*entelecheia*', he is not only dealing with issues that we would recognise as belonging to psychology, but also with matters that we would assign to the natural sciences such as biology. Everson points out that 'in attempting a theory of the *psuché*, Aristotle is implicitly committed to providing a theory of the mind: while Aristotelian 'psychology' may not be a theory of the mind, it must include such a theory' (p. 169). The issue that primarily concerns us – that of identity – is enmeshed with a general exploration of the nature of living things. Things are made more difficult by the lack of firm definitions for crucial terms. The term *psuché*, being

¹³⁶ This argument is expressed in several places, mainly in the Book Zeta, which is notoriously fragmented, but the best exposition of the argument occurs in the summary to Zeta 10.

¹³⁷ Aristotle, *De Anima*, p. 126.

¹³⁸ Everson, 'Psychology', p. 168. Future references will be given in the text.

derived from *psucho*, 'breath', can mean 'soul', 'spirit', 'life-force' or more rarely, 'mind', while Aristotle's own term – 'εντελεχεια,' (*entelecheia*) – although usually translated as 'soul' is also taken to mean 'life-force' or, less specifically, 'the complete reality or perfection of a thing'.¹³⁹ Ross points out that Aristotle's neologism is probably derived from the Greek phrase meaning 'having completeness', which reinforces the conceptual link between the soul and notions of unity and wholeness.¹⁴⁰

Aristotle describes the soul in *De Anima* as follows:

If then we must say something in general about all types of soul, it would be the first actuality of a natural body with organs. We should not then inquire whether the soul and body are one thing, any more than whether the wax and its imprint are, or in general whether the matter of each thing is one with that of which it is the matter. For although unity and being are spoken of in a number of ways, it is of the actuality that they are most properly said. (p. 157)

To put it another way: the concept of unity is fundamental to Aristotle's concept of being and the soul is necessary to bring about 'actualization' – to bring the body into the living state of being – it makes no sense to talk of the animating force being separate from the body. It follows that if the soul/body is a unified entity, so too must the soul be. That having been said, Aristotle did briefly countenance the possibility of a soul with parts. Towards the end of Book 2 Chapter 1 of *De Anima*, Aristotle states: 'It is quite clear that the soul is not separable from the body, or that parts of it are not, if it is its nature to have parts' (413a, p. 158). However, as we saw, Aristotle's concept of unity can encompass an entity of parts that remains indivisible. He

¹³⁹ This last definition is from *The Dictionary of Philosophical Terms and Names*
<http://www.swif.uniba.it/lei/foldop/foldoc.cgi?entelecheia>.

¹⁴⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. Ross, p. 15.

does not discuss or return to this possibility again and the consensus amongst commentators is that Aristotle viewed the soul as a unified entity.

So far I have attempted to clarify the metaphysical issues and difficulties inherent in Aristotle's concepts of unity, contradiction and the soul/identity. As well as attempting to clarify Aristotle's terms, I have also examined the uncertainty in the notions of unity and identity that is often obscured by Aristotle's confident, didactic style.¹⁴¹ Although this establishes a historical precedent for the concerns explored in Williams' drama, the task of identifying a clear statement of Aristotle's position in these areas remains difficult. The concept of the soul is developed in Aristotle's discussion of the master/slave relationship in *The Politics*. Here he justifies the relationship of master to slave in terms of the differing nature of their souls. Having established earlier that the ruler needs self-control and virtue to be effective, Aristotle describes the differences between the souls of ruler and ruled:

In the soul the difference between ruler and ruled is that between the rational and the non-rational [...] For rule of free over slave, male over female, man over boy, are all natural but they are also different, because while all parts of the souls are present in each case the distribution is different. Thus the deliberative faculty in the soul is not present at all in a slave; in a female it is inoperative, in a child undeveloped.¹⁴²

This description of the soul and how it interacts in the relationship of slave and master explains in metaphysical terms what we would now see to be a socio/political relationship. Here the boundary between the natural sciences and psychology, to use our modern

¹⁴¹ I am using 'didactic' here in its literal meaning of 'in the manner of a teacher'.

¹⁴² Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans T.A. Sinclair pp. 51-2.

classification, is particularly fluid: the 'naturalness' of the relationship is part of Aristotle's view of the nature of living things; the issue of rationality belongs to psychology. This may explain the apparent contradiction in having 'all parts of the soul present in each case' but the deliberative, i.e. rational, faculty of the soul not being present at all in the slave. Aristotle may here be talking of the soul or *psuché* in two different senses: that of the life-force that animates all living things and that of the mind that is only fully developed in the rational male. However, for Aristotle the distinction between these two meanings of *psyche* is unimportant, if indeed he would acknowledge it at all. Aristotle sees the master's soul as naturally whole and capable of governing his body. The slave's soul conversely is naturally incomplete and incapable of governing his body, and can only achieve effectiveness through enslavement when the master's soul provides the necessary governance. I see Aristotle's concept here not as one of a divided soul alongside a whole one, but a partial one governed (and in that sense completed) by a whole soul, functioning as a rational unit. This is a difficult area and the point seems to me to relate to Aristotle's notion of a unity with parts discussed earlier. Despite Bull's assertion that Aristotle 'insisted' on the unity of the soul, the issue is more subtle than that: the *psuché* is a unity, particularly as an animating life-force, but it is also composed of co-dependent parts; some of which may be undeveloped, inoperative, or even missing.¹⁴³ Nowhere is there a suggestion that they may exist independently of the whole and that would reinforce the view that Aristotle saw the soul as unified, whilst

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Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden*, p. 239.

remembering that his concept of unity is a complex one that we cannot assume is the same as, or necessarily compatible with, more modern uses of the term.

Aristotle's concept of drama – discussed in *Poetics* – also depends on his concept of unity. Here Aristotle deals exclusively with tragedy and the emphasis is on plot rather than characterisation.

Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and life [...] So the events, i.e. the plot, are what tragedy is there for, and that is the most important thing of all. (50a)¹⁴⁴

The cohesiveness, the unity of the action is all-important, and reflects Aristotle's belief in wholeness and unity as the pre-eminently desirable state of things. This is shown by one use of *entelecheia* meaning 'the complete reality or perfection of a thing':

A plot is not (as some think) unified because it is concerned with a single person [...] Just as in other imitative arts the imitation is unified if it imitates a single object, so too the plot, as the imitation of an action, should imitate a single unified action – and one that is also a whole. (p. 15)

This assertion supports the unities of classical drama. As Jonathan Barnes says in 'Rhetoric and poetics' in *The Cambridge Companion*:

Classical modern tragedy obeyed — or paid lip-service to — the theory of the "three unities": unity of time, unity of place, unity of action...Of these three unities, only the last, unity of action, is Aristotelian. (p. 281)

¹⁴⁴

Aristotle, *Poetics*, tr. Malcolm Heath p. 11.

The unities of time and place often flow from the unity of action, and though Aristotle did not specify unity of time as a requirement of tragedy, it is implied in his demand that the action should, 'so far as is possible to keep within a single day, or not to exceed it by much' (*Poetics*, p. 9). The unity of time here is distinct from the linearity of time that I discuss later. Unity of time, like those of action and place, reflected a dramatic constraint that was designed to reinforce a sense of realism and facilitate the audience's comprehension of the drama. The action was to be a single main event in that it 'should have a certain length, and this should be such as can readily be held in memory' (*Poetics*, p. 14). The unity of place reflected the single location of the theatre stage and the unity of time attempted a broad equivalence of narrative time with watching time. For Aristotle, drama in performance needed to convey a sense of reality as far as possible: there should be a clear and close relationship between mimesis and reality. Linearity of time on the other hand is to do with order and sequence, with the logic of cause and effect in a temporal frame, and there is a clear link between the linear sequence of causality and Aristotle's concept of unity of action. In describing a play's action he says:

By a *simple* action I mean one which is, in the sense defined, continuous and unified, and in which the change of fortune comes about without reversal or recognition. By *complex* I mean one in which the change of fortune involves reversal or recognition or both. These must arise from the actual structure of the plot, so that they come about as a result of what has happened before, out of necessity or in accordance with probability. (p. 18)

The unity of action requires the ordered sequence of cause and effect, which, in drama at least, ties the concept of linearity to that of unity. Unity is a fundamental and pervasive

notion in Aristotle's thinking: it is a key concept in writings as diverse as *Metaphysics*, *Poetics*, *The Politics* and *De Anima*. In its articulation, Aristotle promoted a singular, linear approach to modes of thinking that eschewed contradiction as well as establishing a view of the world that implicitly valued consistency and wholeness as the Good. These concepts of unity and contradiction are challenged by later thinkers and the issues raised lie at the heart of my argument for the reassessment of Williams' plays. I will demonstrate that Williams challenges not only Aristotelian concepts of identity, but also other basic expressions of unity.

Hegel poses significant challenges to the concept of linear rationality and the unity of coherent entities, or identities espoused by Aristotle and of other thinkers. Hegel's radical departure from Aristotelian thinking lay in his exposition of contradiction and unity. He regarded the rationale of Aristotelian logic as unable to accommodate the true nature of contradiction. It is, he contends, 'a fundamental prejudice of hitherto existing logic and ordinary imagination that Contradiction is a determination having less essence and immanence than Identity' – a clear assertion that Contradiction and Identity have equal value and status.¹⁴⁵ Hegel challenges the Aristotelian position that forces a choice between opposing assertions:

Dogmatism consists in the tendency which draws a hard and fast line between certain terms and others opposite to them. We may see this clearly in the strict "either-or": for instance, the world is either finite or infinite; but one of the two it must be. The contrary of this rigidity is the characteristic of all Speculative truth. There no such inadequate formulae are allowed, nor can they possibly

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Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, pp. 66-7. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

exhaust it. These formulae Speculative truth holds in union as a totality, whereas dogmatism invests them in their isolation with a title to fixity and truth.¹⁴⁶

This clearly rejects Aristotle's 'either/or' analytic approach, and Hegel identifies this exclusion of opposing attributes as responsible for philosophers' tendency to focus on one assertion to the exclusion of the other. Where something is deemed contradictory 'the usual inference is [...] this object is nothing' (*Enc.*, p. 153). Once truth is assigned to one object, Hegel argues that the consciousness of the other is obscured: rather than accept contradiction, contradictory things were denied existence. In this notion of truth obscuring contradiction by its denial we have the beginnings of a different idea of integrity and unity that is developed by Malcolm Bull in his theory of 'hiddenness' (see later in this chapter). Hegel's solution to the problem of contradiction is not dogmatism or analytic truth, but speculative truth. This truth, unlike Aristotle's, holds contradictions 'in union as a totality'. This was a radical departure from accepted thinking. Hegel is here describing a new concept of unity that encompasses the contradictions of the 'either/or' within it: a totality that embraces the disunity of conflicting argument and propositions. This embracing of conflicting notions underlies Hegel's dialectical process: opposites are accommodated and incorporated into a new entity as part of a dynamic process. I am not suggesting that this is all there is to the dialectical process – that would be a gross simplification of a very complex area of Hegel's thinking. But I make two points here: first, though a simplification, it is, I believe, true to the essence of Hegel's dialectical process;

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Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, p. 52. Subsequent references will be given in the text abbreviated to *Enc.*

second, the task of clarifying Hegel's arguments from the mass of his shifting and mutating terminology is so difficult precisely because his terminology is an example of the incorporation of contradiction. An inherent ambivalence is, I suggest, not merely characteristic, but essential, to Hegel's mode of thought and argument. Findlay states: 'Hegel presents his thought in a barbarous diction of his own devising where terms are not merely oddly but shiftingly used [...] The entities mentioned by Hegel are, moreover, usually described as in a state of active self-transformation: they repel themselves from themselves, 'they "swing round" into their counterparts'.¹⁴⁷ Hegel's 'speculative truth' proposes a startling alternative to the fixed logic of Aristotle's mode of argument that proceeds on the rejection and exclusion of contradiction. But Hegel's understanding of contradiction went further: he believed not just that contradiction could be accommodated in a union of totality, but that 'every actual thing involves a co-existence of opposed elements' (*Enc.*, p. 78).

In *The Science of Logic* Hegel explains this co-existence of opposites in his discussion of the opposed entities of continuity and discreteness:

Continuity itself contains the moment of the atom, since continuity exists simply as the possibility of division; just as accomplished division, or discreteness, cancels all distinction between the ones — for each simple one is what every other is — and for that reason contains their equality and therefore their continuity. Each of the two sides contains its other in itself (p. 211).

¹⁴⁷

Findlay, 'Hegel', p. 320.

In other words, though these are opposing terms, continuity contains within itself the possibility of division and therefore discreteness: it encompasses its opposite in potential form. This is reminiscent of Aristotle's unified soul with parts: both posit a division within a unity. Hegel's conclusion, however, leads him to a more profound examination of the nature of unity which exposes issues that were latent in Aristotle's theories but ignored by intervening thinkers.

Hegel's description of self-consciousness is linked to his notion of lordship and bondage and is a development of Aristotle's thinking on the master/slave relationship. That, as we saw earlier, depended on a fixed notion of the soul, where master, slave and woman were locked into their roles by the nature of their soul, the child's soul alone having the potential for development. The master's soul is able to direct the tasks of the slave without necessarily knowing how to perform those tasks, whereas the slave is dependent on the master for that direction before he can perform any tasks. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel identifies the ambiguity of this position. If the master lacks the skill for the task, the slave has a degree of independence in performing it: 'the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed only to have an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own'.¹⁴⁸ In other words it is in the alienation from 'self' that the bondsman finds 'self'. Hegel, like Aristotle, saw the master/slave relationship mirrored in that of the soul/body: 'the soul becomes master of its natural individuality, of its bodily nature' (*Enc. III*, p. 92) but Hegel's idea of coexisting contradiction allows him to move the concept of self-consciousness and identity on from the

¹⁴⁸

Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 119.

fixed concept of Aristotle's master/slave analysis to an altogether more complex and mutable notion. Bull states that:

the originality, and confusing complexity, of Hegel's remarks on mastery and slavery may in a large measure be attributed to his attempt to exploit the ambiguous condition of the slave in Aristotle's account to generate precisely that contradiction which Aristotle excluded.¹⁴⁹

Hegel describes the master/slave relationship as a process in which the opposing states of master and slave interchange and coexist within an individual, thus allowing the individual to develop and change. In his related discussion of self-consciousness Hegel describes a self-consciousness that relates to itself as if it were two separate persons and also two persons who relate as if they were one self-consciousness. As Bull explains:

According to Hegel, self-consciousness becomes self-consciousness rather than consciousness by differentiating itself from the content of consciousness, between an 'I' that is conscious and what the 'I' is conscious of. However, in so far as that 'I' is self-conscious, what it is conscious of should be another 'I' and not a self-less object. So self-consciousness moves towards positing its content as another self-consciousness, a double of itself. (p. 223)

In other words the self has to be both separate from the content of consciousness, but also part of it. Self-consciousness, or identity, is not unified for Hegel, nor is it conventionally divided. Rather, it is essentially fluid and mutates between contradictory states of being and not-being separate.

¹⁴⁹

Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden*, p. 213.

W.E.B. Du Bois, the African American intellectual and philosopher, develops concept of identity further in his description of the African American identity. Du Bois studied at Harvard and the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, and his thinking, in particular his concept of the double consciousness, owes much to Hegel. Shamoan Zamir explains:

In 'Strivings' Du Bois draws heavily on the middle chapters of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, particularly the account of the 'unhappy consciousness', as a resource not only for his famous description of African-American 'double consciousness' but for his entire narrative.¹⁵⁰

Du Bois' concept of the double consciousness is set out in the much-quoted passage from 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings' in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

After the Egyptian, and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹⁵¹

The significant idea here is that of the double consciousness – the unreconciled, conflicted duality of the emancipated Negro. The allied concepts of veiling and second sight are also relevant to my argument, and are complex and multi-layered. Du Bois' concept of 'veiling' is a term imbued with biblical imagery and Du Bois uses it in several different ways. Werner Sollors

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Zamir, *Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903*, p. 13.

¹⁵¹

Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 11. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

draws attention to the biblical antecedents of the term, which would have been readily familiar to Du Bois' contemporary audience:

Du Bois imaginatively adapted two biblical images of the veil as a division within the Temple [*Exodus* 26.33] and as the cover that the divinely inspired Moses wore when he came back from Mount Sinai and spoke to the people [*Exodus* 34.33-35].¹⁵²

These historical references imbue Du Bois' 'veiling' with notions of division and intuitive insight, ideas that are characteristic of Williams' plastic theatre. In Du Bois, these notions become linked in his concept of second sight – the veil simultaneously disadvantages the African American in his exclusion from American society and privileges him with inspired insight. Du Bois uses the veiling trope in a number of ways and the veil becomes a multi-layered concept as Bull explains:

For Du Bois the veil has three related functions. Sometimes it is the veil of the reader's ignorance which the author promises to throw aside in order to reveal a truth that is hidden from view. More often it is the veil that divides black from white within American society, preventing members of each group from understanding each other. In drawing aside the veil, Du Bois is therefore not just uncovering any truth but specifically the truth about the black world that is hidden from his white readers. On other occasions, however, it appears that the veil lies not between black and white but rather within black American consciousness, dividing one consciousness from another within a single individual. In so far as this is the case, unveiling the truth about black people means not just revealing that something is veiled, but revealing something veiled, something that continues to be partially hidden even as it is uncovered. (p. 241)

¹⁵²

Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent In American Culture*, p. 49.

Here again is a contradiction of outcome: the throwing aside of the veil to reveal what it is to be black, reveals not the black identity, but the hiddenness of the double consciousness; reveals not knowledge of the thing itself, but knowledge of ignorance. Moreover it is not just white ignorance of what it is to be black but it is also the more profound inability of the African-American to know what it is to be himself in his entirety, as Bull explains:

And because white and black are veiled from one another, the American Negro is veiled from himself, able to see himself either as an American or as a Negro but not both at the same time. (p. 242)

In his concept of second sight Du Bois foregrounds the spirituality of the double consciousness that the Negro's African roots represented as expressed in the sorrow songs. Each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* begins with two epigraphs: a poetic quotation from Western literature and a musical notation, without lyrics, of a Negro spiritual. These twinned epigraphs are not so much representative of the double consciousness, but rather enactments of its inherent obscured duality. Eric Sundquist describes the complex relationship of the epigraphs:

These 'African' songs remain functionally at odds with the 'Western' belletristic epigraphs with which each is matched, coiled in a kind of anarchic symbiosis until the sorrow songs finally prevail in the last chapter. (p. 322)¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Sundquist, 'Swing Low: *The Souls of Black Folk*' (from *To Wake The Nations*) reprinted in *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 331-349. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in the text.

The juxtaposing of lyrics from one side of the veil with music from the other is a powerful expression of the interdependence of the two consciousnesses, whilst demonstrating their fundamental incompatibility. Sundquist explores the controversial and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to capture the sorrow songs in Western notation:

The musical epigraphs are therefore ‘alternating sounds [...] an example of a cultural ‘language’ (in this case black) that cannot be properly interpreted, or even ‘heard’ at all since it fails to correspond to the customary mapping of sounds and signs that make up the languages of the dominant (in this case white) culture [...] Hidden within the veil of black life, the music and words of the sorrow songs form a hidden, coded language in *The Souls of Black Folk*, one that recapitulates the original cultural function of the spirituals themselves. (p. 324)

Du Bois’ use of the musical epigraph displays the fact that pulling back the veil reveals only more incomprehension: the cultural forces inhabiting either side of the veil are inherently incompatible. This is true of all three uses of the veiling trope, whether it be interracial, internal to the individual consciousness or even the relatively simple exercise of making known that we don’t know. Veiling is intimately connected to Du Bois’ notion of second sight – the gift depends on being separate from the culture for which it provides its crucial insight. It is from the spiritual roots of the sorrow songs – protected in their coded language and hidden from white culture – that the African-American’s second sight comes and which Du Bois believed would ultimately provide the salvation of American society, as he describes in *Souls*:

We are Americans not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion. Farther than that, our Americanism does not go. At that point, we are Negroes, members of a vast historic race that from the very dawn of creation has slept but half awakening in the dark forests of its

African fatherland. We are the first fruits of this new nation, the harbinger of that black tomorrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic to-day. We are the people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy. (p. 181)

Du Bois' double consciousness is a complex concept, rooted in European Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, and the relatively new science of psychology.¹⁵⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson uses the term in 'The Transcendentalist', originally given as a lecture in 1842:

The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other; never meet and measure each other; one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves.¹⁵⁵

In 'Song of Myself' (1855), Walt Whitman also embraces an implicitly contradictory duality of consciousness:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever mindful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man.¹⁵⁶

Whitman's romanticism encompasses an Hegelian notion of contradiction more explicitly as well as the multiplicity of identity we shall shortly discuss in the work of Malcolm Bull:

¹⁵⁴ See Dickson D. Bruce Jr. 'W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness' *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 64.2 (June 1992): 299-309. Reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 236-44.

¹⁵⁵ Emerson, 'The Transcendentalist', *Selected Essays*, p. 254.

¹⁵⁶ Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass*, p. 40. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then ... I contradict myself;
 I am large ... I contain multitudes. (p. 85)

‘Double consciousness’ is used in psychology as early as 1817 and Dickson Bruce writes that William James, Du Bois’ Harvard mentor, ‘describes “alternating selves” and the “primary and secondary consciousness” ’ in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890).¹⁵⁷ The hierarchal structure of the double consciousness implicit in James’ terminology disappears from Du Bois’ reworking of the concept, where the two sides of the consciousness are equal, but the conflicted, unreconciled opposition of the two elements of double consciousness remains intrinsic to the concept from its beginnings – whether from its Romantic or psychological root – and predates Du Bois’ adoption of the term. For Du Bois the double consciousness is the product of the Negro’s emancipation, the uneasy coexistence of free American and enslaved African, but others have recognised a similar conflicted multiple identity in other emancipations, notably Bull (see below). In ‘Genealogical Shifts in Du Bois’s Discourse on Double Consciousness as the sign of African American Difference’, Bernard W. Bell quotes several feminist critics:¹⁵⁸

Had Du Bois ‘considered the issue of gender,’ states historian Darlene Clark Hines, ‘instead of writing, “One ever feels his twoness”, he would have mused about how one ever feels her “fiveness”; Negro, American, woman, poor, black woman.’ Prominent white feminists like Catherine MacKinnon and black

¹⁵⁷ Dickson Bruce, ‘W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness’, p. 241
¹⁵⁸ Reprinted in W.E. B. Du Bois, *On Race & Culture*, p. 87.

feminists like bell hooks contend that patriarchy is the central problem in the social construction of contemporary human identities.¹⁵⁹

In *Seeing Things Hidden*, Bull explores the concept of identity in relation to notions of apocalypse (defined as 'the reincorporation of excluded contradiction') and 'hiddenness' (p. 100). His arguments are a development of earlier concepts of identity which moves the debate forward into a twentieth-century, post-emancipation context. Bull's work provides an insight into the nature of concealment, disguise and contradiction and, in exploring the links between these concepts, offers an intellectual framework within which we can view Williams' work from a new and more holistic perspective.

In his first chapter Bull discusses the perceptual phenomenon of the alternating picture beloved of psychologists, and develops the link between contradiction and concealment that is expressed in Du Bois' notion of veiling. Most of us are familiar with one or more of the alternating images that Bull uses: the old hag-like woman who is also an elegant young lady, the two faces that are also a candlestick, and Jastrow's duck-rabbit (used in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*). These are all expressions of co-existing contradiction. In them we are confronted with a figure that both is and is-not: one that is, at best, inherently incompatible and at worst contradictory. We know the figure does not alter, but even when we are aware and have seen both images, at any given time we can perceive it as only one or the other. The potential perceptions exist simultaneously, but even knowing that, one is always disguised or obscured by the other. The contradiction that is the duck/rabbit co-exists

¹⁵⁹ Bell is quoting from Hine, 'In the Kingdom of Culture: Black Women and the Intersection of Race, Gender and Class,' in *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and The Ambivalence of Assimilation*, p. 338.

by virtue of a concealment resembling Du Bois' veiling, but it is also a denial reminiscent of pre-Hegelian attempts to deal with contradiction – the two cannot be seen simultaneously *because* they are contradictory. Bull explains this is an issue of perception:

Seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck hides the rabbit not because the rabbit becomes insensible – in seeing the duck you are necessarily sensing all that is to be sensed of the rabbit – but because the rabbit becomes imperceptible. (p. 22)

Bull describes these alternating perceptions using Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of 'continuous aspect-perception'.¹⁶⁰ This is relevant to Bull's argument and my own, for it explains how perception shifts in relation to expectations, both personal and cultural. Using the example of the alternating image with two different and incompatible perceptions, Wittgenstein describes the differing perceptions thus: the experience of seeing things literally – in other words what you expect to see – is described as 'continuous aspect-perception'; the process of discovering the second perception – the duck where previously we had seen only the rabbit – is described as 'aspect-dawning'; and the failure to see the duck even when told it is there is to be 'aspect-blind'. Continuous aspect-perception both precedes aspect dawning and can continue thereafter as a common-sense *modus operandi*, capable of reflecting both previous personal experience and social mores. We do not spend our time endlessly oscillating between duck and rabbit, but tend to settle on one or the other for our casual glance, seeing the hidden only when prompted. These instinctive choices can be, and usually are, culturally determined. Moreover (as a prelude to arguments I develop later in relation to Williams' later

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Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 166-178.

plays) continuous aspect-perception can slide into uncritical assumption. The intellectual and artistic challenge here is to prompt and reawaken the process of ‘aspect-dawning’ – to move from conventional perspectives and attitudes (Wittgenstein’s continuous aspect-perception) to a more radical and different set of perspectives and attitudes (Wittgenstein’s aspect-dawning). Aspect-dawning and aspect-perception might therefore be seen respectively as the challenges to and the expressions of the extant cultural matrix that is Raymond Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’. Aspect-perception represents the conventions and assumptions of the established ‘structure of feeling’, whilst aspect-dawning indicates the new thinking that challenges that established order and heralds the formation of a new structure of feeling. Aspect-blindness is the failure to see changes for what they are or appreciate their cultural significance. In this light, the limitations of Bigsby’s criticism of Williams’ plays might be seen as an instance of aspect-blindness: a failure to see anything other in Williams’ homosexuality than that which the dominant culture defined and expected. Bigsby, like others, was too deeply embedded in the cultural values of the then current, but fading, structure of feeling, to recognise the radical nature of Williams’ artistic challenge. Conversely, the importance of Savran’s critique lies in his radical view of the relation of Williams’ sexuality to his writing: this is an expression of aspect-dawning and cultural change.

These changes are distinguished not by redefining or changing the object of perception, but by the nature of the response to it, and are profound, if often subtle, expressions of shifting cultural mores. It is my view that the shift in perception – in how an

individual sees the world – is the great driver of artistic creativity. In

aspect-dawning the response is intuitive, in the aspect-blind the response is mechanically interpretive.

The dawning of the rabbit-aspect does not involve examining the drawing as if it were a blueprint and interpreting the arrangement of lines as a representation of a rabbit; it rather involves a new response which suggests that the figure has somehow altered its properties. Aspect-dawning is not a matter of reclassification, but of direct apprehension of something that did not appear to be there before. (Bull, p. 187)

Aspect-dawning is the sudden, sometimes tentative, and intuitive perception of something that was always there but formerly unperceived. The aspect-blind struggle to see the alternative image, even when they know it is there, interpreting the lines as representational, within the parameters of an established cultural frame of reference. One final point about the duck/rabbit, which Bull makes less of than I do, and which relates to earlier comments on Hegel: the dual image is inherently contradictory. Bull makes the point that in seeing one image the other is inevitably disguised or hidden and that it is not possible to see both simultaneously. But in addition to issues of perception, these images raise ontological issues of co-existence. Here is the paradox of a compatible incompatibility. The figure cannot be both duck and rabbit simultaneously, but it is – and not merely potentially so – for two observers can view the figure simultaneously and each see a different, and exclusive image. In this understanding of contradiction we have moved on from both Aristotle's unity with parts and Hegel's continuity with potential for discreteness. The alternating figure makes

extant the co-existing contradiction and I argue that this notion of co-existing incompatibilities is expressed in the plasticity of Williams' characterisation and stagecraft.

Bull's contribution to the debate on identity lies in his identification of the process of emancipation as 'the central experience of late modernity'. In *Seeing Things Hidden* he asks:

Why do we now see the world aspectively rather than perspectively, and secondly, why should the shift to aspectival perception be accompanied by the recognition that the aspects we see are so contradictory and manifold as to hide one another? (p. 249)¹⁶¹

Bull explicitly connects hiddenness with multiplicity and contradiction and goes on to link this to the process of 'soul-dawning' in Hegel's master/slave dialectic:

This process of recognition can aptly be described as soul-dawning for two reasons: first, it involves the slave's seeing in himself and the master seeing in the slave just that indefinable humanity that was previously supposed to be absent; secondly, the way this happens has the peculiar quality of revelation, of seeing something that was there all along and had inexplicably remained unperceived, but is now impossible to miss [...] Soul-dawning does not transform a slave into something else so that it is no longer possible to see her as a slave; rather it changes the way she is seen in such a way that it allows her to be seen as a person as well as a slave, and thus as an enslaved person. (p. 252)¹⁶²

But the foundation of slavery rests in Aristotle's thinking on the reduced, human status of the slave and the impossibility of enslaving a 'whole' person. This view of the soul as 'whole' or 'reduced' is a precursor of the unified concept of identity in the philosophy of the

¹⁶¹ As Bull explains earlier in *Seeing Things Hidden*, to see something or someone perspectively is to see it/her as essentially alien, whereas to see something or someone aspectively is to recognise similarities to ourselves along side the alien aspects.

¹⁶² This is a moot point. Even if it is impossible to miss, it is not impossible to ignore.

Enlightenment and the work of Raymond Williams. Although this is presented as an objective philosophical argument, from the perspective of the twenty-first century we can see the influence of the cultural context, or structure of feeling. Aristotle's arguments were developed in a culture that saw the concepts of slave and person as incompatible. For the concept of 'enslaved person' to lose its contradictory quality, the concepts of both 'slave' and 'person' have to change; the slave is no longer alien and slavery becomes an imposed process rather than an inherent nature. These are profound changes and they underlie Du Bois' notion of double consciousness. Where earlier we had the necessary obscuring of incompatible perceptions and the paradox of being and not-being, in Du Bois' veiling of the soul the hiddenness masks the irreconcilable internalised conflict of free American and enslaved Negro. Even if we assume that emancipation delivers what it promises, Du Bois' contention that the conflict persists beyond political emancipation is based on the persistence and pervasiveness of cultural forces. But there is no reason to suppose that the process eloquently described by Du Bois occurs only in the emancipation of slaves, as Bull recognises:

Hegel's master–slave dialectic has been recognised not only as an illuminating description of the emancipation from slavery, but also a narrative applicable to emancipations of class (Marx), gender (Beauvoir) and race (Fanon) [...] This is due in large measure to the paradigmatic nature of the narrative of slavery and emancipation within western society. The emancipation of slaves has long been recognised as the first in a sequence of emancipations in which identification with and acknowledgement of the members of other classes, genders, races, ages and species has, to varying degrees, led to their conceptual, social and legal recognition on terms of equality with those who were previously their masters. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that such emancipations have been the central experience of late modernity, for the vast majority of people who live in contemporary society enjoy whatever legal and social status they have as a direct result of them. The texts of Aristotle, Hegel and Du Bois may

therefore be taken not just as an account of slavery and emancipation, but also as a potentially illuminating account of one of the crucial dynamics of modernity. (pp. 248-49)

The key element in the emancipatory process is not the issue of physical freedom, but the transition from an identity imposed by a dominant culture to one that is self-defined. After emancipation, the Negro slave did not become a free American like a white American: the process of self-definition demanded an incorporation of the Negro's blackness – a process which is marked by the changes in terminology from 'nigger' through 'Negro' to 'black' to 'African-American'. It is implicit in Bull's argument that veiling forms a part of the process of the many emancipations of the twentieth century – whether racial, sexual or gender based. Issues of oppression, resistance and suffering vary considerably, but it is my argument that at the core of all these emancipation and liberation movements is a similar struggle to develop and establish a self-defined identity free of the influences of the dominant culture, and that this struggle affects the nature of identity itself.

Although the emancipation of Negro slaves necessitated an organised political movement – because of its economic and political implications – the process can be a more individual one. Bull's description of soul-dawning – the recognition of self in others and others in self – implies mutual participation, but individual soul-dawning is not inherently illogical. Just as seeing the duck can be a lonely experience, so too can the recognition of a common humanity. Bull focuses on emancipation as a social and political process played out on the large canvas of history, but the political movements of the late 1960s (in particular the Women's Movement and Gay Liberation) widened the definition of political to include the

personal and were distinctive in their assertion that the political could exist outside established political structures, and issues of personal emancipation, acknowledgement and integrity entered the political vocabulary. These political movements acknowledged the personal self-awareness, or soul-dawning, that often precedes social or political emancipation and placed previously ignored issues on the political agenda. The full import of these 'personal' issues was not necessarily appreciated at that point, but their acknowledgement as politically relevant was innovative. By giving these issues political status the 1960s movements were instrumental in what Bull describes as 'coming into hiding'. Bull's term 'coming into hiding' describes the process that occurs when we become aware of a new aspect of something which remains concealed or disguised – in Wittgensteinian terms, what could be described as 'partial aspect-dawning'. In the duck/rabbit figure, it is the awareness of an obscured second figure when seeing the rabbit, but without seeing the duck: we know a second figure exists, but cannot see it. The significance of the unspecified awareness that Bull exposes here is that even this partial aspect-dawning acknowledges existence where existence was previously denied. Bull's argument is that something can only be hidden if we know it exists and that therefore for something to be hidden is in itself an acknowledgement of its existence. For previously unacknowledged entities or states to become hidden is not a process of 'going into hiding' with its reductive negative implications, but rather a process of entering a more positive state of acknowledgement, of 'coming into hiding' from the deeper darkness of unacknowledged existence. Bull relates his process of 'coming into hiding' to that of emancipation.

Bull's argument broadens the notion of enslavement to encompass those individuals caught in the alienating definitions of a dominant and intrinsically hostile culture. Bull relates this to contemporary Western societies and, referring to the research of Charles Lemert, he identifies African-Americans, women, homosexuals and other 'minority' groups as more likely to experience the conflicted multiple identity of Du Bois' double consciousness, while identifying the white heterosexual male as having the greatest chance of having a strong sense of undifferentiated self. Members of the dominant group in a society – in this case white heterosexual males in a patriarchal society – are most likely to see themselves as what the culture defines and is universally perceived as normal and human. The 'Other' groups will perceive themselves in the lower status defined and assigned to them by the dominant culture. Subsequently, as aspect and then soul-dawning occurs, they will 'come into hiding' as they begin to be self-defined, but incompatibly divided. If we equate this process to homosexuality and women's liberation, the personal recognition of repressed sexuality, social repression and prescription becomes a 'coming into hiding'. Even when social repression and prescription continue, the acknowledgement of previously denied sexuality is a step towards emancipation and an implicit recognition of repressive social and cultural forces.

From this perspective Blanche's promiscuity in *A Streetcar named Desire* becomes more than the mere working out of an individual sexual neurosis: it is transformed into a self-awareness that struggles, and fails, to find socially acceptable expression. Blanche's opening words encapsulate the tensions of her position: 'They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian

Fields!¹⁶³ Here the juxtaposition of desire, death and mythologised virtue are situated in the cultural prescriptiveness of 'they told me'. In this first scene Blanche is 'daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat' (p. 245), but as the play progresses Blanche's relationship with light/white and the purity it symbolises becomes ambivalent. When Mitch finally confronts her, tearing the paper from the lantern that Blanche has shaded, she is dressed in a scarlet satin robe and her fear of being seen in the light is evident. However the moment of physical exposure is matched by Blanche's statement of her personal dilemma:

I don't want realism. I want magic! [*Mitch laughs*] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! – *Don't turn the light on!* (p. 385)

'Magic' is Blanche's attempt at veiling: in her lies and deceit she attempts to reconcile the conflicting pressures of passion and purity; of giving people what they want and fulfilling her own desires. Her articulation of her dilemma can be seen as Blanche's tentative self-defined identity 'come into hiding'. The symbolism of shaded lights and veiled interiors is not the covering veneer of neurosis, but a reflection of the veiling that marks Blanche's embryonic but doomed emancipation.

After 'coming into hiding' Bull argues that identity moves into the stage of 'living in hiding'. This involves managing the 'multiple self' that characterises modernity. Bull's

¹⁶³ Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in *TTW*, Volume 1, p. 246. Subsequent references will be given in the text. All references to Williams' plays are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

arguments here, though complex and fascinating, range beyond the area of my immediate concerns as he explores the politics of recognition and how these issues affect multiculturalism and social and political structures. The crucial issue for my argument lies in the problem of recognising the multiplicity implicit in the veiling and hiddenness of identity, and whether that can be accommodated within the unified self of the liberal tradition. Du Bois and Bull expose the multiple conflicted self produced by emancipation and Bull argues for the personal realisation that follows as a consequence to be seen as an expression of modernity. The implications of this extend beyond the internalised hidden conflicts of the individual to create a 'tension between the single, unspecified self of the liberal humanist tradition and the specific identities of those that tradition has sought to recognise' (p. 272) – the liberal desire to recognise the emancipated self/selves is at odds with the liberal notion of a unified self. This is no insignificant conflict of interests and ideas, for as Bull points out it leads, I suggest inevitably, to a subtler repression:

The affirmation of the single unified self against the multiplication arising from the emancipation of modernity can have [...] the openly reactionary purpose of negating their effect and cancelling the recognition of selves emerging from multiple forms of enslavement. (p. 271)

The emancipatory process that Bull argues defines modernity is incompatible with liberal notions of unity, and by implication, established concepts of unity are challenged by modernity itself. I am not here suggesting a nihilistic fragmentation or disintegration of identity that characterises some aspects of postmodernism in this challenge to unified concepts. Rather, I am suggesting that a crucial aspect of modernity is the acceptance of a

multiple, mutating but cohesive identity and that this is expressed in Williams' experimental drama.

In this chapter I have discussed the development of identity from its Aristotelian roots of unity to Bull's notion of multiplicity. In Aristotle we saw a unified identity that rested on hierarchical notions and a belief in unity as the desirable state. In Hegel we saw the rehabilitation and incorporation of contradiction and the finding of self within the process of alienation. Du Bois' description of double consciousness empowered the veiled and alienated identity with a particular insight. Bull developed the notion of co-existing contradiction and related Du Bois' post-emancipation duality beyond the issue of slavery. By placing that duality within a contemporary context, Bull suggests a redefinition of post-modern fragmented identity as a cohesive but multiple entity.

Chapter 8

Considering Identity: A Re-reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Williams' reputation as a realistic dramatist set the context for the first performances of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and at the time it was welcomed as a new kind of realistic play. Contemporary critics saw 'traditional' dramatic realism in the domestic setting, its focus on the family and in recognisable characters whose future was being shaped by their past. But the rawness of the sexual content and the play's introspective psychology – so disliked by Raymond Williams – marked *Streetcar* out as a departure from earlier 'realistic' plays. It is still seen, and performed, as a prime example of 'realistic' drama, but this view misses significant elements in the play, and obscures *Streetcar's* place in Williams' dramaturgy.

A realistic interpretation of *Streetcar* throws up a web of contradictions that are not readily resolved: there is an interplay of contradiction that transcends conventional notions of reality.¹⁶⁴ Others see an interplay of contradictions in *Streetcar*: in Philip Kolin's collection of essays on *Streetcar*, a number of contributors identify contradictory elements in the play.¹⁶⁵ In this chapter I consider the dualities identified in these essays before developing my argument through a close reading that re-assesses *A Streetcar Named Desire*, placing it at the beginning of a trajectory of dramatic and stylistic development that constitutes an extended examination of the nature of (post)modern identity. In his introduction to *Confronting Tennessee Williams*, Kolin refers to contradictions in Williams' characters – 'revealing what we want concealed and concealing what we want revealed' – exposing notions of both contradiction and hiddenness (p. 1). Kolin refers to the changing analysis of Blanche and Stanley:

¹⁶⁴ Much of the argument and material in this chapter first appeared in my Masters dissertation: Tyrrell, "'Catching The Bird": Hiddenness, Duality and Resistance in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams', but I have significantly enlarged and developed the scope of that early work here.

¹⁶⁵ Kolin, *Confronting Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire: Essays in Critical Pluralism*.

The dichotomies that have frozen Blanche and Stanley in critical inquiries for years are being dislocated [...] though Williams offers dualities, he 'makes his thematic point that to fragment or dissociate human experience by seeing it as mutually exclusive, either/or series of options, rather than to regard it from an integrative, both/and perspective is one of our greatest sins, debilitating both to the individual and to society'.¹⁶⁶

Kolin is drawing attention to the complexity of Williams' characterisation, its deliberate rejection of the either/or analysis of identity and the pathologising of fragmented identity. Though Kolin does not articulate it, this implicitly rejects the notion of unity (rooted in Western humanism from Aristotle through to the Enlightenment) as a formal, moral and psychological 'good'. Several of the contributors to *Confronting Tennessee Williams* identify contradictions within characters and dramatic form that are unresolved in the play and forced to remain in a dramatic tension – in an inherently unstable co-existence. These often involve an element of crossover between characters, destabilising and challenging accepted notions of unity. William Kleb's analysis of the rape scene discloses the sexual similarities between Blanche and Stanley that cut across the obvious binary polarisation:

She reconstitutes Stanley's paternalism as a kind of domestic tyranny where rape and adultery are male prerogatives. The rape scene demonstrates this process at work: Ironically, just as Stanley (defender of the Same) pins down Blanche (proliferating Other) as a controllable sign for sexual lunacy, she pins *him* down as a sexual outlaw. She implants her otherness *in him*.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Kolin, 'Reflections on/of A Streetcar Named Desire', p. 5. Kolin is quoting from Adler, *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and The Lantern*.

¹⁶⁷ Kleb, 'Marginalia: *Streetcar*, Williams and Foucault', p. 40.

Kleb sees Williams' dramatic project to 'relocate the Other within man's own nature, within the Same', identifying an inherent and inescapable contradiction within the identities of Williams' characters (p. 41). Laura and Edward Morrow apply chaos theory to *Streetcar*, identifying conflict and contradiction not only in the characters of Blanche and Stanley but in the structure of the play itself. They comment on the difficulty in 'distinguishing the protagonist from the antagonist, identifying the play's generic form, discerning what Williams intended by a conclusion in which nothing is concluded'.¹⁶⁸ They argue that Williams' scholarship needs to take account of such contradictions: that it 'demands a methodology that recognizes and accounts for the interpenetration of order and disorder' (p. 59). Laurilyn J. Harris describes the internal contradictions within Blanche who she describes as 'fragmented, unable to [...] amputate self from self and compartmentalize the incompatible segments of her life'.¹⁶⁹ It is not just Blanche's life that is riven with incompatibilities: Blanche herself is contradictory and Harris' description of her efforts to 'compartmentalize' incompatible segments of her experience recognises the duality of Blanche's identity and that this fragmentation sets Blanche apart. Here, Harris echoes aspects of Du Bois' theory of veiling and she describes this as akin to schizophrenia, placing it within the paradigmatic framework that sees unity as the good – a paradigm that I argue Williams' drama fundamentally challenges:

She cannot reconcile her two self images: the aristocratic lady from Belle Reve and the whore from the Flamingo Hotel. She is denied a sense of wholeness 'in a world where other people have managed to achieve coherence'. (p. 93)

¹⁶⁸ Morrow and Morrow, 'The Ontological Potentialities of Antichaos and Adaptation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*', p. 59.

¹⁶⁹ Harris, 'Perceptual Conflict and the Perversion of Creativity in *A Streetcar Named Desire*', p. 91.

Like Harris, Kenneth Holditch recognises the duality of Blanche's character, seeing it as responsible for her final betrayal and incarceration:

Blanche is ambivalent and exists on two levels; she is at once the romantic and the passionate female and the inevitable conflict between the two elements leads to her defeat.¹⁷⁰

This implicitly pathologises the contradiction, internalising the cause of Blanche's duality as a sickness – a mental instability. This pathologising of the contradictory duality of Blanche again rests on a belief in the unified identity as good – as *wholesome*. Harris also questions the realism of the play in describing the conflict in the play as 'not between fantasy and reality, but between two radically different *perceptions* of reality' (p. 85). This is an anti-realistic critique in its rejection of a stable reality and the contest of fantasy versus reality that has historically characterised criticism of *Streetcar*. Harris depicts these 'radically different perceptions' locked in a relentless struggle for supremacy, not as different but coexistent perspectives:

The central issue of the play thus revolves around the question of whose perceptions, whose reality, will prevail and be accepted by the other, more malleable characters as authentic. (p. 86)

This moves her critique closer to a binary analysis than a reading that sees the complex duality as coexistent. Though Harris initially embraces a destabilised, mutable, notion of reality, she ultimately looks to a resolution of the competing realities where one triumphs over

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Holditch, 'The Broken World: Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism in *A Streetcar Named Desire*', p. 159.

the other. The successful perspective survives and achieves authenticity by convincing other characters that it is the 'real' reality. Harris is implicitly seeking a unified reality – ultimately for her, only reality can survive; only one can be 'real'. These analyses see the contradictions and dualities in *Streetcar*, but for the most part ultimately require resolution to the series of oppositions identified: a resolution that, as critics recognise, Williams refuses to supply. Kolin argues that the normal binary assessment of the conflict between Blanche and Stanley needs to be replaced by a subtler analysis of the internalised conflict within these characters (*Confronting Streetcar*, p. 5), an analysis that in my view is achieved by examining their names.

In Williams' choice of characters' names we see a significance beyond simple naming: from the obviously symbolic – Val Xavier (*Battle of Angels*, later re-worked as *Orpheus Descending*) and Flora Goforth (*The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*) to the overtly anti-realist One and Two (*I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*) – the process of naming is clearly a serious and deliberate one. In *Streetcar* Williams draws our attention to naming when Blanche explains her name – 'It means woods and Blanche means white, so the two together mean white woods'.¹⁷¹ This encourages us to look at the meaning of her name, but also the juxtaposition of the elements within it – 'together they mean white woods'. Her name has to be seen in the context of the opposition of light and dark that is a constant reference in the play. Kazan saw Blanche and Stanley as relatively simple protagonists in a metaphysical contest of light and dark:

¹⁷¹

Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, p. 299.

[It is] a message from the dark interior. This little, twisted, pathetic, confused bit of light and culture puts out a cry. It is snuffed out by the crude forces of violence, insensibility and vulgarity which exist in our South – and this cry is the play.¹⁷²

But Blanche is Blanche of the woods and however white the woods are, they remain a place of darkness and shadows, of secrecy and hidden things. The South that Blanche represents is not merely one of Southern gentility: it carries the dark shadow of race and racism. Blanche's surname – DuBois – links her to W.E.B Du Bois (the African-American philosopher discussed earlier) putting emancipation and blackness at the heart of the repressive Southern white aristocracy that Blanche represents. Her role as a plantation owner at Belle Reve places her as an expropriator and beneficiary of black labour – the foundation of the now dissipated family wealth – and encodes her, in the same way that Faulkner's characters are encoded, as racially black.¹⁷³ More importantly in both these authors, this encoding echoes the Hegelian analysis of the master/slave relationship. This encoding as Other within her plantation owner identity is compounded by her sexual Otherness as predatory transgressor within her identity as Southern Belle. Even at this early point in the play, Williams has alerted us to hidden layers of identity in Blanche: her first name is a complex of ideas – embodying notions of both light and fear (blanching) – and the contradictions in Blanche's name are not solely those of white versus woods, for the fear embodied in 'Blanche(ing)' is accommodated in the secrecy of the woods. But Blanche's complexity is not self-contained: the dark/light opposition that is represented by Stanley and herself indicates a complex web of

¹⁷² Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Typescript dated 5 April 1947 in Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, quoted in Bigsby, *Twentieth Century American Drama*, p. 63.

¹⁷³ See Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labour: William Faulkner and the South's Long Revolution*.

similarities and disparities that span their characterisation. If we take up Williams' implicit invitation to examine his characters' naming, Stanley too reveals contradictions. Stanley is commonly associated with uncomplicated no-nonsense strength – the name means a 'stony meadow' – and Kowalski is derived from *kowal*, Polish for a blacksmith.¹⁷⁴ But whilst the dark industrialisation of 'blacksmith' and the harshness of 'stony' contrasts with Blanche's fearful gentility, there is a crossover contrast between Blanche's woods and Stanley's meadows. Here it is Stanley who basks in the rural openness and light of the meadow whilst Blanche lurks in the darkness of her woods – the association of light and dark are reversed, but not in a denial of the earlier associations: instead, they become a further dimension which lays difference and similarity side by side. Moreover, Stanley is also encoded as black by Blanche's description of him as an 'ape' and by his Polishness as ethnically Other. The cross currents that are buried in the naming indicate a complexity of contradiction: the white and black of Blanche and Kowalski are in classic opposition, but the DuBois/St Stanley contrast is undermined by the association of 'woods' with 'dark' and 'meadows' with daylight. The black/white contrasts are further compromised by the bucolic affinity of 'woods' and 'meadows'. What was ostensibly a simple character contrast shifts and black is shown to be also white, just as white is revealed as also black and then, in an additional twist, these shifts turn out to have a generic affinity. The black/white contrast is further countered by Stanley's action of bringing Blanche's dark secrets to light. Blanche's dead husband, Allan Gray, amalgamates this

¹⁷⁴ 'Stanley ' as 'stony meadow': see Eric Partridge *Name This Child*. Kowalski – derived from kowal – blacksmith from *The Great Polish/English Dictionary*, ed. Jan Stanislawski.

black/white contrast between Blanche and Stanley in his name and in his sexuality:

the woman who loves men and the man who loves women becomes the man who loves men.

This amalgamation of the black/white conflict is not an accommodation that allows co-

existence and fails in its attempt at resolution, ending in the annihilation of Gray's suicide.

The internal contradictions in Williams' characters' identities form a web of similarity – itself a contradictory process – between characters in conflict. Contradiction is not limited to an internalised pathology, but characterises the external conflict between Blanche and Stanley. The internally contradictory characteristics become the similarities that unite those in conflict. Contradiction therefore becomes similarity and introduces a metatheatrical dimension: the dramatic structure of Blanche and Stanley's conflict is itself contradictory, undermining and destabilising attempts to rationalise the play's dramatic conflict in conventional terms. The contradictions of Blanche and Stanley's names are the most important in the play, but similar conflicts exist in other names. Stella – 'Stella! Stella for Star!' (p. 251) – was, as Stella DuBois, star of the woods, an image containing light in rural simplicity, the dark references of the wood we see in Blanche, and light against a dark sky. This latter image is both a symbol of hope for Blanche as the world of Belle Reve disintegrates, and a reminder of Stella's relationship with Stanley. Stella has abandoned the darkness of the wood to become the blacksmith's star, exchanging a rural identity for an industrial one, where the contradiction of light and dark persists. This is played out in the conflict between loyalty to her sister and love for her husband. This conflict of loyalties is, I argue, better understood as Stella's struggle to hide the truth from herself, to accommodate the contradiction of the rape

and the need to believe in Stanley: to accommodate this conflict of light and dark demands an exercise in hiddenness, a veil between truth and desire. Finally, Shep Huntleigh, Blanche's potential rescuer, is also an ambivalent character. He never appears in the play and there is an uncertainty about him – Stella does not remember him – and it is a moot point as to whether he exists or is merely a figment of Blanche's imagination. Whether fact or fantasy, the name embodies both protector – Shep(herd) – and predator – Hunt(leigh)¹⁷⁵. 'Leigh' further links to Stanley through the similar sounding 'ley' and 'lea', yet another form of open meadow. If he is Blanche's fantasy, the level of contradiction is compounded, for then Blanche herself is casting her rescuer as a contradiction, and becomes someone who actively embraces contradiction, in others as well as herself. This view also recasts her final actions in a new light, enabling us to see her eventual acquiescent departure, not as a retreat from reality, but as an acceptance of the duality of the doctor's role as both her incarcerator and her protector.

The dramatic tension that centres around the relationship between Blanche and Stanley, who are so culturally and temperamentally different to the point of being anathematic, also demonstrates duality and contradiction, but beyond the obvious contrasts there are tensions that are more subtle and more complex than a simple juxtaposition of cultures. Blanche is predominantly associated with white and light throughout the play and the stage directions in the first scene describe Blanche's arrival at Elysian Fields, establishing her character in terms of the delicacy and vulnerability associated with the innocence of

¹⁷⁵ I am indebted to Lionel Kelly who mentions this contrast in his essay 'The White Goddess, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Desire', p. 129.

white/light. This is represented in her white clothing, but Williams introduces at this early point the conflicting harshness of light's glare:

She is daintily dressed in a white suit and fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat [...] Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth. (p. 117)

Blanche's 'moth-like' quality, moreover, hints at the tragic relationship of 'white' (Blanche) to 'light', establishing the similarity and difference between them. In this simile, Stanley's sexuality becomes the light to which Blanche is drawn, an allusion that further destabilises any simple equation of light/dark to innocence/power or good/evil. Blanche arrives at Elysian Fields wearing a white suit and gloves, the radio she turns on to annoy Stanley during the poker game is white, she wears 'a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown' in the 'rape' scene, and only the Doctor's intervention prevents Matron restraining her in the white straitjacket as she is taken to the asylum. The degradation of 'white' in Blanche's clothing pursues a clear trajectory through the play and ostensibly represents the loss of innocence and illusion. The complexity of both Blanche and Stanley's black and whiteness, however, militates against such a straightforward reading and instead we realise it is another example of shifting, mutating values. A similar complexity is evident in Blanche's (white's) relationship to light. She presents visually as a symbol of light and delicacy in her whiteness, but fears light's harsh scrutiny that would penetrate her hiddenness: 'turn that over-light off! Turn it off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!' (p. 120). Yet her fear does not prevent Blanche's manipulation of the lighting to present herself as she wishes

to be seen: during the poker game she disingenuously stands silhouetted by the bedroom light as she tries to attract Mitch's attention, and when Stella protests, Blanche moves, only to move back into the light as Stella leaves. She later masks the light in a paper lantern, making the light complicit in her deceit of Mitch, reversing the traditional relationship of light with truth and innocence. Later Mitch destroys the lantern and Stanley uses it to taunt her after her history is revealed. But again, this is no simple inversion of a clichéd symbol: we are meant to see this as yet another aspect of light's symbolism, co-existing with its more traditional references. Williams' stage directions are renowned for being exceptionally detailed and specific, and in *Streetcar* the stage directions continually shift the reference to light and maintain its complex symbolism in the play.

The initial straightforward characterisation of Stanley is similarly compromised by later events. He is introduced as a strongly male, not to say macho, character in the company of his bowling, poker-playing buddies. The three men – Stanley, Mitch and Steve – pay scant attention to their women as they plan an evening session of poker. Stanley is clearly the dominant male in the group, ultimately determining the terms on which they all meet:

Steve: Hey we playin' poker tomorrow?

Stanley: Sure – at Mitch's.

Mitch: No – not at my place. My mother's still sick

Stanley: Okay, at my place [...] But you bring the beer! (pp. 263-4)

The following stage directions confirm his quintessential maleness:

He is of medium height, about five eight or nine, and strongly compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens [...] the gaudy seed-bearer. He sizes women up with a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. (pp. 264-5)

The dialogue with Blanche that follows confirms Stanley's confident sexuality and set the terms of the relationship with Blanche:

Stanley: Where you from Blanche?

Blanche: Why, I – live in Laurel.

Stanley: In Laurel huh? Oh, yeah, in Laurel, that's right. Not in my territory. Liquor goes fast in hot weather. [*He holds the bottle to the light to observe its depletion*] Have a shot.

Blanche: No, I – rarely touch it.

Stanley: Some people rarely touch it, but it touches them often. (p. 266)

This exchange sets Stanley's directness against Blanche's hesitancy and establishes the balance of power between them. While it clearly juxtaposes Stanley's strength and Blanche's vulnerability, Stanley's final comment presages his exposure of Blanche in his ability to reveal what she tries to keep hidden. The balance of power established at the outset is confirmed by both later in the play when Blanche says of Stanley, 'The first time I laid eyes on him, I thought to myself, that man is my executioner!' (p. 351), and when Stanley says in the rape scene, 'We've had this date with each other from the beginning' (p. 402). Williams opposes Blanche's old southern gentility to Stanley's crude modernity, her fragility to his brutality, and her

manipulative deception to his ruthless dissection. But underneath these opposing characterisations Williams has woven a web of contradictions, designed to destabilise the comfortable simplicity of either/or distinctions, depicting instead the contradictory complexity that inherent in Williams' view of the world.

If we re-examine the characters in *Streetcar* in the light of Bull's work on hiddenness using his analysis of aspect-dawning and 'coming into hiding', Williams' insistence on undermining the simple binarisms of more traditional critiques assumes a new significance. Aspect-dawning – the process of becoming aware of an aspect or perspective on something of which we were previously oblivious – is at the heart of Williams' characters' fluidity and contradictions. Williams continually upsets notions of unified normality by confronting us with inherent conflicts so that Blanche and Stanley defy simple categorisation. They are multi-aspected: Stanley *is* both brutal and caring:

Stanley: When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it, having them coloured lights going! And wasn't we happy together, wasn't it all okay till she showed here? ... And wasn't we happy together? Wasn't it all okay? Till she showed here. Hoity-toity, describing me as an ape. (*He notices the change in Stella*) Hey what is it Stell? (*He crosses to her.*)¹⁷⁶
 Stella: (*quietly*): Take me to the hospital.
He is with her now, supporting her with his arm, murmuring indistinguishably as they go outside. (p. 378.)

Similarly Blanche *is* both vulnerable and predatory:

¹⁷⁶ Stella, who we realise is in the early stages of labour is described in the stage directions as having a 'blind look and a listening expression' (p. 377).

Mitch: Didn't you stay at a hotel called the Flamingo?

Blanche: Flamingo? No! Tarantula was the name of it! I stayed at a hotel called The Tarantula Arms!

Mitch: (*stupidly*) Tarantula?

Blanche: Yes a big spider! That's where I brought my victims ... Yes I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with ... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection. (p. 386)

In these passages we see yet further coding of both characters as black: Stanley is associated with 'dirt' and the race-inflected (not to say racist) images – 'colour', 'ape' – whilst Blanche is associated with the (black) tarantula. In addition to the cross currents of black/white symbolism discussed earlier, more obvious descriptions are subject to oppositions: Stanley's attempts to resurrect the sexual fantasy of his relationship with Stella in 'the coloured lights' and his genuine concern and love for her compromises the view of him as realist/rapist; while Blanche's violation of Stanley's domestic space and his relationship with Stella, and her manipulative relationship with Mitch similarly compromise her image as vulnerable fantasist. By refusing to stabilise his characters as 'fantasist' or 'realist', 'violation' or 'violated', 'victim' or aggressor, 'good' or 'evil', Williams does more than demonstrate that people are complex. In this process of destabilisation Williams is suggesting more than the difficulty of establishing what Blanche or Stanley *really* are: he is demonstrating that they are *all* these things. In the cross currents that undermine the black/white dichotomy, he is not describing Stanley and Blanche in shades of grey, but making clear that black *is* white and white *is* black – just as Du Bois' emancipated 'Negro' is *both* free American *and* African slave, is both culturally 'white' and 'black'. This is not a denial of the initial perception, but a shift to a

new perspective, displaying something previously unseen and a conflicting aspect of what was formerly seen.

Though it is possible to dismiss Blanche as melodramatic and self-indulgent and to recast Stanley as a gentle giant, Williams' complex narrative of the play denies such a comfortable analysis: Stanley rapes his sister-in-law and Blanche builds an alternative 'fantasy' world which relies on manipulating 'the kindness of strangers'; Stanley's reasserted brutality obscures his tenderness to Stella, but we remain aware of it. The uncertainty of these paradoxical juxtapositions persists, reinforced by Stanley's rape of Blanche, and the image of a 'caring' Stanley becomes unclear and elusive. The awareness of hidden characteristics doesn't soften the initial perception: instead it takes on a new and heightened contrast. Aspect-dawning in Williams' theatre does not resolve conflict but sharpens our awareness of contradiction. The process is not comfortable, nor is it meant to be. Williams wrote in a stage direction in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: '[The playwright] should steer [...] away from "pat" conclusions, facile definitions which may make a play just a play, not a snare for the truth of human experience'.¹⁷⁷

Through the Hegelian perspective of Du Bois and Bull, Blanche's tragically conflicted sexuality can be recognised as culturally determined rather than the classic 'tragic' flaw typical of the Western humanist tradition from Greek drama to twentieth-century realism. Williams sets the cultural norm of 'pure' Southern womanhood against Blanche's repressed sexual desire and this conflict produces her self-destructive promiscuity. Just as the American 'Negro'

¹⁷⁷

TTW, Volume 3, p. 115.

of Du Bois' analysis separates his American aspirations from his slave history, so Blanche separates her culturally received notions of female purity from the reality of her sexual desires. 1950s homosexuals similarly separated their sexuality from the 'normal' aspirations and images of American masculinity. Neither the 'Negro' nor Blanche nor the homosexual can reconcile the conflicting aspirations and aspects of their dual identities. A partial accommodation is achieved by veiling: when one aspect is seen and acknowledged, the other is hidden behind the veil – veiling allows the Negro to espouse American notions of equality despite his slave history. The veil of fantasy allows Blanche to uphold the Southern virtues of female purity despite her sexual promiscuity. The veil separating homosexuality from masculinity allows homosexuals to be American 'men' despite their sexuality. The two processes of veiling and aspect-dawning together produce an awareness of hiddenness and with it an acknowledgement of the thing hidden. It allows, in Bull's terms, a 'coming into hiding' of the veiled aspect: for Blanche, veiling allows her sexuality to 'come into hiding'; for Stanley, veiling allows his vulnerability and need for Stella to co-exist with his strutting sexuality.¹⁷⁸ There is in Stanley a further veiling suggested by the homosocial context of his poker nights and his clothing. He maintains the poker nights as exclusively male by excluding Stella, Blanche and Eunice and by his attempts to ignore them when they interrupt the game:

Stella: Blanche and I took in a show. Blanche, this is Mr. Gonzales and Mr. Hubbell.

Blanche: Please don't get up.

Stanley: Nobody's going to get up, so don't be worried.

¹⁷⁸ It is important in this argument to maintain the distinction between acknowledgement and acceptance: the former doesn't necessarily imply the latter, but it is a necessary prelude to it.

Stella: How much longer is this game going to continue?
 Stanley: Until we get ready to quit. (p. 289-90)

His 'brilliant silk pyjamas', 'red and green silk bowling shirt' and 'clinging wet polka dot drawers' introduce a camp quality through their references to homosexuality via the associations of eastern exoticism and silk and the sexual explicitness of clinging underpants. The silk bowling shirt ties Stanley's homosocial context to these camp elements, thus introducing a significant ambivalence about the focus of Stanley's 'maleness'.

Williams' desire to encapsulate 'the truth of human experience' is irrevocably linked to his idea that truth lay below the surface 'reality', and thus to the notion of 'hiddenness' which finds dramatic expression in Williams' staging, particularly in his lighting. The gauze screens of *The Glass Menagerie* – which divided the dramatic space and the play's action, partially obscuring action in both time and space – are replaced in *Streetcar* by more subtle and less obtrusive lighting and staging. The set for *Streetcar* enables both the exterior and interior action to take place on the same set with the audience's attention shifting with the changes in lighting. The single, static set throws the contradictions within the action into sharp relief in a way traditional changes of scene could not. Conventional scene changes move location and time – removing the juxtaposition of contradictions by placing them in different times and places – separating one from another and avoiding the crucial realisation of co-existence that Williams exposes: containing the dramatic development within a single space forces us to confront these contradictions whilst denying a conventional resolution. The single set establishes a contrast of light and dark on stage that puts the interior and exterior scenes in a

series of sequential oppositions. We see through the sets as the lighting changes, but retain a sense of the other, now unseen. In the first scene Eunice shows Blanche into her sister's flat, described in the following stage direction:

She [Eunice] gets up and opens the downstairs door. A light goes on behind the blind, turning it a light blue. Blanche slowly follows her into the downstairs flat. The surrounding areas dim as the interior is lighted. Two rooms can be seen, not too clearly defined. The one first entered is primarily a kitchen but contains a folding bed to be used by Blanche. The room beyond this is a bedroom. Off this room is a narrow door to a bathroom. (p. 248)

These directions present a logistical dilemma to set designers; how can one get everything on stage, achieve the necessary sight lines and visibility for the audience yet obey the injunction to have things 'not too clearly defined'? These are not insignificant problems and but the set's structure is doing more than create a location for the action. It enables light to illuminate the physical, and the metaphysical – the light goes on 'behind the blind, turning it light blue'. 'Behind the blind' suggests hiddenness – something obscured by a blind but also revealing something to the previously unseeing. Moreover, the 'light blue' refers back to the lyrical blue of the opening stage direction:

The sky that shows around the dim, white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism, and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. (p. 243)

This lighting cross-reference introduces a subtle temporal cross-reference, suggesting that the play may not follow a simple linear time structure, but in a subtler fashion than the

memory structure of *The Glass Menagerie*, the past will inhabit the present, a suggestion developed in Williams' use of music later in the play.

The innovative lighting techniques continue throughout the play and are a distinctive feature of Williams' work more generally. They evoke a sense of hiddenness and exposure, uncertainty and duality which challenge our inclination to interpret what we see in a literal or unified way. Williams challenges the audience's 'continuous aspect-perception' – its habit of seeing only what it expects to see. His use of scrims and lighting in particular enables him to establish multiple perspectives on a single stage set.¹⁷⁹ We, the audience, are constantly seeing through to something else, less clearly defined than the images of the fore-grounded action but inhabiting the same space. Interior and exterior co-exist, but cannot be seen simultaneously as our perception and awareness is determined by the rise and fall of the lighting. But as with any aspect-dawning, when part of the set that has previously been seen is obscured, we remain aware of it even though it is unseen. This aspect-dawning is limited to the audience: the characters are either ignorant of the facts, as in the early scenes; deny reality, as when Stella refuses to believe Blanche's account of the rape; or substitute one limited understanding for another, as when Mitch rejects Blanche because of her history. The revelation of 'hiddenness' is for the audience alone, and Williams' use of light confines the process to the audience.

But light is both a mechanism and a metaphor in Williams' theatre, clearly demonstrated by the light in the bedroom of *Streetcar*. When Blanche covers the bare light-

¹⁷⁹ A scrim is another term for the gauze screens used in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and I use that term here to distinguish them from the screens in *The Glass Menagerie*.

bulb in Stella and Stanley's bedroom with a coloured Chinese paper lantern, dramatically it achieves several things: first, Blanche cloaks the raw passion of the Stanley/Stella heterosexual relationship with the delicate and fragile elegance of her marriage to Allan Grey, via the association of Chinoiserie with homosexuality;¹⁸⁰ second, the action signals a more general shift from the harsh reality of Stanley's world to Blanche's softer southern gentility; third, illusion replaces illumination as Williams destabilises the role of light as a focus for truth and the shaded light becomes complicit in blurring understanding. In this dimmed coloured light, Mitch sees only what Blanche wants him to see: the illusion of youth that she wants as her 'reality' – in the glow of the bedroom light he is denied the truth that is classically associated with light. The audience become aware of the manipulative effects of that light, and of the potential for deception and confusion in the shifting illumination of the stage lighting. Williams' plastic theatre challenges conventional expectations by unsettling the audience's assumptions – 'continuous aspect- perception' – to prompt the development of aspect-dawning. This is essential to Williams' attempts to expose the true nature of conflicted identities and the role of hiddenness in our notions of self. The scrims of *Streetcar* are visible representations of disguise and hiddenness; they separate and obscure while preserving awareness of 'something' beyond and behind. They operate as a veil evoking the 'veiling' of Du Bois' 'double consciousness'.

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It was a common if unacknowledged convention during the period of the Hayes code for film directors to imply homosexuality and drug use by exotic, oriental allusions, for example in *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon*.

Music is a significant element of plasticity in *Streetcar* contributing to the exposure of dualities in the play, where music and musical references are used to add additional dimensions to the action. The 'blue piano' played with 'infatuated fluency' in the opening scene establishes location and introduces notions of blackness and the plurality of multiculturalism:

A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This 'blue piano' expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here (p. 243).

Just as Blanche is associated with white, so Stanley is associated with blue in *Streetcar*, though this is less pronounced. The 'gaudy seed-bearer' (p. 256) exemplifies the easy-going swagger of New Orleans and this and his blue denim work clothes tie him to the 'blue piano'. The two musical themes of the play – the raw street music (the 'blue music') of New Orleans and Stanley, and the elegant salon music (the Varsouviana) of Moon Lake Casino and Blanche – act as counterpoints to each other. The blues music underscores the relationship between Stanley and Stella as when '*the low clarinet moans*' underneath Stanley's cry of 'STELL-LAHHHHH' (p. 307), while the Varsouviana accompanies memories of Allan Grey's death and Blanche's own mental disintegration:

She [Blanche] rushes past him into the bedroom. Lurid reflections appear on the walls in odd, sinuous shapes. The 'Varsouviana' is filtered into weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle. Blanche seizes the back of a chair as if to defend herself. (p. 414)

The Varsouviana (the Warsaw Polka, named after Poland's capital) provides yet another link between Stanley and Blanche, but also links Stanley to Blanche's dead husband Allan Gray, his ambivalent sexuality and the defining tragedy of Blanche's past. More playfully, it links Stanley to that relationship through 'his clinging wet polka dot drawers' (p. 305). Stanley's underwear, his 'brilliant silk pyjamas' and 'vivid green silk bowling shirt' are all images that reference both the 'gaudy seed-bearer' and Blanche's love of finery. The duality here is tightly woven: the references to Stanley's underwear and pyjamas are both inherently and contextually aggressively sexual, while the bowling shirt reminds us of his macho camaraderie. But embedded in the fabric of these references are essentially feminine qualities – delicacy and fragility – that define Blanche. These conflict with Stanley's established persona of no-nonsense rhetoric and denim work clothes, exposing contradictions at the heart of his identity and his commonality with Blanche.

The language that characterises Blanche and Stanley also demonstrates a crossover of identity between them. Laura and Edward Morrow draw attention to the distinctiveness of Blanche's language:

Rather than attempt to derive or generate clear, rational, orderly meaning, Blanche (not unlike a poet or playwright) plays meanings against each other, hovering about an idea in vaguely concentric patterns rather than directly apprehending it and communicating it; she uses language as it were chaotically.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ 'The Ontological Potentialities of Antichaos and Adaptation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*', p. 64. The Morrows are here using the definition of chaos which 'carries with it an image of order in the midst of order', rather than the more common notion of chaos as a state of utter confusion.

Blanche uses language to display the multiple levels of her own and others

existence: it is elusive and ephemeral language – discursive, hesitant and unstable, punctuated with ellipses and dashes – a language that attempts to articulate the complexity of her life and her self:

I was never hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft – soft people have got to shimmer and glow – they’ve got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a – paper lantern over the light ... It isn’t enough to be soft. You’ve got to be soft *and attractive*. And I – I’m fading – now! I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick. (p. 332)

Blanche’s fragility and other-worldliness sit side-by-side with a ruthless but fearful pragmatism, and the survival of one – fragility – depends upon the effectiveness of the other – ruthless pragmatism. Blanche’s entire existence is predicated on a contradiction. When Mitch confronts her about her past her response attempts to reconcile her multiple perceptions with Mitch’s concrete reality:

I don’t want realism. I want magic! [*Mitch laughs*] Yes magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! (p. 385)

Stanley’s language on the other hand is a model of directness. Blanche’s elusive linguistic style merely distorts reality for Stanley and her equivocal language is for him a network of lies that hides reality rather than enhances it. As Laura and Edward Morrow explain:

His language is as direct and precise as language can be. Stanley's basin of attraction is power, essential to which are, for him, mathematical and verbal precision. Stanley uses language pragmatically, not decoratively, to seek or communicate facts, to dispel illusion. ('Ontological Potentialities', p. 64)

Stanley's language reflects his sexuality and the exercise of power essential to his masculinity:

I never met a woman that didn't know if she was good-looking or not without being told, and some of them give themselves credit for more than they've got. I once went out with a doll who said to me, 'I am the glamorous type, I am the glamorous type!' I said 'So what?' [...] That shut her up like a clam. (pp. 278-79)

While these two polarised linguistic styles are characteristic of Blanche and Stanley, there are subtle crossovers of language which deny a simple unified identity in either of them. Blanche's contradictions are more visible and exposed as her language moves between the poetic and the pragmatic within a few sentences. Her ability 'to hover around meanings' allows her to accommodate contradiction in a way that Stanley cannot. When she playfully seduces the paper-boy, her language is fantastic – 'a young Prince out of the Arabian Nights' – and pragmatic – 'It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good – and keep my hands off children' – in its reminder to exercise restraint (p. 339). She also moves between linguistic styles adeptly when she needs to. When Stanley tackles her about Belle Reve, she abandons her characteristic elusiveness and adopts Stanley's directness:

The poor little thing was out there listening to us, and I have an idea she doesn't understand you as well as I do. ... All right; now, Mr. Kowalski, let us proceed without any more double-talk. I'm ready to answer all questions. I've nothing to hide. What is it? (p. 280)

Even as she adopts Stanley's direct style, Blanche's language is double-edged and manipulative as she attempts to win Stanley over by suggesting a relationship with him of greater depth and understanding than his with Stella. This is more of Blanche's flirtatious behaviour, but here it is couched in Stanley's language whilst embodying the ambivalence characteristic of Blanche's discourse. Stanley responds with a characteristically precise reference to the Napoleonic code, and Blanche temporarily reverts to her coquettish behaviour – 'My, but you have an impressive judicial air!' (p. 281) – while she mentally regroups in order to deal with Stanley's question in Stanley's more direct style – 'All right. Cards on the table. That suits me' (p. 281) – her reference to gambling is a clear identification with Stanley's macho culture.

Stanley's departures from his linguistic register are rarer and less overt, centring around his love and concern for Stella. Whereas Blanche's discursive style readily allows departures from what is an intrinsically unstable 'norm', Stanley's language is by definition more fixed. His linguistic departures are not the volte-face of Blanche's crossovers, but smaller shifts of phrasing and vocabulary that occur within his more usual style of speech. When Stella leaves after a fight in which he has hit her, he displays a vulnerability we associate with Blanche as he pleads for her return 'still shuddering with sobs', using the intimate language normally reserved for their private conversations: 'My baby doll's left me! [...] Eunice? I want my baby! [...] Eunice! I'll keep on ringing until I talk with my baby!' (p. 305). The same vulnerable intimacy, coupled with his characteristic directness, is seen as he strives to remind Stella of the excitement of their relationship before Blanche arrived: 'I pulled you down off

them columns and how you loved it, having them colored lights going! And wasn't we happy together, wasn't it all okay till she showed here?' (p. 377). The reference to 'colored lights' is unusually poetic for Stanley, and forges a visual and sexual link to Blanche through the red paper lantern on the bedroom light. The diffidence and insecurity of 'wasn't we happy [...] wasn't it all okay' echo Blanche's hesitant language in its phrasing, if not its uncertain grammar. The different ways in which Williams achieves these linguistic crosscurrents is a part of Blanche and Stanley's characterisation: despite reflecting conflicting aspects of each other, their own mode of discourse is not compromised, but the contradictions are contained, or accommodated within it.

My aim in this chapter has been to demonstrate that the plethora of conflicts, dualities and contradictions permeating the fabric of *A Streetcar Named Desire* are manifest in all its aspects and constitute, even in this relatively early work, part of a sustained theme that flows through Williams' dramaturgy. These are not the conflicts of conventional tragedies, with their hubristic overtones, but subtler and systematic examinations of the nature of identity. Though these are often subsidiary to other more overt concerns, the hidden conflicted values and fractured personas of those who fall outside the norms of society is a theme that runs through Williams' drama. In Section Three I examine how this theme is developed in some of the more difficult later plays.

Section 3

The Late Plays: A Reputation Reassessed

Chapter 9

Camino Real: The First of the 'Late' Plays

Camino Real was first performed in 1953, when Williams was at the height of his success: receiving both critical and popular acclaim, his first major success, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), had been followed by the even more popular *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Summer and Smoke* (1948) and *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) –all well received on Broadway. Hollywood recognised his talent and box-office potential and a film of *The Glass Menagerie*, starring Gertrude Lawrence and Jane Wyman (which Williams disliked) was released in 1950, followed by *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh in 1951.

Camino Real was, however, to be a different matter altogether. The critics, with very few exceptions, hated it; Walter Kerr described it as ‘the worst play yet written by the best playwright of his generation’.¹⁸² Nor did the audiences respond more favourably. With a wry resignation Williams describes their reaction in the Foreword to the published edition of *Camino Real*:¹⁸³

At each performance a number of people have stamped out of the auditorium, with little regard for those whom they have had to crawl over, almost as if the building had caught on fire, and there were sibilant noises on the way out and

¹⁸² Walter Kerr, *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 March 1953.

¹⁸³ The Foreword originally appeared in the *New York Times* four days before the play opened on Broadway and Williams’ comments are based on the experience of the out-of-town try-outs.

demands for money back if the cashier was foolish enough to remain
in his box.¹⁸⁴

Williams was genuinely perplexed by this response. *Camino* appeared in the same year as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Williams' familiarity with European drama contributed to his bemusement at the response to *Camino*. He 'had never for one moment supposed the play would seem obscure and confusing to anyone who was willing to meet it even less than halfway' (p. 421). He recognised that it was a departure from his previous work, describing it as 'a construction of another world, a separate existence'. Unlike his earlier plays, which he later described as 'quasi-realistic', *Camino* subverted conventions of time and place, operating 'outside of time in a place of no specific locality' (p. 419). Williams was particularly excited by the 'unusual degree of freedom' *Camino* gave him to experiment:

When I began to get under way I felt a new sensation of release, as if I could
'ride out' like a tenor sax taking the breaks in a Dixieland combo or a piano in a
bop session. (p. 419)

Williams, and Kazan (who directed the original production), saw the play as essentially fluid and mobile. The play's elements were in constant interplay, achieving a 'continual' flow which replicated for the audience the sense of freedom that Williams had himself felt in writing the play:

¹⁸⁴ Williams, Foreword, *Camino Real*, *TTW* Vol. 2, p. 420. All references to the play are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

A sense of something wild and unrestricted that ran like water in the mountains, or clouds changing shape in a gale, or the continually dissolving and transforming images of a dream. (p. 420)

For Williams this play was ‘nothing more nor less than my conception of the time and world that I live in’: significantly not the world *we* live in, but Williams’ world (p. 419). Kazan, who thought this Williams’ best work to date, felt it was ‘as private as a nightmare’.¹⁸⁵ *Camino*, despite the political and social references that other critics have identified, is not primarily a social critique, but a personal vision of humanity, and what it means to be an individual.¹⁸⁶ It is a world whose people ‘are mostly archetypes of certain basic attitudes and qualities with those mutations that would occur if they had continued along the road to this hypothetical terminal point in it’ (p. 419). It is also a world in which meaning is neither explicit nor necessarily required. Williams resisted demands that he ‘explain’ the play:

Some poet has said that a poem should not mean but be. Of course, a play is not a poem, not even a poetic play has quite the same license as a poem. But to go to *Camino Real* with the inflexible demands of a logician is unfair to both parties. (p. 421)

He was clearly disconcerted by one interviewer who had identified and listed all the symbols in *Camino* and wanted Williams to explain the meaning of each and every one. The assumption that symbols needed to stand for something, to be individually and discretely explicable, was incomprehensible to Williams, for whom symbols were ‘nothing but the natural speech of drama’ and provided a more visceral and instinctive mode of communication

¹⁸⁵ Kazan, *A Life*, p. 494.

¹⁸⁶ For an example of this approach, see Balakian, ‘*Camino Real*: Williams’ Allegory of the Fifties’.

than words (p. 421). He believed everyone had a vocabulary of images in their conscious and unconscious, and that these surfaced in dreams and were the language of the poet and the dramatist:

A symbol in a play has only one legitimate purpose which is to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words [...] symbols when used respectfully, are the purest language of plays. (pp. 421-2)

Williams wrote an Afterword to the play in June 1953 following the Broadway production: the tone is decidedly less upbeat, and the bruising experience of the Broadway critics – described by him as a ‘bucket brigade’ intent on extinguishing ‘the incontinent blaze of live theatre’ – has clearly taken its toll. He distinguishes the drama of ‘thinking playwrights’ from theatre ‘meant for feeling and seeing’ with which he identifies.¹⁸⁷ He uses the opportunity to dismiss the notion, implicit in the ‘thinking play’, that the text on the page is paramount – ‘The printed script of a play is hardly more than an architect’s blueprint of a house not yet built’ – reasserting his vision of what drama should be (p. 423). Although he doesn’t use the phrase ‘plastic theatre’, he is here reaffirming the values he set out in the Production Notes:

The color, grace and levitation, the structural pattern in motion, the quick interplay of live beings, suspended like fitful lightning in a cloud, these things are the play...My own creed as a playwright is fairly close to that expressed by the painter in Shaw’s play *The Doctor’s Dilemma*: ‘I believe in Michelangelo, Velasquez and Rembrandt; in the might of design, the mystery of color, the redemption of all things by beauty everlasting and the message of art that has

¹⁸⁷

Williams, Afterword, *Camino Real*, TTW Vol. 2, p. 423.

made these hands blessed' [...] I feel, as the painter did, that the message lies in those abstract beauties of form and color and line, to which I would add light and motion. (pp. 423-4)

Camino was a concerted attempt to break away from the rigid logic of realism, or quasi-realism, and stage a drama of fluidity and transience which emphasised the abstract rather than the literal. It was a play that needed plastic theatre to express its innovativeness, its shifting perspectives and its expressionism: a theatre of feeling rather than thinking where the 'inflexible demands of the logician' would have no place.

The *Camino* set is problematic: from the outset, the stage directions require tangible elements to deliver abstract concepts. As the play opens, the early dawn that breaks over distant mountains and an ancient wall is described as 'flickers of a white radiance as though daybreak were a white bird caught in a net and struggling to rise' (p. 431). The plaza, which occupies the main area of the stage, is similarly challenging:

It belongs to a tropical seaport that bears a confusing, but somehow harmonious, resemblance to such widely scattered ports as Tangiers, Havana, Vera Cruz, Casablanca, Shanghai, New Orleans. (p. 431)

The curtain rises to the sound of wind, accompanied by 'distant measured reverberations like pounding surf or distant shellfire' (p. 431). The directions are specific but impractical combinations of various elements. They make sense only as a description of abstract qualities: The 'flickering light of dawn' has to convey the fragility and hope embodied in the struggle for freedom; the plaza must be everywhere and nowhere, but encapsulate the

essential transience of ports, without being identified with any port or continent; the heartbeat of this place must reverberate as a bass note that speaks simultaneously of freedom – the surf – and destruction – the shellfire. Jo Mielziner, who had designed the sets for *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Summer and Smoke*, suggested how the abstract nature of the play could be reflected in the sets:

Gadge [Kazan] and I have talked over some general scenic ideas based on an extreme simplification. Perhaps the basic set might take a physical form which suggested some sort of bear-pit, as though Kilroy were trapped in a place where there is no obvious physical escape. Perhaps some sort of a 'labyrinth'. I hope we could find ways of using projected images and patterns and colors to fulfill your suggestion of the constant changes in the various blocks. Of course physical props that actors dealt with would have to be three-dimensional, but I am convinced that some style in physical production must unite these ten blocks.¹⁸⁸

In Williams' reply it is clear that he sees the play is more uplifting than Mielziner's concept of a bear-pit/labyrinth-style trap suggests:

This is an intensely romantic script, and it needs a magic background. Real visual enchantment! – both in the set and the lighting [...] the important thing is the visual atmosphere of a romantic mystery. I can't visualize your idea of a 'bear-pit' and it doesn't strike a responsive chord. It doesn't sound beautiful, and I think the plaza should have the haunting loveliness of one of those lonely-looking plazas and colonnades in a Chirico – not like that but being emotionally evocative and disturbing to that degree.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Letter from Jo Mielziner to Tennessee Williams, 26 August 1952, published in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 4, p. 136.

¹⁸⁹ Letter from Williams to Mielziner, September 1952, *Collected Letters of Tennessee Williams* Volume 2, p. 452. Williams was notoriously lax in dating his letters and this letter is dated by the editors.

In the event, much to his disappointment, Mielziner didn't do the design for *Camino*. The producer thought him too expensive and there were scheduling problems. In his memoir, Mielziner reiterates his belief that 'too much realistic and heavy scenery would hurt the easy flow of dramatic imagery' of the play, and so it proved.¹⁹⁰ Lemuel Ayers (who designed the set for *Oklahoma!* and was also a friend of Williams) designed set, costumes and lighting for *Camino* and whereas Mielziner's drawings were sparse, pulling the audience into the emptiness of the space and preserving the ethereal subjectivity of the set, Ayers' set was unremittingly solid, with 'stark grey walls and heavily constructed buildings [that] insisted ironically on the Camino Real's relation to an objective reality recognizable to the audience'.¹⁹¹ Kazan was not happy with the design:

I wrote the designer we'd chosen a long note explaining what I hoped for in the set. I didn't get it; what I got was a lugubrious realistic setting that was in a word, heavy-handed. And too real. It made the fantasies that took place inside it seem silly. (p. 69)

The failure to get a set that reflected the essentially ephemeral nature of the play contributed to its hostile reception. Instead of entering the Camino Real on Williams' terms, with a set that established the conventions of non-realistic experimental drama, the audience were confronted with a realistic set implicitly referencing the conventions of realistic theatre. This realistic background to surrealist action provided a juxtaposition that failed to unsettle in any dramatically constructive way but merely confused and irritated the audience.

¹⁹⁰ Mielziner, *Designing for the Theatre: A Memoir and a Portfolio*, p. 162.

¹⁹¹ Murphy, *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan*, p. 68.

The problems that the set presented for the play were exacerbated by the unconventional structure of *Camino*: Williams abandons the theatrical conventions of a specific time and place; removes the fourth wall; substitutes a 'Block' structure for Acts and Scenes; and rejects a conventional narrative or story line. The convention of the fourth wall establishes a formal and well-understood relationship between audience and performance: it contains the drama within a specific space and separates the roles of audience and actor; it allows the audience to relax, and paradoxically, because the lines are clearly drawn and understood, allows an acceptance of realistic drama as 'true to life' – an acceptance that is comfortable and unthreatening. Removing the fourth wall is profoundly unsettling and Williams was keen to reach out beyond the confines that this convention imposed. He had already breached the fourth wall in *The Glass Menagerie* in Tom's the dual role of narrator and participant in the action. However this was too easily dismissed or ignored as a stylistic device for the 'memory' play. In *Camino* the breaching of the fourth wall is altogether more emphatic and assertive.

Camino begins with the entrance of Don Quixote and Sancho, who emerge not on stage, but from behind the audience walking down the aisle in a shaft of blue light. As they approach the stage, their way is barred by guards lowering a barrier at the front of the proscenium. Quixote and Sancho discuss the duality of the CaMIIno ReAL (Spanish pronunciation) CAmino REal (Williams' pronunciation) where CaMIIno ReAL –the 'Royal Road' – becomes in CAmino REal a harsh encounter with reality. After this, Sancho turns back, leaving the theatre from the rear, shouting back to Quixote over the audience as he goes. The

entrance and exit from the rear of the auditorium unsettles the audience as they are forced to make an independent assessment as to what is drama or real incident. The barrier prevents Quixote and Sancho from accessing the stage, and raises questions about what involvement is demanded of the audience as they sit on the 'wrong' side. The ambiguity of actors' and audience's status blurs any distinction between sides, as all defining limits have been removed. Sancho exits without ever putting foot on stage, transforming the whole auditorium into dramatic space. In the first minutes of the play, Williams has challenged and changed the relationship with the audience. He has demolished the comfort zone that the audience conventionally inhabits and replaced it with an uncertain role and a shifting identity: Williams refuses to define the new relationship with the audience and it is no longer possible to say where acting ends and watching begins, which places both actor and audience on the Camino Real. The eradication of boundaries and blurring of 'sides' has further implications for the audience as the play progresses and political and moral issues come to the fore: the option of passive voyeurism is denied them by Williams' use of space and the audience is forced to confront the question of which side they are on. For some, like John Guare, who saw the play for the first time in 1960 while at drama school, this was a liberating experience:

How did this play know me so well? [...] It was the allegory of my existence in 1960. That terror on the stage was my terror. Its fear of the *terra incognita* beyond the city walls – its understanding of how it feels not to be understood and be trapped and yearn for escape on *il fugitivo*, any transport that might take me to freedom which might perhaps be only another ring of hell.¹⁹²

¹⁹²

Guare, 'An Introduction in Nineteen Blocks', p. xii.

The fourth wall is explicitly breached several times in the play: some are subtle but persistent assertions of the new conventions of *Camino* – Gutman’s announcements of the start of each Block – whilst others – the pursuit of Kilroy and the arrival and departure of *il fugitivo* – produce an unrivalled dramatic intensity in the action that is palpable and irresistible. In Block Six Gutman, supported by Officers and Guards, attempts to make Kilroy don the clown costume of the Patsy, but Kilroy leaps into the aisle of the theatre to escape, and the action is pushed further into the audience:

A wild chase commences. The two Guards rush madly down either side to intercept him at the back of the house. Kilroy wheels about at the top of the center aisle, and runs back down it, panting, gasping out questions and entreaties to various persons occupying aisle seats. (*TTW*, Vol. 2, p. 480)

Kilroy’s desperate entreaties for help demand audience involvement on several levels: his physical proximity and grasping of audience members engages them physically, while his dialogue demands their verbal and cultural recognition. His direct appeals reference the commonplace things of the audience’s world – ‘Where’s the Greyhound depot?’ – while his demands that they take a moral position – ‘I’m a free man with equal rights in this world! You better believe it because that’s news for you and you had better believe it!’ (p. 480) – raise again the issue of which side the audience is on. The scene has tremendous energy that threatens to overflow from the stage and engulf the audience. As Kilroy dodges and weaves through the audience the Street People gather along the front of the stage to watch the chase. Esmeralda ‘bursts out of the Gypsy’s establishment like an animal broken out of a cage, darts among the Street People to the front of the crowd which is shouting like the spectators at the

climax of a *corrida*' (p. 481). The chase continues for nearly three pages of text, with Kilroy running and leaping through the theatre closely pursued by the officers and guards as the cast remaining on stage provides a background rising crescendo by way of commentary to the main action. Esmeralda, in front of this group, 'screams demonically' at Kilroy, echoing his struggle in her own as she fights off her mother, Abdullah and Nursie (p. 483). The chase ends when Kilroy leaps onto the stage from the ledge of the box and falls to the ground, twisting his ankle. The chase – one of the most dramatic moments of the play – takes place entirely in the auditorium – a place conventionally reserved for watching, not participating. This encroachment on audience space reverses its function, transforms passivity into activity and serves to magnify the impact on the audience of what is already a highly physical moment in the play.

The arrival of the Fugitivo in Block Nine, exploiting the lack of the fourth wall to amplify the dramatic intensity, begins with 'a faint and faraway humming', which is accompanied with 'a low percussion sound [...] as if excited hearts are beating'. As the inhabitants of the *Camino* see the lights of the approaching plane their dialogue is increasingly animated and the noises of the plane are replaced by the 'the noise of concerted panting of excitement [...] and a low percussion echoes frantic heart beats' (p. 511). The sound of the plane is echoed in the involuntary sounds of anticipation and hope. This subtle, almost subliminal symbolism links the Fugitivo to hope and freedom works and elicits a similar response from the audience. The landing is announced with 'a great whistling and screeching sound as the aerial transport halts somewhere close by, accompanied by rainbow splashes of light and cries like children's on a

roller coaster' (pp. 512-3). The passengers disembarking from the plane enter from the rear of the theatre, approaching the stage down one of the aisles, following Redcaps carrying the luggage. The rest of the Block is a prolonged frenzy of frustrated escape that centres on Marguerite Gautier's desperate attempts to board the plane. The Block finishes as the plane takes off:

There is a prolonged, gradually fading rocketlike roar as the Fugitivo takes off. Shrill cries of joy from departing passengers; something radiant passes above the stage and streams of confetti and tinsel fall into the plaza. Then there is a great calm, the ship's receding roar diminishing to the hum of an insect. (p. 523)

John Guare describes the raw power and emotion of the Fugitivo scene:

I still remember the moment when an airplane, *il fugitivo*, landed in this strange town to rescue a few lucky refugees and deliver them to freedom. Powerful red lights blasted from the back of the house. Refugees ran up the aisle to get on board. Iron gates dropped down barring the rest of the people on stage from getting on. The sound of the plane's taking off became deafening. The lights moved upwards. The plane flew away. The cast and we in the audience looked up as our last chance at freedom flew away. Confetti dropped down on us, falling in our mouths. We were left behind. Would I ever have the luck to find my *il fugitivo* that would transport me to my true life?¹⁹³

Light and sound are used to suggest the arrival and departure of the Fugitivo, but the engrossed involvement described here by Guare is only possible because of the removal of the fourth wall. The lighting, playing from the back of the theatre, and using the aisle as the gangway to the plane reaffirm the auditorium as part of the acting space. But most powerful is the subtle symbolism of the confetti and tinsel. These – the stuff of celebration – are the

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Guare, 'An Introduction in Nineteen Blocks', pp. xi-xii.

departing detritus of the successful few, showering down on cast and audience alike, falling into their open mouths – a mockery of sustenance – and stuffing the unwilling recipients with the taste of defeat and isolation.

Initially the sheer assertiveness of Williams' demolition of the fourth wall is the most striking structural aspect of this non-realistic play, but other departures from the conventions of realistic theatre are interwoven into the play, supporting the opening up of the action that the removal of the fourth wall makes possible. The imaginative use of sound and light to herald the arrival of the Fugitivo is integral to the dramatic energy of the plane's arrival. Similarly, the block structure, the lack of an anchor to time or place or of a conventional narrative driving the action all contribute to the plasticity that is Williams' alternative to theatrical realism.

Gutman's direct announcements to the audience of the sixteen blocks of the Camino Real breaches the fourth wall. But the blocks themselves breach theatrical convention, for though ostensibly merely a different structural sequence that replaces the more usual division into acts and scenes, the blocks are inherently more radical: they do not mark, as scene breaks traditionally do, a shift in time or place, nor do they mark significant shifts in the narrative; rather they reflect in many ways the non-event and stasis of Gutman's throwaway announcements. Yet the blocks are dramatically significant, for they represent both progress and hindrance on the Camino Real. American audiences would be very familiar with the notion of street blocks and of marking one's progress by the number of blocks passed. As Gutman announces each new block, the expectation is of some physical progress, some arrival at a

different location. But the action of *Camino Real* stays resolutely in the same place, in the same plaza that marked the opening of the play. Instead of the expected progress, each block exposes instead further examples of the inhabitants' frustrated attempts at escape from the Camino Real. They represent not progress but the blocking of progress, frustration and denial. It is not simply escape that is blocked on the Camino – physical and emotional survival is also systematically compromised and undermined by the controlling forces, the ruling elite of the Camino Real.

Nor do the blocks constitute a conventional narrative sequence – each block focuses on a different aspect of the daily frustrations of the Camino: the Survivor dying of thirst because the Camino's fountain is dry (Block 2); Kilroy's humiliation as the Patsy (Block 6); Casanova's impoverished status (Block 13); his humiliation at being paraded as the Cuckold (Block 11); and Marguerite's sexual humiliation as a procurer of paid favours (Block 7). The Blocks show the powerlessness of the Camino's inhabitants and the frustration and humiliation of their daily lot. The Blocks' static nature reinforces the lack of conventional narrative: the Blocks change in number but not location and this change-that- is-not-a-change mirrors the inhabitants' failure to move forward despite their activity, and underlines the narrative's failure to move forward as in conventional drama. This is a dramatic representation of the characters' frustration, and an expression of frustration itself. Nothing is going anywhere, not only for the characters but, metatheatrically, for the audience as well. The play has an iterative quality: a sense of going round in circles, a lack of resolution and a frustrating sense of 'What's it all about?' This sense of futility, of repetitiveness, and its attendant feelings

of frustration, is built in part by the Block structure and the lack of conventional narrative, but also by Williams' decision to place the action in 'a place of no specific locality' – an everywhere and nowhere place – and to put its existence 'outside of time', removing two crucial points of stability – the where and when that mark our progress through life. The destabilisation is not just one of not making the expected dramatic progress, it raises the question of what does progress mean without these points of reference? I have talked of the destabilising effect of the structural changes to convention that Williams used in *Camino Real* and the challenge it posed to conventional dramatic assumptions, but in writing *Camino Real*, Williams was doing much more than playing the rebellious *enfant terrible* of American Drama: *Camino Real* represents a marriage of form and content where the unsettling, destabilising nature of the play's structure frees the dramatic space, physically and emotionally, in order that new ideas and perspectives may be explored unhampered by the preconceptions of established convention. The structure of *Camino Real* is an essential component of the plasticity of the play. In the Foreword, Williams describes the constraining nature of convention, and by implication, why it is so important to challenge it:

As for those patrons that departed before the final scene, I offer myself this tentative bit of solace: that these theatregoers may be a little domesticated in their theatrical tastes. A cage represents security as well as confinement to a bird that has grown used to being in it; and when a theatrical work kicks over the traces with such apparent insouciance, security seems challenged and, instead of participating in its sense of freedom, one out of a certain number of playgoers will rush back out to the more accustomed implausibility of the street he lives on. (*Camino*, p. 422)

Camino Real was one of Williams' first attempts to exploit plasticity to explore the ephemeral and contradictory nature of identity discussed in Chapter 7. I do not intend to suggest that this is the only theme explored in the play, but it is a significant one, and depends on the plastic form for its expression. Williams used *Camino Real* to examine political and social inequalities, but mainly to portray the world of the 1950s and its effect on those who inhabited it. His 'archetypes of certain basic attitudes' have arrived at the 'hypothetical terminal point' of the Camino, where 'royal' becomes 'real', and poses basic questions about their, and by extension our, existence. As Guare recognised, Williams fails to answer the questions – 'This play didn't give me any answers but it sure spoke to the problems' ('An Introduction in Nineteen blocks', p. xii) – but this is deliberate, for the inability to resolve life's conflicting values and their expression in a shifting and fluid identity lie at the heart of Williams' thinking:

What the play says through this unashamed old romanticist, Quixote, is just this, 'Life is an unanswered question, but let's still believe in the dignity and importance of the question.'¹⁹⁴

Williams and Kazan saw 'flight' as a crucial concept that ran through the play, both actually – in the flight of the Fugitivo – and allegorically – in the freedom that the play's structure gave to allow its existential themes of identity to 'fly' and in the rootlessness of Quixote's eternal quest. The fugitive is a recurring figure in Williams, from Val in *Orpheus Descending* to Chris in the *Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Saddik points out that the

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Williams, 'Reflections on a Revival of a Controversial Fantasy', *New Selected Essays: Where I Live*, p. 108.

fugitive is engaged 'in the futile search for stability stemming from the pathos of rootless existence'.¹⁹⁵ All the characters in *Camino Real*, apart from those representing the forces of oppression, are fugitives in some degree. The essential transience of the Camino imparts a rootlessness to everyone's existence, and all share in the futility of their attempts to move on. Some, such as Lord Byron, are escaping from their past, while others, like Casanova and Marguerite, are attempting to evade an uncomfortable present. Bigsby says of Shepard and Williams:

Both have found in performance a symbol of lives which are the enactment of stories with their roots in the distant past of ritual and myth as well as in a present in which role and being have become confused.¹⁹⁶

This 'confusion' of role and being, this merging of past myth and present existence is deliberate and shown by Williams' decision to draw *Camino's* characters from different periods, from fiction and history, placing them all on the Camino, where their 'existence is outside of time and of no specific place'. All the characters, whether fictional or factual, bring a past era into a present that has no time reference, foregrounding the ambiguity and conflict inherent in their existence. The baggage of the past becomes mythologised as the fugitives attempt to deal with it in the present, and this conflict is played out in Kilroy in the complexity of public persona (role) versus self-defined identity (being). Saddik links the fugitive's search for stability to their sense of self as a means of exploring identity in the late twentieth century:

¹⁹⁵ Saddik, "'You just forge ahead': Image, Authenticity and Freedom in the Plays of Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard", p. 74.

¹⁹⁶ Bigsby, *MAD*, p. 196.

This 'confusion' of role and being, of performance and authenticity, is at the center of both Shepard's and Williams' characters' search for a stable identity, a fixed reality that both eludes and threatens to trap them as they perform the instabilit(ies) of postmodern identity in the late Twentieth century. (Saddik, p. 76)

The images of flight in *Camino Real* carry the inevitable baggage of past and present, and are a trope for the search for an authentic identity:

Yet while their characters crave the stability of a fixed core identity and a return to origins, the inevitable contradiction is that they ultimately realize that freedom is possible only through fluidity, instability, movement. They must therefore remain fugitives and surge forward, never resting, despite their desperate, romantic need to cling to an unattainable ideal, a core of Truth. Stasis signifies death or confinement (a kind of death), and freedom lies in the flexibility and individual agency, the ability to mold image(s) of the self and remain in process. (Saddik, p. 77)

The various protagonists on the Camino express the instability of identity differently.

Esmeralda, an unwilling child of the Camino Real, suffers the futility of a repetitive rebirth with each reincarnation of her virginity. Her identity is endlessly re-made only to become the same. It is, in all its phases, defined and used by the repressive forces of the Camino. The control of her identity removes any possibility of self-definition and ensures the futility of her rebirth to give rise to an authentically new identity. We do see a brief self-affirming rebellion from Esmeralda in Block 6 as she shouts fierce encouragement to Kilroy, identifying with his dash for freedom, echoing his pain and sobbing in defeat. But her rebellion ends with Kilroy's capture: 'They've got you! They've got me!' (p. 482)

Jacques Casanova and Marguerite Gautier experience the fluidity of identity differently: in keeping with the romanticism of their characters their identities are a poignant mixture of despair and hope. These two, meeting on the Camino, were defined in their heyday by their ability to manipulate sexual desire as the serial lover and the exquisite courtesan. But at the 'hypothetical terminal point' in the road, their reputations merely mock them. Both are ageing, Casanova is impoverished and Marguerite's beauty is fading. Casanova's emotional dependence on Marguerite slowly becomes apparent and Gutman forces him to wear the cuckold's horns. Marguerite rejects Casanova's affection, and is reduced to buying sex in the bazaar. Their journey from the CaMIIno ReAL, where they were sexual royalty, to the CAmino REal, has inverted the previous identities of both, forcing them to play the roles that they had previously imposed upon the objects of their sexual exploitation. Just as they had once wielded power through the manipulation of desire, now they seek redemption and renewal, in varying degrees, through love. After Marguerite, intending to leave Casanova behind, fails to get a seat on the Fugitivo, Casanova is still able to comfort her despite her attempted betrayal, preserving the romantic's optimism:

Because you've taught me that part of love which is tender. I never knew it before. Oh, I had – mistresses that circled me like moons! I scrambled from one bed chamber to another bed chamber with shirttails always aflame, from girl to girl, like buckets of coal oil poured on a conflagration! But never loved until now with the part of love that's tender. (p. 525)

Marguerite has a more jaded and cynical view of love:

Oh, Jacques, we're used to each other, we're a pair of captive hawks caught in the same cage, and so we've grown used to each other. That's what passes for love at this dim, shadowy end of the Camino Real [...] We're lonely. We're frightened. We hear the Streetcleaners' piping not far away. So now and then, although we've wounded each other time and again – we stretch out hands to each other in the dark that we can't escape from – we huddle together for some dim-communal [*sic*] comfort – and that's what passes for love on this terminal stretch of the road that used to be royal. (p. 526)

They are brought to this point in the road by the remorselessness of ageing, and their flight is one from desire and power to love and acceptance. But the response to their situation is ambivalent. Jacques is relatively resigned to his lot: his love for Marguerite is a liberating experience and makes his 'captivity' on the Camino Real bearable. He accepts his situation and defines himself differently. Marguerite, on the other hand, sees in their relationship not love, but a compassion born of need and familiarity and clings to her past persona until it is literally stripped from her. In Block 14 the gigolo she has spent the evening with successively strips her of her money, her jewellery and her clothes before finally rejecting her body. Marguerite gains solace in a mutually compassionate, but asexual, encounter with Kilroy who waits for the Streetcleaners and death. While the Madrecita covers Kilroy's body, Marguerite's final words in the play call for Jacques keeping open the option of redemption through the love that Jacques has offered, and in Saddik's terms retained the possibility of re-defining herself and remaining 'in process':

[*Camino Real*] present[s] a triumph of individual agency, but not through locating a stable Truth or an authentic core of identity. Rather, hope is to be found in the acknowledgement of the inevitability of role-playing and the freedom associated with the ability to construct the self, to remain a work-in-progress. Liberation lies in directing our own performances. (Saddik, p. 80)

In *Camino Real* Kilroy presents the fullest expression of an unstable identity struggling for self-definition in a hostile society. The original character of Kilroy is a fiction of American World War 2 graffiti and the cultural resonances of that character expose the instability and vulnerability of American ideals and individual identity.



The image of Kilroy above is that immortalised on the World War 2 Memorial in Washington.¹⁹⁷ Kilroy was the quintessential all-American boy, defined by his elusiveness. In the mythology of American GIs, Kilroy was a 'super-GI', always there before them in any new conflict, the vanguard of any action, but gone before the troops arrived. The drawing of Kilroy remained remarkably consistent and decidedly un-superhero-like. It shows an all-but featureless face disappearing over a wall as he slips away. Removed from the field of battle elusiveness takes on a less heroic quality and this image presents a very different identity from

¹⁹⁷ The precise origins of 'Kilroy was here' are not known for certain, but a plausible account is given of one J.J. Kilroy, a shipyard inspector during WWII. He chalked the words on the bulkhead of newly constructed ships to show he'd inspected the riveting. These marks made it into battle and American forces embraced Kilroy as the super GI who was always there first. Thus began the tradition of drawing the graffiti as soon as forces landed in a new theatre of operations. See: www.kilroywashere.org/001-Pages/01-oKilroyLegends.html.

that of the GIs' 'super GI'. The graffiti establishes that Kilroy 'was here' but never 'is here', and thus places him in a perpetual past with no relationship to either the present or the future. In the drawing Kilroy's fingers are losing his grip on the wall that failed to hold him in a present he never occupies as he attempts, unsuccessfully, to slip away. He is, instead, caught in a suspended moment outside time, without history or future and fading from the present moment. The featureless face is also without a fixed reference point: it has no identity, operating instead as a blank canvas that is both everyone and no one. Kilroy represents not only the all-American GI of myth, but also individuals caught out of time and of uncertain identity, and it is these aspects, and the conflict they represent with American mythology, that Williams explores in the character of Kilroy.

'Kilroy is coming' is inscribed on the wall of the plaza – inverting the mythology – and when Kilroy appears, he amends it to read 'Kilroy is here' and in the final scene amends it yet again to the familiar 'was here'. Kilroy now has a present and a future and a substance previously denied him, but, by virtue of being on the Camino Real, he remains caught outside time. He is not without identity, but his identity is fluid and uncertain: at the beginning he carries the paraphernalia of his past that initially defines him – the emerald and ruby trophy belt bearing the word CHAMP, the golden boxing gloves, the photo of 'his one true woman' and his heart of gold 'as big as a baby's head' – but the play is a process that systematically strips all these from him, until he is freed from the identity they represent and able to make a bid for freedom. When Kilroy appears at the end of Block Two, Gutman's comments presage Kilroy's fate: 'Ho ho! – a clown! The eternal Punchinella! That's exactly what's needed in a

time of crisis!’(p. 454). The destruction of Kilroy’s material success and social standing begins before he appears on the Camino – his dungarees are ‘faded nearly white through long wear and much washing’ – but it continues apace in Block Three. Despite his itinerant status – Williams describes him as a ‘young American vagrant’ – Kilroy initially displays a confidence in his own and America’s material security. He is mildly bemused at the lack of a Western Union or Wells Fargo office – ‘That’s very peculiar. I never struck a town yet that didn’t have one or the other’ (p. 455) – and he confidently relies on the power of the American dollar:

In the States this pile of lettuce would make you a plutocrat! – But I bet you this stuff don’t add up to fifty dollars American coin. Ha ha! (p. 456)

Kilroy’s faith and belief in American materialism is compromised when, attempting to get rid of street vendors and prostitutes by throwing down a handful of coins, a pickpocket takes his wallet. As Kilroy’s last tangible link to American wealth (and the certainties it represents) goes, his appeals for justice and the power of the American ambassador fall on deaf ears. His powerlessness, and that of the values that underpin the American sense of self-confidence, become apparent, even to him. In Block Two we learn that a ‘bad heart’ is in part responsible for Kilroy’s rootlessness, causing him to retire from boxing and leave his wife. This is a reference not only to Kilroy’s medical condition: because of his iconic status, the failure of ‘heart’ is a comment on the American state and the American sense of identity. The Gypsy’s speech in Block Three exposes Kilroy’s predicament as a process of alienation, but also one of personal destabilisation – an erosion of identity and autonomy:

Do you feel yourself to be spiritually unprepared for the age of the exploding atoms? Do you distrust the newspapers? Are you suspicious of governments? Have you arrived at a point on the Camino Real where the walls converge not in the distance but right in front of your nose? Does further progress appear impossible to you? Are you afraid of anything at all? Afraid of your heartbeat? Or the eyes of strangers! Afraid of breathing? Afraid of not breathing? Do you wish that things could be straight and simple again as they were in your childhood? Would you like to go back to Kindy Garten? (p. 458)

This speech moves systematically from the public world of social and political fears to the private world of personal nightmares, linking social criticism to personal crisis. Moreover, the speech shifts not only from public to private, but also moves relentlessly down a regressive path, destroying the developmental milestones that signify the growth of personal autonomy, culminating in a reversion to the childlike language of the 'Kindy Garten'. Block Three ends on a slightly different, more positive note as Kilroy pawns his trophy belt, 'a precious reminder of the sweet used-to-be', indicating that alongside the process of stripping away the accoutrements of Kilroy's 'all-American hero' identity comes a pragmatic acceptance of present realities. This is the first indication that the destabilising of identity may be a progressive rather than a destructive process: 'Oh, well. Sometimes a man has got to hock his sweet used-to-be in order to finance his present situation' (p. 462).

In Block Four, Kilroy's isolation and incomprehension grows, as he searches in vain for a like-minded soul, greeting the Baron as 'A normal American. In a clean white suit' only to be disappointed when the Baron explains that his suit is pale yellow, he is French and his 'normality has been often in question' (p. 468). Kilroy's ability to relate to his new circumstances and control events is further thwarted when the loan shark refuses his belt and

demands instead Kilroy's golden gloves: Kilroy refuses, 'I'd peddle my heart's true blood before I'd leave my golden gloves hung up in a loan shark's window', but the loan shark's reply, 'So you say but I will see you later', is a terse and prophetic assertion of Kilroy's impotence (p. 467). It is clear to the audience and residents of the Camino, but not yet to Kilroy himself, that the values and sense of self that the gloves represent and which sustained him previously are irrelevant on the Camino Real. There they are merely expressions of Kilroy's vulnerability and naiveté:

Kilroy: These are my gloves, these gloves are gold, and I fought a lot of hard fights to win 'em! I broke clean from the clinches. I never hit a low blow, the referee never told me to mix it up! And the fixers never got to me! Loan Shark: In other words, a sucker! (p. 467).

In Block Five Jacques shows Kilroy the steps that lead to the ironically and ambiguously named 'Magnificent Arch of Triumph' and the only route out of the Camino. Kilroy rushes to the top step only to reel back at the hostility and barrenness of the landscape that is the Terra Incognita beyond the Arch – an arch which we now see as a triumph of captivity, not freedom. However the possibility that it may ultimately provide an escape is suggested when Kilroy says he may cross it 'sometime, with someone, but not right now and alone!' (p. 475).

In Block Six Kilroy reaches the nadir of the stripping of his identity when Gutman forces him to adopt the role of the Patsy. Kilroy's attempts to evade the Camino's guards are frenetic as he leaps from the stage into the auditorium, pleading with members of the audience as he is pursued throughout by the guards. The dramatic impact of the invasion of the audience space cannot be overestimated: the audience, alienated by the invasion of their space, are

unable to respond to Kilroy, and become unwilling participants in Kilroy's isolation

– an isolation emphasised by Kilroy's pleas, as he attempts to assert and impose American values on the chaos that threatens to engulf him:

How do I git out? Which way do I go, which way do I get out? Where's the Greyhound depot? [...] I had enough of this place. I had too much of this place. I'm free. I'm a free man with equal rights in this world! You better believe it because that's news for you and you had better believe it! [...] Oh! Over there! I see a sign that says EXIT. That's a sweet word to me, man, that's a lovely word, EXIT! That's the entrance to paradise for Kilroy! Exit, I'm coming. Exit I'm coming. (p. 481)

The transition from 'Greyhound depot' to 'Exit' as a means of escape marks a subtle but fundamental shift in Kilroy's understanding: It moves from the familiar and specifically American – 'Greyhound' – to the universal – 'Exit' – and is symptomatic of the de-culturing of his identity. This process is completed as his final attempt at escape is a leap from the boxes of the auditorium back into the heart of the Camino. This leap into the midst of his adversaries becomes a gesture of ironic bravado with Kilroy's cry of 'Geronimo' as he lands at Esmeralda's feet. As both are captured, Esmeralda is forced back into her role as re-incarnating virgin, and Kilroy dons the Patsy suit – a role in which he can only communicate by flashing his nose. Jacques' comment articulates the social symbolism of this:

I knew without asking the Gypsy that something of this sort would happen to you. You have a spark of anarchy in your spirit that's not to be tolerated. Nothing wild or honest is tolerated here! It has to be extinguished or used to only light up your nose for Mr. Gutman's amusement. (p. 487)

After the humiliation of Block Six, Kilroy does not reappear until Block Eleven and the commencement of the fiesta that culminates in Esmeralda's re-incarnation as a virgin. The fiesta begins with the crowning of Casanova as the King of Cuckolds, and Jacques, like Kilroy, initially resists Gutman's ritual humiliation, but eventually, again like Kilroy, he embraces it with irony and bravado:

Show me crowned to the world! Announce the honor! Tell the world of the honor bestowed on Casanova, Chevalier de Seingalt! Knight of the Golden Spur by the Grace of his Holiness the Pope ... Famous adventurer! Con man Extraordinary! Gambler! Pitchman par excellence Shill! Pimp! *And – great – lover ...* (p. 531)

The rapport implicit in the similarity of these reactions is made explicit by their mutually compassionate and redemptive actions as they each remove the symbols of the other's imposed identity and source of their humiliation. They finally 'embrace as brothers' – an act that resonates with both radicalism and humanity. Kilroy is now able to plan an escape through the Terra Incognita and sells his gloves to finance this. He emerges from the loan shark's in disguise, but is recognised by Esmeralda, and 'the riotous women' at the festival then strip him of his disguise, leaving him in the dungarees and skivvy (t-shirt) he wore when he first appeared. Disguise and dissimulation are exposed as ineffective means of escape from the Camino, and Kilroy's identity is undefined as he stands dressed simply in the anonymous uniform of an American working-man. This visual identity is stripped of status, unlike his former identity as Champ – and lacking any reference to a trade or skill – bestows an anonymity, a fluidity of identity, on Kilroy that will ultimately enable him to escape the Camino

Real. However Kilroy is not yet entirely free of his past, and as he runs for the steps to the Terra Incognita, he is seduced by Esmeralda's entreaties as she cries out 'Champ' – cries which evoke irresistible memories of his former glory. Reprising his former leap into the plaza with cries of 'GERONIMO!' Kilroy is briefly fêted as the Champ he used to be.

In Block Twelve, Kilroy accepts his featureless identity and in the interview with the Gypsy, presents himself as an itinerant without a history.

Gypsy: Resume your seat and give me your full name.

Kilroy: Kilroy.

Gypsy: Date of birth and place of that disaster?

Kilroy: Both unknown.

Gypsy: Address?

Kilroy: Traveler.

Gypsy: Parents?

Kilroy: Anonymous. (pp. 541-2.)

Later, in his encounter with Esmeralda, he realises that romance and sex are not the redemptive forces that he believed them to be, and he determines to face the Streetcleaners as the fighter he once was. At the close of Block Fourteen, as he falls to the floor the Madrecita covers his body with her shawl.¹⁹⁸

In Block Fifteen, Kilroy's corpse is the focus of an autopsy conducted by a Medical Instructor surrounded by students and nurses. La Madrecita cradles Kilroy's body and laments his death, functioning as poetic counterpoint to the unemotional sterility of the Instructor's commentary, highlighting the iconic and political symbolism of Kilroy's death:

¹⁹⁸

Her full title is 'La Madrecita de los Perdidos,' which translates as 'Little Mother of the Lost'.

Instructor: This is the body of an unidentified vagrant.
 La Madrecita: This was thy son America – and now he is mine.
 Instructor: He was found in an alley along the Camino Real.
 La Madrecita: Think of him, now, as he was before his luck failed him.
 Remember his time of greatness, when he was not faded, not frightened.
 (p. 578)

This Block consists almost entirely of the contrapuntal dialogue of La Madrecita and the Instructor, with the Madrecita's comments forming a eulogy to both Kilroy and the betrayed ideals of an idealised American identity. For simplicity, in the following quotation I have omitted the Instructor's dialogue – marking them only as ellipses – in order to highlight La Madrecita's interjections and their choric role.

La Madrecita: He stood as a planet among the moons of their longing, haughty with youth, a champion of the prize-ring! [...] You should have seen the lovely monogrammed robe in which he strode the aisles of colosseums! [...] Yes, blow wind where night thins – for laurel is not everlasting [...] This was thy son, – and now mine [...] Blow wind! [...] Yes blow wind where night thins! You are his passing bell and his lamentation [...] Keen for him, all maimed creatures, deformed and mutilated – his homeless ghost is your own! [...] His heart was pure gold and as big as the head of a baby [...] Rise ghost! Go! Go bird! 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality'. (p. 579)

La Madrecita, quoting from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, here asserts the heroic status of the culturally denuded Kilroy. Though his past endeavours are recounted, their ephemeral nature is clear – 'for laurel is not everlasting' – and it becomes clear that his heroism now stems from his purity of heart, his authenticity and his desire to engage with reality.¹⁹⁹

Williams' identifies with these sentiments by using his own soubriquet, 'Bird' in the phrase 'Go

¹⁹⁹

The reality here is not that of 'realistic theatre' but the hidden reality of the Production Notes.

bird!’ As the final Block begins Kilroy responds to La Madrecita’s entreaty, rises and reclaims his heart – ‘This is my heart! It don’t belong to no State, not even the U.S.A.’ – in an act of self-definition (p. 582). But achieving self-definition and authenticity is not simple, and Kilroy sells his heart, in a futile attempt to win Esmeralda with material possessions – to achieve love and redemption through (American) materialism. This attempt to rely on past cultural supports fails and marks Kilroy’s final abandonment of certainty. Devoid of possessions Kilroy is now free from the cultural restrictions and received identities of his past, but he is enabled not impoverished by their loss. The stripping of Kilroy’s identity is necessary for his survival and escape from the Camino Real, for the authentic persona lies not in cultural paraphernalia, but in the on-going process of personal discovery, in the assertion that ‘humanity is a work in progress’ (p. 543). Don Quixote, who finally accompanies Kilroy into the Terra Incognita, merely exhorts him not to pity himself:

The wounds of vanity, the many offenses our egos have to endure, being housed in bodies that age and hearts that grow tired, are better accepted with a tolerant smile – like *this!* – You see? [...] Otherwise what you become is a bag full of curdled cream – *leche mala*, we call it! – attractive to nobody, least of all to yourself! (p. 589).

Kilroy’s journey along the Camino Real is a process of deliverance from the cultural trappings that attempted to define him to a situation where identity is fluid, defined only by a commitment to personal authenticity. As Saddick says ‘hope in this play ultimately rests in movement and process’, a sentiment reiterated by Williams:²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ * Saddick, “You Just Forge Ahead”, p. 80.

The only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath and is the sum of your actions and so constantly in a state of becoming under your own volition.²⁰¹

Survival on the Camino Real is dependent on foregoing certainty. But this is not a matter of compromise or capitulation: those characters that emerge with hope at the end of the play are those who manage to relinquish the past certainties that previously sustained them and embrace instead an uncertain future. Casanova embodies hope more than Marguerite because he has faith in a new understanding of love; she is less hopeful because she clings to the cynicism that supported her previous sexual career. Don Quixote, who frames the action of the play, which he claims as his own dream, exemplifies survival as a commitment to fluidity and uncertainty, as even he must shed his past and leave Sancho Panza behind before he can enter the Camino Real. Kilroy sheds his past and everything that seemed to define who he was: in his acceptance of uncertainty, he finds a flexibility that enables him to embrace a new integrity and sense of self that liberates him from the Camino Real. The liberating fluidity of *Camino Real* resists any attempt at resolving conflicting ideas or forces, and the play refuses to impose certainty or structure on the complexity and contradictions that inhabit and characterise *Camino Real*: the fluidity of *Camino Real* is its plasticity, and is expressed in every aspect of the drama – its staging, its structure, its narrative, its character development and particularly in its treatment of the abstract concept of identity.

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Williams, 'On a Streetcar Named Success' in *Where I Live*, p. 21.

Chapter 10

The Two-Character Play and The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme Le

Monde: Experiments in Metatheatricality

In this chapter I look at two of Williams' plays that are linked by their metatheatrical dimension. The first, *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme Le Monde*, was published posthumously in 1983, and was probably the last play Williams wrote. It was published as a limited print run by Albondocani Press rather than New Directions, intended for private circulation amongst a select circle of Williams' friends. New Directions subsequently published it in 2008 in *The Travelling Companion and Other Plays*.

The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme Le Monde is, on any assessment, an extraordinary play. It falls within the group of Williams' plays described as 'outrageous' by Dorff (though the play was unknown when she was writing) and Philip Kolin describes it as 'Tennessee Williams' Little Shop of Comic Horrors', 'outrageous, horrific and perhaps even beyond production'.²⁰² The play is set in a London rooming-house attic, where Mint lives. He has lost the use of his legs and moves by swinging from hooks in the ceiling. He is routinely sexually abused by one of Mme Le Monde's sons and is bordering on starvation as Mme Le Monde torments him with meagre rations of tea and biscuits. The action centres on a single day on which Hall, Mint's old school friend, visits, and who, despite their old-school ties, only compounds Mint's suffering. Despite this grim synopsis, the play is a comedy – a relative rarity in Williams' canon – and bears many of the trademarks of other outrageous plays, such as

²⁰² Kolin, 'The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme Le Monde: Tennessee Williams' Little Shop of Comic Horrors', p. 2.

Gnädiges Fräulein and *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*. However, it is in some ways also similar to *Camino Real*. Both plays deal with themes of cruelty and exploitation, and share elements of cartoon and pantomime that lend a camp quality to both. In *Camino Real* Williams implicitly invokes the cartoon character that accompanied the phrase 'Kilroy is coming' and the pantomimic moments form a complex interplay of themes and identities: Kilroy as the Patsy introduces the farcical cruelty that characterises clowning and pantomime and his Patsy 'red fright wig' foreshadows Mme. Le Monde's 'fiery red mop of hair that resembles a nuclear explosion' (p. 103); the ritual that constitutes the Fiesta in *Camino Real* – a 'serio-comic, grotesque-lyric' (*Camino*, p. 533) – involves Kilroy donning a farcical and 'grotesque disguise, a turban, dark glasses, a burnoose and an umbrella or sunshade' (p. 533). Whereas these moments of farce and grotesquerie act as a counterpoint to other actions and themes in *Camino Real*, in *Rooming-House* the pantomimic perspective dominates and the subtle references we saw in *Camino Real* become an extended grotesque exercise in camp metatheatre. Kolin states:

Essentially, *Remarkable Rooming-House* confronts the idea of performance, to the point of becoming self-referential. The play interrogates the world as theatre and the world of theatre. (p. 8)

He discusses Williams' reversals of theatrical conventions as he strips 'them of their conventional seriousness to show [the] anti-mimeticism of Le Monde and the other characters in *Rooming-House*' (p. 8), seeing the play as 'a culmination' of Williams' dramaturgy, where 'as in everything else the autobiographical strain is inescapable', and the play depicts 'many of

Williams' chronic fears' (p. 2). Though Kolin recognises the metatheatricality of the play and its links with British music-hall, Pinter, Artaud and Beckett, he doesn't see Williams' use of camp and the critique of performance as anything more profound than a choice of style. He implicitly characterises the play as one of personal angst:

Yet while the select circle of Williams friends who were to receive signed copies from the puckish playwright would have roared with laughter at Mint's dilemma and Hall's antics, they perhaps would have sensed Williams' own pain in the process, his private nightmares at the end of a phenomenal career in the world. The play was all Tennessee – coterie camp and apocalyptic lament. (p. 10)

In Dorff's analysis of the outrageous in Williams' drama deeper, more universal themes emerge:

The outrageous late plays are bawdy, over the top farces that appropriate systems of metadrama and the aesthetics of the cartoon to parody the state of contemporary theatre, foregrounding its corruption through farcical renderings of actors, scripts, sets, playwrights, producers and critics. The outrageous qualities of these plays are too often interpreted as uncontrolled, autobiographical excesses on Williams' part, ignoring the voice of outrage, or violent critique, that underlies the notion of the outrageous.²⁰³

Dorff argues that in Williams' late plays the outrageous is expressed 'through forms of parody, parable and farce, all of which function on the level of *meta*-mimesis'. These forms re-work existing dramatic conventions that purport to a mimetic representation of reality and Dorff argues that they superimpose 'a metatheatrical level that emphasizes doubleness', divorcing the word from its object through the parodying of mimetic representation:

²⁰³

Dorff, 'Theatricalist Cartoons: Tennessee Williams' Late "Outrageous" Plays', p. 13.

This form of parodic meta-mimesis, which empowers the parodic text over the mimetic text that it parodies, is nevertheless dependent upon the reader's/spectator's ability to recognize and interpret the ironic doubling of forms. (p. 14)

The grotesque dimension to Williams' use of parody imbues the act of performance in the outrageous plays with a profound and self-conscious irony that Dorff argues 'establishes the subject of the meta-mimesis as drama *about* mimetic representation' (p. 14). Though I argue that the play's critique extends beyond the simple metatheatrical critique of theatre itself, Dorff provides crucial insights into the role of camp in the outrageous plays. Dorff argues that the sustained outrageousness of the plays with their overt and explicit behaviour and language, 'foregrounding the ridiculous' demands a 'camp' reading in order to be understood. This is particularly so in the case of *Rooming-House*, where the dualities depend in the main on the audience's ability to recognise the deliberate and self-conscious artifice of performance whilst remaining aware of the basis of the parody and the critique that the performance represents. As Dorff explains:

The meta-mimetic project of the outrageous plays demands that the spectators be able to recognize the doubled codes and substitutions through which this revaluation takes place, in order to understand the critique of contemporary theatre which they present. (p. 15)

In the other plays that I examine the concept of duality and contradiction is expressed in discrete and readily discernible dramatic elements, such as characterisation, staging and lighting, but in *Rooming-House* the dualities and contradictions are embedded in the dramatic style, in the camp perspective of the play.

The play opens on Mint, 'a delicate little man with a childlike face' who inhabits 'the rectangle with hooks' that is the attic of Mme Le Monde's rooming-house. He is hanging from one of the hooks with which he swings himself around the room, wearing only the short trousers of his old public school uniform as a 'muscular tow-headed young street-boy' (one of Mme Le Monde's many children, Boy) enters 'grinning lasciviously'.²⁰⁴ We are immediately confronted with conflicted images of innocence and depravity: Mint's faux youth is both referenced and compromised by his (un)dress – his vulnerability clear from his hanging from a hook – whilst 'Boy', genuinely young, commands the situation with his sexually precocious and aggressively abusive behaviour. These images are made immediately self-conscious, and therefore camp, by the stage direction that has Boy 'grinning lasciviously'. The grotesqueness of the situation is apparent as Mint tries to reject the inevitable homosexual rape using the language of polite afternoon-tea sociability – 'Oh no, no, not now. I am expecting a visitor' (p. 91). Boy's language on the other hand is aggressive, direct and explicit as he removes Mint from a hook and rapes him in an alcove behind a semi-transparent curtain. When we hear Mint's 'moans of masochistic pain-pleasure' (p. 91) we are in Kolin's words, 'in a most uncomfortable position':

We are voyeurs as well as moralists. We are in the world of dirty postcards that we wish to see but not send. Most disconcertingly, we witness pleasure and agony conflicted in the crossfire. (p. 4)

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Williams, *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme Le Monde*, p. 91. Further references will be given in the text as *RRH*.

If our response to this is to engage with the drama and not to dismiss it out of hand as the perverse imaginings of an artist in terminal decline, then our reaction – our resolution of the conflicted performance on stage and our conflicted emotions – is to find it funny, and in recognising the comic we are recognising the dualities portrayed. For the humour rests on our recognition that the stylised excesses displayed represent an appropriation and transformation of the humiliations and frustrations that underpin this display and are transcended and denied in the process of being appropriated. It depends on the doubling that Dorff identifies and in recognising the humour we are seeing from a camp perspective.

Kolin, conversely, does not see the play through a camp perspective – the doubling that Dorff identifies becomes an unnerving, unresolved experience for him. Kolin is implicitly looking to make sense of the play through unifying elements – ‘the central symbol’ – but is frustrated by Williams’ constant destabilising shifts through the contradictions of the play:

The central symbol of the play, the rooming-house, borders on lunacy, half in and half out of reason, half terrifying, half slapstick. It represents a world of disorientation, distortion, offering maddening bits and pieces, gnawing incompleteness. (p. 3)

Dorff recognises ‘a disordering of the senses’ as a means of engaging in a camp mode of seeing. Discussing *Gnädiges Fräulein*, she describes such disordering of the senses as lending ‘an ironic distance’ which allows performance to be interpreted as ‘a meta-mimetic commentary on the life of the performer’ (‘Theatricalist Cartoons’, p. 19). In *Rooming-House* that distance is given to the audience. The shock and outrage of the initial moments of the

play are mutated into a knowing response as we recognise the coded language of camp. When Mint's visitor, Hall, arrives, Mint is hauling 'an old chamber pot decorated with faded roses, and also some crumpled newspaper sheets' into the semi-transparent closet, where he has just been raped. Here is both the ambivalence of Mint's 'pain-pleasure' in his rape, and the elision of public and private into a half-way house of semi-transparency: Mint's toilet activity becomes as public as his sexual activity, and in its public aspect it too becomes a performance. The activity is made camp by its performative aspect and by the self-consciousness of Williams' description – 'Mint's arm *snakes* out of the curtained alcove' (*RRH*, p. 92, my italics). That moment more than any other defines the tone of the play and the perspective demanded of the audience. It is imbued with the conscious ambivalence of camp, the self-reflexive delight in excess, and the coded significance of gesture and place, in the elaboration of detail. 'Snakes' references both a conscious 'naughty' delight in movement and gesture, and male genitals: 'faded roses' references a genteel aesthetic as well as the ageing roué; and the 'semi-transparent curtained alcove' references the dualities embedded in the hiddenness of the sexual 'closet'. The closet, both here and in gay culture generally, is an essentially camp construct. Whether in or out of the closet, it is a statement of sexuality, which varies only in its degree of hiddenness. Though denying his sexuality in public, the closeted individual advertises it to the knowing by inhabiting the closet: the act of hiding and denial becomes an assertion of what's hidden; similarly, the status of those who are 'out' is defined by the closet they've left – whatever the individual's relationship to it, the closet remains a constant feature of gay identity. In *Rooming-House* the alcove/closet is consciously

portrayed as a contradictory public/private space. Kolin sees this as a subversive destabilising of dramatic conventions:

The gusts of Williams's comic horror turns everything inside out. The inside/outside dislocation starts with the *mise-en-scene* where at '*stage left [...] an alcove with semi-transparent curtain [...] provide[s] a retreat for certain occasions that require privacy*' [...] The audience's visual fare is a *trompe-l'oeil*. Teasingly we are asked to see and not see; things are inside that should not be revealed outside, but they are. (p. 4)

These inversions are subversive and destabilising if considered within the context of non-camp dramatic conventions. But this play was written for a specific and particularly knowing audience, and as such its metatheatricity is not just an interrogation of 'the world as theatre and the theatre as world', but an interrogation of the duality of camp performance itself (Kolin, p. 8). Camp is not just an exercise in metatheatricity: it is, as Sontag says, 'a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon'. It is a subversion of conventional perspectives that offers an alternative view of the world, and part of that view challenges fundamental notions of unity and identity. The celebration of artifice and the notion of being-as-performance that are at the heart of camp are essentially dualistic.²⁰⁵ Williams' use of camp here in *Rooming-House* trades on the knowingness of the audience for which it was intended: coded references in this play are embedded in the fabric of Williams' use of pantomime; in the outrageousness of narrative; in the grimly grotesque humour and relentlessly abusive violence. The play is about humour and survival, but an understanding of that depends on the audience's awareness of the inherent duality of the camp form and of the

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See the fuller discussion of camp in Chapter 5.

obscured reality that necessarily underpins the artifice of performance. It demands an appreciation that camp is both a denial and an assertion of the reality that it implicitly rejects. John Timpane touches on similar issues in his analysis of Williams' dramatic perspective in terms of the 'gaze' (in the sense associated with Laura Mulvey):

I would like to speculate on what the Williams gaze encompasses: 'place' as a construction of the imagination, a metaphor for the chaotic determination of identity; people as subjects rather than selves; humanity as a single group composed of infinite, resistant versions, any of them potential objects of desire; and the 'Southern' as a metaphor for a kind of conflicted identity.²⁰⁶

Timpane argues that Williams' gaze embodies a certain 'resistance' that frustrates conventional expectations, similar to Kolin's subversion of dramatic conventions. Timpane is more specific in describing how this resistance produces an idiosyncratic gaze and what that gaze reveals. In particular, Timpane sees Williams' treatment of place – his repeated insistence that his settings are not real – as sites of transformation and revelation of hidden truths, and that 'the Williams' gaze sees (and projects) character as inevitably labile', so that place becomes where the unstable nature of identity is manifest, and acts as a metaphor for identity:

Place shifts because person shifts; in terms of theatre, place is a way to express the chaotic unpredictable ways in which identity changes. (pp. 3-4)

In *Mint* we see the contradictions of identity played out in graphic terms: no part of him is whole; he is half-dressed, half-mobile, half-cripple, half-athlete, half-starved, half-

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Timpane, 'Gaze and Resistance in the Plays of Tennessee Williams', p. 19.

pleasured, half-pained. But this lack of wholeness imbues place and person with contradictions: he has no privacy, but he is cut off from public activity; his legs are paralysed, but he swings athletically 'like that historical ape-man' from the hooks in the ceiling. These hooks can also be seen as coded references to identity, for as Timpane reminds us, actors and audiences alike look 'for a "hook" to a character' as an aid to 'reducing that character to a known quantity' – to understand him ('Gaze and Resistance', p. 4). But the rooming-house has numerous hooks, and they are what give Mint what little independence and strength he has: the hooks don't define him or take him anywhere and there is no real sense of progression or movement beyond the repetitive struggle to get to the tea and biscuits, to survive – they are merely different hooks in different parts of the room, but all are necessary if Mint is to move at all under his own volition and in a direction, however limited, of his own choosing. Mint's independence, such as it is, and survival, depend on the multiplicity of hooks. Mint is a metatheatrical, metaphorical expression of the nature of postmodern identity: shifting, contradictory, and fragmented.

It is tempting to see the hooks of *Rooming-House* as a defining symbol of the play – as for example Raymond Williams sees Ibsen's wild duck or Chekov's seagull – but that would ignore a fundamental difference in the way imagery is used in these plays, which is yet another distinction between theatrical realism and plastic theatre. Raymond Williams explains that conventional theatrical symbolism is born out of the limitations of realism and is thus irrevocably bound to it:

Fidelity to the representational method [...] compels the author to show people dining, to depict their conversation in minor commonplaces. But if he is seriously concerned with experience, he cannot leave it at this. Either one or more of his characters may – for some reason – have an ability to speak out, to indicate the underlying pattern. In *The Seagull*, Trigorin particularly, and Treplef, who are both writers, possess this faculty. Even then the author may not be satisfied; a total pattern has to be indicated, for since the characters are conceived as absolute, as ‘real persons’, their statements may be merely personal and idiosyncratic. Here, in the final attempt to resolve the difficulty, is introduced such a device as that of the seagull.²⁰⁷

It is the commitment to mimetic realism, the necessity to maintain the theatrical illusion that ‘reality’ is being portrayed, which necessitates the introduction of conventional symbolism in order to express what mimesis cannot. In *Rooming-House* the inherent duality of the play’s form – its camp performance and parodic outrageousness – obviates the need for explicit symbolism and enables Williams to use the entire play to convey complex and abstract themes that conventional symbolism can only hint at. The coded language of camp demands from the audience a sophisticated understanding and recognition of duality, as does the parody implicit in outrageousness. In camp and parody the notion of performance becomes the real as the distinction between world and play is dismantled, as it also is in expressionist drama.

The Two-Character Play is also a metatheatrical play and an example of expressionism in which we see one of the most concerted and sustained attempts to deny any and all distinctions between the world and the stage. It is one of Williams’ most revised plays and at least six manuscript versions and three published versions exist. First published in a limited

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Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, p. 104.

edition by New Directions in 1969, Williams started work on it earlier, for Prosser mentions a reference to the play in an interview with Williams in the *New York Times* on 26 October 1966.²⁰⁸ It was published again in 1973, reworked and re-titled *Outcry*, after the Broadway production of that year and that version is now published in The Library of America Collection of Williams' plays. The play was finally re-published in 1976 under its original title in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*, Volume 5 and it is this version that I use unless otherwise stated.

The play is undoubtedly a difficult one, but the many versions maintain a consistent theme and treatment. The differences between the published versions reflect Williams' attempt to make the play more accessible rather than any fundamental change in content. The play is set in an unspecified theatre in an unspecified location with two characters: Felice, the actor/director of the company, and Clare, his sister. They arrive at the venue as part of a long-running tour, a 'fucking junket into the boondocks'.²⁰⁹ Having been deserted by the company, and being the only remaining members of the cast, they are forced to perform 'The Two-Character Play' written by Felice. Their situation deteriorates further when they find themselves alone in the theatre after the audience, such as it is, walks out and the play closes with the two characters, realising that they are abandoned and locked in the now empty theatre, attempting to come to terms with their situation. The action shifts between the play proper and the play-within-a-play, and the distinction between the two becomes increasingly blurred, until it is impossible to distinguish between them. Williams described the play as

²⁰⁸ See Prosser, *The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams*, pp. 77-8.

²⁰⁹ Williams, *The Two-Character Play*, p. 313.

about 'a brother and sister performing in a play that becomes confused with their lives. The action weaves back and forth between reality and non-reality'.²¹⁰ The transitions between the 'fiction' and the 'reality' of the play(s) become increasingly difficult to track and the confusion that results for both actors and audience is quite deliberate. A central theme of the play is the exposition of fear, explored through the examination of the shifting, uncertain nature of performance and identity. Confusion abounds in this play where nothing is certain and nothing can be relied upon. It is a play of an emotional state – of the fear that grows with uncertainty and the uncertainty that feeds on fear. The metatheatrical structure – the play within a play – immediately raises questions about what is 'real' and what is 'performance' and in Williams' hands it is not long before we begin to question whether any distinction between the two can be at all meaningful. Prosser says:

At every step in the play, at every beat, the truth of the situation may be questioned. This, of course, is the point. The dramatic situation is obviously a metaphor for reality as theatre, a precarious reality that may not be distinguishable from madness, a reality about which we know very little. (p. 80)

The dualism of the two-play structure is more than a simple metaphor 'for reality as theatre', for in its destabilising shifts between the two plays it inevitably becomes an examination of theatre as reality. The distinction between the two is important and is reflected in Clare's comment toward the end of the play:

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Zolotow, 'The Rose Tattoo to Continue Run' *New York Times*, 26 October 1966.

Sometimes you work on a play by inventing situations in life that, that – correspond to those in the play, and you're so skillfull at it that even I'm taken in. (p. 365)

Felice as author invents both drama – 'reality as theatre' – and life – 'theatre as reality' – with the metaphorical interchange between reality and theatre working both ways. To see 'reality as theatre' invokes the verisimilitude of conventional drama that provoked Williams to formulate his initial rationale for plastic theatre – to develop a theatre to portray a hidden reality. When we see 'theatre as reality' we are referencing 'camp' and the body of experience that acknowledges reality as performance, and the ability of the individual to define themselves and their 'reality'. The difference here may be subtle, but it is important: 'reality as theatre' is based on a notion of layered experience, where the 'real' lies hidden and obscured, whereas 'theatre as reality' is based on the complexity of performance, with its integral, and liberating, processes of appropriation and self-definition. 'Theatre as reality' represents a profound and powerful challenge to realist and unified notions of self-hood.

The structure of the play and how we perceive it affects our overall appreciation and understanding of *The Two-Character Play*. The play-within-a-play is an established format, and Williams trades on its history to amplify our feelings of disorientation. Dramatists as diverse as Kyd, Shakespeare, Chekov and Brecht have employed the play-within-a-play, but in nearly every case the two plays function as discrete and discernible entities, and I know of none where the boundaries between the two are so systematically dismantled as in *The Two-Character Play*. Here, the 'play' refuses to stay 'within' the play, as Williams manipulates the structure in complex and deliberately confusing ways. Both plays have the same title and

cast, indicating that we should expect a crossover of issues and themes between the two plays. But if we were expecting a simple illumination of the 'outer' play's issues by their heightened metatheatrical enactment in the 'inner' play, we are doomed to disappointment. For the 'inner' play is frequently interrupted and, as Prosser points out, 'we never know for sure what is interruption or what is part of the play-within-a-play' (p. 79). These are not simple interruptions to the 'inner' play's flow – as when Clare sees the cablegram on the sofa during the performance of the 'inner' play:

Felice: (*in a stage whisper*) You know *The Two-Character Play*.

Clare: (*in a loud stage whisper*) The cablegram is still on the set.

Felice: Clare there wasn't, there isn't a cablegram in *The Two-Character Play*.

Clare: Then take it off the sofa where I can see it. When you see a thing, you can't think it doesn't exist, unless you're hallucinating and know that you are. (p. 329)

In raising the volume of her stage whisper to 'loud', Clare is challenging the 'theatre as reality' of the inner play – drawing the audience's attention to the play as performance. Felice then undermines the status of the inner play by equivocating on the temporal status of the text – 'there wasn't, there isn't a cablegram' – destabilising his own role so that the audience is uncertain whether he is speaking as actor from within the play – 'there isn't' – or as author of a completed text commenting from outside the performance – 'there wasn't'. Finally Clare raises, and simultaneously inverts, profound epistemological questions in prescribing the limits of not how she *knows* that something exists, but how she *denies* that something exists. In this inversion of the classic epistemological question (how we know what we know), Williams links performance – with its denial of a 'reality' – with mental instability/drug use – 'hallucinating' –

and self-knowledge – ‘know that you are’. This view of performance is linked to aspects of camp (see the discussion on *Rooming-House* and Chapter 5), but it crucially lacks the confidence and autonomy of camp. In *The Two-Character Play* the issues of identity that underlie camp and performance are diffuse and elusive, shifting between the two characters and the two plays. The elision of the two plays posits an altogether less stable identity and the appropriation that gives camp its integrity and identity is lacking here, where the outrageous comedy of *Rooming-House* is replaced by the fear of performance and the performance of fear.

Underlying and underpinning fear in *The Two-Character Play* is the sense of shifting and unstable identities. Williams interweaves the themes of fear and identity and each reflects on the other in a destabilising spiralling vortex of uncertainty. The duplication of the characters’ names is disconcerting and questions the authenticity, integrity and unified nature of identity. ‘Felice’ and ‘Clare’ are sexually ambivalent, ambi-gendered names that here span multiple characters and both genders. Moreover, the irony of calling these two characters trapped in a cold, dark and deserted theatre by names that mean ‘lucky, fortunate, happy’ (Felice) and ‘clear, and bright’ (Clare) becomes apparent as the play progresses, introducing yet another element of contradiction. Are the characters in the two plays the same people or not? Are they brother and sister or aspects of a single personality? Are we seeing four people here? Or two? Or one? The text is deliberately contradictory as it disrupts every assumption or conclusion that we try to make about the play. Williams’ stage directions indicate that the roles in the inner and outer plays should be played differently:

Clare appears in the Gothic door to the backstage area. There is a ghostly spill of light in the doorway and she has an apparitional look about her. She has, like her brother, a quality of youth without being young and also like Felice an elegance, perhaps even an arrogance, of bearing that seems related to a past theatre of actor-managers and imperious stars. But her condition when she appears is 'stoned' and her grand theatrical manner will alternate with something startlingly coarse, the change occurring as abruptly as if another personality seized hold of her at these moments. Both of these aspects, the grand and the vulgar disappear entirely from the part of Clare in 'The Performance', when she will have a childlike simplicity, the pure and sad precociousness of a little girl. (p. 310)

There are a number of contradictions and contrasts embedded in this description of the two Clares. The Gothic references that open this stage direction – 'a ghostly spill of light' and 'apparitional look' – are unavoidable reminders of Edgar Allan Poe and implicitly references the ambivalent relationship between Madeline and Roderick Usher and alerts us to things hidden – to the potential for shifting realities and ambiguous relationships. Felice and Clare share 'a quality of youth without being young' – a contradictory state of both being and not-being young that also implies an element of performance – an appearance of youth that masks a different 'reality'. Nor are these implications mutually exclusive, both 'being/not-being' and 'performance' can be, and are, part of Clare's character(s), layering further contradiction into the acknowledged duality of the two Clares. The complexity of Clare's character(s) is further underlined by the description of her 'elegance, perhaps even arrogance': 'elegance' is undercut by the pejorative suggestion of 'arrogance' and further compromised by Williams linking it to an established theatrical tradition of 'past theatre of actor-managers and imperious stars', placing performance at the heart of Clare's identities. Her character become contradictory when 'her grand theatre manner' alternates 'with

something startlingly coarse', and this change in Clare's character is emphatically not a conventional progressive development of character, for the contradictions in her character alternate in a continual shifting pattern. These dualistic elements are co-existing aspects of Clare and the transitions are iterative and abrupt – 'as if another personality seized hold of her at these moments'. All the aspects of this – the outer Clare – 'disappear entirely' in the Clare of the inner play who has 'a childlike simplicity', is 'pure' with 'the sad precociousness of a little girl'. Yet Williams is not here merely distinguishing between the two Clares by establishing contrasting characters: in the characterising and positioning of the 'inner' and 'outer' Clare(s), he inverts the notions of 'real' and 'performance'. The character of innocence and purity, of simplicity and integrity is the Clare of the play-within-a-play, where our expectations are of an acknowledged performance and acknowledged artifice. The character of ambivalence, of expansive gestures and self-conscious portrayal is the Clare of the outer play, where the suspension of disbelief would normally dictate that we see this character as 'real'. Moreover, the 'outer' Clare's 'grand theatre manner' links her to notions of performance and camp. The inversion of our expectations of performance by this substitution of artifice for 'real' and 'real' for artifice warns of further erosions to come of the distinctions between the real and the performed.

In addition to the issues discussed above, the unified integrity of identity is subverted by the suggestion that haunts the text: namely, that Felice and Clare may represent two aspects of a single identity. As Prosser comments:

The situation is further complicated by the possibility that the two characters are really polarities within one consciousness and what we are really watching is a split personality trying to control its own hysteria as it seeks some form of integration. Williams never spells this out for us, but as in *The Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, we see two characters, mysteriously joined, who represent two aspects of one consciousness. (p. 91)

In Act One Clare says, 'We never hear the same thing at the same time any more, *caro*' (p. 315), while Felice says in Act Two 'Sometimes we do still see the same things at the same time' (p. 357), indicating that they previously shared a unity of perception. Later Felice reinforces the notion of their disparate 'unity' when he says 'Sometimes the same idea still occurs to us both' (p. 363), and again, even later, both characters refer to shared thinking:

Clare: You have a dark thought in your head and I think I know what it is.
 Felice: Sometimes we have the same thought at the same time and that could be an advantage to us now. (p. 366)

Their shared experiences move from perception to imagination: from how things are to how things could be, from the 'real' to the 'not-yet-real'. The suggestion of a shared identity is expressed in the shared dialogue that is interspersed in the text, the first of which occurs in the first minutes of the play:

Felice: Fear is a monster vast as night –
 Clare: And shadow casting as the sun.
 Felice: It is quicksilver, quick as light –
 Clare: It slides beneath the down pressed thumb.
 Felice: Last night we locked it from the house.
 Clare: But caught a glimpse of it today.
 Felice: In a corner, like a mouse.
 Clare: Gnawing all four walls away. (p. 311)

This poem is clearly a rehearsed piece, a ‘performance’ presumably written by Felice or Clare, and though it lacks the truncated, staccato rhythm of later passages, its syntax is deceptive since it has only two complete sentences – ‘It slides beneath the down pressed thumb’ and ‘Last night we locked it from the house’ – the rest being divided between the speakers or depending on other statements to be intelligible. The controlled rhythm of this ‘performed’ piece of shared dialogue – part of the outer play – differs dramatically from the following piece of shared dialogue from the inner play:

Clare: We’ve been informed by the –
 Felice: Acme Insurance Company –
 Clare: – that the insurance money is –
 Felice: Forfeited.
 Clare: Yes, the payment of the insurance policy is forfeited in the –
 Felice: Event –
 Clare: Yes, in the event of a man –
 Felice: In the event of a man killing his wife then killing himself, and –
 Clare: Unkindly forgetting his children. (p. 343)²¹¹

This dialogue is taken at a fast pace throughout, and the interjections follow on so quickly that it has the effect of being a monologue of two voices rather than a conventional dialogue. In contrast to this elision of voices, the stage directions place Felice and Clare at a distance from each other on opposite sides of the stage, facing out in clearly ‘posed’ stances that increase both the artificiality of the ‘performance’ and isolate the two characters from each other. The physical staging emphasises the separateness of Felice and Clare whilst the dialogue unifies them. Moreover, in these examples of ‘shared’ dialogue, the ‘performed’

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I have omitted the stage directions from this quotation.

piece is in the outer play, with its convention of 'theatre as reality', whilst the more spontaneous dialogue takes place in the play-within-a-play where the element of 'performance' is expected. This reversal of the vocal element of the play is compounded by the contradictory stage directions and these individually subtle dramatic elements become, collectively, profoundly unsettling because of the difficulty in consciously registering what is going on. This is an example of Williams' subtlety in destabilising dramatic expectations and notions of identity: he portrays destabilisation in his characters whilst inflicting the same emotions on the audience. We cannot assert with any confidence that Felice and Clare are a single unit for no sooner do we see them as one, then things shift and they become separate again. Nothing is certain and nothing is resolved. As Prosser puts it:

The basic situation is a brilliant conceit, an Escher image in which perceived reality changes before the eyes [...] The situation is like a recurring bad dream, full of possible interpretations yet always elusively inconclusive. (p. 79)

The destabilising of identity and the portrayal of fear in the play are linked, and fear is thematically foregrounded in Felice's opening soliloquy:

To play with fear is to play with fire. – No, worse, much worse, than playing with fire. Fire has limits. It comes to a river or sea and there it stops, it comes to stone or bare earth that it can't leap across and there is stopped, having nothing more to consume. But fear – [...] Fear! That fierce little man with a drum inside the rib cage. Yes, compared to fear grown to panic which has no – what? – limits, at least none short of consciousness blowing out and not reviving again, compared to that, no other emotion a living feeling creature is

capable of having, not even love or hate, is comparable on – what?–
force? – magnitude? (p. 309)²¹²

The poem of shared dialogue by Clare and Felice, quoted earlier, is also about fear and follows this opening soliloquy. Both the soliloquy and the shared poem stand apart from the rest of the dialogue of the play and neither relate to events or speech that occur around them. Felice's opening speech is reflective and introspective, unlike his addresses to the audience that occur later: whereas those addresses erode the fourth wall, this speech is a lyrical exposure of raw emotion. Felice interrupts Clare's speech about courage to cue the poem 'Fear is a monster', turning on a tape recorder, and the poem finishes when he stops the tape. Neither character refers to the poem and the conversation that encloses the shared recitation continues as if nothing had interrupted its flow. These statements about fear stand apart from the rest of the play, and function almost as an interjected prologue to the play(s). Fear is a constant in the play(s), whether expressed explicitly and abstractly as in the passages above, or enacted as when Clare stamps on the cockroach – '*Cockroach! Huge! (She stamps her foot) Go!*' (p. 312) – or embodied in a discrete, albeit abstract entity, such as confinement, when fear is given an identity and shape.

'Confined' is a prohibited word between Clare and Felice and the acknowledgment of that prohibition defines it as a source of fear: 'the word' is 'not in the [play]', and when Felice uses it, it obliterates all other activity. This brief section (barely more than a page at the end of Act One) is pivotal and complex and Felice and Clare's discussion of 'the word' gives language

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I have omitted the stage directions from this quotation.

a status that transcends that of conventional dialogue. It draws attention to the word as signifier and gives it status as an entity, a thing, with both role and power within the play. Its power is immediately evident as Clare ‘gasps and stumbles’ to the piano where she repeatedly ‘strikes a treble note’. This reminds us of her signals to cut the play, – the striking ‘a C-sharp’ – and links script, and more profound psychological cuts, to the piano notes and to the concepts of both fear and confinement:

Clare: You shouldn’t have spoken that word! ‘Confined’ is not in the –
 Felice: Oh, a prohibited word. When a word can’t be used, when it’s prohibited its silence increases its size. It gets larger and larger till it’s so enormous that no house can hold it. (p. 338)

This is the first time that fear is focussed, where the amorphous emotion that has been building during Act One appears finally to be being pinned down, to becoming clear and known. But as always things are not as they seem – Williams denies us that clarity even as he offers it: ‘Confined’ is too big a word to be contained; its prohibition, born of fear, forces ‘Confined’ out of its confinement, out of its controlled space, leaving it free to run amok and ravage what little stability Felice and Clare have. Both recognise and fear the power of the ‘prohibited word’:

Clare: Then say the word, over and over, you – perverse monster, you! (*Felice turns away*) Scared to? Afraid of a – ?
 Felice: I won’t do lunatic things. I have to try and pretend there’s some sanity here.
 Clare: Oh, is that what you’re trying? I thought you were trying to go as far off as possible without going past all limits. (*He turns to face her, furiously. She smiles and forms the word ‘confined’ with her lips; then she says it in a whisper.*

He snatches up a soft pillow.) Confined, Confined! (He thrusts the pillow over her mouth, holding her by the shoulder. She struggles as if suffocating). (p. 338)

From this moment at the end of Act One Felice and Clare share and alternate their reactions to fear as embodied in the prohibited word: Felice uses the word first, in a moment of frustration and anger; Clare reacts with fear and dismay as Felice asserts mastery of the word by defining its power. But it is Clare who finally taunts Felice with the word and with his fear of it, demonstrating her mastery by her controlled and measured repetition of the word. Felice ends the confrontation with an ambivalent attempted suffocation, (the stage direction states 'as if suffocating') and the two 'stare at each other silently for a moment' suggesting an ambivalent 'armed neutrality' that is confirmed by the disputed, but shared, announcement of an interval that follows:

Felice: an interval of five minutes.

Clare: *Fifteen!*

Felice: (*rushing into the wings to lower the curtain*) Ten! (p. 339)

The 'Confined' episode, while clearly about fear, also displays the linked duality or divided unity – we can never be sure which – of Felice and Clare. They share emotions and dialogue, alternate control and mastery of both and do so in a seemingly endless, circular performance where nothing changes and everything carries the burden of an unspoken past, that seems doomed to be relived through re-enactment in both inner and outer plays. It is in these uncertainties about character and identity, reality and performance that the real fear in the play resides: fear is the destabilising force, the agent that exposes the cracks in the 'reality'

that Felice and Clare try to maintain. The questions that are posed in this play are generated by fear, and have a dramatic significance different from those prompted by curiosity. Curiosity is a confident process that maintains its integrity by keeping a distance from the interrogation and the information obtained. Fear is different: it is inherently destabilising because the questions it generates emanate from uncertainty, destabilise our confidence in what we know and intrude on and undermine the integrity of identity, of who and what we are. The fear in *The Two-Character Play* arises out of questions of identity and reality and then reasserts those questions, so that the psychological structure of the play reverberates with uncertainty, echoing the metatheatrical structure and the characters' physical situation. Fear feeds on itself, the play(s) are interdependent and ultimately indistinguishable, and Felice and Clare are locked in destructive interdependence. The uncertainties, the dualities, the contradictions and the fear they engender permeate every aspect of the play: the overarching psychology and metatheatre, the dramatic structure, and the plot or lack of it, all are inherently unstable and deny the audience any toe-hold on reality. David Wade, reviewing a 1967 production said:

Mr. Williams succeeds quite brilliantly in sustaining the idea that nothing whatever is to be relied upon and if we get through one veil there is just another beyond.²¹³

Wade's comment links the uncertainty and insecurity the play generates to the ephemeral and unarticulated secrets that haunt the play, which in turn links it to the notion of

²¹³ Wade, review of the Hampstead Theatre Club production, 'Tennessee Williams' New Voice', *The Times*, 12 December 1967.

hiddenness. We never really know what happened in Felice and Clare's past, whether the allusions to murder and suicide refer to any 'real' past of either the inner or the outer play. But it's not just that revelations uncover more hiddenness: the 'reality' of the revelations are challenged by the uncertainty that surrounds Felice's and Clare's identities and whether either is reliable or sane – revelations become un-revealed as their veracity becomes suspect. This profound level of instability in the play casts doubt on the role of hiddenness in the play: we no longer know whether there are secrets haunting the lives of these two people or whether insanity alone has produced what we see. But even if we could resolve the question of the characters' sanity, we would be no further forward, as Saddik explains:

By throwing the sanity of Clare and Felice into question, Williams dislocates truth even further. Not only are boundaries between reality and fiction (play-within-a-play), author and text, and truth and lies disrupted in this work, but the very reliability of the characters and the words they speak in the text become suspect. We (as the audience), however, are not *only* thrown into uncertainty concerning the issue of whether the characters are mad or sane. Even if the characters were represented as unequivocally insane, there still would exist the uncertainty of whether their words were 'nul [sic] and void, without truth or significance' or whether they revealed 'some hidden truth' – an uncertainty which undermines any sort of stable center we might try to impose upon this drama.²¹⁴

The difficulty in establishing any stable centre in the play is compounded by the fact that the only voices we hear are those of Felice and Clare – we have no benchmark, no alternative reference point against which to measure or assess the sanity or validity of what they say. We are forced to inhabit their world and share the fundamental instabilities that

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Saddik, *The Politics of Reputation*, p. 102.

they experience within it. Saddik sees Williams' linguistic style as a major element in establishing such a shifting and insecure world:

In *The Two-Character Play*, most strikingly, Williams was aiming for a Beckettian kind of drama – drama that focus on linguistic play and deliberately lays bare notions of the inexpressibility of expression and the contradictions inherent in the concepts of plot and meaning. (p. 14)

The Two-Character Play abounds in puns and wordplay, but the wit that we normally associate with wordplay is entirely subservient to the generation of instability, and the majority of these wordplays allude to the metatheatricality of the play, serving to dismantle distinctions between the inner and outer plays, as well as between performance and reality. When Felice says as the plays opens, 'to play with fear is to play with fire' (p. 309) Williams is juxtaposing three notions: the, as it were, 'arsonist of paranoia'; the actor 'playing' fear; and Felice playing alongside Clare's fear and having to 'keep her from getting too panicky to give a good performance' (p. 310). In this short phrase a range of contradictions, levels of control and insecurity are conveyed: the uncontrolled danger and voyeurism of the arsonist; the controlled abandonment of the actor's persona in delivering a theatrical performance; and the attempted exercise of psychological control over Clare's (potential) lack of emotional control, to produce 'a good performance'. This is a hierarchical depiction of control, or lack of it, and its relation to performance as Williams moves from the anarchic total abandonment of control (with its attendant dangers, excitement and insecurity), to two other, different versions of playing with fear – one self-imposed and in control of its limits, the other, externally imposed yet uncertain as it attempts to contain an otherwise uncontrolled fear. These strategies for

‘playing’ with fear echo strategies and descriptions of identity: the abandonment of identity to insanity, the self-determined and self-defined identity and the externally imposed and determined identity. There are other examples of similar wordplay: when Felice criticises Clare for failing ‘to get lost in the play’ (p. 317), control and abandonment are again part of performance, but set against Felice’s opening remarks, ‘playing’ is associated with fear and insecurity throughout the play and haunts the linked themes of performance and identity. Insecurity and unpredictability are never far from the surface, though sometimes more subtly referenced. When Clare complains that her voice is going, Felice’s mimicking taunt – “‘I’ll have to perform in pantomime tonight’” – introduces a layer of performance over performance within the inner play that is itself a layer of performance over the outer play. As if this tottering pyramid of performances were not unstable enough, Clare replies: ‘Strike a lucifer for me’ (p. 316). The reference to ‘lucifer’ here is unique (elsewhere matches are simply matches), and therefore the single use of this early twentieth-century slang warrants examination. In addition to the obvious biblical reference with its associations of falling from grace and damnation, ‘lucifer’ matches (introduced in 1829) were notoriously unpredictable and disconcertingly violent, having a tendency to self-ignite explosively. Clare’s ‘lucifer’ is yet another unpredictable and unstable dimension to (her) performance. Moreover, the linguistic structure of the play itself is built on conversational dislocations. At the beginning Felice and Clare speak in tandem (see the shared dialogue quoted earlier) but this soon collapses into a sequence of overlapping non-sequiturs as they struggle to control their performance and assert independent selves:

Clare (*rising*): – Exhaustion has – symptoms ...
 Felice: So do alcohol and other depressants less discreetly mentioned.
 Clare: I've only half a grain of –
 Felice: Washed down with liquor, the effect's *synergistic*. Dr Forrester told you that you could have heart arrest – *on stage!*
 Clare: Not because of anything in a bottle or a box but –
 Felice (*overlapping*): What I know is I play with a freaked out, staggering –
 Clare (*overlapping*): Well, play with yourself, you long-haired son of a mother!
 Felice (*overlapping*): Your voice is thick, slurred, you've picked up –vulgarisms of – gutters!
 Clare (*overlapping*): What you pick up is stopped at the desk of any decent hotel.
 Felice (*overlapping*): *Stop it!* I can't take anymore of your –
 Clare (*overlapping*): *Truth!*
 Felice (*overlapping*): *Sick, sick – aberrations!*
 (*There is a pause.*)
 Clare (*like a child*): When are we going home?
 Felice: – Clare, our home is any theatre anywhere that there is one. (p. 315)

This exchange is riddled with innuendo and veiled references to sexuality, perversion and mental instability, but Clare's impassioned cry of '*Truth!*' cuts through the litany of abuse as if surfacing like a drowning (wo)man from the catalogue of vulgarities and aberrations. It is followed by silence as if their linguistic play has exhausted them, and Clare longs, like a child, for the security of home. Any hope for security is dashed by Felice's comment that their home is 'any theatre', echoing Clare earlier remark that they while away their time in 'a state theatre of a state unknown' (p. 313). 'State unknown' highlights the instability of their emotional and psychological state as well as their physical rootlessness: they inhabit the world of performance and performance defines who they are. Saddik points out that Williams privileges linguistic play over language's more conventional role of communication and information:

In this play both the inadequacies (represented through silences) and overdetermined quality of language (represented through linguistic play) are emphasized over its signifying powers and its supposed access to truth. (*PR*, p. 92)

But the play is about more than the inadequacies of language, of the Beckettian notion of the inexpressibility of expression. The instabilities and dualities embedded in linguistic play challenge stable meanings and unified identities; they posit a world of multiplicities, of shifting entities, of fragmentation and uncertainty, of a non-unified reality:

The Two-Character Play provides an experience rich in linguistic play, which emphasises the instability of language and character and brings out the complexities of expression and presentation. It reacts against the constructed unities of realism, as realism's debt to 'the well-made play' rests on its tendency to undermine any attempt at representing a particular character's sense of discontinuity, dislocation, or fragmentation as anything more than individual aberration from a fixed and stable 'human nature'. This play rethinks constructed notions of the real by challenging the linguistic boundaries that define truth, and it denaturalizes the relationship between truth and representation by calling attention to its own creation. (*PR*, p. 108)

Both *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme Le Monde* and *The Two-Character Play* are compelling experiments in metatheatres, which go beyond dramatic self-reflexive examinations of the nature of theatre. By his use of the camp perspective in *Rooming-House* and his depiction and manipulation of fear and uncertainty in *The Two-Character Play*, Williams explores the nature of performance and identity, exposing hidden and implicit dualities that fundamentally challenge ideas of unified reality and identity.

Chapter 11

I Can't Imagine Tomorrow and In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel: Experiments in Language

The plays in this chapter – *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* (1966) and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) – reflect Williams' fascination with the limitations and potential of language and mark a departure from his earlier lyricism.²¹⁵ They use language in very different ways, though at first seem very similar in approach: both lack a traditional linear narrative and in both language and communication collapse as Williams explores experiences that transcend language. Whereas Savran and others place Williams in cultural and historical contexts using postmodern and poststructuralist ideas of language, I have not done so: partly because that work has already been done, but also because poststructuralist theories tend to assume that language has no social reference. Conversely, I argue that Williams relates language to identity, both individual and collective, and poststructuralist theories are therefore less useful in developing the argument I'm proposing. In addition, the idea of the postmodern is also intrinsically periodizing. It would therefore place Williams in a linear or teleological light (realism – modernism – postmodernism), whereas I argue that Williams' anti-realism consistently rejects linearity.

I Can't Imagine Tomorrow deals with familiar Williams' themes – loneliness, love, time and death – but overarching these is the juxtaposition of articulacy and incoherence of the

²¹⁵ *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* was first published in 1970 as part of the *Dragon Country* collection of plays, but in *TTW* Volume 7, a copyright date of 1966 is given, indicating that the play was written earlier than *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*.

two characters – One and Two – as the play explores the limitations of language and communication. Saddik comments that:

[In the later plays] he began to rely less on language as a direct, reliable expression of truth and more on the silences, pauses, and indirect implications that lie beyond the capacity of verbal representation in order to express the idea that reality could not be articulated. (*PR*, p. 81)

Williams' language and characterisation in *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* is similar to that of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, and of *The Two-Character Play*: the characters, One and Two, like Felice and Clare in *The Two-Character Play* and Miriam and Mark in *Tokyo Hotel*, are not characters in the sense that we would expect in realistic drama. They function instead as expressions of particular emotions or perspectives. As Saddik explains:

Characters in the later unrealistic plays are not characters in the realistic sense of the word, but often are themselves representations of a particular idea, emotion, or theme, following a more subjective point of view. This representation of character [...] often seeks to directly represent the nonrational paradoxes of the human psyche. (p. 79)

Naming the characters as 'One' and 'Two' asserts the play's anti-realism, and bestows anonymity and universality on the characters whilst simultaneously establishing an affinity and a distinction between them – they are both joined and separated by their numerical nomenclature and are primed to embody the contradictions and 'paradoxes of the human psyche' that Saddik mentions. The two characters each represent in their different ways a conflict with 'wholeness' and manifest an inability to relate to the world outside the safety of the room of the play and accordingly display a mutual dependence: One, a woman, is

articulate but housebound and dying; Two, a man, cannot talk to anyone but One, and struggles to do even that. He lives in a nearby hotel and is about to lose his job as a teacher as a result of being unable to speak to his students, and 'each is the only friend of the other' (p. 133). The mutual dependency and synergy that exists between these two, though very different from the conflict and tension of the Felice/Clare, Miriam/Mark in *The Two-Character Play* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, nonetheless invites us to consider these ostensibly separate characters as paradoxical aspects of a single person. Unlike *The Two-Character Play* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* is a love story: an engaging mixture of the disturbing and the comforting – Prosser describes it as 'one of the most moving works from Williams' late oeuvre' – in which the contradictions that fascinate Williams are accommodated with compassion.²¹⁶ The form and content of the play are interdependent and synergistic: the structure of the play, its repetitiveness and circularity, mimics the situation of the characters and is itself an expression of the emotion and perspective they represent. This is a radically different relationship of form and content from that in realistic drama and is characteristic of Williams' later, more experimental, plastic drama.

I Can't Imagine Tomorrow has a minimal set: there are no walls, 'only such pieces of furniture [...] that are required by the action of the play'. In contrast the lighting is understated and gentle – 'soft blue evening dusk is the lighting of the play, with soft amber follow spots on

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Prosser, *The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams*, p. 257.

the players'.²¹⁷ The play moves slowly, there is no plot and both One and Two move carefully and deliberately. The opening moments set the tone and pace of the play: One 'stands [...] with her arms spread apart as if she were dividing curtains to look out of a window'. Two appears to stand before an empty doorframe as One 'draws back and covers her face with her hands'. Two then 'raises an arm as if to knock at a door', an action he repeats 'two or three times' before One 'makes the gesture of opening the door' (p. 133). The language of the stage directions anticipates the tone and style of the characters' relationship; 'as if', 'makes a gesture', 'draws back' are reflective, somewhat tentative yet deliberate phrases, that link form and content and fulfil a number of dramatic functions: they establish the non-realistic nature of the play; the slow deliberate pace suggests an introspective and reflective or dream-like quality; the studied gestures and lack of dialogue alert us to the significance of both silence and symbol. The relationship between One and Two is established not with words but in a silent mime of symbolic gestures. The characters remain essentially anonymous and de-personalised throughout the play: it is only in the text that they exist as One and Two – in performance they are nameless. This de-emphasises them as individuals and reinforces their function as representative of particular emotions or states of mind. This stripping bare of set and character coupled with the lack of any linear narrative produces an intensely introspective drama that is about process rather than ends. The narrative, such as it is, explores the process of existence through the medium of (non)communication and repetition.

²¹⁷

Williams, *I Can't imagine Tomorrow*, p. 133.

The iterative nature of the ritual that is the backbone of their relationship is linked to the limitations of communication:

Every evening you have a frightened guilty expression. I always say, 'Oh, it's you,' and you always say, 'Yes, it's me. [...] It would be better if you just stepped in and sat down to eat and then dealt out the cards or turned on the television. But, no. We have to repeat the ritual, oh, it's you and yes, it's me, there's almost nothing else said, at least nothing else worth saying. (p. 139)

But One is here ignoring that it is she who initiates the ritual exchange, and we realise that the ritual is both necessary and inescapable. The unchanging pattern of One and Two's life provides a point of reference and stability for them: 'I see you every evening. It wouldn't be evening without you and the card game and the news on TV' (p. 134). It is only in their time together that they seem able to experience life, as their individual inadequacies are neutralised by their mutual support: Two provides company for One and One provides support for Two as he struggles to speak. In this they validate each other's existence:

One: It's not getting any better, is it?

Two: What?

One: I said it's not getting any better, your difficulty in speaking.

Two: It will. It's – temporary.

One: Are you sure? It's been temporary for a long time now. How do you talk to your students at the high-school, or do you say nothing to them, just write things on the blackboard?

Two: No, I –

One: What?

Two: I've been meaning to tell you. It's been five days since I've met my high-school classes.

One: Isn't that strange. I thought so. I thought you'd stopped. What next? Something or nothing? (p. 134)

In this exchange the mutuality of the relationship is evident: Two brings One the outside world and youth and activity – his high-school students – whilst One encourages his conversation and offers helpful alternatives – ‘do you [...] just write on the blackboard?’ (p. 134). Their contributions compensate for each other’s shortcomings and suggest again that they exist not separately but jointly. This is reinforced by One’s appropriation of Two’s thoughts and actions – ‘I thought so. I thought you’d stopped. What next?’ (p. 134). The boundaries between the two are blurred and become increasingly irrelevant. Despite the gentle tone of *I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow*, the duality of One and Two is a meeting of opposites, of contradictory perspectives, though these are significantly less conflicted than those in either *The Two-Character Play*, or *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. The repetition and introspection of their conversation establishes a pace and tone to a performance in which differences and contradictions are accepted and accommodated with affection rather than aggression. The play examines how One and Two’s relationship accommodates contradictions and paradoxes. This is very different from more conventional narratives which are dominated by a concern with endings, with the resolution of contradictions in tragic or comic ways. *I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow* depicts a repetitive process that attempts to accommodate rather than resolve contradiction: a process that *is* the relationship between One and Two. The play’s title indirectly refers to this concern with process, for the relationship’s repetitive circularity renders the imagination of tomorrow meaningless, for One and Two are caught in a perpetually repeating present.

In a key moment in the play, Williams juxtaposes the primary concerns of One and Two: Two writes 'I love you and I'm afraid' and when One urges him to explain what he fears he writes 'Changes [...] Everything. All.' (p. 140). One writes:

If there wasn't a thing called time, the passing of time in the world we live in, we might be able to count on things staying the same, but time lives in the world with us and has a big broom and is sweeping us out of the way, whether we face it or not. (p. 141)

Two fails to react to One's piece and she urges him to write again. He reiterates 'I love you and I'm afraid' (p. 141). This exchange exemplifies the contradictions of their relationship: One writes eloquently of the remorseless sweep of time and the inevitability of change while Two exemplifies the repetitive, unchanging nature of their emotions and, by extension, their existence; One repeatedly raises the idea of change and Two repeatedly rejects it. The emotional contradiction at the heart of the play centres on this dichotomy – the remorselessness of time-driven change versus the unending repetitiveness of daily life. They cannot imagine tomorrow because they cannot conceive of a change in their routine, yet change brought about by time is the only (un)certainty and hope that intrudes upon their daily lives. One trusts to time, Two trusts in love and although these two positions are ultimately in conflict, they are accommodated by the uncertainty implicit in their inability 'to imagine tomorrow'.

In juxtaposing Two's incoherence with One's lyrical articulateness, Williams highlights the shortcomings and limitations of conventional, verbal communication. One's first substantial speech, and probably the best known of this little-known play, gave the name,

Dragon Country, to the collection of one-act plays of which it forms part. It is classic

Williams, portraying with heart-breaking lyricism the pain of existence. But it is spoken to no-one – it is a cry from the heart going nowhere:

Dragon Country, the country of pain, is an uninhabitable country which is inhabited, though. Each one crossing through that huge barren country has his own separate track to follow across it alone. If the inhabitants, the explorers of Dragon Country, looked about them, they'd see other explorers, but in this country of endured but unendurable pain each one is so absorbed, so deafened, blinded by his own journey across it he sees, he looks for, no one else crawling across it with him. (p. 138)

The loneliness of existence is portrayed here not as an inevitable isolation, but as a failure to relate, to communicate. The inhabitants of Dragon Country are, of necessity, intrepid – ‘the explorers’ – but blinkered. They fail to look around, fail to see the other explorers and their lack of curiosity forces them to follow ‘a separate track [...] across it alone’. The inability to communicate or see clearly causes their isolation. The limited view of the explorers is a metaphor for Williams’ view of realistic theatre – its failure to see the more profound realities of existence – and the blinkered shortcomings of realistic theatre are echoed in the blinkered perspectives that inhibit the process of living. *Dragon Country* presents contradictions that challenge survival: it is uninhabitable but inhabited, unendurable, but endured. One’s speech embodies a crucial contradiction: her outcry against the blinkered self-created isolation of the explorers is made in isolation. There is no attempt to share it with Two – indeed, the speech is book-ended with mundane domestic instructions to Two that take him elsewhere and underline One’s decision to articulate these emotions alone.

One and Two occupy opposite ends of the articulacy spectrum: One uses language easily, with a poetic style laden with imagery – she describes Two in his ‘ice-cream suit’ and looking ‘like a delivery boy with nothing to deliver’; Two’s language is functional and unadorned – ‘As I came up the drive I saw you at the window. Then you closed the curtains’ (p. 133). Here at the opening of the play both characters are expressing a degree of unease with the other. One is irritated and disappointed with Two – ‘nothing to deliver’ – whilst Two’s anxiety and insecurity (made clear later when he reveals that he thought One was not going to let him in) is expressed in the bald factual statement ‘Then you closed the curtains’. But in this exchange both characters punctuate their comments with significant pauses – ‘strangely prolonged silence(s)’ – which create spaces in the conversation that are imbued with a private but mutually understood meaning. As the conversation progresses, Two’s sentences falter and break off midway, marked by a series of dashes in a linguistic structure that is unsupported by more conventional punctuation:

Two: I wondered if –
 One: If what?
 Two: You didn’t want to – to –
 One: Want to what?
 Two: – to see me this – this evening. (p. 134)

Until this point in the conversation, One’s irritation shows in the rhythm of the exchange between them – the breaks in the flow of words signifying her interruptions as well as Two’s hesitancy. But at this point the tenor of the conversation changes and One’s responses lengthen and become more elaborate, ameliorating the confrontational tone: ‘I see

you every evening. It wouldn't be evening without you and the card game and the news on TV' (p. 134). Even as she describes the repetition of their lives, One settles into it, yet her words embody conflicted emotions. This passage marks a partial transition from irritation to acceptance and the sentences express both annoyance and compassion. They also mark a transition in the style and function of One's commentary as she complements and completes Two's broken speech. At times this role is supportive. When Two explains he's not seen his students, One's comment, 'Isn't that strange. I thought so. I thought you'd stopped' (p. 134) is empathetic and sympathetic, but her tone soon becomes more inquisitorial:

Two: There's always –
 One: What?
 Two: Got to be something, as long as –
 One: Yes, as long as we live.
 Two: Today. Today I did go.
 One: To the clinic?
 Two: Yes. There.
 One: What did you tell them? What did they tell you?
 Two: I only talked to the girl, the –
 One: Receptionist?
 Two: Yes, she gave me a paper, a –
 One: An application, a –
 Two: Questionnaire to –
 One: Fill out?
 Two: I – I had to inform them if I –
 One: Yes?
 Two: Had ever before had –
 One: Psychiatric?
 Two: Treatment, or been – hospitalized.
 One: And you?
 Two: Wrote no to each question.
 One: Yes?
 Two: No.
 One: (*impatiently*): Yes, I know, you wrote no. (p. 135)

Throughout this exchange Two delivers only one complete sentence – ‘Today I did go’ – everywhere else he falters as he approaches the significant idea of the sentence, and One supplies it, but invariably as a question. The structure and content of this exchange are at odds with each other: the faltering statement followed by one-word responses produces a constantly frustrated rhythm where Two’s deliberate speech is hurried along and harried by One’s interjections and the interrogative mode emphasises this. But the content of One’s remarks are supportive and encouraging as she supplies the missing words that articulate Two’s thoughts. These are more than the conventionally encouraging words of the good listener: they are the words that bind the rest together, that make sense of it all. The linguistic relationship between them is therefore beyond being merely supportive: its interdependence is essential and necessary. But there is also a tension at the heart of this relationship, for One and Two are both repelled by and attracted to language. One’s support of Two is cut through with frustration, but in expressing it she appropriates the punctuation that is characteristic of Two:

You poor dear little man! (*She suddenly catches hold of him with a sobbing intake of breath.*) I don’t have the strength anymore to try and make you try to save yourself from your – paralyzing – depression! (p. 139)

Similarly, when the stage directions suggest that One is detaching herself from the relationship – ‘(*She drifts away from him*)’ – Two brings her back by appropriating One’s linguistic style:

On the way coming over I passed a lawn, the lawn of a house, and the house was dark and the lawn was filled with white cranes. I guess at least twenty white cranes were stalking about on the lawn. (p. 136)

The dialogue's structure of interdependent part-sentences shared between the two characters inevitably suggests a single persona whose conflicted complexity is represented by separate characterisations. This linguistic device portrays dual identities both here and in *The Two-Character Play* (and as we shall shortly see, in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*). In all these plays the plurality of the persona is reinforced by one character's appropriation of the other's thought. One not only 'knows' that Two has already stopped teaching his classes: she also knows that when Two says 'Today I did go' he is referring not to the high school as one would expect, but to something not previously mentioned, namely the clinic. This reference to something unspoken makes us conscious of a communication outside verbal language – of the significance and eloquence of the silences and the spaces between words. 'Today I did go' resonates beyond its obvious reference: because there is no linear narrative, we cannot, and do not, suppose or imagine a history or back-story as an antecedent to the play, and 'Today I did go' becomes one part of a thought jointly held by One and Two. Despite the use of past tenses and the history implicit in ritualised behaviour, there is a contradiction at the heart of the relationship between One and Two: their daily ritual paradoxically refers to a history of repetition that traps them in the circularity of the moment. Because each day repeats itself, past, present and future are undifferentiated and therefore have no meaning – One and Two enact an ever-present repetition that exists only in the moment of the play.

In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel is from the same period as *I Can't Imagine*

Tomorrow and has, like *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*, received scant attention and very few performances.²¹⁸ It was originally performed at the Eastside Playhouse, New York, in May and June of 1969, and I know of only three other performances, all within the last ten years.²¹⁹ It was widely condemned when initially performed and is still regarded by many as Williams' greatest failure. Reviewing the original production, Clive Barnes said it was 'almost too personal, and as a result, too painful, to be seen in the cold light of public scrutiny'.²²⁰ Writing in 2000 before the current surge in interest in Williams' late plays, Bigsby suggests that *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* and other late plays are 'close to self-parody', demonstrating 'a kind of narcissism which reflected his [Williams'] paranoia and self concern' (*MAD*, p. 63). On the other hand, Michael Criscuolo's review of the 2007 production is indicative of the change in attitude toward the late plays and *Tokyo Hotel* in particular:

Time has finally caught up with Tennessee Williams' long-neglected play, *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. Initially reviled at its 1969 debut for what many considered its avant-garde and impenetrable text, the play comes across as positively quaint now – and surprisingly fresh: *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* feels as if it could have been written by one of today's countless indie theatrical playwrights. The theatrical experiments of Williams' day have become the mainstream norm now.²²¹

²¹⁸ This analysis of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* that I use here first appeared (in a rather different form) in my Master's dissertation, 'Catching the Bird': Hiddenness, Duality and Resistance in the Theatre of Tennessee Williams.

²¹⁹ These were at the Marigny Theatre, New Orleans (April 2004) The Abingdon Theatre, New York, (February 2007) and The Paley Center, New York, (May 2010).

²²⁰ Clive Barnes, *New York Times*, 12 May 1969.

²²¹ Criscuolo, nytheatre.com review archive, <http://www.nytheatre.com/showpage.aspx?s=toky4733/>

Despite attracting more serious critical attention, *Tokyo Hotel* remains one of the least understood of Williams' plays. It is a difficult and demanding work, emphatically and dramatically unlike his earlier successful plays in its rigorous minimalism and defiant rejection of classic theatrical modes. Like *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* its anti-realism is characterised by its lack of action, fractured dialogue and stylised, minimalist sets. Recent critics have tended to focus on specific aspects of the play: Terri Smith Ruckel examines the dramatic significance of the play's 'painterly' visuals, foregrounded by the set and Mark's profession; Hale identifies a number of subsidiary themes within the overarching structural formality of Japanese Noh theatre; whilst Saddik and Savran both focus on the language of the play, albeit in different ways.²²² These approaches have identified areas that are important to my own reading of the play, but none have discussed the structural and dramatic relationship between *Tokyo Hotel* and Williams' earlier plays such as *Streetcar*, or the wider social and cultural significance of Williams' experimental plays. Using the philosophical notion of the person as plural embodied in the Hegelian perspective of identity and which informs the work of Du Bois and Bull (see Chapter 7), the language of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* and the other late plays takes on a new significance and place in Williams' dramaturgy.

As we saw earlier, Hale argues convincingly for the link with Noh drama: apart from the Japanese reference in the title of the play, Williams had been introduced to Noh plays by Yukio Mishima on a visit to Japan in 1959, and had subsequently written an unpublished manuscript, *The Day a Man Dies* (subtitled *An Occidental Noh Play*) on which *Tokyo Hotel* was based

²²² Ruckel, 'Ut Pictura Poesis, Ut Poesis Pictura: the Painterly Texture of Tennessee Williams' *In The Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*'. Hale, 'In The Bar of a Tokyo Hotel: Breaking the Code'.

(‘Breaking The Code’ p. 150). Hale draws attention to the linguistic structure of Noh plays, to ‘the duet style of dialogue’ in which ‘two characters share the lines phrase by phrase to build to a climax’ (p. 154), suggesting that this is mirrored in the incomplete dialogue of Miriam and Mark in *Tokyo Hotel*. Hale recognises in the silences of the dialogue a suggestion of ‘the empty spaces of Japanese painting, which are considered as meaningful as what is pictured’, and briefly acknowledges that Mark and Miriam may be ‘halves of one person’ (p. 154.) but pursues neither of these ideas in any depth. Rather, she sees the language of *Tokyo Hotel* as a puzzle or code, which when solved reveals the ‘meaning’ of the play, which she identifies as predominantly religious, expressed in the themes of Taoism and Christianity. Savran and Bigsby, albeit for different reasons, both regard the disjointed, incomplete dialogue of *Tokyo Hotel* as evidence of Williams’ personal and professional breakdown. Bigsby describes the language as being ‘made to bear the impress of a certain hysteria’ in a play that represents ‘special pleading from a man whose own nervous experiments [...] suggested a loss of direction and momentum’.²²³ Savran feels that Williams’ ‘eloquence [had] ground to a halt’ in *Tokyo Hotel*. Both interpret the unfinished sentences of the play’s characters as evidence of the playwright’s personal plight, ignoring any possibility of dramatic import. Savran, as I discussed earlier, sees the fractured dialogue as an unfortunate consequence of the greater public awareness of homosexuality and Williams’ own coming out, and the language of the later plays was an unsuccessful attempt to invent ‘a new discourse of concealment’ (CCQ, p.137). Savran recognises the innovativeness of Williams’ new language, but frustratingly fails

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Bigsby, *CIT2*, p. 114.

to see its broader implications. He concentrates on defining Williams and his art in terms of his homosexuality, seeing the politics as only sexual and the language as only speech. This aspect of Savran's reading limits and obscures the significance of Williams' achievement in *Tokyo Hotel*: the fractured dialogue is related to Williams' coming out and the context of then current sexual politics, but it is not an inarticulate or redundant voice. It is a bold experiment in which Williams attempts to express dramatically the inherently conflicted multiple identity that the emancipation of coming out entails.²²⁴

What was formerly expressed in the coded and veiled drama of the earlier plays, such as *Streetcar*, as the hidden aspect – 'come into hiding' in Bull's phrase – now becomes a more open attempt to accommodate and live with the inherent contradictions that persist despite emancipation – a process Bull describes as 'living in hiding'. What could only be hinted at previously – emotions that could not be acknowledged, even to oneself – are now out in the open and the problems and contradictions they bring with them demand to be articulated and accommodated. Using Bull's analysis of hiddenness the language of *Tokyo Hotel* expresses the transition from 'coming into hiding', which we saw in *Streetcar*, to the more challenging and culturally advanced state of multiplicity that characterises 'living in hiding'. *Tokyo Hotel* becomes a logical and radical dramatic and cultural development of the earlier plays. It is through the sexual emancipation of coming out within the broader social context of gay liberation that Williams recognised Du Bois' process of veiling in the homosexual experience. This intensely personal process is nonetheless rooted in an historical process consequent on

²²⁴

See the discussion of Bull's work in Chapter 7.

emancipation, and in understanding this wider context we can see the cultural relevance and radical nature of Williams' writing.

Saddik sees Williams' language in the later plays, including *Tokyo Hotel*, as genuinely experimental and a consciously anti-realistic approach to drama:

These later plays draw attention to a consciousness of performance and emphasize the ambiguity resulting from a language which inadequately expresses ideas and emotions. They do not seek to reproduce the illusionistic drama of closure/(dis)closure and the reestablishment of order that realism embraces; rather they deliberately avoid the 'slice of life' illusion, [and] reproduction of realistic speech patterns through referential language. (*PR*, p. 79)

For Saddik, the language of *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*, and *Tokyo Hotel* is in the European tradition of experimental expressionism: Williams' writing should be seen alongside that of Beckett and Pinter. And for Saddik, the language of Williams' late plays, like that of Pinter and Beckett, is essentially nihilistic. Quoting Beckett – 'nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express' (p. 81) – Saddik describes Williams fragmented language as expressing futility and a Freudian death wish:

Suspicious of the language which has become their prison, [the characters] have resigned themselves to the fact that the only escape is silence and death, and they don't even seem to hope for anything to save or protect them. (p. 80)

Saddik does not see, as I do, the fragmented speech of Mark and Miriam in *Tokyo Hotel* as a positive aspect of anti-realism – a challenge to the notion of unity that underlies

conventional realism. It is for her an expression of chaos and despair signifying a descent into madness which (unusually for Saddik) calls out for biographical explanation:

Rational linguistic structures have, for the most part, broken down, and we are outside the boundaries of sanity. The language of *Tokyo Hotel* is the language of madness, and it is the omnipresent fear of madness that dominates its atmosphere. Williams has called this work the 'first full statement of [his] 'darker vision', and it was the last play he wrote before his nervous breakdown and subsequent hospitalization in the psychiatric division of Barnes Hospital in 1969. (p. 87)

Like a number of earlier critics including Bigsby and to some extent even Savran, Saddik has here pathologised the fragmented and disjointed discourse that marks the later plays. In contrast, I view the fragmentation in Williams' dialogue more positively as an expression of the multiple contradictions that constitute identity. In her efforts to place the plays in a dramatic tradition Saddik implicitly makes them an expression of personal pathology that limits their social and cultural significance.

The linguistic structure of *Tokyo Hotel* is the most obvious and immediate challenge to audience understanding. The following passage is typical of the play's dialogue and contains points of both continuity and fracture:

Miriam: Stars and constellations. You could name them. Oh and the northern lights that night made a crackling sound like giant white sheets being shaken out in the sky.
 Mark: While I fondled your breasts as I still desperately long to do.
 Miriam: Mark, your hands are.
 Mark: I know, I know – I know.
 Miriam: Your condition has to be diagnosed by a good neuropathologist, soon as. Immediately.

Mark: Miriam, I swear it's the intensity of. Why did you say a neuropathologist?

Miriam: I had an uncle with a brain tumour and the symptoms were identical.

Mark: I'm not going to interrupt my.

Miriam: Well, take a loft with a window.

Mark: The images flash in my brain, and I have to get them on nailed-down canvas at once or they.

Miriam: Flash back out of your brain. A neuropathologist would be interested in that. I'm not a neuropathologist and I'm not concerned with a thing about this thing but flying you into the care of.

Mark: There's a feeling of, a sense of.

Miriam: You won't shut up about it.

Mark: Of, of.

Miriam: Stop it.²²⁵

This dialogue has moved on from the realistic rhythms and natural phrasings of earlier plays: here there is no hesitation, no faltering – instead, the dialogue is intensely energetic and positive. The tempo is precise and staccato, defined by definite punctuation. Phrases are not interrupted with commas, but terminated with the precipitate abruptness of a full stop. This is not the faltering hesitant speech of *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*: ideas are not left suspended, but severed. There is a brutality to the pace and structure of the speech in *Tokyo Hotel* that contrasts dramatically with the gentle supportiveness of *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*. Here the silences are not hesitant pauses but full-stopped lacunae, cut across by peremptory but knowing interjections or ostensible non-sequiturs. For example, 'I know, I know – I know', flows logically, if irritably from the previous phrase, but 'Your condition has to be diagnosed by a good neuropathologist, soon as' shifts the conversation abruptly in a new direction that is nonetheless immediately comprehended and picked up by the other – 'Why did you say a

²²⁵

Williams, *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, p. 23.

neuropathologist?’ This linguistic interchange is no simple duet but an explicit expression of the undermining of dichotomies we saw in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. There conflicting characteristics were displayed sequentially: Stanley’s ‘black’ and Blanche’s ‘white’ were progressively undermined by veiled references to their hidden aspects. In the fractured dialogue of *Tokyo Hotel*, by contrast, we see the simultaneous and continuous exposure of conflict. The dialogue starts in reminiscence and the structured sentences slow down the overall pace, which is dominated by the interspersed phrases. Miriam’s phrase ‘Mark your hands are’ marks the transition from reminiscence to present by being truncated but also by linguistically referring forward as well as back. The ‘hands’ refer back to the fondling of Miriam’s breasts but also forward to an unspoken communication in the present that prompts Mark’s ‘I know, I know’.²²⁶ As the language moves to the present, sentences disintegrate and the pace accelerates, becoming increasingly frenetic as the interplay of speech constantly undermines and rebuilds itself. It is simultaneously constructive where it completes meaning – Miriam’s ‘Flash back out of your brain’ – and destructive where it denies it – Miriam’s ‘Stop it’. The dialogue becomes a simultaneous process of exposure and denial.

What marks *Tokyo Hotel* as ‘living in hiding’ as opposed to the ‘coming into hiding’ of *Streetcar* is precisely this simultaneous exposure of contradiction, the explicit display of opposites occupying the same space. If we approach the expressionism of *Tokyo Hotel* expecting the realist dialogue of earlier plays, the surreal simultaneity, the lack of sequence and logic defeat us, rendering the dialogue incomprehensible. It is only when we recognise the

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A director may be tempted to have Mark gesture at this point, but Williams has no stage direction here, so we must assume that no gesture is made.

‘dialogue’ as the monologue of a multiple identity that it begins to make sense.

Miriam’s suggestion of her ‘oneness’ with Mark and his desperate refusal to acknowledge it demonstrates this:

Miriam: Are we two people, Mark, or are –

Mark: (*with the force of dread.*) Stop there! (*She lifts her hands to her face, but the words continue through it.*)

Miriam: Two sides of!

Mark: Stop!

Miriam: One! An artist inhabiting the body of a compulsive-

Mark: Bitch! (p. 30)

The ‘duet’ of Noh dialogue becomes a duel of conflicted aspects in the divided monologue of a single identity as Mark attempts to resist the unity of absorption by Miriam. This is no simple Freudian-style opposition in which the male struggles to be free of a consuming female. The ambiguous status of Mark’s remark ‘Bitch!’ undermines the integrity of his attempts at separateness. ‘Bitch’ completes Miriam’s preceding statement and distances him from her in its abusiveness: they are both one and separate in Mark’s phrases as well as Miriam’s. The fractured language is a densely complex construct through which Williams expresses the conflicting, co-existing aspects of the Miriam/Mark character. The de-structured language of the quasi-dialogue portrays the struggle to accommodate and express the experience of an unreconciled multi-aspected identity.

The concept of ‘living in hiding’ is also expressed visually in the play. Ruckel’s focus on the visual images of *Tokyo Hotel* draws attention to its expressionist qualities and Williams’ increasingly sophisticated use of light and lighting to depict the divided persona. In *Tokyo*

Hotel as in *Streetcar* Williams uses light to do more than illuminate the set. In the earlier play light became a metaphor for the veiling implicit in the process of ‘coming into hiding’, in which light hides as much as it illuminates – a visual metaphor of the characters’ hidden aspects – contributing subtly to the audience perception of conflict and contradiction. Light is a major factor in establishing the ‘elusive and allusive’ quality that Williams strove for in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The role of light in *Tokyo Hotel* is altogether starker, more emphatic and dramatic. In this, one of Williams most expressionist plays, light is foregrounded visually and conceptually. The opening stage directions describe a minimalist set, heavy with contrast in which the dramatic effect of lighting dominates:

A smartly and exotically dressed American woman is seated at a small round table in a small area of intense light. She is glossily handsome. She wears a hat crowned with blue-black cock feathers. The Barman, behind a bar of polished bamboo, is in a pin-spot of light. He is young and his appearance suggests an Oriental idol. (p. 3)

This is a complex array of images where the dark/light contrast dominates: the visual images of the pin-spot of light within the semi-circular darkened stage and Miriam’s dark figure within the larger, intense circle of light create two contrasting images of dark in light and light in dark – reminiscent of the yin/yang symbols of Taoist philosophy identified by Hale (*Breaking the Code*, p. 151).²²⁷ The implication of harmony and synchronicity that this suggests is refuted both by Miriam’s ability to reflect light from within the darkness of her ‘glossy’ handsomeness and the Barman’s potential to reflect light from his cocktail shaker and

²²⁷ The scene design in the Dramatist’s Play Service edition 1969, referred to by Hale (p. 151), shows the cyclorama as a perfect half-circle, p. 41.

wineglasses from within the darkness beyond the reach of the pin-spot light. Light, as in *Streetcar*, becomes an unstable reference point. These images establish the concept of simultaneous co-existing opposites, but, by persistently undermining this relationship, deny it any stability and challenge the intrinsic notion of harmony that the Taoist reference implies as well as challenging the Western notion of a unified self.²²⁸

The numerous examples of the symbolic interplay of light and dark in the play further undermine notions of unity and harmony. When Miriam attempts to seduce The Barman he initially resists approaching the table and entering her circle of light, but succumbs to the lure of 400 yen and Miriam 'immediately places her hand on his crotch' – a gesture that is totally lacking in eroticism but redolent of power and control. During the following ten lines of dialogue, both characters are immobile, caught in the intense circle of light. This lack of movement intensifies the spatial composition of the frozen moment, creating a visual tableau which both echoes and contrasts with the opening yin/yang image. Here there is no harmonious merger of identities, but the isolation of resisted domination. The Barman, removed from, but referencing back to the pin-spot of light in his resistance, is held by, but distinct from, Miriam's darkness within the circle of light. This gives a series of asymmetrical opposites of dark (Barman) within light (pin-spot) held by dark (Miriam) within light (circle). This image evokes the harmony of yin/yang and male/female characteristics in conflict and is another visual expression of the multi-aspected identity which is now better understood in the

²²⁸ Taoism is a 5th and 6th century Chinese philosophy based on the notion of natural harmony. The Tao regulates natural processes and nourishes balance in the universe embodying the idea of a harmony of opposites, no love without hate, no light without dark, no male without female. The yin/yang symbol, a circle divided by a sigmoid line in which the black half contains a white circle, and the white half, a black circle represents the harmonious co-existence of these oppositions (see: 'History of Taoism www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/taoism).

context of Bull's philosophy. The conflation of these contradictory images within the asymmetric series described achieves an expression of opposites and contradictions occupying the same space which gives physical expression to 'living in hiding'. That this conflict is expressed first between Miriam and The Barman before being developed later in the Mark/Miriam relationship takes it beyond the confines of marital disharmony: the merger of cultural and gender contrasts suggests a broader significance.

Just as the lighting in *Tokyo Hotel* takes a more expressionist form than in *Streetcar*, so too do the verbal references to light. These are more developed and complex in *Tokyo Hotel* than in the earlier play. The images and symbolic references that express simultaneous cohabiting contradiction are constantly and persistently undermined and contradicted. The light that Blanche fears and manipulates in *Streetcar* achieves an independent status in *Tokyo Hotel* beyond mere symbolism. Here it becomes a character in its own right, forming a triangular relationship with Mark and Miriam.

At the start of the play Miriam talks of 'taking excursions at night' and stares at The Barman beyond her circle of light because she likes 'to see what is going on about me in the circle of light'. The ambiguity of this last phrase is typical of the play: it only makes sense in response to the Barman's question 'Why are you staring at me?' if we read 'see what is going on about' as separate from 'me in the circle of light' – as an expression of Miriam's interest in the dark beyond the light. However, a more interesting reading places her curiosity in what is going on not outside the circle but inside – in what is 'about me *in* [my emphasis] the circle of

light' (p. 4). At the end of the play Miriam's relationship to the circle of light is more concrete, but it denies and contradicts her earlier position:

Miriam Conley is not going to step out of the circle of light. It is dangerous, I don't care to. This well-defined circle of light is our defence against. Outside of it there's dimness that increases to darkness: never my territory [...] The circle of light stays with me. Until. Until can be held off but not forever eluded. You've seen how fatal it is to step out of the. (p. 51)

Light, which was once the basis for Miriam's exploration and engagement with the world, has become a defence and a retreat. Conversely, Mark has and maintains a creative relationship with light – through his art he seeks and discovers colour and light:

I didn't know it till now. Color, color, and light! Before us and after us, too. What I'm saying is – color isn't passive, it, it – has a fierce life in it! [...] but now I know the last things, the imperishable things, are color and light. (p. 24)

Despite this he dies in the dark because he 'made the mistake of deliberately moving out of the [light] [...] He thought that he could make his own circle of light' (p. 53). As the play progresses the dominant association of male/light, female/dark are reversed, this is achieved in a complex series of shifts that deny any stability to the reversal. Miriam starts Act One bathed in light but espousing darkness; she ends the play clinging to the circle of light for protection but is finally plunged into an isolated and impotent darkness as the curtain falls. Mark's attempts to 'create his own circle of light' give him a fragile hold on existence and cause his death, but in the creativity of his discovery of colour and light, there is the hope of renewal and re-birth:

Put the words back in the box and nail down the lid. *Fini*. – Wait for me just ten minutes. Watch the clock and clock me. I'll remove the tissue and talcum my face and be back in ten minutes, exactly. (p. 50)

Light has become both battleground and refuge – a force for destruction and redemption for Mark/Miriam and, in its independent status in the play, another expression of contradiction within a single entity. The contrast with *A Streetcar Named Desire* is stark: In the earlier play, the instability of light hints at hidden conflicts; in *Tokyo Hotel* the searching harshness of light not only lays bare the antagonistic forces at the heart of the Mark/Miriam identity, but is an independent expression of those forces. Williams leaves his signature on both plays in the way he uses light and the increasing confidence of his lighting pushes at dramatic boundaries and marks the trajectory of his dramaturgy.

In the fragmented, disjointed language and expressionist visuals of *Tokyo Hotel* there is a sophisticated expression of multiplicity. For not only are the complexity and contradictions expressed through the dramatic techniques of speech and lighting: the play presents yet another contradiction within its overall structure as the dislocated language is juxtaposed to the visual serenity of contradiction contained. The images of light within dark and dark within light exist as uncontentious, though contradictory images. They represent an accommodation which the linguistic structure of the play has yet to achieve. This is an extremely sophisticated experiment in expressionism and enables Williams to portray the conflicting aspects of a multiple identity on stage, not sequentially, but simultaneously: to move from the veiled allusions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* to the explicit but enigmatic expression of 'living in

hiding' so that what was veiled and elusive in *Streetcar* is made nightmarishly explicit in *Tokyo Hotel*.

Chapter 12

Something Cloudy, Something Clear and Clothes for a Summer Hotel:

Experiments in Destabilising Time

In this chapter I consider two more of the later plays, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1979) and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980). Both of these experiment with the representation of time, distorting the conventional dramatic unities and destabilising normal expectations and perceptions. In Williams' plastic theatre the underlying certainties and logic that we expect in realistic theatre become mutable and in these plays time in particular loses its linear logic.

Distortions of time feature in several of Williams' plays: in addition to *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, time is manipulated in *The Glass Menagerie*, *Vieux Carré*, and *Camino Real*, and it is worth spending a little time here to establish a framework within which Williams' treatment of time can be understood. His experimentation with and manipulation of time is not the same in all these plays: although all deconstruct time and deny its linearity they do so in significantly, if subtly different ways. In order to simplify the discussion of Williams' use of time, I propose to divide these plays into three broad groups: the memory play, the ghost play and the 'time-bent' play. The first two categories are Williams' own: in the Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Williams describes it as a 'memory play',²²⁹ and in the set notes to *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980),

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The term is in quotation marks (*TTW*, Volume 1, p. 131) but Williams does not elaborate on what he means by it.

Williams describes that play and *Camino Real* as ghost plays.²³⁰ Williams' purpose in using the ghost play form was 'to penetrate into character more deeply and to encompass dreamlike passages of time' (TTW, Volume 8, p. 204]. The third category 'time-bent' plays, is a distinction of my own, and refers to plays such as *Vieux Carré* (1977) and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981). In these plays time is again manipulated, but neither play is a memory or ghost play because the time shifts move beyond the single focus of memory and the relatively simple representation of dead visitors from the past implied by the term 'ghost'. Although Williams' manipulation of time changes and develops through his career, it would be a mistake to see these various categories as representing a simple chronological development. Williams' rejection of linearity in time is mirrored in the lack of a chronological linearity in his dramaturgy. Just as Williams picks up and repeatedly reworks dramatic themes in his plays, he revisits and reworks dramatic and intellectual conventions as he develops the techniques that characterise plastic theatre.

In the memory play the retrospective action of the play is seen through one person – a narrator whose memory the play is – such as Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*. In memory plays the linearity of time isn't challenged: we are merely privileged to step back in time via the vehicle of a single memory and view events from that individual perspective. The play is defined by the holder of the memory, and it becomes an unequivocally subjective

²³⁰ Although Williams also describes *Camino Real* as a ghost play, the term is not mentioned in the foreword or afterword to that earlier play. I can find only one use of 'ghost play', by Tennessee Williams, and it is that quoted above.

psychological drama. The memory play is not unique to Williams: Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* uses a similar time structure. Miller shares aspects of Williams' innovative approach to time, for he describes 'the conception and manipulation of time' in the Introduction to *Plays One* (1958) as a 'decisive influence upon style'.²³¹ He shared Williams' belief that altering the 'realism' of time revealed aspects which reality kept hidden:

The compacting of time destroys the realistic style not only because it violates our sense of reality, but because collapsing time inevitably emphasizes an element of existence which in life is not visible or ordinarily felt with equivalent power, and this is its symbolic meaning. (p. 6)

But Miller's approach to manipulating time is crucially different to that of Williams' ghost or time-bent plays in that Miller doesn't challenge the underlying linear rationality of the Aristotelian/Enlightenment view of time, or the sense of unity implicit in that view.²³² Miller's exposure of hidden meaning is primarily concerned with laying bare the silent connections and consequences of actions:

All My Sons takes its time with the past [...] because its theme is the question of actions and consequences, and a way had to be found to throw a long line back into the past in order to make that kind of connection viable. (p. 20)

Despite the, then, unconventional structure of *After the Fall*, Miller's conception of time remains conventional and linear. Here the line thrown back to the past is Quentin's thread of reminiscence, giving a sense of progression through the play and Quentin is

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Miller, *Plays: One*, p. 5.

²³²

See Chapter 7.

ultimately able to move on because of the reflective but essentially linear process of self-enlightenment, as is shown in his final speech:

... Yes, I don't want to be late. Thanks for making time for me ... No, it's not certainty, I don't feel that. But it does seem feasible ... not to be afraid. Perhaps it's all one has. I'll tell her that ... Yes, she will, she'll know what I mean. Well, see you again some time. Good luck and thanks.²³³

This is a process of compacting, rather than distorting, time which preserves the conventional sense of its essential teleological nature: ultimately, it remains committed to a similarly conventional notion of realism.

Williams' ghost plays are decidedly more radical in their treatment of time: they step outside and beyond time, assembling in the case of *Camino Real* a cast of characters from different eras in a location without time; in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* the characters are from the same era, but inhabit the action from a point beyond death (although their awareness of this is patchy and uncertain) and outside the time frame of the play's events. It is this quality of being 'outside' time that is characteristic of 'ghost' status and which Williams had in mind in calling these plays 'ghost' plays.

The 'time-bent' plays look very similar to memory plays at first, but in these memory does not frame the action, but becomes fragmented and interwoven with current actions and emotions, and its subjectivity is lost as past and present coexist. In the time-bent play the action moves fluidly and seamlessly between time frames leaving traces in past and future

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Miller, *Plays: Two*, p. 241

alike. Of all these plays, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* is the most difficult to pin down. Williams describes it 'as a ghost play because of the chronological licenses which are taken' (p. 204), but it seems to me more complex than that.²³⁴ Although at various points in the play *Zelda* in particular is 'outside' time, the complex manipulation of time in *Summer Hotel* is much more like the 'time-bent' plays, and I propose to view it as such. In order to clarify precisely what Williams is doing in these plays I turn to Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method*.²³⁵ Genette's theory is developed in relation to narrative prose, rather than plays, and establishes five distinct areas in narrative: order, duration, frequency, mood and voice. The first three are concerned with the treatment of time, the fourth with the type or style of discourse used by the narrator and the last with the implications of the author's choice of the voice to tell his narrative. There are problems in attempting to use Genette's approach to analyse dramatic structures in that aspects of his analysis do not translate across to a different literary medium and are therefore not relevant. This is not a trivial problem as is clear from Genette's description of the fundamental relationship between story, narrative and narrating:

I propose [...] to use the word *story* for the signified or narrative content [...] to use the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, and to use the word *narrating* for the producing narrative action.
(*Narrative Discourse*, p. 27)

²³⁴ It is a mistake to take the 'ghost' description too literally. In the author's note, Williams states 'Of course in a sense all plays are ghost plays, since players are not actually whom they play (p. 202). All page references are to *TTW*, Volume 8.

²³⁵ Marcia Eppich-Harris' "'An Improbable Fiction": The Marriage of History and Romance in Shakespeare's *Henriad*', is the only other example of Genette's theory being used in relation to drama that I have found.

The *story* is the series of events to be described, the *narrative* is the text that describes those events and *narrating* is the process by which they are described. On this basis, one could argue that drama, because its entire purpose is enactment, is all story and narrating and that there is no narrative as such; the text is the script which is merely a means to performance, which is itself the direct *narrating* of the *story*. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott suggests that the issue is not whether drama has a narrative, but whether a narrative requires a narrator (pp. 13-14). But plays like *The Glass Menagerie* and *After the Fall* which have narrators (Tom and Quentin), have a narrative even according to Genette's definitions. The issue then becomes whether those plays are qualitatively different from others, or if the narrative element is indeed present in all drama, albeit functioning at times in a different way. It seems self evident that however radical these plays may have been, they are unquestionably dramas, and therefore not generically different from plays without narrators.

Second, the view that drama has no narrative is to ignore the paratext – the author's stage directions. Williams' stage directions are copious and detailed, and in more complex plays such as *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, shift both time and place within the action much as in a conventional narrative. In performance stage directions, and much else besides, are at the mercy of the director's interpretation, but in the text of the script they come closest to Genette's definition of narrative, though at times Williams almost uses them as a narrating voice for the author. I argue then that drama has a narrative, with or without a narrator, but that Genette's analysis has to be used with care.

Notwithstanding the difficulties inherent in applying Genette's techniques to another genre, the sections on time do provide a framework and point of reference for an analysis of this problematic aspect of Williams' more difficult plays. Genette describes three aspects of narrative that are concerned with time: order, duration and frequency. Order deals with the relationship between the order of events in the narrative and their order in the story. In relation to prose Genette identifies three 'times' relating to the story, the narrative and narrating: *story time*, the time the events actually took; *narrative time*, the time of the narrative with its contractions and extensions of events; and *reading (or watching) time*, the time it takes to read a narrative (or watch a play).²³⁶ The relationship between narrative and story time is the most varied and complex, whilst the issue of reading time seems only relevant to prose narratives and the pause for reader reflection that it allows. Story time is chronological and linear because events follow one another in a sequential way, whilst narrative time need be neither. Narrative time is often riddled with anachronies as it moves back from the *dispatching narrative*, or pivotal time point, in a recall of the past – *analepsis* – or forward in an anticipation of events – *prolepsis*. Genette develops a formula for tracking anachronies that relate narrative order, designated by letters of the alphabet, to chronological order, designated by numbers. This somewhat arcane process enables us to follow extremely convoluted and complex temporal distortions. The basic anachronies of analepsis and prolepsis, movements back and forward in time, can be external to the narrative – if the event described exists wholly outside the narrative's time frame – or internal – if it exists within it.

²³⁶ Genette's tripartite analysis is not universally accepted: Seymour Chapman (*Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, 1978) simply distinguishes between story and discourse, subsuming Genette's narrative and narrating into the single element of discourse.

Genette identifies a sidestepping anachrony – the *paralipsis* – in which, unlike an ellipsis (which leaps over a period of time), the main narrative action is frozen while a sub-narrative detour is made.²³⁷ The main narrative is re-joined at the point of departure with no temporal shift in that narrative. There is much more to Genette's analysis of Order, but the final aspect which has relevance to my analysis is *inverse movement*. This is a mixture of analepsis and prolepsis, in which one contains the other, as in an anticipated memory – 'I shall look back on this moment', or a remembered anticipation – 'We lay awake waiting for it to snow'. In drama the expectation is of a simple chronological sequence, albeit with ellipses between scenes, in which any analepses or prolepses are confined to a character's reminiscence or anticipation of events.

Duration (sometimes referred to as pace) concerns the relationship between narrative time and story time – the real time of events. In prose narratives events can be related more slowly or quickly than they actually occurred. The events of a whole evening, or more, can be covered in a sentence, whilst a brief emotion of a few seconds can be explored over several pages. Prose narratives continually expand and contract event time in this way, and isochronic texts (where the narrative time equals story (real) time), are studiously avoided, quite simply because they are extremely boring. Dialogue in prose, however, is isochronic, and therefore drama, being composed of dialogue, is primarily a series of isochronic elements or scenes. Indeed, Genette uses the dramatic term 'scene' to describe isochronic elements within a prose narrative, and 'summary' to describe contracted events. Conventionally, drama achieves a

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Genette uses both the terms *paralipsis* and *paralepsis*, but confusingly, chooses the former term in his consideration of Order, and *paralepsis* in his discussion of Mood.

variation in pace by temporal ellipses between scenes, but events themselves are isochronically portrayed, making issues of duration irrelevant. Frequency on the other hand deals with the relationship of repetition between narrative time and story time, with Genette identifying three types of relationship: *singulative* where the number of times an event is narrated is the same as the number of times it occurred; *iterative* where what happened several times is narrated only once; and *repeating* where a single event is repeatedly narrated. The performance of drama is essentially singulative – the action takes the time it takes. However interesting things can happen within the dialogue when characters become obsessively repetitive (repeating) or refer once to a sequence of repetitive events (iterative). When this happens the dialogue is functioning more like a prose narrative and has taken on the characteristics, however briefly, of oral storytelling in which issues of duration and frequency continue to be relevant. In the prose narrative, scene and summary are alternated to vary pace and provide background material to support the singulative events. In drama parts of dialogue are used in the same way (for example, soliloquies, speeches direct to the audience, ‘catch-up’ reported action dialogue between characters and so on). This type of speech, monologue or dialogue, forms a ‘sub-narrative’ to the isochronic, singulative action of the play.

However, in Williams’ ‘time plays’ something different is going on. Of these, the memory play, such as *The Glass Menagerie*, is the most straightforward and accessible. The temporal disturbance – the play as analeptic excursion – is immediately evident. The narrator, Tom, is the memory holder: he announces at the outset that the play is an enactment of his

memory – a subjective analepsis, the normal stuff of memory. In memory plays the issue of *voice* is relevant, but also straightforward. In both *The Glass Menagerie* and *After The Fall* the voice is clearly that of the narrator, Tom or Quentin respectively, because, quite simply, it is his memory. Even if temporarily we think in *The Glass Menagerie* that we are watching what happened to Amanda and Laura, Tom's speeches to the audience remind us that he mediates the action and we see only what he remembers. The ghost and time-bent plays are significantly more problematic. Williams identifies *Camino Real* and *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* as ghost plays but the treatment of time in each is different: *Camino* is populated with a mixture of fictional and real, but deceased, characters, who loosely merit 'ghost' status in the conventional sense because both can be seen as figments of the imagination; *Camino Real*'s location is a port that is both everywhere and nowhere, and the mixed status of the characters places the action outside of time. The 'ghost' status of the play establishes its non-realistic nature, but the action is isochronic with occasional iterative incidents, for example the re-virgination of Esmeralda, whilst time itself seems irrelevant as if life on the Camino Real were outside of time in a process of eternal suspension, marked by the lack of analepses or prolepses or any sense of what Genette calls a dispatching narrative – an anchoring point from which the narrative moves. The few references to past histories are brief and centre on issues of identity such as Kilroy's former status as a boxing champion or Casanova's as a great lover. There is no sense of a past or future as such and inhabitants of the Camino Real don't reminisce or anticipate future events, they are defined instead by their overwhelming desire to escape from a stateless, timeless incarceration. On the other hand,

time is a prominent and active feature in *Clothes for A Summer Hotel* and has more in common with *Vieux Carré* and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*. For that reason I regard it as an example of a 'time-bent' rather than a 'ghost' play. The structure of these time-bent plays is considerably more complex than the 'ghost' plays, and it is here that Genette's analysis, particularly in relation to the temporal order, will be useful.

Although *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* was written in 1979, it was not produced until 1981 and not published until 1995.²³⁸ Williams describes it as 'one of the most personal plays I've ever written' and publication was delayed until after the death of his literary executor, Maria St. Just. St. Just believed that the play's overt homosexuality would damage Williams' public image. The play reprises the themes and narrative of *The Parade* (1962) which Williams originally wrote in 1940, immediately after the events depicted in the play. That draft resurfaced in 1962 when Williams rewrote it, but it was not produced until 2007 (at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival) and eventually published in *The Travelling Companion and Other Plays*, in 2008.

Both plays are set in Provincetown and depict Williams' relationship with Kip Kiernan – a dancer he met there in 1940 – and Williams' artistic frustrations as a young writer. The narratives are strikingly similar, but the structure, particularly as it portrays time, is dramatically different. *The Parade* has a linear, singulative, realistic narrative, describing the events of a single day in August 1940 and the characters' dialogue moves between analeptic

²³⁸ Eve Adamson's 1981 production is the only one listed in Drewey Wayne Gunn's bibliography, (1991) and is the only production during Williams' lifetime. Since publication of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* there have been productions in Painesville, Ohio (1997), New York (2001), London (2003), Philadelphia (2008), and Rochester, NY (2011).

conversations of previous events and proleptic talk of future ambitions. The dispatching narrative is realistic, conforming to Aristotelian notions of unity and is anchored in a single time frame. *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* is quite different, having two time frames: the first a month later than in *The Parade*, in September 1940; the second in September 1980. Moreover the narrative is not singulative but repeating since events are 're-enacted'.²³⁹ But this is no memory play, where the characters 'remember' in flashback as in *Glass Menagerie*. Nor is it a simple ghost play where the central character is visited by the dead or future apparitions. In *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* time assumes a malleability, a plasticity that enables time to bend and reshape our perception of events, hence my term 'time-bent'.²⁴⁰

Williams' description of the set indicates the temporal uncertainties that are embedded in the play:

A time and sun bleached shack on dunes rolling upward [...] the front and side walls are transparencies and there is no door, just the frame. Part of the roof is missing. Adjoining this somehow poetic relic of a small beach house is a floor, a platform, all that remains of a probably identical beach house that was demolished more completely by a storm. Shimmering refractions of sunlight from the nearby sea play over this dreamlike setting. The setting itself should suggest the spectral quality of a time and place from deep in the past: remembered specifically from a time forty years later.²⁴¹

²³⁹ This is an example of the limitations of Genette's analysis: the repeating narrative in Genette is a feature of obsessive memory because his notion of time remains linear. Here where Williams' rejects the linearity and darts around time frames, the notion of 'repeating' is potentially misleading.

²⁴⁰ I am not using this term as in Arthur Miller's autobiography, but in the different and specific sense described here.

²⁴¹ Williams, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, p. x.

The transparencies that form the sides of the shack mark the production as non-realistic, but also, as in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, suggest a process of revelation. Time and weather have 'bleached' the shack: time by stripping away parts of the structure, leaving only the frame, which is ambiguously both the central support and the margin; the weather has bleached distracting detail from the structure leaving the essence unencumbered. The adjoining platform is a remnant of a similar beach house, 'demolished more completely by storm'. This differs from the description of the platform in *The Parade* – 'a wooden platform, used to catch the airmail' – and marks Williams' shift to a more symbolic non-realistic drama which hints at the tempestuous nature of the relationship with Kip.²⁴² This setting is 'dreamlike': images 'shimmer' and are refracted by the light that illuminates them. It is also ghostlike, with a 'spectral quality of a time and place deep in the past', but at the same time 'remembered'. Time and perception are intricately linked: dreams, ghosts and memories drift and shift in various time frames both illuminated and changed by sunlight. Light is part of Williams' 'dramatic signature' and he uses it here as elsewhere to indicate ambiguity and to hint at things hidden.

The opening stage directions continue the interplay of light and time and establish a sense of shifting perceptions. The front wall of the set is 'transparent', Kip and Clare (whose name means 'light') are 'apparitionally beautiful' – conveying the dual meanings of light – 'bright' and 'insubstantial' – whilst Kip and Clare's apparitional beauty introduce ideas of the ghostly, with all the associated time shifts which that implies. Also, the stage directions state

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Williams, *The Parade*, p. 167.

that the writer (based on Williams) ‘*will* be called August’ but ‘the younger man *is* Kip’ (p. 1, my italics), immediately placing these two characters in different time frames.²⁴³ Moreover the duality of the time frames is mirrored in the duality of light images exemplified in the title and August’s cataract:

Kip: I noticed his left eye’s a little cloudy but the other one’s clear. There was something nice in the clear one. (p. 5)

Linda Dorff relates the symbolism of the cloudy/clear duality to the complex characterisation of August and to the overlapping time frames that she characterises as ‘double exposure’.²⁴⁴ Williams linked the cloudy/clear dichotomy to the ‘obsessively homosexual, compulsively interested in sexuality’ and the contrasting ‘gentle and understanding and contemplative’ behaviours that he identified in himself.²⁴⁵ Dorff’s linking of ‘double exposure’ to photographic images is useful and she draws a distinction between the treatment of time in this play and that of the memory play:

The Glass Menagerie naturalizes the relationship between the characters and their surroundings by displacing narrative into the past, which is signified by allowing the audience to see through a transparent scrim as if they were looking into the past through a romantic window [...] In contrast to this modernist scenic coding of the past, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* denaturalizes characters by foregrounding the difference between past and

²⁴³ The different tenses here also indicate that ‘August’ is a fictional name but that ‘Kip’ is that character’s real name.

²⁴⁴ Dorff, ‘“All very [not!] Pirandello”: Radical Theatrics in the Evolution of *Vieux Carré*’.

²⁴⁵ Radar, ‘The Art of Theatre V: Tennessee Williams’, *The Paris Review*, 81 (Fall 1981) reprinted in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, p. 346.

present through the metatheatrical context of the 'double exposure' [...] In other words, *Menagerie* is a modernist representation of the past through the natural metaphor of memory, whereas *Something Cloudy* is a postmodern presentation that creates a simultaneous past and present through the metaphor of photographic superimposition. (p. 15)

The photographic analogy is enigmatically referred to by August:

Clare: I think.

August: Do you? Are you sure that you're thinking?

Clare: [*with sudden urgency*]: *Not yet!*

August [*smiling slowly*]: The double exposure. You're right. I concede the point. (p. 7)

This exchange is perplexing and obscure when it occurs, hinting at a mutual understanding between August and Clare and at their knowledge of something hidden. Moments later August refers to Clare's 'rather precocious – knowledge of such things', suggesting a privileged status for Clare's utterances (p. 8). As their conversation continues August's remarks and status become temporally ambiguous.

August: I'll make many mistakes, but they'll be my own mistakes, I'll never concede to manipulation by –

Clare: Don't – don't ever. In the end you'll take pride in having never. (p. 8)

August proleptically anticipates his future in the style and voice of a narrator – 'I'll make many mistakes' – but any suggestion of narrator status is undercut by the temporally ambiguous 'I'll never concede to manipulation' which is an assertion of intent and an anticipation of future events. Clare's remarks anchor August's comments in the time frame of their conversation, denying August a role as narrator. They seem at this point to share a prescience about their

future lives, but to be conversing in the present. Later, however, the time shift and double exposure become explicit:

Clare: You have a strange voice.
 August: Are you sure you hear it?
 [We hear the record, Ravel's Pavane pour une infante défunte.]
 Clare: It isn't as clear as it was, that summer.
 August: Forty years ago, Clare.
 Clare: I feel – light-headed. Is it *déjà-vu*?
 August: You said not yet.
 Kip: [from the platform]: Not yet! [He clasps his head.] (p. 11)

Clare introduces a note of uncertainty around August by commenting on the strangeness of his voice, whilst August reciprocates by destabilising her confidence, and ours too, in her perceptions. Both alert us to something untoward and unsettling, but as yet unknown. The music contributes to the unsettled atmosphere, for it translates as '*Pavane for a Dead Princess*', introducing notions of ghostliness and time shifting. The musical structure of the pavane – a slow dance in double time (2/2 metre) and danced in pairs – underlines this doubling. However it is Clare's reference to 'that summer' that marks a time shift and relates the destabilising uncertainty and doubling to time. This is not a simple analepsis, in which Clare is merely recalling a memory, nor is it an inverse movement where memory and anticipation are mixed. It is more like a paralipsis, where the main narrative action is frozen while a sub-narrative is briefly explored. But even this is not quite what is happening: when August and Clare speak of 'that summer' the dispatching narrative has changed from the 1940s to the 1980s, and they would appear to have shifted time frames to the later period. But Kip, who only inhabits the early 1940s period, responds to Clare and August's conversation

with his comment '*Not yet*', thus connecting the two time frames, making clear that neither is frozen or suspended but that both are simultaneously active and *interactive*: these are two dispatching narratives, of equal importance, co-existing yet occupying different time frames and inhabited by the same characters. Clare's reference to '*déjà-vu*' and August's '*You said not yet*' refer back to their previous conversation enabling us to see August's earlier remark about '*the double exposure*' as a reference to the overlapping time frames.

Dorff's photographic analogy, with its suggestion of overlaid images, remains useful, yet it is implicitly static and suggestive of Genette's paralipsis, with its frozen narrative suspended while the focus moves to another. However, the co-existing time frames of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* are dynamic, and in Kip's comment in particular we have an interaction between time frames that goes beyond mere overlay. The movement between the time frames is often subtle, and the narrative's status is constantly shifting. Clare, who symbolises in part clarity and prescience, is the character who resists acknowledging the shifting time frames, begging August not to '*name the summer*' (p. 12) and denying her memory of the earlier period:

Dead princesses don't remember their pavaues on your silver victrola. Is it as bad to die when you're young as Kip and I were, and even you were that summer? Tell me. You've lived long enough to discover an answer. (p. 12)

Clare's status here is clearly that of a ghost as she refers both to her own death and August's survival. But lest we settle on thinking of this as a simple ghost play, August momentarily anchors it as memory:

Clare: Perhaps you, perhaps he –

August: Perhaps I've transfigured him in my memory? [*He looks out the window at Kip.*] No. I've memorized him exactly as he was. (p. 12)

The act of looking out of the window at Kip produces a complex ambivalence in the relationship between the two time frames. On the one hand we have the summer of 1980 where August and the ghost of Clare converse, whilst Kip dances in the summer of 1940 to the pavane being played in both 1980 and 1940. But when August looks at him he is both remembering, as in Dorff's phrase 'looking into the past through a romantic window', but also making contact with the summer of 1940. August's statement 'I've memorized him exactly as he was' straddles the two periods, as he validates his (1980) memory by checking it against the (1940) reality of Kip 'exactly as he was'. The relationship between time and events is here shown at its most unstable, underlined by Clare's response:

Clare: This is the summer of 1940, August. Let's drop the metaphysics, play it straight, play it not like the summer long past but as it was then.

August: Then! Yes! But I'm no prompter, you have to remember your lines. (p. 13)

This moment introduces yet another time frame and one which is unnamed, outside of the play and the acknowledged periods of 1940 and 1980. This exchange transcends the narrative and is a metatheatrical comment on the process of narrating. It is very similar to the exchanges between Felice and Clare in *The Two-Character Play*, but the function here is somewhat different. Metatheatricality is destabilising because it erodes the definitions between reality and performance, but in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, the destabilising

centres on time, rather than performance, for the comment places it outside of time.²⁴⁶ Clare attempts to introduce an element of stability, 'to play it straight', asserting that 'This is the summer of 1940'. But this plea for temporal stability is immediately undermined by her statement 'play it not like summer long past but as it was then', introducing two concepts of the past that are in conflict. Clare rejects 'summer long past', presumably because it is mediated by memory, preferring to 'play it like it was', which suggests something more direct. But both are 'played' and inevitably mediated by performance.

Kip's dancing practice ends as he stumbles, his balance having been affected by his brain tumour. As he takes a swim 'to clear his head', the play makes yet another anachronistic turn when the stage directions describe the arrival of Frank Merlo and the location changes to the hospital in which Merlo died:

A nurse wheels on the memory of Frank Merlo onto the upstage dune and leaves him there in a wheelchair. He is gasping. (p. 17)²⁴⁷

This is the only change in location in the play and it operates as a paralipsis. Merlo was Williams' long time partner, whom he met in Provincetown in 1947 and who died in September 1963. The conversation between Frank and August is a mixture of present dialogue set just before Merlo's death in 1963 and the narrator's analeptic commentary set in 1980:

²⁴⁶ This also references Clare's shifting ghost status.

²⁴⁷ It is intriguing to speculate on how a director or audience could distinguish between the ghost and memory status of Merlo and the other characters, for there seems to me to be little difference in the manner in which August straddles time in dealing with them, and in the way time shifts and changes around them all.

Frank: [...] How long's it been since they wheeled me in here without any oxygen?

August: I'll call. [*He turns slightly in shock*] Nurse! Mr. Merlo's oxygen! – He sat there gasping like a hooked fish for half an hour before they found time to bring his oxygen to the room in which they'd put him to die, inhuman sons of–

Frank: Thanks. – Nurse. (p. 17)

This is yet another time frame (1963) and location, but one that is discrete and unrelated to the others and that contains echoes of Williams' time in Barnes Hospital (1968) in the disembodied voice of the doctor offering August 'something to calm you down this evening'.²⁴⁸ Structurally this is very different from the interaction of the 1940/80 time frames, because the Merlo memory/encounter doesn't link to the other two time frames, which are suspended momentarily and rejoined at the point that Kip takes his swim, making it, in Genette's terms, a paralipsis. August alone links the Merlo episode to the 1940/1980 time frames, and that only through a momentary confusion. I have indicated the time frames in square brackets:

August: Is Frank all right now? [1963]

Clare: – Frank –? [1940/80]

August: Francesco Filippo Merlo! That was later. Much later. [1980]– Sorry, I meant to ask about Kip. ... [1940]

Clare: No, Kip's not quite all right. – Gone for a swim to clear his head. [1940] (p. 18)

The play closes with Kip and Clare bidding farewell to August and the summer, but they remain on stage and are still there during August's final speech:

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Following Merlo's death in September 1963, Williams experienced a prolonged period of depression and was eventually hospitalized in September 1968.

See how light the sky is? Light as clear water with just a drop or two of ink in it. Note to end on? How did it go, that bit of Rilke? 'The inscrutable Spinx [sic]? Poising forever – the human equation – against the age and magnitude of a universe of – stars ...' The lovely ones, youthfully departed long ago. But look (*He points*) very clearly here, and while this memory lives, the lovely ones remain here, undisfigured, uncorrupted by the years that have removed me from their summer. (p. 85)

August is asserting the primacy of memory here and this makes it easy at this point to see the whole play as a memory play akin to *The Glass Menagerie*. However to do so would be to deny the complex temporal movements I have been describing. If this is a memory, it is a memory quite unlike that of Tom Wingfield's. This is no romantic view through a window onto the past – it is less passive and voyeuristic than that – and the manipulation of time in this play leaves us with a sense that past and present interlock and interact as the distinction between them is breached and blurred.

Clothes for a Summer Hotel was Williams' last play to be produced on Broadway. Like *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, the play was a failure and has received scant attention since.²⁴⁹ Williams revised the play following the unsuccessful production at the Cort Theatre, and these revisions appear in the Dramatists Play Service edition (1981), but Williams made further revisions and these appear in the text of the New Directions edition (1983). It is this last text that I am using unless otherwise stated. My reading of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* is

²⁴⁹ There were three productions in 1980: Kennedy Center, Washington, 29 Jan; Blackstone Theatre, Chicago, 26 February and finally Cort Theatre, New York, 26 March-6 April, all listed in Gunn's Bibliography. I have only discovered two other productions since then – at the Hudson Guild Theatre, NY in February 2010 and a reading of extracts from the play in Provincetown (September 2010).

not a comprehensive one, but instead concentrates on two short passages in order to give a full examination of Williams' manipulation of time in that play.

The play is based on the lives of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and centres on Scott's visit to the Highland Hospital, the Asheville asylum where Zelda died in 1948. The time distortions and movements in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* are more difficult and complex than in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*: the concept of a double exposure works in relation to the earlier play because though time shifts, the location is the same, with the single exception of the Merlo paralipsis, but it is less helpful in the later play. The overall structure of *Summer Hotel* is deceptive: not only do we move in and between different time frames but the locations also change, so that points of reference become increasingly difficult to plot. The produces a destabilisation that is designed to represent and replicate the diffuse uncertainties of a mental asylum by exploiting the plasticity of the dramatic structure:

One reason for taking extraordinary license with time and place is that in an asylum and on its grounds liberties of this kind are quite prevalent: also these liberties allow us to explore in more depth what we believe is truth of character.²⁵⁰

The different locations inhabit a single set, so that different places as well as different times are shown to coexist, though the awareness of this only emerges gradually. The dispatching narrative is based on the asylum – the Highland hospital – and the set is dominated by 'a pair of Gothic-looking black iron gates, rather unrealistically tall' (p. 204). The

²⁵⁰ Williams, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, p. 202. The *Summer Hotel* of the title is probably a reference to the fact that many of these mental hospitals were converted from 'summer hotels'. In her poem *You, Doctor Martin* (1960), Anne Sexton refers to the hospital in which she was treated as 'this summer hotel'.

building behind is in 'sudden perspective' so that the third floor, on which Zelda died, is as prominent as the lower floors. Apart from this there are only three other items on stage: a green bench, a bush of 'flickering red leaves that suggest flames' and a large rocky outcrop (p. 204).

At first the time structure of *Summer Hotel* appears to be similar to that of memory plays, with the dispatching narrative – the 'present' (the 1930s) – giving flashbacks – analepses – to the 1920s. But there are four main time frames in the play, none of which are explicitly stated, but can be dated by reference to location and biographical information. These are, in chronological order: the 1920s in the South of France;²⁵¹ the early 1930s – the Fitzgerald's friendship with Hemingway; 1937-38 – Scott's visits to Zelda at the Highland Hospital; (post) 1948 – after Zelda's death at Highland. The play begins in the late 1930s at Highland hospital and moves to the 1920s and the South of France in Act One Scene Two. The second Act opens in France, following on from the action of the preceding scene. The final scene of the play, Act Two Scene Two, returns to the asylum and a point after Scott's death in 1940. This appears to make the mid 1930s and 1940s frame the earlier action in France. But within this larger structure, odd time shifts occur, often signalled by fleeting references or subtly nuanced stage directions. In order to understand precisely how Tennessee Williams is manipulating the chronology of the play, we need a detailed analysis of what is happening within the scenes, and even within particular bits of dialogue. To do this I am going to concentrate on consecutive scenes from the play: Act One, Scene Two and Act Two, Scene One.

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Zelda's affair with Edouard Jozan is a subset of this period as it took place in 1924.

The opening act of the play is clearly set in Highland Hospital in the late 1930s, but at the beginning of Act One Scene Two the stage directions place the action in an area set for Scott to write in, with Zelda 'looking as she did in about 1926', yet Scott's comment – 'Hemingway's still in good shape and drinks more than me' – places him in the mid 1930s during his friendship with Hemingway (p. 233). Two things are happening here: Williams is destabilising the conventional certainties by defining *place* by its function – 'an area to write in' – rather than location, and *time* by an indeterminate visual reference – 'looking as she did in about 1926' – rather than a clear temporal reference. The two characters are in different time frames, Zelda in the 1920s and Scott in the mid 1930s: the action between Scott and Zelda proceeds across these time frames until Zelda exits into the asylum (late 1930s) (p. 240). She then reappears dressed for the beach (1920s) and Edouard appears dressed as an intern from the asylum (late 1930s). As so often happens in this play, the time frame is suggested by visual hints and oblique references. In order to track these temporal shifts I shall assign periods to places as far as possible: Zelda died at the Highland hospital in 1948, having entered in 1936;²⁵² the beach is in the South of France, where the Fitzgeralds lived from 1924-27; Zelda's affair with Edouard Jozan took place in 1924; the asylum frames Zelda's exit and entrance (1937-48); the main action takes place on the beach (1920s) – to further confuse matters, Edouard appears as an intern (1937+) before he strips down to swim (1924), visually masking and then revealing an earlier time;²⁵³ Edouard and Zelda are on the beach (1924) until

²⁵² Pinning down this time frame is particularly difficult. Scott died in 1940, so his appearance subdivides the period.

²⁵³ I am deliberately avoiding the term 'past' here because Williams' manner of juxtaposing time elements confounds the normal perception of time lines moving from past through present to future.

Edouard exits into the asylum (1937+); Zelda remains in what has now become an ambiguous space – one that represents the beach of moments before and a new undefined space that is outside of time.

If we then give the four time periods in this scene the following values, Scott's workspace (early 1930s) 3, Zelda (1926) 2, the asylum (1937-48) 4, the beach (1924,) 1, we can divide the scene to reflect time shifts. If we similarly divide the action, Section A runs from the beginning of the scene (p. 233) to Zelda's exit (p. 240). Section B covers the period of Zelda's absence from the stage described in the stage directions. Section C covers the brief moment described in two lines of the stage directions between Zelda's entrance and Edouard's entrance. Section D is the even briefer moment before Edouard takes off his intern's jacket. Section E covers the remainder of the stage directions through to Edouard's exit (p. 244). Section F is Edouard's exit and section G covers the final moments of the scene as Zelda is left alone. If we now allocate time values to the various parts of the scene it looks like this:

A3+2, B4, C1, D4, E1, F4, G1

The action's progress disappoints expectations as a return to the starting time, 3 (that of the early 1930s of Scott's writing), does not happen.²⁵⁴ We appear to move back from that time to the earlier 1924 of the beach via the punctuating prolepses that anticipate the asylum, but even that is deceptive. The final time section, G, in which Zelda occupies the stage alone, is ambiguous. While Zelda sits two dancers perform a lovers' pas de deux and Zelda's final

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Zelda's time frame is merely hinted at in her appearance, so our expectation is a return to the time frame established by the setting and Scott.

comment, 'And so the appointment is made! The hawk and the hawk will meet in light near the sun' has the tone and feel of a classical chorus or narrator (p. 244). But her comments are proleptic, placing her outside the action and outside time. The formula above now needs to be amended, and if we take 0 to represent no time, it now looks like this:

A3+2, B4, C1, D4, E1, F4, G0,

If we ignore, for the moment, Zelda's final position as being outside the action, the sequence is still unsatisfactory. Edouard's proleptic exit (F4) anticipates Zelda's incarceration, but it doesn't feel like that; it functions dramatically as what it is, an exit, an end. This in turn further destabilises the ambiguous opening position, (A3 +2, between Scott and Zelda) which no longer feels like a starting point for the action. The cumulative effect of this is that we no longer have an effective temporal benchmark from which to make our analeptic and proleptic excursions. This deconstruction of linear time is exacerbated by Zelda's final ambiguous position that is both in time (G1) and outside time (G0).

Act Two Scene One is even more problematic. The opening stage directions (p. 245) refer to the asylum – 'as if a dark cloud has blown over it, the asylum lawn is dimmed out' – and the hotel in the South of France – 'downstage of the flaming bush' – establish two different locations in two different times. The action in the hotel follows on from the previous scene and its time frame dominates the beginning of the scene, but both locations, and both time frames, co-exist. The ever-present flaming bush that both recalls (because of our growing sense of Zelda's ghost/outside of time status) and anticipates the asylum fire that killed Zelda

reinforces the sense of co-existing time. Zelda's reference to Scott – her 'very late husband' (p. 246) – reveals Edouard and Zelda's awareness of the co-existing timeframes and the ambiguity of the phrase signifies Zelda's occupation of three time frames; in the first, Scott is merely tardy in visiting the asylum (1937-38), in the second, dead (1940s), but both are seen proleptically from the third time of 1924. Scott, who is sitting on 'the bench', is outside the asylum sometime in the late 1930s, being watched from the hotel in 1924. Zelda's reaction to Scott's presence is temporally complex.²⁵⁵

How like him, how terribly like him, patiently seated outside while his wife and heroine of his fiction betrays him upstairs. (p. 246)

Her description of Scott, 'patiently seated', feels like an analepsis, but is instead, the logically impossible 'retrospection' on future actions. This is decidedly not an example of Genette's inverse movements, where one anticipates how a moment will be recalled in the future, or remembers how an event was anticipated. Nor does the difference come from transposing that narrative structure into the dramatic format. Something entirely different is afoot here: Williams' characters simultaneously inhabit and transcend multiple time frames. Zelda is operating in both time frames, relating Scott's presence outside the asylum to his reaction to her affair. Zelda's description of her infidelity presents a further temporal dimension: the subordinate clause is in the present tense and, coupled with 'how like him, how terribly like him', gives an iterative dimension to this bit of dialogue. So we are at this point looking back on the future, repeatedly. It is this which gives the statement its outside-of-

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I am ignoring for the moment issues of Scott's ghostliness and death.

time, quasi-choric feel, and destabilises our normal concepts of time. Moments

later, Zelda is again straddling time but with significantly less objectivity. Again I use Genette's method to analyse the time shifts in this speech:

Slight did you say? [A] A slight infidelity, was it? [B] Scott and I always made love in silence. [C] Tonight was the one time that I cried out wildly. [D] But, oh, how quiet you were: strong, enormously, and assured, completely, but not – not impassioned. [E] Of course, your adventures of this kind are many and probably varied [F] – mine, this once ... [G] And I think never again ... [H].
(p. 246)

The speech is riddled with temporal ambiguities: section A would logically be an immediate response to Edouard's description of the affair as 'a slight infidelity', the past tense serving to emphasise anger and disbelief. But we have already left temporal logic far behind, and so are alive to the possibility that this is an analepsis from a future standpoint. Similarly, section B could be a more emphatic expression of anger, but the repetition of the past tense, 'was', also signifies a distancing from the event. Section C is a simple analepsis, followed by an unambiguous return to the present of Edouard's remark in section D. E seems an analepsis from an even more distant future point, followed again by an unambiguous return to the time of Edouard's remark in F. What seems like a simple statement in the present at G is compromised by the reflective ellipsis and we have instead a sense of drifting in time. In the final sentence at H, the iterativeness of 'never' coupled with the reflective 'I think' confuse what would be a simple prolepsis and give the statement a temporal transcendence. At this point *Summer Hotel* could be mistaken for a sophisticated version of a memory play, in which Williams has hidden the narrator's role in Zelda's character. Like a narrator, she alone

possesses the omniscience of memory and the choric, out-of-time moments would be consistent with such a reading. However, later in this scene it is clear that Edouard, too, possesses the ability to straddle time. As he dresses for the Murphy's party, he asks, 'Could I have saved you Zelda?' (p. 249), referring to her eventual death at Highland in a recall of future events. Williams juxtaposes this with an abrupt return to the time of the party: 'We must arrive separately so I'll leave first'. Later still, at the Murphy's party, Edouard and Zelda discuss how he died:

Zelda: [...] I was about to say fire, oh, God, about to say to you fire, that element you crashed in! Didn't you, later on, love?

Edouard: – No, I –

Zelda: I was certain that eventually you and that plane, in which you performed aerial acrobatics over the red-tiled roof of the Villa Marie, would crash in fire.

Edouard: I must disappoint you. Nothing like that happened to me at all.

Zelda: Then what did happen to you? After you left me that summer?

Edouard: Well, gradually as such things occur to most living creatures, Zelda, I – *grew old* ... (p. 251)

This is not Zelda's memory of how Edouard died; for she knows only what she thought would happen. It is Edouard who 'remembers' the reality of how he is to die. Zelda's is a true prolepsis, an anticipation of an event, but Edouard's is, again, the 'recall' of a future event – a type of time shift we see repeatedly in *Summer Hotel*, and one for which Genette has no term. Genette's analysis can take us only so far because despite its ability to accommodate and describe the twists and turns of analepses and prolepses, and their inversions, it is predicated on an immutably linear notion of time, one which is at odds with Williams' notion of the 'ghost play':

This play must be regarded as a ghost play because of the chronological licenses which are taken comparable to those that were taken in *Camino Real*, the purpose being to penetrate into character more deeply and to encompass dreamlike passages of time in a scene [...] The extent to which characters should betray an awareness of their apparitional state will be determined more precisely in the course of production. (p. 204)

Tennessee Williams 'ghost plays' are not what we would generally describe as 'ghostly': they don't deal with the supernatural, with haunting in the conventional sense, or even with ghosts. The characters' status as apparitions is left entirely fluid because it is irrelevant to Williams' intention 'to penetrate into character more deeply'. Although the initial production of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* lists six ghosts in the cast list, these were subsequently deleted by Williams.²⁵⁶ Williams' plays are 'ghost' plays because he disrupts the normal linear chronology by placing his characters outside time. Zelda, Scott and Edouard are not outside looking in: they are all both in and of the time and yet simultaneously outside it. 'Ghostliness' is merely the convention that Williams uses to deny temporal linearity and the fixed notions that flow from the intransigence of that concept.

For this reason I prefer the term, 'time-bent' plays, as Williams' manipulation of time render the plays 'timeless'. The disruption is so profound and the temporal destabilisation so complete that time becomes irrelevant. Time is not denied, for its effects persist, but they are no longer contained or immutable: characters move and shift through and between time frames, interacting across temporal spaces that plasticity has rendered malleable; knowledge

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The first production was at the Cort Theatre, New York in 1980. Williams revised the play following a poor reception of the first performance and the ghosts do not appear in either the Dramatists Play Service text or the New Directions text.

and emotions that were previously contained or hidden come into play. This process – this plasticity of form and content – produces a form of theatre, unlike realistic drama, that can explore ‘the truth of character’.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued against a number of critical readings of Tennessee Williams' work, notably the view of him as a realist or romantic playwright, examining in the process how Eddie Dowling's direction of the initial performance of *The Glass Menagerie* led to a mis-reading of Williams' plays that persisted throughout Williams' lifetime. I have also argued against the view that his was a career of two halves: an early successful period as a dramatist of lyrical realism and a later chaotic period of incoherent and largely incomprehensible plays. Although I have examined plays from the full extent of his body of work, I have rejected the idea of a linear development in his dramaturgy and the attempt to present Williams' work as a chronological progression from the 'realism' of early work such as *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* through to largely unsuccessful experimental forays into different dramatic forms in the later plays. I have instead developed a new interpretive model that identifies and examines the development of plasticity throughout Williams' work. As can be seen in the Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams initially conceived plastic theatre as a medium to challenge the then current approach to drama and one through which he could expose a truth and a reality obscured by conventional drama. It was to be an antidote to the 'Frigidaire realism' of the then current drama that

Williams saw as suffocating and limiting drama's purpose, which was 'to resume vitality as a part of our culture'.²⁵⁷

However Williams' plastic theatre is much more than that. By examining the provenance of the notion of plasticity, I have exposed implicit concepts embedded in plastic theatre, namely anti-realism, contradiction and challenges to the notion of unity. Consequently, a major part of this thesis has been the examination of Williams' anti-realism and the depiction of fractured identity in his plays.

Williams was undoubtedly influenced by theatrical movements beyond what was happening in America – he was particularly influenced by European expressionism and the absurdism of Beckett and Pinter. However, plasticity in Williams' drama is not a variant of these movements, a culmination of influences, or even a genre or tradition: it is a project of perception – a distinct and innovative way of viewing the world – defined by its layering of concepts and the accommodation of contradiction. Plastic theatre is inherently anti-realistic. It destabilises and undermines itself constantly, but it is uniquely defined by a conceptual layering through which Williams explores the notion of hiddenness and duality, particularly in the expression of modern, that is post-emancipation, identity. Plasticity is more than a style of writing or performance, more than a dramatic form or structure: it is a necessary fusion of idea and expression. Notwithstanding Susan Sontag's view 'that style and content are indissoluble, that the strongly individual style of each important writer is an organic aspect of his work', in other words that the author's choice of style is as fundamental to the work as its

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Production Notes, *The Glass Menagerie*, p. 131.

content, the relationship of style and content in plastic drama is of an altogether different order.²⁵⁸ The plasticity of Williams' plays is not a matter of choice, but necessity: Du Bois' and Bull's notions of identity – the divided, co-existent contradictory sense of self that follows emancipation – depend on the duality of Hegelian plasticity in Williams' theatre to achieve dramatic expression.

The interpretive model that I have developed in this thesis establishes a new way of looking at Williams' work that recognises the fundamental importance of plasticity to understanding Williams' drama. Through the philosophical work of Bull and the tradition of Hegelian thinking which extends into the work of Du Bois, I have set out a new and different framework within which to analyse Williams' plays. I have also made use of the narratological theories of Genette in my analysis of *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* in order to examine the complex temporal shifts which are an important component of the anti-realism and plasticity of that play. These paradigms do not simply provide a broad philosophical underpinning, though they also do that: they are the basis of a new interpretation of plastic theatre which establishes a new perspective that for the first time enables us to see Williams' work as a cohesive whole.

In my analysis of more recent criticism, I have set plastic theatre in a number of contexts: cultural, historical, critical and, to some extent, biographical. I have, like Savran, emphasised the significance of the cultural context in both its influence on Williams and his influence on it, but I have also rejected the critical approach that relied on biographical detail

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Sontag, 'On Style', *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, p. 15.

as a means to interpretation and understanding of Williams' work. Apart from subscribing to D.H. Lawrence's principle of 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale', the habit of viewing Williams' work through the prism of his personal history inevitably frustrates the real purpose of criticism, which is to recognise and explain the wider significance of a work.

Finally I have used the interpretive model that I have developed in specific readings of a number of plays. These include Williams' two greatest commercial successes, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as a number of more problematic later plays, including *Camino Real* from 1953 to probably the last play Williams wrote, *The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme. Le Monde* (1982). These plays were chosen in order to demonstrate the scope and range of Williams' plasticity and in support of my argument that Williams' plastic theatre was not a process of chronological and linear development but, rather, a process of continual experimentation and re-examination. In the case of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* these readings attempt to redress the earlier view of them as 'realistic' by exposing the ignored plastic aspects of those plays. In the case of the later plays, my focus is on the plasticity of Williams' most experimental work and establishes a new reading of them that confirms the continuity and cohesiveness of Williams' body of work throughout his career. In so doing it places these plays firmly within Williams' dramaturgy as prescient and innovative pieces of drama. Moreover it enables us to see that Tennessee Williams' plastic theatre constitutes, in Raymond Williams' words, a:

specific literary phenomenon: the dramatization of a process, the making of a fiction in which the constituting elements, of real social life and beliefs, were simultaneously actualized and in an important way differently experienced, the

difference residing in the imaginative act, the imaginative method,
the specific and genuinely unprecedented imaginative organization.²⁵⁹

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