Tennessee Williams's Poetry: Intertext and Metatext

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"are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving. . . .
It is the blight man was born for"

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Spring and Fall"

As Lyle Leverich reports in the first volume of his authorized biography, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, as early as ninth grade Tom Williams began trying his hand at writing verse; by 1934, his work had appeared in both a reputable literary magazine and a national anthology; and by the age of twenty-five he had been published in *Poetry* magazine. In 1944, James Laughlin—who would become Williams's longtime editor at New Directions—chose twenty-seven of Williams's poems (along with works by Eve Merriam, John Frederick Nims, Jean Garrigue, and Alexandra Carrion) for inclusion in the Third Series of *Five Young American Poets*. All but two of these poems would later be reprinted in either *In the Winter of Cities* (1954) or *Androgyne, Mon Amour* (1981), though they would be published there without the useful notations identifying place and date of composition. They also appeared in those volumes accompanied by neither the "Frivolous" nor the "Serious Version" of their author's "Preface to My Poems." Therein, Williams calls his poetry "a sort of spiritual witness. . . of an unattached and nomadic existence of six or eight years duration"; he then goes on to claim that "actual physical survival" and "not competitive philosophies of art nor even political ideas" is the central "problem" facing poets. As he asserts: "The most destructible element in our society, the immature and rootless artists or poets, is the one that is subjected to the worst lambasting" (*Five* 123-24).

Perhaps because he did write verse before he turned to short fiction and before his earliest plays were given amateur productions, Williams often uses poetry—his own and that of others—as an *intertext* in works for the stage throughout his career. Over a dozen of his plays in their printed versions feature appropriate epigraphs from writers as various as Sappho, Dante, Rimbaud, Yeats, and, an especial favorite of his, Hart Crane, whose poems he lauded in the 1944 "Preface" as "my only library and all of it" (126). Several of his plays, particularly *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Night of the Iguana* (1961), *The Mutilated* from *Slapstick Tragedy* (1966), and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), incorporate poetic texts that provide a key to the respective drama. In the first of these, the Southern parson's daughter, Alma Winemiller, recites at her literary club a version of William Blake's "Love's Secret" (1793) that is just slightly altered to accommodate a female speaker; the poem not only foreshadows the course the action will take as she loses Dr. John Buchanan to another, but hints as well in its opening lines ("Never seek to tell thy love,/Love that never can be told" [*Summer* 175]) at the rejection that may be visited upon a somehow forbidden passion. Blake's lines may be seen to resonate as well during Alma's assignation with the traveling salesman at play's end, when she shares with him one of her little nerve-calming pills, which he "places on his tongue" and washes down with water from the angel named "ETERNITY" fountain, so that it becomes a kind of secular communion. In the Williams moral encomium, physical sexuality to assuage loneliness becomes, in fact, one of life's little graces proffered to the fragile and desperate souls whom society would uproot and destroy.

Through his poetic imagery, Williams, in effect, oftentimes sacramentalizes the physical. In *Winter of Cities*, for instance, "the tongue of the beloved" is denominated as "holy bread" (96); or, using religious symbology to describe more specifically homosexual love—as in the baroque canonization of "their patron saint" entitled "San Sebastiano de Sodoma"—the martyr's arrow-pierced body is the chalice or "cup that was profaned/[now giving] up its sweet, intemperate wine" (112). As John Ower comments in his powerful reading of "Erotic Mythology in the Poetry," Williams tends to "invest human sexuality with a broader philosophical and spiritual significance" (611). Ower links this tendency with "the Neoplatonizing bent of English Romantic poetry" to which he sees Williams indebted for his belief in

the "deification of man," as well as for his notion of the "defilement" of his "supernal essence" or spirit—as manifested in phallic potency—by "corporeal existence" or matter—as embodied in the enveloping feminine (612-13).

More often than not, however, this pattern of a fall from a more perfect state, when it occurs in Williams's own poetic texts within the plays, is presented in more specifically biblical (that is, prelapsarian/postlapsarian) rather than Neoplatonic terms: humankind must continually negotiate a way to live humanely in the ruined Eden of the present. As Joan Gould observed recently in another context, "our intuitive sense of human development [is]: Garden of Eden, Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained" (23). As Williams, somewhat in the mood of Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations," writes in "Heavenly Grass" from *Blue Mountain Ballads:* "Then my feet come down to walk on earth,/ . . . . But they still got an itch for the heavenly grass" (*Winter* 101). This recurrent pattern in his poetry of innocence, guilt, and grace might be seen as forming a *metatext* for understanding Williams's wider body of work—though the third phase, that of redemption, may very well be achieved in iconoclastic or even seemingly transgressive ways.

In *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, the playwright's last work to receive its New York theatrical premiere before his death, the autobiographical character, here named August, recites a fragmentary stanza from a poem he had composed at sixteen years of age:

> God give me death before thirty,
> Before my clean heart has grown dirty,
> Soiled with the dust of much living,
> More wanting and taking than giving. . . .(23)

Although now dismissed by August himself as "absolute corn" (and here, perhaps, Williams the playwright might be seen as engaging in some belated metacritical judgment of his own juvenilia), these lines do pivot on a contrast that recurs over and again in the poetry: between original innocence and a soul inevitably sullied by the very nature of worldly existence—"clean heart . . . grown dirty"; and between a spontaneous tenderness, generosity, and compassion for others and a using and abusing of those others for selfish ends, "more wanting and taking." The imagery in a whole sheaf of Williams's poems draws just such a contrast between humankind's unfallen and fallen

state. Throughout *Androgyne, Mon Amour*, for example, the contrast frequently finds expression as an almost Manichean duality pitting the forces of light—or spirit—against the forces of dark—or matter—as found in "gold-hammered doors" vs. "enormous night/skies" (9); "glittering spheres" or a diadem of stars" vs. "shattering glass" or "a handful of debris" (14, 66); "the phenomena of light." with "God [as] the unisexual propagator . . . of the rooted,/green-leaved kingdom," vs. "the nonphenomena of a mineral existence [in] terra incognita" or "inferior matter" or "the mineral kingdom" of death (24, 32, 64, 65); or, as most simply put, "angels" vs. "monsters" (64).

Certainly the fullest and most overt poetic statement of this motif appears in Nonno's archetypal poem completed in the last few moments of his life and near the close of *The Night of the Iguana*, which virtually reproduces—in tightened syntax and with only one change of any significance—a poem entitled "How Still the Lemon in the Branch" (rptd. in Leverich, 379-80) that Williams himself actually wrote in 1940 in Mexico, the time and place the action of *Iguana* occurs. Just as Shannon asserts that "we—live on two levels" (317), so must the aged Nonno's lines about the cyclical nature of existence be read and understood on two levels. On the literal one, the golden orange (altered from the lemons Williams observed in real life in order to heighten the color value) reaches its height of perfection ("zenith") only to plummet to the ground in dark of night, mix with the earth, and then decay—sensing, however, not the least tremor of regret over nature's elemental and immutable processes. On the allegorical level, humankind, conscious of change and loss, finds it deeply fearful and unsettling to contemplate leaving the pristine world of green and gold only to commence "A second history," "An intercourse" with "earth's obscene, corrupting love," "A bargaining with mist and mold" that occasions disillusionment and even self-loathing (371). Yet only by living through that "second history" of paradise lost, understanding the need to endure despite humankind's fallen state, and summoning the "Courage" to not despair despite guilt over the personal failure that is an inevitable part of being human, do Williams's characters confront and conquer a spiritual malaise and exist beyond hope. The Garden of Eden has given way to Gethsemene, with its cup that will not pass away. Together with Hannah's crucial utterance about how every person must respond to the Other nonjudgmentally, since "Nothing human disgusts [her], unless it's unkind, violent" (363-4), Nonno's poem about how each person must accept the

imperfect Self would seem to contain and express virtually the entirety of Williams's ethical vision. The "Courage" that Nonno beseeches might "dwell" in his "frightened heart" holds an artistic resonance as well: the creative effort of completing his final poem that is greeted with the triumphant assertion, "It is finished," required, like the *consummatum est* of the Cross, a sacrifice to bring forth the saving word, which Hannah hears and names "good."

Although Leverich unearths and prints the ur-text of this climactic segment from *Iguana*, one of the best known of Williams's poems from *In the Winter of Cities*, "Lament for the Moths" (notated "October, 1942—Jacksonville" [*Five* 133]) seems also in form, content, and tone a definite precursor and companion piece to Nonno's lines as well. In "Lament," however, the decline and fall, rather than attributable to—or, allegorically, associated with—nature's cyclical process, is actively caused by some external, if "invisible evil." "The velvety moths"—"flakes of bronze. . .as fragile as ashes" that serve as guardian spirits protecting the narrator's "troubled heart. . . . in a world by mammoth figures haunted!"—are set upon by "a plague. . . . a pestilent mist" (*Winter* 31). The closing quatrain, like Nonno's a secular prayer imploring help, invokes in its opening line a gendered deity, perhaps one from the classical pantheon, or maybe even one intended to call to mind the Virgin Mary, pleading: "Give them, Oh mother of moths and mother of men,/strength. . . ." (Today, one could almost imagine this Williams poem taking on renewed life as a kind of anthem in the crusade against AIDS.)

In Nonno's poem in *Iguana*, fear springs from a recognition of decay and death as an inescapable part of life's process; for the persona in "Lament for the Moths," it arises from an awareness of some impersonal force of evil at work against all the delicate and fragile beings that exist in the world. For the narrator/artist figure of Williams's poem "Wolf Hour," however, the fear stems from something much more personal and internalized. During Wolf's Hour, that "three A. M." black time of night "not well-spent alone" when awareness of the sounds of garbage being collected outside accompanies the "delayed or premature contractions of a damaged heart-valve," the speaker finds his only "bit of comfort" in his "hands' curved remembrance" of "the unclothed flesh of the youth who refused to stay longer" (*Androgyne* 84). This artist figure, his craft diminished by time, is still possessed, though, by a demon that assumes the imagistic form of a spider within his head and heart, given the "all but impossible task/to somehow weave together a pair of enor-

mous and thoroughly/incompatible/abstractions/called time and peace" (83). Yet the narrator becomes resigned to continuing "Till confronted/with the last, unchangeable red STOP sign" (85), thus relating "Wolf's Hour" to all those plays, beginning as early as *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), where the artist must somehow learn to live with—and beyond—creative powers diminished by the passage of time.

In his essay on "The Playwright as Poet," William E. Taylor observes correctly that, "as one reads Williams's poems, the mind constantly flashes to characters, situations, themes, and symbols in the plays and the fiction" (Tharpe, 624). Taylor implies a unity in Williams's work, that the poet's work is all *one* work, if you will. It is not difficult to uncover numerous examples of such *intratextuality,* throughout Williams's canon. In *Winter of Cities*, for instance, the line "bearing a warm teacup of a brew from the seeds of the poppy in "Those Who Ignore the Appropriate Time of Their Going" (37) links with Hannah's soothing brew in *Iguana*; "the cry of "Brother!" as subversive and so "struck out of our language" from "The Dangerous Painters" will be echoed in *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (1977); and *"The Paper Lantern"* subtitle for section 3 of "Recuerdo," where it is "torn from a string!" (80), alludes to an action involving a vital symbolic stage prop in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). In *Androgyne, Mon Amour*, the question "Can magic still, at times, be the order of our existence?" from "Tangier: The Speechless Summer" (90) again recalls a central motif from *Streetcar*, while "the poppy kimono" and "the forgetfulness tea" in the poem "Evening" (40,42) return readers to Hannah and *Iguana* once more. In that play, Nonno's plea for courage to face the terrors of the night is not the only time he resorts to verse. In another of his intertextual poems, this one more jaunty doggerel than lyrical profundity, Williams has Nonno validate, even celebrate, the notion of *carpe diem,* embracing sensuality and sexuality as between Maxine and Fred or Maxine and Shannon (or, from an earlier dramatic text, between Alma and her salesman), so long as it is mutually respectful and not predatory. The verse urges its listeners to "Dance to the candle while lasteth the wick, . . . Gaze not before and glance not behind, ... But laugh with no reason except the red wine" (310-11).

The image of the candle is, of course, one that Williams employs with some frequency in both his poetry and his drama. A profusion of candles—and significantly of roses, too—appears in the incantatory verse, "A Wreath

for Alexandra Molostvova," an elegy written to console Maria Britneva on the death of her sister (*Winter* 42-3). The candle oftentimes has phallic connotations, as it does in Nonno's limerick-like ditty, with its burning down suggesting loss of potency/fertility. Considered intratextually, these associations might lead to and support a richer, if perhaps uncharacteristically somber, reading of the close of *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), a play that ends with Laura's final extinguishing of her candles in response to the plea, better still command, of her brother Tom. In order to escape the ghostly figurative touch of her hand that haunts him at every turn, he has sought—in what, along with the nightly furtive meetings at movie houses, is the most overt hint of his otherwise closeted homosexuality—other escapes, "companions" in "strange cit[ies]," "anything that can blow [her] candles out" (237) and so release him from guilt over having deserted mother and sister.

When the Laura-in-Tom's-mind—a projection of a solipsistic imagination that tries desperately not to speak its real guilt—accedes to his plea, it appears that his act of remembering has been therapeutic and that she has forgiven him. But if, as a result, his world can now open out, hers in effect will necessarily become ever more constricted emotionally, psychologically, even sexually, since the extinguished candle, like the unicorn's broken horn, is phallic. Perhaps Williams here had in mind an earlier theatrical command for darkness to overtake light, that of Othello as he goes to his bride Desdemona's bedchamber, putting out first the torch that he carries and then the light of her radiant being. The extinguishing of Laura's candles means that she is destined to remain, like Desdemona, forever virginal—the possession of her brother, if not in body as he unconsciously desires, then still continually available to him as inspiration and object of his art. Incestuous desire ordinarily, however, remains, as sublimated in Williams's plays (notable exceptions being *The Purification* [1941] and *Out Cry* [1971]) as homosexual desire would for a long time remain closeted, except in the poetry.

The subject of closeting, of silencing what others would find transgressive or deviant, is itself treated with tender circumspection in "Photograph and Pearls" from *Winter of Cities*. The poem's narrator pays a condolence call on the mother of a former lover who was killed in the War, after having mailed her a "last" letter from an island where Gauguin "died painting/the formalized, purified images of the lust that diseased him" (42). He wonders whether the letter from this son might not contain some "craftily concealed"

hint of "something that mothers/aren't told" that would "disturb" this "elegant" woman's "dominion of pearls," as the narrator himself apparently did when he perhaps foolishly violated "decorum. . .with such unmannerly hunger" (42-3) rather than maintain silence within his own family about his homosexuality. But he restrains himself and reveals nothing, and "with a smile of exhaustion" rises to leave. The light outside reminds him of the "narrow blond head" fixed in the photograph on the mother's mantel that he first knew in the "glass-rooms of pool and gymnasium" (42-3).

The lovely lyric "Poem for Paul," which exists in a holograph copy signed "Tenn" and dated "August 1941" in the manuscript collection of Butler Library at Columbia University and has now finally reached print in Leverich's biography (with an identification of the recipient as Paul Bigelow) (419), more openly addresses homosexuality. In it, Williams catalogues some of society's marginalized outsiders who will later people his plays, rather wishfully beseeching that "pity" and "mercy" and care and comfort might be vouchsafed to them, at least temporarily, "before. . . /the earth destroys her crooked child." The poem's persona speaks for all "the strange, the crazed, the queer," "the wild," "the lonely and misfit," "the brilliant and deformed," mentioning specifically those "places known as gay,/[the] secret clubs and private bars."

When Williams adapts and expands the poem twenty-five years later in *The Mutilated*—one of the pair of one-actors comprising *Slapstick Tragedy*—it becomes the song sung by the Carollers to punctuate the action. The original list of suffering classes is now broadened to include "the agonized," "the lost," "the wounded and the fugitive," "the solitary ones," those with an "outraged heart," "the dreamers," "the wayward and deformed," and, finally, all "the ones with measured time/Before the tolling of the bell" (81, 102, 111, 119,122). The song makes explicit that surcease from misery will be "A miracle, A miracle!" taking the form of some "act of grace," "the finding of a love unknown," In the play, Trinket, who has lost a breast to cancer and so, fearful of the male gaze, has become hardened through closing herself off to any possibility of physical love, and her one-time friend Celeste, a down-and-outer who craves male attention and so flaunts her aging sexuality, finally repair their rift and respond to each other with mutual concern in a moment of almost magical realism; in a Christmas passage imagistically replete with roses and candles, they feel the presence of Our Lady and kiss her robe, and Trinket's pain leaves her. Delma Presley has contended that Williams's pro-

tagonists who choose to demonstrate tender mercies toward others, rather than admit to and perhaps rail against an existential hopelessness, somehow diminish themselves in the process and are rendered inauthentic and sentimental (575, 580). It could just as reasonably be advanced, however, that such a viewpoint denies the dramatist the right to entertain and express a vision that, while fully cognizant of death, still insists on running counter to some fashionably absurdist one. In the last two renditions of the Carollers's song, Jack in Black joins along in the singing. A figure of Fortune spinning the wheel or throwing the dice, he is Death come for Everyman and Everywoman in the guise of a cowboy. So the miraculous blessing can only be temporary, providing but a momentary reprieve, for it is an illusion "That we're not made of mortal dust" (129). Death might smile upon us, allowing us to "forget" him and go on with our living, yet only for awhile.

In what, then, does the state or condition of humankind's fallenness consist for Williams? Such poems as "How Still the Lemon in the Branch" and "Poem for Paul"—which might be termed metatextual for Williams in that they encapsulate his ethics and aesthetics—would suggest at least three categories: first, there are those who, through no fault of their own, are stigmatized by society, declared Other because of their social, psychological, or sexual difference; second, there are those (like Blanche in *Streetcar* or Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* [1955]) who, because they have failed another, perhaps as much from thoughtlessness and fear as out of deliberate cruelty, have lost a belief in their own human dignity and self-worth; and, third, there are those—really all humankind, but most especially the aging artists aware of diminishing springs of creativity—who experience intimations of mortality and must (re)discover some strength and incentive for enduring. How, then, might redemption or paradise regained, but here on earth, come to these temporarily lost and abandoned souls? For the first group, the maginalized, it comes through unconditional acceptance and being the recipient of some act of kindness and compassion, perhaps even an act unsanctioned by traditional mores: in, for example, the relationship, however fleeting, between Alma and her salesman, or in Hannah's altruistic response to the underwear fetishist's request. For the second, those who are unforgiving of themselves, it springs from an unexpected reawakening of some affective gesture of openness to another that they thought was dried up from disuse, but that allows them to rediscover some belief in their own goodness, as happens between the Prin-

cess and Chance in *Sweet Bird*, or with Shannon and Nonno in *Iguana*. And for the third, it arises through re(commitment) to the creative act itself, in the full awareness of past failures but in the hope, like Nonno, of the final resurrection of a creative power that will speak to humankind's need to live and act humanely after the fall. No longer "incompatible abstractions" as they were in the poem "Wolf Hour," for a modernist visionary like Williams *"peace"* can now come in the fullness of *"time"*—not just for the artist but for all society's "most destructible" Others as well.

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