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A Playwright with a Social Conscience

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In 1966, Tennessee Williams was asked by an interviewer if he would ever write “directly” about current political events, including the struggle of African Americans for civil rights and the Vietnam War. “I am not a direct writer,” Williams replied, “I am always an oblique writer, if I can be; I want to be allusive; I don’t want to be one of those people who hit the nail on the head all the time” (qtd. in *Conversations* 129). This did not mean, however, that the important political and social events of his time had no interest for him. Nine years later, in the wake of Watergate, Nixon’s resignation, and—still—Vietnam, Williams said to another interviewer, “All my plays have a social conscience” (qtd. in *Conversations* 292).

¶2

Both statements are true. His earliest plays were born out of the political and social temper—and the political and social drama—of their time. Like Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw (whose plays for the politically committed Group Theatre the young playwright knew), Williams in the mid-1930s found that he was best able to express his personal hopes and anxieties through the experiences of people he read about in newspapers: the coal miners of Alabama (*Candles to the Sun*), the homeless and dispossessed of St. Louis (*The Fugitive Kind*), and the inmates of a Pennsylvania penitentiary (*Not About Nightingales*). In later plays, politics and social struggle receded to the background. Or did they?

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As Tom Wingfield says at the beginning of *The Glass Menagerie*,

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. (145)

Beyond a further poetic reference to the “adventure and change” that awaited Tom’s generation “in the folds of Chamberlain’s umbrella,” there is little other mention of the larger world in *The Glass Menagerie* (179). Yet all the characters in the play, perhaps excepting Laura, are influenced by the same desperation that affected so many of those who lived through these difficult years. The Depression is, in fact, the most important given circumstance of the play: the Wingfields live in an apartment too small for them because they cannot afford a larger one; Tom slaves in a shoe warehouse for a few dollars a week so that they can manage even that; Amanda makes plans and provisions to safeguard her children from the perils of a dangerous time. Is the outside world really in the background if it is in the front of everyone’s daily thoughts?

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The same is true of much of Williams’s later work. *Camino Real* is one of Williams’s most political plays, both in the circumstances of its creation and in its content, but the content does not consist of uncontradicted slogans or simple actions that climax in a clenched fist or a slaughter of the innocents. It is allusive and elusive.

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As for *Camino*'s creation: In 1949, Elia Kazan began using scenes from Williams's one-act version of the play, called *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, as an exercise at the Actors Studio. Inspired by the results, Williams decided to expand the material into a full-length play. By the time he had finished, Cold War fears of Communist infiltration of the government and the culture had set in. In March 1953, when *Camino Real* opened on Broadway, Senator Joseph McCarthy's Senate subcommittee on investigations was in full swing, as was the House Committee on Un-American Activities, known as HUAC, which had been attempting to ferret out Communists in the entertainment world off and on since the mid-1930s. In a panic over losing sponsors and audiences, television and film executives established blacklists of writers, actors, and directors whose testimony before HUAC was not deemed sufficiently patriotic. Many lost their jobs, and a deep sense of fear enveloped the industry, reflecting a general paranoia in the country at large. The Gypsy's act 1 announcement on her loudspeaker sums up the feeling:

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? (*Camino* 25)

^{¶16} In this atmosphere, Williams had to decide whether or not to stick by his choice of Elia Kazan to direct *Camino*. In 1952, Kazan was called to testify before HUAC. At first he would not identify any of his former Group Theatre colleagues who, like him, had been members of the Communist Party in the 1930s. When the news broke, Williams wrote to his friend Maria St. Just that Kazan's refusal to give the Committee names was "very admirable of him, and very brave, and all decent people ought to respect his sense of honor about it. But of course most of them don't!" (St. Just 54). (After Kazan ran a long ad in the *New York Times* defending his ultimate decision to name names, Williams wrote his agent, Audrey Wood, that the act was "a very sad comment on our Times [sic]" (*Letters* 424). Still, he stood by Kazan, and the director was grateful that Williams proved loyal at a time when many of his friends turned their backs.

^{¶17} Williams's loyalty, however, had as much to do with self-interest as with political courage. He was acutely aware that his two previous plays, *Summer and Smoke* and *The Rose Tattoo* (Kazan had agreed to direct the latter and then changed his mind), had lost money, and he wanted the new play to be a financial success. Although he had briefly considered other, younger directors such as Peter Brook and José Quintero, Williams decided that Kazan, who had directed both the Broadway and film versions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was the best insurance against another failure. In a subsequent letter to St. Just, Williams turned apolitical and expressed skepticism that Kazan would return his loyalty: "I take no attitude about [Kazan's testimony] one way or another, as I am not a political person and human venality is something I always expect and forgive. But I am not yet sure that Gadge [Kazan] will not disappoint me, personally, as he did with *Tattoo*" (St. Just 56).

^{¶18} Then there was the matter of Arthur Miller. A few months after *Camino*'s Broadway run ended, Williams wrote a letter of protest to the State Department for denying Miller a passport to travel to Europe to attend the Belgian premier of *The Crucible*. At the last minute, fearful that his own passport request would be denied, Williams did not mail it. He wrote the *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson that his inaction "shows what an atmosphere of intimidation has come to exist among us" (*Letters* 545).

^{¶19} If Williams hesitated over Kazan and Miller, he was quite forthright in his handling of the Baron de Charlus. This character, borrowed from Proust, barely exists in the one-act *Camino* that Kazan worked on at the Actors

Studio. After seven unrevealing lines of dialogue, he disappears. Williams fleshed out this walk-on character for the full-length version. The result was still a minor role, but one that made a significant statement: At a time when gay men and women were also the targets of government-sponsored witch hunts (six weeks after *Camino* opened, President Eisenhower issued an executive order instructing heads of federal departments that “sexual perversion” was not only sufficient but necessary grounds for dismissal from government jobs [Bérubé 269–70]), this character, created for a commercial production on Broadway, was a very gay and outré figure who is murdered by agents of the government for the crime of being different.

¶10

The desire to be circumspect, the decision to be bold, a willingness to overlook the larger political issue to focus on a personal one, are all reflected in the text of the play. The world of *Camino Real* is one of fear and of courageous personal gestures. The central conflict is between two forces. Power is represented by Gutman, his police officers and Street Cleaners (the two sinister, aptly named figures who, at the command of the state, kill and then sweep away the dreamers and troublemakers). Gutman and his associates deny the one remaining source of water on the Camino Real to the poor and dispossessed, and guard against the forbidden word—*Hermano*—being spoken in public, where it might lead to uprising and revolution. On the other side are the “legendary figures,” the Romantic characters borrowed from history and literature who believe in what Williams called the “romantic attitude toward life” (*Letters* 419), including Jacques Casanova, Marguerite Gautier, the Baron De Charlus, Lord Byron, and a contemporary American, Kilroy. If Williams’s purpose was to hit the political nail on the head, we would expect the Romantics to oppose actively Gutman and his forces of repression, to “search for a way to live romantically, with ‘honor’, in our times...” (*Letters* 438) (as Williams described the play’s theme at one point to Kazan), but for the most part, they do not. Gutman tells us that as a group they are “confused and exhausted” (16); at cocktail time they “drift downstairs on the wings of gin and the lift...and exchange notes again on fashionable couturiers and custom tailors, restaurants, vintages of wine, hair-dressers, plastic surgeons, girls and young men susceptible to offers. . . .” (16–17). The Romantics are aware of their impotence but make no attempt to change. Only Kilroy attempts to oppose the power of the state; otherwise, their acts of gallantry are meant solely for one another.

¶11

Williams’s choice to remain allusive in his politics makes *Camino Real* very much a play of, “On the one hand—but on the other—.” Don Quixotes cries, “The time for retreat never comes!” (8), while Marguerite Gautier, the famous courtesan, believes that “Bohemia has no banner. It survives by discretion” (49). Of all the Romantics, only the Baron risks being seen talking to Kilroy, whose arrival on the Camino Real attracts the unwanted attention of the police. Jacques Casanova is outraged at the brutal treatment meted out to the Survivor, but as the man is murdered in the street, the famous libertine sits on the terrace of the Siete Mares hotel, watching. “My heart is too tired to break,” he says, sipping his brandy (18). The Romantics want to live life honorably, but lack the bravery to face down Gutman and engage in what is now called “regime change.”

¶12

Of the many poetic images in Williams’s work, the flock of birds in flight is perhaps the most constant. The flying birds symbolize freedom of all sorts: to love, to think, to dream, to change, to *be*. In *Camino Real*, the birds are not free; they’re captive. Sancho Panza warns Don Quixote, “—there are no birds in the country except wild birds that are tamed and kept in—[...] *Cages!*” (8). Marguerite, anxious to flee both the desperate atmosphere of the Camino and her feelings for Jacques (commitment of any kind comes hard for most of the Romantics), tells him, “Caged birds accept each other but flight is what they long for” (54). The Baron complains about the bourgeois guests at the Siete Mares, “who rap on the wall if canaries sing in your bed-

springs after midnight” (29). One of the play’s high points is the appearance of Lord Byron, who, in Williams’s hands, is a poet who has squandered his gifts on the sensual prizes with which life has rewarded (or trapped) him. He is striking out for unknown territory in the hope of rediscovering “the old pure music” (60) that once gave his life and work meaning. Several porters carry his luggage, which consists, the stage direction tells us, of “mainly caged birds” (61). “*Make voyages!*” he cries. “*Attempt them!*—there’s nothing else . . .” (60). If the poet finds his voice again in new lands, finds the courage to speak the forbidden word, perhaps the birds will burst the bars of their cages as the violets break through the mountain rocks at the play’s end.

¶13 The question is, can honor be found in acts of generosity between one person and another, such as the one Marguerite finally bestows on Jacques, and in the poet’s quest for authenticity? Or is Byron’s grand exit from the repressive and cruel Camino Real just . . . flight?

¶14 Williams wrote in the *New York Times* that *Camino Real* was “nothing more nor less than my conception of the time and world that I live in” (Foreword xxxi). He told the *Saturday Review*, “each time I return [to the United States] I sense a further reduction in human liberties, which I guess is reflected in the revisions of the play. . . . It is, I guess you could say, a prayer for the wild at heart kept in cages. . . . The romantic should have the spirit of anarchy and not let the world drag him down to its level” (qtd. in Devlin 31–32).

¶15 The world that Williams wrote about is one where people fear the cost of speaking out on behalf of others. It is a world where empathy is in short supply and few have the courage to say *Hermano*, while the Gutmans of the world boast, in one way or another, “I have mine and the hell with you.” It is a world, in other words, like the one we live in now. “*Make voyages! Attempt them!*—there’s nothing else . . .” Lord Byron’s final words, as he and his caged birds head out of the Camino Real for “Terra Incognita,” are “THIS WAY!” (61).

¶16 Which way? Private gestures of personal kindness, or public acts of civic bravery? Which is more honorable, more necessary in times of trouble? Is it a matter of either/or? Or of both/and? Williams, preferring to be allusive, does not say. Perhaps there is a clue in the fact that in the context of that time and place, he wrote the play and asked us the question.

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