

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

## Absorbing Images: Tennessee Williams's "Plastic Theatre" and European Painting

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*Note:* Sophie Maruéjols-Koch's essay below makes reference to several works of art that, for copyright reasons, we cannot post in the online edition. A fully illustrated version of the essay can be found in the print edition of the 2012 issue of The Tennessee Williams Annual Review. [Order a copy!](#)

I like to think that literature and painting are very close in America today, that the painter and writer are both seeking to deal with real life and to see below the surface of that life, and that they are both striving for that self-honesty which is at the basis of the best art.  
— Grant Wood, "The Writer and the Painter"

This remark by Grant Wood appeared in the first issue of *American Prefaces* in October 1935. Only three years later the young Thomas Williams, then a student at the University of Iowa, where Wood taught painting, chose *American Gothic* as a title for a short play.<sup>[1]</sup> In this instance, a work of visual art prompted Williams to write the story behind the scene. But the paintings and painters alluded to in his later plays were more than mere sources of inspiration: they took part in the shaping of a medium that appropriates images and translates them into words. In a sense, Williams's constant interest in the pictorial arts (see *Notebooks* 104n189), coupled with the way images weave themselves into the fabric of his texts, places him simultaneously in the position of a writer and a painter. As a creator of pictures,<sup>[2]</sup> Williams not only moves away from a "photographic likeness" he associates with "the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions" (*Glass Menagerie* 395) but also finds the means of creating a new language for the theater. Called "the language of vision" as early as 1942 (*Purification* 44), this new expressive form betrays a desire to break into "the region [that] exists between painting and writing" (Wood 3).

<sup>[1]</sup> Writing for the theater indeed requires the ability to reach that region, and when Williams coined the phrase "plastic theatre" in 1945,<sup>[3]</sup> he undoubtedly had in mind an interartistic form of expression. Tracing the origins of the term, Richard Kramer underlined the combined influence of painting, stagecraft, and cinema in the elaboration of a concept that gradually emerged out of "multifarious experiences, surely enhanced by Williams's private contacts with artists, performers, and writers of many different disciplines and styles [who] . . . impressed on him how integral to theatre all the arts were" (Kramer). This analysis of Williams's plays through the lens of painting aims at highlighting the role played by some painters in the elaboration of his plastic language, a language that seems to have evolved along the same lines as those that led the pictorial arts away from mimetic representation. If the impressionist movement in painting was described as a revolution (Todorov 141) that spread throughout the arts in the twentieth century, it is because impressionist painters—perhaps unconsciously reacting against the mechanical reproduction of photography—planted "the first seed of modernism"<sup>[4]</sup> (Greenberg 44) that was to change the status of images in art. Under their influence, the artistic image was no longer seen as a representation but as a living "presence" (Todorov 141).

In a sense, then, painters initiated the “turn to the non-representative” (Williams, “Notes to the Reader” 26) that manifested itself through the emancipation of the plastic elements of the picture—color, line, texture—from their mimetic function. Comparing himself with a painter who “thinks in . . . terms of balance, rhythm, harmony” (26), Williams found in this departure from a perfect rendering of reality the means of creating “a theatrical experience beyond the mere image of actual life” (Kramer).

### Dark Images: Van Gogh’s Peasants and Williams’s Miners

<sup>¶4</sup> In an earlier version of *Candles to the Sun*—a twenty-three-page manuscript entitled “The Lamp”—the following handwritten note appears:

Impressionistic—a work of art is valuable as afford evaluated as esthetic experience—one does not ask messages or knowledge—just experience satisfying a sense of beauty—. . . Best criterion "total experience" meaning experience and emotion. (1)

The description of Williams’s first full-length play as “impressionistic” relegates its social dimension to the background.<sup>5</sup> The naturalistic strain in *Candles to the Sun* indeed serves an aesthetic purpose that William Jay Smith underlined in his introduction to the 2004 edition of the play:

If taken only literally as a chronicle of social protest, the play can never be fully understood. It must be read as a closely unified and carefully developed metaphor. It is an extended study of light and dark, both inside and outside the characters and the setting. (xvi)

The translation of the social theme into a plastic language brings the playwright closer to a painter who influenced him from the beginning of his career: Vincent van Gogh. While he was working on *Candles*, Williams dramatized an episode of the Dutch artist’s life. The play, entitled “The Holy Family,” was never published, but the manuscript is stored at the Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin. The following passage sheds light on how Williams understood the notion of “reality” in van Gogh’s early work:

VAN GOGH: I’m going to introduce you to my coal-miners and my potatoe-eaters [*sic*]. Paul says they’re hideous, they’re grotesque. They violate all the rules of composition. Ha! Ha! What of it? They’re real potatoe-eaters [*sic*], real coal-miners. In spite of what Paul says. They’re our brothers, our fellow creatures. (“Holy Family” 8)

<sup>¶5</sup> Significantly, van Gogh’s first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters*, is a dark painting that inspired the writing of *Candles* in many ways. Similar artistic goals underscore the evolution of both works. Van Gogh’s search for beauty in the underground world of poor workers is reflected in the numerous sketches and portraits he made in the Nuenen period.<sup>6</sup> His heads of peasants and of peasants’ wives alternate with still lifes and studies of women sewing or peeling potatoes. These sketches anticipate *The Potato Eaters* and testify to a creative process that feeds on former works. For instance, his *Peasant Woman with Headdress*, painted in March 1885 (see Walther and Metzger 88), looks almost exactly like the young woman sitting next to the peasant in *Potato Eaters*. Van Gogh approached his models gradually, sometimes sketching the same person five or six times until he managed to capture the authenticity he was looking for. Regarding himself as a weaver, he wrote:

I’ve held the threads of this fabric in my hands all winter long and searched for the definitive pattern—and although it is now a fabric of rough and coarse appearance, the threads have none the less been chosen with care and

according to certain rules. And it might just turn out to be a genuine peasant painting, I know that it is. (van Gogh 291)

Thus the characters, the objects, and the setting of *The Potato Eaters* were first painted separately and then put together in a work that was completed in van Gogh's workshop, "inside his head," as the painter used to say (Walther and Metzger 163).

¶16 Similarly, Williams found in his early one-act plays the materials he needed to write *Candles*. Moreover, his work as a clerk for the Continental Shoe Company between 1932 and 1935 gave him insight into a world he had not previously been acquainted with. Appropriating that experience, he set about dramatizing the lives of poor workers. The characters he created during this period range from a secretary in love with her boss (*The Pink Bedroom*) to a workingman experiencing the pains of fatherhood (*Moony's Kid Don't Cry*) to an unsuccessful artist living in a garret with a leaking roof (*The Magic Tower*). These one-act plays were the threads with which the playwright wove the more elaborate fabrics of *Candles*, *Fugitive Kind*, and, later, *Stairs to the Roof*.<sup>7</sup> Considered "a terribly sincere story" by a member of the Dramatists Guild,<sup>8</sup> *Candles* conveyed a sense of depth that, according to Grant Wood, was required if the artist was to "see below the surface" and "put a whole philosophy into the picture, not just a set of features and a complexion" (3).

¶17 In *Candles* as well as in *The Potato Eaters*, the pictures of real life conceal congruent philosophies. Summed up by Williams as the "sacrifice of [the] individual to *social* ends" ("Lamp" 1), they are actually expressed in the same plastic terms. First, both artists depict a world threatened by shadows, real and metaphorical. Light is used as a counterpoint to the prevailing darkness, but it is scarce, a valuable commodity that must be used sparingly. In the painting, the light coming from the lamp is reflected by the potatoes on the table. Thus associated with food, light becomes an analogue of life. The same metaphor underlies Williams's play, which opens with a description of a "*typical miner's cabin, sparsely furnished, and dark, lit only by a faint streak of lamplight*" (*Candles* 1). When Bram, the "typical miner," enters the scene, the light that brightens his face seems to bring him back to life:

BRAM [*lighting the lamp*]: There now. Light! [*He looks slowly around him, blinking his eyes, a dull, phlegmatic interest flickering on his face.*] (1-2)

¶18 In addition, the symmetrical composition of the painting is echoed by the structure of the play. Van Gogh gives the passing of time the shape of a circle—the circle formed by the peasant family around the table. The women who face the spectator thus appear to be two versions of the same person, separated in time. Their expectant looks are redirected to the plate of potatoes by the two characters sitting at each end of the table. Thus blocked, gaze and the hope it represents can only go round and round in a circle that symbolizes the monotony of lives reduced to the satisfaction of man's most basic needs. Using the same device, Williams sets his first, middle, and last scenes in Bram's cabin. The play therefore ends almost exactly how it started: with Bram eating "mush." In the last scene Bram's daughter-in-law has replaced his wife in the house without his noticing. In his confused mind individuals merge into an undifferentiated mass of doubles:

BRAM: Where's the milk, Hester?

FERN: Gone, Hester's dead.

BRAM [*dully*]: Gone? Yes, I keep forginnin' about that too. You're Fern. Where's all the others? (110)

¶9 Eventually, the miners and their wives turn out to resemble the food they eat every day, a uniform mixture aptly referred to as “mush” in Williams’s text. The reduction of people to food is a central element of van Gogh’s painting, one that has often been pointed out by critics. The muddy yellow used to paint the peasants’ faces recalls the color of potatoes, suggesting the strong connection that ties humanity to earth. Williams’s and van Gogh’s early works can accordingly be regarded as necessary steps in their artistic development. Their peasants and miners are stripped of the lies and illusions of civilization. As such, they provide both artists with the soil from which more brightly colored pictures will spring.

### Heavenly Visions: Paradise Lost

¶10 The language of color and light in Williams’s subsequent plays reveals a desire to go beyond this coarse and primitive image of humanity, and once again the art of painting plays a significant role in his development. Allusions to religious paintings, for instance, aim at bringing the picture of the ordinary world to heavenly heights. When Williams writes in his production notes for *The Glass Menagerie* that “[t]he light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas” (397), he wishes to endow his female character with a religious dimension that transcends her flesh-and-blood reality. The painter he refers to in the lines following the quoted passage is El Greco, a Renaissance artist whose originality and talent were recognized in the late nineteenth century “when painters like Cezanne rediscovered his work and admired it intensely” (Francis 4). El Greco’s works appealed to postimpressionist artists because they present the spectator with idealized, mystic visions where naturalistic details disappear behind the painter’s highly subjective style. Through his brilliant colors, his innovative use of light, and the elongated figures of his saints, El Greco imbues his biblical characters with an immaterial quality that makes them awe inspiring.

¶11 In his descriptions of Laura, Williams draws upon paintings where the source of light seems to come from the Virgin’s face, illuminating her with a supernatural radiance, such as *Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin* (1596–1600). Laura is accordingly elevated to the rank of a saint when the Gentleman Caller’s smile “lights her inwardly with altar candles” (*Glass Menagerie* 452). It may also be worth noticing that Laura’s “fragile, unearthly prettiness” is brought out by the soft light coming from “the new floor lamp with its shade of rose-colored silk” (444), one of the two colors traditionally associated with the Madonna’s clothes in religious paintings. The other color—blue—surrounds and defines the character of Laura throughout the play. The nickname given to her by Jim links her to the poetic image of blue roses and, in the last scene, her head rests on “a pale blue pillow, her eyes wide and mysteriously watchful” (444). These pictorial details create a larger-than-life image of the character, turning her into an icon that exists only in the narrator’s memory. They both elevate her and confine her to an idealized, nostalgic vision that prevents the narrator from going forward. In fact, he is free to move on only when Laura’s candles are snuffed out at the end of the play and her image disappears.

¶12 The references to religious paintings inevitably convey a sense of loss. They evoke ideals of purity or innocence and thereby elevate the picture of actual life, but at the same time, they are estranged from that life. They therefore take part in an idealizing process that tends to be associated with the act of remembering. *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), for example, began with “the vision of a woman in her late youth” (Devlin, *Conversations* 330). As Williams recalls, she “had been stood up by the man she planned to marry” and she

“was sitting in a chair all alone by the window with the moonlight streaming in on her desolate face” (330). This nostalgic image, reminiscent of the playwright’s sister Rose, was the originating idea for the play:

I believe I was thinking of my sister because she was madly in love with some young man at the International Shoe Company who paid her court. He was extremely handsome, and she was profoundly in love with him. Whenever the phone would ring, she’d nearly faint. She’d think it was he calling for a date, you know? They saw each other every night, and then one time he just didn’t call anymore. That was when Rose first began to go into a mental decline. From that vision *Streetcar* evolved. (330–31)

The character Blanche sprang from this recollection of a time before Rose’s “descent into madness.” Trying to re-create this lost image, Williams resorts to imagery from religious paintings that idealizes the heroine of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

<sup>¶13</sup> In his analysis of the play’s pictorial elements, Henry I. Schvey enumerates the visual details that connect Blanche with the image of the Virgin Mary throughout the play. His insightful reading leads him to conclude that “Williams’s true intention . . . is to suggest not ‘the ultimate point of descent’ but to indicate that Blanche’s tragic destruction on one level, may be seen as heroic transcendence on another” (Schvey 75). The color of Blanche’s dress in the last scene indeed conjures up the image of the Madonna, thus suggesting the idea of purification and redemption. Yet the symbolic meaning of the color points out the gap that separates Blanche from the other characters at this point of the play:

EUNICE: What a pretty blue jacket.

STELLA: It’s lilac colored.

BLANCHE: You’re both mistaken. It’s Della Robbia blue. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures.  
(*Streetcar* 558)

Blanche’s elevation can only be achieved through her complete estrangement from life. If, at the end of the play, her “Barnum and Bailey world” is no longer make-believe, it is because *she* is mistaken into believing that the ideal image of herself is true: redemption comes at the cost of alienation and madness in *Streetcar*. Once again, the celestial vision suggested by the allusion to early Renaissance paintings calcifies the character into an image, confining Blanche to the illusion she herself created.

<sup>¶14</sup> Throughout his career, Williams would use references to religious paintings to call forth images that hover high above the here-and-now reality of the stage. As the playwright stated in 1945, “If you look at one of the great religious paintings of the Quattrocento perhaps you will see more clearly what the artist can do with the unesthetic facts of the case” (“Notes to the Reader” 25). Yet these harmonious visions that look “like the correct spelling of a word that is illegibly jumbled on the tablet of nature” (25) are delusory insofar as they always symbolize an impossible dream. In *Summer and Smoke*, the “pure and intense blue [sky] (like the sky of Italy as it is so faithfully represented in the religious paintings of the Renaissance)” (*Summer and Smoke* 569) is both beautiful and deceitful. It materializes Alma’s spiritual aspirations as well as her doom, for the faultless Alma too turns out to be confined by the image she has built for herself. Her yearning for purity changes her into “a *stone Pietà*” (621), but a worshipped idol cannot be loved as a real woman:

JOHN: The night at the Casino—I wouldn’t have made love to you. Even if you had consented to go upstairs. I couldn’t have made love to you. [*She stares at him as if anticipating some unbearable hurt.*] Yes, yes! Isn’t that

funny? I'm more afraid of your soul than you're afraid of my body. You'd have been as safe as the angel of the fountain—because I wouldn't feel *decent* enough to touch you . . . (624)

¶15 Moreover, the way Williams envisions the stage of *Summer and Smoke* reveals the part played by painters like Paul Gauguin and Giorgio de Chirico in the conjuring up of a harmonious, dreamlike picture cut off from real life. The playwright mentioned his admiration for Gauguin in a journal entry from late May 1939. He was then sharing a cabin with his friend Jim Parrott in California. The postimpressionist painter seems to have inspired not only the paintings Williams made during this period,<sup>9</sup> but also the perspective with which he assessed the world around him:

Life here at Laguna Beach is like a haunting picture of my favorite painter, Gauguin—"Nave Nave Mahana"—The Careless Days—It is like a dream-life—Nothing of importance occurs but it is all so quiet and sun-drenched and serene—with just a little shadow of sadness in the knowledge that it will have to pass away. (*Notebooks* 149)

*Nave Nave Mahana* functions here as a filter through which Williams perceives his environment: life and art merge while objective elements—light and shadow—mingle with the writer's impressions. The "sun-drenched" landscape becomes "quiet" and "serene"; shadow is associated with the passing of time. Thus is the experience of reality transformed into a dreamlike picture.

¶16 More significantly still, Gauguin's plastic language in *Nave Nave Mahana* seems to have inspired the setting of *Summer and Smoke*. First, the painter subverts the rules of perspective so that his figures appear to be floating on the surface of the canvas, frozen in artificial poses. The overall effect is a distancing between the Tahitian models and their representations. The harmonious, highly subjective use of color adds to the sense of estrangement as the correspondence between the characters and their background anchors the figures in an idyllic, remote vision. Thus cut off from reality, Gauguin's exotic characters seem to belong to a paradise in which the viewer as well as the painter can take no part. The feeling of being excluded from the picture is further conveyed by the staging of gaze, which casts the spectator as an outsider. Only two women are looking at each other in the painting, but the exchange, though central, is only half visible; the secret communication remains a matter of conjecture. The viewer's gaze is attracted slightly to the right, toward a woman in the foreground who is staring directly at him. Yet even she appears to be out of reach: her gray, expressionless face and straight, regular features evoke the aesthetic perfection of a lifeless statue.

¶17 Like Alma, who gradually becomes identified with the stone angel that dominates the setting of the play, Gauguin's staring woman is beauty preserved, immortalized by the idealizing process of art, culture, and civilization. Both are attractive and yet unapproachable, inhabitants of a lost paradise. In that sense, the pervasive blue of the sky in the setting imagined by Williams stands for an excess of spirituality that eventually destroys the two protagonists. Alma and John's impossible encounter therefore has a visual equivalent in the inviting and yet forbidding gaze of the staring woman. When Williams underlines the importance of "[c]olor harmonies" in the creation of a picture based on visual contrasts, he reinforces the parallel with a painter who, as Karl Ruhrberg explains in his work on art in the twentieth century, was looking for a "melody of colors" (Ruhrberg 16):

During the day scenes the sky should be a pure and intense blue . . . and costumes should be selected to form dramatic color contrasts to this intense blue which the figures stand against. (Color harmonies and other visual effects are tremendously important.) (*Summer and Smoke* 569)

Such visual effects take on a dramatic dimension as the background appears to absorb the characters and the action evolving against it, signaling the annihilating power of a superior order that denies mortal life. No wonder then that the only challenger of this order, John Buchanan Jr., turns out to be associated in the stage directions with “*a Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society*” (575). The dramatic tension of the play thus takes shape visually as Gauguin’s picture is superimposed on that of religious paintings.

¶18 One last reference to the art of painting allows the playwright to elevate his vision of the setting still further beyond the picture of real life, endowing it with a dreamlike, enigmatic quality:

But in fact there are no really interior scenes, for the walls are omitted or just barely suggested by certain necessary fragments such as might be needed to hang a picture or to contain a door-frame. . . . Chirico has used fragmentary walls and interiors in a very evocative way in his painting called “Conversation among the Ruins.” (569–70)

The de Chirico painting in question shows a woman sitting in a room without walls. Her back is turned to the viewer so that her face is not visible. She wears a dress evocative of ancient Greece, while the man standing in front of her is dressed in contemporary clothes. The position of her body indicates that she is not looking at the man facing her but at a portrait of a Greek hero, apparently preferring the ideal over the real. The anachronisms of dress, combined with the absence of walls, dislocate time as well as space. Once liberated from these limits, the picture breaks away from its mimetic function, all its elements becoming part of a symbolic language that must be deciphered like images in a dream. The meaning that emerges parallels Alma’s overweening desires, her tragic hubris: “To me—well, that is a secret, the principle back of existence—the everlasting struggle and aspiration for more than our human limits have placed in our reach” (612). De Chirico’s surrealist work echoes and reinforces the meaning conveyed by Williams’s allusions to Gauguin and religious paintings. The playwright weaves these images into his text, transforming his medium into “the language of vision” he advocated in 1942. Paintings not only shape the setting of *Summer and Smoke* but also take part in the building up of dramatic tension. In that sense, they have a narrative function that provides the reader with interpretive keys and points out the interpictureoriality of the playwright’s language for the stage.

### Infernal Colors: The Impetus of Desire

¶19 An analysis of interpictureoriality in other Williams plays reveals the presence of a second group of paintings that do not elevate the picture of the real but, instead, bring it down. Thus the movement toward heavenly visions in some works is counterbalanced by what may be described as a descent into hell. Interestingly, the term *descent* was used by Williams in 1975 to refer to van Gogh. At a time when he was looking back over his life and art, the playwright praised van Gogh for his ability to “capture . . . moments of beauty, indescribable as descent into madness” (*Memoirs* 250). It may not be a coincidence, then, if van Gogh’s and Williams’s art evolved along similar lines—from the dark, underground world of poor workers to the lowest depths of the human mind.

¶20 In fact, the painter’s colorful works provided Williams with the means of expressing a conflict that ruled his life as well as his art. Quite significantly, his first professionally produced play was called *Battle of Angels* (1940), a title that encapsulates the playwright’s artistic and personal preoccupations. In “The History of a Play (With Parentheses)” he mentions the need to give those preoccupations a visual shape: “The stage or setting of this drama was the country of my childhood. Onto it I projected the violent symbols of my adolescence” (16).

The idealized past associated with childhood innocence is here opposed to the impetus of sexual desire, which is described as both violent and future-oriented.

¶21 Explaining the symbolism of his pictorial language in *The Night Café*, van Gogh likewise associates vivid colors with obscure impulses announcing the imminence of a violent action:

In my picture of the Night Café, I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can destroy oneself, go mad or commit a crime. In short, I have tried, by contrasting soft pink with blood-red and wine-red, soft Louis XV-green and Veronese green with yellow-greens and harsh blue-greens, all this in an atmosphere of infernal furnace in pale sulphur, to express the powers of darkness in a common tavern. (van Gogh 399)

This painting inspired the setting of the famous “Poker Night” scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Without giving much indication as to where he wished the picture to be hung, the playwright insists on having it on the stage: “*There is a picture of Van Gogh’s of a billiard-parlor at night*” (492). Drawing a parallel between van Gogh’s work and Williams’s description of the scene, Schvey argues that “the resemblance between Williams’ detailed stage directions and van Gogh’s painting would hardly be worth mentioning were it not for the fact that in ‘The Poker Night’ scene, Williams is concerned not only with external but with internal equivalence” (Schvey 72). More than just a small, two-dimensional reflection of the setting, the painting expresses in visual terms the dramatic tension underlying a scene that ends with a series of violent actions.

¶22 Yet the picture’s power of expressing what lurks inside the human mind, together with its presence on the stage throughout the whole play, extends its influence to other scenes. Scene 10 in particular is written in a language deeply inspired by van Gogh’s expressive style. Materializing Blanche’s inner fears, primary colors and nightmarish distortions challenge the idealized visions conveyed by references to religious paintings. These fears appear at a moment when Blanche is left alone on the stage. Only then does “the scene [move] into an expressionistic mode; that is, reality becomes distorted by Blanche’s subjective vision of it” (Londré 59). More interesting still, at this precise moment “the walls become transparent, so that the sordid life on the street (an encounter between a drunkard and a prostitute) can be seen simultaneously” (Londré 60). The scene is designed to evoke van Gogh’s painted image.

¶23 The use of transparency directs the spectator’s eyes to the drunkard and the prostitute on the street, while van Gogh’s lines of perspective lead the gaze toward the couple sitting in the left corner of the cafe. The patrons of the seedy cafe and Williams’s two characters appear to share the same function: as secondary focal points, they attract the gaze into the depths of the picture, materializing an underground world that announces the future awaiting Blanche as well as the destiny of the central figure in van Gogh’s painting. This character, standing alone by the billiard table, has often been identified as a self-portrait of the painter. Like Blanche, he is the centralizing self, around which all the other elements of the picture revolve. His distorted features suggest a face deformed by fear, skull-like and uncanny, a face that anticipates the tormented visage in Edvard Munch’s famous expressionistic painting *The Scream*.<sup>10</sup> Through their central figures, van Gogh and Williams open a passageway into the mind’s dark motives and desires. The secondary characters can thus be regarded as distorted doubles of the self. At the same time, their presence announces the imminence of a dreadful action, of a nightmarish future that will cause the destruction of the self. The transposition of expressionistic modes of representation into a language for the stage allows Williams to create visual counterpoints to the idealized, dreamlike visions of a distant paradise.

¶24

The stage is in this way suspended between heaven and hell, past and future, idyllic images and nightmarish hallucinations. In other words, images in art create the dynamics of opposition that underlie Williams's conception of space. As "a section of space that is more like that of the painter's canvas than ordinarily it is allowed to be" ("Notes to the Reader" 26), the stage becomes a place torn between conflicting images. Using paintings as a painter would resort to colors and lines, Williams turns the stage into a dynamic space built on a principle of opposition—an act that brings to light the influence of German painter Hans Hofmann's theories on the playwright's "plastic theatre." The two men met in Provincetown in the early 1940s (see Kaplan 7–8). Hofmann taught painting then, and his conception of space finds an echo in the playwright's language for the theater. Kramer draws a parallel between the painter's definition of "plasticity" and Williams's notion of "plastic space."<sup>11</sup> What Williams seems to have borrowed from Hofmann's writings, in particular his essay "The Search for the Real in the Visual Arts," is the idea that a work of art is brought to life by the tension opposing forces to counter-forces:

Movement and countermovement result in tension. Tensions are the expression of forces. Forces are the expression of actions. In their surreal relationship, the lines may now give the idea of being two shooting stars which move with speed through the universe. Your empty paper has been transformed by the simplest graphic means to a universe in action. This is real magic. So your paper is a world in itself—or you may call it, more modestly, only an object, or simply a picture with a life of its own—a spiritual life—through which it can become a work of art. (Hofmann 42)

Williams translates the painter's theory into dramatic terms that recall the title of his first produced play, *Battle of Angels*. In the playwright's words, Hofmann "shows us the vitality of matter, its creation and its destruction, its angels of dark and light" ("An Appreciation" 197–98). Hofmann's "push and pull" theory thus takes the shape of a conflict on Williams's stage, a conflict of images issued from the pictorial arts.

¶25

The best illustration of the role played by images in the building-up of dramatic tension is to be found in *The Night of the Iguana*. The play is composed like a triptych with three acts and three main characters. The central character—Reverend Shannon—is at a crossroads between the need for spiritual elevation and the desire to indulge in a lustful descent. The two women who attract him in opposite directions—Hannah Jelkes and Maxine Faulk—belong to very different pictures. Hannah and her grandfather Nonno are artists; she sketches and paints while he writes and recites poems. Their occupations convey the idea of elevation through art, a notion further imbued with religious connotations through Williams's use of colors. For instance, when Nonno enters the stage in act 2, he is "*impeccably dressed in snow-white linen with a black string tie. His leonine mane of hair gleams like silver as he passes under the globe*" (374). Hannah, on the other hand, is turned into the statue of a saint in the following description: "*She is softly lighted so that she looks, again, like a medieval sculpture of a saint. Her pale gold hair catches the soft light. She has let it down and still holds the silver-backed brush with which she was brushing it*" (398). Both are surrounded with silver and gold, colors reminiscent of El Greco's early icon paintings. *The Dormition of the Virgin* exemplifies this kind of work, in which the brilliance of the colors and the refinement of the figures are meant to suggest the presence of the Divine. Reinforcing the parallel, Hannah and Nonno share these colors with Shannon's God, who appears as a "*majestic apocalypse of gold light, shafting the sky as the sun drops into the Pacific*" (370)—or, later in the play, as a purifying storm that "*bathes the scene in an almost garish silver*" (388).

¶26

Contrasting with this unearthly picture, Maxine, the Mexican boys, and the Fahrenkopf family glorify the power of the flesh. The Germans especially are characterized by their two-dimensionality. To Shannon, they look like a “little animated cartoon by Hieronymus Bosch” (333), and further on in the stage directions, they seem to be coming right out of “*an animated canvas by Rubens*” (360). The allusion to Peter Paul Rubens underscores their sensual appeal, an idea underlined by Williams’s describing them as “*splendidly physical*” (334) and “*heavily handsome*” (400). Each time they enter the stage, the Germans exhibit alluring, fertile bodies in harmony with natural elements. Many details present in the following passage conjure up one Rubens painting in particular, *The Union of Earth and Water*:

*They are all nearly nude, pinked and bronzed by the sun. The women have decked themselves with garlands of pale green seaweed, glistening wet, and the Munich-opera bridegroom is blowing on a great conch shell. (360)*

Like Rubens’s pagan gods, the Fahrenkopfs’ earthly bodies are surrounded by water elements. Nothing about them is ethereal, but rooted as they are in the material world, they are attractive as well as revolting. In fact, these “fiends out of hell with the . . . voices of . . . angels” (408) are highly ambivalent figures. Their darker side is expressed pictorially through Shannon’s reference to Bosch. The Fahrenkopfs’ physical beauty in fact conceals an underlying dreadfulness that becomes visible through the association of their bodies with inanimate objects. In a manner that recalls Bosch’s monstrous, hybrid creatures, Williams uses the “*big inflated rubber horse*” (334) and the portable radio as extensions of the Germans’ bodies. The horse’s “*ecstatic smile*” (334) thus turns out to reflect Herr Fahrenkopf’s inevitable “*toothy grin*” (361), while the Germans’ “*almost phosphorescent pink and gold color of skin*” (407) makes them look as artificial as the “*fantastically painted rubber horse*” (407) that accompanies them everywhere. Their boisterous laughter and bright colors equate them with the mocking devils in Bosch’s representations of hell. The laughter of these exultant Nazis is cruel; it is the tormentor’s laughter that finds delight in watching others suffer. It is the laughter Brian Parker defines as “the rictus of the torturer, laughter as snarl . . . , [which] always goes along with complete lack of respect for the humanity of the victim” (Parker 181–82).

<sup>127</sup> The victim, Shannon, is torn apart between opposite panels of a triptych that recalls Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. The setting for the action, the Costa Verde Hotel, suspended as it is between sea and sky, offers the same pleasures as those represented on the central panel. Trying to resist its temptations, Shannon appears as a Christ-like figure enjoying “a voluptuous kind of crucifixion” (402). His final admission—“I can make it down the hill, but not back up” (427)—suggests a descent into hell that mirrors the movement of the spectator’s eye in front of the triptych: that is, from the Garden of Eden on the right to the Garden of Earthly Delights, and eventually to hell. Williams’s “angels of dark and light” thus emerge out of images that take part in the building-up of dramatic tension. In *The Night of the Iguana*, they create the “push and pull” movements necessary to “give a spiritual character to the work” (Hofmann 63).

### The Playwright as Painter: “The Language of Vision”

<sup>128</sup> In the later plays, this structure of opposition is less relevant, for the “spiritual character” of the work advocated by Hofmann implies a transfiguration of the real through art that disappears after 1961, giving way to transvestism and a desire to dissolve any notions of limits or divisions. Until *The Night of the Iguana*, though, the paintings that hover over Williams’s stage turn space into time, as the stage becomes the mirror of an

impossible present as well as of an impossible self, forever suspended between nostalgic reminiscences and the irresistible impulse of desire. Thus drawing on the art of painting, the playwright moves from the raw, dark picture of poor workers to a more complex and colorful vision of humanity. But this analysis of the “plastic theatre” through the lens of art would be incomplete without discussion of an essential characteristic of Williams as an artist: the fact that the playwright was also a painter. Although his “reputation with a pen eclipses any repute he has earned with a paintbrush” (Smith Ruckel 80), the dozens of paintings and drawings housed in private collections, museums, and galleries across the United States shed light on the intersemiotic aspect of a creative process that feeds on images. In fact, pictures accompanied Williams’s texts from the beginning. When, at the age of nine, he wrote the “Rainbow Comic Paper” for his sister Rose, he included a sketch of a suffragette and signed the piece with a self-portrait (*Notebooks* x). A few years later, in 1928, the presence of drawings in the margins of his first short story, “The Vengeance of Nitocris,” further underlined the role played by images in the development of his own artistic language (Plumley 789). If, on the one hand, Williams’s art “provides something of the man that the plays never intended to offer” (Plumley 804), on the other hand, some of his canvases encapsulate the underlying themes of his plays as if, at times, words and images were perfectly interchangeable.

¶29 Two paintings housed at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin echo, in style and theme, two of Williams’s plays. The first, *By the time Summer and Smoke were past*, was titled after a poem by Hart Crane and painted around 1947 while Williams was working on the play *Summer and Smoke*, first produced on Broadway in 1948. The oil painting is composed of light, diluted colors, mainly blue, pink, and yellow. Dark lines drawn in pencil or crayon define the contours of a woman’s head and shoulders. She seems to be floating against the sky, which constitutes the only background of the picture. Her small right hand is held down toward someone who is reaching out to her. Only the hand of this character is visible, a masculine, strong hand that is almost as big as the woman’s head. There is no certainty as to whether this ethereal woman is trying to escape or is actually striving to grasp the hand held out to her. But what is clear is that Williams managed, in this picture, to translate Alma’s doom in pictorial terms. The painting tells the story of a play that, according to the playwright himself, “deals with intangibles which need plastic expression far more than verbal” (*Letters II* 180). Interestingly, a crisscross pattern covers the whole surface of the canvas, suggesting the confining nature of lofty ideals, another main theme of the play.

¶30 In stark contrast to this painting, an undated canvas dedicated to Audrey Wood, Williams’s agent, brings the spectator down to earth through a vivid depiction of Christ’s crucifixion. Raw streaks of paint thickly applied to the surface of the canvas seem to emanate from the central figure like ripples around a body emerging from water. The body of Christ on the cross thus appears to be coming out of the picture, an impression reinforced by his black and white face, which literally protrudes from the surface of the canvas. The cross is indistinguishable from the background, but its shape is everywhere, from the position of the body to the vertical and horizontal streaks of paint that surround it. As God incarnate, the figure of Christ symbolizes the impossible meeting of the ideal with the real. The expressionistic style of this painting conveys a sense of agonizing despair, a feeling of abandonment that recalls Christ’s last words in the New Testament: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Williams’s *Crucifixion* depicts the end of hope, the nailing down to earth of man who nevertheless cries out, questions, and wonders. His Christ is akin to Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana*, torn between contradictory desires and realizing that the only way out is a way down.

These two very different paintings express a tension of opposites that underlies Williams's plays at least until 1961. As visual echoes of the plays, they reveal an important aspect of the artist's creativity, one that has often been overlooked by critics and scholars: that is, the reciprocal influence of words on images in the creative process. As an artist who "paints a story into his pictures" and as a writer who "puts word-pictures into his story" (Wood 3), Williams is always at a crossroads, in between words and images, in that "no-man's land, which is the property neither of that art nor of the neighboring arts, and which is occupied sometimes by one and sometimes by another" (Wood 3).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The manuscript of this early, unpublished play is housed at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. It was first performed in September 2010 at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. For more on the play, see John S. Bak, "American Gothic Grants Tennessee Williams a 'Woodian' Play."

<sup>2</sup> Jo Mielziner visualized the setting of *Summer and Smoke* so clearly that he equated the playwright with a creator of pictures: "[t]he extraordinarily knowledgeable and sensitive eye of the dramatist created a picture that even a mediocre designer could not spoil" (Mielziner 153).

<sup>3</sup> An earlier term that Williams used was "sculptural" drama.

<sup>4</sup> As Greenberg wrote,

Monet, the arch-Impressionist, had started from the opposite direction—by narrowing and even suppressing value contrasts—and where the Cubists arrived at the *skeleton* of traditional painting, he arrived at the *shadow* of one.

Neither of these paths to what became abstract art was inherently superior to the other in sheerly pictorial quality. Just as Picasso, Braque and Léger found the right kind of color for their various purposes, so Monet developed the right kind of "architecture" he needed for his. What the avant-garde missed in Late Impressionism was light-and-dark structure; but there is nothing in artistic experience which says that chromatic, "symphonic" structure cannot take its place. Sixty years of modernist painting have finally brought this home to us, now that the first seed of modernism, planted by the Impressionists, has turned out to be the most radical of all. (Greenberg 44)

<sup>5</sup> In his foreword to *Candles to the Sun*, William Jay Smith recalls how the audience received the March 18, 1937, premiere:

When to thunderous applause, loud cheers, and resonant foot-stomping the full cast gathered for numerous curtain calls, they suddenly all burst out singing "Solidarity Forever." The celebrated union anthem, totally uncalled for in the script, gave the play an aura of propaganda, which the playwright, despite his pronounced sympathy for victims of social injustice, had clearly not intended. (x)

<sup>6</sup> Van Gogh lived in Nuenen between 1883 and 1885. There, he created works that reveal his overriding concerns for his fellow man: "I am choosing the said dog's path, I am remaining a dog, I shall be poor, I shall be a painter, I want to remain human in nature" (van Gogh 250).

<sup>7</sup> The recycling of former works characterized Williams's writing throughout his career, reinforcing the analogy between painting and writing. The numerous drafts—stories, poems, or plays—function like preliminary studies or "sketches" out of which the full work gradually emerges. *The Glass Menagerie*, for instance, developed out of multiple works, among them "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" or "The Front Porch Girl," which Williams also titled "Mississippi sketches" (now held in the Harry Ransom Center).

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Tyle, in a report on *Candles to the Sun* that was read on January 14, 1938, now housed at the Harry Ransom Center with the drafts and earlier versions of the play.

<sup>9</sup> One of these paintings is reproduced in *Notebooks*. It represents the small cabin that the playwright shared with Parrott during their stay at Laguna Beach, California. The moonlight bathes the scene with a hazy clarity that adds to its dreamlike quality. The cabin's central position—in between sea and sky—creates a mirror effect enhanced by the reflection of the moonlight in the water. The picture conveys a sense of harmony and serenity in keeping with Williams's feelings at that time:

Laguna is located on a bay surrounded by mountains—it is just opposite Catalina Islands—you can see it plainly on clear days. The water is marvellous blue and the hills thickly wooded and covered with gorgeous wild flowers. The coast along here is very

rocky but we have a beautiful sandy beach for swimming. Jim Parrott and I are renting a little cabin about two miles out of town, in a beautiful canyon. . . . I have a beautiful outdoor studio in which I do my writing and painting—Oh, yes, I'm quite an artist these days! (148n252)

<sup>10</sup> *The Night Café* foreshadows Munch's painting in many ways. The central figures' distorted features and the lines of perspective that lead the spectator's gaze toward the back left of both paintings reveal similarities in the composition that allowed critics to regard van Gogh as a forerunner of expressionism.

<sup>11</sup> According to Hofmann, the tension of opposites is what breathes life into the picture, hence his conception of space as "dynamic" and "alive" (Hofmann 49).

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Self-Portrait by Tennessee Williams, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin



“By That Time Summer and Smoke Were Past . . .,” by Tennessee Williams, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin



*Crucifixion*, by Tennessee Williams, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin



Self-Portrait by Tennessee Williams, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin