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"Hysteria is the condition of this place": *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* and the Failure of Quietism

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When Donald Spoto, in one of the few comments made about the play to date, judges *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* to represent a "total personal and social breakdown" (339), he indicates just how closely aligned the playwright's life and social vision had become by the time this late play was written. Tennessee Williams's failing health and faltering career, depressing enough in their own right, gave him an especially jaundiced view of the world around him. Naturally, it was hard to find hope for humanity when there was little prospect of personal salvation.

¶2 Also implicit within Spoto's assertion is the impression that the playwright's fatalism is characterized by irrationality or perhaps even clouded by insanity. While it permits us to witness fleeting moments of benevolence and human dignity, *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* registers a low point in civilization, a seemingly irreversible decline. Yet it is my contention that Williams's thinking is surprisingly lucid. His indictment of a creaking nursing-home system—and of the hostile world it parallels—is a considered and logical response to the social ills he found so ubiquitous, not a symptom of paranoia or a chaotic, visceral rant.

The Condition of This Place

¶3 In truth, Williams's political utterances were always shot through with cynicism. Whether attacking capitalism's relentless advance at the expense of the workingman's soul, or railing at the accumulation of nuclear arsenals, he repeatedly sniped at the failings of successive political regimes. And by 1980 (when Williams wrote *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom*), there had been ample evidence of societal tensions spiraling out of control in the preceding two decades. At home, civil disturbances became a feature of the late sixties, with frequent outbreaks of urban rioting reflecting the ghettoization of nonwhites in major American cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. Student protests and the formation of the counterculture led to violent confrontations with police and the National Guard on university campuses, most notably Kent State in 1970. The Vietnam War, a focus for those disparate elements that made up the counterculture, was recent enough in the collective memory (and had been prolonged to an intolerable degree) for its worst atrocities to reflect both a measure of America's diminishing authority throughout the world and mankind's capacity for willful destruction. In the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict showed little sign of permanent abatement, and indeed Williams references the most recent hostilities in the play with a comment about the 1977 Palestinian terrorist attack near Tel Aviv.[1]

¶4 To this mounting catalog of violence must be added the looting and vandalism that accompanied the 1977 blackout in New York City, further proof to contemporaneous observers that society's very infrastructure was disintegrating. This outbreak of mass lawlessness (there were more than 3,700 arrests) seems especially

influential in forming the view reflected in the play: that the nation, if not the world, is teetering on the brink of collapse.

¶5 Unusually for Williams, *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* is set during a real event: a four-day strike in New York in April 1978. Now consigned to the backwaters of history, the bitter dispute over a 15 percent pay raise for nurses, orderlies, porters, and kitchen workers was significant enough at the time to reach the front page of the *New York Times*. Reports of abandoned patients suffering from untreated bed sores and dehydration, many of whom were also forced to lie in their own excrement, appalled a city and a nation already primed for concern about nursing-home conditions by several shocking publications in the seventies. For example, Mary Adelaide Mendelson's 1974 book, *Tender Loving Greed: How the Incredibly Lucrative Nursing Home "Industry" Is Exploiting America's Old People and Defrauding Us All* exposed the "chiselers and conmen" (32) who were exploiting public funding for largely private institutions. More famously, in *Why Survive?: Being Old in America* (1975), Robert N. Butler criticized the equipment and staffing in nursing homes before damningly labeling them "preburial storehouses where persons exist in isolation and excruciating boredom, with no possible hope for anything but their own demise" (261).

Gerontophobia

> There is too much putting away of old and worn-out people. Death will do it for all. So why take premature action?
>
> — Emerson Sykes in *A House Not Meant to Stand*

Tennessee Williams's gerontophobia—his personal anxiety about deteriorating health and possible institutionalization—is intrinsically connected to the societal issues, including provision for the elderly, outlined above. In *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom*, these concerns are manifested in many ways: a prevailing sickness (even the younger, nonresident characters have serious health problems); the inadequacy of the human metabolism; and a conviction that nursing homes are, as Emerson Sykes warns Cornelius McCorkle, tantamount to death. Increasing fears about aging are also evident in two other one-act plays of his late phase that, taken together with *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom*, might be viewed as forming a triptych focusing on senile dementia (*Lifeboat Drill*, 1979), retirement communities (*The Frosted Glass Coffin*, 1970), and nursing-home life. Like the work under discussion, these other plays suggest that the physical and mental infirmities consistent with advanced years render the final stage of life a grim joke. The coping mechanisms, the mundane rituals we adopt to make sense of a world that has become little more than a "frosted coffin" (205)—a place we can only just perceive in our unburied state—are pathetic and barely offer resistance to the inevitable.

¶7 Arguably, though, the nursing home represents the final indignity, death's ante-room or the "preburial storehouses" described by Butler. When, to everyone's surprise, Mr. Kelsey, living "a sort of crocodile existence that seems to go on forever" (208), out-survives his wife in *The Frosted Glass Coffin*, the character Two observes that nursing-home care is on par with being administered chloroform "like an old dog" (208). Worse, it offers only an inhumane form of death or, at most, a prison sentence favored by a society that seeks to shut away and forget its aging population. In *The Traveling Companion* (1981), too, the older character Vieux supplies us with a horrifically vivid snapshot of a Dallas nursing home that is "appalling beyond belief," its residents "strapped into chairs, comatose but groaning" (291).

¶8

Fittingly set in "*one of the drearier sections of Queens*" (333), the nursing home of *Peaceable Kingdom* is, like the wider world it represents, beyond redemption. This is confirmed by the play's alternate title, a piece of graffiti visible from the outset. "Good Luck God" also underscores the irony of the main title, which is taken from the series of paintings by the Quaker artist Edward Hicks (1780–1849). Where tolerance and peaceful cohabitation were once the worthy aspirations of at least some of the nation's founding fathers, greed, violence, and irreconcilable ethnic differences have become all too commonplace features of modern society.

¶9 As the curtain rises, Williams encourages us to watch a silent pantomime, only to then make us understand that it is beyond contemplation. The wheelchair-bound patients "*staring grimly out*" (333) effectively accuse the audience of ignoring the "*geriatric infirmities*" (333) that have blighted their lives. Among them is Mrs. Shapiro, a Jewish mother whose children, Bernice and Saul, are seen caring for her. Consistent with the real strike, in which the authorities resorted to asking relatives to come into the affected homes and help out, this act of unity gradually becomes a source of recrimination—as two other patients, Lucretia and Ralston, comment on, and then enter into an antagonistic dialogue with, the family. Here, though, the feeding of Mrs. Shapiro and the exchanges that immediately follow point to the strain placed on the siblings and their consequent division. Saul cannot watch his mother eat and is barely able to contain a sense of horror. Mrs. Shapiro is obviously a shadow of her former self. Worse than this, she is in a vegetative state, so completely dependent on others that Williams quickly reiterates her vulnerability: she is described as "*entirely helpless*" and then as "*the helplessly senile woman*" (333) within a couple of lines of the mise-en-scène. Her condition is beyond the reach of anything but palliative care, and while Bernice is keen for her to have the best medical attention, Mrs. Shapiro's apparent insensibility underlines both the unforgiving horror of old age and the deteriorating living conditions experienced in the wake of the strike.

¶10 Mrs. Shapiro arouses pity, but her condition is so parlous that she is also absurd and part of the "*gallow's* [*sic*] *humor*" (333) Williams prepares us for. Given that she barely lives, and that most of her sensory faculties have shut down (she is blind and almost completely deaf), it is not surprising that failing bodily functions become a focal point. For in this play we move beyond the not-inconsiderable problems of how geriatrics occupy themselves in their lengthening retirement, survive on limited means, and deal with the early stages of dementia. Instead, we are forced to inhabit the lives of those for whom a purposeful and independent existence has long ceased to matter.

¶11 As he does in *Lifeboat Drill*, Williams uses the temporary misplacement or complete loss of false teeth to create the visually grotesque image of a sunken face and to further suggest that meaningful communication has been lost. With two sets already flushed down the toilet, either by Mrs. Shapiro herself or an unscrupulous nurse on the make, she cannot articulate her most basic needs except in dimly recognizable sounds. The old woman has seemingly slipped beyond any worthwhile existence and reentered an infantile state. Fed pureed food like a baby and drooling, she painfully embodies incapacity, the pitifulness of the human form in decline. However, despite the emphasis on oral deficiency—via her inability to feed herself or speak intelligibly—the mouth represents a last trace of animation in the dark nothingness that gradually envelops us. Perhaps borrowing the striking image from Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (1972), Williams has Saul interpret his mother's mouth as a symbol of all human life shrinking toward death: "Nothing left but an open mouth at the end" (350). The familiar, the beloved has become a gaping orifice, a dependent cavity disconnected from a defunct body.

¶12

When Mrs. Shapiro goes into a spasm as a result of the traumatic riot at the heart of the play, her "*expiring cry*" (356) seems to be a nadir, confirmation that untold suffering and humiliation are not alleviated by easeful death. Yet her passing is made still more appalling by Bernice's comically inept attempts to salvage some respectability. Tying a scarf around her head to support the collapsed jaw, she only succeeds in making her mother a figure of fun with a "Baby Snook's bow on her head" (364) and a ludicrous victim for the journalists seeking to photograph the lurid details of the scene. This and other tragicomic elements of the play emphasize the inadequacies of the human body, the sense that, ravaged by illness and systemic failure, it ultimately mocks the individual and any vitality once enjoyed. Similarly, the discussion of Mrs. Shapiro's incontinence at the start of the play provokes the reaction from Lucretia that certain geriatric infirmities amount to an "indecent existence" (335), a second "life" that should not be contemplated. Self-control is an obvious benchmark of the quality of life, of human decency, a point that parallels the body and the civil (dis)order that the play also explores. Just as the body's regulatory processes and its defenses against infection have broken down, so the rule of law has ceased to operate on the streets.

Without God Now[2]

Mrs. Shapiro, then, is used as an illustration of old age's worst afflictions; she also helps to dramatize a debate over euthanasia. Is her condition so bad that existence is pointless? Or is the determination of Bernice to make her mother as comfortable as possible the only humane option? Because Mrs. Shapiro's fate ultimately renders this question irrelevant, we must look to the play's other significant characters: Lucretia and Ralston. Though she survives the riot, Lucretia's reaction to it presents the most enduringly disturbing image of the play. Maddened by the senseless behavior she witnesses around her and convinced that Mrs. Shapiro is better off dead, Lucretia repeatedly bashes her head against a section of wall just below the graffiti. This is not just an act of frustration: she craves death, she tells us, because her surroundings have suddenly become a madhouse—not just a shabby nursing home without caregivers, but bedlam. Although she has proudly defined herself as a Christian in opposition to the Jewish family, Lucretia admits to having lost her faith when she came to the home, a detail that makes both the graffiti and the repeated announcement that "This is the Peaceable Kingdom, the kingdom of love without fear" still more ironic. Furthermore, longevity has proved a curse. Lucretia has outlived her relations and has not been discarded by them as she once thought; her long life is not a cause for celebration so much as virtual solitary confinement.

¶14 Lacking both the strength to kill herself and the assistance of an understanding relative, Lucretia finds herself in an intolerable situation, one to which society seems completely indifferent. But bleak as it is, Williams's world is not wholly devoid of compassion and generosity. Lucretia's exasperation at the end of the first scene becomes a much quieter resignation by the end of the play. She is not fooled by Ralston's playing at being God, but she is receptive to his help. In a godless universe, he is the closest thing to a deity; in a loveless world, he radiates a rare benignity.

¶15 Tennessee Williams's thanatophobia—his recurrent fears of his own death and the ever closer possibility of mankind's extinction following a nuclear Armageddon—is less a feature of *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* than is that limbo of the final years spent awaiting death's onset. Aging is not the dread of physical unattractiveness or the slowing of the writer's productivity but the nightmare of incarceration and the continuation of life beyond an acceptable point. The nursing home distills these fears because it seems synonymous with human

degradation and, particularly in the case of the strike, with our abandonment or warehousing of an ever larger aging population with greater demands, medical and humane.[3] It also seems likely that the nursing home is, in part, an aggregate of some of the institutions Williams had experienced or written about—Barnes Hospital (where Williams himself was confined to a psychiatric ward), Farmington State Hospital (where Rose's lobotomy was performed), Stony Lodge (where Rose was kept), Lion's View (of *Suddenly Last Summer*), and St. Carmine's (of *Stopped Rocking*). These are consistently viewed or conceived of as places where the staff habitually uses restraint, inflicts correctional pain, and is guilty of neglect; places that, almost by definition, dull the human spirit still further. While the mortification of physical deterioration is great in *Peaceable Kingdom*, the simple mental realization (among those still capable of making it) that life will only become more insufferable—that there is no possibility of rehabilitation—is equally as hard to come to terms with.

¶16 Williams does not make the nursing home a separate world, a hermetically sealed environment with its own rules and moral values. Neither does he straightforwardly allow us to assume it is just a microcosm—though Bernice's comment after the commencement of the riot that "Hysteria is the condition of this place, this city, the world" (353) does point to the universality of events taking place there. Instead, the nursing home is consciously made an integral part of the urban squalor that is modern-day New York, and the disturbances on its streets are brought inside; they are not just a parallel occurrence. Moreover, the graffiti is "*in a script resembling that which often decorates subway cars in the city*" (333), as if the worlds of the old and the disaffected youth are much closer than we might imagine. This proximity is also brought home in the riot. The commotion may begin with the geriatric patients' frustration at being left with no staff to care for them, but it soon acquires a social dimension.

¶17 Williams is clearly looking back to the blackout of the summer before—a power outage in New York that, together with the hot weather, proved a catalyst for widespread, opportunistic looting, especially by the long-suffering African American and Hispanic communities. Though a disturbance begins in the play when the supervisor announces that negotiations are taking place, the riot really gains momentum following the entrance of a "*middle-aged Westchester County-type matron*" (353) with her chauffeur. Her authoritative manner and condescension, together with the meager food parcels she dispenses as an act of charity, arouse considerable resentment. The protesting cry of "RICH, RICH, GIVE US SHIT!" (356) indicates that the grievances of the nursing-home patients have moved away from a sense of simple abandonment to more general and long-harbored feelings of social inequality. The point becomes more evident when we consider the make-up of the rioters: though both black and white join in, the black inmates are mentioned first, and the matron's comment that "these nigras are looting" (355) reveals her inner fear of a violent, uncontainable African American underclass normally confined to the ghettos of New York.

¶18 The connection with the blackout is asserted in three further ways. First, normally enfeebled patients become, with a brushstroke of magic realism, "*phenomenally revitalized*" (355) and push wheelchairs with "*amazing force*" (353). They suddenly resemble angry youths—statistically a majority of the blackout looters—rather than immobile geriatrics. Second, when the violence comes to a head, the police enter and, overreacting in the circumstances, hurl tear-gas canisters. Third, Saul refers to the blackout when he talks about an alternative Jewish nursing home. Located in Spanish Harlem, this site would, he implies, be no improvement, as the neighborhood experienced some of the worst of the looting the previous summer, and small Jewish businesses were particularly affected. It had become a no-go area, a place that even cabdrivers would avoid.

¶19 Williams is not just echoing the earlier event to enliven a fairly low-key strike, to give an otherwise static play an exciting heart; the interconnectedness creates a vision of a failing society, a country where discontent is rife and justifiable, but where civil disobedience is, by the same measure, no solution. Recourse to violence has become all too common and is sharply at odds with a Quaker philosophy of peaceful coexistence that was once a part of the American experience. The "Strange Voice" of the play, a solemn announcement rising and falling in cadence, creates an ironic commentary on events. We hear it "*as if from outer space*" (338) to further emphasize its unfamiliarity and its contradiction of what we witness on stage.

Hicks's Legacy

As Margaret Thornton reminds us (Williams, *Notebooks* 104), and as Sophie Maruéjouls-Koch explores in this issue, it was not unknown for Tennessee Williams to allude to famous artists and their paintings in his plays. The choice of Edward Hicks's work, itself inspired by chapter 11 of the Book of Isaiah, reconnects us with America's past, with the innocence and idealism of Quaker quietism. In its narrowest sense, this religious philosophy stresses the importance of surrendering the soul to the Divine Will and shunning a secular life of sensuality and aggression. But although Williams seems to have had a distant connection with Quakerism through his maternal grandfather, who converted from it at a young age, and although there are elementary contrasts between Christianity and Judaism, the play seems less preoccupied with doctrine than with a looser notion of gentle forbearance.[4] The simple truth it expounds is that modern humanity appears incapable of existing peacefully, of countenancing difference and averting disputes; and the most aggressive individuals and nations show no signs of reining in their behavior, of accepting compromise when those disagreements arise.

¶21 Hicks's series of over sixty (known) paintings, each bearing the title *The Peaceable Kingdom*, contains variations on a central picture promoting understanding and the serenity that should accompany it. Differences among some of the paintings are minimal and quite subtle; others include newly introduced scenes, such as that of Elias Hicks (the artist's cousin and a prominent preacher) and other Quakers bearing banners. In all, Hicks prioritizes the reconciliation of various innate character traits by visualizing, very literally, the close proximity of wild and domestic animals referred to in Isaiah (11.6–9). Thus the lion and leopard, both by nature predatory, sit side by side with gentle creatures like the lamb, the ox, and an innocent young child. In at least one representation, the lion has an ear of corn in its mouth to symbolize the renunciation of meat, its natural diet. For Hicks, similar sacrifices were necessary but not always easily achievable. As Eleanore Price Mather points out, the whole work develops in a way that not only reflects an ideal but also conveys the artist's inability to match up to it. Hicks's "inner self" was "torn between what he was and what he wanted to be," between a "fitful, hot-tempered, and fiercely proud" character and one that was "steadfast, patient, and loving" (15). In certain paintings, the startled or ambivalent gaze of the leopards in particular captures this tension.

¶22 Perhaps of greater significance to Williams (though he does not refer to it in the play) is William Penn's historic agreement with the Lenni-Lenape/Delaware Indians.[5] Hicks painted their legendary meeting under an elm tree on the banks of the Delaware at Shackamaxon in the corner of various versions of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, obviously holding it up as a model of conciliation, a platform on which the values of a united country could be built. Indeed, in a separate group of paintings entitled *Penn's Treaty*, a border running along the bottom of the canvas entitled "Penn's Treaty with the Indians" refers to the initiative as "The Foundation of Religious and Civil Liberty, in the U.S. of America." Penn's "Holy Experiment," his plan to establish a colony

(Pennsylvania) based on quietistic principles—of which his promise to honor the territorial claims of the Indians was a key part—was idealistic and proved ultimately unworkable. Though noble in aspiration, Penn's legacy was short-lived: even his own sons dealt with the Indians differently and "did not hesitate to use fraud and intimidation" (Kenny 3); and the Paxton Boys' bloody attacks on the Conestoga Indians as early as 1763 generated "wave after wave of violence on the frontier" (Kenny 5).

¶23 The essence of the Quaker vision, its pacifism and magnanimity, is the gauge against which Williams measures modern society and, more particularly, the deterioration we see in the nursing home. The connection between a twentieth-century strike that highlighted the inadequacy of care for the elderly and a series of nineteenth-century religious paintings may seem a tenuous one, but Williams portrays the dispute as merely the latest in a series of interrelated events, satirizing humankind's pretense to civilization. In losing some of its historical specificity, the play nevertheless tests the power of large themes like love and religious conviction among those most skeptical of their influence.

Avoiding Offense

Though inclusiveness and greater understanding of different cultures should be an aspiration for all, there is a sense in *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* that this harmony is hardest to achieve between Christians and Jews, and that the latter are in danger of being viewed as antagonistic and proudly independent. To some extent, the denouement of the play dramatizes this prejudice. Before Lucretia acknowledges Ralston's strength and kindness, the Jewish family desperately tries to salvage some dignity in front of the flashing cameras of the journalists. Mrs. Shapiro's face is now covered with the scarf, and her children, standing rigidly as if posing for a family photograph, recite a Hebrew prayer in an effort to show the "ancient grief of our people" (365). This solidarity could appear comical, even pathetic, given all that has gone before, but Williams stipulates that the gesture is not to be mocked. "*A moment of solemnity is achieved*" (365) before the light fades, which elicits no subsequent comment from Lucretia or Ralston. Their apparent acceptance of the situation is consistent with Williams's caution that the play "*should be staged in a manner to avoid giving any ethnic offense*" (333). For, though it contains anti-Semitic comments and references to both the persecution of the Jews and their influence in business affairs, these proceed from ignorance and misunderstanding. Saul, a humanities lecturer who is somewhat less defensive than his sister, states definitively that "in the end which the Jew and Gentile both come to, it's time for more understanding, necessary to keep the peace of the world" (349). In other words, we should define our relationships against the great leveler—death—and deflect religious differences.

¶25 Viewing the play as "possibly 'offensive'" (Prosser 259), because it might perpetuate certain prejudices and thus become a risky venture for any director, seems to miss an obvious point. Granted, *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* has been performed infrequently—but the drama needs to give voice to potentially insulting remarks, needs to embrace what we now label political incorrectness, in order to highlight how irretrievably lost are Penn's and Hicks's utopian visions. For the play's moments of selfless behavior are just that: rare glimpses of a better, more humane society amid an enveloping misery that seems most acute in the nursing home.

Conclusion

Though the seventies had been a quieter decade than the sixties in terms of civil unrest, and though President Jimmy Carter felt confident enough to declare, in his State of the Union Address of 1978, that the American

people had rediscovered their "moral course" after "a long period of turmoil and doubt" (*State of the Union* 4), Williams appears convinced that little has been done to arrest the decline of both America and the world. He arrives at this position having taken the unusual (for him) route of filtering political comment through a play ostensibly concerned with the ignominy of senescence. The problems associated with an aging population thus seem part of a descent into a state of near anarchy, and Donald Spoto is right to view this as Williams's dark verdict on his time. However, by referencing Edward Hicks's most celebrated paintings and the religious philosophy behind them, the playwright is able to suggest historical perspective, the distance traveled from such admirable, if ultimately unrealizable, ideals; and with this sense of perspective comes coherence. On the surface, Williams's approach to his material may appear desultory, as diffuse as the technique favored by the artist in *The Day on Which a Man Dies* (1960), whose spray-gun is used liberally and angrily to bedaub his canvases. On closer scrutiny, though, *This Is the Peaceable Kingdom* plausibly traces the progressively worsening dilemmas of the modern era back to the failure of quietism in eighteenth-century America.

Notes

[1] In the play, Saul comments on a meeting of the Knesset and the Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, that had been broadcast on television the night before. He thinks they should have made greater concessions to the Palestinians, but Bernice strongly disagrees, citing the attack on Tel Aviv as just the latest instance of "more terror, more, more hate and destruction!" (350).

[2] Gabriel Santacruz, a priest in Bushwick, reportedly told his congregation on the first Sunday after the 1977 blackout, "We are without God now" (Gottlieb and Glanz).

[3] The term *warehouse* to describe emotively how old people are kept in homes is used by Mendelson (32).

[4] Donald Spoto comments briefly that Walter Dakin was a Quaker before studying for the Episcopalian ministry (4); Lyle Leverich makes no mention of this but does state that Edwina Williams's great-great-grandfather, Preserved Fish Dakin, was of English Quaker ancestry (18). Perhaps more interesting is the fact that, on his father's side, Williams was descended from Gen. John Sevier, an Indian fighter (Leverich xi).

[5] This is commonly thought to be in 1682 but Hicks has a date of 1681.

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