Tennessee Williams and Jackson Pollock: The Art of Crossing the Line

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> The work of a fine painter, committed only to vision, abstract and allusive as he pleases, is better able to create for you his moments of intensely perceptive being. Jackson Pollock could paint ecstasy as it could not be written. Van Gogh could capture for you moments of beauty, indescribable as descent into madness.
> —Tennessee Williams (*Memoirs* 250)

This passage from Tennessee Williams's *Memoirs* reads almost like an admission of defeat. Trying to write about himself, the playwright realizes that words cannot adequately express the "moment-to-moment occurrences" (250) of life; only images can. The examples he chooses to illustrate his point underline his fascination with Vincent Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock, two artists who influenced his work.[1] In the late 1930s Van Gogh inspired the writing of a play that remained unfinished, while Pollock served as a model for the character of the painter in *The Day on Which a Man Dies*. Completed in 1960, *Day* was later revised and titled *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*. At different points in his career, Williams identified with different aspects of the painters' life stories. As a young writer striving for recognition, he felt a kinship with Van Gogh, who was "constantly misunderstood and persecuted" (*Letters* 116). Besides, the painter's tragic end perfectly coincided with his romantic vision of the doomed artist. Then, as an older playwright who had known both success and failure, he found in Pollock a portrait of the artist that looked very much like his own. In a 1975 interview, Williams was asked about the autobiographical overtones of *In the Bar*, and he replied:

> But do you know who I thought I was writing about? Jackson Pollock, not myself. Tony Smith, a dear friend of mine, was also a close friend of Pollock's, and I knew towards the end that Jackson Pollock was crawling around naked on the floor with a spray gun, just spraying canvas and streaking it over the canvas with his fingers. (*Conversations* 294)

Beyond Van Gogh's and Pollock's highly dramatic lives, something else appealed to Williams: an aspiration toward fusion, a desire to break through the limits separating an

artist's self from his or her work. Quite significantly, the terms "madness" and "ecstasy," so often used to describe Van Gogh's and Pollock's paintings, both refer to inner states of mind that have found their outer reflections in art. As such, these terms evince an ability to give a visual shape to the intensity of feelings that links Van Gogh and Pollock with Expressionism.

In its general sense, Expressionism is understood to define a subjective rendering of reality. As a forerunner of Expressionism, Van Gogh put himself into his pictures, distorting his lines and intensifying his colors to express an emotionally charged perception of the environment. The inside of the artist's self thus emerged on the surface of the canvas, blurring the differences between content and form. In a way, Pollock pushed this form of Expressionism to its limits, to the point where no distinctions can be made between the form and the content of the painting. The all-over paintings of 1947–50, which came to be seen as the culmination of his art, achieve a oneness the painter was looking for when he expressed a need to be "part of the painting." As the artist's expression of "an inner world" (Pollock 21), the all-over paintings bring together the inside and the outside, merging content and form in a paradoxical reversal. Art historians refer to them as Abstract Expressionist paintings.

Pollock disliked being called an Abstract Expressionist, arguing that his technique was "just a means of arriving at a statement" (Pollock 23). However abstract his all-over paintings might appear, they were always attempts at saying something, but the content of the message could not be dissociated from its form. Pollock's originality lies in his ability to create a new language based not on the conventional nature of the sign but on a more direct communicative experience. Such an experience demands that the spectator relinquish all preconceived ideas. For Pollock, the spectator "should not look for, but look passively—and try to receive what the painting has to offer" (Pollock 20). Under that condition only could s/he reach the trancelike state of ecstasy mentioned by Williams and thereby fully commune with the artist.

The evolution of Williams's dramatic writing throughout his career reveals a gradual progression toward a new language for the stage that pushed the limits of expression to extremes and challenged the image of the playwright as a poetic realist. The reappraisal of the late plays by scholars such as Linda Dorff, Ruby Cohn, Annette Saddik, and Philip Kolin has brought to light the consistency of his work and given the late plays the respect they had been denied by Williams's more vituperative critics. Like Pollock's all-over paintings, the plays written after 1961 can be regarded as the culmination of his art, as the final step in the search for "a new, plastic theater" advocated as early as 1945 in the production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*. As attempts to "write differently" (Kolin 3), they show not only how the playwright managed to shape a theatrical language made of visual as well as verbal elements, but also how he freed himself from existing forms,

achieving the creation of a medium he had always wanted to be "organic," that is to say alive:

> Writing since I was a child, I had begun to feel a frustrating lack of vitality in words alone. I wanted a plastic medium. I conceived things visually, in sound and color and movement. The writing of prose was just their description, not their essential being: or so I felt it to be. I was impatient of sentences. . . . The turbulent business of my nerves demanded something more animate than animate language could be. . . . It seemed to me that all good writing is not just writing but is something organic. ("The History of a Play" 16)

Throughout his career, Williams never stopped experimenting with form, trying to find an outlet for "the turbulent business of [his] nerves" much in the same way Pollock had managed to make "energy and motion" visible in paintings alive with what he termed "organic intensity" (Pollock 24). In addition, after 1961 and *The Night of the Iguana*, the line between Williams's life and art became more blurred as the playwright put himself into his work in bolder, more obvious ways. What the critics failed to see was that the autobiographical dimension of the late plays reflected a need to dissolve the distinctions between life and art. The late plays first met with hostility and even disgust perhaps because they broke through the many walls that had blocked Williams the man and the artist from the beginning. The writer who had always felt "wrapped up in literary style like the bandages of a mummy" ("The History of a Play" 16) finally found a way to express himself:

> To release the essential spirit of something there needs to be a stripping down, a reduction to abstracts. This was the need that prompted the turn to the non-representative in painting. As the painter becomes more aware of what is fundamental in painting—design and balance and so forth—in order to release those things more strikingly he must clear the deck for their action. So he turns the object into the value. . . . A similar turn to something more abstract may very well be the direction of the plastic theatre. ("Notes to the Reader" 26)

Turning to Abstraction: *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*

What role did Jackson Pollock's art play in the evolution of the "plastic theatre"? To answer this question, one needs to look back to the summer of 1940, when the playwright and the painter met for the first time, in Provincetown:

> And then one day I was on the dunes with a group that included the yet-unknown, or uncelebrated abstract painter, Jackson Pollock. Later on he was to become a "dark" man, outside his work, but that summer I remember him from his boisterous, just slightly drunk behavior. He was a sturdy, well-built young man, then, just a little bit heavier from beer-drinking than was attractive to me, and he used to carry me out into the water on his shoulders and to sport about innocently. (*Memoirs* 56)

Pollock had been employed in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration to join the easel division of the Federal Art Project in New York. In 1940 he was still working for the WPA (now the Work Projects Administration) and would remain in the agency's employ until its termination in 1943. There, the traditional teaching he had received from the American regionalist Thomas Hart Benton clashed with the experimental art of Mexican muralists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose workshop he joined in 1936.

As for the yet-unknown playwright, the early 1940s saw him trying to provide a social message to *Battle of Angels* at the request of Erwin Piscator, who intended to produce the play for the experimental Studio Theatre of the New School for Social Research. The project came to a dead end, as "Williams felt Piscator, who had called [*Battles*] a Fascist play, had turned it from a religio-poetic encomium to individual liberty into a socialist vehicle" (Bak 93). A few years before, in 1937, Williams had written a play about "the hypocrisy of a Midwestern society he confronted daily at home" (Bak 62), inspired by Grant Wood's regionalist painting *American Gothic*. Pollock and Williams were children of their age, striving to find their own voices. Pollock "was no more influenced by leftist ideology than by Benton's conservatism" (Cernuschi 32), and Williams wavered between the realist tradition and the experimentations of socialist artists such as Erwin Piscator. The playwright's affinity with the painter may thus have originated from a common need to be freed from existing artistic movements. His plays, like Pollock's paintings, are "ambiguous, private rather than public, psychological rather than sociological, vague rather than specific" (Cernuschi 32).

The first explicit reference to Pollock in one of Williams's plays comes long after the two first met. *The Day on Which a Man Dies*, a play Williams wrote in 1960, a few years after Pollock's death, can be read as an homage to a painter he saw, at the time, as a double of himself. But it is in fact a great deal more than that; the way the death of the artist is dramatized in the play shows that the painter and the playwright faced a similar artistic challenge.

Between 1960, when Williams finished writing *Day*, and 1969, when *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* premiered Off-Broadway, the focus seems to have shifted from Japanese theatre to a "stripping down" inspired by abstract painting. The original work was influenced by Noh theatre as well as by a Japanese art movement known as Gutai which, as Annette Saddik notes in her introduction to *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays*, manifests itself through "the death of the painter and the eccentric means by which paintings are created and destroyed on stage" (xvii). Dedicated to the writer Yukio Mishima and subtitled *An Occidental* Noh *Play*, *Day* is filled with references to Noh theatre, starting with the two stage assistants who play various secondary roles and comment upon the action in a detached way. The central theme is the death of the artist, a painter named Man. Quite significantly, death is staged as his ultimate act of creation

and, more significantly still, as an attempt at destroying an image, that of the woman, the "other" he can no longer possess:

> MAN: Images!—Come back! [*He turns about, giggling crazily, and whistling for them (his lost visions) as if they were dogs.*] I think I could do it today, I think I could really do it! . . .
>
> [*He rushes to the table and drains the bottle of Lysol. It cuts him like a fire in his mouth, throat, and belly. He gags and crouches over. A Stage Assistant jerks a string that releases from the ceiling a paper transparency on which is a line-drawing of the woman's lovely nude body. It falls in front of the man. Percussive music. After a few moments, the man stumbles through the thin paper. Instantly, the Stage Assistant lowers another paper transparency on which the woman's body is projected still larger. The man breaks through the second piece of paper. Then the Stage Assistant lowers another large tissue rectangle on which the woman's body is three times larger than life-size.*
>
> *The percussion is augmented by wind instruments, grotesquely lyrical and mocking.*
>
> *It takes some moments longer for the man to crash through this third projection, and when he does, he's dying.*] (*The Day on Which a Man Dies* 40)

The "line-drawing" of the woman's body is the visual embodiment of a limit, a frontier to be crossed by the artist searching for "lost visions." It is a dangerous frontier, since it leads him to his death, but breaking through it is the necessary, ultimate step toward freedom. Three times, the painter destroys the image of the woman that becomes larger and larger, threatening to enclose him in its expanding contours. The sexual implications of this repeated action are obvious, but his desire for the woman's body mingles with a desire for new images to paint. His desperate attempts at breaking through the line representing the woman's body reveal a need for a sexual as well as an artistic fusion. The symbolic dimension of the line as a separating and confining limit that must be broken through further reflects an artistic dilemma Pollock solved pictorially, in liberating the line from its figurative function.

An examination of *Number One*, or of any of Pollock's finest paintings from the late 1940s, reveals that his all-over line does not give rise to positive and negative areas: we are not made to feel that one part of the canvas demands to be read as figure, whether abstract or representational, against another part of the canvas read as ground. There is no inside or outside to Pollock's line or to the space through which it moves. Thus line, in Pollock's all-over drip paintings of 1947–50, has been freed at last from the job of describing contours and bounding shapes (Fried 98).

The death of the artist, as envisioned in *Day*, is the visual expression of Williams's need to push the limits of his art as far as possible, to a point of no return that Pollock seemed to have reached before him. The line that delineates the shape of the woman's body is a finished form. Breaking through it means moving away from existing modes

of expression toward new, unexplored areas. *Day* thus appears as a landmark in the evolution of the "plastic theatre." It announces the move toward abstraction Williams claimed in 1944.

As he revised the play, Williams drew more explicit parallels with painting, suppressing the stage assistants and reducing the stage to a single set where the main elements were the line of the bar, the circle of the table, and the arch through which the characters entered and left the stage. Man and Woman became Mark, an alcoholic painter, and Miriam, his wife. In this play, the death of the artist will occur discreetly, a slight disturbance in the course of things:

> MARK: Put the words back in a box and nail down the lid. *Fini.*—Wait for me just ten minutes. Watch the clock and clock me. I'll remove the tissue and talcum my face and be back in ten minutes, exactly.
>
> [*He staggers and falls to the floor. Leonard crouches over him quickly, and feels his pulse. Leonard motions to the Barman.*]
>
> LEONARD: Barman.
>
> [*They carry the body of Mark out of the bar.*] (*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* 50)

From *Day* to *In the Bar*, the focus has shifted. Instead of being put into dramatic form, the death of the artist is expressed through visual terms. The line, circle, and semicircle that constitute the set take precedence over the characters, turning the stage into the flat surface of a painter's canvas:

> Williams uses the canvas of *In the Bar* to move beyond the spoken word as dialogue by employing the expressionist painter's method. His theatricalized images become painterly images; his theatrical spaces become painterly spaces. Williams redirects the dramatic emphasis from language to image in the plastic space of *In the Bar*. (Smith Ruckel 90)

Terri Smith Ruckel underlines the role of the line as an enclosing boundary. She demonstrates how the table of *In the Bar* serves as a link between the two main characters, locking them in a deadly embrace that symbolizes their mutual dependence. She argues that the line formed by the contours of the characters' bodies and the table brings Mark and Miriam together, making them one and "the same person, one shape that might be construed as two" (88). She adds that "much like Pollock, Williams wants to create a canvas that reflects the struggle between man and the performance of creation, and he attempts this visual creation on the dramatic canvas of *In the Bar*" (90).

Once again, what brings Williams and Pollock together is the conception of the line as a frontier to be crossed. The circle of the table that encloses Mark and Miriam is the main symbol of the play. It materializes the "circle of light" that Miriam equates with "the approving look of God" in the play's last part (*In the Bar* 53). It is a never-ending line that protects and confines Mark as a man and an artist, a line he desperately wants

to cross, even if it means death. Miriam's last speech reinforces the idea of the circle as a reassuring, delimited space outside of which there is nothing but darkness and death:

> MIRIAM: The circle is narrow. And protective. We have to stay inside. It's our existence and our protection. The protection of our existence. It's our home if we have one.
>
> LEONARD: Not to be trusted always.
>
> MIRIAM: You know and I know it's dangerous not to stay in it. There's no reason to take a voluntary step outside of the. Do you understand that? [*He nods.*] Miriam Conley is not going to step outside the circle of light. It's dangerous, I don't dare to or care to. This well-defined circle of light is our defense against. Outside of it there's dimness that increases to darkness: never my territory. (51)

Despite her unwillingness to venture into the unknown, unlimited space outside the circle, Miriam is the one who wants to sever the link that ties her to a man whose "dependence on [her] is like a baby" (36). This is repeatedly referred to in the play as a need to put "some space" between her and Mark. Her longing for separation thus parallels Mark's yearning for oneness. Both of their dreams come true when Mark dies. Death indeed separates them forever but, as the ultimate dissolving of the self into the world, it also achieves the fusion the artist desperately sought. The shape of the circle thus haunts the play, symbolizing a paradoxical desire that manifests itself through the conflicting relations opposing the main characters.

Throughout the play, Mark and Miriam's mutual dependency is translated in visual terms. Miriam appears as an indomitable woman who swears, smokes, and "*places her hand on* [the barman's] *crotch*" (12), in a reversal of the behaviors conventionally associated with femininity. Her rejection of traditional gender expectations is expressed through her repeated requests that the barman remove a flower from the table. When she finally hurls the flower at the bar, she states her desire to cross the line that imprisons her. That line, represented by the contours of the table, is the symbolical limit she must break through to escape from Mark: "There's a limit to things and I want out" (40). Her desire to cross the line is further expressed through her coarse attempts at seducing the barman, who desperately seeks refuge behind the line of the bar, a barrier she boldly crosses when she decides to make herself a drink and "*goes back of the bar and* [the barman] *goes in front of it with noticeable rapidity*" (33). Miriam's every action serves to establish her as a transgressor. Her fondness for clipping flowers, for instance, is a habit that Mark is quick to link to a penchant for castration: "When I heard you were clipping flowers outside my studio, it would sometimes occur to me that you wished the flowers you were clipping were my" (29). A threatening character, Miriam belongs to an uncivilized world. Unlike the cut flower the barman keeps placing on her table, she doesn't "disguise [her] true nature" (19), preferring to be a "wild" creature who says "savage things" (51) or a

"compulsive bitch" (30) hunting "desired strangers" (37) to escape from her husband's "tyrannical dependence" (27).

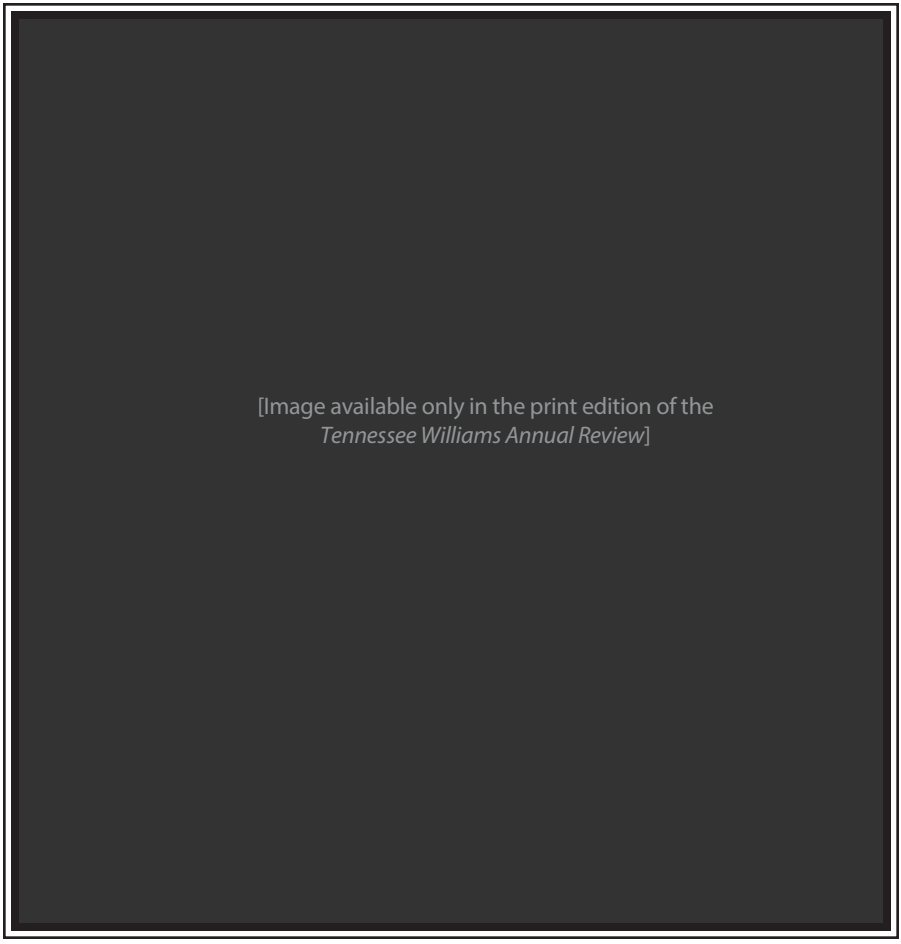
In stark contrast with Miriam, Mark is presented as a pitiful character, constantly crashing into objects, stumbling, or leaning against walls for support. It is as if he is unable to maintain a distance between himself and the world. Mark yearns for a oneness that, in his words, feels like "crossing the frontier of a country [he has] no permission to enter" (19). He too wishes to cross a limit that would free his art and liberate color and light from the enclosing contours of the line. Equating the intimacy between the artist and his work with the feelings existing between husband and wife, Mark curiously describes the forbidden place he wants to reach as "a jungle country with wild men crouching in bushes, in in in—trees, with poison arrows to" (23), thus reinforcing the analogy between his artistic preoccupations and his desire for the "wild" woman's body. As "two sides of one person" (*Conversations* 294), Mark and Miriam are opposites brought together in "the circle of light" that is the stage. The table around which the action of the play is centered is the main motif of the painting Williams wants to create.

The parallels between Pollock and the character Mark go beyond a shared profession; stylistic tendencies link Pollock to Mark and, in turn, to Williams himself:

> MIRIAM: Mark hasn't shown any marked preference for figurative or conventional styles of. He's gone through drip, fling, sopped, stained, saturated, scraped, ripped, cut, skeins of, mounds of heroically enduring color, but now he's arrived at a departure that's a real departure that I doubt he'll return from. (41)

Reducing the stage and the action of *In the Bar* to "abstracts"—that is, visual motifs such as the circle, symbolizing oneness, and the broken circle or the line, representing separation—Williams gives a new direction to his "plastic theatre." Like Pollock, who gave up figuration in his all-over paintings, Williams writes a play that reflects his radical departure from the kind of writing that had made him famous in the 1940s and '50s.

Interestingly, the motif of the circle related to the union of opposites appears in a 1943 painting by Pollock entitled *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*. As a transitional work, the painting announces the abstractions of Pollock's later years. In the upper part of the canvas, the spectator can make out two figures that merge, below, into one indistinct mass of billowing white forms. The figure on the right is identified by the title as the Moon-Woman. She is frozen in the act of cutting a circle with a knife. The broken contour of the circle is in the upper center of the painting. In the upper left, an indefinite red figure seems to bow its head in a submissive attitude that contrasts with the proud, warlike aspect of the Moon-Woman, who wears feathers on her head. The name given to her in the title associates her with the moon, the archetypal symbol of the female principle in Jungian theory. Pollock "spent four years in Jungian analysis" (Cernushi



The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle *by Jackson Pollock; © 1943 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY*

64), and "even if he did not read Jung" (69), he was familiar with Jungian symbolism. Williams entered Jungian analysis in 1957 and developed an interest in "the man with the cosmic-unconscious theory" (*Notebooks* 382n596) as early as 1943. The resemblance between Miriam and Pollock's Moon-Woman is first hinted at through the description of Miriam's hat: "*She wears a hat crowned with blue-black cock feathers*" (3). The correspondence is further underlined by the central position given to the circle in both works. Pollock's circle—an enclosing line that has to be broken in order to differentiate two beings from one indistinct red mass—is transposed, in Williams's work, into the visual symbol of the table.

Yet, inasmuch as it is a liberating act, the cutting of the circle reflects an artistic dilemma. The following passage from *In the Bar* illustrates this point:

MARK: For the first time, nothing that sep, sep!
MIRIAM: Are you trying to say separates?
MARK: Yes, separates, holds at some dis!
MIRIAM: To translate your incoherence, holds at some distance, is that it?
MARK: You understand what I'm trying to say. (17)

By completing Mark's sentences, Miriam not only acknowledges the couple's mutual dependence but also assigns meaning to his words. Without her, Mark's language would not make any sense; it would remain incomplete and incoherent, a symbol of the chaos that threatens to engulf him. By ending Mark's sentences, Miriam puts a limit to the infinite potentialities of language. Meaning as well as existence can be reached only at the cost of a separation, and Miriam is on the side of meaning and life. Without her, Mark cannot exist as a complete, meaningful being. Similarly, in *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, the act of cutting gives birth to the red shape on the upper left part of the painting, allowing the spectator to differentiate it from the chaos of merging forms in the lower part. The painting and the play thus reflect the same dilemma, that of the artist torn between a desire for oneness (the circle) and the vital need to exist as a meaningful yet inevitably incomplete being (the cut circle, or the line).

At the end of the play, this dilemma is acted out symbolically. After Mark's death, the table remains center stage. As the unbroken circle from which Mark and Miriam are now excluded, it is a painful reminder of an ideal, irretrievable union. The barman, reinstating the barriers necessary for life to go on, replaces "*the overturned stool to its place, . . . crosses to the center table, takes the two glasses and returns to behind the bar*" (50). Yet this return to a perfect, finite form cannot completely erase the signs of the performance. Visual traces of the cutting of the circle remain. They become visible when Miriam, realizing that part of herself has been torn away, "*wrenches the bracelets from her arms and flings them to her feet*" (53), thus ending the play with a final image of a broken circle.

Williams weaves elements of Pollock's art and life together in a play that can be read as his own new artistic credo. Despite the pessimistic ending of *In the Bar*, with this work he paves the way for "something more abstract" in his future work. *In the Bar* announces the liberation of a playwright who is trying to move out of "the circle of light" that has defined and confined his writing. Seen in this perspective, Mark's death heralds a new beginning. Williams's use of language turns the name of the character into a simple mark on an abstract stage:

LEONARD: Absence of Mark.
MIRIAM: Mark that made the mistake of deliberately moving out of the.
LEONARD: Yes, Mark's absence.
MIRIAM: Of the man who has made a crossing that neither of us but each of us. (53)

The repetition of the name, together with the alternation of the genitive, underlines the distance separating the word from its referent in the world. Now that Mark is dead and his body has been removed from the stage, his name has become a sign, a floating word with no body, no reality, attached to it. The line has been crossed, and the longed-for fusion has finally occurred: Mark has become a signature on the canvas of *In the Bar*. Williams removed his body from the stage and left his spectators with a mere mark in an attempt to free language from its codes and conventions. The playwright thus states his desire to return to a primordial mode of expression, to an original language made of marks instead of words.

The Dream of Oneness: Williams's and Pollock's Totemic Figures

The return to a primitive unity further manifests itself in Williams's and Pollock's art through the presence of ambivalent figures reflecting both artists' quest for a complete, primordial self. Embracing contradictory elements, these figures bear many similarities to the totem of primitive societies. According to Freud's definition, the totem is "the common ancestor of the clan" and "at the same time, their guardian and helper." Often represented by an animal and "more rarely [by] a plant or a natural phenomenon," the totem is "inherent, not in some individual animal or entity, but in all the individuals of a given class" (Freud 3). The presence of totemic characters in Pollock's semi-figurative works of the 1940s and in some of Williams's late plays reveals an affinity between the two artists. They manifest a common need to unveil the true nature of humanity, the part that had disappeared under the veneer of civilization and was commonly referred to as "the unconscious" in the post-Freudian age. In Pollock's paintings, these figures evince a "tendency to rethink conventional divisions by reintegrating and recombining the traditionally separate" (Cernuschi 83). This also applies to Williams, who, like Pollock, found inspiration in myth, Jungian archetypes, and the experimental Surrealist creation of figures that merge opposites together.

Williams's fascination with hermaphroditic figures is but one aspect of his dream of a primordial self. Because the hermaphrodite combines the traditionally separate characteristics of male and female, it embodies an ideal oneness the playwright mentions in a poem written in 1976:

> Androgyne, mon amour,
> brochette de cœur was plat du jour,
> (heart lifted on a metal skewer,
> encore saignante et palpitante)
> where I dined au solitaire,
> table intime, one rose vase,

lighted dimly, wildly gay,
as, punctually, across the bay
mist advanced its pompe funèbre,
its coolly silvered drift of gray,
nightly requiem performed for
mourners who have slipped away . . .

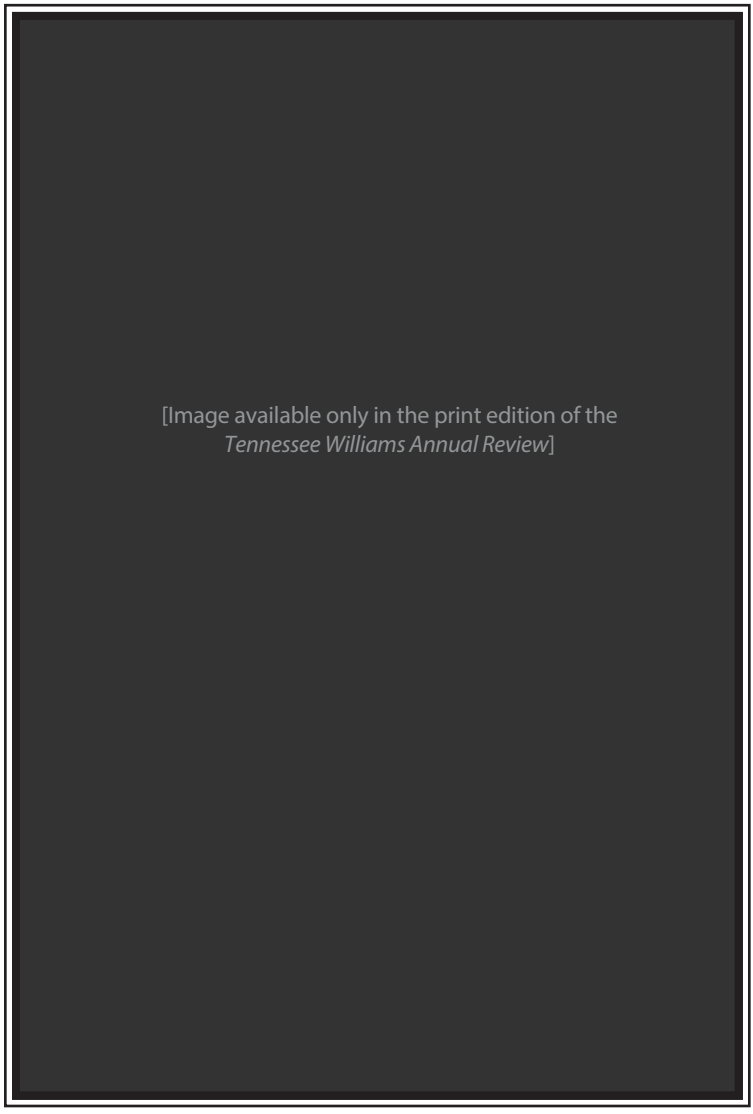
Well, that's it, the evening scene,
Mon amour, Androgyne. ("Androgyne" 89)

The chiasmus that opens and closes the first verse; the red heart served on a plate; the silver-gray mist, a harbinger of death: all suggest the cycle of life and the ephemeral nature of earthly love. The setting of the poem recalls the stage of *In the Bar*, as Williams muses over the ideal being that also haunted Mark and Miriam:

MIRIAM: —Are we two people, Mark, or are we—
MARK [*With the force of dread*]: Stop there! [*She lifts her hands to her face, but the words continue through it.*]
MIRIAM: Two sides of!
MARK: Stop!
MIRIAM: One! An artist inhabiting the body of a compulsive—
MARK: Bitch! (*In the Bar* 30)

The conception of a fractured being made of two separate halves both longing and dreading to be reunited reappears in *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow*, a two-character play from 1970. A woman and a man, called One and Two, complete each other's sentences in fractured language that recalls the conversations between Miriam and Mark and foreshadows the interactions of Williams's symbiotic pairs in several of his late plays. One is dying, and Two is described as a depressive, extremely shy character who won't be able to live without her. Two's written declaration to One encapsulates the tragedy of their situation: "I love you and I'm afraid" (*I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* 140) is an admission of both love and fear. The need to love is counteracted by the fear of loss, neutralizing any attempted action and resulting in total inertia. In this play, the future is unimaginable and the past can't be retrieved: "There's no way back there, believe me" (141). To fill the void of a loss that has not yet occurred but already separates them, One and Two talk about unimportant things to prevent themselves from thinking, stalling time with trifles until the dreaded moment when One dies and Two must take her place:

ONE: I think you've always wanted to stay in my house. Well, now's your chance, so make yourself at home. You know where everything is: the TV set, the liquor, the Frigidaire, the downstairs bedroom and



Male and Female *by Jackson Pollock; © 1942–43 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; courtesy The Philadelphia Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY*

> bathroom. I leave you with all these delights. I'm going to sleep in a minute. I suppose it's still possible that tomorrow you'll pull yourself together and meet your classes. I wouldn't bet on it, though. (149)

The interchangeability of One and Two is further pointed out by their association with the objects surrounding them, as One makes clear at the beginning of the play: "I see you every evening. It wouldn't be evening without you and the card game and the news on TV" (134). Yet, focusing on things can't stop them from thinking about their confinement into two separate bodies:

> TWO: I think you're still in pain. Aren't you?
>
> ONE: If I am, it's my pain, not yours, and I have the right not to discuss it, don't I? I think a person in pain has the privilege of keeping it to himself. (145)

No matter how hard Two tries, One will die alone. Fusing with the other remains an impossible dream, a dream Williams explores through the complementary couples that populate his late plays. Playing on the idea of interchangeability, the author makes it hard for the spectator to differentiate one character from another. In *Out Cry*, for instance, Felice and Clare both have long hair, which adds to the ambiguity created by their unisex names. The playwright's use of pronouns further blurs distinctions, as "you" and "I" repeatedly merge into an inclusive "we":

> FELICE: Well? Well? Do we do it or forget it?
>
> CLARE: Sometimes our fear is . . .
>
> FELICE: Our private badge of . . .
>
> CLARE: Courage . . .
>
> FELICE: Right! The door is open. Are we going out?
>
> [*Pause. She backs away from him a step.*] (*Out Cry* 804)

Clare's step backward finally breaks the unity, reestablishing the separate use of "you" and "I."

The 1942–43 painting titled *Male and Female* shows that Pollock was also haunted by the dream of an ideal, whole state of being in which opposites meet. The two black poles facing each other on the right and left parts of the canvas are totemic figures. Both are adorned with feminine and masculine attributes that prevent the spectator from confining them to a specific gender class.[2] In this light, both figures combine the sense of oneness with the notion of duality expressed in the title. They thus take part in a strange, impossible equation that Pollock attempted to solve on the totem pole represented in the right part of the painting. The result inscribed under the long succession of numbers is 69. Beyond the sexual hint, the mirror-like nature of two perfectly reversible numbers reveals a deeper meaning. Like ambiguous totem poles, the numbers 6 and 9 appear as two incomplete halves, expressing pictorially what Cernuschi terms "an archaic and primal state of being where contraries are reconciled" (83). Such a state is true, too, of Williams's complementary couples. Thus Pollock and Williams both use their respective mediums to play on the notions of unity and duality, trying to solve an impossible equation and make 2 become 1.

The totem represents a oneness that encompasses much more than the idea of a union of the sexes. At a crossroads between the masculine and feminine, the animate and inanimate, the totem of primitive societies materializes a collapse of all notions of

frontiers. From the totem, each member of the clan derives his/her identity, name, and function. The totem stands as the origin of being, the point from which existence and meaning derive. This original moment is reenacted through a number of rites on which the life of the community depends. Williams never uses the word "totem" in his plays, but the "*monolithic presence*" of the "*dark statue*" that dominates the stage of *Out Cry* bears many of its characteristics. The statue provokes the first action of the play:

> [Felice] *is staring from the raked platform . . . at a huge, dark statue upstage, a work of great power and darkly subjective meaning. . . .*
>
> *Almost immediately he starts to move toward it, at first slowly and cautiously. . . . Then he leaps off to the pediment of the sculpture that towers over him and begins a fierce, demonic effort to push it away.* (775)

The "chained monster" (777) Felice would like to move away from the stage holds a secret that he and his sister refuse to acknowledge, a secret that is both the origin and end of the play. Felice and Clare try to escape from it through acting, but no matter how far their tours take them, the secret never stops pursuing them:

> CLARE: Felice, that chained monster's *obscene!*
>
> FELICE: I made the same observation, I tried to move it, I couldn't, I called for assistance, I got none, so now we have to forget it. And by now you surely must have noticed that on these long, long tours we run always into certain *unalterable circumstances* that we just have to—*ignore!* (777)

Gradually, the spectator understands that the terrible secret has something to do with the death of Felice and Clare's parents, a death first described as a "terrible accident" (796) and then as a murder followed by a suicide. Williams gives the spectator two opposite versions. In the first one, their father killed their mother and then committed suicide; in the second, "what we saw was Mother with the revolver, first killing Father and then herself and—" (803). This tragedy is the original act that separates the children from their parents, but it is also the act that will end the play—since, within the internal logic of this play, the only way for Felice and Clare to escape from the secret is to repeat it by killing themselves. The statue thus stands as the reminder of an original, haunting truth, a trauma that will have to be reenacted because there is no way out of the tragic cycle that places death at the beginning and end of life. The statue is a totem because it represents the authority of the ancestors (the parents) who dictate to the members of the tribe (the children) the rituals to perform.

Moreover, the statue appears as the external reflection of inner character, and as such it materializes the indeterminate nature of the unconscious. This is alluded to in parenthesis at the beginning of the play:

> *Something about* [the statue]*, its monolithic presence and its suggestion of things anguished and perverse (in* [Felice's] *own nature?) rivet his attention, which is shocked and fearful.* (775)

Then, as Felice calls for help, he lacks words to describe the imposing prop: "*Is someone, anyone, back here to help move this—please?*" (775). Suggesting something impossible to name, the statue is further referred to as "it" or "this." Yet what cannot be named soon turns out to be "a monstrous aberration" and an "obscene chained monster" (777). The language suggests the abnormal nature of an object that has to be moved away to an invisible space because it deviates from a norm. The statue of *Out Cry* is taboo, which reinforces its identification with the primitive totem. What's more, the statue reflects the taboo desires of the unconscious that threaten to pervade the stage. Like Clare's "strangulated cry" uttered at the beginning of the play, the statue represents a secret that "rises reluctantly to the surface of consciousness" (776), striving to find expression. Williams's dark statue brings together the familiar and the strange, the self and the other, in a dissolving of limits characteristic of the totem. It is the "terrifying demon" embodied by the totem in primitive societies:

> A primitive chief is not only disguised as the animal; when he appears at initiation rites in full animal disguise, he *is* the animal. Still more, he is an animal spirit, a terrifying demon who performs circumcision. At such moments he incorporates or represents the ancestor of the tribe and the clan, and therefore the primal god himself. He represents, and is, the "totem" animal. (Jung 262–63)

In addition, the theatre in which Felice and Clare are imprisoned is situated in a "primitive faraway place" (779) where confusion reigns. Felice admits he "can't tell [Clare's] highs from [her] lows any more" (779). Echoing his words, Clare later refers to the original moment of her parents' death as the night when no one "could tell the dead from the living" (802). The statue that keeps the secret of their past as well as their future materializes that sense of confusion. As both a reminder of an original moment and a harbinger of death, it brings together the beginning and the end in a neutralization of all limits or separations. In that sense, the statue recalls the symbol of the circle, representing oneness, in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*.

The totemic figure of *Out Cry* reveals Williams's affinity with Abstract Expressionism's fascination "with primitive ways of thinking and with humanity's relation to the natural dimension" (Cernuschi 78). But what brings Williams and Pollock together is their visual, often violent way of mixing forms to break down the rigid distinctions separating humans from beasts. In an untitled drawing made in 1939–40, for instance, Pollock achieves "an unprecedented fusion of human and animal forms" (76). Out of the jumble of forms Cernuschi discerns two human heads, an embryo-like figure, and several horses'

heads and limbs. Pollock's cluster of forms creates a homogeneous mass that joins opposites together. What appears to be a bird's pointed beak is seen entering the open mouth of a human head in the bottom left part of the drawing, while the embryo-like shape seems to come out of the body of a horse whose hind legs are recognizable on the right. Both violent death and unnatural birth are represented in the painter's monstrous combination of animal and human forms. The drawing reveals Pollock's attempts at bringing back to the level of consciousness the primitive, animal part of human nature. In the totemic works of the 1940s, he merges various recognizable forms into one homogeneous mass to create monstrous creatures that bring opposites together and stand as visual expressions of oneness.

In *The Gnädiges Fräulein* (1965), Williams similarly combines animal and human elements to create fantastic birds whose totemic dimension is brought out first through their link to the divine. Called Cocaloonies throughout the play, these monstrous birds were initially referred to as "pelicans" by the playwright. In Christian mythology, the pelican was said to have given its blood to feed its babies; it later became associated with Christ in religious paintings. Moreover, Williams indicates that the only Cocaloony present onstage should be played by an actor wearing a giant pelican head, showing his desire to mingle human and animal attributes in the manner of a totem. The Cocaloony is thus presented as a hybrid, monstrous creature belonging to a primitive, cruel, and violent world.

In addition, the disruptive birds turn the world upside down, reversing the conventional notions of "high" and "low" and reducing humans to the position of beasts:

> POLLY: Was that two cocaloony birds that flew over or was it just one cocaloony bird that made a U-turn and flew back over again? OOPS! Bird-watchers, watch those birds! They're very dangerous birds when agitated and they sure do seem to be agitated today. OOPS! [*She crouches under another swoosh*]—I might as well remain in this position if it wasn't so inelegant for a lady in my position. (*The Gnädiges Fräulein* 219)

The Cocaloonies' capacity to wreak havoc underlines their resemblance in form and function to the Native American figure of the Trickster. In Native American mythology, the Trickster is often represented as a crow or a raven and is known as a deceitful and mischievous character. Karine Weisshuhn portrays it as an archetypal figure, "both creative and destructive, who knows neither good nor evil but causes both; acting on instinct only, it is a creature deprived of any conscious will" (48). Like the Trickster, Williams's Cocaloonies signal a dissolving of the codes, laws, and norms by which so-called civilized people live. Much like Pollock's monstrous creations, they suggest the intermingling of animal and human forms. The Cocaloonies are the totems of the modern world as Williams envisions it: they represent humanity's link to the primitive

as well as its doom. Standing halfway between the rituals of primitive societies and the artificiality of theatrical representation, they are at the crossroads of reality and art.

Through their hybrid figures, Williams and Pollock express a desire to cross the line, both literally and symbolically, and reach that borderline "state of flux, uncertainty, openness and experimentation" (Chaudhuri 62) where opposites can be reconciled. On Pollock's canvases, these recognizable forms gradually disappear under the tangle of lines and colors of the all-over paintings—while in Williams's late works, they exhibit their artificiality in the most extreme ways. Williams's "outrageous" (Dorff 13)[3] plays are exaggeratingly theatrical. They "take as their subject a pre-existing dramatic form . . . and, through the superimposition of a metatheatrical level that emphasizes doubleness, create an 'ironic . . . repetition with a difference'" (Dorff 14). Like Pollock, who juxtaposed layers of paint upon his canvases, Williams superimposed levels of theatricality in his late plays to create the sense of confusion that arises when all notions of limits vanish.

Confusion and Disorientation: The Magic of Trance

What is to be found in the depths of Pollock's abstractions? The thickness of the canvases made in the late 1940s indeed suggests the presence of something hidden beneath the layers of paint. The title of one of them illustrates this point. *Full Fathom Five* was painted in 1947 and was titled after a line from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Pollock did not choose the title himself; yet, by not objecting to it, he implicitly revealed a central tenet of his work at this stage of his career. As Lanchner explains:

> At the time [*Full Fathom Five*] was painted Pollock was particularly insistent that each of his canvases was possessed of its own life, independent of any specifically descriptive function. Nonetheless, he had no objections when a neighbor proposed that he adopt a line from William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* as the title of his new painting. The nearly complete verse reads as follows: "Full fathom five thy father lies: / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes: / Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth not suffer a sea change / Into something rich and strange." (Lanchner 23)

The surface of *Full Fathom Five* reveals the presence of a stocky human figure buried under the thick layers of paint. Its recognizable contours, delineated by various small objects such as nails or buttons, were brought to light by an x-ray photograph of the painting. Interviewed in 1969, Lee Krasner assessed her husband's desire to hide the forms and figures originally present on the canvas:

> I saw his paintings evolve. Many of them, many of the most abstract, began with more or less recognizable imagery—heads, parts of the body, fantastic creatures. Once I asked Jackson why he didn't stop the painting when a given image was exposed. He said, "I choose to veil the imagery." (qtd. in Stuckey 183)

Similarly, the superimposition of theatrical levels in Williams's late plays seems to function as a series of veils—or theatre curtains—coming between the world and its representation onstage, accordingly denying the spectator any clear or immediate interpretation of the spectacle that unfolds before his/her eyes. The 1967 London production of the initial version of *Out Cry*, titled *The Two-Character Play*, was regarded as a puzzling and obscure work. David Wade was one of the few critics to see the elusiveness of meaning in a more positive light: "Mr. Williams succeeds quite brilliantly in sustaining the idea that nothing whatever is to be relied upon and that if we get through one veil there is just another beyond" (qtd. in Saddik, *Politics of Reputation* 27). Pollock's thickening of the surface is thus transposed onto the stage, directing Williams's theatre toward "something more abstract." Williams never explicitly acknowledged the influence of Pollock on his writing, but there is definitely an affinity between the two artists that led them to follow the same path, using their respective mediums to express similar artistic and existential preoccupations. The outcasts, failed artists, fantastic creatures, histrionic figures, and even ghosts that people the late plays function as so many masks put on the conventional, easily recognizable face of the real. These figures are marginal; they stand outside of the conventional, reassuring "circle of light" referred to as "the approving look of God" in *In the Bar*. They allow the playwright to cross the line and expose what is usually kept aside, in the margins. For instance, as soon as the Fräulein enters the stage, her incongruous appearance estranges her from her surroundings:

> The Gnädiges Fräulein is now out on the porch. She wears a curious costume which would not be out of place at the Moulin Rouge in the time of Toulouse-Lautrec. One eye is covered by a large blood-stained bandage. Her hair is an aureole of bright orange curls, very fuzzy. (230)

As a histrionic character (as well as an outcast and a failed artist), she blurs the lines separating the world from the stage. She is "out of place," a figure of the other side emerging on stage and bringing with her what should be kept in the dark, literally and symbolically. The Fräulein can thus be regarded as "obscene," that is, as someone who should not be seen. And yet, she is "onto" (from the Latin *ob*) the "scene" (from the Latin *skènè*, which refers to the area at the back of the stage), in full view of the spectators.[4] Williams thus comes back to the original function of theatre, reconciling what is commonly understood as "obscene" with the sense of the spectacular.

The etymological link between the obscene and the spectacular explains why the marginal characters that Williams puts center stage—such as the Fräulein (performer), Mark (painter), or Felice and Clare (actors)—belong not only to the world of art but also to the real world of outcasts. The prostitutes Trinket and Celeste in *The Mutilated*, the homosexual manager in *Now the Cats with Jewelled Claws*, or the senile old characters in *Lifeboat Drill* are but a few examples of the late plays' shift toward the margins.

The obscene manifests itself through garish clothes, eccentric haircuts, or outrageous makeup. Like the makeup Bea uses to hide her skin eruption, it is a mask covering the face of the real:

> BEA: May I borrow your compact?
> MADGE: No.
> BEA: Why not?
> MADGE: You have a skin eruption that may be contagious.
> (*Now the Cats* 300)

The character of Leona in *Confessional* further underlines the link between theatre and world. Her stereotypically female job as a beautician places her on the side of artifice, while her histrionic behaviors—drinking, screaming, throwing chairs—are stereotypically male. Leona is a living paradox, a beautician who looks like "*a 'villain' wrestler*" (*Confessional* 153). Out of these contradictions emerges a sense of the obscene, a theme that gradually moves from the margin of Williams's work to the center after 1961.

Thus displaced into a space beyond limits where artistic representation bears the mark of artifice, Leona, the Fräulein, the ghosts in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980), or the actors in *Out Cry* move away from realism. Devoid of psychological depth, they are grotesque caricatures or pathetic sketches with whom the spectator cannot identify. In fact, their ostentatious artificiality is their only substance. Of course, grotesque figures appear in Williams's earlier plays, too: the Fahrenkopf family in *The Night of the Iguana*, the libertine and the drunkard seen by means of transparency in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But after 1961, these marginal figures move center stage. Like Pollock's superimposition of layers on the surface of the canvas, the playwright's emphasis on theatricality conceals the recognizable face of the real behind a mask—the better to lead the spectator into a maze where he/she finally gets lost.

The spectator's sense of confusion arises from the embedding of various performances in other performances. This theatre-within-a-theatre strategy complicates his/her relation to the spectacle. Such is the case in *The Gnädiges Fräulein*, where the spectator finds himself/herself watching characters watching a performance:

> POLLY: She's holding her scrapbook out.
> MOLLY: I'm looking at her. I'm observing her actions.
> POLLY: I think she wants you to put her scrapbook away.
> MOLLY: It will be interesting to see what she finally does with it when she discovers that no one is going to accept it from her hand, Polly. [*The Fräulein suddenly tosses the scrapbook into the yard, raising her arms and crouching: a dramatic gesture accompanied by another dismal soliloquy of one vowel, prolonged . . .*]
> POLLY: Sudden.—Action. (249)

In this passage, Polly and Molly are simultaneously spectators and stage directors of the Fräulein's performance. In fact, Williams presents the spectator with a series of masks, interweaving the performances as so many theatrical curtains coming between audience and character. The juxtaposition of masks creates a sense of confusion, as the audience is made to feel that there is no end to artifice. The result is a thickening of the surface—which, interestingly, gains some depth, since the disoriented spectator keeps searching for the hidden recognizable figure, the ultimate secret meaning. Similarly, in Pollock's work

> the drawing is irregular and sinuously curved, while the composition, instead of being orderly and exact, is exuberant and explosive. Both [drawing and composition] suggest the organic, and since the lines of natural forms are varied and unpredictable, we search longer for the recognizable outline (which, of course, isn't there) and are all the more baffled when we cannot find it. (Coates 73)

If, according to Coates, "the recognizable outline" isn't there, it might be because it is not what Pollock and Williams wanted the spectator to find. Indeed, neither Williams nor Pollock draw the spectator's attention to a specific point, a center around which all elements revolve. There are almost no in-depth, realistic characters in Williams's late plays: no Blanche, no Maggie, no Shannon. There are only two-dimensional sketches, colorful masks that briefly attract attention before dissolving into other masks. Smith Ruckel notices this dispersive effect in her analysis of *In the Bar*:

> Mark and Miriam Conley, *In the Bar*'s protagonists, present somewhat of a conundrum for the reader or the spectator. Should the vigorous and bold Miriam be the central focus of the canvas or is the artistically perceptive Mark located at center stage? (86)

Pollock's all-over paintings likewise lead the spectator astray by presenting elusive, constantly shifting centers:

> There are other elements in the painting besides Pollock's line: for example there are hovering spots of bright color, which provide momentary points of focus for one's attention, and in this and other paintings made during these years there are even handprints put there by the painter in the course of his work. But all these are woven together, chiefly by Pollock's line, to create an opulent and, in spite of their diversity, homogeneous visual fabric which both invites the act of seeing on the part of the spectator and yet gives the eye nowhere to rest once and for all. That is, Pollock's all-over drip paintings refuse to bring one's attention to a focus anywhere. (Fried 98)

The "homogeneous fabric" of Pollock's all-over paintings prevents the spectator from discerning any distinct forms or figures. Tangles of black and white lines dissolve into patches of shimmering colors, creating a uniform mass that pervades the whole surface

of the canvases. The spectator's gaze gets lost in this chaos of shifting forms until the final reversal occurs, and it becomes impossible to distinguish bottom from top, surface from depth. While Pollock makes visible a complete dissolving of limits, the spectator falls into an ecstatic state akin to trance.

As the ultimate goal of Pollock's and Williams's art, the state of trance implies the idea of fusion: fusion of the self with the other, the artist with his art, the personal with the collective. Allan Kaprow observes this dissolving of limits in the apparent chaos of Pollock's paintings:

> Employing an iterative principle of a few highly charged elements constantly undergoing variation (improvising, like much Oriental music) Pollock gives us an all-over unity and at the same time a means continuously to respond to a freshness of personal choice. But this type of form allows us just as well an equally strong pleasure in participating in a delirium, a deadening of the reasoning faculties, a loss of "self" in the Western sense of the term. It is this strange combination of extreme individuality and selflessness which makes the work not only remarkably potent, but also indicative of a probably larger frame of psychological reference. (Kaprow 87)

The presence of handprints on the surface of many all-over paintings pictorially represents the impossible meeting of the individual and the universal that Kaprow insightfully equates with a "loss of self." As signatures, these marks of the artist's self signal the existence of "another side," of an inverted reflection that haunts the canvas.

The magic of Pollock's art accordingly consists in showing both of these sides, the face as well as the mask. Through the use of forms and other pictorial means aimed at confusing the spectator, the painter manages to undermine his/her way of seeing. The handprints visible on the surface of *Number One* (1948) prompt a series of questions from Charles Stuckey:

> Do the handprints in *Number One* testify to the pressure cast upon the surface from without (as they should, since Pollock made them in that way), or do they "represent" the palms of hands? Can we imagine them exerting pressure from within and being limited by the painting's surface from extending out into the space of the spectator? Are they the prints of left hands attempting to penetrate the canvas, or are they representations of right hands trying to escape it? (Stuckey 182–83)

Be they traces of the artist's self or of someone else imprisoned within the painting, the handprints disturb and puzzle the spectator because they signal the presence of a vanishing point where all points of reference vanish.

This is where Pollock meets Williams. The sense of disorientation produced by the late plays coincides with a "loss of self" reminiscent of the impression conveyed by Pollock's abstractions. Once the line has been crossed, chaos and confusion rule.

Consider the effect of Mark's death in *In the Bar*, which seems to consign Miriam to aimless wandering:

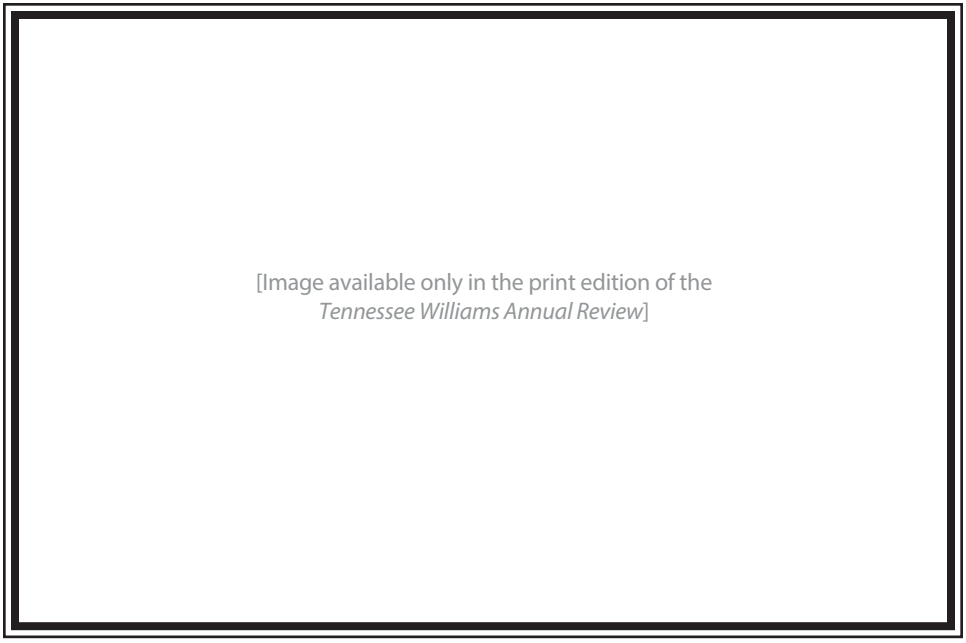
> LEONARD: Miriam, what are your actual plans?
> MIRIAM: I have no plans. I have nowhere to go. (53)

But there is a way out of this existential dead end, as Williams's late plays, like Pollock's all-over paintings, invite the spectator to cross the line separating the world from art and lose his/her way in the maze of representations. In *Out Cry*, Felice and Clare take refuge in their roles to escape from a reality that offers no issue but death:

> FELICE: It was cold even with the lights on us, but I was so lost in the play that it seemed warm as summer.
> CLARE: You're suggesting that—
> FELICE: We must go back into the play.
> CLARE: But with the stage so dim—
> FELICE: If we can imagine summer, we can imagine more light.
> CLARE: When we're lost in the play.
> FELICE: Yes, completely lost in *The Two-Character Play*. (*Out Cry* 822)

Choosing the reality of the role rather than that of the actor/actress playing it appears to be the only feasible solution for the two characters of *Out Cry*. But it is also a matter of survival for a playwright who put himself into his plays to erase the frontiers between life and art. At the end of the line, it is the spectator who gets lost in "a maze of amazement" (*Out Cry* 794), unable to find his/her way out of a labyrinth of masks. To reach the ultimate meaning of all this confusion, the spectator must forget his/her frame of reference and go back to the origins of art, to a time when art was magical and the performer, possessed by his role, fell into a trance, literally forgetting himself and becoming other. Only through the crossing of that ultimate line can the self be liberated from its earthly strings. Significantly, the word "trance" etymologically means "to cross over" (from the Latin verb *transire*). Originally referring to "the passage from life to death," trancelike states provide Williams with the means of mocking death, the ultimate frontier. The redemptive trance Celeste and Trinket fall into at the end of *The Mutilated* (1966) allows them to keep death away and, for a while at least, to enter the place where illusions become true:

> [*There has been a gradual change of light in the room: it now seems to be coming through stained glass windows—a subjective phenomenon of the trance falling over the two women. Celeste stretches out a hand as if feeling for the invisible presence. She suddenly cries out and draws back her hand as if it had touched the presence.*]



Number 1A *by Jackson Pollock; © 1948 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; digital image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by Scala / Art Resource, NY*

> TRINKET: *What, what?*
>
> CELESTE [*sobbing and rocking on her knees*]: I touched her robe, I touched the robe of Our Lady!
>
> TRINKET: *Where is it, where is the robe of Our Lady?*
>
> CELESTE: *Here!* [*She seizes Trinket's hand and draws it forward.*]
>
> TRINKET [*fallen into the trance*]: *Here?* (*The Mutilated* 128)

Williams's late plays are various attempts at reaching that state. Influenced by the ritualistic dimension of primitive art, the playwright explores the relations between art and magic. Creating moments when illusion becomes the only reality, he breathes life into his theatre and revives that magic instant when the real and its image become one and the same.

Williams and Pollock thus cross the same line. The playwright's late plays indeed glorify the power of the mask, making it the only possible reality. The new direction Williams's "plastic theatre" takes after 1961 allows him to elevate illusion to the rank of truth and present the spectator with theatricalized visions of a world that has become incomprehensible, a world that, for the aging playwright, looks like a masquerade:

> No rational, grown-up artist deludes himself with the notion that his inherent, instinctive rejection of the ideologies of failed governments, or

> power-combines that mask themselves as governments, will in the least divert these monoliths from a fixed course toward the slag-heap remnants of once towering cities.
>
> They are hell-bent upon it, and such is the force of their unconscious deathwish that if all the artists and philosophers should unite to oppose them, by this opposition they could only enact a somewhat comical demonstration, suitable for the final two minutes of a television newscast: desperate farmers driving their pigs and goats up the stately Capitol steps would be scarcely more consequential. ("The Misunderstandings and Fears of an Artist's Revolt" 187)

The excess of theatricality, the triumph of the mask over the real, are the answers given by Williams to the absurdities of the modern world.

Williams and Pollock derive their originality from their belief in the magic of art. Their work evolved along similar lines not only because they were children of their age, but also—and primarily—because their vision of the world is not nihilistic. The evolution of their work evinces their search for a meaning to express, and for the means by which to express it. Williams's late plays do not belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, and there is meaning to be found in the depths of Pollock's abstractions. In other words, confusion is a necessary step but not the ultimate aim of their art. And it might not be going too far to say that, in the late plays, Williams finally reaches the truth he had been pursuing all along "with words that are misunderstood and feared because they are the words of an Artist, which must always remain a word most compatible with the word Revolutionary, and so be more than a word" ("Misunderstandings and Fears" 189). Only through the destruction of rigid frames of thought could the last works fully reach a public Williams had always wanted to "embrace" ("The History of a Play" 24). Regarding his art as a means not of communicating but rather of communing with the spectator, the playwright, like the painter, needs the spectator to relinquish all of his/her preconceived ideas. Williams's late plays, which he himself described as his "isolated cave-drawings" in "The Misunderstandings and Fears of an Artist's Revolt" (187), depend more on the spectator's ability to believe in intuitive feelings than on intellectual understanding or knowledge. For, in the playwright's view, "the scratches upon the caves of our solitude" (188) have the power to transport us to that original, magical time when belief was stronger than reason and thus could defeat death:

> FELICE: *Oh, yes, I see it. Its color's so brilliant that it seems to be shouting!*
>
> CLARE: Keep your eyes on it a minute, it's a sight to be seen.
>
> [*She crosses to the sofa: lifts the pillow beneath which the revolver is concealed: gasps and drops the pillow back: looks toward Felice.*]
>
> FELICE: Hurry, it won't hold!
>
> [*She crosses to him and touches his hand.*]

CLARE: —Magic is a habit.

[*They look slowly up at the sunflower projections.*]

FELICE: —Magic is the habit of our existence . . .

[*The lights fade, and they accept its fading, as a death, somehow transcended.*]

(*Out Cry* 824)

Notes

[1] In a letter to Williard Holland, who staged and directed three of his early plays ("Headlines," the script of which seems to have been lost; *Candles to the Sun*; and *Fugitive Kind*), Williams wrote: "Assignments keep me so busy I hardly have any time for independent work. However I am still planning to write the 'Van Gogh' for which I have chosen the title 'The Holy Family' suggested by an anecdote from his life. He took a prostitute to live with him who soon gave birth to an illeg. child by another man. V. G.'s friend, Gauguin, tried to persuade him to leave the woman but V. G. remained devoted to her. In disgust, as he left, the friend exclaimed, 'Ah! The Holy Family—maniac, prostitute and bastard!'—Does that sound too profane? I think the real story of the relationship is rather beautiful and would make good dramatic material." (*Letters* 108)

[2] As Cernuschi observes,

> The painting may be interpreted as the female figure at left, distinguished by her eyelashes and curvilinear form, and the male at right, strictly vertical and exposing an erect phallus at the moment of ejaculation. But the sexual identity implied in the title is far from clear. In fact, some Pollock scholars even disagree as to which figure is male and which is female. The ambiguity, however, may itself be revealing, since totem poles are intentionally sexually ambiguous. For example, in an article titled "Totem Art" in *Dyn* magazine, Wolfgang Paalen wrote that the "ancestral post was originally bisexual, that by its very erection it expresses the male principle, and by its material the female principle (wood symbolizes the maternal element). This corresponds to the archaic *complementary concept* . . . which in many religions is expressed through divinities morally ambivalent and physically hermaphrodite." (81)

[3] The adjective "outrageous" was chosen by Linda Dorff to describe Williams's late plays. The word implies the crossing of a frontier, which Dorff expresses in terms of an attack upon "various aspects of traditional theatre through an unconventional, fantastic mode" (13).

[4] This interpretation of the word "obscene" is based on Georges Zaragoza's etymological approach. Since his definition of "obscene" implies being center stage, saying that theatre is obscene is redundant. To go beyond this tautology, he quotes Sartre in *La Nausée* and comes up with the following definition: "What is 'obscene' is so ostentatiously shown that it blinds you; its presence is linked to a sense of excess, it is *exaggeratingly* there" (3).

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