Narrativa Oscura: The Open Question of Tennessee Williams's "One Arm"

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In the introduction to Tennessee Williams's *Collected Stories* (1985), Gore Vidal suggests the stories "are the true memoir of Tennessee Williams. Whatever happened to him, real or imagined, is here. Except for an occasional excursion into fantasy, he sticks close to life as he experienced or imagined it" (xx). At the time of the volume's publication, just two years after Williams's death, critical attention to the short fiction had focused primarily on its significance as apprentice work and as source material for the plays that made him famous; when Dennis Vannatta published the first book-length study of the short fiction in 1988, he estimated that Williams criticism "runs probably fifty to one—a very rough estimate—concerning the plays rather than the short stories." (ix). Although critical attention came belatedly to the fiction, Williams produced and published it throughout his long career, and the collected stories do indeed represent the scope and variety of his "life as he experienced or imagined it": from the unrequited love of shy loners to the brash machinations of street swindlers, from small Southern towns to exotic cities, from quiet moments of human contact to acts of sudden and shocking violence.

As with all of his work, sexuality and its diversity are significant to many of these texts. Vannatta notes, for example, that as early as 1941, Williams was writing sensitive and interesting short fiction in which homosexuality is treated, and if we wish "to see how a great writer dealt artistically with this very personal, often painful, part of his life, we must turn to his short fiction" (x). In a 1964 essay, William H. Peden noted that the best stories from Williams's first two collections "are those concerned with basically non-exceptional characters" depicted with "understanding, sympathy and compassion," despite the fact that they are "pathological or societal outcasts and rejects" that represent Williams's "almost obsessive preoccupation with homosexuality, decay, and degradation." Peden's assessment is representative in pointing to Williams's sympathetic

treatment of subject matter that is nonetheless often described in the work itself and in the critical analysis with the language of condemnation and disgust, as "unnatural" or "degenerate" (117–20).

More recently, critics have argued that Williams's stories represented homosexuality more openly and more positively than did his plays of the same period; John Clum suggests that Williams's depiction of homosexuality in his theatrical and cinematic texts remained indirect until "public tolerance allowed a candidness in drama which Williams had previously restricted to his stories and poems" (150). David Savran calls several of the prose pieces "avowedly and almost jubilantly gay," while the "pre-Stonewall plays and films, written for a much larger and more popular audience, are more cautious and, to use Williams's word, 'oblique'" (83). Claude J. Summers, in his book on *Gay Fictions*, asserts that Williams "fills his fiction with grotesque characters and situations, and homosexuality in his work also often reeks of decadence." But, he continues, Williams's gay fictions "are never designed merely to shock," for they "present homosexuality straightforwardly and unapologetically," and they are "actually strong and healthy contributions to the literature of compassion" (133). Summers argues that the publication of gay fiction in the 1940s and '50s contributed to the "change of consciousness that has made possible the creation of a homosexual minority" and was one of the "necessary preconditions to gay liberation" (17). Michael S. D. Hooper claims that Williams's use of the short story form in the early 1940s captured the details of his life at the time, for writing prose "may have offered greater freedom at a time when the freshness of Williams's experiences of the gay underworld would have made them compelling material upon which to draw" (97).

Peden calls the title story of Williams's first collection, *One Arm and Other Stories* (1948), among the best from the decade, with its portrait of Oliver, a former sailor and light heavyweight champion who loses his arm in an automobile accident. Oliver leaves the hospital "to look about for destruction," taking up street life and male hustling before murdering a client who had paid him to act in a pornographic film (Williams, "One Arm," *Collected Stories* 176). It is the act of murder, not the act of sodomy, that makes Oliver an extreme version of Williams's many illegal bodies; although he commits sexual crimes for a living, the text's narration makes the distinction that his arrest is "not on an ordinary charge of lewd vagrancy, but for questioning in connection with the murder" (177). With what the story's narrator calls "the mechanical cruelty of the law," Oliver's life ends in state-sanctioned execution after a period on death row during which he receives love letters from former johns coaxing him out of the detachment that defined his life after the accident (179).

Brian M. Peters analyzes "One Arm" and "Desire and the Black Masseur" for their "images of subverted male-male desire," arguing that Williams's use of figurative language in the two stories "reflects the impact of society's often limiting approach to

non-conventional romantic options," and that the stories provide "an articulation of homosexuality that reveals the downfall of the queer character" (109). The presumption that the protagonist of "One Arm" is homosexual has gone unchallenged; although Peters acknowledges that "during his boxing career Oliver is not (to the reader's knowledge) gay," he suggests that once Oliver loses his arm, he "assumes a new 'calling'" as his "heterosexual past is exchanged for a homosexual present" (113). Such an exchange is questionable, but perhaps the question of Oliver's homosexuality is significant precisely because it cannot and should not be answered. To do so would be to delve into a matter that Williams chose to obscure: although the story contains explicit references to Ollie's homosexual activity, it is coy about his homosexual identity.

The story's obliqueness serves to expose the complicated nature of Williams's gay fiction. Indirection in "One Arm" begins with the title, which persisted through many drafts; it points to an absence via a presence, for by referencing the arm that remains, it calls our attention to the missing one. This strategy does not, however, shield us from the tragedy of Oliver's situation, for the title is shockingly graphic. The visibility of the missing arm determines his life, for as a "broken statue of Apollo" he is "unforgettable" (175–76). The narrator tells us that with the arm "had gone the center of his being," but Oliver does not "consciously know" the full impact of the "psychic change which came with his mutilation" (176). His true self is hidden from him and only hinted to us, even as his illegal actions, beginning with transient prostitution and ending with murder, are in plain sight, like the mutilation. The striking contrast of the external injury with the mysterious interiority of its effect suggests that explicit physical desire, when prohibited by cultural norms, can result in an obscuring of the self.

With "One Arm" Williams created a fiction that depicts an extreme version of the reality many Americans faced in the mid-twentieth century, when norms of culture and law had not progressed to match changes in demographics and lifestyles. Oliver represents an individual who has lost "the center of his being"; the accident is the occasion for that loss. The loss does not keep him from doing but from being, and the story explores the idea that with the concealment of identity one may be temporarily free from public scrutiny, but cannot long survive. Williams's own struggles to maintain the integrity of identity in a society that condemned many of his personal and professional choices found their way into his work, which stuck "close to life as he experienced it" and become visible to us with "One Arm": in the published text, in its revision history, and in Williams's own comments on the text.[1]

The question of Oliver's homosexuality is an open one because his center has gone but only the "speechless self knew it." Who he is, including his sexual orientation, is unknowable, even to him; with few exceptions, the story's revelations emerge from action rather than reflection. The mystery of Oliver and the necessity for the mystery

reflect the legal and political climate of the postwar period, when the question "are you now or have you ever been?" destroyed private and public lives. Legal scholar William N. Eskridge Jr. describes the half generation after World War II (1945–61) as an era of close scrutiny of those persons suspected of sexual deviance, a time when "American society and law unequivocally and prominently stigmatized and discouraged the crime against nature," the latter broadly defined to include a multitude of sex crimes. Persons accused of sodomy or other sexual crimes were "not only legal criminals, but also political outlaws theoretically excluded from the franchise, jury and military service, government jobs, professional license, and if foreign even entry in the United States." The nation, he argues, "has never committed more resources to sexual purification than it did during the McCarthy era." From the perspective of homosexuals, Eskridge concludes, "this was a dark period of terror" (7–8). To be named homosexual was a form of social suicide; masking the self was a survival tactic. The open question of Oliver's identity relies upon an obscurity of narrative that reflects the self-masking many Americans practiced to keep themselves safe.

These dark years coincided with the sixteen years of Williams's greatest success on Broadway, when cultural condemnation and exclusion of difference sparked the playwright's interest in the interrogations and assaults on identity that came with heightened attention to sexual criminal activity. Not surprisingly, given his own homosexuality, Williams was well versed with laws that regulated sexual practice; "One Arm" provides an excellent example of their incorporation into his work, as the narrative focuses on law's power to determine not only Oliver's life, but his death. The draft materials that constitute the story's composition history show Williams considering carefully the connections between Oliver's sexual activity and his criminal fate in the climate of mid-century America, when cultural and legal debates about identity and difference were informed in part by a succession of sex-crime panics beginning in the 1930s.[2] Historian John D'Emilio calls these panics "a series of initiatives that one can reasonably describe as a politics of personal life" that, at their most extreme, "induced fear and promised punishment" in response to the "grave threat that a surge of sex crimes posed" (236). Increased mobility among young adults, many of whom had migrated to urban areas during the Depression and on the waves of 1940s military mobilizations, created opportunities for increased sexual freedoms, even as the access to such freedom fueled a backlash against it.

The composition of "One Arm" during the early 1940s coincided with Williams's own period of increased mobility, his "coming out," and his exploration of the gay underworld; his journals and letters detail his sexual experiences, with strangers and in public places, in New Orleans, Key West, New York, and Provincetown. Williams's homosexuality has been called an "open secret," a phrase that my "open question"

echoes, the former suggesting, accurately, that depending on audience and circumstance, Williams's sexuality was alternately a public or a private matter. His correspondence reflects this fluidity. In early 1941, Williams was rewriting his play *Battle of Angels* while staying with Cora Atwood Black in Key West, and his letter to Lawrence Langer describes an "exciting double life": "writing all morning, spending my afternoons in an English widow's cabana on the beach where I associate with people like John Dewey, James Farrell and Elizabeth Bishop"; then, in the evening, "consorting, in dungarees, with B-girls, transients and sailors at Sloppy Joe's or the Starlight Gambling Casino" (*Selected Letters* 2:305). The latter companions provided colorful material for his plays and stories while educating him about the range of sexual practices among men and women, the "double life" he lived heightening his awareness of the rich tension between "bohemia" and "suburbia."

But he absorbed more than just conflicting sets of values, for his work demonstrates his awareness that people might be publicly exposed and prosecuted for acts that were deemed "degenerate" and therefore criminal, the revelation and censure of sexual transgressions among his work's constants. "Unnatural" and "lascivious" acts were legislated at the state and local levels as "crimes against nature," with many of the statutes in place since colonial times, but with population growth throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries came the expansion of such laws, particularly in cities. These changes in the legislation of sexuality were framed, as were the sex panics, by new freedoms on one side and new fears on the other; Eskridge notes that as the country was transformed through industrialization and other factors, "demographic changes produced new patterns of sociability and sexual behavior, with sexual variety openly flourishing" (41). In his book *Gay New York*, historian George Chauncey depicts the development of an unlawful sexual sphere in that city at the eve of the twentieth century; much of what he describes is useful for understanding the urban underworlds that Williams discovered as a young man and aspiring writer. These spaces were sometimes bars, but Chauncey also reports that much of the gay world took shape in streets and parks, "where many men—'queer' and 'normal' alike—went to find sexual partners, where many gay men went to socialize, and where many men went for sex and ended up being socialized into the gay world" (179).

D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, in their history of sexuality in America, write about the effects of economic and social change during the period between 1880 and the First World War, with a shift "toward consumption, gratification, and pleasure" that resulted in the "commercialization of sex, previously an underground, illicit phenomenon," moving somewhat into the open (172). Public spaces and a culture of pleasure may have facilitated homosexual sex and multiple other sexual transgressions, but such acts remained criminal up until the early 1960s: in most jurisdictions, sexual activity

other than marital intercourse consummated in private, with the intention of or the possibility of procreation, was prohibited by law, and men and women who violated sodomy laws, which included all forms of solicitation, were deemed sexual deviants. Peters argues that by linking homosexuality with prostitution in "One Arm," Williams proposes "that queer desire is tantamount to sexual deviancy" (113); however, the history of sexuality demonstrates that the playwright merely represented a connection already established by the laws of the period.

Williams's work demonstrates the legal conflation of homosexuality and prostitution, not to mention the amalgamation of other acts of sexual promiscuity that historians and legal scholars have documented. For example, his characters often describe their sexual crimes with legal terminology such as "lewd vagrancy." The category "lewd" was added to vagrancy laws in many states during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the addition facilitated the control of any behavior that could be considered an affront to public decency. Police often used it to arrest prostitutes of both sexes, but it had legal applications beyond prostitution charges (Eskridge 58–59). While the term's legal vagueness meant that it could be cause for police interference in a variety of heterosexual or homosexual trysts, it also served Williams's trademark elusiveness when describing sexual activity in his personal and public documents. In New York City, police used the disorderly conduct law to charge people with "degeneracy," another of Williams's most notable descriptors. Although arrests for lewd vagrancy were originally limited to public acts of sexual deviance, Eskridge reports that in 1953 Congress amended the District of Columbia's indecent exposure law to include "any 'obscene or indecent' exposure, sexual proposal, or act anywhere in the District," in order to insure prosecution of private homosexual acts or solicitation by "removing the common-law public-place requirement for indecency, lewdness, or lewd solicitation." By 1960 twenty-one states had followed suit (94).

Williams embarked upon a very public career just as sexual diversity became more visible, but increased legal legislation and prosecution during what Eskridge calls the "Antihomosexual Kulturkampf" made its practice more dangerous. *One Arm and Other Stories* was published in a limited edition in 1948, the same year Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* reported that 40 percent of the men interviewed had engaged in homosexual activity. Legal scholar David A. J. Richards notes the mixed reaction to the report, which "surprised and shocked Americans" but "prepared the way for a freer discussion of sexual matters" (16). Public dialogue about sexual variation had pros and cons. As Robert J. Corber notes about the Kinsey report, one of the ways the Cold War "discourses of national security tried to contain the impact of these findings was by using them to justify the construction of homosexuality as a security risk," for if gay men did not differ significantly from straight men, "then they could infiltrate the nation's

cultural and political institutions and subvert them from within" (11). He argues that in "promoting fears about the potential illegibility of the gay male body, the discourses of national security sought to contain the increasing visibility of gay men" (64). In 1949, as Eskridge reports, "sodomy or solicitation of sodomy generated almost sixty percent of the arrests" made by the city morals squad in Philadelphia, and in 1950 the squad "was hauling two hundred homosexuals into court each month" (98, 100). The upswing in arrests also coincided with the Truman administration's investigations of government employees believed to be homosexual.

Williams had worked on "One Arm" at various times during the 1940s. He was drafting it in May 1942 when he left a note for Donald Windham at the New York City YMCA: "today wrote new story 'One Arm' about the 1-armed blond hustler in New Orleans—I want to show to you" (*Letters to Donald Windham* 27). A notebook entry written the following year finds Williams in Santa Monica: "yesterday was foggy so I stayed home and went back to work. Worked well on short story about the 1-armed youth in N.O" (*Notebooks* 399). In subsequent entries dated over the next few weeks, he mentions "One Arm" several times, and on November 14 he writes, "I read it over and discovered that I had destroyed it" (405). In another letter to Donald Windham dated July 28, 1945, from Laredo, Texas, Williams describes his return from a trip to Mexico. When he crossed the border back into the States, he tells Windham, a customs official confiscated all of his manuscripts and he was delayed in Laredo waiting for them to be cleared. Upon receipt of them, he writes, "I discovered one was missing, the story 'One Arm' which I had just gotten into final shape when I left Mexico. Of course I suspected it was being held because of its subject matter" (*Letters to Donald Windham* 175–76). The officials denied keeping the manuscript and Williams was driven back to his hotel to check for it in his trunk. He found it there under a pile of shirts, but he failed to report the discovery and thus managed to avoid having the story inspected by border officials.

His and others' concerns about the subject matter of his short fiction appear in several letters written prior to the publication of the 1948 volume. Here, Williams expresses his nervousness about the book's advertising to editor James Laughlin:

> I don't think the book should be publicized and sold through the usual channels. We agreed to have it sold on a subscription basis. This is mostly because of consideration for my family, and because only a few of us will understand and like it, and it is bound to be violently attacked by the rest. (*Selected Letters* 2:139)

And in a later letter to Laughlin: "Please remember not to let ONE ARM be displayed for sale in bookstores. When I heard that Miss Steloff had ordered 200 copies, I became alarmed with visions of you and I pinned up like our one-armed hero" (2:211). Trepidation about publicizing and distributing the volume was echoed in Laughlin's

letter to Audrey Wood, in which he assures her there would be "no advertising" and "no review copies." "You may be sure," he wrote, "that I don't want any scandal any more than you do" (2:139n).

Hooper summarizes nicely the conflict Williams faced, arguing that "on the one hand, Williams's attitude to the marketing of his books would suggest that he was prepared to tread carefully and avert controversy," while on the other hand, "the very writing of such stories, at a time when he was enjoying commercial success in the theatre, represents a determination to address gay experiences without being gagged" (103). As Hooper notes, the legalities of the 1873 Comstock Act would have allowed authorities to stop the distribution of material considered obscene (98). Indeed, Williams's prose of this period, by its very existence, was a challenge to intersecting sets of laws that sought to protect society from "undesirable" elements: laws governing individuals and their acts, and laws governing texts. The need for caution was in contest with the pull of freedom.

Richards argues that the narrowing of what could count as obscene speech in *Roth v. United States* (1957) was significant in "its empowering of public arguments for gay rights." Films and literary works depicting homosexuality, "covertly, tentatively, and sometimes quite unfairly," began to make their way into theatres and bookstores, as this landmark case facilitated the legal loosening of speech about activities considered "unnatural and therefore obscene." Richards offers *A Streetcar Named Desire* as an example of just such a groundbreaking creative text, noting the play's representation of multiple sexual transgressions. He calls *Streetcar* a "great play by a famous playwright and gay man" that "touched sympathetically on gay issues" but also "brilliantly showed, in Blanche DuBois, the plight of a highly sexual straight woman whose life challenged dominant stereotypes of women's sexuality in the same way the lives of gay men challenged stereotypes of male sexuality" (18–19). What Richards writes about *Streetcar* bears on my analysis of "One Arm," for although the homosexual sex in the story is the primary focus for Williams's representations of illegal acts, the text in draft and in finished form includes multiple transgressive sexualities and their legal regulation.

Whether or not Oliver is homosexual, his body is a lure for men interested in sex and willing to pay for it, and it is therefore significant to Williams's wide-ranging interrogations of sexual illegality. Oliver is identified at the story's opening as one of "three male hustlers" loitering on Canal Street in New Orleans. Of the three, he is the "unforgettable youth"; before we know what will become of him, we hear of his singularity. He attracts attention from potential johns with no effort on his part, "staring above the heads of passers-by with an indifference which was not put on" ("One Arm," *CS* 175). Raymond-Jean Frontain argues that Oliver "has been reduced to prostituting himself to other men in order to survive financially" (80), but Chauncey notes that sex workers "could make ten times as much money on the streets, at a saloon, or in a bawdy house

as they could in a sweatshop" (43), and the story reports that when Oliver joined the southern migration of hustlers and vagrants who wintered in Miami, he "struck it rich" ("One Arm," *CS* 177).

Once damaged, Oliver enters a liminal space that is both public and secretive. The text implies that he attracts attention because of his physical mutilation, and his need to support himself requires that he live a transient life with little or no privacy, meeting his johns on street corners. On the other hand, he must keep his activities hidden, because he regularly breaks laws against prostitution and sodomy. His mutilation limits his employment options while expanding his sexual desirability; however, the story hints at his pre-accident disposition for engaging in acts of "unnatural ardor." Prior to leaving Arkansas to enlist, he hauled lumber for a living while conducting a "coarse and startling affair" with the wife of the man who employed him, this adulterous relationship the "first to make him aware of the uncommon excitement he was able to stir" (176–77). There are moral and legal prohibitions against all his couplings, save for the "tentative knowledge of girls" that had "suddenly exploded" into the illicit affair; what few details we have about Oliver's former life reveal a transgressive and illegal heterosexual past.

Although Oliver's earlier sexual experience was heterosexual, it was with another man's wife, and Ursula Vogel has documented the history of laws prohibiting adultery as "the vestiges of a long and powerful legal tradition which has created 'adultery' as an offence of different quality and consequence for women and men." In multiple ancient and modern systems, she explains, a "double standard exists or did exist" in which "a wife's (but not a husband's) adultery strikes at the order of property and, as a direct consequence, at the foundations of civil society itself" (147–48). American legal codes bear up this double standard, for there are considerable variations in state adultery statutes, a good number of which remain in place today: as Posner and Silbaugh report, there are two issues that arise in legal definitions of adultery, and the first is "whether only a married person can be guilty of adultery or whether an unmarried person is also guilty of adultery for engaging in sex with a married person." In at least one state, Minnesota, only a married woman can be charged with adultery, and the other party, married or not, is also subject to prosecution; however as the statute goes on specify, there is "no prohibition against sex between a married man and an unmarried woman" (103, 106).

This differentiation is no doubt related to long-standing notions of wife as property; in this context, and because he has violated the marriage of another man, Oliver is morally and legally guilty of sexual theft. Furthermore, as Vogel notes, adultery prohibitions are concerned not only with the sanctity of marriage and "the property right of a private person that is at stake," but " adultery counts as a punishable offence under the criminal law, which will exact retribution for the violation of the public interest" (148–49). A nine-page draft version of "One Arm" makes no mention of the affair, and instead describes

Oliver's prior sexual experience as follows: he had only known "fooling around with the fellows and just the bare beginning of knowing girls" ("One Arm," [story], 1942). In this version we have even less information about his sexual past, with only "fooling around" and the "bare beginning of knowing" to suggest innocent adolescent exploration.

The details of the adulterous affair in Arkansas included in the published version are few but significant, for they reveal Oliver's proclivity for sexual criminal activity before mutilation, and before the psychic change that came with it; furthermore, they underscore the ambiguity of his sexual identity. Oliver's sexual orientation is less significant than his sexual activity, for whether violating the legal sanctity of another's marriage or hazarding arrest for lewd vagrancy on Canal Street, it is through sexual transgression that the text presents Oliver as a figure of "uncommon excitement," and it is in the paucity of information that the text conveys the need for secrecy in an age that prosecutes all that is considered deviant.

Once Oliver finds his economic and sexual paths joined, he acclimates quickly to a life on the street that involves being passed from "one wealthy sportsman" to another. He finds fleeting pleasure in fast money until one night, while drunk on a yacht in Palm Beach and "for no reason that was afterward sure to him," he strikes his client's inclined head with a copper book-end and kills him. Picked up by the police a few months afterward, "not on an ordinary charge of lewd vagrancy" but for questioning in connection with the murder, Oliver lands on death row after a short trial during which "everything went against him" ("One Arm," *CS* 178). Although the murder he commits is initially described as one that occurs "for no reason that was afterward sure" to him, the published text does provide a smattering of detail about what preceded and perhaps precipitated the murder. Like other pieces of the story it focuses on illegal acts and relies on legal language to convey its shocking nature. The filming of a "blue movie" on the yacht, with Williams describing it "as a privately made film of licentious behavior among two or more persons," in this case starring Oliver and a female prostitute who "had been given a hundred dollars each," caused Oliver to "suddenly revolt," to strike the girl, and to kick over the camera.

A passage that was removed from the printed story at Williams's request provided a reason for Oliver's revolt, one that shows him reacting negatively to pornography and thus emphasizing the difference between Oliver before the accident and after. In a letter to James Laughlin dated May 18, 1948, Williams asks his editor to remove all reference to the "blue movie" that prompts the murder, claiming that he and Donald Windham thought the episode cheapened the story (*Selected Letters*, 2:193–95). Oliver's participation in and reaction to the blue movie appear in the published version, but a passage that describes his previous experience viewing a pornographic film is cut.[3] Here is the omitted section:

> Oliver had seen one in Marseilles when he was in the navy. It was exhibited in a room in a fancy brothel, projected on a sheet torn off a whore's bed, while the audience of sailors and girls gasped and giggled and under the inflaming influence of the erotic images flickering on the silk sheet, the gathering had turned into a circus of lust. But that was before his reserve had gone with his arm. The spectacle and its influence on his shipmates had sickened the seventeen-year-old sailor. He had slipped out of the brothel and vomited behind it and the disgust of the experience had made him chaste for weeks. But that was the last voyage before the loss of his arm and barely two years later he found himself and a girl prostitute performing some of the very scenes that he had witnessed in the blue movie at Marseilles. ("One Arm," [story], 1945)

What this passage from one of the story drafts makes visible is Williams's exploration of Oliver's disgust and physical revulsion in the face of transgressive sexuality and specifically that which is not homosexual. Its removal thus limits the reader's access to Oliver's pre-accident self.

The May 1942 version of the story features a very different version of the murder, one that has Oliver reacting with disgust to the "queer" desire he elicits. The passage is sexually graphic, and in it Oliver is far from detached when he kills the john:

> Outside of Phoenix, Arizona, he was picked up by a queer who acted very excited. The man made a pass at once. Oliver sat there like an Indian, holding his knees clenched together, until they reached the desert after the mountains . . . The man undressed so roughly he tore his clothes: his penis stood up scarlet as a dog's in the glaring desert sunlight. Oliver felt disgusted and undressed slowly, lingering deliberately over the trouser-buttons and clasp of the belt. The man came up impatiently behind him and began to run his hands along Oliver's back, cupping them over the massive, tight-muscled buttocks with frenzied, panting sounds and rubbing himself up against him.
>
> Oliver thought to himself, I can't do this, not even for fifteen dollars. The man's too dirty.
>
> However he got undressed. He stood here groaning a little and stared at the purplish mountains while the dark little man crouched midget-like with his busy tongue and fingers between the columnar limbs of the former boxer. It got continually worse in Oliver's mind as he stood and looked at the mountains. The mountains were like spectators, austere and shocked, and the sky seemed to be full of eyes that looked down at the beastliness on the desert. Oliver thought to himself: What am I? A piece of goods for strangers? No, I'm a human being, free, belonging to no one. I'm not to be bought like this and used by people to satisfy dirty instincts. He suddenly kicked at the man whose mouth had just fastened leech-like upon his groin. The man fell back, he sprawled on his hairy rump in the burning sand. Oliver's shoes were on. They were high-top shoes and so he had not unlaced them. He planted one on the prostrate belly before him: the other he brought down fiercely on the man's face and he ground the heel around on the mangled features until the man quit squirming. Then he put his clothes on and returned to the car.

> He took the victim's pants with him and found in a wallet three hundred and eighty-five dollars: he drove the car off with a clean, elated spirit, into the purplish mountains which now seemed friendly. ("One Arm, [story], 1942)

This passage is remarkable for several reasons: its use of nature, and specifically the desert; its graphic sexual depictions; and, in sharp contrast to the published version of the story, the inclusion of an internal monologue revealing Oliver's emotional response to the experience.

The violent act he commits frees Oliver of his negative feelings, and the description of nature reinforces purification. While the desert sunlight was initially "glaring" and the mountains "shocked," the sky "full of eyes that looked down on the beastliness," the murder and subsequent robbery of the excited "queer" transforms Oliver into a "clean, elated spirit" and the mountains into "friendly." The section of this draft that describes Oliver's confession also differs quite substantially from the printed text: in the latter version, it takes up no more than an utterly unrevealing sentence: "'I knew when they left him alone with me that he would be sorry,' Oliver said in his statement to the police" ("One Arm," *CS* 178). The draft typescript, on the other hand, expands the details of the arrest and includes Oliver's extended account:

> Sullenly he said, "Yes, I killed the man. I guess I wanted his money.—Why?—I was broke that's why.—But that's not <u>all</u> the reason.—The son of a bitch was dirty. Sure, you get accustomed to people being dirty. But this was worse on account of it was right out there in the open, the sun still up, the light showing every goddamn detail of it!—It got me sore and I kicked him and let him have it! That's about all I can say." ("One Arm," [story], 1942)

It is, legally and linguistically, useful to frame Oliver's response to his lascivious john with prevailing cultural attitudes about the preservation of morality in the age of sex-crime panics. Public safety may have warranted some concerns (the prevention of perversions that endangered children, for example), but paranoia paired with issues of national security made for unnecessary policies designed to prevent the "infiltration" of individuals or groups deemed dangerous or unpatriotic. The draft versions of the story include Oliver's revulsions about pornography and his condemnation of homosexual sex, especially when it is animalistic and anonymous, but the published version of "One Arm" broadens the scope of Oliver's own transgressions before the accident while limiting information on his attitudes about them. These changes result in the recession of Oliver's identity, sexual or otherwise, as the narrative obscures the character's self: by removing Oliver's emotional responses from the text, Williams performs an editorial amputation that makes the protagonist as unknowable to the readers as he is to the johns he attracts and the detectives who arrest him. "'I knew when they left him alone with me that he would be sorry" is enough to establish premeditation for murder, but it

is not enough to expose him as a sexual criminal, even one who reacts violently against his "dirty" client.

After Oliver has arrived on death row, when the law can do no more to him than carry out his sentence, "One Arm" moves toward personal revelation and narrative resolution. The physical loss that had facilitated his indifference, the "dulling of his senses," allowed him to commit acts of homosexual sex without experiencing the passion of sexual intimacy; by cutting the sections of narrative that show Oliver as explosive or emotional, Williams advances this view of Oliver as "cut off" from humanity. However, a change begins with the publicity of his trial and conviction, for the "face of the one-armed youth was shot from newspapers into the startled eyes of men who had known him in all those places Oliver had passed through in his aimless travels" ("One Arm," *CS* 178). His private life is made public, and he is suddenly connected, his "face" with their "startled eyes," to all the men he has known. The 1942 draft includes the explicit and ambiguous emotional reactions of the former johns:

> In all the cities he'd been in his picture and crime were published. In other places, smaller, which he'd passed through, a man who was drinking coffee and reading the news would suddenly find a tightness around his heart as he saw that face and remembered where he had known it. A man on a train would gasp and look again. A man in his office, in some big city building, would look and brood and shake his head in sorrow. ("One Arm," [story], 1942)

This passage also raises the question of whether the "tightness" or the "gasp" reflects feeling for Oliver or fear, this previous association reminding them of their own "open questions."

As Oliver awaits execution, his former sexual companions reach out to him in letters written on "fine white paper, some of them faintly scented," communications that illustrate the shift among his admirers from sexual attraction to a search for a more meaningful connection. There was "something about him, they wrote, not only the physical thing, important as that was, which had made him haunt their minds since" ("One Arm," *CS* 178). For some the search was spiritual, for "he became the archetype of the Savior Upon the Cross who had taken upon himself the sins of their world to be washed and purified in his blood and passion" ("One Arm," *CS* 179). The idea that sins could be "washed and purified" in "blood and passion" resonates in this context, for it recalls the sex act, alluding to the public discourse of the "crime against nature" with its dependence on moral and religious tropes of filth and purity. The following section from the 1942 version has Oliver continuing to keep his distance from the men, even as the passage casts them in a sympathetic light:

> Once he said to a jailer, Did you ever have anything to do with queers? The man replied Hell, no!—An I don't associate with rattlesnakes neither!—Well,

> said Oliver, they're a funny bunch!—What are they like? asked the jailer.—They're all well-off, said Oliver, They've got wonderful, modern apartments or stay in expensive hotels and nearly always drink Scotch. They love to take pictures of you without any clothes on and some of them want you to do the craziest things!—Like what? asked the jailer.—But Oliver shook his head. It seemed to him now that he ought to keep their secrets. Gradually in his powerful, ox-like heart a feeling of human warmth, of something like gratitude had begun to appear. ("One Arm," [story], 1942)

The unpublished section makes explicit Oliver's complex attitudes about the men who allowed him to make a living and who have now reached out to him, and this passage shows his movement from considering them as his meal ticket to thinking of them as human beings whose sexual secrets he ought to keep. Even as he decides to protect their privacy, he reveals himself to them, and in the published text, the focus is on Oliver's revelations about himself.

Oliver responds to the men who have written him, "at first with a laborious stiffness," but we see him quickly transformed into one of Williams's compassionate artist figures: "the sentences gathered momentum as springs that clear out a channel" and "began to flow out almost expressively and to ring with the crudely eloquent backwoods speech of the South, to which had been added salty idioms of the underworld he had moved in, and the road, and the sea." His language thus retains the color of his experience and even its illegality and transience, but what was formerly "crude" is now "crudely eloquent." Most significantly, however, an internal mental and emotional change occurs, for "as a stone gathers heat when lain among coals, the doomed man's brain grew warmer and warmer with a sense of communion" ("One Arm," *CS* 180).

His confessions to them include his acknowledgment that the identity he had forged as a transient was as a prostitute, not as a homosexual: "I picked up strangers in every city I went to. I had experience with them which only meant money to me and a place to shack up for the night and liquor and food." The letters, he tells those who have written to him, prove that he "meant something important to hundreds of people" and that he had "run up a debt of some kind. Not money but feelings." This recognition offers him a revived sense of his own self and purpose: "If I had known then, I mean when I was outside, that such true feelings could even be found in strangers, I mean of the kind that I picked up for a living, I guess I might have felt there was more to live for" (181). The published story reminds the reader that it is Oliver's ultimate detachment from life, living out his endgame on death row, that brings about the change that once again makes him whole—if not physically, then emotionally. It is striking that he is both surrounded by law and free of it: "In his stifling cubicle there was very little to do while waiting for death and time enough with the impetus of disaster for the boy's malleable nature to be remodeled still again, and the instrument of this process became the

letters" (179). One final opportunity for identity formation and community connection presents itself to him.

The correspondence "decriminalizes" the sexual acts he and the men performed together, elevating the relationships with feelings of self-respect unavailable to him when his focus had been on the economy of transgressive street sex. Before imprisonment he had thought of his maimed body as something that, being broken, "was only fit for abuse," and the "excitement he stirred in others had been incomprehensible and disgusting to him" ("One Arm," *CS* 182). But the letters from men "who couldn't stop thinking about him" had "begun to revive his self-interest." "Armed" again, at least figuratively, with the compassion of others, Oliver adopts an attitude of self-love which, fittingly, takes an erotic turn as his "one large hand made joyless love to his body." We are reminded, however, that loss looms large and unyielding on death row: "too late, this resurrection" ("One Arm," *CS* 182).

It is at this point, resurrected too late, that Oliver receives a visit from a young Lutheran minister whose attraction to Oliver is matched only by his fear of it. In this encounter we come close to seeing who Oliver is, not just what he does, as he seeks to use the visitor in his self-initiation into feelings and sexual desire. He asks the visitor for a rubdown, first with a towel, and then, as Oliver lowers his shorts, he directs him to proceed softly and to rub with his hands. What might seem to be the first acknowledgement of Oliver's homosexual desire is complicated by his repetition of what he had written to his johns: that it is not desire but indebtedness that motivates him, the letters on the shelf reminding him of "bills from people I owe. Not money, but feelings" ("One Arm," *CS* 187). He goes on, however, to say that for "three whole years I went all over the country stirring up feelings without feeling nothing myself. Now that's all changed and I have feelings too. I am lonely and bottled up the same as you are" (187). Robert Bray describes the story's turn thusly: "What begins as a story of a deformed hustler evolves into a study of unreciprocated love, psychological transference, and incompleteness as Oliver recounts the many love letters and the Lutheran minister confronts his own emerging sexual compulsions as he attempts to 'heal' Oliver" (45). When the minister flees, Oliver hopes that perhaps he will return. He does not, and the narrator explains that "Oliver died with all his debts unpaid" but with "a good deal more dignity than he had given his jailors to expect of him" (188). He expires with the letters closed between his thighs "in a desperate vise," a macabre embrace of the compassion that has been shown him and the feelings he has discovered within himself.

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Although the short fiction provided a creative space for Williams to explore homosexuality with considerable candidness, this discussion of "One Arm" demonstrates that his

prose from this period is not without its opaqueness. Ambiguities about sexual identity create textual interest, but they also suggest Williams's awareness of a complex cultural and political climate that valued clear delineations of sexual identity at a time when such delineations were being exposed as simplistic and unrealistic. In 1977 Ren Draya described "One Arm" as an "early catalogue of Williams's concerns: an openly homosexual theme, the fascination with mutilation and its attendant psychic loss, the power of words (represented by the letters) to effect change, the theme of guilt and atonement, and the importance of sex both as a means of human communication and as a channel to awaken acceptance of one's existence" (648). Two decades later, Jürgen C. Wolter reiterates Draya's assessment by noting one of the major problems that had confronted the critics in their assessment of the quality and significance of Williams's short fiction: that they "have to accept homosexuality as a serious and genuine expression of humanity" (227).

We might see the narrative, then, as an example of what Martha Nussbaum invokes in her work on emotion, disgust, and law: a challenge to respect fellow citizens (and, implicitly, the self), "endowing the other with life and purpose, rather than dirt and dross, with human dignity rather than with foulness." We must cultivate a "shift in the imagination," she argues, for the "person who practices the politics of humanity never retreats to a position from which the equal humanity of others can't be seen" (50–51). But "One Arm" also reminds us that law's attempts to regulate sexual activity and sexual identity have all too often resulted in assaults on privacy, and that the need to keep our identities shielded from the very communities we inhabit can cripple our development and our social integration, leading to real or figurative imprisonment or death.

Notes

[1] This essay is drawn from research for a book-length work in progress on Williams and law, and I deal in the larger full-length study with the later versions of "One Arm," particularly the screenplay. In the interest of space, I limit my discussion here to the short story, both the published version and several of the draft manuscripts. The unproduced screenplay *One Arm* is included in the volume *Stopped Rocking and Other Screenplays* (193–291). In 2004 playwright and director Moisés Kaufman developed and directed a stage version that he adapted from multiple versions of the short story and the screenplay. Kaufman and his Tectonic Theater Project produced *One Arm* at Steppenwolf Downstairs Theatre in Chicago in 2004 and in 2011 at the New York City's New Group.

[2] See Estelle B. Freedman's "'Uncontrolled Desires'" (83), which reports that in 1937 the *New York Times* created a new index category, "Sex Crimes," to encompass the 143 articles it published on the subject that year, while "national magazines published articles by legal and psychiatric authorities who debated whether a 'sex-crime wave' had hit America."

[3] It is not clear from the available correspondence whether Williams or Laughlin made the final decision on the cuts.

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