Autofiction and Jouissance in Tennessee Williams's "Ten Minute Stop"

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In October 1936 Tom Williams received a letter from the magazine *American Prefaces* suggesting some ideas for the revision of his short story "Ten Minute Stop." As the young writer considered the changes "preposterous" (Williams, *Notebooks* 61), the story remained unrevised and unpublished until 1985, when it was included in the *Collected Stories* of the by-then-renowned Tennessee Williams. Unlike other stories such as "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" (1942) that have attracted critical attention owing to their autobiographical content and influence on Williams's plays, "Ten Minute Stop" remains all but unexplored. In his 1988 study of Williams's short fiction, Dennis Vannatta unenthusiastically deems this story "not entirely successful" in its treatment of the "theme of the downtrodden masses" and discards any possible autobiographical component (16). However, the subsequent publication of enlightening materials such as Williams's letters and journals calls for a reconsideration of this story's significance. "Stop" heralds many aspects of Williams's recurrent symbolism while also exemplifying the autofiction techniques that the southern writer would employ throughout his career.

During the summer immediately preceding the composition of "Stop," there was a significant event in Tom Williams's stifling St. Louis life. In June 1936 he joined his comrades Clark Mills McBurney and Willie Wharton, both editors of the proletarian magazine the *Anvil*, on a trip to Chicago to attend the Midwest Writers' Conference. Williams's *Notebooks* attest to the writer's feelings about the futility of the whole experience. On the way to Chicago he had a "sleepless night. Horrible humor. Sitting next to a negro on bus with Clark & Will across the aisle" (37). Once there they visited the offices of *Poetry* but found that editor Harriet Monroe was actually in St. Louis.[1] To make things worse, Williams discovered that the writers' conference "seemed more concerned with politics than literature"; it turned out to be "so exhaustingly dull" that he left after the first session (*Letters* 87). Utterly disillusioned, he traveled back to St. Louis to "the awful screech of trolley wheels" and the stormy atmosphere of his "wretched" family home, where his sister Rose showed a deeper psychological deterioration each day (*Notebooks* 51, 59).

"Ten Minute Stop" portrays the frustrated mood and gloomy reflections that Tom Williams entertained during his return trip to such an uncongenial situation. It tells the story of Luke, who has also traveled to Chicago in the hope of finding a job but comes back empty-handed because, regardless of their previous appointment, "[t]he man whom he went to see . . . was not in town" but on a lake cruise ("Ten Minute Stop" 54). After their Chicago fiascos, Luke's and Williams's emotions start to overlap. Both feel indignant and disappointed after the thwarted expectations of their journey, reluctant to return to a place they can hardly call home. "Stop" focuses on Luke's thoughts and feelings during the ten-minute stop that gives the story its title, after he gets off the bus and spends some time wandering into a café, sitting on a fence contemplating a lighted billboard, and, at the end, trying to sell his bus ticket and thus aborting his return home. Luke will prove to combine features of both Williams's self-portrait and his wishful alter ego; his experience will not be purely a geographical journey but an existential one, too.

Some of the autobiographical allusions interwoven in "Stop" illustrate Williams's permeability to the polarizing culture wars of the 1930s that pitted bourgeois against proletarian writing. Whereas some, like the Agrarian Donald Davidson, took an elitist stand and embraced modernist and New Critical aesthetics to counteract the effects of mass-produced art (Bradley 31–32), others followed literary Communist Mike Gold in 1929 and "went Left" by advocating literature's political commitment toward the working class and promoting the production of social realist art addressed at and created by workers (Marsh 3). At the time of the story's composition, Williams was under the influence of proletarian writing but was already having some reservations as to its significance.

Accordingly, when Luke suddenly recalls his university studies and reflects on the masquerade of highbrow literature, we can discern traces of Williams's newly acquired social conscience, a result of his contact with the Anvil group (to which he was peripheral from 1935 to 1938). Thanks to Clark Mills, he had abandoned his preference for the lyricism of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sara Teasdale and acquainted himself with Rilke, Hart Crane, and the revolutionary activism of radical writers such as Jack Conroy—publisher of the *Anvil* and labeled "the American Gorky"—that would shape his works of the 1930s (Hale 14–16). Like Williams himself, the protagonist of "Stop" realizes that the "extremes of sentimentality and of cynicism" of "saccharine poems" (he mentions authors such as Thomas Otway, Joseph Addison, and John Dryden) gloss over an abject historical reality that literature must account for too: "toilets that didn't flush. And the dangers of bathing and fresh air in winter. And the rotting teeth. And horse dung all over the narrow streets. And the diseases and the deaths and the ignorance" ("Ten Minute Stop" 58). Depression-era St. Louis offered a picture nearly as dismal as that of Restoration England in its Hooverville along the Mississippi riverfront, where "people lived like debris washed ashore, in tar paper shacks or old autobodies, and foraged food from the refuse from boats" (Hale 13). These circumstances provided an urgent prompt, to authors, to replace the phoniness of heroic tragedies with the crudity of contemporary social reality and the denunciation of everything, in Luke's words, "that was terrible and dark in the individual lives of the people [and] was left unsaid and forgotten" (58).

The means to accomplish this social function had already become apparent to Williams, who until then had been primarily a poet and short-story writer. After the unexpected success of his brief cowritten comedy *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!* in 1935, "1936 turned out to be the year Williams decided to write for the theatre" and marked the appearance of his first full-length play, *Candles to the Sun* (Isaac xix–xxiii). Two other plays would complete what Hale calls Williams's proletarian trilogy: *The Fugitive Kind* (1937) and *Not About Nightingales* (1938). Dated 1936, "Stop" seems to voice Williams's determination to devote himself to drama by means of the epiphany with which Luke's musings conclude: "I don't belong. I'm not one of the actors. That's why I'm able to sit here and look at the show. No, I'm not really a part of it. Not one of the *dramatis personae*" (58). So, we are tempted to surmise, he may be actually *the playwright*.

Yet "Stop" functions as a proleptic example of the path Williams's writing was heading toward—far from partisan agendas and labor movements and into the poetics of the self. In fact, Williams's experience at the Chicago conference had started to undermine his belief in the actual political impact of proletarian literature as long as "revolutionary writers [were] receiving monthly checks of well over a hundred dollars from the Government for activities which they themselves describe as mainly 'boondoggling'" (*Letters* 87). Those people, including his friends Mills and Wharton, began to make him "sick at [his] stomach" (*Notebooks* 59), maybe also due to the fact that one story of his had been accepted by the *Anvil* but never published due to a change in the magazine's management (Wixson 366). Therefore, although Luke's story sets off in a tone reminiscent of those *Anvil* stories whose browbeaten characters, "jobless or homeless, . . . in righteous protest or some effort to survive, come up against authority" (Hale 15), it discreetly insinuates some stumbling blocks that would make Williams move away from proletarian art and develop his own voice.

Luke's protest encompasses not only the revolt against the intellectual authority of genteel literature mentioned above, but also the distrust of the homogenizing force of some forms of popular culture with which the American left associated itself in the Depression era. The year 1935 had marked the Communist Party's shift away from the use of more avant-garde artistic techniques and toward "a populist embrace of mass-mediated culture" (Barnard 8); in the case of labor-oriented theatre, for example, this involved the exploitation of formulas of mainstream entertainment, "the idioms and imagery of vaudeville, radio, Tin-Pan Alley, and the melodramatic morality play," in order to convey its political message (Hyman 209). This strategy, however, was a double-edged sword. On the positive side, leftist artists who resorted to those popular genres could make their message more accessible and understandable for a larger working-class audience, given the shared cultural background that workers from distant areas and different ethnic and linguistic origins had acquired in the 1930s thanks to the spread of mass-produced culture—especially movies, radio shows, and music. This common background was in fact an important factor that facilitated the organization of labor movements and the achievement of working-class cohesion (Cohen 357).

The downside of this industrialization of popular culture was that it entailed a constrictive standardization of art forms and the imperative to conform to certain aspects of the dominant ideology—something Williams would never be willing to accept. Consequently, Luke manifests his wariness toward Tin Pan Alley, "one of the earliest industries geared to standardization and mass marketing" (Furia 13), as soon as he enters the student-filled café and hears the song "Is it True What They Say about Dixie?" written in 1936 and popularized by Al Jolson in blackface. Luke proves his capacity to look right through the "handful of clichés" that Tin Pan Alley songs and minstrel shows teamed up to perpetuate in the American mind (Whitfield 11–14), and, instead of following the sugarcoated lyrics and wondering "Do they laugh, do they love, like they say in every song?" he casts doubt on the tune's fictitious image of the South by sarcastically fashioning his own question: "Do they really flog women down there?" (56). Love was the paramount subject matter of Tin Pan Alley (Furia 15), and Luke also manifests his disconformity with its heteronormative commonplaces when he feels an "impulse to strike" a drunk student who repeatedly asks him whether Memphis is "like they shay in shongs" and, specifically, wants to know about "the girls, the girls, *the girls!*"(60). It is fitting that the atmospheric music that Williams chooses for the story's climax is the song "Star Dust," which "does not conform to the A-B A-B structure widely used in the Tin Pan Alley era" but rather, in the words of Oscar Hammerstein II, "'rambles and roams like a truant schoolboy in a meadow'" (Alistair Cooke, qtd. in "Stardust").

Together with this acknowledgment of the stereotyping force of popular music, "Stop" inaugurates Williams's use of cinema: another mass-mediated element that had commenced to "reinforce uniform national values and . . . a social order rapidly disintegrating under economic and social pressures" (Susman 159). During the 1930s "the [Hollywood] studios were in the process of adopting a production code that was intended to ensure the wholesomeness of their product and its consistent support of consensus values," and as a result, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was founded in

1934 (Palmer and Bray 16). In "Stop," the billboard that Luke contemplates acts as a surrogate for the cinema screen; although at first he seems inclined to admire the "delectable promontories of [the actress's] bust" (57), he will end up discarding its heterosexual message when he comes nearer (actually too near) it. The billboard may look realistic at a distance but is actually a visual illusion, just as the make-believe stars Williams contrives sound like real performers but are only parodic ones—the resonance of names such as Jane Barlow, Stark Navle, and April East can hardly go unnoticed.[2] When Luke looks at the billboard closely, its illusion fades and the image gets deconstructed into mere patches of color: "The face was outlined with a single stroke of purple paint. . . . Her lips were crimson daubs" (61), However, it is that loss of the symbolic referent of the poster and the discovery of the materiality of its painting (the color, the stroke) that mesmerizes Luke in the end, as he "kisse[s] the purple brush stroke at the base of Jane Barlow's throat," not *the throat* it represents (61–62). In similar fashion, Williams's later work would demonstrate that it was not so much the content of movies but their *form*, "the complementary processes involved in moviemaking, especially the coordination of musical, lighting, and camera effects," that fascinated him, as we can see in his use of cinematic techniques in plays such as *The Glass Menagerie* (Palmer and Bray 17).[3]

Luke thus makes a proper alter ego for Williams yet a poor proletarian hero. Unlike Jack Conroy's protagonists in *The Disinherited* (1933), "marginal men [who] do not participate in any culture, real or imagined . . . do not listen to the radio [or] go to the movies" (Susman 171), Luke partakes in the dominant culture spread by radio and movies, but from a nonconformist position that unveils and rejects their reinforcement of normativity. He is, nevertheless, concerned by the raw experience of life and by the unspoken, most private struggles of the weakest. From this autobiographical beginning, Luke will evolve to become an imaginary self for Williams, passing through an existential experience that reflects Williams's own negotiation of sexual identity by means of a subtext of rampant desire—one that, not surprisingly, also defies conventions. To borrow a phrase from Philip Kolin in his discussion of another 1936 story, "Gift of an Apple," Williams utilizes a sort of "fictional surrogacy" (28) in "Stop" to depict all that he coveted (escape, adventure, and especially sexual freedom) but could not achieve until he began his own wanderings in early 1939.[4]

Williams describes Luke's situation at the beginning of the story as one of physical and mental dullness: "he could stay neither sleep nor awake. . . . His brain felt stunned. He wanted to think. . . . But couldn't" (56). His frame of mind is one of spiritual void: he does not "feel like himself" but "as though the thread of his identity had snapped" (54). Vannatta is right in pointing out that this is not just the usual isolation most people feel in buses (17); it originates at a much deeper emotional level, as shown by Williams's July 5, 1936, journal entry, written a couple of weeks after returning from Chicago:

> I live in some kind of a cage—or enchantment—*nothing happens*—I seem unable to take any *action*—just drift along haphazardly from day to day—wondering what will turn up—I can't force myself to do anything . . .
> I've written two short stories lately—one pretty good I now think—"Ten Minute Stop." (*Notebooks* 41–42)

Williams sets Luke at a vital crossroads where he will be able to overcome his initial feeling of nothingness and reach a final ecstasy of nonnormative desire. Progressively, Luke will prevail over his initial physical and mental obtuseness by undergoing an escalating tension reminiscent of "the fundamental orgiastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, . . . of intensification to the point of climax and consummation" that Robert Scholes identifies as the connecting feature between fiction and sex (26). Williams also connected sex and fiction in his own fashion, as Gore Vidal recounts in his introduction to the *Collected Stories*: Williams's stories, Vidal observes, derive from "a sexual desire for someone. Consummated or not, the desire . . . would produce reveries. In turn, the reveries would be written down as a story. But should the desire still remain unfulfilled, [Williams] would make a play of the story" (xxi). That "Stop" did not generate a subsequent play may indicate that its narrative of desire was fulfilling enough for Williams, that Luke's experience provides a satisfying vicarious relief for the author's own personal frustration.

Desire in "Stop" adopts a wide range of configurations that make this story a repository of Williams's polymorphous motifs in his interrogation of subversive sexualities. Luke shares the back seat of the bus with a young black man who, despite the autobiographical coincidence, is presented as a symbolic rather than a real presence. Luke, in his despondency, regards this man with "admiration and envy" as the representative of the integrity and the capability for life that he lacks. This nameless man performs acts that Luke is unable to accomplish: he sleeps "earnestly" whereas Luke can just get some "restless, enervating sleep," and he smiles at Luke several times. Our protagonist, on the other hand, "tried to grin back but his lips were stiff. This alarmed him still more. Not even able to crack a smile!" The black youth embodies "something splendid and heroic . . . that made life possible under any circumstances. A kind of impregnable simplicity. A completeness. An undividedness" (55). He is one of the first African American males—"always conceived as objects of fetishistic fascination and paradigms of masculinity" (Savran 127)—to appear in Williams's canon. As a fetish, he is depicted as the counterpart for Luke's "'incompleteness,' [the] void occurring in those characters who lack something in their own constitution" (Bray 44). Similar relationships will feature in the stories "Desire and the Black Masseur" (1946) and "Miss Coynte of Greene" (1972) and the novel *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975), whose white protagonists find in black men their salvific sexual counterparts. In addition, the black man on the bus in

"Stop" is discovered to be a boxer, the first in a string of prizefighters whose physical prowess is set in opposition to the impotence of characters in such works as the one-act "The Strangest Kind of Romance" (1946) and the story "The Mattress by the Tomato Patch" (1953). In "Stop," the many impressive features of the black character coalesce in the phallic image that attracts Luke's attention, the boxer's "bandaged hand dangling between his legs" (55). Luke becomes conscious of his own incompletion before this desirable phallic Other, and imagines the black man's life as a "strong black line pushing stubbornly forward without a curve," whereas "his own life, a wavering thread of gray," looks "broken" and "snapped" (55).

The homoerotic undertones of the fetishized racial Other may still be embryonic, but the story features other clearer manifestations of the nonnormative desire that stirs Luke during the stop at Champaign, Illinois. After getting off the bus and sitting on the fence of an open lot next to the lighted billboard, he simultaneously senses that "[s]omewhere in the wet grass a cricket began chirping. A young couple strolled by." Even if the excitement that Luke feels "in his own loins" (57) while gazing after the girl's figure seems built up on a heterosexual framework, it nevertheless contains an element of perversity: not only her generous hips but also the movements of her lover's arm about them contributes to awakening Luke's dormant desire. Luke becomes one of Williams's erotic voyeurs, who derive their pleasure from watching others' intimacy (Crandell 30–31). The advent of this deviant desire coincides with the cricket's chirping—an appropriate mating call for Luke's "sweet answering thrill" (57)—in a correlation that punctuates the whole story: every time Luke stops thinking, the chirping comes up by indirect mention or onomatopoeic rendering ("*Katy-did, did-she-Katy, did-she-kid-kid-kid*," 58) as the sonorous signifier of the rising current of desire that underlies the narration. Such a correlation between unconscious drives and this sort of natural music will be more directly included in the later story "The Field of Blue Children" (1937), in which the protagonist, despite not knowing "what she [is] going to do," starts following "movements . . . without any conscious direction" until she realizes all at once that she has been driven to the place where her lover lives and where "there were cicadas burring in the large oaks" (74).

After the encounters with the boxer and the young lovers, Luke's initial lifelessness gradually turns into "an increased alertness" and he starts to feel "vividly alive and upon the verge of taking some kind of definite action" (59)—so much so that he decides to cancel his homeward trip and sell his bus ticket to a group of college students. While he speaks to one inebriated youth, the other boys swarm around him and the atmosphere of violence intensifies as the rumble of the bus motor sets off a contagious outbreak of aggressiveness—"The air thundered and shook. The very walls and pavements of the street seemed to be roused to fury," and the boys' "faces and their eyes [were] demonically inflamed" (60). The mob closes in around Luke, shoving and dragging him in an attempted dismemberment scene that recalls the lynching of the pharaoh in Williams's debut story, "The Vengeance of Nitocris" (1928). The dismemberment may not merely be *attempted*, considering the emasculating connotations of Luke's "torn white [ticket] stub" being trampled underfoot (60), a harbinger of Sebastian Venable's appalling end in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1957). The evocation of arousal, inflammation, and thrusts forward and backward endows this scene with homoerotic insinuations of sadomasochistic pleasure like those that will erupt in its bluntest form in "Desire and the Black Masseur," in which the chamber where Anthony Burns dies at the pounding hands of the masseur is surrounded by the roaring flames of a nearby building (211). Luke's violent contact with the boys culminates in his arousal and unleashes a "momentary plethora of sound and motion," causing his need for definite action to explode in an orgasmic frenzy of wetness, darkness, and uncontrollable laughter as he hastily flees: "He splashed through water that seemed knee-deep. Then darkness gathered about him. The other side of the street. An areaway between two buildings. This is madness. Lost my mind. But what do I care? Ha, Ha!" (60–61).

Under this guise of violence and fear hides the discourse of jouissance or bliss that inspires Williams's narration of perverse desire in "Stop."[5] It depicts "a culmination of emotions as is associated with sexual orgasm, but . . . distinct from the mild, comfortable enjoyment of *plaisir*" that takes place in connivance with normativity (Hsiao 47). Unlike pleasure, jouissance represents an aggressive, radicalized version of desire that takes the subject beyond ordinary sexual gratification and jeopardizes its own subjectivity and life. Hence Luke's closing laughter sounds "bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened" by jouissance's maddening eruption of sex and death (Kristeva 206). Luke's frantic watershed brings about both the resolution of his existential tribulations and his symbolic death—"the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss" (Barthes 7). On the one hand, he ends up appropriating the very "completeness" and "undividedness" that he had initially envied in the black boxer:[6] when he opens his eyes after his turbulent escape, he feels himself immersed in "[s]ymphonic completeness that reality seldom achieves. A picture by Turner. 'Rainy nocturne' might be the title . . ." (61; ellipsis in orig.). From the nothingness, "nothing at all," that had terrified him at the beginning (55), his physical and emotional blankness, and his failure to crack a smile and conciliate sleep, Luke has undergone an "intensifying of perceptions" (59) that has awakened his desire in manifold ways, triggered several smiles and even apocalyptic laughter, and led him to a completeness in which there seems to be only one thing left to do: to "stretch himself out in the tall grass somewhere near the spot where the cricket was chirping and . . . [fall] into a sound, blissful sleep" (61–62). In the final paragraphs even syntax demonstrates how Luke is progressively carried away into the blissful but desubjectivized stasis that comes with jouissance. Since bliss cannot be expressed in words (Barthes 21), Luke does not pronounce or think a word anymore, and the narration becomes fragmentary, made up of isolated paragraphs typographically separated by blank lines, sentences (un)closed by ellipses, and series of noun phrases in apposition. Luke's symbolic death is more clearly signified by the disappearance of his proper name on the last two pages of the story, and even of his pronoun in the final paragraph. Instead of using language, he eventually resorts to other semiotic utterances that hark back to nonlinguistic expressions like the purring of a cat "*Miaouuu*" (61; italics in the original) or the "loud bird" of infantile disapproval he directs to the billboard before falling asleep (62).

In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Roland Barthes differentiates between the pleasure in a text, sensed as a comfortable satisfaction in accordance with culture, and the text of bliss, which "imposes a state of loss" and a crisis in relation to language, unsettling the reader's cultural assumptions (14). "Stop" proves its potential to be read as a Barthesian text of bliss that "attempt[s] to reproduce in historical terms the bliss repressed beneath the stereotype" (41) when it regains for Luke (and the reader) the jouissance that has been repressed by mass culture. The "deconstruction of the imaginary" (Boothby 159) that jouissance requires could not be better epitomized than by the blurring of the billboard poster. Also, Luke's exhilarating experience with the mob of students exemplifies a soft-core version of the "combination of pleasure and pain, or more accurately, pleasure *in* pain" necessary to move from an indirect grasping of jouissance as the insufficiency that haunts the subject—as it does Luke in relation to the African American boxer in the bus—to the feeling of completeness and ultimate fulfillment that only jouissance and death promise us (Homer 89–90). At the end, Luke breaks with his up-to-that-moment conventional life for an indeterminate though sensually satisfying state of loss—loss of his mind, of his planned destination, of a certain future. His blissful *petite mort* signifies the disrobement of his self from constraining social and sexual roles, a plea for individual freedom and self fashioning.

With this open conclusion, "Ten Minute Stop" sets the tone for Williams's other autofictional texts, all of which are equally "perverse in that they are outside any imaginable *finality*" (Barthes 51–52). In fact, that "Williams had not presented any clear reason why the main character should stop in Champaign" was the major fault that Wilbur Schramm, editor of *American Prefaces*, found in "Stop" (*Notebooks* 60n98). A decade later, Williams would render Karen Stone, his "first fictionalized self-portrait after his success" (Donald Windham, qtd. in Spoto 167), capable of feeling "a sharply immediate sense of being" and an incontinent desire "divorced from reason and will" only when fertility, "a purpose not part of her plan," withdraws from her body. Once the reproductive aim is bypassed, "[n]othing could happen . . . but the desire and its possible gratification" (*The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* 59–62). Both Luke's and Mrs. Stone's stories of unfettered desire are concluded by tropes of timelessness and death. Her final reunion with a mysterious stranger has been interpreted as "a suicidal gesture" (Fisher 56) and her closing words ("Look! I've stopped the drift!") are a fitting summary of the momentous feat Williams also attempted to achieve in "Stop": to place Luke within "ten minutes [that] had absolutely no bearing upon anything that had gone before or anything that might conceivably come after," so that he ends up "removed from the ordinary stream of life for [a] short interval" that is prolonged indefinitely (59).[7] These autofictional works show that the real political force of Williams's texts of bliss is their "resist[ing] sanctioned sexuality (by perversion, which shields bliss from the finality of reproduction)"—thanks to menopause in Mrs. Stone's case, or homosexuality in Luke's (Barthes 23–24).

Only a couple of years after writing *Mrs. Stone* would Williams eventually figure out the formula to exemplify in a more optimistic light this kind of marginal though satisfying existence. Written as a tribute to the "wild weeks on the road sharing liquor and men" that Williams had spent with his friend Marion Black Vaccaro (Spoto 62), the story "Two on a Party" (1952)[8] presents Cora and Billy, "a female lush and a fairy who travel together" and reject any labor and family ties by living in constant pursuit of sexual pleasure and the "lyric quarry" (302, 286). Their radical departure from socially sanctioned behaviors and their especial relationship that cannot "safely be framed in language" (301) have been mistakenly interpreted as mere prostitution (e.g., MacNicholas 583), but they really symbolize the hopeful possibility of a permanent flight from homogenization into supple and nomadic (sexual) identities. As Mauricio D. Aguilera-Linde has persuasively argued, Williams describes Cora and Billy's fugitive existence in terms that subvert the American frontier mythology and present their deviant option "as morally right and superior in a world made of frauds and contemptible institutions." "Two on a Party" is the most upbeat of this series of autofictional texts that "encapsulates the writer's rebuttal to the homogenizing tendencies of the postwar era establishment and also articulates Williams's rejection of mainstream norms" (Aguilera-Linde 43).

In conclusion, "Ten Minute Stop" offers a complex and insightful perspective of the personal and professional growth that the young Tom Williams was undergoing during the late 1930s. It reflects how Williams had begun to harbor a "natural uncongeniality" with the proletarian movement after the Chicago conference (*Notebooks* 65), his subsequent trilogy of social plays notwithstanding.[9] If Luke's story falls short as a defense of the downtrodden masses, as Vannatta pointed out, it is because it explicitly disavows "the need to feel one's self a part of some larger body, some larger sense of purpose," one of the basic Marxism-infused truths of the decade (Susman 172). On the contrary, the joyous Luke contravenes all larger purposes and escapes in exaltation toward a life of individual choice, away from the crowd on the numbing bus, from the mass of culturally conditioned students, and from any respectable aim but personal satisfaction. He, like

Williams himself, does not fall "in with prevailing tastes: he learn[s] . . . that 'outsiderhood' was the source of his peculiar strength" (Robinson 31). Such marginal position, however, does not hinge on labor or social status. Eventually Tennessee Williams's revolutionary thrust would not fight against the oppression of economic lower classes; it is his understanding and defense of the sexual Others that would make his work groundbreaking. His concern for what was "terrible and dark in the individual lives of the people [and] was left unsaid and forgotten" was not so much inspired by the tragedy of social injustice as by the frustration of the sexual repression that "he was still suffering at age twenty-five" (Leverich 175). It is not surprising, then, that in August 1936 Williams wrote in his diary about "Stop": "I just love that story & it would delight me to have it in *Amer. Pref.*" (*Notebooks* 51). Unfortunately, for the reader of a more conservative pleasure, such as the editor of *American Prefaces*, "Ten Minute Stop" can be an unsettling, disagreeable text of bliss that defies and destabilizes mainstream currents. For Tom Williams, the story was complete and satisfying as it stood, and in that original form it has come down to us.

Notes

[1] Earlier in 1936, Monroe had written to Williams to inform him that two of his poems would be published the following year (Isaac xix).

[2] Although the film that the billboard advertises, named *Sacramento*, does not seem to exist, by his choice of actors and description of the poster Williams may be concocting a mixture of two movies that were released shortly before the story's composition. Clark Gable and Jean Harlow appeared together in *Red Dust* (1932), a film about a rubber plantation that would inspire a more famous remake, *Mogambo* (1953). The poster of *Red Dust* coincides literally with Williams's description of the billboard in "Stop" but for one detail: Gable was not wearing his notorious moustache yet ("Red Dust"). He was, however, on the poster of Frank Capra's screwball comedy *It Happened One Night* (1934), although the composition of the image (and Claudette Colbert's dark hair) does not fit Williams's description so neatly. The plot does bear a resemblance with "Stop," though: Capra's film was an adaption of Samuel Hopkins Adams's short story "Night Bus" (published in the August 1933 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine), a romance melodrama in which a wealthy young heiress runs away from home and meets a broke newspaper reporter on her bus trip to New York, a meeting that will obviously change her future plans as regards her marriage ("It Happened One Night").

[3] In later Williams stories—"The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" (1941) and "Hard Candy" (1953)—it is the theatre house (not the movies shown in it) that becomes the physical, material setting for clandestine manifestations of desire. It houses the very double spectacle that Williams's plays present to their audience: a heteronormative scene on the surface/screen, and at the same time a darkened homosexual subtext/gallery whereby resistance to conventional morality is already possible (Savran 78).

[4] Williams's first trip to New Orleans was before New Year's Eve 1939; from there, he would join clarinetist Jim Parrot in a pilgrimage to the West Coast that would take him to California, down to Mexico on a bicycle tour, and eventually to visit D. H. Lawrence's widow, Frieda, in New Mexico in August 1939 (*Notebooks* 131 *ff.*)

[5] Actually, Roland Barthes wonders whether jouissance and fear may not be identical: "Proximity (identity?) of bliss and fear" (48).

[6] Jouissance is also described as the surplus enjoyment that conventional fantasies associate with some minorities, including black men (Homer 63) but also women or Jews.

[7] Another analogy between "Stop" and *Mrs. Stone* is the somewhat baffling reference in the former to Luke's not having enough "centrifugal force" (58). Williams will elaborate on this in the latter work, explaining that Mrs. Stone "had been continually occupied with more things than a single existence seemed sufficient to hold, and for that reason, the way that centrifugal force prevents a whirling object from falling inward from its orbit, Mrs. Stone was removed for a long time from the void she circled" by repeating symbolic "rituals" and "little diversions" (107). Similarly, Luke, not having "enough centrifugal force," does not remain circling the external orbit of the symbolic order as represented by the literary discourses and other "things" like cinema or music that keep him "occupied"; instead, he experiences the nothingness that they try to cover up and finds in it the possibility for jouissance.

[8] "Two on a Party" was included in the collection *Hard Candy* (1954).

[9] The conclusion of "Stop" strongly diverges from the tone of Williams's coetaneous proletarian works, especially *Candles to the Sun*. It may not be coincidental that Williams also chose the name Luke for one of the key characters in *Candles*. A miner's son, this latter Luke renounces the college money his mother has saved for him and offers it to his deceased father's comrades in order to sustain them during a strike. "In a good Marxist ending, *Candles* shows the individual giving in to the group for the good of the Cause" (Hale 18), yet Luke's personal fate strikes a rather somber, deterministic note. In an interview with the *St. Louis Star-Times* a few days before the play opened, Williams admitted: "The play ends as a tragedy for the individuals, for in the end they realize they cannot achieve success and happiness apart from the group, but must sacrifice for the common good" (*Notebooks* 80n129). Despite the protest's partial triumph, Luke's bighearted donation entails his giving up any hope for a better future and his condemnation to the same dead-end life in the mine that his father—also a victim of failed aspirations—had been forced to lead. For the young poet who had had to abandon Missouri University in 1932 to work as a clerk in the same shoe company his father worked for, *Candles*' Luke may be a negative, *non*-wishful self-portrait, the alter ego Williams did not want to become. In contrast, instead of the jubilant workers' singing that brings *Candles* to its "good Marxist" close, Luke's peaceful sleep in "Stop" is only accompanied by the cricket's chirping, the soundtrack of the triumph of desire.

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