

Artist as Savior, Artist in Need of Salvation: Val Xavier's Evolution from Jesus to Orpheus

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In the long development of the play that became *Orpheus Descending*, one important element remained constant: Williams used the central character, Valentine Xavier, to explore the role of the artist in the modern world and, more narrowly, in the South. Set in Mississippi and featuring a protagonist named after a distinguished Williams ancestor whose name has an obvious messianic connotation, this play finds Williams projecting an important aspect of himself onto the South of his childhood.¹ Williams's personal investment is at this distance plain. Where do I, an artist, fit in this environment so alien to art? What is my worth, my place? And what can I do—what can art do—to redeem this region where beauty languishes in the midst of bigotry and corruption? We can boil these questions down to two: What must the artist do to be saved? And what can the artist do to save others?²

Williams never satisfactorily answered these questions, because his conception of art and the artist contained contradictions that he could never overcome. And ultimately, instead of building a fruitful paradox, these contradictions produced an unresolved, even tragic confusion. Nonetheless, so deeply felt were these antithetical desires, and so explosively dramatized were they in outsized characters, that despite its flaws, this play in its various versions contains some of Williams's most memorable scenes.

The contradictions Williams could never resolve led also to a fascinating production history, especially where film adaptations of the play are concerned. During the transition from *Battle of Angels*, the earliest staged version of the play, to *Orpheus Descending*, its final stage form, Williams shifts the balance in his artist-savior in favor of the artistic side, a change reflected in the new title. Williams also increases the role of Lady (named Myra in *Battle of Angels*)—the woman who, with tragic consequences, takes Val as her lover.³ This change, I will argue, signals Williams's attempt to inject a new artist figure into the play, one who overcomes the contradictions that stymie Val.

Despite the fact that in the play these two become lovers, conceiving a child together, the views of art, life, and redemption they represent are incompatible, and their deaths are the only means Williams can devise to disguise this incoherence. In effect, by the end of *Orpheus* we have two protagonists. This development contributed to one of the most interesting facets in the history of film adaptations of the play. The filming of *The Fugitive Kind* was delayed over casting issues concerning the two stars, Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani.⁴ Despite heroic efforts on the part of Williams and the director, Sidney Lumet, to accommodate Magnani, whom Williams badly wanted for the part, the film leans decidedly in Brando's direction, as she feared it would. By contrast, the 1990 Turner film version of *Orpheus Descending* is a vehicle for Vanessa Redgrave, who had starred in a stage revival of the play. This contrast between the two films reflects Williams's own ambiguity in his conception of the artist—an uncertainty that sets the play intellectually at odds with itself and requires directors to find a creative resolution that the playwright never managed.

A second dichotomy emerges concerning Williams's understanding of the artist's role in society. *Battle of Angels* and its immediate successors came as close to the theatre of social protest as any of Williams's mature plays.⁵ In one version, Val takes up the cause of a lynched black minister who preached for racial justice (Wallace 327–28). Val is framed in Christian imagery, suggesting his affinity with Jesus. In *Orpheus*, written some seventeen years later, the mythic allusions have a more pagan cast, as the title suggests. And salvation takes a more personal direction, emerging from Val's interaction with the three primary female characters. This contrast between personal salvation and social protest comes to the fore when one compares the play to Lumet's film version of it. Lumet emphatically returns the play to the social justice side of its dialectic, once more making a choice that Williams seems unable to effect.

The Role of the Artist: Saint or Satyr?

Reflecting Williams's personal investment in the character, Val struggles in every version of the play to meet contradictory notions of authenticity. It is clear that Val is an artist and so must answer that high calling if he is to be true to himself. In *Battle* he is a writer, filling a box with sheets of his book-in-progress. He's traveling and "digging" in order to discover the truth of existence and turn it into art (31). By *Orpheus*, Val has become a musician, and his guitar is his "life's companion" (273). He sees the instrument both as the means of his own artistic expression and as a repository of the art of others, a fact that is signaled by the collection of autographs he has acquired from other blues musicians.

In both plays, Val's fierce protectiveness of the symbol of his art indicates that the role of artist is central to his identity. However, he is conflicted concerning the requirements of this role. Perhaps the most comprehensive terms for describing the

poles between which these demands swing are *immanence* and *transcendence*. On the one hand, Val feels that he must plunge into the depths of life, immersing himself in experience, particularly that of the senses. On the other hand, Val feels an obligation to rise above sordid reality and create a beauty untainted by the raw stuff out of which beauty is made. There is more than a whiff of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* in Val's notion of art, an influence perhaps traceable to one of Williams's literary heroes, Hart Crane. In the plays, we see more of Val's angst about being an artist than we do of the art he has created. *Orpheus* does include a song with lyrics by Williams, but much more attention is given to Val's poetic musings, which are his real artistic creations in the plays. And these observations, despite their frequently moving lyricism, run in opposing directions. Most of these ruminations concern sex, loneliness, and freedom.

Val is torn in his attitude toward sex. He expresses the struggle Williams inherited from the bitter battles between his puritanical mother and his profligate father, from his socially unacceptable homosexuality, and, more broadly, from the Puritan-Cavalier dichotomy characteristic of the white South of Williams's formative years.⁶ The problem is especially acute where the artist is concerned, because in Williams's world artistic creation is dependent upon the natural forces of procreation. The sex drive motivates the artistic impulse. Yet at the same time, the high calling of art demands a purity that is threatened by sexual contact, especially that of a promiscuous kind. These contraries are evident from Val's first appearance in *Orpheus*. When Carol Cutrere asks him to go "jooking" with her, he tells her, "I'm all through with that route" (245–46). He complains to Lady that Carol mistakenly thought he had a "Male at Stud" sign hung on him (258). And later, in telling his life's story, he terms the loose living of his early nightclub musician days "corrupted" and says he had to flee in order to make a clean start (273). Initially, he turns on Lady as he had on Carol when she makes what he takes to be a sexual overture, accusing her of hiring a man to work a double shift without paying him overtime. Yet at the same time, Val's vitality and charisma clearly are rooted in his sexual power. His description of his control over his biological "functions" concludes with his saying, "Well, they say that a woman can burn a man down. But I can burn down a woman" (264). The creativity he incites in the three major female characters is rooted in sexual attraction. This is true even for Vee Talbott, the repressed sheriff's wife who, after meeting Val, paints a church with a red steeple, a clear phallic symbol (though she seems unaware of it as such). Val's music, as well as his stage appeal, spring from his sexual magnetism. Astute commentators have observed plausibly that the Val of *Orpheus* is shaped by Williams's awareness of Elvis Presley, who burst on the American pop-culture scene at the time Williams was writing (Goldthwaite; O'Malley). Sex is the necessary fuel for creativity, yet the artist must flee the corrupting influence of sex. This is one of Val's contradictions.

Val's need to flee corruption in the form of promiscuous sex is matched by a need for freedom. Val desires a purity and transcendence that is at odds with the Dionysian view of art represented by his sex appeal and snakeskin jacket (Wallace 326–27). This longing for transcendence is best captured in Val's legless-bird speech, the most memorable single passage in the play:

You know they's a kind of bird that don't have legs so it can't light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky? That's true. I seen one once, it had died and fallen to earth and it was light-blue colored and its body was tiny as your little finger, [. . .] so light on the palm of your hand it didn't weigh more than a feather, but its wings spread out this wide but they was transparent, the color of the sky and you could see through them. [. . .] They sleep on the wind and . . . [. . .] never light on this earth but one time when they die! (265–66)

The bird represents Val's ideal of freedom and transcendence. Nothing holds it back or contains it, and even its color makes it one with the sky, a universal symbol of transcendence. Indeed, eternity shows through its wings. It is also pure—completely untouched by the sordid trodden soil over which it soars. Its beauty is one with its truth, one might say.

However, the price of this freedom would seem to be the loneliness that Val also registers as inherent in the human condition. Although he desires a deep and abiding connection with another human being, to Lady he declares that such a thing is impossible: “Nobody ever gets to know *no body!* We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life! You understand me, Lady?—I'm tellin' you it's the truth, we got to face it, we're under a lifelong sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins for as long as we live on this earth.” (271). Touch—sex—doesn't help, he explains. Lovers become greater strangers than they were before they met.

Thus, in Val's version, the artist is caught in a dilemma between the need for involvement and the equally strong need for detachment. One solution, and perhaps the one Williams is grasping for, is that of D. H. Lawrence, to whom he dedicated one version of *Battle* (Williams, *Notebooks* 56). Indeed, Robert Bray calls Val “the prototypical D. H. Lawrence hero” (“*Battle of Angels*” 25). Williams's Xavier bears a strong resemblance to the savior of Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*, a retelling of the aftermath of Jesus's crucifixion, in which instead of being raised from the dead, as the canonical gospels have it, Jesus wakes up from a coma in his tomb and reemerges. The restored Jesus believes his earlier ministry was a mistake, so instead of returning to his disciples he departs Judea to start a new life. Reaching Sidon, he asks for shelter from a priestess. She is a devotee of “Isis Bereaved, Isis in Search”—the Isis who goes looking for her murdered brother-husband Osiris. In the man who died she believes she has found

Osiris; he, in turn, comes to believe that through her he can finally enter the world of touch—full material reality—and thus be healed of the lingering sting of death that detaches him from life. Together they conceive a child. Pursued by those who would betray him yet again, he escapes in a boat, laughing to himself: “I have sowed the seed of my life and my resurrection, and put my touch forever upon the choice woman of this day, and I carry her perfume in my flesh like essence of roses. She is dear to me in the middle of my being. But the gold and flowing serpent is coiling up again, to sleep at the root of my tree. So let the boat carry me” (211).

The emphasis in Lawrence's story, as in the first two acts of *Orpheus*, is on the healing of the savior figure. The (unnamed) Jesus of Lawrence is recovering from an encounter with death. He recoils now in disgust at the body-denying spiritualism he formerly preached and at the role of leader of men that he assumed. In his second chance at life, he learns to embrace physical existence. Likewise, Val has been emptied by the demands of admirers, from whom he has escaped in order to make a fresh start. And he, too, will begin the next stage of his journey through a sexual liaison. Val's snakeskin jacket certainly recalls “the gold and flowing serpent” with its mythic and sexual connotations. But in other ways, Val reverses the Lawrentian Jesus. Val renounces sexual excess; the man who died renounces sexual abstinence. The priestess aids Jesus in claiming a new kind of freedom; Val is trapped by his relationship with Lady, which precipitates his death at the hands of a lynch mob. Lawrence's hero attains true transcendence through immanence; the universal is realized through the particular. Larger, mythic patterns that reflect the rhythms and forces of nature have intersected in his connection with the priestess; he is the Osiris brought back to life by his Isis. But for Val the gap never closes. Even after having brought temporary hope to Lady, he fails to save her and cannot save himself. His myth is that of Orpheus, who not only left his Eurydice behind in Hades but was himself hunted down to death in the world above.

The incompatibility of Val's roles as artist and lover is dramatized in the final scene, when Lady seizes his guitar and refuses to return it unless he promises to stay. He is ready to take up the symbol of his art and claim the artist's freedom; she is willing to mute his song in order to tie him to herself. Val's most “uncorrupt” sexual relationship, one that has led him to tell Lady he has a “true love” for her that he has never felt before, threatens to rob him of the freedom he needs to create—and does, in fact, lead to his death. In Val's case, immanence, in the form of his involvement with Lady, is at odds with transcendence, in the senses of freedom, detachment, or holiness. Thus, Williams's artist figure never attains the salvation he seeks; Val is a tragic figure not only because he is the victim of jealousy, hatred, and bigotry, but also because his conception of the authentic artist is incoherent. But Val's failure to find salvation for himself is separate from his role as savior to others.

The Artist as Savior: The Social and the Personal

Another set of tensions within *Orpheus* concerns the nature of salvation. The term has strong religious overtones appropriate to the mythological apparatus Williams employs, but it also acquires a range of meanings—many of them far from conventionally religious—that reflect Williams’s attempt to redeem the hostile and sordid world in which these characters find themselves. Broadly speaking, the salvation delivered by this Xavier starts out directed toward the social and, as Williams revises the text, becomes increasingly weighted toward the personal. In *Battle*, Val is clearly a messianic figure, a fact underlined, sometimes crudely, by Christ symbolism. Val tells Vee that he has been saved, that he doesn’t smoke or drink, and that he has an uncle who was a Catholic priest and worked in a leper colony for six years without catching the disease (15). When Vee includes Christ in one of her paintings, the face looks remarkably like that of Val. Just before the catastrophic turn of events that leads to the death of the two principals, Val tells Myra, “It’s finished!” (115). Val is executed by a mob on the “lynching tree” outside of town after they have torn off his clothes (120).

These strong Christian associations, muted in *Orpheus*, are aligned behind a message of social reform. Racism, although not Williams’s primary target, comes under attack. Val champions the cause of a black man the sheriff tries to arrest. A townsman calls Val’s views “red talk” (*Battle* 69). The Conjure Man, who remains significant in *Orpheus*, plays a more prominent part in *Battle*, defiantly holding up the snakeskin jacket as though to confront the forces that martyred Val. The stage direction for the epilogue requires “*the sound of chanting from a Negro church*” (119). But perhaps most telling for Williams’s reformist intentions is the manuscript for an unstaged version of the play in which Val learns the story of Jonathan West, whom Jack Wallace terms “a black socialist preacher” (327).⁷ Val takes up the cause of this slain activist and dedicates himself to pressing his message when he discovers that the Conjure Man has memorized West’s sermons. In the threads of social realist drama remaining in *Orpheus*, we can see this impulse. Lady and her father have been the victims of the Ku Klux Klan (or the “Mystic Crew,” as *Orpheus* has it). Lady’s father was burned out for selling liquor to “niggers,” as well as for simply having the effrontery to succeed despite being an immigrant “Wop” (312).

C. W. E. Bigsby is completely justified in calling *Orpheus* the most sharply political of Williams’s mature plays. Williams takes on the racism, nativism, and vigilantism represented by the two male authority figures in the play, Jabe Torrance and Sheriff Talbott. Equally important is a fourth target: sexism. The male power structure of Two River County controls and suppresses its women, especially their sexuality, and it is at this point that the bridge between social and personal salvation comes into view.

Without doubt, sex is a powerful force in this play, as it is in most of Williams’s work. However, as will become apparent, the sexual tensions that fuel the killings in

the play's final scene are at the service of Williams's notion of the artist-savior, as well as his critique of the South. One of the most intriguing facets of his work is the notion that sexuality drives culture, especially in a post-Victorian society that continues to repress sexual desire. In the world of this play, politics is inevitably sexual, as is religion. Williams is one of the figures of the Southern Renaissance—Lillian Smith comes to mind as another, along with Faulkner—for whom Freudian insights opened up a whole new level of cultural analysis. Richard King has suggestively discussed southern self-understanding as dominated by the psychological paradigm of the family romance, in which society is conceived as an extended, patriarchal, racially compartmentalized family. The white planter stands at the head of it, with his wife as a pure and nurturing counterbalance to his cavalier ruthlessness. Daughters are supposed to be beautiful and flirtatious yet virginal and ultimately dutiful. Sons are expected to sow wild oats but be prepared, Prince Hal–like, to assume the reins of power when their time arrives. The roles of the black “family” members, who have the status of children, mirror those of the white in the following way: black men are supposed to be servile instead of masterful, and their sex drive, presumed to be insatiable, is a constant threat to the white order. Black women in this myth are as sexually eager as white women are scripted to be frigid, and are presumed to be available to white men.

The connection between this social-psychological myth and social order becomes clear in the practice of lynching, a topic addressed in all the versions of Williams's scripts. It goes without saying that lynching was an extralegal tool used by white supremacists to maintain social control over blacks. It is no accident that, in many cases, lynching victims were black males accused of rape or some other sexual advance on white women. Sexual purity was necessary to racial purity, and the racial purity of white children was vital to the white supremacist structure of southern society in the Jim Crow era. Because of the sharp racial divide, sex was more political in the South than in any region of the country. And although Williams's story is not one of interracial romance, there are strong racial overtones throughout the scripts, and sex is certainly a force that threatens social order. Carol Cutrere likely makes a reference to the Scottsboro Boys when she mentions a black man who “was sent to the chair for having improper relations with a white whore” (252). The real crime for which Val is eventually lynched is that of presenting a sexual threat to the patriarchy. For Williams, sex becomes a means of social protest and a source of potential healing from the wounds that socially sanctioned violence unleashes on the innocent. The social problems that emerge in the play are rooted in race, bigotry, and sexual repression; the savior figure, who represents a needed but doomed alternative, brings both artistic and sexual virility.

The ways in which sexual awakening can contribute to social reform and personal salvation are suggested in Walker Percy's *Lancelot*, his parody of *The Fugitive Kind*.

As Arthur Wilhelm has pointed out, the fictional movie being shot in the novel is loosely based on the Lumet-directed film (64). Percy has his own purposes, and he is not trying to be fair to Williams, but Percy's fictional writer-producer's description of his "stranger" character illustrates the connection between personal and public that is part of Williams's agenda as well. Speaking of the community into which the stranger has come, Percy's Merlin explains, "Everyone is hung up. The sharecroppers, black and white, are hung up in poverty and ignorance. The townies are hung up in bigotry and so forth. Not only is the stranger free, he is also able to free others. . . . Perhaps he is a god. At least he is a kind of Christ type." The liberation the stranger brings begins with the personal, especially in the case of the sexually repressed librarian. From her point of view, sex with this man is "a kind of sacrament and celebration of life. He could be a high priest of Mithras" (148). The kind of freedom that Val brings to Two River County is very similar to the stranger's; freedom from sexual repression leads to the breaking down of other artificial barriers designed to keep power in the hands of white male racists. And this freedom has a religious as well as a political cast. By tapping repressed sexual energy, the savior figure gives life—an animal vitality that replaces the aura of death surrounding the town and all its citizens. This "priest of Mithras" brings the dead to life by unblocking the channel between body and soul through the "sacrament" of sex. No doubt the very name Valentine Xavier is meant to suggest the link between erotic love and salvation. The effects of Val's charisma are thus both social and personal.

The Artist-Savior Meets His Match: From Val to Lady

As Williams moved from Christ imagery to Orpheus associations in his development of Val, he also swung his play toward personal salvation. Percy's "stranger" actually has more in common with the Val of *Battle* than of *Orpheus* in this regard. In *Orpheus*, Val deeply touches three characters, all women: Vee Talbott, Lady Torrance, and Carol Cutrere. Each of them responds to important aspects of his nature that allow us to complete our picture of him as savior. Vee and Lady are artists themselves, inspired to creation by Val.

Vee, wife of the sheriff and primitivist painter of religious visions, struggles to explain what her art means to her. Val brings her motives to expression:

VAL: You don't have to explain. I know what you mean. Before you started to paint, it didn't make sense.

VEE: —What—what didn't?

VAL: Existence!

VEE [*slowly and softly*]: No—no, it didn't . . . existence didn't make sense. . . . [*She places canvas on guitar on counter and sits in chair.*]

VAL [*rising and crossing to her*]: You lived in Two River County, the wife of the county sheriff. You saw awful things take place.

VEE: Awful! Things!

VAL: Beatings!

VEE: Yes!

VAL: Lynchings!

VEE: Yes!

VAL: Runaway convicts torn to pieces by hounds! (290–91)

But painting has allowed her to deal with the horror. Val declares: “And so you begun to paint your visions. Without no plan, no training, you started to paint as if God touched your fingers. [. . .] You made some beauty out of this dark country with these two, soft, woman hands . . .” (291–92).

Curiously, this revelatory exchange between the two artists (the stage direction has Vee placing her painting on top of Val’s guitar) has nothing directly to do with the content of the painting. Vee has painted the Church of the Resurrection—her Episcopal parish church. Except for the detail that she has made the steeple red—because she feels it that way, she says—there is nothing in the painting to suggest violence. Yet there is an emotional logic to the scene. Vee has moved from mere physical sight to intuitive vision, a change drawn out by her complaint that something is wrong with her eyes. “Appearances are misleading,” she says, “nothing is what it looks like to the eyes. You got to have—*vision—to see!*” (289). However symbolically and naively, Vee’s vision has allowed her to express the violence around her and the emotion within her, transforming it into a kind of beauty. This revelation amounts to a personal, psychological redemption—it allows her to cope with the horror she has witnessed, and it also permits her to offer a gift to others, though within the town she finds no takers. For her, the painting of the church offers hope of resurrection—an alternative to the culture of death that tyrannizes Two River County. She presses this hope even more forcefully after receiving her last vision, one she does not have time to paint. On the Saturday before Easter she sees the two eyes of Christ blazing from the sky—the eyes of the Risen, not the Crucified Christ, she insists (316). Despite what Vee might think, this vision has more to do with the power of art than the actions of God. Her creative vision itself, and not any divine event, is the only real hope for the characters in this play. Val embodies this creative power in another form.

That Vee is mistaken in her naive Christian faith is suggested by the sexual desire evident in her picture and manifest in her interactions with Val. The prominent church steeple is an obvious phallic symbol. Both of her intense conversations with Val about vision culminate in an intimate touch interrupted by her outraged husband. In the second instance, she falls to her knees before Val and clasps him in both arms, leading the sheriff to threaten Val with violence if he’s not gone by morning. Vee is ignorant

of the sexual nature of her excitement, a truth implied by her un hypocritical, puritanical denunciation of card playing and drinking and her complete lack of shame in responding to Val. Her art taps a reservoir of sexual energy that is at odds with the severe spiritualism and sexual repression present in her conscious belief. Like Lawrence's man who died, Vee finds nourishment she didn't know she needed. Within the larger context of the play, Vee's naive Christianity is thus subsumed under the Lawrentian religion of "the great dark God" of the passions (*Kangaroo* 202) rather than the other way around. And although Val cannot free her from the bondage of her marriage, he does help open the way for her crowning vision, which she describes to him while pressing his hand to her bosom.

Lady's debt to Val is even greater, and as an artist she surpasses him in a crucial way, temporarily overcoming the gap between transcendence and embodiment that Val can never bridge for himself. Although she is not as clearly marked as the painter Vee and musician Val, it is Lady whose artful creation proves vital to the climax of the play. Her re-creation of her father's wine garden in the made-over confectionary of Jabe's mercantile store is the most important artistic and political act of the play. It comes to represent her personal rebirth after a long winter with her now-dying husband, and, once Lady learns the truth about her father's death, opening the confectionary becomes an act of defiance against the forces of racism and violent repression that hold the people of Two River County in thrall. The status of Lady's creation is drawn out by the reaction of Jabe and his nurse:

NURSE: Well, isn't this artistic?

JABE: Yeh. Artistic as hell.

NURSE: I never seen anything like it before.

JABE: Nobody else did either.

NURSE [*coming back to upstage right-center*]: Who done these decorations?

LADY [*defiantly*]: I did them, all by myself.

NURSE: What do you know. It sure is something artistic. (311)

Lady and her creation are also associated with theatre through her recollection of her father's wine garden. As a girl she performed there, taking her turn on the stage, as it were. And her final words echo a remark of her father's and allude to the tragic "show" she has put on at the cost of her life (339). After discovering that Jabe was responsible for burning out her father years earlier, Lady explains why she is determined to go ahead with the opening of her confectionary room. She relates an anecdote about her father, who once performed as an organ-grinder with a trained monkey. One hot day the monkey collapsed from exhaustion and died, prompting Lady's father to say, "The show is over, the monkey is dead" (325). But Lady insists that the show is not over for

her. The grand opening of her re-creation of the wine garden will be an act of justice, a piece of theatre necessary to counter the vicious destruction of her father's dream. Of Jabe she says, "I want that man to see the wine garden come open again when he's dying! . . . Hell, I don't even want it, it's just necessary, it's just something's got to be done to square things away, to, to, to—be *not defeated!*" (329). When Lady shouts her defiance loudly enough to rouse Jabe, he emerges from his room and shoots her. Making her last steps into the confectionary, she echoes her father's theatrical farewell: "The show is over. The monkey is dead" (339).

Lady has been an artist of life, taking from Val the inspiration to defy death, which is represented by the nay-saying Jabe. The confectionary is the place where imagination meets life: justified as a commercial enterprise, it is also an illusion, a consoling dream that brings back her youth and restores her hope. Furthering her hope is her pregnancy—a literal return to fertility after her years of servitude to the dying and apparently sterile Jabe. Lady is the one character in the play who dares to believe that art may transform life.

From Brando to Redgrave

The shift in the play's dramatic center of gravity unfolds in the two film adaptations of *Orpheus*. The first, both in its promotion and its direction, makes Val the centerpiece. The second is just as clearly a vehicle for Vanessa Redgrave's Lady Torrance. And given Williams's vacillation where the nature of the artist is concerned, both versions move within the bounds Williams set.

In the play as written, Val makes his entrance in the first scene, after preliminary conversation in the Torrance Mercantile concerning the impending return of Jabe from the hospital. Val's entrance is preceded by the Choctaw cry of the Conjure Man and quickly becomes the center of attention despite a brief appearance by Jabe and Lady. Val has an extended scene with Carol Cutrere before his interview with Lady, in which his history and philosophy of life are the chief topics. It is only in act 2, scene 2, that Lady's needs come to the fore, and here the context is her clumsy and only half-aware attempt to seduce Val, who controls the action. At the end of the scene she literally begs him to stay, telling him she needs him in order to go on living. Act 3 finds Lady beginning to dominate the action, after Jabe inadvertently confesses to joining in the raid that killed her father. Suspense builds as Lady goes ahead with her plans to open the confectionary while Jabe lies dying upstairs. Val, threatened with violence by the sheriff, makes plans to leave and plays a secondary role to Lady, who defiantly proclaims her right to joy and justice, celebrating her pregnancy and shouting in Jabe's direction, "I've won, Mr. Death, I'm going to bear!" (338). Jabe emerges and shoots Lady, whose final words and

onstage death give her a grand exit; Val says nothing in reply, runs away, and is captured and killed offstage.

Lumet's alterations in *The Fugitive Kind* tilt the play toward Marlon Brando, as Val, in significant ways. Lumet's motives are not entirely clear, but Brando's star power may have been motive enough. Given Brando's breakthrough film performance in the famous 1951 Elia Kazan adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, another Williams-Brando pairing seemed a sure success. Williams wanted him for the role, and Brando was interested, even though he was deeply involved in making his own film, *One-Eyed Jacks*. "I know how to write for that boy," Williams had said of Brando (Lahr 337). In the end, Brando signed the first million-dollar contract ever offered a movie star, to play Val Xavier. Lumet uses him to good effect. Williams and screenplay collaborator Meade Roberts wrote a new opening monologue for Val, who in the first scene of the movie is conducted from a jail cell to stand before a New Orleans judge on a drunk and disorderly charge. In the Criterion DVD interview made in 2010, Lumet recalled that he wanted something that would lock in the audience on Brando and lead them to think, "This is our hero." Brando, in the center of the frame throughout, delivers an intense yet coy rejection of his hard-partying past that convinces the judge to release him. It is a scene on a par with Brando's best work, as John Lahr opines (341), and it establishes the film as Val's story from the beginning. Lumet also includes a lengthy scene at the jail, in which Val meets Vee and the sheriff, before taking the viewer to Jabe's store. Some thirty-seven minutes of film elapse before Val meets Lady. In *Fugitive*, we follow Val and Carol on their nighttime drive away from town, which allows Lumet to show Val in a romantic situation with Carol. Even when Lady's story becomes paramount in the last quarter of the film, Brando is a constant presence. Most tellingly, Lady's death is much less visually arresting than Val's demise, which in the film comes as the result of Val being blasted into the burning confectionary with a firehose wielded by the sheriff.

To a large degree, it is this focus on the plight of Val that gives *The Fugitive Kind* its coherence. An artist-hero determined to flee corruption and pursue purity and truth, he is used even by those who love him and dies trying to protect the one woman he has come to love. However temperamental and hypersensitive she may have been, Anna Magnani was justified in complaining that the film put her in Brando's shadow. She also was cast for her part by Williams, who had latched onto her after her work in *The Rose Tattoo*. No doubt the fiery Italian actress's performance influenced that of Vanessa Redgrave in the 1980s revival of the play—and the 1990 made-for-cable TV film *Orpheus Descending*.

The 1990 production might in this context be called Lady's Revenge. Peter Hall's direction reverses many of Lumet's decisions. After a brief shot of Val exiting a stalled car, Lady appears in a much more intimate shot, wedged in the backseat of a car carrying her husband in the front, driven by one of his male cronies. When Val makes his speaking

entrance, it is clear that he has entered Lady's world. Val quickly encounters hostilities that have already been established as those pressing in on Lady—the crude, commercial, sexist, racist regime of the Anglo-Saxon South. His interactions with Vee and Carol funnel him toward Lady; when he begins his affair with her it is as though he has fulfilled his primary function. In stark contrast to *The Fugitive Kind*, this film is dominated, throughout, by Lady. Her explosive celebration of her pregnancy is the emotional climax of the action. When she decorates herself in Christmas tree tinsel it is as though she has become the true work of art in the utopian world of her confectionary—art and artist are one. Val has indeed initiated and enabled this change, but Lady is its centerpiece.

Vanessa Redgrave gives a stunning performance. As *New York Times* reviewer Frank Rich says, “The fusion of Vanessa Redgrave and Tennessee Williams in an artistic explosion was bound to happen.” The part, as she envisioned it, was very much in line with her own political activism, which has been fueled by a liberationist agenda on behalf of women and oppressed ethnicities. In Redgrave's interpretation of the role, Lady rises to temporary empowerment against nativist, racist, and sexist forces through the power of love and art, before the inevitable backlash slaps her down. Through her rebellion, she points to the social criticism that Lumet draws out in different ways.

Carol Cutrere and Social Realism

The third woman Val “saves” in Williams's play is Carol Cutrere, who is left to claim the snakeskin jacket and speak a word on behalf of “the fugitive kind” after the double killing of Lady and Val. Unlike Vee and Lady, Carol is not an artist; instead she is a former social activist and “Christ-bitten reformer” (251). Born into the landed gentry, Carol has fought against her legacy, trying for a time to use her inherited money and connections to improve the plight of the black majority. Stymied by her father and brother, she has turned to a dissolute life of “lewd vagrancy” as a way of venting her frustration. She thus mirrors and amplifies the social-protest dimension of Val's persona at the same time that she is enmeshed in the corruption he flees. She recognizes in Val a kindred spirit and begs him to take the route of escape with her, apparently having foreseen the hopelessness of remaining in the South. “This country used to be wild,” she announces, “the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick with neon, it's broken out sick, [. . .] like most other places . . .” (327). Val's vitality revives her, but also makes her fear for him. In *Battle*, Carol is named Cassandra, and in the later play she retains her prescience. As one who raises a voice of social protest, Carol hearkens to the critical rather than the visionary side of Williams's concerns. For this reason, she is a clue to another aspect of Lumet's interpretation of the play.

Lumet's debut as a director of feature-length films came in 1957 with *Twelve Angry Men*, a major success that still ranks as one of his best. Three aspects of *Twelve Angry Men* have a bearing on *The Fugitive Kind* generally and on the character of Carol Cutrere specifically. Lumet adopts a naturalist style, keeping us inside a single room for an extended period of real time. Much of the interest he generates comes through character study, as each juror reveals himself through comments on the case and interaction with other jurors. Finally, he focuses on the theme of justice as meted out, imperfectly, upon individuals in American society. Realism, intense character examination, and justice also permeate *The Fugitive Kind*, and his treatment of Carol provides a good entry point to these concerns.

Carol's role in the film is not central, but it is thematically essential. Played by Joanne Woodward, Carol expresses a wild rebelliousness at the beginning of the film that matches Lady's outburst at the end. Lumet gives her an extended scene with Brando that is not in the play. The two visit a seedy roadhouse with bare, cracked walls and naked tables where she confronts her drunken brother. When he slaps her, she slaps him back; Brando has to pull her away. One could argue that Brando's exchanges with her are more sexually charged than those with Magnani, especially when he takes the driver's seat in Woodward's convertible and she stretches both legs across the gear shift. In addition to Carol's description of her brief career as a crusader against racism, Lumet establishes her connection with blacks by making up the Conjure Man in such a way that the two resemble each other. In the black and white of the film, Carol and the Conjure Man appear to have nearly white, shoulder-length hair, and each wears a full-length, unbuttoned coat. The similarity is reinforced when the two exchange objects at the beginning and end of the film. Further, Carol stands up to the white male establishment, physically fighting her wealthy brother and the gas station owner who refuses to serve her. She is bloodied in the second encounter, rescued once again by Val. In these ways, Lumet's Carol comes across as a frustrated crusader who stands up for social justice and personal freedom; as Robert Bray observes in the Criterion edition commentary, she, more than any other character, represents social conscience in the film (Bray and Palmer).

Social justice comes to the fore in other ways in Lumet's version. As previously noted, we open with Val in a jail cell and follow him to a bleak courtroom lit by a single harsh light, in a scene reminiscent of Kafka's *The Trial*. Val is back in jail as soon as he arrives in Two River, only this time he is being offered shelter from a rainstorm. He hears the sheriff's dogs catch a fugitive and soon meets the sheriff himself, who is immediately suspicious of him. In these ways Val is presented as a solitary individual likely to be snapped up by the jaws of the hostile legal system at any time. This note is struck most forcefully in the climactic scene already noted, when Val is driven to a fiery death by a firehose manned by the gleeful sheriff. It is difficult at this remove to watch the scene

and not think of Bull Connor and the Birmingham civil rights protests of 1963, but even without that anachronistic association the scene had social justice implications. By 1959, when the movie was filmed, water cannons already had a considerable history in the dispersal of protesters. They were used against southerners in the General Textile Strike of 1934, for example. Another alteration in the film has Jabe calling down to Val and demanding that he stand before him so that Jabe can see who is working for him. This assertion of power is clearly meant to put Val in his place as a working man at the beck and call of his capitalistic boss.

Ironically, after Williams had moved his artist-savior away from social justice and toward personal salvation, Lumet managed to bend the material in the opposite direction. But in the process, the director managed to mute both the artistic and religious elements of Williams's hero. Lumet's Val is charismatic but not particularly artistic—except in his attachment to his guitar, which he only strums twice in the film, and in his speech, which retains its lyrical quality. Except for the obvious significance of Val's last name, which is drawn out by the court clerk's asking whether he spells his name with an "S" or an "X," little of Williams's religious symbolism is left. Lady brings palm branches into the confectionary just before her fatal scene and gives one to Val, perhaps echoing Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but Lumet calls no attention to the Passion Week setting of Williams's play. During the editing process, Lumet cut a scene he had shot in which Vee rushes to tell Val she has had a religious vision (Lumet). Nor for that matter does Lumet pay much attention to the pagan symbolism Williams attaches to his Orpheus. The snakeskin jacket seems as much a curiosity as anything else—a trademark with no particular significance beyond its association with the owner. The primitive, talismanic power of the wild is the province of the Conjure Man. Lumet's Val is a misunderstood working-class anomaly, crushed by a homogenizing society for failing to fit in. When Carol makes her final testament to Val as one of the fugitive kind, she seems to be testifying to a rebel-without-a-cause creed that does not carry Williams's Lawrentian overtones. Lumet's film, which is well worth watching despite its failure at the box office, nonetheless obscures one of the vital elements of Williams's play and indeed of Williams's psyche: the longing for transcendence.

Barton Palmer's way of framing Lumet's changes is to say that Lumet removes the mythological from *Orpheus*, replacing it with realism. This realism reinforces Lumet's forte as a director, which is to bring out the fragile connections alienated characters form with others to establish themselves in a world they cannot reject but into which they do not fit. Palmer believes that the connections established in the film between Val and others (presumably the three women discussed above) bring a coherence to Lumet's film that Williams never achieved in the play itself (Bray and Palmer).⁸ There is a great deal of justice in this observation, and it coincides with Lumet's acknowledgment that it was

difficult for him to fit characters who bordered on “the fantastic” into the realistic style that came naturally to him (Lumet).⁹ However, the price Lumet paid was to strip out the religious element central to Williams’s original inspiration. Without either angels or Orpheus, the film loses much of the play’s spiritual and poetic resonance. We are given neither a savior nor salvation but instead are left with a man who did die and a heightened sympathy for sensitive souls crushed by the wheels of history.

Notes

¹ According to the website run by the Tennessee Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, Williams’s distinguished ancestor John Sevier, “The father of Tennessee,” was the son of one Valentine Xavier, a French Huguenot who changed the spelling of his last name when he immigrated to London (“Life of John Sevier”).

² Tara Powell provides an insightful history of anti-intellectualism in the South as it affects writers in *The Intellectual in Southern Literature*.

³ The most thorough account of the various versions of the play is that of Jack E. Wallace, “The Image of Theater in Tennessee Williams’s *Orpheus Descending*.” See also David C. C. Matthew’s careful comparison of the two staged versions: “‘Towards Bethlehem’: *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending*.”

⁴ John Lahr tells the story well in *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (336–43). See also Lumet’s comments on the Criterion Collection DVD of the film (Lumet).

⁵ C. W. E. Bigsby says that the play harkens back to Williams’s first plays written for the Mummies in St. Louis (60). Of this group’s director and Williams, biographer Lyle Leverich says, “The combination of Willard Holland and Thomas Lanier Williams proved to be an auspicious team for the times: the one concerned with a theatre of social protest and the other with a dramatic depiction of violence in society, both believing the individual ineffectual except as a member of the collective consciousness” (207–08).

⁶ Peggy W. Prenshaw admirably sets out Williams’s southern context in “The Paradoxical Southern World of Tennessee Williams.”

⁷ Wallace describes the content of this unpublished manuscript, housed in the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

⁸ See especially minutes 22–25 of Palmer’s Criteria DVD commentary (Bray and Palmer).

⁹ See the final two minutes of Lumet’s Criterion DVD interview (Lumet).

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