

Documentary Sources for *Camino Real*

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I

Since the death in 1993 of Tennessee Williams's executrix, Maria St. Just, the huge amount of archival material he dispersed among many depositories in the U.S.A. has at last become fully available for study and citation. The second volume of Lyle Leverich's authorized biography is proceeding apace; editions of the letters and journals are under way; and the best of Williams's unpublished early and late plays are being rediscovered and produced and are gradually also finding their way into print. A remaining task—perhaps the most daunting of all—is to collate, put into sequence, and analyze the enormous number of drafts, revisions, and subsequent rewritings that lie behind all of this published work.

Writing was a psychological necessity for Williams, the imaginative activity which kept him from breakdown like that of his sister, Rose. He wrote compulsively, typing at great speed, then revising by hand and often independently on the many working carbons or mimeograph copies he made for each draft; and he worked by the intuitive "feel" of character and situation rather than from a detailed plan or outline, constantly fidgeting with small changes of order or wording but, more characteristically, rewriting in larger units of whole scenes or acts. The imaginative prodigality of this kind of composition and the poetic, very un-Aristotelian way he pieced his final texts together like mosaics can be illustrated by quoting two of Williams's early St. Louis friends, as reported in the first volume of Leverich's biography. Clark Mills McBurney, a poet who shared his family's basement with Williams in 1937 for what they nicknamed the "writing factory," recalls:

I could never have imagined anyone working as he did. He would do, say, a half page or two pages, and it was fast—he was fast on

the typewriter—he would be operating as if blindly. He was never sure if he knew where he was going, but when he got there—when he finished that passage and it might not be right—he'd toss it aside and start all over again. While he would do the whole business over, it would go in a different direction. It was as if he was throwing dice—as if he was working toward a combination or some kind of result and wouldn't have *any* idea of what the result might be but would realize it when he got there. You know, usually one sits down and writes page one, two, three, four, and so on—but he would write and rewrite and even in the middle of a passage, he'd start over again and slant it another way.¹

Similarly, Willard Holland, who directed some of Tennessee's early plays for an amateur company called the Mummers, describes Williams's patching together of a text from many drafts:

Tom to me was like a typewriter that never stopped writing, piling up on the floor and corners. We literally pasted [the script of] "Fugitivo" together. We would read a page of dialogue between two players and decide that two-thirds of it would play better in an earlier scene, scissor the stuff we liked and then paste it into a scrapbook until we got the whole thing the way we wanted it.²

Camino Real is a particularly good text with which to illustrate this characteristic method of composition because—at least at the beginning—Williams worked more spontaneously on it than he had done on any previous play (or was to do on any play subsequently), and despite its relative failure on Broadway and comparatively infrequent revivals, it remained one of his favorite works because he felt he had been imaginatively freer in creating it than theatrical circumstances usually permitted. It is a crucial text, in fact, for understanding that Tennessee Williams was never *ever* a "realistic" writer but always a poet. His "natural language," as he claims himself, was symbols—including the semiotic effects of such performance elements as set, lighting, color, and sound (which he called "plastic theatre")—and metaphoric analogy, rather than logical cause-and-effect, was his characteristic mode of thought.

Camino Real was a comparative failure in its first performance because in 1953 its intertextual and selfreferential techniques were at least twenty years ahead of their time, but now that they have at last become familiar to us from the experiments of Off-Off Broadway, performance art, and postmodern theory in general, it is time to look at *Camino Real* again in order to recover from Williams's early drafts a balance that was ultimately distorted in production by the very different sensibility and urgently personal political agenda of its first director, Elia Kazan.³

The plays exist in two forms: a one-act version entitled *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, and a final three-act version, much revised, entitled *Sixteen Blocks on the Camino Real*. Known drafts of these plays are in four main locations: the Billy Rose Collection of the Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts, Columbia University, the University of Delaware, and the Humanities Research Centre of the University of Texas at Austin (which holds the lion's share of Williams's archive). In addition, one very important late version of the text as actually produced on Broadway in 1953 but available in none of the printed editions is owned by a private collector, Mr. Fred Todd of San Antonio.⁴ I have published an elaborate "stemma" (or family-tree) for all *Camino Real* documents currently known,⁵ and in the present paper shall concentrate in more detail on source material for the play that is specifically documentary—all of which can be found in the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas.

II

Experience in Mexico

There are two main kinds of documentary source for *Camino Real*: one expected, the other perhaps more surprising. The "expected" source is Williams's early experience of traveling on a shoestring in Mexico—though the location of the final play, as the opening stage direction tells us, is supposed to be an amalgam of "such widely scattered ports as Tangiers, Havana, Vera Cruz, Casablanca, Shanghai, [and] New Orleans." Incidentally, the Casablanca elements are derived less from the port in Morocco than from the famous movie of the name, which was playing at the New York theatre where Tennessee earned \$15.00 a week as usher before Audrey Wood

secured the break that sent him to Hollywood with a salary and made possible *The Glass Menagerie*.

A bicycle trip Tennessee took down the Baja coast with his friend Jim Parrot in 1939 during his first visit to California introduced him to the risks and squalor that such Mexican border towns as Tijuana and Agua Caliente can hold for romantic young men without money, and also to the *Camino Real/Camino Real* pun (“royal” versus “real” road) which serves the play as its title, and by association with Dante’s “middle of life’s way” also with its imaginative spine; and these initial impressions were confirmed during a second visit by distressing experiences at “Todd’s Place” and a run-down hotel called the Costa Verde near Acapulco where he fled in August 1940 after a break up with his first important lover, Kip Kernan, and which he later used as a locale for *The Night of the Iguana*.⁶ But it was on a third trip in the summer of 1945 (during *The Glass Menagerie*’s first Broadway run), that Tennessee had the imaginative experience which gave *Camino Real* three of its main characters and also its delicate balance between lyrical melancholy and exaggerated, cartoon-like farce, which Kazan failed to achieve in his hurried, over-directed Broadway production. In an unpublished foreword to the one-act version, written at Taos, New Mexico, in May 1946, Tennessee records the experience vividly as follows:

I am traveling alone through Mexico, my only companion being some particularly vicious little microscopic organisms which have set up housekeeping in the slums of my interior. I have dysentery, or what is more gaily known as The Mexican Two-Step. I am running a few degrees [of] temperature so that the dream-like effect of the country through the train windows is more than a little subjective. It is between the capitol of Mexico and Guadalajara that I am traveling, a journey that begins in the early morning and continues till long after dark, so that if you are ill when you start, there is plenty of time to die before you arrive, but the journey is interesting enough to keep you alive while being strenuous enough to kill you. It is now about dusk and the train is drawing into one of those shy and melancholy little villages of central Mexico that you find huddled beneath the comforting ranges of blue mountains in a way that suggests a Quattrocento Madonna nursing her child. The blue dusk in the village, all of the pale adobe, is like the essential

myth of a poem, and the incidental phenomena are as lines and images chosen with the taste for sweet congruity that belongs to a graceful minor poet. Figures of women, pale and voluminously cloaked, more spectral than human, are rushing lightly as dancers along the open windows of the coaches, crying out in their soft voices such words as *pan dulce*, *pasteles*, *bonitas*, whose commonplace meanings a foreigner can ignore. Also along the tracks are oil-burning flares which throw shadows of the ghostly hawkers against the dim façades of the street. And not far off, in one of the rose-lit cantinas, a woman is singing with a guitar one of those peculiarly haunting popular songs of Mexico such as *Noce de Ronda* or *Palabras de Mujer*.

So far there is nothing anomalous, nothing harsh or shocking, for it is all of one pleasantly and uneventfully harmonious piece, the quality being similar to a painting of Picasso's Blue Period. [It was this element that Kazan failed to capture—was impatient with, in fact.]

The first discrepancy occurs when a woman passenger, obviously an American tourist, alights from one of the coaches further ahead. She starts to move down the coaches in my direction. She has on a summer coat of white material and her hat is heaped with artificial violets. Now her slightly worn but classically beautiful face catches the flickering glare of the torches. She has purchased some fruit from one of the vendors along the tracks. A man calls anxiously behind her. He is a distinguished looking gentleman in a white linen suit. He warns her that the fruit is probably unwashed. She laughs and says, "I think it would be wonderful to die of eating a piece of unwashed fruit!" Now the train has started creeping forward again. The man is afraid to leave her. He seizes her arm and half drags her onto the nearest platform of the coaches. She breaks into a laugh that turns into a paroxysm of coughing.—Yes, now I know who it is—Marguerite Gautier! *La Dame aux Camellias*!

A second later a low wall has swung in close to the train and as it slides past I catch a glimpse of a childish drawn inscription, one that I have seen in a thousand different public places in the States but never before in Mexico. *KILROY WAS HERE*, it announces. The faint blue harmonies of the Mexican Village had received Camille with surprise but no particular shock. She also belonged to the romantic tradition. But Kilroy is another matter. He

comes into the Sonata like hot licks on a trumpet, he and the world that he lives in, a world of pawn-shops on Rampart Street, jitney dance-halls, dollar-a-night hotel rooms, bars on Skid Row, all the vivid, one-dimensional clowneries and heroisms of the nickel comic and adventure strips, celebrated in the raw colors of childhood's spectrum. This is Kilroy, the most famous citizen of America, about whom nothing is known except that he goes everywhere that it doesn't cost much to go, the poor man's Don Quixote or Paul Bunyan. Here is the stuff of a Picasso ten or fifteen years after the Blue Period. Here is the new congruity of incongruities which is the root of the power in modern art, the dramatic juxtaposition of the crude and the tender, the poetic and the brutish. Yes, it could be done with paint. But with language? In some of Hart Crane, yes! But how about a play?

Possibly. Yes, possibly. But not a play that is conceived just as spoken drama. It would have to be a play whose values are mainly plastic, a play that is less written than painted.

A play that is painted? Why not!

At least I could try. I did. And here it is.⁷

Most of the elements of the eventual play are in this anecdote: the hallucinatory intensity of fever, a ground base of lyrical sadness, the Madonna and child motif, the originals of Marguerite and Casanova, the nearly missed train that foreshadows the "Fugitivo" (which, borrowing from Casablanca, becomes an airplane in the play), the violets, and the contrasting clownish, raucous tone of Kilroy, "the poor man's Don Quixote," juxtaposing "the crude and tender, the poetic and brutish," to make a "new congruity of incongruities" which is typical of all Tennessee's own best work and which he here defines as "the root of power in modern art" and identifies especially with the poetry of Hart Crane.⁸ I am also fascinated by his emphasis on quite specific visual effects for "a play that is less written than painted." There are, in fact, beautiful watercolor sketches for the one-act ten-block version by Jo Mielziner in the New York Public Library, which paint with colored lights and projections in a way that allows for quick transitions in exactly the way Tennessee is thinking of.⁹ But that project was canceled; and for the eventual three-act sixteen-blocks production, Lem Ayers, an old acquaintance of Williams who was one of Kazan's colleagues at Actor's Studio, was

allowed to provide a depressingly realistic, inflexible, and unpoetic set; while Kazan—influenced by the grotesque, caricature style of the Mexican artist Posada—concentrated on developing the vaudeville and political aspects of the play—brilliantly but disproportionately—at the expense of the delicate Lorca-esque “blue” melancholy which for Tennessee (he says here) constituted “the essential myth of the poem.”

III One Arm

The second, surprising source is Tennessee’s well-known short story “One Arm” (written 1942, published by New Directions in *“One Arm” and Other Stories*, 1944), about a beautiful but maimed ex-naval boxer called “Oliver Winemiller,” who reluctantly becomes a male prostitute in New Orleans, kills a particularly evil client, receives appreciative letters from many of his casual lovers while he is on death row, fails to seduce an ambiguously motivated Lutheran minister who comes to pray with him on the eve of his execution, and is finally electrocuted with his clients’ love letters clamped between his thighs. In the medical college to which his unclaimed corpse is sent for dissection, the students are abashed by the Apollo-like beauty of the body under their knives. “But death,” concludes the story, “has never been much in the way of completion.” Any appearance of the name “Oliver” (or “Ollie” for short) is a sure indication in later drafts of *Camino Real* that there is a link back to this source.

There are four sets of fragments to consider, and an anomalous fifth that I shall tack on as a coda; and because of space, I shall be very brief about all but two of them. Firstly, there is a draft entitled *Camino Real, or The Rich and Eventful Death of Oliver Winemiller*,¹⁰ with “3 Brass Balls and a Gypsy” penciled in as a subtitle. This dramatizes the main incidents of the short story in ways that Williams would expand in the 1960’s into an elaborate but never produced screenplay that is printed in the New Direction’s volume *Stopped Rocking and Other Screenplays* by Tennessee Williams. Unlike the screenplay, however, this draft also has elements which anticipate *Camino Real*.

The set, for example, is a “unit montage” with the façades of three buildings facing the audience up stage: a pawnshop in the center, with a

flophouse to its right and a Gypsy's fortune-telling establishment to its left. Downstage center is a bar called Mack's (with an on-stage "boogie woogie" band) which later doubles as an autopsy theatre; while a prison cell down right is balanced by an execution chamber down left. Over the buildings on an upper third level at the back, where the arch to *terra incognita* is positioned in the play, is a rainbow arch beneath which is a ticket booth for the "Sunshine Special" express train to Florida.

The Gypsy, who uses a phony Spanish accent, tells the fortunes of a series of bizarre clients as "entractes" between the Oliver scenes, advising most of them to go to Florida; but when Oliver visits her himself, she uses the cards to predict his imminent death.

Instead of missing an arm, Oliver in this version suffers from the more easily staged disability of an enlarged "athlete's heart" (like Kilroy), and he laughs with a mechanically mirthless, bitter "Ha-ha-ha" that is given to one of Gutman's guards in the play.

Finally, at the autopsy after his execution, Oliver's heart is exhibited by one of the medical students as "a shining crimson sphere . . . as big as the head of a baby"; and when the anatomy Instructor's stylized lament "America, this way thy son . . . etc." (which is spoken by the Madrecita in the play) culminates in "This was Adonis, but who will weep for him?", three figures in coats and hats, representing the "many strangers who knew him," mysteriously appear out of the dark as a chorus to end the draft with "a long drawn ahhh of lamentation."

Another draft titled *3 Brass Balls and a Gypsy*¹¹ (with "Tuesday Fat"—i.e. Mardi Gras—as an alternative subtitle) begins with "Annunciation," a weird prologue in which the Greek Fates, represented as three middle-aged spinsters in "summery costumes of forty years ago," sit at sewing machines on an upper stage to oversee the action, provide commentary and connecting sections of narrative, and produce all the play's sound effects; one of them also announces Oliver's arrival with the phrase "Kilroy is coming," but this is the only Kilroy reference. The Fates are not used subsequently in the draft, however, which also drops all connection with the short story (except for the autopsy scene) and begins instead to sketch out events that will provide the action of the eventual play: Oliver's visits to a sinister flophouse where dying drunks moan behind locked doors; his repeated need to patronize the central pawnshop; and, especially, the first sketch of his comic en-

counter with the Gypsy's daughter, Esmeralda, which will become one of the best scenes in the play. Already Esmeralda claims to be a virgin "because each time feels like the first"; she parodies "serious" conversation by garbled remarks about currency control, the class struggle, and Bolshevik dialectics; provides a comic metaphor for intercourse by letting Oliver lift her veil, providing that he does it "gently"; and persuades him to pawn his golden gloves to take her to Florida (altered in pencil to Acapulco), then repudiates him when he returns with the tickets. There is an unassimilated fragment where Oliver shares reminiscences about their past love lives with Jacques Casanova (though there is no Marguerite in this version), and another where he dies fighting off sinister streetcleaners, as in the play. It is the Madrecita, not the dissection Instructor, who laments him in the autopsy scene, with the city's beggars, not his clients providing the chorus of lament; his heart is found to be pure gold (no longer a crimson globe), and Oliver escapes with it to the pawnbrokers again, only to be repulsed once more by Esmeralda. As he turns away in disillusion, he meets an old man with a burro who identifies himself as Don Quixote and persuades Oliver to leave with him down South Rampart Street (in New Orleans), shouting to an off-stage Sancho Panza to catch them up.

A third draft, called *Observe his heart! (a choral Elegy)*,¹² develops the autopsy scene and subsequent encounter with Don Quixote even closer to the play, but there is no time to linger on this version, except to note a fragment in which Oliver is restored to life, not by the Madrecita (as in the play), but by Esmeralda appearing to drop her single tear onto his forehead. This relates to a last, very different but important draft that fills in yet another part of the emerging pattern.

In this fourth version, which is untitled,¹³ Oliver meets a Smith College girl who is touring Mexico with her professor father, her mother, and a younger brother. Oliver rescues the girl from threatening beggars whom she has been naïvely trying to photograph, and in gratitude she takes him to a fiesta whose folklore origins her father has come to research. A Gypsy tells them that centuries ago a king cohabited with a werewolf and had a daughter who now lives with the wolves; but every full moon, which the village celebrates with a fiesta, she descends in the form of a beautiful virgin to choose a dancing partner, who afterwards is allowed to lift her veil. When the full moon sets, however, the girl reverts to werewolf, and her partner must accompany her

to the hills where he will be eaten by the pack—unless the daughter should laugh or weep from the heart, in which case the curse will be broken and the daughter herself must pay the price of dying. In the scene between Oliver and Esmeralda in this draft, he fails to make her laugh with his feeble, corny jokes, but after he has lifted her veil, she cradles his sleepy body in her arms and sings a lullaby (“Rock-a-bye Yanqui”) as cold darkness descends, and when the Gypsy comes to announce the time for parting, Esmeralda does shed one single tear. She thereupon leaves sadly to meet her death, and Oliver is thrown roughly out by the Gypsy, in one draft; in another, he meets the Smith girl again and, to the sound of wolves howling wildly in the hills, they escape to share a taxi which her family is taking to the airport. So the elements of fiesta, virginity renewed at full moon, the dance with the chosen hero, and the significance of Esmeralda’s single tear (which is left unexplained in the final play) are added in Williams’s characteristic process of imaginative accretion, with elements that were originally developed quite separately being amalgamated gradually into a complex final text—just as a poet evolves a poem.

IV Coda

Finally (as a curious coda), Texas possesses another updated fragmentary draft also entitled *3 Brass Balls and a Gypsy* that actually proclaims itself “(The original sketch for *Camino Real*).”¹⁴ This has some interesting variants, including one sequence where the Gypsy quarrels with and subdues the fat hotel proprietor, Gutman, and another where one of the Gypsy’s customers is a Mississippi shoe salesman, clearly patterned after Tennessee’s father, Cornelius Coffin Williams. But the hero in this draft is called Kilroy, not Oliver; and there is a reference to the death of James Dean, which did not occur till 1955. Far from being “the original sketch,” then, this must be very much after the fact. Was Tennessee fabricating this phony “source” to raise money, perhaps? Possibly. But it seems to be more likely that, as so often, he was just reopening a text that technically was finished but not to his satisfaction, in order to fidget with it some more; and as some of the draft is written in the capital letters of his portable Olivetti on paper from the Comodoro Hotel in Havana (whose Barriochina has been added to the first stage direction), I would chance *my* arm that it was written in April,

1959, when Williams spent several idle, drunken days in Havana waiting for an opportunity to meet Fidel Castro that did not take place until Ernest Hemingway provided him with a letter of introduction.¹⁵

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Notes

¹ Lyle Leverich, *Tom: the Unknown Tennessee Williams* (New York: Crown Pub., Inc., 1995), pp. 206-7.

² *Ibid.*, 244-5.

³ cf. Brenda Murphy, *Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 64-94, though Ms. Murphy is more sympathetic to Kazan than I am.

⁴ Since this piece was written, another typescript of *Ten Blocks* has been located in a private collection in New York, and undoubtedly further data will turn up in due course—especially when the Elia Kazan archives at Wesleyan University are opened to researchers.

⁵ “A Development Stemma for Drafts and Revisions of Tennessee Williams’s ‘Camino Real’,” *Modern Drama*, vol 39, no. 2 (Summer, 1996), 331-41.

⁶ See Leverich, pp. 302, 368-80, 389-90.

⁷ HRHRC, University of Texas at Austin: MS (Williams, T.) works/[Ten Blocks...]: Foreword/Tms. S. with emendations [4 pp.]/1946 May (Taos, N.M.). Copyright © 1997 by the University of the South. Reprinted by permission of the University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee.

⁸ cf. the 1953 “Statement in Behalf of a Poet”: circulated by Jane and Paul Bowles, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Lotte Lenya, Gore Vidal *et al.* (Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University: Spec. MSS Coll./T. Williams/Box 5/244 526), which defends the play as “a complete and courageous departure from past works—: like *Alice in Wonderland* or *Ubu Roi*, it is a work of the imagination — romantic, intensely poetic, and modern.”

⁹ Billy Rose Library, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York, T. MSS 1993—002/Box 27, Folder 2.

¹⁰ Univ. of Texas: MS file (Williams, T.) Works/Camino Real, or The Rich and Eventful Death of Oliver Winemiller [play]/T.MS [30 pp.] with A.emendations on 18 pp./Dramatization of One Arm (short story)/Above title “(The Time or A Match).” Below “3 brass balls and a gypsy”/n.d.

¹¹ Univ. of Texas: MS (Williams, T.) Works/[Camino Real]/T.MS/early drafts/inc. with A. emendations/Titled “Tuesday fat; 3 brass balls and a gypsy.”

¹² Univ. of Texas: MS (Williams, T.) Works/Observe his heart (A Choral Play)/n.d.

¹³ Univ. of Texas: MS (Williams, T.) Works/Camino Real/[Unsorted pages of incomplete drafts]/T. and T.cc. MS [c. 640 pp.] with A. emendations on c. 325 pp./n.d./Includes partial versions of both short and long play.

¹⁴ In folders 3 and 4 of the collection listed in note 13 above.

¹⁵ cf. Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1975) pp. 67-8.