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“All very [not!] Pirandello”: Radical Theatrics in the Evolution of *Vieux Carré*

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LEADING ACTOR: I thought this play was locked.

[ACTRESS PLAYING] JANE: Plays are never locked up till indicted and convicted.

—Tennessee Williams, *Vieux Carré* (ca. 1973, unpublished draft)

In an intermediate, unpublished version of Tennessee Williams’s *Vieux Carré* (ca. 1973), an actor “drops” character to remark “All very Pirandello.”^[1] Although this comment, on one level, self-reflexively “notices” the play-within-a-play structure (of this version), its tone is more playfully ironic than the serious tenor of Pirandello’s metadrama, which separates actors from characters and fictions from “reality” in order to establish metaphysical meanings. Instead, “All very Pirandello” sounds closer to Prior’s campy “*Very Steven Spielberg*” (Kushner, *Angels* 118), spoken as the angel crashes through the ceiling in Part One of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1992). Pirandello’s modernist self-reflexivity does not—indeed, *could not*—apprehend Prior’s camping in the face of death. “*Very Steven Spielberg*,” like “All very Pirandello,” springs from varieties of late-twentieth century postmodern theatricalism that incorporate elements of popular culture into the previously sanctified realm of “high” art.^[2] Kushner explains that the irony in Prior’s comment “is there to undercut the mythical and magical aspects of the moment with an invocation of contemporary culture and the real world” (*Conversations* 83), much as Williams’s ironic meta-reference undermines the notion that he is merely imitating Pirandello, for his (supposed) “Pirandello” drafts, as well as the published play actively revision a more contemporary theatricalism.^[3] The evolution of *Vieux Carré*, which began in 1939 and was resumed in the 1970s, presents a unique opportunity to contrast the modernist lexicon of its first drafts with the more postmodern, radically theatricalist vocabularies of the “(not!) Pirandello” versions, thereby glimpsing the trajectory of Williams’s evolving theatricalist poetics through the lens of a single play.

¹² From the beginning of his writing life, Williams’s cannibalistic process fed upon and recycled writing—his own and that of others—into his texts, a process that is analogous to various descriptions of postmodern artistic processes.^[4] Hal Foster, for instance, describes a postmodern *anti-aesthetic* in which art functions as “a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them” (32).^[5] Williams’s work certainly “destructures,” breaking apart his own life experiences and the work of other writers in order to “reinscribe” it in his theatricalist art. During his apprentice years (from 1934 to 1939), however, there was little overt “critique” at work, as, like many young writers, he learned through imitation and frequently adopted meanings as well as imagery. By the early 1940s, Williams began to shape these dismembered borrowings into aesthetic

structures that were clearly his own, and it is at that point that his work begins to engage in a postmodern sense of critique. Many of Williams's later plays venture further into poststructural territory, becoming parody that "paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 11). Because *Vieux Carré* was first drafted in Williams's apprentice years and then rewritten during his late period, its development through (at least) nine different versions reveals how Williams's rewriting process transformed specific modernist metaphors and forms into a more radically theatricalist drama. This movement may be understood as having taken place in five stages: during the first stage, or the apprentice years, the first two versions reinscribe vocabularies of modernist writers such as D.H. Lawrence without much critical edge; in the second stage, with the 1943 story "The Angel in the Alcove" Williams employs an ironic narrator's voice that actively revises not only his own early draft, but also Lawrencean imagery; in the third stage, Williams develops a short play with contemporary (1960s) characters; in the fourth stage Williams reinvents Pirandello, adding his own theatrical innovations as actors rehearse two one-act plays (the 1939 story and the contemporary play); in the fifth stage, for the New York and London productions Williams erases the Pirandellian frame play, blending the two plays together into the 1939 period. While this final stage seems like a compromise that returns to a "memory play" format (like that of *The Glass Menagerie*), the mixing of two time frames anticipates the "double negative" memory technique employed in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981). To show how Williams's process borrowed metaphors and forms from sources, recasting them into his radical theatrics, emphasis will be placed on unpublished drafts with limited, comparative attention given to the published version.

Stage 1: Imitating Modernists: The Apprentice Drafts

13

Dead Planet, the Moon! (1939) and The Lady of Larkspur Lotion (1941)

The first draft of *Vieux Carré* was written in January 1939, within weeks after Williams first arrived in New Orleans on December 28, 1938. He quickly reported in a letter to his mother (Edwina Dakin Williams) that "I'm using my colorful experiences here as background for a new play which is well underway . . ." (quoted in Leverich 284). At the top of the draft to which the letter refers,^[6] Williams has typed *Vieux Carré (A Long Play)*, but *Vieux Carré* has been scratched out and a new, handwritten title added: *Dead Planet, The Moon!* This title provides a strong textual clue as to when and how Williams revised the autobiographical incidents and characters that provided the inspiration for this play, for it represents a literal reinscription. In crossing out the actual place name (which came first) and inserting a poetic metaphor in its place, we can see Williams at work, shaping his metaphoric vocabulary. Williams seems to have developed the "dead planet" metaphor during his first pilgrimage to the former home of D.H. Lawrence in Taos, New Mexico. Upon arriving in mid-August 1939, he wrote to his (then new) agent Audrey Wood complaining that he did not like Taos, that "these people are like the country—which is like a dead planet—the moon!—They have a brilliance but it is not living. Whatever was living in them must have died with Lawrence—anyway, it is certainly dead."^[7] Lawrence's mythopoeic writing method recycled primitive symbols for death and rebirth (such as the phoenix and the moon) from sources like James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Williams, who owned a copy of *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence*,^[8] may have derived part of this imagery from some of these poems, such as: "The moon is broken in twain, and half a moon/ . . . Is buried away in the dark where all the dead lie" (Lawrence 114). In composing his "dead planet, the moon" metaphor, the cannibalist Williams consumed the raw materials

of his experience with the people of Taos, the lunar landscape of its desert and Lawrence's literary imagery, which conflates the moon with "the dead,"⁹ and reinscribed it as his own text. It is likely that he worked on the *Vieux Carré* script in Taos, at which time he probably scratched out the original title, reinscribing his new Lawrencean poetic symbol, *Dead Planet, The Moon!*

^{¶4} This incomplete draft transforms the residents of Williams's rooming house at 722 Toulouse Street into modernist characters: here, the Writer of (the published) *Vieux Carré* is named Valentine, described as a "literary not-quite" (*Dead Planet* n.p.), who prefigures Valentine Xavier of *Battle of Angels* (1940) and *Orpheus Descending* (1957); here, the character later called Mrs. Wire (based on Williams's actual landlady Mrs. Anderson) is Mother O'Neill, who resembles "Popeye in a grey frowsy wig" (*Dead Planet* n.p.) (This cartoon character is most likely a none-too-flattering reference to Eugene O'Neill). This draft also presents episodes that Williams reported as actually having occurred at 722 Toulouse Street, including the landlady's short-lived attempt to start a restaurant and an incident in which she poured boiling water through the floorboards on a rowdy party below.¹⁰

^{¶5} While these correspondences demonstrate Williams's ability to craft life into art, the major character of the play was most likely not drawn from life, but was an amalgam of modernist metaphors adapted from Lawrence's fiction. This character's name, Sky Rocket, echoes Lawrence's phallic metaphors, and he dominates this first draft. He in no way resembles the offstage character of Sky in the published version, a clarinet player who calls to the Writer to leave with him at the end.¹¹ The Sky Rocket of this first draft is a former big band trombone and sax player who has hit the skids. This romanticized jazz musician is a perfect modernist figure, through whom Williams develops the "dead planet" theme. Sky claims to have the "instinct for self destruction . . . the kind that would go to the moon on a one-way ticket!" (*Dead Planet* n.p.). As Sky repeats, "I bought a one-way ticket to the moon" (n.p.), the text also seems to allude to Clifford Odets's play *Rocket to the Moon*, which had been produced by the Group Theatre in New York in November 1938. It was still playing to great success on Broadway in February 1939 when Williams sent five short plays to a competition sponsored by the Group Theatre. While Williams would not have read or seen the play¹² (which bears no resemblance to *Dead Planet, the Moon!*), he would have been aware of the play's title, and (not the least) of Odets's success.

^{¶6} While the published version of *Vieux Carré* and "The Angel in the Alcove" have become known as Williams's (quasi) autobiographical coming-out narratives, in *Dead Planet*, there is no mention or implication of homosexual experience. Lyle Leverich has suggested that Williams's first sexual experience with a man may have taken place later than Williams claims it did, that is, during the 1939 New Orleans trip (278). It is also possible that, if it did occur in 1939, Williams was unwilling to include homosexual experience in a play that presents modernist recapitulations of Lawrencean heterosexual union, which Williams reinscribes in a sexual episode between Sky and a woman named Kelly. Sky claims sex was "accidental . . . [when] we stumbled over each other an' got tangled up in a bed" (*Dead Planet* n.p.). He goes on to describe the experience as a resurrection, using Lawrence's metaphor for the power of physical touch to resurrect a dead soul:¹³ "The rest wasn't touched until you touched it. And then it stopped being empty, it wasn't a desert no more" (*Dead Planet* n.p.). The reference to the desert seems so similar to Williams's reference to the country around Taos (in his August 1939 letter) that it suggests he was still actively drafting the play at the time of his visit to Lawrence's home. While the play is still unformed (and the extant draft incomplete), it demonstrates ways in which Williams reinscribed the world around him in Lawrencean modernist metaphors.

Two years later, Williams wrote a one-act play that expanded his literary representations of the Vieux Carré: *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* (1941). Whereas Valentine, the writer of *Dead Planet* is merely *one* of an ensemble of characters, in this play, the writer's character and point of view are more fully developed. The boarding house scenario is maintained, and for the first time the landlady is called Mrs. Wire. The romanticized, modernist voice of *Dead Planet* is still at work here, seen as the young writer declares himself to be "Chekhov! Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov!" (89). The unabashed passion of the writer to inhabit the very person of his literary influence¹⁴ exposes the uncritical enthusiasm with which Williams recycles his cannibalized texts in these apprentice years. It is a voice filled with desire to *become* the idol, a voice that will gradually be tempered as a more mature writer's voice emerges.

Stage 2: Revising Lawrence: The Emergence of Irony

"The Angel in the Alcove"(1943)

The details of the rooming house background and the core story of the Writer's coming out are not set down until 1943, when Williams first drafted the short story "The Angel in the Alcove" while in Santa Monica.¹⁵ The story, which was first published in the *One Arm* collection in 1948, develops two core elements that structure (the published) *Vieux Carré*: the angel's comforting of the Writer after his sexual encounter with the Painter (absent from *Dead Planet*) and Mrs. Wire's boiling water attack, which is set down in fuller detail than the episode related in *Dead Planet*. In addition to its finely shaped plot, "The Angel in the Alcove," like most of Williams's short fiction, employs a heavily ironic narrator's voice. The ironic voice in "Angel" is in distinct contrast to the enthusiastic, youthful modern writers of *Dead Planet* and *Larkspur Lotion*. Irony, according to Linda Hutcheon, "'happens' in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid" (*Irony's* 12) and may function (among its other uses) to distance, to transgress and to play (the ludic function, indicating humor and/or theatrical play) (47). These three functions are evident from the story's first sentence: "Suspicion is the occupational disease of landladies and long association with them has left me with an obscure sense of guilt I will probably never be free of" (125). This sentence cues the reader to read between the lines, noticing the implied temporal and physical distance. Although written only four years after Williams had these experiences, the narrator's ironic tone suggests that 1939 was decades ago and the Vieux Carré, a continent away. This sense of extreme distance enables Williams to poke fun at landladies, as well as his own (alleged) response to their "disease." Most significantly, the irony allows the narrator's voice to adopt a critical tone that is similar to a postmodern *anti-aesthetic* in which writing functions as "a critique [that] destructures . . . [and] reinscribe[s]" (Foster 32). Gone are the dutiful and near-reverential imitations of Lawrence and youthful salutes to Chekhov, replaced here by a skeptical voice and subject (coming out) that indicates that not only a revision, but a critique of *Dead Planet* is occurring. This is partially suggested when Williams links the angel's appearance to moon imagery, recrafting the forbidding, barren death he glimpsed in the lunar landscape of Lawrence's Taos (described in the letter to Wood) and shaping it into a force of healing:

The apparition occurred in the alcove most often on those winter nights in New Orleans when slow rain is falling from a sky not clouded heavily enough to altogether separate the town from the moon. New Orleans and the moon have always seemed to me to have an understanding between them, an intimacy of sisters grown old together, no longer needing more than a speechless look to communicate their feelings to each other. This lunar atmosphere of

the city draws me back whenever the waves of energy which removed me to more vital towns have spent themselves and a time of recession is called for. (128)

¶19

Williams's ironic reference to New Orleans as a "lunar landscape" is evidence of a redefinition of his earlier troping on Lawrence's desert and moon metaphors.¹⁶ In this passage he transfers them to an urban context that is more in tune with Hart Crane's cityscapes than Lawrence's primitive natural settings. Williams also recasts Lawrence's death-moon as a moon that heals, promoting "speechless" understanding. From this point on in Williams's work, the moon is also conflated with lunacy (its etymological association) to create benign portrayals of madness, which is evident in an early, 1945 draft of *A Streetcar Named Desire* entitled *Blanche's Chair on the Moon*.

Stage 3: Mapping the Revolution: The Vieux Carré in the 1960s

¶10

***Broken Glass in the Morning, or Skylight* (ca. 1960s), and *I Never Get Dressed Until Dark on Sundays* (1970)**

After finishing "The Angel in the Alcove" in 1943 Williams apparently put aside any plans to dramatize it until the 1960s, when the rebellious spirit of young anti-war protestors and the youth counterculture reminded him of the riotous characters of *Dead Planet, the Moon!* At first he did not revive either of the earlier works, but started with fresh characters who reside in the 1960s Vieux Carré. The first new draft was a one-act entitled *Broken Glass in the Morning, or Skylight* (ca. 1960s).¹⁷ In this fairly complete play, the characters Virginia and Paul (written for Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward)¹⁸ are wild young people living (and dying) on the edge in a cheap Vieux Carré flat with a giant skylight, which symbolizes a sort of vision. The broken glass of the title signifies the breaking of vision as death approaches for the young man. This play is a precursor to the next stage, another one-act entitled *I Never Get Dressed Till After Dark on Sundays*.¹⁹ Williams read this play to an audience of students at Duke University in April 1970, probably soon after it was written, and he felt that they understood it.²⁰ He read it again to an audience in Key West on May 1, 1970, telling the students that the play is about:

the deeply disturbed and disturbing young people of our immediate time and place, the ones who drift up and down our streets with lost eyes, to the sense obliterating noise of their "nite-beats," to their pads and their crash pads. I read it and inscribe it to these and to our possible understanding of their crisis, which is *our* crisis, too. (n.p.)

These readings occurred immediately after the revelation of the United States' military invasion of Cambodia, which sparked a chain of violent and disruptive anti-war protests on college campuses across the United States. Williams, who spoke out publicly against the Vietnam war, conducted these readings of his play while the demonstrations were unfolding, just days before four students were gunned down at Kent State University. The fiercely apocalyptic background against which this play was written and first read bespeaks Williams's strong political allegiance to these bohemians—his fugitive kind—whose boarding house ghosts he visioned being reborn in the fiery outcry that illuminated that spring. The draft he read to the students reflects the upheaval with its references to revolution and cry of "VIVA CHE!" (n.p.).

¶11

Set in a one-room apartment in the "slave quarters" (1-1) of an old Vieux Carré house "only a few buildings away from Bourbon Street" (1-1), the new setting responds to the fact that, while boarding houses were ubiquitous during the depression years, they had all but vanished by the 1960s. These revisioned, postmodern

characters of *I Never Get Dressed* are similar to those in *Broken Glass*, but they are renamed Jane and Tye, as they will appear in later drafts of *Vieux Carré*. Tye is a strip-show barker, and Jane is dying of leukemia. The only ostensible connection between this play and the *Dead Planet, the Moon!* is found in a comment Jane makes to Tye, telling him that when he doesn't come home, she doesn't know "if you've caught a space-ship to the moon or a squad car to the House of Detention" (2-16). This statement ironically echoes Sky Rocket's claim to have the "instinct for self destruction . . . the kind that would go to the moon on a one-way ticket!" (*Dead Planet* n.p.), suggesting that Sky, which rhymes with Tye, is (at least minimally) the source of Tye's character.

Stage 4: Pirandello or *Not!*: Merging 1939 with 1970

¶12

Vieux Carré, "a double-bill" (c. 1973) & *Vieux Carré*, "a pair of one-acts" (c. 1973-76)

While on a cruise to Asia in April 1973,^[21] Williams first drafted *Vieux Carré* as a metadrama, which seems, throughout the first half, to have been inspired by Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). Between April and October 1973, Williams apparently continued the draft, writing to Maria St. Just in October that he was working on a "double bill" which he was going to "try-out" in Providence, Rhode Island (*Five O'Clock* 303).^[22] In this version, two plays entitled *The Angel in the Alcove* and *I Never Get Dressed Till After Dark on Sundays* are rehearsed by actors in a larger, Pirandellian frame play. When considering the ways in which Williams borrowed from Pirandello, it is crucial to understand that even Williams's early plays exhibit textual and performative awareness of the theatre,^[23] seen in metadramatic metaphors such as Blanche's "paper moon" song and her paper lantern. During the last half of his career, Williams's experimental dramaturgy evolved beyond these modernist metaphors, expanding into full-fledged theatricalist plays like *Outcry/The Two-Character Play* (written and rewritten 1967-80) and *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* (1976, unpublished). During the 1960s, '70s and early '80s, Williams borrowed metadramatic techniques from Pirandello, Jean Genet, Bertolt Brecht and Peter Handke, but redefined them in his own theatricalist vocabularies. Just as one can see the how the modernist influence of Lawrence in *Dead Planet* was transformed into a new language with "The Angel in the Alcove," so the early stages of the new "double-bill" *Vieux Carré* at first seem like Pirandello, but then invent an expanded, postmodern theatrics.

¶13

It was natural for Williams to look to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as a model, for, as Elinor Fuchs observed, it became the "theatricalist *Ur-text* in the modern period" (Fuchs, *Death* 34). Fuchs notes that Pirandello's metadrama embodies a "core dilemma of modernist drama, which repeatedly introduces *as a humanistic problem* its own very questioning of the human on stage" (*Death* 35). While Pirandello's actor/character split would seem to physicalize modernist constructs of fragmented identity, literally breaking one person into two, the text of *Six Characters* seems valorize the characters' search for an authentic story. This is seen in the characters' multitude of objections to the Manager's theatrical illusions, claiming that "ours is an immutable reality" (266). The actors' inability to recover all of their story is framed by Pirandello as a metaphysical tragedy that, in the end, comes close to becoming the melodrama that Pirandello strives to resist. *Vieux Carré* manages *not* to become mired in this modernist problematic, but instead discovers a present, postmodern tense in which to define its theatricalist form and context.

¶14

This "double-bill" draft is the first version of *Vieux Carré* to turn away from the more traditional expressionist form of Williams's early work and convert to a totalized theatricalist format, partially derived

from Pirandello's use of the play-within-a-play and the actor/character split. Most definitions of metadrama note that it is "drama *about* drama" (Hornby 4), but this simple definition may have a universalizing effect. Like parody, metadrama or theatricalism usually serves distinct purposes and functions in different historical periods. While modernist metadramas frame problematics of fragmented identity, fragmentation is not such a problem to postmodernism, as it is generally accepted in late twentieth century philosophy that character/identity is a construction or a performance. Bert O. States describes an historic shift in theatrical form that is similar to the disjuncture between the function of modernist metadrama and postmodern theatricalism:

The distorted world of the perturbed protagonist gave way to a world distorted by the artist's personal project: an artistically mediated view of the world, but one, strangely enough, that did not set out to express the world or (in many cases) even to signify it, but to stand, in some degree, in its place. Here was a theatre, one might say, that was about the reality of art as much as about the reality outside. (101-102)

Williams's early expressionist plays staged the "distorted world of the perturbed protagonist" that States describes. Beginning with *Suddenly Last Summer* in 1958, his later plays increasingly stage "a world distorted by the artist's personal project," producing a radical, theatricalist dramaturgy that is about art, in which plays are *about* methods of seeing through theatrical representation. These theatrics erase not just the fourth wall but the other three as well, exposing the walls of the theatre itself as they are literally exposed in *The Two-Character Play* and these "(not!) Pirandello" versions of *Vieux Carré*.

¶15 Like *Six Characters*, *Vieux Carré* begins with a similar frame play set on a theatre stage but by its end, new meanings and new forms have been invented. In the beginning actors arrive in a Broadway theatre for rehearsal in the midst of a blizzard outside the theatre, which has prevented the Director from attending. As in *Six Characters*, the Playwright is also absent, allowing Williams to poke fun at himself, as one actor ironically claims that the author "doesn't look a day over ninety" (*Angel* 6). The actor suggests the play might be improved with "a few dog howls" (*Angel* 4), lampooning the barking dogs in *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and "cat meows" (*Angel* 4), gesturing at Maggie the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Just as the first part of the frame play seems to imitate the Pirandellian form without challenging it, so the rehearsal of *The Angel in the Alcove*, the first play-within-a-play, seems to be very similar to *Six Characters*, particularly when actors break character. The Writer says that he is using "material for a story now turned into a play" (*Angel* 43), theatrically "noticing" what Williams's process is. Many of the exchanges between the Writer, Nightingale and Mrs. Wire in the published version exist here, but the order is quite different. The Writer speaks to the audience, providing narrative commentary on each scene, much as he functions in the published version. When the Writer says that the coming-out story was "then, when young—shocking, then . . ." (43), the older Williams revalues the story (and the play itself) more ironically in a post-Stonewall world.

¶16 The second half of this "double-bill" *Vieux Carré* changes its tone to challenge actively the modernist innovations of *Six Characters* in two ways: through voices of postmodern parody and through Williams's own theatricalist innovations. The second half of the bill—or the rehearsal of *I Never Get Dressed Till after Dark on Sundays*—begins with the Director and Playwright (now) mysteriously present, and their exchanges with the actors are rich with parody. When the actors break character to complain about lines (as they did in *The Angel* and *Six Characters*), saying "who talks like that?" (*I Never* 5), it becomes a theatricalist question asked of Tennessee Williams: in other words, Is it Lawrence? Is it Pirandello? When the Playwright responds, he speaks

in Williams's own poetry: "Nobody I know but me. —Once I said: 'Give me your tongue in my mouth like holy bread at communion.' Proceed from the skin bit, please" (*I Never* 5).

¶17 The Playwright's response first claims his own voice, and then parodies both his own writing and the actor's response to it, by ironically referring to it as "the skin bit," which carries connotations of pornography. This sort of postmodern parody allows the text to both incorporate and challenge a pop culture reference (pornography), revealing how Williams's poetic lines like the "communion" analogy are heard and interpreted in consumerist culture. Williams's parodies continue in this radical revision of *I Never Get Dressed*, with voices of tourists intruding from the street:

LADY'S VOICE: *Bess! It's a Little dream! It's like a dream.*

JANE: "Like a dream" — last line of first act of Chekhov's *Sea-Gull*.

— Played Nina once — "I'm a seagull"— no good translation. (*I Never* 8-9)

Jane hears the words coming from the "real" world as if they were art—lines from Chekhov. In contrast to the sensationalized public perception of Williams's plays as sexually decadent "skin bit[s]," Jane's comment suggests that Williams himself hears in the opposite way: he hears "real" language as art.

¶18 In the second type of challenge to the modernist innovations of *Six Characters*, the actors in *I Never Get Dressed* invent new modes of theatrical speech that go far beyond Pirandello's actor/character split. These inventions, which I will call "quotation theatrics," radically disrupt realist conceptions about dialogue in three ways: First, actor/characters speak stage directions as they perform them; Second, they use dialogue to express interior, extra-textual thoughts; and Third, they invent dialogue and a new plot ending. Quotation theatrics represent a radical, theatricalist leap for Williams, an innovation that is clearly a postmodern anti-aesthetic that radically revises modernist constructions of character, plot and discourse.

¶19 When quotation theatrics ironically reverse the nature and purpose of stage directions, it affects both the dramatic text as well as modernist concepts of character. Stage directions are never spoken aloud and exist as (usually pedestrian) roadmaps for actors and directors. Williams's stage directions, however, are renowned for their literary value that creates a secondary, (unspoken) narrative text that is hermeneutically contrapuntal to the plays' spoken dialogue. When the actors decide to speak stage directions aloud in this version of *I Never Get Dressed*, it is (the invisible) Williams who, speaking through the actors, transgresses the authority of the Playwright and the dramatic text. The Director and Playwright have become mysteriously absent again, and the actors take over, creating and speaking their own stage directions:

JANE: I have a suggestion. —Stay in character and describe the action.

TYE: This is—amateur night in Dixie!

JANE: Let's give it a try. We'll just tell it like it happens. I say that he knocks at the door. I try to stop Tye but Tye lets him in and —Tye?

TYE: Yeah, I let him in and he does a slow take and then he—

JANE: Calls me— (19)

In this exchange, actors narrate their movements as they make them, which is strikingly similar to Brecht's method of quotation (acting in the third person), in which actors in rehearsal describe what they are doing as they do it. Brecht theorizes quotation as an anti-Aristotelian distancing technique that helps actors to avoid

emoting and aids audiences in maintaining a critical distance from characters and events.^[24] Quotation theatrics (as I posit that Williams uses them) function in the same way. When Jane speaks the line, “I say that he knocks at the door,” it blocks spectators’ ability to believe in the (illusion of) her character’s “reality” or that of the play. Whereas Pirandello values the “reality” of the characters’ stories in an humanistic, modernist sense, as Hutcheon observes, “Brecht’s theater and postmodernist art further contest [the] entire set of assumptions . . . [that] derive from the humanist concept of subjectivity: originality, uniqueness, authority, universality” (*Poetics* 220). Character construction in Williams’s plays and fiction also fracture humanist assumptions about identity. David Savran has theorized that Williams’s texts engage in “a process of *desubjectification*, an unbinding and deconstruction of the sovereign subject” (145). When Williams’s quotation theatrics speak stage directions to reveal interior thoughts and invent dialogue, they unbind and disrupt modernist valuations of identity, textuality and performance.^[25]

¶20 When interior thoughts, such as “She’s thrown an awful lot at this country boy” (24), are spoken aloud on stage, it might at first seem to resemble O’Neill’s modernist experiment with *Strange Interlude* (1928), in which characters pause to speak their inner thoughts in long monologues. But Williams’s theatrics not only reveal characters’ interior monologues, but those of the actors as well, so that spectators see and hear these contradictory thoughts and comments emanating from the same person. Williams’s technique more closely resembles the avant-garde plays of German writer Peter Handke, whom Williams admired. In a 1979 interview he described Handke’s writing as “oblique, elusive, enormously evocative. . . . provocative. Subtle, in other words” (“Bard” 321). Handke’s *Offending the Audience* (1966) strenuously rejects any and all audience expectations by abolishing a traditional script, eliminating characters, sets and costumes. Instead, an actor (or several actors) lectures the audience, negating every expectation, platitude and theory about theatre, saying “This is no drama” (15); “You are sharing no experience” (9); “No mirror is being held up to you” (9). Williams’s theatrics are more like Handke’s negations than O’Neill’s inner revelations.

¶21 Quotation theatrics also transgress traditional dramatic narrative when the actors reject the Playwright’s ending to discover their own. This leads to one of the most stunningly beautiful moments in the entire nine-draft cycle of *Vieux Carré*’s evolution, which occurs at the end of this “double-bill” version—a moment that was partially revised for the play’s May 1977 Broadway production and entirely cut in the published version. The Playwright’s ending, which the actors veto, concludes with a stage direction for “CURTAIN” (*I Never* 27). In the alternate (actors’) ending, as Jane is left alone on stage to die, Ferguson, an aging assistant stage manager appears. He encourages the actress to go on with her character and not be stopped by the “Curtain” direction, observing that “a play’s not stopped by a curtain. I mean if it’s a true thing, it continues after the curtain the way that life does after sleep, it comes out of the night stop and goes into the next day” (*I Never* rev. 27). While this sounds like the metaphysical tone of Pirandello’s discourse, the alternate ending resists the narrative closure of *Six Characters*. As Jane dies, lying in Ferguson’s arms, he coaches her to “look up at the black skylight with a question: then straight out into the house, with the same question, eyes—?” (*I Never* rev. 28). Jane and Ferguson work together to discover the ending until he finally says “Yes, that’s how it ends: see what I mean? —no curtain . . .” (*I Never* rev. 29). Williams has typed “NO CURTAIN” as his final stage direction, and then added by hand, “No curtain . . . no curtain . . .” (*I Never* rev. 29).

¶22 The next draft of *Vieux Carré* still maintains the two plays-within-a-play format, but changes the place and time of *I Never get Dressed*, moving Jane and Tye back in time to 1939 and into Mrs. Wire’s rooming house. In

a letter to Maria St. Just dated September 9, 1975, Williams states that the director for “a pair of one-acts called *Vieux Carré*” (331) has arrived in New Orleans, indicating that another version was probably written between 1973 and 1975. A professionally typed script that most likely represents this second “(not!) Pirandello” version has recently been discovered in the collection of designer Boris Aronson (at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center). This version smooths out the rough (but interesting) edges of the “double bill” script, losing some of its experimental qualities. It begins, like the other version, with a rehearsal from which the Director and Playwright are absent. Ferguson, who first appeared in the “double-bill” script, takes over and the actors move swiftly through both plays with no interruptions or breaking of character. In uniting both sets of characters under the roof of the rooming house in 1939, Williams does not radically alter the sequence of events. *The Angel in the Alcove* still focuses on the relationship of the Writer to the Painter and Mrs. Wire, but Jane and Tye are present as tenants of the house and as witnesses to the drama. Similarly, in the second play, the focus is still on Jane and Tye, but the Writer and others are present. In a sense, the rooming house becomes a character at this point, a group protagonist like Chekhov’s cherry orchard, which stands for the entire ensemble of characters whose stories and lives take place within its walls. While this is a significant step toward the final version, revealing how its dramatic structure evolved, most of the experimental quotation theatrics of the previous draft have been lost. The most significant innovation retained in this script is the ending, which is almost identical to that of the “double bill” version above.

Stage 5: Compromise: Erasing Pirandello and Quotation Theatrics

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***Vieux Carré*, “May 1977” (Broadway version) *Vieux Carré*, as published by New Directions (1979) (London production script, 1978)**

Before it opened on Broadway May 11, 1977,²⁶ Williams rewrote *Vieux Carré*, erasing the Pirandellian frame play and plays-within-a-play, along with most of his radical innovations. Over the last decade he had staged plays that were more radically theatricalist than the experiments of the “(not!) Pirandello” drafts, (*Outcry* in 1975 and *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* in 1976), and so this apparent revisiting of *The Glass Menagerie*’s “memory-play” format seems like a curious compromise. A possible reason for the elimination of the (“double-bill”) radical theatrics is hinted at in interviews with Sylvia Sidney, who played Mrs. Wire. Sidney first read the play in late 1976 at the encouragement of director Arthur Allan Seideman, with whom she had recently done *The Glass Menagerie*. After reading it, she said, “I’d love to do it if it were a *play*, but . . . there [are] terrific problems” (qtd. in Spoto 324). Her ironic observation that it was not a “play” was a judgment shaped by her experience as a film actress in Hollywood. During her brief sojourn as one of the Group Theatre’s “movie stars,” which began with her marriage to Luther Adler in 1938 and ended with the Group’s bitter dissolution in 1940, she financially backed some of its later productions, such as Odets’s *Rocket to the Moon* (1938). As an investor, she was horrified by the way Odets had written the last act, as she thought it would cause the play to lose money. Although Odets defended his work, minor modifications were made to mollify her (Smith 346-47). It is not unlikely that she felt capable of offering similar criticisms to Williams (through Seideman) and by January 1977, shortly after Sidney had read it, Williams reported that he was writing a “new play” called *Vieux Carré* (Spoto 323). Sidney’s history, along with Williams’s prompt and definitive erasure of experiments and return to a “memory play” format seem to suggest that the changes were a compromise to bring it into line with what Sidney considered to be a “play,” thereby securing her agreement to appear in it. The Broadway

production was fraught with every imaginable problem, including, until the very end of rehearsals, the absence of the playwright, leaving the actors and director Arthur Allan Seidelman to interpret Williams's rewrites (delivered by friends) on their own. Unlike the rehearsals in the "(not!) Pirandello" drafts, no innovative methods were apparently discovered while the writer was away.

¶24 A *Vieux Carré* script dated "May 1977"²⁷ that is very close to that of the Broadway production exists in the archives of Columbia University, in which virtually all traces of Pirandellian actor/character splits and the rehearsal frame play have been removed. In eliminating the frame play and its context (of the rehearsal of a "pair of one-acts"), Williams has fused the two one-acts into one long memory play. Although the plays-within-a-play have been erased, the events remain in the same chronological order, maintaining the same structure. Only one small remnant of the quotation theatrics remains in the final scene: Ferguson was deleted with the frame play but the Writer takes his place, stepping in to help Jane die. He quotes his actions as he performs them, saying, "—And holds her close, closer, and look up at the skylight with a question—eyes—dark as the skylight" (90). Then, instead of the "no curtain . . . no curtain" open ending of the "(not!) Pirandello" versions, Williams adds (for the first time) a curtain speech for the Writer similar to the one in the published version. While, in a sense, this is an example of the way in which theatricalist experiments have been excised from the scripts for the Broadway and London productions, Williams's words dissolve walls and evaporate characters in lines borrowed from the 1943 story, which claims that "In eight years' time such characters disappear, the earth swallows them up, the walls absorb them like moisture" ("The Angel" 126-27).

¶25 After the Broadway production closed on May 15th due to poor reviews, Williams rewrote *Vieux Carré* again for a production in London the following year,²⁸ which met with much more favorable reviews. The script for this production is represented by the version published in 1979. Here the Writer is more active as a narrator, standing like Tom between the present and past frames of *The Glass Menagerie*. Rather than looking backward in Williams's canon for a comparison, however, I prefer to look forward, discovering how the radical theatrics in the "(not!) Pirandello" drafts and the published version of *Vieux Carré* contributed to theatricalist innovations in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, produced Off-Off-Broadway in 1981. The reviews for this production resemble the notices for *Vieux Carré* in their use of the label "memory play" and unfavorable comparisons to *The Glass Menagerie*.²⁹

¶26 Although both plays appear to be similar to *The Glass Menagerie*, in that characters and action are staged through the memory-lens of character/narrators, significant formal differences exist. *The Glass Menagerie* naturalizes the relationship between the characters and their surroundings by displacing narrative into the past, which is signified by allowing the audience to see through a transparent scrim as if they were looking into the past through a romantic window. Harry Smith points out that this is essentially a "pictorial" (183) mode of representation that is also used in early plays such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Summer and Smoke* (1948). In contrast to this modernist scenic coding of the past, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981) denaturalizes characters by foregrounding the difference between past and present through the metatheatrical context of the "double exposure" (SCSC 7), which is like the "performative" modes described by Smith (183) that are presentational. In other words, *Menagerie* is a modernist representation of the past through the natural metaphor of memory, whereas *Something Cloudy* is a postmodern presentation that creates a simultaneous past and present through the metaphor of photographic superimposition.

The “double negative” is seen through the distorted vision of character/narrator August, whose “left eye’s a little cloudy but the other one’s clear” (*SCSC* 5). Williams explained the analogy at the time of the play’s premiere in a 1981 *Paris Review* interview, linking his cloudy left eye to the part of his nature “that was obsessively homosexual, compulsively interested in sexuality” (346) and the clear eye to “the side that in those days was gentle and understanding and contemplative” (346). In *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* this analogy not only articulates homosexual subjectivity, but also describes the narrator’s distorted vision, which produces the play’s disjunctive “double negative” theatricalism. The seeds of this image appear first in the “(not!) Pirandello” drafts, when the writer explains he has a cataract, which makes his eye appear “cloudy” (“double-bill” 12). The complete cloudy/clear analogy, however, was not developed until *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, just as this later play more fully realizes the radical theatrics that were suppressed in the last two versions of *Vieux Carré*.

¶28 The final version of *Vieux Carré* may be considered to be a less extreme double negative in which two time frames—1939 and ca. 1970—are juxtaposed with rough edges smoothed out. It seems highly probable that the idea for the “double negative” was conceived during the final revisions of *Vieux Carré* when the Pirandellian frame was erased and the two plays were fused together—a process that must have seemed like superimposing a present scene onto a past exposure. Therefore, the published *Vieux Carré*, while superficially more similar to the “memory play” format, is the apparent source for *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*’s more radically theatricalist “double negative.”

¶29 Williams’s radical theatrics can be playful, and they also function to disrupt realist modes, replacing traditional (realist) signification with an aesthetic based upon the disruption of signification, which epistemologically questions not only *what* is known, but *how* it is known. It may be that future generations of audiences will be ready to accept Williams’s late, multi-layered radical theatrics, and if so, the two “very (not!) Pirandello” scripts may be of greater interest than the milder published version.

Notes

¹ This quote may be found in the unpublished draft of *Vieux Carré* that I have labeled “Double-bill” in the list of Works Cited. Williams himself referred to this stage of drafting as a “double-bill” in an October 1973 letter to Maria St. Just stating that he wrote the play “last summer” (*Five O’Clock* 303). It was apparently at that point that he joined a pair of one-act plays, *The Angel in the Alcove* and *I Never Get Dressed Till After Dark on Sundays*, together to function as Pirandellian plays-within-a-play.

² Frederic Jameson theorizes that such characteristics of postmodernism emerge from late capitalist consumer cultures (13). See also his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991).

³ Williams’s process is inherently metatextual, for his plays are dramas (or texts) *about* dramas (or texts) (Hornby 4). However, rather than defining the form of his later plays as “metadramas”—a term that seems to emphasize text over performance—I choose to use “theatricalist,” which emphasizes performance and the theatre.

⁴ Like modernism, the term “postmodernism” is more of a problematic site of contestation than a clear, concrete and definable mode, aesthetic or period. It is, like Roland Barthes’s “text of bliss” (14), a difficult ground, which to me is similar to (and filled with echoes of) Williams’s writing. Like the “text of bliss,” a Williams text is that which “discomforts . . . unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (Barthes 14). Such a text resists critical methods that are reductive (such as the ever-popular biographic approach to Williams) or one-dimensional (such as psychological frames of reference). Williams’s rich, multilayered texts seem to respond best to critical and performative strategies that are equally complex and difficult.

⁵ It is immediately apparent that many writers and art movements identified with post World War I modernism (such as Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, Dadaism and surrealism) clearly participate in the spirit of this anti-aesthetic, suggesting that Foster’s use of

the term “postmodern,” as well as my own, in this argument, does not necessarily limit the postmodern aesthetic to a particular period. Even Fredric Jameson, whose theory might be considered the most periodizing of postmodern theories, admits the difficulty of delimiting postmodernism to particular years with absolute clarity. Some writers, such as Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett and even August Strindberg, might be considered to articulate both modernist and postmodern perspectives. Deborah Geis discusses ways in monologues in the works of Brecht and Beckett might be considered to be both modernist and postmodern (23-27). Elinor Fuchs argues for Strindberg’s late dramaturgy—and particularly the characterology in *To Damascus*—to be viewed as at least partially anticipating postmodern notions of character (“Strindberg” 75-87).

⁶ The draft of *Dead Planet, the Moon!* to which this essay refers resides in the Tennessee Williams Papers of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin (see Works Cited).

⁷ This letter to Audrey Wood, dated only “Wed. Nite, 1939” in Williams’s hand, seems to date from Williams’s first trip to Taos, New Mexico. In a letter to his mother dated “mid-August” of 1939, Williams writes that he has just arrived in Taos—the same sort of message he writes to Wood. A third letter to Wood from Taos is also undated, listed as ca. August 26, 1939 in the Williams Papers of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (where the other two letters also reside).

⁸ The Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University has Williams’s copy of *The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence* in its archives.

⁹ Lawrence also employed moon imagery to describe women in his short novel *The Ladybird*, in which he refers to “moon-fierce womanhood” (62) and the “moon-mother of the world” (77). See also John B. Humma’s *Metaphor and Meaning in D.H. Lawrence’s Later Novels* (Works Cited).

¹⁰ Williams described the landlady’s attempt at a restaurant in a letter to his mother dated 2 January 1939 (HRC, see Works Cited). In another undated letter, presumably from that period, Williams details the entire boiling water attack and his subsequent court appearance for his mother (HRC, see Works Cited). While parts of this story are told in *Dead Planet, the Moon!*, it is only with “The Angel in the Alcove” and *Vieux Carré* that all the details in his letter are fully exploited.

¹¹ As has been well-documented, the character of Sky in the published version of *Vieux Carré* is derived from Williams’s friend Jim Parrott, with whom Williams traveled from New Orleans to California in 1939 (Leverich 288-89; Spoto 71-72).

¹² Odets’s *Rocket to the Moon* opened in New York on November 24, 1938 and ran through April 4, 1939. It was first published in a Modern Library edition of Odets’s collected plays in 1939. As Williams did not travel to New York during the run of the play and it was not published until after the draft of *Dead Planet, the Moon!* was written, it is impossible that the play’s text could have influenced this draft. The title, however, no doubt had some impact, but Lawrence’s writing was, by far, the more important of the two to Williams.

¹³ See Jill Franks, *Revisionist Resurrection Mythologies: A Study of D.H. Lawrence’s Italian Works* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994): 5-6.

¹⁴ I am not interpreting Williams’s writing process through Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence in which a later “strong poet” is overcome with oedipal anxiety and attempts to displace, or to rewrite the work of his predecessor (see *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Works Cited). I choose not to employ Bloom’s Freudian methodology that reads influence through the lens of family romance, partially because I do not believe it to be an appropriate paradigm for a gay writer. In contrast to a Bloomian approach, Robert F. Gross speculates that “for the gay poet . . . the predecessor need not be a repressive [father] figure” (250), but that the predecessor might serve as an “initiator to the young poet, helping him find his voice and speak his desire” (250).

¹⁵ Two unpublished drafts of “The Angel in the Alcove” exist in the Tennessee Williams Papers of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (See Works Cited).

¹⁶ This passage from “The Angel in the Alcove” is highly reminiscent of the opening paragraph of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), who was another influence that Williams began to read because of his impact on Hart Crane. In this paragraph, Ishmael, the novel’s narrator, speaks of his longing to return to the sea. He portrays the seas as his restorative, saying, “Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul . . .—then, I account it high time to get to the sea as soon as I can” (21). Williams’s text is resonant with the same context, meter and sound, as the narrator says, “This lunar atmosphere of the city draws me back whenever the waves of energy which removed me to more vital towns have spent themselves and a time of recession is called for” (128). Williams’s reference to “waves” indexically points to Melville’s ocean, and while Williams has transposed the natural force of the ocean into an urban (and Cranian) setting, his New Orleans has the same power as Melville’s sea—that is, it creates, destroys and (here) heals.

¹⁷ The draft of *Broken Glass in the Morning, or Skylight: A Play in Two Scenes* to which I refer exists among the Tennessee Williams Papers of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University (See Works Cited).

¹⁸ The draft of *Broken Glass in the Morning, or Skylight* referred to above contains a note written in pencil in Williams's hand on the title page that says, "Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward."

¹⁹ The draft of *I Never Get Dressed Till after Dark on Sundays: A Play in Two Scenes* to which I refer exists in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Columbia University (See Works Cited).

²⁰ Tennessee Williams, Interview with Tom Buckley, 1970, *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986): 178.

²¹ At the time of *Vieux Carré's* opening on Broadway in 1977, William Burroughs interviewed Williams for the *Village Voice*. In this interview, Williams said that he "wrote *Vieux Carré* on a ship called the Oronza" ("Orpheus" 302). The similarity between the name "Oronza" and the name of the ship that Hart Crane leapt from to commit suicide in 1932—the "Orizaba"—is interesting, to say the least. No doubt aware that he was sailing during the month of Crane's leap (April), Williams may have fictionalized the name of his ship to add more mythic dimension to his tale (particularly since he refers to the ship's "rocking" twice, which was a Cranian metaphor in the "Voyages" cycle of poems). In fact, Williams took this cruise to restore his spirits after the devastating reviews that greeted the opening of *Outcry* on Broadway (March 28, 1973). He told Burroughs that it was a "geriatric cruise" (302), on which "these old people were breaking hips right and left" (302), with three of them "collected by the Reaper" (302) before hitting the first port in Japan.

²² At the time of publication, I have not been able to ascertain if this try-out was a production, performance or staged reading.

²³ See, for example, C.W.E. Bigsby's chapter, "Tennessee Williams: the theatricalising self" in *Modern American Drama: 1945-1960* (See Works Cited).

²⁴ See *Brecht on Theatre* (Works Cited), which includes several essays by Brecht with remarks on acting, most notably: "The Street Scene," "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" and "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect."

²⁵ In a slightly different version of the "not Pirandello" stage of drafting, it is the Playwright rather than Jane who suggests speaking the stage directions, thereby transgressing the authority of his own text (see Works Cited for *Vieux Carré*, Ms. 9407996 14/2, Harvard Theatre Collection). Williams's *Kingdom of Earth* was revived Off-Broadway in June 1996 in a production directed by John Cameron Mitchell that added the character of Tennessee Williams, who sat on the side of the stage and read the play's stage directions. While this is not the same thing as Williams's quotation theatrics, which were more transgressive, it is, nevertheless, an example of a postmodern approach to Williams that uses the dramatic text in an anti-aesthetic way in order to restructure the ways in which spectators see/hear/interpret the play.

²⁶ *Vieux Carré* ran from May 11-15, 1977 in Broadway's St. James Theatre. It was directed by Arthur Allan Seidelman, set design by James Tilton, costume design by Jane Greenwood. Actors: Richard Alfieri (Writer); Sylvia Sidney (Mrs. Wire); Tom Aldredge (Painter).

²⁷ Most reviews of *Vieux Carré's* May 1977 premiere on Broadway (typically) preferred to ignore the play's form, however, and focus instead on the autobiographical elements of the play, comparing it unfavorably to *The Glass Menagerie*. Reviewers condemned Williams for recycling some of his earlier work—namely, the short story "The Angel in the Alcove" (1943)—suggesting that he must have nothing new to say. See, for example, Walter Kerr's review, in which he views the narrator as "standing in for Williams himself," while misunderstanding what he calls the "aimlessness" of the play's structure (*New York Times* 22 May 1977, sec. 2:5, 30).

²⁸ The London production of *Vieux Carré* opened May 16, 1978 in Nottingham's Playhouse Theatre. Keith Hack directed, with set by Voytek. Actors: Karl Johnson (Writer); Sylvia Miles (Mrs. Wire); Richard Kane (Nightingale).

²⁹ Criticism that compares *Vieux Carré* unfavorably to *The Glass Menagerie* includes Thomas P. Adler's approach through the perspective of the unreliable narrator, finding *Vieux Carré* to be of "lesser stature . . . as a work of art" ("(Un)reliability" 9) and Walter Kerr's review, cited above.

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