

“Fox-Teeth in Your Heart”: Sexual Self-Portraiture in the Poetry of Tennessee Williams

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I

Despite the presence of the libidinous, free-spirited *Memoirs*, Tennessee Williams’s friends often stated that the deeper truths about the author were to be found in his creative work. Donald Windham, for example, considers Williams’s work filled with “psychological self-portraits” more truthful than his public statements (237). But he admits it is problematic determining self-portraiture in the plays and fiction since Williams often splits his own admissions and revelations between several characters (193). There is one aspect of Williams’s work, however, in which this fictive layering and division is rarely an issue: his poetry. Almost entirely ignored in his lifetime (and even today), Williams’s two volumes of verse—*In the Winter of Cities* (1956; rev. ed. 1964) and *Androgyne, Mon Amour* (1977)—offer the clearest road-map we have to Williams’s own deepest feelings, especially in regard to his sexuality. In his poems, Williams drops the kind of posturing which infects the interviews and *Memoirs* of the 1970s for a direct, though often symbolized or mythologized, portrayal of his life as he understands it.

That many of Williams’s poems are directly autobiographical can scarcely be disputed. From *In the Winter of Cities*’s “Little Horse,” describing an early encounter with Frank Merlo (for whom Williams invented the nickname) to *Androgyne, Mon Amour*’s “Tangier: The Speechless Summer,” which details a 1962 season spent away from Merlo with Paul and Jane Bowles in Morocco, we continually see Williams transmuting the events of his life into verse in a strikingly straightforward way. Always at least a semi-autobiographical writer, Williams the poet creates work that is filled with intersections uniquely close to his own experiences: his friends, his lovers, his most intimate impressions.

Nancy Tischler points out that, despite some notable early successes in verse, Williams by 1939 had begun to characterize himself “as a playwright, not a poet” (75). And yet he continued to quietly write poems throughout his life, occasionally publishing them but rarely drawing attention to them and denigrating them when he did (Buckley 179). He was no doubt aware that the image he portrayed in his verse was quite different from the happy bohemian the world knew from the *Memoirs* and television—different even from the veiled self-portraits in the plays, where truth and fiction, self and non-self intermingle complexly and often impenetrably. Over and over again in the poems, the reader senses a writer speaking almost as if to himself. In the middle of *Androgyne, Mon Amour*’s title poem, for instance, Williams abruptly interrupts a sad description of his lost youth—and the fact that potential young lovers are likely to laugh at his body—with this:

(Chekhov's *Mashas* all wore black
 for a reason I suspect:
 Pertinence? None at all—
 yet something made me think of that.) (17)

Often Williams's poems are in essence "interior dramatic monologues" (Barbera 78) with tangential or free-associational material loosely tossed into their texts. It seems likely that his reticence regarding his poetry stems from exactly this: that here more than in any other genre, Williams opens his uncensored psyche to public view. He had claimed to be doing this, of course, all throughout the 1960s and '70s, with the *Memoirs* and ever-more sensationalistic interviews—but what he passed off as candor "must not be confused," as Donald Spoto writes, "with real psychological intimacy or spiritual self-disclosure" (308). What he offered journalists was merely a collection of racy anecdotes, not the story of his true inner life. For that we must go elsewhere.

If this is true, then, how does self-portraiture function in the verse of Tennessee Williams? If the image of the self-assured, proud (and endlessly randy) gay man that he promoted in the *Memoirs* is inaccurate, what do the poems suggest as the truth? The answers—like the man—are complex, but certain observations can be made at the outset. Despite his loud public proclamations that he never thought anything about his gayness, grappling with homosexuality is in fact a central theme of many of the poems, dating back as far as the mid-1940s and as late as 1977. Further, his attitudes toward both his own homosexuality and the subject of homosexuality in general are clearly conflicted: there are moments of beauty in many of the relationships he depicts, but there are just as many suggestions of deep disharmony and a searching for the spiritual which is only ever partly attained—in stark contrast to his occasional portrayals of heterosexuality, which are invariably depicted as pure, loving, and near to God. Finally, there is an unmistakable sexual guilt aimed partially at homosexuality itself, partially at his own inability to respond sexually to women. Williams's poems, then, far from portraying the carefree gay soul of the *Memoirs*, instead take us deep into the psyche of a profoundly troubled and guilt-ridden man.

II

If we wish to find in Williams a positive, joyous portrayal of homosexuality, we might expect it to appear most prominently in the poems on his lover of fifteen years, Frank Merlo. Though they shared a stormy relationship, Merlo was by all accounts the great love of Williams's life. From the time they began to live together in 1948—a year after they first met—to his death from cancer in 1963, Merlo appears to have provided an emotional anchor for Williams in a way no one else could. Further, Merlo seems to have been the only person Williams would listen to in regard to the conduct of his private affairs. "Frank would . . . put me down like a prize shit when I deserved it," Williams said, "and I often did. One loved him for it" (Jennings 235). Williams's own testimony is supported by virtually everyone who knew the both of them: his brother, for instance, writes that Merlo was "a steadying influence" on Williams (D. Williams and Mead 169). Actress

Barbara Baxley said Merlo “was so perfect about everything—he sensed everything Tenn needed” (qtd. in Spoto 186-87). And director Frank Corsaro called him Williams’s “right arm,” the “bright side” of the writer’s life (qtd. in Spoto 239).

Since Williams himself was invariably positive and admiring in his public comments on his lover, it is instructive to consult the verse for a deeper sense of how he viewed their relationship. There are four poems in particular that chart Williams’s feelings about Merlo: “Little Horse,” written in the late 1940s and included in the original version of *In the Winter of Cities*; “A Separate Poem,” from 1956, which formed the new conclusion for the expanded *Cities* of 1964; and “Tangier: The Speechless Summer” and “His Manner of Returning,” both written in the 1970s and included in *Androgyne, Mon Amour*.

“Little Horse,” which uses Williams’s nickname for Merlo as its title and is dedicated “For F.M.,” is a deceptively simple lyric describing an early meeting of the two. After informing us that “My name for him was Little Horse. / I fear he had no name for me,” Williams-as-narrator recounts an incident in which Merlo shares his umbrella with him, offering the poet a riddle:

For it was late and I was lost
when Little Horse enquired of me,
What has a bark but cannot bite?
And I was right. It was a tree. (*In the Winter* 120)

The poem concludes with a recapitulation of the first verse, but changed now to present tense: “My name for him is Little Horse. / I wish he had a name for me” (120).

“Little Horse” at first appears to be so simple as to approach the level of a nursery rhyme. Indeed, Signi Falk classifies it among Williams’s poems about childhood, claiming it carries “lighthearted rhythms for children” (25). Here, however, we would do well to take note of William E. Taylor’s perceptive warning: “The problem is that [Williams] is doing so much [in his poetry], his imagination is so volatile, his symbols so rich, that the unresponsive reader is likely to be left sitting at the curb after the express has gone” (625). Nowhere is this tendency for Williams’s poetry to fly past the inattentive reader more pronounced than in “Little Horse.” Far from “lighthearted,” this poem—in which speech and silence play such complex, dynamic roles—is in fact a serious and almost despairing view of Williams’s relationship with Merlo. Given the longevity of their time together, the fact that Williams could write such a poem in the late 1940s is all the more surprising—though it uncannily foreshadows his later treatments of the theme. Before the end of the first stanza, for instance, “fear” has made an appearance—an emotion that is everywhere in Williams’s poetry on Merlo and homosexuality in general. More importantly, Williams-as-narrator in this poem is the figure doing the “naming.” Merlo is conspicuously, ominously silent, other than to offer the poet a childish riddle. In “Little Horse,” then, the responsibility for the couple’s lack of communication is assigned largely to Merlo, who is unable to name, hence understand, Williams. It is also true, admittedly, that the narrator does not hold himself blameless: the umbrella, after all, keeps Little Horse “quite dry” until he divides it with Williams, but the main thrust of the poem directs us toward Merlo’s

failure, not his own.

By 1956 the equation has greatly changed. “A Separate Poem” uses the metaphor of an island to describe Williams’s relationship to Merlo; they live on their island still, “but more as visitors, / than as residents, / now” (*In the Winter* 126). A god moves through their day, but it is a wandering god, “led by the sky as a child is led by its mother.” Most important is the lovers’ way of speaking to each other: they say “small things / in quiet, tired voices,” asking each other trivial questions about the newspaper:

But under the silence of what we say to each other,
is the much more articulate silence of what we don’t say to
each other,
a storm of things unspoken,
coiled, reserved, appointed. (*In the Winter* 128)

Here the silence is not merely sad. It is “articulate”: it is explosive, dangerous, it is a storm, a time-bomb, it is coiled snake-like amongst the “small, familiar things spoken.” Nothing can be trusted on their island any longer—both gods and the truth wander through the sky, “and the sky wanders, too.” The narrator describes a dream in which his lover “put on the clothes of a god which was [his] naked body” and they made love, but even then, he writes, “I knew that to build an island is not to hold it always.”

Perhaps it would have been better if I had touched only
your hand,
or only leaned over your head and clasped it all the night
through.
But longing was so much stronger. (*In the Winter* 127)

It is difficult to read these lines as anything but a condemnation of sexual desire—in this case, homosexual desire. Williams-as-narrator seems to blame the loss of the island on his own lust. Thomas P. Adler, in arguing that Williams portrays a “humankind [that] must continually negotiate a way to live humanely in the ruined Eden of the present,” states that in the poems “Williams, in effect, oftentimes sacramentalizes the physical” (64-65). This is certainly true in “A Separate Poem.” In the dream, Merlo is portrayed as strangely sexless and pure: his naked body is godlike—suggestive of beauty, but also of immateriality, remoteness, asexuality—and he pays no particular attention to the narrator as he moves “from window to window in a room made of / windows, drawing, closing the curtains.” When he at last comes to the bed, it is with no apparent sexual excitement: he comes not to life but “to rest, fleshed / in a god’s perfection.”

Ultimately, however, outside of the context of the dream, neither of them is communicating anything of meaning to each other. Williams-as-narrator realizes that Merlo is in fact not a god, but, further, he suggests that spirituality is only ever fleetingly available to them, in “quick, light pencil-scratches” (129). Moments of beauty are all that is possible, such as the two of them traveling “through the canals of Bangkok” and seeing the grandmothers bathing their grandsons in the

“warm tawny water . . . this, only this, / spoke to us of the limitless range and simplicity of a god” (129).

It is important to note this image’s implicit heterosexuality. Nowhere in “A Separate Poem” are the lovers able to attain any more than the “pencil-scratches” of a god who wanders aimlessly through the sky; but when they behold this vision of the “ancient women” bathing the little boys “as if paying them homage,” the sight gives them “a sense of reverence for something.” Suddenly—for the only time in the poem—the gods stop wandering and are crystallized into this image of mothers and sons, the cycle of generations, family love. Having indicted his own homosexual lust, Williams-as-narrator offers as the most truly and unreservedly spiritual image one of a traditional, heterosexual family scene. It would be too simple to claim that the poem acts as a total condemnation of his homosexuality—he and Merlo are able to find bits of a god, after all, however briefly, a god described as having a “limitless range”—but there is no question that Williams offers a highly normative image of heterosexuality as the most spiritual of human relationships.

“Tangier: The Speechless Summer,” apparently begun in the 1960s, describes the summer of 1962, when Williams—unable to stand the tensions between himself and Merlo, particularly since they had been exacerbated by Merlo’s lung cancer—spent the summer with Paul and Jane Bowles in Morocco. He had with him a young poet named Frederick Nicklaus (Spoto 251), referred to in the poem simply as “The Poet.” Williams and Merlo had essentially separated by this point. “It was,” writes Williams’s brother, “in effect, a divorce, with alimony”—Merlo was kept on salary, as he had been throughout most of his relationship with Williams, and was given ten percent of the profits from three Williams plays including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (D. Williams and Mead 244). But Williams clearly had no conception of this summer with a new lover as any kind of rebirth; Nicklaus is described as “Fair as Adonis but rational as ten hatters at Alice’s tea-party” (*Androgyne* 90), and he in fact proved to be only the first in a long line of what Williams invariably referred to as “traveling companions” (St. Just 181).

Williams’s treatment of his own “iron of silence” (*Androgyne* 90) has grown increasingly despairing by the time of “Tangier: The Speechless Summer.” His narrator admits to receiving some level of partial comfort from his companion, but is nonetheless filled with doubt:

Can [Nicklaus] still, at times, like me?
Can magic still, at times, be the order of our existence?
He can, at times, offer a comforting dimness to rooms
still lighted
and rooms aren’t always lighted. (90)

Despair and self-doubt have made it virtually impossible for the narrator to be sure of anything, particularly in regard to his new lover’s feelings toward him. As a result, he is unable to speak more than a few inconsequential words, and wishes he could pretend that a “growth on [his] vocal cords” had made their removal necessary (91).

But the real issue of silence in this poem has nothing to do with Nicklaus;

rather it is bound up with Merlo. Merlo is mentioned nowhere in the poem's text, but in its subtext he is everywhere: Williams gives, indeed, no reason at all for his narrator's inability to speak, but the poem is overwhelmed with despair, isolation, and death imagery inescapably connected to the gravely-ill lover Williams has left back in Key West. "I hear it is clear today but I don't want to see it," the poem begins. "How can I keep it away?" The house in which he is staying is the home of his "torment" (89). The straits between Morocco and England are described as "the bedsheets / of someone dead of convulsions"; the narrator wishes to be released from the "troublesome matter of speech" by electing "the cool death" of drug addiction; the poem ends on "a long white beach," mysteriously both empty and "much populated" (by ghosts?), and the wan "No day is finished but discontinued awhile" (91, 92)—which may certainly be read as a reference to his intermittent relationship with Merlo. The sole, brief moment of beauty—when the narrator and "The Poet" lean on the windowsill to catch rainwater in a cup (92)—is, significantly, a silent, nonsexual moment, and it is not difficult to sense in the reference to "the purest water" a desire in Williams to capture a greater purity in himself.

Also significant in "Tangier: The Speechless Summer" are "Paul" and "Jane" (who are not given surnames in the poem). The narrator walks with Paul through the streets of Tangier voicing only "a few precisely spaced and forced observations," meanwhile longing to speak to him of his "panic" (89)—a panic which he later expresses the desire to lock "in a closet." Williams-as-narrator might be expected to find in Paul a kindred soul, since in life Bowles is also a male artist and a homosexual—and surely familiar with "closets." But he does not, instead disappearing in a crowded shopping area, explaining his action with a quote from Paul: "'I've never had a neurosis'" (89). Apparently he believes that Paul is simply too well-adjusted to comprehend what he wishes to say. By the end of the poem, however, he has managed to speak, not to Paul but to Jane, who offers a wry comment about him not being much of a talker—which is nonetheless a kind of validation. Too, Jane and the narrator share a silent moment of recognition as they comprehend the simultaneous emptiness and crowdedness of the beach, a kind of psychic connection nowhere suggested in his relationships with Paul or "The Poet" (or Merlo)—which gives the concept of "articulate silence," which was so dangerous and threatening in "A Separate Poem," a new dimension of comfort and understanding, but which is reserved, significantly, for the narrator's relationship with a woman. Again, then, a woman is seen as offering Williams's narrator things that men cannot—just as the grandmothers in "A Separate Poem" supply a vision of spirituality he fails to find in his own relationship with Merlo.

Like "Tangier: The Speechless Summer," "His Manner of Returning" never names Merlo as a character, but there is no question that the "very clear apparition" which appears in the narrator's "[t]all-fenced garden, tropically planted" (*Androgyne* 70) is Merlo. The house described is clearly Williams's home in Key West. The Jane Bowles Summerhouse was a gazebo on the Williams property, and it was in fact decorated with brass plates inscribed with the names of Williams's loved ones, including one reading "Little Horse" (Spoto 160-61)—the only one of Williams's lovers included in the collection who ever lived at Key West. As to the ghost, Williams offers this:

Of what was familiar about him there remains a great deal,
such as
that pride of bearing that makes him seem tall
and his moving about the place in a way that declares it
his own. (*Androgyne* 71)

If guilt appears as a subtext in the earlier poems, it virtually cries out from the pages of “His Manner of Returning.” Merlo’s ghost does not care for a newly-added fish pool on the property; suddenly, Williams-as-narrator dislikes it also. The narrator compares himself to Chekhov’s Trigorin and Merlo to the “clear youth of Nina, the sea gull that [Trigorin will] shoot down, / without intention.” He refers to his own “vulgarity of the living” that “aren’t and never were” the apparition’s (72)—a restatement of the Merlo-as-god theme of “A Separate Poem.”

Most self-damning, however, is the line just after the narrator points out the brass plate with Merlo’s name. The gazebo is eight-sided, he says, and “on each of its eight sides there / is a brass plate engraved with the name of someone whom / I’ve loved. / Here’s yours, you see, between the rose vines that are / beginning to climb” (71), to which Merlo’s ghost offers this devastating retort: “‘Loved? You?’” (72). The narrator seeks to reply to this, but cannot—he falls silent, “an outcry rising” within him which nonetheless remains unspoken (72).

The act of speech, then, has come full circle. The narrator’s gentle reproach to Merlo’s silence in “Little Horse” has evolved, nearly thirty years later, into Merlo’s accusation of him from beyond the grave—and the narrator’s inability to voice an answer.

III

Thus far women have been seen in Williams’s poetry entirely in cliché terms: woman-as (earth)mother (the grandmothers of “A Separate Poem”) and woman-as-sisterly-supporter (Jane in “Tangier: The Speechless Summer”). There are, indeed, several poems in the Williams canon which play into these somewhat crude archetypes: in “Speech from the Stairs,” for instance, the earth is referred to literally as “your first mother” (*Androgyne* 19), and it would be all too easy to fall into the belief that Williams’s portrayals of women can be summed up in the following lines from “Winter Smoke is Blue and Bitter”:

Winter smoke is blue and bitter:
women comfort you in winter.
Scent of thyme is cool and tender:
girls are music to remember. (12)

Indeed, the poem constructs a direct contrast which is tempting to view as a unified-field theory of Williams’s sexuality:

Men are made of rock and thunder:
threat of storm to labor under.

Cypress woods are demon-dark:
 boys are fox-teeth in your heart. (12)

While this neat juxtaposition—comforting, tender women; thunderous, threatening men—has its value, it is too incomplete to be seen as paradigmatic of Williams’s entire point of view. It omits, for instance, all mention of the spiritual in either gender; more importantly, it considerably oversimplifies Williams’s view of women. Williams’s poems—particularly “Evening” and “The Lady With No One at All,” both from *Androgyne, Mon Amour*—in fact often portray women not only as sexually alluring, but as in many ways more desirable than men and their “fox-teeth.” At the same time they portray Williams-as-narrator as incapable of responding sexually to them, and thus being consumed with guilt.

Williams’s feelings toward women and their sexuality were clearly ambivalent. On the octagonal gazebo in Key West, for instance, he included not only the names of “Little Horse” and two other male lovers, but also those of Hazel Kramer (his first romantic friend, from his high school days) and Bette Reitz, with whom he claimed to have enjoyed his only sexually consummated affair with a woman (Spoto 160-61; Jennings 230). For a man who identified himself as a homosexual—either openly or secretly—throughout his entire adulthood, and who practiced homosexuality exclusively from his late twenties to the end of his life, a male-to-female ratio of 3:2 seems oddly off-kilter. Too, there is this, from the Jennings interview: “I’ve loved [women] very deeply, but I’m shy of women sexually. I’m shy of *men* sexually . . . I think it’s most likely I’ll go back to a woman in the end. Women have always been my deepest emotional root” (230).

Despite the fact that Williams claims to be “shy” of men, his multitudinous male sexual partners belie this—the reference to men, in any event, seems an afterthought designed to distract the interviewer from the (perhaps inadvertently) more revealing statement regarding women. Williams here portrays his lack of heterosexual involvements as the result of an extreme shyness rather than a lack of desire, and admits that women have been his strongest emotional supports (the only man he refers to on the same level is Merlo). He visualizes himself with a woman, not a man, “in the end.” Women, then, are to Williams all that he claims in “Winter Smoke is Blue and Bitter”—but also considerably more.

In “Evening,” for instance, evening itself is personified as a woman: “She is not Oriental and yet she’s acquired the graces of the / Far East. / They go with the skin exposed by the whispering / poppy kimono” (*Androgyne* 40). She is waiting for Williams-as-narrator as he ascends the stairs to her apartment; once there, she offers him “fragrant tea,” volumes of Rilke and Crane, and her lap “that’s softer than / a silk cushion!” (41-42). Interestingly, the act of speech functions quite differently here than in the Merlo poems: like the moment of psychic communion between Williams-as-narrator and Jane in “Tangier: The Speechless Summer,” no words are needed for Evening to communicate with him. She offers a “cool smile” or “a finger to her lips” and he immediately understands her (40, 42); what’s more, Williams-as-narrator never speaks in this poem, yet Evening knows what scents please him, what tea, what books—again, an “articulate silence” vastly different from that we have seen in the narrator’s relationship with men. In short, Evening is a virtual stereotype of heterosexual male fantasy. She appears to

exist only to please the narrator; she is in full control of the domestic space, yet instantly responsive to his needs; she offers both motherliness and sisterly support, yet is also highly eroticized and obviously eager for sex (though entirely unpressuring).

The key to the fantasy for Williams-as-narrator, however, is that she is endlessly forgiving. Having been offered all of Evening’s enchantments, the narrator is distracted by an “apparitional youth” standing outside, a young man with a “luminous upward look” (42). Suddenly the narrator rushes from the room to him, but, reaching the street, discovers that “He” has disappeared. Evening, however, does not even hint at any kind of reproach: she merely gives him her lap again and offers him the “forgetfulness tea” (42).

Evening is more than the grandmothers of “A Separate Poem” or Jane of “Tangier: The Speechless Summer.” She is enormously sexually alluring, a quality Williams-as-narrator is not unaware of—he refers to her “exposed” skin, the flash of “a breast’s ivory satin,” her “flickering eyes” (40). And yet he is inescapably drawn to the “terror” that waits outside, a world filled with mist and apparitions (40, 42)—a homosexual world. The question the poem poses, and which the narrator seems unable to answer, is why he cannot respond to what he clearly believes he *should* find sexually irresistible, instead requiring (as Barbera writes of another Williams poem) “the transient flesh of a stranger” (72). Indeed, the poem gives no reason at all that anyone should be attracted to the dangerous homosexual life portrayed outside: while danger may be part of sexual excitement, the homosexual world in “Evening” is one of outright terror, false promises, and abandonment. Evening herself offers the narrator everything: comfort, communion, sexiness, mystery—and, importantly, she is given the final words of the poem (they are not in quotation marks; apparently she is communicating to him psychically): “I am Evening: He only pretended to be” (42). Like Merlo’s ghost’s “Loved? You?” remark, this is an assertion which is allowed to stand unchallenged. The homosexual desires of Williams-as-narrator are presented, then, as irrational, inexplicable, and doomed; and heterosexuality, whether or not he is able to respond to it, is seen as normative, natural.

“The Lady With No One at All” acts in many ways as an extension of “Evening.” Although the woman in this poem is referred to as “Milady,” she can easily be viewed as an older version of Evening herself. There are suggestions of a similar grace—she wears a “whisper of lilac chiffon” (*Androgyne* 80)—and devotion to Williams-as-narrator. Now, however, the grace has decayed, and her beauty has faded: she has become more self-involved, studying her face in a mirror, and she moves “unsteadily” (81). What’s more, the “articulate silence” between them is gone. She spends most of the poem talking, although it is difficult to ascertain to whom: Williams-as-narrator is both present and not present, watching her and yet unable to respond, and referring to himself in the third person as “no one at all” (80).

Milady has clearly devoted herself to the unresponsive narrator for a good deal of her life, and as a result, her feelings toward him are mixed. She mistakes “a pain in her groin / for fingers remembered as given to intimate probing”; and yet she does not welcome this apparent touch, instead crying, “Oh, no, please don’t!” (81). This reaction may, however, simply be the result of shock: she has

waited for “him who is no one at all” (82) a very long time. In any event, she quickly catches herself, asking the narrator to wait until later. Then:

“Do you know how very much and constantly
I have loved you?” she whispers to him,
leaning to brush with her lips the lips of no one at all. (82)

Williams-as-narrator, however, cannot respond.

Especially when regarded as a companion piece to “Evening,” it is difficult not to view this poem as being, at its core, about Williams’s feelings of guilt at being homosexual. From the selfless devotion of Evening—a devotion which is totally unrequited—to Milady’s fading youth and desperate loneliness as she waits for him who is no one at all, Williams presents women—or, really, a composite Woman—ready to offer him everything, and indeed, unable to function completely without him. Evening’s entire existence is centered around pleasing Williams’s unfaithful narrator; Milady is growing old and dying of loneliness as a result of his inability to respond to her, to ever be fully present in her life. She has even resorted to speech, never an effective means of communication in Williams’s poems and always required only of other men, to try to communicate with him—reducing herself to the level of the narrator’s homosexual lovers. The psychic connections between them, then, have broken down, and they have become not unlike Williams-as-narrator and Merlo. The crucial difference, however, is that the two men are—or were—in fact lovers, and so have an actual intimate relationship, however limited or flawed. In “Evening” and “The Lady With No One at All,” the theme is not relationships but non-relationships, relationships to which Williams-as-narrator is never able to fully commit himself, and, as the incident of the male apparition in “Evening” illustrates, the narrator’s homosexuality is presented as the cause of his failure. Despite his drinking the “forgetfulness tea,” Williams’s narrator is never able to forget, or come to terms with, his homosexual lust, and thus is consumed with visions of the selfless women for whom he feels he *should* have been present. “Evening” and “The Lady With No One at All” chronicle what he sees as the tragic plight of these women and the resulting destruction of the articulate silence, a destruction he sees as entirely his own fault.

IV

Williams’s verse makes clear that the swaggering bohemian of the interviews and *Memoirs* is strictly a construct, an image presented for the consumption of the public in order to generate interest, perhaps, in the autobiography and late plays. Far from a man proud of and comfortable in his gayness, Williams communicates a deep belief in the essential wrongness of homosexuality and the impossibility of gay couples in their “ruined Eden” (Adler 65) ever capturing more than the “pencil-scratches” of a wandering, uninterested god. While this portrayal may at first seem inextricably bound up with Williams’s own emotional life, hence relevant only to himself—that is, an account only of his own affairs, without a more global significance—his poems on women make it clear that

homosexuality itself is in fact the source of Williams's profound sense of guilt. "He thought he was wrong," longtime Williams friend Gore Vidal has written in reference to this issue, "and *they* were right" (xxii). Nowhere is this attitude more clearly expressed than in the poetry—which goes some distance in explaining why Williams seemed so reluctant to publicize it.

John M. Clum offers a useful distinction between Williams's "private art," by which he means the poetry and fiction, and his "public art," the drama (164). Though the poetry and short stories were published by New Directions, scant attention was paid to them, and the author of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* had little to fear from such comparatively limited exposure. Particularly in his verse, this allowed him to express—more clearly and directly than in any other genre—his true passions and fears about his homosexuality. Today, the poems remain for us, and, more than the *Memoirs* or any of the dramas, they constitute Tennessee Williams's true emotional autobiography.

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