

“Where Memory Begins”: New Texas Light on *The Glass Menagerie*

Gilbert Debusscher

The early drafts or discarded versions of a masterpiece have always interested scholars because they seem, more than the finished product, to reveal the secrets of an artist at work. In the case of Tennessee Williams they are all the more fascinating since the playwright has always been comparatively reluctant to provide information about his works in progress. In his article on the Texas drafts of *The Glass Menagerie*, R. B. Parker could therefore confidently predict that “the genesis of the text remains a promising area for further research and criticism.” Indeed, the texts finally acted and published—and there are minor but not insignificant variations between these two—were the result of a protracted sequence of trial and error testifying to “the difficulty Williams had in coming to terms with his material and the complexity of his responses to it.”¹ In the course of selecting material for his final version, Williams discarded much that he originally intended to include in a story that would have sustained comparison in length with *Gone with the Wind*. The rejected drafts, some of which Williams himself designated as “the ruins of a play,” are contained in four boxes of miscellaneous texts, partial versions, overlapping fragments, composite typescripts, a handwritten notebook, and numerous single draft pages that constitute a manuscript librarian’s nightmare to sort out, date, and classify chronologically. Parker’s examination of them has already thrown new light on the origins of the play and on some of its final aspects. However, not contained in the humanities Research Center boxes specifically connected with *The Glass Menagerie* (sometimes catalogued as an “unidentified” play or story or, in other instances, bearing a title that suggests its relationship with the play) are a number of items that reveal, upon examination, their close connection with the final text. Some of these announce, more clearly than the *Gentleman Caller—Menagerie* manuscripts, many of the techniques finally used

in the play; they prefigure some of its best passages or provide a glimpse at its most memorable images or phrases. In these early contexts, the materials of *Menagerie* possess shades of meaning which can only be guessed at in their final dramatic settings but which contribute to the textual richness of the play, its "imaginative penumbra" in Parker's apt formulation.

The most important of the *Menagerie* related items is a six-page typewritten manuscript, on brownish-beige paper of poor quality, which comprises a first page simply inscribed "For my Grandmother Rosina Maria Francesca von Albertzart-Otte Dakin (or Rose)" and five pages of actual text, unnumbered. It starts with a stage direction describing *The Boy Who Tells the Story* as he steps out of the wings and addresses the audience. He is a twenty-five year old hitch-hiker on an invisible highway, "indistinguishable [sic] from the rest of his kind, the youths in nondescript dusty clothes with battered valises who stand about the country's highways in summer wanting a ride to California from New York or from New York to California—or wanting a ride anywhere. . . ." His first speech, on the theme of memory, establishes the background of the action—the house, the sky, the birds—the properties—the swing on the hill, the stairs, the chandelier, the piano, the dining room table—the characters, their way of speaking, their actions. He claims that everything is memory and therefore different from actuality but nevertheless essentially true in fact. He, only, is not memory: "I am the one who remembers." On his imaginary way back to where the memories started, he tentatively invites the spectator to accompany him: "I want you to go back with me! (Light fading) Will you?—Will you?—Will you. . . ?" Music is heard as a spot of light reveals the boy and girl as children in white clothes on the steps by a single white column representing the porch of a Southern house. With them is a "black negro mammy" who sings to them of heavenly grass.

As she stops singing and prompts them to scatter "everywhere—all over," the children run out from the steps and the Boy resumes his narrator's comments to introduce the singer as "Ozzie, our negro nurse." And as he makes the gesture of the hitch-hiker and a great rumble suggests the approach of a truck, he adds "I think that memory begins with her. . . ." Light returns to the black nurse who is now joined on the steps by the mother "very lovely, unbelievably lovely in a long and indefinite dress the color of morning skies, very early" who inquires if her children are happy and instructs Ozzie to "keep

them happy—Keep them blind for while.” But the servant claims that the sun does that for them and that only when their eyes get used to the light will they begin to see around.

As she starts singing her ballad again, the mother leans on the pillar and muses on the ephemeral character of all things before turning back to the house. The children are heard laughing in the distance as Ozzie’s singing fades. The last four lines of the text, arranged as poetry and not specifically attributed but presumably spoken by the youth, return to his previous comments: “Memory begins with her—Ozzie—the black singer. Life. Death. The earth—All wisdom and all understanding—Who knew the secrets of the sun before time even started. Ozzie—the black singer—the nurse—Where memory begins. . . .”

The points of resemblance with *The Glass Menagerie*—as well as some significant differences—are immediately apparent from the initial stage direction. The fragment has, like the full-length play, a narrator who is also a character in the action. He is not a merchant marine sailor but a road traveler, which brings him closer to a self-portrait of the playwright than Tom in the final play, and is reminiscent of Val Xavier in *Battle of Angels*, the play in which Williams by his own avowal had put his whole heart in 1938. Also more clearly perceptible here than in the final play is the generic character of the narrator/hero. After identifying him with “the rest of his kind,” the initial description introduces him as one of those

youths who seem to breathe the salt air of the Atlantic in Kansas and walk the earth of Texas in Manhattan. Who say hello with the tongue of Mississippi in Chicago. Who remember the Great Lakes in Arizona. Who can tell a chance acquaintance in San Francisco where to get a good meal for twenty cents in New Orleans. Their landscape is America: and the bigness of it seems to have widened their eyes and lengthened their bodies.

A number of the early drafts of *Menagerie* examined by Parker indicate that Williams originally conceived of the story of the Wingfields as representative of American experience in general: some of them start with the Narrator in front of a map of the United States pointing at cities as mentions them; another, dated April 1943, Clayton Mo., is subtitled “An American Family Portrait” but none establishes so clearly as this fragment that in one of his

original incarnations Tom was meant to be, physically almost, as Kilroy in *Camino Real*, “the Son of America.” This opening stage direction ends with “They own very little and they are owned by nothing: and they aren’t afraid,” a comment in which can be glimpsed Tom’s later preoccupations with “freedom” but, in this case, conceived not in terms of individual experience but in a perspective closer to Williams’s socio-economic commitments of the late 30s and early 40s.

Of these political preoccupations traces can be found in other Texas drafts, most evidently on the front page of *Ruins of a Play* which has inscribed in pencil, recognizably in Williams’s hand, a quotation from “Clark Mills . . . in a conversation” which reads “capitalistic society is a pyramid of boxes.” This image may have inspired the very first stage direction of the final play in which the Wingfield apartment is described as part of one of those “vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population.”

Absent from this early version, perhaps because of its attempt at generalization, is the contrast, also of political import, briefly established in Tom’s introductory speech, between the relative peace that prevailed in the United States—now represented by a much abbreviated list of three cities—and the Spanish Civil War, the forerunner of a major international conflagration abroad. Judging then from a comparison between this and other early drafts and *The Glass Menagerie*, a first conclusion imposes itself: without completely obliterating them, the movement in the final version is away from the general, the emblematic and the political towards a more intimate, more immediate, less ponderous—indeed less pretentious statement. The notebook draft corroborates this as the Narrator there, obviously trying too explain why the play is finally reduced to “commonplace incidents,” says:

This is the preface to a larger play than I am able to give you. I know how incongruous it is going to seem attached to the commonplace episodes that follow—you see I’m admitting this play to be a failure. I make this admission not just to disarm criticism but more to engage your participation in probing back of what is displayed for that which is hidden or lost or not remembered.

That which is hidden, fortunately not lost and now slowly remembered, is precisely what is preserved at the Humanities Research Center.

Before turning to the dialogue and action of the fragment, it is interesting to note Williams's preoccupation, in even such early stages of the work, with the lighting—fade-out to separate scenes, spots of light on specific characters for emphasis—and with the music, two devices that would acquire prominence in his conception of a new plastic theatre “destined to take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions,” as outlined in the *Production Notes* of the final play. They appear to have grown organically with the material rather than constituting a redundant illustration of it.

The first words of the Boy, “The play is memory,” are of course preserved, although not as overture; in the final version of *Menagerie* where they are also developed—as they are, but to a lesser extent, in this fragment—to emphasize that memory operates through selection and transformation, which makes accessible the essential, emotional truths embedded in the action. However distorting its effects—the sky is “clearer and paler than any sky could be,” the birds are “always in one place and always flying-away,” the properties are “fused with the landscape for that’s how memory is—it runs together,” the speeches are “wilder and more impassioned than any speech could be,” the costumes are “soft, indistinct—not any definite color”—this stylization is, as Williams will later state in the preface of *The Rose Tattoo*, the necessary legerdemain by which “events are made to remain *events*, rather than being reduced so quickly to mere *occurrences*”—thus bringing about “the great magic trick of human existence” viz. “snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting.” It is surprising to find early sketches such as this one replete with so many indications of Williams's conception of a “new” theater destined to replace the “exhausted” modern realistic mode. It is as if, very early on, Williams had conceived this new form, a combination of dialogue, music, sound, and visual effects built into a series of dramatic episodes, of which the successive full-length plays represented tentative realizations.

Ozzie, the black nurse, constitutes the real originality of this dramatic fragment. She is well-known from Williams's biographical studies as the servant who took care of the Williams children and fascinated them with her stories. It is from her presumably that the playwright acquired his taste for fabulation, and it is natural, then, that he would make her here the source of

information, the repository of the family's lore. The fragment is thus provided with a double perspective, the Narrator's and Ozzie's, made necessary by the playwright's original project to tell the story of his family from the beginning, i.e. long before he could become a plausible narrator of the events. This double viewpoint has left slightly problematic traces in the finished play: it raises questions as to Tom's access to information about such things as Amanda's return from the D.A.R. meeting and her subsequent conversation with Laura or the final *tete-a-tete* of Laura and Jim, but since the scope of the events is limited to the period of Tom's young adulthood, one may accept there the explanation, as one could not in the fragment, that whatever he could not have witnessed directly, he may have gathered from conversations with his sister or remarks by his mother. But if making Ozzie into the chronicler—where memory begins—solves the problem of the reliability of the information, one may wonder how Williams envisaged solving the problem of this double point of view. The fragment breaks off conveniently long before the narrated events would have forced him to confront it.

The presence of the black Ozzie as the original narrator pairs together with her description in the final lines as “the black singer Life-Death-the earth. All wisdom and all understanding. Who knew the secrets of the sun before time even started” and brings this short draft, in this respect, close again to *Battle of Angels*, in which the Conjure Man is also the mysterious source of knowledge, the character closely associated with nature and its elemental processes.

As she appears on the stage, Ozzie is singing to two children, a boy and a girl, presumably Tom and his sister Rose, dressed in white clothes, and her ballad is arranged in four stanzas as is the poem reproduced later in the volume *In the Winter of Cities* (1956) in the section “Blue Mountain Ballads” under the title “Heavenly Grass” where the text is presented as one poem of nine lines. That it was reproduced by Williams in this collection testifies to its lasting importance for him and to his belief that it had, with the formal rearrangement, reached its final expression. It was set to music by Paul Bowles, the playwright's friend who also composed the music for *The Glass Menagerie*; it was used again in *Orpheus Descending*, the remake sixteen years later of *Battle of Angels*, and there again, as in the draft, it expressed one of Williams's perennial themes, viz. that of the inevitable corruption of innocence and the concomitant nostalgia for lost purity. Here,

as musical background accompaniment to the scene in which the children, in virginal white, are prompted literally to “inherit the world”—“the earth is yours—everywhere is yours” exclaims Ozzie at the end of her song—it ties in with the later image of the blinding sun, expressing the confidence that they can, at least for some time yet, remain blissfully unaware of the corruption attendant upon growing up.

Finally, in the short scene in which the mother appears, the rapturous description of her as “very lonely, unbelievably lovely” testifies to the author’s wavering attitude towards the character and his original conception of her as totally sympathetic. Interestingly enough, her first inquiry “Are my children happy?” and the few words she exchanges with Ozzie reveal a deep-seated anxiety, an apprehension about the future which is concurrent with the nostalgic message of the song which Ozzie repeats in reply. It is surprising that in this very early incarnation of Amanda, an Amanda at an early age, one would find what is going to become a major character trait which, one usually assumes, is the result of a particular painful existence. Here it appears as a constituent trait of the character. The echo of this young version of Amanda in the later final woman is made clear when she says, in the draft, leaning against the pillar:

This pillar is solid—but sometime it may fall.
Nothing is safe and nothing is everlasting.
I think that even—sometime—the sky will fall!

This constitutes the early version of the last of the legends to be projected on the screen in the play after the announcement that Jim has a girl with whom he goes steady: “Legend: ‘The Sky Falls.’” In the early draft it introduces the mother’s awareness that everything decays and that her world, however happy and secure it seems in the present, is doomed to collapse sooner or later. As such it reinforces the ominous tension, the premonitory note introduced by the “Heavenly Grass” ballad which Ozzie repeats contrapunctally as if to stress its congruence with the mother’s words.

It is significant in this context, although perhaps not immediately conclusive, that one of the short stories preserved at the Humanities Research Center should be titled “In Spain there was revolution.” One remembers the phrase from the introductory words of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* where as narra-

tor he seems to establish the contrast between Europe, where World War II is in rehearsal, and the United States, where “there was only shouting and confusion.” The story is on a typed manuscript of eight pages by Thomas Lanier Williams with a penciled note on the title page that reads “Not a bad story and rather prophetic. T.W. (written about ’36).” A small slip in the same file indicates that the text was originally “rejected by Story—sept. 21, 1936.” This early offering concerns the brief summer idyll of Steve, a lifeguard on a lake resort in the Ozark Hills (also a favorite summer retreat of the Williams family) with a school girlfriend who is a counselor at a nearby camp. The bulk of the story is comprised of their sensual encounter in a rowing-boat, hidden amidst the rushes on the banks of the lake overhung with willows—an encounter not very different from that which Val recalls at the end of Act II Sc I in *Battle of Angels* and that curtains the lovers from sight. As Steve returns to his place at the dock to survey the bathers, a fat man engages him in conversation about “this trouble in Spain.” When Steve reports that he is not aware of any and asks what it is all about the man retorts “Revolution. Next it will be the Whole world!” Disgusted at Steve’s indifference, the fat man swims off the dock with an inner tube girdling his middle while the lifeguard “looked down at him and shook with noiseless laughter.”

At first sight the short story illustrates Steve’s indifference to anything except his intense concern with the girl and their love affair: “He avoided the fat man’s searching squint, kept his eyes fixed stonily on the water. He wanted to think of the girl. Nothing else.” And Thomas Lanier Williams seems to be distributing the roles: “Steve is a muscular lifeguard with coffee-brown shoulders, his girlfriend an expert oarsman who has tanned deeply and smoothly”; by contrast the fat man is described as a “stooge,” a “white collar nonentity” who tries ineffectually on vacation to be a “vital and specific” personality by “exposing [his] moist white skin immoderately to the sun’s indifferent burning,” one of those men who “lived narrow, slavish lives in cooped-up places, . . . caught in ruts, graves with both ends kicked out.” Such a person largely justifies Steve’s attitude towards him and forces the fat man and his news into unwelcome intrusions in an otherwise quiet and idyllic world. However, on the back of the final page, obviously in Williams’s own hand in brown, fading ink, resembling an afterthought or constituting a note for a further bit of dialogue between Steve and the man, appear the words “Spain is a long way off but not the Revolution. Which Revolution? The one

in which you will be killed. You and all the other young fools who think that Spain is such a long way off!" The passage cannot have been conceived as an addition, since it could have served as an alternative or, even less likely, an added ending to the short story. It must, therefore, be read in conjunction with Williams's (this time Tennessee's) later remark on the title page about the prophetic quality of the text. And indeed the short story informs *The Gentleman Caller* draft and *The Glass Menagerie* itself with a sense of things running irretrievably towards a major change, quickly approaching an end: the summer's plenitude is almost over and, although the young lovers will see each other again in school, things will never again be the same:

"He looked up and smiled.

"Sure it will be just the same.

"What? She asked . . .

"At school—The way it is here.

"I don't know," she repeated gloomily. School isn't like here."

"I know it isn't, he admitted. "Here it's just perfect."

Tom's later words, then in the final play, about the difference between Spain and the United States may not be as clearly contrastive as I had thought previously: rather they may be hinting, as Williams's handwritten note makes clear, that although major trouble was limited so far to Spain, the United States would soon be drawn into the conflagration, of which the final blackout is the scenic realization.

It is obvious from our investigations at the Humanities Research Center that *The Glass Menagerie*, probably the best known play in the American repertoire, has not yet and might very well never reveal all the secrets of its long and painful conception. It is equally obvious that the published short story "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" or the film treatment *The Gentleman Caller* in its various guises cannot account, as Parker already demonstrated, for all the material. Williams seems throughout his career to have worked at various projects simultaneously, many of which ended up not in the dustbin but carefully preserved in the material that is today housed at the Humanities Research Center. That material is daunting: fragments of it, sometimes small like phrases, names of characters, or addresses, sometimes more important like an episode in a story or the sketch for a narrator frame, are used as raw

materials, the building brick of a house, ultimately meant to stand on their own. Consistently, the blocks in their original setting appear clumsy, uncut, undeveloped, revealing sometimes aspects that were later occulted but, systematically almost, less rich than the final product. It seems to have been Williams's particular flair or poetic genius to have worked on the material and altered it until he had found for it a setting, be it a poem, a one-act play, but most often a full-length play, a short story or sometimes all three, in which the blocks of imaginative material had been sorted out and shaped neatly together to make the clearest sense of the emotional experience.

That long and compulsive process of transmutation to which the archives at Austin eloquently and abundantly testify is that of transforming experience into art or, as Williams himself put it, mere occurrences into lasting events. To observe the process is to appreciate the playwright's craft; to look at the final result is to marvel at his mastery.²

Gilbert Debusscher
Universite Libre de Bruxelles

Notes

¹ Parker, R. B., "The Composition of *The Glass Menagerie*: An Argument for Complexity." *Modern Drama*, XXV, 3, (Sept., 1992), 409-22.

² This essay was first presented at the Tennessee Williams Scholars' Conference, New Orleans, March 1997. It will appear in the volume "Union in Partition"; *Essays in Honour of Jeanne Delbaere*. Liege L3 Press, 1997.