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TESIS DOCTORAL

THE OTHER TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: A POSTMODERN STUDY OF IDENTITY AND ABJECTION IN HIS SHORT FICTION

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A mi madre y a mi padre.

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction 7
2. Tennessee Williams and the Body/Soul Conflict: A Dialectics of Opposites? 15
3. Postmodern Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, Kristeva 47
4. *Approaching his Fiction*: Tennessee Williams as Short Story Writer 87
5. The Androgyne: A *Real* Existence 117
6. More Sacred than Holy Law: "Gift of an Apple" 131

THE ANDROGYNOUS ABJECT

7. "The Accent of a Coming Foot" 155
8. "The Important Thing" 181
9. "Something About Him" 207

THE DARK ABJECT

10. "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" 251
11. "Ten Minute Stop" 278
12. "Desire and the Black Masseur" 305

13. Beyond Abjection: Other Texts 339
14. Conclusion 353
15. Works Cited 366

1

INTRODUCTION

I am I!
The most preposterous circumstance of all –
Identities, moments, their shock…
Tennessee Williams ("The Couple;" *Collected Poems* 105)

In my father's extensive theater library, there was a book that was clearly more eye-catching than all the rest. Instead of a dull, pastel-colored cover, it had a painting of sinuous figures in bright colors, and its back cover showed the photograph of a woman in her nightdress. It even had pictures inside, which for a child – as I was at the time – was a quite appealing thing too. That 1951 Signet edition of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with Thomas Hart Benton's painting, Vivien Leigh's portrait, and snapshots of different productions of the play around the world, was the door that led me into Tennessee Williams's dramatic world which, years later, I would re-discover from a more analytic perspective as university student.

However, as the title of this dissertation mentions, it is not on Williams's plays but on his short stories that my study focuses. The interest on his fiction obviously derives from a prior acquaintance of his dramatic texts and from the fascination these provoke; especially, their characters. For Williams has been traditionally considered a playwright of *characters*: his plays do not develop intricate

plots but intricate identities.[1] Blanche DuBois, Brick Pollit, or Princess Kosmonopolis, to name but a few, cannot be easily classified as victims or victimizers, heroes or villains. The complexities of their characterization are manifested through their behavior on stage; yet what happens inside their minds remains an intriguing mystery. That is one of the reasons why I first turned to Williams's fiction: the hope of finding a clearer path to his characters' inner feelings and motivations, given that the narrative genre is (*allegedly*) able to render their consciousness more straightforwardly thanks to the diverse types of point of view. The strategy proved, as it were, *rewardingly futile*, as I discovered that Williams's short fiction is in reality multifaceted and engaging in its own right, and its characters as fascinating as the theatrical ones. Instead of a direct rendering of their thoughts and feelings, we find that some of them remain opaque to narrative omniscience – which makes them all the more captivating. Rather than providing a clear outline of their personality, the stories exacerbate their ambiguities and depict what Williams calls "the most preposterous circumstance of all" in the poem that opens this chapter: the absurdity of the individual *I* because it only originates at the moment of shock of two identities that meet each other.

Moreover, by focusing on his stories it became evident that they still seem to be an undervalued part of Williams's prolific production, despite the author's affirmation that "he considered his best writing to be in his short stories and one-act plays" (qtd. in Gaines 217). In 1988, after the publication of Williams's *Collected Stories* (1985), Dennis Vannatta affirmed that criticism ran "probably fifty to one – a very rough guess – concerning the plays rather than the short stories" (ix). Although a long time has passed, and certainly a number of studies have provided insightful analyses of some stories, to date Vannatta's is still the only full-length book devoted exclusively to Williams's short fiction. A reason for this maybe the peculiar *uneasiness* the stories inspire in the reader, and also in the literary critic. They show something that, maybe, we do not want to see. William Peden was one of the first to notice this disturbing quality when he compared them with "a rotting mackerel in the moonlight,

[1] This continues to be the source of inexhaustible critical readings; for example, one of the most recent ones is Morné Malan's dissertation "The Multiple Formations of Identity in Selected Texts by Williams Faulkner and Tennessee Williams" (2009).

which ‘shines and stinks, and stinks and shines’” (Peden, *Short Story* 76). This combination of repulsion and fascination will mark the tone of this study, as it epitomizes the dynamics of abjection by which the identities in the stories are constructed and, what is more, by which the world as we know it – its social and cultural structures – is constructed too.

Therefore, the goals of this dissertation are, first, to explore the construction of identity of the characters in Tennessee Williams’s stories; also, to reveal in those texts a certain structural cohesion, as well as to demonstrate their hermeneutical potential and vindicate their significance within Williams’s canon. To be more precise, it will be in fact the *de-construction* of identity what my study will investigate, since any consideration of the questions of identity or individuality must take into account the drastic philosophical re-formulation that those concepts have undergone after the undermining of Descartes’ philosophy of the *cogito*. The notion of an individual as a whole and coherent self, who willingly controls the impulses of the body and uses language as a mere instrument to reflect and affect the external world, has been dismantled by successive critical theories such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism, and deconstruction. My study of Williams’s fiction will then problematize some conceptions of identity in the criticism of his works, and will move on to disentangle the postmodern and revolutionary aspects of identity in his short fiction.

Hence, the first chapter of this dissertation will be devoted to a review of the assessment that themes such as the body, the spirit, and identity have received within Williams scholarship. It will trace their development from a more or less traditional perspective that considers the dichotomous nature of those elements of the human being, to the more recent postmodern analyses that set them in an interdependent relationship and integrate them into the experience of the *subject*. Within these analyses, the most fruitful insights for Williams scholars have been inspired by Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical model of the *desiring, split* subject, because it emphasizes the significance of language for the formulation of identity and paves new ways for literary criticism. However, some of Williams’s texts reveal aspects that Lacan’s paradigm does not quite account for; for example, the preponderance of orality or the

revaluation of the maternal. It becomes thus necessary to broaden the theoretical framework and search for additional perspectives that might shed some light on how Williams articulates these elements within the construction of subjectivity in his work.

The theory that can provide us with such enlightening perspective is Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical model, and the second chapter will concentrate in examining it in relation to Sigmund Freud's and Lacan's theories – the two models of identity that Williams criticism has prioritized until now. After revealing her foundations on those previous models, I will point out what Kristeva's own innovative contributions are, and will situate her concept of *abjection* within her model of postmodern subjectivity. Abjection is a fundamental stage in the constitution of the Kristevan *speaking subject-in-process* that directly affects the bodily boundaries and also involves a complex dynamics of interaction between I/Other, including the issues of orality and the maternal previously mentioned. Moreover, the affiliation that Kristeva's abjection has with Freud's concept of the *uncanny* makes the former all the more pertinent to approach the study of identity in Williams's fiction, since the uncanny is the philosophical underpinning of gothic literature, and Williams's short stories have usually been categorized within that genre.

Accordingly, the third chapter will elaborate on this coincidence by clarifying some aspects of the gothic, such as its narrativization of Otherness and its formulation of the uncanny, and explaining how they overlap with Kristeva's abjection. After this, we will return to Williams criticism to see how and why Williams's stories have been classified as gothic or *grotesque*, and what the implications are for a study of the identity of his fictional creations. Finally, once the intertwining of the gothic, abjection, and subjectivity is made manifest, I will delineate the main aspects that will be taken into account in the examination of the individual stories. The "shock" between identities, the confrontation between self and other, will be rephrased as the encounter between subject and abject: a crisis of identity that involves a blurring of dichotomies, a lapse into ambiguity and meaninglessness, and a return of the repressed (m)Other. This process of abjection will be the focus of my analysis, and throughout all the stories I will pursue the different arrangements that the two participants in it, the subject and the abject, can adopt. In this crisis of identity two

other elements are significant: the grotesque body and the semiotic genotext. Whereas the former has clearer gothic origins, the latter derives from Kristeva's theory of poetic language and is a helpful instrument to approach the strategies of representation and the narrative practices that Williams employs in his stories.

Thus, those three aspects – identity, the body, and language in abjection – will constitute the pillars of this study. The abject, an uncanny Otherness that threatens the self, can take two main configurations in Williams's work: the sexual Other and the dark Other. Whereas the dark Other has already been analyzed in gothic theory, I deem it indispensable to supplement the chapter on gothicism with a short discussion of the androgyne as an abject. I argue for the integration of this figure into the discourse of subjectivization and abjection as a primordial fetish that encapsulates the qualities of the (m)Other – combination of opposites, defiance of social norms, mythical resonances of completion. Its recurrence throughout Williams' oeuvre (not only the stories) makes it necessary to adopt a closer look at this figure that, we will see, does not let itself *be viewed* very easily.

The following chapters in the dissertation will each deal with one of Williams's short stories. The first one, "Gift of an Apple," is presented as the primary example of the dynamics of abjection that will be unfolded in the rest of the stories, because it condenses all the elements that will reappear in other texts in a more scattered way. It depicts the crisis of sexual, racial, and religious identity of its protagonist, and conceives one of the most *abjectable* characters in the whole canon. The rest of the stories are grouped according to their representation of the abject in predominantly sexual or racial terms. Both aspects can be considered part of the same deconstruction of categories of identity that abjection effects, and both refer ultimately to the (m)Other that disrupts the socio-cultural establishment – the psychoanalytical *Symbolic*. The selection of texts has followed a chronological order: they all belong to the earliest stage in Williams's career, their composition taking place before his success with *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944. In addition, another interesting feature connects them: they seem to have *satisfied* Williams somehow as he never re-wrote them into a play. As Gore Vidal recounts Williams's creative process in his "Introduction" to the *Collected Stories*:

> In the beginning, there would be, let us say, a sexual desire for someone. Consummated or not, the desire … would produce reveries. In turn, the reveries would be written down as a story. But should the desire still remain unfulfilled, he [Williams] would make a play of the story … (xxi)

After the two groups of early stories, a further discussion will establish a dialogue with later texts and will highlight the aspects than can lead us to compose a more cohesive image of Williams's short fiction. The conclusion will summarize how Williams's characterization involves a postmodern conception of identity or the self as inextricably bound to an-Other, and at the same time aspires to a revaluation of difference.

For the study of the stories, I will fall back on other sources and critical paradigms in order to deepen the insight and open the texts to a multiplicity of discourses. Although I do not engage with deconstruction directly, if "to deconstruct is to acknowledge and to analyze the operations of exclusion, erasure, foreclosure and abjection in the discursive construction of the subject," as Judith Butler defines it (8), this is certainly a deconstructive reading of Williams's short fiction.[2] Other postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes will offer hermeneutical concepts and strategies that complement the principally psychoanalytical approach of this dissertation. In fact, Barthes sustained his theory of the *text of bliss* on the Kristevan concepts of *phenotext* and *genotext*, as well as on Lacan's notion of *jouissance*. In the elucidation of the semiotic genotext in Williams's stories of abjection, I will then follow Barthes's advice and realize the *other* reading of those texts, one that does not *devour* their plot but that painstakingly chews and tastes their various levels of *signifiance*.[3] This seems to me the appropriate starting point to approach this series of stories, given the scarce or nonexistent critical attention they have received (with the exception of "Big Black " and "Desire and the Black Masseur"). Moreover, as Marc

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[2] Echoes of Jacques Derrida's theories can also be found, for example, in the importance of the act of naming in the stories.

[3] See *El Placer del Texto* (22-3).

Robinson states in *The Other American Drama* (1997), Williams "set aside 'action' of the usual sort [i.e. the plot] in favour of the internal catastrophes that sometimes can't be seen, can't be assigned to any clear source" (32). I hope this *other* reading of the *othered* side of Williams's oeuvre may reveal some source for such catastrophes or, at least, a better way to cope with its effects.

2

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND THE BODY/SOUL CONFLICT: A DIALECTICS OF OPPOSITES?

> It is not the essential dignity but the essential ambiguity of man that I think needs to be stated.
>
> Tennessee Williams ("POV" 118)

In 1940 Tom Williams – already under the penname *Tennessee* – made his first professional visit to New York City after being awarded the Rockefeller Fellowship grant ($1,000), a financial support that allowed him to live "well-off" and to enjoy "cruising in the park at night. And eating, eating, eating! … I love the pleasures, the sensual pleasures so much. … I suppose I am too much body, not enough soul," he concluded in his diary at the time (*Notebooks* 251).[4] Williams's acceptance of this "too much" bodily side of his was nothing if not problematical. The feelings expressed in his first-person writings toward such corporal needs oscillate from the self-condemnation inspired by coming out in his first visits to New Orleans – "Am I all animal, all willful [*sic*], blind, stupid *beast*? *Is* there another part that is *not* an accomplice in this mad pilgrimage of the flesh?" he torments himself in his journal (*Notebooks* 133; italics as in the original)[5]– to the (some would say *self-fashioned*[6])

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[4] Entry dated 20 October 1941.

[5] Entry dated 14 January 1939.

[6] In Christopher Conlon's opinion, we can only encounter Williams's "true emotional autobiography" in the manifestations of his troubled psyche in his poems, because "the swaggering bohemian of the

self-assurance of his late *Memoirs*, in which he opens up, tells the reader intimate confessions like the one above, and acknowledges "being a sensual creature" that

> will go on doing what I am doing while waiting. I will comfort myself with good wine and food but not to drunkenness and satiety and grossness of the flesh. … And I will have, I still hope to have, both spiritual and carnal knowledge of a desirable young companion: not as frequently, now, but at prudently spaced intervals. (249)

This may very well be the least scandalous remark of all those candid memories in *Memoirs* that, according to Smith Ruckel, "reveal one of Williams's basic tenets: that the sensual and the spiritual are inextricably intertwined" (98). The conflictive yet inescapable duality of body and soul, a commonplace in Williams's scholarship,[7] is attributed by the author himself to "a combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains in my blood which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in the people I write about" (qtd. in Day vii).

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interviews and *Memoirs* is strictly a construct, an image presented for the consumption of the public" (Conlon 68-9).

[7] While some scholars like Robert Siegel (2002) have directly approached the mind/body duality in Williams (as we will shortly see), references to the clash between soul-spirit and body-flesh in his works appear throughout the critical corpus on innumerable occasions. Most critics have agreed that in Williams's plays there can be no reconciliation between spirit and flesh (Tynan 772; Fedder 124; Presley 44, Thompson 103, 153). The question of which characters embody the spiritual side and which the bodily side is never clear-cut; consider, for example, Val in *Battle of Angels/Orpheus Descending*, whose sexual allure cannot be resisted by any of the women in the play while he insists on his aspirations to transcendence. In this regard, Haley offers a rather countercurrent interpretation of *The Glass Menagerie* in which the "struggle between flesh and spirit" is embodied in, on the one hand, Tom's "spiritual goal – freedom – and, on the other, Amanda's physical goal – the marriage of her daughter" (ch. 3) –, Amanda being most often considered the champion of Puritanism and of the spirit *par excellence* (Fritscher, *Love and Death* ch. 1).

The Puritan side corresponds, on the one hand, to the overall Calvinist spirit of mid-century America,[8] and on the other to the most influential religious representative for the playwright – indeed a strain *in his blood* –, his grandfather Rev. Walter Dakin, rector of a Episcopalian church, "father figure and role model" (Hale, "Preacher's Boy" 11). Allean Hale considers that "the spirit vs. flesh conflict that runs through most of Williams's plays must have had its origin in his grandfather's sermons," which emphasized the power of man to choose and to surmount his animal nature (16). For a young Williams gradually realizing his strong (homo)sexual inclinations, this triumph must have seemed hardly achievable, so that he started to part from a religion that "condemned him as a sinner" (18). In a more drastic way than his grandfather's homilies, Calvinism also equated depravity with the body, an equation Williams would always attempt to overcome (Fritscher, *Love and Death* 19).[9] As a consequence, the most adequate epithet attached to his name is the one Nancy Tischler chose for her seminal book, "rebellious Puritan," which best exemplifies the coalescence of Williams's strong religious background and his need to subvert it.[10]

Whereas the spiritual constituent has been traced back to his Puritan upbringing, Williams's understanding of the bodily, Cavalier side has usually been tracked down to one of his greatest literary influences, D.H. Lawrence. Both writers "become deeply preoccupied with the dualism of the body and the spirit" (Leverich 310), and stress the "necessity of a resurrection of sensual values" to counteract the stale rationality of normative culture (Fedder 9).[11] Several critics have pointed out that

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[8] For an in-depth study of the ways Williams's plays characterize the failure of the Edenic Garden of a Calvinized America, see John J. Fritscher's dissertation *Love and Death in Tennessee Williams*, Ch. 1 ("The American Blues: Williams' Heritage of Tension in Matter and Form").

[9] For example, Lincoln Konkle examines the Calvinist influences over Sebastian in "Puritan Paranoia: Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* as Calvinist Nightmare."

[10] Nancy Tischler, *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* (New York: Citadel Press, 1961); elsewhere she defines him as a "no Calvinist" romantic (Tischler, "Romantic Textures" 160). Jack Fritscher also labels him a "neo-romantic" for whom Calvinistic perfectibility is impossible (Fritscher, *Love and Death* 7).

[11] Norman Fedder states in *The Influence of D.H. Lawrence on Tennessee Williams* (1966) that both authors' common purpose in their stories was "to demonstrate the negative consequences of sensual or

Williams's point of view, however, is more pessimistic than Lawrence's as regards the likelihood of achieving a successful integration between body and soul. Lawrence was able to envision a regeneration of spiritual sterility through the passionate coming together of the opposites, man and woman.[12] By means of sexual union, his characters get to attain a "state of organic wholeness – individual, natural, cosmic –" (Fedder 124), they can recover the essence of a complete self that had been lost under bourgeois repression (Rodríguez Salas 41).[13] He puts it so in his preface for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*:

> A young girl and a young boy is a tormented tangle, a seething confusion of sexual feelings and sexual thoughts … Where we want to get [is] to our real and

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spiritual fragmentation" (27), although Williams shows a greater sympathy towards his homosexual and heterosexual "perverts." Besides a number of symbols and motifs (the fugitive fox, the fragile rose, the sexual allure of dark-complexioned foreigners), they also share a condemnation of the bourgeois and the "modern day mechanical man" (32) and the frequent depiction of "the awakening or destruction of a virginal figure by a virile representative of the claims of the flesh" (33). Unfortunately, Fedder is noticeably biased in favor of Lawrence and his comparison of both authors always places Williams in a demeaned position: "Williams' fictional technique […] is everywhere inferior to Lawrence's" (125) due to the playwright's ineffective union of theme and form and the general ineptness of his prose style, Fedder contends (46).

[12] Roger Ebbatson finds in *Women in Love* (1916) an example of this union yet in homosexual terms too: after the loss of his friend Gerald, the protagonist Birkin feels "the failure of his homosexual programme of 'eternal union with a man,' 'another kind of love' … through which his nature might fulfil its needs" (108). The two men's relationship still "articulates [Lawrence's] dualistic belief in the unity of opposites; the presence within Birkin's consciousness of a model, a rival, an opposite and an erotic object" (Ebbatson 109).

[13] Throughout this dissertation, I will use the terms *self* or *ego* as near synonyms; while *self* refers to the traditional concept of a coherent, self-transparent Cartesian *individual*, Lacan configures his imaginary *ego* as a kind of heir to the former, whose unity and identity are nonetheless discovered to be only a fantasy because it necessarily interacts with other psychic agents such as the unconscious or Real, as well as with the external Symbolic order. Accordingly, I will use the term *subject* instead of *individual* to refer to the experience of the split, governed-by-language being (which comprehends *ego*, unconscious, superego).

> accomplished chastity, our completeness, when our sexual act and our sexual thought are in harmony… (qtd. in Scholes 138)

Despite their constant longing to do so, Williams's characters do not achieve that state of completion. For many of them, sex "is not a melting flow toward Lawrentian union but a competitive tension which sets [their] teeth on edge as it builds toward rituals of open aggression," for example in the case of Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) (Davis 76). Arthur Ganz was probably the first to ground the reason for this violence on Williams's deep morality (his Puritan side), which is at odds with the Lawrentian viewpoint that

> the great natural instincts that well [*sic*] up out of the subconscious depths of men – and particularly the sexual instinct, whatever form it may take – are to be trusted absolutely. But Williams is too strong a moralist, far too permeated with a sense of sin, to be able to accept such an idea with equanimity… (Ganz 216-7).

Yet Ganz's conclusion seems a bit unclear, because throughout his essay he reiterates fact that what Williams intensely denounces is "the rejection of life" in the latter's various forms (such as sexual awakening or acceptation of others), whereas he concludes that what the author chastises is that very surrender to the corrupting flesh: "he is condemning what he most desires to pardon… [and] must sometimes, in order to condemn at all, do so with ferocious violence" (217).

The different approach that Lawrence and Williams take towards the conflict of flesh and spirit originates, I think, from their dissimilar literary heritage and sociocultural context. On the one hand, Lawrence belongs to the modernist movement which, despite its advocation of freer literary forms and its breaking up with narrative conventions, still retained the idea of a hidden individual essence as regards its characters, the possibility of achieving a subjective epiphany through which a sense of wholeness and identity were still available for the modernist self (Rodríguez Salas 41). On the other hand, Williams does also aspire to that unity of opposites that Lawrence

celebrates, although in his ambivalent vision the contraries are interdependent yet not assimilable, as C.W.E. Bigsby points out in the following example:

> In *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (originally entitled *Tenderness*) D.H. Lawrence distinguishes between a soulless sexuality, obsessive and self-destructive, and a sexuality which vivifies and regenerates the self through its surrender. Connie Chatterley knows both kinds. In *Streetcar*, Blanche and Stella represent those two opposing interpretations, two poles of experience. But such contradictions are, to Williams, the essence of human existence. (*American Drama* 58)

Unlike the Lawrentian essential wholeness, for Williams the essence of human existence hinges upon those very contradictions; their conflation, if attainable at all, would be as devastating as the distressing tension of the opposition, as Jack Fritscher has also noticed: "He places no one in balance… He more often illustrates the extremes by bottling the opposing tensions into a central character who, after an interior recognition scene, finds the *Angst* of his opposing values sliding into ripe paranoia" (*Love and Death* 14).

It is in this disbelief in the transcendental unity of opposites or *coincidentia oppositorum* that Williams departs from Lawrence and gives a postmodern tinge to his work. His writings evoke the transition from the modernist self into the postmodern conception of the *split subject*, inherently and irrevocably incomplete, whose introspection (the "interior recognition scene" Fritscher mentions above) only brings about the anxiety of an existential nothingness, and who must look out of themselves, not in, in order to find its decentered self in the o/Other:

> Modernist writers usually allude to the notion of 'self', an essential and immovable identity that hides in the individual, independently from the changes the latter may undergo through the learning process of life. … In radical contrast, Linda Hutcheon

> ... and Steinar Kvale ... recognize the paranoia, or dismemberment, that characterize postmodernism, to the extreme ... of a radical decentring...[14] (Rodríguez Salas 40-1)

This postmodern shade can be better appreciated if we broaden the scope of influence of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, those "two poles of experience" that need to be included into the essential self, and consider its manifestations beyond the body/spirit conflict.[15] Other dichotomies, such as feminine/masculine, conscious/unconscious, or I/other, are also fundamental for the constitution of identity, as Judith J. Thompson has studied. Her analysis of the mythical patterns in Williams corroborates Mircea Elíade's premise that the *coincidentia oppositorum* is *the* mythical pattern underlying countless traditional rites and myths (80). Behind the diverse references to myths like those of Orpheus, Attis, or Persephone, Thompson identifies a common tendency throughout Williams's plays towards an attempted integration of several pairs of opposites: an androgynous combination of the feminine and the masculine in *The Rose Tattoo* (1950) and *The Night of the Iguana* (1959) (56; 165-7), brother-sister incest in *The Two-Character Play* (1968) (188), or, unsuccessfully as in "Desire and the Black Masseur" (1946), the approach between "human nature and a transcendent God" (103).

[14] "La norma general entre los escritores modernistas es aludir a la noción de "self", una identidad esencial e inamovible que se esconde en el individuo, independientemente de los cambios que pueda experimentar en el proceso de aprendizaje de su vida. ... En radical oposición, Linda Hutcheon ... y Steinar Kvale ... reconocen la paranoia, o desmembramiento, que caracterizan al posmodernismo, hasta [el] punto ... de un descentramiento radical..."

[15] As Susan Bordo summarizes, this dualism founds Western culture via the ideological tradition that originated in Plato, continued in Augustine, and was solidified in Descartes. The Greco-Christian heritage conceives a human existence "bifurcated into two realms or substances: the bodily or material, on the one hand; the mental or spiritual, on the other," and its formulation by Descartes identifies "the inner and essential self" (the "thinking thing" or Cartesian self) with the willed control of an instinct-driven, unruly body (Bordo 230-1). Freud's psychoanalytical postulates will subvert this clear-cut antithesis, undercutting especially the capability for *willed* control of the self.

Thompson, like Elíade,[16] finds the psychological significance of this tendency in C.G. Jung's psychoanalytical theory of the constitution of the individual, which follows a similar pattern:

> According to Jung, "individuation, or becoming whole, is neither a *summum bonum* nor a *summum desideratum*, but the painful experience of the union of opposites," a process of becoming which is recurrent throughout one's lifetime.
>
> …
>
> The Jungian psychological process of "individuation": [is] that process of psychic development "arising out of the conflict between the two fundamental psychic facts" – the conscious and the unconscious – whose reconciliation leads to the realization of the personality as "a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole.'" (9, 8)

In Williams, this process of individuation never seems to succeed, since what Williams's plays stage is precisely the failure of the union of opposites. It is the change of attitude towards such failure that marks the inflection point in Williams's career, Thompson concludes. While it is a constant that "most of Williams' protagonists fail to achieve that psychic wholeness realized through individuation," his earlier plays (1944-61) confront this failure in a tragic tone of lamentation and nostalgia for mythic wholeness. In contrast, the plays he wrote from the sixties onward are characterized instead by "comic spirit of survival … alternative to romantic despair and existential angst" (Thompson 8, 180). The turning point was Williams's last successful major play, *The Night of the Iguana*,[17] where he depicts a fallen world where "duality is not

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[16] "Según Jung, el proceso de individuación consiste esencialmente en una especie de *coincidentia oppositorum*, puesto que el yo comprende tanto la totalidad de la conciencia como los contenidos del inconsciente" ("According to Jung, the process of individuation essentially consists in a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*, because the ego comprehends both the totality of consciousness and the contents of the unconscious") (Elíade 80).

[17] Maybe a forewarning, while *Iguana* was still running "*Time* magazine put Williams on its cover and devoted a long article to evaluating his career" up to that moment (Palmer and Bray 12). The article was the first written by T.E. Kalem as drama critic in *Time*, and was entitled "The Angel of the Odd" (*Time*, June 9, 1962).

to be resolved: spirit and flesh are not to be united; the divided self remains divided; and salvation depends on accepting and enduring the particular limitations of one's inherently incomplete nature" (Thompson 153).

The acceptance and endurance of this inherently incomplete, divided self (or *split subject* in postmodern terms) seems to me already present in Williams's early work of the late Thirties and early Forties, and it constitutes the cornerstone of the short fiction I will analyze in this study. For, as regards the assimilation of opposites, Williams's keen eye seems to discern the same danger that Herbert Marcuse would examine about Cold War society in *One-Dimensional Man* (1954): the integration of the contraries is the main instrument that contemporary society uses to subdue protests and dominate by means of a closed discourse that assimilates its contradictions in a "fruitful destructivity" of divergence (119). Applied to the psychological realm, the (dis)solution of the inherent heterogeneity in the subject (formulated as the body/spirit conflict, the unconscious/conscious topology, or the I/other pair, as we will see) would imply a similar destructive effect, an erasure of difference into sterile homogeneity and a balance or *stasis* that equates death.

Thus, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate that Tennessee Williams's stories illustrate how, as tempting as wholeness may be, the attempt at individuation cannot be based on such a union of opposites because the "unconscious longing to attain that infantile sense of original unity … also represents the annihilation of self" (Thompson 115). The stories relate the experience of characters (or *subjects*) that confront the possibility of a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a transcendental union with the *other* sex, or the *other* race – an Other that is often depicted as possessing a mystifying two-in-oneness in itself;[18] in other words, as being enviably complete. The encounter with the fetishized, whole Other has the radical effect of revealing the split in the subjects' identity, which is discovered to be a volatile construct that hides an underlying incompletion. Moreover, this crisis of identity is accompanied by the

[18] Elíade's study on the *coincidentia oppositorum* was originally entitled *Mephistopheles et l'Androgyne* (Éditions Gallimard, 1962, a title that remains in its Spanish translation *Mefistófeles y el Andrógino*, Kairós, 2001), whereas in its English version it was changed to *The Two and the One*; hence my coinage.

fragmentation of the body image, which exposes the obsolescence of the traditional perspective of the Cartesian individual that considered the body in subordination to the self, and simultaneously suggests a dynamics of interdependence between the two elements.

This incompletion or fragmentation of both body and self is precisely the "leitmotif to be found among [Williams's] stories, … [the] idea of 'incompleteness,' a void occurring in those characters who lack something in their own constitution [physical and psychical] or in their relationships" (Bray 44). Yet instead of considering the reconciliation of the opposites as a way to the complete personality that Jung propounded above, the only option that those subjects have to re-stabilize their (albeit fragile) sense of identity is to *separate themselves from the Other* in order to avoid the complete annihilation of self (often figured as bodily death) about which Thompson warns us. From the beginning of his career, Williams was aware that the fusion into original unity and completion, however desperately pursued, had to remain of necessity the most primordially foreclosed desire. Its impossible accomplishment is, indeed, the thrust that sets our lives in motion, the "long-delayed, but always expected something that we live for" (*Menagerie* 401).

The Postmodern Turn

In *The Other American Drama* Marc Robinson remarks that one of the keys to understanding Williams's dramatic innovation is the fact that his "characters no longer had only an intellectual life: They had bodies as well." His stage is peopled with characters of a powerful physical presence such as Stanley Kowalski, Val Xavier, Serafina della Rosa, or Maxine Faulk, and the workings of physical desire and sexual seduction weave the structure of his plays (31). Sex is, for most critics, the foremost bodily aspect that worries Williams as well as his fictional creatures (cf. Bauer-Briski 2002). Sexual union seems to promise the juncture of the body and the spirit, through which an initially physical urge can lead to emotional fulfillment – at least in theory. The fact is that, at times, it is not just the spiritual side that interferes in such sexual

union – the body has its say too. Nor is that *spiritual side* – if we understand it as the non-physical component of a person, be it called mind, psyche, etc. – always disinclined to the merging with an-other. The analysis of the conflictive body/spirit dichotomy in Williams's characters must then call into question the presumption of a univocal meaning for those two elements, and take into consideration the postmodern readings of the subject that reconfigure the relationship between, say, its corporeal and non-corporeal components, and introduce a third party, language, as a fundamental participant in the equation of the self.

As Robert Siegel (2002) opens his (millennial) essay on Williams with the intention of carrying out "a mind/body analysis" of his work, it seems to me an apt starting point of current Williams scholarship on the issue. Siegel extracts from Williams's plays "archetypes … for the flesh and the spirit, that seek, test, and do battle with each other" (112), whereas they are unable to recognize their own *other side*. Therefore, the violence in *Streetcar* and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) originates in their protagonists' denial of that other part of themselves: "Blanche's spirit … lacks the emotional resources to cope with adversity" and "cut off from the flesh, denying its needs, becomes insensitive and badly deluded" (116). Blanche's self-delusion is as condemnable as Sebastian's lie to others about his spirit, his pretense of chaste creativity while he actually personifies the body's evilest (ab)use. Alternatively, *Summer and Smoke* (1948) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* present analogous (and more conciliatory) patterns because John and Maggie, representatives of the body in each play, somehow come to terms with the spiritual side embodied by Alma and Brick respectively. In the case of *Summer*, the resolution is sad "acceptance but no union," whereas in *Cat* "the ending ... is a truce, not a resolution, an open-ended recognition of mutual need between body and spirit" with a more than uncertain prospect of union (114, 122). The difference between these plays is the presence of a "competitive need to be right in *Summer*" while *Cat*'s archetypes "become more aware of their own shortcomings" and are moved by kinder motives (122).

According to Siegel, Williams culminates this more optimistic trend in *Iguana*, where "self-awareness and mutual need … hold out this possibility of mending the tear between spirit and body" (123). *Iguana*'s particularity lies in its different

arrangement of the body/spirit archetypes: instead of a duality, we encounter a "trinity: Maxine as body, Hannah as spirit, and Shannon as the tormented embodiment of both" (123). What they all do share is generosity and honesty towards their counterparts: Shannon helps Hannah with her grandfather and intercedes on their behalf with Maxine; and despite her apparent toughness, Maxine is not to hard on Shannon's spiritual crisis and eventually lets Hannah and Nonno stay. Still the "unique development" that differentiates this play is the character of Hannah and her "unfailing tenderness, beneath the honesty … Spirit, in this play, is accepting of body and therefore accepting of, and at peace with, herself" (128). Hannah, so it seems, does indeed symbolize the possibility of a non-conflictive embodiment of both spirit and body just as she personifies "a reconciliation of masculine and feminine polarities," "a complete...human being whose love-life manifests itself through helping people" (Gulshan Rai Kataria, qtd. in Siegel 127). However, at the end of the play it is not with Hannah but with Maxine that Shannon eventually moves in; a thorny conclusion that, Siegel argues, "has the feel of an arrangement, that he *is* settling, that body and spirit can never be soulmates" (128).

Siegel's study still maintains the rather traditional tendency in Williams criticism that highlights the importance of the second term in the body/spirit dichotomy – the very title of the chapter betrays this bias, as it is "The Metaphysics of Tennessee Williams," and not his *physics*, that it purports to analyze. Yet in so doing it makes again evident (as Thompson's also does) that the *spiritual* tensions that Williams's characters and their critics deal with are not only rooted in a religion-based conflict or Puritan aspirations on their part: Blanche and Sebastian's deceits, Brick's unresolved sexual tendency, or Shannon's excessive self-awareness are issues that stem from *identity conflicts.* Such is the approach that other recent critical studies employ in examining the body/spirit dichotomy, whose terms, they have realized, are not quite in opposition, but rather in flexible *correlation*. David Savran's groundbreaking study *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (1992) was the one of the earliest to inaugurate the analysis of the body images in Williams and to call attention to the parallel fragmentation of body and (gender) identity that he carries out in his plays, especially

in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) (*Communists* 102-10). Consequently, instead of the body/spirit conflict I will from now on speak about the body/identity relationship, whereby the latter appears related to and even derived from the former.

Savran's influential work is of vital importance to embark in an examination of body images and identity in Williams's work, since his postmodern approach introduces a number of concepts that have become fundamental for Williams's criticism. Whereas I will intersperse references to Savran's work throughout my analysis (from *Communists* as well as from his 1998 volume *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture*),[19] a summary of his most important points must be conveniently made here.[20] Savran analyzes Williams through the lens of postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, or Jacques Lacan; the latter provides him with the framework for the study of the construction of identity (or the *spiritual* side) in Williams's characters. He applies Lacanian psychoanalysis and its critique of the Cartesian *cogito* to outline the Williamsian character as an only superficially self-possessed subject, divided by the inadmissible forces of the unconscious and desire, who unsuccessfully strives to occupy a masculine or feminine posture that, in reality, is nothing but a mask (*Communists* 14).[21]

Drawing on Judith Butler's Lacanian reformulation of the notion of womanliness as masquerade – put forward by Joan Riviere in 1929 –, Savran sustains that Williams's texts prove that not only femininity but masculinity too is just a performance, an "act of assertion" in relation to a matrix of significance dominated by Lacan's master signifier, the phallus:[22]

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[19] Most recently, Savran has explored the intersections between consumer culture, jazz, and theater in *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (2009).

[20] Amongst others, I will discuss Savran's ideas as regards Williams's deconstructive tendency of the gender and racial dichotomies in my chapter on "Big Black."

[21] I will dwell on Lacan's theories more extensively in the chapter on psychoanalysis, as well as in the critical part of this dissertation. The same applies to other Lacanian concepts such as the phallus, the fetish, or the desiring subject that appear hereafter in the discussion of Savran's book.

[22] Except in quotations from external texts, I will not capitalize this term.

> in Lacanian psychoanalysis the distinction between genders (and sexual positions) is founded upon the difference between "having" and "being" the Phallus – the forever elusive paternal signifier, the Law of the Father, the "fullness of being" that, because it is always just beyond reach, also denotes a lack in being. …Woman is understood as "being" (or never quite "being") the Phallus. … Femininity as masquerade is precisely this performance, this womanly impersonation of the Phallus … [In a] corresponding theory of *masculinity as masquerade* … man is understood as the one who "has" (and yet never quite "has") the Phallus … despite the fact that the penis he does have … can never be synonymous with the Phallus. … The man's masculinity, his male world, is the assertion of the phallus. It is this act of assertion, of phallic identification, that I designate by the term *masculinity*. … It is always a display, a sham, a mask of power… constantly subject to the vicissitudes of history. (*Communists* 15-6)

Although initially grounded on the presence or absence of a physical organ (the penis), the Lacanian phallus exceeds the bodily and signifies a wholeness, a "fullness of being" that can never be impersonated (*been*) by women nor attained (*had*) by men. In consequence, Savran demonstrates that both women and men in Williams's plays suffer from a similar illusion of (sexual) identity without ontological foundation, a fantasy that only attempts to masquerade or veil the underlying lack in being that the unreachable phallus evokes.

Savran takes *Cat* as a case in point to illustrate how that impossibility for wholeness or completion of identity also affects the bodily construction of Williams's characters. Although the bodies of both male and female characters appear likewise disjointed – take for instance the "no-neck monsters" or the "animalistic grotesques" that "old-bulldog" Big Mama and the panting, cancer-consumed Big Daddy embody –, Maggie is "the most radically fragmented, produced discursively as a collection of disarticulated corporeal details, an assemblage of body parts:" references to her hands, throat, eyes, or eyelashes proliferate in the stage directions, but never one to "a whole body in sight" (*Communists* 106). She represents "the play's prime example of what Lacan designates as the 'imagos of the fragmented body,' the images of 'castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the

body' that 'represent the elective vectors of aggressive intentions'" (Lacan, qtd. in Savran, *Communists* 107). Although Savran does not overtly state the link between Lacan's imago of the fragmented body and identity, he makes the point that such instability of the bodies correlates with a similar insecurity of the subject positions, so that "insistently, Williams destabilizes and ruptures the coherence of the self-identical subject, turning all of the characters into subhuman creatures or human beings so radically fragmented, diseased, or wounded as to be barely recognizable as human" (*Communists* 106).

Furthermore, Maggie's peculiar fragmentation, Savran contends, is related to her status as the main desiring subject in the play. "Eaten up with longing," she goes beyond the traditional feminine role as a mere object of (masculine) desire and actively "forces her way" into the relationship with Skipper and through Brick's aloofness. Both object and subject of desire, her incomplete body is defined by Savran as "fetishized … [that is,] she is constituted distinctively by the body part she lacks. … The absent Phallus becomes reinscribed in her body and so allows her to be produced as the one who 'is' the Phallus" (*Communists* 107). Earlier in the book, Savran defines the fetish as the status of "both 'being' and not 'being' the Phallus, representing both object of desire and source of anxiety." Maggie thus becomes a sign of absence and presence, of castration and erotic desire, "a phallic woman," a fetish (49). Yet Savran's contention is that Brick is also fetishized since he is equally characterized as a subject *and* an object of desire: his supposed active masculine position of "having" the phallus is visually undermined by his plastered leg, a symbol of "his status as a commodity, as an object of devotion, as one who both 'has' (not) and 'is' (not) the Phallus, as a castrated man (more object than subject of desire, neither fully hetero- nor homosexual)" (108). Characterized by a presence/absence that, although inscribed in their bodies, really originates in an ideologically-charged paradigm, Maggie and Brick:

> cut diagonally across the culturally produced antitheses between subject and object, masculinity and femininity, homosexuality and heterosexuality, or, more exactly, expose the arbitrary and provisional nature of these binarisms ... by installing in their place unstable sets of sheer difference that *resist being conceptualized as polar*

> *opposites* [italics added]: desire and sterility, the Phallus and its multiple displacements, metonymy and metaphor, the scenic and the textual, spoken dialogue and (silent) stage directions. (108)

In conclusion, Savran's study detects again Williams's concern to deal with the type of antitheses that inspire the *coincidentia oppositorum*, and reveals the playwright's refusal to their integration, a deconstructive movement towards the destabilization of the very binary system that anticipates Jacques Derrida (Shackelford 112). That deconstructive development lies behind his experimentation with a fragmented form of language (the binary system *per excellence*) in his later plays, and motivates his constant attempt to flexibilize and pluralize subjectivity. The impression of Williams that Savran's book emanates is that of a writer whose experimental efforts, misunderstood by the critics at his time, can be now retrospectively appraised as postmodernist, as "his fragmentation of narrative and of the subject, his questioning of universalist claims, [and] his subversion of the antitheses between high and low art, philosophy and kitsch," indicate (*Communists* 98).

Savran's *Communists* paved the way for other studies that consider Williams's oeuvre in a postmodern light and advocate for an assessment of his pioneeringly deconstructive posture. For example, D. Dean Shackelford (1999) supports Savran's argument in relation to *Cat* ("the resistance to one reading of Brick's character anticipates deconstructionist arguments against essentialism," 110), whereas John S. Bak (2005) directs his attention to the racial divide and affirms that, in the play *Suddenly Last Summer* and the story "Desire and the Black Masseur," "Williams first establishes a black/white binary so as to deconstruct it" ("Religious Acts" 140). Since I agree with Shackelford that Williams's deconstructive subtext "problematizes subjectivity as a critical construct and opens up the possibility for Lacanian and other post-structuralist readings of literature" (110), my analysis will also draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis so as to underscore the effects of that deconstructive impetus in Williams's short fiction, mostly overlooked in the case of the early texts. It will be with its help that I will keep track of the examples of fragmentation of body and identity in the stories in order to claim that they expose Williams's first intuition of that very

problematic subjectivity that characterizes the postmodern subject. Before that, nevertheless, a closer look must be undertaken at a series of studies that, following Savran's, discuss the codependence between body and identity in *Suddenly* – the play by Williams that is most "haunted by the body" (Sofer 336) – and bring up several important features for whose elucidation I will need to move beyond Lacan's paradigm and resort to other poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and, most importantly, Julia Kristeva.

Andrew Sofer's "Self-Consuming Artifacts: Power, Performance and the Body in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*" (1995) agrees with Savran on the illusory unity of identity that Williams exposes in his characters, and turns too to Butler's concept of performance to explain how they construct a fiction of their/themselves. He insists on the importance of the body for this construction, noticing that "the self-consuming body is Williams' central trope, but one that has attracted less attention than his characters' celebrated 'performativity' ... The two are in fact inseparable, for performativity is the theatrical mechanism by which Williams' self-consuming body is realized on-stage" (338). For Sofer, Williams's creations are confronted with an "impossible choice: to be consumed from without by the devouring energies of human predatoriness, or to be eaten from within by a performance that feeds off itself," because "it is the *self*, which seeks to impose its own version of itself on the world, that is literally consumed in the praxis of performance" (340, 339). The self-fictions or *fantasies* that the Williamsian subject performs, despite being the only possible strategy to resist normative power, undermine the very possibility of a stable self, even more so if such "performance is always uncertain, since at any moment the bodily ground can give way beneath one's feet" (339). The body becomes the setting for a struggle of forces, "the energies of power and performance," that endanger its stability at the same time as they annihilate the self (338). "As the body gives way," Sofer continues, "the subject in Williams flees from sexuality to language," since it "both mediates the body and transcends it." It is through language that Williams's characters can attain their "fantasy… of a performativity that finally, ecstatically, transcends the body," as in the perfect incorporeal union of Blanche and Shep Huntleigh in *Streetcar*

or in Sebastian Venable's legacy of his discursively constructed body in *Suddenly* (340).

Sofer's article places the subject in Williams at the crossroads "between a self-reiterating performance, fueled by the body, and a lethal 'reality' imposed from without," with which it attempts to come to terms through language (339). Yet language is not completely successful in containing or displacing "dangerous sexual impulses … to one's own advantage," because its space, discourse, is in fact "the place of seduction, a power play that has as much to do with fantasy as with the body" (340). With this model of a subject constructed discursively at the interface between body and society, Sofer seems to continue Savran's Lacanian trail, given that this positioning recalls Lacan's theory of subjectivity. The Lacanian subject experiences the fantasy of a stable identity or *ego* (which is based on the body image) and uses language (the most effective surrogate for the abovementioned phallus) to cope with its feeling of incompletion, or in Lacanian terms, to bridge the gap between the Real and the Symbolic. Like Lacan too, Sofer foreshadows the triumph of the later: "What remains when performance [i.e. the fantasy of self] implodes and the body takes its revenge is power … The body must accept its inscriptions from the beginning;" hence the astounding calm which with Blanche, Chance, and Sebastian are complicit with their fates (346).

Moreover, in grounding his study of the Williamsian body on Butler's construct of the body as "*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface*" (338; Sofer's italics), Sofer highlights the presence of a discourse of corporeality as a boundary or liminal space between an inside and an outside, between the inner impulses and the "reality imposed from without" that threaten to annihilate the subject. The article's many references to these threats contain a further hint towards the way in which they operate: *eaten* by a performance that *feeds off* itself ("eaten up with longing," as Savran put it above), or *consumed* by the *devouring* energies of human predatoriness, of the "power [that] feeds off the body of the other" (339), the body boundaries are breached by cannibalistic forces that even affect linguistic exchanges: in *Suddenly*, "[Catharine's] discourse [about Sebastian] swallows [his mother's] discourse in a Darwinian competition"

(344). These generalized assertions, which before focusing on *Suddenly* refer to Blanche and Bid Daddy's experiences too, make *orality* or, as Sofer puts it, "cannibalistic performativity" (346), appear to go beyond the outrageous punishment for Sebastian and suggest that the oral (not just *the verbal*) is a predominant mode of interaction for Williams's subjects, the trope for other types of (physical) intercourse too.

Therefore, orality arrives on the scene as yet another aspect to bear in mind in the discussion on the body/identity relationship and its role in the constitution of the subject in Williams. However, unlike Sofer's more comprehensive view, most critics analyze it only in its most striking shape, literal cannibalism, in the play *Suddenly* and the story "Desire" two texts that have the added interest of being his most daring depictions of male homosexual desire. Thus, Steven Bruhm (1991) defines its "cannibalism as a trope for the social anxiety surrounding homosexuality" (533), and Brian M. Peters (2006) affirms that "in *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams presents the idea of cannibalism as a code for subverted homosexual desire" (par. 3). Some like Donald Spoto (1985) or Judith J. Thompson interpret the use of such violent imagery as Williams's creative outlet for a "fierce guilt about sadistic homosexuality" (Spoto 123), which can only be purged by surrendering to a painful sacrifice of body and self that, in the story, even acquires the connotations of an ironic Christ-like redemption or "unholy communion" (Thompson 103).

It is probably Annette J. Saddik's "The (Un)Represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire and the Black Masseur' and *Suddenly Last Summer*" (1998) that most neatly renders the interconnection between cannibalism, bodily fragmentation, and identity in those two texts: [23]

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[23] The plot of *Suddenly Last Summer* revolves around the confrontation of the two versions of the story of Sebastian Venable, who never appears on stage since he has died by (reportedly) being devoured in a foreign country by the street urchins he had lured (or rather *bought*) into homosexual relationships. While his mother Violet defends his transcendental purity and poetic talent and negates the possibility of his having suffered such an atrocious end, his cousin Catharine insists on his predatory character and demonic vision. In "Desire and the Black Masseur," a timid, child-like man, Anthony Burns, goes to a Turkish bath in search of a soothing massage for his aching back and what he finds there is the

> The incorporation of the body in the cannibalistic act signifies a yearning for the wholeness – a oneness – which will put an end to fragmentation through, on the one hand, the ultimate 'union' with the other, and, on the other hand, an eradication of desire (the source of fragmentation) in the annihilation and death of the 'self.' At the same time, cannibalism becomes the punishment for the transgression of yielding to contradictory, taboo desires and exposing that a stable self does not strictly exist. 'Individuality' becomes only the elusive dream of an unfragmented self. In these two works [*Suddenly* and "Masseur"] Williams illustrates the futility of trying to define and contain human desire, of trying to construct and control the human subject through sexuality, and displays the destructive consequences of these attempts. ("Fragmentation" 348)

Anthony Burns and Sebastian Venable, the protagonists of the texts, are, as Maggie is for Savran, "not represented as a unified subject with a stable identity, but [as] the fragmented consequence of [their] desires, which effectively resist defined boundaries" (353). Nevertheless, Saddik finds this "inextricable" link between identity and desire only in relation with a homoeroticism that is, again, "wrought by guilt and even self-loathing [and] inevitably becomes a desire *for* death" (353, 350). In other works by Williams, she argues, the punishment for unruly desires involves an assault upon the body (Chance's castration in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1952) and Val's lynching in *Orpheus Descending* (1957) are paradigmatic examples), but it "does not involve physical incorporation … Only homosexual desire falls victim to cannibalism" (348).

While Saddik`s insight reiterates the importance of the yearning for metaphysical wholeness that Williams's characters feel ("the ultimate 'union' with the other" into a "oneness," quoted above), her restricted focus on homosexual identities somehow undercuts the general validity of her claims. For, if it is true that

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realization of his hidden masochistic desire at the pounding hands of a big black masseur. The violence of the blows increases, and Burns's *treatment* concludes when his emaciated body is eventually devoured by the masseur.

> Williams uses the act of cannibalism as a metaphor for the consuming nature of desire – both human desire and, more generally, the cosmic desire of a universe … constructed as a cruel and insensitive mechanism that mercilessly *incorporates* the subject, *human social relationships too rely on violence and mirror that same 'hunger'*. (italics added; 352)

Consequently, as Sofer stated, such a tendency to consume or *incorporate* should be present in other (not just homosexual) social or personal relationships, which in Williams also seem to be founded on orality ("that same 'hunger'"). The oral incorporation of the body that cannibalism represents is just another attempt to overcome fragmentation through the ultimate fusion of opposites that pervades Williams's work – the self's union with the other, the masculine with the feminine, and now also the fusion of black and white (if we, like Bak, consider the racial division that both *Suddenly* and "Desire" feature).

Although largely centered on the construction of gay subjectivity, Robert F. Gross's "Sublimity and Gay Poetics in *Suddenly Last Summer*" (1995) does presage the possibility of finding a wider framework that comprehends these issues – the codependence between body and identity, their fragmentation, and the dynamics of orality – beyond their manifestation in the homosexual subject. Gross puts his finger on some shortcomings of applying Lacan's psychoanalytical theory for the understanding of Williams's construction of subjectivity; in that way, he brings to light the need for moving on in the critical paradigm in order to enrich the analysis with a model that accounts for those disagreements. His analysis disentangles a series of different "plot triangles" in *Suddenly,* one of which exposes the rivalry of Violet Venable and Catharine Holly for the role of companion to the former's son, Sebastian ("Sublimity" 229). The incestuous connotations of Sebastian and Violet's relationship are not extraneous to the critics (e.g. Sofer 341, Garrido Chamorro 102), and constitute the basis for a traditional psychoanalytical justification of Sebatian's homosexuality, as Thompson recaps: "Sebastian's life and work still depend … on a symbiotic relationship with his mother for sustenance and nourishment. Freud explains such extended dependence as Sebastian's as the genesis of male homosexuality" (113).

Gross coincides in mentioning that the attachment between mother and son makes them appear "as a single being, in a world in which time seems nonexistent" ("Sublimity" 242). However, whereas Thompson emphasizes the negative consequences of Sebastian's dependence on Violet, evoking again the destructive effect of its aspiration to wholeness,[24] Gross's approach sees their relationship in a more positive light. On the most evident plot level, the mother in *Suddenly* is "stripped of her power and allure" and the spectator, like Sebastian, is "forced away from her;" below the surface, the mythically magnified "Mother continues to exercise her fascination and power" (241).

To begin with, Gross dismisses the very possibility of finding a coherent temperament in Sebastian, for his character, disseminated throughout Catharine's and Violet's narrations, is as fragmented as his body was on the streets of Cabeza de Lobo. Instead, he considers *Suddenly* as the illustration of the very process by which Sebastian, in whom we can begin to detect hints of the postmodern subject in general, becomes split:

> Sebastian is a figure of unresolvable contradiction. With his mother, Sebastian was an artist; with his cousin, he was incapable of artistic creation. With his mother, he was fastidiously clean; with his cousin, he sought squalor. ... The break represented by Sebastian's movement from Violet to Catharine becomes a radical shift in the nature of his identity, a break so profound that the audience cannot constitute a coherent picture of Sebastian Venable. ("Sublimity" 239)

Gross also founds this shift of identity formation on the relationship with the mother, yet as it is formulated not in Freudian, but in Lacanian terms. For every subject (not just the homosexual), Lacan situates the most intense bond with the mother in the pre-Oedipal stage, where the mother is still a powerful (*phallic*) figure because the child is

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[24] "Consciously desiring to escape from those who would devour him, [Sebastian] is at the same time pursued by an unconscious longing to attain that infantile sense of original unity which also represents the annihilation of self. Psychologically, then, Sebastian is devoured by his mother – womb become tomb" (115).

unaware of castration; that is the realm Lacan calls "Imaginary," where the body image and the incipient ego take shape. After the Oedipal split, the infant will identify with the father, entering the "Symbolic" realm which includes the acquisition of language and the incest prohibition that inaugurates the child's entrance into patriarchal culture. In Gross's view, Violet obviously corresponds to the maternal Imaginary, and Catharine, with her commitment to ethical truthfulness, represents the Symbolic. Sebastian's experience, thus, should not be deemed exclusively gay (not even exclusively "male," as Gross's wording suggests), but the exemplification of a process that, psychoanalytically speaking, everyone undergoes:

> The trauma in this plot is the terrible, Sublime, experience of the wrenching separation from the Mother, which forced the male subject out of the Imaginary realm. In Sebastian's leaving Violet behind on his last journey, we see the attempt to master the trauma of an inevitable loss by presenting it as something that was *willed*. Ultimately, it is surprising to discover that it is not the loss of the Son which provides the most profound emotional impulse in the Violet-Sebastian-Catharine plot in *Suddenly Last Summer* – it is the prospect of the loss of the Mother. It is that prospect that sends Sebastian to Catharine, and to his death. (243-4)

In spite of Thompson's equation of Violet with the negative psychological archetype of the Terrible Mother and her voraciousness (114), Gross considers that *Suddenly* really intends to underscore the importance of the pre-Oedipal Imaginary and its maternal bond for the artistic process – the really "terrible" experience is that of separation, not of union. Primarily, Violet represents "a phallic, impregnating Mother who provides the will necessary for artistic creation to take place," that is to say: "Williams situates creativity in the realm of the pre-Oedipal Imaginary" ("Sublimity" 241-2). Hence, once he exchanged his mother for Catharine, Sebastian could not write his annual "Poem of Summer." Moreover, the power of the Imaginary is also decipherable in the fact that "the oral dominates. … The nature of the oral bond between mother and infant is reflected in a play that, for all of its references to sexuality, always construes that sexuality in oral, rather than genital, imagery" (242). Profuse references to orality are not reduced to the final cannibalistic scene and include Dr Cucrowicz's name (Polish

for "sugar"), the birds eating the newly-hatched turtles at the Encantadas, Sebastian's unusual dietary habits and his equation of sex with food ("Blonds were next on the menu," 118), and Catharine's memory of the "hot, ravenous mouth" of her lover at the Duelling Oaks (133).

For Gross, then, Williams is trying to demonstrate "the need to rescue the Imaginary from the negative connotations it bears in Lacan's writing" ("Sublimity" 242). As Daniel Dervin criticizes, Lacan was "so captivated by the role of castration that he makes it the pivotal moment of becoming human, enabling him to equate truth with language-acquisition in the phallic stage and to … wall off the [Imaginary] mirror/mother from further psychological inquiry" ("Where Freud was" 357). Rather than this phallocentric view, Gross defines Williams's aim as follows:

> To restore the Imaginary to its rightful pride of place, to view it not as a stage to be outgrown but as an ineradicable constituent of the human psyche and, more important, as the, essential, [*sic*] indeed the only matrix of fantasy and fiction. ("Sublimity" 242)

Lacan's model is pertinent yet not completely satisfactory, because although

> the crisis of the play is precipitated by the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, … Williams's version of this transition does not depend, as does Lacan's, on the intervention of the Father and the creation of the Oedipal crisis. ("Sublimity" 242)

The critical moment that triggers this transition in *Suddenly* is the visit to the Encantadas, where the hatching of sea turtles symbolizes the moment of mortal danger in breaking out of the maternal shell, and

> confounds the first, physical separation from the Mother at birth, with the later, Freudian separation of Mother and Son at the moment of Oedipal interdiction. This is the moment Lacanian thought has equated with the transition from the Imaginary level, to the Symbolic order of language. ("Sublimity" 242-3)

Therefore, it seems to me that the need for a revision of the Lacanian theory is triggered, first, by this relocation of the moment of crisis for the subject away from the Oedipal split and back to the separation from the Mother. Furthermore, there is a further divergence with Lacan, namely, the fact that for Williams "the Imaginary is not pre-linguistic:"

> Violet and Sebastian share a language, a poetic language that is to be found in the *Poem of Summer*. Significantly, however, those volumes remain closed to the audience; we never hear a line from them. The language of the Imaginary is an intensely private one as opposed to the public language of the Symbolic. ("Sublimity" 243)

Thus, despite the enlightening insights that Lacan's theory of the split, desiring subject offers for a reading of subjectivity in Williams's works, Gross's analysis shows us that there are important features that such approach leaves unaccounted for. What Gross calls "Williams's highly idiosyncratic revision of psychoanalysis and Kierkegaard['s existentialism]" does not picture the Imaginary as just a realm of misrecognitions and suffocating maternal bonds that needs to be outgrown into the Symbolic ("Sublimity" 244), as Lacan does with the Mother that is ultimately subjected to the Law of the Father, the (m)Other that he positions in the place of the Freudian Thing and is substituted by the linguistic Other of discourse.[25] It seems that for Williams, the Imaginary remains a part of the subject's psyche and inspires creativity and, more specifically, a poetic language that is different to that acquired in the Symbolic. It also shapes in oral terms the manifestations of desire and social relations, for orality is the fundamental manner for interaction in the Imaginary. Most importantly, the greatest trauma in the process of identity formation happens during "the first, physical separation from the Mother at birth," instead of upon the discovery of castration in the Oedipal phase – Lacan's phallus seems to be not so powerful after all. It seems

[25] The equivalence between these Freudian and Lacanian agents will be clarified in the chapter on psychoanalysis.

necessary then to look within the psychoanalytic framework for additional substantiation of this not-so-Lacanian model of subjectivity, as well as to question whether that "terrible, Sublime, experience" for the Williamsian subject can also be found in the rest of Williams's work (Gross, "Sublimity" 243).

In my opinion, the thinker that can provide us with a reworking of Lacanian psychoanalysis that undertakes the revaluation of the Imaginary and comprises the issues of orality and poetic language is Julia Kristeva. Kristeva unites the Lacanian orders of the Real and the Imaginary in a new realm she calls the *Semiotic*.[26] This pre-Oedipal stage is the scenery for *abjection*, the most primitive experience of identity, a differentiation between child and mother that is manifested in oral terms – "the infant begins to expel from itself what it finds unpalatable" (McAfee 35). Unlike Lacan's Imaginary, Kristeva's Semiotic is the basis for the acculturation of the subject, it already inscribes it within a symbolic matrix and continues to exert an influence in later life; it makes itself felt on the Symbolic. Like the "intensely private" language that Sebastian and his mother share but "we never hear" (Gross, "Sublimity" 243), the Semiotic is the origin of a different mode of signification that infuses language with non-verbal features such as melody, rhythm, silences, etc. that are fundamental for poetic language and, in actual fact, for any type of communication:

> [Kristeva's] semiotic and the symbolic are sometimes taken to be a reworking of Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic, but the semiotic in fact has many of the properties of the real. The symbolic, for Kristeva, is the formal structure of language, while the semiotic is linked to the pre-Oedipal primary processes. The semiotic is thus linked to the body and the drive which Kristeva locates in the *chora* (usually translated from the Greek as enclosed space or womb).

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[26] For clarity's sake, I will continue Gross's usage (followed by other critics too, such as Myers) and write the names of the Lacanian orders (the substantivized adjectives) with a capital letter in order to distinguish them from the everyday words – hence, the Real, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and also the Kristevan Semiotic. However, quotations will retain the spelling as in the original. I will deal more extensively with the parallelisms and divergences between Lacan and Kristeva's theories in the chapter on psychoanalysis; my aim here is merely to present the singularities that make Kristeva's ideas so fitting for an analysis of Williams's work.

> The *chora* is not a fixed place, however, but an endless movement and pulsation beneath the symbolic. The semiotic functions as a disruptive pressure on the symbolic and can be traced through the gaps in language, the tendency to meaninglessness and laughter. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva identifies this kind of language with avant-garde poetry and literature. (Homer 118)

This pressure of Kristeva's Semiotic on symbolic language can then help to account for those futile efforts of the subject in Williams to "flee from sexuality to [a] language" that "both mediates the body and transcends it" (Sofer 340); the body and the drives cannot be transcended since "embodiedness will always have its say" (McAfee 80), manifesting itself on language through the semiotic mode of signification. This does away with the fantasy of the existence of any univocal, stable language – or identity. For Kristeva, who "folds two huge areas of inquiry – subjectivity and language – into one," both the subject and the language that constitutes it (as a *speaking being*) are dynamic actions: the former, "always in process and hetereogeneous" (*sic*); the latter, just part of a *signifying practice* that involves the bodily experience too (14, 41).

Thus, opening up the analysis to Kristeva's theories allows us to understand better the connections between body and subjectivity I have been pursuing in Williams's work. Her subject, like Lacan and Williams's, "cannot be the transcendental subject, who lacks the shift, the split in logical unity brought about by language which separates out within the signifying body, the symbolic order from the workings of the libido" ("System" 29). Yet when she considers that language itself is a practice equally incapable of logical unity due to the disrupting drives and bodily forces of the Semiotic (her equivalent for the libido), she establishes a definitive bond between the body and the speaking subject. The clearest sign of this is still the parallel fragmentation of body and identity we have repeatedly encountered in Williams, given that Kristeva's Semiotic comprises the Lacanian Real, whose ego-shattering force is "experienceable only in the loss of an imaginary unity, a collapse into the *corps morcele*" (Boothby 149). However, unlike the Lacanian Real, Kristeva's Semiotic *can also be traced in language* so that, if the body affects language and language establishes the subject, the study of the Williamsian subject will require taking into

account how it is constructed linguistically and how that language features the diverse components of the semiotic mode of signification that are perceivable in what Kristeva calls the *genotext* (“System” 28-29; “Revolution” 120-1).

Studying the subject in Williams from a Kristevan perspective can also provide us with a novel insight into the issue of the *coincidentia oppositorum* that so persistently haunts Williams’s work. As we have seen, Williams’s position remains ambiguous, because, on the one hand, he insists on envisioning the possibility of the mythical integration of opposites into a unity; whereas, on the other, a certain intuition of the destructive effects of such union makes him increasingly distrustful of its alleged boons, and inspires his deconstructive attempt to destabilize the opposition altogether. Still, as Savran noted too (*Communists* 108), his deconstructive thrust does not eradicate difference altogether, but substitutes the culturally produced antitheses by other sets of difference that cannot be considered mutually exclusive opposites; in other words, he advocates for a coexistent heterogeneity that cannot be reduced to a synthesis. This can be seen, for example, in Philip C. Kolin’s (1999) postmodern view of Blanche when he analyses *Streetcar* in the light of Barthes’s discussion of the Lacan-derived terms *plaisir* and *jouissance*:

> Blanche is an “impossible text” within the void of bliss, diverse, impenetrable, unknowable. She has been classified through a host of wildly opposing signifiers ... and yet she is none and all of these. ... Her signifiers are those of concealment and/or transparency, stability and/or flux, and sometimes both interruptedly, each canceling the other... (“Barthes” 298)

Such heterogeneity is precisely the center of Kristeva’s poststructuralist philosophy. Her Semiotic and Symbolic are not conceived as two opposed elements that need to be integrated into one, because “instead of holding to the dualistic thinking of the West, Kristeva is showing how the poles of these dichotomies are intertwined” (McAfee 17), or as Kolin puts it above, how they “both” are present “interruptedly, [while] each canceling the other.”

This dynamics of ambiguous affirmation and negation, simultaneous presence and absence, is what Kristeva calls the *negativity* of the Semiotic, the functioning of the drives that "attacks not only denotation (the positioning of the object) but meaning (the positioning of enunciating subject) as well" (Lechte 135); that is, that destabilizes language and the subject. It is towards the acknowledgment of this semiotic component and the acceptance of its own heterogeneous nature that the Kristevan subject-in-process progresses:

> the subject of the semiotic metalanguage must, however briefly, call himself in question, must emerge from the protective shell of a transcendental ego within a logical system, and so restore his connection with that negativity – drive-governed, but also social, political and historical – which rends and renews the social code. ("System" 33)

This seems to me the meeting point between the construction of the Kristevan subject and the "terrible, Sublime, experience" of the Williamsian subject (Gross, "Sublimity" 243). The loss of the protective shell of their ego, of the fantasy of their performativity or their fetishes, makes Williams's characters *call themselves into question* and experience the force of the Semiotic. The latter's negativity "destroys the image and the isolated object even as it facilitates the articulation of the semiotic network" ("Revolution" 100-1).[27] Consequently, its first effect is the fragmentation of the character's imaginary unity, a sort of reversal of the mirror stage. Further back, the subject enters the space of the *maternal chora*, the pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic phase that Kristeva describes as the place where the child does not differentiates itself from the mother yet; in other words, the equivalent to the state of mythical wholeness that many critics such as Thompson or Saddik have detected in Williams.

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[27] John Lechte explains that "because there is still a slightly logical connotation to the term negativity, and thus an absence of a sense of expenditure and drive energy," Kristeva will replace that term by "the term 'rejection' [which] becomes the more appropriate term for describing the pre-verbal, heterogeneous semiotic function. 'Rejection' could be described as what is repressed – kept at bay – in the operation of the symbolic" (135).

Yet, like Thompson told us about the mythical union, the Kristevan "longing to fall back into the maternal *chora*" stirs as well "a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity"– this fear is "what Freud identified as the ultimate source of the feeling of uncanniness ... [or] 'the return of the repressed'; Kristeva calls it 'maternal abjection'" (McAfee 49). Maternal abjection is the earliest movement by which the infant separates itself from the mother, and as such, for a subject that is restoring its connection with the Semiotic, it is the last-ditch opportunity not to succumb into absolute undifferentiation (o *coincidentia oppositorum*) and the blurring of boundaries of body and self that precede it. Accordingly, abjection introduces itself as the strategy of the subject in Williams to recover a sense of identity after facing that supposedly gratifying wholeness that is, nevertheless, existentially unsustainable. Instead of the Jungian process of individuation by union, what founds the Kristevan subject is the separation or *abjection* of the Mother, now understood, according to Kristeva's topology, to be more than a actual person – it is the big Other of the Semiotic, the representative of drives and body, the origin of desire and poetic language.

In conclusion, Kristeva's explanation of abjection closely resembles Williams's depiction of the traumatic, terrible experience of the wrenching separation from the Mother that Gross mentioned above. Her dynamics of abjection in *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (1982) helps to explain a number of elements in Williams's oeuvre that otherwise seem rather disparate: the search for religious solace, the incestuous subtext,[28] desire and fragmentation of the body, orality. First, in view of claims such as "ambiguity has been a recurring theme in discussions of plays by Tennessee Williams" (Gronbeck-Tedesco 735), and "the key to Williams's choices of characters and plot lines is ambiguity" (Haley ch. 1), abjection may be the best pattern to analyze such choices since "abjection is above all ambiguity" (Kristeva, *Horror* 9). It is the ambiguity between attraction and repulsion, between self and other, subject and object, masculine and feminine, the inside and the outside of a body that is only

[28] See Dervin's "The Spook in the Rainforest: The Incestuous Structure of Tennessee Williams's Plays" (1979).

faintly silhouetted. It implies a confusion of boundaries that sees the opposites flow "into one another" only to be immediately wrenched apart (Lechte 117). When the subject encounters the ambiguous, the composite, the *abject*, it feels equally fascinated and repulsed, and as it belongs to the initial stage of child development, the most elementary way to express this rejection is oral. The abject that triggers such a crisis in the subject can take diverse shapes – defilement, food taboo, sin –, all of which upset the body boundaries and provoke the collapse of the border between me and not-me, inside and outside, as well as the intuition of formlessness or admixture that calls the subject into question and causes its "revolt of being" (Kristeva, *Horror* 1). For that reason, the abject is prohibited by Symbolic Law and the subject's fear of losing its identity is warded off by symbolic rituals – and yet, the confrontation with the abject and its rejection is a necessary process to constitute the subject and to enter the social and symbolic order.

To my knowledge, only Calvin Bedient (1993) has explored in detail the intersections between Kristeva's theory and Williams's drama. Notwithstanding a couple of references to *Orpheus*, Bedient's analysis focuses only on *Streetcar*, which he defines as "a masculinist rout of female abjection." Blanche personifies the ambiguous abject: the power of maternal seduction, the defiance of the Law and meaning, the "identity-threatening corporeality that the mother, in her archaic guise, represents" (47). Stanley, as a representative of the patriarchal order of "desires, objects, productivity," must defeat her (56). This clash is translated onto the stage by means of elements such as colors, sounds and gestures, "prelinguistic sensory phenomena" that take us back to the realm of the Semiotic (47). In addition to Blanche's sacrifice in order to save the community, abjection is played out on the individual psyche as well: Blanche herself experiences the same need to purge herself of the haunting mother, as she shows for example in her – not too unwilling – loss of Belle Reve. "She is the Mona Lisa of dread, the fragility and terror of the 'I' exiled from the womb but still inside the mother-space," Bedient affirms, before acknowledging the fragile equilibrium that such position entails. The subject of abjection finds itself in a crossroads between regression or progression:

> What checks regression is, in Kristeva's view, the powerful horror of abjection: fear of the mother as murky and suffocating materiality, as mortally unclean. … Yet a lost maternal utopia nonetheless beckons to the fundamentally wounded, deficient, empty – that is, to everyone. (50)

This *maternal utopia* is the Kristevan equivalent to the "infantile sense of original unity" that the mythical pattern in Williams's plays aspires to. Like the latter, it "also represents the annihilation of self" (Thompson 115), as Bedient warns us: everyone who feels empty, deficient, *incomplete*, runs the risk of being lured to "the abyss on the far side of abjection." Most will oppose the abject and – in Kristeva's words – "buy into the 'legal fiction known as symbolic activity' … to 'lose the Thing'" and return in time to the identity-sustaining law. "Only suicides and the depressive dumb or those who use words without any belief in them" will ultimately revert to the mother-Thing (Bedient 47).

Bedient affirms that "Williams's 'poetry' is … his wooing of [the lost maternal utopia], the sign of his seduction by it" (50). My attention to Williams's short stories will reveal that, behind his ambiguity of characters and plot lines, and his deconstructive treatment of oppositions and meaning, there lies this courting of the abject. These two components make each an analytical step necessary before proceeding with the study of the individual stories. First, the complexity of Kristeva's theories requires an exhaustive examination of the psychoanalytical bases of her work, revisiting Freud and Lacan's paradigms on which it is based, as well as placing her concept of abjection within her model of postmodern subjectivity. Secondly, a review of the criticism of Williams's stories will be basic to frame my research within the critical debate, and will provide further validation for the advantages of employing Kristevan abjection in the analysis of Williams's gothic narratives.

3

POSTMODERN PSYCHOANALYSIS: FREUD, LACAN, KRISTEVA

> We are bound to be divided and split. I think all of us are.
>
> Tennessee Williams (qtd. in Brown 257)

Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical model is firmly grounded on Freud's theories of narcissism and primary identification, and on Lacan's model of the decentered subject, split between the Real and the Symbolic, with its emphasis on language as the formative agent of subjectivity. She can be said to have performed the *return to Freud* that Lacan so insistently advocated for.[29] The difficulty of Kristeva's theory lies mainly in its handling a number of initially obscure concepts – the *chora*, the Semiotic, abjection – that need to be seen in relation to the previous Freudian and Lacanian paradigms. This will allow us to grasp the significance and innovation of her personal reformulation of the process of subjectification and its parallel, the process of sociosymbolic acculturation. Her understanding of psychoanalysis takes it beyond the limited scope of personal subjectivity and expands it to comprehend the wider area of social interaction, and of the religious and political superstructures that are enlarged projections of the configuration of the individual psyche.

In reality, Kristeva's interest in those psychoanalytical paradigms resided originally in their applicability to developing her theory of language and the signifying process, which would inevitably lead her to engage in the study of the *speaking being*, the subject. She first turned to Freud and Lacan's theories to find support for the

[29] See "La Cosa Freudiana o Sentido del Retorno a Freud en Psicoanálisis" in *Escritos* (384-418).

insights she drew from phenomenology, for example her concept of the *thetic phase* as originator of language (McAfee 21, 29). Thus, a practical starting point to understand the coincidences and divergences between their models is, first, to revise Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis by approaching the phenomenological implications that each bears; after that, we will be able to recognize the overlapping areas on which Kristeva builds up her theory of the *speaking subject-in-process*.

Freud's Conscious/Unconscious as Object/Ground

Richard Boothby's study on *Freud as Philosopher* (2001) offers us a comparative analysis of Freud's metapsychology and Lacan's psychoanalysis in relation to the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Boothby starts from Merleau-Ponty's concepts of "dispositional field" and "positional object." The former refers to the surrounding background upon which the latter is profiled: the dispositional field is the backdrop against which positional objects are highlighted when we focus our look on them. Although the dispositional field remains retreated from awareness, its influence is fundamental to "lend specific quality and character to objects," to distinguish their definite contours (21). In his study *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty recognizes the possible application of this perceptual configuration to the human psyche, so that the unconscious would be equated with the dispositional field on which the (positional) figures of consciousness stand out:

> This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our "consciousness," but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is "unconscious" by the fact that it is not an *object*¸ but it is that through which objects are possible. (Qtd. in Boothby 60-1)

The unconscious is then the background for our conscious, objectal reasoning – yet still an indispensable element of our psyche. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923) Freud had employed similar terms to develop his theory of the unconscious:

> We shall now look upon an individual as a psychical id, unknown and unconscious, upon whose surface rests the ego, developed from its nucleus the *Pcpt*. [Perception] system. … For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct. (*Ego and Id* 30)

The *id*, or unconscious, works as a surface on which the conscious system (the *ego*) organizes its perceptions and thoughts. Although he insisted that his "topographical way" of representing psychic agencies should not be taken literally (that is, as located in specific organic elements), Freud continued using this model on condition that the agencies that compose it be considered in dynamic interrelation.

Besides this *topological* model of id-ego-superego,[30] probably his most notorious one, Freud also formulated the psyche in *economic* terms in his theory of the drives, especially the libido, the sexual energy that originates in the *id* and that the *pleasure principle* leads through cycles of tension/release as long as the *reality principle*, the outer circumstances, permits it (Thurschwell 84-6). This energetic model can also be formulated in phenomenological terms like the topological one, as Boothby demonstrates. When Freud describes the transference of libido or *cathexis* "as an investment of energy that focuses attention and interest," it clearly reminds of the perceptual procedure by which a figure is extracted from its adjoining background (Boothby 77). Boothby sustains that the Freudian metaphor of psychical energy and its investment or *cathexis* does follow a dynamics of positionality and dispositionality, and can be used to "elaborate the concept of a dispositional field in a way that is equally applicable to the image and the word" in order to pinpoint problems of perception and language (69).

An example of the application of the dynamics of (dis)positionality to the cathexis of libido on the image is found in fetishism. When the libido's focus of attention is put on a particular figure, it is not onto typical symbols of the phallus (e.g. a stick) that desire is invested, but onto substitutive positional objects chosen by perceptual contiguity across the dispositional field of the mother's body: "The choice

[30] For a detail account of Freud's several "maps of the mind," see Thruschwell 79-93.

of fetish object is made in a lateral movement across the field of the perceptual tableau of the maternal body" (Boothby 76-7). For instance, Freud recounts that feet and shoes are usual fetishes because they *are seen* at the onset of the child's gaze when he looks upwards at the feminine genitalia from his lower position (Freud, "Fetichismo" 2995). The mother's body is the receding background that will disappear into the unconscious, leaving only the fetishistic attraction to remain *objectively*.

This orientation of libido to create perceptual unities with erotic interest can be extended to the general concept of psychical energy which Freud developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). He divided it into two types: the pleasure principle or *Eros* and the death drive or *Thanatos*.[31] In (dis)positional terms, psychical energy can thus be directed both to a positional "gathering together into ever greater unities under the influence of Eros and [to] the splitting apart and disintegration effected by the death drive" (Boothby 5). Eros impels our tendency to union, integration, and a balanced cycle of desire – "the homeostasis of the pleasure-seeking ego" that profiles objects (Hsiao 55). Thanatos, which animates the dispositional field, causes fragmentation, self-destruction, and the disappearance of desire altogether; it leads us to the ultimate and complete release of tension that can only conclude in the dissolution of the ego and death.

Lacanian Theory: The Imaginary

Boothby uses the phenomenological concepts of positionality and dispositionality to correlate Freud's theories with Lacan's notions of identity and language. Freud's focused investment of libidinous energy onto images of especial interest (or "focal cathexis") corresponds to the Lacanian Imaginary, whose formation of the primitive ego in the mirror stage also consists in the "isolation and promotion of the figural content along with suspension or suppression of the environing ground." Freud's "diffuse cathexis," the process by which words acquire meaning through "an

[31] As Blanche puts it: "Death – … The opposite is desire" (120).

immensely complex web of associations" that are never registered by consciousness, is the way in which Lacan's Symbolic works, since "the meaning of linguistic signs is imbricated within a broad system of other signs and associations that remain the unconscious possession of every speaker" (Boothby 86-7). Although words cannot be made figures of perception in their materiality or *objectality*, the allocation of their meaning can be seen to proceed according to a dynamics of (dis)positionality too:

> For most linguistic terms, any fully adequate account of their meaning must take note of two dimensions… [On the one hand,] the more discrete and definite moment of determinate indication by which reference can be made to an object in the world. On the other hand, there is a more vague and diffuse horizon of subtle hints and shadings that escape explicit registration yet may decisively color the term's total meaning. (Boothby 125)

Unlike positional objects, we do not perceive words as letters on the page or discrete sounds, but we directly grasp their meaning. Still, this meaning is not univocal: there is the denotation of "an object in the world," but also a connotative "horizon" that influences the meaning of linguistic terms and "escape[s] explicit registration," that is, escapes consciousness. In psychoanalytic treatment, the aim of the psychoanalyst is to bring to light those vague shadings, unlocking the multiple meanings and symbolism of the patient's dreams or speech (Thurschwell 3).

Lacan's theories, despite their later mathematical and metatheoretical formulations, are in fact grounded on a phenomenological basis: in "the first phase of Lacan's career – from the completion of his doctoral thesis in 1932 to 'The Rome Discourse' in 1953 … – he was philosophically speaking a phenomenologist" (Homer 19). The clearest and most influential outcome of this phenomenological approach is his model of "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" ("Le stade du miroir," 1949), in which Lacan sets out from Freud's topological model of the psyche to propose that the conscious ego is not an inherent feature of the human being: it comes into being through identifications with a

series of *images of the self.* [32] Homer enumerates the strands of thinking that inspired Lacan's "Mirror Stage," which include Heideggerian phenomenology (carried over to France by Jean-Paul Sartre), Henri Wallon's psychological work on mirroring, and Hegelian dialectics via Alexandre Kojève (19-26).

In the Lacanian mirror stage, the prematurely born human infant discerns its image on the mirror and can thereby congeal its inner impressions of a disorderly, fragmented body into the fantasy of an orderly body based on the unitary image or *imago* that the mirror reflects:[33]

> The total form of the body, thanks to which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturity of its power, is presented as a *Gestalt*, that is, an exteriority … [that] appears in a high relief that coagulates it and in a symmetry that inverts it, as opposed to the turbulence of movements with which [the subject] experiences itself ... (Lacan, "Espejo" 87-8; my translation)[34]

The result of this physical perception is an "I" or imaginary ego which proves to be a positional *object*,[35] not a given, innate identity but an artificial construct that provides us with a fiction of psychic unity only at the expense of the disappearance of the surrounding field that profiles it, the turbulent bodily drives. The subject in this

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[32] For a detailed study about the extent to which Lacan's formulation of the ego in "The Mirror Stage" is (un)faithful to Freud's own, see Dervin ("Where Freud was" 351 *ff*).

[33] A version of this discussion on Lacan's mirror stage has already appeared in print, see my publication "Goffman meets Lacan" (475-77).

[34] "La forma total del cuerpo, gracias a la cual el sujeto se adelanta en un espejismo a la maduración de su poder, no le es dada sino como *Gestalt*, es decir en una exterioridad ... [que] le aparece en un relieve de estatura que la coagula y bajo una simetría que la invierte, en oposición a la turbulencia de movimientos con que se experimenta a sí mismo." All excerpts from Lacan's *Escritos* and *Seminarios* are my translation from the Spanish.

[35] In Seminar 2 ("El Yo en la Teoría de Freud"), Lacan repeatedly insists: "Literally, the ego is an object" (73). In this sense, the ego is the rough equivalent to the traditional Cartesian individual or *self* who perceives itself as a whole object of consciousness (*I think, therefore I am*). On the other hand, the Lacanian *subject* has always a part of itself that is missing; it cannot be present to consciousness as a whole, since other agencies that compose its psyche (the id, or the superego) are not accessible.

Imaginary order is "caught up in the lure of spatial identification" and experiences a "succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image [*corps morcelé*] to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" (Lacan, "Espejo" 90; English translation qtd. in Homer 25).

That the Lacanian ego depends on an exterior reflection before materializing as a narcissistic self-image explains why Lacan considers that *alienation* is the first step towards subjectivity. His human being is alienated in the sense of being "eccentric" to itself, since it finds its foundation in an identification with an external image and then with a symbolic (linguistic) Other (Lacan, "Carta Robada" 5). In addition, for the positional, imaginary ego to be isolated as a perceptual unity it is necessary that a constitutive part of the subject fade into dispositionality, that it disappear as a no-thing, or as Sartre puts it, that it be *nihilated*.[36] Thus, the core of our being is external to ourselves and, besides, it is a mere nothingness: "[Lacan] took the unconscious not as a container, but rather as something ex-sistent – outside itself – that is connected to a subject who is a lack of being" (Jacques-Alain Miller, qtd. in Homer 21).

Lacanian Theory: the Real

We can observe here that the leftover part from which the objectal ego stands out in relief is, again, a sort of dispositional unconscious that Lacan names the *Real*. The Real is equal to the Freudian *id* (or "*Es*" in German), a primeval force that underlies our psyche – the primitive part of subject that remains *beyond* the ego. The Imaginary order stages the construction of an illusory unity out of a background field of chaotic and heterogeneous energies that must remain ignored; as it were, the ego is *cut out*

[36] Translator Hazel E. Barnes credits Sartre with the coinage of the French verb *néantir* (from *néant*, "nothing"), whereas "the English word 'nihilate' was first used by Helmut Kuhn in his *Encounter with Nothingness*." Nihilation is the process that allows consciousness to exist, because it separates the latter from the object of which it is consciousness (Barnes, "Keywords" 632-3).

from the Real. This severance is at the heart of Lacan's idea of a split subject suffering a continual misperception or *méconnaissance*: the ego (*moi*) can never attain a full knowledge of the subject (*je*) because it can only defend its deceptive consistency by suppressing part of the subject's desires. "What is excluded, remaindered, and alienated by the imaginary," Boothby explains, "is in the first place something of the subject's own being, a portion of the vital energies that animate the living organism" (148). Nevertheless, this portion will return to attack the ego's deceptively organized unity.

Although the Real is "the impossible" because it "forever outstrips everything figured in the imaginary or signified by the symbolic" (Boothby 148, 12), it can be intuited in some ways. One way to detect it is in the effects of trauma,[37] but possibly the best signal of the existence of the Real is the experience of anxiety. First, anxiety does not refer to any specific object – it is a reaction against the *lack* of an object, otherwise it would be just fear (Freud, *Inhibición* 2878). Also, both the upsurge of anxiety and the eruption of the Real provoke a breakdown of the ego's imaginary coherence (Boothby 148). This fragmentation occurs because, like in the Freudian model, the Imaginary constructs perceptual unities animated by Eros, whereas the Real is the source of the death drive or Thanatos that destroys them.[38] Lacan's Real contains

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[37] Boothby explains that Freud considered trauma as the result of "an unresolved perceptual complex that outstrips the subject's capacity for representation" (208). Interestingly enough, Blanche in *Streetcar* relates her two traumatic losses in similar perceptual terms, based on touch and vision: as Belle Reve was lost, she "saw! *Saw! Saw!*" the Dubois on their deathbeds crying out "Hold me!" (27; original italics). As regards her husband Allan, who was "clutching at [her] – but [she] wasn't holding him out," she also "saw!" and discovered his homosexuality (95-6).

[38] "Since the Death Instinct is closely connected with the destructive, aggressive drives and is conceived as unrepresentable and indispensable, it appears fit to associate it with the Real in Lacanian sense" (Hsiao 56). Hsiao differentiates between a destructive "death drive" that operates in conjunction with the life instinct or *Eros*, and Thanatos or "Death Instinct" as an equivalent for Lacan's Real and Kristeva's negativity. I will use "death drive" or "instinct" as synonyms for Thanatos when necessary, since I understand that Hsiao's terminological dichotomy is unnecessary. What Hsiao denominates "death drive" can be simply termed *aggressivity*, as it refers to the hostility to the other that is inherent in the Imaginary function (in Eros), as Kristeva mentions: "The human being is inhabited by this death drive which contrary to what is believed is not the aggression drive: in fact, aggressivity is already found in

"an irrecoverably left-over, a portion of the body's energies that fail to receive adequate registration" (Boothby 287); this is the death drive, which leads us to the limit of pleasure and life that Lacan names *jouissance*.

In brief, the concept of the Real can be better understood if we consider it a dispositional field on which the figures of consciousness are delineated, so that any disturbance or reorganization of its arrangement will disintegrate the harmony of the contours of the ego, itself an artificial object of consciousness. When Slavoj Žižek employs Lacanian theory to analyze the film *The Matrix*, we can notice that this idea of the dispositionality of the Real is at the center of his reading too. Reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's affirmation above that the unconscious is "in front of us, as articulations of our field," Žižek warns us that

> we should not forget the radical ambiguity of the Lacanian Real: it is not the ultimate referent to be covered/gentrified/domesticated by the screen of fantasy – the Real is also and primarily the screen itself as the obstacle that always – already distorts our perception of the referent, of the reality out there. … The Matrix itself is the Real that distorts our perception of reality. ("Matrix")

Although he places it in front of the object instead of as its background, Žižek still retains the Real as a conditioning field that lends a particular character to the objects it surrounds; it is always there, interfering with our perception of reality.[39]

I would like to pause briefly this psychoanalytical account to call attention to the strikingly similar terms in which Tennessee Williams wrote to Elia Kazan:

> Nobody sees anybody truly but all through the flaws of their own egos. That is the way we all see each other in life. Vanity, fear, desire, competition – all such distortions within out own egos – condition our vision of those in relation to us. (Kazan 329)

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eroticism; when I attack someone, this attack is part of Eros, of desire" ("Freudian Models"). See also Homer (24) and Thurschwell (88) for similar disclaimers.

[39] As Homer, quoting Lacan, titles a section of his book: "the Real is always in its place" (82).

It is the "flaws" in our egos, the cracks through which the force of the Real reveals itself, that condition our perception of the reality out there. Williams's presentiment of such underlying force in human experience is nowhere better acknowledged than in his defense of the gothic school:

> the true sense of dread is not a reaction to anything sensible or visible or even, strictly, materially, *knowable*. But rather it's a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about, which underlies the whole so-called thing. It is the uncommunicable [*sic*] something that we shall have to call *mystery* which is so inspiring of dread among these modern artists... ("*Reflections*" 44)

Written in 1950, this explanation antecedes Fiedler's treatise on the gothic (dated 1960) and the popularization of Lacan's theories in the English-speaking world.[40] Nonetheless, Williams's description of that in*visible*, unspeakable, and unknowable "something" in gothic narrative corresponds almost verbatim to later studies on the gothic that consider it as the attempt to signify the emergence of Lacan's impossible Real, as the next chapter will expound.

Furthermore, this intuition of the awe-inspiring Real that underlies subjectivity is not the only aspect Williams shares with Lacanian theory. As the quotation from the letter above attests to, he also manifested a distrust for the ego like that Lacan boasted about in his repeated attacks to ego psychology.[41] For example, Williams's letters to Donald Windham in the summer of 1943 show the idea of an ego or "I" that is not a stable, trustworthy entity but a temporary amalgamation whose function is to allow us to live a precarious life:

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[40] The first translation into English of Lacan's "Le stade du miroir" (1949) was published in the Marxist journal *New Left Review* in 1968.

[41] See my chapter on "Something about Him" for a more detailed account of the Lacan/ego psychology debate.

> we are makeshift arrangements. ... We are slapped together by any two bodies that happen to lust for each other. And told to live – and be good and decent and render a good account of ourselves in the world! Naturally we don't. Naturally we have very little integrity, if any at all. Naturally the innermost "I" or "You" is lost in a sea of other disintegrated elements, things that can't fit together and that make an eternal war in our natures. (*Letters* 92; 28 Jul. 1943)

Williams's "I" surges from a chaotic "sea of disintegrated elements" like the imaginary ego coagulates from the heterogeneous drives of the Real. The possibility that that "I" subduing the "eternal war" that characterizes our nature is not only remote, but also undesirable, because it would separate us from "the only really warm and comforting things in human life," as Williams puts it in another letter to Windham:

> the dreadfully conscious and willful people with the over-developed minds are peculiarly dead and away from the only really warm and comforting things in human life. Competitive groups such as Hollywood and Manhattan sets make a high degree of conscious will necessary. The unconscious that wants other things is more and more lost and thwarted and so the hearts wither up. It must be kept away from, these Lemuel Ayers and Ruth Ford with their fearful conscious egos saying, I will, I *will* all the time. (*Letters* 113-4; 3 Nov. 1943)

In the early stories that I will analyze in this dissertation, we will see the vestiges of such conception of the human being as a (literally) multi-layered subject, whose identity is just a contrivance attempting to counteract the little integrity it "naturally" has. Although the greatest influence on Williams's understanding of the self was probably exerted by Freudian psychoanalysis,[42] the Lacanian tinges in his work surface

[42] References to Williams's Freudian orientation appear, for example, in W. David Sievers's *Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama* (370-88); Tischler's *Rebellious Puritan* (247, 293) and "Romantic Textures" (160); Fedder (10-11, 124); Benjamin Nelson's "Avant-Garde Dramatists" (506-07); Savran's *Communists* (92), and Arrell (67). For more in-depth studies, see for instance Rita Di Giuseppe's analysis of the conflict between Freud's pleasure and reality principles in *Streetcar* ("Monsters: Tennessee Williams, Darwin and Freud"), and Nieves Garrido Chamorro's

once and again and will permit us relate the stories with Kristeva's theories, which draw on and expand Lacan's own.

Lacanian Theory: The Symbolic

Summing up, of Lacan's three orders, the Imaginary appears then as the realm of appearances and images – in other words, of positional objects –, and the Real as the dispositional field that permits their profiling (albeit only insecurely). The body plays a fundamental part in this distinction: the ego arises from its reflected image, and a part of its energy recedes from awareness into the Real. So desire is grounded in the body but is different from mere instinct because it cannot be completely filled out by any-*thing*: although it leads us to the formation of objects, a part of it remains dispositional or non-objectal; desire is (and must remain) unsatisfiable. Lacan's third order, the Symbolic, is the final stage in the process of subjectification, and marks the subject's abandonment of the world of images for the entrance into the realm of the linguistic signifier.[43]

Lacan uses the terms the *Law* or the *Name-of-the-Father* as near synonyms for this order of language, culture, and social relationships that the child accesses after the Oedipal stage, when its bond with the mother is severed.[44] Lacan's chief contribution to Freudian ontology is thus the paramount role he ascribes to language as the essential human feature:

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dissertation *El Miedo en la Producción Dramática de Tennessee Williams* (where, among other psychological theories, she explains the different types of fear in William's plays in psychoanalytical terms).

[43] Lacan follows here Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, which describes "the way in which the unique experience of the individual subject (sense-perception, the feeling of the here-and-now, the consciousness of some incomparable individuality) turns around into its opposite, into what is most empty and abstract, as it emerges into the universal medium of language" (Jameson 338).

[44] Despite common use in Freud and Lacan's theories, I would rather avoid the masculinization of the child and use *it*, *its*, etc. instead of their *he*, *his*, etc.

> We are born into this circuit of discourse; it marks us before our birth and will continue after our death. To be fully human we are *subjected* to this symbolic order – the order of language, of discourse; we cannot escape it, although as a structure it escapes us. As individual subjects, we can never fully grasp the social or symbolic totality that constitutes the sum of our universe, but that totality has a structuring force upon us as subjects. (Homer 44)

As we have seen above, Boothby points out the way in which language also suggests a dynamics of (dis)positionality in that such "totality" of the symbolic code, the rules of language adopted by the subject, remains dispositional. As speaking subjects, our entrance into the symbolic involves the interiorization of language as a system of whose rules we remain mostly unaware, but which determines our position within the sociosymbolic order from the very moment in which we signify ourselves with the pronoun "I" within a sentence.

Therefore, Lacan's legendary dictum that the unconscious is structured like a language seems better clarified if we consider that both systems are constructed on dispositional fields.[45] He based this thesis on Freud's study of dreams, which revealed that their unconscious workings were organized by the *primary processes of condensation and displacement*, which correspond to the linguistic tropes of *metaphor and metonymy*.[46] In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud explains that elements in a dream do not have a unitary meaning; they contain several wishes and desires that are *condensed* into one final form. For example, an intimidating figure in a dream can be a mixture of our parent, our boss, and an unfriendly old classmate. This psychological primary process of *condensation* of meaning is then akin to the linguistic trope of metaphor, where a term substitutes another on account of certain shared meanings. Once again, we can reword this process in phenomenological terms: the

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[45] In "Subversión del sujeto y dialéctica del deseo en el inconsciente freudiano," for instance, Lacan affirms that the unconscious is a chain of signifiers that bears the structure of language ("El inconsciente, a partir de Freud, es una cadena de significantes ... Una vez reconocida en el inconsciente la estructura del lenguaje ¿qué clase de sujeto podemos concebirle?" (778).

[46] It was thanks to Roman Jackobson's structural model of metonymy and metaphor that Lacan reformulated them in relation to Freud's primary processes (Homer 43).

possibility of metaphoric substitution stands for those signifiers which share a common connotative background, or dispositional field. "Metaphor generates a new experience of meaning by overlapping the associative penumbra of one term with that of another substituted for it;" for instance, in *John was a lion* the object *lion* is superimposed to the object *John*, and the similar dispositional field that traces them as *brave* bestows on them "a measure of identity" (Boothby 126). Moreover, Lacan's definition of metaphor as "the insertion of another signifier into a signifying chain, so that the signifier it supplants fall onto the rank of the signified … as a latent signifier" echoes the (dis)positional dynamics too: a pure metaphor (resulting from the mentioned above) such as *I met the lion*, exemplifies how one (positional) signifier displaces another that "falls onto" the background on which it remains dispositional, as a latent meaning ("Ernest Jones" 318[47]).

The other primary process, *displacement*, which Lacan equates with metonymy, is more easily graspable in (dis)positional terms since it coincides with the process of fetishization described above. In displacement, the attention is moved from an object to a contiguous part of the dispositional field, which then is raised to positionality. So in metonymy, for example, "businessmen usually wear suits, [and] the phrase 'the suits' can be metonyms for businessmen" (McAfee 32); the suits stand out, and the signified of "businessmen" becomes dehumanized as the men wearing the suits disappear onto the background. This is the same positional process that fetishization follows, as Anne Fleche explains:

> The fetish is both a displacement and an association. Linguistically, the fetish works metonymically. And as Laura Mulvey argues in her article on Pandora's Box, metonymy operates in this way: two things come to be identified with one another, creating both association and substitution, by virtue of a displacement. That is, metonymy is above all a *spatial* relation, carrying with it, she says, quoting Bachelard, the "dialectics of inside and outside." ("Door" 264-5)

[47] "La implantación en una cadena significante de otro significante, con lo cual aquel al que suplanta cae al rango de significado ... como significante latente."

The importance of these formulations of metaphor and metonymy is that they allow us to perceive the effect of the unconscious in language and *vice versa*, the weight of language in the construction of subjectivity. Freud had already noticed the important role that *parapraxes* or disruptions in speech, such as slips of the tongue and *faux pas*, had for the understanding of the unconscious.[48] The relation between the Real and the Symbolic is not one of mutual exclusion: the word can approach the Real in a way the image cannot, since it "serves to designate something that overflows the imaginary economy; it says, in effect, 'there is something extra here, I know not what' … something that escapes representation" (Boothby 216). Like the Real, the symbolic system is not completely governed by the subject, whose discourse strives for unity and coherence – both imaginary features – but inevitably includes "an openness to wandering, to getting lost … There is always something further to be said, for every position there is always another reply" that cannot be controlled (157). The function of language, Lacan affirms, is not to plainly inform but to evoke; its aim is the other's response, which is just an attempt at solving the greater, ungraspable question: the Other's desire ("Función y Campo" 288).

The Lacanian Other, Desire, and the *Objet a*

The role of the Other and its desire plays a fundamental part in Lacan's theories about language and subjectivity for, as his thinking developed, he abandoned his early structural approach to the subject as the effect of signifiers, and "substituted for metaphor and metonymy the operations of alienation and separation. These two operations describe the process by which the subject realizes him or herself in the Other" (Homer 71). This realization of the subject in the Other is the basis for Lacanian affirmations such as the unconscious is "the discourse of the Other" (*Seminario 5* 486), or the subject's own desire is founded on "the desire of the Other" (Homer 73). This finding itself in the Other is what makes the Lacanian subject *decentred* or *eccentric* to

[48] In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (published 1901).

itself. However, those operations of *alienation* and *separation* are realized in relation to two different shapes of that Other depending on the developmental stage of the subject – its age, so to speak.

I have mentioned above that the subject's misrecognition at the mirror stage brings about its alienation from itself. For Lacan this is the preliminary estrangement that will enable the subject to become doubly alienated once he enters the symbolic order:

> Alienation designates the process through which the subject first identifies with the signifier and is thereafter determined by the signifier. … The subject [is] doubly alienated: first, through the infant's (mis)-recognition of itself in the other during the mirror stage and, second, through the subject's accession into the symbolic and language. … The alienated subject is the subject of the signifier; it is the subject that is determined by the symbolic order and language and is constitutively split or divided. (Homer 71)

This alienation happens after the child identifies with the father in the positive phase of the Oedipal stage and adopts his language.[49] The Other in which the subject realizes itself in this process is then the patriarchal Other of Law, the Other of the Symbolic, the chain of signifiers where the subject *inserts itself* (like the metaphorical signifier) in order to attain its (self-)definition only by reference to other signifiers; hence, its inner self becomes a part of that discourse of the Other.

Yet before the Oedipal split there is already an Other in which the subject begins to realize itself by a process of separation that is prior and unrelated to language:

> Separation is linked to desire and designates the process through which the child differentiates itself from the (m)Other and is not simply a subject of language. …

[49] The Oedipus complex has two phases: the negative one when the father is the focus of aggressivity for being considered a rival for the love of the mother, and the positive one, when the child eventually identifies with the father and displaces its love object from the mother to other women (see Dervin, "Absent Fathers").

> Separation takes place in the domain of desire and requires from the subject a certain 'want to be'; a 'want to be' separate from the signifying chain. It also involves a 'want to know' of that which is outside structure, and beyond language and the Other. However, the Other in this case is not the same as the Other of alienation. … Previously we considered the Other as consisting of signifiers, but the Other of separation is first and foremost a 'lacking' Other. … What Lacan calls separation is this encounter with the lack in the Other and the 'want to be', more than merely lack. Separation involves the coincidence, or overlapping, of two lacks: the lack in the subject and the Other. The interaction between these two lacks will determine the constitution of the subject. Separation, therefore, takes place at precisely the point that the subject can formulate the question: what am I in the Other's desire? and can thus differentiate itself from the desire of the Other. (Homer 72-3)

The Other in this case corresponds to a maternal Other, or "(m)Other" (Homer 72): in the earliest developmental scenario, the child's closest bond is with the mother, who it hopes will fulfill all its needs and desires. When the child finds out that the (m)Other often directs her attention elsewhere, that is, that she herself *has a desire*, it means that the Other is as incomplete and unsatisfied, or "lacking," as the child is. Whereas the Other's desire remains unknowable, the child gets to discern that it is something different, apart from itself. The only thing the child can do is to aspire to occupy that locus of her desire; hence, the desire of the subject is the desire of the Other:

> the subject finds in the desire of the Other the equivalent to itself as subject of the unconscious. In this way the subject realizes itself in the loss that constitutes it as unconscious, by the lack that it produces in the Other. ... *Separare*, separating, ends here in *se parece*, engender oneself. ... [The subject] encounters the desire of the Other, before it can call it desire, or even imagine its object. What the subject places there is its own lack ... (Lacan, "Posición del inconsciente" 378-9[50])

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[50] "El sujeto viene a encontrar en el deseo del Otro su equivalencia a lo que él es como sujeto del inconsciente. Por esta vía el sujeto se realiza en la pérdida en la que ha surgido como inconsciente, por la carencia que produce en el Otro ... *Separare*, separar, aquí termina en *se parece*, engendrarse a sí mismo. ... [El sujeto] encuentra efectivamente el deseo del Otro, aun antes de que pueda siquiera nombrarlo deseo, mucho menos aún imaginar su objeto. Lo que va a colocar allí es su propia carencia."

In the traditional Lacanian formulation, this corresponds to the discovery of castration and to the child/subject's want to *be the phallus*.[51] Therefore, for Lacan, the maternal (m)Other of the pre-Oedipal stage occupies the place that the linguistic Other will hold in the Symbolic order; it is the gap that the (m)Other's desire opens that the later signifier will come to cover up. We should see them as functionally equivalent within the development of a subject that stays in relation to both of them, for it "is never … said to finally emerge as a stable and complete entity. It emerges only fleetingly through a continuous process of subjectification - alienation and separation" (Homer 74).

The relation of the subject to the (m)Other is thus one of separation, and the explication of the way in which that separation is equivalent to metonymy can reveal important points about Lacan's understanding of desire, the Real, and the subject's relation to both. First, we must notice that the (m)Other is directly related to the Real, the realm of drives and desire, by means of a concept that Lacan takes from Freud: *das Ding* or the Thing. In Seminar VII Lacan defines the Thing as a prehistoric Other that the subject tries to return to, a lost object that it tries to retrieve although, in reality, it *was actually never lost* (69-74).[52] Whenever we feel that there must be something missing whose recovery would make us fully happy, "we retrospectively turn nothing into something;" it is to the Thing that our desire is reaching. The Thing is "the Other who is believed to experience a level of enjoyment beyond our own experience" (Homer 90). The maternal Thing is the holder of *jouissance*, of "too much pleasure," and as such it stands closer to Thanatos than to Eros, as the role of the pleasure

[51] This *being the phallus* corresponds to the negative stage of the Oedipus explained above (i.e. killing the father and taking his place). The positive stage will turn this aspiration into *having the phallus*, that is, becoming, like the father, a possessor of the symbolic signifier.

[52] "El Otro prehistórico, inolvidable, que nadie nunca más alcanzará después. ... Das Ding, en efecto, debe ser identificada con el Wiederzufinden, la tendencia a volver a encontrar que, para Freud, funda la orientación del sujeto humano hacia el objeto. ... Asimismo, este objeto, puesto que se trata de volver a encontrarlo, lo calificamos de objeto perdido. Pero, en suma, ese objeto nunca fue perdido, aunque se trate esencialmente de volver a encontrarlo."

principle is "precisely to prevent the excess, the surplus of pleasure" (Lacan, *Seminario 7* 69-70)[53].

In other words, the Thing is the (m)Other from which the subject separates in order to set the circuit of desire in motion, it is "originally that what we call the outside-signified… thanks to which the subject keeps its distance" (Lacan, *Seminario 7* 70).[54] Homer clarifies it:

> the Thing is *no-thing* and only becomes something through the desire of the subject. It is the desire to fill the emptiness or void at the core of subjectivity and the symbolic that creates the Thing, as opposed to the loss of some original Thing creating the desire to find it. (85)

The retroactive creation of the Thing is then the primordial attempt to mask the void of subjectivity (the gap of the unconscious) that so intimidates the split subject. In the Sixties Lacan replaced the concept of the Thing for the idea of the *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire and remainder of the Real, whose description will finally reveal the role of metonymy in this process (Homer 132).

The *objet a* (or *petit a*) is an essential intermediary for the dynamics of desire; actually, it is its existence that distinguishes animal instincts from human desire, because the chaotic energy that animates the Real only becomes a "drive" when natural impulses are drawn into the orbit of the *objet a* (Boothby 293). A similar intercession was already pointed out by Hegel, with whom Lacan concurs that the subject's desire is necessarily represented under the sign of mediation. Since the genuine object of the subject's desire is itself a desire, that of the (m)Other, Hegel asserts that the subject cannot have an object constituted for its desire without any mediation (qtd. in

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[53] "Es un objeto que, literalmente, aporta demasiado placer. ... El principio del placer efectivamente tiene un modo de funcionamiento que es justamente evitar el exceso, el placer en demasía."

[54] "*Das Ding* es originalmente lo que llamaremos el fuera-de-significado. En función de ese fuera-de-significado ... el sujeto conserva su distancia." This is probably the earliest example of how, as I mentioned above, the core of our being is external to ourselves (*outside*) and, it is a mere no-thingness: such *outside* corresponds to the "signified" – it configures a dispositional field, which is the reason why it cannot be filled out by any objectal *thing*.

"Causalidad Psíquica" 171). The appearance of partial objects when the infant starts to differentiate itself from the mother allows it to bestow this desire onto them as intermediaries that consecutively embody that primordial *objet a*, which intercedes as a surrogate for the desire of (M)Other.

The process of that differentiation begins with a cut in the body of the (m)Other which originates a series of partial objects; these objects will receive the subject's libidinous investment that was formerly oriented to the (m)Other as a whole, not-lacking Thing (Boothby 272-80). The first of these objects coincide with the eroticized body organs that Freud listed during infantile sexual growth, from oral, to anal and genital:[55] the breast, the feces, and the phallus, to which Lacan will contribute two transitional, non-physical objects: voice and gaze. The bodily drives attached to those erotogenic zones must not be mistaken for biological instincts, however, for "each serves to launch a movement of desire beyond the natural … that transcends any merely biologically determined object" (293). There is always a surplus of libido that can never be gratified as an instinctual need is – that is the reservoir of desire.

Those partial objects are only imaginary materializations or *metonymies* of the fundamental locus of desire that is the *objet a*. Boothby clarifies their role for the subject's relation to the Thing as follows:

> Of key importance is the moment of the cut, originally a cut in the body of the imaginary object by which a series of partial objects (the breast, the feces, the phallus, voice, gaze, etc.) are separated from the body of the other. By means of this separation, a succession of objects are established that will mediate symbolically between the subject and the other. … The successive figurations of the *objet a* offer to the subject a means, like a series of stepping stones that both differentiate and connect, by which the desire of the Other as Thing is separated from the imaginary order and passed into the symbolic circuit. Each step in this succession provides the symbolic wherewithal by which the subject is able to represent the moment of lack that is constitutive of desire. That is to say, each incarnation of the *objet a* allows the subject, not to provide any final answer to the question of the Other's desire, the

[55] See Freud, *Three Contributions on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).

> unthinkable dimension of the imaginary other that emerges primitively as *das Ding*, but to pass that question into the unfolding of a symbolic process. (272)

Even though they still belong to the Imaginary, these figures incarnating the *objet a* – all partial, *positional* objects, in our terms – already provide a symbolic means to *represent* the lack that triggers desire, "the deficit in the subject's capacity to know the desire of the other" (Boothby 274). These parts of the body therefore "assume the status of primitive signifiers, [for they] supply the material for the first acts of signification" (170). They constitute the positional focus of an attention that wanders about the contiguous dispositional field (the Thing as *no-thing*), unable to pinpoint a definite answer as to what will satisfy the Other's (and the subject's) desire – in other words, they are *fetishes*. Thus, Boothby concludes that "desire, as the ceaseless posing of that question, [is] ... an undending metonymy" (274).

That metonymic object of desire is the contradictory *objet a*, which combines both an imaginary grounding as a bodily object and a symbolic function representing the *lack* that constitutes desire and transcends the register of the image. What the *objet a* is used to refer to, namely its referent, is something beyond the material object, it is the unknowable desire of the (m)Other that ultimately is the desire of the subject itself. Such referent is a void that, along the subject's development, can only be first swathed by an imaginary veil and then transposed into language. For Lacan, the linguistic signifier will be the preeminent holder of the place of the *objet a* as Thing, because it is able "to set forward a figure of attention without 'filling in' its content," in other words, to project "an *indeterminate positionality* [italics added], the establishment of a positional unity that remains open with respect to its content" (Boothby 218). The *objet a*, as the representative of the Real and desire, functions as a paradoxical *dispositional object* that in theory cannot be made present to awareness but at the same time has the quality of a discrete entity.

At this point, we can start raising a usually overlooked connection between Lacanian theory and its posterior reworking by Julia Kristeva. Boothby's elucidation draws attention to the importance that the body bears for signification, something Lacan had manifested in his Seminars: "what we call oral, anal phase is the way the

subject articulates its demand by the appearance in its discourse … of the signifiers formed in one or another stage of development" (*Seminario 5* 487).[56] Even if Lacan gives preference to the word, his system of signifiers appears "inflected by an imaginary center of gravity" (Boothby 291): the body, from where the earliest materializations of the *objet a* stem. This already presages Kristeva's revalorization of the maternal body within the process of symbolic signification, as we will see. Her depiction of the maternal *chora* as an ordering of drives coincides with Boothby's conclusion that in Lacan the body is situated as "the original matrix of signification, the [dispositional] ground upon which the synchrony of the most elemental signifying system will be oriented" and throughout which desire is cathexed in a succession of metonymies (Boothby 170, 274). Moreover, inspired by Lacan's process of separation/metonymy, Kristeva will also address "the non-objectality of the archaic mother, the locus of needs," in her theory of abjection ("Psychoanalysis" 317). Let us now see the main aspects of Kristeva's theory, its Freudian and Lacanian foundations, and her divergence from the latter in several fundamental questions.

Julia Kristeva

A disciple of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva was the first to introduce Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of intertextuality and carnival into Western academia, although she then earned herself a well-merited place within postmodern intellectuality thanks to her theories on semiotics, poetic language, and the psychoanalytic experience of the speaking subject. Her wide-ranging work discusses Hegel's dialectics, Marx's critique of ideology and production, Husserl's phenomenology, and principally, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. As regards the latter, she integrates, for example, Freud's account of narcissism, the primary processes and the death drive, and the primary

[56] "Lo que llamamos fase oral o fase anal es la forma en que el sujeto articula su demanda mediante la aparición – en su discurso en el sentido más amplio ... – de los significantes que se formaron en tal o cual etapa de su desarrollo y le servían para articular su demanda en fases recientes o más antiguas."

identification with the father of individual prehistory, within the experience of the Lacanian desiring, split subject.

To begin with, she adopts the three Lacanian orders constitutive of the psyche, but rearranges them in her own fashion. Her Symbolic keeps most of the features of Lacan's own: it is the realm of language and patriarchy. On the other hand, she combines the Real and Imaginary into what she denominates the *Semiotic*, which comprehends pre-Oedipal primary processes, including Lacan's mirror stage, and is the originary field for the subject and for signification.[57] In developmental terms, the experience of the Semiotic begins at the stage of the closest bond between child and mother, when the former does not in fact realize any difference or separation between them – it only feels the pressure of the drives without even realizing the existence of its (nor her) body. Instead, the space where that endless flow of heterogeneous basic pulsions (mainly oral and anal) circulates is the "semiotic *chora*" (Moi, Introduction 12).[58] The drives in the *chora* are simultaneously assimilating and destructive, so that they do not allow for any fixed identity:

> the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him. We shall call this process of charges and stases a *negativity*… (Kristeva, "Revolution" 95)

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[57] To Freud's two fundamental processes of the unconscious, displacement (metonymy) and condensation (metaphor), Kristeva adds a third one, the passage from one sign-system to another through a combination of both, which she studies in relation to language in what she calls *intertextuality*: "We examined the formation of a specific signifying system – the novel – as the result of a redistribution of several different sign-systems: carnival, courtly poetry, scholastic discourse. The term *intertextuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources', we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic – of enunciative and denotative positionality" ("Revolution" 111).

[58] *Chora* comes from the Greek word for "enclosed space, womb," used by Plato in his *Timaeus* (Moi, Introduction 12).

That *negativity* develops along a series of processes and relations that will progressively pave the way for the constitution of the subject in the Symbolic: metonymy/displacement and metaphor/condensation, orality and anality, the separation from the mother's body – the *fort-da* game that articulates the death drive through repetition.[59] All of them articulate "the semiotic network, which will afterwards be necessary in the system of language" (Kristeva, "Revolution" 96, 100-1).

This is the main difference between Kristeva's Semiotic and the Lacanian Real: unlike the latter, the Semiotic is not just a chaos of drives and desires that remains occult and impedes signification, but it is *a modality of signification* in itself. For Kristeva, "the drive activity of the body is what is rejected by, but is present in, the symbolic" (Lechte 136). Although the Semiotic belongs to the primordial stage in the development of the subject, it makes itself felt all along its existence:

> All these various process and relation, anterior to sign and syntax, have just been identified … as previous and necessary to the acquisition of language, but no identical to language. Theory can 'situate' such processes and relations diachronically within the process of the constitution of the subject precisely because *they function synchronically within the signifying process of the subject himself…* (Kristeva, "Revolution" 96; Kristeva's italics)

[59] "In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud … finds himself watching a one-and-a-half-year-old child (in reality his grandson, Ernst) playing a game which Freud calls 'fort/da' (or 'gone/there'). The child repeatedly throws away a spool of string and then brings it back to himself, yelling his baby version of 'fort' and 'da' as he does so ('fort' becomes 'o-o-oo'). Freud interprets this game as the child's re-enacting in play the painful event of his mother's periodic leaving. When the baby triumphantly brings her back ('da!') or flings her away ('fort!') he can pretend he is in control of his mother's movements, instead of her making decisions without reference to him" (Thurschwell 87). Lacan's formulation of the breast as cedable object derives not just from the pretense to control the mother's absence as an object, but from the need "to signify something otherwise ungraspable. … the *motive* behind [her comings and goings] – the question of her desire," because "the *Fort* - *Da* bears less on the mother as a mere object of perception than upon the mother as *das Ding*" (Boothby 220). This separation from the mother as Thing is what Kristevan abjection accomplishes, as we will shortly see.

The semiotic mode of signification is, however, different from a symbolic *law*: it is an *ordering* of oral and anal drives around the mother's body. It is her body that "mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*" (95). In order to distinguish between the *ordering* of these semiotic drives and the realm of symbolic signification, Kristeva defines this latter as a process of *positioning*:

> The semiotic continuum must be split if signification is to be produced. This splitting (*coupure*) of the semiotic *chora* is the *thetic* phase (from *thesis*), enabling the subject to attribute differences and thus signification to what was the ceaseless heterogeneity of the *chora*. (Moi, Introduction 13)

The thetic phase is the process by which the subject detaches itself from the semiotic *chora* and positions itself and others as objects. Borrowing the concept of the thetic from Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology (McAfee 21), Kristeva's scheme falls into line with the phenomenological-psychoanalytical design of (dis)positionality that Boothby describes. According to it, the *chora* would clearly resemble a dispositional field, as Kristeva's own account suggests: "it can never be definitely posited …, one can situate the *chora* and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form" ("Revolution" 93-4). On that surrounding topology, the thetic process *positions*, that is to say, profiles positional objects and allows for a semiotic fragment to be attributed to the object; in so doing, that semiotic fragment becomes a signifier. For example, the holophrastic "woof-woof" with which a child refers to a dog "constitutes an *attribution*, which is to say, a positing of identity or difference, …[and] it represents the nucleus of judgment or proposition" (99).

Thus, Kristeva herself summarizes the main features of her two orders or "levels:"

> By "semiotic" I mean an inherence to language, a certain disposition of the senses, but also of the drives dating back to early infancy, to echolalia, to everything pre-linguistic and which is brought up to date in poetic language, for example. This level

> which manifests itself yet once again through rhythms, alliterations or other intralinguistic phenomena is linked to the level of drives and perhaps, from there, more to the bodily and biological levels of the signifying function. With regard to this level, one should keep in mind another level that I call "symbolic", that is, the stricto sensu [*sic*] field of language in the sense of sign, feeling, synthesis and logic. ("Freudian Models")

It must be noted, however, that when the negativity of the Semiotic enters the level of language, it does not become suppressed and assimilated into the latter, but remains as a continually renewed energy. The Semiotic and the Symbolic are not one more formulation of the opposites that merge into one (again, *coincidentia oppositorum*), but they defy Hegelian synthesis:

> We must note that the dialectic between what Kristeva calls the semiotic and the symbolic is not a Hegelian one. In Hegelian dialectic, negativity, which generates negation and the negation of negation, i.e., the contradictions between these terms, always ends up being incorporated by the synthesis that emphasizes reconciliation over crisis, a unity that covers up the unstable process leading up to such a unity … Kristeva argues that since Hegel insists on positing the subject's unity and remaining at the level of consciousness ("Self-consciousness Is Desire"), Desire's basis in drives will inevitably be dismissed and forgotten in his analytical theory of desire … just as the *other* will turn out to be superseded and become part of the expanding consciousness after all … (Hsiao 60)

Conversely, the Semiotic, manifest through operations such as holophrastic utterances, gestures, laughter, or rhythmic echolalias, allows "the energy charges of the drives [to] become *part of* – not language – but the signifying process" (Lechte 136). This signifying process, produced by the Semiotic in conjunction with the Symbolic, is what Kristeva calls *signifiance*, which "encompasses the body, the material referent, and language itself" (McAfee 38). Signifiance differs from *significance* in that the latter is considered to be univocal, *the* meaning of a term or a text; signifiance, on the contrary, refers to a polyphonic text that renders a plurality of readings, produced by the reader

as much as by language itself.[60] In literary texts, signifiance is produced by the interaction of two textual levels: the *phenotext* is the level of the Symbolic, of grammar, syntax, and other linguistic phenomena; the *genotext* is the level of the Semiotic, of rhythm, rhyme, and other paralinguistic features.

The reason why the Kristevan Semiotic can manifest itself on the Symbolic is that her thetic phase, the process by which the subject separates itself from the semiotic *chora*, is not so a rigid boundary as the other classical entrance into the Symbolic, the Oedipal stage. This is another of the fundamental differences between Kristeva's and Lacan's theories. Kristeva acknowledges Lacan's mirror phase and its foundation of spatial intuition as essential steps in the thetic, as the separation of the specular image and the positing of the object pave the way for the definitive stage when this process of splitting is fully accomplished – the Oedipal phase with its threat of castration:

> The discovery of castration … detaches the subject from his dependence on the mother [the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*], and the perception of this lack … makes the phallic function a symbolic function – *the* symbolic function. This is a decisive moment fraught with consequences: the subject, finding his identity in the symbolic, separates from his fusion with the mother, *confines* his *jouissance* to the genital and transfers semiotic motility on to the symbolic order. Thus ends the formation of the thetic phase, which posits the gap between the signifier and the signified as an opening up towards every desire…(Kristeva, "Revolution" 101)

Nonetheless, although they may seem superficially similar, the functioning of Kristeva's thetic is not the same as that of Lacanian castration. For Lacan, the advent of the Oedipal phase marks the final repression of the imaginary figurations of the *objet a* and the eventual supremacy of verbal language because, after symbolic castration and "once a person has gotten a secure foothold in this realm of language, … the symbolic, not the imaginary realm, structures the subject. … The imaginary is

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[60] Roland Barthes adopted this Kristevan concept for his theory of the text and various essays on music; see Allen (83-7, 117-24).

territory lost to analysis" (McAfee 35). Also, after the Oedipal stage, the Real definitively recedes as a lack that can only emerge as a force destroying imaginary and linguistic coherence. It will be in and through language that a subject receives and maintains reality, and gives a symbolic mediation to its Real desire ("Función y Campo" 309-10).

In contrast, Kristeva approaches in a novel way that place where Lacan finds a gap, the void of the Real around which language orbits:

> But it does seem to me that the semiotic – if one wants to find correspondences with Lacanian ideas – corresponds to phenomena that for Lacan are in both the real and the imaginary. … I think that in a number of experiences with which psychoanalysis is concerned – most notably, the narcissistic structure, the experience of melancholia or of catastrophic suffering and so on – the appearance of the real is not necessarily a void. It is accompanied by a number of psychic inscriptions that are of the order of the semiotic. (Qtd. in McAfee 37)

For Kristeva, the thetic phase has a different effect on the structures of the semiotic *chora* than Lacanian castration has on the Real. Although her thetic is also "the place of the Other… the precondition for the positing of language," and comprehends the mirror stage *and* castration, it does not establish the preeminence of the Symbolic "imposed once and for all, perpetuating the well-ordered signifier and positing it as sacred and unalterable within the enclosure of the Other" ("Revolution" 102, 105). Instead, the thetic is a "a traversable boundary" that allows for the return of semiotic motility in the Symbolic:

> Only the subject, for whom the thetic is not a repression of the semiotic *chora* but instead a position either taken or undergone, can call into question the thetic so that a new disposition may be articulated. … At the same time, however, this completion of the Oedipal stage and the genitality it gives rise to *should not repress the semiotic.* (italics added; "Revolution" 104)

As a result, this unrepressed Semiotic, including traces of the Imaginary, returns to dislocate the Symbolic and constitute "the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory" (Moi, Introduction 13). Kristeva founds her Symbolic on "the imaginary realm of signification with its accompanying semiotic modes of signification," both inherent components that give all language – not just poetic language – its inexhaustible force and meaning (McAfee 40). With this formulation of a traversable thetic that permits the subject to stand in relation to the Semiotic even after the Oedipal stage, Kristeva moves away from the *phallogocentrism* with which Freud and Lacan have been charged. Instead of "submit[ing] the desire of the Mother … to the law of the Father," that is, of submitting the Semiotic to the Symbolic, her model maintains both in a constant negotiation of signifiance, and "resist[s] the assimilation of all phenomena to language" (Payne 173).

Therefore, "Kristeva parts company with Lacan" as regards two important questions that McAfee enumerates:

1. "Kristeva argues that the imaginary is not a lost territory. The psychoanalyst can find its traces. It continues to be discernible in the semiotic mode of signification. Even the real is not necessarily 'always in its place,' outside of signification."
2. It is in the maternal *chora* that "the infant begins to experience a logic that allows it eventually to learn the ways of language and culture. Even in this 'uncivilized' maternal space, the child begins to learn the language of civilization" (35-7).

These divergences show that, unlike Lacan's concern for "trac[ing] the limits of the signifiable and bring[ing] it under the auspices of the symbolic order," Kristeva's psychoanalytic model does not privilege the logic of the signifier, but instead "extend[s] the limits of the signifiable, perhaps to the extend of relativizing the role of the symbolic order" itself – her notion of the *chora* and her appreciation for Bakhtinian carnival and intertextuality are two examples of subversive modes of signification that relativize the supremacy of the Symbolic (Lechte 56).

This destabilization of the Symbolic is accompanied by a similar destabilization of the subject, whose lack of unity is, in Kristeva's formulation, regarded in a much more optimistic, liberating light than in Lacan's. "If identity is supposedly plagued by lack, an idea which Kristeva adopts uncritically from Lacan, … the fragility at the heart of identity appears to become the central positive aspect of our being." Just like the semiotic component of language offers the latter its richness and vibrancy, "the non-completion of our identity" is for Kristeva our "defining characteristic of aliveness" (West-Pavlov 105). Her subject is always dynamic, an open, interacting "subject-in-process," "a self that is always in process and hetereogeneous [*sic*] … [but] also affected by the people around us … get[ting] feedback from these others, energy returned that will shape our future actions and self-understanding" (McAfee 40-41). The Kristevan subject-in-process is a desiring subject like Lacan's and also a speaking subject that has to negotiate its interaction with the other through via the forces of its unconscious; in her own words:

> Our positing of the semiotic is obviously inseparable from a theory of the subject that takes into account the Freudian positing of the unconscious. We view the subject in language as decentring the transcendental ego, cutting through it and opening it up to a dialectic in which its syntactic and categorical understanding is merely the liminary moment of the process, which is itself always acted upon by the relation to the other dominated by the death drive and its productive reiteration of the "signifier". ("Revolution" 98)

Kristeva's Theory of Abjection

Finally, there is a third issue about which Kristeva differs from Lacan and which I will take as the core of my analysis of Williams's stories. She displaces the fundamental thesis for the constitution of the subject further back in its developmental process, before castration and even the mirror stage:

> she disagrees [with Lacan] about the point in time at which the infant begins to differentiate itself from its mother. She places this break before the mirror stage, at an earlier time, when the infant begins to expel from itself what it finds unpalatable. This is the process she calls *abjection* … (McAfee 35)

Kristeva elaborates her theory of abjection in *The Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Although I will repeatedly turn to and elaborate on its principles along the analysis of the stories, I will here place it in relation to the Freudian and Lacanian paradigms and give a general explanation of its main aspects.

Abjection takes place at the most archaic stage in the development of the subject, when it is no more than a baby. This baby finds itself in a state of total communion with the mother; in fact, it is not able to distinguish itself from her, as it does not yet have a conscience of its ego, nor even a body image of the mother or of itself. The baby is everything and everything is a part of it; it is completely satisfied or, rather, desire as such does not yet exist. This is the state of idyllic wholeness that Lacanian psychoanalysis pictures in relation to the maternal Thing: a "Golden Age of symbiosis" that we can only dream of from our actual lacking state (Kilgour 247). Our condition of desiring beings derives precisely from the desire to return to that state of completion.

However, natural growth requires that the baby starts to differentiate itself from the mother, and the first manner to do this is by splitting that wholeness and creating a certain boundary: this border will separate what *is* the baby from what is *not* the baby. Kristeva exemplifies it by describing the experience of food loathing: when the baby refuses to eat some food, by balking and vomiting it, it creates its first sense of an "I:"

> "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," ... I *expel* myself, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*. (Kristeva, *Horror* 3; Kristeva's italics)

By this abjection, the most primary sense of a body appears, articulated by what I take *in* and what I spit *out*: the distinction between inside and outside *me* creates a border from which "my body extricates itself, as being alive" and "clean and proper" (3, 101). This first boundary also involves the most primitive cut between self and other and a sense of an ego: that which I reject as *not I* did not exist previously, it was no-thing, but after I spit it outside it can become an-Other, the pre-Oedipal mother as *chora*: [61]

> Without "believing" or "desiring" any "object" whatsoever [yet], the subject is in the process of constituting himself vis-à-vis a non-object. He is in the process of separating from this non-object so as to make that non-object "one" and posit himself as "other": the mother's body is that not-yet-one that the believing and desiring subject will image as a "receptacle". (Kristeva, "Revolution" 128, note 21)

Let it be said that this primordial cut does *not yet* correspond to Lacan's figurations of *objet a* as the representative of the desire of the Other that I described above. Separation for Lacan differentiates the subject from the desire of the Other when this Other is discovered to be *lacking*; in abjection, the part of itself that the child renounces corresponds to the *whole* mother as Other, the (m)Other or Thing, what Kristeva calls "the non-objectality of the archaic mother, the locus of needs, of attraction and repulsion" ("Psychoanalysis" 317). She explains that "abjection is … preliminary to being and object," it is the "recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" and which precedes "its more or less fetishized products, the 'object of want' [*objet a*]" (*Horror* 5). Abjection is then the originator of the anxiety that the partial objects of desire will attempt to cover up or *disavow*,[62] and as such, it is also the instigator of desire. Lacan himself had intuited this in his study on weaning: the lack in the subject is not triggered by the loss of the object-breast; on the

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[61] Although Kristeva does not mention it as a direct source, Freud opens *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) with a similar description of the baby's first state as a wholeness that progressively realizes an "outside" or "*not-I*" that it detaches from itself (3019-20).

[62] Disavowal or "denegation" is "a specific mode of defence which consists in the subject's refusing to recognize the reality of a traumatic perception" (Moi, "The True-Real" 215).

contrary, he sustains that the child voluntarily *cedes* the breast to hush up the angst that it already feels:[63]

> in recasting the breast as a "cedable object," Lacan invites us to think of it as something the child yields or gives up. … The object is ceded as a way to avoid anxiety. … On the Lacanian view, anxiety predates the loss of the object. (Boothby 245-6)[64]

Anxiety, "the fear of a non-object (unnameable), is the fear of separation," the anguish facing maternal abjection (Lechte 161). As I put it above, when the subject abjects the mother it is really cutting out a part of itself, since initially they were in total communion. Abjection thus exemplifies at its best the first cut both "figured in the body of the other … [but] also a cut internal to the subject itself" that effects the repression of "the unimagable dimension of *das Ding* [the Thing] in the other correlative with a similarly unthinkable dimension in the subject, *das Es* [the id]" (Boothby 273). After the baby abjects the mother through rituals related to cleanliness, toilet training, eating habits, etc., she mother will occupy the place of the Thing "becoming, at the pre-symbolic level, the prototype of what the drives expel," that is, the inaccessible core of the subject's unconscious where all repression rests (Lechte 159).[65]

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[63] Lacan introduced his hypotheses on weaning in an early article about the family for the Encyclopedie Francaise ("La Famille," 1938). He compares weaning with the separation undergone at birth, since both entail the severance of a former unity. Instead of the word "separation" (that seems to suggest the pre-existence of two amalgamated elements), Lacan labels this process *sépartition*, an interior partition of a unity. Kristeva's abjection is a development of this Lacanian insight.

[64] This brings reminiscences of Gross's comment that "in Sebastian's leaving Violet behind on his last journey" in *Suddenly*, "we see the attempt to master the trauma of an inevitable loss by presenting it as something that was *willed*" (243).

[65] Lacan also associates the separation from the mother with her constitution as an abjected Other, in terms that remind of the gothic discourse of the *doppelganger* I will deal with in the next chapter: "*Fort! Da!* Es sin duda ya en su soledad donde el deseo de la cría de hombre se ha convertido en el deseo de otro, de un *alter ego* que le domina y cuyo objeto de deseo constituye en lo sucesivo su propia pena" ("*Fort! Da!* It is certainly in its solitude where the desire of the baby has become the desire for/of another, an

After abjection, there will be the possibility of differentiation between a nascent narcissistic subject, a (m)Other, and the intermediary objects of desire:

> It seems to be the first authentic feeling of a subject in the process of constituting itself as such, as it emerges out of its jail and goes to meet what will become, but only later, objects. Abjection of self: the first approach to a self that would otherwise be walled in. Abjection of others, of the other ("I feel like vomiting the mother"), of the analyst, of the only violent link to the world. A rape of anality, a stifled aspiration towards an other as prohibited as it is desired – abject.
>
> The outburst of abjection ... [assumes a key position] in the dynamics of the subject's constitution… (Kristeva, *Horror* 47)

The "jail" in which the subject finds itself is primary narcissism, the time when the subject invests all its drives and libido on itself since, as we have seen, there is no-thing outside of itself yet.[66] Primary narcissism is then an equivalent for the semiotic *chora*, the space where "the child orients its energy in relation to its mother – who is not yet an 'object' for the child 'subject.' There is not yet any subject–object distinction. The child experiences plenitude without differentiation" (McAfee 35). When the subject abjects the mother and *emerges out* of that jail, it suffers "the archaic narcissistic wound" that forces it to acknowledge the existence of difference and the experience of incompletion (Lechte 177).

This ordeal confers a particular nature to the *abject*, the non-object that is expulsed. On the one hand, its rejection is necessary for the constitution of the subject, because abjection inaugurates the series of theses in the *chora* that will support the symbolic function later on. As a result, the abject must remain repulsive, "repellent and repelled," or "prohibited" as Kristeva says above, so that separation can take place (Kristeva, *Horror* 6). On the other hand, the abject is also the ultimate locus of attraction and fascination, because it holds the promise of the return to that primordial

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alter ego that dominates it and whose objet of desire will constitute its own sorrow" ("Función y Campo" 307).

[66] "This time of the unnameable pre-object is the time of primary narcissism" (Lechte 177).

completion, to the supreme synthesis or *coincidentia oppositorum* of subject and object, I and other, inside and outside. Such unification with the mother in infinite fulfillment and desirelessness promises, in one word, *jouissance*:

> Jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such. One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it [*on en jouit*]. Violently and painfully. A passion. And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object *a* [in Lacan's terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift... Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. (9; Kristeva's insertions)

I must clarify here that the "Other" that Kristeva is referring to above is a Third Party, the symbolic Other that makes the abject repugnant in order to sustain itself on the set of differences that abjection launches. The Symbolic profits from maintaining the abject as the locus of jouissance while making it repulsive to prevent the subject from dissolving into it. The abjected mother, like the Thing or (m)Other, is attributed with an excess of enjoyment which the subject takes to be the portion he feels lacking in itself. The re-union with the abject, assimilating it again into what is *inside I*, could then provide us with *jouissance* for ourselves, but at the same time it would burst through our earliest border and make our-selves disappear. That is why the function of the Symbolic is to keep the abject as repellent as it is attractive, and it primarily does so by means of incest taboo:

> Incest prohibition ... cuts short the temptation to return, with abjection and jouissance, to that passivity status within the symbolic function, where the subject, fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, word and deed, would find death, along with nirvana. (63-4)

Just like Freud's incest prohibition in the primal horde was the backbone for its establishment as a social group, the universal rejection of the abjected mother,

endowed with the potential for jouissance, is what holds together Western society, Kristeva sustains.[67] It is "the feminine. ... [which] does not succeed in differentiating itself as other but threatens one's own and clean self, which is the underpinning of any organization constituted by exclusions and hierarchies" (65). This rejection can be extrapolated to other "others" or groups that are believed to possess a similar excess of enjoyment. That is the case with racist fantasies that imagine that the ethnic other wants to steal our enjoyment or has access to a "some strange *jouissance*" (Myers 105). As the best example of this, both Žižek and Kristeva choose the Jew:[68] once "the Jew becomes threatening …, in order to be protected, anti-Semitic fantasy relegates that object to the place of the ab-ject" (Kristeva, *Horror* 185). Another instance would be the conventional fantasy of sexual potency associated with black men (Homer 63). Kristeva's theory of abjection opens up here to ethical and sociological visions when she transposes the same process that affects the individual self/body onto the social self/body:

> Prohibitions and conflicts that are specific to a given subject ... will appear as isomorphic with the prohibitions and conflicts of the social group. ... They both follow the same logic, with no other goal than the survival of both group and subject. (Kristeva, *Horror* 68)

What this extrapolation of abjection into the social field also demonstrates is that it is not a one-time event in the experience of the subject-in-process. Abjection occurs originally in the semiotic *chora* but its effects continue well after the subject's entrance into the symbolic realm. Like the Lacanian Real, abjection is "a constant companion of consciousness, a longing to fall back into the maternal *chora* as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity" (McAfee 49). It "does not radically cut

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[67] Instead of placing the Oedipal myth of the "primal patricide ... at the origin of the Judaic tradition" (Lacan, "Hamlet" 42), like Freud and Lacan do, Kristeva avers that maternal abomination is the basis for the strategy of identity in monotheism (*Horror* 90 *ff.*).

[68] Žižek develops this issue in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to James Lacan through Popular Culture* (1991).

off the subject from what treatens [*sic*] it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (Kristeva, *Horror* 9). The experience of abjection can be relived in adult life too, since as long as we maintain a sense of identity or *ego*, we must remain narcissistic to some extent, and as long as there is narcissism there is the possibility of its being wounded by abjection – they are "coexistent," Kristeva affirms (9).[69]

Kristeva enumerates the different forms that abjection can take; for instance phobia, the inexplicable fear of an object not fearful in itself but which refers to a more secret feeling, the anxiety of separation (Lechte 161). The most understandable experience of abjection is food loathing: when we feel an inexplicable nausea upon touching the skin on the surface of milk, we revive the experience of the baby "vomiting the mother," as Kristeva put it above. There are three main groups in which the abject, the *something* that triggers abjection, may be classified: polluting objects, food taboos, or sins. The first ones originate in pagan societies where abjection "appears as a rite of defilement and pollution … [and] takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality)" (Kristeva, *Horror* 17). Substances such as excrement, corpses, semen, or blood (especially menstrual) belong to this category, which shows the close relationship of abjection to the body, and reminds us of the Lacanian *corps morcele* under the effects of the Real: "It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but ... gave way before the dejection of its contents" (53).

Secondly, in monotheistic religions like Judaism it is food that can be unclean or *impure* and defile the subject; that is the case with the dietary restrictions in

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[69] Initially, in "On narcissism: An introduction" (1914) Freud distinguished between the infantile stage of primary narcissism, necessary for the emergence of the ego, and the (partially pathological) occurrence of secondary narcissism in later life whenever the ego withdrew its investments from external love objects in order to re-focus on itself. He nevertheless changed this developmental model for the notion that narcissism is an on-going, constitutive structure of the ego (McAfee 36). Kristeva adopts this notion of narcissism as a permanent structure, and so does Lacan: "the narcissistic bond of the ego and its objects must give way before the emergence of a speaking subject determined by its reliance on a symbolic code, a discourse of the Other. But … the narcissistic substructure of the personality forever exerts its own gravity" (Boothby 83).

Leviticus or in the Quran. This category introduces an important aspect of abjection: orality. As abjection takes place at such an early stage in the development of the child, the primary means the latter has to effect the rejection of the mother, as well as any other exchange with the outer world, is through the mouth. Orality becomes then the mode to articulate abjection; and just like Kristeva defends abjection as a more vital constitutive process for the subject than castration, the oral stage comes to attain a more fundamental role than post-Oedipal genitality.

Finally, the *transgression* of the Law can be abject too, either in its religious variant of sins or just "any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law." In general terms, "it is not lack of cleanliness or health what causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). What does not respect *positions* – the particular nature of the abject can be understood in phenomenological terms again. "The abject continues to haunt the subject's consciousness, remaining on the periphery of awareness," McAfee describes (49). The abject, as the precedent of the *objet a*, belongs then to the peripheric dispositional field on which the subject's ego is positioned; yet it also acquires a certain figuration (as a corpse, blood, etc.). It is then a confusing dispositional object, a *something* that is not *a thing*, and which if it rises to positionality it "is alluring enough to crumble the borders of self" (50). So, Kristeva summarizes the experience of abjection thus:

> A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (Kristeva, *Horror* 2)

Since in every articulation of Kristeva's theory, whatever takes place on the subjective level has an effect on the linguistic level too, when this experience of abjection

emerges again in later life it brings with it the disrupting semiotic mode of signification that threatens the *clean and proper* use of language. She devotes the final chapters of *Powers of Horror* to the analysis of the traces of abjection in the texts of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and points at diverse stylistic resources to accomplish a "resurrection of the emotional, maternal abyss, brought up flush with language" (189 *ff.*): melodic and intonational patterns, slang and spoken language, syntactic thematization, ellipses, etc. I will not dwell on these elements of the rhetoric of abjection because they will be dealt with as we *read* the abjection implicit in Tennessee Williams's stories.

Nevertheless, it could be useful now to differentiate between several terms that I will use throughout my study and that could be confusing. For example, I will generally use the terms Real and Semiotic indistinctively given that the Kristevan term comprehends the Lacanian order, and both refer to the primitive, pre-Oedipal and pre-Imaginary stage of the subject, as the following explicatory chart shows:

<table>
<tr><td>FREUD</td><td colspan="3">Unconscious – id</td><td colspan="2">Conscious – ego</td><td>OEDIPUS</td><td>Superego</td></tr>
<tr><td>LACAN</td><td colspan="3">Real</td><td>MIRROR STAGE</td><td>Imaginary</td><td>OEDIPUS</td><td>Symbolic</td></tr>
<tr><td>KRISTEVA</td><td>Semiotic
(chora)</td><td>ABJECTIO</td><td>I / not-I</td><td>MIRROR STAGE</td><td>Semiotic
(imaginary / objects)</td><td>THETIC</td><td>Symbolic</td></tr>
</table>

Fig. 1 Psychoanalytical orders. Notice the thetic appears as a traversable boundary that initiates already in the Imaginary mirror stage but lets the Semiotic interact with the Symbolic. Abjection, on the other hand, is not traversable.

Besides, I will only rarely refer to abjection as it is experienced by the baby for the first time, the process that every subject undergoes and which is "formative of the I" (Lechte 158); that original thesis I will call *primordial abjection*. In most cases, I will

deal instead with the situation that Kristeva's last quote above depicts: an already constituted subject, more or less firmly posited in the Symbolic, suddenly encounters a something that confounds it and threatens the borders of its identity. That uncanny something or someone, which can take diverse shapes as we have seen, is *the abject*, the signifier of the (m)Other. The subject facing the abject begins then to approach *the state* or *border of abjection*, a sort of reversal of the process of primordial abjection, moving backwards towards primordial non-differentiation. The subject falls back into the gravity of the abject, which attracts it, tempts it to unite with it, and makes the subject's identity waver, blur, or become "unclean" too. This reverse process must stop short before the actual fusion takes place; otherwise, we know that – albeit accompanied by jouissance – only death can ensue. Therefore, there takes place *the moment of abjection*, the re-enactment of the primordial rejection, when the subject separates from the abject and recovers a certain sense of identity, even if this is shaken and tenuous, already aware of its fragility and artificiality.

As Kristeva herself mentions, abjection reminds us of the "emergence of uncanniness" that Freud described in 1919 in his eponymous essay "The Uncanny," although, she points out, abjection is "more violent" (Kristeva, *Horror* 5). It seems then fitting to consider the theory of abjection in relation to gothic literature, whose critical approach is in fact based on Freud's theory of the uncanny. Gothic texts are haunted by the presence of some-things that are ambiguous, both threatening and desirable, and breach the borders between dichotomies – take the un-dead vampire, for example. If the gothic reflects "the fear of nonseparation, annihilation, and the loss of identity," and recreates the confused boundaries of the oral phase and the return to a repressed past, it certainly seems to overlap with most of the aspects of the theory of abjection (Kilgour 171). Moreover, as Tennessee Williams's stories are usually grouped as part of the American Southern gothic, we can assume that the use of such theory to their study may render interesting and innovative insights. Accordingly, I will now turn to a revision of the gothic in general and its psychoanalytical underpinnings, as well as of the critical reviews on Williams's gothicism; the application of Kristevan theory to the latter will highlight the major issues I will deal with in the analysis of the stories.

4

APPROACHING HIS FICTION: TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AS SHORT STORY WRITER[70]

> There is a horror in things, a horror at heart of the meaninglessness of existence. … It seems to me that the cards are stacked against us. The only victory is how we take it.
>
> Tennessee Williams (qtd. in Kalem, "Angel" 53)

Outsiderness is the defining feature of most of the character types that populate Williams's fiction: the middle-aged woman, the still innocent youth, male or female; the handsome and usually dark man, the fugitive, the ill-fated artist – all of them are "pathological or societal outcasts and rejects" (Peden 79), or "emotional or physical cripple[s] … set off from society" (Draya 654).[71] The characterization in his stories joins up with the *Rhetoric of Outcasts* that Darryl E. Haley (1999) has studied in the plays. Williams imbues his narrative with a "concern for the Other" who is the victim of mainstream society's hostility (Wolter 228), and so molds this Other in one of its paradigmatic casts: the female Other, the sexual Other, the dark Other. Although at the time of the stories' publication reviewers like James Kelly (1955) may have considered that "compassion, or even healthy optimism, is nearly invisible in the[ir] lurid studies of perversion, madness and human decay" (114), later on the most widespread opinion within their (and the plays') criticism is that Williams's attitude towards this Other,

[70] Kristeva titles Chapter 1 in *Power of Horror* "Approaching Abjection" (1-31).

[71] These or very similar Williamsian archetypes are mentioned by Draya (653 *ff.*), Skloot (200), Vannatta (22), or Wolter (225).

whatever shape it takes, is insightful and sympathetic (Bigsby "Streetcar" 257; Kakutani; Savran, *Communists* 83; Thompson 11). For some, this was probably due to the fact that those characters' "outsiderhood" was shared by their creator as well (Robinson 31; Haley ch. 5). Hence the epithets T.E. Kalem dedicates him: "The Angel of the Odd" (*Time*, June 9, 1962), or "The Laureate of the Outcast" (*Time 121* (1), March 7, 1983).

Williams's strategies of characterization in his fiction – his concern for psychic and cultural disintegration (Van Duyvenbode 214), his penchant for the grotesque, his violent imagery, and the use of physical abnormality or caricature "to suggest the inner nature of a character" (Peden, *Short Story* 70) – have commonly placed him together with McCullers and other Southern writers such as Truman Capote and Flannery O'Connor under the label of the new "American Gothic" (Tischler, *Rebellious Puritan* 310-1), also called "Southern Gothic" (Van Duyvenbode, Bray and Palmer, *Hollywood*;[72] Fedder 15) or "Southern grotesque" (Presley 37; Gleeson-White).[73] Williams himself acknowledged his adherence to gothic aesthetics in his preface to Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1950), where he defended the need for the modern writer to expose a "sense, an intuition, of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience," a feeling that he and gothic narrators transpose into the experience of their fictional creations (Williams, "*Reflections*" 42). This gothic affinity is additionally underlined by his concern for the Other, since the "common threat" of the gothic is its "narrativization of Otherness" (Savoy, "Theory" 6). Moreover, in the American context, Leslie Fiedler's pioneering *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) has shown that "America itself is gothicism [*sic*] writ large" since its whole literary production as well as its definition of the national self relies on the haunting presence of a repressed Otherness in the shape of "gothic specters" – sexual perverts, runaway slaves, or pagan savages (Bak, "Religious Acts" 122-3).

[72] Although taking mainly Williams's films as examples, Palmer and Bray (2009) devote one chapter to a comprehensive overview of the links between Williams's writing and the trend of decadence and exoticism within the Southern Renaissance that came to be "stigmatized" as Gothic (221-239).

[73] For a discussion about "where, in the tradition of the short story, does Williams's work belong?" see Vannatta (76-82).

Thus, a study of Williams's narrative should engage with a reconsideration of the gothic elements in it, for they can be crucial to a better understanding of the representation of those outsiders or *Others*; in addition, such review will shed some light on the similitude between the gothic and Kristevan abjection.

First, it is necessary to reassess the "representational strategies of the gothic" that reveal "the underside, the Otherness, of the narratives of national self-construction" and of the individual self that faces the Other (Savoy, "Theory" 16, 18). Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy's volume *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (1998) is a valuable help in this regard since it takes into account the postmodern turn that the theory of the gothic has experienced in the last decades, actualizing the conventions of the gothic genre – or rather, of the gothic "discursive field" (Savoy, Introduction vii) – from Fiedler to the latest scholarship on popular literature and cinema.[74] To begin with, Savoy, like Fiedler, invokes Freud's concept of "The Uncanny" as the grounding for most of the gothic theory. Freud defines the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" ("Uncanny" 220). Using a now well-known etymological analysis, Freud explains how the German word for "uncanny," *unheimlich*, incorporates the term *heimlich* ("of the house, familiar") – in other words, the very thing that spooks us belongs to us, it is a part of our own unconscious. "What is *experienced* as uncanny … can be traced back without exception to something familiar that has been repressed" (247).[75] For instance, such is the case of the fear of the *doppelganger*, a typical gothic motif: although eerie, it is *our* double, and what could be more familiar to us than *us*?[76] This return of the repressed causes an ambivalent "terror not from something external,

[74] See for example Stephen Bruhm's chapter on "Stephen King's Phallus or the Postmodern Gothic" (75-96), or Maggie Kilgour's analysis of *The Silence of the Lambs* (42 *ff.*).

[75] Thruschwell offers a brief though clarifying explanation of Freud's paper on the uncanny, with the aim of exemplifying Freud's own talent as a literary critic, since he analyzes uncanniness in literary pieces by E.T.A. Hoffman and Otto Rank (117-119).

[76] Some characters in Williams's plays have been identified as *doppelganger* couples, for instance Sebastian Venable and Dr. Cukrovicz in *Suddenly* (Thompson 123), or John Buchanan and Alma Winemiller in *Summer* (Siegel 114).

alien, or unknown but – on the contrary – from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it" (Morris 302).

Savoy reformulates this psychoanalytic principle in Lacanian terms: the gothic narration of Otherness is then an attempt to signify the emergence of Lacan's Real (his equivalent for the Freudian unconscious or *id*); its strangeness reveals "a pattern of anxiety about the Symbolic and … the fragility of our usual systems of making sense of the world" (Anne Williams, qtd. in Savoy, "Theory" 8). The problematics of the gothic discourse is that, according to Lacanian theory, the Real outstrips symbolization, it is the unrepresentable, the indescribable, the inexpressible; the narration of Otherness must include an Other that remains essentially elusive (5). The means to achieve this narration, Savoy contends, is the use of the double discourse of allegory, and prosopopoeia – "the act of personifying, or *giving face* to an abstract, disembodied Other in order to return it to narrative – [which] disturbs logocentric order, the common reality of things" (10). The gothic gestures towards the unspeakable Real by turning from denotation to connotation through allegory and by giving voice to the haunting figures of the repressed by prosopopoeia.

Following Anne Williams's "model of gothic 'complexity' that tends towards allegory … [through] 'an intersection of grammar, architecture, and psychoanalysis'" (qtd. in Savoy, "Theory" 6), Savoy explains that the architectural component "supplements the impossibilities of language" by means of the tropes of the frontier or, notoriously, the haunted house, "the most persistent site, object, structural analogue, and trope of American gothic's allegorical turn" (7, 9). Poe's "House of Usher" is the paradigm of the latter, which Fiedler viewed as the perfect vehicle to express whatever is corrupt, morally wrong, or rotten in American civilization (Aguilera Linde, "O. Henry" 13).[77] The tradition of American gothic, Savoy argues:

> can be conceptualized as an attempt to invoke "the face of the tenant" – the specter of Otherness that haunts the house of national narrative – … in a double talk that

[77] Aguilera Linde mentions Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* as another classical example. For an analysis of Hawthorne's Gothicism, see Robert K. Martin's "Haunted by Jim Crow: Gothic Fictions by Hawthorne and Faulkner," in Martin and Savoy, 129-42.

> gazes in terror at what it is compelled to bring forward but cannot explain, that writes what it cannot read. ("Theory" 14).

The current critical theories *re-allegorize* this trope and use it now to denote "both the text that is inhabited by the specters of referentiality and the subject who is haunted by the repudiated Other" (14). Such is the point of Eve K. Sedgwick, who in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980) and *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), advances her model of the homosexual closet in her discussion on the psychic spatialization of the self as a premise for the gothic.[78] The subject is initially "blocked off from something" (the Other), and its "inside life and the outside life have to continue separately, becoming counterparts rather than partners [which creates] a doubleness where singleness should be" (qtd. in Savoy, "Theory" 14). Sedgwick links "gothic conventions to an 'insidious displacement of the boundaries of [the blocked-off] self'" (Jarraway 72). The gothic narrative troubles its inside/outside border by awakening the *double*, the repressed Other that threatens the stable boundaries of the subject's self, just as it menaces to tear down the walls of the haunted house: "American gothic houses … are structures whose solid actuality dissolves as they accommodate (and bring to spectacular figure) a psychic imperative – the impossibility of forgetting" the face of their uncanny tenant (Savoy, "Theory" 9).

To sum up, this "loss of a coherent self and the fracturing of a transparent, clearly referential lexicon" are the main features of the gothic, which on the one hand brings about the fragmentation of linguistic reliability, and on the other heralds an imminent violation of the ego. Thus, the gothic goes beyond the literary and can be understood as a "cultural ritual" that "registers *a trauma in the strategies of representation* as it brings forward a traumatic history toward which it gestures but can never finally refer" (11-2). The trauma that Freud and Lacan read as the manifestation of the unconscious/Real attains here its discursive representation through a gothic "poetics of the ephemeral and indistinct," signifying both a return and a loss, terrible and melancholy, that turns down yet emerges from nostalgia (10, 8).

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[78] See her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

Savoy, who upon introducing the volume announces that its intention is "to orient the gothic toward 'theory'," chooses Kristeva's abjection as the first "theory" to mention, and although his own chapter does not cite it directly, it is not difficult to detect their similar rhetoric:

> The entire history of the gothic lies behind – to cite one influential example – Julia Kristeva's understanding of the abject, that which is "radically excluded" from individual and national self-definition yet which "draws [the subject] toward the place where meaning collapses" for "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master" (2). Like psychoanalysis, like revisionist historiography, the project of the gothic turn in narrative has been to take the ego, or the story generated by the national ego, "back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away," and Kristeva's metaphor for this uncanny cultural encounter might well illuminate the gothic tendency itself: "[i]t is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (15). (Savoy, Introduction viii-ix)

His psychoanalytically-oriented examination of the theory of the gothic, summarized above, is sprinkled with ideas that surreptitiously refer us to Kristeva's formulation of the dynamics of abjection: the fall into anxiety and meaninglessness, the unreliability of an ambiguous language, the breaching of the inside/outside boundaries of a troubled self. The essential axis is Freud's notion of the uncanny, which describes the exact scenario of abjection: "a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people. I believe that these factors are partly responsible for the impression of uncanniness," Freud avers ("Uncanny" 236). During this regression, something secretly familiar escapes from the constriction of repression and threatens the ego: it is the abject; as I said above, not a strange external force but a component of our heterogeneous "I" – in a word, *uncanny*. Freud "calls this phenomenon 'the return of the repressed'; Kristeva calls it 'maternal abjection'," and lay people call it *trauma* (McAfee 49).

It is Davis R. Jarraway's chapter in *American Gothic* that explores more extensively the overlapping of gothic narrative and the Kristevan psychodynamics of

subjectivity in his study of William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932). The constant ambiguity in Faulkner and Kristeva's handling of identity allows us to detect two forms or *faces* in the subject. Joe Christmas, Faulkner's protagonist, has one psychic sphere "continually turned back upon the maternal, the sphere of loss, separation, and abjection," while "another face … looks to the future rather than the past, a side of him that *can* perceive an identity for himself" (Jarraway 62-3). Described both in black and white, misogynist and murderous, Joe is drawn towards an abyss where he expects to find a final equilibrium and discovers instead "a threat to complacent self-adequation" (65); his subjectivity is depicted in the process of formation, walking a tightrope between death and life, disavowal and negation, hell and heaven.

Various related appellatives are available to define Joe's subjectivity. Jarraway, who places "the gothic within the psychic space of 'melancholy'," shares Kristeva's conceptualization of the latter as the negation of negation, or the disavowal of loss that nostalgically and painfully rivets the subject to "the real object (Thing) of their loss" and leads it "to that state of nonmeaning associated with death" (60). Thus, Joe is a "gothic melancholiac," "the imaginary subject (ego) forming the border between the real (Mother) and the symbolic (Father)" (Sedgwick, qtd. in Jarraway 62). He is like a haunted house, for, "as a theory, melancholia resembles a ghost story, in which the ghost of the dead past actually invades the self" (Thurschwell 91). This is also the case in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, in which Williams attempts to objectify by means of Brick's "'homosexuality' … some 'inadmissible thing' … the metaphysical mystery of the so-called Gothic school of literature" (C.E. May 279-80). Accordingly, Brick Pollit has been defined by numerous critics as "melancholic (in the Freudian sense)" (Arrell 61):[79] tormented by the memories of his dead homosexual friend Skipper, Brick lives in a house haunted by the specters of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, the homosexual couple that founded the plantation. An analogous label for the melancholiac would be "depressed narcissist," a subject who for Kristeva "fails to negotiate primal loss 'on the basis of which the *erotic Thing* might become a

[79] See for example articles by Robert J. Corber, George W. Crandell ("Gaze"), Robert F. Gross ("Eros"), and Marian Price.

captivating *Object of desire*'." In other words, a subject for whom the (m)Other is still the locus of desire (Lacan's *objet a*) and no other fetish can substitute for it (Jarraway 63). As Morris put it above, the abject defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it.

In featuring this troubled ego who fails to negate the Thing, Faulkner's gothic narrative depicts the disruption of the symbolic heaven of control and obedience by a maternal hell. This "put[ting] the maternal into the paternal" is manifested in linguistic terms as a trope that "might be *possible* to emerge" in meaningful, regulated discourse (such as Savoy's allegory above), and, in terms of identity, as "a possible sign for a kind of characteriological 'polymorphism'." The revolutionary effect of this maternal intervention is a renovation of the symbolic, "deregulating egregiously paternalistic and racial attitudes entrenched in the cultural life of the hierarchically ordered South" (Jarraway 67).

The final label for Faulkner's protagonist would then be that of *subject of abjection*, standing on the border of the Real abyss that attracts and repulses it, the locus of the subject's generation and obliteration: the Semiotic. Although for a subject (or a reader) that is already integrated in the Symbolic, overcoming abjection apparently "presents to identity an equilibrium where none actually exists," Jarraway warns us that

> the mysterious darkness and horrific suspense of the gothic narrative tells us that, in a sense, we never do get past our depressive melancholy, that the reality of abjection will always exceed even out best imaginative efforts to symbolize it... and that abjection, through its eternal provocation of identificatory attainment, will always leave open for us the process of subjective construction. (65)

The fascination of the American gothic, like that of abjection, is that it "reenact[s] 'a crisis of subjectivity which is the basis of all creation, one which takes as its very precondition the possibility of survival' itself" (Kristeva, qtd. in Jarraway 66). At the same time, it prophesies the possibility of paternal renovation, showing us that "we might swerve past arresting notions of human identity [that are] 'in the service of obedience'" (71). As Joan Copjec suggests, it may be not so ludicrous to expect that

from "the contributions of detective and Gothic fiction" there blooms "a 'mutation of the symbolic order'" (qtd. in Jarraway 67), or in Kristevan terms, a semiotic *revolution in language*.

Earlier, I mentioned that Williams' intuition of the underlying dreadfulness – or *uncanniness* – in modern experience, and a concern for the Other that would correspond to the gothic narrativization of Otherness are the foundations for his adscription to Southern "gothic" (the term Rachel Van Duyvenbode and others choose) or Southern "grotesque" (as Presley puts it).[80] While some critics' use of the term *grotesque* instead of *gothic* may seem a question of capricious preference,[81] those who tackle the gothic elements in Williams's work show an especial interest in the issue of corporeality that makes quite fitting the tag of *grotesque*, with its etymological origin in the distorted body of the paintings found in the caves or *grottos* of the subterranean Tito's baths (Bakhtin, *Cultural Popular* 35). For, if the haunted house is the structural analogue for the gothic discourse, the body, the most primitive "spatialization of self," is the structural analogue for the haunted house.

In Williams's fiction there is certainly the presence of characters that are physically *abnormal*, be it deformed, animalized, or maybe mutilated – yet there also are different perspectives to approach the function of those grotesques within (gothic) narrative. Whereas on the main they have been interpreted as the eerie specters of Otherness that inhabit any gothic tale, their physical incompletion being the source of *uncanniness*, I would like to consider the possibility that the repudiated Other that haunts the subject in Williams's may not be an incomplete one but just the opposite: the representative of the complete and abjected (m)Other, the embodiment of the forces of the Semiotic. In order to do this, I will initially revise the critical assessment of the grotesque aspects of Williams's stories which, due to its emphasis on corporeality, chiefly focuses (again) on those texts where the body is most radically altered: "Desire

[80] See also James Louis Dersnah, *The Gothic World of Tennessee Williams.*

[81] "Irving Malin, for example, says his examination of grotesque works (*he prefers the term 'gothic'*) [italics added] is fundamentally a description of their surface characteristics" (Presley 37).

and the Black Masseur" and its (one could almost say) companion piece *Suddenly Last Summer*. I will also point out the hermeneutical dangers of the traditional consideration of the grotesque in Williams, underlining instead the latter's deconstructive potential that some recent reviews have revealed. The extension of the theory of the grotesque via its formulation by Bakhtin will offer us a new standpoint to embark upon the analysis of the relationship between Williams's early short stories and Kristeva's abjection.

By *traditional consideration of the grotesque* I mean the perspective, represented by Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), that considers the gothic a study of the darkest recesses of human fears and desires, portraying a demonic world of violence and alienation where the grotesque characters are hostile and inhuman (Bakhtin, *Cultura Popular* 47). The first critics to identify the gothic tones of Williams's work did so mostly from this traditional, or in Eve K. Sedgwick's terms, "commonsense" perspective, exploring the perverse and decadent with a more or less morally-tainted eye (*Between Men* 90).[82] For example, Delma E. Presley (1972) defended the moral function of distortion in Williams as Southern Grotesque writer, setting off from Flannery O'Connor's premise that "to be able to recognize a freak, you have to have conception of the whole man" (qtd. in Presley 38). Presley interprets the anomaly of the grotesque character or *freak* as a signal of the latent possibility of recovering a now lost completeness, since the fact that we can recognize them as incomplete presupposes "that there exists a norm against which the aberrations of their characters should be judged" (40). Such norm would be a whole man that reveals to us "what we have been and what we could become" thanks to the redeeming force of God's grace (in O'Connor's work) or, Presley explains, through the more human type of love that Williams and McCullers espouse (37-9).[83] In Williams, however, the redemptive potential of love is rooted in Christian thought, as we can see (though in an obverse version) in the religious parodies of his most grotesque texts, "Desire" and *Suddenly*, where the freakiest of all physical alterations, cannibalism, is

[82] See for instance Tischler (*Rebellious Puritan* 301-2), Fritscher (*Love and Death* 26).

[83] Haley reaches the same conclusion: "It is the the lack of an expansive, inclusive, enduring love that Williams's outcast characters feel; this is the incompletion that makes them outcasts" (ch. 5).

the result of a profound misconception of God. "The function of distortion in Southern grotesque is essentially moral in nature," Presley concludes, because it "set[s] forth an interpretation either of the whole man [as he once was] or of what might make him whole" – God, love, or maybe both– and encourages us to strive for the completeness we "ought to" have (40, 44).

Presley's article clearly illustrates the tricky dialectics that underlie the discourse of the gothic and the grotesque. Robert Skloot follows a similar line when he affirms: "'Freaks' is the harsh word which inspires Williams to create his most troubled characters. The word is organized society's term for the incomplete people whose presence irritates and disturbs the vulgar and insensitive 'normality'" (200). Although he never explains what he means by his quotation-enclosed "normality," Skloot, like Presley, assumes the existence of a *norm* the incomplete freak deviates from, a conception of the whole man that allows us to recognize – and be irritated by – a freak. But, should that norm really be *norm*al, there would be no need for the moralistic use of the grotesque to advocate for human perfectibility; or to put it simply, if we recognize the freak because we are normal, we are already whole, unlike the incomplete grotesque. The freak would not awaken the aspiration to be any *wholer* – only the disturbance of those who already are "insensitive[ly] normal," and the wish to assimilate its deformity into conformity and restore it to an original state of normality, against which its aberrations are judged.

Nonetheless, any ascendancy of normality as a philosophical category is anything but undisputable, as Michel Foucault has argued in his theory of the apparatus of normalization, in which he also discusses the grotesque as a category of historical-political analysis (Elden 94). In his course on *The Abnormals* (1974-5),[84] Foucault expands the reasoning he used in *Histoire de la folie* ("where the notion of madness is able to constitute what we think of as reason") and applies it to the grotesque or abnormal elements. In this way, "we know that the 'normal' is often defined by what it

[84] According to Elden, the content of this course is "the most thorough treatment we are likely to get from what would have been in the originally planned set of volumes" of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Its original thematic approach included chapters devoted, among others, to "The children's crusade" and "The perverse" that Foucault did not eventually develop (93).

is not," or in Georges Canguilhem's, Foucault's mentor, words: "the abnormal, whilst logically second, is existentially first" (qtd. in Elden 103). The definition of what is *normal* derives from the survey of what is *abnormal*, as Freud himself grudgingly acknowledged in *On Narcissism*: "Once more, in order to arrive at an understanding of what seems so simple in normal phenomena, we shall have to turn to the field of pathology with its distortions and exaggerations" (82). Williams's own standpoint as regard the aim of (his) art reflects a deconstructive focus on the analysis of what it is *not* normal in order to constitute what *is*:

> We [artists] have tried our best to indicate which are the healthy blood cells and which is the normal tissue in the world of our time, *through exposing clearly the dark spots and the viruses* [italics added] on the plates and in the blood cultures. ("POV" 120)

Thus, against Presley's tenets, freakishness or abnormality needn't be the opposite of a previous state of lost wholeness nor of a normality ontologically original; they are the very condition for our conception of wholeness and/or normality as such. In addition, Presley's view belongs to those which resort to the universal to express the darkness of human existence,[85] instead of grounding historically each representation of that Otherness that disturbs it. Examples of this latter stance are found in other more contemporary reviews of the gothic elements in Williams's stories by critics such as John S. Bak and Brian M. Peters, who do acknowledge "the cultural embeddedness of the emergence and definition of a genre" (Savoy, Introduction x). They focus on Williams's presentation of the "homophobic thematics [that] was a force in the

[85] Hurley also overlooks any homosexual issues in "Desire," and analyzes it as an example of Williams's "electrifying sense of evil, [which] by focusing on the inescapably grotesque, could … expose the ugliness which lies concealed beneath the surface of certain contemporary attitudes," namely "America's attraction to a philosophy of acceptance, of enduring any perversion of individuality so long as one may 'belong'" (55). As regards racial issues, "Williams's decision to make his masseur a Negro," Hurley explains in a footnote, is "puzzling," and he applies to it a symbolic interpretation concluding that "[t]he Negro is not a real character…[but] an unseen but unquestioned force, a powerful 'presence,' just as God, Society, Religion" (55, note 6).

development of the Gothic" (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 92), as well as on his use of a racialized discourse that connects him with Fiedler's contention that the "proper subject" of American gothic is "slavery" (qtd. in Bak, "Religious Acts" 125).[86]

Bak's 2005 analysis of *Suddenly* and "Desire" seems to engage indirectly with Presley's claims on the theological meaning of these two texts. Presley had considered that the coincidence in "Desire" of a story of grotesque horror with the celebration of the death of Jesus at Easter states that "the pain and pleasure of human violence has a theological counterpart." This "relationship between human actions and theological meaning" remains, nevertheless, "without clarification" until Williams's later play, *Suddenly* (43). Sebastian's misconception about true love (his love is abuse) and the true God (his God is "a – *cruel* one" (Williams, *Suddenly* 131)) is a problem he shares with all modern mankind, for whom his destiny sets a moral example: Sebastian's death *serves him well* for that is "what happens to one who possesses a daemonic vision of God and lives completely unto himself" (44).

Bak does agree that "religion is at the heart of gothic evil," although not as a its redemption but rather as its trigger ("Religious Acts" 133). In his view, Williams's confrontation in "Desire" and *Suddenly* is with heteronormative white Puritanism, "with the religious zealots who position themselves as the standard-bearers of desirable human behavior … The true Other here, then, is not the homosexual, nor the black, but the Christian" (131, 133).[87] The only "true human religion" is, as always in Williams, "desire, [which] as Williams readily maintains, brings us more into communion with one another than our different skin colors, sexual proclivities, or religious leanings divide us" (133, 124):

[86] Other critics have taken a Fiedlerian approach to Williams's dramatic, not narrative, work; see for example, Winchell's "Why *Streetcar* Keeps Running."

[87] In Sherwood Anderson's conception of grotesque, it would be actually those "standard-bearers," and not the deviants they condemn, who should be considered grotesque, as he puts it in "The Book of the Grotesque:" "It was the truths that made the people grotesques. … the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (*Winesburg*).

> What Williams demonstrates best here is that each Other is inextricably bound to each *other*, including the Self, be it the protagonist of the story or the creator of that protagonist. Therefore, we cannot accept a given Self/Other binary because the complexities of human desire deny a one-to-one correlation between sexuality, race, and creed. (Bak, "Religious Acts" 137)

Yet, despite Williams's being "always suspicious of what is deemed the 'norm'… and eager to dismiss its dichotomizing tendencies" (Bak, "Religious Acts" 124), Bak argues that he is incapable of escaping the gothic process of othering which Fiedler located at the heart of the American literature and self. By equating unfettered, unchristian desire with the black characters in "Desire" and *Suddenly*, Williams inadvertently diverts attention away from the homosexual as Other and highlights the specter of the *racial* Other. This Africanist presence is what Toni Morrison, reformulating Fielder in *foucauldian* terms, finds in the center of the American "process of establishing others in order to know them, to display knowledge of the other so as to ease and to order external and internal chaos," that is, so as to construct the Self (qtd. in Bak, "Religious Acts" 143). Also, the grotesque makes its appearance in those two texts by means of ubiquitous consumption tropes that clearly dichotomize between black/eater and white/eaten and establish the racial Other/body as a cannibalistic threat that will eventually and physically incorporate white society by miscegenation and sociopolitical emancipation.

A similar anxiety towards the Africanist Other is studied by Rachel Van Duyvenbode (2001) in the film *Baby Doll*,[88] where the Sicilian Silva Vacarro embodies the dark *tenant* of the Southern gothic house: "creeping through the house … transmuted into a ghostly ancestral spirit, resurrected from the bodies of dark others who were enslaved and died on the Plantation" (213). She nevertheless trusts

[88] The interculturalism here and in *Streetcar* reflects "Williams' own contradictory response to the survival of the South in the context of the fledgling Civil Rights movement of the 1950s" (Van Duyvenbode 214).

Williams's deconstructive impetus,[89] since his conflation of the foreigner and the dark male through racial signifiers (for example, blues music or the typically gothic blood mixing) exposes that the racial other is a masquerade. Moreover, so is whiteness too: "That prevailing fears of psychic or cultural disintegration should be encoded within the bodies or shadows of racial others subverts the independence and integrity of white characters. … the fantasy of whiteness relies upon its darker mirror-image to affirm meaning" (207).[90]

Williams's "overriding attraction to and repulsion" by the inevitable prospect of miscegenation seems to be equally powerful as regards the sexual Other (Van Duyvenbode 205), as Brian M. Peters (2006) has noticed. He traces the use of gothic semiotics ("significations of darkness, despair, and violence") in the stories "One Arm" (1945) and "Desire," and finds that the predominant gothic elements in those texts are the use of cloistered, dark settings (such as a prison's cell and Turkish baths), the relationship between the body and pain, and the paradigm of "attraction and repulsion [which] work together to form the kind(s) of desire that Williams represents" (pars. 2, 3-5). These motifs are intertwined within the treatment of homosexual desire, which is depicted in both stories as a clandestine and destructive, only capable of violent outlet and "frightening fulfillment" (par. 24). In "One Arm," Oliver, its protagonist, turns from a (supposedly heterosexual) boxer to a mutilated homosexual hustler and is imprisoned after killing one of his clients; he ends up being executed after a failed sexual encounter with a minister. "Like the gothic monster of the nineteenth century," Peters states about Oliver, "the queer Other … the homosexual is created, recognized, feared, hunted or ostracized, and finally destroyed" (pars. 10, 11). In "Desire," Anthony Burns finds his object of desire, his oral fetish, in a black,

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[89] Williams "simultaneously affirm[s] racial typecasting and seek[s] to break down the permanence of racial boundaries," she believes (207).

[90] Van Duyvenbode mentions several suggestions of grotesque and orality: whereas the animalistic depiction of Silva pictures him "gnaw[ing] at the remains of chicken bones and hurl[ing] the lemon rinds 'savagely away'" (212), his perverse effect on Baby Doll's desire is expressed as "deviant oral satisfaction … with reference to her insatiable thirst which cannot be satisfied by a drink from the doll's house but only by the watercooler… [which is] for colored" (210).

powerful masseur – his absolute Other – in a relationship where "sexual and racial boundaries are crossed" by "sadomasochism, cannibalism" (par. 18). The coexistence of homophobic and homoerotic discourses, as well as an unredeemable racist imagery that nevertheless endows the objectified Other with a shade of subjectivity through desire, are some evidence of the "complex meshing of opposites" that Anthony and the masseur illustrate (par. 27), and that can be condensed into one: the entwining of death and desire (or as Fiedler and Fritscher put it in their titles, *Love and Death*) that characterizes gothic literature.

To sum up, several common lines surface from these studies of the gothic echoes in Williams's fiction. First, one is struck by the paucity of attention that stories other than "Desire" and "One Arm" (and to a certain extent, "Big Black") have received.[91] Although the presence of the Other is constant in Williams's work, it seems as if they were the only examples in which the Other is narrativized in gothic terms. They probably are the most blatant, but, as Savoy affirms, "the gothic is a fluid tendency" like allegory, so that we could expect its discourse to permeate other stories ("Theory" 6). Even more so when this group of stories belongs with the rest of Williams's work in pointing up, once again, the conflictive "meshing of opposites" which functions to "allegorize how black and white relations, like any that exists between Other and Self (black/white, gay/straight, communist/capitalist, etc.), [also man/woman] reflect a certain desire for metaphysical wholeness, for completion, which is only impeded by the social need for othering" (Bak, "Religious Acts" 126). Yet, ironically, what these stories actually depict is the ultimate consecution of the *coincidentia oppositorum* that seems to be beyond reach everywhere else in Williams's canon. While in "One Arm" the narrator's epitaph for Oliver looks like an apology to

[91] Bak mentions "Big Black" as an earlier tryout for "Masseur" in which Williams's attempt to "affirm the humanity of African Americans" is equally unsuccessful, since "Big Black" features the same implicit imagery of black predatoriness ("Religious Acts" 136). Others like John M. Clum (quoted below) mention in passing the grotesque appearance of certain characters but do not pursue the gothic resemblances any further.

the reader ("death has never been much in the way of completion," 188), in the ensuing story Anthony Burns and the masseur's final union makes a whole set of opposed signifiers collapse into one another (black/white, strong/delicate, big/small, active/passive, master/slave) and attain completion ("it is perfect ... It is now completed," 211). Likewise, Sebastian Venable's final sacrifice achieves a sort of "Completion! – a sort of! – *image*!" (*Suddenly* 131). It seems that the supreme gothic horror in Williams is the attainment of that very completion his whole oeuvre is said to be moving towards.

This is related to another common trace of these gothic stories, the paradigm of attraction and repulsion that applies to miscegenation as well as to homosexual desire. As mentioned above, Jarraway correlates this paradigm with the dynamic/s of abjection (65), a process that, we know, sees the opposites flow into one another only to be immediately wrenched apart (Lechte 117). Interestingly enough, this final step is missing in "Desire" and *Suddenly*: they feature a critical blurring of boundaries that will never be undone. And, since there is no separation, what the long-awaited completion brings about is death. Repulsion is necessary to avoid self-annihilation, as Jarraway cautioned us, borrowing Kristeva's words: American gothic and abjection are fascinating for their re-enactment of "a crisis of subjectivity … which takes as its very precondition the *possibility of survival*" (italics added 66). Completion is not *only* "impeded by the *social* need for othering," as Bak said above; subjectivity (life itself?) sustains itself on the othering process – "each Other is inextricably bound to each *other*, including the Self," Bak affirms too, but this bond should not be pulled in too close. As it appears, those texts by Williams usually classified as gothic are only the extreme examples of a conflict that runs throughout his work, and that correlates with his treatment of sexual and racial issues. The question stands, then, whether and how other stories that narrativize Otherness depict the same pattern of attraction and repulsion, that is, of abjection.

Besides, we can notice that reviews of Williams's gothic stories – and of his short fiction in general – focus almost exclusively on the first of those two parties in gothic narrations: "the text that is inhabited by the specters of referentiality and [not] the subject who is haunted by the repudiated Other" (Savoy, "Theory" 14). The

presence of the haunting Other is analyzed in order to disclose the national anxieties and, more often than not, the author's own fears (e.g. Bak, "Religious Acts" 125). Yet if this Other is also said to haunt a subject *within* the text, we may wonder how Williams's gothic texts reflect the *crisis of subjectivity* (one of the main components of the gothic) *in a diegetical self*, that is, not in the author but in (an)other character(s) construed by him. Just as the textual Other is "the liminal projection of the author's view of self" Bak, "Religious Acts" 133), so is the textual Self that is *inextricably bound* to it.

The *experience* of this subject that encounters an Other whose appeal breaks through its solipsism and endangers its most intimate self – that is, the subject that undergoes abjection – is one of the focus of this study.[92] It is also this subject that most critics seem to have in mind when they identify the motivating force that drives Williams's characters as an "incompleteness" – as Bray remarks specifically about his short stories (44) –, or an appalling sense "that their lives are tainted by the sense of a void at their core" (Skloot 201). Definitely, the search for completion is the fundamental theme that permeates Williams's oeuvre. His characters are emotionally and/or physically incomplete, and struggle to transcend that feeling of lack using strategies of variable effectiveness: the erection of a protective barrier to isolate oneself inside an emotionally impregnable *shell*, the fleeting satisfaction of sexual relationships (Fritscher, Colanzi 461), the fulfilling experience of maternity (Hall), the sublimating escape of art (Skloot). The quest to overcome the anxiety that such

[92] I am following here Kristeva's use of the word *experience*: "As an opening to the other that exalts or destabilizes me, experience finds its anthropological foundations in my links with the primary object: the mother, archaic pole of needs, desires, love and repulsion" (*Intimate Revolt* 251). West-Pavlov elaborates on this notion of experience as "an openness to alterity" that can be traced back to the moment of abjection: "experience is not a given to which we are passively exposed, but the very mode of processual engagement with a world which constantly provokes the active auto-re-organization of selfhood. … Indeed, it is our situation from the beginning, the engagement with otherness which, by virtue of the way in which it always threatens to make us other (to the point of the fear of extinction) has accompanied us from the very beginnings of our existence" (95-6). In the subject of *experience* we find a compromise "between the myth of the bourgeois sovereign subject and the abstraction of the text as process without a subject" (103).

nothingness provokes has inspired appraisals of the existentialist tinges in Williams's work.[93] Yet Williams himself acknowledged that his debt to existentialism was due to its common link with the American gothic ("*Reflections*" 42). It is through the depiction of that incomplete character, that subject of abjection, that Williams's stories call for a reconsideration of identity and the self from a postmodern perspective.

Since, reversing Bak's aphorism, each Self is inextricably bound to each Other, the other focus of this study will almost inevitably be that Other. However, contrary to Fedder's pronouncement that "'the freaks of the cosmic circus' are the *protagonists* [italics added] of Williams' short fiction" (26), it seems to me that the *freak* or Other in the stories is not the protagonist, if we understand as such the character whose point of view the narration adopts. Williams might not have such an "uncanny ability to get under the skin of abnormal people" in his stories (Ramaswamy 273), since the abnormal, *othered* characters actually remain obscure to narrative omniscience, while it is another character, the incomplete subject I have mentioned above, who opens up to the reader about its thoughts, impressions, and bodily reactions in the confrontation with the Other. This Other that society gets rid of, the grotesque oddball who does not fit into normality, does not suffer a certain incompleteness but instead shows an unusual *excess*. There is an extra *something* in it that is undoubtedly freakish but that is difficult to figure out or even to speak about for the subject that enters in contact with it. To put it plainly, *the freak does seem whole*, be it metaphorically or at least in the eyes of the beholding subject, who turns it into a fetish. Williams's stories take to the extreme the ontological pre-eminence of the abnormal Other and (re)present it as the embodiment of a completion that is, in the author's view, as satisfying as it is destructive.

The freakish Other makes the subject realize the lack, the nothingness, that founds its-self in contrast to the apparent wholeness the former suggests. Alluring yet repulsive, the Other in Williams's stories offers the very possibility of completion that the return to the maternal *chora* represents: a re-union into a wholeness that promises

[93] See Colanzi's "Caged Birds: Bad Faith in Tennessee Williams's Drama," and John S. Bak "'sneakin' and spyin' from Broadway to the Beltway: Cold War Masculinity, Brick, and Homosexual Existentialism."

fulfilment yet at the expense of losing one's identity into womb-like plenitude; therefore, the Other and the abject overlap. On the one hand, the abject itself is the ambiguous, the composite that embodies an integration of opposites – external and internal, male and female, body and spirit, black and white. On the other, the possibility of its re-integration into the self signifies the collapse of the very condition for the latter's emergence, and it is in this sense that Williams envisions the merging with the abject as a non-desirable outcome, since that means the destruction of *both* self and Other, the consumption of Otherness into Self in a colonialist attempt at the erasure of difference that is, at the same time, a suicide in disguise.[94]

Also, this gothic crisis of subjectivity was described by Sedgwick as an "insidious displacement of the boundaries of self," a self she additionally defines as *permeable* (qtd. in Jarraway 72). From a Lacanian perspective, such disarticulation of a spatialized psyche correlates with a similar experience of fragmentation of the body (like a reverse mirror stage, as it were), and so the consequences of this crisis on the body are the same as those on the gothic house, "whose solid actuality dissolves" (Savoy, "Theory" 9). As Savran explained above about *Cat*, an insecurity of the subject position involves a parallel instability of the body.[95] In the stories, there can hardly be any other displacement of the boundaries of the body as radical as the cannibalization in "Desire," or as obvious as the mutilation in "One Arm." We have seen that Williams makes use of such grotesqueness to mark deviancy on the body of his protagonists, as John M. Clum (1989), dealing with homophobic discourse in the story "Hard Candy," mentions: "the physical grotesqueness and disease of the subject … implies a connection between disease/ugliness and homosexual desire" ("Something Cloudy"

[94] On the colonialist implications of the Uncanny see Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.

[95] The plays are crowded with examples of characters that correspond to the gothic metaphor of incompletion by physical disfigurement,[95] from Laura's subtle cripplehood in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), to the masterectomized Trinket in *The Mutilated* (1965), and the hysterectomized Heavenly in *Sweet Bird*. The difference with the stories is that the body fragmentation in the latter is not a pre-existent condition, but comes about during the story; in that sense, they stand closer to the offstage final mutilations of Chance Wayne in t *Sweet Bird* and Valentine Xavier in *Orpheus*.

167). Later, Clum (1997) adds mutilation to the "sign[s] of a potential gay reading of the straight body" ("Sacrificial Stud" 139).

Yet, as Sarah Gleeson-White (2001) has shown in the case of Carson McCullers, reading the grotesque from a different angle can endow physical *freakishness* with a revolutionary tinge of "promise and transformation" (109). Gleeson adopts Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptualization of the grotesque body as a body always in movement and change, a body of excess whose boundaries are constantly displaced and traversed inwards and outwards in an fluid intercourse between two bodies and/or between the body and the world (Bakhtin, *Cultura Popular* 285). Bakhtin states that this grotesque or *carnivalesque* body breaks with the classical canon of the perfectly completed and delimited body, sealed and observed from the exterior by "decent" official and literary discourses that circumvent any mentions to its intimate functioning or deficiencies (287-8). Instead, it shows a mutation of some things/bodies (human, vegetal, animal) into others, and signifies "the eternal imperfection of existence" (35, 52). Hence "the invigorating aspect of the Bakhtinian grotesque" that Gleeson-White applauds: "it is transgressive because it challenges normative forms of representation and behavior; it disturbs because *it loves the abject* [italics added] and will not rest; it is always in a state of becoming. The carnivalesque grotesque, then, is a strategy of resistance," she avows (110), "transgressive" and "normative" being broader equivalents for Clum's *gay* reading of the *straight* body.

It seems to me then that the Bakhtinian reformulation of a transgressive grotesque may be adequate to complement a crisis of subjectivity that resists obedient notions of human identity. Just as the grotesque body defies the complete, normative body, the representation of subjectivity in the discourses of gothicism and abjection defies the complete, Cartesian self. In fact, the same acts of the grotesque body that Bakthin situates in defiance of the classical body are those which jeopardize the integrity of the self. These "acts of the bodily drama," as Bakhtin calls them, are those which overflow the limits of the body: eating, drinking, and all types of physical excretions; intercourse, pregnancy and birth; aging, disease, and death; dismemberment and the absorption of one body by another (*Cultura Popular* 286). More succintly, Caroline M. Counihan enumerates "the acts of eating, copulation, or birth – which

cross the physical barriers of the body –" as the "terrifying threats to the psychological integrity of the self" (*Anthropology* 73). In addition, one of the fundamental features of the grotesque body image is the tendency to exhibit *two bodies in one*, picturing at times bicorporal or androgynous images – the only such image that has come down to us within the classical canon being the breast-feeding mother and the child (Bakhtin, *Cultura Popular* 30, 290-1).

It should be noted that, like the physical two-in-oneness of maternity, both corporeal excess and permeability of the body have been traditionally associated with women's bodies,[96] as Luce Irigaray has theorized in her "metaphysics of fluidity" (Weiss 79 *ff.*). Nevertheless, as regards Williamsian bodies that gender divide seems destabilized too. For example, Gross concurs with Irigaray and points out the liquid imagery and "porousness" that characterize Catharine and her speech in *Suddenly*, but claims as well that Sebastian's body is similarly permeable, "rather than … a sovereign body that is intrigued but frightened by the prospect of losing unity and control" ("Sublimity" 236, 247). Savran, on the other hand, draws a distinction between Arthur Miller's women, who have "a dangerous female body constantly in danger of overflowing its corporeal limits," and Williams's women, whose body is "a collection of dismembered fragments, constantly in danger of disintegrating," although, as we know, he does agree that "male bodies … are as fragmented as female bodies" (*Communists* 108). Furthermore, the Cold War discourse of containment put male and female bodies on the same level as members of one "American social body" that stood in "fear of infection, of the infiltration of a foreign pollutant," a rhetoric of disease that was already budding in the pre-war decade (Eburne 61).[97] Be it by fragmentation, infiltration, or leakage, Williams's bodies seem to crack open "the containment inherent in the aesthetics of the classic body" and in the constitution of the American self (Gleeson-White 114).

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[96] See for example Counihan's chapter on "Food, Sex and Reproduction" (*Anthropology* 61-75), or M. L. Price's *Consuming Passions. The Uses of Cannibalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (69).

[97] See for instance J. Edgar Hoover's 1938 speech "Combating Lawlessness: America's Most Destructive Disease" (*Vital Speeches* 15 Feb. 1938: 269-72; qtd. in Eburne 63).

Even though it centers on the actual performances of actors and actresses in Williams's Broadway productions, I would like to mention John Gronbeck-Tedesco's 1995 paper on "Ambiguity and Performance" in Williams's plays, as it is especially suggestive of the *type* and *function* of bodily grotesqueness we are considering. Unlike Gross and Savran, who pick a *gay male body* for their case (even if only reportedly so, like Brick's body for Savran), Gronbeck-Tedesco recognizes the grotesque also in the performance of typically heterosexual male bodies such as Stanley's in *Streetcar* or Chance Wayne's in *Sweet Bird.* He attributes the ambiguous appraisal of certain characters in Williams's plays to an incongruity between their physical behaviors and their social roles, and to an "excess of characterization" (738). The bodies of Marlon Brando, Vivien Leigh, or Paul Newman (among others) appear in contorted, asymmetrical, and exaggerated postures that bear a close resemblance to Mannerism, the artistic style that appeared at the time of the Protestant Reformation as a representation of the shattering of the formerly unified spiritual authority of the Catholic Church (737). Like Mannerism, the incommensurate physical style of acting in *Streetcar*, *The Rose Tattoo*, or *Sweet Bird* "distorts the body so that it cannot be read successfully by recourse to ordinary social norms ... [it] turn[s] the human figure into a trope ... a site of complexity and interpretive uncertainty;" in other words, "the body breaks out of the prevailing semiotic system that surrounds it" (743-4). The consequence of this acting style is one that could easily be put side by side with that of gothic narratives:

> There was … '*something else*' [italics added] which was signaled by the multiple organization of the characters' bodies. … The excess of meaning in the acting makes it always appear that there is something more to the story that remains *unspoken and unspeakable* [italics added], something to which the text can only gesture with its silences and to which the actors can only allude with their bodies. (739, 748)

Therefore, reading the grotesque bodies in Williams's stories is a basic step for understanding the ways by which the unspeakable, the Lacanian Real or Kristevan Semiotic, makes itself felt. The displacement, disfigurement, or breaching of the body

limits reveal a crisis of subjectivity signified by *acts of the bodily drama* which range from the most violent dismemberment to subtler references to the body's capacity for intake and outlet, that is, its permeability. Although for most critics sexual acts are the bodily manifestation that acquires the greatest significance,[98] there are other corporal processes and body-related issues that spread through Williams's oeuvre and that have drawn lesser critical attention. "Throughout his plays there is a continuous fascination with the intricacies of the bodily processes" that Marion Magid calls "the mysteries of the nursery and the bathroom" (39). She locates this predilection, for example, in his use of pregnancy (as Hall has noticed too), his numerous medical accounts of illnesses such as Big Daddy's spastic colon in *Cat in a Hot Tin Roof* and Heavenly's hysterectomy in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and also in unseemly allusions to bathroom behavior like Stanley's coarse complaints whenever his bathroom is busy (*Streetcar* 31, 102) or those in *Iguana*, where Shannon urinates on the excursionist ladies' luggage and tells the story of the destitute that ate human offal in a nameless tropical country (*Iguana* 398, 422). Besides, Williams's innumerable references to food and drink, as reported by W. Kenneth Holditch, suggest that the body's permeability can be signified by a pervasive seme of orality, and demonstrate that Williams's interest in the body is not limited to the sexual function,[99] but comprehends a wider range of bodily functions – digestive, excretory, reproductive – that need to be taken into account when considering the subject's body. For this permeability is closely related to the process of abjection: "the abject permeates me, I become abject," Kristeva declares, "it is [a] flow that is impure" (*Horror* 11; 102). Williams' concern for those bodily acts may help us discover, as Gleeson-White put it above, a *love for the abject* and the author's predisposition towards a more fluid model of body and self.

Finally, since the fragmentation of the body and the fracturing of the self/ego is accompanied by a "fragmentation of linguistic accountability" (Savoy, "Theory" 11),

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[98] For instance, Bauer-Briski affirms: "Williams primarily deals with the effects the [sexual] act has on the psyche and the actions of his protagonists" (13). The debate about what types of physical acts critics consider to be *sexual* is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study.

[99] Which, incidentally, he also defined in liquid terms: "Sexuality is an emanation, as much in the human being as the animal" (*Memoirs* 53).

it is also necessary to turn to a more linguistic textual analysis in order to perceive the trauma in the strategies of representation and the narrative practices through which that *something else* is signified in Williams's stories. Williams's narrative technique, unfortunately, has received scarce critical consideration, as Jürgen C. Wolter (1998) laments in his essay on "Tennessee Williams's Fiction" (220-31). The major critical approaches to his narrative have usually identified common themes and characters, and set them in relation to his drama, paying special attention to the stories that originated subsequent plays or those with autobiographical content. Some critics such as Roger Boxill and Ren Draya have noted the symbolic quality of his fiction (Wolter, "Fiction" 226) – with "Desire" once more as the main example of a persistent utilization of metaphors that can transform some stories in complex allegories, as is the case too with "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" (Savran, *Communists* 78) and "Three Players of a Summer Game" (C. E. May 285 *ff*.). However,

> critics still have not really fathomed Williams's concept of writing … because they have not taken his fiction seriously enough. … Many of Williams's fictions are unconventional not only in their themes, but also in their narrative technique. In some cases, his experiments with the intrusive narrator and the first-person narrative are remarkable, for example, when the narrator is used as a persona, a mask in the sense of ancient drama. (Wolter, "Fiction" 228)

Wolter gives credit to two critics who do take Williams's fiction seriously and explore his unconventional narrative techniques: Dennis Vannatta and David Savran. Throughout Vannatta's book-length study of Williams's fiction, there are numerous comments on the allegorical overtones of the stories (22; on "The Angel in the Alcove," 33; on "The Mattress by the Tomato Patch," 71), as well as on issues such as point of view, narrative voice, and dialogue. The use of a distanced narrator is "a characteristic of, though not universal in, Williams's short fiction" (32): there is on the one hand "the mythically detached, though ultimately sympathetic, voice in 'The Mysteries of the Joy Rio,' 'The Malediction,' 'One Arm';" on the other, "the flip, condescending, ironic, but finally moving voice of 'Two on a Party'." Also, in the

autobiographical stories "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" and "The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin," we can notice "the elegiac nostalgia infusing Tom's voice" (63). Vannatta's usual assumption is that "the *narrator* speaks for Williams" (59; his italics). So as the author grew old, his tone became both more ironic and more intrusive, resulting at times, like in "Hard Candy," in "awkward prose" (70).

The stories written during Williams's long period of "Decline" (1953-83) show a different style based on the slapstick, a grotesque black humor, and verbal wit, and although such comic touch may be occasionally entertaining, Vannatta considers it "shallow and more irritating than engaging," or as in the case of the dialogue in "Sabbatha and Solitude," "sophomorically scatological" (68-9; 73). Then again, he acknowledges Williams's avant-garde impulse in situating the narrator in "Resemblance," his *alter-ego* Tom, in a position of self-awareness and "awareness of the process of writing [that] approaches the self-referential intensity of the phenomenon – associated with though not isolated to postmodernism – called metafiction" (57). The function of Tom's metafictive passages is to momentarily divert the narration from the "morbid obsession" with the other protagonist of the story, his (Williams's) sister Rose; thus, those "organic… healthy distractions" represent the textual equivalent to Williams's vital strategy of "distanc[ing] himself from her, avoid[ing] her trap" (58). Unconsciously, Vannatta reveals a narrative strategy, metafiction, that may be likely to realize the *abjection* of Williams's own Other.

Savran's insightful reading of the detached narrator in "Hard Candy" (1953) disagrees with Vannatta's altogether. Although the protagonist of the story, old Mr. Krupper, who goes every day to a third-rate cinema to cruise young men, could not be described in grosser terms ("unattractive, sick, detested … dangerous, sad"), two narrative strategies undercut the (homophobic) power of that list: one is precisely the wry tone of the narrator, and the other is a metanarrative intrusion again. The narrator interrupts the action to warn the reader that there is "a certain mystery in the life of Mr. Krupper … too coarse to be dealt with too directly," and that he is approaching it "in the only way possible without a head-on violence that would disgust and destroy and which would actually falsify the story" (337). Savran interprets this appeal to the reader as quaintly wicked petition for a parodic reading of the story, for the recognition

of the different levels of the narration concerning Mr. Krupper's final act – a visit to the theatre where he meets a youth, the lights (and the narration) fade out, and upon their return Mr. Krupper's dead body is discovered sustained on two chairs, kneeling on the floor in an (ironic) "attitude of prayer" (345).

While the characters in the text make naive interpretations of the old man's sudden death, "for the perspicacious reader … the old man's passing acquires a rather different meaning, becoming perhaps … an almost mystical love-death; or perhaps an illustration of a desubjectification, the dissolving away … of an individual subjectivity" (Savran, *Communists* 113-4). The occurrence in "Hard Candy" of this "polyvocality" – Savran's term for what clearly resembles Bakthin's *discoursive polyphony* (Lodge 21)[100] – reveals that the actual *mystery* which the narration promises to disclose is in fact "the near impossibility of reading the secret," the overlapping of codes of reading and writing that are the result of the censorious culture's policing of sexuality and its representations (Savran, *Communists* 114). Similarly, in plays such as *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) and in the novel *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975) (which belong to the author's period of "Decline"), Williams makes use of incomplete, fragmented sentences to evidence the split in the subject and the impossibility to name desire, a technique that for Savran has "a profoundly revolutionary potential" (135, 166). In earlier stories such as "Big Black," "Desire", and "Rubio and Morena" (1948), he had already done so by means of "physical brutality [a]s the sign of the impossibility of discourse to contain and express desire," especially if it was homosexual (126).

Based on Barthesian and Foucauldian notions, Savran examines the implicit revolution in Williams's work by analyzing "how *textual pleasure* is coupled with a

[100] Savran's analysis debunks Wolter's rather surprising affirmation that Williams as a fiction writer "fix(ate)[s] unresolved personal dilemmas in a linear, *monovocal* text on silent paper and then dissolve[s] this text into *polyvocal* events, into voices and roles *for acting*" (italics added; 228). That Williams's short stories do not usually contain lengthy dialogues does not impede their being *dialogical* in the Bakthinian sense, which "includes, but is not restricted to, the quoted verbal speech of characters … [because it] also includes the relationship between the characters' discourses and the author's discourse," as Savran shows (Lodge 22).

process of *desubjectification*, an unbinding and deconstruction of the sovereign subject" by means of "a profligacy of words that disrupts traditional notions of narrative continuity and dramatic form" and "a profligacy of bodies that disrupts postwar moral and sexual norms" (145). His exemplary *texts of pleasure* are *Moise*, whose "ability as a text of bliss and desubjectification [is] to lead the reader or spectator simultaneously to recognize the oppressiveness of the present historical moment and to think an unthinkable alternative" (Savran, *Communists* 168), and the much earlier short story "Sand" (1936):

> In its figuration of an ecstatic and "timeless" moment … atomiz[ing] language, colors, bodies, words, an identity (a name) like grains of sand or like the silent, dismembering stage directions of *Cat* … ["Sand"] is a quintessential Barthesian text of pleasure, "reveal[ing] itself in the form of a body, split into fetish object, into erotic sites" (p. 56). (158)[101]

The profligacy of words and bodies in the text of pleasure realize what Savran, following Susan Sontag, calls a *camp*, "homosexual" mode of interpellation, which transcends plot and narrative continuity and draws the reader or spectator's attention "to a detail, an image, a metaphor, or a charged moment of silence … that suspend time, produce a radically discontinuous narrative and simultaneously articulate inchoate and unspeakable desires". Every Williams's work contains such a mode of address overlapping a *straight*, "heterosexual" one based on "the patient unfolding of a conventionally linear … narrative that articulates relatively orthodox and satisfiable longings" (159). This double writing encourages a double, *camp* reading too, that depends upon the reader's recognition of "problems of coding and language, … innuendo and gossip; ... elaborate substitutions and delight in the capriciousness of spoken and performative languages … transpos[ing] genders, producing transvestite subjects based on its recognition that all gender is masquerade" (118).

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[101] Savran is quoting Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (trans. Richard Miller; New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

Hence, Vannatta and Savran's analyses answer to a certain extent Savoy's question: "What is … the discursive materialization of such [gothic] 'hidden forces' in narrative? Can language ever 'lay bare' the Other?" ("Theory" 10). They enumerate a number of narrative strategies that attest to the fragmentation of linguistic reliability and the disturbance of the logocentric order that Williams's fiction accomplishes: the precedence of connotation over denotation by means of allegory; a discontinuous narration that "delights" in spoken language, with fragmented sentences, silences, and metanarrative intrusions; a multilayered polyphonic discourse that trusts the reader's ability to read against the grain and experience the pleasure (or *jouissance*) that the deepest level evokes. All these seem in effect to trace "the fracturing of a transparent, clearly referential lexicon" that attempts to lay bare the Other (Savoy, "Theory" 12), that is, the traumatic effects on language of the rise of the unspeakable – be it called the impossible, desire, the Lacanian Real, or the Kristevan Semiotic.

Therefore, to further my analysis, I will fall back on Kristeva's theory again, as it registers the presence of the disturbing though indispensable semiotic components of language on a level she calls *genotext* – the drive forces that underlie the *phenotext*, the narration of events as it presents itself linguistically to the reader. Recognizing the genotext is like reading the *camp* in the text, becoming aware of *something else* that is not reducible to the language system:

> Designating the genotext in a text requires pointing out the transfers of drive energy that be detected in phonematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm), in the way semantic and categorical fields are set out in syntactic and logical features, or in the economy of mimesis (fantasy, the deferment of denotation, narrative, etc.) … The genotext is thus the only transfer of drive energies that organizes a space in which the subject is not yet a split unity that will become blurred, giving rise to the symbolic. Instead, the space it organizes is one in which the subject will be *generated* as such by a process of facilitations and marks within the constraints of the biological and social structure. (Kristeva, "Revolution" 120-1)

The genotext refers us back to the "space in which the subject is not yet a split unity," that is, to the *maternal chora*, thus "put[ting] the maternal into the paternal" – Jarraway's phrase above (67). Also, the *chora* is the space that the subject of abjection approaches in its encounter with the Other; so the scene: as the subject experiences abjection, the body fragments, and language discloses its semiotic undercurrent.

The intertwining of these lines of research throughout Williams's earliest stories will firmly establish them too as affiliate of the gothic school "conceptualized as a cultural ritual of inscribing the loss of coherent ego formation, the negation of national imaginary [bodies], and the fragmentation of linguistic accountability" (Savoy, "Theory" 11). This ritual reveals the anxiety of society before its Others, and the anxiety of the subject before its (m)Other; in both cases, it calls for a reconsideration of the relationship I/Other that commences in a reconsideration of one's self. I will explore this ritual in Williams's texts in order to find out whether, like the gothic, Williams uses his short fiction to "swerve past arresting notions of human identity [that are] 'in the service of obedience'," such as sexual and racial pigeonholes (Jarraway 71).

5

THE ANDROGYNE: A *REAL* EXISTENCE

In the narrativization of Otherness that Williams's gothic texts realize, two strains have been acknowledged: homophobic thematics and racialized discourse. The racial Other is usually articulated according to the Africanist presence that Fiedler and Morrison place at the core of American national self-construction.[102] Yet the shape that the haunting Other takes in the discourse of sex/gender is not always a strictly homosexual one: sometimes the subject faces an uncanny figure that disturbs the categories of gender altogether. For, in the scenery of the uncanny and abjection, when the subject regresses to a time when the ego has not yet separated itself from the (m)Other, sexual dichotomies make no sense (as they only become known after the Oedipus stage). Then, as regards the sexual Other there is a figure that recurs in Williams's stories and that can satisfy the problematics that the representational strategies of the gothic confront: to signify the emergence of Lacan's Real by including an Other that they, nevertheless, cannot incorporate (Savoy, "Theory" 5). This is the figure of the androgyne, the archetype of the formula of the *coincidentia oppositorum* and the origin

[102] Kolin has also taken into consideration the Hispanic presence in Williams's plays (from *Not about Nightingales* (1938) to *Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975)) as another type of racial – or rather, ethnic – Other. Hispanics are for Williams "quintessential outsiders whose sexuality and violence are signifiers of Otherness. Through their elemental humanity … [they] embody the poetry and primitivism he sought in his life and work … [and] also helped Williams to problematize the darker, more oppressive resistance to his ideas about power, sexuality, and art" ("Compañero" 36).

of mythical discourses (Elíade 120).[103] The androgyne can reveal its potential as an agent in the process of subjective (de)construction that gothic narrative displays, because

> the androgynous fantasy is a narcissistic "caress" in which the subject annihilates itself. In this double movement of pleasure and destruction, the fantasy allies itself with the "death drive," the regressive tendency towards the restoration of a less differentiated, less organized, ultimately inorganic state. The androgyne [is] at once immortal and annihilating… (Pacteau 82)

The restoration of an undifferentiated state, the annihilation of the subject, pleasure and death – all these situate the androgyne at the intersection between the promise of mythical completion and the crisis of subjectivity that the abject Other leads to.

However, the word "androgyne" is possibly the paradigmatic example of the "slippery signifier" that engages poststructuralist cultural studies (Lewis 161). The figure of the androgyne has been, and still is, a polyvalent symbol that can be used to represent the ideal of wholeness, the epitome of sexual perversion, or the extreme of narcissism. As Tracy Hargreaves has affirmed, "the meaning of androgyny depends on its function in a given discourse" (3). Therefore, it seems to me that, whereas the idea of the dark Other as an abject can be more easily integrated into the psychoanalytical version of gothicism I have explained previously, it may be necessary to summarize here the heterogeneous meanings of the androgyne before analyzing it as a sexual Other/abject. Its consideration in relation to the Lacanian and Kristevan models will reveal how the androgyne functions as an *objet a* that appears to cover the lack after abjection. Actually, it would be the first one of them, the most primitive signifier of the loss of the (m)Other. Thus, it can considered an appropriate signifier of the gothic Real that cannot be incorporated but that can be included within semiotic *signifiance*.

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[103] Furthermore, it is through this myth that the word emerges, as Jean Libis concludes: "nada como el concepto del Andrógino puede explicar por qué hablamos" ("Nothing like the concept of the Androgyne can explain why we speak," my translation) (249).

The primary appearance of the androgyne in Western tradition is Aristophanes's discourse in Plato's *Symposium*, a secular variant of the multiple religious myths that narrate the fall from an original state of grace. Aristophanes's creation myth describes how in the beginning human beings were whole, rounded creatures of three different sexes according to the combination of two halves. There were those composed of two male parts, those made up of two female parts, and a third sex that joined a male and a female part, the andro-gynes. Since the power and autonomy of such beings were an obvious threat for the gods, these, led by Zeus, decided to split them apart into halves so that they would be doomed to spend the rest of their existence looking for their other half. Thus, the objective of love is to lead those two half-people to achieve the blending into only one complete being, and so heal the seminal wound of our wretched human nature (Plato 576); the side-effect of this union, by the way, is procreation. Therefore, the androgyne could be considered, on the one hand, the nostalgic symbol of a quasi-divine state of wholeness and completion, but also a necessary victim if we are to secure the physical immortality of the human race, that is, its progeny. In its self-sufficiency, the androgyne's actual existence would become the emblem of non-generativity.

A later classical legend which also depicts a similar two-sexes-in-one creature seems to strengthen the inherent relation between androgyny and some kind of violent physical assault, yet this time in the opposite direction to the Platonic account: instead of brutally disintegrated, the androgynous being suffers a violent amalgamation. In what Maggie Kilgour considers an ironic reading of the *Symposium* (31), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tells how Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, is raped by the nymph Salmacis, who, overrun with desire, fuses her feminine body to his masculine one. "Piercing each the other's flesh, they run / Together, and incorporate in one," with the consequent transformation of his name into an archetypal metaphor for the etymologically more accurate *andro-gyne* (Book IV).[104] When Kilgour moves on to trace the Ovidian hypotext in her analysis of the metamorphoses

[104] An archetypal metaphor is "an identity of an individual with its class" (Frye, *Anatomy* 366).

in Dante's *Inferno*, the hermaphrodite emerges again as an intertextual reference with definitely negative connotations. In Cantos 24 and 25, Dante's literal rendering of the supposedly ideal union of opposites features a series of demonic metamorphoses: men and serpents merge in a hideous embrace that causes their becoming "nor double now, / Nor only one … / two figures blended in one form / Appear'd, where both were lost. / … Of former shape / All trace was vanish'd. Two yet neither seem'd" (Dante 25.69-76). The combination of selves does not lead to the longed-for wholeness into one, but to a dissolution of identity that language strives to define – neither two, nor one, nor neither – and that is hardly imaginable as a grotesque vision, a "perverse image" (Kilgour 68).

Those perverse images progressively left their mythical-allegorical manifestations and turned flesh and bone as real human beings whose disconcerting anatomical disposition had to be accounted for or, at least, keep under control. Michel Foucault's study of *The Abnormal* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (a course in the Collège de France in 1975) traces the evolution from the repulsion towards the physical hermaphrodite to the reprobation not only of the body in itself, but also of the use that the hermaphrodite made of it, that is to say, of a sexual behavior that deviates from a given cultural norm (Elden 97). This modern concept of the androgyne retains the main attributes that were present at its inception: this *monster* still combines the naturally impossible – as the symbol of an unattainable state of harmonious integration of opposites – and the morally forbidden – since its conduct is in conflict with the Law, especially against the reproductive obligations of society or "biopower," in Foucault's terms (*Voluntad* 148-9).[105] The hermaphrodite (or androgyne, since Foucault uses both terms interchangeably), along with the incorrigible individual and the masturbator, were included into the "technology of [the] abnormal" or anomalous, which interpreted them as the *other* against which the *normal* could be defined (Elden 98, 103). The

[105] Foucault's concept of "monster" is "an extreme phenomenon … [that] combines the impossible and the forbidden. … It is essentially thought of as a mixture." The hermaphrodite follows the bestial man – half-man, half-animal – and the Siamese twins (medieval and Renaissance monsters, respectively) as the privileged human monster during the period Foucault denominates the Classical age (17th and 18th centuries) (Elden 96).

principal mechanism of the apparatus of normalization to achieve that was the proliferation of medical and psychological sciences of sexuality – or *scientia sexualis* – whose "chase for peripheral sexualities" began to inscribe what was before a simple performance onto the identity of the person, so that "homosexuality appeared as one of the figures of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul" (Foucault, *Voluntad* 44-5).[106]

The discourses of sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries established the androgyne either as a disturbing relapse or as a liberating alternative for sexual roles. Charles Darwin's affirmation in *The Descent of Man* (1874) that "some extremely remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have been hermaphrodite or androgynous" (Ch. VI, "Lower Stages in the Genealogy of Man") inaugurated the former current. Havelock Ellis, author of the first English medical textbook on homosexuality (*Sexual Inversion*, 1897),[107] uses Darwin's biological foundation to assert that "each sex is latent in the other, and each, as it contains the characters of both sexes (and can transmit those of the recessive sex) is latently hermaphrodite" (Vol. II, ch. III). While bisexuality/androgyny was thus (re)instated as a throwback to an archaic potential state, homosexuality developed into the mark of an abnormal growth caused by the appearance of a dominant tendency of the supposedly regressive sex. Surprisingly, when Sigmund Freud begins his *Three Essays on the*

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[106] For a detail account on homosexuality with a recuperative reading of Freud's texts, see Dollimore (1991). Sedgwick deals in *Epistemology of the Closet* with Karl Ulrichs's formulation of the homosexual constitution as a female soul united with a male body – "*anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa*" – noticing that it nevertheless preserves an inherent heterosexuality in desire, which, no matter the physical sex of the partakers, must unavoidably flow between a feminine being (even if in *virili* disguise) and a masculine being (*Epistemología* 114).

[107] Ellis himself notes a few previous volumes, but they had been published either privately or abroad. He mentions John Addington Symonds's *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Problem of Modern Ethics: Being an Enquiry into the Phenomena of Sexual Inversion* (1891), Edward Carpenter's pamphlet entitled *Homogenic Love* (1894), and Mr. André Raffalovich's *Uranisme et Unisexualité* (1896), "the most comprehensive book so far written on the subject in England" but published in French in Lacassagne's *Bibliothèque de Criminologie* (Ellis, vol. II).

Theory of Sexuality (1905), he does it neither with biological nor psychological, but with mythological references: he identifies the "poetic fable of dividing the person into two halves – man and woman – who strive to become reunited through love" with the "popular theory of the sexual impulse" that finds "very surprising to hear that there are men for whom the sexual object is not woman but man, and that there are women for whom it is not man but woman."[108] Freud defends, like Ellis, that a "certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism really belongs to the normal," and retains androgyny as the initial arrangement of a sexual impulse whose primitive and universal disposition leans towards perversions. So, the original disposition of the human being for Freud is a somewhat androgynous organism of potentially bisexual and strikingly perverse desires, a creature that he studied "with extraordinary acumen" (Putnam v): the child.

When Freud describes the early symbiotic union and satisfaction between mother and child, and the splitting moment when the satisfying breast is removed "at the very time when it becomes possible for the child to form a general picture of the person to whom the organ granting him the gratification belongs" (*Three Essays*), he is rendering an ontogenetic version of the phylogenetic Platonic myth. Like in the case of the androgyne in the *Symposium*, two bodies come out of this initial dissection: the infant's, who "come[s] to experience itself as a body for the first time with the separation or ceding of the breast" (Boothby 246), and the mother's. Yet since the child does not know of sexual difference yet, his imago of the mother will turn to be also an androgynous one. The androgynous (m)Other embodies the impossible blending of the sexes, so that it will be indispensable to de-idealize her through the discovery of castration – which will reveal her incompletion – and the Oedipus complex, if the child is to move on in its development as a definitely sexed, though incomplete, subject. "In the psychoanalytic scenario," Hargreaves summarizes, "the figure of the androgyne represents a fantasy of plenitude, offering recuperation from the loss entailed by the necessary adoption of a subject position as the child separates from the mother and enters language" (19).

[108] Obviously, by then Aristophanes' man-man and woman-woman beings, which justified homosexual impulses, seem to have been duly obliterated from the vulgarized version of the Platonic myth.

By the turn of the nineteenth century the intertwining of these evolutionary and psychoanalytical paradigms with literary discourses had the key effect of popularizing an image of the androgyne that, although strayed a little from its mythical origin, suited better the spreading anxieties about sexual orientation, sexual identity, and gender institutionalization. The androgyne now came to personify "a superabundance of erotic possibilities"(Elíade 98), as comprehensive studies such as Bert Bender's on American narrative (2005) and Tracy Hargreaves's on British literature (2004) relate. From Harold Frederic's impotent degeneracy in the male or D. H. Lawrence's barren opposites to the really transcendent sexual (i.e. coital) union of man and woman, to Jack London's "boyish 'new' women and gentler 'new' men" (Bender 78), or Edward Carpenter's intermediates as artistic renovators (Hargreaves 56), the androgyne can be considered in a positive or negative light, but it remains an outsider anyhow:

> androgyny can be achieved only outside the society that deforms the sexual ideal. … Even writers who wished to legitimize intermediate identities could do so only by locating their 'types' in spaces beyond culture, rendering androgyny the subject of disapproval: we both must and must not see it. (Hargreaves 66)

This question of its visibility and the apparent ambivalence (or plurivalence) with which it can be assessed are fundamental for the postmodern considerations of the androgyne, one of whose most relevant examples is Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp.'" For Sontag, Camp can be either a type of vision, "one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon," or a quality present in objects and people's behavior (point 3). Regarding this latter, she introduces the androgyne as "certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility." Whereas flamboyant sexual and personality mannerisms are also part of Camp taste, the androgyne reappears as the subtle representative of aesthetic subversion because:

> the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most

> beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine. (Point 9)

An example of the exaggerated is the temperamental acting of Tallulah Bankhead or Mae West; the attenuated is epitomized by the "haunting androgynous vacancy behind the perfect beauty of Greta Garbo" (point 9). What underlies both facets is the element of artifice, the challenge of the *natural* – in its senses both of the unaffected and of the (allegedly) biologically predestined. This artifice is playful, theatrical, and points towards the postmodern impossibility to pin down a unitary subject and towards the plasticity of gender performances. Sontag's concept of Camp vision is what Savran adopts for his camp mode of reading, which is in charge of discovering in Williams's texts frivolous Camp sub-texts like those Sontag perceives in otherwise earnest objects and performances – because "the pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious" (point 19). Sontag's formulation of camp underlines the key aspect of visibility that has been subjacent to the trope of androgyny from its early inception. Therefore, we can surmise that the qualification of a person as "*androgynous*" does not usually come from themselves, but it implies the presence of an evaluating observer. Androgyny, so to speak, is in the eye (and mind) of the beholder.

This short revision was intended to show that indeed "the meaning of androgyny depends on its function in a given discourse" (Hargreaves 3) – therefore, what can be its meaning within the discourse of postmodern psychoanalysis and abjection we will be following in Williams's gothic stories? Actually, it will be the figure of the *beholder* of androgyny, the subject who discovers the presence of an androgynous figure, that will be of crucial interest for those discourses, as Francette Pacteau has shown in her chapter "The impossible referent: representations of the androgyne" (1984). She first defines androgyny as "a question of a relation between a look and an appearance, in other words *psyche* and *image*. I do not encounter an 'androgyne' in the street; rather I encounter a figure whom I 'see as' androgynous." The focus now swings from the figure of the androgyne itself to that interpreting *I* and the "mental processes at work in the *fascination* exercised by sexual ambiguity" (62). Pacteau follows Freud in situating the origin of these mental processes in the infantile

narcissistic desire for completeness and self-sufficiency that leads to the fantasy of incorporation of the mother, who at the stage is still a "complete and autonomous" hermaphrodite being endowed with both male and female signifiers of fertility and power, breast and penis: "the mother who is all and everything" (71). The androgyne, Pacteau maintains, is the manifestation of a similar repressed desire but reworked after the child crosses the Oedipal divide and the discovery of sexual difference shatters its belief in and its image of the "phallic" mother (Pacteau 82). According to Freud and Lacan, the child faces two options: the *normal* one would be to turn his desire to the father, identifying with him and aspiring to acquire what he possesses: the phallus, and then the word, language. The other possibility is that the narcissist ego, facing the fear of suffering a castration similar to that it perceives in the mother, unconsciously disavows that sexual dichotomy and finds himself a substitutive *fetish*: a fantastic, illusorily whole – i.e. androgynous – body endowed with the now *admittedly* impossible coincidence of sexes. "I know... but nevertheless" is the phrasing of disavowal (Pacteau 70).

Pacteau explains that this fetishistic fantasy involves an unsolvable conflict within the symbolic order that the phallic signifier institutes and where the subject constitutes itself. Once in the Symbolic or "Law," the subject inhabits the domains of gender identity and of linguistic articulation, both based on separation and difference marked by a lack. Therefore, the return of the fantasy of androgyny in adult age poses a dangerous contradiction to those two constituent aspects of the Law. First, it "represents a denial, or a transgression, of the rigid gender divide, and as such implies a threat to our given identity and to the system of social roles which defines us." Thus, for the gazing subject that comes upon a possible materialization of its fetishized object of desire, "the androgynous-looking figure presents me with an impossibility, that of the erasure of difference, that very difference that constructs *me* as a subject" (Pacteau 63). In a paradigm where we construct our identities in relation to the *other*, "when the other is not identifiable, my own position wavers" (68). As a result, the encounter with this androgynous other undermines the stability of the gazer's ego, who faces the tension between a repressed desire and the menace of dissolution of its precarious

identity: in "the primal wish for union" that the androgyne recalls, "difference, and therefore identity, is abolished" (82).

As regards the androgyne's challenge of the linguistic side of the Law, Pacteau opens her article recognizing the fact that

> discussions of androgyny invariably seem to come up against a resistance – not so much, or not only, from the speaking subject, but from language itself. Any attempt to *define* androgyny reveals an ever evasive concept which takes us to the limits of language. (62)

The process of disavowal that is at the root of its interpretation cancels difference: the androgynous figure is a volatile construction, both "not this" and "this" – I *know* it is "not" a man *and* a woman, but *nevertheless*, I see it as "that." So, holding a position "logically outside systems of signification, the androgyne demands not to be talked about, not to be represented (hence the difficulty, the impossibility of pinning it down, of arresting it in an image)" (82).

To sum up, Pacteau's androgyne is at variance with the imaginary as well as with the symbolic system of representation. The androgyne, she has mentioned above, cannot be "arrested in an image:" it eludes the direct gaze even if it is its most powerful attraction, because trying to uncover its mystery by focusing the look would destroy the defense of disavowal. That is what differentiates it from the mere physical hermaphrodite:

> What sets the androgyne apart dwells in one gesture: the uncovering of the body. ... [it is that display] that positions the hermaphrodite on the side of the visible... (Pacteau 74)

> The *fixing* of the look is contrary to the androgyne who can only ever be the object of a *searching* look. The hermaphrodite would be the resolution of the search, following the … unveiling gesture, when light is shed on the case. …
> The androgynous figure has to do with *seduction*, that which comes before undressing, seeing and touching. *It can only exist in the shadow area of the image*

> [italics added]; once unveiled, once we throw a light on it, it becomes a woman or a man, and I (myself) resume my position … (77-8)

The androgyne, according to Pacteau, is just *perceived* but not *seen*, it necessarily stays in the periphery of the look, that is, in the dispositional field: as soon as we focus our inquisitive look on it, it disappears as an *androgyne* and has to be referred to by the signifiers of either *woman* or *man* (78). Hence probably the title of Pacteau's chapter, "The Impossible Referent."

However, Pacteau's overall position about the androgyne seems a little contradictory. She has affirmed above that the androgyne stands "logically outside [the] systems of signification." It is true that, in most of its historical manifestations, there is a conflicting relation of the androgyne to what the Symbolic represents: the Name-of the-Father, the Law, social regulations, cultural norms. This has been explicit in Dante's grotesque images, Foucault's abnormal hermaphrodite, androgynous types "beyond culture" in modernist literature. Yet the androgyne must be *outside* and *inside* the social at the same time for, in order to be characterized as an outsider, it needs to have entered an *inside* that functions as a reference. Also, she also argues that "androgyny can be said to belong to the imaginary, where desire is unobstructed; gender identity to that of the symbolic, the Law" (63). Although she is right in locating gender identity on the side of the symbolic order, we have seen how it is precisely the androgyne's impossibility to be pinpointed as "one being," that is, as a positional object, what impedes its imaginary realization, its unveiling.

It seems to me then that a consideration of the androgyne in relation to the Kristevan model can shed some light on these two (and other) conflicting aspects of this figure. First, the difficulty for its imaginary realization can be clarified by the dynamics of (dis)positionality. Pacteau's description of the androgyne as existing "in the shadow area of the image," an *object* but only for "a *searching* look" that cannot pin it down, matches Boothby's reworking of the *objet a* as a dispositional object. Like the latter, the androgyne has the quality of a discrete entity, but at the same time resists definition by consciousness. We can then start to discern certain parallels between the androgynous figure and the fetishized *objet a*, which appears to cover up the loss of the

(m)Other. Nevertheless, instead of representing a cut in the body of the Other, like the Lacanian figurations of *objet a* do, the androgyne stands for the whole Other, an "object total" around which desire would revolve (Pontalis, qtd. in Pacteau 83, note 23).[109] Like the *objet a*, Pacteau's androgyne is "an attempt to objectify desire," but fixing it in an image is impossible, because even "the 'body' as an entity [a positional object] … cannot contain the excess of the androgynous fantasy" (Pacteau 80-1).

The androgyne as an excessive fantasy that refers to the body – yet not to its *fixed*, contained image – seems an adequate signifier for the Semiotic stage of the subject. Fantasy is, for Kristeva, an emissary of the maternal *chora* with an unsettling effect on the body and on language: "In the speaking subject, fantasies articulate this irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier … fantasies remind us, if we had ever forgotten, of the insistent presence of drive heterogeneity" ("Revolution" 102-3). The motif of androgyny assembles the disrupting effect of the drives on the body, the blurring of the boundaries of gender identity, an attraction that despite all that still keeps us fascinated by its presence – all of which needs to be repressed if we are to enter the Symbolic. It seems then that the androgyne fulfills all the requisites to be an abject, as Pacteau acknowledges although without mentioning this Kristevan term: "The figure of the androgyne represents the gathering into one image of those various instances when the certainty of our identity wavers under 'constant pressure of something hidden but not forgotten'" (79). Like the semiotic *chora*, the androgyne occupies a "place where the subject is both generated and negated" (Kristeva, "Revolution" 95), the combination of desire and threat that so mystifies Pacteau and that characterizes the abject.

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[109] Given that Kristeva undervalues the discovery of castration in favor of the moment of abjection as the fundamental thesis for the constitution of the subject, it figures to me that the androgyne as signifier of lack could be a likely alternative for the Lacanian master signifier, the phallus, in an attempt to "'reterritorialize' this symbol in subversive ways" (Salih 85). The androgynous (m)Other as *objet a* of desire and the archaic ordering of semiotic drives in the *chora* would institute the logic of a more flexible, polyphonic language, which the phallus, a developmental latecomer, comes to thwart by imposing binary oppositions and semblances of fixity.

Furthermore, instead of being completely outside signification, as Pacteau suggests, the androgynous figure functions in a way that reminds of the Semiotic, which exists within the Symbolic and awaits a keen (revolutionary, Kristeva would say) reading to unveil it. So does the androgyne depends on a flexible eye to perceive its motile, deconstructive potential, its *excess*, just like "the 'excesses' of language … the potentially explosive ways in which signifying practices exceed the subject and his or her communicative structures," as Kristeva defines the semiotic mode of signification (McAfee 14-5). Yet its bond with the death drive makes the androgyne also into a dangerous "perverse image" in the sense that Kilgour mentioned at the outset: the androgyne invokes a regressive self-destruction, like Thanatos's "disintegration of the living self, a wish to return to an inorganic state and homeostasis" (McAfee 64). This still agrees with the idea of the androgyne as primordial *objet a* for the abjected (m)Other. As an *objet a* (a signifier of lack), the *coincidentia oppositorum* that the androgyne embodies can be considered to mark the most baffling lack for any structural system: the lack of difference, the absence of lack. This *lack of lack* could have indeed a most shocking consequence: the disappearance of desire, since it is "the moment of lack that is constitutive of desire" (Boothby 272). The androgyne as object of desire cannot be attained lest the subject's desire reach a dead end, a *stasis* – even if it is part of a "double movement" accompanied by pleasure, as Pacteau recognized above (82).

In conclusion, the trope of androgyny can allow us to signify the emergence of Lacan's Real/Kristeva's Semiotic by depicting an uncanny figure that defies representation, cannot be incorporated, and puts the maternal into the paternal – the ideal Other of gothic fiction. The subject that confronts the androgynous figure discovers the artificiality of gender roles, a desirable completion, and an escape from symbolic constrictions; on the other hand, it also sees dichotomies dissolve, language falter, its coherent identity waver. Only be separating itself – abjecting – the androgyne can the subject recuperate certain stability, at the expense of enduring again its founding incompletion. It certainly becomes a gothic subject, an "imaginary subject (ego) forming the border between the real (Mother) and the symbolic (Father)" (Jarraway 62). Therefore, connotations of androgyny will endow the sexual

Other/abject in Williams's gothic short stories with the subversive capability to disrupt the subject and the social, and to let its mark on the semiotic genotext.

6

MORE SACRED THAN HOLY LAW: "GIFT OF AN APPLE"

"Gift of an Apple" (1936) features one of Williams's most representative characters and also a rather recurrent narrative pattern: the fugitive, the wanderer that appears for a moment in a particular setting and causes a story to develop, leaving at its conclusion. Later stories that will follow this pattern are "Something about him" (1946), "Man Bring This Up Road" (1953), and "A Recluse and His Guest" (1970); many of the wanderers will not really leave the place, but directly die at the end, as in the case of Lucio in "The Malediction" (1945) or Val Xavier in the plays *Battle of Angels* (1939) and *Orpheus Descending* (1957).[110] The storyline in "Gift" seems simple at first sight: we witness a chance meeting between a young hitchhiker on his way from California to Kentucky and a woman that lives in a house trailer off the road along which he walks. The boy asks her for something to eat, and she offers him an apple. She is, however, reluctant to share with him the meat she has reserved for dinner, and after a series of insinuations that suggest that what is at stake is something more *carnal* than a meal, she dismisses the still hungry hitchhiker, who continues his tramping with an arrogant snub that can hardly conceal the bitterness for his thwarted expectations. Throughout the narration, which is presented from the boy's perspective, the woman gathers around her a plethora of symbols that turn her into, very possibly, the most *abjectable* of Williams's characters. She is the sexual, racial, and maternal Other – all at once. "Gift" is thus a useful example to begin to outline the different

[110] Ganz adds *Camino Real* (1949) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1954) to *Battle/Orpheus* as the three plays in which Williams tells "the story of a wanderer who is or has been innocent, who comes into the world of universal corruption and who is thereupon destroyed by it" (213). The wanderer in "Gift," however, is anything but innocent as we will see.

spheres in which abjection operates in order to understand how it effects the destabilization of the identity of the subject that confronts it (i.e. the young hitchhiker). Such spheres – androgynous sexuality, dietary restrictions, incestuous desire – coalesce in the representation of the orality characteristic of the earliest pre-Oedipal, semiotic stage of the subject, when the sexual and nutritive drives are not distinguished yet.

The sexual abject: the androgyne

Williams's use of animal imagery is well-known, from the mythical unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) to the *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), the profuse bird symbolism in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950) , or the death-sentenced iguana in *The Night of the Iguana* (1959). In "Gift of an Apple," the protagonist's first impression of the Italian woman makes him compare her to a catfish, an animal symbolism that does not stop at the mere spatial-physical resemblances from which it originates. When the boy approaches the trailer, he distinguishes through its back door's curtain the figure of the woman, too "huge" for "such close quarters," whereas the catfish, which he once found inside a jug he and his friends pulled out of a river, was already "too big to get out" of the bottle (64).[111] As if dealing with an instance of Darwinist "analogical resemblances [that] are the result of adaptation to the environment" (Beer 91), the woman trapped in the trailer also looks like that catfish trapped in the bottle: "She had a face like the catfish. Dark and blunt-featured. Coarse hairs along her upper lips" (65).[112] Moreover, whereas the fish was caught in the Sunflower River, it is interesting to observe that the woman continually stands facing the sun, like sunflowers do: "She stood above him blinking with the sun in her eyes" (65); "She fixed her eyes on the round orange ball of the sun" (67); "her face set in a slight frown, looking out at the sun" (68).

[111] All references to Williams's short stories are taken from the 1985 volume of *Collected Stories*. They will be noted in the text by page number.

[112] "Catfish … have eight appendages on the head called 'barbels,' four on the upper jaw and four on the chin. The barbels are sometimes called 'whiskers'" ("Catfishes").

More importantly, what connects woman and fish in the boy's mind is really their oddity, a *freakishness* that makes them repellent yet mesmerizing. With reference to the catfish, "there was something not normal about" it, having "grown up inside a bottle." This oddity makes the boy discard his friend's proposal of eating the fish, an idea that just "repelled him" (64). On her part, the woman displays signs of an abnormality that baffles the youth for, besides noticing her facial hair:

> He was shocked to see there were even a few dark hairs in the middle of her chest where the neck of the underslip sagged down. He had never seen a woman before with hair on her chest. It made him think of that hermaphrodite in the sidewalk show at Dodge City. The barker pointing to the woman-man standing in the window, one side of her a fully developed female and the other a man … It didn't seem possible, though. (65)

This remembrance brings up two related aspects. First, it combines with the animalistic description of the woman to make her a part of what Kolin labels "Williams's menagerie of the southern grotesque" ("Gift" par. 6). Like we will see in other stories ("Big Black" or "The Important Thing" for example), the suggestion of a grotesque appearance is framed within a reference to a *show*, the cultural setting of public exhibition where *freaks* are acceptable. Whereas Big Black's face is like the "nigger" in the "revolving circle of wooden dummies … at carnivals and amusement parks" (27), and Flora behaves like a circus's "bright little monkey on a wire" (171), the Italian woman in "Gift" is the "Woman Man," a classical sensationalistic attraction of the dime museum (Somerville 59).[113] Yet the danger of these grotesque figures in Williams's fiction is, precisely, that they are *not* encountered in the safe context of the sidewalk show, that is, within "the closeted circle of scrutiny and control" that public spectacles – in the vein of Foucault's Panopticon – represent (Fleche, "Door" 257). Instead, for Williams's characters such as the hitchhiker here, there is no window to

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[113] We can actually consider her equivalent, the catfish, to be part of a cruel grotesque show too, as the hitchhiker and his friends "crouched on the bank" of the river and watched the fish "until it quit flopping" out of the water (65).

separate them from those disquieting racial and sexual *freaks*, so that they usually get *too* close to their spectators and jeopardize any claims to domination or distance on the latter's part. It is not behind a window but "in the door of the trailer" that the woman stands and where the action of the story takes place (68). This threshold is a *liminal* space like those Homi Bhabha explores in *The Location of Culture* (1994), an in-between space where fixed conceptions of identity are transgressed, especially notions like self and other. "To give privilege to liminality is to undermine solid, authentic culture in favour of unexpected, hybrid, and fortuitous cultures;" yet the effect of such a collapse of traditional categories makes the subject experience an existential anxiety, the return of the uncanniness of what has been repressed to establish fixed identity (Huddart 5, 52 *ff.*). Although references to the door and the threshold in "Gift" may seem fortuitous, their recurrence throughout the stories in this dissertation points at an overlooked importance of those motifs in Williams's texts as a means to represent the boundary of both identity and the body, as well as the possibility of its trespassing.

Secondly, the hermaphrodite's anecdote introduces the story's emphasis on "the problematics of sexual identity and indeterminacy" that Kolin analyzes ("Gift" par. 1). Like many Williams characters in which dark racial attributes are mingled with sexual allure, the woman in the trailer is initially portrayed as a racial *freak* – "black-haired," with "dark eyes" and features, and "brown" arms and legs (64-5)[114] – and then as a sexual *freak* that, stepping out of the show, faces the youth and flaunts both her (and as we will see, also *his*) sexual indeterminacy. It seems ironically fitting, as Kolin has also pointed out, that she should remind the boy of an "hermaphrodite" in "Dodge City:" a being eluding the sex/gender dichotomy is obviously performing a "dodge" of fixed categories ("Gift" par. 16). In a clear example of the parallelism between the depiction of a character's body and house, Kolin interprets the profuse food imagery with which the trailer is decorated as additional hermaphroditic symbols that bear witness to its owner's ambiguous sexuality:

[114] Only at the end of the story do we discover her Italian origin: "An old dago slut she was," the boy grunts (68). It may seems a little incongruous, however, that right after her first appearance the narrator already labels her as "foreign" on account of only two features: that she looks "huge and black-haired" (64).

> Phallic-shaped "strings of velvety red coxcomb" as well as vaginal-appearing "yellow gourds" hang on the trailer wall (64). Among her wares are "dried ropes of sage, dill, garlic, and red pepper" (65), conjuring up images of aphrodisiacs and dildos. Finally, she is associated with a piece of "rich, oily meat" (68) (one thinks of the masculine Stanley Kowalski throwing a package of blood-stained meat to Stella at the beginning of *Streetcar*) as well as with the "apple" (Eve's calling card). ("Gift" par. 16)

Once the woman's sexuality is described as androgynously indefinite and dissolute – her "great loose ... bosom" and her legs and arms "bare, loose-fleshed," implicitly shape her into a *loose* woman (65) –, we can see how the boy undergoes a corresponding sexual dislocation along the story. He is the subject who, coming near to the in-between, androgynous figure, will see his own (sexual) identity waver.

At the start, the boy ingeniously brags his masculinity, hitching at the belt of his trousers, producing a (phallic) pocketknife from his pants, or recounting his "night after night" adventures with a young Greek girl in an alley behind her father's restaurant (67). Despite such boasting, his position in the story develops into an emasculating one, for example after the comparison that feminizes him in the woman's (and the reader's) eyes: "You got nice skin like a girl's," she tells him after caressing him (68). Not accidentally, it is his skin that is feminized, the "protective tegument of the body … [with] its role in demarcating the boundary of self and world" (Boothby 140). The skin is the border of the body but also of the self since, at the Lacanian mirror stage, its imaginary surface keeps together the interoceptive fragmentation of the subject and allows for the foundation of a sense of identity in the form of an imaginary ego (221-2). In this manner, the woman's feminizing comparison belittles the hitchhiker's masculine ego because her remark, plus the boy's polite response ("Thanks," he replies to this dubious compliment), "undercut the masculine bravado of his earlier escapades with the eleven-year-old Greek girl … [and] imagistically equates

him with the young girl whose nervous sexual awakening he glibly contrasted with his own seasoned experience" (Kolin, "Gift" par. 17).[115]

The boy's feminization is further underlined when considered in relation to the power and gender relations that are entailed in the treatment of food in the story. Food is never mere nourishment but, as Barthes affirms, "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" ("Food Consumption" 21). The work of other structuralist thinkers, such as Mircea Elíade's or Lévi-Strauss's seminal work *The Raw and the Cooked* (1966), attests to it.[116] That "protocol of usages" is different in each culture and its study exposes the power relations and conceptions of sex and gender that each social order espouses, as Carole M. Counihan has shown: "In many ways, food establishes and reflects male and female identity and relationships" (*Anthropology* 13). Therefore, the ubiquitous usage of food in "Gift" hints at the unspoken ways in which the hitchhiker is situated in a subordinate, powerless (and thus, traditionally feminine) position in his alimentary interaction with the masculinized woman. Analyzing food imagery can shed some light on the boy's "shifting sexual desire/identity" (Kolin, "Gift" par. 17) in relation to the woman. Moreover, not only *actual* food is "the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationships between the human being and the other, its mother." The woman is endowed with attributes that make her into both a maternal figure and an oral object herself, an abject "who wields a power that is vital as it is fierce," the (m)Other (Kristeva, *Horror* 75-6).

[115] As an additional feminizing note, Kolin also mentions the boy's recollection of "eating eggs," which he considers "an indisputable symbol of women's sexuality" ("Gift" par. 17). My own interpretation of that symbol differs from Kolin's in focusing not on its sexual connotations but on its relation to the maternal/incestuous undertones of the story, as we will shortly see. In both cases, however, it represents a key element in the destabilization of the hitchhiker's identity, sexual or otherwise.

[116] "Alimentarse es un hecho cultural y no solamente un proceso orgánico. Incluso en el estadio de la primera infancia, el bebé se comporta frente al alimento como ante un mundo simbólico" (Elíade 155).

Oral imagery: the apple

From its title to its last word ("apple"), "Gift" is a gastronomic feast: the (in)famous apple, the catfish in the bottle, "potato peelings and cantaloupe rinds and damp coffee grounds" in the alley behind the Greek restaurant, the "big piece" of meat that the woman plans to have for supper, the hardboiled eggs the boy suddenly fancies (67). The apple of the title unarguably stands out as the central symbol loaded with biblical and sexual connotations. Hardly any reader would fail to notice that the boy and the Italian woman impersonate Adam and Eve in the enactment of the (flagrantly patriarchal) tale of a female *seducer* enticing a still innocent man with a tempting fruit (Genesis 3.6-7). In its biblical context, the apple is the primordial object of a desire that results in the discovery of sexuality as embodiment – in Adam and Eve feeling suddenly *self*-conscious when noticing their formerly ignored nudity.

However, "Gift" departs from the biblical parable concerning several points. The hitchhiker's flashback about his encounters with the Greek girl does not quite characterize him precisely as sexually *naïve*, and the "gift of an apple" the story deals with does not represent a sexual awakening but the starting point for a *system of communication* through which the protagonists subtly negotiate the exchange of culinary and sexual favors. The overlapping symbolism between sex and food is obvious from the moment that the boy eats the apple and the narration renders his thoughts as the allegorical intimation of an *inverted* ejaculation :

> It is like the act of love, he thought, as he ground the skin and pulp between his jaw teeth. … The pulp dissolved in his mouth. He tried not swallowing it. Make it last longer, he thought. But it … all turned to liquid and flowed on down his throat. He couldn't stop it. It is like the act of love, he thought again. You try to make it last longer. Draw out the sweet final moment. But it can't be held at that point. It has to go over and down, it has to be finished. And then you feel cheated somehow. (66)

These thoughts are accompanied by a relish for voluptuous details on the narrator's part, describing the boy's tongue "roll[ing] around the front of his mouth… lick[ing]

the outside of his lips and … curving [them] into a sensuous smile" as he swallows the snow-white liquid (66). This excerpt is indeed a "devilishly clever piece of pornography," which should be added to the "wicked sexual metonymy" that Kolin finds in the similitude between "the hairy, whiskered *cat*fish trapped in the narrow opening of the neck of the bottle" and the woman's *mons veneris* (Kolin, "Gift" par. 8; his italics) – yet this time with a homoerotic innuendo of *fellatio*.

Besides the possibility that these homosexual connotations of the protagonist's entrancement undermine his "masculine bravado" too, there is an important, unnoticed aspect of this scene that differentiates it from the tale of Adam and Eve, and that places the woman in a (manly) dominant position. Unlike the biblical characters, who *share* the fruit of sin, the woman in "Gift" first gives the boy one apple and then takes another one that she eats herself, frustrating the anticipation of the boy, who had seen "her stoop over the basket again and take out another apple. Good," he had rejoiced in vain (66). Whereas this certainly tells us something about the woman's character, which defies American women's shame for "eat[ing] in front of men, so they may offer food but not eat it, giving pleasure to males but denying it to themselves," her refusal to give the second apple constitutes a blatant manifestation of power towards the still hungry, expectant boy – hunger probably being the supreme sign of powerlessness (Counihan, *Anthropology* 11, 7).

The sense in which this power is gendered is explained in Counihan's classification of the two ways of exerting the "power of food:" by coercion and by influence. Coercion entails the control of resources that can be denied to others, and is typical of societies in which "resources are concentrated in the hands of the few, who are usually male" (*Anthropology* 47). The power of influence, on the other hand, ensues after the act of giving and the obligations it creates, as shown in Marcel Mauss's classic study *The Gift* (first published in 1925). The "gift," according to Mauss, involves "a tripartite obligation:" for the donor to give, and for the beneficiary to receive and to repay, that is, a *quid pro quo* economics of reciprocal exchange (95). Influence is the power of this gift, conventionally "the power of women who feed, who satisfy hunger," and so can manipulate the gratitude of the recipients (46-7).

If we return to the *gift* of the apple that gives the story its title, it seems clearer now that the woman's decision to provide herself with another apple, and in so doing to deny it to the boy, challenges the power dynamics of the "gift" or feminine influence. She is the donor who gives initially, but she then settles the obligation created by satisfying it herself. Instead, her control of the resources – be it the apple, the meat, or the mouth-watering decorations of the trailer –, and her refusal to share them place her in a masculine, coercive role.[117] Moreover, her association with a piece of meat is a signal of her masculinization, not just for the intertextual connection to Stanley's package of meat, as Kolin remarked above, but because "patriarchal power in Western society is embodied in meat consumption, which involves the linking of women and animals and their objectification and subordination" on account of them being *meat* consumed – sexually or digestively – by men (Counihan, *Anthropology* 10).

Oral imagery: the catfish and the meat

Clearly, the allusions to the woman's "meat" go beyond the mere reference to what she is going to have for dinner and are overloaded with sexual overtones: the use of the term "meat" as a metaphor for the *genitalia* or of the phrase "eating meat" as a metaphor for sex is a long-established tradition.[118] So, the second part of their negotiation moves from culinary to sexual favors, when the famished teenager tries to convince his hostess to share the meat she is going to cook for dinner:

> "What have you got for supper?"
> "Meat."

[117] The idea that her role as apple-owner places the woman in powerful position can be reinforced if, following Northrop Frye, we consider that the tree of life and the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil in Genesis are metaphorically conflated into the same tree, one endowed with the mythical import of "'the lost phallus,' a giver of life" (*Bible* 147-8).

[118] See for instance G. Williams's *Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature* (303 *ff.*, 746 *ff.*).

> "A big piece?"
> "Yes. A pretty big piece."
> "Enough for two people?"
> "Naw, I don't know," she said. "I ought to save some for my boy." (67)

This, the longest conversation between the protagonists, gives the key to understanding the boy's subsequent daydream, in which he recalls one Easter Sunday with his mother and sister. In a fragment where free indirect speech juxtaposes sentences and images from the boy's mind, he (very much unexpectedly) thinks of

> the five colored eggs in one corner. … Hardboiled eggs. He wondered if he had eaten them afterwards. Eggs were good hardboiled. The white coming loose from the yellow center. The yellow a round ball, rich and grainy, forming a paste in the mouth and sticking to the teeth so that the taste remained for a long time afterwards. Mmmm. He'd like to be eating some hardboiled eggs right now. (67)

These two elements – the boy's attempt to partake in the meat feast and his bizarre sudden fancy for eggs – spell a further movement in the *food dialogue* between the boy and the woman that sabotages the stability of the former's identity. For, if the language of food power in the text implies that the woman occupies the position of power in relation to a powerless youth, that would mean too that it is the boy who should become linked with the animal (and its meat). It will be necessary then to connect those two elements to the initial comparison of the woman and the catfish in order to see how they represent that link of the young boy with the animal that culminates the blurring of his identity – that is, his approach to the border of abjection.

It should be remembered at this point that, in the hitchhiker's eyes, the similarity between the woman and the fish is based on an idiosyncrasy that, at least in the case of the fish, makes it *repellent to eat*: "The others had wanted to break the jug open and cook the catfish for supper but the idea of this had repelled him because *there was something not normal* [italics added] about a catfish that had grown up inside a bottle" (64). This repulsion inspired by the *abnormality* of certain food is the basis for the rules of pollution studied by the British anthropologist Mary Douglas, on which

Kristeva builds up her own theory of abjection. Following Barthes, Douglas is convinced that "food categories … encode social events" and convey a message about "different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one" (36). In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas identifies polluting (and therefore prohibited) food as "that which is formless (or anomalous, and/or is viewed as threatening to the structure of categories)."[119] Pollution is attributed to areas of confusion and ambiguity, and it is equated with concepts of uncleanness ("That which is unclean or polluted does not conform" and vice versa) (Meigs 101).

Douglas's logic of food pollution and prohibition sets up what will become Kristeva's view on the abject as the non-object that threatens both the borders of the clean and proper body (like tabooed food, or filth) and of the social order/*body* – such as those who do not "respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, *Horror* 4). Kristeva shares Douglas's definition of defilement as that which escapes the symbolic system, and commends her intuition in finding in the human body the prototype for the "boundary, the margin," that defilement threatens (66). Her own analysis leans on Douglas's definition of what is pollution/polluting (e.g. filth and corporeal waste) on the secular level, and moves on to explain its "promotion" to the ritual level of sacred defilement and its imposition of the symbolic order. For Kristeva, the significance lies not so much on the issue of *what* is defiling/abject as on the question of *why* it is so: its relation to the maternal/feminine (70 *ff.*, 91-2).

Once the catfish has been established as *abject* food, it follows that its metaphorical correlative, the woman, should be considered equally *abject* on the grounds of her being "threatening to the structure of categories" in the immediately subsequent description of her apparent hermaphroditism, that is, her sexual "confusion and ambiguity."[120] The sex/gender divide (discovered upon the Oedipal split and cause

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[119] Bataille makes a similar point in asserting that the human being "does not eat anything before he has made an object of it" (qtd. in Boothby 187).

[120] If "Gift" really depicts a "Darwinian world of forbidden sexuality," as Kolin maintains ("Gift" par. 11), it is no wonder that the catfish be the symbol for a hermaphrodite: in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin holds that "some extremely remote progenitor of the whole vertebrate kingdom appears to have

of the definitive separation from the mother) is a development of the earliest dichotomy that effects the most primitive break of the subject and its mother: the "'I should like to eat this" or "I should like to spit it out" that Freud located at the origin of negation (Freud, *Negación* 2885). Not just negation depends on this oral rejection; for Freud and even more so for Kristeva, the oral stage when sexual and oral activities are not yet differentiated sets the basis for all self/other relationships in later life. For Freud, "it is the prototype of that which later plays such an important psychic rôle as *identification*" (Freud, *Three Contributions*, II "Infantile Sexual Investigation"); in Kristeva's theory, the infant's expulsion from itself of what it finds unpalatable constitutes the paradigmatic case of maternal abjection (McAfee 34).

Thus, like the abnormal fish, a repulsive yet fascinating abject, the unclassifiable foreigner in "Gift" – half-fish, half-woman, half-man – appears as sexually inedible or disgusting, making the boy "inwardly … recoil" from her touch, while at the same time she provokes a growing attraction (68). When he sensually imagines her

> sleeping at night on a cot by the side of the road with the moon looking down at her big dark female body and her arms thrown out to receive the cool wind like a lover, her flesh moist with sweat… (66; suspension points as in the original)

the hitchhiker cannot "keep his lips from spreading into a senseless grin," the same betraying sign of a (sexual) appetite that he manifested while eating the apple – when he "felt [his lips] curving into a sensuous smile" (66). That the boy's erotic inclinations may lead him into a contact with the abject is also perceptible in the nauseating recollection of his encounter with the Greek girl, in which he intermingles filth, food, and sex in an experience where, in his own words, there was again something "*not normal perhaps*:"

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been hermaphrodite or androgynous," but that in our time "we have to look to fishes, the lowest of all the classes, to find any still existent androgynous forms" (ch. VI, "Lower Stages in the Genealogy of Man").

> Back in the alley night after night behind her father's restaurant, between the ash pit and the three huge garbage pails. Mmmm. … With the hard concrete and all those cold wet smells. Potato peelings and cantaloupe rinds and damp coffee grounds. … But the hardness around them making the comfort inside her sweeter. (67)

For that reason, when we read in the *meat dialogue* (quoted above) that follows this recollection that the boy wants to share the woman's meat (or *flesh*, as it were),[121] we can infer that such courting of the abject will lead him to the border of abjection, where his identity risks dissolving. The youth's wish for *commensalism*[122] ("the sharing of food," *one* piece of meat for *two*, and not the one-to-one apple gift) prefigures a dangerous liaison given that his companion at the table is an animalized, sexually ambiguous, racial other – in one word, an abject –, and that commensalism "implies intimacy, both sexual intimacy and kinship" (Counihan, *Anthropology* 96, 9).

Oral imagery: the eggs

Whereas the boy's desire for sexual intimacy with the woman is self-evident thanks to the overlapping symbolic associations of food and sex, the connotation of "kinship" that food sharing entails is the fundament to understanding the intricate repercussions of the hitchhiker's craving for eggs, a not so capricious anecdote that hides the final import of the story. If, as we can see in the dialogue above, the woman is uncertain about sharing the meat because she is supposed to save some for her son, the only way for the hitchhiker to get hold of the son's prerogative is *to become her son himself*. Hence, the fantasy of the ingestion of the eggs is the allegorical version of his unspoken desire to take the son's place in the allocation of food because, in the context

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[121] In Kolin's analysis, the "rich, oily meat" figures both as "a further allusion to the catfish's flesh" and as the projection of the woman's own "oily, fat" corporeality ("Gift" par. 6-7). This has interesting cannibalistic implications since the woman eventually *eats* that very meat, a *self-consumption* that pretty much coincides with the boy's cruel hope that she should die of "cancer… inside her dark flesh" (68).

[122] This term, originated in anthropological studies, appears in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) to denominate the sacrificial ritual of a god and his worshippers (176).

of orality in which the story develops, "what I incorporate is what I become" (Kristeva, "Freud" 243).

This principle of the oral phase of the libido's organization underlies the whole story and surfaces here at its most forceful, all the more when considering that male catfishes have "the extraordinary habit of hatching within their mouths, or branchial cavities, the eggs laid by the females" (Charles Darwin, qtd. in Pauly 141). The boy, ready to incorporate the woman (sexually and orally), has therefore become a catfish himself, brooding the eggs in his mouth yet cannibalistically eating them to supplant the son that prevents him from satisfying his own desire. The satisfaction that this impersonation promises will prevail over the pleasure of "the act of love" that the apple represented: instead of the ephemeral juice that cannot be held in the mouth and that makes "you feel cheated somehow," the eggs "[form] a paste in the mouth and [stick] to the teeth so that the taste remain[s] for a long time afterwards" (66-7). As Sarah Sceats, following Freud, explains: "because sexual intercourse is a fleeting and less than absolute form of union, it is ultimately unsatisfying in comparison with the fantasy of cannibalism" (35). An absolute merging with the son anticipates an absolute union with the mother, a falling back into her abject body/flesh as the only guarantor of permanent fulfillment, albeit at the expense of one's own self (McAfee 48). Besides the undermining of his sexual identity, the boy undergoes a transmutation into the very thing that repelled him: he is now a *not normal* catfish, which eats its own young, a "white [boy] coming loose" and dissolving into the abject (67).

The final part of the story features a reversal of sorts in the expected course of events: although the woman seems willing to cede to the boy's desire, touching him not merely with her eyes but with her hand, she finally decides against it. Something happens that frustrates their coming together; something, in fact, that may be glimpsed in the argumentation of the preceding paragraphs. Before proceeding with her caresses, the woman asks the boy exactly the same question that he had been pondering previously – he had "wondered what her age was" (67):

> "How old are you, huh?"
> "Nineteen."

> "Umph!"
> She grunted as if she had just been stuck with a pin.
> …
> "Nineteen is just how old my own boy is! You better go 'way!" (68)

Ironically, the boy's longing for occupying the son's place has become much *too* real; the woman's desire is thwarted not just, as Kolin points out ("Gift" par. 9), for his being too young, but for being exactly *as old as her own boy*. "If he had said twenty-one or even said twenty, it might have been okay with her, but not nineteen because that was the age of her boy…" (68; suspension points as in the original). What is more, as by the same token the boy has turned into a catfish and into the son too, even his newly acquired catfish-like nature is cunningly suggested in the prick the woman feels, a hint about the "notorious sting of the catfish" which, "if handled improperly, … can give a sting as painful as a bee sting" ("Catfishes"). The logical inference from all these terms in which the woman's rejection of the boy is worded is that, in figuratively becoming her catfish-like son, the boy has turned out to be the supreme abject for the woman: the abject that defies the incest prohibition. "Gift" constitutes a good example of the "incestuous subtext played out with substitutes for mother and sister and resulting in variants of castration/death" that Daniel Dervin has revealed in Williams's plays ("Absent Father" 62).[123] However, it is not necessarily castration or death, but abjection, that concludes it. The woman separates herself from the boy, *abjects* him, and brings to a close any food/sex negotiation, repelled by the idea of implicit incest.

Consequently, the boy parts from the woman and observes her again with the same detachment he showed in his treatment of the catfish at the beginning of the story. For, there is not really any sign of "the narrator's preference for and protection of [the catfish] for being 'not normal'" (Kolin, "Gift" par. 6); quite the reverse, after the youth rejected it as no good to eat, he and his friends dispassionately watched it die "floundering in the bottle after the water had been poured out. A mean thing to do," that is his only feeling about that sad spectacle they supervise (65). At the end, he hopes that the woman suffers an equally cruel fate: that the flesh she did not want to

[123] He analyzes that subtext in more depth in "The Spook in the Rain Forest."

share with him rots in her own entrails and so her trailer becomes her coffin. "She would die some day. Some ugly disease like cancer. It might be already started inside her dark flesh," he presumes while looking "back over his shoulder" (68).

Defiance and return to the Name-of-the-Father

Vannatta calls our attention to the last lines of the story, when the boy, who is now continuing his wanderings, feels the "fresh and sweet" taste of the apple in his mouth and wonders: "Maybe it was better that way, just having that taste in his mouth, the *clean white* [italics added] taste of the apple" (69). His "yearning to preserve the 'clean white taste' of the apple … represents a yearning for purity and normality – a normality that does not exist in harsh reality" (nor does it seem to exist anywhere in this story for that matter) (Vannatta 18). As could be expected, a self that has stood so close to the (in Douglas and Kristeva's term) *unclean* abject will fall back on the opposition between pure and impure as "a coding of his repulsion in relation to the other in order to autonomize himself" (Kristeva, *Horror* 82). For the hitchhiker, such opposition represents "the striving for identity, a difference … [and] appears instead of *sexual difference*" – this latter having been more than disjointed throughout the text. The boy attempts thus to recover a feeble sense of identity by raising a border between the impure, dark woman and his own "clean white" self. Although just in passing, Kolin infers a very similar conclusion: "[The boy's] longing for a pure presence is fulfilled, ironically enough, by rejecting and being rejected by the Other;" in other words, by mutual abjection (Kolin, "Gift" par. 21). It seems to me, however, that the irony really lies elsewhere: in the fact that it should be the apple, an unmistakable "ancient symbol of sex, sin, and the Fall" (Vannatta 18), that is ultimately established as the only *pure* signifier in the story.

This paradoxical turnabout does make a certain sense when reviewing the third of Williams's signature elements (after the sexual and the racial) that is incorporated into the story: the spiritual (Kolin, "Gift" par. 12). The religious undertones of the text are articulated around a series of symbols that oppose the figure

of the woman, a kind of ancient matriarchal earth goddess (like Olga Kredova in the later story "The Mattress by the Tomato Patch" (1953)), and traditional biblical motifs such as the apple or the sun. For example, although the presence of the catfish in this story very likely originates in Williams's memories of the South (the *Ictaluridae* being a family of catfish native to North America and associated to American Southern folklore), this is also a fish that, being scaleless ("Catfishes"), represents a classic example of the biblical tabooed food Kristeva analyzes in relation to abjection: "Whatsoever hath no fins nor scales in the waters, that shall be an abomination unto you" (Lev. 11.12; also Deut. 14.10). Her association with that fish already lets slip the woman's own abject, anti-biblical character out.

More obvious is the woman's flouting of the biblical (symbolic) Law if we consider how the reference to the meat is framed between the boy's two remembrances of "palms" and "ash" (in the escapade with the girl), and of "one Easter Sunday" with his family. In the context of those religious allusions, the woman seems bold enough to consume meat during a figurative Lent, a transgression that, eventually, the boy is willing to perform too.[124] Moreover, at that precise moment when the boy borders transgression, the references to "Easter" and "supper" transform his eating of the egg into a parodic Eucharistic comm-union with the body of a sacrificial Son in order to participate of the kingdom, not of the Father, but of a subversive Mother that defies the Symbolic's dichotomies and rules.

Certainly, she seems governed by a different logic, one beyond gender roles and dietary restrictions, a logic of the flesh that the youth is for a moment on the brink of embracing. In this way, the return from the woman's tempting flesh to the *cleanness* of the apple symbolizes the youth's reinstatement into the patriarchal Symbolic – which evidently stands on the side of the pure and has the apple as a fundamental icon – after a process of abjection in which:

[124] In one annotation to the *Notebooks*, Margaret B. Thornton mentions that during Williams's first stay in New York City (in 1940, on the Rockefeller Fellowship) he started to use the term "'ashes hauled' as a euphemism for sex" adopted from early blues singers (182).

> the abjected object from which I am separated through abomination, if it guarantees a pure and holy law, turns me aside, cuts me off, and throws me out. The abject tears me away from the undifferentiated and brings me into subjection to a system. (Kristeva, *Horror* 111)

This "system" into which the subject is *subjected*, Kristeva argues, combines the abomination that separates it from the abject with "logical (holy Law) reference" into "the imposition of a *strategy of identity*, which is, in all strictness, that of monotheism:"

> In other words, the place *and* law of the One do not exist without a *series of separations* that are oral, corporeal, or even more generally material, and in the last analysis relating to fusion with the mother. The pure/impure mechanism testifies to the harsh combat Judaism, in order to constitute itself, must wage against paganism and its maternal cults. (*Horror* 94; Kristeva's italics)

Kristeva had already put forward a similar analysis in her notes "About Chinese Women" (1974), where she presents Judaism as the triumph of patriarchal monotheism over an earlier maternal religion:

> Monotheistic unity is sustained by a radical separation of the sexes; indeed, it is this very separation which is its prerequisite. For without this gap between the sexes, without this localization of the polymorphic, orgasmic body, desiring and laughing, in the *other* sex, it would have been impossible, in the *symbolic realm*, to isolate the principle of One Law … ("Chinese Women," 141)

In "Gift," the conflict between the maternal cult the woman embodies and the monotheism that the Law espouses is staged through the tension involved in the former's relationship with the most ancient monotheistic symbol, the sun.[125] As

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[125] In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud traces the founding of the Hebrew religion back to the Egyptian cult of Aton, the sun-god at Heliopolis whose *only* worship became the state religion under Amenophis IV (who accordingly changed his name for Akhen*aton* I), the earliest case of a monotheist

mentioned at the outset, the narration repeatedly emphasizes her *facing* the sun in what looks like a silent defiance, a challenge that she momentarily seems to win when her hand rests "on the back of [the boy's] head… down his neck" (68), the very place that the sun had occupied before, when "he had walked with the sun very hot on the back of his neck" (63). The boy himself, after surrendering to the apple offering, acknowledges that it is "good to sit facing the sun" (66). Besides, the immobility that her dusty trailer represents, without tires and stuck for "a mighty long time" in the middle of nowhere (64), is an equally subtle hint towards her opposition to "the symbolic order … [as] a temporal order" of which the sun is the chief timekeeper (Kristeva, "Chinese Women" 152). Hence her groan after the boy's question, "What time is it?", which remains unanswered (66).

In addition, the woman-sun conflict is also encoded in the cinematic style of narration for which Kolin praises the story. For instance, he details how using a filmic point of view Williams defines the woman's position of power over the boy: "In prose suggesting a low-angle shot, the camera looks up from the young man's eyes as they follow her and are dominated by her image above in the frame" ("Gift" par. 19). Regarding the woman and the sun, another singular camera effect appears in the two panoramic shots that frame the narrative. In the shot at the beginning, just before making out the trailer far ahead, the boy "look[s] back" and sees the shape of the sun become "more *distinct* [italics added] with the fiery brilliance waning." Then, spanning to the front, the town he is approaching "acquire[s] definition" so he can see "a steeple and a few pointed roofs" (64). In this shot, a well-focused religious imagery such as the sun and the steeple stands out. On the other hand, the closing panorama paints "fields … darkening. Grayish dusk closing in … ahead of him, dimly white frame buildings," and whereas the steeple has disappeared, now it is "the car and trailer [that stand] out *distinct against* [italics added] the waning gold light" (68-9). This swapping of focus – the distinct sun that vanishes in order that the distinct trailer may appear – carries a

religion in human history. As regards Christianity, Sir James Frazer notes, for example, the importance that the cult of the Persian deity Mithra, identified with the sun, had in the early days of the Church, to the extent that ecclesiastical authorities instituted Christmas on December 25th following the Mithraic festival of the Nativity of the Sun (416).

similar codification of power as the high-low angle shots between the woman and the boy, as Douglas affirms:

> So many ideas about power are based on an idea of society as a series of forms contrasted with surrounding non-form. There is power in the forms and other power in the inarticulate area, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries. (qtd. in Meigs 101)

Douglas's "series of forms contrasted with surrounding non-form" takes us to the concepts of positionality and dispositionality in the perceptual process (Boothby 21, 60 *ff.*).[126] The conclusion of the story sees the trailer and its owner, representatives of the Maternal Thing and the abjection that "tumble[s] over into … the impossible [R]eal" that lurks in the background of consciousness (Kristeva, *Horror* 11), emerge from the dispositional field and become positionally triumphant, whereas the monotheistic sun "recedes from awareness around [its] figural contour" (Boothby 60). The boy's final recognition highlights the power that such *confused area*, suddenly congealed into positionality, can get to wield: "such women make little rules for themselves, more sacred than Holy Law" (68).

At the end of "Gift," the hitchhiker continues his wanderings with the poise that the return to the *clean* Symbolic offers him, but the story has shown that the principle on which that One Law is based has very fuzzy edges. On the surface, the foreign woman stands for the polymorphic, desiring and laughing (m)Other ("she laughed shortly" on page 66) that should remain separate from the self if the latter is to move on in its maturity as a definitely sexed, autonomous individual. Yet Williams makes clear that he is not dealing with a Cartesian ego, but with a subject-in-process that potentially can traverse that separation or *thetic phase* and revisit the pre-Oedipal, where meaning and

[126] As the explanations in the chapter on psychoanalytic theory let deduce, the pair "dispositional field" and "positional object" can be considered a rough equivalent to the pairs "unconscious/conscious" or " *chora*/ego."

sexual dichotomy blur, the genital gives way to the oral, and the Mother is still an all-satisfying, complete and powerful object of desire. As a result, the separation proves to be not a definitive boundary, but a crossable zone back into the Semiotic where subject and object would fuse were it not for a timely abjection.

The hitchhiker's encounter with the woman exemplifies this experience in an exceptional way – the two nameless characters could easily be turned into archetypes of abjection. The narration hints at the boy's predisposition to such return to the maternal when it focuses on his continuation of the archaic bond between orality and sex (in the eating of the apple excerpt) as well as on their mixing with filth and impurity (e.g. in the Greek girl's remembrance), since "filth and defilement which exist – in light of Mary Douglas' work – on the border of identities and threaten the unity of the ego, epitomize the separation from the mother; they epitomize the mother's *not* being an object of desire" (Lechte 162-3). The boy's memories are a telltale sign of his prospective passage from the *litter* around the Greek girl to the *litter* of the catfish woman, to the mother's *indeed* being an object of desire. The Italian woman is Williams's alternative for "the feminine exalted to the point of mastery" that hides behind Céline's anti-Semitism, as Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror*:

> It is on account of being ... the one who Is and the one who Has that the Jew becomes threatening. So, in order to be protected, anti-Semitic fantasy relegates that object to the place of the ab-ject. The Jew: a conjunction of waste and object of desire, of corpse and life … And I who identify with him, who desire to share with him a brotherly, mortal embrace in which I lose my own limits, I find myself reduced to the same abjection, a fecalized, feminized, passivated rot... (185)

The woman is the one who Is (the flesh) and the one who Has (the meat/flesh) that the youth wants to share in a *mother*ly embrace that places him in the very same position he initially repudiated: feminized, animalized as her catfish-like son – what retrospectively (if we consider his appellation of her as "bitch," 68) would make him into one of those very "sons of bitches" he had disparaged while still on the road (63). Reduced to the same abjection, he puts the woman back in the place of the abject in

order to be protected, imagining her as a rotting *corpse* with that "cancer … already started inside her dark flesh" (68). Yet, ironically, the boy has turned out to be as abject for the woman as she is for him, both feeling the "stifled aspiration towards [each] other as prohibited as it is desired – abject" (Kristeva, *Horror* 47).

This exhaustive analysis of "Gift of an Apple" serves, first, for exemplifying the process of abjection that this dissertation explores, and for displaying the main motifs that will reappear and develop in the next stories in more indirect forms. The process unfolds as a crisis of (sexual, racial, religious) identity for the protagonist of the stories when he/she encounters an other that destabilizes clear-cut dichotomies, who despite being not *normal* exerts a powerful attraction. On the one hand, there is something uncanny about that grotesque other, as it endangers the subject's symbolic preconceptions and its image of self, and lets the repressed surface. On the other, the meeting of the protagonist/subject with this other/abject promises a complete satisfaction, the overcoming of any sense of incompletion and loss. Thus, Williams's narrativization of that Otherness makes use of a series of tropes that suggest that this uncanny encounter takes the subject back to the moment of its inception, to the stage of wholeness and fusion with the (m)Other in the semiotic *chora*, the primary instance of *coincidentia oppositorum*. Fantasies of cannibalism, ingestion, or disgust signal the return of the oral mode of interaction that governs that stage; the experience of liminality makes the inside/outside borders become nebulous; the imaginary coherence of the body disintegrates as the bodily boundaries are affected too by the suppressed drives, which find their way into the narration by means of semiotic effects such as fragmentation of language, silences, swapping of subject/object positions, etc. Although not all of these elements will be present in each story to the same degree, their analysis will be able to unravel the structural and thematic continuity of Williams's articulation of this relationship of subject and abject, which subsumes both the self/other relationship and the identity/body relationship intrinsic to the subject – we should not forget that the first sense of an ego arises from the first sense of a self-contained body, and this latter can only be attained by establishing the inside/outside border that the return of abjected (m)Other menaces.

THE ANDROGYNOUS ABJECT

7

"THE ACCENT OF A COMING FOOT"

> The ego plunges into a pursuit of identifications that could repair narcissism... An empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts – "powerless" outside, "impossible" inside.
>
> Julia Kristeva (*Horror* 49)

In Dennis Vannatta's opinion, "The Accent of a Coming Foot" (1935) is very likely the first story in which Williams infuses a clearly autobiographical component (11).[127] Williams himself acknowledged, in a note attached to the story's unpublished manuscript, that he had felt "something too close to [him]self in the character of Bud and the tension of Catharine," the protagonist couple (reprinted in *Collected Stories* 571). This emotional closeness caused him a sort of heart attack as he was writing the climactic scene: with his heart pounding and skipping beats, he had to stop typing and rush out onto the streets of University City in St. Louis in "an instinctual, and animalistic reaction" (*Memoirs* 38). As the most obvious similarities between the story and the author's life, Vannatta spots the dedication of Williams and Bud to poetry, which makes them both *odd* before their families, and compares Catharine's unconscious sexual frustration to Williams's own struggle to accept his homosexual

[127] The title of the story comes from Emily Dickinson poem "Elysium is as far as to:" "Elysium is as far as to / The very nearest room / If in that room a friend await / Felicity or doom. / What fortitude the Soul contains, / That it can so endure / The accent of a coming Foot, / The opening of a Door!" Williams would use the last two lines of the poem again in *The Glass Menagerie* as projected legends in Scene Six just before Jim's arrival at the Wingfields'.

inclinations. Moreover, the protagonists' characterization does not only contain certain traits from its author, but also partakes of Williams's recurrent inspiration in his sister Rose. Rose, who had a delicate mental state that would eventually lead her to internment and lobotomy, shared Catharine's propensity to emotional collapse as well as Bud's need for isolation – besides the latter's floral name. Vannatta thus concludes that this story epitomizes two converging tendencies in Williams: that of dividing himself between two or more characters, and that of commingling the identities of himself and Rose into the same character (12).

This blurring of identities between Williams and his senior sister is frequently mentioned in studies both about his life and on his work. Many of his biographers chronicle how Rose was for Williams "like his second half" (Hale, qtd. in "Late Plays" par. 46), "an extension of himself" (Vassilis Voglis, qtd. in Spoto 223), "a kind of a double" (Lance 3). Nicholas Pagan even mentions a postcard that Williams sent to his sister and which he signed with the name "Rose" (*Literary Biography*, 122-3). Accordingly, Williams's dramatic employment of the motif of the brother-sister relationship ranges from his early verse play *The Purification* (1940) (which deals very openly with its incestuous risk), or his first Broadway success *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) – where it symbolizes "a study in the duality of male and female in his nature" (Leverich 564) –, to his latest, experimental plays, such as *Outcry* (1975). In this last play, a revision of the previous *The Two-Character Play* (1967), the only two characters, Felice and Clare, are siblings trapped in their house, attempting to achieve a certain psychic integration and a return to an ancestral (and incestuous) union (Thompson 188).

As regards fiction, although Vannatta considers that it is in "Accent" that "for the first time [Williams] clearly employs his own experiences as substance for a short story" (11), there is a previous story in which the intimate affinity between Williams and Rose is already obvious. In Williams's first published tale, "The Vengeance of Nitocris" (*Weird Tales*, 1928), Francesca M. Hitchcock finds the earliest reflection of "the connection between Tom and Rose as so close that they appeared as 'two halves' of a whole person" (595). The correlatives of Tom and Rose in this legend taken from Herodotus are the unnamed pharaoh and his sister Nitocris, who embody

"the undifferentiated androgynous ideal" with which Williams attempts to transcend gender identity (598). Besides their physical description in androgynous terms, the most important connection between the pharaoh and his sister is a "psychological reciprocity" that helps Nitocris plot the revenge for his brother's death just as he would have found it adequate. This psychic bond and their ability to transcend gender roles convert the pharaoh and Nitocris into "two of Williams's most mentally and physically capable characters," the wishful depiction of himself and Rose in their youth. A few years later, Hitchcock laments, this aspiration would be smashed, or at the very least largely altered after Rose's lobotomy. Not surprisingly, when a mature Williams writes *The Two-Character Play*, brother and sister now "represent wounded halves, each alienated from the 'other'" (600-1).[128]

By considering both Vannatta's and Hitchcock's accounts we can shed some light on the dynamics of identity that unfolds in "Accent." We have seen that Vannatta sees features of Tom and Rose mingle in each of the characters: Catharine's inner sexual tensions are Williams's and her psychic breakdown is Rose's; on the other hand, Bud's poetic aspirations are Williams's and his emotional alienation is Rose's. However, according to Hitchcock, Williams transposes himself and Rose into fiction not as different, separate characters but as two halves of *the same person*. Such tendency is first displayed as a harmonious, androgynous bond, such as that between Nitocris and her brother, but later on becomes more pessimistic, for instance in *Outcry* siblings' "'solitary confinement' inside their own subjective experience … divided androgynes of a single personality which ultimately accepts its own shadow-side" (Thompson 187-8).

It seems to me that "Accent" already belongs to this latter type of stories because Catharine and Bud, in reality, are not *two* characters that fuse Williams and Rose, but artful manifestations of *one* split single personality. We will see that the underlying pattern of this story is the depiction of the splitting of Catharine's ego, a

[128] I must acknowledge the existence of two unpublished dissertations that study the presence of androgyny in Tennessee Williams, which unfortunately I have been unable to consult: Hitchcock's "In Search of Brother Adam and Sister Eve: The Quest for the Androgynous Ideal in the Works of Tennessee Williams" (Diss. U of Alabama, 1993), and Tomoyuki Zettsu's "Broken Boundaries: Tennessee Williams and a Poetics of American Androgyny" (Diss. U of Texas, 1998).

narcissistic crisis caused by a conflict of drives that "bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated" in the narcissistic image, is "abjection" (Kristeva, *Horror* 14). For abjection is also the process whereby the subject both recognizes and refuses its corporeality, by virtue of which the boundaries of the self are simultaneously demolished and created: "It is an insistence on the subject's necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality … [and] demonstrates the impossibility of clear-cut borders" (Elisabeth Grosz, qtd. in Weiss 92). Catharine will face such abjection in her encounter with her friend Bud, and a close textual analysis will prove that, although tempting, it is not necessary to resort to biographical sources that link the story's characterizations and real-life Williams and Rose in order to reveal the blurring of identities that takes place in "Accent," and thereby discover that Catharine and Bud have actually *too* much in common.

Catharine's negation of corporeality

The storyline focuses on Catharine, a young girl who has just returned to town after having spent ten months in the city only to find that her bosom friend Bud is not there to receive her. She has to walk in the rain alone from the train station to his family's house, where she will lodge during her visit. At the Hamiltons' Bud's mother and sisters try to entertain her, especially Cecilia, the older sister who had shared school and college days with Catharine and Bud. The atmosphere does not seem very welcoming, however, and Cecilia warns Catharine that her brother has become increasingly solitary and uncivilized, always secluded in the attic and devoted only to writing. Catharine's waiting for Bud's return turns out to be an interval of escalating tension that proves to be doomed to catastrophe as soon as the boy gets home. Although "nothing much *happens* in the story," as Vannatta complains (12), something *does* happen *in* Catharine, and so the story depicts her gradual loss of confidence and the revelation of her fragile identity.

The story opens with a description of Catharine that exposes her need to disguise a delicate self, which she does by means of "a substitute point of focus in

order to mask and deny a painful psychological reality," that is, by means of a fetishized commodity (Tyson 29). A commodity is an object that is valuable not for an inherent quality, but only for the social prestige that its possession confers – its sign-value in Baudrillard's terms (Lane 75). When the Hamilton sisters welcome her into their home, we can read a detailed account of Catharine's new "city clothes" that cause the jealousy of the two *town* girls: "the spring hat of dark blue straw trimmed with red cherries, the gaily printed crepe dress, the brand-new slippers of black suede with silk bows" that still retain their urban luster and are only "slightly mud-flecked" from their walk through town. This first impression makes patent that Catharine's corporeality is deliberately hidden, from head to toe, under the commodities which make up a unified image of herself, the image she wants the Hamiltons, especially Bud, to admire. Just as effectively as "she felt the eyes of the sisters appraising enviously her city clothes," she also "feels," not merely imagines, that the absent Bud must be somewhere around the house, "peeking timidly now and then through the streaked windows, appraising like his sisters her new city clothes" (32-3). Catharine's actual ability to physically *feel* is nevertheless questionable, because this shield of the commodity can only congeal a coherent imaginary ego at the expense of bodily sensations. The fact that she does not realize that she has her gloves on even though she strokes Cecilia's hair points to her usual separation from real feeling, a numbness of sensitivity in her "so icy cold" fingers covered underneath (36).[129]

This use of the commodity to disguise her body is the first sign of the profound misrecognition that Catharine suffers. Given that a person's sense of bodily wholeness plays a decisive role in establishing the groundlines of their subjective identity (Boothby 140), we may expect Catharine's identity to be *embellished,* just as her body is, to mask some sort of distressing psychological reality. Therefore, the narrative rendering of Catharine's thoughts reveals a self-representation that smacks of delusion. During her waiting for Bud, she tries to reassure herself before their definitive reencounter, and so convinces herself that she knows how to behave to help

[129] Catharine only notices the gloves when, several paragraphs after the reference to Cecilia's hair, she "look[s] down at her hands… [and] observe[s] that her black kid gloves were still on" (36).

Bud overcome his seclusion: "Didn't he know that she would make it very easy for him? Just as easy as she possibility could! Catharine knew how to make it easy for Bud." Again, the way to make things "easy" involves a denial of the body. Basing her confidence on her "wisdom to hold herself off" in his presence, she quietly plans to control any gesture towards physical contact that might "frighten him off:" no kiss, no shake of hands, until the right moment of old-time complicity has been reached. Her strategy to do so is, once more, to provide a "substitute point of focus," to divert any attention from her corporeality, now by talking: "She would glance in his direction for only one moment and simply call out very loudly … '*Hello, Bud!*' And then she would go on talking to the others" (38-9). We can observe this strategy at work already in the encounter between Catharine and Cecilia, when at the beginning of their conversation "there was a touch of self-consciousness in the ultra-casual pose of their bodies [and] Catharine was anxious to remove it with a friendly chatter" (35).

Catharine's emphasis in turning attention away from the body marks the spot of her inner conflict, the gap that she tries to cover up with commodities and words so as to make it invisible. She fits into Andrew Sofer's definition of Williams's characters as subjects that transcend the body, "flee[ing] from sexuality to language," by way of "fictions of themselves and of their sexuality [that] carve out a site of resistance, a haven from implacable forces that seek to destroy them" (338-40). Yet such a "haven" from the forces of the body, a narcissistic "conservative, self-sufficient haven" as Kristeva puts it (*Horror* 14), is only a fragile protection against the abyss of the Real that threatens the subject, against the abjection that the Symbolic "must reject, cover over and contain" (Grosz, qtd. in Weiss 92).

Inside/outside the threshold of the body: the semiotic genotext

Despite Catharine's efforts to cancel it out, we can detect the pervasive force of the body throughout "Accent" by analyzing its *genotext*, that is, the workings of the Semiotic that interfere with the linguistic order at the same time as they perturb the stability of the subject. One of the semiotic devices that reveal the drive basis of the

Symbolic is condensation or, in Kristeva's terms, *over-determination* (Lechte 142).[130] The manner in which overdetermination works and its relationship with the unconscious (or the Semiotic) derives directly from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Elements in a dream are overdetermined, that is, they do not have a unitary meaning; they have, as Freud put it, multiple *condensed* meanings. For Kristeva, this primary process of condensation is one of the ways through which a text displays the unavoidable pressure of the bodily drives. The text's "semiotic disposition" presents itself in "the over-determination of a lexeme by multiple meanings which it does not carry in ordinary usage but which accrue to it as a result of its occurrence in other texts" (Kristeva, "System" 28). Quoting Kristeva, Lechte explains what this overdetermination consists in: "an image, word, or *sémème* (effect of meaning deriving from a specific group of words) may be invested with a 'plurality of significations and drive operations' not apparent in the pheno-text due to the effect of repression." For instance, Kristeva analyzes the word "fleur" (flower) in a certain poem by Mallarmé by comparing it with its appearance in other poems, and concludes that it condenses a number of semantic features such as "maternity" or "irony" not evident in the word's initial appearance, but caused by its connotative enrichment within the author's canon (Lechte 144). The result is that all metaphors are overdetermined, Kristeva takes for granted (*Horror* 40).

In "Accent" we encounter two occasions of that overdetermination in the genotextual background. The clearest one is the metaphorical import of the cherries on Catharine's spring hat. Mentioned in the opening sentence (32), they have a continuous presence during the story through references to their tinkling whenever Catharine moves her head (33, 35). Their symbolic role is obliquely suggested when the narration reaches the point where Catharine designs her strategies to divert Bud's attention from her body. Instead of reaching out and touching his hand, her plan is to touch the "bright red cherries on her hat as if to signify by their color something of what she had to offer this time" (39). This is the first appearance of one of Williams's favorite sexual

[130] I will henceforth drop the hyphen and use the form *overdetermination*, following common practice and Kristeva's own spelling in her latter work (e.g. *Horror* 40; also Dervin, "Absent Fathers" 55; Pacteau 80; Thurschwell 35; Yancy 232).

metaphors that will recur in his later work. In *Streetcar*, for example, the devirginating implication is still subtly hinted when, upon meeting the paper boy, Blanche reveals her sexually aggressive side and compares him to a "cherry soda" that makes her mouth water; she will have to content herself with just a kiss, though (*Streetcar* 83-4). On the other hand, Myrtle in the story "Kingdom of Earth" recounts more candidly how she lost both "her cherry" and "her heart" on her boss's desk when she was only fifteen (375). Half-way between these two, the novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* contains a scene where the alimentary and the sexual subtexts interlace:

> A girl at the table ... fished the cherry out of her cocktail and tried to thrust it into Paolo's mouth … She forced the cherry into his mouth. … Her face was suffused, … and his eyes remained barely open as he continued to make the little babylike noises in his throat while one of his hands lolled caressingly in his lap. (122)

In Catharine's case, although she is trying *not* to frighten off Bud, her unconscious virginal offering is hardly compatible with the attempt to make things easy for him. Her allusion to the cherries demonstrates that she cannot escape the influence of the bodily drives even though she intends to mitigate their manifestation. The unspoken threat that underlies her encounter with Bud, the prospect or possibility of bodily, sexual intercourse, makes itself metaphorically present at the very moment that she is actually trying to protect Bud (and herself) from it. Moreover, as with her clothes, Catharine's attempt to divert attention from her body to the cherries attest to her numb physicality: the cherries "clink… brittlely together" and their sound reminds Catharine of the rattling of a human skeleton she once brushed against in a lab (35). This hint of the mortal coldness that affects her sexuality is another clue that advances the eventual realization of her inability to face the *physical* encounter with Bud.[131]

In addition to the more or less straightforward metaphorical condensation of the cherries, there is another "effect of meaning deriving from a specific group of

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[131] This association would make Catharine join the grotesque *freak show* that most of the characters in this dissertation belong to, since "'The Missing Link' and 'The Living Skeleton,' [were] two acts regularly featured in Barnum's exhibits" (Somerville 59).

words" in the text that defies the univocity of language and reveals the bodily forces underneath. Drive-based condensation shows an additional feature as formulated in Freud's study of dreams: condensed elements can be interpreted both visually and *verbally* to better understand the latent content of the dream. Thurschwell provides the following example:

> My friend Talia broke her arm and dreamt that she was Napoleon. … One might interpret the wish underlying the dream as a desire to be as powerful as Napoleon, even with a broken arm. But when Talia repeated her dream to another friend he said, 'of course – Bone-Apart!' The dream's meaning emerged through both its visual imagery – the picture of Napoleon Bonaparte with his hand in his jacket – and a punning commentary on the language of his name. (36)

Kristeva acknowledges that this type of analysis of "*dream* logic" is the only one to devote certain attention to the semiotic articulations that equally dominate dreams and the signifying practice of *texts* ("Revolution" 96).

The signifying process in "Accent" features a similar combination of visual imagery and verbal witticism in the overdetermined use of the word "spring" and, to a certain extent and in combination with it, "wind." Reviewing their several occurrences in the story shows how their semantic interaction pluralizes meaning and jeopardizes the border between inside and outside (the body). That is the very same boundary that abjection blurs when the subject has to contend with "an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside" (Kristeva, qtd. in Weiss 93). It follows that such semantic pluralization can confirm the semiotic disposition of this text and support the abovementioned theory that this story defies the clear-cut distinction between its characters' identities, since the blurring of the inside/outside limits is the most archaic version of the I/Other opposition, as Kristeva affirms (*Horror* 7).

To begin with, we read on the first page that there is a metallic “spring” inside Catharine’s body that threatens her imaginary coherence. Hers is a clear example of Lacan’s theory that

> [the] illusion of imaginary unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of slipping back into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety. (Lacan, “Reflections” 15)

Catharine’s intended dominion over the body proves to be just wishful thinking, a defensive subterfuge of her ego to conceal ungraspable fears and the hazardous unreliability of her physicality. In reality, the mere prospect of meeting Bud again has started a slow but constant arousal of anxiety that operates

> like a relentless crank *winding* [italics added] up inside her some cruelly sharp steel *spring* whose release would certainly whirl her to pieces. But the release had not come. … So the *spring* had to go on *winding* [italics added] itself still tighter till heaven knows what might happen. (32)

This menace to Catharine’s imaginary bodily integrity impends in the story’s background,[132] and its escalating tension is an ominous sign of Catharine’s likely failure in overcoming the estrangement between her and Bud.

However, there is another “spring” that seems a complementary opposite to Catharine’s own and that makes the Gothic reverberations of this story plain. It appears in relation to the Hamiltons’ house, which fulfills all the requisites to be considered a Gothic haunted house, at least in Catharine’s view:

> There was nothing about this house that was calculated to warm a visitor’s heart. It was uncompromisingly ugly. Its lean yellow shape spoke more palpably of age than its creaking timbers, and its interior, with high ceilings, tall stairways, suspended

[132] References appear on pages 33, 37, 39, and 40.

> lamps, and angular furnishings, had a relentlessly vertical look as though one could never lie still in it for a moment but must climb ceaselessly toward some undiscovered submit of darkness. (34)

Through the use of prosopopoeia, the house is another participant in the story – an aged, dead body that "pucker[s] its yellow face malevolently" against the life-giving April that knocks from the outside, while "to Catharine [the rain] sound[s] like sly laughter and whispering of ghosts" resounding throughout its dark cavities. This haunted house follows the Gothic formula that makes it both an actual and an allegorical site. On the first level, it seems clear that the specter that inhabits the dark recesses of this decaying body is Bud. Catharine remembers that the youth had never got "out of his shell," not even during his only year at college, when he was nicknamed "the galloping ghost." This "ghost" has definitely forsaken any bodily (pre)occupation: unshaven, forced by his mother to take a bath, and only half-dressed, as Cecilia explains, Bud has retired to the house's "undiscovered summit of darkness," the attic, and only manifests himself by the pounding of his typewriter (34).[133]

This haunted house follows the Gothic formula that makes it both a real and allegorical site: it represents both the setting of the story (which takes place exclusively within the house) and also the borders of the *interior* space of Catharine's self. We can find examples of this metaphorical use in Williams's poetry too, where he has employed the image of the attic to signal the existence of a hidden psychic retreat:

> I have sensed that somewhere about the premises which I inhabit,
> probably in its storm-wracked attic,
> There lives a dark and cunning old creature
> whom I know as the spider,

[133] Attics are a usual refuge for Williams's writers and artists in general, probably inspired by his own experience in rooming houses in New Orleans. He sets stories such as "The Angel in the Alcove" (1943) or "Chronicle of a Demise" (1948) in attics; still in the early 1980s, one of his last plays, *The Rooming House of Mme. Le Monde* (probably completed in 1982), takes place in an attic that becomes a chamber of horrors, both physical/sexual and psychic. For a detailed account of Williams's use of boarding/rooming houses as settings for his plays, see O'Connor.

obsessively industrious, adaptable to whatever
conditions
have thus far assailed him in his secluded corner.
And so I think of him as the loom of my heart. (“Wolf’s Hour;” *Collected Poems* 134-5)

The inhabitant of that retreat, that *looming* creature, is described in another version of this poem as “nameless, / unknown but most familiar” (“Wolf’s Hour” *ND* 30 version: *Collected Poems* 294); that is, the *unheimlich* or uncanny repressed. Despite the use of a masculine pronoun to refer to “him,” the tenant of Williams’s attic brings to mind the suggestion of the repressed mother/madwoman in the attic in another poem, which links it with evocations of madness and childhood (which moves it closer to the maternal abject):

… The low-peaked roof
would provide small space for an attic to house the lunatic one
who drifts apart till requiring separate enclosure:
screaming ecstatically in its fantasies of that which is its reality,
so alien to your own.
This imposes a most unwanted distinction upon the house
and inhabitants of it.
The ones sufficiently past infancy to enquire, “What is it,
the cry?”
can be given what answer, intelligible to their beginning-to-be
formed minds? (“The Color of a House;” *Collected Poems* 163)

Thus, within the gothic narrative in “Accent” Bud proves to be not only the tenant of the Hamiltons’ house, but also Catharine’s *doppelganger*, an abject whose return brings the “reality” that she keeps “enclosed” and “alien” to herself – her body.[134] She

[134] With a gender reversal, the story becomes reminiscent of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” even more so if we keep in mind the theory that the protagonists are *alter egos* for Williams and Rose – the incestuous connotations would be then reinforced.

imagines him "in her mind's eye" as a spectral body, moving with "an amazing penury of sound" just "like a tall, vague shadow," a ghost drifting through "a thousand different rooms" and "regions of perilous dark" (39, 34). Just like the gothic house is a structure "whose solid actuality dissolves as [it] accommodate[s] (and bring[s] to spectacular figure)" that which haunts it (Savoy, "Theory" 9), Catharine's body and self will dissolves as Bud's own body stops being a shadow and becomes *spectacular* or visually displayed.

Returning now to the overdetermined use of "spring," we can notice that it appears both in relation to Catharine's body and to the house. Just like the former is cold, deadened and haunted by vegetal-named *Bud*, the latter opposes everything that suggests life and renovation: the greenness of trees and the five-day long rain outside[135] – it is noteworthy that the only natural remnant in the house, the logs for the fire, are "artificial" (34). The personified house struggles with "the re*turning spring*" and speaks "a loud denial to the playful *wind*" outside (italics added; 34). Paradoxically, however, whereas Catharine's inner "spring" forebodes a dangerous bodily disintegration, she thinks that the outer "spring" could effect a similar collapse of physical barriers, but in a more positive light. For Catharine, such collapse would help her reunite with Bud:

> She wanted all at once to stand up and beat her fists against the old yellow boards of the house that were frailly forbidding the spring. She wanted to beat hard against them from the inside like April from the outside till the yellow boards splintered and tumbled down and she and Cecilia stood unsheltered in the leafy wetness outside. And then with no threshold to push his timid feet across, Bud would surely be there. … She would be able to wade out to him again and lead him back to the shore… (38; last suspension points as in the original)

[135] The chapter on "Scatological Symbolism" in Havelock Ellis' *Psychology of Sex* explains the erotic underpinning of the rain (Vol. V, Ch. III), which would explain why Catharine makes such a point from keeping the wet branches from brushing her hat and its cherries (33). Water in the story is, however, an ambiguous symbol that can stand for natural regeneration or for death – like in Bud's "cold lake of his loneliness" (34), or Cecilia's remark that "people have to sink or swim" (37).

In her "looking forward to self-mastery," as Lacan put it above, Catharine sees herself capable of affording the risks of eventually pulling down the physical boundaries that scare Bud so deeply. Yet these physical barriers, the "boards of the house," are really a correlative for her body. Therefore, her wish for crumbling of the house's walls constitutes more than the opening of a mere *crack* in the bodily shell that separates her from Bud; it stands for a total collapse of the physical limits, a vanishing of the body altogether with which the "threshold" that indicates the point to be traversed (the site of the sexual intercourse that Catharine fears as much as she desires) would disappear too. However, what Catharine cannot grasp yet is that her wish for pulling down the house's walls, that is, her aspiration to transcend the bodily, requires first an *acknowledgment* of the walls themselves; in other words, a creation and destruction of the boundaries of the body and the ego that she conceals.

In conclusion, the force of the two "springs," the one "winding" *inside* and the other beating down the walls with its "wind" from the *outside*,[136] would have the same outcome: the recognition and obliteration of the body, that border that separates Self and Other and that has to be transcended to access the symbolic realm. That transcendence is Catharine's fantasy, as we can notice in her attempts at denying her body, her focus on the commodity, and her use of chatter. Yet she is not aware that the entrance of the exterior "spring" that she longs for would be as destructive as the release of the interior "spring" that she fears: the body cannot be annihilated without the Self perishing with it. Thus, Catharine's wish of demolishing the house also provides the dream-like visual equivalent to the bodily disintegration that she is trying to prevent, and it testifies to the importance of "the economy of mimesis," for example fantasy, as one more means to detect the drive energy that designates the genotext (Kristeva, "Revolution" 120).

The correlation between the "spring" inside and the "spring" outside continues in the scene of the final encounter between both youths, where it subtly reemerges by means of a linguistic pun similar to the ones that surface in dreams.

[136] Through an analysis of his poems, Linda Dorff has concluded that Williams followed his admired Hart Crane in using the wind as a trope for dismemberment (92, note 15), which further supports this argument on the parallelism between the body's and the house's destruction.

When the sound of Bud's car announces that the moment of crossing the threshold has arrived, Catharine realizes that she may be "ready in spirit" for that traumatic experience, but her body is not ready to *hold off* as planned: the water from which she wanted to rescue the fearful Bud, the "wetness outside," is really *inside* herself, and although she tries to reach "deep into her bones for something that was solid … her bones [are] hollowed out by the running waters of fear" (40). In other words, a *spring* of fear overwhelms her; she will not be able to "wade out" the wetness since it originates *in* her.

This overdetermination of the term "spring" condenses a plurality of interrelated meanings that simultaneously set up an inside/outside frontier and signal the blurring of that divide at the semiotic level – in the Semiotic, the distinction between exteriority and interiority does not make any sense yet (Lacan, *Seminario 2* 151).[137] The climax of this final scene does bring about the expected "splintering" of that frontier ("the moment gathered intensity … [until] it ended with a noiseless *splintering,*" 41), but (obviously) not the vanishing of the body Catharine desired.[138] That will be the end of the process of abjection that marks both the shattering of Catharine's ego after discovering her inability to pull through her fantasies of reconciliation and the separation between Catharine and Bud. Let us turn now to the second factor of this separation and co-protagonist of the story, Bud.

The faceless tenant

Although absent for the most part of the story, we soon realize that Bud plays a fundamental role in the characterization of Catharine so far: her inner tension, her

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[137] "Con respecto a la exterioridad y la interioridad, reparen en lo siguiente: tal distinción no tiene ningún sentido a nivel de lo real. Lo real carece de fisura. … Lo real carece de fisura."

[138] In the quote above, she wanted the boards of the house to be "splintered and tumbled down" (38); at the moment of abjection there will occur such a splintering or fragmentation at the level of the Imaginary, but bodily limits can only tumble down completely in extreme, *jouissance*-full situations like that in the story "Desire and the Black Masseur," as we will see.

daydreams, her refusal of the body have him as their point of reference. In fact, it is precisely his *absence* that sustains the story that remains centered on Catharine's waiting for him, and creates a setting that partly echoes the church scene of the later story "Something about him," as we will see. That scene depicts the protagonist Miss Rose's confrontation with the Real, the subsequent damage to her imaginary consistency, and her attempt at recovering it through imaginary identification. Like Miss Rose, whose experience starts when she arrives at the church only to find out that her friend Haskell is not attending that day, Catharine arrives in town and discovers that Bud is not there as she expected him to be. I have already noted that confronting his *lack* or absence makes Catharine's imaginary integrity falter, triggering the *imago* of the fragmented body (caused by the spring that would "whirl her to pieces," 32) that reveals the existence of the Real, or Semiotic in Kristeva's terms (Boothby 48-9).

After this initial situation, the physically absent Bud takes a particular shape in Catharine's imagination that will reveal his function within her psychic universe. As mentioned above, Catharine employs the commodity to project a poised image of herself that matches her wishful self-concept as a confident woman. Now then, Bud is an essential contributor to this wish of hers because it is by imagining him *gazing* at her that Catharine can bring to fruition this fantasy of identity. The experience of the gaze does not require the actual presence of an-other person looking: "this window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straightaway a gaze," Lacan explains (qtd. in Boothby 253). Catharine continually looks to the muddy windows with the hope of discerning Bud in the act of "peeking" inside, "appraising like his sisters her new city clothes" and admiring her self-control (33, 36). What is more, the gaze is not exclusively related to the organ of sight, as Sartre points out in *Being and Nothingness*: "a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain" can suggest its presence (257). In this fashion, Catharine perceives Bud's gaze also in the form of "little noises … which may betray his stealthy return. … Footsteps moving along the upper halls. Now slow and now hurried. Footsteps on the stair" (39).

Bud is the gaze Catharine needs to attract, as Miss Rose does with Haskell, in order to believe in herself as that new, career-woman just returned from the city. Like the infant experiences its own unity through the influence of the mother's gaze (Boothby 196), Catharine grounds her imaginary integrity and ego on the possibility of being recognized under Bud's gaze. "To exist one has to be recognized by an-other. But this means that our image, which is equal to ourselves, is mediated by the gaze of the other. The other, then, becomes the guarantor of ourselves" (Homer 26). Bud becomes such a guarantor of Catharine's own identity because she desires her own recognition by him, as her musings evince: whenever she envisions their reencounter, the exclamation she puts on Bud's lips is "Oh, it's *you*!" (italics added; 35, 38). He also inspires in Catharine the temporal permanence of the identity that she tries to attain for herself: "Bud was always like that" is just one example of the many statements referred to him containing the adverb "always" or its negative counterpart "never" (36; also 35, 37, 39). Catharine, on the other hand, is a *subject-in-process* exposed to the pressure of the Semiotic: her experience is marked by the repeated use of "now" throughout the story which, like an ticking of an impossible clock, marks the pulse of a time which does not pass. It is always "now," the present, the only time the unconscious knows, according to Freud (Thurschwell 82).

Catharine's characterization of Bud as the gaze also stands in relation to her aforementioned discard of his corporeal component as well as to her other remembrances of him as a voice, a "drowsily delicate flow" that used to read out poetry to her and Cecilia (39, 37). The gaze and the voice are Lacan's two original contributions to the series of figurations of the *objet a* of desire that sustain the subject in its fantasy against the impossible Real (Homer 94). More concretely, the gaze and the voice are the transitional figurations that take the subject from those materializations of *objet a* grounded on the body (the breast, the feces, and the phallus) to the ultimate symbolic intermediary of desire, language. "The gaze is one of the prime figures in which the imaginary relation opens out upon a symbolic horizon," as Boothby puts it (260). Thus, if Catharine belongs to those of Williams's characters whose desire is to "transcend the body" and "flee from sexuality to language" (Sofer 340), Bud exemplifies the perfect fantasy to achieve it. In a narration filtered through

Catharine's point of view, Bud appears as the fetishized *objet a* whose obtaining, she hopes, will let her hold at bay the fragmenting force of the Real inside and return to a symbolic relationship that is like a "book … closed for a while but the place marked plainly" (39).

In actuality, Bud's corporeal absence is the very requirement for his function as the *objet a* of Catharine's fantasy, because "by identifying the gaze with *objet a*," Boothby reminds us, "[it] must be located in the dispositional field. … [i.e.] it cannot occupy the positional focus of attention" (258). As long as he remains a ghost that gazes at her, and his body just a blurred insinuation through the muddy windows, she will still be reassuredly in control. But if Catharine's Bud as the guarantor of her own identity is bodiless, we may anticipate that his actual *physical* manifestation at the end of the story will have tragic consequences for her. The transition into the Symbolic that the gaze and the voice mediate will collapse and the materialization of the *objet a* will imply the subject's return to the imaginary, Semiotic realm, with the corresponding resurgence of the body.

The materialization of the abject (body)

In the final scene, Bud appears in person and confronts a paralyzed Catharine that becomes aware of her illusory self-possession when upon the moment of his arrival her body does not react in accordance (40). This scene depicts how Catharine's construction of identity as formulated throughout the previous pages of the story crumbles down, accompanied by the fracture of her physical coherence, as both are closely intertwined. She trusted that the waters of fear were surrounding Bud and would not affect her, when they really are inside herself; she pictured the splintering of a exterior barrier between her and Bud, when it is her own anesthetized body that interposes between them. More importantly, with Bud's entrance the incorporeal symbolic gaze that Catharine had imagined materializes and stops guaranteeing her misrecognized identity.

This crucial moment takes place when Bud stands at the door threshold looking at Catharine. His former Lacanian gaze, whose main feature is that it cannot be seen (Homer 125), turns into a "palpable blaze" now that "all that Catharine [can] see of him plainly [is] his eyes" (41). The apprehension of a look, Sartre comments, "appears on the ground of the destruction of the eyes which 'look at me'" (258); Catharine's blurring of Bud's body into a "shadow" or a "ghost" had performed such a destruction. It is at this point, however, that Bud's *real* pair of eyes enters the scene, and the gaze as a symbolic referent that she had attempted to manage vanishes. In fact, at the same time as Bud materializes, Catharine's body materializes too because her former strategies to divert attention from it do not work anymore: "She [can't] speak the gay words of greeting nor touch the red cherries that trembled on her hat's brim" (41). The narrator describes Bud's reaction to his perception of Catharine in accordance with this new awareness of her physicality, and transforms the setting of their encounter into the room dedicated precisely to the "acts of the bodily drama" (Bakhtin 286): "Bud bowed … as though this house were a bathroom which he had inadvertently entered at the wrong moment, finding Catharine there unclothed or in an unfortunate pose" (41). No other setting could be more terrifying for Catharine: instead of her protecting, fetishized, clothes, she appears "unclothed," and her speechlessness will not help that "unfortunate pose" go unnoticed, as she had intended before with the chatter in order to remove "the ultra-casual pose of [her] body" in her meeting with Cecilia (41, 35).

All of Catharine's plans for the moment of the encounter are thwarted: her failed defenses, founded on an imaginary, autonomous ego sustained by the other's symbolic gaze, cannot sidestep the threat of the bodily fragmentation that the drives fuel. Although she insists to herself: "Be composed!," she feels "herself impaled like a butterfly," her body exposed and wounded under Bud's "arrow-bright" eyes (40, 41). The butterfly simile is one of the couple of examples that Vannatta terms "generally distasteful sexual imagery" in Williams's indirect citation of Catharine's thoughts (12). However, the use of sexual imagery is not reduced to Catharine's feelings: other terms of the description of Bud's entrance suggest that Catharine's feared moment, the occasion of their sexual encounter, is taking place in this climactic scene. Her

"impalement" by an "arrow" is indeed the bluntest of the metaphors, to which we can add the symbolism of the foot as a substitute of penis (Freud, *Three Contributions* I.2.a), which bestows a new significance not only to the story's title, but more especially to the synopsis with which Williams summarizes what Catharine's existential trial consists of: "the agony of feet coming toward one and of a door thrown open!" (40). Bud's incursion through that door would not be a mere physical entrance *in full,* but a bodily penetration performed with a much more concrete organ.

Consequently, even though Bud is entering his own house, he is an "impertinent intruder" because the door, the liminal space between inside and outside, is clearly the "threshold" of Catharine's own body, which she wanted to dominate. The door's figurative sexual meaning is present as well in the form of a semantic overdetermination similar to that we observed above. Bud pushes the door "all the way" open, and "bangs" the "hatrack" with it (41). Going "all the way" with Catharine, who sports a "hat" with sexually resonant "cherries," could actually be an equivalent to *banging the hatrack*.[139] Distasteful or not, the sexual insinuations are not only evoked by means of visual imagery but also by the verbal witticism that shows the semiotic undercurrent impeding a univocal interpretation of language.

Once the sexual implications of Catharine and Bud's encounter are unveiled, they may seem to contradict the aforementioned argument that this scene concludes with the protagonists *severed* from each other – after all, sexual intercourse is the paradigmatic form of bodily union, not separation. Nonetheless, in its typical context such union takes place between *two* independent bodies whereas, as we have seen throughout the story, both Catharine's and (more notably) Bud's body have been either hidden or dead frozen in the former case, or completely absent in the latter. It is only at the final moment when their physicalities manifest themselves; it is actually when Bud, both physically and textually, ceases to be just a part of Catharine's reveries. Therefore, we can consider that the indication of a sexual intercourse points here not to a physical coming together, but really to the opposite perspective: the possibility of intercourse implies the separateness and closure of two bodies that had gone so far

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[139] We might add to this erotic climax the ominous repetition of "He is coming"(40), "He is coming"(41).

unnoticed. Such will be also the import of John's sexual assault on Flora in "The Important Thing:" the sexual act really signifies the bodily split between a previously identified subject and its not-yet object.

This idea of bodily separation is further supported by Catharine's own comment on the situation, through which Williams accomplishes yet another subversion of the inside/outside border and its parallel I/Other opposition. Rendering Catharine's thoughts just before Bud's appearance, the narration remarks: "She knew she couldn't wait for him any longer. … She wouldn't be able to *bear* the intolerable moment of his *birth* in her presence" (italics added; 40). Hence, Catharine and Bud's eventual re-union is at the same time signified as the exemplary moment of separation of two formerly united bodies, the experience that Kristeva interprets as "the ultimate of abjection". In fact, has Catharine not been *expecting* Bud all along, feeling "a funny feeling in her stomach" (38)? Does "Accent" not depict a "scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), ... sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual," like birth is (Kristeva, *Horror* 155)? Moreover, Catharine's use of the word "birth" carries a further twist in relation to the inside/outside boundary that seems so reversible in this story. A symbol of the opening of the body limit, a "passage of boundaries" that puts a woman "deeply in touch with her body" (Counihan, *Anthropology* 197; also Weiss 52), the birth-giving metaphor transforms here Bud's outside-to-inside intrusion into an inside-to-outside passage. Ironically enough, Bud would turn out to be thereby a "precious new life … given [to] her to an unburdened bosom," that is, Catharine's off-*spring* (40). He becomes thus the expelled abject that "demonstrates the impossibility of clear-cut borders" and "implies the subject's [Catharine's] recognition and refusal of its corporeality" (Grosz, qtd. in Weiss 92).

Bud is the enticing yet distressing abject from which Catharine must become detached (if she wants to recover a primordial sense of identity), a process that also involves the recognition of the inescapable corporeality to which she must erect a fundamental (though fragile) boundary. This process of abjection has taken Catharine's "ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego ha[d] broken away," that is to say, to the body which her self-concept denied. Now, if

the subject is still to survive this ordeal, after abjection there must be a narcissistic "resurrection," "a return to [the] self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven" that the subject formerly occupied (Kristeva, *Horror* 14-5). So, at the end of "Accent," at the same time that Bud disappears as quietly as he appeared, Catharine flees up the stairs to "the *haven* of darkness above" after painfully realizing that it is *now* that they are really separate, and that the only way to endure in life is in a state of "tranquil self-absorption" (40, 42).

Conclusion – (con)fusion of selves

After clarifying the process of abjection, I can return to my initial contention that Catharine and Bud, in reality, are (for the most part of the story) not *two* separate characters, holding clear-cut I and other positions, but manifestations of *one* single subject facing the abject: Catharine, who orchestrates all but the last page when Bud appears, or *is born*, at the expense of her psychic and physical integrity. What "Accent" narrates is "the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject," similar to the "separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech" that pregnancy entails (Kristeva, "Women's Time" 206). We have already discovered the interaction of physiology (the bodily drives of the Semiotic) and language in this story, and briefly called attention to how the metaphor of the birth hints at that separation of self and other. We can now delve into the entangled network of parallelisms that show us how, from the very beginning, Catharine and Bud have indeed "coexisted" and engaged in a continual reversal of positions that suggest that Bud, when he appears to the reader mediated by Catharine's memories and fantasies, is actually a part of her, a projection of her shadow-side.

The most relevant of these reversals is caused by the premise with which the story commences: Bud (perhaps deliberately?) misses Catharine at the station, he is neither there waiting for her, nor is he "waiting on the other side of any door of this house," Catharine uneasily finds out (32). This changes the expected course of events: his absence is the trigger of anxiety that causes Catharine's inner spring to coil and,

more significantly, the protagonists' roles to be inverted. From that moment on it is Catharine who has to stand behind the door withstanding the tension of the wait, as she herself later realizes: "it was now her turn, it seemed, to know all of what he had known" (40). Just like Catharine had "force[d] her way through his pretended forgetfulness" each time they met, he now *forces* his way through her body (35). We may wonder whether Catharine's approach to Bud was certainly as violent as his is now, seeing that Cecilia teases her suggesting that Bud did not go to pick her up because "he was scared you'd bite him or something" (36). In Freudian terms, such oral, cannibalistic incorporation of another person is an illustration of extreme identification, of the consumption of one ego by another. It may be then that Catharine's relation with Bud was as destructive for him as for her is now the experience of abjection that his entrance triggers.[140] As a consequence, the only escape from their tribulations is the same for them both: even if Catharine initially condemns the malevolent caging the house represents – with the ghostly, "undiscovered summit of darkness" Bud inhabits (34) –, when terror overcomes her she feels a similar urge to flee and find refuge in what now presents itself as that "haven of darkness above" (40). At the end (like at the beginning), Catharine *becomes* Bud, sinking in the waters of her fear and finding protection in a regressive, psychic isolation within the darkest recesses of a body unable to reach and be reached by others.

Another example of their mutual resemblance is suggested by their sharing the same body position at different points along the story. When Catharine describes her arrival at the Hamiltons' – "all the way up Elm Street I had to hold my hand in front of me to keep the leaves from brushing my hat" (33) – she is, on the one hand, advancing the noteworthy role of the hat and its cherries (especially the latter's *untouchability*), but she is also impersonating her own image of Bud, whom she later imagines walking with "one hand stretched slightly before him like the feeling hand of the blind" (39). The same position will be repeated by both in the climactic scene

[140] Other details hint too towards the destructive quality of Catharine's relation with Bud; for instance, the consecutive references to Bud pictured as a faun – a mythical figure half-man, half-*goat* –, to the *butcher*'s truck breaking down in front of the Hamiltons' house, and to Catharine's black *kid* gloves (36).

when, during the few seconds they are petrified staring at each other, Bud holds "his hand lifted slightly before him" and Catharine mirrors him with her hand on the staircase's banister (41).

What is more, when Catharine looks through the darkened, rain-streaked, muddy windows with the hope of discerning Bud, is it not a distorted image of herself what those hardly translucent windows reflect? The guarantor of her identity would merely be a fancy, a projection of herself refracted from the streaming windows: she prepares herself to make their encounter easy by demolishing "the house" and avoiding physical contact *for Bud's sake*, whereas it is her own anxiety she is trying to dispel. Catharine's shadow-side (as Thompson put it at the outset) is her problematical relation to her body, which she projects onto the shadow-like Bud in an attempt to get rid of her inner conflict by investing it in the other. As Walter A. Davis explains, such an "effort to help the other must involve a displaced and safe way to deal with something 'wrong' in oneself." That is the situation Williams would later on suggest in his depiction of Blanche and her homosexual husband Allan in *Streetcar*: she approaches him with the unconscious hope that (Davis paraphrases): "if I can make him okay, then I'm okay; rescuing him from his sexual problems delivers me from my own" (88). What is "wrong" with Catharine, her fear of sexual, physical contact, is what she had been convincing herself she would help Bud to confront. Her supposed skill to hold herself off in his presence and her plans to carefully manage their bodily advances are unconscious strategies to justify her own reticence. Therefore, we could say that, for the most part of the story (until he physically appears), Bud is Catharine, the projection of her shadow-side. We can find here echoes of a later "Doppelgänger, [a] threatening figure… that manifests the return of the repressed" and that also depends on a *Catharine* for the reconstitution of his liminal, sublime body into the play from which he (unlike Bud, though) remains permanently absent: Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer* (Gross 239).

To sum up, in "Accent" the characters' identities merge into one another only to be finally and painfully separated, exemplifying the process of attraction and repulsion that we identify as *abjection*. It may be true that "Accent" is the expression of Williams's tortured love for his sensitive, imaginative sister, whom he adored but

whose descent into schizophrenia (manifested through, among others, sexual delusions) haunted him. He confessed that in Rose's delirium he identified part of his own inner turmoil – his *shadow-side*, as it were, what he calls "the enemy within [him]self" or the "Blue Devils" (Leverich 174)–, and that despite his unconditional affection, he felt terrified of ending up like her (*Notebooks* 40, 177). In any case, a keen reader unacquainted with the biographical import of the text could equally notice that "Accent" deals with only *one* subject-on-trial,[141] and agree on the conclusion that, in Catharine's words, the story is all "a game of solitaire" (37).

[141] "Subject-on-trial" is, together with "subject-in-process," one of the possible translations of Kristeva's *sujet en process*, which in French has the double allusion of being "both 'in process' and under legal duress" (McAfee 38).

8

"THE IMPORTANT THING"

> The androgynous is a myth. … However, the androgynous is the truest human being. And if it's a myth, where does that leave us?
>
> Tennessee Williams (qtd. in Fayard 212)

"The Important Thing" (1945) relates the relationship between two college students, John and Flora, two incipient writers that have many things in common. Although this story has not received much critical attention, the few commentaries about it agree about its central theme: "the dominant Williams motif of the outcast" (Draya 654), "an elegy to the marginal world" (Spoto 120), "the fate of the lonely" (Vannatta 44). They pay attention mainly to the feminine protagonist, Flora, who is said to embody "the emotional or physical cripple who suffers intense loneliness and hunger for love and acceptance ... set off from society by [her] looks or manners" (Draya 654.). Only Vannatta admits that John may be "more interesting" since Flora corresponds to an stereotypical figure, the "Rose character" of Williams's oeuvre (44). The biographical details given by Donald Spoto support this view: he explains that the story is Williams's fictional version of his college friendship with Esmeralda Mayes, but that "in the first draft, the marginal, rejected, poet Flora of the story had been named Laura, revealing perhaps a connection between Williams's feelings about his girlfriend and about his sister [Rose] (who would become Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*)" (120).

The fact is that the marginal Flora, even if she plays a fundamental role in the story, can neither be made the central protagonist nor said to "suffer intense loneliness" or any other feeling for that matter, since she remains a mysterious

character inaccessible for the narrative voice. Like in the case of Bud in "Accent," everything we get to know about Flora reaches us through John's voice. It will be his uncanny experience of connection and disconnection with Flora that the story will narrate us. The idiosyncratic features of that relationship and the different stages that it undergoes will unfurl something else than an elegy to marginality: a parable of the constitution of the subject with its side effect, the appearance of the abject.

Exceeding the Imaginary, defying the Symbolic – the ambiguous Flora

The scenery for the first encounter between John and Flora – a ballroom at her college where he goes to meet a girl friend – establishes the conditions for the unusual relation between the two youths. That initial setting is characterized by a stunningly visual atmosphere, "glaring" due to the several "blazing chandeliers" that illuminate the gymnasium where the dance is taking place. The brilliant effect increases with the light refracted by the "highly polished glass" of the long mirrors that cover the walls. In this kaleidoscopic venue the dancers "uneasily" observe their reflections on the mirrors. Moreover, every dancer faces their imaginary counterpart, an-other dancer to form each dancing couple (163). The ballroom is then a perfect analogue for the realm of the Imaginary, which contains the ego and the pole of its identification, be it its image on the mirror or an imaginary other, as Lacan explains it in "The Mirror Stage".[142] John's encounter with Flora in the ball contradicts that premise in an interesting way. When a Harpy-like teacher forces him to dance with an unknown girl, he does not find that imaginary *other* with a unified bodily image to reinforce his own. Instead, he feels "too furious … to even look at her," so that he does not notice the girl's face or figure. The only physical thing he perceives about her is a set of fragmented body parts that intertwine with his own separated members: "the cord of bone" of her spine "beneath

[142] Lacan represents this graphically via his Schema L, where the axis of the Imaginary stretches between *a* (from *autre,* the perceived objects or others with a seemingly coherent body image) and *a'* – the imaginary ego that acquires a precarious sense of consistency and unity by perceiving them (Boothby 82-3).

his warm, sweating fingers and her fine, loose hair plastered … against his damp cheek." On the whole, Flora's corporeal aspect is practically absent – her body has "no weight," it is "unbelievably slender," as she herself will joke later on: "being a fence-pole … you can hide behind anything with the slightest diameter." The most significant consequence of this is that, unlike the rest of the couples, it seems to John that he is just "dancing by himself" – he does not perceive an-other partner in his solipsistic dance (164).

Later on, Flora's imaginary character will continue to be oddly contradictory. Despite her visible delicateness, she demonstrates a deep inner strength, for example, on the several occasions she squeezes John's arm in "a grip that was almost as tight as a wrestler's." This energy tells her apart from the stereotypically feminine "softness and languor which he [John] found physically interesting in girls" (165). That her "odd appearance" is nevertheless interesting is evident from John's descriptions of Flora's face, her only body part that gets to be depicted (168). Not only is the very fact that John describes the same trait *twice* noteworthy, the language used in the portrayals is relevant as well, for both focus on the same features and repeat identical terms:

> Her face was very wide at the top and narrow at the bottom: almost an inverted pyramid. Her eyes were large and rather oblique, hazel brown with startling flecks of blue or green in them. Her nose was long and pointed and the tip covered with freckles. (167)

> Her face… So broad at the top and narrow at the bottom. Long pointed nose, and eyes, flecked with different colors, which were too large for the rest of her and always so filled with superfluous brightness. (172)

Yet the second description is not completely redundant, since in this example a quality of Flora subtly emerges through adverbial modification: her features are not simply "outlandish" but excessive too – a face "so broad," eyes "too large" and "always so filled with superfluous brightness." John seems to have difficulties to capture Flora's appearance in words, reiterating the same expressions when his hidden fascination with

that disproportionate look makes him retry the description. This peculiarity of hers has a baffling effect: no matter how often he insists that she is “by no means pretty,” “not good-looking,” or “almost ugly” (164, 167, 174); he cannot help finding her strangely appealing. After meeting for the second time, he paradoxically finds her “at once homelier and more attractive than he remembered” (167). A weightless wrestler, simultaneously homely and attractive, uniting “the fresh wonder of a child” and “an adult’s mature understanding” (169), Flora departs from the typically feminine and starts to suggest some of the main features of the androgyne (or abject): the combination of opposites and an excessive, overflowing character that can come to be threatening (Pacteau 79). Also contributing to that immoderate nature is the quality with which Flora’s inner intensity endows her behavior: movement. There is “no relaxation in Flora” (165): she speaks fast, blinks her eyes rapidly, nods with “quick eager jerks” (167). “Don’t you ever want to be still?” John asks her; “Never till I have to!” is her answer (171). That constant action is the basis for her motto of sorts: “I’ll always be moving when other people are still, and still when they’re moving” (166). Given that, in her opinion, “the trouble with this world is that everybody has to compromise and conform” (167), such a state of social immobility implies that she will have to “always be moving.” Similarly, her enthusiasm is not centered on any concrete thing, but constantly circulates “so diffuse,” in John’s words (168). That makes it difficult for him to get to figure out the reasons for such vitality, which some times is “so charming” whereas afterwards seems “a little – fantastic!” or right away “absurd” (167, 165, 170).

As a result, Flora’s incessant movement and ambiguous nature clash with her imaginary character also in the most important aspect according to Pacteau’s description of the androgyne: the impossibility of being arrested in an image (Pacteau 82). This is clear in the way John perceives – or rather, cannot *perceive* – Flora’s gender ambiguity. He discovers that he is not able to *visualize* her in the expected roles or situations that are culturally appropriate for girls:

> He could not imagine her lying passively still and quietly submitting the way he thought a girl should to a man’s embraces. (165)

> Other girls on the campus, he could look at and imagine in the future, settled down into average middle-class life… But when he looked at Flora he could not see her future, he could not imagine her becoming or doing any known thing… (170)

The impossibility to pin down Flora into "any known thing" does not preclude, however, John's imaginary impulse from continuing seeking a representation for her, a likeness to some ordinary being that could help appease the uneasiness that her indeterminacy causes. This vision necessarily strays from the commonplace and materializes into a series of "perverse image[s]" (Kilgour 68) that (re)present Flora as a freak, a grotesque creature. For example, while she looks for fossils around a quarry, John observes her at a distance and compares her to a dancing, "bright, attractive little monkey on a wire, her green smock fluttering in the wind" (171), the protagonist of a sort of circus show that evokes both wonder and mockery.[143] Likewise, later on he finds her strikingly reminiscent of "an undersized child he once knew in grammar school" (172). That "timid, ridiculous creature," nicknamed Peekie, suffered the jokes of the large boys but, at the same time, "there'd been something exciting about Peekie" that made him both the center of attention and the school laughingstock (173). That misshapen creature exerted a combination of attraction and repulsion similar to that John now finds in Flora.

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[143] Williams will again use the same image of the monkey in *Orpheus*. In the final pages, Lady Torrance remembers the show her father used to perform when they arrived in the US: he had "a well-dressed monkey. … It had a green velvet suit and a little red cap… The grind-organ played and the monkey danced in the sun." When the monkey dropped dead for dancing too much, her father turned to the public and said, "The show is over, the monkey is dead" (Williams, *Orpheus* 84). Lady's remembrance identifies her with the monkey as Act I included a mention to her own performance with her father in the wine garden, playing and singing Italian ("Dago") songs (13). Furthermore, after being shot by Jabe, she enters the confectionery to die and her final line is, "The show is over. The monkey is dead…" (96). For Judith J. Thompson, this identification rounds off "Williams' darkest tale of humankind's fundamental nature: the story of a monkey and a stud … the vision of man as an animal, bought and sold, a slave to his own base instincts and abused by those more brutal than he" (qtd. in Hall 694). Yet a dancing monkey dressed in green velvet can hardly be a good example of instinctual behaviour.

Thus, Flora stands as an apt candidate to represent the abject, the ambiguous, in-between which defies categories and at the same time refers to the semiotic wholeness of the *chora*. As such, her oddness is not restricted to the realm of the Imaginary, but disrupts the Symbolic too. We may notice that in his linguistic relationship wit Flora, John experiences almost the same situation as that of "dancing by himself:" there is such a surprising accord between their discourses that it seems John is really talking to himself when he converses with her. He identifies most of Flora's utterances as equal to his own thoughts:

> How extraordinary it was that she and John should feel exactly the same way about this! (165)
>
> [He was] astonished at the way her words fitted exactly what he had been thinking. (166)
>
> John had felt the same way about joining a fraternity and he told her so. (167)

The effect of this unusual agreement is to expose the unsatisfying artificiality of language. John's encounters with Flora revolve around unflagging debates in which both youths seem to share one mind, to the extent that when he fumbles for words she provides them as if "know[ing] intuitively what he was trying to say" (167). Nevertheless, although John always feels "that he had a great deal to say" (167), their long discussions end up "without making any impression upon the other's mind" (171). Language is discovered to be an empty tool and not a personal possession for intimate expression: not only do John's thoughts find articulation through Flora, but afterwards he also echoes Flora's phrases – those he had previously recognized as his own ones. This happens, for instance, in the dialogues regarding their respective attempts to publish their literary pieces:

> 'Why don't you [publish them]?' asked John.
>
> 'Oh, I don't know,' said Flora. 'I think the main thing is just expressing yourself as honestly as you can. …'

> …
>
> How extraordinary it was that she and John should feel exactly the same way about this! (165)

> 'My goodness, why don't you?' exclaimed Flora.
>
> 'Oh, I don't know,' John said. 'I think the main thing is just expressing one's self, don't you?'
>
> Immediately afterwards they both laughed, remembering that Flora had said the same thing about the story her English teacher had wanted her to send to Harper's. (168)

The overall impression is an uncanny mutual reverberation, and from John's perspective it seems as if discourse was unnecessary to communicate with Flora, who intuits his most inner feelings without having to tell her. It might then be that she is not so odd after all, if she is so close to his private self.

In addition to this, as the androgyne's rapport with the Symbolic is everything but trouble-free, Flora acts in boldly rebellious ways towards the representatives of the Law: she refuses to join a sorority, despises the participants in the spring dance, and chooses not to worry about human relations, living her own life the way she pleases. Initially, John admires these disobedient attitudes and likes Flora's "proud defiance" (167) so that, like their discourses, we witness how their positions converge progressively: "They were *both* on the staff of the University's literary magazine," "they *both* joined the Young Communists' League," and eventually "they *both* remained in the University," even though John had been threatened with expulsion due to a pamphlet attacking fraternities and academic conservatism, and for Flora's promise had been: "If you get expelled … I'll quit school too!" (italics added; 168). Their (re)union reminds us of that of the two halves of Aristophanes's hermaphrodite, "clinging to each other, thus dying of starvation" (Pacteau 66): enmeshed in their conversations, John and Flora realize too late that "both of them had missed their lunch" (168).

In the semiotic *chora*: Flora as abject

For John, this identification and concurrence with Flora is characterized, as we have seen, by a mixed feeling of fascination and repulsion that clearly exemplifies Pacteau's description of the encounter with the androgynous other. Just as for the gazer's ego the androgyne represents both a figuration of desire and a threat to its identity, for John Flora is the trigger of a constant excitement but she also jeopardizes his individuality. Not only does she not offer an imaginary counterpart to help coagulate his ego, but she also disrupts the principle of difference that rules the Symbolic by *mirroring* his position there, echoing his discourse. If his own thoughts, feelings, and sympathies are articulated by this ambiguous, freakish girl; if their many common interests "served to draw them closer together," John risks discovering that he is not so different to her, as he comes to wonder: "Perhaps it was the contagion of Flora's intensity" (168); "Perhaps he was no more like other people than she was" (170). John experiences what Kristeva denominates "state of abjection," a position of non-separation between subject and object where the former finds its borders threatened by the latter, an "abject" both repellent and seductive (McAfee 49-50). Possible examples of the abject are "the horrible and fascinating abomination which is connoted in all cultures by the feminine or, more indirectly, by every partial object which is related to the state of abjection" (Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis" 317); in her androgynous femininity, Flora embodies both cases.[144]

Kristeva locates the appearance of the abject before the Symbolic and the Imaginary, in the earliest stages of her subject-in-process in the maternal *chora* (McAfee 47). Correspondingly, John faces something in Flora that transcends imaginary *and* symbolic representation and, consequently, undermines the supremacy of this second order as well as it represents the girl's most disturbing aspect. First, we have already seen that Flora's excess and idiosyncrasy are impossible to be *visualized* within the conventional social contexts. In addition, verbal description is not enough

[144] This "partial object which is related to the state of abjection" corresponds to the Lacanian *petit objet a*, and the androgyne (m)Other is its primordial configuration.

for John to convey her peculiarity, to pin her down symbolically. Lacan bases the ascendancy of the signifier on its use "to mark something that escapes representation … to designate something that overflows the imaginary economy; it says, in effect, 'there is something extra here, I know not what'" (Boothby 216). When John tries to define Flora's *overflowing* character he finds himself lacking in words, and only an indefinite circumlocution – actually, very like Boothby's – attempts to justify why he feels so strangely attracted to her:

> But there was something about her, something which already excited him a little… (164)

> But there was something exciting about her … There was something about her that he wanted to set his hands on… (173)

That "something about her," whose effect is to produce a constant excitement on John's part,[145] has a pervasive presence throughout the story; or more accurately, it remains ubiquitous in its *absence*, never concrete nor definable but lurking behind imaginary and symbolic realizations that can only encircle it. That is precisely the quality of the Real, in which, according to Lacan, two things concur: the unrepresented dimension of the subject's own desire and the Thing, "the unencompassable kernel at the heart of the object" which artistic practice makes "at once present and absent, present *in* its absence" (Boothby 263, 214).

By means of the phrase "something about her," the symbolic signifier gets as close as it can to represent the facet of the abject related to the unrepresentable order of the Real, or in Kristeva's terminology, the semiotic *chora*. When Kristeva takes the notion of the Real from Lacan, she integrates it into her *Semiotic*, the extra-verbal signifying mode in which bodily energy makes its way into language (McAfee 17). Within the Semiotic, the *chora* is the primordial space of union between mother and child, where the subjectivity of the latter starts to be both generated *and* negated. This process of *negativity* can be discerned in John's experience so far: he has discovered

[145] References appear on pages 164, 165, 167, 168, and 173.

his own subjective thoughts and feeling by means of Flora's words, but this also negates his own subjectivity in that they are not *exclusively his*, but part of the (m)Other with which he shares a space where there is not a difference between subject and object yet. An example of this appears in the quotations above where he echoes Flora's words. In the utterance "I think the main thing is just expressing one's self," the pronoun *I* could be either John or Flora, since both repeat the same sentence. This *I* exemplifies the undifferentiation between John and Flora, and the instability of the subject in language, as Lacan (and Kristeva after him) has shown:

> Following the linguist Emile Benveniste's (1902–76) conception of 'I' as a *shifter* – as having no specific referent but in the act of speech designating the person who says 'I' – Lacan argued that the 'I' in speech does not refer to anything stable in language at all. (Homer 45)

This repetition of the same signifiers with different signifieds illustrates one of the genotext's deviations: "the replacement of the relationship between the protagonists of any enunciation as they function in a locutory act" (Kristeva, "System" 28-9). When Flora and John realize this mutability of the signifier, the outcome is distinctly semiotic: "immediately afterwards they both laughed" (168).

Besides, in Flora's portrayal several hints point towards a parallelism with the maternal *chora*, the chaotic, motile space of the drives, and the surfacing of the Semiotic. The bond between Flora and the maternal Semiotic is obliquely suggested by an appropriate image: leafing through a book of poems that she had lent him, John comes upon *her mother's letter* – a maternal contribution to the Symbolic, so to speak. I have already noted that her close relationship with John approximates the state of abjection where it is not possible to separate between subject and object and which takes us back to that primeval union with the (m)Other. Also, Flora's behavior is characterized by a continuous movement and by the dispersion of an unquelled energy on multiple things that "caught her attention" one after the other (168). Her own words when describing her somewhat hostile attitude towards people suggest a similar disorder: "it will be a terrible mess and a mix-up from start to finish!" (166;).

Furthermore, Flora's discourse does manifest the "pulsional pressure on or within symbolic language" through which the *chora* can be perceived (Moi, Introduction 13), as we can see in the *excessive* features of her dialogues that cannot be reduced to the normative components of language. "Prosody, word-plays, and especially laughter fall within the ambit of the semiotic," John Lechte enumerates (129). To the first category belong all the "excited inflection[s] in her [Flora's] speech" which we can detect in the innumerable exclamation marks that close all but a couple of her turns (165). More importantly, Flora most often presents the last of those semiotic manifestations: laughter. "Everything that she said had a wry, humorous twist," and her chuckling punctuates her speech throughout the story (164, 168, 169). In fact, John and Flora's opening conversation at the dance arises when she starts laughing and he first addresses her by asking "What're you laughing at?" Her laughter is disquieting, and John suspects that it points to a deeper knowledge that cannot be revealed: even if the matter was not humorous, "she would laugh slightly and John had the impression that she was unusually clever" (164-5).

It must be stressed that it is actually thanks to John's *impressions* that we learn about Flora, whose intimate thoughts and feelings remain occult for the narrative voice. Her unattainable imaginary representation, her reverberating words, her overflowing strangeness ("something *about* her") that manifests itself in semiotic devices and insinuates an exceptional knowledge – all reaches us through John's experience as the subject that encounters the androgynous abject. It is therefore his reaction towards Flora's enigma that constitutes the focal point of the story. That reaction, nevertheless, proves to be more complex than the easily conciliatory one Ren Draya succinctly suggests: "John, the rather more ordinary young man who is drawn to Flora, learns to accept the girl as she is" (654). Quite the opposite, John will live through the difficult tension of having to come to terms with the anxiety that the state of abjection causes him.

John's identity becomes decentered by the encounter with Flora, because recognizing himself – as he does when he listens to his own thoughts through Flora's words – implies accepting the presence of the (m)Other as a component of the subject (Payne 95). He realizes the "feeling of incompletion" that makes him "strangely

miserable" (171), and clings to the hope that that *something about* Flora could appease his anxiety. He tries to incorporate the mystery of the (m)Other, that surplus which, he senses, is lacking in himself. All through the story, John holds the prospect that an actual (let's say, imaginary) manifestation of that "something about her" can be eventually feasible, but a number of textual clues point at the conflictual character that it would involve. For example, when he attempts to find out some personal information about Flora, an initially innocent question leads to a kind of existential interrogation:

> Once he asked her where she came from.
>
> 'Kansas,' she told him.
>
> 'I know, but what place in Kansas?'
>
> He was surprised to see her face coloring. …
>
> '…it doesn't matter where you come from. It only matters where you're going!'
>
> 'Where are you going, then?'
>
> 'I don't know!'
>
> …
>
> 'Where are you going?' John repeated under his breath.
>
> Flora hid her face in the notebook and continued laughing.
>
> 'Where are you going, where are you going, where are you going!' John whispered. *He did it to tease her* [italics added]. She looked so funny with the black leather notebook covering her face, only her braided hair showing and her throat flushed Turkey red.
>
> All at once she jumped up from the table and he saw that her face was contorted with crying. (169)

This scene not only presents John's attempt at testing Flora's unusual cleverness verbally, but also anticipates their final encounter in its passing from symbolic to imaginary destruction: his insistent questions both dismantle her apparent wisdom and manage to shatter her only imaginary coherence, her face, which first disappears behind the book to end up "contorted" after his constant mockery. His verbal *teasing* is not a mere joke that stops there, but its hostile undercurrent on the imaginary level will

emerge afterwards when John will conclude that the way to grasp that intriguing "something about her" is "to set his hands on [it] in a rough way – twist and pull and *tease*!" (italics added; 173).

What looks like a simple questioning is really a sign of the incipient aggressivity that taints the effort to seize the overflowing aspect of Flora: as the Symbolic proves ineffective, the Imaginary takes its place. As we have seen, John's other approaches to Flora on the side of the Symbolic stumble upon the echoing reciprocity of her words, so that, despite his incessant questions, nearly all she says has the ringing of the *already known* – "a brilliant statement, though it sounded a little familiar as if he [John] had come across it somewhere before in a book" (171). This is an pertinent exemplification of the insufficiency of language to concrete that *unknowable* "something" whose lack constitutes desire and which is beyond the Symbolic. Moreover, on the rare occasions when she tells him something not so familiar, misunderstanding ensues: "… if we hold on to our personal integrity everything won't be lost!" she exclaims, while John "wasn't quite sure what Flora was talking about, and personal integrity seemed the vaguest of terms" (166). The greatest misunderstanding, nonetheless, remains unnoticed by John himself and gives the story its title. The key lies in their first conversation, which Flora brings to a close by stating her purpose in life:

> 'What isn't silly, in your opinion?' asked John.
>
> …
>
> 'The Important Thing isn't silly!'
>
> 'What Important Thing?' John asked.
>
> 'I don't know yet,' said Flora. 'Why do you think I'm living, except to *discover* what *The Important Thing* is?' (italics added; 166)

John seems to unconsciously embrace a similar goal when later on he summarizes his feelings in relation to his friend:

> *Something very important* [italics added] was going to happen between them. He could not have explained why he felt that way. … When he was with her he felt the kind of suppressed excitement a scientist might feel upon the verge of an important *discovery* [italics added]. A constant expectation or suspense. (168)

However, we as readers can detect that John's "important something" cannot possibly coincide with Flora's "The Important Thing," *capitalized* in every example above, be it mentioned either by her or by John. This subtle typographical differentiation denotes that the latter misinterprets the character of this "Thing" and relegates it to the realm of the Imaginary, just like the lower case "other" is not the complete equivalent of the big "Other" but only a partial imaginary materialization:

> There is an important distinction being made here by Lacan between the little other and the capitalized big Other. The lower case 'other' always refers to imaginary others. ... This is the other of the mirror phase who the infant presumes will completely satisfy its desire. ... The big Other, on the other hand, is that absolute otherness that we cannot assimilate to our subjectivity. ... It is also the discourse and desires of those around us, through which we internalize and inflect our own desire. (Homer 70)

In his attempt to find the materialization of "something about her," John is aspiring to solve the question of his own desire by internalizing Flora's desire for "The Important Thing" but degrading it to a lower case "important thing," to an imaginary equivalent that could help him abandon abjection and re-stabilize his ego. However, abandoning the state of abjection involves that "the imaginary institution of the ego is stabilized only at the price of a profound alienation of the subject from its own desire" (Boothby 13), the desire that Flora represents. In consequence, John's recovery of this imaginary stability will have Flora as its necessary victim. The final scene of the story is the crucial moment when the consequences of this misconception will be clear: what John *interprets* as the culmination of his desire and the release of his anxiety – "Suddenly he thought he knew what the important thing was that was going to happen between them" (173) – is not the epiphanic discovery of "The Important Thing" the story's title

alludes to, but the violent des-amalgamation from the *chora* and the materialization of the *objet a* that the androgyne embodies.

The moment of abjection

The closing event represents the peak of the aggressive tendency on the imaginary level that we foreshadowed in John's verbal harassment and the shattering of Flora's face. The two friends meet in a secluded hill in the country where John ends up assaulting Flora physically. The consummation of the rape remains doubtful, and although the violence of the act is unquestionable, it nevertheless fits as the corollary for the state of abjection that the story exemplifies. Even the protagonists assume the inescapability of such ending: "They accepted this thing, this desperate battle between them, as though they'd known all along it was coming, as though it had been inevitable from the start" (173). There are clear resemblances with *Streetcar*, a play that Williams began to draft the same year that "The Important Thing" was published (Williams, *Notebooks* 433). "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!" exclaims Stanley while carrying Blanche to bed (*Streetcar* 130). For Fleche, Blanche's rape "suggest[s] an overthrow of meaning" and a relativization of temporality (*Disillusion* 105), two features that we can actually perceive in Flora's rape too.

First, the finale does bring us reminiscences of the starting scene of the story, not only for its setting in spring and its references to "gay parties and dances that night" (173). Upon this last encounter, the Symbolic stops playing the significant role it has had in the central part of the story. Instead, there is a restoration of the Semiotic in its various manifestations, for instance, orality (they eat "deviled eggs" and drink wine), and a musicality in their dialogue that invites a poetic reading:

> "I wish I had time to make you a wreath, …
> You'd look too adorable with a wreath of green leaves!"
> "Why don't you be a nymph? …
> Take off your clothes and be a wood nymph!

> I'll chase you through the birch trees!" (171-2)[146]

Beyond this excerpt, their conversation is reduced to a kind of metalanguage. The two students have met to prepare for an examination in French, so that their formerly long, profound discussions are now cut into a drilling of meaningless structures, words, and grammar rules. John, in fact, "no longer listen[s]" (172), just like at the initial ball "he couldn't hear a word she was saying" (164). As Bedient puts it, he is on the verge of "the abyss on the far side of abjection … [like] those who use words without any belief in them" (47).

Once the symbolic figuration of *objet a*, language, fails, the relationship self/other returns to the imaginary level, where the only way to establish an individual self is by aggressivity. As Savran puts it, the "impossibility of discourse to contain and express desire" is the cause for "physical brutality" (*Communists* 126). So, John's focus turns now to the bodily, sensory phenomena that, according to psychoanalytic theory, can help him institute his separation from Flora:

> Lacan's stress on the privileged role of the body image is also an echo of key points in Freud's own description of the origin of the ego. Freud related the function of the ego, always centered on defense, to the protective tegument of the body and to its role in demarcating the boundary of self and world. Yet the visual sense of the body's wholeness clearly comes to play the decisive role in establishing the groundlines of subjective identity. 'The ego,' he says, 'is first and foremost a bodily ego.' (Boothby 140)

Unlike the initial scene where John's and Flora's bodies fused in a dance of fragmented parts – her hair plastered against his cheek, her lips against his throat –, we now witness the splitting of their physicalities, necessary for John's establishment of his identity. Their fight concretizes exactly the same body parts in their – from now on –

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[146] The alignment of the dialogue on the page has been modified to make clear its rhyming pattern. The ellipsis correspond to the narratorial remarks "she said" and "John asked," which would actually be absent in the diegetic dialogue.

two separate bodies. He becomes "newly conscious of the life in his body" and experiences it independently: he "flexe[s] his legs, rub[s] his stomach and arche[s] his thighs" (172). When he also becomes aware of the physical side of Flora (formerly overlooked but for her face) and his eyes travel "down her body," he first "look[s] at her legs," after that "place[s] both hands on her thighs," and in the fierceness of their struggle kicks her in the stomach "trying to make her lie still." Likewise, Flora responds by attacking that part of John's that had corresponded to her physicality so far: "Flora clawed at John's face and John's clawed at Flora's body … John's face was scratched and bleeding in several places" (173). Injured in face and stomach, they remind us of the halves of the mythical hermaphrodite as they were healed by Apollo: after their division, he gave a turn to the face and pulled the skin from the sides all over the belly, where the navel will remain as a memorial of the primeval state (Plato 575-6).

Not only face and stomach, but also that *skin* that is pulled to cover the seminal wound will come into view at this defining moment. The skin actually works as a kind of catalyst for those two sides of Flora that otherwise would seem mutually exclusive: her earlier characterization as the emissary of the unrepresentable order of the Real or the maternal *Thing*, and the introduction of her bodily, material side. Skin is the part of her anatomy that really fascinates John and prompts his assault: "Her skin was the most attractive thing about her. It was very fine and smooth and white…" (173). Flora's skin is the innermost border of the imaginary body, a swathing for the kernel of the Real stirring below:

> Indeed, *das Ding* [the Thing] is the real core around which the unity of the imaginary contour is wrapped. … The imaginary becomes the power by which the skin of appearance is stretched *over the empty skull of the real*. The imaginary is the power of the veil, the power of seduction *par excellence*. (Boothby 211-2)

After John's teasing abandons the ineffective linguistic and becomes a wish to "twist and pull and tease" Flora's especial *something* physically, "to *set his hands* on" her Real appeal, it seems inevitable that he encounters her skin as the veil to be torn in

order to finally discover the "Thing" behind. Yet as Boothby explains, the Imaginary only "gives the illusion of fullness, of substance, of filling-out what cannot be filled" (211), and that will be one of John's discoveries at the end.

The few critical reviews that consider this story give a different interpretation to its scene of sexual assault. Draya does not mention it and simply classifies the story within the group of Williams's texts that "examine the relationship between sexual knowledge and the elusive sense of fulfilment" in a relatively abstract style – in contrast to more explicit stories like "Kingdom of Earth" (655). Vannatta does highlight the dramatic ending and suggests that John's "rage during the attempted rape at the climax may stem less from frustrated desire than from the eruption of unacknowledged homosexuality" (44). Fedder, on the contrary, seems to disregard any homosexual connotations when he compares John and Flora's relationship with Paul's abortive liaison with Miriam in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, both depicting "the awakening or destruction of a virginal figure by a virile representative of the claims of the flesh" (32-3). An analysis from a Kristevan perspective has placed the motive for the rape in the sate of abjection that John has experienced throughout the story, a threatening state of pre-objectal undifferentiation that preserves "the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from [i.e. abjects] another body in order to be" (Kristeva, *Horror* 10). The sexual act itself is then not as relevant as that bodily splitting that the narrative exposes and that constitutes what Kristeva denominates a *thetic* moment: a break by which the previously identified subject and its not-yet object divide. After this phase, in which "the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects … detached from the semiotic *chora*" (Kristeva, "Revolution" 99-100), the advent of the sign – the return of the Symbolic – will finally be possible. The description of all the consequences of John's undergoing such a thetic phase occupy the concluding paragraphs of the story.

Acknowledging the loss

John's change after this abjection can be discerned from his disappointed words once the struggle is over and he realizes he has only discovered that *illusion of fullness* of the Imaginary: "We didn't have anything – we were fooling ourselves" (174). Two interesting details arise from this statement. The first one is the obvious frustration of John's expectation to grasp the ungraspable in Flora, to find out the "Important Thing" behind the "thing" of mere sexual intercourse. He comes close to understand that the Thing is an "object that is nowhere articulated, it is a lost object, but paradoxically an object that was never there in the first place to be lost" (Homer 85). Kristeva defines the abject in similar terms: "The abject is the violence of mourning for an 'object' that has always already been lost" (*Horror* 15). The Thing, like the abject, is a construction that relativizes temporality, as Fleche put it above: it is only perceived in retrospect when we feel a sense of incompletion that makes us think there must have been *something else* whose recovery could make us complete. Yet the subject cannot find what is/was not there, and only a constant quest remains, as John recognizes:

> He and this girl had been searching for something else. What was it? Again and again later on the search would be made, the effort to find something outside of common experience, digging and rooting among the formless rubble of things for *the one lost thing* [italics added] that was altogether lovely – and perhaps every time a repetition of this, violence and ugliness of desire turned to rage. (174)

Williams places his protagonist at one of the main crossroads that characterizes the postmodern desiring subject, as Slavoj Žižek explicates: "we mistake for postponement of the 'thing itself' what is already 'the thing itself', we mistake for the searching and indecision proper to desire what is, in fact, the realization of desire" (qtd. in Myers 95). For this subject-in-process, desire is never to be fulfilled, it is only the "the search," the aspiration of satisfaction, that constitutes desire; the frustration of the Cartesian ego before this discovery is the cause of that violence, ugliness, and rage.

Secondly, John's statement above also reveals that his situation in relation to Flora has varied, because it is the first time in the story that he uses the pronoun "we." He does not find himself immersed in the previous undifferentiation of abjection whereby Flora and he indistinctly shared the pronoun "I," which could stand for any of them in the sentences they echoed. On the other hand, once John abjects Flora and separates from her he achieves a (however precarious) sense of individuality that allows him to count on himself as independent and on Flora as an-other different from him, and so the use of "we" becomes possible. Yet this "we" is not a dialectical one, a synthesis of "self" and "other" (Homer 23) – that was actually the situation *before* abjection. Instead, it constitutes a recognition of their difference, as Irigaray argues:

> I recognize you is the one condition for the existence of I, you and we… This *we* is the work of the negative, that which cannot be substituted between us, the transcendence between us. It is constituted by subjects irreducible one to the other… (qtd. in Terzieva 146).

Abjecting what is other to himself, John creates the borders of an "always tenuous" self (McAfee 45) and eventually recognizes Flora as a different entity to himself – in fact, when he uses "we" he is speaking "to himself." This is what the narration makes clear when, after having focused exclusively on John's consciousness, we encounter the first reference to Flora's formerly inaccessible impressions: "She felt the sudden turning of understanding" (174). She is now an-other subject intricately connected to John – necessary for his own constitution – but also separate, someone that even *feels*.

Flora's different status is also manifest in another of John's statements – the last word he utters in the story: "Flora…" (174). This is the first occasion he actually calls out the girl's name, a symbolic signifier with which John had only had a brief and passive relation – "He [had] caught the name Flora shrieked through the increasing din" of the opening spring dance (164). The act of naming is specially relevant to Kristeva, for without the thetic "the child cannot name what she has lost. It will never be an *object* for her, but an unnameable *thing*" (Homer 60). It is after the "founding experience of separation" that one can achieve "the acquisition of a capacity for

symbolization through the definitive detachment of the rejected object, through its repression under the sign" (Kristeva, qtd. in Hsiao 59). Consequently, John can now "repress under the sign", that is, actively *name* Flora in what represents both the ultimate confirmation of their separation and his attempt at cancelling her destabilizing effect by pinning her down symbolically: "The sign represses the *chora* and its eternal return. Desire alone will henceforth be witness to that 'primal' pulsation" (Kristeva, *Horror* 14), or in Williams's words above, "again and again later on the search would be made."

As a result, it seems logical to expect that, after being abjected and repressed under the sign, Flora will lose her "something" exceptional; that after his aggression, John will have attested that she is no more especial than other women. Such would be the presumable consequence once the "power of the veil, the power of seduction *par excellence*" (Boothby 211-2) of her imaginary, bodily side has been torn, or as said by Pacteau: "The androgynous figure has to do with seduction, that which comes before undressing, seeing and touching … once unveiled, … it becomes a woman or a man, and I (myself) resume my position" (78). A traditional narrative would finally pinpoint Flora as a woman and have John resume his position as a stable ego; yet Williams's story does not offer us such a straightforward closure.

As we know, in the Kristevan paradigm the return of the semiotic *chora* impends over the Symbolic to disrupt its seeming solidity. Similarly, "what makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self" (McAfee 46). Flora's abject nature does not completely disappear even after the story's climax, but instead becomes a particular trope that intermingles those conscious and unconscious sides: the androgyne. Like the Thing or the phallus, which are only discovered in retrospect (Salih 85), Flora's androgynous character, despite the several hints and textual clues this analysis has observed, is not acknowledged by John. Only now he realizes it looking back and uses it as the ultimate definition to label her:

> She was not like a girl. He wondered that *he had never noticed before* [italics added] how anonymous was her gender, for this was the very central fact of her nature. She belonged nowhere, she fitted in no place at all, she had no home, no shell, no place for comfort or refuge, she was a fugitive with no place to run to. (174)

The only satisfaction left for John is trying to achieve an interpretive closure of Flora, because:

> [since] the pulverization of the abject … does not always satisfy desire, the writer is tempted to give one interpretation and one only to the outer limit of the nameable. … What once defied discourse now becomes the ultimate object of one and only one interpretation… (Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis" 318).

Recognizing androgyny as "the very central fact" of Flora, John reflects the subject's need for assigning univocity and meaning to the meaningless, to mask the void that he has fleetingly glimpsed in his encounter with the Real. On the surface, he seems to have endowed Flora with a somewhat successful symbolic closure, a feat similar to that of uttering her name, for "once it has been named, that [the *chora*'s] functioning, even if it is pre-symbolic, is brought back into a symbolic position" (Kristeva, "Revolution" 126). The problem with this symbolic interpretation is, as we know, that the androgynous figure is in itself opposed to *only one* definition, that *androgyny* is an apt example of the slippery signifier. Actually, John's own word choice already announces that contradiction: his label for Flora's gender is "anonymous," a signifier that only covers the lack of a definitive name – just like her skin covered up the impossible Real.

This confirms that the Semiotic's pulsional pressure on the Symbolic, revealed by means of "contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences" (Moi, Introduction 13), still subsists in the last paragraphs of the story, especially in the last quotation above. Although John starts it with a partially triumphant epiphany about Flora's androgyny, its last lines resist a fixed meaning:

> Others in her position might make some adjustment. The best of whatever is offered, however not right. But Flora would not accept it, none of the ways and means. The most imperfect part of her was the most pure. And that meant –
>
> “Flora…” (174; punctuation as in the original)

Contradiction is nothing new when dealing with the androgyne, which is characterized by the *coincidentia oppositorum*: the purity in Flora is her imperfection; her freakishness, her most fascinating asset. Yet this mysterious statement is also a further example as to the androgyne’s closeness to abjection. Flora’s paradoxical *imperfect purity* is not a casual discovery but arises from the *anonymity* of her sex: “The hierarchy founded on the pure and the impure displaces (or denies) the difference between the sexes,” Kristeva states. Like the latter, the dichotomy pure/impure represents “the striving for identity, a difference” (*Horror* 82). The speaking subject conceives of that opposition in order to autonomize himself in relation to an object that must stay in the place of impurity. Not in Flora’s case, however, for she again oscillates blurring the borders between the sexes and between purity and impurity, as the abject does.

Moreover, the most noticeable example of semiotic disruption in the quotation above merges meaninglessness and silence in the “*suspension* of interpretation” with which the paragraph ends (Kristeva, “Psychoanalysis” 310). Flora’s anonymity of gender just “meant –.” This dash, as well as the suspension points that follow Flora’s naming and those which bring the narration to a close, is a mark of “silence as frustration of meaning.” What this interpretive silence insinuates is that “meaninglessness [i.e. the Semiotic] *exists.*” Despite the attempts to define and allocate a definitive meaning, “the interpretation which both posits and lives off meaning, … never stops approaching – and dissolving” into powerless silence (317). Language proves insufficient before the always ever-evasive meaning and the persistent semiotic load of the androgyne.

Thus, the appearance of the androgyne after abjection can be considered the remnant of the abject’s captivating (though threatening) relationship with the subject’s desire. What the androgynous fantasy inspires is the desire to the return to the union

with the (m)Other in the *chora*; in primordial abjection, that (m)Other is actually not androgynous *stricto senso* because sexual difference is not grasped yet. As Kristeva explains, abjection is the “recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” and precedes “its more or less fetishized products, the ‘object of want’ [*objet a*]” (*Horror* 5). Thus, John’s concluding acknowledgment of “the one lost thing” that bars the postmodern subject coincides with his retrospective interpretation of Flora as androgyne: he discovers the lack that triggers desire, and the fetish, the *objet a*, comes to mask that gap. Both movements are retrospective: he reflects on the “lost thing” once he realizes they “didn’t have anything” before, as well as he only perceives Flora’s androgyny – which has been suggested all through the story – after he has had the opportunity to assault her sexually and (hypothetically) shed any doubt about her sex, that is, when she does not (or should not) have any androgynous aura anymore. The androgyne is then a fetishized attempt to represent that *want* whose only genuine signified is, for Kristeva, abjection, and its only signifier, literature (Kristeva, *Horror* 5).

Once the want or lack is pinned down symbolically through fantasy, “the subject attempts to sustain the illusion of unity with the Other and ignore his or her own division” (Homer 87) – this Other is now not the abjected (m)Other, but the Law of the Father. John can reconcile himself with his dissatisfaction and partake of the social reality he had tentatively opposed at the beginning of the story. Instead of remaining a dissident, he shares now the attitude of exclusion towards Flora that every character in the story – girls, students, fraternity members – had formerly manifested. He had wondered first: “could she have found any refuge whatsoever?” (170); and at this point he concludes: “She belonged nowhere, she fitted in no place at all, she had no home, no shell, no place of comfort or refuge.” His fantasy of androgyny is the justification for this social exclusion: it transforms Flora into an outsider, “a fugitive” (174), in contrast to which John can found both his subjectivity and his social bonds as an *insider*. Now that he has abjected Flora, we can see how John changes his relation to this symbolic Other by his assessment of the paradigmatic symbolic ritual that opens the story: the spring dance. His first description had been a clear condemnation of the artificiality and imposed character of such ceremony – the dancers’ dresses were

"*un*accustomed," their voices "*un*natural," and their glances "*un*eas[y]" (italics added). The dance was "not like a social affair. It was more like an important military maneuver" (163). Conversely, at the end John observes the town from the hill and thinks about the "many gay parties and dances that night," he dreamily imagines how the "girls in dresses that seemed to be woven of flowers would whirl about polished dance floors and couples would whisper and laugh behind clumps of ghostly spirea." His reasoning becomes completely different: "These were the *natural* [italics added] celebrations of youth" (173-4). This adjustment is the effect of that "illusion of unity" with the Law, of social compliance and integration at the expense of the repression of the Real, or in other words, of the unacknowledged adoption of a certain *ideology*:

> As Žižek writes, the 'ideological' is precisely '*a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence*' (1989: 21). That 'essence' is the moment of barbarity, conflict and antagonism that must be repressed if a society is to claim legitimacy as a 'natural', peaceful and democratically evolving state. (Homer 113)

After a violent abjection and the partial suppression of the Semiotic – the *repressed moment of antagonism* – John finally voices the legitimacy of the natural(ized) sociosymbolic; the subversive possibilities announced by his initial insight are cancelled by the defensive embracing of the Law and its ideological tenets. Regarding this, we can assume that, although he had initially turned down any offer to join a fraternity (just like Flora), now that he repudiates her he will probably join the professional one that had rushed him before but that had alleged that Flora was too queer for him "to be seen with" (170).

John's experience in this story shows us a process of abjection whereby the subject arises by separating form the abject and regulating desire around a fantasy in the same way the ego is regulated around the body image. Despite its violence, their separation has provided John and Flora with "sorrowful understanding" of the futile search for the lost Important Thing; the return to a completion that brings with it the disintegration of the symbolic order that, as speaking beings, we inhabit. They

acknowledge themselves "unable to help each other but through knowing" (174) – there is here a missing direct object, an absence: John does not *know the other*, does not *know* what Flora "meant –." He just knows the absence, the gap that the split subject bears at its core. He and Flora are, as Irigaray put it, *subjects irreducible one to the other*; that is what the closing paragraph emphasizes: "together in the dark … each completely separate and alone – but no longer strangers…" (174; punctuation as in the original). The symbol for that understanding of the foolish search for completion is "their hands loosely clasped" (174), a non-invasive, gentle bodily gesture in contrast to amalgamation/disjointing of their physicalities.[147] "The Important Thing" figures the fictional rendering of Williams's entry in his diary a couple of years before its composition: "What is our purpose? To understand our lives and to communicate our understanding. Let's all join hands in the dark!" (*Notebooks* 357).[148]

[147] The couple in "Ten Worms" (written 1945 too) also ends up with "a chill wind of shared apprehension … and their fingers wound together" (204). In "The Night of the Iguana" and "The Knightly Quest" the gesture is attributed to homosexual couples, as it is in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to Brick and Skipper: "we'd reach across the space between the two beds and shake hands to say goodnight," the former confesses (79).

[148] Entry dated 21 March 1943.

9

“SOMETHING ABOUT HIM”

> It is only the outside of one person’s world that is visible to others, and all opinions are false ones, especially public opinions of individual cases.
>
> Tennessee Williams
>
> (“Three Players of a Summer Game” 308)

“Something about him” (1946) is a story that has been almost completely overlooked by critics; even Vannatta in his exhaustive study dismisses it in just one sentence as “too shallow and mechanical to be more than a good read of the *Mademoiselle* variety” (50). It could be classified within the Piedmont tradition of Southern literature in which Kimball King includes some Williams’s plays like the pair *Battle of Angels/Orpheus Descending*, because it clearly recalls the same “stereotypes of small-town life: gossipy neighbors, fear of scandal, aristocratic families treated deferentially by the rest of the community” (King 632). In such a social context, it is easy to imagine that the advent of an androgynous character can be troublesome; such character is personified by Haskell, the new grocery clerk nobody likes. While the “community,” the social group, feels suspicious before this peculiar man who does not respect the rigid norms that sustain their world, there is only one person, librarian Miss Rose, who ventures to come closer to that oddball and step out of bounds. Like “The Important Thing,” “Something about him” relates the relationship between two characters, an outsider and a socially integrated subject, that come together and separate after an act of knowing. Despite Vannatta’s critique, we will see how the story is anything but shallow, since its

depiction of the effects of the androgynous Haskell on the community and on Miss Rose reflects a complex process of abjection and the disclosure of the workings of ideology that hold sway over the subject.

Haskell against the Symbolic (community)

That Haskell can be considered androgynous may not be very obvious at first sight, but there are undoubtedly a number of signals that point towards his destabilization of the normative masculine role as well as of other symbolic foundations. To start with, we can remember the aspect of narrative perspective that we already noticed in "The Important Thing," that the androgyne is impermeable to otherwise omniscient narrations.[149] Haskell's hidden consciousness – we never get to know what he feels or thinks unless he expresses it verbally – is clearly reminiscent of Foucault's remark on the "area of shadow" that surrounds the androgyne Herculine Barbin: "The story revolves about her and yet she is described only in terms of the others' perception of her, in terms of their own fantasies unleashed by her ambiguous figure" (qtd. in Pacteau 76). That is the circumstance with Haskell too, about whom we only learn from communal chitchat and from Miss Rose's impressions – which, in fact, do not stray far from those rumors either. However, the narrative voice in this story is different from that in "The Important Thing." Whereas in the latter there is not a separate narrator beyond John's perceptions, "Something about him" features an incursive narrator that very occasionally intercedes as a counterpoint for *the others' perception* and precludes the establishment of a univocal point of view.

Most evidently, the hints at Haskell's androgyny are physical, like the tone of his voice, which reaches "an almost girlish falsetto" (216), or his fingers, "as delicate in their precision as the fingers of a young woman" (218). Yet, despite their apparent fragility, it is his hands that betray the inner strength that impulses our

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[149] That is the case of Flora in "The Important Thing" as well as of the equally androgynous Italian woman in "Gift of an Apple."

protagonist, when we picture him "wringing hands so fiercely that the married ladies' rings cut into their fingers and they whispered afterward among themselves, 'What a strong personality!'" (213). The effect of this interior energy is, as in Flora's case, the impression of a continual movement, a clash with imaginary permanence that can only be reproduced by means of a "perverse image" (Kilgour 68). Even when performing such a calm and solitary action as reading in the library, everything about Haskell seems to be actively moving ahead:

> He would alter his position frequently without ever removing his eyes from the book. It was like he was steering around hazardous turns in an auto race – you know, his body bent stiffly forward, his neck extended so that the cords stood out, and little crystal beads of sweat coming forth on his forehead and even his fingers clenched on the sides of the book. Yes, it was *ludicrous* looking. (214; original italics)

Like the monkey's circus show in "The Important Thing," Haskell's oddity inspires a representation that combines the interest and attention of a spectacle – this time, an auto race – with the ridiculous of the grotesque. We should not be deceived as to the real origin of that comparison, for the italics and the expressions of dialogue that the paragraph includes ("you know," "yes") frame this depiction within the discourse of gossip that mediates all the narration: it is the community who *sees* Haskell as ludicrous, who tries to conciliate the apprehension that his indeterminacy causes by fixing him in a momentary image.

That is why the narrator intervenes at this point to open the interpretive field and offer the reader the possibility of a less one-sided point of view (as he also does in the opening paragraph). After the long description quoted above, such a categorical statement as "Yes, it was *ludicrous* looking" is a brief compromise with the discourse of gossip that nevertheless appears doubly disaffected by the explicit affirmation and the italicization of *their* opinion. After that, the narrative voice quickly counteracts it with an assertion that discredits the gossip's opinion: "Yes, it was *ludicrous* looking. Not because Haskell himself was homely. He wasn't. … Except for these eccentric manners of his he might have been called good-looking" (214). In addition to a

periphrasis that reinforces the narrator's estrangement from the people's gossip – "these eccentric manners of his" instead of just *his eccentric manners* –, this narratorial addendum introduces the motif of the integration of opposites that the androgyne embodies: using a parallel morphology, it portrays the "*ludicrous* looking" Haskell as simultaneously "good-looking," not homely in spite of his grotesque description. Moreover, this remark impinges on his gender construction too, good looks being considered as a suspiciously feminine attribute for a man at the time of the story's composition (Sarotte 156).

Besides these imaginary ambiguities, there are several aspects of Haskell's odd behavior that contribute to suggesting a certain sexual indistinctness too. Just like the excessive androgyne (Pacteau 79), Haskell is not only "neat and courteous" in Mr. Owens's words (218), but extremely polite to the extent of being judged "too oily" and "gruesomely excessive" by his fellow citizens (213). This, together with his scrupulous cleanness (his spotless glasses and apron give proof of it), is a further sign of Haskell's undermining of the normative masculine role that was prevalent in the American Forties, as Leslie Fiedler puts it in his *Love and Death in the American Novel*: "modesty, politeness, neatness, cleanliness – come to be regarded as concessions to feminine demands" (qtd. in Sarotte 185). In the case of the bachelor Haskell, there is no exterior demand but a concession to an insinuated feminine tendency.

Another deviant aspect is Haskell's artistic taste: for example, his preference for modern poetry is "extremely queer" on the whole according to librarian Miss Jamison, and specially "unusual" for someone who is merely a clerk in a grocery store, her assistant Miss Rose comments (214). A later literary reference is more relevant: before leaving town for good, Haskell returns a volume of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays* to the library, where he coincides with another man that comes up to ask for a book by Edna Ferber about pioneers (219).[150] The significance of this scene is manifold, as we will see. Suffice it for the moment to notice the reference to the pioneers as the literary referent for the community. As regards gender roles, it may

[150] We only know this person is a man because he is later on described as having "*his* eyes fixed on her [Rose]" (219; my italics); elsewhere he is referred to as "a/the stranger."

seem on the face of it that Haskell's formerly suggested femininity would be completely at variance with the masculine model as personified by the pioneer– in fact, Georges-Michel Sarotte has evidenced that the pioneers are a fundamental piece in the construction of "the American virile ideal" (187). David Savran's and Brian Baker's studies (1998; 2006) agree that this ideal of an aggressive, wayward masculinity was still very much exploited in the Cold War years "to withstand feminization and communism" (Baker 66). The oily and baffling grocery clerk of this story (first published in the magazine *Mademoiselle* in 1946) looks like the obverse of the competitive, Wayne-like male "figure whose meaning seems absolutely fixed" (Savran, *Taking it* 123).

Yet a closer reading does not allow us to establish such a clear-cut opposition between Haskell's ambiguous gender and the character of the romantic pioneer. If, in Sarotte's words, "the American virile ideal is the ideal of a country that was once a land of pioneers … [whose] indispensable characteristics are youth, strength, 'Caucasian' beauty, purity, a thirst for unlimited freedom, and physical and moral courage" (187), we can notice from the commentaries of the town residents that Haskell *does* actually fulfill most of these requirements of the *real* man.[151] He is a "young man" (218), not only strong in his personality but also physically, as noted above. In spite of joining an inflexible community, he continues to be undeniably free and courageous enough to contradict customers or unspoken conduct rules, for instance when he dares to dispute a miscalculated overcharge of seven cents with Mrs. Austin (218), or when he heartily compliments a plump girl about her necklace, notwithstanding her mother's irritation because "people who knew her tactfully mentioned nothing about Lucinda [the girl] except her reported skill at domestic science" (213).

So Haskell does not entirely do away with pioneer-like masculinity, and instead of showing a total opposition to that all-American myth, he integrates it with various feminine aspects that undermine a definite classification of genders. Like the

[151] Interestingly, Sarotte includes here "beauty" and "purity" as masculine features, whereas a few pages before he mentions "good looks" and "cleanliness" as feminine inclinations.

androgyne "both 'this' and 'not this'" (Pacteau 82), Haskell destabilizes the symbolic gender system, not standing out as completely different but challenging it from within, performing what Gayatri C. Spivak and Judith Butler would call "an enabling violation:" "acts of disobedience must always take place within the law" because, although "subjects are always implicated in the relations of power … they are also enabled by them, not merely subordinated to the law" (Salih 79). With this violation, Williams seems here to be paving the way for the advent of the "new masculinity" that was to appear in the Sixties when, Savran explains, men "were reimagined as androgynous beings … both assertive and yielding, independent and dependent, job and people-oriented, strong and gentle, in short, both 'masculine' and 'feminine'." Savran also acknowledges that "the concept of androgyny mobilized in countercultural discourse, this *both/and formulation*, simultaneously subverts and reinforces the binary system of gender" (Savran, *Taking it* 124); just like Haskell, who has that "something about him" that casts a doubt on his masculinity, but who still remains consistent with the model of the frontier man.[152]

Haskell blurs the frontier between the genders and exceeds imaginary and symbolic representation (he is only imaginable as a grotesque figure and language can only repeat that there is "something about him"); so, his presence brings reminiscences of the pre-symbolic, pre-imaginary state of the subject: the maternal *chora* and its semiotic function. The reference to this maternal side is as subtle as in "The Important Thing," though more sophisticated. Similar to John's interest in knowing where was Flora from, in "Something" there is an effort to locate, to *order* Haskell within the social structures that are so fundamental for such a symbolically-based community. Yet the attempt is unsuccessful: "There were Haskells in Grenada and also a family of Haskells down near Biloxi. However, none of these were related to him, not even remotely it seemed. He had no family connections whatsoever" (213). Haskell's effective connection to the maternal surfaces by way of umbilical imagery when his boss finds him "tying about his lean waist the immaculate strings of an apron with

[152] In fact, his "ludicrous" description in the library ("bent *stiffly forward*, his neck extended so that the *cords stood out*, and little crystal *beads of sweat coming forth* on his forehead") insinuates that he both has the phallus (for being a man) but also that he *is* the phallus.

fingers that were as delicate in their precision as the fingers of a young woman" (218). Besides the connotations of androgyny that this scene projects, it suggests a hidden bond between Haskell and motherhood, since "the image of 'silver cords' and 'apron strings,' used to bind children to their moms, is a recurring one in the discourse about momism" that marked the American Forties and Fifties (Chopra-Gant 89). This diatribe against incompetent mothering, championed by Phillip Wylie's misogynistic book *Generation of Vipers* (1942), blamed mothers for the sexual and political transgressions of their (primarily male) children and for the tragic consequences for the national security state that such subversive behaviors could lead to (Baker 66). The attack against the dangers of a *matriarchal society* ("momism") demonized mothers one way or another: neglecting mothers raised criminals – what at the time chiefly meant communists; overprotective mothers reared perverts, or to be more precise, homosexuals (E.T. May 96). The allusion to Haskell being bound by apron strings may not fail to inspire this latter judgment; however, the particularity in his case is the added relevance of the observation that those strings are not only clean, but "immaculate." Thus, the feminine-maternal resonances of this scene merge, on the one hand, the threat that those bonds represent both for the subject's identity and for the socius's stability (and so, the need to cut them off), and, on the other, the suggestion that such relationship stands on the side of *purity*, that is, the position the speaking subject *must actually hold* in order to autonomize himself in relation to the impure (Kristeva, *Horror* 82). In those "immaculate apron strings" we find the symbol for the negativity that is experienced in the maternal *chora* – the place where the subject is negated and generated at the same time, which recalls undifferentiation and completion but which must be abandoned to constitute subjectivity (Kristeva, "Revolution" 95). Equally, Lacan's translator, Alan Sheridan, summarizes the former's concept of the Real as "that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element …: the umbilical cord of the symbolic" (qtd. in McAfee 34).

Haskell's relation to the *chora* can also be traced if we compare his linguistic practice with that of the community, because the *chora* manifests itself by means of the semiotic "pulsional pressure" it exerts on symbolic language (Moi, Introduction 13).

On the genotextual level, Haskell's speech shares with Flora's the presence of the semiotic element of prosody, reflected by way of a constant use of exclamation marks: "Yes, *isn't* it, though!"; "Yes, it *is* cloudy!" (215); "Oh! In*deed*!... I'll make inquiries *at once!*" "I *beg* your pardon!" (216). Examining these vehement quotations, it follows that the extra-verbal signifying mode of the Semiotic also finds its way into the text through the numerous italics sprinkled throughout Haskell's turns. These excited inflections in his speech are the supralinguistic symptom of the motile energy of the *chora*, the continuous movement that was equally perceivable on the imaginary sphere.

In opposition to these semiotic manifestations in Haskell's speech, we encounter the vacuity of the discourse of the community, which we have already see is the predominant voice in the story. "Without the semiotic," McAfee observes, "our language would have no force; it would be devoid of meaning. Without semiotic force, we would be like bad actors when we spoke" (41). The language of Blue Hill citizens does seem to follow a script, a repetitive pattern that is echoed by every member of the community (except Miss Rose). "There's something about him…that I don't like" is uttered by Haskell's boss, Mr. Owens (214); Mrs. Austin, a customer (218); and Miss Jamison the librarian (219). It seems the verbal articulation of "the repetition without any real deep, sustaining abiding rhythm" that Williams sensed in city life (*Notebooks* 353).[153] This gossipy reverberation serves to expose the ineffectiveness of the Symbolic in two complementary ways. One is the re-encounter with that phrase, "something about him," that in "The Important Thing" pointed at the gap, the pervasive *absence* of the unrepresentable Real. This phrase attempts to grasp that excessive part in Haskell's character that surpasses symbolic definition and that apparently involves a latent threat for the proper functioning of the small Blue Hill community. The importance of that expression is now increased to the extent of becoming both the story's title and its leitmotiv, appearing already in the opening line: "There was something about him, something they didn't like, they didn't know what" (213). The interpretive indetermination of that "something about him" is a further sign of the Semiotic's undermining of symbolic language. In addition to this

[153] Dated "Between Sunday 14 and Wednesday 17, March 1943" in New York.

indetermination, the use of pronouns in that first sentence of the story renders the passage almost meaningless: Who is *he* about whom there is "something"? And who exactly are "they"? Given that pronouns find their meaning only in discourse, not in reality (Barthes, "Structural Analysis" 109), what the reader comes across in this opening sentence is a lack of textual referent, a void covered up by linguistic signifiers; in other words, the disclosure of the symbolic function.

In the closing phrase that makes up the gossip – "… that *I* don't like" –, it is the role of pronouns too that constitutes the second trace to reveal the artificiality of language. The various characters that repeat the rumor may feel that they are expressing *their* own opinion as individuals, but they are misguided – the "I" they pronounce is a shifting signifier that alternately symbolizes here Mr. Owens, there Mrs. Austin, etc., all quoting each other, or actually quoting an empty "them" (as in the opening "*they* didn't like") or other vague terms such as "others" and "people" (218). The pronoun "I," the subject of the enunciated, is really "the subject of the social network" that covers the void of the subject of the enunciation:

> the abstract pronoun 'I'… [is] a general term I share with everyone else. In order to share it with everyone else, my empirical reality must, in a sense, be annihilated … In other words, the subject can only enter language by negating the Real, 'murdering' or substituting the blood-and-sinew reality of self for the concept of the self expressed in words – in *names* or *pronouns*, for example. (italics added; Myers 83-4)

After this process of entrance into language, or the Symbolic, the social "group and [the] self are inseparable extensions of one another… Groups make a space where one can go for … deliverance from existential contingency," Walter Davis explains. "One who would destabilize any group," like Haskell does, "must perform a *Verfremdungseffekt*, by exposing the rituals through which the group creates and maintains a shared identity" (Davis 14). Therefore, when they are confronted with the destabilizing Real that Haskell represents, the unaware denizens of this city can only echo the same words once and again, showing how they have bereaved themselves of

their Real *selves* all for a full assimilation into the Symbolic. The *ritual* that is exposed is that of "consensual validation," a "process of identity formation" that legitimizes the belief in "the fact that the majority of people share certain ideas or feelings proves the validity of these ideas and feelings" (Davis 14; Fromm 14). This is a clear equivalent to the workings of ideology, what Barthes, following Plato, calls the *doxa (Placer* 30; 47-9): "common sense, public opinion, cliché, dominant ideology, the idea of stable and singular signifieds behind signifiers," "that which has been assimilated by majority culture and has been given the appearance of Nature" (Allen 89; 96). People in Blue Hill are subject to *endoxal* thinking or false logic:[154] they give Haskell "the same look" (214), "say the same thing" (218), and even "must" feel "the same way" about him only because *people* do (219). This is the doing that provides them with an "I"dentity, and holds them together bringing them stability as a group opposed to the *para-doxical* Haskell.

The other instrument "for the concept of the self [to be] expressed in words," the name, also exemplifies the antagonism between Haskell and the community. To begin with, it is most obvious to notice the absence of any title to position him within the social system, whereas everyone else in the story is Mr., Mrs., or Miss – he is just "Haskell." Besides, this name has a curious musicality – another semiotic feature (Kristeva, "Revolution" 118) – that reminds us of the word *hassle*, a term that would aptly describe the atmosphere that surrounds our protagonist: agitation and heated discussion because he is "just *irritating* to people" (218; original italics). More importantly, considering Haskell's connection with the "unnamable, … anterior to naming" *chora* (McAfee 19), we can expect that the dynamics of naming in the story will bear witness to the *chora*'s dismantling of the illusion of univocity and stability of language. The quotation above – "There were Haskells in Grenada and also a family of Haskells down near Biloxi" (213) – shows that it is by tracking Haskell's (sur)name that people aim at locating him, pinning him down within socio-symbolic str(i/u)ctures. The act of naming is a way of terminating with undifferentiation and meaninglessness, a symbolic strategy for classification, a *thesis* in Kristevan terms:

[154] In addition to "endoxal language: language which is frozen" (Allen 100).

> The only basic truth of the [proper] name would then be the one we would approach if the speaking being were willing to face up to the most fundamental separation of all: the murder (of the Father) as the basic condition of the Symbolic function. ("The True-Real" 235)

Naming is a thetic act, "a fissure" that establishes a necessary "*frontier*" for the allocation of meaning (Kristeva, "System" 29). Like pronouns, names are signifiers that negate or "murder" Real heterogeneity before entering the Symbolic, and give the subject a feeling of individuality and distinctiveness. However, as representative of the Semiotic, Haskell belongs to the stage before that thesis, he does not easily accept signification nor is he granted such an individual identity. Consequently, the lines referring to Haskell's name question the truth of such a feeling of individuality, exhibiting the proper name's fragility "when it comes to fixing a signified identity" (Kristeva, "The True-Real" 235): there can be many "Haskells," and *Haskell* in Grenada does not mean the same as *Haskell* in Biloxi nor *Haskell* in Blue Hill; there is no one-to-one identity.

Likewise, Lacan concludes his *Seminar 10* on "Anxiety" by stating that there is no overcoming of anxiety unless the Other has been named.[155] Since in order to sustain the anxiety that Haskell inspires the Real should not be "murdered" by the name, the fact is that nobody throughout the whole story ever denotes Haskell *by name*. Excluding the references by the narrator, Haskell is always (and insistently) mentioned using pronouns (*he, his, him*) or other phrases like "clerk" or "grocery clerk;" in fact, the original title for this story was "Miss Rose and the Grocery Clerk" (Williams, *Notebooks* 392). Even when the narrative voice is indirectly quoting Mr. Owens's thoughts, it does not say his name: "'Hmmm,' said Mr. Owens. The young man was neat and courteous and he was very reliable – but nobody seemed to like him" (218).

[155] "No hay superación de la angustia sino cuando el Otro se ha nombrado. No hay amor sino por un nombre, como cada cual sabe por experiencia. Y bien sabemos que el momento en que el nombre de aquél o aquella a quien se dirige nuestro amor es pronunciado, constituye un umbral de la mayor importancia" (372).

Unnamed, Haskell keeps his halo of strangeness and ambiguity until the final part of the story, when he will eventually be named at the moment of his abjection.

Miss Rose, subject-in-process

There is one member of the Blue Hill community, nonetheless, that does not find Haskell so disquieting, someone who dares enter in contact with the Semiotic he embodies. Miss Rose, the Assistant Librarian and Haskell's only friend, can be considered the real protagonist of the story – like John in "The Important Thing" – as it is her character that is more thoroughly depicted by way of the narrator's omniscient perspective on her feelings and thoughts. After she and Haskell get acquainted with each other in the library, she suggests that he move into the same boarding house where she lives, whereupon they share some crucial moments for the constitution of Miss Rose as the *subject-in-process* that experiences abjection and tries to re-constitute her threatened ego through fantasy. Still, a number of textual clues will let us see that her belonging to the community conditions the way in which this progression takes place, as the workings of ideology and acculturation manifest themselves through her actions.

For Miss Rose, in spite of standing out from the rest of her fellow citizens for her sensitivity and her interest for Haskell, still displays in an understated way some of their social characters. For example, she is one more link in the chain of gossip, as when she "learn[s] from Mrs. Stovall" that Haskell has paid for a new room in the rooming house and that he will be moving in by next month (216). We actually see her perform a travesty of consensual validation when she convinces herself of her liking Haskell "through saying it once or twice to herself" so that the idea gets "firmly fixed in her mind" (214), just like the false logic from rumors gets fixed in one's mind by hearing it repeatedly. Before that self-convincing, she had also professed the same type of prejudice as the group in her opinion that "it's unusual … for anybody to read modern verse, least of all a clerk in a grocery store," although she had acknowledged two lines above that he reads "good books" (214).

Nevertheless, once she has "concluded that she like[s] Haskell" (215), Miss Rose starts a relationship with him – and her own subjectivity – that develops along four scenes of the story that correspond to four stages of the subject-in-process. The first one takes place inside a church, and represents the subject's (that is, Miss Rose's) perception of the Real that hides under the symbolic veil. Secondly, the subject's ego attempts to counter that feeling of incompletion by means of imaginary constructions (what Lacan would call "the mirror stage"); consequently, we will see how the scene of Miss Rose's use of the mirror and the fetishized commodity symbolizes such attempt at coherence and evidences the influence of ideology on subjectivity. Yet the role of Haskell as representative of the Real then disrupts Miss Rose's imaginary unity and brings with it the effects of the semiotic *chora*, such as the blurring of the boundary between self and world in the state of abjection. Finally, the moment of the cut, of abjection, entails the repression of the Semiotic and the return to/of the Symbolic with its emphasis on signification. That will be the final scene in the story, which like "The Important Thing" offers only a *seeming* symbolic closure of the heterogeneity of the androgyne and the *chora*.

The church scene. The scene in the church is Miss Rose's first attempt at coming closer to Haskell once they already have speaking acquaintance in the library. One Sunday she sees him enter the First Presbyterian Church, and the following Sunday she goes there herself planning to meet him. She sits and glances around her trying to find Haskell among the parishioners. Yet she experiences the same disappointment that Catharine felt when she got off the train in "Accent:" "But [Haskell] wasn't there." She only finds Haskell's *absence*, an external emptiness that corresponds to the internal feeling of solitude that she simultaneously experiences (215). This scene reveals its complex connotations if we notice its similitude with an example that Jean Paul Sartre uses in *Being and Nothingness*:

> I have an appointment with Pierre at four o'clock. I arrive at the cafe a quarter of an hour late. Pierre is always punctual. Will he have waited for me? I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, 'He is not here.' (9)

Sartre uses this case to demonstrate the necessary existence of *non-being* as "a perpetual presence in us and outside of us;" in other words, to explain how "nothingness haunts being" (11). He does so by clarifying the dynamics of (dis)positionality that characterizes the visual search in the café, which that involves a *double nihilation* – that of the ground of perception and of the perceived object:

> in perception there is always the construction of a figure on a ground. ... When I enter this café to search for Pierre, there is formed a synthetic organization of all the objects in the café, on the ground of which Pierre is given as about to appear. This organization of the café as the ground is an original nihilation.
> … Thus the original nihilation of all the figures which appear and are swallowed up in the total neutrality of a ground is the necessary condition for the appearance of the principle figure, which is here the person of Pierre. … But now Pierre is not here. … This figure which slips constantly between my look and the solid, real objects of the café is precisely a perpetual disappearance; it is Pierre raising himself as nothingness on the ground of the nihilation of the café. So that what is offered to intuition is a flickering of nothingness; it is the nothingness of the ground, the nihilation of which summons and demands the appearance of the figure, and it is the figure – the nothingness which slips as a *nothing* to the surface of the ground. It serves as foundation for the judgment – 'Pierre is not here.' It is in fact the intuitive apprehension of a double nihilation. (9-10)

Like Pierre, who raises himself as nothingness on the nihilated café, Haskell rises as an emptiness, a nothingness that requires that the place for its appearance, the church, be equally turned into the *nothingness* of a dispositional ground that would outline his figure if he did actually appear. But he does not, and Miss Rose's look can only capture him as a *nothing*– a non-object – that nevertheless *slips to the surface of the ground*: he becomes a *dispositional object* that is able "to set forward a figure of attention without 'filling in' its content" (Boothby 218). This is the dispositional object we identified as *objet a*, the figuration of desire that appears when the subject attempts to represent the lost (m)Other. In Kristevan terms, this is an attempt at representing the *chora*, which

"precedes and underlies figuration" (Moi, Introduction 13). If we try to posit it as an object for consciousness in an effort to comprehend it, even if we nihilate everything else to compose a ground upon which the *chora* could materialize, what we encounter is this paradoxically dispositional *objet a*, the androgynous "object of a *searching* look" that is never found but just out of the corner of our eye (Pacteau 77). In this scene, Miss Rose has inadvertently come across the impossibility to posit the ambiguous Haskell in the Imaginary – "he would alter his position frequently," as we know (214). Additionally, it offers us another visual analogue for the antagonism between the abject and religion like that we discovered in "Gift:" the church must disappear onto the background before Haskell can be perceived.

The scene is thus made up of three movements: first, Miss Rose encounters the nothingness that is perpetually present "outside of us" – Haskell as the *objet a* that signifies the (m)Other –, and then she realizes the nothingness "in us," her own split, the lack that her *occupation* with symbolic chores tries to conceal (Sartre 11):

> she began to feel, once more, gnawing voraciously under the tweed and crisp linen … that fox-toothed loneliness which always plagued her when she was not occupied with books and rubber stamps and ink pads and yellow library cards… (215; last suspension points as in the original).

After those defining moments, the full bearing of this scene appears when eventually Miss Rose's feelings are contrasted with her immediate reaction to them: "She fastened her eyes on the stained glass picture of the Shepherd Jesus and composed her face with marvelous fortitude" (215). This response completes the sequence of the subject's confrontation with the Real, the destructive effect this meeting has for its imaginary consistency, and the subject's attempt at recovering the latter by means of imaginary identification. As "the real is experienceable only in the loss of an imaginary unity, a collapse into the *corps morcele* [fragmented body]" (Boothby 48-9), so do Williams's metaphors depict Miss Rose's body as a gnawed *morsel*, falling apart under those voracious, fox-like teeth. Her ego coherence, based on the imaginary construction of a unified body in the mirror stage, is lost upon her discovery of the heterogeneous realm

of drives that disrupts such a stable image. Therefore, in order to re-establish that coherence she must resort to a new identification, an imaginary base on which to ground her identity and dispel the unsettling pressure of the Real: it is not by praying, but by "fasten[ing] her eyes" on the picture of Jesus that she can counteract her collapse into the fragmented body and "[*re*-]compose her face."[156] Very conveniently, Jesus is figured here as a *shepherd*, the guide that can lead her to return to the misrecognition of unity that characterizes the subject in the Symbolic.

The mirror scene. This strategy to recover from the imaginary fragmentation caused by the experience of the Real in Miss Rose's relationship with Haskell is the focal point of the second scene they share in the story.[157] This scene can be divided in two parts: the moment of the mirror and the moment of the gaze. The former begins when, after learning from her landlady that Haskell is moving in into her same rooming house, Miss Rose goes to a store and, "without acknowledging to herself any special reason," she buys "an exquisite French negligee of shell-pink crepe de chine with a froth of ivory lace at the throat and sleeves." The underlying *reason* for the purchase of that robe is suggested soon thereafter:

> That night when she was alone in her room she slipped it on and stood in front of the long oval mirror. It created a new Miss Rose, not one who was employed at the Blue Hill Public Library, but one who danced all night in open pavilions, laughed recklessly in Mediterranean moonlight and won huge sums, they said, at roulette in the gambling casino… (216; suspension points as in the original)

[156] Even textually, the narration of Miss Rose's reaction can be said to *overlap* the narration of her feelings in the same way as her identification with Jesus's image covers up her inner fragmentation: after an initial mention of her feelings ("She felt quite terribly let down. Miserable, in fact"), the attempt at imaginary coherence is introduced ("She fastened her eyes…") only to return to the description of the feelings that are still *simultaneously* stirring in her – "… with marvelous fortitude *as* she began to feel…" (215; italics added).

[157] The scene in the church is the first scene Miss Rose and Haskell *share* because, as we have seen, he is still present (object) in his (dispositional) absence.

Two different aspects appear in this stage. First, Williams is offering us here a transparent staging of imaginary identification that coincides with Lacan's formulation of it in "The mirror stage."[158] When Miss Rose faces her image on the mirror she achieves a sense of unification that neutralizes her former feelings of fragmentation – what she sees is "*a* new Miss Rose, not *one* who … but *one* who" (italics added; 216). Yet there is a mediating element that makes her imaginary identification additionally interesting: the negligee. The acquisition of this delicate wrap bestows on her a new flair that makes her fantasize about a different, glamorous life of dances, casinos, and, more relevantly, *public admiration* – her new life would/should turn her into the object of people's attention: "[she] danced all night… and won huge sums, *they said* [italics added], at roulette" (216). As I have stated elsewhere, this fantasy of riches and distinction caused by a simple object bought without "any special reason" nor utility is a clear example of alienated consumption, alike to Catharine's use of her city clothes in "Accent" (Torres Zúñiga, "Something" 124).[159]

Baudrillard explains that the object of consumption only acquires a special significance (beyond its use value and its exchange value between two persons) within a certain system that grants it its sign-value: "it functions via its relations with other objects. In other words, it functions like the Saussurean sign: differentially and arbitrarily" (Lane 75). He seems to respond here to Lacan's reminder that "there is

[158] This is not the only occasion on which Williams demonstrates an intuition of the details of this imaginary identification, which are the metaphorical basis for his poem "You and I" in the collection *Androgyne, Mon Amour* (reprinted in *Collected Poems*, 123). In this poem, the *other* whom the "I" asks the opening question "Who are you?" offers a façade of wholeness and closure, it is "a surface warm to my fingers / a solid form, an occupant of space..." What the speaking *I* experiences is, on the other hand, a fragmented body, broken into an assortment of incoherent body parts: "Who am I? / A wounded man, badly bandaged, … / a box of questions shaken up and scattered on the floor, / A foot on the stairs, a voice on a wire, / a busy collection of thumbs …" Despite their difference, both "you" and "I" are entangled in a network of mutual identification, each of them defined in relation to the other: "you" is "not I, / an enemy of mine. My lover." Likewise, "I" is "an enemy of yours. Your lover."

[159] The negligee and its effect are the epitome of alienated consumption as Erich Fromm (1956) describes it: "there is not even the pretense of use," and the consumed object appeals to Miss Rose's "phantasy of wealth and distinction" rather than satisfy a real need (132).

perhaps something that has been overlooked in the Marxian analysis of economy" and that should be added to "use values and exchange values:" "ritual values" ("Hamlet" 40). Thus, it is within the Symbolic and its rituals that the commodity works, and its use evidences the effects of the symbolic Law in the subject's psyche. The point here is that, although Miss Rose chooses it "without acknowledging herself any special reason," the negligee proves to be not a *free* choice, but one which is *unacknowledgedly* induced by the ideological supremacy of the Symbolic. That is the situation in the third stage of the "narrative of ideology" in which Žižek re-elaborates Althusser's investigation on "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970):

> In the first stage … ideology takes the form of a supposedly truthful proposition or a set of arguments which, in reality, conceal a vested interest. … In a second step, a successful ideology takes on the material form which generates belief in that ideology … in the guise of Ideological State Apparatuses. Third, ideology assumes an almost spontaneous existence, becoming instinctive rather than realized either as an explicit set of arguments or as an institution. The supreme example of such spontaneity is, for Žižek, the notion of commodity fetishism. (Myers 71)

Miss Rose's use of the negligee demonstrates that she is a "(good) subject … inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs" (Althusser), and that commodity fetishism is her ideological ritual. For her, her newly-acquired garment is turned into "a partial object; that is, the commodity can be a fetish in the Freudian sense … as a substitute point of focus in order to mask and deny a painful psychological reality" (Tyson 29). It can supposedly help her *disavow* ("mask and deny") the "painful psychological reality" that we know she needs to cover up: the feeling of inner fragmentation that the risky contact with Haskell has caused her. It is thus fitting that Miss Rose simultaneously grounds her fantasy of identity on the fetishized negligee just as she does with her integrated body image on the mirror reflection.

As a result, we discover in this scene how commodity fetishism operates in connivance with the process of defensive misrecognition that the mirror stage represents. During the latter, the subject's identification with its mirror image "is

alienating in the sense that it becomes confused with the self;" in other words, the ego that emerges cannot be equated with the whole reality of the subject. Therefore, "the function of the ego is, in other words, one of *mis-recognition*; of refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation" (Homer 25). In the same way, for Althusser "one of the two functions of ideology as such … [is] the function of *misrecognition – méconnaissance*)." Baudrillard applies this idea to his analysis of *The Consumer Society* (1998) and agrees that "the dimension of consumption … is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of *misrecognition*" (qtd. in Lane 72). Modern consumers fall back on an array of "signs of happiness" to try to satisfy their (really unsatisfiable) desire; however, this abundance of commodities is really "'empty' of all real content; it is the site of the playing out of our desires, protecting us at the same time from confronting the everyday realities of a dangerous and problematic world" (Lane 72).

Subsequently, we can conclude that this moment of the mirror with its two aspects – the fetishization of the negligee and the fantasy of a (new) ego – has a basically protective purpose for Miss Rose, a perspective that is reinforced by Williams's own description of the robe. Just as one of Freud's figurations for the ego is "a protective layer, … a shell" (Abraham and Torok 80), the protecting negligee is made of "shell-pink crepe de chine" (216). Abraham and Torok assign two functions to the shell-ego, an outward protection to moderate external assaults, and also an inward one to channel excessive impulses (Abraham and Torok 80). This inwardly-directed protection of the ego-shell is the equivalent to the Imaginary's "power by which the skin of appearance is stretched *over the empty skull of the real*," the Semiotic of uncontrolled drives (Boothby 211-2; Boothby's italics). Rather than a shell, then, the negligee can be considered a metaphorical *skin* that wraps Miss Rose's fragile identity, because the textual hints also point to that interpretation. For the "*shell*-pink crepe de chine" is adorned with "ivory lace" (216), this latter substance being one of Williams's favorites to signify the skin. For instance, the woman in the poem "Evening" exposes the flash of "a breast's ivory satin" (*Collected Poems* 92), and the Countess in *This is (An Entertainment)* praises her chauffeur-lover's "skin, ivory tinged with rose" (2-8). The clearest example, which combines the same two materials of the negligee, is to be

found in the short story "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll," which features a bathing girl whose body "catch[es] the sunlight like wet ivory," "her skin … gleaming white like the inner surface of a wet shell" (29-30).

Miss Rose's fetishization of the negligee is thus the representative of the fetishization of the skin as the retaining wall / containment barrier that both separates the subject and the exterior objects, and the subject from its own Reality. Yet this dermal barrier can be threatened by physical intimacy and that is why, upon meeting in the hall or on the stairs of the rooming house, Miss Rose and Haskell "edged unnecessarily close to the wall to prevent [even] their clothes from touching" (216). The negligee will be the armor that will protect her in the encounter with Haskell that she carefully plans in the second part of this scene, the moment of the gaze. Because Miss Rose, who does not want to be touched, does instead want to be *viewed*: we have observed that in her daydreams about a new life she wishes to be the center of people's conversation, the object of their attention – her fantasy is not so much about what she will do or feel, but about what "they" will *see her doing*, the same empty "they" that we encountered above. She then prepares a *casual* meeting with Haskell in which she can be viewed but keeping a safe distance and a protective layer. Wrapped in her negligee, Miss Rose fetishizes herself /her body as the object for Haskell's gaze:

> One morning she stood just on the inside of her door till she heard him descending the stairs… Then she caught the creamy lace about her throat and stepped out of her bedroom. She stood there in his full gaze for three ecstatic moments before she scurried into the bathroom with a slight hysterical giggle and locked the door… (216)

We may observe here the intriguing phrase "three ecstatic moments." If the fact of counting *three moments* is already unusual, the adjective "ecstatic" complicates the question. A plausible explanation for this can be found in Sartrean ontology, which uses the word "ekstasis" to label the processes by which the for-itself is separated from the in-itself (Sartre 298-300). In a loose way, we can say that "being-in-itself is nonconscious being and that being-for-itself is conscious being," or the ego (Barnes,

“Ontology” 15). The first ektasis is the “internal negation of the In-itself by the For-itself,” a covering up of the unconscious/Semiotic by the imaginary ego, which would correspond with our scene in the church (Barnes, “Introduction” xxxiii). The second one is the “Reflection” through which “the For-itself tries to adopt an external point of view on itself,” that is, a self-reflexive mirror stage of sorts (Barnes, “Keywords” 630). Finally, the *third ekstasis* is the cause for the appearance of another dimension of being, the “Being-for-others,” when the for-itself realizes its own embodiedness as it “exists outside as an object for others” (629). As an example for this ekstasis, Sartre uses the experience of peeping, in which our consciousness or attention is absorbed by the objects of our sneaky look until the Other suddenly arrives:

> I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole. I am alone and on the level of a non-thetic self-consciousness. This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness … I am a pure consciousness of things … But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being … I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me – as it is usually expressed. (259-60)

The way to discover our embodiment is by means of the Other’s look, a look that does not necessarily have to come from an-other actual person as long as we *believe* we are being looked at:

> The look which the eyes manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are is a pure reference to myself. What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that *there is someone there*; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt… (259; Sartre’s italics)

Accordingly, Miss Rose’s “*three ekstatic* moments” draw our attention to the dimension of her *for-others* or the “body – our body – [which] has for its peculiar characteristic the fact that it is essentially that which is *known by the Other.* … Thus the nature of my body refers me to the existence of others and to my being-for-others” (Sartre 218). Now, there is a fundamental difference between Miss Rose’s and Sartre’s

third ekstasis. For Sartre, a basic condition for this ekstasis seems to be the unawareness of the for-itself as to the imminence of the occasion of being looked at: it is "all of a sudden" that it becomes "suddenly affected" by the look, and "in the shock which seizes me when I apprehend the Other's look … suddenly I experience a subtle alienation" (260, 264).

On the other hand, Miss Rose has watchfully prepared the setting and *herself* for this occasion of being looked at – there is no shock, no sudden self-consciousness when she purposely runs into Haskell on the stairs. In order not to apprehend that she "is vulnerable, that [she has] a body which can be hurt," she flaunts a corporeality shielded by a fetishized commodity that acts as an alienated surrogate for her skin. She stands in front of Haskell in an attempt to *fasten his look* to what she has composed as an unified, coherent image of herself – however misconstrued. Miss Rose's ekstasis is short-circuited by that alienating commodity that makes her, instead of "standing out from" herself – *ekstasis* in Sartre keeps this original Greek sense (Barnes, "Keywords" 630) –, really imprison her-self within an impermeable skin that blocks exterior and interior threats. Significantly, the scene takes place between doors, and although Miss Rose steps out of one, she hurries to lock herself again behind another.

The abjection scene. Miss Rose's contact with Haskell ends up in a breach of her defensive strategies and the identity crisis that abjection entails. This violation occurs in the next scene, which carries on with the issue of the gaze with a twist. On this occasion Miss Rose and Haskell take a walk from their home to the library while debating poetry, and then she experiences Haskell's gaze in a very different – and more dangerous – way than before: "He looked down at her very slyly and something new came out of his eyes. It was almost palpable. It seemed to touch her cheek with little, tentative fingers. A palpable though very timid caress" (217). In spite of Miss Rose's initial avoidance of physical contact and desire to be only looked at, Haskell ironically accomplishes the former by means of the latter: his gaze *touches* her, announcing the cracking open of her shell and hence the destabilization of her pretended solidity. The same happened to the hitchhiker boy in "Gift" when he started to surrender to the enticements of the androgynous Italian woman: "[her eyes] went on down his body. He

could almost feel them. He leaned back quickly in response to the suggested caress" (67).

A number of textual clues help us notice in this destabilization of identity the return of the *chora* with its mode of signification. First, Haskell's look is indeed a contradictory combination of opposites that seems impossible in the society of the spectacle with its "privileging of the human sense of sight … [and] distancing from the real world accessed most immediately through touch" (Lane 99). As opposed to this ascendancy of sight, what Williams describes here is actually the bodily, *palpable* materialization of the gaze that appeared in the preceding scene. The condition for that previous gaze was "the disappearance of the Other's eyes as objects which manifest the look;" more succinctly: "If I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes" (Sartre 268, 258). Conversely, it is Haskell's eyes that Miss Rose perceives now and his look becomes a kind of appendix that protrudes from them and unites both protagonists in a reciprocal contact: it "touch[es] her cheek" and it is equally "palpable," capable of being touched. Not casually, this conversion can also be explained by Lacanian theory, in which "the gaze is not something that can be seen, as by its very nature it is that which escapes the field of vision, but it is something that can be represented in the form of the *objet a*," the paradoxical representation that Haskell embodies (Homer 125-6).

During this defining encounter, sight gives way to touch not only in the metaphorical but also in the literal sense: Haskell's eyes touch Miss Rose, and he physically touches her body too:

> He caught her elbow as she stepped over the curb. His touch, his slight upward pressure, seemed to release her from all effect of gravity so that she felt as though she were floating with feathery lightness over the street. The laughter bubbled out of her lips irrepressibly like water gone down the wrong way. She was lifted up and blown forward, a thin tissue kite that was suddenly caught in a rising wind. (217)

The primary consequences of Haskell's touch is Miss Rose's bursting out of laughter, a *Real* one instead of the fetishistic one in her casino fantasy, or her slight chuckle when

scurrying between doors. Her laughter, besides being one of the main semiotic manifestations, is here compared to a leaking liquid that escapes “irrepressibly,” a clear signal of the opening of a breach in her self-contained embodiment. Likewise, this simile reveals the ineffectiveness of her protective ego, because if its function was precisely to *channel* excessive impulses, Miss Rose’s laughter has found the fissure through which to flow *the wrong way*, which is actually “forward,” Haskell’s own posture.

Unlike the planned visual encounter, it is this “sudden” physical intimacy that alters Miss Rose’s relation with her embodiment. Formerly, her body was presumed as a solid presence prepared to be apprehended, a fetishized object and as such a substitute for the symbolic phallus, the object of desire whose absence Lacan hides not exactly under a negligee but behind a “veil” that “suggests that there is an object behind it, which the veil covers over, although this is only a presumption on the part of the subject. In this way the veil enables the perpetuation of the idea that the object exists” (Homer 56). This is also the veil that Joan Riviere locates as the essence of femininity in “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929), since like the fetishized commodity, “what the notion of masquerade foregrounds is not the *essential* identity of women but rather the *constructed* nature of that identity” (Homer 101).

Conversely, if the contact with the abject “continuously violates one’s own borders” (McAfee 47), Miss Rose’s contact with Haskell can be presumed to bring about such a violation of her border, her fetishized veil/skin. Under his caress her embodiment loses its opacity when that veil is discovered to be only a weightless, flimsy “thin tissue” that does not guarantee the existence of any object behind nor even its own resilience as a barrier. The shattering of this defense is craftily implied by a narrative parallelism: we read about Miss Rose being “lifted up and blown forward, a thin tissue kite that was suddenly caught in a rising wind,” whereas a few paragraphs above, we have read that the sky of that Mississippi spring had “white threads … like bits of shattered web” as if “some radiant white cloth, like a bridal veil, had been drawn swiftly over the sky and fragments of it had caught on these sharp projections and been torn loose and held there” (217). The ensuing depiction of Miss Rose’s upward flight does not fail to awaken the prospect of such an ending. There are

inescapable sexual connotations in the *sharp projections* – "pointed church steeples" – that tear the "bridal veil:" bell towers are an usual grotesque symbol for the penis (Bakhtin, *Cultura Popular* 279). Williams himself showed his familiarity with that equivalence when he commented to Clark Mills about some paintings in the Chicago set of *Battle of Angels* that "depict[ed] churches with red steeples:" "Get it? It's symbolism, Freudian symbolism" (qtd. in Leverich 390).

Still, Miss Rose's metaphorical violation/sexual intercourse by/with the abject Haskell differs from Flora's rape in "The Important Thing," because the latter represents a separation between the formerly united protagonists that engenders John's subjectivity, while the former initiates their union after the dissolution of Miss Rose's "swathing that… allows for the foundation of a sense of identity in the form of an imaginary ego" (Boothby 221-2). That dissolution of the boundaries between self and world, subject and object, that endangers "the groundlines of subjective identity," is characteristic of the semiotic *chora* that Haskell embodies (Boothby 140). So, in addition to Miss Rose's uncontainable, *wrong* laughter that signaled the irruption of the semiotic mode of signification, we can expect other semiotic "linguistic changes [that] constitute changes in the *status of the subject* – his [and her] relation to the body, to others, and to objects" (Kristeva, qtd. in McAfee 38). We start to see that progressive change in the characters' relationship, for instance, when Miss Rose's lines begin to be sprinkled with italics, just like Haskell's are: "Oh, goodness, you ought to *move!*", "Oh! Now I *won*der!" (215), "Of *course!*" (216). A more oblique linguistic change can be observed in the adjustment of syntactical coordination in the story. Initially, Haskell appears in direct opposition to the rest of the community in numerous examples of adversative structures in which the split between them (Semiotic and Symbolic) is emphasized by periods:

> … "What a strong personality!" But Haskell wasn't a preacher…
>
> People who knew her tactfully mentioned nothing about Lucinda except her reported skill at domestic science. But Haskell didn't know this … (213)

> Yes, it was *ludicrous* looking. Not because Haskell himself was homely. He wasn't. (214)

In contrast, in the scene we are dealing with (after their physical contact), we realize the union of Haskell and Miss Rose in a series of *copulative* sentences where the repetitive (ab)use of conjunctions brings reminiscences of infantile, pre-Oedipal language (Alarcos 398; Gili Gaya 276):

> *And* then instead of turning at his usual corner he walked up another block to the library steps *and* said good-bye to her there *and* they *both* looked back at the same time *and* smiled as she entered the Public Library door. (italics added, 217)

And then it is Miss Rose who also stands in an adversative position similar to Haskell's: "[The library door] seemed to swing open from someone pushing inside. She stepped away to avoid a collision. *But* [italics added] there was nobody but her" (218).

These statements inaugurate the final part of this climactic scene in which, we can see better now, Miss Rose lives through the state of abjection that I already noted in "The Important Thing." Like John experiences his initial mergence with Flora in a glaring scenery where he feels as if dancing by himself, Miss Rose enters the library under the feeling of "undifferentiated union" with both the abject and the surroundings (McAfee 48). The objects (and other subjects) are subsumed underneath the intensity of light that surrounds her since, now, the inside/outside border blurred, the brilliance that was formerly outside (and that will again be exterior at the end of the story) is *internal* now:[160] "The room inside was wonderfully light and spacious. Brilliance was refracted from every surface, from the yellow oak tables and chairs, from ink pads and pencils, even from old Miss Jamison's knobby cheekbones" (218). For her it seems that there is *nobody* but her in that wonderful space of completion.

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[160] References to exterior brilliance appear on page 215 (where Haskell calls Miss Rose's attention to "Such brilliant sunlight this morning!") and on the description of the morning after Haskell departs, when the air is "keen and brilliant as a polished blade."

The fact is that there *is* someone else, but since Miss Rose does not perceive her superior, Miss Jamison, apart from being one mo(e)re surface dissolved into the brightness, the effect is a further antagonism to the gaze of the social Other. Miss Rose acts with "alacrity" and "spontaneous good humor," oblivious to "Miss Jamison watch[ing] her sourly" (218). Miss Rose is now a fearless object for the *disciplinary gaze* – as Foucault would put it –, just like Haskell has been throughout the whole story, as "Mrs. Henderson glared at him suspiciously" (213), Mrs. Jameson "sharply," and "Mr. Owens gave him the same look that customers gave him, puzzled, uneasy, a little bit hostile" (214).[161]

In conclusion, what we can witness in this whole scene – the protagonists' encounter and Miss Rose's entrance in the library – is the splitting of the ego and the blurring of boundaries that Kristeva associates with abjection: "The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression ... is relaxed," she warns (*Horror* 13). The abject causes a "*narcissistic crisis*" that will lead the subject to "a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)" (14, 15). Our scene then depicts the first moment of this crisis, in which "the symptom, the abject[,] permeates me, I become abject;" in our case, it is Miss Rose that undergoes that crisis and momentarily adopts Haskell's stance, that is, *becomes abject* herself. The story's final part, like in "The Important Thing," illustrates the second moment, where "I keep it [the abject] under control" through "*sublimation*... the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal" (11). Subject and abject separate and, after that thesis, the symbolic balance is restored – at least in part.

[161] The disciplinary gaze is the basis for the Panopticon scheme of social surveillance and control, as Foucault describes it in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and the interview "The Eye of Power" (1980). For detailed applications of Foucault's theories to Williams's texts, see Kleb on *Streetcar* and Bernard on the prison drama *Not About Nightingales*.

Symbolic closure

After the focus on Miss Rose, let us remember that the process of abjection does not take place only at the individual level; the same dynamics appears in the social system, represented here by the community in which Haskell does not fit. There can hardly be a better candidate than Haskell to embody the indefinite abject that perturbs system, borders, and rules (Kristeva, *Horror* 4). He disturbs the social order when, classified as "just an ordinary dime-a-dozen grocery clerk," he defies his expected role as a shopkeeper by inappropriately acting "like a new preacher" (213), displaying those "eccentric manners of his" that make him into the (unsuitable) center of attention (214). "A clerk in a grocery store is unusual as a subject for conversation," Miss Jamison rejoins (215). He does not respect the unspoken though always respected rules of the community, as in the examples above where he disagrees with customers, and is ambiguously masculine and feminine. "*Irritating*" as he is (218), he fulfills all the requisites to be an abject and get excluded and expulsed "with no other goal than the survival of both group and subject" (Kristeva, *Horror* 68).

Thus, the last section of the story describes that expulsion and the conditions of the "survival of both," the community and Miss Rose. After all the complaints from his customers, it is Haskell's boss who performs that expulsion, dismissing him without a sound reason in a clear illustration of the endoxal thinking that supports the community, as I have stated elsewhere:

> [Mr. Owens] finally surrenders to the dictates of the covert authority of public opinion. … His excuses when eventually firing Haskell reflect the influence of their opinion, when he muses ''Hmmm,' said Mr. Owens. The young man was neat and courteous and he was very reliable – but nobody seemed to like him' (218). All of Haskell's positive attributes are counteracted just by a blurred generalization, so that we see it is only people's pressure that forces Mr. Owens to discharge him, as the modal constructions later show: "I *have to* let you go" (218), "I *can't* keep you here" (219). (italics added; Torres Zúñiga, "Something" 121)

There is a particular aspect in Mr. Owens's behavior that again exposes the emptiness of the symbolic order and its ideology. He does not quite voice the dominant beliefs without some reticence: he moves away from Haskell to avoid being questioned about the reasons for his firing, and when he ends up answering with "an impatient gesture," he is not especially assertive – "you just haven't pleased 'em somehow" (218), "How should I know? It's something *about* you, I guess" (219). These signals subtly suggest that Mr. Owens acknowledges the irrationality of Haskell's dismissal, so that only "after getting rid of him he achieve[s] that '*curious* relief' of agreeing with people's opinion and he can face his customers heartily (219)" (Torres Zúñiga "Something" 121). Mr. Owens seems *to know what he is doing, but he does it anyway* to guarantee the survival of the group by expelling the odd one out. This closely corresponds to the strategy of *disavowal* that underlies the process of fetishization as the ultimate defense of the ego, and which effects a positioning, a splitting, similar to the thetic phase and necessary for the re-institution of the Symbolic after abjection. The difference however is that disavowal is a psychic process – "I know very well (something is not true) but nevertheless (I keep believing otherwise)" –, whereas in Mr. Owens's case the key is on the *doing*, on which he *has to* and *can't* do, notwithstanding what he might think. This is the sphere where Žižek locates the reflection of ideology:

> As cynical subjects, we know full well that our understanding of reality is distorted, but we nevertheless stick to that falsehood and not reject it. … The ideological illusion lies in the reality of what we do, rather than what we think. (Myers 65-7)

The postmodern, cynical subject performs ideologically-charged actions even though they know "they are following an illusion" in order to achieve an impression of meaning and stability (67). Hence, ideology is to the social as fetishism is to the individual: an attempt to cover up the lack in the Symbolic that the contact with the Real threatens to reveal:

> In terms of Žižek's theory, then, … ideology fills out the abyss of the antagonism – it patches over the hole in reality (the Symbolic Order). Ideology, as it were, makes

> sense of what does not make sense … concealing the gap opened up by the failure of reality (the Symbolic) to account fully for the Real. (Myers 75-7).

The function of ideology is to secure the stability of the symbolic order itself as the function of the fetish is to sustain the subject within the Symbolic, a subject who otherwise would have to confront the emptiness in itself.

Therefore, as Mr. Owens re-establishes the (symbolic) order in the community by forcing out its antagonist, our subject-in-process Miss Rose will only overcome abjection and return to the Symbolic by also trying to make "sense of what does not make sense" and so fetishizing Haskell. This happens during their last encounter, when the ex-clerk drops by the library on his way to the station to return Emerson's *Essays* before leaving town. There he meets Miss Rose, but their short conversation is interrupted by another patron who returns a book on pioneers; Haskell then leaves for good, and Miss Rose returns to her former existence. We have already seen the details of the contradistinction between the community's masculine model represented by the pioneer and Haskell. Yet this scene goes beyond the issue of gender if we consider now the apparent correlation it makes between Haskell and Emerson's *Essays.*

Aguilera and Torres interpret the coincident reference to the pioneers and to Haskell's return of Emerson's *Essays* as the metaphorical clash of two contrary conceptions of the individual. The dissident Haskell would embody the spirit of individualism and nonconformity that emanates from Emerson's *Essays* – especially from the renown "Self-Reliance" (1841) –, a spirit that surfaces here counteracted by a puritan community still rooted in a nostalgic past and based on the homogeneity and obedience of its members (Aguilera and Torres 193). Some narrative choices sustain this latter point: it does not seem casual that the man who asks for the pioneers book remains an unidentified "stranger," and that his intimidating presence thwarts Rose's impulse to run after Haskell, that is, to disobediently follow him: "She would have pursued him except for the stranger's presence" (219).

Now, although it is tempting – and to a certain extent logical – to make Haskell into the symbol of the Emersonian rebellious spirit, attributing his peculiar

behavior to a mere implementation of Emerson's principles *by the book* (so to speak) would result in a too neat justification for his too evasive strangeness. It seems paradoxical that Haskell should differentiate himself from the obedient crowd by following *someone else*'s dictates. In fact, the story provides us with an explicit example of Haskell's distrust in the blind acceptation of the opinions of literary authorities. In his previous conversation with Miss Rose he had questioned the infallibility of Robert Browning's poem "Pippa's Song:"[162]

> The year's at the spring,
> And day's at the morn;
> Morning's at seven;
> The hill-side's dew-pearl'd;
> The lark's on the wing;
> The snail's on the thorn;
> God's in His heaven –
> All's right with the world! (Browning 24)

"Occasionally," the young man explains to her, he has his doubts about this ideally structured order of things, which appears to him "not always *completely* convincing" (217). The seeming static perfection the poem depicts, however pleasing, does not offer possibilities of disagreement if we want everything to be "right with the world," and Haskell does not take this reality for granted and wonders why things should be so. Furthermore, Haskell's contravention of symbolic difference – his blurring of boundaries between gender and social roles – could not be based on such a dichotomist discourse as Emerson's, whose tenets in the *Essays* and other works constantly pigeonhole reality into clear-cut oppositions: "As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists" (*Transcendentalist*), and in politics "we go for the conservative, or for the reformer" (*Conservative*); even "human life is made up of the two elements, power and form" ("Experience"). To sum up, "everything in

[162] From Browning's play *Pippa Passes*.

nature is bipolar, or has a positive and negative pole. There is a male and a female, a spirit and a fact, a north and a south" ("Character").

These implied incongruities are not the only ones to interfere in a too hasty identification of Haskell with Emerson's "great man … who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" ("Self-Reliance"). Williams's text itself actually cancels out that identification almost at the same time it triggers it. Although it is Haskell who brings the *Essays* back to the library, we read that it is a volume which "Miss Rose had taken out *for him* [italics added] the night before." His apology to her when he returns the book is also significant: "Sorry I won't get to read them" (219). The narration suggests that *it is from Miss Rose's perspective* that Haskell corresponds to the individual Emerson describes, so that it was her idea that he might be interested in reading the *Essays*; hence his apology for not having read them. Haskell then would appear untainted by Emersonian theories, and the reason for his odd way of being should not be ascribed to a particular school of thought, but remain occult after he leaves the story.

My contention here is that the reference to Emerson's *Essays* symbolizes Miss Rose's attempt at the symbolic closure of Haskell's destabilizing ambiguity by "giving one interpretation and one only to the outer limit of the nameable," the strategy that follows the rejection or "pulverization of the abject" (Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis" 318). That is the same procedure that we encountered at the end of "The Important Thing" when John, after separating from Flora, constructs her into a fantasy of androgyny that helps him to eventually conceal the Real gap and *make sense of what does not make sense* – that is, to enter the Symbolic after pinning down symbolically that "something about her" that we find here echoed in Haskell's "something about him."

The way in which this interpretation of Haskell as the Emersonian "great man" is related to the symbolic materialization of the androgyne needs to be clarified. Although they may seem two facets difficult to combine, Miss Rose's interpretation of Haskell in relation to Emersonian individuality has a noteworthy point in common with my initial analysis of his androgynous character: both suggest a desire for psychic wholeness. On the whole, the ultimate aims of performing androgyny and developing

self-reliance look pretty much the same: to overcome social constraints and achieve a longed-for sense of completion. The possibility of an androgynous masculinity represents "less an easily attainable achieved state than the goal of personal development" that aspires, as in the case of the mythical androgyne, to "that fantasy of psychic unity which provides the solution to the Marxian problem of alienation" (Savran, *Taking it* 124). In the same way, Emerson's discourse in his *Essays* insists that, although it might be "easy in the world to live after the world's opinion," we must grow out of the "conspiracy" of society against our personal liberty and develop our own character. Emerson's glorification of the individual's self-government arises from a deep belief in man's *psychic unity*, his capability to intellectually comprehend the world and himself.[163] For him, "mind is the only reality;" likewise, "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind" ("Self-Reliance").

Moreover, recent criticism has debated Emerson's belief in the essentialist positions of his era as regards male and female temperaments, suggesting that he in fact advocated an androgynous ideal, as his journals reveal: "the finest people marry the two sexes in their own person. Hermaphrodite is then the symbol of the finished soul … in every act must appear the married pair: the two elements shall mix in every act" (qtd. in Gilbert 97).[164] In any case, constructing Haskell as an androgyne or as an Emersonian individual would represent two sides of the same fantasy: a semblance of an enviable psychic completeness. While, as noted earlier, we count on sufficient signals that hint at the integration of masculine and feminine aspects in Haskell, other textual details support the parallelism drawn by Miss Rose: Haskell always seems to be acting willfully in what certainly looks like Emerson's picture of self-determination – he "decide[s] to compliment Lucinda," he resolves to "make inquiries at once" and

[163] I am keeping Emerson's conventional use of *man* as the generic for *individual*, either man or woman. He hardly ever distinguishes both sexes in the *Essays*; in "Self-Reliance," for example, the only example is: "We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state."

[164] The discussion is open between critics like Armida Gilbert, who considers that an androgyny-friendly Emerson even anticipates Virginia Woolf's ideas of an androgynous creative mind in *A Room of One's Own* (98), and others such as Jeffrey Steel who affirms: "Unwilling to validate mythic female power … Emerson found it nearly impossible to envision the enlightened and empowered self in terms of androgynous spiritual harmony" (134, n. 31).

leaves the library so quickly that he "ha[s] to return for his book;" and after being dismissed he goes "home at once" and packs without second thoughts (213, 216, 219). There are enough narrative references to support both perspectives, and there is a reason why the former remains somewhat veiled whereas the latter is introduced more overtly by Miss Rose. She, as we have seen in the scene of the mirror, is really a "good subject" inserted into symbolic rituals, so her return to the Symbolic after abjection involves putting forward an interpretation that again stays in tune with the constraints of the social order, and Emerson's individual is the appropriate one.

How a radical like Emerson can be said to function as a symbol of abidance by the social order is explained thanks to the subjacent similarities between Emersonian liberalism and the tenets of the Ego psychology, which flourished in the United States in the years following the Second World War. On the surface these two paradigms may seem to collide in their view of the relationship between the subject and the world: Emerson hails the nonconformist, while Ego psychologists (such as Anna Freud and Rudolph Löwenstein) postulate the need of strengthening the ego to *adapt* to reality (Boothby 12). Yet their crucial link is that both paradigms set out from the same premise: the appointment of the ego as the preeminent agent in the psyche. Whereas "the ego psychological tradition … centers the personality upon the ego and equates the adaptive functions of the ego with the 'self'" (Boothby 145), we also find that such confidence in the promise of fulfillment of the potentials of the ego constitutes one of the foundations of the liberal-radical tradition in America, of which Emerson is a major exponent (Susman 68). The Emersonian individual must have an *I* – an ego in psychoanalytic terms – able to overcome the dictates of the conspiring society and thereby prove *its own integrity* and character.

Ego psychology was repeatedly criticized by Lacan for its belief in the ascendancy of the conscious mind and its efforts "to secure the ego's dominance and control over the id and the superego" (McAfee 30) – a rebuttal akin to that he devoted to Sartre's existentialism.[165] Ego psychologists consider the ego a fixed entity that can

[165] The opposition between Lacan's psychoanalysis and Sartrean existentialism has been reconsidered by Christina Howells, who reveals a number of common points between them, for instance that "Lacan and Sartre are in agreement in seeing man's original state as *dereliction, … manqué à être …* lack of being,"

be controlled and developed to successfully confront reality. Written before the Freudian revolution, Emerson's numerous *Essays* manifest a comparable standpoint: "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself," he affirms in "Self-Reliance," and dealing with "Experience" he believes that "the subject exists, the subject enlarges … As I am, so I see." Postmodern psychoanalysis, in contrast, places the conflict not so much between us and the world, but within the split subject (who can never be at peace with itself), and sees the ego as an artificial construction in the mirror stage – *As I see, so I am*, we might summarize Lacan's mirror stage –, a fiction through which the subject creates an "illusion of coherence and mastery" (Homer 25). In his *Ecrits* Lacan condemns this idiosyncratically American theory of the autonomous ego, locating the cause for "the degradation of [Freudian] psychoanalysis" in this country in the antihistoricism and behaviorism that characterize its psychological heritage ("Significación" 666).

Therefore, Miss Rose's linking of Haskell and Emerson can be considered a strategy for attaining the former's symbolic closure within an order that privileges self-mastery, independence, and personal achievement – in a word, the ego. She reads Haskell's self-determined behavior as a good example of the liberal "performance of free will … conserving [a] sense of individuality and integrity," that is to say, "a realization of the *I*" (Torres Zúñiga, "Something" 126). There is still a further clarification for Miss Rose using this tactic to congeal Haskell's strangeness. It is related to one of the most important details that Lacan disparages about North American ego psychology (of which Emersonian liberalism can be regarded a precursor of sorts, as we have seen). His comments in *Ecrits* reveal and attack the implicit compliance of the degraded version of psychoanalysis practiced in the US with

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or that "Lacan's intense opposition to ego psychology may be compared here to Sartre's analysis of role playing and bad faith in *Being and Nothingness,* in that both thinkers reject the alienation ensuant on any identification with a defined role" (335, 334). She concludes that Sartre was really one of the first philosophers to think about the "split subject" because, contrary to the "popular view of Sartre as a philosopher of unrestricted freedom and lucidity" (336-7), his subject as formulated in his later texts of the Sixties and Seventies loses part of its autonomy and free will to become subjected to family circumstances and social conditioning (see Howell's notes on Sartre's *The Idiot of the Family* (1971), 339 *ff.*). For a discussion of Sartre and Lacan's concepts of vision and gaze, see K. Oliver (57-63).

the principles of consumer society and the *American way of life*: psychoanalytic therapy in mid-century America was reduced to a means to obtain "*success*" and a requirement for "*happiness*" ("La cosa freudiana" 399).[166] This needed "to introduce … some stable value, some standard of the measure of the real" for the patient-analyst interaction in analysis, and as a result there appeared "a team of [analyst] egos" who offered Americans to guide them to happiness without disturbing their autonomy, namely, their own egos (570).[167] The effect of their denegation of Freudian psychoanalysis and restoration of the stable ego is the psychoanalysts' return to the ranks of psychology, a discipline that, according to Lacan, "is the vehicle for ideals" and "a servant to society," as it betrays in its deference to marketing and consumption tendencies ("Posición del Inconsciente" 368).[168] Only a few years later, Kristeva and other leading theorists such as Foucault and Althusser would take up a like position in their articles for *Tel Quel*, the radical French journal which, concerned with the plurality of language, "associate[d] notions of clear and stable meaning with consumerism and consumption" (Allen 76-7).

Consequently, when Miss Rose allocates a stable meaning to Haskell's "something" by tying it up with a (Emersonian) fantasy of ego autonomy, she is performing an equivalent fantasy to that she experiences in her consumption of the negligee as a commodity. Just as she remains wrapped up in a commodity fetishism that makes her need an object to support her identity, Miss Rose constructs Haskell as the ideal that would help her overcome her inner fragmentation – a completeness that could fill up the void of the Real that she experienced in the church, where what she encountered was its *lack*. The abjected Haskell may become the paradigm of the whole

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[166] "*Success*" and "*happiness*" appear italicized in English in the French original and the Spanish translation.

[167] "Se concibe que para explayar una concepción tan evidentemente precaria, algunos de ultramar hayan sentido la necesidad de introducir en ella un valor estable, un patrón de la medida de lo real: es el *ego* autónomo ... Un equipo de *egos* menos iguales sin duda que autónomos ... se ofrece a los norteamericanos para guiarlos hacia la *happiness* sin perturbar las autonomías, egoístas o no, que empiedran con sus esferas sin conflicto el *American way* hacia ella."

[168] "La psicología es vehículo de ideales: la psique no representa en ella más que el padrinazgo que hace que se la califique de académica. El ideal es siervo de la sociedad."

individual able to think and act willfully, an autonomous ego; but after all, the ego is nothing more than an *object* of consciousness, coagulated to hide fragmentation and alienation, to swathe the instability of the subject like the negligee does with Miss Rose's body; in other words, the ego can be a fetish too, like the androgyne is.

There is still another approach to imbricate the autonomous individual and the androgyne based on the coincidence of another quality: self-sufficiency. As we know, the myth of androgyny has comprised the faculty of self-regeneration or *self-sufficiency* from its inception. Similarly, Emerson trusts man's "powers of thought" to help him cultivate a solid character that will make him "self-dependent … self-sustained … self-existent" (*Transcendentalist*); in one word, self-sufficient: "The face which character wears to me is self-sufficingness [*sic*]" ("Character").[169] This overlapping is what Maggie Kilgour discovers in some of Dante's metamorphoses in *Inferno*: "for Dante the possibility of aspiring to personal and poetic autonomy is already imaginable, even if it is consigned to Hell" in the form of hermaphroditic monsters, she explains. So, the depiction of the punishment of those self-sufficient hybrid creatures hides Dante's underlying concern about the emergence of the Renaissance autonomous individual after the Middle Ages (76).

In Williams's story, we encounter what seems to be the opposite strategy: Miss Rose's interpretation of Haskell as the autonomous individual would veil the possible parallel construal of Haskell as the self-sufficient androgyne, *already imaginable* but not overtly displayed. We have already noted a number of correspondences with the story "The Important Thing" (where the androgyne does emerge openly) that help support this idea. For instance, the several hints about Haskell that point towards a combination of gender traits make this grocery clerk be *unlikable* though also the favorite target of public interest, just as the androgynous Flora was both strange and attractive. Like in "The Important Thing" too, the end of "Something about him" brings about a moment of abjection – Haskell's expulsion from the community – that parallels the thetic moment when subject and object separate. Let us

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[169] In "Self-Reliance" he also establishes a consubstantial importance of these two features, praising "the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul."

remember Haskell's final appearance is at the library, when he returns Emerson's book to Miss Rose, apologizes for not having read them, and leaves for good while Miss Rose's attention is distracted by another user. The cleavage between Miss Rose and Haskell is manifest on the most literal level when the narration returns to an imago of the *corps morcelé* to depict Miss Rose's feelings: "She would have pursued him [Haskell] except for the stranger's presence, his eyes fixed on her, pinioning her attention coldly like a blade thrust down on quivering, agonized wings" (219). Their separation suggests itself on the syntactic level too: instead of occupying the same position with respect to the socius and being joined by copulatives, now Haskell and Miss Rose (who, we have just read, feels again the disciplinary, "pinioning" gaze of the Other) stand in adverse positions further distanced by a line break:

> 'Haskell!' she called.
> But he had already gone out the library door. (219)

Finally, in this last quotation we observe that Miss Rose, like John in "The Important Thing," effectuates two attempts at Haskell's symbolic closure. One was that fleeting connection to Emerson, which can be said to involve disavowal as in the case of the androgynous Flora: Haskell's "something" is tied to an explanation almost at the same time as the narration insinuates that there cannot be such a univocal meaning. He *both is and is not* an Emersonian individual, just like he is and is not a *real man.* The other gesture in order to identify him can be seen in the quote above: that is the first time that someone pronounces Haskell's name instead of referring to "him," "the young man," or "the grocery clerk." Miss Rose calls out his name to prevent him from leaving, to pin him in down in his continuous movement. That is the moment of *sublimation* that keeps the abject under control by "the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal," that is, naming what have been lost (Kristeva, *Horror* 11). Despite Miss Rose's efforts, though, these attempts at a definitive classification are eventually unsuccessful – Haskell's odd "something about him" remains a conundrum that he still takes away with him when leaving: "She saw his *oddly-shaped* [italics added] hat bobbing across the window" (219).

After the abjection of the ill-fitting Haskell, the conclusion of the story restores the community's functioning: "boxcars shunting about the freight yards, whistles screaming urgently …, the traffic signals changing and cars moving onward or halting" (220). In this hustle and bustle we witness the reinstatement of a normality that helps heal the instability Haskell caused; that is, this frenzy can neutralize the feeling of emptiness that he evoked by *filling it up*: the atmosphere in town is now "replete with sound and motion" (220). The town offers a semblance of "fullness of being" like that Sartre encounters *before* the perception of nothingness: "the cafe by itself with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps which fill it – the café is a fullness of being" (9). Yet, for the subject-in-process that façade of routine does not successfully eradicate the disturbing effects of the Semiotic, as Kristeva affirms: "abjection... does not radically cut off the subject from what treatens [*sic*] it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (*Horror* 9). Thus, the concluding paragraph features a Miss Rose who cannot return to her previous life before meeting Haskell. Though rebuilt after abjection, her protective barriers are not so efficient now and they constitute a remainder of that constant threat of falling "back into the maternal *chora* as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one's subjectivity" (McAfee 49). On the one hand, fetishism does not seem to work out anymore: her formerly special tweed jacket, which she had chosen for facing Haskell in the church (a similar defense as the negligee), has lost its appeal so that "she now wore [it] every day."

On the other hand, her resurrected ego does not offer her such a visual illusion of wholeness, but shows evidence of the lurking threat of fragmentation that abjection has only temporarily subdued. Lacan explains that the total shape of the body that the still unweaned infant perceives on the mirror is an exteriority characterized by "a relief of stature that coagulates it and … a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast to the turbulence of movements with which he [the subject] experiences himself" ("Espejo"

88).[170] Miss Rose's final image, however, is slightly asymmetrical, disfigured by the constant pressure of those turbulent movement*s* that belong to the sphere of the semiotic *chora*: "In windows she caught her image, angular, *tall*, her wrists *too long* for the sleeves of the brown tweed jacket, the hem of the skirt – yes! – *uneven*" (italics added; 220). The last line of the story attests to that presence of the maternal *chora* as both a menace to subjectivity and also a desirable state of completeness, because Miss Rose's closing words voice the underlying desire for the "flow that mingles two identities" (Kristeva, *Horror* 105): "Milk and a cream cheese sandwich" (220).

In summary, "Something about him" recounts a process of abjection on both its individual and its social level through which Miss Rose, the character facing the abject, catches a glimpse of the disrupting force of the Real before returning to the Symbolic as a subject split from its desire but *subject* to semiotic influences. This abjection is the equivalent to the extraction of the *objet a* that sustains the barred subject and the sphere of the social world, according to Lacan.[171] So, the abjected Haskell is presented as the epitome of ambiguity, sexual and otherwise, the irritant that must be purged if order is to be maintained. He heralds a possibility of acknowledging and overcoming the emptiness inside and outside us by approaching the other and shedding the artificial, symbolic *skin* that interposes between us and the others, yet without imposing close-ended identities to what/whom seems different or bizarre, like Miss Rose inadvertently does:

> As soon as I am sure that I know you, … I have stopped having a relationship with you and instead have a relationship with myself, with my own projection onto you. When I think that I know you, our relationship is over. (K. Oliver, "Look" 64)

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[170] "La forma total del cuerpo ... le aparece en un relieve de estatura que la coagula y bajo una simetría que la invierte, en oposición a la turbulencia de movimientos con que se experimenta a sí mismo animándola."

[171] "Es pues en cuanto representante de la representación en el fantasma, ... como el S, $ tachado del deseo, soporta aquí *el campo de la realidad, y éste solo se sostiene por la extracción del objeto* a *que sin embargo le da su marco*" (italics added; "Cuestión" 239, n. 15).

Let me stress here again, as at the beginning of the chapter, the idea that Haskell *is presented*: everything the reader gets to know about him is from the point of view of the community, whose rumors Miss Rose and even sometimes the narrator echo. We never read directly about his thoughts and feelings – except from his commentary about Browning's poem; we cannot *be sure that we know him*. For that reason, we should distrust the conclusion that Miss Rose and Miss Jamison reach when in their final conversation they agree that what made Haskell unlikable had been that "he was sincerely anxious to please *every*one!"[172] "Anxious, yes, that's the word!" Miss Jamison repeats (220; Williams's italics). It might seem that this deduction is the definitive explanation for Haskell's "something," but it isn't. What this *anxiety* really indicates is not Haskell's but the community's *projected* feelings. According to Davis, the purpose of projection is "to exorcise inner anxiety … by putting it on someone else's back" (21), and that is precisely the strategy of the community: they put on Haskell's back the anxiety that he himself provokes in them and that is the main signal of the existence of the lost (m)Other, in order that his removal can mean the appeasement of their uneasiness and the return of symbolic coherence. It seems a perfect illustration of "how projection functions as the glue for a collectivity" and has as its outcome "the creation of the outsider" (Davis 23). For the postmodern subject, as we have seen, the fissures of the shell may be glued after abjection but they still leave a scar that reminds it of their fragility.

[172] Similarly dubious is the explanation in the opening paragraph that Haskell was "trying to please everybody but [was] so dreadfully afraid that he wouldn't" (213). It is preceded by "you know," a discourse marker that places this appreciation within the community's gossip – Haskell does not actually look or act fearful at any point in the story.

THE DARK ABJECT

10

"BIG BLACK: A MISSISSIPPI IDYLL"

Despite being posthumously published in the *Collected Stories* (1985), "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" (written 1931-2) has received a relatively large amount of critical attention due to the fact that it is the story that features the first African American in the Williams canon. Moreover, unlike other secondary black characters in his plays, Williams makes Big Black the story's sole protagonist, a focal character whose depiction is, to say the least, controversial. Big Black is a huge black rock-breaker who works without exhaustion in a Mississippi road crew, not a popular guy though tolerated by the men in the gang and their volatile Irish boss. His only involvement with the rest of the team is when once in a while, shirt torn open and arms flung above his head, he exclaims his "savage, booming" cry: "YOW-OW. YOW-OW-W-W" (27, 31). Indecipherable in its meaning, it nevertheless penetrates forcefully into the minds and bodies of his exhausted fellow workers. This howl accompanies a strongly animalistic physical description: Big Black's huge size, ugliness, and strength make him into "a black beast that had taken grotesque human form" (28, 29).

During the central event in the story – when Big Black fortuitously glimpses a naked white girl swimming in a nearby river – his animal-like behavior is exacerbated: hidden amongst some bushes, he crawls "noiseless[ly] as a snake" and crouches on his fours "like a great black animal," waiting for the girl to come close enough to him while following her movements with his "glistening animal eyes" (29). This scene of predatory stalking reaches its climax when Big Black, who has been "devour[ing] her with his eyes," finally jumps upon the little girl and holds her in what looks like an attempted act of cannibalism. He feels "intoxicated … sway[ing] back and forth, clasping her, and utter[ing] low, guttural sounds like a hungry animal tearing

at a fresh kill" (30). Then comes the abrupt interruption of this violent frenzy when, on the brink of forcing the girl, Big Black experiences a sudden disgust with himself, after which he throws her back into the river and flees. The finale shows him again breaking rocks with a road-laying team, now in Georgia, and still howling his enigmatic cry (31).

This précis demonstrates how Big Black's characterization hardly manages to escape the cliché of "black men as a sexual threat to white women," a demonization that was the basis for the racial segregation still much enforced in the America of the 1930s (Somerville 1, 35). Consequently, Williams scholars who deal with this story may feel "frustrated," as Jürgen C. Wolter puts it ("Fiction" 226), by this propinquity of the unflattering portrayal of its protagonist to the racist stereotypes of the black male that had currency at the time of the story's composition.[173] David Savran (1992) and George W. Crandell (1997) are two such critics who acknowledge the ambiguous nature of Williams's racial Other. Grouping "Big Black" with other stories such as "Ten Minute Stop," "Desire and the Black Masseur," "Rubio y Morena," and "Miss Coynte of Greene," both scholars agree that the Africanist presence is more prominent in Williams's short stories than in his larger works. For that reason, its examination in the former can be helpful to clarify the indirect allusions to the racial thematic in his plays (Crandell analyzes *Streetcar*) and films (Savran studies *Baby Doll*).

In his section on the issues of masculinity, narrative, and racial difference in Williams, Savran mentions "Big Black" in passing as an example of the explosive desire that arises from the encounter of different ethnicities and races – "the greater the difference in skin color, the more violent the sexual encounter" (*Communists* 125). Despite Williams's clearly antiracist posture (see for instance his depiction of racist bigots in *Battle of Angels* or *Sweet Bird of Youth*), it is always the dark Other that he exoticizes and objectifies in scenes of violent sexual complementation of different races – the most notorious example is the story "Desire and the Black Masseur"

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[173] Fedder traces Williams's "symbolic practice of associating dark-complexioned foreigners (Italians, Poles, Mexicans), [and] animals … with the flesh" back to the influence of D. H. Lawrence (12). The black characters, however, are not foreigners but nationals, which reinforces their bond with the gothic uncanny (*un-heimlich*).

(1948). Therefore, black men in Williams's works become "objects of fetishistic fascination and paradigms of masculinity," the source of desire as well as of anxiety, in view of the uproar that the film *Baby Doll* (1956) caused due to its innuendo of an interracial (and adulterous) relationship (127).

Although without reference to Savran's study, Crandell's later analysis of "Big Black" reaches parallel conclusions. He first finds in "Big Black" resonances of the pervasive cultural image of the dehumanized, degraded black man that American fiction helped to spread in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Novels like J. T. Trowbridge's *Cudjo's Cave* (1864) or Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) describe black male characters using similar animal imagery and feature them, respectively, uttering savage cries or attacking white women sexually (Crandell, "Miscegenation" 340-1). In Williams's oeuvre, however, this image of the beastly, fearful black man "driven by instinct and desire … unable to control his violent sexual impulse" is in no way used as a justification for segregation or against miscegenation (340). Quite the opposite, Crandell contends, Williams depicts the black man both as a physical threat and as "a sexually fascinating object," a racial Other that excites "both fear *and* desire in the mind of an observing narrator or character" (342, 339). These latter objectify the black man into a set of qualities – strength, virility, unselfishness – that turn him into a metaphor, a romanticized symbol "of what [his] white counterparts *lack* [italics added] rather than as [a] fully developed character" (342). Crandell's *symbol of lack* is tantamount to Savran's "object of fetishistic fascination" or *fetish*, both synonymous labels for the racial Other as an illusorily whole object of desire that mirrors back to the subject (and covers up) its incompletion.

The fetishization of the dark Other is, understandably, the most conspicuous aspect in "Big Black," but it is necessary to point out that neither is Big Black the only (dark) Other in the story nor is he the only fetishized character. Critical reviews tend to ignore certain details about the contextual background of the story, when the descriptions of other characters, such as the crew members, their boss, or the white girl, further complicate Big Black's ambivalent role, and point at some interesting facets of the protagonist's characterization that have remained unnoticed. Thus, taking into

account these overlooked elements will help us read the multifaceted operations that underlie Williams's narration.

A Big Black Other

To begin with, we may reconsider Big Black's racial Otherness if we notice the particular position that he holds in relation to his fellow workers. As aforesaid, he is estranged from the men of the gang, since he is "too strange, savage, inarticulate," in their eyes (27). Thus, he qualifies as one more of Williams's outsiders, "one of the early misfits and fugitives who populate the Williams canon" (Kolin, "Masterpiece" 33). Yet the reason why those around him regard him as an oddball is related to Big Black's physicality – his most accentuated feature as we have seen – in a rather unexpected sense. For, despite being described as "a black monster of a Negro" (30), extremely ugly and repulsive, it is not on grounds of his different skin color or his looks that he is excluded. Within the story's diegetic frame, Big Black is not the *Other* just for being black, because the whole road crew is "a gang of Negroes" (26), as the first words of the story make clear. Not only the workers are black too: actually, even the *Irish* boss is part of an ethnic minority that some – Williams included – likened to blacks. George Yancy remarks that, "in the light of the rise of revolutionary movements for Irish liberation, the British re-presented the Irish as 'Black Negroes'" (240), a comparison that Jan Nederveen Pieterse finds in America too (qtd. in Crandell, "Miscegenation" 344). In addition, in a 1974 interview Williams groups together the Irish and "the Blacks" as his two "favorite people" (qtd. in Brown 266). Within this all-black group, then, Big Black does not stand out as a *racial* Other, although his embodiment still plays a part in the articulation of his strangeness.

It is Big Black's relationship to his own body that sets him apart from his fellow workers. Even though he is depicted through powerful bodily images, Big Black does in fact reject the satisfaction of bodily drives (what Williams names "The Love of Life Returning after Toil" (28)) which for the rest of the gang represents the only reward for their hard existence. That "Love of Life" is the fulfillment of the needs for

food and sexual mating for both the black workers, who return to their cabins to find "the scent of suppers [and] cotton-picking girls … in the doorways, their hands on their hips," and the Irish boss, who similarly thinks of what awaits him at home – "a big Irish supper on a checkered table cloth, a big Irish woman on a brass bed" (28). Big Black, on the other hand, seems to disregard or even suppress those needs. The narrative voice turns into free indirect speech to display his negative evaluation of those very elements which compose "The Love of Life:" instead of joining the march toward the "scent of suppers" and the sensual warmth of "hugged close hot black bodies" (28), Big Black

> did not go with them. There was no one waiting for him in the cabins. And it would be hotter in them than it was upon the road. There would be the stench of sweating bodies, sizzle of frying foods … He preferred to be by himself. (29)

Although the story's climatic scene may present a beast "driven by instinct and desire" (in Crandell's words above), before the encounter with the girl the narration makes plain that Big Black, in spite of his animal appearance, snubs the basic bodily drives or *instincts*. It is not his physique but his rejection of "Love of Life" in terms of food and sex that makes Big Black a most bizarre outsider:

> He never … went into town on Sundays to drink "likker" and visit a woman. He never chased after the cotton-picking girls or told tall tales when he was off the road, or lay with his belly in the hot-soft dust and laughed with The Love of Life Returning after Toil. He was a black beast that had taken grotesque human form… (28)

The narrator's use of certain metaphors reveals that there is a surrogate on which Big Black displaces the energy that he would otherwise engage in culinary and amatory pleasures: "Work was Big Black's meat, said the men in the gang. And it was a good analogy, for Big Black gorged work as though he were famished for it;" "his body was tired after its orgy of labor on the road" (27, 28).

Big Black's displacement of his appetites onto work is a clear example of what Freud denominated *sublimation*: the substitution for noninstinctual goals of the aims of instinctive impulses that, unimpeded, would pursue an immediate (usually sexual) distension. This human capacity is what differentiates man from instinct-driven animals, because "sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development … [and] makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life" (Freud, *Malestar* 3038).[174] A communal organization is irreconcilable with the satisfaction of individual desires so that, to make both compatible, it is required to accompany the repression of instinctual urges with the establishment of alternative and socially sanctioned ways of gratifying them.

Thus, for Freud sublimation is the fundamental process that founds civilization since, as Lacan also notes, it involves the socialization of the instincts and the subject's initiation into a symbolic system.[175] In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), where Freud's main contention is that "civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct" (Freud, *Malestar* 3038), he remarks that work is probably the most valuable technique to invest sublimated desires due to "the possibility it offers of displacing a large a mount of libidinal components, whether narcissistic, aggressive or even erotic, on to professional work and on to the human relations connected with it" (3027, note 1693).[176]

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[174] "La sublimación de los instintos constituye un elemento cultural sobresaliente, pues gracias a ella las actividades psíquicas superiores, tanto científicas como artísticas e ideológicas, pueden desempeñar un papel muy importante en la vida de los pueblos civilizados."

[175] Lacan deals extensively with sublimation in his *Seminario 7* (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*). It is also noteworthy that Lacan disapproves of the term *instincts* as an inadequate translation of Freud's *Triebe*, to which he prefers *drives*; see for example "Del Trieb de Freud y del deseo del psicoanalista" in *Escritos*.

[176] "La posibilidad de desplazar al trabajo y a las relaciones humanas con él vinculadas una parte muy considerable de los componentes narcisistas, agresivos, y aun eróticos de la libido, confiere a aquellas actividades un valor que nada cede en importancia al que tienen como condiciones imprescindibles para mantener y justificar la existencia social."

As a result, Big Black's renunciation to "The Love of Life Returning After Toil" and his libidinal focus on that *orgy of labor* that he carries out "feverishly," "with a fury," "never get[ting] enough of it" (27, 31), point away from the widespread construal of him as dominated by his desires, and suggest instead the existence of a patent effort on his part to counteract or suppress those drives. Whereas the other black workers, rejoicing in "The Love of Life," could be said to embody the equally stereotypical image of the *happy darky* (exploited though contented as long as food, "likker," and women are available), the initial depiction of Big Black pictures him staying away from those bodily satisfactions and becoming the Other amongst the O/others not because of his race, but due to that displacement of desire or *sublimation* that, paradoxically, would make him more *civilized* than his fellow workers. The narrator may insist in calling him "a beast," yet his outsiderness within the story's context resides more in his characterization as a repressed individual than in his incarnation of an unfettered physicality.

This preliminary description of Big Black's libidinal economy makes it all the more interesting to assess the story's main scene, which apparently presents a quite opposed image of him as an animalistic, sexually impulsive black man, a "walking phallus" (Savran, *Communists* 127). The previous account of his sublimation of physical urges would help justify Big Black's attack on the white girl as the explosive manifestation of such pent-up desire, so that the aggression would not be caused merely by the encounter of different races, as Savran states. In any case, it is not so much the motive of the assault as the reason for its *failure* that adds a further dimension to Big Black's ambiguous portrayal. In order to analyze it, we must first look at the dynamics of fetishization and voyeurism at work in the textual rendering of the scene, because they do not operate in a univocal way either.

Fetish in black and white: voyeurism and the desiring subject

As already mentioned, both Savran and Crandell coincide in remarking the fetishistic character of black males in Williams. As in the case of the fetishization of the androgyne, the critical interest should be placed not only on the fetish itself but also on the observing, desiring subject. According to Savran, the relationship between desiring

subjects and fetishized objects in Williams's works develops within a matrix of eroticized dichotomies that includes race as one of its element:

> desire is provoked by differences in race, ethnicity, social class, and age. Almost inevitably, subject and object are configured as antitheses that are congruent with a series of binary oppositions – white/black, wealthy/poor, old/young. Almost inevitably, the first in the pair is granted the priority of the desiring subject, while the second is objectified and exoticized… (Savran, *Communists* 125)

Williams adds the gender dichotomy to this set of differences in order to "ensure the palatability of these desires" by making them explicitly heterosexual (Savran, *Communists* 125.). However, such addition makes this pattern still more controversial because it transposes normative gender roles by placing women as the first term in the binary opposition and men as the second. Thus, Williams's female protagonists (such as Baby Doll, Blanche, or Myrtle in *Kingdom of Earth*) are constituted as desiring subjects themselves, while at the same time they keep part of their traditionally feminine position as objects of the desire of (masculine) others. Correspondingly, their male counterparts – Silva Vacarro, Stanley, Chicken – do not embody the white bourgeois paternal figure promoted during the domestic revival of mid-century America, but they are decentred heroic figures characterized as a fetishized, phallic Other, whose main feature is his darker or mixed-race body (123-4).[177]

Williams's handling of the white/black and the male/female oppositions, although operating along similar lines, receives a different appraisal in Savran's analysis. The racial divide is more or less a constant within Williams's oeuvre – "black men are always conceived as objects of fetishistic fascination" (Savran, *Communists* 127). For Savran, this eroticization of interracial relations misses its subversive potential because it shows Williams "inverting – rather than deconstructing – racial

[177] To these two roles Savran adds a third position, the older white man who does symbolize a weak version of the Anglo-Saxon hero: an emasculated Protestant who competes with the dark Other over the woman. This triangle constitutes "the most durable characterological pattern in Williams's work," his master narrative (Savran, *Communists* 122-3).

hierarchies" (130). He may invert the scales and revalue the dark Other as a captivating fetish, but it still remains an object anyhow, set in a subsidiary relation to the subject whose desire it lures. As a result, when Savran, only incidentally, fits "Big Black" into that antithetical pattern in which the black protagonist is exalted as a repulsive still desirable fetish, an objectified and exoticized Other, he is precluding Big Black from attaining the subject's position that is preserved for the observing Self that approaches him with fascination.

Unlike this white/black antithesis which remains stable in its superposition on the subject/object pair (the black member is *always* the objectified one), the male/female dichotomy is flexibly subverted and dispersed in Williams's works, Savran affirms. For example, he finds a definitely revolutionary force in Williams's reversal of gender positions in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as I have already mentioned, where Maggie is both a desiring subject and a fetishized body, "a phallic woman," and Brick "is also rendered a fetishistic object … more object than subject of desire," so that both "cut diagonally across the culturally produced antitheses between subject and object, masculinity and femininity, homosexuality and heterosexuality" (*Communists* 107-8). Throughout his study, Savran emphasizes "the strain in Williams's work that does not simply reverse but rather deconstructs the sex-gender system" (119); the racial system, on the other hand, seems still subjected to a strict – albeit inverted – polarity.

Savran's approach to appreciate such deconstructive force in the representation of gender, as we know, is to perform a different, *camp* reading of Williams's oblique discourse or "transvestite poetics:"

> for it to be effective in teasing out the contradictions in Williams's work that accumulate around gender (rather than simply reinscribing despotic binarisms), the interpretation must recognize the coexistence – and even codependency – of different modes of writing and reading … of the "camp" and "straight," of the reversal and radical subversion of gender. (119-20)

As we have seen in the analysis of androgyny, from the camp perspective – in its formulation by Sontag – the transposition of gender roles is not interpreted as just an

inversion of the polarity of the sexual binarism, but as the manifestation of the plasticity of gender performances and of the impossibility of pinning down a unitary (gendered) subject. Now, Savran implicitly admits the possibility of applying such a camp reading to the representation of race when he compares it with the case of gender:

> Like the "reversal of gender" with which Williams so often flirts, this reconfiguration of masculinity and inversion of racial hierarchies function in complex and contradictory ways, both to subvert and to reinscribe the binarisms on which these constructions are founded historically. (130)

Of these two strategies, *subversion* and *reinscription*, the "straight" mode focuses on the latter whereas the camp interpretation concentrates on the former, and if this works for the deconstructive "reversal of gender," it should as well for the reversal of race. Therefore, we can apply the camp reading to the representation of race in "Big Black" in order to, following Savran's own line, discover the coexistence of the inversion of racial hierarchies *and* the deconstruction of that very binarism. We can prolong his question "how is the desiring subject articulated?" (in terms of gender) to comprehend also its articulation in terms of race: How is the *white* desiring subject articulated? Is Big Black only the (black) object of the fetishizing gaze? And is he the *only* fetishized object?

Unlike Savran, Crandell does deal rather extensively with "Big Black" in two articles that take in hand issues in Williams's fiction such as the fetishization of the black male, the subject/object and Self/Other dynamics, and the voyeuristic gaze. In the first of them, "Misrepresentation and Miscegenation: Reading the Racialized Discourse of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Name Desire*" (1997), he centers on the effects that the encounter with the racial Other produces in the observing Self:

> This fearful and desirable Other serves … to reflect the divided and incomplete nature of the observing Self. In the figure of the Other, the Self first recognizes its

> own incompletion, and then, desiring to unite with the Other, seeks to compensate for the inadequacy it perceives in itself. ("Miscegenation" 339)

As in the encounter of the androgyne, it is chiefly the observing, desiring Self that is destabilized in its egoic solidity by the presence of the racial Other, and who perceives the lack in itself which that fetishized Other is supposed to complete. In stories such as "Ten Minute Stop" (1936) or "Miss Coynte of Greene" (1972) that observing subject is another character within the text; in "Big Black," however, it is the narrator who takes the place of the gazing Self who, according to the racial divide, is supposed to be a white subject observing with ambivalent feelings the luring though menacing black Other. Therefore, expanding Savran's pattern of dichotomies, we would place the narrator as the gazing (white) subject and Big Black as the observed (black) object within

> a process that once initiated ultimately leads, in Williams's fiction, to the objectification of the Other. As much, then, as Big Black is a source of fear, he is to the gazing narrator an object of wonder, admired by the storyteller for his strangely attractive, exotic qualities. Enjoying a kind of voyeuristic pleasure in the observation of Big Black, the narrator displays a type of behavior that closely corresponds to … "romantic racialists" … (Crandell, "Miscegenation" 341-2)

On the whole, Crandell's formulation in this article follows Savran's in keeping the subject/object pair superimposed to the white/black antithesis: the Other is a dark object of voyeuristic pleasure, the Self is the white voyeuristic subject. There Big Black becomes one more part in the *freak show*, as the narrator's initial comparisons reveal: his gigantic body is like a wrestler's, and his grotesque face is "like that of the 'nigger' in the revolving circle of wooden dummies at which baseballs are cast for Kewpie dolls prizes at carnivals and amusement parks" (27).

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the black character in "Big Black" and those in "Ten Minute Stop" or "Miss Coynte of Greene." Most importantly, black males in the latter stories are secondary characters whose objectification bars the narrative access to their consciousness; they fulfill a metaphoric

or symbolic function instead of having an individualized personality. Although Crandell considers Big Black another embodiment of this symbolic role, his position within the narration is poles apart from other black secondaries: he is the story's protagonist and the center of an omniscient narration, especially in the climatic scene which renders his feelings and thoughts closely. Moreover, Crandell inadvertently problematizes his own categorization in the subsequent article he devotes to voyeurism and taboo in Williams's fiction (1999). He again chooses "Big Black" as the first example in the group of "erotic voyeurism" stories, but this time it is not the narrator but Big Black *himself* who takes on the role of the voyeuristic *subject*:

> Williams's erotic voyeurs … gratify themselves by watching. In "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll," for example, the voyeur is a black laborer, who, chancing to observe a young white girl bathing in a river, cannot repress his sexual longing ... ("Voyeurism" 31)

Crandell concedes that, due to his violent reaction, Big Black is an exception to other distant, fearful voyeurs more frequent in Williams's stories; he is an "unusual" voyeur, even more so, I would add, if he acts *simultaneously* as the gazer and the gazed.

This revelation of the coexistence of two apparently contradictory positions is the basis for unraveling the deconstructive possibilities of the representation of race in "Big Black." The reconsideration of Big Black as not only a fetishized Other, but also a voyeuristic Self, entails a number of corollaries. First, it directs the analysis towards a different subject/object pair, with Big Black now taking the place of the subject and yet another fetish, the white girl, as the object of his desiring gaze. Also, we may go back over Crandell's explanation above on the encounter between the observing Self and the racial Other, so as to question whether Big Black does experience the same effects, namely the destabilization in his ego and the recognition of his incomplete, split constitution.

To establish the white girl as a fetish, it is necessary to review the light and dark imagery with which "Big Black" is studded with, because it is obviously the second set that has attracted more interest. Yet the representation of whiteness is far

from being straightforward, nor does whiteness appear as an established quality with ontological priority. In "Big Black" Williams already tries out the postmodern strategy that he will later employ in *Baby Doll* and *Streetcar* where "the fantasy of whiteness relies upon its darker mirror-image to affirm meaning" (Van Duyvenbode 207). The cases of whiteness or "light imagery" in this story exemplify this interpenetration of blackness and whiteness, or else suggest that "whiteness," as one of the elements in a theoretical system of differences, is a mere category in a symbolic network and not a primordial essence. Hence, various vivid images show "light" containing "dark" or vice versa; for example, the opening Mississippi landscape, a wide expanse of cotton fields with the contrasting speck of the all-black group of rock-breakers (26). Also, the white rocks that Big Black is breaking get smeared by the dark brown tobacco juice he spits on them (31). And conversely, attention is drawn to the black laborers' smiling faces that expose "white teeth flashing" (28), or to the dark surface of the river when it reveals the girl's "white arms flashing" (29). It is this co-existence with black that "affirms" white, making it all the more eye-catching.

In addition, we can discover that a number of things that are initially categorized as "white" are not so in actual fact; for instance, as said above, the "white boss" is only dubiously *white* for he belongs to an ethnic group usually compared to blacks: "an Irishman, wet and fiery red as if he had just been dipped into a tub of blood" (26). Furthermore, the narrator's repetitions highlight the fact that this supposedly white boss is not white at all: he is a "drunken red Irishman … [with] his red barrel chest, … his bare throat, wet and bright red as blood, and … his arms, red hams." Similarly, the "white moonlight" only appears for a fleeting moment before, in the next paragraph, "the white moon turn[s] yellow" (28). Other subtler examples actually hint at a certain ontological primacy of blackness; in other words, white appears as the outcome of a process with a darker starting point. Thus, the Irish boss's bodily hair is "white-bleached," and the automobile tire that Big Black passes in his way to the river is "worn smooth and white with frayed edges" (28, 29).

This interdependence of whiteness and blackness is probably the earliest encoding of the prospect of miscegenation that instilled concurrent feelings of anxiety and longing in Williams (Crandell, "Miscegenation" 339; Van Duyvenbode 205;

Savran, *Communists* 129). Every reference above incorporates its own deconstruction: nothing looks *purely* white or black in the story. There is, nonetheless, an exception. What such intermingling of light and dark imagery accomplishes is to accentuate the fetishization of the figures that stand out in the text as symbols of *complete* blackness and *complete* whiteness – Big Black and the white girl. For, if the former is the object of the narrator's voyeuristic desire for completion and union, the girl acts as an analogous object for Big Black's gaze. Both are fetishes in a voyeuristic Chinese-box structure where the narrator (and the reader) gazes Big Black gazing the white girl. Despite their seeming differentiation, their structural equivalence makes the black man and the white girl share comparable descriptions, since the focus on their captivating physicalities concretizes the same body parts: "His great, round face … His shoulders and his arms were gargantuan;" of her, "he could see now an arm, now a shoulder, and now her face…" (27, 29). Skin, the most relevant physical feature for fetishization, is also stressed in similar terms: "He tore his blue shirt open to the waist, laying bare the gleaming black arch of his chest;" "Her skin was gleaming white like the inner surface of a wet shell" (26, 30).

Besides these common features, the depiction of the girl introduces another specific aspect of her. In later works such as the story "Twenty Seven Wagons Full of Cotton" (1935) and the resulting film *Baby Doll* (1956), Williams will endow "the symbolic white woman" with "the combination of voluptuousness and sexual innocence … [through] explicit use of child imagery" (Van Duyvenbode 208). In "Big Black" we know the white girl also acts as a symbol (as opposed to a full character), and the way child imagery characterizes her is noteworthy, yet not voluptuous. Just as she is fetishized for being an exotic, completely white object in a world of no pure whiteness, she represents another type of unattainable *completion* too: her prepubescent body brings up echoes of androgyny, as she is on the threshold of sexual maturity, "just ripening into womanhood" while at the same time "very young – not more than a [gender-neutral] child" (30, 29).

So, the role of the white girl as a fetish is more complex though more clear-cut than Big Black's who, we have seen, integrates object and subject positions. The

girl, in contrast, remains objectified and sealed to narrative omniscience.[178] As a result, although there still exists the extradiegetic voyeuristic relationship between the narrator and Big Black, where the racial opposition is supposed to continue, if we place Big Black and the girl's relationship within Savran's pattern, we can notice that it subverts the correlation between the racial hierarchy and the desiring subject/exoticized object dichotomy: the desiring subject is a black voyeur, the fetishized *objet a* white girl. The question may remain as to whether Big Black really fits the role of desiring subject in the sense that Crandell set forth above, that is, as an observing Self that discovers its own incompletion – its actual split nature – in that encounter with the Other. The key to this question lies in the textual description and eventual frustration of Big Black's assault on the girl.

Abjection of the (racial) self

Summarizing so far, Big Black is a strange black man, who devotes himself only to work, does not rejoice in food or sexual pleasure, and goes alone to the river to avoid unwelcome company. He prefers to be by himself, different and separate from the other workers. But when, in the river, he comes across and spies a white girl, the bodily drives he has tried to suppress are awakened. He is neither inarticulate nor impassible: "She will cross the river, … and then I will get her," he says to himself, while his desire grows to an unbearable peak, and impels him to assault her (30). Facing the vision of the fascinating Other, his sublimating defense against the demands of the drives crumbles. This initiates the process of abjection that "takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away" (Kristeva, *Horror* 15). Besides, we will see how the terms with which this abjection is rendered will allow for a further consideration of the subversion of the voyeuristic pattern.

[178] This will bear a vital significance for the interpretation of the moment of abjection, as we will shortly see.

As already seen, the narrative voice chooses a "telling, violent imagery" for an animalistic description of Big Black from the very beginning (Vannatta 9): Big Black is called a "black beast" several times on the initial pages before any good reason has been presented. This accentuates at the moment of his voyeuristic approach to the girl, and when "man strays on the territories of animal," Kristeva tells us, "the abject confronts us" (*Horror* 12). Orality surfaces when he actually behaves "like a hungry animal tearing at a fresh kill," first stalking (*devouring* her visually) and then grabbing the girl in his arms, uncontrolled at her mere physical contact (30). Yet something stops him; it is not any moral restraint or compassion, but an almost automatic repulsion that aborts Big Black's frenzy. The moment is worth quoting in full:

> Then of a sudden the ecstasy fell away from him. Horror replaced it. His eyes fastened upon his black hand clasping the white, terrified face of the girl. Its great spatulate fingers spread wide, gripping the white face, it looked like a hideous, huge black spider. It was ugly, ugly. The ugliness of it sickened him. … Standing quite still, all of the desire gone out of him, he stared with fierce loathing at that black hand of his, and he muttered bitterly to himself,
>
> "You big black devil! You big – black – devil!" (30)

We can witness here how Big Black undergoes "one of those violent, dark revolts of being" that accompany abjection (Kristeva, *Horror* 1). Big Black's encounter with the girl provokes his formerly sublimated drives to break through the defenses of repression – the repression on which his own individuality, his separateness from the other black men, was founded. The lifting of such repression opens the way for the eruption of the Real and its breakdown of the ego's imaginary coherence (Boothby 148). As Kristeva warns us, "the more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed" (*Horror* 13). Abjection, which blurs the borders between self and other, inside and outside, endangers identity by warping or destroying the image of oneself which supports the ego – for Big Black and his "orgy" of work,

that is his self-image as a (work) *hand*. This close relationship between the imaginary representation of the body and the (ego) identity clarifies the point that this excerpt signifies the strike at the foundations of Big Black's self, the revelation of his split nature and thus of his rightful adoption of the subject's position. "The body image … can express a desire to achieve a stable identity by projecting that very stability onto our own bodies" (Weiss 36); consequently, the instability of Big Black's identity goes together with a sudden fragmentation of his body. At the crucial moment, Big Black experiences an abrupt alienation from his hand, the border that separates him from the Other and the desire she embodies. With his eyes "fastened" on it, he observes that limb as an alien element, not himself but still a part of him, ergo an abject: it is "that" hand "of his," not *his* hand, and the fingers are "its," not *his* either.

Repulsion and disgust, fundamental for this revolt(ing) of abjection, are doubly manifest in the description of the scene (Kristeva, *Horror* 11, 45).First, we can find evidence of that repugnance on the genotextual level. One of the ways by which the disrupting appearance of the Semiotic is displayed in the genotext is the use of phonematic devices (Kristeva, "Revolution" 120). In this passage, we can notice the manifestation of semiotic drives and energy in the repetition of certain consonantal phonemes: the glottal /h/ and the velar /g/ that appear in words such as *huge, hand, hungry, hideous, great, gripping, finger, ugly, ugliness* (30). These guttural consonants from the text, like Big Black's own "guttural sounds like a hungry animal" (30), represent the earliest, pre-symbolic articulation of the feeling of *horror*:

> Horror is generally accompanied by various gestures, … [and] sounds thus made are expressed by words like *uh* or *ugh* … Mr. Wedgwood, in the Introduction to his "Dictionary of English Etymology," … shows by intermediate forms that the sounds here referred to have probably given rise to many words, such as *ugly*, *huge*, & c. (Darwin, *Emotions* Ch. XII, "Horror," fn. 28).

In addition to "this language of the body [or] (geno-text)" (Allen 117), on the level of the phenotext, the most evident, linguistic plane, the narration mentions explicitly the feelings of "horror," "loathing," and sickness that plague the protagonist.

Yet the clearest evidence of the destabilization of identity that abjection brings can be found in Big Black's use of pronouns in the two utterances that enclose this climactic scene. While in the first of them he speaks to himself still as a coherent self ("She will cross the river, … and then *I* [italics added] will get her"), during abjection he mutters also "to himself, '*You* [italics added] big black devil!'" (30). Subject and other are swapped: his "I" becomes an external "you" when not simply Big Black's hand, but his whole self has become an other, an abject. "In human discourse," Ihab Hassan notes, "every I implies a Thou," every self needs an other ("Quest" 430). "No power seems more menacing than the power of the other, everything the self perceives as alien to itself," he affirms (429). The extreme manifestation of this power comes when this alien other is part of the *self* itself, as it happens in abjection, Kristeva remarks:

> If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, … finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject. (*Horror* 5)

For our protagonist, it is his whole body, represented in the form of his hand, that incarnates "the impossible within." From the beginning of the story, Big Black's rejection of the Love of Life can be considered an effort at transcending the culturally ingrained vision of the black male as an emblem of bodily (including sexual) prowess. When we first notice that "that which is needed to sustain [his] body (e.g. relationships with other people, food, drink, clothing, shelter) becomes the abject other," we can assume that his is one example of those "bodies [that] are at odds with their own body images" (Weiss 97). In Big Black's case, this conflictive relation to his body image goes a step further, because when the racial component is entailed too, there appears what Franz Fanon in *Black Skins White Masks* calls the "corporeal malediction" of black men and women. The black person's consciousness of his body can be solely a negating activity due to "the peculiar nature of the 'dialectic' that unfolds between the black body and its world, a dialectic that is mediated from the outset by a not so

invisible third term, namely, white society with is white values" (qtd. in Weiss 27). The influence of this third term causes that "the black man experiences not whiteness but *his own blackness* as the not-self, as that which resists all attempts to achieve corporeal closure" (29). As a consequence, Fanon concludes that the only reaction available for the black man who accepts "the condemnation of white society for his or her 'degraded' state [is] 'Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea,'" in other words, abjection (qtd. in Weiss 27).

Through the contemplation of his own hand, markedly black in contrast with the white body it does not stop clasping, Big Black experiences that not-self which is inscribed in his body by white society. The not-self of animalistic drives, the savage nature of the black body, not his idea of him-self – his constructed ego – as a feverish, lonely worker. He finds himself in the first moment of abjection, the *symptom*: "a structure within the body, an non-assimilable alien, a monster… In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject." The only way to recover a certain sense of identity is to detach himself from that alien, to split that abject-I and throw out (up?) its sickening component. This second moment of abjection involves "the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal" (Kristeva, *Horror* 11). So, Big Black addresses his hand as a separate "you," and by the epithet with which he names it we can detect the effect of that mediating "invisible third term." "You *big black* devil! You *big* – *black* – devil!" he says (30), using the same name that others use for him ("They called him Big Black," 31). His inner self remains nameless, and the name that others give to him due to his body he uses for the abject he expels from him. Spitting the words one – by – one, he names the abject in order to control it, but he becomes split in the process.

The mediation of that third term in "Big Black" is an important aspect for understanding the story's construction "from the outset," as Fanon puts it, because it also affects (and is illuminated by) the voyeuristic structure that sustains the text. Big Black's abjection of self effects the final shift in the subject/object, observer/observed pairs that, we have seen, are already subverted as soon as he takes both positions at the same time. Now, in his adoption of that abjecting, external perspective in relation to

himself, he will make visible a *third* position in the dynamics of voyeurism that, however, was there all along.

The gaze on race

At the moment of abjection, Big Black is seen to be adopting the disembodied perspective that, according to Weiss, attempts to transcend one's blackness and proves the internalization of an anti-black perspective (32). This change of standpoint also affects Big Black's position in the voyeuristic pattern: he is not the gazed (fetish in relation to the white voyeur) or the gazer (subject in relation to the girl) anymore. If we locate it within Lacan's paradigm of the gaze, this third position corresponds to *the gaze* itself. The possibility of that third position is what differentiates the Lacanian gaze from the existentialist one of Sartre. In contrast to Sartre's dialectic model that places the one who is looking and the one who is looked at in an either/or relation, in Lacan's model "there is nothing to prevent both positions from being occupied simultaneously" (Boothby 254), and moreover, Lacan does not count exclusively on those two participants but establishes a permanent third position, the gaze:[179]

[179] Sartre does count on the possibility that a "Third" participant may intervene in the scene where, initially, the one who is looking (I) and the one who is looked at (Other) are alone. Its effect is to originate a new casuistry of experience, with the Third and the Other grouped as "They-subjects" that look at me, or as "They-as-objects" that I look at. More importantly, it causes the perception of the "Us-object" that engages I and Other under the look of the Third (Sartre 415-6). Unlike Lacan, for whom "the gaze" as the third term is omnipresent and non-positional (Boothby 258), Sartre considers it contingent and positional – I can look at the Third too. The closest Sartre gets to ponder the existence of an absolute Third position is in his discussion on God. His atheist postulate is that the belief on an omniscient deity arises from the positing of the whole humanity as an "Us-object," which requires "the presence of a Third who looks at us all collectively but upon whom no outside gaze may be directed" (Sartre 423).

> For Lacan, the structure of the gaze is not dual but triadic. It includes the subject (the one who sees), the visual object (the other who is seen), and the gaze (a third locus that fails to coincide with the visual other). (Boothby 255)

The easiest example to understand what this *gaze* refers to is precisely that of voyeurism:

> the voyeur is always already seen by the gaze. Indeed, the deliciously anxious excitement of his act of peeping is constituted by this very exposure to the gaze. … The voyeur's thrill derives less from his enjoyment of a stolen view of another's private moments than from the way in which this theft is itself seen by the gaze. What is most profoundly seen in voyeurism is the voyeur himself. (Boothby 258)

In "Big Black," the voyeuristic Chinese-doll structure of the story (the narrator/reader watching Big Black watching the girl) serves to disclose this triangular structure of the Lacanian gaze. Initially, the narrator/reader assumes the voyeuristic position on the objectified Big Black; then, Big Black himself acts as the voyeur on the objectified girl. Yet after the moment of abjection Big Black steps into the narrator's shoes and emulates the same discourse that the latter has used throughout the story: Big Black's description of his own hand echoes the narration in which that fetishizing gaze had previously described him as a repulsive monster, a black beast, an ugly animal. As Weiss, quoting Lewis Gordon in *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (1995), explains:

> The black who regards his body as a black body, as a repulsive body, as, ultimately *pure, unformed matter*, has taken a transcendent position toward his body. His body is frozen under the force of the Look, the force by which his body ends up standing in relation to itself as the Other. The point of perspective becomes separated from itself... (qtd. in Weiss 31)

Big Black sees his hand through the eyes of the (white) Other, and his words to himself are probably the same that the fearful narrator would address him after witnessing his aggression: "You big black devil!" (30). Not meaninglessly, his own name is engulfed

in that expletive. Big Black is not only trapped as a piece in an external symbolic circuit; the Symbolic is within, unconsciously mediating like that same gaze. That is the experience of blackness that George Yancy recounts in first person:

> My dark embodied existence, my lived historical being, becomes a chain of signifiers: inferior, Nigger, evil, dirty, sullen, immoral, lascivious. As Fanon writes, 'In the unconscious, black = ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality' (192). When phenomenologically returned to myself, I appear no longer to possess *my* body, but a 'surrogate' body whose meaning does not exist anterior to the performance of white spectatorship. (221-2)

Big Black stands in relation to his hand as the (white) Other stands in relation to his (Big Black's) whole body: what he sees is a beast, a monster, ugly and disgusting but also mesmerizing. He is not "viewing himself from the perspective of the terrified young girl," as Robert Bray suggests (44), since her point of view remains inaccessible. He is instead surreptitiously assuming and therefore jeopardizing the authority of the narrator's perspective, whose "white gaze has constructed the Black body 'as the specular negative images of itself and that hence, abstracts the white person into an abstract knower'" (Sartwell, qtd. in Yancy 222).

Now, Big Black's repetition of the voyeuristic white narrator's rhetoric makes explicit and undermines the ideological stance of that "abstract knower." On the one hand, it evidences the symbolic code, the "invisible third term," to which Big Black *and* the narrator are subjected, the "chain of signifiers" that precedes them both and mediates their perception of the black other as the "epitome of ugliness, horror, and malevolence" (Gordon, qtd. in Weiss 31). On the other, if Big Black reaches the same view as the white voyeur, there might not be such a safe distance between them both after all: he cannot be such a *savage beast* as the narrator has us believe, if he partakes of his same discourse.[180] In fact, such partaking is the prerequisite for abjection:

[180] Such engaging of Big Black and the narrator, I and Other, under the mediation of the Third (in this case, the Symbolic/language), would be a good example of Sartre's "Us-object," see note above.

> I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be "me." Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic … Significance is indeed inherent in the human body. (Kristeva, *Horror* 10)

That Big Black, like the narrator, may be possessed and caused to be by the Symbolic too offsets the frustrating tinges of racist stereotyping that surface on a first reading of the story. His abjection jeopardizes the fantasy of the excessive *jouissance* of the Other that, according to Žižek, is the trigger of racism (Myers 104). Following the same Lacanian line, Homer explains that "what holds communities together is the attribution of *excessive* enjoyment to other or alien groups; for instance, the stereotypical fantasy of sexual potency associated with black men" (63). Big Black cancels this attribution of excessive enjoyment or *jouissance* when his escalation of desire is suddenly frustrated at the point when he is about to enact that fantasy he has been placed in – not merely sexual power, but more precisely interracial sex. The narrator's emphasis on his corporeality and bestiality leads us to expect a conclusion consistent with the stereotype, but Big Black obstructs the circuit of desire in which "the white male imaginary is able to 'get off' at the thought of watching a Black male desiring a white woman," but *only if* it is "the Black body [that] is looked at. The Black body does not return the gaze. The white body is the looker" (Yancy 228). In "Big Black" the black body does return that gaze, not yet in defiance, but demanding the subject position and echoing a white Self that thereby discovers the unsustainability of his own dichotomous gaze.

As regards Williams's plays, John Timpane has observed that there is an interplay of gazes in which both the audience and the text put up a certain resistance: "I am resisting much that the play presents and suggests; moreover, something about the *text* appears to be resisting *me*, almost as if some agent somewhere had anticipated my expectations and reactions … and moved to frustrated them" (751-2). Timpane labels this latter gaze (Williams's) "androgynous" for its ambivalent appraisal of dramatic

characters, which it portrays as evolving subjects rather than stable selves, "beheld with pleasure and fear" due to their ever-present sexual power, whether male or female (759). This is the real gaze that hovers over all the others in "Big Black." Behind the narrator's racist bias and Big Black's alienating experience we can perceive the workings of that "agent" that "conjures up the audience's [or the reader's] desires and denies them, often with the wrenching pain of self-denial" (760). The narration predisposes the reader to behold the violent union of opposites but afterwards what we get to witness is the equally violent division of self. The "savage" is indeed more affected by social restraint, closer to us, than we are comfortable to think. "Big Black" may be then Williams's first invitation to feel "the pleasure of being shown you are wrong" if the reader is perceptive enough to "catch the glimpse" (752).

Timpane acknowledges that "adopting this gaze is a challenging, singular opportunity. That gaze suggests an identity in conflict" (759). The reader/gazer's identity is destabilized, and so is Big Black's since, according to Barthes, narratives "where object and subject are confounded in a single character" are "narratives of the search for oneself, for one's own identity" ("Structural Analysis" 107-8, note 2). The same "destabilization of classic narrative" that Savran found in *Baby Doll* appears here, in the creation of a black (instead of female) character "who is both actively striving subject and an object of the desire of others" (Savran, *Communists* 124). It may be premature to suggest that Williams is anticipating here the experience of the "Negro" that Norman Mailer will present in "The White Negro" (1959), although Mailer certainly depicts a similar existential crisis for the black man: "Hated from outside and therefore hating himself, the Negro was forced into the position of exploring all those moral wildernesses of civilized life which the Square automatically condemns as delinquent or evil or immature or morbid or self-destructive or corrupt." Moreover, according to Jonathan P. Eburne, Mailer's essay "posits 'race' – figured as blackness – as a metaphor for the abject" and configures "the black male at once as active – the locus of cultural and sexual potency – and as passive the courted object of desire. Both phallus and lack" (70).

Williams's Big Black is not *yet* depicted as the locus of cultural renovation, but future stories will progressively develop a kind of "fictional program of eugenics"

(Granofsky 9), through which black (or generally darker) characters bring new strength to a stultified American society – Stanley being the most famous case. Whereas the scarce white couples in the stories are sterile ("The Vine," 1944) or on bad terms ("Tent Worms," 1945) and they do not leave descendants (Maggie and Brick would belong here too), in the later "Kingdom of Earth" (1954) or "Miss Coynte of Green" the female protagonists get impregnated by black lovers (in the latter instance) or by a half-breed "wood's colt" with Cherokee blood in the former short story that will turn into black ascendancy in the 1967 homonymous play (368). Williams voices his position through Miss Coynte herself: "there is bound to be a great new race in America, and this is naturally going to come about through the total mixing together of black and white blood, which we all know is actually red, regardless of skin color!" (499). Black, white, and red are also the chromatic signifiers in "Big Black," a bold move in the America of the Thirties. The prospect of miscegenation in this story is still a thorny issue, but the subjectivization of a black character for its protagonist is already a step ahead.

For, while Big Black is the phallus – or rather, its primitive alternative, a fetishized abject – for the voyeuristic narrator, he is also a lacking subject. He sees his identity collapse when his body becomes the battleground for the drives and the disciplinary gaze of the symbolic Other. He is far from being a whole subject, or that fetish that stands for what his white counterparts *lack*: he carries the very causes of his breakdown with him, and he will continue to although he may attempt to escape and start anew. Hence the circular structure of a story whose opening and closing scenes are almost exact copies, though situated in different places. Big Black is a *deject*, "one by whom the abject exists," and as "a tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray" (Kristeva, *Horror* 8). Big Black runs away from the place where he experienced abjection but he cannot leave the danger of disintegration behind. In his new road crew, he is again the outsider, a nameless "black monster of a Negro … prodigiously big, prodigiously ugly… They called him Big Black." There, his renovated "orgy of labor" is interrupted by "a picture flashed sickeningly into his mind of a black hand, like a huge and hideous spider, gripping the white face of a girl!" (31).

This revolting remembrance of abjection is followed by Big Black's legendary cry, whose indecipherability is now endowed with a semiotic significance. When he simultaneously cries and flings his arms above his head, as he also did to throw the white girl into the river (30), he seems to be trying to divest himself of abjection's "weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, which crushes [him]" (Kristeva, *Horror* 2). No doubt his cry is "elemental, epical …. like a challenge flung at Life" (31; also 27), for abjection is the most elemental process of separation from that which threatens the ego, like the drives of that capitalized "Life" (a shortened version of "the Love of Life Returning after Toil"). His cry is not linguistically understandable because it signifies abjection's pre-linguistic splitting: it seems able "to split open the sky" just as Big Black was split by abjection (27, 31).

So the story ends as it began, in what looks like an unavoidable cycle of abjection and escape for Big Black. Kolin has noted that black characters in a few of Williams's works, such as *Streetcar* or "The Last of My Solid Gold Watches," play the role of timekeepers, "opening their respective plays to a timeless world of 'Black synesthesia' [*sic*] … or the eternal present" ("Negritude" 217). No other (or earlier) piece of work can symbolize this in a clearer way than "Big Black." From beginning to end, we can hear the picks of the workers clanging upon the rocks "as heavy and as monotonous as Time" (26, 30). Nevertheless, there is an occasion when this ticking stops: always at the instant of Big Black's cry, "there [is] a break in the clanging of the picks" (26, 30). Although only for a moment, Big Black accomplishes a titanic feat within Williams's canon: Time, the enemy, stands still. It is in such moments of arrest of time where Williams places the depth and significance of a complete work of art ("Timeless" 49). In "Big Black," that timelessness is the setting for his howl, the semiotic manifestation of an abjection that, we can surmise, will not be final but eternally reminisced.

Like other characters in Williams who face abjection, Big Black glimpses the disrupting force of the Real before returning to his place in the Symbolic now as a subject split from its desire who evinces semiotic influences. The difference is that, in Big Black's case, the focus is more on the social than on the individual side of abjection. Abjection does not confront him "with our earliest attempts to release the

hold of maternal entity" at the level of personal archaeology, but with "the threatening world of animals and animalism … as representatives of sex and murder" from which societies mark out their culture (Kristeva, *Horror* 12-3). In Big Black we encounter a quite idiosyncratic symbolization of this interconnection between identity and society. He first shows the confrontation between the subject and the constraints of reality (*Ananké*) by sublimating desire so as to "[make] oneself independent of the external world by seeking satisfaction in internal, psychical processes" (Freud, *Malestar* 3027).[181] On the pillars of that sublimation, civilization is built up. Freud argues. However, as a narcissist strategy sublimation is fragile, and gets disordered when the conflict of drives disrupts narcissism and "bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated with a given system of signs, is abjection for it" (Kristeva, *Horror* 12). That which is not integrated, the absence of which creates the gap in the subject, is both the animalization and the threat that his own black body symbolizes in the "given system of signs" of the Symbolic. When the irruption of desire brings forth these "abjects" and the split is bridged, the borders between outside and inside, subject and object, overlap and smudge, and only abjection can restore a flimsy sense of identity and the Symbolic's preponderance. Yet in this process, Big Black (and we) ultimately discover that the restrictions to desire do not really come from the confrontation with an external reality, but from *within*: the discourse of the Symbolic is a part of himself, which separates him from his desire and in so doing again founds him as a split subject in language. Thus, Freud's sublimation is not enough: it is Kristeva's abjection that helps found civilization; "abject and abjection are," in her own words, "the primers of my culture" (2).

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[181] "La tendencia a independizarse del mundo exterior, buscando las satisfaciones en los procesos internos, psíquicos, manifestada ya en el procedimiento descrito, se denota con intensidad aún mayor en el que sigue."

11

“TEN MINUTE STOP”

> You sit here quiescent, waiting, and I would like
> to infect you suddenly with the great, the intense
> excitement that comes of self-recognition, of knowing
> the fact of your being, your rising at morning and
> being yourself again after night, after dreams, after
> temporary cessation.
>
> Tennessee Williams (August 1940)[182]

In October 1936, the magazine *American Prefaces* returned the short story “Ten Minute Stop” to Tom Williams with some ideas for revision that the author described as “preposterous” (*Notebooks* 61). Accordingly, the young writer did not accept the journal’s suggestions and the story remained untouched and unpublished. “Ten Minute Stop” shares with the slightly posterior “Gift of an Apple” the year of their composition and their non-publication before the *Collected Stories* volume, as well as their being examples of Williams’s early predilection for wanderers as “a symbol of [the] escape and adventure he desperately craved” but could only envisage through his fiction (Kolin, “Gift” par. 2). Kolin argues that in these stories Williams creates an imaginary self that relates “a déjà vu experience played in reverse,” a sort of *wishful writing* about all that he would like to have experienced (especially sexual freedom)

[182] Collected by Bradham Thornton in his *Notebooks* (208, note 359).

but which would not come until he began his own wanderings in early 1939.[183] We have already seen that the sexual experience in "Gift" does not get to be very satisfying indeed. The case in "Stop" is quite different, however. William's *wishful writing* makes Luke, the protagonist, into an exceptional character because he will eventually be able to achieve a measure of completeness and *jouissance*, an usual feat in Williams's oeuvre. The story begins when Luke, after having traveled to Chicago in the hope of finding a job, has to come back empty-handed since "the man whom he went to see … was not in town" (54). After this initial fiasco, Luke's experiences on his homeward bus trip constitute the core of the story, in which Williams depicts not a purely geographical journey – from Chicago to Memphis – but an existential one too.

Luke's situation at the beginning of the trip is one of physical and mental dullness: his body is stiff, he cannot think, nor sleep.[184] His frame of mind is one of spiritual void: he does not "feel like himself" but "as though the thread of his identity had snapped" (54). This is not just the usual isolation most of people feel in buses, as Vannatta states (17). Without identity, Luke seems to be in the adequate condition for experiencing *jouissance*. Jouissance is a complex term that acquires different connotations depending on the critic that employs it. For Kristeva, jouissance is the state of bliss that the reunion with the abjected (m)Other promises, but which must be made repugnant through abjection and repressed by language to prevent the subject from foundering. (Kristeva, *Horror* 9).[185] It is the excess of enjoyment that is (and *must* be) always beyond ourselves, in the realm of Other. In Lacan,

> the term is usually translated as 'enjoyment' but, as we will see, it involves a combination of pleasure and pain, or, more accurately, pleasure *in* pain. *Jouissance*

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[183] Williams's first trip to New Orleans was for New Year's Eve 1939; there, he would join clarinettist Jim Parrot in a pilgrimage to the West Coast that would take him to California, down to Mexico on a bicycle tour, and eventually to visit D. H. Lawrence's widow, Frieda, in New Mexico in August 1939 (*Notebooks* 131 *ff.*)

[184] "He could stay neither sleep nor awake. … His brain felt stunned. He wanted to think. … But couldn't;" he "could not think of nothing that he wanted" at the café (56).

[185] Except in quotes, where the authors' use of italics for *jouissance* will be retained, I will follow Kristeva's use and will not italicize it.

> expresses that paradoxical situation where patients appear to enjoy their own illness or symptom. In French the word also has sexual connotations and is associated with sexual pleasure. The example of *jouissance* that Lacan usually provides, however, is of religious or mystical ecstatic experience. (Homer 89)

Jouissance and pleasure are the two categories that Barthes explores in *The Pleasure of the Text*. The pleasure in a text is experienced as a reinforcement of the ego, a comfortable satisfaction in accordance with culture. The text of jouissance, on the other hand, takes pleasure and shatters it; jouissance is the supreme antagonist of the ego, which it dissolves by seeping through the splits in subjectivity (Barthes, *Placer* 83; 16).[186] In "Ten Minute Stop," already its title signifies a rupture or *break* in Luke's trip, during which we will witness how the protagonist undergoes a bodily and mental arousing that reminds of "the fundamental orgiastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, … of intensification to the point of climax and consummation" that Robert Scholes identifies as the connecting feature between fiction and sex (*Fabulation* 26). Yet Luke does not experience a usual sexual climax at the end of the story – his exaltation crosses over the border of *jouissance* and concludes in (symbolic) death.

To begin with, Luke is in fact not isolated during his trip: he shares the back seat of the bus with a young black boxer. As we know, black men symbolize for Williams a powerful sexuality; stories such as "Big Black," "Desire and the Black Masseur" (1946), "Miss Coynte of Greene" (1972), or the novel *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975) feature black males that "are always conceived as objects of fetishistic fascination and paradigms of masculinity" (Savran 127). In addition to sexual fitness, this black man on the bus is also the first in a row of boxers that will incarnate for Williams the quintessence physical prowess as opposed to feeble,

[186] "*Placer del texto*. Clásicos, Cultura. ... Extraordinario refuerzo del yo... *Textos de goce*. El placer en pedazos; la cultura en pedazos. Los textos de goce son perversos en tanto están fuera de toda finalidad imaginable..." (83). "No es la violencia la que impresiona al placer, la destrucción no le interesa, lo que quiere es el lugar de una pérdida, es la fisura, la ruptura, la deflación, el *fading* que se apodera del sujeto en el centro del goce" (16).

impotent characters. Examples of this are the lover-boxer in the one-act "The Strangest Kind of Romance" (1946) and the boxer-lover Tiger in "The Mattress by the Tomato Patch" (1953). Related in a negative sense is the singular pathos of the crippled Oliver of "One Arm" (1945), another prizefighter. That the black character in "Stop" epitomizes these impressive features is obvious in the phallic image that calls Luke's attention, "his bandaged hand dangling between his legs" (55).

Luke, in his despondency, regards the pugilist with "admiration and envy" as the absolute obverse to himself, and so does the narration present him too. For instance, the wrestler performs the actions that Luke is apparently unable to accomplish: he sleeps "earnestly" whereas Luke can just get some "restless, enervating sleep;" he smiles at Luke several times, while our protagonist "trie[s] to grin back but his lips were stiff." More important is Luke's vision of the black man as the embodiment of the wholeness that he lacks and aspires to. In contrast to the broken thread of his life, the grinning black youth incarnates for Luke "something splendid and heroic. Something that made life possible under any circumstances. A kind of impregnable simplicity. A completeness. An undividedness" (55). A complete *something* that *makes life possible* seems a rather proper definition of the (m)Other as abject. At first sight Luke's relationship with the boxer may look different from the relation subject/abject in other stories: the black man gets off the bus at the stop and disappears from the story early on, leaving Luke alone instead of approaching him as a tantalizing threat for his subjectivity. Nonetheless, it will be the boxer's farewell remark: "This here's Champaign … Home for me, but for you, just a ten minute stop," that will echo afterwards in the story to the effect of triggering Luke's existential epiphany (56).[187] That will be the second step in Luke's awakening; I will return to it shortly, but before that the entire process and the initial stage must be described.

The process through which Luke will progressively prevail over his physical and mental obtuseness progresses along three phases of escalating tension. Once the

[187] We can find here a certain resemblance with Shannon's situation in *Iguana*, as he attempts to come to terms with his own *abject* counterpart, not physically present but always lurking: "MAXINE: So you've got the spook with you again. / SHANNON: That's right, he's the only passenger that got off the bus with me, honey. / MAXINE: Is he here now? / SHANNON: Not far" (335-6).

bus stops at Champaign, Illinois and the passengers get off, Luke stays around a brightly lighted café and an adjoining open lot containing billboards. He sits on a wooden fence, and from that liminal position observes the scenery while his body lets go of its initial stiffness. Next, he will start a long meditation that gains intensity till reaching an euphoric epiphany – so, he will be able to *think*, before he eventually *loses his mind*. The concluding scene will depict the orgasmic fragmentation of body and ego that presages jouissance; as Luke does not realize a final abjection to safeguard his self, his is an unstoppable fusion into the Semiotic that can only be consummated by death, or its nearest equivalent, sleep. Under the semblance of realism, "Stop" actually narrates the fantasy that "it is possible to reject the symbolic order and return wholeheartedly to the undifferentiated semiotic *chora*, to the plenitude of that early time;" however, as McAfee warns us,

> no matter how untenable the symbolic order might seem, going back to this archaic state spells a complete breakdown of any kind of life. We should be wary of any communitarian "thirst for sleep and jouissance" (ibid.). This thirst can only be quenched with death.[188] (McAfee 56)

In the first stage of his ten-minute stop, Luke seems to come to life again thanks to the abundant pleasant perceptions that excite his senses: the stifling bus is substituted by the cooler open air and the vision of a pretty café, with lighted windows and diffused figures through the wet glass, where a "light and infectious" song helps shock him "a little out of his daze" (56). Yet his most significant bodily reaction occurs shortly after, when he exits the bar and sits next to a lighted billboard in an adjoining open lot. Then two elements appear simultaneously: "Somewhere in the wet grass a cricket began chirping. A young couple strolled by." Luke becomes then one of Williams's erotic *peeping Toms* (Crandell, "Peeping Tom" 30): gazing after the girl's figure and "expanse of hips," he feels the excitement "in his own loins." The image of the actress on the billboard, with "gorgeous breasts" and "hips [that] were ample, too," contributes to animate Luke's dormant desire too (57).

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[188] McAfee is here quoting Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, p. 180.

This advent of desire falls together with the cricket's chirp, an unsurprising coincidence if we consider that this insect's sound has the purpose of charming or *calling* the opposite sex. Hence, Luke's "sweet *answering* [italics added] thrill" at the vision of the two lovers (57). Such a correlation between unconscious drives and this sort of natural music will be more directly included in the later story "The Field of Blue Children" (1937), in which the protagonist, despite not knowing "what she [is] going to do," starts following "movements … without any conscious direction" until she realizes, at the same time, that she has been driven to the place where her lover lives and that "there were cicadas burring in the large oaks" (74).

The cricket's chirping will continue to punctuate the narration at different moments as a sonorous signifier of the current of drives that underlies the text. It acts as a *background* sound that, every time Luke's thoughts stop being objectal, comes up into awareness: "Then ceased thinking about the poster. Listened to the cricket's chirping" (57); "again his thoughts trailed off into nothing and he only heard the chirping of the cricket" (58). This *awareness of the background* hints at the semiotic charge of the cricket's song, which is further reinforced by its onomatopoeic representation in the text. The phrase "*Katy-did, did-she-Katy, did-she-kid-kid-kid*" transforms a meaningless chirr into a more or less coherent piece of language (58). "The recognition of something wordlike" in an unknown language, and maybe also in natural sounds, "calls out attention to a pure readiness-for-meaning. … Such readiness-for-meaning is precisely the relation to the Freudian Thing," or the Kristevan (m)Other (Boothby 235). We are always ready to attribute a meaning, that is, to position an object, since the chaotic backdrop out of which we extract them, the *chora*, is also always there.

However, when Luke concludes that the *Katy-did* phrase above "seem[s] a sort of pointedly foolish commentary upon the fact of existence" (59), he seems to imply that what is pointedly foolish is that very "pressure-toward-meaning" that institutes the Symbolic at the expense of the Semiotic (Boothby 235).[189] By contrast,

[189] "The felt pressure-toward-meaning at stake here, a pressure that constantly animates the speech stream and that is highlighted by the example of the unknown word, is rooted in the necessity that binds together the binarism of differential features" (Boothby 235).

Luke appears to be exposed to a different "pressure," one that understands language through a semiotic point of reference: as the cricket begins to chirp and the young couple appears, he hears their "words … like the movement of a body in the dark" (57). The cricket's sound is thus one of the first signals of the semiotic disposition of the text and its protagonist; it remains symbolically meaningless but semiotically insistent until the last paragraph of the story where, we will see, it accompanies Luke's escape into semiotic jouissance.

The second stage begins after one of the cricket's intrusions: "Then ceased thinking about the poster. Listened to the cricket's chirping. What's he talking to himself about? Refined old ladies making conversation on the church lawn. Or Professor Abbott on Restoration Drama" (57). Luke suddenly brings back to mind memories of his university studies, and reflects on the masquerade of literature, taking as examples Thomas Otway (*Venice Preserved*), Joseph Addison (*Cato*), and John Dryden (*Conquest of Granada*). As opposed to the cynicism of their "saccharine poems" and the Manichean simplicity of their "extremes of sentimentality and of cynicism," Luke reminisces the ugly, dirty, disgusting – in a word, *abject* – historical reality that those works obviate:

> The vicious intrigues. Constantly draining their passion like running sores on prostitute flesh. And toilets that didn't flush. And the dangers of bathing and fresh air in winter. And the rotting teeth. And horse dung all over the narrow streets. And the diseases and the deaths and the ignorance. And the masses suffering and dying ignominiously …(58)

In these and more examples along his tirade, Luke shows his inclination towards the abject, piling up its various manifestations (uncleanness, excrement, crime, death) in a series of copulative sentences that (ab)use conjunctions as infantile, pre-Oedipal language does. He elaborates a long "description of absurdity, stupidity, violence, sorrow, moral and physical degeneracy" like those Kristeva analyses in Céline, and which signify "excitement and disgust, joy and repulsion … abjection and fascination" (*Horror* 204).

Furthermore, he repeatedly censures "the long, heroic speeches of Almonzaro … Heroic tragedy and heroic love. … The heroic tragedies were sacredly kept for posterity," he protests, while "all that was terrible and dark in the individual lives of the people was left unsaid and forgotten," that is, repressed (57-8). His model for heroism is not in the Symbolic, but in the figure of the black boxer, his "splendid and heroic" archetype of completeness (55). The evocation of the black man at this point is nor reduced to this reappearance of the word *heroic*, however. Luke's increasingly exalted interior monologue finishes when he finally embraces the abject (or in his own words, he *gets* it) by means of echoing its discourse, in this case the fighter's farewell remark:

> And I being here, thought Luke: that's the strangest of all. I somehow being a part of all this. … All without rhyme or reason. … Astonishing, isn't it! Ten minute stop in a strange town – home for me, but for you – just a ten minute stop! I get you, thought Luke. I don't belong. I'm not one of the actors. That's why I'm able to sit here and look at the show. No, I'm not really a part of it. Not one of the *dramatic personae*. Not dark enough or not light enough. Not enough – what do they call it? Centrifugal force? Specific gravity? Let it go at that…
>
> Here again his thoughts trailed off into nothing and he only heard the chirping of the cricket in the wet grass. (58; suspension points as in the original)

In my opinion, this passage represents the key moment when Luke experiences the *uncanny strangeness* that the encounter with the abject stirs up: "a shock, something unusual, astonishment … that leads the self, beyond anguish, toward depersonalization" (Kristeva, *Strangers* 188). Its full significance depends on the last phrases in Luke's monologue, which are rather obscure. Williams's use of the trope of life as (freak) show has reappeared in his short fiction several times, but his mentions of *specific gravity* and *centrifugal force* in this story may just seem capricious, as they remain unexplained. Although a discussion about physics is beyond the scope of this analysis, I will shortly explain these notions. *Specific gravity* is the rate of density of a liquid in relation to the density of water (Gettys, Keller, and Skove 378). If Luke's specific gravity is low, that would make him as dense as water then, unable to separate

himself from it (say, like oil does).[190] Hence, this mention may point at a sort of *liquefaction* of Luke's self, an immersion into the oceanic feeling of the maternal *chora* that the union with the abject promises.

As regards *centrifugal force*, Williams would indeed give an explanation in his novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, written fourteen years after the completion of "Stop" (1950). Its protagonist is also more than aware of the quality of life as a mere performance: an actress herself, her behavior in the social world is nothing but another characterization she puts on to play "a paragon of loyalty and goodness" while "nobody was more aware of the automatic quality of her gestures than Mrs. Stone herself" (104). That awareness is precisely what makes her special, unlike her acquaintances, who lived

> without any evident consciousness of taking part in a vast ritual of nothingness. Mrs. Stone knew of that ritual. She took part in it herself. She went to the parties; she pursued the little diversions. She moved in the great empty circle. But Mrs. Stone glanced inward from the peripheries of that circle and saw the void enclosed there. She saw the emptiness. She knew it was empty. But Mrs. Stone was always a busy woman. She had been continually occupied with more things than a single existence seemed sufficient to hold, and for that reason, the way that centrifugal force prevents a whirling object from falling inward from its orbit, Mrs. Stone was removed for a long time from the void she circled. (107)

Centrifugal force is then, for Williams, the pressure that keeps us from falling onto our inner void, our *no-thingness*; a force that makes us *eccentric* to ourselves, forever busy in an unending series of symbolic relationships with "things." It seems thus a necessary catalyst for the moment of abjection, a contributor to the overcoming of the anxiety of facing existential nothingness by rejecting it onto unconsciousness.[191]

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[190] We have also seen how, at the border of abjection, Miss Rose also experiences a loss of gravity, this time in its common-sense meaning of weight.

[191] Interestingly, the centrifugal force is in fact an example of a *fictitious* force (Gettys, Keller, and Skove 128). Forces act in pairs (action-reaction) but fictitious forces do not have a complementary force; they are made up theoretically to explain an exception (a *gap?*) in a theorem.

Consequently, what the passage from "Stop" reveals is that Luke, not having "enough centrifugal force," will be unable to resist the fall inward into the nothingness the abject stands for; his low specific gravity will lead him to a dissolution into the semiotic *chora*. Although we witness him realize a separation ("I somehow being a part of all this. … No, I'm not really a part of it"), that does not constitute a *thesis* in the Kristevan sense. He detaches himself from the Symbolic as represented by the literary discourses and the show or symbolic "ritual" that abjects nothingness; so, he rebuffs the dichotomization of experience. Instead of allocating differences through a thesis, he sides with the ambiguous, "not dark enough or not light enough." His rejection of any (dramatic) *persona* is probably the most straightforward clue as to his self's movement toward depersonalization. Just as his thoughts, guided by the black man's words, trail off into nothingness, his own person will fade into a jouissance that, impelled by the death drive, is "a return to a state of isolation, close to an inorganic state, even to nothingness" (Kristeva, "Freudian Models").

Luke's epiphany about the meaninglessness of existence and the nothingness of subjectivity is the turning point in his experience: if initially his broken threat of identity made him feel "lost in space that stretched terrifyingly about him," now it seems he finds that spatial indeterminacy liberating (55). Let me stress two terms here that act as near synonyms: *now* and *spatial*. Williams's choice of fictional mode for Luke's meditation emphasizes the *now*, the present moment, since narrated monologue reveals a "fictional mind suspended in an instant present, between a remembered past and an anticipated future" (Cohn 126). Not only the epiphanic part is narrated in the present, as the passage above shows, but also the previous part on literature includes numerous continuous forms ("masses suffering," "the king's mistress threatening to have a miscarriage," "the earth still merrily reeling through space," 58). After his thoughts fade into nothing, Luke himself apprehends this temporal suspension or *break*:

> These ten minutes had absolutely no bearing upon anything that had gone before or anything that might conceivably come after. Perhaps that was why he found this

> brief space of time so peculiarly agreeable. He seemed to be removed from the ordinary stream of life for this short interval … (59)

Like Big Black, Luke achieves the most extraordinary deed for Williams: arresting the rush of time.[192] This again will reappear in *Mrs. Stone*, whose closing words in the novel, just before meeting the mysterious man on the street (her own *abject*), are "I've stopped the drift!" (148). From this moment on, we will encounter in "Stop" various textual devices that underline that sense of continuous present in the narration: adverbial markers such as "at this moment," and especially "now" (59, 60 twice), combine with an abundant use of the present continuous tense.[193] Luke is immersed in the present, which, Freud claims, is the only time the unconscious knows (Thurschwell 82); he has nothing before and cannot *conceive* of anything after.

In addition, this interruption of time coincides with the irruption of the Semiotic again. In fact, in Kristevan theory both elements stand in a sort of antagonistic relation: whereas "the symbolic order … is a temporal order," the semiotic modality of signification signifies the *chora*, a *space* rather than a temporal stage for the constitution of the subject (Kristeva, "Chinese Women" 152). In this second part of the story, Luke has emptied his mind of any transcendent content ("Let it go," his meditation concludes), and concentrates only on his body and the current sensorial perceptions that stimulate its drives. It is them that make that "*space* of time" so "peculiarly agreeable:" "It was pleasant, really, to be sitting here. Coolness of night air. Fresh smell of recent rain on the grass. Voices of unknown people and faint strains of music from a bright café. Quite pleasant." Luke realizes that the arrest of time is allowing him to have an "intensifying of perceptions … an increased alertness. Felt himself vividly alive" (59). It is the Semiotic that actuates that "intensifying of

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[192] In his essay "The Timeless World of a Play," Williams avers that it is "the *arrest of time* which has taken place in a completed work of art that gives to certain plays their feeling of depth and significance" (49).

[193] "At this moment the college boys were crowding out at the café door. Behind them the proprietor was shouting loud," "passengers were now streaming out of the café and returning to their seats," "the drunk boy staggered among them, catching at their sleeves and shrilly enquiring: 'Who'sh going to Memphish?" (59).

perceptions," since "sensation occupies the same structural position as the *chora*/Semiotic" (West-Pavlov 99). Accordingly, sensation is equally opposed to time, it only knows the *present*, as West-Pavlov reasons:

> Sensation cannot, in reality, bring back time past, but what it does achieve is to replace the linearity of time with the present dimensions of space. … Sensation alerts the subject to the plenitude of space. In the moment of focussing upon the intensity of physical sensation, the immediacy of such experience may banish any sentiment of the loss incurred by our subjection to time passing. (98)

Paraphrasing this, sensation alerts Luke to the plenitude of the *chora* and banishes his initial "panicky" feeling of being lost (54). After "time slows down and coagulates," it "gradually transforms into space" (West-Pavlov 102) – that space will be the last setting of the story.

Moreover, we may notice that such replacement of "the linearity of time with the present dimensions of space" has been active from the beginning of the story. When Luke compares himself to the black man in the bus, he replaces their (life)time with a spatial metaphor, an example of the "visual thinking" which "stands nearer to unconscious processes than does thinking in words" (Freud, "Ego and Id" 23). Luke visualizes the black man's life as a "strong black line pushing stubbornly forward without a curve" in contrast to "his own life, a wavering thread of gray" (55). What is more, we could even say that the whole story depicts such an abandonment of time in favor of space (an sort of undoing of the Theory of Relativity) summarized in the boxer's remark: "Home for me, but for you, just a ten minute stop." Home/space/Semiotic *chora* for the abject, minutes/time/Symbolic for the subject; unless till the latter becomes abject himself. This would be another way to understanding Luke's evolution towards union with the abject: he will abandon his life and accept the *break* in his trip/time, which exposes the lack (the *Unheimlich*), as his space/home, the *Heimlich*.

Before proceeding to the concluding scene, there is still another fundamental symptom of the pressure of the Semiotic on Luke that accentuates itself in this second

part, although it had already surfaced earlier in the story: laughter. For Kristeva, laughter "bursts out, facing abjection, and always originating at the same source, of which Freud had caught glimpse: the gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure, be it sex or death" (*Horror* 205-6). So, whereas at the beginning of the story Luke had discovered with alarm that he was "not even able to crack a smile!" (55), as the story progresses, we see him display a timid grin first (56 twice, 57), and, after his epiphany, the narration insists three times: "Luke/he smiled to himself" (59). Specially relevant is the fact that, in all these cases, Luke is grinning or smiling "to himself" – there is not an external cause for his laughter but his own vacuous self, he is both the *subject* and *object* of it: he borders abjection.[194] Eventually, we will see that there will be a burst of his laughter punctuating the climactic final. This second part concludes with Luke feeling "upon the verge of taking some kind of definite action," "vividly alive" as if after "a kind of catharsis" (59). However, if the abject is what catharsis should purge us from, as Kristeva affirms ("Psychoanalysis" 317), in Luke's case we have seen that catharsis has really purged his symbolic self, his artificial *persona*, and in so doing has paved the way for the re-union with the Semiotic *beyond the verge/border* that the final scene depicts.[195]

In the last part of the story, which is far from "pointless" as Vannatta criticizes (17), Luke returns to the street and near the bus he meets one of the college students that were formerly in the café. He tries to sell his ticket to the inebriated youth, while other students – all "jubilant" – swarm around him (59). The atmosphere raises in violence when the bus rumble starts to affect everyone and everything around it in what Williams describes as a contagious outbreak of aggressivity. Let me quote in full:

> the motor's savage roar had infected them all … The air thundered and shook. The very walls and pavements of the street seemed to be roused to fury. The college

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[194] "The state of abjection" can be understood "in the sense of non-separation subject/object" (Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis" 317).

[195] "Self, self, self – How wearisome and ugly. I think it poisons my work. I must purify it somehow before the end," Williams would still lament a few years later (*Notebooks* 343; 12 Jan. 1943).

> boys pressed in close around Luke clutching him by the coat lapel and the sleeves. Their breaths were strong with beer, their eyes and their faces demonically inflamed. Some of them shoved him toward the bus door, other dragged him backwards. He felt desperately frightened and with a desperate effort broke away. … He splashed through water that seemed knee-deep. Then darkness gathered about him. The other side of the street. An areaway between two buildings. This is madness. Lost my mind. But what do I care? Ha, Ha! (60-1)

The mob of boys seize Luke and agitatedly knock him about in a attempted dismemberment scene reminiscent of the pharaoh's lynching in the prior story "The Vengeance of Nitocris" (1928) – or maybe not just *attempted*, if we consider the emasculating connotations of his "torn white [ticket] stub" being trampled underfoot (60). The homoerotic insinuations make this scene an early forerunner of the sadomasochistic pleasure-in-pain that will erupt in "Desire and the Black Masseur" in its bluntest form, as well as of Sebastian Venable's fate in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Williams suggests a situation of arousal and inflammation, a "momentary plethora of sound and motion" in which Luke's need for *definite action* will finally explode (61). He desperately flees from the place in a turbulent reaction accompanied by symbols of an orgasmic climax like wetness, darkness, and an outburst of uncontrollable laughter.[196]

Luke's experience in this scene fulfills the characteristics of jouissance, as it "does not only emerge as a culmination of emotions as is associated with sexual orgasm, but also declares its vehement, radicalized status which is distinct from the mild, comfortable enjoyment of *plaisir*" (Hsiao 47). For example, like jouissance, the text depicts a maximized degree of aggressivity (49), a frantic state of loss (Barthes, *Placer* 25), and an excess (or "plethora") of sensation. More significantly, we can observe the eruption of the semiotic mode of signification in/on the text by means of Luke's burst of laughter, which can be qualified as "apocalyptic" in the Kristevan

[196] I have dealt with the correlation between laughter and sexual tension/release in Williams in the paper "*[T]hat heavily drawn HA-HA:* Laughter as the surrogate for sexual desire in Tennessee Williams's stories."

sense: it is "bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened" by the eruption of sex *and* death, that is, by jouissance (*Horror* 206). Actually, Barthes wonders whether jouissance and fear may not be identical.[197] This fleeting moment concludes with a turmoil of sensations – "Brick roughs and damp to the back of his head. Cool wind playing upon his face. Smell of wet grass. Coolness. Cool darkness. The night after a fever…" (61; suspension points as in the original) – which will make Luke enter a *plenitude of space*, as West-Pavlov pointed out above.[198]

After the moment of jouissance, Luke opens his eyes and contemplates the same scene that he saw upon his arrival, but now the light in the puddles, the diffused forms in the rain-streaked windows of the café, and even the music, all belong to a unity of perception in which he is immersed: "The scene was attractive. Symphonic completeness that reality seldom achieves. A picture by Turner. 'Rainy nocturne' might be the title…" (61; suspension points as in the original). As Luke enters this semiotic completeness– or, in Kristeva's words, is "swallowed up" by jouissance (*Horror* 9) – he achieves in a less violent way the goal that Sebastian will pursue in *Suddenly*: "Completing! – a sort of! – *image*!" (*Suddenly* 131). The prevalence of the Semiotic makes the linguistic lose its hold: sentences become shorter or mere noun phrases in apposition, and the narration breaks up into isolated paragraphs with a blank line in between. Each paragraph is (un)closed by suspension points, a sign for the "Madness/meaninglessness" in a text (Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis" 310). In addition, in these last paragraphs Luke does not pronounce a word anymore, but instead resorts to "holophrastic utterances," the most archaic semiotic fragment which "perform as markers of a 'return of the repressed' at the level of the statement itself" (Kristeva, *Horror* 203). So he looks at the billboard and, since the actor's "mustache looked like the whiskers of a cat," Luke purrs: "*Miaouuu*" (61; original italics); a bit later, he gives the actor "a loud bird" of infantile disapproval (62).

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[197] "Proximidad (¿identidad?) del goce y del miedo" (Barthes, *Placer* 78).

[198] While Luke's inner emotions go into an explosion, the space that surrounds him seems to undergo the opposite process, *implosion*: the darkness in which he was initially lost, which "stretched terrifyingly about him" (55), now "gather[s] about him" to the point of *touching* him – he *feels* a synaesthetic "Cool darkness" (61).

Luke's reactions towards the billboard seem to me a good example to illustrate how his rejection of the Symbolic in favor of the Semiotic corresponds to jouissance's subversion of the status quo (Hsiao 49). In the decade when the story was written, a new instrument to support that status quo had appeared: the *talkies*. The Thirties witnessed the development of talking movies (as well as radio broadcasts) that "helped reinforce uniform national values and … reinforce a social order rapidly disintegrating under economic and social pressures" (Susman 159). This is why Williams's sophisticated references to the billboard are worth noticing. Instead of an actual film, he makes up a nonexistent movie for the billboard under the name of *Sacramento*. However, its make-believe stars have names with very familiar resonances: the rhyming patterns of *Jane Barlow* and *Stark Navle*, and the cunning transformation of *April East* can hardly go overlooked; such phonematic devices and semantic puns are in addition a basic element of the genotext (Kristeva, "Semiotics" 86). These film stars *sound like* real performers but are only imaginary ones – that is the first clue as to the billboard's role in the story, which the final scene makes even clearer.[199]

When after his climactic moment Luke advances beyond the *verge/fence* into the wet grass of the open lot, he gets too near the billboard. Although at a distance it may have looked realistic, he discovers that, if looked at closely, it gets deconstructed into mere patches of color: "The face was outlined with a single stroke of purple paint. … Her lips were crimson daubs" (61). "*Jouissance* thus requires the

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[199] By his choice of actors and description of the poster, I guess Williams may be concocting a mixture of two films that were released shortly before the story's composition. Clark Gable and Jean Harlow appeared together in *Red Dust* (1932), a film about a rubber plantation that would inspire a more famous remake, *Mogambo* (1953). The poster of *Red Dust* coincides literally with Williams's description of the billboard in "Stop" but for one detail: Gable was not wearing his notorious moustache yet. He was however on the poster of Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), although the composition of the image (and Claudette Colbert's dark hair) does not fit Williams's description so neatly. The plot does bear a resemblance with "Stop," though: Capra's film was an adaption of Samuel Hopkins Adams's short story "Night Bus" (published in the August 1933 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine), in which a young wealthy heiress runs away from home and meets a broke newspaper reporter on her bus trip to New York, a meeting that will obviously change her future (marriage) plans (*IMDB*).

deconstruction of the imaginary," as Boothby affirms (159). And also of the Symbolic: the billboard loses its symbolic meaning, it does not *signify* people or a film anymore; it only retains the *materiality* of painting: the color, the stroke. It is in such materiality that the semiotic dimension of painting surfaces, most evidently in abstract art. For instance, "[Jackson] Pollock's art reveals that the real [Lacan's Real] is to be equated more with the material foundation of painting than with the representations in the symbolic which so seduce the ego" (Lechte 141).[200] The billboard, which had initially *seduced* Luke's voyeuristic desire with its symbolic referent (the actress's breasts),[201] becomes now one more indicator of his semiotic inclination: he "kisse[s] *the purple brush stroke* [italics added] at the base of Jane Barlow's throat," not *the throat* it represents (61-2). Moreover, we have seen that what it elicits from Luke is not desire anymore, but those holophrastic sounds that belong to the Semiotic.

Therefore, the billboard in "Stop" clearly embodies the unreality of cinema: it signifies a pretense world that disappears if it is ever approached, like the film stars seem to be authentic only if we hear their name casually. Upon fusing with semiotic jouissance, Luke rejects cinema's normative values and beliefs – "the magnificent opiate of the twentieth century" (Fritscher ch. 1) –, all for a more material, *Real* enjoyment. He anticipates Tom Winfield's complain to Jim in *The Glass Menagerie*:

> I'm tired of the movies. … All of those glamorous people – having adventure – hogging it all, gobbling the whole thing up! You know what happens? People go to the *movies* instead of *moving*. ... Yes, until there's a war. That's when adventure becomes available to the masses! *Everyone's* dish, not only Gable's! (251)

The photograph, the radio, and the moving picture may make "the decade of the Thirties … a most dramatic era of sound and sight," Susman asserts (158). Luke,

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[200] For an account of the influence of painting on the titles and settings of Williams's works, see Bradham Thornton's note in *Notebooks* (104, n. 159).

[201] Barthes places pleasure and desire on the side of the ego, while the subject of jouissance *joys* in its (the ego's) loss and fragmentation (*Placer* 83).

nevertheless, attains his own *plethora of sound and motion*, his personal adventure, as we have seen. Williams's use of the billboard in "Ten Minute Stop" heralds later references to cinema in his stories and plays, for example in "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" (1941), which Savran chooses to introduce his study about Williams's homosexual subject (*Communists* 76-78). In "Joy Rio" Williams depicts the clandestine encounters of his first homosexual protagonist, Pablo Gonzalez, in a derelict movie theater where cowboy pictures and sentimental narratives are shown. Savran employs this theme as the overriding metaphor for Williams's own theater: his drama offers the double spectacle of a heterosexual surface or *screen*, whereas a homosexual subtext offers a site for resistance, resisting the prohibitions of bourgeois morality.[202] William's subversive use of cinema consists again in focusing on its material side, on a background *spatiality* that Savran, in terms that evoke the semiotic *chora*, describes as a place

> that privileges the sense of touch and hearing and smell… a theater of metaphor and metonymy, in which images and objects and words are ... discovered to be similar to and contiguous with each other, a surrealist theater of extravagant and polymorphous desires. (Savran, *Communists* 78)

It seems obvious that the *extravagant* desire that finds its outlet in the darkness of the cinema theatre is typically a homosexual one – hence, Amanda Wingfield's nervous suspicions when her son goes to the movies "*entirely* too *much*" (Williams, *Menagerie* 237; original italics).

The billboard has a further role as a signifier of the Symbolic, alluding at the clash between the Semiotic and religion which, although less conspicuously than in "Desire and the Black Masseur," is also present in "Stop." The imaginary film's title, *Sacramento*, has an obvious religious origin: *sacraments* are a sign of a spiritual reality, the main rites that set worshippers in communication with God, through which

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[202] Savran chooses another story with the cinema as its setting ("Hard Candy") to introduce his second chapter about Williams's revolutionary narrative techniques, as I have commented in the chapter on Williams and the Gothic.

He manifests Himself in our souls (baptism, Eucharist, marriage, etc.).[203] As "a laughing apocalypse is an apocalypse without god" (Kristeva, *Horror* 206), when Luke approaches the billboard at the end he does not consider any symbolic/religious meaning of the film's name. For him, it becomes a signifier of an exterior *space*: "The name of the picture was *Sacramento*. What was Sacramento? A city on the western coast…" (61; original suspension points).

Besides in relation to the billboard, Luke's radical position as regards mass culture can be also perceived in the way he interprets the music sounding in the café. Listening to the sugar-coated words of the song "Is it true what they say about Dixie?" Luke does not follow the lyrics when they wonder "Do they laugh, do they love, like they say in every song?" Instead, he casts doubts on the song's idyllic representation of the South with his own question: "Do they really flog women down there?" (56). The song belongs to the Tin Pan Alley tradition that, from the distant New York, perpetuated a fabricated image of the South. It was written in 1936 – it is thus contemporary to the short story – by Irving Caesar, Sammy Lerner, and Gerald Marks; the singer who popularized it was blackface Al Jolson (Whitfield 11). If Tin Pan Alley songs "were presumably an existential expression of emotions that for the sake of the social order might require sublimation," it seems fitting that Luke looks right through the "handful of clichés" that those songs and minstrel shows repeated (30, 14).[204]

Correspondingly, when upon the moment of symphonic completeness he hears another song, it is "Star Dust," which "does not conform to the A-B A-B structure widely used in the Tin Pan Alley era. American poet laureate Oscar Hammerstein II claimed that it 'rambles and roams like a truant schoolboy in a

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[203] "Sacrament: a Christian rite (as baptism or the Eucharist) that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and that is held to be a means of divine grace or to be a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality" (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*).

[204] "For almost half a century," Whitfield continues, "the Tin Pan Alley craftsmen were nevertheless listened to; they provided the voice of America. Blanche Du Bois comes from Mississippi in a play set in New Orleans. The musical possibilities from which Tennessee Williams could have had her pluck are very rich. Yet the song with which she serenades herself is 'It's Only a Paper Moon' (1933) – lyrics by Jewish New Yorkers Yip Harburg and Billy Rose, music by a cantor's son, Harold Arlen" (31). For Williams's use of music in *Streetcar*, see Maiman 15-21.

meadow'" (Alistair Cooke, qtd. in "Stardust"). Luke's unconformity with the stereotype is also manifest in his "impulse to strike" the drunk student he attempts to sell his ticket to, as the boy's speech is packed with the very stereotypes Luke had implicitly condemned before: he asks Luke whether Memphis is "like they shay in shongs," and is especially interested in "the girls, the girls, the *girls*" – an echo of the Restoration speeches "of love. Of love, of love" (57; original italics). "Stop" belongs then with the Barthesian text of bliss in its regaining (for Luke and the reader) the jouissance that has been repressed by the stereotype, be it in literature, movies, or songs.[205]

At the beginning of this analysis, McAfee warned us that the wish to return to the desubjectification of the archaic *chora*, the "thirst for sleep and jouissance," can only lead to a *dead* end (or maybe an "areaway," in Luke's case). Therefore, after the explosion of jouissance, there seems to be only one thing left for Luke to do, something that in fact was his greatest wish already at the start. In the bus he had hoped "he would be able to stretch himself out" on the back seat but could not because of the other passengers, so that he could only have "a restless, enervating sleep" (55). Now, on the contrary, he advances "purposefully" through the open, and "stretch[es] himself out in the tall grass somewhere near the spot where the cricket was chirping and turn[s] his face away from the lighted poster and [falls] into a sound, *blissful* [italics added] sleep" (61-2). Luke's position illustrates perfectly his wholehearted return to the Semiotic (drawing near the cricket) and rejection of the Symbolic (turning his back on the billboard). As his thirst for sleep is quenched, we can detect the effects of his symbolic death: his proper name disappears on the last two pages, while in the final paragraph, even his pronoun withdraws – *he* is only used in the opening sentence ("He advanced still closer"), then it is missing in the following six ones.

His final situation is one of *completeness* indeed, for he has achieved everything he was incapable of at the beginning of the story: he has been able to think about the world and about himself, to smile and eventually even to laugh, to stretch

[205] "El estereotipo es un hecho político, la figura mayor de la ideología. Por el contrario, lo Nuevo es el goce ... una tentativa por hacer resurgir históricamente el goce reprimido bajo el estereotipo" (Barthes, *Placer* 67).

himself out and sleep. Yet Luke's blissful sleep speaks of a more profound death than a mere *petit morte*: his state of complete satisfaction implies an absolute stasis, a timelessness and motionlessness like those of the picture by Turner he figures himself immersed in – it is difficult to imagine how Luke could move on *beyond* that *open* space of completion he has attained. The conclusion of the story, however, places the reader in a similarly open field for interpretation; we can only guess whether Luke will ever wake up and be himself "again after night, after dreams, after / temporary cessation," as the poem on the first page of this chapter hopes.[206]

This open conclusion was precisely one of the faults that Wilbur L. Schramm, editor of *American Prefaces*, found in the story when Williams submitted it for publication; he suggested that the young author present a "clear reason why the main character should stop in Champaign" (qtd. in *Notebooks* 60, n. 98). As I have already mentioned, Williams refused to make any change, maybe because, as he wrote in his diary, he "just love[d]" the story the way it was (51). Like in the case of other stories that are so emotionally close to the author (as we have seen with *Accent*, for instance), there are enough hints subtly interwoven in the text to insinuate an autobiographical transposition of Luke. To begin with, the very protagonist's name may not be capricious since St Luke, patron saint of artists, appears very often as the *alter ego* of writers or painters that include themselves in their work under his name (Rodríguez Domingo).[207]

More indicative is the fact that in June, 1936, Williams joined his comrades Clark Mills and Willie Wharton, both editors of *The Anvil, Magazine of Proletarian Fiction*, in a trip to Chicago to attend the Midwest Writers' Conference (Hale,

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[206] This process is strikingly similar to what Žižek, in a postmodern version of St John of the Cross's *dark night of the soul*, calls an *act*. In the act the subject rejects the Symbolic and is annihilated, eclipsed temporarily. It *fades* (*aphanisis*), and then can be reborn – or maybe not. "It is an act of madness in which one withdraws from the world, risking not only any possible return but more fundamentally what one will return to" (Myers 60). Such is also the fading that the subject of jouissance undergoes (Barthes, *Placer* 16).

[207] Characters named "Luke" appear in two other early pieces, *Suitable Entrances to Springfield or Heaven* and *Candles to the Sun* (1935), where it seems Williams chooses it for its Biblical meaning of "light" (*Candles* 18).

"Proletarian" 17). He had a "sleepless night. Horrible humor. Sitting next to a negro on bus with Clark & Will across the aisle" (*Notebooks* 37; 16 June 1936). The young writer's expectations to meet some receptive editors for his work were frustrated when he found none at the conference. Instead, he discovered that the event "seemed more concerned with politics than literature" and it turned out to be "so exhaustingly dull" that he left just after the first session (*Letters* 87). Utterly disillusioned, Williams traveled back to University City in St. Louis and returned to "the awful screech of trolley wheels" and the stormy atmosphere of his "wretched" family home (*Notebooks* 51, 30 Aug.; 59, 7 Oct. 1936). "Ten Minute Stop" may very well portray the mood and reflections that Tom Williams entertained during his return trip as Luke's and Williams's experiences seem to overlap. Both men feel indignant and powerless after the thwarted expectations of their trip to Chicago, both are reluctant to return to a place they can hardly call home. A couple of weeks after returning from Chicago, Williams would write:

> I live in some kind of a cage – or enchantment – *nothing happens* – I seem unable to take any *action* – just drift along haphazardly from day to day – wondering what will turn up – I can't force myself to do anything ... I've written two short stories lately – one pretty good I now think – "Ten Minute Stop" ... (*Notebooks* 41-2, 5 July 1936)

Luke, who substitutes the confining, numbing bus for an open, sensually satisfying vacant lot, who stops the drift of time making ten minutes last indefinitely, who is able to take definite action and abandon symbolic strictures, looks like an obvious *alter ego* for the disheartened young writer. "Williams never really fell in with prevailing tastes," Robinson explains, "he learned early in his career that 'outsiderhood' was the source of his peculiar strength" (31). He seems to have made Luke reach the same conclusion.

Furthermore, Luke's unexpected tirade against literary establishment can be again tracked down to Williams's state of mind after the Chicago conference. Williams's disenchantment with proletarian literature was more than a tantrum for not having found any editor for his work; literary people now made him "sick at [his]

stomach" (*Notebooks* 59; 7 Oct. 1936). For Williams, the conference's supposed concern on the dreadful menace of Fascism looked quite hypocritical in an America where "revolutionary writers [were] receiving monthly checks of well over a hundred dollars from the Government" (*Letters* 87). There could not be many possibilities of political upheaval stemming from those writers sponsored by the authorities themselves, although they, like the Restoration playwrights that wrote plays about political insurrections, probably "believed a great deal of what they wrote" too (57).

"Ten Minute Stop" proves to be a story that, though deeply ingrained in the literary and cultural scene of its time, almost always shows a destabilizing relationship with the mainstream currents. It is a rich text full of incipient traces of Williams's future works, especially "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer*. Unlike them, to my knowledge "Stop" has not received any critical attention. My previous analysis of "Stop" following the Kristevan model of abjection and *jouissance* reveals its potential as a text of bliss. As such, it permits a *camp* or "homosexual" reading like that Savran proposes for other texts of bliss by Williams such as *Moise* and "Sand" (1936), a story coetaneous to "Stop." When Savran reads the *camp* in "Sand," he stresses "its figuration of an ecstatic and 'timeless' moment … atomiz[ing] language, colors, bodies, words, an identity (a name) like grains of sand or like the silent, dismembering stage directions of *Cat*" – or, we could now add, like the genotext in "Stop" (Savran, *Communists* 158). The homosexual mode of interpellation/reading makes those texts into texts of bliss that narrate a dissolution of the subject, "a process of *desubjectification*, an unbinding and deconstruction of the sovereign subject" (145). Luke's experience as I have described it (focusing on the genotext) involves such a desubjectification, a recovery of the wholeness of the *chora* in a retroactive jouissance that undoes primary abjection, and re-unites subject and abject in stasis, that is, death.

I acknowledge, however, that the general tone of the story seems more positive than what such conclusion suggests: there is also a *straight*, "heterosexual" narrative that articulates relatively orthodox and satisfiable longings" (Savran,

Communists 159). On this straight, phenotextual level, Luke looks like a contented prospective vagrant who deserts his passive life and joyfully locates himself as an outsider, the "fictional surrogacy for the St. Louis-weary Tom, eager to get on the road to fame and to freedom" (Kolin, "Gift" par. 2).[208] "Stop" could be understood then as a still romanticized vision of vagabond life as the alternative to an unbearably oppressing family/society. Even so, portraying Luke as one of the earliest members of the *fugitive kind*, Williams would still be breaking with the literary standards of his time:

> The 1930s had its forced wanderers … Indeed, such "marginal men" became the subject of a literature that has emerged as a special legacy from the period. Such marginality is not desired or accepted voluntarily; life on the road is not romanticized, nor is it a source of any genuine pleasure or special wisdom. It is not a journey that ends in discovery or explanation. (Susman 171)

The key to the conclusion, as I mentioned above, lies *beyond* the text. The phenotext, the level of the realistic plot, points at a positive ending: unlike, those forced wanderers, Luke's stop has actually been a source of genuine pleasure and self-discovery, and nothing makes us think that he will not wake up the following morning and get on the road to freedom. In the genotext, the level of the semiotic drives and bliss, Williams seems more equivocal: we know that the cancellation of opposites, the merging with the (m)Other, demands a very high price, the subject's self. I have insisted throughout this dissertation that "abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)" (Kristeva, *Horror* 15). The processes of abjection that I have explained in other stories, for example "Gift" or "Accent," entail a *temporary* closeness to the abject that effects that death of the ego, followed by a rejection of the abject that re-establishes the self/ego on a more or less firm symbolic ground. Luke's incorporation of the abject is not transitory, though: his "Symbolic suicide" has taken him back to the archaic timelessness before abjection (Myers 60). Thus, it is difficult to predict whether his self will achieve a *resurrection*.

[208] We can even surmise that if Luke is "not one of the actors" he may be, indeed, *the playwright*.

As I turn now to the analysis of "Desire and the Black Masseur," I intend to realize an analogous critical reconsideration of the story considered also as a text of bliss which, like "Stop," remains inevitably equivocal because (at least) two alternate readings are possible. The case with "Desire," and with *Suddenly* too, is nonetheless the opposite to that with "Stop:" most of their criticism follows the phenotext and recognizes a symbolic suicide like Luke's in "Stop." They highlight the use of cannibalism as a trope for the return to the wholeness of the ultimate union with the other, whose side effects are the eradication of desire and the annihilation of self (e.g. Saddik, "Fragmentation" 348).[209] When the return to the *chora* that I have traced in the genotext of other stories surfaces so openly, there might be *something else* lurking in the dark. Consequently, I will try to draw attention to the polyphonic narrative and to the workings of the Semiotic in the genotext to figure out what the real *scandal of jouissance* in "Desire" may be (Barthes, *Placer* 34).[210]

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[209] Gross even mentions that Sebastian and Violet's bond in *Suddenly* makes their world one "in which time seems nonexistent" ("Sublimity" 242).

[210] "El texto de goce surge en [la historia] siempre bajo la forma de un escándalo (de una falta equilibrio)."

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"DESIRE AND THE BLACK MASSEUR"[211]

"Desire and the Black Masseur" (begun 1942, finished 1946) may very likely be Williams's most frequently mentioned short story because of its astounding ending, its almost inexhaustible symbolic interpretations and religious parallelisms, and its controversial handling of a homosexual relationship based on sadomasochism. This tale about Anthony Burns, the masochist white clerk, and the sadist black masseur dangerously breaks with taboos of sex, race, and religion, so it is understandable that its critical reception covers the whole spectrum from open praise to absolute scorn. On the most disapproving extreme, Peden condemns it as an "undigested and indigestible allegory" ("Pilgrimage" 122), and Fedder, after comparing it with D. H. Lawrence's "The Woman Who Rode Away," concludes that Williams's story is just "a sickening record of sadism and masochism which hardly fulfills the author's high-flown allegorical intentions" (43). More receptive to its disturbing content, Spoto considers it "one of [Williams's] bitterest allegories about what people do to each other … a celebration of pain and the mute inevitability of self-sacrifice" (123), and for Wolter, it is "the typical example of Williams's concept of personal and universal guilt in an imperfect, fragmented world and of the corresponding desire for at-one-ment through violence" (223). The most effusive acclaim comes from Draya, who thinks that "this story is one of Williams' most carefully crafted and succeeds as serious, startling fiction" (657).

[211] A shorter version of this chapter has already appeared in Andrés-Cuevas, Carretero-González, and Torres-Zúñiga's "In the Name of Love."

These opinions seem to follow a chronological tendency: the more recent they are, the more appreciative. Not surprisingly, the most insightful analyses come from the more modern field of queer studies, where scholars such as Edward A. Sklepowich or David Savran include this story within the all-encompassing allegory of unspoken homosexual desire that underlies most of Williams's work. Sklepowich examines chronologically the image of the homosexual in Williams's fiction and its evolution from the "mystical to a more social perspective, a personal, if fictional microcosm of the wider cultural demystification of homosexuality" (526). "Desire" corresponds obviously to the former stage, where love and death are still inextricably linked in a parable of the need for human contact beyond cultural constrictions in which "perhaps he [Williams] is intimating that what is fulfilment for the homosexual is actually death to this world with its restrictive social and religious standards" (531).

Savran briefly cites "Desire" as the extreme example of the explosive desire that rises from the encounter of different ethnicities and races (125) – like we have seen in "Big Black" and "Gift" – but his most interesting contribution is his use of its protagonist's feelings in the cinema house to illustrate the *camp* or homosexual mode of interpellation. He builds upon his commentary on the Joy Rio that I have mentioned in the analysis of "Stop," where he divided Williams's texts into a heterosexual surface or *screen* and a homosexual site (orchestra, boxes) for the expression of polymorphous desires. "Desire" opens with the image of Anthony Burns finding refuge in the darkness of a cinema house, where his anxiety is soothed and his body and mind relax. Burns's attitude is peculiar, though:

> He didn't follow the story on the screen but watched the figures. What they said or did was immaterial to him, he cared about only the figures who warmed him as if they were cuddled right next to him in the dark picture house and he loved every one of them but the one with shrill voices. (205)

According to Savran, the story on the screen" that Burns ignores is the equivalent to the heterosexual mode of address that "calls upon a spectator to be attentive to what characters 'said or did,' to plot, narrative continuity, and anecdote, to the larger

structures of desire and meaning that impel Williams's theater." On the other hand, Burns's position in the cinema corresponds to the posture of the reader who detects the homosexual mode of address in Williams "evoked through diegetic prose, stage directions, or visual images," who takes notice of "a detail, an image, a metaphor, or a charged moment of silence …that may be hazardous to the safety and integrity of the desiring subject in the narrative and to the reader who … enjoy[s] danger." This second approach to the text is the instigator of the pleasure and provides access to bliss/jouissance both for "the subjectivities in its [Williams's text] midst and those of the readers and spectators who are (knowingly or inadvertently) hailed into [it]" (Savran, *Communists* 159-60). Unfortunately, Savran does not delve any further in the development of both modes of address/reading in "Desire," and the potentiality of this story as a multilayered text of bliss remains unexplored.

As I mentioned at the end of the last chapter, I think that what makes "Desire" a more complex text and differentiates it from other stories I have dealt with in this dissertation is the following: the desubjectification which Savran (after Barthes) sets at the core of the text of bliss is present in "Desire," but *not* as a part of this homosexual discursive level. The bodily fragmentation of the subject, his split and incompletion effected by an unspeakable desire, the sacrifice of the self for a return to completion – all these appear quite overtly within the plot and narrative continuity that make up the heterosexual mode of reading. The result is that most of the critical analyses of "Desire" (like those I have reviewed in the chapter on Williams as a gothic writer) recognize at first sight issues such as these, which are more difficult to pinpoint in other stories – for example, "Something about Him" or "Stop." "Desire" has almost always been deemed a clear allegory with gothic/grotesque resonances, whereas many other stories by Williams, especially those with biographical inspiration, are treated as realistic narrations, although I have attempted to prove that the gothic allegory of abjection underlies them too.[212] Nonetheless, the overt display in "Desire" of such a

[212] Be it said *in passim* that, however grotesque its characters may seem, the idea for "Desire" probably originated from its author's inspiration in real people: a "sadistic black masseur who had found a willing partner in a frail white masochist" Williams met at the Athletic Club in New Orleans in 1941 (Spoto 90).

desubjectification has not lead to its consideration as a text of bliss. Only Sklepowich acknowledges a experience close to jouissance in "Desire" when he affirms that "Burns suffers violence as a mode of self-knowledge, pleasure, and exaltation" (530). Yet it seems to me that the keyword here that short-circuits the possibility of a *camp* reading of "Desire" is "suffer," or in the more general terms that appear in all criticism, *guilt* and *atonement*.

The usual interpretations of this story depict Anthony Burns as a repressed man who occults his homosexual inclinations and *deliberately seeks* the purification of his depraved instincts. Guided by the sense of guilt that his concealed desire inspires him, he submits to a masochistic self-sacrifice to achieve an agonizing atonement. For instance, Ganz avers that "to him [Williams], Walter [*sic*] Burns is not an individual but a broad symbol of human guilt" (207), and Saddik defines Burns's death as "an escape from the guilty concealment of desire – … a desire which is wrought by guilt and even self-loathing" ("Fragmentation" 350). The main defense for this reading of the story's moral import is the narrator's long aside on the incomplete character of man and our impossibility to cope with the demands of desire.[213] The digression is worth quoting in full due to its intense imagery and aphoristic quality:

> For the sins of this world are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what sufferings must atone for. A wall that has been omitted from a house because the stones were exhausted, a room in a house left unfurnished because the householder's funds were not sufficient – these sorts of incompletions are usually covered up or glossed over by some kind of makeshift arrangement. The nature of man is full of such makeshift arrangements, devised by himself to cover his incompletion. He feels a part of himself to be like a missing wall or a room left unfurnished and he tries as well as he can to make up for it. The use of imagination, resorting to dreams or the loftier purpose of art, is a mask he devises to cover his incompletion. Or violence such as a war, between two men or among a number of nations, is also a blind and senseless compensation for that which is

[213] According to Thompson, Benjamin Nelson was the first (in 1961) to quote this passage as "representative of Williams' philosophy or understanding of the world" (205, note 28).

> not yet formed in human nature. Then there is still another compensation. This one is found in the principle of atonement, the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby clearing one's self of his guilt. This last way was the one that Anthony Burns unconsciously had elected. (206)

Analyses such as Wolter's that consider "Desire" "the *typical* example of Williams's concept of personal and universal guilt" take this excerpt as a transliteration of Williams's own point of view, and are ready to cite his "Foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth*" (1959) as further evidence. In a passage that is often quoted to exemplify his Christian-Calvinist model of morality,[214] Williams states:

> Guilt is universal. I mean a strong sense of guilt. If there exists any area in which a man can rise above his moral condition, imposed upon him at birth and long before birth, by the nature of his breed, then I think it is only a willingness to know it, to face its existence in him, and I think that, at least below the conscious level, we all face it. ("Foreword to *Sweet Bird*" 109)

Thanks to these two selections, critics justify Burns's death as a sacrificial act that purifies, to an extreme degree, his guilt for his homosexual desire and even for the more global "sins of this world:" "the white man, a victim to his repressed instincts, is also, in Williams' view, the redeemer of his race. …His sacrifice atones for the guilt and the aggressions of white and black alike" (Hassan, "Victim" 144).

My point here is not to explore Williams's concept of guilt in depth, but just to problematize the assumption that the former passage as well as that from "Desire" can be taken at face value when attempting to interpret Burns's conduct. For, if we turn to other non-fictional declarations, Williams conveys a rather different opinion on the same issue:

[214] See for instance Bedient (52); Draya (656); Fritscher (15); Haley (ch. 1); Tischler ("The Glass Menagerie" 269).

> I don't believe in "original sin." I don't believe in "guilt." I don't believe in villians [*sic*] or heroes – only right or wrong ways that individuals have taken, not by choice but by necessity or by certain still-uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances, and their antecedents. ("The World I Live In" 91; dated 1957)

> There are very few acts of volition. I don't believe in individual guilt. I don't think people are responsible for what they do. We are products of circumstances that determine what we do. ... I don't believe in individual guilt at all, and sometimes I wonder whether I even believe in collective guilt. (qtd. in Rader 357; dated 1981)

Comprising a time span of almost thirty years, these citations simply attest to the variability of Williams's declarations: they always display enough ambiguity or inconsistency to make us have some reservations before founding any univocal conclusion on only one of them. The same happens with his fictional works: in her "Introduction" to Williams's *The Fugitive Kind* (1937), Hale explains that its protagonist, Terry the gangster, "voices a theme which will recur constantly in Williams: that there is no guilt, that one is a victim of birth and circumstances beyond his control" (xviii). This very vision appeared in Williams's letter to Donald Windham in 1943 – while "Desire" was work in progress (1942-6) – which I quoted in the chapter on psychoanalytical theory. I will recall it now because it is a clear counterexample for the excerpt from "Desire." In that letter, Williams intimates that the "makeshift arrangements" used to cover incompletion are not a mere device that complements a more intrinsic and stable "nature of man;" they are in fact the only components of a man *naturally* fragmented and unstable:

> All of us must sadly face the fact that we are makeshift arrangements. ... And [we are] told to live - and be good and decent and render a good account of ourselves in the world! Naturally we don't. Naturally we have very little integrity, if any at all. Naturally the innermost "I" or "You" is lost in a sea of other disintegrated elements,

> things that can't fit together and that make an eternal war in our natures. (*Letters* 92; 28 Jul. 1943)

The conclusion that Williams reaches after this heartfelt confidence ("It has done me good to write this out, I hope you don't mind," he apologizes to Windham afterwards) is precisely that "nobody can honestly blame you for anything that you are. Blame or guilt is all mistaken and false" (93). Could we then contemplate the possibility that guilt in "Desire" be *all mistaken and false* too? Or, like Kristeva asks about Adam, is Burns "a sinner to begin with, or did he become one of his own 'free will'?" (*Horror* 125).

Burns: neither actor nor martyr[215]

A close reading of the text may cast some doubt on two aspects that have been fundamental to elucidating the issues of guilt and atonement. One is Burns's concealment/repression of desire as the origin of his guilt; the other is his submission of self that atonement demands. As regards the first, the description of Burns at the beginning of the story emphasizes several times that Burns's relation with desire is one of *unawareness*, not concealment: "His was not an inquiring type of mind. He only learned what he was required to learn and about himself he learned nothing. He had no idea of what his real desires were" (206).[216] He lives in absolute ignorance of his own nature and of his desire, which is "clear to us before it is to him" (Vannatta 48). Whereas Ganz thinks that "the story concerns an elaborate, ritual punishment of one who has rejected life, and, more specifically, rejected sexuality" (208), the initial position of Burns is that of an innocent, timid man who has neither rejected nor hidden a sexuality he does not even grasp. His immaturity is also physically visible "in his

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[215] Kristeva titles Chapter 6 in *Power of Horror* "Céline: neither actor nor martyr" (133-9).

[216] Like Hale, Benjamin Nelson extends this quality to the bulk of Williams's stories: "For most of Williams' protagonists there is no choice. They are not responsible for their situations" (174).

face and body [with] the unformed look of a child" and his behavior "like a child in the presence of critical elders" (205).

Furthermore, the narration places Burns within recurring passive structures, for example as passive object or in pseudo-locative expressions (Fowler 159), that emphasize a submissive position even grammatically.[217] He is driven by desire "without intention or effort;" his judgment is *anaesthetized* by a desire that "allows[s] Burns to slip by it" so that, for instance, "without knowing that he was really going, he went to the baths," and once there, "no more action or will on his part was called for" (206-7). Williams models the narrative so that Burns is exempted from taking any active decision, and desire, that undefined intrinsic force, is personified and made the grammatically active participant which provokes the events; indeed, "Desire" is the metonymic substitute for the protagonist already in the story's title. With the affirmation that the only possible posture before desire is to "surrender, to take what comes and ask no questions about it" (208), the narration flash-forwards to Sebastian Venable's existential attitude in *Suddenly*: "[Catharine:] *He! – accepted! – all!* – as – how! – things! – are! ... He thought it unfitting to ever take any action about anything whatsoever! – except to go on doing as something in him directed" (*Suddenly* 145). Although I understand that such submissiveness would not exonerate completely the protagonist from responsibility, it certainly argues against allegations such as Clum's that "Anthony's life becomes devoted to attaining his desire … [and] sought-for compensation" ("Sacrificial Stud" 131); there is neither devotion nor search in his passive existence.

Therefore, Burns does not, at any moment of the story, betray any sign of guiltiness towards a desire that he has not yet discovered – not even after he *does* discover it –, nor does he show any determination to achieve atonement or purification for it. The narrator's aside about this latter is in fact oxymoronic: how could Burns *elect* atonement "unconsciously"? The diegetic temporality and the very masochistic dynamic also counteract the view that Burns resorts to the masseur to atone for a pre-

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[217] Countless examples in the text include: "[his desire] swallowed him up" (206); "a Negro masseur … propelled him onward and … he was led into one of the curtained compartments" (207); "a faraway feeling engulfed him" (208); "the luxurious tiredness made him unable to [move]" (209).

existent desire. The temporal order of the factors is actually reverse: first, Burns submits to (mis)treatment at the baths, and only then does he feel "his first true satisfaction" and "by surprise is [his] desire discovered" (209). This order gives further support for weakening the view of Burns as a (sexual) martyr (Clum, "Sacrificial Stud" 144; Haley ch. 2): martyrs or saints punish themselves because of their emerging sexual excitement, while masochists chastise themselves so that they can later have the orgasm *without punishment*. "With the masochist the discontent is wiped out by the sexual gratification, with the ascetic or saint the sexual excitement by the discontent or by the self-punishment" (Theodor 49). What remains at the end in the case of the masochist is sexual gratification, not expiation. For Burns the suffering at hands of the masseur is indeed the realization of his most intimate need, it is pleasurable and guiltless, and as a consequence its redeeming potential vanishes. Just like Shannon's voluptuary make-believe crucifixion in *The Night of the Iguana* "turns upon a self-indulgent and hence ineffective penance" (Mac Nicholas 593), Burns as a martyr who *enjoys* martyrdom makes a poor sacrificial archetype.

In addition, there remains the issue of the "surrender of self to violent treatment" in atonement (206), a relinquishment which we could consider somewhat parallel to the desubjectification that the story is said to relate. The question may be whether Burns *does have a self* to surrender as the story begins. On the first page he is described as just a tiny element in an overwhelming world that "swallow[s] him up:" he goes unnoticed in a family of fifteen children, at the largest class at high school and in the largest wholesale company of the city, and his essential innocence makes him accept this fate of dissolving into the hugeness of life. His refuge in the cinema resembles a withdrawal into a protective womb where whatever little individuality he possesses numbs and liquefies:

> He loved to sit in the back rows of the movies where the darkness absorbed him gently so that he was like a particle of food dissolving in a big hot mouth. The cinema licked at his mind with a tender, flickering tongue that all but lulled him to sleep. Yes, a big motherly Nannie of a dog could not have licked him better or given him sweeter repose when he went there after work. His mouth would fall open at the

> movies and saliva would accumulate in it and dribble out the sides of it and all his being would relax so utterly that all the prickles and tightenings of a whole day's anxiety would be lifted away. (205)

For Burns, the cinema is not a place for encounters with an other, as is the case with Pablo Gonzalez in "Joy Rio" or Krupper in "Hard Candy," because there he recedes into selflessness by focusing on the *screen*, the contrivance for heterosexual normativity. Yet his attitude towards the film is peculiar too, as I have mentioned above in the commentary on Savran. Burns does not follow the film's plot but just watches the figures and listens to the (semiotic) quality of their voices – he likes them only if they are not "shrill." Burns finds in the cinema house a surrogate for the maternal *chora*, a space of dispossession of mind and body, not yet inhabited by others or governed by a symbolic law (both story line and language are unimportant), where orality is the interacting mode. Unconcerned by language and mute until he meets the masseur, Burns is revealed to be not yet a subject – not a speaking subject, nor even a *desiring* subject, as explained above – who cannot suffer from guilt or self-loathing as Saddik maintains, since he does not have a desire to feel guilty about nor even a self to loathe.

It is also noteworthy that, like in the case of Sebastian Venable and many other Williamsian characters,[218] Anthony Burns holds a striking resemblance with his patron saint, St Anthony the Abbot, as he appears in Flaubert's work *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*.[219] Although Bak has traced the origin of the protagonist's name to "the

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[218] Gilbert Debusscher in "Tennessee Williams as hagiographer" explains the ironic correspondences between different characters and their patron saint in the plays, including Sebastian Venable and St. Sebastian in *Suddenly*, Shannon and St. Lawrence in *Iguana*, and Christopher Flanders and St. Christopher in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1962). The reference to St. Lawrence makes Shannon another victim of implicit cannibalism too, as while the saint was burnt to death he mocked his executioners saying he was ready to be eaten; this cannibalistic connotation is retained in the parallelism between Shannon and the iguana, which is trapped by the boys to eat it (454).

[219] During hard-up times in New Orleans, Williams mentioned in his *Notebooks* the "Sacred Heart of Jesus. St. Anthony. St. Raymond" (255; 27 Oct. 1941). Bradham Thornton explains in a note that "St. Anthony's devotion to the poor is remembered in the charity of St Anthony Bread, which is devoted to

last black slave to be returned (despite public outcry) to the South under the Fugitive Slave Law in 1854" ("Religious Acts" 131), Burns shares with his saintly namesake his most characteristic features: the wish of an impossible return to the stasis previous to life, the desire to enter sleep and cancel the eternal return of time, the attitude of pure passivity towards the images that surround and tempt him (Foucault, Prólogo 25, 31).[220] More importantly, in the story of St. Anthony there is also a hint at the ineffective redeeming value of intentional martyrdom for, as his ex-disciple Hilarion reproaches the hermit, that is a hypocritical posture that looks for isolation in order to give oneself up to concupiscence. So, Hilarion reminds him, the Elvira Council (300 a.C. approximately) condemned the *deliberate search for martyrdom*, something that has a bearing on the understanding of our Anthony too (Flaubert 79, 216 note 48).[221]

The *hidden polemic*: from atonement to at-one-ment

Thus, we can consider that the existence of guilt and the intention of atonement in "Desire" may be indeed mistaken, or at least, misleading. In spite of other textual traces, what really leads the reader and the critic to those conclusions is the (in)famous

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the relief of the starving and the needy" (254; note 429) – our Anthony Burns will turn himself into *bread* too in an ironic Eucharist, as we will see. Kristeva also mentions Anthony the Abbot as the inventor of confession, as he preached to his brethren: "Let everyone of us take note of and write down his acts and feelings, as if we were to apprise other people of them;" with confession, atonement is transformed into discourse "in order to topple sin into the Other … the One" (*Horror* 130).

[220] "Antonio desea el imposible regreso a la inmovilidad previa a la vida: toda su existencia, de este modo, volvería a entrar en el sueño, reencontraría su inocencia, pero se despertaría nuevamente en el susurro de las fuentes y de las bestias, en el centelleo de las estrellas. Ser otro, ser todos los otros y que todo recomience idénticamente, remontar al principio del tiempo para que se anule el círculo de los retornos, ésta es la cima de la tentación" (25); "Todas las formas visibles habían sido conjuradas; pero habían vuelto con fuerza, poniendo a prueba al santo. ... Le rodeaban, le atacaban por todas partes y, ... frente a ellas, el santo sólo podía ser pura pasividad" (31).

[221] "Hipócrita que se hunde en la soledad para entregarse mejor al desenfreno de su concupiscencia!" (79); "'Elvira', en España, en el emplazamiento actual de Granada, el lugar de un concilio que se llevó a cabo hacia el año 300, y que condenó la búsqueda del martirio" (216).

narratorial intrusion about “the sins of this world,” whose *authority*, so to speak, remains uncontested. However, I wonder why this insertion has never been regarded in the same way as those Savran analyses in the later story “Hard Candy” (which I have summarized at the end of the chapter on Williams as a gothic writer). Savran interprets Williams’s metanarrative intrusions as a wink to the reader for the detection of different levels in the narration, each of them offering a divergent version of Mr. Krupper’s death (*Communists* 113-4). Although he goes against some of Clum’s ideas, Savran is here closely following the latter’s earlier analysis of homophobic discourse in “Hard Candy,” as he also affirms that

> Williams’s rejoinder both shows his sympathy and understanding of his audience’s sensibilities and prejudices, and plays with those prejudices ... writ[ing] about the forbidden in a sympathetic, even subversive way. That mystery, however, is also clothed in harsh authorial judgment, which places the narrator in a superior position to his central character and allies him with the “average reader’s” moral judgment. (Clum, “Something Cloudy” 166)

As I see it, the intrusion in “Desire” can also be considered one of Williams’s first attempts at that type of doubly-voiced or *heteroglossic* narration (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 324). Although it is not strictly metanarrative, it stands out from the rest of the text as the words of a distanced, judgmental narrator that will shortly thereafter address the reader directly: “You would suppose that the mere suggestion of such a thing would frighten him out of his wits, but …” (206). The tone of the aside strikes us as unexpectedly proverbial, changing the narration into the present tense as if claiming universal truth: “For the sins of the world are really only its partialities … and these are what sufferings must atone for.” Suddenly, sin and suffering arrive on scene in a cataphoric warning about what is going to happen – actually, what “*must*” happen – in the story; one should be aware that such generic statements are often “blatantly ironic” (Fowler 132). A certain inconsistency is also perceptible in the paragraph, for example as I said above about the oxymoron, or as regards the following: despite the fact that all of the “makeshift arrangements” fulfill the same role, only in the last option,

surmounting incompletion by submitting oneself to violent treatment by others, there appears the added need to *clean oneself of one's guilt*. Imagination, art, or violence are used to conceal the incompletion (i.e they function as *fetishes*), but they do not involve any reference to guilt or shame; only the compensation that Burns *unconsciously selects* does.

Like in "Hard Candy," in "Desire" Williams seems to be playing with his audience's prejudices, "anticipating and affirming their homophobic reaction" before Burn's stupefying act and providing them with a more *reasonable* explanation for it (Clum, "Something Cloudy" 177). This type of discourse corresponds to what Bakhtin calls *hidden polemic*:

> Any speech that is servile or overblown, any speech that is determined beforehand not to be itself, any speech replete with reservations, concessions, loopholes and so on. Such speech seems to cringe in the presence, or at the presentiment of, some other person's statement, reply, objection. (qtd. in Lodge 37)

Hidden polemic is an "active kind of ambivalent word" that proves the dialogism of discourse and the dismantling of any notion of univocity or objectivity in writing, Kristeva states ("Word, Dialogue" 44). I think that the narrator in "Desire" is an example of this discourse, through which Williams finds a compromise between two overlapping though contrasting narratives of Burns's story – the *straight* and the *camp* readings, in Savran's terminology.

On the one hand, the narrator's introduction of "sin," "atonement," and "guilt" on this narrative level (but *not* on the diegetic level of Burns's own feelings or intentions) sets the basis for the analysis of the protagonist's conduct from a more or less orthodox, *straight* perspective, that interprets Burns's actions as a quest of redemption for his misdoings. Foreboding his audience's response, Williams makes the story more *palatable* by superposing a Christian pattern of sacrifice as an ideological framework that orientates Burns's willing offering of his life to a higher, redeeming aim. For it is only through the audience's participation that Burn's death can be read as an expiation whose universal appeal ("the sins of *this world*") verges on martyrdom:

> The audience is crucial to the success of the act. Without the belief of the audience, both within the narrative … and without …, the saint would quite simply not be a saint. Sanctification as an embodied performance of 'truth' relies entirely upon the presence and complicity of the spectator. (S. Oliver 122)

Burns's story, constructed as a performance of atonement, results then in a text that, despite its unquestionably scandalous topic, still remains compliant with the socio-symbolic order that frames it. The theory of atonement as developed by Anselm of Canterbury (the basis for most of our modern conceptions of it) involves the "necessary assumption" of "a belief in universal moral order," which is breached by human actions and "requires a counterbalancing act of restitution which maintains that order" and provides "satisfaction" to God (Gunton, sec. 3). When "completion" and "satisfaction" are mentioned after Burns's death, which takes place next to a church celebrating Our Lord's "poem of death on the cross," it seems that the moral order recovers its balance and Burns's act acquires the full significance of Christ's "passion" (210-1).

On the other hand, there can be an alternative *camp* reading of "Desire" which, disregarding the claims of guilt and atonement, finds in this story the overt description of the process of *coincidentia oppositorum* that I have been tracing on the genotextual level of other stories. Everything that has been metaphorically or allegorically suggested in the other texts becomes here literal: a deconstructive combination of opposites, the fragmentation of the body and the breaching of its boundaries,[222] the integration with the abject. What Burns will find in the masseur is not atonement but *at-one-ment*,[223] the realization of the fantasy that has underlain this dissertation: a dissolution into *the Real Thing*, the fusion of opposites, and the

[222] "Burns left the baths one day with two broken ribs," and later on "h]s right leg was fractured" (210).

[223] This morphological division originates in Anselm of Canterbury, who coined the word (according to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, it is the only Christian theological term coined in English). This etymology permits a clear pun on words that Thompson uses to signify the "ultimate reconciliation with a universal order" and the "struggle to attain wholeness [that] informs all of Williams' characterization" – *at-one-ment* would then be the motivating force of all his characters (10).

jouissance that the *chora* involves. Yet the subversive force of this reading resides in the twist that the final scene effects on the process of desubjectification that this fusion with the (m)Other entails. For Burns does not resort to masochistic treatment to shake off and atone for a self he does not yet possess; like Luke in “Stop,” he does not have an identity when the story begins. Quite the reverse (and this is the unpalatable *scandal* of this text of bliss): thanks to his relation with the black masseur, Burns will (quite literally too) *find himself in the (m)Other*, and will eventually attain a subjectification that the *straight*, symbolic order cannot but be oblivious to.

A dangerous reading of Desire

The characterization and the description of the relationship of the two protagonists of “Desire” displays an overabundance of dichotomies and parallelisms from which almost unlimited critical commentaries can spring. “Williams blurs the lines of liaison as three binaries – parent/child, teacher/student, and master/slave – exist both independently and interchangeably throughout the text,” Peters affirms (par. 22), but the binaries are more than three. To begin with, Burns and the masseur are physical nemeses: the former, white, small, underdeveloped, childlike, passive; the latter, black, gigantic, powerfully physical, experienced, active. Like the boxer in “Stop” and other black characters, the black masseur is a nameless object of a fetishistic fascination; yet Burns is also regarded with certain interest by the masseur, who “had already sensed an unusual s*omething about* [italics added] his latest patron” (207).

This reveals a fundamental difference between this story and the others I have analyzed: in “Desire” we can read about Burns’s and the masseur’s thoughts, that is, *both* participants are open to narrative omniscience. Unlike “Something about Him” or “Gift,” for instance, where a subject faces an other/abject whose consciousness remains mysteriously impervious, “Desire” portrays Burns’s *and* the masseur’s feelings toward each other, which seems to me a proper narrative symptom of their ambivalent position in the story as both *subjects* and *objects* of desire. As the binaries that Peters noticed above, the subject/object positions are taken by both protagonists

interchangeably throughout the text.[224] The narrative focus on Burns at the onset places him logically as the subject that will find the object or "instrument" of his desire in the black masseur (206), for whom Peters "discovers no individual identity …, only a series of racialized sexual stereotypes" that constitute him as a typical Williamsian dark fetish (par. 24). Yet we have seen that Burns begins the story without an individual identity either, and that he does not experience desire until he passively submits to the masseur's pounding – that is, until he becomes the *object* of the masseur's desire.[225] So, like in the case of Big Black, we should also consider the pair masseur-subject and Burns-object: initially, the masseur possesses a much clearer knowledge of his desire than Burns ("he loved to have their white skin prone beneath him, to bring his fist or the palm of his hand down hard on its passive surface"), and he takes the role of subject in objectifying the little, passive man to satisfy his own desire – "in the white-collar clerk he had located all that he longed for" (209).

Thus, as Peters concedes, the story redeems its racism when "the objectified 'Other' attains subjectivity through desire" (par. 25); the dark fetish also has a fetish himself, Burns and the masseur are *objets a* of each other's desire. There is a perfect reciprocity in their relation so that, when thinking of the other, both react in the same way: the masseur's "lips would slacken into a dreamy smile," and Burns "would smile and his work-stiffened fingers would loosen" (209). Their final fusion confers completion and satisfaction to both, who can then be fittingly labeled *perverts* in the Lacanian sense, subjects who make themselves the instrument of the Other's *jouissance* (Lacan, "Subversión del Sujeto" 804).[226]

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[224] The issue of the active/passive, subject/object positions as regards sexual acts between men has been extensively dealt with by Michel Foucault in the context of classic Greece. As he explains, Plato subverted the traditional erotic model that clearly dichotomized both positions by sustaining that the one who is loved, as long as he is in relation with the truth through Eros, cannot remain passive and must take an active subject position too (*Sexualidad II*, 267-9).

[225] As I will shortly explain, the final scene offers a last reversal of the subject-object pair, and Burns eventually occupies the subject position at the time of his death – he ends up being *subjectivized*, not desubjectivized as usual readings of the story aver.

[226] "No abordaremos aquí la perversión en la medida en que apenas acentúa la función del deseo en el hombre, en cuanto que instituye la dominancia, en el sitio privilegiado del goce, del objeto *a* del

The events in “Desire” take place in three settings whose evident parallelisms suggest a certain progression along the story. I have already mentioned the opening description of Burns in the cinema, where he feels *absorbed by darkness* “like a particle of food dissolving in a big hot mouth” (205). The second setting, the Turkish baths, is again like “the inside of a tremendous mouth,” and the alcohol that the black man uses for massage “bit[es] at him [Burns] like insects” (208). All these references to orality anticipate the final scene of the masseur’s devouring of Burns. Also, Burns finds at the pounding hands of the masseur the same effect that he had obtained in the cinema, although what was formerly a metaphorical liquefaction turns now into a more literal, orgasmic fluid: he experiences a “feeling of pleasure … swept as a liquid from either end of his body,” and a “luxurious tiredness” until “a knot [comes] loose in his loins and release[s] a warm flow” (208-9). Therefore, we can notice that the story evolves towards a collapse of opposites also on the linguistic level, as the metaphorical expressions of the first scene become *factual* events in the following parts. For instance, the narrator personifies Burns’s desire and relates how it “exuded a sort of anesthetizing vapor all through Burns’ nerves … allowing Burns to slip by it” (207). That will be Burns’s exact experience in the baths, where he will feel “drugged and all but dissolved in this burning white vapor” (208). His desire “was so much too big for him … as a coat that should have been cut into ten smaller sizes” (206) – or like the white sheet the masseur gives to Burns, who “envelop[s] himself in the enormous coarse fabric” (208). Another example is Burns’s impression when he undresses in the baths, when he feels “*as if* [italics added]... in the clasp of someone standing behind him, manipulating” him (208); a few minutes later, this feeling becomes more than real when the masseur *manipulates* his prone body.

The concluding “orgiastic and surreal” scene of “Desire” depicts the climax of Burns and the masseur’s symbiotic relationship (Hassan, “Victim” 144), as well as the absolute *demetaphorization* of discourse – in fact, I think the moment is not quite *sur*real but much *too* Real, as the tropes of orality that have appeared throughout the

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fantasma que sustituye al A. ... Solo nuestra fórmula de la fantasía permite hacer aparecer que el sujeto aquí se hace instrumento del goce del Otro.”

text literalize. The final setting carries on some parallelisms of the earlier scenes although now the action is located in two sites, the room where Burns and the masseur meet and a church across the street. These places are not only opposite each other spatially; they are also *thematically* opposed, in a disagreement similar to that I have analyzed in the case of the "hidden polemic." Williams relates how, after the manager discovers the brutality of the treatment, the masseur and Burns have to abandon the baths and move to "a room in the town's Negro section," a "death chamber" where "all windows were open …[and t]he curtains blew out like thirsty little white tongues." "Across from the room," Williams explains, "there was a church whose open windows spilled out the mounting exhortations of a preacher." As we read that it is the end of the Lenten season, the religious analogies of Burns's *passion* become more explicit (210). Actually, *too* explicit, quite contrary to Williams's oblique use of Christian and hagiographic references "intended to draw the readers' and spectators' attention away from the surface of the play" (Debusscher, "Hagiographer" 455). Like the sudden mentions of "guilt" and "atonement" in the narrator's discourse, this deliberate reference to the church invites an ironic reading as it seems to uphold the evocation of a Christ-like sacrifice on Burns's part, which otherwise may not be so obvious. It does keep the readers' attention on the surface of the text and away from some details that may turn doubtful the suggested resemblance between what is happening in the "death chamber" and what is happening in the church where "the fiery poem of death on the cross [is] repeated" (210).

In the church everybody is "involved in a massive atonement," a hyperbolic ceremony of exposed wounds and slashed arteries under the guidance of a preacher whose dictate is "Suffer, suffer, suffer!" Williams presents a ritual whereby each individual has surrendered to the communal frenzy and vanished into a crowd that engulfs and overpowers them:

> The preacher was not fully conscious of what he wanted nor were the listeners, groaning and writhing before him. … The congregation could not remain in the building but tumbled out on the street in a crazed procession with clothes torn open.
>
> The sins of the world are all forgiven! they shouted! (210-1).

All this is reminiscent of Burns's equivalent inclinations at the beginning of the story, when he found protection as a particle immersed in the mass (a fifteen-child family, the largest class, the largest company), and just let his consciousness go at the cinema. The same desubjectification that he showed then is now symbolized by the flock of parishioners, where any individuality is estranged into the collective *mass*, the body of the church.[227]

However, that is not Burns's situation anymore. At this moment he has grown a sense of his individual body, which was initially anaesthetized, dissolved, and which later Burns feels "from either end of [it]" (208). He has experienced the reality of his desire, which does not consist in mere suffering, but in a painful pleasure, pleasure *in* pain: jouissance (Homer 89).[228] As Sklepowich affirms, he has attained a measure of "self-knowledge, pleasure, and exaltation" through "interaction with another" (530). Burns has, in sum, acquired a self that he did not have at the beginning, and he demonstrates it for the first (and last) time when he *actively,* somewhat authoritatively, tells the masseur to abide by his last *will*:[229]

> The Negro masseur leaned over his still breathing victim.
> Burns was whispering something.
> The black giant nodded.

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[227] The fact that the church is in the "town's Negro section" makes us presume an all-black congregation, which has inspired affirmations like Thomas P. Adler's that in Williams, "occasionally, the Christian liturgy is inverted in a kind of black mass culminating in cannibalism that signifies a predatory world, as in 'Desire and the Black Masseur' and *Suddenly Last Supper*" (qtd. in Bak, "Religious Acts" 126). Bak builds on this and elaborates a comparison of the black mass in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and the final ceremonies in both Williamsian texts (129 *ff.*). However, as I see it, the *mass* was already implicit in Burns's description at the beginning, regardless of skin color.

[228] Williams did in fact declare his disapproval of gratuitous sadism (qtd. in Jennings 244).

[229] Robley Evans (1992) maintains that "Burns, in identifying with his punisher, is rendered speechless by his wish for self-punishment" and interprets this last sentence as a rhetorical questions (142). Besides the fact that Burns was already speechless or language-less before meeting the masseur (e.g. in the cinema), the role of his last sentence is, I think, more than mere rhetoric: its illocutionary force makes it almost a command.

> *You know what you have to do now?* [italics added] the victim asked him. The black giant nodded.
>
> He picked up the body, which barely held together, and placed it gently on a clean-swept table.
>
> The giant began to devour the body of Burns.
>
> It took him twenty-four hours to eat the splintered bones clean. (211)

Despite the emphasis upon the resemblance between this cannibal rite of at-one-ment with the masseur and the Eucharistic communion (*common-union*) by eating Christ's transubstantiated body and blood, the outcome is quite different: Christ's banquet aims at reinforcing unity and obedience among his congregation (Kilgour 15), whereas the fulfillment of Burns's desire "mark[s] a personal and psychological triumph" (Peters par. 27). The final awakening of his dormant subjectivity turns his ordeal into a celebration of individuality and "*jouissance* that breaks the symbolic chain, the taboo, the mastery" of herd-like compliance and repression (Kristeva, "Chinese Women" 154).

Like in other stories, a *camp* reading of "Desire" shows that the proximity to the abject has effected a crisis of subjectivity in Burns, although, instead of shaking the foundations of a previous inner self, the abject has (as in the case of primary abjection) helped him construct a feeble sense of individuality. Rather paradoxically, it has *separated* him from the mass by incorporating him into the *mass*eur, a similarly separate outsider.[230] At the end, "Burns' surrender to his Negro masseur is rather paradoxically an active turning to a passive attitude" (Fritscher, "Query" 5). Like Luke in "Stop," Burns ends up realizing a *definite action* by counteracting abjection (that is, by not separating from the abject), abandoning the Symbolic, and fusing with the (m)Other. Like Luke too, Burns does not seem to have enough centrifugal force and once he has "entered the orbit of passion" of the masseur (209), he plummets into it. Other similarities with Luke's jouissance at the conclusion of "Stop" include the

[230] The closing lines of the story depict him moving on to "another city," finding "once more" a job as a masseur, waiting for "another" patron like Burns – the masseur is equally estranged from any community, a roaming outsider.

atmosphere of simultaneous inflammation and water ("a house had caught fire on the block in back of the church … [but] powerful hoses were useless"), the textual fragmentation (shorter sentences, like in the excerpt above) at the moment of the bodily fragmentation, and the "quiet" and "air of completion" after the peak of violence. "Yes, it is perfect," thinks the masseur, "it is now completed!" (211).

This remark represents the ultimate religious one-liner: "a parody of Christ's last words on the cross, 'Consumatum est'," as Clum rightly points out ("Sacrificial Stud" 132), but not part of "Burns's final thoughts before death," as Bak assumes ("Religious Acts" 137). It is on the masseur's cannibalistic lips that Christ's words are placed; it is the masseur's "satisfaction," not God's, that Burns's at-one-ment has accomplished. That the masseur acts as a surrogate for God may not be a far-fetched assumption, given other textual hints. "The giant loved Burns, and Burns *adored* the giant" (italics added; 209); this is a commentary that, Peters believes, "must, in the end, be read straight" despite the narrator's satirical edge (par. 27). The initial description of the masseur has also certain god-like resonances: being the absolute authority in "a tiny world of their own," the black masseurs acquire mythical proportions as their hands "might just as easily have seized bolts of lightning and thrown them back at the clouds" (207). This image of a fabulous, Zeus-defying black deity recurs in several of Williams's poems in the volume *Androgyne, Mon Amour* (1977); for instance, although without reference to skin color, the deeply symbolist "A Liturgy of Roses" offers an explanation for the masseur's power to return the "bolts of lightning" to the clouds, which acts for Williams as a sexual metaphor for fecundation:

> A power that draws the light back to its source,
> until you let go and all of those doors floating open
> ……………………………
> And it is announced, Yes, now as before, now is the moment,
> yes, now
>
> As it was in the vagina, yes, now, as it was in the testicles
> and the prostrate, as it was in the sperm and the ova,

and as it ever shall be, world without end till we end. (*Collected Poems* 117)[231]

In "Dark Arm, Hanging Over the Edge of Infinity," the protagonist is actually a black *manipulator* upon whom the order of the universe depends:

Dark arm, hanging over the edge of infinity,
what have you let go of,
what are your fingers dangling emptily towards?

This is the moment of continued momentum
but will not continue forever.
The spheres will relax,
will suddenly drop out of heaven,
unless you resume your skillful [*sic*] manipulation.

Sleeping Negro, wake up,
bestir your dark copper limbs,
the rhythm is broken, there is danger in heaven!
…………………………
Dreaming ball-player,
drinker of the warm white milk of space,
prostrated Negro juggler,
skillful [*sic*] manipulator of a million glittering spheres,
Wake up, wake up! (*Collected Poems* 87-8)

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[231] The connection between "Desire" and this poem seems to run deeper, as the latter contains a scene of dismemberment reminiscent of that in the story yet worded in heterosexual terms: "To cut your sweet love's body, mutilating more and more / … Dragging her purified body into the bathroom and dismembering / her purified body in the bathtub, yes, dismembering / … and depositing parts of it / Into those three salty branches that water the Autumn rose island" (*Collected Poems* 118). These and other details (such as the poetic voice's passage "through rooms … curved as wombs" and "concealed appurtenances" that remind of the baths' cubicles, or the parodic use of a religious term for its title) would require a deeper exploration of the connections between story and poem, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present analysis.

A similar demiurgic black figure reappears in "Stones are Thrown:" "by an immense Black Man in the circular meadows of heaven, / … can it be that he's attended by subordinate beings / who do not dare to suggest / that He might limit these acts of an apparent caprice?" (123).

Yet, if we follow Savran's advice and take notice of *an image hazardous to the reader who enjoys danger* (Savran, *Communists* 160), we may see a more concrete divine being personified by the masseur in the last scene. Tenderly *bearing* Burns,[232] holding his emaciated body, "which barely held together," the masseur enacts a grotesque *Mater Dolorosa* to Burns's ironic Christ (211). The maternal as the foundation of the abject is not missing from the masseur's characterization, although the allusions here are quite understated. "In the sack, in which he had carried the bones, [the masseur] dropped his belongings, a neat blue suit to conceal his dangerous body, some buttons of pearl and a picture of Anthony Burns as a child of seven," Williams tells us (211). This rather particular collection of personal effects can be enlightened with reference to Williams's poems again. The last items appear as the title of the poem "Photograph and Pearls" as the two symbols of the possessive yet assuaging bond of a homosexual man and his mother:

> When I think of how the light touches him,
> no more flatteringly in the photograph on his mother's mantel
> than I have seen it upon his living face
> ……………………………
> I catch myself, for a split second, persuaded
> that it might after all have been somewhat more satisfactory,
> finally, not to have torn with such unmannerly hunger
> at the coarse fibres [*sic*] of experience
> but to have accepted, as he did,
> the pacifying dominion of a mother's pearls … (*Collected Poems* 24)

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[232] "The black giant tenderly lifted his drowsy partner and *bore* [italics added] him away to a room in the town's Negro section;" "those bare white bones … were placed in a sack and *borne* [italics added] to the end of a car line" (210-1).

Years later, Catharine will also refer to a "string of pearls" as the symbolic equivalent to the "*umbilical* cord" that keeps Sebastian and Violet joint in *Suddenly* (138; original italics). As I have also mentioned in "Something about Him," the "umbilical cord of the symbolic," the foreclosed element that the Symbolic misses but always attempts to capture, is the Real, the realm of the (m)Other that the masseur represents (Alan Sheridan, qtd. in McAfee 34). In addition, the masseur's first possession, his "neat blue suit," resonates with echoes of Blanche's jacket in "Della Robbia blue. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures" (*Streetcar* 135).[233]

Furthermore, the analysis of this story as a sample (indeed, as *the* sample) of Williams's gothic narrative also endows the masseur with maternal connotations. In *Love and Death in the American Novel* Fiedler describes

> an archetypal relationship which also haunts the American psyche: two lonely men, one dark-skinned, one white … They have forsaken all others for the sake of the austere, almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love which binds them to each other and to the world of nature which they have preferred to civilization. (Qtd. in Sarotte 93)

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[233] Another similitude with *Streetcar* – whose composition Williams begun at the same time he was finishing "Desire" (*Notebooks* 439)– is the circumstances of Burns's demise: "placed in a sack and borne to the end of a car line … and dropped … under the lake's quiet surface" (211), whereas Blanche desires to be "buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard" into the ocean (*Streetcar* 135). Blanche's burial in the ocean conjures up a more upbeat note than the deadly connotations of the lake's still waters, although both can be considered burials *á la* Hart Crane. Crane committed suicide jumping off a boat in the Caribbean, and Williams himself wanted to be (so to speak) *buried* near him in the form that Blanche describes (*Memoirs* 117). Moreover, Debusscher's study of the pervasive influence of Crane on Williams's writing suggests a further link between "Desire" and Crane. Debusscher points at the cannibalistic references in Williams's short play *Steps Must Be Gentle* (ca. 1947, published 1980) as the tryout for *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). Yet we may as well consider "Desire" (written 1942-6) a tryout for *Steps* itself, as the latter, an imaginary dialogue between Crane and his mother, reformulates some of the themes I have explained in this chapter: "in *Steps* in a similarly startling equation of Communion with a cannibalistic version of fellatio… Grace [Crane's mother] exclaims there: 'Feed you with *what*, Hart? … the – sex of sailors picked up in Brooklyn, dockside bars, as if they were the thin bits of bread that symbolized Christ's flesh at Holy Communion, and their seed as if it were His – blood!" (Debusscher, "Hart Crane" 469).

Sarotte counts "Desire" as an example of this black-and-white archetype of the homosexual couple (103), but the dark-skinned partner (Nigger Jim is the epitome) is in addition, "to be sure, … a substitute for wife or mother presumably waiting in the green heart of nature: the natural man, the good companion, pagan and unashamed" (Fiedler, qtd. in Sarotte 93).[234] This maternal implication is underscored by the story's thematic link with later texts that depict a mother-son relationship, most obviously *Suddenly*,[235] but also *Steps Must be Gentle* (see note 233 above). Or maybe, "Ten Blocks on the Camino Real," which Williams finished at the same time as "Desire" (between the months of February and March 1946) and whose hero Kilroy is reborn after lying "across [the Madrecita's] knees, in the attitude of Michelangelo's Pieta" (72).

Although decidedly hazardous, the image of the masseur as *Mater Dolorosa* is consistent with the characterization of the abject as archaic mother that I have been developing, and evokes a similar subversive use of religious symbolism as that pointed out in the analysis of "Gift." It turns our attention towards the "permanent lining" that Christian religion could not do without but cannot admit openly: "Every God, even

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[234] Fiedler deals with the American ideal of male companionship in "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" on which Mark Royden Winchell bases his reading of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to conclude that Williams subverts the American myth "not just by making its homoeroticism explicit but by domesticating it" in the figures of the plantation's owners, Straw and Ochello (711). For Michael Bibler, the subversion is not that radical because these "patriarchs" still represent the elite white male authority that has traditionally managed Southern plantations. Therefore, their homosexual relation can remain unchallenged as long as the other hierarchies on which it depends (race, class, and gender with regard to subordinate women) are maintained (394-5). Hence, Bibler doubts about the possibility of a white patriarch having a homosexual relationship with a black man: "if such a relationship were to incorporate that same tenderness as does Straw and Ochello's love, it would represent a very serious threat to the plantation because it would effectively elevate the black man above his 'place' and make him an equal to his white lover" (395, note 10). We have seen that, in a less social/public context than the plantation, the relationship between Burns and the masseur does involve the love and tenderness that effectively subverts established hierarchies.

[235] "The 'almost incestuous' female relationship Gross points out, between Sebastian and Violet, parallels the relationship between Jesus and his mother so poignantly illustrated in the Pieta" (Haley, ch. 2).

including the God of the Word, relies on a mother Goddess" (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 176). Kristeva's study of the Virgin Mother describes the need for such a god-like feminine figure in terms comparable both with the retrospective creation of the Thing (holder of *jouissance*), and with Burns's evolution from his speechlessness in the cinema to his progressive subjectivization at the masseur's hands:

> If language is powerless to locate myself for and state myself to the other, I assume … that there is someone who makes up for that weakness. Someone, of either sex, *before* the id speaks, before language, who might make me be by means of borders, separations, vertigos. In asserting that "in the beginning was the Word", Christians must have found such a postulate sufficiently hard to believe and … added its compensation, its permanent lining: the maternal receptacle, purified as it might be by the virginal fantasy. ("Stabat Mater" 176)

The manifestation of the Virgin as the *Mater Dolorosa* signifies, on the one hand, such "reassuring wrapping in the proverbial mirage of the mother – a love" like that of the masseur for Burns ("The giant *loved* Burns"). On the other, it represents "joy and even a kind of triumph" over death, she expects Christ's resurrection (Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" 175, 176). We may then wonder whether there is such promise of negation of death after Burns's purifying demise – "on a clean-swept table," surrounded by "the purity of the flame," and leaving only "clean" remains (211).

In any case, I think "Desire" heralds the same message that Gross reads in *Suddenly*, namely, that "breaking and consumption need not be horrifying and sublime, but can be loving and salvific" (Gross 247). Consequently, we could say that this reading of "Desire" has "put the maternal into the paternal," as Jarraway proposed in his study of the gothic (67). Like in *Suddenly*, the result is that, "hidden beneath the rhetoric of Gothic horror," there "lies an image that Williams can … construe as benignant" (Gross 247). The ability to see the more *benignant image* – one that postulates the openness towards desire, the acknowledgement of the abject, and the plasticity of identity – depends on whether the ambivalence or *androgyny* of our gaze matches Williams's own, as Timpane explained. The commentary by Timpane which I

included in the analysis of "Big Black" seems quite fitting here too. "Desire" is a paradigmatic example of that "*something about* [italics added] the [Williamsian] *text* … as if some agent somewhere had anticipated my expectations and reactions … and moved to frustrated them;" still, in that frustration resides "the pleasure of being shown you are wrong" (Timpane 751-2). The last paragraph in the story, ignored by all critics, wraps it up by showing us that we may be wrong in thinking that the gothic horror and atonement belong exclusively to Burns and the masseur's grotesque world, for

> meantime, slowly, with barely a thought of so doing, the earth's whole population twisted and writhed beneath the manipulation of night's black finders and the white ones of day, with skeletons splintered and flesh reduced to pulp, as out of this problem, the answer, perfection, was slowly evolved through torture. (212)

Williams's story "bring[s] all men into communion, joined not by race or creed but rather by sin and desire," Bak affirms ("Religious Acts" 130); maybe we should be made aware that we all are potential *Anthonies* that should wake up from a lethargy in which we are equally fractured but do not *realize* our jouissance.[236]

All this makes "Desire" into a "queer Christian allegor[y]" indeed, which "reproduce[s] the religious imperative only to expose it" (Bak, "Religious Acts"

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[236] It may seem Paul J. Hurley approaches a similar conclusion, when he affirms: "Like Anthony Burns, many men, Williams intimates, have become automatons living mechanically in a society they have never dared to question; nevertheless, they suffer from feelings of loneliness and anxiety, insecurities which they feel can only be removed by increased conformity, by becoming more a part of the group" (53-4). Nevertheless, for him the masseur is a representative of that society, "a powerful 'presence,' just as God, Society, Religion," and Burns is a negative example of the ugliness of society, not an ecstatic figure (55, note 6). Incidentally, I notice in Hurley's paper, written in 1964, a certain anti-Communist reek in other affirmations such as "none of the playwright's stories reveals more vividly his refusal to be affirmative, to preach the joys of submission to authority" (53), "religion … manipulated in the past the same sense of guilt which society now takes advantage of" (54), or "society is now God, Williams suggests" (55). In a way, this would establish a further link between "Desire" and "Ten Minute Stop," with its rebuff of proletarian literati.

123).[237] What this exposure bares is the need for a recuperation of the maternal that the religious imperative, as the Law of the Father-God, forecloses. As a conclusion, I will now go into a short discussion about the relation of abjection to religion in the Kristevan paradigm, which will help explain a number of details about "Desire." For, when Kristeva analyzes the Lacanian Real, religion and jouissance overlap as parts of a continuum:

> Who can prevent this *jouissance*, this truth, and replace it with the plausibility of reasonable discourse? ... The old weapon, the proven balm for use against this sort of wound: religion. The latter is a discourse that creates plausibility through fictional devices (projection, introjection, characters, etc.), and economizes on the signifier as truth and/or as death: castration, and rejection or refuse. ("The True-Real" 236)

Kristeva opposes here clearly the two discourses that I have analyzed in "Desire:" the discourse of jouissance as representative of the Semiotic, and the discourse of religion, as the representative of the Symbolic – a symbolic order that is post-Oedipal ("castration"), but also post-abjection ("rejection"). Unlike Freud or Lacan who situate the advent of the superego and the religious conscience after Oedipus, for Kristeva the place that religion will come to occupy in subjectivity is already profiled in the earliest stage of the subject, as a third position that appears after the symbiotic bond son-mother is broken by primary abjection. It is on the occupancy of that position that the success of the process of abjection depends.

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[237] Bak, who acknowledges that "the true Other here, then, is not the homosexual, nor the black, but the Christian, whose hegemonic role in American society has replaced innocence as our birthright with guilt," nevertheless objects: "Or so Williams would have us believe" (133). He mainly focuses on the use of racial stereotypes, which "indeed runs counter to Williams's public support of Civil Rights and interracial relations (sexual and otherwise) throughout the late Sixties and Seventies and allows us to differentiate author from narrator and recognize thematic exposition" (127). Despite his acknowledgment of this differentiation author/narrator, Bak still conflates both and characters when he affirms: "Anthony Burns and Sebastian Venable project a respectable front while struggling internally with the inconsistencies between their spiritual leanings and the homosexuality it repudiates in them" (123). Burns is far from struggling internally, as we have seen.

At the moment of primary abjection, the child can accomplish a successful separation from its mother, introjecting the feeling of emptiness that ensues and transforming her into an object of desire, not of phobia, only if it diverts its need for identification and union to what Kristeva, quoting Freud, names "father of individual prehistory" ("Freud" 244). McAfee summarizes this scenario thus:

> In the imaginary realm, while the child is beginning to lose or "negate" its mother, it also begins to incorporate or identify with an imaginary father, a phantasm of the logic of identifying one thing with another. If the structure works successfully, the child will complete its separation from its mother while at the same time learning to use words to name what he has lost – which will allow him to call out to her when he needs her. (67)

Kristeva introduces this "imaginary father," "father of individual prehistory," or pre-Oedipal father in her *Histoires d'amour* (1983) as a move away from the idealization of the pre-Oedipal mother, the absolute protagonist of *Powers of Horror*. We can understand the father of individual prehistory more easily if we consider it as an approximate equivalent of the mother's desire for the phallus in the Lacanian paradigm: whereas Lacan focuses on the child's aspiration to take the place of the phallus and be the object of the mother's desire, Kristeva's imaginary father offers to the child the same possibility by means of identification.[238] Thus, the role of imaginary father is fundamental for the constitution of a future ego in the mirror stage and, most importantly, paves the way for the development of the child's future ability to speak and to love. The possibility of moving away from primeval maternal satisfaction – that

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[238] There are nevertheless important differences between them. The phallus is initially an imaginary (visual) object, like every other figuration of *objet a* is, and it "then functions symbolically through the recognition that desire cannot be satisfied and that as an object it will remain beyond reach" (Homer 98). Kristeva's paternal instance is called "imaginary" because it belongs to the Imaginary, understood as the pre-Oedipal developmental phase; yet it is actually a pre-object or, as McAfee puts it, a "phantasm," a mere position to be occupied by the child when it separates itself from the mother. Kristeva defines it as not "an object, but as … the very possibility of the perception, distinction and differentiation that allows one to see" ("Freud" 253).

is, the separation from the mother's body and the introjection of maternal loss – hinges upon the primary identification of the child with the imaginary father. This relationship to the father is not based on the same physical dependence that binds the child to the mother if it wants its survival needs to be satisfied; it is a transcendent relation that for Freud originates the psychic agency superego and the ego ideal (*Ego and Id* 39). Therefore, it already points to the Symbolic where the subject will become a signifier for another signifier:

> [Freud] dissociates idealization (and with it the amatory relationship) from the bodily exchange between mother and child, and he introduces the Third Party as a condition of psychic life, to the extent that it is a loving life. If love stems from narcissistic idealization, it has nothing to do with the protective wrapping over skin and sphincters that maternal care provides for the baby. Worse yet, if that protection continues, if the mother 'clings' to her offspring… neither love nor psychic life will ever hatch from such an egg. The loving mother, different from the caring and clinging mother, is someone who has an object of desire; beyond that, she has an Other with relation to whom the child will serve as go-between. She will love her child with respect to that Other, and it is through a discourse aimed at that Third Party that the child will be set up as 'loved' for the mother. … It is in the eyes of a Third Party that the baby the mother speaks to becomes a he … The bodily exchange of maternal fondness may take on the imaginary burden of representing love in its most characteristic form. Nevertheless, without the maternal 'diversion' towards a Third Party, the bodily exchange is abjection or devouring …phobic or borderline ... (Kristeva, "Freud" 250-1)

The whole process can be summarized as follows: thanks to the presence of that third party, when the mother is abjected she can be turned into a "loving mother," or a *desiring subject*; the subject meanwhile transfers its identification to the pre-objectal father, who is already the locus of the Freudian superego, the Lacanian Symbolic, and its representatives: language and religion. Both participants are essential in the process of constitution of the subject's earliest narcissistic ego in the oral stage – "To each ego its object, to each superego its abject," Kristeva itemizes (*Horror* 2).

Let me emphasize here a term that has appeared several times so far: *introjection*. Identification with the pre-objectal father helps the subject *introject* the feeling of emptiness that the separation of abjection opens up and prepares it for the acquisition of language:

> Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want, and the aggressivity that accompanies it, by *saying*. … oral activity, which produces the oral signifier, coincides with the theme of devouring … *any* verbalizing activity, whether or not it names a phobic object related to orality, is an attempt to introject the incorporated items.[239] (Kristeva, *Horror* 41)

Kristeva differentiates here between *introjection* and *incorporation* – their relationship with "the theme of devouring," the central theme in "Desire," makes a brief explanation of these two terms necessary. She takes these notions from the work of two Freudian psychoanalysts, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. They elaborated Sandor Ferenczi's concept of *introjection* as "a constant process of acquisition and assimilation, the active expansion of our potential to accommodate our own emerging desires and feelings as well as the events and influences of the external world" (Rand 14). By way of psychic introjection, the subject is able to accept the loss of the mother as well as the many other subsequent losses and mishaps it will encounter along its existence.

"While the introjection of desires puts an end to objectal dependency, incorporation of the object creates or reinforces imaginal ties and hence dependency," Torok explains (114). Unlike introjection, she defines *incorporation* as a fantasy in which the loss of the object is *not* accepted. Instead, the subject counteracts the loss by imagining it can *subsume the object into itself* in an attempt "to transform the world rather than inflict injury on the subject" (Abraham and Torok, "Mourning" 125). It does not risk the stability of its ego by changing it in reaction to the lack of the object,

[239] The "phobic object" that Kristeva mentions here is a post-Oedipal equivalent for the abject: "verbalization has always been confronted with the 'ab-ject' that the phobic object is" (*Horror* 41).

but denies the very fact of having had any loss whatsoever and pretends the object, the mother, the past, still remains alive. As a consequence, when the *language of incorporation* appears in adult age – for example, in dreams – it points back to an inability to introject the lack of (or separation from) the mother, an inability that can derive, as we have seen, from the lack of a father of individual pre-history which whom the child can identify. When this archaic symbolic party fails, the Imaginary takes its place:

> Because our mouth is unable to say certain words… we fantasize… that we are actually taking into our mouth the unnameable, the object itself. As the empty mouth calls out in vain to be filled with introjective speech, it reverts to being the food-craving mouth it was prior to the acquisition of speech. … The crucial move away from introjection ... to incorporation is made when *words* fail to fill the subject's void and hence an imaginary thing is inserted into the mouth in their place. … In the face of both the urgency and the impossibility of performing one type of mouth-work – speaking to someone about what we have lost – another type of mouth-work is utilized, one that is imaginary and equipped to deny the very existence of the entire problem. (Abraham and Torok, "Mourning" 128-9)

Thus, the unspeakable turns into the edible and prompts the language of incorporation, which "*states* the desire to introject" and founds the rhetoric of myths such as that of "the fruit of knowledge whose ingestion by the first couple conferred on it genital sexuality," and traditions such as cannibalistic rites and the Eucharist (Torok 115). Since incorporation destroys the process that makes metaphors possible, "the act of putting the original oral void into words" – i.e. introjection –, the language of incorporation is made up of "a new figure of speech… namely the figure of the active destruction of representation:" *antimetaphor*, some examples of which are coprophagy and "obscenities encouraging incest" (Abraham and Torok 132). Since Kristeva defines the child's relationship to the pre-Oedipal father as "a *metaphorical identification*" (Moi, "Freud and Love" 239), it seems rather adequate that this language of incorporation, inspired by his lack, be made up of *antimetaphors* .

If we return to "Desire" after this digression, several corollaries arise. We may remember that what the polyphonic narration of this story does is superpose the discourse of religion on a diegesis where (we can now say) that third paternal position is missing – there is only Burns and the masseur, (not-yet-)self and (m)Other, subject and abject. As the scene of the cinema makes clear, Burns has not moved away from primeval maternal satisfaction yet: he has not *introjected* maternal loss but aspires to its restoration, he has not learnt to use words to name her – no wonder the masseur remains *nameless* the whole story. The absence of an imaginary father with whom to identify and on whom to sustain himself in the symbolic order is what triggers Burns's fantasies of *oral incorporation*. Moreover, since without that third party primary abjection cannot succeed, he will not eventually reject/abject the masseur as protagonists in other stories do, but he fuses with him in a bodily exchange of devouring and jouissance. As Bedient puts it, "the erosion of theological support for the symbolic order – the disappearance of the consolatory myth" leaves us "prey to the mother-Thing … that makes love implode into death, death into love" (49).

"Always the pagan," like Clum calls him ("Sacrificial Stud" 132), Williams tinges this process with a revolutionary shade that suggests that such absence or dysfunctionality of the paternal/religious party may not after all be so critical, that the separation from the maternal should not be that severe since it still deserves a place in our processes of subjectivation and signification. That is what is revealed by the *camp* reading of "Desire," which underlines the existence of a subversive discourse of jouissance under the regulated discourse of Christian guilt and redemption, as well as brings to light the "characteriological polymorphism" that accrues in the figure of the masseur as dark sexual pervert, as pagan deity, as maternal figure, as the supreme gothic other – in a word, as abject (Jarraway 67). The conclusions of this reading run counter to Kristeva's affirmation above that "if that protection continues, if the mother 'clings' to her offspring … neither love nor psychic life will ever hatch from such an egg" (Kristeva, "Freud" 250). There is *love* in "Desire" – actually, the use of that word is an exception to the rare usage of this verb in Williams's fiction. There is psychic life for Burns at the end too: he demands the fulfillment of his last will, whereas before he

had not even had a will of his own. So, paraphrasing Savran,[240] the textual pleasure that the discovery of Burns's jouissance and subjectivization attains is coupled with a desubjectification or deconstruction of a sovereign subject, in this case the "readers who are (knowingly or inadvertently) hailed into this text of bliss" (Savran, *Communists* 161).

In addition, the linguistic consequences of the failure of the religious party are exemplary in "Desire." Given that the existence of the imaginary father grounds the logic of metaphor, without that third party, language is not metaphorical anymore but Real: hence the progressive demetaphorization that I have traced in this story. Desire is not *like* a hunger; oral incorporation subsumes both. Orgasm is not a *petit mort*; it becomes death itself. When "the logic of identifying one thing with another" fails (McAfee 67), the two positional signifiers cannot be swapped; the dispositional background swallows up both. Peden, who finds no bliss in the story, criticized it "because Williams makes no effort to bridge the gap between the specific framework of character, incident, time and place, and the allegorical, symbolic, or mythic" ("Pilgrimage" 122). Quite the reverse, I think: the gap is in fact bridged, the symbol becomes actual incident, the realistic character an allegory, and the whole story itself becomes abject; that is why he finds it "undigested and indigestible."

[240] "I propose … taking Williams at his word and examining the revolution 'implicit' in his work though an analysis of how *textual pleasure* [Barthes] is coupled with a process of *desubjectification,* an unbinding and deconstruction of the sovereign subject" (*Communists* 145).

13

BEYOND ABJECTION: OTHER TEXTS

> The modern, unstable and empty subject, [Kristeva] argues, ought not to be fixed and stabilized, but to be turned into a work in progress.
>
> Toril Moi (Introduction 14)

> Humanity is just a work in progress.
>
> The Gypsy to Kilroy, *Camino Real* (203)

This dissertation has attempted to revalorize a number of early stories that go mostly unacknowledged in Williams criticism but which set the tone and topic of many of his later works. I have followed Barthes's advice not to devour them, but to chew and scrutinize them meticulously in order to lay bare their perverse images, their narrative techniques, and the hermeneutical potential that Kristeva's postmodern psychoanalysis offers to their analysis. Once the validity of this approach has been demonstrated, it is now possible to broaden its application to other stories that have been excluded from this study due to limit constraints. For, in choosing these particular texts, I have tried to prove the presence of the dynamics of abjection and the crisis of identity in those stories where, in fact, they are *least* conspicuous. Other stories that have inspired this dissertation feature a reworking of these themes although, nevertheless, they have never been assessed in relation to each other or to a more comprehensive framework.

For example, in "The Malediction" (1945), we meet Lucio, a childlike character for whom interpersonal exchange always bears the hazard of self-destruction, it "“may set off a kind of explosion. The skin of his body … may seem to be split down

the seams, releasing his spirit" (147). His work at a factory leaves him "drained out … feeling empty;" "all his blood flowed out … so that he scarcely had strength to remain on his feet" (150, 154). He manages to refill that leaking body thanks to the nocturnal encounters with his landlady, whose "body stuffed full of honey-sweet popular songs" he unstops "like a ten-gallon jug … before supper" (154). The cannibalistic tinges are reciprocal: "her mouth was wet, the heat of her bosom engulfed him" every night (153). Á la Burns, Lucio returns to the safety of the maternal as represented by the full corporeality of the landlady and by the comfort of selflessness that his pet, a cat named Nitchevo, inspires him. She exudes "something liquid and warm in the air like the womb of the mother remembered a long way off" (159), and when Lucio watches her

> his mind smoothed out. The tights knots of anxiety loosened and were absorbed. … Her form grew in size and the rest of the room dwindled and receded. It seemed to him, then, that they were of equal dimensions. He was a cat like Nitchevo … (152)

She is the physical embodiment of "a natural, predestined order … a denial of the many threatening elements of chance" and, especially, of time: "Nitchevo, being a cat, existed in only one sliding moment of time: that moment was good" (156).

However, when chance deprives Lucio of his symbolic props – his job, the letters he writes to his jailed brother – he discovers that such selflessness only leads to death. He actually becomes, like he wished, "not conscious of fear nor self-pity nor even regret anymore," and acts "instinctively" (160). Yet he admits that he now has "no name, no mother, no dreams" – which equates *no present, no past, no future* (159). As his turning into an unconscious creature signifies death for him, the cat Nitchevo becomes more *human* and that means death too. She discovers the unavoidable scourges of humanity: "Loneliness – yes. Hunger. Bewilderment. Pain." Her little body cannot contain "*hold* any more" affliction; her eyes, "full to the amber brims," want to close "on what they had *gathered*" (161). They let themselves be swept away by the river in one more reenactment of Christ's passion: Nitchevo "claw[s] his shoulder and arm in a moment of doubt . *My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?* Then the

ecstasy passed and her faith returned" (162). God, nevertheless, offers no answer, even if He is ubiquitous in the story. He is embodied by a visionary drunkard that introduces himself: "*I'm God Almighty!*" (155). For Nitchevo, her own personal divinity is her owner, a reassuringly present God figure that provides for and protects her, representing "the quality of infinite mercy" (156). After losing her for some days, Lucio suddenly finds her when "once more and for the last time in his life a great and merciful thing: an act of God" takes place (160). It is tempting to look beyond this third personification of God towards the purposeful workings of the writer that bestows a last solace to his doomed character. Even at the final moment it is the cat that acquires a Christ-like quality. If everybody can be God, even a simple cat, then God is probably, like Nitchevo, "nothing."[241]

The story of Oliver Winemiller, the crippled ex-boxer/hustler in "One Arm" (1945), has also echoes of the type of identity crisis I have studied. The injury of his bodily fitness after losing his arm in a car accident means the collapse of his personal integrity, and he is not able to find an alternative to adapt himself psychologically to his new impaired condition. He cultivates a "cold and absolute insularity behind which has lain the ruined city of the crippled champion. Within those battlements had been little or nothing to put up a fight for survival" (182). He becomes what Kristeva calls "a fortified castle:" "an ego, wounded to the point of annulment, barricaded and untouchable, that cowers somewhere, nowhere" (*Horror* 46-7). It is this emotional isolation, his indifference towards others, towards himself, and even "to weather," that makes him "look about for destruction" in the first place (175-6). It is not his homosexual encounters but his assumed position as a mere object for sale, a "commodity," that estranges his behavior from himself: he acts "for no reason that was afterward sure to him", "hardly [with] any effort." There is only one occasion on which Oliver trespasses this emotional blockade: "to his own astonishment, … [he] suddenly revolt[s]" towards the acts that he has been paid to perform at a yacht party, and kills one of the guests (176-7).

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[241] Nitchevo is the equivalent in Latin alphabet of the Cyrillic "Ничего," which means "nothing" in Russian.

After undergoing this revolt and being taken to prison, he experiences a paradoxical case: whereas *outside* he had been trapped *within* the battlements of that spiritual "ruined city" of himself, now, *inside* jail, in a setting of extreme physical confinement, he encounters the possibility to get *out* of his emotional barricade. In Williams's words, "the instrument of this process" of revivification in Oliver "became the letters" that his old clients send to him after discovering the doom (death sentence) that awaits their ephemeral lover (179).[242] His ex-clients' "sorrows poured onto paper like water from broken dams," and Oliver's "sentences gathered momentum as springs that clear out a channel and … began to flow out almost expressively" (179-80). As Kristeva explains, "letting current flow into such a 'fortified castle' amounts to causing desire to rise" (*Horror* 46). Therefore, Oliver experiences a progressive reanimation in which the manifestation of primeval drives takes him back to an infantile stage of "autoerotic sensations" and semiotic manifestations (182). For, in the flow of letter exchanges, it is the semiotic aspect of language that acquires a greater signification: he includes the "idioms of the underworld," "exclamatory punctuation," drawings. Even Williams inserts his only illustration in the whole corpus of stories to be able to faithfully signify what Oliver expresses in his letters. Moreover, Oliver constantly includes "the cartoon symbol of laughter" in its letters, especially when mentioning the approaching moment of sitting on the chair. That "heavily drawn HA-HA" signals the recession of his utter indifference and the resurgence of growing feelings of disquiet before his approaching execution: "setting that [laughter] down on paper was what gave him most relief, for it had the feel of the boiling intensity in him" (180). Oliver's apocalyptic laughter, "bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened" by the eruption of sex and death (Kristeva, *Horror* 206), his contact with the Semiotic, his recovery of the "rainbows of the flesh" (182), turn him into a Queer Other thoroughly *abjectable*, like his final encounter with a priest/subject demonstrates.[243]

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[242] It seems thus difficult to agree with Vannatta's consideration that it is the loss of the arm that makes Oliver reconsider his position in the world and become more sensitive to himself and others (47).

[243] The end of the story encapsulates the encounter subject/abject when a young priest comes to offer Oliver spiritual comfort and sees his own (sexual) identity waver before the Apollonian boy. The episode of the encounter of Oliver and the priest seems an initial version of the later hyperbolic sadistic

The tropes of orality that have appeared already in the earliest stories ("Gift" and "Big Black") will be a constant source for allegorical subtexts that point at the underlying struggle with pre-Oedipal issues such as aggressivity, dependency, and hierarchy (Granofsky 64-5). "Hunger – hungers – desire" is "the operative principle" not only in the case of homosexual liaisons (Clum, "Sacrificial Stud" 133), nor in extreme examples such as "Desire," but in almost every type of personal relationship described in his work. For example, the correlation between the use of food and the use of sex appears in an oblique way or as a minor motif in "In Memory of an Aristocrat" (1940). Its protagonist, the painter-whore Irene, is a girl "built for comfort" to whom the narrator and his friend resort to satisfy their hunger (82). Nonetheless, each of them will find the fulfillment of just one of the primeval appetites: while Irene and his friend engage in a quarrel that ends in a passionate sexual intercourse, the narrator – probably Williams's own voice – helps himself to Irene's *stew*, which in fact amounts to almost the same if we consider one of the secondary meanings of that term.[244] The act of eating coincides in duration with the act of love. so that when the lovers consume their passion on the bed, "the pot of stew was almost entirely exhausted" (84).

"The Dark Room" (1940) deals with the anomalous conduct of a girl who has remained locked in her room for six months, naked in the dark, waiting for the reviving visits of an already married ex-boyfriend. The social worker that demands an explanation for such behavior to the girl's mother learns that the mother listlessly allows such clandestine meetings because they are the only occasion upon which the girl remains so calmed that she is able to eat:

[Social worker] "You mean she doesn't take regular meals?"

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relation in "Desire:" in small, closed and hot compartments, either the cell or the bath cubicle, the abject Other, "fixed in his orbit" (178), attracts the passive member of the couple – "[the priest] appeared to himself to be surrendering to an outside power" (183). Also, reminiscent of Bak about "Desire," Summers believes that the religious connotations of "One Arm" advocate a kind of counterreligion to Christianity based on the possibility of "salvation and resurrection" during life on earth through "sexual sharing" (qtd. in Wolter 226).

[244] *Stew*: Whorehouse. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*.

> [Mother] "Not regular. Just what he brings her. … When he don't [*sic*] come around she takes on something awful. The folks upstairs complain about it sometimes. But when he comes she's better. She stops making noise. And he brings her something to eat every time and she eats whatever he brings her." (96)

What they do in the darkness of the room remains unsaid, but in a previous and homonymous play, included in Williams's awarded collection of one-act plays *American Blues* (1948), there are clearer references to the girl being pregnant from her visitor, who then not only fulfills her nutritive need but evidently also her sexual hunger.

Not only in the short stories has the trade or demand of gastronomic favors sexual undertones. One of the final scenes of the controversial film *Baby Doll* (1957) shows the intruder Silva Vacarro *feeds* Baby Doll under her husband's very eyes, both sharing the same piece of bread soaked in broth – "pot licker," a typically Black dish (Hughes 278) – in a scene full of laughs and moans of satisfaction. Adultery, miscegenation, and even incest combine in this scene, as along the film we can also observe Vacarro adopting a child-like character, substituting the suddenly grown-up girl in the crib she used to sleep in or playing with the hobby horse, and later declaring himself "anxious to try those eggs Birmingham" that Archie Lee, Baby Doll's husband, could not taste. He embodies thus the promise of the child that the old husband would not be able to engender – as Archie Lee's visit to the doctor's suggests his impotence. Archie Lee's problem, as his own wife reveals to him, is that he has "bi[tten] off more [he] could chew:" he actually suffers from heartburn even *before* eating anything in the dinner scene described above. It is little surprise then that the movie was denounced as "revolting", "possibly the dirtiest American-made motion picture that has ever been legally exhibited" (Savran 120-121).

Williams continued to use orality as a trope for social relations throughout his career. "Man Bring This Up Road" (1953) resembles "Gift" in its depiction of a young man, Jimmy Dobyne, who turns to an older woman in search of (financial) support symbolized in gastronomic terms. If the Italian woman resembled a catfish, the wealthy old art patroness Mrs. Flora Goforth is a predatory marine bird, living in an

Italian retreat that looks like an inaccessible nest – "three Easter-egg-colored villas perched on a sea cliff" (347) – and wearing "a halter strap … made of fish net … with two long dangling *tails*" (italics added), a phallic sign of androgynous power (355). Mrs. Goforth's maliciousness will keep the ravenously hungry Jimmy on the brink of fainting, offering him nothing to eat but black coffee and making advances that he is unable to reply. When helpless Jimmy starts crying ("my God, yes, he was bawling *like a child!*"), and in contrast with Mrs. Goforth's former predatory character, "some other person seemed to move into her body and take possession of her." She now takes "the sobbing young man … gingerly in her arms" and embraces his head "carefully to her bosom, as if it might break against her *like a bird's egg*" (italics added; 356-7). Like in "Gift," the eventual identification of protagonist, child, and egg points again to an abortive end for the story in which neither Flora nor Jimmy achieve the fulfillment of their desire.

Twenty years later "A Recluse and His Guest" (1970) depicts a similar culinary relationship like "The Dark Room" but with a gender reversal. The isolated recluse is a man that only leaves his house just "now and then to buy necessary provisions" (457). This hermit is the only hope for a young woman that arrives in his town and looks for an unmarried man who might take her in. After she unexpectedly convinces him to let her live with him, Williams uses culinary imagery to illustrate her attempts to convince this solitary man to open up and enjoy life fully. She insists "to buy a lively young hen that would soon give them eggs" and "a she-goat that gave them milk" (459). They progressively establish a kind of emotional relationship in which her meals seem to become the main instrument for defrosting the recluse's feelings: "She plucked [a goose] and stuffed and cooked it, and the meal was delicious and they smiled at each other, shyly" (460). But, once she gets him to go out from his seclusion, Klaus becomes frightened again by the perils of life and returns to his refuge, rejecting Nevrika and her food, which, he thinks now, must have been seasoned with "poisonous spices" (460).

In the semi-autobiographic story "The Mattress by the Tomato Patch" (1953), orality and androgyny combine in a more optimistic re-creation of the Italian woman in "Gift." The story depicts the goings-on of Olga Kredova's hotel in

California, a state that "makes you a healthy animal, anaesthetizing the troublesome little soul" (*Letters* 91; Jul. 1943).[245] Olga is such a healthy creature, a "virtual earth goddess" which again is described by means of food and animal imagery (Vannatta 71), but which has lost the abject quality that marked her in "Gift." Olga is a goddess of pleasure, and plans her sexual dates like one more item on her menu. Her prospects for any day include "a hot barbecue and a cold beer for lunch …, a good movie, ... some tamales with chili and two or three bottles of Carta Blanca" and, on the bus back home, "a good seat-companion near the back" with whom she will get off at the Palisades Park and enjoy one of those fleeting affairs that "burst into prodigal flower" (364). Two things make Olga into an exceptional creature. One is that "time is no problem to her" (363). She laughs it off, "ag[ing] at leisure and lap[ping] up life with the tongue of a female bull" (367), as if she were the feminine equivalent to the god Dionysus, usually represented under the image of a bull (Frazer 452). The other is her philosophy: "everything that goes on is known and accepted" without contempt, disgust, or fury (366): the goings-on in her hotel, couples that come and go after a night of pleasure, the residual cigarette stubs and contraceptives, the damages to beds and tables, quarrels and music. Specially remarkable is her innocent acceptance of the acts of the bodily drama, from the sexual encounters in her rooms to others of more eschatological quality, as the narrator explains:

> Sometimes while we are talking, she will go in my bathroom and continue the conversation with the door wide open and her seated figure in full view, looking out at me with the cloudlessly candid eyes of a child who has not yet learned that some things are meant to be private. (361)

This acceptance changes her usual "neither friendly nor hostile" indifference towards her impotent, cuckolded husband into a compassionate attitude when "he has a cramp in the bowels that doubles him up" due to his chronic intestinal trouble. She helps him

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[245] "Zola the Landlady" was the real-life landlady depicted in one of Williams's letters to Donald Windham during his work at Metro Goldwin Mayer in 1943 (as the story also mentions) (*Letters* 105; 20 Sept. 1943).

to the bathroom, "utter[ing] good-humored 'phews' and wave her cigarette at the stench of his anguish, sometimes extending a cup to cup his forehead. And if he bleeds and collapses … she'll pick him up and carry him back to bed" (365). She certainly combines the features that Williams most admired: "I can understand the tenderness of woman and the lust and libido of the male, which are, unfortunately, too seldom combined in women. That's why I seek out the androgynous, so I can get both" (qtd. in Jennings 229).

In Olga's good-natured, androgynous acceptance we begin to discern the possibility of defeating the "Earnies of the world," the *earnest* ones who resent any non-normative behavior (366). There is one more story where Williams *seeks out the androgynous* and whose generally upbeat tone would suggest a certain reconciliation with the abject and an acknowledgment of its revolutionary quality. "Two on a Party" (1952) heralds already in its title the attainment of that impossibility this dissertation has been tracing: it relates a two-in-one-ness, two people are able to join each other without mutual destruction. Cora is an uncommon woman, she has "none of that desire to manage and dominate which is a typically American perversion the female nature" (289).[246] Her passivity borders selflessness: she takes no decision, living "like a big piece of seaweed washing this way and that way" (289). Yet that very Oriental attitude towards life endows her with a fitness for survival, a toughness that makes her "able to absorb" the hostilities of life (243).[247] When Billy, a homosexual writer, joins her in her outlaw existence, they form a deviant *coincidentia oppositorum*: he, "slight" and "very blond," and she, "a good deal darker" and "more heavily built," look good together in the mirrors of the bars they go cruising, their common objective (284). Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde (2010) has recently analyzed how Billy and Cora's fugitive existence subverts the frontier formula by relocating geographical boundaries as sexual boundaries and simultaneously reversing its expectations in a counter-discourse that defies the "grand récits," the master narratives of America: moving east instead of west, the white man is beaten up by a motorcycle driver nicknamed "the

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[246] It is interesting to notice phonetic (semiotic) parallelism between the names of the heroines in Williams's stories: Flora, Olga, Cora (we can add Rosa from *The Rose Tattoo*). The open vowels may denote the openness of those women that defy social constrictions.

[247] "I look. I absorb. I go on" is Miriam's motto in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969).

Indian," and the white woman vanquishes the Puritan ideal ("the errand in the wilderness") in her figuration as the Whore of Babylon riding a scarlet beast – a '47 Buick convertible. The story of this androgynous party of "a female lush and a fairy that travel together" and disturb the borders of American identity also features a narrative technique that makes it stand out from the rest (302). It easily oscillates between the consciousness of both protagonists – it starts narrating from Billy's point of view, then changes to Cora's, while the narrative voice intervenes at times in a fluid dialogue with its reader:

> Sometimes Billy would wonder. Why do we do it?
>
> We're lonely people, she said, I guess it's as simple as that…
>
> But nothing is ever quite so simple as it appears when you're comfortably loaded.
>
> Take this occasion, for instance.
>
> Billy and Cora are travelling by motor. (294)

Moreover, the narrative tense evolves along the story and projects it into the future, making the Party into the symbol not of a "makeshift arrangement" but of the possibility of a permanent flight from uniformization into supple and nomadic identities.[248] The narratorial intrusion quoted above marks the change of tense from the past with which the story commences into the present of the episode with the motorbike driver, and the last page opens the narration into timelessness by predicting that "one morning the phone will ring … [and] off they go" into the continuous tense – "shuttling about the Dixie circuit, in spring going back to Manhattan, two birds flying together … addressing room service … spilling a little [coffee] on the bedclothes and saying, Oh, honey, excuse me, ha ha!" (302). Two in one, Billy and Cora's relationship extends timelessly, cannot "safely be framed in language," and is based on "a respect for each other" (301, 292) – certainly a utopia within the whole of Williams's fiction,

[248] "The only form of civilization may be migration, a nomadism based on the strange ability some people possess of never identifying with 'themselves' or 'here' or 'now'. The power to be always finding other places without losing their minds" (Kristeva, qtd. in West-Pavlov 84).

and so "Williams [was] so powerfully allured to 'Two on a Party' and simultaneously so disturbed about its subversive potential," like the subject in contemplation of the androgynous abject (Aguilera Linde, "Wilderness" 42).

Therefore, it is still necessary to reconsider Williams's short stories from a diachronic perspective in order to study how the relationship self/other changes along his career, especially if we consider the change of attitude presented in the play *The Night of the Iguana*, a text of cannibalistic and pagan connotations like those that open and close my analysis ("Gift" and "Desire"). I mentioned in the first chapters that Thompson considered *Iguana* a turning point in Williams's career, in which he eventually recognizes that dualities are not to be reconciled into unity and completion, but that "salvation depends on accepting and enduring the particular limitations of one's inherently incomplete nature" (153). In my opinion, Shannon's *dark night of the soul* in *Iguana* is a further development of the progression through a death of the ego to an agonizing, narcissistic *rebirth* that these stories of abjection portray. Indeed, reading *Iguana* within the discourse of abjection renders a quite pertinent explanation for the ending that some critics like Siegel have considered optimistic but somewhat unsatisfactory (128). Although an exhaustive analysis of *Iguana* exceeds my purposes here, there are several details throughout the play that match the analytical discourse I have been employing and encourage a reconsideration of this play.

The usual question about *Iguana* is: why does Shannon stay with Maxine instead of joining the tender and honest Hannah, who is "a complete ... human being," "a reconciliation of masculine and feminine polarities" (Gulshan Rai Kataria, qtd. in Siegel 127)? In his choosing Maxine over the complete, androgynous Hannah, I think we can intuit the separation of the subject from the whole (m)Other that Hannah, "a reconciliation of … polarities" or *coincidentia oppositorum*, embodies. Her name, a palindrome, already evokes a sense of completion. Other hints corroborate this parallelism between Hannah and the other abjects we have seen so far: besides being "totally feminine and yet androgynous-looking," she seems "almost timeless" (*Iguana* 338) – her occupation is in fact to freeze time painting her "quick character sketches in charcoal or pastel" (353). As Nada Zeineddine has pointed out, her use of a "silver brush is connected to a mother-figure in a manner similar to its connection with

Shannon's mother" (150). While Shannon cracks up, Hannah is seen on her cubicle's threshold with the brush in her hand (398), although she will not use it to spank Shannon for his self-indulgence, like his mother used to do as Maxine reminds him (390).

At the moment of Shannon's figurative death, a number of other motifs reappear that bring to mind Luke's own climax in "Stop:" "the roar of the bus motor," a splashing of water – yet a pretty gross one[249] –, a burst of laughter and fragmentation of language ("There go my ladies, ha, ha! There go my … ladies, the last of my – ha, ha! – ladies") (399). Language breaks down too, as his dialogue with Hannah will repeatedly feature incomplete sentences.[250] Eventually, Shannon will get to dismiss language altogether to communicate with her and propose instead: "How about wall-tappings between us by way of communication? You know, like convicts in separate cells... One tap: I'm here. Two taps: Are you there? Three taps: yes, I am. Four taps: that's good, we're together" (420). Shannon's "kind of crucifixion," which he "voluptuous[ly]" enjoys, is also a travesty of martyrdom like Burns's (402). Besides, I have mentioned before the cannibalistic parallels when the cabana boys catch Shannon and tie him up like the iguana they trapped to eat, and when he is later veiledly equated with St. Lawrence and his execution grill. Yet Williams's choice of animal is not at all irrelevant: the iguana is "an insurance against castration" and for rebirth, due to its ability to survive the sacrifice of a part of its-self by regenerating a new one, a most enviable capacity for any Williamsian character.

During that limbo stage in the womb-like/cross-like hammock,[251] Shannon pictures Hannah as a "Thin-Standing-Up-Female-Buddha" (404). Buddha, besides being also described in dual sexual terms (Hargreaves 20), postulated the revelation of

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[249] "SHANNON: I don't know what I did. (*He turns to the Mexican boys who have come back up the path.*) Que hice? Que hice? (*There is breathless, spasmodic laughter from the boys as Pancho informs him that he pissed on the ladies' luggage*.)" (398).

[250] For example, on pages 369, 412, 423, 424.

[251] "Regression to infantilism, ha, ha, regression to infantilism… The infantile protest, ha, ha, ha, the infantile expression of rage at Mama and rage at God and rage at the goddam crib, and rage at the everything, rage at the … everything… Regression to infantilism. …" shouts Shannon (401; original suspension points).

the unity of previously different things – or "the logic of contradictions," in Hannah's words (408)–, as well as strived to "empty out the self, void it utterly … denying the individual self any reality" (Hassan, "Quest" 423-4). Shannon's coming together with Hannah would promise completeness yet at the expense of the dissolution of Shannon's self and of the possibility of rebirth, as the Buddhist emptying of the ego in *nirvana* means the end of the cycle of death and reincarnation that all beings are subjected to (Ling 170). So with the abject, which tempts us to return with "jouissance, to that passivity status within the symbolic function, where the subject, fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, word and deed, would find death, along with nirvana" (Kristeva, *Horror* 63-4).

Yet in Hannah Williams finally articulates the philosophy that underlies his other texts of abjection, of encounter with the (m)Other and crisis of self. Shannon will achieve a final rebirth thanks to his contact with Hannah but not through their eventual union. What Hannah professes to Shannon as a means to overcome his impasse and be reborn is, curiously, the same moral that guided Sebastian Venable to his fate in *Suddenly*: "Accept whatever situation you cannot improve" is Hannah's oriental morals (*Iguana* 417), jus as Sebastian "*accepted! – all!* – as – how! – things! – are!" (*Suddenly* 145). And in Shannon's paraphrasing, it really matches up with Burn's active passivity in "Desire:" "'When it's inevitable, lean back and enjoy it' is that it?" (*Iguana* 417). The way to develop this capability for acceptance is, despite Hannah's Buddha-like appearance, not a mystical attitude of in-sight. Rather than a self-aware introspection, which would only disclose the inner void and the impossibility of completion, he has to recognize *the other*(s) in the outside so as to recognize his own relational self;[252] so, Hannah urges Shannon to "look out of [him]self, not in" in order to overcome his spiritual crisis (411).

Thus, although Siegel had started his exegesis on *Iguana* by affirming that it is self-awareness that draws its characters together, he also acknowledges that

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[252] As opposed to a self-centered Cartesian *cogito*, a relational self is "interactionally achieved in relationships with others," mainly in oral interaction (Arundale 201). I have discussed the interactional construction of identity and the correlations between Lacan's theory of the subject and Erwin Goffman's concept of *face* in conversation in "Goffman Meets Lacan" (474-81).

Hannah's restorative aim is to get "Shannon to see how self-involved he's been" and to help him understand himself by means of her own "open[ing] up about her life" (128). We can indeed notice a certain escape from his self-absorption when at the end he speaks of himself in the third person and is able to consider his self as a part of a plural "we:" "Now Shannon is going to go down there with his machete and cut the damn lizard loose … because God won't do it and we are going to play God here" (424). Hannah's ethics of acceptation of the other is the solution for Shannon's existential anguish and emptiness, and proclaims the possibility to

> reach out to … another, *albeit in painful, difficult ways*, *and to help ... another, however imperfectly* [italics added], without descending into madness, alcoholism, or cannibalism; and in this way body and mind are able to move past the impasse, to begin again, to get on with the business of living, not destroying. (Siegel 129)

Not mere self-awareness but also *other*-awareness is the way to understanding and to "begin again." Thanks to his encounter with Hannah and her guidance, then, Shannon undergoes a "painful, difficult" rebirth from the womb-like hammock after the acknowledgment of that complete Other from which he must nevertheless separate, "however imperfect" his subsequent self/ego should remain. Therefore, this brief analysis of *Iguana* has revealed the potential of the discourse of abjection to work out the internal coherences in Williams's writing, to provide enriching perspectives not only on his short fiction but also on other more canonical dramatic texts, and finally, to suggest that there are ethical implications of the dynamics of abjection too. These aspects will be now the focus of the conclusions of this dissertation.

14

CONCLUSION

> Critics may have decried Williams's fiction as *repulsive* because they noticed, but could not appreciate, its *revolutionary* potential.
>
> Jürgen C. Wolter (italics added, 228)

The itinerary that this dissertation has traced may very well resemble a little House of Horrors: bodies that pop open and ooze their inner fluids, ghosts that lurk behind our backs, doors that open to obscure territories, a freak show with its bestiary, Woman-Men and Man-Women, and cannibalistic giants. Although some of the stories may not be clear exponents of gothic narrative, all of them depict the crisis of categories, the loss of a sense of unity, and the suspension of the inside/outside binary that characterize the gothic. The protagonist of these stories finds itself midway between the need for social integration and the attraction that that Other exerts. It is then a perfect example of gothic identity, the "imaginary subject (ego) forming the border between the real (Mother) and the symbolic (Father)" (Jarraway 62). Whereas mainstream society adopts the place of the Symbolic, the Law of the Father that founds culture and community at the expense of individual desires, the Other is endowed with attributes that convert it into the representative of the maternal Thing that returns in the form of the abject. In between, Williams's characters are not individuals split by the flesh/spirit dichotomy, but subjects that experience the Semiotic/Symbolic *interaction* and the impossibility of attaining a fixed and stable identity, a moment that can be as devastating as exhilarating. Their *revolt of being* is not brought about simply by a sexual awakening, but by a manifestation of the body in its broadest sense: the

breaking through of the semiotic drives and their destabilization of homogeneity and unity with reference to identity and language.

These texts relate “the most preposterous circumstance of all,” as Williams puts it in the poem that opened my “Introduction:” an encounter of self and other that acquires mythical proportions and symbolizes the clash between normative strategies of identity and the possibility of a more flexible subjectivity, one that does come close to its *dark side* but does not cancel it out through repression or assimilation. Here lies the revolutionary potential of Williams’s work, especially of his short narrative, which attains structural continuity and thematic cohesion thanks to abjection. If he narrates the experience of “characters who … transform the singular into the plural, the personal into the universal” (Kakutani), abjection allows him to signify the psychic ordeal or *trauma* of separation of the singular split subject,[253] whereas the possibility of transposing it into the social field exposes the ideological workings of the Symbolic Law, the hetero-normative culture of the America of his time. The individual American subject during the Cold War era was envisioned as “a body perpetually at risk of pollution, the enemies who posed this threat lurked not only outside of the various physical and psychic bulwarks (and fallout shelters) of the U.S. identity-structures, but often from within these boundaries” (Eburne 63-4). Communists, sexual deviates, foreigners: the ideology of containment established a series of “perversely phallic Others with the ability and will to penetrate into the national fabric and disrupt its integrity. …their essential ‘otherness’ [was] compounded into an ‘abject’ which could be located as the source of internal differences within the U.S. self” (64). Therefore, there is certainly no need for the often-drawn “distinction between Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller on the basis that the former is concerned with personal fears and frustrations while the latter is concerned with social issues” (Bigsby, “Streetcar” 252). Williams’s stories of abjection have the interest of both rendering the intimate experience of the subject of abjection and depicting the abject, that essential Otherness that disrupts not just personal but also social integrity.

[253] “The obvious discursive consequence of trauma … is abjection” (López Sánchez 55).

In this narrativization of Otherness, my analysis has yielded a series of symbolic elements whose study in other texts may let us recognize similar *revolts of being*. For example, in *Battle of Angels*, Val laments that “we’re all of us locked up tight inside out own bodies. Sentenced … to solitary confinement inside our own skins” (224). This is one of the quotes most frequently used by Williams critics to describe the isolation and incompletion that his characters suffer. However, the early stories in this dissertation, some of them coetaneous to this play, reveal Williams’s attempts at the depiction of instants when that life sentence is momentarily paroled, and the tightly sealed bodies of their protagonists let their inner currents of desire seep out. Thus, we may consider the liquid imagery that surrounds the climaxes of abjection. The images of liquid and water in Williams were studied very early by Richard B. Vowles, who in 1958 already detected their association with maternity and sexual release (53-4). Yet there is a third aspect in which the correlation of water with abjection seems to contest Vowles’s analysis. “The liquid image is identified with *time*, the dimension crucial to the idea of flow,” Vowles affirms (55). Yet the outflow of water in the stories – Catharine’s sinking in her spring of fear, Luke’s orgasmic wetness, Burns’s burial in the lake – points instead to a moment of timelessness, to the image of the oceanic womb/tomb of the maternal semiotic order, which signifies what was *before* and what will be *after* the current of life. The fluidity that Williams envisions here is an antagonist to the unavoidable, one-way stream of time: it is a dissolution diffusing “the wrong way,” like Miss Rose’s laughter, a liquid *deviation*. The re-union with the abject (m)Other allows an alternative to the expected symbolic course – a breaking of the Law of the Father, a *ten minute stop* of Time.

Therefore, a further analysis of the water/time imagery in Williams’s canon seems necessary, as it may render a deeper insight of other texts, for instance, the novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, whose eponymous protagonist is perhaps the Williamsian character most evidently concerned with the current of time. Mrs. Stone struggles against the *drift*, “the drifting that was nothingness” (147), a nothingness that begun “when the pearls broke from their string” (20). Although as an actress Karen actually had a pearl necklace broken in her last appearance on the stage, the maternal connotations of the metaphor have already been noticed in the analysis of “Desire.”

Her drifting is only concluded when she succumbs to the mysterious man that has haunted her throughout the novel; "*Look! I've stopped the drift!*" she exclaims while waiting for him to appear through the door to her rooms (148). Then, while this figure seems to oppose such a current – he "alone had not seemed to drift while she was helplessly drifting" (147) – he is characterized as that who *makes water* (run) in the wrong place – in front of a petrified Mrs. Stone whom he encounters from doorway to doorway (124). We may also notice that he is described in a way that reminds us of the abject: basically masculine but portrayed in androgynous terms, *nameless*, he is the "something" that would interrupt the nothingness and fill up the "awful vacancy" in Mrs. Stone (148). Moreover, like Luke or Burns, Mrs. Stone comes to this ending via an active surrendering: "nothing that she had planned or wanted to happen, and yet she was making it happen" (147). The framing of *Mrs. Stone* within the patterns of abjection would accordingly provide a firmer grounding for James Fisher's insinuation that the final meeting between Karen and the mysterious man, the union with her abject, could be, "perhaps, a suicidal gesture" (Fisher 56).

Another symbolic element that has recurred in these stories has been doors, which signify the threshold between interiority and exteriority that the subject approximates in abjection. The trailer's door that promises a satisfying *dinner* in "Gift of an Apple," the lack of a cabin (or doorway) for Big Black, the library door that Miss Rose so easily opens, the violent banging of the Hamiltons' door when Bud appears – all of them represent the possibility of exit from a self-confinement that is as protecting as stifling. For the door of the gothic house of the self may be a weak spot to allow the *spook* to go in, but also to let it out. "Broken gates between people so they can reach each other" are "something to believe in" instead of God, Hannah advises Shannon in *Iguana* (408). Yet the blurring of the borders between inside and outside that these early stories depict can bear a further significance for the study of Williams's later dramatic language and technique. In fact, it foreshadows the destruction of spatial boundaries that Anne Fleche situates as the key to understanding, on the one hand, Williams's rupture with mimetic realism in his plays, and on the other, his relationship with the closet.

As regards the first, we can see in *Streetcar*, for instance, how through the use of transparent screens and projected images that let the inside of the Kowalskis' house enter the street and vice versa, "the outside keeps becoming the inside … [and the] 'inner-outer' distinctions of both realistic and expressionistic representation are shown coming together" (Fleche, *Disillusion* 95-7). Most evidently in the scene of Blanche and Stanley's violent and erotic confrontation, this violation of realism, Fleche contends (99), "visualizes the restless discourse of desire, that uncontainable movement between inside and outside, soul and body." When afterwards Blanche is labeled as mad and incarcerated, her exclusion represents, "as Foucault has argued, a conscience on the perimeters of society, setting up a boundary between inside and outside." It is this *confinement in the outside* that makes Blanche into "the embodiment of nonbeing … a reminder that beneath the appearance of order something nameless has been lost" (100-1). In other words, she is the *inescapable* heart of abjection, as Bedient puts it (57), and that is why "in the end the play itself seems to have some trouble letting go of Blanche" (Fleche, *Disillusion* 101). As in the stories, the eventual separation from the abject does not prove to be entirely successful for it continues haunting the subject. It is not completely *outside* and is still capable of leaving its mark *within*.

Fleche has also discussed how the inside/outside distinction transcends mere spatiality and turns into "an epistemology of the border – a spatial notion of identity and difference," most clearly in the trope of the closet that gay and lesbian theories rely on ("Door" 254). Fleche criticizes that gay and lesbian criticism does not really get rid of the border itself but is only concerned about its displacement, for example, moving the boundary line in order to *out* a writer that was formerly *in* or, similarly, to out a character like Blanche, who has been interpreted as a male in drag.[254] Implementing the inside/outside-the-closet exclusionary principle of queer identity only legitimizes the

[254] This is the theory of the Albertine Strategy that Stanley Edgar Hyman inaugurated in Williams criticism as early as 1958, and has recurred once and again in different studies such as Edward Sklepowich's.

very structure it criticizes, instead of advocating a real crisis of categories as regards sexual identity. Therefore:

> Blanche can be seen as the representation of a woman who finally doesn't pass as a subject, because she does her gender incorrectly, and because her hyperbolic theatricality challenges the masculine/feminine heterosexual codes that enable and constrain gender performativity. … If, as Butler suggests, all sexuality is closeted, defined in some way by its negative space, Blanche is not in drag, any more than anyone else is. (Fleche, "Door" 266-7)

The positioning of a subject inside or outside the closet constitutes a disavowal strategy to "substitute an affirmation for a denial, a gay man for a gender performance," a still stable category for the empty artificiality of gender roles/identity (267). Thus, the closet becomes a fetish that "both represents and conceals anxiety – the anxiety, the one about identity and self and meaning in the world" (265).

The construction of identity, self, and meaning along the inside/outside boundary is what Williams negotiates in the stories of abjection. In fact, we can see that they depict it very much along the lines Fleche wishes queer theory to follow: as a desire to get beyond boundaries, to blur their dichotomization, and show "the undecidability of where one's identity lies, relative to the structuring principle of identity;" that is what *queer* means for her. In this sense, the stories in this dissertation can be labeled *queer*; furthermore, their use of the abject as the structuring principle of identity is analogous to that of the closet. The abject appears as the fetishized *objet a* that covers existential nothingness, an other that becomes a (m)Other when the subject comes *too* close to it and the ambiguity it represents. It denotes the impossible, the limit from which the subject has to separate if identity is to be established, but which cannot be completely eliminated. Similarly, the closet as fetish "conceals nothing, but it's [*sic*] precisely nothingness that is feared;" where the homosexual – or any other subject for that matter – places itself is not really in or out, but "on the side of the closet" (Fleche, "Door" 265). So, Fleche concludes:

> Uninhabitable, yet inhabited, separate yet inseparable, the closet is not an interior from which a lesbian or gay person emerges, a door s/he closes on a hidden or divided identity. The closet is a metonymic structure, a fetish object, a displacement. It's the limit of what can appear, it's what marks the appearance of sexuality and identity – I would argue, for any person. We carry our closet with us. (267)

However, the discourse of the closet seems to have a narrow scope, so that Fleche wonders why Williams's plays of the 1960s, *I Can't Imagine Tomorrow* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, "are *not* considered plays about gay experience" although they depict a comparable boundary crisis (262). What the theory of abjection can do that the closet does not quite achieve is precisely to appeal to *any person*, not just the homo/heterosexual, but comprehending other categories of identity – racial, social – that also follow "the closet's exclusionary law, the law [the Law] by which identity is secured through disavowal and displacement, tight border controls." If "theatre lives to rebound those borders" (267), so does Williams's postmodern fiction from its earliest examples.

In conclusion, the inside/outside spatiality in Williams's short stories proves thus to be pregnant with hermeneutical implications and to be present in other texts *intertextually* – in the Kristevan sense of the term, as a "transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another" ("Revolution" 111). In particular, the breaching of bodily boundaries that the narrations suggest transposes into the materiality of the stage, where scenic space is organized too as interiors and exteriors that are traversed by performers. We may notice that almost all Williams's settings, not just those of *Streetcar*, invite the exterior *into* the stage: the fire escape in *Menagerie*, the gallery in *Cat*, the "most important" terrace of the white villa in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1962) (135). This certainly encourages future research into Williams's stagecraft from a semiotic perspective, focusing not just on the iconic/symbolic value of some individual props (e.g. Laura's victrola and unicorn in *Menagerie*), or the

setting of one particular play,[255] but of the signifying network that weaves theatrical space, historical space, psychic reality, and literary text together (Übersfeld 108-143).[256] The fascination of theatre is its objectality in the world, its materiality; furthermore, "theatre is a body, it says that emotions are necessary," Anne Übersfeld concludes in her book (208-9).[257] Nicholas Pagan has contended in "Tennessee Williams's Theater as Body" that he is following Übersfeld's lead in tracing the affinity between theater and body in Williams, but he does not tackle the *material* questions of stage; instead, he pursues an absence, that of the body of the homosexual male in Williams's plays. Insisting that "theater cannot free itself from language" (98), Pagan actually underplays the value of the very metaphor of theater as body by considering it a "groundless" substitution of resembling signifiers (100). Yet we know that there is a (back)*ground* for metaphorical substitution that corresponds to the Semiotic, the bodily drives, which are ever-present in the articulation of language.[258] The articulation of dramatic space in Williams is still in want of a more comprehensive (transversal) study, and the dynamics of abjection in the body of Williams's theater are yet to be disentangled.

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[255] Judith Thompson comments on *Iguana* that each of its cubicle bedrooms is "a concrete symbol of existential isolation: the separate, self-contained world of individual consciousness," while the hotel's verandah is "the communal gathering place for the play's lonely inhabitants" (152). Haley redraws this parallel in religious terms: "the set is the interior of a church, in which communion is taking place. The verandah represents the place of communion, even to the presence of the hammock (the apex of Golgotha) in its center" (Haley ch. 3).

[256] For other applications of Semiotics to the study of theatre see, for example, Lotman and Aston and Savona.

[257] "La fascinación que ejerce el teatro ... se debe en primer lugar, al hecho de ser un objeto en el mundo... La práctica teatral es materialista. ... El teatro es cuerpo, el teatro dice que las emociones son necesarias y vitales, y que él – teatro – trabaja con y para las emociones..."

[258] Not only in psychoanalytical discourse: pragmatic linguistics has also demonstrated that metaphor originates in *embodied* experience (Gibbs, Lima and Francozo).

In addition, the rupture with realism in his drama corresponds with the anti-realist narrative in his prose, as we can deduce from Fleche's problematization of the interpretation of the dramatic text in a way that resembles the polyphony of the narratives that this dissertation has explored. She questions the possibility of a univocal reading of *Streetcar* by signaling a similar superimposition of interpretations as that we have seen in "Desire and the Black Masseur:"

> Stanley is wrong and Blanche is right, the moralists agree. But the hypocrisy of the "priggish" reading is soon revealed in its ambivalence toward Blanche/Stanley: to make a unity of the play... requires a reading that finds Blanche's rape inevitable ... she's the erring woman who gets what she "asks" for (her realistic antecedents are clear). For the prigs, this outcome might not be unthinkable, thought it might be – what is worse – distasteful. But Williams seems deliberately to be *making* interpretation a problem: he doesn't exclude the prigs' reading; he invites it. … The realistic setups in this play really *feel like* setups, a magician's tricks, inviting readings that leave you hanging from your own schematic noose. Analytically this play is a trap; it's brilliantly confused... In a way it's wrong to say Williams doesn't write endings. He writes elaborate *strings* of them. (*Disillusion* 93-4; Fleche's italics)[259]

Williams's narrator provides such realistic setups too, and similarly early stories also make interpretation a trap when, anticipating the narrator in "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" and "Hard Candy," they "both validate [the] story by telling it, and collude with his 'straight' reader by judging it" (Clum, "Homophobic Discourse" 168). Other stylistic issues that have risen from the analysis of the stories of abjection demonstrate that language, like the subject, bears the effects of the Semiotic too and does not render a univocal meaning, since one of the symptoms of abjection is "a language that gives up" (Kristeva, *Horror* 11). Therefore, silences, fragmentation, repetition and meaninglessness, rhythmic patterns, and/or polyphony hamper the apparently obvious

[259] For an analysis of the various readings implicit in *Streetcar* and a discussion of their representation in its filmic versions, see Schmeter (96-106).

transparency and coherence of language; an "obviousness" which, like the subject's, is a mere ideological effect (Althusser). A *camp* reading of these stories can perceive at least one more bead in the string of endings in Williams's texts by not only looking where the narration points at, but also "be[ing] aware of the hand pointing there" (Barbera 78).

The semiotic disruptions on the subject and on language in the stories bring to fruition a deconstructive effect as the one spotted by Savran in Williams's later plays, by showing the futility of dichotomizing experience and the need for acknowledging that genders and sexualities (which I consider as parts of a more complex subjectivity) "are not set in opposition but are dispersed and plural, constantly in circulation." Savran's "nomadic subjects produced by this process" are certainly reminiscent of Kristeva's *subject-in-process* (Savran, *Communists* 108). Also, just as *Cat* "radically redefines both the self and the Other, … and cunningly destabilizes normative constructions of sexuality" as they were defined in Cold War America (109), abjection also unveils the strategy of identity of normative society or, in Kristevan terms, the Symbolic. What the subject facing abjection rejects, the non-object that the Symbolic prohibits, the abject, is actually not an-other but a part of it(s)self. The abject, the very Other against which I am established, is not a strange external force but a component of our heterogeneous "I;" as Kristeva titles one of her books: we are *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991). The abject "*show[s] me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva, *Horror* 3; her italics), and since "abjection is coextensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as on the collective level" (68), it shows us what normative society – or in Williams's terms, *the squares* ("Party" 292) – thrusts aside in order to sustain itself. There lies the paradox: that which we reject is the necessary foundation of ourselves.

Williams's early stories depict this process of separation, whereby we see Kristeva's theory of abjection and the gothic coalesce. Gothic narratives take the ego "back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, [it] has broken away" (Savoy, "Introduction" viii), whereas Kristevan theory provides "the semes that clothe the process of separation" that sustains "the place *and* law of the One [the Symbolic]," which are exactly those that permeate Williams's narrative work: "orality,

death, incest" (Kristeva, *Horror* 94). The tracking of these semes in the stories has revealed that they do not just feature in overtly gothic texts like "Desire;" for instance, "Gift of an Apple" mingles them too. We may remember, however, that the process involves going back to and then away from the limits, attraction and separation/repulsion, and the stories focus mostly on the initial movement – in some, like "Stop" or "Desire," the second one is in fact missing. Therefore, when the semes are used to describe the initial movement of attraction to the abject, they take the shape of what Abraham and Torok called *antimetaphors*, the tropes of the language of incorporation that is caused by the refusal to drastically introject the (m)Other and enter the Symbolic. Kilgour has demonstrated that the formulation of these antimetaphors, *from Communion to Cannibalism*, can be diverse. Nevertheless, when she quotes the "demonic" motifs "which for [Northrop] Frye act as kinds of 'antimetaphors'," she comes up with a list of the very tropes of abject Otherness that pervade the texts in this dissertation: "hermaphroditism, incest, and cannibalism" (235).

What all these antimetaphors have in common is their image of two-in-oneness or *coincidentia oppositorum*, a perverse synthesis of categories such as sexes, races, I/Other, inside/outside. It seems to me that the real import of the dynamic of abjection in which such demonic antimetaphors are employed lies precisely in the challenge of the very mythical pattern. It reveals that the meta-*physical* wholeness that the *coincidentia oppositorum* bodes is just a legendary fake: completion means stasis and obliteration and, despite any existential pressure towards its achievement, it is unattainable if we want to ward off death. Incompletion, though hard to coming to terms with, keeps desire, life, going on, "en avant!" as Williams's "clarion cry" proclaimed (Leverich 9). Does this mean that the contraries – especially, self and other – should not be brought together? Not at all. "When you ignore other people completely, that is hell," said Williams in *Time* at the time of *Iguana* (Kalem, "Angel" 53). Every Williams work depicts the attempt to reach the other; what must not happen is to approach the other as a means – as an object, a fetish – to complete the self, that is, to attempt to subsume the other into the self.

Thus, there is an ethics of alterity to be deduced from Williams's stories of abjection. As I have reminded above, the antimetaphors of incorporation originate when the subject does not accept the loss of the (m)Other – in other words, when introjection fails. However, Jacques Derrida considers that such failure may not actually be something to be regretted. Penelope Deutscher has analyzed Derrida's revision of Abraham and Torok's theory of mourning, and she wonders whether "perhaps failed mourning of incorporation is a greater fidelity to the other." If introjection or "successful mourning assimilates or digests the other … in failed mourning, I can not assimilate the other. … Where the other is to me indigestible, the other is to me other, not same" (Deutscher 166). The ethical relation self/other can be said to develop along similar lines as the mourning of the (m)Other: the introjecting model would be the equivalent to narcissistic self-other love relations which are censurable because they integrate the other into the self, subordinating it to my nostalgia for unity (174). On the other hand, the model of incorporation, where I cannot assimilate the other because it "is always in excess of my reductions of and identifications with him or her" (170), is more respectful of *otherness*, of difference and diversity. So, Derrida considers that "the failure succeeds: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, … outside of us" (35).

"An aborted interiorization," "a tender rejection" – an abjection? To renounce the wish for completion in order to let the other *be* an-other. To recognize its otherness by approaching it and testing the vulnerability of the borders, the fragility of any pretense of an independent self, and the artificiality of conventional polarities, in order to "know ourselves and each other a great deal better, well enough to concede that no man has a monopoly on right or virtue any more than any man has a corner on duplicity and evil" – that is the "positive message" that Williams struggles to convey ("World I Live in" 90). Yet to *know the other*, looking out not in, cannot be the same as assimilating it, subordinating it to our power/knowledge as Foucault would say. The other must be accepted qua *other*, as separate and unknown. This requires "a new way

of identifying the other, the stranger, not in order to reify and exclude it, but in order to welcome it" (K. Oliver, "Introduction" 8).

We encounter that revolutionary idea in the closing lines of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, which (not surprisingly?) are often omitted from productions of the play, Haley comments (ch. 5). In "the single most jarring interruption of dramatic structure in Williams's work" (Spoto, qtd. in Clum, "Sacrificial Stud" 14), Chance Wayne breaks through the fourth wall, comes downstage, and addresses the audience: "I don't ask for your pity, but just for your understanding – not even that – no. *Just for your recognition of me in you* [italics added], and the enemy, time, in us all" (236). It may not be accidental that Williams uses here the term "recognition" and not *identification*, for the latter is part of the process of introjection that leads to the subsuming of Otherness into Self. On the contrary, "recognition requires that we are two different beings, inaccessible to each other, and yet able to communicate because of what is between us" (K. Oliver, "Look" 61). It is for the recognition and acceptance of the abject, of the otherness in ourselves yet also of the other as a separate entity, that Williams, via Chance, is advocating. Or as he already put it earlier:

> For God's sake let's have a little more freakish behavior – not less.
>
> Maybe ninety per cent of the freaks will be just freaks, ludicrous and pathetic and getting nowhere but into trouble.
>
> Eliminate them, however – bully them into conformity – and nobody in America will ever be really young any more and we'll be left standing in the dead center of nowhere. ("Something Wild" 14)

15

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