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Dramaturgical Innovations in the Late Plays of Tennessee Williams

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Theses of the Dissertation

In my doctoral dissertation I explore the dramaturgical innovations in Tennessee Williams's late plays, written after *The Night of the Iguana* in 1961. My project is to challenge old and prevailing approaches of the Williams criticism which has read Williams's plays through the biography of the playwright, or reading his biography into his plays. I do not regard Williams as a regionalist Southern playwright, but view him as a dramatist of the twentieth century world stage, whose work is comparable in its dramatic achievement to great plays of other dramatists. I do not examine Williams's work through the filter of thematic criticism, looking for moralistic or redemptive structures in the late plays. In opposition to the old critical stance, I claim that Williams's successful dramaturgy does not constitute "poetic realism," demonstrating means in which the successful plays represent subjectivity in an expressionist way and examining how the late plays expand upon expressionist and metatheatrical elements which had been present in the successful plays as well. Furthermore, my aim is to re-evaluate the late plays, showing that they are not a radical break away from the dramaturgy of his early and successful plays, but a gradual evolution from representational to meta-mimetic theatre.

David Savran, one of Williams's critics quotes Michel Foucault's idea on desubjectification and I found that it is the desubjectification which becomes the main propelling process to function in different ways in Williams's early, successful, and late dramaturgy. Neither Foucault nor Savran give a detailed elaboration of the term "desubjectification," and since I found that desubjectification is present in Williams's all dramas, I define how I use this term. Following Foucault as well as other poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, and Julia Kristeva, for example, who pointed out how the subject is constructed by language, ideology, power, social technologies of gender, the abject, or the Other, I conclude that the aim of the desubjectification process is to achieve multiple possibilities, being liberated from subjugation. Desubjectification is a process in which subjects become transgressors to surmount the subjugating norms. The desubjectification process comes about by transgression, thus it seems that Williams's characters are desubjectified because they are transgressors, who violate various norms, such as spiritual, gender, or sexual ones. The desubjectification manifests itself through erasure, distortion, or dismemberment of the characters.

In the early and successful plays, some characters undergo an extreme mode of desubjectification, that is, their subjectivity is erased by death. Allen in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are sexual transgressors and their desubjectification is manifested through their erasure from the dramas, that is, they are dead before the plays begin. Eloi Duvenet in *Auto-da-Fé* dies at the end of the play because he realizes his subversive sexual desire. The subjectivity of other characters like Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or Alma Weinmiller in *Summer and Smoke* becomes disfigured through the desubjectification process. Blanche goes mad by the end of the play, which means that her subjectivity is distorted by her insanity, signifying the “mental death” of her character. Alma loses her chastity and becomes a cocotte, which means the metaphoric distortion of her subjectivity. As one can see from these examples, desubjectification in the early and successful plays affects the subjectivity of the characters through erasure or distortion, both literally and metaphorically.

In the late plays, desubjectification also works on a different level; it does not only affect the subjectivity of the character, but also the realist mode of representation itself. Transgressors are no more erased from the stage but they are visible; they are either dismembered or have visions of dismembered subjectivities. Their desubjectification functions as an anti-mimetic process distorting and/or erasing modes of realistic representation. In the late plays, the desubjectification process is expanded into postmodern, metatheatricalist poetics which destabilizes and ruptures the coherence of realist systems of meaning, in which desubjectification signifies that characters become transgressors; all this causes a mutilation of characterology, dramatic place and language.

The characters in Williams’s early and successful period are visionaries, who perform a crucial function in his play since their visions of a broken world create a sense of fragmented subjectivity, which shapes the thematic and formal concerns of his dramaturgy. His plays are structured around visions objectifying the condition of subjectivity, and these visions distort realist conventions of figuration. This pattern begins to shift in the late plays with *Suddenly Last Summer* in 1958, in which he attempts to reconstruct, through Catharine’s remembrance, the story of the erased, absent poet Sebastian question the viability of dramatic narrative, discarding poetic metaphor in favor of theatricalist poetics of desubjectification, which in the dramatist’s late plays functions as decentralization disrupting the modes of realistic representation. As Williams’s plays evolved into a totally fragmented, estranged territory of the late plays, which Williams called “Dragon country, the country of pain, is an uninhabitable country which is inhabited” (*I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow*, 138), like Sebastian in

Suddenly Last Summer, the late visionaries have already been broken, or desubjectified, before the plays begin. Their visions seem to parallel with Hart Crane's poetics of discontinuity or Arthur Rimbaud's aesthetics of the "disordering of the senses," locating the late plays outside the tradition of American realism and situating them closer to the bleak landscape of Samuel Beckett and the alienated, broken word-scapes of Harold Pinter.

In my project, eighteen late plays by Williams are read in various depths. I selected the works which characterize the playwright's late dramaturgy the most; my selection was based upon the availability of the late plays, that is I rely on the ones that has been published in a printed form until the end of 2009. Some plays are read in a more detailed way, while others are examined in less detail, and there are some which are almost only mentioned. I do not rely on the plays which I have not read myself; these are the unpublished ones that are referred to by Williams scholars and journalistic reviewers. Throughout my project, I sometimes stray from the field of literary criticism to that of Theatre Studies because in the past few years the critical apparatus of the genre of drama tends to the now emerging new discipline, Theatre Studies when investigating plays. I sometimes must rely upon theatre critics, reviews since they reflect the immediate reception of plays. Having read all late plays published, I put them into arbitrary categories I found the best help to give an insight into the evolution of Williams's late dramaturgy and his dramaturgical innovations. In order to find the theoretical basis of my dissertation, I read the earliest and latest related Williams criticism as well as scholarly works on theatre semiotics and found that I could best describe the evolution of Williams's late dramaturgy with pointing out how his characters are desubjectified in various ways.

My method of detailed reading of the plays derives from semiotic, post-semiotic, rhetorical and queer-based theories of theatre as they apply to the various explorations of each chapter. My work is fringed upon the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes's, Michel Foucault's, Jean Baudrillard's, David Savran's, Paul de Man's, Lee Edelman's Thomas E. Yingling's, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's, and Linda Hutcheon's theories. My reading of the late plays is both intra- and intertextual. It is intratextual because I constantly compare the language, rhetoric figures, metaphors and metonymies, as well as the desubjectification of the characters in the late plays to those of Williams's early and successful dramas. Moreover, I rely on the playwright's short stories when necessary because many of his plays root in his early short stories. I do not take his poetry into consideration because it would span the limits of this dissertation on the one hand, and Williams's poems are not relevant enough to the interpretation of his plays, on the other. My enterprise is also intertextual because I refer to

American expressionist influences, such as Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice when construing Williams's expressionism. Beside the American drama, I take European theatre tendencies and influences into consideration, that is, I put my investigation into broader context than the US and rely on the dramaturgy of Williams Shakespeare, Calderón de la Barca, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Anton Chekhov, Luigi Pirandello, Jean Genet, Jean-Paul Sartre, Williams Butler Yeats, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Ferenc Molnár, Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, Johan Smuul, Heiner Müller, and Yukio Mishima, as well as opera composers such as Richard Wagner, Béla Bartók, and Richard Strauss. Not only theatre and opera, but also poetry is referred to, namely, that of Hart Crane, Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur Rimbaud, and the modernist Constantine P. Cavafy, who wrote in Modern Greek. Some of the context-making authors among the above mentioned appears only in footnotes in the dissertation because of the limits of the volume.

Beside Modern Greek poetry of Cavafy, I turn to Ancient Greek religion and culture, and drama, especially when reading *Suddenly Last Summer*, the play which is of crucial importance to have an insight into the evolution of Williams's late dramaturgy. Later in my dissertation I give examples from Greek and Roman literature when pointing to the roots of certain metaphors and cultural phenomena. Also, Christian myths and Biblical allusions are taken into consideration since both *Suddenly Last Summer* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* contain relevant Christian references as well. To put the late Williams dramatic oeuvre into an even larger than Western context, I have to look into how Japanese Nō drama and Kabuki theatre techniques are based upon not the original teachings, but the popular variant of Zen Buddhism. Understanding the rudiments of the philosophy of Zen Buddhism is of great importance to see how a Japanese Nō drama is different from European theatre.

The dissertation is divided into two parts and Part One is preceded by an introduction. Part One examines the process of desubjectification not observed by other critics in the early and successful plays, while Part Two construes the dramaturgical innovations in the late plays along with the desubjectification.

In the Introduction, I give account of the development of the Tennessee Williams scholarship from 1961 to now, their critical paradigms, while giving a review of the most important related critical works. First I point out how criticism categorized Williams as a "Southern playwright," and his playwriting technique as "poetic realism." Since his playwriting career spanned almost half of the twentieth century, it can be understood that Williams's dramatic art went through several periods, each marked by different approaches to dramaturgy, but with each period carrying forward a thread of development which extends

from the beginning of his dramatic oeuvre to its end. It seems that Williams's late work, with its emphasis upon theatre itself, may be considered as a parallel to Picasso's late line drawings (1930-1937) to the *Vollard Suite*, which grotesquely depict satyrs and women in erotic postures sometimes expressing violent intention, rendered in minimalist pen and ink. Furthermore, I demonstrate that criticism along with expectations of audiences misunderstood Williams's later work and regarded it as a failure. Due to their beliefs about what a "proper" Williams play should be, they interpreted the later plays based upon their preconceptions established by old criticism with its clichés of "South, sex, and violence" in the playwright's work.

Next I examine Williams's expressionism along with its American and European origins. After showing how critics analyzed the manifesto-like "Production Notes" to *The Glass Menagerie* and the playwright's concept of his "new, plastic theatre," I compare his notion about his new dramatic technique to European and American predecessors. I point to the differences between the German Georg Kaiser's as well as the American Elmer Rice's expressionist theatre techniques, and that of Williams's. Erwin Piscator's and Bertolt Brecht's epic form as well as the latter's screen technique give other elements which Williams incorporated into his expressionism. I mention another European root of expressionism, namely, the Swedish August Strindberg, the progenitor of European expressionist drama. I observe a parallel between Williams's "Production Notes" to *The Glass Menagerie*, and the "Preface" to *Miss Julie* (1888). In his "Preface" to the play, Strindberg seemingly speaks about naturalism and defends it, while, in fact, he launches a manifesto to theorize the expressionist drama. Similarly to Strindberg, Williams in his "Production Notes" establishes his "plastic theatre," which actually seems to be the manifesto of his own specific expressionist style.

Afterwards, give an insight into how biographic approach regarded Williams's plays as a mimetic mirror for the author's alleged selves. The prevalence of psychological approach regards the events of the dramatist's life as driving motivation behind his work, seeking morality and redemptive power in the playwright's work. In the next subchapter I examine how the old clichéd criticism fuelled the misunderstanding of the late plays. Finally, before describing the aims, methods, and organization of the dissertation, I show the differing critical voices, that is, the positive evaluations of the late plays which do not describes the late plays with negative judgment of decline. I also show how poststructural theories (Philip C. Kolin, Nicholas O. Pagan) along with queer based approached (David Savran, Lee Edelman, Thomas

E. Yingling) contributed to the re-evaluation of not only the late, but also the early and successful plays.

I start Chapter One with discussing the emergence of realistic theatre and acting in Europe, and I move forward to the American scene and give an insight into how the Stanislavskian Method was developed with psychoanalysis into “Method Acting.” Having taken a closer look at Williams’s first Broadway success, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), I demonstrate that Williams did not follow realism in its strict sense but uses many non-realistic elements, such as expressionism, surrealism, Brechtian alienation techniques, in order to forge his own specific dramaturgy. *Camino Real* (1953), yet written and performed in Williams’s successful period also shatters the conventions of realistic theatre. I conclude that Williams started his success with an ambiguous relationship to realism and realistic theatre.

Having seen the non-realistic elements, I argue that Williams uses modernist metaphors in his early and successful plays; the metaphors of disease, intoxication, and purification through fire were applied along modernist binary oppositions, which becomes the result of the desubjectification process. Whereas Williams’s earlier plays use these metaphors, through expressionist means, a shift occurs with *Suddenly Last Summer*, in which desubjectification eliminates its metaphoric structure and gradually expands to become the subject and also a dramaturgic form of the late plays, significantly revising constructions of subjectivity established in his earlier plays. In the plays which followed *Suddenly*, the new emphasis on desubjectification evolves into metatheatrical poetics which informs every aspect of Williams’s dramaturgy. To see the shift in subjective vision from the earlier to later works is to understand it as an evolution articulated through changing modes of desubjectification. In the early and successful plays, desubjectification is expressed in metaphors which construct identity through bodily fragmentation and erasure of realist dramatic narrative, which is predominantly a modernist formulation. The late plays, however, oppose the production of modernist metaphoric meanings, such as revelation and redemption, expanding the desubjectification process into postmodern, metatheatricalist poetics which destabilizes and ruptures the coherence of realist systems of meaning, in which desubjectification signifies a mutilation of characterology, dramatic place and language.

While examining the metaphors of the early plays, I point out that these metaphors produce partial or complete erasure or disfiguration of the stable subject of realism. Relying on Paul de Man’s theory of disfiguration, *prosopopeia*, and de-facement, I show the above mentioned metaphors in *Camino Real* serve as a redemptive effect. Next I construe successful plays such as *Summer and Smoke* (1948) along with its late variant, the *Eccentricities of a*

Nightingale (1977), and afterwards, *The Rose Tattoo* (1951). While reading together *Summer and Smoke* with *Eccentricities*, I claim that in the late variant of a successful play, the construction of the desubjectified character undergoes a transformation, in which visionaries are already broken, or have become transgressors before the play begins. Their shattered visions provide a new context for Williams's revisioning of desubjectification, in which there is no purification, only continuous fragmentation. I conclude that in the majority of Williams's early and successful plays, the vision of love and sexuality brings about the death or psychic dismemberment of the visionaries.

Chapter Two identifies the dismembered, absent poet Sebastian of *Suddenly Last Summer* as a model for subjectivity in the later plays. Like the earlier characters, Sebastian is desubjectified through erasure, but in this play, desubjectification takes on an additional function, operating as a cultural mark—a sign of the Other—which inscribes the body with a mutilation which alters Sebastian's identity and vision. This process reshapes Williams's later stages according to a new, deconstructive logic of desubjectification, revising the rhetorical mode of *prosopopeia*, and displacing it with what Paul de Man describes as “de-facement.”

The third chapter, “From Sebastian to the Late Plays” still explores the successful plays, but those which were written after *Suddenly Last Summer*. This chapter shows how Sebastian's desubjectification becomes the medium for reinvention of subjectivity on stage, demarcating a new aesthetic of dismemberment. It also looks into ways in which Sebastian's desubjectification articulates Rimbaud's aesthetic of the “disordering of the senses,” focusing upon mediums through which late subjectivity is disfigured through visionary states brought about by disease, intoxication, and madness.

In Part Two, I give detailed readings of the late plays based upon the main ideas of the above mentioned theoreticians. The arrangement of the chapters does not follow a chronological order of the plays; rather, I group them in the categories which seem to be the most characteristic nodes of Williams's dramaturgical innovation, being aware that categorization is arbitrary and thus categories are unstable, bearing no ontological status. For this reason, overlaps occur in my dissertation since I sometimes read a play—in various details—several times in different chapters. A seeming inconsistency may seem to be the fact that I read a late play, *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* in Part One; I do it so because it is worth reading together with, and in comparison to its early variant, *Summer and Smoke*.

In Chapter One, I aim at showing how Oriental philosophy and traditional forms of Japanese drama, that is, Nō and Kabuki made a recognizable impact on Williams's plays. I give a very brief summary of the main ideas and terms of Zen as well as Japanese theatre.

While reading *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, I make references to the short story upon which the play is based, "Man Bring This Up Road," as well as to Yukio Mishima's modern Nō play, *The Lady Aoi*. At the end of the chapter, I demonstrate that the character of Chris in *Milktrain* is not a savior, but similarly to Hannah in *Iguana*, more of a Bodhisattva. Furthermore, I propose that the end of the play seems to be a Zen-koan. Afterwards, I trace the development of *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) from its earlier variant, *The Day on Which a Man Dies* (1959). After pointing to the zen-inspired Nō and Kabuki elements of the plays, I give three readings of *Tokyo Hotel* to solve the oxymoron of its being an "Occidental Noh play, as the subtitle of the play formulates it; first I give an "Oriental reading, then a Biblical interpretation, finally a comparison of the play with Chekhov's theatre, showing Chekhov's impact on the formulation of artistic problems in *Tokyo Hotel*.

Chapter Two explores the semiotic infiltration of the desubjectification process into the stage space in late plays. When stage space becomes "dragon country, . . . an uninhabitable country which is inhabited," this contradiction calls into question traditional forms of representation, in which the two primary kinds of space possible in a play – actual (real, theatrical, *stage space*) and virtual (fictional, *dramatic place*)—are represented as a supposed unity. In the early and successful plays, stage space mimetically represents a picture of the house wherein the visionary is confined, using transparency at crucial moments to focus the attention of the audience on the inner journey of the character. In *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, transparent walls are used as a pictorial device to frame interior stages within the home, expressionistically X-raying the set, and permitting the audience to see through previously opaque walls into an inner fourth-wall space where hidden meanings are revealed. The later characters, exiled from the family structure, are positioned in marginalized zones of bars, boarding houses, hotels, and asylums. The "pictorial" mode of the earlier plays, in which transparency enacts a seeing-through of the outside/inside dichotomy of mimesis, is abandoned as the scene shifts away from the home to the transient spaces, in which transparency becomes a solvent, *dissolving* stage space, in which dramatic place and its (signified) meaning *disappears*. When space becomes "Dragon Country," purification becomes impossible as the metonymic relationship between stage space and dramatic place is deconstructed, rupturing the mimetic continuity between *what is seen and heard* on stage (the theatrical signifier) and *what it means* in the fictional sense of place (the dramatic signified).

Chapter Three takes a closer look at the problematics of theatricality, metadrama, and metatheatricality. After theorizing metatheatricality, the chapter examines the various aspects

of *The Two-Character Play* (1979) with references to *similar* metatheatrical structures which can be found in Pirandello's and Genet's theatre. While reading and referring to Pirandello and Genet, the chapter also examines the different metatheatrical elements in other playwright's works, ranging from Shakespeare to Ferenc Molnár. The reading of the Williams play construes the significance of incompleteness, madness, dissolving boundaries, and deconstruction of the theatre. Afterwards, the examination of the play indicates that the later plays of Williams become anti-mimetic, showing up representation *as* representation, for there is no escape from the trap of representation in the genre of drama.

The fifth chapter focuses on Williams's construction of homosexuality through modes of desubjectification in the successful and late plays, as well as in short stories. While the successful plays represent homosexuality under the disguise of "screens and covers" (Savran 83), in which gay characters are erased from the stage, several late plays stage gay characters, who are inscribed with various marks of mutilation. While comparing the successful plays to the late ones, I conclude that in the successful plays gay subjectivity is constructed upon the basis of its difference from heterosexual identities, in the late plays, Williams portrays new type of gay subjectivities, emphasizing the differences within gay identities.

Chapter Five, "Memory, Apparition, and Ghosts" illuminates how memory does *not* bring truth alive, like in modernist analytical drama, but rather constructs it. This chapter looks at Williams's "ghost" plays, which desubjectify characters and stage space, distort language through the introduction of ghosts and apparitions. The ghosts represent the ultimate form of the desubjectified subject, expressionistically making visible the condition of dismemberment and translating stage into an evocation of an afterworld. The chapter differentiates between characters referred to as "apparitions," who manifested in plays which I label as "séance plays," and characters called "ghosts," who appear in the more totalized form of the ghost play as simulacra.

This dissertation ends with a Conclusion, summing up the main points and results of this enterprise of reading the late plays in relation to the earlier ones, in which the late plays are re-visioned as part of the (r)evolutionary extension of a complete Williams canon.

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