

This article is also available in pdf

**“SOME ATTITUDES AND A POSTURE:
Religious Metaphor and Ritual in
Tennessee Williams’
Query of the American God”**

**written by
John J. Fritscher, Ph.D.
(Jack Fritscher, Ph.D)**

**published in
Modern Drama 13, 1970
pages 201-215**

Tennessee Williams’ theater is in one sense very like the ancient classical theater. It is essentially a religious act. *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore*, and *Baby Doll* center on altar tables of beds; *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, *Summer and Smoke*, and *Camino Real* revolve around ritual fountains of Eternity.¹ *Battle of Angels*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Suddenly Last Summer* are ritual re-enactments of events of salvation and damnation. The patio setting of *Night of the Iguana* is sanctuary-like, the characters making entrance from their isolated sacristy cells.

A Streetcar Named Desire moves its people in a deftly choreographed ritual from the Introit of scene one, played appropriately on the steps of the house, to Stella’s Offertory to Blanche, to Blanche’s repetitious ritual cleansing in white tubs of water, to the ritual of *The Poker Night* played around an altar of a table by men whom Williams’ stage directions place in ritual vestments of primary colors. Blanche, Host-white as a victim should traditionally be, knows Stanley to be her executioner. Her words of consecration are her story to Mitch about her young first husband: she wins Mitch and “there’s God—so quickly.” This story next told by Stella does not convert Stanley who by scene ten vests himself in the ritual silk pajamas of his wedding night and protrudes his tongue between his teeth to rape-consume Host-Blanche in an inverse ritual of communion become sexual cannibalization. The remainder of the play is concerned with cleansing and collecting: Blanche bathes herself, a used communion dish, and collects her things together, the victim doing the ablutions and straightening proper to the executing priest. Eunice gives Stella a credo to live by (“You’ve got to keep going”) and Blanche, attended by Doctor and Matron, processes out past a congregation of Williams characters.

Williams’ metaphorical translation of the Episcopalian Mass is dark parody of institutionalized religion. With Emerson, Williams feels that prayers and dogma simply mark the height to which religious waters once rose; now, when the aesthetic (to do the beautiful thing) is replacing the institutionalized ethic (thou shalt not), Williams’ translation points up the lack of the old economy. The validity of listening to artists in areas of interpersonal relationships (which include man’s relation to God) is that historically artists have pre-known and pre-sung for ages

¹A truly excellent study of Williams by R. B. Vowles elaborates at great length upon the fluidity of Williams’ plays, their flow of verbal image intermingling with stage setting. *Tulane Drama Review*, III (1958), 51-56. See also Martin Esslin *The Theater of the Absurd* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1961), p. 149.

the *kerygma*, the primacy of charity, that the institutions have arrived at only latterly. This is true no more than in the comparison of sensibility between ancient Greek drama and the *kerygma* of inter-personalism which Belgian and Dutch theologians have brought to the attention of twentieth-century America's theological consciousness.

Williams obviously prefers the intuitive aesthetic approach to what an institutionalized religious ethic would call the metaphysical interaction of God and man. To show his preference he oftentimes contrapuntally plays the intuitive aesthetic against the institutionalized ethic. Williams defines *artist* in the Greek sense of the *maker*, "the man of *poiein*," the man who imposes order on disconnected reality. Art, therefore, can be as wide as the art of being human. Many of his "artists" live at least near, if not next-door to, churches of various denominations, if indeed they do not live in parsonages themselves. If the protagonists do not live *near*, *next*, or *in*, then some representative of the religious institution is likely to intrude upon them—and rarely to good advantage.

Williams' cynical take on clerics runs through the mincing minister of *You Touched Me*, the mercenary Reverend Tooker of *Cat*, the sexually disturbed Lutheran prison chaplain of the story "One Arm," the misunderstanding priest Father de Leo of *Rose Tattoo*, the concerned-with-appearances Reverend Winemiller(s) of *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* and *Summer and Smoke*, Mrs. Venable's hateful references to priests and scriptures of institutions, the minister's raucous family in "The Yellow Bird," and the bought-off clerical rivals of *The Knightly Quest*: the Catholic Father Acheson and the Reverend Doctor Peters of the Methodist Episcopal Church. This scandalous division Williams presents nowhere so concisely as in *Night of the Iguana* where the battle between institutional responsibility and personal integrity is waged within the protagonist, the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon. Accused of "fornication and heresy...in the same week," Shannon is quite rightly more disturbed by the "heresy"; for his shaking preachment of personal belief to a congregation is wider reaching than his one-time sexual act.

The next Sunday when I climbed into the pulpit and looked down over all of those smug, disapproving, accusing faces uplifted, I had an impulse to shake them--so I shook them....Look here, I said, I shouted, I'm tired of conducting services in praise and worship of a senile delinquent—yeah, that's what I said, I shouted! All your Western theologies, the whole mythology of them, are based on the concept of God as a *senile delinquent* and, by God, I will not and cannot continue to conduct services in praise and worship of this...angry, petulant old man. I mean he's represented like a bad-tempered childish old, old, sick, peevish man—I mean like the sort of old man in a nursing home that's putting together a jigsaw puzzle and can't put it together and gets furious at it and kicks over the table. Yes, I tell you they do that, all our theologies do it—accuse God of being a cruel, senile delinquent, blaming the world and brutally punishing all he created for his own faults of construction.²

With a God like this it is small wonder that the western theologies, the western institutional religions, manufacture congregations that Shannon likens to snakes and cockroaches; it is small wonder that he detests the institutional Christianity that in masked violence made of Mexico "a country caught and destroyed in its flesh and corrupted in its spirit by its gold-hungry Conquistadors that bore the flag of the Inquisition along with the Cross of Christ." It is small wonder that he hates the socially blind congregations who "go home and close...windows,

² *Night of the Iguana* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 54-56. Henry Popkin notes Williams' heavily anti-institutional bias: "For Williams, religion is a convenient source of symbolism, but [in institutional form] it seems to be without real value in the world of his plays." Henry Popkin, "The Plays of Tennessee Williams," *Tulane Drama Review*, IV (March, 1960), p. 62.

all...windows and doors, against the truth about God.”

Because of the personal tension the Reverend Shannon becomes a dispossessed wanderer. He becomes a guide for Blake Tours. (One presumes Shannon gives Blake’s customers “Tours of Experience” when they expected only “Tours of Innocence.”)

Shannon: I entered my present line–tours of God’s world conducted by a minister of God.... Collecting evidence...[of] my personal idea of God, not as a senile delinquent, but as a...

Hannah: Incomplete sentence.³

Just so for Williams is God Shannon’s sentence seeking a completion. Because of what his national religious culture has subjected him to and because of what he has experienced in his family, Williams presents to date a highly ambivalent attitude toward God. He does not know as yet which fork in the sentence will end in accurate completion. Inductively seining his plays’ functional religious trappings and overt theological statements against the interpretive biography “written” by his mother, one can construct—like Cocteau on “Saint” Genet—the ambivalent theological stance of Tennessee Williams. It is in this “knightly quest” that Williams promotes the religious act of his theater; it is the lack of “time for contemplation,” the lack of the necessary “introversion” for which Williams censures America in his latest novella, the off-stage comment of *The Knightly Quest*.⁴ It is in order to offset this lack of time that he creates the timeless world of his plays.

Unbelief for Williams is an impossibility; for unbelief is inorganic in the sense that it is an interruption in the development of the whole, created personality. Despite the Freudian fingers popularly pointed at Williams, the playwright’s principle of belief is totally un-Freudian. (Freud, an unbeliever himself, said that “experience of God is reducible and that unbelief represents a higher degree of development, while belief represents retrogression to a lower degree of the sense of realism.”⁵) Williams nowhere doubts God as a primary cause. In his characters’ heavily felt sense of creaturehood he elaborates his full belief that God is the whole of everything, is the cause of everything. It is, however, the nature of this Prime Causality that greatly disturbs the Williams world.

Williams and his characters see God in two ways. Shannon’s sentence can be completed by one or the other selections in Williams’ dual choice. God is perceived either as an Old Testament God of Wrath ruling over a semi-Calvinistic cycle of guilt-submission-atonement-uncertainty, or a New Testament God of Love offering a cycle of need-submission-communication-salvation. In either case, however, surrender of the creature is required, and it is here that Williams’ difficulty begins; for the idea of God in man is not a flash occurrence; it is the result of organic growth. From identification with parents, siblings, and others in the domestic environment, the personality develops an ego-ideal which is free of the short-comings of the real ego. A tension develops between egos. “Consciously or unconsciously, the proper ego makes continual comparison with the ideal ego. Conscience, feeling of guilt, self-criticism are the usual expressions of this relationship.”⁶ Beyond this ego and super-ego development lies the awakening of the libido on the sensory levels of oral-eroticism, anal-sadistic

³ *Night of the Iguana* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 56-57.

⁴ *The Knightly Quest and Other Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. 59.

⁵ H. C. Rumke, *The Psychology of Unbelief: Character and Temperament in Relation to Unbelief* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

phase, and the genital stage. The Oedipus complex which arises during the genital stage as a boy fixates on the mother with a concomitant repulsion for the father becomes latent after the genital stage until puberty when it is revived and normally solved.

Yet while still in the genital stage, the child experiences a tense polarity.

The idealized mother promotes affection, imagination and intuition. She directs emotional development...the inner life, the foundation of morality and opens the way to religious experience. The father--representing the link with the outer world--promotes by identification the sense of observation of the outer world and rouses...the aggressive instinct. He symbolizes authority, which defends and oppresses....Will power is reinforced and intelligence takes shape; ...the way is prepared towards outside reality, towards Nature, society and country.⁷

Character genesis is, therefore, particularly associated with the Oedipal-fixation of the genital stage. This is important for a playwright whose mother writes:

Friction between Cornelius [Tennessee's father] and Tom existed from the start, with Cornelius even unconsciously putting it into words when he tried to reassure Rose upon the birth of her first baby brother: "He's no good, is he?" All through Tom's life, that seemed to be his father's feeling about him.... His father contemptuously called him "Miss Nancy." ...I just stood by and took it. I wanted my children to feel there was one parent in whom they could have faith.⁸

About her husband, Tennessee Williams' mother continues, "He took no joy in the children.... The most trivial act might spin him into a tantrum and after it was spent, he would sit on the couch and glare, when he wasn't stretched out on it snoring, recovering from a hangover."⁹ Tennessee has written of those early years of paternal violence and alienation:

On those occasional week-ends when my father visited the house...the spell of perfect peace was broken. A loud voice was heard, and heavy footsteps. Doors were slammed. Furniture was kicked and banged.... Often the voice of my father ...was harsh. And sometimes it sounded like thunder. He was a big man. Beside the slight, gentle figure of my grandfather [recall *Iguana's* Nonno], he looked awfully big. And it was not a benign bigness. You wanted to shrink away from it, to hide yourself [he might have added, like Adam and Eve cowering at the wrathful exit of an Old Testament Garden].¹⁰

The indirect point of this is what it did to Williams' personality; the direct point has to do with the displacement of his artistic ego as the displacement influences his plays' dual concept of God.

We find the infantile link with our worldly father--or the rebellion against the father originating in our Oedipus complex--rejected by our ego and projected on

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 50-51.

⁸ Edwina Dakin Williams, *Remember Me to Tom* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

the word “God” and the shape behind it. Prohibitions coming from this “projected” father help the ego in repressing rejected ambitions, especially those concerned with sex and power.¹¹

The God-image, in short, becomes delineated in terms of the father-image as experienced in early childhood. The God-father projection on *God* is colored by the father-son relationship established by the son’s father. Thus as a personal unresolved Oedipus complex becomes, in a reinforcing national-religious culture of Calvinism, projected on the word *God*, it is small wonder that the word receives angry connotations of alienation and violence. God becomes Shannon’s “senile delinquent,” Moony’s “crazy man, deaf, dumb, and blind, [who] could have put together a better kind of a world than this is,”¹² and Sebastian’s carnivorous deity of the Encantadas.

The Oedipal alienation from the violent father is wider; it becomes an ambivalent reaction—a confusion of love-hate—to the mother-sponsored inferiority which counsels passivity and surrender. This passivity is intolerable to a person whose stage of individuation has become fixated on his isolation. To become passive is to engender a feeling of existential guilt to the individual who betrays himself by making a sacrifice of individuality in becoming passive to another. This guilt-anxiety (Shannon’s spook) emerging from the sub-conscious is particularly acute in individuals who suffered

psychic traumatism in early youth—for instance...a too actively caressing mother, or a surgical operation which the child considered an outrage. Thus an operation for tonsillitis or any other surgical intervention may be the starting-point of fear of passivity: fear of a senseless urge to defend and protect oneself when surrender is demanded.¹³

This is significant—at least superficially since his psychiatrist’s records are not public—to Tennessee Williams, whose plays one feels are the pulsations of his psyche.¹⁴ When he was five years old, Williams nearly died of diphtheria. For nine nights his mother slept with him, packing his throat in ice. On the ninth day, Mrs. Williams noted that his tonsils, enlarged by the illness, had disappeared. The doctor diagnosed that the fevered child had swallowed them. For the next two years Williams had Bright’s disease which affected his kidneys and paralyzed his legs so that he could not walk. During this traumatic time, “the important people in Tom’s...life were,” his mother says, “his grandparents, his sister, Ozzie [a Negro nurse] and myself.”¹⁵ In other words, he was surrounded by a genteel old man and three doting women.

It would be no surprise if out of trauma in such an unresolved Oedipal stage the personality, in its refusal to be subjugated and duped, transmuted through simple reaction the

¹¹ Rumke, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹² *American Blues: Five Short Plays* (New York: Dramatist’s Play Service.)

¹³ Rumke, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁴ Williams attests to this equation: “Last year [1958] I thought it might help me as a writer to undertake psychoanalysis and so I did. The analyst, being acquainted with my work... [recognized] the psychic wounds expressed in it.” “Foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth in Three Plays of Tennessee Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 335.

¹⁵ Edwina Williams, p. 25.

wrathful God-father¹⁶ into the vengeful Black Mother, the *vagina dentata* of various mythologies. Williams has his complementary hero, D. H. Lawrence, say, in *I Rise in Flame*:

all women resent...anything...that distinguishes men from women....They take the male in their bodies—but only because they secretly hope that he won't be able to get back out again, that he'll be captured for good!¹⁷

Fear of passivity to women transmutes to fear of passivity to God; to illustrate this “primordial fear” of the male that he will be held fast, absorbed, annihilated, or emasculated by the female Williams has inverted what could have been the Earth-Mother-Lover into the wrathful bitch Goddesses who are often his women: the seeds were in Amanda and Blanche; they bloomed in Maggie Pollit, Maxine Faulk, Cassandra Whiteside, Carol Cutrere, Sissy Goforth, Mrs. Venable, and Lot's wife, Myrtle, in Williams' 1968 *Seven Descents of Myrtle*. These are Calvinist women, “swamp-bitches” and “female devils” in the words of Mrs. Goforth. Williams molds, therefore, the subconscious of the human condition, the national-religious bias, and the personal trauma of being subjugated to passivity into an organic and terrifying esthetic. It is typical Williams irony that Sebastian finds God, well-toothed, in the company of his ravenous mother immediately after the female-dominated act of the turtles' birth.

In the Confessional play, *Suddenly Last Summer*, the Venables' image of God is the eschatological deity of the Old Testament. While all that Mrs. Venable says must be read with a mirror, she does try to make Sebastian into the poet-priest; she emphasizes to the play's confessor, Doctor Sugar, who is (Williams' not Mrs. Venable's) Godfigure-arbiter (to perform lobotomy or not), Sebastian's virtues of chastity, discipline, and abstinence. She is like Saint Genet in her twisting to positive virtue the glories of the inverted. She sees the Venables' role of benefactor as one of sacrificial victim. Sebastian could only agree that he was indeed

¹⁶ Shannon in his pseudo-crucifixion admits an equation: he is in “rage at Mama and rage at God.” P. 95. This is the exact equation Maxine had made when she said that because Shannon had been caught masturbating by Mama the confusion of sex-mother-God started his problems. Shannon agrees, as she says: “And once she caught you at it and whaled your backside...because she said she had to punish you for it because it made God mad as much as it did Mama, and she had to punish you for it so God wouldn't punish you for it harder than she would.... You said you loved God and Mama ..., but it was your secret pleasure and you harbored a secret resentment against Mama and God.” P. 81.

¹⁷ *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix* (New York: Dramatist's Play Service, 1951). In heavily supportive repetition of the ravaging female, *vagina dentata*, theme are the following: *Iguana's* Shannon: “All women, whether they face it or not, want to see a man in a tied up situation. They work at it all their lives.” P. 97.

Sweet Bird's Chance curses the Princess who warns him of the coming of his castrators: “That [castration] can't be done to me twice. You did that to me this morning, here on this bed....” P. 448.

Cat's Maggie viciously tries to subjugate Brick by telling him how she had destroyed Skipper and made him only a *passive receptacle*: “When I came to his room that night...I destroyed him.... From then on Skipper was nothing at all but a receptacle for liquor and drugs.” *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: New Directions, 1955), p. 43.

“At the center of most of Williams' plays there is the same slightly repellent *pas de deux*: the man austere, eager to keep his purity; the woman turning to him like Potiphar's wife unto Joseph.” M. Magid, “The Innocence of Tennessee Williams,” *Commentary*, XXXV (January, 1963), p. 38.

priest-victim of the Black Mass on his own death. As he ran up the street to the “Glorious” Hill of his Golgotha, he completed “a sort of!–*image!*–he had of himself as a sort of–*sacrifice* to a!–*terrible* sort of a–...–God ...–a *cruel* one.”¹⁸ Sebastian’s fault, says Catherine Holly, who is Williams’ spokesman (note her last name, evocative of the New Testament Incarnation time), is his passivity.

*He!–accepted!–all! ...–He thought it unfitting to ever take any action about anything whatsoever!*¹⁹

In his passivity Sebastian is like his proto-portrait, Anthony Burns, in Williams’ ardently homosexual and sado-masochistic short story, “Desire and the Black Masseur.” Burns feels secure only in the passivity of a movie theater. He submits the passive surface of his white body to a Black Masseur who takes Burns’ passivity and teaches it to be active surrender. This is first key to Williams’ ambivalent view of man’s relation to God. Sebastian’s passivity to his Old Testament God is that of victim to executioner. Burns’ surrender to his Negro masseur is rather paradoxically an active turning to a passive attitude that allows an opening up to atonement and New Testament love.

Man, because of Eden’s loss, is incomplete. Eden’s loss is, perhaps, only the explaining mythology of the gap-lack between the ego and the super-ego. “The sins of the world,” Williams writes, “are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what sufferings must atone for.”²⁰ Thus the guilt that the ego feels at falling short of the ideals of the super-ego demands in Williams’ economy a “principle of atonement, the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby cleansing one’s self of his guilt.”²¹

Burns’ difference from Venable is that Burns and the Black Masseur love each other. This is what makes the eating of Burns salvific communion while the eating of Sebastian is violent cannibalism by gay-for-pay Bacchantes. Characteristically grounded in tropes, Williams cannot resist tickling his readers by having Burns’ death occurs at the end of Lent next door to a church whose religiously institutionalized people passively celebrate the “fiery poem of death on the cross,”²² that during the consumption of the man with the fiery name “Burns” the house behind the church burns down in purification–undoubtedly the doing of *Auto-De-Fe*’s Eloi, that Burns’ bones are taken to the end of the carline–presumably Blanche’s streetcar named “Desire” that goes to Elysian Fields.

This is the tension of growth in Williams’ psyche: to make the passivity he feared emotionally as a child into the active surrender he knows intellectually is the capacity of an organically composed creature. (Creature is defined as that which did not make itself, does not hold itself in existence.) In searching for a system compatible with America’s generally endemic Christianity, Williams often adds tones of Oriental philosophy which help, by their very distance

¹⁸ *Suddenly Last Summer* (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 62. Aunt Rose, rejected by her family, actively resigns herself to the hands of her Savior in “The Unsatisfactory Supper,” a playlet whose very title continues the communion-cannibalization eating imagery. Through her active passivity she triumphs over the cannibalization attempted upon her by her selfish relatives. See *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays* (New York: New Directions, 1946).

¹⁹ *Suddenly Last Summer*, p. 84.

²⁰ *One Arm and Other Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

from Western culture, to define active surrender; in addition, as he searches for metaphors of his two views of God he has settled on *mercantile* men of wrath like Big Daddy and Boss Finley to symbolize the Old Testament God-father. Opposing this eschatological metaphor is Williams' incarnational view of the New Testament God, a Christ who is young, virile, most often blond, and at least superficially a stud.

If the ego in an unresolved Oedipus complex refuses surrender to the mother, the obvious reaction is aggression. Christ's appeal as Walt Whiman's Calamus God of love is that historically he aggressed against his world, successfully enough to quiet the wrathful Old Man (although he might awaken²³) and was able to suffer a death of atonement by crucifixion on the cross of Stupidity and Cupidity²⁴ and yet be laid, dead-but-not-dead, like Kilroy in the Pieta arms of his mother, La Madrecita. Thus the ego-displacement of the God-transferred Oedipus complex becomes manifest in a desire to be equal to God, to be at once a victim of otherness, the ultimate aggressor against and savior of another. Christopher Flanders voices it as one person becoming God to another.²⁵

This person-to-person god-ness is given almost as if in answer to the Writer in *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* who keens, "Where's God? Where's Christ?...What if there is no...?" Men still need "compassion and understanding" one for another. It is also reassuring that the God of love is a social God, found in other people. This is particularly so to the Williams people who have no surety that the Mumbo-Jumbo will keep the angry Old Man asleep and "off their backs." For this reason they often cling physically together like Chris' two little animals in sleep, simply to salve the feelings of being dispossessed by a carelessly whimsical deity.²⁶

Even though the New Testament has no reassurance that the Old will not be revived, Williams proceeds to construct the New on Western civilization's Christ-base because of Christianity's inherent philosophy of *hermano*²⁷ and its ready sado-masochistic adaptation. Williams' view of the God of love, as was his view of the God of wrath, is interesting when framed by the Gilsonian perspective that man does not deduce the creature from God, but God

²³ *Camino's* Esmeralda talking of institutionalized religion says: And how do you feel about the Mumbo Jumbo? Do you think; they've got the Old Man in the bag yet?

Kilroy: The Old Man?

Esmeralda: God. We don't think so. We think there has been so much of the Mumbo Jumbo it's put Him to sleep! *Three Plays of Tennessee Williams*, p. 291.

²⁴ "Cupidity and Stupidity, that is the two-armed cross on which you have nailed me!" "The Strangest Kind of Romance" in *27 Wagons*, p. 151.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁶ Making an allegory of people in the house of a dubious master, Chris says: "Have you ever seen how two little animals sleep together, a pair of kittens or puppies? All day they seem so secure in the house of their master, but at night when they sleep, they don't seem sure of their owner's true care for them. Then they draw close together....Their owner's house is never a sure protection, a reliable shelter. Everything going on in it is mysterious to them, and no matter how hard they try to please, how do they know if they please? ...We're all of us living in a house we're not used to....We're left alone with each other." *Milk Train*, pp. 73-74.

²⁷ *Camino* is particularly concerned with *hermanos*, brothers in brotherhood, to waylay the dispossession man feels under the ambivalent deity.

from the creature.²⁸ Therefore, to find God Williams has looked not only at his wrathful or loving fellows, but more importantly he has looked into his own experience of wrath and love, into his own existential isolation and refracts for himself what for him works as an image of God.

Because the nature of God is uncertain, because space and time are prisons, and because deserts lie between the closest individuals, Williams has Kilroy—made patsy willy nilly—shout that the whole human race has been shanghaied.²⁹ And because Williams-Kilroy will not be passive, will not buy the “Sleep-Sleep” Lotus-Eater cry of *Camino*’s street people,³⁰ will not make the easy escape through the consuming vaginal arch called The Way Out,³¹ he suffers a terrible tension in his attempts to be awake and to awaken others.

A significant proportion of Williams’ plays occur on the liturgical feasts of Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. When so used, the tropes of these feasts are sometimes incorporated to give italicized theological dimension to the human condition. For instance, Boss Finley’s messiah-complex is handsomely enlarged in his own mind when university students burn him in effigy on Good Friday; he then proceeds ironically to have Chance castrated on the feast of second life, Easter Sunday, the same day that both Val Xaviers (Saviors) are burned. The Xaviers’ deaths are the fiery demises of the phoenix, that symbol of resurrection whose banner Williams explicitly states must hang over the Camino Real “since resurrections are so much a part of its [the play’s] meaning.” Lady-Myra (whose name scrambles the Christian Blessed Lady Mary) celebrates her conception by telling a biblical trope, the story of the fig tree, and by asking to be decorated with Christmas ornaments.

This liturgical location of his plays is Williams’ grimace of irony; for in Williams there is no providence: Mary doesn’t help a Christian;³² she gives no sign;³³ and God doesn’t free the iguana.³⁴ Consequently, the Williams people are driven like the writer in the short story, “Night

²⁸ Etienne Gilson, *A Gilson Reader*, edited by Anton C. Pegis (New York: Doubleday Image, 1957), p. 101.

²⁹ *Camino Real in Three Plays*, p. 221.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³² This is Kilroy’s plea throughout *Camino*.

³³ In *The Rose Tattoo*, Serafina, in her doubt, repeatedly asks for a sign from the Virgin Mary. Act One, for instance, ends with the plea: “Lady, give me a sign!” and Act Two begins with it.

³⁴ Shannon says: “Now Shannon is going to go down there with his machete and cut the damn lizard loose so it can run back to its bushes because God won’t do it and we are going to play God here.” *Iguana*, p. 122. Once again, in lieu of a dubiously silent God, people must be responsible for each other. Only in *Slapstick Tragedy* is there any kind of providence or divine intervention: in *The Mutilated*, set at Christmas time, Celeste and Trinket are reconciled by an “apparition,” the presence of the Virgin Mary; in *Fräulein*, the Fräulein says that God threw her a fish. In both instances, the individuals are sub-normal. Celeste and Trinket are delusional drunken whores and the Fräulein, torn to shreds by birds, is merely translating her own act of love and calling it “providence” as she knows all too well the sacrifice of her being God to Indian Joe. *The Slapstick Tragedy: The Gnädiges Fräulein and The Mutilated*, *Esquire* (August, 1965).

of the Iguana,” to say: “The help of God! ...Failing that, I have to depend on myself.”³⁵ But the more knowledgeable people know that because there is no providence, human beings must take social responsibility for each other. This is the responsible vocation which Christopher Flanders assumes in aiding old men to drown and aged women to die. It is summed in the forbidden word” which the Christ-figure Dreamer says as he places his arm about a blinded Survivor: *Hermano! Brother!* Gutman calls it “the most dangerous word in any human tongue.” But Casanova says, “People need the word. They’re thirsty for it!”³⁶ They need the mutual compassion it implies. As a result, its violation, deliberate cruelty, is the “one unforgivable thing.”³⁷ This is sin—a very original sin—in Williams original theology: sin is not so much an offense against some God, but an establishment of alienation between people which keeps them from meaning God to each other.

Alma and John debate the Williams theology as do the virtually anagram-named Hannah and Shannon. Alma sees the footprints of an otherwise inscrutable God in the science of medicine because it is a social service. She professes that a doctor receives his appointed vocation from God and this “is more religious than being a priest!”³⁸ As a small girl, Alma meeting John held her hands as if to receive a Communion wafer; grown up, she tells him that he is “like holy bread ...among us.”³⁹ John, then, after a cynical disquisition on religious neurotics, gives Williams’ famous anatomy lecture, the Puritan-Cavalier confrontation with its resultant reversal of roles. This is perverse Williams again as John himself through good works of brotherhood and Alma, lovelorn, withdraws from all brotherhood by selling herself (mercantile damnation) to salesmen.

In *Iguana*, Hannah argues with Shannon that he has gone too far in making pseudo-identification with the Brother of Brothers, the Lover of Lovers, Christ. She is like *I Rise in Flame*’s Frieda who shouts at Williams’ other Lawrence:

You can’t stand Jesus Christ because he beat you to it. Oh, how you would have loved to suffer the original crucifixion.⁴⁰

Hannah lashes him for enjoying his voluptuous crucifixion, tied into a hammock, “no nails, no blood, no death.”⁴¹ In fury that Hannah punctures his act of pseudo-atonement, Shannon threatens a satanic Black Consecration of hemlock and poppyseed tea which will kill the Old Man, Nonno. Hannah screams for him to stop; he has gone too far in being active (the reason he is tied) just as others had gone too far in being passive. Either extreme is Mrs. Winemiller’s puzzle in which “the pieces don’t fit.”⁴² And either extreme leads to psychotic desperation, “the sort of

³⁵ *One Arm and Other Stories*, p. 193.

³⁶ *Camino Real*, p. 189.

³⁷ *Streetcar*, p. 146.

³⁸ *Summer and Smoke*, p. 134.

³⁹ *Eccentricities of a Nightingale in Two Plays by Tennessee Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 75.

⁴⁰ *I Rise in Flame*, p. 8.

⁴¹ *Iguana*, p. 96.

⁴² *Summer and Smoke in Two Plays*, p. 151.

desperation that comes after even desperation has been worn out through long wear!”⁴³

The Survivor in *Camino Real* prescribes the moderate antidote to extreme activity and passivity: “When Peeto, my pony, was born—he stood on his four legs at once, and accepted the world!” This kind of active submission typifies Williams’ preoccupation of late with an Oriental theme of acceptance. His *Milk Train* integrates “a pair of stage assistants that function in a way that’s between the Kabuki Theater of Japan and the chorus of Greek theater.”⁴⁴ To this form of pure theatricality he has matched fitting matter, a theological posture of Oriental active-submission which he feels is not only wisdom for the human condition but is also compatible with Western versions of Christianity’s new dispensation of love.

To surrender the ego, a problem not only Oedipally difficult, but also dangerous because of the advantage it gives the other, is the only route Williams sees to balanced creature-Creator relations.

The many offenses our egos have to endure...are better accepted...Otherwise what you become is a bag full of curdled cream—*leche mala*, we call it!—attractive to nobody, least of all yourself!⁴⁵

This is what Shannon is told by Hannah as she becomes more Eastern, a “Thin-Standing-Up-Female-Buddha.” She tells Shannon of her love experience with the Aussie underwear fetishist. “The moral” of that story, she says, “is oriental. Accept whatever situation you cannot improve.” She doesn’t want him to accept the falsely passive “no sweat” philosophy being sold by Maxine and she doesn’t want him to take the hyper-activist’s “long swim to China.”⁴⁶ Neither would she approve of Gewinner’s lover, Dr. Horace Greaves, whose

samadhi (a trance-like condition known to Hindu mystics and their disciples) was probably only synthetic since he could enter a customs shed with apparent, dreamlike composure but was apt to go to pieces if a customs officer inquired into the nature of certain pills and vials that were tucked away into his luggage.⁴⁷

Alma when drugged, however, finds her repressed ego more constructively released:

Those tablets work quickly....I’m beginning to feel almost like a water lily...on a Chinese lagoon.⁴⁸

Sissy Goforth lives on the Divine Coast, achieves pseudo-Nirvana on drugs, dresses in Chinese

⁴³ *Camino Real in Three Plays*, p. 240.

⁴⁴ *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore* (New York: New Directions 1964), p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Camino Real in Three Plays*, p. 327. The imagery of milk in Williams is intricately meaningful. Its best summary is here in *Camino*. When mother’s milk turns bad, when the milk of human kindness is not the cup, specifically named as consecrated in *Milk Train*, then men cannot mean God one to another and they become *leche mala*, sour on themselves and each other.

⁴⁶ *Iguana*, pp. 98, 115, 99.

⁴⁷ *Knightly Quest*, p. 29.

⁴⁸ *Summer and Smoke*, p. 178.

ritual robes, and receives unknowingly a true guru teacher, an author of a book of Hindu verse entitled *Meanings Known and Unknown*. He is a blond, bearded Christ-figure about whom everything is a contradiction. He counsels a Calvinistic world to a wise dualism of keeping the body in a state of repair because it is the home of the spirit. Sissy—who is a social sissy—accuses him of being a saint because unlike most people who “get panicky when they’re not cared for by somebody,” he gets panicky when he has “no one to care for.”⁴⁹ Sissy’s rejection of him grows when she learns from the pagan Fata-Morgana Witch of Capri that Christopher (Christ-bearer) has the medieval reputation of being the Angel of Death. Then alternately repelled and fascinated by him, Sissy asks Chris for a kiss. He refuses; for a kiss now would be a Judas kiss. Sex between them would obfuscate in her mind exactly what was Chris’ spiritual mission to her. His refusal ignites her sarcastic question: “Can you walk on water?” This aggressive woman, whose early history was undoubtedly that of the waif in the story, “This Property Is Condemned,” cannot bear to hear Chris’ message of life and death: “*Accept it....Accept it.*” She cannot see that acceptance is not weak passivity. Significantly, as she lies dying, the hospital *Salvatore Mundi* (Savior of the World), cannot be reached by telephone. “Acceptance,” Chris says to the dying woman.

Mrs. Goforth: What of?

Chris: Oh many things, everything, nearly. Such as how to live and to die in a way that’s more dignified than most of us know how to do it. And of how not to be frightened of not knowing what isn’t meant to be known, acceptance of not knowing anything but the moment of still existing, until we stop existing—and acceptance of that moment too.

And she dies not understanding, not accepting, screaming at Chris: “No, *no*, go. Let me go!!” He stands over her quietly sipping “the milk as if it were sacramental wine,”⁵⁰ unable because of her resistance to become God to her as Doctor Sugar had to Catharine when she gave him her resistance, actively choosing to be passive.⁵¹

About human beings unwilling to admit that it is acceptance, the active submission of the ego, which is the answer to their existential tensions, *Adjustment*’s Isabel says:

They’ve all got a nervous tremor of some kind.... The world is a big hospital ...a big neurological ward and I am a student nurse in it.⁵²

Like Chris she finds her vocation in others, a student of her self simultaneously. She finds God in them and they in her, all accepting the fact that this is the best they can do. Williams specifies this in his autobiographical “Grand” when he says of his grandmother who loved him: “‘Grand’ was all that we knew of God in our lives!”⁵³

God exists for Williams as factually as does his father; but the way to approach that fact is a psychic problem. Not to know whether God is an avenger (this eschatology leads to the basic

⁴⁹ Milk Train, p. 73.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 82, 110, 65, 92,105, 113,114.

⁵¹ The long, “resistance” passage of *Suddenly Last Summer* begins the climax of the play with Doctor Sugar’s injection into Catharine’s willing arm. p. 66.

⁵² *Period of Adjustment* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 118.

⁵³ “Grand” in *The Knightly Quest*, p. 172.

existential desperation in all Williams' plays) or whether he is a lover (as Williams hopes) loved in what seems more than a makeshift way in other people, leads Alexandra to pray in the last act of *Sweet Bird*: "Someday, the mystery god may step down from behind his clock like an actor divesting himself of make-up and costume."

Williams' God is, in short, the father of the fragile *Menagerie*, the father who fell in love with long distance. His existence is known, but he sends no word, no address; he makes no claim to the wornout recordings he left behind. The family he abandoned, the brotherhood of men, must cling together—the only sure hope—to belie the statement of *Sweet Bird*'s Heckler who says: "I believe that the silence of God, the absolute speechlessness of Him is a long, long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of."⁵⁴ ©1966, 1970, 2004 Jack Fritscher

⁵⁴ *Sweet Bird*, p. 433.