Anne fleche – the space of madness and desire assignment

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Tennessee Williams exploits the expressionistic uses of space in the drama, attempting to represent desire from the outside, that is, in its formal challenge to realistic stability and closure, and in its exposure to risk. Loosening both stage and verbal languages from their implicit desire for closure and containment, Streetcar exposes the danger and the violence of this desire, which is always the desire for the end of desire. Writing in a period when U. S. rama was becoming disillusioned with realism, Williams achieves a critical distance from realistic technique through his use of allegory. In Blanche's line about the streetcar, the fact that she is describing real places, cars, and transfers has the surprising effect of enhancing rather than diminishing the metaphorical parallels in her language. Indeed, Streetcar's " duplicities of expression"(3) are even more striking in the light of criticism's recent renewal of interest in allegory. 4) For allegory establishes the distance " between the representative and the semantic function of language" (I89), the desire that is in language to unify (with) experience. Streetcar demonstrates the ways in which distance in the drama can be expanded and contracted, and what spatial relativism reveals about the economy of dramatic representation. Tennessee Williams' plays, filled with allegorical language, seem also to have a tentative, unfinished character. The metalanguage of desire seems to preclude development, to deny progress.

And yet it seems " natural" to read A Streetcar Named Desire as an allegorical journey toward Blanche's apocalyptic destruction at the hands of her " executioner," Stanley. The play's violence, its baroque images of decadence and lawlessness, promise its audience the thrilling destruction of

the aristocratic Southern Poe-esque moth-like neuraesthenic female “ Blanche” by the ape-like brutish male from the American melting-pot. The play is full in fact of realism’s developmental language of evolution, “ degeneration,” eugenics.

Before deciding that Stanley is merely an “ ape,” Blanche sees him as an asset: “ Oh, I guess he’s just not the type that goes for jasmine perfume, but maybe he’s what we need to mix with our blood now that we’ve lost Belle Reve” (285). The surprising thing about this play is that the allegorical reading also seems to be the most “ realistic” one, the reading that imposes a unity of language and experience to make structural sense of the play, that is, to make its events organic, natural, inevitable.

And yet this feels false, because allegorical language resists being pinned down by realistic analysis — it is always only half a story. But it is possible to close the gap between the language and the stage image, between the stage image and its “ double” reality, by a double forgetting: first we have to forget that realism is literature, and thus already a metaphor, and then we have to forget the distance between allegory and reality. To say that realism’s empiricism is indistinguishable from metaphor is to make it one with a moral, natural ordering of events.

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 order events sequentially requires a reading that finds Blanche’s rape inevitable, a condition of the formal structure: she is the erring woman who gets what she “ asks” for (her realistic antecedents are

clear). For the prigs this outcome might not be unthinkable, though 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.

What makes Streetcar different from Williams' earlier play The Glass Menagerie (I944)(5) is its constant self-betrayal into and out of analytical norms. The realistic set-ups in this play really feel like set-ups, a magician's tricks, inviting readings that leave you hanging from your own schematic noose. Analytically, this play is a trap; it is brilliantly confused; yet without following its leads there is no way to get anywhere at all. Streetcar has a map, but it has changed the street signs, relying on the impulse of desire to take the play past its plots.

In a way it is wrong to say Williams does not write endings. He writes elaborate strings of them. Williams has given Streetcar strong ties to the reassuring rhetoric of realism. Several references to Stanley's career as “ A Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps” (258) set the action in the “ present,” immediately after the war. The geographical location, as with The Glass Menagerie, is specific, the neighborhood life represented with a greater naturalistic fidelity: “ Above he music of the ‘ Blue Piano' the voices of people on the street can be heard overlapping” (243).

Lighting and sound effects may give the scene “ a kind of lyricism” (243), but this seems itself a realistic touch for “ The Quarter” (4I2). Even the interior set, when it appears (after a similar wipe-out of the fourth wall), resembles The Glass Menagerie in lay-out and configuration: a ground-floor apartment,

with two rooms separated by portieres, occupied by three characters, one of them male. Yet there are also troubling “ realistic” details, to which the play seems to point. The mise en scene seems to be providing too much enclosure to provide for closure: there is no place for anyone to go.

There is no fire escape, even though in this play someone does yell “ Fire] Fire] Fire]” (390). In fact, heat and fire and escape are prominent verbal and visual themes. And the flat does not, as it seems to in The Glass Menagerie, extend to other rooms beyond the wings, but ends in a cul-de-sac — a doorway to the bathroom which becomes Blanche’s significant place for escape and “ privacy. ” Most disturbing, however, is not the increased sense of confinement but this absence of privacy, of analytical, territorial space.

No gentleman caller invited for supper invades this time, but an anarchic wilderness of French Quarter hoi polloi who spill onto the set and into the flat as negligently as the piano music from the bar around the corner. There does not seem to be anywhere to go to evade the intrusiveness and the violence: when the flat erupts, as it does on the poker night, Stanley’s tirade sends Stella and Blanche upstairs to Steve and Eunice, the landlords with, of course, an unlimited run of the house (“ We own this place so I can let you in” 48), whose goings-on are equally violent and uncontained. Stella jokes, “ You know that one upstairs? more laughter One time laughing the plaster — laughing cracked — ” (294). The violence is not an isolated climax, but a repetitive pattern of the action, a state of being – it does not resolve anything: BLANCHE I’m not used to such MITCH Naw, it’s a shame this had to happen when you just got here. But don’t take it serious. BLANCHE Violence] Is so MITCH Set down on the steps and have a cigarette with e. (308) Anxiety

and conflict have become permanent and unresolvable, inconclusive. It is not clear what, if anything, they mean. Unlike realistic drama, which produces clashes in order to push the action forward, Streetcar disallows its events a clarity of function, an orderliness. The ordering of events, which constitutes the temporality of realism, is thus no less arbitrary in Streetcar than the ordering of spade: the outside keeps becoming the inside, and vice versa.

Williams has done more to relativize space in Streetcar than he did in The Glass Menagerie, where he visualized the fourth wall: here the outer wall appears and disappears more than a half-dozen times, often in the middle of a " scene," drawing attention to the spatial illusion rather than making its boundaries absolute. The effect on spatial metaphor is that we are not allowed to forget that it is metaphor and consequently capable of infinite extensions and retractions.

As we might expect, then, struggle over territory between Stanley and Blanche (" Hey, canary bird] Toots] Get OUT of the BATHROOM]" 367) — which indeed results in Stanley's reasserting the male as " King" (37I6 and pushing Blanche offstage, punished and defeated — is utterly unanalytical and unsubtle: " She'll go] Period. P. S. She'll go Tuesday]" (367). While the expressionistic sequence beginning in Scene Six with Blanche's recollection of " The Grey oy" (355) relativizes space and time, evoking Blanche's memories, it also seems to drain her expressive power. By the time Stanley is about to rape her she mouths the kinds of things Williams put on screens in The Glass Menagerie: " In desperate, desperate circumstances] Help me] Caught in a trap" (400). She is establishing her emotions like sign-posts: " Stay back] ... I warn you, don't, I'm in danger]" (40I). What had seemed a

way into Blanche’s character has had the effect of externalizing her feelings so much that they become impersonal.

In Streetcar, space does not provide, as it does in realistic drama, an objective mooring for a character’s psychology: it keeps turning inside out, obliterating the spatial distinctions that had helped to define the realistic character as someone whose inner life drove the action. Now the driving force of emotion replaces the subtlety of expectation, leaving character out in space, dangling: “ There isn’t time to be — ” Blanche explains into the phone (399); faced with a threatening proximity, she phones long-distance, and forgets to hang up. The expressionistic techniques of the latter half of he play abstract the individual from the milieu, and emotion begins to dominate the representation of events. In Scene Ten, where Blanche and Stanley have their most violent and erotic confrontation, the play loses all sense of boundary. The front of the house is already transparent; but now Williams also dissolves the rear wall, so that beyond the scene with Blanche and Stanley we can see what is happening on the next street: A prostitute has rolled a drunkard. He pursues her along the walk, overtakes her and then is a struggle. A policeman’s whistle breaks it up.

The figures disappear. Some moments later the Negro Woman appears around the corner with a sequined bag which the prostitute had dropped on the walk. She is rooting excitedly through it. (399) The mise en scene exposes more of the realistic world than before, since now we see the outside as well as the inside of the house at once, and yet the effect is one of intense general paranoia: the threat of violence is “ real,” not “ remembered” and it is everywhere. The walls have become “ spaces” along

which frightening, “ sinuous” shadows weave — “ lurid,” “ grotesque and menacing” (398-99).

The parameters of Blanche’s presence are unstable images of threatening “ flames” of desire, and this sense of sexual danger seems to draw the action toward itself. So it is as though Blanche somehow “ suggests” rape to Stanley — it is already in the air, we can see it being given to him as if it were a thought: “ You think I’ll interfere with you? Ha-ha] … Come to think of it — maybe you wouldn’t be bad to — interfere with… ” (40l). The “ inner-outer” distinctions of both realistic and expressionistic representation are shown coming together here.

Williams makes no effort to suggest that the “ lurid” expressionistic images in Scene Ten are all in Blanche’s mind, as cinematic point-of-view would: the world outside the house is the realistic world of urban poverty and violence. But it is also the domain of the brutes, whose “ inhuman jungle voices rise up” (40l) as Stanley, snakelike, tongue between his teeth, closes in. The play seems to swivel on this moment, when the logic of appearance and essence, the individual and the abstract, turns inside-out, like the set, seeming to occupy for once the same space.

It is either the demolition of realistic objectivity or the transition-point at which realism takes over some new territory. At this juncture “ objective” vision becomes an “ outside” seen from inside; for the abstraction that allows realism to represent truth objectively cannot itself be explained as objectivity. The surface in Scene Ten seems to be disclosing, without our having to look too deeply, a static primal moment beneath the immediacy of

the action — the sexual taboo underneath realistic discourse: BLANCHE Stay back] Don't you come toward me another tep or I'll STANLEY What? BLANCHE Some awful thing will happen] It will] STANLEY What are you putting on now? They are now both inside the bedroom BLANCHE I warn you, don't, I'm in danger] (40I) What " will happen" in the bedroom does not have a name, or even an agency. The incestuous relation lies beyond the moral and social order of marriage and the family, adaptation and eugenics, not to mention (as Williams minds us here) the fact that it is unmentionable. Whatever words Blanche uses to describe it scarcely matter.

As Stella says, " I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley" (405). The rape in Streetcar thus seems familiar and inevitable, even to its " characters," who lose the shape of characters and become violent antagonists as if on cue: " Oh] So you want some roughhouse] All right, let's have some roughhouse]" (402). When Blanche sinks to her knees, it is as if the action is an acknowledgment. Stanley holds Blanche, who has become " inert"; he carries her to the bed. She is not only silent but crumpled, immobile, while he takes over control and agency.

He literally places her on the set. But Williams does not suggest that Stanley is conscious and autonomous; on the contrary the scene is constructed so as to make him as unindividuated as Blanche: they seem, at this crucial point, more than ever part of an allegorical landscape. In a way, it is the impersonality of the rape that is most telling: the loss of individuality and the spatial distinctions that allow for " character" are effected in a scene that expressionistically dissolves character into an overwhelming mise en scene that, itself, seems to make things happen.

The “ meaning” of the rape is assigned by the play, denying “ Stanley” and “ Blanche” any emotion. Thus, the rape scene ends without words and without conflict: the scene has become the conflict, and its image the emotion. Perhaps Streetcar — and Williams — present problems for those interested in Pirandellian metatheatre. Metatheatre assumes a self-consciousness of the form; but Williams makes the “ form” everything. It is not arbitrary, or stifling. Stanley and Blanche cannot be reimagined; or, put another way, they cannot be imagined to reimagine themselves as other people, in other circumstances entirely.

Character is the expression of the form; it is not accidental, or originary. Like Brecht, Williams does not see character as a humanist impulse raging against fatal abstractions. (In a play like The Good Person of Setzuan, for example, Brecht makes a kind of comedy of this “ tragic” notion — which is of course the notion of “ tragedy. “) Plays are about things other than people: they are about what people think, and feel, and yet they remove these things to a distance, towards the representation of thoughts and feelings, which is something else again.

If this seems to suggest that the rape in Streetcar is something other than a rape, and so not a rape, it also suggests that it is as much a rape as it is possible for it to be; it includes the understanding that comes from exposing the essence of appearances, as Williams says, seeing from outside what we cannot see from within. At the same time, and with the same motion, the scene exposes its own scenic limitations for dramatizing that which must inevitably remain outside the scene — namely, the act it represents.

Both the surface “ street scene” and the jungle antecedents of social order are visible in the rape scene, thoroughly violating the norms of realism’s analytical space. When Stanley “ springs” at Blanche, overturning he table, it is clear that a last barrier has been broken down, and now there is no space outside the jungle. “ We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning]” We have regressed to some awful zero-point (or hour) of our beginning. (A “ fetid swamp,” Time critic Louis Kronenberger said of Williams’ plays, by way of description. (7) We are also back at the heart of civilization, at its root, the incest taboo, and the center of sexuality, which is oddly enough also the center of realism — the family, where “ sexuality is ‘ incestuous’ from the start. “(8) At the border of civilization and the swamp is the sexual transgression whose suppression is the source of all coercive order. Through allegory, Williams makes explicit what realistic discourse obscures, forcing the sexuality that propels discourse into the content of the scene. The destruction of spatial oundaries visualizes the restless discourse of desire, that uncontainable movement between inside and outside. “ Desire,” Williams writes in his short story “ Desire and the Black Masseur” (I942-46), “ is something that is made to occupy a larger space than that which is afforded by the individual being. “(9) The individual being is only the measure of a measurelessness that goes far out into space. “ Desire” derives from the Latin sidus, “ star” (“ Stella for Star]” 250, 25I); an archaic sense is “ to feel the loss of”: the ndividual is a sign of incompleteness, not self-sufficiency, whose defining gesture is an indication of the void beyond the visible, not its closure. The consciousness of desire as a void without satisfaction is the rejection of realism’s “ virtual space,” which tried to suggest that its fractured space implied an unseen totality. Realism’s

objectivity covered up its literariness, as if the play were not created from nothing, but evolved out of a ready-made logic, a reality one had but to look to see.

But literature answers the desire for a fullness that remains unfulfilled — it never intersects reality, never completes a trajectory, it remains in orbit. The nothing from which literature springs, whole, cannot be penetrated by a vision, even a hypothetical one, and no time can be found for its beginning. As Paul de Man reasons in his discussion of Levi-Strauss' metaphor of " virtual focus," logical sight-lines may be imaginary, but they are not " fiction," any more than " fiction" can be explained as logic: The virtual focus is a quasi-objective structure osited to give rational integrity to a process that exists independently of the self. The subject merely fills in, with the dotted line of geometrical construction, what natural reason had not bothered to make explicit; it has a passive and unproblematic role. The " virtual focus" is, strictly speaking, a nothing, but its nothingness concerns us very little, since a mere act of reason suffices to give it a mode of being that leaves the rational order unchallenged. The same is not true of the imaginary source of fiction.

Here the human self has experienced the void within itself and the invented fiction, far from tilling the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness, our nothingness stated and restated by a subject that is the agent of its own instability. (I9) Nothingness, then, the impulse of " fiction," is not the result of a supposed originary act of transgression, a mere historical lapse at the origin of history that can be traced or filled in by a language of logic and

analysis; on the contrary fiction is the liberation of a pure consciousness of desire as unsatisfied yearning, a space without boundaries.

Yet we come back to Blanche's rape by her brother-in-law, which seems visibly to re-seal the laws of constraint, to justify that Freudian logic of lost beginnings. Reenacting the traumatic incestuous moment enables history to begin over again, while the suppression of inordinate desire resumes the order of sanity: Stella is silenced; Blanche is incarcerated. And if there is some ambivalence about her madness and her exclusion it is subsumed in an argument for order and a healthy re-direction of desire. In the last stage direction, Stanley's groping fingers discover the opening of Stella's blouse.

The final set-up feels inevitable; after all, the game is still " Seven-card stud," and aren't we going to have to " go on" by playing it? The play's turn to realistic logic seems assured, and Williams is still renouncing worlds. He points to the closure of the analytical reading with deft disingenuousness. Closure was always just next door to entrapment: Williams seems to be erasing their boundary-lines. Madness, the brand of exclusion, objectifies Blanche and enables her to be analyzed and confined as the embodiment of non-being, an expression of something beyond us and so structured in language.

As Stanley puts it, " There isn't a goddam thing but imagination] … And lies and conceit and tricks]" (398). Foucault has argued, in Madness and Civilization, that the containment of desire's excess through the exclusion of madness creates a conscience on the perimeters of society, setting up a boundary between inside and outside: " The madman is put into the interior

of the exterior, and inversely" (II). (I0) Blanche is allegorically a reminder that liberty if taken too far can also be captivity, just as her libertinage coincides with her desire for death (her satin robe is a passionate red, she calls Stanley her " executioner," etc. . And Blanche senses early on the threat of confinement; she keeps trying perversely) to end the play: " I have to plan for us both, to get us both — out]" she tells Stella, after the fight with Stanley that seems, to Blanche, so final (320). But in the end the play itself seems to have some trouble letting go of Blanche. Having created its moving boundary line, it no longer knows where to put her: what " space" does her " madness" occupy? As the dialogue suggests, she has to go – somewhere; she has become excessive. Yet she keeps coming back: " I'm not quite ready. " Yes] Yes, I forgot something]" (4I2 4I4). Again, as in the rape scene, she is chased around the bedroom, this time by the Matron, while " The ' Varsouviana' is filtered into a weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle," the " lurid," " sinuous" reflections on the walls (4I4). The Matron's lines are echoed by " other mysterious voices" (4I5) somewhere beyond the scene; she sounds like a " firebell" (4I5). " Matron" and " Doctor" enter the play expressionistically, as functional agents, and Blanche's paranoia is now hers alone: the street is not visible.

The walls do not disintegrate, they come alive. Blanche is inside her own madness, self-imprisoned: her madness is precisely her enclosure within the image. (II) In her paranoid state, Blanche really cannot " get out," because there no longer is an outside: madness transgresses and transforms boundaries, as Foucault notes, " forming an act of undetermined content" (94). It thus negates the image while imprisoned within it; the boundaries of

the scene are not helping to define Blanche but reflecting her back to herself. Blanche’s power is not easy to suppress; she is a eminder that beneath the appearance of order something nameless has been lost: “ What’s happened here? I want an explanation of what’s happened here. ” she says, “ with sudden hysteria” (407-8). It is a reasonable request that cannot be reasonably answered. This was also Williams’ problem at the end of The Glass Menagerie: how to escape from the image when it seems to have been given too much control, when its reason is absolute? Expressionism threatens the reason of realistic mise en scene by taking it perhaps too far, stretching the imagination beyond limits toward an absoluteness of the image, a desire of desire.

The “ mimetic” mirror now becomes the symbol of madness: the image no longer simply reflects desire (desire of, desire for), but subsumes the mirror itself into the language of desire. When Blanche shatters her mirror (39I) she (like Richard II) shows that her identity has already been fractured; what she sees in the mirror is not an image, it is indistinguishable from herself. And she cries out when the lantern is torn off the lightbulb, because there is no longer a space between the violence she experiences and the image of that violence.

The inner and the outer worlds fuse, the reflecting power of the image is destroyed as it becomes fully self-reflective. The passion of madness exists somewhere in between determinism and expression, which at this point “ actually form only one and the same movement which cannot be dissociated except after the fact. “(I2) But realism, that omnivorous discourse, can subsume even the loss of the subjective-objective distinction — when

determinism equals expression — and return to some quasi-objective perspective.

Thus at the very moment when all space seems to have been conquered, filled in and opened up, there is a need to parcel it out again into clearly distinguishable territories. Analysis imprisons desire. At the end of A Streetcar Named Desire, there is a little drama. Blanche's wild expressionistic images are patronized and pacified by theatricality: " I — just told her that — we'd made arrangements for her to rest in the country. She's got it mixed in her mind with Shep Huntleigh" (404-5). Her family plays along with Blanche's delusions, even to costuming her in her turquoise seahorse pin and her artificial violets.

The Matron tries to subdue her with physical violence, but Blanche is only really overcome by the Doctor's politeness. Formerly an expressionistic " type," having " the unmistakable aura of the state institution with its cynical detachment" (4II), the Doctor ... takes off his hat and now he becomes personalized. The unhuman quality goes. His voice is gentle and reassuring s he crosses to Blanche and crouches in front of her. As he speaks her name, her terror subsides a little. The lurid reflections fade from the walls, the inhuman cries and noises die our and her own hoarse crying is calmed. 4I7) Blanche's expressionistic fit is contained by the Doctor's realistic transformation: he is particularized, he can play the role of gentleman caller. " Jacket, Doctor? " the Matron asks him. " He smiles ... It won't be necessary" (4I7-I8). As they exit, Blanche's visionary excesses have clearly been surrendered to him: " She allows him to lead her as if she were blind. " Stylistically, he, realism replaces expressionism at the exact moment when

expressionism's " pure subjectivity" seems ready to annihilate the subject, to result in her violent subjugation.

At this point the intersubjective dialogue returns, clearly masking indeed blinding — the subjective disorder with a assuring form. If madness is perceived as a kind of " social failure,"(I3) social success is to be its antidote. Of course theater is a cure for madness: by dramatizing or literalizing the image one destroys it. Such theatricality might risk its own confinement in the image, and for an instant there may be a real struggle in the drama between the image and the effort to contain it. But the power of realism over expressionism makes this a rare occasion.

For the " ruse," Foucault writes, "... ceaselessly confirming the delirium , does not bind it to its own truth without at the same time linking it to the necessity for its own suppression" (I89). Using illusion to destroy illusion requires a forgetting of the leap of reason and of the trick it plays on optics. To establish order, the theatrical device repeats the ordering principle it learns from theater, the representational gap between nature and language, a gap it has to deny: " The artificial reconstitution of delirium constitutes the real distance in which the sufferer recovers his liberty" (I90).

In fact there is no return to " intersubjectivity," just a kind of formal recognition of it: " Whoever you are — I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. " Streetcar makes the return to normality gentle and theatrical, while " revealing" much more explicitly than The Glass Menagerie the violence that is thereby suppressed. This violence is not " reality," but yet another theater underneath the theater of ruse; the cure of illusion is

ironically “ effected by the suppression of theater” (I9I). The realistic containment at the end of Streetcar hus does not quite make it back all the way to realism’s seamlessly objective “ historical” truth. History, structured as it is by “ relations of power, not relations of meaning,”(I4) sometimes assumes the power of reality itself, the platonic Form behind realism, so to speak, When it becomes the language of authority, history also assumes the authority of language, rather naively trusting language to be the reality it represents. The bloody wars and strategic battles are soon forgotten into language, the past tense, the fait accompli.

Useless to struggle against the truth that is past: history is the waste of time and the corresponding conquest of space, and realism is the already conquered territory, the belated time with the unmistakable stamp of authenticity. It gets applause simply by being plausible; it forgets that it is literature. To read literature, de Man says, we ought to remember what we have learned from it — that the expression and the expressed can never entirely coincide, that no single observation point is trustworthy (I0-II).

Streetcar’s powerful explosion of allegorical language and expressionistic images keeps its vantage point on the move, at a remove. Every plot is untied. Realism rewards analysis, and Williams invites it, perversely, but any analysis results in dissection. To provide Streetcar with an exegesis seems like gratuitous destruction, “ deliberate cruelty. ” Perhaps no other American writer since Dickinson has seemed so easy to crush. And this consideration ought to give the writer who has defined Blanche’s “ madness” some pause. Even the critical awareness of her tidy incarceration makes for too tidy a criticism.

In Derrida's analysis of Foucault's Madness and Civilization, he questions the possibility of " historicizing" something that does not exist outside of the imprisonment of history, of speech — madness " simply says the other of each determined form of the logos. "(I5) Madness, Derrida proposes, is a " hyperbole" out of which " finite-thought, that is to say, history" establishes its " reign" by the " disguised internment, humiliation, fettering and mockery of the madman within us, of the madman who can only be a fool of a logos which is father, master and king" (60-6I).

Philosophy arises from the " confessed terror of going mad" (62); it is the " economic" embrace of madness (6I-62) To me then Williams' play seems to end quite reasonably with a struggle, at the point in the play at which structure and coherence must assert themselves (by seeming to) — that is, the end of the play. The end must look back, regress, so as to sum up and define. It has no other choice. The theatrical ending always becomes, in fact, the real ending. It cannot remain metaphorically an " end" And what is visible at the end is Blanche in trouble, trapped, mad.

She is acting as though she believed in a set of events — Shep Huntleigh's rescue of her — that the other characters, by their very encouragement, show to be unreal. There is a fine but perhaps important line here: Blanche's acting is no more convincing than theirs; but — and this is a point Derrida makes about madness — she is thinking things before they can be historicized, that is, before they have happened or even have been shown to be likely or possible (reasonable). Is not what is called finitude possibility as crisis? " Derrida asks (62). The other characters, who behave as if what Blanche is saying were real, underline her absurdity precisely by invoking

reality. Blanche's relations to history and to structural authority are laid bare by this " forced" ending, in which she repeatedly questions the meaning of meaning: " What has happened here? " This question implies the relativity of space and moment, and so of " events" and their meanings, which are at-this point impossible to separate.

That is why it is important that the rape suggest an overthrow of meaning, not only through a stylized emphasis on its own representation, but also through its strongly relativized temporality. (Blanche warns against what " will happen," while Stanley says the event is the future, the fulfillment of a " date" or culmination in time promised " from the beginning. ") Indeed, the problem of madness lies precisely in this gap between past and future, in the structural slippage between the temporal and the ontological.

For if madness, as Derrida suggests, can exist at all outside of opposition (to reason), it must exist in " hyperbole," in the excess prior to its incarceration in structure, meaning, time, and coherence. A truly " mad" person would not objectify madness — would not, that is, define and locate it. That is why all discussions of " madness" tend to essentialize it, by insisting, like Blanche's fellow characters at the end of Streetcar, that it is real, that it exists.

And the final stroke of logic, the final absurdity, is that in order to insist that madness exists, to objectify and define and relate to it, it is necessary to deny it any history. Of course " madness" is not at all amenable to history, to structure, causality, rationality, recognizable " though" But this denial of the history of madness has to come from within history itself, from within the language of structure and " meaning. " Blanche's demand to know " what

has happened here" — her insistence that something " has happened," however one takes it — has to be unanswerable.

It cannot go any further. In theatrical terms, the " belief" that would make that adventure of meaning possible has to be denied, shut down. But this theatrical release is not purifying; on the contrary, it has got up close to the plague, to the point at which reason and belief contaminate each other: the: possibility of thinking madly. Reason and madness can cohabitate with nothing but a thin curtain between. And curtains are not walls, they do not provide solid protection. (I6) Submitting Williams' allegorical language to ealistic analysis, then, brings you to conclusions: the imprisonment of madness, the loss of desire. The moral meaning smooths things over. Planning to " open up" Streetcar for the film version with outside scenes and flashbacks, Elia Kazan found it would not work — he ended up making the walls movable so they could actually close in more with every scene. (I7) The sense of entrapment was fundamental: Williams' dramatic language is itself too free, too wanton, it is a trap, it is asking to be analyzed, it lies down on the couch.

Kazan saw this perverse desire in the play — he thought Streetcar was about Williams' cruising for tough customers: The reference to the kind of life Tennessee was leading rear the time was clear. Williams was aware of the dangers he was inviting when he cruised; he knew that sooner or later he'd be beaten up. And he was. (35I) But Kazan undervalues the risk Williams is willing to take. It is not just violence that cruising invites, but death. And that is a desire that cannot be realized.

Since there is really no way to get what you want, you have to put yourself in a position where you do not always want what you get. Pursuing desire requires a heroic vulnerability. At the end of “ Desire and the Black Masseur” the little masochistic artist/saint, Anthony Burns, is cannibalized by the masseur, who has already beaten him to a pulp. Burns, who is thus consumed by his desire, makes up for what Williams calls his “ incompletion. ” Violence, or submission to violence, is analogous to art, for Williams: both mask the inadequacies of form. Yes, it is perfect,” thinks the masseur, whose manipulations have tortured Bums to death. “ It is now completed]”(I8) NOTBS I Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, vol. I (New York, I97I), 246. Subsequent references are to this edition and rear nod by page number in the text. 2 See Conversations with Tennessee Williams, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson, Miss. , I986). 3 Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, 2nd ed. , revised (Minneapolis, I983), I2. See de Man, Blindness and Insight, I87ff, where he outlines the critical movements in Western Europe and the U. S. that have thus “ openly raise d the question of the intentionality of rhetorical figures” (I88). Among the critics he cites are Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault (to whose work I will turn later in this essay). Subsequent references to Blindness and Insight are noted by page number in the text. 5 Tennessee Williams, The Gloss Menagerie (New York, I97I). 6 Stanley is quoting Huey Long. 7 See Gore Vidal’s “ Introduction” to Tennessee

Williams’ Collected Short Stories (New York, I985) xxv. 8 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. I: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York,

I978), I08-9. 9. Tennessee Williams, “ Desire and the Black Masseur,” in Collected Stories (New York, I985), 2I7. I0 Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. Richard Howard (New York, I965). II. Ibid. , 94. I2 Ibid. , 88. I3 Ibid. , 259-60. Subsequent references are noted by page number in the text. I4 Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected