

## Tennessee Williams's Plastic Theatre: *Camino Real*

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Tennessee Williams's play *Camino Real* seems, at a cursory look, to present a major deviation within the body of Williams's dramatic works. Instead of a clear-cut story line, which involves what the audience and critics tend to read as realistic characters and unfolds in a place that actually exists, *Camino Real* consists of an enumeration of apparently unrelated episodes happening in a mythical, nameless place that is inhabited by characters from literature and symbolical figures. Some critics regard *Camino Real* as almost diametrically opposed to all other dramas of Tennessee Williams. Louis Broussard writes: "Williams, who has been in all his plays, both before and since, so earthy and starkly realistic, chooses here to work almost entirely in symbols."<sup>1</sup> In his review of the play, Eric Bentley admits he is undecided whether to laud or deprecate it. To him "the genuine element in Tennessee Williams had always seemed . . . to reside in his realism"<sup>2</sup> of which *Camino Real* is almost completely devoid.

This line of argument can only be supported if one subscribes to the notion of Williams as a realist playwright. Taking a closer look at some of Williams's plays, one can, however, discern a number of symbolist traits in ostensibly realistic components. Many of Williams's characters achieve a higher, symbolic meaning apart from their place in the story as interacting individuals, some of the most prominent examples being Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending*, Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and Jim O'Connor, the gentlemen caller in *The*

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<sup>1</sup>Louis Broussard, *American Drama: Contemporary Allegory from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 116.

<sup>2</sup>Eric Bentley, *The Dramatic Event: An American Chronicle* (New York: Horizon, 1954), 107.

*Glass Menagerie*.<sup>3</sup> In some of the plays, for instance, *The Rose Tattoo* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the location is almost as unspecific as in *Camino Real* and serves as a general, atmospheric background that raises certain connotations: Both the Gulf Coast and the seaport of a presumably Latin-American country suggest heat but also give the plays an intimation of a political climate, that of the segregated Deep South and the military rule in Central and Latin American countries. The home where Blanche and Stella of *A Streetcar Named Desire* grew up—Belle Reve—is as nonexistent and as evocative as the seaport in which the *Camino Real* turns into the *Camino Real*. Furthermore, Williams had abandoned the linear form of narration in favor of an episodic structure several times—*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*—before he wrote *Camino Real*.

Most significantly, however, Williams makes ample use of nonverbal devices in almost all of his plays in order to “emphasize that his plays are not realistic”<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, as early as in the production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams outspokenly turns against “the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions” and proposes instead a “new, plastic theatre,” which becomes a program not only for *The Glass Menagerie* but for all ensuing plays as well. The purpose of this “plastic theatre,” of which lighting, music, set, and props are essential elements, is to provide “a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are” than mere realism can accomplish.<sup>5</sup>

The representation of reality thus achieved is “organic” rather than “photographic,”<sup>6</sup> and, as Williams professes in his afterword to *Camino Real*, organic, alongside with dynamic, are the terms that “still define the dramatic values that [he] value[s] most. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding the impression many viewers and critics receive of *Camino Real* as having nothing to do with reality, Williams maintains in its foreword

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<sup>3</sup>In the first two cases, the symbolic dimension of the characters is made explicit by the use of telling names.

<sup>4</sup>*The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama*, eds. John Gassner and Edward Quinn (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), 912.

<sup>5</sup>Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New Classics, 1945; reprint, New York: New Directions, 1978), 7.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>7</sup>Tennessee Williams, *Camino Real* (New York: New Directions, 1954), xiii. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.

that a play represents "nothing more or less than [his] conception of the time and world that [he] live[s] in" (Williams 1954, viii). This representation is effected through symbolic sets, props, lighting, music, and characters. Thus, far from being a deviation from the pattern established by his preceding plays, *Camino Real* is actually the culmination point of Williams's efforts at depicting reality "organically." It is not a fantasy play written by a realist playwright but rather the most radical of Williams's "attempt[s] to impose nonrealistic plays on the essentially realistic American theatre."<sup>8</sup> As Harold Clurman points out, *Camino Real* is not a maverick but indeed "significant of its author's seed thoughts."<sup>9</sup> It is an example of the "plastic theatre" in its purest form.<sup>10</sup>

The interrelation between observations on the world and the formal devices of the play is so close in *Camino Real* that C.W.E. Bigsby is induced to regard the very "form of the play [as] its message."<sup>11</sup> Lighting, music, and sound effects all contribute significantly to the world view expressed in the play. The predominant feature, however, remains the setting, the way in which Williams divides the stage into the basic parts of the world as he sees it.

The center of the stage, the place where much of the action of *Camino Real* takes place, is taken up by the plaza of an unspecified town. This plaza can be seen as a metonymy for the town itself, the Siete Mars hotel and Skid Row on either side of it representing two variations. The site is known, as Sancho reads to Don Quixote from a guide book, as "the end of the *Camino Real* and the beginning of the *Camino Real*" (Prologue, 5). The shift in emphasis indicates the double meaning that "real" has: The second version represents the English corruption of the Spanish title and connotes reality or realism, since the English adjective "real" basically has only this one meaning. The first version represents the Spanish pronunciation, where "real" is polysem-

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<sup>8</sup>Reader's Encyclopedia 1969, 921.

<sup>9</sup>Harold Clurman, *Lies Like Truth: Theater Reviews and Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 83.

<sup>10</sup>Esther Merle Jackson, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 102, quotes Williams on *Camino Real* and affirms that he "believes that in this drama he has achieved plasticity."

<sup>11</sup>C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama 2: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 76.

ous: It can stand for reality but also for nobility (the English equivalent being "royal"). Thus, the plaza and the whole town on the audience's side of the wall are marked as the realm of reality, to which nobility has given way.<sup>12</sup> The relentless demand for realism made by this place is seen in the guards of the town and when Kilroy is immediately stripped of the disguise that he has donned to veil his plans of escape. Similarly, pieces of apparel are forced onto some characters, not in order to disguise them but to show them for what they really are. Thus, Kilroy, making himself ridiculous in his repeated futile and pathetic attempts to flee, has to wear the "Patsy outfit" (Block 6, 53), (which, for Signi Falk, is a "grotesque symbol of man's loss of dignity")<sup>13</sup> to be marked as the butt of the joke of the real forces in power. And Casanova is crowned by the street people with antlers and thereby exposed as the cuckold he really is, being betrayed by Marguerite and divested of his pretenses to be an irresistible lover.

The powerful sway that reality holds over the people in the town is frightening for someone who approaches the plaza from the "royal" part of Camino, after a lifetime of greatness. Sancho Panza is scared away from the town by the dreary description the guide gives him, and even Don Quixote, although courageous enough to enter town and thereby face reality, is unpleasantly affected by the atmosphere of the plaza, which strikes him as desolate and lonely in spite of the many people inhabiting it. He cannot bear to stand too long in the plaza and therefore moves to the wall to take a nap. All that follows is declared to be Quixote's dream; the action, then, becomes representative of the nightmarish view that Quixote has of reality.

All the other famous characters of the play enter the plaza as mere shadows of their former selves. Their spirit is gone, although they seem all right physically. Marguerite, for instance, is described as "a beautiful woman of indefinite age" (Block 7, 59) but, as Gutman explains to the audience, her once passionately burning fever has faded. Correspondingly, Lord Byron, who has still enough physical power to fill the plaza with his voice, has temporarily forgotten his "onetime devotion" (Block 8, 74). Casanova still carries himself with

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<sup>12</sup>Signi Falk, *Tennessee Williams* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), fails to recognize this double meaning, which is why her interpretation of the town is one-sided. She does not discern the struggle between realism and romanticism that is at play in *Camino Real*. For her, the plaza is a place of romantic decadence and the play is Williams's "own version of hell" (94). If the plaza is a kind of hell for Williams, it is the hell of stark realism and not that of dark romanticism.

<sup>13</sup>Falk 1978, 96.

pride but he is no longer able to win women over as easily as he once did. This mixture of old grandeur and an overall lacking spirit is reflected in the costumes of the legendary figures, which are "generally 'modern' but with vestigial touches of the period to which [they were] actually related" (Prologue, 8). The confrontation with an all-too-stark reality evidently has a devastating effect on the characters' mental disposition; they give up their dreams and high romantic aspirations and give in to reality in resignation.<sup>14</sup>

This sense of disappointment, frustration and hopelessness reaches its highest intensity after the Fugitivo departs and leaves those who pinned all their hopes for escape on it behind with shattered spirits. All this is not expressed in dialogue or action but merely conveyed by having the plaza lit by flickering lights "as if ruins were smoldering" to "suggest . . . a city desolated by bombardment" (Block 10, 94).

But the presence of the dreamer and the conversion of Byron and, eventually, Kilroy indicates that, even in the midst of bleak reality, there is still a slight hint of the possibility to transcend it, to gather what is left of one's spirit and to rise above mere realism. This, too, is indicated by the way the plaza is lit at certain moments. It "is seen fitfully" lit by a flickering white light that suggests daybreak, which is compared by Williams to "a white bird caught in a net and struggling to rise" (Prologue, 1). This little trace of spirit or romanticism is necessary to be able to bear the demoralizing effects of pure reality. It works as a kind of bolster, like the pad at the bottom of a cat's paw. When Esmeralda prays to God to "bless all cats without pads in the plaza" (Block 16, 155), she pronounces one of the central ideas of the play: that those who lack even that slight intimation of romantic spirit while facing reality are worse off than anybody else.

The idea that dreams and romantic aspirations are essential prerequisites not only for the spiritual survival of the individual but also for the creativity and fertility of human culture is reflected by the fountain at the center of the plaza, which has run dry, failing to supply the population of the town with water. The fountain no longer fulfills its function as life-giver or life-preserver, as we see most clearly in Block 2 when the survivor, dying of thirst, finds the fountain dry. The survivor is shot, and his first impulse is to approach the fountain one

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<sup>14</sup>It is thus only to some extent that the "royal road is the dream of past youth and the real road is a view of present age" as Roger Boxill sees it in Boxill, *Tennessee Williams* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 136. Youthfulness is part of the issue, but the general focus seems to lie on spirit and courage rather than age. (Don Quixote is also not the youngest of characters, but he never really leaves the royal way and lets the real way pass him by in a dream.)



more time, clinging to its rim as if desperately trying to hold on to life. But the attempt is futile—the survivor of the expedition through the desert receives no help from the fountain nor from the surrounding people. He dies within the limits of the town. The comment in the stage directions that he is “ignored, as a dying pariah dog in a starving country” (Block 2, 15) calls to mind Prudence’s dog, which is found dying near the fountain earlier. Thus, the fountain has not only stopped being a symbol of life, but also has become closely associated with death and with the lack of human kindness that is to be found in the plaza.

The fountain also bears negative sexual connotations, which arise when Prudence refers to Casanova as the “one fountain that hasn’t gone dry” (Block 1, 11). Judging from Casanova’s sensitive reaction and Gutman’s laughter, her estimate is evidently wrong. The dry fountain hints at physical impotence but this connotation is elevated to a moralistic level when Marguerite manifests her infidelity by tossing her ring over the fountain toward Abdullah, an act by which she symbolically discards and even defies the idea of true love. Not only physical love but also, and more important, the ability to become emotionally attached to a person, to make a romantic commitment to somebody, to feel pure love, has become lost in the world of bleak realism.

Even when someone makes some kind of commitment, when Esmeralda chooses Kilroy as her hero, the fountain stays dry. As the Gypsy tells Nursie, this is because the choice has been made without the old spirit, which has become obsolete among the shallow manifestations of popular culture, “television . . . be-bop [and] *Screen Secrets*” (Block 12, 108). In the ultimate analysis, therefore, the fountain remains dry because the cultural values have been neglected, because the omnipresent instances of cheap entertainment have numbed the people’s sensibility so that they can no longer appreciate a special moment and transform it to something higher than reality, something romantic. Roger Boxill points out that the carnival, a potential source of renewal and strengthening of cultural values, becomes “the spoiled occasion or ruined festivity of *Camino*.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, instead of choosing a poetic personality who inspires people’s dreams, Esmeralda settles for the pathetic figure, the fighter who left the ring and his wife because his heart is too big. Esmeralda’s aspirations, like those of everyone else, have stopped being high and, instead of a poetic tale from *A Thousand and One Nights*, we experience a scene as full of

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<sup>15</sup>Boxill 1987, 137.

banality, shyness, and awkwardness as may happen in real life. Having given in to reality, the inhabitants of the town are no longer able to love or to come forth with something of real cultural value. As Sancho's tour guide says: "The spring of humanity has gone dry in this place" (Prologue, 5). Thus, the fountain epitomizes what Francis Donahue calls the "spiritual depletion of the world."<sup>16</sup>

Most of the characters are still somehow attracted to the fountain as if there were a natural impulse to turn to one's spiritual center for help after reaching a point from which it seems impossible to go on. Kilroy, when he has been robbed of his wallet and refused help by the police; Baron de Charlus, when he is desperate for physical love; Lord Byron, when he cannot remember his onetime devotion; Marguerite, after the Fugitivo has left without her; and even one of the guards, when he cannot brush off the complaining Kilroy—they all cross to the fountain. But they never receive any inspiration from it, are left helpless and confused. Like the fountain, their spiritual resources have run dry, and only Byron manages to at least reach his former determination. Most of the characters only approach the fountain, circle it, sit down on a bench before it, or hang on to its rims. Don Quixote is the only one actually to step inside. As soon as he approaches the fountain, it starts to flow. Quixote's vigor has not been numbed by his short exposure to reality, which he perceives as a dream anyway. Dreams and ideas inform his reality, and with this romantic attitude he can make the spring of human life flow again and bathe in its spiritual essence. Through his romanticism and indefatigable spirit of moving forward instead of stagnating or retreating when faced with frustrating circumstances, he can inspire other people, such as Kilroy, to do the same. Following his example, the whole of humankind could partake in this spirit of forward movement.

The plaza, apart from its symbolic dimensions stressed by the central position of the fountain, also serves a structural purpose (which eventually becomes symbolic itself): It divides the town into two parts, the Siete Mares hotel and Skid Row. Within the area encircled by the wall, the Siete Mares presents a refuge, the one place where people can still find consolation in living together in pairs, where they achieve at least some degree of happiness due to the comforts of physical love. Although idealism and romance have gone from couples and lovers in the Siete Mares, the mere warmth of physical love is enough to mellow the harrowing effects that reality has on them. As an emblem of the

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<sup>16</sup>Francis Donahue, *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1964), 63.

strained yet comforting happiness of the lodgers in the Siete Mares, the first floor displays "a pair of elegant dummies . . . looking out into the plaza" (Prologue, 1), whose smiles are painted but who are at least shielded from the plaza by the great bay window. Thus, the Siete Mares provides the characters of the play with a hiding place to withdraw to when reality becomes too strong to bear. Casanova, for example, rushes into the Siete Mares to escape from Prudence's remarks on the corrupting effect that the passage of time has on people's love life, a fact Casanova loathes to be reminded of because it is an essential part of his own personal dilemma.

The Siete Mares is a means of escapism, a shelter that allows its inhabitants to avoid both a confrontation with the real world and a true effort at breaking away from the strict confinements of reality. This retreat, however, is not accessible to everyone; only the privileged are allowed in. And this privilege is not based on moral virtues. Quite the opposite. The Siete Mares has become the stronghold of the corrupt and the unscrupulous, "a mecca for black marketeers and their expensively kept women" (Block 7, 62). The key to admittance is wealth. The guests of Siete Mares are members of the upper classes who guard their position with jealousy. They hoard their water, the only natural spring water in the town, and shut themselves off from the suffering of the other townspeople. They show no mercy for the underdog and, while they may be shocked by the events happening in the streets, they affect absolute indifference. Tumult and uproar may toss the Siete Mares like a ship in a storm, which is hinted at when, in reaction to the civil unrest invoked by the utterance of the Spanish word for brother, the hotel is transformed into something like a steamer. But the stronghold of the rich will eventually weather the crisis and come out of it without major damage as long as dreams can either be contained within the system (sublimated in the celebration of fanciful pageants or in the hope for an easy way out—the Fugitivo, which comes to the people and ostensibly offers them a chance to escape without any efforts of their own) or suppressed by the guardians of the system.

The hotel provides its guests with a separate world, where gossip and small talk have become objects of their interest. "Fashionable couturiers and custom tailors, restaurants, vintages of wine, hair-dressers, plastic surgeons, [and] girls and young men susceptible to offers" (Block 2, 16) replace the miserable conditions of the people in the streets or the killing of a guileless man looking for help as the most important news items in their conversations. They turn their backs to human suffering and let themselves be taken in by Gutman's speech



about the need to protect their privileges, with ruthless violence if necessary.

The clientele of the hotel shares another major attribute with the bourgeoisie: double moral standards. While people like Gutman himself have secret lovers or, like Lord Mulligan, are renowned to be "black marketeers" who keep women with the help of their money, they do not allow any form of excessive sexuality as displayed by Baron de Charlus, the prostitute Marguerite, and the notorious lover Casanova. Conformity is the rule of the Siete Mares, which marks all bohemians as outsiders.

In the Siete Mares, the authority of the law effectively asserts itself: People not only hide from facts about themselves, but they also never dare to openly confront the system. "Questions are passed among them like something illicit and shameful, like counterfeit money or drugs or indecent postcards" (Block 2, 15). Thus, it is not difficult for Gutman to run the place. The lodgers are too comfortable in their conformism and too afraid to break away from it to present a serious threat to the established order. Gutman does not need to keep their spirits from rising up against the hand that provides them with luxury and relative security.

This is illustrated by the white cockatoo, Aurora, who cries out wildly when the sun rises. But as Gutman later reveals, the bird cries "at daybreak only" (Block 7, 70) and then remains quiet for the rest of the day. In a passage quoted earlier in this essay, Williams symbolically connects birds, daybreak, and a struggle of the human spirit to rise. Aurora's outcry, therefore, seems to be a pronouncement that she will gather her spirits and fly away. But instead, she stays on Gutman's wrist, although no visible leash holds her there. Parallel to Aurora's outcry, Casanova outspokenly denies that he has given up hope but, like Aurora, he is one of those who cannot muster enough courage or determination to stand and leave the realist side of the world or turn against Gutman by joining the public upheaval. Quite appropriately, then, does Sancho's tour guide mention that, at this place "wild birds . . . are tamed and kept in . . . cages" (Prologue, 5). For the guests of the Siete Mares, the hotel has become a cage, but it is one they do not even try to escape, for, as Williams says in the foreword, "a cage represents security as well as confinement to a bird that has grown used to being in it" (Foreword, xi). Comfort and luxury are part of the ideologization that keeps the members of the bourgeoisie in their place.

From the balcony of the hotel, Gutman oversees the action in the plaza, gives orders to the guards and, evidently, controls the events of the play. As manager of the Siete Mares, Gutman is also the ruler of the Seven Seas (the English equivalent of Siete Mares), the unmistakable

sovereign of the realist side of the world, with only one person to whom he is answerable: the Generalissimo. This mysterious leader figure, who never appears on stage and does not care about what goes on in the plaza as long as his subordinates are in control, bears connotations of fascism, which ruled in some Latin American countries at the time the play was written. Thus, the world on the audience's side of the wall achieves a double meaning: It is the world of unmediated realism but also a paradigm for the workings of totalitarianism. Donald Spoto sees *Camino Real* as a "frankly political play," a "denunciation of the fascist demagoguery then spreading over the country in the voice, especially loud, of Senator Joseph McCarthy."<sup>17</sup>

Exactly which characters are in power is indicated by the phallic power symbol, the cigar. Gutman and the guards are constantly smoking cigars when they appear in the plaza and only put the cigars out when they leave. The only individual in possession of cigarettes, obviously the effeminate version of the power symbol, is the Gypsy, who condescendingly offers one to Kilroy, as if she were trying to tease him by offering him empowerment shortly before his death. The powerlessness of everyone else becomes evident when Kilroy asks Baron de Charlus: "Where is your cigarette?" (Block 4, 40), a question that the Baron never answers. Of the people who appear on stage, Gutman has the most power, which he demonstrates by commanding both the Gypsy, the representative of the ideological apparatuses drugging people with feasts and games, and the guards, the incorporations of the repressive forces called into action when ideology fails to keep people in their place.

In spite of all these dreary aspects, the *Siete Mares* has one redeeming factor: It allows people to live in pairs. This togetherness is the precondition for love. And it is love that is able to resurrect people. It is with the touch of roses, the symbol of love, that the Madrecita raises Kilroy from the dead, and it is because of her need for love that Marguerite finally delivers Casanova from his predicament. Therefore, it is no wonder that the hotel, the site of love, however constrained, also bears the emblem of resurrection, the phoenix (Prologue, 1).

Escape or new beginnings seem much further out of reach for those who live across the plaza from the *Siete Mares* hotel, on Skid Row, the last resort for people who cannot afford the comfort and protection that the tenants on the luxury side of the plaza enjoy. This part of town is

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<sup>17</sup>Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 185, 187.

cheap and dilapidated, but it is also much more colorful and vibrant than the other side of town. In spite of its shabbiness, there is a certain vitality that is lacking in the Siete Mares. Williams wants "this side of the street [to] have all the color and animation that are permitted by the resources of the production" (Block 3, 32). But this festival-like liveliness conceals a certain despair. People on this side of town have had to give up their ideals completely in order to make a living.

The loan shark's shop is the place where people trade tokens of their former aspirations (e.g. instruments) for cash. The most prominent example of this loss of self-respect is Kilroy, who sells his golden gloves, symbols of his past greatness but also a token of the potential strength he still has. When he first sells his gloves, which were given to him as a prize for his greatest success and have become more important to him than his "heart's true blood" (Block 4, 37), his intentions are admirable. He plans to use the money to finance his expedition beyond the wall. Thus, he appears to be released from the tie that has bound him to the past and to be able to face a new beginning. However, Esmeralda persuades him to stay, and we see that his vanity is too strong to let go of the past. Thus, he remains trapped on Skid Row, stripped of his symbol of grandeur; the selling of the gloves has become an act of self-degradation. He seems to sink even lower when he finally sells his golden heart in order to impress Esmeralda with material wealth, which he intends to be a signifier of his real value. But Esmeralda dismisses him as a cat in her dreams; she does not acknowledge material values as a marker of what makes a person real.

But even before that, he has to practically steal his golden heart from the hands of the authorities, who are just about to dissect it. As he runs away with the heart, Gutman alerts the guards, saying that the "gold heart is the property of the state" (Block 16, 152). Thus, the heart becomes a symbol not only of Kilroy's good-natured disposition and ability to love, but also of the control that the state has wielded over him. Manipulating Kilroy by luring him with sex and romance, the real forces of the town are successful in keeping him from escaping from the world encircled by the wall. Kilroy has to dispose of his heart before he can venture out of town. Significantly, Casanova, when encouraged by Kilroy earlier to join him in his expedition, has pointed to his heart as an explanation of why he cannot go. The heart and the commitment that one makes force Casanova and, for a time, Kilroy, to stay inside the realm of realism. This allows a consoling sentimentalism to be mixed into that realm and is apt to make one forget the frustrating aspects of reality or else bear up to them for the sake of

sexual satisfaction. Therefore, love and sex in *Camino Real* are another form of escapism.

Beside the loan shark's shop is the Gypsy's stall. The Gypsy achieves on her side of town what the security of the Siete Mares, and Gutman and the guards achieve on the luxury side: She keeps people in line. She does so, however, not by threats of violence but by giving them visions or distraction from the harsher sides of reality. At the first sign of civil unrest, she is called upon to organize "some public diversion" (Block 2, 22). Here, and in general, Williams has the Gypsy make her announcements over a loudspeaker; they are amplified and pervade the entire town. The Gypsy talks about fiestas, mythical celebrations, and visions that she promises those who have doubts about the world of realism. "If anyone on the Camino is bewildered, come to the Gypsy. A poco dinero will tickle the Gypsy's palm and give her visions" (Block 3, 31). But of course those visions never concern the nature of the system that the people live in or ways in which to overcome it. Rather, the visions divert the people with questions concerning reality and refer to mystic rites, love and death. As Marguerite has realized, the Gypsy is a fake. She is not primarily a fortune-teller but rather the chief propagandist of the town. Williams's use of the loudspeaker helps convey this, evoking memories of propaganda blurted out through loudspeakers and booming through the streets of the totalitarian states of the twentieth century.

The Skid-Row counterpart to the Siete Mares hotel is the "Ritz Men Only," a cheap, run-down hotel, the very name mocking its real character. In many respects it is the opposite of the Siete Mares. Instead of luxury, it offers shabbiness. While the Siete Mares can be symbolically transformed into a steamer when trouble arises, the Ritz Men Only is just "a little white ship to sail the dangerous night in" (Block 4, 34), a refuge much too fragile to really provide sufficient protection. In addition, it is cramped and its rooms are stuffy, forcing the tenants to lean out of the only window that can be opened "as if suffocating" (Block 3, 32). The people who stay here don't have enough room to live or even enough air to breathe. Their confinement, forced on them by their economic destitution, is so complete that (with the exception of Casanova, who only moves in for a limited time) the audience never sees anyone leave the Ritz Men Only alive. The most dispiriting factor, however, is that the hotel manager rents only single rooms. Thus, the Ritz Men Only lacks even the consolation of physical love and togetherness. Accordingly, instead of a smiling pair of dummies, the window displays a bum, the embodiment of absolute loneliness.



Skid Row is the very bottom of the real world, which is indicated by placing the entrance to the Ritz Men Only on street level. All the bright lights (mainly neon), cheap places of amusement, and seemingly happy festivities only cover up a deeply grounded despair of people who have been treated badly by reality and who, unlike the inhabitants of the other side of the town, can not afford luxury and love to protect them from further painful effects of reality. They are on their own to face real life at its harshest.

Also on street level are the two arches leading to streets outside the area of the stage. In the production notes, Williams marks them as "entrance[s] to dead-end streets" (Prologue, 2). This is meant literally: When the survivor dies, two people in the outfits of street cleaners, with bloodstains among the dirt spots, enter the plaza through one of the arches, put the corpse into their barrel, and roll it out into the dead-end street. Their work is accompanied by piping, which has started as soon as the survivor died of his shot-wound. This is repeated whenever anyone in the town dies or is about to die. Thus, Williams again makes us of an acoustic device: The piping always connotes the approaching of death and therefore creates a great amount of tension.

The street cleaners point their fingers at certain people and laugh while carrying out the recently deceased, which makes it clear who is going to be next on their list. In spite of that knowledge, death can never be prevented. The street cleaners are uncompromising and only tease their future victims by pointing at them. Death, then, is unavoidable for the inhabitants of the town, and everyone knows that it will come to him or her sooner or later. Gutman remarks to someone who complains about the street cleaners: "They can't be discharged, disciplined nor bribed! All you can do is pretend to ignore them" (Block 7, 58). Death is an undeniable part of life and, on the realist side of the wall, it is the only way out.

A form of escape that (at least momentarily) does not involve death is hinted at by a staircase that leads to the "ancient wall" encircling the town. At the top of the stairs there is an archway marking the passage over the wall to the other side. According to Casanova, this is "the Way Out" (Block 5, 44), the only true form of escape from stark realism. Interestingly, the way out is not hidden or barred. The staircase and the archway provide a visible, and seemingly easy, access to the top of the wall. In theory, every character in the play could use them to cross the wall and leave the domain of realism behind. As soon as Kilroy learns about the stairway, he "plunges right up to almost the top step" (Block 5, 44). Nobody obstructs his way or tries to make him return to the plaza. Nevertheless, shortly before reaching the archway, he stops, unable to proceed. The second time he gathers the



spirit to ascend the steps, he is even encouraged to do so by Gutman, the least likely character to want anyone to escape from the city. Even so, Kilroy returns and once more makes himself the laughing stock for Gutman, who has known all along that Kilroy would not be able to go through with his intention.

Thus, it becomes evident that the wall does not really present the inhabitants with a physical barrier but rather with a psychological one. What keeps Kilroy and the others from taking the final step through the archway is the prospect of what lies on the other side of the wall: the desert, sometimes referred to as the "Terra Incognita" (Prologue, 1). Technically, this desert presents somewhat of a problem since it lies immediately behind the wall and can therefore not be made visible for the audience. Of course it is discussed in the dialogue but it would go counter to Williams's conception of the "plastic theatre" if such a significant idea as the Terra Incognita were not expressed by some other means than a mere verbal reference. Williams circumvents the problem by invoking the desert (or some other kind of wasteland) acoustically: Whenever Kilroy approaches the archway and looks behind the wall, the sounds of a wind arise. This wind attests to the effectiveness of the "plastic theatre," for through the use of the wind at different places in the play, a whole web of poetic connotations is created that reflects on the idea of the desert and how it affects the characters of the play.

When the wind sounds for the first time at the beginning of the play, before the first actors appear, it is heard in connection with "reverberations like pounding surf or distant shellfire" (Prologue, 1). This introduces the wind as some kind of natural force that can have devastating effects on human beings. The ideas of power and of violence are suggested. And indeed the wind later proves to be powerful enough to influence people's acts. It induces Marguerite to cruelly crush Casanova's hopes of forming a love relationship with her and then "sweeps her toward the terrace away from him" (Block 10, 99).

At another place, in the survivor's tale of his pony, Peeto, the wind is associated with unrestrainable, animalistic spirit. The pony's name, Peeto, which sounds like "pito," the Spanish word for "penis," indicates physical urges and sexual drives.

Finally, the wind conveys a sense of desolation when it rises in response to Sancho's desertion, to which Quixote responds "Lonely" (Prologue, 6), a word reverberating through the plaza as if carried by the wind. This melancholy impression is repeated when Madrecita addresses the wind in her funeral speech for Kilroy, which is accompanied by mourning voices that express regret for what is irretrievably lost

in the past. The wind is Kilroy's "passing bell and lamentation" (Block 15, 150).

All these elements represented by the wind—spirit, compulsions, sexual drives, and melancholy—are aspects of the human psyche. Thus, the Terra Incognita becomes the landscape of the human soul on the other side of the wall from the city or dreary rationality, of analytic reason that dissects the human body after death and separates its chemical components, where humans are turned into their physical parts and used by the state according to their usefulness, the "size or structure" of their "vital organs" (Block 5, 43). The Terra Incognita is the place where the spirit is set free from the restraints of clinical reality and has enough space to roam uninhibitedly, but it is also potentially dangerous, as is proven by the fact that, of a whole group of young explorers that attempted to cross the desert, only one survives (and only to return behind the safe walls of the city of rationality).

There is something terrifying but at the same time fascinating about Terra Incognita that makes both Casanova and Kilroy approach the end of the stairway again and again only to stop and stare at the desert, too frightened to go on but too transfixed to simply turn around and never confront it again. While the town represents everything that can be grasped by human understanding, the desert behind the wall defies rational comprehension. It is frightening because it is as unknown to humans as "the craters and plains of the moon" (Block 5, 44). Since the Terra Incognita, the unknown land, is the landscape of the human soul, what happens there can be as unpredictable as human moods, which is indicated in the Gypsy's remark on the "changeable weather" (Block 12, 118) when she hears the wind howling. The outcome of any undertaking within that realm can not be known because of the mere fact that all those undertakings are initiated by dreams and ideals. Every new dream, every new ideal has to be explored before anything can be said with certainty.

Obstacles, such as too much regret about what one has lost or too much concern about how realistic one's dreams and hopes are, or, for that matter, a too-complete surrender to the demands of one's psyche, can thwart all efforts to successfully traverse the desert, to act on the dreamer's side of life. Marguerite, for example, feels the wind from the desert but her will power is so weak the wind takes control of her, signifying the immoderate influence her drives have on her behavior. She is swept toward the Siete Mares, refuge from reality as well as from spiritual freedom, and numbs her fears with noncommittal sex. Only strong will and determination, as it is displayed by both Don Quixote and Lord Byron, can guarantee a safe passage through that alien land of dreams, ideals and the soul.

From the beginning Don Quixote shows enough spirit not to let himself be drawn in by the encumbering and restraining effects of rationality. He rests comfortably against the wall, which for him alone does not really represent a barrier. He is always close to the level of romantic spirit necessary to surmount the wall and to keep on pursuing his path of chivalrous grandeur, holding high his ideals of "truth . . . valor . . . and devoir" (Prologue, 3f) in spite of the sobering effects of reality he has had to confront. Unlike Marguerite, Don Quixote is not swept by the wind but stays in control because of his tremendous will power, which enables him to assert his voice above the roaring of the wind, to which he is congenial or at least of almost equal rank since his voice "is nearly as old" as the wind (Prologue, 2).

Lord Byron, too, enters the stage in close association with the wind, which accompanies his first appearance. Byron shows enough determination and, after some deliberation, a clear enough goal to be able to face the Terra Incognita after his sojourn within the walls of realism. Although he has temporarily forgotten "the object of [his] onetime devotion" (Block 8, 74), the spirit seems never to have left him, since he carries the wind with him, escorted by it both at his appearance and his departure.

When Kilroy seems finally to be ready to attempt an excursion into the desert on his own, he is held back by the seductive Esmeralda. Like Marguerite, Kilroy does not have enough will power to control his sexual drives nor his vanity; he cannot resist Esmeralda's display of adoration, calling back memories of his past vigor. Significantly, during the whole episode the wind, always audible when Quixote or Byron are present, never rises, not even when Kilroy ascends the stairway. The effort seems to be hopeless from the outset because Kilroy's spirit has not yet reached the necessary degree of determination.

Byron and Quixote are the ones who are most likely to realize the dream of crossing the desert and reaching whatever goal there might be at the other side because they never lost their ability to dream, to set their goals high instead of giving up in the face of untoward circumstances. Apart from Kilroy, who is taken along by Quixote, they are the only ones to ever go to the end of the stairway and pass the archway to the other side of the wall.

Furthermore, it is significant that there is desert land beyond the wall, which puts that area out of the control of Gutman, the ideological master of the seven seas. Ideology and repression are presented as an undeniable part of reality. The refusal to give in to realism, to adhere to one's dreams and ideals in spite of reality, eventually enabling one to cross the wall, appear as highly subversive acts. As Gutman himself warns his superior, "revolution only needs good dreamers who

remember their dreams" (Block 2, 30) in order to be successful. Therefore, transgressing the wall and venturing out to pursue high and romantic ideals becomes a possibility for undermining authority, for a true escape from the world ruled by realism.

But even the world of dreams and ideals has its limits, as evidenced by the range of mountains, far beyond the wall. Since they set the boundary for the *Terra Incognita*, the realm where dreams and aspirations have free reign, those mountains can be interpreted as the place of highest human achievement, the pedestal to which the human spirit aspires while traversing the desert. In the set, the mountains are placed towering above the wall and the city and, therefore, symbolize the peaks of the world of the play. People like Don Quixote and Lord Byron may finally reach this peak and thereby gain a nobler status in life than all other human beings.

On the other hand, the mountains, being immensely higher than the wall, also represent another barrier, larger, more challenging and more majestic—apparently unsurmountable. Their tops are covered with snow, marking an area where life can no longer be sustained. Marguerite remembers a resort in the mountains, in which she once stayed, called "Bide-a-While." The resort is "surrounded by snowy pine woods" (Block 7, 67), a zone where life is still present but the snow has already intruded. The beds in the resort are compared to tombstones and the audience learns that Marguerite is talking about a time when she was close to death. According to her, the last impression one has of the world when dying is "the smell of an empty icebox" (Block 7, 68), signifying essential coldness. In the same block, Gutman serves Casanova "very cold and dry wine from only ten meters below the snowline in the mountains" (Block 7, 64). The wine carries the label "Quando," Spanish for "when," which Gutman paraphrases as the question "When are accounts to be settled?" (Block 7, 64). Given Casanova's peculiar situation—he is faced with being thrown out of the *Siete Mares* because of his inability to pay his bills—this can be interpreted as a hint that Gutman's patience with Casanova's debts is coming to an end. But in conjunction with Marguerite's story about the Bide-a-While, the last temporary station before death, the question has another connotation. The accounts that need to be settled may also refer to Casanova's deeds, which are soon to be evaluated when he dies. The wine Gutman serves comes from just below the snow line and the Bide-a-While is situated immediately behind that border. The



snow line therefore becomes the frontier between living and dying. Once one crosses it, it is only a matter of days until one dies.<sup>18</sup>

Snow, cold, and ice are symbols of death. The mountains are covered with snow; thus, death waits at the end of the trail even for the one who travels through the Terra Incognita. Death is a fact that no one can circumvent. The people in Williams's symbolic description of the world, however, can choose between approaching death at the end of a life full of spirit, dreams, and romanticism and die at the top of the world, or they can passively wait, either giving in to reality or hiding from it in a sheltered, conventional lifestyle, until death seizes them, and they are done away with and forgotten. The first is the nobler way, the one that Williams favors. Unfortunately, according to Williams's world view as presented in *Camino Real*, most people choose the second.

The preceding analysis shows that Williams's philosophical world view is manifested in the different sections of the set, before which the characters play out an illustration of Williams's ideas. Other nonverbal devices, such as the lighting of the plaza, the wind, the street cleaners' piping, the Gypsy's loudspeaker, are employed to enrich the overall meaning of the play with additional connotations. Seen in this light, *Camino Real* contains some of the most artistic features of Williams's "plastic theatre."

Unfortunately, the play also displays one of the major weaknesses of this conception: excessiveness. In addition to the set, props, and sound effects analyzed in this essay, Williams uses a multitude of other potentially symbolic, or at least evocative, devices: the pit, the parasols, Kilroy's belt, the three brass balls, the divan, the veil, flowers, a revolver, the sound of brakes, flamenco shouts, humming, timpani, percussion, a roar, a gong, shots, crashes, bells, sirens, and more. This play represents an extreme example of Williams's "tendency towards strewing [the] stage with any number of highly significant objects."<sup>19</sup> Instead of enlightening the viewer and achieving an organic representation of reality, this immense accumulation of nonverbal devices may have a numbing or confusing effect. The highly evocative means

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<sup>18</sup>George Nathan somehow seems to miss this point in his polemic condemnation of the play when he reads the remark about taking snowshoes to the desert behind the wall as an instance of trying to "pass off nonsense for sense." George Jean Nathan, *Theatre in the Fifties* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 111.

<sup>19</sup>C.W.E. Bigsby, *Confrontations and Commitment: A Study of Contemporary Drama 1959-1966* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1968), 89.



discussed in this essay are threatened to be drowned by the excessive presence of symbols and effects.

It is therefore understandable why this play, in spite of its very poetic nature, became a "financial and critical failure."<sup>20</sup> Audiences had a hard time making sense of it and many critics reproached it for the lack of restraint in its symbolism.<sup>21</sup> For a final, objective evaluation, one should, however, take both negative and positive aspects into consideration. Because of its all too sensationalist and accumulative use of nonverbal devices, the work is flawed. But, because it incorporates a world view in stage set, props, lighting and sound, *Camino Real* remains Williams's most wholehearted attempt at "a new plastic theatre," and that is its undeniable artistic achievement.

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<sup>20</sup>Bigsby 1984, 81.

<sup>21</sup>See Falk, 99, for a short account of the critics' reactions.