unawares, taking me altogether by surprise" (124). The vision of Amanda and Laura always is the same, "like bits of a shattered rainbow." Tom remembers them only to incorporate with their memory other realities of the American nation in the 1930s. When he translates that larger memory into the perfect disguise of illusion, he creates a masterpiece of the imagination we know as *The Glass Menagerie*. Certainly it is a good thing that Tom finally leaves home. He becomes a voyager through some of the crucial decades of the twentieth century. Tom becomes the poet of the American memory.

CHAPTER 8

Tradition and Technique

The curtain rises and reveals the depressing wall of a tenement building, framed by a jagged network of fire escapes, clothes lines, and garbage cans. As the narrator concludes his introduction, a transparency allows the wall to reveal the inside of the Wingfields' apartment. The audience observes the beginning of the first scene through the wall as it slowly ascends out of view. The characters are seated for a meal, and they use gestures required for eating, but there is no food on the table, nor are there utensils. The text calls for the projection of a line from a fifteenth-century French ballad on a screen as we hear a mother call her son to the dinner table. Thus begins *The Glass Menagerie*.

The unusual setting surprises audiences today, perhaps, as much as it did those of the 1940s. A British reviewer wrote that the play was a "patchwork bubble of sentimental imagining"; he said the characters were less than real and that Amanda and Laura in the final scene "appear like dim specimens in some pixyologist's elfarium."[1] More than likely the reviewer was taken aback by the pervading sense of unreality Williams incorporated into his "memory play." Although the vast majority of critics and audiences have not found the play to be "sentimental imagining," the reviewer raised a good question: *How*

can a nonrealistic play present an audience with a vision of real people? The question leads directly to the nature of Williams's contribution to the modern stage.

Two concepts pertinent for discussions of twentieth-century drama appear prominently in the author's prefatory production notes for *The Glass Menagerie:* expressionism and realism. Williams identifies with the former and rejects the latter. He claims that expressionism offers the following advantages:

> Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are.

He considered the achievements of the realists to be significant, and he often mentioned his debt to Chekhov, whose earlier works especially were in the realistic tradition. (A letter written to Donald Windham while he was working an early version of *The Glass Menagerie* reveals that Williams's study wall contained a "nicely framed" picture of Chekhov.)[2] However, at the beginning of his career, he sensed the need to move beyond realism:

> The straight realistic play with its genuine frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance.
>
> These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre that must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.

Williams probably was not deliberately aligning himself with the Bauhaus school of the expressionist theoreticians Walter Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee. Neither was he indicating a preference for certain plays, such as Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine.* Rather the concept of expressionism gave him the latitude that permitted him to bring into the theater a variety of nontheatrical approaches, such as poetic dialogue, theme and background music, impressionistic lighting, and transparent stage settings. Without these elements we could never enter so deeply into the world of Tom's memory.

If Williams borrowed from the tradition of realism, as modified by the expressionists, he also borrowed from an art form with distinctively American associations: the cinema. During the 1920s and 1930s the young Williams resembled Tom. He spent a great deal of his spare time in movie houses, watching silent films, which typically were accompanied by a piano or a small orchestra. In the absence of dialogue, movie directors depended on carefully placed titles. If movies are imitations of the drama—a single performance frozen in time—then Williams decided to see whether drama might benefit from some of the techniques movie directors used. An immediate example of this borrowing is the large picture of the smiling doughboy, the absent Mr. Wingfield. In this case most directors follow the playwright's suggestion that it light up at precisely the right moment near the beginning of scene 4 when an inebriated Tom tells Laura about the "escape" of Malvolio the Magician.

In traditional theater the floodlight follows the action, illuminating the characters engaged in dialogue. In the view of Williams, however, there is another kind of dramatic action which often takes place in a location apart from the dialogue. The third scene begins with a narration by Tom, followed by Amanda's solicitation of a magazine order over the telephone. That is all that happens before the stage dims. Momentarily the lights return, and we hear the beginning of an argument between Tom and Amanda. But what we see is the frail figure of Laura, "*with clenched hands and panicky expression.*" Williams calls for a "*clear pool of light on her figure throughout this*

scene." Meanwhile Tom and Amanda engage in a fierce verbal battle "*behind the portieres,*" jointly firing a total of nineteen exchanges. Once Tom and Amanda appear, "*the upstage area is lit with a turgid smoky red glow.*" This confrontation between Tom and Amanda is a turning point in the drama because it leads eventually to a mutual apology and to Amanda's request that Tom fetch a gentleman caller for Laura. Yet the real action takes place elsewhere. By focusing the "*clear pool of light*" on Laura, Williams suggests that the barbs so brutally exchanged between Tom and Amanda find their mark deep inside Laura.

The production notes speak of the need for "a new, plastic theatre," suggesting possibilities previously explored only by the motion picture. The appearance of cinematic techniques in *The Glass Menagerie* is a major development in the drama, a development that may be related to the circumstances under which he began to write the play. Williams was not only drawing on his early fascination with motion pictures. His agent, Audrey Wood, had helped him obtain a job as a screenwriter for Metro Goldwyn Mayer in 1943. He was supposed to write a screenplay as a vehicle for the actress Lana Turner, but he quickly realized that he could not put his heart into it. Independently he prepared some original film outlines and proposals for M-G-M. He immersed himself in the techniques of a medium he had admired from a distance as a youth. One screenplay about which he felt strongly was based on his short story, "Portrait of a Girl in Glass." He gave it the title "The Gentleman Caller." Already he had decided upon the actress to play the role of Laura, and his hopes were high. However, M-G-M turned down the proposal almost immediately. Williams later recalled an executive's rationale: *Gone with the Wind* had sufficiently treated the subject of southern women. (After *The Glass Menagerie* had achieved commercial and critical success, M-G-M engaged in a losing battle with Warner Brothers Studios to purchase film rights to the play.)

A continuing debate among students of Williams and the drama is the matter of those movielike projections that appear forty-four times. Most directors have eliminated the projections completely, focusing

attention more directly on the delicate interaction among the four characters. When he prepared the text for reading, however, Williams insisted that the projections be included. His production notes suggest that they offer "a definite emotional appeal." Then he gives directors an unusual invitation to "invent many other uses for this device than those indicated in the present script."

From an "architectural" standpoint, he believed the images and legends would help audiences better grasp the narrative line. "Each scene contains a particular point (or several) which is structurally the most important." The reader might test Williams's theory by engaging in a brief exercise in mental association. The object is to recall quickly memories of exact moments in the drama prompted by the following list of ten images and ten quotations that appear on the screen:

Images

Amanda as a girl on a porch, greeting callers
a swarm of typewriters
Jim as a high school hero bearing a silver cup
glamor magazine cover
sailing vessel with Jolly Roger
caller with bouquet
moon
Amanda as a girl
executive at desk
Blue Roses image

Quotations

"Ou sont les neiges"
"After the fiasco"
"You think I'm in love with Continental Shoemakers."
"Plans and Provisions"
"Annunciation"
"The Accent of a Coming Foot"
"A Pretty Trap"
"Not Jim!"
"Love!"
"The sky falls."

Most who have experienced the play have little difficulty remembering specific moments captured by these images and words. Indeed the mind rushes to make connections between the projections and scenes in the drama. Sometimes, however, readers make associations between legends and images: the photograph of a "swarm of typewriters" reminds us of how Laura acted "After the fiasco." We immediately connect the image of Jim "bearing a silver cup" with this exclamation: "Not Jim!" Should one go beyond the rudimentary and make other connections, say between Amanda's past "as a girl on a porch, greeting callers" and the image projected as she calculates a remedy for Laura—"young man at door with flowers"—that is probably what Williams intended also, for he believed that truth is never simply a matter of correct responses. The device brilliantly serves the purpose of recapturing the impressionistic qualities of the human memory—Tom's and ours.

Memory colors everything in the play with subjective and personal hues. This may explain why he chose a fairly unfamiliar line from a French poem for two of his projections at the beginning of the play: "Ou sont les neiges." It is from "The Ballade of Dead Ladies" by the fifteenth-century French poet, François Villon. The line can be translated, "But where are the snows of years gone by?" Now how does that help us interpret scene 1? It helps very little. (In fact, the legend probaby would help us better understand a play he would complete soon after this one. Among the "dead ladies" Villon lists is one named "Blanche," the name Williams chose for the heroine of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.) If we know that Villon lived at a time of great social transition in his country, that information may help us relate the context of the poem to Williams's play. If we know that Villon's emphasis in this collection of ballads is on death and love, we also can appreciate the quotation. However, to assume that audiences possess such knowledge of the French language and literature is a bit presumptuous. But Williams probably put the legend there because he considered Amanda a type of person whose passing should give us pause. The projections therefore are like forty-four works of art, each focused momentarily on a screen. Some projections make an impact,

and others do not. Some appear to mock the events onstage, while others suggest deep pathos. Together, however, they provide a visual framework for the memory Tom shares with the audience. It is the same with music coming at us from three directions—from Laura's Victrola, from the Paradise Dance Hall, and from "the fiddle in the wings."

The allusive qualities of music especially intrigued Williams, as his production notes make clear. Laura's theme "is used to give emotional emphasis to suitable passages." Like the distant calliope of a circus parade, the music works nostalgically as Tom recalls for us his sister's orderly arrangement of glass figures—her circus. It perfectly captures his memory of his sister: "it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest" (production notes, xi). Laura's Victrola provides strains of romantic music such as the waltz "La Golondrina." She is re-creating musically the atmosphere of her mother's cotillion days. The activity also acknowledges her long-gone father who left those records behind as a reminder of his absence. The Paradise Dance Hall provides a musical background for most of the play. "All The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" gets to the very heart of the play's social meaning. The dance hall band also accompanies Jim and Laura's climactic scene together. It begins with a waltz that filters through the night air into the apartment. Jim's words are couched in music as he asks: "Has anyone ever told you that you were pretty?" Later he says: "Somebody . . . Ought to—kiss you, Laura" (112). At that moment Williams indicates "MUSIC SWELLS TUMULTUOUSLY." Then we learn the truth about Jim, and there is no more music. The next time we hear the band Jim is telling Amanda about his love for a "girl named Betty." Immediately a "tender waltz" bitterly mocks the rise and fall of Laura's and Amanda's hopes, while Jim picks up his hat and prepares to leave.

Wiliams incorporated cinematic techniques in *The Glass Menagerie* as a means to allow the audience to gain access to Tom's memory. Tom remembers an image before he re-creates the dialogue. In his memory the dialogue achieves poetic texture, evoking a touching lyricism. There is a peril here, of course, and Williams was aware of it. To

recover the subjective past with such immediacy tempts one to assume that one's personal vision is the only vision that makes sense. The movies, however, taught Williams how to avoid solipsism. Fundamentally the music and projections, especially the projections, function as benign distractions. When directors follow the acting edition of the play and eliminate most of the distractions, they focus more subjectively on the lyrical aspects of Tom's memory. (Thus the play so easily becomes too sentimental, too easily dominated by Amanda.) The forty-four interruptions—"NOT JIM!" "TERROR!" "AH!" "HA!" etc.—force the audience to take a few steps back from the events and to join Tom whose memory as narrator contains the safety devices of distraction. The primary function of the most controversial aspect of Williams's technique is objectivity. But is not this precisely correct for a narrator who speaks most of his lines with an almost annoying sense of detachment? It is the only way he can tell the story without being consumed by guilt and regret.

Memory touches the heart in *The Glass Menagerie,* but it never breaks it. Such is the chief virtue of Williams's sense of distance. Without this sense, Tom might begin the long and difficult mission of the voyager, but he would never complete it. The candles lighting Laura's face are far too strong, far too magnetic. The vision of Amanda comforting Laura is like the music of the sirens of the sea who seek to lure to destruction the first great voyager, Odysseus. Such profound longings can turn an adventurer's face away from destiny. Tom experiences these longings, but, like Odysseus, he has another great purpose: he longs for the truth. Tom's secret is that he has learned to live with the past rather than in it. He accepts his past with neither resignation nor complete understanding. Rather Tom has learned that his mission as a voyager requires him to keep searching for the truth, even if the search constantly brings him back to his past.

In classical tragedy the hero also lives in a world of memory, and he often has difficulty coping with the past. In tragedy that is where the problem always seems to begin—the past. The origin of the suffering of humanity, as portrayed by Oedipus, lies in the unremembered past. Oedipus acts as though he were innocent of wrongdoing.

Through a crushing series of events, he discovers that the source of evil in the kingdom is himself. Faced with the truth, he recognizes it and takes action, blinding himself and thereby cleansing and renewing both himself and the citizens of Thebes. Historical circumstances of Elizabethan England are quite different from those of Athens in the age of Sophocles. Yet Shakespeare's tragedies suggest that the fundamental problem faced by the hero is the past. Hamlet learns that the gnawing problem he faces essentially is moral in nature: the entire kingdom has been corrupted by the king's outrageous sins. The only solution is to expose the source of corruption—a task he eventually accomplishes after much hesitation. Tragic heroes cause suffering, endure suffering, and redeem suffering.

Although he was not using the term in its classical sense, Williams found it helpful to discuss his characters' situations as tragic. In a preface to *The Rose Tattoo,* entitled "The Timeless World of a Play," he writes:

> Yet plays in the tragic tradition offer us a view of certain moral values in violent juxtaposition. Because we do not participate, except as spectators, we can view them clearly, within the limits of our emotional equipment. These people on the stage do not return our looks. We do not have to answer their questions nor make any sign of being in company with them, nor do we have to compete with their virtues nor resist their offenses. All at once, for this reason, we are able to *see them!* Our hearts are wrung by recognition and pity, so that the dusky shell of the auditorium where we are gathered anonymously together is flooded with an almost liquid warmth of unchecked human sympathies, relieved of self-consciousness, allowed to function. . . . So successfully have we disguised from ourselves the intensity of our own feelings, the sensibility of our own hearts, that plays in the tragic tradition have begun to seem untrue.

The fall of the hero of classical tragedy does not take place in Williams's plays nor does it occur in most other modern plays. But his protagonists lead the audience toward a sense of recognition about the deeper meaning of the spectacle onstage. Williams's plays take place in

the age of the antihero, when moral values are not so commonly held. Justice, goodness, nobility—these concepts no longer have the same meaning for everyone. Philosophers and social scientists have encouraged us to probe these concepts, and opinions vary about their meaning today. The Greek hero lived with a fixed order. The moral universe he lived in was far less ambiguous than that of his modern counterpart. The antihero lives among a disorder of relativity but nevertheless has a mission.

Tom Wingfield, like many other protagonists in modern literature, is an antihero. He lacks those superior social and/or moral qualifications we associate with heroic figures. The Wingfields do not belong to the ruling class. We see in this lower-middle-class apartment, nevertheless, much suffering. A remarkable achievement of *The Glass Menagerie* is the depth of its exploration of the nature of despair. But the play does not end in despair. Tom chooses to become a voyager, to begin a quest, because he believes that there is a source of meaning beyond the ash pits of modern civilization he encounters in that St. Louis apartment. As he engages in his long journey, he discovers that a key to understanding lies in the past. What can redeem the suffering of modern man? The answer lies in the vision of his sister, comforted by his mother—the illusion that haunts him as he quests for the truth. This illusion brings Tom to the threshold of truth. Magically the illusion both attracts and repels at the same time.

So Tom continues to be pursued, but never to be overtaken, by memory. Since memory is such a compelling force, there are times when one simply must beg the past to let go. The closing pantomime functions as a ritual, which Tom repeats as he travels through time. It always ends the same way, as Laura acknowledges Tom's request and "blows the candles out." The ritual reminds him that he must be faithful not only to his past but also to his future. Like a pivotal scene in a movie, he repeats the sequence again and again. Once the scene ends, Tom again can renew his search.

If Tom abandons his artistic search for creative resolution, he becomes Amanda.

CHAPTER 9

The Voyage of Tom Williams

In September 1982 a young married couple on vacation in Key Largo, Florida, were drinking coffee in a small café. They observed a man seated alone at an adjoining table and began a conversation with him. Mr. and Mrs. Steven Kunes soon were talking about writers and writing with Tennessee Williams. The author grew expansive and took them into his confidence. The couple learned that Williams was waiting for a bus to take him to his home in Key West. (They did not know that he had slipped away earlier that morning, much to the consternation of his housekeeper.) Soon the two were driving him back to Key West, thoroughly enjoying the conversation.

When the husband mentioned that he was working on a novel, Williams eagerly encouraged him. "Write a play, Steven. . . . Just write a play. I know you can hit the core. I know it like I know a good wine. Don't be flattered when I say this. You can flatter me by using this old machine here to do the job." Then Williams presented him with a vintage Underwood typewriter on which he said he had written *Summer and Smoke* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. As the couple left him secure in his home, perhaps they were surprised by the playwright's insistence that they should call him "Tom." Six months later they