Blond Ambition: Tennessee Williams’s Homographesis

Steven Bruhm
Blond Ambition: Tennessee Williams's Homographesis

Steven Bruhm
Mount Saint Vincent University

What exactly did Sebastian Venable write in his Poem of Summer? What comprised the body and soul of this brainchild that took nine months—"the length of a pregnancy" (14)—to produce? We don't know, of course. Tennessee Williams's Suddenly Last Summer simply tells us that Sebastian, the gay poet murdered before the play opens, has written a poem each summer for 25 years. We have a title, but we have no text, a signifier with an ostentatiously absent signified. Which is interesting, of course, because we also have a play about a gay man but with no gay man in it: he is absent, apparitional (to borrow Terry Castle's adjective); he is always already consumed at the moment we would have rendered present so that we may consume him. Like a Foucauldian case study of the discursive construction of sexuality, Sebastian exists only as a composite of various testimonies that attempt to define the poet and, indirectly, the "homosexual." But such an absence can be productive, and not only for what it tells us about straight definitions of the gay man. I want to suggest here that while we can never know the content of Sebastian's Poems of Summer, it is precisely the presence of the poem which can never be read that marks the queer meaning of Suddenly Last Summer, and whose slippage goes to the heart of Williams's self-representation in the late 1950s.

Sebastian's silenced poem is crucial to the play not only because it frames the problem of presence and absence that is central to the play's representation of the gay man, but also because it raises the question of homosexual writing, a question that, for Lee Edelman, is crucial for the 1950s' construction—and destruction—of gay males. In Homographesis, Edelman argues that straight America during the Cold War was plagued by the feeling that homosexuals had, on the one hand, infiltrated culture and politics on every level but were, on the other hand, impossible to detect. Like communists, their very invisibility led them to be "seen" everywhere. This troubling (in)visibility, he argues, gives rise to "homographesis," the attempt to posit homosexuality as a legible phenomenon while simultaneously acknowledging the frequency with which it manages to escape detection; it

constructs male homosexuality in terms of what the "public eye" can recognize even as it situates it in an ontological shuttle between perceptual sameness and difference. (154; emphasis added)

In Edelman’s analysis, what “the ‘public eye’ can recognize” is effeminacy, which becomes the diagnostic homographic designation, the “essential” characteristic of the gay man. The very “difference” of homosexual maleness can be cognized only by seeing it as similar to (straight) femininity. And this diagnosis is made possible, Edelman argues, by a strategy of metaphor: whereas, prior to the late nineteenth century, the sodomite was viewed as an agent whose activities could metonymically be seen to operate anywhere and everywhere, the twentieth-century psychopathologizing of the homosexual reinterpreted “the subject’s relation to sexuality ... as essential or metaphoric.” Effeminacy becomes the “visible emblem or metaphor for the ‘singular nature’ that now defines or identifies a specifically homosexual type of person” (8). Homography, the writing of the homosexual into visibility (and consequently into a specific kind of persecution), proceeds by the deployment of metaphors that claim to capture him, embody him, “carry” him “over” in the literal sense of the rhetorical term.

While the competing testimonies of Suddenly Last Summer do not portray Sebastian as particularly effeminate, they do draw on legible images of homosexuality that are equally homographic in Edelman’s terms: sensitivity, creativity, “grandeur,” secrecy—in short, all the characteristics of “narcissism.” And while Williams never alludes directly to the Narcissus myth in any of its variations, he does use Sebastian for some very telling narcissistic reflections: the gay man in this play is intensely private and antisocial, working in a cloistered atelier so that “no one but he could see” the fruits of his labors (14); he was “unknown outside a small coterie of friends” (11) and “had no public name as a poet” (13); more important, he was strongly cathexed on his mother—the telltale sign of the homosexual narcissist since Freud—and seemed unable to produce any poetry without her during the summer of his death: “something had broken,” Catharine says, “that string of pearls that old mothers hold their sons by like a—sort of—a—umbilical cord” (77); this mother-fixation is stereotypically enhanced by the absence of the father, which mounts the assumption of psychoanalysis in the late 1950s / early 1960s that “a constructive, supportive, warmly related father precludes the possibility of a homosexual son” (Bieber 311); and finally, Sebastian rejected the Echo-like advances of Catharine as she “made the mistake of responding too much to his kindness, of taking hold of his hand before he’d take hold of [hers], ... of appreciating his kindness more than he wanted [her] to” (74). Without saying so, Williams draws a textbook study of the kind of homosexual man the Freudian enterprise had identified some forty-five years earlier, the type whose delusions of grandeur result from an inability to cast the mother in the role of sexual otherness, and who instead identifies with her too fully. In the desire to please her, he identifies with her desire, the desire for the male body, for the phallus of another man.

Williams’s representation of Sebastian as narcissist is by no means accidental in the context of his career. In 1957, the year he began writing Suddenly Last Summer, Williams responded to the death of his own father and the disastrous reviews of Orpheus Descending by undergoing Freudian psychoanalysis with Dr. Lawrence Kubie, psychoanalyst to the stars and theorist of the relation of neurosis
to creativity. But while Williams's biographers see a profound usefulness in the visits with Kube, the playwright was ambivalent about the analysis. On the one hand, as he tells Maria St. Just on August 27, 1957, "The 'good doctor' has shown me many things about me which I hope will make me less self-centered, gradually, in the future. I can be a better friend some day than I've been up till now" (Five O'Clock 150). Kube, in other words, can make him less of a narcissist, and by January 3, 1958, Williams tells Donald Windham that "analysis has helped me" (Windham 294). Yet in the same series of letters to St. Just, Williams also comments caustically on the dual direction of Kube's treatment. First was the sexual: "Of course he is attacking my sex life and has succeeded in destroying my interest in all except the Horse [Frank Merlo], and perhaps the Horse will go next. . . ." (150); and in his Memoirs he talks about "the mistake of strict Freudian analysis" with Kube who "taught me much about my true nature but he offered me no solutions except to break with Merlo, a thing that was quite obviously untenable as a consideration, my life being built around him" (173). Coupled with this proscription against (homosexual) sex—Kube suggested he try women for a while—Williams was also to give up writing (Spoto 215; Hayman 170). Writing, Kube apparently reasoned, was not only a direct source of anguish for a playwright falling out of critical favor, but it actually exacerbated the patient's problems by inviting him to dwell on them in his texts. Williams's literary gloominess could only make him more neurotic. Thus Kube connected Williams's sexual endeavors to his textual ones as a combined source of his paranoia and depression, and by having the patient give up both, he hoped to make him healthier, happier, more heterosexual.

Thus, Kube's identification of the legibly homosexual—his homographesis—assumes an equation between the sexual and the textual, and he argues that to indulge this equation is to drive the patient further into neurosis. Indeed, it is one of the major arguments of his book, Neurotic Distortion of the Creative Process (published 1956, the year Suddenly Last Summer was first performed), that creativity becomes neurosis when the artist repeatedly and automatically returns to his private obsessions, when he narcissistically indulges his own murky and tedious psyche. (And this, of course, was one of the grounds on which critics condemned Orpheus Descending.4) The narcissistic indulgence of the creative self is equivalent to the narcissistic indulgence of the sexual self both in Kube's diagnosis and in Suddenly, and frames what I am calling Sebastian's "blond ambition," the pathologized pairing of homosexuality and egomania. Sebastian's famous attraction to the sea turtles who are eaten on the beach of the Encantadas is a homographic inscription of his sexual/textual guilt: sexually, Catharine's remarks that Sebastian was "famished for blonds" and that "that's how he talked about people, as if they were—items on a menu" (39) align him programmatically with the birds of prey, and echo Williams's letter to Donald Windham in which he declared himself sated with dark Romans and hungry for northern blonds (215). And textually, Sebastian sees in this flesh-eating spectacle "God's image, an equation of God," "a clear image of him" (19). Williams completes Kube's equation by connecting Sebastian's inability to write during his final summer with his inability to enjoy sexual satisfaction. His textual blankness is replayed as a sexual blankness, a homographesis that, for Robert F. Gross, allows Sebastian's body to become his final poem in an act of sublime dismemberment and poetic reincarnation (244-51).
But if the predatory metaphor is employed to represent the homosexual narcissist in the 1950s—if it acts as the homographic designation of the guilty gay man—then it also carries with it some other tropic equivalences that are less comfortable for psychoanalytic diagnosis. For Williams depicts Sebastian not only as the eater but as the eaten, a victim not only of his own desires but the desires of others: Violet who wants him “chaste” (24), Catharine who wants his sexual friendship, George who wants his inheritance, Cukrowicz who wants his trust fund. Indeed, it is Suddenly Last Summer’s major social criticism that Sebastian’s fatal behavior is not metaphor but synecdoche, a signifier of everyone’s opportunism. As Catharine tells that other great predator, the lobotomist Cukrowicz, “we all use each other and that’s what we think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what’s—hate” (63). If the destruction of the turtles metaphorizes Sebastian’s treatment of other human beings it also employs the homosexual to figure synecdochically the non-homosexual, the social, the Garden District of New Orleans. Egomanical grandeur is morally no less reprehensible here than it is in Sebastian, but it is divested of its supposedly homosexual psychic configurations. Rather, the play has as its subject matter the impossibility of a homographesis that will write the homosexual in a complete, omniscient, essentializing narrative.

This inability, this gap in the central metaphor of the play, creates in Sebastian an effect akin to narcissism. As Julia Kristeva, following Lacan, has emphasized, the narcissism of the mirror stage centers on a fundamental emptiness in which the self is located where it is not (23). Narcissism emphasizes the difference in a subjectivity thought to be characterized by a self-enclosed sameness. For Ovid’s Narcissus, this difference is profoundly productive of homoerotic love: Narcissus falls in love with another man, a man he recognizes only as other; moreover, as Tiresias tells us, Narcissus will live as long as he does not know that the image in the water is himself (83-87). In other words, homoerotic desire does not paralyze him but rather engages him, for the first time, in the love of another, and the maintenance of the erotic life depends here on the maintenance of homosexual desire, the cessation of which means death. This self-love, which is simultaneously the erotic cathexis on another, becomes in later treatments (the most famous being those of Plotinus and the Schlegels) the metaphor for philosophical and poetic textual creativity. It is only with the interruption of narcissistic desire—that is, desire for the other man—that Narcissus stops cathecting, stops creating, stops living. And the same is true for Sebastian Venable. Catharine tells us that he was “Completing—a sort of—imagel—he had of himself as a sort of—sacrifice to al—terrible sort of a— . . . God” (64), the God of the Encantadas, the God whose image he had sought. But while the egomanical completion of the image results in his death—that is, Narcissus drowns—the play asks us to consider Sebastian before the completion, when his image of himself was still presumably fragmentary, differentiated, split. In this Sebastian we see the productive poet; in this Sebastian we see the active homosexual; and, most interestingly, in this Sebastian we see the man capable of acts of kindness to others, as he rescues Catharine from her disastrous scene at the Mardi Gras Ball. Thus, in Williams’s intervention in the homographic metaphors of psychoanalysis, homosexual desire is not egomanical and self-destructive so much as the end of desire is deadly; in fact, the desire for his own divine image and for the sameness of another male body is directly connected to the awareness of and concern for the other.6 In Suddenly Last Summer, it is the end of homosexual narcissism, of blond ambition, that heralds death.
By divesting of its power the very metaphor that claims to embody the homosexual, Williams employs a narcissistic metaphor to rewrite the terms of Kubie's treatment. In doing so, he undertakes a new kind of homographesis, one which will take us back to the curious, apparitional present absence of the Poems of Summer. David Savran has argued that works such as Moise and the World of Reason and "One Arm" explore a "symmetry of writing and sexuality, pencil and penis, page and anus" that "announces an erotics of writing and reading" (156-57). Writing in these works seems homographically equivalent to homosexuality as it inscribes a Barthesian "pleasure of text." Savran quotes the letter that makes this clear: "There are only two times in this world when I am happy and selfless and pure. One is when I jack off on paper and the other is when I empty all the fretfulness of desire on a young male body" (157; originally in Windham 105). Perhaps we see here another kind of narcissism, the one Herbert Marcuse articulated in 1955, two years before Suddenly Last Summer. Commenting on the figures of Orpheus and Narcissus (figures clearly on Williams's mind as he writes both Orpheus Descending and Suddenly Last Summer in 1957), Marcuse writes: "The Orphic-Narcissistic images are those of the Great Refusal: refusal to accept separation from the libidinous object (or subject). The refusal aims at liberation—at the reunion of what has become separated . . . an order without repression" (170). In both Williams and Marcuse, homographic narcissism moves from pathology to transgressive strategy. 

But paradoxically, such refusal of separation, such indulgence of the narcissistic paradigm, is simultaneously contradicted by other scenes of writing in Williams's texts. Catharine's journal in Suddenly Last Summer is not an immediate, narcissistic record of her thoughts but rather a displacement of herself: she writes in the third person as a way of controlling, manipulating and understanding her complex of experiences and desires. And this phenomenon of authorial displacement was a long-standing concern for Williams. In Moise and the World of Reason, Moise charges the narrator-poet with using language to falsify the real: "you writers, you people of the literary persuasion, you substitute words and phrases, slogans, shibboleths and so forth for the simplicities of true feeling. Put a few words in what you think is a clever arrangement, and you feel absolved of all authentic emotion" (160-61). While this charge in one way fuels the image of the superficial, conventionally narcissistic homosexual, it also indicates how homographesis—the moment of writing and sexuality, the moment of writing sexuality—is also the moment of "selflessness," the displacement of the self at precisely the moment at which the self is rendered most present. This othering of self through writing is, for Lee Edelman, the truly transgressive moment of homographesis, for the inscription of "self" in clearly recognizable terms is also a displacement of that self, a "de-scription" in language that renders him other, capable of existing outside the diagnostic gaze of psychoanalysis (14). The queer narcissist cannot be homographically narcissistic in Kubie's terms but only in his own, terms that are much more fracturing, differentiating, sexually and textually productive.

Thus the Poems of Summer do not simply stand as symptoms of a poetic megalomania, as Violet assuredly confirms for us; they actually figure—or perform—the narcissistic sexuality/textuality that Williams employs to evade his paralyzing therapist. For the poems must be seen on the one hand to gesture to a plenitude of homoerotic sex: they are printed in the French Quarter where
Catharine (and presumably Sebastian before her) had come out long before doing so in the Garden District, and which is famous in New Orleans geography for its sexual accessibility. Moreover, these poems are composed on and around the sexually active beaches and costume balls of Sebastian’s orbit. But on the other hand, the poems bespeak distantiation: they emerge from the French Quarter, outside the public gaze; they are not to be circulated until after the poet’s death; and most tellingly, they are shared only with Violet, that least homophilic of readers who appears unable to detect any homoerōs in them whatsoever. Are the poems, then, the discourse of a closet queen? Perhaps, or they are a register of erotic desire whose otherness keeps Violet, the phobic reader, outside the narcissistically interpretive circle where it takes one to know one,” and instead speaks to the queer self, the queer other.

This negotiation of the queer self with the queer other—the queer self as the queer other—is achieved theatrically through the figure of Doctor Cukrowicz, who stands, I want to suggest, as the erotic centre of the play at precisely the same time he displaces it. Robert F. Gross has argued convincingly that Cukrowicz is “a spectral echo of the late Sebastian Venable” and as such “elicits Catharine’s sexual desire as her cousin had done before him” (237). The doctor’s blandness, Gross says, (metonymically) suggests Sebastian’s desire, since he was heading for northern blonds after Cabeza de Lobo, and so Cukrowicz comes to figure as an object of Sebastian’s desire, a desire with which Catharine can identify as a way of salvaging some erotic connection with her dead cousin. This argument is compelling not only for the way it illuminates the psychological complexities of Catharine’s desire, but also for the way it figures Williams’s narcissistic homographesis. Cukrowicz is the blond, suave, beautiful male dressed in white: as a stage figure, he is clearly intended to stand in for Sebastian, to replace him metaphorically, and as such to give us a visual and visually erotic representation of a gay male who is absent from this play. Yet if Cukrowicz is the subject of the play’s erotic cathexes he is also their object: he too is marked as a magnet for the play’s erotic charges, for he draws the erotic investments not only of Catharine—who displaces her desire for her cousin onto him—but also of Sebastian, that lover of blonds. “You would have liked my son,” Violet tells him, and “he would have been charmed by you” (22). And in case the metonymic significance of charm should be unclear, Violet elaborates: “He was a snob about personal charm in people, he insisted upon good looks in people around him, and, oh, he had a perfect little court of young and beautiful people around him always, . . . a little entourage of the beautiful and the talented and the young” (22). Thus Cukrowicz is both the desiring Sebastian and the object of Sebastian’s desire, a theatrical embodiment of the queerly split subject. As such, Cukrowicz enacts the narcissistic bifurcation and its homoerotic desire that I have been arguing underlies Ovid’s myth: Sebastian’s eros, like that of Narcissus, is directed toward the other as it circles around the self.

In 1958, after a pause in his analysis, Tennessee Williams returned to Kubie for treatment, “but unfortunately I got restless and started hopping back and forth between the analyst’s couch and some Caribbean beaches” (Where I Live 108). The candor in this statement is both deliberate and strategic. In 1958, the same year as the emergence of Suddenly Last Summer and Neurotic Distortion of the Creative Process, Williams said that “If . . . writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it. It isn’t so much his mirror as it is the distillation, the
Blond Ambition: Tennessee Williams’s Homographesis

essence, of what is strongest and purest in his nature, whether that be gentleness or anger, serenity or torment, light or dark. This makes it deeper than the surface likeness of a mirror and that much more truthful” (Where I Live 100). Whether the Poems of Summer contain the best of Sebastian we cannot know. (Violet thinks they do, but then, as we have seen, her hermeneutic acuity may be lacking.) What the poems do demonstrate by their absent significations is the shattering of any “mirror” that could coherently reflect the homosexual narcissist, either to himself or to his public. Yet in that shattering and fragmentation they create a space in which desire can be projected, encoded, and homographically enacted. The Poems of Summer signify by their absence that gap by which we construct Sebastian—dismissively, erotically, but always narcissistically—as we provide for him an erotic text that can never be, and is always, his own.

NOTES

1. We can note here the preponderance of spectral gay men in Williams’s early plays: Blanche Dubois’s husband Allan, Peter Ochello and Jack Straw in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and of course the illusive Skipper in the same play. What is interesting about these characters is not just that they are dead, but that their presence is rendered all the more palpable as they orchestrate so many of the confusions and passions in the living characters.

2. See “On Narcissism,” 89-91, where Freud argues that narcissism can develop as an identificatory response to narcissistic parents, particularly the mother who once held the child inside as part of her. This thesis gets explicitly spelled out in his 1910 study on Leonardo da Vinci, which Freud then summarizes in the 1922 “Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia, and Homosexuality.” In that later work he describes the “organic factor in homosexuality” thus:

   a few years after the termination of puberty a young man, who until this time has been strongly fixated to his mother, changes his attitude; he identifies himself with his mother, and looks about for love-objects in whom he can rediscover himself, and whom he might then love as his mother loved him. (230)

3. Discussions of Suddenly Last Summer are instructive of how critics understand the analysis. Both Ronald Hayman and Donald Spoto detect a creative usefulness in the supposed guilt that underwrites the psychoanalytic therapy, and the way the analysis fosters the writing of Suddenly Last Summer. Hayman discusses the image of the sea turtles thus:

   This was the most ferocious theatrical image Tennessee had yet found to express the guilt he felt at eating luxuriously in cities where the natives were starving, and at paying boys to make love when they were too poverty-stricken to say no. He writes as if his own predatory homosexuality had come to nauseate him. . . . Sebastian inherits not only Tennessee’s predatory interest in boys but also his diffidence. . . . Sebastian resembles Williams closely. Fed up with dark boys, he feels famished for blonds. “That’s how he talked about people—as if they were—items on a menu. —‘That one’s delicious-looking, that one is appetizing,’ or ‘that one is not appetizing’—I think because he was really nearly half-starved from living on pills and salads.” Ten years earlier, after two months in Italy, Tennessee had told Donald Windham he was
tired of dark Romans and building up an appetite for northern blonds." (174-75)

Donald Spoto sees the same efficacy in guilt:

_Suddenly Last Summer_, written quickly, in something like a confused trance of guilt and remorse, was the most creative result of [Tennessee Williams's] psychoanalysis. With his doctor he felt confined and restricted; in the study at the new apartment on East 65th Street, he produced a confessional drama that dealt with his demons not by avoiding them, not by reducing that guilt to insignificance or by denying it, but by asserting that guilt and working through it: confession to begin the healing process. (219-20)

4. While Williams thought _Orpheus Descending_ was panned mostly because of its subject matter (Spoto 212), he also suggests that critics were out to get him for his self-aggrandizing narcissism: "In New York they put [ _Orpheus Descending_] down with a vengeance. . . . I suspect it was a cabal to cut me down to what they thought was my size" (Memoirs 173). Moreover, this narcissism, as in Kovie's interpretation of homosexuality, is directly linked to Williams's repetitious indulgence of his own neuroses. As Hayman records, Williams told the New York _Herald-Tribune_ in May of 1957, "Maybe, I thought, they'd had too much of a certain dish, and maybe they don't want to eat any more" (170). Given that the next play Williams would write is about the cannibalizing of a gay artist, I suspect his gustatory metaphor here is not accidental.

5. Kristeva discusses fully the implications of the Narcissus story for the speculative thought of Plotinus (105-10). The use of the myth for the figuring of the poet is found in Friedrich Schlegel's _Lucinde_ (105-06); for his brother August's treatment of Narcissus, see Vinge 305-06.

6. This perpetual decentering of the self is, for Leo Bersani's reading of Freud, what establishes the possibility of desire. Only through a "radical disintegration and humiliation of the self," he says, is the subject able to seek meaning in another, a search whose medium we call desire (217). Bersani's reading here of Freud's _Three Essays on Sexuality_ clearly aligns him with Lacan and Kristeva who see split subjectivity as the foundation of desire. But for Lacan and Kristeva, homosexual narcissism is the collapse of difference back into the self; it is the failure of splitting and otherness. For a theoretical discussion of the relation of splitting and desire to queerness, see Judith Butler's "Phantasmatic Identification and the Assumption of Sex" (Bodies that Matter 93-119).

7. For a more complete discussion of narcissism's queer disruption of interpretive circles, see my "Taking One to Know One: Oscar Wilde and Narcissism."

**WORKS CITED**


