

Something Cloudy, Something Clear: Tennessee Williams's Postmodern Memory Play

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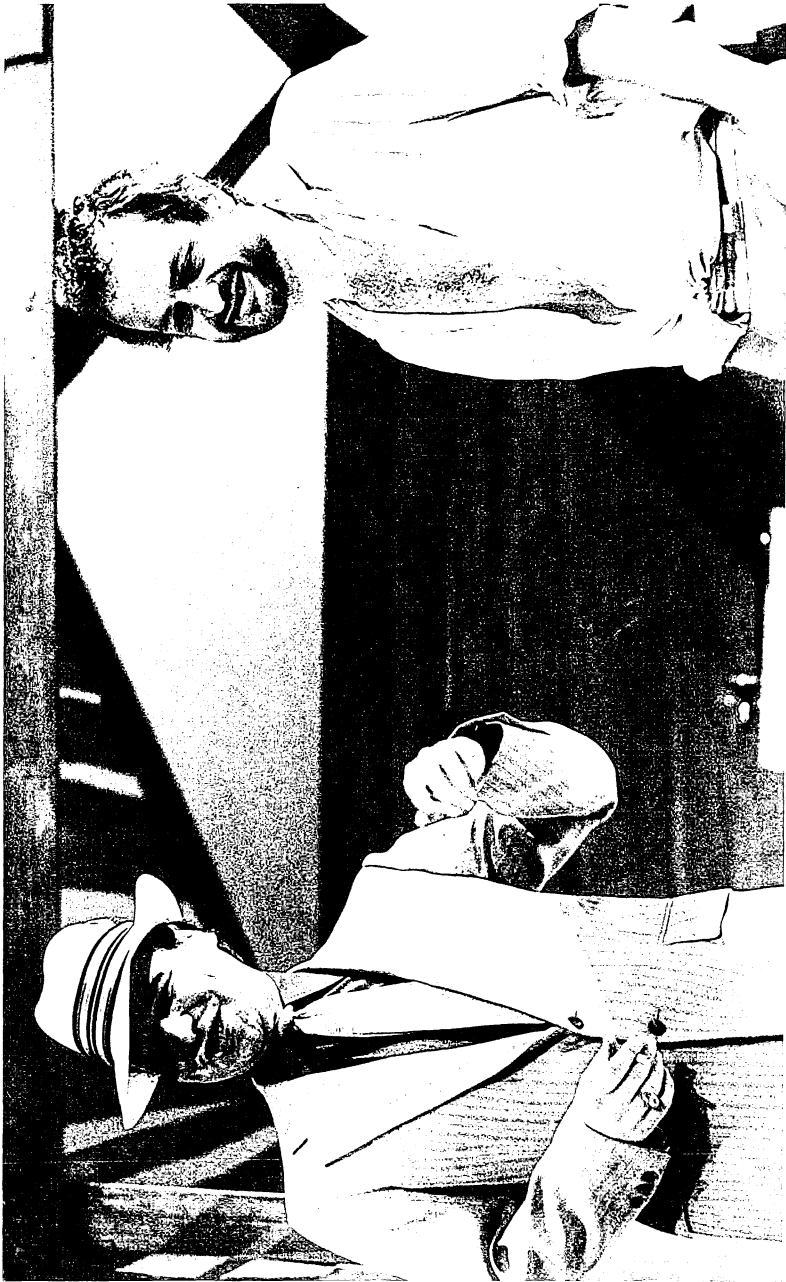
Something Cloudy, Something Clear spans the poles of Tennessee Williams's career. It was written near the end of his career about the circumstances surrounding the play—the *Battle of Angels* (1940)—that helped to launch that career. According to Ronald Hayman, *Something Cloudy* was "the last new play to be staged during his life."¹ Performed in 1981, *Something Cloudy* was not published until mid 1995,² twelve years after Williams's death, because Maria St. Just, Williams's self-appointed literary executor, feared it would hurt the playwright's reputation with its unabashedly brutal disclosure of his homosexuality. According to Williams, "*Something Cloudy* was one of the most personal plays I've written—it released for me some of the emotional content of my life."³ *Something Cloudy* recounts the events of the late summer of 1940 when Williams met Kip Kiernan, his first great male love,⁴ on the beach near Provincetown, Cape Cod, the time he was revising *Battle* for production. *Something Cloudy* is Williams's attempt to make peace with, and in some instances to exorcize, the ghosts from that time in his life, as well as a few specters before and after 1940. The play is inhabited by Kip; Clare, Kip's make-believe sister, a composite of Williams's fractious heroines (Carol Cutrere; Andrea Del Lago) and who at times functions as Williams's conscience; the Fiddlers—Maurice and Celeste—the officious, mercenary producers Lawrence Larger and Armina Marshall who commissioned the ill-fated production of *Battle of Angels* for the Theatre Guild; Caroline Wales, or Miriam Hopkins, who starred as Lady in *Battle*; Hazel Kramer, Williams's boyhood sweetheart; the dying Frank "Frankie" Merlo, perhaps the greatest love of Williams's life; Williams's arch-foe and arch-friend, Tallulah Bankhead; August, a 30-year old Tennessee Williams; and, as Eve Adamson notes, "the ghost of the 1980 playwright who is Tennessee Williams."⁵

Like almost all of Williams's late plays, *Something Cloudy* did not receive an enthusiastic response from the critics. Williams gladly accepted his

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misfortunes among the critics for his experimental work. Speaking of his "decline in popularity" shortly before the premiere of *Something Cloudy*, he observed: "It may very well be that I no longer have a critical following in New York, with the exception of two or three exceptional members of the press, uptown and down."⁶ In addition to these few friendly critics, Williams had an appreciative director in Eve Adamson and her company, the Jean Cocteau Repertory. Adamson had previously directed two other plays by Williams—*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* and *Kirche, Kuche, und Kinder*—and securely captured Williams's high regard. "I met Miss Adamson and her repertory company through this brilliantly luminous and concise revival of one of my least popular plays [*Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*]. . . ."⁷ And just as important, Adamson was comfortable with Williams's later works: ". . . with Tennessee I guess because I am used to working with poetic theatre, with a theatre of imagery, I don't seem to have any problems with his plays."⁸ She succinctly summarized their relationship: "We really spark off of each other."⁹ Williams worked closely with Adamson during rehearsals for *Something Cloudy*, rewriting at her suggestion and even coaching the actors.¹⁰ Perhaps this is why Craig Smith (a remarkable young Williams look-alike) gave a spirited performance as August while having the uncomfortable honor of having the playwright, whom he was portraying as he was forty years ago, sit before him in the theatre. Premiering at the Off-Off Broadway Bouwerie Lane Theatre on 24 August 1981, and opening to the critics on 11 September, the Cocteau Repertory's *Something Cloudy* ran through 13 March 1982, for a total of 48 performances in repertory.¹¹

Sounding a well-rehearsed refrain, the critics faulted *Something Cloudy* for being a tired re-run of Williams's much over-used dramatic techniques from *The Glass Menagerie*. Speaking of the shifts from the past to the present in *Something Cloudy*, Frank Rich warned that "Mannered and scattershot in execution, this once lyrical technique has steadily devolved since *The Glass Menagerie* to become the playwright's favorite evasion technique."¹² Also reading *Something Cloudy* as an imitation of *Glass Menagerie*, Walter Kerr assailed Williams for his "impersonally rhetorical" language and his lack of convincing characterization. Kerr asked: "I wonder if Mr. Williams's distinctive creative voice tends to diminish in direct proportion to his preoccupation with his himself and his past. He has made capital of his early years before—most notably in *The Glass Menagerie*—. . . but leaning so hard on his life does Mr. Williams feel virtually no need to wake up his imaginative gifts as well."¹³ Catharine Hughes likewise faulted Williams for self-indulgent memorial reconstructions and time-shifting in *Something Cloudy*: "This is not a new device for Williams. Nor is it one with which he has been successful. It is as if the playwright has become so enamored of his images, his memories of things past, that the dreamlike sequence



Left: Harris Bertinsky as Bugsy Brodsky. Right: Craig Smith as August. Jean Cocteau Repertory production of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* by Tennessee Williams. Directed by Eve Adamson.

he seeks to create becomes a prisoner of a form of myopia . . . a play can be too personal, too autobiographical to communicate the inner world of its creator."¹⁴ While not directly impugning *Something Cloudy*, John Clum nonetheless indicted Williams's autobiography for diminishing his art; "as the sexual self became clearer, and the plays more autobiographical, the writing became murkier."¹⁵

But while Williams's career was consistently informed and sustained by memory, it is egregiously misleading to see *Something* as a botched imitation of *The Glass Menagerie*, an *apologia pro vita sua*, or a wholesale dramatization of the *Memoirs*, a sensational *Portrait of the Artist as a Queer Young Man* for the stage. *Something Cloudy* is not simply an autobiographical hall of mirrors. The events in Williams's life and the plots for his scripts were more indeterminate than the one-to-one correspondence critics smugly claim for them. As Nicholas Pagan persuasively demonstrates in his postmodern biographical study of Williams, the plays do not bear a filiate relationship to the life.¹⁶ Nor should we continue to accept the conventional imperative of a fixed filiation between one script and another. The plays influenced the playwright's life as much as the playwright influenced his plays. They helped Williams to perform the life rather than the other way around. In point of fact, writing the plays helped Williams to live his life. Like Sebastian Venable, for Williams "his life was his occupation." *Something Cloudy* shows us Tennessee Williams as he was becoming Tennessee Williams.

Something Cloudy is a triumphant closure to Williams's exploration of non-linear dramaturgy. Seen from the perspective of the 1970s and 1980s, Williams the experimental playwright is a postmodern artist, and *Something Cloudy* is a postmodern investigation of the playwright and his art. Considerably more than an autobiographical junket, *Something Cloudy* interrogates the larger postmodern issues of the creation of art and culture; the synchronicity of memory and contemporaneity; the representation of fictions and disclosure of self; the register of authority; the playwright's negotiations with self and with the community of the disremembered; the sexualization and theatricalization of place; and the commodification of art.

In the Preface to his *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster emphasizes that "How we conceive postmodernism, then, is critical to how we represent both present and past—which aspects are stressed, which repressed."¹⁷ The relationship of past to present and present to past, vital to Williams's postmodern strategy, is poignantly reflected in the title of the play. As Williams pointed out in an interview with Dotson Rader: "I prefer the title *Something Cloudy*, *Something Clear* because it refers to my eyes. My left eye was cloudy then because it was developing a cataract. But my right eye was clear. It was like the two sides of my nature. The side that was obsessively

homosexual, compulsively interested in sexuality. And the side that in those days was gentle and understanding and contemplative."¹⁸ Conceiving postmodernism as the confrontation and confluence of past with present, present with past ("then," "in those days" and the now of representing them), Williams in *Something Cloudy* gives us a "double exposure [which] is the key metaphor of the play. Two times, two selves, two sensibilities exist simultaneously . . ."¹⁹ This double exposure is the impetus for and the representation of past and present—Williams's postmodernism—in *Something Cloudy*.

In his widely-respected interpretation of what accounts for and characterizes the postmodern, Jean-Francois Lyotard offers the following analysis which readily applies to what we and Williams see through the "double exposure" of *Something Cloudy*.

The postmodern would be that which puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms . . . ; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them, but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of *what will have been done*. Hence the fact that the work and the text have the characters of an *event*; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always begin too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).²⁰

Williams broke the established rules of good taste and convenient principles of his earlier creation of a memory play in *Something Cloudy* to grapple with the unrepresentable and offered it all through the future past paradox Lyotard stresses. As I hope to prove, *Something Cloudy* unfolds "what will have been done" in Williams's work and life.

Something Cloudy is grounded in an unmediated postmodern heuristic. Postmodernism has consistently been occupied with accounting for the production

and consumption of culture, and postmodernism discourse attempts to describe how we produce culture. Applying the tenets of a postmodern inquiry into culture to this late Williams play reveals to us how he creates a script, and, more specifically, how he produces memory, the chief discourse about/of his script. *Something Cloudy* is intimately and inextricably involved in the ways in which Williams exploits memory analogous to the way a postmodern culture articulates discourse formation. *Something Cloudy* is primarily concerned with the production and consumption of memory, and the two inescapable by-products of memory—desire and disappointment—which animate the process of exposure and (dis)closure, the dialectic of representation in the play.

Given the polygenics of his composing process—for *Something Cloudy* and in almost every other work in the canon—Williams was a closet postmodernist. His vertiginous stream of revisions—deletions, substitutions, combinations, permutations, and transformations—in a barrage of texts encrypted in a host of images corresponds to the plurality of a postmodern instantaneity. A Williams script contains as it sustains and subverts, engendering conflicting and confluent images—the loci of desire—similar to a postmodern canvas with the heterogeneity of cultural forms represented from beer ads to MTV to the architecture of street people. Williams the playwright-painter invested in his canvas-script as many forms of discourse on memory as he could, always flooding the stage with those forms, jamming in all the images and details he could.

Something Cloudy characteristically challenges causal linearity to privilege the postmodern randomness of the plurality of forms (identities, voices, characters) that crystallize Williams's art. The play documents the explosions of self. Director Eve Adamson noted that Williams was constantly rewriting lines and parts of scenes (about himself, to himself, for himself) during rehearsal, and she feared that Williams's revisions were intentional because "he was really trying to sabotage his own play before the critics got a chance to harm him."²¹ I do not believe Williams was eager for self-immolation. More to the point, he was in the process of (in)determinacy, mapping yet collapsing the boundaries and taboos of the limbic world, fragmentizing the plurality of selves that comprise the atoms of memory. August (as Williams) is both writer and redactor, a viewing participant and a speaking subject.

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Something Cloudy, *Something Clear* exhibits many of the characteristics associated with the postmodern. In creating a postmodern memory play, Williams, of course, added his own signature to a movement generally regarded as antithetical to his more celebrated but lapsed modernity. What results is a

work that carries both audience and playwright into an extraordinary flux of ontologies. Here, then, are the hallmarks of this most postmodern of all Williams's plays.

(1) A close, almost indissolvable correspondence exists between fiction and reality in *Something Cloudy*. The play is self-conscious, self-disclosing, anti-mimetic. Clare instructs August/Williams: "This is the summer of 1940, August. Let's drop the metaphysics, play it straight, play it not like summer long past but as it was then."²² "Play it straight" is almost wicked, given the overt homoeroticism in and of the fetishized script, but it is the shibboleth for this Williams play. In no other Williams work is Williams least fictional, so stripped of the metaphysics of illusion. He does away with "pretense" (8) and, consequently, role-playing. No longer does Williams speak through characters such as Blanche, Alma, or Andrea Del Lago; he leaves them aside, letting their personas fall where they may in our memory and his, too. The surface reality in *Something Cloudy* is the drama. Memory is script; script is memory.

Through a fictional Clare, Williams paradoxically reveals a postmodern exposé of a fictionality he has abandoned. Clare tells August that they are two desperate artists, "A couple of solitaires, always in makeup, always in masquerade. But what does that matter? There's the game and we play to win, but sometimes we even win if we lose . . ." (51). *Something Cloudy* stars Williams without makeup, "the unscrupulous, horny bastard on the make; in effect the playwright as stinker," as Michael Feingold terms him.²³ It may be the most sexualized, brutal play in the canon, demonstrating that when fictions collapse, a new revolutionary culture/theatre emerges. *Something Cloudy* teasingly draws an audience's attention to the guise of pretense that the play resists. The world of the play is the play of the world. The very tenets used for centuries to uphold dramatic artifice are in *Something Cloudy* reinvested as the necessary loci of sexual, financial, and entrepreneurial negotiating and contracts. What August tells Kip is as much a description of the dramatic action of the play as it is the throughline of Williams's life: "Kip, we're negotiating for an advantage, aren't we. Like most people, if not all, sometimes" (65). The ideologies of plot and character dissolve into practical sexual bargaining. And traditional (modern) notions of symbolic representation are resisted by and through an anti-aesthetic which refuses to privilege them. What you see inside the theatre is what you could have seen outside the theatre in Provincetown in the summer of 1940, or vice versa.

(2) Central to *Something Cloudy* as a postmodern script is the compression of time and space. "I don't have a watch," August tells Kip, underscoring the fusion of "Present and past, yes, a sort of double exposure" (38).

And perhaps given the intermixture of pastness and futurity, the main character (and author) of *Something Cloudy* would be impeded by a watch, a sign of time's logic, as well as a measurement of cadenced fictionality. *Something Cloudy* dispels a ratiocinative temporality. "Life's is all—its just one time. It finally seems to occur at one time," and in a 1981 interview Williams likewise pointed out "there's a quality to events as one gets older. The past and the present begin to merge" ²⁴ Tennessee Williams historicizes both before and after he enters history. August/Williams lets us hear things from other years as if they happened today. As David Harvey points out in *The Condition of Postmodernity*: "The collapse of time horizons and the preoccupation with instantaneity have in part arisen through the contemporary emphasis in cultural production on events, spectacles, happenings, and media images." ²⁵ *Something Cloudy* is Williams's postmodern spectacle, an image, a soundbyte for the media of today's theatre. We see Kip dance on the beach in 1940 but we also see August recalling it forty years later, or fifty, or sixty, since as long as *Something Cloudy* is performed or read even greater amounts of time exist and yet do not exist for an audience trying to negotiate with August.

As if in one time, one space, Williams brings Hazel Kramer before us, his childhood girlfriend from the 1920s in St. Louis, and on the same set and in the same undivided time frame we hear the death groans of Frank Merlo . . . who died in 1963. A little later, we are transported back to 1955 and to Williams's battle royal with Tallulah Bankhead immediately after her camp performance as Blanche DuBois. We then hear Tallulah as she is dying "in a Manhattan hospital" in 1968 and immediately jump back years before to hear her cautioning Williams to "let Frankie drive you home to bed . . . I'm going home. Yes, I'm going to take your play up country" (59). Tallulah, like the outlaw August (Williams), coexists in a past which is present and a present which is past, all compressed into postmodern instantaneity. The parade of ghosts in *Something Cloudy* filters the tenses out of Williams's verbs; space and time may suggest change, but both modalities remain fixed in the play. Adamson insightfully likened the events in the play to a "time warp," ²⁶ which is the "paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)" Lyotard characterized as the core of postmodernism. Tallulah is the future in 1940 but she becomes part of the *status quo ante* midway through the play while another actress Caroline Wales (Miriam Hopkins) is presumptively past but she is very much active on the present stage.

(3) *Something Cloudy* rebounds with the fragmentation of postmodern literature. As August prowls through loosely connected segments of script, we encounter Williams's various selves as they interact with a plethora of individuals who enter a playing space that within itself incorporates beach, ocean, harbor, hospital, drawing room, Provincetown bar, gangster nightclub, and theatre. The

flux of selves decenters character as the shifts of time and space, drained into one flowing instant, contribute to the fragmentary quality of *Something Cloudy*. Several critics wondered why Williams injected so many diverse—and diffuse—characters into the play; Bugsy Brodsky, Clare's gangster ex-boss, or Hazel Kramer, for example. Flooding the audience's memory with bits and pieces of people and times extracted from Williams's/August's psychic interrogation of self inevitably produces and proclaims fragmentation. Fragmentation becomes the key to unshackling a postmodern memory play, which is not unlike a postmodern film. Given Williams's lifelong interest in and use of cinematic techniques, it is not surprising that *Something Cloudy* resembles the postmodern (fragmented) cinema that Harvey describes as follows:

The serial use of images and the ability to cut back and forth across space and time, free it (postmodern film) from many of the normal constraints, even though it is, in the final analysis, a spectacle projected within an enclosed space on a depthless screen.²⁷

Something Cloudy may well be a spectacle of fragments on a depthless screen. Like the filmed *M. Butterfly*, *Something Cloudy* subjects us to many times, places, and identities separately yet simultaneously, foreclosing any possibility of containment.

(4) Like much postmodern art, *Something Cloudy* invests heavily in the engagement of the reader/auditor in the script. We join or participate with Tennessee Williams in the very "delinquency of his being,"²⁸ and our own, too. *Something Cloudy* is a play of negotiations, bargains, concessions, deals. August/Williams involves us in deals, contracts, or negotiations going on with no fewer than seven individuals—with the Fiddlers regarding his advances and contract for *Battle of Angels*; with the Seaman about a sexual arrangement—"Seaman: So you can fuck me for another fin and a drink.—Okay? 'Sat a deal? August: Yes, I reckon—we've made a deal this time" (56); with Kip about their living together; with Clare regarding his actions towards Kip; with Clare and Bugsy about her role as his firefly; with himself about his behavior towards Kip; and of course with us—the audience—with whom he negotiates throughout the play. We as audience are caught up in so many unsettling contracts in *Something Cloudy* that we long for a satisfying resolution that fragmentation must *pro rata* deny.

We are asked to negotiate with the playwright (August/Williams) about the very disputes of his being. The image of Williams that emerges is hardly flattering, romantic, or sentimental. He fuses the mercenary (his relationship

with the Seaman or the Fiddlers) with the aesthetics of cruelty (his rage for love). The firefly image that Clare projects—as one of the fireflies in Bugsy's club and as "Queen of the Fireflies" in August's club—metaphorically, metonymically—captures the "double exposure" of August's own vision/dialectic that we are drawn into. Fire can be creative, Promethean, celestial; flies on the other hand, are the intrusive emissaries of a paid or forced love that August subjects us to witness and validate. Violet Venable has fruit flies flown in to satisfy the erotic hunger of her venus flytrap. The firefly is the site of contradictions and resistances where we are intimately initiated into August's (Williams's) figurations.

He does this by taking us into and through a rewrite of his life, which is his canon of memories. The most operative expression is in the Fiddlers' demand for a revision/rewrite from August in order to produce his play. What the Fiddlers demand of August, he demands of us. *Something Cloudy* is the rewrite of Williams's life that we get and from it we have to negotiate with the playwright. What concessions will August (or we) have to make with Tennessee Williams? Is Williams having to concede the more brutal side of his nature/art in order for us to love Kip, to recall him as Williams/August wants us to? "Perhaps I've transfigured him in my memory? No, I've memorized him exactly as he was" (12), says August. "I'd rather be cruel than sentimental," declares August to Clare and to us, and like her, we are uncomfortably drawn into a domain that we would have perhaps more happily preferred to remain an empty, unlit room, as Blanche confesses to Mitch in Scene Six of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But Blanche's revelation (her firefly) must die for Kips to be born or reborn.

Williams may have taken the biggest risk of his professional career, for *Something Cloudy* is as close to virtual reality as he would ever create, and as audience, we are a part of the geography of brutalizing desire. Like Kip, Williams is negotiating with the audience from and for advantage. He invites us in to see the past and almost tempts us to take up residence in a new life of Williams, to move him out of the hallowed space of *Glass Menagerie* into the combative, postmodern post-Darwinian world of sexual and theatrical politics. In fact, given the "time warp" of *Something Cloudy* we actually take up space in the Williams canon, lodged within, between, and among the various evolving scripts being simultaneously played or proleptically anticipated. We are both inside and outside the text at once.

We as audience are part of the process of textual (de)composition. Our unraveling is Williams's, too. As Reed Woodhouse claims, the script offers a lesson in survival. "To survive is to become necessarily 'corrupt,' forced into compromises; the doctored scripts, the repressed anger, the bought lust, the

'bargaining' the young August is already beginning to do . . . the 'corruption' is unavoidable . . . The refusal to condemn such necessary tragic bargains is August's final point of view—and a fitting end to the career of his creator. . . ."29

(5) The language/style of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* radically departs from Williams's celebrated lyricism. Although Eve Adamson claims that the play "is a delicately woven tapestry. . . [a] dramatic poem,"³⁰ I believe, to the contrary, that the script postmodernly defuses such stylistic nostalgia. Directing a 1996 production of *Something Cloudy* for the Eastenders Repertory Company (San Francisco), Susan Evans was closer to the truth when she observed: "I was shocked by the stark 'modern' quality of this play. And not just by the four-letter words (although we are jaded now by David Mamet and his ilk, it's still a bit surprising to hear street language from Williams's characters); I was struck by the rawness and stripped-down quality of the language . . . this is definitely not a valentine to youth."³¹ Though Evans calls it "modern," the "stark" and "rawness" of Williams's style in *Something Cloudy* is as close to postmodern as he would ever come, excepting his bleakest foray into the apocalyptic style of the one-act play "The Chalky White Substance" (first published in 1991).³² The language in *Something Cloudy* is brutal, blunt, and resists sustained nostalgia through lyricism. Here is Williams untranslated into metaphor. Clare and Kip may be apparitionally beautiful, but Williams is cloudy, disfigured.³³

He strips away any lyrical veneer in the script; in fact, he seems to defuse any attempt on the part of the characters (or audience or himself) to find rescue or fulfillment through poetic language. For example, discussing August's choice of music, Kip rhapsodizes:

Music like this makes even tonight's sky clearer than it is,—I can only make out two constellations I know, Orion and Ursa Major.—So many visible that they lose themselves in each other.—I thought the falling stars, the meteors, were just in August. (63)

Postmodernly undercutting Kip's poetic attempts to romanticize (and to sentimentalize) and to be redeemed in poetic tropes (e.g., the ambiguity of August as character and month), August starkly retorts: "Their schedule's not that strict" further depoeticizing the script. Immediately thereafter, August and Kip turn to August's drunken assignation of the previous night and they as well as the audience are assaulted by the stench of August's quarters: "There's a sour odor in there and the floor's crusty with dried vomit." With this pungent line, August (Williams) disallows any lyrical rapport to develop between himself and Kip, or himself and the audience, as he had done in *Glass Menagerie*.

This exchange in *Something Cloudy* markedly contrasts with a highly lyrical moment in Williams—Blanche's poetic, anthropomorphic description of Kip's constellations when she and Mitch return from Lake Pontchartrain: "I'm looking for the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters, but these girls are not out tonight. Oh, yes they are, there they are! God bless them! All in a bunch going home from the bridge party . . ." (*Streetcar*, Scene Six). A postmodern malaise—signified by the smell of dried vomit—clouds the lyricism of the stars Kip and we as audience want to see. A new, almost unWilliams Williams emerges in the *écriture*. The absence of any opportunity for the lyrical moment is necessary for Williams (who is simultaneously aged 30 and 70) to chronicle now as in the past the defeat of desire by time. The only way for Williams to accept the living body, from his postmodern perspective, is to neutralize or repel the lyricism of promised fulfillment. Caught in the "exigencies of desperation," August (Williams) must fragmentize in an appropriate postmodern style. In *Something Cloudy* the lyrical half of Williams has expired, paying the price for his disempathic eroticism through time. As Clare says, "We all live on half of something" (54).

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Calling *Something Cloudy* a postmodern memory play may seem like a contradiction in terms, but it is not. It is far more accurate than linking *Something Cloudy* to *Glass Menagerie*, as the New York critics did, to denigrate the former work. *Something Cloudy* does not simply copy techniques or situations (e.g., shifting times; using a narrator who is the author and character; bewailing the plight of the struggling author; etc.) from *The Glass Menagerie*; it foregrounds an entirely different way of accounting for and representing memory. It would be jejune to claim that *Something Cloudy* exemplifies how low culture imitates or reassembles the high art (or high culture) of *Glass Menagerie*—the family nostalgia of the earlier play being replaced by the sexualization of the later. *Something Cloudy* is much more postmodernly grounded. In *Something Cloudy* Williams interrogates and reconfigures the very persona who created *Glass Menagerie*, expelling him from the process that created him. *Something Cloudy* remembers (and represents) the disremembered side of Tom Wingfield. Thomas P. Adler has pointed out that in *Glass Menagerie* "art makes the world flesh,"³⁴ but because of the "animal thing" (33) flesh makes the world art in *Something Cloudy*. The late play negotiates with *Glass Menagerie* on the level of the gut and the gonads, effectively disengaging the earlier one from its status as the simulacrum of canonicity.

As a postmodern play, *Something Cloudy* displaces and dispels many of the trappings of memory that made Williams's *Menagerie* so famous in the form. Ironically, the events in *Something Cloudy* occur both before and after the time depicted in *Glass Menagerie*, which of course preceded the composition of the later play by almost 40 years. As August (Williams) announces, "Present and past, yes a sort of double exposure" (38). From this dual perspective— aesthetically and autobiographically—Williams is subjecting his art (*Menagerie* and *Something Cloudy*) to a postmodern post-mortem.

Essentially, *Something Cloudy* is unredeemed by lyricalizing nostalgia or benevolent future blossoming into career found in *Glass Menagerie*. In *Menagerie* Williams imagined in art (illusion) the dreams that he hoped to fulfill. But, from a postmodern perspective, in *Something Cloudy* fictionality dissolves into terminal, stark truths; as we saw, the play offers a bitter script without illusions. "Was I that terrifying forty years ago?" asks August in 1981 speaking about 1940, which are both simultaneously and instantaneously present in the *Cloudy* script. Despite August saying that "in those days I knew that there would be tomorrows . . . I could only see the turning beam of the lighthouse. Thought maybe Kip could hear me if I shouted Kip—Kip, hey, Kip" (55), the harsher, fragmentary subtext of August and Kip was more clearly expressed in the gangster Bugsy Brodsky's threat to Clare: "Your time's up here" (53). Caught "in the exigencies of desperation," August (Williams) in *Something Cloudy* gives us truth in the not very pleasant (dis)guise of truth. Illusion vanishes. And illusion in *Glass Menagerie* is the somewhat comforting buffer that encapsulated an earlier Tom Williams (Tom Wingfield) by allowing him to transform memory into nostalgic art. An older Tennessee Williams (August) pays a much deeper price for memory than Tom Wingfield did.

At stake is engendering the most plausible conspectus of Williams's identity. Significantly, Tom Wingfield and August were/are companions of merchant seamen. Dressed like a merchant seaman—a sailor—at the end of *Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield conjures up powerful, even grandiloquent literary interlocutors such as the Ancient Mariner, Ishmael, or Charles Henry Dana. But the illusions of *Glass Menagerie* are replaced with flat truths in *Something Cloudy*. The sailor became the ravager in Williams, not the figure of mournful remembrance but the sexual predator. Witness the seaman in *Something Cloudy* as representative of the traveling companions with whom the young Tom Wingfield would associate. The playwright's progress is also the sailor's—that is the message of identities in *Something Cloudy*. Greeting the Fiddlers, the rapacious guardians to the gates of theatrical success that the young Williams wanted to enter, August "returns carrying a bottle of rum," and Celeste playfully remarks, "Rum? Oh, yes, part of the sailor's tradition" (44). Young

Tom (Wingfield) Williams had joined the sailors in 1940, five years before and ever since *Glass Menagerie*. Appositely, Frankie Merlo served in the U. S. Navy during World War II. In the *Something Cloudy* world of double exposures, we are both simultaneously and subsequently immersed in a career that created and then had to evacuate the pristine politics/poetics of *Glass Menagerie*. Clare says prophetically and yet contemporaneously of Tom Wingfield/August/ Tennessee Williams that "the cat is out of the bag." The illusion of the sailor/forlorn traveler has been transformed, through the free(ing) associations of Williams's life and art, into the cat, who as Kip observes with the Williamsesque duality of this memory, is both different from yet identical with the sailor. "What of it. What good is a cat in a bag. A cat is a natural wide-open night prowler by nature, by, by . . ." (83). In *Something Cloudy* we confront a postmodern Tom Williams both before, during, and after the time he became merchant seaman Tom Wingfield, searching, prowling cat-like, for sailors beached in P-town. Gore Vidal's great plumed bird was indeed a sea-going cat.

From the start of the script, Williams seemingly invokes a landscape of memory as he did in *Glass Menagerie*, using space to fix identity. "*The setting itself should suggest the spectral quality of a time and place deep from the past remembered specifically from a time forty years later*" (x). The setting turns out to be the blustery beach—the dunes and the Atlantic—just outside of Provincetown where August lives in a "blown away beach shack" (1). "There's no pane of glass in the window" (5) and so it "rain[s] in without any windowpanes or door to close" (9). Yet, despite the lure of sentimental memory in this watery setting, this is not the world of transparent glass, the translucent world of shadows from the past. In *Something Cloudy* that space is filtered through a postmodern prism of fragmented particularity. Setting is grounded in negative space, viewing the world not with comforting boundaries but in jarring fragments.

Unlike in *The Glass Menagerie*, we do not have dissolvable walls; what we do see is a transparent playwright. Through a postmodern view, Williams physicalizes the "spectral quality" the script promises by theatricalizing the set, literalizing the artist's struggle through the act of performance calling attention to itself. The set is the most important visual metaphor, blunt and rough-hewn, in *Something Cloudy*, replacing Laura's menagerie or Tom's fire escape. The stage represents a stage; the act of writing is the performance of the performance. The playwright makes no pretense of dissolving (or erasing) himself from the set. Inside the "blown away beach shack" sits August motionless or writing frenetically, embodying a postmodern emphasis on writerly practices. The shack is symbol and substance, the tiring house, the prompter's room. It is also the Bouwerie Lane Theatre and the stage of August's mind from which the action of

the present, the past, and the future flow. The theatre's formal conventions are revealed as conventions.

Just outside the shack is a platform, the remaining part of an adjacent shack that has been blown away. This platform is also a platform (or play form), another anti-mimetic part of Williams's landscape in *Something Cloudy*. Clare asks August: "Why do you keep everything under the platform?" (13). For it is there that August hides his typewriter, silver victrola, paper and records—the tools of his trade, the building blocks in and of this postmodern, instantaneous memory play. The typewriter is Tom Wingfield's old portable *Smith Corona* before, during, and after he used it. The original subtitle of *Something Cloudy—The Silver Victrola*—emphasizes that, as August confesses to Clare, Williams cannot write without music. Quite postmodernly, Williams underwrites his new stage with immediate self-reflexivity. This Williamsesque stage for the 1980s further suggests retrospectively the origin from which future memories will have to evolve. Reconfiguring a beach landscape into a stage and then back again, Williams theatricalizes and fragmentizes the most poignant—and seemingly spectral—moments on this platform. For it is on the platform that Kip the young artist does his "warm-up exercises" (8) and when he "dances in a cool light on the platform, August looks raptly at him."

The auditory world of Williams's set is also theatricalized by being embedded, too self-consciously, within the reality surrounding it. The loud and sometimes terrifying world of the ocean, heard periodically in *Something Cloudy*, jerks nostalgia right out of playwright and audience as if in defiance of any romanticizing pathetic fallacy, as was operative in *Menagerie*. The correspondence between nature's fury and the turmoil of the playwright's experiences is too loudly orchestrated in Williams's self-conscious theatrics. Sound and script call attention to themselves too intrusively, too fictionally. We can almost visualize August in his tiring/beach house inserting appropriate stage directions into the ongoing script he is writing. In a sense, though, these off-stage noises correspond to the "masquerade" and "make-up"—the game that desperate artists such as Caroline and August must play with their audiences (51). In 1981, Williams stripped away such ruses in order to foreground the real subject of his play—writing itself. If any symbolism adheres to the *Something Cloudy* stage it is that Williams moves his audience from nature (ocean roar, end-of-summer winds) into a different predatory space—the theatre. And in the theatre space of *Something Cloudy*, subtext and text are synchronous, defeating a dialogic theatricality that had in the *Glass Menagerie* "past" privileged illusion over truth, however enticing for Williams and his willing cosignatories, the audience.

In yet another postmodern reflection, Kip is the new Laura in Williams's memory play for the 1980s. In Williams's postmodern script gender is erased,

or at least unconfined, as Kip is reimagined as Laura for Williams (August) to care for, to love, and to receive inspiration from. Woodhouse claims that Kip "outside [August's] window [is] like a male muse"³⁵; Laura also served for August/Tennessee/Tom. The points of similarity between these two characters are transformational, as one is postmodernly metamorphosed into the other and back again, irrespective of chronology or conventionality. Each contributes to the fragments of desire and disappointment in Williams's serrulated memory.

Kip and Laura both look to Williams for protection which he underwrites more fictively in *Glass Menagerie* but postmodernly in *Something Cloudy*. Like Laura, Kip is an outcast, marginalized by a cruel society that would devour him. Sister and lover are endangered by conventional ideologies which imprison and trap them in youth. Kip flees an oppressive patriarchy—the Canadian government—that wants to draft him. Laura similarly tries to escape a world of commerce and coercion that would freeze her into a routine of terror. Laura's dependence attaches itself to Kip through Williams's recollection. Kip (and Clare) need someone (August) and someplace to get them through the winter just as surely as Laura and Amanda need Tom to provide for them. "Clare and I are the ones—that are in the vulnerable position," confesses Kip to August. Casting aside chronology as easily as he does gender, Williams concentrates on the similar traumas his lover and his sister cannot endure. What Clare says of Kip's affliction could also be said of Rose's: "He goes into sudden lapses. Gets attacks of migraines and doesn't relate to the present" (19). Both also suffer, at different times and in different physical and psychic places, brain surgery. In the 1930s Rose (or Laura) Williams underwent a frontal lobotomy at the Missouri State Sanitarium which was fatal to her development as an independent, evolving woman. Kip died from a brain tumor. Uniting fragments of Kip to Laura (Rose), Williams has Kip speak of his own mental tortures which August never had to go through.

He never had the top of his head sawed off and an ounce of diseased brain matter removed from the his top-piece, and he never had to choose between a charity ward and sleeping with Bugsy Brodsky. He never sat next to us for six weeks in that . . . show—blow—varium in—(*He rubs his forehead, confused.*)
Rose—show—pose! POSE. (78)

In his paroxysm of pain, Kip releases the magic, fragmentary name from August's (Williams's) psychic past. It is the "time warp" of the past which is also the gnawing present/future in *Something Cloudy*. The utterance of "Rose" most directly, openly cements the union between Williams's sister Rose and his lover

Kip. In that name Williams inscribes and encodes his lamentation for lost desire. Like Othello's trance in Act 4, scene 1, where the Moor speaks the very words that objectify a subjective ontology, Williams (August) connects Rose's lobotomy to Kip's operation. In this central revelation/relationship, Williams dissolves fiction and blurts out reality, or evolving realities since Rose's lobotomy predates Kip's cancer by a decade, but in this postmodern memory play where pseudo-fictions are honest truths, Williams destabilizes the more conventional idea of character integrity. Significant, too, in Williams's montage of memory, both Laura (Rose) and Kip are destined for asylums, evicted from home. "Where's home? Some hospital?" Clare announces.

In Williams's compression of time and psyche, Laura's pristine passivity also seeps into Kip. Critics like Frank Rich faulted Williams for painting Kip "as a saintly Nijinskyesque icon—a skin deep pin-up, not a person. On stage, Kip wears virginal white and tirelessly rehearses his 'modern dance' exercises on August's beach."³⁶ But this is pure Lauraism. Williams's virginal sister compulsively strokes her glass collection—the sign of her artistic becoming—almost as often as Kip dances his pavane. They are fellow artists under the skin of their creator-historian, August/Tom Wingfield. Interestingly enough, Kip may dance to the accompaniment of the same victrola that August's (Williams's) sister played in the St. Louis tenement.

Ultimately what most terrifyingly conflates Laura and Kip is Williams's guilt for abandoning/mistreating them. Both Kip and Laura (Rose) are forced into performance—literally and memorially—by Williams, an artistry that comes back to haunt him in *Something Cloudy*. Laura is condemned by Tom to repeat, again and again each night, her walk across the stage of his memory with inextinguishable burning candles. Correspondingly, Kip must dance as part of his performance and, even more demeaningly, assume the guise of "a massa-type nigger" (80), waiting on August to curry his favor. Kip is forced, too, to perform as a catamite; he "looks like a whipped dog," declares Clare to the mistreating August. The young Kip "emerges spiritually wounded."³⁷ August himself confesses that "I thought it was possible, then, that he was giving a performance, and it made me say harsh things to him" (68), referring to Kip's tears and dejection. "Mean games never go," remonstrates Kip to August. But in this reconstituted and redesigned postmodern memory play, the "mean games" of performance went on each night at the Bouwerie Lane Theatre and in Williams's psyche. Whatever nostrum the memories of Laura had in *Glass Menagerie* vanish in *Something Cloudy*; a new memory of the sister was compounded with even more strident and accusatorial impact because of Kip. He becomes Laura in remission.

- 4 -

In a key place in the script of *Something Cloudy*, Williams's devotion to memory confronts and ultimately defeats one of the most pernicious threats in the postmodern world—the commodification of art. However closely he may have adopted postmodern techniques, Williams never subscribed to consumer aesthetics—producing art as if it were a commodity—that debased play and playwright. He never downsized his art. Williams's plays are manifestoes to the intense power and complex pain of art, and *Something Cloudy* is no exception. It is for this reason that the center point of the play is occupied by Williams's justifiably brutal attack on Maurice and Celeste Fiddler, the producers who attempt to subjugate the playwright and commercialize his art, co-opting his integrity. Although Dan Isaac calls this section of *Something Cloudy* "the best piece of writing the master has done in some time,"³⁸ most critics brand the episode as extraneous and monotonous. Closer to the truth, though, the Fiddler episode meritoriously endorses Frederic Jameson's critique of the devaluation of art and diminution of the artist in a late capitalistic (postmodern) society. Compressing time and space again, Williams collates events from 1940 with those in 1981. In fact, the Fiddlers' despicable business tactics in the 1940s bear uncanny resemblances to the commodification of art that Jameson decries in the 1980s.

As Jameson points out, the production of culture "has become integrated into commodity production generally; the frantic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods (from clothes to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."³⁹ Harvey elaborates on these points: "The struggles that were once exclusively waged in the arena of production have, as a consequence, now spilled outwards to make of cultural production an arena of fierce social conflict. Such a shift entails a definite change in consumer habits and attitudes as well as a new role for aesthetic definitions and interventions."⁴⁰

The Fiddlers' view of art and the artist is inescapably commercial and frantic in this postmodern world. Art for them is a commodity to be purchased, but not to be respected. Possessing "an unfathomed depth of venality," they see their interaction with August as a social struggle to buy him cheap. The Fiddlers reduce art to production and the playwright to a hired, itinerant worker inextricably caught in the loop of a production cycle. They valorize business as the real power broker over aesthetics. Dichotomizing the two in order to privilege the latter, Fiddler begrudgingly compliments August: "You're a good businessman for an artist. Here's twenty more" (49), as if his cash determines the essentiality—the quality—of art.

Jameson's later-day capitalists, the Fiddlers exploit playwrights by denying their emancipatory talents. When Maurice boasts that "I'm famous for my sympathy for young writers," August retorts: "You don't want to pay them." Maurice's craven attempts to pass himself off as artist—"I know how to talk to this boy. We have rapport. Artists speak the same language" (48)—betray his true allegiance to commodity art. What the Fiddlers most want from August is the rewrites for the second act of his play so they can offer it for consumption by their audiences. But an artist's autonomy opposes the commercialization of art. Their "aesthetic interventions" are financial. "Maurice can't give you another dime till you've done the rewrites demanded," asserts Celeste (46), and when August tries to invoke an honorable economic precedent—the promise of an agent—Maurice insists: "Never mind what the ten percenters insist" (49) and advocates instead "special arrangements just between you and me." He warns: "we have to stick to agreements" (47). When August refuses to supply rewrites without payment, Maurice "*pulls out a roll of bills from his pocket*" and a second or two later, "*He peels more bills off his roll of currency*" (49). Receiving the rewrites, Maurice can only ask, "Are these pages numbered in sequence," quantifying art like an assembly line foreman. When he leaves, "*Maurice goes up the dune arranging the pages*" (50). These repetitive, mechanical gestures—peeling bills out of a wallet, arranging pages—illustrate Maurice's crass sensibilities, his preoccupation with quantification. Williams deplores the aesthetic vacuum in which culture brokers like the Fiddlers thrive.

But most significant about the Fiddlers in *Something Cloudy*, Williams shows audiences in the 1980s that using postmodern dramatic techniques does not coerce a playwright to validate the commodification of art. August outwits the Fiddlers at their own demoralizing commercialism by rejecting out of hand any attempt to impose their mass-consumer fashions and dictates on him. A blunt, even shrewd Williams responds "Outlines don't work for me, Mr. Fiddler. I don't want any ideas but my own right now" (46). He refuses to surrender his own rewrites until his condition is met—"When you take out your wallet, Mr.—Maurice" (48). Deconstructing any Fiddleresque characterization of him as an inept artist, August demands and receives a "regular contract" (45) and "regular option money." The exploitation of the artist by the postmodern capitalist fails as August (Williams) rejects any attempt to control or monitor him by an aggressive theatre establishment. The young August successfully repels the politics of representation urged upon him by the Fiddlers. In doing so, he proves to the audience that he has not been tempted into concessions, as he told Clare he feared he might when she first met him (6).

Tennessee Williams in *Something Cloudy* is a gutsy fighter, not a dreamy, shy Southern gentleman. In being so calculating, Williams reinvents

a more fulfilling economy, i.e., espousing a script, as something so worthwhile it defies a commercializing theatre economy designed to deface and fix its value. *Something Cloudy* provocatively appeals to audiences that likewise refuse to be typed by or sold low on the stage of their life. The episode with the Fiddlers, then, should be seen as being assimilated into all the other negotiations in the play, and because of it, attentive audiences, along with Williams, can ultimately reject the debilitating world of Broadwayism, and instead embrace the economics of postmodern memory at the Jean Cocteau Repertory at the Bouwerie Lane Theatre.

Notes

1. Ronald Hayman, *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else is Audience* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) 237.
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3. Quoted in Michiko Kakutani, "Tennessee Williams: 'I Keep Writing. Sometimes I am Pleased,'" *New York Times*, Aug. 13, 1981: C17.
4. Quoted in Kakutani.
5. Alan Chesler, "An Interview with Eve Adamson, Artistic Director of the Jean Cocteau Repertory Theatre," *Tennessee Williams Review* (Spring/Fall 1982) 41.
6. Tennessee Williams, "Something Tennessee," *Other Stages* [New York] 3.23 (30 July 1981) 7.
7. "Something Tennessee."
8. "An Interview with Eve Adamson" 43.
9. 41.
10. 41.
11. I am grateful to Elise Stone, resident actor and Educational Programs Coordinator at the Jean Cocteau Repertory, for this information.
12. Frank Rich, "Memories Distilled," *New York Times*, 11 Sept. 1981: C3.
13. Walter Kerr, "A Comic At A Loss, A Playwright At Sea," *New York Times*, 27 Sept. 1981: II, 3.
14. Catharine Hughes, "Specters," *America*, 10 Oct. 1981: 202.
15. John M. Clum, "'Something Cloudy, Something Clear': Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 81 (1989) 163.
16. Nicholas Pagan, *Rethinking Literary Biography: A Postmodern Approach to Tennessee Williams* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1993).
17. Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay P, 1983) xi.
18. Dotson Rader, "An Interview with Tennessee Williams," *The Paris Review* 81 (Fall 1981); rpt in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986) 346.
19. Eve Adamson. "Introduction," *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (New York: New Directions, 1995) vii.
20. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 81.

21. "An Interview with Eve Adamson" 42.
22. All quotations are from *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (New York: New Directions, 1995) and will be cited parenthetically.
23. Michael Feingold, "The Playwright as Stinker," *Village Voice* (Sept. 16-22, 1981) 89.
24. Kakutani C17.
25. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 59.
26. "An Interview with Eve Adamson" 39.
27. Harvey 308.
28. Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 42.
29. Reed Woodhouse, "The Lovely Ones, Youthfully Departed Long Ago," *Boston Book Review*, Nov. 1, 1995.
30. Adamson, "Introduction" vi.
31. Susan Evans, "Something Cloudy, Something Clear," [http:// www.sophistem.com/eastend/cloudycl.htm](http://www.sophistem.com/eastend/cloudycl.htm). Jan. 22, 1997.
32. See Philip C. Kolin, "The Existential Nightmare in Tennessee Williams's *The Chalky White Substance*," *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 23 (Jan. 1993) 8-11.
33. Woodhouse.
34. Thomas P. Adler, "Tennessee Williams's 'Personal Lyricism': Toward an Androgynous Form," In *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, ed. William W. Demastes (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1996) 180.
35. Woodhouse.
36. Rich C3.
37. Hughes 202.
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39. Quoted in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 63.
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