

Literature and Mythology in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*¹: fighting against Venus and Oedipus

Pau Gilabert Barberà
Universitat de Barcelona (University of Barcelona)²

To Charo Ojeda, Maria Salvador and Patrick Cerrato

Classical Philology has certainly been in luck because there have been many contemporary and non-contemporary playwrights who, as a result of a personal decision and a clear consciousness of the Greek origins of Western theatre, have used all sorts of explicit or implicit references to heroes, myths, historical events, etcetera, taken from Classical Antiquity. Therefore, we should suppose that this wide range of references endow their plays with an extra value. At any rate, T. Williams's plays do display this classical fidelity in *Suddenly Last Summer* -with such a degree of literary savoir faire that in my opinion it could hardly be surpassed- by referring on this occasion to two mythical characters, Venus and Oedipus, who seem to be the most suitable to attain the necessary tragic tension.

Indeed, the influence of the classical legacy on T. Williams's plays has often been examined³ and I should like to mention, for instance, a good study by A. Gómez García entitled *Mito y realidad en la obra dramática de T. Williams*⁴, which was published in Salamanca in 1988. In accordance with the literary tendency known as "mythical, archetypal or primitive", she is in favour of relating -audaciously and at the same time carefully- several of T. Williams's plays with archetypal classical myths, which does not mean that the playwright becomes a prisoner of the prestigious model but, on the contrary, he integrates it coherently into his personal symbolical world. He takes advantage, then, of ancient myths -like many other playwrights- on account of their enigmatic, symbolical and non-temporary nature, so that A. Gómez establishes some significant associations such as: "Persephone in Saint Louis" and *The Glass Menagerie*; the "katábasis to Hades" and *Kingdom on Earth*; "Dionysus crowned with roses" and *The Rose Tattoo*; "Orpheus and Eurydice" and *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending*, and, finally, "Oedipus in search of his identity" and *Suddenly Last Summer*.

"Oedipus in search of his identity" already shows that the thesis of A. Gómez and mine must be somehow different with regard to the significance of the role played by Venus in *Suddenly Last Summer*. As a teacher of Classical Tradition, I know perfectly well the risk of turning any classical reference into the key of the "best" interpretation of a text. This kind of risk must certainly be taken into account but, on the other hand, I am reasonably convinced that the binomial Venus-Oedipus, Oedipus-Venus -with the help of some more classical reference I shall comment later on-, becomes in this case highly significant. And I also know the risk of approaching a literary work too much conditioned by the archetype, i.e. by myth, thus accepting

¹ *Tennessee Williams. Baby Doll; Something Unspoken; Suddenly Last Summer*. London: Penguin Books, in Association with Martin Secker & Warburg LTD, 2000. All the quotations will correspond to this edition and the numbers between brackets refer to it. This article was published in *BELLS (Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* -electronic review) 15 (2006) 1-11.

² Ordinary teacher in the Greek Philology Department at the University of Barcelona. Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes 585, 08007, Barcelona. Telephone: 934035996; fax: 934039092; e-mail: pgilabert@ub.edu; personal web page: www.paugilabertbarbera.com

³ See, e.g.: Coronis, A. 1994. On his tragic conception: Asibong, E. B. 1978 and Fleche, A. 1997. On his bibliography and guides to research: Crandell, G. W. 1995 and Kolin, 1998. Finally as a general introduction to and criticism of his work: T. Williams: Griffin, A. 1996; Crandell, George W. 1996; Tischler, N. 2000 and Gross, Robert F. 2002.

⁴ Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca.

a sort of hermeneutic dictatorship. Indeed, to follow the archetype is too often mistaken for “absolute fidelity”, while T. Williams certainly does not create *ex nihilo* but creates in the end in spite of relying on a consolidated paradigm.

Furthermore, he never admitted, contrary to the opinion of his critics, to being a poetic realist: “The critics still want me to be a poetic realist, and I never was”⁵. He does follow the conventional laws of realism, and his characters, even while being grotesque, still show a clear desire to be credible, although the techniques that T. Williams uses in order to achieve this goal are not precisely conventional. From his point of view, characters must suggest and, in the end, go beyond the concrete reality of the drama: “I am not a direct writer; I am always an oblique writer, if I can be; I want to be allusive... life is too ambiguous to be represented in a cut and dried fashion”⁶. Consequently, his frequent appeal to the benefits of myth is really comprehensible, since, as unanimously admitted, *mythos* is neither logical *stricto sensu* nor univocal; on the contrary, it hides different meanings, stimulates our minds and is highly malleable. To sum up: bearing in mind that the characters of T. Williams’s plays are not very “normal”, showing very often an extreme sensibility and seeming to be doomed to collide with the laws and customs of the society in which they live, any language that, like myth, excels in suggesting rather than in rationalizing people, attitudes or events had to receive inevitably the American playwright’s approval –leaving aside, of course, the role T. Williams himself played in the creation of another modern myth such as that of the South of the States⁷: its people, values, attitudes, etc.

Here ends, then, the always necessary preface, and I present now the necessary reflections to show, as suggested before, the extra value which is inherent in the explicit reference to Venus and to the implicit one to Oedipus in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

From my point of view, *Suddenly Last Summer* is basically a drama on God, on the human search for God, on His true face, on the dawn of the world, on Nature-Gods’ cruelty, on life and on men and women’s impotence to become the privileged beneficiaries of God’s providence.

Indeed, God does not take care of human beings, He is not provident or “pronoetic”. On the contrary, by becoming evident in Nature He makes them live and, at the same time, He devours them, thus demanding the most civilized of human acts, self-sacrifice, since God or Life is nothing but a process of constant creation in which birth and death occur unceasingly:

. (Violet Venable talking to Dr Cukrowicz): ‘... my son was looking for God, I mean for a clear image of Him. He spent that whole blazing equatorial day in the crow’s nest of the

⁵ A. Gómez. p. 19.

⁶ A. Gómez. p. 20.

⁷ See, e.g.: A. J. Devlin. *Op. cit.*: “Williams’s maternal grandfather, the Reverend Walter E. Dakin, was the rector of St. George’s Episcopal Church in Clarksdale from 1917 until his retirement in 1932. During that time, his grandson came to know the core and gossip of the town and Coahoma County from periods of residence and visitation at the rectory, and from joining his grandfather on calls to the privileged families of his parish” (102); and also Kenneth Holditch and Richard Freeman Leavitt. *Tennessee Williams and the South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002: “From all these southern experiences, the childhood in the Mississippi hills and the Delta, the years moving back and forth from New Orleans to Key West, Tennessee drew most of the material that he was to transform through the magic of his talent into great literature. To criticism that his portrayal of the region was not accurate, not realistic, he replied once that he was not a sociologist but a dramatist. ‘What I am writing about is human nature’, he said... He was not a realist, but the intensity with which he feels whatever he does feel is so deep, is so great, that we do end up with a glimpse of another kind of reality; that is, the reality in the spirit rather than in society” (103).

schooner watching this thing on the beach... and when he came down the rigging he said 'Well, now I've seen Him!', and he meant God' (119).

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): '... I tried to save him, Doctor'. Dr: 'From what? Save him from what?'. C: 'Completing – sort of! – image! –he had of himself as a sort of! –sacrifice to a! – terrible sort of a...'. Dr: 'God?'. C: 'Yes, a – cruel one...' (143).

The Roman goddess Venus –the Greek Aphrodite- and the tragic hero Oedipus –and very probably, as we shall see afterwards, Dionysus and those *bacchae* who always accompany him-, myth in short, helps T. Williams to stress the magnitude of this drama. Nevertheless, when dealing with God and the dawn of the world, it would be unforgivable not to think of the *Bible* and the *Book of Genesis* that Western people learn in the earliest stage of their lives –and so has T. Williams. Christian orthodoxy would never admit that the *Bible* is based upon myth and talks to us by means of it. However, it is quite obvious in my opinion that the playwright wants to confront the myth of Eden, that garden or paradise in which there was complete happiness before the original sin, with the real Nature, which is not “edenic” but cruel. Nature is certainly a true Venus devouring a son of hers who is doomed to remain united to her forever. And her son is a true Oedipus who in his turn is doomed to self-sacrifice or, in other words, to return definitively to that great original Mother from whom he emerged:

. (V.V. talking to al Dr. Cukrowicz): 'Yes, this was Sebastian's garden... Those ones are the oldest plants on earth... in this semi-tropical climate... some of the rarest plants, such as the Venus flytrap'. Dr: 'An insectivorous plant?'. V.V.: 'Yes, it feeds on insects... my son, Sebastian, had to provide it with fruit flies flown in at great expense from a Florida laboratory that used fruit flies for experiments in genetica' (113).

. "... a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest, in the prehistoric age of giant fern-forests when living creatures had flippers turning to limbs and scales to skin. The colours of this jungle-garden are violent... There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and... sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by bests, serpents, and birds, all of savage nature" (113).

Everything seems to show, then, that Nature is not created in the image of man's compassion, that is to say, God or Nature through which He makes Himself evident by becoming a phenomenon are not merciful but cruel and demanding. Consequently, the best thing would be to escape from those civilized “realms” that human beings have created, because they are in fact a selfish denial of both a natural and universal cruelty. The best thing would be in fact to design gardens resembling the dawn of the world and full of unmerciful devouring organisms and flesh-eating birds, whose savage cries appear throughout the most tragic episodes of the drama. And we should also take advantage of those great and cruel spectacles, which a still uncivilized Nature continues to offer in some places like the Encantadas –the Galapagos Islands- to everyone bold enough to explore them. And after having reached them, the best thing would be in its turn to spend the whole day in the crow's nest of the schooner watching God's face, watching Life in its original cruelty:

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'He (i.e. Sebastian) read me Herman Melville's description of the Encantadas, the Galapagos Islands... extinct volcanoes, looking much as the world at large might look – after a last conflagration... We saw the great sea-turtles crawl up out of the sea for their annual egg-lying... It's a long and dreadful thing, the depositing of the eggs in the sand-pits, and when it's finished the exhausted female turtle crawls back to the sea half-dead... in time to witness the hatching of the sea-turtles and

their desperate flight to the sea!... the sky was in motion... Full of flesh-eating birds and the noise of the birds, the horrible savage cries of... as the just-hatched sea-turtles scrambled out of the sand-pits and started their race to the sea... To escape the flesh-eating birds that made the sky almost as black as the beach... while the birds hovered and swooped to attack... turning sides open and rending and eating their flesh. Sebastian guessed that possibly only a hundredth of one per cent of their number would escape to the sea' (116-18).

Nature's cruelty is overwhelming in *Suddenly Last Summer* and turns into an image "thanks to" the cannibalism always *in crescendo* throughout the play till reaching the final climax. First of all, vegetable cannibalism, that devouring plant, the Venus flytrap in Sebastian's garden. Secondly, as just seen, those flesh-eating birds devouring the just-hatched sea-turtles. And, finally, those bands of hungry children in Cabeza de Lobo devouring Sebastian, that is, cannibalism in its paroxysm with the help of the terrific bird-cries and the chromatic effect, for instance, caused by a bunch of red roses crushed against a blazing white wall:

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): '... bands of homeless young people that lived on the free beach like scavenger dogs, hungry children... He would come out, followed'. Dr: 'Who would follow him out?'. C: 'The homeless, hungry young people... He'd pas out tips among them... Each day the crowd was bigger, noisier, greedier!' (152-3).

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): '... a few days after... one of those white blazing days in Cabeza de Lobo, not a blazing hot blue one out but a blazing hot white one... there were naked children along the beach, a band of frightfully thin and dark naked children that looked a flock of plucked birds, and they would come darting up to the barbed-wire fence as if blown there by the wind, the hot white wind from the sea, al crying out, 'Pan, pan, pan!'... they made gobbling noises... those little pills in his mouth... his! (i.e. Sebastian) – eyes looked – dazed, but he said: 'Don't look at those little monsters'... the! – band of children began to serenade us... Play for us... instruments of percussion... were tin cans strung together... bits of metal, other bits of metal that had been flattened out, made into... Cymbals!... others had paper bags... to make a sort of... Noise like... a tuba' (153-6).

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): '... my cousin Sebastian had disappeared in the flock of featherless little back sparrows... and this you won't believe, nobody has believed it, nobody could believe it, nobody, nobody on earth could possibly believe it... They had devoured parts of him... Torn or cut parts oh him with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with... and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs. There wasn't a sound any more, there was nothing to see but Sebastian, what was left of him, that looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses... crushed! – against that blazing white wall' (158-9).

Sebastian himself indecorously shows a human hunger, which is beyond any limit, thus turning the others into the items of a menu. In fact, satiety seems to be out of Sebastian's reach, since sometimes he is famished for dark boys, sometimes for blond ones, sometimes he wants to fly to the south, sometimes to the north:

(Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, he was fed-up with the dark ones and was famished for blonds. All the travel brochures he picked up were advertisements of the blond northern countries... Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that's how he talked about people, as if they were –items of a menu. – 'That one's delicious-looking, that one is appetizing', or 'that one is not

appetizing'... Sebastian suddenly said to me last summer: 'Let's fly north, little bird – I want to walk under those radiant, cold northern lights – I've never seen the aurora borealis!' – Somebody said once or wrote: 'We're all of us children in a vast kindergarten trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks!' (130).

A man who dares to gaze at God's face watching the cruelty of His creation, a man who designs and takes care of gardens which are not "edenic" but full of insectivorous plants and flesh-eating birds makes us see that his wish is to create (*poieîn*) or, in other words, he is a poet *Graeco sensu*. A poet is his work, a poet is his poetry or poems. The Great Poet, God or Nature, both everlasting and non-generated, "creates or recreates" every year in order to renew the seasons. And Sebastian also gives birth to a poem once a year, though in this case, in accordance with the human nature of this birth, he needs nine months, the length of a pregnancy:

(V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'Sebastian was a poet? That's what I meant when I said his life was his work because the work of a poet is the life of a poet, and –vice versa, the life of a poet is the work of a poet, I mean you can't separate them... Poets are always clairvoyant... here is my son's work (i.e. the garden), Doctor, here's his life going on!' (114-15).

(V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'Poem of Summer... there are twenty-five of them, he wrote one poem a year... One for each summer that we travelled together. The other nine months of the year were really only a preparation... The length of a pregnancy...'. Dr: 'The poem was hard to deliver?'. V.V.: 'Yes, even with me! Without me impossible... he wrote no poem last summer' (116).

A poet creates or gives birth like a woman or like those Greek philosophers⁸ who considered themselves the midwives of pregnant young people and, in addition to this, feeling themselves the labour pains. In the case of human pregnancy, it is a woman who is inseminated and, nine months later, she gives birth to a baby. However, Sebastian's special personality demands to interchange the traditional roles. Now it is Sebastian who is pregnant for nine months, and it is his mother who, always next to him, inseminates or inspires him. Indeed, that summer in which Violet did not travel with her son, Sebastian's notebook turned out to be only blank pages, thus confirming that *poïesis*, the process of creation, was impossible because of the lack of motherly insemination:

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'She's a destroyer (i.e. Catherine). My son was a creator!' (126).

⁸ See e.g. Plato. *Symposium*, 209b-c: (Diotima talking to Socrates): 'So when a man's soul is so far divine that it is made pregnant with these from his youth, and on attaining manhood immediately desires to bring forth and beget... and if he chances also on a soul that is fair and noble and well endowed, he gladly cherishes the two combined in one; and straightway in addressing such a person he is resourceful in discoursing of virtue and of what should be the good man's character and what pursuits; and so he takes in hand the other's education. For I hold that by contact with the fair one and by consorting with him he bears and brings forth his long-felt conception' (ὅταν τις ἐκ νέου ἐγκύμων ἢ τὴν ψυχὴν, ἢ θεὸς ὦν καὶ ἡκούσης τῆς ἡλικίας, τίκτειν τε καὶ γεννᾶν ἤδη ἐπιθυμῇ... ἂν ἐντύχη ψυχῇ καλῇ καὶ γενναίᾳ καὶ εὐφυεῖ... πρὸς τοῦτον τὸν ἄνθρωπον εὐθύς εὐπορεῖ λόγων περὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ περὶ οἷον χρῆ εἶναι τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἂ ἐπιτηδεύειν, καὶ ἐπιχειρεῖ παιδεύειν. ἀπτόμενος γὰρ οἶμαι τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ὁμιλῶν αὐτῷ, ἂ πάλαι ἐκείει τίκτει καὶ γεννᾷ -translated by W. R. M. Lamb. *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983).

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'Here it is... Title? 'Poem of Summer', and the date of the summer – 1935. After that: what? Blank pages, blank pages, nothing but nothing! – last summer' (149).

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'When he was frightened... I'd reach across a table and touch his hands and say not a word, just look, and touch his hands with my hand until his hands stopped shaking... and in the morning, the poem would be continued' (149-50).

It is quite clear, then, that the relationship between mother and son, son and mother, is certainly unusual. Nevertheless, T. Williams knows perfectly well that he can rely on a mythical reference which helps him, at least partially, to design Sebastian as a character and to make him understandable, that is, Oedipus, never mentioned explicitly but undoubtedly present in the literary consciousness of any cultivated reader who, in his/her turn, will also know very probably the Freudian interpretation of the Greek myth.

Violet and Sebastian are mother and son but, at the same time, they are a couple like Oedipus and Iocaste in Sophocles's tragedy. In this case, however, the son is chaste, lives a celibate life and is pure like the overwhelming white colour of his clothes. Sebastian looks for the company and the constant help of his mother, he possesses her in such a way that any competition with his father is logically discarded. In fact, it is Violet who should want to possess her husband legitimately, but Violet stayed with her son when her husband was critically ill and her immediate return was advised. Violet and Sebastian are above all poets or sculptors, day after day, of their lives. They are like Renaissance aristocrats absolutely strange to the vulgarity they believe to discover in the others:

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'My son Sebastián was chaste... we had to be very fleet-footed I can tell you, with his looks and charm, to keep ahead of pursuers...'. Dr: 'Chastity at – what age was your son last summer?'. V.V.: 'Forty...'. Dr: 'He lived a celibate life?'. V.V.: 'As strictly as if he'd vowed to!... I was actually the only one in his life that satisfied the demands he made of people' (122).

. (Dr Cukrowicz talking to Catherine): 'Tell me: what was your feeling for your cousin Sebastian?'. C: 'He liked me and so I loved him'. Dr: 'In what way did you love him?'. C.: 'The only way he'd accept: a sort of motherly way' (143).

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'But then I made the mistake of responding too much to his kindness, of taking hold of his hand before he'd take hold of mine, of holding on to his arm and leaning on his shoulder, of appreciating his kindness more than he wanted me to, and, suddenly last summer, he began to be restless...' (148).

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'Sebastian was white as the weather. He had on a spotless white silk Shantung suit and a white silk tie and a white panama and white shoes... a white silk handkerchief...' (153).

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'We were a famous couple. People didn't speak of Sebastian and his mother or Mrs Venable and her son, they said, 'Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian are staying at the Lido... and every appearance... attention was centred on us!... Vanity? Ohhhh, no... It wasn't folie de grandeur, it was grandeur... An attitude toward life that's hardly been known in the world since the great Renaissance princes were crowded out of their palaces and gardens by successful shopkeepers!... Most people's lives – what are they but trails of debris... with nothing to clean it all up but, finally, death... My son Sebastian, and I constructed our days, each day, we would – carve out each day of our lives like a piece of sculpture. – Yes, we left behind us a trail of days like a gallery of sculpture! But, last summer' (122-3).

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'We had an agreement between us, a sort of contract or covenant between us which he broke last summer when he broke away from me and took

her with him... He was mine! I knew how to help him, I could! You (i.e. Catherine) didn't, you couldn't!' (149-50).

. (V.V. talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'I got back this cable from my late husband's lawyer: 'Mr Venable critically ill Stop Wants you Stop Needs you Stop Immediate return advised most strongly Stop Cable time of arrival'... I made the hardest decision of my life. I stayed with him. I got him through that crisis too' (120).

Consequently, Sebastian, who has married his mother incestuously, gives birth to a child every year, his poem, thus being both its father and brother, since both come from the same mother -just as Oedipus was father and brother of Iocaste's children-, and everything seems to show that it is a fruitful relationship of which he does not feel any abhorrence. Sebastian might have exhausted his search for femininity by focusing on his mother, so that he develops a clear sexual desire, which in his case is certainly not chaste, for young and beautiful boys -perhaps the most feminine for him of masculinity?-, a little court of whom was always around him. He would like to possess them, and the fact that Nature does not pay any respect to living creatures - not even for human beings- has taught him to use others unscrupulously, thus often thinking of enjoying those boys sexually, although he has always failed. He has used his mother as bait for several years and, when Violet could not travel any longer, Sebastian asked Catherine to accompany him:

. (Dr talking to Catherine): 'You think she did have a stroke?'. C: 'She had a slight stroke in April. It just affected one side, the left side... but it was disfiguring and, after that, Sebastian couldn't use her' (142).

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'Said (i.e. Sebastián): 'Mother can't go abroad with me this summer. You're going to go with me this summer instead of Mother' (144).

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'He bought me a swim-suit I didn't want to wear... It was a one-piece suit made of white lisle, the water made it transparent!... but he'd grab my hand and drag me into the water, all way in, and I'd come out looking naked!... I was procuring for him!... She used to do it, too... Sebastian was shy with people. She wasn't. Neither was I. We made contacts for him, we both did the same thing for him, but she did it in nice places and in decent ways and I had to do it in the way that I just told you!' (152).

. (Violet Venable talking to Dr Cukrowicz): 'My son, Sebastián... was a snob... about the 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... he always had a little entourage of the beautiful and the talented and the young... Both of us were young, and stayed young, Doctor... It takes character to refuse to grow old, Doctor - successfully to refuse to. It calls for discipline, abstention. One cocktail before dinner...' (121).

Therefore, Sebastian is a cruel son -and a cruel cousin last summer- but Violet is not an innocent Iocaste who marries her son unawares. On the contrary, between them there was an "agreement, a sort of contract or covenant" which she demanded be fulfilled. She possesses him and keeps him far from life; she knows -as denounced by Catherine- how to retain him and, above all, she is a devouring Venus -like the one in Sebastian's garden- who seduces and finally kills the son whom she herself gave birth to. T. Williams seems to take advantage of the general belief that all mothers would want somehow to retain their sons, and some of them even to possess them totally. For these last ones, the love that their sons feel for other women is in fact a betrayal, so that they must love other men in order not to awake their mothers' jealousy. However, T. Williams writes a total drama and those boys, as already seen, will not mean

Sebastian's salvation but, on account of being also a "phenomenon" of an omnivorous Nature, they will devour him.

T. Williams has once more used classical myth; he has looked for the charming beauty of the archetype Venus and, needless to say, he has felt absolutely free to pervert it, since he is convinced, furthermore, that any cultivated reader will associate that insectivorous plant with the image of a possessive mother. And very probably he also hopes that the implicit reference to the archetype Oedipus will make any reader think of Sebastian as a sensible human being who is both anxious and inquisitive –he is a poet in the end used to the "abyss" of creation (*poiesis*). He will give up, as a consequence, his safe and comfortable life, and he will go forward till finding out the horror which is peculiar to Nature, that is, to him and all creatures as being parts of a Whole or God which, in accordance with the parameters of man's compassion, shows a cruel behaviour. Sebastian does not content himself with a safe life in a civilized or human realm created to keep us far from any risk. He believes himself to have discovered the "plague" that contaminates this false stillness. This has certainly been his *anagnórisis* and it has to do not only with him but also with a Nature-God, in which everyone devours everyone, so that he will not make himself blind but will accept being the victim of a sacrifice which is inherent to the human condition.

Sea-turtles devoured unmercifully by flesh-eating birds: that is life, and the most intelligent and coherent thing would be to "pay homage" to the evidence. At any rate, in order to turn this strong conviction into an image he will rely in this case upon a Christian "mythical" hero, Saint Sebastian, who is an icon-martyr whom T. Williams believes to be homosexual⁹ -homosexuals are always special human beings who have been "arrowed" for centuries, both allegorically and non-allegorically. Sebastian has prepared everything for the sacrifice which the cruel innocence –paradoxically, then- of Nature-God demands¹⁰. It is a white light –pure and innocent- which

⁹ "Sebastian is supposed to have lived in the third century and to have been shot full of arrows by order of the Roman emperor Diocletian (245-313 a. D.) for misusing his position as a captain in the Praetorian Guard to promulgate Christianity. Left for dead, he was rescued and nursed back to health by St Irene... but on his recovery disrupted one Diocletian's processions to denounce the persecution of Christians; whereupon the emperor had him cudgelled to death and his corpse thrown into the *cloaca maxima*... From there the body was recovered and buried in the catacombs by another woman called Lucinda... Besides becoming patron saint of archers... from the end of the seventh century onwards Sebastian was chiefly revered as a major intercessor against the Black Death... traditionally symbolized by arrows... Equally influential in St. Sebastian's case perhaps was *The Iliad* 1: 42ff, in which Apollo's arrows also punish the impious.... In keeping with his position as officer in the Praetorian Guard, early illustration of Saint Sebastian... represented him as middle-aged, bearded... However, by the fifteenth century he began to be represented as a beautiful, beardless youth, naked except for an exiguous loincloth, bound to a pillar or tree... Initially the representation of him as a nude youth seems merely to have been an attempt by Renaissance artists to match the beauty of such classical pieces as the Vatican's statues of Antinóus or the Apollo Belvedere... –taken from: www.utpjournals.com/product/utq/693/693_parker.html; see it, then, for further information. It should also be taken into account that T. Williams published in 1954 in a collection called *In the Winter of Cities* a poem entitled 'San Sebastiano de Sodoma', and it is hardly necessary to add that, as said by Parker, "Williams is adapting tradition for his own quite heterodox purposes". Here it is: "How did Saint Sebastian die? / Arrows pierced his throat and thigh / which only knew, before that time / the dolours of a concubine. / Near above him, hardly over, / hovered his gold martyr's crown. / Even Mary from Her tower / of heaven leaned a little down / and as She leaned, She raised a corner / of a cloud through which to spy. / Sweetly troubled Mary murmured / as She watched the arrows fly. / And as the cup that was profaned / gave up its sweet, intemperate wine, / all the golden bells of heaven / praised an emperor's concubine. / Mary, leaning from her tower / of heaven, dropped a tiny flower / but, privately, she must wondered / if it were indeed quite wise to / let this boy in Paradise?"

¹⁰ In fact T. Williams presents Sebastian as if he were a benefactor saint and a sacrificial victim: (stage direction) "She lifts a thin...volume... as if elevating the Host before the altar... It says 'Poem of Summer'. Her face suddenly has a different look of a visionary, an exalted religieuse" (116). (Violet

almost kills him before being devoured by those boys in Cabeza de Lobo; the beach is white, too, and so are his suit, tie, panama, handkerchief, etcetera, which –paradoxically, too- are suitable for the “sacred” horror he will know very soon¹¹:

. (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz): ‘It was all white outside. White hot, a blazing white hot, hot blazing white, at five o’clock in the afternoon in the city of – Cabeza de Lobo. It looked as if -... a huge white bone caught up on fire in the sky and blazed so bright it was white and turned the sky and everything under the sky white with it’... Dr: ‘You followed your cousin Sebastian out of the restaurant on to the hot white street?’ (157)... ‘up the blazing white street (i.e. Sebastian). The band of naked children pursued us up the steep white street in the sun that was like a great white bone of a giant beast that had caught on fire in the sky!... Sebastian... screamed just once before this flock of black plucked little birds that pursued him and overtook him halfway up the white hill’ (158).

Sebastian will be devoured by cruel boys, but their cruelty is pure and uncivilized as if they were masculine *bacchae* amid the terrible noise of their cymbals. Consequently, God or Nature would be like the Dionysus of Euripides’s *Bacchae* trying to introduce savage rites into a realm which has been civilized by thoughtful citizens. Nevertheless, Sebastian-Pentheus, unlike in Euripides’s tragedy, has already accepted the new god, and he looks for the *bacchae* rather than spying on them¹².

To sum up: if the Christian Sebastian suffered a cruel martyrdom, Sebastian Venable will accept being arrowed allegorically -and devoured literally- in order to feel in his own flesh the cruelty of this Mother, Nature or God who both gives life to us and kills us. All human beings are Oedipuses who are doomed to return to the bosom of the original Mother –and sooner or later their sacrifice will take place¹³-, thus committing incest inexorably. We should like to escape from it by creating a human or civilized realm in which we could remain safe, always invulnerable and alive, but the Great Mother or devouring Venus avenges herself finally.

Venable talking to Dr Cukrowicz): ‘... this vandal (i.e. Catherine)... she’s gone about smashing our legend... The role of the benefactor is worse than thankless, it’s the role of a victim, Doctor, a sacrificial victim, yes, they want your blood... on the altar steps of their outraged, outrageous egos!’ (123-4).

¹¹ The ethical geometry of Platonism often adopted by the Western world confronts light with darkness both vertically and radically, the superior world with the inferior one, good with evil. T. Williams turns upside down the Platonic logics of salvation. If Platonic idealism summons human beings to keep themselves far from the darkness of a cave-world in order to be able to fly towards the Light, here it is the pure and white light, the blazing sun, which almost kills Sebastian unscrupulously. And, after having abandoned the protecting darkness of the worldly refuge, everything is burnt by God’s blazing eye. What else could we expect from the light in Cabeza de Lobo (Wolf-Head)? Wolves both attack and devour. One can find real protection in the north under the light of the Aurora Borealis, under the cold and radiant lights of the north. If one wants to live among civilized people, he should search for blonds in northern countries. Dark ones in southern countries, on the contrary, are devoured by the blazing light and, at the same time, they devour everyone.

¹² See e.g.: Siegel, Janie 2004.

¹³ In Joseph Mankiewicz’s cinema-adaptation, *Suddenly Last Summer* (United States 1959, 114 minutes. Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz; producer: Sam Spiegel; screenplay: Gore Vidal & Tennessee Williams; music: Buxton Orr & Malcom Arnold), the sacrifice takes place in an ancient ruined temple: (Catherine talking to Dr Cukrowicz) ‘Nowhere. He never reached the end, they stopped nowhere! Never! Except, except at the very top of the hill. Something, a place, a ruin, broken stones, like the entrance to a ruined temple, some ancient ruined temple which he entered, and they overtook him there, in that...’. For everything related to cinema-adaptations of T. Williams’s plays, see e.g.: Yacovar, Maurice 1977.

If Greek tragedy, according to Aristotle, aims to awaken in the audience the catharsis of those performed passions¹⁴, *Suddenly Last Summer*, which undoubtedly reproduces to a high degree Oedipus's search as established by Sophocles, seems to summon us to both a general and transcendental catharsis: the inevitable acceptance of Truth.

Any allegorical reading of a text, always intending to find out a hidden or extra meaning by going beyond the literal words and the concrete characters, is a risky one. However, it is difficult not to suspect that this painful "extraction" of the truth that Catherine has stored in her tortured memory is, at the same time, a clear demand for accepting the Truth, decent or not decent, civilized or not civilized, honourable or not honourable and, above all, triumphing over any divine attempt to change it:

. (Catherine talking his brother George): '... if they give me an injection. I won't have any choice but to tell exactly what happened in Cabeza de Lobo last summer... I won't have any choice but to tell the truth. It makes you tell the truth because it shuts something off that might make you able not to and everything comes out, decent or not decent, you have no control, but always, always the truth!' (133).

. (George talking to his sister Catherine): '... So you've just got to stop tellin' that story about what you say happened to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo, even if it's what it couldn't be, TRUE!... you can't tell such a story to civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country!'. C.: '... I know it's a hideous story but it's a true story of our time and the world we live in and what did truly happen to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo' – (134).

. (Catherine talking to his brother George): 'I can't change truth. I'm not God! I'm not even sure that He could, I don't think God can change truth! How can I change the story of what happened to her son in Cabeza de Lobo?' (140).

Quite obviously, it is fighting "against" Venus and Oedipus, against Violet and Sebastian, that Catherine will overcome the consequences of her shock in Cabeza de Lobo and will avoid the terrible experience by means of which her aunt wants to extract the truth from her brain, thus calming her tortured soul. In this case, Dr Cukrowicz's sweetness ('... it's a Polish word that means sugar' -114-) has been real and it confirms that his art consists of helping, of being used by the others rather than of using them –who knows if through this metaphoric character T. Williams is even telling us that human beings always need and look for a sweet therapy against the bitterness of their lives. Nevertheless, it is also "thanks to" Venus and Oedipus –and to the Christian martyr Saint Sebastian- that the playwright succeeds in showing the magnitude of men and women's tragedy, which from his point of view is only that they have failed both to see any kind face of God and to feel His loving and fatherly providence. "Somebody said once or wrote: 'We're all of us children in a vast kindergarten trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks!'".

Complete bibliographical references:

¹⁴ *Poetics* VI: "Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude... it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions" (ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένω λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν -translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe, *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965).

- . Asibong, E. B. *Tennessee Williams: the tragic tension: a study of the plays of Tennessee Williams from 'The Glass Menagerie' (1944) to 'The milk train doesn't stop here anymore (1966)*. Ilfracombe: Stockwell, 1978
- . *Aristotelis De Arte Poetica Liber* (Rudolfus Kasse, ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- . Coronis, A. *Tennessee Williams and the Greek Culture*. Athens: Kalendis, 1994
- . Crandell, G. W. *Tennessee Williams: a descriptive bibliography*. Pittsburgh & London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995
- . Crandell, G. W. (ed.). *The critical response to Tennessee Williams*. London: Greenwood. 1996
- . Roudané, Mathew, C. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Cambridge: C. U. P., 1997, cap. 5 a càrrec de Devlin. Albert, J. "Writing in 'A place of stone': Cat on a Hot Tin Roof".
- . Fleche, A. *Mimetic disillusion: Eugene O'Neil, Tennessee Williams, and U. S. Dramatic Realism*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997
- . Gómez García, A. *Mito y realidad en la obra dramática de T. Williams*. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1988
- . Griffin, A. *Understanding Tennessee Williams*. Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1996
- . Gross, Robert F. *Tennessee Williams. A Casebook*. New York & London: Routledge, 2002
- . Hamilton Fyfe, W. (ed.): *Aristotle's Poetics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press & William Heinemann Ltd (*Loeb Classical Library*), 1965
- . Holditch, K. and Freeman, R. *Tennessee Williams and the South*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002
- . Kolin, Philip C. (ed.). *Tennessee Williams: a guide to research and performance*. Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 1998
- . Lamb, W. R. M. (ed.). *Plato's Symposium*. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press & William Heinemann Ltd (*Loeb Classical Library*), 1983
- . Parker, Brian. "Tennessee Williams and the Legends of St Sebastian" (www.utpjournals.com/product/utq/693/693_parker.html).
- . Siegel, Janice. "The Classical Side of T. Williams Euripides *Bacchae* as Model for Suddenly Last Summer". *THEATRON*, Spring, 16-17, 2004.
- . Tischler, N. *Student Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press, 2000
- . Yacovar, Maurice. *Tennessee Williams and Film*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977.