

Spaceships and Vampires: Sexual Dissidence in Tennessee Williams's 'The Knightly Quest'

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Notwithstanding Gore Vidal's praise of the story as one of the best ever written by Tennessee Williams, 'The Knightly Quest' (1966), a dystopian fable with a spacefaring ending, has received sparse critical attention. Largely sketched during the 1940s, the novella, a hybrid of SF and Gothic, shows Williams's awareness of the sexual deviant's political resistance in a world verging on totalitarianism; and, simultaneously, illustrates the author's use of counter-narrative strategies against the normative order. In choosing apocalyptic SF Williams is reversing the logic of the favorite Cold War genre. Here the threat does not come from an external space (the alien invasion or the Russian nuclear attack) but from within: the emergence of a nation which annihilates any form of alterity and dissidence. Likewise, by making a homosexual vampire (the quintessential expression of the Jungian shadow and the polymorphous perverse) the morally superior hero of a world in its death throes and the survivor in a future utopia, Williams is granting a privileged position to the demonized Other as the savior of the American dream of limitless individual freedom.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams; short fiction; Cold War; homosexuality; science fiction; sexual dissidence

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Naves espaciales y vampiros: disidencia sexual en 'The Knightly Quest', de Tennessee Williams

Pese a que Gore Vidal calificara 'The Knightly Quest' (1966) como uno de los mejores relatos de Tennessee Williams, lo cierto es que el cuento distópico con final intergaláctico ha sido lamentablemente objeto de escasísimos estudios críticos. Bosquejado durante la represión de los años cuarenta y concluido a mediados de la turbulenta década de los sesenta, la obra, un híbrido de ciencia ficción y literatura gótica, revela no solo la conciencia ideológica de Williams sobre el papel de resistencia política del desviado en un sistema que raya en el totalitarismo, sino que muestra algunas de sus estrategias contranarrativas en la lucha contra el orden (hetero) normativo. Al elegir el desenlace típico de la ciencia ficción apocalíptica, Williams invierte la lógica del género popular favorito de la Guerra Fría. La amenaza ya no procede del espacio exterior (la invasión alienígena o el inminente ataque nuclear soviético) sino del propio

sistema: el surgimiento de una nación que aniquila cualquier forma de alteridad y disidencia. De idéntico modo, al convertir al vampiro homosexual, la quintaesencia del perverso polimorfo y de la sombra jungiana, en el héroe moralmente superior de un mundo agonizante y en el superviviente de una incierta utopía futura, el escritor sureño otorga un papel privilegiado al Otro demonizado como salvador del sueño americano de una libertad individual sin límites.

Palabras clave: Tennessee Williams, relato breve; Guerra fría; homosexualidad; ciencia ficción; disidencia sexual.

1. INTRODUCTION

When Samuel R. Delaney was still a teenager befuddled about his sexual identity he experienced a doppelgänger encounter in a wet dream: lying down at his side, he saw a bed companion identical to himself, whose name was Snake and whose tongue had been cut out. Unable to express what he longed for, Snake started to caress his newfound friend and cried with happiness to discover that he had eventually met someone able to understand his wordless messages (Delaney 2004: 97-98). Delaney was then a young black with such a light-skinned complexion that he could pass as white; a homosexual who functioned as a heterosexual (he would marry poet Marilyn Hacker years later); and, in addition, “the most ambiguous of citizens, the writer” (2004: 111). This feeling of suspension among a multiplicity of contradictory identities placed him at the hub of a universe of ambiguities: at any moment a steadfast decision could be adopted but there was no clear sign ahead, or rather there were too many. Writing science fiction in the autumn of 1961 became the only way to avoid being castrated of language; the escape valve through which the young New York writer could appease his suicidal impulses to jump off a roof or under a train.

Literature is a marginal discourse, “a subversive activity at play in the social margins of politics, industry, advertising, and the media” (Delaney 1986: 43); and the minor literatures, Delaney convincingly holds, are “on the margin of the margin”. SF emerges as the ideal vehicle to imagine an order where everything that is excluded, oppressed or muffled can be given a legitimate voice. Through the fabrication of utopian worlds, Snake, the Jungian shadow of young Delaney, becomes articulate again. Not in vain, the ultimate goal of SF is to materialize “the unthinking assumptions that limit human potentiality” (James and Mendleson 2003: 153), since the strangeness of the *novum*, the illogical or impossible in factual terms, is rendered rationalized and plausible. This infidelity to the ‘real world’ infuses the fictive world with a critical mode which aims at destabilizing and decentering patriarchy and heteronormativity (Jackson 1995). As Scott McCracken notes, “at the root of all science fiction lies the fantasy of alien encounter . . . the meeting of self with other is perhaps the most fearful, most exciting and most erotic encounter of all” (1998: 102). In any case, this “encounter with difference” (Roberts 2006: 16), i.e. the expression of alterity, becomes one of the essential ingredients of SF.

The purpose of this article is to probe into some of the ideological conflicts disguised in the depiction of a dystopian world within the context of sexual dissidence. I have chosen Tennessee Williams as a case in point in order to analyze: (i) how sexual otherness operates in his short fiction; and (ii) which reverse discourse strategies (Foucault 1978) are employed to contest and challenge the legitimizing discourse of the oppressor. I will focus on ‘The Knightly Quest’, a novella published on February 22, 1966, although its plot lines were largely sketched in 1942, during the summer the author spent in Macon, Georgia. Given that any SF story, despite “its exotic trappings”, is “best understood as a commentary on contemporary issues” (Boyer 1985, qtd. in Bould et al. 2009: 86), for it remains, in Suvin’s words, largely senseless without “a given socio-historical context” (1988: 62), I will

start by introducing the ideological conflicts of the Cold War Era in relation to dissident sexualities. I will then proceed to interpret the novella's central character, Gewinner, as an icon of a polymorphously perverse sexual order which jeopardizes the stability of gender binaries: his costumes, night-prowlings and insatiable sexual appetite turn him into a vampiric creation, an image of marginal, transgressive homosexual desire.

2. WILLIAMS AND THE COLD WAR LOGIC

Following Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950), Cold War Americans desperately needed the vehicle of the space frontier to maintain the hope of "settling a new land", "finding a new democracy" and thereby "escaping the ills of urban life" (Wolfe 1989: 249) and the overwhelming constraints on individualism imposed by social institutions. This pervasive influence of SF was not alien to Tennessee Williams as frontier imaginary was already deeply rooted in his short fiction. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Williams's strategies of resistance against the oppressive laws of uniformity involve the remapping of the Western border: abandoning the conventional values of mainstream society in the quest for a new land entails the recovery of the topoi and the rhetoric of the American frontier (Aguilera Linde 2010). The two homeless people of his short story 'Two on a Party', Cora and Bill, "a female lush and a fairy who travel together" (1985: 302), defy the prescriptions of respectable society (the so-called "squares"), and in doing so they become buckaroos, trappers in search of 'trade', roughnecks away from the narrow moral constraints of civilization. East in Williams's imagination is always Puritan and therefore repressive. West is wilderness: it symbolizes the longed-for suspension of prescribed norms and morals. Gradually aware that his own voice could only be that of the Other, Williams assumes that the only space where subversive values can still be embraced is the uncertain terrain beyond the border, his textual strategies implying movement away from the center. Deviation becomes the natural course; marginality the ideal state, and the western frontier the *bona fide* scenario to counteract the castrating influence of establishment culture.

Besides resorting to the props and costumes of a theatrical West (Frederick Jackson Turner had announced the disappearance of the frontier back in 1893) Williams started to look upward to discover a new frontier imaginary, as many of his contemporaries had been doing since the 1930s. The "cowboy world of sagebrush and open spaces" (Mogen 1982: 30) was now to be found not in the recreation of the mythic West but in outer space. Spacefaring fiction offered American readers "both the machine and the wilderness"; and SF can be rightly called "an outgrowth of frontier fiction" (Wolfe 1989: 249). The combative spirit of the American rebel, now "an exile at home" (1985: 444) since "the frontiers [have] been exhausted", can still be found, Williams hastens to admit, in the defiant, "lunatic honesty" (444) of the homosexual's rebellion. He may no longer be doing the same things as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, but the romantic spirit of freedom can still be glimpsed in his pocketknife carving a "large glory hole in the wooden partitions of the depot lavatory" (444).

In 1941, in his unsuccessful play *Stairs to the Roof*, Williams retains the Western trappings, but for the first time he introduces a typical spacefaring ending. Ben Murphy's rebellion against a world dying of spiritual anemia is to go to his office in cowboy boots. Later on, when he helps the heroine recover her love letter, he appears wearing "a broad-brimmed dove-gray Stetson" and "an emerald-studded belt" (2000: 50). Normal adjustment is rejected by this nonconformist white-collar clerk who manages to escape the "cage of the Universe" by discovering a hidden attic from which he can look up at the stars. The finale is marked by an unexpected intergalactic voyage: Ben is chosen by the aliens as the new Adam who must "colonize a brand-new star in heaven" (97), thereby granting mankind a new opportunity for salvation. Mr. E, a Jehovah-like, flowing-bearded figure, is dressed in a "sky-blue robe sprinkled with cosmic symbols" (92) and holds an enormous sparkler. Yet, although Ben's sexual orientation fits the heterosexual norm (he is married and his wife is actually expecting a baby), Mr. E's instructions are all too clear: Ben must leave earth on his own and become the begetter of countless millions. Monosexual reproduction is the watchword of the new world: "having two sexes has made [a mess] of things down here on World Number One" (95).

Williams's dabbling in SF can be traced back to his first publication at the age of sixteen, 'The Vengeance of Nitocris' in *Weird Tales* (August 1928). The story, a hybrid of fantasy fiction and Gothic, was reprinted several times: in spring of 1963 *Gamma* presented it again in a volume subtitled *New Frontiers in Fiction*, and in 1966 Kurt Singer included the same title in an anthology of the supernatural. An identical label was given to an otherwise very different story, 'Desire and the Black Masseur' (1948), classified as a horror story and reprinted in *The Unspeakable People* (1968). This overlapping of fantasy and Gothic continues in his novella 'The Knightly Quest' (1966). Not surprisingly, Donald Allen Wollheim, the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, the leading SF magazine of the 1930s and 1940s much sought after by the Great Depression writers as it paid very well, did not harbor any doubts about Williams's true nature as a writer: he "could have been another Kuttner if he hadn't wasted himself trying to break into that rat's nest, the Broadway theater" (Resnick 1997: 22). Williams himself acknowledged to "have developed a great interest in atomic and cosmic science", and although he confessed "being so stupid that [he had] to read each page twice and sometimes twice again", he had no qualms in admitting that "[e]ven so it [was] better than prevailing trends in fiction" (2004: 140).

Williams spent the summer of 1942 with Paul Bigelow in Macon, Georgia: there he encountered the eccentricities of the gay world in the circle formed by Holt Gewinner; became the lover of Andrew Lyndon, a very conflictive relationship marked by clashes between violence and tender feelings; met Emily Jelkes, a crippled music teacher who would serve as the basis for such characters as Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* and Hanna Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguana*; and was arrested and taken to jail, along with Paul, for scandalous behavior: "I was recently picked up on Cherry Street . . . as a suspicious character because of my dark glasses and cigarette holder" (2006: 298). As early as July 3, 1942 his diary entry reads: "I have the material for a short novel in my mind". The

message of the new work in progress is no other than the terrible danger hovering over the nation: “personal freedom is gone, even the illusion of it” (2006: 299). Sexual repression, neurosis and fear dominate the writer’s mind during the so-called Macon period, one of the most decidedly formative of his prolific career: “I see a terrifying, narrow vista of time like this —no real escape anywhere; effort and endurance— thirst of the body and of the heart that I cannot slake any longer. Am I beginning to walk across a long desert under a merciless sun?” (2006: 291). The feelings that the small town milieu arouses go from “lostness”, “helplessness”, “struggle for contact” to “final surrender” (299). Racial conflicts, pervasive in the South, also lurk behind the deceitful peacefulness of this town.

‘The Knightly Quest’ has been rightly defined as a dystopian tale “to protest against the repression of freedom” (Murphy 2005: 189); “a campy fable” (Barrow 1967: 81) that inveighs against an increasingly homogenized society which implements direct methods, as well as less conspicuous ways, to suppress differences, and which punishes those who dare challenge the norm. It is simply the story of the transformation of a southern town called Gewinner (clearly modeled on Macon) into the seat of The Project, a powerful military organization which pursues the eradication of freaks; a society not very different, in Williams’s words, from “the famous Jones Project”, the radar system invented by the British physicist of the same name aimed at identifying enemy targets at night (2004: 275). The clash between the squares and the freaks —an obligatory thematic force in his short fiction and drama— intensifies, and the world depicted looks even more menacing.

Gewinner (“Gay Winner”) is a “non-fitter-in”, the gay artist isolated in a tower, unable to come to terms with a world composed of big corporations, and dominated by uniformity and a “wave of new religiousness” which short-circuits any attempt to become a deviant (1985: 421). He is the medieval knight in pursuit of impossible ideals, a reincarnation of the eternal Don Quixote, now converted into a homosexual rebel who sleeps with his hand intertwined in Sancho’s (445). Gewinner’s homosexuality, a key element in the story, and not a subject of minor importance as Ren Draya suggests (1977: 661), emerges as a form of oppositional consciousness against castrating, oppressive models of masculinity (as in the character Spangler) and the dictatorial powers of Cold War America. When he returns home, the city, swept by a non-stop spy scare, has been transformed by The Project into a mass of frightened workers, unable to fight for their rights since the major unions have been dissolved (1985: 432). New regulations designed to isolate freaks and weed them out of society are passed every day: “It’s all right to talk about tolerance and individual rights and all that sort of business but you got to draw a line somewhere”, Spangler claims (421-22). The target of the new legislation are “the fuck-offs . . . like the sissy Pearce brother”, blacks and Asians (421). The punishment against non-conformists or radicals is “Camp Tranquillity”, a concentration camp where all kind of tortures are systematically inflicted upon dissident prisoners. Business premises, polluting factories and fast-food eateries are erected in areas previously designated as residential. To keep people contented movie theatres are opened everywhere, and there is a ban on blues music, for the city’s motto is

“Nothing to worry about”. Accordingly, a Happy Song Center has been created with the sole aim of composing “light-hearted ballads” (432). The only solution for Gewinner is to escape aboard a spaceship called, significantly, “The Ark”. Unlike Ben Murphy in *Stairs to the Roof* who has to travel without a companion, this spacefaring ending has Gewinner escaping with two women as well.

Raymond Williams (1956: 41) divides SF into three subgenres: putropia (the story of a paradise that turns into a secular hell); Doomsday (the story of a catastrophe that puts an end to all forms of life); and Space Anthropology (the discovery of new patterns of life on a new planet). ‘The Knightly Quest’ brings together all three types, although it is undeniable that the first dominates most of the story: it recounts the decline of a city which is finally destroyed by the bomb that, hidden in a thermos of coffee, goes off in the hands of Billy, the man in the service of The Project’s security. Raymond Williams uses a three-fold schema to explain the inextricably linked notions of utopia and dystopia: “the externally altered world”; the technological revolution; and “the willed transformation, in which a new but less happy kind of life has been brought about by social degeneration” (Williams 1980: 196). Gewinner, the Southern town, clearly fits into the last type. When the protagonist returns from his never-ending travels, the place has been turned into a “harmful [kind] of social order” (196). The destruction of planet Earth takes place some minutes after the three subversive characters — Gewinner, Gladys and Violet, terrorists against a State of terror— board the spaceship headed toward an unknown destination. The explorative model of SF, the discovery of an alien land rife with possibilities for a new life, is merely hinted at, and remains largely uncertain: the new world to be discovered is “a spot marked X on the chart of time without end” (455), but whether Gewinner’s sexual orientation will be accepted or not is a question that is left deliberately unresolved.

Tennessee Williams’s dystopian tale becomes meaningful only against the backdrop of the Cold War conflation of the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare. The postwar fear of an atomic attack from the Soviet Union, and the identification of ‘commies and queers’ resulted in the conviction that “[s]ex [was] the subversives’ secret weapon”, since “Marxism came into Russia on a wave of free love” (Lait and Mortimer 1952: 52) and “Communism actively promote[d] and support[ed] sex deviation” (44). As the whole nation was “going queer” (the masculinization of women, Lait and Mortimer contended, had its inevitable counterpart in the feminization of men), the first area which threatened the security of the country was the State Department which, “despite denials and purges, [was] considerably more than 30 per cent faggot” (1952: 44). Homosexuals destabilized the security of the nation by creating an anonymous underground network in the army, the Capitol and the major universities with the aim of spreading the Communist credo and paving the road for a Russian attack. In the 81st United States Congress (March 29-April 24, 1950) Congressman Mr. Miller of Nebraska, the infamous author of “the sex pervert bill” whereby homosexuals were ordered to be confined as pathological cases in psychiatric units, defended the need to continue work in this direction first and foremost in the District of Columbia:

How many have been in sensitive positions and subject to blackmail. It is a known fact that homosexuality goes back to the Orientals . . . that the Russians are strong believers in homosexuality, and that those same people are able to get into the State Department and get somebody in their embrace, and once they are in their embrace, fearing blackmail, will make them go to any extent. Perhaps if all the facts were known these same homosexuals have been used by the Communists . . . These homosexuals have strong emotions. They are not to be trusted and when blackmail threatens they are a dangerous group. (Griffith and Baker 2001: 132)

This “Red bed-battalion” (Lait and Mortimer 1952: 52), i.e. the clandestine army of ‘pinko commies’, was to be found and arrested. As D’Emilio and Freedman argue: “[l]abeling of homosexuals as moral perverts and national security risks, along with repressive policies of the federal government [e.g. Executive Orders 9835 and 10450], encouraged local police forces across the country to harass them with impunity . . . Throughout the 1950s, and well into the 1960s, gay men and lesbians suffered from unpredictable, brutal crackdowns” (1997: 293).

Williams’s creation of *The Project*, a military-police unit patrolling the city and watching over the citizens’ movements with the aim of cleansing the social order of anomics (prostitutes are banned; maladjusted people are sent to neurological hospitals; subversives are simply “torn to pieces by wild dogs”, [435]), closely resembles the McCarthy witch-hunt, the paranoiac prosecutions brought by the HUAAC, and the social riots of the late fifties. In fact “spy scare” was not periodic in *Gewinner* but constant. The police forces combing the cities for nests of “perverts” in the America of the 1940s and 1950s also find their parallel in the “Black Cat Gang”, a criminal band assaulting solitary patrolmen at nighttime. Crime is everywhere, more bans and a night curfew are imposed. After finding out that the leader of the gang is the Chief of the Police, the security forces of *The Project* are in the hands of “government agents in armored cars” (438) who make certain that everything falls back “into the former well-ordered pattern of existence” (438). In the meantime, *The Project* is engaged “all day and all night in the development of some marvelously mysterious weapon of annihilation” (402). The fumes from its industrial plants result in inevitable collateral damage: flowers die as soon as they start to bloom.

However, Williams is doing something more than simply building up an Orwellian image of the America of the forties and fifties and a utopian hope for the future through the opening of the space frontier. In rehashing the clichéd ending of the apocalyptic SF novel with its messianic savior, undoubtedly one of the favorite subgenres of the 1950s,¹

¹ In 1949 the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb; in 1957 the Soviet satellite Sputnik was launched. The fear of a Soviet occupation was followed by the threat of nuclear annihilation: not only would “our children be living as enslaved subjects of the Kremlin”, they would be annihilated as well. McCartheyite scaremongering “fostered paranoia of all kinds” (James 1994: 84). In this atmosphere, apocalyptic SF (alien races invading the earth or nuclear holocaust) becomes the favorite genre. The Cold War fifties is the golden age for novels and motion films about the aftermath of atomic wars and other catastrophes. In 1956 25 SF films were released; 24, one year later. See David Seed (1999) and Mark Bould et al. (2009).

the narrator is, strangely, reversing the Cold War logic. Now the potential threat, the fear of an attack, does not come from without —be it through an alien invasion or from nuclear radiation— but from within. What is to be destroyed is not foreign but domestic, indeed the very power structure and the set of deeply rooted values which conservative American nurtures: patriarchy, repression of sex (masturbation is now preferable to messing around with women), loss of freedom, oppressiveness, the Puritan morality —“men with characters of rock” is what the world needs, Bill Spangler asserts (424)— and, of course, its condemnation of all that defies labels and categorization; in short, the principles represented by The Project and The Center, the elite members of the organization. The Eye, wide-open and blue and painted on the entrance (432), is the symbol of the vigilante tradition of meting out punishments for bodily pleasures and it watches over the mass of dull, obedient workers. Conformism, the idea that citizens should act as though “cells of one great uplifted being”, rules out dissident values and is seen as the only “way toward which the whole progress of mankind [has] always pointed” (421).

Individual difference is a terrible sin which jeopardizes the stability of America. It is at this point that Gewinner, the incarnation of evil, comes onto scene, and becomes the elected man who can hamper the doings of The Project, and challenge Bill Spangler’s ‘moral’ strength. By inverting the logic of the apocalyptic stories of the 1950s, Williams is creating a counter-narrative whereby he is warning not against the risks of atomic devastation orchestrated by the Soviet Union, but against the emergence of American totalitarianism.

3. GEWINNER AND THE JUNGIAN SHADOW: WILLIAMS’S GAY VAMPIRE

But feeling guilty is foolish. I am a deeper and warmer and kinder man for my deviation . . . Someday society will take perhaps the suitable action —but I do not believe that it will be or should be extermination. (Tennessee Williams, qtd. in Leverich 1995: 421)

Williams debunks the ideological message of the postwar SF genre by also creating an antihero, Gewinner Pearce, the last hope for the regeneration of American liberties and genuine values. If the dynamics of anti-Utopia involve, as Jameson puts it, a dialectic of Identity (uniformity) and Difference (alterity), i.e. a confrontation between “the systemic nature of the social totality” and “radical otherness” (2005: xii), Gewinner unambiguously represents the latter aspect of this dichotomy. Following a narrative strategy similar to the one adopted in ‘Two on a Party’, the point at stake here is the choice of the deviant as the morally superior candidate, the savior of a civilization gone to pot. Not only does he represent the reprobate, his sexual orientation makes him a pervert as well. Thus, he stands for everything that the hegemonic establishment decries and silences. The ideology that equates sexual deviation and political subversion is, Dollimore notes, very old, and is accompanied by religious and racial fears (1991: 236). As Corber argues apropos of Cold

War America, “gay male identity is defined less by sexual preference than by resistance to the dominant political and social order” (1997: 4). The reverse-discourse strategy entails the displacement of the binaries through inversion: only the pervert, along with the women rebels, can destabilize the dominant, oppressive masculinity and ultimately provide an alternative order through the discovery of an emergent utopia. Although Williams echoes the Women’s and Gay Lib vindications of the 1960s, he also expresses his doubts that homosexuality can be permanently given a central position and a legitimate voice in the making of the new status quo. In any case, the narrator does not hesitate to lay bare the protagonist’s marginality and oppositional role. Gewinner is an anomaly, a mistake, an accident that should not be brought to the surface; a disturbing presence lurking in the dark. In brief, he embodies the Jungian notion of the shadow.²

In ‘Psychology of the Unconscious’, Jung defines the term as the other within. The shadow archetype can be described as a dark mirror reflex, the uncivilized, unspeakable desires and drives we feel ashamed of for they are simply incompatible with widely accepted moral principles; “the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and the content of the personal unconscious” (Jung 1943: 66). The shadow is therefore the Other, opposed to the Self but absolutely necessary if we aim to maintain the stability of the ego. Once repressed, it “remains in the background, unsatisfied and resentful, only waiting for an opportunity to take its revenge in the most atrocious way” (Jung 1953: 587).

This dualistic tension between the Other and the Self is rendered visible in the novella through the dialectical opposition of Gewinner vs. Spangler. As the very name denotes, a spangler is somebody or something that spangles, i.e. that sparks or glitters. Billy Spangler, the muscled American boy with a dazzling smile, the attractive owner of “The Laughing Boy” drive-in, dressed in a snowy white uniform (412), “seem[s] to be a matching part” of the “fair-weather day” (414). Gewinner Pearce’s true personality, on the other hand, belongs to the night: he loves “most the hours between midnight and dawn” (438) when he patrols “the empty and dimly-lit [streets] till three or four in the morning” (421). Spangler is the light; Gewinner, the shadow. Not at all surprisingly, Bill’s smile “set off sparklers and spit devils in Gewinner’s nervous system, a scorching reminder of various irreconcilables in his nature” (414-15). While Gewinner is unable to control his outbursts of anger, which verge on epileptic seizures, Bill, a master of his own passions, always keeps his calmness and “unruffled voice”. Gewinner literally knocks the drive-in owner down by racing his car on two wheels while Bill is leaning on the fender. Bill, poised and unfazed, manages to catch sight of his enemy’s “snakelike jerking forward of the head” (426). His

² Williams started to read Jung in the forties, not long before his stay in Macon, as his letter to Windham (dated November 3, 1943) proves. In 1958 Jung writes *Flying Saucers. A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, whereby the psychologist launches the theory that UFOs are the expression of “a living myth” (2002: 11) which allows man to believe in something supernatural (“extraterrestrial, heavenly powers”) disguised in the shape of a technological construction which intervenes with the aim of providing “order, deliverance, salvation, and wholeness” (2002: 18) at a time when anxiety over global destruction is a predominant feeling.

angel-like appearance — “he was wreathed in cherubic smiles that made him look like a butch and tender angel of honest-to-goodness young, sweet, pure-hearted manhood” (437)— stands in contrast to Gewinner’s devilish, emasculated nature. The former divides women into two kinds, the good and the bad, and sees sex as Satan’s temptation —when he smells Edna’s menstruation, he thinks of it as “the darkly crimson incubative condition” (424); the latter enjoys cruising the streets for a sexual partner. These binary cuts (light vs. darkness, good vs. evil, bright and pleasant vs. obscure and offensive, creation vs. destruction) echo the sharply polarized, Zoroastrian system: the complementary twins, one dark (Harminus) and one light (Hormistus), that dominate the world, and man’s Janus-like nature.

That Gewinner incarnates polymorph-perverse tendencies can be seen in his depiction as a vampire.³ A creature of the night, Gewinner, the “Prince in the tower” (406) is, like Dracula, a refined dandy — “they had called him the Prince as much in awe as in mockery of his refinements” (408)— and a man “instructed in the humanities” (406), who lives in the highest room of a gray stone mansion “with a pop-art resemblance to a medieval castle” (407). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) and Alan Sinfield (1994) long ago noted both the historical connection of the Gothic genre (the perfect locus for the trope of the “unspeakable”) with the feminization of the aristocracy (otiose, decorative and ethereal as opposed to the productive, pragmatic and manly values of the bourgeoisie). Byron, the outsider, the fatal man and the sexual deviant, was the earliest model of the modern vampire (Wilson 1999).⁴ After the trials of Oscar Wilde, the effeminate aristocratic model (aesthete, *flâneur*, *bon vivant*) became “the dominant one available for homosexual men of both upper and middle class” (Sedgwick 1985: 94). Les Brookes, following Richard Dyer’s ideas, argues that one of the most conspicuous figures of this aristocratic decadence is the vampire. “Charming, cultivated, dandified, sexually voracious and abnormally aware” (Les Brookes 2009: 132), vampires are liminal figures with transgressive energies since they mirror the dissidence encoded in aesthetic effeminacy. Their secret nature,

³ A perversion was originally defined as a sexual activity which “has given up the aim of reproduction and pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it” (Freud 1966: 316); or, more precisely, a sexual function which “has transgressed its limits in respect to the part of the body concerned or to the sexual object chosen” (Freud 1997: 43). Children are born with an innately bisexual disposition which is polymorphously perverse. I herein use the term as understood in post-Foucauldian (queer) theory as a departure or transgression (deviance) from any social order, or hegemonic norm.

⁴ The first literary vampire is Polidori’s Lord Ruthven, clearly modeled on Byron, the peripatetic, depraved aristocrat, a regular customer of “the centres of all fashionable vices” (*The Vampyre*). Williams felt powerfully attracted to the figure of Lord Byron, to the extent that a character of an early story, Paul Bagby, an *alter ego*, was nicknamed “Byron, the Campus poet”. Paul Bagby is an obvious variant of Paul Bigelow, Williams’s inevitable companion in his cruising adventures (2006: 128). Lord Byron is also one of the characters of *Camino Real*: he embodies the rebellious spirit who, much like Gewinner, is ready “to make a departure” from a world that is too restrictive, and to “struggle for freedom” (1953: 56). Williams might have also been attracted to the conflicting sides of the Byronic hero torn asunder by the clash of centripetal forces and reputed to be “bad, mad, and dangerous to know” (Gross 2001: 148). Byron was also familiar with Zoroaster’s philosophy, and he was an admirer of Persian Sufi poet Hafiz.

coupled with their voyeurism, runs in parallel with the furtive nocturnality and cruising of contemporary homosexuals.

Thus, while the rest of the city dwellers are fast asleep, Gewinner, bathed and anointed with perfume “like a bride”, walks down the fire escape ladder, dressed in “a midnight-blue tuxedo made of silk gabardine” (439) and a white silk scarf.⁵ During his nocturnal prowls he cruises the streets at junctions and stops at the stadium where he eventually finds a suitable stranger. Then they both drive to the Negro cemetery, a clearly heterotopian space whereby mainstream values (those that legitimate the prevailing order) are contested, and have sex “among the humble mossy tablets and weather-paled crosses of wood” (441). After unfolding the silk scarf on the floor and taking off his clothes, Gewinner asks the stranger: “Well? Am I too ugly?” (441). In choosing a black cemetery as the setting for the acts of deviant sexuality, Williams is linking the Sexual Other with the Racial Other, for they have in common the fact of embodying evil values and practices: crime, uncleanness, and rampant, sordid sexuality.⁶ By depicting Gewinner as a vampire Williams is also validating Judith Halberstam’s assertion that sexuality is “the dominant mark of otherness” in the twentieth century (1995: 7).

Characterized by a hidden depravity and the secrecy of a sordid sexuality, vampires belong, along with wolves, to the non-heteronormative terrain. In fact they “cross back and forth boundaries that should otherwise be secure —the boundaries between humans and animals, humans and God, and, as an expression of a ‘polymorphous’ sexuality, man and woman” (Gelder 1994: 70). What moves a vampire is “the gratification of all desire” (Day 2002: 6) since all taboos are broken. Jung believed that the vampire image was an expression of the shadow. In fact we can subscribe to Cohen’s words when he states that the “cultural fascination with the monster is born of the twin desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens” the stability of the system (Cohen 1996: viii).⁷

⁵ Gewinner’s tuxedo, black topcoat and moiré silk scarf are the obligatory costume of the cliché vampire as an urbanite sophisticate, an image popularized by Lugosi’s films that can be traced back to Hamilton Deane’s first theatrical adaptation of Stoker’s *Dracula* in 1924. McNally and Florescu demonstrate that the tuxedo-clad, pale-skinned vampire is to a large extent a consequence of Deane’s impersonations of the character (1994: 156-57). Gewinner’s body is also “lightly dusted with powder” (439), as befits the post-Deane antihero.

⁶ Heterotopias are “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1986: 24). Cemeteries are “no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city but ‘the other city’, where each family possesses its dark resting place” (1986: 25). Cemeteries are typically Gothic settings, a natural scenario for the necrophilous impulses. In choosing a black cemetery as the place where homosexual acts are performed, Williams endorses Leslie Fiedler’s famous assertion that “the proper subject for the American gothic is the black man” (1960: 397), slavery and racial conflict. Homosexuality is therefore coupled with blackness as the most visible expression of subjugated alterity.

⁷ Not surprisingly Williams started to have vampire nightmares during his summer in Macon in 1942 immediately after meeting Holt Gewinner, Williams’s “connection with the gay-mad world” (2006: 286; Leverich 1995: 455). Williams must have felt both attracted and frightened by the disregard of moral conventions and unprincipled life of excess and pleasure which Gewinner led in such a conservative environment. His “white skin”, which Williams defined as “tantalizing”, and his constant parties in “the most fantastic house” (2006: 287) definitely aroused mixed

Following C. W. E. Bigsby's sentiments, David Savran insists that Williams's radicalism, "lacking a political correlative, tends to be displaced into a sexual subversiveness" (1992: 80). The only way to transform the world was neither political activism nor the Marxist credo but the "destabilization of the mid-century notions of masculinity and femininity" through the celebration of "subjugated masculinities" and the valorization of "female power and female sexual desire" (1992: 81). The solution lies in "re-moulding the world a little nearer to our Heart's Desire", if one aims to understand the "sorry Scheme of Things", as Tom, the protagonist of 'Square Pegs' (and Williams's alter ego) defends; a goal which duplicates the lines of the *Rubáiyát*. If (wo)man's desire could be nurtured without constraints, if (s)he were allowed to meet and follow her/his own shadow, (s)he "could find his own, natural place in the world. Get what I mean? No mis-fits! No square pegs in round holes!" (2006: 206).

Gewinner's Persian coin, the gift he wants to give to the right owner on his (k)nightly quest, is a motif that insists on the idea of following the libidinal instincts of the ego. His nocturnal prowls become the twentieth-century counterpart of the medieval knight's quest for the Holy Grail. Unlike Spangler, the successful young jock cut out for business, Gewinner epitomizes the romantic quester. He is "the eternal Don Quixote in the human flux" (444): the idealist aspiring to find true love "some galactic night", someone to whom he could make the gift of the Persian pendant. In the 1898 preface to the *Rubáiyát*, Talcott Williams speaks about the necessity of understanding that "religious fervor and sexual passion may be legal tender for the same emotions", a message present in the two faces of some ancient coins which bear on one side "the altars of the God and on the other the symbol of lust" (1898: XIV). "I'd like to live a simple life – with epic fornications", writes Williams in Macon in the summer of 1942 (2006: 303). Gewinner's coin encapsulates the unambiguous triumph of dissident sexuality.

To conclude, in making the "Prince of the Tower" one of the few survivors after the destruction of the world and the only male passenger of the Ark of Space, Williams is joining Freud and Jung in their insistence on the importance of awakening libidinal energies in order to counteract the discontent of present-day civilization, and the castrating one-sidedness of contemporary society. Only the return of Dionysos, "not just the de-repression but the recuperation" (Bishop 1995: 227) of sexual and creative urges which Western civilization has buried, will regenerate the world. By desublimating the polymorphous perverse the individual can liberate himself from repressive constraints (the negation of the self) and aggressive impulses (the negation of the environment), and release a subversive energy; an idea, Dollimore remarks, already expressed in Norman O. Brown's *Life against Death* (1959): we must reach a "Dionysian consciousness" in order

feelings, a conflict of desire and fear. Soon he felt like "a divided being": one part of him pulled into the direction of "Brimstone Drive in Perdition" (2006: 289); the other pulling in the direction of fear and violence: "The sexual neurosis continues to occupy the center of my emotional stage" (2006: 289). Williams is about to transform the neurosis into a perversion. Perversion is "the opposite of neurosis . . . either we sexualize something or it becomes a neurotic character trait" (Delaney 1999: 19).

to “return our souls to our bodies” (Brown 1985: 158). Apollo, the negation of instinct, is a deathly form which sustains “displacement from below upwards” (174) and makes us “desexualized animals” (167).

Gewinner is the savior, the “finally elected” (444), the dark monster who will vanquish Apollo and open the sluice-gates of desire, the vampire who will murder Spangler and be on the lookout for new frontiers. The original Apocalypse, contends Fredric Jameson, entails “both catastrophe and fulfillment, the end of the world and the inauguration of the reign of Christ on earth, Utopia and the extinction of the human race all at once” (2005: 199). Williams’s finale is therefore rife with religious or metaphysical reverberations, but the central strategy of his novella is to invert the binaries (natural vs. unnatural, good vs. evil, normative vs. marginal) that define sexual identities: the aberrant, demonized Other is now the morally superior opponent, the survivor of a civilization in decline. Aboard the spaceship, en route to an unknown destination, Gewinner asks the pilot whether his silk scarf, the garment he uses as ‘bedlinen’ on his nocturnal cruises, will be allowed in the new world. The answer is that he will be admitted to the new planet on a term of probation. In other words, the outsider will remain perpetually an outsider, a man inexorably bound to inhabit the fringes of the system, the restless quester in pursuit of a radically innocent and natural vision of the self and society.

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