What Mr Williams has made of D. H. Lawrence

> There is also a spurious element. .. . Sometimes it's his thought; one day a critic will explain what Mr Williams has made of D. H. Lawrence.
>
> Eric Bentley: *The Dramatic Event*.

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS has frequently stated that he considers D. H. Lawrence the greatest modern writer, and has freely acknowledged a considerable debt to him. Lawrentian themes and characters appear in every Williams play; there are recognizable quotations from Lawrence; there is a play *You Touched Me!*, based on the Lawrence short story, and a one-act play, *I Rise in Flames Cried the Phoenix*, based on the last days of Lawrence; and there is a poem dedicated to Lawrence, 'Cried the Fox', where Williams reveals that it is the quality of the rebel, the outcast, the destroyer in Lawrence which most appeals to him - a quality of restless, nervous energy devoted to making vicious, but relatively ineffectual attacks upon society and its conventions. The fox is 'desperate', 'frantic', 'lonely' and 'fugitive' - and the process is ultimately 'fatal', self-destructive.

Val in *Battle of Angels*, and later in *Orpheus Descending*, is much the same sort of character, with these potentially tragic elements brought out. The imagery of fox and hounds is retained. Val and Sandra both 'belong to the fugitive kind'. Sandra has prophetic insight: 'Whoever has too much passion, we're going to be burned like witches because we know too much.' Both these characters are 'untamed', both are eternally on the move, seeking freedom. It seems, however, to be Williams' intention to distinguish between the two forms of passion, Sandra's decadent, neurotic, poisonous, tending to self-destruction, Val's primitive and vital. Lawrence distinguishes clearly between reductive, sensationalist sexuality and true passionate desire. But Williams finds it impossible to maintain the distinction. Sandra's sexuality is associated throughout with life-themes and images. She takes the advice of the corpses on Cypress Hill - 'live!' She invokes the dominant life symbol - the Moon Lake Casino - in the name of Apollo and the secret language of the birds: 'They advised her to drive her car as fast as she wanted to drive it, to dance like she wanted to dance. Get drunk, they said, raise hell at Moon Lake Casino, do bumps an' wiggle your fanny!' But living, in these terms, is reduced to joking, and we wait for Sandra's

behaviour to be 'placed' by the subsequent action. She is, indeed, shortly to be accused of being corrupt, 'Absolutely - de-graded!' but the tone is ironic, for the condemnation is by Dolly and Beulah who have already been dismissed as hissing geese. Myra, indeed, offers love on very different terms. We should like to believe that hers is a genuine passion. But whereas the play never takes any clear stance with regard to Sandra, Myra is rejected, on the grounds that she represents a threat to Val's freedom, that she seeks to tame him, to possess him, that she offers a make-believe answer in his quest for purity, being ‘only a woman, like the girl on the Witches Bayou. The ending of *St Mawr* is invoked here:

> *Val*: Listen, Myra, there's only one safe thing for me to do.. Go back to New Mexico and live by myself.
> *Myra*: On the desert ?
> *Val*: Yes.
> *Myra*: Would I make the desert crowded ?
> *Val*: Yes, you would. You'd make it crowded, Myra.
> *Myra*: Oh, my God, I thought a desert was big.
> *Val*: It's big, Myra. It stretches clean out 'til to-morrow. Over here is the Labos Mountains, and over there, that's Sangre de Cristo. And way up there, that's the sky! And there ain't nothing else in between, not you, not anybody, not nothing.
> *Myra*: I see.
> *Val*: Why, my God, it seems like sometimes when you're out there alone by yourself (not with nobody else!) that your brain is stretched out so far, it's pushing right up against the edges of the stars!

Even if we can overlook the appalling travesty of Lawrence's prose, the passage is quite incomprehensible in Lawrentian terms. It is sheer romantic escapism, escape from the world, from the flesh, from corruption. If we turn to the ending of *St Mawr* we note how the New Mexico landscape is realized in terms of life, in terms of acquiring an inward vision and cleaner energy with which to 'win from the crude, wild nature the victory and the power to make another start.' And yet, for all the beauty and conviction of its concrete realization, it is only a *pis aller* to save Lou from cheapness:

> I've got to live for something that matters, way, way down in me. And I think sex would matter to my very soul, if it was really sacred. But cheap sex kills me.

Lou asks her mother the question we might put to Williams:

> What do you call life ? Wriggling half naked at a public show and going off in a taxi to sleep with some half-drunken fool' who thinks he's a man because - oh, I don't even want to think of it. I know you have a lurking idea that that is life.

The idea of purity, of sacredness in sex, or in human life at all, is an idea which Williams finds it impossible to maintain in his plays. Lady offers Val love on the best terms in which Williams can conceive it. But it is not enough. It is Val's destiny to become 'burning flame at the hunter's door' - cleansed by fire of all human corruption. Lou only makes for the New World because real love does not offer itself in the Old.

The same desert and snow-capped mountains reappear in *Camino Real*, where sexual love is shown to be a shabby second-best for those without the courage to reject it and set out into terra incognita. *The Rainbow* is also about *terra incognita*; but the unknown, here, is realized in terms of living human experience, as opposed to the vague romantic associations of Lord Byron's name and the suppressed death-wish implied. And sexual love (though not the sort that Casanova would know anything about) is here a prerequisite, the doorway to the unknown, the entry to ever-widening circles of experience, adventure and achievement. Whereas Williams's *terra incognita* seems to offer only the escape of a 'heroic' death. The Camino Real itself, with its street cries of 'Love? Love?' is real life, and the best it has to offer Kilroy is the make-believe of the Gypsy's 'virgin' daughter. All the characters are completely helpless against Gutman, the guards and the street-cleaners. You can clear out, if you have the guts, or you can make the best of it; but you can't change it. That's life.

In *Orpheus Descending* the 'purity' image becomes the legless, transparent blue-bird which Val wishes to become - never touching the ground until death. Love is again a 'make-believe answer'. The only real answer is death. Val's death is significant in that it is itself a gesture against the world of the play, the hell to which Val descends, peopled with living corpses, agents of death in life, the ultimate evil. Also, by invoking Christian and fertility ritual, the idea of resurrection is introduced and enacted at the end. The phoenix rises from the flames, the snake sloughs its skin and emerges purified. Humanity, life, vitality, wildness reasserts itself at the end of the play when Carol, to the accompaniment of the Choktaw cry, dons Val's snakeskin jacket, and, laughing, defies the Sheriff's order not to move:

> Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean
> skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are
> tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind
> can always follow their kind . . .

Carol is also given the speech which most directly announces the play's theme:

> Something is still wild in the country! This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick with neon, it's broken out sick, with neon, like most other places .. .

But what are the qualities of this 'phoenix' ? Is not her reckless driving a death-wish? Carol is given a history which seems supposed to encourage us to condone her conduct:

> I'm showing the 'S.O.B.S.' how lewd a "lewd vagrant" can be if she puts her whole heart in it ...

The implication is that society is hell and its values evil and that any form of anti-social or unconventional behaviour, however ineffectual, however corrupt, however self-destructive, is to be applauded. In any case, the term 'corrupt' is only applicable to society. Only society has moral responsibility. The individual is merely a victim of social, economic and psychological pressures. Vitality presupposes promiscuity. Energy presupposes outlets in sundry dissipations. So that even Val, who is Williams' vision of a 'pure' man says: 'A single man doesn't always come home alone at. nights.'

Willliams does not really believe in Val as he believes in Dr Johnny or Stanley Kowalski or Rosario delle Rose.

If we think of the man who died, or Lawrence's gypsy or gamekeeper, we sense the world of difference between these men and Val, the most Lawrentian (by intention) of Williams' characters. Val's energy is febrile, hectic, intense, self-advertising, potentially destructive. It is on the surface and continually demanding expression. In John Buchanan these qualities are even more evident:

> He is now a Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society. The excess of his power has not " yet found a channel. If it remains without one, it will burn him up. At present he is unmarked by the dissipations in which he relieves his demoniac unrest.

There is, in Lawrence's heroes, a restraint, an inwardness, an insouciance at the heart:

> The man who died rowed slowly on, with the current, and laughed to himself: 'I have sowed the seed of my life and my resurrection, and put my touch forever upon the choice woman of this day, and I carry her perfume m my flesh like essence of roses. She is dear to me in me middle of my being.
>
> But the gold and flowing serpent is coiling up again, to sleep at the root of my tree.
>
> So let the boat carry me. To-morrow is another day.

Compare the rhythms of this with the nervous St Vitus's dance of the Williams' poem:

> I run, cried the fox, in circles
> narrower, narrower still,
> across the desperate hollow,
> skirting the frantic hill.

Life, for Lawrence, is not nervous, hectic, ecstatic. 'I hate ecstasy,' says Birkin in *Women in Love*, 'Dionysic or any other. It's like going round in a squirrel cage.'

J. W. Krutch, writing of the Nietchean distinction between Dionysian and Apollonian, wrote that Apollonian represents

> aspirations in the direction of rationality, harmony, peace, contentment and quiet happiness. Apollonianism is co-operative, uncompetitive, serene. In a word, it holds that harmony should and can rule both in society and within the individual. But in man, and, therefore, in nearly every society, there is also a Dionysian or drunken element. It promotes not only contest, rivalry, and strife, but also the intoxication of heroism, the ecstasy of pain and of self-destruction. ... To seek contentment and peace is rational and therefore to the worshipper of Dionysus not really human.

It is clear that Williams can, in this respect, be called a Dionysian. Compare Lou in *St Mawr*:

> My dealings with men have only broken my stillness and messed up my doorways. It has been my own fault. I ought to stay virgin, and still, very, very still, and serve the most perfect service. I want my temple and my loneliness and my Apollo mystery of the inner fire. And with men, only the delicate, subtler, more remote relations. No coming near. A coming near only breaks the delicate veils, and broken veils, like broken flowers, only lead to rottenness. She felt a great peace inside herself as she made this realization. And a thankfulness. Because, after all, it seemed to her that the hidden fire was alive and burning in this sky, over the desert, in the" mountains. She felt a certain latent holiness in the very atmosphere, a young, spring-fire of latent holiness, such as she had never felt in Europe or the East.

Peace, harmony, within the individual and the society and civilization as a whole, is the Lawrentian goal. He will not shirk the struggle. But the end is peace, a 'swift, laughing togetherness' of mankind in 'a kind of accomplished innocence'. Lawrence writes of what should and can be. He is normative.' This 'rationality', if you like, is unacceptable to the Dionysian - not really human. Williams writes of what is. And his vision of reality is always a vision of corruption in the bud - in this sense puritanical, but a corruption with which he tries to come to terms as an alternative to an out-and-out rejection of life.

Williams speaks of 'a combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains in my blood which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in my characters.' But the

play in which these conflicts are represented offers some sort of resolution, some reassurance that there exists a norm, a way of life, a set of values consistent with health and humanity. The plays, clearly, do not stop at psychology, but grapple with the ultimate moral issues. *Streetcar* raises these issues, and proceeds to offer us two parallel resolutions. One is tragic, the tragedy of Blanche, a woman of refinement and sensitivity with much love to offer driven by circumstances over which she has little or no control to withdraw from reality behind a veil of sham ideals ('There are no lies but those forced into the mouth by the iron fist of necessity' - *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*), driven by her need for protection into promiscuous sexual relationships, haunted by the memory of the young husband and his sordid death, for which she holds herself partly responsible, exposed, at her weakest, to the jungle of Elysian Fields and the rat-race of Stanley Kowalski's world, her last hope of a decent relationship destroyed by him, raped by him, driven insane by him, and condemned by him to an asylum so that he can continue to drag Stella down to his animal existence. Blanche's world may be .only a Belle Reve, but her aspirations are vastly superior to Stanley's grovelling in the gutter. 'It means that if you don't watch out the apes will take over', as Williams is reputed to have said. Blanche's story is told with great psychological insight and great compassion, and the non-realistic technical devices of the play are used largely to enable us to see the horror of Stanley's world through her eyes. Her final assertion of dignity as the doctor offers her his arm is deeply moving.

Then there is the other resolution which is largely Stella's,

> Everything depends on, as the phrase goes, which side the author is on. It appears that to many members of the audience this question presents no difficulty. They are, and they assume that the author is, on the side of the sister. She is 'healthy', 'adjusted', 'normal'. She lives in the present; she accepts things as they are; and she will never be confined to a mad-house. Her husband is crude, even somewhat brutal, but he is also virile; he is the natural man, and one of nature's many kinsmen of Lady Chatterley's lover. Virility, even orgiastic virility, is the proper answer to decadence. Stella, the representative of the decayed aristocracy, is rejuvenated by a union with a representative of the 'people'. (Krutch, *Modernism in Modern Drama*, 128-9.)

There is plenty of evidence in the text to support this interpretation. Stanley's 'drive' is apparently endorsed by the play, even as it is used to 'get front position in the rat-race'. His 'animal force' is also endorsed as an alternative to Blanche's escapism, or, at best, flirting with life. This endorsement is

apparent in the stage-direction which introduces us to Stanley with such permissive gusto (Blanche has already been placed as pathetically effete):

> Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the centre of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. Branching out from this complete and satisfying centre are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer. He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. (*Streetcar*, 24.)

The early sentences appear to be invoking Lawrentian positives, though we baulk at such phrases as 'pleasure with women' and the degrading comparison of women to hens. The last sentence confirms the crudity of Stanley's sexual appetite (which is given the credit for such auxiliary appetites as eating, drinking, gambling and possessing consumer goods). John Osborne puts his finger on it: ‘Williams’s women … all cry out for defilement, and most of the get it. … The female must come toppling down to where she should be - on her back.' It is no kinsman of Lady Chatterley's lover who can say 'I pulled you down off them columns, and how you loved it, having them coloured lights going!' There is nothing of the 'gaudy seed-bearer' or sexual extravert about Lawrence's heroes. Mellors has great respect for Connie, and the gypsy for Yvette. They revere their women, sexually. The sex act is an act of homage to the religious mystery of sex, never a 'defilement'. It is the gateway to a fourth dimension of existence which all Lawrence's art goes to define and which will not be reduced to 'coloured lights going'. Reviewing *Picnic* under the heading 'Pathetic Phalluses', Eric Bentley writes:

> The torn shirt of Stanley Kowalski is no mere fact in another author's story, it is a symbol, a banner, an oriflamme. It stands for the new phallus worship. There is, of course, no denying that a hero has a body and that it is a male body. What is remarkable in certain plays of T. W. and William Inge is that so much is made of the hero's body, and that he has so little else. The rose that, for Mr Eliot, is rooted in so deeply and broadly human a garden blooms, for Mr Williams,

in the bared chest of quasi-primitive man.[1]

> Admittedly, it may be impossible nowadays to sustain the attitude of the phallus worshipper in its purity. Kowalski is an impure phenomenon: if he is the full-blooded husband that every woman craves, he is also destructive and evil. In fact he is the cunning mixture of good and evil, health and sickness, that, for millions of spectators, has proved a fascination. (*The Dramatic Event*, 103.)

The second resolution of the problems raised in Streetcar, and, in the last analysis, surely the overriding resolution, is summarized in the words 'Life must go on'. For all his impurity, Stanley (like the unwashed grape) is life-sustaining. Blanche cannot stand very much reality. But it is decadent to demand purity. Purity is sterile: it will not ensure the survival of the race: to the mad-house with it. Life may be savage and sordid, a rat-race, a jungle, a trap, but we must come to terms with it. The play ends with the focus on the child wrapped in a pale blue blanket, but, in the background is the 'inhuman abandon' of Stella's sobbing, the 'sensual murmur' of Kowalski as 'his fingers find the opening of her blouse', and the final ape-cry: 'This game is seven-card stud.' This is the world whose perpetuation the child guarantees.

The two resolutions are obviously contradictory. It is a tribute to Williams's power and integrity (faithfulness to the reality as he sees it), that he can develop them simultaneously. The Puritan in him rejects life as impure; the Cavalier accepts life on any terms. Sex, in particular, is invariably tainted. Desire equals lust. It is promiscuous, a form of self-gratification which is habit-forming and comparable with drinking or drug-taking. In Lawrence's vocabulary, it is 'reductive': 'And I quite agree, we can have no hope of the regeneration of England from such sort of sex.' For

> desire itself is a pure thing, like sunshine, or fire, or rain. It is desire that makes the whole world living to me, keeps me in the flow connected. It is my flow of desire that makes me move as the birds and animals move through the sunshine and the night, in a kind of accomplished innocence, not shut outside of the natural paradise.

This is the desire which is realized with such sanity and health in *St Mawr*, *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, and *The Escaped Cock.*

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[1] Eliot had, of course, created his own ‘quasi-primitive man’ in Sweeney. Eliot’s famous rose image, like so many of the images of *The Four Quartets*, had been used many times by Lawrence in a much more 'broadly human' way, especially in ‘the Crown’. I was contemplating a paper on 'What T. S. Eliot has made of D. H. Lawrence' , until Eliot himself assured me that he had never read ‘The Crown’.

It is not the same word as the name on the streetcar. Williams would like very much to believe in Lawrence's sex, but he can't quite manage it. In his own experience sex is not like that at all. Nor can he believe wholeheartedly in the regeneration of America by the kind of sex he can accept as real - Big Daddy's elephants.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Brick, like Blanche, demands purity, the kind of purity he thinks he had with Skipper, but which the world in general, and Maggie in particular, have destroyed. That world is also Big Daddy's world – the plantation, in a bid for which Brick is asked to reproduce himself. It is, as Big Daddy himself admits, a world of mendacity. It is devoted, according to the film version, to piling up rubbish. The big question which the play raises – Is Brick justified in rejecting this world 'to the ultimate biological degree' ? (to quote Arthur Miller) – is not answered. Because Williams does not know where he stands on this issue. He finds himself throughout in sympathy with Maggie and Big Daddy, who say 'You've got to live with it; what else is there to live with?' Brick he regards as being in a state of 'spiritual disrepair' because he wishes to opt out. Yet there is something heroic in Brick's stand which Williams vaguely recognizes. Instead of two resolutions here we have two endings.

Brick's denial of sex is only penultimate. In *Sweet Bird of Youth* we have the ultimate – castration. Chance has a 'vocation' for love-making which he is prepared to 'use' either for pleasure (Heavenly) or for business (Princess). He divides the human race into those who have had this pleasure and those who have not, and are therefore envious of it and seek to destroy it. He has had so much of it that he apparently qualifies as a Fertility God in the play's symbolism. But Chance's vitality leads him (of necessity, according to the play's standards) into corruption. On the only occasion on which Heavenly enters his world she is corrupted, contracts venereal disease, and has to be spayed. Chance is not blamed for this by the play, only by those who do not wish Heavenly to marry a criminal degenerate. They want her blood to be pure. They also defend pure blood in another context,_that of racism. They, like the grey ones of *Orpheus Descending*, can preserve purity only at the cost of life. They also seek to cleanse Chance, allegedly for revenge, in fact out of sexual envy. Chance meekly accepts castration as an appropriate ending to his youth. It was all time's fault anyway, and by forestalling time in this respect, he asserts a certain dignity - or so we are told.

The world, the flesh and the devil (Time), have conspired to taint the purity of Chance's love for Heavenly (who closely resembles the girl on the Witches Bayou - the make-believe

answer). In the flesh, at least, purity can be reclaimed, by cutting out life at the root. If we compare the section in *St Mawr*, where it is suggested that the stallion should be gelded, we shall see how far from Lawrence Williams has come. The play begins as thought it were intended to be an indictment of 'our whole eunuch civilization, nasty minded as eunuchs are, with their kind of sneaking, sterilizing cruelty.' (*St Mawr*) But the sterilizing is endorsed by the play. The sweet bird must be legless.

The alternative is to make do with the relationship offered by the Princess, which is similar to that offered to Casanova by Marguerite in *Camino Real*, a particularly unpleasant combination of maudlin sentiment and sexual itch. Such people, according to Lawrence, rush into a sort of prostitution because they are incapable of real desire. Of Don Juan he says, 'He should have gone into a monastery at fifteen.' Williams seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion. He had a nervous breakdown while writing *Sweet Bird of Youth.* 'I felt castrated,' he said. He took a holiday in the Far East — perhaps in search of a suitable monastery.