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Complicity Across the Atlantic: A Literary Liaison between Two Androgynous Artists

Le vrai drame, c'est la distance et que les êtres ne se connaissent pas.
S'ils se connaissaient, on éviterait de la tristesse et des crimes.
Jean Cocteau, *L'aigle à deux têtes* (1946)

When Tennessee Williams re-encountered Jean Cocteau in 1953, he wrote in his journal that the French poet “is astonishing in his ageless vitality. Drugs? I like him.” (N 575). His review of Cocteau’s *The Diary of a Film* three years earlier suggests a less unequivocally positive opinion. Williams takes the older artist to task for two of the vices he would often be blamed for himself: exhibitionism and hypochondria (NSE 200-1). Even so, Cocteau would be present throughout the playwright’s career. In 1949, the former mounted a production of the play that marked the high point of and secured Williams’s fame, namely *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Three decades later, a decidedly less successful Williams named his penultimate effort for the stage after a poetry collection Cocteau published in 1954: *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981) for *Clair/Obscur* (Kontaxopoulos 4).

That said, by labeling “the androgynous [as] a myth [,] an ideal [as well as] the truest human being” (qtd. in Bigsby 47), Tennessee Williams once openly expressed his interest in all things liminal. An ardent reviser and adapter of his own and other artists’ works (Parker 331), he nevertheless found a natural supporter and mutual influence in Jean Cocteau, the French paragon of hybrid artistry. Not contented with attaining popular acclaim for his stage dramaturgies and feature films or critical prestige for his poetry and novelistic work, the latter equally expressed himself through imaginatively idiosyncratic drawings, paintings, ceramics,

mosaics, frescoes, furniture, stained glass, tapestries, advertising posters, and even postal stamps (Gullentops and Van Sevenant 13). After all, with the continuous exploration of the brittle boundaries between media, genres, and referential frameworks, both Williams and Cocteau carried a certain sensitivity towards the principle of *reciprocity* that is not only rare but even more rarely leads to well-assimilated artistic creations.

Due to its in-part collaborative and emulative nature, the reciprocal process at the very least implies a sense of complicity that is however defined by its sheer boundlessness as, in the words of leading literary critic Harold Bloom, “there is no end to ‘influence’” (xi) as there are no limits to “the power of invention” (xviii). Endemically dialectic, the logic of influence is driven by a dynamic that to Bloom holds primarily positive connotations when considered from the angle of the *inspiration* it implies and the mutually sympathetic themes or moods on which it thrives (5-12). In a context characterized by such reciprocities, the need for an approach capable of capturing the mechanism’s intrinsic constructiveness therefore becomes palpable. Especially so when taking into account both Cocteau and Williams’s shared reliance on rewrites, translations, and adaptations. After all, these three variants of textual hybridity function by virtue of interplay between familiarity and innovation, and thus strike by their recoil from fixity without for that matter alienating their audiences. It is therefore all the more fitting that this analogy-based “doubleness” of convention and invention would find both aesthetic as well as thematic echoes in the meandering reciprocity of influence between Tennessee Williams and Jean Cocteau. In particular since the production of an analogical relation does not require anything but a context highlighting structural relations (Dunbar 330). The perspective offered by the theater, incidentally a prime expressive platform for both Williams and Cocteau, provides precisely such an environment. The notion of “performance,” after all, could be understood as a metaphor for analogizing itself, effectively staging a *double exposure* of product and process that stimulates analogical thought. Especially the human body on stage has kept fascinating artists, audiences, and philosophers alike because of “its impermeability and intangibility” (Van den Dries 71) as *engine* of such associative thinking – a characteristic which prompted the towering acting theorist Jerzy Grotowski to the

following statement:

I have seen for a very long time now that a theatre with tangible, corporeal and physiological characteristics is an ideal medium for *provocation*, a pestering of oneself and the audience through the actor (the actor who actually challenges himself when he challenges the audience). The theatre has to combat our stereotypical world vision, our conventional feelings, our preconceived notions as they are anchored in the body, in respiration, the inner reflexes, in short, in the entire human organism. The theatre has to break these sorts of taboos. Through this *transgression* the theatre will enable us to engage ourselves, “naked” and entirely agitated in something which cannot be easily defined. (Grotowski 273)

A similar reasoning prompted Jean Cocteau, impressed by the raw viscerality exuded by the young Marlon Brando playing Stanley Kowalski, to adapt Tennessee Williams’ *Streetcar Named Desire* to a *succès de scandale* on the French stages in 1949 (Lieber, “La question” 153-4), thus initiating a reciprocal relation of artistic attraction and resistance that arguably informs the various works under scrutiny in this presentation. A first connection is provided by Cocteau’s and Williams’s shared fascination with the Orpheus-myth. Even though many artists took an interest in the Greek singer, his story’s appeal for Williams lay in its combination of “poetry, love, and death” (Dickinson, qtd. in Schlatter 95), the elements “that drew Cocteau to it” (95) as well. Perhaps both writers’ interest in the Orpheus material also converges via a third figure: Rainer Maria Rilke. Indeed, the Austrian poet’s “image of the legendary hero in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*... has far surpassed any other figure in modern literature in its international fame and impact on representations of Orpheus” (Bernstock 25). Rilke was, moreover, of special importance to Cocteau as well as Williams. The former had read, respected and responded to the writings of the German-speaking author since 1912 (165). In Cocteau’s case, we can speak of a reciprocal relation of influence. Rilke thanked Cocteau for his *Orphée* and was translating the play when he died in 1926 (Albright 213; “It is not *inspiration*” n.p.). The Austrian poet also proves a persistent presence in Williams’s work. As early as 1940, the character Miriam discusses “Keats or Rilke or Crane” (183) in *The Parade*, a predecessor to *Something Cloudy*,

Something Clear. In this late play Williams pays tribute to his muses and significantly brings together Rilke and Cocteau (Mann 141).

Jean Cocteau engaged with the Orpheus myth in three films and a play: *Orphée* (1926), *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1950), and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960). Cocteau's 1926 "tragedy" presents a surprisingly passive and seemingly not very creative Orpheus-character. We learn that Orphée had once been a celebrated poet who is now obsessed with writing down messages dictated to him by a horse (*O* 390). The demi-god of Antiquity moved Persephone by means of his musical gift (Bernstock xvii). Cocteau's Orphée, conversely, merely recites his poetry to make sure he stays awake while he is on his way to meet Death (*O* 410). He retrieves his wife in exchange for Death's gloves, which she left at his house. Even the rescue-scheme itself was of the angel Heurtebise's rather than the poet's making.

In 1950, Cocteau brought a new version of the legend to the silver screen. The eponymous character is still a celebrated poet now ostracized by a younger generation of writers and plagued by the press. While Eurydice was murdered by Aglaonice in the film's stage predecessor, it is now one of Death's satellites who takes her life in order to meet Orphée again. The Princess in question is found guilty by a court and Orphée's wife returned to him under the famous condition. Orphée obsessively listens to the radio in the Princess's car in order to hear the mysterious messages sent by Jacques Cégeste, a poet whose death the main character witnessed at the beginning. The protagonist once more looks back at Eurydice, now through the rear-view mirror of his lover's Rolls Royce. This time, Orphée is shot by a group of writers looking for Jacques Cégeste. As happened in the play, the two spouses are re-united at the film's conclusion. To that end, Princess Death reverses their story before she is taken away to face the punishment for her transgressions.

Tennessee Williams's early play *Battle of Angels* (1940) also portrays its Orpheus-figure as a writer rather than a musician. Whereas Val Xavier is not reduced to taking dictation from an animal or a radio, his artistic activities nevertheless pale when compared to his female counterpart's. We occasionally witness *Battle's* male protagonist at work, as happens in the second act where he "is raptly composing an idyllic passage in his book" (*BA* 213). Apart from its subject matter, i.e. "Life" (*BA* 210), the

book Val keeps in a tin box remains a mystery (*BA* 242). Myra Torrance's creative spell leads her to craft an imitation of the orchard she knew as an adolescent. Decorated with "imitation dogwood blossoms" (*BA* 242), the confectionary becomes the scene where Myra tries to relive her past.

Over the course of seventeen years, Williams revised the "emotional record of his youth" (*NSE* 80) and brought it back to the stage as *Orpheus Descending*. A fugitive wanderer once again helps a shop-owner's wife momentarily forget about her miserable marriage and provokes the wrath of the village's male inhabitants. The second time around, Val Xavier has developed into a guitar player strongly associated with blues music while Myra has become Lady Torrance, an Italian immigrant. Even though *Battle of Angels* was also heavily indebted to the Orphic material, the more recent version draws attention to the lyre player's presence by means of its title.

All works under discussion here focus on repetition and transformation, two elements inherent in the myth. Orpheus's story is not only repeated by various artists under a wide variety of guises but is also repetitive in itself. Its male protagonist loses his beloved female companion two times. The singer's power to transform reality, then, has been celebrated by different writers, including Stéphane Mallarmé and Rilke (*Bernstock* 4, 5). In his *Sonette an Orpheus*, the latter famously incited his readers to "Will transformation" (qtd. in *Bernstock* 28, original italics).

Orphée's concern with repetition and transformation is obvious from the very beginning. The eponymous character tries to decipher the mysterious horse's message while his wife implores him to admit the animal always dictates the *same* word (*O* 390). Cocteau's play repeats the relationship between a character named Eurydice and her husband Orpheus from previous material but also transforms it. Theirs is, after all, a querulous and troubled bond, as also becomes clear from the opening passage. Yet even Cocteau's newly-defined connection between the two characters develops into a repetition. In a wilfully ambiguous comment, Heurtebise expresses his fear that the scenes between the spouses will begin for a third time once they are brought back together again (*O* 414). The angel's concern is based on their earlier reunion. During their first meal after Eurydice's return, the couple proves incapable of avoiding their argument about the moon and the horse (*O* 409, 410). The second meal, which closes the play,

offers a final combination of repetition with transformation. It pictures the same triad gathering to eat together. However, the relations between those involved are altered. Orpheus no longer makes his wife cry; he addresses her respectfully (*O* 422). The presence of a third character might be attributable to the influence of Rilke. In his poem “Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes.” (1904), the Austrian poet let the god “mediate... the distance between the lovers, Orpheus and Eurydice” (Nelson 79). Heurtebise fulfils a similar part but is associated with winged creatures of a different type, namely angels (*O* 422).

Orphée’s own bodily transformation at the hands of his persecutors is similarly repetitive yet innovative. The singer’s dismemberment has been a constant over the decades, even if some versions of the myth ended happily (Bernstock xviii). Different reasons for the frenzied women’s violence have been proposed. In one version, the female population of Thrace sought vengeance because the poet took no interest in them or tempted their spouses (xvii). Then again, Orpheus might also have angered Dionysus by worshipping Apollo (xvii).

Cocteau makes use of the dubious horse to explain the protagonist’s death. Aglaonice, the persecution leading woman, has born a grudge against Orphée for a long time. But it is the horse’s offensive sentence which provides her with an excuse to end the poet’s life (*O* 412). The protagonist’s corporeal transformation once more confirms his essentially passive nature and ties in with the play’s contemplation of the connection between life and art. Orphée’s decision not to run from the women is paradoxically both passive and active. He actively resists Heurtebise’s determination to save him against his will (*O* 414) yet passively submits himself to the fate Aglaonice has decided upon for him. Unlike some of his other incarnations, Cocteau’s Orphée does not change reality but is changed by reality. Orphée’s gruesome death allows life to transform him into a masterpiece, as he himself explains:

Que pense le marbre dans lequel un sculpteur taille un chef-d’œuvre ? Il pense : on me frappe, on m’abîme, on m’insulte, on me brise, je suis perdu. Ce marbre est idiot. La vie me taille, Heurtebise ! Elle fait un chef-d’œuvre. Il faut que je supporte ses coups sans les comprendre. Il faut que je me raidisse. Il faut que

j'accepte, que je me tienne tranquille, que je l'aide, que je collabore, que je lui laisse finir son travail. (O 415)

This idea is repeated and markedly adjusted in one of Cocteau's later plays. In *L'aigle à deux têtes*, the female protagonist also wishes to convert her life into art, a tragedy to be more precise (A 1085). However, the queen does not let life run its course. She actively pursues her goal, to the dismay of her male antagonist of choice (A 1099).

Like Cocteau before him, Williams opted to focus on the Orpheus myth's connection to repetition and transformation in his play *Battle of Angels*. Most obviously, Myra Torrance – the playwright's Eurydice figure – loses the man she cares about two times. This already gives an impression of how Williams adjusts the Orphic story (see Egan also). Normally, Orpheus is twice bereaved of his wife, as was the case in Cocteau's play. Here, it is the female character who suffers the loss of two different men. The male protagonist Val Xavier, for his part, repeatedly finds himself obliged to move because of troubled relations with a woman (BA 219).

Both protagonists undergo bodily transformations. At the end of the play, Myra tells Val she is pregnant, although she had always assumed she was barren (BA 269). The transformation of the female character might be construed as a repetition of Rilke's Eurydice. The singer's wife is "pregnant with her own death" (Nelson 95) in "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes.," a poem Cocteau was also inspired by. Moreover, Myra's unexpected corporeal change rehearses an earlier scene where Beulah remarks she "didn't know these olives had seeds in them" (BA 195). Beulah's observation carries Rilkean overtones, too, since "[i]n his works death is often portrayed as ripening inside us like the seed within a fruit" (Brodsky 37). After her husband shoots her "where [she] would have carried the child," Myra asserts "[t]here's nothing but death in [her] now" (BA 270). Val is not torn to pieces like his Greek and Coctelian predecessor but rather transformed by means of a blowtorch. Again this transformation offers a variation on Act One. Beulah and Dolly observe how the sorbet Vee brought is changed through heat, "[r]educéd to juice" (BA 199) more precisely.

In *Orphée*, the main character's death is announced in a similar fashion. At the very beginning of the first scene, Eurydice complains her husband

does not have any patience. In French, she literally claims Orphée “has no head.” Later on, the protagonist himself wonders where his head was. Williams arguably imitates these allusions to Orpheus’s head, even if Val Xavier is not decapitated. After he fights with Sheriff Talbot, Myra despairingly asks “Oh, Val, Val, Val, why didn’t you keep your head?” (*BA* 239). The itinerant writer, for his part, relates how he “lost [his] head for a minute and struck [the Woman from Waco] in the mouth” (*BA* 240).

Imitation would appear one type of repetition Williams is particularly concerned with. During their preliminary tour of the store, the Temple sisters urge their visitors to “[n]otice those imitations...” (*BA* 193). On the whole, all the characters seem to take an interest in imitations of various types. Val mimics Cassandra’s expression (*BA* 200). Eva Temple complains about the singing of one the women during choir practice which was nothing short of “a perfect imitation of the Cannonball Express” (*BA* 215). The character most obviously associated with imitation is Val’s nemesis. The Woman from Waco is “a hard, dyed blond in a dark suit” (*BA* 259) according to the stage directions or “a vicious, pitiful, artificial blond” (*BA* 262) in Myra’s opinion. Hence, she appears a poor imitation of Williams’s Eurydice character, whose golden hair Dolly and Beulah had previously admired (*BA* 249). But Myra also imitates the Texan. Both women would rather incriminate Val and endanger his life than let him leave without them (*BA* 266). It is a bit curious that the female protagonist spurns her predecessor because of the artificiality of her hair color. She herself has, after all, relied on imitations when recreating the orchard from her past (*BA* 242).

Imitation also is related to the issue of influence at stake here. Whereas Elizabethan authors such as Ben Jonson seemed to have had fewer qualms about owning up to their imitations (Bloom 27), the phenomenon has a decidedly negative ring to it in Williams’s play. This could be partially attributable to the playwright’s often remarked upon affinity with the Romantics, who tended to put high stakes on “originality” (see Tischler). And yet Williams was always in the habit of borrowing from or appropriating other artists’ work. It might have been impossible for him to acknowledge his loans within the context of his first professionally produced play. At the end of his career, Williams would devote an entire

play to F. Scott Fitzgerald, an author notorious for his appropriations. Furthermore, the playwright's *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* would seem to espouse a different attitude, too, with its continuous references to "recurring allusions" (SC 20).

Myra's confectionary raises the issue of the relation between life and art. As mentioned, her creative effort imitates a place she knew when she was younger. She therefore appears to mimic Williams, who claimed "The stage or setting of [his] drama was the country of [his] childhood" (NSE 16). Val's artistic endeavour seems bent on transformation rather than imitation. He is "gifted with too much imagination" (BA 212) which further strengthens his association with Orpheus, "the singer with magic in his notes, who could metamorphose nature by his art" (Bernstock 5). Vee Talbot's painting holds the middle ground. Her depictions of the Apostles and Jesus are strangely unimaginative. Christ's disciples all "look... like some man around Two River County" (BA 198) while her vision of the Saviour leads her to portray Val. Vee's representation of the church steeple, conversely, is subject to "a sort of imaginative treatment" (BA 232). Her painting thus combines repetition with transformation, as is true of Williams's text.

Williams arguably mirrors yet alters Cocteau's most obvious articulation of the connection between life and art in *Orphée*. The eponymous character was convinced life carved his body, all the while making a masterpiece. In *Battle of Angels*, the girl Val meets on Witches' Bayou has a similarly carved body, as witnessed by the following exchange between Val and Myra:

- VAL: Well, it was. She'd been lonesome.
 MYRA: How did you know? Did she tell you?
 VAL: She didn't have to. She had it carved in her body.
 MYRA: Carved? Is lonesomeness carved in people's bodies...
 VAL: Kind of. Anyhow you can see it. (BA 227)

The dialogue offers perhaps the most blatant example of a series of allusions to the Coctelian predecessor.

It is conceivable *Battle's* references to opium are connected to Cocteau as well. When Myra first encounters Val "[s]he has on a cheap Japanese

kimono of shiny black satin with large scarlet poppies on it” (BA 207). The flowers relate to the female protagonist’s forgetfulness (BA 228) but also form the basis for the French poet’s drug. In the second act, Eva discusses a Miss DeQuincey (BA 218). Bearing in mind the earlier hint at opium the name seems particularly appropriate. Indeed, Thomas De Quincey famously described his dependence on drugs in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). Tennessee Williams was well-aware of the French writer’s addiction and “often recalled Cocteau’s having smoked opium to excite his poetic inspiration... to justify his own drug use for similar creative stimulation” (NSE, Bak’s note 280). Finally, *Orphée* as well as *Battle* tap into Orpheus’s association with magic (Bernstock 5). In his description of the scenery, Cocteau points out that Orphée’s sitting room resembles the one of a conjuror/magician (O 387). Williams’s play also immediately draws attention to the Conjure Man (BA 191). This is hardly surprising since magic is often concerned with transformation.

In his introduction to the screenplay, Cocteau highlights his film’s concern with repetition and transformation. According to the director, the eponymous character embodies various themes, one of which can be summarized by Mallarmé’s line “Such that at last eternity *transforms* him into himself” (Williams J. 131, italics ours). Mallarmé was one of these artists very much concerned with Orpheus’s potential to transform reality, as mentioned. The older writer’s line implies the poet must die several times in order to be born, following Cocteau’s assessment (OF n.p.). It captures the interconnectedness of repetition and transformation as repeated deaths give rise to change. The theme is, moreover, no novelty within the context of Cocteau’s oeuvre. By his own admission, he already provided his take on the subject with his film *Le Sang d’un poète*. *Orphée* offers a transformed, “orchestrated” view on the same theme. Finally, Cocteau defines his film as nothing but the paraphrase of a classical myth (“le film se propose de n’être que la paraphrase d’un mythe de l’antiquité grecque” OF n.p.). Paraphrase again brings together the two elements under discussion here, in that it constitutes the repetition of an older idea under a changed form. Yet Cocteau’s film presents a different stance vis-à-vis the material and also engages with representations of the mythic singer other than the classical. The idea of *Orphée* as the mere paraphrase of a Greek myth would appear

not entirely truthful.

Orphée's conversation with the anonymous "Monsieur" at his story's inception is quite fittingly accompanied by jazz music (*OF* 4). In Gérard Genette's opinion, "the happiest balance between transformation and repetition [can be found] in the variations of jazz" (104). This is not the only time music adds to the film's central concern. Music from Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* plays at the Princess's ramshackle mansion as well as Orphée's house following his return (*OF* 17, 19, 32). Cocteau's film could be said to repeat the ending of the opera, where the lovers are also reunited (Goldhill 222). Whereas *Orfeo's* conclusion is nothing short of "happy" (222), it is difficult to claim the same for *Orphée*, however. The couple's reunion "comes at a hefty price, that of amnesia and ignorance" (Williams J. 113). Heurtebise refers to the spouses' return to conjugal "happiness" as returning them to their "mire" (Williams J. 133, "les remettre dans leur eau sale" *OF* 116), thus hardly suggesting a positive assessment. Interestingly, Cocteau also seems to refer to another musical variant of the story. When Orphée implores Heurtebise he would follow his wife to hell, his plea brings to mind Jacques Offenbach's operetta *Orphée aux Enfers* (1858). The piece "parodied Gluck mercilessly" (Goldhill 229) and can thus be viewed as an instance of "repetition with difference" (101), Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody.

In *Orfeo*, Eurydice's disappearance is attributed to the female protagonist's behavior rather than her husband's flawed character. The opera's Eurydice "berates [Orfeo] for ignoring her till he finally looks round" (Goldhill 214). In the 1950 film, Eurydice also almost brings about her own disappearance if it were not for an unexpected black out. As Cocteau explains in one of his frequent voice-overs, Orphée's wife wishes to deliver him from her presence (*OF* 97). To this aim, she tries to wake her husband while he is sleeping on their couch. Both Eurydices (nearly) cause their inability to stay with Orpheus. Even so, the decision in Cocteau's version is probably related to Rilke's "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes." rather than to Gluck's opera. *Orphée's* Eurydice would appear to espouse the kind of "self-sacrificing" (Brodsky 28) love Rilke took such an interest in. As a result, he portrayed a wife "who has learned not to need love and turns back on purpose" (28). In the film, self-sacrifice does not characterise one woman, but two. The Princess

as well as Eurydice are willing to renounce themselves for the poet's sake and thus mirror each other. Additionally, Cocteau's Eurydice is pregnant, just like Rilke's. Myra Torrance found herself in the same condition, as we have seen. But it seems highly unlikely Cocteau could have known about Williams's pregnant Eurydice. *Battle of Angels* had received only one (disastrous) production in the U.S. by the time *Orphée* was made.

While Cocteau repeats and transforms other models, he looked back to his own previous treatment of the material, too. The film differs significantly from and at the same time engages with its stage predecessor. Cocteau brings an equally trouble-ridden marriage to the screen and the celebrated poet is similarly concerned with his own corruption. On many occasions, the characters repeat the things their precursors mentioned using different words. In this way, they take up the idea of paraphrase Cocteau broached in his introduction.

Cocteau was already working on *Orphée* in December 1947 and had started filming *L'aigle à deux têtes* in October of that same year (Van Steerthem 255). It is not surprising that aspects from one work spilled over into the other. Like her predecessor the queen, the Princess is "royally displeased" (*OF* 56; *A* 1103). In this case, the Princess's dismay is a result of her subjects' unruliness whereas *Aigle's* female protagonist is offended by her reader's eavesdropping. Furthermore, both women possess an extensive capacity for plotting. Eurydice's death in the film is, in Cocteau's own words, "a destiny fabricated by the Princess." The queen, for her part, stages her own death, as we shall see.

Orphée also repeats and transforms quite a few of its own elements. The film's continuous inversions offer one example. When Heurtebise takes Orphée back to his wife and restores him to life, we see the exact same scene from his first voyage to the zone but "the reel turns backwards" (*OF* 112). Moreover, the same gestures and assertions are repeated throughout the film, albeit by different characters. The second image the viewer is presented with includes several couples embracing. Later Eurydice is embraced by Aglaonice and her husband, whereas Orphée is held by Heurtebise and the Princess (*OF* 27, 41, 67, 81). The final time we observe the eponymous character, he embraces his wife (*OF* 113). In the play devoted to the famous lyre player something similar can be witnessed. Its

characters are continuously kneeling down, perhaps in keeping with its more obviously Catholic context (see Dwight Page). The inquest provides a memorable example of a question evincing *Orphée's* repetitions with variations. The judges sternly ask the Princess "Do you love this man?" (*OF* 79), before they twice ask Heurtebise "Do you love this woman?" (*OF* 80, 81). While dreaming, Orphée repeats this very same question (*OF* 98).

Orpheus Descending is similarly repetitive by virtue of its characters' movements. Kontaxopoulos asserts Williams "keep[s] the mythological name only in the title and drop[s] every other direct allusion to the legend" (5). However, the legendary singer's behavior to a large extent influences the actions of Two River County's inhabitants. Orpheus descended to the nether realms, crossed the river Styx, tried to return to earth but turned around and looked at his wife. In the 1957 text, descending, crossing, (re) turning, and staring are practically all the characters are capable of. These actions are not limited to Val Xavier but scattered all over the play, thus contributing to its concern with dismemberment (*OD* 272, 282, 283, 302, 304, 330). Witness the following scene between the two protagonists and David and Carol Cutrere:

VAL crosses below and picks up the coat that Carol has dropped on the floor...

DAVID looks up at the landing; stands frozen as LADY rushes down the stairs....

LADY {turning to Val}: Val, go out....

He opens the door for his sister; she glances back at Val with desolation in her eyes.

VAL crosses quickly through the confectionary....

He turns as if to go....

She crosses to him. DAVID turns back to her.

(OD 296, original italics, bold face ours)

Of course, Val Xavier's story does not only transform an ancient myth but is also a "transformation of *Battle of Angels*" (King 137). The older play's abundant references to imitation are entirely absent from its newer incarnation. Gone also are the allusions to opium and (Orpheus's) decapitation, two possible connections to Cocteau. The male protagonist still meets a girl on Witches' Bayou yet she no longer has a carved body. Williams knew of Cocteau's film, for he described Jean Marais as "the beautiful youth of 'Orfée' [*sic*]" (*N* 575) in 1953. But links between *Orpheus*

Descending and *Orphée* prove hard to find or are rather vague. The play and film both focus on a transgressive love relation and are concerned with corruption. All four stories discussed here elaborate on the myth's repetitive nature and its focus on transformation. Since so many different artists have dealt with Orpheus and Eurydice, it is difficult to establish if Williams looked to Cocteau to craft his version of the legend. The playwright's debt to the latter's *L'aigle à deux têtes* in his *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* is far more easy to discern.

The French poet's 1946 play portrays another transgressive relation: it revolves around the love affair between a rather unusual queen and the anarchist who intends to assassinate her. Stanislas is the spitting image of the female protagonist's deceased husband and a poet. After he breaks into her room at night, the young man becomes the queen's "free prisoner" (A 1087) and angel of death. And since the queen always wanted her life to be a tragedy, she casts Stanislas as her fate, a role he particularly resents. The poet appears able to escape his task by killing himself rather than his paramour. However, the harsh words the queen speaks to him while he is dying prompt Stanislas to stab her in the back. In this way, Cocteau's royal protagonist ultimately triumphs.

The queen's story is deeply concerned with doubles and mirroring (see Gullentops and Van Sevenant 235). The eponymous two-headed eagle proves a case in point. The two heads mirror each other, at least as depicted in the drawing by Cocteau which adorned the text's first edition (1947). If the protagonists should be able to carry out their desire to become a two-headed eagle, they will mirror the queen's coat of arms, as Stanislas points out (A 1115).

The poet's appearance probably offers the most blatant example. Stanislas looks like the king to such an extent the queen actually believes her husband's ghost entered the room when they first meet. While Stanislas's appearance is akin to the king's, his demeanour and ideas mirror the queen's and vice versa. Representative of royalty and revolution, the two would appear opposites. However, the female protagonist describes herself as an "anarchist queen" (A 1094), a label she seems to deserve as a result of her disregard for the established rules. The poet, for his part, dons the king's costume (A 1095). Most importantly, both protagonists

are artists. Stanislas's poem "The End of Royalty" is much admired by the queen because of its formal innovation and prefigures the play's tragic end. The queen constructs, directs, and acts in the tragedy she wants her life to become (A 1085). In order to induce the ending she envisioned, the queen pretends Stanislas's impending imprisonment was a plot of her making in keeping with the court's constant scheming ("Tout ici n'est qu'intrigue" A 1140).

The play's incessant mirroring as well as the queen's behavior easily account for the presence of *Hamlet* in *Aigle*. Shakespeare's play is, after all, concerned with doubles, too. In addition, "there is hardly a scene in [*Hamlet*] in which some character is not trying to dramatize another" (Abel 119). As mentioned, *Aigle* also revolves around the queen's desire to dramatize Stanislas and herself. In the second act of Cocteau's play, Stanislas reads the famous closet scene in the queen's presence. Not surprisingly, the scene is mirrored by the French text. Prior to the poet's reading, the queen alludes to her excellent hearing which allows her to "hear the servants listening at the doors" (A 1095), thus foreshadowing Polonius's eavesdropping.

"The Mousetrap" mirrors Hamlet Sr.'s murder and doubles the play's structure. Although Cocteau did not incorporate such a well-defined and fully-fledged inner play into his text as *Hamlet* does, *Aigle*'s mirroring is also structural. The first act's third scene can be viewed as an embryonic play-within-a-play featuring one actress. The queen pretends to have supper with her deceased husband on the tenth anniversary of their wedding and his death. Cocteau's stage directions indicate "the entire scene should be mimed by the actress as if the king is present in the room" (A 1074-1075). The queen's so-called "tragedy" might be construed as an elusive inner play. However, the female protagonist fuels her masterpiece with material taken from her life, which makes it exceedingly difficult to distinguish between the different layers of performance.

Williams's *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* mirrors Cocteau's play in many ways. Most obviously, Flora Goforth's story mirrors the set, characters and certain plot elements from *L'aigle à deux têtes*, as Gilbert Debusscher already pointed out (400). Examples Debusscher discusses include the queen and Flora Goforth's shared widowhood and artistic aspirations, as well as the nickname and profession Stanislas and Chris

Flanders have in common. From the very beginning, Cocteau's text is present in *Milk Train*, albeit more cryptically. The epigraph of Williams's play hails from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," from the 1928 collection *The Tower*. According to Paller, Williams chose to cite this poem because its author was equally interested in Japanese Nō theatre (26). Yet Byzantium's imperial symbol was a double-headed eagle and would therefore appear to reinforce the relevance of *L'aigle*. In her first speech, Flora Goforth alludes to the symbol's mirror image. Williams's female protagonist recounts her last husband "wore a signet ring with the heavy Romanov crest" (M 9) with which he accidentally hit her. The Romanovs' crest involved another double-headed eagle, as was the case for imperial Russia's coat of arms.

The reference to Byzantium also points to the play's concern with hybridity. Eastern and Western culture intersected in the capital of the Byzantine Empire. The same can be said about Williams's play. It includes two Kabuki stage assistants presented as "a theatrical device of ancient and oriental origin" but "[w]ith occidental variations" (M 7). Paller is convinced "we [should] change the angle of our perception from Greece to Japan" (38). But Williams's "Author's Notes" mention we should look at Greece as well as Japan, since the stage assistants "function in a way that's *between* the Kabuki Theatre of Japan and the chorus of Greek Theatre" (M 3 italics ours).

While *Milk Train* is a cultural hybrid concerned with cultural hybridity, it also includes other types of the in-between, more obviously connected to *L'aigle à deux têtes*. Williams's play involves a wide variety of monsters, as Gross also claims (99). Flora's own "heraldic device" is not a double-headed eagle but a "gold griffin" (M 8). The link with the eponymous bird of the French text is still present, as the griffin has the head and wings of an eagle, combined with the body of a lion. *Milk Train*'s concern with monstrosity mirrors Cocteau's. In the 1946 play, the Count of Foëhn is convinced his ruler is a chimera, one more creature straddling the boundaries between different species. On the whole, monstrosity proves another one of these issues all the characters take an interest in. Stanislas is persuaded the queen was made into a monster of pride ("On fait de vous un monstre d'orgueil," A 1100), to cite but one example. The same could easily be said about Flora. Indeed, Blackie is positive "Mrs. Goforth is a dying monster" (M 29). Even

the stage assistants' assessment of the monstrous griffin mirrors Cocteau's, as they insist it is "wholly and completely human" (M 7). Cocteau took an interest in human monstrosity and the humanity of monsters (Gullentops and Van Sevenant 370).

L'aigle à deux têtes is a play which revolves around mirrors and doubles, as we have seen. Williams's *Milk Train* perpetuates the text's mirroring by reflecting a wide variety of its components once again. Cocteau's text, in turn, complements *Milk Train*'s central concern of hybridity, in that it adds a French element to the text's *mélange* of different cultures and extends its array of hybrid monsters. While mirroring and hybridity are not the same thing, both make for a duality befitting the presence of the two-headed eagle in the two plays.

Too frequent for coincidence, the multiple aesthetic and thematic analogies between Cocteau's *Aigle* and Williams' *Milk Train* indeed find further confirmation in what one could come to call the *Clair-Obscur*-dialogue. After having written the autobiographical one-acter *The Parade* in 1941, a playlet that would remain unproduced until 2006 but which bears the same title as the 1917-ballet which Cocteau created in collaboration with Erik Satie, Serge Diaghilev, and Pablo Picasso, Williams rewrote, restructured, and re-titled it 40 years later as *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, a full-length two-act play that once again took its title directly from Cocteau's signature 1954 poetry collection *Clair/Obscur*, a work which itself thematically thrives on the double exposure of lucidity and opacity constantly interacting. With the terms "double exposure" and "recurring allusion" forming a *literal*-because-repeatedly-emphasized throughline in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, presenting this textual genealogy as an inter-artistic dialogue moreover carries supplementary weight when taking into account the play's thematic and structural conception. Beyond the multiple and rather self-evident biographical readings about this work to be staged during Williams' lifetime – justified by the reference made to the protagonist's cataract in one of his eyes – the play is above all an eloquent exercise in exploiting the stage's elusiveness, as well as a further display of the particular aesthetic sensitivity implied by an intrinsically *integrative* perspective. Even though, on a more superficial level, Williams himself described it as "one of the most personal plays" he ever wrote, "releas[ing]

some of the emotional content of [his] life” (qtd. in Kakutani C17), its central conceit of the aging playwright remembering the summer of 1940 that directly preceded the production of *Battle of Angels* by the Theatre Guild (which effectively launched his career in professional theater) serves as a mere bridge to a more layered rendering of those creative principles that constituted the ‘artistic content’ of his life.

Despite a declining critical stature caused by Williams’ unwillingness to forfeit experimentation and exploit the niche he carved out for himself in the American theater, he kept appealing to a band of drama enthusiasts who “securely captured Williams’ high regard” (Kolin 36). One of them was Eve Adamson, credited with staging some of the artist’s least popular plays like *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969) and *Kirche, Küche, und Kinder* (1979) while acting as the artistic director of the Jean Cocteau Repertory Theatre. That she would come to direct the first production of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, a play with a title so clearly reminiscent of *Clair/Obscur* and a structural opacity so similar to Cocteau’s dramaturgic work, could in hindsight be interpreted as a natural occurrence, i.e. a logical turn in a non-linear dialectic between like-minded spirits. For, as Eve Adamson herself pointed out in the introduction to the play’s printed version, this “double exposure” of past and present – but also of fact and fiction, or better, of originality and influence – forms “the key metaphor of the play” (SC vii).

After all, the play’s *ur*-version, the one-act *The Parade* already dramatizes duality with both its title echoing Cocteau’s scandalously famous ballet and opening sequence depicting a “perfect dance floor” that only requires “mirrors” to allow “for ballet practice” (P 167). Just so, *The Parade* then juxtaposes “incestuously fatherly” feelings with thematic – but also structural – ‘queerness’ is depicted quasi-simultaneously through the theme of homosexual attraction, the incessant play with language’s so-called ‘logic of supplementarity,’ and the dramatic refusal of a straight narrative progression. In the words of Don, Williams’ presumed alter ego in this early version,

as soon as I love – then I lose all my character. I seem to dissolve. Love makes some people charming but it makes me dull. I haven’t thought of anything to say for several hours. He was here dancing. I supplied the rhythm. (P 175)

Homosexuality, however, proved one of the major stumbling blocks to a positive reception of the later play because most ‘traditionalist’ critics took issue with ‘double exposure’ of lofty meta-artistry and coarse queer disclosures, as witnessed in the following scene between the young playwright and his love interest:

- AUGUST: You’ve noticed the catholicity of my tastes. I know the difference between old popular favorites and great music, Kip.
- KIP: Which do you prefer?
- AUGUST: Guess!
- KIP: Music like this makes even tonight’s sky clearer than it is. – I can only make out two *constellations* I know, Orion and Ursa Major. – So many visible that they lose themselves in each other. – I thought the falling stars, the meteors were just in August.
- AUGUST: Their schedule is not that strict.
- KIP: Were you drunk last night?
- AUGUST: Why do you ask that?
- KIP: There’s a sour odor in there and the floor’s crusty with dried vomit. . . . What made you sick, was it me? My – not coming back?
- AUGUST: I was sad that you didn’t come back, I was hurt, but such things don’t make me vomit. – I had a drunk visitor last night just after you’d slipped away. A visitor that vomited on the floor. (SC 63 emphasis added)

Still, the “numerous variations” (SC 11) on and “recurring allusion[s]” (*ibid.* 20ff.) to the theme of ‘double exposure’ are precisely what prevent the play from lapsing into the one-dimensional exhibitionism of an “unscrupulous, horny bastard on the make” (Feingold 89). For one the term ‘constellations’ in the previous fragment already hints at a more integrative perspective than mere accusations of self-centeredness would allow, just as the actor’s body performing on stage functions as a repository of a ‘double consciousness’ of simultaneously the live and the simulated to actor and audience alike. Moreover the adaptation and even literal integration of a passage from *The Parade* cumulatively contributes to a cognitive ‘massage’ of sorts ushering our perception away from monolithic readings:

- AUGUST: All my life, at least since I started to shave, I've been like a kid on a grandstand, flag-draped, you know, waiting for a circus parade to come by. I hear the calliope in the distance. It gets louder slowly, that light, haunting music. But there's another sound, the sound of a thunderstorm approaching much more quickly. There's a sudden torrent of rain, a deluge – disperses all, all are dispersed except me. I stay on the deserted grandstand among drenched, motionless flags – always the obstinate writer.
- KIP: How long did you wait for it, August?
- AUGUST: I waited until a sort of faceless policeman in a black raincoat tapped my shoulder and said, "The parade's been rained out, son, it's been called off till later." But later *still* hasn't come ... (SC 24 emphasis added)

Much like "haunting music," Williams's incessant play with allusions and analogies dramatizes an aesthetic of elusiveness that finds its most appropriate platform on the theater stage but is essentially poetic in conception. Just as the integration in fiction of many autobiographical elements or characters (like Williams's lifelong partner Frank Merlo or the notoriously mercurial actress Tallulah Bankhead both Williams and Cocteau so admired – see Fisher 2011) resembles a poet's associative play with metaphor and metonym, let alone the constant creative tension between a recognizable format and formal experimentation, so, too, does Williams here rely on the poet's radical disrespect for rounded readings as we can only "live on half of something – some [even] on less" (SC 52). Typical for the poetic oeuvre of Cocteau is precisely the transposition of creative *techniques* and *motives* across media and genres (Gullentops 128, 147). More concretely, then, this implies an artistic practice of analogy-based 'bricolage' less interested in capturing 'essences' of meaning but rather in the actual *transfer* of creative energies, 'recurring allusions' and their 'double exposure' of product and process at once. Above all, however, it provides an indication of an effectively *mutual* influence between himself and Williams. For, at least two poems in Cocteau's *Clair/Obscur* explicitly elaborate some of the themes the American playwright developed in *The Parade*, although it was never published before 2004, but which would keep 'haunting' his later plays as genuine aesthetic keystones of his oeuvre

as well. When Cocteau writes,

Temps j'aimerais te prendre en faute
 Vaincre tes ruses visiter
 Ton faux avenir côte à côte
 Avec ta fausse antiquité. (*C/O*, LXXI)

he tackles the issue of 'mediation' underlying poetic creation head-on, but, more interestingly, in direct juxtaposition with the uneasy tension between fact and fiction in the two versions of Williams's memory play on the period preceding his first professional stage production, which coincided with his first 'serious' homosexual relation (see Gener 7-12). Moreover, "Ton faux avenir" recalls the make-believe world of the theater where high art and bad taste may meet to dance a subversive, 'two-headed' tango:

Merveilleux mauvais gout, comédiens illustres
 Vos trônes vos divans vos retables vos lustres
 Vos gestes vos voix d'or
 Où sont-ils? Où sont-ils tombés? Dans quelle trappe
 D'un théâtre royal dont le Rideau se drape
 Comme un toréador. (*C/O*, 'Trois fois hélas')

And even though *Clair/Obscur* was released when Williams's career was only just beginning, the poetic 'suturing' between elevated taste and the entrails of the trapdoor so present in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, which Cocteau also hints at in this second poem, proved precisely the prime motivating factor for the latter to take the then unknown *Streetcar*-play to the French stages (Lieber, "La question" 154). After all, in the words of Harold Bloom, this "questing for fire, that is, for discontinuity" (79) constitutes the essence of a poetic consciousness both artists unmistakably shared since, so Bloom continues, "strong poets necessarily are perverse" (85).

Ranging far beyond presumed thematic immoralities, this perversity pertains to multiple levels of the poetic composition simultaneously. Not in the least for a theater play in the intersemiotic transposition from text

to *mise-en-scène*, but also in a part-ekphrastic poetry collection such as *Clair/ Obscur* where word and image are made to interact continually – an approach already announced on its original part-photo, part-drawing book cover depicting its author’s face as mediated entity (Callebaut n.n.; Gullentops and Van Sevenant 32). To Van Steerthem, Cocteau always sought to concretize visually that which literature could only suggest conceptually (86). In *L’aigle* this mechanism is even transposed into the staged fiction as a *mise-en-abyeme* when in the first act we perceive an immense portrait of the deceased king in the queen’s bedroom after which Stanislas enters the same room and indeed doubles the painted image through his strikingly resemblant ‘liveness’ (Lieber, “Théâtre” 25). This duality, however, is double only in a strictly poetic sense, as the ontological effect and cognitive affect generated thrives on precisely the ‘perverse’ *tension* between recognition and estrangement. Cocteau meant as much when he wrote in *Clair/Obscur* that

Avec ce double effroi lorsque notre art en use
 Marche le choc brutal d’un visage ou d’un corps
 Car Persée invisible est moins beau que Méduse
 Lorsque du chef coupé le regard vit *encor*. (C/O LXXXVII – emphasis added)

Just as last word of this stanza is wilfully faulty to highlight the essentially *embodied* nature of cognition, both on stage and off, so, too, does *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* diffusely draw on autobiographical references, structural doublings, and intertextual analogies to present its audiences with a poetics of visceral response to the complex ‘constellation’ of impulses and influences that constitute a play – or, as the case of Jean Cocteau as intermedialist creator *par excellence* demonstrates, any art form imaginable for that matter.

The very notion of ‘intermediality,’ more specific than its cousin-concepts ‘intertextuality’ and ‘(reciprocal) influence,’ itself refers to the exchange and convergence *process* of techniques and modes of expression across different communicative or artistic media (see Mariniello). In this sense, Cocteau’s restless exploration of media, genres, and form(at)s already hints at aspirations of *horizontal* transcendence, whereby the status quo of

fixed readings and realities comes under fire through the very form they inhabit (Gullentops and Van Sevenant 339) instead of challenging these with yet another hermeneutic discourse. The preceding analyses in our article, in turn, were precisely intended to highlight both the meandering nature as well as the *mediated* quality of (reciprocal) artistic intertextuality. As a result, this allowed us to stress the broader relevance of the creational act in a 'constellation' of influences over formulaic assessments of any decontextualized 'product' – artistic or otherwise. Like Williams's labeling of the androgynous as the 'truest' human being, inter-relational hybrids then strike us as part of one great humanist poem perpetually in progress. Perhaps, finally, such a perspective implies that no artistic creation can ever be fully clarified, nor its genealogy exhaustively mapped. Yet, by elusively stimulating our imagination the two-headed eagles of reciprocal influence and double consciousness may still cloud that which occasionally seems clear, while transforming obscurity into something markedly more radiant.

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