Gustav von Aschenbach Goes to the Movies: Thomas Mann in the Joy Rio Stories of Tennessee Williams

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Tennessee Williams's short story *The Mysteries of the Joy Rio*, written in 1941 at the very beginning of his career before he was known at all as a playwright, appears to have held a particular fascination for the writer, for he returned to the material twelve years later, writing a second story, *Hard Candy* (1953), set in the same cinema and with a similar theme. Surprisingly, he did not consider *Hard Candy* simply as a revision of the earlier story, but as an independent work. The following year, in 1954, Williams published a collection of short stories, taking *Hard Candy* as the name for the volume as a whole, but placing the earlier *Mysteries of the Joy Rio* as the final story in the collection. An editor's note (although no editor is identified) calls the stories "variations on the same theme," although "different in result."[1] Both stories are set in the run-down cinema called the Joy Rio and both concern elderly men who haunt the cinema in search of sex with other men. In somewhat different ways the two stories show clear evidence of the texts as reworkings of material drawn from two works by Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* (1912) and *Tonio Kröger* (1903).

The relationship between the texts by Williams and those by Mann has apparently gone unremarked, aside from a brief comment by one critic who mentions in passing that Brick's "problem" in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is "similar" to Aschenbach's, which he defines as a desire to escape the flesh into pure Beauty.[2] The point, unfortunately, is not developed, although that characterization of the "problem" does not offer much hope for the pursuit of the subject. Criticism of Williams's work has not often been written at the highest level: much of it is sensationalist, anecdotal, and biographical. Recent work, inspired by queer theory, has begun to address important questions of gender construction in Williams, although there remains a strong current of thought that accuses Williams (like Mann) of internalized homophobia. Perhaps because this work has been concentrated so strongly in North America, no one has taken up Jac Tharpe's challenge to fulfill the need "for a study of European contexts" for Williams.[3]

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[1] Tennessee Williams, *Hard Candy. A Book of Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1954) [4].

[2] Charles E. May, "Brick Pollitt as Homo Ludens," *Tennessee Williams. 13 Essays*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1980) 55.

[3] Jac Tharpe, "Preface," *Tennessee Williams. 13 Essays* xiii.

In the case of Williams and Mann, it is not a matter of arguing for influence, although it may well have existed. Mann's work was known well enough, and Mann and Williams knew each other in California around 1943. What is more important is the intertextuality between the various works, the ways in which the texts both quote and deny one another, in a continuing struggle for an adequate formulation. Williams's texts, in other words, seek a kind of mastery over Mann, one that allows the later texts to rewrite the earlier ones as part of a process of absorption and critique. Some of the similarities may be attributed to the existence of a common source, in Plato. Others amount to a simultaneous homage and rebuke. Williams takes material from the Mann texts and reworks it in a far less abstract, high-culture setting while simultaneously providing a strikingly real sense of abjection. Williams's use of Mann as a model and point of challenge is an important indication of the degree to which Mann's works were already perceived during his lifetime as crucial constructions of homosexual desire. If the Williams texts engage so directly with the Mann stories, it is because Mann already plays a role as the modern chronicler of death and desire.

If Mann's most obvious contribution is the model of the older man willing to give up all respectability in a mad pursuit of youthful beauty, in Williams that theme is divorced from its Platonic roots and mythological allusions. It is as if Williams insisted on *embodying* the Mann texts, in making sexual desire explicit, realizable, and sordid. By looking at *Tonio Kröger* as well as *Death in Venice*, one can see that Mann also provided a model of national identity as a way of speaking about sexual identity. Tonio's divided self is a form of androgyny that is echoed in Williams's thematic use, particularly in *Mysteries*, of German/Latin intersection. Both stories also adopt from *Death in Venice* a symbolic pattern of illness. Kroger, in *Mysteries of the Joy Rio*, suffers from "a chronic disease of the bowels," while his lover Gonzales has cancer. In both cases, internal organs are destroyed and the body transformed. In the later story, *Hard Candy*, Krupper is suffering from spasms of the heart (that is, from his desires) and sharp pain in the intestines. Like the bowel disease, the intestinal pain points toward a sexuality organized around the anus, as well as the oral gratification so clearly indicated by the hard candy. If disease in Mann is a model for these illnesses, it is stripped of its foreign, threatening quality, and made instead into something organic, a dysfunctioning within the body.

The critical reception of these stories by Williams has been frequently hostile. The first extensive analysis locates Williams in the context of the Gothic, emphasizing the grotesque and identifying that element with homosexuality.[4] It should be remembered that the writers of the "new" Southern literature in the 1940s—Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams—were

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[4] See Edward A. Sklepowich, "In Pursuit of the Lyric Quarry: The Image of the Homosexual in Tennessee Williams's Prose Fiction," *Tennessee Williams. A Tribute*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1977) 531–34.

working against a dominant realist school that saw itself as political and saw the more imaginative, dreamlike, and psychological works of the new Southern Gothic school as a threat not only to literature but to the body politic. In a classic statement, the "Southern homosexual style" is "pseudo-magical, pseudo-religious, pseudo-gothic,"[5] defined by its falseness even in those genres to which it is claimed to belong. Williams is assumed to represent a homosexual perspective (and hence be flawed) on the one hand and to share a sense of guilt and self-hatred on the other.

A more recent critical essay, though claiming to offer a different perspective, essentially repeats the argument. For John Clum, the stories offered the opportunity for much more direct treatment of homosexuality than the plays, and thus reinforced Williams's own ambivalence, his "complex acceptance of homophobic discourse."[6] One of the problems of such an argument is its apparent confusion of the representation of a certain form of homosexual desire and abjection with its endorsement. Furthermore, paying attention to Williams's adaptation of the Thomas Mann material makes it clear that Williams is employing an important historically and culturally constructed figure *and* that he does so in part strategically, as part of a critique of a tradition of subtle high-cultural representations of homosexual desire, a tradition that requires the very kind of operatic death and transcendence that Williams may be attacked for employing. In other words, recognizing the iconic quality of the older man permits us to see Williams's revisionary project, which takes place within a particular discursive tradition.

The two principal characters of the earlier story, *Mysteries of the Joy Rio,* have names that clearly echo the cultural divisions that are internalized in Mann's *Tonio Kröger,* although at the same time in Williams's text they are Americanized. The older man, Emiel Kroger, is clearly marked as Germanic, while his lover and successor is the Mexican Pablo Gonzales, echoing the German, patriarchal Kröger and the Latin, maternal Tonio in Mann's story. The national difference is employed as a means of addressing a split between body and soul, the central mystery of these stories being, as in the *Phaedrus,* the embodiment of ideal Beauty in the mortal body. That split can only be reconciled by an act of transcendence that leads out of this world. The characters themselves participate in an attempt to overcome difference. Although they are marked off by national names and identities, they both contradict them and in their union embody an attempt to go beyond them. Kroger is described twice in an oxymoron as a "romantically practical Teuton" (M 103 and 109),[7] and Pablo as the "adored apprentice" (M

[5] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960; Cleveland: World, 1962) 451.

[6] John M. Clum, "'Something Cloudy, Something Clear': Homophobic Discourse in Tennessee Williams," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (Winter 1989): 164.

[7] All references to this story and *Hard Candy* from Tennessee Williams, *Collected Stories* (New York: Ballantine, 1985). For clarity, page references are preceded by the abbreviations M and HC.

106) comes to represent many of Kroger's values in his own life. The binary structure is by no means limited to the national; there are oppositions as well of age, beauty, sexuality, and metaphysics. The drive of the story is toward an overcoming of all difference.

The two principal sites of the story also indicate these oppositions. Emiel Kroger is a watchmaker, and his watch repair shop clearly indicates his place in the material world of mortality, in which desire is always defeated by death. The cinema, on the other hand, with its ascending balconies, is a site of transcendence, a place of communication with another world. If the watchmaker's shop is one of accuracy, attention to detail, and regulation, the cinema is the place of desire, imagination, and freedom. Kroger treats time "with intense seriousness," indeed virtually becomes one of his perfect instruments of time: "In practically all his behavior he had imitated a perfectly adjusted fat silver watch" (M 103). The one time that he quits this rational world of perfect regulation is when he meets Pablo; for Kroger the world of human desire brings him out of the place of control and into "a confusing, quicksilver world that exists outside of regularities" (M 103). After Kroger's death, Pablo loses some of his concern with time: the shop is open irregular hours as he "drifts apart from the regularities that rule most other lives" (M 104). He no longer hears the sounds of the very timepieces he tends; in fact, he no longer tells time by them but by light.

Throughout Williams's career (as indeed for many writers of this period) the cinema had special meaning as a place of dreams. (One thinks of Hart Crane's evocation in the Proem to *The Bridge* of "panoramic sleights / With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene / Never disclosed, but hastened to again,"[8] of film's promise and ultimate deception, its offer of a sublimity never fully achieved.) The autobiographical Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* escapes his mother's and sister's withdrawal by going to the movies, prompting his mother's accusation: "You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions,"[9] which is, of course, precisely what movies do. In the Joy Rio, no one appears to actually watch the films, which (perhaps not unlike Tom's escape) exist primarily as a pretext. The films shown there, though, are westerns, and some connection with the American dream of masculinity is suggested. The audience is composed in large part of male adolescents who both watch the film and share its myths and are watched by the other patrons, seeking not merely the film image of the male body but something more fleshly. The cowboy remains an icon of desire in American culture, from Jon Voight's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) to Matt Dillon's *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), with an ironic variant in Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967).

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[8] Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 45.

[9] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945; rpt. New York: NAL, 1987) 135.

Although Williams is far clearer than Mann about the physical expression of desire, he recognizes some of the forms it takes as elements of abjection at the same time that they may be seen to participate in the search for the holy, for transcendence. Clum's argument that Williams participates in homophobia is undoubtedly fed by comments such as the narrator's that characterize Kroger's cruising in the cinema as "fleeting and furtive practices in dark places" or as "sad, lonely things" (M 106). Certainly Williams, like Mann in *Death in Venice,* sees the acknowledgment of desire as possibly leading to a breakdown of rational German order when faced with a sexual threat that is simultaneously an invasion from another culture. But the paradox that Williams insists upon—and here he remains faithful, I believe, to the example of Mann—is the simultaneous possibility of even the most degraded forms of desire as nonetheless participating in the search for the ideal. After years of cruising the cinema, Kroger finds what he had been seeking in the person of Pablo Gonzales. Gonzales, twenty years later, returns to his origins (and even recovers his youthful body) and is welcomed to death by Emiel Kroger.

This double vision—echoing Mann's, where Tonio needs to be at once within the culture and excluded from it, or where Aschenbach is at once illuminated and destroyed by his desire for Tadzio—is signaled powerfully by the oxymoron "earthly heaven" (M 112) to describe the Joy Rio. It is "shame," that is to say, the product of homophobia, that leads Kroger and later Gonzales to the upper reaches of the Joy Rio. But it is also there that they achieve some spiritual truth in the form of Kroger's repeated advice, presented as an "ancient lesson" (M114) told on prayer beads. It teaches that when one fails to achieve the dreamed-of ideal (or the desired young man), one simply "go[es] home alone without it," waiting for the vision at another time. The man at the top of the stairs, the object of Gonzales's terrified flight, is revealed to be Charon, conducting him to "the Stygian blackness" (M 113) of the afterworld, but also presumably Hermes psychopompos, Mann's guide of souls and phallic emblem.

It is, of course, deliberately provocative on Williams's part to suggest that the mundane and the divine intersect so totally. He does not see a beautiful young man as an angel without words, but a much more sordid scene of fear (Williams provides the homophobic hatred that is missing in Mann) and desire. The search for the sublime in Williams passes less obviously through classical philosophy. The usher's hateful and ignorant cry "morphodite" (M 112) locates the lives of Kroger and Gonzales in a context of homophobia, which protects the usher's heterosexual adventures while censuring the homosexual ones of the men. The usher's action, attempting to protect his own space, acts out a social process of criminalization and medicalization—all the more striking in that he does not even know the correct "scientific" term. The usher is a false *psychopompos* who can receive the bribes of Gonzales but offer no passage to the underworld: only the beloved Kroger can offer that. Gonzales's final vision of the welcoming Kroger as a "dim figure" in "deepening shadow" is Williams's

revision of the conclusion of *Death in Venice,* one which both draws on the Mann materials (and the traditional figure of desire that Mann has adapted from Plato) and rewrites them in a more realist mode; the shabby theater replacing the hotel of the Lido and the fat man replacing the beautiful youth Tadzio. By portraying both the youthful Pablo, the Tadzio of the story, and his later fatter self, Williams makes it clear that beauty, and hence desire, is evanescent. For Williams, however, to say that everything vanishes is not to doubt the inevitability of the attempt to stop time and death. *The Mysteries of the Joy Rio* is in some sense his modern, and less sentimental, *Death in Venice.*

Williams's revised story, *Hard Candy* (written 1949–1953), is not as close to the example of Mann as the earlier version. Once again the principal character has a distinctly Germanic name, in this case Mr. Krupper, but he has no young lover. The theme of the opposition between two nationalities, or two sexes, is rendered much less directly, and becomes clear only in the seduction scene where Krupper speaks to himself in German, while the boys are identified as Italian or Hispanic. Krupper, apparently, does prefer "a dark youth" (HC 362), but that seems to signal class and otherness more than a deep structural pattern. The difference here underscores the greater importance of the political and economic themes as opposed to the sense of divided national and sexual identity, as Williams works away from his sources in Mann. Krupper, however, is revealed to be stereotypically German, a character of regularity, even ritual repetition. He is a retired sweetshop owner, not a watchmaker, but his life is regulated by a strict sense of time: his excursions to the Joy Rio take place "with clocklike regularity" (HC 359), always with his bag of candy and stack of quarters ("exactly eight"). These two items are in fact linked in the symbolism of the story, and reflect Williams's ongoing concern for the links between food and sexuality (most clearly seen in *Suddenly Last Summer*). This relationship may be seen at the simplest level as indicating eating as a metaphor for oral sex, but to remain at that level is to ignore the larger politics and economics of the theme.

Steven Bruhm has brilliantly demonstrated the connections in Williams between what he terms "the libidinal economy" and "the commercial economy" and identified them with New Orleans, even to its topography and division between commercial American city and libidinal Vieux Carré. He argues that "the commercial sensibility of the American city surrounds the erotic topography."[10] Krupper has sold his business to his cousins, but since the cousins can never earn enough to make the final payment, he remains directly involved in the business. His connection to the commercial economy is signaled by his regular visits to the shop where he inevitably helps himself to hard candies that he will take to the cinema as a means of seducing young men. The candies thus establish the link between the commercial economy (Krupper gets

[10] Steven Bruhm, "Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the Economics of Desire," *Modern Drama* 34 (1991): 529–30.

the candy because he owns the shop and because his cousins cannot make enough money to be free of him) and the libidinal economy (Krupper uses the candy to procure sex). Williams does not seek to romanticize the relation between Krupper and the boys in the cinema by imagining their desire as somehow exempt from the economics of exchange. On the contrary, the candies, like the quarters, indicate the interrelatedness of the economic and libidinal economies. When the boys take first the candy and then the coins, they seal a "contract" (HC 364). Just as the cousins' debt to Krupper ensures his hold over them, so the boys' need to fulfill their hunger also ensures their willingness to participate in the sexual desires of Krupper, to indeed fulfill *his* hunger.

If the earlier story put "mysteries" in the plural, the ambiguity served to suggest both the sense of ritual cult behavior and the sense of a secret kept from the larger community, those who never mount past the first balcony of the Joy Rio. In both cases it is a matter of secret knowledge imparted only to a few. In *Hard Candy*, "mystery" is singular, and refers simply to those aspects of his life (his cruising of the Joy Rio) that are unknown to those around him, and that indeed remain unknown after his death. At most, Williams can refer to "the mysteries of his nature" (HC 358). *Hard Candy* has by and large abandoned the metaphysical language of *Mysteries of the Joy Rio* and the equation of sexual and religious questing (nonetheless an important thematic throughout Williams's work). This shift, I am suggesting, is directly connected with the decline in importance of the Mann model, with Williams's increasing mistrust of grand allegories.

Once again the film is identified with the cowboy genre, but here Williams's description of it as "an epic of the western ranges" (HC 360) makes its function as national myth explicit. Its relationship to the scene at the Joy Rio is ironic. The West offers a sense of open, male space, while the cinema is a parody of a vanished high culture with "faded gilt [and] terribly abused red damask" (HC 359)—the pun on gilt/guilt is crucial as is the allusion to sexual abuse. The young man who enters the cinema simply in search of a place to rest flees the noise of the film, the sounds of conventional American masculinity, and hence inadvertently enters the "higher" realm of Krupper. There can be no doubt of the boy's sexuality: he touches a "naked female figure" (HC 360) only to realize that it is actually a statue. In *Mysteries*, the opposition between homosexual and heterosexual is acted out between the usher and Gonzales, since the boys are never seen; in the later story it apparently is more important to insist upon the heterosexuality of the boy in order to emphasize his role as an object of desire and economic value.

The demystification of this work compared to Mann's is most strikingly indicated in the narrator's comment that Krupper's body is found on his knees, "in an attitude of prayer" (HC 364). Williams here returns to the possibility of seeing the sexual as the spiritual, but only for comic effect. *Hard Candy* confronts

the loneliness of the old man and his implication in a system of exchange (money and candy for sex) in a direct manner that does not seek a metaphysical reading. In fact, the narrator has only scorn for the newspaper obituary, with its inability to understand the event in anything other than a sentimental way, just as he ironically reports the cousin's misreading of Krupper's death as being the result of "chok[ing] to death on our hard candy" (HC 365). The "mystery" of Krupper and the Joy Rio appears to remain intact, since, as the narrator suggests, none of the anonymous sex partners is likely to offer any greater truth.

The irony of this final inability of the world to understand what happens in the upper reaches of the Joy Rio points toward a kind of culturally closeted space within the city, that exists inside the commercial city in a hidden libidinal city, to borrow Bruhm's terminology. Locating desire in an urban space creates a very different portrait than that obtained from the more mythic spaces of Thomas Mann. At the same time the final scene, with Krupper collapsed on the floor, cannot help reminding us of the conclusion of *Death in Venice*. As with the sentimental newspaper story in *Hard Candy*, so in Mann's novella the world remains fooled, seeing only what it wishes to see. Aschenbach, the man of will, "had collapsed sideways in his chair," while "the world was respectfully shocked" by the news of his death.[11] The parallels are there, but the irony is much heavier in Williams, just as there is greater frankness about sexuality. Williams's rewriting of this scene from the conclusion to *Death in Venice* speaks for the playwright's desire to move beyond the classicized longing of Mann's novella and to replace it with a more brutal vision of desire. What if, as so often in such desires, Tadzio were poor and homeless? What if Mann could imagine a consummated relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio, one where in fact they at least speak? Williams uses the Mann material as a way of seeking his own space as a writer of homosexual desire. The twelve years between these two stories and the very different use they make of Mann demonstrate Williams's increasing discomfort with a spiritualized sexuality, even if he would never entirely give up the link between the spirit and the body. Like Mann in *Death in Venice* (but perhaps unlike Aschenbach), Williams's texts know that the body is mortal and subject to decay; this renders desire all the more urgent, if also all the more futile, in its attempt to conquer time.

[11] Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. David Luke (New York: Bantam, 1988) 263.