ANALYSIS

Camino Real (1953)

Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)

Camino Real is exceptional among the plays of Williams for its artistic ambition, its Expressionistic style, and its commercial failure. It grew out of a lyrical one-act drama called *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real* (1948), a kind of pageant for dancers, musicians and actors characterized by one critic as "a mime of the spectacle of existence." Williams called *Camino Real* his favorite play: "It had my best writing in it." He describes it in his *Memoirs* as having freed contemporary American theatre from "realistic constrictions," yet the critics "were savage." They mocked "his great bid for High Art."

There is a lot of music as well as lyrical speech throughout *Camino Real*--songs, waltzes, guitars, mandolins, whistling--all contributing to the dreamlike qualities, or expressionism, of the play. Williams calls it "an elaborate allegory" whose characters "are mostly archetypes of certain basic attitudes and qualities": Don Quixote the idealist, Gutman the cynic, Byron the poet, Casanova the lover, Camille the vulnerable lady, Baron de Charlus the decadent aristocrat, Esmeralda the Gypsy's daughter, Kilroy the American hero. His epigraph from Dante's *Inferno* suggests that the play is Williams' Inferno of the modern world. A more technical influence is Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902).

Though *Camino Real* is dreamlike, the characters are on Real Street, the road to reality where they lose their illusions, and some display a "gradual wasting away of everything decent in us." (72) On the grandest scale, the Camino Real is the way of life, the universal course of things imaged above by "the glittering wheels of the heavens." (55) The play is divided into a Prologue and 16 short "blocks," rather than acts. The tone of each block varies, modulates and conveys thematic motifs in a dreamlike way as Kilroy, the timely American hero with the vulnerable heart, has his ups and downs: "The altitude on this block has affected my ticker!" (140) Such dreamlike or expressionist characteristics reappear later in the drama of Ionesco, Beckett and Genet.

There is only one set--the plaza at the end of *Camino Real*, in a tropical seaport. Williams says in his Foreward, "A convention of the play is existence outside of time in a place of no specific locality." (viii) At the center of the plaza is a dry fountain. On one side of the stage is the luxurious facade and dining

terrace of the Siete Mares hotel, on the other is Skid Row. The name of the hotel, Seven Seas, conveys the global scope of the play. An ancient wall backs the set. Upstage is a great flight of stairs that mount the wall to an archway that leads out into a "wasteland between the walled town and the distant perimeter of snow-topped mountains." (2) The "wasteland" evokes T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), the most influential poem of the twentieth century. The focal symbol of the poem, its major themes and some of its expressionistic techniques became traditional in subsequent works of modernist literature. In *Camino Real*, Williams plays his own variations on the tradition. His character The Gypsy, for example, is a counterpart of the fortune teller Madame Sosostris in Eliot's poem.

Williams says of *Camino Real*, "in this work I have given more conscious attention to form and construction than I have in any work before." (ix) To structure his poem, Eliot uses the legend of the Grail knight on a quest; to frame his play, Williams uses the legendary knight Quixote on a quest, dressed like an old "desert rat." Sancho Panza, being practical, deserts Quixote and retreats. Quixote then falls asleep and in effect dreams the play, in order to choose one of its characters to take along with him "in the place of Sancho." (7) At the end, he wakes up and chooses Kilroy, the resurrected "Chosen Hero" of Esmeralda the Gypsy's daughter, the young American boxing champ with the heart of gold—"thy son, America—" (148) What is needed in the modern world is not so much practicality as idealism, the will to go on--to resurrect the soul. Quixote wakes up restored by Kilroy and the dry fountain in the center of the plaza begins to flow. The curtain falls as Quixote and Kilroy advance through an arch and on into the wasteland, toward the mountains.

"Kilroy" is a fictitious American soldier created by American troops who left the inscription "Kilroy was here" on walls all over the world in the years during and after World War II. Here he expresses American values: "I'm a free man with equal rights in this world!" (51) One of the most repeated lines in *Camino Real* points to the bighearted childlike innocence of Kilroy, or America: "His heart is as big as the head of a baby." Though he is so naive he becomes a clown, a patsy with a blinking red nose, Kilroy embodies the courage, sincerity and honor that is much needed in the modern world: "I have ideals" (28); "...these gloves are gold, and I fought a lot of hard fights to win 'em! I broke clean from the clinches. I never hit a low blow, the referee never told me to mix it up! And the fixers never got to me!" (37) By 1953, America was no longer the undisputed champ. Kilroy is confused and spiritually lost. He has had to retire from fighting and cannot leave the end of the Camino Real until he has hocked his golden gloves, a disarmament that strengthens him spiritually, enabling him to carry on with Quixote.

Despite the efforts of Kilroy, the world remains a cruel and repressive place: "I tried to interfere, but what's th' use?" (41) The Seven Seas Hotel is built over the only water source, owned by Gutman, whose name and outlook associate him with the seven deadly sins. Gutman is human nature at gut level. He is capitalism and government as one, manipulating the play and serving his own interests. He owns the military, who protect his property and suppress all revolutionary expression. The people are "thirsty" for brotherhood, but the fountain is dry. (21) When a thirsty survivor of the wasteland is shot down by guards, Gutman is not interested: "Happenings in the plaza don't concern us." (16) When asked about the class struggle, Kilroy is not interested, and the set has political implications: "Downstage right and left are a pair of arches which give entrance to dead-end streets." (2) Williams suggests that the only ways out of the wasteland are spiritual: "I am not a political person."

Some scholars see *Camino Real* as the work that most expresses Williams's personal vision. According to one biographer, when the play was revived in 1970, Williams described it as portraying an individual caught in a fascist state, and his own difficulties as a romantic "in a predominantly cynical world." In an interview in 1981, Williams said his art is "emotionally autobiographical." The emotional world of *Camino Real* is a police state, evoking not just external constraints but also the conditioned puritanism Williams identified with the influence of his mother and of Christianity: "I'm a Catholic by nature...my work is full of Christian symbols." La Madrecita cradles the dying survivor in her arms "in the attitude of a Pieta." (22) The play is set in Tierra Caliente, on hot fiery ground. When he enters, Kilroy refers to the ship that brought him as "one continual hell" (25), there are "demon custom inspectors" (85), and all the guests in the hotel are feverish. Kilroy calls himself a Christian (52,153) and is told, "There are no flights out of here till further orders from someone higher up." (70) Esmeralda speculates that God must be asleep, a feeling that underlies the sense of Existential absurdity in the play.

Moments before he is carted off dead in the garbage can of the streetcleaners, the sexual predator Baron de Charlus confesses that he has much to "atone" for. (40) Yet a part of Williams does not believe in guilt: "I don't believe in individual guilt. I don't think people are responsible for what they do. We are products of circumstances that determine what we do." This self-forgiving fatalism [compare to Naturalism], expressed in *Camino Real* by Marguerite Gautier, the legendary Camille, is a recurrent posture in Williams that defies and subverts the puritanism in his nature: On the dining terrace of the hotel, Lord and Lady Mulligan represent stuffy convention offended by Casanova and Camille, who are resurrected, whereas the Lord is soon stuffed into the garbage can.

In rejecting guilt, Williams rejects any need for redemption, but he does emphasize spiritual "resurrection." Stage directions require a phoenix to be "softly lighted now and then in the play, since resurrections are so much a part of its meaning." (1) Several true resurrections in the play are contrasted to the bogus popular spectacle, used by Gutman to distract and by the Gypsy to defraud the public, of Esmeralda recovering her virginity, accompanied by vegetation rites that again echo Eliot's poem. La Madrecita, the blind singer, recovers her sight through her tenderness (20) and resurrects Kilroy with a touch of her flowers. (150) Lord Byron resurrects himself, advocates gentleness, and exits into the wasteland. (79) Marguerite teaches Casanova "that part of love which is tender," yet she says, "I've out-lived the tenderness of my heart," and "tenderness, the violets in the mountains--can't break the rocks!" (97) The curtain line of the play, spoken by Quixote when Casanova reveals his love for Marguerite, is "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!" (161)

Several critics have suggested that Byron represents Williams himself, reviving his inspiration as an artist after being distracted by "vulgar plaudits." It has been pointed out that Williams expressed the same feeling he attributes to Byron, in his essay "The Catastrophe of Success," a preface to *The Glass Menagerie*. Since *Camino Real* is a dream allegory and "emotionally autobiographical," other characters likewise may be seen as "archetypes of certain basic attitudes and qualities" of Williams himself, such as Gutman, the manipulator of the play; Marguerite, the vulnerable and self-forgiving fatalist; Casanova the aging lover, losing his credit and his potency; Baron de Charlus, the sexual cruiser who gets murdered; and even Kilroy, the sincere American. Williams revised *Camino Real* after it closed on Broadway. "At each performance a number of people have stamped out of the auditorium. I am at a loss to explain this phenomenon. (ix) He never attempted another play so ambitious, Modernist, and personally revealing. The reason may be suggested by La Madrecita, Little Mother of the Lost, when she says, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." (150)

NOTES

1. Esther Merle Jackson, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (U Wisconsin 1966) 115.
2. Williams, quoted in John Gruen, *Close-Up* (New York 1968) 91. See also *Five O'Clock Angel: Letters of Tennessee Williams to Maria St. Just 1948-82* (Knopf 1990) 71.
3. Williams, *Memoirs* (Doubleday, 1972), 167.
4. Foster Hirsch, *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams* (Kennikat Press 1979) 43. Walter Kerr called the play Williams' "most decisive failure," in *How Not to Write a Play* (*The Writer* 1955) 186.
5. Williams, "Foreward," *Camino Real* (New Directions 1953) viii. This edition cited hereafter by page number in parenthesis.
6. *Letters* 56.
7. Jackson 110; Felicia Hardison Londre, *Tennessee Williams* (Ungar 1983) 110.
8. Francis Donahue, *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams* (Ungar 1964) 58. Quoted by Signi Falk, Tennessee Williams (Twayne 1978) 100.
9. Williams, Interview, "The Art of Theater V: Tennessee Williams," *The Paris Review* XXIII (Fall 1981) 165.
10. Interview 155-6.
11. Interview 181.
12. *Falk* 95; Londre 116.

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