Throughout his career, Tennessee Williams was attacked from all sides for his treatment or nontreatment of homosexuality in his work. During the early years of gay liberation, gay critics complained that Williams was not "out" enough in his work and demanded that he stop writing around his homosexuality. One gay playwright went so far as to assert: "He has yet to contribute any work of understanding to gay theater."1 Williams's response to such attacks was a series of candid personal disclosures culminating in the unfortunate volume of memoirs, and more explicit treatment of homosexuality in his later, often autobiographical works. This new candor led to attacks by heterosexual critics, one of whom even referred to one play of the seventies as "faggotty fantasizing."

The first critic to deal intelligently with this aspect of Williams's work was Edward A. Sklepowitch, whose formulation was too simplistic, though typical of early work in gay studies:
Williams' so-called "decadent" vision and his preoccupation with loneliness, evasion, role-playing, wastage, sexual reluctance and sexual excess are in many instances functions of a homosexual sensibility which has been evolving steadily in the more than quarter century since the publication of One Arm and Other Stories. In this period, Williams' treatment of homosexuality has undergone significant changes, moving from a mystical to a more social perspective, a personal, if fictional microcosm of the wider cultural demystification of homosexuality.¹

I do not see such a steady evolution in Williams's "homosexual sensibility": rather, there seems to be a constant attitude toward homosexual acts, though Williams's presentation of homosexual persons changed when public tolerance allowed a candidness in drama which Williams had previously restricted to his stories and poems. That change in presentation, alas, was also a function of his decreased ability to convert memory or self-judgment into a controlled work of art. But the constant in Williams's career is the dual vision that shaped his presentation of the homosexuality he was always impelled to write about.

Some relatively late statements issued by Williams demonstrate his sense of a split personality which separated the homosexual artist from his work, and they provide a crucial starting point for any discussion of the relation of Williams's sexual orientation to his work, particularly his plays. This one is from an interview with Dotson Rader:

I never found it necessary to deal with it [homosexuality] in my work. It was never a preoccupation of mine, except in my intimate, private life.⁴

Quibbling with this statement becomes a matter of semantics. Williams may not have found it "necessary" to "deal with" homosexuality in his work, but the fact is he did. His poetry is filled with homoerotic visions and encounters with "gentlemen callers." Indeed, no poet has so vividly and poignantly captured the tension, excitement, and loneliness of the anonymous sexual encounter as Williams, from the wry humor of "Life Story" to the poignancy of "Young Men Waking at Daybreak." The focus of these poems is not so much
homosexuality as it is the peculiar alienation of the brief sexual encounter. Williams's best stories also feature homosexuals as central characters. The semi-canonization of the boxer/hustler/murderer in "One Arm," who dies with love letters from the men with whom he has tricked jammed between his legs, is typical in its combination of religion, mortality, and impersonal gay sex which pervades many of Williams's best stories. The plays, too, are filled with homosexual characters: from the offstage martyrs of the plays of the major period, to the happy, ideal "marriage" of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, to the writers, artists, and hustlers of the later plays for whom sex is a temporary cure for loneliness.

Williams's theoretical separation of his homosexuality from his work is in conflict with his many assertions of the highly personal nature of his work and of his close relationship with his characters. It does not conform with "I draw all my characters from myself. I can't draw a character unless I know it within myself," unless one factors in an essential variable: "I draw every character out of my very multiple split personality." Split personality and split vision are recurring themes in Williams's work, particularly in references to himself. They suggest not only the multiple split personalities which allow such empathetic relationships with his characters, but also the split presentation of his own homosexuality.

Part of Williams's need to deny the homosexual element in his work is an extension of his need for validation as a writer (though he seldom got it in the last twenty-five years of his life). Admitting to the homosexual dimension of his work was a professional liability:

You still want to know why I don't write a gay play? I don't find it necessary. I could express what I wanted to express through other means. I would be narrowing my audience a great deal [if I wrote for a gay audience alone]. I wish to have a broad audience because the major thrust of my work is not sexual orientation, it's social. I'm not about to limit myself to writing about gay people.

While making clear his continued, though frustrated, interest in writing for a broad audience, this statement demonstrates Williams's political naiveté: for him, homosexuality was merely a sexual issue,
thus incongruent with his “social” interest. This separation is impossible for the homosexual, for whom the sexual is social, as Williams implies when he passionately asserts that “I do not deal with the didactic, ever.” For him, a gay play was bound to be didactic, a notion his later work all too often bears out.

The split persona is seen again in a crucial quotation from his Memoirs: “Of course I also existed outside of conventional society while contriving somewhat precariously to remain in contact with it. For me this was not only precarious but a matter of dark unconscious disturbance.” While Williams is referring to himself as a social being rather than as an artist, this statement defines the problematics of Williams’s stance as homosexual artist and of the gulf between private art (poetry and fiction) and public art (drama), and the corollary gap between private homosexual and public celebrity. For most of his career, Williams was extremely protective of this split. Homosexuality was not the only element of Williams’s personality which placed him outside of conventional society, but it was the subject which in the 1940s and 1950s seldom spoke its name. Williams was privately open about his sexual orientation, but publicly cautious, as he was relatively willing to treat homosexuality directly in his nondramatic writings, which would reach a limited audience (he never until his later years strove for the money and publicity of a best-selling novel), but cautious in his dramas. His caution takes two forms. One is the clever use of what he calls “obscenity or indirection” to soften and blur the homosexual element of much of his work. The other is a complex acceptance of homophobic discourse, which he both critiques and embraces.

This reliance on and occasional manipulation of the language of homophobia is the basis of Williams’s treatment of the subject of homosexuality in his plays, reflecting a split he saw in his own nature. Williams wrote of his vision problems in 1940:

My left eye was cloudy then because it was developing a cataract. But my right eye was clear. It was like the two sides of my nature. The side that was obsessively homosexual, compulsively interested in sexuality. And the side that in those days was gentle and understanding and contemplative.
This double vision, which always obsessed the playwright and led to the title of his last produced play in New York, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, defines the split Williams conceived between his homosexual activity and his "human" side. Even in his confused later novel, *Moise and the World of Reason*, in which he depicts himself as an eccentric aging playwright the narrator encounters, he fixes on a dual vision:

He came back to the table and simultaneously two things happened of the automatic nature. He kissed me on the mouth and I started to cry. . . .

"Baby, I didn't mean to do that, it was just automatic."

(He thought I was crying over his Listerine kiss which I'd barely noticed.)

He slumped there drinking the dago red wine as if to extinguish a fire in his belly, the rate at which he poured it down him slowing only when the bottle was half-empty. Then his one good eye focussed on me again but the luster was gone from it and its look was inward.¹⁰

The outward gaze becomes linked to an automatic, impersonal homosexual advance while the inward gaze signifies the writer's now uncontrollable withdrawals into memory, which form the basis of his later autobiographical work which, paradoxically, depicts his split vision and at the same time demonstrates the loss his work suffered when he blurred the public/private split which was essential to his control over memory and craft.

Williams's split vision, then, defines the internal conflict that compelled him to write of his homosexuality and, in doing so, to rely on the language of indirection and homophobic discourse. It signified a cloudy sense of his own sexual identity, but it enabled him to write clearly. On the other hand, as the sexual self became clearer, and the plays became more autobiographical, the writing became murkier.

The story "Hard Candy" (1954), characteristic of Williams's fiction in dealing with homosexuality and its evasions, embodies Williams's split vision and attendant manipulation of language. "Hard Candy"
centers on the last day in the life of an elderly man, Mr. Krupper, who habitually goes to an old movie palace with a bag of hard candy and a handful of quarters, his bribes to willing young men for their sexual favors. On the day of the story, Mr. Krupper dies while performing fellatio on a handsome young vagrant. Before describing Mr. Krupper's fatal visit to the movie theater, Williams offers this peculiar rejoinder:

In the course of this story, and very soon now, it will be necessary to make some disclosures about Mr. Krupper of a nature too coarse to be dealt with very directly in a work of such brevity. The grossly naturalistic details of a life, contained in the enormously wide context of that life, are softened and qualified by it, but when you attempt to set those details down in a tale, some measure of obscurity or indirectness is called for to provide the same, or even approximate, softening effect that existence in time gives to those gross elements in the life itself. When I say that there was a certain mystery in the life of Mr. Krupper, I am beginning to approach those things in the only way possible without a head-on violence that would disgust and destroy and which would only falsify the story.

To have hatred and contempt for a person . . . calls for the assumption that you know practically everything of any significance about him. If you admit that he is a mystery, you admit that the hostility may be unjust. 11

Mr. Krupper's "mystery" is contained in his afternoon visits to the Joy Rio movie theater; his sexual encounters there with poor, beautiful (of course) young men are acts which would brand him in the eyes of most people as a "dirty old man" or worse. Williams's rejoinder both shows his sympathy and understanding of his audience's sensibilities and prejudices, and plays with those prejudices. The language of mystery and evasion allows him to write about the forbidden in a sympathetic, even subversive way. That mystery, however, is also clothed in harsh authorial judgment, which places the narrator in a superior position to his central character and allies him with the "average reader's" moral judgment. As Mr. Krupper approaches the Joy Rio theater, the narrator describes it as "the place where the
mysteries of his nature are to be made unpleasantly manifest to us.”

Williams is both compassionate and judgmental: the story is both grotesque and touching. The “mysteries,” however natural, are “unpleasant.”

This dual vision functions in a number of ways in the story. There is the split between the physical grotesqueness and disease of the subject, which implies a connection between disease/ugliness and homosexual desire, and the shadowy beauty of the object of that desire. More important, the story embodies an intense consciousness of the split between the public persona and the private actor central to Williams’s treatment of homosexuality:

When around midnight the lights of the Joy Rio were brought up for the last time that evening, the body of Mr. Krupper was discovered in his remote box of the theater with his knees on the floor and his ponderous torso wedged between two wobbly gilt chairs as if he had expired in an attitude of prayer. The notice of the old man’s death was given unusual prominence for the obituary of someone who had no public character and whose private character was so peculiarly low. But evidently the private character of Mr. Krupper was to remain anonymous in the memories of those anonymous persons who had enjoyed or profited from his company in the tiny box at the Joy Rio, for the notice contained no mention of anything of such a special nature. It was composed by a spinsterly reporter who had been impressed by the sentimental values of a seventy year old retired merchant dying of thrombosis at a cowboy thriller with a split bag of hard candies in his pocket and the floor about him littered with sticky wrappers, some of which even adhered to the shoulders and sleeves of his jacket.

Mr. Krupper dies in a public place while engaged in a very private act that is never in any way literally described in a story which is a model of playful circumpection. Yet the gay reader immediately recognizes the significance of Mr. Krupper’s position and the act of worship it denotes, as he understands the sticky papers from the candies which are stuck to Mr. Krupper’s shoulders and sleeves. Characteristically for Williams, an act of pederasty satisfies two hun-
gers simultaneously; the sexual hunger of the older man and the real hunger of the boy he feeds. (This pederasty/hunger nexus will reach its extreme in Suddenly Last Summer when the hungry, naked boys Sebastian Venable sexually exploits literally eat him.) In what amounts to a sexual pun underscored by the young cousin’s final line in the story—“. . . the old man choked to death on our hard candy!”—hard candy represents both hunger of the phallus and of the stomach.”

But Mr. Krupper, unlike Williams, is also private, anonymous in the audience of a theater, not the public creator of theatrical and cinematic fantasies. Krupper is allowed an anonymity and mystery forbidden his creator whose late autobiographical work fixes on the unknown, still anonymous, private writer/homosexual.

The young cousin’s final line speaks to the public misunderstanding of the private act. To the obituary writer, the old man’s death was the sentimental extinction of a man with a sweet tooth and a love for westerns. To the child, a hated old man choked on the products of the family business. The real meaning of the death is a secret between the dead Mr. Krupper and the young men who shared his box at the Joy Rio. It is private and mysterious, reinforcing and embodying Williams’s little treatise on mystery. Yet we also have the judgment of the narrator, the only reliable witness, who tells us that Krupper’s “private character” was “peculiarly low.” In making this harsh judgment on his own creation, the narrator both validates Krupper’s story by telling it, and colludes with his “straight” reader by judging it harshly.

As the authorial judgment keeps Williams on the side of his reader, so the smokescreen of mystery, created with what Williams calls “obscenity or indirection,” allows him to turn Mr. Krupper’s death into something both tawdry and beautiful. While acknowledging his reader’s possible scruples and prejudices, he manipulates them, luring his reader to see Mr. Krupper’s life and death as at least pathetic. Still, Williams allows no space in this story for alternatives to Mr. Krupper’s Joy Rio meetings. Homosexual encounters are furtive, impersonal appeasements of hunger. The operative word is “anonymous,” matching Krupper’s nonexistent public character. It is interesting to note as well that Krupper’s partners enjoyed or profited from their encounters with him.
The devices Williams uses in "Hard Candy" are much more typical of his plays than of his fiction. One can see a minversion of the public/private problem in Blanche's monologue about her husband in A Streetcar Named Desire. Blanche tells of "coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty — which wasn't empty, but had two people in it... the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years." This extremely discreet picture of Blanche's discovery of her husband's private homosexuality is followed by her public reaction to it on a crowded dance floor: "I saw! I know! You disgust me...", and then by his public act of suicide. Once made public, Alan's homosexuality becomes unbearable for him: he cannot deal with public disapproval.

Suddenly Last Summer weaves an interesting set of variations on the theme of exposure for the homosexual artist. Sebastian Venable has always been a private artist, wishing to be "unknown outside of a small coterie." The privacy of Sebastian's art is a corollary to his sense that his art is his expression of his religious vision; for the rest of his experience, living was enough: "his life was his occupation." Yet that life was to be even more private than his work: "He dreaded, abhorred! — false values that come from being publicly known, from fame, from personal — exploitation." But Sebastian's private life became a public matter when his cousin/wife witnessed his death and devouring at the hands of adolescent boys Sebastian had sexually exploited. To protect Sebastian's privacy, his mother will have Sebastian's widow lobotomized.

Homosexuality in Suddenly Last Summer is linked with Sebastian's brutal, carnivorous sense of life, but it is also linked with Williams's private sexual proclivities. Sebastian connects sex with appetite:

Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, he was fed up with the dark ones and was famished for blonds... [T]hat's how he talked about people, as if they were — items on a menu —.

Donald Spoto argues convincingly for a strong autobiographical element in Suddenly Last Summer, nowhere clearer than in this speech. While in Italy in 1948, Williams wrote Donald Windham: "[Prokosch] says that Florence is full of blue-eyed blonds that are very tender hearted and 'not at all mercenary'. We were both getting an appetite
for blonds as the Roman gentry are all sort of dusky types.”¹⁹ Sebastian’s unfeeling sexual exploitation is as much a dramatization of the playwright as is Sebastian’s pill-popping and confused sense of private and public personae.

_Cat on a Hot Tin Roof_, written around the same time as “Hard Candy,” is the most vivid dramatic embodiment of Williams’s mixed signals regarding homosexuality and his obsession with public exposure. _Cat_ takes place in the bedroom once occupied by Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a room dominated by the large double bed the lovers shared for thirty years. The plantation the ailing Big Daddy now controls, and which is now being fought over by his potential heirs, was inherited from Straw and Ochello. In ways both financial and sexual, the legacy of these two lovers lies at the heart of the play, and the love of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello stands as a counter to the compromised heterosexual relationships we see played out. Their relationship, the reader is told in the stage directions, “must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon,”²⁰ yet the audience never hears the relationship spoken of in positive terms. Straw and Ochello do not carry the freight of negative stereotypes other Williams homosexuals carry: they are not frail like Blanche duBois’s suicidal husband; nor voracious pederasts like Sebastian Venable, the poet-martyr of _Suddenly Last Summer_; nor are they self-hating like Skipper, the other homosexual ghost in _Cat_. Yet, beyond the stage directions, there is no positive language for Straw and Ochello, who become in the action of the play the targets for Brick’s homophobic diatribes.

Straw and Ochello’s heir was Big Daddy Pollitt, the cigar-smoking, virile patriarch who admits to loving only two things, his “twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the Valley Nile!”²¹ and his handsome, ex-athlete son, Brick, who has turned into a drunken recluse since the death of his best friend, Skipper. The central scene in the play is a violent confrontation between patriarch and troubled son in which Big Daddy tries to get at the truth of Brick’s relationship with Skipper.

Williams’s stage direction tells the reader that Big Daddy “leaves a lot unspoken” as he tells Brick of his young years as a hobo and of being taken in and given a job by Jack Straw and Peter Ochello.²² The implication of the stage direction, and other hints Big Daddy gives
in the scene, is that homosexual behavior is not alien to Big Daddy, who "knocked around in [his] time." Yet Brick is so terrified of being called "queer" that he cannot listen to what his father is trying to tell him:

**BIG DADDY:** . . . I bummed, I bummed this country till I was —
**BRICK:** Whose suggestion, who else's suggestion is it?
**BIG DADDY:** Slept in hobo jungles and railroad Y's and flophouses in all cities before I —
**BRICK:** Oh, you think so, too, you call me your son and a queer. Oh!

Maybe that's why you put Maggie and me in this room that was Jack Straw's and Peter Ochello's, in which that pair of old sisters slept in a double bed where both of 'em died!

**BIG DADDY:** Now just don't go throwing rocks at — 35

The exchange is a brilliant reversal of expectation: the object of suspicion will not listen to expressions of understanding and tolerance, countering them with homophobic ranting. Brick is obsessed, terrified of being called a "queer," and conscious of the irony of being expected to perform sexually in Straw and Ochello's bed. Big Daddy will allow no attacks on Straw and Ochello, but his defense is interrupted by the appearance of Reverend Tooker, "the living embodiment of the pious, conventional lie," an interruption that suggests that it is the pious conventional lie that forbids defense of Straw and Ochello.24 The interruption is Williams's choice: it allows Brick's homophobic discourse to dominate the scene. In addition to "queer[s]" and "old sisters," Brick speaks of "sodomy," "dirty things," "dirty old men," "ducking [sic] sissies," "unnatural thing," and "fairies." Brick's acceptance of the pious conventional lie is heard in statements which sound like a caricature of the voice of pious respectability: "Big Daddy, you shock me, Big Daddy, you, you — shock me! Talkin' so — casually! — about a — thing like that." Yet his stated reason for his shock is not moral, religious, or psychological; it is public opinion: "Don't you know how people feel about things like that? How, how disgusted they are by things like that?" 35 Homosexuality to Brick is terrifying because it is inevitably public.

Brick's homophobia is part of his sexual/emotional malaise. He is painfully aware that his nonsexual, nominal marriage to Maggie is a far cry from the total relationship the bed signifies. Brick occupies
a perilous middle state: he does not love his wife, with whom he 
claims never to have gotten any closer “than two people just get in 
bed which is not much closer than two cats on a — fence humping.”

an echo of Big Daddy’s loveless sex with Big Mama and an expression 
of Brick’s inability to combine sex and friendship or love. Yet he 
is horrified at the thought of a sexual dimension of his friendship 
with Skipper: “Why can’t exceptional friendship, real, real, deep, 
depth friendship between two men be regarded as something clean 
and decent without being thought of as fairies.”

Ironically, Maggie, Brick’s frustrated wife, understands that Brick’s 
friendship with Skipper “was one of those beautiful, ideal things they 
tell you about in Greek legends, it couldn’t be anything else, you 
being you, and that’s what made it so awful, because it was love that 
ever could be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked 
about plainly.” Maggie knows that it is Brick’s “ass-aching Puritan-
ism” that puts him in such an unhappy position—that he would be 
better off if he had the courage to have a complete relationship with 
Skipper. But Skipper is dead as a result of his own internalized hom-
ophobia, and Brick has, as Big Daddy cogently puts it, “dug the grave 
of [his] friend and kicked him in it! — before you’d face truth with 
him!”

The bed of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello represents an unstated 
ideal relationship which seems unattainable for the heterosexual mar-
rriages in Williams’s play. In positing this ideal, the play is subver-
sive for its time, yet the love of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello never 
seems a real possibility for homosexuals either. It is, to coin a phrase 
from Simon Gray’s Butley, more a figure of speech than a matter of 
fact, and a rather paradoxical figure of speech at that, since the only 
positive words used to describe the relationship are silent hints in the 
stage directions. The only operative terminology for homosexuals the 
play allows is Brick’s homophobic discourse.

Just at the moment that Big Daddy’s dialogue with Brick reaches 
the crucial issue of Brick’s relationship with Skipper, Williams offers a 
lengthy stage direction which echoes the rejoinder found in “Hard 
Candy”:

The thing they’re discussing, timidly and painfully on the side of 
Big Daddy, fiercely, violently on Brick’s side, is the inadmissible
thing that Skipper died to disavow between them. The fact that
it existed had to be disavowed to "keep face" in the world
they lived in, may be at the heart of the "mendacity" that Brick
drinks to kill his disgust with. It may be the root of his collapse.
Or maybe it is only a single manifestation of it, not even the most
important. The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is
not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I'm trying
to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that
cloudy, flickering, evanescent — fiercely charged! — interplay of
five human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis. Some
mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play,
just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of
career in life, even in one's own character to himself. This
does not absolve the playwright of his duty to observe and probe
as clearly and deeply as he legitimately can: but it should steer
him away from "pat" conclusions, facile definitions which make
a play just a play, not a snare for the truth of human experience.30

Williams begins this statement with a definite interpretation of
Brick's panic that places responsibility on the false values of Brick's
world, then hedges his bets by qualifying his interpretation, then
moves the focus away from Brick to the problems of five people,
and finally dismisses definite interpretations altogether in the name
of "mystery." The last sentence of Williams's little treatise thickens
the smokescreen: he wants to offer the truth of human experience
without facile conclusions or pat definitions. Fair enough. But he
seems to worry about such things only when homosexuality rears its
problematic head. Of course, his printed warning is not shared by his
audience, only his readers, but it allows him to proceed with a scene
about homosexuality while denying that that is what he is doing.
At the end of his statement, he directs that the scene between Big
Daddy and Brick be "palpable in what is left unspoken." His concern
for the unspoken dominates this scene, and what is unspoken here
and in the rest of the play is the positive force of the love of Jack
Straw and Peter Ochello and the unrealized possibility it represents
of a nonhomophobic discourse.

Love is not an operative term for the men in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.
It is a word used only by Maggie and Big Mama—the men can only
wonder, "Wouldn't it be funny if it were true?"31 Not able to accept the love of women, neither can the men accept the unspoken option of sexual male/male love. Nor can Williams convincingly offer that option. The tenderness Williams sees as the clear side of his vision here exists only in a stage direction: the cloudiness of homosexuality remains an object of terror, not of the act, but of public exposure.

While elements of homosexuality suffuse many of Williams's major plays, his later post-Stonewall works deal more directly with his attitudes toward homosexuality. He moves from indirection and poetic image to didacticism and thinly veiled autobiography; the problematics of Williams's treatment of homosexuality become clearer, if less dramatically viable.

Small Craft Warnings (1972) establishes a formula Williams will use again in Vieux Carré (1977): the antagonism between a homosexual and a heterosexual "stud," and the placement of a troubled homosexual encounter in the context of a chaotic set of heterosexual relationships. In Small Craft Warnings the homosexual character, Quentin, is immediately seen as out of place in the Pacific Coast bar in which the play is set, not because of his sexuality, but because of his appearance, which announces him as a stereotypical homosexual out of a 1940s movie: "dressed effetically in a yachting jacket, maroon linen slacks, and silk neck-scarf."32 His face, "which seems to have been burned thin by a fever that is not of the flesh," makes him a brother to Williams's many aging male beauties, but here the wasting is an outward manifestation of the spiritual dessication which has resulted from Quentin's sexual promiscuity:

There's a coarseness, a deadening coarseness, in the experience of most homosexuals. The experiences are quick, and hard, and brutal, and the pattern of them is practically unchanging. Their act of love is like the jabbing of a hypodermic needle to which they're addicted but which is more and more empty of real interest and surprise. This lack of variation and surprise in their... "love life..." [He smiles harshly]... spreads into other areas of... sensibility.33
The result of this emptying is finally the loss of the “capacity for being surprised,” which is the loss of imagination and, potentially, of the possibility of creation. Quentin speaks of himself here in the language of textbook homophobic “objectivity.”

Quentin is given the profession of screenwriter, and the experiences he recounts are those of Williams with MGM in the early 1940s. Moreover, he now writes pornographic movies, candid depictions of sex, even as Williams’s plays have become more simplistically and candidly focused on sexual activity. These autobiographical clues enable the reader to see Quentin’s emotional diminution not merely as the inevitable result of a pattern of homosexual activity, but as a corollary of Williams’s fear of the draining away of his emotional and imaginative resources that would eventually cripple his writing. He wrote Donald Windham in 1955, the year of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof:

I think my work is good in exact ratio to the degree of emotional tension which is released in it. In a sense, writing of this kind (lyric?) is a losing game, for steadily life takes away from you, bit by bit, step by step, the quality of fresh involvement, new, startling reactions to experience, the emotional reservoir is only rarely replenished . . . and most of the time you are just “paying out”, draining off.34

The spiritual waning that cripples the artist becomes here the inevitable cynicism of the aging homosexual who is so self-hating that he can have sex only with boys who are not homosexual, thus emerging as the most articulate and least interesting older member of the typical Williams gay liaison: an older homosexual hungry for the flesh of beautiful, young, heterosexual men.

Williams felt that Quentin’s monologue is “much the most effective piece of writing in the play,” and one does see in it an effective duality.35 Quentin is suffering the physical and spiritual ravages of time and mortality, the great nemeses in Williams’s world. Yet he also suffers for his awareness of the brutality of his sex life. The attraction of youth is the attraction of what has been lost emotionally, and the attraction to heterosexuality is to the possibility of an alternative to the “coarseness” of homosexual activity. Part of that coarseness involves the need to keep sex on a financial basis, a mat-
ter of distancing and control which Williams well understood—even his beloved Frank Merlo was on the payroll. (Williams saw the male prostitute, homo- or heterosexual, as saintly.) Leona tells Bobby, the boy Quentin has picked up, to take Quentin’s payment: “He wants to pay you, it’s part of his sad routine. It’s like doing penance . . . penitence.”

Quentin’s expression of the homeless place of homosexuality as one cause for his sexual/spiritual malaise is reinforced by echoes from the other characters, who present an image of homosexuality Jerry Falwell would cheerfully endorse. The exuberant, sexually active Leona, tells Quentin:

I know the gay scene and I know the language of it and I know how full it is of sickness and sadness; it’s so full of sadness and sickness, I could almost be glad that my little brother died before he had time to be infected with all that sadness and sickness in the heart of a gay boy.

And Bill, the stud who lives by his cocksman ship with women, who proves himself through fag-bashing—“Y’ can’t insult ’em, there’s no way to bring ’em down except to beat ’em and roll ’em”—at least sees homosexuals as victims of determinism: “They can’t help the way they are. Who can?” And Monk, the bartender, does not want gay men in his bar, because eventually they come in droves: “First thing you know you’re operating what they call a gay bar and it sounds like a bird cage, they’re standing three deep at the bar and lining up at the men’s room.”

Williams, who did not want to “deal with the didactic, ever,” has written here not the gay play he swore he didn’t want to write, but a virulently homophobic play. The only positive possibility for homosexual experience resides with Bobby, the young man who accompanies Quentin into the bar. Bobby, Williams’s typical fantasy youth, is omnisexual, able temporarily to equate sex with love and enjoy whatever experience comes his way. Bobby has the sense of wonder Quentin has lost, a function of youth; all he lacks is the sexual specialization he calls Quentin’s “hangup.”

Williams’s relationship to Small Craft Warnings was complex. He saw it, in characteristically dualistic fashion, as “a sort of lyric appeal
to my remnant of life to somehow redeem and save me — not from life's end, which can't be revealed through any court of appeals, but from a sinking into shadow and eclipse of everything that had made my life meaningful to me."¹⁹ The play was originally titled "Confessional," which suggests a very personal relationship to the creation. And Williams, to keep the play running long enough to prove that he was still bankable, appeared as Doc through the last weeks of the show's run, though, as Donald Spoto points out, his drunken and drugged shenanigans and foolish ad libs "advertised the very condition for which he dreaded condemnation."²⁰ Ironically, Williams's performances in Small Craft Warnings were taking place at the same time as his creation of his most antic public performance, his Memoirs, in which the tables are turned and the public homosexual totally overshadows the private playwright.

Not ironically, but perhaps predictably, the equally confessional Vieux Carré is a desperate mining of memory and early fiction ("The Angel in the Alcove" [1943]) for material. As with Williams's first success, The Glass Menagerie, this late work is narrated by the playwright as a young man, here nameless and, alas, faceless. The time is the late thirties, when Williams finally had his first homosexual experiences, and the setting is a boarding house in the Vieux Carré. While the play seems to present Williams's "coming out," the liberation is, at best, conditional. Vieux Carré is the most vivid evidence for the consistency of Williams's attitude toward homosexuality: in the 1943 story and the 1977 play, homosexual activities are characterized as "perversions of longing" experienced by the young writer and an artist who is fatally diseased. Williams once again presents his past life and his past material in such a way as to expose himself to his audience while anticipating and affirming their homophobic reaction.

In his poem "Intimations" Williams states:

I do not think that I ought to appear in public below the shoulders.

Below the collar bone

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I am swathed in bandages already.
I have received no serious wound as yet
but I am expecting several.
A slant of light reminds me of iron lances;
my belly shudders and my loins contract.

While the poem is about mortality, it also suggests Williams's sense of separation from his own physicality and sexuality as well as his confusion of private and public selves. In "Intimations" only the mind is public: the body, of which only the belly and loins are specifically mentioned—appetite and sexuality—are private and already "swathed in bandages" to cover their disease. This is a regrettably fitting self-image for Williams the homosexual and for the homosexuality he depicted throughout his career.

Notes

Thanks to my research assistant, Christopher Busiel.
5 Dotson Rader, Tennessee: Cry of the Heart (Garden City, N.Y., 1985), 153, 289.
7 Ibid., 355.
8 Tennessee Williams, Memoirs (New York, 1975), 162.
9 Spoto, Kindness of Strangers, 81.
10 Tennessee Williams, Moise and the World of Reason (New York, 1975), 45.
12 Ibid., 340.
13 Ibid., 345. "Hard Candy" is one of two stories ("The Mysteries of the Joy Rko" is the other) in which aging, diseased, fat homosexual men go to the former opera house, now a faded movie theater, to die while reliving their homosexual fantasies.
14 Ibid., 346.
16 Tennessee Williams, Suddenly Last Summer (New York, 1958), 15.
17 Ibid., 17.
18 Ibid., 40.
20 Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (New York, 1955), 15.
21 Ibid., 88.
22 Ibid., 118.
23 Ibid., 117–18.
24 Ibid., 118.
25 Ibid., 121.
26 Ibid., 125.
27 Ibid., 122.
28 Ibid., 58.
29 Ibid., 127.
31 Ibid., 80, 173.
33 Ibid., 46.
35 Williams, Memoirs, 234.
36 Williams, Small Craft Warnings, 44.
37 Ibid., 40.
38 Ibid., 27–28, 50.
39 Ibid., 74.
40 Spoto, Kindness of Strangers, 334.
41 Tennessee Williams, In the Winter of Cities (New York, 1964), 62.