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VIOLENT FRAGILITY:
THE MYTHICAL, THE ICONIC AND
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' POLITICS OF GENDER IN "ONE ARM"

Most Tennessee Williams stories are concerned with inner lives. Although "One Arm"[1] deals with the private drama of a youth's belated awakening, it contrasts with the others as it is also a story of social critique. The private facet of the narrative focuses on the ways Oliver Winemiller's exceptional, then mutilated beauty affects his behavior at various stages of his existence. The protagonist is a farm-boy from "the cotton fields of Arkansas" (197) who breaks off an affair with a planter's wife to join the Navy, become a boxer, lose his arm in a car accident and start a career as a hustler. The public facet is triggered off when he kills a wealthy patron in a yacht at Palm Beach and is sentenced to death. In his death-cell Oliver opens himself to otherness by answering letters from former (male) clients who recognized his picture in newspapers. The letters produce a sense of unpaid emotional debt with him which Oliver attempts to pay back when, a few days before his execution, a young minister, in whom he senses repressed homosexual feelings, pays him a visit. The view of the youth's naked body parts, however, makes the minister fly in panic. Oliver is eventually executed, still clutching his lovers' letters. His body is turned over to medical students, who feel embarrassed by its beauty.

"One Arm" has been discussed[2] in the light of gender studies notably by Brian M. Peters who argues that in it "Williams presents the homosexual as a modern monster, ostracized from society and destined to destruction or consumption.” (Peters: 32) In the present paper I contend that the reading of the story through the prism of myth makes the above representation more nuanced. The homosexual is presented as the victim of a ritualistic rending which leads to knowledge and inclusion. Besides, Oliver’s story goes beyond a mere representation of the homosexual. "One Arm" is an almost overtly committed narrative, descending from Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance* (1763), Victor Hugo's *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* (1829), Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1897) and Albert Camus’ *The Outsider* (1942),[3] all of which side against the death penalty. So does “One Arm” in which, however, capital punishment is combined with a socially constructed structure of gender and a symbolic illustration of the South. Williams’ Southern marginal hero stems from autobiographical, local and classical substance. Specific aspects and identity principles relating to Apollonian and Dionysian myths find their way into Williams’ hero whose flaw – the missing arm – makes of him an epitome of the myth of the South. As an antinomian figure dominated by the Nietzschean conflict between apollonian form and Dionysian matter, Oliver discovers that his flaw is also a weapon. The effect of his paradoxical identity is then translated into similes and visual metaphors which draw on Iacchus’ myth, as revisited by D.H. Lawrence, in order to transform Oliver into a forceful icon that serves gender oriented politics and makes the story operate at a high ideological level. Williams’ bisexual character transcends the strictures of morality of the time of writing and baffles the borders of the story pleading for individual completion and social inclusiveness. Hovering between fragility and violence, the icon seems eventually to stand for Williams’ oeuvre whose politics of gender are promoted by drawing on myth.

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[1] Begun in 1942 and finished in 1945, "One Arm" is the title story of a collection first published in 1948 in a limited edition issued by New Directions. The collection was dedicated to Kip Kiernan, a Canadian dancer and Williams' lover during the summer of 1940.

[2] By Robert Roth in "Tennessee Williams in Search of Form in *One Arm and Other Stories*," Chicago Review, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer, 1955), pp. 86-94, and Robert K. Martin in "Toward an *Écriture Gaie*." *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. Ed. David Bergman. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993. 296–307.

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[3] *The Outsider* was published the year Williams set out to write “One Arm”.

The story of abjection "One Arm" opens up is not clearly foreseen on reading the title, a synecdoche in which metonymically the "one arm" stands for Oliver's character as a whole. On the grounds that an arm is a human limb but can also be a weapon,[4] the horizon of expectation the title creates in the readers' minds is shaped like a "Y." We are invited to infer either an epic-like plot, relating the deeds of a daring hero, or a pathetic narrative recounting the misfortunes of a cripple. We can also assume both; in which case the horizon of expectation is twofold, opening out over a double set of paths which the readers may follow in turns.

This is in keeping with Oliver's two-fold character, both extreme and sympathetic, wavering as he does between arrogance and servitude, kindness and cruelty, worship and abjection, order and trouble, criminality and dejection, fragility and violence. Williams' characterization of Oliver seems to echo Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) in which the apparent sense of order of the Greeks is based "on a tension between the Apollonian stress on order and individuality and the Dionysian rapture, violence and destruction of individuality that underlies it." (Macey:274) Oliver's features can, indeed, be sorted out into two opposite paradigms of behavior, Apollonian and Dionysian.

Apollo, the god of light, sciences and arts who embodies a youthful but mature male beauty and moral superiority, "is the most characteristically Greek of all the gods". (Howatson and Chilvers: 45) Oliver, who is endowed with exceptional beauty and thereupon explicitly compared to Apollo in the opening and closing paragraphs of the story (196, 211), displays an apollonian concern for moral integrity on several occasions, notably through a "wholesome propriety" within him which made him leave home when the planter's wife "had introduced him to acts of unnatural ardor." (197) However, Oliver's most notable apollonian feature is his concern with the self which, paradoxically, is revealed through his genuine "lack of concern" (184) for the other. This lack of concern indicates a separatist ego, one which counts on its natural qualities of excellence, and therefore constitutes a typical aristocratic feature (*aristos* being the Greek word for excellent). In order to translate to politics the principles arising from Apollo's myths, Camille Paglia quotes Plutarch:

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[4] As in the opening line of *The Aeneid*, "Arms and the Man I sing" (Virgil, I, 1).

> Plutarch calls Apollo the One, denying the many and abjuring multiplicity. The Apollonian is aristocratic … the western personality, the glamorous, striving, separatist ego. The Apollonian "One," strict, rigid and contained is Western personality as work of art." (Paglia: 97, 31, 97)

Oliver is systematically compared to a work of art but what Plutarch calls the Apollonian "one" is also quoted in the story's title, "*One* Arm" (my emphasis). Thus, by synecdochical effectiveness, the wording of the title has the character's Apollonian quality govern the whole narrative.

As Oliver himself seems half-aware of his Apollonian slant, his interest in the self is highlighted by the poetics of the narrative whose playful associations of place and character through naming are reason enough to stop and consider with more attention. The names of the towns that map out Oliver's short lived Odyssey are bound up with meaning. Before committing his crime, "He lived in Miami a while." (198) If "My," "am," and "me" are taken phonetically out of Miami, they are each indicative of Oliver's self-concern at that moment.

As the leader of the Muses, Apollo is also the patron god of the arts. When Oliver is sentenced to death and his picture circulates around the country, the men who had hired him write to him kind letters to which Oliver makes it a point of honor to answer. Letter writing makes of him an embodiment of the writer, the more so as, progressively, his writing becomes authentic, at the same time Southern, universal and unique.

> Soon the sentences gathered momentum as springs that clear out a channel and they began to flow out almost expressively after a while and to ring with the crudely eloquent backwoods speech of the South, to which had been added the idioms of the underworld he had moved in, and the road, and the sea. Into them went the warm and vivid talk that liquor and generous dealing had brought from his lips on certain occasions, the *chansons de geste* which American tongues throw away so casually in bars and hotel bedrooms. (201)

The letters also include "a sketch of the chair he was condemned to sit in." (202) Thus Oliver is also a creator of images. The sketch draws upon Vincent Van Gogh's "The Chair" (1888) in which, however, Oliver/Williams replaces the pipe on the side of the seat by a "tack in the middle" (202). Oliver's Apollonian qualities are not flaunted; they stand in the dark being a sign of the character's unawareness.

Oliver's character is also marked by Dionysian features. Dionysus is an agrarian and chthonian deity, the god of wine, of revelry, of ecstasy and of theatre, represented as a long-haired adolescent who is both compassionate and cruel. Oliver's connection with Dionysus is suggested by his family name, Wine/miller, which associates wine with grinding, liberation with "creative destruction". Winemiller's career as a hustler starts by his being cast as Mellors in a condensed Southern version of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928):

> [Oliver] had known … hard work in the sun and such emotional adventures as farm boys have … a tentative knowledge of girls that suddenly exploded into a coarse and startling affair with a married woman whose husband he had hauled lumber for. She was the first to make him aware of the uncommon excitement he was able to stir. (197)

Like Mellors, Winemiller is also called Oliver. According to Camille Paglia,

> Dionysus is Apollo's antagonist and rival. He is god of theatre and … free love but also of anarchy and mass murder. Dionysus expands identity but crushes individuals. The violent principle of [his] cult is *sparagmos*, which in Greek means "a rending, tearing, mangling" … The body of the god … or a[n] animal substitute is torn to pieces which are eaten or scattered like seed. (Paglia: 88, 95, 97, 98)

Oliver's features are not at variance with the principles arising from Dionysus' myth. His revelry and debauchery are part of the Dionysian paradigm; so is the loss of his right arm which conjures up the ripping of Dionysus to pieces by the Titans (Howatson and Chilvers: 184), a tentative enactment of the protagonist's final rending in a medical laboratory classroom. Thus, if the term "one" in "One Arm" sides with the apollonian paradigm, the torn apart body part is Dionysian.

Oliver’s ties to theatricals are established through his performing in a blue movie while drunk - that is, under the aegis of Dionysus. No wonder if the performance results in murder and Oliver’s flight by diving in the middle of Palm Harbor. The episode parallels Dionysus descent to the underworld by diving. In the narrator’s terms, the flight by diving ends “the more affluent chapter of Oliver’s existence” (198); it consequently opens up a new one: Oliver’s arrest, trial, conviction, death sentence and awaiting execution in a death cell; which is no less a descent into hell. According to myth, Dionysus was rowed by Polymnos or Prosymnos -both names signify the phallus cult celebrated with songs (Kerényi: 311)-, to a secret passage in the middle of a lake where from the god dived through to the Underworld. For showing him the way Prosymnus asked Dionysus to make love to him in return. However, when the god returned to pay back his debt, Prosymnus had died. The god went then to the man’s tomb and fulfilled his promise using a simulacrum made of fig-wood. (Callimach: 125) The belated fulfillment of Dionysus’ promise finds also an echo in the episode with the young minister who comes to see Oliver in prison the day before his execution. The young clerical sees in the convict the human substitute of a golden panther he had long observed behind the bars of a zoo cage, when adolescent, and been fascinated by.

> At his first swift glance the minister’s mind shot back to an obsession of his childhood when he had gone all of one summer daily to the zoo to look at a golden panther... Then he would cry himself to sleep for pity of the animal’s imprisonment and unfathomable longing that moved through all of his body. (206)

As Walter Friedrich Otto points out,

> The panther… appears in descriptions … as the favorite animal of Dionysus and is found with him in countless works of art. … Of all the cats devoted to Dionysus it was not only the most graceful and fascinating but also the most savage and bloodthirsty. The lightning-fast agility and perfect elegance of its movements, whose purpose is murder, exhibit the same union of beauty and fatal danger found in the mad women who accompany Dionysus. (Otto: 111-112)

Oliver’ response to the minister’s belated visit parallels Dionysus’ acknowledgement of his debt to Prosymnus. For when he senses the minister’s repressed homosexual feelings he attempts to offer him his body; a way for him to pay back his emotional debt to his correspondents. The minister, however, panics, runs away and the experiment fizzles out.

Oliver's Christian name alludes to the olive tree, an emblematically transatlantic southern symbol of peace. Indeed, the character embodies Southern culture in various ways. On one hand his apollonian affiliation endows him with the pride, haughtiness, indeed the arrogance of a Southern cavalier. On the other, his loitering "in his skivvy shirt" (196) while waiting to be addressed by a prospective client, is a Dionysian attitude of free love which, nevertheless, shows his situation haunted by a a sense of slavery; a feature in keeping with Oliver's Southern and agrarian origins. The syncretic intertwining of Apollonian and Dionysian in connection with Southern historical and cultural features in the shaping of the character opens up a new paradigm of features centered on the figure of Christ, closer to Southern sensibility than either of the above gods.

Thus, to some of his correspondents, Oliver "became the archetype of the Savior upon the Cross" (200). However, "Letters of this sort enraged the imprisoned boy." (200) Oliver's disavowing response to the Christ-like aura bequeathed to him by his correspondents suggests that Christ's impact on the narrative cannot be religious. It is rather aesthetic and political. Williams' strategy consists in Christianizing pagan principles in order to accommodate their claims within the contemporary ideological context. Thus, although Oliver's final rending is a reenactment of Dionysian *sparagmos*, Williams compares Oliver's body to Apollo's (211). In addition, the ideological dimension with which this episode is endowed draws on Heine's description of Apollo's impaling in *Gods in Exile* (1853) as revisited by Walter Pater in his *Renaissance* (1873), that is in such a way as to evoke Christ. Heine shows Apollo living as a shepherd in Lower Austria. His beauty and form aroused suspicion and, being recognized by a monk, he was delivered over to the court, confessed that he was Apollo and was consequently executed. "Sometime afterwards people wished to drag him from the grave again that a stake might be driven through his body … but they found the grave empty" (Pater: 32). In Pater's version, Apollo's vanishment stealthily brings to mind the resurrection of Christ. Although in "One Arm" Williams doesn't have Oliver's body disappear from the laboratory, his account of the prospective rendering appeals to the readers' Christian feelings or it may even outrage them. The suggested *sparagmos* and subsequent maiming of the body's beauty go against the principles of fitting humane behavior.

In a second phase, Williams' strategy consists in locating Oliver within a univocally Southern context by making use of standard cultural patterns such as Southern agrarianism vs. Northern corruption. By so doing, he nuances the character's guilt. Oliver's flaws and crime stem out of an age old "natural" order, the "physical world [Oliver] grew into" (197); to this order, Williams opposes the corrupt values of modern society. Thus, although a criminal, Oliver appears less guilty than the society which sentenced him to death. According to this scheme, Oliver's Southerness opposes the corrupting values of the Northern big city through short statements that go unnoticed. Thus when the narrator announces that in New York Oliver learns "the ropes of what became his calling" and becomes "fully inured to the practices and culture of the underworld" without feeling "any shame that green soap and water did not remove" (198), he ingenuously drops in the same breath "…[he] joined the southern migration." (198) As the story starts "in the winter of 39" (196) with Oliver already being a hustler, the reader is given enough chronological information to locate the character's departure from New York in 1937 and therefore, because of the sentence's wording, connect Oliver with the croppers of the "okie" migration. Besides his individual fate, Oliver, then, also shares a collective Southern lot; his corrupted flesh is nonetheless part of a brave social body representing uncorrupted agrarian virtues as opposed to "the crowded industrialized materialistic Northern city with its unhappy mass of wage-slaves." (Forkner and Samway: 1991, XVI) This conflict "between the fatal flaws of the old order and the corrupt values of the new" one which "accounts for the stress Southern art places on the tragic on one hand, and on the satiric and the grotesque on the other" (Forkner, Samway 1995: XVI) is fully in action in "One Arm" in which Oliver, the handsome cripple sentenced to death, redeems himself by comprehending otherness and thus becoming complete only to be electrocuted and his body torn to pieces.

The sense of loss Oliver harbors for his physical integrity is still another feature which makes of him an epitome of the South.

> [Oliver] new that he had lost his right arm but didn't consciously know that with it had gone the center of his being. … He never said to himself, I'm lost, But the speechless self knew it and in submission to its unthinking control, the youth had begun … to look for destruction (197)

Oliver's sense of loss stems from specific time and place evidence. As Ben Forkner puts it, "From the beginning of the nineteenth century the Southern plantation had become a legend imbued with a haunting sense of loss and falling away." (Forkner and Samway 1991: XVII) It is this sense of loss that Williams recycles within Oliver's character. Like *The Glass Menagerie* which Williams was composing in parallel, "One Arm" is about beauty and brokenness. The appeal of Oliver's picture in the papers over the men who had known him – and by extension the impact of the character to the readers – originates in the combination he offers of brokenness, loss and (in)completion. Brokenness and loss are injected into Oliver's characterization as combined, attractive, exceptional and precious qualities.

> "What they were alluding to was the charm of the defeated which Oliver had possessed, a quality which acts as a poultice upon the inflamed nerves of those who are still in active contention. This quality is seldom linked with youth and physical charm, but in Oliver's case it had been and it was this rear combination which had made him a person impossible to forget." (188)

"Charm" is the secularized reading of "divine grace", a characteristic assigned to Christian icons. It is harbored by Oliver as a result of his loss and bestows on his icon (not on himself) the property of working miracles. In turn, recycling converts the character's fragility into an effective dramatic item. We are moved by Oliver not because he is good, but because he is fragile and because his fragility translates the abjection about him into art. In Daniel Mendelsohn's terms, the South

> had created a great romance out of a great defeat, a civilization that had been able to endure loss … because it believed in its own myth of lost beauty the possession of which, however brief and however long ago, elevated the lovely and effete vanquished far above the crass, practical victors. (Mendelsohn 1999: 16-17)

The parallel between Oliver's lost arm and the South's lost cause promotes a politics of fragility and loss. As with Southern culture, so with Oliver, loss and defeat are commanding factors which endow fragility with power.

Oliver's power is mainly represented through images both textual and visual which draw on the mythological paradigms of Apollonian, Dionysian, Christ-centered and South-centered politics already addressed. These politics, as we shall see, are gender oriented.

When Dionysus is associated with initiation mysteries he is evoked under the epithet Iacchus; but it was also thought by some that the "lusty Iacchus" (Graves I, 89), was a different deity (Grimal 221), Demeter's son, the light bearer of the Eleusinian mysteries. Iacchus' name is onomatopoeia for boisterous laughter and shouts (Graves II, 396, Grimal 221, Howatson 283). Given that Oliver's Odyssey starts with a three-line-long digest version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Williams cannot have missed Connie's association of Iacchus with the phallus in one of her reveries.

> Ah yes, to be passionate like a Bacchante, like a Bacchanal fleeing through the woods, to call on Iacchos, the bright phallos that had no independent personality behind it, but was pure god-servant to the woman! The man, the individual, let him not dare intrude. He was but a temple-servant, the bearer and keeper of the bright phallos, her own. (Lawrence: 219)

Iacchus' function at the Eleusinian mysteries was to "scatter the darkness" with the light of his torch, and is therefore called "Day star of our secret rite" (Aristophanes: 170-171). Through Williams' creative syncretism, the phallic symbolism and thus the omnipresence of potential, energy and force related to the representation of Iacchus, find their way in the poetics of the images created by Williams to represent Oliver and of those created by Oliver/Williams to represent the character's death-chair.

"One Arm" is peppered with images either relating to Oliver's looks by way of similes, metaphors and allegories, or "drawn" by Oliver himself in a cartoon-like mode. Those relating to Oliver afford the impressions of the narrator and the men who had known Oliver. The protagonist is consecutively compared to a "stone figure" (184), a sculpture (184), a statue of Apollo (184, 198) and a portrait of "a juvenile saint by a painter of the Renaissance" (193). These images range from age old figurative representations (stone figure) to photography (Oliver's picture in the newspapers) thus showing Oliver's image as a subject of worship which stands the test of time. In addition, when the press gives space "all over the country" to Oliver's picture, the men who had known him think of him as an image (rather than a person). "None of these men who had known him had found his image one that faded readily out of mind." (201) There is something uncanny, one might say, with this image which, like the picture of Dorian Gray resists time and has as an effect on those who look at it. The effect is "shown" through a new visual combination of simile and metaphor representing Oliver bathing in light: "[the youth] stood like a planet among the moons of their longing." (202) This representation of Oliver/Iacchus/phallus surrounded by the longing of his worshipers which bathes him in a moon-light halo is built around Connie's portrayal of Iacchus as "the bright phallus" and Aristophanes' comparison of him to a star.

The textual picture is topped by a visual on the same page (202) imitating a comic strip panel in which Oliver tries out his cartoonist's skills by sketching an electric chair. The picture is supposed to be humorous improved as it is by "The cartoon symbol of laughter … that heavily drawn HA-HA with its tail of exclamatory punctuation, its stars and spirals." (202) Hereupon we may notice that if we replace the chair with

Oliver/Iacchus, the image offers a visual version of the previous combination of simile and metaphor in the self-reflexive light of a *mise en abyme*. The self reflexivity of the image is the more conspicuous as the cartoonist's chair draws on Van Gogh's 1888 painting (which, as we know, represents his own chair with his pipe as if drawn by a child), and as the painter of the painter's chair is obviously Williams himself. Thus, to sum up, Oliver/Iacchus compared to a planet is here replaced by Van Gogh's chair while the cartoon-like drawn HA-HA, the exclamatory punctuation and the stars and spirals replace the moons of the worshippers' longing. The reference to Iacchus is explicit not only through the phallic connotations of the tack in the middle but also on account of the boisterous laughter in the origin of his name which is part of the drawing. The equation between the victim and the death-tool (Oliver/Iacchus/pallus and the chair) cannot be missed.

The surface vivacity of the sketch competes with anxiety and sorrow in an almost postmodern combination of high and mass culture underpinning Oliver's ironical "caption": ″You probably didn't know that I was an artist" (203). However there is a shift in the scope and target of the irony; for, there is no doubt, that the sketched chair *is* art. The irony lies, rather, in that at the literal level of the story, Oliver is unaware of his artistic drive which lies in his indisputably Apollonian (i.e. formal) approach to art and creation (how could it be otherwise since the drawing is Williams' own); as he is also unaware of the ambiguous symbolic value of the chair. Indeed, the chair points to a different direction from what is both stated and depicted. Surrounded as it is with stars and spirals and in keeping with Oliver's planet-like halo, the chair is also surrounded by rays, a principle which, according to Alberto Manguel, derives from the representation of Apollo, the sun god. Apollo's head was crowned by the rays of the sun in the later Roman Empire.

> "This fiery image became the emblem first of the emperor Constantine the first Christian emperor, and then of Christ Himself. After Christ, the Lamb of God, the angels and the saints all inherited this particular sign of divinity.″ (Manguel: 52)

In its symbolism the chair then brings together items that belong to Dionysus (rapture, violence destruction, sexuality), Iacchus (light, phallic symbolism), Apollo (light, formal artistic achievement) and Christ (fatality, suffering, martyrdom as connected with the myth of the South) and therefore propose a synthetic representation of all not only within the character's identity but also in Oliver's artistic accomplishments; and, through the self-reflexivity, in Williams' own. In other terms, the depicted chair is metonymical for both Oliver's body and Williams' creative work. Besides, in the light of what has been mentioned and also with a view to the sense the term "chair" has in common language, the sketch is as much that of an electric chair as of the celestial throne, a death-tool as well as a symbol of eternal glory. This, of course, is also ironical, bordered as it were on the miraculous. It is given textual evidence through Williams' oblique use of the phoenix. The symbolism of forthcoming regeneration or resurrection after death with Oliver is announced within the same episode which connects the character with Dionysus' initiation to homosexual practices; that is Oliver's diving in the middle of Palm Beach (198) before his symbolic descent into hell. In Greek, Palm is "phoenix". Williams adopted the phoenix as a recurrent symbol from D. H. Lawrence's work, in which it is emblematic; he systematically handles it covertly in his own by the agency of the "alternative" palm. (Vernadakis: 51)

Through irony, Oliver as image and the image by Oliver are therefore imbued with transcendent qualities – pregnant as they are with a meaning Oliver himself is not aware of. They are concerned with death and rebirth through completeness – one which Oliver achieves by "offering" himself to the young minister who stands for otherness. They are also impregnated with spiritual symbolism; like Byzantine icons. In Byzantium the term icon (an image) designates "a portable portrait of Christ, Mary or a saint perceived as matter imbued with divine grace" (Pencheva: 631). As we have already seen, Oliver's picture in the newspapers has a tremendous iconic effect on the men who recognized him. Like myths, icons are loaded with ideology which, in the present case, relates to what we now call the politics of gender. There is no doubt that the focus on male homosexuality through mythopoetics, which Williams combined with the death penalty, discloses the story’s concern with gender-oriented politics and aesthetics.

Williams has politics and aesthetics operate together for his hero, a homosexual icon and also a discursive construct confined into an isotope of reading and writing. All of Oliver’s actions are connected with books, pens, pencils, writing etc. down to the finest detail. For instance, Oliver’s crime “was perpetrated with a copper bookend.” (199) His life is then compared to a pencil, “In the changeless enclosure of his cell the time that stood between the youth and his death wore away like the soft lead pencil that he wrote with until only a stub too small for his grasp was left him”; (204) The comparison poetically echoes “the stump of the arm he had lost” (197). Oliver is a discursive artifact. His identity takes shape through myth rewriting and metafictional devices that blend a powerful image of fragility with a strong commitment against death penalty and the exclusion of the homosexual from modern society. If to the above aspects we add the self-reflexive quality of Oliver’s chair, which is metonymical for both Oliver’s fragile beauty and Williams’ work, needless to say that Oliver’s corpse is also Williams’ oeuvre.

In 1954, when the first trade edition of “One Arm” came out, the 1948 limited first edition of the story was compared to “privately circulated erotica” (Roth: 86). At the time, Tennessee Williams - a homosexual - could not openly acknowledge what it was he thought to be beautiful, ethical or socially and politically appropriate; such issues had still to be accessed through back doors. Through the pseudo-historical prism of “One Arm” (which starts with a factual date, encloses a wealth of authentic contemporary details and is shaped like a piece of historical marginalia), Williams’ myth-rewriting surreptitiously “retrojects” new aesthetic, social and gender values, endowed with a distinguished pedigree so as to suggest their permanence for all time to come and be accepted as such by virtue of a "politics of discomfort" (to use an expression coined by Judith Butler). Williams' choice of Apollo and Dionysus as mediators is justified by the role they play on the Greek stage in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in which Apollonian formalism checks Dionysian impulse into the well-balanced tragic form. In recycling Nietzsche's gods, Williams aims at interacting not merely with the stage but with society, for a collective, more inclusive future. Thus he resorts to myth and icon not only for what they are but also for what they do. Because myth is endowed with a quality of permanence which binds past, present and future together, Williams turns to it in order to imprint new values and perspectives upon the minds of an audience to which this values may be alien, and perhaps contrary to their interests. According to Eric Csapo's definition, one which stands behind all the pages of the present paper, "Myth is anything which is told, received and transmitted in the conviction of its social importance." (Csapo: 278)[5] The values Williams transmits and hopes for them to be received as myths are concerned with gender politics. He addresses society as a complex and conflicting whole rather than simply exposing a personal gender-centered ideological stand. Thus, in Csapo's words, "In appealing to the interests of opposed groups, a myth will incorporate within its structure the contradictions that arise from the opposed interests of the larger subgroups." (Csapo: 302) Williams' claims are here introduced by means of an at least dual perspective (announced by the "Y" shaped synecdoche of the title) opening up several reading paths ranging from tragic to hilarious.[6] Thus, "One Arm" can be read as a homoerotic fantasy; a story of beauty crashed and heroic failure; an autobiographical account of what homosexuality amounts to in an exclusive society; a self-referential reflection about completion which will always remain out of reach in literature and life... However, whatever our reading of the story may be, Williams is striving in it for a collective and more inclusive future.

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[5] See also "Myth [is] a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance. There can be myths about recent events, contemporary personalities, new inventions. This is a symptom of myths' function which should not be confused with their essence. Myth is a function of social ideology". (Csapo: 9)

[6] The dialogue between Oliver and the young minister takes on an hilarious dimension if the reader has already deciphered Oliver's metafictional symbolism.

Finally, if Oliver epitomizes Williams' work, which he probably does, in the light of the double horizon of expectation the title opens up we are to understand that the boxer's arm/weapon the title refers to is myth. As a consequence, if, in order to understand the whole we need to make up for the part, the missing part of Oliver's body, his right arm, is the author's own arm. Are we expected to understand that Williams envisages his work as a punch? If so, the aim is not to put the Other out of the ring but to awaken him or her to the adventures, pleasant or unpleasant, of the game. Violence is sometimes necessary, Williams seems to suggest, for some to awake into reality. As Oliver puts it to the young minister who came to see him :

"All you need's to be given a push on the head!" (210)

But at the same time, Oliver and Williams are also well aware of the fragility of beauty and warn us how easily it can be broken.

Oliver is one and many at the same time, a torn-in -pieces victim of Dionysian Sparagmos and an Apollonian "One" thanks to his achievement as an artist who managed to bring together the many-sidedness of his Dionysian self into his art: a hustler, a victim/offender of social and gender codes, a homosexual icon, personification of the brokenness of beauty, an epitome of the South in its fragility and in its dramatic self-perception, a handsome corpse, a phoenix... His consumption and rebirth, however take place only after the curtain has fallen on the stage of Oliver's drama. For as the character is also a self-reflexive representation of his author's work, the Dionysian tearing of his body is occurring here and now. As the medical college students must have dissected Oliver's corps to understand how the parts of a living body function together, we have deconstructed a part of Tennessee Williams' corpus in pursuit of the same goal. Oliver is Williams' representation of his own work, passionately Southern, affectingly violent and thoroughly fragile.

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