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THE VISIBLE INVISIBLE:
THE STRUCTURE INTERFACE IN
WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? AND *A STREETCAR*
NAMED DESIRE

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Motto: "The mastery of metaphor must have an eye for resemblances" (Aristotle)

We read narratives and dramas for the uncanny feeling of following the plot. This plotted side of the reading is thus to be revealed by reading a structure that is innate within the text and comes into a visible being by a delicate dissection of meanings within the texture of the given reading. Thus we make the seemingly readerly text into a writerly insight. The basis for the plot quest in our case is the texture of two disputed, widely read and performed modern American dramas: Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This essay will be wrapped in the structuralist context of Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot*, in its subplotting semiotics of Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics*. Reading for a/the plot involves the archeological excavation of the dramatic text that becomes a basic structure, both as the visible words and their more or less visible designates, the underlying strata, which is displayed both in an Aristotelian (the plot as *mythos* and as *praxis*) 'skin', layer and in an E.M. Forsterian (*ethos*) logic or design. My quest here will be to follow the plot in the dialogue of the characters, and so to set up the structural dynamics of the plot's *pleasure principle*, as enounced by Freud, in the mentioned two dramas. The pleasure principle induces and engraves in the texture of the dramas the structural rhetoric of desire, which constitutes the highly tangential point of the two above mentioned dramatic texts living under different titles and different authorial names.

Plot, as Peter Brooks conceives it, is both the design and the intention of the narrative, it gives the morphological structure and the semantic content of the story, it sets to work all the internal energies and

tensions of the words from the page, and ignites their fuel: the desire. While the literary texture of *A Streetcar Named Desire* suggests an approach comprehensible in terms of *desire*, of plenitude, of wholeness, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* turns the question toward the *lack* as such. Yet, both speak of the same, of each other, since the lack as such produces desire, and desire turns to transform lack into a possible fulfillment. The structure of the action, the plot itself, follows the same route of "the same but different" (Brooks 1984: 91). Narratives and dramas, by their plot component, function as metonymies since they affirm resemblances, and in this sense, repetition. These metonymies tend, in their repetitive quest for the end, to reach the final metaphor, death. Lack and desire plot these dramas (and others as well), they are the design as the creative principle, to use Nortrop Frye's term (1970), of the textual art. Desire becomes textualized in *Who's Afraid...* and *A Streetcar...* transforming both dramas into chains of desiring metonymies, both tending to tell the inexorable end, both tending to reach the "quiescence of the inorganic world" (Freud 1991: 303). The setup of dialogues, the characters, which are, in essence forms of action, are all part of the mastery of the plot. Beginnings and ends, verbal and non-verbal delayments which produce the tension of the given drama, of the given text, all prevent that "short circuit", the direct action or telling it straightforward (that otherwise would spoil the telling and as such, would spoil the plot). Therefore the grammar of these dramas, their syntax, will be made up of detours from the straightforward, a "vacillating rhythm" (Brooks 1984: 104) of the recognition (*anagnorisis*), catharsis, and death, a deviance between illumination (*pistis*) and blindness (ignorance), or in Paul de Man's terms, the lateral dance of blindness and insight. The Williamsesque and the Albeean dramatic texts become a dilatory space, where the plot is the delay, where events are repeated in different forms, and where *fabula* becomes *sjuzet*. The play of the Eliadic myth of eternal return is to be found at the roots of the repetitive matrix structure, which I will call hence *the primal story*.

The primal story is the primordial, original event, similar to the Oedipus scenario or the Freudian family romance episode, the story to which all actions of the drama allude, the milestone of all events, the matrix from where all else springs, the hermeneutic code or the code of enigmas (Silverman 1983: 257-262) of the text. The primal story is repeated throughout the dramas in different symbolic or explicit forms and thematizes the plot with its hermeneutic morphemes, some of which become the proairetic codes, the codes of action. The primal scene needs to be repeated at least three times in order to obey the rules of repetition, and this

threefold constituency accounts for the minimal structure of the plot. The primal scene is the archaic wound of the drama, the trauma of birth, the locus from where the text opens to understanding. If we succeed to find, to visualize the primal scene of the dramatic text, the skin-ego of the deep structure will, reiteratively, open up a world of similar constructions to the found one. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George, the character and the theorist, suggests a way of understanding, a way of repetitive reading in layers of the surface structure and deep structure:

"we all peel labels sweetie and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs ... them which is still sloshable - and get down to bone...There's something inside the bone...the marrow...and that's what you gotta get at" (Albee, 1965: 124-125)

In Albee's drama the marrow, the wound-matrix, the primal scene/sin is to be found in the *Walpurgisnacht* part, where George verbally performs his own exorcism in telling Nick (and us) about the accidental death of his parents, a death that was caused in both cases by him (Albee 1965: 61-62). This tale is going to be repeated afterwards in several metonymical forms. After the *Fun and Games* part, which introduces the units of the repetition in the drama, and after the matrix event of George with the chorus-like title-giving nursery rhyme, the *Exorcism* endpart reveals, in its mass of words and in its factual funeral mass, the repetitive death of the imaginary child (Martha, in an outburst, reveals the taboo subject of their boy to which George reacts by verbally killing him). The euphemism of the George-Martha couple, the boy that has been verbally and factually transformed into an epiphanic body via the procedure of the dual text, appears, here in the third part of the drama, reiterated simultaneously, in maternal, Martha-type of *mater dolorosa* language and in Latin (by George), similar to Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" (Kristeva 1987: 234-263). The pain of the characters is rescheduled in the echoing couple of the future George and Martha, Nick and Honey, who also have a compulsion to repeat the failures. The drama of repetitive failures is uttered by Martha in the Requiem scene of the *Exorcism* part, while George utters the Latin words of the mass:

"I have tried, oh God I have tried; the one thing...the one thing I've tried to carry pure and unscathed through the sewer of this marriage; through the sick nights, and the pathetic stupid days, through the derision and the laughter...*God!*, the laughter, through the failure after another, one failure compounding another failure, each attempt more sickening, more numbing than the one before; the one thing, the one

person I have tried to protect, to raise above the mire of this vile crushing marriage; the one light in all this hopeless... darkness... our SON" (Albee 1965: 132-133).

As in the other Albee dramas, characters echo each other: Peter echoes Jerry in *The Zoo Story*, Edna and Harry echo Agnes and Tobias, Julia echoes Claire in *A Delicate Balance*, the repetitive recurrence is as its best. Another textual opening projecting the end is the issue of pregnancy (as both life and death present in its varied forms), as outlived by all of the participants, by all of the characters. *Who's Afraid...* starts with mentioning the Bette Davis movie, in which the main character had peritonitis, then the reader gets to know about the "revirgination" of Martha after the affair with a gardener boy. The chain of metonymic pregnancies is followed by Nick's confessing about Honey's hysterical pregnancy, a symptom that she likes to call "appendicitis" (aiming to the fact that a child is an appendix for the parents) and which turns in the end into a desire to have a child (Albee 1965: 130). While George is deparenting himself by telling his own truthful story, Martha mentions the boy they never had, their own hysterical pregnancy, to Honey. George will verbally murder their virtual son, by repeating his own repressed story of killing. The pleasure principle will lead here to a process of repetition compulsion that channels the plot towards the pulsations of the end, the death instinct. The chain of repetitions is reinforced by the bell chimes, by the flow of drinks (as means of forgetting, of forgiving and of purgation) and by George's appearance, with a bunch of snapdragons, as the Mexican woman, in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. They both utter the same words, in the "same-but-different" dramas: "Flores, flores para los muertos" ("Flowers, flowers for the dead" - translation mine) and thus bringing forward the movement of the inexorable end, death (Albee 1965: 115). Here, in the moment of the exorcism, while the sacred echoes the profane, the latest turns sacred in the celebration of the eucharist, in the virtue of presence through absence.

The present absent in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Allan Grey, Blanche Dubois' young, effeminate husband who committed suicide. Blanche is in the Allanesque posthumus drama his echo, she is his characterial reincarnation. Allan is not present in the actual drama but his character seems to generate meaning for the text, "allowing the reader to understand the way the repetitions work to generate meaning" (Miller 1982: 116) for the uncanny behavioural patterns the readers encounter in the Blanchic actions. These will reveal their repetitive nature via the compulsion to repeat things (and in the compulsory failure to succeed). The primal scene in the drama of desire is the ball scene, when Blanche

discovers Allan's Platonic inclination (Williams 1976: 182-184). The scene is accompanied by the music of Varsuviana, which is going to be the audial vehicle for the play's chorus; the repetitive design of any drama: Whenever significant events occur the Varsuviana starts echoing the past. The lateral dance of the repetitive structure, which, in its nature, hunts for the fulfillment of desires and is governed, as all plots by the desire to reach the end, is reinforced by the enigmas of the text. The reader finds words with specific connotations, referring to an end induced by the sacrificial theme. The beginning of the drama foretells the end, the rest of the drama is the arabesque of the plot. The initial place of Blanche's compulsion to repeat is Belle Reve (the place of repressed dreams, the place of family traumas), the actual place of the drama is New Orleans (allusion to Orléans, where the virgin Joan d'Arc was executed connects the fact that Blanche is herself born a Virgo), the protagonist is called Blanche Dubois, the name meaning the sacrificial white woods "like an orchard in spring" (Williams 1976: 150), the time setting is early in May (the latest time for the annual spring sacrifice, as the archaic form of tragedy), the music is that of the blue piano, the first words uttered are St. Barnabas ('the prophecy'), the aim is Elysian Fields (the fields for the content dead), and the means of transport for the body of the protagonist is the streetcar labelled Desire. The concept of desire, in Lacanian terms, includes the absence of the beloved, the lack in the rhetorics of the need -here the lack- and demand -here the death drive- (Lacan 1991: 60-61). Blanche's actions are plotted by Allan and thus her telling-and-acting will fulfill the requirements of an Allanesque obituary. "All narratives may be in essence obituaries" (Brooks 1984: 95) and in the Willamesque text Blanche follows this route in her quest for understanding the plot. As she repeats Allan in all her deeds and words, she will open, symbolically the letters he wrote to her and which she carries with her whenever she goes. Blanche wants to erase the primal scene (when in the middle of the dance she confessed her disgust at her husband's inclinations) her primal sin.

"He stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired - so that the back of his head had been - blown away!...It was because - on the dance floor - unable to stop myself - I suddenly said 'I know! I know! You disgust me...' And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this - kitchen - candle..."(Williams 1976:184)

Her words tell a context but her body confesses the truth. By the numerous hot baths she takes, a compulsion doomed to repeat, she tells

things otherwise, metonymically, by lying and by drinking, all similar to the George-Martha-Nick-Honey group in *Who's Afraid...* The Alanesque (1) scene is rehearsed in the Blanche's past, in her encounter with a young pupil in Laurel (2), followed by the wilde one-night-stands at the Tarantula and Flamingo hotels (3). Mitch is the next on the route (4), on her route, but he is also doomed to fail her and she is also doomed to fail in this liasion, so the next episode is governed by the tempting of the young collector boy (5) for the Evening star magazine (Williams, 1976:172-173) followed by the rough bodily encounter with Stanley Kowalski (6) in scene ten and culminating in the takeaway end picture of Blanche's phantasies about a young, nice-looking doctor (7) on her death-ship. The Mexican woman is always present as the catalyzor and the unifying principle of the plot, as a reminder of Allan. She foretells the end by selling flowers for the dead. The rhetorics of desire and the workings of the plot converge in the ultimate metaphor. The end is the seven (7) card stud, after the seven nodal points of the above mentioned matrix of previous events, the card game erases thus the primal scene by taking away its cause, Blanche, and by showing the potentialities of the number implied.

The intertextual rhetoric of desire in dramas and narratives promise and fulfill the workings of Freud's masterplot in the commemoration of the absence of the beloved (son in *Who's Afraid...* and husband in *A Streetcar...*). The plotting is made by the absent in the realm of the pleasure principle and the repetition compulsion. Repetition, repression and the return to the visible slice of resemblance make up the plot of these dramas. The desire-intertext of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is fulfilled by their masterplotted structure, which is activated in the process of reading.

"...the superimposition of the model of the functioning of the psychic apparatus on the functioning of the text offers the possibility of a psychoanalytic criticism. And here the intertextual reading of Freud's masterplot with the plots of fiction seems a valid and a useful move. Plot mediates meanings within the contradictory human world of eternal and the mortal. Freud's masterplot speaks of the temporality of desire, and speaks to our very desire for fictional plots" (Brooks 1984: 112.)

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