"We've had this date with each other from the beginning": Reading toward Closure in A Streetcar Named Desire

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As Anca Vlasopolos has shown, the strategy of Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire is to implicate the reader in “violent processes of historiography—the processes of constructing a narrative of the characters’ pasts” (322). Streetcar presents competing narratives, inviting the reader regularly and climactically to assess the authority of the storytellers. The play, as Vlasopolos notices, is “made up of acts of ‘reading,’ of interpretations of texts that range from documents and inscriptions—the Belle Reve papers and the words on Mitch’s cigarette case—to pictures and people” (326). The text that becomes central to the struggle between Stanley and Blanche and to the construction and the reading of the play is Blanche’s past, which, since the devastating death of her young homosexual husband, has included a succession of sexually needy and interested men. Blanche styles herself “a priestess of Aphrodite” who slipped outside to answer the calls of young soldiers; Stanley casts her as “the male joke about insatiable fallen women” (334).

Blanche’s story might have found endorsement in scene 10 with her acceptance of Shep Huntleigh’s invitation to the Caribbean, but the play makes it clear that she has fabricated this most recent chapter in her history and that Shep will not appear. On the other hand, scene 10 validates Stanley’s story of Blanche’s past through the “rough housing” that will culminate in rape, the ultimate expression of male authority and the consummate male joke. Understanding the direction that the plot he has been narrating must pursue, Stanley scripts the climactic scene between himself and the “whore,” tellingly accounting for his behavior by explaining, “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning” (402). The scene involves the reader in the most complex reading moment in the play, for even as she or he responds to this dramatically intense and emotional encounter, she or he is invited to assess its place not only within the scenes preceding it but also
within the two narratives. Stanley’s arresting recognition implicates the reader, as it has Stanley, in both a moral and an aesthetic retrospective reading toward closure.

Retrospective reading necessarily locates the reader within the critical discourse of reader response theory, a critical practice that, inhibited by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley’s New Critical caution against the Affective Fallacy, did not come of age until the 1970s. Still, the reader’s complicity in dramatic closure was already proposed by Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. Predicated on the assumption of the imaginative and emotional need for a unified whole, which, Frank Kermode points out, still informs the ways in which we structure both experience and fiction, the Poetics is instructive in its acceptance of the human penchant for pattern, shape, and design. This desire, Aristotle implies, is implicated in an ending: The reader takes pleasure in the sure progress of the action and in the completion of the whole.

The principle of affective response that Aristotle teases in the Poetics (he also speaks of reader response in terms of “pity” and “fear” [20]) receives fuller treatment in Wolfgang Iser’s work on the act of reading. Describing more generally the process that the reader undergoes, Iser locates the meaning of a work of literature in the interaction between text and reader. Rather than accepting the historically defined reader sought by critics involved in Rezeptionstheorie or Rezeptionsgeschichte (in theory or history of reception), however, Iser proposes a theory of aesthetic response, a Wirkungstheorie. For Iser, the literary text is a prestructure, which, through its intentions and strategies, “anticipat[es] the presence of a recipient” and “designates a network of response-inviting structures” (34). In place of the “ideal reader” (Culler), the “superreader” (Riffaterre), the “informed reader” (Fish, “Literature in the Reader”), or the “intended reader” (Wolff), Iser postulates an “implied reader” who “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down ... by the text itself” (34); the implied reader is a literary construct, actualized by the real reader. As W. Daniel Wilson puts it, “The implied reader ... can be defined as the attitudes and judgments demanded of the real reader by the text” (856).

Iser’s comments help clarify the problematic nature of Aristotle’s affective response, which provocatively suggested, two millennia before reader response theory was formulated, that the reader’s reaction is essential to the definition of tragedy. For both Aristotle and Iser, the play is structured so as to orchestrate responses; it is attentive to how a reader feels as he or she proceeds through the play and, most important for our purposes, to how the reader feels at play’s end. Author, text, and reader all “know” that dramatic closure is a collaborative act that cannot occur without the reader’s consent.
Building on Iser’s insights, Hans Robert Jauss, also a leader of the Konstanz school of *Rezeptionsästhetik*, divides the reading process into two hermeneutic acts: understanding and interpretation. A first reading of a literary text, he suggests, involves the reader in an aesthetically perceptual reading, an immediate constitution and understanding of the work as aesthetic object. Because the first reading does not provide the reader with fulfillment of form until the final line, however, Jauss suggests that “analysis cannot begin with the question of the significance of the particular within the achieved form of the whole; rather, it must pursue the significance still left open in the process of perception that the text, like a ‘score,’ indicates for the reader” (141). Only in the “second” reading, which follows and is activated by the end of the first, can a reader understand the ways in which each segment of the text and each reading moment contributes to the whole. The second reading—not to be confused with a rereading—involves the reader in a reflective, retrospectively interpretive performance. As Jauss describes it, “The experience of the first reading becomes the horizon of the second one: what the reader received in the progressive horizon of aesthetic perception can be articulated as a theme in the retrospective horizon of interpretation” (143). The second, retrospective reading speaks to the reader’s need to establish the “still unfulfilled significance retrospectively, through a new reading... in a return from the end to the beginning, from the whole to the particular” (145). In practice, that reading, though dependent on the achievement of the first reading and necessarily successive, becomes synchronic once the artistic whole is achieved.

Umberto Eco speaks of this prospective and retrospective process in terms of the *fabula*, which is “not produced once the text has been definitely read: the *fabula* is the result of a continuous series of abductions made during the course of the reading” (31). Forced at many points to face a “disjunction of probabilities” (31), the reader asks questions and forecasts, accepting tentative answers based on expectations established both within and outside the text—and certainly within (overcoded) intratextual frames. As Eco puts it, “The end of the text not only confirms or contradicts the last forecasts, but also authenticates or inauthenticates the whole system of long-distance hypotheses hazarded by the reader” (32).

Throughout the early and middle scenes of *Streetcar*, the reader has sustained an ongoing critical posture, witnessing Blanche’s attempts to legitimize her construction of self through memorializing her life of refinement at Belle Reve and Stanley’s attempts to deconstruct that past, to impose his own interpretation upon the formation she and others provide. Not yet committed to either version of the past, the reader has periodically though tentatively evaluated the two historiographers’ claims. Now, with Stanley’s recognition of the inevitability of his “date” with Blanche standing in sharp relief, the reader is prompted to reassess the competing claims of the “cul-
tivated woman” of “intelligence and breeding” (396) and the “sub-human” man with “an animal’s habits” (323), to choose between Blanche’s story and Stanley’s.

The first meeting between Blanche and Stanley, though not yet styled in the competitive mode, anticipates the contest between them, the achievement of the aesthetic whole. For Stanley’s questions, though innocent—“Where you from, Blanche?” “You’re a teacher, aren’t you?” “What do you teach, Blanche?” and, critically, “You were married once, weren’t you?” “What happened?” (265–68)—leave Blanche feeling ill. Though she proves herself the skilled and selective respondent, one wonders how she would fare were Stanley’s questions about her past not so well intended.

The reader anticipates just such a circumstance when Stanley learns from Stella that the family estate has been lost. His insistence on seeing the papers so he can claim his share under the Napoleonic Code and his subsequent rummaging through Blanche’s wardrobe trunk, offering assessments of the financial value of each item and questioning how she acquired gowns and jewels on a teacher’s pay, sets the tone for the encounter with Blanche at the end of scene 2. Here Blanche uses her resources: “freshly bathed and scented” (276), she slips into a new dress, then asks Stanley to button it. Blanche sustains her refined speech and cheerful air even as she discovers that Stanley has examined her trunk. When she goes too far with her flirting, however, Stanley changes the tone, booming a command: “Now let’s cut the re-bop!” (280). She tries a second time to gain ascendency through being playful, this time eliciting his confusion and anger: “If I didn’t know that you was my wife’s sister I’d get ideas about you!” (281). When Blanche at last offers information about Belle Reve, she does so seriously, from the perspective of one familiar with the history of the estate, leaving Stanley disadvantaged and needing assistance: “I have a lawyer acquaintance who will study these out” (284). Blanche is not far off when she boasts to Stella of how she handled the encounter:

We thrashed it out. I feel a bit shaky, but I think I handled it nicely. I laughed and treated it all as a joke... I called him a little boy and laughed and flirted. Yes, I was flirting with your husband. (285)

Though the dialogue has come to an end, the reader anticipates its renewal and its intensification in subsequent scenes and doubts Blanche’s ability to hold her own in future competitions. Though her manner was at first disconcerting to Stanley, she does not appear to be sufficiently prepared to keep the inquisitor at bay. At this point, an assessment of the status of the competition will entail a recursive reading: To balance her minor triumph, the reader will return to the opening scene, in which Blanche arrived at Elysian Fields. Her dislocation then was immediately apparent in the incongruity of her appearance and this New Orleans setting: Stanley’s house
is a two-story corner building in a poor section of Elysian Fields; Blanche is dressed "as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district" (245). The reader has heard Stanley bellow at Stella, seen him heave a package of red meat at her, and watched him disappear around the corner with Mitch, "roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes" (244), a bowling jacket over his arm. Stanley has already established himself visually as a substantial and formidable presence, unlike the moth-like woman of "uncertain manner" and "delicate beauty" (245). Later, Blanche's conversation with her sister will reveal that Stanley is a "different species" (258), unlike the men they knew at Belle Reve. Yet this is the man who is challenging Blanche's story.

From the perspective of scene 2, the reader's forecasting will include two options: Either Blanche will get Stanley to understand how she came to lose the family estate and to rest his personal claim or Stanley will blame Blanche for her negligence or outright dishonesty and insist on his right to the property. Either way, both Stanley and the reader will need to know more about Blanche. The characters have begun their power play, each intent on gaining ascendancy through controlling the narrative of Blanche's past.

That narrative develops significantly in the middle scenes, when Stanley learns from his supply man in Laurel that Blanche has been associated with the Flamingo Hotel. Anticipating exposure, Blanche attempts to neutralize the story by warning her sister about "unkind gossip" and alerting her to difficulties at home. If the reader's tendency here is to accept Stanley's investigative work, Blanche's sad tale about her boy husband in scene 6 restores her dignity and reinstalls her as storyteller, capable of eliciting sympathy and understanding and, in effect, explaining the behavior that her brother-in-law could only dismiss with scorn. The reader will feel Blanche's desperation most acutely in scene 8 when, on her birthday, Stanley gives her a bus ticket back to Laurel; so also will the reader feel Stanley's brutish cruelty in this scene, for his cleaning of the table exceeds even the cruder behavior that has distinguished him all along. But the narrative competition has not yet been resolved: though Stanley has succeeded in upsetting Mitch with his version of Blanche's past, Blanche, ready with an alternative story, has left a telephone message for Mitch to call.

As the reader proceeds through the beginning and middle scenes, he or she is involved in periodic readjustments, necessitated by the placing of new events in the context of previous events. Despite temporary judgments on the reader's part and tentative endpoints, however, the impulse of this first reading is insistently prospective. As the reader asks questions about the competition between Blanche and Stanley—and its human booty, Stella and Mitch—she or he anticipates the end, the terminal event in the struggle between them and the completion of the aesthetic whole.

That event occurs in the play's penultimate scene, when the two narratives of Blanche's past come face to face to compete not only for priority but
also for closure—Throughout the play, Blanche has seen the “miscellaneous” sexual encounters of her past as a means of filling an empty heart and of helping to satisfy the yearnings of lonely men; emotionally defeated by the suicide of her sensitive, homosexual husband and haunted by a succession of family deaths, Blanche has clung to the emotional debris, searching for kindness in strangers. Stanley, on the other hand, has shown little interest in the death of her husband or in the sacrifices she made at Belle Reve. Throughout the play, he has decontextualized her promiscuity, placing it outside the harshness of experience or emotional need. Like the people of Laurel, where “it was practickly a town ordinance passed against her!” (363), Stanley has been reading Blanche’s sexual past not as a sad attempt to establish intimacies with strangers but as a repeated expression of raw, unbridled lust. Now, like Mitch, he is ready to collect what he has “been missing all summer” (389).

With Stella in the hospital and the two in the apartment alone, the narrative showdown begins. Blanche desperately tries to reach Western Union to wire Shep Huntleigh but fails. The millionaire Texas gentleman will not appear to claim her cultivated company. “Beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart” (396)—all qualities she has said men admired in her—remain unconfirmed, inactivated within her ineffective story. Stanley, on the other hand, is able to complete his narrative—and becomes a participant in it. To Stanley, this wanton woman, who freely gave favors to soldiers and seduced a seventeen-year-old boy, has earned his treatment of her. The narrative line of Blanche’s story of self fails at the same point that the narrative line of Stanley’s story reaches its frightening conclusion.

However offensive Stanley’s behavior, the reader now understands the force of his pronouncement of the inevitability of this “date.” For Stanley’s story, no less than Williams’s play, has been pursuing the inexorable rhythm of tragedy: the rape, however repugnant, is the inescapable end of Stanley’s narrative. Moreover, it affirms Blanche’s story of Stanley as apeman, “grunt­ing . . . and swilling and gnawing and hulking!” (323). If Jauss is correct in his characterization of the aim of the prospective reading, the rape, as terminal event in both Stanley’s and Blanche’s narratives of each other, offers satisfaction, for it provides the reader with a sense of the aesthetic whole.

In the second reading, Stanley’s story of Blanche has priority, for the reader now knows that it has prevailed. Her desperate effort to construct herself as a woman of breeding and refinement, of poetry and beauty, has yielded its credibility to Stanley’s construction, which, the reader knows, has been legitimized through completion. Though in the first reading the reader may have wanted to understand Blanche’s antisocial behavior and make allowances for it, he or she now knows that it is futile to do so, for scene 10 has secured the unsettling but incontestable fact that, as Vlasopolos
puts it, “historical discourse depends on power, not logic, for its formation” (325). Having experienced the force of Stanley’s script and its terminal action, the reader reevaluates Blanche’s past in the prevailing author’s (i.e., Stanley’s) terms.

Now when the reader reviews earlier scenes, he or she realizes that he or she should not be surprised by the triumph of brutality in this climactic scene, for the force of Stanley’s unrefined insensitivity has consistently determined the end of several encounters. Not only had his inquiry into her youthful marriage in scene 1 left Blanche physically sick, but also his examination of her love letters in scene 2 left her “faint with exhaustion” (283). In scene 8, his gift of a bus ticket back to Laurel left her clutching at her throat, coughing and gagging (376); and in scene 9, his exposure of her to Mitch left her crying wildly at the window: “Fire! Fire! Fire!” and then staggering and falling to her knees (390). These moments of physical disabling at the hands of Stanley are monumentalized in scene 10 in her inability to defend herself against rape. Scene 10 ends with the overpowered Blanche moaning and sinking to her knees: “He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed” (402).

The second reading will also reactivate a number of previous remarks: Stanley’s “If I didn’t know that you was my wife’s sister I’d get ideas about you!” (281), Blanche’s “Yes, I was flirting with your husband” (285) and her flippant invitation to Mitch, “Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?” (344) will no longer be comments without a climactic context. From the perspective of scene 10, these remarks have painfully self-fulfilling consequences. The reader will recall as well that in scene 6, when Blanche discussed Stanley with Mitch, she confessed that “the first time I laid eyes on him I thought to myself, that man is my executioner! That man will destroy me, unless—” (351). Now, one scene after Mitch has been disabused of the notion that Blanche is a “lily” and has withdrawn his marriage proposal (the “unless” of Blanche’s proposition), the executioner performs his labor, graphically joining the deliberate cruelty that Blanche deplores and the sexuality that has been seething for months.

The reader involved in this retrospective reading will become aware of the extent to which his or her prospective reading was implicated in the play’s generic character. For this play, as George Jean Nathan observes, commands interest comparable to that “held by a recognizably fixed prize-fight or a circus performer projected out of what appears to be a booming cannon by a mechanical spring device” (90). The pressure of the tragic form, the “continual rush of time, so violent that it appears to be screaming” (as Williams describes it in “Timeless” 49), is abruptly arrested in the moment before the blackout of the rape, providing the reader the opportunity to marvel at the force with which this streetcar has been careening to this stop. For the reader who has completed scene 10, reassembling the reading moments leading to the rape reveals the play’s response-inviting design, which
Combines explicitly anticipatory events within an implicitly generic (i.e., tragic) mode.

The retrospective reading will also reveal that the interpretive process, though activated by the achievement of the aesthetic whole, is not wholly aesthetic. For in authorizing Stanley’s narrative over Blanche’s, the scene pressures the reader into a moral endorsement he or she might otherwise not have been willing to give. In agreeing to closure, the reader permits Stanley’s taxonomy of female sexuality—Blanche must be either virgin or whore—to stand. The reader unwittingly becomes complicit in the text’s “hidden determinism,” a “gender-determined exclusion from the larger historical discourse” (Vlasopolos 325).

Moreover, in accepting Stanley’s narrative as terminal event, the reader agrees to Blanche’s future, for the narrative within the play has not only defined Blanche’s past but also determined the outcome of the present dramatic action as well. In scene 10, Blanche, having exhausted her resources and Stanley’s good will, is destitute. Moreover, if she is to have the support of her sister, she must rely on Stella’s believing her version of this most recent event. But Stella has confided to her sister that Stanley’s violence on their wedding night “thrilled” her (313), that “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant,” things that Blanche characterizes as “brutal desire” (321). How can Stella, who is not “in something that I want to get out of” (320), believe that, while she was in the hospital giving birth to their first child, her husband raped her sister? As Stella admits, “I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley” (405). Hence, Blanche is exiled and institutionalized.

Vlasopolos is especially perceptive in her analysis of the final scene, which implicates the reader in the public endorsement of Stanley’s achievement. Not only has the reader retrospectively reassessed both versions of history and realized the force of Stanley’s reading, but now, with the others in Elysian Fields, he or she watches unobtrusively as events wind down and Blanche is removed, her version of her past silenced and ignored, her hope for the future denied. Attracted by the integrity and the pleasure of the aesthetic whole, the reader, in accepting Stanley’s final fiction, has been seduced into a hegemonically masculine and conventionally generic reading of the play. The reader’s “pragmatic shrug” (Vlasopolos 337) endorses the ideology implicit in both historical discourse and the tragic form.

But the text also provides for another implied reader, one who sees the final scene as an occasion to reassess rather than endorse the “pleasurable” reading activated by scene 10. At this point, that reader will have recognized his or her complicity in what can be described only as coercive closure. And, with Blanche, the reader will be demanding to know “What’s happened here? I want an explanation of what’s happened here” (408). Stanley’s deliberate cruelty—his jeering at Blanche and tearing down the paper lan-
tern—will seem especially gratuitous here, with Blanche already in defeat and minutes away from the asylum. Moreover, Blanche’s reliance on the kindness of strangers, even as family and acquaintances assemble to witness, not to prevent, her expulsion, may alert the reader to how little kindness his or her own reading has shown her. For the reader uneasy about allowing the play to end so neatly, at Blanche’s expense, yet another retrospective reading will deliver him or her back to scene 10, this time to question his or her own agreement to the closure it urged.

The comfort and discomfort implied in the strategy of scene 11 has clearly had an impact on criticism of the play, which has hardly offered a consistent reading of the end. Nor have the two film versions resolved the problematic final scene. In Williams’s play, Stanley appears to escape accountability; the closing tableau finds him kneeling beside his wife to comfort her, his fingers finding the opening of her blouse. Elia Kazan’s 1951 Hollywood film, however, under pressure from censors and the Catholic Legion of Decency, rescripts the end. In Kazan’s final scene, Stella (Kim Hunter) reproaches her husband (Marlon Brando) as he tries to hold her: “Don’t you touch me. Don’t you ever touch me again.” Stanley walks away from Stella, who stands watching the physician’s car, with Blanche (Vivien Leigh) inside, pull away and round the corner. When her baby cries, she picks it up, and, as Stanley calls, “Stella, C’mon Stella,” she resolutely insists, “I am not going back in there again, not this time. I am never going back. Never.” Clutching the child, she runs up the stairs, with Stanley wailing her name like an animal in pain.

The retrospective reading of the Kazan version prompts an interpretation of its own, not only because of its morally stabilizing character but also because the director has tampered with the text throughout. Several of the lines that are activated by a retrospective reading of the text following scene 10 are left unspoken here: Stanley’s “If I didn’t know that you was my wife’s sister I’d get ideas about you!”, Blanche’s “Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?”, her narratives of her homosexual husband and the drunken soldiers who staggered onto her lawn. Most importantly, the precipitating line itself is gone: Stanley’s “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning.”

John Erman’s 1984 remake, by contrast, respects the original text. In Erman’s scene 11, the camera follows Blanche (Ann-Margret), on the arm of her gentleman physician, past the poker players, out the door, and through the archway, then into the back seat of the car. As the car pulls away, Stanley (Treat Williams) kisses Stella (Beverly D’Angelo). She wraps her arm around his neck as he comforts her. The camera moves to Eunice, the upstairs neighbor, holding the baby, then back to Stanley and Stella as they walk into the house, arms locked in an embrace, past the poker game to the bedroom.

This production ends not with Stanley but with Blanche. The physician’s
car, with Blanche in the back seat, drives down a long road, at the end of which is a church. Once the car rounds the corner, the camera moves down the road as well and, when it comes to the end, moves upward to focus on the steeple. The bells sound in three echoing peals, ending the play and completing an association suggested earlier of Blanche with church bells. The peals rise above the cacophony of street sounds that accompany so many scenes, connect with the plaintive cry of the Mexican woman who sells flowers for the dead, and recall Blanche’s “Sometimes—there’s God—so quickly!” (356). They also complement Blanche’s frequent association with candles, which are often arranged as though on an altar; her repeated baths, which are her daily attempts at spiritual cleansing; and the incessant New Orleans rain.

Erman’s production responds to the text’s suggestion of a sacramental context for Blanche’s wish for purification. When the film ends with camera focused on the steeple and the three resonating chimes, Blanche’s yearning seems fulfilled. As the camera rises about the New Orleans cityscape, the reader is left with the impression not of her sordidness or of her desperation but of the woman this lover of poetry and music and art wished herself to be. The final shot is a sad and powerful judgment on Stanley and the brutes. Blanche’s own words in scene 4, when she responded to Stanley’s “stone-age” bestiality, resonate: “Maybe we are a long way from being made in God’s image, but Stella—my sister—there has been some progress since then!” (323).

The two film versions of the play, then, offer their own interpretation of desire in New Orleans. Both films present endings that explicitly invite the reader to lament the loss of Blanche’s world of poetry, music, and art, of Greek-columned houses and rhinestone tiaras, of the woman who insisted “I don’t want realism. I want magic!” (385). Though motivated by moral idealism, these reorchestrations of the final scene pressure the reader into a reevaluation of scene 10, permitting reflection on the aesthetic and ideological forces that enabled Stanley’s narrative to prevail.1

Reading Streetcar from the perspective of reader response theory, as articulated by Iser and Jauss, directs attention to the end of the text, the anticipated point of the first reading, and the activating point for the second. Necessarily, such reading involves frustrations. Yet, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, frustration is a necessary part of the gratification that characterizes literary closure: “Every disruption of our expectations causes some kind of emotion, and...the emotion is not unpleasant if we are confident of the presence of design in the total pattern” (14). For many readers, scene 11 will serve as a coda to a play brought to closure in scene 10. But those who understand scene 11 as the terminal event will recognize scene 10 as the point at which Stanley’s narrative—not Williams’s play—closes. Reading toward closure in Streetcar entails the final retrospective
interpretation of the penultimate scene, once the whole of the aesthetic form has been perceived.

NOTE


WORKS CITED


