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The Tennessee Williams Centennial: Some Perspectives

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As in 1999, when I edited an issue of the *Southern Quarterly* on Tennessee Williams's non-dramatic canon, I am honored to guest edit this issue celebrating the Williams centennial. Born in Columbus, Mississippi on March 26, 1911 and dying in New York at the Hotel Elysee (Elysian Fields!) on February 24, 1983, Williams led a life seared with religious symbolism and earthly tortures, the hallmarks of his plays and stories. Appropriately, his birthday, March 26, is the feast day of St. Montanus who was beheaded for the faith, and on February 24, the day Williams died, the Church acclaims St. Theodorus, the third-century Bishop of Pentapolis, who had his tongue cut out.<sup>1</sup> The lives of these saints would have resonated with Williams's keen sense of the horrific.

Undeniably, he was Mississippi's, and America's, most influential playwright, and also its most prolific. A centennial celebration at the University of Missouri, one of his alma maters, was aptly entitled "Tennessee Williams: The Art of Endurance." For six decades, he wrote poems, plays, screenplays, novels, stories, letters (three volumes thick), memoirs, essays, prefaces, and afterwords; he kept notebooks overflowing with ideas, character sketches, and reminiscences of the people and places he would transport into the magical world of his plays. Close to twenty of his plays/screenplays were made into Hollywood movies guided by twelve distinguished directors, including Sidney Lumet, Richard Brooks, Elia Kazan, and Joseph Mankiewicz. Most recently, a forgotten screenplay, *The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond*, was made into a film (2008) directed by Jodie Markell. Williams may also be the only American writer who substantially added to his canon posthumously, with abounding premieres of previously unpublished or unperformed full-length plays and a seemingly inexhaustible repertoire of new one acts. Moreover, folder after folder of his unpublished poems bulge at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. And then there are the irrepressible rumors that he left numerous new play-stuffed portmanteaus under beds, in attics, or in cavernous basements.

Amid all Williams's works, though, he compulsively strove to write about himself. His mother Edwina Dakin Williams referred to him as "my writin' son."<sup>2</sup> He recreated himself from *Tom to Tenn*, as a new biographical musical succinctly described his miraculous transformation. He repeatedly wrote about the writer he was or would be or wanted to

become. His life was the experiment that fueled his plays, stories, and poems. Metamorphosized, he went by many names – Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944); Allan Grey and Sebastian Venable, the deceased gay poets in *Streetcar* (1947) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), respectively; Mister Paradise, an aging writer in the one-act play (1939) of the same name; the Writer in *Vieux Carre* (1977), and August in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981). The last two personas were younger versions of himself recalled thirty years earlier by an older Williams. In a 1973 *Playboy* interview, he also confessed “I can identify completely with Blanche [DuBois] ... we are both hysterics.”<sup>3</sup> Williams was always the historian of self.

But the fine frenzy of his autobiography never prevented Williams from protesting the cruelties of the times. Among his earliest works, *Candles to the Sun* (1935) decries the dreary lives and unsafe conditions coal miners encountered, and *Not About Nightingales* (1938) protests inhumane prison conditions. He was also an outspoken critic of bigotry whenever he found it, as his singeing portraits of Jake Torrance in *Orpheus Descending*, Boss Finley in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Archie Lee Meighan in *Baby Doll*, or the monsters in *Red Devil Battery Sign* terrifyingly illustrate. He deplored fascism rearing its ugly bombs in *The Glass Menagerie* or the *Night of the Iguana*. His much maligned later plays continued his attack on the police state, represented by the vengeful cockaloonies in *Gnadiges Fraulein*, the ravages of Watergate in *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, the cannibalism/holocaust of the *Municipal Abattoir*, or the Apocalyptic dystopia of *Chalky White Substance*. But *Camino Real* (1953) remains the crucible of the ills that plagued Williams’s conscience and his art – political, sexual, and cultural.

Recognizing Williams’s signal contributions to American theatre and culture, centennial celebrations, performances, and festivals abounded throughout 2011 in all the places he called home. In Mississippi, festivals in Clarksdale and Columbus honored their native son. The New Orleans Tennessee Williams Literary Festival celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday even as it did its own 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in late March. As so many of Williams’s plays attest, New Orleans was his spiritual home. The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, site of the Cape where he spent time working on his first professional production – *Battle of Angels*, has been staging cycles of his plays since 2006. Other notable celebrations have taken place in Key West, where Williams owned a house on Duncan Street for many years, and even at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in New York, a place evocative of Williams’s ephemeral liaisons. Conferences in Europe,

particularly in France, Italy, and England, places he fled to escape mean-spirited critics or the blue devils, the fits of depression that left him overwrought but from which he always recovered, have extended our knowledge of the playwright whose works are regarded as one of America's most revered cultural exports.

Adding to the centennial celebrations are the seven articles written for this special issue of the *Southern Quarterly*. In the first essay, Mark Cave, an archivist at The Historic New Orleans Collection, sketches Williams's early life – before he reached the success of *The Glass Menagerie* – through the artifacts that symbolize his triumphs and struggles. Contending that what we know of Williams's early career is largely gleaned from archival collections across the country, Cave turns directly to those documents housed at the HNOC's Fred W. Todd Collection. Many of these archival treasures are illustrated in Cave's essay. As these documents reveal, Williams's life experiences prior to 1944 energized his writing for decades, providing a record of his persistent quest for fame and the inspiration in the most notable works that brought him recognition, including two Pulitzers, one for *Streetcar* (1947) and the other for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955).

Concentrating on an even earlier period of Williams's creative energy, my own essay includes a previously unpublished poem on the Armistice written when he was only 14 and a solid student at Ben Blewett Junior High School in St. Louis. Untitled save for allusion to the Armistice, the poem finds Williams at a very young age engaged with the harrowing connection between the personal and the political, examining the futility of war and the indomitable spirit of the soldiers who even in death reject its horrors. I argue that this early poem looks forward to other Williams's works on the Armistice, including a high school newspaper story about his 1928 visit to European battlefields with his grandfather, various poems published in college or trade magazines, and, most importantly, a curtain-raiser for Irwin Shaw's play *Bury the Dead* for the Mummies, a radical St. Louis theatre troupe Williams was associated with in the 1930s and which performed two of his early full-length plays.

Opening a new chapter on how a much-neglected St. Louis landscape influenced Williams, Sandra Leal demonstrates how he drew upon the zoo and floral conservatory at Forest Park to develop the conflicted characters in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. In particular, she traces parallels between the botanical exhibit called the Jewel Box, which featured a Venus fly trap, and the predatory/prey relationships and the entrapment plots of these two plays. Fictionally incorporating the exhibits

at Forest Park into Laura Wingfield's escapes, Mrs. Venable's primeval garden, and her son Sebastian's death by a mob of predatory boys, Williams revealed his keen knowledge of science and the tragic sacrifice his sister Rose made for the progress of biomedical neuroscience.

If Williams's relationship with his sister Rose (Laura Wingfield) approximated idolatry, one of his most tempestuous friendships was with Tallulah Bankhead (1903-1968), the subject of the following essay by James Fisher. The flamboyant and "damaged" actress appeared in the first major New York revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1956, but her unique interpretation, often dismissed as pure camp, led to critical controversy and a heated public dispute with Williams, which spilled over into the *New York Times*. However, as Fisher points out, throughout Williams's professional and personal life, Bankhead emerged as an undeniable, influential force. In fact, he wrote several roles with her in mind (including *Battle of Angels*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, and, of course, *Streetcar*) and sought out her talents for others. At the end of his career, Williams featured her as a character in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1995), where on her deathbed, Tallulah cried out for "Bourbon. Codeine!" (59). Ultimately, Fisher maintains that her role as a muse for Williams's work and her performances in his plays have been much misunderstood. His essay thus brings much welcomed clarity to the Williams-Bankhead connection, especially illuminated through her interaction with Gerald S. O'Loughlin, Stanley in her 1956 *Streetcar*, whom Fisher interviewed expressly for his contribution to this special issue.

In her essay on *Camino Real*, Brenda Murphy examines how Williams imaginatively transformed diverse cultural materials into this boldly experimental play premiering in 1953, in the heyday of McCarthyism. Murphy insists that *Camino Real* is at once an extremely personal play for Williams and a self-conscious representation of the wide-ranging cultural contexts in which he saw himself working as an American artist in the early 1950s. While Murphy concedes that Williams conscientiously read Proust, Byron, and Jacques Casanova's memoirs to develop *Camino*, she convincingly argues that what fed the play was much broader, deeper, and richer than these literary sources. According to Murphy, Williams's intimate knowledge of the movies, including *Camille*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Casablanca*, which he saw many times when he was working as a movie theatre usher in New York, provided the foundation of the play. Quoting Williams, Murphy explores the images and incidents from "the really 'tough' Americana of the comic sheets, the skid-row

bars, cat-houses, Grade B movies, street-Arabs, vagrants, drunks, pitchmen, gamblers, whores, all the rootless, unstable and highly spirited life beneath the middle-class social level in the States” to reveal how these sources shaped *Camino*.

In the following essay, George Crandell offers a profitable way to solve a longstanding critical problem that Williams’s plays raise. From the 1940s onward critics claimed that Williams’s tragic world-view was best explained in terms of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the models that surrounded his theories of drama. But closely examining *A Streetcar Named Desire* and other tragedies such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or *Orpheus Descending*, Crandell finds that a possible and probable source for the tragic forces at work in Williams’s plays is Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Emphasizing Nietzsche’s philosophy based on a binary continuum in which the opposite poles are symbolized by the Greek deities of Apollo and Dionysius, Crandell mines the history of these two gods to explain the forces that collide in figures such as Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski and to chart the conflicting drives within these characters that threaten to fragment their already divided selves. Most importantly, though, Crandell asserts that critics have overlooked the central fact that Williams’s tragic world-view approximates Nietzsche’s inexhaustible spirit of life.

In the final essay in this issue, R. Barton Palmer posits that the films made from Williams’s Broadway successes had a very diverse history in America than they did in Europe. Unquestionably, they were important events in American film culture not only because of their artistic quality but also because they challenged the representation of “adult themes” outlawed by the film industry’s Production Code. Viewing Williams’s films as part of a trend, Palmer assesses their importance in dismantling the Code in 1966. Yet, however seminal the Williams films are in America, they did not earn a lasting cinematic importance in Europe which, Palmer claims, privileged the evolution of *film noir* that more directly offered the intriguing connections to surrealism that supposedly were not found in the cinematic adaptations of Williams’s plays.

This special issue closes with three-time Pulitzer Prize winning Edward Albee’s “Appreciation” of Tennessee as well as with five poems that pay tribute to Williams the poet as they, paradoxically, reveal how the poet Williams entered the metaphors of these poets’ worlds. Above all else, Williams saw himself as a poet; a 1994 PBS special about him was insightfully called *Orpheus of the American Stage*.<sup>4</sup> In a bitterly erotic poem entitled “Tangier: The Speechless Summer,” included in

his collection *Androgyne: Mon Amour* (1977),<sup>5</sup> Williams recollects his fleeting relationship with a Moroccan young man and asks a question that a lifetime of Tom Williams's plays had already answered:

My young companion, "the Poet."  
 Fair as Adonis but rational as ten hatters at Alice's tea-party.  
 Seems to be succumbing to my iron of silence  
 which is so desperately unwillful.  
 Can he still, at times, like me?  
 Can magic still, at times, be the order of our existence?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Feast Days – February, March," *Catholic Online* (<http://www.saints/f-days/Feb.Mar./php>).

<sup>2</sup> In Edwina Dakin Williams, Water Dakin Williams, and Lucy Freeman, *Remember Me to Tom* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1963), p.36.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Robert C. Jennings, "Interview with Tennessee Williams," *Playboy* (April 1973), p.72.

<sup>4</sup> Public Broadcasting System, *American Masters. Tennessee Williams: Orpheus of the American Stage* (Dec. 19, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> In Williams, *The Collected Poems*, ed. David Roessel and Nicholas Moschovakis (New York: New Directions, 2002), p.139.