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Book Review:
# Tennessee Williams's *Notebooks*

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**Tennessee Williams. *Notebooks*. Ed. with Notes by Margaret Bradham Thornton. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006. 828 + xxvii pages. $40.00.**

Although the title page of Tennessee Williams's *Notebooks* indicates they were "Edited by" Margaret Bradham Thornton, the dust jacket (whether deliberately or not) appropriately omits those two words. Instead, Williams' name appears above the title with Thornton's, admittedly in somewhat smaller typeface, below. Williams may have been ambivalent about whether these confessional-like journals should ever appear in print —at one point proclaiming "they were certainly never written for publication and have no literary value" (v), while at another proposing that "Someday I want very much to get all these journals together and publish them intact. . . [for their] usefulness as a history of an individual's fight for survival" (ix). But he seemed more certain that, if published, they necessarily would be accompanied "with footnotes by their author." However, since he never undertook the project himself, Williams could not have been more fortunate than to have Thornton as the one chosen to transcribe "all known journals" and provide an impressive array of scholarly apparatus. The end result almost reads like a jointly-authored work.

¶2 The thirty notebooks, the first bearing the intriguing inscription "Dead Planet, The Moon / I salute you! (a writer's journal)" (3), contain close to 800 entries, penned over twenty-five years between 1936 and 1958, and then picking up once again from 1979 to 1981 under the title "MES CAHIERS NOIRS." The most complete coverage is of two periods, what might be called the eight apprenticeship years until November 1943, which witnessed the writing of the posthumously produced *Not about Nightingales* and the disastrous Boston tryout of *Battle of Angels*; and the two years between 1953 and 1955 that saw the failure of the expressionistic *Camino Real* and the triumphant success of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. The longest hiatus in Williams' journal-keeping occurred between 1958 and 1979, though the playwright claimed—in an annotation added when he went back and, as was at times his habit, reread the journals—that his life during those years was "so similar" as not to alter the record in any substantial way. There are, however, around two dozen other briefer gaps as well; and for all of these Thornton, an independent scholar, has written narrative passages to bridge the major events in the dramatist's life and career during the missing years.

¶3 More impressively, however, on the pages facing Williams' printed journals she has provided nearly 1100 notes—more often than not a solid paragraph rather than just a sentence or two in length—annotating the entries. Many of these comprise brief lives of family members or of friends and companions, while others identify literary or theatrical associates. It goes without saying that devotees of Williams and the theater will already recognize many of these (such as Oliver Evans or Carson McCullers or Erwin Piscator or Margo Jones), although others, like Salvatore Maresca, one of the playwright's Italian lovers, will be less familiar. Other notes provide performance histories of plays, or plot synopses of either unproduced or unpublished works—many of them later revised under other titles. Still other annotations trace artistic influences, real-life sources for

characters, or recurrent subjects and dominant thematic motifs Finally, Thornton has consulted the archives to quote from relevant letters in various collections, or to choose for reproduction almost 200 facsimile pages (either in the author's holograph or typescript) of items such as unpublished poems or postcards he mailed back home from his travels, as well as nearly 350 photographs, including over a dozen of Williams's own paintings and an equal number of set designs, ending with a haunting photo of the playwright's death mask and of the crowd of mostly young admirers gathered outside the Hotel Elysée, where he died.

¶4 Those approaching the *Notebooks* hoping to find extensive commentary by the dramatist about his works generally will be just as frustrated as readers of the *Memoirs* (1975) were on that account; the best source for such reflections is still found in the two volumes of the *Selected Letters* and in Williams' occasional essays, collected in *Where I Live* (1978). If pressed, one would probably conclude that there is more of substance in the present volume about *Cat* than any of the other plays, including material on the controversy with Elia Kazan over the Broadway rewrites, as well as the rather remarkable concern (especially given the charges of homophobia the some critics later would level against the playwright for shrouding the true nature of Brick's sexuality) that "The intrusion of the homosexual theme may be fucking it [an earlier draft still called "Place of Stone"] up again" (631). So the disclaimer Williams wrote three decades ago could just as easily appear again here: "Why do I resist writing about my plays? The truth is that my plays have been the most important element of my life for God knows how many years. But I feel the plays speak for themselves. And that my life hasn't and that it has been remarkable enough, in its continued contest with madness, to be worth setting upon paper" ( *Memoirs* 153-54). And yet he cautions readers of the *Notebooks* against accepting uncritically everything he puts down here about his life: "these notebooks despite their attempt at merciless candor about my life fall short, give very little, perhaps really distort unfavorably for I seem inclined to note only the seedier things" (397)—a warning that Kazan echoed when he told Thornton that "Williams was one of the most secret people he had ever known. 'Latch unto that word,' he instructed" (xvi). But, of course, one of the very aspects most prized about Williams's characters is what he termed their "mystery," their ambiguity and unknowability, and so why should it be any different with their creator? For, indeed, what the *Notebooks* sketch is a portrait of the artist that, if not totally unexpected, is still every bit as complex and compelling as one of his creations.

¶5 The outline of that personality begins emerging from the earliest entries: the insecurity and anxiety; the loneliness and restless wandering; the writer's block and "blue devils"; the conviction he was a failure and yet the distrust of success; the discouraging rejection and ennui, and yet the Beckettian determination to "go on"; the fear of death and of the havoc time wreaks on creativity; the physical debilities and dependence on drugs and drink. Two concerns that he saw as simultaneously guilt-producing and yet as having a potentially salvific effect preyed on Williams almost incessantly: his relationship with his beloved sister, Rose, well-known as the model for many of his heroines, and discovering and accepting his own homosexuality. Readers who know Lyle Leverich's biography and Williams' own *Memoirs* will already be familiar with his gnawing guilt, not only over having been absent at the time of the prefrontal lobotomy meant to "cure" Rose's dementia praecox, but particularly over an incident when he felt revulsion toward her and, in a moment of deliberate cruelty that he came to feel was unforgiveable, called her "Disgusting." It is not just that the string of "obscenities" she uttered during one of the family's visits to the sanatorium is shocking, but her mental condition makes him question the "mysterious" ways of an apparently capricious God. And yet, after forty years of guaranteeing that all of her

materials needs were met, he can praise her as "the living presence of truth and faith in my life [who] defined a true nobility to me and gave to my life what I have known of grace" (741).

¶6 In his discussion in *The New York Times Book Review*, Edmund White reads the *Notebooks* primarily as a case study and object lesson in coming of age as a homosexual in pre-Stonewall times; and, indeed, Williams could hardly be expected to have escaped the self-loathing and guilt-inducing social construction of homosexuality in mid-century America. And so, while a homosexual love that is caring and fully cognizant of the needs of the other is seen ideally as no different from a heterosexual one, Williams does distinguish between a committed homosexual relationship and promiscuous gay sex that early on he terms "appalling really." Despite the fact that he craved the cruising and one-night stands as an essential "diversion" that liberated him, he still understood that such activity could have an enervating effect on his work and longed for something that would be "clean" and lasting, "as if a benign Providence, or shall we be frank and say God, had suddenly taken cognizance of my long misery . . . and given me . . . a token of forgiveness" (725). Furthermore, he intimates that his identity as a gay, despite the "intolerable burden of guilt . . . . humiliation and a great deal of sorrow," was crucial to himself as a writer: "I am a deeper and kinder and warmer man for my devigation. More conscious of need in others, and what power I have to express the human heart must be in large part due to this circumstance" (235).

¶7 What Martin Duberman wrote recently in his biography of that other cultural icon, Lincoln Kirsten (whom Williams acknowledges in these pages as the "helpful" go-between introducing him to James Laughlin), could as easily apply to the playwright: "undomesticated adventurous anonymity and risk-taking were central not only to intensified erotic arousal but to profound creativity of any kind. Had timidity and adherence to convention been the key components of Lincoln's personality, none of his . . . ventures would ever have gotten off the ground." What Williams most feared and condemned was a "calcification" of the heart, the very opposite of the ethic of reaching out with tolerance and compassion to other "tortured" people in need that adumbrates his works. As he writes in an entry from 1941 that presages the indelible curtain line of *Streetcar Named Desire*, "To you—whoever you are—when I am gone—Remember to be kind tonight to some lonely person—For me" (221). Whereas Beckett read the story of the two thieves crucified with Christ on Calvary as proof of only a 50-50 chance of salvation, Williams, ever more magnanimous of heart, prefers to see both thieves "invited to dine with him that evening in Heaven" (753).

¶8 Approaching a volume as weighty and, thus, physically unwieldy as this—and one that could well have benefitted from publication as a multi-volume set to allow for larger type-faces throughout and clearer photographic and facsimile reproductions—many readers might be tempted to focus on absorbing only what appears in the journals themselves; however, to read Williams's entries in tandem with Thornton's scholarly apparatus brings greater rewards. When, for example, Williams writes in June 1939 about being left physically nauseated by a sexual encounter that challenged his ideal of "Purity!" fostered by a residual Puritanism ("Rather horrible night with a picked up acquaintance Doug whose amorous advance made me sick at the stomach" [153]), Thornton locates this experience in Laguna Beach, rather than an episode six months earlier in the more raffish and bohemian New Orleans, as Williams' first consummated homosexual affair. She also reproduces a previously unpublished poem ("Your passion is arranged in decimals / I counted 200 blond hairs on your bare forearm" [152]) apparently inspired by the experience. Among other annotations related to this subject are ones informing us that Williams first broached the subject of homosexuality in a one-act play from 1937, "Escape"—

alternatively titled “Summer at the Lake”; that *Not about Nightingales* from 1938 “includes one of Williams’ first overtly homosexual characters, the Queen” (124); that by 1940 Williams had begun “to identify casual homosexual acquaintances only by initials” (182); that reading William Baxter’s 1951 novel *Look Down in Mercy* “may have influenced Williams in the suggestion of a homosexual relationship between Brick and Skipper” (570), since one did not appear in the source story; and that Williams commented admiringly on Hemingway’s having “‘a remarkable interest in and understanding of homosexuality, for a man who wasn’t a homosexual. . . . The final line in Hemingway’s *Islands in the Stream* is one man saying I love you to another’” (648). Any number of other subjects, from the recurrence of suicide in Williams’s works to the influence of film and painting on Williams’s career, can be mapped out in just such a way by following Thornton’s impeccably researched and judiciously written notes.

¶9 In her Introduction, Thornton valorizes the journals for “reveal[ing] Williams’ authentic voice—genuine and unadorned . . . .allow[ing] glimpses into his interior world” (ix) in a way that even the letters do not. Mostly they are replete with searing words about the agonizing process of artistic creation—with little acknowledgement of or even attention to its potential ecstasy. In 1939, Williams questions whether he has the necessary gifts to make the transition he has decided upon from poet to dramatist: “The tragedy of a poet writing drama is that when he writes well—from the dramaturgic, technical pt. of view he is often writing badly—one must learn—(that is the craft, I suppose)—to fuse lyricism and realism into a congruous unit—I guess my chief trouble is that I don’t” (173). And, as early as 1948, he fears something that the critics of his intensely personal and more experimental later plays will pass harsh judgment upon: “The fault, the danger . . . lies in the over working of a vein: loneliness, eroticism, repression, undefined spiritual longings, the intimate material of my own psyche is what I have filled my work with” (489). Yet in the face of the critics’ cruel rejection comes Williams own understated, dignified rejoinder: “Perhaps I was never meant to exist at all, but if I hadn’t, a number of my created beings would have been denied their passionate existence” (639). The example of Williams’s hard-won endurance—his motto *“En Avant!”* (285) appears already in his journals for 1942—must surely have helped Margaret Thornton remain undaunted through over a decade’s labor that has resulted in what can only be called a monumental work of scholarship.