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Staying Out of the Clutches of the Goddess: Heeding the Wisdom of Tennessee Williams

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Staying Out of the Clutches of the Goddess

Heeding the Wisdom of
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

by Richard Goodman



Tennessee Williams in college

USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

On November 30, 1947, Tennessee Williams, in what would become a kind of tradition, published an essay in the *New York Times* prior to the opening of his play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It's titled "The Catastrophe of Success." He wasn't, of course, referring to the astonishing success *A Streetcar Named Desire* would have, since his essay was published before the play actually opened. No, he was writing about what happened to him after the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, his first play produced on Broadway. Subsequent to "The Catastrophe of Success," Williams published quite a few essays in the *New York Times*, each appearing before a new play of his opened. They contain potent wisdom about what it means to be a playwright, what makes a good play,

an honest play, and what it means to be a writer in America. Most of these are collected in his book, *Where I Live: Selected Essays*, published by New Directions in 1978, but it is not a popular or well-known book. Williams is certainly not neglected as a playwright, but he is, I firmly believe, neglected as an essayist, and as a poet. I have recently learned that *Where I Live* will be published in a new edition next year and will contain more of Williams' theatre essays, which is good news, indeed.

Any aspiring or working writer can take much from these essays. They are to some extent about craft. But knowledge of craft, Williams knew so well, is just one aspect of what it is to be a writer. If you are to pursue this writing thing for the long run, it also takes courage, gumption, discipline,

heart, and a sense of values. This is what you learn about when you read Williams' essays. In this first essay, he writes about what William James called "the bitch-goddess success." No one has written about this hag better. In many years of teaching, I have heard again and again requests by students on how to get published, or at least how to find an agent. But no one asks, "What do I do if I'm successful?" Understandable! That seems but a fantasy for the beginning writer, and perhaps slightly absurd. The aspiring writer might well say, "Let me worry about how to deal with success when it comes to me. That's a problem I wouldn't mind having."

Maybe. But any kind of success can catapult the young writer into a world he or she is not accustomed to, and the results can be stultifying, even disastrous. The stories of one-book

authors, or authors whose later writing is a parody of their earlier, famous work, are part of literary lore and depressing. Think of the long, Flying Dutchman-like struggle of Malcolm Lowry after he published *Under the Volcano*. Or Ralph Ellison's lonely battle for a second novel after *Invisible Man*. Of course, we can't always be sure why a writer produces just a single book; the reasons are often complex and indiscernible. But, surely, some writers were done in by the glare and attention and expectations of their first large success, especially if it comes at an early age. But success is relative. It can mean, of course, publishing a first book, but it can also be as simple as publishing an essay or story in a well-regarded journal. It doesn't have to be a success on Broadway or a huge advance from a publisher. It's all part of the same corruptive and disorienting family. The goddess has cousins and nieces.

Then it's time to turn to Tennessee Williams. His "The Catastrophe of Success" is a wonderfully wry and funny essay in addition to being lyrical and wise. After the success of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams woke up one morning, as Bryon did, to find himself famous:

"I was snatched out of virtual oblivion and thrust into sudden prominence, and from the precarious tenancy of furnished rooms about the country I was removed to a suite in a first-class Manhattan hotel." Here, his troubles began. Luxury was his undoing:

"I lived on room service....Once I ordered a sirloin steak and a chocolate sundae, but everything was so cunningly disguised on the table that I mistook the chocolate sauce for gravy and poured it over the sirloin steak."

But more importantly, he soon found himself "indifferent to people." And, "sincerity and kindness seemed to have gone out of my friends' voices. I suspected them of hypocrisy."

He escaped to Mexico, and there, in "an elemental country where you can quickly forget the false dignities and conceits imposed by success," he found himself again. "My public self," he wrote, "that artifice of mirrors, did not exist here, and so my natural being was

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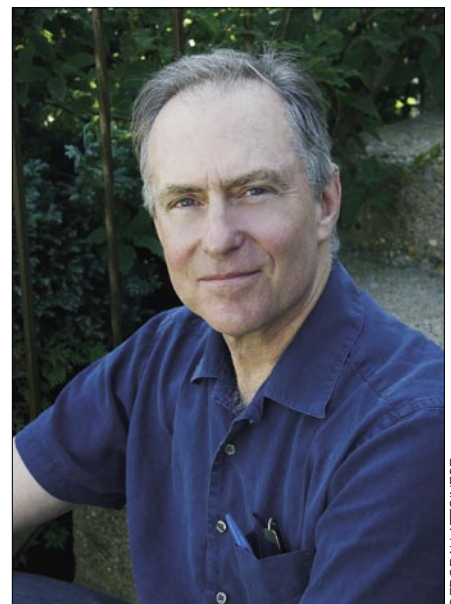
resumed." He was able once again to "apprehend the vacuity of a life without struggle," and that "the heart of man, his body and his brain, are forged in a white-hot furnace for the purpose of conflict (the struggle of creation)." He summed up what he learned from this catastrophe: "Security is a kind of death, I think, and it can come to you in a storm of royalty checks beside a kidney-shaped pool in Beverly Hills or anywhere at all that is removed from the conditions that made you an artist."

The essay must be read in its entirety to get the full impact of this journey back home for Williams. The fact is, though, it's an essay about how to contend with *not* achieving success, as well. Or, to put it another way, it's also about so-called failure. Williams is instructing all artists that they shouldn't be writing for any idea of success, because if, and when, that success arrives, it's only bewildering and can be highly toxic. If you don't "succeed"—if your essay or story or novel isn't accepted for publication—it's a kind of blessing. This may sound a bit absurd coming from a writer whose work *has* been published to a writer who hasn't had the least encouragement about his or her work from editors. But the cold clear fact of the matter is this: One of a writer's greatest assets, greatest gifts, is his or her freedom—freedom to write authentically, from the heart. Success can impede that, even for the strongest of souls. You may begin to feel, subconsciously, you have to write

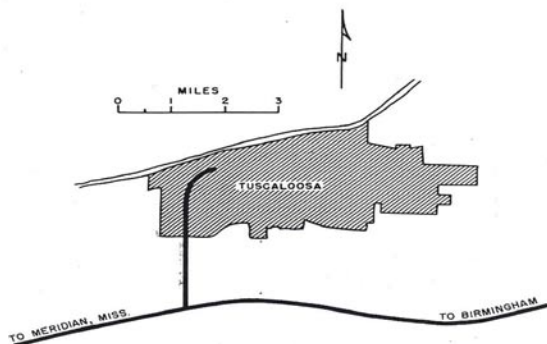
again what made you successful *before*. You feel you can't stray from that. Soon enough comes success's evil twin: a fear of failure. The reluctance to take chances, to listen to your heart. We have heard and seen this story before, but very few have written about it so incisively and feelingly as Tennessee Williams.

A personal note: When I was writing my first book, *French Dirt: The Story of a Garden in the South of France*, I was in a state of blessed obscurity. I had no pressures on me, save what I imposed upon myself, every morning. For one thing, I was forty-six years old, and no one even thought of me as a writer anymore, even in theory. Those days had long passed. I got up early before my job and wrote. I wrote only to please myself, day after day, until the book was finished, a year later. It was an exhilarating time. When the book was published, it received some praise. It wasn't anything remotely near what Tennessee Williams received for *The Glass Menagerie*, but still—expectations were raised. I know for a fact that whatever success I had bewildered me, threw me off balance, and I let it cut me off from my authentic voice. My second book was stillborn, a harsh experience, and it didn't help

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Richard Goodman



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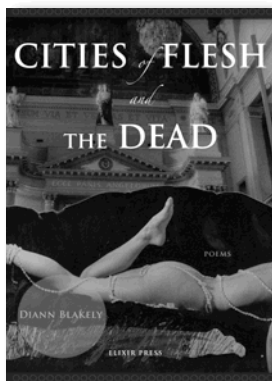
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that my editor turned out to be a fair weather friend, did not stick with me during sickness, but only in health, and turned her back on me. It took me seventeen years to come to grips with that—and with God knows what else—and to write a second book. Because of the elapsed time, I wrote the second book in the same blessed obscurity as I wrote the first. I can’t say if the new book is good or not—that’s up to the public to decide—but I can say that it’s *me*. I can say it’s authentic, and that’s the best thing about it, as far as I’m concerned.

Now I don’t mean to say that as a writer you should avoid any chance of success. Any writer wants *readers*, and lots of them. Why else write? Just for yourself? Then why bother publishing? No, writers want readers, and if you are fortunate enough to get them, then that success will affect your life, and—here I can speak from experience—your work. How you deal with it is the rub, and that’s why it’s a good thing to have an ally like Tennessee Williams on your side.

If you want an extended taste of what Williams’ life was like before he became famous, read the excellent biography of his early years, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* by Lyle Leverich. Practically every other letter Williams writes to his agent, the steadfast Audrey Wood, is for \$5 or \$10 or \$25 to get his typewriter or bicycle out of hock, or to pay a few days’ rent. But even in poverty and obscurity, Williams still battled those demons of success. Headed for New York City in January of 1940—*The Glass Menagerie* would not open until five years later—he wrote in his journal, “Sorry to report I feel rather dull due to the blue devils of defeatism which nearly always rear their ugly little faces in reaction to some period of triumph and elation.”

On that trip and on a few subsequent trips, he stayed at the West Side YMCA on 63rd Street near Central Park West. This happens to be where I gave one of the first readings from my new book, and where I have been many times. When I go, I often think of the young, struggling Tennessee Williams, with his great resolve, working away in his tenth floor room, not yet courted by the bitch goddess, but free to struggle to be the playwright he was meant to be.

Richard Goodman is the author of The Soul of Creative Writing and French Dirt: The Story of a Garden in the South of France.

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