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

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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
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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.