

“The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams”: Prospects for Research

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In April 1995, Nancy Tischler and I were authorized by the surviving Trustee of the Will to collect, edit, and publish “The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams.” Soon thereafter we signed contracts with New Directions Books, Williams’s longtime publisher, to deliver a manuscript by the year 2000.¹ To date we have gathered 2,500 letters, notes, and telegrams from various institutional sources, including the major Williams archives at Columbia University, the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas, and the New York City Public Library. In following stages of collection, we shall turn to smaller public and private sources and then begin the process of selection and annotation. At the same time, we are critically reading letters and acclimating ourselves to the literary career that Tennessee Williams lived for nearly fifty years. His half-dozen or so canonical plays are the famous products of a vast (and uneven) life-work that very few readers have measured. Lyle Leverich, Williams’s authorized biographer, is the chief exception to this rule; his first volume, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), is proving indispensable for solving the many problems of time, place, and work-in-progress that the letters present. Indispensable too is the bibliographical research of Drewey Wayne Gunn and George Crandell and the astute scholarship of Allean Hale. Behind all of these contemporary sources is the “field work” of Andreas Brown, who was instrumental in the 1960s in forming the principal Williams collection at the Humanities Research Center in Austin (HRC).

One of Williams’s longest and most revealing correspondences at the HRC was with his agent Audrey Wood. Their productive relationship lasted for thirty-one years, beginning in 1939 when Williams was a seldom published writer, and ending in 1971 when his career had faltered with a string

of personal and artistic failures. Both have told the story of their nasty parting scene—he in 1975 in *Memoirs*, she in 1981 in an autobiography entitled *Represented by Audrey Wood* (and published shortly after her death). Their notorious and regrettable breakup is not my subject, although the letters that I shall cite give essential foreground to its peculiar dynamics. My purpose instead is to begin an inventory of the correspondence in order to understand better the role that letters may have played in forming and sustaining Tennessee Williams's far-flung literary life. The sources, however, are not without evidential shortcomings. The Williams-Wood correspondence at the HRC ends in 1956, fifteen years before the breakup. Generally, Williams's correspondence slackened after 1955, but other sources reveal that author and agent corresponded well in the 1960s. While Williams's nomadic life insured that many recipient letters were not kept, Audrey Wood was a cautious businesswoman who seems to have copied every word that she wrote to the mercurial Williams, and to have filed his own letters as well. Only a part of the Liebling-Wood collection at the HRC has been catalogued, but the letters now available for study tell a story of literary self-discovery and creation that Tennessee Williams recorded with unusual candor and entrepreneurial skill.

By the end of 1939, the astute literary agent must have realized the complexity of her recent discovery. In early-April, in his first known letter to "Miss Wood," Williams confessed, "My personal affairs are in quite a muddle just now," and he went on to express an eagerness to "jump into the arms of any agent who could assure me the quick sale of anything - even my soul to the devil!" (10 April 1939). He was frustrated in part by repeated failure to breach the "fortress" of *Story* magazine, which he knew to be a distinguished market for experimental fiction. By late-April, Williams and Wood had agreed to terms of agency, and Williams's letters from Southern California continued the lifelong process of mythologizing his personal "muddle." To Audrey Wood, in New York City, these first letters may have seemed to arrive from the back of the American cultural beyond, or so Williams hoped to suggest. They spoke of his descent from "Indian-fighting Tennessee pioneers" (5 May 1939), his relentless travel in the South and West in the preceding months, comic misadventures on a chicken ranch in California, a myriad of casual jobs, and always his poverty. "Do literary agents dispense any advice about feeding small chickens," he asked facetiously in June, after reporting that

some of "the poor little bastards" under his care "had starved or foundered themselves!" (June 1939). Audrey Wood had been warned in effect that representing "Tennessee" Williams (as he had now called himself for six months) would exceed mere literary agency. His creativity, she realized no doubt, would often be self-absorbed, and she would be called upon to assist in its painful exercises and rehearsals.

When Williams wrote to Audrey of his literary plans in 1939, they came with a pent-up rush. In closely succeeding letters, he cited "two long plays in progress" (5 May 1939) and proposed writing others about the wandering poet Vachel Lindsay, "D. H. Lawrence's life in New Mexico," "writers fired off the WPA" (16 July 1939), and a "fugitive from life" (30 July 1939) named Jonathan Melrose, who was a prototype for Val Xavier and especially Chance Wayne. In addition, he was writing new sketches for the *American Blues* "gallery," and he had "several ideas for short novels" tucked away, never a favorite genre of Williams, as well as "a great mass" of verse (16 July 1939). Wood tried to moderate this excess, if only by delaying judgment of new ideas and scripts—many unsalable to her practiced eye, and only of passing interest to Williams. But the profusion itself was another manifestation of "muddle," and it implicitly defined Tennessee Williams as "that most common American phenomenon, the rootless, wandering writer,"² peddling his vast store of experience. Tennessee Williams was Kilroy, the ubiquitous American wartime graffito, well before he wrote about him in *Camino Real* (1953).

Although quickly abandoned, the Lindsay project told the inner story of Williams's early career with the greatest precision. In his poverty, his wanderings, his unrequited commitment to a literary vocation, Williams identified with the same beleaguered markings of Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931), an Illinois-born poet of some renown, whose grisly suicide in 1931 (he drank lye) had deeply moved him. The biographical play, Williams told his new agent in June, "would concern . . . the whole problem of the poet or creative artist in America or any other capitalist state." No artist, he said of Lindsay, had "ever put up a braver, more pitiful struggle against the intellectual apathy and the economic tyranny of his time!" (June 1939). There is a familiar overreaching in the scope of Williams's plan, for it eventuated only in an unpublished fragment of homage entitled "Suitable Entrances to Springfield or Heaven."³ But Vachel Lindsay's "struggle" to maintain artist purity

and reserve was an inspiring model for Williams, who knew well (underlined by a father's harsh pressure) the artist's vulnerability in a "capitalist state." In the following summer, he secluded himself at Acapulco and drafted a "serious comedy" entitled *Stairs to the Roof* that was a scathing indictment of the "economic tyranny" of the time. Tennessee Williams, a spiritual southerner, had come under the sway of a literary nationalism peculiar to the 1930s. In this early key, his was a native American voice of protest straining to be heard above the moral and economic din of the republic. Soon Williams would confirm this prophetic identity in several important letters to his friend Joe Hazan (HRC), but already its outline must have been clear to Audrey Wood, who with equal bravery took up its service.

Before examining later stages in the Wood correspondence, let me suggest the kind of interactive effect that a "selected letters" of Tennessee Williams can have. The two collections published to date consist largely of letters written by Williams to their respective editors, Donald Windham and Maria St. Just. Their volumes, published in 1977 and 1990, respectively, perform the invaluable service of placing Tennessee Williams on the record; but they also entail him in rather narrow editorial fictions not of his making. Maria St. Just's collection, entitled *Five O' Clock Angel* (Knopf), is made further problematic because the original Williams letters seem not available for study. Donald Windham's sources are held by Yale and generally reveal sound editorial practice (if some inaccurate dating) when compared with the published text. In both cases, however, Tennessee Williams suffers the rigors and distortions of appropriation by "friends" whose personal or literary needs seem urgent. Some hint of the enlarging effect of a "selected letters," with its multiplicity of correspondents and comparative texts, can be seen through the lens of Williams's letters in the summer of 1939.

In June Williams began a letter to Audrey by excusing her delay in answering a letter of his: "Your 'long delay in answering my long descriptive letter concerning myself' is perfectly understandable. Perhaps you have known enough writers (I have) not to be too surprised when they show an unusual propensity for talking about themselves." Williams continued then to talk about himself, and in ways that further embellished his precarious literary life. "Since I am now living in a lonely canyon with a minimum of social intercourse I see no promise of checking that tendency [sic] in myself, as letters are just about my only means of advertising my ego at the present

time." It was in this same letter, mailed from "a little cabin" in "Bootleg Canyon," near Laguna Beach, that Williams had first described the Vachel Lindsay project, claiming in effect his own desolating "personal experiences" as authority for a play idea that he found "very hard to dismiss" (June 1939).

As Williams was putting the finishing touches on his lonely outpost, he was also writing to his mother in St. Louis as a dutiful son of the middle border. No isolation or anxious leisure, no febrile "advertising" of the artistic ego, no poverty occasioned by "economic tyranny" were broached to Edwina at this time. She was treated instead to a sunny tour, as should all mothers be. The cabin described to Wood as a remote and lonely "shack" (June 1939) was equipped now with a congenial roommate, Jim Parrott, and was "marvelously comfortable and attractive." Laguna Beach itself was "located on a bay surrounded by beautiful wooded hills," Williams said in his best tourist style, and there were "endless places to visit and things to see!" His writing, he claimed, had prospered in this Eden, and when actually forced to work, it was with the nonchalance of a lazy southerner: "I work some nights in a bowling alley (setting up pins) and Jim plays Saturday nights in Los Angeles bands[,] so we do some toiling and spinning in return for our magnificent [sic] raiment!" (Summer 1939).

Always an avid player himself, Williams has spoken eloquently of the ontology of theatre. Stage characters "do not return our looks," he wrote in 1951: "We do not have to answer their questions nor make any sign of being in company with them, nor do we have to compete with their virtues nor resist their offenses. All at once, for this reason, we are able to *see* them!" ("The Timeless World of a Play"). Letters, I think, give us the same spectatorial advantage and freedom. In the summer of 1939, we can see Williams enacting a self-scripted drama of disclosure and disguise. The interplay of parts, seeming disingenuous, does not, however, warrant a judgment, for no particular virtue or vice exists in his surpassing drama of self-display. He is by turns Tennessee and Tom, to adapt Lyle Leverich's useful typology, and they are not merely the deconstructing bits of an illusory paper author. They are complementary modes or phases of a discernible subject who constructs himself, or is constructed, from the sinuosities of domestic and artistic emotion. It is a structure of feeling that will crop up again and again in the letters, but not with more poignance or clarity than in 1954, when Williams asked his publisher, New Directions, to censor the collec-

tion entitled *Hard Candy*: “Don’t distribute the book anywhere that my mother would be likely to get her hands on it,” he urged Robert MacGregor: “That is, around St. Louis. It must not be displayed in windows or on counters anywhere. . . . My mother’s reaction is the only one that concerns me. Isn’t it awful to have conventional blood ties? You just can’t break them” (27 May 1954). Coincidental letters written to Audrey Wood and Edwina in mid-1939 and, residually, to Bob MacGregor in 1954, allow us to see Williams enacting vivid, authentic roles, rather than mere editorial fictions, in a self-revealing “selection” of letters. And finally, they reveal the double paradox of his later distinguished career: a personal dynamic of allegiance and resistance to domestic emotion mediated by a commercial stage whose own master discourse was governed by the canons of familial realism.

In their continuing correspondence, Williams averaged nearly twenty-five communications per year with Audrey Wood over the next sixteen years. One prominent effect of these letters (along, of course, with Wood’s own letters) is that they characterize Wood almost as fully as they do Tennessee Williams. Above all, she was his primary and most trusted reader for at least the first two decades of their association. “Would you like me to send it to you scene by scene, so that you can criticize it as I go along?” he asked her in 1946, as he began revision either of *A Streetcar Named Desire* or *Summer and Smoke* (coincident works-in-progress that are often hard to disentangle in the correspondence). His dependence was still evident in 1950, when he anxiously sought Wood’s reaction to *The Rose Tattoo*. “It is totally impossible to judge for yourself” (3 February 1950), he wrote in defense of his usual impatience. And in 1953, after Wood had shown little enthusiasm for still another revision of *Battle of Angels*, he reassured her that her “reaction to a script means much more to me than anyone else’s, including the critics” (14 October 1953). By the late 1940s, Williams came to suspect that the firm of Liebling-Wood (he considered Wood’s husband and partner, William Liebling, to be deceptive) required oversight as managers of his finance. But for another decade, his confidence in Audrey Wood’s literary taste and her astute knowledge of Broadway mores did not waver substantially, and thus she was admitted time and again to the most intimate recesses of his literary life.

If the early letters to Audrey Wood allowed Williams to mythologize his personal “muddle,” then their ensuing correspondence often helped him

to deal with the strain of writing for the commercial theatre. In late-1941, in the sobering aftermath of the failure of *Battle of Angels*, Williams described his thin skin while thanking Audrey for a testimonial (from John Tebbel, managing editor of the *American Mercury*) that she had slipped into a recent letter of hers. "I don't believe anyone ever suspects how completely unsure I am of my work and myself and what tortures of self-doubting the doubt of others has always given me" (25 September 1941). In a following letter, Williams tilted his sensitivity toward stoicism, telling Wood that "I have lived behind the mobile fortress of a deep and tranquil pessimism for so long that I feel almost impregnable" (October 1940). Torture and tranquility, exposure and protection, publicity and reserve—the regularity of the "see-saw" motion (3 April 1950), as Williams would later describe it to Wood, was already familiar to the agent by 1941. But these and other such letters addressed to Wood were also an occasion for Williams to objectify and adjust his own "precarious balance of nerves" (4 September 1942) as no other correspondent had allowed to date. She might not be an infallible "Court of Human Relations" (5 November 1946), as Williams said in 1946, but Wood's personal and professional stability and her reserved friendship were crucial elements in Williams's prolonged maturing as a writer. Their sad break in 1971 has a long foreground in the letters, one that begins ironically with the most enduring product of their relationship: the production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947.

In April 1947, Williams wired Audrey Wood that her choice of Irene Selznick as a relatively untried producer for *Streetcar* "had better be good" (8 April 1947). It was a warning tinged with comical bravado, but by August Williams's mood had turned serious, and he complained to Audrey that his "irreducible rights as an author" were being compromised by a "high-handed" producer. There was a kind of fatality involved, or so he thought: "A play is my life's blood" (25 August 1947), he protested. By 1947, their relationship was sufficiently weighty and secure to allow such candid exchange, but the more subtle point is the one conveyed by tone. The important letter of August 25 has the clear accent of a progress toward maturity and self-possession. Williams's criticism of "the Selznick company" does not proceed from mere carping or a familiar case of nerves, but from a conviction that the play in question is special. "I am not going to lose this play because of poor management and I am going to see to it that it is protected in every possible

and reasonable way because that it what I have a right to expect as the one who has given most and who has the most at stake." The following line in the letter, "A play is my life's blood," might have been written from a residue of Blanche DuBois's own hysteria, but it was delivered to Audrey with measure and precision and emotional reserve. The naive, accommodating author who had been subject to the whims of producers and directors in the staging of *Battle of Angels* (1940) and *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) was now determined to give his classic work "the maximum protection" (25 August 1947). Was there not finally an impressive trading or transfer of stability and resolve in the author-agent relationship?

It is not surprising, however, that *Streetcar* was both the vehicle of a great and apparently lasting success and the site of the first serious breach in the author-agent relationship. On December 5, 1948, Williams informed Audrey that he wished his younger brother Dakin to assume oversight of his financial affairs. (Dakin had completed a law degree at Washington University in 1942 and had some additional training in business at Harvard.) Eddie Colton, his present financial advisor, did not give Williams the "security or understanding" that he required in the flush times following *Streetcar*, especially when Williams contemplated his staggering tax bill for 1948. Dakin's "double check" of Eddie Colton, who had the support of Liebling-Wood, would both protect his financial interests and insulate him from "the business side of life," or so he hoped to persuade Audrey Wood.

On December 9, Williams wrote a two-part letter to Dakin, one with straightforward instructions that he might show to Audrey, the other not for her eyes. In the second, he advised Dakin to practice great "TACT!" in dealing with Audrey when he reached New York City. "I am very, very anxious to have you avoid betraying any sign of any distrust of her handling of my affairs. . . . You must handle her with great tact and diplomacy: a breach in my relations with her would be extremely dangerous and detrimental." Read comparatively, as a "selected letters" must be, Williams's revealing correspondence with Audrey and Dakin evokes the same feeling of vulnerability as his identification with Vachel Lindsay had produced in a time of obscurity. What has erupted paradoxically as a consequence of success is Williams's awareness of the writer's precarious existence on Broadway and his fear of being silenced. Writing and production were truly his "life's blood," as he had told Audrey, and as he would write to Brooks Atkinson in 1955, after

reading his smash review of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. "I love writing too much, and to love anything too much is to feel a terror of loss: it's a kind of madness" (25 March 1955).

During his prolonged apprenticeship, Williams had lived a simple set of alternatives: either succeed as a writer or accept stagnation and defeat in some such unforgiving city as St. Louis. In stories and plays, in letters and journals, and then in the midst of his great success on Broadway, he returned obsessively to these alternatives, all the while attempting to master the fear that framed his view of life. Writing and being were inseparable for him, and the urgency of their connection made the familiar Williams "sins" of prevarication, self-aggrandizement, and the breaking of friendships the survival techniques of a desperate man. He voiced precisely this fear of a conspiracy against his work in 1971 in his parting scene with Audrey Wood: "And as for you," she has recalled his shouting, "you have wished I was dead for the last ten years" (*Represented by Audrey Wood*, p. 200). The neglect that he attributed to her agency in the 1960s was a matter of life and death, as were her power and prestige on Broadway two decades earlier. The editors hope that the "Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams" can show this and more in their curiously clarifying sweep through his distinguished career.

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Notes

¹ The unpublished letters of Tennessee Williams are quoted with the permission of New Directions Books, New York City. The Williams-Wood correspondence is held by the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin. Williams's letters to Robert MacGregor and Brooks Atkinson are held, respectively, by New Directions Books and the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York City Public Library. Letters are dated parenthetically in the text.

² "A Playwright Named Tennessee," in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986), pp. 28-29.

³ The undated typescript (25 pages) of "Suitable Entrances to Springfield or Heaven," subtitled "A Play in Homage to Vachel Lindsay," is held by the University of Delaware Library.