

BOOK REVIEW

Tennessee Williams: New Selected Essays: Where I Live. Edited by John S. Bak. Introduction by John Lahr. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2009. List of major works and non-fiction prose, introduction, afterward, notes, index. xvi, 313 pp. \$18.95 paper.

WHERE I LIVE IS AN UPDATED, NEWLY EDITED VERSION OF NEW Directions's volume of the same name, originally edited by Christine Day and Bob Woods and published in 1978. A fine and indispensable source both for Tennessee Williams scholars and the laity, this book provides a more or less chronological collection (1940-1981) of Williams's direct commentary on his philosophy of art and the artist, plus a section of his juvenilia dating from 1927. In addition, it includes a list of Williams's important published creative work and a complete list of his published non-fiction prose. As John S. Bak explains, the book is significantly more comprehensive than the first edition in that it now includes many more of Williams's "important essays . . . along with smaller prose works—some previously unpublished; others published but imprisoned in out-of-print books . . . on the dusty shelves of August libraries" (264). The updated volume is a well-edited and broad collection that brings together both well known formal essays, reviews, and introductions by Williams and more obscure references and commentaries excerpted from the author's memoirs, journals and letters. As John Lahr comments in his astute introduction, this collection illustrates both the growth and the disintegration of an artist, as his "pulse changed from one of exhilaration to one of exhaustion" (xvi). The essays in particular reveal Williams as torn between his vision of himself as a dramatic artist and his role as a professional writer and celebrity dependent on philistine producers, hard-hearted agents, and a fickle, ignorant public. Bak explains that these "essays form individual chapters of Williams's shadow memoirs . . . [and] singular pieces of a complex mosaic" (260).

The volume is divided into three sections: "Essays," "Miscellany: Reviews, Introductions, Appreciations, and Program Notes," and "Juvenilia and College Papers." This system of organization is not always useful to scholars. Perhaps an arrangement based somewhat on chronology would be more helpful; at least the juvenilia section should

be first in the text, and the other two sections could be collapsed into each other chronologically, since there is often little significant difference between what is included in the "Essays" and in the "Miscellany." For example, among the "Essays" we find "T. Williams's View of T. Bankhead," and among the "Miscellany" a "A Tribute from Tennessee Williams to 'Heroic Tallulah Bankhead.'" However, the organization is a very minor flaw in comparison to the richness and variety of the material, Lahr's excellent introduction and Bak's astute afterward, and the value of having all of Williams's significant commentaries about his work in one convenient volume.

Lahr addresses what many critics have called Williams's tendency to digress even when he was attempting to explain ambiguities in his work. Bak calls Williams's skewed defenses "redirection" (261). This "Tell the truth, but tell it slant" characteristic is perhaps the most descriptive of Williams's writing, and is a clear pattern throughout this collection. In "The History of a Play (With Parentheses)," Williams says very little about the actual "history" of *Battle of Angels*, but a great deal about professional theatre, the insufficiency of prose, the meaning of morality, and the tragic mental delicacy of Miriam Hopkins. He concludes by writing, "With love and with honesty, the embrace is inevitable" (24). Williams's "History" is actually philosophy and artistic theory—the real meat of the essay is in the "parentheses." In "Questions Without Answers," he describes a farcical cocktail party conversation after he is "hemmed in by three women in basic black" (41). First protesting to his readers that he is a "writer who is not intentionally obscure, and never, in his opinion, obscure at all," he describes the unanswerable questions posed to him about the "theme" or "subject" of *Summer and Smoke* (41). Pretending surprise that his plays can be puzzling or difficult to understand, he protests that he writes "about life" (41). Williams's self-deprecation saves this essay from pretentiousness, since he admits that his broad artistic claim really isn't a straight answer to reasonable questions. He then concludes his non-explanation by describing his happiness in being asked those "questions without answers" because in being questioned, he knows that he has "really succeeded" in "writing about [life]" (42). In other words, he provokes the questions, but refuses to answer, although he offers answers to questions that haven't been asked! Similarly, in the prosaically titled "The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*," he does little to pin down the "meaning" other than to say that

“*The Rose Tattoo* is the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance” (63). He might as well be saying it is a play about “life,” as he states more openly in “Questions Without Answers.” But these essays give us something beyond an explication or an interpretation of any individual work: they hint at the fearsome mystery of artistic creation. Williams is repeatedly frustrated by questions about intent or symbolic interpretation. While he might not be clear in describing his “meaning,” he is clear in explaining *why* he cannot provide an interpretive guide: “We all have in our conscious and unconscious minds a great vocabulary of images, and I think all human communication is based on these images . . . ; and a symbol in a play has only one legitimate purpose, which is to say a thing more directly . . . than it could be said in words” (70). In short, Williams is asserting, “If you don’t understand my plays, it is your fault, not mine.”

One of the new selections in this edition is from Williams’s “Program Note for *The Red Devil Battery Sign*” (1980). In his brief commentary Williams says poignantly that “The written play reminds me somewhat of a raw, bloody wound” and that his “kind of serious theatre is to somehow combine humor and terror and sensuality and heart-break” (218). *New Selected Essays: Where I Live* goes a long way in helping us understand the source of Williams’s wounds. It also illustrates how often he achieved the simultaneous audience responses of laughter and terror and the ageless thematic combination of sensuality and heartbreak. Williams’s record of his artistic striving is in this text, and Tennessee Williams scholarship is richer because of this publication.

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