

“Gathering up the ‘Pieces of [His] Youth’: A Study of Tennessee Williams’s Non-Fiction”

Final Report

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Tennessee Williams wrote almost daily for over forty years, leaving behind him a trove of manuscripts that editors are only now beginning to discover. Previously unpublished work of his has thus appeared almost yearly in journals and in book form since the mid-1990s, attesting to the fact that Williams is enjoying a literary afterlife as fertile as the one he knew while he was still alive. My research at Columbia University’s Rare Book & Manuscript Library (RBML) hopes to contribute to prolonging that afterlife.

During my research stay at the RBML this past August, I was able to examine many of Williams’s non-fiction manuscripts, in particular those related directly or indirectly to his *Memoirs*, published in 1975. I first ordered files in “Subseries II.3: Other Works & Related Material: ‘Essays, [v.p.], 1979, 1982 (2 t.ms. Mes Cahiers Noirs [acq 430, 7.1.88]; Valediction [acq 490 (Mixer), Dec 14, 1989])’ and ‘Articles, essays and reviews , [n.p.], 1950-1970 (1 folder).” It was in this subseries that I discovered a heretofore unknown non-fiction piece by Williams: “‘When You Betray me, If You Betray Me’ Statement on the production of his play [This Is (An Entertainment)]. 3 pages.” In addition to these files, I looked at essays entitled “Some Philosophical Shop-Talk” and “These Scattered Idioms,” which represent some of Williams’s late attempts at establishing a permanent record of his family, his artistic credo, and his struggle to continually please his critics. I also studied folders containing fragments and drafts of essays titled “Man in the Overstuffed Chair” (which he wrote alongside other essays, such as “Prelude to a Comedy”) and his “Cahiers Noirs”. These date from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, demonstrating that Williams had begun his memoirs long before 1972 (when he dedicated most of his time to the project), and even later, which proves that he was at work on a second autobiographical collection at the time of his death.

Undoubtedly, though, my greatest discovery included the folders in box 54 recently donated to the RBML by Williams’s agent, Mitch Douglas. No Williams scholar has yet had a look at these manuscripts, whose several thick folders were processed only a few months ago. The files contain together nearly a thousand pages of manuscripts and other material related to Williams’s *Memoirs*, and it will take me the better part of this year to sort through them all, collating these pages with those that I discovered at Harvard back in 2011. These files were incredibly rich and will no doubt help me to piece together the final year that went into the publication of the *Memoirs*. (Incidentally, during my trip to New York, I was able to read through another version of the memoirs housed at the Billy Rose Collection that will also help me to situate better the RBML manuscripts).

In addition to these manuscripts, I read through folders containing letters from Williams's publishers, New Directions and Doubleday, which will provide the needed backstory to the publication of the *Memoirs*. Again, these are letters that have never been published (or perhaps even seen) by Williams scholars, and they will be instrumental to my research. Once I finished reading through them, I turned to boxes A and B of the collection, which contain letters to and from Williams over the years. Of particular interest to me were the letters of the 1960s and 1970s, which remain unpublished to this day. They gave me solid biographical information on Williams lacking for the most part in the books dedicated to his later years.

If the Harvard collection figured centrally in my recent monograph, *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), the RBML will be showcased in my new book project on reconstructing Williams's *Memoirs*. His *Memoirs* were so heavily edited by Doubleday prior to their publication, much to Williams's chagrin, that it is my hope now to use these numerous manuscripts at the RBML to retell the life story that Williams had wanted to leave to posterity but, for legal and moral reasons of the day, could not. This book will be the first in-depth study of Williams's last decade or so alive, a period in his life riddled with apocrypha and false stories. Thus, while I benefitted greatly from my research stay at the RBML, I hope to return the favor in the coming years with the publication of this monograph.

Conducting research on Tennessee Williams from France is no easy task. Not only do I feel physically isolated from the research materials needed to carry out my work, but I also feel professionally detached from the community of American drama scholars. The research award alleviated these handicaps, if only a short while. While at Columbia, I benefitted greatly from conversations with curators Jenny Lee and John Tofanelli. John and I even spent an hour or so over drinks discussing our various research projects on Williams. We agreed to help each other, if we find documents relevant to the other's research. I look forward to continue working with the RBML, whether it be on completing my current project or on undertaking future ones that will necessitate work in the Williams Collection there.