IN AN addendum written in March, 1944, for the published text of *Battle of Angels*, Tennessee Williams affirmed his allegiance to the plastic medium of the theater. "I have never for a moment doubted that there are people—millions!—to say things to," he concluded. "We come to each other, gradually, but with love. It is the short reach of my arms that hinders, not the length and multiplicity of theirs. With love and with honesty, the embrace is inevitable." When *The Glass Menagerie* reached Broadway one year later, on March 31, 1945, the embrace was consummated. The thirty-one-year-old southern playwright met and won his audience, and the planet's most formidable band of critics awarded him the New York Drama Critics' Circle prize for the best American play of the 1944-45 season. If in the fall of 1945 a second occasion for an embrace, his earlier-written dramatization of a D. H. Lawrence story under the title *You Touched Me*, proved less ardent, it was still an encounter with a well-disposed public that patronized the play for several months. Two years later, moreover, *A Streetcar Named Desire* quickly took its place after the Broadway première on December 3, 1947, as the outstanding American drama of several seasons, holding its own even against so strong a rival as *Mister Roberts* and winning a second Drama Critics' Circle award as well as the Pulitzer Prize. By common consent its author is the foremost new playwright to have appeared on the American scene in a decade, and our theater capital is at present eagerly awaiting *Summer and Smoke*, concerning which reports have been glowing ever since Margo Jones produced it in Dallas in the summer of 1947.

All was not well when Tennessee Williams predicted an inevitable embrace between himself and the theater, and a less resolute young man might hastily have retreated from the battlefield of the stage. After having written four unsatisfactory and unproduced full-length plays by 1940, he had seemed to be riding on the crest of the wave when *Battle of Angels* was put into production by the Theatre Guild in the fall of that year. A
group of his one-acters, aptly entitled *American Blues*, since their scene was the depression period, had won a small cash award from the Group Theatre in 1939. He had received a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship and had been given a scholarship to an advanced playwrights’ seminar at the New School for Social Research in February, 1940, by Theresa Helburn and John Gassner. Since both instructors were associates of the Theatre Guild, they submitted their student’s play to the Guild when he showed them a draft of *Battle of Angels* at the end of the semester. The play went into rehearsal under excellent auspices, with Margaret Webster as director and Miriam Hopkins as the leading lady. But the results were catastrophic when the play opened in Boston. The play concluded melodramatically with a conflagration, which the stage manager, previously warned that he was weakening the effect by his chary use of the smokepots, decided to make thoroughly realistic. An audience already outraged by examples of repressed sexuality in a southern community was virtually smoked out of the theater, and Miss Hopkins had to brush away waves of smoke from her face in order to respond to the trickle of polite applause that greeted the fall of the curtain. The reviewers were lukewarm at best, and soon Boston’s Watch and Ward Society began to make itself heard. The Theatre Guild withdrew the play after the Boston tryout and sent a hasty apology to its subscribers. The author, who had lost an unusual opportunity to make his mark in the theater, became once more, as he put it, that “most common American phenomenon, the rootless wandering writer,” who ekes out a living by doing odd jobs. He was ushering in a movie theater for a weekly wage of seventeen dollars when Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer took him out to Culver City along with other young hopefuls. The studio promptly forgot about him after his submission of an outline for a screenplay that contained the germ of *The Glass Menagerie*, wrote him off as just another bad penny in Hollywood’s expensive slot-machine, and dismissed him at the end of his six months’ term.

If his prospects seemed bleak in the early months of 1944, Tennessee Williams nevertheless had reasons for self-confidence. He had been sufficiently inured to straitened circumstances during his youth, especially while pursuing his studies at the University of Missouri, Washington University, and the University of Iowa. His education had even been interrupted by two years of depressing employment as a clerk for a shoe company. His later apprenticeship to the writing profession had included desultory work as a bellhop in a New Orleans hotel, as a typist for engineers in Jacksonville, Florida, and as a waiter and reciter of verses in a Greenwich Village night club. He also knew the direction he was taking and had, in fact, already covered some of the road, having absorbed considerable experience and poured out a good deal of it in the remarkable one-act plays later collected under the title of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton*. He was developing a precise naturalism, compounded of compassion and sharp observation and filled with some of those unsavory details that Boston had found offensive but that Williams considered a necessary part of the truth to which he had dedicated himself. He was certain that, although he had written poetry and short stories, his métier was the theater because he found himself continually think-

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4 *New Directions*, 1945.
ing in terms of sound, color, and movement and had grasped the fact that the theater was something more than written language: "The turbulent business of my nerves demanded something more animate than written language could be." He was also moving toward a fusion of the most stringent realism with symbolism and poetic language wherever such writing seemed dramatically appropriate.

Above all, Williams was ready to carve out plays that would be as singular as their author. Although one may surmise that he was much affected by Chekhov and D. H. Lawrence and possibly by Faulkner, he drew too much upon his own observation to be actually imitative. Nor did he fall neatly into the category of social and polemical dramatists who dominated the theater of the 1930's, even if his experience of the depression inclined him toward the political left. His interest was primarily in individuals rather than in social conditions. His background alone would have distinguished him from urban playwrights like Odets, Arthur Miller, and Lillian Hellman, who were attuned to political analysis and regarded personal problems under the aspect of social conditioning. By comparison with his radical contemporaries, this Mississippi-born descendant of Tennessee pioneers (he was born in Columbus on March 26, 1914) was insular and had been conventionally reared and educated. His father, formerly a salesman in the delta region, was the sales manager of a shoe company in St. Louis, and his maternal grandfather was an Episcopalian clergyman. Cities appalled Williams. He disliked St. Louis, where he spent his boyhood, and he never felt acclimated to New York. His inclinations, once he felt free to wander, took him to Florida, Taos, Mexico, or the Latin Quarter of New Orleans, where he still maintains an apartment. The pattern of his behavior established itself early in his life, and it was marked by a tendency to isolate himself, to keep his individuality inviolate, and to resort to flight whenever he felt hard-pressed.

II

The one-act plays which first drew attention to Williams foreshadow his later work both thematically and stylistically. The first to be published, *Moony's Kid Don't Cry*,7 presents a factory worker who longs to swing an ax in the Canadian woods, a carefree youth who doesn't hesitate to buy his month-old baby a ten-dollar hobbyhorse when he still owes money to the maternity hospital. Moony, whose effort to escape is effectively scotched by his practical wife, is a prototype of the restive young heroes of *Battle of Angels* and *The Glass Menagerie*. The sturdy one-acter *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* gives a foretaste of the rowdy humor that was to prove troublesome in *Battle of Angels* and was to establish a fateful environment for the heroine of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The pungent naturalism of Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner is very much in evidence in this extravaganza about a cotton-gin owner who loses his wife to the man whose cotton gin he burned down in order to acquire his business. *The Purification*, a little tragedy of incest and Spanish "honor," reveals Williams' poetic power and theatrical imagination, and *The Long Goodbye* anticipates *The Glass Menagerie* with its retrospective technique.

Most noteworthy, however, are those evidences of compassion for life's waifs which transfigure crude reality in the one-acters. Pity glows with almost un-

6 *Pharos*, spring, 1945, p. 110.

7 *The Best One-Act Plays of 1940*, ed. Margaret Mayorga (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1941).
bearable intensity in the red-light district atmosphere of *Hello from Bertha*, in which an ailing harlot loses her mind. Pity assumes a quiet persuasiveness in the vignette, *Lord Byron's Love Letter*, in which two women's pathetic poverty is revealed by their effort to subsist on donations from Mardi Gras tourists to whom they display a letter from Byron; and Williams is particularly affecting in his treatment of battered characters who try to retain shreds of their former respectability in a gusty world. Self-delusion, he realizes, is the last refuge of the hopelessly defeated, and he studies its manifestations in *The Portrait of a Madonna* with such clinical precision that this one-acter would be appalling if it were less beautifully written. Its desiccated heroine, who imagines herself being violated by an invisible former admirer and who plays the southern belle of her girlhood by bandying charming talk with imaginary beaux, is almost as memorable a character as Blanche Du Bois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams would like to grant these unfortunates the shelter of illusions, and it pains him to know that the world is less tender. Mrs. Hardwick-Moore of *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* is the butt of her landlady, who jibes at the poor woman's social pretensions and at her invention of a Brazilian rubber plantation, from which her income is incomprehensibly delayed. Only a fellow-boarder, a writer nearly as impoverished as Mrs. Hardwick-Moore, is charitable enough to realize that "there are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth by the hard-knuckled hand of need" and to indulge her increasingly reckless fabrication as she locates the plantation only a short distance from the Mediterranean but near enough to the Channel for her to distinguish the cliffs of Dover on a clear morning.

It is quite apparent that Williams was nearly fully formed in these short plays as a painter of a segment of the American scene, a dramatist of desire and frustration, and a poet of the human compensatory mechanism. It is a curious fact about American playwriting that, like O'Neill, Paul Green, Odets, and Irwin Shaw, Williams should have unfolded his talent in the one-act form.

III

When the young author wrote *Battle of Angels*, the first of the full-length plays to attract a Broadway management, he was on less securely charted territory. He did not yet know his way through the maze of a plot sustained for an entire evening. He was so poorly guided in the revisions he made for the Theatre Guild that the play as produced was inferior to the script that had been accepted, and he also appears to have been fixed on D. H. Lawrence somewhat too strongly at this stage to be able to master the play's problems. *Battle of Angels* is unsatisfactory even in the revision published in 1945, which differs in several respects from the play that failed in Boston, for it lacks the Wagnerian conflagration climax, stresses the note of social protest in one scene, and employs a prologue and epilogue as makeshift devices. He had plainly tried to throw together too many of the elements he had dramatized separately in his best one-acters. He brought his vagabond hero, Val Xavier, into a decayed town, involved him with a frenzied aristocratic girl, grouped an assorted number of repressed matrons and unsympathetic townsmen around him, and made him fall in love with the frustrated wife of a storekeeper dying of cancer. He not only made the mistake of multiplying dramatic elements instead of fusing them but piled up fortuitous situations, such as the arrival of an avenging fury in the shape of a woman.
from whom he had escaped and the killing of the wife, Myra, by the jealous storekeeper—a murder for which Val is innocently lynched. Williams, moreover, made the mistake of offering an ill-defined cross between a provincial vagrant and a D. H. Lawrence primitive as an example of purity of spirit. A somewhat ill-digested romanticism would have vitiated the play even if its dramaturgy had been firmer.

_Battle of Angels_, nevertheless, contained some of his most imaginative dialogue and memorable character-drawing. Myra is a rounded portrait, and Williams has yet to improve upon his secondary character, Vee Talbot. Vee painted the Twelve Apostles as she saw them in visions, only to have them identified as “some man around Two River County,” and paints the figure of Christ, only to discover that she has drawn Val Xavier. If Williams had been able to exercise restraint, he could have made his mark in 1940 instead of having to wait five years.

He did achieve simplification with his next work, _You Touched Me_, a comedy in which a Canadian solider liberates a girl from her musty British environment and the mummifying influence of a spinster. But here he was working with another writer’s material, paying an overdue debt to D. H. Lawrence. The lack of personal observation was apparent in this competent dramatization; the play did not bear his own special signature of anguish. Even simplification had to become a highly personal achievement in Williams’ case. Only when this transpired in _The Glass Menagerie_ was there no longer any doubt that the theater had acquired a new dramatist.

IV

The plays that thrust Tennessee Williams into the limelight have much in common besides their clear focus and economical construction. Both _The Glass Menagerie_ and _A Streetcar Named Desire_ transmute the base metal of reality into theatrical and, not infrequently, verbal poetry, and both supplement the action with symbolic elements of mood and music. A major theme is southern womanhood helpless in the grip of the presently constituted world, while its old world of social position and financial security is a Paradise Lost. But differences of emphasis and style make the two dramas distinct.

_The Glass Menagerie_ is a memory play evoked in the comments of a narrator, the poet Tom, who is now in the merchant marine, and in crucial episodes from his family life. The form departs from the “fourth wall” convention of realistic dramaturgy and suggests Japanese Noh-drama, in which story consists mostly of remembered fragments of experience. If Williams had had his way with the Broadway production, _The Glass Menagerie_ would have struck its public as even more unconventional, since his text calls for the use of a screen on which pictures and legends are to be projected. Disregarded by the producer-director Eddie Dowling, these stage directions nevertheless appear in the published play. They strike the writer of this article as redundant and rather precious; the young playwright was striving for effect without realizing that his simple tale, so hauntingly self-sufficient, needs no adornment.

As plainly stated by Tom, the background is a crisis in society, for the depression decade is teetering on the brink of the second World War. His tale belongs to a time “when the huge middle-class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind,” when “their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fin-
gers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy,” while in Spain there was Guernica. But his memory invokes his home life and the provocations that finally sent him to sea. In episodes softened by the patina of time and distance he recalls the painful shyness of his lovable crippled sister, Laura, and the tragicomic efforts of his mother, Amanda, to marry her off, as well as his own desperation as an underpaid shoe-company clerk. The climax comes when, nagged by the desperate mother, Tom brings Laura a “gentleman caller” who turns out to be engaged to another girl.

Without much more story than this, Williams achieved a remarkable synthesis of sympathy and objectivity by making three-dimensional characters out of Tom’s family and the gangling beau, who is trying to pull himself out of the rut of a routine position and recover his self-esteem as a schoolboy success. The carping mother could have easily become a caricature, especially when she remembers herself as a southern belle instead of a woman deserted by her husband, a telephone man who “fell in love with long distances” but who probably found an incitement in his wife’s pretensions. She is redeemed for humanity by her solicitude for her children, her laughable but touching effort to sell a magazine subscription over the telephone at dawn, and her admission that the unworldly Laura must get a husband if she is to escape the fate of the “little birdlike women without any nest” Amanda has known in the South. And Laura, too shy even to take a course in typewriting after the first lesson, acquits herself with sweet dignity and becoming stoicism when let down by her first and only gentleman caller; she is an unforgettable bit of Marie Laurencin painting. At the same time, however, Williams knows that pity for the halt and blind must not exclude a sense of reality, that Tom’s going out into the world was a necessary and wholesome measure of self-preservation; it is one of humanity’s inalienable traits and obligations to try to save itself as best it can. Although Tom will never forget Laura and the candles she blew out, he is now part of the larger world that must find a common salvation in action, “for nowadays the world is lit by lightning.”

In A Streetcar Named Desire, too, health and disease are at odds with each other, but here the dialectical situation flares up into relentless conflict. The lines are sharply drawn in this more naturalistic drama, whose story, unlike that of The Glass Menagerie, is no longer revealed impressionistically through the merciful mist of memory. Nothing is circuitous in A Streetcar, and the dramatic action drives directly to its fateful conclusion as plebeian and patrician confront each other. Like other southern heroines of Williams, who invariably suggest Picasso’s dehydrated “Demoselles d’Avignon,” Blanche Du Bois is not only a recognizable human being but an abstraction—the abstraction of decadent aristocracy as the painter’s inner eye sees it. It is her final tragedy that the life she encounters in a married sister’s home cannot spare her precisely when she requires the most commiseration. Her plantation lost, the teaching profession closed to her, her reputation gone, her nerves stretched to the snapping-point, Blanche has come to Stella in the French Quarter to find her married to a lusty ex-sergeant of Polish extraction. She is delivered into his untender hands when he discovers her lurid past and, although he may be momentarily touched by her fate on learning of the unhappy marriage that drove her to moral turpitude, his standards do not call for charity. With her superior airs and queasiness she has inter-
fered with Stanley’s married happiness, and she must go. Loyal to his friend, who served in the same military outfit with him, he must forewarn Mitch, who is about to propose to her, that the southern lady has been a harlot, thus destroying her last hope. Having sensed a challenge to his robust manhood from the moment he met Blanche, he must even violate her. It is his terrible health, which is of earth and will defend itself at any cost, that destroys Blanche, and sister Stella herself must send the hapless woman to a state institution if she is to protect her marriage and preserve her faith in Stanley.

As in The Glass Menagerie and in the one-acters, the private drama is pyramidied on a social base. Blanche is the last descendant to cling to the family plantation of Belle Reve, sold acre by acre by improvident male relatives “for their epic fornications, to put it plainly,” as she says. Her simple-hearted sister declassed herself easily by an earthy marriage to Stanley Kowalski and saved herself. Blanche tried to stand firm on quicksand and was declassed right into a house of ill-fame. The substructure of the story has some resemblance to The Cherry Orchard, whose aristocrats were also unable to adjust to reality and were crushed by it. Nevertheless, Williams subordinated his oblation to reality, his realization that Stanley and the denizens of the New Orleans slum street called Elysian Fields represent health and survival, to a poet’s pity for Blanche. For him she is not only an individual whose case must be treated individually but a symbol of the many shorn lambs for whom no wind is ever tempered except by the godhead in men’s hearts and the understanding of artists like Williams himself. It is surely for this reason that the author called his play a “tragedy of incomprehension” and “entered,” in the words of his quotation from Hart Crane, “the broken world to trace the visionary company of love, its voice an instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled).” It is in the light of this compassion that the pulse of the play becomes a succession of musical notes and the naturalism of the writing flares into memorable lines, as when Blanche, finding herself loved by Mitch, sobs out, “Sometimes there’s God so quickly.”

As his plays multiply, it will be possible to measure him against dramatists whom his writing so often recalls—against Chekhov, Gorki, O’Neill, and Lorca. That such comparisons can be even remotely envisioned for an American playwright under thirty-five is in itself an indication of the magic of his pen; and it will soon be seen whether this magic works in Summer and Smoke, another, but more complicated, southern drama which carries a woman’s soul to Tartarus. The test may prove a severe one, since the new play is episodic enough to be considered a chronicle. Further testing will also gauge the range of his faculties. Williams has himself detected a limitation in the sameness of theme and background in his work. He is turning toward new horizons with two uncompleted plays; one of them is set in Mexico, the other in Renaissance Italy. In time we shall also discover whether he overcomes noticeable inclinations toward a preciosity that could have vitiated The Glass Menagerie and toward a melodramatic sensationalism which appears in the rape scene of A Streetcar Named Desire and in the addition of wedlock with a homosexual to Blanche’s tribulations. All that is beyond question at the present time is that Tennessee Williams is already a considerable artist in a medium in which there are many craftsmen but few artists.