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THE GLASS MENAGERIE: THE ROMANTIC VISION OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

In the title of this address* I have intended to suggest that Tennessee Williams views the world from the perspective of Romanticism. This is somewhat arbitrary, for one could as easily argue that Williams belongs to any one of several other traditions. His plays certainly have a strong affinity to Naturalism. One thinks of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. There we witness struggles between conflicting forces, struggles in which the weak are inevitably crushed by the strong, in which the political, technological, and natural conditions of life determine a tragedy as unavoidable as say, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski are the prototypic elements in a Darwinian struggle for survival and a survival of the fittest. In *The Glass Menagerie* the three Wingfields seem like a doomed species unable to adapt to the demands of a changed and changing environment. Laura's crippled leg is the physical manifestation of the playwright's Naturalism, just as Tom's belief that "man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter" reflects this same bias. But viewed from a

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radically different perspective Tennessee Williams appears to be equally inspired by Impressionism, Expressionism, and Symbolist Poetry. The soft textures of his plays, the rich suggestiveness of their atmospheric qualities—the light, the music, the mythic overtones—provide deeper layers of meaning, of poetic truth, than can be achieved through the harsh doctrines of Naturalism. As Tom tells us at the opening of *The Glass Menagerie*, “The play is memory.” “Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music.” Or as the playwright tells us in justifying his theatrical techniques, “Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were present in appearance.”

Hesitating therefore to be too doctrinaire in our description of Tennessee Williams' works, we must see in his plays an exquisite blend of different traditions. We know, for instance, that he was strongly influenced by such different writers as D. H. Lawrence and Hart Crane. In Lawrence—“that insane Mr. Lawrence,” as Amanda Wingfield described him—we are shown the ruthless passions that operate beneath the surfaces of life. In Crane we see the fragile triumph of delicate feelings, of images lovingly evoked; we see nature suffused with meaning. We might extend this description. We might note, for example, that Williams' plays embody the spirit of existentialism present in the works of almost all important writers of the post-World War II period. Or, following the cue of one of Williams' self-descriptions, we might say that he is a kind of rebellious puritan—one who having incorporated a cruel ethical code seeks in his writings, like Herman Melville, to exorcize this demon.

But I have chosen to discuss Tennessee Williams as a Romantic, for in this category we find, I believe, the proper light for illuminating his work. Like the early Romantic poets of the nineteenth century Williams finds a strange and compelling beauty in all that is primitive, and a nauseating ugliness in so-called civilization. And like Hawthorne and Poe he sees a symbolism in the grotesque: thus, the iguana of *Night of the Iguana* reflects human life and values in nature. In Williams also we find the

belief, which is perhaps most central to the Romantic tradition, that progress is actually decay, that all that is truly beautiful is mutable, that as life develops it seems to worsen. Conversely and to speak more affirmatively, the Romantic poet is one who defies convention, and who, like Shelley, having brought the Promethean fire, must suffer and suffering find some new, unconventional love.

Among the Romantics of American literature one may see in the theatre of Tennessee Williams the unification of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. In Whitman we have the large-minded celebration of life in all of its disparate forms. His is the voice, as he says,

Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.
Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

It was Whitman who said: "The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer." So too the heroes and heroines of Williams' plays are the loners, the losers, the crippled, the nymphomaniacs, the decadent aristocrats, and the criminals. In Whitman and Williams we learn to love whatever is offbeat, and to despise all that is normal, happy, and average. But if Whitman's world is large in its universal acceptance of things as they are, the world of Emily Dickinson is compressed—caged like that of Laura, polishing a glass menagerie. Hers was a velvet scaffold as she describes it in her poetry:

Not with a Club, the Heart is broken
Nor with a Stone—
A Whip so small you could not see it
I've known

The self-portrait that Emily Dickinson presents is that of one who lives at the outskirts of progress, renounced by a world that has passed as is racing frantically forward. It leaves behind the neurotics, the screwballs and the

freaks. Nevertheless, this life, at least in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, has its own special redemption, the redemption of art. So also, in this way precisely, the world of Tennessee Williams is redeemed.

The point that I wish to make by way of introduction is that, although Tennessee Williams is most emphatically a writer of the twentieth century, his plays have their roots in nineteenth-century Romanticism. In him we can find the usable past of American literature gathered together and integrated. Like those Romantic writers, Williams constructs his theatre in an atmosphere that is inward, irrational, and sentimental; like them he explores all that lies behind the surfaces of things. The rebelliousness of Melville, the grotesques of Poe, the celebrations of Whitman, the self-reliance of Emerson and Thoreau, the closeted tragedy of Emily Dickinson—each of these elements is discernible, in some fashion, in each of Williams' major productions. This is not to deny other lines of influence. Certainly the theatrical heritages of Chekhov, of Ibsen, and Strindberg made their mark on the plays of Tennessee Williams. In Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* we have a particularly illuminating antecedent to *The Glass Menagerie*. Nor should we ignore the important contribution of Faulkner whose portrayal of the decadent South undoubtedly contributed to Williams' early work. And of course, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* must have had some effect, however indirect, for this poem summed up the meaning of the modern experience so powerfully that no writer who followed it could possibly escape its analysis. One of Williams' earliest plays was entitled, *April is the Cruellest Month*. Remember the questions asked by the desperate woman in "The Game of Chess"?

'What shall I do now? What shall I do?

+ + +

What shall we do tomorrow?

What shall we ever do?'

Consider this with Amanda's questions:

So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie...?

Before proceeding further, however, I must make a distinction between the Romanticism of the nineteenth century and the form in which it

survives in the plays of Tennessee Williams. As we know the Romantics were the poets of a revolutionary era: they saw the world from new perspectives and, they claimed, with freshly discovered spiritual powers. We think of them as strong, defiant, triumphant. This component of Romanticism is generally lacking in Tennessee Williams. Particularly in *The Glass Menagerie* we have depicted a weakened version of the earlier tradition: daydreams, movies, idle wishes, stale memories, and fragile glass. In Williams the romantic vision survives but it is trapped in the still, rancid backwaters of thought.

The twentieth-century Romanticism of Tennessee Williams is analogous to that of Sherwood Anderson. In his short story, "Death in the Woods", we witness the death of an old woman who is pursued by a pack of hungry dogs. They want the small parcel of meat she is carrying. The woman has spent her life feeding others; now in death the dogs have her. And yet the point of this tale is that there is a virginal quality in the old woman that she has somehow preserved, an inward romantic purity that neither life nor death has defeated.

So also in *Winesburg, Ohio* Anderson presents the reader with an assortment of twisted lives—"grotesques," he calls them—people who have been abused by too much reality. They are, he says, like the twisted apples that we find in an orchard after the pickers have been through. Rejected and worthless in the market, these apples are the sweetest. So too, in *The Glass Menagerie* we taste the sweetness of twisted lives.

In the poetry of E. E. Cummings we find another survival of the romantic vision, an incorruptible and uncoquerable lyricism. The verse motto printed with *The Glass Menagerie* is a line from Cummings: "Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" The poem from which this line is drawn is a tribute to a woman who is able in her intense fragility to enclose and to release the poet's feelings:

your slightest look easily will unclothe me
 though I have closed myself as fingers
 you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
 (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

(I do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands

The Glass Menagerie is Williams' most autobiographical play. To some extent, no doubt, all theatre, all art, is autobiography, for every dramatist—even Shakespeare, despite his stubborn personal obscurity—tells his own life-story through the symbolic action of his play. But *The Glass Menagerie* is autobiographical in a far more literal sense. During the Depression Years the Williamses lived in a shabby apartment in St. Louis, Missouri, and according to the author's memoirs this was the most intolerably painful period of his life. The family was uprooted from Mississippi by the father's transfer, in 1926, to the St. Louis office of the International Shoe Company. The three Wingfields—Tom, Amanda, and Laura—correspond precisely to Tennessee Williams, his mother Edwina, and his sister Rose. Only the author's father—a brutal, hard-drinking man—and his brother Dakin are deleted from the play, though the father is indirectly present in the prominently displayed photograph. "He was a telephone man," says Tom, "who fell in love with long distance." The actual father had, in fact, been an employee of the telephone company for many years in Tennessee and Mississippi.

The innovation of a highly personal element, a device commonly denied to dramatists, is provided in the play through the use of Tom, who functions both as a character and as narrator. As narrator he evokes the scenes of the play and interprets their meaning; indeed, as he insists, the entire drama exists only in his memory. The name given to Tennessee Williams at birth was Thomas, a fact which alone assures the identification of Tom with the playwright himself. Tom has a dreary job in the warehouse of Continental Shoemakers where he writes poems in the wash-room at odd hours. So too Tennessee Williams held a similar job for three years, earning \$65 a month, dusting shoes, copying order forms, and composing poems on shoebox lids. It was, he said later, "an indescribable torment." He did not, of course, become a merchant sailor, but he did, upon leaving St. Louis in 1938, travel further than the moon—to New

Orleans, California, Mexico, Florida, New York—back and forth, restlessly.

The character of Amanda Wingfield is notoriously based on Edwina Williams. The author tells us that he took his mother, without forewarning, to one of the early performances of *The Glass Menagerie* in Chicago. Seeing herself portrayed by Laurette Taylor, "Mother began to sit up stiffer and stiffer. She looked like a horse eating briars." She has been described as prim, delicate, beautiful, genteel, high-strung, and Puritanical—the daughter of the pastor of a smalltown Episcopal Church. It seems to me that this quality of delicate gentility should be always present in Amanda, as the ingredient to soften her persistent manipulations. We must see that she is not really an "ugly—babbling old—witch." But to what extent Amanda derives from the actual Mrs. Williams, I do not know or am especially curious. She remains certainly the most interesting and complex personality in the play, and is one of Williams' enduring artistic triumphs.

To complete the triangle we need only note that Laura is the reflection of the playwright's sister Rose. Hers was a real-life tragedy, a girl, who like her brother was painfully shy, sensitive, and imaginative, but who lacked his creative power or his capacity for violent retaliation. Gradually she retreated into psychosis and was removed to an institution. In this regard she became Blanche of *Streetcar Named Desire*. But in *The Glass Menagerie* I believe that Williams was correct in omitting this rather sordid detail. Laura is allowed to remain simple, quietly lyrical, never melodramatic. Rose, however, is still wistfully suggested in her nickname, "Blue Roses."

One of the known and most important features of Tennessee Williams' habits of work is his tendency to rewrite his materials. *Battle of Angels* which flopped in 1940 became *Orpheus Descending* in 1957, and then rewritten again it became the film, *The Fugitive kind*. As Williams tells us, his works often originated in forms very different from those by which they are best known. So it was with *The Glass Menagerie*, the success of which is partly the result of the fact that it went through three major transformations and much rewriting along the way. The first version was "Portrait of a Girl in Glass," a short story included in the collection,

One Arm and Other Stories. Here a girl named Laura lives like a cornered animal in her bedroom. This room is furnished with cheap ivory stuff, and on one of the walls an effeminate portrait of Jesus Christ smiles tearfully. Laura spends her days listening to the phonograph and polishing the hundreds of glass objects she keeps on the shelves, while outside in a place called Death Valley a dog sheds kittens to pieces. Her brother, the narrator, has a meaningless job in a warehouse. The mother is garrulous and penny-pinching, and to save the household from poverty and spinsterhood, she enrolls Laura in a business college. When this fails, she forces her son to bring home a big red-haired Irishman named Jim Delaney. A tender scene ensues, but in the end Jim admits that he is already engaged to be married, and departs. Soon afterwards the brother loses his job and becomes a wanderer, driven like a dead leaf through the cities, working to develop a "shell of deliberate hardness," but the shell is continually broken by the image of the girl in glass.

This story was probably written sometime in the early 1940s. In the meantime *Battle of Angels* had caught the attention of John Gassner who recommended the script to the Theater Guild. A trial run was performed in Boston, but it was a fiasco. The audience responded with a scorn exceeded only by that Paris audience that heard the first performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Afterwards Williams went to Hollywood where he failed again. On a short-term contract he was assigned by MGM to write a film starring Lana Turner. When it was demonstrated that he was unable to write lines for Miss Turner, he was put to work on a script for the child actress Margaret O'Brien. When he refused to do this, he offered the film company an original scenario entitled *The Gentleman Caller*. This was flatly rejected, with the observation that *Gone With the Wind* had already been filmed and the writer was discharged. Williams spent the next three months in California rewriting the film script into a three-act play which he now called *The Glass Menagerie*.

This was in 1943. The play opened on Broadway on March 31, 1945, and was immediately both a popular and a critical success. It was then that critics began to describe the "magic" of Tennessee Williams, the word that is used, probably more than any other, to praise his theatrical artistry.

The magic of *The Glass Menagerie* is neither wholly technical nor

wholly thematic; it derives rather from the union and effective interdependence of both. The play is so tightly structured that, from a purely literary point of view, it may be discussed as a poem. What I mean by this is that the patterns of imagery and characters—plot being a minor consideration—are established and arranged so as to reveal the central tension of the drama. The tension is between romance and reality. To take only one aspect of this tension—one that Amanda perceives—it is the tension between the romance of *The Gentlemen Caller* and the reality of Betty, Jim's intrusive fiancée. Or to treat the primary symbolism of the play the tension is visually represented by *The Glass Menagerie* on stage left and the typewriter on stage right. One is the dream world, the other is the futile attempt to join the stenographic future. The tension is represented also within the glass menagerie in the romance of the unicorn and the reality of horses. Laura's unicorn is made to exist on a self with the horses. It is passively content to be there, but being an extinct species, it feels strangely freakish. It comes reality in the person of Jim O'Connor, and with all his well-meaning awkwardness he breaks the unicorn's horn, making it exactly like all the other real, but monotonous horses. And Laura's reaction? She accepts this fact, of course, for she has no other choice. The glass horse, no longer a unicorn, has joined the tribe of normal, happy, hopeful horses; thus it becomes for Jim a gift, and a souvenir. In almost every clash between romance and reality, romance is defeated. I say "almost" for as we shall see, reality's victory is not absolute.

We can find this same tension in the most minor details of the play. Just offstage, for instance, our attention is drawn to the Paradise Dance Hall and Garfinkel's Delicatessen. At the Paradise lights create a rainbow, the music is slow and sensuous. In the alley behind the ash pits and telephone poles (the telephone being both a sign of urban blight and the father's escape route), you can see young lovers kissing. But Garfinkel is there too, reminding us that there is food to be bought and eaten, and during the years of economic depression you have to ask the grocer to carry your bill for another month. We see this tension also in the references to Rulicam's Business College, the Continental Shoemakers, and the prospect of taking "a night-school course in accounting at Washington U." Against these is set the art museum, the bird house, the Jewel Box where

they raise tropical flowers, and of course, the movies—Garbo, Micky Mouse, travelogues, and Malvolio the Magician.

The tenement in St. Louis becomes the focal point for several subordinate components of this tension. Behind it in the past is Blue Mountain, the Moon Lake Casino, and Amanda's seventeen Gentlemen Callers. Horizontally there is some prospect of vitality in spite of the squalor, depression, and sterility. "In Spain," Tom reminds us twice, "there was Guernica!" In the future there is only the plaintive longing for escape, and the knowledge that the coming years will bring further mechanization of human life. It is Jim who announces this somewhat prophetic credo: "I believe in the future of television!" And as the orchestra plays, "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise," Tom remarks acidly, "All the world was waiting for bombardments!" A coordinate arrangement of images is suggested in Amanda's preoccupation with the moon. Moon Lake evokes the memories of her romantic youth. One of her lovers was drowned in the lake; two others, shot it out on the floor of the casino in the grand old style of the aristocratic South. In Scene V as the moon rises, ironically over Garfinkel's Delicatessen, Amanda wishes her perennial wish: "Success and happiness for my precious children." But finally when she sees that Tom will no longer ally his efforts with hers, she delivers her final shot: "Go, then! Go to the moon—you selfish dreamer."

So far we have been emphasizing the imagery of the play. When we turn to the characters we see more clearly into the art of Tennessee Williams, and we gain an appreciation of his masterly control of his materials. The four characters divide themselves into groups of two—Tom and Amanda on one side, Laura and Jim on the other. In terms of the dramatic tension I have introduced, Laura and Jim are set in simple, unqualified opposition to one another.

Simple is certainly the word for Laura. She is the poetic center of the play, the emblem of romance at its most inward, dreaming, passive, and therefore hopeless extreme. The drama revolves about her, she is always present to our view, but being the character upon whom the action is focused she is never active. In my conversation with Michael Cacoyannis he made a point in this regard which should be emphasized. Laura's mental and emotional life is flaccid. While Tom and Amanda are verbal acro-

bats, Laura hardly ever utters two connected sentences. Her vocabulary usually mirrors the words of others, and she never speaks in intentional irony or metaphor. The only strong feeling she experiences is panic, and this is prompted whenever she is being pressured to do something—to go to school, to buy groceries, to answer the doorbell. “Please, please, please, you go!” Although her situation in life is desperate, she wants to go on dreaming, listening to records, polishing glass. She wants nothing to change; indeed, her motivation is simple: to subdue passion and to keep everything precisely as it is.

Jim O'Connor is another totality, an emblem of the opposite extreme. A stage direction describes him as a “nice, ordinary, young man”, and Tom pinpoints his role in the drama by saying that he is “an emissary from a world of reality.” Jim is the all-American boy, the former high-school hero who studies radio engineering and public speaking. Who reads the newspapers and is interested in baseball. Professionally he has not met with much success, but still he believes in success, just as he believes in the future—particularly the future of technology. “Knowledge-Zzzzzp! Money-Zzzzzp!-Power! That’s the cycle democracy is built on!” “Sure,” he says at one point, “I’m Superman!”

Thus, obviously, Jim is a recreation of Horatio Alger, a personality that persists in the American imagination, having had its origin in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. In one sense we could say he is a figure of popular romance—as the Wingfields are the unpopular version—for in Jim we have the embodiment of the American Dream. He is the green light of the orgiastic future that Fitzgerald described in *The Great Gatsby*. For Tom also The Gentleman Caller is a symbol: “he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for.” Jim enjoys his few hours with the Wingfields: he is pleased to have his adolescent heroism remembered, he is charmed by Amanda, and he would, if he could, transform Laura into the American Sweetheart. But he will return to reality: he will marry Betty, have a moderately successful career, and raise a tribe of average O’Connors. In Tennessee Williams’ later plays he would be more viciously portrayed: he would become the insipid Mitch of *Streetcar Named Desire*, the scheming Gooper of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and the emasculating Miss Fellowes of *Night of the Iguana*. But reality as portrayed in *The*

Glass Menagerie is only innocuously predominant.

The polarities represented by Laura and Jim are also manifested in Tom and Amanda, but here the pattern is more complex, for in them the conflict of the real and the unreal has been internalized. The battle rages not only between them, but also within them. Amanda has been described by one critic as an "evangelical realist." While this is not entirely true, it is not wholly false. There is much about her that gives us the impression of one determined to survive in the real world. She is a woman who has "plans and provisions." Her "Rise and Shine!" is the battlecry of American Motherhood. Like a real mother in the real world she places her daughter in a business college and checks in to see how things are progressing. When she learns that Laura has been walking about in a daydream, she is insulted and humiliated. "I wanted," she says, "to find a hole in the ground and hide myself in it forever!" Amanda can understand and admire a man like Jim, for she too has embraced the working-class ethic. It is the failure of her children to share this ideal that so irritates her. "What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?" She sees clearly that Laura has two, and only two, chances for survival: she can either get a job or be married. Now that Amanda's husband has escaped, her daughter is on the verge of spinsterhood, and her son is corresponding with the Merchant Marine, she sees herself as the last bulwark against failure, the last prophet of the American Dream. So she spends her time bewailing Tom's retreats to the movies, tries her hand at salesmanship with a telephone campaign for *The Homemaker's Companion*, and plots to lure a Gentleman Caller into the domestic trap. They are all escapists, she seems to be saying: I am the only realist.

But of course Amanda's realism is only a guise; it's the foolish armour she wears to protect the household from ruin. Tennessee Williams tells us that she is a woman "clinging frantically to another time and place." She clings to the past because there is nothing else that is truly beautiful and to be valued in her squalid world. The hundreds of platitudes by which she lives and her memories of beaus and cotillions and jonquils are her means of preserving beauty and values—and she does it with style. Not that any of this is an act, though of course she can turn out a fine performance. We are to understand that Amanda is the genuine article, a romantic who

remains true to her ideal. She was and still is the Belle of Blue Mountain. Perhaps she has a darker, more pathological side to her personality, but we almost never see it. Only once does the facade crack. "Tom—Tom—life's not easy, it calls for-Spartan endurance! There's so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you!" A later Tennessee Williams would have developed this further, but here the crack closes quickly and we are brought back to Amanda as she appears—fragile, tender, garrulous, manipulative, and more than slightly seductive.

Tom, like his mother, is a mixture of romance and realism, and like her also, he is fighting for survival. As a realist he can barely tolerate Amanda's romantic flights, and he brings her back to earth whenever possible, lashing out in irony and anger. Occasionally he reasons with her in an important way. For example, when Amanda describes Laura as "lovely and sweet and pretty," Tom urges his mother to "face the facts." "Laura seems all those things to you and me because she's ours and we love her." "Fact" is an important, but rarely spoken word in the Wingfield household. "Fact", like "crippled" and "instinct," is to be avoided at all costs; "Christian adults" want "Superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit!" And again, when Tom admits that he longs for adventure, Amanda suggests that he should find adventure in his career. Clearly her plan for survival involves the superficial acceptance of things as they are and the covering of them with a haze of fantasy; his plan requires the changing of the things themselves. Thus Tom has two points from which he must escape: the fantasies at home and the realities at work. Thus also Tom and Amanda are fundamentally antagonists to one another, but having agreed to an uneasy truce they are temporary allies. In the meantime, he escapes into the movies and drunkenness, and secretly plans his departure. "I'm tired of the *movies*, he tells Jim, "and I am *about* to *move*!"

The truth is, however, that Tom is trapped by his own romantic feelings; he is caught in the emotional web of both his sister and his mother. At the beginning and at the end we see that he—quite as much as Amanda—is the instrument of his memories. We know that he cannot dispell the memory of his sister, but in a deeper, subtler way it is the burden of his mother's feelings that he cannot unload. Tom asserts and would like to

believe that he is a happy-go-lucky wanderer like his father. "I'm like my father," he tells Jim. "The bastard son of a bastard!" But Tom the poet, called Shakespeare, is made of the same stuff that made his mother. In Amanda's longer speeches we see the verbal artistry that turned her son to poetry, and throughout the play we see also the tremendous control she has over Tom's emotional responses. Except for momentary outbursts he is extremely obedient and deferential to her wishes. Both Tom and Amanda are dreamers; both, no less than Laura, spin out their days in fantasy. The trouble between them, of course, is that they fantasize at cross-purposes, and so, more or less continually, they accuse each other of their own crucial failure. This is, perhaps, the most important interrelationship in the drama, and it is brought home most vividly in the climatic scene when Amanda sees with undisguised realism the true state and future of her life, and when she is able finally to spit out the terrible word "crippled":

Go to the movies, go! Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure! Just go, go, go—to the movies!.... Go, then! Go to the moon—you selfish dreamer!

One is tempted to conclude that *The Glass Menagerie* is a tragedy, but is not. Grim it is, but not tragic, for the essence of tragedy is the defeat of the ideal. Tragedy always shatters our dreams. Laura, Jim, Amanda, and Tom will never truly succeed; each separately will grope through life. But being dreamers, they will always have their dreams. This surely is the meaning of the "fifth" character, the father who joined the uncounted Huckleberry Finns of American literature, and about whom Tom remarks with admiration: "He... skipped the light fantastic out of town." Laura also makes this point for us in the scene when her unicorn is broken. "It's no tragedy," she says, "I'll just imagine he had an operation." So the dream is never truly defeated. Its apparent defeat is simply the occasion for another dream. And this is the meaning that we take with us

as we close the book or leave the theater: the knowledge that the romantic spirit is somehow unconquerable. Without being dated, *The Glass Menagerie* is something of a period piece, and it is useful finally to place it in its historical setting. In 1945 America had survived ten years of economic depression and five years of global war. Within a few months after the opening of the play, this era would end in two unforgettable atomic blasts. Perhaps at this period of history the world had enough of reality and needed to have affirmed the very act of dreaming. The second most popular play in this Broadway season was the comic fantasy, *Harvey*, by Mary Chase. It concerns a man who goes about with an imaginary giant rabbit, two meters tall. *Harvey* is a trivial, but pleasant piece of entertainment, one that deserves to be compared to *The Glass Menagerie* only in its most memorable line. When a psychiatrist tells the protagonist that he must face up to reality, he answers: "I wrestled with reality for forty years, and finally I won out over it." *The Glass Menagerie* is by far a greater play; indeed it has become one of the classics of American literature. But one, among several things that has made it a classic is the lyricism of the author that touches us so deeply, that touches us most when we remember our Blue Mountains, when we go to the moon, or when we cherish our glass unicorns. And this is what I have tried to describe as a romantic vision.