There is a short story entitled “The Poet” (1948), originally published in the collection *One Arm and Other Stories*, which reveals something extraordinary about Tennessee Williams’ approach to the creative process. Far more intimate than the flamboyantly sensational (and sexualized) *Memoirs* (1975) written largely to generate publicity and financial reward, “The Poet” is its antithesis – a quiet, introspective tale that depicts the poet as solitary and passive, a “ruminant beast” who scavenges his way through life, surviving in a driftwood shack. His poems are not written down, only spoken, and his audience is made up of adolescents “poised between the coming of wisdom and its early rejection”. Whatever early rage the poet once possessed is now gone, “purified out of his nature”. And when he dies, we are told “the sun and the sand and the water washed [his body] continually and swept away all but the bones and the stiff white garments”. While the self-portrait in “The Poet” is obviously stylized and perhaps even mythologized, what is particularly striking is Williams’ description of the creative process itself:

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The poet distilled his own liquor and had become so accomplished in this art that he could produce a fermented drink from almost any kind of organic matter. He carried it in a flask strapped around his waist, and whenever fatigue overtook him he would stop at some lonely point and raise the flask to his lips. Then the world would change color as a soap bubble penetrated by a ray of light and a great vitality would surge and break as a limitless ocean through him.

In this story, the poet’s process is not guided by rational or external events but by a kind of internal, spiritual vision. He quaffs his fermented liquor, and “the world [changes] color as a soap bubble penetrated by a ray of light”. In short, the story reveals Williams not as part of a realist tradition, but as a prototypical Expressionist poet whose creative impulse is visionary and comes from within. Discussion of this potentially prophetic power of the artist goes back to Plato, who mistrusted it and banned the poets from his ideal Republic. It is also firmly lodged within the tradition of Bardic wisdom associated with Romanticism, as in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*:

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, & Future sees
Whose ears have heard,
The Holy Word,
That walk’d among the ancient trees.

In the twentieth century, this vatic perspective towards art is most closely identified with Expressionism: “Die Welt ist da. Es wäre sinnlos, sie zu wiederholen.” With this pithy comment, German critic Kasimir Edschmid articulated perhaps most concisely the definition of the European movement in literature, music and the visual arts known as Expressionism. Swiss painter Paul Klee put it equally succinctly in his “Creative Confession”: “Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder,

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