THORNTON WILDER AND THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

There's no better writer to head the "America in Performance" series than Thornton Wilder. First of all, he is, quite simply, the greatest American author yet to write for the stage. More than a decade after his death, three of his full-length plays are frequently revived--Our Town, The Matchmaker, and The Skin of Our Teeth. At least two of his one-act plays are considered masterpieces of the form, and are regularly performed at high schools and colleges--The Happy Journey from Trenton to Camden and The Long Christmas Dinner. His novels are still available in paperback editions, and at least two of them, Heaven's My Destination and The Eighth Day are novels of such stature that a person can't claim to be an expert on American twentieth century fiction unless he's read them. Eugene O'Neill, the most celebrated American playwright of the first half of this century, never wrote fiction. Tennessee Williams and S. N. Behrman attempted fiction, with disappointing results. Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Hemingway, on the other hand, had no success with the theatre, thus leaving Thornton Wilder our only writer of stature to distinguish himself both in the novel and the drama.

Secondly, Wilder consciously tried to define and understand what it means to be American, to isolate those essential qualities that make the American experience unique. This attempt recurs in many forms, from his first

novel, The Cabala , published in 1926, to his last, Theophilus North. In The Cabala, the youthful American hero, after gaining entry to the most secret, powerful and mysterious circle of Roman society, winds up on an ocean liner headed for America. He carries on a conversation with the ghost of the ancient poet, Virgil, the one who led Dante through Hell in The Divine Comedy. Virgil urges him to reject Europe, and find your own Rome in your native land. With this, the hero turns away from the nostalgiac and neurotic world of Rome and turn towars the modernity of New York City. To be American, for Wilder, is to be vital. It is to be oriented toward the future rather than the constraining past. Mr. Antrobus, with all of his plans and inventions, is a very American figure. Nowhere is his writing is a European given such reckless vitality.

To be American is also to be democratic. On a Novermber evening in 1953, Wilder went to his favorite bar in Newport, Rhode Island--"Ann's Kitchen" it was called--and watched the television there. He wrote what he saw that evening in his journal. It was the old show, This is Your Life, which he described with great detail and excitement, making the show sound like one of his own plays:

> A retired schoolteacher, Miss Anne Lou Babcock of the high school (thirty- five years there) of a town in Michigan I never heard of (White Falls?--something like that), comes up from the audience...Her beauty, dignity, sweetness, and her composure under astonishing surprises are a large element in what follows. Photographs of her parents, of herself as a baby, young girl, young woman; of the schools where sahe had successively taught. Then people suddenly appear from behind a curtain; a beau who she had not seen for thirty-five years; her sister; a sergeant

> from World War I who had known her when she ran a canteen in France; a member of the first class she had taught in this high school in 1907, a famous baseball player and his wife...

Wilder tries to understand the great appeal this program had for him. He asks,"Why was I so strongly confirmed in my sense that this is the greatest country in the world?" Not because of the technology or the expense, he explains but because Miss Babcock, born neither to wealth or aristocratic station, was being celebrated because she was "admirable in her function," and that there were thousands of people in this country alone who were respected for that, and that the respect given her was not given at the expense of others. Anyone who is admirable in their function in this country, gains the respect of his or her peers. This is Your Life celebrated the best of everyday life in America.

Wilder believed that Americans know how to celebrate the everyday in a way that Europe never has known. Wlat Whitman's great poetic listings, Emily Dickinson's simple and profound poetry, Wilder's presentation of Gladys' day at school; every action in life has a meaning, and all points of view are to be respected for their partial truth. No one but Thornton Wilder could give us Sabina's third act speech to Mr. Antrobus:

> Mr. Antrobus, don't mind what I say. I'm just an ordinary girl. But you're a bright man, and of course you invented the alphabet, and the wheel, and my God, a lot of things... and if you've got any other plans, my God, don't let me upset them. Only every now and then I've got to go to the movies.

Yes, says Wilder, there are the great inventions and the great achievements, but unless they are set alongside the moments of escape and

ephemeral enjoyment and daily tasks, the American writer cannot hope to paint an honest picture of American life. There are no straw men, no cheap shots in Wilder. His works try to hold amazingly disparate elements and ideas in balance. Look at The Skin of Our Teeth--dinosaurs and Moses, the Boardwalk and the Deluge, the words of Spinoza and the jeremiads of the Fortune Teller. The American world is both vast and thickly populated, and that is a part of its greatness. As a result, our literature has a sense of magnitude and scale not to be found in European literature; perhaps only an American could write a lengthy novel about a great white whale. We are a country of vast size and huge numbers. "Billions have lived and died," wrote Wilder, "Billions will live and die; and this every American knows in that realm beyond learning, knows in his bones." Notice the vastness of The Skin of Our Teeth. The opening mewcast immediately bombards us with partially told stories, headlines, multiple actions and geographic breadth. Wilder creates a world of size and complexity from the start. Only in the Bible, Wilder remarked, can we find an imaginative magnitude and plentitude of the kind we produce in our own literature. The vastness can be exhilirating.

But it is this very vastness of American life and imagination which creates special problems for us. All Americans are either from somewhere else themselves or are the descendents of people from somewhere else. Whe we grow up, we move out of our parents' home and live apart from them. We don't have the certainties and hallowed traditions of Europe; buildings that we consider ancient are still considered new by European standards. We're are suspicious of any form of authority. Wilder noted "Americans

constantly feel that the whole world's thinking has to be done over again." To be American is often to be rootless, restless and driven. It is also to be lonely. We sometimes feel dwarfed by the vastness, feel impotent and insignificant in the crowd. In our quest for freedom and independence, we can lose vital connections. We can assert in individualism so egotistical that it threatens everything that limits us. That assertion is made by Henry in the final act. Listen to him:

> Nobody can say must to me. All my life everybody's been crossing me--everybody, everything, all of you. I'm going to be free, even if I have to kill half the world for it.

Henry here articulates what Wilder sensed was the great dilemma of American life. How can each individual be granted "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" without it turning into a savage war of each against all? What are the legitimate bonds which curb the individual will and place it in a nourishing community? In other words, how can a society give rein to the individual without disintegrating into lawless anarchy?

There are three sets of bonds that Wilder returns to repeatedly in his writing. First, and, interestingly enough, the weakest, is the family. Wilder, working in the great tradition of Western thought, portrays the family as the basic unit of social organization. And yet it has its inescapable problems. Children resent their parents and sometimes like to play at being orphans. Parents fantasize about the life they would be living if they had never had children. Sons rival their fathers; dauthers, their mothers. Husbands and wives never really understand each other. The family is a battlegound where love and attention are desperately

fought for. A family, Wilderr explains, "is life a forest; each tree must fight for the sunlight; under the ground the roots engage in a death struggle for moisture. We are told that some exude an acidity that is noxious for all except themselves [...] In every happy family there is one who must pay." In Wilder's world, children are painfully aware of the gulf that exists between them and their parents. As a child explains in one play, "We've found that it's best not to make friends with grownups because... in the end...they don't act fair to you." Even the happiest couples are aware that their spouses are mysteries to them. Think of that bottle Mrs. Antrobus thropws out to sea, the bottle that tells the truth about women; the truth of which men are unaware. Wilder does not presume to know that truth, but he knows that exists. It is up to women to articulate it. His recognition of the need for a "women's literature" is perhaps the most far-seeing and prophetic moment in Wilder's writing.

Wilder himself knew about the struggle to survive in a family. He was one of a pair of identical twins; the other died after only a few hours. "Why me and not the other?" he must have asked himself. What was the price paid for his survival? Might we not see in Henry an aler ego for Thornton Wilder's fears and guilt at having outlived his twin? Perhaps Wilder is Cain to his twin's Abel.

The second bond is to the state, or community. If the first is the domestic realm, this is the political. From the very beginning of the play, the Atrobus family has many ties to the outside world of school, work, and civic life. The family is only a small unit within a larger social network.

Wilder only touches on political life in his plays; his idea of the state is most clearly articulated in his novel about Julius Caesar, The Ides of March.

The third bond is the one we have with all the great artists and thinkers who have left a record of their experience through painting, music, literature, philosophy, etc. The study of arts and letters is not an elitist activity for Wilder. A marvelously well-read and erudite man, his writings abound in references to or echoes of Catullus, Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Edgar Allen Poe, Schiller, Goethe, Spinzoa...But Wilder is not playing a snob's game, where you can't understand the work unless you have several advanced degrees in philology and literature. Wilder believes all people should have access to the great achievements of world culture, and that it is incumbent upon each age to renew and pass on those achievements to the next generation. The preservation of culture is a moral imperative; without it we have no larger framework for our ideas and are limited to our most recent and immediate notions. Just as democracy respects the value of differing viewpoints among the living, so tradition respects the value of differing opinions among those who have lived before us. Wilder was involved, both as a teacher and author, in the revival and transmission of civilized values. He did not write for a scholarly elite, but for the average, literate human being, and believed that the idea of a democratic readership was particularly American.

For Wilder, the tradition was not an inert mass of dusty tomes; it was an adventure, because learning and experience (any *true* experience worthy of the name) engages our highest powers of energy, concentration and

creativity. So when we attend a wedding ceremony, vote in an election, when we think about Plato's idea of the Good or read the works of Shakespeare, the event *renews* what was done before--our action makes it happen all over again. Just as every infant seems proud to have discovered walking, and every young lover is convinced that no one has ever loved quite this way before, everything that we take from the tradition we *appropriate*--we make it our own.

That appropriation is, however, not only a pleasure, it is a sacred duty. The most important activity for Mr. Antrobus is the education of his children. And it is this richness of a life lived within a world of great inventions and aspiratios that Wilder explores in The Skin of Our Teeth. Every civilization must work assiduously at preserving itself against the forces of mindless hedonism (in the Atlantic City scene), violence (in the final scene) and despair. Just as Christian thought has often seen Adam and Eve as types, or allegorical representations, of all human kind, so too, Mr. Mrs. Antrobus are *us*. We all discover a myriad of things in our life-times--the alphabet and the multiplication tables, the Illiad and the tomato. It's just that we become deadened by habit, cynicism and despair and forget how wonderful all these things are. Wilder labors to help us rediscover the wonders that we participate in as human beings.

And yet, he never shies away from depicting the self-destructive elements that threaten civilization. When Lily Sabina decides to lure George away from his wife, she exults, "I'll turn the whole world upside down," and we laugh at her comic *hubris*. But that line also reveals Sabina to be another

version, albeit a less threatening one, of Henry, who is the ultimate rebel in his opposition to order, tradition, or anything that might curb his own anarchic ambitions. Henry must be fought--George Antrobus understands that very well, but he also realizes that Henry is one of us as well. Henry is the product of our own darkness, savagery and rebellious impulses. He is the nightmare behind the American Dream--individualism run rampent, without regard for anything else. He will always be with us and must be fought, but he also must be embraced, ministered to, cared for in his alienation. He is not merely Other--he is also us, all of us. In a Wilder play or novel, every single character is an aspect of each of us. Just as the Protestant Reforman urged lay people to read the Bible, with an eye to their own spiritual travails and difficulties, Wilder makes the reading of a novel or the seeing of a play an occasion for ethical scrutiny and self-examination, in a tradition that goes back to Protestant homiletics and Bunyan's Pilgrims Progress. He demands that we come to an understanding of ourselves and the strength of the bonds that unite us, making a civilized life possible. Yes, he admits that we are lonely much of the time; time and again he makes outsiders the protagonists of his novels. He assumes that no human has ever really known another person in all of their complexities. He knows that we live much of our lives on the edge of despair, surviving individually and collectively by the skin of our teeth. But we must orient ourselves toward meaning, and away from chaos. Only through such an orientation can we find the bonds that hold us together even in our loneliness.

The bonds of family, community and tradition; these are the three aspects

of life George Antrobus enumerates near the play's end:

> Now I remember what three things always went together
> when I was able to see clearly: three things. Three things:
> The voice of the people in their confusion and their need
> [the political bond]. And the thought of you and the children
> and this house [the domestic]...And...Maggie! I didn't dare
> ask you: my books? [the cultural tradition]

I think in times like ours, in which we are often unable to see things clearly, in which we are deluged with meaningless information, bombarded with high-pressured selling techniques and a terrible jumble of the significant and the stupid within a few moments of television viewing; where the demogoguery of politicians and the hysteria of churchmen are daily presences; a world in which a lot of people would agree that "dog-eat-dog was the rule in the beginning and always will be"--I think in such a world as this, we need to think carefully about the priorities that Thornton Wilder sets before us, and ask if we could find better ones. I know that I can't.

I'd like to end with a prediction: if we get through to the 22nd century by the skin of our teeth, I believe that the literary historians will look at the American literature of the first half of the twentieth century and say that most of it was bad (as bad literature vastly outnumbers the good in any age), and some of it was interesting, but that only 3 American authors had the complexity, breadth and depth of vision linked with a superb handling of the English language to be called "geniuses": the poet, playwright and critic, T.S. Eliot; the lyric poet, Wallace Stevens; and the playwright and

novelist, Thornton Wilder.

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