

Man and the Divine: Religious Concerns in Wilder's Early Dramatic Works

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Thornton Niven Wilder's early dramatic works display a keen interest in free artistic expression not yet tempered by the theatricality of his later plays. These plays clearly demonstrate Wilder's search for the right form, and show him to be motivated by a desire to express man's spiritual state. Wilder published numerous works, winning many awards and world-wide acclaim. However, this study will consider only his early dramatic work and follow the development of a major concern of his: explaining life in order to give a sense of the unity of the universe and to fashion an adjustment between the physical world and the transcendent, the here and the hereafter, the human and the divine.

His education and family background suggest a rationale for his artistic stance. He was born in 1897 to a religious family: the father, a devout Congregationalist whom Wilder described as a very strict Calvinist; and the mother, a daughter of a Presbyterian minister. For a time while his family was in China, he attended an English missionary school at Chefoo as a boarding student. Later, upon the insistence of his father who wanted him to attend a college that would provide a proper spiritual atmosphere, Wilder went to Oberline College "... at a time when the classroom and student life carried a good deal of the pious didacticism which would be called now Protestantism." (Cowley, 1958: 104; also Isabel Wilder, 1977: ix-x) He stayed there for two years then transferred

to Yale where he graduated in 1920. During his stay at Yale, he published several one-act short plays and a single longer play, **The Trumpet Shall Sound**, in the school's literary magazine. He was teaching French in New Jersey when he published **The Bridge of San Luis Rey**, a novel which won him the Pulitzer Prize for 1928. Later that year, encouraged by his success, he published a volume gathered from his very earliest works, a collection of short plays, **The Angel That Troubled the Waters**. Wilder published another collection of plays in 1931, **The Long Christmas Dinner**, after his third novel, **The Woman of Andros**, prompted vehement criticism. The last play in the collection shows a maturing writer who exhibits an imaginative understanding of his craft. It marks the end of training and the beginning of genuine dramatic productivity.

When **The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays** appeared, Bernard Grebanier thought the publication was justified by what he considered a brilliant introduction that displayed "acute self-knowledge," yet he dismissed the plays as not plays at all but rather works in which he discerned "a deeply earnest concern with moral values (without didacticism or uncton)." (Grebanier, 1964: 11). Michael Gold poked fun at what he judged to be Wilder's simplicity in thinking the revival of religion a matter of rhetoric, then moved on to describe the plays as "pretty, tinkling, little three-minute playlets. These are on the most erudite and esoteric themes one could ever imagine." Gold then described the "garden" cultivated by Wilder as a "museum" with devitalized air in which "move the wan ghosts he has called up, each in 'romantic' costume. It is an historic junkshop over which our author presides." (Gold, 1930: 266)

The plays did not fare much better in the opinion of other critics. St. John Adcock described them as full of "the grotesquerie, allegory, mysticism, the bizarre poetry of thought and emotion that went to the making of the old moralities and miracle plays of the Middle Age." (Adcock, 1929: 318) Donald Haberman refused to consider them plays: "They are in the exegetical tradition of the Protestant sermon which takes a biblical text and then expounds upon it, examining some of its implications for the Christian life." (Haberman, 1967: 28)

Though these critical views, taken together, accurately describe many aspects of Wilder's early plays, several works remain interesting enough to warrant a recent production on public television. In them, we see Wilder initially observing the relationships between man and man, and man and the divine. He then asserts, with the optimistic enthusiasm of a young idealist, that there exist "higher laws" which men do not follow or even see. Consequently, he feels duty bound to point out these laws. In addition, we see the young Wilder attempting to ally himself with the great playwrights' tradition by assimilating whatever he thinks to be the best from his readings. The plays are, in Wilder's words, "full of allusions" to his wide readings, at the time, in the Bible, the classics, and Romantic and Victorian poets. (Wilder, 1928: xiv) The plays, as a result, seem eclectic in nature. Lacking a distinctive stance, they instead reveal a writer attempting to reconcile the new ideas he is encountering and accepting with his

conservative background.

One can see this eclecticism in the plays as well as in the Preface of the volume. There, taking a hint from Emerson's definition of the poet, Wilder describes the artist as

One who knows how life should be lived at its best and is always aware of how badly he is doing it. An Artist is one who knows he is failing in living and feeds his remorse by making something fair, and a layman is consoled by his success in golf, or in love, or in business. (Wilder, 1928: xi-xii)

The denial of the possibility of achieving successful perfect earthly living suggests a denial of the existence of absolutes on earth. Wilder suggests, instead, the existence of absolute ideas which the artist alone can perceive.

The scene in **Nascunter Poetae** is a world of pale blues and greens, where women instruct a boy chosen to be an artist. After the first woman gives him the necessary gifts of pride and joy, the boy becomes impatient to live. However, he trembles his way off the stage when the second woman gives him the necessary dark gifts of an artist: a staff that signifies the journey he will have to take all his life, since he will be homeless, and a crystal that will allow him to see beyond the confinement of the life of ordinary men, yet will deprive him of peace since he will see laughter and misery in the same day, the trivial and the divine in the same hour. His appointed task: give voice to this life of man and mark its meaning.

Wilder, in **Centurus**, seems literally to be trying to dramatize an aspect of Plato's theory wherein ideas are eternal, perfect, and changeless entities found outside time and place. In this play, Shelley appears before the performance of Ibsen's **The Master Builder** to claim the play as his own. Asserting that on the night before his drowning he composed a poem, "The Death of Centaur," he pleads that he did not have time to put it on paper. Ibsen answers by saying that the "poem hung for a while above the Mediterranean, and then drifted up toward the Tyrol and I caught it and wrote it down." (Wilder, 1928: 86)

Wilder originally called the collection **Three-Minute Plays for Three Persons**, but these "plays" are not suitable for presentation on stage. In length, they vary between thirty and one-hundred lines. Non-realistic, both in technique and style, they almost all deal with ecumenical themes reflecting Wilder's readings and giving the impression that he wrote them as fantasies. Later in his career, Wilder reminisced about this early period:

I think of myself as having been--right up to and

*through my college years--a sort of sleepwalker.
I was not a dreamer, but a muses and
self-amuser....My head has always seemed to me to
be like a brightly lighted room, full of the most
delightful objects, or perhaps I should say,
filled with tables on which are set up the most
engrossing games. (Cowley, 1958: 106)*

And indeed the early plays have a touch of the mystical about them, for they attempt to intimate insights into sacred mysteries, to express a detachment from material concerns; yet, at the same time, because of their compression, they remain somewhat mysterious, esoteric and visionary.

Borrowing its title and plot from a poem by Browning, "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came," presents Child Roland, a knight, trying to get into a dark tower to get help for his wounds. We know no more about the tower than what the knight says.

*I know your name! All my life I have heard of this
tower. They say that on the outside you are dark
and unlovely, but that within every hero stands
with his fellows and the great queens step proudly
on the stairs. (Wilder, 1928: 78)*

The girls inside refuse to open the door until Roland is dying. Opening the door, one of the girls says, "Take courage, high heart. How slow you have been to believe well of us. You gave us such little thought while living that we have made this delay at your death." (Wilder, 1928: 79) Browning refused to explain his poem and claimed that he wrote it with no conscious intention, that it came upon him as a dream and that he did not know what he meant by it beyond that. Like Browning's poem, Wilder's play cannot be assigned any kind of ethical meaning.

Another play, **Brother Fire**, reveals the same kind of mystical quality. A mother and her daughter invite Brother Francis for supper in a hut in the northern mountains of Italy. The Brother tells the little girl his fantasies about Brother Wind, Sister Rain and Brother Fire whom he loves:

*I know that there is a flame to burn all evil in
the Lake of the Damned. I do not speak of them
now,--but I know also that Fire is at all times
useful to the great Blessed. It surrounds them
and they dwell in it. (Wilder, 1928: 48)*

The play has a dream-like quality that attempts to communicate a feeling of something uncommunicable, a perception beyond the range of human experience.

The plays, in addition, have romantic traits. The characters resemble an assembly of exotic figures from the far away in time and place. This romanticism becomes most evident in the treatment of the love theme. **The Penny That Beauty Spent**, set in a jeweler's shop in Paris, features a dancer who comes with her husband to claim the present the king ordered for her after watching her performance. The dancer wants the gift for her husband but the jeweler says that she must get it herself because the king has "chosen" her. Because of the love she bears her husband she refuses to accept the jeweler's words. She becomes violent, threatens to scratch the king's eyes out, and emphatically affirms that her husband will have the present against the will of Versailles. In another play, **The Message and Jehanne**, set in a goldsmith's shop in Renaissance Paris, a ring delivered to a young lady has an inscription in it that convinces her to run away from her parents and from a marriage they have planned for her, in order to marry a student who loves her. The inscription reads, "As the hermit his twilight, the countryman his holiday, the worshiper his peace, so do I love thee." (Wilder, 1928: 71)

In both plays, the characters are bound by a powerful, beautiful and spiritual force: love, which as the basic system of faith, in both instances, dictates a clear moral stand. In **Fanny Otcott** this system comes closer to the heart of the play. An Irish actress, her black boy attendant and a former lover of hers, a Bishop, constitute the cast. The Bishop comes to tell Fanny that their affair remained a distressing spot in his consciousness and that he wants to make a public confession of their "sin." Fanny rebukes him saying that she never considered their love a sin, that "that year and my playing Faizella will bring troops of Angels to welcome me to Paradise." (Wilder, 1928: 39) To her and to Wilder the Bishop must have "learned long names from books and heard great many sneers from women as old as myself. You have borrowed your ideas from those who have never begun to live and dare not." (Wilder, 1928: 38)

Fanny's last statement reflects what Wilder, in the Preface to his book, clearly declares to be his objectives as a writer:

Almost all the plays in this book are religious, but religious in that dilute fashion that is a believer's concession to a contemporary standard of good manners. . . . It is the kind of work that I would like to do well. . . . I hope, through many mistakes, to discover the spirit that is not unequal to the elevation of the great religious themes, yet which does not fall into a repellent didacticism.

Wilder adds that the schoolmaster in him sees the Christian tradition "made repugnant to the new generations by reason of the diction in which it is expressed... The revival of religion is almost a matter of rhetoric." (Wilder, 1928: xv-xvi)

Wilder attempts to answer his own call for the revival of religion through a new description of old dogmas--though not for an outright reinterpretation--to fit the conditions of life and people of the day. This can be seen in almost all the plays of this first collection of his. However, one can also see that he could not follow his own advice to stay away from the didactic. 1

Prosperina and the Devil which Wilder described as one play of a series that was meant to illustrate the history of the stage, presents a puppet-show in Venice, 1640 A.D. The spoken lines are fewer in number and less important than the stage directions. Two manipulators mix the puppets and their roles. As a result, we see Christian and mythological figures mingling together. Thus, Wilder draws attention to the fact that Christian and mythological characters interacted in the theatre of the seventeenth century and he goes further to suggest that the myths of Greece and Rome still exist but in different form. This play teaches history, not morality, but the rest of the plays in the volume do try to point out moral lessons, often, without much subtlety.

The Angel on the Ship takes as its topic man's insolence towards the divine. Three characters on a raft -- what was left of their ship -- attend to the figurehead of the ship and begin treating it as a god. They start praying, confessing their sins and asking for help of this god. But this does not last long, for as soon as a ship appears on the horizon, they toss the god they erected overboard. In **Leviathan**, a mermaid discovers the soul to be the most precious thing a human being owns. She asks a prince floating on what remains of his ship to lend her his soul. He tries to explain the impossibility of her request only to make her angry enough to drown him. After his death, she discovers that the prince lacks something which she was not able to see. At this point she ponders, "Perhaps it is better, although your body has passed to Leviathan, still have another part of you somewhere about the world." (Wilder, 1928: 96)

The foolish egotism of human beings clinging to their identities even after the Day of Judgment becomes clear in **And the Sea Shall Give up its Dead**. Here we are supposed to see three spirits rising from the bottom of the sea. In their conversation they relate how they were trying to cleanse themselves from their self-awareness throughout the years since they had drowned. However, they panic at the end of the play when they realize that they will lose their identities very shortly and be reduced to their "quintessential matter." But their panic does not help, for "the souls divested of all identification have tumbled, like falling stars into the blaze of unity." (Wilder, 1928: 103) This last idea foreshadows the idea of one of Wilder's later characters who states that we live in the mind of God.

In **Now the Servant's Name was Malchus**, "Our Lord" listens to Gabriel who submits petitions from human beings when Malchus comes in to request the eradication of his name from the Bible. Malchus complains that he feels ridiculous whenever someone on earth reads the story in the Bible about the cutting of his ear.

The rejoinder comes that many on earth feel that he appears

ridiculous too because I suffered from the delusion that after my death I could be useful to men... My promises were so vast that I am either divine or ridiculous. (Pause) Malchus, will you stay and be ridiculous with me?

Malchus agrees and adds that the book mentions the wrong ear, to which Christ replies that the book also has some untrue things about him. (Wilder, 1928: 112) The moral seems obvious.

Leaving the moral to the last lines of the play, in **Mozart and the Grey Steward**, Wilder employs a fable which claims that Death commissioned Mozart to write a requiem for the poor millions who die unnoticed. Mozart hesitates consequently, the Gray Steward, Death, takes him and points out the moral of the play: "Know henceforth that only he who has killed the leper can enter the kingdom of Art." (Wilder, 1928: 125) The substitution of "Heaven" by "Art" seems to be an attempt to revive religion through rhetoric, while, at the same time, charging artists with the task of reviving religion.

The last three plays present specifically Christian ideas and like **The Servant's Name was Malchus**, they appear to borrow the form of the Medieval mystery play. **Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job** presents the argument between Satan and Christ over their respective knowledge of the human heart. Satan initially boasts of his influence over Judas. However, Christ confounds Satan when, through his mercy, Christ wins Judas over. Judas subsequently curses Satan from eternity to eternity. The third play, **The Flight into Egypt** teaches us to abandon our doubts and to have faith in God. The play presents "Our Lady" with a child on a donkey, Hepzibah, accompanied by an old man, "St. Joseph." Hepzibah does most of the talking. Asserting the necessity for reason even in faith.

Of course, your child is dearer to you than others, but, theologically speaking, there's no possible reason why you should escape safely into Egypt while others be put to the sword, as the Authorized Version has it. When the Messiah comes, these things will be made clear, but until then I intend to exercise my reasoning faculty. (Wilder, 1928: 139-140)

Reminded that the child is the Messiah, Hepzibah runs faster declaring "Lord, what a donkey I was to be arguing about reason while my Lord was in danger." He inquires of faith and reason only to be answered, "Dear Hepzibah, perhaps some day. For the present just do as I do and bear your master on." (Wilder, 1928: 140-141)

The last play, **The Angel That Troubled the Waters**, deals with the Christian paradox of power through suffering. The angel that touches the water in order to heal invalids bathing in it, refuses the requests of a doctor who asks to be healed so that he can in turn help. The angel reasons,

*Without your wounds where would your power be? It
is your very remorse that makes your voice tremble
into the hearts of men... In Love's service only
the wounded soldiers can serve. (Wilder, 1928: 149)*

Again, another substitution of words appears, "God" by "Love."

In addition to the short plays, Wilder's first long play, **The Trumpet Shall Sound**, (Wilder, 1919-1920) must be mentioned in this discussion of his "undergraduate" work. This play appeared serially in **The Yale Literary Magazine** while Wilder was still a student. Other than the one failing performance by the American Repertory Theatre in 1926, the first performance of any of his works, this play remained neglected by critics and by Wilder who did not make any effort to publish it again. **The Trumpet Shall Sound** exposes Wilder's unripened artistry. Its allegory mars and dulls this play about judgment, justice, and mercy. The action takes place in the great drawing-room of Peter Magnus' New York mansion in the Fall of 1871. When the old faithful butler of the house dies, the rest of the servants, Sarah, a housekeeper, Flora, a housemaid, and Flora's brother, contemplate using the mansion as a boarding-house to make money while the owner remains in California. Because she wants to follow the example of the butler who got "more than money" for his faithfulness, Sarah hesitates to comply with Flora's wishes. The caretaker who comes to get the body of the butler gives the servants advice and a warning:

*You've got an easy life holding these here floors
down. But keep your heads. Don't let the master of the
house come back and catch you at a high
jinx! We know not the day nor the hour. Like a
thief in the night. The Trumpet Shall Sound.
(Wilder, 1919-1920: 16)*

This and the unseen picture of the owner on the fourth wall, which Flora describes as staring and watching her, lead us to believe that Peter Magnus, mark the name too, represents Christ. Flora reserves the big room for her lover while renting the rest of the rooms to a "silent and furtive crowd... the halt, the deaf, the dumb and the blind." (Wilder, 1919-1920: 26) Flora's lover Carlo, a sailor, comes to visit her — we discover that Carlo does not love Flora, but to be able to use her, consents to marriage in a mysterious though touching ceremony which Flora performs. Meanwhile, the furnace in the house produces smoke instead of heat. The cold combined with smoke suggest Milton's hell and we are to understand that each of the characters waits in his hell for

the repair promised at midnight when Magnus returns and arranges for his judgment. Magnus summons all the guests to tell them that as owner of the house he forgives them:

I am the only person injured by your intrusion and I forgive it you. As far as living in the house is concerned, you are absolved, -- but there are others among you who I can forgive but not absolve, -- the thievish, the fraudulent, the blasphemers, and the filth. (Wilder, 1919-1920: 198)

From this point on, the scene becomes somewhat incongruous with what has gone before and with what the audience has been led to expect. The roomers shift their culpability on to Flora who accepts it, taking all the blame on herself, thus making the forgiveness of Magnus possible. He sends them away forgiven. Magnus commends Carlo because he repudiated Flora during the marriage ceremony which Magnus considered a degradation of the marriage sacrament. But the marriage scene remains one of the most touching scenes of the play. More puzzling still, Magnus treats a prostitute rudely asking her to leave immediately for, according to him, people like her "bring empires to decay." (Wilder, 1919-1920: 202) One remembers Christ acting differently on a similar occasion. Sentenced to prison, Flora manages to commit suicide to escape that fate. Magnus' harsh words end the play. "Ah, Well! So pleasure will be paid!" (Wilder, 1919-1920: 207) However, one cannot forget the fact that Flora was willing to take the sins of the roomers on her and in doing so acted in the true Christian tradition.

The allegory does not accept a consistent interpretation. Wilder does not leave any doubt in the minds of his audience that Magnus represents Christ. Yet Magnus does not forgive Flora who took in the afflicted roomers, and thus acted as a true Christian should. The play leaves the reader puzzled whether to take Magnus as an embodiment of Christ's mercy or to see in him man's limited ability to judge. It is interesting to note that Wilder left this play unpublished a second time.

Three years elapsed before Wilder published his second collection of one-act plays, **The Long Christmas Dinner and Other One Act Plays**. (Wilder, 1931) This volume presents a "graduating" artist capable of writing theatrical and actable plays, in contrast with the previous unrepresentable ones. The characters seem realistic and individualized while the approach to plotting, in some of these plays at least, appears conventional. Significantly, Wilder abandoned his bluntly religious preaching. Nevertheless, he remains concerned with the life of man and his relationship to ultimate realities.

The plays show a writer who no longer sees everything from the point of view of reviving religion, nor a Christian teacher expounding dogmas; yet the humanist

emerges — a playwright who tries to explain the best way to live, to teach how life should be lived, and to evoke a religious feeling in his audience. In their form and in their ideas, these plays were according to Malcolm Goldstein, "Wilder's most important original work up to the date of their publication." (Goldstein, 1965: 74)

The six plays in the volume are not of the same caliber. **Such Things Only Happen in Books** can be dismissed as only an exercise. In fact, Wilder did not include it in the second edition of the volume. Though theatrical, the play does not say anything of significance. A writer tells his wife that in real life there are no plots, no such things as murderers coming back to the scene of their crime, no maids feeding strange people in the kitchen, or married women of thirty-five taking lovers. As the play unfolds we discover all these things happening in the writer's own house without his knowledge.

Suggesting that people do not appreciate their ordinary lives, a theme that will be of major concern to Wilder in his later work, **Queens of France** presents emotion-thirsty women in 1869 New Orleans hoaxed by a lawyer claiming to be the representative of a historical society in Paris. The lawyer manages to convince each of these women to be the sole real heiress to the French throne, and that this can be proven only after they purchase some documents. One of the "queens" — a teacher who runs out of money — elicits sympathy and draws attention to Wilder's theme. Mentioning the dream she was living in, she says "It was so beautiful while it lasted. It made even school-teaching a pleasure." (Wilder, 1931: 45-46)

Wilder returns to the love theme in **Love and How to Cure It**. A medical student, madly in love with a young dancer who does not share nor appreciate his feelings, threatens to kill the girl, then to kill himself. However, when a clown tells the story of the selfless love his wife bore him, the lover decides to abandon his plans and the girl. That love must be spiritual and selfless comes across only as a hint of the theme. This is partially accomplished by depicting individualized characters involved in concrete action; their portrayal helps remove the "moral" to the background.

The rest of the plays do not use conventional plots and they present characters that resemble types though they avoid overt preaching. In **The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden**, **The Long Christmas Dinner**, and **Pullman Car Hiawatha**, Wilder displays new insights into life and the dramatic art by manipulating the conventions of time, place and the box-set, and by emphasizing the matters of everyday life; as a result, the audience achieves an insight of its own: to discover the important matters of life. In these three plays and in his following major plays, Wilder's underlying framework resembles that of the Medieval age morality play. By telescoping time, characters can journey through it physically and spiritually. Morality plays present the life of man as a progression from childhood to maturity then to old age and death. Thus, man's life is followed, his follies traced and his salvation or condemnation depicted using the simplest kind of plot.

Using recurring incidents on stage, the cyclical form of **The Long Christmas Dinner** suggests man's relationship with a superior power and law and life's patterns that would lead to better lives when perceived. Over a period of thirty minutes, ninety years of the life of one family are presented in the form of one long Christmas dinner. Two portals at each end of the dining table represent birth and death: the characters enter from one side, join the continuing dinner, show their growing age by putting on wigs of white hair and then depart from the other side. Births, marriages and deaths occur and are accepted without much anxiety or pain.

The absence of props from the stage serves two functions. It gives meaning to the little things of a Christmas dinner that otherwise might look bland; on the other hand it makes it possible for the family on stage to represent families anywhere. The repetition of births and deaths further emphasizes the cyclical nature of life. Life becomes a tale told by a story-teller, and behind this transitory life lies an unseen but majestic presence that inspires awe and fascination.

The play succeeds in imparting a discovery of a higher truth and a greater knowledge gleaned by perceiving life's pattern. By compressing the lives of a family, Wilder shows love and the little things of life to be all that man has, that he should try to make the most of these, try to love and to show his love. The characters in the play experience one main regret: their failure to tell the departed ones how wonderful and how loved they were.

Wilder introduces his own version of the Greek drama chorus in the guise of a stage manager. In **The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden**, the stage manager arranges four chairs to represent a car in which a family of a husband, a wife, with their son and daughter make a trip to visit their married daughter in Camden. The characters engage from the beginning to the end in ordinary, seemingly unimportant activities. The stage manager plays all the secondary parts. We see the family at home preparing to leave. Then the neighbours say their goodbyes. The trip itself has its little incidents and a little misunderstanding between the son and the mother. At the end the daughter welcomes the family. Though simple in structure and incidents, the play captures "reality" and not mere versimilitude. For although events approximate reality, the pretence that four ordinary chairs make a car clearly points out that what transpires on stage must be taken as an interpretation of life. The many little things one family experience together make the journey happy — happy because it presents *pure* living. The average American mother who dominates the play, "strives to maintain an atmosphere of forward looking industry and readiness." (Haberman, 1967: 104) She couples her forward-looking industry with a resignation to the will of God. Remembering her own son who was killed in the war, and consoling the married daughter for the loss of her first baby, the mother says

*God thought best, dear. God thought best. We
don't understand why. We just go on, honey, doing*

our business. (Wilder, 1931: 121)

Pullman Car Hiawatha moves away from the earlier plays in the direction of **Our Town**. The Pullman car, a microcosm, makes a journey from New York to Chicago on December 21, 1930. On the empty stage, the stage manager marks lines with a piece of chalk to show the different compartments of the car. Every word of the dialogue attempts to evoke in the audience a feeling of a real trip. The stage manager asks the characters to think aloud and the series of monologues they utter help individualize them. A sick woman dies and the stage manager reports the car's "position geographically, meteorologically, astronomically, theologically." (Wilder, 1931: 58) Actors personifying a town, a field, a tramp travelling under the car, another town and a ghost of a man who was killed nearby also report their positions. Then, personifications of the hours recite passages from different philosophers followed by personifications of the planets who come in and participate with all other characters in humming a tune together. Gabriel and Michael, representing the theological position of the car, come in to take the dead woman. She protests that she would not be happy "there," and expresses her shame to go with them because she has not done anything worthwhile in her life and that she is only another American. However, the angels whisperingly convince her to go with them. Before she does, she stops for a minute to say her goodbyes to every little thing she experienced in her life. The play ends when the train arrives in Chicago.

By harmonizing man with the universe, Wilder assigns man a significant place and role that add to the meaning of the universe. He sees clear order in the cosmos brought about by a power that orchestrates everything. Every part, no matter how insignificant it may seem, adds to the whole and thus is highly important. To show unity in a seemingly fragmentary world, Wilder adopts a teleological attitude in his early works. He shows everything as participating in the "symphony" of the cosmos and contributing to its meaning. This concept naturally calls for the appreciation of life and what it offers including little things normally unnoticed or thought of as boring and dull. In his major plays, this essentially optimistic vision will become clearer, more powerful, and quite moving.

NOTES

1 Later in life, Wilder admitted that he has a considerable element of the didactic in his work, but insisted that all the greatest playwrights "except the very greatest *one*, have precisely employed the stage to convey a moral or religious point of view." He argued that he was trying to keep his moralizing down throughout a large part of his life and that because of his struggle he was becoming more objective. In (Cowley, 1958: 109, 111). See also Linda Simon, **Thornton Wilder: His World** (Garden City, N.Y., 1979)

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