

## **"Thornton Wilder's Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth"**

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A preoccupation with explaining life marks Thornton Wilder's two major plays : Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth. He develops in these plays a vision that focuses on what he considers to be the essence of all that life has to offer. The plays aim to produce in the audience a sense of unity in the universe, of harmony between the physical and the transcendent worlds, of a conciliation between the here and the hereafter, and of an enhancement of the relationship of man with the divine.

Wilder's plays have been attacked and defended with labels such as "humanism," "mysticism," "didacticism," and "religious Platonism". Michael Gold, for instance, charges Wilder of presenting what he termed a "dilettante religion".<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Malcolm Cowley, a critic who describes Wilder as "serious writer" absorbed with "moral problems"<sup>2</sup> - defends him against Gold's charge and points out the similarities between Wilder's work and that of the transcendentalists.

Wilder's work, he says,

Has more than a little of the moral distinction they tried to achieve, and like their work it deals with the relation of one to one, or of anyone to the All, the Everywhere and the Always. Like theirs, it looks toward the future with confidence.<sup>3</sup>

Edmund Fuller, evaluating the work of Wilder, joins Cowley in defending Wilder's work by declaring it

Permeated by a profound mystical and religious sensibility - too mature to war upon or sneer at orthodoxy, too creative to fit snugly in its confines. His vision and celebration of man are harmonious with Christian humanism.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the literature written about Wilder prepares one to understand the summation of the critics' treatment of Thornton's work offered by Amos Wilder, the playwright's senior brother:

Wilder, they agree, is indeed somewhat anomalous and hard to pigeonhole, but he falls outside the main line of advance of the novel or the drama. His work has been on the margin of those explorations and engagements so essential to our twentieth-century experience. Worst of all, he smacks of Middle America and even a disguised religiosity. Thus all across the board - subject matter, outlook, style - he does not fit the common premise or lend himself to the central debate.<sup>5</sup>

When Wilder began publishing in the twenties, the cruelties and harsh realities of World War I had generated spiritual emptiness and lack of direction. Many of Wilder's contemporaries, influenced by the European realists like Ibsen and Strindberg, either satirized what they saw - one can take Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine as a representative example - or hated it completely. Moreover, they saw no form of idealism that was acceptable to them and their plays were marked with the absence of a specific course of action, prompting one critic to dub the theater of the twenties a "Theater of inaction, a negative theater".<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the onslaught of the devastating economic depression of the thirties brought on a social and political theater. Wilder's contemporaries wrote about the masses, their struggle and their pain. Some of them saw a chance to examine and reject the accepted values of previous generations and present solutions to the ills they perceived.<sup>7</sup> Brecht, for instance, wrote didactic plays to teach people about specific problems. Elmer Rice wrote We, the People (1933) to expose corruption. Odets' Waiting for Lefty (1935) called for strikes to protest economic conditions. In general, the theater of the thirties was political theater about the necessity for "action" to solve social problems.<sup>8</sup>

Wilder's plays do not fall into the general trend of the twenties or the thirties. In fact, at a time when idealism was lacking, Wilder presented a theater that has ideals. When the rejection of traditional values was the trend among writers, he presented a theater that affirms the bedrock of traditional values. This is not to say he did not reject anything, for he did reject the traditional format of the theater of the previous generation. One can argue that he followed the general trend of his contemporaries by rejecting not what they rejected but the forms of the theater that he saw. In content he

was different from his contemporaries by having a direction and ideals, a fact that made him suspect to the social critics who saw ills associated with religion and saw writers they did not agree with as religious (i.e. conformist), defensive, foolishly sanguine and hence indirectly endorsing the social structures around them.

Wilder had a "religious" background. But more importantly his background included, among other things, classical education-reading of the Greek and Roman writers, foreign travel, and exposure to the theater at an early age. All contributed to shape his theater and his themes. Wilder was dissatisfied with both the tragic and the comic theater of his time for he perceived it to be inadequate, evasive, and aiming to be "soothing".<sup>9</sup> His early dramatic works showed him attempting to experiment in form yet many of these works had traditional themes.<sup>10</sup> These plays were electric in nature, reflecting Wilder's reading in the classics, in the Romantic and Victorian poets and the Bible. These plays appeared as The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays (1928). Of them, Centurus seems to be a dramatization of Plato's theory of "ideas". The Penny That Beauty Spent, The Message and Jehanne, and Fanny Otcott have love as the basic system of faith. Leviathan, and And the Sea Shall Give Up Its Dead, Nascunter Poetae among others, seem to be concepts that Wilder wants to dramatize. But, the ideas in these plays remain essentially unembodied. Some of these plays like The Servant's Name was Malchus, Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job, and The Flight from Egypt, present Christian ideas in a format influenced by the form of the medieval religious drama. Wilder's craft improves in his second collection of plays, The Long Christmas Dinner and Other One Act Plays. In some of these plays, especially The Long Christmas Dinner and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, Wilder displays new perceptions of the dramatic art and a deft manipulation of the dramatic conventions of time, place and the box-set.

Wilder's Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth were produced within a span of four years. Both retain elements from his earlier plays but they display the subtlety of a writer in complete control of his material. In the early plays, he was learning his craft and attempting new techniques and concerning himself mainly with the mastery of his form.

When Wilder was teaching at the University of Chicago he met Gertrude Stein and they began a long friendship. From Stein, Wilder learned many things, one of which was her definition of the religion which he explains in an introduction he wrote for her book Four in America:

Religion . . . has very little to do with cult and dogma . . . Religion is what a person knows - knows beyond knowing, knows beyond anyone's power to teach him - about his relation to the existence in which he finds himself.<sup>11</sup>

He also formulated a theory about the theater which owes a lot to Stein. He became convinced that the theater was better than the other arts because the viewers in a theater could see pure existence, could know the pretense involved and consequently interpret it for themselves. He wanted such kind of drama to restore to the theater what it had at one time. To Wilder, a play came to mean a religious ceremony of some sort where the audience would muse on the ritualistic interpretation of life, the human condition and the position of man in relation to humanity and the universe. By producing such a play Wilder was hoping to revive the "elements of mystery and love that are the basis for the affirmation of a higher presence".<sup>12</sup>

Our Town was first produced in 1938 and since then it has been produced very frequently in some town or another in the United States and other countries all over the world. Almost fifty years after its initial production, the play in 1986 held second place in the list of plays produced most often in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> The play won for Wilder his fame as playwright and is considered one of the best American plays. Critics, almost unanimously, compliment his for this "masterpiece" considered by many to be a classic.

In Our Town, Wilder chooses to relate a parable, a "generalized allegory,"<sup>14</sup> following the structural formula of morality plays. He aims to discover the truth of ordinary life and the human experience and to dramatically express this truth in a show that would hold the "unified crowd". Two statements of Wilder about Our Town can help us understand the play. In the first statement, Wilder talks about his

Unresting preoccupation with the surprise of the gulf between each tiny occasion of the daily life and the vast stretches of time and place in which every individual plays his role. By that I mean the absurdity of any single person's claim to the importance of his saying, "I love!" "I suffer!" when one thinks of the background of the billions who have lived and died, who are living and dying, and presumably will live and die.<sup>15</sup>

The second statement appears in the introduction of his Three Plays.

Our Town is not offered as a picture of life in a New Hampshire Village; or as a speculation about the condition of life after death . . . It is an attempt to find events in our daily life. I have made the claims as preposterous as possible, for I have set the village against the largest dimensions of time and place . . . Emily's joys and griefs, her algebra lessons and her birthday presents - what are they when we consider all the billions of girls who have lived, who are living, and who will live? Each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner . . . Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of Shakespeare's seven ages of man, Wilder selects three periods to present in three acts: "Daily Life," "Love and Marriage," and "Death." The selection itself is significant in its emphasis on human interaction and the chain that binds people together. One can restate the titles of the acts as: the state of the chain of being, how new links are forged, how these links end. The "moral" is conveniently conveyed in this last part through the classical device of a visit to the underworld. Wilder introduces a stage manager who serves many purposes including initiating the audience to "secrets" and facts and commenting on the main action of the play: life and how it should be lived. He serves to keep the dramatic illusion from getting too realistic thus allowing the audience to think and feel with the characters on stage yet at the same time keep the action flowing smoothly thus enhancing the theatricality of the play.

Wilder was proclaiming as early as 1931 the importance of believing in the "Significance and even in the concealed implication of every event".<sup>17</sup> Our Town presents exactly such a concept of life. The play tells a very simple and well known story. The first act presents the "Daily Life" of two families. The second act deals with "Love and Marriage" of the son and daughter of the two families. The last act presents the last stage of man's life, "Death". Two tables and some chairs serve as scenery and are arranged by the stage manager, who serving as the counterpart of the Greek Chorus, introduces the play, narrates some of the incidents, plays some of the minor parts and comments on the action. The characters, although somewhat individualized by their speech, remain as Wilder described them, "Halfway abstractions in an allegory".<sup>18</sup> They come close to being types, clichés of small-town life, and thus become symbols easily. George must be seen not as a particular person but rather the son and then the husband; Emily is the daughter and

then the young wife; and so on. The elements of make-believe in the presentation are stressed throughout the play helping thus to establish the allegory and to force the audience to remain aware that the action on stage must be thought about and interpreted.

The deities of Greek Drama and the God of the morality play are replaced by a "cosmic spirit" that permeates the whole play. Rebecca, George's sister, identifies this "cosmic spirit" at the end of the first act as the Mind of God. She tells her brother,

I never told you about that letter Jane Croft got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Croft; the Croft Farm; Grover's Corners; Stutton Country; New Hampshire; United States of America . . . Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; The Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God - that's what it said on the envelope. (p. 28)

Wilder finishes his parable by reporting and presenting the highlights of the lives of his characters in their existence in the Mind of God. At the very end, the stage manager assures everyone that "There's something waydown deep that's eternal about every human being". (p. 52) Through the elevation of his characters to the realm of idea and type, and by compressing the life of every man and playing against the stretches of time, Wilder manages to evoke in his audience belief in what they see, and experience the revelation he wants them to have.

When he presents the humdrum of daily life of every man, Wilder shows the truth about life, shows the insignificance of this life in relation to the broad framework of the universe he presents which he broadens with every act. But by investing the play with the cosmic spirit, by suggesting that human beings live in the Mind of God, Wilder gives the life of every man a significance and by that he shows himself as a religious person, for in this attitude toward life, the universe and God, Wilder attempts to effect an adjustment between man and "the existence he finds himself in", a framework of personal security. A short leap of faith and the nature of the world is revealed in personal premonition, so one would know beyond the ability of anyone to teach him that the universe has a design. Consequently, every minute of life becomes valuable; man should take everything life offers with gratitude, not for granted. But people walk in self-centered dreams while their lives are running out

rapidly. Emily notices this from her vantage point after her death and sees the blindness of human beings because they do not notice all the "wonderful things" that happen around and to them. She asks the stage manager if there were human beings who realize every minute of life while they live, and he answers that only "the saints and poets" do. (p. 62) To establish the significance of the little things of life, Wilder manages rather successfully to make the homely sublime and the everyday event integrated with the eternal and gives these events the tint of the enigmatic and the reverent.

By presenting the entirety of existence, Our Town tries to present the truth. It transmits a sense of human limitations. A hero should assert his will and should give life meaning by living fully. Death, which must be accepted with stoical resignation, will cut man's part of living. Human reason would do best to accept the will of the divine. Wilder accepts this will, affirms the goodness and justice of the system he portrays and sends his audience away exalted in spirit and with a deep sense belonging to the system portrayed in the play. This view of existence implicitly relates to Christianity, but Wilder's beliefs on this point remain unstated although the relationship seems clear and becomes clearer in The Skin of Our Teeth (1942) where Wilder seeks the vision of a unity in the universe through combining Biblical and evolutionary history.

Although The Skin won for Wilder his third Pulitzer Prize, it did not win unanimous approval, for the play was received with a mixture of praise and condemnation. Both Bernard Grebanier and John Gassner rated the play as one of the best plays in the history of the American theater, while Joseph Campbell and H.M. Robinson accused Wilder of plagiarizing Finnigan's Wake.

Wilder, who professed the deep indebtedness of the play to James Joyce's work, was concerned mainly in "trying to make some sense out of the multiplicity of the human race and its affections".<sup>19</sup> He was fascinated with Joyce's book because it presented a pattern similar to the one he himself used in "The Long Christmas Dinner," where a cyclical concept of history was adopted. The morality play structure in The Skin was not noticed when the play was first produced. Harrison Smith, in a short review of the first production, saw the play as "a morality play, its theme as ancient as time - a morality play without the moral ardor which could have captured the imagination of the audience with its recital of mankind's long agony, his indomitable hope."<sup>20</sup>

In the Skin Wilder fuses the homely daily life events of a family (the Antrobuses), with the history of mankind in its development through time. In each of the three acts, the family faces a major crisis: the ice age, the flood, and war. A microcosm, the Antrobuses are described as a "typical American family," yet they are rather a-typical human family, The action takes place in a perpetual present suffused with a geological, Biblical and then historical chronology.

In the first act of the allegory, Antrobus, who stands for Adam and the eternal male, has just finished the alphabet and has invented the wheel. He is described as a fine man, husband and father and "a pillar of the church and has all the best interest of the community at heart". His wife Eve, the eternal female and mother, comes across as a fine woman who "lives only for her children". (p. 71) There are two children in the family, Henry-Cain and the eternal evil and Gladys, hope and goodness. The family has a maid, Sabina, an eternal Lillith.

The family indulges in everyday ordinary action that compresses, at the same time, the progress of mankind in thousands of years. A crisis threatens the house: ice pushes south and freezes everything. The Antrobuses give shelter to Homer, Moses and the Muses and fight the ice with fire they build as Henry learns the multiplication table and Gladys learns the alphabet and the Bible. The act ends with Sabina asking the audience to pass their chairs to feed the fire and save the human race. The whole act stresses the fact that faith in religious and human values will save the world.

The second act takes place in Atlantic City where the "ancient and honorable order of mammals, subdivision humans" hold their convention. The situation of the world seems to be like that before the Flood. Gambling and seduction prevail. Antrobus - Noah - who gives the watchword for the future as "Enjoy Yourselves", succumbs to the seduction of Sabina, who has won a beauty contest. Henry kills a Black man with a stone. A fortune teller warns of the coming deluge and predicts a narrow escape. Mrs. Antrobus refuses to grant her husband a divorce and by this action she saves the marriage and the family from the deluge. The last words of the act are addressed to the Antrobuses by the fortune teller, "Think it over! A new world to make. - Think it over!" Thus, the affirmation in this act follows primarily the Judaic-Christian tradition.

Instead of a new world, the third act presents a world that has suffered from a war that has just ended. Antrobus who was fighting Henry-Cain comes back home hopeless. But he recovers his hope when he remembers that living means struggle and that everything must be fought for. "All I ask is the chance to build worlds and new Gods has always given us that. And has given us new voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us . . . We've come a long ways. We're learning." (p 136) voices Antrobus refers to are personified as hours that recite passage from, Spinoza.

After experience had taught me that the common occurrences of daily life are vain and futile; and I saw the objects of my desire and fear were in themselves nothing good or bad save insofar as the mind was affected by them; I at length determined to search out whether there was something truly communicable to man.

Plato,

Then tell me, O Cristias, how will a man choose the ruler that shall rule over him? Will he not choose a man who has first established order in himself, knowing that any decision that has its spring from anger or pride or vanity can be multiplied a thousand fold in its effects upon the citizens?

Aristotle,

This good estate of the mind possessing its object in energy we call divine. This we have occasionally and it is this energy which is pleasantest and best. But God has it always. It is wonderful in use; but in Him how much more wonderful.

And lastly from the Bible,

In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth; and the Earth was waste and void; And the darkness was upon the face of the deep . . . And God said, Let there be the light and there was light. (pp. 136-137)

Sabina, ending the play in a scene that is similar to the opening scene says, "This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet. 'You go home. The end of this play isn't written yet,'" (p.137)

The common occurrences of daily life are robbed of their significance when Wilder plays them against the vast stretches of time. But this juxtaposition, however, shows the cyclical pattern of life which in turn shows that the sum of existence can be explain only by the assumption that there exist a definite design in the microcosm. Wilder implies that we cannot know more about this design and we cannot explain the riddles of the universe. Consequently, Wilder agrees with Spinoza that we can give life the meaning our minds choose to give it; with Plato, that each person must be morally responsible in order to give his life significance; with Aristotle, in a belief that man can be divine and can be part of God, the beginning and the end of all things.

Wilder insists in this play that a man should be emphatically alive enjoying his existence, that a man becomes what he makes of himself, that man should have discipline because he is responsible for his fellow man, and finally that man should be committed to action. But it is belief in God, the Alpha and the Omega, that informs Wilder's position and gives ultimate meaning to a world that otherwise seems meaningless.

#### NOTES

1. Michael Gold. "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ," New Republic, LXIV (October 22, 1930), 267.
2. Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return (New York, 1951), p. 304.
3. Malcolm Cowley, "The Man Who Abolished Time," SRL XXXIX (October 6, 1956), 52.
4. Edmund Fuller, Books With Men Behind Them (New York, 1962), p. 42. Other scholars had conflicting opinions also. Francis Fergusson, for instance, places Wilder in the company of Elliot and Brecht, then treats the three writers as allegorists who used the theater "in the service of their consciously worked out moral or philosophical ideas . . . Their aim is not discussion in any sense, but teaching . . ." [Francis Fergusson, "Three Allegorist: Brecht, Wilder and Elliot," The Sewanee Review, LXIV (Fall, 1956), 41]. In discussing Wilder's philosophy, Fergusson describes it as a sort of religious Platonism: deistic, but not more Christian than

Unitarianism, or ethical culture.” (p. 51) On the other hand, Robert W. Corrigan, dismisses the notion of Wilder as a religious writer. Wilder, he argues, lacks “the backdrops of religious belief”. [“Thornton Wilder and the Tragic sense of Life,” Educational Theatre Journal, XIII (1961), 171]. He adds that Wilder has a tragic view that sees life as a “cheat and its conditions those of defeat”. (p. 169) Furthermore, he stresses that Wilder’s themes are life, love and earth and that, “Each of his plays is a hymn in dramatic form affirming life”. An affirmation that Corrigan claims not to be Christian. “Wilder has no belief in religion that is revealed or historical. These are basic premises of Christianity. To be sure Wilder is deistic, but . . . he is essentially a religious Platonist: and this position must ultimately reject the historic dimension as meaningful”.(p. 167) One critic describes Wilder as “resolutely unfashionable,” [Elmer Davis, “Caeser’s Last Month”, Saturday Review of Literature, XXXI (February 21, 1948), 11]. While another critic calls him a “folk author”. [Malcolm Cowley, Exile’s Return, p. 3.] While one critic considers Wilder’s work singular and standing apart from the main stream of the American literary tradition, [Harold Clurman, “Theatre,” Nation, CLXXXI (September 3, 1955), 210] another sees it as representing “continuity and tradition, [Malcolm Cowley, “The Man” . . ., 14.]

5. Amos Niven Wilder, Thornton Wilder And His Public (Philadelphia, 1980), p. 29.
6. Bamber Gascoigne, Twentieth Century Drama (New York, 1966), p. 24.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
9. Thornton Wilder, “Preface” in Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker (London, 1975) p. 8.
10. See my “Man and the Divine: Religious Concerns in Wilder’s Early Dramatic Works,” Bulletin of the Faculty Of Humanities And Social Sciences, Volume 10 (1987).
11. Gertrude Stein, Four in America (New Haven, 1947), p. XVI.
12. Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (New York, 1961), p. 87.

13. USA Today (February, 1987).
14. "Our Town - From Stage to Screen," Anon., Theatre Arts, XXIV (Nov., 1940) p. 824.
15. Malcolm Cowley, ed., Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews (New York, 1952), p. 113.
16. Thornton Wilder, Three Plays (New York, 1961), p. XI. Subsequent references from Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth are from this edition and will appear in the text.
17. Walther Tritesch, "Thornton Wilder in Berlin," Living Age, CCCXIV (September, 1931), p. 45.
18. "Our Town - From Stage to Screen," p. 824.
19. Cowley, Writers at Work, p. 114.
20. Harrison Smith, "The Skin of Whose Teeth?" Part II, SRL, XXV (December 26, 1942), p. 12.