The New Criterion

Books

October 2009

The eternal incognito

by Eric Ormsby

Of all the characteristics which set Thornton Wilder apart from the other great American writers of his generation and which make him something of an odd man out, it is his unexpected serenity which most unsettles. Even when dealing with tragic events, he is possessed of a decided equanimity. The shock of such events—a collapsing bridge in eighteenth-century Peru or (no less harrowing) a young girl's twelfth birthday revisited from beyond the grave in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire—is always captured from a vastly wider, indeed, a cosmic, perspective. The effect, curiously enough, is to bring those calamitous moments closer, to make them painfully familiar, as though they formed part of our own experience.

Such serenity has nothing to do with mere cheerfulness (though Wilder seems to have been a bracingly cheerful man), nor with aloofness (Wilder loved life with enormous gusto), nor with some specious, peculiarly American "optimism" (which he lampooned with mischievous affection). Nor is Wilder's serenity a matter of bland indifference. It is a tragic stance. It represents an acceptance of the ultimate dismantling of all our dreams, expectations, and most fervent longings; at the same time, it holds these up close, cherishing them as momentary flickerings of significance, the way children cup fireflies in delighted hands. It is a stance which brings with it the recognition that, though we lose everything, the lives lived, the love given and received, confer a value beyond loss.

In the famous closing sentences of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, his early masterpiece, Wilder wrote, "Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning." In a lesser writer, this could have been a pat ending. As so often in Wilder's plays and novels, the message, the moral, teeters on the brink of banality, comes dangerously close to the embroidered motto on the crocheted tea-cozy: "Home Sweet Home" or (even more sick-making) "Love Conquers All."

Wilder had been a schoolmaster at the Lawrenceville School, and, as a writer, he remained a moralist as well as fabulist; for all his sophistication, he was a wry Aesop, much given to cautionary nudges. The tendency—no doubt reinforced by Amos Parker Wilder, his overbearing, "octupus-like" father (as he described him, with typical misspelling, in an early letter)—was in him from the start. In another letter, he owned up to "an ignoble passion to be didactic that I have to fight with." Still, it may be in just such adroit tightrope treading between homespun maxim and harsh fact that Wilder's singular distinction lies. He refuses to puncture the time-worn "verities." Quite the opposite: he defiantly scours them until they shine again.

Serenity isn't a conspicuously American trait; our authors seldom aspire to the Olympian. (Whitman comes closest but is too clamorous.) Nor is serenity fashionable: it lacks the requisite edginess as much in vogue in Wilder's day as in ours. It has a stodgy, rather mildewed sheen. Serenity is the sort

of trait we associate with such pedestaled behemoths as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (the full name says it all). And, in his serenity, as well as in several other respects, Thornton Wilder may be the most like him of all our writers. Not that this is really so odd: Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and the Transcendentalists were ardent Goetheans—in those days every manse housed a would-be Faust. Wilder's take was different; less systematic, more instinctive. Though he knew German and German literature remarkably well, the attraction went deeper. After participating in the 1949 Goethe Bicentennial Festival in Aspen, Wilder wrote to his older brother Amos, "most of all I love Goethe. Nobody ever loved anybody like I love Goethe." It's typical of Wilder that that last impish sentence could be a line from a Broadway musical; it virtually hums itself.

In the new Library of America edition of Wilder's early novels, stories, and essays (which appears two years after his *Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* of 2007, also edited by J. D. McClatchy), these traits are everywhere much in evidence. In addition to *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the volume includes his amazingly accomplished first novel *The Cabala* (1926), *The Woman of Andros* (1930), *Heaven's My Destination* (1935), and *The Ides of March* (1948), together with six short stories (including the previously unpublished "Précautions Inutiles," written in 1922–23) and four essays on fiction: "On Reading the Great Letter Writers," an essay on Gertrude Stein's *Four in America*, and two essays on James Joyce.

McClatchy's notes are spare but informative, though some of Wilder's own errors remain uncorrected, such as when he refers in an essay on Joyce to "the Sutras of the Koran" instead of "the suras." The chronology of Wilder's life and career is a marvel of concision, as lively as it is detailed. I hope that a third Wilder volume is in the works which will include his last two novels, *The Eighth Day* (1967) and *Theophilus North* (1973), along with some of his many essays and lectures, as well as selections from his voluminous, and quite wonderful, correspondence. (It would be interesting, too, to have some of his unpublished work available, particularly excerpts from his extensive commentaries on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and on the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega, subjects he pursued obsessively for decades.)

If I press the comparison with Goethe, it isn't only because Wilder was equally versatile in both drama and fiction (though, of course, he wrote no poetry), nor is it because he seems to have cultivated a notion of *Weltliteratur* not so different from Goethe's, drawing on French and Spanish and German literature for his plots and characters with complete aplomb. Among many possible examples, I might cite the compelling character of Doña María, Marquesa de Montemayor, in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, modeled on that of Madame de Sévigné, whose letters Wilder knew well, and *The Matchmaker*, his 1954 comedy (later transformed into *Hello, Dolly!* on Broadway) was based on the nineteenth-century Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy's farce *Einen Jux will er sich machen.* Almost all Wilder's plays and novels depend upon such genial marauding of the past. But the affinity goes deeper than these incidentals might suggest.

Like Goethe, Wilder was both profound and frolicsome. This is a note he struck from the outset. In *The Cabala*, his first novel, he tells us that the Princess Alix d'Espoli displayed, as the consequence of all her sufferings, "a pure well of heartbroken frivolity." This is a keynote of Wilderian serenity. It goes beyond facile paradox, but, at the same time, it depends upon the oldest of artistic conventions. The frivolous but heartbroken princess is a type. In all his novels and plays, Wilder reveals himself as a typecaster of genius: The Merchant, the Friar, the Marquesa, the Salesman, the Woman of Andros, and many others are distinct types, stock figures.

Wilder's acuity in spotting the eternal type under a character's idiosyncratic lineaments is on display throughout his work, and it extends to his letters. Of his friend Ernest Hemingway, he could write, in a 1926 letter from Paris to his mother and sisters, "Ernest is just a Middle Western kid whose genius and health and good looks and success have gone to his head a little." This isn't the impression of the young Hemingway we expect, and, yet, by stripping him of all his usual traits—the swagger, the

machismo, the ruthless ambition, the highly mannered prose style—Wilder captures something fundamental, something vulnerable and forgivable, about him. He has been reduced to a type ("a Middle Western kid"), but the reduction has made him somehow larger; it has set him squarely in the scheme of things. Wilder's palpable sympathy for his fictional characters has little to do with their individuality; it is what is universal in them that moves him.

When he turned his sharp eye on individual foibles, he did so within a wider compass. Consider his treatment of the undeflectable George Brush, the evangelical traveling textbook salesman of *Heaven's My Destination* of 1935. Brush, whose name echoes both "Fuller Brush" and "brash," is keen on self-improvement:

> He got up and began to shave. It was his custom while shaving to prop up before him a ten-cent copy of *King Lear* for memorization. His teacher at college had once remarked that *King Lear* was the greatest work in English literature, and the Encyclopaedia Britannica seemed to be of the same opinion. Brush had read the play ten times without discovering a trace of talent in it, and was greatly worried about the matter. He persevered, however, and was engaged in committing the whole work to memory. Now while shaving he boomed away at it.

What's amusing in this passage isn't so much Brush's opinion of Shakespeare's "talent" as his sheer doggedness in reading, declaiming, and learning the play by heart because he believes that his perseverance will improve him. It is trivial, a passing moment which nevertheless lays bare a deep and universal aspiration. By such means, Brush believes, he will succeed in remaking himself, in learning finally "to be happy." He will become, at last, the man he believes himself to be. Brush is not portrayed as either ridiculous or pathetic; we recognize the impulse that propels him. The joke is gentle, but it's on us too. Haven't we all entertained such edifying projects for self-betterment, propped up beside the toothbrush and the safety razor? In his preface to *Our Town*, Wilder described his own greatest play as "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life." This is one such "event," almost too ephemeral to be noticed, and, yet, like so many others throughout Wilder's work, it opens onto larger vistas.

In a breezy letter from Milan of February 12, 1970, some eight years before his death, Thornton Wilder advised the younger writer James Leo Herlihy to "see to it that in every novel you write … you touch all bases: death and despair and also the ever-renewing life-force, sex, courage, food, the family." And he reinforced the message by concluding, "Touch all bases to make a home run." Though this might seem like a slick formula for the concoction of potboilers, it describes Wilder's own artistic agenda quite accurately. He adhered to it during his long career and it brought him more than a few home runs. Still, it came at a cost. After his death on December 7, 1978, his friend Malcolm Cowley wrote that Wilder was "the most neglected author of a brilliant generation." Neglected? Almost everything he wrote, from his first prizewinning short story to his final bestselling novel, was acclaimed; he received the Pulitzer Prize three times, along with any number of fellowships, honorary degrees, residences, and prestigious lectureships, all of this crowned by the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963. Nevertheless, one knows what Cowley meant. Though he fully deserves it, Wilder doesn't yet enjoy the critical esteem of a Hemingway, a Fitzgerald, a Faulkner.

Perhaps this too has something to do with that sly serenity. In his wonderful essay "On Reading the Great Letter Writers," Wilder wrote that "Art is confession; art is the secret told." (Again, shades of Goethe who claimed that his work formed "a great confession.") A few sentences later, quite characteristically, he qualified the dictum by adding,

> But art is not only the desire to tell one's secret; it is the desire to tell it and to hide it at the same time. And the secret is nothing more than the whole drama of the inner life.

Wilder, you might say, hid the secret of his art in plain sight, concealed within “the smallest events in our daily life.”

“I long to be ordinary as Elinor Wylie longs to be respectable,” he quipped in a barbed letter of 1925, but being “ordinary,” while a splendid camouflage, isn’t the surest way of attracting “critical esteem.” Wilder couldn’t have cared less; he once wrote to a friend, “How good for me to be always tangential to someone else’s whirlwind,” and he meant it. In “Spiritus Valet,” his first short story, which he wrote in 1918, when he was not quite twenty-two years old, Wilder described his elusive protagonist Sebastian Torr as “the great self-concealing poet, the eternal incognito.” It was his own most prescient epithet.

Eric Ormsby's latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld).

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 28 October 2009, on page 67

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