

BRUCE BAWER

“An Impersonal Passion”: Thornton Wilder

He was born in 1897, the same year as William Faulkner, a year after F. Scott Fitzgerald, and two years before Hemingway; he published his first novel in 1926, the same year as *Soldiers' Pay* and *The Sun Also Rises*, a year after *The Great Gatsby* and *Arrowsmith*, and a year before *Elmer Gantry*, and was immediately hailed as one of the best writers of his generation. He went on to write several more novels, almost all of them critically acclaimed bestsellers, and to win three Pulitzer Prizes, one for fiction and two for drama (he is still the only writer to have won Pulitzers in both categories). One of his novels was among the twentieth century's great publishing sensations; one of his plays is the most performed American theatrical work of all time; yet another of his stage efforts was the basis for one of the most successful Broadway musicals in history. Some consider him the equal or superior of Hemingway and Fitzgerald as a novelist, and some place him alongside—or above—Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams in the pantheon of American drama.

Why, then, can it seem as if Thornton Wilder has fallen between the cracks? When his generation of American writers is discussed, the names of Scott and Ernest are ubiquitous: both have been the subjects of multiple biographies; their books are English-department staples; volumes of their letters, notebooks, and ephemera have been published by the shelfful. Yet when does Wilder's name ever come up? I spent years studying modern American literature but never took a course in which any work by him was taught (or even mentioned). The reading list for my doctoral orals exam seemed endless but didn't include a single Wilder title. In the last twenty-five years I've had occasion to write about hundreds of modern American authors, but never Wilder. Indeed, until recently I'd read only one of his novels—his last,

Theophilus North (1973), which I happened to pick up in my teens when it was first out in paperback.

Over the last few years a serious attempt has been made to draw renewed attention to Wilder's work. HarperCollins' paperback editions of his novels and major plays now include forewords by the likes of John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut;¹ the breadth of his contribution to American drama has been underscored by a new Library of America volume of his collected plays and writings on the theater.² There's a lot here to read—and to make one's way through it all is at once to be overwhelmed by the remarkable range of genres, forms, styles, and settings he employed and to recognize that whether he was writing a farce about a matchmaker in Yonkers, an epistolary novel about Julius Caesar, or an avant-garde play in which New Jersey suburbanites are also prehistoric cavemen, his thematic preoccupations remained the same. To read his works, moreover, in conjunction with his life story is to recognize him as something of an anti-Fitzgerald or anti-Hemingway. The son of a "very strict Calvinistic father" (his words) who served as U.S. consul general in Hong Kong, Wilder was a decidedly buttoned-up fellow who appears from an early age to have absorbed not only his father's professional self-discipline and devotion to the Protestant work ethic, but also his mother's serious devotion to literature, high culture, and humanistic learning. (His lifelong proclivity to preach may also betray the influence of his maternal grandfather, a Presbyterian minister.) Raised in Wisconsin, California, Shanghai, and Connecticut, a dedicated student at Oberlin and Yale and then an equally dedicated teacher at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, Wilder was, it seems eminently safe to say, better educated than any half dozen of his celebrated American literary contemporaries put together: he knew his classics, was a fine classical pianist and accomplished baritone, did literary scholarship for fun (he filled over a thousand pages with notes about Lope de Vega), and spoke several languages fluently. (At the 1949 Aspen

¹ All of the following are published in paperback by Harper Perennial: *The Cabala* and *The Woman of Andros*, Foreword by Penelope Niven; *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Foreword by Russell Banks; *Three Plays*, Foreword by John Guare (includes *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and *The Matchmaker*); *Our Town*, Foreword by Donald Margulies; *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Foreword by Paula Vogel; *Heaven's My Destination*, Foreword by J. D. McClatchy; *The Ides of March*, Foreword by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; *The Eighth Day*, Foreword by John Updike; *Theophilus North*, Foreword by Christopher Buckley. (New York, 2003).

² THORNTON WILDER: Collected Plays & Writings on Theater, ed. by J. D. McClatchy. The Library of America. \$40.00.

Goethe Festival, he not only lectured but served as translator for Albert Schweitzer and José Ortega y Gasset when they gave talks in German and Spanish respectively.) Nicola Chiaramonte called him “the only contemporary American writer who is literate in the European sense . . . the humanistic sense.” One reason for his low public profile, relative to Fitzgerald and Hemingway, may be that his life story is utterly free of puerile slug fests and boozy hijinks.

Indeed he was, to all appearances, the Distinguished Writer from Central Casting—polite, properly dressed, eminently clubbable, a thoroughgoing professional whose very active and conspicuous public life was never touched by even the slightest hint of scandal. And, oh yes, he was homosexual—a fact that Gilbert A. Harrison doesn’t let slip out until page 166 of his 1983 biography, *The Enthusiast*, in which he records that Wilder was not only “discreet” but also prudish—“so shockable,” according to Glenway Wescott, that “it was intimidating . . . you wondered how he dared write fiction.”³ Harrison reports that “in the fifties after a dinner in New York, when a friend suggested they visit a ‘gay’ playwright at his apartment, Thornton refused; he didn’t want to be ‘drawn into that group’”; he also once told Gore Vidal that “‘a writer ought not to commit himself to a homosexual situation of the domestic sort,’ that one’s career was stunted by such a liaison.” Presumably it didn’t occur to him that his very humanity—and, consequently, his ability to write about human lives and relationships with full empathy and insight—might be stunted by the lack of any such “liaison.” For the fact is that while Wilder had an abundance of friends and protégés (to whom he could be extraordinarily generous with time, money, and advice), he seems to have made a lifelong effort not to get too close to anyone—an effort, that is, to avoid the kind of intense personal relationships (whether romantic or comradely or otherwise) without which most writers would have precious little to write about. One gathers that he just couldn’t allow himself to be that vulnerable. All writers, to be sure, are voyeurs; but Wilder, far more than most, preferred to stand apart from the human drama, observing it from the sidelines and shaping it into art.

Wilder’s short, elegant first novel, *The Cabala* (1926), could in

³ Gilbert A. Harrison, *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder* (New Haven, 1983). All the quotations in this essay, other than those from Wilder’s novels and plays, are taken either from Harrison’s book or from the front and back matter in the Harper Perennial editions of Wilder’s work.

fact be subtitled “A Portrait of the Artist As Aloof Observer.” Based on his experiences in 1920–21, when he was a student at the American Academy of Rome, the book recounts an erudite young American’s introduction to and quickly intensifying involvement with members of a mysterious circle of rich, powerful Romans called the Cabala. Published the same year as *The Sun Also Rises*, another largely autobiographical first novel about a young American in Europe, this sumptuously written narrative—in which his urbane protagonist navigates his way smoothly from one glamorous palazzo to another, exchanging bon mots in Italian with grandes dames and princes of the church—could hardly be more different from Hemingway’s plainspoken account of fishing trips, fistfights, bullfights, and barroom bluster. Though the substance of the conversations in *The Cabala* soon drops out of the reader’s memory, along with the diaphanous strands of plot, what does linger is the ambience of the beau monde into which Wilder’s alter ego has gained entrée—a milieu whose appeal for him is clearly grounded not in a lonely newcomer’s pleasure in making new friends but in something closer to an anthropologist’s fascination with an unfamiliar culture.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) begins by reporting the death of five people in a 1714 bridge collapse in Peru and asking: “Why did this happen to *those* five?” Was it a random accident or did it mean something? The sole witness, Brother Juniper, is certain that the collapse was “a sheer Act of God” and decides to study the victims’ lives in hopes of figuring out why God chose to take those individuals at that particular time and place. Were they saints being rewarded or sinners being punished? Brother Juniper, who believes that it is “high time for theology to take its place among the exact sciences,” proceeds to collect testimony. Meanwhile, Wilder presents us with narrative portraits of three of the victims (these make up the bulk of this very short book) which contain vital information about their lives that Brother Juniper will never know. In the end we return to the good brother, the results of whose years of investigation, we are told, have proven inconclusive. But then, any half-conscious reader will have known from the beginning that this is where Wilder was headed, that in the end the point of it all would be that Brother Juniper is a well-meaning but misguided soul whose project was

necessarily doomed to failure—for the world is simply too complex, the human heart too mysterious, and the ultimate truths of the universe forever inscrutable. (As if to ensure that we get the point about Brother Juniper’s excessive literal-mindedness, Wilder has him give each of the five victims scores, ranging from zero to ten, for goodness, piety, and usefulness, “rating their value *sub specie aeternitatis*.”) Is there a God? Explaining to a correspondent where this book comes down on the question, Wilder quoted Chekhov: “The business of literature is not to answer questions, but to state them fairly.” For him, in the end, the only certainty is the consolation of love; as one of his characters puts it in the book’s concluding words, “There is a land of the living and the land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.” It’s a powerful sentiment, beautifully expressed—but it doesn’t feel quite earned.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey was a gigantic hit and has been a perennial bestseller; for eighty years it has been accorded the highest of praise by a range of writers and critics. In his foreword to the Harper Perennial edition, Russell Banks calls it “as close to perfect a moral fable as we are ever likely to get in American literature” and says that it “feels . . . ancient, classical, almost biblical.” Certainly one reason why it feels ancient and classical is that it is written in a stately, artificial-sounding prose (Wilder referred to the book’s “removed” tone) that was influenced by such seventeenth-century French writers as Saint-Simon, La Rochefoucauld, and Bossuet, and the purpose of which is to lend to the narrative a certain elevation of tone, universality of implication, and air of profundity. Sample sentence: “Some say . . . that to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God.” It is impossible to fault Wilder’s prose, but a little of this goes a long way, and for this reader, anyway, the book feels throughout like a self-conscious performance, a stylistic experiment—an attempt (and a brilliantly successful one, at that) to persuade middlebrow readers that they’re encountering something literary and profound but that, in fact, doesn’t really challenge them intellectually or philosophically.

Wilder’s blockbuster was succeeded by *The Woman of Andros* (1930), his shortest and most esoteric book yet. Based in part on

a comedy by the Roman playwright Terence, it won widespread praise (as had its predecessors) for its elegant style and structure; but coming as it did not long after the 1929 stock market crash—which caused enthusiasm for aesthetic sophistication to wane and increased demands for “socially conscious” literature—it made Wilder, for the first time, a major target of attacks by partisans of “proletarian” fiction. Leading the charge was the Communist writer Mike Gold, who in *The New Republic* called *The Woman of Andros* “a daydream of homosexual figures in graceful gowns moving archaically among the lilies.” This was, to say the least, unfair; but one doesn’t have to be a Stalinist or a homophobe to find Wilder’s first three novels (none of them set in America) a tad too genteel for one’s tastes; for all their artistry and intelligence, reading them can be like sitting in an airless room and wanting desperately to throw the windows open. Wilder himself summed up the main weakness that his first three novels share in a 1928 conversation with André Maurois: “I know little of life.” In creating his characters, he drew not on people he’d known but on great writers he’d read: his *Cabala* protagonist was based not only on himself but also on Keats; one of the victims in *Bridge*, Doña Maria Marquesa de Mountmajor, was a Spanish-speaking version of Madame de Sévigné. Also relevant here is Wilder’s own contemporaneous *apologia* for his early novels: “I am not yet ready to do something modern. I cannot yet reconcile a philosophical theme with the ringing of doorbells and telephones.” One is reminded of Louis Simpson’s famous lines from his poem “American Poetry,” which of course apply to American fiction as well: “Whatever it is, it must have / A stomach that can digest / Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.”

Curiously, though Wilder’s early novels didn’t have such a stomach, many of the plays he was writing during the same period did. Wilder had strong views about what was wrong with modern drama, and for him it all came down to what he saw as its misguided concept of realism, which, in his view, accomplished the opposite of what it supposedly intended by abandoning the genuine, stripped-bare emotional and psychological realism of the classical theater. Plays that he had been moved by on the page, he complained, “became false” to him on the stage because what mattered in them was smothered in specious efforts at verisimilitude; in his own plays, he sought “to capture not

verisimilitude but reality.” And so he did. Readers familiar only with his early novels might be surprised by the innovation and raw emotion of the one-acters collected in *The Angel that Troubled the Water and Other Plays* (1928) and *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act* (1931), not to mention their American settings, situations, and voices—all of which were depicted with energy and wit. The most memorable of them all, “The Long Christmas Dinner” (1931), is nothing less than a *tour de force*, compressing ninety years of a family’s history into a single scene at a dining-room table, during which one Yuletide repast blends into another and the characters age before the audience’s eyes.

The play for which Wilder is best known today, of course, is *Our Town* (1938), a story about family, young love, and a girl’s untimely death in Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. Its most obvious innovation was a lack of scenery: by stripping away the sets and props that were supposed to make plays look realistic but that, in Wilder’s view, actually got in the way of attempts to reflect the essence of human experience, he aimed to return to what he saw as the true realism of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Another classical touch was the wisdom-spouting Greek chorus in the form of the Stage Manager, whose aloof presence in the midst of the characters’ terrible grief not only seems to mirror the author’s own detachment (significantly, Wilder himself played the part in several productions) but also testifies to the former prep-school instructor’s penchant for explicit teaching and preaching. (In a letter, Wilder lamented “that ignoble passion to be didactic that I have to fight with.”) “There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being”: this is one of the play’s messages, but instead of being satisfied that he’s communicated this point dramatically, Wilder puts these very words into the Stage Manager’s mouth; in the same way, he feels the need to have Emily, his recently deceased teenage heroine, spell out another theme: “Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. . . . That’s all human beings are! Just blind people.”

Wilder once identified *Our Town* as “an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life”; at the same time he wanted audiences to view their lives under the aspect of eternity. In his preface to the play, Wilder describes it as addressing the question “What is the relation between the

countless ‘unimportant’ details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?” Like *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Our Town* is an audience-savvy work that has warmed the hearts of millions of playgoers in search of sentimental uplift; yet Edward Albee has also called it “one of the toughest, saddest plays ever written,” and he’s right. In fact, *Our Town* is a chilling piece of work; the more you examine its vision of small-town American life, the more the charm shades into claustrophobia, the innocence into conformism. And its depiction of the afterlife is creepier than any horror movie.

The Skin of Our Teeth (1942) was if anything even more avant-garde than *Our Town*. Its main characters, the Antrobus family, live at once in present-day America and in prehistoric times: “the author,” the family’s maid, Sabina, informs the audience, “hasn’t made up his silly mind as to whether we’re all living back in caves or in New Jersey today.” On the page, at least, it’s hard to think of, or care about, these characters as human beings; Wilder’s impatience with the particulars of individual lives, and his conviction that his obligation as a serious writer was to move beyond those particulars to sweeping abstract truths about humanity, is never more transparent than it is here. Though one might well have expected this unconventional play to put off Broadway audiences in the 1940s, its message of human endurance over the millennia proved inspiring to Americans in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and made it a hit. In his preface to the play, Wilder points out that it “was written on the eve of our entrance into the war and under strong emotion and I think it mostly comes alive under conditions of crisis”; this makes sense and doubtless helps explain why it can seem less compelling to a reader today than it was to theatergoers in 1942. Another reason, of course, is that the kind of self-referential absurdism that it helped pioneer on the American stage has long come to seem old hat.

There is no gainsaying, however, that at the time both *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* were highly original efforts to convey deep and abiding human truths, and along with the best of his short plays (as Paula Vogel points out in her preface to *The Skin of Our Teeth*) had a considerably more extensive influence on postwar American drama than is sometimes recognized. The third of his three Broadway hits was something else again. That

the author of *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* could also write *The Matchmaker*—a 1955 reworking of his 1938 Broadway flop, *The Merchant of Yonkers*, which was based on an 1842 Viennese comedy, which in turn was based on an 1835 English comedy—is testimony to his sheer professionalism. Set in 1880s New York, this story of a miserly merchant and the busybody matchmaker who sets her cap for him is a pure contrivance—a textbook example of a well-made farce, which seems almost to have been written as a how-to guide to breathing new life into stock types and situations and putting them together with the craftsmanship of a Swiss watchmaker. (As if to underline just how sure Wilder’s popular touch was, *The Matchmaker* became the basis for the smash 1964 musical *Hello, Dolly!*)

With his fourth novel, *Heaven’s My Destination* (1934), Wilder left behind the foreign settings, patrician characters, and high-toned prose of his earlier novels and—improbably—entered Sinclair Lewis country with a comic, unmistakably American tale. George Brush, a naïve, openhearted young traveling salesman in the Midwest, is a tireless amateur evangelist (he was, we learn, led to Jesus by a beautiful, heroin-addicted teenage revivalist), and—rather curiously, given his supposed theological inflexibility—is also a fervent admirer of Gandhi. Though picaresque in structure (Wilder wrote it after teaching a course on Cervantes), the novel builds very nicely and naturally, leading Brush through several genuinely funny set pieces: in Kansas City, for example, he’s the dinner guest at a house which he’s too naïve to recognize as a bordello; and in a hilarious episode on a train, the budding Billy Sunday is himself evangelized by a persnickety old pulpit-thumper who gives him a pop Bible quiz and, though Brush does dazzlingly, pronounces his eternal soul imperiled because he gets a preposition wrong here, a pronoun wrong there:

“What’s Romans five one?”

“Therefore, being justified through faith, we have peace with God, through—”

“No. No, it’s not.”

“I . . . I think it is.”

“No. By faith. . . . Therefore, being justified by faith . . .”

A misfit, Brush rubs the world the wrong way at every turn—scandalizing a banker by refusing to accept interest, outraging a minister by repenting a beating he gave a ruffian. Is Brush an

ignoramus who's read too little and talks too much? Is he too earnest and virtuous to get by in a hypocritical, self-seeking world? Is he an idiot? Or is he bonkers? "Everybody's crazy except me; that's what's the matter," he says. "The whole world's nuts." When a scientifically literate acquaintance definitively demolishes Brush's biblical literalism, one might expect it at least to give him pause, but nope: "Why, can't you see that you don't know anything about religion until you start to live it? . . . All you've done is *think* about it as though it were . . . as though it were a *fish* a long ways off. Even your doubts aren't the right doubts to have." The riposte, at once surprising and totally in character, enhances one's admiration for both the author and his hero.

In a way, Brush recalls Brother Juniper, another literal-minded Christian. But one of this novel's virtues is that Wilder doesn't settle either for making relentless fun of Brush or for depicting him with unalloyed admiration; instead, he keeps turning Brush over in his hand, as it were, showing us every side of him—one minute the ignorance and obnoxiousness, the next the gentleness and generosity. (The book was, in fact, criticized for both promoting and mocking Christianity.) Brush remains completely plausible throughout, even as he grows ever more complicated and interesting. One is reminded, by turns, of *Forrest Gump*, *Wise Blood*, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the Robert Duvall movie *The Apostle*, and (of course) *Elmer Gantry*—and, indeed, some of the superbly vapid dialogue might be right out of Sinclair Lewis. Yet while Wilder finds plenty of good subjects for satire in his material, he also strikes a rich vein of humanity.

After this foray into middle Americana, Wilder returned to the alien and antique in a book he described as "a fantasia on certain events and persons of the last days of the Roman republic." Taking the form of correspondence between Julius Caesar and others, Caesar's entries in his journal, and similar items, *The Ides of March* is a triumphant instance of a writer transforming a remarkable amount of learning about a subject into a rich, credible portrait of an historical figure. It is amusing to reflect on the fact that what we have here is Wilder—an author even more distant and godlike than most members of the breed—imagining himself as Caesar, also known in these pages as "the Dictator" and "Supreme Pontiff." We see Caesar as husband, diplomat, friend;

we observe him shifting register as he turns from a note to his wife to a journal entry to a missive to Cleopatra. As with Brush, we see Caesar at his best and worst: the ruthless autocrat determined to maintain order; the friend who sits up all night by the deathbed of Catullus, even though the latter has savaged him in verse and plotted his downfall. (“[T]he true poets and historians,” Caesar reflects, expressing a sentiment that Wilder doubtless shared, “are the highest ornaments of a country.”)

Wilder’s Caesar is a rationalist and a reformer, an aging husband, a reflective but remorseless leader who is serious about his duties and unafraid to make decisions; in his physician’s words, he exists fully in the present, “giv[ing] little thought to the past and . . . not attempt[ing] to envisage the future clearly.” Though popularly regarded as a deity with magical powers, he secretly finds such superstition foolish: “if our minds can make such Gods and if from the Gods we have made there flows such power, which is no more than a power resident within us, why cannot we employ that power directly?” Like *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, this “fantasia” is a meditation upon individual destiny, its title, like the earlier book’s, pointing to a moment of destiny of which the reader—but not the central character or characters who are unwittingly approaching their rendezvous with fate—is aware from the outset. There is, to be sure, one frustrating structural detail: instead of moving relentlessly forward toward Caesar’s assassination, Wilder keeps jumping back in time, as if to deny us the easy pleasures of mounting tension; that the book holds our interest quite handily nonetheless is testimony to his ample powers of invention and of style—his ability to make every last sentence, in and of itself, just plain interesting.

A couple of parallels with other Wilder works may be worth mentioning. First, Caesar, like Dolly Levi in *The Matchmaker*, believes in keeping money moving: “Caesar could never conceive of money as money when it was *at rest*. . . . For Caesar, money is only money at the moment of its doing something.” Second, nearing his assassination, the Dictator records his intimations of nothingness and the meaninglessness of all effort, but then notes his “other vision” in which he seems “to grasp the fair harmony of the world,” is “filled with unspeakable happiness and confidence,” and wants “to cry out to all the living and all the dead that there is no part of the universe that is untouched by bliss.”

Shades of Emily at the end of *Our Town*! “Life,” Caesar muses, “life has this mystery that we dare not say the last word about it, that it is good or bad, that it is senseless, or that it is ordered”; a part of wisdom, he suggests, is to recognize as a “childish thought” the idea that one’s duty is “to find some last answer concerning the nature of life.” This is, of course, the very theme of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.

Wilder called *The Eighth Day* (1967) his “first ‘real novel.’” Well, it’s his first book with any heft—435 pages in its first edition, making it considerably longer than any of its predecessors. Like *Bridge*, it begins with a sudden death—in this case, the 1902 murder of Breckenridge Lansing in Coaltown, Illinois—and goes on to recount in succession several people’s life stories. Here, in contrast to *Bridge*, the stories mostly concern the aftermath of the fatal event: what happened to John Barrington Ashley, the man who was convicted (perhaps unjustly) of the killing and who escaped under mysterious circumstances? What happened to his family, and to Lansing’s? But whereas the compression and allusiveness of *Bridge* lend the material an air of mystery, the leisurely, endlessly detailed, suspense-free, told-but-not-shown life stories in *The Eighth Day* (whose title is drawn from a pastor’s comment that since God rested on the seventh day, “We are children of the eighth day”) ultimately induce reader exhaustion. The characters fail to rise off the page, remaining bloodless case studies about whom it’s impossible to care a thing and whose lives, as Wilder has imagined them, are almost uniformly improbable.

The closest thing to a credible, fully-developed, and sympathetic character here is Ashley himself, who after escaping his captors works his long, slow way southward to Chile and (not unlike Wilder’s alter ego in *The Cabala*) has a long series of adventures and encounters with colorful people, to none of whom he becomes particularly close. Meanwhile, three of his four children become world-famous in different fields; Wilder’s apparent enthrallment by these utterly inert figures brings to mind Salinger’s Glass family, whom he adored so much that he ultimately forgot to make the effort to endear them to readers. Ashley’s children, Wilder’s narrator tells us, “had . . . a quality of abstraction, an impersonal passion. . . . [a] freedom from self-reference” that they inherited from their father and that made them great—but we never really see this quality; like virtually

everything else about these characters, it's only asserted, never dramatized. A rural deacon is obviously speaking for Wilder when he gives a little speech to Ashley's son Roger about how once in a very long while "on the sea of human lives *one* wave in many hundreds of thousands rises, gathers together the strength—the power—of many souls to bear a Messiah," and suggests that the cluster of greatness in Roger's family suggests that perhaps the Ashleys have "been marked" and will someday "bring forth a Messiah." It's all very grand sounding, but the characters' unmitigated implausibility renders the deacon's lucubrations utterly meaningless to the reader.

To make matters worse, Wilder let his didactic impulse get the better of him, to the extent that the characters and their experiences ultimately seem to exist only as opportunities for the narrator—à la the Stage Manager in *Our Town*—to churn out Observations About Life (rather too many of which are underwhelming, puzzling, or unpersuasive): "Man is not an end but a beginning." "It is the duty of old men to lie to the young." "There is no creation without faith and hope." "It is the diversity of life that renders thinking difficult." "The root of avarice is the fear of what circumstances may bring." "The great persuaders are those without principles; sincerity stammers." "In sixth-rate hotels all is misery and vice; in a fourth-rate one there is a grain of effort and a wisp of hope." "There is no true education save in answer to urgent questioning." "The world was a place of cruelty, suffering, and confusion, but men and women could surmount despair by making beautiful things, emulating the beauty of the first creation." For a hundred pages or so, the blizzard of apothegms is actually quite impressive; one finds oneself reflecting that alongside Wilder, who brought to the American novel a mature understanding of life and a classical sense of balance, Scott and Ernest can seem like romantic egoists, even idiot savants; yet eventually all of the telling and no showing wears one down. One tires of Wilder's habit of wearing his learning on his sheeve ("all young people secrete idealism as continuously as the *Bombyx mori* secretes silk"), tired of his tendency—not just here but throughout much of his fiction—to make characters implausibly, and gratuitously, multilingual (the Ashleys of Coaltown, we discover to our stupefaction, set aside one evening a week to speak French together).

At his worst—and in this book, unfortunately, he *is* at his worst—Wilder can come off as self-congratulatory, as the Guy with All the Answers; here, finally, his chronic air of detachment not only from his characters but from life itself truly feels like a serious personal failing, the outer sign of some fear masquerading as a strength. While Fitzgerald (one reflects) threw himself into life, trained a merciless eye on his own foolish and tormented heart, and transformed what he saw into undying art, Wilder, in *The Eighth Day*, doesn't even bother to breathe life into his characters before he starts dryly cataloguing the eternal verities that those maddeningly un-alive lives supposedly illustrate. Throughout the book, moreover, he fetishizes people (especially extremely old people) with professional connections to the cosmic—a Chicago archbishop, a nun, an old Chilean fortuneteller, the aforementioned deacon—all of whom, improbably, spout wisdom on cue. “When God loves a creature,” the fortuneteller tells Ashley, “He wants the creature to know the highest happiness and the deepest misery—then he can die.” Turning over a rug with a “mazelike design” to note the “mass of knots and . . . threads” on the back, the deacon describes the lives of the Ashley family, among which there is no visible connection, as “the threads and knots of human life. You cannot see the design.” This, the one sustained attempt by the author of *Our Town* to depict an American family in novel form, is also his most conspicuous failure—a book by a man who seems less interested in life itself than in ideas about it.

After the heavyhandedness of *The Eighth Day*, *Theophilus North* couldn't be more welcome. It's as light as air and abounds in charm. If *The Eighth Day*—not only structurally but in its faux profundity, its implicit claim to be probing the ramifications of fate—is very much a pendant to *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Theophilus North* is a pendant to *The Cabala*. This last of Wilder's novels, like his first, presents us with a young, obviously autobiographical protagonist who arrives in a strange city, befriends locals both high and low, enters closed social circles, learns secrets, and gets involved in intrigues—all the while remaining an essentially private person who, for all his wise, discreet involvement in the lives of others, is never fully invested emotionally in the events he observes, influences, and records. This time around the year is 1926, the city Newport, Rhode Island, and the result

an old-fashioned, wonderfully congenial valedictory entertainment (it appeared two years before Wilder's death) that exudes nostalgia for golden youth and endless summer. As in *The Eighth Day*, Wilder inflicts upon us a number of maxims about life ("kindness is not uncommon, but imaginative kindness can give a man a shock"), but they're less labored, are served up in a lighter spirit, and are incorporated in a natural way into a story about characters one believes in and cares about.

In *The Enthusiast*, Gilbert A. Harrison notes that Wilder, in his many travels to almost every corner of the world, "had listened to hundreds of individual stories . . . but for him they were not the stuff of literature. . . . He was looking for clues to the universal. . . . The small incident had to embody the big subject, some useful, abiding truth about humankind. . . ." Alas, Wilder's readiness to move quickly past the messy particulars of individual lives and to embrace, hold up, and preach what he saw as the abiding truths of those lives was his Achilles' heel. His own confession that he wished the spoken word could be "as precise as the written, and that the encounters of friends should have the character of a work of art," is deeply illuminating; uneasy with the arbitrariness and disorder of real life, he felt a powerful urge to exercise control, to impose order and structure. No wonder he fled from personal commitment, with all its chaos and need for flexibility and vulnerability—and no wonder his work, despite his masterly prose style and gift for dramatic construction, sometimes fails to be touched by a feeling of *life*, a feeling that he's captured something real and human between hard covers. With Wilder, for all his brilliance, you rarely catch yourself forgetting that you're reading a book; you're almost always aware that his works are made (extraordinarily well made, but made), almost always aware, for better and worse, of the abiding and, alas, all too often intrusive presence of his strong, shaping intelligence.