

But that story about the “some of us” who “love to cook” captures only one mode of modernity and only one modern iteration of the kitchen. There are other scenes, and these are absent from Wilson’s engrossing book, though they’re almost certainly a lot more common than her absorbing AGA saga. One scene is, of course, the kitchens of the poor and struggling; another is the kitchens of middle-class people unenchanted by food and its preparation. What’s a pleasure for Wilson and me is a pain in the ass for a lot of people. In the past few years, fiftieth-anniversary editions of two of America’s most popular cookbooks appeared. One—you’ve guessed it—was *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, by Julia Child, whose *batterie de cuisine* is now a foodie shrine in the Smithsonian. The other—which I bet you haven’t guessed—is *The I Hate to Cook Book*, by Peg Bracken, whose pots and pans are now presumably in a landfill. More than 3 million copies of *I Hate* were sold, and, after the book had been out of print for some years, the rights were eagerly snapped up by publishers who reckoned it was “in sync with lifestyles today” and that there were millions of home cooks still yearning to whip up something quick and tasty with a packet of onion-soup mix, some canned peas, and that indispensable tin of cream-of-mushroom soup without using any piece of kitchenware more exotic than a Jell-O mold. The middle classes, too, know their way very well in and out of the microwave; they are a profitable market for Whole Foods’s ready-made Harvest Squash Soup and Marks & Spencer’s heat-and-serve chicken Kiev; they eat out a lot; they often eat alone; and with many of them, the made-from-scratch meal for the whole family is an endangered species. Just as the kitchen has become a more social space, so the dining room has fallen into relative disuse.

We talk a lot about food, but much of it is just talk: our kitchens may be well appointed, but the equipment, like the cookbooks—and a bit like the fish knife—is often for show. Bee Wilson speaks to some of us, Peg Bracken to others. Wilson’s people sit around in their kitchens, trading stories about *sous vide* machines and immersion blenders. Bracken’s people are just as contemporary but have different pri-

orities: “If anyone gives you a shiny new cooking utensil for Christmas, you’re as thrilled as a janitor with a new bucket of cleaning solvent,” she writes. “The less attention paid to your cooking

equipment, the better.” And the less said about it, the better: “Your cooking is a personal thing, like your sex life, and it shouldn’t be the subject of general conversation.” ■

THE CHAMELEON

Thornton Wilder’s multifaceted life and work

By Michael Dirda

Discussed in this essay:

Thornton Wilder: A Life, by Penelope Niven. HarperCollins. 848 pages. \$39.99. harpercollins.com.

Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays and Writings on Theater, edited by J. D. McClatchy. The Library of America. 888 pages. \$40. loa.org.

Thornton Wilder: The Bridge of San Luis Rey and Other Novels 1926–1948, edited by J. D. McClatchy. The Library of America. 731 pages. \$35. loa.org.

Thornton Wilder: The Eighth Day, Theophilus North, Autobiographical Writings, edited by J. D. McClatchy. The Library of America. 864 pages. \$35. loa.org.

Poor Thornton Wilder! He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize three times, produced not one but two high school classics—the short novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927) and the play *Our Town* (1938)—and essentially wrote the book for the phenomenally popular Broadway musical *Hello, Dolly!* Most of his seven novels became best-sellers, as well as selections of the Book of the Month Club. Throughout his career, Wilder served as U.S. literary ambassador to the world, going on goodwill missions to South America, attending conferences in Europe, and appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine with the American flag in the background.

All of these were, of course, terrible career moves. Even before Wilder’s death in 1975 at the age of seventy-eight, he had come to be widely, if wrongly, perceived as the gray-flanneled Rotarian of American letters, at once middlebrow, patriotic, and—pick one—sentimental or sententious. That his work repeatedly obsessed over the family and family life didn’t help. Out of context, even his most-quoted sentence—from the close of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*—sounds as hokey as a Hallmark card: “There is

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a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

Alas, the strikes against Wilder don’t stop there. He remained unmarried, enjoyed the company of elderly ladies, liked to pal around with handsome young men, and seems to have been either that old-fashioned thing, a confirmed bachelor, or that politically incorrect thing, a closeted homosexual. Whichever the case, Wilder hardly lived up to his last name. Worst of all, he was your father’s kind of writer—successful.

As Penelope Niven demonstrates in her capacious and authoritative *Thornton Wilder: A Life*, Wilder was in fact among the most cosmopolitan of men, a writer who never repeated himself, a fastidious stylist with a flair for every kind of comedy, from the most ironic to the most farcical, a major interpreter of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, fluent in French, German, Italian, and Spanish, and a guy who could hold his liquor at least as well as his friends Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Just as nearly all of Wilder’s novels remain fresh, readable, and remarkably difficult to categorize, so some of his plays, such as the famous *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) and *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931), could almost be



the work of a funnier Brecht, a more loquacious Beckett.

It may further surprise readers to learn that Wilder met, and was esteemed by, a greater number of eminences than that tuft hunter Truman Capote could even dream of. Wilder chatted with Sigmund Freud, received fan mail from Albert Einstein and T. E. Lawrence, counted heavyweight boxing champion Gene Tunney a close friend, worked harmoniously with Alfred Hitchcock on the script for *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), discussed existentialism with Sartre, and consorted with such

movie stars as Montgomery Clift and Tallulah Bankhead. In the 1930s he tipped that era’s literary kingpin, Alexander Woollcott, to assist a promising eighteen-year-old actor named Orson Welles. In the late 1950s, he suggested that a young poet named Edward Albee should try his hand at plays.

Wilder’s affability and even temper, steady application to his craft, and unwavering devotion to his family can seem unromantic, almost insipid. But he was, in many ways, a European-style intellectual, his favorite writers ranging from Madame de Sévigné and Goethe

to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. At the same time, he was a consummate American theater professional, even playing the Stage Manager in innumerable performances of *Our Town*. And despite the Pulitzers, Broadway hits, and celebrity friends, Wilder never acted the prima donna. He didn’t fuss or go in for star turns; he simply got on with his work.

Penelope Niven, best known for her biographies of Carl Sandburg and Edward Steichen, opens her *Life* with a brief account of her subject’s austere New England ancestors, whose Yankee virtues of thrift, temperance, and Christian high-mindedness were taken to unfortunate extremes by Wilder’s father. Three days before his wedding, Amos Parker Wilder felt morally obliged to tell his bride that he would never get over his love for another woman. As his wife, Isabella, later wrote, he “never did. Never has.” She once called their wedding day “the worst day that ever befell either of us.”

For a while, Amos ran a newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin, but eventually he wangled a post as U.S. consul general in Hong Kong. The constant socializing of their new diplomatic life overwhelmed Isabella, who grew increasingly neurasthenic and depressed. During the first six years of their marriage she had dutifully produced four children, as well as the stillborn twin of Thornton. Eventually Mrs. Wilder boldly took her two younger daughters to Italy, then moved to Berkeley, California. Years would go by before the family reunited. They all became inveterate letter writers.

Amos proved to be a lackluster, even incompetent, foreign-service officer. Instead of wine he would serve grape juice at official functions. While his elder son, also named Amos, won paternal approval for his athletic prowess and religious bent, Thornton was derided as a “delicate, girl-playing aesthetic lad” who liked to sing and to play the violin and piano. Both boys attended a German-run school in China before being shipped to a boarding school in California. Thornton was often lonely, especially for his mother.

Because two of the family’s forebears had helped endow Oberlin College, and because it was a theologically minded institution with a tradition of social

service, the senior Wilder sent both his sons there for two years. Wilder loved Oberlin, but to his father's consternation spent most of his time writing short stories and plays.

After transferring to Yale—and now set on a literary career—Wilder managed to flunk three courses (Latin, geology, and biology) in his first two years. When the First World War broke out, he interrupted his studies to enlist, serving stateside as an artilleryman before returning to Yale to graduate in 1920. During the summers, Amos Sr., taking the notion of muscular Christianity quite literally, mandated that his children work on farms or as coaches at summer camps. None of the Wilder children—Amos, Thornton, Charlotte, Isabel, Janet—would ever wholly escape their father's controlling “octopus-personality.”

Inevitably, as Niven writes, Wilder had “to get away from home in order to be himself.” After his graduation, the would-be writer spent a year in Italy, during which time he learned Italian, explored Rome, and visited an archaeological dig that would crucially influence his artistic vision. There, as Wilder wrote in a letter, he marveled at a series of “faded paintings of a family called Aurelius” discovered underground while “the street-cars of today rushed by over us.” The images of everyday domesticity prompted an epiphany: “We were clutching at the past to recover the loves and pieties and habits of the Aurelius family, while the same elements were passing above us.”

During his European sojourn, Wilder, who had hitherto mainly produced playlets for his colleges' literary magazines, began work on a book. In 1926, Albert and Charles Boni published *The Cabala*, Wilder's deliciously witty first novel, in which a young American arrives in Rome, falls in with an aristocratic clique, and coolly records its members' pretensions and unhappy love lives. Structured, like so much of Wilder's later fiction, as a series of intertwined “portraits,” or episodes, *The Cabala* could readily be mistaken for an early work of Aldous Huxley or Ronald Firbank. (Asked to say grace, the learned Cardinal Vaini begins: “Oh, pelican of eternity.”) It also displays those mixtures of fantasy and realism,

comedy and tragedy, illusion and disillusionment, and spiritual belief and earthbound reality that run throughout Wilder's work.

The Cabala proved a critical success, and though Wilder kept his day job teaching French at the Lawrenceville School, he soon began work on a second novel, this one about five people who are killed when the finest bridge in all Peru suddenly collapses. Wilder was in his late twenties when he wrote *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, at once an inquiry into God's unfathomable ways and a work of almost eighteenth-century suavity. The story's abbess is so hated by the archbishop of Lima that the latter “counted the cessation of her visits among the compensations for dying.” Wilder neatly balances irony and often poignant understatement: “Uncle Pio said that when they had crossed the bridge they would sit down and rest, but it turned out not to be necessary.” Nearly all the book's characters inadvertently hurt those they love most.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey won the Pulitzer Prize (edging out the oddly similar and comparably beautiful *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, by Willa Cather), and its success made Wilder temporarily rich. His father, it almost goes without saying, grouched that his son would probably just waste the money or spend it on worldly frivolities. In fact, Wilder gave most of his earnings to his family.

In 1930, further demonstrating his artistic range, Wilder produced *The Woman of Andros*, a novel set in ancient Greece and composed in a crystalline, serene prose reminiscent of Benjamin Jowett's translation of Plato. Its first half focuses on Chrysis, a gracious and learned courtesan resigned to “the slow misery of existence.” An affair between Chrysis' younger sister and the son of a local chieftain constitutes the second half of this plaintive “notation of the heart,” to borrow a phrase from *The Bridge*. All ends in sorrow, leavened by prefigurations of the solace that Christianity will one day bring to humankind.

If ever a work of fiction deserved to be called exquisite, this is it. *The Woman of Andros* has earned a place in the company of the pseudoclassical works so prevalent in interwar Europe—think of Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos*, Cesare Pavese's *Dialogues with Leucò*, Igor Stravinsky's

Apollo ballet, the plays of Jean Giraudoux and Jean Cocteau. Even though the action in Wilder's novel ostensibly takes place on the island of Brynos, the characters often seem to speak on an almost bare stage like that of the great play Wilder would write a few years later. Indeed, *The Woman of Andros* contains the seed that will eventually grow into *Our Town*. Chrysis relates the story of a man who foolishly requests that the gods return him to life for a single day:

Suddenly the hero saw that the living too are dead and that we can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasure; for our hearts are not strong enough to love every moment. And not an hour had gone by before the hero who was both watching life and living it called on Zeus to release him from so terrible a dream. The gods heard him, but before he left he fell upon the ground and kissed the soil of the world that is too dear to be realized.

The *Woman of Andros* provoked an unexpected and withering attack. The Marxist critic Michael Gold lacerated Wilder as a toady of the establishment and a practitioner of mannered, outmoded forms of writing. Gold's tendentious barrage is now generally dismissed, but there is some truth to his criticisms. Wilder's early fiction scarcely acknowledges the modern industrial world; his books, concerned with metaphysical and theological questions, might almost be categorized as *contes philosophiques*. Even the beautifully wrought *Bridge* could be faulted for its Olympian remove. One never feels close to its doomed characters—Wilder simply talks about them—and the high stylistic gloss of the narrative exudes an almost Frenchified artificiality.

Despite his claims to the contrary, Wilder may have taken heed of Gold's argument for a more relevant social-realist art. His next book, *Heaven's My Destination* (1935), relates the picaresque, fast-paced adventures of a hayseed Don Quixote in the Depression-era Southwest. The hero, George Brush, is a good fool—Freud called him an “American fanatic”—who believes in the literal truths of the Bible, eschews drinking and smoking, and tries to live by the precepts of Gandhi, especially those

concerning nonviolence. Brush is also a traveling salesman, peddling school textbooks, and on his rounds this innocent mistakes a brothel for a boarding house, tries to save the soul of a hold-up man during a robbery, and one night succumbs to the blandishments of a farmer's daughter, who disappears before he can do the right thing and marry her.

Turning away from the elegant and often epigrammatic prose of his earlier books, Wilder here revels in the poetry of the vernacular. In one chapter, for instance, a well-to-do judge announces his hope that George, whom he persists in calling Jim, will take his rather plain daughter off his hands:

The judge paused, then began in a cordial and confidential tone: "Jim, young fella, you made a big hit with my daughter, a big hit. I know that little girl and it's not every man that interests her, no, sir. Now listen. I want to give you a little tip. Just between you and I, see? ... just man to man. That girl ought to have a nice home of her own. See what I mean? You might say she ain't really happy up at our house. Jim, thirty-five thousand dollars goes with that girl. Yes, sir, if she can find a good home, thirty-five thousand dollars goes with her. Depression year, too. Think it over. Yes, and what's more, I'm in a position to settle a young man in some good job around the Capitol, too. Well, that's just between you and I.... How does it appeal to you, eh?"

We've come a long way from the campy quips of *The Cabala* and the meditations of *The Bridge* or *The Woman of Andros*. This is the kind of homespun twang, suitably tempered, that will make possible *Our Town*. But how, finally, we should regard *Heaven's My Destination* remains elusive: Is it a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*, or a critique of cornpone fundamentalism? Is its protagonist a simpleton, or a saint in the making?

By 1938, Wilder was well established as a novelist, lecturer, and teacher. *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* (1931) had also been staged on Broadway to respectable notices. But a new work about "the life of a village" juxtaposed against "the life of the stars" was about to become the most popular play in the American theater repertory. Wilder

himself worried that *Our Town* might possibly be too painful, its somber truths too heartbreaking. According to Niven, as the original cast did its first read-through of the famous third act, when the dead Emily returns to Grover's Corners for a single day, they had to stop, again and again, because of their weeping.

Responding to the outbreak of the Second World War the following year, Wilder constructed his most ambitious drama, a theatrical extravaganza that is half myth, half Marx brothers comedy. *The Skin of Our Teeth* tracks the history of the human race through time as a single, seemingly immortal family (and its sexy maid) face one crisis after another. It features, among other things, a woolly mammoth and a dinosaur, the arrival of the Ice Age and a biblical flood, the invention of the wheel and the alphabet, a visit to the Atlantic City boardwalk, a radio interview with the president of mammals, a global war, pratfalls and seductions, and audience participation.

By the time this "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral"—to borrow a phrase from another playwright—opened, the forty-five-year-old Wilder was again in uniform. Assigned to intelligence, he rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel and earned a Bronze Star. At war's end, Wilder was left physically and mentally exhausted. He retreated to his family's home in Hamden, Connecticut, but was soon faced with several crises, starting with his sister Charlotte's schizophrenia, the final dashing of his sister Isabel's marital hopes, and his mother's death. Partly as therapy, Wilder started fiddling with what would become an epistolary "fantasia" about the events surrounding the assassination of Julius Caesar. Published in 1948, *The Ides of March* presents itself as a compilation of documents—memos, letters, reports, diary entries—swirling around a weary, politically astute Caesar, the existential hero as overworked executive: "I enclose in this week's packet," he writes to his friend Turrinus,

a half-dozen of the innumerable reports which, as Supreme Pontiff, I receive from the Augurs, Soothsayers, Sky Watchers, and Chicken Nurses.... What's to be done? I have inherited this burden of superstition and nonsense. I

govern innumerable men but must acknowledge that I am governed by birds and thunderclaps.

To many, *The Ides of March* is its author's most winning novel, and fully the equal of Robert Graves's better known *I, Claudius* and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Wilder investigates the opposing tugs of order and disorder, the former represented by the dictator Caesar, the latter by the wild, thoughtless girl Clodia (who inspires the love-racked poetry of Catullus, another character in the novel). Just before the death he has foreseen, Caesar declares that what matters most of all is to live one's life with "intensity."

Like his other works, *The Ides of March* reveals Wilder as a creative magpie, drawing on, and transforming, the work and thought of others, whether Suetonius or Sartre. *The Woman of Andros* was partly derived from a play by Terence, while *The Skin of Our Teeth* was once assailed, somewhat ludicrously, as being a simplification of *Finnegans Wake*. During the 1950s Wilder labored over a never-published drama called "The Emporium," inspired largely by his fascination with Kafka's *The Castle*. Even his last major play, *The Alcestiad* (1955), would reconfigure an ancient myth, used by many writers before him: The good wife Alcestis agrees to die for her husband—and then returns from the dead.

The 1950s proved a frustrating decade for Wilder. He delivered the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1950–51 but never managed to transform his reflections on classic American literature into the crafted work of nonfiction he envisaged. (*American Characteristics and Other Essays* was edited by Donald Gallup and published, posthumously, in 1979.) By 1962, the aging man of letters felt it was time to light out for the territories. Shortly after he was honored by President Kennedy at a formal White House dinner, Wilder packed his bags and drove west. When his car broke down near the small town of Douglas, Arizona, he stayed there for nearly two years. Known as "the Professor," Wilder cooked his own meals, drank at the local saloons, and, to his own surprise, eventually started a new novel. Published in

1967, *The Eighth Day*, a mix of mystery and family saga, won the National Book Award. The book opens with a dramatic flourish:

In the early summer of 1902 John Barrington Ashley of Coaltown, a small mining center in southern Illinois, was tried for the murder of Breckenridge Lansing, also of Coaltown. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. Five days later, at one in the morning of Tuesday, July 22, he escaped from his guards on the train that was carrying him to his execution.

On the run, Ashley abandons his family and flees to South America; three of his four children, however, grow up to become world famous. *The Eighth Day* is Wilder's longest and most ambitious novel, albeit one that divides readers. Some, like Wilder's Library of America editor, the poet J. D. McClatchy, view it as his masterpiece; others find it ponderous and windy, a gallimaufry of Theodore Dreiser, *All the King's Men*, and *Atlas Shrugged* (preternaturally gifted characters, inventions that could revolutionize the world). I find it an uneven work, though parts of it are irresistible, like this distinctly Joycean summary of the blustery conversation of old-style newspapermen:

The talk turned largely on liquor (after-effects of last night's consumption), women (rapacity of, their staggering over self-estimation, Schopenhauer's matchless essay on), politics (gorgonzola in the City Hall, populace led by the nose), their editors (exposure and downfall predicted), literature (Omar Khayyám, greatest poet that ever lived), philosophy (Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, towering intellect of), Chicago's rich men (hands and feet in the trough), religion (farical character of, opiate of the masses), venereal disease (wonder doctor reported in Gary, Indiana).

When *The Eighth Day* appeared, Wilder was seventy, and his financial future had recently been secured by the 1964 musical *Hello, Dolly!* (based on his unsuccessful 1938 farce *The Merchant of Yonkers*, revised in 1954 as *The Matchmaker*). Though he might easily have devoted his later years to annotating *Finnegans Wake* or establishing the chronology of Lope de Vega's plays (two scholarly hobbies that obsessed him), Wilder instead wrote one final novel.

Set in 1920s Newport, Rhode Island, *Theophilus North* is a mixture of autobiography and fiction, its hero a young adventurer with a flair for improvisation who comes to the aid of those in trouble, freeing them from the psychological bonds that prevent them from engaging with, and enjoying, life. The book is, in effect, one of those nostalgic, exuberant homages to youth sometimes produced by a great novelist at the end of his life. Think of Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull* or William Faulkner's *The Reivers*.

By 1973, the year of *Theophilus North*'s publication, Wilder was suffering from increasing deafness, loss of vision in one eye, hypertension, and several other ailments, though his boyish spirits and mental alertness were scarcely diminished. When he died—in his sleep, from a heart attack, with a copy of Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* on the bedside table—he had been toying with an idea for a mystery novel to be called “Theophilus North, Zen Detective.”

Niven's biography, the first to draw in depth from the Wilder family archives, underscores how much its subject regarded himself as part of “the little republic of Wilders.” Niven portrays a man not so much riven as energized by opposing impulses. Though gregarious, Wilder also craved solitude. He loved his home in Hamden, Connecticut, but could write only elsewhere, usually abroad, often aboard a ship. Like *Theophilus North*, he enjoyed “butting into turgid complicated lives” yet always contrived to remain “tangential to someone else's whirlwind.” Married women fell in love with him, but he discouraged intimacy while somehow preserving friendship. In his work too he alternated between fiction and drama, between teaching and acting, between scholarship and imaginative work.

Wilder's novels and plays, says Niven, raise the same tormenting questions over and over: “How does one love, and why? What is the nature and purpose of art, and the function of the artist? How does one truly live and bear the burdens of life?” In a beautiful passage from the seldom-staged *Alcesteiad*, Wilder's heroine, Alcestis, reflects that the bitterness of death is not in the parting but in the “despair that one has not lived. It is the despair that one's life has been without meaning. That it has been nonsense;

happy or unhappy, that it has been senseless.” The dead implore us, she says, “to show them that their lives were not empty and foolish.”

Virtually everything Wilder wrote addresses this universal angst, this mystery. Artists aren't in the answer game, but Wilder's work suggests, again and again, the vital importance of really seeing the world around us, of relishing the routines of ordinary life, of finding satisfaction in the quiet making and appreciation of art.

Kurt Vonnegut once called Thornton Wilder “the calmest, least strident, most humane and scholarly and forgiving and playful and avuncular American storyteller of the twentieth century.” But Vonnegut also pointed out a “lack of immediacy and urgency and astonishment and suspense in all he wrote.” That sounds quietly damning, yet surely there's a place for an art of such intelligence and humor and beauty and spiritual depth; we honor Apollo as well as Dionysus. Perhaps Edmund Wilson phrased it better still when he said that Wilder's work exhibits nothing less than “a Mozartian combination of lightness and grace with seriousness.” ■

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