

Wilder and Wilder

Thornton Wilder and His Public, by
Amos Niven Wilder, *Philadelphia, Pa.:*
Fortress Press, 1980. 102 pp. \$8.95.

WE CANNOT HAVE too much about Thornton Wilder. The assumption lying behind that assertion is that Wilder is a major author who has been undervalued. Or perhaps not even so much undervalued as neglected. Not infrequent have been those casual chats with professional colleagues

about which modern authors belong to the first rank and will pass the test of time. When I finally bring up Wilder's name, they inevitably respond, "Oh, yes, Wilder, too." They just had not thought to mention him.

All along I have thought that, if I had to say, in little space, why Wilder is regularly overlooked, I would offer that he is not experimental, not unconventional, not trendy, and not modernist. He sets in motion no new literary movement or counter-movement. Also, he belongs to no "school" of modern fiction or drama. So he is of little use to the literary taxonomists. Worse yet, for his contemporary reputation, he is no more modernist in content than he is in form. As one recent commentator said of him, his "major works represented an artistic and therefore oblique, though critical, affirmation of the great traditions of the West, classical and biblical."

The author of those perceptive words is one who knew Thornton Wilder intimately and from the beginning: his elder brother by a year and a half, Amos. It is not every brother who is able to illuminate his sibling's writing. But Amos Wilder is not just Everybrother. He has had a long and illustrious career as a theologian, now with emeritus status from Harvard Divinity School. In particular, he has studied literature avidly and has written much about it, especially as theological reflection impinges upon it. What a serendipity then: a theologian-brother with literary bent (even having published poetry himself) commenting on a novelist-dramatist-brother with theological interests and themes. And Amos does not disappoint. One who reads this book will know at once that the most fruitful studies of Thornton's work will follow out the lines sketched briefly here by Amos.

Literary history is full of cases in which an author regarded as slight by his contemporaries or immediate successors is later perceived by critics as one of high value: in the English language alone we may begin the list with John Webster, virtually the whole of the metaphysical school of poetry, William Blake, Herman Melville. Is Thorn-

ton Wilder another with a similar destiny? So believes brother Amos, along with quite a few others of us.

Since the Romantic period, and especially in the twentieth century, there has been an especially strong sentiment that the true artist is necessarily one who stands apart from and feels alienated from the cultural tastes of the conventional, bourgeois, and philistine majority. Thus, any author who is popular, who receives widespread acceptance, is suspect—and probably worse. So how, for example, can one whose play *Our Town* is performed by high school youngsters across the land and whose novels reach the best-seller list be of genuine value in the world of contemporary letters? At the very least, we should ask if this elitist attitude about art is a viable universal reality or transitory, culture-bound phenomenon. Surely, alienated artists can produce enduring products. What is not sure and obvious is that artists who secure for themselves broad public appeal cannot do so.

These thoughts of mine are much along the same line of those of Amos Wilder. He takes as his special task "to explain the seeming hiatus between the whole [iconoclastic modernist] movement and my brother's writing and public." He warns early that he will make much of "the grass-roots and religious influences in my brother's background and outlook." And he seeks to place his brother somewhere in the line of "classics of our tradition [which] have had to do with moralities and in the normative sense." Normative moralities? This is hardly the language of our *cognoscenti*.

Amos Wilder's little book turns out, ineffectually, to be a discerning critique, pointedly polemical by mild Amos' standards, of deracinated modern intellectuals—an elite out of touch with tradition. Remarking on Thornton's varied but always atypical content and setting, Amos observes, "My brother's appeal to the unmodern, either that of the past and the timeless, or that of the anonymous multitudes, can only appear reactionary or untimely. The fact is they [contemporary

critics] do not know what to do with him." Given Amos' approving recognition of "the traditionalism of Thornton Wilder" and his conviction that "the whole program of modern revolt and iconoclasm has bypassed certain abiding aspects of our deeper human reality," it is not surprising that he should so judge. Yes, occasionally, Amos exhibits a miffed tone, uncomprehending of how some critics can be so uncomprehending; but his good manners always prevail.

For all of Amos' insistence that Thornton Wilder revered tradition, he emphatically denies that his brother was at all sheltered from the realities of the modern world. In fact, he insists that Thornton was fully immersed in the issues of the day but simply did not come to the same conclusions as those of the regnant "iconoclasts." Amos so meticulously traces evidence of Thornton's learnedness ("polymath," "man of letters," M.A. in French from Princeton, dating of plays of the Spaniard Lope de Vega, special work on Kierkegaard, annotation of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, acquaintance with Goethe and other German writers, lecturer at the University of Chicago on classical epic and drama, and more) that no doubt can remain: here is a man of letters of broad reaches, certainly no narrow American provincial.

At the same time, one of the initially surprising but then validated claims by Amos is that his brother cannot be understood apart from his American context. His themes and settings are—yes, of course—cast widely, universal in implication. But this man—who lived in Maine, Wisconsin, California, China, Chicago, back in New England—who wrote works placed in ancient Greece, ancient Rome, southern Illinois, New Hampshire, Peru—still always saw his universal realities through American eyes. Here was an American author always, with international personal experience and international personal contacts. *And* international

reputation. Amos especially delights in Thornton's warm reception in Germany—to the point of adding a bibliography on that subject, as well as a Supplement giving Thornton's speech to a German audience (in German), "Culture in a Democracy."

What about future studies of Thornton Wilder? Amos gives valuable hints. He calls for a "main study" from someone who is "congenial to his humanism and to his own kind of Americanism." The ideal person would be an American who is a true humanist who has rapport with both the Christian (first) and classical traditions of the West. Such a scholar will find quite useful Amos' revelations about the life of the Wilder family, especially including his analysis of the father's (readily) misunderstood role in Thornton's life. (In his long section on the family, Amos is not primarily chronicler but analyst-from-the-inside.)

The best and most needed study of Thornton Wilder, says brother Amos, will be essentially biographical—and for a fascinating reason. Years passed when Thornton was seemingly unproductive. Why so? Because his main task in life was to live, not to write: "...his novels and plays were gestures or overflow of his life." To borrow the tapestry imagery from the end of *The Eighth Day*, Thornton Wilder saw as his greatest contribution his life rather than his art. For him, art grew out of life and reflected it. He gave of himself (in ways which brother Amos documents). It was his life, including his writings, which was to be of whole cloth. If Amos Wilder is correct in his perception of his brother, Thornton Wilder is the kind of writer who can help lead us out of our preoccupation with literature as something which is separate and distinct from everyday, ordinary living and who can lead us toward an understanding that the best of literature can help us know how to live as ordinary mortals on this planet.

Reviewed by EDWARD E. ERICSON, JR.