

Novelist into Playwright

An Interview with Thornton Wilder

BY ROSS PARMENTER

ONE of the most attractive characters in "The Woman of Andros" is a young priest of Apollo. Because of his calling, he lives apart from his fellows. He is a man of few words, and preoccupation with the sick in body and soul has made him constitutionally sad. He is also wise, compassionate, gentle, and disciplined beyond his years, and the accumulation of a lifetime's thought is stored up in his eyes.

From his work and what I knew of his life, I always felt Thornton Wilder himself was probably very like that priest. Actually, as I learned when I interviewed him, he is not nearly so romantic a figure. In appearance he suggests a young colonel in civilian clothes. He obviously enjoys life. His eyes behind his round steel-rimmed glasses have a peculiarly bird-like quality. And he talks a blue streak.

We were introduced not long ago in Jed Harris's office by Robert Reud, Mr. Harris's press representative. And as soon as Mr. Reud withdrew, Mr. Wilder began dictating. The idea of dictation was Mr. Wilder's. He explained that he tried to phrase things exactly and therefore, unlike most men being interviewed, he wanted to see his words written down.

"Why do you spend so little time in New York?" I asked.

"I'm a great deal here," he replied in a very rapid voice. "I like it ever so much. I roam around a lot. I rise early and take the Staten Island ferry. Long hikes are a life-time hobby with me. I like to take the subway to the Heights and walk on Riverside Drive as dawn comes up. In fact, I hope to become a New Yorker."

When I explained that I was asking about literary New York, he slowed down and dictated:

"One of the problems of the writer is keeping the moment of writing free of any consideration other than the text itself—free of speculation about audience approval or disapproval, free of consideration as to monetary rewards, free of the image of critics or friends. Living in a community of fellow writers, one inevitably becomes aware in some corner

of one's mind of a lot of pressures, of self-consciousnesses that are extraneous."

He then made a distinction between ages which were great and ages which were not: the difference being that in a great age "the work of art by tacit assumption is, with the religious life, one of the few absolute human values."

"As great ages have shown us—the Elizabethan taverns, for instance—the congenial company of fellow workers is an invaluable stimulation. But in ages which are not great the community of artists is an occasional stimulation, but we all mix our attitude towards a work of art with a series of fretful, restless, all too personal commentaries."

He then broke off and in his very quick voice mimicked a gossip at a literary gathering. Putting his hand to his mouth, he whispered between his fingers, "So and so is slipping" and a few other words. He stopped with a laugh and said: "You know the sort of stuff that goes on."

Mr. Wilder's "Bridge of San Luis Rey" was filmed in 1929 and he has since worked on several motion pictures, including "The Dark Angel." I therefore asked him what he thought of the movies.

"I hope some day," he said, "to have gained my own confidence and a company's confidence sufficiently to suddenly compose a motion picture that is a motion picture from the first moment on. The best motion picture will ultimately rest on the work which represents in every corner one or at most two persons' directing thought. In Charlie Chaplin author, director, leading actor were combined, and those pictures were the best ever made. The most threads should be in the fewest hands. Walt Disney and the Frank Capra-Robert Riskin combination are examples."

We then passed on to plays and novels. Mr. Wilder, of course, is one of the few Americans who has been successful in both fields. He repeated what he said in November, 1935, when he renounced novel writing—namely, that drama was superior



Ben D. Gross, Tucson

Thornton Wilder in Arizona

to fiction because it was freer from "the editorial presence." The stage manager role which Frank Craven plays in "Our Town," he said, was a "hang-over from a novelist technique."

"Perhaps in the very greatest dramatic representations—as in 'Othello'—the ultimate point of view that the beholder should take upon the action is nowhere indicated, but is distributed throughout the work by a series of strains and stresses in selection and emphasis. It may be, though, that in an age in which an audience contains such varying approaches to fundamental questions of life a commentator is useful for delivering signposts."

The question of the impersonal artist brought him to the last of his four novels, "Heaven's My Destination," which was criticized because he did not indicate his own attitude towards its textbook selling hero. (The critical reception of that book, incidentally, he said, had no influence on his decision to give up novels.)

"My last novel," he said, "was written as objectively as it could be done and the result has been that people tell me that it has meant to them things as diverse as a Pilgrim's Progress of the religious life and an extreme sneering at sacred things, a portrait of a saint on the one hand and a ridiculous fool jeered at by the author on the other."

"For a while I felt that I had erred and that it was an artistic mistake to expose oneself to such misinterpretations. But more and more in harmony with the doctrine that the writer during the work should not hear in a second level of consciousness the possible comments of audiences, I feel that for good or for ill you

should talk to yourself in your own private language and be willing to sink or swim on the hope that your private language has nevertheless sufficient correspondence with that of persons of some reading and some experience. This belief was clarified for me by that admirable teacher of young writers, Gertrude Stein.

"It seems to me," he continued, "that the writer learns what is called technique not by any willed application to hand books, to exercises, and to what is called experimentation, but through the admiration of a series of admirable examples—a learning which takes place in the subconscious.

"And one remembers certain models one no longer admires greatly but which for years held one under a spell. After my sophomore year at college I worked on a farm and used to declaim to the cows in the stanchions the judge's speech from Barrie's 'The Legend of Leonora.' A few years later George Moore was my meat and drink, an author now doubly distasteful. Then through the enviable accident of sitting under a great teacher, Dr. Charles H. A. Wager of Oberlin, these imaginative absorptions were transferred to Sophocles, Dante, and Cervantes.

"Beware of what you admire when you're young; because admiration is the only school for the will."

Mr. Wilder was forty-one last April. He is five feet eight in height and of medium size. There is nothing of the Bohemian about him at all, and although he has been on the faculty of the University of Chicago since 1930, he is too pleasantly bronzed by the sun to suggest a professor. His hair is cut short and he wears it parted low on the left and brushed straight across the top of his head. It is iron gray at the sides and sparse at the top, giving a high, round dome to his forehead. At the base of that dome are his eyebrows, the most striking feature of his face. They are large, bushy, beetling, and black. His moustache, however, is light brown; and whenever he smiles, the lie is given to the ferocious brows and the hawk-like eyes.

As his books indicate, he has considerable powers of concentration. He is too intense, indeed, to have the serenity of one of his own characters. His personality hops from the oracular perch to the impish one with the quickness of a restless canary. He gave me the impression of being anxious both to be liked and to be understood. Altogether, I thought to myself, a highly-strung, friendly person.

And then I asked my next question, prefacing it with the explanation that it was not a challenge.

"You are a sensitive man," I said. "Don't you find yourself distressed and saddened almost unbearably by the evils in the world about you?"

He got to his feet, hesitated a moment, and then began walking around the table as he answered:

"I think that I'm aware of the tragic

background of life. I meet it through the principle of diversity of gifts. In the slow education of the human race to living side by side with one another in understanding and peace there are two forces. The force of those that are endowed for a practical, immediate activity in the correction of injustices. And the force of those who feel the only thing they can do is to compose as best they can works which, through the attempt to present illustrations of harmony and of law, are affirmations about mankind and his ends.

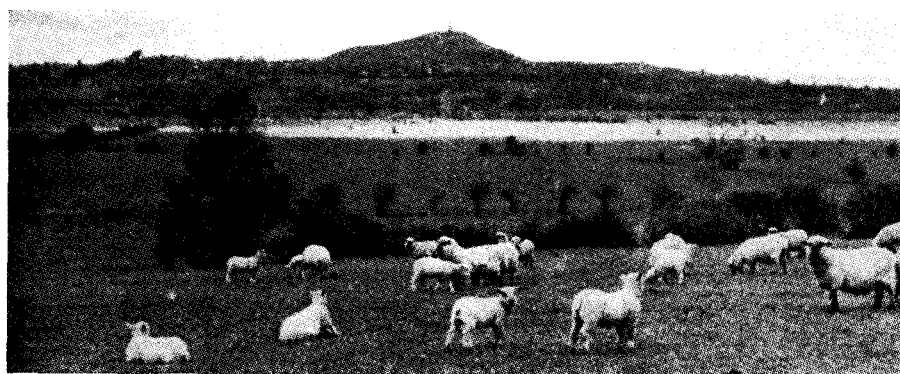
"The race needs both the practical worker and the believer that the ends are valid. Shaw is the practical pamphleteer and he said with some reason that more than any one outside Scandinavia he was responsible for the superior status of women in the modern world. But even the fires of the practical activity of Shaw had first to be stoked by writers of apparently ivory-tower isolation.

"The great poet describing an apparently impersonal suffering is saying something about the dignity of man which ultimately finds its way into legislation and into concrete humanitarian work. A poet is a triumph of common sense, but on a time scale of centuries. A pamphleteer works in decades."

I then asked him how he had changed in the ten years that elapsed between his two Pulitzer prizes.

"For years I shrank from describing the modern world," he said. "I was alarmed at finding a way of casting into generalization the world of doorbells and telephones. And now, though many of the subjects will often be of the past, I like to feel that I accept the twentieth century, not only as a fascinating age to live in, but as assimilable stuff to think with."

As we shook hands at parting, he asked me please to leave in his "perhappes" and "it may bes" because he felt their tentativeness was very much part of him. I felt, on the other hand, that his request was largely shyness, that the man who passed his adolescence as a stranger in China and his young manhood as a retiring master at a boy's private school had outgrown that tentativeness more than he knew.



Exclusive News Agency, Roehampton

"Mr. Shanks talks of England's winsome landscape, her early history, then of her present institutions" . . . (Glastonbury Tor, from "My England.")

English Attitudes

MY ENGLAND. By Edward Shanks.
New York: Funk & Wagnalls. 1938.
\$2.50.

Reviewed by RALPH SARGENT

THIS book goes off in several directions—as a man does in conversation. Mr. Shanks talks of England's winsome landscape, her early history, then of her present institutions, her law, morality, games, her private lives, her cities and provinces, and finally the Englishman's attitude toward foreigners. What Mr. Shanks's writing lacks in brilliance and profundity is made up for by ease and pleasant readability. The value of the book lies in its revelation, conscious and unconscious, of English attitudes.

Americans will enjoy, for example, the chapter "Neighbors and Cousins." The English, he thinks, would always be willing to accept the United States back into the British Commonwealth. The American will be moved to wonder whether we should be eager to accept England into the Union as a forty-ninth State! The author laughs at Mr. Mencken for trying, unsuccessfully, to establish the existence of an "American" language. Mr. Mencken "seems to have suffered from joyous leg-pullers in England who sent him all sorts of grotesque information for his grateful acceptance."

Mr. Shanks's love and skill go into the opening chapters. Here he reconstructs the England of Piltdown man, of the Romans, of King Arthur, with the novelist's recreative power and the poet's delicacy. Of England today Mr. Shanks writes to explain, to criticize mildly, to point with pride. He demonstrates that the Mother of Parliaments is a bad jumble, and still she owns his admiration. He discusses Edward's abdication with a touch of relish for a scandal lived through. He rather unexpectedly berates the English system of justice, so admired from afar by Americans. He believes that the influence of the B. B. C. will destroy the old mark of English class distinction, accent in speech. His defense