

Chile. The story is exciting, but Wilder does not allow it to tell itself, frequently interrupting to comment and interpret. At the outset, for example, we are told: "John Ashley was a man of faith. He did not know that he was a man of faith. He would have been quick to deny that he was a man of religious faith, but religions are merely the garments of faith—and very ill-cut they often are, especially in Coaltown, Illinois." After a discussion of the nature of men and women of faith, Wilder states: "There is no creation without faith and hope. There is no faith and hope that does not express itself in creation. These men and women work."

AGAIN, speaking of Ashley's success with cards, he writes: "Ashley had no idea why he was so accomplished a gambler. He relied upon a whole series of fetishes, irrational promptings and superstitions, and was ashamed of them. Faith is an ever-widening pool of clarity, fed from springs beyond the margin of consciousness. We all know more than we know we know."

Often Wilder is aphoristic: "The process of learning is accompanied by alterations of pain and brief quickenings of pleasure that resemble pain." "Many a beginning philosopher has been on the point of grasping the problem of suffering, but what sage can cope with that of happiness?" "The root of avarice is the fear of what circumstance can bring." "The truest virtues are supererogatory: compassion not toward the good but toward the wicked, generosity to the ungrateful, fidelity without formal commitment." "The leave-takings of the

children of faith are like first recognitions. Time does not present itself to them as an infinite succession of endings."

It is one of today's literary dogmas that the novel should be objective; that the novelist should never appear in his own person as Fielding and Thackeray and many lesser novelists did; that he should try to make himself invisible in the manner of Flaubert and James. But surely the novelist is in his novel even though he never lifts his voice; if he does not tell the reader what to think, he does his best to arrange matters so that the reader can't think anything but what the novelist wants him to. The familiar distinction between telling and showing is important, but not so important as many critics maintain. In *The Ides of March* Wilder introduces extracts from Julius Caesar's journals and from letters by a number of persons, including Cleopatra, Cicero, and Catullus. There is much wisdom in the book, and of course it is Wilder's though the wise sayings are ascribed to characters. From this it was only a short step to the abandonment of the pretense of objectivity, and Wilder has taken it in his new novel. Who is speaking in the passages I have quoted (and there are hundreds like them)? The author and nobody else.

WILDER follows the same procedure in describing Roger Ashley's rise to fame as a journalist. We are told, for instance: "Roger possessed little sense of humor. There was no second Roger lodged within his head. A sense of humor judges one's actions and the actions of others from a wider reference and a longer view and finds them incongruous. It dampens enthusiasm; it mocks hope; it pardons shortcomings; it consoles failure. It recommends moderation. This wider reference and longer view are not the gifts of any extraordinary wisdom; they are merely the condensed opinion of a given community at a given moment. Roger was a very serious young man. Further advantages and disadvantages will come to our attention in the course of this history." The actual steps by which Roger achieves a success worthy of one of Horatio Alger's heroes are realistically and convincingly described. Wilder does not merely tell; he shows—Roger as a hotel clerk, Roger as a hospital orderly, Roger and his girls. Roger's apprenticeship in a newspaper office. But he comments whenever he feels that comment may be valuable.

We are also told about Lily as a singer and Connie as a philanthropist, though not very much. (The life of the third sister, Sophia, is blighted by her too early assumption of too great a responsibility.) Wilder goes back to 1883 to tell about John Ashley as a young man and about his romance with Beata. More

surprisingly, he tells about the upbringing of Eustacia Sims, who became Mrs. Breckenridge Lansing. (But it is true that the Lansing daughter, Félicité, marries Roger Ashley, and that the son, George, who eventually has a strange career as an actor in Russia, plays a crucial part in the story.) The last chapter not only explains the murder of Lansing and the rescue of Ashley but gives us glimpses of what happened to the principal characters after the mystery was solved in 1905.

AS Wilder is discussing the youth of John Ashley, he remarks in a typical passage—typical save for the use of the first person singular: "As I shall have occasion to say when we consider the early years of Eustacia Lansing: all young people secrete idealism as continuously as the *Bombyx mori* secretes silk. It is as necessary to them as food that life be filled with wonder—that they contemplate heroes." Such generalizations may or may not seem true to the reader, but they engage his mind in the search for truth that Wilder has undertaken.

Wilder's way of commenting on the characters does not diminish one's sense of their reality but enhances it. In fact, he seems more objective than the impersonal moderns, for he talks about these people as if they were real. This is contrary to another dogma of the moderns: characters have no existence out of their books; you mustn't ask how many children Lady Macbeth had. But surely all of us except the rarefied intellectuals, the specialists, do become interested in the people we read about in novels if the novels are any good, and feel that they have an independent existence. The most important thing a novel can do, according to E. M. Forster, is to bounce you into a sense of life, and this Wilder does.

There is always the possibility, by the way, Wilder being Wilder, that some of the characters in *The Eighth Day* do have an independent existence in either fact or fiction. He did not hesitate in *The Cabala* to have Keats die in 1920, or in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* to transfer Madame de Sévigné from France to Peru, or in *The Ides of March* to pluck Edward Sheldon out of the twentieth century and make him Caesar's confidant. Also, he has borrowed from other authors, as freely as any Elizabethan: from Prosper Mérimée in *The Bridge*, from Terence in *The Woman of Andros*, from *Finnegans Wake* in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, from a comedy by Johann Nestroy in *The Matchmaker*. So far as his borrowings are concerned, he has written: "Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs. . . . I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods and I hope a remover of

**FRASER YOUNG'S
LITERARY CRYPT No. 1234**

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1234 will be found in the next issue.

ZGWNRMIRS ULHUBPBLBGU

GOCRBPND HS BFG PDRNWVG-

BGDB WIDS QNM IVVNPDBWGDDB

HS BFG RNMMLVB QGA.

-UFIA

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1233

The only good copies are those that reveal what is silly in the bad originals.

-LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

obtrusive bric-a-brac. . . . Literature is the orchestration of platitudes." As for the deliberate anachronisms, Malcolm Cowley has explained that Wilder's sense of time is not like that of most of his contemporaries; his principle is: "Everything that happened might happen anywhere, and will happen again." I shall not be surprised, therefore, if some researcher discovers that John Ashley and his children have their prototypes, perhaps in twelfth-century China or in a Finnish saga.

Wilder, near the close of *The Eighth Day*, makes a comment on history: "But there is only one history. It began with the creation of man and will come to an end when the last human consciousness is extinguished. All other beginnings and endings are arbitrary conventions—makeshifts parading as self-sufficient entireties, diffusing petty comfort or petty despair. The cumbrous shears of the historian cut out a few figures and a brief passage of time from that enormous tapestry. Above and below the laceration, to the right and left of it, the severed threads protest against the injustice, against the imposture." In the light of that statement it is easy to understand why he did not want a tight structure, why he moved back and forth in time, why he introduced characters not essential to the plot, why he left many questions unanswered: he could not present the whole tapestry, but at least he could let the severed threads be seen.

In the end Wilder comes back to the question of design. The venerable leader of a pious sect tells Roger Ashley that he thinks he can see the operation of God's will in the whole Ashley affair, but, like Brother Juniper in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, he isn't sure. Wilder writes: "There is much talk of a design in the arras. Some are certain they see it. Some see what they have been told to see. Some remember that they saw it once but have lost it. Some are strengthened by seeing a pattern wherein the oppressed and exploited of the earth are gradually emerging from their bondage. Some find strength in the conviction that there is nothing to see. Some" There the novel ends.

Wilder offers the reader no certainty, but he does inspire a beautiful sense of human possibilities. He does not deny the existence of evil. He knows that suffering and disappointment and defeat are inherent in the human condition, but he believes that for some people in some places in some times life can be satisfying. That is not exactly a robust faith, but it has sustained Wilder in a long and creative career and has inspired a novel that is as likely to survive, in part because it is unfashionable, as anything written in our time.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

Old Age Inaugural: Five years ago, at the age of sixty-five, Thornton Wilder abruptly brought to an end virtually all his correspondence, declined all further invitations from friends and acquaintances, and went off to the Arizona desert. Although he called the removal from his usual haunts his retirement, Wilder was in fact inaugurating his "old age" with work on a new novel. Not since Melville at sixty-nine began work on *Billy Budd* had a major American novelist—pace Upton Sinclair—successfully beaten the calendar. With the publication of *The Eighth Day* Wilder demonstrates that the wellspring of his creative energies is undiminished.

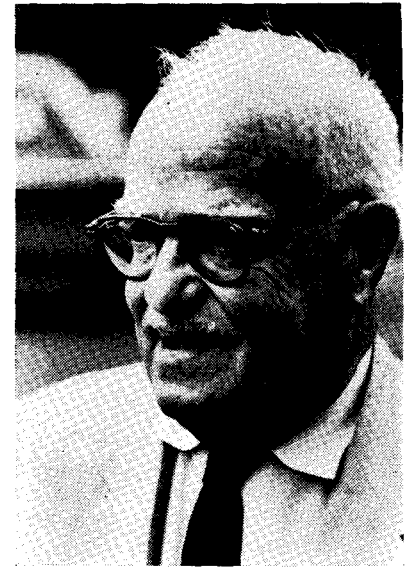
Descended of old New England stock and for the past fifty years a Connecticut resident, Thornton Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897. His father was a newspaper editor for whom good writing and oral expression were a central fact of existence. (The late Henry Luce told me that Amos Wilder was the most effective impromptu speaker he had ever heard.)

Wilder's mother, Isabella, who combined wit with a keen understanding of people, was devoted to literature and the arts. While Thornton derived his profound respect for disciplined expression from his father, from his mother he gained a lifelong infatuation with the imaginative possibilities of language.

Wilder once said to me:

Comparison of one's lot with others teaches us nothing and enfeebles the will. Many born in an environment of poverty, disease and stupidity, in an age of chaos, have put us in their debt. By the standards of many people and by my own these dispositions were favorable; but what are our judgments in such matters? Everyone is born with an array of handicaps—even Mozart, even Sophocles—and acquires new ones. The most valuable thing I inherited was a temperament that does not revolt against Necessity and that is constantly renewing in Hope. . . .

Up to the age of nine, Thornton lived a conventional childhood in Madison. But during the next decade the pattern of his life was erratic and unusual. In 1906 the elder Wilder was appointed by Theodore Roosevelt to be Consul General in Hong Kong. After six months in China, Mrs. Wilder brought her four children back to the United States to be educated, settling in Berkeley. During most of those years Wilder describes himself as having been "a sort of sleep-walker. I was not a dreamer, but a muser and a self-amuser and have never been without a whole repertory of absorbing hobbies, curiosities, inquiries, interests.



—Pix.

Thornton Wilder—"a muser."

Hence my head has always seemed to me to be like a brightly lighted room . . . filled with tables on which are set up the most engrossing games."

Though a better than average student, Wilder did not impress his teachers as outstanding; he achieved nothing noteworthy. Despite the great distance that separated them, the elder Wilder kept in close touch with the details of his children's accomplishments, and he was concerned about Thornton's practical competence all through the boy's adolescence. Robert Maynard Hutchins, Wilder's classmate both at Oberlin and at Yale, recalls championing one of Wilder's essays in the *Yale Literary Magazine* and provoking in the elder Wilder the terse rejoinder: "Carving olive pits. Carving olive pits."

After graduating from Yale in 1920 and following a year at The American Academy in Rome, Wilder somewhat allayed his father's misgivings by successfully functioning as a French master at Lawrenceville Academy. Four years later, aged twenty-eight, he took leave from teaching to enroll in the Princeton Graduate School, from which he emerged in 1926 with an M.A., one completed novel, and the half-completed draft of a second. The first novel, *The Cabala*, enjoyed a modest critical success, but neither Wilder nor anyone else was prepared for the popular acclaim that greeted *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* the following year, 1927. Within a few months Wilder was an international celebrity.

In the forty years since the publication of *The Bridge*, Wilder has produced novels and plays which, characterized by devotion to the writer's craft and to the artist's conscience, have substantially added to his reputation: *The Woman*