CHAPTER-V
Wilder as a Novelist of All Time to Come:

Wilder is known for one thing very particularly. He is known for his versatility and duality. In fact he is not very much swayed away by the current conditions prevailing in America. Some critics took him to task on this issue. But before pondering over the charges leveled against him by some critics, it would be fair to go deep into the themes of his novels from the very beginning. Harlan Hatcher an American critic who has written extensively on American literature has to say as follows about the early works of Wilder:

[Thornton Wilder] has shown little interest in the contemporary scene, or in the problems that have concerned the war generation of which he is by the calendar a member, his experiences have been varied................."

His first novel, The Cabala (1926) was a flight from the contemporary American scene and its problems to a specialized milieu in Rome that was able to include the present day and the death of John Keats in the same twice setting. It was episodic in form and was told in the first person .......... And yet, as a matter
of simple fact, The Cabala dealt with a group of degenerate people familiar to the fiction of the day, and its chief episode was the suicide of a young pervert after an incestuous scene. The "disciplinary warning" was not, evidently, against unpleasant substance but against a too robust frankness in presenting it. The materials of Thornton Wilder have not really been essentially different from those handled by the least restrained realists: a drunken old woman trying to dominate her daughter, an actress of easy virtue, an unfortunate monk, a courtesan, an illegitimate child fathered by a respectable Greek boy and the young Roman of The Cabala.¹ There is change only in the setting.

Similarly writing about the theme of The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) Harlan Hatcher writes. "Its theme was intriguing because, with all the advance in science through the years, people still knock on wood, observe omens, and in various ways pay tribute to the uncertainty of Chance. It raised again the question of Job and a million others: Do events befall by accident or by design? And it isolated the problem with the specific instance of a bridge in Peru breaking and destroying five persons in the year 1714. The resulting stories are beautifully told. They are short, the whole book being less than a third the length of an ordinary novel, yet it gives the effect of a
longer work because of the clean economy of the art and the
evocative power of its poetic compression, And the short form
makes possible a sustained mood. ² For the setting of The
Woman of Andros, (1930), the third novel by Wilder, he chose
the romantic isles of ancient Greece. The novel was somewhat
disappointing because it was an academic piece, - - - ³. Wilder
could have made a change in the setting but perhaps he was
never worried about critics.

The nature of the theme of the novels quoted above was
bound to create controversy in certain quarters. But the critics
had no effect on him. For in this matter he was guided by
Gertrude Stien who advised him that he should not bother about
what critics have to say. He should not waste his energies in the
criticism for it was the business of critics to go on pointing out
one or the other thing, Instead, she advised him, he should
concentrate on creative work. The result was evident. "Neither
seemed to have any great effect upon Thornton Wilder. He
followed the dictates of his own genius in his own way. ⁴

In an interview with Goldstone Wilder was asked to comment
on the suggestion made by a really eminent critic that among the
critics he (Wilder) had made no enemies. The reply given by Wilder
was that "The important thing is that you make sure that neither
the favourable nor the unfavorable critics move into your head and take part in the composition of your next work". When asked "Why have you generally avoided contemporary settings in your work", Wilder replied that "I think you would find that the work is a gradual drawing near to the America I know. It began with the purely fantastic twentieth century Rome (I did not frequent such circles there), then, Peru, then, Hellenistic Greece. I began, first with Heaven's My Destination, to approach the American scene. Already, in the one act plays, I had become aware of how difficult it is to invest one's contemporary world with the same kind of imaginative life one has extended to those removed in time and place. But I always feel that the progression is there and visible; I can be seen collecting the practice, the experience, and courage to present my own times".

Heaven's My Destination, set in the American Midwest of 1930, derived its title, Wilder tells us, from a doggerel verse of the day, children wrote it in their school books, filling in the blank places:

- - - - - is my name;
America's my nation
- - - is my dwelling place
And Heaven's my destination.
The novel (Heaven's My Destination) confused a number of critics when it first appeared. Wilder himself noted that some thought it was the portrait of a saint, others believed it was a satire on a ridiculous fool. Still others suggested it was some kind of a joke and took Wilder to task for being frivolous at such a moment in America's history. Sigmund Freud, who had been overwhelmed with admiration for The Bridge of San Luis Rey, was revolted by Heaven's My Destination: he did not understand why Wilder wanted to write a book about an "American fanatic" and threw the book away in anger. But Gertrude Stein loved it. She was quite right.\(^7\)

It was nothing new, before him critics like Michael Gold, had took him to task. In a review dated 22\(^{nd}\) October 1930 he "castigated Wilder for failing to address American social problems associated with the Great Depression of the 1930s in The Woman of Andros, and his earlier works". He pointed out that Wilder was a writer of dreamlands so to say and had nothing to do with the modern materialistic world, particular the American world experiencing severe depression as a consequence to the World War.

In a very harsh and sarcastic mood Michael Gold writes:

"And this, to date, is the garden cultivated by Mr. Thornton Wilder. It is a museum, it is not a world. In this devitalized air move
the wan ghosts he has called up, each in "romantic" costume. It is an historic junk-shop over which our author presides.  

Michael Gold makes a fiery remark while making a passing reference to the host of eminent writers, while denouncing Wilder as a writer of worth:

Mr. Wilder strains to be spiritual, but who could reveal any real agonies and exaltations of spirit in this neat, tailor-made rhetoric? It is a great lie. It is Death. Its serenity is that of the corpse. Prick it, and it will bleed violet ink and aperitif. It is false to the great stormy music of Anglo-Saxon speech. Shakespeare is crude and disorderly beside Mr. Wilder. Neither Milton, Fielding, Burns, Blake, Byron, Chaucer nor Hardy could ever receive a passing mark in Mr. Wilder's class-room of style. 

Michael did not stop there. He throws a volley of questions:

"And this is the style with which to express America? Is this the speech of a pioneer continent? Will this discreet French drawing-room hold all the blood, horror and hope of the world's new empire? Is this the language of the intoxicated Emerson? Or the clean, rugged Thoreau, or vast Whitman? Where are the modern streets of New York, Chicago and New Orleans in these little novels? Where are the cotton mills, and the murder of Ella
May and her songs? Where are the child slaves of the beet fields? Where are the stock-broker suicides, the labor racketeers or passion and death of the coal miners? Where are Babbitt, Jimmy Higgins and Anita Loos's Blonde? Is Mr. Wilder a Swede or a Greek, or is he an American? No stranger would know from these books he has written.¹⁰

But as against his approach pointed out earlier Wilder was this time no doubt impressed by the volley of questions of an eminent critic for he took up for his theme the American background for the first time in Heaven's My Destination. However, as is made clear hereafter he did not succeed in satisfying critics like M. Gold even after adopting American scene for his next novel.

Edmund Wilson, an eminent American critic judges Heaven's My Destination Wilder's best novel and comments on the use of humour and religious theme. While reminding the sarcastic criticism passed by Michael Gold, he writes.

"Mr. Wilder has here taken up the challenge; and though, in the course of the polemical battle, he was some times unfairly treated; the polemics have been justified if they inspired, as they are said to have done, this new book".

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Heaven's My Destination seems to me much Mr. Wilder's best novel. It is as brilliant and sharp as The Woman of Andros, which seems to me his weakest novel, was comparatively mawkish and pale. And - what makes Heaven's My Destination unique in its Middle Western field - he has handled his Sinclair Lewis material with his characteristic elegance of form and felicity of detail, his peculiar characteristic Mozartian combination of light-ness and grace with seriousness.  

George Brush the quaint creation of Wilder is not representative of modern American youth. He turns out to be a religious man most unfit in the modern American life-style. Mr. Edmund Wilson seems to be satisfied with the presentation of George Brush but it is not going to satisfy critics like Michael Gold. 

Edmund Wilson is satisfied with the Heaven's My Destination. No critic of communist ideology is going to satisfy with it. Edmund Wilson writes: "I do not see any reason why the radical reviewers who have been urging Thornton Wilder to write about his native land should find Heaven's My Destination unacceptable." Edmund Wilson calls George Brush a type of saint and a universal character. To quote Edmund Wilson again:
"George Brush is, as I have said, the type of saint, and he is therefore an universal character. The saint is a very special kind of person, but he turns up in other fields besides the religious one. The radical movement, too, has its saints, and they are people fundamentally akin to George Brush. Upton Sinclair in his early phases resembled him in some ways quite closely and committed some of the same kind of absurdities".13

M.C. Kuner, known for her biographical and critical study: "Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark" "discusses Wilder's development of a distinctly American artistic vision, and comments on the literary influences and philosophical concerns that inform his writing." She is of the opinion that "the charges of reviewers like Michael Gold forced Wilder to an evaluation of this phase of his career and, in many ways, changed it. Two other forces certainly combined to direct his efforts in another direction, and, as always with Wilder, they came in the form of new ideas. It is true that every writer is more or less susceptible to the currents of his times, but it is not until Wilder has thoroughly absorbed a concept, has apprehended it intellectually rather than emotionally, that it can have any effect on his work."14
Rex Burbank talking about the theme of Heaven’s My Destination writes: Heaven’s My Destination is among other things a testimonial to the effectiveness of a well-managed narrative perspective, which permits Wilder better than in any of his previous fiction to express his themes through action rather than assertion. The narrator is so objective, in fact, that Wilder was chastised for failing to state unequivocally his attitude towards Brush. He told Ross Parmenter in 1938: "My last novel (Heaven’s My Destination) 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 screening at sacred things, a portrait of a saint on the one hand and a ridiculous fool jeered at by the author on the other. Such misinterpretations were a result, surely, of the failure by those readers to detect Wilder’s marvellous comic irony, which functions best when the author keeps himself and his comments out of the story as he does here.\textsuperscript{15}

Rex BurBank observes further: "Out of that conflict arise the implied themes of a faith purified of ignorance, of moral principles based upon both tolerance of human frailties and understanding of evil, and of skepticism tempered by moral
concern. Brush symbolizes both the best and the worst in the American religious and moral tradition.\textsuperscript{16}

Again in his novel The Eighth Day\textsuperscript{"} the hero of the novel, John Ashley is repeatedly called a man of faith.

The main character (John Ashley) and the main theme (an attempt to present a pious person to purify the world.) must be considered the crucial one in a novel. Wilder's hero, here is quite different from a tragic hero, he is a man of faith.

Edward Ericson Jr. in his book Kierkegaard in Wilder's "The Eighth Day" writes about the impact of Kierkegaard on Wilder as follows:

\section*{Influence of Kierkegaard on His Themes:}

"That an examination of Kierkegaard's influence on The Eighth Day will prove fruitful we have Wilder's own word. John Ashley, the hero of the novel is repeatedly called a man of faith. noticing what seemed to me striking parallels between Ashley and Kierkegaard's knight of faith in Fear and Trembling", I wrote to Mr. Wilder to inquire about the matter.

in a letter addressed to me dated April 24, 1931, he responded: Yes, indeed John Ashley is a sketch of Kierkegaard's
knight. Once one has read S.K. (Soren Kierkegaard) he remains a part of one's view of life and I'd like to think that he appears and disappears throughout the book "even when I'm not aware of it". This impelling piece of external evidence is both sufficient encouragement to seek the internal evidences of Kierkegaard's thought in the novel and a prima facie case for their presence. We should not claim too much for Kierkegaard's influence. Nevertheless, an influence which explains the main character and the main theme must be considered the crucial one. Like Kierkegaard's Wilder carefully distinguishes men of faith from tragic heroes; "Try as hard as you like, you cannot see them (men of faith) as the subjects of tragedy. (It has often been attempted: When the emotion subsides the audience finds that its tears have been shed, unprofitably for itself).

The main influence of Kierkegaard on The Eighth Day (at least rivaling Wilder's use of Kierkegaard's knight) on the main theme of Wilder's novel, that of living by faith.

"The central meaning of The Eighth Day is most clearly laid bare in the closing pages when the Deacon of the congregation at Herkomer's knob shows Roger Ashley the old tapestry and uses it as an object lesson to give his view of the meaning of life. The rug has a complex maze like design on one side, but" no figure
could be traced on the reverse. It presented a mass of knots and of frayed and dangling threads. The Deacon explicates: "These are the threads and knots of human life. You cannot see the design. - - - After further explication of the tapestry image as it relates to Roger and the whole Ashley family, the Deacon adds; "There is no happiness equal to that of being aware that one has a part in a design." - - - In Wilder's words, "History is one tapestry. No eye can venture to compass more than a hand's breadth - - - - Life must remain an enigma to us because of our limited point of view. Only God, who in His omniscience can scan the whole tapestry of history in one glance, is in a position to assert with confidence that life is pervaded by a meaning which is objectively verifiable. We are left with the insoluble mystics of suffering and injustice.

"All this sounds strikingly like Kierkegaard. He does not deny that life has a system. He denies only that finite man is capable of viewing the system inherent existence. But God has a vantage point which allows him to see it.

"Truth for man is always subjective and not objective, according to Kierkegaard. One can attain this truth only by the leap of faith, which is executed in the face of the absurdity that the available evidence is insufficient for such a conclusion - - - .
Wilder urges faith. His men and women of faith in The Eighth Day attain just that kind of faith which is not fully supported by the facts of life.

It is only at the end of the novel that Roger - and the reader - learns of the religious principles which informed John Ashley's entire life - - - - (The) disclosure at the novel's conclusion casts a retrospective light over all of Ashley's life in the preceding pages. We see now that what underlay his nobility was not humanistic moralism but religious faith, we see now with full clarity why Wilder insisted on calling him a man of faith. 

Theme and Techniques of The Novels:

Malcolm Cowley, an American critic noted in particular for his critical studies of Modern American Literature has provided a positive assessment of The Eighth Day, and has emphasized the originality of theme and technique.

The novel is based on a reported incident. "In the early summer of 1902 John Barrington Ashley of Coaltown, a small mining centre 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
Thursday, July 22, he escaped from his guards on the train that was carrying him to his execution.

- - - - Wilder has a way of choosing the necessary facts and of stating them in the simplest and briefest fashion. The facts may be prosaic, but his statements are as hard to change as a finished line of poetry."

According to Malcolm Cowley naturally several questions cropped up relating to the Ashley case - - - - Those questions as they relate to the Ashley case are the theme of The Eighth Day. - - Mr. Cowley has come to the conclusion "that there are no final answers to the questions. There are only the illuminations we have found by the way, with the author's comments on human destinies, and the pleasure of reading - I almost said "of hearing", since Wilder writes for the ear - a skillfully told and well invented story."

"The Eighth Day reminds one distantly of Wilder's most popular novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) which also was concerned with chance and destiny. I can find in it no resemblance to any other novel of the past 100 years. Most of others imitate reality, or offer us dreams to be substituted for reality, but Wilder has neither of these aims. Instead of imitating
or evading, he illustrates, and he thus goes back to an older tradition in fiction.\(^{18}\)

As we know he gave the working title to the draft of the novel "The Cabala as "Memoirs of a Roman Student". But when completed the novel was to be titled "The Cabala". In 1926 The Cabala was published in its full form. But before that he had thirty light short pieces printed from 1915 to 1925. It is not the number that is important here, it is the theme and technique adopted by Wilder that is important, for many of the publications were plays in which three characters performed for only three minutes. The critics have termed these literary pieces as tricky and pedantic sketches. But they are examples of quite different experiment in theme and technique. A collection of the these titled "The Angel that Troubled the Waters and other plays appeared and were applauded.

Malcolm Goldstein points out towards this aspect of Wilder's art in his book entitled "The Art of Thornton Wilder" as follows.

Two of the plays are valuable advance sign of the professional career soon to begin. Among the first to be conceived though not published until 1920, was Proserpine and
the Devil", a sketch which fore-shadows Wilder's later, lengthier plays in its presentation of simultaneous views of past and present. Here the scene is an out door puppet-booth in seventeenth century Venice; the characters, two puppeteers and their manager. The theme is that the myths of Greece and Rome still exist, but have taken a new form: Christianity. Another, more pointed early sketch, The Death of the Centaur : A foot Note to Ibsen, presents Shelley, or his ghost, before the curtain at a performance of Ibsen's. The Master Builder at a moment when he takes the opportunity to tell the audience that he is the true author of the play. Its substance, he says, is the content of a poem he was on the point of writing on the day he drowned. In an oblique way the little play suggests that Wilder very early in life developed the idea that the great themes of literature may be borrowed and re-borrowed without discredit to the borrower - that in fact, such a process is inevitable."19

Rex Burbank rightly remarks: Edmond Wilson correctly observed that the Cabala reveals the influence of Proust in the theme of the hopeless love of the person of superior sensibility (Alix) for one who is unworthy of it (Blair). He further points out: The Cabala brings past and present together in modern and mythological characters: but with this difference: Wilder brings
his classical gods to the present and suggests their presence in characters drawn with considerable realism—The Cabala has an episodic structure unified by themes rather than by action—Wilder’s episodes enjoy additional unity because the characters constitute a single group.”

However, according to him, “In the "Alix" episode the thematic unity of the book breaks down somewhat, but, next to the cardinal, Alix is the most complex and compelling character in the book.”

But though the theme is of the agonizing love of a superior person (Alix) for an inferior one, there exist agonized suffering in other episodes also—Thus the moral theme of love prevails in the novel from the beginning to the end.

Though The Cabala is a romance novel but it is not a romance novel in the popular meaning of the term. Its main characters constitute of a group of Roman aristocrats who suffer misfortune symbolizing the decline of old European culture. They are visited by Samuele who symbolizes modern American culture.

There is a conflict between past and present, aristocracy and modernism. The Cabalists live in royalist past. They are in constant opposition with forces of modernism.
The novel is divided in five episodes. It gives a moral that the past, whatever its glories, is dead and that the responsibility now is to the present, and the future.

The next novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey, is set in eighteenth century Peru. It is strange that Wilder never visited Peru before choosing the theme. But he made extensive use of his learning. Though not physically present he was all the time present mentally. It is only such type of pressure that matters in all great works of art. Therefore, he having not traveled to Peru was of no consequence to him.

The theme of the novel again presents a new comer who tries to find out some role of destiny in the accident resulting in collapsing of the Bridge and death of five persons. He is certain that the event is no accident.

The million dollar question that is raised in The Bridge is:
If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life. Either we live by accident and die by accident or we live by plan and die by plan?

According to Rex Burbank "The Bridge" explores the Themes of moral isolation and love and raises the question of whether events occur by accident or design.
But the author is not going to give a direct answer. He has another very important factor involved in between. He points to the "Central passion" in each of the major characters.

"The fall of the bridge of San Luis Rey symbolizes the force of circumstance or of the meaningless workings of nature but the passions of the victims act as the primary human cause leading them to the bridge. Fusion of these two factors brings about the magic unity of purpose and chance that provides the element of mystery which is the essence of mysticism.23

In fact the whole theme revolves between "Perhaps an Accident" and 'Perhaps an Intuition', "This aspect of the theme sustains our curiosity. But it is not all successful. It has its drawbacks. Rex Burbank points it out in the following manner:

"The Bridge has often been charged with being sentimental, but there are really no grounds for such charge because Wilder gives enough scope to the weaknesses of the characters to preclude the expenditure of any undue feeling for them. Furthermore, there are no tears of happiness at the end of their suffering, their love in each case brings pain, and finally, death, Nor is the book so optimistic as it might seem to be at first reading".
Yet" The Bridge" is not an unqualified success as a novel. Its most noticeable weakness is the episodic structure which though thematically unified, obviates progression in a single narrative line. Characters are developed almost entirely in the next one and replaced by a new cast. Another weakness - its most important technical one - is the sometimes obtrusive presence of the omniscient author who judges and interprets as he narrates the histories of inner lives of the main characters. This subjective, arbitrary narration, weakens the dramatic structure of the book, although it is compensated for to a considerable degree by the fact that the dramatic scenes embody or suggest much of what the omniscient author says about the character.24

Bernard Grebanier feels that the "Heaven's My Destination has not been fully appreciated. The reason is not far to seek. It has been high lighted in the chapter "Making of the Novelist". He is not only a literary figure but a man of altogether different mould. He was born and bred in a religious back ground. He was impressed by great thinker and philosophers of his time and those of posterity. It is because of such a background that he always considers himself a teacher and not a writer. Again he was a teacher not of routine type or an academic teacher but of
an altogether different bent. He was out to mould the life of people – their thinking pattern their worldly behaviour.

The world, materialistic as it is growing day by day, wants to seek immediate materialistic gain. It seeks utility of the world order. Utility, no doubt, is of utmost importance but it should not be purely materialistic and utterly mundane. Marxists and materialists of the modern America were eager to seek immediate gain. They were eager to find out a solution of the most transient and temporary crisis created by The Depression. It was certainly not an all time problem. It was a temporary phase in the Economic life of America. Any literary work limiting its approach only to such a temporary and transient problem was bound to loose its charm after such a passing phase was no more of any consequence. What Wilder was trying to do was to take notice of the perennial and permanent phase in life.

It is therefore, not surprising when Bernard Grebanier observed as follows:

"If The Woman of Andros has been the least appreciated of Wilder's best work, Heaven's My Destination has been the most misunderstood.
Nothing could be further from a true appraisal of the novel's hero, George Brush, than one critic's summation of him as a "nit-wit Babbit, a religious fanatic and unholy mischance. Harry Hansen hoped that Wilder himself would never have the misfortune to meet a George Brush in the flesh – yet Miss Isabel Wilder has encouraged me to believe that there is some autobiographical element in her brother's depiction of his hero."25

Bernard Grebanier is very critical against critics like Sinclair Lewis and he is right. He writes:

"To begin with, Sinclair Lewis largely resented his countrymen and concentrated fiercely upon their short comings. Wilder Loves his fellow Americans and, not blind to their faults, sees them with the charity with which we view those we love. Moreover, nothing could be further from Wilder's purposes or methods than Lewis' raw, heavy handed, black-and-white satire. It is an irony that Lewis should have been the generalissimo of American letters in charge of the onslaught against our cultural vacuities. It is not by onslaught that such vacuities are filled, and there was more than a little of Babbitt in Lewis himself. Too often he makes us feel that his chief grievance is that in the United States writers and artists are not able to drive the
Cadillac's of successful financiers. Wilder's, on the other hand, is a richly cultivated intelligence.  

Brush is not ludicrous only because of his simplicity or innocence but also because he wants women to shun smoking. In fact Brush should have gone a step further, He should have prohibited smoking for men also. In a modern society believing in equality there should have been no discrimination on the basis of sex. But are the radicals ready for such radical changes. 

Bernard Grebanier further elaborates the good qualities or saintly qualities in Brush, He writes:

"The man is full of the noblest intensions, and every where he encounters hostility because of his sincere desire to help others and maintain his own moral integrity. To an extent his experience illustrate the readiness of the world to give the truly unselfish man a black eye as the reward for his goodness. At the same time his experiences re-inforce one's faith in goodness, no matter what the penalties innocence must suffer. (This is, perhaps, what is autobiographical in the portrait.) -- - - Brush insists upon the most rigorously fundamentalist interpretation of the scriptures. He also looks upon women's smoking as the ultimate depravity. But such narrowness in, so good a man is as
pathetic as it is comic. He himself misses felicity because of his archaic views; but the opposition of the world to all he stands for is not because of his narrowness, but because of his stubborn selfness. Under the influence of the Bible and of Gandhi, he has taken a voluntary oath of poverty, and is no more interested in financial success than he is in depravity. One might say that his chief trouble in life comes from his trying logically to live up to his principles – if one could say that he is ever really in trouble. For despite experiences which would destroy any one else, George Brush has not pity for himself. To him all sickness is the product merely of discouragement, and no matter what happens to him he is never discouraged for more than a moment."27

There was hue and cry on the catastrophe of Depression that the United States faced and naturally critics like Michael Gold were very sensitive towards it. They decried that apathy noticed in Wilder on this issue. But here George Brush has a unique solution for it. Bernard Grebanier writes: "For the time in which this very young man lives - the Depression years - his principles are no less sturdy than amazing. "I think", he says, "everybody ought to be hit by the depression equally. "Successful as a book salesman, he is only upset when he has more money than he can spend on his simple needs. He disapproves of
interest and unintentionally aggravates the imminent ruin of a bank when, on closing a small account, he refuses to withdraw more than the original sum he deposited. He is tireless in his attempts to help others in distress, no matter to what moral depths they have sunk — and it is usually his fate to incur their hatred. His own goodness is only an irritant to those around him, and some are provoked into inventing mischief with which to undone him. But he cannot be undone. The basic thing about the hero of this hilariously funny novel is not the stupidities born of his ignorance, but his dauntless, unpriggish, unsanctimonious will to be good in a world that finds goodness harder to tolerate than evil. "28

But Even in a farce, which need do no more than supply an evening's diversion, Wilder was bound to have something to say. "Money should circulate like rain water." and "Money is like manure, worthless, unless spread about encouraging young things to grow" — one of the characters of Wilder proclaims and with it is proclaimed the character of the author. What more Radicals want to expect from a genuine writer. For whom the gates of Heaven are open? How can we take such a novel lightly?

Theophilus North is the last novel written by Wilder. It is an episodic novel very like the earlier novel The Eighth Day.
Again it is set mainly in the United States. From the above it can be said that Wilder had a variety of range, forms, settings and characterizations unmatched by any other American writer. He has full command and mastery over the forms. It is also told in first person.

Theophilus North is unique in such qualities. It has Newport, Rhode Island as the background. Theophilus North, the hero, has just resigned from his teaching job at a boy's preparatory school. It resembles the life history of Wilder who had himself resigned from Lawrence Ville School in the 1920s. Like Wilder, the hero of the novel also passes though Newport and decides to stay for the summer. According to Rex Burbank "Like most other first-person narratives, this one reveals the character of the story teller as well as of the people in the story. In order to make his living in Newport, North gives tennis lessons and language instruction to children of the well-to-do who are there for the summer months and he reads from classical works of literature for other people who hire him. He explains that he is tired of teaching at the boys school but doesn't want to be a full-time writer, either, he is chiefly interested in becoming "far more immersed in life" than having a profession or career allows. He must work for a living, but be wants to do it on his own terms.

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and at times suitable to him self, and thus leave himself free to be involved in the life around him. He admits that he is "to all appearance cheerful and dutiful, but within - - - - - cynical and almost totally bereft of sympathy for any other human being" except the members of his own family. He therefore, finds a kind of spiritual therapy in getting involved with individuals who need his help."²⁹

Theophilus North is, in a way a counter part so to say, to George Brush in Heaven's My Destination. He resembles Roger Ashley in The Eighth Day. To quote Rex Burbank again "He often adopts the role of school master in its less flattering aspects, lecturing or directing others with annoying self-assurance and complacency. We are never quite certain that North and the author aren't the same person, so we can't be sure that North is drawn with ironic detachment, as Brush is, and permitted to display his own weaknesses."³⁰

North is given the honour of bringing a drastic change in the life of Newport. "He succeeds in his desire to restore his own emotional well-being by becoming a helpful friend to others." What is important about North is very well summed up in the following words by Rex Burbank:
"Like his other works it is indubitably his and if as Wilder wished, the reader can join in North's fun – and in his desire to be "obliging" – he or she can enjoy this series of episodes by an author who enjoyed life himself and wanted most touchingly to help his fellow human beings enjoy it too.\textsuperscript{31}

According to Granville Hicks "What Theophilus North learns in Newport is that most people could be happier than they are, and experimentation teaches him that sometimes he can improve their lot. His first name proclaims that he is a lover of God, but we see him as one who loves his fellow man which as Leigh Hunt observed – may be the same thing. As far the second name, it may be a reminder of the cold wind of skepticism. It is like Wilder that he should celebrate 50 years of distinguished writing by producing a book that is gayer in spirit than anything he had previously written, that generously displays his varied talents and that asks more questions than it answers."\textsuperscript{32}

W.D. Maxwell Mahon in his The Novels of Thornton Wilder writes about Theophilus North as follows:

"Of Wilder's last novel Theophilus North (1973), which was published two years before his death, the most that can be said is that it touches the nadir of his fiction. - - - - Wilder appears
to be re-living many of the fantasies he had as a young man; there are given an air of respectability by linking them with Freudian psychology; two 'nine life ambitions' are materialized by way of the various characters with whom North comes into contact after he resigns his job to spend all his time searching for a meaningful life. Predictably, he finds this meaning in the self abnegation of helping others to find it. Perhaps Wilder was writing a sequel to Heaven's My Destination and presenting us with the sort of man George Brush should have been. But this sort of man, despite his noble deeds (or because of them), is the shadow and not the substance of his creator.33

Richard H. Goldstone in his "Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait" writes about Theophilus North as follows:

"To say that Theophilus North is the least inflecting example of Wilder's fiction is not to say that it is an utter or contemptible failure. The book enjoyed the respectful attention of large numbers of serious readers who found that it evoked successfully the 1920s and portrayed skillfully those Americans of a half century ago who were still able to remain innocently self-absorbed and unconsciously isolated in places like Newport, Rhode Island.34"
In fact Thornton Wilder was an innovator an experimenter. His theme, therefore, is always relating to and fully concerned with the survival and emancipation of the human race in the face of ignorance, catastrophe, and folly. With this aim before him he moves backward and forward in time as rapidly as possible without caring much about the harsh criticism.

Thornton Wilder has his own choice in selecting his profession. He had some fancies of his own. Such things turned out very important in the making of the man. Bernard Grebanier observes: " a man who has neither hastened to follow nor troubled to oppose the current mode, who has gone his own way, and who has clearly never sought the popularity which has periodically been his. The key to his significance, perhaps is the number of important paradoxes brilliantly reconciled in his writings.

" - - - - - He has always chosen to show much in little - - -

- The spacious air of his work is owing not to form but idea."

"Like all good book-worms, he is in love with the past. But his re-creation of the past belongs very much to the present. He has never tried to write a museum-piece."
"No writer of his time has been more uniformly concerned with moral issues; none is less didactic. Didacticism he has branded as an attempt at "Coercion". "Beauty is the only persuasion".

His experience and interests have made him cosmopolitan. Yet no story-teller has been more attentive to locale and setting. He is a man of the world, and he could have been born only in the United States."35

He preferred to write small pieces. Even some of his plays run only into three pages and end abruptly in three minutes.

His collection of early pieces, The Angel That Troubled The Waters" "consists of sixteen three minute plays" -- More seriously, the pieces are all too brief to be capable of representation on the boards; They would be over before they seemed to begin."36

Bernard Grebanier draws our attention towards the attribute of Wilder noticed ever since his childhood. He says, "While still a boy he was irritated by the "needless repetition", "The empty opening paragraph, the deft but uninstructive Transitions, "and the superfluous summarizing conclusions of most writing (still being held up as models of excellence in our
schools). If the pieces are too brief for any telling dramatic effect, they at least show the artist conscious of a principle which he feels he must perfect.37

R.H. Goldstone in an interview (date winter 1957) with Thornton Wilder asked an introductory question which Wilder readily agreed to put. The question runs like this: One of our really eminent critics, in writing about you recently, suggested that among the critics you had made no enemies. Is that a healthy situation for a serious writer?"

(After laughing somewhat ironically, Wilder replied): The important thing is that you make sure that neither the favourable nor the unfavourable critics move into your head and take part in the composition of your next work.

In reply to one very important question he says "many writers firmly guide their readers to "what they should think" about the characters and events. If an author refrains from introducing his point of view, readers will be nettled, but will project into the next their own assumptions and turns of mind. If the work has vitality, it will, however slightly, alter those assumptions.38

In the same interview Wilder explained the role of a critic on a work of art. He says "I realize that every writer is necessarily
a critic, that is, each sentence is a skeleton accompanied by enormous activity of rejection; and each selection is governed by general principles concerning Truth, force, beauty and so on. But as I have just suggested, I believe that the practice of writing consists in more and more relegating all the schematic operation to the subconscious. The critic that is in every fabulist is like the iceberg-nine-tenths of him in underwater. Yeats warned against proving into how and why one writes: he called it "muddying the spring". He quoted Browning's lines:

"Where the apple reddens do not pry.

Lest we lose our Eden, you and I."I have long kept a journal to which I consign meditations about the "Omniscience of the novelist" and thoughts about how time can be expressed in narration, and so on. But I never re-read these entries. They are like the brief canters that a man would take on his horse during the days preceding a race. They inform the buried critic that I know he is there, that I hope he's constantly at work clarifying his system of principles, helping me when I'm not aware of it, and intimating that I hope he will not intrude on the day of the race.

Gertrude Stein once said laughingly that writing is merely "telling what you know". Well that telling is as difficult an
exercise in technique as it is in honesty, but it should emerge as immediately, as spontaneously, as un-deliberately as possible.  

In his work on The Art of Thornton Wilder, Malcolm Goldstein has said in the foreward that "It is a paradox that this least secretive, most gregarious of authors wishes not to be the subject of a full scale biography during his own life time." 

He further points out towards another very peculiar aspect of Wilder's nature. He says:

"He has long been helpful to students of his work and has cordially answered queries from high school pupils, members of graduate seminars, and professional critics, but has drawn the line at detailed questions covering persons and places. Nevertheless, so frequently have accounts of his travels, public appearances; and social engagements appeared in the press that it is no very difficult task to place together a view of the whole man.

Miss Isabel Wilder, the writer's sister has shown great patience with my requests for information on Wilder's non-literary activities beyond what is available in newspapers and magazines. During his withdrawal to the Arizona desert to write in freedom from just such requests, she relayed to him those few questions which she herself was unable to answer."
One peculiar noticeable aspect of Wilder's nature is that once he had produced any work of art, he never engrossed himself in the critical comments appearing in the press. He was of the opinion that it was the business of the critics to say things for and against the work of art and it should be the business of the artists not to be swayed away by it. In other words, it should not detain the artist from his creative activity. It is because of this that he always preferred seclusion or an unknown destination to concentrate on his new work.

The sensationally harsh review in the "New Republic" had no very much impact on Wilder. Malcolm Goldstein writes: "For two months at the close of the year (1930) the defects and merits of this (Six short plays somewhat cumbersomely) titled "The long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in one Act) and Wilder's three earlier books were weighed in the correspondence columns of the magazine, while the novelist himself remained silent - - - - - To brood over Criticism of his writing would have bound him intellectually to work already accomplished; by ignoring the review and its aftermath he minimized a serious threat to his growth, as well as a threat to the continued enjoyment of the pleasures his productivity had earned for him."
Even in March 1962 in his announcement of his decision to leave the east and settle for two years in the Arizona desert, where, away from the distractions of "Cultivated Conversation" (his phrase) he could get down to his work.\footnote{43}

Let us see what Thornton Wilder's has to say about the theme of his novels:

"As to the theme of the book, there are a number of themes on all levels. Some of the lesser themes are, I suppose the difference between the matter-of-factness and almost the triviality of daily life as we live it and the emotion and beauty of the same life when we remember it, looking backward from years later.

"Another theme is the wistfulness and bewilderment of the pagan soul and the elements of sincerity and faith even in superstition.

Perhaps the principle theme is the theme of all my books, namely, when a situation is more than a human soul can be expected to bear, what then? The Cabala was a series of three such extremeties, three such" nervous breakdowns". "The Bridge" said that there lay an intuition of the heart of the major attachments of life that offered at last sufficient strength for such crises."\footnote{44}
The two novels - The Cabala and The Woman of Andros were published later on in one volume. The Woman of Andros is a novel hardly of 75 pages. Wilder himself has admitted this glaring fact in the following words: "It is even shorter than The Bridge. The habit of compressions seems to be growing on me, and I begin to wonder whether I shall ever be able to write a long novel.\textsuperscript{45}

The combined edition of the Cabala and the Woman of Andros records under the heading "About the Author" as follows:

"In his quiet way, Thornton Niven Wilder was a revolutionary writer who experimented boldly with literary forms and themes, from the beginning to the end of his long career. "Every novel is different from the others, "he wrote when he was seventy-five - - - - The thing I'm writing now is again totally unlike anything that preceded it." Wilder's richly diverse settings, characters, and themes are at once specific and global. Deeply immersed in classical as well as contemporary literature, he often fused the traditional and the modern in his novels and plays, all the while exploring the cosmic in the common place."\textsuperscript{46}

Wilder had altogether different theme for all his novels. In a way he has variety of themes at his disposal. His this very quality is enough in itself to place him on the fore-front of the modern American novelists.
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