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A LETTER IN MS. FROM THORNTON WILDER  
TO EDMUND WILSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND ANNOTATIONS

IN LIEU OF A PREFACE

When I first read the letter in Ms, it did not seem that there were so many problems awaiting me. The first thing that came to my mind was Wilson's *Axel's Castle*--for which Wilder expresses in his letter such an admiration, and with which I was well acquainted.

But, a telephone conversation with Linda Simon, author of *Thornton Wilder: His World*--a most enjoyable and interesting biography of Wilder --changed the route of my thoughts and led me to new directions: «Why don't you write something about the relationship between the two men, and how Wilson was always in support of Wilder, during their thirty year friendship?» suggested to me from the other end of the line Ms Linda Simon.

I will try not to dissappoint you Linda Simon, and let me thank you once more for your most valuable help.

I grasp this opportunity to express also my thanks to my colleague Judy for her useful suggestions on how to find the date the letter was written; to Patricia, the Reference Librarian of St. Anselm College, for her kindness and patience in helping me so gracefully to find which was that year when the sixth of May was Friday.

Last, but not the least, I am grateful to Professor Paul Lizotte for the opportunity he gave me to get deeper into the worlds of Wilder and Wilson--the world of Poe is another example- -and, also, to thank him for his inspiring lectures which prescribed and showed me the possibilities of literary study.

## THORNTON WILDER

### Chronology<sup>1</sup>

- 1897 April 17, born in Madison, Wisconsin.
- 1906 Lives six months in Hong Kong during father's term (1906-1909) as American Consul General. Attends a German school.
- 1906- Resides and attends public schools in Berkeley, California;
- 1911 lives in Shanghai, where father has been transferred. Attends a German school briefly in Shanghai, then is a student for a year and a half at the China Inland Mission School at Chefoo.
- 1912- Attends Thacher School, Ojai, California.
- 1913
- 1913- Attends and graduates from Berkeley High School.
- 1915
- 1915- Enters Oberlin College, Ohio. Early works, including some plays later in *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, appear in the *Oberlin Literary Magazine*.
- 1917- Transfers to Yale. Family living near New Haven.
- 1918 Publishes short plays and essays in the *Yale Literary Magazine*.
- 1918- Summer work for War Industries Board, Washington, D.C.
- 1919 Turned down by various services because of his eyes, but finally accepted by Coast Artillery. Serves as corporal in First Coast Artillery, Fort Adams, Rhode Island, for eight months.
- 1919- Returns to Yale. On editorial board of *Yale Literary Magazine*.
- 1920 First long play, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, published serially in *YLM*. Receives B.A. from Yale.
- 1920- Studies archaeology—though not enrolled in courses—at the
- 1921 American Academy in Rome. Begins writing *The Cabala*.
- 1920- Teaches French at the Lawrenceville School, New Jersey. 1924,
- 1924 publishes *Three Sentences* (from *The Cabala*) in *The Double Dealer* (New Orleans, Louisiana); and *A Diary: First and Last Entry* in *S4N* (New Haven)—first publications in nonacademic

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1. Wilder's Chronology is taken from Rex J. Burbank's *Thornton Wilder* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) —without permission.

- periodicals. Spring 1924, takes leave of absence to attend Princeton Graduate School.
- 1925 First of several summers spent writing at MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire. Receives M.A. in French literature. Begins writing *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Goes to Europe to work on *The Bridge*.
- 1926 *The Trumpet Shall Sound* directed and produced in New York at the Laboratory Theatre by Richard Boleslavsky. *The Cabala* published, fall.
- 1927- Returns to Lawrenceville as Housemaster of the Davis House,  
1928 1927. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* published, November 1927. Receives Pulitzer Prize for *The Bridge*, 1928. *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* published, 1928. Resigns from Lawrenceville, June 1928; goes to Europe to finish *The Woman of Andros*.
- 1929- Makes a cross-country lecture tour. *The Woman of Andros* pub-  
1930 lished, 1930.
- 1930- Lectures in comparative literature at University of Chicago, half  
1936 of each year. Makes lecture tours and works for several five- to six-week periods at various motion-picture studios in Hollywood.
- 1931 *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays*. Translates and adapts André Obey's *Le Viol de Lucrece* for actress Katharine Cornell. Produced in New York by Cuthrie McClintic, music by Deems Taylor.
- 1933 *Lucrece* published.
- 1935 Meets Gertrude Stein, who is lecturing at the University of Chicago. Spends one term as visiting professor at the University of Hawaii. *Heaven's My Destination* published.
- 1937 Translates and adapts Ibsen's *A Doll's House* for actress Ruth Gordon. Produced and directed by Jed Harris.
- 1938 *Our Town* given first performance in Princeton, New Jersey, January 22. Plays a week in Boston. Opens February 4 in New York. Awarded Pulitzer Prize. *The Merchant of Yonkers* first produced, Boston, December 12; opens in New York, directed by Max Reinhardt, starring Jane Cowl, December 28.
- 1938 *The Merchant of Yonkers*.
- 1941 Essay on James Joyce published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.
- 1942 Writes script for Alfred Hitchcock film, *The Shadow of a Doubt*. Enlists in U.S. Air Force, commissioned a captain after

- training in Air Intelligence School. *The Skin of Our Teeth* produced by Michael Myerberg at Shubert Theatre, New York, November; directed by Elia Kazan with Tallulah Bankhead, Fred-eric March, and Florence Eldridge.
- 1942- Serves in African Theatre of War. Receives a third Pulitzer Prize,  
1943 for *The Skin of Our Teeth*, 1943. Stationed in Caeserta, Italy; promoted to lieutenant-colonel.
- 1944- Returns to U.S. Revival of *Our Town* at City Center, New York, 1944.
- 1945 Separated from military service, September, 1945.
- 1946 American production of *Our Town*, directed by Jed Harris, opens in London at the New Theatre, April.
- 1948 *The Ides of March*.
- 1949 Lectures at the Goethe Festival in Aspen, Colorado.
- 1950- Holds Charles Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetry at Harvard,  
1951 lecturing on Thoreau, Poe, Melville, Emily Dickinson, Whitman in series titled «The American Characteristics in Classic American Literature.»
1952. Awarded Gold Medal for Fiction by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
- 1954- *The Matchmaker* (revised text of *The Merchant of Yonkers*) per-  
1956 formed at Edinburgh Festival, Scotland, August 1954, directed by Tyrone Guthrie, with Ruth Gordon as Dolly Levi. Plays a year in London and a year in New York. 1955, *The Alcestiad* (called *A Life in the Sun* during its opening run) performed at the Edinburgh Festival in August. *The Skin of Our Teeth*, starring Helen Hayes and Mary Martin, sent to Paris by U.S. State Department for the *Salut à la France* festivities.
- 1959 Opening of French language production of *The Matchmaker*, National Theatre, Brussels, Belgium. Opening of Germann language production of *Die Alkestiade*, Schauspielhaus, Zurich, Switzerland.
- 1961 Opera libretto *The Long Christmas Dinner*, music by Paul Hindemith, presented at Mannheim, Germany.
- 1962 Opening at the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre, Bleecker Street New York, of three one-act plays, January 11: «Someone from Assisi,» from the cycle *The Seven Deadly Sins*, «Infancy» and «Childhood,» from *The Seven Ages of Man*; all given the general title for this production, directed by José Quintero, *Plays for Ble-*

*ecker Street*. World premiere of *The Alcestiad* (operatic version) libretto by Wilder, music by Louise Talma, in German as *Die Alkestiade*, Frankfurt, Germany, March. April 30, «An Evening with Thornton Wilder,» Washington, D.C. —Wilder reading from his works as guest of President Kennedy's cabinet. May 20, retires to Arizona to write.

1963 Awarded U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom.

1964 *Hello, Dolly!* musical comedy version of *The Matchmaker*, produced on stage.

1965 Awarded National Medal of Literature.

1967 *The Eighth Day*.

1968 Wins National Book Award for *The Eighth Day*.

1973 *Theophilus North*.

1975 Dies December 7.

1977 *The Alcestiad* published posthumously.

## EDMUND WILSON

### Chronology<sup>1</sup>

- 1895 May 8, Edmund Wilson, Jr., born in Red Bank, New Jersey, to Edmund and Helen Mather (Kimball) Wilson; only child.
- 1908 Attended The Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, until 1912; contributed to and edited the *Hill School Record*. First trip to Europe in summer, 1908, during which young Wilson wrote impressions of the Azores, Spain, Italy, Germany, and France in a diary—the beginning of a lifelong interest in travel writing.
- 1912 Attended Princeton; received A.B. in 1916; contributed to and edited the *Nassau «Lit»*; met his esteemed mentor, Christian Gauss (1914); became friends with other promising young writers, such as John Peale Bishop and F. Scott Fitzgerald.
- 1916 Reporter on the *New York Evening Sun* at fifteen dollars a week until 1917.
- 1917 August, enlisted as a private in the army, served with Base Hospital Unit 36 and then, as sergeant, with the Intelligence Corps, in France; until July, 1919.
- 1920 Managing editor of *Vanity Fair* until 1921; met Edna St. Vincent Millay.
- 1921 Drama critic for the *New Republic*, with which he would be associated for nearly twenty years.
- 1922 *The Undertaker's Garland*, in collaboration with John Peale Bishop.
- 1923 Married actress Mary Blair; daughter, Rosalind; divorce, 1928. Death of Wilson's father.
- 1924 *The Crime in the Whistler Room* produced on October 9 by the Provincetown Players in Greenwich Village; starred Mary Blair as «Bill.» In October reviewed Ernest Hemingway's *Three Stories and Ten Poems* and *In Our Time* in the *Dial*—the first article on Hemingway published in the United States.
- 1926 *Discordant Encounters*. Associate editor of the *New Republic* until 1931.

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1. Wilson's Chronology is taken from Charles Frank's *Edmund Wilson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970). —Without permission.

- 1929 *Poests, Farewell!* and *I Thought of Daisy*. Nervous breakdown in New York in February.
- 1930 Literary battles with the Humanists. Married Margater Canby, who died from a fall in Santa Barbara, September 30, 1932; no children, although Margaret had a son by a previous marriage.
- 1931 *Axel's Castle*, published piecemeal since 1924, established Wilson's reputation as an important literary critic.
- 1932 *The American Jitters*, an account of Wilson's nationwide investigations into poverty, racism, industry, and reclamation.
- 1935 May to October, trip to Russia on a Guggenheim Fellowship for the thwarted purpose of studying Marxism and the Russian Revolution at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow; the trip culminated in scarlet fever and a six-week sojourn in a hospital in Odessa.
- 1936 *Travels in Two Democracies*; the Russian half of this book, comprising selections from the diaries he kept on the Soviet trip, barred him from Russia.
- 1937 *This Room and This Gin* and *These Sandwiches*. Open literary war with the Marxists.
- 1938 *The Triple Thinkers*. Married writer Mary McCarthy; son, Reuel; divorce, 1946.
- 1939 Taught at University of Chicago summer school.
- 1940 *To the Finland Station*, published piecemeal since 1932. Broke his long association with the *New Republic* over the pre-war policy of its owner.
- 1941 *The Boys in the Back Room* and *The Wound and the Bow*.
- 1942 *Note-Books of Night*.
- 1943 *The Shock of Recognition*. Succeeded Clifton Fadiman as literary editor for *The New Yorker*, until 1948.
- 1945 Trip to Europe in the summer as a reporter for *The New Yorker*.
- 1946 *Memoirs of Hecate County*, suppressed as obscene soon after publication in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and other places. Married Elena Thornton, his present wife; daughter, Helen.
- 1947 *Europe Without Baedeker*, resulting from *New Yorker* trip, brought charges of Anglophobia from reviewers. Trip to New Mexico for *The New Yorker* to visit the Zuni (and Navaho) Indians for a month and to observe their Shälako festival.
- 1948 Revised and enlarged *Triple Thinkers*.
- 1949 Trip to Haiti for a month for the *Reporter*.

- 1950 August 15, *The Little Blue Light* produced by the Brattle Theater Company at the Cambridge (Mass.) Summer Playhouse. *Classics and Commercials*. Death of Christian Gauss.
- 1951 April 29, *The Little Blue Light* at the American National Theater and Academy Playhouse in New York (eight performances).
- 1952 *The Shores of Light*.
- 1954 *Five Plays*. Trip to Palestine for *The New Yorker* to investigate the Dead Sea Scrolls findings.
- 1955 *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea*. Awarded the gold medal for essays and criticism by the American Academy of Arts and Letters (Van Wyck Brooks made the presentation).
- 1956 *Red, Black, Blond and Olive* and *A Piece of My Mind*.
- 1958 *The American Earthquake*. In serious trouble with the Internal Revenue Service for failure to file income tax returns from 1946 to 1955.
- 1959 *Apologies to the Iroquois*. Unexpurgated *Memoirs* republished. Taught Harvard seminar on Civil War literature, until 1960.
- 1961 *Night Thoughts*.
- 1962 *Patriotic Gore*.
- 1963 *The Cold War and the Income Tax*. One of thirty-three recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States; John F. Kennedy presided.
- 1964 Awarded the Edward MacDowell Medal «for his out-standing contribution to literature» at the MacDowell artists' colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire; Aaron Copland presided.
- 1965 *O Canada* and *The Bit Between My Teeth*.
- 1966 Awarded the National Medal for Literature «for the excellence of his total contribution to literature» (including five thousands dollars tax free, so that, in Wilson's words, «not a penny of it will be demanded for the infamous war in Vietnam»). Also awarded the Emerson-Thoreau Medal «for distinguished achievement in the field of literature.»
- 1967 *Galahad* and *I Thought of Daisy*, in one volume; and *A Prelude*.
- 1969 *The Fruits of the MLA*, *The Duke of Palermo and Other Plays*, and *The Dead Sea Scrolls: 1969*.
- 1972 Dies June 12.



## INTRODUCTION

Ellerslie, Edgemoor--F. Scott Fitzgerald's home--turned out to be not only «a handsome old big square white house, with Greek columns and high-ceilinged rooms,»<sup>1</sup> but also the place where Thornton Wilder and Edmund Wilson were, for the first time, introduced to each other. It was early in 1928, February 25th, when Wilson attended a weekend party at the Fitzgerald's in Edgemoor, Delaware. Wilson, then the book editor of the *New Republic*, and a very influential critic, was met at the station by Scott Fitzgerald and Wilder. After the preliminary introductions they drove to Ellerslie.

It was a habit of Wilson to talk to people about books which he had read but they had not -- especially about hard to find and written in a language that they did not know. So in the course of the drive to Ellerslie Wilson and Wilder started talking about Marcel Proust. But in this case, writes Wilson, «my expectation was disappointed, for it turned out that Wilder had been following Proust just as attentively as I had and had read *Le Temps Retrouvé* as promptly.»<sup>2</sup> Wilson had not yet read any of the books that Wilder had published by that time -- *The Cabala* (1926), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), -- but as he wrote later «I had had the impression that his [Wilder's] novels were rather on the fragile and precious side, and was surprised to find him a person of such positive and even peppery opinions. He had his doubts about *Le Temps Retrouvé*; he declared that too many of the characters turned out to be homosexual.»<sup>3</sup> Fitzgerald, who was an admirer of Wilder, promised Wilson to send him a copy of *The Cabala*, which for him was «the very best thing that had come out...since Hemingway....»<sup>4</sup>.

That first literary conversation between Wilson and Wilder turned out to be a life - time friendship and appreciation for each other's work. Since that time the two men «began a correspondence that was to

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1. Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), p. 356.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

continue for nearly thirty years, its high point being the series of letters they exchanged about their respective close readings of Joyce's *Fennegans Wake*<sup>1</sup>.

Fitzgerald kept his promise and sent Wilson a copy of *The Cabala* which Wilson read with «much admiration». But the book that really engaged the absorbed attention of Wilson was *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. The summer of that year Wilson wrote for the *New Republic* the first of a series of articles about Wilder. With these articles Wilson had supported and championed Wilder, especially when the latter was involved in some controversies with the literary establishment of that period. But at the same time this support had also a few periods of silence from Wilson's side. For instance, when Wilder's *The Ides of March* was published in 1948, it was completely ignored by Wilson, who as has been said had been for so many years a friend and a «mentor.» As Goldstone writes, «Even with Edmund Wilson... Wilder had lost touch during the years since the outbreak of World War II»<sup>2</sup>.

Remembering how surprised Wilson was--during that first literary conversation -- to find how promptly Wilder had read *Le Temps Retrouvé*, we are not surprised to find out that Wilson in his first article about Wilder had identified Marcel Proust as Wilder's chief model and influence. Writes Wilson: «One of the things about Mr. Wilder that I do not think has yet been said is that he seems to be the first American novelist who has been influenced deeply by Proust»<sup>3</sup>.

At this point, and before we discuss Wilson's respectful essay about the impact of Proust on Wilder's work, it is fair, since the main point of Wilder's letter to Wilson is to thank him about the «Proust essay,» to say a few things about Wilson's masterpiece *Axel's Castle* (1931) where the chapter on Marcel Proust is the longest and the most important one.

Reviewing *Axel's Castle*, I wrote in 1980: This study of the imaginative literature from 1830 to 1930 still has strong claims more than any other book upon all who are interested in the general intellectual development of Contemporary Europe. In these essays on eight cosmopolitan writers, Edmund Wilson traces the origins of certain tendencies in contemporary literature, interpreting the work of these writers as a development of the Symbolist School and of its fusion or conflict with Naturalism. The writers studied are, W.B. Yeats, Paul Valéry, T.S. Eliot,

1. Richard H. Goldstone, *Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Saturday Review Press / E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1975), p. 58.

2. Goldstone, p. 220

3. *Shores*, p. 384

Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and Arthur Rimbaud.... Symbolism for Wilson was a reaction against the Naturalism of the nineteenth century, and these writers take it a step further: the danger, then, is Axel's castle. Axel, is a figure in a story by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who renounces life as not being reality; and Wilson sees in the authors he treats a dangerous withdrawal from everyday life. The unifying central thesis of all these essays is that this literature has been living for a long time in the enchanted palace of Symbolism -- the Axel's Castle -- where the artist took refuge because he was essentially romantic and wounded by the bourgeois ugliness of nineteenth and twentieth century life. Axel is of the same lineage as Poe's Roderick Usher, a lineage which reaches its most extreme and certainly final representative in the neurotic central figure of Proust's narrative.

Proust, who had already taken refuge from reality in an «Axel's Castle» of his own imagination -- the same holds true for the other writers -- finally took to bed in a cork-lined room with the most prideful lot of neurotic symptoms any one has ever had. Having given us a guide-map of Proust's many-volumed novel, Wilson states that Proust, as well as the rest of the writers, have given us works of literature which «...for intensity, brilliance, and boldness for an architectural genius, an intellectual mastery of their materials, rare among their Romantic predecessors, are probably comparable to the work of any time.»<sup>1</sup> It was Wilson's belief and hope that Proust, Joyce, and the others, «Though we shall continue to admire them as masters, will not any longer serve us as guides.»<sup>2</sup> These novels helped Wilson «return to his own lost time, to the bourgeois world of father and son and of mother and son that he had left behind, that prewar world,»<sup>3</sup> where, as he says in connection to Proust, everyone is «sick with some form of the ideal.» The social world of Proust's hero, that neurasthenic and emotionally bound to his mother child, is morally corrupt, like the world Wilson glimpsed in his childhood at Lakewood, a world, he writes, that «either ignores or seeks to kill those few impulses toward justice and beauty which make men admirable.» «Proust and his hero,» Paul Sherman writes, «use their illness to escape contact with this world, and they permit their masochistic passivity to become sadistic -- forms of behavior Wilson tries to avoid.»<sup>4</sup>

1. Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931, 1954), p. 297.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 283, 292.

3. Sherman Paul, *Edmund Wilson* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p.87.

4. *Ibid.*

Wilson hopes that the new writers would not retreat from the real world of everyday life to isolation; that they would return to such universal moral questions as whether it is possible to make a practical success of human society, and whether, if we continue to fail, a few masterpieces, however profound or noble, will be able to make life worth living even for the few people in a position to enjoy them.<sup>1</sup> Leaning more toward the Marxist Literature's point of view, Wilson thought that for writers unable to interest themselves in our society, either by a scientific view of it, or by attempting to reform or satirize it, «there are... only two alternative courses to follow - -Axel's or Rimbaud's. If one chooses the first of these, the way of Axel, one shuts oneself up in one's own private world, cultivating one's private fantasies, encouraging one's manias, ultimately preferring one's absurdest chimeras to the most astonishing contemporary realities, ultimately mistaking one's chimeras for realities. If one chooses the second, the way of Rimbaud, one tries to leave the twentieth century behind - -to find the good life in some country where modern manufacturing methods and modern democratic institutions do not present any problems to the artist because they haven't yet arrived.»<sup>2</sup>

But it is Edmund Wilson's conviction that neither of these directions is possible or desirable and that the new writers must look for some combination of the Symbolist vision with the Naturalistic sense of fact.

Back now to Proust and our Wilder. Wilson thinks that the «subject and agonising love on the part of a superior for an inferior person, or at least on the part of a gentle person for a person who behaves toward him with cruelty.»<sup>3</sup> is the central theme of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. While, in *The Cabala* Wilson finds that Wilder has brought «the typical Proustian note of hypochondriacal melancholy almost to the point of burlesque.»<sup>4</sup> Yet, Wilson admits, «The Proust influence seems simply the influence of a first-rate senior writer on a first-rate junior one.»<sup>5</sup>

I mentioned above that Wilder twice, at least, in his literary career was the center of a furious controversy, and that Wilson had always stood by his side. The Gold-Wilder controversy as it is known, was aroused by an article that Michael Gold, then a very influential Marxist critic, wrote for the *New Republic* on October 22, 1930. The article, «Wilder:

1. *Axel's Castle*, p. 293.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 287

3. *Shores*, p. 385

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 385-86.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

Prophet of the Genteel Christ», accused Wilder as «the poet of the genteel bourgeoisie» and his work as «a museum, it is not a world.....It is an historical junkshop over which our author presides.» Gold was referring to *The Cabala* and *The Bridge of San Louis Rey*. Wilson, though at that time in his Marxist period and sympathetic to Gold, described the latter's comments on Wilder as «harsh and scurrilous,»<sup>1</sup> conceding at the same time that Gold was a respected Marxist critic and «important writer.» Wilson's analysis of Proust's illness, his acceptance that «all of his [Proust's] thinking is sick,» and the fact that he had already recognized in Wilder the great influence of Proust, all these, were taken by Gold to portray Wilder as an «effete apologist for--and, simultaneously, a stylist panderer to --the corrupt tastes and degenerate values of upper-class Anglo-Saxon Protestants.»<sup>2</sup> Wilson, recognizing the damage--unintentionally though--he had done to his friend Wilder, wrote in 1932, in his article for the *New Republic*, that he himself not long before had contributed to the same magazine a long and sympathetic essay on *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* and had also published a novel not unflavored by the «fumes of the cork-lined chamber.»

A few years later Wilder was again the center of a new controversy. This time he was accused of no less than plagiarism. In their article, in the *Saturday Review*, December 1942, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, working at the time on *A Skeleton key to Finnegans Wake*, wrote: *The Skin of Whose Teeth?* They decided that Wilder's new play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942) --for which he had received his third Pulitzer--was «not an entirely original creation, but an Americanized re-creation, thinly disguised, of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. This accusation, as Linda Simon informs us, «shocked many critics, but one had the boldness necessary to defend Thornton. Edmund Wilson, who had long known of Thornton's interest in Joyce and had followed his analysis of *Finnegans Wake*, aired his own views.»<sup>3</sup> Wilson, indeed, wrote a full article entitled «The Antrobuses and the Earwickers» (*Nation*, 30 January 1943, pp. 167-68): «The general indebtedness to Joyce in the conception and plan of the play,» he wrote, «is as plain as anything of the kind can be; and it must have been conscious on Wilder's part. He has written and lectured on *Finnegans Wake*; is one of the persons who has been most fascinated by it and who has most thoroughly studied its

1. *Ibid.*, p. 500.

2. Goldstone, p. 80.

3. Linda Simon, *Thornton Wilder: His World* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979), p. 177.

text.... Joyce is a great quarry, like Flaubert, out of which a variety of writers have been getting and will continue to get a variety of different things; and Wilder is a poet with a form and imagination of his own who may find his themes where he pleases without incurring the charge of imitation.»

To Wilson, Wilder might have written a greater play if he had allowed more freedom for his own sense of creativity instead of having «been somewhat embarrassed and impeded by the model of the Earwicker family». An advice that echoes another wish that Wilson had expressed in his first article on Wilder: «Thornton Wilder's feeling for national temperaments - -French, Italian and American - -had already appeared in *The Cabala* as one of his most striking gifts. But I wish, for our sakes, and perhaps for his own, that he would now follow Virgil's advice and return for a time to New York. I wish that he would study the diverse elements that go to make the United States, and give us *their* national portraits. Mr. Wilder already knows Europe, and he also knows something of the Orient; and we need him at home. I believe that this player on plaintive stops has more than one tune in his flute.»<sup>1</sup>

Wilder did return his attention to the United States. His new novel *Heaven's My Destination* (1935) was very much admired and Wilson wrote that it was «much Mr. Wilder's best novel,»<sup>2</sup> and that Wilder had created «something more even than an excellent picture of an American variety of religious experience.»<sup>3</sup> And Wilson concludes: «Mr. Wilder ought to be challenged once more to make it clear just what George Brush's [the hero] point of view is when he goes out on the road again.»<sup>4</sup>

Wilder himself was on the road again as he had been almost all his life, rediscovering America and the World.

As a conclusion we may ask what were the ties between the two men that made and turn their first meeting, at the Fitzgerald's weekend party, to a life-long friendship and admiration? Though, so far as I know, nobody has as yet examined the impact and influence of this

1. *Shores*, p. 301.

2. Some years later, in two letters addressed to Helen Muchnic and Gly Morris, dated March 31, 1967 and April 20, 1967, respectively, Wilson would recommend Wilder's new novel *The Eighth Day*, and think of it as the «best thing he ever wrote». «It stirred me up,» he wrote, «more than anything I had read since *Zhivago*.» (*Edmund Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics* [New York, 1977], pp. 670-71).

3. *Shores*, p. 591

4. *Ibid.*, p. 592.

friendship on the literary evolution of either man, I will try to place it under some perspective.

Wilson, it is true, followed Wilder's literary career with both an enthusiasm and a kind of concern. Both men felt akin to each other. They were representatives of the middle-class, had the same education (mostly classical), and both had traveled abroad a lot - though for different reasons. Wilder did have many long stayings abroad, a fact which made Wilson feel very disappointed, for he did not approve of those American writers who settled in Europe. Wilder, in the eyes of the American intelligentsia, was more as an escapist - thus and Wilson's hope and wish that Wilder will soon return to New York. For, it was Wilson who first saw in the work of Wilder the new faith and affirmation, the enduring values of the human spirit that his country so much needed. Both men were addressing the same kind of readers: the alert, concerned, intelligent persons who want to understand things, and make them better. But somewhere their roads would diverge. Wilson would stress more the social significance of literature and its moral effect, which may be entirely personal and something quite different from the author's moral insight. Wilder, more close to the doctrine of Humanism, would find the moral and aesthetic dogma in the dramas of Sophocles and Euripides. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* was, for Wilson, the only contemporary novel which even approached the specifications of the Humanists. But Wilder, though he shared the humanistic temperament of his time, yet he avoided the tendencies to make humanism a dogmatic, systematic philosophy. He feels closer to Wilson who thought that such moral and ethical virtues as love, duty, responsibility, and justice represent positive commitments to life in action. This commitment to life in action is a noteworthy characteristic of the two men's friendship - a commitment also to each other.

Wilson's letters to Wilder, but more characteristically the mentioning of Wilder's name in Wilson's letters to some of the distinguished literary persons of their time, reveal a true commitment between the two men. Unfortunately, the letters of Wilder have not yet been published, which makes our understanding of the men's relationship incomplete. Even Wilson's letters to Wilder that are included in *Edmund Wilson: Letters on Literature and Politics* are not but a very small portion of the numerous letters the two men have exchanged in the course of their thirty-year friendship - and not the very representative ones. There is a need for publishing Wilder's letters, so we can base our estimation on both sides.

THORNTON WILDER  
DAVIS HOUSE  
LAWRENCEVILLE, NEW JERSEY

Dear Edmund Wilson

I should have thanked you long ago for the Proust essay. It was fine. You and Mary Colman only Americans that can do a big book nobly.

I wrote one review once. Never again. I don't seem to have no thoughts about a book - only ~~one~~ one intuitive appraising metaphor and a half, and a gesture of the hand. I suspect ~~that~~ Bramah, ask Maribel Draper (scribe's for April) to review Douglas, she would about it already and has a

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Princeton fine, preferably Tues or Wed. ~~on~~ Fri. I lecture in New Haven (terrible: "English Letters and Letter-writers") Much prefer you'd est here. I don't care est any more (songs for a while) Rabala full of wide-eyed boyish hero-worships. "I wonder what people on a big scale are like? I wish I knew some." About four weeks ago I had my Easter vacat. in New York and I phoned you and Stack Young over and over again to be asked to your famous round table

Sues  
Thornton W.



## THE TEXT OF WILDER'S LETTER TO WILSON\*

Dear Edmund Wilson:

I should have thanked you long ago for the Proust essay<sup>1</sup>. It was fine. You and Mary Colum<sup>2</sup> only Americans that can do a big book nobly.

I wrote one review once. Never again. I don't seem to have no [sic] thoughts about a book - -only one intuitive appraising metaphor and a half, and a gesture of the hand<sup>3</sup>. I suspect Bramah [?] <sup>4</sup> Ask Muriel Draper<sup>5</sup> (Scribner's for April) to review Douglas;<sup>6</sup> she raved about it already and has a fair pen.

Princeton fine, preferably Tues or Wed. Fri[day] I lecture in New Haven (terrible: «English Letters and Letter-writers».) Much prefer you'd eat here. I don't dare ask any more congés for a while.

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\* I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge a considerable debt to the English Department of the Pennsylvania State University for making this latter in Ms. available to me, through the kind request of professor Paul Lizotte.

1. The «Proust essay» is the chapter on Marchel Proust on Wilson's *Axel's Castle*. Since Wilson's book was published in 1931, this is another evidence that Wilder's letter was written some time after this event (see also note 10).

2. Mary Colum, a friend of Wilson and a very distinguished literary critic. She is known for her book *From These Roots*, where she traces the origins of the ideas that shaped Modern literature. In her words, Wilder's *The Bridge of San Louis Rey* was «attacked because the author did not come 'to grips with life', and did not deal with strikes, modern industrial life, with economic struggle.»

3. Wilder served for a period as a drama critic for the *Theater Arts Monthly*, in 1925.

4. From the MS it is clear that even Wilder was not sure about this word. I could not find any reference to this word; I do not know, either, if this is the correct spelling.

5. Muriel Draper was an English Professor; during the 1935 she was teaching in Moscow.

6. The name Lloyd C. Douglas is mentioned in connection to Wilder in Goldstein's *The Art of Thornton Wilder* (1965). Commenting on *The Bridge of San Louis Rey*, Goldstein finds that its «faults are not ruinous», for they are not «caused by such deficiencies in taste and wisdom as are evident in most American religious fiction - - the novels of Lloyd C. Douglas provide suitable examples for comparison» (p. 60).

*Cabala* full of wide eyed boyish hero-worships. «I wonder what people on a big scale are like! I wish I knew some.»<sup>1</sup>

About four weeks ago I had my Easter vacat. [ion] in New York and I phoned you and Stark Young<sup>2</sup> over and over again to be asked to your famous round table<sup>3</sup>.

Ever

Thornton W.

Rereading your letter I can't be sure which Wk[week] you mean by next: If May 6 - -Fri<sup>4</sup> I go to New Haven.

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1. This justifies what Isabel Wilder wrote in her Foreword to her brother's *American Characteristics and Other Essays* (New York: Harber & Row, 1979), pp. ix-xviii: «From childhood Thornton was a hero worshipper and advised the young to go out and become the same». As for the quotation, it seems that it is Wilder's own invention.

2. Stark Young, was the drama critic for the *New Republic* and *Theater Arts Monthly*. They first met on shipboard during Wilder's return trip from Rome--one of the many. Young, as Simon informs us, «impressed with Thornton ...had given him the address of Edith Isaacs...advising him to contact her and bring her some of his work» (see also note 3).

3. Goldstone, commenting on the success of *Our Town*, writes that «a successful Broadway playwright was assured a seat at the Algonquin's famed Round Table.» Maybe Wilder refers to this round table.

4. This was the only concrete information as to what year the letter was written. After some «unusual» calculations it came out that the year when the 6th of May was Friday was the 1932 Anno Domini.