

Thornton Wilder & the gods

by James Como

A quintessential American man of letters, Thornton Niven Wilder (1897–1975) worked as a dramatist, novelist, critic, and scholar (no one in his day knew more about Lope de Vega or *Finnegans Wake*). Wilder was a polyglot and a cosmopolite of international renown—an American in Paris who was an exception to the Lost Generation—and a distinguished soldier. (He volunteered for service in World War II in his forties, went through basic training, and served admirably enough to be both promoted and decorated.) Yet much of his work is forgotten.

Sure, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1928) was made into a movie three times and may still be read in some high schools. And, sure, *Our Town* (Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1938) is a recurring hit on Broadway. And, yes, Wilder won a third Pulitzer in 1942 for his play *The Skin of Our Teeth* (no other writer has won Pulitzers for both fiction and drama). His work was publicly attacked by the Marxists in the 1930s and he was awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom in the 1960s, but still, how many readers can name anything else by Wilder?

In the end, prizes and longevity are not the most telling points about his work. Rather, the point is this: for all of those decades there abides a piercing sensibility marked by a fusion of reverence, gratitude, wonder, and *Selmsucht* (that stab of longing to which C. S. Lewis attributes his Christian awakening). Wilder's penultimate novel, *The Eighth Day*, which won the National Book Award in 1968, explores agape,

both in history and among the members of a family. The narrator tell us that “our lives are a seamless robe,” rather like the “complex maze-like design” in a rug admired by a young man looking for answers. “Turn it over,” he is instructed, and when he does so he sees the “mass of knots and of frayed and dangling threads,” which is the aspect that eternity—never far away in Wilder—presents to us in time. These themes of design and provident love (especially its obliquity) are typical of Wilder's work.

Only once in his long career, in his play *The Alcestiad*, did Wilder abandon his obliquity—and with mixed success.¹ As a child, he had first heard of Alcestis and her husband, Admetus, from *Bulfinch's Mythology*. In one way or another, he wrote about them—implicitly in *The Woman of Andros* (1930) and explicitly in *The Ides of March* (1948)—until he could no longer resist treating the myth formally. After a long gestation and many interruptions, *The Alcestiad, or A Life in the Sun* premiered in Edinburgh on August 22, 1955, and remains Wilder's only flop. There are good reasons. Wilder could not find a way to make the play work as theater. He was never happy with its dramaturgy, nor with Tyrone Guthrie's direction, nor with his friend Montgomery Cliff's behavior (Cliff was picky and pulled out), nor with Irene Worth's attack of opening-night nerves which slowed down the pace. In his review, Kenneth Tynan, who

¹ *Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*, edited by J. D. McClatchy; Library of America, 800 pages, \$40.

previously had been thrilled by Wilder, called him “a schoolmaster who would like to be a poet” and pronounced the play a “dramatic nullity.” Wilder himself thought that his “intellectual passion” had been “dulled and dimmed” and that he had allowed “the old TNW-pathos, the human tug” to enter too largely; he had allowed it “to get out of hand.” That may be true of the play on stage, but it is not true of the piece as literature on the page.

The tale is simple enough. When Apollo’s son the doctor Aesculapius restores a dead man to life, Pluto is offended. Jupiter, at the request of his underworld brother-king, kills the doctor. Apollo, in retaliation, kills Cyclopes, the maker of Jupiter’s thunderbolts. Apollo’s punishment is to serve King Admetus as a common herdsman, no different from any other mortal laborer.

Admetus competes for Alcestis, a woman of otherworldly beauty and divine delicacy, and wins his bride through the help of Apollo, even though Alcestis longs only to know and to serve Apollo. When Admetus’s death is fated, he learns that he will be spared only if someone else volunteers to die in his place. But no one, not even his very aged parents, will do so. Only Alcestis is willing to sacrifice herself, and does. Hercules, however, is fond of Alcestis for her beauty and virtue. (He calls Antigone, Penelope, Leda, Helen, and Clytemnestra, each of whom he knows, “Dirt. Trash,” compared to Alcestis). A dear friend to Admetus, Hercules travels to the underworld and with very great effort retrieves Alcestis, restoring her to Admetus. Wilder’s greatest alteration is to deny Admetus any knowledge that a surrogate will save his life—or that his wife is that surrogate.

Wilder touched on the story at a number of points in his career. Antedating the play is *The Ides of March*, a riveting epistolary novel about the events and characters surrounding that fateful day in 44 B.C. There Wilder gives us Catullus’s version of the Alcestis myth, or a part of it, since we are told, at a crucial point, that “the narrative breaks off.” “And I?” Alcestis asks, “what am I to do? What I am doing now? My interest is to inquire into the nature of the Gods—whether they exist and

in what ways we may find Them. You may well imagine—.” Exactly here, then, is the kernel of Wilder’s interest.

In his notes on *The Alcestiad*, Wilder tells us that stories about the gods have lasted precisely because “they are ambiguous and puzzling”:

We are told that Apollo loved Admetus and Alcestis. If so, how strangely he exhibited it. It must make for considerable discomfort to have the god of the sun, of healing and song, housed among one’s farm workers. And why should a divine love impose on a devoted couple the decision as to which should die for the other?

This reflection is reminiscent of Pamphilus, the narrator of *The Woman of Andros* (1930), as he speculates similarly:

It seemed to him that the whole world did not consist of rocks and trees and water nor were human beings garments and flesh, but all burned, like the hillside of olive trees, with the perpetual flames of love,—a sad love that was half hope, often rebuked and waiting to be reassured of its truth . . . as though it were waiting for a voice to come from the skies, declaring that therein lay the secret of the world.

That secret is tortuously difficult to suggest.

In the notes, Wilder writes: “Following some meditations of Soren Kierkegaard, I have written a comedy about the extreme difficulty of any dialogue between heaven and earth, about the misunderstandings that result from the ‘incommensurability of things human and divine.’” The unfathomable nature of love, Kierkegaard writes, is that “it is indeed less terrible to fall to the ground when the mountains tremble at the voice of the God, than to sit at table with him as an equal. And yet, it is the God’s concern precisely to have it so.”

As late as January of 1955, Wilder was still wondering how to work out “the *donnée* of the numinous,” and in August of the same year he was almost grieving: “I am ashamed of this lukewarm imitative dilettante religiosity. Pfui!” But this pessimism is as much existential as it is dramatic. Isabel Wilder, Thornton’s sister and until her death a keeper

of both the books and the flame, opines that her brother was a traveler and a socializer because of his “deep loneliness,” and that “he had no sturdy last resource against the occasional conviction ‘I don’t belong.’” But in his notes, Wilder wrote that, as with Kierkegaard, “an eternal truth has come into being in me . . . precisely like any other individual human being.” Nevertheless, Wilder allowed that “as writers we have only one duty, namely to pose the question correctly. It is not the task of literature,” he continued, “to answer the question. But only a religious person will ask the question correctly. . . . Someone with religious faith can only write with the inspiration of faith.”

Wilder’s own faith—“I am a Protestant and a practicing Christian,” he told George Wagner in 1953—may be perceived in the early debate in *The Alcestiad* between Apollo and Death:

DEATH: [*shrilly*] Leave these human beings alone. Stay up on Mount Olympus, where you belong, and enjoy yourselves. . . . You made these creatures and then you fell in love with them. You’ve thrown the whole world into confusion.

APOLLO: They have begun to understand me. At first they were like beasts—more savage, more fearful. . . . Then two things broke on their minds and they lifted their heads: my father’s thunder, which raised their fears to awe; and my sunlight, for which they gave thanks.

DEATH: All this loving. . . . It’s hard to tell which is the unhappier—you or these wretched creatures. When you try to come into their lives you’re like a giant in a small room: with every movement you break something.

Later, Alcestis says to her maid: “the thing that I love more than Admetus is . . . is Apollo. . . . I wish to live in the real.” No wonder that, at the very end of the play, Apollo tells Alcestis, “The grave means an end. You will not have that ending. You are the first of a great number that will not have that ending. Still another step, Alcestis.” It’s the Old and New Testaments, with a dash of church history, in a nutshell.

There persist those who, rankled by the benedictions that Wilder conveys, dismiss him

as a mere sentimentalist. In response, I call upon Amos Wilder, Thornton’s brother, writing in *Thornton Wilder and His Public*:

Sometimes talent or virtuosity is combined with something more, some further stature or scope or power of conception, and this is both rare and disturbing. . . . For those excited by talent or contemporaneity all such untimely or timeless works will appear austere or insipid. All about us—yesterday, today, tomorrow—there is an unrecognized court in the hearts of men and women which sifts the arts of an age and . . . breaks through our modern fates.

C. S. Lewis, who shares enough literary and biographical affinities with Wilder for the two to be both professional and spiritual brothers, thought his own greatest work (and his one true novel) was *Till We Have Faces*. Like *The Alcestiad* it appeared in 1955, was based upon a Greek myth (Cupid and Psyche, from *The Golden Ass*), and posed a question about the gods. Its first-person narrator, Orual, is the vexed and vexing sister of a transcendent beauty, Psyche, who will be sacrificed to the presumed Brute of the mountain—a Brute who, it turns out, is no brute at all but a resplendent god. Here is Psyche, attempting to persuade her sister to worry not over her impending sacrifice:

How can I be the ransom for all Glome unless I die? And if I am to go to the god, of course it must be through death. . . . [Some masters] have taught that death opens a door out of a little, dark room (that’s all the life we have known before it) into a great real place where the true sun shines. . . . The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing—to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty comes from . . . my country, the place where I ought to have been . . . the longing for home.

A piece of personal advice: read these two works in tandem. If you do, you will, I think, see that in evoking the numinous—and the agape that often emanates from it—Wilder’s work vindicates its author’s long devotion to his tale. He and Lewis make siblings of us all.