

# The search for the new human being in the work of Thornton Wilder 1897-1975

*Deborah Ravetz, Stuttgart, Germany*

**M**any people who have been through a crisis in their lives can describe how reading particular authors helped to lead them out of despair. Tolstoy is probably the most frequently mentioned. The writer Thornton Wilder also has this possibility. The artist and teacher Suzi Gablik writes in her book, *The Re-enchantment of Art*:

*In the past we have made much of the idea of art as a mirror (reflecting the times); we have had art as hammer (social protest); we have had art as furniture (something to hang on walls); and we have had art as search for the self. There is another kind of art, which speaks to the power of connectedness and establishes bonds, art that calls us into relationship. Perhaps... the new aesthetics will not be found in museums or beautiful objects, but in some visible manifestation of the soul's desperate concerns.*

Suzi Gablik is a contemporary American. She belongs to a long line of Americans, beginning with the writers of the Declaration of Independence, who reflect in their work, their ideas and the way they live their lives, the search for the answer to one fundamental and pressing question. They ask, What does it mean to be a free human being? In this line, Thornton Wilder has an honored place.

The question of freedom is particularly relevant to America because of its history and its conscious rejection of the governmental forms of the Old World. Thornton Wilder was very aware of the shortcomings of American culture. He was convinced however that beneath the surface something creative was happening. He said of the Americans,

*They don't know it and they often do it awkwardly and fall short but they are inventing a new kind of human being- a new relationship between one human being and another - a new relationship between the individual and the all.*

He likened the underlying task of being an American to being in a trackless desert without any kind of old form to guide one. He felt that out of this nothingness a new kind of government, a new kind of education and a new kind of church would have to emerge. He had confidence that despite much that was tragic and much that would go wrong, the human -spirit would prevail.

Thornton Wilder was at home with the giants and giantesses of the modern world. He was a close friend with the American writer Gertrude Stein and he worked hard to make her work accessible to the American public. He was not afraid of difficult work and he kept in his pocket a copy of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, which he spent years decoding and penetrating. He was as committed to the theatre as to the novel. For him the theatre was not there to soothe. For this reason he was a champion of the modern theatre, stripped of the ultra-realism of the box set and made bare to be inhabited by the efforts of our own imagination. All his work was in relation to his time but was firmly

rooted in the great works of the past. He loved the Greeks, read Dante in the original, had absorbed Goethe and all the great literature of the past and the present. In his life he experienced two world wars. He

saw the arrival of radio and cinema and then television, he saw the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the sixties revolution. All this he absorbed and digested and made into art. This was the grounding of everything he said.

Wilder was aware of an experience, closeness to God, which is no longer accessible to us. He intuited that if we would have the courage to face our terrible loneliness and go forward rather than fleeing back in terror to the old and familiar, then meaning would flood back and modern man would break through to a greater reality. It is the process of finding the courage to face that loneliness and the qualities needed to meet and break through to that new reality that lie at the heart of his work. He said a writer was not a mythmaker but a myth-restorer and his work was to write of the timelessness and eternal in the everyday. His heroes and heroines are very ordinary people but they are capable of mythic acts of courage. They are the new human beings; they are not defeated, but rather called into existence by their confrontation with difficulties.

In one of Wilder's early novels, *Heaven's my Destination*, a young textbook salesman travels America selling his textbooks and trying to live a saintly life in the manner of Tolstoy and Ghandi. In time his naive saintliness alienates everyone. The salesman, George Brush, sinks into depression and begins to die. He can't understand why no one wants to try and make the world a better place. While he lies dying someone reads his letters to him. One letter contains a single silver spoon. It is the gift of a dying priest who wanted him to know he valued him. From this moment on the young man begins to recover and takes up his life of idealism again. Thornton Wilder said this book was about himself but that what he wanted to say was so intimate he dared not say 'I'. In a letter to a friend later he said that giving must never have the expectation of gratitude; 'Service is joyful or it is nothing'. His novel describes the capacity to make one's ideals inner realities which are independent of other people's reactions: the first step to becoming a free human being.

There is nothing gentle in his message. As the characters in ancient myths and fairy tales must endure seemingly impossible trials to come to their goal, so too do his heroes and heroines. *The Eighth Day* has as one of its heroes a blithe and loving man with an abundance of wonder. He gives himself away tirelessly. He lives in Coaltown, the small community where he helps maintain the failing coal mine. No one meets him without going away richer. He is married with one son and three daughters. This man is accused and condemned to death for a murder he has not committed. The respectable Christian town he has lived in for years joins in condemning him. They have never felt comfortable with his lack of ambition or his capacity for joy. John Ashley is mysteriously rescued on the way to his execution and manages to get to Peru where he lives in exile unable to make any contact with his family who have been left destitute.

Faced with his impotence to help his family he feels for the first time a doubt so terrible he is unable to find any rest. He looks at the world and it is as if the whole

empty and meaningless universe mocks him with derisive laughter. It is a toothless crone and fortune-teller who tells him the meaning of his fate. She says to him,

*When God loves a creature he wants the creature to know the highest happiness and the deepest misery, then he can die. He wants him to know all that being alive can bring. That is his best gift. There is no happiness save in understanding the whole. You are a creature who God loves-particularly loves. You are being born.*

The old crone goes on: up until then Ashley has always been loved because one sees in his blue eyes that he is a man of faith. She tells him faith is not enough and, pointing to the red blood on her crucifix she says, as if she were bestowing the greatest honour on him and his unhappy fate, 'Maybe if you are lucky you will be born to love.' John Ashley lives the next few years in Peru. Wherever he goes he sheds blessing, but there is no happy ending, he drowns escaping from a bounty hunter and slips out of the novel in a single sentence. This is the story of John Ashley who, when he suffered, allowed the pain he met in his life to pierce him and who, nevertheless, got up every day and gave generously of himself. He died anonymously. This is often the case with Wilder's heroes and heroines. They have no need of memorials. His stories are aware of another reality, a reality described by the Abbess at the end of another of his novels, *The Bridge Of San Luis Rey*. She says,

*But love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.*

Thornton Wilder's last novel is called *Theophilus North*. The hero is a young man who comes to Long Island for the summer. He comes to rest and think about his life and he supports himself by teaching. Determined to keep a low profile he finds he cannot stop getting involved in the lives of the community. Thornton Wilder had a very particular view of human relationships. He possessed what is called in French *curiosité*. This had nothing to do with gossip or inquisitiveness. He defines this word in the following way,

*This is an interest in human beings so intense and so unremitting that, it approaches and resembles love.) It is impossible to people who despise human nature or believe it incapable of any very happy surprises. To the eyes of this curiosity nothing one discovers is really repugnant. It is this attitude we define when we say that the angels are never shocked by what they see among us.*

*Theophilus North* appears at first to be a simple and light-hearted book. However, it is Wilder's most serious and challenging work. It explores the practice of the most profound words ever spoken to man, the words of Christ in the Gospel of St. John, the only commandment he gives us, that we 'should love one another.'

The new human being of whom Wilder speaks is a disciple of Christ. He is not a servant, he is a friend.

In this book the hero is very wide. He has moral imagination. The people whom *Theophilus* meets and with whom he becomes involved find a new and enriched access to their lives and to themselves. The misguided and the good are enabled, the saintly and the wicked find peace or self-knowledge, all at the hand of, 'an interest in human beings so intense and so unremitting that it approaches and resembles love.' The

whole community is affected by his presence. As a malevolent or weak person can create havoc, so an intelligent and interested person can release the incredible potential each person has within them as a force for the good. This book is the last he wrote. Like *Heaven's My Destination* it was autobiographical. The hero of the first must grapple with goodness and its application and wrest idealism out of despair. The hero of Wilder's senior years is so at home in his element he seems to play, but his subject is profound. The potential of every human meeting is made visible; we are shown what we could be to each other if we would dare.

Wilder was a great teacher, though he said that he believed that authentic talent always educates itself. A teacher was only there 'to agitate the works'. He described the way he wrote his novels and plays. Every morning he wrote three pages and then got on with the day. The next morning he did the same. He said the work grew in the night. He had a special relationship with death. He describes a dream about his mother and father where his last thought as he woke was, 'How wonderful it is that people die'. Thinking about the dream afterwards he wrote,

*Is it possible we all receive just such intimations, such reconciliations with the fact of dying.... I hoped this was so: Not from weariness of life, not from a tragic protest against life's difficulty, not from a dread of declining years, but from some deep purely natural acceptance of the given assignment of youth, maturity, age and death.*

Thornton Wilder said he only found himself weeping when he felt joyful. He felt that joy especially when he saw the life of another person turned, 'into the gold of art.' His plays, his novels and his lectures have at their heart just such transformation. The community of Coaltown, where John Ashley met his fate, celebrates the arrival of the twentieth century at a gathering where the doctor gives a speech. He says,

*Nature never sleeps. The process of life never stands still. The creation has not come to an end. The Bible says that God created man on the sixth day and rested, but each of those days was many millions of years long. That day of rest must have been a short one. Man is not an end but a beginning. We are at the beginning of the second week. We are the children of the eighth day.*

Wilder's novels help us to experience the reality of what man might be. He helps us to cross the bridge as the Coaltown doctor puts it, 'from the self-enclosed, self favouring life into a consciousness of the entire community of mankind: Such is the possibility of the new human being.'