

INTERTEXTUALITY IN AMERICAN DRAMA

*Critical Essays on Eugene O'Neill,
Susan Glaspell, Thornton Wilder,
Arthur Miller and Other
Playwrights*

*Edited by Drew Eisenhauer and
Brenda Murphy*




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A "Psalm" for Its Time

History, Memory and Nostalgia in Thornton Wilder's Our Town

JEFFREY ERIC JENKINS

The Unhappy Journey

After seeing the 1938 New York premiere of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Alexander Woollcott is purported to have sat on a curbstone, weeping at the emotional profundity of the playwright's work. There appear to be three versions of the tale told with only slight variations in the wording. None of these, unfortunately, comes with what one might call completely reliable sourcing, although one was included in Wilder's *New York Times* obituary. In the *Times's* telling, Woollcott, the professional gadfly, is asked by a publicity man if he will "endorse" the play. Woollcott supposedly replied: "I'd rather comment on the Twenty-Third Psalm than *Our Town*" — implying that it was not his place to pass judgment upon holy text. In each of the versions, the details and phrasing are slightly different, but the consistent element is the scriptural allusion (Whitman 1).

For Woollcott, perhaps, *Our Town* was sacred, but its forty-year-old playwright — by then a prestigious author and world traveler — constructed consciousness onstage in ways that reminded its characters (and audiences) of the fragility of the human condition in 1938. As the play unfolds, Wilder's narrator prods audience members to consider the patterns of their intimate histories even as he encourages them to recall a simpler time in their own lives. By the play's end, however, the reader or listener is unsettled when the playwright brings to mind the anxiety provoked by the unknowable when juxtaposed with the comfort of the known. Written in an era when cultural upheaval seemed the new normal, when the drums of war again sounded in Europe, and economic turbulence seemed a constant, *Our Town* transported its audience to a time when cultural disturbance was a drunken Polish immigrant asleep in a snowdrift. Through the course of this essay, it may become

clear that Wilder's play draws its 1938 contemporary context into sharp relief even as it lulls its audience into a nostalgic stroll — a stroll that might well have taken place by the "still waters" of the psalm invoked by Woolcott. Wilder's letters to friends detail his own anxieties about his work and demonstrate his concern that *Our Town* be seen not as simplistic nostalgia nor as what he calls "abject truth."

It is significant to note here that by the time of *Our Town's* opening, the vagaries of dramatic criticism were in Woolcott's past. He was no longer a drama critic but was the so-called "Town Crier" broadcasting *bons mots* over the radio waves. It is also worth mentioning that Woolcott was by 1938 a close friend to whom Thornton Wilder had confided his misgivings about the Boston tryout of *Our Town*. (Wilder later dedicated the published version of the play to Woolcott.¹) In his letter dated 27 January 1938, Wilder's anxiety is palpable as he frets over producer-director Jed Harris's "lost courage about my central intention" and the production's shift to a "different set of emphases." He goes on to deplore the casting of Frank Craven, as the Stage Manager, and Tommy Ross, as Editor Webb — even referring to Ross as a "garrulous Irish mugger." Wilder also records his disturbance at the "storms of nose-blowings and sobs" by the play's end, which indicate to him that the third act's cemetery scene is too "abrupt a change of tone," signaling to the playwright "the strength of the earlier acts has been devitalized" (*Selected Letters* 333–38).

Are these merely the panicked words of an award-winning writer en route to a Broadway production? Did the evoked emotional response make Wilder fear another attack by the likes of radical critic Mike Gold?² Christopher Bigsby quotes a broadside launched in 1930, when Gold referred to Wilder as "the poet of a small sophisticated class ... our genteel bourgeoisie ... Wilder is the perfect flower of the new prosperity" — this, as the economic calamity of the Great Depression gained momentum — "This Emily Post of culture will never remind [the parvenu class] of Pittsburgh or the breadlines" (Bigsby 256).

Wilder himself, however, seemed to recognize his elitist *bona fides* when, two years before Gold's attack, he told André Maurois:

My weakness is that I am too bookish. I know little of life. I made the characters of *The Bridge* out of the heroes of books. My Marquesa is the Marquise de Sévigné. In my first novel, *The Cabala*, the hero was Keats. The method has served me well, but I don't want to use it again. I shall not write again before I have actually observed men better [Maurois 13].

It is no small irony, perhaps, that Gold's condemnation of rarified Wilderian prose came in response to *The Woman of Andros* (1930). Bruce Bawer notes that Gold referred to *Andros* as "a daydream of homosexual figures in graceful

gowns moving archaically among the lilies" (Bawer 506). Wilder, it appeared, had not held to his commitment to become less "bookish."

In a 1938 letter to designer Sibyl Colefax, sent three weeks before the Woollcott letter, Wilder works through some of his concerns about *Our Town*, noting at one point that he had come near to "withdrawing my play from the producer's hands" (*Selected* 328). He goes on, however, to commend producer Harris's changes to the script:

Jed had made some admirable alterations in the order of the scenes, and some deletions that I would have arrived at anyway, and proposed the writing of a transitional episode that seems quite right. He has inserted a number of tasteless little jokes into the web, but they don't do much harm and they give him that sensation of having written the play which is so important to him. The main tendency of his treatment is to make the play "smoother" and more civilized, and the edge of boldness is being worn down, that character of a "primitive" with its disdain of lesser verisimilitude; but I guess the play remains bold enough still [328].

Wilder is ambivalent about the development process, but he can hardly have been surprised by the weeping that Act III induced in Boston theatregoers. As he reported to Colefax, the first reading of the script caused the actors to weep so much during the third act that "pauses had to be made so that they could collect themselves" (328). He even lauded, in the letter to Colefax, Frank Craven's portrayal of the Stage Manager though he would denounce the casting to Woollcott a little more than three weeks later.

Wilder's letter to Woollcott arises in the wake of early reviews that the playwright interpreted as dismissive. "Our reviewers say," he writes, "that it is a nostalgic, unpretentious play with charm." His concern over Harris's "lost courage" led him to argue that the "vestiges of my central attention that remain stick out as timid and awkward excrescences." As for "unpretentious," Wilder was having none of that: "What I wrote was damned pretentious" (333).

The subject of the play I *wrote* is: the trivial details of human life in reference to a vast perspective of time, of social history and of religious ideas. It's too late to change it into a genre play. The succession of brief scenes can only be justified against the larger frame [of time, history, philosophy]; if it had been written as a picture of rural manners it would have been written differently [333, emphasis added].

But Wilder believes that Harris and Craven have shifted the play in ways that run counter to his intent:

The subject of the play I wrote *now* is: homely, humorous, touching aspects of a village life; of a wedding there; on to which is added a sad and all but harrowing last act [334, emphasis added].

The shredding of the fourth wall and the Stage Manager's commentary on "our living and our doctoring and our marrying and our dying," were resisted by Harris, who argued, in Wilder's telling, that:

those things interrupt the affectionate interest in the family lives before us. Frank Craven is embarrassed by [the interruptions]. But that's the central intention of the play. And it is picked up everywhere.... Yes, Alec it's a great play. And all good people are deeply rejoiced by it. But from what's there now they have to guess and grope for that side of it [335].

What is missing for Wilder is "that deep New England stoic irony that's grasped the iron of life and shares it with the house." Writing from Boston, eight days before the Broadway opening, Wilder clings to his ideal: "I'm all right. I fight for the restoration of lines and for the removal of Jed's happy interpolations of New Jersey-New Hampshire.... I'd rather have it die on the road than come into New York as an aimless series of little jokes, with a painful last act" (336).

It is unclear from these letters if Wilder had the "aimless little jokes" removed by the Broadway opening, or if Harris's directorial "smoothing" in effect smothered the play's boldness. But the question of what Wilder expected — or desired — his audience to experience remains. Burns Mantle noted in his *Best Plays* seasonal overview that when the play opened:

Broadway was a bit awed.... A majority of the reviews were mildly ecstatic. A few were modestly doubtful of the complete impressiveness of Mr. Wilder's statement. One or two questioned the effectiveness of the sceneryless stage.... Audience response was also divided, but generally favorable [67].

Mantle's seeming lack of enthusiasm may be attributed to his temporary absence among the first-night critics. The *Daily News* critic was scheduled to give a talk to the Chicago Drama League 9 February 1938 (Cass 13). He was thus forced to miss the opening due to his travels and relied on "correspondents" sending "daily dispatches from the front." His "chief spy," presumably John Chapman whom Mantle quotes by name later in his report, told Mantle, "It is a brand new form ... and everybody raved about it" ("Critic Covers" E2).

The raving of the critics (except Mantle) and the weeping of the audiences (including Woolcott) may have soothed whatever birth pains Wilder suffered in the weeks before the Broadway opening. By 13 February, nine days after the opening, Wilder published a preface to the play in *The New York Times*. The piece discusses how the play came into being, drawing parallels between his play and the work of archaeology. In unfolding his process, Wilder states the "central theme" of *Our Town*:

What is the relation between the countless "unimportant" details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history and current religious ideas on the other? ["Preface" 1].

Beyond shining light on the playwright's process and central intention, however, the preface also serves as an apologia of sorts for Wilder's choices

in scenic representation — or lack thereof. Wilder writes that the “theatre longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves” and he frets over the limits of realism that he credits William James with noting as “abject truth”: “Most works in realism tell a succession of such abject truths; they are deeply in earnest, every detail is true, and yet the whole finally tumbles to the ground — true but without significance” (“Preface” 1).

By eliminating scenic realism, Wilder tries to “restore significance to the small details of life.... The spectator, through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his own head” (“Preface” 1).³ In 1938, flush with success, Wilder argues for his audience to engage memory: for what is imagination if not a reconstruction of images recalled? Winfield Townley Scott argued from a similar perspective fifteen years later in an essay on *Our Town*, “Again and again we do not construct ... an invented scene: as [the writer] constructs it he *reminds* us ... of something we know — and, hardly conscious of the process, we adapt our memory to his text at once” (Scott 104).

In a 27 March 1938 letter to the widow of renowned playwriting professor George Pierce Baker, Wilder said he did not mind critical charges of “immaturity, confusion, and even pretentiousness”:

It's a first play; it's a first sally into deep waters. I hope to do many more — and better — and even more pretentious. I write as I choose; and I learn as I go; and I'm very happy when the public pays the bills [*Selected* 341–42].

A few months later, and with the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for *Our Town* recently to his credit, Wilder's sanguinity had deepened as he told Lucius Beebe of the *New York Herald Tribune*:

Our Town evades every possible requirement of the legitimate stage. It is pure description, entirely devoid of anything even resembling conflict, expectation or action, which are usually considered the component parts of any play. The only other drama in all literature that I know of that is as static as *Our Town* is *The Trojan Women*.... Any other play I write will have to be more active [qtd. in Beebe 19–20].

Troubling the Waters

The 23rd Psalm is a poem of comfort and reassurance, which reminds the faithful that they are protected by God's calming, restorative powers; that all is well, that all shall be well. When Woolcott drew the hyperbolic parallel between this scripture and his friend's play, he employed imagery more patently religious than Wilder himself appeared comfortable expounding in the public square. A decade earlier, in his 1928 foreword to “*The Angel That Troubled the Waters*” and *Other Plays*, Wilder writes of that collection of religious plays:

Almost all the plays in this book are religious, but religious in that dilute fashion that is a believer's concession to a contemporary standard of good manners.... It is the kind of work that I would most like to do well, in spite of the fact that there has seldom been an age in literature when such a vein was less welcome and less understood. I hope, through many mistakes, to discover the spirit that is not unequal to the elevation of the great religious themes, yet which does not fall into a repellent didacticism [*Collected Plays* 653-54].

Christopher Bigsby argues from this foreword that, for Wilder, "the failure of religion to engage the modern mind stemmed from a failure of language" (257). It is also possible, however, that the playwright locates this "didacticism" in what he calls the "intermittent sincerity of generations of clergymen and teachers" who have "rendered embarrassing and even ridiculous all the terms of spiritual life" (653-54). Although Wilder declares that the "revival of religion is almost a matter of rhetoric" and wonders if all religions die "with the exhaustion of the language," one suspects that the impact of 1928 American culture also informs his concern (653-54).

Wilder is, after all, writing these religious plays from a perspective that reflects his own spiritual "aspirations," to employ a word that recurs in the foreword. But only a year earlier, in 1927, Sinclair Lewis published *Elmer Gantry*, which became a bestseller, roiled midwestern clerics, and was adapted into a (failed) Broadway play by Patrick Kearney. Such diverse personalities as the Kansas editor William Allen White and Yale professor William Lyon Phelps decried Lewis's depiction of men of the cloth.⁴ This satire of religion, in which belief is manufactured just as surely as consumerist desire is created, showed, as *Chicago Daily Tribune* book critic Fanny Butcher noted, "how easy it is for a thoroughly worthless, selfish pig to get ahead if he just puts his mind to it" (13). The mainstream success of cynicism toward religion — as displayed in *Elmer Gantry* — may be part of what drove Wilder to despair of religious writing being welcomed or understood in American culture.

Just two weeks after Butcher proclaimed *Elmer Gantry's* literary merit — while noting repeatedly that it was sure to offend many of the faithful — in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Winfred E. Garrison wrote in the same newspaper that during the present "period which is sometimes spoken of cynically as the age of irreligion, there has been a notable increase both in the number of religious titles and in the total number of religious volumes sold." Garrison, a dean at the University of Chicago and literary editor of *Christian Century*, goes on to argue persuasively that readers are "perennially interested in the problems which ... old theologies undertook to solve, for they represent the most vital and universal concerns of men" (10).

Although Wilder may have felt somewhat isolated in an arid landscape of religious rhetoric, Preston William Slosson notes in a 1930 social history of life in America that in spite of "interpretations of religious history in the

terms of modern American commercial life," which arose in certain veins of literature, "popular interest in the problems of religion and the church was still active." Slosson's research — which relied on government surveys, periodicals, newspapers, and scholarly works — found that although the "impression widely prevailed that the increasing pressure of secular interests was crowding religion out of American life," there was a "large increase in church membership" (427).

In this age of supposed irreligion, Slosson also found that "church organizations and associations were never so active in projects of social welfare and civic reform, and many complaints were heard, especially in connection with the prohibition question, that the United States was politically ruled by the churches" (427). Citing U.S. Department of Commerce statistics, Slosson marks an almost twenty-five percent increase in church membership in the decade of 1916 to 1926, though he also notes trenchantly, "In what other country would the collection of religious data be done by the Department of Commerce?" (428).

It is ten years after Wilder's foreword to his religious plays that the preface to *Our Town* first appears in the *New York Times*. As that preface draws to a close, it includes an elision from a monologue by the Stage Manager, which the author apparently could not quite let go. This deleted text crosses from the quasi-ecumenical construct of much of the rest of the play into a recognition of Christianity's primacy in American culture. In the removed text, the Stage Manager speculates about a projected civilization, a thousand years into the future, that might recover the play *Our Town* from a time capsule.

The Stage Manager was to have said, "The religion at that time was Christianity; but I guess you have other records about Christianity" ("Preface" 1).⁵ Is this a Wilderian fantasy of Christianity's future doom, based on his concern for the decay of language as noted in the *Angels* foreword? Is it a supposition of Christianity's continued ubiquity? The Stage Manager goes on to describe marriage as a "binding relation" between "a man and one woman" — a definition certainly expanding in the twenty-first century. As the deleted text draws to a close, the Stage Manager adds, almost as an afterthought, that after death people were "buried in the ground just as they were" — as if it might seem a novel idea ("Preface" 1).

Does Wilder imply (or fear) that Christianity might disappear in another millennium? Why comment on the marital paradigm? Why the offhand comment on the handling of the dead? One suspects from Wilder's 1928 foreword to his religious plays that he — or, more likely, his producer — may have sought to vitiate somewhat *Our Town's* religious overtones. Despite these deletions from the text, changes that appear to subtly distance from a dominant religious model, Brooks Atkinson wrote on just this topic in the *New York Times* — in

answer to Eleanor Roosevelt's published complaint that *Our Town* had depressed her "beyond words":

When I went to see *Our Town*, I was moved and depressed beyond words. It is more interesting and more original and I am glad I saw it, but I did not have a pleasant evening. Sometimes we need a pleasant evening, so why must we have all our plays in the same vein? What can't the critics have standards for different types of plays and give us an idea of the kind of an evening we may have if we go to this play or that? Usually I want to be amused, then again, I want to be stirred. But it is rather rare that you can find out what kind of a play you are going to see by reading any of the criticisms [14].

After gently chiding the president's wife, Atkinson wrote, "In the deepest sense of the word, *Our Town* is a religious play" ("Standards" 1).

Wilder continued to wrestle with the religious thematics in *Our Town* for years to come. In a letter to Esther W. Bates, in which Wilder responded to Scott's 1953 essay on the play, the playwright noted that "committed Christians are severe with me that I indicated without pressing their eschatology" (*Selected* 507).⁶ He went on to point to "literary borrowings"—which he often acknowledged—such as the inspiration he took from the "muted hope of Dante's *Purgatory*" (*Selected* 507). He noted as well to journalist Heinrich Walter, and to Bates, that the litany of Emily's goodbyes to her material life—"Good-by to clocks ticking ... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths" (*Our Town* 108)—were an echo of Achilles's "praise of the things he had valued in life," (*Selected* 477, 508) where the ancient hero's "'fresh raiment' becomes 'new-ironed dresses'; his wine—naturally—becomes coffee" (*Selected* 508).

In the *Virginia Quarterly* essay, Scott particularly noted the contradiction of the universal and the particular, those poetic (and historical) elements with which Aristotle was concerned:

This is the great thing that *Our Town* accomplishes; simultaneously we are made aware of what is momentary and what is eternal.... [W]e are doubly spectators, having a double vision.... And indeed we are not taken out of ourselves, we are driven deeper into ourselves. This, we say, is life: apparently monotonous, interminable, safe; really all mutable, brief, and in danger [109].

Scott remains with the notion of doubled experience when he discusses Emily's return to her twelfth birthday. The Stage Manager says, "You not only live it, but you watch yourself living it" (*Our Town* 99). From this moment, Scott conjures an emotional vision,

Now Emily ... will achieve that double vision we have had all along; and now we shall be burdened also with her self-involvement.... Now *we* are taken back with Emily's double-awareness accenting our own. Though the then-living are unaware as always, now the golden veil [of nostalgia] shines everywhere, even all around us ourselves.... Here if the play is to get its proper and merited response there is nothing further to say of it: one simply weeps [116-17].

Wilder's grateful response to Scott demonstrated his persistent concern that *Our Town* was not taken seriously enough, even as it continued to grow in the American canon: "There is a Pompeii aspect to Grover's Corners.... The theme words of *Our Town* are: hundred, thousand, million. I have no other subject; but now it is the one soul in the billion souls" (*Selected* 333). Wilder felt as though Scott's appraisal had "made the play respectable" at a time when the playwright believed *Our Town* "embarrasses 'professionals'—professors and critics" (*Selected* 508).

History or Poetry?

By invoking influences such as Homer and Dante, and declaring his interest in universals, Wilder leads us to Part IX of the *Poetics* where Aristotle discusses the difference between history and poetry: "The true difference is that [history] relates what has happened, [poetry] what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (68). This is not to suggest that Wilder's work in *Our Town* is Aristotelian, but one overlooks such a dominant construct at one's peril. Wilder, however, accomplishes in *Our Town* what appears to be a conflation of history and poetry. By demonstrating what has happened in this mythical Grover's Corners, and disrupting that narrative with commentary, with flashes forward and back, Wilder allows his audience to imagine a wider range of possibilities than might be experienced with a more linear narrative.

It is very nearly Brechtian: the fourth wall is shredded; the stage space filled only by a few utility items and whatever we are able to conjure in our imaginations; the Stage Manager describes what we are about to see (or imagine, in the case of scenic elements), which allows the audience to analyze what happens; the Stage Manager destabilizes the narrative by interrupting scenes before audiences can be lulled into the spiritual somnolence that often attends theatrical realism. *Our Town* opens with a stage image akin to that of the beginning in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* where an unadorned proscenium stage with its curtain raised and rehearsal furniture are "scattered about as during rehearsals" (524–25). Wilder had written to his mother about Pirandello—"whose plays I adore"—in April 1921. He had seen an early performance of *Six Characters*, though it was not mentioned in the letter to Wilder's mother (*Selected* 145).

Wilder's 1957 comments in the Preface to *Three Plays*, also give clues to certain affinities he shared with Bertolt Brecht. Wilder describes his dissatisfaction with the theatre: "It was on the stage," he wrote, "that imaginative narration became false.... I found the word for it: it aimed to be *soothing*."

These are words that might not be out of place in Brecht's 1948 theoretical work "A Short Organum for the Theatre," and Wilder was definitely concerned, as noted above, over Jed Harris's "smoothing" of *Our Town*.⁷

Wilder points to the rise of the middle class as the turning point for "where the theatre had run off the track" and shied away from "heat," from "bite," from "social criticism" because the bourgeoisie "chose to ignore wide tracts of injustice" that represented "precarious positions" where "abysses yawned on either side. The air was loud with questions that must not be asked. These audiences fashioned a theatre which could not disturb them" (*Collected* 682–84). Wilder registers the early annoyance with theatre, which may have awakened his antirealist approach:

Toward the end of the 'twenties I began to lose pleasure in going to the theatre. I ceased to believe in the stories I saw presented there.... Finally my dissatisfaction passed into resentment. I began to feel that the theatre was not only inadequate, it was evasive; it did not wish to draw upon its deeper potentialities [*Collected* 682–84].

In the first moments of *Our Town* Wilder disseminates a great deal of dramatic information, which is not unlike the narrative captioning that Brecht employs at the beginning of scenes in works such as *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Before Doc Gibbs even enters the stage, we know he will die in 1930; we also learn that his wife, who busies herself before us in an imagined kitchen, will die many years before him. A few minutes later the newsboy, Joe Crowell, hands a paper to Doc Gibbs, they exchange pleasantries and Joe exits. The Stage Manager stops the action, with a comment:

Want to tell you something about that boy Joe Crowell there. Joe was awful bright — graduated from high school here, head of his class. So he got a scholarship to Massachusetts Tech. Graduated head of his class there, too. It was all wrote up in the Boston paper at the time. Goin' to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France. — All that education for nothing [9].

It is a poignant moment of audience recognition not unlike the one that comes at the end of *Mother Courage*, when the title character — beaten, impoverished, and alone — goes in search of Eilif, the son Courage believes to be alive but whom the audience knows has been executed for looting (86–88). Less than five minutes into *Our Town*, the Stage Manager has already collapsed what is actual and what is possible, where we are and where we will be, lifting the dramatic moment to a plane where the particular meets the universal, history encounters poetry. No wonder Brooks Atkinson, and so many others, have seen religion inscribed across this text.

When one continues to consider the cultural moment in which the play premiered, certain elements come into sharper focus. From the perspective of popular media of the day, the *Times's* Atkinson wrote three prominent and

favorable pieces about the play within six weeks of its premiere, calling it a “hauntingly beautiful play” in the opening night review (“Frank” 18); Stirling Bowen of the *Wall Street Journal* called it “heart-warming,” “heart-lifting,” “witty and touching,” and “wise” (9); Joseph Wood Krutch wrote in the *Nation* that Wilder had “succeeded in communicating a mood as rich and tranquil and satisfying as it is hard to define” (224).

Although Mantle does not name those who were “modestly doubtful of Mr. Wilder’s statement” (*Best Plays* 67), he might have included John W. Gassner who wrote:

It is a mistake to consider Grover’s Corners real except in our dreams, for the idyllic nature of Mr. Wilder’s town is open to suspicion. Our history tells a different story — one of social stratification, greed, corrupt business practices and politics, and even crass intolerance [218].

Mantle correctly notes, however, that the Pulitzer Prize in Drama helped to develop new interest “that carried the play” well into the next season (*Best Plays* 67). By the time of the end-of-season awards, the *Times* characterized *Our Town*’s business as “doing comfortably” though not a “smash hit” before the Pulitzer, which became a “potent lure at the box office” (“Rialto Gossip” 1).⁸

Memory and Nostalgia

The 1937–1938 theatre season had, as Mantle recorded it, “statistically ... fallen somewhat behind the two previous [economic] recovery seasons, which is in keeping with the record, there having been a recession noted in the commercial world” (*Best Plays* 3). The so-called “Roosevelt Recession,” which roughly paralleled the 1937–38 season saw nearly a five percent increase in general unemployment between 1937 and 1938 — this after five years of declining unemployment. Indeed, between 1935 and 1938, a nearly six percent decline in unemployment was reversed by the steep rise of 1937–38, and it was beginning to feel like 1931 again to many Americans (*Statistical* 135). On the day that the *New York Times* reported the impact of the Pulitzer Prize on *Our Town*’s box office receipts, the margin-to-margin banner headline on the first page of the arts section read: THE BROADWAY THEATRE: NO NEW PLAYS DUE THIS WEEK (“Rialto Gossip” 1). In an odd turn, there is no article discussing the dearth of new production to accompany the headline. Brooks Atkinson assesses the Theatre Guild’s “private depression” of the past two seasons, which is more about artistic achievement than financial woes, and other pieces discuss theatre gossip, the relationship between Hollywood and Broadway, and a new *Shylock* by John Gielgud in London.

During this same season, the embattled Federal Theatre Project was far from immune to theatrical vicissitudes as it saw significant new productions

limited in 1937–38 to the new Living Newspaper production *One Third of a Nation* and a revival of the prior season's *Power*. After the budgetary debacle at the FTP in 1937, which resulted in Orson Welles and John Houseman's *The Cradle Will Rock* publicity stunt that Barry B. Witham calls a "romanticized" account, much of the creative energy of the government-funded FTP in New York seemed to have been drained (84). The 1937–38 FTP season also saw short runs of plays such as O'Neill's decidedly lesser play *Diff'rent*, Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Fitch's *Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines*, Toller's *No More Peace*, and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. Mantle looked askance at those who referred to the season as "exciting," presuming that these assessments meant the season had been "punctuated with novelties" and had "exceeded expectations in the matter of the quality of the plays produced." Mantle also suggested that there had not been much in the way of "artistic advance" in that season (Mantle, *Best Plays* 3).

For the purposes of this study, however, Mantle's observations on the pre-Pulitzer size of the audiences are interesting, especially when taken into consideration with Wilder's concerns about excessive weeping at performances of his play. One key is to consider what theorist Jill Dolan might call the "presumed spectator." Although women have long been the backbone that keeps theatre standing, it is the theatre critics whose identities and ages one may note most easily. While spectators today might see *Our Town* as old-fashioned, in its reconstruction of a time before the automobile was omnipresent, to its first audiences it was a construct with which they almost certainly were quite familiar. Indeed, if one figures that Emily was twenty-six when she died in 1913, she would have been fifty-one in 1938 — precisely the age of the weeping Woollcott, and within a decade of such critics as Atkinson (44), Krutch (45), Clayton Hamilton (57), Walter Prichard Eaton (60), George Jean Nathan (56), Stark Young (57), and Gilbert Seldes (45). The skeptical Mantle, at 65, perhaps was inured to certain nostalgic parallels that might be drawn to that earlier twentieth century era.

When it comes to the 1938 audience for *Our Town*, however, the bulk of that group would certainly have had strong memories of the era that comprised Emily's life. This is the strength of Wilder's narratorial construct: it exists almost entirely before the dawn of the modern era in America. It is before World War I, before the influenza pandemic, before the cultural contradictions of loosened morals and straitened drinking laws, before the Wall Street crash, before the rise of Fascism, before the privations of economic calamity. It is, to re-purpose the words of a former speechwriter, "a kinder, gentler" era. And yet, Wilder tacitly uses the impact of war and pestilence — as he would do more overtly in *The Skin of Our Teeth* — to puncture the comfort of his audience's reverie, to shake them awake, to remind them

how quickly sand flows through the hourglass, how unceasing is the ticking clock.

This is Wilder's vision of the theatre described in his 1941 essay, "Some Thoughts on Playwriting," where he notes that "Novels are written in the past tense.... The novel is a past reported in the present. On the stage it is always now" (124–25). These thoughts of Wilder's and his stated fascination with theatrical art of the Elizabethan era, put one in mind of Shakespeare's Scottish usurper intoning "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," eternally reminding his audience that in the theatre there is only now, and now, and now — before the performed moment recedes into the corridors of memory.

After bathing in the glow of an early twentieth-century town in New Hampshire, Wilder's audience is exhorted to live fully in the moment because now forever becomes then. This point is driven home when Emily is allowed, after her death, to return to an earlier moment in her life. Upon arriving in her own past, she is immediately and repeatedly stung by the knowledge of how the future will unfold; and of how unaware we all are of our own presence in our own present. After a few torturous minutes she returns to the town graveyard, where she joins the community of the dead.

Despite its apparent nostalgia here and there, the final scenes of *Our Town* force the audience to confront the modern dilemma: it is a thorny existential question, filtered through a premodern lens. The Stage Manager unsettles the audience when he asks, "And what's left when your memory's gone, and your identity, Mrs. Smith?" (88). It is, one suspects, a question with such broad and deep implications that it may be what led Winfield Townley Scott to write of the final effect: "one simply weeps" (116–17).

Director David Cromer apparently disagrees with Scott's assessment of this ultimate impact. In Cromer's Off Broadway production — which originated in Chicago, collected critical accolades and awards, and ran in New York for eighteen months — the director added his own twist to Wilder's structure of presence and absence. Although Scott argues that as the writer "constructs it he *reminds* us... of something we know ... [and] we adapt our memory to his text at once" (Scott 104), Cromer's conception of *Grover's Corners* was contemporized in order to shake his audience from its twenty-first century torpor. Cromer's rethinking — in which he also played the omniscient role of the Stage Manager — shifted the audience's attention away from existential questions and onto the delicious smell of bacon frying in a pan. Ignoring Wilder's instruction, repeated time and again during his life, that "when Emily 'returns' there is not even the table and two chairs [in her parents' kitchen]: all, all is in our minds" (*Selected* 508), Cromer elected to heighten the impact of Emily's own nostalgic experience by creating an idealized image of her early life.

In Cromer's vision, Emily's return is marked by a scenic shift to a hyper-real setting where none had existed before. The colors were vivid and the aroma overpowering; but the directorial *coup de théâtre* in the play's penultimate moments drew attention from the question Wilder asks of his audience and shifted focus onto a theatrical parlor trick — to "oohs," "aahs," and "yums" from the audience, it must be noted. This was not the gauzy, soft-focus imagery of nostalgia's gentle embrace, which makes Emily's recognition of reality more powerful. Cromer's concept was not unlike a "laugh track" employed by television producers concerned that audiences will not get the joke. To turn Wilder's phrase: nothing, nothing was in our minds. Cromer chose to ignore that the *Our Town* characters represent the stout middle class of Grover's Corners — a virtual ruling class, in fact — and made them into members of a postindustrial working class. This shift may make the play more contemporary, but it vitiates key thematics in the play. The director's vision also undermined the power of the text with an arena staging, which, perhaps unintentionally, emphasized the pantomimic dramatization of mothers preparing their families for the day — as opposed to focusing on Wilder's "countless 'unimportant' details of our daily life" ("Preface" 1). Wilder might have told Cromer, as he wrote in "Some Suggestions for the Director,"

that Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb in the preparation of breakfast perform much of their business with their back to the audience, and do not distract and provoke its attention with too distinct and perhaps puzzling a picture of the many operations of coffee-grinding, porridge-stirring, etc. [*Collected* 661].

Indeed, Wilder vigorously opposed stagings that did not employ "that homely even ugly 'rehearsal stage'" offered by an empty proscenium theatre with its "steampipes and back stage ladders" because the "audience's imagination has to fight doubly hard to overcome and transcend those concrete facts" (*Selected* 652).⁹ Frying bacon in the theatre requires no construction of imaginative audience memory — one simply triggers the salivary glands and hopes for a long run.

One might argue that Wilder's original vision — which we know the playwright struggled to see enacted from its earliest rehearsals — may continue to languish in a netherworld at the nexus of text, memory, and nostalgia. After *Our Town's* initial success, as noted above, Wilder used the "preface" published in the *New York Times* to explain what might seem scenically strange to potential audience members. From that 1938 perspective, the smell of frying bacon in 2009 carries with it the aroma of Wilder's despised "abject truth." As Wilder evolved into the avuncular national writer of the 1930s and after, an author who also played the Stage Manager role in productions from time to time, perhaps the "abject truth" of success eventually obscured his early impulses and anxieties about the play, perhaps he got his wish, or perhaps there is a version yet to be done.

It is tempting to ascribe Cromer's decision to make *Our Town* "relevant" and "theatrical" to the same cultural ennui some theatregoers experience when they think of seeing the play. The eminent playwright Robert Anderson — he of the aphorism "you can't make a living in the theatre, but you can make a killing" — spoke for some when he said:

I have seen *Our Town* many times under many different circumstances, and, as with Beethoven's Fifth, my tendency is to ask, "Do I have to see it again?" But I do see it, and its deceptively simple magic always moves me deeply [qtd. in Bryer, "Thornton" 15].

Consider also Donald Margulies's take on *Our Town*, prior to seeing a 1988 landmark production at Lincoln Center Theatre (ironically, the theatre roundly rejected by Wilder when approached in 1967 for a thirtieth anniversary production). Margulies spoke at a 1997 Yale symposium regarding Wilder's legacy and, as Jackson R. Bryer notes, admitted that he was "prejudiced against Thornton Wilder" because his first exposure had been a "hackneyed reading" of the play. His experience of the Lincoln Center production, however, gave him a "truly thunderous experience in the theatre." He told the symposium:

Rereading it just days ago I was struck again by its poetry and its lack of sentimentality — which is something that high school productions simply do not convey [qtd. in Bryer, "Thornton" 17–18].

From the comments of these playwrights a picture continues to emerge of the adapted memory about which Scott writes. Anderson celebrates the play's "deceptively simple magic," even as he admits resisting its charms. Margulies is entranced by *Our Town's* "poetry" and "lack of sentimentality," while implying there is a need for virtuosity in performance. Is there something about memory and its softer-focused sibling, nostalgia, that may have caused Cromer to overdetermine the emotional experience of Emily's return? Did Wilder's quiet simplicity in a time of hypermediated culture, rising irony quotients, and shortened attention spans, make the director feel a need to compensate for raw, quiet emotion?

Emily has her moment of clarity. It comes when memory, nostalgia, and "reality" conflate to show her what we who live cannot see: how it all will end. We know generally how it will end, of course, but if we focus on it we might become paralyzed with anxiety. Emily knows the loss of being unable to be "present" in one's own present. Director Cromer, perhaps with good reason, does not trust his audience to have the doubled experience of Emily's recognition, as Scott refers to it, so he gives us something else to think about.

A stroll through the Broadway theatre district of today provides a possible entrance point to this construct — although "stroll" is not what one does

among the jostling throngs that pack Times Square. Everywhere one glances there are cellphones, cameras, and video recorders capturing digital images that create mediated experience through lenses that are neither figurative nor theoretical. Observing the effort expended on the electronic capture of the Broadway or New York "experience" leads one to the conclusion that these mediated encounters provide fodder for future nostalgia.

There, in that most public of squares, we see experience disappear down the rabbithole of two-inch by three-inch color screens. Was one really present if there is no image? Or, more to the point: Can one truly be present if the focus of the experience is the capture of images? One might well amend Wilder's question: "What's left when your camera's gone, Mrs. Smith?"

Notes

1. Woolcott's last name is misspelled in the dedication to *Our Town* as "Woolcott" (v).
2. Christopher Bigsby has noted the presence of a Mike Gold-like character in *Our Town*: the Belligerent Man at Back of Auditorium who asks simplistic questions about "social injustice and industrial inequality" (Bigsby 260). See also Wilder, *Our Town* 25.
3. Those few words about "inside his own head," makes one wonder if Arthur Miller might have taken them as inspiration for his tragedy of the "small details of life," *Death of a Salesman*, which was first titled *The Inside of His Head*.
4. See Butcher; Atkinson, "The Play: *Elmer Gantry* Reaches the Stage"; "Lewis's Novel on Religion Branded Punch and Judy"; and "Elmer Gantry Not Real."
5. Despite Wilder's seeming assertion in the *New York Times* "preface" that these and adjacent lines have been deleted from the text, virtually all of the purported deletions appear in the *Best Plays* excerpt of *Our Town* (Mantle, *Best Plays* 73-74). In the 1998 edition of the play, the references to Christianity's primacy, marriage between men and women, and burial of the dead are the only "deletions" that do not appear (Wilder, *Our Town* 32-34).
6. The letter to Bates was in appreciation of Winfield Townley Scott's essay, "Our Town and the Golden Veil" in the Winter 1953 number of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*.
7. Brecht writes that the "stage's inaccurate representations of our social life, including those classed as so-called Naturalism, led it to call for scientifically exact representations; the tasteless rehashing of empty visual or spiritual palliatives, for the noble logic of the multiplication table." Brecht's strident call is unlike Wilder's in his focus on the political, but his reference to theatres as "having degenerated into branches of the bourgeois narcotics business" might well have induced a sympathetic nod from the American playwright. See Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" 179.
8. The article also suggests that the Pulitzer Prize has stronger drawing power than the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.
9. Wilder also refers to Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in this letter to Schuyler Chapin, which explains why the *Our Town* author is unwilling in 1967 to allow a production at Lincoln Center Theater's Vivian Beaumont Theater due to its deep thrust stage.

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