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THORNTON WOLDER'S PLAYS: TRADITION AND MODERNISM

What is Modernism? Many critics use this denomination, but quite honestly, I don't think it means anything. A break with the past? A break with XIXth century provincialism, understood in a universal sense? For instance, most scholars consider Thomas S. Eliot and Ezra Pound modernists, although you cannot say these two poets broke away from tradition. From provincialism I dare say they did. In The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, v. II, pg. 1512 and following, under the heading "Modernism: Toward a Definition," we find these statements:

> There is a danger of making Modernism too inclusive; and it must be said that many good writers .... were largely unaffected by these turbulences... One such theme, obviously, is the demand for an open breach with the past, or even the abolition of the past. This professes to be more than a simple reaction against the art of the preceding generation: it is a whole new thing.

A reaction, then, against the preceding generation, but how can you group together Conrad, Lawrence and Forster as the editor of this article does? If we turn our eyes towards American Literature the piling up gets even worse. The tendency is to put together writers in such a wide spectrum, as William Carlos Williams, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Thornton Wilder, Steinbeck and so on.

What is there so similar between the literary style of Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster, on one

hand, or Faulkner and Steinbeck, on the other?

The matter is further complicated when we use the word in Spanish, "modernismo." In our language this word means the poetry and prose derived from the supreme model of Rubén Darío. "Modernistas" in Spain were Villaespesa, Manuel Machado, Marquina and Valle Inclán in his initial output. My question is: what have these poets in common with Yeats, Eliot, Pound, etc.? I suppose simply that they wrote poetry.

In the realm of the American theatre Thornton Wilder and Elmer Rice are often classified as modernists, although this second playwright may be better called an expresionist. With O'Neill the business of sticking tags on him becomes rather frustrating; he is too big and varied to be defined in just one word.

Matters have become even more complicated since the word "postmodernism" has been coined. It is a sort of label of a handy closet where you can hang together anything that has been written since WWII. But if a term is used in such a wide sense, why use it at all? Why don't we treat writers as individuals, study them as individual phenomena of literary creation, instead of crowding them under a big banner?

In this modest discussion on the literary excellence of Wilder's play I do not venture any further than treating him for what he really was, a very personal, original and peculiar writer.

This is Mr. Thornton Wilder's language, the one he uses when his characters express themselves:

> STAGE MANAGER: 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 Massachussetts 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. [1]

This is no doubt colloquial American Language; nothing much literary about it. But in the majority of plays written all over the world one finds lines stated in another linguistic code, that of the stage directions:

HOWIE NEWSOME, about thirty, in overalls, comes along Main Street from left, walking beside an invisible horse and wagon and carrying an imaginery rack with milk bottles. The sound of clinking milk bottles is heard...[2]

So, after all, we may find it difficult to label this play as "realistic." Actually "realistic" is a much abused word. Art can be more or less "realistic," but, on the whole, no art is totally realistic. In the first place, art tends essentially towards synthesis, while science favours analysis. Let's take another example from a different play by Thornton Wilder:

A projection screen in the middle of the curtain. The first lantern slide: the name of the theatre, and the words: NEW EVENTS OF THE WORLD. AN ANNOUNCER's voice is heard. [3]

The stage direction does not sound like anything in the tradition of stage writing. Since the 20s and the 30s film has been used together with other arts in the theatre, but it is a relatively very recent innovation.

Therefore, in Wilder's plays there is a conspicous mixture of realistic dialogue and, let's say, "unrealistic" stage effects, like the actors interrupting the action to complain about things, or complain about their roles, addressing the audience while they step out of the play. These effects were not new, of course; for instance Bertolt Brecht had used them in the XXth century, and Eugene O'Neill shortly before Wilder started writing plays. But neither Brecht nor O'Neill had been the first ones. Who knows when this sort of alienation was employed for the first time on a stage. Even so, a well known fact is the vogue that this device acquired among English dramatists of the XVIIIth century in parodies of more serious genders, as it happens in a couple of plays by Fielding and The Critic by Sheridan, among others.

Thornton Wilder had started his literary activities writing narrative. He had published two novels in the mid 20s; one of them became a considerable critical success, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927), but his efforts at drama-- having started as early as 1915-- had been totally unrewarding. Why did he persist in writing for the stage?

Fortunately, we have his own explanation right at the beginning of the Preface to the Penguin plays edition just mentioned:

> Toward the end of the twenties I began to loose pleasure in going to the theatre. I ceased to believe in the stories I saw presented there. When I did go it was to admire some secondary aspect of the play, the work of a great actor or director or designer. Yet at the same time the conviction was growing in me that the theatre was the greatest of all the arts. I felt that something had gone wrong with it in my time

> and that it was fulfilling only a small part of its potentialities. I was filled with admiration for presentations of classical works by Max Reinhard and Louis Jouvet and the Old Vic, as I was by the best plays of my own time, like Desire Under the Elms and The Front Page; but at heart I didn't believe a word of them.

In this Preface Wilder went on to blame the middle-classes in the Western countries for pettiness and low standards in art. Mind you, he doesn't have a good word for the aristocracy either:

> An aristocracy, defending and fostering its lie, extracts from the arts only such elements as can further its interests, the aroma and not the sap, the grace and not the trenchancy. Equally harmful to culture is the newly arrived middle class. In the English-speaking world the middle classes came to power early in the nineteenth century and gained control over the Theatre...

He accuses them of being sanctimonious, of ignoring "wide tracts of injustice and stupidity in the world about them," of distrusting the passions and trying to deny them, of favouring melodrama and sentimental comedy; in short, he hardly has a good word for them. Nevertheless, let's follow Wilder's discourse and see what he had to say about the theatre's true possibilities:

> It is through the theatre's power to raise the exhibited individual action to the realm of the idea and type and universal that it is able to evoke our belief. But power is precisely what those nineteen-century audiences did not -- dared not -- confront. They tamed it and drew its teeth; squeezed

> it into that removed showcase. They loaded the stage with specific objects, because every concrete object on the stage fixes and narrows the action to one moment in time and place. (Have you never noticed that in the plays of Shakespeare no one--except occasionally a ruler--ever sits down? There were not even chairs on the English and Spanish stages in the time of Elizabeth I.) So it was by a jugglery with time that the middle classes devitalized the theatre. When you emphasize place in the theatre, you drag down and limit and harness time to it ... I became dissatisfied with the theatre because I was unable to lend credence to such childish attempts to be "real".

So, at a first glance, it seems that Wilder was against too much realism, petty and photographic realism; but that, of course, was not his main objection, as one can see by examining the plays he has written. It is amazing that, on speaking about a decade that produced so many theatrical hits -after years and years of barreness-, such as Emperor Jones, Desire Under the Elms, Strange Interlude, The Adding Machine, Street Scene, Gods of Lightning, Wilder should say that American drama was unsatisfactory; which amounts to proclaiming that he was confident of doing it much better.

To be able to assess that, we'll start by looking at the type of drama he had been trying to write since the beginning. The first play he ever published was The Trumpet Shall Sound, which was printed by The Yale Literary Magazine in three separate issues.[4]

Nevertheless, as we have said before, he had been writing plays, mainly in one act, for several years, and therefore, had acquired certain

theatrical experience. The majority of these one act plays are very brief; the dramatist himself called them Three Minute plays. A selection of them was published in New York in 1928 under the title The Angel That Troubled the Waters. Words used in his titles such as "Angel" and "Trumpet" are self-explanatory, a clue to the religious nature of a good number of his plays.

Surprisingly enough, while he was writing them, Wilder must have had in mind a modest contribution from Theodore Dreiser, of all people, to the dramatic genre, Plays of the Natural and the Supernatural. It sounds odd that the master of American naturalism could have influenced a man with such a solid religious background as Wilder, the same man who outspokenly stated his dislike of the crudities of his contemporary fellow-dramatists. Wilder's father was an authoritarian, engaged for some time in the diplomatic service, who sent his son to Oberlin College at one stage-- the Wilder family had been living in China and California previously -- in order to make him improve his religious background.

No doubt it was the experimental style of Dreiser's plays which attracted Wilder's interest, but Donald Haberman in his book The Plays of Thornton Wilder (A Critical Study) goes beyond that aspect. He points out the ideological influence too, by comparing the contents of Dreiser's The Spring Recital with Wilder's And the Sea Shall Give Up Its Dead.[5]

As regards to Wilder's major dramatic achievements, it is interesting to notice that in both these modest plays human life is regarded as something almost sacred.

The next set of plays he published, The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays, in 1931 saw a

remarkable improvement in quality. Three major items in the book, one of them the title piece, share a technical device that he later uses in his longer play, the appearance of a narrator. He also manages to overcome the problem of having his subject bound to specific time and place, something he had earnestly been aiming at since his refusal of contemporary play standards.

Thornton Wilder's reputation as a playwright rests on three plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker. From a literary point of view that last one is the least interesting, since it is a straightforward comedy with no technical innovations. The reason for its being frequently published together with the other two is that it inspired a very sucessful musical adaptation, Hello, Dolly!

The plot in Our Town is very thin. It centers mainly on the lives of two provincial families, the Gibbs and the Webbs. The environment, rural Midwestern, is truly American. But the question is: are we facing a very local play, in contradiction with what its author himself complained about? Not so, because Wilder, thanks to the use of ingenious stage-craft and allusive dialogue manages to transcend daily living in a very provincial town and to achieve the dramatic rendering of the importance of life itself.

Apparently nothing much happens. The children grow up and, in due course, George Gibb and Emily Webb fall in love, they marry and poor Emily dies in childbirth. Finally, she fulfills her wish of coming back from the dead to witness again her twelfth birthday. The experience is rather frustrating, but it helps to show the audience the immense value of every minute of our lives.

The unrealistic presentation, using the

alienation techniques we mentioned before, manages to give the play intellectual and emotional dimensions far above the plot's anecdote. At the beginning of Our Town the STAGE MANAGER addresses the audience and informs them about the title of the play, its author and the name of the very theatre-hall where it is being performed. By using this device Wilder wanted to break the illusion of reality. It is like saying, " this isn't my life in the streets, this is fiction, a performance that comments upon life." The STAGE MANAGER explains several events in the play, in a way of a synthesis that avoids the actual stage scenes. It's a narrative technique that reduces dramatic rendering to the most essential episodes.

Just after we watch Doctor Gibb, one of the characters appearing for the first time in the play, as he comes down the main street back from helping to deliver a child, the STAGE MANAGER tells that Gibb died in 1930, that the new hospital was named after him and that his wife had died before 1930 of pneumonia. Does this kind of anticipation endanger the impact of the play? Well, it's a matter of one's personal taste, but, anyway, Our Town aims at a higher level of understanding and, in fact, it works very well on stage. It has been performed successfully many times and in several countries since it was first produced in 1938.

Thornton Wilder's reverence for life becomes all the more evident at the end of the play, after EMILY's brief visit to the world of the living:

> EMILY: ... Good-bye, Good-bye, world. Good-bye, Grover's Corners... Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths...and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

Once she is again among the dead, her visit to the "other world" brings forth several comments from the other souls in the cemetery.

EMILY: I'm ready to go back.
(She returns to her chair beside Mrs. Gibb. Pause.)

MRS. GIBB: Were you happy?

EMILY: No..., I should have listened to you. That's all human beings are! Just blind people.

MRS. GIBB: Look, it's clearing up. The stars are coming out.

EMILY: Oh, Mr. Stimson, I should have listened to them.

SIMON STIMSON: (With mounting violence; bitingly:)
Yes, now you know! Now you know. That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those...of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centred passion, or another. Now you know -that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to.Ignorance and blindness.

MRS. GIBB: (spiritedly:) Simon Stimson, that ain't the whole truth and you know it. Emily, look at that star. I forget its name.

Local American atmosphere is reconciled with the universal theme of life and death. But Wilder, although his language sounds vernacular, is an artist with an international schooling - after his college education in the U.S.A. he also studied in

Europe - a true cosmopolitan, as the subject of his novels reveal. His wide knowledge of the classics surfaces in his writing, which is full of literary allusions and even quotations. He himself has acknowledged that the goings on among the dead in the third act of Our Town were inspired by the 8th Canto in the Purgatorio of Dante's Divina Comedia 6

An obvious literary allusion in the play is the use of a character called PROFESOR WILLARD. George Willard is the key figure in Winesburg, Ohio, the set of tales with recurrent characters that Sherwood Anderson wrote, narrating mainly the frustrations of the inhabitants of a small town. In Anderson's stories, George is a promising reporter who wants to get away from the callousness of his environment. In Wilder's play ironically the young dreamer has turned into a boring scholar, who manages to see Grover's Corners only from a dry geological and paleontological point of view.

The Skin of Our Teeth is a more ambitious play, which tries to depict Man in his struggle through centuries of hardships and occasional satisfactions. The play had its first night in 1942 and with it Thornton Wilder won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, his third one, since in 1927 he had been awarded the same prize for his novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, and in 1938 the first Pulitzer for drama, thanks to the critical acclaim dispensed to Our Town.

In The Skin of our Teeth Man is represented by George Antrobus, outstanding citizen in his community. Although the environment in Act I seems very local, Excelsior, New Jersey, the actions are valid as a synthesis of the whole history of Humanity. The local flavour is contrasted with frequent references to biblical sources and historical events, like the Ice Age and the Big Flood.

The play is presented by an ANNOUNCER in much the same way as the STAGE MANAGER introduced Our Town, but the universal significance is keenly stressed from the very beginning. The ANNOUNCER acts somehow like a radio anchorman, informing the audience of the News Events of the World. The farcical tone of the play is rapidly established:

> The Society for Affirming the End of the World at once went into a special session and postponed the arrival of that event for twenty-four hours.

The universal dimensions of its scope is established just as quickly. In a New York Theatre, the ANNOUNCER informs, the cleaning women have found a lost wedding ring inscribed: "To Eva from Adam, Genesis II: 18."

The main characters are modeled on biblical figures, Adam and Eve, although the actual names of the couple are Mr. and Mrs. George Antrobus. Antrobus, of course, is a variation on the Greek name for Man. The play even casts the fallen woman, the outsider, the temptress, who tries to break up the marriage of the standard couple. Her name is Sabina, in a classical reference, emphasized by the fact that Mr. Antrobus kidnapped and raped her. At the beginning of the play she has fallen from the position of a well-provided mistress to that of a downtrodden housemaid, but in the second act she appears as the winner in a beauty contest under the name of Miss Lilith Sabina Fairweather, a clear allusion to Lilith, Adam's first wife, according to some biblical sources. To round up the parallelism, Henry, Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus's only living son, has previously killed his brother with a stone and turns out to be a very aggresive and unruly child. The play also welcomes other historical and mythical figures, like Moses, Homer and the Muses, among the dispossessed that roam the streets of

America and seek asylum in Antrobus's home. Justly so, because in his chronicle of Man's past and present Wilder couldn't afford to ignore the bleak socioeconomical situation in his country, which was recovering from the depression and became engaged in WWII.

> .... The REFUGEES are typical elderly out-of-works from the streets of New York today. JUDGE MOSES wears a skull cap, HOMER is a blind beggar with a guitar. The seedy crowd shuffles in and waits humbly and expectantly.... [7]

The play is structured around three events that might have endangered the continuity of the human race. In Act I it is the Ice Age, in Act II the Universal Flood, in Act III Total War. Nevertheless, some human beings, led by Mr. Antrobus, inventor of the wheel, the alphabet and other useful devices, manage to overcome all the hardships. The Skin of Our Teeth is, therefore, an allegory of the survival of Humanity, written in a humourous style, in order to make the moral lesson all the more entertaining.

Shortly after The Skin of Our Teeth had its first night, two critical scholars, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, accused Thornton Wilder of plagiarism. They insisted that the play had taken James Joyce's idea for Finnegan's Wake and given it a vulgar treatment, which was a disgrace to its source of inspiration.[8]

Wilder had never denied his admiration of the iconoclastic Irish writer. He had been reading Joyce's last novel while writing the play and admitted to having quoted, more or less directly, some of its lines, but to go as far as to say that The Skin of Our Teeth was a cheap rendering of

Finnegan's Wake was stretching matters too much.

The idea of a character representing All Men and the idea of action showing his progress through right and wrong are as old as the hills. In the English speaking theatre you can go as far back as the medieval Everyman to find that same kind of vision. On the other hand, the use of myth and cyclical presentation wasn't anything new either.

In the history of drama many stories, characters, and even stage effects are recurrent. Wilder had been inspired by Joyce in earlier plays and he was never against dipping into the tradition of the classics. For instance, the technical device of one or another character interrupting the action in order to comment on the actual performance had been very popular in some XVIIIth century English plays, such as Pasquin by Fielding and The Critic by Sheridan. Moreover, since then there have been multiple cases of metadrama.

Thornton Wilder didn't mind looking for inspiration in former literature. What truly worried him was that drama had lost its mythical touch and universal dimensions, so he strove wholeheartedly to recover the old transcendentalism, but also aimed at not being too highbrow, and tried to make his language understandable to his general audience. And we must admit that Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth are two remarkable achievements in this field.

However, before we close this lecture, let me supply you with one more example of Wilder's admiration and love for western theatrical tradition, especially the stages of England and Spain in the XVIth century:

> The fact that Lope de Vega wrote well over 500 plays does not in itself establish him as a great dramatist; but when we come to see that

this immense output was itself an aspect of his nature - inexhaustable, creative, impassioned, adaptable, amused, devout, patriotic - it is apparent that the quantity enriched rather than diminished the quality. From 1620 to his death in 1635, the masterpieces became increasingly frequent, though he wrote plays of the first order as early as 1608. Some are vast frescoes from Spanish history (he went back as far as the Visigoths for subjects); some are dramatizations of crimes which recently had engrossed the public, some like THE SHEPHERDS WELL, are powerful blows for socialjustice; some have rare poetic tenderness (his is the best telling of the story that Maeterlinck wrote as SOEUR BEATRICE and that Reinhardt staged as THE MIRACLE;) some, like THE GARDENER'S DOG are high comedy of the finest silver pen; many are light-hearted dramas of love and honor and loyalty.

It is not the fault of many great dramatists that their works are not easily assimilable by us today; other gulfs than time separate us from Euripides and Terence, Racine and Goldoni, The Japanese Noh and Goethe. Many of the conventions that govern Spanish drama of the Golden Age seem artificial to us, as ours would be to that audience.

El Caballero de Olmedo, however meets us more than half way. Lope wrote many times the figure of the old woman who inserts herself into homes as a go-between among lovers, but never with a sharp relish that he here brings to Fabia. It is a mark of his range that in this same play he can give us also a scene that leaves an ache about the heart - in which the hero in his lone night-ride hears a voice in the distance singing a ballad which is a premonition of his death.[9]

Notas

1 Our Town, Penguin Plays, 1984, p. 25.

2 Ibid., 25-26.

3 The beginning of The Skin of Our Teeth, in the same edition as Our Town of Penguin Plays, together with The Matchmaker.

5 (Middletown, Con.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), pp. 12-13.

6 In a letter to Mrs. Baker, addressed in March, 1938, which is kept in the Yale Library Collection of American Literature. Yale was Wilder's university. Mrs. Baker's husband, George Pierce was the famous founder of "47 Workshop" at Harvard, the rival academic institution.

7 Penguin Plays, p. 119.

8 "The Skin of Our Teeth." Saturday Revue of Literature (december 19, 1942, and February 13, 1943).

9 Reproduced by John D. Mitchell in The Theatre: The Seach for Style, (Midland, Michigan: Northwood Institute Press, 1982), ps. 122-123.