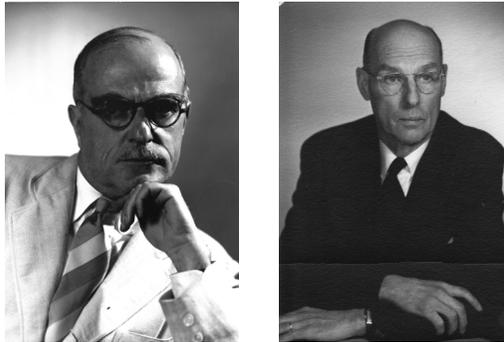


Thornton Wilder & Amos Wilder

Writing Religion in Twentieth-Century America



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Introduction

Brothers in Arms

The plays and novels of Thornton Wilder have often attracted religious interpretations. These interpretations, however, are profoundly ahistorical and have ignored significant elements of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century context of Wilder's work as well as their historical settings. In doing so, such explications have failed to reveal Wilder's pervasive sense that religious themes are always contested and always shaped by historical forces. In other words, an individual's apprehension of the sacred is dynamic rather than static, and the manifestations of the sacred are plural rather than monist. Further, most critics have ignored the most immediate religious context for Wilder's work: the scholarship of his brother, Amos Niven Wilder, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, an ordained minister, a biblical scholar, and a published poet. Both brothers saw themselves in a battle, not against the modern age, but against those who would, consciously or not, reduce faith to antiquarian interest.

In his introduction to *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays* (1928), Thornton Wilder describes how he began to come up with titles for the plays in the collection while he was in his teens and wrote many of them while still an undergraduate at Oberlin and Yale. This not only indicates how early Wilder discovered his vocation as a writer, but it also shows his initial and ongoing interest in diverse religious traditions; among the early titles that turned into plays are

“Brother Fire” (featuring Brother Francis, a character obviously derived from Saint Francis) and “Proserpina and the Devil” (a puppet show that synthesizes Greek and Christian mythology).¹ Many of the plays seem anachronistic for the 1920s, and Wilder’s description of some of the subject matter is presented as a challenge to accepted literary and social practices of the time:

The last four plays here [“Mozart and the Gray Steward,” “Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job?” “The Flight into Egypt,” “The Angel That Troubled the Waters”] have been written within a year and a half. 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. But these four plant their flag as boldly as they may. . . . 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 repellant didacticism. (*CP*, 653–54)

This statement provides an explicit justification for critics interested in Wilder’s religious beliefs. One biographer, Richard Goldstone, sees Wilder as ultimately a nineteenth-century man who, despite his enormous erudition, world travels, and literary experimentalism, was very much the product of his father’s earnest New England, Congregationalist background: “We must remember that Wilder’s world was essentially the world of the nineteenth century; he was born before 1900 and the old century conditioned his moral and spiritual Weltanschauung, together with that of all his intimates.”² Exactly why being born in 1897 restricts one to a nineteenth-century worldview is unclear. But even more important, Goldstone ignores elements of the nineteenth century that, for better or worse, shape most of us in important ways even in the twenty-first century: the nineteenth century of Darwin, Marx, Frazer, Nietzsche, and, at the turn of the century, Freud; the nineteenth century in which the developing sciences of astronomy and geology threatened to turn humanity into a meaningless cosmic accident, and in which the individual felt himself dwarfed by the immensity of space and time.

Moreover, Lincoln Konkle also argues that Goldstone's characterization of Wilder as a Puritan is both ill informed and pejorative. Nevertheless, Konkle, too, insists that "the tradition Wilder's drama and fiction stem from is heavily doctrinal, Puritan, and didactic."³ Konkle is surely right to see traces of the Puritan heritage in Wilder's work; few American writers escape the Puritan legacy, just as few can escape the philosophical traditions of pragmatism. Both are simply part of the culture, absorbed by osmosis; and this is true whether one was raised Protestant, Catholic, Jew, agnostic, or atheist. Wilder himself identified in 1931 a pervasive Puritan belief that Americans feel themselves to be "permanently, directly, and responsibly bound to world destiny."⁴ But Konkle's version of Puritanism is very much that of the seventeenth-century settlers of Massachusetts. And, as Amos Wilder has shown, "There are many differing aspects and amalgams of the Calvinist and wider Protestant heritage in our society"; a part of this heritage was avowedly progressive.⁵ In any case, Wilder's introduction to *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* specifically repudiates didacticism in literature: "Didacticism is an attempt at the coercion of another's free will, even though one knows in these matters beyond logic, beauty is the only persuasion" (*CP*, 654).

Yet another critic commenting on *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, David Garrett Izzo, claims that "Wilder rejected the Christianity of his youth, even to the point of considering its dogmatic aspects ultimately deleterious to Western Civilization"; Wilder was, in fact, "a Karmi Yogi" who "believed in the Vedantic unicity of one/many, east/west, many faiths into one faith, the all in the *All* concurrently accounted for in the *eternal now* which obviates the artifice of time."⁶ All of Wilder's works, in Izzo's view, are parables of the path to "goodness." Without much effort, one could multiply examples of scholars who have explicated Wilder's works in relation to different religious or spiritual traditions. Rhea B. Miller detects the influence of the Russian Christian existentialist Nicolai Berdyaev in Wilder's later works.⁷ Thomas E. Porter sees Northrop Frye's "apocalyptic myth" in *Our Town*.⁸ And many have pointed out Wilder's close reading of Kierkegaard, with Paul Lifton and Donald Haberman offering particularly good exegeses of Kierkegaard's influence.⁹

Wilder might well have been surprised by this wide variation. In a letter to Stanley J. McCord on May 3, 1962, he confesses, “I’m always embarrassed—astonished and embarrassed—when anyone proposes doing a thesis—or a mere paper—on me. This is not from modesty but simply that I don’t see my work as sufficiently complex to afford material; it all seems sort of self-evident to me.”¹⁰ But what is striking about these divergent readings of Wilder is how compelling most of them seem, even when they are contradictory. The poetic density of his language very much repays rereading. Nor is it difficult from Wilder’s published and unpublished works to make a case for his familiarity with almost any writer one can think of. Fluent in French, German, Italian, and Spanish, he read the major works of those cultures in their original languages, and he certainly knew all the major literary and philosophical works of classical Greek and Roman civilization. He adapted Ibsen for the Broadway stage and translated Sartre for Off-Broadway. He published scholarly articles on dating the plays of the Spanish Golden Age playwright Lope de Vega in *Romance Philology* and annotated Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* obsessively. Thus, Wilder can be seen both as a central figure in an American literary tradition and as an American interacting with world literature. Indeed, he lectured on the topic of Goethe and World Literature. Few readers can share Wilder’s enormous erudition. Moreover, his career was both lengthy and productive. His first full-length play, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, was published serially in the *Yale Literary Magazine* beginning in 1919, and his last novel, *Theophilus North*, was published in 1973. If there were a unifying trope that covered all of Wilder’s career, then his works would be a great deal less interesting than they in fact are.

While Wilder’s works may unconsciously reflect an American Puritan tradition, he was very much an avowed modernist, at least formally.¹¹ In his sister Isabel’s quasi-autobiographical novel *Mother and Four*, Spencer may well be a portrait of the young Thornton at Yale:

Spencer, Carlo, and their friends lived in a busy world they had created for themselves under the patronage of the university. They were snobs in and out of term time and they were tyrants. They judged a man by his knowledge of Proust and James Joyce and D. H. Law-

rence. Spengler and *The American Mercury*—that big squarish book and that bright green magazine—were their badges. They made and broke reputations through their mouthpiece, *The Newton Literary Magazine*, known as the *Newt*.¹²

This cannot be taken as an unqualified picture of Wilder since *The American Mercury*, founded by George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken, did not begin publication until 1924, and Wilder graduated from Yale in 1920. But the rest of the list certainly sounds like what Wilder (and many other bright young men and women) would be reading at the time.

Certainly, Wilder's English themes at Yale reflect a young man's condescension toward the American intellectual and literary tradition. About Ben Franklin's *Autobiography*, the beginning of the pragmatist tradition in America, he sneers, "He is the dreadful man who would be glad to lead his life over again, 'with minor alterations.'" Wilder is just as hard on Hawthorne, clearly an important voice in the Puritan literary tradition: "As a matter of principle I view the story that is half story and half allegory with aversion; and when, proportionately, the story tends toward the realistic, and the allegory toward the heavily didactic, like the lovers in Dante, 'in that book I read no more.'" ¹³ The instructor graded that theme a B. And Wilder insists on the primacy of the aesthetic in works of fiction. About *Uncle Tom's Cabin* he writes, "There are two factors that ought not to influence a critic in the appreciation of a novel. Its economic or moral effects; the extent of its popularity" (B+).¹⁴

In the 1920s, Wilder was very much *au courant* with literary trends. Edmund Wilson discovered while riding in a taxi with Wilder that he had read Proust closely and not uncritically. He subsequently wrote a review detailing the influence of Proust on Wilder.¹⁵ Proust, in *Within a Budding Grove*, satirizes those who call for a literature that upholds social and moral standards. M. de Norpois, the earnest purveyor of moral uplift, criticizes Bergotte for his emphasis on form because "we may be overwhelmed at any moment by a double tide of barbarians, those from without and those from within our borders." M. de Norpois' criticism of "Art for Art's Sake" is that "it is all very precious,

very thin, and altogether lacking in virility.” Proust, of course, is well aware that such criticisms will be made of his own work, but he allows the reader more than a hundred pages to reflect on the claim before he dismisses it: “The arguments of M. de Norpois (in the matter of art) were unanswerable simply because they were devoid of reality.”¹⁶ All considerations in art must be secondary to aesthetic imperatives. Thus, while I believe that Wilder’s works allow us to reflect on the religious issues therein, they must be examined in the context of the modernist moment in literature, when skepticism toward conventional pieties, both religious and artistic, forced writers into new forms inspired by new ideas from economics, sociology, and psychology. Wilder was, according to Wilson writing in the late 1920s, in the first rank of American writers, along with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos.¹⁷ Although Wilder writes of historical subjects in a way that none of those writers do, they are his intellectual contemporaries, rather than New England Puritans or Eastern mystics.

I shall argue that no single religious or philosophic system can account for the variety and complexity of Wilder’s works, which are too often seen as independent of the debates over meaning and value that have raged since the decay of the great medieval synthesis in the seventeenth century. To explain what I mean by that, I would like to address the ways that Wilder sees an interest in, or focus on, religious themes as an authorial position increasingly regarded as irrelevant by the modern world, or, at least, by its educated members. Wilder admits in the quotation from *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* cited above that a “contemporary standard of good manners” requires that most of his plays be religious only in a dilute, attenuated sense. The four explicitly religious plays fly a flag that invites battle. And, later in the introduction, Wilder suggests that the battle will be difficult, perhaps hopeless: “The revival of religion is almost a matter of rhetoric. The work is difficult, perhaps impossible (perhaps all religions die out with the exhaustion of the language), but it at least reminds us that Our Lord asked us in His work to be not only as gentle as doves but as wise as serpents” (*CP*, 654). “Rhetoric” here keeps its traditional sense; it is the art concerned with persuasion or for communication on subjects

where logic is inappropriate because the subject is incapable of demonstration. But the persuasion used for religious subjects faces an uphill fight. The language of religion is almost exhausted, and the reference to Matthew 10:16—“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves”¹⁸—indicates that the religious writer, like the apostles, faces powerful opposition.

Wilder often specifically incorporates a modern skeptical attitude toward religion and religious beliefs in his works. While there are multiple examples, one will suffice to indicate the breadth of his awareness of the assault waged by some in the social sciences on the foundations of religion. In his novel *Heaven's My Destination* (1935), Burkin, the itinerant film director, convinces the hero, George Brush, to let him have half an hour so he can explain what George would know if he had gone to a decent college. Burkin is an unattractive character, but he nevertheless allows Wilder to introduce the intellectual traditions that ultimately Brush's naïve Puritanism must confront: “Burkin plunged into primitive man and the jungle; he came down through nature myths; he hung the earth in astronomical time. He then exposed the absurdity of conflicting prayers, man's egoistic terror before extinction” (*Heaven's*, 163). Freud, whom Wilder knew and whose work he respected,¹⁹ claimed in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) that “the beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art meet in the Oedipus complex.”²⁰ This is not a metaphor: Freud thought that some sons had murdered their father and then recreated the father as a totem to expiate their guilt, and that all religion flowed from this act. In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Freud insisted that religion is a product of man's ignorance, analogous to the mental states of a child:

Religion would thus be the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father. If this view is right, it is to be supposed that a turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle phase of development.²¹

Here the modern age is the point where man turns from his childhood neurosis onto a necessary path to maturity. Any attempt to hang on to religious belief is therefore not only immature; it also shows a maladjustment to reality.

But Burkin's deconstruction of religious belief does not just rely on psychoanalysis. He also, through his reference to primitive man and nature myths, introduces anthropology and Sir James Frazer's explanation of religious ritual in the immensely influential *The Golden Bough* (1890). In a letter to his mother, for which the editors of *Selected Letters* suggest a date of 1925, Wilder elaborates on Frazer's assault on religious belief:

I'm reading the *Golden Bough*, the one volume edition abridged from twelve. Tons of folklore, witch doctors, how to make it rain, May day myths, Spring ceremonies, resurrection legends . . . the evidence accumulating like a great Juggernaut trying to flatten out any particular importance that might be reserved for Christian doctrine. But the theoretical interludes are a little pompous and repetitive and there remains a chance that the notions I learned at your knee may survive.²²

The tone of the letter indicates both Wilder's interest in religious skepticism and his own intellectual balance, which his character Burkin lacks.

In Frazer's analysis of nature myths, he traces an intellectual development in humanity from magic to religion to science. Originally, man believes that he can manipulate nature by imitating its actions. Thus, man sacrifices because he sees that the corn must die to be reborn every year. When he sees that he cannot manipulate nature, he posits higher beings who arrange natural events and whom he must propitiate. Finally, he recaptures the magical belief in cause and effect, but now through scientific observation:

Thus the keener minds, still pressing forward to a deeper solution of the mysteries of the universe, come to reject the religious theory of nature as inadequate, and to revert in a measure to the older stand-

point of magic by postulating explicitly, what in magic had only been implicitly assumed, to wit, an inflexible regularity in the order of natural events, which, if carefully observed, enables us to foresee their course with certainty and to act accordingly. In short, religion, regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science.²³

Frazer subsequently develops this into an analogy of history as tapestry, with magic a black thread, religion a red one, and science a white one. White, he is quite sure, will come to dominate.

Burkin moves back historically from Freud to Frazer in his critique of religion; and when he hangs man in astrological time, he has moved back to the discoveries of the nineteenth century that so troubled Tennyson after the death of his dearest friend. Sorrow tells Tennyson of an empty, meaningless universe in *In Memoriam*:

“The stars,” she whispers, “blindly run;
 A web is woven across the sky;
 From out waste places comes a cry,
 And murmurs from the dying sun;

“And all the phantom, Nature, stands—
 With all the music in her tone,
 A hollow echo of my own,—
 A hollow form with empty hands.”²⁴

The dinosaurs have come and gone, and nineteenth-century physics has discovered the concept of entropy as symbolized here by the dying sun. Tennyson has to win back his faith in the face of grief and the destabilizing vision of modern science. That he does so indicates that the march of science is not quite so irresistible as perhaps Freud and Frazer believed it to be. Even the vegetation cults that Frazer analyzed retained acolytes in the twentieth century. The startling fact of Jessie L. Weston’s 1920 analysis of the myth of the Holy Grail in *From Ritual to Romance* (which T. S. Eliot described as a book of great interest in his notes to *The Wasteland*) is that Weston believes that the “Grail is a living force” that “will rise to the surface again.”²⁵

But granted the recurrent skeptical characters in Wilder's work, Wilder's claim in the introduction to *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* that he is a believer cannot be separated from his sense that belief itself is in danger of exhaustion with the exhaustion of religious language. To an American reader in the twenty-first century, this seems like an odd statement. It is a commonplace that Americans remain far more religious than, for instance, Europeans. Moreover, Finke and Stark have argued (somewhat controversially, I should add, granted the nature of the evidence) that despite recurring claims of religious crisis, America became progressively more religious from the rough-and-tumble colonial days to the settled twentieth century, reaching perhaps a peak in the 1920s, at least as measured by church attendance, with most of the growth occurring in conservative churches at the expense of the liberalizing mainline congregations such as the Congregationalists and Episcopalians.²⁶ Nor is there any shortage of writers in the English language in the twentieth century who were working in a wide variety of fields and genres and in whose works religious issues take a significant role: W. H. Auden, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Graham Greene, C. S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Alan Tate, and J. R. R. Tolkien were all unapologetic about their faith. The writers Philip K. Dick, Walter Miller Jr., and Clifford Simak all produced science fiction involving religious issues. If one includes once best-selling authors who perhaps no longer claim many readers, such as the historical novelists Lloyd C. Douglas (*The Robe*, 1942) or Thomas B. Costain (*The Silver Chalice*, 1952), the list could be extensively lengthened.

But I would guess that many of these writers saw themselves, like Wilder, fighting a rearguard action "against principalities, against powers" that sought to render a religious understanding of life a historical curiosity.²⁷ In Tom Stoppard's *Jumpers* (1972), George, a philosopher working on a lecture "Is God?" muses, "There is presumably a calendar date—a *moment*—when the onus of proof passed from the atheist to the believer, when, quite suddenly, secretly, the noes had it."²⁸ Skepticism about the existence of God, or at least about God's interest in human affairs, goes back to antiquity: most famously perhaps in Lucretius' *De Rerum Naturam*, which Wilder mentions reading

in a letter to his father in 1912.²⁹ But Stoppard is surely right: in the last three hundred years the skeptics have come to dominate, in intellectual circles at least. To trace the rising tide of skepticism through the Enlightenment is beyond the scope of this introduction, but it would not be difficult to document. And, of course, as Dostoyevsky had laid out by 1880, the “Higher Criticism” of the nineteenth century threatened a literal-minded faith. Father Paissy warns Alyosha “that the science of this world, which has become a great power, has, especially in the last century, analysed everything divine handed down to us in the holy books. After this cruel analysis the learned of this world have nothing left of all that was sacred of old.”³⁰

Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, originally published in 1906 and available in English translation in 1910, explores relentlessly the analysis that so troubles Father Paissy. David Friedrich Strauss, Bruno Bauer, and many others over the course of the nineteenth century had shown in enormous detail and with great scholarship the incompatibility of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) with the Gospel of John—the inevitable and mutually exclusive choice between supernatural and historical interpretations of the ministry of Jesus, and the eschatological character of Jesus’ teachings and the problem of the delay of the Parousia (the Second Coming). For an intellectually honest man, the historical Jesus “will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religion of the present can ascribe, according to its long-cherished custom, its own thoughts and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making. . . . The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma.” This does not mean the end of faith for Schweitzer: “Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from Him and in the spirit of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world.”³¹ Nevertheless, the history of biblical criticism and its identification of contradictions and accretions within the Gospel doubtless troubled many who lacked Schweitzer’s comprehensive vision. In the Irish playwright and novelist George Moore’s *The Passing of the Essenes* (1930), Paul actually meets Jesus, who has survived his crucifixion twenty years earlier. Paul is not ultimately dissuaded from his own Christianity since he believes that he has heard the word of God, and Jesus says tolerantly,

“It may be, as I have said, that my name hath crept into these reports, and that my sufferings, which were great, have been used by God for his own glory. (*He smiles.*) Paul, I would not rob thee of my name-sake.”³² Moore, who had become interested in German biblical criticism as early as 1898, presents early Christianity as a tripartite spiritual struggle between the Essenes, Paul’s insistence on the miraculous Resurrection, and Egyptian allegorical wisdom. Early versions of Moore’s exploration of the thesis appear in 1910 (“The Apostle”), 1916 (*The Brook Kerith*), and 1923 (*The Apostle*). My point here is that the doubts introduced by historical analysis had worked their way into literary circles.³³

Some of the philosophically inclined, whether pious or not, saw the loss of God, or, at least, of Christianity, as virtually accomplished from an early date. Kierkegaard writes in his diary in 1851, “I must admit that I have never seen a Christian in the strict sense of the word.”³⁴ Kierkegaard’s standards may have been impossibly high; it is not clear that Thomas Aquinas would have counted as a Christian in his view. Yet in America, Henry Adams, reflecting on his youth in and near Boston at about the same time as Kierkegaard’s entry, wondered whence religious belief had disappeared:

The boy went to church twice every Sunday; he was taught to read his Bible, and he learned religious poetry by heart; he believed in a mild deism; he prayed; he went through all the forms; but neither to him nor to his brothers and sisters was religion real. . . . The religious instinct had vanished, and could not be revived, although one made in later life many efforts to recover it.³⁵

Ultimately in Adams’s conception, increasing physical prowess (“the dynamo”) minus the binding force of religion (“the Virgin”) would lead to social disintegration. Although his autobiography was published in 1907, the 1918 reprint made Adams, in the words of Michael E. Parrish, “a posthumous member of the lost generation.”³⁶ In Europe, Max Weber, Adams’s contemporary, in 1905 traced the relationship between economics and Puritan theology and deduced that the final product was a cage of materialism: “The modern man is in

general, even with the best will, unable to give religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve.”³⁷ For both authors, the machine has swallowed the spirit.

From this perspective, even Nietzsche’s famous vatic utterances in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–1885) about the death of God take on less of a revolutionary coloring and emphasize the relatively unthreatening idea of existence in this world:

God is a conjecture: but I do not wish your conjecturing to reach beyond your creating will.

Could ye *create* a God?—Then, I pray you, be silent about all Gods! But ye could well create the Superman.

Not perhaps ye yourselves, my brethren! But into fathers and forefathers of the Superman could ye transform yourselves: and let that be your best creating!—

God is a conjecture: but I should like your conjecturing restricted to the conceivable.

Could ye *conceive* a God?—But let this mean Will to Truth unto you, that everything be transformed into the humanly conceivable, the humanly visible, the human sensible. Your own discernment shall ye follow out to the end!³⁸

In fact, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche claims that most industrious Germans “simply have no time left for religion.” While they participate in religious customs when it is required, they do so “with a patient and modest seriousness and without much curiosity and discomfort: they simply live too much apart and outside to feel any need for pro and con in such matters.” Those connected with universities fall into this category, but also “those indifferent in this way include today the great majority of German middle-class Protestants, especially in the great industrious centers of trade and traffic.”³⁹ Utilitarianism, philistinism, and the vestiges of the slave morality left by Christianity are the foes that Nietzsche sees himself fighting, because God has already left the stage of history.

H. L. Mencken, the American popularizer of Nietzsche, has a similar attitude. He is not ardently opposed to religion. Writing in

1920, he claims, “I am anything but a militant atheist and haven’t the slightest objection to church-going, so long as it is honest. I have gone to church myself many times honestly seeking to experience the great inward exaltation that religious persons speak of. Not even at St. Peter’s in Rome have I sensed the least trace of it.” Mencken illustrates that the true enemy of religious faith in the modern age is not atheism but indifference, in that he feels no indignation that religious faith still exists. Like Nietzsche, Mencken thinks that Christian morality is a significant problem: “In other words, systems of morality almost always outlive their usefulness, simply because the gods upon whose authority they are grounded are hard to get rid of.”⁴⁰ But that is largely a problem of the fact that most people, in Mencken’s view, are uneducable.

Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) is careful to stress that he is not talking about the “truth or beauty” of the prominent creeds in America; nevertheless, “economic causes work towards a secularization of men’s habits of thought.” The poor and the stupid remain religious, while the “artisan class” is moving away from the major creeds. In the middle and upper classes, religion is, to some extent, an opportunity to demonstrate conspicuous consumption. But in each case, it is clear to Veblen, that an anthropomorphic deity is a survival of archaic habits of thought.⁴¹ Unlike Veblen, Upton Sinclair makes no pretense of disinterested analysis. For him, organized religion is “a great capitalist interest, an integral and essential part of a predatory system.”⁴² In this quotation, Sinclair is speaking specifically of the Anglican Communion, but all of the creeds exist to prop up an unjust social order. Sinclair does not deny the numinous, but in a capitalist society every religion, he claims, turns into an instrument of oppression.

Not surprisingly, then, if one turns to the significant American novels of the 1920s and early 1930s, one will find no shortage of authors now freed to comment on the abuses of organized religion. On *Main Street* (1920), according to Sinclair Lewis (like Wilder a Yale man) in the novel of the same name, religion is a mechanism to enforce conformity as well as a mark of social respectability, much as Veblen argued. Dr. Kennicott is not a villain, merely the product of

Midwestern provincialism when he proclaims: “Sure, religion is a fine influence—got to have it to keep the lower classes in order—fact, it’s the only thing that appeals to a lot of those fellows and makes ’em respect the rights of property. And I guess this theology is O.K.; lot of wise old coots figured it all out, and they knew more about it than we do.”⁴³ Kennicott and his wife Carol rarely attend services themselves, since Carol is something of a rebel and Kennicott, after all, is the height of respectability and does not need religion to show his status. There is not much evidence of passionate conviction for or against religion in Gopher Prairie, at least among the propertied.

In Lewis’s direct attack on American religion, *Elmer Gantry* (1927)—dedicated to Mencken—he is closer to Upton Sinclair. The film version with Burt Lancaster, while great, depicts only a small section of the novel, Elmer’s sojourn as an evangelist, and ignores, for the most part, Lewis’s fascination with nineteenth-century biblical criticism and his rehearsals of the “contradictions” of the New Testament. The novel satirizes not only tent-show revivals but also small-town Baptist churches, big-city Methodism, the Catholic Church, Episcopalians, and the Rotary Club. All, in one way or another, are in the business of religion and profiting off the frightened and ignorant. Worse, religion responds with violence when threatened. Frank, the honest minister, is savagely beaten when he defends evolution. Still, the small-town skeptic, Lem Staples, suggests to Frank the same sort of slow decline of religion that Nietzsche and Veblen describe:

Then can you tell me why it is that nine-tenths of the really sure-enough, on-the-job membership of the churches is made up of two classes: the plumb ignorant, that’re scared of hell and that swallow any fool doctrine, and, second, the awfu’ respectable folks that play the church so’s to seem more respectable? Why is that? Why is it the high-class skilled workmen and the smart professional men usually snicker at the church and don’t go near it once a month?⁴⁴

Religion, as Nietzsche suggested and as Lewis presents it, has already become irrelevant to the artisan and professional classes.

One can see the twentieth century's aversion to old answers in writers outside the mainstream Protestant sects. James Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932–1935) was published while Thornton Wilder was teaching at the University of Chicago. In the story, Danny O'Neill, a student at Chicago, finally sees through the Catholic Church when snubbed by a priest with whom he tries to discuss his doubts: "It had made him feel that it was not merely ignorance and superstition. It was perhaps not merely a vested interest. It was a downright hatred of truth and honesty. He conceived the world, the environment he had known all his life, as lies." In Farrell's Chicago, immigrants in cafés talk about Nietzsche and Bolshevism, thus indicating the spread of antireligious views. Danny finally comes to see that "God was a mouldering corpse within his mind."⁴⁵

Michael Gold, who attacks Wilder in 1930 as the "Prophet of the Genteel Christ," respects the faith of his mother in his 1930 novel *Jews Without Money*, although he no longer believes in anything except the revolution. But the temple itself has been corrupted by the New World. The orthodox Jews of the ghetto deprive themselves and their children of food for five years to bring a true rabbi from Europe who will fight the pernicious influence of America. A conversion does occur, but not the one that the pious had in mind: "The climax came a year after his arrival. One day the Rabbi deserted his congregation. He had been offered a better-paying job by a wealthy and un-Chassidic congregation in the Bronx."⁴⁶ The rabbi himself is simply a religious entrepreneur. In Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep*, Reb Yidel Pankower, enraged by the children who do not respect him and who are becoming Americanized, vindictively reveals David's dubious parentage and thereby creates a near catastrophe.⁴⁷ David's father, in a relentless struggle with the harshness of life on New York's Lower East Side, has no time for religion at all.

Of course, religion is present in American literature not only among charlatans and pharisees. The African Americans of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and the decent, poor Southerners of *As I Lay Dying* who do what they can for the egregious Anse, have a faith that enables them to endure the pain of the world. But those are precisely the people whom savants such as Mencken regarded with

contempt. The former minister Hightower in *Light in August* (1932) identifies petrified churches as a central part of the problem: “He seems to see the churches of the world like a rampart, like one of those barricades of the middle ages planted with dead and sharpened stakes, against truth and against that peace in which to sin and be forgiven which is the life of man.” Hightower has been driven away from the church: “I am not a man of God. And not through my own choice.”⁴⁸ The educated characters in Faulkner long for a faith they no longer possess. Further, in Theodore Dreiser’s 1925 best-seller *An American Tragedy*, the faith of Clyde Griffiths’s mother and the Reverend Mc-Millan is real, although shaken by the execution of Clyde, but it is also clear that a part of Clyde’s fall is related to his faulty education as the son of a pair of street preachers. Society as a whole is much like the jury who convict him of murder, “with but one exception, all religious if not moral, and all convinced of Clyde’s guilt before ever they sat down.”⁴⁹

Granted this intellectual milieu, it is not hard to understand why Wilder’s letters show, if not estrangement from his inherited faith, at least a sense that he does not accept that faith uncritically. In 1920 he writes to his father from Paris, “When you have counted your troubles with a certain Puritan satisfaction in the reflection that the inexplicable Disposer of things has thought you worthy of trials beyond the endurance or even sympathy of most men,—leave me out.”⁵⁰ His letters to his father show both antagonism and acceptance of the older man’s views, but above all that he cannot be indifferent to religious practices. He complains to his sister Charlotte about a sermon in 1922: “Lots of foolish things were said in the sermon, but no one got up and yelled that it was too sacred a place to tell lies in, so I sat still too.”⁵¹ Most important for my purposes, Wilder insists that religion must adjust to the modern age. In 1925 he writes to his father about rereading William Law’s *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*:

It’s pretty good but God had better hurry up and raise a new devotional literature for an age of Bessemer and Radiotelegraphy—the impress of machines is more than skin-deep. My generation can no longer exclaim in the purple light of an eclipse that the heavens

declare the glory of God; eclipses aren't at all strange; we have found that space is finite and we have chased the unknowable down into the kernels of an atom. If that explodes tomorrow I shall have nothing to pin my faith to except the music of Schubert, the prose style of George Santayana, and the disinterested affection of people in New Haven. (*SL*, 177)

There are a number of elements here, including Henry Adams's thesis that the world has passed into the age of the dynamo, and an attempt to link faith to an aesthetic response to music and prose. Even the latter, however, is complicated by the reference to Santayana. In a letter to William Nichols on February 16, 1927, Wilder says that he has been reading Santayana's "*Character and Opinion in the United States*—the devil's own intelligence playing around the Puritans and other institutions All sorts of beautiful things wilt at the breath of that damned Spaniard" (*SL*, 206). Wilder is, I believe, being ironic here, and I will argue in subsequent chapters that Santayana sees a significant role for religion in American life. But the most salient point is that some new devotional literature must be created because the old rests upon an entirely different, and no longer compelling, set of assumptions.

When Thornton writes to his brother Amos in a letter probably from 1929, he admonishes him, "You better do something about churches, honey. I've just about been for the last time. . . . I *don't* ask a good sermon. Just a little instinctive spiritual discretion. And everywhere I go I am about the only young man in the house, a few old colonels, a few old profs, a few old grocers. It's serious."⁵² Thornton's bluntness to Amos, an ordained minister, is significant; unless something is done, organized religion, threatened by old age, is endangered. Wilder did not stop attending services, nor did he stop writing about the conflicting emotions that those services inspired in him. In 1937 he writes about attending the celebrity evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson's church: "But summed up: not a grain of real religious feeling, I think. Not one. But not vulgar insincerity either. It's merely that it [is] an entirely different thing: hominess, cheer, breezy cant, trite uplift poetizing, and a lot of grand style coquetry. But perhaps I should

have gone in the evening when the hysteria takes place!”⁵³ This quotation is more sympathetic than it appears. Without a sense of the sacred, the media-savvy evangelist nevertheless speaks of something sacred for which her congregation longs.

Wilder longs for it, too. He writes to Amos in a letter dated September 28, 1942:

“Simple” church attendance is very hard on me because of the hymns. City churches don’t sing those hymns. They’re the Chefoo hymns and Papa’s hymns and some Oberlin hymns. And the past rushes up and I’m unstrung. And then the “messages” begin and I turn to stone they’re so bad, and then a hymn begins and I’m turned to water. Nobody ought to be made to oscillate like that. Ain’t human.⁵⁴

The intellectual in Wilder can barely stand the sermon, but the child and young man are drawn by the music back to his religious roots. Nevertheless, before going off to service in North Africa with the Army Air Corps in 1943, Wilder writes to a friend, Bill Layton, “Went to church and was revolted with what passes for church these days (Yale University Chapel, too).”⁵⁵

A recurring theme in Wilder’s letters to his brother Amos in the 1920s is spiritual ennui. On March 7, 1927, he writes that he is reading Rilke and Spengler: “We live in an autumnal age—the ebb of joy and faith has parched the writers.”⁵⁶ The ebb of faith alludes to Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1867), where “The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full”; now, that has receded, and the poet hears only “Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar.” I do not know exactly which works by Rilke that Wilder was reading, and it should be mentioned that Rilke is not ultimately a pessimist. But melancholy pervades many of Rilke’s poems, and a sense of the loss of the numinous: “Once again let it be your morning, gods. / We keep repeating. You alone are source. / With you the world arises, and your dawn / gleams on each crack and crevice of our failure.”⁵⁷ The wish for the morning of the gods comes from the midst of the ruins of the modern age. Spengler, in his widely read work of cultural morphology, *The Decline*

of the West (1918–1923), claimed that Western civilization had reached the end of its “Faustian” age and was about to enter an age of caesars. Western “culture,” which in Spengler’s view had been alive and organic, had turned into Western “civilization,” which is dead. At such historical moments, the vibrant town is replaced by the dead city, and great art or music is no longer possible. Religion was just one of the manifestations of the now-dead Gothic spirit, and the tolerance of the modern city shows its lifelessness:

The spiritual in every living Culture is religious, has religion, whether it be conscious of it or not. It is not open to a spirituality to be irreligious; at most it can play with the idea of irreligion as Medicean Florentines did. But the megalopolitan *is* irreligious; this is part of his being, a mark of his historical position. The degree of piety of which a period is capable is revealed in its attitude toward toleration. One tolerates something either because it seems to have some relation to what according to one’s experience is the divine or else because one is no longer capable of such experience and is indifferent.⁵⁸

As in Mencken, tolerance is possible because of indifference, for Spengler the sure sign of a society about to collapse from its petrification.

In a subsequent undated letter to Amos, Wilder writes about the “extraordinary harmony & reverberation from Golden Bough to Spengler to Keyserling to Whitehead. A sad, autumnal world.”⁵⁹ The pairing of Spengler and Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* with Keyserling and Whitehead is a little odd, since neither of the latter sees religion as dead, but merely as something under enormous pressure to change. Alfred North Whitehead in the Lowell Lectures of 1925 does observe that “there has been a gradual decay of religious influence in European civilization. Each revival touches a lower peak than its predecessor, and each period of slackness a lower depth.” Without reference to Veblen, Whitehead makes a somewhat similar point: “Religion is tending to degenerate into a decent formula wherewith to embellish a comfortable life.”⁶⁰

It should be stressed that Whitehead sees the advent of science as by no means incompatible with the religious spirit, but that science does require that religion discard medieval fancies. Count Hermann Keyserling, something of a cult figure in the 1920s, also is not ultimately pessimistic and sees mankind as capable of combining Western individualism with Eastern spirituality. But the American is the most Western of all Western men, and at his worst represents the depths to which man can sink: "What is terrible in Americanism is that it makes a man a pauper. Just as it reduces all values to one of quantity, so it reduces the whole soul to one apparatus for the purpose of making money. It thus pushes man back to the level of the lowest animal."⁶¹ Behaviorism in psychology and pragmatism in philosophy and education (which Keyserling sees as uniquely American approaches to their subjects) both treat man as an animal to be conditioned to appropriate behavior. Western society can either go forward or backward, but forward only if it realizes that progress in ideas must take precedence over material accumulation.

Bearing in mind the elements of irreligion in the *zeitgeist*, and with evidence from Wilder's letters that he perceived signs of religious crisis, I would suggest that while *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* is, as Wilder claimed, a series of religious plays, thematically they represent more suffering than consolation, and they are by no means consistent.⁶² Some of the collection are unproblematic in that they represent Romantic and Victorian idealism of the sort with which any American schoolboy growing up in the early twentieth century would have been familiar; Paul Lifton is surely correct when he claims that Neoplatonic concepts inform much of the collection.⁶³ In "Nascuntur Poetae," the yet unborn poet is told the price of his gift: "For you there shall be ever beyond the present a lost meaning and a more meaningful love" (*CP*, 6); this obviously recalls Wordsworth's ode "Intimations of Immortality." A similar Romantic Platonism is present in "Centaur" and will recur many years later in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. The character Shelley explains that Ibsen's *The Master Builder* is really derived from one of his unwritten poems: "Well it is not a strange idea, or a new one, that the stuff of which masterpieces are made drifts about the world waiting to be clothed with words. It is a truth that

Plato would have understood that the mere language, the words of a masterpiece are the least of its offerings” (*CP*, 31). And “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” is Wilder’s play on the same subject as Robert Browning’s poem. Because Roland has so busied himself with the great affairs of life, the enigmatic character of the Dark Girl plays with him before allowing him entrance: “Take courage, high heart. How slow you have been to believe well of us. You gave us such little thought while living that we have made this little delay at your death” (*CP*, 29). But Roland’s belief that there are consolations in death (the dark tower)—“They say that on the outside you are dark and unlovely, but that within every hero stands with his fellows and the great queens step proudly on the stair” (*CP*, 28–29)—is unchallenged if unconfirmed.

On the other hand, many of the playlets lack nineteenth-century optimism about stable Platonic forms and life as a strenuous but surmountable test. Human nature both mocks and is drawn to the divine in other plays. Satan tells Christ in “Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job?” that mankind will always turn to him: “Learn again, Prince, that if I were permitted to return to the earth in my own person, not for thirty years, but for thirty hours, I would seal all men to me and all the temptations in Heaven’s gift could not persuade one to betray me. For I build not on intermittent dreams and timid aspirations, but on the unshakable passions of greed and lust and self-love” (*CP*, 49). Whether one is religious and sees the passions as a consequence of sin, or simply as facts of human nature (as would the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes), the truth is that these passions surely exist. Satan’s error and the cause of his hubris is his belief that these passions constitute the totality of human motivations. Judas recants and says to Satan, “Accursed be thou, from eternity to eternity” (*CP*, 50). Moreover, the love of Christ for “my beloved son” Judas stands as a reproach to Satan, who remains “uncomprehending”—that even Judas is drawn to God is beyond Satan’s assertion that mankind is driven entirely by motives of self-interest. This is a conventional statement of the transformational force of divine love.

But elsewhere Wilder enacts the anthropologist’s conception of the invention of worship. In “The Angel on the Ship,” three characters dying of thirst confess their sins to the vessel’s figurehead, which they

have named “the Gawd of the Atlantic”; the figurehead stares forward, but in desperation they turn it aft to face the deck and kneel before it. Fear makes them seek forgiveness for their sins, but when another ship sails into sight, they begin to repudiate their idol:

VAN (*His eye falls on the angel*): What’ll they say to the figgerhead here?

SAM (*Sententiously*): But that’s the great God Lily. Her’s saved us. You ain’t goin’ to do anything to her?

VAN (*Starting to beat the angel forward with his hammer*): They’ll call us heathen, bowin’ down to wood and stone. Get the rope, Sam. We’ll put her back. (*CP*, 22–23)

On one level this is the commonplace that man seeks the divine when it suits him and recants when he reaches safety. As such, it is similar to the Hemingway vignette in *In Our Time* (1925). Under shelling the soldier prays, “*Christ please please please christ. If you’ll only keep me from getting killed I’ll do anything you say. I believe in you and I’ll tell every one in the world that you are the only one that matters. Please please dear jesus.*” The shelling stops. “*The next night back at Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. And he never told anyone.*”⁶⁴ The vestiges of religious belief may remain, however, because of the purely coincidental arrival of the desired result. In “The Angel on the Ship,” not only does Sam wish to continue to venerate the idol, but Minna says, “But I can’t never forget her and her great starey eyes. Her I’ve prayed to” (*CP*, 23). In this playlet the reader sees how gods are created and why people are loath to discard them.

Wilder also dramatizes the messy historical process of syncretism. The puppet show of “Proserpina and the Devil,” which takes place in Venice in 1640, is a miniature of the phenomenon and shows how heterogeneous elements conglomerate in the Renaissance. Hermes and the Archangel Gabriel are one character, as are Pluto and the medieval Satan. Proserpina offers a pomegranate to her lord “*With an odd recollection of the Garden of Eden*” (*CP*, 9). The Manager regards the chaos with indifference: “Hurry through with it,” he tells the manipulators, “I’m off for a cup of wine” (*CP*, 8). Rather than showing the similarity of religious systems, which could conceivably imply

“unicity” of beliefs, the playlet suggests the loss of belief itself. As the stage collapses at the end, “*The Archangel falls upon the pavement and is cherished by gamins unto the third generation; the Devil rolls into the lake; Proserpina is struck by a falling cloud, and lies motionless on her face; Demeter by reason of the stiffness of her brocade stands upright, viewing with staring eyes the ills of her daughter*” (CP, 9–10). Religious icons are reduced to unmoved and unmoving puppets. Wilder’s artistic lineage here extends back to Browning’s dying bishop, who sees no distinction between the classical icons and Christian texts that will decorate his tomb. Venice in Wilder’s playlet represents a mercantile culture appropriating classical and Christian symbolism in an inept puppet show for children. For religion to survive this, it would have to be reinvented. Nor do established churches fare well in the collection. In “Fanny Ottcott,” George Atcheson, the bishop of Westholmstead, visits the title character, a former actress and former lover. He, an arrant hypocrite, wants to make a public confession of his sin and comes to consult with her because of her reputation at court and in the church. She is disappointed and contemptuous: “You have borrowed your ideas from those who have never begun to live and who dare not” (CP, 13).

And even when Wilder bases a play (or its title anyway) on an overtly religious text, “And the Sea Shall Give Up Its Dead”—from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer for burial at sea—he challenges conventional piety. The dead, in a clear precursor of *Our Town*, lose their personalities at the Last Judgment. The Empress reflects:

We still cling obstinately to our identity, as though there were something valuable in it. This very moment I feel relics of pleasure in the fact that I am myself and no one else. Yet in a moment, if there is a moment, we shall all be reduced to our quintessential matter, and you, Mr. Nissem, will be exactly indistinguishable from me. God himself will not be able to tell the Empress of Newfoundland from the Reverend Dr. Cosroe. (CP, 39)

The souls are “panic-stricken.” This does not mean that the collection as a whole denies an afterlife: the plays of Malchus and Childe Roland imply the immortality of the individual soul. Nor is the idea that the

soul dissolves into the cosmos a particularly new one. Edgar Allan Poe in *Eureka* (1848) rhapsodizes about just such an event: “Think that the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness—that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah.”⁶⁵ That is, the universe, both man and matter, is the diffused God, and God will cyclically reunite in one supreme consciousness.

Nevertheless, it is a painful idea for many. Tennyson is horrified in *In Memoriam* to think that his dear friend A. H. H. might be swallowed up in some oversoul: “Remerging in the general Soul / Is faith as vague as all unsweet” (Section 47). And the great Catholic existentialist Miguel de Unamuno, whose work Wilder knew, dismissed the entire idea: “All this talk of a man surviving in his children, or in his works, or in the universal consciousness, is but vague verbiage which satisfies only those who suffer from affective stupidity, and who, for the rest, may be persons of cerebral distinction. For it is possible to possess great talent, or what we call great talent, and yet be stupid as regards the feelings and even morally imbecile.”⁶⁶ “And the Sea Shall Give Up Its Dead” may well provoke religious meditation, but it is not of a comforting sort. Of course, if the world is only material, then the ego is extinguished in death. But this playlet suggests that even if the world is not reducible to the material, the ego may *still* be extinguished.

The conventional piety of playlets such as “Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job?” and the implicit skepticism of ones closer to “The Angel on the Ship” are compatible within the paradox of Christianity. That is, the scandal of the Cross, where the Son of God dies like the lowest criminal, is by its nature both absurd and redemptive. In “Now the Servant’s Name Was Malchus,” Malchus requests that his name be removed from the Bible because he feels ridiculous whenever someone reads about his ear being cut off. Our Lord responds that he is himself ridiculous:

OUR LORD: Ridiculous because I suffered from the delusion that
after my death I could be useful to men.

MALCHUS: They don’t say that!

OUR LORD: And that my mind lay under a malady that many a doctor could cure. And that I have deceived and cheated millions of souls who in their extremity called on me for the aid that I had promised. They did not know that I died like any other man and their prayers mounted into vain air, for I no longer exist. My promises were so vast that I am either divine or ridiculous. (*Pause*) Malchus, will you stay and be ridiculous with me? (*CP*, 42)

The accusations that Our Lord makes against himself are those of the modern age diagnosing Jesus' delusions. And the playlet begins with Our Lord being told by Gabriel of prayers seeking his aid; and one of those praying at the beginning will be arriving soon, we are told at the end, indicating that Our Lord decided not to answer them. But far from seeing the playlet as commenting on Our Lord's irrelevance, or denying his own divinity, the obvious echo here is of 1 Corinthians 1:25: "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men." To modern doubt, the response is only that of faith. Belief has nothing to do with prayer, at least not in the sense of receiving divine aid.

The difficulty of faith is expressed by the ordinary donkey carrying Mary and the infant Jesus in "The Flight into Egypt." Hepzibah, the donkey, brings up the problem of evil: "I always say to the girls; Girls, even in faith we are supposed to use our reason. No one is intended to swallow hook, line, and sinker, as the saying is. Now these children that Herod is killing, Why were they born since they must die so soon? Can anyone answer that? Or put it another way; Why is the little boy in your arms being saved while others must perish?" (*CP*, 52). Mary interjects that Herod's soldiers are gaining and that "my child will be slain while you argue about Faith," but the donkey wants her to concede that this is a purely personal motive and in no way addresses the Problem of Evil: "Of course, your child is dearer to you than others, but *theologically speaking*, there's no possible reason why you should escape safely into Egypt while the others should be put to the sword, as the Authorized Version has it. When the Messiah comes these writings will be made clear, but until then I intend to exercise

my reasoning faculty” (*CP*, 52). Hepzibah does come to see that she must put forth her best efforts to save the child, but she also marvels at the strangeness of creation: “Well, well, it’s a queer world where the survival of the Lord is dependent upon donkeys, but so it is.” The donkey asks Mary for help—“It’s this matter of faith and reason, madam. I’d love to carry back to our group of girls whatever you have to say about it”—and Mary can only respond, “Dear Hepzibah, perhaps someday. But for the present just do as I do, and bear your master on” (*CP*, 53). We can only hope for knowledge, taking it on faith that the works required to serve the Lord do make sense.

And true faith requires an unworldliness that most people cannot face, as exemplified in “Brother Fire” and its central character, Brother Francis. Wilder, writing to his sister on March 10, 1922, complains that their father had given \$35 to a “chinaman” at a time when both Thornton and Charlotte were contributing to their parents’ upkeep: “Providence was honestly vexed at some of the self-deprivations of St. Francis; it always drove her to exhausting ingenuities, ways of providing him with material things of which he presently and gaily dispossessed himself.”⁶⁷ In the playlet, Brother Francis holds his cloak in the flames until it catches fire. Annunziata rips it from him and throws it on the fire before Brother Francis is burned. She points out that it is illogical to kill animals for their pelts and then toss them in the fire, to which Brother Francis responds, “Bring me not logic, sister. She is the least of the handmaids of Love. I am often troubled when she speaks” (*CP*, 17). That he is “troubled” by logic is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, logic makes it hard for him to hear Love. On the other, it points out that there is a cost to his search for divine Love.

Even where the playlets suggest, for instance, the operation of divine providence, doing the right thing is rarely pleasant. In “The Message and Jehanne,” a ring inscribed with verses is misdelivered to a young woman about to marry “a great German with fierce eyebrows” (*CP*, 24), who is obviously jealous and possessive. The verses, meant for the jeweler’s sweetheart, make the young woman realize that her marriage would be loveless and so she flees: “It has broken my will. I am in flight for Padua. My family are truly become nothing but sparrows and God will feed them” (*CP*, 26). If this is providence, then it

comes with a high price for Jehanne and her family. The play is set in Renaissance Paris; she has broken a marriage agreement at a time when marriage defines a woman's place in society. Her family will be destroyed by the flight unless there is divine intervention, and the play ends with foreboding.

To sum up, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* and its title playlet are about the suffering of the believer, his doubt, and the pain that enables him to help others because he understands them. The angel asks the Newcomer in the title playlet, "Without your wound, where would your power be?" (CP, 56), and the wounds of apparent chaos, obstacles to faith, and weak human nature are dramatized but not healed. No doctrine, whether Puritan or some version of Eastern mysticism, is affirmed. The playlets are about great religious themes, but they do not provide any pat answers. In fact, one might say that they affirm doubt as a part of spiritual growth. Difficult and demanding, they are very much at home in the intellectual landscape of the 1920s.

Beyond locating Wilder in the context of the angst of the believer in what appeared to be an increasingly secular age, we need to examine Wilder's ideas alongside those of his brother Amos. Indeed, Amos Niven Wilder is immensely interesting in his own right.⁶⁸ Ordained as a Congregationalist minister, he finished his doctorate at Yale in 1933; a version of his thesis was subsequently published under the title *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teachings of Jesus* (1939; rev. 1950 and 1978). This was just the beginning of a prolific and distinguished academic career. He taught at Hamilton College, Andover-Newton Theological School, and Chicago Theological Seminary (which was affiliated with the University of Chicago), and he was named Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, the oldest endowed chair in the United States. He was an important scholar of the New Testament and also a pioneer in the use of the techniques of literary criticism to analyze the Bible. He published four individual volumes of poetry as well as a collection of his poetic works. And, perhaps most interesting for my purposes, Amos wrote a number of books on religion and modern literature from the perspective of a poet, a Christian, and a very much up-to-date critic and scholar.⁶⁹ As a critic he was a sensitive interpreter of modern poetry. As a scholar he was intimately familiar with the revo-

lution in biblical studies that occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which forced a reinterpretation of the Bible in terms of its historical context.⁷⁰

His experiences in the First World War forced Amos to think about religious and literary transformations. While a student at Yale, he volunteered for the American Ambulance Hospital in Paris in 1916. After service in Paris, he transferred to the American Field Service, where he drove ambulances at the front in the Argonne and in Macedonia. When the United States entered the war, he enlisted in the Army and served in the field artillery, seeing action in a number of major battles.⁷¹ In the context of a discussion of the new poetry, Amos describes how he felt in biblical terms: “For our part, it seems to us that we met Leviathan in the thickets of the Villers-Cotterets in 1918.”⁷²

Virginia Woolf famously asked in *A Room of One's Own*, “When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other's eyes that romance was killed?” For Woolf and her circle, the poetry of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti speaks in a language and of a world that is gone. Amos Wilder shared this experience. In an interview in 1977 he told Kendig Brubaker Cully that “as a World War I ambulance driver and private I began to be dissatisfied with the genteel Victorian tradition we were brought up in, an experience shared by many of that generation.”⁷³ Certainly, the war left an emotional mark on Amos that lasted for years after he was mustered out. By August 1918, he recollected decades later, “I must have had some kind of radical depletion, made up of battle fatigue, sleeplessness, and nervous strain. Duties had to be pursued under a kind of cloud and excessive burden. Apart from those who censored my letters and any routine medical checkup, none could suspect what was a kind of chronic anguish in my condition.”⁷⁴ The effects of the nervous exhaustion—which would probably be diagnosed now as post-traumatic stress disorder—lasted for years. Their father writes to Thornton, in a letter dated February 13 but without a year, while Thornton was teaching at Lawrenceville, “The war has left a mark, apparently—he [Amos] does his work, is pleasant, but apart from his studies no action as yet.” In a letter dated April 17, probably from the same year, their father again writes to Thornton about Amos:

Dr. Blumer looked Amos over and says he is all right, barring war effects and will be all right. He says some intimation that Ojai Valley Church may want him—that looks good to me. Of course it confuses me that the boy seems to lack interest in many of the conventional things of the ministers' calling; yet he is so bed-rock in character that all must be right: and will come out right.⁷⁵

Amos's father could not see how much of an adjustment that his son had to make to reintegrate himself into American life. Reflecting on his first experience of seeing troops on the way to the front and the dehumanizing experience of war, Amos remembered: "Our reactions of the time did, indeed, anticipate, what became general in the sequel of World War I, a recognition of how superficially and fraudulently the rhetoric of patriotism and heroism and sacrifice had been invoked."⁷⁶ Doubt was a part of the legacy of the war, and any response to central issues required an honest recognition that attitudes had changed.

The war brought religion close to the minds of Amos and those with whom he served, and sometimes it was a revelation of ignorance. In December 1917 he writes, "A fellow about here is prophesying the end of the war in February, based on Revelation xiii [*sic*], which he expounds with huge superstition. I am astounded at the combination of ignorance and moldy superstition one finds if Christianity is raised in company like this."⁷⁷ Amos, an alumnus of Oberlin and Yale, was an educated Christian, and the war revealed to him that that group was a smaller one than he had supposed. But at the same time he writes home in September 1918 that some religious virtues are strengthened by combat experience: "There is little religion in the armies but one of the most Christian qualities is widely attained among those who fight and that is humility—a sanity of self-conception that gives a tremendous amount of sincerity and expressiveness."⁷⁸

And there is a recurrent sense that beyond the inevitable cynicism, his fellow soldiers were nevertheless fighting to save civilization, and that this ennobled their cause. Amos quotes his own poem (published in 1923) inspired by the Battle of Belleau Wood fought on June 1, 1918, about how the victory had a cosmic significance:

We, bearing in us the decree of God,
 The *ne plus ultra* to the mindless urge
 Of the unordered universe, the surge
 Of Chaos, to the shelving border trod.
 Halted and turned the tide, and saw emerge,
 Again the flowering valleys from the flood.⁷⁹

The soldiers have reaffirmed God's fruitful creation against the impulse to primeval chaos. Order is God's decree, but it is the responsibility of man to preserve it. As an old man reflecting on the poem, Amos dryly admits, "No doubt any such theological reading of our actions would have been far from the thoughts of those engaged. Yet it is remarkable how generally the soldiery of all wars are persuaded that higher powers, if only fate or some vague idea of nemesis, overrule the fortunes of battle."⁸⁰ Thus, the First World War was not the death of religion for Amos as it was for some men, but it forced a re-examination of his sense of the individual's relationship to his society and his faith in a purposive universe: "The complacent premises of a settled society had been undermined and we knew that we needed an armistice in the aggressions and conflicts of our peacetime existence as well as the one we had attained."⁸¹ One difficulty, he wrote to Thornton in a letter dated June 16 and probably from 1919, was hanging on to the conviction of purpose created by the war. About the experience of reading a collection of letters written by a French soldier to his mother from the front, Amos laments: "Reading a book of letters like this reminds one of the high spirituality of danger and endurance, and makes one disgusted and discouraged with the lowering of the sky and cheapening of one's disposition even so early in the peacetime. Truly one hates comfort and luxury, for what they kill of one's high belonging."⁸²

It is possible to see Amos and Thornton's desire to write about serious things as a part of their Puritan heritage. But at the same time, both brothers share a profound vision of a changing role for religion and for literature about religion, because of the damage done to the existing structures; as Amos quotes Mary Colum, "We are living in the ruins of a world, our duty is to study the ruins."⁸³ Neither was

satisfied with the anatomy of a corpse, but both thought it necessary to know what was lost before they could create a new expression for the religious impulse in the modern world.

Throughout this book I will be using Amos Wilder's work as a gloss on Thornton Wilder's plays and novels. Amos said in an interview for a documentary that when Thornton's works are examined for religious or philosophical themes, it is unfair to hold him to the standards of a theologian. Nevertheless, those works show his intellectual background—and parts of that background are the works of Amos, although he modestly did not mention that to the interviewer.⁸⁴ Of course, this kind of thematic reading must be subordinate to the formal demands of Wilder's works, and this is especially true since so many of them were written during the ascendancy of the New Critics. I borrow unapologetically Amos's own defense of his analysis of modern poetry for its religious elements: about the New Critics he says,

I would try to keep in their good graces, first, by constantly insisting that viewed as *poetry* this material must always be judged by the aesthetic canons of poetry and not by the alleged superior spirituality or truth of its contents. But we will add that whether for better or worse this poetry abundantly evidences basic viewpoints or convictions. Such data we should be able to use for our purpose, being careful, however, as to how far we identify the particular author under consideration with the given viewpoint.⁸⁵

As long as the analysis of a writer's religious beliefs is done in the context of his intellectual milieu and formal creation, it is therefore legitimate. Thornton Wilder is a storyteller first, but a part of the story he has to tell is the place of faith, hope, and love in the modern world.

The overarching theme of this book is to understand Thornton Wilder's works historically, just as Amos Wilder's works insist that Christianity must be understood historically. In an undated letter to Thornton, Amos writes about the difficulties of ecumenical dialogue:

The basic model lies here—when Paul sees Christ on the road to Damascus (or any other initial revelation of religion) the whole

“event” can be appropriately “described” in terms of social [and] then psychological conditions, i.e. it can be empirically accounted for in *large part*. The Catholic says “sheer revelation”. The positivist says “epilepsy” or “compensation”. We should say “The Spirit finding opportunity in such [and] such social and psychic condition to make answer to an agonizing need—not of an individual only but of a social or even a racial crisis etc. etc.”⁸⁶

In Amos’s view, both the Catholic and the Positivist are reductive: the Catholic denies history, and the Positivist denies any spiritual component whatsoever. Amos believes that to understand Paul’s conversion fully, one needs also to understand when and where it occurred and the conditions that made it possible. My argument throughout this book is that Thornton Wilder’s works can be understood more fully if attention is paid to the when and where present in the works themselves, and to the historical moment in which he wrote them.

In a lecture at Wellesley on November 18, 1981, Amos recalled reactions to his works on modern literature: “I remember how puzzled people were in the church circles when I as a churchman sought to show the importance for them of the new writers.” In those works Amos Wilder repeatedly argued that nineteenth-century literary forms could not speak to the new age, and that even secular modernists spoke to the spiritual crisis of America: “I felt that these voices were kinds of prophets of the age, by whom we could read our omens plain.”⁸⁷ In the works of Thornton Wilder and Amos Wilder, we see the omens of the age in which they lived. Through their “conversation,” I would like to explore their version of the religious impulse in twentieth-century America.