

*Wilder's Joyce:
Inspiration, Borrowing, Appropriation, Plagiarism*

*O Joyce de Wilder:
Inspiração, empréstimo, apropriação, plágio*

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Abstract: *American novelist and playwright Thornton Wilder's lifelong attraction to and passion for if not obsession with the work of James Joyce has led to unintended consequences. Wilder was writing what would become his second Pulitzer Prize winning play, The Skin of Our Teeth, while in the midst of "unriddling" Joyce's final novel, Finnegans Wake. Accusations of plagiarism would subsequently arise from two major Joyce scholars, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson as they raised questions about the tipping point in creative practice, the point at which common practices of textual influence and reference cross the line into excessive borrowings and plagiarism. Such accusations, which Wilder failed to acknowledge and to fully address in a timely fashion, have lingered to his discredit and have obscured his achievements both as a playwright and a major scholar of experimental literature with a particular emphasis on James Joyce. The essay details the need to return to and to reassess the issues of Wilder's creative practice within the current theoretical climate of intertextuality and thus to reassess Wilder's pioneering work on both Ulysses and Finnegans Wake.*

Keywords: *James Joyce; Finnegans Wake; Joseph Campbell; Edmund Wilson; Thornton Wilder; The Skin of Our Teeth; Plagiarism; Intertext.*

Resumo: *A atração e a paixão do romancista e dramaturgo norte americano Thornton Wilder (se não sua obsessão) pela obra de James Joyce rendeu consequências inesperadas. Wilder estava escrevendo aquela que viria a ser sua segunda peça vencedora do Pulitzer, The Skin of Our Teeth, enquanto tentava "desemaranhar" o romance final de Joyce, o Finnegans Wake. Acusações de plágio surgiram depois, feitas por dois grandes estudiosos da obra de Joyce, Joseph Campbell e Henry Morton Robinson, que levantaram questões quanto ao*

ponto de inflexão da prática criativa, o momento em que práticas de influência e referência textual passam do limite e se tornam empréstimos excessivos, e plágio. Essas acusações, que Wilder não reconheceu e a que não deu resposta no momento, nunca foram derrubadas, para seu descrédito, e toldaram suas realizações como dramaturgo e também como um dos grandes estudiosos da literatura experimental, com uma ênfase toda especial em James Joyce. Este artigo expõe minuciosamente a necessidade de uma reavaliação das questões em torno da prática criativa de Wilder dentro da atmosfera teórica atual de intertextualidade, reavaliando assim o trabalho pioneiro de Wilder tanto com o Ulysses quanto com o Finnegans Wake.

Palavras-chave: *James Joyce; Finnegans Wake; Joseph Campbell; Edmund Wilson; Thornton Wilder; The Skin of Our Teeth; Plágio; Intertextualidade.*

In March 1941 American playwright, novelist, literary critic, translator, university lecturer in French, defender of the era's most experimental writers, like Gertrude Stein (see Burns 1996), and Joyce aficionado (see Burns 2001), Thornton Wilder, was asked, at news of Joyce's death, to write a tribute for *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (370-75). He was a natural choice given his life-long interest in or obsession with Joyce – and more broadly with modern experimental literature in general. He had, for instance, written Introductions to three of Gertrude Stein's works (Wilder 1979, 181-222). On news of Joyce's death, Wilder was telephoned "long distance" by Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry* and asked for a statement on Joyce (Wilder 1979, xvii; Feshbach, 498). In response Wilder produced something of an overview essay or eulogy, "James Joyce, 1882-1941." He would subsequently publish "Joyce and the Modern Novel," a 1954 lecture, in 1957 and "Giordano Bruno's Last Meal in *Finnegans Wake*," which appeared in *Hudson Review* in spring 1963, a distillation of some 290 pages of notes on the *Wake* (Feshbach 515). All three essays were collected posthumously by Wilder's estate and published in a volume called *American Characteristics and other Essays* (Wilder 1979, 165-180, 278-286) after Wilder's series of Norton lectures at Harvard University delivered as part of his year-long appointment as Charles Elliot Norton Professor of Poetry, 1950-51 (1-64). (T. S. Eliot had held the post in 1932-33.) Writing to Adaline Glasheen during his Norton tenure, however, he cited some friction between his Joyce work and the growing community of Joyce scholars: ". . . I found that F_____s Wake addicts are a curious brand of cats. They think everybody else is a benighted flounderer and that *they* – each one – holds the answer. They don't want to pool their insights; they don't want to contribute to a Master-Copy. I came away from the meeting very angry"¹ (Burns 2001, 3). With Glasheen, however,

Wilder found a kindred spirit, someone with whom he could share his insights and work toward a “master copy,” and he did so until his unexpected death in December of 1975, a letter to her left unfinished at his death.

Wilder references much of the tradition of contemporary experimental writing in his first novel, *The Cabala* (Modern Library 1926, rpt. 1958), dedicated to “my friends at the American Academy in Rome, 1920-1921.” In it the narrator visits an enlightened, erudite but “unbelieving” Cardinal in Rome, part of the “cabal,” and observes that “A pile of volumes lay on the table beside him: *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay*, by Oswald, Spengler, *The Golden Bough*, *Ulysses*, Proust, Freud” (106, cited in Feshbach 496). Wilder spoke as a literary critic in his own voice in the “Preface” to *Three Plays* by drawing distinctions between texts and performances, that is, contemporary theater: “I believed every word of *Ulysses* and of Proust and of *The Magic Mountain*, as I did of hundreds of plays when I read them. It was on the stage that imaginative narration became false” (Wilder 1957, viii). The depth of Wilder’s commitment to Joyce and his work is evident in the recently released letters; written between 1950 and Wilder’s death in 1975, Wilder and Glasheen share their readings of *Finnegans Wake* on paper, that is, through the mails, the letters published as *A Tour of the Darkling Plain: The “Finnegans Wake” Letters of Thornton Wilder and Adaline Glasheen, 1950-1975*. Glasheen, who would publish the *Third Census Of Finnegans Wake: An Index Of The Characters and Their Roles* two years after Wilder’s death, calls the period “the amateur age of unriddling.” As she says in her “Introduction” to *A Tour of the Darkling Plain*, “In the late 1940s some friends and I took to playing around with *Finnegans Wake*, enjoying ourselves and doing our best to unriddle bits of that difficult and entertaining book” (xiii). Characterizing this work as “amateur” or mere “playing around,” however, understates the intensity of this long collaboration, but one that reviewer Geert Lernout, citing Glasheen’s comment, accepts and repeats in his review of the volume, that is, “Glasheen and Wilder were amateurs” (Lernout 384). Wilder, of course, had been writing about, or perhaps even re-writing the *Wake* at least since its full publication in 1939, as his *Journals* reveal (Feshbach 498).

The opening paragraph in Wilder’s *Poetry* tribute lays out the tensions he saw in Joyce’s life and so in his life’s work:

Bound to Dublin in love and hate, parallel, irreconcilable, each emotion whipping on its contrary; a love that only briefly could make peace with the hatred through the operation of the comic spirit; a hatred that could only make peace intermittently, make peace with the love through the intensity of artistic creation. This unresolved love and hate recurred in every aspect of his life: it

went out towards his youth, toward the religion in which he was brought up, toward the role of the artist, toward the very phenomenon of language itself. (167).

“Like Cervantes,” Wilder continues, “Joyce groped confusedly for his subject and his form. . . . Like Cervantes, Joyce tried, unsuccessfully, poetry and drama” (168). Of the poetry, Wilder would admit its “watery musicality, a pinched ventriloquial voice,” and of Joyce’s one play he would be “astonished at the woodenness of *Exiles*” given Joyce’s expert handling of dialogue in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (168, *Poetry* 371). Brooks Atkinson would review the play for the *New York Times* in 1957, and he seemed to echo Wilder’s assessment: “It was an attempt at spiritual expression by a man who has lost faith in ‘luminous certitudes’ and is doing penance every day of his life.”

For Wilder, Joyce’s major achievement was his depiction of consciousness:

Ulysses brought a new method into literature, the interior monologue. The century-long advance of realism now confronted this task: the realistic depiction of consciousness. To realism mind is a babbling, a stream of fleeting odds and ends of image and association. Joyce achieved this method with a mastery and fullness of illustration that effaces any question of precursors. . . . Yet all art is convention, even the interior monologue. Joyce’s discovery has the character of necessity, a twentieth century necessity, and again it was wrung from him by the operation of his love and hate (168).

In the “Preface” to *Three Plays*, Wilder would celebrate the immediacy of theater’s impact with what was perhaps a nod to Marion Bloom: “Of all the arts the theatre is best endowed to awaken this recollection within us— to believe is to say ‘yes’; but in the theatres of my time I did not feel myself prompted to any such grateful and self-forgetting acquiescence” (Wilder 1957, viii).

One of the works with which Wilder attempted to redress what he deemed the falsity in contemporary theater was *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which premiered the year after Joyce died and after the *Poetry* tribute appeared. The play takes its title from the “Book of Job,” 19:20, “My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth,” and the convention-breaking, myth-driven play is laden with overt biblical imagery with a focus on the genesis of humankind. But the depth of Wilder’s commitment to the work of James Joyce upset noted Joyce scholar Joseph Campbell and novelist Henry Morton Robinson who detected other unacknowledged sources and have seen Wilder’s play as heavily derived from, at least, if not a wholesale but silent appropriation of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. That is, by 1940, Wilder was already rewriting or adapting not only biblical

but contemporary, avant-garde material from European authors for the Broadway stage, with a special focus on the work of James Joyce, in his attempt to counter the “imaginative narration [that] became false” on stage. In response to the play’s success and its nomination for the Pulitzer prize for drama, Campbell and Robinson wrote the committee to make the group aware of their findings, to no effect, however, and the committee awarded Wilder his third Pulitzer, his second for theater. Their letter to the Pulitzer committee followed up findings and accusations published in a high profile essay, “The Skin of *Whose* Teeth?”, which appeared in the *Saturday Review* barely a month after the play’s Broadway opening. Their conclusions were based on their work on the pioneering and very influential study, *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* of 1944, only a year after Joyce final novel was published, and Campbell himself would write his own short “Obituary Notice” for his university newspaper, *The Campus*, on 22 January 1941 (Campbell xxi-ii, 293n4). Work on their *Skeleton Key* led them to conclude that “Mr. Wilder’s play, *The Skin of our Teeth*, was not entirely an original composition but an Americanized recreation, thinly disguised, of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*” (257), and that such a level of borrowings in Wilder’s play, they contended, went far beyond the bounds of what was professionally and ethically acceptable: “Important plot elements,” they continue, “characters, devices of presentation, as well as major themes and many of the speeches, are directly and frankly imitated, but with the flimsy veneer to lend an American touch to the original features” (257). As they recount parallels, they note, “There are, in fact, no end of the meticulous unacknowledged copyings” (259). Wolcott Gibbs, a champion of Wilder’s play, suggested yet another source for Wilder’s borrowings. In the December of 1942 issue of *The New Yorker*, he claimed that “The truth of the matter is that, instead of being partially borrowed from Mr. Joyce’s work, ‘The Skin of Our Teeth’ was actually taken almost in toto from an early novel of my own, called ‘Nabisco’ (Roycroft Press, \$1)” (Gibbs). If that accusation sounds preposterous, the oddly named novel published by an inexistent press, it is, as Edmund Wilson points out in his reply to the Campbell and Robinson critique in *The Nation*, a reply that includes his own *Finnegans Wake* parody, which he thought to send on to Wilder as a joke, then thought better of the idea (82). Wilson points out the ineptitude of the Gibbs parody of Campbell and Robinson since it is clear to him at least that Gibbs never got beyond the first page of Joyce’s final novel. As early as 1940 Wilder and Wilson thought to collaborate on their own “key” to *Finnegans Wake* and proposed it to publisher Benjamin W. Huebsch, who had just turned down the Campbell and Robinson volume on the basis of “preliminary material.” Huebsch, who had published *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man* (1916) in the United States expressed interest in the Wilder-Wilson proposal (Niven 546). The

Campbell and Robinson essays in *Saturday Review* generated “A long, heated exchange of letters to the editor . . . most of them defending Wilder. This brought more publicity for *The Skin of Our Teeth* but some unwelcome notoriety for Wilder, who, on his lawyer’s advice, declined public comment . . .” (Niven 547).

Wilder’s publishers, however, have since jumped to the rescue to counter what amounts to an implication of plagiarism with an online blog defending the American playwright and the play popular in school curricula. Such a return to the issues tends, however, to do little more than keep the issue of plagiarism before the public:

. . . Wilder’s own reputation was seriously damaged by Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson’s entirely unjust accusation that Wilder had plagiarized James Joyce’s difficult novel *Finnegans Wake*. Campbell and Robinson’s article was believed by some because Wilder declined to defend himself, very few reporters then or now were likely to read the enormously complicated *Wake*, and the play does borrow some of its ideas from Joyce. Although the distinguished critic Edmund Wilson refuted the charge by pointing out that playwrights have always borrowed from previous writers, and differences of tone and characterization between the two works are great, for a long time the unfair aspersion lingered in memory — Robinson repeated it in 1957 in connection with another Wilder success, *The Matchmaker* [a “reworking” of *The Merchant of Yonkers*], which eventually was turned into the musical *Hello Dolly* (http://files.harpercollins.com/OMM/the_skin_of_our_teeth.html).

The comment above from the publisher’s study guide, a “Note to Teachers,” offers, at best, a tepid and perhaps misleading defense of their author to the effect that the scholarly detailed allegations from Campbell and Robinson are “believed by some because Wilder declined to defend himself.” The cause and effect here is curious if not duplicitous, since when *Saturday Review* asked Wilder for a response, he began one, but put it away. In his 1983 biography, Gilbert Harrison summarizes what Wilder might have offered in defense of such borrowings: “In that unpublished statement he explains that in deciphering Joyce’s novel the idea had come to him that one aspect of it might be expressed in drama . . .,” but he soon realized that “any possibility of dramatization was ‘out of the question’” (Harrison, 231; cited in Campbell, 265-6). And the defense attributed to the estimable Edmund Wilson “that playwrights have always borrowed from previous writers” seems more applicable to an Elizabethan stage than to that in the world of copyright, but the publisher seems to misrepresent Wilson’s “defense” as well. Wilson, in fact, doesn’t exactly “refute” the claims of Campbell and Robinson; rather, he agrees with them in large part, although

with a reservation, noting, “I did not approve of the tone of the article, but its principal contentions were true, and since they generally have been received with incredulity, I may as well produce my burlesque” (81). That parody may have been intended to deflect criticism of Wilder’s efforts, that is, we all do parodies of Joyce, say, and Wilson notes further of the accusation that “It is probably true, however – though what Wilder is trying to do is quite distinct from what Joyce is doing – that the state of saturation with Joyce in which the play was written has harmed it in certain ways: precisely, in distracting Wilder from his own ideas and effects; and that it suffers, as a serious work, from the comparison suggested with Joyce” (83-4). Wilson seems to be suggesting here that Wilder’s play contains few of “his own ideas and effects.” Furthermore, editors Burns and Gaylord also seem to miscast Wilson’s critique: “At the time, Wilder did not defend himself or his play. Edmund Wilson, an early and enthusiastic reader of *Finnegans Wake*, did, however, in an essay. . . . Wilson and Wilder had had long talks and had exchanged letters about Joyce. In a note to a reprint of his seminal essay, “The Dream of H. C. Earwicker” [a review of the novel published in *The New Republic* on 28 June 1939], Wilson writes about Wilder, ‘I have also had the advantage of discussions with Mr. Thornton Wilder, who has explored the book more thoroughly than anyone else I have heard of. It is to be hoped that Mr. Wilder will someday publish something about *Finnegans Wake*” (Burns 2001, xxiv); of course, Wilder would, but not the book he had proposed to Huebsch in 1940 (Niven 546), but perhaps *The Skin of Our Teeth* represents such as well. If Burns and Gaylord’s comments represent their best defense of Wilder, it remains hardly more compelling than that offered by Wilder’s publisher.²

In 1994 Sidney Feshbach, former president of the James Joyce Society (NY), offers his defense in terms of modernist intertextuality: “Many other writers also figure in his work; he used them in quotation, in imitation, in echoes, in transformations, and in analogies, as did Joyce himself in all his work and as did T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* (which, when first published, some described as a pastiche, parodied, and then wondered where quotation and plagiarism left off) and Ezra Pound in the *Cantos*” (500). As Feshbach continues:

To clarify further what Wilder might have been thinking when he made use of *Finnegans Wake* for *The Skin of Our Teeth*, it is necessary to consider first a broader aspect of his work, his use of the work of predecessors. At every point in his writing, from his earliest high school and college exercises onward, Wilder constantly engaged in adaptation, reapplication, and transformation of others’ work. Joyce is only one of many authors that he used (510).

And Feshbach returns to his justification with Hellenic and Elizabethan examples: “I prefer to regard Wilder’s use of the work of other writers not as plagiarism, which it is not, but instead as his expression of the two-thousand-year-old tradition and practice of *imitatio* and *emulatio*, adaptation as well as translation. When Wilder took what he did from *Finnegans Wake*, he would not have felt that he was doing anything wrong.” (511).

Feshbach’s preferences or what Wilder “felt” was ethically right or wrong, however, may not be the issue here, nor should we necessarily trust the judgments of authors about their own work. Campbell and Robinson are adamant on the issues not only of originality but of acknowledgement: “It is a strange performance that Mr. Wilder has turned in. Is he hoaxing us? On the one hand, he gives no credit to his source, masking it with an Olson and Johnson technique [American rubber chicken comedians of *Hellzapoppin* fame whom Wilder acknowledged as influences]. On the other hand, he makes no attempt to conceal his borrowings, emphasizing them, rather . . .” (260). Several weeks later, Campbell and Robinson follow up their original findings, that were based on viewing the play, with additional charges made after the play was published: “. . . the appearance of the play in book form offers abundant evidence that Mr. Wilder not only vigorously adapted the play from *Finnegans Wake* to the Broadway temper, but also intended that someone, somewhere, someday should recognize his deed for what it is” (261). Their commitment to their analysis is evident in that both pieces are reprinted in Campbell’s *Mythic Worlds: Modern Words: On The Art of James Joyce* (1993, 2003), and so the essays have become part of Campbell’s official Joyce legacy and appear in his “Collected Works.” Editor Edmund L. Epstein, a former student of William York Tindall at Columbia College, augmented the essays by adding “An Editor’s Afterword” in which he cites Wilder biographer Gilbert Harrison’s overview of Wilder’s tentative response to the *Saturday Review* articles and includes Wilder’s notes for a 1948 British production starring Laurence Olivier (265-67).

Others, too, have continued the defense by citing additional sources on which Wilder drew. The Wilder Society web page follows up the publisher’s “Note to teachers” with a critique by Ashley Gallager: “Influenced by James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and “German expressionism, vaudeville, burlesque, and Wilder’s own one-acts,” *Skin of Our Teeth* pays homage to those sources in its depiction of the Antrobus family. In his ‘Preface’ to *Three Plays* Wilder goes further: “I should be very happy if, in the future, some author should feel similarly indebted to any work of mine. Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs” (687). Gallager’s Thornton Wilder Society sanctioned summary of influence is not exactly what Wilder wrote, however: “The play

is deeply indebted to James Joyce *Finnegans Wake*” (Campbell, 267). Or more fully, as Wilder declines to see himself as a creative innovator, “not one of the new dramatists”:

Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs. The theatre has lagged behind the other arts in finding the ‘new ways’ to express how men and women think and feel in our time. I am not one of the new dramatists we are looking for. I wish I were. I hope I have played a part in preparing the way for them. I am not an innovator but a rediscoverer of forgotten goods and I hope a remover of obtrusive bric-à-brac (Wilder 1957, xiv).

New York Times theater critic Mel Gussow returns to most of these issues. He quotes Wilder’s statement above in his review of a 1988 New York revival of *Our Town*, as he references as well, “Wilder’s response to James Joyce and ‘Finnegans Wake,’ the source of his play ‘The Skin of Our Teeth.’”³ Feshbach would merely dismiss Campbell and Robinson, or at least their aggressive tone: “They used such inflammatory innuendo that, without their actually using the term, ‘plagiarism’ was obviously what they were referring to. Wilder had, indeed, alternated working on the play with reading the *Wake* – but their charge was absurd” (498). Wilson, however, leans the other way: “The general indebtedness to Joyce in the conception and plan of the play is as plain as anything of the kind can be; it must have been conscious on Wilder’s part” (83).

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Stuart Gilbert’s *James Joyce’s Ulysses* would appear in 1930 (revised in 1950), and Frank Budgen’s comprehensive *The Making of Ulysses* finally appeared in 1934, both works the product of their authors’ near daily meetings with Joyce. In her “Notes and Acknowledgments” to the *Third Census* (1977), Glasheen acknowledges that these studies “contain information provided by Joyce himself” (xiv), and she includes Samuel Beckett among those coached by Joyce as well. Wilder will reference the complexity of the schema these authors outline at the opening of his James Joyce Society (NY) lecture, “Joyce and the Modern Novel,” in February of 1954 and Wilder would defend the novel’s symbolic scaffolding and narrative intricacy. Such defense also returns us to the issue of literary borrowings that plagued Wilder’s career: “For Joyce was hunting for a style that would reveal the extent to which every individual – you and I, the millions of people that walk this earth – is both sole and unique and also archetypal. To establish that each individual

is archetypal, he had to draw on the human being he knew best: himself. So the book is likewise confession, and its confession is at a very deep and agonizing level” (172). That is, in essence, Wilder lays out the underpinning of what would become *The Skin of Our Teeth*. In his review of Campbell and Robinson’s *Skeleton Key*, Wilson would take much the same universalist, mythical approach as does Wilder (and Campbell and Robinson, for that matter): “The sleeper [i.e., HCE] who passes from fatigue to refreshment, from death to resurrection, is enacting a universal drama which is enacted every night by every man in the world; but every man is a particular man, and this man is a particular Dubliner, asleep on a certain night, in a room above a certain pub in the bosom of a certain family” (187).

But such mythic and archetypal features would run counter to an entrenched, prevailing realism – particularly on the eastern side of the Atlantic. By September 1928 a critical tone was established by Rebecca West in her essay, “The Strange Case of James Joyce,” published in *The Bookman* (9-23). In it she attacked non-conventional, experimental writing, and so Modernism itself, but her principal target was James Joyce. Her essay opens with an anecdote of buying a book of poems in Paris, James Joyce’s *Pomes Pennyeach*, from its original publisher, Shakespeare and Co. (1927). She focuses on the poem “Alone” from this collection, which she quotes in full and concludes that it “may seem inconceivable that this poem should bring pleasure to any living creature . . . this is plainly an exceedingly bad poem,” concluding finally that “Mr. James Joyce is a great man entirely without taste” (9). Writing in the journal of international Modernism, *transition*, No. 15, in February 1929, William Carlos Williams responded to West with a summary of and rejoinder to her essay point by point. “A Point for American Criticism” offers a defense of Joyce, a critique of English criticism, which Williams finds pot-bound, but he also argues for a distinctly American approach and idiom to literary criticism. The essay might have been part of Williams’ essay collection *In the American Grain*, but its subject was not an American author. Its subject, however, is very much American receptivity to literary experiment and particularly to the work of James Joyce then appearing in serial form in *transition*, a Parisian journal edited by two American expatriates, Eugene and Maria Jolas, and Williams’ defense of Joyce was reprinted in the essay collection published in anticipation of what would finally be titled *Finnegans Wake, Our Exagmination ‘Round His Factification for Incamination of ‘Work in Progress’*:

In summary: Rebecca West makes (is made by) a mould; English criticism, a product of English literature. She states her case for art. It is an excellent digest but for a world panorama inadequate. She fails to fit Joyce to it. She calls him, therefore, “strange”, not realizing his compulsions which are outside of her

sphere. In support of this, she builds a case against him, using Freudian and other non-literary weapons. She is clever, universal in her informational resorts. What is new left over – Joyce’s true significance – his pure literary virtue – is for her “nonsense”. Of literature and its modus showing that she knows nothing. America, offering an undeveloped but wider criticism, will take this opportunity to place an appreciation of Joyce on its proper basis (86).

The reprint of Williams’ counter attack on West is also notable since this volume of essays supporting and anticipating what becomes *Finnegans Wake* opens with Samuel Beckett’s essay detailing Joyce’s sources and borrowings for his work on the novel, and Beckett lays them out in the title of his essay, developed under Joyce’s guidance, with its quirky but chronological punctuation, “Dante . . . Bruno. Vico . . . Joyce” (5-13), and in which Beckett does his best imitation of Stephen Dedalus in “Proteus.” Stuart Gilbert would also be a contributor. Undeterred by accusations of plagiarism, Wilder would continue his methods of adaptation for the American theater. In 1948 he translated and in the process adapted Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *Mort sans sepulture* [*Unburied Dead*, perhaps] as *The Victors*, which was produced in New York by the New Stages Company in 1948. Much of Wilder’s work on that adaptation is available at the Morgan Library.⁴ And in 1956 Wilder would retranslate Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* for American director Allan Schneider, and it was that Wilderized retranslation that was staged in Coral Gables, Florida in December of 1956. Mel Gussow would observe that “Perhaps part of Wilder’s enthusiasm for ‘Godot’ was a reflection of the dark undercurrents in “Our Town,” an aspect of the play that has long been neglected.” In his collected translations and adaptations of Wilder’s work, editor Ken Ludwig would write:

Here is a man who knows the classics backwards and forwards. Nothing could have been more natural to him than to draw upon these giants of the past, stand on their shoulders and weave their ideas and techniques into the texture of his own writing in order to forge something new and original.⁵

Such an assessment, a statement of creative method, would include the work of James Joyce.

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These figures, Thornton Wilder, Joseph Campbell and Edmund Wilson, (along with W. Y. Tindall, former president of the James Joyce Society [NY] and author of *James Joyce: His Way of Interpreting the World* [1950]), were American voices for Joyce, critical and

theoretical voices in an American grain, part of that “wider criticism” and “an appreciation of Joyce on its proper basis.” Three time Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner Archibald MacLeish would call Thornton Wilder “the most felicitous speaker on cultural subjects in America” (MacLeish cited in Leaf). These were principal players in the years of serious literary journalism during the nascent years of American Joyce studies before the field was institutionalized in American universities, beginning with Tindall at Columbia and the founding of the *James Joyce Quarterly* in 1963 at the University of Tulsa by Thomas F. Staley, who was the journal’s editor for its first twenty-five years. During those years, the University of Tulsa would gather a coterie of Joyce scholars around the *James Joyce Quarterly* as the field of study and student interest burgeoned into what is not infrequently called the “Joyce industry.” The *Finnegans Wake Society* and *The James Joyce Society* had been functioning through New York’s Gotham Book Mart since 1947 with Padraic Colum as its President and T. S. Eliot as its first member. The society has had a strong public, that is, outreach function, particularly in the New York City area. Thornton Wilder was a regular at these meetings, and his 1954 lecture to the group, “James Joyce and the Modern Novel,” was taped, adapted, and published in *A James Joyce Miscellany*. Its conclusion might be deemed an indirect riposte to the Rebecca Wests of the literary world: “The terrible thing is to live in our twentieth century with a nineteenth century mentality” (180).⁶ Williams’ language is more pointed, if not harsh, but like Wilder his focus is on entrenched resistance to the new: “Here Joyce has so far outstripped the criticism of Rebecca West that she seems a pervert. Here is his affinity for slang. Even if he has to lay waste the whole English structure. It is that the older critics smell and – they are afraid.”

Despite what may be appropriation, or an “homage” of indebtedness, said “homage” is usually more credible when acknowledged as such, or at least, as what Sidney Feshbach will call “deeply indebted.” Wilder’s curious implication that *Finnegans Wake* may have been forgotten goods by the time of Joyce’s death notwithstanding, he was a decidedly astute reader and critic of Joyce’s work, which his 1941 eulogy punctuates. Wilder’s focus on Joyce’s “realistic depiction of consciousness” may be old news to us now, but his extended analysis still rings true: “To realism, mind is a babbling, a stream of fleeting odds and ends of image and associations . . . [see West, for example]. Joyce’s discovery has the character of necessity, a Twentieth century necessity and it was wrung from him by the operations of his love and hate. There is destruction in that it saps the dignity of the mind; there is profound sympathy in the uses to which he put it for characterization. With it he explores three souls, Stephen Dedalus and the Blooms, one failure and two great triumphs” (168-9). Of Dedalus’ failure, Wilder asks, “How can unreconciled love and hate

make a self portrait?” The answer for Wilder lies not only in Stephen’s sentimentality but in his ability to mock himself. Leopold Bloom, on the other hand, is “The miracle of the book,” as “Joyce’s anti-self,”

and his wife Marion – transcendent confirmations of the method itself. If we could surprise the interior monologue of any person – it seems to affirm – we would be obliged to expand the famous aphorism: to understand that much is not only to forgive that much; it is to extend to another person that suspension of objective judgment which we accord to ourselves (169).

Ulysses as a whole is “a homage to the life force itself in the play of consciousness relegating all questions of approval and disapproval” (169).

For Wilder, moreover, Joyce has mastered the “long book,” where Proust, among others, has failed, that is, like Cervantes, “he found in the dimensions of the long book, his form and his theme” (371). Wilder attributes that success to “curious architectural devices and the comic spirit [. . . enhanced by] complicated schematization: each chapter marked by one color; each chapter representing an organ in the human body; each under the sign of a theological virtue and its allied vice; each bearing a relation – partly as parody, partly for emotion – to a corresponding book of the *Odyssey*” (372). West, on the other hand, castigates such correspondence as one of “two colossal fingerprints left by literary incompetence on *Ulysses*.”

The lingering issues of Wilder’s creative practices or the ethics of intertextual borrowings or his strategies of translation and adaptation overshadow his Joyce studies as they continue to be addressed on his publisher’s and the Wilder Society’s web pages: what the publisher calls “the contentiousness of the play’s historical context, political, theatrical, and literary.” Assessing an international Wilder conference at the College of New Jersey in 2008,⁷ Jonathan Leaf offers the following evaluation of Wilder and Joyce:

The principal false charge against Wilder – which he faced repeatedly during his career – was of plagiarism. An influential essay cowritten by the Jung scholar Joseph Campbell [and Henry Morton Robinson] on the delightful comedy *The Skin of Our Teeth* succeeded in convincing many that the play was a rip-off of Joyce’s high-falutin, lengthy, and mostly inscrutable final work, *Finnegan’s Wake* [sic]. Among those who affirmed this idea was critic Edmund Wilson, and the notion can be encountered still in essays on the modern theater. Yet, as Wilder himself said, there is almost nothing to it. Wilder freely acknowledged that from Joyce he “received the idea of presenting

ancient man as an ever-present double to modern man.” But the episodes and characters in the play are not taken from Joyce.

Paula Vogel’s 2009 “Foreword” to *The Skin of Our Teeth*, takes on the issue once again and so permanently binds it to the text of the play:

The man who generously paid tribute to James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* wrote: “I should be very happy if, in the future, some author should feel similarly indebted to any work of mine. Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs.” He suffered the charge of plagiarism leveled against *The Skin of Our Teeth*, written in the spirit of tribute to Joyce’s work. This spurious charge, brought by Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson in the two articles they published in late 1942 and early 1943, may well have cost him the Nobel Prize.

Like most defenders of Wilder, Leaf drags out his version of the “everybody does it” defense. Like those defenders, as well, his rhetorical strategies are analogy and the rhetorical question, which are the defenses of last resort, as every politician knows: “Would it make sense to accuse Tom Stoppard of plagiarism in writing *Arcadia*, the outline of whose plot was, by his admission, suggested by an A. S. Byatt novel?” The keys, of course, are “suggested by” and “by his admission,” as Wilder continually engaged with *Finnegans Wake* throughout the writing of *The Skin of Our Teeth* but what admissions was made were grudging and belated. And so Wilder seems permanently, inescapably bound, rightly or wrongly, fairly or unfairly, to James Joyce for all the wrong reasons since it puts the American author’s originality and critical acumen indisputably in dispute. Rather than adjudicate this issue that will not die and attempt to render a summary judgement on its persistent contentiousness, on the ethics of such fairly common practice, particularly in commercial theater, we might suspend the ethical debate and focus on qualitative production: Wilder as critic and early champion of Joyce and Wilder as playwright and professional theatrical entrepreneur, and thereby edge closer to the point made by Scott Proudfit reviewing a collection of essays called *Thornton Wilder in Collaboration* in which he challenges the

concept of the modern writer as singular, independent and the sole determiner of text’s meaning. This collection [of Wilder essays under review] reclaims Wilder as a theatrical writer, essentially collaborative in his process, whether he is writing the play *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the film *Shadow of Doubt* [for Hitchcock], or the novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* [based on newspaper accounts]. This adjustment of our concept of Wilder reminds readers that

the “myth of the author,” as Foucault would have it, is never more obvious than when it [that is, authorship, not myth] is unsuccessfully applied to the communal work of those who primarily make their living in the theater (242).

To try further to uncouple the two authors, we might invoke Wilder’s assessment of [Mrs.?] Marion Bloom – there is a spirit, an energy, a life spark in Wilder’s passion for and insights into Joyce that deserve further reflection if not celebration, as this essay attempts, and so our appeal is to recalibrate and retheorize work on a major American intellectual, an astute and dogged literary critic, especially of Joyce, and to think in terms of a professional dramatist who understood that theater is always and inevitably collaborative. The long shadow cast by Campbell and Robinson, interesting and insightful as it may have been at the time, and may still be, has occluded a clear assessment of Wilder’s contribution not only as a playwright but as a scholar of twentieth century European experimental art. In Janet Dunleavy’s reassessment of the early years of Joyce criticism, *Re-viewing Joyce Criticism*, almost no attention is played to Wilder’s pioneering criticism (nor much to Edmund Wilson’s, for that matter, except slight mentions of his early *Axel’s Castle* [1931] and his review of Campbell and Robinson, 36 [he’s misplaced in the index as well]), even as Adaline Glasheen’s *Census of Finnegans Wake* (1956) and *Third Census of Finnegans Wake* (1977) are featured in a chapter by Bonnie Kime Scott (46-59).⁸ The references to Wilder are perfunctory, for the most part, although Scott cites Wilder as one of the “donors” listed in a 1959 “appendage” to the first *Census* (57-8n3, notes not indexed) and cites Wilder’s comment that Glasheen “is a lady who sits and thinks” (47). Scott’s assessment may underplay Glasheen’s “Acknowledgment to the First Census,” in which she writes:

When my list was inchoate and contained no identifications, I had it mimeographed and sent it to a few Joyceans. One of these was Mr. Thornton Wilder, who treated it with heavenly kindness and generosity. He gave me many valuable identifications and wrote me at length about *Finnegans Wake*. [see Burns 2001, . . .] I am especially indebted to him for interesting me in the four fascinating old men [the “Mamalujo episode,” see also *Third Census*, 97].⁹ Most of all he encouraged me to expand the *Census* and add as many identifications as I could (rpt. in 1977, xx).

The 1991 Dunleavy critical retrospective may be one measure of Wilder’s erasure from contemporary Joyce discourse, as is, thereby, a significant portion of his contribution to American letters and intellectual life, all of which may have been truncated through the

persistent *Finnegans Wake* controversy. While the 2001 *A Tour of the Darkling Plain* (Burns 2001) may offer some redress, we are not yet at the point where we can recognize Wilder's contributions, as a pioneering critic and crusading intellectual wholly in the American grain, an avant-garde champion who could recognize, invoke and celebrate but never quite enter that promised land himself.

Notes

- ¹ The meeting held at the Grolier Club 4 December 1949, organized by John J. Slocum, founding member of the James Joyce Society (NY) (Burns 2001, 4n2).
- ² for Wilder's more compelling and expended defense see Niven 547-49
- ³ Mel Gussow's 1988 review of Greg Mosher's revival of *Our Town* appeared in the *New York Times* (December 11, 1988, Section 2, Page 7): <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/11/theater/theater-view-the-darker-shores-of-thornton-wilder.html>
- ⁴ <https://www.themorgan.org/literary-historical/234557>).
- ⁵ "Though Wilder's dramatic reputation soared with the premiere of *Our Town* (1937), his first Broadway shows were translations: André Obey's *Lucrece* (1932) and *A Doll's House* (1937) by Henrik Ibsen. He also translated Jean Paul Sartre's *The Victors* [Mort sans sepulture] from French at Sartre's personal request, and *The Bride of Torosko* by Otto Indig from German for producer Gilbert Miller. *The Victors* was produced off-Broadway in 1948 at The New Stages Theatre in the West Village, directed by Mary Hunter Wolf. Wilder's translation of *The Bride* has never been produced in the United States." <https://www.thorntonwilder.com/blog/2020/8/21/the-2020-thornton-wilder-prize-for-translation>
- ⁶ Ed. Marvin Magalaner. *A James Joyce Miscellany*. New York: James Joyce Society, 1957, pp. 167-71; reprinted in *American Characteristics and other Essays*, pp. 172-80.
- ⁷ <http://www.twildersociety.org/tag/the-college-of-new-jersey/>
- ⁸ Glasheen credits "Mr. Wilder of Connecticut" in the "Note to the Second Census" (1963), reprinted in the third (1977, xxii).
- ⁹ "As far as I know, Joyce was the first artist to set senility down at length. Listening to an educated man, dying of hardening of the arteries, I realized that he spoke in the manner and matter and very rhythm of the Four. Joyce does not prettify his senescent Four – they are boring, repulsive, sinister – but he does leaven them. A crazy beauty hangs about the honeymoon section [. . .]." Adaline Glasheen, *A Third Census of Finnegans Wake*, p. 97.

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The piece was reprinted in the essay collection in anticipation of the publication of *Finnegans Wake, Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. Paris: Shakespeare and Company; and Faber and Faber, 1929, pp. 80-86. <https://zehfilardo.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/our-exagmination-round-his-factification-for-incamination-of-work-in-progress-searchable.pdf>

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