

ANALYSIS

Heaven's My Destination (1935)

Thornton Wilder

(1897-1975)

“Of all the forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age.”

Thornton Wilder
The Woman of Andros (1930)

“In *Heaven's My Destination* Wilder evidently attempted to answer those critics who had been berating him for his refusal to write about contemporary life. The author has admitted Gertrude Stein's influence upon his work. It was not a happy influence, for it led him studiously to avoid taking up an attitude toward his hero, who is a noble idealist one moment and an unconscionable prig the next. Sinclair Lewis, whose field Wilder here invaded, would have made himself clearer. Yet the dominant tone is satirical, and a picaresque novel whose hero is forever getting himself into trouble for his innocence and idealism, his militant evangelicalism, his opposition to tobacco and alcohol, his pacifism, and his incorrigible proselytizing is perhaps sufficiently unusual so that his history ought to be forgiven a certain failure to achieve complete singleness of effect.”

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 406

“*Heaven's My Destination* is an adroit and subtle satire on two facets of American life: the ‘mythology of salesmanship’ (as in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*) and the tradition of fundamentalist evangelism (as in Lewis *Elmer Gantry*). The hero, George Brush, is a devoted, idealistic, but priggish young man who makes his living as a textbook salesman but considers his work as an amateur evangelist more important. Essentially George's difficulty is that he is completely logical by nature and that he literally believes the Christianity of the Bible; he thus tries doggedly to live in the twentieth century according to the spirit of the Gospels, which involves him in a series of farcical mishaps.

Typical of these is the story of his relations with Roberta Weyerhauser, a farmer's daughter who seduces him in a hayloft and whom he therefore conscientiously regards as his wife. He pursues her to Kansas City and insists on marrying her, even though he does not love her and she candidly hates him; when the marriage turns out to be a failure George is sincerely surprised and disillusioned. George also has a genius for getting locked up in small-town jails, usually because of his philosophy of non-violence (which he borrows from Gandhi) or because the local rustics misinterpret one of his frequent twenty-four-hour vows of silence and consider him either mad or criminal.

Wilder's attitude toward his hero has caused much controversy. The novel is obviously a satire, even a farcical one in spite of its restrained and mock-solemn style. Yet Wilder evidently sympathizes with George, who at worst is only a monomaniac and who may from another point of view be considered a sincere idealist who takes seriously the religion his fellow-men mouth hypocritically but lack the character to practice. George is in the end likeable, as maddening as his priggish earnestness may be to the other characters of the novel as well as the reader.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 309

“Thornton Wilder's *Heaven's My Destination* is one of those minor classics, like Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, which American writers often produce but which American critics with the single-minded absorption with ‘the great American novel’ and with ‘greatness’ in general let fall into

neglect. A Gargantuan romantic, like Thomas Wolfe, whose *Of Time and the River* appeared in the same year as *Heaven's My Destination*, gets all kinds of attention, criticism, dispraise, and acclaim, as its perhaps his due, but a compact classic like *Heaven's My Destination*, with its assured form and its economical prose, drops into silence. Now it is time for the balance to be struck. Of major American critics, only the perspicacious Edmund Wilson has consistently, and from the start, seen the true worth and stature of Wilder as a writer. The present essay will try, in its turn, to further the cause.

Heaven's My Destination—the title comes from the last line, 'And Heaven's my destination,' of a four-line doggerel verse which children of the Middle West used to write in their schoolbooks—was published in 1935 during the Depression and, as such, is a wonderfully acute picture of that memorable era. At the same time it has larger historical and thematic dimensions because its protagonist, George Brush, is the American version of the Protestant saint, in the form of Middle Western Baptism. Then in addition to all this there are reverberations throughout the novel of that timeless quixotery that Cervantes first explored—the endless paradoxes involved in the clash between the ideal and the real which was the subject of the world's first great novel and which, as has often been said, is the subject of most great novels written since. In a lesser way, *Heaven's My Destination* takes its place in this pantheon. For although George Brush is only a textbook salesman covering the middle South and the lower Middle West of the United States in the 1930s and although he is a literal-minded, Bible-intoxicated Baptist, his problems, his defeats, his quixotic destiny, are timeless.

Wilder's picture of the United States in the Depression must immediately evoke a nostalgic reaction in any who remember those then terrible...days... Roberta, a girl whom Brush, in his one great moral lapse in life, had seduced (or vice versa)...is now a waitress in 'The Rising Sun Chop Suey Palace' in Kansas City. Brush had been trying to find her for years and finally succeeds; she does not recognize him.... [The] mastery of the idiom is equaled by Wilder's own exposition, which is clear, and spare, but not without its occasional stylistic felicities, as in the description of Mrs. Efrim who keeps a store and who is described as 'a wrinkled old woman with the head of an intelligent and dolorous monkey'; or the account of an educated man trying to argue Brush out of his fundamentalist position: He 'plunged into primitive man and the jungle; he came down through the nature myths; he hung the earth in astronomical time.'

Not only is the idiom of the thirties captured, the social background is as well, from the humorous to the grim. The most simple and most powerful symbolic memories of the thirties are the dust bowl, the trek of the Okies, of which Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is the literary embodiment, the bread lines in the large cities, the battles between pickets and police, and so on; in short, the terrible suffering of the working class. But Wilder, never having evinced a talent for portraying such scenes and men, still had the instinct to seize upon another almost equally potent set of symbols that had indelibly impressed themselves on the middle-class consciousness. For this type of mind and memory there are three enduring symbols of those days. The first two are negative: failing banks, and suicidal businessmen ('failing banks, falling businessmen,' as the saying went, and the movies used to show pandemonium at the Exchange or a run on a bank and then brief shots of bodies falling from skyscrapers).

But drastically counterpointing these negatives, there was the positive image of Gandhi, who was an actual physical symbol since he could be seen—a little wizened man in a white loincloth and robe, in the rather dim newsreels of the day; these are some of the central memories of the thirties: the bankruptcy, moral as well as financial, of the American economy, and the moral grandeur of the little Indian. The fact that Gandhi, largely because of his dress, must always look slightly ridiculous to American eyes added to the piquancy of the contrast.... Brush, of course...is a Gandhian throughout the novel. As he tells the terrified banker, he practices voluntary poverty, 'like Gandhi'.... Like his 'master, Gandhi,' he is given to passing a day in silence, and to fasting. He carries newspaper clippings about India in his pocket.... Not far behind Gandhi, for Brush, is, of course, that other great apostle of anarchism and passive resistance, Tolstoi, and Brush also carries around in his pocket *Sayings of Leo Tolstoi*.

But underlying the comedy of Brush and banks and Brush and Gandhi are certain terrible facts, and above it are certain wonderful aspirations. As for the terrible facts, the Great Depression was no joke to those who endured its worst aspects, and constantly we are reminded of its grim dreariness and terror. The physical center of the novel...is in Kansas City—the dead center of the nation—at Queenie Craven's

boardinghouse... The moral dead center of the novel, the dialectical counterpart to the Quixote of Brush, is Herb, an embittered nihilist who doesn't even enjoy the wild pranks—hanging by one's fingernails from the gutter of the roof, getting Brush drunk, taking him in his innocence to a whore house—in which his more simple-minded compatriots revel. On his deathbed Herb says to Brush, 'I'm on the point of croaking, and I don't care if I do.'...

Always we are reminded of the grimness that persists underneath the quixotic comedy of Brush's life. Counterpointing all this grimness is the eminence of Gandhi, which, in its turn, is not all comedy either. Behind both Gandhi and Brush is Thoreau, an American, and his doctrine of 'civil disobedience.' All three men (and one is imaginary) had the courage of their convictions and defied the state, up to the point of physical incarceration. And Brush's fictive life and character are a poignant reminder that the same civilization that produced the financial debacle and the mass suffering of the thirties had also produced in the mid-nineteenth century in Thoreau one of the greatest spokesmen for philosophical anarchism, an idealism so pristine that one truly professing it can hardly be a member of any social group....

Finally there is the odd, high irony that, in the midst of everything that Thoreau would have detested, there arose in the imagination of an American novelist another American Thoreau—George Brush—and the even odder irony that it was precisely in the historical reality of these terrible thirties that there was a resurgence of American idealism—much of it mistakenly attaching itself to organized Communism, a completely different kind of political animal than the body of thought Thoreau or Gandhi or Brush or Tolstoi were talking about—such as few other decades in our history have witnessed....

Heaven's My Destination was Wilder's answer to Mike Gold's [prominent Communist] famous attack upon him, published in the *New Republic* under the title 'Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ' and making the criticism that Wilder refused to deal with the contemporary world.... The year was 1930, and Gold's attack set off an immense response of pros and cons, generating hundreds of letters from readers. In the short run Wilder lost, and his reputation and popularity suffered under the onus of being 'socially' irresponsible.... What Wilder knew was that the greatest and most permanent piece of literary social criticism ever written was *Don Quixote*, with its great protagonist, the saint-fool, and its lofty perspective on the permanent ambiguities of the social life of mankind, that realm where life is, inextricably, both a farce and a tragedy. And so in the long run, Wilder has all the best of the argument. Not only did he present the thirties with power and truth, he transcended them as well.

Heaven's My Destination is also about Protestantism in its American setting, for Brush, while he is in his literary pedigree a descendant of Don Quixote, is in his historical-religious heritage the Protestant saint in its Baptist, or extreme, variation; most of the historical attributes of radical Protestantism are embodied in his character, which is simultaneously Hudibrastic and sympathetic. There are three main points of view in the novel: Catholic: Father Pasziewski and Queenie Craven; Protestant: Brush and others; and finally, secular 'American-no-nonsense' common sense: Judge Carberry and Lottie Weyerhauser. But it is Brush's point of view that finally prevails, and thus *Heaven's My Destination* is a *protestant* novel, in the true sense of that word.

Significantly, Brush is, in effect, an orphan... 'I didn't put myself through college for four years and go through a difficult religious conversion in order to have the same ideas as other people have.' In short he is a Protestant man alone with his God and his Bible and what he considers 'the Truth' in an American setting... He is a twenty-four-hour-a-day apostle, attempting, often with unpleasant results, to convert casual acquaintances or fellow passengers on trains. His puritanism is unexceptionable: a young lady who smokes is presented with Brush's card upon which its written—neatly, of course—'Women who smoke are unfit to be mothers'; he himself doesn't drink or smoke and his relationship with the opposite sex, save for that lapse with Roberta, whom he considers his 'wife' unto eternity, despite the fact that for years he has not seen her, is consistently Platonic.... For Brush is possessed of a higher logic than that of the ordinary world, and in his public appearance in Judge Carberry's court, he gives a very good account of himself; in fact, he is unanswerable, as he explains his doctrines of voluntary poverty and pacifism.... 'I'm not the usual kind of traveling salesman'."

John Henry Raleigh
Introduction

Heaven's My Destination
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Michael Hollister (2015)