

## SUNSHINE + DUST = SUNBEAMS

"Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."--Genesis 3:19 King James Version

Occasion In our tree house (as my older sister calls our second-floor trees-surrounded open-to-the-sky lanai), a dinner guest made the comment whence came this Thinksheet's title. Someone else had adverted to Loree's age-four learning of "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam" (a Sunday school song she learned in Sunday school) (as told in her Craigville Colloquy lecture, Thinksheet #2846.1). After dinner (it was three evenings ago), we all went to the Tabernacle, where we all were readers of a briefed version of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" (fifth in a series on "Modern Drama and God," each reading followed by lengthy audience participation).

1 Some metaphors just sit there quietly, others glow with life. In the latter class is the sunbeam figure as scientifically illumined from within by the guest's comment. We are indeed dust (as powerfully presented in the last, graveyard, act of Wilder's play), but such dust as can glow with divine life, the indwelling Spirit of God.

The big Webster<sup>2</sup> has this as the second meaning of "sunbeam": "One who radiates happiness, as a bright, merry child." The much later big Random House<sup>2</sup> does not have this meaning (but, instead, the Australian slang for unused tableware & dishes when the meal is over).

2 The book (above) has on its jacket-front the shrewd & benign beautiful face of Thornton, & immediately above it the name (as author) of his 1½-year-older brother Amos, the shy quiet opposite of boisterous extravert YB (younger brother). I learned to respect & love OB (older brother) while I was writing a doctoral dissertation under him, & even more subsequently through the decades. In his early 90s, Amos told me of his determination to write this book on "the black sheep in our family" (said with a wry smile). At the time, he was still going to his office (Harvard New Testament emeritus professor)! He died at 96.

In the after-play discussion Monday evening, I used the book mainly to correct **misimpressions** of the play & playwright: of great American authors of this century, Thornton's the most misunderstood, largely because literary critics (from his 1927 BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY onward) lacked the necessary acoustic range to hear his lower octaves "hidden in his art" (72--to switch to another metaphor). I hope this Thinksheet will help your lower-register hearing of this Puritan whose religion was, like his underwear, invisible to the public but closer than any of his outerwear.

If you think this Thinksheet is wandering all over the place, I ask you to attend more to the place than to my wanderings.

3 The book tells us more about the Wilder **family** than we can find anywhere else. What a family it was! Solidly Puritan, including daily family devotions. And astonishingly high-achieving. Mother an accomplished French-&-Italian translator, a PPK (Presbyterian preacher's kid [47]), who had more to do with cultivating the 2 boys & 2 girls spiritually, esthetically, intellectually than had the father--who was often away, as much of the time when he was U.S. consul general in Hong Kong & then Shanghai. Father, a newspaper editor (in NYC & Wisconsin) by profession, got our country's, if not the world's, first PhD (Yale) in municipal government (Amos' Yale PhD, 1932, pub. 1936 as ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS). In contradiction to the common canard against Puritans, the family was big on the arts; & the reading aloud of great literature was a daily occurrence in the Wilder household. (The sisters became authors, Amos became famous for interfacing theology & literary criticism--as in his THEOPOIESIS [& other late works, including volumes of his poems], & Thornton's oeuvre is world-known.)...46: "The ultimate relation of Puritanism to the arts" is like the biblical dead lion with a beehive inside: "Out of the strong came forth sweetness." Critics hooked on modernistic alienation failed to perceive Thornton's "wrestling and survival deeper even than that of contemporary alienation."

4 In the Wilder family Puritanism, "there was no fanaticism or obscurantism as in some forms of Protestant sectarianism" (47). Father was "a devout Congregational layman," insisting for his children on "Christian education in the Sunday school and in school and college. As a consul he was a friend and supporter of missionaries in China.... This strain of Protestant piety from which most of our oldest colleges in New

England, and many in the West and South,...has been identified with public concerns and reforming zeal." 48: "Many sophisticated circles today stand at such a distance from the kind of home represented by that of our parents that they can only misread the record. This is related to a wider **inability** [my boldface] to understand important aspects of American culture, and therefore of my brother's work, concerns, and audience." They are "out of touch with these deeper roots in the American reality....the visions and disciplines of the great Reformers, as well as of Milton and Bunyan, of George Fox and the Wesleys, and of many of the early settlers of this country."

5 In 1940 I was deeply impressed by a God-&-literature series of lectures by Yale's world-famous Wm. L. Phelps, who--I learned much later--had been the Sunday school teacher of the Wilder chn.'s mother. It was "Billy" Phelps' favorable review of THE BRIDGE OF SAN LUIS REY (1927) that launched Thornton on his spectacular career. (Billy & Thornton were of histrionic personality. When the former acquired a 1st ed. of a Browning book, the whole faculty & student body had a parade around the campus! It took one to know one.)

6 Another character similar to Thornton, & whom I knew better than most did, was his schoolmate & longtime friend Robt. Maynard Hutchins (who was, as was T.'s mother, a PPK). The two of them were fighters against what H. called "**foam rubber**" Protestantism (11). Both were (1) deeply Calvinist-Puritan in their substrate values & (2) loyal to the Puritan vision while avoiding the specific religious language.

"What was distinctive in my brother's work was the combination of local and universal in his vision [my underlin.] and genres....Masterful improvisation and poesis took precedence over whatever various motifs or legacies might be drawn into the whole (76)." For him in his work (73), "persuasion is not a matter of indoctrination or moralities but of vision." Faith & hope are, in him, deeper than moderns' despair & *Angst* (sick anxiety). Though accused, he was not guilty of sentimental moralism and Pollyanna piety; rather, he worked from "a more austere and a more magnanimous vision [my underlin.] of our [human] condition than is current among our intellectuals today....If this combination of severity and mansuetude [gentleness] traces to a Puritan religious perspective on mortal affairs, let the objectors make the most of it. In any case **the legacy is mediated in the art** [my boldface], and there are hosts of men and women who are so constituted as to respond [74; cp. Ro.11:22]."...Of the several other Thornton-as-Puritan references in my personal index to the book, I choose only this (38): his Puritan legacy "endowed him with a deeper human orientation that could assimilate the new experience [of modernism] in a more universal vision [my underlin.; Amos, characteristically, modifies with a self-effacing "may have"]".

7 Thornton was a "polymath," lecturing freely in German, French, Spanish, English. At Aspen he was on-the-spot translator of Albert Schweitzer's lectures from German, & the next day of Ortega y Gasset's from Spanish; Schweitzer remembered that at Oxford he had a Wilder as a translator from French, & T. informed S. that that was T.'s brother Amos; the latter got from Schweitzer "a gracious note" (60).

8 T. was an enemy of soul-&-imagination-strangling modernism with its "limiting dogmas" (80; my underlin.), as he was expansively, in the American-democratic mode, against pre-modern limiting dogmas. For preaching American democracy in plays & presence, he was wildly popular in Europe & Asia after WWII. We are all, he said in a lecture 40 years ago in Germany, "**equal in God's grace**" (98; my boldface). And (96) he was early sensitive to the anti-democratic danger in calling God "Father" & "King." But his "disguised religiosity" should not be overread as un- or anti-religion. He didn't go in for social indictment (a Marx legacy), & the sexual revolution (a Freud legacy) turned him off (70-71).

9 T. had an **oblique** way of affirming underlying convictions--the resurrection, e.g. (87; in OUR TOWN, the corpses are "waiting for something important to happen"; the book has more than a dozen references to OUR TOWN)....I've enough notes on the book to run on for 2 more pp.--but I spare you!...."Where is God?" (in OUR TOWN & the other dramas in our reading series) was the central question. Cp. GATES OF PRAYER 606: "Where is God, amid the broken ramparts, the shattered cities? Where is God?"