

THE CABALA: ROMAN MEMOIRS

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Abstract: Thornton Wilder sternly believed that every modern notion has its origin in the thoughts of great authors, just as every current activity is rooted in the deeds of those who lived long ago. The guiding principle and recurring theme in his works has been “everything that happened might happen anywhere and will happen again.”¹ Since his education and training owed much to the ancient heritage, it is not surprising that his first three novels were set in remote periods of time or in foreign lands, and the the aim of this paper is to present the complex intertwining of themes in Wilder’s first novel.

Keywords: Thornton Wilder, *The Cabala*, ancient heritage, recurring theme

Wilder’s first novel, *The Cabala* (1926), is a manifestation of his preoccupation with a glorious past that continues through the present, and his admiration for an elite of people who inhabit the present world gifted with a special charisma that makes them “different” and capable of carrying the inheritance of the past. The title is in itself intriguing and refers to the Cabalists, a mysterious group who, without relating to any Hebrew religious lore or secretive political party, satisfy several of Wilder’s standards of life². Like himself, they are dedicated to the past and the conservation of tradition, their superiority is of “divine nature”, their intellect outstanding, their appreciation for the arts exquisite and their ability for love and devotion quite rare. Wilder’s working title had been *Memoirs of a Roman Student* (1922), fictional memoirs that served as a framework for episodes set in Rome and its environs. The structure of the novel remained episodic (Books Two, Three and Four respectively focusing on Marcantonio, Alix, Astree-Luce and the Cardinal, while Book One is titled “First Encounters” and Book Five “The Dusk of Gods”) and the narrator identified more or less with young Wilder and his Roman experiences.

The first chapter (“Book One: First Encounters”) begins on “the train that first carried (him) into Rome,” a means of transport as well as a vehicle of dreams that is going to

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¹ Malcom Cowley, “The Man Who Abolished Time”, *Saturday Review*, 39 (October 6, 1956), 51

² The title is reminiscent of Jewish mysticism (a theosophic interpretation of the religious Scriptures of the Jews), or of the English secret society during the reign of Charles II in the seventeenth century (Lat. Cabbala, Heb. *qabbalah*, “a reception”, mysterious doctrine, from *qabal*, “to receive, take”

reappear in later novels like *Heaven's my destination* (1935) and *The Eighth Day* (1967). A young American encounters the Rome he had so far been familiar with only through books of history and literature, and the opening paragraph is charged with high emotions when from a distance he sees "the faintly colored clouds that hung above Rome" and discerns "the dim outlines of a mountain ridge":

*It was Virgil's country and there was a wind that seemed to rise from the fields and descend upon us in a long Virgilian sigh, for the land that has inspired sentiment in the poet ultimately receives its sentiment from him.*³

The train moved slowly across the Campagna and made a stop at Naples of which "the air generated legend."⁴ The American Italians who board on it unpleasantly interfere with the romantic narrator's visions of a superior Roman race. They return to their homes "in some Apennine village after twenty years of trade in fruit and jewelry on upper Broadway," they have "invested their savings in the diamonds of their fingers," and are completely deprived of the natural charm "the Italian soil bestows upon the humblest of its children," having come back "with bulbous features, employing barbarous idioms and bereft forever of the witty psychological intuition of their race."⁵ But Wilder's Rome has remained so unaffected of its ancestral purity in the young American's mind that all the diverse passengers on the train comprise "such a company as Rome receives ten times a day, and remains Rome."⁶

The narrator's companion is James Blair, who, after six years of classical studies at Harvard, went to Sicily as archaeological adviser to a motion picture company that aspired to transferring "the body of Greek mythology" to the screen. After the failure of this project, the young scholar "roamed the Mediterranean, finding stray employment and filling immense notebooks with his observations and theories."⁷ Blair, whose presence is going to be critical, especially for one of the members of the Cabala in Book Three, is also the character Wilder uses to introduce the Cabala, or at least how the group is viewed by society:

*fierce intellectual snobs [...] the chief thing about them is that they hate what's recent [...] they find a pocket of archaic time in the middle of a world that has progressed beyond it [...] they are supernatural [...] they are so wonderful that they're lonely*⁸

Blair suggests that if the narrator has come to Rome to study before he settles down to the ancients "he should see whether there aren't any interesting moderns."⁹ However, the pursuit of these moderns is not unrelated to the ancients for Wilder already sees in the Cabalists "the Olympians [...] who had at least, each of them, one prodigious gift."¹⁰

The first chapter ends with the death of a poet, who might be a "Keats figure," as several critics state, but not merely a poetic personage that carries the nineteenth century

³ Thornton Wilder, *The Cabbala* (New York, Carol and Graf, 1987), 1

⁴ *ibid*, 2

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*, 3

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*, 4-5

⁹ *Ibid*, 4

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 7

malaise¹¹. He is the Keats of the classical past who requests from his young American visitors to provide him with "translations from the Greek."¹² Wilder does not fail to underline the importance of authentic classical erudition through the ability of the narrator to read Homer in the original, and by having the sick poet told that Chapman's translation "was scarcely Homer at all makes "his heart bleed."¹³ The dying poet is not one of the Cabalists but, except for the classical allusions, he has in common with them "a great gift," the gift of poetry, and after his death "his fame began to spread over the whole world."¹⁴ His end also pre-shadows two of the Cabalists' deaths that mark the conclusions of the second and the fourth chapters, an author's clever device to bring past and present together and to dress his characters in the mists of an Olympian glory which is timeless and immortal.

In *The Cabala* Wilder's love for mythology does not lead him to the past in order to restructure the myths in their own times, but rather brings "his classical gods to the present and suggests their presence in characters drawn with considerable realism."¹⁵ The Cabalists, whose stories tell the three middle chapters, are depicted as modern incarnations of mythological figures. Marcantonio is a truly Dionysiac figure, a Pan for most critics, Alix is Venus, and her infatuation for Blair recalls the goddess's love for Adonis, whereas Cardinal Vaini is Jupiter, Astree-Luce Diana-or Vesta, Elisabeth Grier Ceres, and finally the narrator stands for Mercury, the messenger of the gods.

The unnamed narrator is one of Wilder's-favorite devices: "he moves in and out of the lives of a group of characters, and serves as a catalyst who generally holds the book together."¹⁶ A commentator rather than an active participant, like the Stage Manager in Wilder's plays, he successfully serves the episodic structure of the novel, and existing between the major characters and the reader creates an effect of distance and detachment, which contributes to the author's serenity of style that distinguished him from his literary contemporaries. In this novel the narrator becomes the Cabalists' confidant, mediator, friend and mentor. They believe that he simply loves them "in a disinterested new world way" and Alix names him Samuele after a beautiful setter she used to own, whereas it is only in the last chapter that the mythical appellation of Mercury is openly conferred upon him.¹⁷

¹¹ "As the location is described – an apartment near the Spanish Steps – and the Englishman's malady – consumption – the reader is instantly aware that the poet is John Keats who actually had died exactly a century before. Already past and present are jumbled." (M. C. Kuner, *Thornton Wilder: the Bright and the Dark*, New York, Crowell, 1972, pp. 55-57). See also "the Keats episode" in David Castronovo, *Thornton Wilder*, New York: Ungar, 1986, p. 33, and Hermann Stresau, *Thornton Wilder*, trans. Frieda Schutze, New York: Ungar, 1971, p. 16

¹² Wilder, 27

¹³ Ibid., 28. See John Keats' poem "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"

¹⁴ Ibid., 30

¹⁵ Rex J. Burbank, *Thornton Wilder*, New York: Twayne, 1987, p. 31

¹⁶ Kuner, 54

¹⁷ "You didn't have to give Samuele a sandwich to win his evotion. He liked to like. You won't be angry with me if every now and then I call you Samuele to remind me of him?" (Wilder, 69) Mercury is the Latin equivalent for Hermes, god of wisdom, messeger of the Olympian deities, and a patron of sooth-saying, literature nd the arts. Ibid., 140. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1960), vol. 1, 29, 63-67

In the second chapter (Book Two: Marcantonio) Samuele, as a wise mediator, will be asked to solve the problem of Marcantonio, a sixteen-year-old aristocrat, "incredibly slight and definitely elegant with spark-like black eyes," son of the Duchess d'Aquilanera, the Black Queen, "a short, dark, ugly woman with magnificent fierce eyes [...] seven huge lumpy amethysts strung about her neck on a golden rope."¹⁸ Representing the aristocratic principle of an ultraconservative nobility, she wished for her son to continue the family tradition through a prearranged suitable marriage. But young Marcantonio has become a Dionysiac revel, surrounded by debauchery, suggesting a resemblance with the god Pan¹⁹.

In this entourage Samuele encounters Marcantonio who, with a mind "flooded with images of passion," believed that "all women were devils." His sexual initiation having started with a group of Brazilian girls, "a sort of Rubens riot in his hands," he had continued to engulf in all sorts of sensual excesses like Pan, his mythological counterpart, who was despised by the Olympians for his simplicity and love of riot.²⁰ The Romans similarly misunderstood the Dionysiac nature of Marcantonio, and Samuele, in his turn, within the limitations of a New England Puritan, fails to discern the young Pan in him and proceeds counseling with "the vocabulary of the Pentateuch" or "that of psychiatry" in an effort to convince that "everything he thought and did, humor, sports, ambition - presented themselves to him as symbols of lust."²¹

The painful consequence is, tragically enough, Marcantonio's suicide after he has seduced his half-sister, Donna Julia, and the chapter ends with the rich old Itadian villa at its most characteristic, "a dead prince lying among the rosebushes."²² The conclusion echoes that of the previous chapter, and presages the pattern of catastrophes to befall the other characters in the chapters that follow. In mythological terms, the promiscuous Pan was the only god who had actually died, and Samuele as Mercury manifests the god's other function as leader of the dead to Hades (The Underworld).²³

Marcantonio's double tragedy – incest followed by suicide – foreshadows the tragic situation of Alix, Princess d'Espoli, in the third chapter (Book Three: Alix), "a Frenchwoman of utmost smallness and elegance, sandy-haired, pretty, and endowed with a genius for conversation in which every shade of wit, humor, pathos, and even tragic power followed in close succession."²⁴ She is Wilder's favorite personality in the novel, the

¹⁸ Wilder, *The Cabala*, 35-37

¹⁹ "Pan, whose name is usually derived from 'paein', 'to pasture', stands for the 'devil', or 'upright man' of the Arcadian fertility cult, which closely resembles the witch cult of North-western Europe. This man dressed in a goat skin, was the chosen lover of the Maenads during their drunken orgies on the high mountains, and sooner or later paid for his privilege with death." See Graves, I, 102

²⁰ A rather extreme mythological identity attributed by the critics to the character of Marcantonio is that of Priapus, the ugly child with the enormous genitals, son of Aphrodite and Dionysus who had tried to violate Hestia, the goddess of the domestic hearth and social order. See Graves, vol. I, 69, 75 and Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Young, 1952, 390

²¹ Wilder, 61

²² *Ibid*, 65

²³ "The news of his death came to Thamus, a sailor in a ship bound for Italy by way of the island of Paxi. A divine voice shouted across the sea: "Thamus, are you there? When you reach Palodes, take care to proclaim that the great god Pan is dead!, which Thamus did; and the news was greeted from the shore with groans and laments." From Plutarch: *Why Oracles are Silent*, Graves, vol. I, 101-103

²⁴ Wilder, 48

best of the aristocratic tradition, a rarity of high intelligence and sensibility with a great potential for love and a profound need to be loved. Unhappily married to the misanthrope Prince d'Espoli, Alix has experienced a succession of "strange stormy loves as brief and fantastic as they were passionate and unsatisfied."²⁵ In the episode narrated in the third chapter, Wilder's Venus, the Roman counterpart of Aphrodite, barely survives an agonising love for some inferior person, a modern Adonis, represented by the American archaeologist James Blair, who offers in return his cold intellectualism.²⁶

If there existed villains in the author's works, the latter could have been one, "the blind and dessicated embodiment of the puritanical American", who, at the beginning of the story appears "engaged in establishing the exact location of the ancient cities of Italq", harangues the princess with "long quotations from Livy and Virgil", and, although he searches for beauty and art, he is never able to find and appreciate it.²⁷ His erudition connected with antiquity is typical of the dry scholar who, after having filled notebooks with his discoveries, eventually donates them to Harvard's library where they forever remain of "an incomputable value." On the contrary, Alix is a sensitive, exquisite nature to whose love Blair cannot respond simply because - as an inferior personage - he is not capable of loving sufficiently in the same manner that he lacks the intelligence and humanity to understand in depth the works of art:

*He knew everything about Michelangelo yet he never felt deeply a single work [...] studied the saints and never thought about religion. His endless pursuit of facts was not so much the will to do something as it was the will to escape something else.*²⁸

He is the Adonis or Anchises, one of the mythological mortals who, not being her equals did not deserve Venus's affection, whereas the abominable Prince d'Espoli could be taken as Vulcan (Hephaestus), the ugly unloved smith-god.²⁹ In his turn, Hermes - Mercury, the commentator, was also in love with her as it becomes apparent through Wilder's admiring descriptions and sympathetic attitude towards the Princess's misfortunes throughout the novel:³⁰

*I was trembling with a strange happy excitement, made up partly of my love and pity for her, and partly from the mere experience of eavesdropping on a beautiful spirit in the last reaches of its pride and suffering. I was lying thus, proud and happy in the role of the guardian...*³¹

²⁵ Ibid., 71

²⁶ On Aphrodite's humiliating love affairs with mortals (mainly Adonis and Anchises), see Graves, vol. I, 69-73: "Though Zeus never lay with his adopted daughter Aphrodite, as some say that he did, the magic of her girdle put him under constant temptation, and at last he decided to humiliate her by making her fall desperately in love with a mortal. This was the handsome Anchises, king of the Dardanians [...] Persephone, justly aggrieved, went to Thrace, where she told her benefactor Ares that Aphrodite now preferred Adonis to himself. 'A mere mortal', she cried, 'and effeminate at that!'

²⁷ Castronovo, 35, and Wilder, 74

²⁸ Ibid., 77

²⁹ Graves, vol. I, 67-71

³⁰ "Flattered by Hermes's frank confession of love for her, Aphrodite presently spent a night with him, the fruit of which was Hermaphroditus, a double-sexed being." See Graves, vol. I, 68

³¹ Wilder, 84

In addition to the central mythological symbolism, there are several classical allusions in the Alix Chapter. Mme Agaropoulos introduces a young compatriot “who claimed to have discovered the secret of ancient Greek music.” And there is the charming but unhappy Miss Darrel with “something antique” about her, “something Plato would have seized upon in the effect of her beauty.”³²

The last section of the Chapter takes place in the entourage of Basilis, the seer, vice president of the Rosicrucian Mysteries, who gathered around him a group of mediocre existences that relished in listening to stories “of how Virgil never died, but was still alive on the island of Patmos,” or “how Cleopatra’s son Caesarion was preserved in a translucent liquid of ‘oil of gold’ and could be still seen in an underground shrine at Vienna.”³³ In one of those gatherings, Alix meets accidentally Blair who ignores her. She leaves heartbroken but, after a suddenly interrupted trip to Greece and a hospital phase of desperation, she stops being “Alix aux Enfers”, returns to the Cabala and “her old graces begin to reappear.”³⁴ However, the final scene of the chapter justifies Wilder who believed that only exceptional people possess the gift of loving deeply and truly. When a Danish archaeologist, who discusses the classical associations of the waterfall at the villa in Tivoli, praises Blair as a new Leonardo, Alix faints “with a happy smile upon her face.”³⁵

One of Wilder’s favorite approaches to worldly affairs is that of bringing together the pagan and the Christian worlds, which definitely occurs in the fourth chapter (Book Four: Astree-Luce and the Cardinal), the story of Mlle Astree-Luce de Morfontaine and Cardinal Vaini, who has already been extensively introduced in the Marcantonio Chapter:

*... though unimpaired in mind and body, looked all of his eighty years. The expression of dry serenity that never left his yellow face with its drooping moustache and pointed beard gave him the appearance of a Chinese sage that has lived a century*³⁶.

Like Wilder, who had lived a formative part of his life in China, the Cardinal has been a missionary in Western China and, exposed to foreign cultures and religions, had somehow marvellously combined the pagan and the Christian elements in his faith. He had achieved

*A harmonisation of Christianity and the religions and accepted ideas of China that had its parallel only in those daring readings that Paul discovered in his Palaestian cult [...] had interpreted the atonement in Buddhist terms and had allowed pagan symbols to be stamped upon the Host itself.*³⁷

His erudition and detachment make him the Jupiter (Zeus) of the Cabala, one of the strongest characters in the novel, whose power and scope are not encountered until the creation of Julius Caesar in *The Ides of March* (1948). When he is not the father of the gods, the Prince of the Church, he is always praised for his wisdom, or compared to other mythical figures. His knowledge of Latin “would have entranced the Augustans”, and his

³² Ibid., 87, 93

³³ Wilder, 100

³⁴ Ibid., 103

³⁵ Ibid., 104

³⁶ Ibid., 42. A memorable description that suggests a Goya painting. See Kuner, 61

³⁷ Ibid., 44-45

fellow churchmen viewed him with awe like the Homeric Achilles “sulking in his tent,” and “dreaded the moment when he would ultimately arise, swinging his mighty prestige to crush them.”³⁸

The fourth chapter, the so-called “Christian chapter” of the novel, examines religious scepticism versus simple faith through the relationship of the Cardinal and Astree-Luce. The latter, “generally in yellow satin, her high ugly face lit with its half-mad surprise,” with “a headdress of branching feathers” looked like “a bird of the Andes blown to that bleakness by the coldest Pacific breezes.”³⁹ She had always illustrated for Wilder “the futility of goodness without intelligence,” and her faith is described as a comic naivete: “all references to fish and fishing sent her off into the clouds,” as the Greek word for fish was the monogram of her religion and “acted upon her much as a muezzin’s call acts upon a Mohammedan.”⁴⁰ Astree-Luce thus becomes an unfavorable version of Vesta (Hestia) or Diana (Artemis) who “requires the same perfect chastity from her companions as she practices herself.” But for Wilder sainthood is impossible without obstacles and charities may be “immense but undigested.”⁴¹

The Cardinal’s loss of simple faith, which testifies the books he is surrounded by like Whitehead’s *Appearance and Reality*, Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Proust’s *Recollections of Things Past*, and certainly Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, arouse Astree’s religious monomania and, comically enough, instead of Diana’s bow, she picks up a revolver from a flower arrangement, shoots Vaini, but misses.⁴² Seeking to escape despair, the Cardinal departs once again for China, but dies on the journey, and is buried at the Bengal sea. And the chapter ends with the death of another god-figure that concludes the series of the novel’s episodes patterned on the poet’s death, that is Marcantonio’s suicide and Alix’s fainting in the previous chapters.

The last chapter of the novel serves as an epilogue that attempts to shed light on several of the young American’s historical and philosophical musings as well as the Cabalists’ identity. Impressively titled “Book Five: The Dusk of Gods” consists of Elizabeth Grier’s account of the Olympians and the narrator’s contemplations before his departure for the new world. Miss Grier, the wealthy American, who had introduced Blair and Samuele to the Cabalists, and to whom critics have vaguely conferred the mythical appellation of Ceres (Demeter), has been the mother-earth figure of the international set, and naturally Samuele’s questions on the Cabala re-addressed to her.⁴³ Quite unexpectedly, the harsh reality of the previous episodes succeeds the mythological fantasy of a “twilight for the gods”:

³⁸ Ibid., 46-47

³⁹ Ibid., 107

⁴⁰ Ibid., 108-109

⁴¹ Ibid., and Graves, vol. I, 74-75, 87

⁴² The Cardinal had foreseen Astree-Luce’s reaction in his translating a passage from *Oedipus at Colonus*. See Wilder, 130

Generous son of Aegeus, to the gods alone old age and death come never. But all else is confounded by all-mastering time. The strength of earth decays and the strength of the body. Faith dies. Distrust is born. Among friends the same spirit does not last true ...

⁴³ See Burbank, 31 and Graves, vol. I, 89-92. In Wilder’s short play *Proserpina and the Devil* (1915) Demeter appears as “a handsome Italian matron” in stiff brocade.

Well, first you must know, Samuele, the gods of antiquity did not die with the arrival of Christianity. [...] Naturally when they begin to lose worshippers they began to lose some of their divine attributes. They even found themselves able to die if they wanted to. But when one of them died his godhead was passed on to someone else; no sooner is Saturn dead than some man somewhere feels a new personality descending upon him...⁴⁴

In Miss Grier's words, the Cabalists from mere symbols of the past have become literal embodiments of it, and it is overtly suggested to the narrator that he is "the new god Mercury," and his transformation could be similar to that of a certain Hollander who became who became Mercury through a process of deification that she reads from a document, which basically describes how he acquired the pugnacious power of sinning without remorse. His personality and conduct mirror those of the narrator – Wilder, who "also loved discord among gods and men," had always been happy, the happiest of the gods," and was summoned to Rome to serve as the god's messenger and secretary:

The Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva is built over an ancient temple to that goddess and there one day I found her [...] I spent hours about the station in search of newly arrived divinities. [...] There was no incipient Bacchus among the Oxford students on vacation; the Belgian nuns on pilgrimage discovered me no Vesta. [...] I turned to see a strange face looking at me from the small window of the locomotive – mis-shapen, black with coal-dust, gleaming with perspiration and content, and grinning from ear to ear, was Vulcan.⁴⁵

It follows that the members of this extraordinary society Samuele associated with for a year were true functional incarnations of the ancient gods, who slowly disappeared with the advent of Christianity:

All gods and heroes are by nature the enemies of Christianity – a faith trailing its aspirations and remorse and in whose presence every man is a failure. Only a broken will can enter the kingdom of Heaven. Finally tired out with the cult of themselves, they give in.⁴⁶

Several critics state that Wilder's Olympian gods, after losing their great strength, they all undergo "a gradual decline through the central episodes, each of which has been a chapter in failure." It is rather amusing to read, for example, of "the failure, with Marcantonio, of the gods to reproduce themselves; with Alix, to attract new worshippers; with Astree-Luce and the Cardinal, to broaden their powers;"⁴⁷ or that the "Keats episode" in Book One, which symbolizes the immortal success of a short life, serves as a contrast to the Cabala circle "condemned to hopeless failure."⁴⁸

The above comments contradict the author's philosophy who simply admired excellence and great passions, which mark one's being with the stamp of immortality. There is high quality in the conduct of Wilder's personages, and Cardinal Vaini, doubting

⁴⁴ Wilder, 140

⁴⁵ Ibid., 142-143

⁴⁶ Ibid., 144

⁴⁷ Malcom Goldstein, *The Art of Thornton Wilder*, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Publishing, 1965,

⁴⁸ Stresau, 16

the possibility to prove the existence of God, makes three memorable statements which reflect the behavior of the other characters in the respective chapters: “Who can understand religion unless he has sinned? Who can understand literature unless he has suffered? Who can understand love unless he has loved without response?”⁴⁹ The poet’s suffering, Alix’s unrequited love, as well as Marcantonio’s erotic passion, and Astree-Luce’s obsession for royalty and religion, certainly constitutes what makes the characters glorious and immortal.

The book ends with Samuele’s departure on a steamboat under Virgil’s star, which has similarly marked the novel’s opening paragraph with great poetic beauty:

*It was Virgil’s sea that we were crossing; the very stars were his: Arcturus and the showery Hyades, the two Bears and Orion in his harness of gold. All these before me in cloudless sky and in the water, murmuring before a light wind, the sliding constellations were brokenly reflected.*⁵⁰

Samuele himself, after his illuminating discussion with Miss Grier, becomes part of the mythological fantasy that dominates “The Dusk of Gods.” Taking seriously the role of Mercury, not only as messenger of the gods but also as conductor of the dead, he believes that he should be able to invoke spirits. He conjures the apparition of Virgil, “the prince of poets, mediator between antiquity and Christianity, greatest spirit of the ancient world and prophet of the new,” who in fact appears in a supernatural manner “completely visible with pulsations of light, half silver and half gold,” and holds an unexpected imaginary conversation with Samuele on the Christian Parnassus and the meaning of the “Eternal City.” Milton who “spoke a noble Latin” had been of high esteem while Erasmus was in debate with Plato and Augustine “had descended from the hill;” Dante was guilty of the sin of pride while Virgil exhibited only the sin of anger.⁵¹

Samuele then asks for guidance in order to decide whether his time in Rome has been meaningful and complete: “Master, I have just spent a year in the city that was your whole life. Am I wrong to leave it?” The poet replies that immortality does not rest in a single city, no matter how majestic that city could be, but in the creation of a city:

*Rome existed before Rome and when Rome will be a waste there will be Romes after her. Seek out some city that is young. The secret is to make a city, not to rest in it. When you have found one, drink in the illusion that she too is eternal.*⁵²

The young American has eventually found an answer to the question that preoccupied his mind. He can leave Rome in peace because there is hope for greatness that may rest not only on a classical and glorious site, but any place, even modern New York, where he is sailing for. Virgil himself has heard of his city, “its foundations have knocked upon our root and the towers have cast a shadow across the sandals of the angels.”⁵³ And as the author bids Virgil farewell and finishes his memoirs with an evocation of the Latin poet’s

⁴⁹ Wilder, 118

⁵⁰ Ibid., 144

⁵¹ Ibid., 145

⁵² Ibid., 147

⁵³ Ibid.

beautiful Mediterranean sea: “The shimmering ghost faded before the stars, and the engines beneath me pounded eagerly toward the new world and the last and greater of all cities.”⁵⁴

The appearance of Virgil in the conclusion of the novel serves Wilder’s purpose to associate the present world and the mythological past in Christian and pagan terms. Each of the characters is an amalgamation of pagan and Christian faith against the background of a classical and Christian Rome. The narrator is not only an Olympian Mercury but a Samuele, after the prophet and judge of the Old Testament, the link between the monarchies of the past and the kingdom of the future represented by David.⁵⁵ Several modern literary personages also bear names of relevant duplicity, and their authors have a similar intention of reconciling the ancient with the modern world. Eugene O’Neill’s Dion Anthony in his play *The Great God Brown* is named after Dyonissus and St. Anthony, and the Dyonissiac figures in Tennessee Williams’s *Orpheus Descending* and *Suddenly Last Summer* are respectively St. Valentine and St. Sebastian. The assumption that Christianity might have caused the decline of the Olympians, as Miss Grier states in the last chapter, raises questions about the possible divinity of man in a pagan or Christian world. The character of Marcantonio is a truly Dyonisiac who marvellously revels in the escort of his modern Maenads, a conduct permissible in antiquity, but quite unacceptable by the Christian teachings. He fails and commits suicide because he is mercilessly urged by Samuele, the New England Puritan, to reform. For a year the young Roman has alternated “communion and dissipation, the exaltation of the former itself betraying him into the latter and the despair of the latter driving him in anguish to the former.”⁵⁶ His final act of incest with his sister Donna Julia, an extreme form of sin for the Christian critics, was not considered abnormal in antiquity, and is even approved by Cardinal Vaini who, addressing Samuele hints upon the fate of Marcantonio in Book Four: “Would you be surprised if I gave up any life to reviving the royal brother-and-sister marriage of Egypt?”⁵⁷

Then Alix fails because she cannot find a response to her amorous quest. For Blair, the unimaginative scholar, she is first an enemy to his studies, and second “the strange hedged monster which all his wide reading had not been able to humanise: a married woman.”⁵⁸ The American Puritan bookishly oriented misses Venus’s love and almost destroys her beauty. Finally Vaini-Jupiter in his effort to syncretise the doctrines of his papal church and his Eastern experience collapses as a person and as the focal point of the imposed religion on the other members of the Cabala. He pleads with Samuele for the reform of Marcantonio while he believes that it is unjust to act against nature’s bent: he cannot help the charming Alix either, and unwillingly draws his Vestal friend Astree-Luce to an attempt of murder. His greatness rather lies in his pagan side, which seeks freedom of faith for, when he is spiritually restricted, either by the Church, as it had happened early in

⁵⁴ Ibid., 148

⁵⁵ In *Proserpina and the Devil*, where the traditions of classical mythology are also conflated with those of Christianity. Hermes appears as Archangel Gabriel.

⁵⁶ Wilder, 62

⁵⁷ Ibid., 119

⁵⁸ Ibid., 80

his clerical career, or by his congregation, in the case of Astree-Luce, he causes havoc and ultimately loses himself “in the tides of the Bengal sea.”⁵⁹

Although *The Cabala* was heralded as a “magnificent literary event and one of the most delectable myths that ever issued from the seven hills of Rome.” Wilder’s masterly retreat in time and space is not exclusively indebted to the classical authors but to more contemporary authors who also shared a special affection for aristocracy and the past.⁶⁰ It is impossible to read *The Cabala* without thinking of Marcel Proust and *Recollections of Things Past (A la recherche du temps perdu)*, which in fact Cardinal Vaini read in Book Four. Having in common love for the past, Wilder has learned from the French master the complex impressionistic technique and inherited certain themes, “a formula of emotion, of the criticism of life” that recur in his works.⁶¹ The Alix episode echoes the favorite Proustian formula of a superior individual’s love for a lesser person who treats the former with cruelty, and the presence of Helen Darrell in the *Cabala*, like the unannounced characters in the Proustian social scene, causing Alix’s envy with her beauty, her languishing illness and her encounter with the dying French poet, is undoubtedly a Proustian overtone, but definitely lacks the French author’s “mournful magic.”

Wilder has been accused that, like Proust, he only “deals with the illness of the cultivated people in a capitalistic society,” but the former never professed that he wished to compose a narrative, or create a theater for the common man, as in the case of Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams, who transfer the elements of mythology or classical tragedy to the twentieth century stage.⁶² Rosario’s Dionysiac identity in *The Rose Tattoo* is that of a truck driver, Val in *Orpeus Descending* works in a shoestore, whereas Arthur Miller’s protagonists are mostly common men who have been given tragic stature in plays like *Death of a Salesman* or *A View from the Bridge*. The latter specifically in his essay “Tragedy and the Common Man” explains why “the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were,” contradicting the Aristotelian definition of “the tragic mode as fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly,” a statement Wilder’s elitistic favouritism seems to be in agreement with.⁶³ Since the time of *The Cabala* Wilder has been unconcerned with popularism and the class struggle, which made him the recipient of severe criticism in the 1930s. He did not appreciate the interest of writing about “coalminers, the childslaves of the beet field or the murders of Ella May and her songs;” he favoured the classical notion of tragedy, elegance, beauty, intelligence, whatever makes a character distinguished and eminent, and its author in those times a total fugitive from the American scene.⁶⁴

Wilder differs from the other American writers, who are considered authentic disciples of Henry James, whom he certainly recalls in his books, like Edith Wharton or Louis Bromfield, in that they also write as aristocrats with aesthetic sensibilities inspired by the European atmosphere as a refuge from the American vulgarity, but their scope is

⁵⁹ Ibid., 136

⁶⁰ From the *New York Times*, Harrison, 91 and Goldstein, 45

⁶¹ Edmund Wilson, *Shores of Light*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952, 385

⁶² Ibid., 386. Wilson also mentions his conversation on Proust with Thornton Wilder “who has been following the French author as attentively as he had.” See *ibid.*, 376-77, 503

⁶³ *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller*, ed. Robert A. Martin, New York: Penguin, 1978, 3

⁶⁴ E. K. Brown, “A Christian Humanist: Thornton Wilder,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 4 (1953),

not in the least as artistic or scholarly as his. For example, Wharton's story, "Roman Fever" has Rome as setting and is about the city's impact on the lives of an American elite, but its interest lies exclusively in its social scene. However, the influence of Henry James remains indisputable in the narrator's device, an American cultural pilgrim who, after his sojourn in Europe, "gains a new awareness of the cultural qualities his own country lacks."⁶⁵ Samuele echoes Jamesian characters like Mrs. Tristram in *The American*, Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors*, and Mrs. Stringham in *The Wings of the Dove*. The confrontation of the innocent American and the sophisticated European is in fact a Jamesian formula that Wilder employs but James, as a pre-World War I author, was overtly partial to the Europeans while the former writing in post-World War I years, and in spite of his cabalistic favoritism, seems to make an effort to apply his antiquarian experience to the new world.

Another author whose influence on Wilder has been the subject of criticism is James Branch Cabell, who in esoteric romances like *Jurgen* brings past and present together. The difference is that Wilder does not send his heroes back to the ages and places of the myth. He might have drawn his Cabalists as modern incarnations of the classical gods, in the manner of Cabell, but they live in the present and are depicted with considerable realism. Cabell's characters remind of James's who search for an ideal in the past without looking into the future. Moreover, the former employs a non-realistic technique, he has an obsession with sex, and satirizes the aristocratic qualities that Wilder affirmed as humanistic principles of decorum related to the Hellenic-Christian culture.⁶⁶

What certainly makes *The Cabala* unique is its transition from reality to mythological fantasy, and one can definitely disagree with the critics who mostly consider it as a major weakness of the novel. Whereas the characters are naturally depicted with simple legendary allusions in the middle episodes, fantasy governs in the last chapter where all are overtly metamorphosed into mythological figures, and an apparition supernaturally participates in the actual dialogue. The classical past is glorified through a dialectic of the familiar and the unfamiliar in Levi Straus's terms, by which there is no static use of the myths, thematological conservatism, or fixity in narrative detail. Wilder is rather interested in their dynamics and employs the power of the myths in order to reshape them across space, time, and cultural contexts.

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⁶⁵ Burbank, 31

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