

THE IDES OF MARCH: A ROMAN NOVEL

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Abstract: *The present article continues the analysis of mythological and historical motives used by Thornton Wilder in his postwar novel, “The Ides of March”. Wilder moved from the use of mythology in “The Cabala”, and of legend, in “The Woman of Andros”, to depicting a major historical figure in “The Ides of March”. As literary technique, the gallery of portraits of his first Roman novel, symmetrically delineated in an episodic pattern, is replaced by a narrative device that the author employs quite successfully for the first time - a variant of epistolary form supplemented by historians' accounts.*

Keywords: *Roman novel, The Ides of March, Thornton Wilder, narrative technique*

After *The Woman of Andros* Thornton Wilder started to accept the twentieth-century America as a fascinating place and age to live in and write about. This growing conviction, along with his extensive study of European theater, made him abandon the distant romantic scenes of his first three novels and search for material in the present American setting inhabited by unpretentious characters who communicated in a colloquial idiom. His one-act plays in the collection entitled *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931) move more or less in a world of actuality, and his novel *Heaven's My Destination* (1935), set in the period of the Great Depression, portrays an American similar to those who populate the realistic literature of the United States, surrounded by numerous secondary characters who

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behave like average Americans. His three long plays that follow, *Our Town* (1938), *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938), and *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), are also set in America and express "an effort to find a value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life."¹ Although Wilder's classical bent still remains obvious in these works, he definitely tries to view life through an American perspective and describe human adventures of real Americans:

The real Americanism will be important in the future as a belief in the significance and even in the concealed implication of every event. [...] Just think what it means to every American to believe himself permanently, directly, and responsibly bound to world destiny. The significance that this belief imparts to the simplest dealings and the simplest events seems to me the beginning of all achievement. Such a trend precedes all great cultures.²

In spite of this period of declared Americanism, with his first substantial postwar work, *The Ides of March* (1948), Wilder literally returns to the Roman antiquity he had left since the time of *The Cabala*, and produces "a fantasia on certain persons and events of the last days of the Roman republic."³ After he revisited Italy during the war, he decided to return to a Roman setting, not the modern or the mythological one of his first novel, but that of Caesar's Republic, through a literary reconstruction of events of which the historical fidelity is rather irrelevant.⁴ Whereas

¹ Especially on *Our Town*, Wilder made this statement in his Preface to *Three Plays*. See *Three Plays*, New York: Harper and Row, 1985, xii.

² Interview with Walther Tritzsch, "Thornton Wilder in Berlin," *The Living Age*, CCCXLIX (1931), 47.

³ See author's prefatory note in Thornton Wilder, *The Ides of March*, New York: Harper and Row, 1987, ix.

⁴ "The Italian surrender on September 7, 1943, foreshadowed the move of the airplanes section of Mediterranean headquarters from North Africa to Caserta, Italy, about fifteen

mythology permeated the pages of *The Cabala*, and legend the story in *The Woman of Andros*, *The Ides of March* depict a major historical figure through a narrative device that the author employs quite successfully for the first time. The gallery of portraits of his first Roman novel, which were symmetrically delineated in an episodic pattern, in this novel replaces a variant of epistolary form supplemented by historians' accounts, inscriptions and samples from original Latin poetry. In the prefatory note Wilder calls the attention of the reader "to the form in which the material is presented," and makes references to certain chronological violations:

Within each of the four books the documents are given in approximately chronological order. Those in Book One cover September, 45 B.C. Book Two, which contains material relevant to Caesar's inquiry concerning the nature of love, begins earlier and traverses the whole of September and October. Book Three mainly occupied with religion begins earlier still and runs through the autumn, concluding with the ceremonies of the Good Goddess in December. Book Four resuming all the aspects of Caesar's inquiry, particularly those dealing with himself as possibly filling a role as an instrument of "destiny," begins with the earliest document in the volume and concludes with his assassination.⁵

Each chapter embraces and extends the previous one, which makes the novel's structure "comparable to a set of bowls placed one within

miles from Naples, Wilder, now a lieutenant colonel was billeted in a trailer in the English Gardens that Lady Hamilton had laid out for the Queen of Naples. There was no hot water for shaving, but a palace stood nearby and behind it an arboretum, spacious grounds, tall trees. During off-duty hours Thornton walked alongside the ancient aqueduct that supplied the city's water, composing in his head material for a postwar novel about Julius Caesar." See Gilbert A. Harrison, *The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder*, New Haven and New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1983, 238.

⁵ Wilder, *The Ides of March*, x.

another."⁶ All end with a misfortune for Caesar, which pre-shadows the final catastrophe of his assassination recorded by Suetonius from *Lives of the Caesars* at the end of Book Four, a technique reminiscent of the catastrophic endings of *The Cabala* episodes.

The first chapter commences with a report by the College of Augurs, gives the essence of Caesar's personality, introduces most of the persons closest to him, except for Cleopatra who appears in the next chapter, and ends with Caesar's epileptic seizure after the first assassination attempt at Clodia's party. The second starts with a letter from Servilia to Caesar's wife Pompeia about the arrival of the Queen of Egypt, deals with the love affairs of Clodia and Catullus, Caesar and Cleopatra, and ends with the latter found in an embrace with Marc Anthony. The third chapter, like the first one, opens with Caesar's religious preoccupations requesting a purification of the rituals of The Bona Dea, and concludes with the profanation of the rites instigated by Clodia Pulcher and aided by Caesar's wife, whom he ultimately divorces. The final chapter begins with Servilia's letter inviting Brutus to Rome to help depose Caesar which is eventually effected with the latter's assassination at the end of the novel.

Central to all four Books is certainly Julius Caesar, the focal point of the other personages' thoughts and deeds. Like the major figure in most of Wilder's works he is "a consciously wrought projection of an aspect of the author's idealized self."⁷ He recalls the tragic Cardinal Vaini and continues asking the philosophical questions about love and religion that were initially posed in the pages of *The Cabala*. The historical Caesar wished to reform the political, economic, and religious structure of ancient Rome, but his plans were violently disrupted by Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators. Similarly Wilder delineates the portrait of a public Caesar

⁶ Malcolm Goldstein, *The Art of Thornton Wilder*, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, p. 132.

⁷ Richard H. Goldstone, *Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait*, New York: Saturday Review Press/Dutton, 1975, 213.

who undertakes serious reforms. In the first chapter it is made explicit through his journals that he accepts human destiny and despises superstition:

I have inherited this burden of superstition and nonsense. I govern innumerable men but must acknowledge that I am governed by birds and thunderclaps. [...] What can I do against the apathy that is glad to wrap itself under the cloak of piety, that tells me that Rome will be saved by overwatching Gods or is resigned to the fact that Rome will come to ruin because the Gods are maleficent?⁸

He philosophizes on man's potential and the limitations of the average human being continuing a line of thought established in *The Women of Andros*:

Man—what is that? What do we know of him? His Gods, liberty, mind, love, destiny, death—what do these mean? You remember how you and I as boys in Athens, and later before our tents in Gaul used to turn these things over endlessly. I am an adolescent again, philosophizing. As Plato, the dangerous beguiler, said: the best philosophers in the world are boys with their beards new on their chins; I am a boy again.⁹

Caesar explains that for him there are four realms in which he seems to recognize the possibility of life's mystery: love, poetry, destiny, and the particular moment of vision that accompanies his attacks of the "sacred Malady." Throughout Wilder's works love has been a highly favored theme and the gift of poetry greatly esteemed. In *Our Town* the poets and the saints are the ones who can perceive life's precious gifts in the little dear moments of human existence. In the letter that concludes Book One

⁸. Wilder, 5-6.

⁹. *ibid.*, 8.

written by Asinius Pollio to Virgil and Horace, some fifteen years later, Caesar explicitly states "that poetry, life love, indeed proceeded from the Gods and that both were accompanied by a state of possession that had universally been conceded to be more than human."¹⁰ Poetry civilizes men, and it is "by poets that all men are told that we press forward to a Golden Age and they endure the ills they know in the hope that a happier world will arrive to rejoice their descendants."¹¹

The ideal of poetry becomes incarnate in Catullus whose unrequited love for Clodia, another favorite Wilder formula, is catastrophic, but also the source of an incomparable beauty that remains immortal in his lyric verses. Clodia Pulcher, one of the major female figures in the novel, is also presented in Book One as a woman of "beauty, health, wealth, birth, and intelligence," but deprived of the "perfect felicity in every moment of every day."¹² It is a common belief that she poisoned her husband and has improper relations with her brother, but she claims that Caesar, being her ex-lover, bears the responsibility because he made her what she really is, his "creature" and his "monster."¹³

The joys of love and their implications become the central theme of Book Two, in which Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, arrives in Rome to reassume her relationship with Caesar, and the feverish passion of Catullus for Clodia is heightened. The legendary Cleopatra had always fascinated Wilder and inevitably occupies the position of the major female character in the novel. In one of his very early journal entries, 1917, the author recalls the moments of this admiration:

When as a little boy I heard of Cleopatra for the first time and how in the following days the name seemed to be mentioned in everything I read and how chance sights and

^{10.} *ibid.*, 77.

^{11.} *ibid.*, 79.

^{12.} *ibid.*, 16.

^{13.} *ibid.*, 44-45.

sounds became reminiscent of her and stray objects would suddenly suggest an association with her.¹⁴

Like the characters of Princess d' Espoli or Chrysis in his previous works, the heroine of *The Ides of March* is a charismatic personage of exquisite beauty, divine grace and intelligence:

Her skin is the color of the finest Greek marble and as smooth: her eyes are brown, large and most living. From them and from her low but ever-varying voice proceeds an unbroken message of happiness, well-being, amusement, intelligence, and assurance.¹⁵

Caesar, who has fathered her son Caesarion, admits that she also has "a genius for administration," and understands him "in a realm where few are capable of understanding" his achievements.¹⁶

Her appearance in the Roman scene offends the moral code of the conservative patricians, as it had happened with the other Alexandrian in *The Woman of Andros*, and causes the conflict of the private with the public Caesar:

She is indeed a woman now and a most queenly one. At moments I find myself dreaming that she is more woman than queen and must arrest my thoughts. Cleopatra is Egypt. No word she lets fall and no caress she dispenses is without a political implication. Each conversation is a treaty and every kiss a pact. I could wish that association with her did not require so constant a vigilance and that her favors had more abandon and less art.¹⁷

¹⁴ Harrison, 253.

¹⁵ Wilder, 138.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 93.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 113.

The private Caesar addresses her as his "pearl" or "lotus," and demonstrates in his letter a fascination similar to that of Wilder in his journal entry:

But what would I not do for the great Queen of Egypt? I have not only become a thief: I have become an idiot. I can think only of her. I blunder my work. I forger names.[...] I make visitors wait: I postpone tasks--all this that I may hold long conversations with the everliving Isis, with the Goddess, with the witch who has stolen my mind away. There is no drunkenness equal to that of remembering whispered words in the night. There is nothing in the world that can compare with the great Queen of Egypt.¹⁸

In his turn, the public Caesar refuses Cleopatra to bring their child to Rome, and explains to her the existential solitariness of a leader:

The condition of leadership adds new degrees of solitariness to the basic solitude of mankind. Every order that we issue increases the extent to which we are alone, and every show of deference which is extended to us separates us from our fellows. In looking forward to the Queen's visit I promise myself a mitigation of the solitude in which I live and work.¹⁹

But Cleopatra's reply indicates that his isolation is rather self-imposed and excessive:

Is it not the danger of rulers to increase this solitude by ascribing to others that motivation alone? [...] I ascribe the urgent lessness of your conduct to the fact that you have,

¹⁸.*ibid.*, 129.

¹⁹.*ibid.*, 105.

indeed, created for yourself a solitude that is excessive even for the ruler of a world.²⁰

His conflict becomes more tragic at the end of Book Two, when Cleopatra is surprised "struggling and protesting in the embrace of a very drunken and ardent Marc Anthony."²¹ Consequently, Caesar's love for Cleopatra becomes unrequited like Catullus' love for Clodia, which is highlighted in the same chapter.²²

The latter requests from the poet to consider a change in his feelings to view her in a friendly manner as "the nature" of friendship "makes no claims" "establishes no possession," and "is not competitive."²³ Catullus' response is full of pain, anger, and expresses a Platonic view of love, as it is exposed in Plato's *Phaedrus*, already mentioned in *The Woman of Andros*:

You swore you loved me, and laughed and warned me that you would not love men forever. [...] Never, never can I conceive of a love which is able to foresee its own termination. Love is its own eternity. Love is in every moment of its being: all time. [...] All, all that Plato said was true. It was not I, I myself, who loved you. When I looked at you the God Eros descended upon me. I was more than myself. The God lived in me, looked through my eyes and spoke through my lips.²⁴

²⁰. *ibid.*, 106-107.

²¹. *ibid.*, 143.

²². Catullus, the greatest of the Latin lyric poets fell overwhelmingly in love with Clodia, a beautiful and intelligent aristocrat who regarded their relationship quite frivolously. The poet traced the whole story of his misplaced love in *The Poems to Lesbia*, verses unsurpassed for the expression of direct personal emotion, which assured him immortality.

²³. Wilder, 102.

²⁴. *ibid.*, 108-109.

Catullus' unrequited love finds an outlet through his verses quoted in the original Latin by the author, whereas Marc Anthony's affair with Cleopatra becomes the cause of another rejection, that of the actress Cytheris, until then lover of Marc Anthony, who laments accordingly:

It filled my days with radiance as it filled my nights with unbearable sweetness. For fifteen years I have found no reason to ask myself why one lives or why one suffers. I must now learn to live without the loving glances from those eyes on which I have dreamed my life away.²⁵

The chapter on the pleasures and misfortunes of love manifested in the relationship of the three couples succeeds Book Three focusing on religious issues, specifically those of syncretism and deification that had furnished adequate subject material for *The Cabala*. Like Wilder, who in his early youth had been exposed to Christianity and the exotic cults, Cardinal Vaini introduced certain syncretizing reforms in the Christian religion. In his turn, Julius Caesar attempts to reform the mysteries of the Good Goddess by allowing "each woman to find out in herself her own Goddess."²⁶ He sees "the importance for administration of encouraging an identification of the Gods of other countries" with those of Rome, and explains in detail that of the Gallic and the Roman gods as well as Venus' with her Eastern counterparts Astarte and Astoreth:

If I live long enough, or if my successors also see the importance of this unity among the cults, all the men and women in the world will call themselves brothers and sisters, children of Jupiter.[...] The votaries of the Good Goddess during the rites wear a headdress which is certainly neither Greek nor Roman and which is known among them as the "Egyptian Turban." How it came to be there no one has ever

²⁵ *ibid.*, 144.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 155.

explained. But who can explain the symbols, the influences, and the expressions of that universal mixture of joy and terror which is religion?²⁷

The theme of deification and the possible divinity of the personages, which was dominant in *The Cabala*, Wilder further explores in *The Ides of March*, particularly through the main characters of Caesar and Cleopatra. The historian Cornelius Nepos records the royal physician Sosthenes talking about the supernatural effect Caesar has had in popular belief:

It is said that he was conceived by his mother of a bolt of lightning.[...] There is no abnormality that has not been charged against him and it is believed that, like Jupiter, he has predilections within the animal kingdom.²⁸

Pliny the Younger, about one century later, mentions that people believed Caesar's body had not been burnt after his assassination, but seized by a mystery cult, was divided into many pieces, which were buried under different parts of Rome. In this manner, Caesar's "sparagmos" fulfilled "an old prophecy which affirmed that the survival and greatness of Rome was dependent on his murder and dismemberment."²⁹

Cleopatra's arrival in Rome also fires "the imaginations of the people to so luxuriant a body of legend," as in her union with Caesar the Roman people celebrate "the nuptials of the Unconquered Sun and the Fecund Earth."³⁰ While Caesar appears as the questioning mind that philosophizes on the issue of divinity, Cleopatra unreservedly applies for admission to the mysteries of the Good Goddess supporting her divine claims with immense documentation on her descent from the Goddess Qu'ed and the Goddess Cybele identified through "emanation" with the Roman

²⁷. *ibid.*, 168.

²⁸. *ibid.*, 173.

²⁹. *ibid.*, 175.

³⁰. *ibid.*, 173.

Goddess.³¹ In her capacity of deity, Cleopatra can easily sense divinity, which she recognizes in Caesar, who views as naive and dangerous "this ascription of divine attributes:"

The history of nations shows how deeply rooted is our propensity to impute a more than human condition to those remarkable for gifts or to those merely situated in conspicuous position. I have little doubt that the demigods and even the Gods of antiquity are nothing more than ancestors about whom these veneration have been fostered.³²

After all these interpretations of the divine, Caesar could possibly agree with that of Catullus who was "certain that love is the only manifestation of the divine and that it is from love, even when it is traduced and insulted, that we can learn the nature of our existence."³³ The great poet dies eventually reconciled with Caesar, who at his deathbed praises Clodia Pulcher "as though she were some Goddess."³⁴ It is quite ironic that the same Clodia will very soon commit such a sacrilegious act as the profanation of the Mysteries of the Good Goddess by introducing her brother, who had formerly seduced Caesar's wife, dressed as a votary in the ceremonies. Book Three ends quite tragically for the public and the private Caesar as sacrilege, a failure in the affairs of the state, and his divorce with the involved Pompeia, an absolute domestic scandal, presage his actual collapse at the end of the concluding chapter.

In the documents of Book Four, Marcus Brutus is introduced with the vague suspicion of Caesar's concealed paternity, of which the legitimate object or not, the former definitely enjoyed the tacit affection of an older

³¹ *ibid.*, 157.

³² *ibid.*, 169.

³³ *ibid.*, 170.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 182.

for "a younger man of notable capability."³⁵ The woman's role in the Republic as "political heads" or influential brides is also emphasized in this chapter, whereas Caesar utters final reflections on his position of "Destiny's favorite," and the changing attitude of the people towards the master they had loved now merging "with all the masters they had hated."³⁶ When the chain letters of his assassination are discovered, he believes that it will "help to illuminate the ancient problem of 'de natura deorum' for such an assassination would of necessity disclose the metaphysical-historical meaning."³⁷

During his metaphysical struggles Caesar contemplates on the mystery of mortal life:

Life, life has this mystery that we dare not say the last word about it, that it is good or bad, that it is senseless, or that it is ordered. That all these things have been said of it is evidence only that all these things are in us. This "life" in which we move has no color and it gives no sign. As you once said: the universe is not aware that we are here.³⁸

Like Chrysis, who in *The Woman of Andros* had welcomed "the bright and the dark," Caesar embraces "all experience," and admits, in a rather existential manner, that "life has no meaning save that which we may confer upon it," echoing Camus' view that legends, or myths even, do not have a meaning of their own, but wait to be incarnated. In *The Woman of Andros* existed the assumption "where there is an unknowable there is a promise," which taken up by Caesar is rephrased into the hope of final knowledge maintained in the future generations:

³⁵ *ibid.*, 203.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 204-205, 219.

³⁷ Helmut Papajewski, *Thornton Wilder*, trans. John Conway, New York: Ungar, 1968, 72.

³⁸ Wilder, 232.

I dare to ask that from my good Calpurnia a child may arise to say: On the Meaningless I choose to press a meaning and in the wastes of the Unknowable I choose to be known.[...] We are not in relationship to anything until we have enwrapped it in a meaning, or do we know for certainty what that meaning is until we have costingly labored to impress it upon the object.³⁹

The above lines echo the epigraph of the novel from Goethe's *Faust* translated by Wilder as follows, with the addition of a gloss:

The shudder of awe is humanity's highest Faculty
Even though this world is forever altering its values.
Gloss: Out of man's recognition in fear and awe that there is an Unknowable comes all that is best in the explorations of his mind, – even though that recognition is often misled into superstition, enslavement, and overconfidence.⁴⁰

A year later Wilder retained the memory of Caesar as he had made him, like Goethe, on a hint from history:

A great weeper – but over the wonder of life, not over life's much – advertised pathos, and that's what I liked best about him. Goethe was like Caesar – amazed wonder, not tender sympathy.⁴¹

The perspective by which Caesar views the wonder of life owes a great deal to the general influence of the existentialist philosophers, which prevails throughout the novel. Wilder had been reading extensively Sartre,

³⁹ *ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁰ Papajewski says that Wilder has not recognized the passage's syntactical context, and is of the opinion that his interpretation of Goethe's text is wrong. See Papajewski, 73-74.

⁴¹ Harrison, 253.

Camus, and Kierkegaard. The summation of his reading he briefly expressed in a letter:

There is no God; there is the concession of the absurdity of man's reason in a Universe which can never be explained by reason; yet there is the freedom of the will defended for the first time on non-religious ground, and how.⁴²

Wilder himself tells that *The Ides of March* can be considered as written "under the sign of Kierkegaard," and most critics discuss the novel in relation to Sartre's existentialism.⁴³ Kuner believes that Wilder does not go beyond a kind of agnosticism and refers to Sartre's *The Flies* (*Les Mouches*), also mentioned by Goldstein along with *Morts sans sépulture* (*The Victors*), which Wilder had translated.⁴⁴ For Burbank, who in connection with *The Alcestiad* discusses *The Ides of March* under the chapter title "Existentialism and Humanism," the metaphorical irony basic to the novel "consists in Wilder's substitution of 'Unknowable' for Sartre's 'meaningless' in describing the operation of the universe."⁴⁵ Castronovo simply mentions Camus but none of the above critics and many others, who have viewed the novel as a dramatic reworking of Roman history in terms of the existential philosophy, seems to have noticed that Camus had also been interested in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* and, like Wilder,

⁴² From a letter he wrote to his "war buddy" Joe Still. See Harrison, 245. For Wilder's attitudes toward the existentialists, see his *Journal* entries on Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Maritain. Wilder had also worked on a play in 1953 called *The Heir*, a drama about "the Existentialist man who, in words Camus quoted to me from Dostoyevsky, is afraid that he doesn't hate everything enough." See David Castronovo, *Thornton Wilder*, New York: Ungar, 1986, 160.

⁴³ M. C. Kuner, *Thornton Wilder. The Bright and the Dark*, New York: Crowell, 1972, 176.

⁴⁴ Wilder had met Sartre, and the latter impressed by his interest "placed the American disposition of his plays in Thornton's hands." See Harrison, 245.

⁴⁵ Rex Burbank, *Thornton Wilder*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1978, 100.

had chosen one of the "twelve Caesars" as a vehicle of his philosophy of the absurd in his thesis-play *Caligula* (1938-39).⁴⁶

The difference lies in that Wilder's Caesar is not an incarnate of the absurd, he undermines the existential "Unknowable," and seeks some meaning in the nature of things reconfirming the gloss of Goethe's epigraph. He might recall the alienated personages of the existentialists in his private life, of which he is severely accused by Cleopatra, but as a statesman, he is under "the obligation to create, moment by moment" his own glorious Rome that Wilder had praised in *The Cabala*:

Wilder's Caesar is an emblem of fortitude who stands up to disaster by resolute action. Nothing could be farther from Wilder's early indecisive people; this latest protagonist – equipped with the philosophical resources of the existentialists – has committed himself to "the first and last schoolmaster of life" – "living and committing oneself unreservedly and dangerously to living."⁴⁷

Although the novel has been considered as "the most comprehensive literary exposition of the existentialist conception of life created thus far in America," Wilder is not a committed existentialist and displays the school's philosophical ideas in a liberal manner very dissimilar to that of an obvious proponent like Camus.⁴⁸ Even if Goethe's glossed statement remains the philosophical basis of the book. *The Ides of March* is not a thesis-work, but a novel composed from a curious blending of resources,

⁴⁶Caligula became emperor of Rome in 25 A. D. Suetonius gives a detailed account of his life and assassination in *Lives of the Caesars*. Thanks to his teacher, and writer of *Les Iles (The Islands)*, Jean Grenier, Camus became acquainted with the "Twelve Caesars" at a very young age. See Mary Koutsoudaki, *The Dionysiac Myth in Camus and Williams*, Athens: University of Athens, S. Saripolos' Library, 1987, 45-59, 69.

⁴⁷Castronovo, 132-133.

⁴⁸See Goldstein, 144, and Castronovo, 132.

historical as well as personal, which all have contributed to the creation of an original Caesar.

It is interesting that the historical background and Wilder's personal experiences actually juxtapose ancient with modern history. *The Ides of March* is a postwar novel and Wilder, having served in Europe and Africa between 1942 and 1948, was affected by the presence of great dictators like Hitler and Mussolini on the stage of world history. Sartre's play that he had translated was also about the French resistance against the Germans, and it must not be overlooked that Lauro de Bosis to whom, together with Edward Sheldon, the book is dedicated, was an Italian poet of noble extraction who "lost his life marshaling a resistance against the absolute power of Mussolini" as "his aircraft pursued by those of the Duce plunged into the Tyrrhenian Sea."⁴⁹ In the margin of a copy of his novel Wilder later noted that "the broadsides of Conspiracy" against Caesar had been inspired by the leaflets circulated in Mussolini's Rome by Lauro de Bosis on whom he modeled the character of Catullus.⁵⁰

The second dedication is to Edward Sheldon, "who though immobile and blind for over twenty years was the dispenser of wisdom, courage and gaiety to a large number of people."⁵¹ He inspired one of the off-stage characters of the novel, Lucius Mamilius Turrinus, to whom the most

⁴⁹ Wilder, v. Lauro de Bosis, son of the poet Adolfo de Bosis, was for Wilder "a most advanced, sophisticated young man and yet as sunny and idealistic as any New Englander. See Harrison, 81.

⁵⁰ Wilder's "review" of *The Ides of March* was noted in margins of a copy given to Terrence Catherman, a young American he had met in Germany shortly after the war. See Harrison, 253-254.

⁵¹ Wilder, v. Edward (End) Sheldon was a successful dramatist who for years had been bedridden, a victim of osteoarthritis. Poet Conrad Aiken mentions that "the atmosphere of reverence as friends approached Sheldon's bed was so thick you could cut it." He had become a legend and his home the center of literary and dramatic network. "With End," Wilder said, "you shared a thing in a state of growth." See Harrison, 161.

confidential letters on politics, love, poetry and religion are addressed. Turrinus was a blinded and mutilated general of Caesar's who, rescued by the latter from the Belgians, since then resided in seclusion on the island of Capri. He belongs to Wilder's injured identities, reminiscent of the maimed Philocles in *The Woman of Andros*, whose silence highlights the notion of pain while his strength and sensitivity "cause his friends to develop insights as they communicate with him, and as Wilder told Sheldon of his anxieties about his plays, Caesar confides his deepest fears and hopes to his fellow campaigner."⁵² The sinister affection Caesar feels for the mutilated Turrinus, who has experienced one of the cruelest forms of "sparagmos," preshadows his own bloody death and legendary dismemberment that follows after the end of the novel.

Even though the recent deaths of the twentieth-century dictators might have contributed somewhat to the writing of the novel, Wilder's portrait of Julius Caesar bears no resemblance to the figures of Mussolini, Hitler, or Stalin. Unlike his contemporaries, the author is not interested in investing his writing to draw portraits of the psychologically corrupt or the psychopathic:

So far from having a Mussolini in mind, Wilder in creating his hero must deliberately have cast off the image of that pompous, vacuous Italian as well as the images of the dehumanized Austrian and the devious, barbaric Georgian – except in so far as their overruling of territories had engulfed the world in destruction – in order to seek the man, Julius Caesar, chief architect of the Roman Empire as well as its dictator.⁵³

Similarly, Wilder's Caesar bears no resemblance to the other literary Caesar's like Shaw's or Shakespeare's, for example. Shaw's Caesar is witty

⁵²Castronovo, 133.

⁵³ Bernard Grebanier, *Thornton Wilder*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964, 39.

and charming, but "he is only another disguise behind which Shaw himself is lurking."⁵⁴ Shakespeare's hero is not Caesar, who is more or less caricatured in the play, but Marcus Brutus. Unlike Shakespeare's, Wilder's Caesar is no enemy of thought, likes to read and has faith in humanity. He is charming, magnanimous, and decorous in conduct, even during the moments prior to his death, which recall the Andrian Chrysis having perished in an equally dignified manner.

The classical beauty of Wilder's Caesar who views the world from a philosophical perspective also justifies the fact that the initial concept of *The Ides of March* predated his reading of the existentialists as well as his Roman visit during the Second World War. In 1929 he had written E. H. Marsh seeking advice "on a conversation-novel turning upon the famous profanation of the Mysteries of the Bona Dea, with Clodius, Clodia, Catullus, Caesar, Cicero," but it was not until he interrupted the writing of *The Alcestiad* in 1945, and "just for fun began the Caesar-Clodia-Catullus-Cicero novel in letters" that further attention was given to this idea.⁵⁵ In one of the 1939 entries to his *Journals*, the early title of the novel, "The Top of the World," makes clear that he intended to delineate a tragic figure of unsurpassable stature backed with his series of impressions from admired authors:

Suppose I wrote "The Top of the World" and prefaced it with this note: "In this novel I have put into Julius Caesar's mouth words gathered from many authors in many different ages. The discourse to Catullus on nature is a paraphrase of Goethe's "Fragment" of 1806. The arguments on the immortality of the soul in the conversation with Cicero are

⁵⁴ Kuner, 178.

⁵⁵ Harrison, 253.

from Walter Savage Landor, and he in turn was indebted for several of them to Plato and Cicero.⁵⁶

His adoration of the gifted persona is more than evident, but in a later entry he believes that his judgment has considerably matured in that direction since the time of *The Cabala*: "In *The Ides of March* I already scraped the moss from the word gifted, with its implicit allusion to a wise rather than a blind and haphazard donor."⁵⁷ The change was not solely of content but involved a remarkable development in form to which his friendship with Gertrude Stein had contributed. Their conversations on the portrait of his Caesar, and their exchange of opinions on the novel form had positively influenced his artistic development. Twenty-four years after the novel was published, Wilder mentioned in response to a question on whether the novel form is dead:

Gertrude Stein once said to me, "One of the things we have to face in the Twentieth Century is the decline of the belief in an imagined thing." I tried to get around this by trickery in *The Ides*—documents, letters pseudo-authentic. We are beginning to see the decline of belief in an externally reported life.⁵⁸

And in an earlier entry, Wilder had explained that what really fascinated him while he was writing the novel, was mainly the representations of "life's diversity" and "time's achronicity":

All that is what kept me interested in *The Ides of March*. No view of life, then, is real to me save that it presents itself as kaleidoscopic,—which does not mean essentially incoherent. (The very children's toys of that name show us

⁵⁶See February 3, 1939, *The Journals of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961*, ed. Donald Gallup, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, 2.

⁵⁷See Goldstone, 212.

⁵⁸Harrison, 254-255.

always a beautifully ordered though multi-fragmented pattern.)⁵⁹

With the overwhelmingly rich and diverse material used for the composition of the work, Wilder succeeded in creating a volume by which it is testified "that mere accuracy does not determine the reality of truth."⁶⁰ Caesar's sonorous Latin speech, the women's voices, Catullus' rhapsodies along with Cicero's objective realism, Cornelius Nepo's chronicling, and Suetonius' historical entry make the *Ides of March* the most compelling and artful vision that Wilder has produced in his fiction.⁶¹

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⁵⁹. See February 15, 1954, *The Journal of Thornton Wilder, 1939-1961*, 328.

⁶⁰. Herman Stresau, *Thornton Wilder*, trans. Frida Schutze, New York: Ungar, 1971, 83.

⁶¹. In 1963 a dramatization of the novel was attempted in Berlin's Renaissance Theatre, but the German translation did not do justice to Caesar's story. In this project Wilder had been encouraged by Jerome Kilty's play *Dear Liar*, which was similarly based on letters. A second attempt in London turned out to be another failure, and Caesar remained a memorable dramatic figure of fiction, which never made it on the stage.

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