Aspects of Knowing and Unknowing in the Literary Meaning-Spaces of Thornton Wilder

Tania Rajabian
Bachelor Degree Project
Literature
Spring, 2011
Supervisor: H. W. Fawkner
Abstract

The object of investigation in this essay is the tension between passively-constituted and actively-constituted knowing-modes in five works of literary art by Thornton Wilder—*The Cabala, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Woman of Andros, Our Town,* and *The Eighth Day.* The study demonstrates that, although Thornton Wilder in parts of some of his plays and novels allows active experience-constitution to have priority, there is a prevailing tendency in his works to give priority to events, acts, feelings, thoughts, and states of consciousness that are passively constituted. These are life-moments in which something other than human agency is shaping and directing the coursing of the experienced life-stream. The investigation uncovers the complex nature of the crucial passive-versus-active contrast by means of a phenomenological mode of text-disclosure highlighting the concomitant tension between immanence and transcendence. The investigation shows that Wilder’s writing is often centred on the phenomenon of ‘unknowing,’ a passive mode of experience in which the one who knows is left out of the constitution of knowing, or pushed far into the background. This phenomenon often has the status of revelation. The study is based on close readings of numerous text-moments that are in one way or another promoting the idea that many immanent, intense, and moving dimensions of life actualize themselves for us rather than by us. As Wilder tends to put it: we do not live life; life lives us. Elucidating this state of affairs involves recognition of the circumstance that what is given in life is often actualized for modes of subjectivity that have not been actively involved in the constitution of lived experience.
Topic and Approach

This essay investigates passively-constituted and actively-constituted phenomena in five works by Thornton Wilder: *The Cabala*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *The Woman of Andros*, *Our Town*, and *The Eighth Day*. Through close readings and the highlighting of certain significant instances in the texts, I will attempt to disclose the way that life actualises itself in Wilder’s writing through passive constitution. This involves focus on the difference between passive and active constitution—in other words the contrast between experiences that we consciously co-create and experiences where the creation of the experience-stream happens of its own accord without human supervision, choice, guidance, or control. Such an opposition will largely come to expression in terms of the concomitant difference between a condition of ‘knowing’ and one of ‘unknowing.’ The research-approach I employ here is phenomenological.

As a method, phenomenology was started by Edmund Husserl at the very beginning of the twentieth century, and has since been widely used in literary criticism. “The point” of phenomenology, Husserl explains, “is not to transgress the perceived as such in any point, but to describe it purely as such, purely in its subjective how of givenness, but, on the other hand also, to overlook nothing which is constitutive for it.”¹ Phenomenology is in other words prepared to look at what is deeply and essentially ‘constitutive’ of the field under investigation; yet at the same time this searching for the roots of the ‘how’ of manifestation should avoid any sort of departure from what is given, any forcible ‘transgression’ of what is immanently and

immediately at hand in that field. As Steven Galt Crowell points out, phenomenology “is thus not brought to experience from the outside but is the very ‘method’ of experience […] The question of the sort of science to be carried out on its basis is inseparable from the question of how life is to be clarified from within.”² In an important sense, solutions are thus internal or immanent to what is being reviewed, in this case a literary work of art, rather than external or transcendent to it.³ Accordingly, this exposition is primarily concerned with what is explicitly or implicitly manifested in the text itself, secondary sources being sidelined to footnotes and offered purely as supportive clarifications of things presented in the primary texts.

1. Knowing

This chapter opens the investigation of passive constitution in the works of Thornton Wilder by discussing the phenomenon of knowing as it actualizes itself in The Cabala, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Woman of Andros, Our Town and The Eighth Day. We turn first to Our Town⁴ in order to take note of crucial discrepancies between opposed modes of knowledge and knowing.

Focussing on life in a small American town at the beginning of the twentieth century, the play quickly shows the ‘stage manager’ inviting Professor Willard to give us “a little more information about the town, kind of a scientific account” (OT, 21). This “rural savant” (OT, 21) forwards matter-of-fact information:

Grover’s Corners … let me see … Grover’s Corners lies on the old Pleistocene granite of the Appalachian range. I may say it’s some of the oldest land in the world. We’re very proud of that. A shelf of Devonian basalt crosses it with vestiges of Mesozoic shale, and some

---


³ It is not a matter of refraining from intellectual analysis but of not giving preset theory the authority to impose on and (re)define what is given by the literary work of art itself. As Mikel Dufrenn remarks, that “which aesthetic experience brings about on the plane of perception is […] a knowledge which ceases to be knowledge in order to let meaning appear. But this meaning remains to be stated, whereas, on the plane of perception, meaning has already been stated by the work itself in an irreproachable and definite manner.” The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience. Translated by Edward S. Casey et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 16.

sandstone outcappings; but that’s all more recent: two hundred, three hundred million years old. [...] Yes … anthropological data: Early Amerindian stock. Cotahatchee tribes … no evidence before the tenth century of this era … hm … now entirely disappeared … possible traces in three families. Migration toward the end of the seventeenth century of English brachiocephalic blue-eyed stock … for the most part. [...] The population, at the moment, is 2,642. The Postal District brings in 507 more, making a total of 3,149.—Mortality and birth rates: constant.—By MacPherson’s gauge: 6.032. (OT, 21–23)

Grover’s Corner is the archetype of a small American town. As the play unfolds, we become acquainted with it in terms of a seemingly uncomplicated sense of belonging, familiarity, and love. Here we find recognizable types: the good, loving mother; the sensible, working family-father; the teenagers in love, and the miserable town drunk. They all turn up in all their loveable and faulty commonness as genuine and recognizable people. This, however, is not due to our knowledge of “the old Pleistocene granite of the Appalachian range” (OT, 21), nor to the fact that there are “eighty-six per cent Republicans” and “six per cent Democrats” populating Grover’s Corners (OT, 24). Needless to say, we do not really know much about Grover’s Corners through such statistical reports. Knowing instead actualizes itself through acts and events such as the sight of Mrs. Gibbs gently scolding her chickens (OT, 17), of Mrs. Webb diligently stringing beans (OT, 17), or of the trepidations of a young bridegroom facing the altar (OT, 77). Although they are manifestly ‘simple,’ the small acts and small events of small-town life radiate a knowing that immediately surpasses the empty power of ‘information’ to elucidate anything of importance about our town. This discrepancy between knowledge in the ‘objective’ sense and knowing in the living sense is indeed thematized in the play, as words spoken to the audience by the ‘stage manager’ make evident:

Y’know—Babylon once had two million people in it, and all we know about ‘em is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts…and contracts for the sale of slaves. Yet every night all those families sat down to supper, and the father came home from his work, and the smoke went up the chimney,—same as here. And even in Greece and Rome, all we know about the real life of the people is what we can piece together out of the joking poems and the comedies they wrote for the theatre back then. So I’m going to have a copy of this play put in the cornerstone and the people a thousand years from now’ll know a few simple facts about us—more than the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh flight. See what I mean?
So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. (OT, 33)

In Wilder’s first novel, *The Cabala*, this above-mentioned matter of perceiving “real life” without objectifying it (OT, 33) is accentuated by the narrator-protagonist’s refutation of the life-style of a Harvard graduate who, unlike himself, never gets to know Rome as something throbbing, alive, and immanent. Trapped in an objectifying scholarly attitude that is focussed on what is transcendent to the present moment, James Blair is “the dupe” of the “grand style” used by historians to discover facts that never touch the “actuality” of the lives of the “heroes” of history (CWA, 66). Knowing life as “actuality” is for Blair to know life as “triviality” (CWA, 66), and so he roam[s] the continents to fill his scores of “notebooks” with historical data and purely factual information (CWA, 65). Whereas Samuele, the narrator-protagonist, is getting “dragged” (CWA, 66) into history as a huge vibrant messy (but intermittently beautiful) ‘now’ in which the pathos of individual lives is busy shaping history in the flow of its living, affective actuality, James Blair is totally devoted to the indirect, compressed actualities that are to be found circulating in historiography. Long dead high-society women receive his “fascinated attention,” whereas Samuele’s equal but quite different fascination is attentive to the needs and despairs of the high-society women of Rome that he actually happens to encounter in the living ‘now’ of their crises or hopes. Blair contemplates the enchanting prospect of spending ten years of his life constructing the full critical apparatus to attack the historical problems surrounding the life of St. Francis of Assisi. It would take almost as many to get up the Roman road-system, the salt-roads and the wheat roads,—God, the whole problem as to how the Rome of the Republic was fed. Another day he would be dreaming about starting on the eight or ten books in French and German on Christina of Sweden and her life in Rome; then one studied up Swedish and read the diaries and the barrels-full of notes; when one knew more about her than did anyone alive one passed on to her father and buried oneself for months in libraries to master the policies and the military genius of Gustavus Adolphus. Thus life stretched … bindings … bindings … catalogues … footnotes. One studied the saints and never thought about religion. One knew

---


6 In his novel *The Ides of March* (Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer Books, 1976; first published 1948), Wilder uses the epistolary form precisely to get close to the immanent actuality of the lives of historical figures like Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Catullus, Cicero, etc.
everything about Michelangelo yet never felt deeply a single work. James spent weeks of fascinated attention on the women of the Caesars and yet could scarcely be dragged to dinner at the Palazzo Barberini. [...] The present casts a veil of cheapness over the world: to look into any face, however beautiful, is to see pores and the folds about the eye. Only those faces not present are beautiful. (CWA, 65–66; emphasis added)

We see here that the narrator-protagonist’s opposite is committed to an agenda of transcendence, making a point of always being “not present,” of being securely transcendent to full presence. This agenda is by the same token a philosophy of absence. “The present,” what is not absent, is feared on account of the presumed “veil of cheapness” that it casts over everything. Pure immanence is dreaded, because it exposes and brings to knowing the immanent, sometimes less ideal, “pores” of the real in its full presence. There is in other words a sheer mode of immanent knowing into which James Blair does not wish to be “dragged.” This sense is of course reinforced by the image of having “buried oneself” in deadening types of library-work (CWA, 66). To have known “everything” is pointless if what has been known was “never felt deeply” (CWA, 66). Here, affective meaning-spaces have been carefully excluded.

The young man’s “endless pursuit of facts” is “not so much the will to do something as it was the will to escape something else” (CWA, 66). The “will to escape” is precisely a will (CWA, 66; emphasis added). Blair wills himself to affectivity-deprived knowledge because he fears the “pores” of immanence and the affective “actuality” of unmediated presence as things that just get constituted in situations one finds oneself “dragged” into (CWA, 66).

This sort of implied critique of a life-agenda based on transcendence-cult and on the presumed supremacy of active constitution (controlling life) over passive constitution (undergoing life) is deepened into a thematized concern in Wilder’s great breakthrough novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey. The novel gets its name from the central event in the text. This is the totally inexplicable disaster of the sudden

---

7 It is to be noted that Wilder was not hostile to scholarly research as such. He spent much time on a scholarly project to decipher the puzzle of Finnegans Wake, and many years on a massive project to date the many plays of the Spanish dramatist Lope de Vega. See The Selected Letters of Thornton Wilder, edited by Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer (New York: Harper, 2008), pp. 360, 361, 439, 449, 460, 462, 479, 480, 483, 487, 495, 539, 595, 598; in parenthetical documentation hereafter abbreviated SL.

8 Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (New York: Harper Collins, 2002; first published 1927); in parenthetical documentation hereafter abbreviated BSR.
breakdown of the famous bridge of San Luis Rey. In the novel we encounter two opposed ways of coping with this disaster. One of them comes to expression among people in general, the other in the scholarly fanaticism of Brother Juniper, a Franciscan monk. The general reaction to the disaster is one that is wide-open to its frightening presence. Juniper’s alternative reaction involves an act of gigantic detachment from presence, a disengagement orchestrated in the abstracted domain of facts, statistics, compilations, calculations, and lofty theorizing. Not belonging to the flight-from-presence agenda of Brother Juniper’s escape-world, the citizens of Peru respond to the accident by keeping its immanence and awesome presence alive in their experience-stream: “People wandered about in a trance-like state, muttering; they had the hallucination of seeing themselves falling into a gulf” (BSR, 5). These people are not committed to an agenda of transcendence. In their “trance-like” states of mind (BSR, 5), they now themselves feel themselves falling into the abyss. Far from being an escape or transcendence, what is trance or “hallucination” (BSR, 5) entails a living-with, a sort of participation, a sort of collective acceptation of the event. Here trance does not mean dream in the sense of fantasy or unreality. Instead it means a type of knowing. The people of Peru can only fully know the catastrophe as something living and affective by feeling it in its full presence. As outsiders, this is for them only possible in hallucination. Trance lets them get “dragged” into a falling off the bridge in the way that Samuele in The Cabala got “dragged” into the horrors and epiphanies of Roman night-life (CAW, 66).

This sort of passive constitution is resisted by Brother Juniper. Convinced that the breakdown was “a sheer act of God” that he will one day fathom (BSR, 7), he thinks that he can “surprise the reason” behind this tragic event and reveal God’s plan thorough actively investigating the case by means of “scientific examination” (BSR, 7). There is a vehement desire in Juniper to place theology “among the exact sciences” (BSR, 7), to provide “proof, tabulated proof, of the conviction that was so bright and exciting within him” (BSR, 98). However, the set of “statistics” compiled by Brother Juniper runs wildly contrary to his theological expectations (BSR, 98). Unlike the reader who becomes involved in the pathos of the events narrated in the text, Brother Juniper had no access to the factor at the heart of everything that transpired—namely feeling. He had pieces of information about people, “thousands of little facts” (BSR, 9), but he did not know them. Knowing here does not merely require being-acquainted. It means being able to dream oneself vividly into the
affective individuations of hidden, personal life. “Yet for all his diligence,” the narrator tells us, “Brother Juniper never knew the central passion of Dona María’s life; nor of Uncle Pio’s, not even of Esteban’s” (BSR, 9; emphasis added). I contend that in much of Wilder’s writing, this inability to truly know is tied to the phenomenon of overly zealous agency. Exaggerated confidence in human agency obstructs the invisible working of passive constitution.

2. Passive Constitution

We have seen how the volitional resources of human agency can fall short of knowing the immanence of affective meaning-spaces. It is now time to turn to the passive (rather than active) constitution of feeling in Wilder’s fiction, where it actualizes itself as a force that is stronger than the will. Here we shall see that the efforts of will-power to master emotion are unsuccessful, and often end in a succumbing to passion. Despite the fact that the Marquesa in The Bridge of San Luis Rey “longed to free herself from” the “ignoble bond” of a perpetual obsession to appropriate the feelings of her rather indifferent daughter Clara, she constantly ends up realizing that this “passion was too fierce to cope with” (BSR, 18). There is an on-going, passive constitution of emotion independent of every effort made by the Marquesa to actively manage her affective life. Although she is fully aware of the destructive and undesirable effects of her egotistic feelings, she can “not prevent herself from persecuting Dona Clara with nervous attention and a fatiguing love” (BSR, 14).

The fact that the passive constitution of feeling has structural priority over the active constitution of feeling is manifested not only in this tendency of undesired

---

9 The distinction made here is one between experiencing feeling as presentation (constitution) and representation (mirroring). While a work of art (like Wilder’s novel) presents and enacts feelings, a scientific examination of a coldly mathematical-mechanical kind (like Juniper’s compilation of facts) objectifies feelings as transcendent representations. As Andrew Bowie observes in his phenomenological study of music, such “analytical” objectifications “work on the assumption that language is primarily to be understood in terms of its ability to represent an objective world”; Music, Philosophy, and Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 31; in parenthetical documentation abbreviated MPM. Such an “exclusively representational approach” (MPM, 31) promoting “the model of a spectatorial subjective mind confronting an objective world” (MPM, 8), would see meanings as things that “re-present”—in the sense of “present again what is already there as such” (MPM, 7). In this sense, a theoretic model of feeling “based on recognizing emotions with which we are familiar from elsewhere” promotes a “restrictive notion of emotion” (MPM, 28). If the manifestation of feeling was limited to statistical, objectified “garden varieties” of emotion, art would be fairly pointless on an affective level (MPM, 28).
feelings to rush up and flood the freedom of the active will but also in feeling’s refusal to be forthcoming when ordered to present itself. On her way to the funeral of her best friend and her son, Camila kneels down by the pillar of a mud church, allowing herself a moment of contemplation in which she tries to actively bring out the affective depths of bereavement: “She wandered through her memory, searching for the faces of her two. She waited for some emotion to appear. ‘But I feel nothing,’ she whispered to herself” (BSR, 103). This active state of searching for feeling as a correlate of the will’s desire to produce it turns out to be ineffectual, leaving Camila with a sense of resignation: “I have no heart. Look, I won’t try and think of anything; let me just rest here” (BSR, 103). Yet as soon as she has given up the attempt to actualise feeling through an act of the will, feeling in its whole depth wells up of its own accord: “And scarcely had she paused when again that terrible incommunicable pain swept through her, the pain that could not speak once to Uncle Pio and tell him of her love and just once offer her courage to Jaime in his sufferings” (BSR, 103). Here, passively constituted, “incommunicable” feeling has actualised itself to Camila by and in its own autonomous manifestation and revealing of itself—independent of her act of conscious thinking and searching for it.  

When Manuel, one of the twin brothers in The Bridge of San Luis Rey, falls in love with the renowned Lima actress Camila, known as ‘the Perichole,’ he finds himself utterly immersed in unprecedented passion:

It was not the first time that Manuel had been fascinated by a woman (both brothers had possessed women, and often, especially during their years at the waterfront; but simply, latinly), but it was the first time that his will and imagination had been thus overwhelmed. He had lost that privilege of simple nature, the dissociation of love and pleasure. Pleasure was no longer as simple as eating; it was being complicated by love. Now was beginning that crazy loss of one’s self, that neglect of everything but one’s dramatic thoughts about the beloved, that feverish inner life all turning upon the Perichole and which would so have astonished and disgusted her had she been permitted to divine it. This Manuel had not fallen in love through any imitation of literature. It was not of him, at all events, that the bitterest tongue in France had

---

10 As Michel Henry remarks, “feeling does not wait for thought to turn to it nor does it expect any answer from thought. Feeling is not to be grasped in the ‘attentive grasp’ of thought.” The Essence of Manifestation, translated by Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), p. 550; in parenthetical documentation hereafter abbreviated EM. Feeling is thus in its immediate uprising autonomously constituted, ungoverned by active thinking. Furthermore, the sense of the incommunicability of feeling is due to the fact that “the language of feeling is feeling itself”; this language “cannot be understood by thought and expects no response from it” (EM, 552).
remarked only fifty years before: that many people would never have fallen in love if they had not heard about it. (BSR, 45; emphasis added)

Here love is clearly not a willed act. We note that the narrator expressly calls attention to the fact that Manuel’s passion is not an intentional “imitation” of some wishful notion derived from romantic forms of “literature,” nor the pursuit of something idealistic that he has “heard about.” On the contrary, his imagination and willpower have simply been “overwhelmed” (BSR, 45). The “feverish inner life” of the affections is able to engulf the “will” as a centre of active constitution (BSR, 45). The fact that even Manuel’s “imagination” has been overtaken shows us that no premeditated agency is mediating between Manuel and this fully immanent affectivity. There is no will to fall in love, for there has in this particular young man’s life never been a possibility of the imagination to be directed to anyone in this way. Indeed, this infatuation seems to be altogether unreasonable and undesirable, since it is doomed to remain unrequited. In the most unwelcome of ways, desire is passively constituted in one who has not sought it, and who is unlikely to benefit from it. There is no longer a “self” directing itself towards sources of pleasure but instead an unexpected, radical “loss of one’s self” that is absolutely “crazy” (BSR, 45). Pleasure is no longer of a “simple nature” like the primordial desire for food, for it has now been “complicated by love” (BSR, 45).

This complication issues from the fact that we can, as intellectual beings, have feelings about feelings, what can be called meta-feelings. These meta-feelings are a sort of second order stratum of feelings that we can have about the primary, passively constituted emotions that arise in us. So when Manuel undergoes a “complicated” mixture of feelings, these are directed towards the presupposed, primary feeling, namely love. From an ethical-philosophical point of view then, Manuel cannot be responsible for his love-feeling in so far as it is something constituted (like sense impressions) in a passive manner. Love has already manifested itself autonomously and actualised itself erotically in its very first appearing. Yet although Manuel is not responsible for the constitution of love, he is responsible for meta-feelings and for how he manages these meta-emotions. Life has become “complicated” for Manuel because first-order, passively-constituted feeling is no longer in agreement with free will (BSR, 45). Amorous feelings have manifested themselves against his will. However, as we come to see in the novel, he can use his free will to divert his attention, deflecting it in another direction.
When Manuel sees himself as having to make a choice between his brother Esteban and Camila, he tells himself that he is capable of all “at once” removing the latter from his heart “in one unhesitating stroke of the will” (BSR, 50; emphasis added). Having prioritized his brotherly affections and “sacrificed” his amorous feelings for Camila (BSR, 50), Manuel actively directs his attention and feelings away from the actress. However, the question of supposed free will is problematized by the state of delirium that Manuel undergoes as an unexpected consequence of a serious knee injury. Here the superiority of passively-constituted feeling over will is manifested with accentuated force. As the actively constituting forces of the ‘free’ will lose their (superficial) sovereignty during the turmoil of Manuel’s terrible fevers-trances, first-order feeling returns to establish its deeper, immanent, and irreducible reality. The fever as such is too much for the free will: “With all the fortitude in the world Manuel could not prevent himself from shouting and from flinging himself upon the bed” (BSR, 53; emphasis added). The decent, reasonable second-order feelings that Manuel would like to generate in himself, suitable for a rational life, are too feeble to have any effect on the autonomous, amorous passion. In Manuel’s worst state of delirium, he attacks his brother with unjustifiable condemnations in a rage where “all the thoughts he did not permit himself in his right mind would burst magnified from his mouth” (BSR, 53; emphasis added). The words “right mind” indicate the rational-reflective stratum of second-order consciousness governed by free will. In his “right mind,” Manuel’s meta-feelings have taken the responsibility not to “permit” his primary feelings for Camila to destroy the bond between the twins. Yet the weakness of meta-feelings has been made evident, as Manuel admits in hindsight: “I’m not responsible what I say […] I just lose myself” (BSR, 54–55). In the lapses between one fever-peak and another, Manuel in this way tries to excuse himself. But what was really to blame is passively-constituted feeling itself. Coursing in a direction opposite to the one favoured by free will, it was the source of love and destruction.
3. Unknowing

We have been looking at the way in which Wilder’s literary texts highlight feeling as something that is most forceful and authentic when passively (rather than actively) constituted. We shall now see how, in parallel fashion, passive constitution comes to expression in the tension between knowing versus unknowing in Wilder’s fiction.

The mystical centre of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is the inexplicable collapse of the bridge. The mystical centre of *The Eight Day* is the supposed murder committed by John Ashley. The mystery in which both events are embedded calls attention to the radical limits of knowledge conceived as an actively-constituted phenomenon. We find ourselves on the threshold to what I shall call ‘unknowing.’

Confrontation with the limits of actively-constituted knowledge causes characters to dwell on issues of contingency and predestination—on “the powers of light and the powers of darkness” that might well be “engaged in some mighty conflict behind the screen of appearances” (ED, 427). Knowledge is so circumscribed that characters often fail to know essential things even about those who are closest to them. Breckenridge Lansing is a case in point. It turns out that Ashley’s business partner “never knew” that his wife concealed a very large sum of money from him during their entire marriage (ED, 319). Brother Juniper found out in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, “there was least to be learned from those who had been most closely associated with the subjects of his inquiry” (BSR, 100). In *The Eighth Day* this sobering idea comes to expression in a slogan used by Dr. Gillie’s: “We keep saying that we ‘live our lives.’ Shucks! Life lives us” (ED, 309).

This sense of (passively) being constituted rather than (actively) constituting is in Wilder’s works a macrocosmic state of affairs—but also a microcosmic phenomenon playing itself out in the nuances of social life, human behaviour, personality, etc. In *The Cabala*, Alix’s expertise in the “fine art” of conversation has been passively constituted as a fluid set of discursive reflexes that have automatically shaped themselves in her being by the habit of “unconsciously noting” on the faces of men and women of society which “tones of the voice,” “fleck of the hands,” or “delayed adjectives” meet with success and which do not (CWA, 65; 11)

---

emphasis added). Here there is passive constitution on both sides—in those who teach as well as in those who learn; in those who have unconsciously picked up nuances of proper behaviour long ago as well as those who are newcomers. There are thus unconscious donors as well as unconscious beneficiaries. This state of affairs is in *The Eighth Day* internal to the Ashley family in so far as John Ashley (donor) and Constance Ashley (beneficiary) share a common but splendid naïveté in their dealings with people and life. Constance has passively received her father’s immaturity, as a (passively-constituted) gift given (passively) by one who is unaware of it:

Throughout her whole life her friends and enemies used to say of her, ‘There’s a side of Constance […] that really never grew up; there’s a silly side.’ […] It was the little-girl side of her that carried her through difficult times—the brutality of the police, the insult and filth thrown at her. She had the fearlessness of a little girl, not that of a mature woman. All this candor and self-confidence were a gift to her from her father and brother. The fairest gifts—and the most baneful—are those of which the donor is unconscious; they are conveyed over the years in the innumerable occasions of the daily life—in glance, pause, jest, silence, smile, expressions of admiration or disapproval. (ED, 401-02; emphasis added)

Passively-constituted know-how may in some cases require no acquaintance with the world whatever: a “bird hatched from an egg in a dark room can build a nest without having seen one” (ED, 314). Lily Ashley did not mould her refined and elevated conception of married love on some externally-given world-paradigm. She “invented marriage. She raised an edifice” despite the fact that she “had seen no examples of the kind of marriage to which she aspired” (ED, 314). This sort of unknowing qua knowing implies a faculty of passively constituted pre-knowing. In *The Cabala*, the journal of a Hollander living under the delusion of his own deification speaks of his active life as a site for auto-constitution: “Godlike I never reflect; all my actions arrive of themselves. If I pause to think I fall into error” (CWA, 129; emphasis added). Life is revealed to itself in its very moments of manifestation: “I gradually discovered further traits of my new being. I woke up mornings to discover that bits of information had been deposited in my mind overnight” (CWA, 128). This man is in all probability delusional, but we find in *The Eighth Day* that the same type of passive constitution is acknowledged as an inner reality by the highest of scientists:
A few years after these events a relatively obscure scientist, working in a bureau of weights and measures in Switzerland, was searching—as were many others—for a formula that would express the nature of energy. He tells us that it appeared to him in a dream. He awoke and reconsidered; he laughed, for it was of a laughable self-evidence. An ancient philosopher ascribes knowledge to recollection: the delighted surprise at learning what one already knows. (ED, 123; emphasis added)

There is a similarity here to the experience of the demigod who in *The Cabala* “woke up mornings to discover” that a new store of knowledge had found its way into his mind and been made accessible to his cognition while he had been asleep (CWA, 128).

In *The Eighth Day*, we find John Ashley “laying plans without being aware of it” during the eight days he has spent sleeping in the woods (ED, 111). A man with “little if any faculty for making plans,” he awakes each evening “with a project formed in his mind” (ED, 111). He does not decide on the identity of his new nationality; it is just there in and for him one day: “Waking on that first evening near Tatum, it was clear to him that he was a Canadian on his way to work in the mines of Chile” (ED, 111). “Plans were the gift of sleep” (ED, 111); “gifts” that are “learned”, “revealed,” and made “successively clear” to Ashley, letting him know the way to cross the Mississippi River, the appropriate speed of his journeying and the ways to reach the southern regions of the Pacific Coast (ED, 111–13).

Unknowing does not only manifest itself in sleep, but also in ordinary (awake) life. At one point in *The Eighth Day*, Ashley is required to answer the unpredicted question of how to bring a priest to Rocos Verdes, even though he “had given no thought to this” (ED, 172). But to “his own surprise he heard himself saying offhandedly—‘I suppose you write to the Bishop’” (ED, 172). He then goes on to give a full exposition of a solution to the problem. The hidden knowledge has here revealed itself in the very act of speech. This phenomenon of hearing your own thoughts being uttered (pre-reflectively) without really knowing beforehand the thoughts expressed, is elaborated in *The Woman of Andros*: “Great talkers are so constituted that they do not know their own thoughts until, on the tide of their particular gift, they hear them issuing from their mouths” (CWA, 151; emphasis added). There is an unknowing, or pre-knowing, of thoughts that only come to light on the “tide” of the speech act itself with the sudden surge of words, and a delayed knowing as speakers “hear them issuing from their mouths”—the speakers being
surprised as it were by the materialization of “their own thoughts” (CWA, 151). This manifests the pure immanence of passive constitution as something as close, or indeed closer to individuals than the active, conscious agency side of their ‘selves.’

The phenomenon of hearing ‘lip-constituted’ rather than mind-constituted thoughts voices a state of affairs that we likewise encounter in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In addition to ordinary Spanish, the twins have “a secret language for themselves” which they have “invented” and which they use “only when they were alone” (BSR, 42). This language is “the symbol of their profound identity with one another,” betokening the sacred and primal “oneness of these brothers” (BSR, 43). But Manuel and Esteban also have an on-going, immanent rapport that is completely pre-verbal, a telepathy that constitutes itself automatically out of their supreme proximity. They have “a need of one another so terrible that it produced miracles as naturally as the charged air of a sultry day produces lightning” (BSR, 43). This passively-constituted quasi-language is, like the natural, charged energy that generates the flash of lightning, so deeply hidden from human perception and consciousness that it is almost pre-conscious: “The brothers were scarcely aware of it themselves, but telepathy was a common occurrence in their lives” (BSR, 43). This third language of telepathy, of which they are “scarcely aware,” keeps affecting the cognitive lives of the twins to the extent that “when one returned home the other was always aware of it when his brother was still several streets away” (BSR, 43).

In *The Eighth Day*, Ashley’s grandmother is said to have “moved among horses like one knowing their language,” and to have “exchanged intelligence” with animals (ED, 110). There is an ongoing non-verbal language between man and animal. We also learn the story of prisoners tapping out messages of “love and

---

12 While immanence indicates closeness, immediacy and pure givenness, transcendence indicates distance and objectification, a holding-before-one-self. Luis Bermúdez remarks that “as soon as we formulate a thought in words (or on paper), it becomes an object both for ourselves and for others. As an object it is the kind of thing we can have thoughts about. In creating the object we need have no thoughts about thoughts—but once it is there, the opportunity immediately exists to attend to it as an object in its own right” *Thinking without Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.158. Thus, objectified thoughts can be grasped, in Michel Henry’s terms, “in the light of the world” where they are lived as “external phenomena”; *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, translated by Scott Davidson (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 7; in parenthetical documentation hereafter abbreviated SI. In contrast, pre-objectified (because pre-reflective) thoughts are immanent because they are revealed as the “Internal” which is the “original ‘way’ of being given and ‘being lived’” (SI, 6). “In the Internal,” Henry explains, “there is no putting at a distance and no putting into a world—there is nothing external, because there is no exteriority in it […] It is revealed in the way of life. Life experiences itself immediately such that it coincides with itself at each point of its being” (SI, 7). Life here is a term used by Henry to refer to immanently constituting processes at the heart of lived experiences.
courage and faith” to each other through the walls of their adjoining cells (ED, 248). This goes on for a long time, the “chain of communication” being intermittently broken, only to then be restored by new prisoners filling the cells, so that there is a tangled mix of people with different languages who are eagerly tapping out messages whose meanings they do not even know, until some of them end up “transmitting patterns that were unintelligible to them” (ED, 249–50). In a world where we are “surrounded by mysteries beyond the comprehension of our limited minds” (ED, 250), segments of unknowing unwittingly participate in the constitution of knowing.

This type of mosaic between knowing and unknowing is in Wilder’s writing not only an interpersonal possibility but also the structure that is internal to each individual. This phenomenon is accentuated in certain types of people: “Men of faith and men of genius have this in common: they know (observe and remember) many things they are not conscious of knowing. They are attentive to relationships, recurrences, patterns, and ‘laws’” (ED, 123; emphasis added). John Ashley was a “gifted mathematician—perhaps with a touch of genius,” although he “did not know it” (ED, 123). The ‘unknowing’ factor facilitates the constitution of an extended, expanded, and enlarged field of personality-energy: “The nets they fling are wider and deeper than they are fully aware of” (ED, 123; emphasis added). A lack of self-consciousness is helpful. Conversely, self-consciousness may obviously be unhelpful. Those who always wish to shed light on themselves may be inhibiting clarity if lucidity does not always (or even mainly) have its source-point in the presumed clairvoyance of human agency: “Clarity is a noble quality of mind, but those who primarily demand clarity of themselves miss many a truth which—with patience—might become clear at some future time. Minds that are impatient for clarity—or even reasonableness—become gradually narrower and dryer” (ED, 123; emphasis added).

The Eighth Day consistently forwards the view that the benefits to be had from minds refraining from active self-constitution is especially tangible in the sphere of religious or quasi-religious feelings: “Faith is an ever widening pool of clarity, fed

---

13 The nature of the ‘dormant,’ passively constituted knowing is elucidated by Edmund Husserl in Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic, translated by Anthony J. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers); in parenthetical documentation abbreviated PAS: “Wakeful life has, so to speak, a background of non-wakefulness, constantly and with eternal necessity [...] The wakeful ego with its lived-experiences of the ego cogito, thus has a constant, broad horizon of background lived-experiences to which the ego is not present and ‘in’ which it does not reside” (PAS, 19).

14 Cf Alix’s genius for conversation in The Cabala (CWA, 65).
from springs beyond the margin of consciousness” (ED, 124; emphasis added). This is in a sense a re-animation of the ancient idea that faith is a gift given by God to the believer, rather than a human accomplishment that enables an individual to come to faith self-consciously and actively constitute her or his believing. The Eighth Day takes this notion to the extreme limit by proposing that the passive constitution of faith could be so passive that the believer in some cases might not even have knowledge of existing faith: “John Ashley was a man of faith” although he “did not know that he was a man of faith” (ED, 106). Being “little given to reflection” (ED, 107) he “had no vocabulary and no grammar with which to reflect on such matters” (ED, 140). Ashley is by no means unique. There are plenty of people who are “slow to give words to the object of their faith” (ED, 107). They tend to be “inarticulate, especially in matters of faith” (ED, 106). We are even told that Ashley’s comportment is paradigmatic, that he is the very archetype of the authentic believer. Like “most men of faith John Ashley was—so to speak—invisible” (ED, 106; emphasis added).

It could be argued, of course, that this is mainly a play of words. Everything depends on what we mean by ‘know.’ It is unlikely that Wilder is identifying some sort of state of ignorance in which the human being is cognitively dead to an inner state of affairs charged with deep emotion, such as religious feeling. In The Eighth Day, those who have faith “know themselves” but “[t]hey are slow to give words to the object of their faith” (ED, 107). To people like Ashley, matters of faith are “self-evident and the self-evident is not easily described” (ED, 107). If these “invisible” individuals suddenly become highly “visible,” it is because they have been “propelled by circumstance” into the light (ED, 106).

We see then that a non-verbal factor is central to this large problematic (what is pre-linguistic shuns the light of the world as a discursive milieu); but there is also a complexity-factor. Music and feeling belong to a domain of inexpressible or near-inexpressible complexity. In the Cabala, we encounter a mystic who has composed a motet with a notation that deviates from the conventional pattern of five staves, suddenly displaying two staves only (CWA, 89). What is truly inexpressible does not “allow of transcription” in any form whatever (CWA, 88)\textsuperscript{15} There are

\textsuperscript{15} Michel Henry suggests that in so far as art and feeling belong to a sphere of auto-affection that possesses radical autonomy, its incommunicability does not lie in some sort of communication-difficulty but in the fact that it does not belong to a realm of communication in the first place but to a realm of immanence that must be entered in a spirit of submission to something special. Kandinsky’s abstract painting thus ultimately refers only to itself as invisible feeling referring to invisible feeling.
feelings in music that only music can articulate. Ultimately, feeling as such is inexpressible. The immense “pain” that Camila undergoes in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is “incommunicable” (BSR, 103). For Pamphilus in *The Woman of Andros*, life’s “most difficult burden” is “the incommunicability of love” (CWA, 150). Quite “humiliated” by the Archbishop’s attempts to translate their secret language into Spanish, Manuel and Esteban simply gave him their “shocked silences” (BSR, 43).

4. Revelation and Pseudo-Revelation

As we shall now see the knowing-versus-unknowing problematic is caught up in the issue of the possibility of retrospective knowing. This retrospective knowing is a meta-knowing—a knowing-of-(un)knowing. When, in acts of retrospective disclosure, reflective knowing brings pre-reflective (un)knowing into the full light of reflective lucidity, a state of some ambiguity comes to prevail. On the one hand, unknowing has been dragged into the light where secrets cannot easily hide. On the other hand, retrospection has renewed acquaintance with unknowing-as-the- unknowable. The retrospective attitude destroys unknowing in the very act of illuminating it; but in a sense it also preserves and sanctifies unknowing, granting it recognition, authority, and value.

The mechanism of *retrospective knowing* is based on the simple fact—known to everyone—that we only appreciate what we have had when we have lost it. In *The Cabala*, Samuele only comes to understand what his homeland America means to him after he has been away from it for a long while in Rome. He had previously, to be sure, “longed for” Rome for “eight years” from “the depth” of his “heart” (CWA, 150).

To speak of “invisible life in its ceaseless arrival into itself” is to speak of something auto-affective, almost autistic (SI, 16). We cannot from the outside communicate with such art; we have to enter it and become exposed to the immanent feelings going on there and only there. Here “there is no light or world” (SI, 16). The immanent affectivity that Basilis tries to put under this “light” of the world through his motet belongs to an invisible realm, which nonetheless is fully present in its own actuality. In Michel Henry’s terms, immanence belongs to the *invisible* while transcendence belongs to the *visible light of the world*. Immanent feelings are “revealed in the way of life,” and have nothing to do with the external transcendence of the world, since they reveal in the “invisible” where there is “no putting at a distance and no putting into a world” (SI, 7). Immanent life has already actualised itself before it is brought out into the “visible” light of the external world, since it has beforehand “taken hold of its own being and has embraced itself in the pathos of this interior and immediate experience of itself and makes it alive” (SI, 7).
7); but now, at the end of his stay, he asks himself why he is “not more reluctant at leaving Europe” and why he is “longing for the shelf of Manhattan” (CWA, 131).

The dangers of retrospection as something prone to idealization is highlighted in a speech by Simo in The Woman of Andros:

> Viewed from a distance […] life is harmonious and beautiful. No doubt the years when my mother smiled to us from that bench were as full of crossed wills and exasperations as today, but how beautiful they seem in memory! The dead are wrapped in love; in illusion, perhaps. They go underground and slowly this tender light begins to fall upon them. But the present remains. This succession of small domestic vexations.” (CWA, 193; emphasis added)

Here Simo acknowledges that the distance produced by retrospection is a likely source of distortion. Once the past has become transcendent, a sort of ‘beyond,’ the revelation of it may be a pseudo-revelation, an “illusion” constituted by the tendency of the “tender light” of transcendence to posit the objects of recollection as idols “wrapped” in a “beautiful” love-aura. There is a risk of mutation. When the bright beam of retrospective attention is turned back into the past so as to reveal what was revealed in the primal state of unknowing, does not this second-order revelation in fact change the first-order revelation?

The experience of death gives poignancy to this problematic. Death often brings us very close to the dead one, even producing the sense that death is the first and only gateway to real knowledge of that individual. Such a feeling is manifested in The Bridge of San Luis Rey with the news of the death of Manuel, Uncle Pio, Pepita, the Marquesa and young Jaime. With Pepita’s death the Abbess realises that she has kept her eyes, metaphorically speaking, on the “moon” (BSR, 28), on that which is transcendent rather than immanent. The Abbess has neglected Pepita’s tender nature by seeing her protégée only as a means to an end, as little more than a fit “successor” to herself and her great work (BSR, 29). In a similar way, Camila comes to feel great pain after the funeral when she understands that she can “not speak once to Uncle Pio and tell him of her love and just once offer her courage to Jaime in his sufferings” (BSR, 103). Dona Clara, who had always had a rather cynical and unloving view of her mother, bursts out in “a long passionate defense” of the Marquesa once she is dead (BSR, 106). The Abbess, feeling that they have been “too busy” (BSR, 103), is full of self-recririmination: “All, all of us have failed” (BSR, 106). The point that needs to be made is that in all these cases, the object of knowledge (the lost loved one) has
undergone a mutation. It is the dead person that is loved so fully in this way. Ironically, the ‘knowledge’ that the mourners have of the ‘reality’ of the lives of their lost ones is in fact ‘knowledge’ of the dead and not the living. As objects of transcendent love, these objects of retrospective knowledge are clad in garments of manifestation that lack the immanent “pores” and “folds” of life that we saw Blair eschewing in The Cabala (CWA, 66). In his case, as we have seen, the notion that solely “those faces not present are beautiful” (CWA, 66) reflected a fear of life encountered in the immanent immediacy of the present. Blair was “the dupe of the historians’ grand style which fails to convey the actuality […] of their heroes” (CWA, 66). As Dr. Gillies points out in The Eighth Day, “even the greatest historians fall victim to the distortion induced by elapsed time: they elevate and abase at will” (ED, 18). It is possible that the ‘enlightenment’ given to mourners by death and disaster is intrinsically false. It could be argued that the clairvoyant condition of superior knowing ‘given’ by the dead (or by death) to the living is a dubious or at least ambiguous phenomenon.

In some of Wilder’s literary works, this idea of a knowing of the living about the dead is reversed through posthumous life, where it is the dead that come to an enlightened insight about the living. The problematic that Wilder is interested in is highlighted in The Woman of Andros by means of a tale about a hero who has died but wishes to return to the life on earth:

[T]he King of the Dead permitted him to return not only to the earth, but to the past, and to live over again that day in all the twenty-two thousand days of his lifetime that had been least eventful; but that it must be with a mind divided into two persons,—the participant and the onlooker: the participant who does the deeds and says the words of so many years before, and the onlooker who foresees the end.” (CWA, 149; emphasis added)

The hero returns to the past as the transcendent onlooker who is not fully present in life as a passively-constituted immanent participant in its flow of acts, events, and experiences. However, this “divided” mind of the transcendent onlooker turns out

---

17 Husserl defines the immanence of passively constituted life as a mode of consciousness in which “we have immanent perception, that of our own lived-experiences.” (PAS, 577). Here “‘the perceived’ is itself a lived-experience” and is thus “only experienceable through pregivenness in such a way that the subject merely exercises acts of receptivity” (PAS, 578). Husserl clarifies the sense of immanent knowing by taking the example of how we live through a joyful experience: “We have here an originally giving consciousness of this joy; not only does it exist, but it is an immanent perceptual object, and cannot but be anything other than that. We are constantly conscious of it, even though we
to make it impossible for the hero to re/live the re/visited day in the ‘normal’ way that he had expected:

Suddenly the hero saw that the living too are dead and that we can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasure; for our hearts are not strong enough to love every moment. And not an hour had gone by before the hero who was both watching life and living it called on Zeus to release him from so terrible a dream. The gods heard him, but before he left he fell upon the ground and kissed the soil of the world that is too dear to be realized.” (CWA, 149; emphasis added)

The typical insight that we are supposed to gain from this sort of onlooker-scenario is that the onlooker has the supposed advantage (having already passed through the ‘educative’ event of death) of seeing reality from an allegedly clairvoyant perspective transcendent to the immanent immediacy of life. We are supposed to come to the understanding that when people are busy with their everyday tasks they are too preoccupied to fully (or really at all) appreciate life. However, as we can see, this kind of conscious knowing entails a negative factor: the experience of “both watching life and living it” is felt to be “terrible” (CWA, 149).

This theme of resurrection is also presented at the end of The Cabala, when Samuele summons the “spirit” of the great poet Virgil back to life (CWA, 132). Viewing once again the world he has left behind and seeing the great Mediterranean Sea stretching before him, the dead poet exclaims:

Oh, beautiful are these waters. Behold! For many years I have almost forgotten the world. Beautiful! Beautiful!—But no! what horror, what pain! Are you still alive? Alive? How can you endure it? All your thoughts are guesses, all your body is shaken with breath, all your senses are infirm, and your mind ever full of the fumes of one passion or another. Oh, what misery to be a man. Hurry and die! (CWA, 134; emphasis added)

The poet, like the resurrected hero, is torn between the “horror” and beauty of being a transcendent onlooker. Having died, he is able to see the beauty of the living world; but at the same time he views the state of being caught in the uncertainty and unknowing of the living as a “misery”. He urges Samuele to see “the world”—to

donothave todirectedtoward itattentively, and it is therefore pregiven for possible reflective cognition...Being and constituted-being for consciousness coincide where immanent objects are concerned. Both are inseparably one” (PAS, 578; emphasis added).
“behold” it (CWA, 134). But the poet himself seems to have fallen into some neglect, for having died and thus been separated from life on earth, he has “almost forgotten the world” (CWA, 134). Yet, as we note, this cannot be entirely true, for Virgil confesses that he still remembers the city that was his “whole life”: “When shall I erase from my heart this love of her? I cannot enter Zion until I have forgotten Rome” (CWA, 133). In order to die entirely and enter “Zion,” it seems that the poet has to forget the past (in this case earthly life).

This indispensable forgetting or letting-go of the past calls for a reconsideration of the status of romantic retrospectio, the most suitable starting-point being Our Town, a play in which the idea of posthumous life-revelation is explicitly thematized. When Emily has died in childbirth and joined the other dead citizens of her town, she is instantly overcome with a vehement desire to return to her past life. But the dead warn her against this, telling her that you “not only live it; but you watch yourself living it” (OT, 99). Like the dead hero mentioned in The Woman of Andros, who upon his return among the living would be an “onlooker who foresees the end” (CWA, 149), Emily will find as she re-lives back in life one of the happiest days of her life that “as you watch it, you see the thing that they—down there—never know. You see the future. You know what’s going to happen afterwards” (OT, 99; emphasis added). Like the heroic figure in The Woman of Andros and like the poet in The Cabala, Emily is resurrected as a knowing onlooker. Yet she too ends up in despair and with an instant desire to be released from her new clairvoyant knowing of life. We see here that transcendent knowing of life—consciousness of the end and of the future—makes it impossible to live life as life.

In so far as Our Town has a tendency to use retrospection as a way of calling attention to the beauty of ordinary life, the sentimentality generated precisely by the distancing transcendence of the onlooker-perspective undercuts this beautifying agenda. The onlooker-position introduces a degree of active constitution (self-consciousness) that deprives the passively-constituted life-stream precisely of that which is secretly most precious in it, namely its unbroken streaming. Wilder is right in wanting to acknowledge “a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life” (OT, 171). Yet this is arguably done fruitfully by focussing on the

---

18 Raimund Borgmeier notes that Wilder’s “endeavour for a positive attitude towards the meaning of life and his esteem for everyday life” has often been “a target of criticism.” “‘The gods’ messenger and secretary’?—Thornton Wilder and the Classical Tradition.” International Journal of the Classical
passively-constituted, always-streaming immanence of unknowing rather than on the actively-constituted transcendence of retrospection.

The Eighth Day, surely Wilder’s foremost work of literary art, takes that less idealizing path. Here the course of events is inexplicable enough to produce “awe, as in the presence of something unearthly” (ED, 40). This awe-factor is tied to the phenomenon of passive constitution and thus to the shrinking of the importance of human agency. Awe is what fills people when, without their active involvement, they are fully exposed to a space of unknowing. Here we are sometimes in the proximity or presence of the sense of the miraculous. “I don’t believe in miracles,” Mrs. Wickersham admits, “but I couldn’t exist if I didn’t feel that things like miracles were happening all the time […] explanations are for people who carry dull minds through dull lives” (ED, 197).

The sense of the miraculous is tied to the phenomenon of authentic, irrational hope—for in the greatest extremity (Wilder’s sustained theme) what one hopes for can only be delivered by a miracle of sorts: “Because it is irrational, hope rejoices in the evidence of the marvellous” (ED, 58). Sophia Ashley, who “saved the Ashley family thorough the exercise of hope” (ED, 57), is said to have drawn “strength from the inexplicable mystery of her father’s rescue” (58). As a “constructive faculty” (ED, 54), hope seems to engender a life-essential “energy of mind and spirit” in people (ED, 10). This sort of “energy” is manifested and takes its expression in the hard work carried out by people like Mr. Wickersham, Olga Doubkov, Sophia, and John Ashley: “There is no creation without faith and hope.

---


20 In Descartes and the Passionate Mind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Deborah J. Brown discusses the importance of awe and wonder in Cartesian philosophy, where “wonder has a crucial role in motivating us to acquire knowledge” (p. 142). For Descartes, wonder is “the first of all passions,” since it prompts modes of attention that are still uncontaminated by judgement. Wonder “is presupposed by every other passion that attaches some value to an object” (p. 146). Amazement and awe are passively constituted: “Before the soul is moved to judge an object even as novel to its experience, its attention must first be captured […] Wonder could not perform its function of directing attention and explaining knowledge acquisition if the mind were already access-conscious of its objects. Indeed, it is not clear that one could have information about an object which was access-conscious and wonder about it, at least wonder in this sense which does not presuppose knowledge of the object” (p. 76).
There is no faith and hope that does not express itself in creation. These men and women work” (ED, 107). This “creativity” and “energy” (ED, 10) find their “nourishment in marvels” and is life-preserving to the extent that Olga Doubkov “lived suspended on hope,” even though her “escape” from her misery “could only arrive by a miracle” (ED, 70).

In contrast to Sophia’s hope-sustained energy and enterprise, which saves their home ‘The Elms,’ her mother is found to isolate herself and her children in the house, initially ‘energy-deprived’ due to the feeling of hopelessness caused by husband’s absence: “The events that had befallen Beata aroused in her no sense of wonder, or even of interrogation. To her they were crushing and senseless” (ED, 52). Beata finds none of the “nourishment” that others find in the inexplicable and “in marvels” (ED, 70). Instead she falls into an apathy that is harmful to her family and home, and which renders her “incapable of planning” (ED, 52). In contrast to Sophia, her very “opposite,” Beata’s “mind refused to confront the future” (ED, 52). Her passive role in this tragic event involves an understanding of passivity as stasis. She reads the condition into which her family has been mercilessly dragged as a “senseless” space of necessary inertia (ED, 52). She is “like a woman adrift with others in an open boat at sea” (ED, 54). There is no hope in a world where passivity means little more than the status quo, little more than all this pointless “peering toward the horizon for the palm trees of an island” (ED, 54).

Her husband is Beata’s opposite. No less stricken by fate than her, he is always open to a sense of amazement at things small and great:

It sprang from his desire not to miss anything. He was constantly filled with wonder: mathematics and the laws of physics were wonderful; a day like this Sunday morning was wonderful; wonderful were the ships before him, the sea gulls, the clouds in the sky and the laws of vaporization that governed them; it was wonderful to be young with a long crowded life before him. (ED, 284)

John Ashley beholds the things that life reveals to him with “grateful wonder” (ED, 178). His lack of “self-consciousness” (ED, 284) and “dominating will” (ED, 107) allow him—even in the direst conditions of his flight—to remain “constantly nourished by astonishment and wonder at life itself” (ED, 106; emphasis added). There is fundamental sublimity in the unveiling—“unfolding” (379)—of life in its very givenness as revelation of itself: “Dawns are a poor thing in Coaltown. He was
overwhelmed with the wonder of it. ‘Yes, that’s what they mean when they say a “new day”!’” (ED, 110).

* 

We have looked at the workings of passive constitution in five works of literary art by Thornton Wilder. Unlike actively-constituted experience, passive constitution readily discloses immanent, immediately-felt realities—the very phenomena that the writer’s art hold precious at the centre of his literary vision. What is passively constituted establishes not only acts of special significance and events of special importance but also entire meaning-spaces that in a sense stand in opposition to life as something actively constituted by human agency and human free-will. We have seen that in Wilder’s fiction the workings of passive constitution are inseparable from the sense of unknowing—understood as gracious lack of self-consciousness but also as awe-stricken surrender to mystery. In The Eighth Day, the writer has arguably brought the complexities of the passive constitution of experience most richly to light.
Works Cited


<http://www04.sub.su.se:2141/content/0t8pp7q281035784/>


