WILDER MASTERS: RECOLLECTIONS OF DEPARTED SOULS

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Abstract:The title of this paper is primarily meant to show the relationship between works by Edgar Lee Masters and Thornton Wilder, though the juxtaposition of the two family names may invite other interpretations that the author does not fully neglect. Spoon River Anthology (1915, before World War I) and Our Town (1938, before World War II) seem to be providing oblique commentaries—"a cemetery on the hill"—or "the city upon a hill" metaphor/myth/legend/allegory… of America proposed by John Winthrop in his 1630 famous sermon on board the Arbella. The substance of the paper is based upon the two worlds in the epigraph, the world of the living and the world of the dead, joined together by memory. history, mythology, and poetry in the messages sent by the dead in the two works, meant to provide imaginative bridges that the living (including the two authors) have always tried to build and (almost) never succeeded; the similarities between the two universes (Midwest and New England) are less important than the complex visions of Masters' and Wilder's remembered voices.

Keywords: Masters, Wilder, the dead, the living, recollections

"There is a land of the living and
a land of the dead and the bridge is
love, the only survival, the only
meaning."
Thornton Wilder,
The Bridge of San Luis Rey
1927

While aware that such a title (its first part, at least) might encourage all sorts of alternative readings (that we are not prepared to explain), we still have decided to stick to it as it simply juxtaposes the names of the two writers from whom we selected the two works put together here; and they obviously are Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950) with his 1915 Spoon River Anthology and Thornton Wilder (1897-1975), author of Our Town (1938).

As in a number of other cases, our movement is chronologically backwards, so we started with an epigraph from the latter—the last sentence in his celebrated Pulitzer-winning disaster novel; having read his later masterpiece, Our Town, what we get from the combination of the two works is this: when the living talk about the dead, what we receive is remembered history; when the dead "talk" about the living, the outcome is myth and mythology(also remembered); when both the living and the dead talk about themselves and each other, the result is poetry; and in the two works we have in mind here all three—history, myth, and poetry—are

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present in various proportions, thus creating the "only meaning" humans have always been striving toward.

The mythic component requires that we introduce one more preliminary element in American "history"—the "city upon a hill" founding legend. In 1629 Cambridge graduate John Winthrop (1588-1649) helped found "The Company of Massachusetts Bay in New England," made up of Puritan merchants that obtained a charter from Charles I; and on April 8, 1630, eleven ships left England to take over one thousand British Puritans (14,000 by 1640) to the Massachusetts Bay colony; the flagship was called Arbella and on it, in the middle of the Atlantic, Winthrop delivered his sermon A Model of Christian Charity, in which he described for his listeners the ideal of a perfectly selfless community (compare with the two communities in Spoon River and Our Town).

Winthrop's central allegory is based upon the "Parable of Salt and Light" in Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount": "Ye are the salt of the earth… Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that ate in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works…" (Matthew 5.13-15) Winthrop's other central concept is that of "covenant": "We are entered into a covenant with… God… In order to avoid breaking this covenant, we…" must be knit together in this work as one man; must show only brotherly affection; prove familiar commerce in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality; rejoice together; labor and suffer together; show unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, plus wisdom, power, and goodness in defending the truth of God…"For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God, in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world." (Norton, pp.40-41)

The "City upon a Hill" image (that was to be Boston), and America as God's country would gradually result in the view and theory of American exceptionalism; as far as our two literary works are concerned, we will focus upon a "cemetery on a hill," upon communities organized to principles completely different from the above, and upon the two "stories" and "by-words" in Spoon River Anthology and Our Town (written and published, each, before one of the World War catastrophes).

First, let us see what "Our Town" is: it is a small fictional place—population 2,640—in real New Hampshire called Grover's Corners, with six churches, a train station, post office, jail and the Polish Town; according to one of its more prominent members, Professor Willard, it "lies on the old Archaeozoic granite of the Appalachian range…, on a shelf of Devonian basalt," etc, etc…, and its coordinates are 42 degrees 40 minutes north latitude and 70 degrees 37 minutes west longitude (these indicate, in fact, a place in Massachusetts, somewhere off the coast of Rockport); according to the address on an envelope received by Rebecca Gibbs' friend, Jane, Grover's Corners is in Sutton County, New Hampshire (in reality, Sutton is not a county but a town in Merrimack County, the north-western part of New Hampshire), United States of America, Continent of North America, Western Hemisphere, the Earth, the Solar System, the Universe, the Mind of God.

Next, all these are in a three-act play, just performed in 1938, which begins:

"No curtain.

No scenery.

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The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light.

Presently the Stage Manager, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and several chairs downstage left, and a table and chairs downstage right…

As the house lights go down he has finished setting the stage and leaning against the right proscenium pillar watches the late arrivals in the audience.

When the auditorium is in complete darkness he speaks:

This play is called 'Our Town.' It was written by Thornton Wilder, produced and directed by…

The name of the town is Grover's Corners…

The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn… He shows the audience how the town lies (Main Street, Town Hall, stores, hitching-posts and horse blocks, Public School, University, Factory, Bank…).

Next: the people—Doc Gibbs, Editor Webb…

Nice town… Nobody very remarkable ever come out of it… In our town we like to know the facts about everybody…"(pp.751 and foll.)

Further on, in Act Two (three years later, i.e. July 7th, 1904, "just after High School Commencement…, early morning"), the same informs the audience: "The First Act was called the Daily Life. This Act is called Love and Marriage. There's another Act coming after this: I reckon you can guess what that's about…/it's 'Death and Dying,' and takes place another nine years later, i.e. 1913/."

So, technically speaking, Wilder violates traditional theatrical conventions (simplification of the stage, minimal properties, little scenery, shorthand accounts of what is happening elsewhere, characters miming the objects with which they interact…) because "our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind/in the memory/—not in things, not in 'scenery.'"(in Lumley, 333) One explanation might be found in the French experimental drama which the author became familiar with in Paris and as a student of French culture, and another in his friend Gertrude Stein's 1925 poetically experimental novel The Making of Americans (the psychological development of members of two families—n.b.—in the western city of Gossols, the marriage of Julia Dehning to Alfred Hersland…).

So much about the composition as such since we need to return to the initial division: the world of the living in the play is conveniently controlled by the writer's delegate into the "story," i.e. the Stage Manager—narrator, commentator and guide, the unifying element, who, not unlike the ancient Greek chorus (see also Masters' Greek influences), has a multitude of roles: prompting actors and joining in the action of the play once in a while (as the minister at the wedding, the soda shop owner, a local townsman…), addressing the audience and requiring questions from them, transporting the audience back and forth in time, interrupting the course of the play, keeping and telling the time and announcing intermissions, getting rid of some of the actors, philosophizing (sometimes didactically)—as in "There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being," only he does not say what that is--, even speaking to the dead (to Emily, in Act Three); this omniscient, ubiquitous presence in the community seems to be

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organizing, God-like, its short-lived history; no wonder then Wilder himself chose to play the role for two weeks on Broadway.

This world of the living the Stage Manager introduces is dominated by the daily routine and family relationships of ordinary people, primarily the early lives of two young neighbors, George Gibbs (son of Dr. Frank Gibbs and Mrs. Julia Gibbs) and Emily Webb (daughter of Mrs. Myrtle Webb and Charles Webb, editor of the local newspaper—like Wilder's father)--, their childhood friendship, romance, marriage, family… and Emily's death (but that takes us to the other world and to another act); simply put, they go to school in Act One, marry in Act Two, and experience tragedy in Act Three. In the meantime, summers and winters go by, rains come and go, babies are born, people are getting married and/or getting older; Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, for twenty and forty years respectively, "have cooked three meals a day…, had no summer vacation…/though Julia Gibbs dreams of going to Paris one day/, brought up children, and never thought themselves hard used…, never had a nervous breakdown" (the Stage Manager's presentation on p.768); Dr. Gibbs' comment: "…Everybody has a right to his own troubles." And there are, of course, other "living people": a paper boy and a milk boy (and his horse Bessie), the village constable, the church organist (not "made for small town life," so he commits suicide), gossipy Mrs. Soames, Professor Willard (supra), a Woman in the Balcony, a Man in the Auditorium, the undertaker coming up for Act Three…, and others.

If Stein's novel evolves from a chronicle of a representative family in her small town to an allegorical history of the entire human race, the history in Our Town is made up of the smallest events and aspects of the human experience that make life precious, the microcosm of the life cycle whose simplicity (viewed through a tragic lens) might suggest the universality of small town daily life. Only toward the end of the second act containing "the world of the living," does the Stage Manager almost ominously announce: "…people are never able to say right out what they think of money, or death, or fame, or marriage… You've got to overhear it…"(p.777); or rather, you've got to listen to the dead, so Act Three takes up Wilder's "world of the dead."

The new setting is that of "the graves in the cemetery… The dead sit in a quiet without stiffness, and in a patience without bitterness.

Stage Manager: This time nine years have gone by, friends—summer 1913… Horses are getting rarer /Fords replacing them/…Moving pictures… Everybody locks their house now at night…/but/things don't change much at Grover's Corners," as "everybody knows that something is eternal"; on the other hand, "you know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long."(p.784) Thus, as a Romanian, one cannot help noticing—with other visitors at the cemetery—the "funny words on the tombstones"; Stan Pătraş and his "Merry Cemetery" at Sapânţa, Maramureş, Romania could find their place here; maybe some other time (and by some other author).

Speaking for the dead and against the history of the living, the Stage Manager also observes: "Whenever you come near the human race, there's layers and layers of nonsense…"(p.793) Only the living human race is rather poorly represented in this act; there's Joe Stoddard, the undertaker, Sam Craig (who had left the village and now is back for the funeral of Emily) , and the Stage Manager himself; the dead, including Mrs. Gibbs, Stimson the organist who drank too much, Constable Warren, Wallace Webb (Emily's brother), Mrs. Soames, Miss Foster, the schoolteacher, the paper boy and the milk boy and Emily herself now (died in childbirth) carry on conversations about life and the living ("Live people don't understand…"; "How in the dark live persons are…"; "From morning till night, that's all they are—troubled…,"

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p.787), while Emily chooses to return among the living, for her twelfth birthday, i.e. fourteen years back, before the beginning of the play.

Again, what she finds in the world of the living is ignorance, so she asks the Stage Manager very soon: "Take me back—up the hill—to my grave…Good-bye… Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?/Great question!/ Stage Manager: No… The saints and poets, maybe—they do some… Emily: That's all human beings are!—Just blind people." And Simon Stimson:"…Yes, now you know! To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those…, of those about you. To spend and waste time /the business of history/ as though you had a million years…" And here another "world of the living" member enters, i.e. George, who flings himself on Emily's grave; "Emily, to Mother Gibbs: They don't understand much, do they? Stage Manager… draws a dark curtain across the scene… it's eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners." The end. As in his novel providing our epigraph, Wilder employs here death as the window to life, in a mythical village completed by these spectral voices, connecting the commonplace and the cosmic dimensions of human experience; in one of his early prefaces to Our Town Wilder explained this mythical dimension as "the life of the village against the life of the stars."

Or death in a village that moves up to a "cemetery on the hill"; Winthrop's mythical hill, three centuries after the Arbella's great Atlantic passage, when it was used to suggest a great beginning for a great nation on earth, becomes, before World War II, the place of the town's cemetery: while at the beginning of Our Town the Stage Manager talked about "Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen…/who/…lives in the big white house up on the hill,"(p.751), in Act Three the cemetery comes to replace "the city": "…this certainly is a beautiful place. It's on a hilltop—a windy hilltop—lots of sky, lots of clouds,--often lots of sun and moon and stars. You come up here on a fine afternoon and you can see range on range of hills—awful blue they are /lots of poetry again/--up there by Lake Sunapee and Lake Winnispesawkee…, and way up, if you've got a glass, you can see the White Mountains and Mt. Washington…Yes, beautiful spot up here, mountain laurel and li-lacks. I often wonder why people like to be buried in Woodlawn and Brooklyn when they might pass the same time up here in New Hampshire… Summer people walk around there…," looking for their ancestors, those on the Mayflower, on Arbella, in the American Revolution and in the Civil War, veterans, young boys many of them: "All they knew was the name, friends,--The United States of America… and they went and died about it… Yes, an awful lot of sorrow has sort of quieted down up here. People just wild with grief have brought their relatives up to this hill. We all know how it is…and then time…and sunny days…and rainy days…'n sorrow… We're all glad they're in a beautiful place and we're coming up here ourselves when our fit's over… A lot of thoughts come up here, night and day…"(p.783) Since there are no coordinates given here, this hill may be just as well in Massachusetts, where Boston is, where Arbella and its mythmakers were arriving: American mythology from "a city upon a hill" to "a cemetery on a hill."

Heralded from the beginning as a "poetic chronicle of life and death," the play's poetical dimension is present in more ways than one; first, the quotation above, about "saints and poets," who might realize what life really is about; then there is Editor Webb, in a discussion with Professor Willard (which we "re-write" as free verse):

"We like the sun
comin' up over the mountain in the morning,
and we all notice
a good deal about the birds.

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We pay
a lot of attention to them,
and trees and plants.
And we watch
the change of the seasons:
yes, everybody knows
about them…" (Act One, p.759)

And the Stage Manager in Act Three, p.784 ("re-written" again):

"Gradually, gradually,
the dead let hold of the earth,
and the ambitions they had,
and the pleasures they had,
and the things they suffered,
and the people they loved.
They get weaned away from earth…
They're waiting,
waiting for something
that they feel it's coming!
Something important and great,
mother's daughter,
husband's wife,
enemy 'n enemy,
money 'n miser,
all those terribly important things
kind of grow pale around here…"

Or, even closer to our purposes, the same Stage Manager, talking about Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb, finds this to say: "It's like what one of those Middle West poets said: You've got to love life to have life, and you've got to have life to love life… It's what they call a vicious circle."(p.768) And "those Middle West poets" certainly refers to Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, and Edgar Lee Masters, and the third is the one who said something that Wilder approximately remembers; so here is

Lucinda Matlock

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
And played snap-out at Winchester.
One time we changed partners,
Driving home in the moonlight of middle June,
And then I found Davis.
We were married and lived together for seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,
And many a flower and medical weed—

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Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the garden valleys.
At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
And passed to a sweet repose.
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you—
I takes life to love Life.

This is number 207 in the poet's list of about 250 speakers from the grave in his 1915 Spoon River Anthology; the numbered poems are 246, only the first is an introduction (infra), 245 is The Spooniad—a synthesis by one of the dead, and 246—The Epilogue; so, there are 243 "individual epitaphs," but those who care to read them all find that 72 is titled William and Emily and 196 is Many Soldiers, whence our "about 250."

It has been known all along that Our Town was suggested to Wilder by "Lucinda Matlock," Masters' maternal grandmother lying in her grave and remembering how she "went to the dances in Chandlerville" and played a kissing game elsewhere. The most interesting thing in this epitaph is that Lucinda (208 is reserved for "Davis Matlock," who knows that "you must bear the burden of life,/ As well as the urge from the spirit's excess…") says she loved life while protesting too much in saying it; "I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,/ I made the garden, and for holiday/ Rambled over the fields where sang the larks…" does not take much reworking to become Wilder's "those ladies cooked three meals a day…, and no summer vacation…, brought up two children apiece, washed, cleaned the house,--and never a nervous breakdown…"; as an unusual detail of literary history, Masters—son of an attorney and himself a lawyer by profession—sued Wilder for plagiarism, only the suit was dismissed (for lack of evidence).

In this "history part" Masters may be said to get wilder than Wilder(the "wilder Masters"—sic!), as a careful peruser also encounters, beside portraits of his pioneering grandmother (another American myth), those of her own grandparents: in 195 one listens to John Wasson, Lucinda's grandfather, who fought in the American War of Independence, and in 204 to Rebecca Wasson, his wife, also of North Carolina initially, both complaining of "poverty, scourges, death" or "the children, the deaths, and all the sorrows"; thus, in four generations, almost all of American history that far. And to make sure that the second great American war and historical event is also included, Masters gives us

200. Ann Rutledge

Out of me unworthy and unknown
The vibrations of deathless music;
"With malice toward none, with charity for all."
Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward millions,
And the beneficient face of a nation
Shining with justice and truth.
I am Anne Rutledge who sleep beneath these weeds,
Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,
Wedded to him, not through union,
But through separation.

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Bloom forever, O Republic,
From the dust of my bosom!

The current legend of Lincoln's romance with Anne Rutledge (1813-1835--of typhoid fever) gives Masters the subject for this poem, that became, much later, her real epitaph on her granite monument in Oakland Cemetery, Petersburg; the legend also includes a rival, John McNamar, references to her father, James Rutledge, as founder of New Salem, Illinois, and an ancestor, Edward Rutledge, signer of the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln's birthplace, Springfield, was in the close neighborhood of New Salem Hill, Petersburg, so the interchanges were quite frequent: Jack Kelso, in Masters' 1928 dramatic poem of this title was a chum of Lincoln (whose demythologizing biography Masters also wrote in 1931—Lincoln: The Man), while "my grandfather had him /Lincoln/ as a lawyer on several occasions, and one time he came to the Masters farm and tried a case before my grandfather, then a justice of peace." (Genesis, 52)

In the poem, as Anne died quite early, she could not have known about Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address of March 4, 1865, but as a mythological ghost she can quote from its fourth—and last—paragraph: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in /Lincoln would be assassinated only one month later/, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

As a matter of fact, one can take a shortcut here and point out that between the age of one and that of eleven Masters lived in Petersburg, where his father was the state attorney; the 3,500-people town "had a social circle of genuine charm," (Genesis) and many/most of the characters and their experiences can be identified with former residents of Petersburg and Lewistown (where the family moved for the following decade); here one cannot help remembering that Wilder spent time (and wrote part of Our Town) in Peterborough, New Hampshire, at the MacDowell colony—a retreat meant to encourage creativity in resident writers, musicians, artists… Back in Petersburg, on the Sangamon—rather than Spoon—River, in Menard County, Masters was impressed by the "serious, high-minded, poetical side of these people"; "I knew them all," he confessed, and the book is a "story of my ancestors…/as/… my blood and stock had something to do with it"; thus, "Fiddler Jones" was "my father's chum," "Jefferson Howard" is an autobiographical account of his own father ("Foe to the church" and "reaping evils I had not sown…"), "Richard Bone" was the one who carved the epitaphs on people's tombstones, "William Jones" in Lewistown introduced Masters to Walt Whitman (a powerful influence), and lawyer "Tom Beatty" (life as a game of cards, and "life as a gambler" who "gives you seventy years to play"—Masters lived to be eighty-two) was lawyer Edgar Lee Masters—of Chicago now.

Here, in Chicago—and in his 1906 European visit—"I began to dream of writing one book, a book about a country town, but which should have so many characters, and so many threads and patterns in its texture that it would be the story of the whole world…" (Genesis, 46)—before Stein's The Making of Americans and Wilder's Our Town—with all speakers dead, so they could be totally honest about themselves, and buried in the cemetery "on the hill." Moreover, in 1904 he had met the editor of the St. Louis Mirror, William Marion Reedy (fanatical "Editor Whedon" at 126: "To pervert truth, to ride it for a purpose,/ To use great feelings and passions of the human family/ For base designs, for cunning ends,/ To wear a mask like Greek actors--/ Poisoned with the anonymous words/ Of our clandestine soul…"), who gave

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him The Greek Anthology (500 BC-1000 AD), a compilation of about 4,500 "epigrams and epithets, and confessional epitaphs" (a much larger Greek chorus than Wilder's).

Its "bald, stark prose" and "epitaphy as a form" combined with his idea mentioned above and "From May 29, 1914 until about January 5, 1915, I poured the epitaphs into the Mirror…" (Genesis, 49); his first 209 poems, followed by other 35 were signed "Webster Ford" in Reedy's Mirror of St. Louis, and so, in the book form Anthology, at 244 (last poem) the patient reader encounters Webster Ford, a "half-witted fool" who lived by the vision of Delphic Apollo: "…I seemed to be turned to a tree with trunk and branches/ Growing indurate, turning to stone, yet burgeoning/ In laurel leaves, in hosts of lambent laurel…"; myth, history, poetry…, and memory, over and over again.

And, compulsorily, "1. The Hill," beginning—
Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozer, the fighter?
All, all, are sleeping on the hill…--,
with this third line repeated six times in a 37-line poem.

Many of the characters are mentioned here and many others in The Spooniad at 245; in this world of the living from the perspective of the dead, "practically every human occupation is covered except those of the barber, the miller, the cobbler, the tailor and the garage man…," (Genesis, 50) and thus, "a sort of Divine Comedy…, a universal depiction of human nature, characters and episodes…"; one can only pick and choose from this impressive portrait gallery: the legendary Catholic Father Malloy (the only one who is spoken of by others: "You were a part of and related to a great past,/ And yet you were so close to many of us…"); Judge Somers (who complains of injustice), a choir director and organist (earlier counterpart of Mr. Stimson in Our Town), Isaiah Beethoven, The Village Atheist ("Immortality is not a gift,/ Immortality is an achievement;/ And only those who strive mightily/ Shall possess it…"); then Penniwit—the Artist, Percy Bysshe Shelley ("They say the ashes of my namesake/ Were scattered near the pyramid of Caius Cestius/ Somewhere near Rome…"), Theodore, the Poet, Voltaire Johnson, Jonathan Swift Somers ("author" of "The Spooniad," infra), Petit, the Poet ("Life all around me here in the village:/ Tragedy, comedy, valor and truth,/ Courage, constancy, heroism, failure--/ All in the loom, and oh what patterns!"), "Indignation" Jones—a carpenter, Plymouth Rock Joe, Professor Newcome (Willard in Wilder), and Margaret Fuller Slack, reminiscent of Margaret Fuller (Ossoli)—1810-1850--, New England feminist, writer and journalist, who, however, drowned, together with her Italian husband and child, off the coast of Fire Island, New York ("I would have been as great as George Eliot/ But for an untoward fate…"—poetry and history once more); and many, many others, representing Masters' world of the dead describing the world of the living in poetry.

Having said that, one also needs to emphasize this third dimension and show that this New World degenerated Eden (very much anticipating Wilder's) is made up of the unpoetic lives brought into poetry as mythic images of repression, frustration and eventual defeat, prompted by a vision of loss, diminution or shrinkage, with death as the great equalizer.

No. 245 is The Spooniad, with the following comment (of Masters' Stage Manager ?):

[The late Mr. Jonathan Swift Somers, laureate of Spoon River, planned The Spooniad as an epic in twenty-four books, but unfortunately did not live to complete even the first book. The

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fragment was found among his papers by William Marion Reedy and was for the first time published in Reedy's Mirror of December 8th, 1914.]

Very early in the poem Swift Somers (having probably read the Ancient Greek anthology that Reedy had given to Masters) uses, Homer-like, the invoking of the Muse to help the poet tell the story (myth and poetry):

"Sing, muse, that lit the Chian's face with smiles
Who saw the ant-like Greeks and Trojans crawl
About Scamander…,"
and so he manages to father most of the characters together.

Added in a later edition, the 245. Epilogue anticipates Wilder's Act Three, with stage directions—

"(The graveyard of Spoon River. Two voices are heard behind a screen decorated with diabolical and angelic figures in various allegorical relations. A faint light shows dimly through the screen as if it were woven of leaves, branches and shadows.")

Loki (a shape-shifter god in Norse mythology), Yogarinda (an Indian goddess), Beelzebub—as Stage Manager—and several "figures" fashioned by him create a Dantean picture of Hell, in front of an audience for whom they "mix the ingredients of spirit," i.e. "passion, reason, custom, rules,/ Creeds of the churches, love of the schools…"—until the whole "phantasmagoria fades out," and the world of the dead is replaced by the "Voices of Spring:" unfinished as it is, this "first book" ends:

"Infinite Depths:--Infinite Law,
Infinite Life."

These two books of American small town life (chronicles of frustrated, petty or tragic existences, of conformity, isolation, poverty and ignorance, hiding beneath the surface all sorts of buried secrets, hypocrisy, oppression and injustice), combining, as we have seen, American history, mythology and poetry in the two writers' memory, may have lost over almost a century much of their impact, but way back then, Spoon River was one of the most popular books of poetry (Ronald Primeau), its first edition went through nineteen printings (a record until then), and was called "the greatest American book since Whitman," which critics compared to Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Rabelais, Zola…; in its turn, Our Town was one of the most performed plays in the twentieth century (even today a production of the play is said to be performed somewhere in the world every night), was described as an American classic or even "the great American drama" (Arthur H. Ballet in 1956) and "a play that captures the universal experience of being alive;" (Donald Margulies in a 1939 preface)—two books of American epitaphs, basically, and thus about the importance and "the only meaning" of memory in a comparatively young culture.

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