Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

THEOPHILUS NORTH

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Theophilus North the Play

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Theophilus North, the Play

(based on the Thornton Wilder novel, 1976)

Mathew Burnett (1966-)

World premiere: Arena Stage
(Kreeger Theatre), Washington DC 2003
and Geva Theatre, Rochester, New York

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Theophilus North, the semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional novel by Thornton Wilder, has been re-invented as a play by an actor called Matthew Burnett. Like the protagonist Theophilus, also known as Teddie, Burnett is a man in his thirties whose life had come to a halt and who needed a new direction. Inspired by the novel to make personal and professional changes, Matthew Burnett reinvented himself as a playwright. Meeting up with

Theophilus, Matthew Burnett found himself profoundly changed. Just like Theophilus who transformed the lives of the characters he met, Burnett transformed the novel and gave it new life as a play. Like Theophilus, he found an absorbing project, and he has been working on it for the last five years. Though the play cannot be fully autobiographical for the relatively young Burnett as it was for the old man Wilder, the play must resonate to some extent with his own issues.

Thornton Wilder had had a rigorous education in America, China, and Europe, went on to college at Yale, and then became a teacher, just like the Theophilus character. Wilder taught French at the Laurenceville School where he got wonderful experience of understanding human nature, but he found that he didn't have enough time for writing plays, and after four and a half years he burned out. Like Theophilus he was a polymath, fluent in various languages, a great conversationalist, a traveler, and a devoted friend who maintained relationships in the USA and Europe by visiting and corresponding. Wilder continued to grow as an enthusiast, an internationally experienced, widely educated, cultured man with many friends. At the same time he was an individualist with a need for seclusion where he could work in peace. Though he didn't marry or have a committed relationship, he had a great interest in the family and the philosophy of human existence.

The novel

Theophilus North is a modern version of the classical picaresque form. It is structured in episodes, the narrative written in the first person, the hero a rascal whose adventures with other characters serve to convey a complete picture of the morals and manners of the society (Kabanova 1999, p. 182). Very loosely based on autobiographical material from early adulthood, *Theophilus North* is about adolescence embellished, idealized, and fondly recollected in senility.

The title *Theophilus North* is the first thing to interest me. Wilder's brother Amos pointed out that this name refers to Thornton himself, the name Thornton being turned into an anagram and compressed to North. Theophilus is an alterego of Thornton and a personification of his twin. Thornton was the only survivor of the twinship, even though he looked like a frail child compared to his twin who, though more fully formed, was stillborn. Tappan Wilder (2003, p. 14) mentioned that, in an interview with the Manchester Guardian, Thornton Wilder had suggested that Theophilus was the name of his twin. In fact it was not his twin's actual name, and neither was it Theodore Theophilus, as Brunauer thought (Brunauer 1999, Tappan Wilder, personal communication). Theophilus was simply an old family name often given to the second-born male in the line. So Wilder chose the name Theophilus both as an idealized representation of his youthful self and also as a reincarnation of his twin, giving him the brilliant life he never had. Poetic license in *Theophilus North* brings Wilder the freedom to both record history

and transform destiny.

In 1968 Wilder began to write the material that he would later collect as *Theophilus North*. It began as a series of unconnected autobiographical novellas set in various cities he had lived in or visited. Each sketch introduced characters in dialogue about their situations and as the series progressed, the protagonist lived through the stories of Wilder's own life. Each story stood alone and was not integrated with the next one. This seems to me to reflect the discontinuity in Thornton Wilder's upbringing, which was filled with multiple separations as his father moved around the world in the course of his work, and then his parents and his siblings lived separately in various combinations on different continents. Without a theme, the pieces would be like beads on a necklace or photographs in an album, rather than an aesthetic whole. It lacked a unifying principle, and Wilder soon abandoned the project. As Kabanova (1999) says, the classical novel in its interiority corresponds with the entire structure of human personality but without an inner center it dissipates. In a similar way, without a central self, the personality splinters.

Wilder would not fall into the trap of writing his memoirs. In any case his memory was not accurate and that was perhaps a saving grace. He would not rely on facts to reach the essence of his being. In 1973, the year before his death at 76, Wilder found a structure for integrating these diverse pieces and developing them. It would be semi-autobiographical and semi-fictional and he

would never tell which was which. This gave him the license to pull the stages of his life together, reveal the rage, despair, love, and jealousy that he brought to them, and explore the defensive processes by which he had dealt with the unknowable and immutable aspects of his being. At the same time, by investing the secondary characters with these attributes, he could disavow all that was personal or emotionally intense for Theophilus and thereby hide the facts of his own life.

The new concept galvanized Wilder into action, and despite failing health and deteriorating vision, he worked energetically all year, dying only after correction of the page proofs was completed (Tappan Wilder 2003, p. 15). He modified the facts of his experiences and manipulated the structure of the piece so that while apparently presenting his external circumstances he nevertheless gave the reader an interior view. He captured the essence of his being, drew attention to the core of what it is to be human in our age, and conveyed his message for society.

What was the idea that brought unity to the novellas? Wilder reduced his entire life to one time and place. He compressed his life into the summer of 1926 and telescoped the international cities of his upbringing into a single city, Newport, which he knew well as a frequent visitor throughout his life and where he had taught during his first summer vacation from teaching. He represented himself as the protagonist Theophilus North, an energetic,

appealing young man who sets off on a journey of exploration and self-realization, hoping to fulfill nine ambitions, among them to be an anthropologist, archeologist, magician, and rascal. Thornton Wilder wrote, "It's about the ambitions Theophilus North had as a young boy, much like my own ambitions, and how these ambitions arise and influence a man. I believe we are all made of the dreams we had in childhood" (qtd in *Conversations with Thornton Wilder*, 1992 p. 113-114). The result is a reminiscence filled with the omniscience and omnipotentiality of adolescence. *Theophilus North* is a fond recollection, full of American optimism and devoid of the cynicism that characterizes some European versions of the picaresque novel.

The protagonist, Theophilus, also known as Teddie, is an engaging, vivacious fellow full of wit and bright ideas to improve the lives of all the people he meets. He is on a journey of adventure but when he has gone no farther than Newport, his jalopy (called hard-hearted Hannah) dies and he has to stop. True to his ambitions, he will investigate the various sectors of the city like an archeologist and like an anthropologist he will observe the social behavior of the citizens. Like an archeologist he will expose the human self as an atoll with layer built upon layer (Kabanova 1999, p. 180-181). Like a magician, he will make problems disappear. Like a rascal, he will cause mischief.

The secondary characters each have a need or a problem for which they

look to Theophilus for help: For instance, they engage him to read to an aging man, teach French to a reluctant adolescent boy, teach a child to play tennis, introduce a boring wife to literature, and rescue an eloping daughter. Theophilus agrees to meet that need or find a remedy by quackery, tricks, shocks, tutelage, and charm. He determines the action and helps the other characters grow and change, and so the story goes.

Members of the high-class segment of society reveal their dependence on the servant, the tutor, and the repairman. With Theophilus's help, they become capable of greater independence and self-direction. The characters represent various stages of the life cycle: Eloise the Fenwicks' innocent child and Charles their resistant adolescent, Dr. Bosworth the old man of learning whose intellectual world is now diminished by deteriorating eyesight, Diana the heedless lover, Mr. Bell the outraged father, Mrs. Cranston, the wealthy widow whose butler Simmons is her main companion, and the young couples troubled by ignorance and adultery. Together they represent figures from Thornton's past.

The characters also refer to parts of Theophilus. As he says, "I am part of all that I have seen." I have the impression that Thornton saw displayed before him the parts of his personality revealed over the stages of his own life, re-invented in Theophilus. The various characters – the eager, the lovestruck, the rejected, the betrayed, the socialite, the scholarly, the ascetic, and the

perpetual child – represent his internal objects strewn before him and now requiring his concern and reparation. Interacting in the various scenes, Theophilus brings them to life, manipulates them, and is the catalyst that alters them for the better.

Moments of change like this happen at moments in a person's life such as going through a crisis, falling in love, or opening the unconscious to psychoanalysis. At such times of heightened awareness, the central self allows repressed parts of the self to emerge. The learning that takes place at moments of high impact effects a new level of integration that makes for a richer personality.

But does Theophilus change himself, or is he simply the catalyst, as he likes to describe himself? Theophilus does not seem to me to change profoundly, but he does feel affected by the people he meets and his adolescent omniscience mellows. He shows some doubt over his tutoring of Charles Fenwick, regret over breaking up Diana Bell and Hillary Jones, longing to stay connected to little Eloise, total shock when Simmons's fiancée agrees to marry him, and perhaps some envy of Simmons for being accepted by a woman, or grief that he is otherwise engaged. And there is sadness when it is time to leave.

In his writing about family life and social dilemmas, Wilder revealed a

deep interest in the inner life. He wrote that he aimed at "significant truth presented in a narration form in the light of a universality that does not exclude the innerness of every existing human being." The novel, said Wilder, is "an extended imagined action whose proposal is to view character from its interiority…..It may often be advisable to emphasize the mind and the actions will take care of themselves" (1985, p. 201). It is not surprising to learn that Wilder was familiar with psychoanalysis. He had met Freud, discussed neurosis with him, and sent him greetings on his 80th birthday. I imagine they had quite a lively interaction with mutual respect. Freud appreciated that "the poet natures had always known everything" and Wilder appreciated that Freud had had a huge impact on the arts. He wrote, "Since Freud, and since the literary consequences of his doctrines, we are more and more aware of the complexity of motivation, the incommunicable character of inner consciousness" (Wilder 1985). I am going into this matter of interiority in some detail as a basis for examining how well the novel transforms into the play.

The play

The world premiere directed by Mark Cuddy for the Arena Stage and the Geva Theatre and performed at the Kreeger Theatre in Washington DC in 2003 followed in the Wilder theatrical tradition of presenting minimal scenery, props, and business to support the words. The simplicity of the stage

set and the mime actions of secondary characters recalled the opening scene of *Our Town*. The floor on which the action took place was a brilliant, polished, classical parquet floor at the center of which was a revolving disc upon which an old gramophone was slowly pivoting, soon replaced by a bicycle. The gramophone served to transform the floor into a ballroom for the rich. The bicycle brought it down to earth. These two images at the center of the set reminded me of Konkle's point that Wilder's writing stemmed from the Puritan legacy and confronted the moral wilderness of the jazz age (199, p. 89). The central disc revolved with Theophilus perched upon it on his bicycle, like a compass needle finding its direction. Above the solid reflective base soared an elliptical ramp, serving as a boardwalk, a podium from which to make demands and judgments, and a way to reach the beacon of light. Ending abruptly face forward to the audience, the boardwalk took the drama to another level, connecting past, present, and future, and confronting us with the play's deeper meaning.

Arena Stage director Molly Smith (2003) quoted Kenneth Tynan as saying that "a novel is a static thing one moves through; a play is a dynamic thing that moves past one." Indeed Burnett's play moved past on its spectacular stage smoothly and inevitably to journey's end, like a bicycle overtaking an observer on the street and finally disappearing into the distance, but could this play bring us the interiority of the novel? In the novel, Theophilus reveals to us his thought processes as he perceives himself and

others, conceptualizes situations and arrives at solutions, whimsical, sensible, and magical. In the play, how does Theophilus reveal himself?

In the play, Theophilus does share with the audience a few questions, doubts, and uncertainties. When he is asked "What do you want?" he stumbles for an answer: "I want … I dunno." Later he asks himself, "Who am I?" and "Isn't there someplace I should be?" and he concludes, "There is such a mystery about who we may become." When Ms. Bosworth, herself a divorced woman living with her father, criticizes his behavior and stridently asks him, "To whom do you offer love?" he is stunned. This confrontation helps him to realize that he has his family to love. Like Eloise who finds out that she wants to be a nun, Theophilus prefers to be alone but with friends in various places, like the North star (there's the anagram of Thornton again) surrounded by constellations that would always be in position but not likely to create a collision or generate a new star of magnitude.

In Burnett's play, Theophilus's thoughts are more often spoken of by others in the chorus of characters. This resonates with my idea of the parts of the playwright being distributed in the various characters, but it takes away from the audience's ability to identify with Theophilus. In the play, the comical, whimsical, unreal aspects of Theophilus as magician are emphasized which lets the audience enjoy him, but only at moments are we given direct access to his feelings, much less to feeling them with him. We see Theophilus

dealing with the other characters' optimism, sexual jealousy, regret, rage over deteriorating capacities, and loss, but what does he want? Where is his sexual energy? We see only hints of it in his wistful glancing after Diana and in his capacity to portray the role of the prostitute beckoning Charles as part of the French lesson. Theophilus as the prostitute clutches Charles from the rear in a position that evokes a homosexual penetration. When Eloise declares that she has decided to become a nun, the audience may laugh at the idea of such a bosomy child deciding to be chaste, but I think that her character's ambition speaks for handsome Theophilus's monastic existence.

Thornton Wilder was bright, engaging and social, and like Theophilus he was also monastic. Some have argued that he was gay – a conclusion that the novel and the play do not make, preferring to leave the matter of sexual preference undeclared and unaddressed. The family knows of no intimate relationships of any kind and the one report of a homosexual liaison remains unsubstantiated (Tappan Wilder, personal communication). It seems more likely that the end of the play truly indicates Wilder's resolution of his sexuality: He drew love from his family and his friends around him and he poured his energy into learning, creativity, and community. Nevertheless this personal accommodation leaves the audience a bit disconnected from Theophilus. How are we to understand such an absence of sex drive in a handsome young man of thirty? In the novel he at least has a fling with Flora, the gossip columnist and writer, even if she is fifteen years older than he.

Unfortunately for dramatic purposes, there is no evidence of such sexual abandon or conflict in the play. Why is Theophilus not attracted to women of his own age? We know from letters that Wilder met Freud in the 1930s, and in the novel, Theophilus discusses with Sigmund Freud how to characterize his sexual inhibition. 'Respectable women, for him, are associated with his mother and sisters, but no such prohibitions apply to women of the lower classes or emancipated women such as Flora" (Brunauer1999, p. 279). Is it possible that Wilder discussed his sexuality with Freud?

At the beginning of the play, the voicing of Thornton's inner thoughts by members of the cast of characters echoed the classical Greek chorus, homage perhaps to another influence on Wilder. This was the first moment at which I thought of the play as a musical. I thought it again when I heard one line of "Hard-Hearted Hannah", and I found myself longing to hear the rest of the song. When Eloise finished her first scene with Theophilus, again a song seemed called for, then a burlesque duet for Theophilus and Charles, an upbeat trio for him and Mrs. Cranston and Simmons, a ballad for Mrs. Granberry, a torch song for Diana, a humorous song, a love song, and a mournful song for Theophilus.

The play strikes me as a reflection on finding the good object in oneself and others, a good object that fills the self with feelings of love and satisfaction and frees the self to be curious and to become autonomous. It is

not an exploration of the hero's conflict but a magical resolution of the conflicts of others. It could have more emotional resonance. Music would offer an affective avenue for conveying the inner life and add richness to the piece. My thoughts find their parallel in Jane Horwitz's (2003) comment: "I very rarely say this, but in this case, I can see this might have made a better musical than a straight play. Just because you have this guy who's innately good and he meets all these other people who are pretty good themselves and he helps them be better." Theophilus is basically good, like Thornton Wilder himself. As David Izzo says, "To truly understand Wilder's art one must know that it is an autobiographical account of his progress in a very specific study: goodness" (1999, p. 109).

The metaphor of the number nine

The repetition of the number 9 – Nine Gables (the Bosworth residence), nine ambitions, nine character situations, nine friends and nine female friends, and especially the nine aspects of Newport society – leads me to associate as others have done to the nine cities of Troy. The vitality that sprang up in the ailing Thornton when pouring forth the novel the year before his death, and the new lease on life that Dr. Bosworth of Nine Gables gained in association with Theophilus, leads me to think of the nine lives of the cat. The nine months of pregnancy also come to mind, a reference both to the incubation of the creative process and to the actual time it takes to produce a

living child. In discussion of an early draft of this paper, someone pointed out that nine might refer to Nein, the German word for No, and another said that nine months is the length of time remaining after the three months of summer. These associations did not mean much to me, but my point in mentioning them is to show how the number is evocative in different ways for different people, and introduces new questions: How many months of life did Thornton sense might remain at the time of writing? What might he have been saying No to?

Thornton Wilder was born a twin, the more puny of the two and yet the only one to be born alive. He lived his first year with parents who, having lost a child, were anxious about his survival. In *Theophilus North*, Thornton Wilder gives his alter ego nine identities and a great future, perhaps his way of acknowledging his own great success as a playwright who invented many characters and settings, but also bringing his dead twin to life in the literary canon at the time when Thornton was nearing the end of his life. He might have been expressing a refusal to accept the death of his twin or his own impending death. This takes me back to the recurring theme of the number 9. 9 is the last number before 10. In 10, the numbers 1 and 0 are together side by side like bodies in a bed. I imagine the 0 as a symbol for the dead twin and the 1 a symbol for the living twin, Theophilus. 10 might be a number that Wilder would have unconsciously wished to avoid.

Theophilus as psychoanalyst

Theophilus's journey through Newport and his meetings with various characters and situations are like the journey a patient sets out on when starting an analysis. Thornton Wilder's writing of it is similar to the recollection of a period of time spent in analysis – various times of life, current situations, past and present figures, self and object, all compressed into the analytic space. Following Fairbairn's idea of the dream as a short, a movie clip of the dreamer's personality structure, we can look at Theophilus's journey as a dream, the various scenes loosely connected through the dreamer and all of them revealing his character and the structure of his mind (Fairbairn 1952). Theophilus's adventure with the various situations (nine in the novel, six in the play) may also be compared to an analyst's day. She might meet with six or nine patients a day, all of them dealing with individual, interpersonal, and societal difficulties. She is the catalyst in relation to whom they find ways of understanding their dreams, analyzing their conflicts, and recovering the ability to love and work. But unlike Theophilus, she is more than a catalyst. A catalyst is a property that remains unchanged by the combinations it effects, whereas an analyst grows by learning from experience in interaction with each patient with whom she is privileged to enter into unconscious communication. Each psychoanalysis is a unique product of the interaction of the analyst's mind with that of the analyzand, the true catalyst being the analytic process whose effectiveness remains for use

in other situations.

Theophilus as tutor and educated general factotum holds some principles of practice in common with psychoanalysis. He conducts his business with strict adherence to his preferred frame of operation. He works in 45 minute increments. He warns his clients that he expects to be compensated for his time, including when appointments are cancelled. He gives no guarantee of success. If his proposal for how to work is not accepted readily, or if he detects resistance to his methods, he quickly resigns from the project – which an analyst would not do, instead interpreting the resistance and waiting for readiness. His walking out is an effective maneuver on many occasions. It reminds me of a psychoanalytic technique called *the cut* in which the analyst of the Lacanian school ends the session abruptly at a moment of the analyst's choosing to emphasize the preceding point. Like Freud, Theophilus thought it best not to make friends with his clients in order to maintain his objectivity, but he does not always follow his own rules, for instance when he takes Eloise for ice-cream and stops for drinks with Diana, just as Freud used to feed the patient referred to as the Ratman. Theophilus's feelings of longing for connection sometimes get the better of him, but he does not act out unethically. In analytic parlance we would say that his countertransference (his reaction to the client and the situation) sometimes works well to help him sense what his client is experiencing and to design effective interventions, and sometimes it gets in his way.

Empathy based on his own experience and his countertransference reaction to Charles's arrogance enables Theophilus to diagnose Charles's attitude to learning as a defense against the anxiety of learning about things that might shock or embarrass him because he had not had enough time talking about physiological functions with boys his own age. Theophilus says that teaching French to boys is like pulling stones uphill, a feeling many analysts have had when dealing with major resistances to the emergence of unconscious conflict. Unlike an analyst who would be more respectful of defenses, Theophilus goes straight to the root of Charles's problem. He finds in himself versions of young boys to help him empathize with and detoxify Charles's adolescent anxieties. He uses drama to enact and rehearse role relationships that provoke social and sexual anxiety. Although compassionate and sensitive to the needs of the other person, he is quite dismissive of symptomatology. When Mrs. Granberry tearfully confides that her husband is unfaithful and she is afraid that his lover is prettier than she is, he tells her to stop all that nonsense as it is a waste of time. He helps her educate herself instead. True to my experience as an analytic marital therapist, Theophilus finds that when Mrs. Granberry starts to recover her sense of self, Mr. Granberry has to acknowledge his feeling of inferiority and unworthiness in the face of her prior idealization of him.

Becoming and being

To me the most interesting moment of the play comes near the end. Dr. Bosworth, the distinguished man of letters, is no longer able to read or to venture outside the confines of his home, but his mind is still lively. He takes to Theophilus as a companion because Theophilus has "resonance" – in other words he has an interesting voice that is the mark of a lively mind filled with literature and philosophy, a mind ready and willing to debate. Rather than risk being found unsatisfactory by the eminent professor who is quick to complain about inferior minds, Theophilus makes for the door before they begin. Dr. Bosworth recognizes the value of being willing to walk away from a negotiation, and at that moment at the door he takes to Theophilus as a kindred spirit. In the course of their studying together, Dr. Bosworth confides to Theophilus that he has a psychosomatic problem akin to a urinary phobia. He is afraid that he will be inconvenienced by frequent urination if not in his own home, and that is why he cannot have the pleasure of a visit to the great academy of letters that he is building. Theophilus prescribes a placebo pill and an unmentionable device as a temporary crutch to address the physical dimensions of the problem. Meanwhile he engages Dr. Bosworth in regaining his grasp on life so that he can hope to venture forth into the outside world once again. As they come to the end of their work together, Dr. Bosworth takes control and leaves before Theophilus can do so, thus turning the tables on him by using the trick of heading for the door, which Theophilus had used on him at the beginning. The old man's parting words are to tell Theophilus

that when you leave a room like that, you always find that you are simply in another room.

At the end of the novel, Theophilus is given the suggestion that he may have something to write about (and after reading it, the actor Burnett is given the idea of writing a play). At the end of the play when his parents ask if he is coming home, Theophilus says, "We are home." He seems to be saying that he has arrived, he has matured, and he no longer needs to chase adventure. He will have whatever he wants where he is. He has accepted the love and knowledge available to him in his own heritage. At the same time, Wilder's "We are home" may speak of reuniting with his parents in death, accepting that the end of his life is near. At the completion of the play, we see at once the ebullient adolescent Theophilus whose future lies uncharted before him together with the man he became, the distinguished old Dr. Bosworth on his way to the next room.

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