THE ELUSIVE PROMINENCE OF MAXWELL ANDERSON'S WORKS IN THE AMERICAN THEATER

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With gratitude to Josephine Beatrice
for the light and to Vicky and Jodie
for the reasons to glow

Contents

Prologue 9

Chapter One: Maxwell Anderson's Plays: A Critical Overview 19

Chapter Two: Traces of Anarchism 53

Chapter Three: The Dual Character as the Abstract Hero 79

Conclusion 99

Bibliography 103

Prologue

1. An Overview of the Playwright and his Works

In his youth Anderson read the English classics with a passion. A. S. Shivers says that he was "above all, romantic in temperament" (1983, 10). At the University of North Dakota, he was influenced by his association with F. H. Koch, who is said to have made his students "glow with his own abundant love for Shakespeare and the other masters of thespian magic" (40). The "glow" stuck with Anderson throughout his playwriting career.

Not unlike G. H. Boker, whose verse drama *Francesca da Rimini* was first produced in 1855, revived in 1882, and staged again in 1901, Anderson tried to bring verse drama back into the theater. He was also influenced by other nineteenth century American dramatists. His *Night Over Taos* (1940g) brings to mind David Belasco's *The Rose of the Rancho*, about the American conquest of Spanish-held lands; and Anderson's melodrama *Cavalier King* (1952) which was never produced, is similar to *Charles II*, by H. Payne and Washington Irving —interestingly enough, Washington Irving appears as the narrator in Anderson's *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938a).

The American theater at the turn of the century was more geared to entertainment than artistic expression. Vaudeville artists such as W. C. Fields and the Marx Brothers attracted large audiences, as did galas like the Ziegfeld Follies and musical comedies like George M. Cohan's *Johnny Jones*. Believing that Americans preferred entertainment to art, Anderson tried to incorporate the musical and slapstick aspects of these theatrical traditions into plays like *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938a), *High Tor* (1940c), and *Lost in the Stars* (1949a). But unlike the earlier American playwrights, Anderson strove to make his texts both entertaining and serious: *Knickerbocker Holiday* criticizes government, *High Tor* comes out against corporate greed, and *Lost in the Stars* attacks racism.

Early American theater also influenced Anderson. *Both Your Houses* (1933), which satirized the United States Congress, is similar to *Androboras*, a farce that ridiculed the New York Senate, and which may have been written by the Governor of the Province, Robert Hunter in 1719. Additionally, in *Valley Forge* (1940f) Anderson pays homage to the British players who, during the American War of Independence, staged plays theaters in Philadelphia and New York.

After obtaining a Master's in English literature, Anderson became a professor at Whittier College. Later, his fondness for scholarship was reflected in his many history plays. But nowhere is his academic inclination more apparent than in his playwriting rules. His "Prelude to Dramatic Poetry," in which he explains his dramatic theory, reads like a conference paper on dramaturgy–only the footnotes are missing: "There is no instance in the theatre of a writer who left behind him a body of unappreciated work which slowly found its public as, for example, the work of Shelley and Keats found a belated public after they had left the scene" (Anderson 1935a,1).

His essays on playwriting are published in two books: *The Essence of Tragedy and Other Footnotes and Papers* (1939) and *Off Broadway: Essays About the Theater* (1947a). However, Anderson was a better playwright than dramatic theorist. His playwriting rules are not original, and, as R. J. Buchanan notes, in the plays there are "important deviations from the rules" (1970, 67); for example, there is no hero in *Winterset* (1940a). With reason, most authors criticize his playwriting theory: E. Wilson (1937), E. Foster (1942), P. J. Rice (1953), D. Gerstenberger (1963), E. M. Jackson (1973).

Anderson had been an editorial writer for the *Globe* and the *New York World* before he became a playwright. While the tendency to editorialize is particularly obvious in the journalist drama *Gods of the Lightning* (1928a), it remains apparent in many of his other plays. At times, the editorialist clashes with the poet-playwright, as can be seen in *Winterset* (1940a), where the subject of the Sacco-Vanzetti case is represented in verse.

Additionally, he was a poet who not only had poems published in nationally recognized magazines like *New Republic*, but he was also one of the founders and editors of *The Measure: A Journal of Poetry*. However, he had only one book of poems published in his lifetime: *You Who Have Dreams* (1925b). A second book of poems, *Notes on a Dream* (1971), was published posthumously. Anderson strove to find a place in his playwriting career for the poet: his essays "Prelude to Dramatic Poetry" (1935a) and "A Prelude to Poetry in the Theater" (1939, 29) are examples of his efforts to do so.

Critical opinion with regard to his verse dramas was generally favorable prior to World War II: C. Carmer (1933), H. Hatcher (1936), J. W. Krutch (1935a, 1935b) and others were supportive. Moreover, the time seemed right to put verse back into the theater. For not only were Anderson's verse dramas popular, but W. H. Auden's *The Dance of Death* and T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* were also successful. However, by the end of the 1930s verse drama no longer appealed to audiences, and after World War II, most of the authors were critical of Anderson's verse plays: H. E. Woodbridge (1945), M. Matlaw (1972), J. Y. Miller and W. L. Frazer (1991).

The scholar, journalist and poet were often at odds in his dramas. *Winterset* (1940a) is the best example of how the three clash in a creative work, with the result being that none of them is satisfactorily represented. As history, the drama lacks rigor; as journalism, one is not sure what the message is; and as poetry, the language leaves much to be desired.

Anderson's need to express himself as a scholar, journalist, and poet in his plays is one of the reasons why he experimented with different styles: *Saturday's Children* (1927a) is a melodrama in prose; *Gods of the Lightning* (1928a) a journalistic play; *Elizabeth the Queen* (1940d) a verse drama in Tudor style; *Both Your Houses* (1933) a satire; *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938a) a musical comedy; *Winterset* (1940a) a Shakespearean drama on a modern subject; *High Tor* (1940c) a fantasy verse comedy on a modern subject; *Storm Operation* (1944) a war propaganda play; *Lost in the Stars* (1949a) a musical tragedy; and *Bad Seed* (1955a) is naturalistic.

As a professional he wanted his plays to be successful both economically and artistically. His desire to make a living on Broadway also influenced his writing style. He tried to write plays in such a way as to satisfy not only his dramatic, poetic, and journalistic bents, but also to earn money at the same time. As a former journalist, Anderson, kept up with the news. But he was no longer interested in writing for the newspapers. Hence, in a play like *Lost in the Stars* (1949a), he takes a serious current event, Apartheid, and with the help of Kurt Weill, puts it to music, and writes the lyrics to the songs (which is another way of writing verse); moreover, the dramatist's text is a passionate statement against injustice and racism.

2. Ideology

Anderson's world view was linked to his conception of the individual as being pitted against the encroaching power of large governmental bodies. In the 1930s Americans had no choice but to disenthrall themselves from the gay 1920s. The Depression compelled them to demand that the government do something to alleviate the misery that wracked the nation. The New Deal palliative was accompanied by a substantial increase in governmental power. In protest, Anderson took a stand in direct opposition to what he considered to be a grave danger to individual freedom. The majority of Americans, however, were not interested in the libertarian concept of the destructive force of political power; or the anarchist creed that government is intrinsically evil; neither did they relate to Emerson's notion of individual spiritual freedom nor was Thoreau's *Walden* and *Life in the Woods* popular. The millions of homeless and unemployed people were not interested in transcendentalism. The America of Whitman and Twain, "of 'horse sense,' of 'practical men,' of 'hard-headed business men'" (W. Durrant 1961, 488), had changed.

The assumption that unscrupulous capitalists must be coddled, as Anderson wryly maintains in *Both Your Houses* (1933), is a conservative position. That Anderson was a conservative came as a surprise to many. Though he called himself "Bolshevistic" at the beginning of 1920, (L. G. Avery 1979, 13), and once claimed that he and his wife were socialists (3), and associated with the left-wing Group Theatre in the 1930s, he nevertheless came out against the New Deal, attacked the "Red Ogpu" in 1938 (1940b, 10) and eventually argued in favor of the blacklisting of former Communists in the early 1950s.

As to that, Anderson explains to his Playwrights' Company associate, J. F. Wharton, "I got inveigled into one or two Communist fronts myself, and I'm ashamed of it, and wish it hadn't happened, but it did happen" (259). Anderson felt that there was nothing in his past that he had to hide. He accepted the fact that, because he associated with Communists in the 1930s, his own was name is listed in *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, which was published in 1950. Furthermore, he insisted that he was not against anyone publishing the names of Communists and ex-Communists "so long as we retain free speech and a free press." Anderson did not criticize the fact that fellow playwright John Howard Lawson and others were jailed for having exercised that same right to freedom of speech.

The erstwhile anti-militarist, whose open pacifism had once "enraged the star-spangled school board" (A.S. Shivers 1983, 47) in North Dakota and later again at Whittier College —costing him his teaching post on both occasions— became a warmonger in the 1940s. Even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Anderson urged American to prepare for war: "We have become very soft indeed as a nation," he writes, and concludes that the time has come for the country to "fight for its life" (1942b). Moreover, after World War II, the former pacifist urged his countrymen to force "a showdown of military strength with Russia before Russia's military strength has caught up with ours" (1948c); and in the following decade he asserted "The United States is facing the greatest danger and most fearful challenge in all its history" (1958). Yet, *What Price Glory* (1926a), the play that had launched his career as a dramatist, was against war; moreover, in *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938a) he satirized militarism, and in *Valley Forge* (1940f) he showed how little the government looks after the people doing the actual fighting.

However, the assumption that Anderson was a one-time Leftist who later became, as Clifford Odets described him, "a damned reactionary" (H. Cantor 1991, 34) is not exactly true. For reactionaries do not "illuminate the tragedy of our own negroes" (Avery 1979, 221). Nor they do admire the democracy of Thomas Jefferson (223). Neither do they maintain a long standing relationship with socialist novelists like Upton Sinclair and Leftists like Elmer Rice.

Naturally, Leftist critics attacked his ideological shift in the 1930s. A. C. Block —whom Shivers considers to be a Marxist-social critic (1985, 88)— found the propagandistic drama *Gods of the Lightning* (1928a), about the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, "a stirring play" whose failure was due to the audience's "absence of play-consciousness" (Block 1939, 239). Apparently, the same defect made *Winterset* (1940a) —his second drama about the case— a success. *Winterset* was a critical and financial success, Block holds, because the audiences went "to the theatre in order to forget the great questions of life that we have." In her opinion, *Winterset* was "a distorted wraith of *Gods of the Lightning*." To the minds of many left-wingers, a bad play succeeded where a good play had failed.

While Leftist authors like Block spun their criticisms out of the syllogisms defined by ideology, mainstream critics like J. W. Krutch praised *Winterset* (1940a) calling the play "brilliant" (1936, 485). But Krutch would later alter his assertion, saying that the play was "tainted with mere romantic sentimentality and the end purely fortuitous" (1938, 77); elsewhere the well-known author writes that there is an "absence of any sense that one's thought or feeling is being anywhere enlarged" (1965, 293). The shift in attitude is symptomatic of a decline in Anderson's critical popularity.

3. Why Anderson is not better known today

Anderson was granted the most prestigious awards an American playwright can receive: the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics Circle Award (twice) and, like Eugene O'Neill before him, the Gold Medal from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Furthermore, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. According to R. J. Buchanan, "In volume of work alone Anderson stands above most of his contemporaries, and in variety both of subject matter and dramatic form he has few if any peers" (1970, 60). Yet he has practically been forgotten in the American theater. In an article entitled "Maxwell Who?" the playwright's son Alan H. Anderson, says, "Why is Anderson not better known today, read more, studied more, and seen more often in production? Considering his prominence, critical acclaim, and popular success among theatre audiences over a period of thirty years, it seems puzzling" (1991, 171).

There are various reasons for this. First, the realism that Anderson eschewed in his plays dominated the American theater after World War II; second, he lost his credibility as a result of his writing war propaganda dramas; and third, he took the offensive against the critics.

The realistic style of theater that the Group Theatre preferred prevailed over Anderson's conception of "Dramatic Poetry." When Anderson's play *Winterset* (1940a) was rejected by the Group, the playwright and the members of the prestigious theater association went their separate ways. H. Clurman became an influential drama critic, E. Kazan a well known stage and film director, and L. Strasberg established a school of realistic acting that is still taught at the Actors Studio, and remains in vogue.

Anderson contradicted himself in the 1940s when he wrote war propaganda dramas. Up till then, he had been faithful to one idea in his plays. Not trusting any "centralized political mechanism," he believed in the individual, and held that "a government is always on the side of the powers that be" (Avery 1979, 15). It seems that when he reneged on this belief during World War II, he sacrificed his credibility.

Having betrayed his ideology (pacifism and anarchism), Anderson was morally bankrupt after World War II. The philosophical stance he had taken to support an art form that led to the writing of *Winterset* (1940a) and *Key Largo* (1940b), was considerably weakened after *Storm Operation* (1944); and though he was to write a few good plays after the war —*Joan of Lorraine* (1946a), *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1948a) and *Bad Seed* (1955a)— the moral factor, the mystique that gives an artist his charisma, had vanished.