

A Talk by Janet Green

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Perhaps you never heard of my father. I can understand that. One of the things that made him less famous nationally than he should have been was his great age when he died. People stereotyped him with his earlier achievements, but he was a practicing writer until the day he died. In fact, he used to complain that recent interviewers acted as if he were already dead; that their tasks were to gather information from a defunct creature about dinosaur matters. Also, Paul Green, for much of his career, was not in the mainstream of the American theatre. That is, he avoided gratuitous violence, loveless sex, miserable introspection, ironic ambiguity, sophisticated banter, and fearful despair, as subjects for the stage. Still another reason you may never have heard of him is because he was in his beginning a regionalist. As the first white playwright to write about blacks, he created plays dripping in dialect, which are heavy going to urban northern people. I am thinking of some production very early in my father's career of his Negro plays, done by northern white actors in blackface, attempting to mimic the deep North Carolina rural dialect. They did this because the theatre was not then open to black actors. But, as you can imagine, their efforts were not usually what the playwright had in mind.

He was born Paul Eliot Greene on a farm in eastern North Carolina on March 17, 1894. For a very sensitive and observant boy, his childhood was hellish. The cultural deprivation of the rural South, the ungodly barbarisms of the primitive religion like the ones that held sway during revivals, the sudden illnesses, and useless deaths, the sick superstitions, the poverty of post-Civil War times, the bitter racism laid their mark on him then and for life. His mother named him Paul, after Saint Paul: was he to be her little preacher? When he was 10, he got osteomyelitis in his right arm and had to have a serious operation at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, another terrifying experience. But he showed a typical Paul Green resilience and determination when, during his convalescence, he learned to pitch ball with his left arm, a talent that brought him money later in life as an ambidextrous sandlot league pitcher. (It was still legal in those days to disguise which hand the ball was to emerge from.)

From his mother, Betty Byrd, he inherited his musical nature and ambition for education, and astounding drive. She it was who sewed the shrouds for the entire community! But one night she put her head up against a mantelpiece, when Dad was about 13, and had a fatal cerebral hemorrhage. I don't think he ever got over it. A story I heard helps to explain him a lot. He was getting ready for bed when his mother collapsed - he had one shoe off and one on - and he was sent for the doctor. But he didn't run fast enough, of course, and so you could say in a very simple fairy-tale way that he ran for the rest of his life trying to bring at least her ideals to life.

He bought books when he could and read them as he plowed. He has said of this period "I was as lonely as a one-legged duck, so I made up things in my head." He ordered a violin, Stradivarius Model, for \$2.45, and, incredibly, taught himself to play it by taking a correspondence course and practicing in the piney woods.

He dreamed of going to the University and he earned a bit of money by pitching ball, farming, and being the principal of a school. I've heard him say, "I borrowed \$5.00 to buy myself a yellow suit, and I've been in debt ever since." Finally, at the age of 22, he got to the University of North Carolina, where his writing was good enough for him, as a freshman, to teach freshman English. (He took his class through the entire semester's work in a few dazzling weeks because he based their capacity upon his own.) But World War I interrupted his college career, and in 1917 he volunteered and his company served with the British Engineers. He rose to the rank of Second Lieutenant, so impressing the Foreign Legion, it was later said, that they made him an offer! With his family, Dad would rarely discuss any war experience, but he has said to others that he carried into the war a childhood terror of big black holes, a fear he attributed to his dying grandfather who had screamed at the little boy of three when he knocked a Bible off the table. Shellshock in the young soldier also focused on the dreadful image of the all-encompassing big black hole, but with time and will power, he has said, he cured himself. He kept all his life one wartime habit, a craving for evaporated milk. When he and his men would come back from crawling around the battlefields on patrol, checking their barbed wire, their British sergeant would always have ready for them a huge can of hot tea with evaporated milk and sugar in it. And there was never anything so good. (Another food passion was corn flakes; he could - in fact did - go around the world breakfasting mostly on corn flakes and evaporated milk.)

In 1919 he went back to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he continued his interest in plays. He studied playwriting with Prof. Frederick Koch, who urged his students to use the material around them, and who formed the famous Playmakers group. Dad had written a play before the war which won a competition and got produced outdoors. It was an astounding experience for him. He had only read two plays in his life, and his own was the first play he had ever seen! Barrett Clark, the drama critic, wrote later that there had never been anything like this in the life of any other dramatist. So now Dad could glimpse one of the two things he needed in life - a vocation. And about this time he got a glimpse of the other thing - my mother and her red hair. They met while they were painting scenery, and after a while got married and had us, a very satisfactory relationship - four children in all.

Dad had a lifelong interest in philosophy. He did graduate work in that subject at Cornell University after college and then returned to the University of North Carolina, where he taught philosophy, creative writing, and English for 13 years. He visited Germany on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1928. Now he was all this same time writing plays. Many were one-acts, based on his experiences with blacks and whites in his native Harnett County. They were full of regional dialect, the folk beliefs and wild superstitious terror of the uneducated, and full of their

love of songs and dreams and rich phrases. These plays like "*The No 'Count Boy*," "*White Dresses*," and "*Hymn to the Rising Sun*" are marvelously skillful depictions of rural conflicts dealing with the powerful feelings like racial hatred, passion, fear of ostracism or ruin, and greed.

In 1927 Paul Green wrote *In Abraham's Bosom* about the struggle of a black man, and a white man too - both of whom have the same white father - to gain a good life in the South. But it is more than the story of how the black man is destroyed by racism. The play shows how man helps to defeat himself. That is, of course, a theme of our oldest tragedies, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. Paul Green won the Pulitzer Prize for this play in 1927. He never won it again, and as he lived on to a full and generous age, he rather resented being identified as a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer of 1927. That was just too far back, and he had by then many other awards. To jump ahead, let me list some:

He received nine honorary university degrees, was voted Distinguished Man of the Theatre by the American Theatre Association in 1978, and, once it got used to him, his native state could hardly do enough for its most famous artist and one of its most lovable, helpful, loyal citizens. In 1978 the new theatre at the University of North Carolina was named the Paul Green Theatre (and here was held his memorial service). The first play performed in the Paul Green Theatre was the still-controversial *Native Son*, a collaboration of Paul Green and Richard Wright.

Then came *Roll Sweet Chariot*, *The House of Connelly* (the first play performed by the new Group Theatre, *The Field God*, and *Johnny Johnson* (with Kurt Weill's music, Mr. Weill having lately departed Hitler's Germany). These are not just well-written, exciting dramas - they very characteristically also portray social issues and moral dilemmas of the human race. For example, *Johnny Johnson*, which has marvelous lyrics and haunting tunes, tells about a young soldier who is against war. It is that simple and it is that deadly. In a stroke of genius, Dad invented the scene that is now a cliché: the simple young hero is confronted by the sophisticated psychiatrist and makes an ass out of the shrink.

In 1940-41, Paul Green collaborated with Richard Wright on a dramatization of *Native Son*, Wright's famous novel about a black man in Chicago who mistakenly kills a white girl. Orson Welles directed it; Canada Lee played Bigger Thomas. The collaboration of a black and a white in 1940 was shocking, but even so, Dad invited Wright to Chapel Hill as an honored fellow-artist. However, one day during his stay, my dad was alarmed by a crowd of angry white Chapel Hill citizens who told him they resented Wright's presence with white girls at a racially mixed party. They threatened trouble. One was my dad's cousin, and he had a gun. Dad calmed them down as best he could, but he spent the night beside Wright's rooming house, in case the mob came for him. This is remarkable enough, but even more remarkable is that Dad never told Wright of this and similar hostile incidents but let him go on believing that Chapel Hill in 1941 was a haven of racial tolerance. Why did he not tell Wright? Because it would have hurt his feelings unnecessarily.

Paul Green went to Hollywood in the '30s, as did most brilliant young writers of his day. He wrote films for Clark Gable, Greer Garson, Bette Davis and Will Rogers (for whom he wrote the first, and still the best, version of *State Fair*). He wrote some fine movie biographies like *Voltaire*. And in *Cabin in the Cotton*, he wrote for its star Bette Davis her favorite line: "I'd like to kiss you, but I just washed my hair."

When he first came as an extremely handsome, vigorous young man to Hollywood, accompanied by my charming red-haired mother, he was a phenomenon - the natural man who knew Plato - the vigorous, lusty North Carolina farmer who taught college. Katherine Anne Porter, the short story writer, said of him at the time: "The honest, tender and gifted soul stood out like a stalk of good sugar cane in a thicket of poison ivy." So gradually my father's hopes for Hollywood, and his need for it diminished, though he did write occasional movie scripts thereafter, for example, *Black Like Me*, in 1963, from John Griffith's true story about a white man who dyes himself black in order to find out what racial prejudice is all about.

Broadway, Dad also felt, was closed somewhat for him partly because after World War II the current for regionalism had ebbed. So he looked around for new openings in drama, and, not finding them, created some. He had written *The Highland Call* in 1939 about the plight of Scottish Tory settlers in the Revolutionary War in North Carolina. He had also done *The Lost Colony*, an outdoor play on the North Carolina coast in 1937. (This play is still going strong.)

So there flowed from Dad's pen about 15 more outdoor dramas, produced all over the country. Usually, the impetus came from civic leaders who wanted a play; a board would be created and a contract drawn. Then Dad would set to work, first to research the history of that area and to find in it a good story - then to write it. He also chose most of the music and often composed some of it. In addition, he helped design the amphitheater, for he loved nothing else so well as "moving earth," as his friend Lambert Davis, former head of the UNC Press, has said. On a tractor my dad was a happy man. He often fought to save the great trees around the theatres from the bulldozers and actively supervised the landscaping.

If you look at all of Paul Green's outdoor dramas, or what he call symphonic dramas, with all of the elements blending into one artistic effect, you can see that he was, of course, trying to entertain. He knew he had to give value for money. He was a businessman as well as an artist. He knew people don't drive an hour, park the car, carry a heavy baby through a landscaped site, and sit on often hard seats in an outdoor amphitheater for two hours just so the kids can spill Kool-Aid all over their mosquito bites. No! People do this only to be entertained. But Dad knew how to entertain and teach at the same time. Dad felt his responsibility to show how the American dream can free us and energize us to become more fully human. Speaking of all his work, he said, "I try to write about men and women struggling not only to be themselves, but to be on the side of something that counts for others." He had remembered well his glorious and intrepid namesake.

Paul Green thought that art, like life, should end in brightness. To implement this belief he created regional theatre centers away from Broadway to educate audiences and create expertise among the people. He continued to write outdoor dramas until his death. In fact, had he lived a few days longer, he would have driven to Texas to discuss a new production of his symphonic drama *Texas*.

Many people do not know that the "Father of Outdoor Drama," one of his ponderous honorary titles, wrote a lot for indoors. For example, he produced several volumes of short stories: if you read one called "*Fine Wagon*," you will feel as if you have swallowed a stone, for days. His essays have a frank and engaging speaking quality. He wrote two fine novels: *The Laughing Pioneer* (1932) and *This Body the Earth* (1935). He wrote incisive criticism, and he conducted a voluminous correspondence, which has been edited by Laurence Avery, the same professor who produced Maxwell Anderson's letters in 1977. Green wrote a little book called *Forever Growing* that is one of the best things I have ever read on how to teach.

So he was writing, writing, writing all the time. He did it by hand or by dictation or on an ancient beloved typewriter. He always had a simple two-story cabin to work in, one that he built himself: no phone, book-lined shelves, full of paper, pencils, old drafts, boxes of notes - always mysterious places, rather dusty, silent, full of hope.

Yes, he was a writer all right. But there is something else about him. Many good writers are stinkers. But not this man. When I went back to North Carolina for his funeral I slept in the room in which he had died. On the bedside table was his wallet. And on the identity card inside he had listed his religion as "Humanist." This choice shows that he did not think of himself as just a writer. His assistant told me that twice when he had gone into the hospital, he had also said that his religion was "Humanist." And the registration clerk had replied on each occasion: "We don't have a code number for that. Can't you think of something else?"

Well, no, Dad couldn't. He was passionately involved in life. And this is what he meant by being a humanist, and I tell you because it is the only occupation for anyone today. He was educated: and he read the papers, watched television news faithfully, and fulfilled his obligation to be informed and to vote. He did not cop out with the easy anodynes of cynicism, drugs, booze or despair. Now, staying aware hurt him, just as it hurts you and me. Nevertheless, he went to battle many, many times for racial equality, prison reform, abolishment of capital punishment, for labor unions, for the United Nations, for equal and good education. Almost all of these causes were once very unpopular and many still are. If you doubt it, just paint your sign and sally forth: what will be thrown at you will probably not be roses.

But it took even more courage, for example in the '30s, to say to officials at the University of North Carolina: "You are mistaken, you are wrong. You have black laborers laying these brick walks, and you will not let them into the building to get a book. Why are they good enough to build it, but not good enough to use it?" So he held that harsh, ethical reflection right up in front of the officials, and they squirmed and reviled him just as they would you. Of course, many

other great leaders prepared a way for the civil rights movement, but my father was out there, almost all alone sometimes, for many years. He had the kind of courage that counts - social courage, the ability to face your own group, even your own kinsman, and say, "You are mistaken."

I remember also his trips to Death Row in the State Penitentiary at Raleigh when 14- or 15-year-old boys, mostly black, would be waiting for execution, sometimes for burglary. And my father would say to prison officials, to the Governor: "You are wrong, you are mistaken, you can't *do* this." So he would hire lawyers for these boys, often out of his own pocket, and year after year on weekends he would go over there.

Involvement with the world is certainly, then, one aspect of the humanist. There is another. As a humanist, Paul Green by his efforts and encouragement enriched the cultural scene. He didn't just sit around complaining of the dullness or ignorance of his town or state. But he did things and tried to make it better. For example, he helped to start the North Carolina Symphony Orchestra and the School of the Arts for talented high school kids, and, wherever he was, he endowed beautiful things.

Although he was extremely generous with his time and his money to other people, he did not ever adopt personal luxury, with one great exception, his "galloping Cadillac," which he drove all over the country, seeing to his many plays and projects. But he would never say how many notes he had signed for people so that they could start a small business or bail the wife out of jail, or send a child to a trade school or buy a car. Many people defaulted on the loans, but we'll never know how many because he didn't care. His attitude was, "Well, they needed it."

As a humanist also he spoke against American militarism, the arms race and violence of any kind. He saw arrogant national pride often as a sickness or a kind of madness. And to violence on TV he reacted immediately, personally, and from TV's beginning. He said at once - and he has been proven right - that television violence would inculcate even more violence in the people who habitually watched it.

No, he thought, militarism is not the answer, nor violence. Nor does organized Christianity of the less enlightened sort offer us much hope. He felt that too much stress on the hereafter prevented us from doing our job while we are here. Life is not a vale of tears nor a waiting room. He said, "Let's write a great story" while we are here. Once he told me that if he were ever charged with a felony, he would much rather take his chances with an educated judge than be tried by twelve good men and true. Twelve average, probably white, Christians (he felt) could not deliver a reasoned and sound judgement. Too much appalling horror had been committed in the name of Christianity, and he did not see that Christians were doing all that much to redress the balance, although he freely admitted some of the good actions and charitable ways and he loved the ethical teachings of Jesus and the beauty of the liturgy and the glory of the music.

If some religion can't help us much either, what then? Well, he would say education can help almost more than anything else, and will power, and character. I think his character was his most supreme achievement, greater even than his art. He was tender, true, courageous, manly, generous, and usually right. And there wasn't a mean bone in him, more than the normal mean bone required to be human. He was an artist and so he was at times impulsive, moody, difficult, or silent (or all these at once).

But, still, he loved life. He was a wonderful, attentive father. He taught us all the time - names of trees, bits of songs, pieces of history. Just a little at a time, so it would take. For example, once we were at a performance of *Hamlet*, and when poor lovesick Ophelia finally sees Hamlet again, she says, "How dost my lord after this many a day?" At this point he leaned over to me and said, "Honey, that's a passage of time line." And I remember going out to the orchard one twilight to give him a message. He was heaving brush in great piles, and he said in a casual, how's-the-weather kind of a voice: "They built great piles like this in Homer's time on all the headlands of the sea to bring the news to Greece - fire by fire - that Troy had fallen." I stood in the cool grass, my imagination set ablaze by his simple words. He went on piling brush.

I can still see his face when we were little kids ringed around the dining room table which he loved to furnish with lots of food. Sometimes he would look up from his silent thoughts and say, "Let's go uptown and have some fun." He loved to have fun then and was very exciting to be with, in fact, sometimes almost strenuous. The electric energy just pulsed through him, his hands twitched, and his eyes constantly searched the room for some blessed object which he never found. He was a good-sized man, almost six feet, and very broad in the shoulders: his head was big and his gestures packed with emotion. His voice was Southern, clear, and a little high. He dominated any gathering he was in. A long ride with him, though a delightful and rare opportunity to talk, left you dazed, a little like a ride with an unexploded bomb. He loved to listen to young people, to advise them, to help.

In his own long, incredibly active life, Paul Green saw Americans becoming richer, more decadent, more self-indulgent, more violent, destroying more land, water, air and people. He never stopped talking against those infamies, and writing those letters to politicians that most of us can't be bothered to write, making phone calls, lobbying in legislatures, going to dull meetings, giving money to causes, following the news carefully, reading and thinking. Why? Because, I think, he was scared. And if we have any sense we are scared too. In 1978 he said, "I represent a concerned world. We have now the ability, the probability of protecting and doing great things for the world but the opposite may occur." That is chilling, but the only possible sane view. "The opposite *may* occur."

As the years went by he felt more and more urgency to work more and more. Almost all of his recreations he set aside, one by one. He worked longer hours out in his little cabin. Instead of coming to the house for lunch he began to take a banana and a Pepsi with him when he went out to the cabin in the mornings, walking a bit more slowly now when he thought no one was looking.

And he worked harder and still harder, and he got tireder and tireder. One Sunday in the springtime, he drove his beloved tractor to its shed. And the next day his surging heart finally refused the burden of his incomparable energy.

And so, on the fourth of May 1981, he lay down in the guest bedroom, turned his face to the wall and slept his way over into death.

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