Thornton Wilder: Two Laments

by James Como (February 2016)

These days the American reading and theatre-going public pays little attention to Thornton Wilder, and that sporadically at best, as when David Cromer's marvelous production of *Our Town* broke Off Broadway in 2012. This neglect is unfortunate for three reasons. First, Wilder may be our greatest Person of Letters (for example, he is the only writer to win Pulitzer's for both his plays and his fiction, *and* his criticism and scholarship are often dispositive). Second, the satisfactions of those plays (even when read, or, in the case of *The Alcestiad,* especially when read) and fictions (well beyond *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*) are of a very high order, intellectually, imaginatively, and as literary art. Third, the neglect is often owing to a misconception: Wilder is *not* saccharine, wildly optimistic, or otherwise treacly. In fact, the exact opposite is true.

That last claim is the basis of the first lament, Wilder's own, very evident in a production of two of his one-act plays now about to close Off Broadway at the Theatre at St. Clements's, located at 423 West Forty-Sixth Street in Manhattan. The production, called *A Wilder Christmas* and consisting of *The Long Christmas Dinner* and *Pullman Car Hiawatha* (both written in the early thirties when Wilder was in his own early thirties), is by The Peccadillo Theater Company: adroitly staged, capably performed, astutely lit and scored, but paced a bit too quickly. The first – think of it as the Dinner Table of Life – takes place over ninety years, with a family and their friends arriving and leaving at the same table over that period. The second – think of it as The Train of Life – shows us a sort of life, as well as death and a sliver of the afterlife, during a night trip from New York to Chicago.

Both are woven around themes apparent in almost all of Wilder's work: time flies, only when we are done with it do we gain any useful perspective on life, and with that perspective comes the bittersweet epiphany that we lived it much less richly and appreciatively than we might have. We squandered a gift. Here is Wilder's lament: *if only* we were fully awake to the quiddity of living and the life that comes with it. Thus, in *The Long Christmas Dinner* we see platitudinous people perfunctorily noticing (and posturing over) what should be deeply-moving

experiences, like the birth of a child. Only two events seem to move them genuinely: the choice of some to be absent from the dinner table at Christmas and, selectively, death. In *Pullman Car Hiawatha* we see . . . grumpiness, and death. Here the themes are leavened by a touch of allegory (the hours speaking) and by the breaking of the fourth wall (by a stage manager who manages audience members – and very cleverly at that – some of whom, he says, "want to be in this play"). In short, we have Wilder at his existential gloomiest: repetition, inauthenticity, despair, and (as with the psychotic in the second play) dread: all touchstones of Existentialism, from Kierkegaard to Sartre, who would be nauseated by the failure of these characters to "stand out." Change without movement.

In 2013 my wife and I were visiting our Peruvian family in Lima. There we saw that a small but well-appointed theater company was mounting *Our Town*, in celebration of its seventy-fifth anniversary. Played in Spanish, it would prove to be the second-best production (after Cromer's) that I had ever seen. For example, the intensity of life was heightened by an Act Two choral-and-dance number complexly, exuberantly, and expertly played by the entire company, a striking contrast to Act Three: the dead sitting around, Emily longing to return to life for one day and getting her wish, she then mourning the living because "they don't understand." One of the dead, Simon Stimson, puts it most strongly:

> Yes, now you know. Now you know! That's what it was to be alive. 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 as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another. Now you know – that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness.

And there we have it, with no suggestion of what comes next, in spite of a few of the dead wanly noting the appearance of a star (all of ten seconds). I could argue that Wilder's fictions follow the same pattern, though in the novels the pattern is rendered more richly, the characters more thickly and attractively – especially in *The Eighth Day*, our Great American Novel. Even there, however, the omniscient narrator (who twice, unfathomably, speaks in the first person) – laments.

And yet . . .

In *Pullman Car* an angel appears. (A very affecting touch is wrought by the conductor and the angel – also, in his own way, a conductor – being played by the same black actor). He will conduct the soul of the dead woman to Heaven, or at least up a flight of stairs by which the angel had descended after emerging from light. But before going she protests: she'd done wrong and must pay. The angel whispers in her ear. But, she protests further, I don't want *someone else* to pay for me! Again, the angel whispers. This time she is convinced and makes the ascent. We do not know what the angel said. There is no Oil of Gladness – no Psalm 45:7 ("Your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness") or Is 61:3 ("the oil of gladness instead of mourning"). In Wilder there rarely is, notwithstanding that sliver of Hope.

And right there is the second lament, this one my own. This Hope is, after all, merely a sliver. Perhaps prudence kept Wilder from taking the leap he himself called "impossible" in his Foreword to *The Angel that Troubled the Waters*, an early collection of one-act plays. At the end of that we read: "The revival of religion is almost a matter of rhetoric. The work is difficult, perhaps impossible . . . but it at least reminds us that Our Lord asked us in His work to be not only as gentle as doves, but as *wise as serpents*." [my emph.] In *The Alcestiad* he certainly tried, and on the page no less a figure than Apollo himself pulls it off – except on stage.

The play would be Wilder's only theatrical failure.[1] The difficulty, as I see it, is simple. Wilder manages to render the promise of cosmic meaning, as when at the end of *The Eighth Day* we see the backside of a woven rug, our side of time. The knots, which seem so randomly scattered, in fact have specific purposes in holding together the design, a design on the other side of time in which we will someday, presumably, have a place. That's the promise, that far and no farther: no glory (for that we need C. S. Lewis) or even wonder (Mark Helprin). Regard: in *Our Town* Emily admits that returning to one day of her life on earth was a mistake, even though what comes next is nothing less than purgatorial.

And yet . . .

After *A Wilder Christmas*, those of us who saw it together talked it over. My theater-trained daughter, once a professional actress who has played in Wilder and whose favorite novel is *The Eighth Day*, accepted my preliminary thinking but

averred that I didn't see far enough into our favorite author. Me: "What am I missing?" She: "Love, poppa." Me: "How?" She explained that Wilder's characters are his witnesses, some testifying to how they got it wrong, a few showing us how to get it right. Apparently Wilder so loves humanity, and so regrets that we too seldom realize that *we are loved*, that he is not only sad but the cause of sadness in the rest of us. In other words, if only we loved enough, we would have the hope we're missing: Wilder as a cautionary prophet, a sort of low key Jeremiah.

But, yes, he is much more than that. John Barrington Ashley, Wilder's protagonist in *The Eighth Day*, is Kierkegaard's quintessential Knight of Faith, utterly individuated and unpretentious, at once alone in the world and accepting of a plan greater than he, one of those knots holding in place a strand of the great design. Walker Percy, the great novelist and Existential philosopher, very well adumbrates Wilder's achievement here:

> Existentialism [writes Percy] has taught us that what man is cannot be grasped by the science of man. The case is rather that man's science is one of the things that man does, a mode of existence. Another mode is speech [rhetoric]. Man is not merely a higher organism responding to and controlling his environment. He is . . . that being in the world whose calling it is to find a name for Being, to give testimony to it, and to provide for it a clearing.

Still, I ask, and in spite of the failure of *The Alcestiad* (in Wilder's own opinion owing largely to its explicitness), would a dollop of narrative Heaven hurt *that* much? Maybe something suggesting Rom 15:13: "May the God of hope bring you such Joy and peace in your faith that the power of the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope." I'll leave it at that. Wilder tells us that we should snap out of it and "stand out" into love – love of living, of each other, and of the Providence who made and presides over both.

But – what do you know? At the very end, there it is, well, almost, in the master's final work, *Theophilus North*, oblique to be sure, but with more than a dollop of Hope, and right there in Percy's clearing. So if you are among the company I referred to in my opening, you might check your unexamined assumptions at the door and go on in, perhaps beginning, no, *not* at that very end but near Wilder's own beginning, with *The Woman of Andros*, a novel short, suggestive and

beguiling, exactly like its protagonist. One caveat, though: you will read the first paragraph over and again: that's how beautiful, how evocative, it is: Love is on the way. In Wilder it usually is, right Helen?

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[1] I've explored this misadventure, along with other aspects of Wilder's career, in "Thornton Wilder & the Gods," *The New Criterion*, 29:9 (May 2011), pp. 78-80.

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