

The Idle Contrarian: Our Town



by James Como

You hear 'Thornton Wilder' and think . . . ? *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, perhaps, and *Our Town*, and possibly *The Skin of Our Teeth*? But even if you've read only those a certain flavor takes hold. He is accomplished, of course – Pulitzers, Tonys and a National Book Award can't all be wrong. (In 1949 it took Faulkner to beat him for the Nobel Prize.) His penultimate novel, *The Eighth Day*, just may be the Great American Novel.

But such judgments are second to that flavor, with its strands of sweetness, lament, gratitude, innocence, virtue, and a certain grand perspective: something portentous this way watches, and it is Good. So: optimism, long-term, even hope, as we see everywhere in the body of work: in the early *Woman of Andros*, and at the end of *The Eighth Day*, and in a

collection of short plays, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, and compellingly in the final novel, *Theophilus North*.

As one who has read everything in print by Wilder, and much about him, and who has written and lectured on his work, I've been nourished over and over again by that flavor. Moreover, for the preponderance of Wilder readers, mine is the prevailing view regarding the man^[1] and his fifty years of work which, while varied, is always transcendently sane.

So, wherefore the 'contrarian'? To answer, I ask: which of Wilder's works is generally regarded as his most affecting, engaging, and disarming, for its take on the value of the quotidian, its argument for enduring gratitude, and for its depiction of love and its tender mercies, all of which account for its frequent staging?^[2] Why, *Our Town*, of course – until Act Three, which pulls the rug out from under the first two.

The *despair* (nothing less) is foreshadowed at the end of Act Two. George and Emily marry, with Emily saying, "all I want is someone to love me . . . And I mean for ever. Do you hear. For ever and ever." George has already assented, passionately. Soon, though, the Stage Manager, that consciousness from above (there, too, in *The Eighth Day*, where the narrator makes one first person reference), breaks in.

"I've married over two hundred couples in my day. Do I believe in it? I don't know. "M. . . . marries N. . . . millions of them." He proceeds to the predictable birth-to-death routines. Then, "Once in a thousand times it's interesting." Both before and after the speech, Wilder uses a Mrs. Soames as a gushing, cliché-riddled foil. How does this cynicism go unnoticed? There immediately follows Act Three, placed in a cemetery. There Emily arrives, befuddled. She recognizes some old neighbors, who warn her not to lament her lost life, which she misses desperately. She would return, if she could, and learns that she may, for one day of her choosing: her twelfth birthday. All the dead tell her not to

go, that she will regret her decision. And here's the catch: she, as a spirit, will observe, but not interfere nor even be seen.

In Cromer's production one hears and smells the bacon sizzling, being cooked there on stage; very concrete: the senses matter. The family prepares. Mother and the twelve-year-old Emily interact, to the dead Emily's mounting frustration. "Oh, Mama, just look at me. . . . *Let's look at one another.*" And finally, "I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. . . . do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?" The Stage Manager clarifies, "The saints and poets, maybe – they do some." Emily answers, "I will go back."

And she will admit her mistake. She learns that the life she lived will fade from memory and into irrelevance. When the widower George enters and falls at the base of Emily's tombstone, sobbing irreconcilably, we now know of its irrelevancy. There is talk of the stars; all realize that they merely must wait, though they know not for what. Mrs. Soames, one who bitterly warned Emily not to return, has said, "that's the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and blindness." No one disagrees, least of all Emily.

The Stage Manager closes the show, watching the quotidian doings of Grover's Corner, the people "straining away . . . so bad that every sixteen hours everybody lies down and gets a rest. . . . You get a good night's sleep, too" he tell us. "Good night." And I ask, were there a different first two acts that this act three actually concludes? Because it does not belong here.

For one thing, Mama and Papa *did* see Emily when she lived, as did George, too, and loved her. For a second thing, does dead Emily *expect* them to see her? And for a third, how were the

living ignorant and blind? Because they never stopped “to smell the roses?” Sure, Time and Eternity offer two radically different perspectives, but those of us in Time have only *that* perspective, and to tell us any memory of it, from Eternity, is irrelevant because it will fade – worse, far worse, that if we re-visit Time we will know its shallowness and blindness and thus its irrelevance – is simply too facile. Nice to know a soul survives death, dreadful to know how benumbed *they* are, with nothing to do but wait.

For this devoted fan: entirely too Beckettesque. So I am angry with Mr. Wilder, and when we finally meet I will tell him so, and why. Of course, by then he will surely know better...

[\[1\]](#) who, by the way, entered military service in his forties, underwent basic training, became something of a seer as an intelligence officer, and came out a Lieutenant Colonel with awards from three different countries.

[\[2\]](#) David Cromer’s vivid production, which I saw Off-Broadway, helped win for Cromer the MacArthur Prize. Of the many productions I’ve seen, the best (including a choral performance) was mounted in Lima, Peru, in Spanish, to celebrate its seventy-fifth anniversary.