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# Revealing the Invisible with the Invisible: Thornton Wilder's Reductive Staging in *Our Town*

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## I. Introduction

In the opening moments of *Our Town* (1938), the Stage Manager looks off beyond the audience, staring at an imaginary Venus and comments, "The morning star always gets wonderful bright the minute before it has to go—doesn't it?" (21). He then breaks away and commences with a tour of the small town of Grover's Corners, pointing toward the various churches and other locales, gesturing where individual shops and buildings lie along Main Street, and indicating the variety of plants in the Webb and Gibbs families' gardens, not to mention the towering "butternut tree" (23) he peruses stage center. Of course, he is gazing and gesturing—famously—to nothing but thin air on a virtually bare stage.

At one point in this playfully enacted opening, two arched trellises are pushed in to indicate the garden of each household. These, along with two tables, a few chairs, and later on two stepladders to indicate the second floor, are all that is used to indicate the Gibbs' and Webbs' homes.

Immediately, the play gets underway, with housewives stoking imaginary stoves and preparing imaginary breakfasts, a doctor carrying an invisible black bag, the paper boy delivering imaginary newspapers, and the milkman delivering invisible milk bottles which he unloads from an invisible horse and wagon. Throughout the rest of the play virtually all hand props, including chicken feed, string beans, lawn mower, baseball, ice cream sodas, church organ, coffee and doughnuts, etc., continue to be pantomimed in this way.

In a 1938 *New York Times* article, Wilder explained his intent:

Most works in realism tell a succession of [. . .] abject truths; they are deeply in earnest, every detail is true and yet the whole finally tumbles to the ground—true but without significance. [. . .] So I tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery. The spectator through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his own head. ("A Preface")

Theater director Tyrone Guthrie accurately noted, "Wilder uses the stage not to imitate nature, but to evoke, with the utmost economy of means, a series of images. He claims that a lot of clutter in the form of scenery and properties and 'effects' is a positive hindrance to the process of evocation" (47). This aesthetic approach was by no means unique to Wilder. Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold similarly held that "The Naturalistic Theater denies that the spectator has the ability to finish a painting in his imagination" (165) and quoted Schopenhauer in support:

A work of art can function only through the imagination. Therefore a work of art must constantly arouse the imagination, not just arouse, but activate. [. . .] It therefore follows that an artistic work

must *not* supply everything to our senses but only enough to direct our imagination onto the right path, leaving the last word to our imagination. (qtd. in Meyerhold 165-166)

In this same vein, Wilder was keen to break away from the limitations of the theater of verisimilitude and through a radically reduced and simplified staging offer “only enough” to “activate” the imagination of an audience. Wilder’s approach also recalls the sort of theater experience director Peter Brook advocated in *The Empty Space*:

I am calling it the Holy Theatre for short, but it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts. We are all aware that most of life escapes our senses. [. . .] Many audiences all over the world will answer positively from their own experience that they have seen the face of the invisible through an experience on the stage that transcended their experience in life. (42)

Wilder, however, does not strip the stage entirely bare of objects in *Our Town*; he allows a certain number of carefully chosen properties to remain on stage in order to ply his craft. Although most major critiques of the play do pay attention to Wilder’s use of the stage devices of “bare stage” and “pantomime,” no thorough examination has yet been made as to precisely what degree Wilder pursues these stage conventions and what their ultimate effect might be. For example, the radical treatment of scenic decor and stage objects greatly facilitates the Stage Manager in his erratic treatment of the overall narrative. Moreover, it proves to be Wilder’s best means of engaging the imagination of the audience, in particular in the final clinching scene where Emily relives her twelfth birthday. This paper argues that the particular mix of imaginary objects and actual stage properties dictated by Thornton Wilder in *Our Town* is by no means arbitrary and that the delicate balance struck between the two is calculated to be the most effective way possible to convey the major theme of the play: appreciating the significance of life in the face of an overwhelming universe.

## II. The Opposition between the Universal and the Particular

Before examining the specific ways in which Wilder stages *Our Town*, it is important to grasp Wilder’s broader aim, which, as he makes clear in the Preface to the play, is to express the universality of shared human experience paradoxically through the depiction of the unique experiences of ordinary individuals:

Every person who has ever lived has lived an unbroken succession of unique occasions. Yet the more one is aware of this individuality in experience (innumerable! innumerable!) the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to repetitive patterns. As an artist (or listener or beholder) which “truth” do you prefer—that of the isolated occasion, or that which includes and [p]resumes the innumerable? [. . .] The theater is admirably fitted to tell both truths. It has one foot planted firmly in the particular, since each actor before us (even when he wears a mask!) is indubitably a living, breathing “one”; yet it tends and strains to exhibit a general truth. [. . .] It is through the theater’s power to raise the exhibited individual action into the realm of idea and type and universal that it is able to evoke our belief. (x)

In *Our Town* in particular, Wilder sets these two principals of the universal and the particular against

each other in a variety of ways.

First, he deliberately places the events of the play within an expanded cosmological landscape by subtly calling attention to tremendously large dimensions of time, space, history, geography, and population. As Lincoln Konkle expresses it, "Wilder was trying [. . .] to create a theatrical effect: [. . .] to set the microcosm of present life against the backdrop of an eternal macrocosm" (66). The aim of this, of course, is to put the inhabitants of Grover's Corners and the events filling their everyday lives at great odds against a universe that threatens to render their existence utterly insignificant. In the Preface to the play he explains:

*Our Town* [. . .] is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life. [. . .] I have made the claim as preposterous as possible, for I have set the village against the largest dimensions of time and place. The recurrent words in this play (few have noticed it) are "hundreds," "thousands," and "millions." Emily's joys and griefs, her algebra lessons and her birthday presents—what are they when we consider all the billions of girls who have lived, who are living, and who can live? (xii)

Wilder wagers the utter preciousness of Emily's life, and indeed every life, even against a backdrop of the most overwhelming dimensions. One of the most representative examples would have to be the letter that Rebecca describes at the close of Act I: "And on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; [. . .] the United States of America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that's what it said on the envelope" (48-49). George's reaction of "What do you know!" (49) echoes the sense of awe that the audience shares.

Our lives are again made to feel infinitesimally small and inconsequential in Act II when the Stage Manager, just before he ministers the wedding, reminds us: "And don't forget all the other witnesses at this wedding—the ancestors. Millions of them. Most of them set out to live two-by-two, also. Millions of them" (68). The Stage Manager succeeds in telescoping time even with humorous, seemingly inconsequential lines: "You know how it is: you're twenty-one or twenty-two and you make some decisions; then whisssh! you're seventy: you've been a lawyer for fifty years, and that white-haired lady at your side has eaten over fifty thousand meals with you" (60).

In Act III, a Man Among Dead makes us feel minuscule and nugatory by reminiscing, "And my boy, Joel, who knew the stars—he used to say it took millions of years for that speck o' light to git to the earth. Don't seem like a body could believe it, but that's what he used to say—millions of years" (90).

Wilder recognized that he was taking great risk by reducing human beings to a mere speck in the universe. "Now, how would we present any individual [. . .] existing and somehow related to totality? How do we do it in such a way that we would be freed a little from the terror of shrinking to nullity?" (AC 176). But he was putting to the test his own conviction (paraphrased by Donald Haberman) that, "Knowing that millions have already lived and died and that probably millions more will live and die paradoxically both reduces the importance of the individual life and makes more urgent the need to provide some validity for the reality of the unique experience" (18). Rex Burbank aptly describes this paradoxical view of life in *Thornton Wilder*:

By relating the ordinary events in the lives of these ordinary people to a metaphysical framework

that broadens with each act, he is able to portray life as being at once significant and trivial, noble and absurd, miraculous and humdrum. (90)

By sustaining this tension between life's preciousness and life's insignificance throughout the play, Wilder creates a subliminal conflict in what might otherwise seem an uneventful, dull drama.

Second, Wilder conveys universality by depicting generic character types performing generic activities such as cooking, eating, mowing grass, drinking strawberry sodas, doing homework, etc. As Francis Fergusson points out, the characters that populate Grover's Corners "are clichés of small-town life rather than individuals" (65). They are drawn from stereotypes: gossiping housewives, the cheerful milkman and neighborly policeman, the loquacious professor, the precocious little sister, the bumbling older brother—or "that gangling thing" (54)—, the town drunk, and so on. These simple small-town folk are deliberately divest of unique biographical detail. For example, the circumstances behind Simon Stimson turning to drink are glossed over with the inexplicit statement, "Well, he's seen a peck of trouble, one thing after another" (48). We know that Mr. Webb is editor of the local newspaper but never hear any particulars of his work apart from this brief exchange:

MR. WEBB. Paper have any mistakes in it?

MRS. WEBB. None that I noticed. (86)

Yet it goes too far to label these dramatis personae as mere "sentimental stereotypes of village folksiness" (65) as Francis Fergusson does. Their generality is precisely what enables us to identify with them, and indeed regard Grover's Corners as truly "our town." The characters, on the other hand, do speak a very specific local dialect of New Hampshire. This, however, ties them to the specified geographical location given at the start of the play, providing a crucial touchstone of specificity for the audience to invest belief in—another example of how Wilder sets the particular against the universal in a delicately poised balance.

In the overall structure of the play, as well as in details large and small, Wilder utilizes the potential of the stage to reveal a "general truth" through the presentation of particulars, and through the depiction of simple events from everyday life, to understand and appreciate the preciousness of our very existence. Through *Our Town*, he enables one, in the words of William Blake, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour" (493).

### III. The Stage Manager—Manipulator of Time and Space

Another—and perhaps the most effective—device that furthers the sense of universality is the introduction of an intervening narrator, or Stage Manager, who comments on the play and seems to have an almost omnipotent hand in guiding the course of events—controlling the actors as they move and act, while nudging the play delicately in the desired direction. Through glibly and omnisciently describing both the past and future of the characters, even at times describing their death before we know anything about their life—adding mildly ironic comments such as, "In our town we like to know the facts about everybody" (24)—he inhibits the usual emotional identification an audience would otherwise invest in individual characters. Moreover, he contributes to evoking the vast cosmological dimensions by, for example, mentioning the two million inhabitants of ancient Babylon and the human beings living "a

thousand years from now" (41) in nearly the same breath.

In addition, the Stage Manager manipulates the unfolding of events without warning: jumping ahead three years to the morning of George and Emily's wedding, but then making a brief flashback to the day Emily and George "first knew that [. . .] they were meant for one another" (60). Similarly, he moves the action in Act III—this time at Emily's behest—from the occasion of her death in childbirth to her twelfth birthday "fourteen years earlier" (84) and back again. In an interview in 1939, Wilder confirmed his unorthodox approach to narrative time:

Mr. [James] Joyce only reaffirms my feeling that the twentieth century has a new concept of narration. My experience with *Our Town* convinces me that the notion of time as immutable and consecutive action is not the only one. In *Our Town* time was scrambled, liberated. (CTW 33)

As a result of these sudden and radical shifts in time, the spectator is left to abstract the "chronological time," i.e., the actual temporal ordering of events, from the "plot time," which Keir Elam in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* describes as the "organization in practice of the narration itself, (including omissions, changes in sequence, flashbacks and all the incidental comments, descriptions, etc., that do not contribute directly to the chain of events)" (118). In other words, the audience is forced to imaginatively reconstruct the "fabula" (119) of the play out of what transpires on stage in non-sequential order together with the numerous incidents that are merely reported. Susan Abbotson likens this process to the piecing together of a jigsaw puzzle: "Being disinterested in conflict [. . .] Wilder prefers instead to present an episodic structure that, once all the pieces come together, will depict the life of a town (29).

The Stage Manager also elaborates on the set themes of each act, each of them reflecting a universal experience of all human beings: daily life (Act I), love and marriage (Act II), and death (Act III). When he first introduces these themes at the start of the play, he does so in a manner that ties the universal and the particular together and at the same time casts them in a cosmological context:

So—people a thousand years from now—this is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century.—This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying. (41)

At the start of Act II the Stage Manager ponders the universal significance of marriage as follows:

Y'see, some churches say that marriage is a sacrament. I don't quite know what that means, but I can guess. Like Mrs. Gibbs said a few minutes ago: People were made to live two-by-two. (68)

Transcending religious grounds for the institution of marriage, he suggests a more home-grown justification for its universal necessity and legitimacy. And in Act III, while similarly skirting issues of religious doctrine, the Stage Manager describes the universal human urge to believe in an afterlife:

Everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. [. . .] There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being. (76)

In this way the Stage Manager offers a timeless and global perspective on these human experiences, transcending cultural boundaries, religious creed, and historical age.

Last, by addressing the audience directly, interacting with the dramatis personae, and by going in and out of the roles of drugstore owner and church minister himself, the Stage Manager succeeds in breaking down the "fourth wall" of the stage and drawing the audience into the moment of here-and-

now. Prof. Willard, Editor Webb, and the emotional Mrs. Soames also make direct contact with the audience or with actors planted within the audience. Mrs. Webb also addresses the audience directly when she reveals her misgivings on the institution of marriage at the start of the wedding (68-69). This manner of staging not only emphasizes the metatheatrical nature of the performance but reinforces the sense that, in Wilder's own words, "each actor before us (even when he wears a mask!) is indubitably a living, breathing 'one'" (10). By breaking the confines of performance time and space, the audience is reminded that they share the present moment with the actors—driving home a very strong sense of the particular. The Stage Manager, thus, plays an indispensable role in disrupting the audience's normal expectations of stage narrative and the flow of events so that a much larger picture may emerge.

#### IV. Pantomiming and Mimed Properties

How does Wilder's extensive use of pantomime on a stage virtually devoid of scenery contribute to creating this paradoxical sense of universality within in an individual experience? Again in the Preface to *Our Town*, Wilder justifies his radical manner of staging the play and insists that by removing all stage and hand properties he can succeed in making the invisible inner experience of the individual apprehensible:

Each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner. And here the method of staging finds its justification—in the first two acts there are at least a few chairs and tables; but when Emily revisits the earth and the kitchen to which she descended on her twelfth birthday, the very chairs and table are gone. Our claim, our hope, our despair are in the mind—not in things, not in "scenery." Molière said that for the theatre all he needed was a platform and a passion or two. The climax of this play needs only five square feet of boarding and the passion to know what life means to us. (xi)

This rather poetically put proclamation—that an actor can communicate a deep inner reality only with the removal of material stage encumbrances—is put to the test more fully in *Our Town* than in any other play of Wilder's.

Wilder recognizes that his approach is neither revolutionary nor new, but an intrinsic part of many forms of theater:

In Chinese drama a character, by straddling a stick, conveys to us that he is on horseback. In almost every Noh play of the Japanese, an actor makes a tour of the stage and we know that he is making a long journey. Think of the ubiquity that Shakespeare's stage afforded the battle scenes at the close of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. (xi)

The closest thing to this age-old convention of using simple props, pantomime, and bare stage to evoke the imagination of the audience would have to be the scene of Mr. Morgan's drugstore in Act II, where a soda fountain counter is created with a simple wooden plank placed on the backs of two chairs borrowed from the Gibbs' dining room. Ordinary chairs will likewise become the sites of individual graves later on in Act III. Another such "riding stick" in *Our Town* would be the stepladders that appear near the end of Act I, which serve to create an "upstairs" level that is physically higher than the other playing area while conveniently providing George and Emily with "desks" at which to study.

In conjunction with these stage devices, Wilder of course relies heavily on pantomime, especially the pantomiming of everyday activities. Unlike French pantomime, which aims to convince the audience through stylized gesturing, Wilder requires a pantomime that is more simple and naturalistic: not a codified technique of visual indications but an action or gesture that, when committed to fully, creates a sense of belief for the actor and in turn for the observing audience. This technique likely drew on the development of acting methods in the 1930s and '40s, especially as exemplified by Constantin Stanislavski. Simple physical action was a key component of acting for Stanislavski, who insisted in *Creating a Role*, "the main thing is to believe to the end in a few objectives and acts no matter how small" (151). He held that the truthful performance of even the smallest everyday activities was critical, for "by beginning with the simplest objectives and actions, you move on to create the physical life of a part, and from that you again move forward and create the spiritual life of a part" (248). In *An Actor Prepares*, he berates his actors for the lack of a "sense of truth" in their acting:

Your make-believe truth helps you to represent images and passions. My kind of truth helps to create the images themselves and to stir real passions. The difference between your art and mine is the same as between the two words seem and be. I must have real truth. You are satisfied with its appearance. I must have true belief. (170)

Stanislavski places these stringent demands on his actors ultimately for the sake of the audience. He continues:

From your standpoint the spectator is merely an onlooker. For me he involuntarily becomes a witness of, and a party to, my creative work; he is drawn into the very thick of the life he sees on the stage, and he believes in it. (170)

Likewise, by challenging actors to believe in their own miming of even the simplest everyday actions, Thornton Wilder enabled them to enter into a state of creative inspiration that would envelop and involve the audience as well.

Wilder also seems to have had Stanislavski's notion of "sense memory" in mind with the depiction of many scenes. On several occasions he requires actors to see imaginary celestial objects such as moon and stars.

MR. WEBB. Quite a moon!

CONSTABLE WARREN. Yepp. (47)

Emily invites her father to enjoy the smell of the heliotropes.

MR. WEBB. Why aren't you in bed?

EMILY. I don't know. I just can't sleep yet, Papa. The moonlight's so wonderful. And the smell of Mrs. Gibbs' heliotrope. Can you smell it?

MR. WEBB. Hm . . . Yes. (48)

Wilder evokes the sense of taste when Father Webb drinks a cup of coffee with his doughnut on the morning of Emily's wedding or when George and Emily sip sodas together during their "important" talk.

The many sounds in the play serve to expand the locale beyond the immediate scope of the play and the dimensions of the theater. A factory whistle in Act I signals the children that it's time to head off to school. The coming of night is evoked by the sound of crickets and a faraway train that Emily and George strain to hear. Church bells ring at the start and finish of the wedding ceremony. Wilder's stag-



ing even calls for sounds to be heard independent of the (imaginary) objects they belong to: notably the clinking of Howie Newsome's milk bottles, the cackling of the chickens Mrs. Gibbs feeds, and the organ music emanating from Simon Stimson's mimed church organ. Even the voice of the imaginary old lady George runs into is produced separately, but before our eyes, by the Stage Manager. In these and other instances, Wilder involves the audience directly in the sights, smells, and sounds of the play purely through the acting skills of the actors and demands the active exercise of the imaginations and "sense memory" on the part of both parties.

In the stage directions of *Our Town*, Wilder is fairly precise in specifying which props are to be real and which are not. In the opening scene, Mrs. Gibbs evokes an entire house when she "pulls up an imaginary window shade in her kitchen and starts to make a fire in her stove" (24). Wilder stipulates that Doctor Gibbs "sets down his—imaginary—black bag, takes off his hat, and rubs his face with fatigue, using an enormous handkerchief" (24). While this has been going on, "MRS. WEBB [. . .] has entered her kitchen, left, tying on an apron. She goes through the motions of putting wood into a stove, lighting it, and preparing breakfast. Suddenly, JOE CROWELL, JR., eleven, starts down Main Street from the right, hurling imaginary newspapers into doorways" (24). By these directions, one may presume that the hat, hanky, and apron are real, but that other hand props such as black bag, wood and matches, and newspapers are to be mimed. Moreover, if one can conclude that in Act I Wilder intended the cooking utensils and food preparation to be mimed, then the same principle would apply to the scene in Act II where Mrs. Gibbs makes French toast for her husband. The stage instructions indicate merely that she "puts a plate before him" (54), upon which "Dr. Gibbs pours on the syrup" (54). Following this, Mrs. Gibbs sits "at the table, drinking her coffee" (55). One can presume here, though, that Wilder intended the plate, syrup, and coffee cup all to be pantomimed. And since Wilder is quite explicit in stipulating that Emily comes home from school "carrying an armful of—imaginary—schoolbooks" (61), one can presume that for consistency, the children's "strapped schoolbooks" (28) in an earlier scene are handled in the same manner (even though no indication is given). In several instances of more large-scale miming, Wilder dictates that George leaps over imaginary rain puddles, repeatedly tosses an imaginary baseball high in the air, and at one point even pantomimes bumping into an invisible lady.

However, other directions are not so clear-cut. Although Wilder specifies or suggests business with personal accoutrements—such as hats, aprons, ties, pince-nez, glasses, handkerchiefs, and pocket watch—one might suppose that some of these activities could be pantomimed if a director insisted on being a purist. For example, the notes held by Professor Willard (32) or the bandage being tied on Mr. Webb's cut finger (34) could arguably be performed either way.

Nonetheless, a definite working principle appears to be that costumes and other personal accoutrements of the characters are meant to be real. The Stage Manager is described as "wearing spectacles" (64) when he plays Mr. Morgan, and Emily certainly must wear a veil during her wedding. Wilder makes it clear that the three baseball teammates who heckle George at his wedding are "dressed for the ball field" (69). In a play such as this, which depends so much on the imagination, actors could conceivably be dressed in black leotards. But Wilder clearly expects them to be dressed in attire appropriate to their roles.<sup>1</sup> Like the local New England dialect that anchors the otherwise nondescript character types, costumes provide a point of concrete reality in a milieu of abstract miming and sparse staging.

This again exemplifies how Wilder skillfully maintains a subtle balance between specificity and universality, keeping objects in the most personal vicinity of a character quite real while rendering those slightly distant as abstract.

Thornton Wilder does not necessarily dictate whether each and every item in the play is to be pantomimed or not, in the manner that a playwright like G. B. Shaw or Eugene O'Neill (both famous for lengthy and detailed stage instructions) might. Yet the preceding analysis has shown that Wilder's general intent regarding the handling of stage properties is not difficult to determine. And while some leeway in interpretation may exist concerning certain small bits of stage business, it is clear that he meant to maintain a carefully calculated degree of realism upon which the pantomime was to be performed, a point of contact to keep the acting anchored in reality without inhibiting the imagination.

## V. The Reduced Stage Set

In considering the balance Wilder strikes between the imagined and the real, between what is pantomimed and what is not, it is important to look at the larger stage setting as it is presented scene by scene.

At the start of Act I, in spite of all the effort of the Stage Manager to describe and evince an invisible Main Street and the Gibbs' and Webbs' gardens, he recognizes there are limits to how far one can tax the audience's imagination, whereupon he brings on the two arched trellises. Unlike the dining room tables and chairs, the small bench (where Emily and Mrs. Webb string their beans), and the stepladders—which are quite practical stage properties—and because they symbolically stand for a garden which has otherwise been eliminated, the trellises are what Keir Elam would term a “scenic synecdoche,” meaning the “replacement of part for whole” (28). Although the Stage Manager comments wryly, “There's some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery” (22), Wilder seems to acknowledge that this bare minimum of scenery is in fact necessary in order for the audience's imagination to stay involved or “activated” and that if he were to pare down the scenery any more than this, the audience's active participation in the play would founder.

In the middle of Act II, to prepare for the wedding scene, stagehands replace the tables and chairs with simple pews for the wedding guests to sit in. The congregation sits facing upstage, which conveniently creates a private space for George, Emily, and Mr. Webb to act out their small last-minute crisis and for Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Soames to share their monologues fully with the audience. Yet again, in this wedding scene, in addition to the practicable church pews, Wilder offers a single, metonymic image to the decor in order to evoke the locale of church: “the image of a stained-glass window [that] is cast from a lantern slide upon the back wall” (67). This visual effect is enhanced by the sound of the organ, which plays Handel's “Largo” (followed later by Mendelssohn's “Wedding March”), and the ringing of church bells. Again, this one concrete image succeeds in anchoring an otherwise abstract and nebulous stage to a concrete particularity.

In Act III, Wilder indicates that “ten or twelve ordinary chairs” have been placed on one half of the stage “in three openly spaced rows facing the audience. These are graves in the cemetery” (74) where the Dead quietly sit. Other than these chairs (and their occupants) the stage is bare. Therefore, as at the

start of Act I, we are dependent entirely upon the Stage Manager for description of the cemetery: this “windy hilltop” (74). He offers a lyrical detailed description of the flora, the surrounding lakes, mountains, and valleys, and then describes in detail some of the tombstones. Finally, he gives us a matter-of-fact introduction to some of the dead persons on stage, such as “Editor Webb’s boy, Wallace, whose appendix burst while he was on a Boy Scout trip to Crawford Notch” (76), the boy whom we have known more intimately as Wally.

At this point, acting on the other half of the stage—which is entirely bare—the undertaker Joe Stoddard is said to be “supervising a new-made grave” (77). It is not clear what kind of action he must perform, but certainly his activities are to be performed in mime. Apart from this small bit of acting, there is little to formulate an image of the graveyard other than the narration of the Stage Manager, until “FOUR MEN carry a casket, invisible to us” (79) onto the stage. At this point, Wilder offers us a momentary piece of scenic synecdoche in the form of the mass of black umbrellas that enter along with the funeral party.<sup>2</sup> Enhanced by the voices singing a cappella over Emily’s imagined grave, this cluster of umbrellas is enough to evoke the entire cemetery described previously by the Stage Manager without reliance on any additional stage setting in the form of flowers, turf, casket, or tombstone.

Before long, the umbrellas disappear along with the funeral party, clearing the stage for the final scene where Emily will relive her twelfth birthday on nothing more than “five square feet of boarding.” Although no scenic synecdoche is introduced for this flashback, a close inspection of the text reveals subtle instructions for creating a sense of “place” by other means. The Stage Manager gives the cue for the scene to start: “We’ll begin at dawn. You remember it had been snowing for several days; but it had stopped the night before, and they had begun clearing the roads. The sun’s coming up” (84). Here, Wilder indicates a striking lighting change: “now the left half of the stage gradually becomes very bright—the brightness of a crisp winter morning” (84).<sup>3</sup> A wintry whiteness is carefully evoked by other means. Emily approaches the house in a “white dress” with hair “tied by a white ribbon like a little girl” (80) and becomes elated upon recognizing the “old white fence that used to be around our house” (84). When Mr. Webb enters the house, he “shakes the snow off his feet” (86). In a variety of subtle ways, Wilder has reproduced a cold, bright winter morning without compromising the sanctity of this all-important expanse of bare stage.

In a final coups de théâtre, the most crucial scene of the play is enacted on a completely bare swathe of stage where, as he puts it in the Preface to the play, “the very chairs and table are gone” (xi). The actresses portraying Mrs. Webb and Emily (as well as Mr. Webb) are especially challenged to perform with nothing to assist them but sheer imagination. “There are some surprises waiting for you on the kitchen table. [. . .] That in the blue paper [. . .]” (87) or “That in the yellow paper” (88) offer clear indication of the unseen objects on the “table.” And while no indication is offered as to what sort of present Emily receives from her mother, its preciousness must be somehow conveyed to the audience by the actress playing Emily: “And this is from you. Why, Mama, it’s just lovely and it’s just what I wanted. It’s beautiful!” (88).

It is notable also that quite unawares, we have gradually been primed or “set up” for Emily’s famous farewell speech, in which she lists concrete objects of the very sort that have been abbreviated from the stage throughout. She says “Good-bye to clocks ticking . . . and Mama’s sunflowers. And food

and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths . . ." (89). Her list consists of things that smell, taste, look pretty, or feel good to the touch—the very things Wilder has been training us, through pantomime, to see, hear, smell, and taste in our imagination throughout the course of the play.

After extricating herself from this traumatic experience, Emily returns to the world of the Dead, where Mrs. Gibbs knowingly inquires, "Were you happy?" Emily responds simply, "No . . . I should have listened to you. That's all human beings are! Just blind people" (89). In view of the manner in which this discovery has been made there lies an interesting irony: For although human beings are hopelessly and irredeemably blind to the preciousness of life, it is precisely when one removes from sight all stage paraphernalia—at once the everyday things that clutter up life and the properties that actors and audience normally rely on—that one is able to palpably and incontestably "see" this truth. What an utterly audacious act it is to have Emily declare on an entirely bare stage, "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you" (89).

## VI. Conclusion

On principle, Thornton Wilder dictates that *Our Town* be performed on a stripped-down stage with actors relying on pantomime as a means of revealing an inner reality that is at once utterly individual and has qualities that are universally shared. Yet, to ensure the full engagement of the audience's imagination, Wilder deliberately allows a certain number of items to remain on stage, in particular, personal costumes, certain practicable stage furniture, as well as carefully calculated scenic synecdoches. In addition, in the same way that human beings in the afterlife are "weaned away from earth" (76), Wilder gradually weans the audience away from their reliance on material stage properties, until in the climactic scene of Emily's twelfth birthday he is able to remove any and all props, forcing actors and audience alike to rely solely on their imaginations.

Not coincidentally, the treatment of narrative time in the play bears a close correspondence to this treatment of scenic decor. By masterfully juggling a variety of temporal perspectives, while playfully nurturing a continual sense of the perpetual now, the Stage Manager forces the audience to actively bridge various gaps between plot time, chronological time, historical time, and even cosmological time in the same way they are required to see objects that are not there. With the same ease that the Stage Manager assembles the chairs and plank to create the "time" and "place" where Emily and George live out their moment of falling in love, Wilder repeatedly challenges and engages the imagination of the audience to transcend the immediate reality before them and thereby recognize the utter preciousness of life—not only of their own but of everybody who has ever lived or ever will live.

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### Endnotes

- 1 Photographs of performances of the play, in which Wilder appears as the Stage Manager, show that the actors wore fully-outfitted costumes complete with hair ribbons, shawls, hats and wedding veil.
- 2 These umbrellas were held pointing horizontally to conveniently conceal Emily's body from the audience until the moment she is to appear.
- 3 In an appropriate symmetry, at the very end of the scene, "The lights dim on the left half of the stage. Mrs. Webb disappears" (88), as if it were a fading dream or illusion.