

The Bridge of San Luis Rey

T. Wilder

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Back in 1968 I received 'The Eighth Day' by Thornton Wilder as a Christmas present from my aunt. I read it dutifully and it did not make any lasting impression on me, in fact the only thing I remember from it is the assertion that people secretly delight in disasters which cause loss of life because it leaves more space on Earth for the rest of us. The book, a hardcover, did not fit with the other of my English books which were pocket books, mostly Penguins, thus it stood many years as an anomaly in my book cases, and for some reason I mildly resented its presence. Thornton Wilder struck me as a rather mediocre writer albeit with pretensions, someone one may safely ignore. However, the present book provided a pleasant surprise.

The setting is colonial South America centered around Lima (the notion of Peru emerged only after the independence from Spain) and relates, I guess, a fictional event, when the eponymous bridge spanning across a deep ravine broke causing five people to fall to their death desperately gesticulating. The story then depicts the individual victims as revealed by a monk whose mission was to decide whether the accident was devised by God or hence had a meaning or whether it was just a capricious event. The victims were the Marquesa de Montemayor and her maid and companion Pepita, the lonely twin Esteban and a certain Uncle Pio and a young boy Jamie, and they are described in the three main chapters, where it transpires that their lives were intertwined through their survivors. Pepita and Esteban were once charges of the Abessa. The old Marquesa suffers from an unrequited love for her only child, a daughter to whom she writes endless but beautiful letters sent to Madrid where the former has sought refuge. She also has the run-ins with the actress Perichole, whose acting is far too precious to be confined to the provincial outlet of Lima according to her impresario, teacher and agent uncle Pio to whom she eventually after relentless pleading entrusts her only son Jamie. And the deceased twin brother of Esteban once had a crush in her, but forced himself to relinquish his desire out of loyalty to Esteban, which eventually would cost him his life.

Basically it is a pastiche written in a style reminiscent of the fantastical realism of a Marquez or the fairy tales of a Borges. This is somewhat remarkable as the short novel was written back in 1927 the year when Marquez was born and Borges had not yet started on his ficciones. What contributes to this illusion is the in addition to the long and ponderous Spanish names the slightly surreal feeling created by the events of a long gone era on a strange colonial stage. Those events are of a certain fabled nature more dreamlike than prosaic, maybe characteristic of the former Spanish empire whose narrow provincialism contrast strangely with its spatial extension. Of course you cannot write a pastiche unless there is a precedent a tradition, and that necessarily predates the names just mentioned, and unknown to me. The result is, as noted pleasurable, pleasant in the same way fairy-tales and fables hold your attention. The impressionistic approach enables the creation of an epic scope within a short span of pages enlisting the favorable imagination of the

reader. The style is perfectly adjusted to the contents, and without it the exercise could not have been carried out. Yet, as in all exercises, you feel that ultimately it is all pointless, no message is conveyed, no real insight provided, the whole thing is just a matter of disinterested aesthetics, not unlike that of an exquisite porcelain figure (and are not all the characters porcelain pieces?) or a pretty piece of music performed on a stage (or why not a somewhat stilted movie by Eric Rohmer?), with no purpose beyond that of proving that such pretty things can indeed be accomplished.

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