

THE VALUE OF A LIFE

Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Harper-Collins Publishers, New York, 2003, 138 pages

Reviewed by Adrian Nyiha

“There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”¹ These poignant words mark the end of Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. A transcendent echo resonates in them, as in the entire novel. Set in eighteenth-century Peru, Wilder’s book explores the author’s profound insights into the close connections among love, suffering, truth, and the meaning of life.

One fateful day, the bridge of San Luis Rey collapses, plunging five people into the yawning abyss below. Brother Juniper, a Franciscan friar witnessing the event, sees in it the occasion to investigate whether he can prove that God permits evil to happen for some greater good. He undertakes an inquiry into the lives of each of the five deceased. Wilder takes us into the histories of some of these deceased characters and the lives of some of those they have affected, suggesting a conclusion wildly divergent from Brother Juniper’s answer to his question: love is “the only meaning.”

Among the people who cross the bridge are the Marquesa de Montemayor and her servant-girl, Pepita. The Marquesa appears to love her daughter, but her love is radically self-seeking and madly desirous of her daughter’s affection. Pepita has been sent by a nun, Madre Maria del Pilar, her “dear mother in God”,³ to serve the Marquesa. Many months go by. Pepita is starved of affection and beset by the challenges of preventing disloyal fellow-servants from abusing the Marquesa’s absent-mindedness. In a moment of intense loneliness, Pepita unburdens her heart to Madre Maria in a letter. The Marquesa stumbles upon it and asks Pepita about it; the little girl destroys it, telling the Marquesa that she would not send it because it “wasn’t...brave”.

Here and throughout the book, Wilder demonstrates a central characteristic of love: its bravery. As the Marquesa then reflects, a person who loves only if their beloved offers some affection in return does not yet love. The reaction of love to pain affords us the occasion of gauging the truth of that love, its generosity, its self-forgetfulness. Here is a difficult truth for many parents experiencing rejection from their older children. True love wants the betterment of the beloved, not because the beloved is pleasant to love, but simply because the beloved is who he or she is.

However, this truth is not without its consolation. Esteban, another of the five who meets their end on the bridge, undergoes a similar experience with his twin brother, Manuel. Their love for one another was inexpressible. For better or worse, this was not to last. Manuel falls in love with a woman, and although he later chooses Esteban over her, the devastating doubt that Manuel would have been happier without him never quite leaves Esteban’s mind. These moments are especially intense when Esteban begins tending daily to Manuel’s newly acquired injury. Delirious with pain, Manuel frequently insults Esteban and declares that he was a hateful obstacle between him and the woman he loved, giving vent to thoughts that he does not permit himself when in his right mind for the love of Esteban. Esteban does not relent in his arduous task; he remains brave. When Manuel eventually dies of the injury, Esteban feels his life to be devoid of meaning. The breaking of the bridge, it would appear, brings to him the death that he had sought only the previous night in a failed suicide attempt. He is alone.

A brave love binds the lover firmly to his beloved. Moreover, it gives meaning to his life. If the beloved is meaningful and worth loving, then the lover experiences himself as *meant* to love. He finds himself in the self-forgetfulness of love. Love becomes the meaning of his existence. And since

love does not depend on whether the beloved is pleasant, it seems that everyone is worth loving, everyone is meaningful, everyone is a path to living a meaningful existence – even the ungrateful child.

Yet it is also clear from Wilder's Esteban that an end to love can be so painful that a person may deem it better to put an end to their existence if they can. Giving love fulfills our existence and, in a sense, receiving and accepting love sustains it. A person loves his beloved when he loves bravely, when he loves even when his beloved does not reciprocate his love, but his love yearns for reciprocity. Everyone needs to be loved by another.

Indeed, the love we receive from others reveals to us our worth and this revelation, in turn, enables us to understand the worth and meaningfulness of others. Camila Perichole, a famous actress, begins her career under Uncle Pio, an enigmatic man who has towards her a reverent and enduring affection. However, as she grows older, Camila becomes greedy for respectability. Suitors flock to her and she scorns Uncle Pio. Then she contracts smallpox. She sells her palace and retires to the hills, allowing entry to none of her former male admirers entry, believing their attention to stem from a pity full of condescension, as if she were no longer lovable because she was no longer beautiful. Only Uncle Pio continues to love her, steadily, with emotion. After Uncle Pio dies on the bridge, Camila realizes the depth of his love, her lack of love for those who love her, and her lack of courage and self-forgetfulness. She leaves everything behind to spend herself, with Madre Maria del Pilar, for the poorest in society.

Wilder has Uncle Pio reflect that passion is self-interested and does not become love until it has been met with indifference or rejection and has even come to hate itself. Passion, it seems, would subject its supposed beloved to its whims, desiring to possess them. It wants them insofar as they are delightful to hold or to behold, to be with, to *have*. Here we arrive at the paradox to which Wilder seems to have been leading: love of the other, union with the other, is possible only if they remain *other* – only then can they be worthwhile not for their qualities which the lover enjoys and, therefore, somehow possesses, but because of who they are in themselves, even when loving them affords no pleasure. And if someone accepts this love from another, realizing that they had done nothing to deserve it, that this love was truly unconditional, then they learn to see that every person truly is worth loving.

In a world filled with so much loneliness and despair, how important is the unconditional love of each man for his woman, each woman for her man, each parent for his or her child, each child for his father and mother, each sibling for his sibling, each person for every other person! And when suffering gets more severe, as it does when we go through difficult financial situations, the loss of loved ones, the experience of our failings and defects, betrayal by our siblings, abandonment by our parents, or the ingratitude of our children, the conviction that we are worth loving can give us the strength to love those who hurt us and to heal familial divisions. Each member of every family must do their best to help everyone experience this unconditional love.

And no one should discount the possibility that Brother Juniper's question has an answer. Perhaps we all are loved. Perhaps even suffering may be the occasion to discover that there is a Someone who loves us unconditionally. Perhaps every suffering is permitted by a God above who deems it worthwhile if it elicits even the slightest spark of love. "But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. ... There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."