

PRAISE FOR GOD ON STAGE

“Made in his image, we have it in our DNA to be creators of worlds on the sub-level of art and specifically theater. Kreeft’s insights into the art of the human drama evoke what Karol Wojtyła meant when he said, ‘Outside of the drama . . . man cannot fulfill himself as a person.’”

—**John Walker**, Associate Professor of Theater,
Franciscan University of Steubenville

“The world’s a stage, and we are all called to play our part in the drama of life and love. Peter Kreeft doesn’t merely play a part. He plays many parts, and he plays them all so well. He is one of our age’s greatest philosophers. He is a great apologist. He is a very good writer. He entertains. He makes us smile. He makes us laugh. He makes us look at ourselves and each other in a new light. And now, this tried and tested guide to life guides us through some of the greatest plays ever written. Those wishing to go deeper into the meaning of life and death, and the mystery of love and suffering, will find no better guide than Peter Kreeft.”

—**Joseph Pearce**, author of *Through Shakespeare’s Eyes:
Seeing the Catholic Presence in the Plays*

“Peter Kreeft modestly calls himself a ‘tour guide’ of these fifteen plays, but he’s something better than that: he’s a gregarious fellow sightseer, an enthusiastic Rambler holding forth less systematically and more vividly than the tour guide. I’m reminded a bit of Sister Wendy Beckett’s art commentary, disparaged by some professional art critics, but beloved by ordinary people who learned more about art appreciation from a few minutes of her rapturous discourse than from pages of typical art criticism.”

—**Deacon Steven D. Greydanus**, creator of DecentFilms.com

**GOD
ON
STAGE**

GOD ON STAGE

**15 PLAYS THAT ASK
THE BIG QUESTIONS**

PETER KREEFT

WORD  on FIRE.

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

© 2024 by Peter Kreeft

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by
Katherine Spitler and Rozann Lee

Scripture excerpts are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition (copyright © 1989, 1993), used by permission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved worldwide.

The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis copyright © C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd. 1946.

Extracts reprinted by permission.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews. For more information, contact Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330 or email contact@wordonfire.org.

ISBN: 978-1-68578-102-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023946605

Contents

INTRODUCTION	ix
THREE DRAMAS ABOUT LIFE AND JOY	
1 Pre-Christian: Dylan Thomas, <i>Under Milk Wood</i>	3
2 Christian: Thornton Wilder, <i>Our Town</i>	14
3 Post-Christian: Samuel Beckett, <i>Waiting for Godot</i>	28
THREE DRAMAS ABOUT RELIGION (RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD)	
4 Pre-Christian: Aeschylus, <i>Prometheus Bound</i>	49
5 Christian: Robert Bolt, <i>A Man for All Seasons</i>	58
6 Post-Christian: Peter Shaffer, <i>Equus</i>	68
THREE DRAMAS ABOUT SUFFERING	
7 Pre-Christian: Sophocles, <i>Oedipus the King</i>	79
8 Christian: William Nicholson, <i>Shadowlands</i>	85
9 Post-Christian: Archibald MacLeish, <i>J.B.</i>	96
THREE DRAMAS ABOUT DEATH	
10 Pre-Christian: William Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i>	117
11 Christian: John Henry Newman, <i>The Dream of Gerontius</i>	133
12 Post-Christian: Cormac McCarthy, <i>The Sunset Limited</i>	160
THREE DRAMAS ABOUT DAMNATION	
13 Pre-Christian: William Shakespeare, <i>Macbeth</i>	172
14 Christian: C.S. Lewis, <i>The Great Divorce</i>	182
15 Post-Christian: Jean-Paul Sartre, <i>No Exit</i>	197
APPENDIX: THE THREE GREATEST DRAMAS OF ALL TIME	205
CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT	215

Introduction

Why should you read this book?

First of all, because it is *interesting*.

Why is it interesting? Because it is about the two things that are the most interesting things of all: yourself and your life and the meaning of your life, and God. Even if God is only a fairy tale, he is at least the most interesting fairy tale ever invented. God is wild. “Aslan is not a tame lion.” God is *not* like Ned Flanders on *The Simpsons*!

Second, because the fifteen dramas it explores, like all great art, will show you great gobs of the three things that you, like every other member of the human species, long for most deeply and passionately: truth, goodness, and beauty and the joy in beauty. We appreciate all three of these most keenly not by abstract concepts of the ideals themselves but by dramas of the concrete struggle with their opposites and enemies: ignorance, evil, and misery. Light shines brightest in the conquest of darkness; goodness in the conquest of evil; joy in the conquest of sorrow. That is why God allows darkness, evil, and sorrow: for the sake of the greater light, love, and life. For life is not a timeless formula but a story, a drama; and it is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.

Philosophy is the love of wisdom, and I am a professor of philosophy (i.e., a professional “lover of wisdom”). (The word for “professional lover” also begins with a *p*.) My most successful

courses are always the least abstract ones, the ones that explore not the profound problems of metaphysics and epistemology or the history of philosophical controversies, but the concrete dramas of human life, in courses like “Philosophy in Literature,” “Philosophy in Cinema,” “Philosophy in Great Plays,” and “The Philosophy of Tolkien.” Of all the philosophical classics, the one the students both “get into” the most and “get the most out of” is the most dramatic one, Augustine’s *Confessions*.

A third reason to read this book, even if you are an unbeliever, is that a book entitled *God on Stage* will give you insight into how believers perceive the difference God makes to human life. Any belief, including both atheism and theism, is best appreciated by contrast to its opposite. William James, the founder of pragmatism, went so far as to say that if any idea makes no *difference* to your life and your experience, it is neither true nor false for you.

Fourth, if you are a believer, this book will help you both to learn and to share more about your faith and about the difference it makes.

It will help you to learn, because a God-created universe is like an enormous and endlessly amazing work of art, and everything in a work of art reveals the artist.

And the divine artist is revealed by at least four dimensions of his art: the setting, which is the cosmos that we inhabit; the plot, which is the events that we live; the characters, which are ourselves; and the theme, which some say is nonexistent, meaningless, or whatever you want it to be, but I say is love. “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women . . . players.” And according to Christianity, “all the men and women” includes God, the Creator who once became a creature, a player.

It will help you to share, because truth, goodness, and beauty are given to us not only to enjoy but also to be passed on. And this is usually done in many anonymous and indirect ways, for everything we say and do reflects to others what we are, what is

in us. And what we are is what we have become by all our interactions with the world. And reading and reflecting on great dramas, great plays, is a powerful way of expanding our world and expanding our interactions with it, and therefore expanding ourselves and what we have to give others. And that is the whole purpose of a human self: to give itself away to others.

*

Reading fiction is like having friends: it is acquiring multiple sets of eyes. Even when we are alone, we already have two eyes, not just one, so that a dimension of depth and perspective opens up; and when we add friends (including artists and authors), we add other sets of eyes. We look not only *at* these friends, whether real or fictional, but also look *along* them, or with them, or by means of them, at their world and ours, especially at the truth, goodness, and beauty in it.

And we learn lasting lessons from all the works of art that we love because love lets us enter into other people and see with their eyes, and in plays those “other people” include the authors and their characters. Love (and friendship, which is a form of love) is a kind of metaphysical magic: it is not just a feeling in us about other people, but it can let our soul actually enter into their souls. Even old Aristotle knew that when he defined a friend as “the other half of my soul.” Two bodies cannot occupy the same physical space at the same chronological time, but two souls can occupy the same spiritual place (which is more than “space”) at the same kairological time (which is more than chronological time).

*

This book will not teach you anything about the history of theater, or of these plays, or the “correct” scholarly interpretation of them,

or about the structure and technique of a play, or how to create or perform one. Nor is it a philosophy or theology of literature or of theater. Nor will it help you to think logically about tricky philosophical issues raised in these plays, like most of the “Philosophy in . . .” books about popular culture that are always written by “analytic” philosophers, who love to analyze, define, and argue. Nothing wrong with that, but it’s not what I do. What *do* I do with these plays? I read, and smile, or frown, or fall in love, or ponder, or open my mouth to make an *O*, the syllable of awe and wonder—wonder at both life and art, and at both God and man, who is God’s art.

*

God on Stage will probably strike you as a strange title, for God is a spirit, and invisible, and therefore cannot literally be on stage as an actor, unless he becomes incarnate. But if God is God, he is present everywhere, invisibly, as any artist is present in all his works. And this presence, even when anonymous, makes a difference that we can sense. It is the difference between the book of Job, written by a Jewish believer, and *J.B.*, the same story written by a modern unbeliever.

*

The ultimate source of the power of God on stage and of every work of art, great or small, is the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Father “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16), and the Son becomes a visible and accessible man, like us “in every respect . . . yet without sin” (Heb. 2:17, 4:15), but the presence of the Spirit is, in a way, somewhere between these two. He “swept over the face of the waters” in the creation of the universe (Gen. 1:2), and he does the same creative work in our souls. He enters

into some of us (as he did to the prophets and to Mary), and he exits from some of us (as he did to Judas, so that Satan could enter him). He “inspires” (in-breathes) us. He speaks in whispers, like the wind. He creates form in the formless waters of our imagination, as the wind creates waves. He is the most anonymous person of the Trinity.

*

Another reason for surprise at my title *God on Stage* is the irreligious reputation of the stage. The institution of the theater has turned almost 180 degrees from religious to irreligious. In its origins in ancient Greece, it was a religious ritual, a liturgy, a paean and poem of praise and piety toward the gods. Today, it is one of the most secular and often deliberately “transgressive” institutions in the world. Yet the true God still loves to infiltrate the ranks of his apparent enemies and inspire the spirits of unbelievers, just as he inspired pagan polytheists to make myths that were often truer than their makers ever knew. He has not abandoned post-Christians today any more than he abandoned pre-Christians then. Some of the most religious plays in our secular culture were written by “heretics,” agnostics, and atheists.

*

If you are still wondering whether to bother to read this book, just look at the Table of Contents. That will tell you what the book is about. Nothing else. I offer no guarantees, no tricks, no salesmanship. I don't work for the inventor of the world's oldest profession, advertising (see Genesis 3). I work for the other guy.

*

Stories are humanity's oldest and most universal art. All stories, whether movies or plays or novels or epics or short stories or just parables or jokes, have five aspects, five dimensions: characters, plot, setting, theme, and style. This book focuses on themes, and further focuses on theological themes. Themes are not necessarily moral lessons, and not necessarily "preachy." All plays have themes; that is, they are "about" something. Sometimes the themes are theological. Many great plays, modern as well as pre-modern, have theological themes.

I have selected three plays for each of five subjects or themes or philosophical or theological issues.

The first is the most general, the most global and intuitive: the meaning of and attitude toward human life as a whole. Is there any kind of faith, love, and above all joy, or at least hope for joy, or is there not?

The second is the relation between man and God or the gods, which is the essence of "religion."

The third is the problem of suffering, especially the suffering of a hero or "culture hero."

The fourth is the meaning of death.

The fifth is damnation—a neglected but crucial and passionate theme. It is the other half of the ultimate drama, what Kierkegaard called the "infinite passion." If there is the possibility of salvation, there must be the possibility of damnation.

For each of these five themes I have selected three plays: one that exemplifies the pagan or pre-Christian or generic, universal, natural point of view; one the distinctively Christian point of view; and one the post-Christian, typically modern point of view.

The post-Christian is as distinct from the pre-Christian as it is from the Christian, just as a divorcée is as distinct from a virgin as she is from a wife.

The historical comparison between the three ages is not the main point of this book, but it is a frame that is as visible as the pictures inside it.

The three greatest dramas of all time are not stage plays, though they could become stage plays. They are treated in the appendix.

Three of these fifteen plays were not published as plays, but they are dramas that are natural to the stage. *The Great Divorce* was published as a novel, but has often been staged as a play, with consistent success. *The Dream of Gerontius* is a dramatic poem, but it could work as an impressionistic movie. The same could be said of *Under Milk Wood*, which was performed as a radio drama. (Its one existing movie version is—well, forgettable.) The theater of the ear can be as dramatic as the theater of the eye, just as music can be as dramatic as painting or architecture.

Most of these plays have been made into movies, sometimes very good ones. The transition from stage to screen sometimes has worked very well (e.g., *A Man for All Seasons*, *Shadowlands*, and *Hamlet*, especially Mel Gibson's version) and sometimes not (e.g., *Waiting for Godot* and *Our Town*). What makes the difference between failure and success in that enterprise is a question that is interesting and important but too complex and technical for this book to explore.

My role is only as a tour guide, not even a mapmaker. My point is just "Look at these!" Or, better, "Look at yourself and your life through these eyes." My point is not how these plays fit into my outline or illustrate my point, as if my point were some great new original discovery. My point is simply their fifteen points, and their relation to your life and your mind.

Three Dramas About
Life and Joy

1

PRE-CHRISTIAN

Under Milk Wood

BY DYLAN THOMAS

It may seem odd to begin a book entitled *God on Stage* with a play that is not, apparently, about God, and that has no stage.

Under Milk Wood is a radio play, which bears essentially the same relation to a stage play as a stage play bears to a movie. A movie supplies its own ultra-realistic setting in the “real world,” so that nothing is left to your own imagination, while a stage play’s setting can only be a few props that are suggestive of the larger world around them, so you have to use more of your own imagination when you watch it. The radio drama appeals even more to the imagination than the stage because it supplies only sound and no sight at all, except your own inner sight.

It is especially challenging to create a radio drama whose protagonist is really the imagined setting itself. In *Under Milk Wood*, the protagonist is really the setting—namely, “Llareggub,” the fictional Welsh town that poet Dylan Thomas invented by spelling “bugger all” backward.

The play’s strongest dimension is its style—that is, the poet’s words. In this play, the prose keeps bursting into poetry, and the poetry keeps turning into music. If you are bored with beauty,

mute with music, weary of words, and puerile about poetry, you will hate this play. I don't expect all the readers of this book to love it as I do, so it is probably an unwise example to begin with. But I never claimed to be wise.

All writers use words, but some love to play with them, like G.K. Chesterton. Whenever I have used some of his books and essays in my classes at Boston College, I always get two radically opposite reactions to his writing style from my students. Some fall instantly in love with *his* falling in love with words and their endless possibilities of combination and recombination, especially surprising and paradoxical ones. Others hate this wordplay, this poetic prose. Some people don't like jugglers, as some people don't like clowns or mimes, and poets are word jugglers. I don't know whether the reason for that dislike is envy, or whether it's simply a lack of sympathy for Chesterton's utterly unpragmatic, childlike delight in language, or whether it's some other, more sympathizable reason. But love of words and love of play are both necessary if the reader or hearer is to enjoy wordplay, especially one as extravagant as Chesterton's. Impatience and the demand to "get to the point" and the "bottom line" are utterly incompatible with appreciating any poetry, especially when the poetry intrudes in areas that we do not expect to be poetic: plays, novels, or essays. I think the very same two opposite reactions are true of Dylan Thomas as are true of Chesterton, especially to this, his longest poem, and for the same reasons, whatever they are.

Style is usually the least important of the five dimensions of any narrative (plot, characters, setting, theme, style), but it is the main reason for the charm of this one. *Under Milk Wood* is a place, not a plot. It is not dramatic, but it contains dozens of mini-dramas briefly described or remembered during the one ordinary sunrise-to-sunset day that frames the narrative. The characters in this play are more than the plot, the setting is more than the characters, and the style is more than the setting. The plot is

simply life itself in all its ordinary extraordinariness (or extraordinary ordinariness).

Yet it is a “play” in the sense of a drama—that is, a narrative—even if it is not “dramatic” in the sense of expressing and eliciting extreme emotional reactions, because that meaning of a “play” (a drama) is one subspecies of the broader meaning of “play”—that is, playing in contrast to working, or in contrast to anything practical and necessary and utilitarian.

Playing is not “rational.” Nor is it irrational, unless you call all sports irrational. Is it “irrational” to enjoy the contrived little drama of trying to hit a ball into the seats with a baseball bat or into a hole with a golf club? Many doggedly practical and utilitarian people think so. Those people will not like this play or “get” it at all, except perhaps to laugh at its apparent silliness. But the silliness is serious—as serious as heaven. For heaven itself is play in both senses of the word “play”: it is a creative drama, a work of art, and it is also a game, or a dance, to enjoy for its own sake rather than a “job” to work at as a means to some other end. It *is* the end. As C.S. Lewis said, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”

The name “Dylan” means “son of the sea” in Welsh, and that is a very good image for his style. His words come at you like waves: a delightful overplus, unceasing, rich and deep and roundly rolling, golden with alliteration, musically lyrical. Poetry cannot be translated nearly as well as prose because every language *sounds* different, even if the meanings are not different; and this is especially true of Thomas’ poetry, which depends not on mental but musical acrobatics.

And this is not just stylistic but substantive: Thomas sees life as music. (The Welsh have the best singing voices in the world, and they have always loved choral singing.) “Life as music” is perhaps one way to translate the implicit theme of *Under Milk Wood*. Just as the implicit theme of the movie *Babette’s Feast* is that life

is a feast, the theme of *Under Milk Wood* is that life is a feast of sound. Because this play depends so much on its musical sounds, translating it into another language would be almost as difficult as rewriting a Chopin nocturne for a marching band.

The play is not designed for the theater of a stage but for the theater of the mind as informed by the ear. Although it was written as a radio drama, it could be made into a movie—and probably spoiled by no longer requiring much activity from the visual imagination, unless it were largely impressionistic. TV and movies have rendered our imaginations passive, and they are eroding not only radio, which demands our active visual imagination, but also reading, which demands also the audible imagination. That is why a movie made from a great book almost always lets us down: it substitutes the director's visual imagination for our own. Lesson: always read the book before the movie, not after.

If you read rather than hear this play, it should ideally be read aloud rather than silently. The words on the page are only a code for the play itself, like sheet music for a performance on a musical instrument. The instrument in this case is the human voice. (Primitive societies like the Aboriginal Australians always prefer orality to writing: it is so much more *alive*.) The effect of this play in your soul depends on your ear as much as on your brain. In most movies, the music is “background music” to the events; here, it is almost the reverse. For Thomas' poetry is as close to music as words can get. One thinks of Edgar Allan Poe (e.g., “The Raven”) or G.K. Chesterton (“Lepanto”) or Gerard Manley Hopkins (“The Windhover,” “Pied Beauty,” “God's Grandeur”) for comparison.

Since appreciation of this work depends on your ear, please move heaven and earth to find and listen to Richard Burton's rendition of it. Then, whenever you read it again (and you will, for poetry demands rereading, far more than prose does), you will remember those sounds, that music, like a bird identifying

other birds by their call. It is like a bird identifying the first creature it sees when it hatches as its mother and as the touchstone for all subsequent meetings with other creatures. (Remember the heartbreaking and hilarious children's picture book *Are You My Mother?*?) We act like that too. Having fallen in love with Beethoven through listening to Toscanini's conducting of all nine of his symphonies, I cannot help judging all other interpretations of Beethoven by that standard. This principle of "primitive patterning" applies to music more than to any of the other arts because music is the least cerebral and abstract, and the most intuitive and mystical; at the same time, it is the most physical.

Thomas finished this play only one month before he died. He drank himself to death. He was as eccentric as the characters in this play. As a boy, Thomas described himself as "small, thin, indecisively active, quick to get dirty, curly." His education ended with grammar school. Imagine how university would have corrupted his art!

I chose this play to illustrate the best in the pagan or pre-Christian or not-quite-Christian attitude toward life as a whole, even though that historical association is something of a stretch. But you could view it not so much historically as personally, as a version of what Kierkegaard called the "aesthetic" or pre-ethical and pre-religious stage on life's way, though Thomas' version of that is significantly more joyful and less tragic than that of the melancholy Dane. The presence of God here is almost totally anonymous, except for the kindly and sweet Reverend Eli Jenkins, whose concluding poem is as close to Thomas' religious philosophy as anything else he wrote.

All of the characters in *Llareggub* are eccentrics. In fact, if, either in this play or in real life, there were one character that was *not* eccentric, that would be the most eccentric eccentricity of all. Eccentricity is the norm; individuality is the supreme universal; being somehow "off-center from the standard" is in fact

the center and the standard—unless and until, like most of the rest of the world, Llareggub becomes “educated”—that is, mechanized, urbanized, technologized, socialized, tamed, domesticated, globalized, and mass produced. The point of Thomas’ eccentric characters is “to hold the mirror up to nature,” for we are all potential eccentrics, if only suppressed eccentrics; that is why we can identify with them. (The same principle holds true for most of the characters in the novels of both Dostoevsky and Dickens.)

That is also why one of the most popular BBC comedy series for almost two decades was *Doc Martin*, set in the fictional Cornish village of Portwenn, almost all of whose inhabitants are only a small step less off-center than those of Dylan Thomas’ Llareggub, and whose ongoing theme was the fittingly unfitting relationship and marriage between Louisa, the most normal and complete character in the village, who is both homely and beautiful and thus the center and the norm, and the title protagonist, the most eccentric personality of all, a curmudgeonly doctor with zero social skills.

Since most readers of this book will be unfamiliar with *Under Milk Wood*, in order to seduce them to buy, read, and hear it, I will not analyze it but just quote a few random passages. The first introduces the protagonist, which is the town itself:

It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets . . . limping down to the sloe-black, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboatbobbing sea.

.....

You can hear the dew falling, and the hushed town breathing . . . the folded town fast, and slow, asleep. And you alone can hear the invisible starfall. . . .

.....

Listen. It is night moving in the streets.

The play alternates between voiceover and characters, the first of whom is

Captain Cat, the retired blind sea-captain, asleep in his bunk in the seashelled, ship-in-bottled, shipshape best cabin of Schooner House [dreaming] of never such seas as any that swamped the decks of his S.S. Kidwelly bellying over the bed-clothes and jellyfish-slippery sucking him down salt deep into the Davy dark.

He dreamingly interacts with the dead (much as the dead Emily in the third act of *Our Town* interacts with the living). Captain Cat sings:

Johnnie Crack and Flossie Snail
Kept their baby in a milking pail
Flossie Snail and Johnnie Crack
One would pull it out and one would put it back

O it's my turn now said Flossie Snail
To take the baby from the milking pail
And it's my turn now said Johnnie Crack
To smack it on the head and put it back

Johnnie Crack and Flossie Snail
Kept their baby in a milking pail
One would put it back and one would pull it out
And all it had to drink was ale and stout
For Johnnie Crack and Flossie Snail
Always used to say that stout and ale
Was *good* for a baby in a milking pail.

The characters don't need to do much in this drama. Their being is their doing. For instance:

Mr. Utah Watkins counts, all night, the wife-faced sheep as they leap the fences on the hill, smiling and knitting and bleating just like Mrs. Utah Watkins.

.....

Now, in her iceberg-white, holily laundered crinoline nightgown, under virtuous polar sheets, in her spruced and scoured dust-defying bedroom in the trig and trim Bay View, a house for paying guests, at the top of the town, Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard, widow, twice, of Mr. Ogmores, linoleum, retired, and Mr. Pritchard, failed bookmaker. . . . "I must put my pyjamas in the drawer marked pyjamas. . . . And dust the parlour and spray the canary. . . ." "And before you let the sun in, mind it wipes its shoes."

.....

"Who's that talking by the pump? Mrs. Floyd and Boyo, talking flatfish. What can you talk about flatfish? . . . There goes Mrs. Twenty-Three, important, the sun gets up and goes down in her dewlap; when she shuts her eyes, it's night."

The philosophy of life of the citizens of Llareggub is perfectly and paradoxically summarized in the character Polly Garter's masterpiece of Welsh and Irish logic: "Oh, isn't life a terrible thing, thank God?" The author directed that these words be accompanied by a

“single long high chord on strings.” A sign. A musical version of “author’s message.”

That is the central theological point, the God-point, so to speak. That line is the only one in the play that mentions God by name. But it is not the only time God is on stage. God is not dead in *Llareggub*; he is just off-center. *And loved*, however anonymously and implicitly. That’s the point, the “thank God”: the cosmic gratitude. It is concrete, though unfocused. It is Molly Bloom’s “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes” in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. True, hers is a yes to unfocused sex, but it is also a yes to life itself, which is the earth on which the cathedrals are built, and an essential aspect of the psychological foundation of all religion. It is that yes to life, that groundwork beneath the faith, as large and encompassing as the planet, that is dying in our hearts and therefore in our world today. The very sense of the numinous, the wonder, “the idea of the holy,” of the holiness of life itself, however poor and “unsuccessful,” is dying in the human heart, as we shall see in plays like *Godot*, *Equus*, and *The Sunset Limited*.

From a theological point of view, *Llareggub* is more pagan than Christian, and it is very far from utopian or perfect. But this life is *loved*, and that is what matters first and most. In the words of the preacher-poet Rev. Eli Jenkins,

A tiny dingle is Milk Wood
 By Golden Grove 'neath Grongar,
 But let me choose and oh! I should
 Love all my life and longer

To stroll among our trees and stray
 In Goosegog Lane, on Donkey Down,
 And hear the Dewi sing all day,
 And never, never leave the town.

The religion of Llareggub is not a creed but a prayer. It is expressed, with a striking simplicity and an extraordinary ordinariness, in the words of Rev. Jenkins' homemade prayer. The prayer is a poem, and thus a song; and that is significant. It is not just a question of style but substance. It is lovers who sing. It could only have been love that first invented music. This love of life in Dylan Thomas is only pagan, with a very thin Christian veneer, and far from the fullness of Catholicism; but it is much, much further from the emptiness of post-pagan, post-Christian secularism. It prays. The first thing is not what it prays, or what it fails to pray, but the fact that it prays:

Every morning when I wake,
 Dear Lord, a little prayer I make,
 O please to keep Thy lovely eye
 On all poor creatures born to die

And every evening at sun-down
 I ask a blessing on the town,
 For whether we last the night or no
 I'm sure is always touch-and-go.

We are not wholly bad or good
 Who live our lives under Milk Wood
 And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
 To see our best side, not our worst.

O let us see another day!
 Bless us all this night, I pray,
 And to the sun we all will bow
 And say, good-bye—but just for now!

The sense of gratitude and the sense of contingency, and therefore preciousness, go together. They are instinctive in human nature and therefore in all cultures whose lives are still surrounded and determined by God's nature rather than man's ideology and technology. In other words, all cultures except one: the one to whom this poem is addressed as a kind of pre-evangelical missionary message.

The most instructive conflict in this drama is not any of the many conflicts within and between the characters, or between them and nature or life or the nature of things, but between this pagan naturalism, in which the persons and their lives fit into the landscape, and the alien, artificial, external, utilitarian unnaturalism of the modern world, represented by an outsider's guidebook to Llareggub, very much as it is also represented by the two critical and dismissive out-of-towners in *Our Town*.

Less than five hundred souls inhabit the three quaint streets and the few narrow by-lanes and scattered farmsteads that constitute this small, decaying watering-place which may, indeed, be called a "backwater of life." . . . Though there is little to attract the hillclimber, the healthseeker, the sportsman, or the weekend motorist, the contemplative may, if sufficiently attracted to spare it some leisurely hours, find . . . in its several curious customs, and in the conversation of its local "characters," some of that picturesque sense of the past so frequently lacking in towns and villages which have kept more abreast of the times.

Tragically, we only appreciate persons, places, and things when they die.

And that is one of the things that *Our Town* shows us.