

“Participation Lost: Theatricality and Allegory on the Cusp of Modern Consciousness”

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Consciousness and theatricality are inextricably linked, and any interrogation of performativity must inevitably address the confluence and confrontation of sensation and linguistic praxis at the heart of figuration. The polarity giving rise to consciousness and objective reality is perennially inscribed in ritual and dramatic presentation so that theatricality inevitably defines and confronts cultural praxis. Hence the evolution of consciousness is mapped by the transformations of theatricality from deep ritual indistinguishable from conscious performativity to the participated pageantry of medieval theatricality and finally the movement from pageantry into spectacle wherein fourth-wall theatricality inscribes the suppression of participation. The key to this mapping resides in the transformations of theatricality in the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods, at the cusp of the final suppression of participation in the evolution of consciousness. A parallel avenue to understanding the cusp of modern consciousness resides in the shift in allegory during this same period. In Spenser we see a very late manifestation of participated meaning in a literary form fascinating yet discomfiting to the modern mind in its stark relief of allegory, its precise chiseling of an epistemology that insists on the mediated nature of all meaning. In Milton we find participation fully suppressed; the allegory is ubiquitous but smoothly fitted to a modern sensibility that is quickly rejecting the mediation of experience by suppressing participation. Between Spenser and Milton we find that great moment of performative theatricality in Shakespeare.

Interestingly, the transformations of theatricality and allegory during these crucial periods also parallel the movement of social-cosmology on the Grid/Group matrix and the concomitant contours of epistemology thereby enshrined. Don Handelman, applying Mary Douglas's Grid-Group analysis of social cosmology, notes that cultural performance in High Grid-High Group societies is marked by pageantry and festival which reinforces a "communal sense of cultural and historical identity" via social products that celebrate "the overall unity and integration of cosmic and social order" (166). In contrast, as societies shift counter-clockwise on the Grid-Group matrix, pageantry moves toward spectacle, first markedly so in the passage through the flamboyant and cynical stage of atomized-subordination, but eventually normalized in Down Grid societies such as ours in which spectacle is ubiquitous and naturally assumed.

The movement of Pageantry into Spectacle, describes the shift in dominant dramatic form from the Medieval to the Modern world. One might also say Invocation into Projection to describe the shift from a participated, communal, ritual pageantry to a mimesis of modern camera-consciousness in which participation is fully suppressed. One may easily inscribe the participated consciousness through the invocatory and ritualized pageants of medieval mystery drama and then mark the suppression of participation through the richly hybridized forms of Renaissance drama which still inscribe participation while pushing toward the development of a projected consciousness in which drama becomes spectacle. In Restoration drama the transformation to spectacle seems complete, yet participation remains as a compacted and internalized sense of reflected separation highlighted by the perennial cynicism of a social cosmology struggling in the discomfiting rationalism of atomized subordination, for life itself has become spectacle which the stage naturally parodies because cosmology itself has become parody.

Years ago I published a study arguing that the York Cycle was essentially allegorical in nature, that the four levels of patristic allegory were intrinsic to the consciousness of the age rather than esoteric exegesis.¹ Early critics who had argued against the use of typology to interrogate the Mystery cycles did so on purely materialist bases that betray uncritical modern prejudices. Yet, I can't help but wonder why just when this debate had been settled in favor of typological critique, that the entire discourse of allegory as it relates to late medieval drama was quickly abandoned. Undoubtedly the answer at least partly lies in the modern world's discomfort with allegory—indeed, ever since the Romantics greatly erred, as Barfield puts it, by “insisting on a categorical gulf” between the mythic and the allegorical (*Eager Spring* 5). Certainly one of Barfield's grand keys to understanding the evolution of consciousness and the myopia of the modern idolatry lies in understanding that medieval allegory is not merely a jaded “personification of intellectual abstractions,” but in very truth “the legitimate offspring of ancient and vigorous myth” (*Eager Spring* 21). The evolution of consciousness moves from the mythic to the allegorical to perceptual objectivity. I can think of no more direct expression of the mythic evolving into the allegorical than the late medieval Corpus Christi cycles in which the foundational sacred mythology of the culture invigorates the developing social cosmology by a rigorously allegorical assertion of the logos in ritualized pageantry. Participation is strong both in the communal structure of the drama and the consciousness it maps. Indeed, the ritually performative nature of these plays would have been much more intense than modern analysis perceives. For the contemporary audience, for whom consciousness still retained a remnant of participation, dramatizing the manifestation of the logos would produce a powerfully ritual resonance between the creative Divine Word and the participatory nature of human

consciousness in the figuration of common representations, a truly experienced resonance between macrocosm (*Logos*) and microcosm (*verbum intellectus, cordis, et memoriae*).²

The natural inheritors of this allegorical theatricality were the Renaissance dramatists, who produced a theatricality partly arising from medieval forms, partly a result of the political suppression of those forms, which resided in an intense border-moment of participated consciousness giving way to modern perspective. In the same sense that the step from ritual to allegory is most discernible in a theatricality still steeped in communal, mythic ritual, the movement from the allegorical to the perceptual objectivity is grounded in the allegorical, with a distinct remnant of participation in consciousness. The connection between poetry and consciousness in Shakespearean drama remains deeply felt even in our day. This spark of felt consciousness is easy to sense yet hard to define exactly because Shakespeare's drama emerged at that significant moment in which the felt sensation of human participation in the production of the world of experience began to give way to the modern distanced perspective.

The Tempest is Shakespeare's final statement on his craft. If anywhere the allegory can be easily perceived in Shakespeare, it is in this final play. Many Shakespeare plays contain language equating the World with the Stage, and though this would seem to inscribe the modern perceptual consciousness, these dramatic structures always point the audience back to participation in consciousness. For Shakespeare, the motif of the play within the play constitutes a moment of meta-reflection on the performative nature of the dramatic arts. The comic crudeness of the Pyramus and Thisbe play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comments most directly on the simplicity and power of iconic theatricality when Robin Starveling as Moon, having been teased by the nobles for his overt proclamation that "This lanthorn doth the hornèd moon present," responds by the simple statement of pageant theatricality as an enshrined given:

"All that I have to say is to tell you that the lanthorn is the moon, I, the man i'th' moon, this thornbush my thornbush, and this dog is my dog" (*MND* 5.1.240, 257-9). And in this, Shakespeare is not really mocking the medieval, allegorical roots of his theatricality; rather, he is celebrating them and reminding us of the power of drama, a power that is indeed drawn from the participation of the Word in consciousness itself. Similarly, in the Prologue to *Henry V*, the Chorus is not really apologizing for the lack of modern cinematography, but, again, asserting the link between the Word, the World, and the figurations of consciousness. In this light, Prospero's ethereal drama in Act IV of *The Tempest* must be more than just a fairyland trope, and more than a reward for Ferdinand's courtly persistence—indeed, the vision disturbs Ferdinand in its "Thomas-the-Rhymer" ability to meld drama, dream, and the figured world. Prospero stops it because of Ferdinand's bewilderment but more so because he is recalled to the other drama he is orchestrating, the subplot of Caliban's revolt and its interweaving with the main plot of his just vengeance against his usurpers—that is, he must leave the play within the play to get back to the play itself. And it is exactly here, embedded in this transition, that Shakespeare as Prospero takes one more stab at uniting Word, World, Stage, and Consciousness, reinforcing participation while creating perceptual consciousness—in effect leading us toward Final Participation. The speech, at first directed toward Ferdinand, shifts so suddenly to grand discourse on life and meaning that it becomes in effect soliloquy and thus incorporates the greater audience, not just Ferdinand and Miranda. To tell Ferdinand that this is an "insubstantial pageant faded" is to calm his fears—to then use the pageant and its retreat to create his grand simile about the essence of consciousness is the supreme Shakespearean audience address.

And like the baseless fabric of this vision.

The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
 And like this insubstantial pageant faded
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on; and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep.

(*Tmp.* 4.1.151-8)

As "the globe" is undoubtedly both the Globe of the World, and a nod to the Globe Theater, the power of the Word is both the dramatist's consummate art and the logos at the heart of consciousness itself. The link he makes points the world both toward the future—consciousness enhanced by the full polarization of the Observer and the World observed—and back to the past: allegory, myth, and the ultimate synecdoche of the Logos at the heart of the polarity of consciousness. Modern critics often ignore the iconic, allegorical elements of Shakespearean drama or acknowledge such as primitive elements that Shakespeare through his career gradually replaces with organic, realistic theater. Yet this is inevitably a modern desire to see in the Renaissance a radical break from the past naturally leading to a modern aesthetic rather than a careful, unprejudiced study of Renaissance theatricality. If Shakespeare's body of work methodically sheds a primitive, allegorical theatricality, why would the late plays, such as *The Tempest*, so overtly inscribe a blending of the mythic and the allegorical with spectacle? And if one believes that this is merely the inescapable nature of his late foray into Romance comedy, we need only look at how puzzled many critics are that his late History play, *Henry VIII*, is so overtly allegorical, and like his tetralogies, and, indeed, the Mystery Cycles seen in his youth,

structured as a series of discrete, iconographic tableaux, linked vertically in a Providential arc that effaces temporal causalities.³

Indeed, the refusal to understand allegory mars generations of Shakespearean scholarship. We would do well to accept Barfield's challenge to re-evaluate the true power of allegory and its place in the evolution of consciousness. Can we find a better key for such a program than Spenser? In turn, there are few keys to Spenser quite as poignant to our program as C. S. Lewis's *The Allegory of Love*. Though rifts between Barfield and Lewis are well noted, their approaches to allegory (as to much else) are more similar than different, especially when placed in the context of the greater critical world, rife with the myopia of the modern idolatry of positivism. Lewis begins his history of allegory by remarking that the concept of allegory is not properly a medieval idea; rather it is inherent in "the very nature of thought and language" (Lewis 44). The equating of happiness with the height of heaven and bright sunlight, and misery with depths and darkness, are so ubiquitous that the question of the "*ultimate* origins" of allegory is futile: "To ask how these married pairs of sensibles and insensibles first came together would be great folly; the real question is how they ever came apart . . ." (44). He then declines any attempt to explore this idea further, instead footnoting the reader to "See Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction*" (44 n2). I suppose few readers of Lewis's famous study have followed this suggestion, but those who have cannot fail to notice that though Lewis perhaps does not explore the evolution of consciousness in detail, he has somewhat deceived his readers by claiming that this program is "beyond the province" of his mere history of the love allegory, for Barfield's theories color themes and readings in many parts of this study. (Perhaps it is also worth remembering that this is the book Lewis dedicated: "To Owen Barfield, wisest and best of my unofficial teachers.")

Lewis's *The Allegory of Love* culminates with his reading of *The Faerie Queene*. In considering it "as a consciously allegorical poem," Lewis defends Spenser's epic against those critics who reject the allegory as the "fatal discrepancy" of "a man who preached Protestantism while his imagination remained on the side of Rome . . . a poet entirely dominated by the senses who believed himself to be an austere moralist" (321-2). Lewis's defense of Spenser's allegory rests on the claim that "allegory exists . . . in the region of the mind where" the division of symbol and meaning has not yet occurred (323). And here again Barfield is undoubtedly behind— or at least right beside— Lewis's thought, for what is being mapped in this analysis is Spenser's moment in the evolution of consciousness, a moment literally on the boundary between a consciousness with a remnant of original participation and the fully suppressed camera-consciousness of modern experience. Indeed, throughout *The Faerie Queene*, we find a modern text that presents major characters (and so also the reader) as gazing on objects in defined space, constructing a modern sense of shifting narrative perspectives. Yet by writing a "consciously allegorical poem" Spenser constantly reminds the reader that consciousness cannot escape its participated construction. In this sense, Spenser's epic is a pivotal text on the cusp on modern consciousness that warns against the dangers of buying into the idolatry of positivism, that is, accepting the externalized representations as core reality, and that points the reader toward "final participation"— the active use of imaginative mythopoesis to fuse the qualities of participation and perspective.⁴

Well, we have hardly left time for the inheritor, and deep admirer, of both Spenser and Shakespeare hinted at in the title of this paper: our dear friend and guide John Milton. Perhaps a few points will make this part of the program obvious. Barfield's discussion about the "architectural element" that pervades Milton's poetry, "but hardly in Chaucer or Shakespeare"

(*Poetic Diction* 96-8), marks Milton as the great epic poet after the complete suppression of participation, and *Paradise Lost* the first epic that, having finally shaken off the dynamic presence of participation, begins the new role of poet to wield creative mythopoesis toward the development of final participation. Reading Milton after Spenser, one cannot help but be struck by an extreme difference—at least on the poetic surface. Milton's presentation is smoothly fitted to a modern sensibility. Satan, in particular, is so startling because he is so poignantly identifiable with the foibles of "feet of clay" humanity: the laughably grandiose pride, the almost nauseating political machinations that make him truly a reflex of Shakespeare's Richard III, the snarling lust for the snap of violence, but also the biting self-incrimination and self-doubt so easily parlayed into petty meanness by insipid, banal sophistry. Yet, can we really deny the allegorical nature of this portrait? Does the richness of the verisimilitude fool us so much that we follow the arch-deceiver into his own naïve insistence on sophist rebellion against all meaning? In many essential ways, *Paradise Lost* is, indeed, a replacement for the Mystery Cycles that were violently suppressed in Shakespeare's youth, but one that also fulfills Milton's youthful desire to follow Spenser into Epic and pays homage to the Bard by a displaced theatricality more gracefully marked than muted. Indeed, as in the Mystery Cycles, we have in *Paradise Lost* the foundational cultural mythology reassessed and reasserted in written epic, tuned to the internalized, individual reader, but still inscribing the ancient power of performance, and couched in a narrative style that both claims a voice beyond the Arc of Time, yet anachronistically breaks into the moment to address the conceptualized audience with everything from prophetic profundity to cynical political swipes—and even the poignant personal moment of self-inscription, doubt, and disquiet in the re-invocation in Book VII. Here is the mythic, the allegorical, and the internalized-isolated perceiver all wrapped together in a poetic line that flows

with the iambs of natural speech but never ceases to frame itself as poetry. For the great poet of the revolution desires freedom only from the *mockery* of meaning, the *false* authority of hegemony, the inexcusable violence of power, not the deception of the vacated, sloganistic absolute freedom that continues to mar the naïve idealism of the modern world. What instead? A fierce adherence to the reality of meaning as an inheritance, not a given, and the rigorous pursuit of that inheritance. Barfield shows us: Final Participation will be hard earned against the destructive power of the positivist idolatry— a sense of our own participation in the production of meaning and experience that is neither effaced nor mocked, neither trivialized nor brutalized, but understood *and earned* as the inescapable residence of the soul. Much post-modernist theory insists that we must first do the difficult work of looking back to have any chance of moving forward. Looking back at how the shifts in allegory and theatricality at the cusp of modernity map the origin and trajectory of consciousness may well present us with a path forward to escape the banal hegemony of the idolatry of modern consciousness and rediscover the hidden flame of meaning.

Notes

1. *Four Levels of Meaning in the York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (see Works Cited).
2. See: Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, Ch XIII – “The Texture of Medieval Thought.”
3. Drawn from a forthcoming book: *The Wheel of Fortune, the Arc of Time: Boethian Providence in Shakespeare's History Plays*, by Jefferey & Leslie Taylor.
4. Drawn from the paper, “Shifting Consciousness on the Boundaries of Modernity” by Leslie & Jefferey Taylor, presented by Leslie Taylor at the 47th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, May 2012.

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