

“Can *Life* be Golden? – Gendered Duality in the Evolution of Consciousness”

Dr. Jefferey H. Taylor

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The essential polarity of consciousness made possible other discriminations, other polarities, including inscriptions of gender. Indeed, the essential polarity itself is metaphorically gendered, so if the World is the Mother Goddess, the Self is the male principal. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, the feminine is the *Khora*, the matrix of space to be filled by the masculine principal, which is the inscribing *pneuma* or spirit—and this text is the source for evolving polarities of gender metaphor for centuries in the Western world. Post-modern feminists have addressed this very problem in several poignant ways. For Kristeva, the Fall in Genesis inscribes the differentiation of an anterior semiotics and the emergence of the symbolic, indeed language itself, imposing form on the semiotic.

All converge on the problematic of space, which innumerable religions of matriarchal (re)appearance attribute to “woman” and which Plato . . . designated as the *aporia* of the *chora*, matrix space nourishing, unnamable, anterior to the One, to God, and consequently, defying metaphysics. (qtd. in Fayad 439)

Other post-modern critics map similar polarities. This would seem to describe the emergence of consciousness from the polarizing of Self and World. Yet, in much post-modern theory there is an inevitable strain of modern consciousness in the description that mutes the evolution of participation as if the suppressed camera-consciousness was the immediate product.

Quoting the above passage from Kristeva, Mona Fayad unpacks this as meaning that “the semiotic is based on a *spatial* dimension of existence, which creates out of the world a location that replaces the matrix of space. Thus the fall displaces this space in order to enter the realm of the symbolic. . .” (439). Then drawing from Irigaray, Fayad notes this emergence as “the patriarchal realm,” defined as specifically male and hegemonic “where the phallus functions . . . as the guarantee of sense(s), the ‘figure,’ the ‘form,’ the ultimate signifier” (qtd. in Fayad 439-40). From a Barfieldian perspective, the important insight arising from this gendered discourse is the realization of the inherent hegemony of figuration itself; hence, the idolatry of camera-consciousness is tenaciously entrenched and gives rise to racist and other ethnocentric attitudes alongside the inherent sexism by promoting the insistence that the common figurations are not collective representations but direct apprehensions of a sacrosanct realism. Yet, this unpacking of the hegemony of figuration might also mollify the fraught nature of much post-modern feminist discourse. For the demon in the works is not an inherent pig-headed bias in all things male and Western, but rather the idolatry of camera-consciousness that, indeed, inscribes, modifies, and often violently imposes, a Western male bias, both symbolically and, too often, politically. However, only by interrogating the evolution of consciousness can we truly identify the source of this bias and thereby find productive paths to its resolution.

Fayad’s ruminations on post-modern feminism frames her analysis of Jean Rhys’s acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a text that by rewriting *Jane Eyre* promotes a post-modern as well as a post-colonial re-contextualizing of meaning. Indeed, both the strength and weakness of Bronte’s text reside in its fierce inscribing of “the truth” against the lies of hegemony, yet the suppression of Rochester’s fraught, hidden truth, his deranged woman in the attic, is undoubtedly a locus for uncovering exactly what “the truth” of modern figuration suppresses. This is easily

represented by those who suffer most from the suppression of participation because they cannot conform to the hegemony of the prevailing figurations and their normative interpretation. And, indeed, Fayad senses the evolution of consciousness in the degeneration of the feminine principal, citing Nebeker's description of "the processes whereby the Great Mother becomes sister to the god, wife of the god, mother of the god, becomes Mary the Virgin mother, becomes lady to be worshipped, becomes, finally, prostitute and temptress to be reviled with hatred" (Nebeker qtd. in Fayad 438).

There is a similar linking of the degeneration of the feminine with the evolution of objective consciousness in Barfield's *Eager Spring*, but also a focus on inverting the evolutionary direction of the polarity to reverse the degeneration and move consciousness toward Final Participation. Vi's discourse relationship with Herapath, including her introduction to Steiner's anthroposophy, complements her academic studies on allegory, and leads her to an understanding of the dynamic in the polarity which drives the evolution of consciousness. Her attempt to explain these ideas to Leo is part of Barfield's attempt to explain this dynamic to the typical mind trapped in the modern idolatry.

"Can't you see? The change of direction – our private consciousness, all subjective experience, given to us long ago by Nature, drawn from the life of Nature like water from a sponge. That was what the myths were doing, and at the end the sponge was left dry and falling to pieces. And that now we have to give back what we have got; that was what allegory was beginning to do, only it didn't know it. But it's also what Harry is trying to do in his very practical way." (40-1)

Harry Coppard's practical way is to plant trees, and in the process he revives Eager Spring. Yet the Spring, though brought back to life by Harry's new trees, is almost immediately

contaminated by the poisonous world of focused, empirical science and the concomitant idolatry of financial profit at the expense of ecological sanity. Harry's task is paralleled by the Earth Lovers movement that Vi gets caught up in, and though such efforts are necessary to heal Nature, they will never be sufficient while the idolatry of camera-conscious dominates the modern mind.

Vi begins to understand that the gendering of discourse in the allegory is linked with the gendering of the polarity both back in the emergence of consciousness from Original Participation and forward to the denigrating objectification of Nature and the feminine. The modern world is marked by a violent domination of Nature and by violent anti-feminine attitudes, both arising from the objectifying of consciousness, and both resulting in brutality directed toward women, children, and the environment. Yet, Vi begins to perceive the allegory, rejected by the modern idolatry, as the key to a reversal, a recovery.

Round and round they still went, the uncertain thoughts, driven by their frustrated impulse to sprout. This time the *Romaunt of the Rose*, *Amour Courtois* and the *Fedeli d'Amore* joined in the circus: Earth-lovers! Did they really love it? What was the meaning of love? . . . Was it even possible for her and her contemporaries to "love" the earth or anything earthy, as distinct from desiring to consume it? Had love itself been 'polluted'? Promptly then her historian's instinct joined in the melee. *Amour Courtois* — was that what it had all been *about*? The change of direction, the fading of divinity from the phenomenal world including the bodies of men and women — the call on human will and human feeling to restore it from within. The end of the Iron Age and the beginning of its erosive sequelae. Had they without knowing it — the Provençal singers and lovers, the troubadours, Dante and his circle — been pioneering that restoration? (48-9)

Indeed, these links had been stirring in her mind for some time and resonating with her own fraught relationship, as a woman, to her empirically minded, perennially distracted, modern husband, Leo. Ruminating on their relationship problems leads Vi to reconsider the meaning of the courtly love allegory:

If Leonard felt it more, Vi was the one who thought about it. The unease, the uncertainty even, as to precisely what 'it' was, kept coming back into her mind at any time when it was not preoccupied, and sometimes even when it was.

Inevitably her attempts to fathom the gulf between them linked themselves with the convictions and still more with the speculations arising from her studies. She tried to get them to throw some light on it. She even went so far on one occasion as to ask herself whether she had anything to learn from the attitude to the sexual relation that transpired through the *amour courtois* tradition. Or was that all over and done with long ago? A line from one of Charles Williams' poems slid into her mind: "The lifting of her eyelash is my Lord". Was she a lady? Was she beautiful? Should she – but this avenue led swiftly to a big laugh at the momentary glimpse it called up of Leo adoring her on his knees. (28-9)

These themes drive the novel and Vi toward two revolutionary acts against the violent hegemony of modern idolatrous figurations: 1) her action with the Earth Lovers to expose the secret poisoning of Eager Spring and various third-world countries; and 2) writing her Conte, which both parallels her struggles and casts light on the beginning of the suppression of participation during the Iron Age and the material rewards but spiritual and ecological losses that accompany this shift from participation to objectivity in consciousness.

This late novel enriches Barfield's discourse on the evolution of consciousness, the gendering of its representation, and the dangerously hegemonic nature of the idolatry, but this is nothing new for Barfield, being part of his life-long program. One of the more interesting poems that interrogate the hegemonic idolatry of strict empiricism is Barfield's "Can Light Be Golden?" which is available in *A Barfield Sampler* (31-2). What the "well-informed" declare about light and sight is parried by the richness and inherent validity of "Those painters of the old Italian school," represented by Cimabue. Barfield reminds us that light is not photons, "light through Newton's hole," but rather the representation of photons which our minds create, "light inbreathed by man's adoring soul," a representation that is as much an inheritance of the artful gaze as it is of the particles that impinge on our visual senses. Moreover, the mild ekphrasis of the poem overtly inscribes a framing that resists the idolatry of positivist epistemology, appropriating the mediated epistemology of Early Modern art and metaphor in a poem purposefully presented in a casual, almost flippant, modern register—that is until the end, when a reversal makes it a courtly love poem with a typically self-effacing conceit that puts the beloved lady back above him using mythic allusion that, again, has ekphrasis resonance to Early Modern paintings of Classical myth—a poetic reversal that employs a gender reversal in the alluded myth: "For now the pagan myth's inverted: she/ (Look up, and see how smilingly it falls!)/ The Shower of Gold; I, wondering Danäe." The "Shower of Gold" is a loved woman, but then also, the Virgin, the Goddess, the Earth, which rather than being solely the object of gaze, pours light back upon the Self, a divine light that "condescending, disentralls!"—for the idolatry is not the intrinsically dominating power it pretends to be, but a thralldom that binds us to the denial of self and objectifying consumption of the other.

Vi's impulse toward courtly desire is legitimate. Any move toward Final Participation must resist the hegemonic idolatry by harnessing the spark of consciousness inherent in earlier art and poetry to reconfigure the gendering of the polarity in ways mutually enriching to both tension ends. It is fitting that the battered Self humbly bend its knee to the divine spark of life, asking to be invited back into the essential communion of mind and creation. True reunification is the goal. "Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 11:11) For only by reuniting the khora and pneuma, the matrix of space and the phallus of inscription, is new life—and new meaning—generated. And only the conscious blending of the polarities, an inversion of the energies of consciousness, will engender Final Participation, a female-male reunification both metaphorical and celestial.

Works Cited

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