

PAN'S "THEATRE OF THE WORLD"

Notes on "Object-Metaphor"

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The Cuban poet José Lezama-Lima suggests that every object aspires to a colossal dimension that, rather than having to do with size, is imaginal, where it can "reach its figuration, triumph over formlessness." "A superior mode of excess, a new creative configuration of men and gods." This could be said to be the aim of Pantheatre's "object-metaphor" work: to realize the colossal figuration of the object-world, to bring Pan back to life in the rocks, bushes and objects that moaned and mourned the announcement of the god's death, and their reduction to "dead matter." Through this "colossal" and "panic" work, both actor and spectator work on object-related, "objective" emotion.

In the *Timaeus* (34c), Plato describes the world as an animal that has a body, a soul and an intellect. In *Timaeus's* words, the creator-god put soul at the center of the universe and then extended it throughout and beyond its confines, as a sky enveloping it. World, anima and animal are overlapping categories in Plato's cosmogony. Our language only differentiates the words "anima" and "animal" by the tail-end of the letter "l". One can hear in the Platonic interplay of these two words that the objects of the world are animals with a soul; that imagination is the animal in the object; that image-making is soul speaking in the world. These are extrapolations that I try to root through object-metaphor work. The actor seeking out imagination enters into an animal rapport with objects; the animal in him will sense the anima in matter; this implies animal moves, animal receptivity. Such an approach to the "theatre of the world" is an education of the "instinct of image," the animal helping us to converse with the colossal soul of the world.

The cosmogony that Plato lays out in the *Timaeus* is followed by a whole section of detailed formulas, of measured combinations of how to dose, mix, blend, compound, compress, suspend, synthesize "nous" and "soma" (all these are his terms). Theatre image-making is a microcosmic reflection of this Platonic "haute cuisine." It brings together "nous" as the breath of poetry, the world of ideas, with physical, visual and vocal matter. It kneads them together in an architecture of fusions, tensions and openings where imagination coagulates.

The French ethnographer Jean Bazin has recently published an article titled "Retour aux choses-dieux" (Return to the things-gods).² The article is based on what are called "bolis": conglomerates of objects used by the Bambara tribes from Mali. In specific ceremonies, bolis are placed in earthenware and sprayed with the blood of animals killed by an officiant. Bazin defines the aim of his article (one could speak here of the "object" of his article) as follows: "I simply want to question the nature, the ontological status of these things: I try to have some idea of what happens when they are thus sprayed with blood."

Bazin uses neither the word "soul" nor "imagination," and his article is precisely about the danger of projecting our Western notions of "soul" and "imagination," through so-called scientific observation, on such ceremonies and cult-objects as the Bambaras' bolis. By calling on Heidegger—his essays on things and thingness—and contemporary French post-modern criticism, Bazin enhances the status of these bolis and demonstrates how they have been diminished by being associated with the derogatory connotations of notions like fetishism, idolatry and animism. He disentangles and in a sense delivers these objects from our Western moralized rational fear of imagination, and of its ambivalent polysemic potential.

I have often spoken harshly of what I have referred to as "anthropological esthetics" in theatre. By this I refer to the excessive veneration paid to exotic non-Western rituals and to the model of the shaman in the imagination of acting, models that come mainly from the credentials of anthropology.

Anthropology combines the fascination of exotic and reputedly authentic religious phenomena with the detachment of scientific observation. If I here call on Jean Bazin's article, it is precisely because of the way in which he questions his own field and the lenses it has used to serve and to fascinate itself.

The notion of fetishism turns imagination into a religious pathology; the fetish thing, by being turned into a replacement idol, loses its autonomous imaginal identity, its thing-ness. According to Bazin, one does not ask a boli "what do you represent?" In itself a boli is seen as a singular object, a thing-god. A boli is not a symbol re-presenting a god or a genius hidden somewhere in the bushes. Nor is it a tabernacle enclosing a hidden or invisible being. These are speculations that come out of the observers' spirit/matter dichotomy. The "symbolic" and the "tabernacle" approaches turn out to be the prevalent ones one encounters in theatre object exercises. Actors construct and get caught in scenarios that are based on these premises, like the ethnographers whose theories Bazin deconstructs.

The first question one asks a boli is "what are you made of?" The answer is in sensual perception, in physical engagement. One does not search the object for symbols, but for the immediate images of its material presence. The more a boli acquires a unique, singular status, the more "god" it is. Similarly in object-metaphor work: the more an actor recognizes and respects the individual thingness of the object, the more in touch he comes with its soul. Imagination rises from the detailed perception of the object's singularity, its texture, patina, articulation, location, scars, awkwardness, its character and the tangible memory it has accrued on itself. Such an encounter moves imagination. The actor then deploys the object's colossal figuration; he is moved by its will. When this occurs, object and image are one, in the same manner that Bazin says that thing and god are one, and the onlooker perceives its metaphorical power or mana and is "showered by a rain of metaphors."

Bazin actually speaks of the "process of individuation" of a boli—of how it acquires individual god nature: "the principle that presides over its production is of individuation, not of representation. It is a question of "constantly engendering a new singular body" (264), of becoming a "thing-person" (266).

The process of spilling blood onto the boli is central to the individuation process. According to Bazin, the sacrificial model does not apply to these ceremonies, since the blood is not offered to an absent or represented deity. The blood directly enhances the presence of the object which gets "charged, so to speak, with enormous metaphorical power." Rather than using terms like "transference" or "projection," Bazin suggests that a term like "transfusion" would be more appropriate. Similarly in object-metaphor work: if there is any sense in which the term "sacrifice" can be used, it is in the relinquishing of personal subjective imaginations. As a form of transfer it is an exorcising of the actor's subjectivity by the "thing-god." One offers one's metaphorical blood to it, like to the souls in the Underworld.³

With bolis, "we are rather on the side of mystic devotion: the divine is not only felt affectively, but materially manipulated, in the same beatitude of the immediate" (270). Here is another phrase that seems to come straight out of an object-metaphor theatre session! The mechanics of engagement imply setting the object into motion and emotion: waking it up, animating it. Correct engagement is at the heart of this imaginal craft. Bazin reports that, among the Bambara, one does not speak of acquiring or buying a boli, "one marries it" (266)! And to qualify the type of marriage involved, he states that "...in no case is it the material mass that is being 'adored,' but a sufficiently complex body so as to be held as more individual than the human ego itself" (266).

But, at this point there is a strong ambivalence about words like "animation," or even more "manipulation." The latter word has strong connotations of cheating, misappropriation, prestidigitation, manufacturing illusion, fake. Similarly, animation can connote Walt Disney or the craft and psychology of masks or puppet work, the latter two being but one aspect of object-metaphor.

What I would like to elaborate on, and which links back to my reserves about “anthropological esthetics,” is the fact that we are speaking theatre, artifice, fiction, agreed illusion, and not so-called authentic or pure religious phenomena. We are talking of the actor, the “showman in the shaman”⁴ or even the charlatan. Furthermore, by describing this work in terms of baroque esthetics, I accentuate its artificial, “synthetic” aspect.

Bazin mentions “mystic devotion” and “beatitude of the immediate,” and, no doubt, there is an atmosphere of religiosity in first approaches to object-metaphor exercises. Of necessity, neophytes to this work, in questioning and discovering other dimensions of imagination, do link back, or reconnect, with religious patterns of creation. Yet, since we are in theatre, the trickster and the miraculous are intertwined. The hermetic element is ever present as an awareness of fiction or metaphorical commerce. Irony and play are an integral part of imagination, and, beyond reverential first approaches, the actor enters into a highly complex and ambivalent dialogue with things-gods. Image-making becomes a complicity, often irreverent and sacrilegious, involving even, to paraphrase Bazin, negative transfusions, demystification.

On Technique and Titanic Teachers

Let us now return to the fabulous Neoplatonic philosophies and, more specifically, to the Orphic fables on the dismemberment of Dionysus that so fascinated Proclus. Proclus read the passage on the “anima mundi” that I quoted earlier from the *Timaeus* as Plato’s interpretation of the allegedly earlier Orphic tales on Dionysus. In this lineage of thought, which we know to be outside historical logic, imagination speaks through fabulous allegorical spirals. I will further confabulate on these and cast some mytho-poetical light on the technical aspect of “objectmetaphor” work. I wish to give the word “technique” a fabulous, soul-making dimension. More than ever, at this point it is necessary to hold together mythological speculation and practical, manual exercising, blood and psyche, fantasy and object.

The Orphic story tells of the dismemberment of the infant Dionysus by the Titans at the instigation of the goddess Hera. Proclus saw in the scattered members of the god the multiple ubiquity of Plato’s “anima mundi,” and he saw in the preservation of the infant’s heart the soul’s unity; the Dionysian heart remained unaffected by the cruelty of the Titans. I associate the Titans with technique: they are the fabulous technicians, the mythical surgeons that operate the dismemberment and scatter soul into the world. Without them, Dionysus, reputed to be the god of theatre, would have remained a baby-god, and imagination would have remained in the crib, identified with the infant, as it remains for so many today. Titanic cruelty tears this baby-imagination apart, boils it, and casts it out into the world. The egocentric, unified imaginal body of the infant is torn into its different components, differentiated. Titans were said to have souls of steel, which fits our image of technique: the hard, arid, steel-like, analytic dissociation drills that actors are put through in “object-metaphor” exercises are a titanic endeavor, tearing apart the infant’s subjective vision, its innocent wholesome body, so that it may see the world, and even his own members, as “other.” These are exercises that tear movement away from language, separate voice expression from words. They are based on principles of syncopation, counterpoint, differentiation, conversion, often seeking the poetics of contradiction. They frustrate illustration, emphasis, global unified energy, and tear into the fabric of fiction in order to reassemble complex synthetic images. Titanic dissociative techniques are the basic tools toward baroque solutions.

On Deadpan Allegories

To round up this fantasy exegesis on the Orphic Titans, some remarks on the Dionysian heart, on the infant’s playpen, and on the role of Hera. There is much to be said about the survival of the heart of

Dionysus in these tales and on the reunification of the god by Apollo. I would like to simply point out that, within titanic technology, the heart of the matter must remain alive while the body of theatre is being torn apart. Proclus identifies the “intelligent heart” with Plato’s universal intellect. James Hiliman devoted a recent Eranos lecture to “The Thought of the Heart.” The titanic nature of dismemberment disseminates Dionysian imagination and inseminates the world with soul. Within this process of disjunction, explosion, separation, there must remain at the center a presence of mind that is heartfelt. The heart irrigates the soul in the world, gives it its *semantic blood*. Without this thoughtful heart, we are in a universe of aleatoric surrealism, meaningless drama, a random cosmogony of imagination. A lot of contemporary theatre is nothing but “deadpan allegories.”

A few remarks now on objects as toys, the world as playground. The Titans lure the infant Dionysus through a collection of toy-objects. Titanic dismemberment is preceded by game. Playful animation is a prerequisite to a heartfelt dismemberment, a stage where objects are caught in the realm of game, a playful soulfulness. Imagination has an infant, animal, playful heart which must precede and survive titanic dismemberment, like the fascinating games that kittens play with woolen balls.

My last remark on this Orphic fantasy pertains to the role of Hera. She commissions the murder, the child’s titanic dismemberment. Within this perspective, we encounter the so-called bad stepmother (and Hera has tended to get very bad press from all quarters, from the advocates of family to feminists and artists)—we encounter Hera as the figure behind the maturing, soul-creating titanic operation. Maybe her ruthless cruelty is necessary to break up the Zeus—Dionysus father—infant protective bond, necessary in order to recognize soul in the world. Until one has come to terms with the Titans and the so-called bad mother, one remains an eternal Cinderella, and the “Theatre of the World” will not move out of the infant’s playground, a sweet pumpkin fairytale.

On Baroque Giants

The seventeenth-century Spanish Jesuit Baltazar Gracián places the notion of “disenchantment” at the heart of baroque esthetics. Re-ensouling the world, on the other hand, is often referred to as the “re-enchancement” of the world, making the soul in the world sing again. This enthusiastic, romantic tradition of enchantment sees soul in the natural beauty of the world, like Saint Francis talking to the birds and flowers, as paraclitic divine manifestations. Gracián’s seems to be a fallen, decadent universe, while the Franciscan vision links up with the rediscovery of the soul in the world, the enthusiasm of a re-birth, a Renaissance. These are two seemingly opposite “Theatres of the World.” One presents a lively miracle, the other a deadly metaphorism. Both are essential for a full simultaneous apprehension of the baroque notion of imagination that I wish to convey: the conjunction of titanic metaphorical dispossession while keeping intact the enthusiastic, bloodful heart. Baroque images seek the tensions and paradoxes that can contain such abysmal disparities. In the performance “Hercules: Twelve Baroque Labors,” the mythic hero confronts through muscular enthusiasm the theatre of object-metaphor, completely missing the point. The result is both comic and pathetic, for after all he represents our own egos desperately fighting the metaphor of death. Through his heroic failures he allows us a tragic insight into the otherness of the imagination of the world. This baroque Hercules, like the Neapolitan Farnese statue of him, is a heavy, melancholic, depressed figure pondering the futility of his life’s labors.

The Farnese Hercules is a baroque giant, like that other figure whose point of view we might profit considering: Goliath. Michelangelo’s colossal struggles are the turning point of the Renaissance—his saturnine gigantic efforts exhaust a certain imagination. They weigh down the youthful, enthusiastic Renaissance, of which the figure of David, the young intrepid shepherd boy, is in many ways the emblem. Mannerism and Baroque art turn in titanic compassion to the decadent, heavy, anchoring figures of Goliath and Hercules, to their disenchanting insight. A figure who is literally caught in this dilemma is Calderón de la Barca’s Sigismundo, a giant of vitality, imprisoned in the play “Life Is a

Dream.” From his dark cell, from his torn soul, come some of the most glorious celebrations of nature. I am thinking of the central speech on the freedom of the bird, the fish, the beast, the stream: a song that rises from the heart of baroque disenchantment, where Calderón describes a wild animal, a baroque version of Plato’s anima(l)—a daring and cruel beast whose fur markings were painted by divine brush strokes to reflect the constellations of the stars.

1. José Lezama-Lima, “Introducción a un Sistema Poético,” in *El Reino de la Imagen* (Venezuela, Biblioteca Ayacucho). My translation.
2. Jean Bazin, “Retour aux choses-dieux,” in ‘Corps des dieux,’ in *Le temps de la réflexion* 7 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986). My translations.
3. In a recent talk, James Hillman stressed how infernal images seek embodiment—as in the *Odyssey* where the souls of Hades came out seeking blood. They give voices to our fantasies: talking alone aloud.
4. From a lecture by Charles Boer on “The Actor of Trois Frères,” normally called the “sorcerer” or “shaman.”
5. “Hercules: Twelve Baroque Labors,” 1986, a solo performance created with Francois Didier.