5. Theatrical Metaphors

In the work of Plato’s old age, the Laws, we read: “May we not regard every living being as a puppet of the gods, which may be their plaything only, or may be created with a purpose?” (I, 644 e). And later: “Man is made to be the plaything of God, and this, truly considered, is the best of him” (VII, 805 c). In the Philebus (50 b) Plato speaks of the “tragedy and comedy of life.” In these profound thoughts, which in Plato still lie the bloom of their first creation, lie the seeds of the idea of the world as a stage upon which men play their parts, their motions directed by God. In the popular lectures on philosophy (“diatribes”) of the Cynics, the comparison of man to an actor became a much-used cliché.24 Horace (Sat., II, 7, 81) sees man as a puppet. The idea “minus vitae” became proverbial. Thus Seneca writes (Ep., 80, 7): “hie humanae vitae minus, qui nobis partes, quas male agamus, adsignat.” Similar ideas are found in primitive Christianity. Paul (1 Cor. 49, 9) says of the Apostles that God appointed them to death as a spectacle (θητριον) for the world, angels, and men. Here the idea in mind is not the stage but the Roman circus. We find a related concept in Clement of Alexandria: “For from Zion will go forth the law and the word of the Lord of Jerusalem, the divine word, the true fighter for the prize, who gains the crown of victory on the theater of the whole world” (Hortatory Address to the Heathen, I, 1, 3 — Clemens Schriften, übersetzt von Stéhlin, I [1934], 73). Here the cosmos is seen as a stage. In Augustine (Enarr. ad ps., 137) we read: “Here on earth it is as if children should say to their parents: ‘Come, think of departing hence; we too would play our comedy! For nought but a comedy of the race of man is all this life, which leads from temptation to temptation.’” Augustine’s pagan contemporary, the Egyptian Palladas, has the same thought, with a different ethical point, in a beautifully turned epigram (A.P., X, 72):

Σκηνή πᾶς ὁ βιος καὶ παλαινον, ἡ μάθεις παιζεν

Τὴν ἀστυδὴν μεταθεῖς, ἣ γέρο τὰς δόλους.

“All life is a stage and a game: either learn to play it, laying by seriousness, or bear its pains.”

As we see: the metaphor “world-stage,” like so many others, reached the

[* Trans. B. Jowett.]
[24 Rudolf Helm, Lukian und Menipp (1906).]
[† Trans. J. W. Mackail.]
Middle Ages both from pagan Antiquity and the Christian writers. Both sources mingled in late Antiquity. When Boethius says “haec vitae scena,” we hear Seneca in it, and also Cicerō (“cum in vita, tum in scena”; Cato minor, 18, 65). The Latin poetry of the early Middle Ages echoes it in turn: “secil huius in seca” (Carm. cant., p. 97, l. 15). Yet the comparison is rare in this period. But in the twelfth century it is influentially revived by one of the leading minds of the age: John of Salisbury. In his chief work, the Polioeraticus, published in 1159 (ed. Webb, I, 190), he quotes from Petronius (§ 80):

_Grex agit in scena minum, pater ille vocatur,
Filius hic, nomen divitis ille tenet;
Mox ubi ridendas inclusit pagina partes,
Vera redit facies, dissimulata perit._

(The troop is on the stage, the mime begins: One is
Called father, one his son, a third the rich man;
But soon the page is closed upon their humorous parts,
The real face reappears, the assumed has vanished.)

This text contains the useful application: “Learn from the actor that outward splendor is but empty show, and that after the end of the play the personages keep their real countenances.” But what does the medieval philosopher and humanist make of this line? He immediately appends a chapter which he entitles, “De mundana comedia vel tragedia.” The old, threadbare actor simile here becomes the conceptual framework for a comprehensive critique of the age. Job, our author says, called life a “term of war service.” 26 Had he foreseen the present, he would have said: “Comedia est vita hominis super terram.” For everyone forgets his part and plays another. John is willing to leave it undecided whether life is to be called a comedy or a tragedy, if the reader will merely grant him “quod esse totus mundus iuxta Petronium exercent histriionem.” 26 The stage of this immense tragedy or comedy is the world. In John’s next chapter, the heroes of virtue are praised. With God and the angels, they look down from eternity upon the tragi-comic business of the world-stage. John revivified the old metaphor by a detailed treatment (it extends through two chapters). In addition, he combined its separate elements, which usually occur singly, into a general view. He finds his starting point in the moralizing commonplace rehearsed by Petronius. The first extension of the horizon is achieved by a comparison with the text from Job. The conception is then deepened by pondering the question: tragedy or comedy? It is again enlarged by the

26 In the Vulgate Job 7:1 runs: “Militia est vita hominis super terram.” Luther’s translation reads otherwise [as does the A.V.].
26 The attempt has been made to reconstruct a fragment of Petronius from this passage. But Buecheler (critical ed. of Petronius, [1862], p. 95) is undoubtedly right when he says that the passage is John’s free rendering of the lines quoted.
extension of the stage to the entire world. Finally a new enlargement—and the last: from earth to heaven. There sit the spectators of the terrestrial play: God and the heroes of virtue. The *semissa vitae* has thus become a *theatrum mundi*. The idea that God assembles virtuous men about him would seem to have stemmed from Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*, of which work John’s expressions in Chapter 9 are also often reminiscent, except that the concept of the world-theater is entirely lacking there. But the harmonizing of Christian doctrine and Cicconian wisdom is a characteristic tendency of the Christian Humanism which the European North brought to flower in the twelfth century.

The *Policraticus* was very widely circulated throughout the Middle Ages, as library catalogues testify. But it was much read in later times too. We know that it was printed in 1476, 1513 (once in Paris, once in Lyon), 1595, 1624, 1639, 1664, 1677. If the metaphor *theatrum mundi* frequently reappears in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the popularity of the *Policraticus* would seem to have had a great deal to do with it.

Let us look around Europe in the sixteenth century. We begin in Germany, and come upon—Luther. As Erich Seeberg (*Grundzüge der Theologie Luthers* [1940], 179), sets forth, *Luther* employs the “extraordinarily bold” expression “God’s play” for what takes place in justification. For Luther all of profane history is a “puppet play of God’s.” In history we see only God’s “masks” at work—that is, heroes like Alexander or Hannibal . . . Seeberg would derive these formulas from Master Eckhart. But they belong to the common stock of tradition.

We proceed to France. The year is 1564. The court is celebrating the carnival at Fontainebleau. A comedy has just been played. We hear the epilogue, written by Ronsard. It begins:

```plaintext
Ici la Comédie apparaît un exemple
Où chacun de son fait les actions contemple:
Le monde est un théâtre, et les hommes acteurs.
La Fortune qui est maitresse de la scène
Apprête les habits, et de la vie humaine
Les cieux et les destins en sont les spectateurs.
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A *theatrum mundi*, then, with men as actors, Fortune as the stage director, and Heaven as spectator.

We proceed to England. 1599—in London the Globe Theatre has just been opened. The new building displays the motto, “*Totus mundus agit histrionem.*” One of the first plays to have its original production here is Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. In this play (II, 7), occurs Jacques’ famous speech in which the world is equated with a stage (“All the world’s a stage”) and the “seven ages” with the seven acts of a human life. A recent editor, G. B. Harrison (in *The Penguin Shakespeare* [1937]) comments on this: “This is Shakespeare’s little essay on the motto of the new Globe Theatre which the company had just occupied.” And whence comes this
motto? Not from Petronius, as some writers have averred, but from the
Policriticus, except only that the “exercitio” of the latter is changed to
“agit.” Whoever was responsible for the display of this motto, then, knew
the Policriticus—which had had a new edition in 1595. The Globe Thea-
Tre, then, was under the banner of the medieval English humanist.

We pass to Spain and the seventeenth century. Don Quixote (Part II,
ch. 12) explains to his squire the similarity between a play and the life of
man. When the play is over and the costumes taken off, the actors are all
equal. Even so men in death. “A splendid comparison,” Sancho replies,
“though not so new that I have not heard it many a time before.” Thus
does Cervantes make fun of a literary cliche. Witty—indirect—mockery
of a fashionable rhetorical ornament: That is the first form in which the
theatrical metaphor meets us in the Spain of the seventeenth century—in
the country and the period in which Calderón’s genius will run its brilliant
course. Rightly has Vossler pointed out that the comparison of the life of
man to a play was a commonplace in the Spain of the siglo de oro.

The second chapter of Baltasar Gracián’s Criticón (1651 ff.) bears the
title, El gran teatro del universo. Here, however, there is no question of the
theater, the chapter treats of Nature as the stage of life (cosmos as page-
ant). But the name which, above all others, must be named, is Calderón.
His too is a mind of the most subtle culture and the most comprehensive
literary education. He is a virtuoso, if you like; but a virtuoso who is at the
same time a child and a genius; a deeply pious artist. The theatrum mundi
makes part of the permanent stock of his conceptual world, though with
iridescent changes in meaning. In his best-known play, La vida es sueño,
the imprisoned Prince Segismundo speaks of the theater of the world,
spokes of it in dream, and, himself a prisoner, gives it the meaning of the
wide world of reality (ed. Keil, I, 16 b):

Selga a la anchurosa plaza
Del gran teatro del mundo
Este valor sin segundo . . .

(Note let this valor unseconded
Go forth upon the wide extent
Of the great theater of the world.)

Taken as a whole, Calderón’s work has the scope of a world-stage, since
his characters act their parts before a cosmic background (Keil, I, 19 a):

El dosel de la jura, reducido
A segunda intención, a horror segundo,
Teatro funesto es, donde importuna
Representa tragedias la fortuna.
Jedermann (1911), a "play of the death of the rich man." God, angels, and devils appear. Allegorical figures such as Death and Faith take part. And the figure around whom the whole play revolves is not a named hero, but the nameless Everyman—man, entangled in the terrestrial and now set before God's judgment seat. This mystery play was produced in Salzburg, in the cathedral square. With his Everyman, Hofmannsthal had conjured up a timeless Middle Ages and had set foot on the road to metaphysical drama. Following it further, he could not but encounter Calderón. From that encounter came the Grosse Salzburger Wallittheater ("Great Salzburg Theater of the World"; 1921). Upon this, and likewise suggested by Calderón, followed Der Turm ("The Tower"; 1925) and Semiramis (published as a posthumous fragment in 1933). These works are not "adaptations" of plays by Calderón, but new creations of the "integrating imagination." The seminal force was the psychological compulsion to reawaken in poetry the intellectual tradition of Europe, which catastrophes had destroyed. Conception was brought about by contact with material from that tradition. This was made possible by the insight that all intellectual substance which has been given form can in turn become the material of new creations: "Actually, nothing has been done when an epoch has brought forth intellectual products; then is the time when something ought to be done." The higher always comes into existence through integration. "Every higher thing is of necessity a composite. The higher man is the union of several men, the higher work of poetry, if it is to be produced, demands several poets in one." Hofmannsthal felt himself to be the heir of the Hapsburg tradition, whose foci in the seventeenth century were Madrid and Vienna.

The poetry of the Spanish period of florescence was untouched by the classicistic literary systems of France and Italy. Artistically, and for its conception of the world, it drew from the unexhausted wealth of a tradition which had never broken with the Middle Ages. It preserved the substance of the Christian West. In history it saw an "archive of the ages" in which the peoples of all times and places had entered their memories. Kings and heroes, martyrs and peasants, are actors on the great stage of the world. Immortal powers intervene in destiny. Over everything arches the dispensation of divine mercy and wisdom.

Calderón was free to create in a world whose monarchical and Catholic structure still stood firm and indeed seemed unshakable. The beginnings of the collapse of state and nation were concealed beneath dynastic and ecclesiastical pomp and display. Hofmannsthal's historical situation is the very reverse. He found himself born into a world decomposed by materialism and relativism. As a grown man he had to live through its dissolution to its catastrophic end. His task—an almost superhuman task—was to descend again to the "persisting root of things"—to find curative virtues in the buried treasures of tradition; finally, to set up eidosions of a restored world again. It was his deepest insight "that life becomes livable only through valid ties." To cleanse and illuminate these ties once again—that
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was his task, his painful and laborious mission in this world: tie between man and wife in marriage; tie between people and rulers in the state; tie between man and God in time and eternity. Upon this road the wisdom of Asia

could be a station and a symbol—but not home and solution. These could be found only in the revelation which had gone forth to West and East—in Christianity. To this Hofmannsthal was directed by the tradition of his people and his native soil; by his Neo-Platonic cast of thought; by a secret call which he could not but follow. When Hofmannsthal wished to connect his Christian plays to a great tradition, it could only be to the tradition of Calderón.

From the Middle Ages and the Spanish drama Hofmannsthal took, not local color but that timeless European mythology which he has revealed to us: "There is a certain timeless European mythology: names, concepts, figures, with which a higher meaning is bound up, personified forces of the moral or mythical order. This mythological firmament spans all the older Europe." But reaching back to this older Europe was, in Hofmannsthal’s eyes, a matter which extended far beyond poetry and the drama. It was but a symbol within an immense historical process, which Hofmannsthal saw coming: "an inner countermovement against that intellectual revolution of the sixteenth century which in its two aspects we are accustomed to call the Renaissance and the Reformation . . ."

29 In Semianus.