Itinerant Spectator/Itinerant Spectacle

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Ann Pellegrini, an apt name for an itinerant spectator, wonders about the derision that comes so quick to the pen of the secular non-humanists as they write condescendingly of those deluded by forms of religious feeling, of religious emotion; Pellegrini finds the automatic response suspect. The United States is a hard place to be subtle about god and those who claim to be his followers. Yet, fervour makes the heart beat faster and the desire to serve informs actions not solely undertaken out of duty, or political extremism, or fear of eternal punishment.

Pellegrini’s work comes to mind as this book lingers at its last threshold, stands on its last hill hoping you the reader stand here by me seeing what I outline, hearing what I make voluble, and then seeing and hearing other soundmarks/landmarks in the distance that come into audible and visual focus because of your own history as an itinerant spectator or perhaps out of the gifts given to the novice who participates.

In a discussion after a panel where performance scholars Joe Kelleher and Nick Ridout had both read/spoken papers about spectating, on the day after I had heard Pellegrini’s talk and on the day of the performance we would be involved in
together, I lay on the floor listening to the papers and suddenly found myself transported back to my adolescent days of religious longing, of the desire to know god, of the goal to be truly good and of use in the world, to the world. Why were those memories happening now, I wondered? So I stood up to formulate a question.

First I responded to the speakers, saying how much I always enjoyed borrowing their ways of seeing and hearing performance, how they convey by conjured phrases the care and attention not just to what happened but also to the mistakes and the overinterpreting natural to the willing participant of a theatrical or performative experience, the way they can tell and then amend, the way they can use the practice of narration to build towards the revelations, the surprises, the... conversions.

And that was it, that is what I said and what I think of now. How entangled all this is with my desire to honour W.G. Sebald’s method of staging memory in the flux of the partially recalled and the vividly recounted. What he says of his friend Austerlitz, ghost or spectator manqué that he may be, counts for his own writing: “From the first I was astonished by the way Austerlitz put his ideas together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events to life.”

So in the collision of Pellegrini, Kelleher and Ridout, I suddenly thought of those books I had read in the fervour of religious desire. First the entertaining ones, Lives of the Saints, which of course really means the variety of amazing deaths of the saints. And then the instructive, the Confessions, the
Meditations, the Teachings. So posing this to Joe Kelleher and Nick Ridout, Kelleher responded with a phrase so resonant for the many varieties of devotion available in spectating, he said something like, “the theatre is the place I allow myself to go to doubt.” And Ridout added that he too could see the resemblance as he fashions theories based on the solitude of the spectator in the midst of others, certainly a Sebaldian characteristic as well as one of those often lauded in saints.

But I too thought of how I first went to The Wooster Group aware of the hype, of the coolness of those audience members who never missed a Wooster performance, and, horrified by the technology and the restrictions of the work, left. I almost lost two things that night, a lover and a lifelong passion for a group. But wasn’t my leaving fundamental to the conversion narrative that would follow? I have described my experience with the Wooster as one where they “taught me to understand and appreciate the work,” but while pedagogy is inextricable from the proliferation of the faith, it is too cool, too controlled a rendering of what was a breathtaking conversion when I saw Brace Up. What changed? Me, I think but also, as these pages narrate, I had learned to participate as a spectator, to wait for cues, to grasp the string. What had appeared as innocuous doorways filled with too much detritus became weathered thresholds to be lingered in. A niche? The passageways behind the altars where pilgrims follow a site-specific progression round the central action?

The passing on of knowledge an “historical metaphysic” yes, but also a companion volume worn in the hand, directed to the ear, where the mix of the heat of staged memory and the contemplative action of theorizing offer something not at all religious and something very like devotion.