Theater Enough

American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789

JEFFREY H. RICHARDS

Theater Enough

Theater Enough

American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607–1789

JEFFREY H. RICHARDS

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London, 1991

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
appear on the last page of this book.

For Ann Dennis
and George Ariffe

CONTENTS

An affectation of displaying ones gifts before Throngs, is too often an abominably proud Fishing for popular Applause; but my work in the Pulpitt, must bee, rather to acquit myself well, in the Discharge of the Duties incumbent on mee there, before the *All-Seeing Eye* of that Majestie, who to mee, shall be *Theatre* enough.

—COTTON MATHER, 1685

For lo! America has become the theatre, whereon the providence of God is now manifested.

—JAMES MADISON, 1781

PREFACE

Toward a Theatrics of Culture

The colonization of America by the English includes both a physical settling of the land and a rhetorical shaping of the experience of settlement. The process by which experience is re-experienced through the creation, transmission, and reading of texts is obviously a complex one. Writers respond to a variety of factors: their sense of a national identity, membership in a family or other subnational group, gender, education, religious background, economic status, individual identity, and the dominant rhetorical patterns of their perceived culture *at that time*. Add to that selective list, then, an encounter with a new land, and one has the beginnings of a reoriented discourse where experience is changed to match the old rhetoric or the rhetoric begins to change to frame the new conditions.

Theater is one of the rhetorical figures imported from England and used by colonists, and later by American-born writers, to express their version of life in the New World. What is meant by theater, however, is not always consistent from writer to writer or group to group, nor is consciousness of theater necessarily (in America) something that is universally held; but whatever social, religious, political, or even cultural differences may distinguish one American writer from another, theater grows out of the religiously dominated rhetoric of the seventeenth century into the politically dominated rhetoric of the eighteenth century as a common figure that expresses aspects of both life in general and the peculiarities of experience in what is now the United States.

Why theater? What conditions in American colonial life might induce a writer to think in terms of theatrical metaphor? Again, the reasons are various, but for the moment I will focus on two: the rhetorical traditions to which Anglo-American writers are heir and the social conditions created by the formation of towns and cities in a wilderness during the period 1607–1789. In the chapters that follow, I will look at texts as products of a rhetorical development that includes the history of theater metaphor in Western literature—and specifically, *theatrum mundi*, the world stage—as both a religious and a political trope. At the same time, I will consider the choice to use theatrical figures of speech as one made because of—or in spite of—the sociohistorical conditions that arise out of the conflicts engendered by American colonial settlement. In other words, that British Americans draw upon a tradition of stage metaphors is not in itself exceptional; however, for those writers committed to a special American status, whether as a separate polity or as the home of a transplanted European culture, the ways in which the figure of theater is applied show the differences between British and American to be more than just a matter of rhetoric.

In *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (1989), William Spengemann has rightly challenged the bases on which scholars declare that a literary artifact or an author is American or that American politics or culture has a peculiar history, unconnected to others. Too often, commentators on the American situation have imagined a culture springing sui generis from the land. Spengemann's criticism that scholars make too much of the difference between British and American authorship does not necessarily invalidate a doctrine of American exceptionalism; it does, however, force critics and historians to rethink the criteria by which they evaluate the claims for American specialness. With that caveat in mind, I suggest that the immigrant writers from England bring with them a rhetoric that allows "American" literature to mirror "British" but that over time, that rhetoric, measured by the gauge of theatrical metaphor, is transformed to meet the needs of a New World society whose crises mark out a corollary yet distinct history from that left behind in the Old World.

In fact, theater appears frequently in American writing as a meta-

phor for history itself, even while such usage reflects the rhetorical history of theater as a trope. As a result, I have structured this book with both histories in mind. In the Prologue, I offer a kind of narrative in reverse, a looking backward from recent history, as a way of showing that at least one set of issues faced by early American writers remains today—in particular, how a performance medium creates its own rhetoric, how that rhetoric can be adapted to new conditions, and how it guides people to think about their experience in new ways. In part 1, chapters 1–3, I take the opposite direction, tracing through example some of the rhetorical possibilities of theatrum mundi from Classical Greece to the European and English Renaissance. I include these excursions outside the title-page chronology in order to minimize the distortion of looking at American usage in a vacuum, especially when the argument supports an exceptionalist reading of American texts. After all, most literate European colonists to the New World would have been exposed in some fashion to the image of the globe as a stage, although not necessarily to the one most of us know—Shakespeare's in *As You Like It*. Beyond that, it is helpful to remind ourselves how pervasive and how complex stage metaphors are, how the American colonist who might chance to employ one draws on a many-threaded history of usage that reflects not only the writer's own age but also earlier attempts to render the world in theatrical terms. Since America does not, as it were, enter the stage of this history immediately, I take the liberty of asking readers to include in this American story even Plato, a writer who understands earlier than most the tension that sometimes exists among theater, politics, and human relations to the divine—and who, as a consequence, anticipates the collocation of theater, revolution, and Providence that engulfs the American colonies in 1776.

Chapter 4 marks a transition from European traditions to American ones. There, I look at Captain John Smith as a writer who, when he leaves Europe for America and later when he tries to explain America to Europe, not only renders his experience in the terms of an Elizabethan convention, the figural stage, but does so in the context of seeing the real stage as a rival to the global theater on which he acts. This rivalry then becomes a theme in the remaining parts, which focus on the American story. In chapters 5–7, I examine Puritan New

England, and especially Cotton Mather, its most prolific and stage-minded minister, in order to account for the persistence of theatrical metaphors in a culture that condemns the theater but is physically removed from one. Chapters 8–10 take up the eighteenth century and the pre-Revolutionary struggle, identifying, particularly in the writings of John Adams, what seems to be a growing self-consciousness about the application of theatrical tropes to the political struggles with England. The last chapters examine the war, its aftermath, and the growth of republican rhetoric as writers turn to the theater in both trope and play to celebrate the new political order. In the Epilogue, I recapitulate some of the argument and suggest possibilities for further connection between past and present usage.

Essentially, I wish to look at a historically limited, primarily literary issue—the appearance of theatrical figures of speech in early American writing—in the context not only of Western rhetoric but also of an ongoing process in American culture, namely, how a class of metaphors both shapes and reflects the development of what might be termed a national-self identity: the nation defined in a self, as Smith, Mather, and Adams all manifest. Though what I have to say is grounded specifically in the American example and what I propose has much to do with the peculiar circumstances of American cultural development, I hope that the terms of analysis will have some application outside the borders of American literature or any of the disciplines that define themselves as having an American emphasis. Therefore, I intend this preface to an American study to serve also as a prolegomenon to some future, more fully developed theoretical statement of how it is that cultures can be scrutinized through the figure of the stage—a theatrics of culture.

Literary critics and historians have traditionally examined theater metaphor as an essentially literary choice, made in the context of other (usually belletristic) writers who decide on tropes for philological reasons. In recent years, however, the cross-fertilization between anthropology and literary study has made it possible for us to see a writer's choices in terms other than simply "literary" ones. Thus, from the work of such people as literary theorist Kenneth Burke, sociologists Erving Goffman and Kai Erikson, philosopher Bruce Wilshire, social

historian Richard Sennett, and anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, we can begin to look at texts as reflecting the dramatic and theatrical conditions of specifically (or generally) demarcated aspects of cultural life. To some extent, then, figural theater does not depend entirely on the presence of an active institution of theater for its usage—though ultimately, of course, the reading of a particular histrionic trope depends upon the reader's understanding of basic theatrical conventions.

Where that understanding comes from, of course, is an open question. Turner, in applying the term *social drama* to crises in both preindustrial and industrial societies, sees drama as an underlying form of human response; that is, the modern stage as we understand it is a reflection of a pretheatrical need to shape mundane life in extraordinary ways. Others, like Geertz, argue for a more limited but deeper symbolic reading of anthropological evidence, choosing to see theater in certain rituals or cultural activities (as in the political spectacles of nineteenth-century Bali or Balinese cockfights). In any event, there is an extraordinary divergence among social scientists about the nature of theater and society, from the broad notion that self is found by casting off masks (Goffman) to nearly the opposite idea, that self is expressed only through playing roles (Wilshire). Society, then, can be viewed as a constant performance, a kind of ever-present aestheticized metatheater, that forces all people as role-players into the roles, ironically, of perpetual spectators, evaluating the performances of themselves and others. At some point, however, this kind of analysis, if allowed to become all-inclusive, breaks down into absurdity. On the one hand, Richard Sennett shows that the conditions of eighteenth-century urban England inspire writers to remark self-consciously about role-playing and spectating, making theater a valuable tool of cultural analysis; on the other hand, as Bruce Wilshire demonstrates in his criticism of Erving Goffman's work, theater has limits as a metaphor if it is to have any meaning at all.

Jean-Christophe Agnew, in examining the relationship of theater to changing concepts of the marketplace in Renaissance England (and later, in America), strikes, I think, the right note and one that I have followed here: "The meaning of the theatrical perspective is neither as timeless as its principal metaphor nor as timely as its current sociologi-

cal embodiment in role theory" (16). That is, theater as a figure has greater relevance in certain historical periods than in others in the same way that—again, if it is to have any meaning—it accurately describes social phenomena only under certain specialized conditions; or else it may be, as Yi-Fu Tuan suggests, that theater and society change their metaphorical relationship constantly over time. By analyzing texts, one can observe when the writers themselves show cognizance of the theaterlike aspects of life—and therefore postulate how the rhetorical use of theater functions as a way of making sense in a discordant world.

To avoid the dangers of seeing theater in all things, I have for the most part restricted the perspective here to applications of theatrical language to the world at large or to America in particular. I am less concerned with the theater itself (after all, there is not much to speak of in America until the mid-eighteenth century) than with its figures of speech; even so, some plays will be looked at later. Further, I have chosen to examine theater largely as an expression of group needs (or the needs of a self who stands for a group) rather than individual or private identity, though the two often overlap; in other words, theater emerges in American usage as a metaphor largely for conveying covenantal goals (in the case of the Puritans) or political ends (in the case of the Revolutionists) rather than the boundaries of private selfhood. The sorts of endless self-mirroring or intricate relationships of self and theater that one finds in a play like *Hamlet* or in the writings of a protean Renaissance Englishman like Thomas More (as analyzed, for example, in Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*) do not, as a rule, show up in early American writing.[1] This is not to say there are not subtleties and shades of meaning to be considered; but in American public language, even the private language of public persons (one inscribed by people who are more aware of themselves as

1. One possible exception might be Benjamin Franklin. As Mitchell Breitwieser points out in *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality* (1984), Franklin is a subtle fry when it comes to the question of selfhood. But as a writer of prose, the printer-inventor-politician-author does not use theatrical tropes very often; and while one might say, as David Leverenz and Mark Patterson do, that Franklin is a theatrical personality, self-consciously adopting roles, he does not refer to himself, in the *Autobiography* at least, in the specific language of the stage.

ministers or housewives or lawyers than as writers), theatrical figures most often appear to serve the purpose of defining life, the world, the country, or institutions.

There is a basic difference, too, between *theatricality* as a generalized critical term for modern commentators and *theater* incorporated as an explicit figure of speech. The two cannot be entirely separated; as one can observe from reading Kenneth Silverman's and Peter Shaw's studies of Revolutionary culture, the increased frequency of the use of theatrical tropes during the Revolution has something to do with the crises and theatricalized events taking place in the streets and courts and meetinghouses and even fields of eighteenth-century America.[2] Indeed, as Rhys Isaac has essentially shown in his study of colonial Virginia, the analogies to theater presented by the rituals of planter, yeoman, and slave life cannot be ignored just because the surviving texts do not always express things in ways an ethnographer two centuries later may find to be significant. Isaac admits that the particular "episodes" he examines are portrayed as if "displayed in a theater." But like Agnew he makes this qualification: "Yet it is not to be supposed that the writer mistakes the world for a stage. Limited aspects of life may be illuminated, but the whole . . . can never be summed up in any interpretative scheme" (*Transformation*, 326). The world

2. Two works that have helped me see more clearly the pervasiveness of theater during the Revolution and to which I will refer more frequently later are Silverman's *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (1976) and Shaw's *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (1981). Silverman discusses theater as one of the arts whose importance grew during the Revolutionary period, and in that context, he sees the Stamp Act protests, for example, as opportunities for "testing out new possibilities of conduct"—in other words, for trying out new roles at a time when an "air of theatricalism" prevailed (82). For his part, Shaw sees the antimonarchical demonstrations that lead to the Revolution as forms of folk theater, enactments of mock parricide rituals designed to kill off the old father-king and allow the American son to achieve independence. I see my discussion as embracing both perspectives but putting things in a different context. Theater during the Revolution cannot be entirely divorced from plays or folk acts, but it also has a life outside both art and ritual. What I wish to assert is a more inclusive notion that sees theater as a historically derived rhetoric—one that sometimes expresses itself in written drama, at other times in popular street protests, but that *figurally taken* needs neither play nor demonstration in order to sway thought and action.

can still be called a stage, but it makes more sense to speak of it that way when conditions bring participants in a literate culture to see it as such. Thus, theater as an institution, as a literary figure, or as a tool for social or anthropological analysis has its separate spheres, but at times they must necessarily conflate.

For the point is, finally, that many early Americans use theater not simply as a rhetorical nicety but often as a trope deeply reflective of America's *place*—and the spatial meaning is intended—in history. Americans share with British writers a common language of stage, actor, play, and mask; but by the late eighteenth century, that language often separates British and American interests. For the British, as well as for their Anglicized sympathizers in the colonies, *theater* serves as a metaphor that illuminates the play sphere of life; the figure highlights a performative rhetoric that befits an urbanized, leisured class, aware of themselves and each other as sharing in a play of society—and aware of outsiders, including Yankee bumpkins, as acting in a different, lesser performance, gathered largely, like the mechanicals at court in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for the amusement of the British aristocracy and the bourgeoisie.

The Americans, I will argue, develop in the spaces left by a largely, though not entirely, stageless culture an ideology of theater that carries with it the weight of history and cosmology. In essence, this figural theater amounts to the continuation of conventional classical and Renaissance theatrum mundi tropes but with the qualification that America is a special case, a special stage in the theater of the world; at the same time, this idea of theater becomes an ideology when it is expressed as a theater of Providence. This theater amounts to a tacit or overt rejection of the performative rhetoric, the aesthetically self-aware playing of social roles, that characterizes urban British society. The Revolution, then, is fought on two stages or two ideas of stage: one is play, one serious; one social, one historical-political; one reductive, one amplifying. The Revolution may well have been caused as much by rhetoric as anything else; but that rhetoric, whether it uses Calvinist echoes or Whiggish buzzwords, reflects some theatrical urge that has been present in American literature since its origins. What follows is a way of accounting for those times when theater appears, or erupts, as a trope in early American writing—and why it is that victory in a revolution has been encoded in the American rhetoric of theater from the start.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have offered me encouragement and assistance. My wife, Stephanie Sugioka, and my children, Aaron and Sarah, have not only endured my retreats to the study with patience, but they have also, through their good humor and endless support, inspired me to get the job done. To them I owe a special thanks.

I am grateful to Keith Striggow for granting me a leave of absence from Lakeland College that I might begin serious research. At the same time, I wish to thank Joseph Flora for hiring me in a visiting position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and giving me a running start on the book, and John Bassett at North Carolina State University both for finding me a position and for supporting this project in many ways. To those colleagues at Lakeland, UNC-CH, and NCSU whose kind words have kept me pointed toward completion, I am pleasurably indebted.

Classes long ago with Richard Atnally and Laurence Avery have influenced my thinking on theater metaphor and American drama. Meredith Strange, Robert Bain, Richard Edens, and Harry West have mentioned sources or given me ideas that appear here. Ritchie Kendall kindly lent me galleys of his book and shared thoughts on the English dissenters. Charlene Turner at NCSU typed the manuscript with an accuracy that defies belief. Reynolds Smith at Duke University Press lent a knowledgeable and sympathetic ear to my proposal and enlisted two readers, Claudia Johnson and Daniel Shea, whose wise counsel has made this a better book. Paula Wald edited the copy text with rigor and tact. And Michael Skube, who has watched my prose with his Pulitzer Prize eye, has given the encouragement of a friend. Thank you all.

At Lakeland College, head librarians Linda Bendix and Charlotte

Wells squeezed budgets to secure materials for me. My thanks to them and to the library staffs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, UNC-CH, and NCSU for guidance. In those libraries, I found works by some scholars to be of uncommon value; those texts are cited frequently in the notes.

Throughout this project, a few people have had special importance. My longtime friend Lawrence Earley gave me both the benefit of his knowledge of colonial literature and his skill as an editor and professional writer. Robert Brinkmeyer, a classmate of yore, never let me forget that I could finish. But without two gentlemen-scholars, I might never have gotten started. For longer than he had reason to, John Seelye steadfastly put my feet to the fire at those times when they got coldest. For his part, Everett Emerson graciously took my first scratchings and found there ideas worth nurturing. Both read the manuscript in its entirety and provided insightful comments. Would that I could repay these four with a faultless text.

ABBREVIATIONS

Frequently cited works have been designated throughout by the following abbreviations (full citations can be found in Works Cited):

AC	David D. Hall, ed. *The Antinomian Controversy.*
AFC	John Adams et al. *Adams Family Correspondence.*
DA	John Adams. *Diary and Autobiography.*
MCA	Cotton Mather. *Magnalia Christi Americana.*
SL	Cotton Mather. *Selected Letters.*

PROLOGUE

Democratic Spectacles: Medium, Message, and Metaphor

When Americans watched television on July 4, 1976, they saw a spectacle: the images of tall ships and Ms. Liberty in New York harbor, local parades, perhaps, or grand fireworks displays, compressed within the space of a 26-inch—or 20- or 13-inch—glass screen. They celebrated themselves and the national polity with which they defined themselves on that Bicentennial Day; and what they assumed, in the televised pictures of self-congratulation, was that everyone else assumed that any spectacle that proclaimed the nation's greatness must be large and grand and visible for all the plugged-in world to see.

Not only was television the most compelling medium for transmitting the minor festivals and major spectacles of the nation's two hundredth birthday, but it still remains a peculiar mirror of the conception that many Americans have of themselves. Television is, at one level at least, a figure, a form of discourse that serves to describe by analogy the way in which the (Americanized) world works. Most Americans assume the importance of their country in world affairs; they measure themselves not only by the real economic or military power that the United States has compared to other countries but also by the images and the media in which largeness, greatness, and power are expressed. In 1976 the world's tall ships came calling, but they were absorbed into an image that could be appropriated for American use. It was right and proper, in American eyes, that the world's

stateliest vessels should gather in our harbors to recognize, as America's first true poet, Anne Bradstreet, would say somewhat ironically of men in her day, our "preheminence in each, and all" (7).

More important than the actual appearance of the ships in New York was the broadcast version and all that television as a vehicle of significance conveyed. Television is a mode of perception, a code that says without saying how people think or what they believe or how nations relate to the world at large. As Marshall McLuhan identifies in *Understanding Media* (1964), it is a medium whose "content" is determined by the rhetoric of the form: the medium is the message (8). To have watched the bicentennial celebrations was to have seen several subjects simultaneously: the spectacle, the spectacle as instant history, and the figurative view of that history, one whose method of presentation—tall ships on a small screen—was as much the point as the actual event portrayed.

Neil Postman, in his study of television discourse, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), carries McLuhan one step further. Not only is medium message, it is also metaphor; and because "metaphors create the content of our culture," he argues, television is further an epistemology, one that determines by its form what and how Americans think (15, 16). Postman laments what he sees as a decline in the ability of modern media to carry the burden of serious ideas. By contrast, he holds up to view the "typographic" culture of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America as one where lofty, reasoned discourse held sway, where ordinary people could listen to analytical arguments in politics or religion for hours (44–63). In Postman's terms, the Age of Exposition was replaced by the Age of Show Business (63); and since "entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television," any event of importance, once televised, becomes reduced to just one more situation comedy or drama, an entertaining performance and nothing more (87).

While I would agree that television creates special problems for sustaining sophisticated analytical discourse, Postman's reading of history does not fully reflect the fusion of medium, message, and metaphor that earlier Americans encountered. Political decisions have for years been made in the context of entertainments, whether as ritual or for delight, and the discourse about political and social issues has been

shaped by analogies to the performance media. Television is only the most pervasive such medium for modern political discourse. In a "dramatised" society, as Raymond Williams explains, one in which the television exposes viewers to more "drama" in a week "than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime," the medium that carries that drama carries the politics too (5). For pre-cinematic America, the medium that people recognized as a metaphor, that served as both a vehicle for entertainment and a metaphor for the presentation of political discourse, was the stage.

Though modern Americans recognize that one's appearance on television, for any reason, confers a kind of instant fame, their nineteenth-century counterparts found that stardom by means of a stage had its own distinctive American allure. As in our own time, actors, with the stage as a platform and print as a supporting medium, could seize the public attention and convert it to idolatry. More importantly, however, stage acting served as a rhetoric through which the desire of individuals for fame and that of the masses to confer greatness could be jointly expressed. Even literary figures could be swept up by starlike acclaim; the tours of Charles Dickens (taking into consideration his account, *American Notes*, 1842) showed that no amount of dislike for his audience could keep a British writer from traveling through America as a Great Author. Certainly, as P. T. Barnum demonstrated with his Jenny Lind tours (described self-admiringly in Barnum's *Struggles and Triumphs*, 1869), a foreign artist could be feted simply by being foreign; and the tour itself becomes the medium by which greatness is conferred by an adoring (usually) American public who appropriate the foreign as their own through popular spectacle. Though Americans have long been derided, and frequently by their own countrymen, for their boorish attitudes toward art, they nonetheless make the art and artists of the world their own by buying, exhibiting, repackaging, selling, and applauding them on their soil. P. T. Barnum may be the prototype of the ultimate lowbrow promoter, but he has a curious avatar in the film character Charles Foster Kane. Citizen Kane, in one scene, brings home "the loot of the world" from one of his European junkets; the employees of his newspaper stage a little show that appears, through the use of deep-focus cinematography, to be monumental; but at the end of the film, after his death and the conclusion-

less investigation into his life by a reporter, we see that the loot stacked up like so much "junk," as one character calls it, is nothing more than an oversized monument to Kane's oversized sense of himself. He tells the public that he has always been one thing—"an American"—and his grandiosity mirrors the aspirations of the limitless American to subsume the world in his national-self identity.

If the huzzahs for candidates, actors, and literary lions all sound remarkably the same, they only demonstrate how in America the lion will lie down with the huckster and mass politics will take their shape as enlarged analogies to performing arts. In monarchies, coronations have their own theatrical splendor, but splendor is essentially a product of a rigid class structure, dependent on a wealthy elite who announce their unalterable difference from the exploited poor. In the democratic process of election—of presidents or, by acclamation, the giants of mass culture—one finds a distinct American expression in the festivals and spectacles of symbolic enlargement. Americans give to their essential rituals of nationhood a spectacular (but not splendorous) bigness because they know the form represents the propagandized inclusiveness to which politicians and others swear belief.

Of early or mid-nineteenth-century writers, Walt Whitman articulates most openly the complex relationships among Americans, severally considered, and their ideals of performative greatness. As Carroll Hollis has shown, Whitman's poetry grows out of a sense of language as speech—not talk, but speechifying, the oratory of the personality/persona who mounts the stage and delivers forth inspiring wisdom for *all* the people. Central to Hollis's thesis is a note he discovered in the Feinberg Collection of Whitmaniana detailing the poet's projected career as a public speaker. No doubt influenced by the literary figures who, in the local television talk shows of their day, toured the lyceum circuit (this is analogy, not equivalence), Whitman created on paper a scheme that far exceeded any ability he had to prosecute it.

While the project seems at odds with the retiring life of the "good gray poet" persona he adopted in his later years, the notion that Whitman would become a presence on the public stage is entirely consistent with an opera-loving poet of plenitude and raunchy excess. With some modifications to the form (I have omitted cancelled words), here is Hollis's transcribed version of Whitman's note:

Abrupt sentences–concise
Lectures (?Readings.)
Agonistic Arena

Short, Lapidary, and fit for an original and vital style of elocution

(not taking more than an hour to be delivered.)
The whole presentation, from its directness to *you, audience*—
from *the amazing and splendid athletic magnetism of its vocalization*
—and from the charm
—of its *abandon* and *hauteur* and *imperative decision*
making merely as an entertainment–attraction, something far
beyond any of the
ordinary attractions of the theatres, the minstrels, concerts +c. (12)

Out of Whitman's abortive experiment with public speaking—his fantasy of peculiar stardom—came a poetry that has all the marks of an extraordinary showmanship packaged in the rough gossamer of the moral lecture. As Hollis remarks, "What Whitman did was to rewrite, reshape, revamp his never-given speeches to gain and maintain the immediacy, the urgency, the audience involvement, the excitement, the emotional uplift of the public performance that might have been" (18). We can infer from Hollis's observation that had Whitman been a real performer, he would not have been a poet—or at least, not the poet he would become. Yet even if we were to imagine a Whitman with "*athletic magnetism*" and good poems, too, one phrase gives away the futility of the enterprise: "*Agonistic Arena.*"

How does one reconcile the vital struggle for purity of soul—the agon of Whitman's poetic self—with performance on the arena stage? Will "*you, audience,*" witness the agon with the same stupefaction reserved for a nimble hornpipe, a dog-and-pony show, an exhibition of exotic and purposeless machines? No wonder Whitman demands of the elocutionist "*magnetism,*" for it would take a hypnotic power to wrench the audience from its propensity to cheer the spectacle and miss the struggle. Nathaniel Hawthorne, another writer who once fancied himself, or at least a persona, as an itinerant speaker, a teller of tales, understood the near impossibility of turning literary performance into mass art. The theme appears in many stories but most directly in "Main Street." There, a showbox operator presents the

history of Salem by relying on his narrative abilities more than the visuals provided by the wretched drawings on the showbox canvas. His performance depends on a delicate balance between his skill in creating romance and the audience's willingness to accept his language as the determinant of reality. Once denounced, as it is in "Main Street," by one unhappy patron who wants a better show for his money, the illusion is shattered and the high seriousness of the showman becomes tawdry entertainment, the stuff for gibes.

Hawthorne, of course, would never commit himself to an agon; he is too busy drawing veils over the "inmost Me," as he remarks in the "Custom-House" sketch, too keen on interposing wry or ironic narrators between himself and his audience to appeal to them in the same way as Whitman projects. By contrast, the poet's stage self is closer in conception to that dramatic, self-defeating life imagined by allegedly antitheatrical Puritans than it is to anything asserted by his theatrically self-conscious, anti-Puritanical (with qualifications), fiction-writing contemporary. For it is the Puritans and their proto-Protestant forebears who most directly conceive of life as a dynamic struggle for mastery of the soul, as something to be acted sincerely on the stage of a stageless world; but a life in which the ending must, to its worldly audience, always remain in doubt. By the nineteenth century, such fearful lack of definition can no longer be tolerated. Whitman proclaims that his agon will be concise, "*Short, Lapidary, and fit for an original and vital style of elocution* (not taking more than an hour to be delivered)."

The brevity of address conflicts with the ultimate expansiveness of "Song of Myself" and its announcement to the world that the pure American democratic self is "large" and contains "multitudes." To be American, one opens the harbors of the self to the heterogeneous many and becomes in that self an entire nation. In Whitman's poem, the more wretched and outcast people are, the more suitable they are for inclusion, though presidents and prostitutes finally occupy the same simultaneously leveled and exalted rank. The poet perfects his soul by a multivalent struggle to project the loafing, boasting barbarian belching welcome to all—and yet he remains "delicate around the bowels" and invisible, as in the parable of the lonely woman and twenty-eight male bathers, a tender, lovelorn Paul Pry.

In his poetry, Whitman proposes in essence to be an agent of a caste-shattering revolution far more comprehensive than the War of Independence ever proved to be. That in his note he hopes to frame the struggle as an agon of the arena—and not, say, as a faceless armed conflict or social upheaval—speaks deeply of American ideas about revolution in the first place. Revolution is *self*-centered, when self, both denied in its separateness and exalted for its inclusiveness, stands for all Americans; it is providentially guided, the speech act of an attentive God who has made America the arena of prophecy; and it is dramatic, even theatrical, but "beyond any of the ordinary attractions of the theatres" themselves.

From what does the notion that revolution is expressed through the medium of a histrionic national self arise? Let us back up a little further to an earlier celebration of the nation's founding, the Jubilee of July 4, 1826. As it has been since the early postwar years, the creation of the Republic is remembered in villages and cities with spectacles and speeches. As the speakers no doubt know, the sitting president, John Quincy Adams, faces the nation's fiftieth anniversary with four living former presidents—though by day's end, two of those, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, will be dead. Those speakers will certainly address the Revolution, and their listeners will hear the word itself as a code for the ritual mastery of American history. As one speaker, Josiah Bent, Jr., of Braintree, Massachusetts, tells his patriotic audience, "Long ere our Revolution began, we trace [God's] hand in relation to our present glory. It was He that saved the New World, so long unknown to the overloaded Old world, to be the theatre of new scenery to our race" (*National Jubilee*, quoted in Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 144n). And for those in the audience unoppressed or unaware of their oppression, the speaker's formulaic yoking of race, glory, New World, God's hand, Revolution, and theater will sound comforting and familiar. These words and phrases emerge out of and make up the popular discourse of the dominant culture, shaping a world view.

Of course, by 1826, there was a growing theater, no longer held in check by the laws or customs of the earlier century. Already, actors were competing with, even replacing, political figures as cultural icons. Thus any sort of metaphoric discourse in which theater domi-

nates could draw its vitality from a lively institution. Yet in the context of Josiah Bent's remarks, among the cliché-ridden language of a Fourth of July address, the "new scenery" he evokes has only peripheral connection to the set of a real stage. More likely, Bent draws upon a preexisting stock of ready-made phrases, one of which is a variant on the theatrum mundi figure that Bent's predecessors in more contentious arenas used to great effect.

Even before the celebrants gathered in 1826, other events had been leading up to the final day of Jubilee. In 1824 and 1825, the Marquis de Lafayette had returned in triumph to the land where he first won fame. As Fred Somkin has documented in his book *Unquiet Eagle*, the ceremonies honoring Lafayette were themselves spectacles of self-congratulation, the taking in of a Frenchman and once again making him one of America's own. Only Washington could claim the more exalted attention of sacred civic memory, for Lafayette's presence in the United States, important in itself, also served to remind Americans of his commander-in-chief, their country's Father. Washington, Lafayette, Yorktown—"The play is over," Lafayette had said when Cornwallis surrendered. And though the old hero may have wondered, in all the festivities of *his* tour, whether a play were still going on, it was an appropriate remark to have made in 1781.

For if we back up even further to the era of the Revolution itself, we find a colonial culture with little actual theater but with a varied and frequently articulated theatrical discourse. Even then, of course, theatrum mundi tropes rolled trippingly off the tongues or flowed obligingly from the quills of speakers, men and women of letters, and political pamphleteers. The language of the world stage may only have been the catchwords of the day, but for a modern reader—and quite possibly for some eighteenth-century readers as well—the encounter with a slightly elaborated analogy or with an awkward or an unusually well-placed figure brings one in contact with cartloads of assumptions that illuminate the reiterated, though otherwise invisible, metaphoric clichés.

But the question then emerges whether or not a metaphor in itself constitutes a world view. How conscious are writers or cultures of their social theatricality? of theater as an epistemology? an ideology? a cosmology? The presence of a trope does not necessarily indicate full

consciousness of either tenor or vehicle, but if developed at all, a figure of speech most certainly reflects a style of thinking that is derived from a literal reading of the originating metaphor. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) argue that almost all language is metaphor and that figurative expressions lead us to think of phenomena in ways peculiar to a given culture. In this scheme, even the cliché plays a significant part in shaping cultural assumptions. As their introductory example, Lakoff and Johnson cite argumentative language. English is replete with war metaphors (attack, defend, defeat) to describe argument; though we may not be conscious of the analogy, the metaphors, they assert, serve to lead us into an essentially combative form of discourse. Though the degree to which this extension of metaphor can be taken has been challenged by Samuel R. Levin in his book *Metaphoric Worlds* (1988), the central principle holds: metaphors have histories and those histories function as sub- or supratexts to the text being considered (S. R. Levin, 4–12). Because theater is such a rich and old metaphor, determining what of its history is relevant takes some sorting out.

Consider, for instance, a passage from an Election Day sermon preached by Izrahiah Wetmore in Hartford, 1773. As with many such sermons, Wetmore's subject turns to the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical authority and their mutual connection to the history of New England. Magistrates, says Wetmore, are apt to think of "civil Government" as "the grand Object of divine Providence in this lower World," in contrast to their view of Christianity as something "admitted, chiefly to enlarge, fill up, and diversify the great DRAMA." Though probably like his Congregational colleagues he has no wish to open the colonies to stage plays, Wetmore uses the dimensions of the dramatic figure to rebut the idea that the worthies of religion will, in T. S. Eliot's words, only "swell a progress, start a scene or two," then bow out for the providentially ordered show of politics. Not surprisingly, Wetmore counters that Christianity is "the special Design of Providence in all Ages; and will continue so to be, 'till the Consummation and final Close of all Things" (*A Sermon*, 11; see Heimert, 237). His use of "DRAMA" to describe secular attitudes conditions our reading of "Close" to signify last things; all is shaped anyway to providential ends, "under the Direction of a most wise and skilful

Manager—even our LORD JESUS CHRIST" (6). That is, in the spare style of the Congregationalist, Wetmore evokes the theatrical construction of history—imaged as competing dramas between rival though ultimately cooperative companies—with some of the same assumptions held by post-Revolutionary generations, who would speak of a providentially favored, theatrically conceived land turned nation.

During the Revolution, Americans exposed to the full variety of contemporary media—sermons, orations, pamphlets, poems, newspapers, cartoons, folk rituals, political demonstrations, and the stage—cannot avoid the sound or sight of theatrum mundi figures or histrionic representations of current political affairs. Whether they do so deliberately or not, many of those Americans frame their epoch-making actions (or those of people around them) as upon a world stage where individuals collectively act out roles in their rituals of independence. And everyone, it seems, is watching. A tea-dumping masque in Boston harbor plays through official communication before the London court. The mock parricide rituals of the Stamp Act crisis, crude though they be, are performed as for a larger audience than the street crowds who gather to join in or watch.

Thus, during the earliest days of the Revolution, spectacles played before the eyes of the world conjoin with statements of American distinctiveness to become the spectacles through which American eyes will look at their enterprise. The day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 2, 1776, John Adams describes what should be the model for all future celebrations of "the great anniversary Festival": "It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more" (*AFC*, 2:30). For Adams, spectacle itself is a medium for expressing the message of American greatness; all Americans should have immediate contact with the unfiltered "Shews" to remind themselves of "the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America" (*AFC*, 2:30). At the same time, the spectacle is merely an acting out of the idealized metaphoric theater in which Whigs have expressed their politics. Where Americans in 1976 see their celebrations through the filtering rhetoric of

television, those of 1776 imagine, and later create, celebrations in the shape of theatrical and amphitheatrical entertainments. For people of the television age, the sight of a spectacle on the small screen may only dimly reflect John Adams's prophetic vision of providential favoritism made manifest, but for celebrants of both eras, to recognize one's Americanness means to make a show before all the world.

Indeed, well before the Revolution or even its prefigurations in the 1760s and early 1770s, Americans aware of their peculiar status in the English-speaking world express the feeling of being curiously exposed to view. In sermons like John Winthrop's famous "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), people are told they are like a city on a hill (Matt. 5.14) and in other religious writings reminded that they are a spectacle before angels and men (1 Cor. 4.9). At the moment of Revolution and back to the moment of founding, Americans style their discourse in terms of being observed by the eyes of the world, and the Eye above all, of having to perform in the great "DRAMA" whose "Close" is figured as both Apocalypse and climax of civilization.

And still further back: Poised in space on English soil, and in time on the cusp of the Renaissance, colonists check their baggage and their number to see what and who they will bring on their journeys. Some will hear sermons like that of William Crashaw to the Virginia Company, 1610: "This enterprize hath only three enemies, 1. The Divell, 2. The Papists, and 3. The Players" (*A Sermon*, 58, reprinted in Alexander Brown, 366). Whatever you do, keep out the players; for those who playact, who, because they only imitate, mock events of great moment, serve but to distract the world's viewers from more important sights: the metaphoric dramas enacted for the age on the theater of the world. One might keep the players out of Virginia or New England; but no one, not even the archest Puritan, can prevent a figural imagination from setting sail. In the small ships of English adventurers, the colonists bring their metaphors with them, entering unheralded—and by the Indians, unwanted—into the natural harbors of the New World. "*The worlds foure Quarters*," writes William Grent for his friend, the Virginia colonist Captain John Smith, are "*like four Theaters to set thee forth.*" What Englishman Grent says of world-actor Smith, English-speaking Americans will later say of themselves and the figural Theater-Quarter they occupy: "*The last whereof* (America) *best showes / Thy paines, and prayse*" (J. Smith, 2:52).

I

A Theater of the World, to 1630