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Language, Setting and Self

The discourses deployed by Basil Ransom in his appropriation of Verena are drawn from the vocabulary of the theatre and, especially, the vocabulary of the arcadian and the pastoral. By draining Verena of any substantive content, they maintain her as a creature of his own imagining, a ‘private’ figure to be shored against the intrusions of publicity. Paradoxically, such a draining is precisely the tactic of publicity itself in its promotion of the spectacular: instead of ‘saving’ Verena in any way, Ransom’s manipulative language succeeds in substituting one form of publicity, although admittedly on a minor scale, for another; his designs, in short, share all the features of the system they aim to subvert. Let us begin by tracking the main line of Ransom’s arcadian language and its support for the schismatic perception whereby he attempts to rigidify the world that is, again, a feature of publicity’s vision. Then let us see how the disposition of this language belongs to the wider concern of James’s interest in the realist setting within the architecture of consumption and, finally, to the inflation of self which he regards as one of consumption’s most insidious infections.

Ransom first uses the language of the theatre at his first sight of Verena, but when her performance on that occasion begins, he slips into arcadian rhetoric to describe its effect. The approximate vocabulary of her ‘strange, sweet, crude, absurd, enchanting improvisation’ becomes ordered through the more specific images of the ‘young prophetess’ and ‘passive maiden’, but the strain of containment produces the more uncertain ‘half-bedizened damsel’. Here, the red of her fan acts as a reminder of vampiric draining, while Ransom attempts a conclusion for his feelings: ‘It was simply an intensely personal exhibition, and the person

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making it happened to be fascinating.' But that 'personal' has difficulties in maintaining itself as Ransom proceeds to what is to be his typical response, the evacuation of the performance by dissociating Verena's utterance from the 'inanities she muttered', a procedure which culminates in a further arcadian image:

It made no difference; she didn't mean it, she didn't know what she meant, she had been stuffed with this trash by her father, and she was neither more nor less willing to say it than to say anything else; for the necessity of her nature was not to make converts to a ridiculous cause, but to emit those charming notes of her voice, to stand in those free young attitudes, to shake her braided locks like a naiad rising from the waves, to please every one who came near her, and to be happy that she pleased.

Ransom's evacuation is accomplished further by the masculine reduction of the female to the realm of pleasure, and by again invoking the insubstantiality of music, 'regarding her as a vocalist of exquisite faculty, condemned to sing bad music' (p. 54).

At their next encounter, in Monadnoc Place, Ransom's linguistic perception of Verena extends his evacuation of her material context. She 'irradiated' and 'made everything that surrounded her of no consequence', dropping upon 'the shabby sofa with an effect as charming as if she had been a nymph sinking on a leopard skin'. Her 'fantastic fairness' reminds him of 'unworldly places' which he conceptualises speculatively and confusingly as 'convent-cloisters or vales of Arcady' (pp. 193–4). His confusion is occasioned by a change in Verena, her present radiance replacing her former 'brightness', and whereas his earlier image of Verena at Miss Birdseye's had struggled to maintain the idea of the 'personal', here his image is forced by 'her air of being a public character' (p. 195), where 'public' is qualified by ovation: It was not long before he perceived that this added lustre was simply success; she was young and tender still, but the sound of a great applauding audience had been in her ears; it formed an element in which she felt buoyant and floated' (p. 193). Water is as dispersive as music in Ransom's scheme of things; 'No wonder she was a success', he muses, 'if she speechified as a bird sings!' (p. 196). Nevertheless his confusion still requires an attempt to objectify the change through his by now familiar images:

At that other time she had been parti-coloured and bedizened, and she had always an air of costume, only now her costume