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Great Pendulum of Becoming: Images in Modern Drama (Book Review)

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Book Review

by John M. Zinkand

The Great Pendulum of Becoming: Images in Modern Drama, by Nelvin Vos. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian University Press, A subsidiary of Christian College Consortium and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980. 135 pages, no price given. Reviewed by James Koldenhoven, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts.

As the title suggests, Vos' book does two things at least. Its subtitle says it is about drama, specifically dealing in images. These images form the titles of chapters in the book, for example, "The Bestial." Besides animalistic images, Vos finds in modern drama images of impotence, the American dream, connections, pipe dreams, performance, dying, and waiting. The book has three divisions: Images of Chaos, Images of Creation, and Images of Becoming.

The first title, "The Great Pendulum of Becoming," is an image in its own right, devised by the author to suggest the extremes of the modern drama and its quest for resolution. Picture this paradigm from its top, from the point at which the pendulum is connected, and look down. You will see that the pendulum not only swings back and forth, but also, slowly, forms a circular pattern. On the circle Vos has placed four points of reference: animal and machine (opposite each other), and angel and demon or thing (opposite each other). Man is placed in the center of the circle, depicting an anthropological theatrical world. Vos provides a drawing early in the book to help visualize his paradigm and his evaluation of modern drama.

A second paradigm is pictured. It is of the Medieval idea of the great chain of being, God at the top of the ladder, things at the bottom. To this vertical paradigm Vos attaches a traditional Christian view of the universe. He leaves off referring to this paradigm early in the book, except to cite often the major artists who subscribed to it. Among these chosen few are Dante, Shakespeare, and T. S. Eliot. His frequent return to these three giants points up his own religious reference point in evaluating the modern drama, as well as his *literary* background.

This is not to say that Vos misses any of the twentieth-century *ideas* which help to illuminate the violent, absurd, and chaotic images which make up the modern drama. Especially well treated is the failure of the American dream, a subject that has dominated American drama in our century. And he rightly observes that theatre of the absurd is more peculiarly a European expression. The reader will also meet some of the most recent scholars whose works have influenced

the drama or helped clarify its meaning. Examples are Stanley Burnshaw's *The Seamless Web* (1970), Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), and Robert B. Heilman's *American Dreams. American Nightmares* (1970). One wishes that the book included a bibliography and an index.

I also wish that some of the foundations of modern drama were treated more completely. Vos does not treat adequately the ritual and rhythmic elements of modern drama. He says once, "...knowledge of myth and psychological structures of meaning have given both the artists and the critics new insights into the nature of human actions" (p. 63), and he provides a five-page impression of Jerzy Grotowski's ritualistic Polish Laboratory Theatre, but the reader is left wanting more. Even more apparent is his lack of psychological treatment. I think particularly of Pinter, whose plays can be understood best if approached from the point of view of such analysts as Eric Neuman. Vos begins such a point of view when treating the "bondage of the subjective" (p. 105), but leaves it unfinished. Another subject needing more attention is space and time, two crucial elements of theatre. And not to mention the work of Suzanne Langer and her views on "virtual history" and "the act" of theatre, suggests an armchair critic, not one who *sees* drama, a visual art form.

That is not to say that Vos' book is without many other examples. In fact, the little volume is crammed with references to plays. John Gassner could scarcely have done better. And, it might be mentioned, Vos has his favorites. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is probably *the* favorite. A reader wanting to have a better understanding of just that play alone would find *The Great Pendulum of Becoming* valuable reading. Vos has a good grasp of the existential mode of experience as it is manifested in the drama, and he counters it with repeated mention of T. S. Eliot and Dante. In his conclusion Vos counters the modern view of the pendulate quest with the Biblical ideal of waiting, the still point of the pendulum, and the "absurd" expectation of salvation as suggested by Martin Heidegger and Nathan Scott.