

The Spectator and the Fool

Watching and Learning with Symeon of Emesa

Nathan Schneider

December 11, 2005

Very often in the late antique hagiographies, and certainly among more recent expressions like the tent-revival preacher as well, the holy person in body is indistinguishable from the fool, or worse, the demon. Like the demon, a saint may appear horribly deformed, ugly, foul-smelling, and malnourished. Among the fathers of the desert, discerning sacred from satanic is a sought-after gift of God that a monk would have to be deemed worthy of. In the case of Symeon the Fool, as told by Leontius of Neapolis, he may defile the churches, abuse the monks, enter the women's baths, and torture the nobles, while still being a crusader for the Christian cause and obedience to propriety for others. Nevertheless, to most people who saw him, Symeon was content, and even careful, to appear a deviant rather than the hero. In his city, seeing Symeon gave no indication of his truer nature as Leontius' account reveals it to us: "he seemed to be a defilement, a sort of poison, and an impediment to the virtuous life on account of his appearance."¹ Leontius goes further to suggest that his folly has a significance beyond simply concealing his virtue, and also offers a lesson about the nature of the Christian life. Further, if we take Symeon's own teachings at face value, his encouragements of others to live honest, dignified lives, he appears to be condemning himself. His sainthood describes a paradoxical universe of both madness and propriety, which leaves his audience, both Late Antique and now modern, with a dilemma of interpretation. How, especially with regard to the Christian habit of imitation, are we to respond to Leontius' account?

I begin with the internal universe of the text and move to the external, the world of its hearers. By reading it in a loose dialogue with the twentieth century theologian William Stringfellow's writings on the circus, I will try to sketch out an idea of the two-tiered view of the Christian life in the text. Mediating these levels and two selves, then, is Symeon's vocation as actor. In several ways, most especially through the period of asceticism and friendship that covers the first half of Leontius' text, his credentials in this role are verified, as they must be. Finally, I will consider how a Christian audience might approach these levels and layers. Through this process of imagination, and following Stringfellow's reading

¹Leontius, 132-133.

of the circus, I find that the text offers to its hearers an example of how to be a properly Christian spectator of the world, rather than simply a fool to imitate.

During the course of his ministry as the fool of Emesa, Symeon comes upon a juggler performing with a group of mimes and decides “to put a stop to such an evil thing.”² Hiding himself in the audience, Symeon makes the sign of the cross on a little stone and throws it at the juggler’s right hand, causing the hand to suddenly wither away. That night, his image came to the juggler in a dream, threatening not to heal him unless he swears to “no longer do such things.” In good sense, the juggler then promises the Mother of God never to play his games anymore, and the next morning when he awoke his hand was healed. Symeon’s attitude toward the juggler’s work seems to suggest that he finds something intrinsically wrong with it. Later, he takes on an audience as well. He fools around with ten “circus fans” for a little while until finally promising them miraculous wheat bread in their houses for life if they “will stop being idiotic circus fans.”³ They accept, and three of them even become monks.

Symeon’s own behavior hardly holds up to the standards he sets for others. As Leontius shows in story after story during Symeon’s life in the city, “he always did things through clowning.”⁴ While going about performing good works, like converting people to faith and rescuing them from habits of sin, he acts in a ridiculous way that would surely be as bad as or worse than the juggler or whatever the circus-goers were watching. Several times over, Leontius explains that Symeon’s act as the fool is meant to conceal the source of all the good works that he does. In cases of outright sins, such as unsanctioned sex or breaking religious fasts, he presents only the appearance of committing them. Still, while he exhorts people not to steal goats, or to live decently, or confess to God, he continues to go on mildly defiling the churches and the houses of nobles, gorging on meat and insulting people everywhere. His babbling leads townspeople to believe that “he was just like the many who

²Ibid., 155.

³Ibid., 166. On 152, note 37, Krueger explains that “circus” probably refers to chariot racing.

⁴Ibid., 167.

babbled and prophesied because of demons.”⁵ But if it is the case that the playful work of the juggler or the pastimes of the circus fans are plainly wrong, isn’t Symeon at least guilty of these things, whatever good works he might do as well? Leontius seems to think not, praising Symeon for “having lived the angelic and most admirable life on earth.”⁶

Before too long the hearer comes to realize that his act bears far more than the negative effect of concealment. The insults and exploits of Symeon are often very funny, and it is easy to become enamored with his character of the fool alone. It takes on a life of its own. Beyond a mere cover for his virtue, Leontius suggests that there may be more intrinsic significance to Symeon’s clowning:

Through spending time in the city, hanging around with women, and the rest of the deception of his life, he truly sought to show a weakness in the virtuous life to the slothful and pretentious⁷

He goes on to refer to passages from 1 Corinthians in which the apparent foolishness of Christians similarly acts as a foil and even judgment on the world.⁸ The text’s message, therefore, goes beyond simply a particular form of ascetic practice in a reflection on the meaning of Christian existence in society.

In his writings on the twentieth century American circus (one can hardly imagine a world more removed from Leontius’!), William Stringfellow describes a familiar picture. A longtime follower of circuses, Stringfellow understands the spectacle as the enactment of an eschatological event, an image of the world redeemed. There, the wild animals are tamed and ride on bicycles, utterly in defiance of their beastly instincts. Tightrope walkers and trapeze artists image the absolute freedom of humankind redeemed. The bold humor of Symeon’s act and the freedom from entanglement that allows him to perform it similarly suggests a superhuman quality. Implicit in this eschaton, to Stringfellow, is a parody of the outside

⁵Ibid., 159.

⁶Ibid., 171.

⁷Ibid., 133.

⁸See especially 1 Cor 3.19: “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”

world. Like Symeon, the circus clown's material is in "the incongruities and absurdities and paradoxes inherent in what common people take so seriously," and most importantly, "their conformity to the world."⁹ This, following Paul, Stringfellow takes to be "the idolatry of death." Still, the message has its limits. Just as Symeon actually leads people to a certain conformity rather than with him against it, the circus maintains a clean distinction between performers and audience. Stringfellow never crosses this barrier or suggests that we should directly imitate what happens in the ring.

Following the lines each of these accounts erects, whether between holy fool and commoner or circus and spectator, the presence of sanctified folly in the unredeemed world creates for itself a two-tiered universe. In it, the holy foolish are subject to the same world and law as the rest, but not the same way of being. Leontius stresses, for instance, that Symeon did all "in accordance with the law."¹⁰ But within it, they have special jobs. Their sanctification permits them to play two roles at once, fully and actually present in both. Rather than being simply fools possessed by demons (though many will go to the grave believing they are this) or idle performers (like the juggler), they are understood as *actors*, inhabitants of two simultaneous skins.

Finally, true discernment only comes, Leontius writes, when "the Lord comes and illuminates everything."¹¹ Only then will we know for sure which fools were holy ones, the real actors. Stringfellow is deeply aware of living in a state of limbo: "The assurance of faith, in biblical terms, is that we live in that awesome incongruity until it is reconciled as the Kingdom of God."¹² In this way his romantic imagination of the circus is a particularly Christian vision of it, one that is distinct from that of those who stand idly absorbed in it (like Symeon's "circus fans") or the children who are afraid of clowns (as I was). Similarly, for Symeon, there were many who lived near him that never guessed about his holiness, seeing only his folly.

⁹Stringfellow, 8.

¹⁰Leontius, 133.

¹¹Ibid., 170.

¹²Stringfellow, 15.

“It is only since putting away childish things,” Stringfellow writes, that the image of circus as eschaton came “so forcefully—and so gladly” into his mind.¹³ In this he reminds us that at first, the circus is not an actor, encompassing both the foolish and the holy at once. In the child’s eye, it is merely fun or frightening. Perhaps then it is fitting that the first people Symeon encounters upon arriving at Emesa after his years in the desert are children. Having tied a dead dog from a dunghill to his belt, he drags it behind him as a group of schoolkids taunts him and beats him on the ears.¹⁴ To neither Stringfellow or Leontius does the role of the actor come easily or immediately. Stringfellow is not very clear about what “putting away childish things” means, but the passages seem to imply that this realization came late. For Leontius, the process that makes Symeon the actor is more explicit.

We learn a great deal about Symeon even before he becomes a fool. First, he and John, a man he meets on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, abandon their families on the road and take off for a monastery along the Jordan. After only two days there, called by an urge to the hermetic life, they escape (with the abbot Nikon’s mysterious blessing) and live twenty-nine years perfecting their souls in a cell in the desert. His final act before becoming the fool is to leave his dear friend John behind in tears. In the context of his later exploits as the fool of Emesa, these come to serve as rites of passage, assurances that he is an adept of the holy life and not a demonic instrument. Leontius explains that these stages are critical to understanding what Symeon represents, “For this was not someone undisciplined, still lacking a trainer.”¹⁵ Only because he had already “quenched the burning of the flesh” and “spat upon all the softness and sentiment of life” can we be assured that he is truly able to live the double existence in mockery of the world and flesh, and as Stringfellow would add, death itself.

In his encounters with the Deacon John, even after Symeon takes on the role of the fool, Leontius shows again that the whole thing is only an act. When alone with John, his

¹³This little preface occurs in at least two places, both in “The Idea of Society as a Circus” and *A Simplicity of Faith*. Ibid., 1 and 15. It is of course a quotation from 1 Cor 13.

¹⁴Leontius, 151.

¹⁵Ibid., 133.

only friend in the city, Symeon steps out of character and reveals himself to be a “holy wise man,” speaking “so gracefully and with such compunction, that often perfume came from his mouth.”¹⁶ Again we see the care and self-awareness of his act when Leontius explains that he prayed God to prevent his hair from growing so that he might never need a haircut, which would expose his game.¹⁷ When we see Symeon in these instances as calculating and conscious, and in light of his life before Emesa, his identity as actor above mere fool is assured.

Stringfellow’s circus is not so self-aware, or at least he does not describe it as being so. The awareness he describes, discovering the circus as eschaton and actor, is an act of the interpreter, not the circus itself. Further, it comes as a reflection not only on the act but on the world that surrounds it, and against which it stands in contrast. Coming to maturity in interpretation is the result of becoming aware of the world and its “awesome incongruity.” Similarly Simeon’s act depends on the circumstance of the city; the city forces him to become a fool. Nevertheless, the becoming that both Stringfellow and Symeon experience, while parallel, are of a different kind. Symeon’s is of the actor himself, while Stringfellow’s is of the spectator. What his discovery amounts to is truly that of “putting away childish things”: the separation of the real from the imaginary. In his reading, however, it is the circus as eschaton that is real, biblically, while the make-up, the tents, and the applause are not.

Imitation has always played a cardinal role in the interpretation of Christian stories. The earliest martyr saints are praised for imitating the death on the cross, and their lives in turn are held up as imitable examples. St. Paul sets this pattern down, and writes to the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”¹⁸ Beginning with Athanasius’ *Life of St. Anthony*, the lives of the late antique monastics, which Symeon falls at least in part within the tradition of, are nearly always phrased as an exhortation to imitation. With Symeon, however, Leontius appears to be doing something different. In the preface, he talks about

¹⁶Ibid., 163.

¹⁷Ibid., 168.

¹⁸1 Cor 11.1.

his work not as providing an exemplar but as “a nourishment.”¹⁹ For its hearer, Leontius hopes that “a divine yearning be aroused in him to shake his soul from sleep.” The most we might imitate Symeon is by what we glean from his virtues rather than his methods. It is perhaps like how one might watch a Hollywood action movie; one certainly cannot afford to imitate the hero’s horrible acts of violence while still finding some upbuilding inspiration in his courage, conviction, or love for the heroine. By setting his goal more on the impression the story is to make on the hearer than the actions set forth to imitate, Leontius places the hearer in the position of the spectator rather than actor-in-training, meanwhile maintaining the uniqueness of Symeon’s calling.

As spectator, Stringfellow represents an ideal model. He is a circus fan and follower, but never a performer. He never tames the animals or walks the tightrope. Perhaps, furthermore, his eschatology of the circus could only come about because of this, because what the circus does feels so out of reach. By juxtaposing the two works, Stringfellow and Symeon, it seems to me that the process of becoming the spectator is very much alike that of becoming the actor. Both encounter in their vocation a two-tiered universe, the society and the act within it. The act, in turn, stands for a spiritual statement about the “incongruity” of the society. On different levels, people are probably called to perform both these roles in their lives. But this does not mean that the hearers of Symeon’s story are expected to tie dead dogs to their belts any more than everybody should join the circus. What both texts warn against, however, is the “conformity to the world,” whether in performance or interpretation, that Stringfellow is so cautious of. It is this fatal conformity, I suspect, that Symeon saw in the “circus fans” that he encounters. What he condemns is not their being spectators at all but their “idolatry of death,” their failure to look beyond the child’s interpretation of it.

Inevitably, in any moment, there are those called to be spectators and those called to be performers. Stringfellow is concerned to defend the side show freaks of the “golden age” of circuses, whose work then was justified by lack of hope for other employment. But now,

¹⁹Ibid., 132.

because of breakthroughs and prosthetics, “there just aren’t any real freaks any more.” Their call as performers came and passed because of circumstance. Symeon and John choose to abandon their families and enter the monastic life by drawing straws, and later on, Symeon finds himself beset with a desire to enter the city, unable to quiet it. Seemingly, they are thrust into their roles by outside forces, yet at every instance they must be ready to take them up. As he must explain to John upon leaving the desert, Paul reminds the Corinthians that fools and the sages are called alike by a common God. Their roles may be different but their telos is the same.

We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.²⁰

²⁰1 Cor 4.10. Odd how every single biblical quotation cited in this paper (by no design of mine) comes from that same epistle.

References

- [1] Stringfellow, William. *“The Idea of Society as a Circus” (1966) and Several Circus-Related Excerpts from His Other Writings*. Edited by B.L. Headtinkerwalla. Scripture Détourné Series, 2005.

- [2] Krueger, Derek. *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius’s Life and the Late Antique City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft6k4007sx/>.

- [3] Leontius of Neapolis. “The Life of Symeon the Fool.” In Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool*.