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On the Marionette Theatre

By Heinrich von Kleist

While spending some time during the winter of 1801* in M., one evening in the public gardens I chanced upon Herr C., who had been recently engaged as the leading dancer at the opera house and who had found exceptional success with the public there.

I mentioned how surprised I had been to notice him on several occasions attending a marionette theatre that had been set up in the local market place, which entertained the masses with short dramatic burlesques interspersed with song and dance.

He assured me that the performance of these puppets was a source of great pleasure to him, and he made it quite clear that a dancer who wished to improve himself could learn a great deal from observing them.

Because his remarks were obviously not to be taken lightly, I sat down with him so that we might discuss his reasons for such a remarkable statement.

He asked me if indeed I hadn't found some of the movements of the puppets, particularly the smaller ones, to be exceedingly graceful in the dances.

I could not refute this observation. In fact, one group of four peasant figures had danced a roundelay in such fashion that Teniers could not have painted anything more charming.

I was curious about the mechanics of these figures and asked how it was possible to control parts of each limb according to the demands of the rhythm of the dance without having myriads of strings attached to the fingers.

He informed me that I must not suppose that every single limb, during the various movements of the dance, was placed and controlled by the puppeteer.

Each movement, he said, will have a center of gravity; it would suffice to direct this crucial point to the inside of the figure. The limbs that function as nothing more than a pendulum, swinging freely, will follow the movement in their own fashion without anyone's aid.

He further stated that this movement was really quite simple; that each time the center of gravity was moved in a direct line, the limbs would start to describe a curve; and that often when simply shaken in an arbitrary manner, the whole figure assumed a kind of rhythmic movement that was identical to dance.

*The essay *Über das Marionetten Theater* was first published in four installments in the daily *Berliner Abendblätter* from December 12 to 15, 1810. Kleist was editor of the newspaper—ed.

These remarks seemed to throw some light on the pleasure that he maintained he discovered in the marionette theater. However, I as yet had no idea of the consequences he would later draw from these observations.

I asked him if he thought that the puppeteer who controlled these figures was himself a dancer, or at least if he did not have to possess an understanding of the aesthetic of the dance.

He replied that though such a task might be simple from a purely mechanical viewpoint, it did not necessarily follow that it could be managed entirely without some feeling.

The line that the center of gravity must describe was, to be sure, very simple, and was, he felt, in most cases a straight line. In cases where that line is not straight, it appears that the law of the curvature is at least of the first or, at best, of the second rank, and additionally in this latter case only elliptical. This form of movement of the human body's extremities is natural, because of the joints, and therefore would require no great skill on the part of the puppeteer to approximate it.

But viewed in another way, this line is something very mysterious. For it is nothing other than the path to the soul of the dancer, and Herr C. doubted that it could be proven otherwise that through this line the puppeteer placed himself in the center of gravity of the marionette; that is to say, in other words, that the puppeteer danced.

I replied that a puppeteer's work had been suggested as something rather dull: somewhat like grinding the handle of a hurdy-gurdy.

Not at all, he replied. Rather the movement of his fingers has a somewhat artificial relationship to those of the attached puppets, somewhat like the relationship of numbers to logarithms or the asymptote to the hyperbola.

Furthermore he stated the belief that this final trace of the intellect could eventually be removed from the marionettes, so that their dance could pass entirely over into the world of the mechanical and be operated by means of a handle, such as I had suggested.

My astonishment now grew even greater, with the realization that he considered this entertainment of the masses worthy of a higher art.

He smiled and replied that he dared to venture that a marionette constructed by a craftsman according to his requirements could perform a dance that neither he nor any other outstanding dancer of his time, not even Vestris himself, could equal.

Have you, he asked while I gazed thoughtfully at the ground, ever heard of those mechanical legs that English craftsmen manufacture for unfortunate people who have lost their own limbs?

I replied that I had never seen such artifacts.

That's a shame, he replied, for when I tell you that these unfortunate people are able to dance with the use of them, you most certainly will not believe me. What do I mean by using the word dance? The span of their movements is quite limited, but those movements of which they are capable are accomplished with a composure, lightness, and grace that would amaze any sensitive observer.

I suggested somewhat jokingly that in this way he had found his man. For this same craftsman who would be capable of constructing such a strange limb would doubtless be able to construct an entire marionette according to his requirements.

What then, I asked, as he for his part looked down at the ground somewhat embarrassed, are the requirements necessary to accomplish this technical skill?

Nothing, he replied, except what I have already observed here: symmetry, mobility, lightness; only all of that to a higher degree and particularly a more natural disposition of the centers of gravity.

And the advantage such a puppet would have over a living dancer?

The advantage? First a negative gain, my excellent friend, specifically this: that such a figure would never be affected. For affectation appears, as you know, when the soul (*vis motrix*) locates itself at any point other than the center of gravity of the movement. Because the puppeteer absolutely controls the wire or string, he controls and has power over no other point than this one: therefore all the other limbs are what they should be—dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity, an outstanding quality that we look for in vain in most dancers.

Take for example the dancer P., he continued. When she dances Daphne and is pursued by Apollo, she looks back at him—her soul is located in the vertebrae of the small of her back; she bends as if she were about to break in half, like a naiad from the school of Bernini. And look at the young dancer F. When he dances Paris and stands among the three goddesses and hands the apple to Venus, his soul is located precisely in his elbow, and it is a frightful thing to behold.

Such mistakes, he mused, cutting himself short, are inevitable because we have eaten of the tree of knowledge. And Paradise is bolted, with the cherub behind us; we must journey around the world and determine if perhaps at the end somewhere there is an opening to be discovered again.

I laughed. Indeed, I thought, the spirit cannot err where it does not exist. Yet I noticed that he had still other things on his mind and invited him to continue.

In addition, he went on, these puppets possess the virtue of being immune to gravity's force. They know nothing of the inertia of matter, that quality which above all is diametrically opposed to the dance, because the force that lifts them into the air is greater than the one that binds them to the earth. What wouldn't our good G. give to be sixty pounds lighter, or to use a force of this weight to assist her with her entrechats and pirouettes? Like elves, the puppets need only to touch upon the ground, and the soaring of their limbs is newly animated through this momentary hesitation; we dancers need the ground to rest upon and recover from the exertion of the dance; a moment that is certainly no kind of dance in itself and with which nothing further can be done except to at least make it seem to not exist.

I replied that although he handled his paradoxes with skill, he would never convince me that in a mechanical figure there could be more grace than in the structure of the human body.

He replied that it would be almost impossible for a man to attain even an approximation of a mechanical being. In such a realm only a God could measure up to this matter, and this is the point where both ends of the circular world would join one another.

I grew even more amazed and simply did not know how to reply to such strange statements.

It would seem, he continued while taking a pinch of snuff, that I had not read very carefully the third chapter of the first Book of Moses; and whoever was not acquainted with that first period of human civilization could not reasonably discuss the matters at hand and, even less so, the ultimate questions.

I told him that I understood only too well how consciousness creates disorder in the natural harmony of men. A young friend of mine had lost his inno-

cence, and Paradise too, simply because of an observation he made that I witnessed at the same time; after that moment, in spite of all possible attempts, he never again regained it. However, I ventured, what conclusions can you draw from that?

He asked me to explain the incident to which I referred.

About three years ago, I explained, I went swimming with a young man whose personality was possessed of a natural charm. He was probably about sixteen years old at the time, and only from a distance could one notice the first traces of vanity in him, a quality brought about by the attentions of women. Now it happened that a short time before in Paris we had seen the statue of the youth pulling a splinter from his foot. Copies of that statue are well known and can be seen in most German collections. My friend was reminded of this statue when after our swim he placed his foot on the footstool to dry it and at the same time glanced into a large mirror; he smiled and told me what a discovery he had made. And indeed I had made the same observation at the same moment; but whether it was that I wanted to test the security of his natural charm, or whether I wanted to challenge his vanity, I laughed and replied that he was imagining things. He blushed and lifted his foot a second time to show me; as one could have easily predicted, the attempt failed. Confused, he lifted his foot a third, a fourth, even a tenth time: in vain! He was unable to duplicate the same movement. What can I say?—the movements he made became so comical I could hardly keep from laughing.

From that day on, from that very moment on, an inexplicable change took place in this young man. He began to stand in front of the mirror all day long, and one virtue after another dropped away from him. An invisible and inexplicable power like an iron net seemed to seize upon the spontaneity of his bearing, and after a year there was no trace of the charm that had so delighted those who knew him. There is only one other person alive today who witnessed that strange and unhappy incident, and who would confirm it for you word for word as I have related it.

Following this line of thought, Herr C. said kindly, I must in turn tell you another story, and you will easily understand why I tell it now.

While traveling in Russia, I came upon the country estate of Herr von G., a Livonian nobleman, whose sons were at that time seriously engaged in learning to fence. The oldest boy, who had just returned from the university, in particular regarded himself as somewhat of a virtuoso, and one morning while in his room he offered me a foil. We fenced, but as it turned out I was superior to him. The heat of anger further added to his confusion. Almost every blow I struck was successful and finally his foil was knocked into a corner of the room. As he picked up the foil he admitted, half jokingly, half angrily, that he had met his master; but everything in this world meets its master and thereupon he proposed to conduct me to mine. The brothers laughed loudly and cried: Let's be off! Let's go! Down to the lumber yard! And with that they led the way to a bear that their father, Herr von G., was having trained in the open yard.

The bear stood, to my amazement, on his hind legs, his back leaning against a stake to which he was chained, with his right paw raised ready for combat, and looked me in the eye: this was his fencing position. It seemed to me that I was dreaming when I first faced this adversary; but—strike! strike!—cried Herr von G., and see if you can score a hit. Having recovered somewhat from my amazement, I went at him with my foil; the bear made a slight movement of his paw

and parried the blow. I tried to throw him off guard by feints—the bear did not stir. I went at him again with a renewed burst of energy; without a doubt I would have struck the chest of a man. The bear made a slight movement of his paw and parried the blow. Now I found myself in almost the same circumstance as the young Herr von G. The single-mindedness of the bear served to reduce my self-assurance; as thrusts and feints followed each other, I was dripping with perspiration. But all was in vain! Not only was the bear able to parry all my blows like some world champion fencer, but all the feints I attempted—and this no fencer in the world could duplicate—went unnoticed by the bear. Eye to eye, as if he could see into my very soul, he stood there, his paw raised ready for combat, and whenever my thrusts were not intended as strikes, he simply did not move.

Do you believe this story, he asked?

Absolutely, I replied with encouraging approval; it is plausible enough that I would have believed it had any stranger told me, but it is even more plausible coming from you.

Now, my excellent friend, said Herr C., you are in possession of everything that is necessary to comprehend what I am saying. We can see the degree to which contemplation becomes darker and weaker in the organic world, so that the grace that is there emerges all the more shining and triumphant. Just as the intersection of two lines from the same side of a point after passing through the infinite suddenly finds itself again on the other side—or as the image from a concave mirror, after having gone off into the infinite, suddenly appears before us again—so grace returns after knowledge has gone through the world of the infinite, in that it appears to best advantage in that human bodily structure that has no consciousness at all—or has infinite consciousness—that is, in the mechanical puppet, or in the God.

Therefore, I replied, somewhat at loose ends, we would have to eat again of the tree of knowledge to fall back again into a state of innocence?

Most certainly, he replied: That is the last chapter of the history of the world.

Translated by THOMAS G. NEUMILLER