

“On the Marionette Theatre”

by

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Translated by Kevin J M Keane

While spending the winter of 1801 in M..., I chanced there of an evening, in a public garden, upon Herr C., who had recently been engaged as lead dancer at the opera and was proving very popular with the public.

I said to him that I had been surprised to find him, on several occasions no less, in a marionette theatre that had been erected on the market place to entertain the riff-raff with short dramatic burlesques strung together with song and dance routines.

He assured me that the puppets’ pantomime gave him a good deal of pleasure, and he made no attempt to hide his opinion that a dancer who wanted to improve could learn much from them.

As this comment, by the way he made it, appeared to be more than merely offhand, I took a seat beside him to ask about his grounds for making such a peculiar claim.

He asked me whether I had not indeed found some of the puppets’ dance movements, especially the more fleeting ones, very graceful.

That, I couldn’t deny. A group of four farmers who were dancing a ronde to a lively tempo could not have been more prettily painted by Teniers.

I asked about the mechanics of the figures’ movements, and how it was possible to govern their individual limbs and joints in the way that the rhythm and dance demanded without having a myriad of strings attached to one’s fingers.

He replied that I had not to imagine that each limb was individually positioned and pulled by the operator during the different phases of the dance.

Each movement, he said, had a centre of gravity; it was enough to govern this one point within the figure; the limbs, which were no more than pendula, followed along mechanically, without any extra help, of their own accord.

He added that this movement was very simple; that every time the centre of gravity is displaced in a *straight line*, the limbs move in *curves*; and that often, when simply shaken randomly, the whole fell into a sort of rhythmical pattern, similar to that of the dance.

This remark seemed to me at first to throw some light on the pleasure that he had professed to find in visiting the marionette theatre. That said, I was still failing by far to foresee the conclusions that he would later draw from it.

I asked him whether he thought that the operator who controlled the puppets was himself a dancer, or at least had to have an understanding of what constitutes beauty in dance.

He replied that when an undertaking, from its mechanical side, was easy, it still did not follow that it could be carried out with a complete absence of feeling.

The line that the centre of gravity had to inscribe was in fact a very simple one, and, as he believed, in most cases, straight. In cases where it was curved, the law governing its curvature appeared to be of at least the first or second order; and also in this latter case only elliptical, which form of movement was anyway the most natural for the outermost parts of the human body (due to its joints) and, therefore, did not require much skill on the part of the operator to carry out.

Then again, this line was, seen from another aspect, something very mysterious. For it was nothing other than the *path of the dancer's soul*; and he doubted that it could be found in any other way than by the operator putting himself in the position of the marionette's centre of gravity, that is, in other words, *by dancing*.

I replied that the operator's work had been presented to me as somewhat rather mindless: similar to the turning of a handle to play a barrel organ.

Not at all, he answered. The movements of the operator's fingers relate to the movement of the puppets to which they are attached in rather a much more artful way, somewhat as numbers are attached to their logarithms or the asymptote to the hyperbola.

He had since come to believe that even this last fraction of spirit could be removed from the marionettes, that their dance could pass completely into the realm of mechanical forces, and could, by means of a handle, just as I had imagined, be reproduced.

The first of four parts.

Source: Berliner Abendblatt No. 63 12.12.1810

I expressed my surprise to see with how much attention he dignified this variant of the art of dance invented for the rabble. It was not just that he appreciated its potential for refined development, he seemed to take a personal interest in it.

He smiled and said that he had sufficient faith in himself to claim that if a craftsman would construct a marionette according to the demands that he thought to make of him, he would have it perform a dance which neither he nor any other talented dancer of his day, not excluding Vestris himself, were able to match.

Have you, he asked, since I was gazing silently at the ground, have you heard about the mechanical legs that English artists make for those unfortunates who have lost their own?

I said, no: I had never set eyes on anything of the like.

I am sorry to hear that, he replied. For, if I tell you that these unfortunates dance with them, then I almost fear you won't believe me. What am I saying, dance? The range of their movements is of course limited; nonetheless, the movements at their disposal are carried out with a calm, ease, and grace that can only leave any thinking person wondering.

I said, jokingly, that he had then found just the man he was looking for. For any such an artist who was capable of constructing so curious a leg would doubtless be able to follow his particular requirements and construct a complete marionette for him.

What, I asked, since he in turn was gazing silently at the ground: what is then the nature of these demands that you are proposing to make on the craftsman's skill?

Nothing, he answered, that was not already to be found here in this marionette theatre; proportion, flexibility, agility – only everything at a higher level; and in particular a more natural ordering of the centres of gravity.

And the advantage that this puppet would have over a human dancer?

The advantage? First of all, a negative one, my excellent friend, namely, this, that it would never be *self-conscious*. For self-consciousness arises, as you know, when the soul (*vis motrix*) is situated in some other point than in the centre of gravity of the movement. Now, as the operator has absolutely, by dint of the wire or string, no other point in his power than this one: all remaining limbs are, as they should be, dead, pure pendula, and so follow the simple law of gravity; an excellent characteristic that one looks for in vain among the greatest part of our dancers.

You only have to look at P..., he continued, when she plays Daphne and, pursued by Apollo, looks around; her soul finds itself in the small of her back; she bends as if she would break, like a naiad from the school of Bernini. Look at the young F..., when he, as Paris, stands among the three goddesses and hands the apple to Venus: his soul even finds itself (it is a horror to see) in his elbow.

Such deficiencies, he added in finishing his point, have been unavoidable ever since we ate of the Tree of Knowledge. Well, paradise is barred and the cherub behind us; and we have to journey around the world to see whether there is perhaps some way in again on the other side.

I laughed. At least, I thought to myself, the mind cannot err where there is none. Yet, I noticed that something was still weighing on him and encouraged him to continue.

What's more, he declared, these puppets have the advantage that they are *antigrav*. They know nothing of the inertia of matter, that most contrary of all physical properties as far as dance is concerned: because the force that raises them into the air is greater than that which keeps them chained to the ground. What would our good G...give, were she sixty pounds lighter, or when such a weight would come to her aid during her *entrechats* and *pirouettes*! Puppets, like elves, need the floor only in order to *skim* it, so as to give new vigour to their limbs by its momentary resistance; we need the floor to *rest* on and recover from the strain of the dance; an instant that itself is clearly not dance and with which there is nothing more to do than to have it, as far as possible, disappear.

The second of four parts.

Source: Berliner Abendblatt No. 64, 13.12.1810

I said that no matter how cleverly he dealt with the paradoxes of our topic, he surely would not have me believe that there was more grace to be found in a mechanical manikin than in the form of the human body.

He countered that it was simply impossible for human beings even to attain the same level of grace as a manikin. Only a god could match matter in this area; for here the point was reached where both ends of the ring-shaped world came to grips with one another.

I was more and more taken aback and quite at a loss as to how to reply to such odd assertions.

It appeared, he responded sharply, taking a pinch of snuff, that I had not read the third chapter of the first book of Moses attentively; and anyone who did not know this first stage of all human culture, with such a person one could not reasonably talk about the following stages, and how much less about the last.

I said that I very well knew what disarray consciousness wreaks on the natural grace of humankind. A young man of my acquaintance had, as the result of a mere remark, before my very eyes, lost his innocence, and, despite all imaginable efforts, never regained the paradise it affords. Well then, I added, what conclusions can you draw from that?

He asked me to describe the incident I had in mind.

I was bathing, I recounted, some three years ago, with a young man, whose body at that time radiated a wonderful grace. He was probably about sixteen, and only from very far away was it possible to make out, elicited by the favour of women, the first traces of vanity. It so happened that we had just recently seen the statue in Paris of the youth removing a thorn from his foot; the statue is well-known and models of it can be found in most German collections. A look cast into a large mirror, at the moment when he was placing his foot on a stool to dry it, reminded him of the statue; he smiled and told me of the discovery he had made. In fact, I had, just at that very moment, made the same

discovery; however, whether it were to test the sureness of the grace that possessed him, or whether it were to cure him a little of his vanity, I laughed and replied that he was probably seeing ghosts. He started to blush and raised his foot a second time to convince me; but the attempt, as could easily have been foreseen, was unsuccessful. He raised his foot in confusion a third and a fourth time, he raised it probably another ten times: all to no avail! He was incapable of repeating the same movement. What am I saying? The movements he made had such a comical element to them that I had difficulty keeping from bursting out laughing.

From that time, from that very moment on, an indescribable change came over the young man. He started to spend his days standing in front of the mirror; and as he did so one attractive feature after another deserted him. An invisible and unaccountable power seemed, like an iron net, to lay itself over his gestures and facial expressions, and after a year had passed, there was no trace left to find in him of the loveliness that the eyes of the people, who otherwise surrounded him, had delighted in. There is a person still living, who was a witness to that peculiar and unfortunate incident, and who could, word for word, as I have related, confirm it.

The third of four parts.

Source: Berliner Abendblatt No. 65, 14.12.1810

I must take this opportunity, said Herr C..., in a friendly manner, to tell you another story, whose relevance to our discussion you will easily understand.

I found myself, during my journey to Russia, staying on the country estate of Herr v. G..., a Livonian nobleman, whose sons happened at the time to be training hard at fencing. In particular, the elder, who had just come down from university, cut the figure of a virtuoso, and, when I was in his room one morning, he proffered me a rapier. We fenced; however, it turned out that I was the better swordsman; passion contrived to bewilder him; almost every thrust I made struck him, and his rapier finally flew into the corner. Half jokingly, half touchily, he said, as he picked it up, that he had met his master: anyway, everything in this world met its master, and right now he wanted to lead me to mine. The brothers burst out laughing, and shouted: Onward! Onward! Down to the woodshed! And with this they took me by the hand and led me to a bear, which Herr v. G..., their father, was raising on the estate.

The bear stood, as I in astonishment stepped before it, on its hind feet, its back leaning on a pillar to which it was chained, its right paw raised ready to strike, looking me in the eye: that was its fighting stance. I didn't know whether I was dreaming, seeing myself confronted by such an opponent; however: Thrust! Thrust! said Herr v. G..., and see whether you can hit him! Since I had recovered a little from my astonishment, I lunged at him with my rapier; the bear made a slight movement with its paw and parried the thrust. I tried to distract him with a few feints; the bear remained motionless. With lightning speed, I lunged at him again. I should certainly have struck a human chest: the bear made another slight movement with its paw and again parried the thrust. I was now almost in the position of the young Herr v. G...The self-possession of the bear contrived to rob me of my composure; thrusts and feints alternated, I dripped with sweat; all to no avail. Not only that the bear, like the best fencer in the world, parried all my thrusts; my feints (no fencer in the world could match him in this) drew no reaction from him at all ; eye to eye, as though he were able to read into my soul, he stood, his paw raised ready to strike, and when my thrusts were not in earnest, he remained motionless.

Do you believe this story?

Absolutely! I cried, with enthusiastic approval; I should believe a stranger, it is so plausible; how much more then should I believe you!

Now, my excellent friend, said Herr C..., you are in possession of everything you need to know to understand my point. We see that the extent to which, as in the organic world, thought becomes dimmer and weaker, the grace within it emerges ever brighter and more powerful. Indeed just as when the intersection of two lines, on the one side of a point, after passing through infinity, suddenly presents itself again on the other side, or the image made by a concave mirror, after disappearing into infinity, suddenly reappears complete before us; so, when knowledge has, as it were, passed through an infinity, grace returns; and in such a manner, that it, simultaneously, appears most purely in that form of the human body that has either absolutely none, or infinite consciousness; that is to say, either in the form of a manikin, or a god.

Consequently, I said a little absent-mindedly, we should have to partake once again of the Tree of Knowledge in order to fall back into a state of innocence?

Precisely so, he replied; that is the last chapter of the history of the world.

The fourth of four parts.

Source: Berliner Abendblatt No. 66, 15.12.1810

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The original German in the Wikisource transcription may be found here:

https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/%C3%9Cber_das_Marionettentheater

Über das Marionettentheater von Heinrich von Kleist

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