

On the Marionette Theatre

by Heinrich von Kleist

Translated by Idris Parry

One evening in the winter of 1801 I met an old friend in a public park. He had recently been appointed principal dancer at the local theatre and was enjoying immense popularity with the audiences. I told him I had been surprised to see him more than once at the marionette theatre which had been put up in the market-place to entertain the public with dramatic burlesques interspersed with song and dance. He assured me that the mute gestures of these puppets gave him much satisfaction and told me bluntly that any dancer who wished to perfect his art could learn a lot from them.

From the way he said this I could see it wasn't something which had just come into his mind, so I sat down to question him more closely about his reasons for this remarkable assertion.

He asked me if I hadn't in fact found some of the dance movements of the puppets (and particularly of the smaller ones) very graceful. This I couldn't deny. A group of four peasants dancing the rondo in quick time couldn't have been painted more delicately by Teniers.

I inquired about the mechanism of these figures. I wanted to know how it is possible, without having a maze of strings attached to one's fingers, to move the separate limbs and extremities in the rhythm of the dance. His answer was that I must not imagine each limb as being individually positioned and moved by the operator in the various phases of the dance. Each movement, he told me, has its centre of gravity; it is enough to control this within the puppet. The limbs, which are only pendulums, then follow mechanically of their own accord, without further help. He added that this movement is very simple. When the centre of gravity is moved in a straight line, the limbs describe curves. Often shaken in a purely haphazard way, the puppet falls into a kind of rhythmic movement which resembles dance.

This observation seemed to me to throw some light at last on the enjoyment he said he got from the marionette theatre, but I was far from guessing the inferences he would draw from it later.

I asked him if he thought the operator who controls these puppets should himself be a dancer or at least have some idea of beauty in the dance. He replied that if a job is technically easy it doesn't follow that it can be done entirely without sensitivity. The line the centre of gravity has to follow is indeed very simple, and in most cases, he believed, straight. When it is curved, the law of its curvature seems to be at the least of the first and at the most of the second order. Even in the latter case the line is only elliptical, a form of movement natural to the human body because of the joints, so this hardly demands any great skill from the operator. But, seen from another point of view, this line could be something very mysterious. It is nothing other than the path taken by the soul of the dancer. He doubted if this could be found unless the operator can transpose himself into the centre of gravity of the marionette. In other words, the operator dances.

I said the operator's part in the business had been represented to me as

something which can be done entirely without feeling - rather like turning the handle of a barrel-organ.

"Not at all", he said. "In fact, there's a subtle relationship between the movements of his fingers and the movements of the puppets attached to them, something like the relationship between numbers and their logarithms or between asymptote and hyperbola." Yet he did believe this last trace of human volition could be removed from the marionettes and their dance transferred entirely to the realm of mechanical forces, even produced, as I had suggested, by turning a handle.

I told him I was astonished at the attention he was paying to this vulgar species of an art form. It wasn't just that he thought it capable of loftier development; he seemed to be working to this end himself.

He smiled. He said he was confident that, if he could get a craftsman to construct a marionette to the specifications he had in mind, he could perform a dance with it which neither he nor any other skilled dancer of his time, not even Madame Vestris herself, could equal.

"Have you heard", he asked, as I looked down in silence, "of those artificial legs made by English craftsmen for people who have been unfortunate enough to lose their own limbs?"

I said I hadn't. I had never seen anything of this kind.

"I'm sorry to hear that", he said, "because when I tell you these people dance with them, I'm almost afraid you won't believe me. What am I saying... dance? The range of their movements is in fact limited, but those they can perform they execute with a certainty and ease and grace which must astound the thoughtful observer."

I said with a laugh that of course he had now found his man. The craftsman who could make such remarkable limbs could surely build a complete marionette for him, to his specifications.

"And what", I asked, as he was looking down in some perplexity, "are the requirements you think of presenting to the ingenuity of this man?"

"Nothing that isn't to be found in these puppets we see here," he replied: "proportion, flexibility, lightness but all to a higher degree. And especially a more natural arrangement of the centres of gravity."

"And what is the advantage your puppets would have over living dancers?"

"The advantage? First of all a negative one, my friend: it would never be guilty of affectation. For affectation is seen, as you know, when the soul, or moving force, appears at some point other than the centre of gravity of the movement. Because the operator controls with his wire or thread only this centre, the attached limbs are just what they should be.... lifeless, pure pendulums, governed only by the law of gravity. This is an excellent quality. You'll look for it in vain in most of our dancers."

"Just look at that girl who dances Daphne", he went on. "Pursued by Apollo, she turns to look at him. At this moment her soul appears to be in the small of her back. As she bends, she look as if she's going to break, like a naiad after the school of Bernini. Or take that young fellow who dances Paris when he's standing among the three goddesses and offering the apple to Venus. His soul is in fact located (and it's a frightful thing to see) in his elbow."

" Misconceptions like this are unavoidable," he said, " now that we've eaten of the tree of knowledge. But Paradise is locked and bolted, and the cherubim stands behind us. We have to go on and make the journey round

the world to see if it is perhaps open somewhere at the back."

This made me laugh. Certainly, I thought, the human spirit can't be in error when it is non-existent. I could see that he had more to say, so I begged him to go on.

"In addition", he said, "these puppets have the advantage of being for all practical purposes weightless. They are not afflicted with the inertia of matter, the property most resistant to dance. The force which raises them into the air is greater than the one which draws them to the ground. What would our good Miss G. give to be sixty pounds lighter or to have a weight of this size as a counterbalance when she is performing her entrechats and pirouettes? Puppets need the ground only to glance against lightly, like elves, and through this momentary check to renew the swing of their limbs. We humans must have it to rest on, to recover from the effort of the dance. This moment of rest is clearly no part of the dance. The best we can do is make it as inconspicuous as possible..."

My reply was that, no matter how cleverly he might present his paradoxes, he would never make me believe a mechanical puppet can be more graceful than a living human body. He countered this by saying that, where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near a puppet. Only a god can equal inanimate matter in this respect. This is the point where the two ends of the circular world meet.

I was absolutely astonished. I didn't know what to say to such extraordinary assertions.

It seemed, he said, as he took a pinch of snuff, that I hadn't read the third chapter of the book of Genesis with sufficient attention. If a man wasn't familiar with that initial period of all human development, it would be difficult to have a fruitful discussion with him about later developments and even more difficult to talk about the ultimate situation.

I told him I was well aware how consciousness can disturb natural grace. A young acquaintance of mine had as it were lost his innocence before my very eyes, and all because of a chance remark. He had never found his way back to that Paradise of innocence, in spite of all conceivable efforts. "But what inferences", I added, "can you draw from that?"

He asked me what incident I had in mind.

"About three years ago", I said, "I was at the baths with a young man who was then remarkably graceful. He was about fifteen, and only faintly could one see the first traces of vanity, a product of the favours shown him by women. It happened that we had recently seen in Paris the figure of the boy pulling a thorn out of his foot. The cast of the statue is well known; you see it in most German collections. My friend looked into a tall mirror just as he was lifting his foot to a stool to dry it, and he was reminded of the statue. He smiled and told me of his discovery. As a matter of fact, I'd noticed it too, at the same moment, but... I don't know if it was to test the quality of his apparent grace or to provide a salutary counter to his vanity... I laughed and said he must be imagining things. He blushed. He lifted his foot a second time, to show me, but the effort was a failure, as anybody could have foreseen. He tried it again a third time, a fourth time, he must have lifted his foot ten times, but it was in vain. He was quite unable to reproduce the same movement. What am I saying? The movements he made were so comical that I was hard put to it not to laugh.

From that day, from that very moment, an extraordinary change came over this boy. He began to spend whole days before the mirror. His attractions slipped away from him, one after the other. An invisible and incomprehensible power seemed to settle like a steel net over the free

play of his gestures. A year later nothing remained of the lovely grace which had given pleasure to all who looked at him. I can tell you of a man, still alive, who was a witness to this strange and unfortunate event. He can confirm it, word for word, just as I've described it."

"In this connection", said my friend warmly, "I must tell you another story. You'll easily see how it fits in here. When I was on my way to Russia, I spent some time on the estate of a Baltic nobleman whose sons had a passion for fencing. The elder, in particular, who had just come down from the university, thought he was a bit of an expert. One morning, when I was in his room, he offered me a rapier. I accepted his challenge but, as it turned out, I had the better of him. It made him angry, and this increased his confusion. Nearly every thrust I made found its mark. At last his rapier flew into the corner of the room. As he picked it up he said, half in anger and half in jest, that he had met his master but that there is a master for everyone and everything - and now he proposed to lead me to mine. The brothers laughed loudly at this and shouted: "Come on, down to the shed!" They took me by the hand and led me outside to make the acquaintance of a bear which their father was rearing on the farm.

"I was astounded to see the bear standing upright on his hind legs, his back against the post to which he was chained, his right paw raised ready for battle. He looked me straight in the eye. This was his fighting posture. I wasn't sure if I was dreaming, seeing such an opponent. They urged me to attack. "See if you can hit him!" they shouted. As I had now recovered somewhat from my astonishment I fell on him with my rapier. The bear made a slight movement with his paw and parried my thrust. I feinted, to deceive him. The bear did not move. I attacked again, this time with all the skill I could muster. I know I would certainly have thrust my way through to a human breast, but the bear made a slight movement with his paw and parried my thrust. By now I was almost in the same state as the elder brother had been: the bear's utter seriousness robbed me of my composure. Thrusts and feints followed thick and fast, the sweat poured off me, but in vain. It wasn't merely that he parried my thrusts like the finest fencer in the world; when I feinted to deceive him he made no move at all. No human fencer could equal his perception in this respect. He stood upright, his paw raised ready for battle, his eye fixed on mine as if he could read my soul there, and when my thrusts were not meant seriously he did not move. Do you believe this story?"

"Absolutely", I said with joyful approval. "I'd believe it from a stranger, it's so probable. Why shouldn't I believe it from you?"

"Now, my excellent friend," said my companion, "you are in possession of all you need to follow my argument. We see that in the organic world, as thought grows dimmer and weaker, grace emerges more brilliantly and decisively. But just as a section drawn through two lines suddenly reappears on the other side after passing through infinity, or as the image in a concave mirror turns up again right in front of us after dwindling into the distance, so grace itself returns when knowledge has as it were gone through an infinity. Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god."

"Does that mean", I said in some bewilderment, "that we must eat again of the tree of knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence?"

"Of course", he said, "but that's the final chapter in the history of the world."

Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) followed family tradition and became an army officer, but left in 1799 to study philosophy and maths. He seems to have been inwardly

overwhelmed on discovering Kant's dictum of the ultimate unknowability of truth. Kleist's work was dominated by the tension between his inner certainty of the validity of the human soul life and the apparent impossibility of discovering meaning in outer existence. He wrote several plays - mainly tragedies - and numerous short stories, including "The Dark Tale of Michael Kohlhaas".

Idris Parry began his introductory essay to the "Marionette Theatre" (from his collection "Hand to Mouth") as follows:

"Heinrich von Kleist wrote his essay 'On the Marionette Theatre' in 1810. The calm statement of this work suggests a man firmly in control. A year later Kleist shot himself. He was thirty-four. On the centenary of his death, the critics agreed he was a hundred years ahead of his time. In 1977 they said he'd come into the world (on 18 October 1777) two hundred years too early...."

I think therefore I am. The theme of Kleist's essay could be a continuation of that famous sentence, a continuation which might go like this: I think, therefore I am aware of myself, and if I am aware of myself I must know that I am a separate entity, aware of and therefore apart from my surroundings; but true knowledge must be complete, connected, indivisible; so separation into subject and object, self and surroundings means distance from knowledge, consequently uncertainty and doubt.

Kleist's essay pivots around a reference to the third chapter of the book of Genesis, the story of the Fall of Man, the discovery of that self-consciousness which establishes and perpetuates human isolation. But 'discover' implies a historical event. Kleist shares with Kafka (who once claimed he understood the Fall of Man better than anyone else) the insight that it is only our concept of time which makes us think of the Fall of Man as a historical event in the distant past. It is happening all the time. The biblical story is a mythical representation of constant human awareness of self and therefore of separation...

According to Kleist there is no way back. Humans are now thinking animals, and the material of thought is knowledge. But knowledge, although the source of uncertainty when fragmentary, is also the vital substance of harmony when complete. So Kleist asserts that our only hope is to go forward to total knowledge."

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