

>> **On the Marionette Theatre** <<

by Heinrich von Kleist

Translated / Interpreted by Herb Ranharter 2016

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During my stay in M... in the winter of 1801 I there met Mr. C... one evening in a public park. He had recently become principal dancer at the opera of the town and was enjoying immense popularity with the audiences. I told him I had been surprised to see him more than once at the wooden marionette theatre which had been assembled in the market-place to entertain common folk with dramatic little burlesques interwoven with song and dance. He assured me that the mimicry of the pantomimes by these puppets much amused him, and he left no doubt about his opinion that a dancer, who wishes to further his discipline, could learn a thing or two from them.

Since his way of presenting this, and the manner in which he did so, seemed more than a mere "spur of the moment" idea, I sat down next to him, in the hope of learning more about the reasons that might support such a strange assertion.

He asked me if I hadn't in fact found some of the dance movements of the puppets, particularly those of the smaller ones, very graceful.

This was a fact I couldn't deny. A group of four peasants, dancing the rondo in quick pace, couldn't have been painted prettier by Teniers.

I inquired about the mechanism in these figures and how it might be possible to govern the individual components of their limbs and their centers, without having a myriad of strings attached to their fingers, so as to satisfy what the rhythm of the motion or the dance requires.

He replied that I must not imagine that during the different moments of the dance, each individual component is pulled and controlled separately by the operator.

Each movement, he told me, has its own centre of gravity; it is enough to control this centre within the puppet. The limbs, which are nothing but 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, agitated in a purely coincidental way, the entire assembly responds with a kind of rhythmic resonance which resembles dance.

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

I asked him if he thought that 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 just because a business is mechanically easy it doesn't follow that it can be done entirely without sensitivity.

The trajectory, that the centre of gravity has to describe, is indeed very simple, and in most cases, he believed, straight. In the cases when it is curved, the law of its curvature appears to be at the very least of the first order or at most of the second order, and even in the latter case the line is only elliptical. Such an expression of movement comes natural to the extremities of the human body (because of the joints), thus describing it hardly demands much art from the operator.

Contrary wise, seen from a different point of view, such a trajectory could be something very mysterious. It would be nothing other than the path of the soul of the dancer and he doubted if it could otherwise be found, unless the operator can transpose himself into the centre of gravity of the marionette; that is, in other words: actually dance.

I replied that I had envisioned the operator's part in this business as something more mechanical, rather like cranking the handle of an organ.

"Not at all", he responded. "In fact, the relationship of the movement of the fingers as they relate to the motion of the attached body of the puppet are relatively artificial, much like numbers relate to logarithms or an asymptote relates to a hyperbola."

Yet, at the same token, he did believe this last vestige of human volition, of which he had spoken, could be removed from the marionettes, and their dance could be entirely transferred into the realm of mechanical forces and be produced all together, as I had suggested, by turning a crank.

I expressed my astonishment at the thoughtful attention he was paying to this form of art which was really invented to serve the broader masses. Not only did he consider it capable of more sophisticated development but he considered its implications for himself.

He smiled and said he was confident that, if he could get a craftsman to construct a marionette to his own specifications, he could stage a dance with such a puppet which neither he himself nor any other skilled dancer of his time, not even Vestris, could accomplish.

"Have you heard", he asked, because I cast my gaze down in silent contemplation, "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 am sorry to hear that", he said, "because, when I tell you these people dance with these, I am almost afraid you won't believe me. What am I saying... dance? The range of their movements is actually limited, but

those movements that they can perform are executed with a calm, ease and grace which must astound any thoughtful observer."

I expressed, almost in jest, that, of course, he had now found his man. The craftsman capable of making such remarkable limbs could without a doubt assemble a complete marionette for him, according to his specifications.

"And what", I asked, as he was now staring down in some perplexity, "What are the requirements you think of bestowing on the ingenuity of such a man?"

"Nothing that isn't to be found in these puppets we see here already," he replied; "Symmetry, flexibility, lightness but, all elevated to a higher degree; and especially a more natural placement of the centers of gravity."

"And what would be the advantage your puppet would have over living dancers?"

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

"Just look at P... when she dances Daphne", he went on. "Pursued by Apollo, she turns to look at him. Her soul at that moment resides in the small of her back. As she bends, she looks as if she's going to break, like a Naiad after the school of Bernini. Or take that young fellow, F..., who dances Paris, when he stands among the three goddesses and offers the apple to Venus. His soul is in fact located (and it's a dreadful thing to watch) in his elbow."

"Such mishaps are unavoidable," he said, "since we have eaten of the tree of cognition. Paradise is locked and bolted, and the cherub stands behind us. We have to go on and make the journey round the world to see if perhaps there is an alternate entrance somewhere on the other side."

I laughed. Certainly, I thought, the human spirit cannot err where it does not reside. I noticed that he wished to add more, so I urged him to continue.

"In addition", he said, "these puppets have the advantage of being for all practical purposes weightless. They are not afflicted with the bothersome inertia of matter, the property most counteractive to dance. The force which raises them into the air is greater than the one which binds them to the ground. What would our good Miss G... not 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 tangent against lightly, like elves, and through this

momentary brush with the ground, to revive the swing of their limbs. We humans must have it to rest upon, to recover from the strain of the dance. Such a moment of rest is clearly no part of the dance; the best we can do is to make it as inconspicuous as possible..."

I replied that, no matter however skillful he might wield arguments on behalf of his paradoxes, he would never, ever, make me believe a mechanical puppet could contain more grace than is contained in the construct of the human body.

He countered by saying that, where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near what's possible for a puppet. Only a god could, in this arena, measure up to inanimate matter and this is the point where the two ends of the recursive world intertwine.

I was further and further astonished and didn't know what to say to such peculiar assertions.

It seems, he elaborated, whilst taking 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 an effective discussion with him about the subsequent developments and even more difficult to talk about the ultimate outcome.

I told him that I was well aware how consciousness can bring chaos to the natural grace of man. A young acquaintance of mine had, as it were, lost his innocence right before my eyes, and all because of a mere 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 was thinking of.

"About three years ago", I said, "I was at the baths with a young man about who's composition lay then a remarkable aura of grace. He was about in his sixteenth year, and only from a distance could one perceive the first traces of vanity conjured up by attentions given to him by women. It so happened that we recently had seen in Paris the figure of the boy pulling a thorn out of his foot; the cast of the statue is well known; it can be found in most German collections. Just as he was lifting his foot to a stool to dry it, he glanced into a large mirror and was reminded of the statue. He smiled and told me of the discovery he had made. As a matter of fact, just then, I had made the same observation; but... I don't know if I did it to prop up the state of his apparent grace or to aid him in fending off his vanity... I therefore laughed and countered that he must be imagining things. He blushed and lifted his foot a second time, to show me, but the effort was a failure, as anybody could have foreseen. Confused, he tried it again a third time, a fourth time; he must have lifted his foot ten times. In vain, he was quite unable to reproduce the same movement again. What am I saying? The movements he made were so comical that I was hard put to suppress my laughter.

From that day on, from that very moment, an incomprehensible transition came over this young man. He began to spend whole days before the mirror. His attractive graces departed from him, one after the other. An invisible and incomprehensible power seemed to clutch him like a net of steel thwarting the free play of his gestures. Within one year nothing of the lovely grace, which had given pleasure to all who looked at him, remained. There still lives a man who was witness to this peculiar and unfortunate incident, one who would, word for word, as I reported it, verify this.

"On this occasion", said my friend warmly, "I must add another story of which you will easily comprehend of how it corroborates this theme.

I found myself, while on my journey to Russia, on the estate of a Mr. von G..., a Lithuanian nobleman whose sons just then relentlessly exercised their fencing. The oldest, in particular, who had just come down from the university, thought of himself a bit of a virtuoso. One morning, when I happened to be in his room, he offered me a turn with a rapier. We fenced, but, as it turned out, I had the better of him. Passions ran high which played a roll, they confused him. Nearly every thrust I made found its mark. At last his rapier flew off into the corner of the room. As he retrieved it he said, half in jest and half full of emotion, that he had met his master; but that there is a master in this world for everyone - and now he proposed to lead me to mine. The brothers laughed loudly at this and shouted: "Come on, come on, down to the wood shed!" They took me by the hand and led me outside to make the acquaintance of a bear which their father, Mr. von G..., was having reared on the estate.

"I was astounded to see the bear standing upright on his hind legs, his back leaning against the post to which he was chained, his right paw raised ready to strike. He looked me straight in the eye; this was his fencing position. I couldn't sure anymore if any of this was real, finding myself in front of such an opponent. They urged me on. "Thrust, thrust, see if you can teach him something!" they shouted. I thrust, since I had by now recovered somewhat from my astonishment and I fell on the bear with my rapier. The bear made a slight movement with his paw and parried my thrust. I feigned thrusts in an effort to deceive him. The bear did not move. I attacked again with sudden dexterity; 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 thrusts. By now I was almost in the same state as the elder brother had been: the bear's utter and calm seriousness had robbed me of my composure. Thrusts and feigns followed thick and fast, I sweat profusely, all in vain. It wasn't merely that the bear parried my thrusts like the finest fencer in the world; when I feigned to deceive him he made no move at all. No human fencer in the world could equal his perception in this respect. Eye to eye he stood with me as if he could read my soul, upright, his paw raised, ready to strike and when my thrusts were not meant seriously he did not move.

Do you believe this story?"

"Entirely", I spewed forth in joyful concordance. "I would believe it hearing it from any stranger, that's how probable I think it is; I believe it all the more from you!"

"Well, my excellent friend," said Mr. C..., "you are thus in possession of all that is necessary to comprehend me."

We see that, to the degree that within the organic world, reflection grows dimmer and weaker while the grace therein emerges all the more beamingly and dominantly. But, just as the intersection of two lines on one side of a point, after their passing through infinity, suddenly reappears on the other side of that point, or as the image in a concave mirror again materializes right in front of us after disappearing into infinity, so the grace itself returns when cognition has, as it were, gone through an infinity. Grace seemingly appears at that very moment, at such a point most purely in that human body component which either has no consciousness at all or possesses infinite consciousness. That is to say, in the puppet or in the god.

"Therefore", I added in some bewilderment, "we would have to eat of the tree of cognition again in order to return to the state of innocence."
"Certainly", he said, "and that will be the final chapter in the history of mankind."