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HEINRICH VON KLEIST

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WRITINGS

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## THE PUPPET THEATRE

In a public garden one evening in the winter of 1801, which I was spending in M.,\* I met Herr C.,\* recently appointed first dancer at the Opera there and enjoying an extraordinary success with the public.

I said to him that I had been surprised to see him — several times indeed — at a puppet theatre erected in the marketplace where little burlesques, into which were woven songs and dances, were being given for the entertainment of the common people.

He assured me that the puppets' silent acting gave him a great deal of pleasure, and hinted that a dancer wishing to improve his art could learn a lot from them.

Behind his words, so it seemed to me, by the way he said them, there was more than a passing thought, and I sat down beside him to question him more closely on the grounds he might have for such a strange assertion.

He asked me whether I had not in fact found the marionettes, especially the smaller ones, often very graceful in their movements as they danced.

I could not deny it. A quartet of peasants dancing a round in rapid time could not have been done more prettily by Teniers.\*

I asked how these figures were worked and how it was possible, without thousands of strings on one's fingers, to govern their separate limbs and particular points in just such a way as the rhythm of the movements or the dance required.

He answered that I should not suppose that every limb at all the different moments of the dance had to be separately positioned and pulled by the puppeteer.

Every movement, he said, had a centre of gravity; it sufficed if this, inside the figure, were controlled; the limbs, which were nothing but

pendula, followed without further interference, mechanically, of their own accord.

He added that this movement was a very simple one; that whenever the centre of gravity was moved *in a straight line* the limbs described a *curve*; and that often, if shaken by accident, the whole thing was brought into a kind of rhythmical activity similar to dancing.

This observation itself seemed to throw some light on the pleasure he claimed to find in the puppet theatre. But I was far from suspecting how much further he would go.

I asked him whether he thought the man working the marionettes must be a dancer himself or at least have some notion of what constitutes beauty in dancing.

He replied that though an activity might in its mechanics be a simple one it did not follow that it could be conducted wholly without feeling.

The line the centre of gravity had to describe was indeed very simple and in most cases, he believed, straight. In cases where it curved the law of its curve did not seem to be more than of the first or at most of the second degree; and even in that latter case only elliptical, and a movement of that description was altogether natural to the extremities of the human body (because of the joints) and so would not require much skill on the part of the operator to achieve it.

However, in another sense that line was something very mysterious. For it was nothing other than *the way of the dancer's soul*; and he doubted whether it could be discovered otherwise than by the operator's putting himself into the centre of gravity of the marionette; in other words, by *dancing*.

I replied that the operation had always been presented to me as something rather mindless: rather like the turning of a handle to play a barrel organ.

'Not at all,' he replied. 'In fact the relationship of the movements of his fingers to the movements of the marionette is quite a subtle one, rather like that of numbers to their logarithms or the asymptotes to the hyperbola.'

He did however think that the last remnant of intelligence, of which he had been speaking, could itself be taken out of the marionettes; that their dancing could be shifted wholly into the realm of mechanical forces and produced by turning a handle, as I had supposed.

I said how astonished I was to see him honouring this popularized version of a noble art with so much attention. Not only did he think it capable of a higher development: he even seemed to have put his own mind to it.

He smiled and said he would go so far as to assert that if he could get somebody to make a marionette to his specifications he would perform such dances with it as neither he nor any other trained dancer of the day, not even excepting Vestris\* himself, would be capable of equalling.

'I wonder,' he said, as I looked down at the ground and was silent, 'whether you have heard of the mechanical limbs that craftsmen in England make for people who have lost their legs?'

I said no: such things had never come my way.

'A pity,' he replied; 'for if I tell you that those poor people can dance with them I am almost afraid you will not believe me. — Dance? What am I saying? The range of their movements is limited, I grant you; but those they are capable of they execute with an ease, grace and poise that every thinking person must be astonished by.'

I remarked, in jest, that there he had found the man he was looking for. For a craftsman capable of making such a remarkable leg would without doubt be able to construct him a whole marionette to his requirements.

'And what,' I asked, since he himself now, rather taken aback, was looking down at the ground, 'what exactly would you require of the skills of such a person?'

'Nothing,' he replied, 'that we don't see here already: balance, agility, lightness — only all to a higher degree; and particularly a more natural arrangement of the centres of gravity.'

'And the advantage that the puppet would have over living dancers?'

'The advantage? In the first place, my dear fellow, a negative one, namely this: that it would be incapable of *affectation*. — For affectation occurs, as you know, whenever the soul (*vis motrix*)\* is situated in a place other than a movement's centre of gravity. Since the puppeteer, handling the wire or the string, can have no point except that one under his control all the other limbs are what they should be: dead, mere pendula, and simply obey the law of gravity; an excellent attribute which you will look for in vain among the majority of our dancers.

'Watch P.,' he went on, 'when she is playing Daphne\* and, pursued by Apollo, turns to look at him: her soul is somewhere at the bottom of her spine, she bends as if she would snap, like a naiade à la Bernini.\* And watch young F. when, as Paris,\* he faces the three goddesses and hands Venus the apple: his soul — it is painful to see — is actually in his elbow.

'Such mistakes,' he added, breaking off, 'have been unavoidable ever since we ate from the Tree of Knowledge. But Paradise is locked and barred and the Cherub is behind us. We shall have to go all the way

round the world and see whether it might be open somewhere at the back again.'

I laughed. — True enough, I thought. Your wits will not lead you astray if you have none. But I could see that he still had things to say, and begged him to go on.

'Also,' he said, 'these puppets have the advantage of being *resistant to gravity*. Of the heaviness of matter, the factor that most works against the dancer, they are entirely ignorant: because the force lifting them into the air is greater than the one attaching them to the earth. What wouldn't our friend G. give to be four or five stone lighter or to have such a weight working in her favour in her entrechats and pirouettes! Marionettes only *glance* the ground, like elves, the momentary halt lends the limbs a new impetus; but we use it to *rest* on, to recover from the exertion of the dance: a moment which clearly is not dance at all in itself and which we can do nothing with except get it over with as quickly as possible.'

I said that although he was defending his paradox very cleverly he would still never persuade me that there was more grace in a mechanical marionette than in the form and build of the human body.

He replied that it would be quite impossible for a human body even to equal the marionette. In dance, he said, only a god was a match for matter; and that was the point where the two ends of the round earth met.

I was more and more astonished, and did not know what to say to such strange assertions.

It seemed, he replied, taking a pinch of snuff, that I had not read the third chapter of Genesis\* attentively; and a man not familiar with that first period of all human education could not properly discuss those following it, let alone the last.

I said that I was perfectly well aware of the damage done by consciousness to the natural grace of a human being. A young man of my acquaintance had, I said, by a chance remark lost his innocence before my very eyes and had afterwards, despite making every conceivable effort, never regained that paradise. — 'But,' I added, 'what conclusions can you draw from that?'

He asked me what had happened.

'About three years ago,' I began, 'I was bathing with a young man whose development at that time had a wonderful grace about it. He would be in his sixteenth year, I should say, and only very remotely, brought on by the kind regards of women, were the first indications of vanity discernible. As it happened we had just seen, in Paris, the youth

pulling a thorn out of his foot;\* the cast of the statue is well known, most German collections have it. Resting his foot on a stool, to dry it, and glancing at himself as he did so in a large mirror, he was reminded of the statue; he smiled and told me what he had seen. In fact, at precisely that moment, I had seen the same; but either because I wished to find out how securely grace dwelled in him or because I thought it would do him good if I combated his vanity a little, I laughed and answered: he must be seeing things. He blushed, and raised his foot a second time, to show me; but the attempt, very predictably, failed. In confusion he raised his foot a third time, a fourth, again and again, a dozen times: in vain. He was incapable of reproducing the movement — indeed, in the movements he made there was something so comical I could scarcely refrain from laughing at him: —

‘From that day, or from that very moment, forth the young man underwent an unbelievable transformation. He began spending days in front of the mirror; and one after the other all his charms deserted him. An invisible and incomprehensible power seemed to settle like an iron net over the free play of his manners and a year later there was not a trace left in him of those qualities that had in the past so delighted the eyes of people around him. There is a person who witnessed that strange and unhappy episode and who word for word could corroborate my account of it.’ —

‘At this point,’ said Herr C. with a smile, ‘I must tell you another story. You will soon see its relevance here.

‘On my journey to Russia I was staying at the country house of Herr von G., a gentleman of Livland,\* whose sons were just then busily engaged in practising their fencing. Especially the elder boy, just down from university, prided himself on his skills and one morning when I was in his room offered me a rapier. We fenced; but it happened that I was better than him; he became heated, confused; almost every thrust of mine hit home and at last his rapier flew across the room. With a laugh, but also a trifle piqued, he retrieved his rapier and said that he had met his match: but everybody would one day, and now he would take me where I should meet mine. The two brothers laughed out loud and cried: “To the wood store with him!” And they took me by the hand and led me down to a bear that Herr von G., their father, was rearing in the yard.

‘The bear, when I approached him in astonishment, was reared up on his hind legs and leaning back against a post to which he was fastened, his right paw lifted in readiness and his eye fixing mine. That was his stance, for fencing. I thought I must be dreaming when I saw myself

confronted by such an opponent; but "Go on, go on," said Herr von G. "See if you can land a hit on him." Recovering a little from my astonishment I thrust at the bear with my rapier: he made a very slight movement with his paw and parried the thrust. I tried to mislead him with a feint; the bear made no move. I thrust at him again, swiftly and shrewdly, beyond any doubt had it been a human breast I would have hit: the bear made a very slight movement with his paw and parried the stroke. Now I was almost in the position of young Herr von G. And the bear's seriousness discomposed me. Now I tried a thrust, now a feint, the sweat was dripping off me: all in vain! Not only did the bear, like the foremost fencer in the world, parry all my thrusts; when I feinted — no fencer in the world can follow him in this — he did not even react: looking me in the eye, as though he could read my soul in it, he stood with his paw lifted in readiness and when my thrusts were not seriously intended he did not move.

'Do you believe this story?'

'Absolutely!' I cried, applauding him in delight. 'I should believe it from any stranger, it is so very likely. How much more so from you!'

'Well my good friend,' said Herr C., 'you now have everything you need if you are to understand me. We see that in the same measure as reflection in the organic world becomes darker and feebler, grace there emerges in ever greater radiance and supremacy. — But just as two lines intersecting at a point after they have passed through infinity will suddenly come together again on the other side, or the image in a concave mirror, after travelling away into infinity, suddenly comes close up to us again, so when consciousness has, as we might say, passed through an infinity, grace will return; so that grace will be most purely present in the human frame that has either no consciousness or an infinite amount of it, which is to say either in a marionette or in a god.'

'But,' I said rather distractedly, 'should we have to eat again of the Tree of Knowledge to fall back into the state of innocence?'

'Indeed,' he replied; 'that is the final chapter in the history of the world.'