

ABOUT MARIONETTES

by **Heinrich von Kleist**

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I passed the winter of 1801 in M. It was there that I encountered M. C. one evening in the public gardens. Although he had been only a short time in this city as first male dancer at the opera, the public had shown him exceptional favor.

I expressed my astonishment at having noticed him several times in the market-place before a booth which housed a marionette show where brief dramatic sketches interlarded with songs & dances delighted the vulgar.

He assured me that the mimic illusion these dolls are capable of creating pleased him exceedingly, and made no bones of the advisability of any young dancer desirous of perfecting his technique going to them for instruction.

From the manner in which this had been uttered I was left in no doubt that it was more than the inspiration of the moment, so I sat down to question him as to his reasons for asserting anything so extraordinary.

He asked if I hadn't, in point of fact, found certain of their movements, particularly those of the smaller dancing figures, most graceful.

I could not deny that I had. A group of four peasants executing a round dance to a swift measure. could not have been more prettily captured by Teniers himself. I enquired after the mechanism by which these figures operated. How was it possible to keep the individual limbs and all their parts under the control which moving or dancing demands without losing one's fingers in a multitude of strings?

He replied that I was not to imagine a throughout an entire dance each member at every beat was dropped or tensed by the operator.

Every movement, he said, had its center of gravity, enough that a feeling for this inhered in his fingers, while the figure's limbs, since they were nothing more than so much dead weight, would follow without any particular attention, automatically. He added that all these movements were perfectly simple, that whenever the center of gravity proceeded in a straight line, the limbs would describe curves; and that often when jostled accidentally the whole marionette would move rhythmically in a fashion very like the dance.

Now I could begin to comprehend the pleasure which he claimed to experience at the marionette show. But still I had scarcely an inkling of those conclusions which he was to draw from this remark.

I asked if he believed that in order to control the motions of these dolls the operator must be a dancer himself or at least have some notion of what it is in dancing which makes it beautiful.

He answered that even though an occupation might be simple mechanically, yet we dare not go on to conclude that a certain sensitivity was unnecessary for its performance.

Those lines which the centers of gravity described were simple enough; and, as he believed, for the most part rectilinear. In those cases in which they were not, the law governing their departure from the rectilinear seemed of the first order - or at most of the second. And even in the latter case, no more than elliptical, which sort of movement, seeing the construction of our joints, was for the extremities of our limbs the most natural; thus no great demands were made upon an operator in reproducing them.

However, such a line, viewed from another angle, contained something most 'mysterious. For what else was it but the path traced by the dancer's soul? And he doubted that it was otherwise obtainable than by the operator's transplanting himself into the particular center of gravity there in the marionette; or, in other words, dancing.

I answered that I had been led to believe that this man's occupation was purely mechanical and rather like turning the crank which works a barrel-organ.

"By no means!" he replied. "The motions of his fingers relate to those of the marionettes most ingeniously; rather like numbers to their logarithms, or asymptote to hyperbola."

But he did believe that this last particle of intelligence of which he had spoken might be removed, so that their dancing could be transposed entirely into the realm of mechanics, prompted by the sort of roller and crank I had just mentioned. I expressed my astonishment at finding him so engrossed in raising a variety of play invented for the diversion of the crowd to the level-in his estimation-of one of the fine arts.

He smiled and ventured to maintain that could he discover a technician who would work according to his specifications, he could construct a marionette capable of performing such dances as neither he nor any other skilled dancer of his time-no, not even Vestris.

"Have you by any chance heard," he asked when he noticed that I stared silently at the ground, "of those artificial limbs which artisans in England manufacture for those unfortunates who have been amputated at the hip?"

I had to admit that no such thing had ever come to my attention.

I am sorry to hear that," he answered, "for were I to tell you that these unfortunates dance, I am afraid you would not believe me. And 'dance' will scarcely do! Although the range of their movements is limited, within those limits they perform with such calm, ease and grace as can only astonish an enquiring spirit."

I remarked jokingly that he had already found the technician for whom he had been looking. For the artisan capable of constructing so extraordinary an artificial leg could doubtless construct an entire marionette according to his specifications. And since it was now his turn to stare at the ground in disconcerted silence, I asked, "Precisely what are these specifications which you would give the artisan in question?"

"Nothing," he replied, "which isn't already present: harmony, agility, ease-but all raised to their highest powers. And above all a natural disposition of the centers of gravity."

"And the advantage which such dolls would have over living dancers?"

"Advantage? First of all, a negative one, my friend, and of the greatest consequence: they would be incapable of affectation. For affectation appears, as you know, when the soul, vis motrix, inhabits any other point than the center of gravity. Now, since thanks to a string or a thread, the operator would have no other point in hand, all the other members would behave as what they are, dead weight pure and simple, acting according to mechanical laws a capital achievement one looks in vain for among the majority of our dancers.

"Why look at P.," he continued. "When she reaches that point in Daphne where she glances over her shoulder at Apollo in pursuit, her soul lingers in the vertebra 27

of the small of tier back! She bows as though she meant to break, like some naiad from the school of Bernini. Or look at young F. When he plays Paris confronted by the three goddesses, and presents the apple to Venus, his soul extends no further-it is a horror to behold-than his elbow.

"Such lapses as these," he added by way of a conclusion after a moments hesitation, "became inevitable once we tasted of the Tree of Knowledge. Now Paradise is shut fast, the Cherub behind us; we must circumnavigate the globe and see if another gate may not stand open."

I laughed. At any rate, I thought, intelligence could not err if it was not present. But noticing that he still wished to unburden himself I requested him to continue. "Moreover," he said, "these dolls have the advantage that they defy gravity. Of inertia, that attribute of matter most hostile to the dance, they know nothing, since that power which raises them exceeds that which holds them down.

What wouldn't our dear old G. give to be sixty pounds lighter, or for a counter-weight in the same amount to come to her assistance during entrechats and pirouettes? My dolls would require earth beneath their feet no more than the elves do, simply grazing it occasionally, that this momentary rest impart new momentum to their limbs. We demand earth beneath our feet to recover from the exertions of the dance, a moment which lies quite obviously outside the dance itself, and with which we can do nothing more, or better, than conjure it away as quickly as we can." I said that no matter how he ordered his paradoxes he could never persuade me that there was more grace in an articulated mannequin than in the structures of the human body.

He retorted that it was totally impossible for a mere man to approach the grace of one of these mannequins. A god alone might in this regard measure himself against pure matter. And at this point the two ends of our ring-shaped world joined.

I was growing more astonished all the while and had no idea how I was to reply to such extraordinary assertions.

It would appear, he retorted, as he took a pinch of snuff, that I had not read the third chapter of Genesis with the requisite attention, and with one who was ignorant of this first chapter of man's formation it was not suitable to treat of the next, much less the last.

I said that I was aware already of the disorders which self-consciousness introduced into the play of man's natural grace. Under my very eyes a young man of my acquaintance had lost his innocence and the paradise this innocence ensures, and that a mere remark had been his undoing, that in spite of every conceivable effort, he never found this paradise again. "Yet what conclusions," I added, "will you be able to draw from this?" He wanted to know what sort of incident I had in mind.

"I was bathing about three years ago with a young man whose entire being radiated

a miraculous grace. He must have been sixteen at the time and presented only the first subtle indications of vanity, elicited by the admiration -albeit from a distance-of the fair sex. As it happened, only a short time before, the two of us had visited Paris together, where he had seen the statue of the boy pulling a splinter from his foot, a statue so famous that casts of it appear in most of our German collections. Looking in a pier-glass at precisely the moment he raised his leg to dry the foot, he was reminded of this work of art. He smiled and communicated his discovery. As a matter of fact, I had noticed the same thing at exactly the same moment. Now whether it was to test the security of the grace with which he moved, or perhaps to give a wholesome rebuff to his vanity, I laughed and answered that he was seeing things.

He blushed and raised his foot again to show me what he meant. But this second attempt, as he might have guessed, was not crowned with success. He tried again and again, becoming more desperate with every attempt. Ten times and all in vain. He was incapable of repeating that chance movement. Indeed, the movements which he did make partook in such a degree of the ludicrous that I was hard pressed not to laugh.

"And since that day a mysterious change has come over this young man. He began spending whole days before his mirror and one charm after another deserted his person. An invisible and mysterious power appeared to have taken hold of his limbs, inhibiting their free expression. It was as though a net of iron had been cast over him. In the space of a year no particle of that loveliness remained which had formerly delighted all who beheld him. And there is still another person living who witnessed this extraordinary and unfortunate case, who will vouch for it as I have recounted it, word for word."

"At this juncture," said Mr. C. in a friendly tone, "I must tell another story. You will immediately understand what prompts me to do so.

I broke my journey into Russia with a visit to the estates of von G., a Livonian nobleman, whose two sons at that time were enthusiastic swordsmen - particularly the elder who had just returned from the university convinced he was an adept. One morning, as I happened to be in his room, he offered me a foil. We fenced, but it fell out that I was the more experienced, and his passion too bewildered him, so that almost every thrust of mine struck home, until at length his foil flew into a corner. Half jokingly, half in earnest, as he stooped for his weapon, he told me he had met his match, but then again everything in this world must, and that he should now have the pleasure of leading me to mine. Both brothers began to laugh and shout 'Away with him! Away with him! To the woodshed with him!' Then they took me by the hands and led me to a bear which their father, old von G., had raised in his yard.

"At my astonished approach the bear was standing on his hind legs, slouched against the stake to which he was chained; his right paw was raised ready to deal a blow, he looked me straight in the eye: this was his way of standing on guard. I thought I must be dreaming, confronted by such an adversary; but no, old von G. suddenly cried 'Engage! Engage! See if you can touch him a single time!' I made a lunge-once I was somewhat recovered from my astonishment. The bear parried my thrust with the most off-hand riposte. I tried to throw him off with feints: the bear refused to budge. I lunged again with the adroitness of the moment: a merely human breast could not have withstood my steel. With one paw the bear parried my thrust with the most off-hand riposte. Now I was in almost the same position in which young von G. had been.

The bear's gravity contributed to my loss of composure, as alternating thrusts and feints I began to run with sweat. And all in vain! It wasn't simply that this bear was the equal of any swordsman in the world at parrying thrusts, but that my feints-and in this no swordsman in the world approached him - provoked no reaction at all; staring straight into my eyes, he seemed to read my very thoughts; he just stood there, that paw at the ready, and whenever my lunges were not in earnest, he refused to budge.

"Do you believe my story?"

"Absolutely!" I cried with ready approbation. "From the veriest stranger, the story is so credible, so how much the more from you!"

"Now, my excellent friend," said Mr. C., "you are in possession of all the facts necessary to appreciate my views. We have seen that in proportion as reflection dims and weakens in the organic world the more radiant and commanding grace emerges. As the line which intersects another will continue through infinity only to find itself back before its starting point, on the other side of the line intersected, and the concave mirror after casting an image through infinity suddenly displays it immediately before us, just so knowledge must traverse an infinity before grace reappears. And for this reason grace is greatest in those whose bodies are totally devoid of self-consciousness or where it is infinite, that is, in the mannequin or the god."

"In consequence," I mused, "must we not taste again of the Tree of Knowledge if we arc to revert to a state of innocence?" "And that," he replied, "would supply a last chapter to the history of the world."