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1

Literary Views on Puppet Theatre

Performances with puppets are attended mostly by children, a tradition that was established – albeit unconsciously – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in even earlier times when French and Italian showmen presented their shows in the palace and gardens of St Germain-en-Laye, to entertain the young Dauphin through many months of the year.

This is not to say that the puppet theatre of the past was only for children; on the contrary, it was a theatre for all ages, enjoyed by all. Children attended performances meant for adults, because in those days the idea of art especially for children was unknown. They were taken, indiscriminately, to see everything.

Some might say that adults enjoyed puppet theatre in the past because of the naivety of the public of those times, but this is not quite true. The main categories of theatre in those days were court theatre and popular theatre, and puppets played the same repertoire for the same classes of audience. Their theatre developed in tandem with actors' theatre, and was accepted in the same way.

In the world beyond Europe puppets have been recognized as a part of theatre for centuries. In the Japan of the seventeenth century it was held in higher esteem than any other form of theatre, and in Indonesia it was almost the only available form, leaving little room for others to develop.

On researching European theatre, the presence of the puppet player is to be found at every stage. Indeed, for many theatre companies, actors and puppets were for a long time simple alternatives.

The classical mimes, Greek, Roman and Byzantine, the members of the Craft Guilds, the priests who organized the Mystery Plays, *comme-dia dell'arte* players, the English Comedians touring the Continent in the seventeenth century – all these recognized the puppet as an attractive means of theatrical expression. The public was fascinated by the Mystery Play whether performed by puppet or actor; it awaited

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with equal impatience the transformation of the flesh-and-blood Harlequin or the wooden version manipulated by a complicated system of strings. The plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe were performed in Europe by touring English companies in both a human and a puppet version, and there is no doubt that the success of Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* initiated the very important tradition of Faust on the puppet stage. In Italy, opera with humans was no more popular than opera with puppets, with figures immortalized in the sketches of Bernini and Acciaiuoli, libretti written by Martelli and Metastasio, and music composed by masters of the calibre of Scarlatti.

In general, puppet companies were organized like actors' companies, with their own auditorium, a stage with suitable machinery, and drummers and clowns to advertise the shows. Experienced manipulators were employed and good writers commissioned, of which the list is long: Le Sage and Fuselier, Sheridan and Foote, Mahlmann, Maeterlinck and Schnitzler, and many writers of our own time, such as García Lorca and Michel de Ghelderode.

Nowadays the puppet theatre revival continues to prove the importance of puppetry as a necessary branch of theatre with its own following, its own style, its own aesthetic. For this reason the puppet theatre, rich as it is in ideas and values that are important for any theory of theatre, should be considered in any discussion of the aesthetic problems of theatre art in general.

Since the most ancient times, puppet theatre has been an illuminating source of metaphors, some of which illustrate the relationship between the Creator and his creation. The Creator used often to be presented as an unknown and powerful being, sometimes without a name, omnipresent, pulling the strings of human actions. The metaphor referred both to the relationship between God and man and, equally, to the links between man and man. Horace wrote in his 'Satires':

... what am I to you?
 Look how you who lord it over me
 Bow and scrape for others like a puppet on a string!¹

The notion of God as manipulator was actually introduced by the Arabs, whose poets and philosophers expressed Arab determinism. Birri, an Anatolian poet of the thirteenth century, wrote in his *ghazal*:

Wise man seeking for Truth
 Look up at the tent of the sky
 Where the Great Showman of the world
 Has long ago set up his Shadow Theatre.
 Behind his screen he is giving a show
 Played by the shadows of men and women of his creation.²

One could quote hundreds of examples of the use and development of this metaphor. Notice how today it contains new meanings. Vladimir Sokolov, a twentieth-century dancer and puppeteer, expressed it thus:

Striving to reach artistic freedom for his creative will, man invented the puppet theatre. Through its discovery he freed himself from the threat of destiny, creating for himself a world of his own and – through the characters which owe him total dependence – he strengthens his will, his logic, and his aesthetic. In short, he becomes a little god in his own world.³

So we see that through the centuries the relationship between the creator and the created, so well illustrated by the mechanism of the puppet theatre, has not changed very much. The only significant change is one of function: the ‘Demonstrator of the World’ has been replaced by the ‘little god’; the ‘created’ has in a sense taken the function of ‘creator’ and has grasped his independence. This is evidenced in all forms of contemporary art. The metaphorical use of the structure of the puppet theatre would not be so important if it were not for the fact that it expresses so well the psychological attraction of creative puppetry: the complete, the ‘divine’ liberty of self-expression, to be found by an artist only in puppet theatre. This question of freedom – autonomy – is valued by many artists other than puppeteers, and particularly by writers and directors of the ‘live’ theatre.

Lemercier de Neuville, famous satirist and puppet player, wrote about his own experience: ‘being unable to find competent actors, the author, wishing to see his plays performed, was obliged to cut his company out of paper!’⁴

Eleanora Duse’s opinion of puppets was similar: she wrote to the Italian puppet master, Vittorio Podrecca, ‘I envy you. I should have been a director of puppet theatre myself. Your actors do not speak and are perfectly obedient: mine can speak and are not obedient at all.’⁵

These quotations are amusing, but they contain a deeper meaning: they highlight the unique characteristic of the puppet, that it has only

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one identity whereas the actor has many. The puppet has no private life, living only on stage: to the reformers of theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century this was its special value. They were striving towards a harmonious reality in theatre, one in which there was no contradiction between the artificiality of the scenography and the reality of the actor.

In any theory of puppet theatre, the most important factor is the relationship between puppeteer and puppet. This relationship has changed down the centuries. Very often the puppet players themselves have not been conscious of the change, especially the folk puppeteers of past times who invariably performed spontaneously. They inherited and passed on their professional experience and their repertory from generation to generation, not caring whether they left any recorded evidence of their artistry or of the content of their shows. The first records we have (not counting the written records of the satirical attacks made by fairground 'Polichinelles' on the monopoly of the 'official' theatre in Paris) date only from the second half of the eighteenth century. The author of this evidence was Samuel Foote, actor and playwright, whose company played in London from 1758 to 1773. Before the first performance of *The Primitive Puppet Show* on 15 January 1773 at his theatre in the Haymarket, Foote gave a long talk whose subject was the 'glory of the primitive puppet show'. He insisted that this form of art had bloomed in Ancient Rome and had unfortunately disappeared together with Rome. Foote wished to revive it, and described how actors,

every part of them, in order to make their figures conspicuous to a numerous audience, were stuffed and raised beyond their natural proportion, their heads covered with masques, and the mouths of those masques lined with brass, in order to convey the voice to the remotest part of their immense theatres; nothing human was visible, the whole appearance was but a puppet; and whether the voice proceeded from within or from behind the figure, the difference could not be very essential.⁶

Foote's interpretation of the theatre of antiquity is very personal, not to say idiosyncratic, but it makes us notice that he was in favour of a theatre of convention, which disguises real life and which, most importantly, even disguises humans. He expressed his interest in *theatricality* thus:

This, gentlemen, was the first state of the stage in Italy: but in the five hundred and fifteenth year from the foundation of Rome this art, by an accident, was brought nearer the puppet perfection. Livius Andronicus, who like your present servant was both author and actor, upon delivering a popular sentiment in one of his pieces, was so often encored that, quite exhausted, he declared himself incapable of a further repetition, unless one of his scholars was permitted to mount the stage, and suffered to declaim the passage, which he would attempt to gesticulate; to this the public assented; and from that period the practice was established of one actor giving the gesture, whilst another delivered the words. This fact will not admit of a doubt, as we receive it from the best authority, that of Livy the historian. Here, gentlemen, by separation of the personage, you have the puppet complete.⁷

Foote's conception of puppet theatre derived from his views on live theatre. In *Tragedy à la Mode* he used flat figures and only one actor who spoke all the roles. In *The Primitive Puppet Show* he applied the principle of the play within a play. When the puppets had finished performing, a second part was played by actors, during which a 'Constable' entered and arrested Foote and his puppets 'under the Vagrancy Act'. The next scene took place in the courtroom where the Constable was found to have no case because, as ever, the puppets brought with them their normal illusoriness. They were not real, therefore they could not be judged – you cannot pass judgment on an object. What was more, Foote himself was equally invulnerable, because, having an artificial leg, he was 'one quarter puppet'! In modern terms, he was a practitioner of 'mixed-media' theatre, mixing humans with puppets on stage, and thus underlining the alienation of the stage character from its surroundings.

However, Foote's ideas on theatricality and his sense of humour were too advanced for the public of the time, which preferred another kind of puppet show, that of 'Punch' and his wife 'Joan'.

With the Romantic Movement in Germany came a new appreciation of the puppet theatre. Lothar Buschmeyer, a twentieth-century writer, said:

The revival of puppetry today would have been impossible without Goethe and the Romantics, because it was they who won for the puppet theatre the interest of the educated classes and of the artists so necessary for its renaissance.⁸

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In Germany especially, the help of the Romantics was very necessary as it was here in the previous period that the Rationalists, for example Gottsched, expressed a desire 'to liquidate this tasteless genre'. Romantic writers and their precursors, however, were enthusiastic about anything to do with folk art.

It is interesting to note that, as in older times, the Romantic writers considered the puppet theatre as a source of metaphor. First it served as a satirical analogy of mankind's small-mindedness, so much accentuated during the so-called 'Sturm und Drang' period. The best example of this is in the words of Goethe's Young Werther, expressing his feelings about the unreality of the world:

I stand as before a peepshow, a magic box. I see small people and little horses passing in front of me and often ask myself if it is not an optical illusion. I play with them, or rather they play with me, like a marionette: now and then I take a neighbour by his wooden hand and recoil in horror.⁹

In Goethe's early plays similar comparisons appear. In *Jahrmarktfest von Plundersweilen* (*Fairground of Plundersweilen*), he presents an image of the fairground of life, or 'the little theatre of the world', meaning the puppet theatre. The same idea was revived in *Hanswursts Hochzeit* (*Hanswurst's Wedding*), published posthumously.

The Polish Romantics exploited the puppet theatre as a source of metaphor to express their opinions on the rules of life. For Adam Mickiewicz, as for Goethe, the puppet theatre was a good analogy for the pettiness of mankind and the world. He wrote:

It is easy to recognise a talented man from his accomplishments, his arguments, his work. But how deeply hidden are his true character and his soul! These artificial marionettes we call people may embrace us in friendship, smile at us, cry sometimes, but underneath you find egoism, greed and pride manipulating their strings, dominating these figures.¹⁰

Słowacki, in his drama *Kordian*, mentioned the English 'Punch' to illustrate the machinations of political activity, while Zygmunt Krasiński similarly called politicians 'Polichinelles manipulated by hidden powers'.¹¹

Having been used as a symbol of the world to the satirical observer, the puppet theatre then took on a new role, exemplified by Schiller in

his concept of *Spiel des Lebens* (the game of life). In the period of early Romanticism it preserved its symbolic function in the so-called *Schicksalstragödie* (the tragedy of fate). Ludwig Tieck, in his novel *Gelehrte Gesellschaft* (*Learned Society*), inserts a story of a puppet performance on this same theme: the hero Hanswurst is a marionette, a symbol of humanity. He is bound – although he does not know it – to another character, undefined, unnamed, disguised. Whenever Hanswurst wishes to take action, for example to meet friends or to give help to another, this other ‘formless figure’ pulls him back. Hanswurst is at a loss to understand what is wrong.

A little later the marionette acquired an aesthetic importance, also illustrated in the works of Tieck. The negative aspects of the marionette (*Leblosigkeit*, lifelessness) he treated as something of value, since it made the puppet a dependant of the writer’s imagination. He also drew attention to the inappropriateness of puppets in the roles they usually portrayed: the lifeless puppet pretending to be a live actor playing ‘Faust’ or ‘Genoveva’ seemed to Tieck to be not only grotesque, but ironic. He decided that the writer or the puppet player should exploit this inherent limitation of the puppet for the sake of ‘romantic irony’, as he did in his own play *Prince Zerbino*. The puppet player should have more importance than the puppet itself; the player should direct its application and use.

Although the Romantics did not write treatises on the aesthetics of puppet theatre, their ideas were expressed within their works, very often works for the stage. Some were specifically written for puppets, and were performed by professional, often folk, puppeteers. When they spoke of the aesthetic value of the puppet, the Romantics clearly thought of it as a virtual actor: one could go so far as to say that they had their own theory of the über-marionette. They were not always satisfied with ‘live’ actors, whom they frequently found motivated by personal ambition, unfaithful to the author’s intentions and over-influenced by traditional, outmoded methods of staging:

but the marionette, an excellent mechanical creature, overcomes all biological and individual human limitations and appears before us as a first class performer, especially in burlesque and comedy.¹²

These words of Eleonora Rapp echo Tieck and also Jean Paul. August Mähmann, in the introduction to his *Marionettentheater* (1806), was similarly convinced: ‘puppets hewn from wood would present my plays better and more truthfully than the living wooden figures in our

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Haupt- and Staatstheaters'.¹³ Justinus Kerner also thought along the same lines:

It may be strange, but for me the marionettes are more free, more natural than live actors. They give me a stronger sense of illusion ... Marionettes have no life backstage: one cannot listen to them nor make acquaintance with them except in the roles they play.¹⁴

The writer who expressed most precisely the Romantic understanding of the puppet as actor was Heinrich von Kleist in his essay 'On the Marionette Theatre'.¹⁵ In the convention of the time he wrote in the form of a dialogue, beginning:

Whilst I was spending the winter of 1801 in M–, I met Mr. C. in a park one evening. He had recently become principal dancer at the Opera in the town, and was enjoying an extraordinary success with the public.¹⁶

This Mr. C. appeared to be a great lover of the puppet theatre, and the author ascribes to him arguments to convince the reader as well as himself, the partner in the dialogue, that the puppet has a real and important value which can creatively influence the live theatre, particularly the ballet:

He assured me that the pantomimes of these puppets gave him much pleasure and stated emphatically that any dancer who wished to improve his art could learn a great deal from them.¹⁷

Two arguments support his thesis: one, the roles of the mechanics of dance; and two, the lack of self-consciousness in the puppet as opposed to the overweening self-consciousness of the dancer. Mr. C. seems to be a connoisseur of the mechanics of the puppet:

Each movement, he said, had a centre of gravity; it sufficed to control the centre of the figure. The limbs, which were no more than pendulums, followed mechanically of their own accord without any prompting.¹⁸

Naturally, the artist and his talents were not thereby diminished:

The line which the centre of gravity must describe was very simple and, as he believed, in most cases straight. In cases where it was

curved, the curve seemed to be of the first, or at the most, of the second order. Even in this case it was just an ellipse, a form which was the natural movement of the human body (owing to its joints): it did not therefore demand any great skill from the puppeteer.

On the other hand, this line was something very mysterious, for it was no less than the path of the dancer's soul, and he doubted that it could be found except by the puppeteer transposing himself into the centre of gravity of the marionettes: in other words, by dancing.¹⁹

With the marionette, the artistry of the performance is not jeopardised by any temptation of the performer to 'charm'. Mr. C. further explains the puppet's advantage over the human:

The advantage? Firstly a negative one, my good friend: that a puppet does not give itself airs and graces. Affectation appears, as you know, when one's soul (*vis motrix* or moving energy) is elsewhere than at the centre of gravity of a movement. Since the puppeteer has only that single point under his control, through the string, all the other limbs are as they should be: dead, mere pendulums which simply obey the law of gravity, an excellent characteristic which one seeks in vain in most of our dancers.²⁰

Affectation or the desire to charm is much connected with the selfishness of the actor/dancer who places his own soul before the public eye instead of hiding it in the invisible 'point of gravity'. Trying to charm actually results in a lack of charm in the stage character, according to Kleist, who cites many examples to prove his thesis. His conclusion is considerably to the disadvantage of the live performer:

so grace returns after understanding has passed through infinity. It thus appears in those human forms which either have no consciousness at all or have an infinite one: in the marionette and in the god.²¹

However, Kleist's theory in all its simplicity had no practical influence, inspiring neither the artists of the live theatre nor the puppeteers to transform their fairground booths into an artistic theatre. It was necessary to wait almost a hundred years to see the ideas of the Romantics bear fruit, and for Kleist's theory to evoke the interest of other artists and authors. We cannot be certain of Kleist's influence on Edward Gordon Craig with his own famous theory of the *über-marionette* –

perhaps Craig did not even read Kleist – but the similarity of the two approaches is obvious.

Little happened to enrich puppetry in the second half of the nineteenth century in ideas or theories, although it was practised by such famous writers as George Sand and her son Maurice, and the group of painters from the Chat Noir cabaret in Paris. The 1852 publication of the *Histoire des Marionnettes en Europe* by Charles Magnin was very important for the dissemination of knowledge of puppet theatre and for its appreciation as a theatre art. . Although several works on the history of puppets have been published since then,²² for example by Philippe Lebrecht,²³ George Speaight,²⁴ Paul McPharlin,²⁵ and John Varey,²⁶ Magnin's work remains an inspiration to historians and theoreticians of puppetry. Magnin collected much of his evidence searching through various documents, dictionaries, almanacs and diaries. His comments were subtle and his methods surprisingly modern, since he presented the theatre activities of past puppeteers against a broad background of contemporary religious and cultural practice.

Through his work Magnin legitimized the puppet theatre as a separate branch of theatre. He was the first to treat it as a creative art, worthy of scholarly research. He collected an immense quantity of historical evidence, adding a special explanation for his interest in the subject:

If someone insisted that I give him a reason for my choice of such an unusual subject, and I felt naturally bound to answer, I would have no difficulty in giving him examples of many profound and acknowledged thinkers who were not afraid to compromise their reputation as scholars, poets, even theologians and philosophers, by their close association with these nice, seductive wonders. How many piquant essays, scientific lectures, wise thoughts, caprices or poems could I cite from the work of the greatest writers of all countries and of all times who were inspired by the marionette. I may surprise some of my readers with no more than an introductory list of such excellent patrons: Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Marcus Aurelius, Petronius, Galen, Apuleius, Tertulian; among modern writers: Shakespeare, Cervantes, Ben Jonson, Moliere, Hamilton, Pope, Swift, Fielding, Voltaire, Goethe, Byron.²⁷

Magnin was trying to convince his readers that puppets were part of the art of theatre and were thus subjects worthy of research. He wrote:

A surprising thing! We shall find in the history of these wooden actors the identical stages of development (hieratic, aristocratic and

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