ON THE THEATER OF MARIONETTES

. . .

One evening in a public garden in M . . . , where I spent the winter of 1801, I happened to run into Mr. C . . . , who had recently been hired as the principle dancer of that city's opera and was already all the rage.

I told him that I was surprised to have found him on several occasions in a makeshift marionette theater erected in the marketplace, an establishment that catered to the rabble with little dramatic burlesques and song and dance.

He assured me that the pantomime of these puppets gave him great pleasure, and suggested in no uncertain terms that a dancer inclined to improve his technique could learn a thing or two from them.

Since, by the way he said it, the remark seemed to me more than the stuff of idle fancy, I sat down with him to learn more about the underlying premises for such an extraordinary statement.

He asked me if I did not, indeed, find some of the movements of the puppets, particularly the smaller ones, to be extraordinarily graceful.

This fact I could not deny. A group of four peasants dancing the Ronde to a rapid tempo could not have been portrayed more charmingly by Teniers.*

I inquired as to the mechanism of these figures, and how it was possible, without myriad threads attached to fingers, to direct the motion of each limb and its pauses as prescribed by the rhythm of the movement or the dance?

He replied that I must not picture it as if each limb were individually posed and tugged at by the machinist during all the different moments of the dance.

Each movement, he said, had a center of gravity; it would suffice to control this point from the center of the figure; the limbs, which are, after all, nothing but pendulums, would follow mechanically on their own without anything else needing to be done.

He added that this movement was very simple; that each time the center of gravity is moved in a straight line the limbs trace curves; and that often, when merely shaken in a haphazard fashion, the entire mechanism slipped into a kind of rhythmic motion that resembled dance.

This remark seemed at first to shed some light on the pleasure he claimed to take in the marionette theater. But I did not then and there have the slightest inkling of the conclusions which he would subsequently derive from it.

* David Teniers the Younger, Flemish genre painter, 1610–1690.

I asked him if he believed that the machinist who controlled the puppet had himself to be a dancer, or at least to have a sense of the aesthetic of dance.

He replied that even if a task seemed simple in its mechanical basis that it does not necessarily follow that such a task could be practiced without any sensibility.

The line the center of gravity had to trace would indeed be very simple, and in most cases, he believed, straight. In those instances in which it was curved, the gravitational law of its curvature appeared to be of the first, or at most, the second order; and even in the latter case, it would only be elliptical, which form of movement was, in any case, (on account of the joints) the most natural for the nethermost parts of the human body, and consequently, demanded no great artistry on the part of the machinist.

On the other hand, viewed from another angle, this same line was something very mysterious. For it was nothing less than the pathway of the dancer's soul; and he doubted that it could be produced in any other fashion than that the machinist adopted the center of gravity of the marionette, in other words, that he danced.

I responded that the puppeteer's craft had been described to me as rather vapid: more like the turning of a crank that plucked at a lyre.

"Not at all," he replied. "The manipulative relation between the movements of his fingers and the movement of the puppets attached to them is really rather ingenious, more like the relation between numbers and their logarithms or between asymptotes and hyperbolae."

At the same time, he believed that this latter soul splitting, of

which he spoke, is extracted from the marionette, that its dance is completely transposed into the realm of the mechanical, and could be evoked, as I had supposed, by means of a crank.

I expressed my surprise to see what attention he lavished on this art form invented for the masses, as though it were a fine art. Not only that he deemed it capable of a higher artistic development, but that he even seemed to dabble in it himself.

He smiled and said that he dared claim that if a mechanic could build him a marionette according to the stipulations he envisioned, that he would have it perform a dance which neither he himself, nor any other skilled dancer of the day, not even Vestris,* could execute.

"Have you," he asked, upon noticing me cast my gaze in silence to the ground, "have you heard of those mechanical limbs that English artists had fashioned for those poor unfortunates who'd lost their own?"

"No, I said." I had never laid eyes on such a thing.

"What a shame," he replied; "for if I told you that these poor unfortunates could dance with them, I almost fear you would not believe it. – Well not exactly dancing! The sphere of their movements is indeed limited; but those movements which they are able to command are executed with a calm, ease and comeliness that makes every thinking person stand in awe."

I remarked in jest that he had surely found his man. For the

* Marie-Jean-Augustin Vestris, a.k.a. Auguste Vestris (1760–1842), a French dancer dubbed "le dieu de la danse" (the god of dance).

artist able to construct such a remarkable limb would undoubtedly also be able to build him an entire marionette according to his specifications.

"What?" I asked, for I noticed him casting a somewhat despondent look at the ground: "Of what sort are those specifications that you would make for the workmanship of such a puppet?"

"Nothing," he replied, "that can't already be found here: symmetry, flexibility, agility – but all to a higher degree; and especially a more natural disposition of the centers of gravity."

And the advantage that this puppet would have over live dancers?

"The advantage? First of all, a negative one, my fine friend, namely that it never *strikes an attitude*. For attitude, as you well know, arises when the soul (*vis motrix*) finds itself twisted in a motion other than the one prescribed by its center of gravity. Since, wielding wire or thread, the machinist simply has no other point at his disposal than this one, all the other bodily articulations are as they should be, dead, pure pendulums, and merely follow the law of gravity; an admirable quality that one may seek in vain among the vast majority of our dancers.

"Take P. . . , for instance," he continued, "when she dances the part of Daphne, and turns around to peer at Apollo, who is pursuing her, her soul sits in the axis of the spine; she bends as if she were about to break, like a Naiad from the School of Bernini.* Look at young F . . . , when, in the role of Paris, he stands among the three goddesses and passes the apple to Venus: his soul, if I dare say so (and it's a horror to see) lodges in his elbows.

* Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Italian Baroque sculptor and architect (1598–1680)

"Such missteps," he added as an aside, "are unavoidable ever since we ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But Paradise is bolted shut and the cherub is on our tail; we are obliged to circle the globe and go around to the other side to see if perhaps there's a back way in."

I laughed. – Indeed, I thought to myself, *the spirit can't go wrong if there's no spirit to begin with*. But I sensed that he still had more on his mind, and bid him continue.

"The puppets, moreover, have the advantage in that they are gravity-defiant. They know nothing of the inertia of matter: for the force that lifts them into the air is greater than the force that binds them to the ground. What wouldn't our worthy G . . . give to be sixty pounds lighter, or if a weight of this magnitude were to aid her in her entrechats and pirouettes? The puppets only need the ground, as do the elves, to graze it, and thereby to reanimate the swing of their limbs against the momentary resistance; we need it to rest on it and recuperate from the strain of the dance: for us the moment of contact clearly plays no part in the dance and we have no other recourse but to get it over and done with as quickly as possible."

Whereto I said, that, as cleverly as he might maneuver the crux of his paradox, he would never convince me that there was more grace in a jointed mechanical figure than in the structure of the human body.

He replied that it would simply be impossible for a human being to even hold his own with the mechanical figure. Only a god could measure up to inert matter in this regard; and here precisely was the point at which the two ends of the ring-shaped world came together.

I was ever more surprised and did not know what to make of such extraordinary assertions.

It appears, he suggested, taking a pinch of tobacco, that I had not read carefully enough the third chapter of the first Book of Moses; and it would be impossible to confer with a man who was unfamiliar with the first period of human refinement concerning the subsequent periods, let alone concerning the last.

To which I responded that I did, indeed, know all too well what a mess consciousness had made of the natural grace of Man. A young man of my acquaintance had, as it were, before my very eyes, forfeited his innocence with a single remark, and was never, thereafter, despite every conceivable effort, able to retrieve this lost paradise. "–But what conclusions can you draw from this?" I added.

He asked me just what had transpired.

"Some three years ago," I recounted, "I happened to be bathing beside a young man, blessed at the time with an astounding beauty. He must have been about sixteen years old, and manifested only the faintest first traces of vanity fostered by the favor of women. It so happened that we had both shortly before seen the young man pulling the thorn out of his foot in Paris; a copy of that famous sculpture can be found in most German collections. A glance he cast into a large mirror at the very same moment at which he set his foot on a stool to dry it reminded him of it; he smiled and remarked that he had just made a discovery. In fact, I had at that same moment made the same association; but, whether to test that his innate grace was still intact, or to put a healthy damper on his vanity, I laughed and told him he was seeing things! He blushed and raised the foot again, to show me; but, as one might well have predicted, the attempt

failed. Befuddled, he raised his foot a third and fourth time, indeed he raised it ten more times: but for naught! He was simply unable to repeat the same movement – and what's more, the movements that he did manage to make looked so comic that I was hard pressed to restrain my laughter.

"From that day, indeed, as it were, from that moment on, the young man underwent an incomprehensible transformation. He began to stand for days at a time in front of the mirror; and he lost one charm after another. An invisible and inconceivable force, like an iron net, seemed to settle over and impinge upon the free play of movements, and after a year had gone by, not a trace could be found of the charming allure that had once entranced all those whose eyes fell upon him. I know another living soul who witnessed that strange and unfortunate incident, and could confirm, word for word, my account."

"In this context," Mr. C . . . replied in a right friendly manner, "I must tell you another story, of which you will immediately comprehend the connection.

"On a trip to Russia I happened to find myself on the country estate of a certain Sir von G . . . , a Livonian nobleman, whose sons were at the time very much focused on their fencing; especially the older one, who had just returned from his university studies, played the virtuoso, and one morning up in his room handed me a rapier. We fenced, yet I proved superior; passion helped put him off his guard; with almost every thrust I struck home, until, finally, his rapier flew into a corner. Half in jest, half pained, he said, as he picked up his rapier, that he had found his master; but everything in nature finds its match, and he would soon lead me to mine. The

brothers laughed out loud and cried: 'Off with him! Off with him! To the woodshed he must go!' Whereupon they took me by the hand and led me to a bear that Sir von G . . . , their father, was training in the yard.

"When I appeared before him in stunned amazement, the bear stood upright on its hind legs, with his back to a post to which he was attached, his right paw raised and ready to strike, looking me straight in the eye: this was his fencing position. And finding myself face to face with such an opponent, I did not know if I was dreaming; but Sir von G . . . , egged me on: 'Thrust man! Thrust!' he said. See if you can teach him a thing or two! And having gotten over my initial amazement, I lunged with my rapier; the bear made a very slight movement with his paw and parried my thrust. I tried with feints to trick him; the bear did not budge. And once again I lunged with a nimble stroke that would have pierced without fail any human breast; but the bear made a very slight motion with its paw and parried the thrust. Now I was almost as befuddled as had been the young Sir von G . . . The bear's perfect calm helped rob me of my own composure, I varied thrusts and feints, sweat dripped from my brow: for naught! Not only did the bear, like the foremost fencer in the world, parry all my thrusts; but, unlike any human counterpart would have done, not a single time did he go for my feints: Looking at me eye to eye, as if he could read my soul, he stood stock still, paw raised and ready, and if my thrusts were ruses, he did not even budge.

"Do you believe this story?"

"Absolutely!" I replied with cheerful applause; "I'd believe it from the lips of any stranger; all the more so from you!"

"Well then, my fine friend," said Mr. C . . . , "you now have all

the knowledge you need to grasp my meaning. We see that in the organic world, to the same degree that reflection gets darker and weaker, grace grows ever more radiant and dominant. But just as two lines intersect on one side of a point, and after passing through infinity, suddenly come together again on the other side; or the image in a concave mirror suddenly reappears before us after drawing away into the infinite distance, so too, does grace return once perception, as it were, has traversed the infinite – such that it simultaneously appears the purest in human bodily structures that are either devoid of consciousness or which possess an infinite consciousness, such as in the jointed manikin or the god."

"In which case," I observed, a bit befuddled, "would we then have to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge again to fall back into the state of innocence?"

"Undoubtedly," he replied; "which will be the last chapter of the history of the world."