

The puppet's paradox

An organic prosthesis

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All movables of wonder, from all parts,
Are here: Albinos, painted Indians, Dwarfs,
The horse of knowledge, and the learned pig,
The stone-eater, the man that swallows fire,
Giants, ventriloquists, the invisible girl,
The bust that speaks and moves its goggling eyes,
The wax-work, clock-work, all the marvelous craft
Of modern Merlins, wild beasts, puppet-show,
All out-o'-the-way, far-fetched, perverted things,
All freaks of nature, all Promethean thoughts
Of man; his dullness, madness, and their feats
All jumbled up together, to compose
A parliament of monsters.

—William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850),
book VII:706–718

The puppet is mostly understood as a figure of human passivity, which it expresses analogically through its inert and tame body.¹ As the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates, the figurative sense of “a small figure, human or animal” is indeed that of “a person [. . .] whose acts, while ostensibly his own, are suggested and controlled by another.” To man, inherently incapable of fully realizing his medial place, inasmuch as he is physically weak with respect to the animal kingdom and intellectually lacking with respect to godlike intelligence, the puppet offers not only the rhetorical force as a metaphor, but also the pathetic force as a performing object whose sphere of activity includes theater and playtime.² These dual meanings can be found as early as this figure's first appearance in the historical and philosophical records in Greek.

Regarding its theatrical character, at the end of the second century A.D., Athenaeus identifies the first known puppeteer [*neurospaste*] in Potheinos. Athenians had allowed him to perform his plays, and he is believed to have inspired Euripedes and his contemporaries

(*Deipn.* I, 35, 19e). Xenophon in his *Symposium*, written around the year 385 B.C., corroborates puppet theater as a form of entertainment appreciated by the public: “[T]hey give me a livelihood by coming to view my puppets [*neurospasta*],” says the puppeteer in *Symp.* IV, 55. Later Plato in the *Laws*, composed around 360 B.C., includes the “puppet show” [*thaumata*] among the performing arts in vogue at the time (*Laws* II:658b–c). In the middle of the first century B.C., Diodorus of Sicily speaks of Antiochus Cyzicenus, the drunk and inept sovereign of Syria born in 135 B.C., who, among the various occupations unworthy of a king, practiced the art of puppetry [*thaumatopoiia*], playing with silver- and gold-painted figures in the form of animals more than two meters tall (*Library* XXXIV/XXXV:34).

Similar negative assessments recur in Western culture at least up to the nineteenth century: The puppet will hardly be considered a serious pastime, fitting at most for children and traveling theater troupes intended for the young and simple-minded. It is not, however, the only form of entertainment of this sort. Dolls, mannequins, automatons, and—though only appearing much later—robots and androids collaborate in constituting the constellation of material and inorganic bodies—anthropomorphic when they are not zoomorphic, and of generally reduced dimensions—that are maneuverable, in which the puppet participates. It is a vast constellation whose constituent members are outdated as toys and linked by the disconcerting characteristic of appearing like “mummified living beings” who invite us to acknowledge them as figures of ourselves. They are human beings of sorts, capable of provoking a primal uneasiness. The nature of their presence is in fact quite vivid, though ghostly at the same time.

Hans Bellmer's *poupée* in all of its variations offers the perfect distillation of this very paradox.³ It is the

1. This text was conceived during the time I spent at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America at Columbia University, New York, thanks to the generous fellowship I received for the spring semester of the 2009–2010 academic year.

2. For the discussion of the theatrical character of the puppet, in particular with respect to acting, see C. Cappelletto, *Marionetta e arto fantasma: il perturbante di un corpo polimorfo*, in *Giocattoli*, ed. A. Violi (Milano, 2010), pp. 107–139.

3. See in particular the photographs published in H. Bellmer, “Poupée: Variations sur le montage d'une mineure articulée,” *Minotaure* 6 (winter 1934–1935):30–31. See S. Taylor, “Hans Bellmer in the Art Institute of Chicago: The Wandering Libido and the Hysterical Body,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, XXII, no. 2, *Mary Reynolds and the Spirit of Surrealism* (1996):150–165 and 197–199.

visual apotheosis of that *quête* of modern poetry whose protagonists are Baudelaire with his anti-humanism, Kleist's marionette, Lautréamont and his "if it is a man or a stone or a tree,"⁴ and Matisse's arabesques in which the human contour intermingles with the floral-patterned wallpaper of its surroundings. The list is long. Giorgio Agamben ends it as follows: "Whatever the name given to the object of its search, the quest of modern poetry points in the direction of that disturbing region where there are no longer either men or gods, where there is but a presence, rising incomprehensibly over itself like a primitive idol, at once sacred and miserable, enchanting and terrifying, a presence that possesses at once the fixed materiality of a dead body and the phantomatic elusiveness of a living one."⁵

Today such a quest seems to have been both exacerbated and domesticated in current aesthetic and aesthesiological practices as well as in the mass production of the imaginary. On the one hand, man is setting into action a process of intense reification, enacting on his body itself the most varied strategies of manipulation—from plastic surgery to genetic engineering and bionic enhancement—that, causing the natural and the artificial to collapse into each other, obtain the paradoxical result of reinforcing our bond to our organic bodies. On the other hand, through the vast production of a certain type of toy, the metamorphic potential of this very process—in which body art represents nothing but its greatest moment of glory—is denied. Two examples are worth noting. The first comes from the *Transformers* series by Hasbro, whose "Robots in Disguise" line of toys for children can be manipulated in such a way as to create indifferently *though obligatorily* a vehicle, an instrument, an animal, or a robot, and whose "Pretender Beasts" line can camouflage its robot form with the help of animal-shaped external shells. The second example is the film *Toy Story 3* directed by Lee Unkrich and produced in 2010 by Disney Pixar, in which the toys—that, handled by the children, become mere bodies at risk of being torn to pieces—seem incapable of having a long-term future other than being recycled, stored, or destroyed. We might then be led to think that even the puppet has

passed without a solution of continuity from the world of play to that of boredom.

Yet, if we take its aforementioned metaphorical valence into consideration, we can pinpoint the specific characteristic that renders the puppet both eccentric with respect to its traditional constellation of reference and so outdated that its artificial nature has been preserved from the aesthetic neutralization of the metamorphic principle active in living beings and their products, to which I just referred. The topical place in which the puppet is played as a metaphor for man is found at *Laws* I:644d–e, where Plato writes: "Let us suppose that each of us living creatures is an ingenious puppet [*thau*ma] of the gods, whether contrived by way of a toy of theirs or for some serious purpose—for as to that we know nothing; but this we do know, that these inward affections of ours, like sinews or cords, drag us along and, being opposed to each other, pull one against the other to opposite actions; and herein lies the dividing line between goodness and badness."⁶ Plato uses the puppet as a schema of the future citizen whose nature he says needs to be molded and governed. Paradoxically, the passions themselves cause us to become, *insofar as* we are living creatures, "puppet-like." The puppet is a reified expression of the passions that dominate man.

Plato's passage becomes even more significant in relation to what Aristotle writes in *On the Cosmos* 398b: God creates forms of every sort by means of mere movement, in a way analogous to that of an engineer who uses a single string to perform many operations and "in the same way too the men who run puppet-shows [*neurospastai*], by pulling a single string, make the creature's neck move, and his hand and shoulder and eye, and sometimes every part of his body, according to a rhythmical pattern."⁷ In passages with analogous content, such as *On the Motion of Animals* 7.701:b:1ff. and *On the Generation of Animals* II:1:734b:11 and II:5:741b:9, Aristotle defends a similar mechanistic position, even though referring to the *automata*, thus not only transposing the metaphorical sense of the puppet from the psychology to the physiology of movement, but also drawing an analogy between machine and nature,

4. Comte de Lautréamont, *Chants de Maldoror*, in *Maldoror and Poems*, trans. with introd. P. Knight (1868–1869; Harmondsworth, 1978), bk. IV, p. 147.

5. G. Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. R. L. Martinez (1977; Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 50–51.

6. Plato, *Laws*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, Mass.; London, U.K., 1994). See how Plato picks up further along and almost with the same words this very concept: Men "mould their lives according to the shape of their nature, inasmuch as they are puppets [*thau*mata] for the most part, yet share occasionally in truth" (*ibid.*, VII, 804b).

7. Aristotle, *On the Cosmos*, trans. D. J. Furley (London, Heinemann, Cambridge, Mass., 1955).

where the former reproduces the causal mechanisms of the latter, accentuating the involuntary character of the puppet's kinetism.⁸

Puppet's wonderful strings

The puppet is meant by both philosophers as a pure line of movement. This purity hides important ambiguities, the first hints of which we find in the comparison between the two terminological families associated with this artifact: *neurospastos* and *thauma*. The former, *neurospastos*, indicates that which is "drawn by strings"⁹ and is composed of the words *neuron*—"tendons"—and *spastos* in the family of the verb *spao*, which means "to draw," but also "to wrench" and in a medical sense "to cause convulsion or spasm," evocative of the syncopated nature of the puppet's movement. *Thauma* means "wonder, marvel"¹⁰ and alludes to what generates marvel as well as to the sense of wonder that is generated but also, in the plural form, refers to the puppet-like world in such a strong way that in some cases performances with animals are also included in this terminological family, as Isocrates wrote in *Antidosis* 213 in 353 B.C. Theophrastus in 319 B.C. extended this meaning to refer to the itinerant puppet theaters (*Characters* VI:4 and XXVII:7). Athenaeus will include mimes, acrobats and entertainers (*Deipn.* X:78:452f).

It is evident that *neurospastos* very literally describes the passive kineticism exemplified by Aristotle, even though the tendons of animals were also used as strings (as, for example, in archery bows) and therefore as transmitters of energy thanks to their own specific elasticity. This definition would thus induce us to consider the puppet as an ingenious mechanism constructed as a replica of the human body, but it would leave unexplained the fact that both Plato in the *Laws* II:658b–c and Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* I:2:983a:14, in two very different contexts, think of these objects

8. Roberto Cordeschi articulates five "theses that have marked the various stages in the discovery of the artificial, both before and after the advent of cybernetics." They are: Functionalism, Modeling Method, Representationalism, Mentalism, Identity of Explanatory Principles. See R. Cordeschi, *The Discovery of the Artificial: Behavior, Mind and Machines Before and Beyond Cybernetics* (1998; Dordrecht, 2002). It is significant to note that at the root of each of these theses there is a principle of correspondence between natural and artificial, which, in fact, seems to be related to that of Aristotle.

9. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1968), under *neurospastos*, on, to.

10. *Ibid.*, under *thauma*, atos, to.

pulled by strings as elements worthy of wonderment and marvel. They use the expression *thaumazo thaumata* [I marvel at marvels] to describe the state of mind they evoke, then they use the verb *thaumazo* to indicate the wonder from which philosophy itself must have originated (respectively in *Theaetetus* 155d and in *Metaphysics* I:2:982:b:12).

This circumstance offers the first suggestion that the puppet is capable of soliciting processes of comprehension—even if not of direct knowledge—that exceed its rhetorical and theatrical nature. It should not be surprising then to find it already in a seminal text for Western thought, the Platonic myth of the cave: "See a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers [*thaumatopoiioi*] set in front of [the] human beings and over which they show the puppets [*thaumata*]. Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as it is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent" (*Republic* VII:514b).¹¹ The shadows of these objects, we know, are projected by a fire onto the wall of the cave that stands in front of a group of human beings who have been chained up at its entrance since they were children. These shadows constitute for them the only possible truth, along with their own shadows. Set these elements, Plato intervenes with an imperceptible move, though decisive for us: he adds that human bodies—in much the same way as puppets—do not present themselves to the enchained men as anything more than shadows, *namely*, as images.¹² That way, we are led to neglect the understanding that if the puppet can signify someone whose movements are hetero-directed, it is because it is *potentiality* of movement—its movement is neither inhibited like a doll's nor autokinetic like an automaton's. Moreover, while anthropomorphic dolls bear the appearance of life and automatons simulate it, the puppet is a schema of action—not of posturing: It does not place itself in the order of "as if," of imitation, of reproduction, of fiction. It does not copy man, who indeed provides no

11. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. A. Bloom (New York, 1991).

12. For a reading of this passage as Plato's direct reference to shadow theater, see J. Przyluski, "Le Théâtre d'Ombres et la Caverne de Platon," *Byzantion: Revue Internationale des Études Byzantines* 13 (1938):595–603. See also A. Grocer, "The Puppet Theatre in Plato's Parable of the Cave," *The Classical Journal* LXXXV, no. 2 (Dec. 1999–Jan. 2000):119–129.

model at all.¹³ “The puppet is nothing if not fantasy. Dolls are entirely devoid of it and are precisely as inferior to a thing as puppets are superior.”¹⁴

Through the story of the projection of shadows, the myth of the cave inaugurated a politics of knowledge that relies on the representation and selection of stable images and forms from the multiplicity of reality, abstracting from their corporeal materiality along an ascending path, until the reach of the luminous source of knowledge. The notion of something like an ambiguous artifact actualizing—not representing—the controversial relation between “mind” and “body” is then neutralized and rejected out of any investigation into the realm of understanding. It is just a toy. Nowadays, the intellectual economy of Western thought based on discrimination—and attempts at reconciliation—between data and ideas, is mostly considered to have run its course. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson give evidence of such a philosophical shift. They state in *Philosophy in the Flesh*, a book that is representative of a pressing line of thought today: “The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical,”¹⁵ so much so that “now that we know that there can be such a direct embodiment of reason, the question becomes an empirical one, to be settled in experimental neuroscience, not in the arena of philosophical argumentation.”¹⁶ The dichotomy between empirical and conceptual is, however, quite suspect. For it is indebted to the very tension between matter and thought that it would like to overturn and it places itself in a naturalistic-realist perspective of existence that is unable to justify its own foundation and that does not seem to be capable of rethinking this kind of distinction. It introduces an ingenuous realism, self-sufficiently expressed by its very animalism. Rather, as Agamben suggests, given that “in our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body

and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element, [w]e must learn [. . .] to think of man as what results from the incongruity of these two elements, and investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation.”¹⁷

An ec-centric body

The tension between corporeal things and the intellect—or consciousness—was discussed in one of their most precise dramaturgies in the history of philosophy: the *Second* of Descartes’ *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, entitled *The Nature of the Human Mind and How It Is Better Known than the Body*. Descartes interrogates the ways in which it is possible to arrive at a true understanding of oneself and of one’s body, apart from the sense perceptions that induce beliefs that can be false. Having defined the body as an extension with a definite form whose presence is registered by the senses in a certain place and that is moved by other agents (“for, according to my judgment, the power of self movement, like the power of sensation or of thought, was quite foreign to the nature of a body”¹⁸), he pushes this position to an extreme by describing his own living body as a dead and abstract one (what phenomenology will call *Körper*): “I had a face, hands, arms and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called the body.”¹⁹ It is not by following a phenomenological attitude but according to rational judgment that he distinguishes man from thing: “If I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons?”²⁰

The “fixed materiality of a dead body and the phantomatic elusiveness of a living one” I mentioned in relation to the constellation to which the puppet belongs, seem to find here the prelude to their theorization, and yet it is difficult to imagine two bodies more different from Descartes’ “mechanical structure” and Baudelaire’s *squelette laboureur*, more

13. This should be understood both in an aesthetic and mechanical sense: the Italian-American puppeteer Remo Buffano made puppets with four fingers, sufficient for performance. He taught Sergei Obraztsov that a “puppet’s anatomy may be determined, not by any requirement of copying human anatomy faithfully but by the demands of the puppet’s character and behaviour” (S. Obraztsov, *My Profession* [1950; Amsterdam, 2001], p. 142).

14. R. M. Rilke, *Puppen*, in *Werke*, ed. H. Nalewski et al. (1914; Frankfurt a. M., Leipzig, 1996–2003), vol. IV, pp. 685–692, here p. 689.

15. G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York, 1999), p. 3.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

17. G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. K. Attell (2002; Stanford, 2004), § 4, p. 16.

18. R. Descartes, *Meditation II*, in *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, ed. J. Cottingham (1639–1640; Cambridge, 1996), p. 17.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 21.



Figure 1. *Aimee Mullins*. Photograph by Nick Knight, 1998.

disparate than the philosopher's mannequin and the man who in the Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* exists "like basalt." With Descartes the distinction lies between an aesthetic experience of life and the knowledge of truth, placing them as alternatives and proposing an economy of knowledge that distrusts the imagination and for which the dead body offers an element of stability, though in the negative. Baudelaire considers instead the diabolical figure of a living death, and Lautréamont the "muscular consciousness" associated with a certain "anatomical pride"—to put it in Bachelard's terms.²¹ Precisely the diversity of their perspectives, however, gives relevance to the analogous character of the enterprise—to which I would add the materialistic Enlightenment. Boyer D'Argens in *Thérèse philosophe*—a novel long attributed to Diderot that Sade

21. G. Bachelard, *Lautréamont*, trans. R. S. Dupree (1940; Dallas, 1986), p. 45. See the Italian edition of Bachelard's text by F. Fimiani (Milano, 2009).

in *Histoire de Juliette* will include in his catalogue of the libertine's library—proposes indeed an image that also recalls the puppet-man passage in the *Laws*: "It certainly is mechanistic, my dear child: We have sensations, and form ideas—of physical good and evil as well as moral good and evil—only through our senses. As soon as we touch, hear, or see an object, spiritual particles flow into the small nerve cavities that alert the soul."²²

22. B. D'Argens, *Thérèse philosophe ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du P. Dirrag et de Mlle Eradice* (1748; Paris, 1992), p. 28. It is worth mentioning that Boyer D'Argens's novel was adapted for the stage at the Ateliers Berthier in Paris, directed by Anatoli Vassiliev, played by Valérie Dréville, Stanislas Nordey, and Ambre Kahan. The run lasted from April 5 until April 29, 2007. In order to capture the urgency of the passions, the actress Dréville remained immobile with the exception of a few syncopated movements. This is meant to express the relationship between the senses and the body treated as a puppet that has been discussed in *The Paradox of Acting*, in which Diderot, in order to save the actor from a disordered sensibility, invites him to make use of himself as though he were a "great basket-work figure of which he is the soul." (D. Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*, trans. W. H.

While Boyer D'Argens can be said to go in a direction apparently antithetical to Descartes' anesthesia, as well as to Plato's ethics and to the performing imagination of the French poets, nevertheless all these works attempt to resolve the break between life and intelligence, between lived experience and control over the passions. What we have here are diverse endeavors to treat the articulation of flesh and spirit, all of which continue to presuppose the first to be passive and malleable, the second active and operative.

Yet, attributing passivity to the body is merely a form of wishful thinking of which Descartes' adamant skeleton represents the extreme consequences. The body overcomes thought not because, as Lakoff would have it, thought is assimilated into it, but because, as paradoxical as it might seem, the body is not by any means sufficiently passive. It is not a matter of remembering that the *Leib*, my very own living body, is not reducible to the *Körper*, namely, my anatomy observed in the third person. The latter is the residue of the body as a *res extensa* that finds space in a continuum of things and is the product of philosophy's gesture of abstraction. We have neither lived nor aesthetic-artistic experience of it. In order to find such an experience, we have to look into the polarity of the "habit-body" and the "body at this moment" that Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes in *Phenomenology of Perception*. With the former he refers to the background of experience through which I have access to the world, with the latter to the body as modified by experience.²³ The polarity of the two, aside from being suggestive of the temporality of proprioceptive experience, affords a conception of the *res extensa* as the result of a neutralization of our "body at this moment."

Against any generalizing approach, Merleau-Ponty investigates phantom limb syndrome and the anosognosia that render the two poles, usually adherent, distant. The study of the body through its disease provides a perspective antithetical to that of Descartes: Instead of discussing the body in general, life experience is investigated through an idiosyncratic but not exclusive mode of the body's existence. Disease is a performing agent that casts light upon the spectrum of possible

human experiences and identifies each of them in specific forms. Finally, by focusing on a particular case, we are able to free ourselves from the assumption that the soul governs the body. As we shall see, if it did, the puppet would not exist.

I shall therefore turn to an experience of the body antipodal to that proposed by Descartes and that, although not corresponding distinctly to any philosophical method, magisterially problematizes the presumed figure of passivity to which I have alluded thus far. The experience in question is detailed in "Night," the first of a series of reflections that Tony Judt published in 2010. The British historian describes his life shaped by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a pathology of the motor neurons that has resulted in a "progressive imprisonment without words," although devoid of any "loss of sensation."²⁴ Judt is immobile but perfectly sentient: "By my present stage of decline, I am thus effectively quadriplegic. With extraordinary effort I can move my right hand a little and can adduct my left arm some six inches across my chest. My legs, although they will lock when upright long enough to allow a nurse to transfer me from one chair to another, cannot bear my weight and only one of them has any autonomous movement left in it. Thus when legs or arms are set in a given position, there they remain until someone moves them for me. The same is true of my torso, with the result that backache from inertia and pressure is a chronic irritation. Having no use of my arms, I cannot scratch an itch, adjust my spectacles, remove food particles from my teeth, or anything else that—as a moment's reflection will confirm—we all do dozens of times a day. To say the least, I am utterly and completely dependent upon the kindness of strangers (and anyone else)." Judt refers to himself as "dead weight." He seems to evoke the image of the Cartesian skeleton, the dichotomy of spatial extension and psychological interiority. Nevertheless, this "modern-day mummy," as he also calls himself, who finds refuge in his thoughts in order to survive the night and "divert my mind from the body in which it is encased," concludes the passage saying: "The pleasures of mental agility are much overstated, inevitably—as it now appears to me—by those not exclusively dependent upon them."²⁵ The immobile body is pressing in its

Pollock [1777; London, 1883], p. 101). See also "A great actor [. . .] has no key peculiar to him; he takes the key and the tone fit for his part of the score, and he can take up any. [. . .] A great actor is also a most ingenious puppet, and his strings are held by the poet, who at each line indicates the true form he must take" (ibid., pp. 61–62).

23. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (1945; London, New York, 2002), pt. I, chap. 1, passim.

24. It is worth noting that one of the conditions that permitted Judt to live was the use of machines that today provide the means for the collapse of the living into the inorganic that I mentioned earlier.

25. T. Judt, "Night," in *The New York Review of Books*, January 14, 2010, p. 4, now recollected in T. Judt, *The Memory Chalet* (New York, 2010). Judt defines his existence as "cockroach-like" and

inertia, and not simply because it is the expression of a psycho-physical unity, nor because, to the contrary, it obstructs the intentions of its “proprietor.” Judt is able to describe his state because he avails himself of his senses as a means to introspection, and his suffering is not simply the dissociation of the self from the body, rather it is also indicative of the contradictions inherent in the body itself. *Inasmuch* as he is a living creature, he testifies to the tension—not the dualism or the schism—between sensible experience and control of the body. It is a perspective antithetical to that through which Plato assimilated man and puppet. If disease makes possible an understanding rooted in the distance of man from himself, then conceiving of passivity as the fundamental disposition of humans is reductive and misleading: The point is that man cannot coincide with himself in his every “here and now.” Judt’s experience of his progressive alienation is, on the one hand, therefore the richest representation of man’s position in the world. It is, on the other hand, an experience of disappropriation that emerges precisely when we attempt to be faithful to ourselves, to fully take on our existence by exercising our faculty of reflection, which interrupts the immediacy of natural life.

In a novel dedicated to the consciousness of its protagonist, which can be considered as an ideal conclusive stage in the process of the normalization of the body in Western culture, Italo Svevo’s *Zeno* is flabbergasted finding out that in a fraction of a second his leg when taking a single step activates fifty-four muscles and relates: “My thoughts immediately rushed to my legs, to seek this monstrous machinery. I believe I found it. Naturally I didn’t identify the fifty-four moving parts, but rather an enormous complication went to pieces the moment I intruded my attention upon it. I limped, leaving that café, and I went on limping for several days. [. . .] But even today, as I write about it, if someone watches me when I move, the fifty-four muscles become self-conscious and I risk falling.”²⁶

explicitly refers to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* through an analogy with the desensibilization of the body that approximates Gregor Samsa and the solitude that accompanies it. Note also Bachelard’s comments on Kafka in *Lautréamont*: “Kafka’s metamorphosis appears candidly as a strange retardation of life and actions. Shall I provide examples? [. . .] As the metamorphosis becomes more complete, Gregor is covered little by little with a sticky substance. He clings to the walls; he lives in a coagulated world, in a viscous temporality; he hobbles haltingly. He is dazed, always slow to grasp an idea, a feeling. With the least exertion he begins ‘to feel breathless.’ His whole life is an animality that wanes little by little” (Bachelard [note 21], p. 7).

26. I. Svevo, *Zeno’s Conscience*, trans. W. Weaver (1923; New York, 2003), p. 105.

Even though the fall, significantly, never happens, the original contradictions have grown rigid in conflict, and the conflict itself has been reduced to a separation that has become the very object of his reflection. The body thus becomes an unsettling and foreign contraption that does not need to deform itself to manifest an anarchic will. It is a *monstruum*. Helmuth Plessner coined the category of “eccentricity” [*Exzentrizität*] to describe man’s ambivalent and synchronic experience of himself, inasmuch as he is an animal who both *is* and *has* a body. This category will allow us finally to rethink the passivity initially understood as a weakness and a flaw. “Man not only lives and experiences, but experiences his experience. [. . .] For him, his mutation from being within his own corporality to being outside of his corporality is an irrepressible deceitful aspect of existence, a real fracture in his nature.”²⁷ He is not—trivially—impotent; rather he is dual-natured and therefore inhibited in his attempt to attain unity with himself. This is the fracture that the puppet—inasmuch as it is a performing object moved by an operator—embodies and exhibits through its unique inorganic expressivity. While the skeleton and the mannequin represent degree zero of the experience that one has of him/herself, and in this sense they are indeed passive figures, the puppet puts into practice a medial and dynamic connection between the subject and the object that man represents to himself.

Kleist’s puppet

In *The Puppet Theatre* Heinrich von Kleist thematizes this paradox. He tells the story of a young man endowed with extraordinary grace and a great fluidity of movement. One day, after having seen a copy of a statue of a boy removing a thorn from his foot, he sees himself in an enormous mirror in a similar position.²⁸ Suddenly aware of the resemblance, he attempts to reproduce the pose but he is never able to hold his body in quite the same way. He attempts to recover the grace he lost by practicing in front of a mirror, with only comical

27. H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. G. Dux, O. Marquard, and E. Ströker (1928; Frankfurt a.M., 1981), vol. IV, pp. 364–365.

28. The reference is to *Lo Spinario*, a Greco-Roman Hellenistic bronze sculpture of a boy withdrawing a thorn from the sole of his foot. There are many versions of the statue. The oldest is probably the one conserved at Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome (I v.c.). It was removed to Paris from 1791 to 1815, where Kleist recalls having seen it.

results. This is the narcissistic version of the very “lack of elasticity” experienced by Zeno and also discussed by Bergson in *Laughter*.²⁹ It refers to the damaging effects of reflection, which is to be understood in its double sense as speculative activity as well as the duplication of an image by means of gazing and mirroring. Certainly for Kleist it is not a matter of regretting irrational instinct. The text rather invites a renewed understanding of self-consciousness. “We should have to eat again of the Tree of Knowledge to fall back into the state of innocence.”³⁰ The loss of innocence, from which the impossibility of being at peace with our animal nature depends, and thus the impossibility of the human body to perform a movement that is “natural” and not artificial or affected, is the leitmotiv of Kleist’s dialogue with a dancer in which he discusses how it is possible for the body to regain the fluidity of movement it once possessed—the pure line that Plato and Aristotle had attributed to the puppet—without availing itself the non-awareness of an animal. In fact, according to Kleist, a mere bear is the only living creature able to make all the right moves in reaction to the assaults of a fencer.³¹ The bear is superior to his opponent because he has preserved “the savage confidence of his animality”³² (to put it in the terms Plessner used in his comment on Kleist), which is in no way distinct from his awareness of being alive.

It is finally the puppet that allows the dancer—whose relationship to this artifact is analogous to that of the puppeteer—to reach the desired nimble agility. Man, as we have seen the embodiment of a shattered naturalness, is indeed able to recreate in the artificial world a medium *through* which to evoke the experience of the

grace admired in the animal world. It is as if a puppet that might be animated could reintroduce in the human world that mode of existence that the animal enjoys in nature: That is how I read Plessner when he affirms that man “does not possess the uninhibited precision of puppets, *that is* the instinctive self-confidence of an animal.”³³ This is why a dancer who wants to improve could learn a great deal from a puppet master, Kleist remarks: “Every movement, he said, had a center of gravity; it sufficed if this, inside the figure, were controlled; the limbs, which were nothing but pendula, followed without interference, mechanically, of their own accord.”³⁴ The dancer will govern the center of the figure drawing either a straight line or a curved line. The latter is elliptical—“a movement of that description was altogether natural to the extremities of the human body (because of the joints)” —and precisely this line “was nothing other than *the way of the dancer’s soul*.”³⁵ In order to find it, the dancer has to move *with* the puppet, allowing his *Leib* to coincide with this artifact for just a moment. The Aristotelian perspective of involuntary kinetism is subverted and the ambiguity hidden in the idea of something like a puppet’s pure line of movement unveiled: “The good manipulator is not, as most people imagine, busily concerned with the details of which string to pull, which rod to push. He works the puppet as unconsciously as he works his own muscles: It becomes in fact an extension of himself.”³⁶

The puppet’s body, whether made of wood or of cloth, is the setting of the expression of kinesthetic experience of oneself as a specific form of existential experience. The puppet, therefore, is paradoxically not implicated by the inertia of matter. It does not require a ground on which to rest and it delegates the difficulty and fatigue of thrusting vertically to the reliable strength of its operator. So much is this the medium of the unity of man with himself that Kleist’s dancer compares the relationship he has with it to that which some amputees have with their prosthetic limbs: “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.”³⁷ The coherence

29. H. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (1900; Mineola, N.Y., 2005).

30. H. von Kleist, *The Puppet Theatre*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. D. Constatine (1810; London, 1997), p. 416.

31. Implicit here is a problem that I cannot address in these pages. The bear responds opportunely because it is capable of distinguishing between the fencer’s feints and his actual thrusts, which is to say that he knows the difference between acting and being, fact and fiction, a theme that runs through the entirety of Kleist’s text, rendering it indispensable for any theory of theatrical representation. (See N. Ridout, Kleist’s “Über das Marionettentheater,” in *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* [Cambridge, 2006], pp. 15–29.) Note that the bear makes this distinction out of ignorance, which is to say that Kleist assigns this capacity of discretion precisely to those who are devoid of the preliminary reflection necessary for any representational activity: The compact unity of the animal neutralizes the residue of representation and renders it useless.

32. H. Plessner, *Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers* (1948), in *Gesammelte Schriften* (note 27), vol. VII, pp. 399–418, here p. 416. Author’s italics.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Kleist (note 30), pp. 411–412.

35. *Ibid.*

36. J. Bussell, “The Art of the Puppet Theatre with Special Reference to Its Position in England,” in *The Puppet Theatre of the Modern World. An International Presentation in Word and Picture*, ed. M. Niculescu et al., trans. E. Osers and E. Strick (1965; London, Toronto, Wellington, Sydney, 1967), pp. 38–39.

37. Kleist (note 30), p. 413.

of movement does not depend on the degree to which a factual body belongs to a living one—to whom it is at disposal—but on the coherence of sensible and kinesthetic potentiality and its actual expression, whether material, natural, or mixed with the artificial. With Kleist, we finally leave behind the domesticated reading of the puppet's valence as the rhetorical figure of a man subject to powers that are alien to him.

The limits of the body

One could, nevertheless, object that the puppet as artifact is not much different from any other material enhancement of the human body. Even proposing—as I do—that the puppet is first and foremost potentiality of movement, yet this characteristic does not pertain to it exclusively, but also to any other piece of equipment—as, for instance, to a pair of pliers or a flight of stairs. We can say then that the puppet is not merely *neurospastos* only if its relationship to the human body is as necessary for it to manifest its own nature as it is for man searching his own unity. Sergei Obraztsov, the puppeteer who has the merit of having made the puppet theater worthy of consideration as an artistic form, writes: “Strange as it may seem, its [the puppet’s] power lies in the very fact that it is inanimate. If an actor on a stage sits down in an armchair and hitches up his trouser legs so that his knees do not spoil the crease, the audience may well not notice it. But if the same movement is made by a puppet, the audience is likely to burst into applause because the puppet has made fun of all the men who make this movement.”³⁸ The puppet needs man as its motor agent, but most of all it needs to be compared to man in order to gain from the contrast that is thus produced its own specific “artificial expressivity.” This expressivity does not simply and obviously depend on its anti-naturalistic aspect, but also on the physical competition by which this artificial object engages itself with its operator.

Obraztsov, educated as an actor in the Stanislavskii method at the Moscow Art Theater, uses hand puppets, which have a relationship to the manipulator, inverse to that of the puppets that hang from strings cited by Kleist. In this case, it is not the artifact that acts as prosthesis to the puppeteer, it is the puppeteer who acts as the prosthesis of the artifact to whom he lends his fingers. Otherwise, the puppet would be missing its

body—which, in fact, consists of a human hand and of an artificial head worn on a finger. This contrast of the living and the inorganic renders it “astonishingly alive.”³⁹ The hand puppet becomes a credible vehicle of expression as soon as it is set in motion, thanks to the metamorphosis of the natural function of the human fingers it has appropriated. In fact, the puppet represents not the mechanism of human movement but its e-motive essence. This does not occur due to a special gift of the puppeteer’s hand, which is agile through the medium of the puppet only to the extent that he feels his hand as extraneous and independent, as the puppet itself is, even though he is the one moving it.⁴⁰ The trajectory here is the inverse of that of the dancer, but the result is the same. By becoming profoundly familiar with the disjunction between his “habit-body” and his “body at this moment,” the puppeteer is able to animate his puppet, which comes to life thanks to its ability to reveal such a disjunction. We can then understand, working backwards, why puppets and automatons are included in the same constellation. They represent different degrees of the self-comprehension of man as body.⁴¹ If the puppet is the embodiment of the “fracture,” the automaton reduces man to a self-propelled animal.

The dynamics of the conflict between *being* and *having* a body as well as the poietic force underlying these dynamics are recounted in Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. The recurring references to literary texts as “evidence” of the sentient experience of humankind should not be surprising. We are indeed discussing the inorganic counterfeit as an expression of our somatosensitive, animal side, which all of us have experienced, though none of us has either dominion over or factual knowledge of it. Let us recall the beginning of the novel: Geppetto takes a piece of wood, initially destined to become the leg of a table. The wood speaks, which startles him a great deal. He unflinchingly sets himself to carving the “marvelous puppet” that does not have to know how to think but “dance, fence with a sword and turn somersaults.” In

39. Obraztsov (note 13), pp. 184–185.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

41. I suggest comparison of this notion of a range of degrees of embodiment of human self-representation with Arnold Gehlen’s three principles that give an account of the relation between human weakness and our needs of technique. He proposes “the principle of organ substitution,” “the principle of organ strengthening,” and “the principle of facilitation,” in light of the fact that for the German anthropologist technology as much as man himself are both “artificial nature” (A. Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology*, trans. P. Lipscomb [1957; New York, 1980]).

38. S. Obraztsov, “Some Considerations on the Puppet Theatre,” in *The Puppet Theatre of the Modern World* (note 36), pp. 17–21, here p. 19.

short, it must be extremely agile. As Pinocchio's organs slowly take form, they spring into action: His eyes move, his nose grows, his mouth laughs and his hands snatch Geppetto's blond wig which Pinocchio promptly puts on his own head. The wig is a metonymic indication of the relationship between the puppet and his artificer, antithetical to that of the statue to its sculptor (as was the case with Pygmalion). Tzachi Zamir is correct when he writes: "To wear a wig is to pass oneself off as someone else. By snatching it, the marionette exposes Geppetto's own theatricality, his own constitution out of detachable parts. [. . .] Taking control of the wig is the culmination of the process in which mock animation meets the real thing and in which Pinocchio is animated as Geppetto is deanimated. By pinching the wig and putting it on its own head, the would-be puppet unmakes its human creator, overturning the relations of creation between things and agents."⁴² The wig, an incorporated ornament placed on the most external limit of the body, represents the threshold over which Geppetto and Pinocchio compete for their respective identity and humanity. Proclaimed father and son by the author, they seem to be born thanks to that *generatio aequivoca* that Bruno Schulz discusses in his *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies* by interrogating the imitative tendencies of matter: Where does my body end? What makes me uniquely me? The body is the field of battle for the conflict between inorganic insensitivity and physiognomy of the passions.⁴³

An aesthetic marvel

If the body of the puppet with its complete lack of autonomy emphasizes kinesthesia as the condition necessary for living beings to consciously come into full possession of themselves, its muteness, compensated for by the puppeteer, points to the voice as a condition of the human body's immanence to itself.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, while movement pertains to man's animal nature, discourse pertains to him inasmuch as he is a rational being, and the voice, which is the transmitter of discourse, would seem to attest to the conjunction between body and spirit, not to their distance. An emblem of this conjunction is found in a story that

circulated in Britain around 1720: It was said that in the first half of the fifth century A.D., Geiseric had invaded North Africa forcing the emperor Valentinian III into a peace agreement that divided it between the Vandals and the Romans. The Romans were orthodox Catholics and they were violently persecuted by Geiseric and his son Hunneric who adhered to the Arian heresy. According to the Anglican clergyman William Berriman, Hunneric had removed the tongues of some Mauritanian Catholics who continued to celebrate the consubstantiation of Christ with the Father, disregarding the Arian prohibition. They remained nevertheless capable of speaking in an articulate and distinct way.⁴⁵ Hunneric's goal was to demonstrate that the body is, metaphorically speaking, in and for itself as mute and impoverished as was the human body of Christ. The miracle would on the contrary testify to the body's consubstantiality with the spirit, which is to say, its animating force. If we prescind from the theological question, in this pseudo-historical apologue the exceptionality of ventriloquism underlines the apparent independence of bodily expression from the laws of the body itself. Ventriloquism would show the healing of man's inherently fractured self, conferring to him an intelligent body.

This phenomenon is nevertheless paradoxical, since the sound that the ventriloquist produces is acousmatic, which is to say that it does not reveal the source of its provenance. It is a disembodied sound that is somewhere between the material and the immaterial, between the corporeal and the purely sensible. Beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing into the nineteenth century (not by chance, during the aforementioned *quête* period), a transition occurred from a notion of miraculous and divine ventriloquism to one of worldly and theatrical ventriloquism. In fact, the ventriloquist becomes "the allegorical figure for mechanized speech,"⁴⁶ and he is given ever more attention just as androids are. He represents then a silent body that does not correspond to the activity of his organs, and precisely the exhibition of this independence allows him to be accompanied by a dummy, in a game of substitutions. Nevertheless, the reciprocal independence of the voice and of its corporeal agent demonstrates by contrast the aesthetic force of their bond.

42. T. Zamir, "Puppets," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (spring 2010):386–409, here p. 391.

43. B. Schulz, *Treatise on Tailor's Dummies*, in *Collected Works*, ed. J. Ficowski, trans. C. Wisniewska et al. (1933; London, 1998), p. 57.

44. See M. Dufrenne, *L'œil et l'oreille* (Montreal, 1987).

45. W. Berryman, *An Historical Account of the Controversies that Have Been in the Church, Concerning the Doctrine of the Holy and Everblessed Trinity* (London, 1725), pp. 326–327.

46. S. Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford, 2000), p. 337. I thank Silvia Romani for discussing with me the link between puppets and ventriloquism.

This paradox was staged by Samuel Beckett in *Not I*. The dramaturge, who cites Kleist as reference in his directorial instructions, had the actress Billie Whitelaw sit in a chair suspended three meters off the ground and completely covered her body with a black sheet that left only her mouth exposed. Her head was then held immobile by two pieces of rubber, in order to ensure that she did not move. "I think I had sensory deprivation," Whitelaw remembers. "I felt I had no body."⁴⁷ Yet, "phenomenologically, the fact that an unassigned voice must always imply a body means that it will always partly supply it as well."⁴⁸ Therefore—as the loquacious and nimble-fingered Pinocchio already suggested—the voice is, after movement, the second agency of the puppet,⁴⁹ capable not only and not so much of making present that which is absent, but of enlivening the present.⁵⁰ As much as the puppeteer must then explore in depth the dissociation between the experience of himself as living body and the awareness of being an alien in order to lend movement to the puppet, so he must also suggest the dissociation peculiar to the ventriloquist between his body and its sonorous expression, lending the puppet a voice. The puppeteer acts as the *acousmètre* of the puppet, according to the expression with which Michel Chion defines those who are "neither inside nor outside the image. It is not inside, because the image of the voice's source—the body, the mouth—is not included. Nor is it outside, since it is not clearly positioned off-screen in an imaginary 'wing,' like a master of ceremonies or a witness, and it is implicated in the action, constantly about to be part of it."⁵¹

From this tension between the living and non-living, this oxymoron of inorganic expressivity, the puppet

47. Quoted in J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London, 1996), p. 597. The video of the performance suggests an analogy between her lips and the lips of a vulva. It was long thought indeed that female oracles spoke by way of their genital organs and that women in general can do that (see Connor [note 46], p. 169 and *passim*, and D. Diderot, *The Indiscreet Jewels*, trans. S. Hawkes [1748; New York, 1993]). Furthermore the noun "marionetta" is feminine; its etymology tied to the Virgin Mary's devotional cults (*Enciclopedia Treccani* [1949], vol. XXII, under marionetta).

48. Connor [note 46], p. 36.

49. See S. Tillis, *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet. Puppetry as a Theatrical Art* (New York, 1992), pt. II, chap. 5, p. 118, for the explanation of how the three elements of the puppet (design, movement, voice) combine with the various styles of theatrical productions.

50. Note that the historical figure of Potheinos, the first puppeteer, was cited by Athenaeus next to that of the ventriloquist Eurycles, who also appears in Plato, *Sophist* 252c.

51. M. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. C. Gorbman (1990; New York, 1995), p. 129.

derives the uncanny feeling it solicits. According to Ernst Jentsch, who describes this special restlessness in *On the Psychology of the Uncanny*, man tends to deduce the animating force imbuing worldly things from their apparent animation, by a process of ingenuous analogical thought that is indifferent to the causal order of events and relationships. When this occurs, a special form of marvel *and* of disorientation arises. Next to the wonder abated by the actualization of such an enigmatic yet somehow functional occurrence, "a slight nuance of the uncanny effect does also come to light now and then in the case of real admiration, and can be explained psychologically in terms of one's bafflement regarding how the conditions of origin for the achievement in question were brought about, on account of which such a nuance is generally lacking in those who are special experts in the field at stake."⁵² The attribution of this sentiment to intellectually naïve mental processes finally justifies the fact that the puppet has been considered a toy for children and simpletons, and the reference to a system of analogical thought confirms its metaphorical valence and its capacity to induce in man paths of self-awareness. The psychological explanation of the *Unheimlich* would justify then that it can be solicited indifferently by all artifacts that resemble puppets—although Jentsch does not mention these, referring instead just to dolls and automatons—so that it would therefore be unnecessary to evoke an *aesthetic* specificity that inheres exclusively to any one of these artifacts.

Nevertheless, if the *Unheimlich* results whenever there is any "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate—and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one's consciousness,"⁵³ then that which disturbs must have an aesthetic foundation before ever having a psychological one. And indeed, movement and sound are the occasions that induce it, as Jentsch implicitly recognizes, mentioning the movement of the automaton and the sound of boiling water into which *Robinson Crusoe's* Friday ignorantly plunges his hand to catch what "evidently" lies therein. This evidence depends on the phenomenological tie between movement and life and between voice and body, and motivates, finally, in an aesthetic sense the *thauma* that only the puppet can solicit in a rigorous sense—also

52. E. Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906), *Angelaki*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1996):7–16, here pp. 10–11.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

apart from the rules of fiction that govern the theatrical game in which it is a player.

In an attempt to delineate a preliminary phenomenology of the puppet, I have endeavored to demonstrate that it must not be taken merely as a metaphor for the passivity of man but rather as the direct inorganic expression of his conflicting existential condition. Its explicit artificiality, animated by rhythmic movements and sound, human though not naturalistic, endows it with an *unnatural sensitivity*, a *hetero-directed responsiveness* from which it derives the aesthetic quality of a stage-presence that is much more fitting than that of an actor, because as Wilhelm Worringer said, its abstract mechanical activity is vastly superior “in strength of expression to organic activity, which is always connected with organic harmony, and therefore rather serves beauty than power of expression.”⁵⁴ Such an outdated toy therefore makes apparent the original dynamics through which the living and the artificial collaborate in the human body and in man’s experience of himself, including his impossible attempts at achieving unity. The puppet well deserves, finally, the ancient honor of being considered a *marvel*.

Translated from the Italian by Steve Baker

54. See W. Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, ed. H. Read (1911; London, 1957), chap. XVIII, p. 157. In particular, he writes: “The contrast between Classical building organism and Gothic building system becomes the contrast between a living, breathing body and a skeleton” (*ibid.*, chap. XIII, p. 107). Significantly, when Worringer assumes a position critical of such inorganic expressivity, it is in reference to mannequins and not to puppets; he speaks of an art form that is nothing more than the “apparent spirituality of mannequins, and many of us feel the moment is about to arrive—or is it perhaps not already here?—in which this mannequin of our apparently spiritual art has lost its last knick-knack after all the distortions and deformations and, stripped naked, hangs here with dangling limbs, like an inanimate and exhausted phantasm” (W. Worringer, *Künstlerische Zeitfragen*, in *Schriften*, ed. H. Bohringer, H. Grebing, and B. Sontgen [1920; München, 2000], vol. I, pp. 895–909, here p. 901). As suggested by A. Pinotti, in Worringer is present the germ of a “phenomenology of the puppet”; see his “Nomadi oltre la linea gotica. Stili di vita inorganica da Worringer a Deleuze-Guattari,” *Millepiani* 5 (1995):135–146, in particular pp. 143–144.