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# On Bunraku

ROLAND BARTHES

## The Three Scripts

Bunraku puppets are up to three feet tall. They are little men or women with mobile limbs, hands, and mouths; each puppet is moved by three visible men, who surround it, support it, accompany it. The master puppeteer controls the puppet's upper body and right arm; his face is uncovered, smooth, light, impassive, cold as "a white onion which has just been washed" (Basho). His two assistants are dressed in black; cloths cover their faces. One, gloved but with his thumb left uncovered, holds a large, stringed, scissors-like extension, with which he moves the puppet's left arm and hand; the other, crouching, supports the puppet's body and steadies its course. These men move along a shallow trench, which leaves their bodies visible. The scenery is behind them, as in the theatre. On a platform to one side are the musicians and narrators; their role is to express the text (the way one squeezes a fruit). This text is half-spoken, half-chanted; punctuated by the samisen players' loud plectrum beats, it is both restrained and flung, with violence and artifice. Sweating and still, the narrators are seated behind little lecterns on which is placed the large script they vocalize. One can perceive the vertical characters from afar when the narrators turn the pages of their librettos. Triangles of stiff cloth, attached to their shoulders like kites, frame their faces, which are prey to all the throes of their voices.

Bunraku thus uses three separate scripts and presents them simultaneously in three places in the spectacle: the puppet, the manipulator, the vociferator; the effected gesture, the effective gesture, the vocal gesture. Bunraku has a *limited* idea of the voice; it doesn't suppress it but assigns it a very definite, essentially vulgar function. In the voice of the narrator there converges: exaggerated declamation, the tremolo, the shrill feminine tone, broken pitches, weeping, paroxysms of anger, moaning, supplication, astonishment, indecent pathos—every emotional recipe, openly elaborated at the level of this internal, visceral body, whose larynx is the mediatory muscle. Also, this outbreak is given solely under the very code of outbreak: the voice moves only through some discontinuous signs of outburst. Thrust from an immobile body triangulated by its clothing, bound to the book which, from its lectern, guides it, and sharply hammered by the samisen player's slightly out of phase (and therefore

impertinent) beats, the vocal substance remains written, discontinuous, coded, subjected to a certain irony (excluding from the word any caustic sense). Also, what the voice exteriorizes, finally, is not what it conveys (“feelings”), but itself, its own prostitution. The signifier, cunningly, only turns itself inside out like a glove.

Without being eliminated (which would be a way of censoring it, that is, designating its importance), the voice is thus put to one side (scenically, the narrators occupy a lateral platform). Bunraku gives the voice a balance, or, better, a check: gesture. Gesture is double: emotive gesture at the puppet’s level (people cry at the suicide of the puppet-lover), transitive act at the manipulators’ level. In Western theatre, the actor pretends to act, but his acts are never anything but gestures; on-stage, there is only theatre, and ashamed theatre at that. Bunraku, though (by definition), separates act from gesture: it shows the gesture, allows the act to be seen, exposes art and work simultaneously and reserves for each its own script. The voice (and there is then no risk in letting it attain the excessive regions of its gamut) —the voice is plated with a vast volume of silence, on which, with all the greater subtlety, other tracts, other scripts are inscribed. And here, an unparalleled effect is produced: distant from the voice and nearly without pantomime, these silent scripts —one transitive, the other gestural—produce an exaltation as unique, perhaps, as the intellectual hyperesthesia attributed to certain drugs. As speech is not purified (Bunraku in no way strives for asceticism) but—if this can be said—is amassed next to the action, the sticky substances of Western theatre are dissolved. Emotion no longer inundates, no longer submerges, it becomes reading material; stereotypes disappear,

*A Bunraku performance of Hyugajima (The Island of Hyuga)*



without, however, the spectacle resorting to originality, or “felicity.” All of this achieves, of course, the *Verfremdungseffekt* advocated by Brecht. This distance, reputed in the West to be impossible, pointless, or ridiculous and readily abandoned, although Brecht very specifically placed it at the center of revolutionary dramaturgy (and the following undoubtedly explains why)—Bunraku shows how this distance can work: through the discontinuity of the codes, through this censorship imposed on the performance’s different tracts, so that the copy elaborated onstage is not destroyed, but as if broken, striated, saved from the metonymic contagion of voice and gesture, soul and body, which mires the Western actor.

A total, though divided, spectacle, Bunraku of course excludes improvisation; to return to spontaneity would be to return to the stereotypes which constitute Western “profundity.” As Brecht saw, here reigns the *quotation*—the pinch of script, the fragment of code—because none of the promotives of the action can take on himself responsibility for something he never writes alone. As in the modern text, the braiding of codes, references, detached statements, and anthological gestures multiplies the written line, not by virtue of some metaphysical appeal, but through a combinative activity which unfolds in the theatre’s entire space. What is begun by one person is continued by another, without pause.

## Animate / Inanimate

In dealing with a fundamental antimony, the *animate/inanimate*, Bunraku muddies it, makes it fade, without benefitting either of its terms. In the West, the puppet (Punch, for example) is expected to offer the actor the mirror of his contrary; it animates the inanimate, but the better to show its degradation, the indignity of its inertia. A caricature of “life,” the puppet thereby affirms life’s *moral* limits and presumes to confine beauty, truth, and emotion in the living body of the actor, who, however, makes of this body a lie. Bunraku, though, does not put its own stamp on the actor, it gets rid of him for us. How? Through a certain conception of the human body, which inanimate matter rules in Bunraku with infinitely more rigor and trembling than the animate body (endowed with a “soul”). The Western (naturalistic) actor is never beautiful: his body would be of a physiological, not plastic, essence. He is a collection of organs, a musculature of passions, whose every spring (voice, facial expressions, gestures) is subjected to a sort of gymnastic exercise. But by an absolutely bourgeois reversal, although the actor’s body is constructed according to a division of passional elements, it borrows from physiology the alibi of an organic unity, that of “life”; it is the actor who is a puppet here.

The basis of Western theatre is, in fact, not so much the illusion of reality as the illusion of totality: periodically, from the Greek *choreia* to the bourgeois opera, lyrical art has been conceived as the simultaneity of several expressions (acted, sung, mimed) with a single, indivisible origin. This origin is the body, and the totality claimed is modeled on organic unity. The Western spectacle is anthropomorphic; in it, gesture and speech (not to mention song) form but one fabric, conglomerated

and lubricated like a single muscle which puts expression into play but never divides it. The unity of movement and voice produces *he who acts*; in other words, it is this unity which constitutes the “person” of the personage, that is, the actor. Actually, under his “living” and “natural” exterior, the Western actor preserves the division of his body and, consequently, food for our phantasms: now the voice, then the look, now again the figure are eroticized, like so many pieces of the body, like so many fetishes. The Western puppet, too (it’s quite apparent in Punch), is a phantasmic subproduct: as a reduction, a grating reflection whose place in the human order is constantly recalled by a caricatured simulation, it lives not as a total body, totally trembling, but as a rigid part of the actor from whom it is derived; as an automaton, it is still a piece of movement, a jerk, a shove, the essence of discontinuity, a decomposed projection of the body’s gestures; finally, as a puppet—reminiscent of a scrap of rag, of a genital dressing—it is quite the phallic “little thing” (“*das Kleine*”), fallen from the body to become a fetish.

It is very possible that the Japanese puppet retains something of this phantasmic origin, but the art of Bunraku imprints on it a different meaning. Bunraku does not aim to “animate” an inanimate object so as to bring a piece of the body, a shred of man, to life, all the while keeping for it its vocation as a “part.” It is not the simulation of the body which Bunraku seeks, it is—if this can be said—the body’s tangible abstraction. Everything we attribute to the total body and which is refused Western actors under the name of “living” organic unity, the little man in Bunraku collects and states, without any lies. Fragility, discretion, sumptuousness, unparalleled nuance, the abandonment of all vulgarity, the melodic phrasing of gestures—in short, the very qualities ancient theology accorded to heavenly bodies, to wit, impassivity, clarity, agility, subtlety—this is what Bunraku accomplishes, this is how it converts the body-fetish into a body worthy of love, this is how it rejects the animate/inanimate antinomy and banishes the concept hidden behind all *animation*, which is, quite simply, the “soul.”

## Inside/ Outside

The function of the Western theatre of the last few centuries has been essentially to show what is said to be secret (“feelings,” “situations,” “conflicts”), while hiding the very artifice of the show (stage effects, painting, powder, light sources). The Italian-style stage is the space of this lie: everything takes place in an interior which is surreptitiously opened, surprised, spied upon, savored by a spectator hidden in the shadow. This space is theological, a space of Guilt: on one side, under lights which he pretends to ignore, the actor (gesture and speech); on the other, in the darkness, the audience (conscience).

Bunraku does not directly subvert the relation of the seats to the stage. It changes most profoundly the motive link going from character to actor, which Westerners always conceive of as the expressive path of an interiority. In Bunraku the agents of the spectacle are both visible and impassive. The men in black busy themselves about the puppet, but without any affectation of competence or discretion, or any

advertising demagogy; quiet, rapid, elegant, their acts are eminently transitive, operative, colored by that mixture of force and subtlety which marks the Japanese gesture and is like the aesthetic envelope of efficacy. The leader's head is uncovered; smooth, naked, without powder—this confers on him a civil (nontheatrical) cachet—his face is offered for the spectators' perusal. But what is carefully, preciously given to read is that there is nothing to read; one finds here this exemption of meaning which we in the West scarcely understand, since, for us, to attack meaning means to hide or invert it, but never to keep it away. Bunraku exposes the sources of theatre in their emptiness. What is expelled from the stage is hysteria—that is, theatre itself—and what replaces it is the action necessary to the production of the spectacle. Work substitutes for interiority.

It is thus vain to wonder whether the spectator can forget the presence of the manipulators. Bunraku practices neither the occultation nor emphatic manifestation of its springs; it rids the actor's animation of all sacral staleness and abolishes the metaphysical connection the West cannot keep from making between the soul and the body, cause and effect, motor and machine, agent and actor, destiny and man, God and creature. If the manipulator is not hidden, why—how?—do you want to make him a god? In Bunraku, the puppet is not controlled by strings. No more strings, therefore no more metaphors, no more destiny. The puppet no longer apes the creature, man is no longer a puppet in the hands of divinity, the *inside* no longer rules the *outside*.

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## The Written Face

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The Japanese theatrical face is not painted (powdered), it is written. This unforeseen movement occurs: though painting and writing have the same original instrument, the brush, it is not painting, however, which seduces writing with its decorative style, its sprawling, caressing touch, its representative space (as no doubt would have happened with us in the West, for whom the civilized future of a function is always its esthetic ennoblement); on the contrary, it is the act of writing which subjugates the pictorial gesture, so that painting is always only writing. This theatrical face (masked in Noh, drawn in Kabuki, artificial in Bunraku) is made from two substances: the white of the paper, the black of the inscription (reserved for the eyes).

The function of the white of the face is apparently not to make the complexion unnatural, or to caricature it (as is the case with Western clowns, for whom flour and plaster are just an incitement to daub their faces), but only to efface the prior trace of features, to make of the face an empty expanse of dull material which no natural substance (flour, dough, plaster, or silk) can succeed in animating with any