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A Note on Bunraku

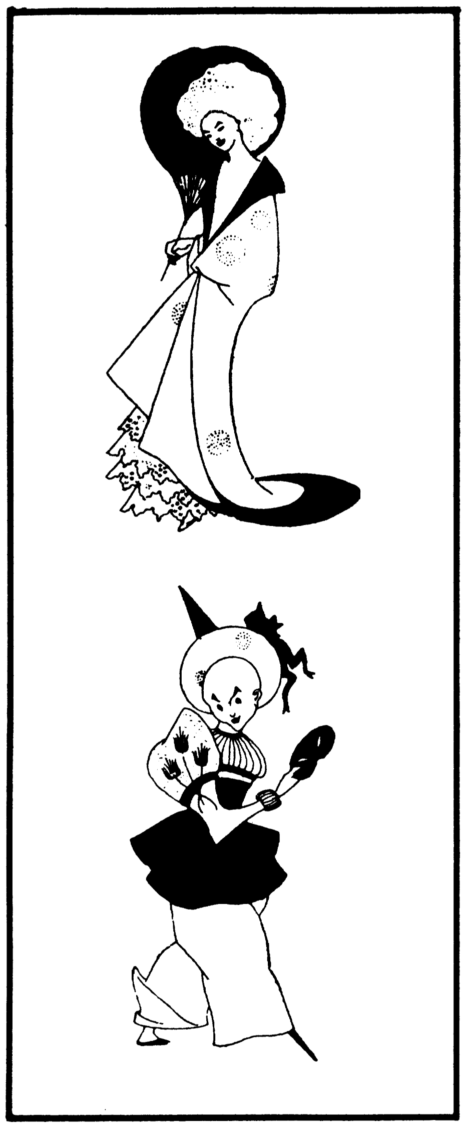
Susan Sontag

"Art is something which lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal. . . . It is unreal, and yet it is not unreal; it is real, and yet it is not real."

—*Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725)*

IN BUNRAKU the play is identified, first of all, as a physical object: a text. And the text is sacred—that is, generative. Hence, the grave ceremony that opens each performance: the chief reader holds out the text and bows to it, before setting it down on the low lectern and beginning to read. Bunraku is a theater that transcends the actor, by multiplying and displacing the sources of dramatic pathos.

The play is acted—that is to say, recited—that is, read. The text (declaimed, sung, chanted, wailed) is punctuated or italicized by music produced by a string instrument, the shamisen. It is also, simultaneously, enacted—by piercingly expressive large puppets, half or two-thirds life-size. The enacting of the drama occupies the stage proper, in front of the audience: the wide rectangular space where figures —the puppets and their handlers— move. But the source of the words and the music—the one or more reciters and musicians who sit to the right of the stage on a rostrum—constitutes a parallel performance. The dialogue is not "off," as in a certain kind of narrative film, but off-center—displaced, given its own expressive and corporeal autonomy.



The drama has a double displacement of emotion, a double scale, a double physical and emotional gait. On the stage proper the leading principle is a kind of anti-hysteria. There is the muteness of the protagonists—who, instead of being living actors, are puppets; there is the impassivity and omnipresence of the humans who make them move. To the *joruri* reciter, who is not only off-center (from the audience's point of view) but physically immobile, is given the task of maximal expressiveness. Most of the texts, which consist of narrative and commentary as well as dialogue, are floridly emotional, and the narration may modulate into a lengthy crescendo of sobs and gasps. The figure of the reciter, who acts, as it were, by proxy, on behalf of the puppets, is just one of the devices whereby Bunraku isolates—decomposes, illustrates, transcends, intensifies—what acting is.

The puppet is, in prototype, a supple doll operated by a single person. The invention, in 1734, of a puppet to be operated by three persons brought the puppet's emotional and gestural potency to a point never equalled before or since. The Japanese puppet can roll its eyes, raise its eyebrows, smile, clench its fists; it can languish, dress itself, run, convincingly take its own life. No string puppet or hand puppet can perform such complex and detailed actions; and the Bunraku puppets have an ability to move audiences, move them to tears, unmatched in any other puppet tradition.

But apart from widening the emotional range and expressiveness of the puppet (a gain we may or may not choose to identify with "realism"), the fact of multiplying the operators—and, of necessity, putting them onstage with the puppets—decisively shapes and transforms the emotional register of puppet drama. The puppet is literally outnumbered, beleaguered, surrounded. The presence of three out-sized handlers contributes an unending pathos to the puppet's movements and efforts. The puppets seem helpless, child-like, vulnerable. Yet they also seem sovereign, imperious, in their very smallness and precision and elegance.

Bunraku works on two scales of spatial relations. The often elaborate decor is constructed to the puppets' measurements. The operators are giants, interlopers. Alongside each delicate puppet head are the three large heads of the operators. The operators look at the puppet as they manipulate it. The audience watches the operators observing the puppet, primal spectators to the drama they animate.The three operators sum up the essence of what it is to be a god. To be seen, and impassive. (One has his face bared.) And to be hidden. (The other two wear black hoods.) The puppet gestures. The operators move together, as one giant body, animating the different parts of the puppet body, in a perfected division of labor. What the audience sees is that to act is to be moved. (And, simultaneously, observed.) What is enacted is the submission to a fate. That one operator's face is bared and two are veiled is another device making Bunraku's characteristic double statement: hyperbole and discretion, presence and absence of the dramatic substance.

This relation between the operators and the puppet is not simply an efficient relation: it is the cruel mystery which is at the center of the Bunraku drama. Handing the puppet a comb, rushing the puppet to its doom—some moments the operators seem like the puppet's servants, at other moments its captors. Sometimes the puppet seems to be reposing solidly on the operators or to be borne placidly aloft by them; other times to be in perpetual, hapless flight. There are constant shifts of scale, to delight the senses and wring the emotions. Sometimes the shadowy manipulators shrink and the puppets swell into a normal scale. Then the operators loom once more and the puppets rebecome fragile, persecuted, Lilliputians.

The situation we call art characteristically requires us both to look very attentively and to look "beyond" (or "through") what is understood as an impediment, distraction, irrelevance. At an opera performance, we look past or over the orchestra to concentrate on the stage. But in Bunraku we are not supposed to look past the shadowy, black-garbed puppeteers. The presence of the operators is what gives Bunraku its elevated, mythic impersonality and heightened, purified emotionality. In order to make the art of the puppets competitive with the art of living actors, says Chikamatsu, the text must be "charged with feeling." But, he adds, "I take pathos to be entirely a matter of restraint." Compare Balanchine, who brought the naively emotive classical ballet tradition to its apex by developing the sense in which dancers are co-sharers, with ideal puppets, in the sublimity of the impersonal: "Silence, placidity, and immobility are perhaps the most powerful forces. They are as impressive, even more so, than rage, delirium, or ecstasy."

In the most profound Western meditation on puppet theater (and, by extension, on the dance), Kleist wrote that the very inanimateness of the puppet was the precondition for expressing an ideal state of the spirit. Kleist's speculative fantasy—he was writing in 1810, about string puppets—is incarnated and fulfilled in Bunraku.☐

At the Grave of Ezra Pound

S. Michele, Venice

i

here lies a man
of words, who in time
came to doubt their meanings

who therefore confines
himself to two words
only here

EZRA POVND

minimal
the injury done
to the white stone

none
to the earth
it rests upon

ii

The spoils of a corsair—
who ranged the Mediterranean
and brought home
porphyry, alabaster, lapis lazuli
and every hue and current of veined marble.

In the bayleaves' shade
dumb now
and within earshot
of the stilled Adriatic
deaf, rests
under white marble
la spoglia, the remains.

—*Clive Wilmer*

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