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Dancing With Words. 
Kleist’s ‘Marionette Theatre’

Bianca Theisen

With its puzzling hypothesis that marionettes dance with more grace than human dancers, Kleist’s essay “On The Marionette Theatre” outlines a mechanistic aesthetics of dance which departs from late eighteenth-century notions of dance as a natural expression of passions, as for instance Noverre had promoted them in his attempt to sever ballet and pantomime from their ties to comedy and commedia dell’arte and to reform ballet through recourse to antiquity and English Renaissance drama. Kleist does seem to borrow from such an influential theoretical text as Lucian’s De Saltatione, a treatise with which Kleist was probably familiar through the translation of his friend and mentor Wieland. Like Lucian’s text, Kleist’s essay is structured as an argumentative dialogue in which one discussant finally persuades the other; like Lucian’s text, Kleist's essay makes certain references to homophilia; and, finally, Kleist’s essay seems to take up the cosmological dimensions of dance, which for Lucian is as old as the world and mirrors the circular movement of the planets.

Kleist apparently also borrows such motifs as the metamorphoses into a frozen statue, which are recurrent in Wieland’s works in the context of pantomime and dance. But Kleist’s essay displaces those traditional motifs and references. In a dance with words, as it were, Kleist displaces the position of an external cause of movement or an immovable mover onto the paradox of a self-implication of the operator in his operation, a paradox that the essay unfolds as a coincidence between marionette and God, unconsciousness and consciousness. Circling around empty spaces supplemented by variables such as the
marionette’s gravitational center, the essay displaces the semiosis of such empty spaces onto pseudo-theological and geometrical terms, proposing a “ring-shaped world” whose two ends, “God” and “matter,” coincide, a world which displaces more traditional cosmological references onto a fictional version of the curved space of non-Euclidian geometry. With its excessive use of paradoxical structures, the essay finally displaces its own semiosis through what might be called a cybernetics of dance. I will draw on Niklas Luhmann’s distinction theory to delineate such a displacement of semiosis.

* * *

Kleist’s essay is structured as a dialogue between a first person narrator and Mr. C., the principal dancer at the local opera. The dancer gradually convinces the narrator to accept a claim he had first dismissed as paradoxical—namely that a mechanical puppet is more graceful than the human body. In support of this claim, the dialogue offers a technical description of the mechanics involved in puppet theatre, pseudo-theological ideas about man’s fall from grace, and two anecdotes. Unconvinced by the dancer’s puzzling proposition, the narrator at first raises what seems to be an obvious objection: that the puppet’s movement could not be graceful in itself, since it is the puppeteer who, pulling a myriad of strings, determines the movement of every limb. The marionettes’ mechanical movement would thus only be graceful because a human consciousness imbues it with grace. The dancer contests this objection. The task of the puppeteer, he claims, is actually quite simple and requires no great skill. Since each movement has a single center of gravity, it suffices for the puppeteer to control this gravitational center within the puppet. The line of movement described by this gravitational center is straight in most cases. Where it is curved, however, it is elliptical and follows a curvature “of the second order” (“von der . . . zweiten Ordnung”). When the puppet’s center of gravity describes an elliptical curve, its movement corresponds to the movement most natural to the human body. The options available to the puppeteer are limited to describing two kinds of simple lines with the puppet’s center of gravity. And yet these lines entail something enigmatic, the dancer believes, for they describe nothing less than the “path of the dancer’s soul.” ([den] Weg der Seele des Tänzers).¹

¹Heinrich von Kleist, Über das Marionettentheater,” Sämtliche Werke und Briefe, ed. Helmut Sembööer, vol. II (Munich: Hanser, 1965) 338–345; 340. All subsequent references from the essay will be taken from this edition and referred to only by the
The puppeteer can only control the gravitational center of the movement through placing himself into and imagining himself at this gravitational center; but thereby he is drawn into it, he disappears into it. The German term Kleist uses, “sich versetzen in,” carries both denotations of a movement of empathy or imagination and of a more physical sense of displacing oneself—in this case a displacing which means to place oneself at the center. Operating the puppet’s dance, the puppeteer must dance himself: the operator is drawn into his own operation. That the puppeteer (dis-)places himself into the gravitational center of the marionette means, the dancer asserts, that he “dances, with other words” (“mit andern Worten, \textit{tanzt}” 340). This phrase is again ambiguous. To say that the puppeteer displaces himself into the gravitational center is to say, in other words, that he dances—and this is of course the more obvious reading of this phrase. But since displacing and dancing become homologous through the filling link “in other words,” the phrase could also be read as indicating that the very strategy of “(sich) versetzen” or displacing, a strategy that Kleist’s essay itself employs extensively, is to dance with words.

Through Mr. C.’s dance with words, the marionette’s center of gravity is set up as an empty space: the place that the dancer’s “soul” would have occupied is empty or lacking if the dancer is a marionette, and if the controlling consciousness or “soul” of the puppeteer, as we had seen, is drawn into the mechanics of this dance. Implied in the movement he seems to govern, the puppeteer can no longer be seen as the external cause of the dance, as the narrator had believed at first. Setting up a paradox of self-implication, or a strange loop through which the controlling operator is displaced into the operation, the dancer thus delineates what I propose to call a cybernetics of dance. By displacing the puppeteer into the empty space of the puppet’s gravitational center, the dancer moreover challenges the presupposition of an immovable mover, or, in the last instance, God. He indeed goes on to map his mechanistic aesthetics of the marionette’s grace onto pseudo-theological claims. Only a god could compete with the marionette’s graceful movement, he suggests. Different from human dancers who need the ground to rest on—a necessary part of human dance that is detrimental for the gracefulness of the movement since it is not a moment of dance itself—the marionettes’ movements are antigravitational, since, suspended by their strings, they are not
subject to the inertia of matter. Grace, here implicitly defined as a suspension of gravity, would be unattainable for humans and only a god could match matter in this respect. This would be the point where, as the dancer phrases it, the two ends of the “ring-shaped world” (“die beiden Enden der ringförmigen Welt,” 343), God and matter, absolute consciousness and no consciousness, coincide. The dancer’s statement is again introduced with “er versetzte,” which here indicates “he replied” but in the context of his eccentric claim also suggests “displacing.” With this paradoxical coincidence between God and marionette, the dancer displaces nothing less than the very distinction between mind and matter. In fact, he continues, it is ever since man ate from the tree of knowledge, and thus ever since he learned to draw such distinctions, that he lost his grace. Paradise has since been barred, but, as the dancer believes, perhaps we can come full circle, travel around the world and sneak into the back-door of paradise. Apparently persuaded by the dancer’s paradoxical syllogisms and stories, the narrator offers a somewhat different, if equally circular solution at the end of the essay: we must eat again from the tree of knowledge, and thus ever since he learned to draw such distinctions, that he lost his grace. Paradise has since been barred, but, as the dancer believes, perhaps we can come full circle, travel around the world and sneak into the back-door of paradise. Apparently persuaded by the dancer’s paradoxical syllogisms and stories, the narrator offers a somewhat different, if equally circular solution at the end of the essay: we must eat again from the tree of knowledge in order to regain the grace of innocence. This proposition should be read neither as a regressive attempt to recover a lost paradise, nor as a progressive attempt to sublate universal history in a paradise regained on a higher level, as philosophies of history had envisioned it. On the contrary: when we repeat the fall, the process of distinction will recommence.

However, whereas the dancer had opted for canceling distinctions in order to circle back into paradise, the narrator now proposes to reinscribe the fall—as the initial instant of drawing distinctions—back into the fall. In the terms of distinction theory as Niklas Luhmann has formulated it in reference to the proto-logical calculus of George Spencer-Brown, we could also say that the narrator proposes a re-entry of the operational results of distinguishing into the operation of distinction itself.

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Distinguishing between graceful and ungraceful movement and indicating Edenic and post-Edenic state, the fall could then be seen as the form of distinction. We can speak of form or the unity of distinction if a distinction as distinction is distinguished from that which it distinguishes. So for instance the fall as fall into distinction is distinguished from that which it distinguishes, be it grace and gracelessness or good and evil. In Kleist’s essay, both the re-entry of the fall into
the fall and the dancer’s displacement of a fixed frame of reference for puppeteer and puppet onto a self-implication of the operator in the operation—what we had called his dance with words—suggest an operational semiosis of empty spaces. Luhmann has reconsidered the sign as form or as unity of the distinction between signifier and signified, or, in the terms of Spencer-Brown’s operational calculus, as the unity of the distinction between distinction and indication.2

The calculus starts by drawing a distinction between a marked and an unmarked space. In drawing a distinction, distinction and indication are simultaneous, since indication marks and can only mark a marked space, for any attempt to mark the unmarked space would turn it into a marked space. Nothing can be said about this unmarked space, because that would turn it into a marked space; the unmarked space, then, is there only as the other side of that which is marked. The unmarked space thus does not precede the distinction, it is rather constructed or “cloven,” as Spencer-Brown says, by the distinction and is operational within it.

For Luhmann, the unmarked space emerges only as “the blind spot of its self-observations.”3 The world, for instance, can only be such an unmarked space for us; as blind spot of its self-observations, the world is no longer an inventory of pre-given and representable objects, but a constructed world which is accessible only through recursive observations. Or in other words: whatever we observe about the world is indicative not of a referential world, but of our own observations and distinctions. As observers, Francisco Varela states, we “distinguish ourselves precisely by distinguishing what we apparently are not, the world.” “In finding the world as we do,” he continues, “we forget all we did to find it as such, and when we are reminded of it in retracing our steps back to indication, we find little more than a mirror-to-mirror image of ourselves and the world.”4

* * *

Kleist’s essay fictionalizes and constructs paradise as an unmarked space or a barred signified contingent on observations and distinctions. Paradise and its state of grace here indeed emerge as the blind spot

of their self-observations. Two anecdotes indicate that the paradoxes of grace in the essay are contingent on multiple orders of observation. After the dancer tried to expose the narrator for not being adequately familiar with the third chapter of Genesis—his comment is again introduced with “versetzte,” which here indicates that he is not only retorting, but also dealing a blow to the narrator—the narrator tells a story of lost grace to prove his familiarity with the biblical text and to refute the dancer’s attempt to embarrass him. A youth of the narrator’s acquaintance lost his grace through a mere remark, an empty comment the narrator made. As they were together in a bath, the youth, lifting his foot to dry it, discovers with a glance into the mirror that he resembles a statue both of them had seen in Paris shortly before and calls the narrator’s attention to this resemblance. Even though the narrator has in fact made the same observation, he laughs and embarrasses the youth with the remark that “he was seeing ghosts” (er sähe wohl Geister!” 343). The youth blushes and tries to recapture the movement through which he likened himself to the statue again and again, but fails miserably and from that moment on loses his gracefulness altogether. Whereas the youth suspends the distinctions between his own movement and the motionless statue, between copy and original, and between living body and lifeless artwork when mirroring himself as an other, those distinctions are being reintroduced when he tries to mirror this mirror-image in the eyes of the narrator. The youth tries to observe his own observations through the observations of an other, thus also confounding the distinction between self-reference and hetero-reference which is indicative of narcissistic self-observation. With his mere remark that the youth was seeing ghosts, the narrator voids the youth’s observation; his remark does not only suggest that the youth’s observation lacks any real similarity to the statue and is a product of his imagination, it also points to the ghostly interspace between life and death, between motionlessness and movement in a statuesque poise which is in fact different from the imitated model (the youth dries his foot, whereas the statue’s frozen movement is that of a boy pulling a thorn from his foot). Pointing to this liminal zone as the space of an indistinction of the distinct or of the youth’s attempt to cancel distinctions between himself and the statue in a mise-en-abyme of mirrorings, the narrator makes the youth see his own blind spot, as it were.

How is this anecdote about the youth who loses his grace through a remark, which embarrassed him by letting him see that he does not see that he does not see, related to the story of the fall in Genesis,
and how, moreover, does it translate into the narrator’s relationship with the dancer? In his conversation with the dancer, the narrator refers to his remark as “mere remark” (“eine bloße Bemerkung” 343). The remark with which he exposes the youth is also quite literally the discovery of bareness or nudity: of “Błöste.” After all, both are in a bath. In Genesis, Adam and Eve believe in the satanic promise that “their eyes will be opened” and they will be like God, only to find out after the fall into sin that even though “their eyes were opened” they are not like God but aware only of their own nudity and mortality. This particular phrasing in the biblical text seems to imply that the Edenic state was one of blindness, a state before their eyes were opened. The fall, then, can be seen as the very distinction between blindness and insight.

The narrator had been using this anecdote and its reference to the biblical text to expose the dancer’s attempt to expose him for his supposed ignorance about Genesis. The anecdote about the youth’s fall from grace is thus at the same time a second-order observation of the dialogue between the narrator and dancer, and especially of the latter’s strategy of responding or “versetzen” in the sense of dealing out blows by exposing his opponent. The narrator models both his and the dancer’s dialogical roles in his story: he exposes the dancer with the anecdote as he had exposed the youth with his “mere remark.” At the same time, however, in a chiastic crossover of positions, the narrator himself inadvertently comes to stand in the youth’s position, since the anecdote is also an attempt to confirm his observations in the dancer’s eyes.

The dancer answers with the anecdote of the fencing bear. The meaning of this story becomes evident only in the context of the narrator’s anecdote, as the dancer explicitly claims; that is, it must be read as a story on the paradoxes of second-order observation. After he has defeated an opponent in fencing, the dancer is taken to meet with his master in turn, a bear whose fencing position is to stand upright, his paw ready to strike, eye-to-eye with his opponent. The bear parries the dancer’s thrusts with a quick movement of his paw, and, moreover, does not even bother to react to feints or to the dancer’s seductive stratagems. “Eye in eye, as if he could read my soul in it,” the dancer says, “the bear stood, his paw lifted to strike, and when my passes were not meant to be serious, he did not move. Do you believe this story?” (“Aug in Auge, als ob er meine Seele darin lesen könnte, stand er, die Tatze schlagfertig erhoben, und wenn meine Stöße nicht ernsthaft gemeint waren, so rührte er sich nicht.
Glauben Sie diese Geschichte?" 345). The bear does not attack, he does not expose his opponent. The bear also does not react to feints or to any attempt to trick him into exposing his own weak spot. Does the bear read in the dancer’s eyes whether he intends to attack seriously or to feint? If the bear could read in this way, he would figure as a second-order observer who could observe how the dancer, as a first-order observer, observes—that is, how he operates with such distinctions as feint/serious thrust or deception/non-deception in his fencing technique. But could the bear really be such a competent reader? In fact, it is in the eyes of the dancer as if the bear could read his soul in them, and thus it is actually the dancer who observes the bear’s alleged observations on how he himself observes. The dancer constructs the bear (about whose observations we know nothing but what the dancer sees in them) as that second-order-observer of his feints which he is in fact himself. What is presented as the bear’s grace, the innocent and infallible certainty with which he is able to distinguish between deception and non-deception in his opponent, is nothing but the blind-spot of the dancer’s self-observations. When the dancer concludes his anecdote by asking the narrator whether he believes this story, he in some sense extends his fictional paradoxes about grace—the blind-spot of its self-observations—onto the paradox of fiction itself. Fiction, we could argue, is characterized by what Iser has called ek-stasis: what fiction can present to us is the simultaneous inclusion in ourselves and exclusion from ourselves, a paradoxical enactment in which we can see ourselves at the same time from within and from without. Fiction would then aim at making us see the blind spot of our self-observation, while the paradoxical character of fiction itself would in turn be such a blind spot. Fiction, one could also say, is then set up as “form,” or as the unity of the distinction between first and second-order observations. Iser, only implicitly drawing on Luhmann, in fact refers to this paradox of fictionality as a “form of distinction” which “can only mark what it marks and leaves at the same time unmarked what is given as its other side, as the presence of an absence.”

Displacing its own semiosis, fiction thus observes the unobservable, unfolding the paradox of a unity of distinction; but in addition, fiction presents the blind spot of its self-observations as a paradox to be observed in turn. Or in Kleist’s words: the fall into fiction can only be suspended by fiction.