Haunted Figures, Hauting Figures : Puppets and Marionettes as Testimonies of Liminal States

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Puppet, Death, and the Devil: Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

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Abstract

The easy way marionettes and puppets can cross the boundaries between lifeless objects and living creatures makes puppetry the ideal artistic expression to picture liminal states between life and death. This ability, commonly used nowadays in puppet and marionette performances, leans on two major changes in the history of representations: the Romantic opposition of nature and technique, which transformed the animation of objects into a disturbing and uncanny experience, and the post-traumatic perception of human beings reduced to the status of things in the totalitarian regimes, genocides, and mass murders of the twentieth century. The article examines how, in two different contexts (the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, then the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century), poets and puppeteers can use these representations as the starting point of a new dramaturgy. Performed in 1892 at the Petit-Théâtre des Marionnettes de la Galerie Vivienne, Pigeon's comedy *L'Amour dans les enfers* ironically presents Arlequin and Pierrot as two ghosts who ask Pluto to bring them their widows, but the men are repelled by them because they look like two corpses. In van Lerberghe's *Les Flaireurs* and Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* (both 1889), we can see how the imagery of death, first stimulated by fairground shows and Holden's Théâtre des Fantoches, eventually transforms itself into a dramaturgy of slow and immaterial forces: death appears no more as a character or an event but as the very substance of the drama, a set of multiple effects and accidents that stretch across the whole performance. But puppetry can also provide visibility to annihilated, invisible people. Take examples from four plays about the Nazi death camps, one written during the Holocaust (Haschenburg's *Hledáme strašidlo,* 1943), then three contemporary ones (Segal's *Le Marionnettiste de Lodz,* 1984; Cagnard's *Les Gens légers,* 2006; Cuscunà's *È bello vivere liberi,* 2009). The article examines how puppets and marionettes are used as poetical and dramaturgical means, which make it possible to represent on stage the process of extermination and the haunting images it left in our memory.

Keywords: puppetry; death; symbolism; contemporary drama; Shoah; undead; Holocaust

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> Le Clastique est manifestation de la mort et
> affrontement au concept même de mort:
> jalon, trace ultime laissée par un vivant pour
> servir de repère aux survivants
> qui viendront rôder autour de l'art et du théâtre.
> (Lazaro and Lemahieu 1996)
>
> [The Clastic is a manifestation of death and
> a confrontation with the very concept of death:
> a milestone, the ultimate trace left by a living person to
> serve as a landmark for the survivors
> who will prowl around the art and the theatre.][2]

Introduction

Deeply impressed by the performances of Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class* (1975) and by his manifest *The Theatre of Death* (Kantor 1977), contemporary puppeteers have more and more explored the potential of their theatrical instruments for "confronting" themselves and their audiences "with the very concept of death" (Lazaro and Lemahieu, 1996) which means with representing not only the event of death but all its possible variations and extensions in our sensibilities and imaginations.

The easy way marionettes and puppets can cross the boundaries between lifeless objects and living creatures makes puppetry the ideal artistic expression to picture liminal states between life and death. On the puppet or marionette stage, human bodies that stand at the threshold of their deaths, enter or come back from the afterlife as ghosts and dybbuks, and memories of vanished moments can find immediacy and obviousness with which the actors' theatre could hardly compete. Tightly connected to the grotesque, surreal, and fantastic, the puppet and marionette theatre is, therefore nowadays, a place where the circulations and exchanges between life and death often stand at the core of the dramaturgy. Not only do animated objects easily become alive or return to lifelessness, but by playing with the interactions of movement and voice, they can also perform ambiguous creatures and complex identities, such as figures haunted by ghosts or memories of the dead[3].

The hypothesis that will be examined here is this contemporary perception of puppets and marionettes as appropriate instruments for the staging of liminal states; this is the result of two major changes in the history of representations. The first one, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century, is the opposition of nature and technique developed by Romanti-

[2] All translations by the authors.

[3] See Gisèle Vienne's performance *Jerk*, 2008.

cism, which progressively lead to consider the imitation of life by an artifact as a disturbing and uncanny (Gross 2011) phenomenon – an evolution that some Symbolist poets and artists made use of by turning over this repulsion and transforming it into an aesthetic experience (Bayerdörfer 1976, Plassard 1992). The second change is the trauma caused by totalitarian regimes, genocides, and mass murders since the twentieth century, which has shown how much human beings can be reduced to the status of objects, dehumanized and annihilated. In that case also, as we will see, the common perception can be reversed by a poetical decision. For contemporary playwrights and puppeteers, puppetry gives a body to those whose bodies have been annihilated, reduced to a thing or a cloud of smoke, and whose memory is still haunting us.

1. From Romanticism to Symbolism

1.1. The Turning Point of Romanticism

As we have long known, the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century was responsible for a major epistemological break that gave way to a series of new antinomies, both in literature and art and in some sciences as well (Schlanger 1971). Nature and technique, and organism and mechanism, were no longer considered as different degrees within a common structure (like, for instance, in Descartes's system), but as two opposite worlds, respectively metaphorized by images of life and death. Not only did Romanticism, born out of this fracture, associate all kinds of technical simulacra with deadly menaces and fantastic visions (Boie 1979), but it also progressively modified the perception of puppets and marionettes in literary and artistic circles.

Commenting upon a marionette show by the artists of the Turinese Compagnia Sales, whose daily performances (from July till November 1858) met great success in Paris, the poet and playwright Charles Monselet wrote:

> Allez les voir, ces marionnettes nouvelles, sous le passage Jouffroy, et vous reviendrez épouvantés; croyez-vous qu'elles sont de grandeur naturelle? Oui! . . . L'effet est horrible; mais les enfants rient à en pleurer: doutez donc du succès!
>
> [Go and see them, these new puppets, under the Jouffroy passage, and you will come back appalled; can you believe they are of natural size? Yes! . . . The effect is horrible; but the children laugh so hard they cry: thus, don't doubt the success! (Monselet 1858, 63)]

One year later, in her novel *L'Homme de neige* (The Snow Man, 1859), George Sand drastically stressed an ontological difference between glove puppets

(*burattini*) and string marionettes (*fantocci*). While the *burattino* was portrayed as a living being, almost a biological extension of the puppeteer's arm, the *fantoccio* was called an 'automaton' and its performance, when technically achieved, "a sorry, even terrifying thing" ("une chose triste et même effrayante", Sand 2004, 182). The technical evolutions introduced by the artists could only reinforce this judgment; during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the growing mechanical perfection and realism of string marionettes transformed their shows in miniaturized pantomimes and music-hall performances, arousing mixed feelings in the literary circles.

"These wooden people are a bit disturbing" ("Ces gens de bois sont un peu inquiétants") noted in 1879, as an understatement, Edmond de Goncourt in his *Journal* (Goncourt 1956, 17), after a performance of Thomas Holden's Théâtre des Fantoches – as if these extraordinary string marionettes had been wax figures or automata. Anticipating the complexity of analogies that, many decades later, Masahiro Mori described as the "uncanny valley" (Mori 1970), where a too-close imitation of the human being makes the robot similar to a moving corpse, puppetry in the late nineteenth century became more and more often associated with funereal imagery by poets and writers. But taking the opposite of this Romantic perception, Symbolists and Modernists had a positive interpretation of these analogies. They elaborated a new poetics in which the feeling of the uncanny and the affirmation of a *théâtre d'art* were closely related.

Already in his 1890 article *Menus propos – Le théâtre* (*Small talk – The Theatre*), Maurice Maeterlinck asserted that artificial creatures, wax figures for instance, should replace actors on stage, because "the atmosphere of terror where they behave is the very atmosphere of the poem; they are dead people who seem to be speaking to us, therefore august voices" ("l'atmosphère de terreur où ils se meuvent est l'atmosphère même du poème; ce sont des morts qui semblent nous parler, par conséquent d'augustes voix", Maeterlinck 2004, 200). Alfred Jarry, in *De l'inutilité du théâtre au théâtre* (On the uselessness to theatre of the theatre, 1896), claimed that even the glove puppet, as well as theatrical masks, remembered "the minerality of the skeleton" ("minéralité du squelette", Jarry 1972, 409). A few years later, Edward Gordon Craig profusely celebrated the beauty of death in one of the most paradoxical passages of his manifest *The Actor and the Über-marionette*:

> But from that mysterious, joyous, and superbly complete life which is called Death . . . that life of shadow and unknown shapes, where all cannot be blackness and fog as is supposed, but vivid colour, vivid light, sharp-cut form, and which one finds peopled with strange, fierce and solemn figures, pretty figures and calm figures . . .; from this idea of death which seems a kind of spring, a blossoming – from this land and from this idea can come so vast an inspiration, that with unhesitating exultation I leap forward to it and behold,

in an instant, I find my arms full of flowers . . . (Craig 1908, 9)

These statements should not be understood as provocations or strange fantasies by some eccentric artists. On the contrary, they reveal how deeply the antinomy of nature and technique, connotated with the respective images of life and death, structured the aesthetical debates at the turn of the century. Puppetry, in this context, was withdrawn in artistic projects that radically modified its reception and, beyond the limitations of regional identities, popular theatre, or young audiences, began to use puppets and marionettes as specific theatrical instruments, endowed with their own qualities – among them, that of giving birth to the multi-faceted dramaturgy of liminal states.

1.2. Visions of the Hereafter

There are indeed many ways of representing death on stage: not only as the trespassing of a character or as the appearance of an allegorical figure, but also as a suspension of action, an alteration of time and space, or a vision of the hereafter. These dimensions began to appear in the Symbolist and *fin-de-siècle* dramaturgy for the puppet and marionette theatre.

In a little comedy performed in 1892 at the Petit-Théâtre des Marionnettes of the Galerie Vivienne in Paris, Amédée Pigeon's *L'Amour dans les Enfers* (*Love in the Underworld*), Pierrot and Arlequin meet again in the hereafter, where they also get to know Plato and Socrates. Getting bored with the peace and quiet of the Elysian Fields and longing for their wives Martine and Colombine, Pierrot and Arlequin ask Pluto to let the two women come and visit them. But when they arrive in the underworld, Martine and Colombine, annoyed by their deathly look, push back their former husbands and promptly return to the daylight.

Several times, Pigeon's play comically alludes to the physical aspect of the figures created by the sculptor Jean-Baptiste Belloc: inspired by the keyboard marionettes used in the mechanical cribs of Provence, they were manipulated underneath by a network of strings attached to a little set of keys; but they could only make a few hieratic movements. These solemn gestures, of course, perfectly suited most of the characters: the two philosophers' and protagonists' shadows (above all Pierrot's, because he died six months before Arlequin), and Pluto, god of the underworld. They underline the liminal state of such ghostly figures who could hardly move but, as Arlequin explained to Colombine, were not "completely dead" since they still could speak (Pigeon 1891, 46).

The dialogue indeed emphasizes the uncanny combination of life and death suggested by the sculpture and animation of the marionettes. The two women cruelly stress the semi-cadaveric appearance of their former hus-

bands, their violet lips, or their funeral smell (Pigeon 1891, 46), thus letting the audience complement, with their imagination, the physical features of the marionettes. "They look like ghosts" ("Ils ont l'air de fantômes"), declares Martine, "not one ounce of flesh / On the bones" ("plus une once de chair / Sur les os", Pigeon 1891, 47). When falling down in the underworld, Martine and Colombine scream in fear, as if they were in Dante's Inferno: "You feel long, cold arms clinging on to you, / On swollen bodies I stumble and slide" ("On sent de longs bras froids qui s'accrochent à vous, / Sur des corps tout gonflés je trébuche et je glisse", Pigeon 1891, 42).

Contrasting with the classical imagery of the Elysian Fields, which still appeared through the descriptions of a bucolic landscape with flowered meadows and peaceful woods, the emphasis put on the dark, the cold, and above all on the decomposition of flesh created a macabre and almost grotesque background for the comedy. Although Belloc's marionettes were unfortunately lost, and no reproduction of them is known[4], the stiffness of their movements certainly helped to reinforce the mental images of living dead characters suggested by the play.

1.3. An Invisible Power

Both written in 1889, Charles van Lerberghe's *Les Flaireurs* (*The Scenters*) and Maurice Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* (*Princess Maleine*) are two plays where, in very different ways, funereal imagery stretches out on the whole dramatic action: death is no more represented as an event, or as a character, but as the very substance of the drama, an invisible power slowly invading the whole stage. The first one to be published, van Lerberghe's play, could be called a minimalist tragedy. In a poor country house at night, an old woman and her daughter are woken up three times by some men knocking at their door. The first man pretends to bring a sponge and a bucket of water; the second one to bring a shroud; lastly, a group wants to enter with a coffin. Each time, the young girl tries desperately to defend the door and chase the intruders while her mother wants her to let them in. Finally, when the men break the door and burst in with the coffin, the mother screams and suddenly dies.

In Maeterlinck's drama, Maleine is locked up with her nurse in a blind tower because, in love with the young Hjalmar, she refuses to obey her father and marry the Duke of Burgundy. When the two women finally escape, their country has been devastated by war, and nobody has been left alive.

[4] Only two heads for the marionettes of *The Tempest*, performed at the Petit-Théâtre in 1888, have been identified. They are kept in the Musées Gadagne – Musée International de la Marionnette, Lyon.

They go to the realm of Hjalmar's father, where Maleine, disguised as a poor girl, becomes a servant in the royal castle. She discovers that Anne, queen of Jutland and mistress of the old King, wants her daughter Uglyane to marry Hjalmar. Maleine takes Uglyane's place on a date with Hjalmar and reveals her identity to him. Hjalmar thus gives up the prospect of marrying Anne's daughter and gets engaged to Maleine while his father progressively loses his mind. After trying to poison Maleine, Anne strangles her with the help of the old King, who, eaten up with remorse and madness, reveals their crime. The desperate Hjalmar kills Anne, then himself.

In both plays, dying becomes a long and iterative process, rhythmically organised by van Lerberghe in a series of three sequences repeating the same narrative structure until the final breaking of the door. However, the process is also somehow reversed because the ritual gestures following the death (washing the corpse, wrapping it in a shroud, and putting it into a coffin) become forewarning signs as if the two separate moments – just before and after death – were superimposed.

Maeterlinck's drama also radically modifies the perception of time, with sudden jumps and contractions in the first act contrasting with the iterations and the progressive slowing down of the action in the four following ones. Maleine can be considered as having died twice because, having been locked up in a blind tower like in a sepulchre and taken for dead by everybody, she comes back to the light of day only to be killed by Anne. Moreover, her resurrection seems incomplete, and after getting out of the tower, she looks more and more like a living corpse. Already mocked, before her imprisonment, she is later called by Anne "a wax beggar" ("mendiante de cire"), with a face "even greener as if she had been drowned for four weeks" ("plus verte qu'une noyée de quatre semaines", Maeterlinck 2002, 76) for her green face and white eyelashes. Everyone points out her thinness, weakness, and paleness, and the little child Allan asks why she keeps her eyes closed while awake. When he sees Maleine, the Fool looks immediately terrified and makes the sign of the cross in front of her as if he wants to ward off a ghost. Then, from the Doctor's monologue, we hear that Anne is trying to poison her, and we understand that Maleine's growing weakness does not come from the unhealthy air of the marshland as the inhabitants of the castle pretend but more probably from the diluted poison she is being administered. Then, in a long and terrible scene, Anne and the King strangle her with a lace, putting definitively an end to the young princess's half-survival after her entombment in the blind tower.

Dark nights, storms, gusts of wind, rain, hail, flashing lights, mysterious knocks on the doors, and other terrifying phenomena create a supernatural atmosphere throughout van Lerberghe's and Maeterlinck's dramas, to the point that a large part of the micro-events, movements, and words spoken

can be interpreted as dreadful warnings. For example, before his secret date with Maleine, Hjalmar throws handfuls of soil at the owls surrounding him and notices that he has the hands of a gravedigger. Then he involuntarily throws some soil at Maleine too, and, hearing that she is not Uglyane, exclaims, "From which tomb did I emerge tonight?" ("de quel tombeau suis-je sorti ce soir!"), which strengthens the assimilation of the princess to the living dead (Maeterlinck 2002 a, 59-61). In *Les Flaireurs*, a few notes of organ music between the acts are heard as an anticipation of the funeral mass, and the bell marks the hour slowly as if it were sounding the death knell. Although the scene takes place in the middle of the night, the opening of a shutter lets a bright light enter through the window, drawing the shadow of a hearse on the wall.

1.4. Fantoches and Marionettes

Van Lerberghe and Maeterlinck were both born in the same district of Ghent, respectively in 1861 and 1862, and van Lerberghe's tutor was Maeterlinck's uncle. They became friends during their common schooling at the Sintbarbara College, then entered together into the literary life by publishing poems in the same journals. Both poets declared their first dramatic experiments, *Les Flaireurs* and *La Princesse Maleine*, as being intended for "a string-marionettes theatre" ("théâtre de fantoches"): the first one, through a subtitle on the front cover of his play's first edition[5] (van Lerberghe 1889); the second one, in a letter to the Belgian poet Iwan Gilkin[6] and when announcing its publication in the first edition of his collection of poetry *Serres chaudes* (1889) with the line, "*Princess Maleine*, drama in five acts for a string-marionettes theatre" ("*La Princesse Maleine,* drame en cinq actes pour un théâtre de fantoches", Maeterlinck 2002, 197). These mentions were clear allusions to the English showman Thomas Holden, whose Théâtre des Fantoches had come several times during the 1880s at the Ghent Fair as well as in Brussels, and to whom Maeterlinck namely alluded to in an 1890 notebook[7].

Nonetheless, it was certainly not to Thomas Holden that van Lerberghe

[5] "Original legend and drama in three acts for the string-marionettes theatre" ("Légende originale et drame en trois actes pour le théâtre de fantoches", van Lerberghe 1889: front cover).

[6] "Princess Maleine, a rather long drama, in five acts, for a puppet theatre ("Princesse Maleine, un drame assez long, en cinq actes, pour un théâtre de fantoches"), Maurice Maeterlinck, letter to Iwan Gilkin, 24 March 1889, qtd by Fabrice van de Kerckhove in Maeterlinck 2002 a, 197).

[7] Thomas Holden's Théâtre des Fantoches came to Ghent in 1883, 1884, 1887, and 1890. See Maeterlinck 2002b, 1107-8.

and Maeterlinck wanted to entrust their first dramatic experiments. Holden's Théâtre des Fantoches, with its multiple tricks, comedy, and agility of its string marionettes could not fit with the hallucinating slowness of the action in both plays. As we can infer from Maeterlinck's notebooks and the drafts of *Un théâtre d'androïdes* (Capiau-Laureys 1977), the essay he was writing in the late 1880s, and which would lead to the article *Menus propos – Le théâtre* (1890), the *fantoches* the two poets dreamt of were much closer to wax figures: they should have been life-size imitations of human actors, "beings with no destiny" ("des êtres sans destinées", Maeterlinck 2004, 200), empty simulacra to be filled with the 'souls' of the characters. The famous *Vénus au repos* (Resting Venus) of the Spitzner Collection – the wax figure of a sleeping woman, with a mechanism lifting her chest slowly as though she were breathing – which Maeterlinck saw in the Ghent Fair of 1887, gave him the idea of those "beings deprived of life" ("êtres privés de vie"), able to awake "the strange impressions felt in wax figures galleries" ("les étranges impressions éprouvées dans les galeries de figures de cire"), and that according to him should substitute living actors (Laoureux 2008, 210).

Even if they were not supposed to become the ideal performers for the whole play, Holden's *fantoches*, as well as other fairground attractions like the 'Pepper's ghost' optical illusions[8], largely inspired Maeterlinck, as we can see in his drafts for *La Princesse Maleine*: ("Maybe rather, in the 3rd act, for the marionette scene, a scene of the story of a haunted castle – Flemish, with bones falling down through the chimney, etc." ("Peut-être plutôt, au 3e acte, pour la scène des marionnettes, une scène d'une histoire de château hanté – flamande, avec des ossements qui tombent par la cheminée, etc.", Maeterlinck 2002, 1061).

The dancing skeleton, decomposing and recomposing itself, was a beloved act of marionette shows performed by Holden, the Tiller and Clowes families, and many others[9]. As already noticed by Fabrice van de Kerckhove, the idea of the 'falling bones' seems directly inspired by Thomas Holden's performances (Maeterlinck 2002 b, 1108). The 'marionettes scene' imagined by Maeterlinck would therefore have been something more than an interlude for *La Princesse Maleine*, or a tribute to the dumb show in *Hamlet*; it would

[8] A 'Pepper's ghost' effect, based on an optical illusion first used by John Henry Pepper in 1862, is the appearance of a spectral image through its reflection on a plate of glass rotated around its vertical axis at 45 degrees. According to Fabrice van de Kerckhove, Maeterlinck planned to use it in *La Princesse Maleine*, then in *L'Intruse* (*The Intruder*). See Maeterlinck 2002, 830.

[9] A description of this act called by Holden *Le Squelette magnétique* (*The Magnetic Skeleton*) is given by Edmond Sée who saw it in 1879 (Sée 1896). The brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière filmed an anonymous performance of it under the title *Le Squelette joyeux* (*The Merry Skeleton*) (1897).

have acted as a concentrate of the funereal atmosphere of Hjalmar's castle, and even a precipitate of the whole drama. Another project for *La Princesse Maleine*, that of an 'aquarium theatre' with a mermaid figure, had also very likely been suggested by the Théâtre des Fantoches because "L'Aquarium sous la mer" ("The Aquarium under the see") was the first scene of Holden's classic *pantomime-farce La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*), a performance that Maeterlinck could also attend at the Ghent Fair (Maeterlinck 2002 b, 579-80; Ginisty 1879, 2).

Thomas Holden's Théâtre des Fantoches can therefore be seen as a direct source of inspiration for Maeterlinck's first dramas. It provided the young poet's imagination with concrete images which echoed the impressions given by his readings of literary works (for instance Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's fairy tales, or E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Die Serapionsbrüder* and *Die Automate*), as well as by the paintings and engravings of the artists he admired (Laoureux 2008). But, enriched by the dialogue with these artistic influences, as well as with other kinds of performances like the wax figures exhibitions, or the "tableaux vivants" (Rykner 2012), this first impulse given by the marionette shows was to be further elaborated in the process of playwriting.

1.5. Towards Invisibility

All the apparatuses of spectral apparitions and more or less sinister jokes, closely related to the performances of travelling marionette theatres, were indeed erased by the author in the final version of his play. Only a few inexplicable phenomena were left, such as clothes moved by a breath of air inside the bedroom during Maleine's monologue in the fourth act (Maeterlinck 2002 a, 101), or a knocking on the door preceding its self-opening at the end of the third act (Maeterlinck 2002 a, 91). This last supernatural event echoed Maleine's first entrance in front of the King, a few scenes before – an already disturbing apparition, because it immediately followed the King's statement "I believe that death begins to knock at my door" ("Je crois que la mort commence à frapper à ma porte", Maeterlinck 2002 a, 74) and preceded his unexpected faint.

Giving up visual imagery of macabre acts inspired by marionette shows and fairground attractions, Maeterlinck carries over the effects he wanted to produce with them to supernatural but invisible forces, whose presence is more suggested by language than shown through scenic tricks. With its multiple iterations, its breaks (the many short exclamations "*oh!*" and "*ah!*[10]",

[10] "Le roi: Oh! il y a!... il y a ici!...
Anne: Quoi? quoi?
Le roi: Il y a ici!... Oh! oh! oh!

the mirroring questions and answers, or the young Allan's persistent stammering, for instance), its emotional charge, and its hesitations, the dialogue creates an obsessive and stifling atmosphere, pointing at some immaterial threatening presence – the 'third character' that the author theorized in the foreword to the 1901 edition of his *Théâtre* (Maeterlinck 1979, XVI). Surrounded by an invisible power which almost petrifies them, the protagonists seem to move at a slower pace towards their own disappearance.

Just like his friend Charles van Lerberghe, Maeterlinck made an intensive use of off-stage voices and noises, light and shadow effects (Gillain 2005), and echoes and repetitions in order to stimulate the spectator's imagination through his or her emotional involvement. At the crossroad between Thomas Holden's performances and the exhibitions of the Spitzner's wax figures collection[11], the poets' shared dream of a *théâtre de fantoches* can therefore be analysed as the starting point of two different ways for a dramaturgical renewal.

On the one side, the marionette stage, with its many scenic tricks, visual transformations, metamorphic objects (Ginisty 1879, 6), and magical light and sound effects, served as a model for a theatre in which scenery and machinery took an active part in the performance. The "Apotheosis" of Holden's pantomime *La Belle et la Bête*, for example, was composed of the following *tableaux*:

> La Cascade du Niagara. – La Pluie d'or. – Le Palais des Roses. – L'Apparition des Fées. – Descente de la voûte. – Apparition du Bon Génie. – Grande chute d'eau. – Effet magnifique, produit par l'eau naturelle, et la lumière électrique de plus de mille nuances.
>
> [The Niagara Falls. – The Golden Rain. – The Palace of Roses. – The Fairies' Apparition. – The Descent of the Vault. – Apparition of the Good Genie. – Great WaterFall. – Magical effect created by natural water, and electric light with more than a thousand shades. (Ginisty 1879, 2)]

Both *Les Flaireurs* and *La Princesse Maleine* made extensive use of all the possibilities of the scenic apparatus, thus shifting the gravity centre of the play which did not take place in the interpersonal conflict anymore but in the tensions between the protagonists and their environment – or, to quote Peter Szondi, which laid no more in the dramatic action, but in the situation

(*Il ouvre la porte en tâtonnant et s'enfuit.*)"
["The King: Oh! there is! there is here!…
Anne: What? What?
The King: There is here!… Oh! oh! oh!
(He opens gropingly the door and escapes." (Maeterlinck 2002 a, 127)]

[11] Maeterlinck saw this collection at the Ghent Fair in 1887. See Laoureux 2008, 78, 270.

(Szondi 1983: 49). Death from this perspective manifested itself almost in every detail, every sound, every change of light, and every movement on stage – as Maeterlinck would explain in the foreword for the 1901 edition of his plays, "the infinite, dark, hypocritically active presence of death fills all the interstices of the poem", ("la présence infinie, ténébreuse, hypocritement active de la mort remplit tous les interstices du poème", Maeterlinck 1979, IV).

On the other side, the idea of a *théâtre de fantoches* leaded also to imagine half-living characters, men and women desperately struggling against death that had already begun to take possession of their body, or of their mind, in *La Princesse Maleine* – and, in the case of *Les Flaireurs*, a death that was plainly accepted by the mother, but refused by her daughter. In both dramas, the process of dying was therefore the very core of the theatrical performance, it led to the dream of half-living creatures: performers able to give a scenic existence to liminal states where movement and voice, already frozen by the grip of death, became immobility and silence, "two things that cannot be reached without automata", ("deux choses qu'on ne peut obtenir sans les automates", Maeterlinck 2002 b, 1107).

2. Holocaust's Haunting Figures

"Pars quae apparet sine parte quae non apparet nihil est" ("A visible part is nothing without the invisible one"). This is one of the Latin proverbs invented by Claudia Castellucci for *Bros* (2021), her brother Romeo's performance. Although their project, in this case, is to expose the mechanisms of power and institutional violence in our contemporary societies, *Bros* also questions the power of effigies. One of the most striking images of the show is that of a group of men in black uniforms, lined up and facing a naked articulated male statuette on a pedestal. The men salute him as the statuette nods and wags its mouth to address them – an image that awakens the memory of every European citizen conscious of his history… It looks as if the memory of the fascitisation of Europe or, more generally, the fascination with violent totalitarian power could not do without an artificial figure (here half totem and half automaton). This underlines the deadly nature of the effigy and the cult it arouses.

2.1. Taming Death

Speaking of dramas dealing directly with the Holocaust, we observe that, in a number of cases, puppets or marionettes are involved, in a paradoxical back-and-forth between life and death forces. It is obvious in *Hledáme*

strašidlo[12] (*Looking for a Ghost*), a short play written for puppets in 1943 in the Terezín ghetto by Hanuš Haschenburg, a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy killed one year later in Auschwitz. This grotesque farce exposes the mechanisms of the Nazi regime and its power: King Analphabète Gueule 1er, to force his subjects to think like him, wants to make a ghost out of the bones of all the persons over sixty years old. Thanks to this skeleton, that "will haunt the people and thus meet all the requirements of the modern man" ("hantera les gens et répondra ainsi à toutes les exigences de l'homme moderne", Haschenburg 2015, 21), he hopes he will rule through fear. Despicable people, but also ordinary characters, behave monstrously: a man wants to get rid of his grandfather who can be used to make "little bricks, gunpowder, or a Viennese schnitzel", ("des briquettes, de la poudre ou une escalope viennoise", Haschenburg 2015, 28), and a woman cries and refuses to give up the bones of her grandmother but still looks forward to the rewards she would get. But before the King could make the ghost, his henchmen find Death, arrest her, and bring her to the King, who recruits her to haunt the kingdom. But Death no longer frightens anyone. Scattered throughout the play, the signs of death are grotesquely turned upside down. They teach us to laugh at death in an attempt to tame it. And the play ends with a small fairground show created by the Jew, Mordekai: two puppets, King Analphabète Gueule 1er and Death, argue in a ridiculous way…

Three contemporary texts have been selected for analysis here, written by artists of different languages, cultures, and generations – each of them building a bridge, through the puppet or the marionette, to this painful memory. In *È bello vivere liberi* (*Living Free is Beautiful*) (2009), the actress, puppeteer, and playwright Marta Cuscunà tells the life story of the young Italian resistance fighter Ondina Peteani up to her deportation to Auschwitz. This female figure, emblematic of women's freedom and emancipation, is set up by Marta Cuscunà as a model for the young women of today.

On the contrary, the actor and writer Gilles Segal, a Romanian Jew who became a French citizen, chose a fictional protagonist – a Jewish puppeteer who escaped from Auschwitz and lived hidden in a maid's room in Berlin with his puppets, convinced that the war in 1950 was still not over. *Le Marionnettiste de Lodz* (*The Puppetmaster of Lodz*) (1984) also allowed Segal to resurrect, through the puppets, bits and pieces of the culture of the Jewish ghettos in Central Europe.

As for writer Jean Cagnard's play *Les Gens légers* (*The Light People*) (2006), it was commissioned by the French company Arketal, directed by puppeteers Greta Bruggeman and Sylvie Osman, as a play about the Shoah. With-

[12] All quotations of this play come from Jolana Duškova's and Alžběta Tichá's French translation of the original Czech (Haschennburg 2015).

out once mentioning the Holocaust or the name of any concentration camp, this play for actors and puppets was written as a parable in which, through a poetical diversion, the inexorable fate of humans, condemned to go up in smoke, is depicted.

2.2. Mental Dissociation

Each of these plays assigns the puppet or the marionette a different place within its structure and gives it different functions. Marta Cuscunà's work is divided into a series of chapters – just like the historian Anna Di Gianantonio's biography of Ondina Peteani (Di Gianantonio and Peteani, 2012). The title of each chapter is announced by the performer who takes on all the parts, changes her voice, and carries all the registers, from the most comical one to the most dramatic. The text is an avalanche of stories and lines that follow one another very quickly, highlighting the actress's highly embodied performance. Many pieces of music accompany this story, told most of the time with an infectious enthusiasm and life force. Only two sequences are reserved for puppets, each time to portray the protagonist's encounter with death.

The first sequence tells the story of how Ondina Peteani, together with another *partigiano*, was charged with finding and executing a spy who, thanks to his talent for disguise, had managed to infiltrate and denounce several resistance networks. This episode, taking the form of a play within the play, is staged in a puppet booth. Marta Cuscunà herself handles the three *burattini*: Ondina, Stecchi, and the traitor Blechi. All the components of popular glove-puppet shows are used: quiproquo, *chassé-croisé*, disguise, and final caning. The figure of the traitor, whose sculpted head is a skeleton skull, re-enacts the traditional scene where Pulcinella kills Death with a stick. Political murder is thus derealised, and death mocked.

This use of a puppet booth and glove puppets marks the first turning point in the show. The protagonist, Ondina, is indeed a positive character who, so far, aroused the audience's empathy. Simulacra make it possible to "give figurability" (Sarrazac 2002: 65) to the assassination through a kind of literal act. The unrepresentable is made visible through a materiality that refers to nothing but itself: a wooden figure. Nonetheless, once the puppet is unsheathed, the naked hand of the manipulator, bloody, emerges from the puppet booth; the performer's flesh is not free of the crime, and the stain remains.

The puppet takes over from the actress in the second turning point of the show with the deportation to Auschwitz and the experience of the extermination camp. There, in contrast to all that happened before, silence and

immobility reign. Speech, still abundant in the *burattini* scene, is reduced to almost nothing. The play area is nothing more than a puppet stage in the shape of a train carriage; it opens up to reveal a camp barrack with a trapdoor on one side and an oven and chimney on the other. Ondina has changed into a frail white doll with a head a little too big for her very thin figure and huge eyes eating her face. Stripped of her dress, then of her hair which falls to shreds, she is nothing more than a skeleton whose bones are easily broken with a shattering noise that resounds in the silence. Beside her lays the body of another woman, or rather what remains of it: an almost larval silhouette, so dark that it almost completely blends into the background.

The discomfort we feel is first reinforced by the fact that the puppet is not directly touched by the performer. To manipulate it, she wears black rubber gloves that pass through a laboratory isolator. Then the puppeteer, on sight, reminds us of the gap between the protagonist and her puppet double. We can see simultaneously what Ondina looked like before her deportation and what became of her in the camp. Here, the inspiration came from Ondina's testimony. She said that she managed to survive the internment through a mental process of dissociation, by trying to look at what she experienced in the camp as though it was happening outside of herself. The animation of the puppet shows this process of mental dissociation, this splitting, which allowed the isolation of the life force from the mortifying experience.

2.3. A poetic Parable about Annihilation

Like Marta Cuscunà, Jean Cagnard has no personal link with anyone who has lived through the experience of the Nazi camps. By combining the universality of mankind in its vulnerability and the singularity of the figures in their particular destiny, he leads us to experience fragility. Moving away from a direct representation of the atrocities committed in the camps, the writer chooses to make us feel the horror little by little through a poetical diversion. The play is in two parts entitled *Prendre le train* (*Taking the Train*) and *Les Gens légers* (*The Light People*): two metonymies for deportation and extermination.

The play begins with a brief preamble relating a very ordinary experience, that of taking the train. A series of simple actions (such as buying a ticket) is associated with physical perceptions and sensations: "Waiting for it to start / The heart beating like a small engine / Very slightly overturned when it starts" ("Attendre que cela démarre / Le cœur qui bat comme un petit moteur / Très légèrement renversé quand cela démarre"). The first scene continues in a simple and prosaic tone with a man and a woman walking down the street and finding a little ash heap in which they recognise a succession

of human forms – their relatives, then themselves.

> Femme On dirait l'oncle Nathan.
> Homme Tu as raison. Quand il a trop bu de café.
> Femme Vingt-cinq cafés.
> Homme On dirait ma mère, quand elle est en colère; Aniechka.
> Femme C'est mon cousin Vladek, celui que tu ne connais pas… Maintenant, tu le connais.
> Homme Il a un petit air à l'instituteur de Schlomo, tu ne trouves pas?
> Femme Oui.
> *Temps.*
> On dirait toi, la nuit, quand tu dors la tête sous l'oreiller.
> Homme On dirait toi, le matin, quand tu n'as pas rêvé.
>
> [Woman It sounds like Uncle Nathan.
> Man You're right. It does. When he's had too much coffee.
> Woman Twenty-five coffees.
> Man It sounds like my mother, when she is angry; Aniechka.
> Woman That's my cousin Vladek, the one you don't know… Now you know him.
> Man It looks a bit like Schlomo's teacher, don't you think?
> Woman Yes.
> *Time.*
> It looks like you at night, when you sleep with your head under the pillow.
> Man It looks like you in the morning, when you haven't dreamed.
> (Cagnard 2006, 12-13)]

The perceptual experience becomes so vertiginous that it resembles a poetic experience. Here, in fact, "the gaze opens up a horizon under which it goes beyond the thing to be seen" ("le regard ouvre un horizon sous lequel il outrepasse la chose à voir"), as Henri Maldiney wrote about Francis Ponge's poems (Maldiney 1973, 49). Through the gaze, the object is revealed: the phenomenology of perception becomes phenomenology of the imperceptible, then ontology, but a negative ontology. *The Petit Tas de Cendres* (*Little Ash Heap*), this "Being" (*Seiende*), is indeed made up of a multiplicity of beings changed into nonbeings, going up in smoke and remaining only as traces. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, "seeing is entering a universe of beings that show themselves, and they would not show themselves if they could not be hidden behind each other" ("voir, c'est entrer dans un univers d'êtres qui se montrent, et ils ne se montreraient pas s'ils ne pouvaient être cachés les uns derrière les autres" 1964, 82). Visual perception has the dual ability to break down the different elements of an object, open up the perspectives of the gaze by always giving us something else to see, and preserve the power to synthesise the different aspects of the object. It opens and unfolds as much

as it condenses. But the revelation of the phenomenological experience of the scene is ultimately up to the reader or spectator because the succession of the names mentioned by the man and the woman, all of which sound Jewish, allows us to make the link to the Holocaust. The title of the play suddenly becomes clear: 'The light people' are those who went up in smoke, of whom only ashes remain.

In this same scene, when the metonymy of the ash heap suddenly takes on its full meaning, time and space are disrupted. Night falls suddenly, then the light returns abruptly before going out again, in an increasingly accelerated manner, and the man and the woman, disoriented, no longer find their way home.

In the next scene, Petite Fille (Little Girl) meets a man who, with the help of a large crank, is working to "to shrink the sky" ("rétrécir le ciel", Cagnard 2006, 17), to make all horizon and colour disappear, as if to empty the world of all perspective, of all idea of transcendence. Death takes the form of a progressive suffocation – physical, metaphysical, and poetic altogether. The two characters will meet twice more in the play; the man will sometimes be busy filling and starting trains, and sometimes he will continue to shrink the sky, but this time by dancing with a chimney (from Petite Fille's point of view) to produce smoke.

Jean Cagnard thus places his play "under the child's gaze" ("sous le regard de l'enfant", Le Pors 2022). The stage directions in Scenes Seven and Twelve state that Petite Fille had been watching the man for a while (Cagnard 2006, 35, 58): she tries to distract him from his task, sometimes by offering to play a calculating game and sometimes by offering to dance. Through her poetic and plastic vision of human activity, however, the horror of the Holocaust is revealed. For example, when the man agrees to play a mental arithmetic game with her, she answers 'six million', the number of victims of the Shoah, every time. Or, when she looks into the trains, the stage directions state "Little Girl leans keenly on what is not seen" ("Petite Fille se penche vivement sur ce que l'on ne voit pas") and it is again she who reveals what the man is unable to see (Cagnard 2006, 37). Through her words, she shows the image of absolute despair at the bottom of the abyss:

> Y'en a plein qui pleurent, et les autres ils boivent leurs larmes parce qu'ils ont soif . . . Je les vois bien. Ils sont tellement serrés qu'on dirait qu'ils ont tous la même tête . . . On dirait qu'ils crient un peu.
>
> [Plenty o' them cry, and the others drink their tears because they are thirsty . . . I can see them. They are so tightly packed that it looks like they all have the same head . . . They seem to be shouting a little." (Cagnard 2006, 37-8)]

The naivety of the child's view combined with a change of scale (here the train seems to be reduced to the size of a toy) reinforces the feeling of suffocation and spreads the unease. It conveys to us the terrifying story of the deportation.

The whole play is organised around a series of reductions and disappearances until the final one of humans flying away in smoke. The sky gradually shrinks and darkens, and the size of the houses decreases until they become hiding places with trains running through them; food becomes scarce, and furniture, plates, and cutlery disappear, making "the act of eating strange and shaky" ("l'acte de se nourrir étrange et bancal", Cagnard 2006, 20). The shrinking of living space forces humans to squeeze against each other until they form a wall where individuals no longer exist. The disappearance of people can be very violent with the irruption of a train smashing the floor of a house, "shattering the eyes, ears and heart" ("en éclatant les yeux, les oreilles et le cœur", Cagnard 2006, 34), and taking away the members of the family.

The second part of the play begins with a *mise en abyme* in the form of a small puppet theatre set up by the deportees to resist the horror. Disappearance is treated in a buffoonish way: Chevalier Estomac (Knight Stomach), after swallowing a potato peel, flies away as if in a parable of those who die by going up in smoke. The ultimate disappearance is that of Petite Fille in her last encounter with Petit Tas de Cendres, which has become a mountain. She has lost her childlike look and, despite being seven and a half years old, feels old and staggers, falling under the weight of the 'light people' who float like clouds above her head. Faced with her friend Petit Tas de Cendres, who is still hungry, she decides to let herself be devoured. But Jean Cagnard chooses to transform her into "a very pretty picnic basket" ("très joli panier pique-nique") and the last stage directions end with "lunch is ready, Big Little Ash Heap…" ("à table, Gros Petit Tas de Cendres…", 2006, 75). Even in this form, lightened by the poetical diversion, the child's sacrifice symbolises the ultimate point of annihilation and the height of horror.

2.4. Puppetry against Death

The core dramaturgical principle of *Le Marionnettiste de Lodz*, Gilles Segal's play, is that of the confusion created by puppets and marionettes between dead and living beings. This confusion is first and foremost the confusion in which the spectator finds himself at the beginning of the play. The action takes place in Berlin in 1950. Finkelbaum is a Jewish deportee who has escaped from Auschwitz and has been living in a locked maid's room for five years, convinced that the war is not over. As the caretaker has left a few er-

rands outside his door, he prepares breakfast while talking to a human form lying in the bed, presumably his wife. She makes a few movements, grunts a little as if she wants to sleep again, and refuses to get up while he jokes with her and makes some amorous teasing. Then he takes her out of the bed, and we discover that she is in fact a large doll that he is manipulating.

We understand a little later that this doll is a kind of reincarnation of Ruchele, his young wife who was gassed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. He lives with her as if she were still alive, in a suspended time of pregnancy for five years. We see him touching her belly and, thinking that she is about to give birth, calling his father (another puppet), and then a doctor (a third one) who declares that this is a false alarm: Ruchele is only three months pregnant. The beloved woman is thus resurrected but frozen in an eternal present, like a photograph that has survived the years. She is also destined to play the leading female role in the puppet show Finkelbaum is preparing.

Ruchele's effigy is coupled with a ghost, visible only to her husband. At the end of the play, Finkelbaum is visited by his friend Schwarzkopf, with whom he escaped from Auschwitz, and the three of them sit down at the table to drink some brandy brought by Schwarzkopf:

> Le regard de Finkelbaum voit Ruchele se lever, aller vers le coin-cuisine, prendre deux verres et revenir avec. Schwarzkopf, lui, voit Ruchele rester à sa place, inerte. Il voit deux verres près de lui, il les prend et les pose devant Finkelbaum juste au moment où celui-ci voit sa 'Ruchele' poser ses deux verres au même endroit ! Finkelbaum la remercie et la voit venir se rasseoir à sa place de départ.
>
> [Finkelbaum's gaze sees Ruchele getting up, going to the kitchenette, taking two glasses and coming back with them. Schwarzkopf, on the other hand, sees Ruchele remaining in her place, inert. He sees two glasses near him, picks them up and puts them down in front of Finkelbaum, just as Finkelbaum sees his 'Ruchele' putting her two glasses down in the same place! Finkelbaum thanks her and sees her coming and sitting back down in her original place. (Segal 1992, 44)]

In the maid's room, smaller puppets represent the deportees of the extermination camp that Finkelbaum made in preparation for an autobiographical show: "The Tragic-Comic Life of Samuel Finkelbaum, Puppeteer! Hundreds of puppets! A dozen sets!" ("La Vie tragi-comique de Samuel Finkelbaum, marionnettiste! Des centaines de marionnettes! Une dizaine de décors!", Segal 1992, 14). He also plans to build more puppets in order to reconstruct the Lodz ghetto, where he lived with all its inhabitants.

When, at the end of the play, Finkelbaum agrees to leave his maid's room to follow Schwarzkopf to Antwerp and packs his bags, we see him hesitate in front of the group of puppets representing the deportees. But this moment,

when we might think that he has come to his senses and has finally allowed himself to be convinced that the war is really over, is instead the moment when the haunting images of the atrocities experienced in the camp return and materialise: manipulated by a puppeteer "dressed all in black as if in Bunraku" ("tout de noir vêtu comme au Bunraku"), Finkelbaum "begins to move like a Japanese puppet" ("se met à bouger comme une marionnette japonaise"), and throws the puppets of the deportees into the lit stove while those of the S. S. "come to life and start to walk around slowly" ("s'animent et se mettent à déambuler lentement"), surveying the scene (Segal 1992, 47-8). The stage space becomes a mental chamber and shows the moment when Finkelbaum's mind collapses: when he recognises Ruchele's body in the pile of corpses he had to put into the crematorium.

In the camp, Finkelbaum only found the energy to survive because he hoped that the Allied troops, whose approach was imminent, would free him and his wife before her delivery and the birth of their child. It was in this hope that he repeatedly stole Schwarzkopf's bread rations and that Schwarzkopf, who could see this, let him do it. As he prepares to throw Ruchele's puppet into the stove in his Berlin maid's room, the past and the present merge, blurring the relationship between the living and the dead. Suddenly, Ruchele's voice, like that of a dybbuk, takes possession of Finkelbaum and begins a loving dialogue with him. But it is also Schwarzkopf's mind, at this moment, that changes: holding the puppeteer and his doll close to him, cradling them both as if they were children, he locks himself inside the maid room with them and responds in turn with a doubtful formula "They say that… they say that…" ("On dit ça… on dit ça…") when the concierge asserts one more time that the war is over (Segal 1992, 48).

Conclusion

Puppetry is certainly not the only way modern and contemporary stages deal with such difficult matters as the fear of death, the distress caused by a definitive loss, or the haunting memories of those who passed away – nor is it the most significant one. As Marvin Carlson stresses in his essay, *The Haunted Stage*, every theatrical performance could be called a "memory machine" (Carlson 2001), and this memory is deeply linked to the dynamics of disappearance and mourning. Nonetheless, being a simulacrum, the puppet has the ability to depict not only the disappeared ones, but also the process of their disappearance: their turning into a corpse, or something near to a corpse, a half-living body, an undead, a ghost.

The recognition of this ability can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when the opposition of nature and technique began to modify the image

of puppetry and to associate it, in some poets' and artists' views, with the world of mechanical artifacts and deadly inventions. First with Romanticism, then with Symbolism and Modernism, that turned this association into a weapon against commercial and institutional theatre, puppets and marionettes progressively became effigies (Plassard 1992) and ideal performers for liminal states and offered models for a decentred dramaturgy.

But the experiences of mass murder in the twentieth century, and particularly of the Holocaust committed by the Nazis – the industrial destruction of entire populations, dehumanisation, and a reduced status to things, and even materials (hair, gold, etc.) – introduced new significations into the confrontation of humans and objects. Puppets and marionettes, in this perspective, appear as remains of the murdered, moving substitutes for those who disappeared, as well as, through metonymy and poetical diversion, they can give visibility to the haunting images of the deportees. Because actors could hardly depict, with their living bodies, the dehumanisation process in the extermination camps, the double nature of artificial figures, both dead objects and images of living beings, makes it possible to get closer to that unrepresentable. Walking through the desolated landscapes of inhumanity, where death is the horizon and the ground we pace, puppets and marionettes might be the best travelling companions, reminding us of the frailty of our existences and making that journey liveable.

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