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Benjamin Bennett

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Part I

PRINCIPLES OF LYRIC AND DRAMA

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I

KLEIST'S PUPPETS

By “principles” of lyric and drama I mean the generic principles that emerge gradually from various texts as young Hofmannsthal struggles to establish in language a firm relation to the private and problematic sphere of self-consciousness. My first point is that Hofmannsthal orients himself in this matter largely with respect to the thought of Heinrich von Kleist, which he finds unacceptable. My focus here is upon Hofmannsthal; I do not claim to present a complete or adequate interpretation of Kleist’s puppet-theater speculations.

I

As far as I know, it cannot be demonstrated that Hofmannsthal was aware of Kleist’s essay “Über das Marionettentheater” before August 1895; but given the extent of his reading in general, plus a few apparent echoes in his writing, conclusive proof is probably not necessary.¹ It is reasonably clear that by 1895 he not only had read the puppet-theater essay but had developed a strong critical attitude toward it. We read among his notes:

leben oder sich ausleben nur im Kampf mit den Widerstrebenden Mächten. So lehrt mich mein Pferd den Werth des Vermögens, der Unabhängigkeit. Sehnsucht, Hass, Demüthigung . . . sind die Einstellungen des seelischen Augapfels zum Erkennen der eigenen Lage im universellen Coordinatensystem und des Verhältnisses zu den andern Geschöpfen. Vorher geht man in Gedanken leichtfertig mit den Wesen um wie mit Marionetten. (scheinhaftes Leben.)² (W29 42; A 127)

to live, or to live oneself out completely, [is possible] only in the struggle with Opposing Powers. Thus my horse teaches me the value of personal resources, of independence. Yearning, hatred, humiliation serve to situate the mind’s eye, so that we recognize our own place in the universal coordinate-system and our relation to other creatures, so that in our thinking we no longer manipulate people and things as if they were marionettes (the life of mere appearance).

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The geometrical image, as well as the mention of puppets, suggests a rejoinder to Kleist. Kleist's ballet dancer claims as an advantage of the puppets that nothing hinders them, not even "the inertia of matter,"³ whereas Hofmannsthal insists that only hindering or "opposing" forces enable us to live truly. What the dancer learns from the bear, that there is a state of "Grazie," or perfect harmony with the world, for which we must strive, is the opposite of what Hofmannsthal learns from his horse: that there is a unique *value* in our having to deal with the disharmonies that hinder us. Or we think of another passage from 1895 (P1 231), on the actor Mitterwurzer, where the idea of a "truth" in gestures, produced by means of a "center of gravity" (see K2 339–41), is a clear echo of Kleist. But the conclusion, that even those bodily motions which originate "beyond consciousness" must be "known" by the actor in that he "knows himself," in "conscious virtuosity," affirms precisely the sort of self-consciousness that Kleist's dancer rejects.

Hofmannsthal later speaks specifically of a "parallel in form: the arithmetical in Kleist and in Poe" (A 63).⁴ Kleist thinks too mathematically, in riddles and problems. He does not confront life as it really is; his approach is "leichtfertig," treating others like puppets or mere counters. He himself, according to Hofmannsthal, unwittingly condemns his own procedure when he speaks of being "irresistibly drawn into an action that one had permitted oneself merely to play with" (A 72). But Hofmannsthal's disapproval of Kleist's thus merely playing a kind of number-game with the complexity and anguish of the human condition becomes explicit only in such passing remarks. His disapproval is in general expressed less by polemic than by disregard: "There are some very great authors to whom I would never seek a serious vital relation, [among them] Kleist, because of his distortions [Verzerrung]" (H/RB-H, p. 168). His disregard of Kleist, the scarcity of direct references in his early works and notes, therefore does not imply ignorance. In fact, his reaction to the puppet-theater essay was such as to make him deliberately disregard it rather than answer it. In his view, Kleist's very approach to the idea of self-consciousness is wrong-headed ("verzerrt"); the quest for an eventual transcendence of self-consciousness appears to Hofmannsthal as the expression not merely of a false opinion, but of an intellectually suicidal poetic attitude that must, if possible, be consigned to oblivion, not dignified by discussion.

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Let us look at the poem "Terzinen II" (1894):

Die Stunden! wo wir auf das helle Blauen
 Des Meeres starren und den Tod verstehn
 So leicht und feierlich und ohne Grauen,
 Wie kleine Mädchen, die sehr blass aussehn,
 Mit grossen Augen, und die immer frieren,
 An einem Abend stumm vor sich hinsehn
 Und wissen, dass das Leben jetzt aus ihren
 Schlaftrunk'nen Gliedern still hinüberfließt
 In Bäum' und Gras, und sich matt lächelnd zieren,
 Wie eine Heilige die ihr Blut vergießt. (WI 49: G 17–18)

Those hours! when we stare at the bright, ever-bluer blue of the sea and understand death, as easily and solemnly and without terror as little girls (who look very pale, with large eyes, and are always chilly) one evening gaze mutely into space and know that life is now silently draining out of their sleep-drunken limbs into the trees and grass, and with a wan smile put on airs, like a martyr who is spilling her blood.

The structure of the poem gives special emphasis to the verb "sich zieren," "put on airs," in line 9, a verb that also figures prominently in Kleist, where the supposed advantage of the puppet over the human dancer is "daß sie sich niemals zierte" (K2 341) "that it never puts on airs." We expect that the clause "Wie kleine Mädchen . . ." will be elliptical, having the understood predicate "den Tod verstehn"; and especially after the lengthy series of attributes in lines 4 and 5, the addition of a separate predicate for the little girls comes as a surprise. The new predicate, however, "vor sich hinsehn / Und wissen," though unexpected, is also exactly parallel to the preceding "starren und . . . verstehn"; the girls' gazing into space recalls "our" staring at the sea, and the knowledge of life's draining into nature is a variation on "understanding death." The sense of completeness produced by this parallel, plus the apparent need for a development of the poem's opening exclamation, suggests strongly that with the words "In Bäum' und Gras," the image of the little girls is finished. We expect it now to be dropped in favor of "those hours" that the poem apparently wants to talk about.

But this is not what happens. The subject, "kleine Mädchen," of what is after all only a subordinate clause in the still unfinished main sentence, now receives yet another predicate, which not only

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disrupts the neat parallel, *starren* : *verstehn* :: *hinsehn* : *wissen*, but also, in the verb “sich zieren,” suggests self-conscious affectation and so apparently clashes with the idea, in line 3, of an effortless and natural relation to death. The expectations awakened by the syntax are thus thwarted not once but twice; and while there is a resolution into symmetry the first time, there is none the second. The second unexpected predicate, “und sich matt lächelnd zieren,” is set off very strongly against the apparent meaning and structure of the language up to its occurrence, and so becomes a principal focus of the reader’s attention.

In order to understand this dissonance or asymmetry, and in the process satisfy ourselves that an awareness of Kleist does figure here, we must understand that a specific *setting* is implied by the poem. Even in the absence of actual description, the language is modulated so as to evoke clearly the idea of a definite and visualizable social situation. The locution “sehr blass aussehen” (“look very pale”), since pallor is by definition visually perceived, is strictly a pleonasm (as “are pale” or “look weak” would not be); and such pleonasm, though disturbing in what we like to think of as the organic compactness of lyric poetry, are common in conversation, especially in polite conversations on uncomfortable subjects. Given the idea of death, there is a clear feeling here of social or conversational *delicacy*, since “look” makes a less positive statement than “are” would, and since “look pale” avoids the conclusion “weak,” even though the ominous “very pale” indicates that this conclusion is present in the speaker’s mind. We detect a delicate conversational avoidance of the unpleasant truth actually implied: that such pale, chill-prone little girls are not likely to survive into adulthood. And it is by way of this suggestion of polite conversation – along with the ideas “one evening” and “trees and grass” – that the poem’s scene is set. What we hear, as it were *behind* the language in lines 4 and 5 – in the familiarity implied by “always chilly” as well as in “look very pale” – are the guarded comments of adults, probably ladies, concerning a sickly child in a garden whom they observe in the course of a social gathering in the evening, perhaps from a terrace, a polite gathering of relatively well-off people.

And this sense of polite society then provides a context for the idea of “a martyr who is spilling her blood,” which we shall now tend to associate with the *painting* of a saint, the sort of painting that belongs in the social atmosphere evoked by the language.⁵ The grammatically required predicate in the next-to-last clause, “Wie

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eine Heilige (sich matt lächelnd ziert),” re-enforces this suggestion by the idea of an affected nobility, a posture, in suffering. But at the same time, the relation between the predicates explicitly applied to the little girl and the painted martyr, between “sich zieren” and “ihr Blut vergiesst,” presents the little girl as the *more artificial* of the two. This suggestion can be explained if we keep in mind the scene that has been set, if we are willing, as it were, actually to *see* by way of an extended chain of verbal inference – for such seeing is what the poem requires of us. Namely, the little girl, in her premonition of death, feels an affinity with the painted martyr she has seen, and now, in the garden, is posturing (“sich ziert”) *in imitation* of the painting. Thus we find ourselves back at the puppet-theater essay, since conscious posturing in imitation of a work of art is also what Kleist’s narrator describes in his anecdote of the young man at the baths.⁶

The figure of the little girl, introduced as an instance of effortless meditative genuineness, comes to be associated with the idea of self-conscious affectation, and the poem thus refuses to accept a strict “arithmetical” opposition between those two poles. True gracefulness is here imagined as arising “only in the struggle with Opposing Powers,” only by way of the self-conscious movement that sullies it, not as a negation of consciousness; the little girl is graceful or genuine precisely in the act of consciously posturing. And I contend that this paradoxical situation is part of Hofmannsthal’s response to Kleist.

We can now also begin to understand the specifically poetic reason for Hofmannsthal’s position, by understanding this poem’s implied relation to its reader. It is clear that the image of the little “girls,” in its visualizable aspect, refers to only one girl; otherwise we must imagine a whole troop of poor sickly creatures posturing in the garden. Moreover, the poem moves from an external toward an internal perspective with regard to the “girls,” and this movement, like the singular “eine Heilige,” reflects the focussing of our attention upon the feelings of one person. In lines 4 and 5 we share the detached perspective of observing adults; but the two strong enjambements in lines 6 and 7, along with the strikingly un-iambic rhythmical unit ˘˘˘˘ (“hinsehn / Und wissen,” “Schlaftrunk’nen Gliedern”), create an impression of sudden fluidity, a slipping out of our detachment into direct sympathy with the flow of experience, a “Hinüberfließen” into the little girl’s own mind. Thus the suggestion of the girl’s imitating the painting is also supported, since the image of “eine Heilige,” by following the shift to an

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internal perspective, is ascribed to that perspective. It is the little girl herself who is thinking about the martyr.

And yet, by adding the predicate “sich zieren,” the poet refuses to let us forget that the grammatical subject is *plural*, suggesting the relatively abstract idea of a class of individuals rather than a single human figure with whom we are meant to identify emotionally. The reader is thus detached (explicit plural) from the little girl’s experience while at the same time he is also involved in it (implicit singular, internal perspective); and this paradoxical situation is in turn *an exact reflection of the experience itself*. The combination of detachment and identification that the language imposes on the reader echoes the combination of self-detachment and self-identity or genuineness in the girl. The paradox may therefore be developed one step further: precisely the reader’s intellectual detachment from the experience of the poem *is* a kind of identification with the little girl, and in fact any such identification would be incomplete if it did not include an element of detachment corresponding to the girl’s “sich zieren.” Readerly detachment, in other words, here itself becomes the vehicle of that profound resonance between reader and language that Hofmannsthal and his critics sometimes call “magic” or “mood.” This point is crucial and will be picked up again shortly.

3

Let us turn now to “Ein Traum von großer Magie” (1895; W1 52–3; G 20–1), where the Magician is described in terms that suggest very strongly the image of a puppet. He leaps from cliff to cliff “mit leichtem Schwung der Lenden” (we think of the weightless puppets’ “Schwung der Glieder” in Kleist [K2 342]): with a light swing of the hips, while presumably the legs dangle after as they do when a string-puppet is made to “leap.” In any event, the Magician, like Kleist’s puppets, represents a state of existence unsoftened by disruptive self-consciousness, therefore free, entirely in harmony with the world, unencumbered by weight or inertia. And at the end of the poem, after he has moved steadily upward, leaving the earth “tief unten,” we hear:

Cherub und hoher Herr ist unser Geist,
Wohnt nicht in uns, und in die obern Sterne
Setzt er den Stuhl und läßt uns viel verwaist.

Cherub and exalted Lord is our own spirit. It does not dwell in us but takes its seat in the upper stars and leaves us orphaned.

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The expulsion from Eden is also a central theme in the puppet-theater essay; and the idea that both the Lord and his cherub are our own spirit that has somehow deserted us recalls Kleist's notion of an "infinite consciousness" (K2 345) that, were we to attain it, would restore our paradisaical naturalness and make gods of us. Spirit or intellect ("Geist") is infinite in the sense that everything is possible in thought; for the intellect, as for the Magician, "nothing is near or far, or small or large." But precisely the infinity of intellect is what causes confusion in self-consciousness, by being out of harmony with the limitedness of our real bodily and temporal condition. If our whole consciousness, meaning not only intellect and imagination but also our direct perception of objects (including ourselves), could become uniformly infinite, then the confusion would disappear as it does for the Magician. But in actuality we are divided self-consciously, and the infinite part of our consciousness dwells somehow apart from our finite condition, as it were in the stars.

At the end of the poem, however, this divided condition is seen in a different light:

Doch Er ist Feuer uns im tiefsten Kerne
 – So ahnte mir, da ich den Traum da fand –
 Und redet mit den Feuern jener Ferne

Und lebt in mir, wie ich in meiner Hand.

For He is a fire in our deepest core – it dawned on me when I found the dream there – and discourses with the fires of that vast distance, and lives in me as I live in my hand.

My own hand, this external, distinguishable object which yet at the same time is somehow filled with the same consciousness that perceives it from a distance. The relation between myself and my hand is analogous to the relation between my intellect or spirit and myself, except that in looking at my hand I experience the relation from above rather than below, from the infinite point of view rather than the finite. I am infinitely more than my hand is; I could exist as myself without it. But I also exist somehow inside my hand; my hand is not merely an object, any more (by metaphorical inference) than my empirical self is merely an object from the point of view of that infinite intellect which dwells in the stars.

The mysterious self-conscious relation of separateness-in-unity (that I am myself and yet also observe myself as it were from a distance) is thus not merely an uncomfortable and perhaps tran-

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scendable accident; it is the central structural theme of our existence from top to bottom, including not only the anguish of intellectual alienation from experienced immediacy, and not only our curious situation in our own bodies, but also (as is suggested after the poem's break by the turn to first-person plural) our relation to other people. Self-consciousness, in other words, far from hindering our achievement of unified being, is the structural principle that knits our being together. Hence the ambiguity of the capitalized "Er," which in one sense refers to the Magician *as opposed* ("Doch") to "our spirit [or intellect]," but at the same time (by grammatical continuity with the tercet preceding, by the analogy with the self and the hand, the raised and rising perspective, looking down on its object) also *is* "unser Geist" itself, which looks down on us from the stars.⁷ Precisely the *separation* between our inmost fiery being ("tiefster Kern") and our divine but detached intellectualness is also a *union* of the two, a communication ("Reden") from fire to fire, a realization of the magical totality of our nature. The Magician, even in his quality as a Kleistian puppet-turned-god, embodies the anti-Kleistian truth that precisely the tension between infinite and finite aspects of ourselves is what generates our magically total being in the first place, a truth we may envision by the simple exercise of contemplating our own hand.

If Hofmannsthal's position vis-à-vis Kleist is referred, in the "Terzinen," ultimately to exigencies of poetic communication, the relation between language and reader, then in the "Traum" it is referred to a kind of philosophical psychology, the understanding that we *experience* our nature as a totality not only in spite of, but also because of our self-consciously disrupted condition. "The soul is inexhaustible because it is at once both observer and object" (P1 8), says Hofmannsthal very early; and then later: "By avoiding thought we cease to be astonished at life" (A 104). Without conscious "Denken," without the internal separation that makes our soul "inexhaustible," the unity or totality of our being might conceivably represent a truth, but could never become a truth *for us*, never the distinguishable (and thus necessarily astonishing) element of knowledge or experience that Kleist apparently wants it to be. We are reminded of Nietzsche's idea that internal disharmony in the human condition has a positive value and essentially the same structuring function as dissonance in music.⁸

To be sure, self-consciousness is still a problem and a torment. Those moments, or "those hours," when our whole being becomes

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an experience for us – whether in dreams or in revelatory flashes of metaphor, or in staring at the sea or at our own hand – are in the final analysis only tantalizing; in the very process of reflecting upon them, holding them fast, possessing them, we lose them. But Kleist's view of the problem – as if it were a problem to be solved, by striving for or at least imagining a condition beyond self-consciousness – is “distorted.” Such a condition would entail the collapse of just that integrated totality of being at which our striving had been aimed. Self-consciousness is in truth a *fruitful* problem, a problem not to be solved but to be exploited as the generating force of our full self-realization: “leben oder sich ausleben nur im Kampf mit den Widerstrebenden Mächten.” We must learn to experience self-consciousness not as a problem at all, but as a divine gift, as itself the ultimate “magic” in our nature.

4

This much, I think, suffices to locate the poetic and philosophical position Hofmannsthal adopts in response to Kleist's puppets. In order now to explore the problems that beset that position, we can begin with the work Hofmannsthal himself called a puppet-show, *Das Kleine Welttheater*.⁹ It is not necessary to say exactly what each figure in this little pageant represents; for our purposes it is sufficient that the idea of “Die Glücklichen” (W3 131; G 297), “The Happy Ones,” is associated with the idea of puppets, and that the Madman is meant to embody the essence, “the purest state” (W3 623; A 223) of such happiness. The connection with a Kleistian idea of the puppet's gracefulness can be made by way of the remark, in the “Prolog” to *Die Frau im Fenster*, that puppets “possess a boundless grace” (W3 129; G 136), which recalls the “indescribable grace” of the Madman (W3 142; G 309).

Happiness in *Das Kleine Welttheater* therefore has to do with being a puppet, with a grace or naturalness born of unselfconsciousness, and Hofmannsthal later applies to this condition, in English, the term “state,” which I take to mean, in roughly Blake's sense, the opposite of a self or individual. Each of the figures on the bridge is a “state,” and I maintain that Hofmannsthal's characterization of the play as a “lyrical dialogized trifle” (B1 215) justifies our imagining all these figures as states or moods or masks of the *same* individual,¹⁰ a single “lyric ego.” This idea, at any rate, produces an exact parallel with the verses “Zum Gedächtnis des Schauspielers Mitterwurzer,” in which the actor is imagined as the