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

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

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FRANCESCA DI FAZIO*

Figurations of Evil in Contemporary Puppet Theatre Dramaturgy¹

Abstract

Puppets' fictitious nature allows them to figure raw themes in all their concreteness on stage. In a close alternation of tragic and comic tones, contemporary puppet theatre faces the darkest fantasies appealing to traditional techniques and post-dramatic staging. Four different plays from the second half of the twentieth century and the early 2000s of the French and Italian repertoires reveal how the scenic space of the puppet booth may become a landscape inhabited by obscure figures. Ceronetti's *La iena di San Giorgio* creates a modern anti-hero out of an old popular gory legend. In Brunello's and Molnár's *Macbeth all'improvviso*, glove puppets abandon comedy to collapse into a tragic situation with no escape. In *La Chpocalypse*, Lépinos employs the character's typical routines to draw on the page a macabre dance. In Jerk, Cooper, Vienne, and Capdevielle concert their skills as authors, directors, and performers to stage a text that spellbinds a heinous story. Moreover, the plays analysed provide several examples of how the use of puppets activates dramaturgical processes that impact the text's mechanism, creating a link between the writing and its staging.

KEYWORDS: puppet theatre dramaturgy; figure theatre; contemporary dramaturgy; playwriting; repertoire

1. "Entering the region that wisdom tells us to flee"

Il est nécessaire à la vie quelquefois non de fuir les ombres de la mort, de les laisser grandir au contraire en elle, aux limites de la défaillance, à la fin de la mort elle-même. (Bataille 2016, 51)

[It is necessary for life sometimes not to flee from the shadows of death but rather to let them grow within it, at the limits of failure, at the end of death itself.]²

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²All translations are mine.

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In his famous essay *La littérature et le mal*, Bataille uses Michelet's essay on witches and their function during the Middle Ages³ as a starting point to reflect on the theme of evil. According to Bataille, despite the instinct to escape death and chase it away as far as possible, human beings are nonetheless drawn into a confrontation with it. Descending into death's depths appears as the ultimate response to the need to avoid it. Arts, and in particular the performing arts, respond, Bataille argues, to this special need. According to Aristotle's notion, tragedy evokes the feelings of pity and fear to overcome, through catharsis, the confusion that they provoke. At the same time, Bataille sees the artistic experience as a way to face the present, anguished feelings that one tries to avoid. The aim would thus not only be to purify oneself from these feelings but to use them to experience life more immediately:

À cette fin nous servent les arts, dont l'effet, dans des salles de spectacle, est de nous porter au plus haut degré possible d'angoisse. Les arts - au moins certains d'entre eux - sans cesse évoquent devant nous ces désordres, ces déchirements et ces déchéances que notre activité entière a pour but d'éviter. (Cette proposition est même vérifiée dans l'art comique). (2016, 51-2)

[To this end we are served by the arts, whose effect, in theatres, is to bring us to the highest possible degree of anguish. The arts - at least some of them - constantly evoke before us those disorders, those tears, and decays that our entire activity is designed to avoid. (This proposition also occurs in comic art).]

In the short addition in brackets, Bataille does not give further examples but simply states that also comic arts can cause a strong feeling of anguish. Laughter does not, therefore, lead to distancing the fear of death but rather to lightening it:

Si nous rions, si nous pleurons, c'est que, pour l'instant, victimes d'un jeu ou dépositaires d'un secret, la mort nous paraît *légère*. Cela ne signifie pas que l'horreur inspirée par elle soit pour nous devenu étranger : mais qu'un instant nous l'avons dépassée. (2016, 52)

[If we laugh or cry, it is because, for now, as victims of a game or keepers of a secret, death seems *light* to us. It does not mean that the horror inspired by it has become alien to us: but that we have overcome it for a moment.]

Thanks to the immediacy of this approach, the comical tone is another way, in addition to the tragic one, to face fears caused by the possibility of death. The comical can represent the absence of life and attain a level of anguish

³Michelet, 2016. In this essay, Michelet proposes an original reinterpretation of the figure of the witch. No longer seen as a culprit and a threat to society, the witch is rehabilitated and seen as the result of the society of the time, a palliative to the difficulties experienced by the people in the feudal society of the Middle Ages.

sufficient to overcome it and feel it more “lightly”. As finite beings, Bataille argues, humans need to get as close as possible to the very object of their terror, to visit the extreme of their possibilities in order to feel life more deeply and, thus, feel safer.

The history of popular folklore and its artistic manifestations are full of correspondences between comic expression and its essential apotropaic function. In outlining the figure of the jester between the Middle Ages and the modern age, Piero Camporesi describes him as a priest of an alternative form of religion, based not on the dogmas of faith but on those of the agrarian cultural model, regulated by the inevitable alternation of life and death. Laughter was thus used in ritualistic moments to exorcise the fear of death and propitiate the continuation of life:

L'immagine del mondo elaborata dalla cultura agraria vedeva nel riso lo strumento magico primario, lo scongiuro più potente per la creazione e la ricreazione della vita. Scaturisce da questa fondamentale premessa legata all'esorcismo fecondante del riso l'elemento comico, farsesco e parodistico proprio del mondo popolare, immerso in una cultura fisiologica ed escrementale, in una oscenità apotropaica, prescritta e rituale.... (Camporesi 1991, 31)

[The image of the world developed by agrarian culture saw laughter as the primary magical instrument, the most powerful spell for the creation and recreation of life. From this fundamental premise, linked to the fecundating spell of laughter, springs the comic, farcical, and parodistic element of the popular world, immersed in a physiological and excremental culture, in an apotropaic, prescribed, and ritual obscenity....]

The so-called “pagan” or “satanic” rites, such as the Black Mass or the Sabbath, are identified by Bataille as a popular response to a substantial gap left by religious rites at the time of the Church's decline. Once the rites were lost, “le sabbat peut-il être tenu pour un dernier mot. L'homme mythique est mort, nous laissant ce dernier message - somme toute un rire noir” (Bataille 2016, ; “the Sabbath can be held as the last word. The mythical man is dead, leaving us this last message - a black laugh after all”). The “black laugh”, witchcraft, and similar rituals would have spread, as Michelet had already claimed, concerning the figure of the witch, within an oppressed working class left without cardinal points. The exaltation of life, to be such, needs to pass through the negation of life itself, or at least the negation of those social and religious principles that would like to keep it intact from the shadow of death and its ghosts.

Ce que le rire enseigne est qu'à fuir sagement les éléments de mort, nous ne visons encore qu'à *conserver la vie* : tandis qu'entrant dans la région que la sagesse nous dit de fuir *nous la vivons*. Car la folie du rire n'est qu'apparente. Brûlant au contact de la mort, tirant des signes qui en représentent le

vide une conscience redoublée de l'être, à réintroduire – violemment – ce qui devait être écarté, il nous sort, pour un temps, de l'impasse où ceux qui ne savent que la conserver enferment la vie. (Bataille 2016, 52)

[What laughter teaches is that in wisely fleeing from the elements of death, we still aim only at preserving life: While entering the region that wisdom tells us to flee from, *we live it*. For the madness of laughter is only apparent. Burning at the contact with death, drawing a redoubled consciousness of being from the signs that represent its emptiness, to reintroduce - violently - what should have been discarded, it takes us out, for a time, of the impasse where those who only know how to preserve it lock up life.]

In choosing to write for a medium such as puppet theatre, some contemporary authors seem to be conscious of this “apparent madness of laughter”. The artistic potential of the violent reintroduction of “what should have been discarded” resides in the “black laugh” that they materialise in their works. From the character of Polichinelle - cousin of English Punch, defined by Antoine Vitez as the “incarnation of absolute evil, of joyful evil” - to the post-dramatic staging of Gisèle Vienne, puppetry has never ceased to face the mind’s darkest fantasies. In the scripts and shows examined here, themes such as violence, murder, drugs, perversion, and cannibalism are conveyed through manipulation techniques that affect the dramatic writing itself. The techniques they refer to are, on the whole, traditional: string puppets for Ceronetti, glove puppets for Brunello and Lépiniois, glove puppets and ventriloquism for Vienne and Cooper. The straightforwardness of the medium not only arouses the immediacy of laughter but also conveys the anguish of death, the need for terror, and the vice of crime. What happens to violent legends and Shakespearian tragedies if puppets relive them? How can the story of a murderer be represented with puppets? Four texts and performances will be analysed to support the following hypothesis: there is, in puppet theatre, a specific language that leads authors, puppeteers, and directors to use its mechanisms in order to express different figurations of evil.

2. If the Villain is Seen as an Artist: Exaltation of Evil

In 1970, the Turinese author Guido Ceronetti and Erica Tedeschi created a small puppet theatre called Teatro dei Sensibili. Ceronetti wrote numerous texts for this miniature theatre, all staged using small string or rod puppets, sometimes accompanied by actors playing in front of the puppet booth. The first work staged by the Teatro dei Sensibili, *La Iena di San Giorgio. Tragedia per marionette*, is a reinterpretation of an older play. The story of the “Iena di San Giorgio” (“St George’s Hyena”) has often been staged by puppeteers, especially in northern Italy, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. The legend probably dates back to a news item from Piedmont in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1835, a butcher from San Giorgio Canavese, Giorgio Orsolano, was sentenced to death following the killing of three young girls who were first raped and then cut into pieces to conceal the crime and make it appear that they were victims of wild animals. Popular opinion later spread the accusation that Orsolano, known as “the hyena” because of his heinous crimes, had used the flesh of his victims to make the products of his butcher shop.

The “Iena di San Giorgio” is just one of many stories around the theme of cannibalism that were told in puppet booths. One possible antecedent is the Venetian legend of the early sixteenth century about the *luganegher* (butcher) Biagio Carnico. The plot is similar: Biagio Carnico is known for the deliciousness of his *guazzetto* (a typical Venetian dish), which, it turns out, is prepared with the addition of children’s meat. Once identified as the criminal, the hideous *luganegher* is condemned to death. The story had some literary success (Foscarini 1844; Forti 1850), and re-proposals of the Biagio Carnico legend have been found in several puppeteers’ repertoires⁴. An early twentieth-century version of the *Iena di San Giorgio* by puppeteer Gualberto Niemen (then published in 1999) is the one Guido Ceronetti refers to for his reinterpretation. Niemen’s text is short and essential, devoid of secondary plots. The protagonist is Gianduja, a typical Piedmontese puppet character who, with his stick, defeats the *Iena* and brings things back to order. The character of the butcher-hyena has few lines, being the necessity of Niemen’s text: its elimination, the defeat of evil, and the triumph of good. The light plot was suitable for the audience that, in those times, still gathered around the puppet booth in the countryside around Turin. In that same countryside, in 1933, Guido Ceronetti, while still a child, saw a performance of Niemen’s *Iena di San Giorgio*, which he used as a starting point for the composition of his darker rewriting.

The plot is much more complex than Niemen’s. The butcher of San Giorgio, Barnaba Caccú, is famous throughout Piedmont for his sausages. However, the town is threatened by the “Iena di San Giorgio”, a vicious criminal who kidnaps and kills young girls. Two young noblemen from the town, Count Femorino and Angiolina, find themselves involved in uncovering the identity of the *Iena*. Angiolina, betrothed to the Count, has a secret lover. She soon realises that he is the criminal, and, rejecting Count Femorino, she

⁴A *canovaccio* (plot outline) featuring the characters of Arlecchino and Fasolino was found in the Fondo Nino Pozzo, (Veronese puppeteer, 1901-1983), now kept in the Biblioteca Civica di Verona; a script entitled *Luganegher de Venezia*, transcribed in 1930 and belonging to the Salici Family, is in the Tinin Mantegazza Fund; an anonymous manuscript entitled *Biagio Garnico* is kept in the Cristofori Fund of the Castello dei Burattini in Parma – Museo Giordano Ferrari.

willingly marries the *Iena*, fascinated by his criminal genius.

Meanwhile, at Angiolina's house, her parents have invited Femorino to dinner: They eat sausages made by the famous butcher of San Giorgio. Femorino finds in his plate a ring still attached to a piece of finger. The diners don't come to suspect anything and go to the butcher only to give him back the ring. In the meantime, in his secret basement, Caccú, helped by his servant Crimea, has tied Angiolina to the table to transform her into sausage, but when he hears someone coming, he runs away. So, when Femorino arrives at the laboratory, he sees Angiolina tied up and Crimea next to her: Crimea is therefore identified as the *Iena*. In the meantime, Caccú has gone to the station disguised as a nun to run away, and he expects to have the whole army after him. No one, however, pays any attention to him. Finally, Caccú meets a judge who, not recognising him at all, tells him that the police have captured the *Iena* - Crimea. Caccú cannot bear the indignity of not being recognised as the great criminal he is. So, he confesses everything, even to King Vittorio Emanuele II, but no one believes him. He remains alone on the scene, shouting in vain "...la Iena...la Iena di San Giorgio...sono io...la Iena di San Giorgio...la Iena..." (Ceronetti 1944, 49; "...the Hyene...the Hyene of San Giorgio...it's me... the Hyene of San Giorgio...the Hyene...").

Ceronetti's reinterpretation turns around two characters: the protagonist Barnaba Caccú and the unusual character of Angiolina, a woman with bewildering behaviour. In his criminal perversion, Barnaba Caccú perceives himself as a heroic and great figure. Still, at the same time, he is the victim of a general indifference on the part of the inhabitants of the village. The recognition of his identity is, in fact, denied more than once - firstly, by the parish priest of San Giorgio, when he dreams about meeting the spirit of the young Berta Baducco, the last victim of the *Iena*. She reveals to him who killed her, but the parish priest tells her she should not spread uncomfortable rumours. Later, the judge at the station does not realise that the *Iena* is hiding under the nun's disguise. Finally, not even King Vittorio Emanuele II, who wanted to get rid of the problem of the *Iena* as soon as possible because it was stealing his space in the newspapers, believes his confession. Only his lover Angiolina recognises him, but without the desired effect: no astonishment, no shock.

Angiolina is contemptuous of any socially imposed convention: She is fascinated by the figure of the *Iena* and openly confesses that she is ready to get killed in his laboratory. As a free and subversive figure, furious in her lust, Angiolina deliberately refuses to marry Count Femorino, preferring to maintain her physical and moral independence. When she shouts in front of Count Femorino to be "una troia! [...] una latrina per la truppa! una baccante! un rifiuto di fogna!" (1944, 12; "a slut! [...] a troop's latrine! a maenad! a sewer waste!"), Angiolina exceeds all the limits of a string puppet character.

The unbridled lust, the sarcastic joke, the freedom of language, and the obscenity are all aspects consistent with the imagery of glove puppets, not with string puppets, and certainly not with a female character's mouth. Female figures are generally not as irreverent as their male companions in puppet shows. On the opposite, Angiolina shares with the *Iena* the same fascination with power and its imposition through pain (after the wedding, Angiolina is portrayed as Barnabas' wife-dominatrix). She already knew that the criminal was her secret admirer, and in her delirium of lust and rejection of social rules, she could not wait to end up in his arms or even under his knives.

The character of Barnaba Caccù has a similar sadomasochistic temperament. He would like to be recognised for the great criminal he is, to be chased by the army in a heroic escape, and he would prefer to be executed rather than live the destiny that seems reserved for him: anonymity, mediocrity, and oblivion.

Il tragico celato nella marionetta, emblema della libertà negata all'uomo da chi ne tiene i fili, è dal macellaio-artista che non potrà mai pronunciare il suo *qualis artifex pereo*, messo sotto gli occhi di tutti, rivelato essenziale. (1994, v)
[The tragedy concealed in the string puppet, emblem of the freedom denied to man by those who hold its strings, is by the butcher-artist, who will never be able to pronounce his *qualis artifex pereo*, placed before the eyes of all, revealed as essential.]

In Ceronetti's *Iena di San Giorgio*, the tragic human essence stands out in its lack of freedom, which is, first, aesthetic. The figure of the criminal is assimilated, for the perfection of his executions, to that of an artist ("the butcher-artist"). And yet, no one recognises Caccù's monstrous ability, him being the creator and artist of the meticulous butchery of human flesh. Barnaba Caccù would like to embody a larger, abnormal dimension, but instead, he is diminished, ignored, or considered insane. Relegated to the margins of society, it is because of this invisibility that Caccù is close to the artist's figure. In this sense, the use of puppets makes this concept perfectly concrete. Barnaba Caccù's string puppet (like those of the other characters) is a figure of just a few centimetres, specially constructed to be manoeuvred in the tiny proscenium of the Teatro dei Sensibili. The miniature depiction of the great murderer, the small flap of white cloth that acts as the butcher's apron, and the tiny knife that he holds around his waist are all elements that contribute to expressing his condition of invisibility, the constriction of his self-proclaimed great soul within a frame that shrinks him to the point of making him invisible.

The marionette dimension, in Ceronetti, also leads to another consideration. On the one hand, Barnaba Caccù embodies that tragic sense of lack of freedom of human nature; at the same time, however, the little puppet

embodies those brutal, violent, and absolute traits that the author seems eventually to exalt rather than condemn. Barnaba Caccú is a strong, cruel, and derisive figure; he is an “artist”, as Ceronetti explicitly defines him in the preface. The “artist” is such that he is the creator of life and death: In a scene, Caccú violently kills a woman, not to make his sausages, but because she had dared to bother him; later, he helps a woman give birth, and with the newborn in his arms he says: “Barnaba Caccú dà morte. Barnaba Caccú dà vita. Caccú è l’Alfa, Caccú l’Omega” (1944, 21; “Barnaba Caccú gives death. Barnaba Caccú gives life. Caccú is the Alpha, Caccú the Omega”). An extreme existence, detached from the rules of ordinary life, finds legitimacy and space in the fictitious puppet theatre. The tiny characters, emanations of the author, can do anything: desire pain, indulge in lust, give life, die, and kill. The microcosm of wood and fabric, of infinitesimal beings, allows Ceronetti’s transgressive thought to become concrete.

3. If Comedy Degenerates into Tragedy: Death of a Puppet who Thought He Was Macbeth

Macbeth all’improvviso (“*Suddenly Macbeth*”) by Gigio Brunello, author and puppeteer from Veneto, and Gyula Molnár, director of Hungarian origin, is a 2001 production which, despite its recent date, has become a classic of Italian glove puppet theatre. The text is an original adaptation of Shakespeare’s well-known tragedy. It was the custom among Italian puppeteers, especially at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to bring Shakespeare’s texts into the puppet booth using typical regional characters (*maschere*). Brunello and Molnár refer to this custom but enrich it with a fundamental shift: *Macbeth all’improvviso*, a play with a marked metatheatrical⁵ structure, is not a simple representation of Shakespeare’s lines recited by Arlecchino and his companions. Instead, the puppets decide spontaneously, and without the puppeteer’s knowledge, to try their hand at reciting the tragedy of *Macbeth*. Like Ceronetti’s, Brunello’s text is a classic script in form, with characters, lines, dialogues, and a story composed of a beginning, a development, and an end. The text is not a simple *canovaccio*, but a detailed script in which the words create all that happens in the performance.

“La tragedia prevista per oggi non si fa” (Brunello 2018, 35; “I’m not going to play the tragedy planned for today”). In this starting frame, the puppeteer opens the show with a shift, creating disorientation in the spectators. He apologizes to the audience: Having failed to finish the puppets and the scenography for the staging of *Macbeth* that evening, he will play an unpub-

⁵See Di Fazio 2021.

lished work by Goldoni, *L'emigrante geloso* ("The jealous emigrant", actually a fake, written on purpose by Brunello). The puppet booth's interior is empty; only the facade is decorated with a black and white reproduction, made by Brunello, of the famous painting by William Hogarth, *David Garrick as Richard III*. The stage design is spare, devoid of the painted backdrops, with no ornaments. The wooden walls are painted black, crossed only by a few guitar strings on which the puppets will hang during the show. Even props are missing, except for the sword (a real one, not in miniature) with which Macbeth assassinates King Duncan. From the beginning of Goldoni's fake comedy, the lack of scenic design and props generate complaints among the puppets:

PANTALONE [...] Qui manca il divano. Di quinte non se ne parla... Dove mi nascondo? Me piccarò qua!

(*Corre ad appendersi ad una corda di chitarra sul fondo*) ...

ARLECCHINO Coremo subito da Pantalon! Da che parte si va in camera?

BALANZONE Io, mi appendo qui e ci sto da papa... (*Si aggancia a una corda sulla parete*)

(*Anche Arlecchino si appende accanto a Balanzone*).

ARLECCHINO Così non può durare. Caro dottor: Questa è la fine della Commedia dell'Arte. (Brunello 2018, 38-41)

[PANTALONE [...] There's no couch in here. Backstage, no way... Where shall I hide? I'll stick to this wall (*he goes to hang on a guitar string on the wall*)

....

ARLECCHINO Let's run to Pantalon now! Which way to the room?

BALANZONE Hanging myself here, I feel like a Pope... (*Balanzone hooks to a rope on the wall, Arlecchino hooks up next to him*)

ARLECCHINO It cannot last like this. That's the end of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.]

Arlecchino pronounces his prologue immediately after the puppeteer's presentation and strongly complains about his decision: He undoubtedly wanted to perform *Macbeth* but agrees to play his role in the comedy. The plot is typical of Goldoni's comedies: Two young lovers, Rodolfo and Colombina, are hindered by the treacherous Federigo Rasponi. When Rodolfo inadvertently kills his father Pantalone, however, a first remarkable twist shifts the atmosphere of Goldoni's fake comedy towards unexpected Oedipal traits. The comedy proceeds smoothly until the moment of maximum *pathos* when the dying Pantalone asks the servant Arlecchino to lay him on the sofa so that he can see his son leave...but there is no sofa. Arlecchino loses his patience and refuses to continue playing his part in the comedy: He wants to play *Macbeth*. Pantalone tries unsuccessfully to dissuade him, and from the seventh scene of the First Act, Arlecchino manages to convince Brighella,

Balanzone, the Generic (the headless puppet that the puppeteer uses to try out the new heads that are still lacking a costume), and finally also Pantalone to perform the tragedy without the puppeteer's knowledge. The staging of *Macbeth* begins in the Second Act: Arlecchino is Macbeth and Brighella Lady Macbeth, Pantalone plays Macduff and Balanzone Banquo, and the Generic takes care of the minor roles (the witch, a messenger, and a guardian). The lines of the puppets intersperse with lines from Shakespeare's text. Each puppet does not disguise but maintains its own costume and regional pronunciation - its identity: Brighella, for instance, plays Lady Macbeth with his deep, cavernous voice, giving the female figure a more disturbing and grotesque feature.

The Shakespearean tragedy is faithfully resumed, although concentrated on the highlights of the drama: the killing of King Duncan, Macduff's escape, Lady Macbeth's death, the march of the forest of Birnam towards the castle of Macbeth, and his killing by Macduff. The more the plot proceeds, the more *Macbeth all'improvviso's* theatrical game is revealed. The puppets, who had begun their claim against the puppeteer by opting out of the canons of comedy, find themselves in an unknown situation they can no longer control. Among the increasingly grim events that characterise *Macbeth's* plot, they fall into a tragedy that does not belong to them. In this way, the murder of King Duncan by Macbeth overlaps with the wounding of the puppeteer by Arlecchino: He picks up the sword and sinks it below the stage. While a severed hand appears on one side of the puppet booth, the puppeteer exclaims: "Proprio tu, Arlecchino!" (2018, 58; "You, Arlecchino!"). At the end of the show, the puppeteer comes out of the booth with one arm missing and his shirt bloodied.

Similarly, the killing of Macbeth by Macduff represents the double of the defeat of Arlecchino, the rebel, by Pantalone, the avenger of the puppeteer-king. In the moment of Arlecchino-Macbeth's death, the tragic mechanism of Shakespeare's play perfectly melds with the nature of puppets, which is exploited to create a tragic doubling: The story of Macbeth merges with that of Arlecchino. Shakespeare's images thus become concrete, visible, and, at the same time, tragicomic:

MACDUFF Volgiti mostro d'inferno, guardami, qual è il tuo nome?

VOCE DI MACBETH (da dietro la quinta) Frameresti ad intenderlo.

MACDUFF No, per me potresti avere il nome più spaventoso dell'orrido inferno.

VOCE DI MACBETH Mi chiamo Macbeth.

MACDUFF Ti sbagli. Tu sei solo un burattino uscito di senno. Torna in te Arlecchino...

VOCE DI MACBETH Io mi chiamo Macbeth. Stammi lontano, la mia anima è già troppo tinta del sangue dei tuoi

MACDUFF Non parlo più, la mia voce è nella spada.

VOCE DI MACBETH Sprechi la fatica... prima dovrà muoversi la foresta di Birnan.

MACDUFF E io sono un albero di quella foresta, la mia testa è di noce massiccia e con me c'è un esercito in marcia di teste di noce, di faggio, di tiglio e di abete.

VOCE DI MACBETH Ma la mia vita è sotto l'impero di un altro incantesimo che non può essere distrutto da chi sia nato da femmina.

MACDUFF Io non nacqui da femmina... Ben lo sapeva il mio povero re. Fu lui a costruirmi e non conobbe per questo le doglie del parto.

VOCE DI MACBETH Maledetta lingua. Spegni in me la voglia di combattere.

MACDUFF Allora arrenditi e sarai trasformato in spettacolo. Ti porteremo in gabbia per le sagre con la scritta: Qui si mostra il tiranno.

VOCE DI MACBETH Non mi arrenderò per baciare la terra ai tuoi piedi. La luce del sole comincia a essermi odiosa e vorrei che in questo istante l'universo perisse con me. Venti soffiate. Fate stormir la campagna! Vieni, distruzione! Almeno moriremo col decoro delle nostre armi. Vieni oltre Macduff e sia maledetto chi si arrende!

(Macduff imbraccia la spada e va all'assalto oltre la quinta finché la lama non attraversa la parete della baracca. Silenzio). (2018, 67-8)

[MACDUFF Turn around you monster of hell, look at me, what is your name?

VOICE OF MACBETH *(off stage)* You'd be thrilled to hear it.

MACDUFF No, for me, you could have the scariest name in hell.

VOICE OF MACBETH My name's Macbeth.

MACDUFF You're wrong. You're just a puppet gone mad. Wake up, Arlecchino...

VOICE OF MACBETH My name's Macbeth. But get thee back. My soul is too much charged.

With blood of thine already

MACDUFF I have no words.

My voice is in my sword.

VOICE OF MACBETH You're wasting your effort... the Birnam forest will have to move first.

MACDUFF And I am a tree of that forest, my head is made of solid walnut tree and with me there is a marching army of walnut, beech, linden and spruce heads.

VOICE OF MACBETH I bear a charmed life, which must not yield. To one of woman born.

MACDUFF I was not born of a woman...My poor king knew it well. He built me, and knew not for this the pangs of childbirth.

VOICE OF MACBETH Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,

For it hath cowed my better part of man!

MACDUFF Then yield thee, coward,

And live to be the show and gaze o' th' time.

We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
 Painted on a pole, and underwrit,
 "Here may you see the tyrant".

VOICE OF MACBETH I will not yield,

To kiss the ground before your feet. The sunlight is beginning to be hateful to me and I wish that in this instant the universe would perish with me. Winds blow. Let the countryside rustle! Come, destruction!

Yet I will try the last. Before my body

I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,

And damned be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"

*(Macduff takes his sword and makes a lunge towards the backstage. The blade goes through the wall of the booth. Silence).]*⁶

Arlecchino dies and does not miraculously reappear after the fight, as is generally the case in puppet shows. He is killed by another puppet made of wood from Birnam forest, who was not born of a woman but at the hands of his puppet-king. Thus, the puppets become the main characters of a drama that concerns them precisely because they are puppets. The tragedy is that of Shakespeare's and another perfectly mirroring it, concerning the puppets and their nature. They live their own tragedy resulting from the choice to perform *Macbeth*, the play that their creator, the puppeteer, had refused to stage. These dramaturgical mechanisms do not implicate mitigation of the tragedy through the comic schemes typical of puppets, but, on the contrary, they let a traditional comedy collapse into a somber modern tragedy. The puppets are not simply 'used' to stage Shakespeare in the puppet booth; they choose to play it:

Per ottenere maggiore credibilità dovevano essere i burattini stessi a prendere l'iniziativa, in congiura contro l'ignaro burattinaio. All'inizio del primo atto Arlecchino confida a Brighella di essere stanco di dare testate alle quinte per far ridere il pubblico, vorrebbe confrontarsi con il teatro vero. Così lui e Brighella, programmati per un repertorio di gag ormai collaudato, abbandonano la farsa per passare al dramma, un genere a loro sconosciuto. (Brunello 2020) [The puppets themselves had to take the initiative to gain more credibility, plotting against the unsuspecting puppeteer. At the beginning of the first act, Arlecchino confides to Brighella that he is tired of banging his head against the puppet booth to make the audience laugh. He would like to measure against real theatre. So, he and Brighella, set up for tried and tested gag repertoire, abandon the farce to move on to tragedy, a genre unknown to them.]

⁶ Brunello interpoles the lines he wrote with some lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. To translate *Macbeth's* lines, I used parts of the original text consulted in the online cited version.

Of course, what appears to be a free choice of puppets is an invention of the author. By highlighting this apparent autonomy of the puppets, he conceals the authorial game behind the operation. It is a mechanism similar to the one in the prologue of Plautus' *Amphitryon*. Here, the author hides behind the words of the character Mercury and declares that he is creating a new genre:

Mercury – Now first as to the favour I have come to ask, and then you shall hear the argument of our tragedy. What? Frowning because I said this was to be a tragedy? I am a god: I'll transform it. I'll convert this same play from tragedy to comedy, if you like, and never change a line. Do you wish me to do it, or not? But there! how stupid of me! As if I didn't know that you do wish it, when I'm a deity. I understand your feelings on the matter perfectly. I shall mix things up: let it be tragi-comedy. Of course, it would never do for me to make it comedy out and out, with kings and gods on the boards. How about it, then? Well, in view of the fact that there is a slave part in it, I shall do just as I said and make it tragi-comedy.

Plautus consciously invents a new genre and informs the public about it. He declares that he wants to follow the public's inclinations: If the audience turns its nose at tragedy, he can turn it into a show that mixes tragedy and comedy, making them cry and laugh. *Macbeth all'improvviso* is linked to the tragicomic genre but reverses its direction. Comedy is transformed into tragedy in a process through which what should be an elevation of the genre (according to the ancient canons that sanction the superiority of the tragic subject over the comic one) and appears instead as a degeneration, as an unraveling of the comedy's plot in increasingly baleful events. Irremediably, the puppets are dragged into a fall that they can no longer stop, into a completely unknown territory from which they cannot escape. "Questa è la fine della Commedia dell'Arte" ("This is the end of the *Commedia dell'Arte*"), said Arlecchino at the beginning.

4. If Who Gives Life Has a Rotten Womb: Polichinelle Succumbs to Death

If the two texts analysed so far have a classic dramatic structure, with dialogues between characters articulated in sequential lines, the last two cases have a different dramaturgical composition. The French writer and playwright, Gérard Lépinos, wrote *La Chpocalypse* in 1991, following a writing commission by the well-known French puppeteer Alain Recoing. Using the character of Polichinelle, the typical routines of its shows, and the characters that usually accompany him (the Dog, the Policeman, the Death...), Lépinos enhances Polichinelle's execrable traits: his perpetual hunger, his irrepress-

ible libido, and his bent on killing.

Although the play was never performed, the style of the script suggests that Lépinos wrote it in close contact with the puppeteer, probably taking part in rehearsals and watching the puppeteer's improvisations. The text, in fact, has no lines, no dialogues, or dramatic characters; it is composed of a series of descriptions of what happens on the stage. At the same time, these descriptions are not mere indications or director's notes. The care with which the text is crafted and its concise and musical rhythm seem to bring the puppeteer's gesture to the page and materialise the puppet theatre in the reader's imagination. The structure of traditional Polichinelle shows, consisting of a validated series of routines, is transposed onto the page and used as a dramaturgical expression. The writing and the scenic process take action together. As a consequence, the figures and their movements take possession of the entire dramaturgy:

La source de violence

A)

Dame Gigogne accroupie. Ample robe, mamelles multiples. Elle est en train de pondre.

Un Gigogneau sort de sous sa robe. Il commence à battre sa mère impassible. Puis il s'endort.

Gigogne se remet à pondre. Un second Gigogneau sort de sous sa robe. Il porte un chapeau de gendarme.

Il aperçoit son frère endormi et préfère aller taper dessus.

Quand le premier né est assommé, le Gigogneau-gendarme s'endort contre lui.

Gigogne exulte d'avoir accompli son devoir.

Elle appelle stridentement sa sœur. Puis sort. (Lépinos 1991, 1)

[The source of violence

A)

Dame Gigogne crouching. Ample dress, multiple udders. She is lying.

A Gigogneau emerges from under her dress. He begins to beat his impassive mother.

Then he falls asleep.

Gigogne starts to lay again. A second Gigogneau emerges from under her dress. He is wearing a gendarme hat.

He sees his brother asleep and goes to hit him.

When the firstborn is knocked out, the gendarme-Gigogneau falls asleep against him.

Gigogne exults at having accomplished her duty.

She shrilly calls her sister. Then she exits.]

The whole text consists of short paragraphs describing the actions performed

by the puppets. Each new character appearing on the scene has to deal with the one who preceded, causing a conflict and a killing each time. The text is thus a reinterpretation of Polichinelle's adventures with Death, who, in this text, only appears in an allegorical way, under the guise of the gallows (her name is, in fact, Potence). Despite the show beginning with an image of birth (Dame Gigogne crouching), it immediately turns into an image of death, and, since Polichinelle enters the stage, the chain of fights and killings becomes very tight.

All the corpses end up in an unknown and disturbing pit at the foot of the puppet booth. The characters feel the presence of this pit because of the unbearable smell coming from it. Despite the stench, Polichinelle's insatiable hunger leads him to be attracted by "le fumet puant du monceau de viande" (1991, 4; "the stinking smell of the meat pile"). Every disturbing aspect of Polichinelle's character is captured and described explicitly on the page by Lépinos. The everlasting dialectic of love and hate between Polichinelle and Death materialises in crude moments of fights that turn into embracings or, viceversa, acts of sexual intercourse which become fatal. In the first duel, Polichinelle struggles against Potence and his noose until the movement turns into a "va-et-vient d'amour" ("back and forth of love"), where Polichinelle's stick becomes an obvious reference to the male sex, slipping into Potence's knot. As usual, their final encounter is fatal for Death:

Polichinelle a désespérément faim, au point d'avoir envie de se jeter dans le vide.

À ce moment, pour la première fois, Potence effleure de son nœud la tête de Polichinelle.

Polichinelle sursaute, saisit le nœud en se retournant, tire sur la corde et fait tomber Potence.

Puis il saute dessus et mord goulûment dans son bois.

Quand il est rassasié, Potence agonise. Il l'achève à coups de batte, puis la pousse jusqu'au bord où elle tombe. (1991,5)

[Polichinelle is desperately hungry, so much that he wants to throw himself into the void.

At that moment, for the first time, Potence brushes against Polichinelle's head with her knot.

Polichinelle jumps, grabs the knot as he turns around, pulls on the rope, and knocks down Potence.

Then he jumps on her and bites greedily into its wood.

When he is full, Potence is in agony. He beats her to death, then pushes her to the edge, where she falls.]

Later, the smell coming from Dame Gigogne attracts Polichinelle, so he heads towards her with his stick, but his wife appears from behind Gigogne, and

they begin to fight. Polichinelle kills her and returns to Gigogne, but Joe the Clown emerges. They fight until Polichinelle throws Joe into the pit. At that moment, the Devil appears from under Gigogne's dress and tries to attack Polichinelle, but he too falls into the abyss. Only at that point does Polichinelle manage to dive into Dame Gigogne's dress, thus initiating a love-death struggle that oscillates between Polichinelle's suffocation under her skirt and the pleasure she experiences. It is in this way that Polichinelle dies.

Polichinelle's death is very unusual. Generally, in Polichinelle's shows, he survives every attempt made by the other characters to kill him, and he eliminates anyone who stands in his way or annoys him, including his son and his wife. He always wins thanks to his stick, even against Death. What does the death of Polichinelle entail in a play consisting of a sequence of births and killings? The disappearance of the great destroyer does not mean an interruption of the chain of violence and killing: The Executioner arrives on stage, throws Polichinelle's corpse into the pit, then is forced by Gigogne to throw himself into it. Dame Gigogne then gives birth to a crocodile, which she immediately throws into the abyss. The series of deaths is therefore no longer determined by the protagonist of the show; Death continues despite Polichinelle, ultimately revealing itself as the real protagonist of the play. The script ends, in fact, with an extremely terrible image. Dame Gigogne, now alone on the scene, offers the shocking vision of her womb:

Puis, face au public, elle soulève d'un coup sa robe. Son ventre est un énorme trou pourri. Puis elle laisse retomber sa robe et va se jeter dans le vide. (1991,8)
 [Then, facing the audience, she suddenly lifts her dress. Her womb is a huge rotten hole. Then she lets her dress fall back down and goes to throw herself into the void.]

The character of the Mère Gigogne, normally a symbol of fertility and life, is here turned upside down into a viscerally disturbing monster whose womb is rotten and who, immediately after giving life, takes it away. In Lépinos's text, the typical routines of Polichinelle's show (fights, escapes, beats, and killings) reach a violent climax and are exploited in their rawest essence to draw on the page a mad carousel. There is no escape from cruelty. The one who gives life has a rotten womb, and who comes to life suddenly falls into the void.

5. If the Puppeteer is Spellbound by His Own Fantasies: a Multilayer Interior

Based on a short novel by the American author Dennis Cooper, *Jerk*⁷ was staged in 2008 by Gisèle Vienne and interpreted by Jonathan Capdevielle. Gisèle Vienne, a French-Austrian director, visual artist, puppeteer, and choreographer, mixes different ways of figuration in her productions - dance, acting, performance, poetic texts, live music, mannequins, and puppets. Specifically, the co-presence of hyper-realistic puppets, or mannequins (sometimes also animated by mechanical devices), and performers (often, inversely, tending to immobility) gives multilayered significations and blurs the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate.

In its narrative format, the text of *Jerk* already uses the device of puppet theatre; the protagonist, who is also the internal narrator, asks his audience to suspend disbelief and give credit to his role as a puppeteer during the performance. Through it, he retraces some moments of his own history. This mechanism is preserved in *Jerk*'s adaptation for the stage:

DAVID BROOKS Ladies and gentlemen, uh ... My name is David Brooks. The story you're about to see is true, based on my own experiences as a drug-addicted, psychotic teen murderer in the early seventies.⁸

Dennis Cooper's short novel is actually based on a true story, that of the American serial killer Dean Corll, who, with the help of two teenagers, David Brooks and his lover Wayne Henley, killed more than twenty boys in Texas in the mid-1970s. The theatre script, adapted by Cooper himself for Vienne's performance, has a multilayered structure. David Brooks is about to tell his story using glove puppets. He has a particular audience in front of him, a class of university students in "Freudian Psychology Refracted through Post-Modern Example", accompanied by their professor. David Brooks tells them to read aloud two texts in a fanzine they have been given. The two narrative texts tell of the revolting criminal game that David Brooks plays with his partner Wayne, carried by Dean Corll's homicidal madness. Dean uses his basement to kill young teenagers with Wayne's help, amidst torture, mutilation, and sexual practices, while David films the whole thing. The killings continue until the death of Jamie, a boy with whom Wayne was in love. Blinded by rage, Wayne kills Dean. David then proposes to stop the killing spree. At first, Wayne seems to agree, but an encounter with another boy, Brad, prompts him to take Dean's place and kill Brad by torturing him. After this murder, David, in a panic attack, kills Wayne. He then calls the police and confesses everything.

Beyond the diegetic level of the story in the fanzine, David plays some

⁷*Jerk* is the first of the stories in *Ugly Man* by Dennis Cooper (2009).

⁸All quotes are taken from the unpublished text of *Jerk*, which I received as a doc file from the author Dennis Cooper.

scenes of torture, sex, and killing through the manipulation of the puppets. Before the first acted scene, he lets the audience hear the different voices he gives to his puppets. He manipulates them, giving each a voice while remaining entirely visible (without using a puppet booth). He also plays himself:

DAVID BROOKS ... Now, before I start, let me introduce you to the cast of characters. (*He holds up the puppet wearing the suit and panda mask*) This is Dean, the evil mastermind, and ... (*DB now adopts the voice of that puppet's character, which is deep and authoritative, while he says the phrase 'he sounds like this'*) ... he sounds like this. Here's my partner in crime Wayne ... (*DB holds up the other puppet of a teenage boy wearing a mask and adopts that character's voice, which is nasal and hyper*) ... who has this voice. The boys we killed will all sound kind of the same because I can't do a lot of voices, so ... (*DB lightly rests his foot on one of the puppets lying on the floor and rocks it gently back and forth as he adopts the boys' voices, which sound typically young and male*) ... this is what they sound like. When they're dead, and Dean turns them into his puppets, he gives them ... (*DB adopts a high pitched, cartoony ghost voice*) ... a ghost voice like this. And the puppet of me, David, well, he sounds like me. (*DB smiles and speaks in his own real voice*) Hi, I'm the puppet of David. Understand? I hope so. Okay, here we go!

The performer's body thus appears as a *corps-castelet*⁹, where different parts of his body are involved: the arms, each holding a glove puppet (those of Dean and Wayne), and the lap on which the victims' puppets lie. The practice of *corps-castelet* implies the direct participation of the manipulator in the scenic game. In this way, fiction becomes problematic, the visible manipulation interrupts any convention of puppet theatre, and the interaction of the performer with the puppet becomes central. The double status of the performer, external and internal to the fiction, makes his body a place (a "*castelet*") where several bodies and identities intersect. As Barberis points out, "le spectateur [...] est confronté aux multiples processus de contamination, psychologique et mécanique, qui vont et viennent entre le manipulateur et ses créatures à l'intérieur d'un même corps" (Barberis 2013, 167; "the spectator [...] faces the multiple processes of contamination, psychological, and mechanical, circulating between the manipulator and his creatures within the same body"). This mechanism is enriched with complexity when the performer, through Dean's puppet, plays a character called "Dean-as-corpse". Dissatisfied with killing boys he does not really know, Dean wishes he could take over their identities as well. So, once they are dead, he decides

⁹The French expression *corps-castelet* refers to a technique of manipulation, mainly used with glove puppets. The manipulator is visible (usually, there is no use of the puppet booth) and uses different parts of his body to animate the puppet as if he was inhabited by it.

what identity to give them. He animates their corpses by turning them into simulacra of some television stars he loves:

DEAN-AS-CORPSE (*stifling a smirk, he picks up the puppet of the dead boy and waves it in the air at Wayne*) Hi, Wayne. It's me, Luke Halpin.

Thus, the performer Jonathan Capdevielle, while playing the character of David Brooks, animates Dean's puppet, which, by becoming Dean-as-corpse, animates the dead boy's puppet, who becomes for a moment a famous TV actor. This schizophrenic multiplication of personalities perfectly reflects two fundamental features of the play. On the one hand, it shows the wrecked mind of David Brooks, resulting from the violence he took part in, which condemned him to spend his life in prison, continuously reenacting those events; on the other hand, it demonstrates the manipulation of the puppets that allows David Brooks to try to overcome the trauma of assuming the role of the puppeteer, i.e., someone who handles the situation. The attempt, however, turns out to be a failure since he does not find stability. In the final scene, where David tells how he killed his lover Wayne, Capdevielle does not use puppets anymore but the technique of ventriloquism. The puppets are no longer present, but their voices, which the spectator can now recognise, resonate in the space around the figure of David Brooks/Jonathan Capdevielle. He stays motionless on the chair on which he has been sitting since the beginning, with his gaze lost in the void as he efforts in the "lip-skill" technique. Nevertheless, the puppet-characters that David had animated up to now are not destroyed; that vision is not blown up, and instead, "tout se passe donc comme s'il y avait eu acte de dévoration, ou d'intériorisation, des marionnettes" (Barberis 2013, 168; "everything happens as if there had been an act of devouring, or internalizing, of the puppets"). Through this introjection, the puppet figures now do before the audience what they do every day within David Brooks, i.e., animate his mind with all sorts of fantasies. As Sermon underlines, "David apparaît littéralement hanté par les voix de son histoire, incapable de se défaire des souvenirs qui peuplent son for intérieur, et qu'il échoue à contenir" (Sermon 2014, 127-128; "David appears literally haunted by the voices of his history, unable to get rid of the memories that populate his inner self, and which he fails to contain"). David Brooks' search for consistency is exceedingly introverted in the continual turning of those voices within him.

Dennis Cooper's intuition of employing the image of puppet theatre to tell a story about identity issues, mental illness, and power games thus finds a further degree of accuracy once transposed onto the stage. As complex as David Brooks' interior, Dennis Cooper's multifaceted text invests, in Gisèle Vienne's staging, the performer's body and identity. As a result, his inner self is unstable and susceptible to simultaneous changes, as immediate as a

hand reaching into a puppet's body.

6. Writing Through Figures

All the plays analysed so far deal, although in different ways, with that primary need to encounter life and its opposite, appealing to the figurations that puppet theatre allows. Barnaba Caccù's desire for greatness remains unheard, rejected by a bourgeois society that prefers to blindfold rather than recognise the evil that inhabits it; his yearning eventually finds visibility in the limelight of a microcosmic chamber theatre in which madness and perversion become synonyms of unbridled freedom with which we end up sympathising. Arlecchino's desire to play a tragic role instead of continuing to bang his head against the wall is realised through a metatheatrical mechanism that is as perfect as it is lethal: The puppet, in revolt against his animator, actually becomes a tragic character and incurs the same fate of death. The routines of the Polichinelle's repertoire bring a macabre dance to the writing that affirms, at each *pas de deux*, how the mantle of the *memento mori* covers all reality. In *Jerk*, the schizophrenia generated by the technique of *corps-castelet* and exacerbated by the practice of ventriloquism determines a series of centrifugal forces acting on the performer, who simultaneously manipulates and preys on the fantasies that inhabit him internally. Each animation technique, therefore, not only conveys a text's theme, but is intrinsically linked to its dramaturgical mechanism, in a bond in which the figurative medium enhances, or simply makes possible, the occurrence of a text on the stage.

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