

Solórzano's Tormented Puppets

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Carlos Solórzano's drama *Los fantoches* of 1958 reflects a modern literary and artistic tradition that views mankind as a powerless marionette at the mercy of an arbitrary destiny in a universe without meaning. Since ancient times the puppet theatre has served as a small-scale mirror of man's precarious adventure in this world. Until the twentieth century puppets were used to imitate human actions. In recent years, however, a strange inversion of roles has taken place, wherein human actors have assumed the characteristics of puppets—their rigidity, jerky movements and ridiculous expressions. This inversion of roles between man and marionette can be noted as early as Heinrich Kleist's essay *Über das Marionettentheater*, where the German romanticist asserted that puppets surpassed humans in the graceful harmony of their gestures because man was an awkward creature who lost his innate charm and spontaneity by eating of the Tree of Knowledge. For Kleist modern man had to regain his original grace by throwing off his civilized consciousness in order to experience the Infinite like a god.

It is exactly man's inability to reach the Infinite which has caused the artists and writers of the present century to portray the reduction of humans to impotent puppets. In the canvases of Giorgio De Chirico man appears as a faceless clothing-store dummy, occasionally placid but usually menacing. Tommaso Filippo Marinetti, the leader of the Italian and French Futurists, showed in his play *Electric Puppets* (1909) how humans can be transformed into automata with push buttons to elicit desired emotional responses. The playwrights of the Italian Theatre of the Grotesque, which arose during the First World War, sought to depict the burlesque social games that persons must play because of ridiculous bourgeois conventions; the human puppets in Rosso di San Secondo's drama *Marionettes, What Passion!* (1918)

are social misfits who have lost individual features and are identified only by a detail of dress like the lady with a blue fox, the man in mourning and the man in grey. Perhaps the author who best expressed man's metamorphosis into a puppet was Luigi Pirandello, who both in his narrative and stage writings represented his characters as voluntarily surrendering their humanity so as to shield themselves from the pain of living by taking refuge in the wooden passivity of marionettes.¹

Outside of Italy and France, the Spanish writer Ramón del Valle-Inclán in his dramatic pieces *esperpentos* looked down at his fictional characters from the vantage point of a puppet-master and deliberately distorted the human figure, making it a gargoyle or a mechanized doll in order to create a sense of estrangement between the grotesque characters and spectators. The marionette theatre also became the principal concern of the Flemish playwright Michel de Ghelderode, who like Kleist before him preferred the magical nature of wax and wood puppets over the limitations of flesh and blood actors; through marionettes Ghelderode hoped to find the freedom to break from the restrictions of conventional theatre in order to restore drama to its original savage state. For all these authors and artists the traditional hero of tragedy and comedy no longer existed. Man was either a marionette awaiting some puppeteer to come and manipulate his strings or an automaton controlled by a hidden mechanism.²

By its very title Solórzano's drama reveals its close ties to the modern European marionettesque theatre. *Fantoche* is the Spanish equivalent of the Italian *fantoccio*, the puppet mechanism articulated by wires,³ which was Pirandello's favorite term to designate the human puppet. Perhaps even more striking is the subtitle of the play: "Mimodrama para marionetas," which immediately calls to mind Ghelderode's sub-title for the drama *Of a Devil who preached marvels* as a "Mystère pour marionettes." Ghelderode and Solórzano of course knew each other, and the edition of *Los fantoches* along with two other plays in the volume *Tres actos* (Mexico, 1959) includes a prefatory letter by the Flemish writer to his Latin American friend.⁴ Upon examination of Solórzano's note of clarification to foreign readers, however, it is obvious that his puppet characters differ somewhat from the *fantocci* and marionettes in the works of Pirandello and Ghelderode because the Guatemalan-born playwright has taken his characters from the greater than life-size figures of bamboo and colored paper that are exploded by fire-crackers on Holy Saturday in the Mexican folk festival of the "Burning of Judas." While Solórzano's play transcends its folkloric origin, it is nevertheless founded on the ceremony of mock immolation in which the people on Holy Saturday can work out their vengeance against Judas the Supreme Traitor, Death, the Devil, or real-life figures from politics or the movies.⁵ This ritualistic quality in the drama resembles the sacrificial rhythm of Jean Genet's plays.

In the stage directions the author states that the puppets are fashioned in the popular style, that they are "figuras grotescas y coloridas" (p. 11). The adjective "grotescas" relates the play to the dramas of the Italian Grotesque authors and to the *esperpentos* of Valle-Inclán. Solórzano's puppets display a similar grotesque external deformation from human form. The author compares the puppets' bright colors to the vivid hues in paintings by contemporary Mexican artists who wish to point out a contrast between the world's outer brilliance and its inner dissoluteness; the creation of that contrast is the essence of the grotesque manner. Those gaudy colors also lessen the drabness of the greyish walls of the terrestrial prison which confines the puppets. The scene is that of a storeroom, with a single small door to one side and a solitary window up high which provides the only illumination. The storeroom, like the infernal cell in Sartre's *No Exit*, is everywhere and nowhere at the same moment, for it represents in Solórzano's words "este mundo cerrado" with all its narrow oppression. Here the puppets drag on their monotonous existences. From the light which penetrates the window we know that a day passes from the darkness before dawn to the brilliance of afternoon and to the bluish luminosity of moonlight in the evening. The play's true time span is life.

After they awaken to the symbolic day of life, the puppets begin the futile activities with which they try to lose themselves and to fill the hollowness of their being. The muscular Young Man, with his shiny black hair and the doll-like red circles on his cheeks, represents the indefatigable activist: "No hay que perder el tiempo," he states, "a trabajar" (p. 14). And the work of this athletic youth consists of beating a drum; he could just as well be engaged in any other absurd activity like bouncing a basketball.⁶ Activists like the Young Man usually turn into human automata. Alberto Moravia, one of whose short story collections bears the title *Automaton*, states in the essay *Man as an End* that the man of affairs is a desperate creature who attempts to occupy his moral alienation with acts that are just mechanically connected; according to Moravia the man of action becomes a machine. The Young Man in Solórzano's play refuses to think; by hastily making decisions he seeks to escape the problem of existence in the monotonous repetition of the same acts: "Lo monótono es la felicidad" (p. 20). Intellectual comprehension eludes the Young Man. Whenever a crisis presents itself, he beats the drum more loudly.

Opposed to the Young Man's obtuseness is the spirit of inquiry in the most obviously grotesque puppet, the scholarly *Cabezón* with his enormous pumpkin head whose weight even affects his walking. Big Head always tries to find explanations for everything and to fit the phenomena of reality in neat schemes. This supreme rationalist founds his life on his faith in the unalterable laws of science. Between the Young Man's animal strength and Big Head's exclusive intellectualism stands the intuitive perception of the

Artist, the romantic dreamer with his flashy Bohemian clothes. Yet on close examination the Artist's creative activities appear as useless as those of the Young Man. He believes his art has the magical power to transform the face of the world, but all he does is to paint pink stripes one day and change them to violet the next day. Solórzano reduces physical labor, intellectual speculation and artistic reverie to the same level of pointless pastimes. Another means for man to impart some sense to his existence is the accumulation of material objects, which briefly seem to assure an illusory power for their possessor. In the play the puppet of the Little Old Man collects pieces of colored paper, remnants of the materials with which the puppets are made. He carefully counts these papers which he claims are "muy valiosos"; the paper is tangible ("se puede tocar," p. 24) and therefore must be meaningful. But the Little Old Man's collecting and cataloguing is merely another Sisyphean occupation, as insignificant and monotonously repetitive as those of the other puppets.

Life in its robust physical beauty is affirmed by the Woman, the incarnation of the vital impulse. She resembles the Mother in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as a creature of pure natural instinct. The Woman lives for the pure joy of living. She is sensually attracted to Big Head and the Artist but above all admires the Young Man. She alone will break the physical barriers between the puppets to experience a moment of love with the Young Man, who will make her a mother and provide her with a baby puppet on whom she can lavish her affections. That breakthrough proves to be illusory. Solórzano describes the Woman as dressed in a white gown with bamboo spikes protruding from it. Those spikes symbolize the eternal barriers between persons, that continual isolation to which everyone is condemned. The most intimate human relationship displays sadomasochistic overtones: no one can touch the woman without being wounded, and through inflicting pain on others she briefly beguiles the tedium of life in the storeroom. Giving birth to the baby puppet merely represents the supremely repetitive act which will continue the race of puppets.

Only one puppet never speaks: Judas, who stands with his back turned to the others in an attitude of shame. On the arms of his green robe are painted the serpents of treachery. Judas is always the last puppet to awaken, as if he were too ashamed to face the responsibility of his crime. At times he succumbs to spasms of remorseful anguish while the other puppets are immersed in their habitual occupations:

Mientras Judas hace su pantomima, el viejo cuenta en voz alta, el joven martillea fuertemente, el artista se pasea viendo al cielo con actitud de ensueño, el cabezón con la cabeza entre las manos se revuelve frenético en su asiento, la mujer, en mitad de la escena ve al vacío como en éxtasis . . . (pp. 20-21)

Even after this particular Judas has to leave the storeroom, the Little Old Man comments that another Judas will come to take his place. Although the details of the story of Judas and the One he betrayed are remote, the puppets recognize the green-faced Judas as the omnipresent traitor in their midst.

None of the puppet characters has an individual name except for Judas since Solórzano wants to present archetypal figures in an allegory of life and death. Significantly there is no female character with the name Beatriz, unlike the other works of the author where that key name recurs. These puppets recall the archetypes of mankind in Calderón's *El gran teatro del mundo*.⁷ Between the archetypal world of Calderón's play and the prison of Solórzano's puppets there exists a profound difference. In the Christian universe of *El gran teatro del mundo* the earthly life only acquires genuine significance in death, through which man can be elevated to the true life of Heaven. Each of Calderón's characters (King, Rich Man, Peasant, Beggar, Beauty and Wisdom) has a recognized role in society's structure that provides the opportunity for them to work out their own salvation. But Solórzano's puppets are at first absolutely ignorant of the implications of death. They resemble the hoboes in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as they sit waiting for the coming of their liberator. In this play he does come as the bearded old Puppet-maker, a creator god who is blind, deaf and mute to the needs of the creatures he fashioned in his image. And with god arrives his daughter Death like a playfully cruel child ready to select at random (*al azar*) a puppet and destroy it. Yet in the beginning none of the puppets recognizes the Girl's smiling mask of death. They eagerly expect her to take them to freedom, which the Artist attempts to define as "algo que está fuera de aquí; algo azul y brillante, una meseta elevada, o la cresta más alta en el oleaje del mar" (p. 19). Every one of the puppets offers himself up to the Girl.

Finally Big Head, the ceaseless investigator, comes to witness Judas' execution. They all learn that death is not liberation but total annihilation. Even before the discovery the puppets were aware that their maker had placed a cartridge of equal size and weight in their chests, and the Artist had even succeeded in deciphering its inscription: "Powder, explosive." According to Big Head the cartridge was responsible for the puppets' spiritual torment. The cartridge symbolizes how every man is born with death upon him, bearing the power of self-destruction. Death for the puppets does not, as opposed to Calderón's world view, provide the passage to a higher existence; it demonstrates that life's natural conclusion is in nothingness.

Slowly and painfully the bewildered puppets confront the prospect of Death and learn to recognize its capriciousness. Although they try to explain away Judas' burning as a just punishment for his treachery, they must at last admit that in time guilty and innocent have to meet an identical fate and that life has no moral significance. The Puppet-maker's daughter openly confesses that she does not know the word "right." Some of the characters

vainly attempt to resist Death. The Woman looks for immortality by becoming a mother. With his positivistic faith in logic and science, Big Head orders his comrades to bar the door when the Girl returns. To his utter astonishment the door yields. Unlike the scientist, the Artist perceives that there are no material defenses against Death; yet he too hoped to cheat Death by exercising his creative talent. But while art itself may be immortal, the individual artist's dreams of personal immortality are only a mad illusion; and in the play Death laughs at the Artist's pretensions as she selects him for sacrifice. To the Little Old Man, Death's choice of the Artist represents life's inherent injustice. Why did she have to take away the young, vigorous puppet while he, the old man, has repeatedly placed himself in her path?

For a philosopher like Sartre, only the dead are truly free since death releases them from the necessity of forging new essences out of the decisive situations in which existence involves men. Of all the puppets only the Little Old Man has arrived at philosophical resignation to death as liberation from the challenges of existence. He more than his comrades understands how Hell is others as he has been both witness to and victim of the acts of violence that the puppets inflict on each other from time to time to relieve their sense of frustration. Still, the Little Old Man acknowledges that their life together has had its gentle moments: ". . . pues hemos vivido, hemos estado haciéndonos compañía, yo he tenido mis papeles de colores y a veces me ha sucedido que siento unas ganas muy grandes de gritar y si no lo he hecho fuertemente, es por temor de que este envoltorio se desbaratara y me arrastrara en un incendio voraz y aniquilador . . ." (p. 26). Tempted toward death, the Little Old Man hesitates before the void, for to be dead is to be nothing. Man's longing for freedom is a basic theme running throughout the play, but like his friend Camus, Solórzano rejects Sartrean metaphysical freedom. The puppets are condemned to die, and even the freedom of revolt seems absurdly ineffective. At the conclusion of the drama the artificial barrier between stage and spectators dissolves when Death points directly to the audience as she summons new victims. Solórzano's universal message is that we are all puppets waiting for death to annihilate us.

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Notes

1. James T. Soby, *The Early Chirico* (New York, 1941), passim, discusses the mannequin figure in the artist's paintings. Rosa Clough, *Futurism, The Story of a Modern Art Movement* (New York, 1961), pp. 145-150, discusses Marinetti and the Futurist puppet theater. The Theatre of the Grotesque and Pirandello are studied by Silvio D'Amico, *Il Teatro dei Fantocci* (Florence, 1920), passim.

2. The grotesque manner of Valle-Inclán and his use of puppet figures are examined by Anthony N. Zahareas, "The Absurd, The Grotesque and the *Esperpento*," *Ramón del Valle-*

Inclán, An Appraisal of his Life and Works (New York, 1968), pp. 78-98. Ghelderode's attitudes toward the marionette theater are explained in the third of his Ostend interviews; see *Les Entretiens d'Ostende* (Paris, 1956).

3. Joseph S. Kennard, *Masks and Marionettes* (New York, 1935), p. 106, discusses the sources of terms for puppets.

4. Throughout this article all page references will be to the 1959 edition of *Tres actos*.

5. Immolation occurs in other Solórzano plays. Cf. the death of Beatriz and her brother in *Las manos de Dios* as well as the crucifixion in *El crucificado*. On the first of these plays see Peter J. Schoenbach, "La libertad en *Las manos de Dios*," *Latin American Theatre Review* (Spring 1970), pp. 21-29. Also consult Frank Dauster, "The Drama of Carlos Solórzano," *Modern Drama*, 7 (May, 1964), 89-100.

6. In a recent production of the play at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the director instructed the actor playing the Young Man to bounce a basketball instead of beating a drum.

7. Esteban Rivas, *Carlos Solórzano y el teatro hispanoamericano* (Mexico, 1970), p. 127, makes the comparison to Calderón's play and points out that no *deus ex machina* arrives to rescue the puppets from their fate.