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– Introduction –

Among the lost manuscripts of Franz Kafka are some letters from a doll, written to an unknown girl. Kafka had encountered the girl while walking in a park in Berlin in 1923, in the company of Dora Diamant, his last companion. The child was weeping in despair at the loss of her doll. He talked with her. Unhesitating, he told her that the doll was not lost, but travelling. She had sent him a letter. Consoled but still suspicious, the girl insisted on seeing the letter. Kafka went home and composed it, bringing the page next day to the park, and continuing over a few weeks to frame further letters. The doll, though loving the child, had grown tired of living with the same family for so long. The letters carried the doll's story forward (within the compressed time of doll reality) to an engagement, wedding preparations, marriage, even finding a house, developments such as prevented her returning home to her former mistress.

Diamant told this story to Kafka's biographer, Max Brod, and to other scholars (as her own biographer Kathi Diamant reports); she stressed the pains he took in writing the letters, working with as much intensity as on his own stories. What would he have written in

these messages for the child (he whose own letters to his family and lovers could be so relentlessly *unconsoling*, anxious, accusatory, and self-wounding, also wildly funny)? I try to imagine Kafka at his writing table, a year from his death, working to frame a true voice for the doll, to honour the child's need and innocence, shaping a story that would answer her mourning and also her appetite for truth. He might have reflected on the bafflement, the sense of isolation, that he himself could feel in the face of ordinary objects as well as persons. He might have thought of the actual lost doll lying beneath a hedge, exposed to the weather, wearing away with its glass eyes open, or seized on by a dog, or by another child. The letters would have been kind. They could not have helped being strange.

These letters would offer a curious pendant to Kafka's 'The Cares of a Family Man'. The story describes a creature-object named Odradek, not quite a doll, rather a thing framed of wooden sticks, a spool, broken bits of thread, able to stand and speak, yet lacking a face or hands. This miniature object looks like something improvised, or like a remnant of some larger construction, and yet, the narrator insists, it is obviously whole, with no part of it unfinished. Kafka makes us feel vividly its crude and careful making, its fitted oddness, even as he keeps it hard to visualize. Odradek is elusive, an artifact and yet alive, if also purposeless, and indifferent to human interest. Questioned by the narrator, it speaks like a child, giving short answers —

“Well, what’s your name?” you ask him. “Odradek,” he says. “And where do you live?” “No fixed abode,” he says and laughs.’ Its laughter is inhuman, ‘like the rustling of fallen leaves’, a sound ‘that has no lungs behind it’. The sorrows of the narrator – a parent, a householder – come partly from the fact that this doll-like thing *cannot* be lost, that its travels remain within the space of his house. Odradek writes no letters. Often as it seems to disappear, it keeps on turning up again, not to be laid hold of, rolling up and down the stairs of his house – and will keep doing so, ‘before the feet of my children, and my children’s children’. ‘He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.’ Odradek might be an image of our memories, our disowned thoughts and histories; or of a child escaping human care, yet challenging it; or simply an evocation of the unknown spaces, noises, dust, lost objects, and small animals that fill any house, marking the fragility and strange power of these things. Odradek becomes one of a population of other such domestic visitants in Kafka’s stories, his lamb-kitten and donkey-greyhound, the shy beast that haunts the synagogue, or the anxious animal who narrates ‘The Burrow’.

Many of the essays in this collection evoke the mysterious roots of the child’s relation to its toys, the nature of the impulse to play, what it means for the child to enter into always changing relation to such objects (things

often made and given to children by adults). These essays implicitly probe the seriousness of play, its inventiveness, which endlessly makes over the most ordinary objects. They evoke the truth and need of the child's imagining of life in the doll she or he takes up, its importance in negotiating the child's passage into a world of adult affections and demands and losses. They also carry the domain of play into a world of adult reverie, suggesting how it remains a part of our experience and consciousness. The thought of the doll becomes a test of memory, a means of taking stock of the writer's present world, including the part which remains hidden. One glory of these writings is the intensity with which they imagine the doll's life, a life that is at once like and unlike a life we know. All are in their own way letters from unknown dolls.

The child's doll – an object that is itself the scale of a child – becomes an object full of equivocal consolations. The violence as much as the care which the child lavishes on the doll is part of the story. Charles Baudelaire imagines a child hungry for its toy, also provoked by it to undertake his first metaphysical researches, player with dolls but also inchoate scholar: he shakes, assaults, knocks, and tears the thing apart in the vain attempt to answer the question, 'Where is its soul?' The doll has no answer, and it is a question that remains, for the adult poet, unanswered. (What kinds of souls, what en-souling stories, do *we* supply to dolls, looking at them in museums, mysterious and of-

ten creepy as they appear? It was a soul at once old and young, resolute and wounded, that I sensed in a doll I saw in 2010, in an Edinburgh collection, a doll made from a ruined shoe, its eyes and mouth indicated by bent nails in the heel.) Rainer Maria Rilke writes movingly that, as children, ‘we took our bearings from the doll’, making it a lodestone or compass, a sign-post on a journey, a place-marker. The kindly doll, held tightly, might comfort the child in the face of those other objects that his imagination invests with dangerous being – Rilke’s fictive alter-ego, Malte Laurids Brigge, recalls from his childhood ‘the fear that a small woollen thread sticking out of the hem of my blanket may be hard, hard and sharp as a steel needle; the fear that this little button on my night-shirt may be bigger than my head, bigger and heavier; the fear that the breadcrumb which just dropped off my bed may turn into glass, and shatter when it hits the floor’ (Stephen Mitchell’s translation). The doll was something that we as children ‘fed with false food like the “Ka”’ (the word refers to a person’s soul or double in Egyptian religion, surviving bodily death and fed even in the tomb). Dolls, Rilke writes, absorbed our love and care, consoling us in turn, ‘allowing themselves to *be dreamed*’, despite the fact that they might, at another moment, be ruthlessly abandoned or thrown away. Yet in all their openness, dolls for Rilke also become our guides in entering into a universe where things turn away from us, conceal their origins and desires, speak to us of death and

absence. Impenetrable, the dolls refuse the food we offer, which only succeeds in staining them, ‘like spoiled children’. These things, ordinary and strange at once, come to baffle our very relation to them, and thus our relation to ourselves

Interrogating the doll’s life and voice, its ambiguous animations, becomes a way of exploring the life of our own thoughts and instincts, the life of our words and ideas, the fate of our bodies and forms of making. Fictions of the living doll may even be a way of tracking the fate of our gods, of our exiled or suppressed human gift for god-making, as Victoria Nelson suggests starkly in her study, *The Secret Life of Puppets*. Dolls become dangerous figures. Sigmund Freud’s argument in ‘The Uncanny’ is to suggest how narratives of the animated doll or automaton – joined with other unsettling images, such as the severed but moving limb, the plucked-out yet still seductive eye – grip our imaginations because they covertly bind us back to infantile fantasies, to modes of thought we supposed long-ago abandoned, but that survive intact within our unconscious, at home there, in all their violence, all their wild ambition. Along with archaic fears and vulnerabilities, and the child’s hungry imagination, its childish faith in the omnipotence of thought, the alien-homely instincts animated by the ‘living doll’ include a vital instinct within ourselves that yet runs against life, that aims toward the cancelling rather than the perpetuation of erotic energy, toward repetition rather than change or

growth. Freud hints that the impulse which winds up the clockwork automaton is also what winds it down.

The intense poetry, the unsettling *thought*, of these writings about the doll lies in how their imaginings of its life try to keep faith with something of the doll's innocence, its belonging to the world of childhood, even as they pitch us toward something not at all childish. Dolls and their cousins, puppets, mannequins, and automatons, become entities that seek to reorient our ideas of innocence, and thus our ideas of childhood. Their innocence becomes more uncanny, and increasingly paradoxical, often haunted by its apparent opposite. In Heinrich von Kleist's crucial essay-in-dialogue, 'On the Marionette Theatre', the chief interlocutor, a master dancer, asks that we honour the mysterious 'grace' of what are too often thought of as clumsy, childish, theatrical toys. The marionette's power, he says, lies in the manipulator's ability to join himself to a centre of gravity in the wooden figure that belongs to it as a form of soul-less matter, an object that moves on strings like a pendulum – this motion along the strings *is* the puppet's soul, its form of knowledge. The puppet's alien, even mechanical grace becomes an image of our own lost, *unfallen* knowledge of ourselves and our bodies. It is the human actor who turns clumsy, graceless, wooden, affected, embarrassed, and even violent in his self-consciousness, in his anxious *wish* for grace, his uncertainty about where to locate his soul. Kleist's dancer in turn invites us – with what seriousness it is

hard to tell – to imagine a theatre that would return us to our lost, original grace through the actor’s acquisition of ‘an infinite consciousness’. While inspiring a line of theatrical and filmic experimenters who find in puppets a means to challenge moribund forms of realism, the essay makes the puppet’s life into a broader parable about the conflicts internal to human forms of making, subjectivity, and language.

Writers following after Kleist dwell with similar complexity on the thought of the doll’s or puppet’s innocence. While the doll turns away from us at times, chills us with its baffling of our love, it may also look back at us with a sharper eye, assert a stranger solidarity. The apparently innocent plaything may say ‘we’ in chorus with a guilty human being, as does the mechanical toy horse in Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘Cirque d’Hiver’ –

Facing each other rather desperately –
his eye is like a star –
we stare and say, ‘Well, we have come this far.’

– the toy’s alien eye being linked to ours through that echo of ‘star’ and ‘stare’. We feel this toy’s survival, its (painful? ecstatic?) knowledge, a knowledge which is a reciprocal if still mysterious gift of human to doll and doll to human. There is also Rilke’s moving attempt to call out to a soul that belongs to dolls alone, a ‘doll-soul’ or ‘thing-soul’. This fiction helps him to catch at the doll’s own peculiar grief and longing, at its knowl-

edge that its fragile self-hood was in fact destroyed by the sentimental affections of children, ‘the larvae who were eating you from within’. Crying out their fears in a domain beyond our knowledge, as Rilke imagines them, these thing-souls manifest themselves only as ‘they swarm and fade at the uttermost limit of our vision’, driven by a will to self-sacrifice like that of moths throwing themselves at candles, ‘and then the momentary reek of their burning would fill us with limitless unfamiliar sensations’. The fumes of that burning are the doll’s suicide notes and their letters of consolation.

Ironic as they can seem, such intuitions of innocence take the form of a more than child-like *care* directed to dolls, an often arcane form of sympathy and courtesy, habits of delicacy in speaking about their lives. The essays invite us to take the side of these dead or inhuman things, to attend to them, cherish them (as Francis Ponge – whose first book was titled *Le parti pris des choses*, taking the side of things – asks our solidarity with ordinary objects, a pebble, candle, or sponge). They invite this care, even in the face of the objects’ continuing strangeness and our own disenchantment, and a sense of how much such sympathy may cost us. Something of this uncanny charity harrows and haunts the narrator of ‘Cares of a Family Man’. It also shapes the way that the father in Bruno Schulz’s story ‘Tailors’ Dummies’, vulnerable heretic-mesmerist that he is, dilates upon these incomplete doubles of human life, silently surrounded by busy human use and human

making, then often abandoned. He evokes the ‘terrible howling of these wax figures’, left alone in empty rooms or ‘shut in fair-booths’. ‘Who knows . . . how many suffering, crippled, fragmentary forms of life there are, such as the artificially created life of chests and tables quickly nailed together, crucified timbers, silent martyrs to cruel human inventiveness.’ If these forms of life are mirrors of the father’s own suffering, they are also something harder to classify, as much a gift as a curse, in that they test our doubt and expand our sympathies.

Dennis Silk’s ‘The Marionette Theatre’ also speaks out of ferocious, and ferociously comic, charity directed to objects in the world – a need to *mind* the domain of things. He refers us to the most common objects, remnants of human making, pieces of human work and tools of further making, plain enough, yet possessed of a strange life that we are in danger of overlooking. These visitants – which may come in the form of a child’s toy, spinning top, or yo-yo, but also a fork, a nutcracker, a corkscrew, the opening and shutting umbrella and the double-minded pendulum – are things whose distinct lives the poet evokes with curious sympathy. Silk’s text reminds us of the charged life that ordinary objects acquire in fairy tales and even novels, also of thing-like characters in Dickens, men who *are* corkscrews and umbrellas. But these objects are also alive to just how readily human beings neglect them, or take them for granted. Silk at one point sug-