

PUPPET, STONE, SWEATER:  
A STUDY IN ANIMATION

“He can only obey the apparently alien impulse within him and follow where it leads, sensing that his work is greater than himself, and wields a power which is not his and which he cannot command.”  
(Carl Jung)

“I can’t manipulate it too much. I can kind of let it do things.”  
(Basil Twist)

1.

The impulse arises in blackness.

There, in the penumbra of the stage, sequestered from the audience, the puppeteers work.

They wear black robes and head coverings, conforming to the Japanese concept, *kurogo*. Because “black” by tradition signified nothing, those dressed in black were thought not to exist. On the periphery of existence, in a kind of netherworld, the puppeteers bring their puppets to life.

2.

Out of this blackness, Petrushka materializes on stage.

Petrushka, the puppet in Basil Twist's puppet show of the same name, originally a part of the ballet performed by the *Ballets Russes* in 1911—is a harlequin-like figure. Dressed in a gray, blousy shirt belted at the waist, with red and blue diamond-patterned pants, red boots, and a foppish hat, he leaps into the air, splits, somersaults, all in pursuit of his love, the Ballerina. Although his gestures appear uncontrolled at times, even sloppy, they seem to rise from deep within. Consider his intensity as he kneels and leans toward the Ballerina and offers his hand, and, as he brings his hand to his heart after the Ballerina has turned from him. His jubilation and exuberance, his rage and his despair--sometimes laughable in their excess--are poignant, too, for he has allowed another to touch him. Overwhelmed by passion, he's opened himself completely, withheld nothing in his urgent quest.

3.

Smitten with the Ballerina, Petrushka battles the Moor, his rival for her love. Under the Moor's blow, Petrushka's body sags as life leaks from him. His eyebrows droop, his mouth hangs slack. There is something tender in his defeat as his frame collapses in on itself—his body, a puddle of cloth. And, then from this heap, his spirit ascends. To the

amazement of the audience--which gasps loudly--he appears once again, waving from a theater box at a side of the stage.

4.

After the performance ended, Petrushka's three puppeteers demonstrated how, using a technique influenced by the Japanese *bunraku*, they animate him. Each holds a control rod to manipulate a part of him. Each movement of the stick generates a corresponding movement in Petrushka. The lead puppeteer operates Petrushka's head and spine—his core--causing his eyebrows to rise and fall, his mouth to open and close, his head to turn. The second puppeteer works his feet, and the third, his arms.

“The essence of puppetry is to animate something,” Twist said in an interview, “. . . to give something life, to give something a soul or to give something a breath. You take something that is not alive, and you make it look like it's alive. . . . And that is actually a really kind of a profound thing to be engaged in, to think something's alive that is not alive, and it actually asks a really big thing: what does it mean to be alive?”

5.

I am not sequestered in the dark with the puppeteers. I can only imagine how they work, how they feel as they enliven their puppet—a bag, really, of wood and cloth. Not long ago, I watched a video demonstration of a puppetmaker crafting an arm control. She holds

up and names the items she uses: dowels, a washer, a hasp hinge, a toggle pin, fishing line, wire, zip ties, elastic and glue. This is the stuff of puppets—“such stuff as dreams are made on,” as Shakespeare wrote in *the Tempest*.

A puppeteer lifts a *bunraku* head into the air to demonstrate its operation on another video. The head is carved of wood, split on a vertical at the ear line, hollowed out, and filled with noisemaking objects to produce sound when moved. A control rod attaches to the head, and threads to the rod. The puppeteer manipulates these threads to animate his puppet. The thread on the stick’s front side controls the head’s up and down movement, those on the backside, other movements such as opening and closing the mouth.

I imagine a puppetmaker standing over her puppet after cobbling its inner workings together. From a bolt, she unrolls a piece of fabric onto a long table, smooths away its wrinkles and puckers, and places her puppet’s neck at its top edge. She considers how to dress him, how his costume will communicate his personality. For her, this work is more than wrapping a piece of wood--she has joined with others to bring an object to life. Now, her throat tight with anticipation, she awaits his first gestures—the first hints of his intrinsic nature. Consequently, it is *her* soul, which lifts as he reaches a sleepy arm into the air

6.

I do know the familiarity of touch, however. I know what it is to stroke my husband's forearm, allow my fingers to linger over his hair, to trace the shape of the bones beneath the skin. I know, too, how it feels to coax my feet into their favorite leather shoes--how I place my toes down at a slight cant, and then slide my foot onto the well-worn insole. I know the little wrinkle—an annoyance I never relieve—on the insole's big toe side. I know the release of my heels into the deep heel bed flattened and hardened by frequent wear. These things I know, even rely on, to ground me and situate me in the physical world.

I don't know how it feels to hold the puppet's control rod, to run my fingers over it and around it. Though a simple object, this stick is something more—a thing worn smooth by caresses over the years, by hands twisting it this way and that, turning it over and back—something molded by a relationship with a human being. The puppeteer, in telegraphing her intention to the puppet via the stick--through thrusting and jabbing it into the air, jostling and manipulating it--animates it as well.

I can only imagine the intimacy that comes from folding my fingers over the stick—recognizing its surface and contour, its length and diameter, re-living memories of rehearsals and performances with this puppet, and the feelings arising from those memories. These feelings shape the puppeteer's interaction with the rod--sculpting it in ways yet unknown--and, in turn, the rod leaves its own invisible marks upon her.

It might happen this way. A woman, outfitted in a black stands in the darkness. She and the others take hold of their control sticks. They poise their puppet in the air, above the stage floor. She nudges her rod a bit. The puppet straightens, his head rolls back gently, and his brow lifts, as he looks in wonder to the sky. Blackness surrounds him. For a moment, he stands, unmoored. Then the other puppeteers work their rods, and his arms extend out to his side in a reflexive yawn, and then lift lazily into the air, arching high above the ground. The puppet stretches and stretches and stretches his arms upward, as though believing he can reach the heavens. And simultaneously, his legs begin to rustle, unfolding in tiny increments, as he wakes from his deep torpor. Standing still, he turns his head to take in this strange, dark place. He seems surprised when his left leg suddenly shoots out, then his right leg, in jerky, drunken movements as though heeding some alien call. The puppet begins to skip in place, rests, skips once more, this time, faster.

Through many years, the puppeteer has learned to trust her intuitive sense of how her puppet navigates through space, and of how she must guide him to satisfy his need to explore and to make his way through the world. So accustomed is she to the smooth, thin stick in her hand, and to the almost simultaneous response she receives from the small arm or leg at the other end, that instinctively she moves the rod in one direction rather than another, or lifts it an inch rather than two. Long ago she quit trying to puzzle out where she ends and her puppet begins, likening it to the drive to figure out where her torso ends and her legs begin. A correspondence--a kind of symbiosis, perhaps—exists between her

and her puppet. The puppet is a part of her—one, which she sets in motion as she does her own arm.

Or, maybe it happens this way. Her body quivers, with some sensation--excitement, fear, edginess. Her hand moves in response, causing the puppet to react, and to express through gesture what she cannot in words. I think of a man I once knew—shy, contemplative—who, when younger, had been an award-winning puppeteer. I read that, as a child, he would close himself in the closet, and create a secret world. Puppeteering may have functioned for him as a kind of rehearsal for life—similar to the gesture of dipping one’s toes into the ocean to gauge its temperature before diving in. His ability to paddle around in a protected cove perhaps made it safe for him to wade ever deeper into the sea.

8.

Petrushka’s three puppeteers arrange themselves in a pyramid to demonstrate their technique. Their arms stretch “spider-like” around each another to manipulate their sticks. As their bodies reach and bend, fold and bow around one another, they perform a carefully orchestrated ballet, whose movements—the position of one’s leg in relation to another’s torso, one’s arm in relation to another’s shoulder--are as fixed and precise as a *plie* or *jete*.

Together, in the dark, the puppeteers form a kind of cocoon. Womblike in shape, it accommodates only their three bodies, and the reach of those bodies into space. Here, they give birth to their puppet.

To make Petrushka believable—to make his gestures understandable and meaningful--the puppeteers must agree on his feelings at each moment, and the gestures that will express these feelings. Each of the three strives, I think, to manipulate his or her section of the puppet (head and pelvis, arms, or legs), to integrate and synchronize that body part's movements with the others' parts. So, for example, I can imagine the first puppeteer lifting his control stick, causing Petrushka's elbows to bend out to the side. This one gesture suggests others. The second puppeteer knows Petrushka's heart—knows that, though gentle-spirited, Petrushka wishes to present himself as fierce. On a very deep level, she understands how Petrushka's legs will move in concert with his arms to reflect his innermost self. She jostles her rod. The puppet stands taut, defiant, his legs spread, as though straddling a fence. And then, the puppeteer working Petrushka's head and core, prods his stick, and the puppet straightens, his stare intense. This puppeteer knows that, despite Petrushka's pretensions otherwise, he is part clown. Sensing that Petrushka's confidence is wavering, and that he is questioning his own ferocity, even his own being, the puppeteer allows the Petrushka's gaze to falter slightly. An eyebrow lifts. Simultaneously, the two working the puppet's arms and legs relax the tension in his stance a bit, allowing his right leg to bend, and his elbows to soften.

Theirs is a dance of nuance, of subtlety. It involves more than the physical ballet of circumnavigating around each other to avoid an elbow, say, or tripping over a foot. Here, the three interact with each other as they respond to unspoken cues, unvoiced intimations. They take turns, stepping in and out of action and re-action, movement and

stillness. One partner may lead, another follow. And then they may switch places, and take up different roles.

I believe that a profound intimacy exists between the puppeteers, born of their singular purpose, their bodies' nearness, their familiarity with each other's slightest inclination or movement, and their reflexive responsiveness to each another—their perfect knowing of one another. And, in so intimate an area and in so intimate an endeavor as bringing an object to life, I imagine them sensing the inhalation and exhalation of one another's breath, and, even synchronizing their breathing to become one. Breath is the element, which separates the animate from the inanimate. Their collective breath *inspires* their puppet, and “[e]ndowing the puppet with breath allows it to assume a separateness from the puppeteer that is really quite magical,” as Lisa Bean explains on her website. In that first moment, the puppet stumbles, groping, his arms reaching out to explore the world in which he finds himself. He takes a step.

Through their shared passion, a sympathy develops among the puppeteers. I know the satisfaction that comes from sharing a love for an interest or activity with others--how it generates strong bonds, a sense of belonging, and, even, of working in the service of something greater than oneself. I feel I can say with accuracy that this sympathy creates a mystical communion between the puppeteers. Through their common endeavor, I believe that they participate in a sacramental act, that of breathing life into a thing.

A hand reaches into the silent closet. Dresses slumber, their shoulders puffed out, proud. Jeans laze, their legs dangling over wire hangers. The sweater, folded into a loose roll, rests on top of t-shirts, under hooded sweatshirts. The fingers fumble, groping for the long, thin wool sweater, deep forest green, flecked grayish white--a giant philodendron leaf reflecting cloud cover.

Snatched from the top shelf, the sweater unfurls tumbling headfirst center part falling open fringe eddying sleeves swooping toward the ground. The woman adjusts her grasp. The sweater hangs--a gymnast folded over a parallel bar. It shakes itself out, slowly, lazily, breathing in the air. As the woman transfers the sweater to her other hand, it rights itself (readying for a task) pulling its arms in close to its body, compressing.

Grabbed by the ruff of its neck, the sweater opens, like a flag rippling in the wind. Its right sleeve drops. The woman's fingers tickle its threads as she roots around for the sleeve opening. Her coiled fist reaches in, and the wool strands wiggle and expand, teasing the confines of its knit shape toward human proportions. Then, the sleeve pinches its fibers together, releases them, and pinches them again--an inchworm wending its way—as it crawls over the familiar forearm, caressing its soft hairs. Finally, lengthening itself down along the slender arm, it relaxes, rests flat, but for a few drifts and hollows carved through frequent wear. The sleeve's fibers curl in tighter and tighter, closing in

around the underarm, cradling it. The underarm snuggles into its warmth and its scent, reminded once more of their intimacy.

The right sleeve mounts the woman's shoulder. Perches, watchful. The shawl neck falls down her back. Its fibers reach and crane, seeking a hold from which to climb the steep ridge between her shoulders. Strand-by-strand in a kind of chain reaction, it pulls itself up the back and across to the left shoulder. Alights on the summit. Rests, as if to catch its breath. Then rolls itself out along the expanse between the shoulders. Still. Meditative.

Free. The sweater hangs loose around the woman's torso. It breathes—its fibers pulse in the air. Light plays between its woolen strands, like rays of sun between trees in a rainforest. Cautious at first, responding to the woman's step, the sweater transfers its weight from one side to the other, then more confident, it sways to and fro. Then, sashays, glides a few steps forward, a few back, twirls, and returns to center. And repeats.

10.

“There are properties common to all things, and the knowledge of this opens the mind to the greatest wonders of nature,” John Berger has written in *From A to X*.

11.

“What is the difference between, you know, a rock and an animal?” Twist asks in the same recent public radio interview. “And maybe actually rocks are alive. Or, it actually goes back to a very primal ways of thinking. . . .”

12.

My dog and I walk along the narrow canyon road, and while he sniffs among the weeds, I notice a small pile of stones—most no larger than the space created by bringing the tip of my thumb and index finger together. I kick one of the stones. It rolls away. Stops. I kick another. It rolls farther than the first. Stops.

I can’t calibrate my kicks to have exactly the same force. I can’t guarantee that one stone will roll as far as another. All I can do is place the stone in front of my foot, draw my leg back, bring it forward, and make contact with it. I have propelled the stone off the tip of my shoe, sent it hurtling into space. But, I cannot feel that I’ve animated it.

13.

The trail is steep, rutted with gravel and stones, crushed blooms, broken twigs, dirt, tattered patches of asphalt. Long, fine grasses push up through the detritus. Threadlike in their delicacy, they stitch together the uneven terrain, and create a raggedy fringe along the

trail's edge. Sunburnt and wind-whipped, they rustle as I brush past them up the hill. These dead weeds camouflage my Golden Retriever, who weaves in and out of them, snags them in a dance, guides them into a dip, and then releases them.

Amid the crows' persistent caws and the parrots' heckles, I hear something--slipping, sliding, falling off. I turn to see a small shower of pebbles, then a lizard darting out from under yellow monkey flowers, scarlet buglers, and manzanita bushes. The dog chases the lizard, but loses it when it sprints back into the underbrush.

The gravel crunches underfoot as we crest the hill. Dust covers my shoes. Near the summit where our path merges with another, I stop. The dog pants at my side. From here, the hills' gentle rise--one beyond another beyond another, lush and wooded--resembles a wave of reclining bodies. A small stone rolls into our path. This time, the chaparral is still, no lizard follows. But the pebble has fallen, propelled by an unseen force.

14.

There is a world out there—larger and more complex, more layered than anything we can imagine. These small instants beckon us, urging us to suspend our habitual busy-ness, to observe and take heed in a way we rarely do. That a stone tumbles down a slope might seem insignificant, or inconsequential, but attending to it opens us to a more profound experience of the intricate workings of the world.

In one of the epigraphs to this essay, Twist comments on his role in animating his puppet, “I can’t manipulate it too much. I can kind of let it do things.” It is as though, having lent it his breath, and set it in motion, his task is complete. Powerless, he must stand aside. Twist’s words beg for a light touch--a willingness to relinquish our dominion, to allow things to unfold, and reveal what they will in their own time. They suggest that we, in the act of creation, can initiate but not control. Something else takes over. It’s this moment—the moment *after* we’ve set the inanimate object in motion--that interests me.

There are so many things that we don’t know, can’t even fathom. We recognize, though, that our actions cause reactions. We know that if we nudge a puppet’s control rod in a certain way, one of its parts will move. We know that if we pull on a sweater, its threads will expand to accommodate our body, its sleeves will slither over and caress our arms, its shape will shift in response to our movements. But, we can’t know the extent to which it will be transformed through this movement. And, we know that if we kick a stone, it will most likely be carried off the ground. Though I can take certain actions to affect its flight through the atmosphere, such as positioning it in a particular place, and kicking it in a particular way--from a standstill or a running start, head-on, or from an angle--I can’t determine the distance it will travel, or even its trajectory through space. After my foot has lifted it into the air, there is nothing more I can do.

But, my comparison between the stone and the puppet and the sweater may not be on point. Though all are inanimate objects, I'm not sure that we affect them in the same way. The puppet is *enlivened*, the stone *propelled*, and the sweater, I think, falls somewhere between the two. The puppet takes on a life of its own in a way--isn't this Twist's point? It becomes more--more complex, more dimensional. I can experience the sweater sensually-- its soft, nubby texture, its weight on my shoulders, the sweep of its hem as I walk. In the end, however, it's still a sweater, and not a being with a smile or feelings, albeit dramatized. Or is it?

We human beings are able to affect the stone's "existence" by setting the stage for it to interact with the world in a different way than it otherwise would—and, for us to interact with the world in a different way because of the stone's movement. Under the puppeteer's direction, the puppet undergoes a powerful transformation as it awakens, and opens to all around it. Once an inert wooden skeleton shrouded in fabric, it now "lives," as people in the wings operate its controls--enabling its legs to bend, its arms to lift, and its head to drop to its chest. But somehow, in coming to life, its measure and effect exceed the sum of its gestures.

The stone comes to "life" in a different way. My actions cause it to be propelled through space, and to land in a new location. More than the puppet, the stone, an object of nature, exists apart from the human realm—can, for example, be set into motion by something other than a person. Recall how it slid onto the trail without human intervention, without any visible force at all--like leaves charmed into the air by the wind.

The sweater, like the puppet, depends on our continued interaction with it. Once set in motion, the sweater *lives* on a person, and functions almost as a comment on all that she does. As she turns, it follows. As she steps back, it, too, retreats. But the quality, and character of the sweater's animation differs from the puppet's. In part, I think that this has to do with our intention with respect to an object. When we *enliven* a puppet, we intend for it to showcase our human predicament and feelings. We don't have a similar intention with respect to the sweater, or, for that matter, a stone.

It is easy, I think, to consider a puppet and a stone and a sweater as vastly dissimilar, to see their "enlivening" as unlike rather than like, to imagine that the stone, though transplanted, remains essentially the same. But, a kicked stone interacts in the universe in a way that it might not otherwise. It, too, is transformed. Consider that my kicking it may cause it to erode or disintegrate as it travels through the air, or collide with, or bind itself to other matter. And the sweater, too, changes--its threads stretch beyond the confines of its knitted shape, and crane to reach my shoulders, to curl into and hug my underarms. What I'm trying to get at is how, through our efforts, a thing (a puppet, a stone, a sweater) becomes—or seems to become—more than its physical properties. I am trying to figure out how our interaction with it *enlarges* it, and endows it with greater scope, and, perhaps, meaning.

To the puppet, to the stone, to the sweater, we transfer our *energy*. What do I mean by the word, *energy*, here? How does it express what I believe we confer upon and extend to inanimate objects to bring them to "life"? Though no student of science, I rooted around in physics to try to clarify how I think about *energy* in this context. I checked out

Einstein's theory of relativity, in which he defined energy in the equation,  $E=mc$ . But, as a PBS website explains, this "recipe for converting matter into energy and back into matter" far exceeds anything in our daily life, and it isn't what I'm getting at anyway. Though I'm not trying to understand the mystery of black holes or the big bang theory, I want to understand what I consider to be the mystery of a transfer of *something* between myself and an object. I imagine a kind of force field, with arrows pointing away from me to the object, and arrows pointing from the object back at me.

I also stumbled on the theory of thermodynamics, which defines temperature as a measure of energy. According to this law, when a cold and hot object come into contact, the temperature of the colder one will heat up, and that of the warmer one will cool, until their temperatures become the same. Applying this theory, I understand how, if I pull on a sweater, and my body temperature exceeds the sweater's, the sweater will warm up, and my body will cool down until our temperatures equalize. But I don't mean *energy* in this sense, either, though this theory does address the flow of energy between objects.

To me, *energy* is less a scientific definition or analysis, than a kind of focus. In animating a puppet, kicking a stone, or pulling on a sweater, we *attend* to—place our attention on—that thing. In those moments, the periphery fades, the background recedes, and that object holds the stage. It alone exists. We engage with that inanimate thing *apart* from us, yet we are infusing it with our *energy*--with whatever we bring to it, whether it be anger, joy, fear. I think about this way: if I'm playing catch with a small child, I'll throw the ball differently—toss it, maybe--than if I'm trying to hurl it as far as I can. It is as though the

object assumes a different quality when I try to blast it out of the park. This is the *energy* that emanates from it. That thing carries us, or a part of us, with it into the world.

16.

In this way, we join with the world. This union affects not only the object—and the larger world--but us, too, each of us. I want to understand how this happens--how infusing our *energy* into inanimate objects *enlarges* us, and grants us a different way to perceive ourselves in the universe.

I do know that the small scale in which the puppeteers work somehow endows their puppet with greater meaning--his every gesture is conspicuous, magnified, and exaggerated, and reflects back to us, maybe with even more clarity than our own gestures, our very selves. I know that in those moments when a puppet comes to life, through its very tiny, animated movements, we may divine something else--something we can't hold in our hands, that transcends the puppet's "thingness." We sense it, even know it on a very deep level, but perhaps cannot name it. This, I think, is what Twist refers to in an interview, when he noted that puppetry deals with "issues of life, death, and the soul."

I don't know how the puppeteer becomes one with her puppet, how her body and daily life molt, like a snake's skin, and are replaced by the puppet. I don't know how, from the first moment that she breathes life into him, she ceases to exist apart from him. Through her singular, meditative focus, she sublimates herself to him, and exists in a kind of self-less

state—her torso, her arms and her legs all at the puppet’s service. Only enlivening this bag of wood and cloth matters. And yet, paradoxically, it is her “self”—her most fundamental being—which generates the puppet’s gestures, and, which allows the puppet to come to life in a credible way. This puppet—this inanimate object—may come closer than any other thing to communicating the puppeteer’s fullest experience of herself, and of the world.

I only imagine that this selfless attention and intention assumes a devotional quality, and, that through it, she can tap into something beyond herself—to, perhaps, a more *magnanimous* self. Though seemingly contradictory, the ability to set one’s self aside and to work in the service of something else, to allow that something else to take over, *expands* the usual sense of self. In enlivening the puppet, the puppeteer embraces and commits herself to an inanimate object physically apart from her. This physical separateness—a kind of un-tethering—encourages the puppeteer’s “essence” to find expression, and as well, her expression to find an “essence.” It is as though the puppet, like a poem, or a painting, gives her a place apart from herself—an external repository—in which to concentrate all of herself into something other. While her body provides the means of navigating through space to achieve the physical work of creating, it is another part of her that is essential to animating the puppet. Without it, the puppet might be propelled without a sense of its being. Pure movement only—a small step, a raised hand, a tilted head—without the knowing inflection that makes it “human.”

I share in the sacred connection between puppeteer and puppet. By recognizing myself in the puppet's gestures, and identifying with his feelings, I participate in their mystical communion—and through them, join in my own. As I watch the puppet embody the essence of my human-ness—frailty and grit, cruelty and grace--my separate-ness vaporizes. I am not alone. I kneel with Petrushka when he offers the Ballerina his hand, stomp the ground in fury when he rages at the Moor. We have a shared identity of interest. His reaction is mine, and, because the puppeteer's own self informs the puppet's reaction, I stand in her shoes, too. We are one. My kinship with the puppet, and the puppeteer fills me with a sense of holiness—a sense of something greater than my singular independent life. I feel this even when I understand, as Twist notes, that “the characters [in the performance] are puppets. . . . are supposed to be puppets. . . . and aren't supposed to be people.”

I experience a similar kind of union with a stone, or a sweater, though perhaps in a less obvious way. That it doesn't depend on an intermediary (the puppeteer), makes my interaction with each more immediate, like a brief shiver of recognition. Though neither of these objects mirrors my self back to me in the way the puppet does, and neither models behavior for me, they nonetheless offer glimpses into my emotional life. I can observe the effect I've had on them by infusing them with my *energy*. I can identify those parts of myself that I've lent to that thing, or detect the tone with which I've interacted with them. This is how they communicate my innermost self.

I send a part of myself out in to the world by joining with these inanimate objects. My sense of who I am moves beyond the material and human confines of my body. I recognize my connected-ness to all things—despite the various forms they assume. I am—we are--a part of something greater, something grander, and this understanding humbles me.