THE MYSTERIOUS SOULS OF HELLÉ AND DEBUSSY'S TOYS

T. F. COOMBES

WRITING TO HIS PUBLISHER IN 1913, Claude Debussy remarked that '[t]he soul of the doll is more mysterious than even Maeterlinck imagines, and does not easily put up with the humbug which so many human souls tolerate'.[1] The letter concerned Debussy's composition of *La Boîte à joujoux* (*The Toy Box*), subtitled 'ballet for children', which was first published that year. Though little more than a fancifully worded admission that his work was progressing slowly, Debussy's remark suggests his awareness of a literary and philosophical discourse about mechanical bodies, to which Maeterlinck contributed. Literary scholars, in particular, have traced the long history of that discourse, in which automata, puppets, and toys became vehicles for reflection on the nature of consciousness.[2] The puppet was particularly important to theatrical modernism, as a substitute for the actor and a metaphor for the condition of the human subject.[3] *La Boîte à joujoux* exemplifies elements of a wide-ranging aesthetic of the mechanical espoused by early twentieth-century French art-music, which Vladimir Jankélévitch described as embodying an 'automaton humanity'.[4] The inquiry pursued here belongs to a larger one, which asks how this music relates to the post-Romantic obsession, especially in dance culture, with mechanical bodies and automated processes.[5]

University of Oxford. Email: tfcoombes@gmail.com. I am very grateful to Daniel Grimley, Flora Willson, and Jonathan Cross for their generous comments on earlier versions of this article, and to the reviewers of this journal for their feedback. Some of these ideas were presented at the 2017 meeting of the American Musicological Society, and I should like to thank all those who offered thoughts in response to my paper. This work was supported by grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK.

[1] Debussy to Jacques Durand, 27 Sept. 1913, reprinted in Debussy and Durand, *Lettres de Claude Debussy à son editeur* (Paris, 1927), 117, as translated in Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1982), 178.

[2] For example, Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley, 2000).

[3] See, for example, Harold B. Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automatons, and Robots in Modernist and Avant-Garde Drama* (Baltimore, 1995).

[4] Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, 2003), 44.

[5] For literary studies of this obsession, see Linda M. Austin, *Automatism and Creative Acts in the Age of New Psychology* (Cambridge, 2018); Felicia McCarren, *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Stanford, 2003). The Ballets Suédois

In scholarship about nineteenth-century opera, automata and mechanical dolls are familiar figures.[6] Musicologists have also considered the image of the toy in relation to Ravel's music, and explored some of its connections with contemporaneous interests in the mechanical.[7] But little music scholarship has investigated the literary interest in dolls to which Debussy referred; nor, in the context of French modernism, have musicologists engaged with the depth of recent scholarship about puppets' longstanding significance for questioning assumptions about subjects, objects, and their interrelationship. Underlying my inquiry is the following concern. If, as is often suggested, modernity constructs an artificial dichotomy between living subjects and inert objects, how might pieces such as *La Boîte à joujoux* dismantle or expose that dichotomy, thereby exemplifying 'modernism's resistance to modernity'?[8] The piece has itself received little sustained examination. The specific interest in mechanical life manifested in Debussy's toy story differs from equivalent interests explored in contemporaneous music-theatrical culture. For one thing, *La Boîte à joujoux* represents a relatively rare species of mechanical body: not the automaton or marionette, but the child's wooden toy.

This article focuses on the piano version of *La Boîte à joujoux*, a musical

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production of *La Boîte à joujoux*, premièred in 1921, falls within the scope of both arguments. Perhaps inevitably, such discussions do not sufficiently acknowledge how much modernist ballets' inquiries into the mechanical were determined by their highly varied music. That relative imbalance in recent scholarship informs my close reading approach in this article.

[6] See, for example, Heather Hadlock, *Mad Loves: Women and Music in Offenbach's Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (Princeton, 2000); Felicia Miller Frank, *The Mechanical Song: Women, Voice and the Artificial in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Stanford, Calif., 1995).

[7] See Deborah Mawer, 'Musical Objects and Machines', in Deborah Mawer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Maurice Ravel* (Cambridge, 2000), 47–70; Carolyn Abbate, 'Outside Ravel's Tomb', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 52 (1999), 465–530. See also Juliane Dorsch, 'Nostalgia and Modernism in Puppet Music of the 1920s' (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2011), and Katharina Hottmann and Sabine Meine (eds.), *Puppen, Huren, Roboter: Körper der Moderne in der Musik zwischen 1900 und 1930* (Schliengen, 2005).

[8] See Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1-22 at 12. The quotation is Brown's gloss of Walter Benjamin, who, incidentally, mentioned *La Boîte à joujoux* in some notes for an essay on toys. See Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs* (London, 2007), 105. The mention is too cryptic to be usefully pursued here. Figures such as puppets destabilize the distinction between subjects and objects, but in a way that demands the acknowledgement of the existence of those categories, especially in the historical contexts examined here. The more extreme rejections of that distinction, associated particularly with Bruno Latour, are therefore beyond the scope of this article.

storybook with illustrations by the well-known artist, André Hellé. The storybook's exploration of the nature of toyhood illustrates what Barbara Johnson calls the 'asymptotic relation between things and persons'. Unlike equivalent puppet characters promoted in modernist theatrical culture, Hellé and Debussy's dolls are comically idealized analogues of the human subject, rather than pessimistic ones. They invite a contribution to philosophical reflection on the role of mechanical bodies as signifying relationships between subjecthood and objecthood. Animated wooden toys such as Hellé and Debussy's are, I suggest, figures entirely untroubled by the distinction between interiority and exteriority that haunted the modernist imagination. The final section answers a broader question prompted by the storybook's opening: how the kind of toy that inhabits *La Boîte à joujoux* could serve as a comic ideal of the modern urban citizen.

THE PIANO VERSION

La Boîte à joujoux began life as an illustrated story by Hellé, and the piano version published in 1913 is almost as much a work of visual art as a work of music.[9] The large score incorporates fourteen full-page reproductions of Hellé's watercolours, as well as numerous smaller illustrations. Before the start of the piece, the authors identify the main characters and their motifs: the soldier, Polichinelle, the doll, and the token of love between the soldier and the doll—a rose. The story, in the form of a ballet scenario, runs above the staves. In the first tableau ('the toy shop'), a group of toys emerge from a toy box and parade around the shop. Exchanges between the soldier and Polichinelle provoke the battle that occurs in the second tableau ('the battle field'), after which the injured soldier is nursed by the doll, whom Polichinelle has abandoned. In the third tableau ('the sheepfold for sale'), the doll and the soldier buy a place in the country; and in the final tableau ('after making a fortune'), they appear twenty years later, married with children, enjoying the pleasures of bourgeois life. The ballet's numerous toy characters include *commedia dell'arte* figures and personages from popular entertainment. The war interrupted plans for a ballet production, and only after Debussy's death was the work fully staged in France together with André Caplet's

[9] Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre*, 177. A friend of the composer, Hellé also designed a set of wooden animals which Debussy had given to his daughter. For connections between the composer and artist, see also Simon Morrison, 'Debussy's Toy Stories', *Journal of Musicology*, 30 (2013), 424–59 at 426.

completion of the orchestration.[10]

Discussions of the music of *La Boîte à joujoux* focus on its nature as a game of musical quotation, from the work of other composers and of Debussy himself.[11] One element of the piece's obsessive intertextuality, which prepares the arguments that follow, has not yet been noted. In an interview, Debussy suggested that his 'pantomime' was based on some of his own albums for children.[12] Although no such albums seem to exist, the piece does refer to children's music in a more general way.[13] Much of *La Boîte à joujoux* mimics tropes of the children's piano music produced in great quantities for the contemporaneous sheet-music market. For example, the dances that constituted much of this music were commonly presented as performed by dolls; waltzes were a very common choice.[14] The principal doll character's waltz in the first tableau is a fond parody of such pieces. Titles and illustrations in children's music often presented children themselves as the imagined performers of more energetic dances. The toy-children's polka in the final tableau is Debussy's version of one of these stock pieces.[15]

The piano version of *La Boîte à joujoux* also mimics a genre of children's music: the illustrated musical story. It bears striking similarities to Théodore Lack's *Le Roman d'une poupée* (*Novel of a Doll*) of 1906, a series of illustrated children's pieces organized into a story about a toy soldier and a doll. The front cover is reproduced in **Figure 1**. Although Lack's story is not a scenario, segments of the narrative run above the staves. Lack's story is set in a toy shop, like Debussy and Hellé's. In both battle scenes, the cannonballs are likened to Clamart peas (famously, the first of the season).

[10] See ibid. for a study of early productions, including fascinating information about performances in the late 1910s in America, Italy, Switzerland, and Russia, sometimes with puppets or children as performers.

[11] For excellent cataloguing of these references, see ibid.; Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre*; and José-Eduardo Martins, 'La Vision de l'univers enfantin chez Moussorgsky et Debussy', *Cahiers Debussy*, 9 (1985), 3–16.

[12] Maurice Montabre, 'Claude Debussy nous dit ses projets de Théâtre', *Comoedia*, 1 Feb. 1914, p. 3.

[13] See Robert Orledge, 'Another Look inside Debussy's "Toybox"', *The Musical Times*, 117 (1976), 987-89 at 988. The epigraph to Gabriel Pierné's 'La poupée mécanique de Claude Debussy' quotes a line of '"musique" de la poupée' given by Debussy to Pierné's daughter, but the theme does not appear in *La Boîte à joujoux*.

[14] For example, 'Poupée-Valse', in Carlos de Mesquita, *20 Pièces enfantines* (Paris, 1900); E. Chavagnat, 'Ma Poupée', in *Les Miniscules. 6 petites pièces enfantines* (Paris, 1890).

[15] For example, Laurent Grillet, *Enfantillages, polka* (Paris, 1896). For the origins of the polka, see Morrison, 'Debussy's Toy Stories', 430.

Musical borrowing is also essential to Lack's 'novel'. In both works, for example, a fragment of Mendelssohn's wedding march indicates the toys' marriage. What for Lack is a means of introducing children to famous pieces becomes, for Debussy, a more developed compositional game. With its *dépouillé* character and lean tessitura, the piano version of *La Boîte à joujoux* often looks, feels, and sounds like children's music. But it is too long, and its faster passages too difficult, to be a *pièce enfantine* in the way that Lack's toy story is straightforwardly 'for children'.

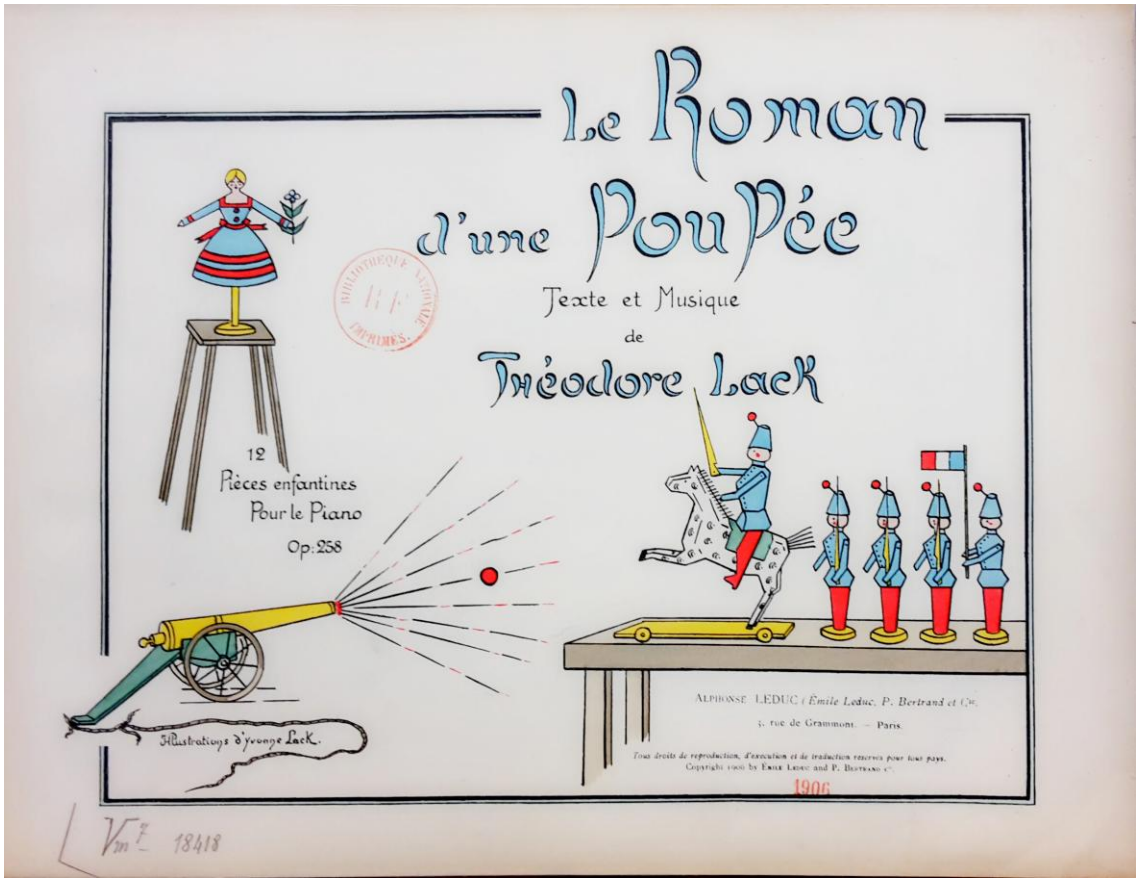

Figure 1. Théodore Lack, *Le Roman d'une poupée*, front cover. Bibliothèque nationale de France

These similarities emphasize that the 1913 publication was not merely a preliminary step towards a ballet production. This in turn may help to explain why it has attracted so little detailed attention. The 1913 version is a particular kind of artwork: music to be played on the piano while listeners follow a story and images. Hellé later recalled adopting a version of this listening practice. While Debussy played at the piano, 'I saw pass in front of my eyes . . . all my jolly little figures, . . . who were born only at

that moment'.[16] Here, Hellé emphasized the dependence of the toy's visual characterization on Debussy's music: only in the moment of musical performance did the characters spring to life, even for the author who invented them, and who held clear views about the future ballet's character. The 1913 version raises unique questions concerning the relation between the musical and the visual—hence my exclusive focus on that version.[17] Although some productions (such as the Ballets Suédois') were closely based on Hellé's illustrations, the storybook's still images have their own distinctive character of movement, just as the piano version manifests a different model of the mechanical from the orchestrated version.

As commentators have noted, the piece contains an essence of the toy-like. Simon Morrison aptly observes that each quotation or near-quotation becomes a 'musical equivalent of the simple, graphic playthings that Hellé designed'.[18] So continual are the moments of recognition accompanying these allusions that the work seems to be derived from a musical world outside itself. Importantly, however, Morrison also notes the possibility of becoming sidetracked by these allusions. 'The music consists of hollow outlines', he observes, 'intended to be appreciated for their own allure (not their associations).'[19] It is this allure that deserves much greater study. The piece prompts some quite general questions concerning the mechanical lives it represents. How does *La Boîte à joujoux* establish an understanding of the 'toy-like', and what is the nature of the world that its protagonists inhabit?

Recent thinking may help the most with this initial inquiry. In the last few decades, philosophers and literary scholars have considered how our relations with puppets and toys serve to question the dichotomies between subject and object that seem intrinsic to perception. Barbara Johnson, for example, argues that our inclination to invest inanimate objects with forms of life illustrates what she considers to be the 'asymptotic relation between things and persons'.[20] The inescapable personhood of

[16] 'je vis passer devant mes yeux . . . tous mes petits bonshommes, . . . qui naissaient alors seulement'. Cited in Denis Herlin, 'André Hellé et *La Boîte à joujoux*: Interview, conférence et texte intégral de *L'Histoire d'une Boîte à joujoux*', *Cahiers Debussy*, 30 (2006), 98–122 at 112.

[17] In addition, I share Morrison's instinct that the ballet's spirit is one which 'embraces the imagined', something he notes in relation to the possibility of reconstructing early productions. Morrison, 'Debussy's Toy Stories', 45.

[18] Ibid., 430.

[19] Ibid., 432.

[20] Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 2.

things mirrors the quandary of the inescapable thinghood of persons. Figures such as toys provide a focus for contemplating that quandary. They are means of thinking through the behavioural signs that we classify as manifesting animacy or consciousness. They both assert and destabilize an assumption, to which we cling, of the existence of two putatively separable orders: the animate/organic and the inert/mechanical.[21] *La Boîte à joujoux* developed conventions signifying the mechanistic while intermixing them with signs associated with the other 'order'; but it still satisfies our desire to believe in the possibility of distinguishing them.

TOYHOOD AND THE TOY WORLD

Debussy and Hellé's characterization of the toys' activities is deeply varied, and depends on their individual personalities. Nonetheless, qualities are shared by different figures, and characterize their collective actions.[22] This discussion focuses on those collective qualities. That *La Boîte à joujoux* was ultimately intended to be a ballet (or pantomime) suggests that it is primarily an investigation of the toy-like as a corporeal condition. Both Debussy and Hellé suggested that the piece manifested a highly conventional language of movement signifying a non-organic body. In an interview in 1914, Debussy insisted that, in future ballets, '[t]he characters must retain their angular movements, their burlesque appearance as cardboard cut-outs, without which the work would become meaningless.'[23] Hellé described the movement embodied in the work as 'the jerky, mechanistic automatism that the gestures of puppets have'.[24] It is certainly

[21] See ibid., 88-9, discussing David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford, 1995).

[22] In Lack's 'Roman d'une poupée', as in much contemporaneous children's music, titles referring to toys passed off this music's jolly, diatonic simplicity (and, perhaps, its customary manner of performance) as an evocation of the mechanical. Debussy's doll topics owe as much as anything to conventions of evoking clowns, including his own in the Préludes. This similarity emphasizes the links between mechanical bodies and popular entertainment made by the first tableau's procession of toys, a link illuminated by the fact that the gestural language governing clown routines was often perceived as puppet-like. This also makes sense of Hellé's description of his ballet as a natural succession from his 'satire of music-hall revues' of 1912. See Herlin, 'André Hellé et *La Boîte à joujoux*', 108–9.

[23] Montabré, 'Claude Debussy nous dit ses projets de Théâtre', as cited and translated in Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre*, 177. As Orledge notes, Debussy originally thought that only puppets could communicate the work's meaning, before agreeing with Hellé that children would be the ideal performers.

[24] 'cet automatisme saccadé et mécanique qu'ont les gestes des pantins'. This was from an unpublished interview, cited in Herlin, 'André Hellé et *La Boîte à joujoux*', 109.

possible to hear this corporeality in passages of the piano version.[25] Instances include the first doll's awakening (see **Example 1**), especially the acciaccaturas and the intrusion of duple emphasis into the triple metre. The most methodical elaboration of this corporeality is what might be called the animation theme, accompanying the toys' coming to life and going about the toy-shop (**Example 2**). Here, before the procession begins, these figures are not marked as individual toy-characters. Debussy's artfully ungainly theme captures the comportment of rigid bodies with minimal internal articulation, suggesting the jerky rocking from side to side through which they must move around. The blocky characters in Hellé's corresponding illustration, some leaning at humanly improbable angles, specify the music's evocation of movement (**Figure 2**). Throughout the storybook, Hellé's images suggest how the restrictions imposed by the simplifications of the toys' block-like bodies determine their actions. Even in these moments, however, the music specifies a subtler corporeality than the authors described. Both the doll's theme and the development of the animation theme (p. 6, especially the dextrous left-hand countermelody in line 2, bar 4), emphasize the toys' darting agility: their physical capacities are as much enhanced as limited by their bodies.[26] While the toys' music may initially prescribe the jerky movements of inorganic matter, this does not clearly signify—as might the comically naïve regularity of the automata music in Act II of Delibes's *Coppélia*—an absence of consciousness or of a self-controlling subject.

Indeed, in passages describing the toys' collective activities, their agility becomes part of almost the opposite characteristic: directness or singularity of purpose. One of the general toy-like modes established in the first two tableaux encapsulates the energy of the moving toy. Through the relentless repetition of small units, it evokes beings that do not deal in plasticity or variation. In the first tableau, this mode is exemplified by the 'round' (pp. 16–18) and by the toys' scattering at the officer's appearance at the window (p. 23, lines 2–4); in the second tableau, it constitutes much of the battle music (p. 29, line 3 to p. 31 line 2).[27] It also appears later in the tableau when Polichinelle scampers off after taunting the wounded soldier (p. 34, line 1).

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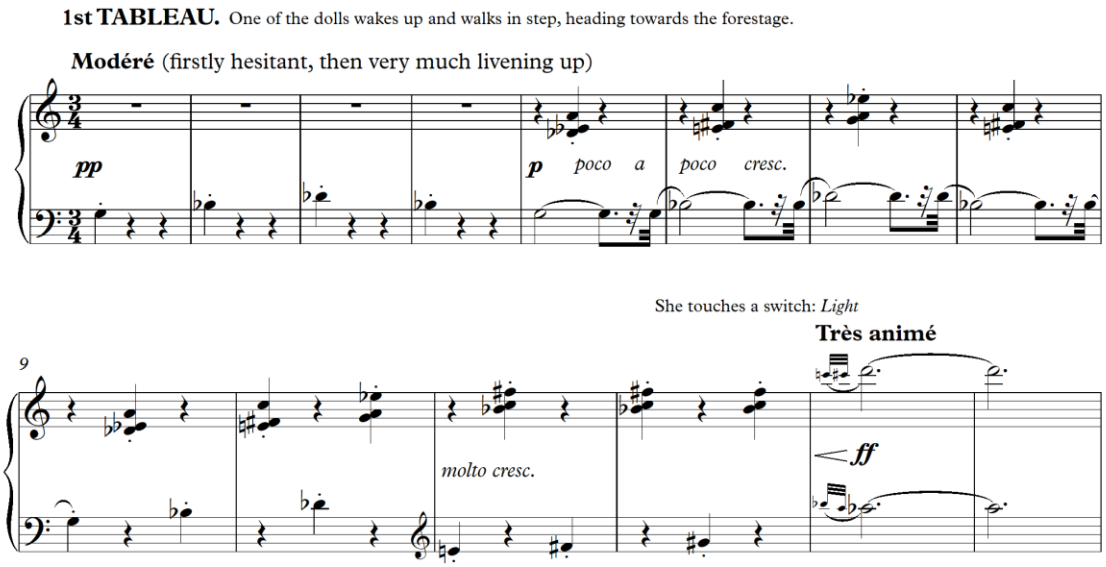
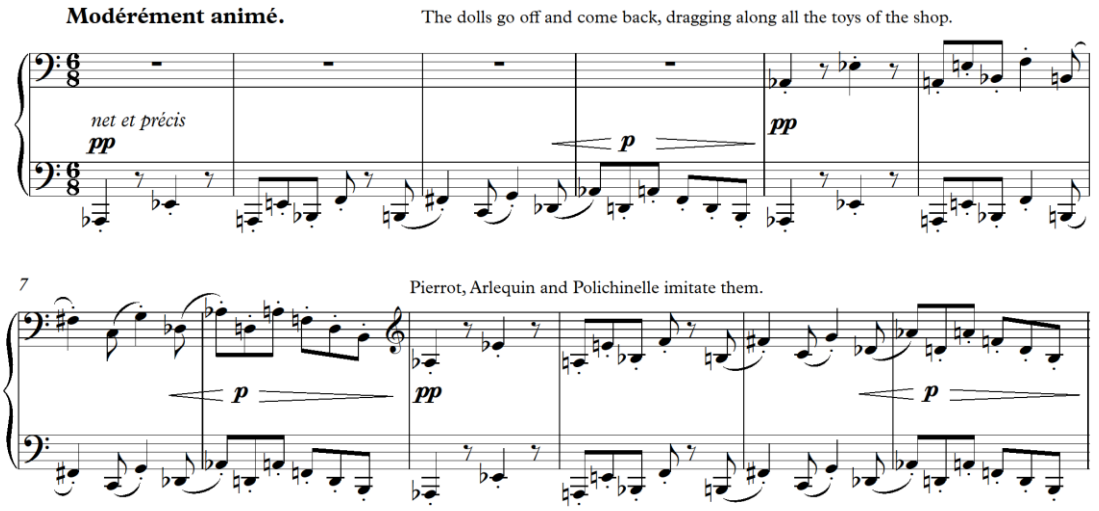
[25] Whether and how Debussy's music embodies mechanical movements was a subject of debate in response to later ballet productions. See Morrison, 'Debussy's Toy Stories', 445.

[26] Page and line references are to the 1913 Durand edition.

[27] This quality is less pronounced in Caplet's orchestration of the battle music, where the different sonorities add much greater variation.



Example 1. Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux,* Tableau 1, opening



Example 2. Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux,* Tableau 1, the toys move around the shop

Primarily, this passage conveys the lightness of Polichinelle's withdrawal, but the absence of variation also suggests the motion of a being that does nothing circuitously, lacking the hesitations or nuances that signify a fully organic body. Polichinelle's retreat displays a decisiveness that often characterizes the toys' activities.[28] At the end of the

[28] In his 'Philosophy of Toys' (1853), Baudelaire identified 'decisiveness of shape' as a defining characteristic of the toy, the 'unique form of statuary' that manifests an aesthetic of childhood. Other characteristics included: 'lustrous cleanliness', which aptly describes the

Figure 2. André Hellé, the toys' emergence from the toy box, *La Boîte à joujoux*, Tableau 1

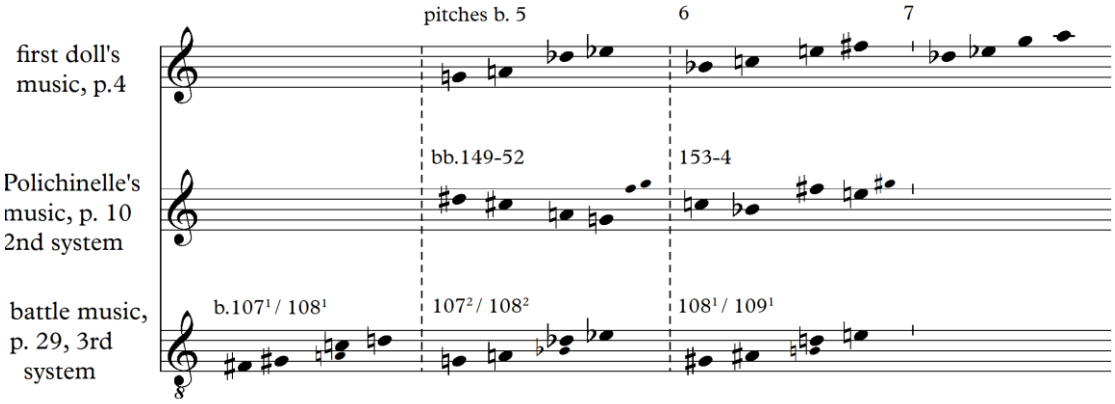
first tableau, his kick at the soldier is followed instantaneously by the lifting of the toy box's lid and the soldiers' comically bellicose drumming (p. 20, lines 3–4). There is a savage concision not only in the gestures themselves but in the manner of their succession, exemplifying the immediacy with which things often happen in the toy world (though less so in the third tableau). This moment echoes, for example, the suddenness with which Pierrot, Arlequin, and Polichinelle leapt into their round. Morrison notes that the '[s]udden switches between melodies, particularly in the first tableau, recall a child's orneriness'.[29] We might also hear this paratactic organization of material as conferring a quality of directness or decisiveness onto the toy characters

energetic *dépouillé* character of the piano version of *La Boîte à joujoux*; 'violence of gesture', which is embodied in Polichinelle's barbed theme and those of other characters such as the sailor (p.18, lines 2-3), whose whole-tone clusters recall Polichinelle's. Often, however, *La Boîte à joujoux* opposes the fierceness of Baudelaire's aesthetic. Although Hellé's illustrations are bright, simple, and flat, they do not display the 'blinding flashes of colour' that Baudelaire found in toys. Charles Baudelaire, 'Morale du joujou', in *Curiosités esthétiques, L'Art romantique et autres Oeuvres critiques de Baudelaire* (Paris, 1962). First published in 1853), 201–7 at 202. In this and other quotations, I have made use of the translation in Jonathan Mayne (ed.), *Charles Baudelaire: The Painter of Modern Life* (London, 1964), 197–203.

[29] Morrison, 'Debussy's Toy Stories', 429.

themselves.

Some of the music discussed so far (and much of that to come) derives from the same material, which is laid out most plainly in Polichinelle's theme. As **Example 3** shows, the two segments of his music rearrange the pitch classes featured in the first two limbs of the sequence introducing the first doll. The battle music, which develops from Polichinelle's appearance, features the relentless parallel use of a version of that pattern. Its use across the piece suggests that it marks something quintessentially 'toy-like'. What is important, of course, is the gesture into which Debussy arranges this material, but each arrangement evokes a comparable harmonic 'hardness', brilliant, dissonant but stable. That dissonance, for example, emphasizes in the off-beat chords of the first doll's theme (Example 1) something of the spasmodic quality to which Debussy referred.



Example 3. 'Toy-like' pitch configurations, *La Boîte à joujoux*

Frequently, however, Debussy introduces qualities quite different from the conventional signs of a mechanical order which he claimed the ballet relied on: lyricism, tenderness, fluidity. These appear especially in the central tableaux. Examples include: the delicate G flat major continuation of the round in the first tableau (p. 21, line 3); the doll's request to Polichinelle for a marriage ring in the second tableau (p. 27); the veiled cadence into F sharp major (p. 35, line 3) marking the entwinement of the characters' lives; and the rising of the curtain onto the third tableau (p. 38). Calling for gentleness and tenderness, Debussy's expression markings, in the illustrated scenario version, suggest to the listener-spectator something of the demeanour and intentions of the characters themselves. These passages do not so much undermine the

work's exploration of the corporeal condition of toyhood, as enter into a dialectic with it, principally through the interaction of music and image. One of the most tender moments is the doll and soldier's kiss in the third tableau (p. 43, line 3), where the music reworks in the major mode the tableau's opening reference to the folk song 'Il pleut bergère' (p. 37, line 1), mollifying the hints of the mechanistic that infiltrated this opening.[30] Hellé's illustration (**Figure 3**) humorously emphasizes the toys' tender actions working through and against the rigidity of their block-like forms. While the music evokes the emotional warmth of the toys' activities, Hellé's illustrations emphasize movements governed by the rigidity of a corporeal matter not considered organic—capable of harbouring such warmth.[31] As in other toy stories, the humour derives from the strict combination of this corporeal language with intentional signs associated with personhood.

Nonetheless, Debussy avoided conferring on these passages all the signs of personhood that he might have done. He thereby produced another essential attribute of toyhood: a sort of transparency of feeling. Here, differences between the piano version and the orchestration are especially important. For example, the orchestration of the doll's prayer in the second tableau, with its sustained upper strings and woodwind lines, is deeply lyrical if strikingly simple. The piano version (p. 31, line 4 to p. 32, line 2) restrains this lyrical impulse: the *dépouillé* effect imparts a striking limpidity to the passage's crystalline melancholy. As in equivalently emotive moments, this quality relates to the nature of the doll's feeling, which itself attains the attribute of concision, of being without depth or complication. Such passages, and their relation with Hellé's illustrations, realize Johnson's idea of the 'asymptotic relation' between things and persons. How exactly the toys' status never quite touches the condition of personhood is confirmed at the very end of the piece, which establishes a fundamental characteristic of children's toys. After the Epilogue has reintroduced the scenery of the toyshop, the soldier suddenly pokes his head out of the toy box (see **Example 4**), restored to youth

[30] The exact moment of the kiss (p. 43, line 3, bar 3) also sublimates the 'toy-like' collection identified in Example 3 (specifically, the arrangement featured in the battle music).

[31] Occasionally, music and text produce a comparable dialectic. Hellé's scenario accompanying the E flat major harmonization of the pentatonic shepherd's pipe music (p. 43, lines 1 to 2), shortly before the kiss, refers to 'the melancholy which the shepherd's pipe pours into their little wooden souls' ('la mélancholie que verse dans leurs petites âmes en bois le chalumeau du pâtre'). The text confirms, then, that these are ensouled beings (animated through play), but also that their souls are 'wooden': these are wooden beings through and through.

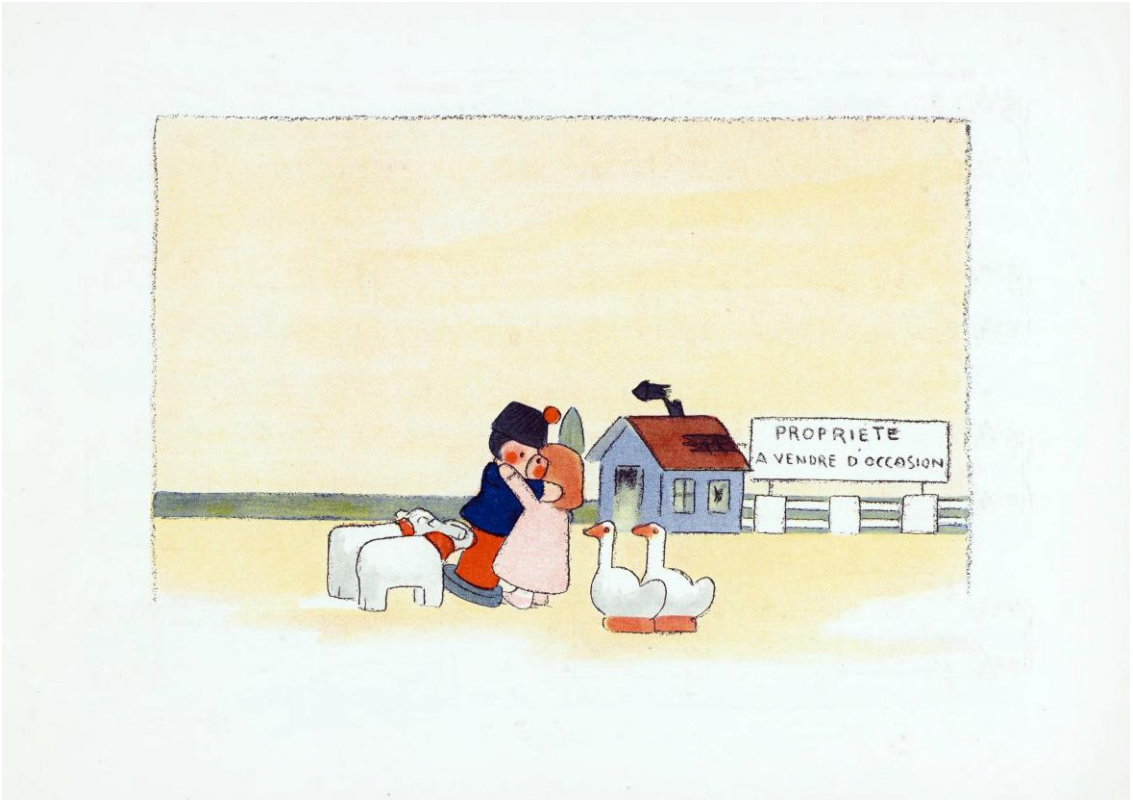


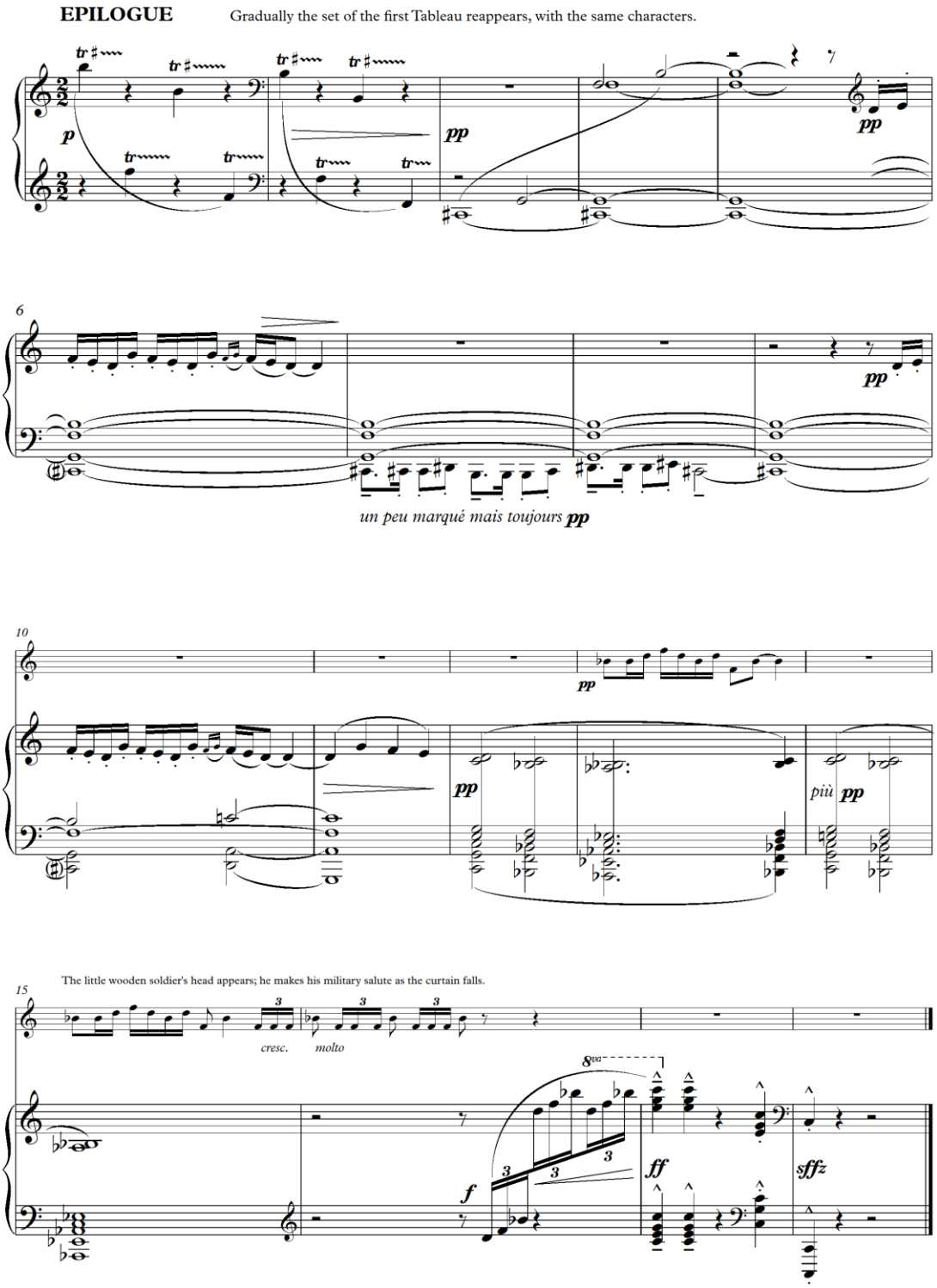
Figure 3. Hellé, the toys' kiss, *La Boîte à joujoux*, Tableau 3

and accompanied by the spritely bugle-call of his first appearance (p. 6, end of line 4), rather than the comically inflated version signifying his middle age in the final tableau (p. 45, line 2). The quality exhibited by his return is best illuminated by D. W. Winnicott's formulation of the 'transitional object', through which the infant learns the distinction between itself and the world.[32] The transitional object 'must never change, unless changed by the infant'; it must 'survive instinctual loving, and also hating'.[33] At the same time, it must also do something 'to show [the child] that it has vitality or reality of its own'.[34] The rejuvenated soldier reveals that he has in no way been developed by his last experience of leaving the toy box: for all his vitality, he has 'survived' the loving and hating he has received. His abrupt re-entrance substantiates

[32] Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971; London, 2005), 2. In 'Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lotte Pritzel' (1914), Rilke set out in concise and poetic form Winnicott's central ideas about the doll as a transitional object.

[33] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 7. This teaches the infant that the world persists separately from itself (things do not disappear, for example, when it leaves), and that it is not 'omnipotent' (it cannot simply choose to destroy things, and can love them without doing so).

[34] Ibid. This helps to teach the infant the existence, as well as the thing-like separation and persistence, of selves equivalent to its own.



Example 4. Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux*, Epilogue

the toys' energy and directness as the mark of figures who are ultimately immune from being changed through their relations with the world.[35] They escape, in the end, the full

[35] It may also substantiate the piece's connection of the toy and the clown, whose cathartic

conditions of subjecthood.

The ending of *La Boîte à joujoux* explains not only the nature of its protagonists, but also the nature of the world they inhabit. As Baudelaire put it, 'toys become actors in the great drama of life, reduced by the *camera obscura* of [children's] little brains'.[36] Debussy and Hellé's self-consciously clichéd story realizes this reduction of the 'drama of life'. In her discussion of the miniature as a narrative form, Susan Stewart observes that

> once the toy becomes animated, it initiates another world, the world of the daydream. The beginning of narrative time here is not an extension of the time of everyday life; it is the beginning of an entirely new temporal world . . ., parallel to (and hence never intersecting) the world of everyday reality.[37]

The Prélude of *La Boîte à joujoux* both links and separates the 'world of everyday reality' and the 'new temporal world' initiated by the first doll's appearance. The hushed iteration of the soldier's theme (p. 3, line 1), which follows a similar premonition of the doll's theme (p. 2, line 1), suggests both temporal distance and the remoteness of events occurring in dreams. At the end of the fourth tableau, the toy world vanishes abruptly in the middle of the toy-children's polka, clearly marking the established disjunction between its own 'narrative time' and that of 'everyday reality'.

The Epilogue confirms, more specifically, the circularity of the narrative time that unfolds within the toy box. The narrative circle is completed at the moment of dissolution into the final C major tonality (Example 4, b. 12), when the circling theme that opened the piece comes to rest. The approach recalls, in harmonically simplified form, the final moment of the Prélude as it tipped into the toys' enchanted world. The chain of parallel ninth chords elaborates the gesture (then in the bass) that accompanied the raising of the curtain to reveal the sleeping toys (p. 2). The themes echoed in the Epilogue have the same *lointain* quality as the Prélude's thematic premonitions. They suggest, then, both recollection and anticipation, reaffirming the circularity of time in

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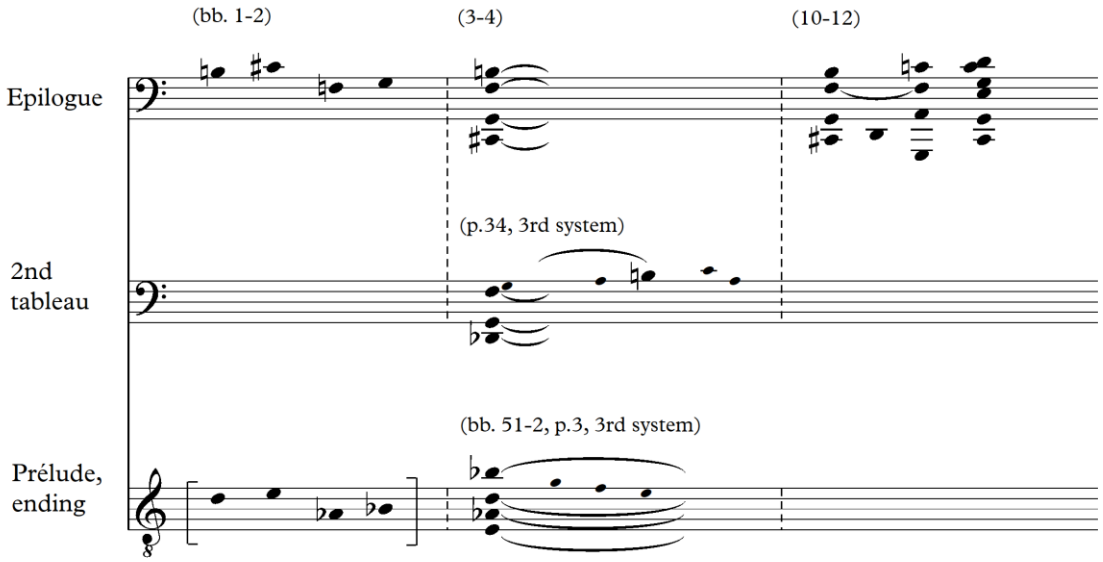
humour derives from the fact that it remains unaffected by ill treatment.

[36] 'les joujoux deviennent acteurs dans le grand drame de la vie, réduit par la chambre noire de leur petit cerveau.' Baudelaire, 'Morale du joujou', 203.

[37] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (London, 1993), 57. *La Boîte à joujoux* is not a miniature in length, but the piece clearly exploits the idiom of miniaturism.

the toy box, where memory and premonition cannot be fully distinguished. This movement in and out of the toys' world is achieved through use of the pitch material constituting several of the toys' motifs. The beginning of the Epilogue spells out the two arrangements of this collection: in bars 3–4, the combination of intervals identified in Example 3 unfurls across two octaves, producing a charged, expectant harmony (see **Examples** 4 and **5**). This is the same chord (in a different inversion) that appears four bars before the end of the Prélude, evoking the enchantment of the still object endowed with the imaginary life that will shortly break out from the toy box.[38] In the Epilogue, this 'enchantment' sonority dissolves at the moment of fusion noted above, enacting in harmonic terms the dissolution of the world of the animated toy.



Example 5. Harmonic arrangements of 'toy-like' pitch configuration, *La Boîte à joujoux*

For Stewart, the function of the miniature is 'to create a tension or dialectic between inside and outside': 'once we attend to the miniature world, the outside world stops and is lost to us'.[39] Performing *La Boîte à joujoux* creates a tension between inside and outside, both within the space of performance (the bourgeois drawing-room, in the piano version's case) and within the toy world itself. The officer's appearance at the toy

[38] This harmony also appears at the piece's dramatic crux to signify the still toy—the soldier lying injured on the battlefield (p. 34, line 3).

[39] Stewart, *On Longing*, 67.

shop's window (**Figure 4**) brings the idea of the exterior world directly into contact with the toy box's interior one. The 'real' figure of the officer, a representative of the exterior world, is himself toy-like. Through the intrusion of this external but still toy-like presence, the toy world acquires its own internal 'dialectic of inside and outside'. It achieves a kind of self-sufficiency, by reproducing within itself a distinction between being inside or outside its own fictionality—the very distinction that is presupposed by its own creation. The 'inside' of the toy box has dissolved the boundaries which we had to cross in order to enter it.[40]

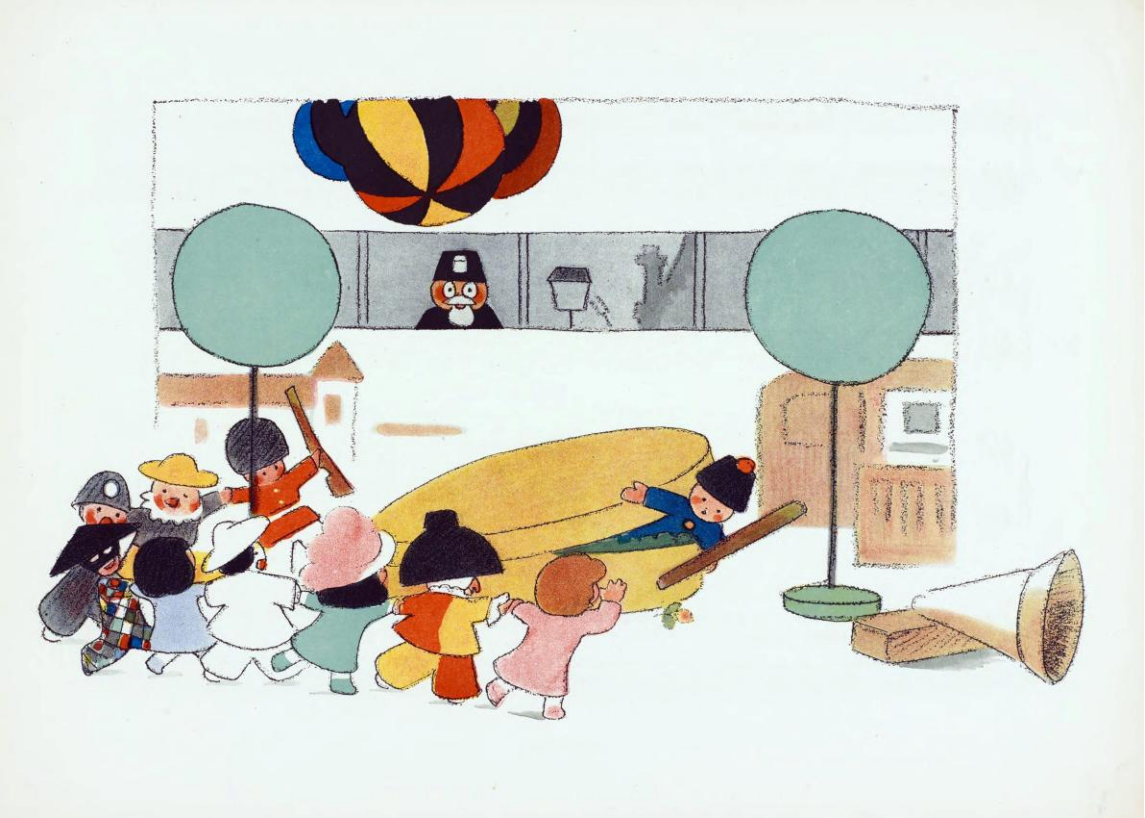


Figure 4. Hellé, the officer's appearance at the toy shop's window, *La Boîte à joujoux*, Tableau 1

By both blurring and drawing attention to these boundaries, the intermediary figure of the officer emphasizes what Kenneth Gross considers to be the puppet's significance as 'an ambassador or pilgrim to human beings from the world of things'.[41]

[40] For another interpretation of the constable, see Morrison, 'Debussy's Toy Stories', 429.

[41] Kenneth Gross, *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life* (Chicago, 2011), cited in Steven Connor, 'String Theories', *Literary Review*, 392 (2011), 22-3 at 22.

Contemporaneous literary and theatrical culture was obsessed with imagining mechanical forms of life as alternatives to, or substitutes for, the human one. That *La Boîte à joujoux* may be considered an example of that obsession is confirmed by Hellé's statement at the beginning of the illustrated scenario: 'Toy boxes are in fact kinds of towns in which toys live like people. Or rather towns are perhaps only toy boxes in which people live like toys'.[42] How exactly are Hellé and Debussy's toy figures analogies for human ones? How might the piece illuminate the features which we give over to that other order of the inanimate, but which we display and discover in each other? To put it another way, how might it reform our inclination to deny the mechanical as 'already a natural part of humanness'?[43] The next section compares the understanding of toyhood embodied in *La Boîte à joujoux* with contemporaneous evaluations of dollhood or puppethood—evaluations which Debussy and Hellé's characters either have been, or could be, mistaken as reiterating. The comparisons throw sharply into relief the nature of the 'soul', as Debussy put it, of the wooden toy. The following discussion distinguishes between different species of mechanical being, and between the varying allegorical roles to which they lend themselves. Early twentieth-century object-characters often appeared in performance contexts, either real or imagined, that lent them precise identities which are too rarely distinguished.[44]

THE 'SOUL' OF THE TOY IN LITERARY CONTEXT

Considering *La Boîte à joujoux* in the context of the First World War, Glenn Watkins adopts the conventional use of the puppet as a metaphor for the human subject deprived of agency, suggesting that the work draws 'subtle parallels between the child, the puppet, and the adult, and their shared helplessness to act in an increasingly menacing

[42] 'Les Boîtes à joujoux sont en effet des sortes de villes dans lesquelles les jouets vivent comme des personnes. Ou bien les villes ne sont peut-être que des boîtes à joujoux dans les quelles les personnes vivent comme des jouets' (n.p.).

[43] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 89.

[44] Some modernists conflated different types: Benois, for example, in associating Petrushka with automata (Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, 237). But others, notably Rilke and Edward Gordon Craig, emphasized essential distinctions between the nature of dolls and marionettes. The central instance of a 'puppet' or 'marionette' I take to be a performing figure attached to an operator; the central instance of a 'toy' is here a stringless, unarticulated object gaining life in childhood play. The 'doll' I consider in the same general class as the toy, although the French 'poupée' can suggest puppet as well as doll, an ambiguity which I uphold below. My point is that we appreciate such ambiguities only once we learn what is ambiguated.

world'.[45] But this does not accord with the vitality that so often characterizes Hellé's and Debussy's toys. Marylin Strasser Olsson suggests that the conventional, pessimistic understanding of mechanical figures corresponds to a narrowly 'adult' view, based on an interpretation of them as, before anything else, 'less than human'.[46] One would expect a 'ballet for children' to eschew such a position. In a lecture about the ballet in 1925, Hellé would assert that if toys could taste the lives of people, 'they would be very happy to become the little inanimate wooden things . . . that they were before'.[47] He described his characters as running along 'towards an ideal life that only they have the bliss of knowing'.[48] What distinguishes the characters of *La Boîte à joujoux* is their contentedness in inhabiting a condition of thinghood.

Nor do these characters display, then, what Steven Connor calls the 'violent hunger for being that seems to be the particular characteristic of puppets'.[49] Connor's observation suggests a distinction between the natures of puppets and toys. It certainly elucidates the difference between the inhabitants of *La Boîte à joujoux* and the figure to whom they most obviously relate: Petrushka. The last action of *La Boîte à joujoux* refers to the appearance of Petrushka's 'soul' above the puppet-theatre's roof at the very end of Fokine and Stravinsky's ballet. The conclusion of *Petrushka* reveals, among other things, the tragedy of the puppet's condition: in being ultimately incapable of life, he is also incapable of death. But the simple jubilance of the soldier's fanfares are markedly different from Petrushka's manic, anguished ones. Unlike that of Petrushka, the animation of Hellé and Debussy's toys does not endow them with the consciousness of lacking something. The animation of un-living things may also be disturbing—as Petrushka's proves to be. In a well-known essay of 1906, Ernst Jentsch defined the Uncanny as a sensation prompted by an uncertainty about whether something is living.[50] Petrushka's unexpected re-appearance certainly plays upon this sensation. But the

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[45] Glenn Watkins, *Proof Through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley, 2003), 114.

[46] Marylin Strasser Olsson, *Children's Culture and the Avant-Garde: Painting in Paris, 1890-1915* (London, 2013), 12.

[47] 'ils seraient bien heureux redevenir les petites choses inanimées . . . qu'ils étaient auparavant'. As cited in Herlin, 'André Hellé et *La Boîte à joujoux*', 111.

[48] 'vers une vie idéale qu'eux seuls ont la félicité de connaître'. Ibid., 112.

[49] Steven Connor, 'String Theories', 23.

[50] Ernst Jentsch, 'Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen', *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift*, 8/22 (25 Aug. 1906), 195–8 and 8/23 (1 Sept. 1906), 203–5.

soldier's unexpected re-appearance does not do so, as is registered in the musical difference between his fanfares and those of Stravinsky's puppet. In fact, the soldier's reappearance is an apt illustration of Freud's argument that Jentsch's definition of the Uncanny is simplistic: there are contexts in which the 'idea of a "living doll" excites no fear at all', the most obvious being childhood play.[51] To the child, the toy's animation is not unwelcome, and nor is the soldier's reappearance.

Stories about the contented existence of objects sometimes served a satirical purpose in nineteenth-century literature. H. J. Schwarcz describes the thinking objects in Hans Christian Andersen's stories as so 'wrapped up in their narcissistic memories that they never realize that they are not free to act'.[52] Their self-absorption inhibits them from becoming sufficiently alive to register that they are not fully living. Schwarcz sees objects' inertness as allegorizing an absence of curiosity that defines the adult world's utilitarian routines. This offers one way of interpreting the contentment of Hellé and Debussy's toys, and of the distinctly bourgeois goals that they achieve in the final tableaux. In general, however, that satire appears much more strongly in the expanded version of the story that Hellé produced in 1926, with new illustrations, in which the toy shop's inhabitants gain the opportunity of observing the pretensions of real people 'who have lost their illusions'.[53]

In the remark cited at the opening of this article, Debussy compared his exploration of the doll's 'soul' with that of Maeterlinck, whose preoccupation with the puppet was especially significant in French culture around 1900. How exactly this preoccupation relates to Debussy and Hellé's requires careful examination. Like other modernist playwrights, Maeterlinck elevated the puppet as a pure vehicle of authorial intention, nothing other than a character.[54] He claimed to be disturbed by the impression that human actors, through their human-ness, bring onstage intimations of a reality which interferes with the drama's fictional world. The puppet constituted a solution to

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[51] Sigmund Freud, 'Das Unheimliche' (1919), trans. Alix Strachey, in *Sigmund Freud, Collected Papers*, iv (New York, 1959).

[52] H. J. Schwarcz, 'Machine Animism in Modern Children's Literature', *Library Quarterly*, 37 (1967), 78–95 at 79.

[53] 'qui ont perdu leurs illusions'. The publication no longer had music, but was dedicated to Debussy.

[54] On the abiding relation between puppets and the notion of authorial control, see Scott Cutler Shershow, *Puppets and 'Popular' Culture* (Ithaca, 1995).

this problem, in being incapable of betraying a personality distinct from that of the character which it plays. But Maeterlinck was not necessarily providing a literal instruction when he gave the subtitle 'three little plays for marionettes' to a series of dramas written in 1894.[55] As Patrick McGuinness notes, Maeterlinck's proposed alternatives to the actor exist more often as 'paradigms from which real actors can learn their art'.[56] Maeterlinck's characters themselves tend towards the puppet-like, 'tugged by the invisible strings of their unconscious and of the unknowable forces that conspire against them'.[57] He adopted, then, a version of the conventional, pessimistic use of the metaphor of the puppet. The contrast between Maeterlinck's understanding of dollhood, on the one hand, and Debussy and Hellé's understanding, on the other, is most clearly signified by the corporealities of their respective mechanical figures. In Maeterlinck's dramas, the sign of the puppet-like is a slow, deliberative, somnambulant style of movement, essentially the opposite of the agile, decisive corporeality of Debussy and Hellé's toys. This reveals a deeper distinction between the natures of the figures explored through those signs.

In Maeterlinck's plays, puppets and dolls also become a paradigm of human inscrutability. This second role throws more clearly into relief the nature of the characters that inhabit Debussy and Hellé's toy box, and it is necessary to explore it in some detail. The second of Maeterlinck's 'plays for marionettes', *Intérieur* (*Interior*), takes place outside a house in which a family is gathered for the evening. Gazing at the family through a window, one of the characters (identified only as The Old Man) observes: 'You cannot see into the soul as you see into that room. . . . They say only trivial things; . . . They look like motionless dolls [poupées], and yet so many incidents are taking place within their heart'.[58] The lifeless doll becomes an end-case in physiognomic inertness. Its impassivity is an analogy for the limits of bodily and facial expression, which may seem incapable of registering true subtleties of feeling. The blankness of the family's exteriors may suggest the absence of interior feeling, but in

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[55] *Alladine et Palomides; Intérieur; et La Mort de Tintagiles: trois petits drames pour marionettes* (Brussels, 1894).

[56] Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford, 2000), 114.

[57] Ibid., 118.

[58] 'On ne voit pas dans l'âme comme on voit dans cette chambre. . . . Elles ne disent que des choses banales; . . . Elles ont l'air de poupées immobiles, et tant d'événements se passent dans leur cœur'. The translation is my own.

fact conceals what Maeterlinck elsewhere called a dark 'interior sea'.[59] The image of the doll therefore emphasizes, in Maeterlinck's human characters, a faulty connection between a shadowy realm of 'interior' feeling and the 'exterior' expression of that realm. Like the post-Romantic subject more generally, his characters are plagued by this disconnection.

The doll or puppet invoked by Maeterlinck's Old Man is a figure without expression, by implication because it has nothing of its own to express. The doll may serve as a metaphor for what cannot be 'seen into' because it is, as Kenneth Gross puts it, a 'subject without interiority'.[60] This absence of interiority was the basis of modernist adoptions of the puppet as a substitute for the actor. But Maeterlinck, crucially, considers the doll more in its status as a mere object with human form, rather than—as it is in *La Boîte à joujoux*—a figure ensouled through play. Debussy and Hellé's dolls, unlike those imagined by Maeterlinck, are highly expressive and quite the opposite of 'motionless'. They display the vitality that Winnicott insisted they must. What distinguishes them, if anything, is not their inscrutability but their *legibility*: the transparency of feeling suggested by the soldier's fanfares or the doll's prayer. Yet it cannot be said that they possess interiority. If Maeterlinck used the doll to emphasize a disjunction between interiority and exteriority, Debussy and Hellé do something like the opposite.

The toys' significance as ensouled yet lacking interiority is illuminated by the best-known passage of Baudelaire's 'Morale du joujou'. Here, he observes: 'Most kids want above all to *see the soul* [of their toys]'; this 'is a first metaphysical inclination'.[61] Opening up a toy after a great effort, the child is dumbfounded: 'But *where is the soul?* This is the beginning of sadness and stupefaction'.[62] Baudelaire's point is not that the toy lacks a soul, but that the soul is not a 'thing' to be physically located. The essay suggests how our relations with toys illustrate the irresolvable paradoxes of substance

[59] Maurice Maeterlinck, *'Confessions de poète', un texte-manifeste de la création poétique symboliste*, in Stefan Gross (ed.), *Introduction à une psychologies des songes (1886–1896)* (Brussels, 1985), 81.

[60] Kenneth Gross, 'Love among the Puppets', *Raritan*, 17/1 (1997), 67–82 at 71.

[61] 'La plupart des marmots veulent surtout *voir l'âme* . . . . c'est une première tendance métaphysique': 'Morale du joujou', 207. The exact philosophical import of Baudelaire's toy essay has escaped attention, despite its title and its familiarity as a point of reference in scholarship about toys.

[62] 'Mais *où est l'âme?* C'est ici que commencent l'hébétement et la tristesse'. Ibid., 207.

dualism. The passage plays upon the deep-seated association between psychological and spatial interiority—between the 'soul' and some hidden inner realm. The child's discovery is that the toy, while an ensouled being, does not reveal any such realm. Baudelaire's essay points towards a difference between toys and their more distant cousins, automata. Harbouring inner mechanisms, the automaton reproduces the sense of distinction between an (often inscrutable) exterior and an (always mysterious) interior. Lacking any simulation of an interior realm, the toy collapses that distinction. The wooden toy represented in Hellé's pictures sustains this idea with particular firmness. One of its most wholesome features is that it is wooden through and through. That it does not conceal an interior realm is related to its homely simplicity and aura of dependability.

Literary scholars and philosophers have sought recently to extend the longstanding tradition of using puppets as vehicles for investigating the nature of consciousness. Chiara Cappelletto, for example, brilliantly argues that the puppet/puppeteer relation serves as a metaphor of the relation between our twinned senses of being and having a body, or of knowing ourselves as subject and object.[63] These writers focus almost exclusively on the puppet (implicitly, the marionette) as a philosophical artefact. As a being entirely without mechanisms, the toy models a different kind of subject-object relation. While, for Stewart, the toy world reconstructs spatial relations between insides and outsides, the toy itself addresses our perception of those relations in their psychological dimension, questioning the distinctions between interior and exterior that we seem impelled to overdraw. The toy is the icon of a subject whose soulhood resides only and entirely in its exterior. More precisely, the wooden toy represents a subject which cannot acknowledge a distinction between interiority and exteriority.

Hellé and Debussy's exploration of the toy-like supports this interpretation, especially in the more emotive moments where the stripped-down piano writing evokes a depthless transparency of feeling. In the doll's prayer, the textural sparseness points out a space around or between the notes, revealing a striking absence of complication or uncertainty: everything is on the surface, cleanly displayed. Another illustrative feature

[63] Chiara Cappelletto, 'The Puppet's Paradox: An Organic Prosthesis', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59/60 (2011), 325–66. See also Tzachi Zamir, 'Puppets', *Critical Inquiry*, 36 (2010), 386–409.

is the toys' decisiveness and singularity of purpose, as in Polichinelle's exit from the battlefield. This aspect of their nature might now be said to arise from their inability to display the hesitations that result from consulting an inner consciousness, pausing between thought and action. The comparison with Maeterlinck clarifies this point. The somnambulant corporeality of his puppet-like characters signifies their failed attempts to fathom their interior selves. Their slow, inexpressive demeanour is a consequence of their total introversion, as they attempt to grasp the obscure sensations flitting across their consciousness. It signals, then, the disjunction between interior and exterior to which they are in thrall. In evincing quite the opposite corporeality, Hellé and Debussy's toys suggest quite the opposite state of being.[64]

To some extent, this interpretation of the nature of the doll's 'soul' corresponds to the nineteenth-century understanding of the puppet as an ideal of un-consciousness. The best-known example is Heinrich von Kleist's famous essay of 1810 on the marionette theatre, whose actors possess their startling grace partly because, unlike human ones, they are not riven by the disunity or self-alienation that arises from self-consciousness.[65] Maeterlinck's doll-like characters, with their paralyzing attempts to scrutinize their own subconscious, display an acute version of that disunity. Again, however, the elegant, ethereal corporeality of Kleist's puppets mark them as different beings— or explorations of the signs of a different state—from Debussy and Hellé's. That ethereality carries the puppet's 'aura of otherness' (in Kleist's case, their proximity to the divine).[66] Carrying the toy's aura of familiarity, the comic figures of *La Boîte à joujoux* embody a more bathetic and relatable ideal of unconsciousness. The ending clarifies this ideal. That the toys' dealings with the world do not engage or expose a core of inner being makes sense of the fact that the wooden soldier is ultimately unaltered by his experiences. He displays what Steven Connor, discussing a contemporary example of a wish to become doll-like, calls 'a thing's power of declining to be subjected to subjecthood'.[67] The toy is free of the subject's obligation to sustain its

[64] Hellé's single reference to the toys' souls, towards the end of the third tableau, might undermine this interpretation, the preposition 'dans' implying the existence of an inward realm. But as I suggested earlier, Hellé's description confirms that these are wooden beings through and through, containing no mysterious section to which their intimations of livingness might be sourced.

[65] This idea also informed Rilke's references to the puppet in the *Duino Elegies*. Segel, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, 45–6.

[66] Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 87.

[67] Steven Connor, 'Guys and Dolls', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26 (2015), 129–41 at 139.

own being through experiencing the world—to be held in a state of unceasing adjustment to the world in order to keep itself in existence. The power of thinghood is its imperviousness to the importunity of the world's demands on our responsiveness. This, then, is the power sustaining the fantastical dream of living 'like a toy' that Hellé outlined at the storybook's beginning.

TOWNS AS TOY BOXES

Hellé's link between the human world and the toys' world—between 'toy boxes' and 'towns'—is quite specific. There might be little significance in his reference to the urban beyond the fact that towns recall the jumble of figures in the toy box. But beneath the sentence in question is an illustration (**Figure 5**) showing a contemporary street populated by a variety of toy-people, who come and go with the comic energy displayed by the toy box's inhabitants. Both the remark and the illustration, appearing on the storybook's first page, suggest that it is in some way about the modern city. In early twentieth-century France, writers, choreographers and film-makers linked urban subjects and mechanical bodies in many different ways, often incorporating music. For example, the inexpressive objectivity of the circling bodies in Jean Börlin and Ricciotto Canudo's ballet *Skating Rink* (1922), with music by Arthur Honegger, suggests how the repetitive rhythms of city life demand a machine-like state in its inhabitants. Hellé's observation continued a late nineteenth-century interest in imagining urban subjects specifically as toys or puppets. The central character in Georges Michel's prose poem of 1890, 'The Toy Shop'—purportedly a response to the static, perfectly arranged figures of Seurat's *Un dimanche après-midi à L'Île de la Grande Jatte*—believes that the crowd around him consists of 'marvellously fashioned' puppets, constantly making the same life-like movements and observations.[68] The poem addresses the alienation of urban life: so estranged are we from others' activities that our glimpses of them could reveal no more than the loop of a miraculous mechanism. But neither of these ways of imagining urban subjects can be convincingly extended to the comically expressive, evidently wooden bodies in *La Boîte à joujoux*.

[68] Ephraïm Mikhaël, *Poésie. Poèmes en prose* (Paris 1890), 131–3. (Mikhaël was Michel's pseudonym.) For the Seurat connection, see Sven Loevgren, *The Genesis of Modernism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1971), 218–19. The translation is from ibid. 218.

Figure 5. Hellé, illustration of a town as a toy box, *La Boîte à joujoux*

The piece is not, in fact, about the city in any direct way.[69] Nonetheless, the opening of the 1913 version raises a clear question. How might the urban subjects of modernist discourse display, or desire to display, qualities of toyhood? How might they re-enter the relation with and among objects that the piece explores? It is the particular status of the toy established by Hellé and Debussy—as a comic figure not alienated from itself—that clarifies its place in contemporaneous discourse about the city. In the context of this discourse, the inhabitants of *La Boîte à joujoux* become more than simply parodies of people who are impervious to their surroundings.

According to literary and medical ideas prominent in French culture (and other European cultures) around 1900, the modern city dweller's subjection to a barrage of stimuli—sonic, visual, and interpersonal—induced the condition of 'neurasthenia'.[70] The clamour of sensations overwhelmed the ability to organize them, threatening one with the danger of simply being those sensations. Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) presents a paradigmatic literary example of the enervated urban subject.[71] Stefanie Harris observes: 'In Paris, Rilke is recorded with (and becomes a recording of) the sensory data received through the eye. The exterior and the interior are no longer distinguishable.'[72] The strategies of defence discussed by sociologists

[69] Indeed, the subject of the third tableau is distinctly rural—although its bucolic flavour arguably invokes the urban through its self-conscious indulgence of a fantasy of permanent escape from the city.

[70] The classic account of this discourse in France is Deborah Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley, 1989), especially Chapter 5. See also Sharon L. Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (Cambridge, 2004).

[71] The novel is about a solitary existence in Paris, informed by the author's experience of living there in the 1900s.

[72] Stefanie Harris, *Mediating Modernity: German Literature and the 'New' Media, 1895–1930* (Pennsylvania, 2009), 25.

included sheltering behind physical and psychological 'shells', which could include a 'uniform code of . . . distant behaviour'.[73] The bodily exterior's potential as one such shell was realized in the motif of the mask. Rilke's speaker recalls the effect of unintentionally surprising a passer-by who has been 'wholly immersed within herself': she 'started out of herself too rapidly and roughly, so that her face was left in her hands. . . . I was appalled to see the inside of the facial mask'.[74] The 'un-masked' stranger, in Diana Festa-McCormick's words, 'reveals a face not composed for Malte's scrutinizing eye', precipitating 'the total display of what is most hidden and intimate'.[75] Here, Rilke develops an important theme in nineteenth-century literature about the city, which celebrated being thrown into fleeting empathy with strangers' expressions, in myriad instants of absorption. To Rilke's characters, this sensation of living entirely from glance to glance in the looks of others has become nightmarish. Adopting an 'everyday public mask' rids its wearer of the burden of spontaneous expressiveness, which threatens to absorb her into the street's overwhelming flux of inchoate or abortive intersubjectivity.[76]

In this context, the masked figure represents an extreme disconnection between public exterior (the mask) and private interior (what is beneath). The citizen must enforce this disconnection in order to resist the collapse of one into the other, and escape the evisceration of interior consciousness that Rilke vividly describes. The mask's inscrutability is founded on its nature as an inanimate object. The image of the inanimate doll may therefore serve as an alternative to the mask. In Maeterlinck's dramas, the doll-like exterior obstructs the capacity that Rilke's speaker is horrified to find himself exercising in the street: the capacity to 'see into the soul'. (James Ensor's painting, *The Intrigue* (1890), a sinister parody of the physiognomy of the urban crowd, makes the link between the conditions of being masked and of being doll-like.) By contrast, the characters of *La Boîte à joujoux* serve as comic ideals rather than potential parodies of the urban subject—through precisely the sense in which Debussy and

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[73] Hirsh, *Symbolism*, 49, citing Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', reprinted in Richard Sennett (ed.), *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities* (1903; New York, 1969), 47–60.

[74] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Michael Hulse (London, 2009), 4.

[75] Diana Festa-McCormick, *The City as Catalyst: A Study of Ten Novels* (Rutherford, NJ, 1979), 75.

[76] Ibid., 25.

Hellé's understanding of dollhood is opposed to Maeterlinck's.

The animated wooden toy offers a fantastical solution to the city dweller's psychological predicament. Acknowledging no distinction between interior and exterior, it represents an imaginary subject without an interior consciousness requiring shelter. It has no need to resort to the self-alienating protection of the 'mask'; indeed, it cannot do so. At the same time, it is invulnerable to the self-loss wrought by the street's sensory bombardment (becoming a mere 'recording' of sensations) since it may experience those sensations without being changed by them. In short, the general fantasy of toyhood explored in *La Boîte à joujoux* acquires a specific intensity and significance in the context of contemporaneous ideas about modern urban experience. So too does the other wish elaborated by the piece—to revisit childhood relations with objects. For the child, the transitional object's role is to establish the very distinction which the urban subject may need to *re*establish: between self and world, interior and exterior. As Rilke put it (anticipating Winnicott), the child uses the doll to establish distance between itself and the 'amorphous world pouring into' it.[77] Rilke might just as well have used this last phrase to describe Brigge's experience of the city's overstimulation. People cannot serve the doll's purpose, since as children we simply 'merge into [people], lose ourselves in them'—just as the flâneur loses himself in strangers' glances.[78] To imagine urban subjects as toy-like is to imagine interactions that never risk self-loss in the street's disorientating flux of incipient intersubjectivity.

In his essay on human relations with dolls, Connor summarizes a recent topic of interest common to the humanities:

> Human beings find many ways to keep alive the idea that there is a thing that may be called 'life', on whose side human beings are, which must be rescued or resuscitated from the deathliness of the object world, the sepulchral generality of the *it*. . . . We are increasingly becoming aware of how we are formed by the *it* that we would wish to take a stand against . . .[79]

The piano version of *La Boîte à joujoux* invites the listener-spectator to revisit childhood relations with objects, and therefore to refrain from opposing a side of 'life'

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[77] Rilke, 'Dolls', as cited in Kenneth Gross (ed.), *On Dolls* (London, 2012), 55. Translation taken from Idris Parry (ed.), *Essays on Dolls* (Harmondsworth, 1994).

[78] Rilke, 'Dolls', in Gross, *On Dolls*, 54.

[79] Connor, 'Guys and Dolls', 140.

to a side of the 'it'. The piece insists on the *liveliness* of the object world, and how qualities of the 'it' inhere in us. Yet the storybook, I have also suggested, in the end sustains rather than rejects a putative opposition between an organic and inorganic order. It emphasizes an understanding of the human that is defined against a vision of the non-human. If, then, *La Boîte à joujoux* exemplifies 'modernism's resistance to modernity', it also illustrates how such resistance might ultimately belong to modernism's reinforcement of modernity.[80]

[80] Brown, 'Thing Theory', 12. See note 8 above.