

Linee d'ombra

Lecture del fantastico
in onore di Romolo Runcini



a cura di Carlo Bordini

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*Lecture del fantastico
in onore di Romolo Runcini*

A cura di Carlo Bordoni

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Eric S. Rabkin
THE LIFE OF TOYS

I. The Wonderful Library

Romolo Runcini, as all who know him know, radiates delight: energy, curiosity, kindness, joy, and—perhaps most notably—a sunny, playful, generous intellect. Those who have had the pleasure of visiting his personal library know that that room, like the fixed leg of Donne’s compass in “A Vale diction: Forbidding Mourning,” grounds him in space while nourishing his spirit that roams wherever imagination dares. The high palazzo ceilings are almost touched by rows of close-packed shelving crammed with parti-colored books higher than a man can reach without a ladder. The sun streams in across the Bay of Naples, the air of fairyland wafts through the legible worlds of this citizen of Fantasie. To pass among the bookcases sometimes requires that one twist, the way is so narrow, the plenitude so overpowering, the variety omnipresent. And atop many of the shelves, perched on pine before many rows, peeking out between booktops and shelf bottoms, and sometimes in cases of their own, one sees a kaleidoscope of bright, compelling toys.

Romolo’s toys are not simply leftovers from his or his children’s youth, not the faded random survivors of a generation of spring cleanings, but rather gorgeous, vivid—albeit often chipped—living artworks from another era. One sees brightly painted puppets, marionettes, masks, game pieces, dolls, tops, and every other conceivable variety of toy but most notably the fine cast iron or sheet metal creations that we can make move and that move us in turn. The sight of a little woodsman forever bent to saw an always ready tin log impels us to turn the crank and watch the reciprocal action, the reciprocating motion of the toy and the toy reciprocating our motive energy by displaying an image of a world a century away in a forest now turned (but let’s not think of this too long) to apartment blocks. These toys reach out to us as strongly as we reach out to them. There is life in these toys.

II. Learning Is Child's Play

Ideally, there is life in all toys. Adults too often forget this, so most children's toys are dead to many adults. For that reason, one *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of toy is "A material object for children or others to play with (often an imitation of some familiar object); a plaything; also, something contrived for amusement rather than for practical use (esp. in phrase *a mere toy*)." "Children or others." In the world of toys, adults become "others." The natives of toyland are children.

In Romance languages, the words for "toy" (like *jouet* in French, *giocattolo* in Italian, and *juguete* in Spanish) all derive from words meaning "to play" (*jouer*, *giocare*, and *jugar* respectively). Children play; adults work. Naturally, then, a toy is also a "plaything." But the real work of childhood is learning which, in our world, we associate often with the Dickensian "gradgrind" of school. Given the complexities of calculation, the horrors of history, and the terrors of tests, it is no wonder that most children's favorite school day is a snow day, when the heavens intervene to allow them unexpected and unstructured leisure. It is hard, in our world, to remember that the very word "school" comes from a Greek word meaning "leisure."

When my family moved to Spain for a year, we English-speakers needed to learn quickly. My wife and I studied Spanish for a few months in preparation and immediately after arrival began to struggle ahead as best we could. Our son, then fourteen, had studied some Spanish, too, and although he attended an English "college" in Spain one of his subjects and the language of the schoolyard was Spanish. Within a couple of weeks he was holding forth manfully. But our daughter, then nine and also registered in an English-language school, gave no signs of learning Spanish at all. Our encouragement literally did not extract so much as a "buenas tardes" from her. Then one day, after perhaps two months in Madrid, my wife called me to peek with her around the door jamb into our daughter's bedroom. There she sat, cross-legged on the floor, a Barbie doll in each hand. She was bouncing each up and down vigorously in turn on the floor to indicate which one was angry, which defensive, as by turns they pursued a fluent and heated argument in—so far as we could tell—perfect Spanish. That night at dinner, we asked her in Spanish if she wanted more vege-

tables. “Si, gracias,” she replied. Even today she speaks beautiful Spanish.

The world scares children. (Truth be told, it scares adults sometimes, too.) How is one to learn to deal with the foreign immensity that growing up makes inevitable? Toys potentiate projection. Children all over the world play house, play tag, build models, draw their fancies on paper or in the earth. When we hold toys in our hands, the world around them becomes toyland. In that realm of fantasy, Superman flies when the child runs across the lawn with the caped doll held aloft. And ray guns zap the mean old man who is always watching from the window across the street. We learn to speak Spanish, how to take on the roles of parents, and how to ventilate fear and anger without coming to blows. How can we say “mere toy” when it is toys that allow us to grow?

III. Living Dolls

The expression “mere toy” is an adult phrase that disparages an object that allows the fancy of a child to take on a crucial solidity against the facts of the world. Perhaps adults so pride themselves on their worldliness that acknowledging the need for—or, worse, attraction to—such an object frightens them. Nonetheless, occasionally, as in the phrase “sex toy,” we acknowledge that this reifying function remains valuable well past childhood. Indeed, some of the world’s great fantasies center on living dolls.

In English, “she’s a living doll” indicates idiomatically that a woman is so beautiful as to be ideal. Sigmund Freud’s most famous essay on fantasy, “Das Unheimliche” (“The Uncanny”), centers on an analysis of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” a novella staged in Offenbach’s *Tales of Hoffmann*, in which Nathanael, the protagonist, falls fatally in love with Olympia, a simulacrum created by a physicist. Of course, Nathanael does not recognize Olympia’s mechanical nature. Most visitors to the scientist’s salon express astonishment at Olympia’s life-likeness. Her joints are articulated marvelously, but she does not speak. So what? “Never before had [Nathanael] had such a splendid listener ... ‘What are words? Mere words! The glance of her heavenly eyes expresses more than any commonplace of speech’” (118).

The reference to heaven signifies much here. Ever since Eve “saw that the tree was good for food” (Genesis 3:6) and, having eaten, Adam

and Eve immediately “knew that they were naked” (Genesis 3:7), eye imagery has combined both knowledge in the intellectual sense and knowledge in the carnal sense. If toys allow projective experience, they do that in part through the imagery of the eyes. Toys become what humans see in them. The Christian notion of the connection between eye imagery and the passage from childhood to adulthood speaks in the words of St. Paul: “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass darkly; but then [in heaven] face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:11-12). As one moves from childhood to adulthood, one puts away toys; as one moves from adulthood to heaven, one puts away the sexuality Eve and Adam brought us and comes to perfect, undisturbed knowledge.

Nathanael, of course, never achieves perfect, undisturbed knowledge. In fact, he dies in a frenzy for lack of a real Olympia. Near the end of Hoffmann’s tale, a professor of rhetoric reflects on Nathanael’s madness and asks, “do you not see the point of it all? It is all an allegory, an extended metaphor. Do you understand? *Sapienti sat.*” While the wise may indeed know, “many honorable gentlemen were not reassured by this. The story of the automaton had very deeply impressed them, and a horrible distrust of human figures in general arose. Indeed, many lovers insisted that their mistresses sing and dance un-rythmically and embroider, knit, or play with a lapdog or something while being read to, so that they could assure themselves that they were not in love with a wooden doll; above all else, they required the mistresses not only to listen, but to speak frequently in such a way that it would prove that they really were capable of thinking and feeling. Many lovers, as a result, grew closer than ever before; but others gradually drifted apart” (123). In Hoffmann’s story, even for those who cannot *see* the boundary between the real and the fantastic, projective play allows a rehearsal of erotic relations that deepens love for some and tarnishes it for others.

In Kate Atkinson’s astonishing novel called *Human Croquet*, the narrator’s entire life is dominated by the absence of her idealized, elegant mother, a figure of fancy so unlike the people around her that she represents not only another role but another world. Late in the novel we learn that this Eliza, like Shaw’s in *Pygmalion*, was made—or remade—by a man. Unlike the crusty but reachable Professor Higgins,

this Eliza's "Dickie" (a boyish nickname for Richard and slang in English for a small penis) makes her into a high-class whore. "Eliza learned to talk properly, learnt from films and from the aristocracy who slummed it [with her]. ... 'I've made you into a lady,' Dickie Landers said to her and Eliza laughed 'I'm just like this bloody war [World War II],' Eliza sighed, 'a phoney'" (302).

Eliza recognizes her own status as plaything, but clearly the *Oxford English Dictionary* is limited in calling this woman toy "A thing of little or no value or importance, a trifle; a foolish or senseless affair, a piece of nonsense." Eliza is of great economic value to Dickie and of overpowering emotional importance to all members of the family she leaves behind.

The first definition of "toy" offered by the OED is "abstract": "Amorous sport, dallying, toying; with *pl.*, an act or piece of amorous sport, a light caress." The erotic component of "toy" is part of its general meaning. While Atkinson borrows Eliza's name from Shaw, the novelist, who cites *Pygmalion* (e.g., 301), clearly knows that she and Shaw both owe their story to Ovid.

In Ovid's tale, the sculptor Pygmalion falls in love with his beautiful statue Galatea. That much is clear in Shaw and forms the popular content of the tale. But in *Metamorphoses* itself, the story is more complex. Pygmalion has seen "the loathsome Propoetides [who] deny the divinity of Venus ... [and so] were visited by the wrath of the goddess, and were the first women to lose their good names by prostituting themselves in public. Then, as all sense of shame left them, the blood hardened in their cheeks, and it required only a slight alteration to transform them into stony flints." Pygmalion, seeing these women, is so revolted that he "long lived a bachelor existence [but eventually] ...carved a snowy ivory statue. He made it lovelier than any woman born, and fell in love with his own creation. The statute had all the appearance of a real girl, so that it seemed to be alive, to want to move, did not modesty forbid. So cleverly did his art conceal its art" (231). In his vision of this statue Pygmalion learns even deeper love than that which the Propoetides had shriveled. "If you gods can give all things, may I have as my wife, I pray - ' he did not dare to say: 'the ivory maiden, but finished: 'one like the ivory maid'" (232). But Venus gives Pygmalion, for his modesty, all that his heart desires. If a toy is "often an imitation of some familiar object," something "like" something else, the living Galatea is no mere toy. But to arrive at that dee-

per understanding of love, attained perhaps by some of Hoffmann's "honorable" folk, required projective experience made possible only by the toy.

IV. The Pinball Effect

Not every object can serve as a toy for every person. For Pygmalion, it was crucial that his art was so great that it concealed itself as art. The ivory of Galatea contrasted the flint of the fallen women in color as well as character. But for some children, the mere suggestion of a cloth head on a corn-cob body may be enough to allow a doll to support an imaginative life. For each of us, in any given circumstance, there is a degree of complexity or lifelikeness that must be reached to grant the toy autonomy. Nathanael granted it to Olympia; most did not. Go to a bowling alley and watch how people stare intently at their balls careering down the lanes. How many twist and strain in the air in an attempt to use sympathetic magic to influence the point of the ball's impact on the pins? This superstitious wrenching, in the United States, is called "body English." It is a kind of silent language spoken by many adults, but clearly not by all.

On a well made pinball machine—and this is even more widely true for today's electronic toys than it was for the mechanical ones of yore—any significant body English would cause the game to "tilt," that is, register an illegitimate interference by the player and cancel all points earned on that play. Yet all engaged pinball players jiggle and twist at least a bit, although, of course, not too much to actually register, which means, not enough to make any difference. The application of body English to a descent of the ball in a pinball game is an exercise in projective reality. While few of us would twist ourselves to influence the simple flight of an arrow, almost all would for a pinball machine. The pinball machine has crossed a line of complexity for most that enables projective reality. I call this crossing of the threshold "the pinball effect."

For the customers of prostitutes like Atkinson's Eliza before she marries, for Pygmalion, and for Nathanael, the pinball effect obtains. One can allow oneself to believe (in the same way that we believe any well wrought fantasy) that the mechanical behavior of the prostitute conveys animate love. The stereotype of the good-hearted whore cap-

tured that fantasy. But, despite the association of “toy” with “amorous sport,” there are many desires not at all erotic enabled by toys.

Perhaps the world’s most famous living doll is no ideal woman at all but a piece of wood carved into the shape of a boy who then wants nothing more than to become a real son to the “father” who made him. The story of Pinocchio begins not with sight imagery but something allied yet much more dangerous, fire. “There was once upon a time a piece of wood. This wood was not valuable: it was only a common log like those that are burnt in winter in the stoves and fireplaces to make a cheerful blaze and warm the rooms” (1). Once the famous living puppet sets out on his own, his prankish behavior and carelessness land him in constant trouble. At one early point, “he returned home like a wet chicken . . . and having no longer strength to stand, he sat down and rested his damp muddy feet on a brazier full of burning embers. And then he fell asleep; and while he slept his feet, which were wooden, took fire, and little by little they burnt away and became cinders. Pinocchio continued to sleep and to snore as if his feet belonged to someone else.” And so he lost his feet (28-30). Fortunately, his father/maker Geppetto repairs Pinocchio this time as so many times. But a key feature of this episode is the dissociation between Pinocchio and his own feet. The living puppet, like my daughter’s arguing dolls, supports extreme discomfort and confronts fear (of the foreign and of destructive fire) by virtue of dissociation. The toy is complex enough—Pinocchio in his own mind and in the reader’s—to allow the figure of fantasy to be “like” the real and thus sustain supportive fantasy. The pinball effect with real pinball machines lets us believe we can influence a mute universe; in children’s literature, we see others doing just the same. Pinocchio cries out, Geppetto comes, the world is set right.

Ultimately, Pinocchio wants more than the life of a son-like toy; he wants to be a son. The story allows him that, but only after he becomes obedient, following the advice of the cricket-conscience and the prescriptions of the carver-father. Those who internalize society’s rules are called adults. The puppet becomes a real boy when he shows that he will be able to learn to obey as real boys learn.

The lesson of Pinocchio would be feckless were the puppet merely a puppet. He is carved from magic wood and speaks long before he becomes flesh. He exhibits a wonderful combination of traits. His famous nose grows whenever he tells a lie, willy nilly. The mechanical inevitability of this growth can stand for many aspects of human life,

from a boy's unbidden erection to a girl's irresistible urge to hold a baby to anyone's shock at tripping into the grip of gravity and falling. The Fall is about this, too. But the key issue in Eden, as with Pinocchio, is that the falling character has free will.

Characters in books, just like toys, do not, of course, have free will. Friar Lawrence will never leave early enough to stop Romeo and Juliet from killing themselves. If you doubt this, just glance at the end of the play. And yet in reading a good story or seeing a good play, we make believe that the character has free will, that outcomes could vary, and that the variation is somehow in the hands of the character. "Why don't you put a cup in front of Raggedy-Ann?" a mother asks a child who is playing at tea party. "Because she said a naughty word," the child replies. The very possibility of projective play requires a level of complexity that allows one to posit free will in the mechanical other. Most of us outgrow toy tea parties. Few outgrow body English.

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the computer HAL that runs the spacecraft supposedly in the service of its human occupants, turns against them and tries to annihilate them. Two survive. HAL kills one of them, but the last manages to enter into the service closet where HAL's integrated circuits fill the lurid racks. Dave begins to remove the circuits. HAL asks Dave what he is doing. Dave is silent and implacable. HAL expresses his commitment to the mission. Dave is undaunted, removing circuit after circuit. Finally HAL starts repeating himself mechanically, then devolves to repetition of a child's nursery rhyme, and then falls silent. Dave leaves the service closet and continues his mission alone.

Some viewers take this key scene to represent the death of HAL, and they are correct. Others take it to represent the destruction of the computer, and they are wrong. 95% of HAL continues to function. Indeed, without massive computer support, the ship could not sustain Dave's life. There is still plenty of computer left. What is not left is HAL's ability to take independent action, to demonstrate—or appear to us to demonstrate—free will. In other terms, HAL begins as sufficiently complicated that he seems to be a character; he then ceases to be a character. He falls below the threshold of the pinball effect.

From the standpoint of projective reality, HAL becomes useless. He goes unmentioned for the rest of the movie.

V. Dangerous Obsessions

In D. H. Lawrence's famous fantasy "The Rocking-Horse Winner," a boy discovers that as he rides his rocking horse, he is able to foresee the outcome of real horse races. Using an adult family servant as a partner, he places bets and makes money that he turns over to his mother, a woman always wanting more material goods. It is clear that the boy, who cares nothing for horse racing or money, wants only his mother's love. This obsession is neither the eros of Nathanael nor the self-protection of Dave, but it is an equally perilous drive. As the boy's winnings increase, his mother's wantings increase, and as the necessary bets increase, the boy, it turns out, must ride his rocking horse ever more frenziedly. He goes faster each time, becomes almost entranced, and pours sweat. Each new outcome won comes at the cost of a more shocking debilitation. Finally, as readers of Lawrence might expect, the boy kills himself riding his desire to win motherly love. The consequences of an unattainable fantasy have become horribly clear.

Just as "The Rocking-Horse Winner" is an adult story, real rocking-horses aren't just for children. True, the nursery sort are for children, but the carousel sort are for teens, young lovers, and even grandparents with grandchildren. It is hard to believe that the rhythmic up and down of the carousel horse expresses free will, but then good riders control their horses fairly well anyway. The pinball effect sometimes takes hold.

Laurence Sterne used the notion of the hobby horse, another name for rocking horse, to define eccentricity.

...every man to his own taste. ...Nay, if you come to that, Sir, have not the wisest of men in all ages, not excepting *Solomon* himself,—have they not had their Hobby-Horses;—their running horses,—their coins and their cockle-shells, their drums and their trumpets, their fiddles, their pallets,—their maggots and their butterflies?—and so long as a man rides his Hobby-Horse peaceably and quietly along the King's highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him, —pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?" (13)

The proviso at the end of Sterne's discussion makes all the difference. Lawrence's boy did not ride "peaceably and quietly" and his mother compelled him to ride by praising him for money brought in. In the adult world, some toys work well, and their lives project our li-

ves and sustain our imaginations, but also in the adult world, the world of Lawrence's mother, some toys are fatal.

VI. Nostalgia and Hope

At the famous ending of *Citizen Kane*, the viewer comes to understand what the dying newspaper tycoon had sought all his life. The enigma of "Rosebud" is resolved in a snow globe—a toy that mimics reality—and a searching shot of a warehouse with an old snow sled branded "Rosebud." Snow sleds do not go very fast, but they go fast enough to create for children the pinball effect. We project into them the fantasy of freedom and speed. It was the freedom above all, the safe freedom of childhood, that the tycoon died still seeking. He was always looking back for the lost toys of youth.

"Nostalgia" comes from Greek roots meaning "the pain of homecoming." But not all homecoming need be painful. The partial, fanciful, projective homecoming that toys allow adults may be, if we ride peaceably and quietly, sustaining.

I am fifty-eight years old and still have in my study two stuffed toys. One is a teddy bear named Ezra, after the founder of Cornell University. The woman who became my wife, bore my children, and lived in Spain with me gave me that teddy bear when we were students together. We named Ezra together. He sits on my bookshelves still.

My son, to whom I dedicated a work about fantastic literature, loved Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, a brilliant children's book. After hearing me lecture about that book to a college class, on the next Father's Day, my then teen-aged son gave me a stuffed effigy of one of Sendak's delightful monsters. He (she?), too, sits on my bookshelves still.

There is only a little pain in these toys, because while they remind me that my years are passing, they recall how good some of those years have been. Indeed, the world, it seems, has known some wonderful years, years in which, say, tin woodmen saw eternally for our pleasure. My friend Romolo understands this perfectly. It is because he loves life so much that he makes so much room for the lives of toys.

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