

# The Philosophy of Toys

Charles Baudelaire

MANY YEARS AGO – HOW MANY? I have no idea; all this goes back into the mists of early childhood – I was taken by my mother to visit a certain Madame Panckoucke. Can she have been the mother, or the wife perhaps, or the sister-in-law of the present Panckoucke? I do not know. I remember that it was in a very peaceful mansion, one of those town-houses where the edges of the courtyard are green with grass, in a silent street, the rue des Poitevins. This house had the reputation of being very hospitable, and on certain days it would become brilliant with lights and noise. I have often heard tell of one masked ball at which M. Alexandre Dumas, who used then to be referred to as ‘the young author of *Henri III*’, created a stir by appearing with Mlle Elsa Mercoeur on his arm, dressed as his page.

I remember very distinctly that the lady in question was wearing velvet and fur. After a while, she turned to me and said: ‘Here is a little boy to whom I would like to give something – to remember me by.’ She took me by the hand and we crossed several rooms; then she opened the door of a chamber where an extraordinary and truly magical sight met my gaze. The walls were invisible, so deeply were they lined with toys. The ceiling had vanished behind a great flowering bouquet of toys, which hung down like wonderful stalactites. The floor barely afforded a winding path for one’s feet. Here was a world of toys of every kind, from the costliest to the most trifling, from the simplest to the most complicated.

‘This,’ she said, ‘is my children’s treasure trove. I set aside a small budget for it, and when a nice little boy comes to see me, I bring him here so that he can take away a souvenir of me. Now choose.’

With that admirable and luminous alacrity which is typical of children, in whom desire, deliberation and action are so to speak compacted into a single faculty – and which sets them apart from degenerate man, almost all of whose time is on the contrary eaten up with deliberation – I promptly seized upon the newest, the most beautiful, the most expensive, the most garish, the most original toy in sight. My mother exclaimed at my indiscretion, and obstinately refused to let me take the prize away with me. She would have me content myself with some entirely mediocre choice. But I could not agree to this, and for the sake of harmony resigned myself to *happy medium*.

I have often been diverted by the fantasy of meeting all those *nice little boys*, who, by now half-way across life's cruel desert, have long since been handling things other than toys, but whose carefree childhood once prospected for a souvenir from Madame Panckoucke's hoard.

As a result of this episode I can never stop in front of a toy shop, letting my eyes wander amid the inextricable jumble of its curious shapes and competing colours, without thinking of the lady in velvet and fur who appeared to me as the Fairy Queen of toys.

I have moreover retained an abiding affection and reasoned admiration for that singular statuary art which, with its lustrous neatness, its blinding flashes of colour, its gestic violence and decisiveness of contour, so well answers to childhood notions of the beautiful. There is in a great toystore an extraordinary gaiety which makes it preferable to the finest bourgeois apartment. Is not the whole of life to be found there in miniature, and in forms far more colourful, pristine and polished than the real thing? There you may find gardens, theatres, beautiful costumes, eyes as clear as diamonds, cheeks kindled with rouge, charming lace-work, carriages, stables, drunkards, charlatans, bankers, actors, punchinellos like fireworks, kitchens, and of course entire armies, in perfect discipline, complete with cavalry and artillery.

All children talk to their toys; the toys become actors in the great drama of life, scaled down inside the *camera obscura* of the childish brain. And in games they reveal their considerable faculty of abstraction and high imaginative powers; they play without playthings. I am not referring to those little girls who put on grown-up airs, paying social calls, presenting their imaginary children to each other and talking about their outfits. The poor little things are copying their mothers; they are already preparing for the immortal future puerility that is theirs, and decidedly none of them will ever become my wife. — But let us take instead the stagecoach! The eternal drama of the stagecoach played with chairs: the carriage as such (a chair), the horses (chairs), the passengers (chairs), where the only living actor is the postilion! The equipage remains motionless — yet with what burning speed it devours the imaginary leagues! What economy of means! And is there not something here that puts to shame our blasé public, whose imaginative impotence demands physical and mechanical perfection of its theatres; who cannot conceive that the productions of Shakespeare would still be beautiful with a machinery of barbaric simplicity?

And the children who play at war! Not in the Tuileries, with real rifles and real sabres; but the solitary child who deploys and leads into battle two armies all by himself. The soldiers are corks, dominoes, draughtsmen, knucklebones; the fortifications are planks, books, and so forth; the missiles are marbles or whatever else lies to hand; there will be dead bodies, peace treaties, hostages, prisoners and war tributes. I have noticed in many children the belief that what counts as a defeat

or a victory in war is the greater or lesser number of dead. Later on, cast into the maelstrom of universal life, themselves obliged to fight so as not to be beaten, they will learn that a victory is often uncertain, and that no victory is real unless it is, so to speak, the summit of an inclined plane, down which their army will thereafter slither with uncanny speed; or unless it be the first term of an infinitely extended progression.

The facility for gratifying one's imagination is evidence of the spirituality of childhood in its artistic conceptions. The toy is the child's earliest initiation into art, or rather it is the first concrete example of art; and when maturity intervenes, the most rarefied example will not satisfy his mind with the same enthusiasm, nor the same fervent conviction.

But let us go further and consider this vast universe of childhood; let us consider the barbaric toy, the primitive toy, where the maker's problem consists in constructing an image as approximate as possible out of materials as simple and economical as possible. For example, the cardboard punchinello, worked by a single thread; the pair of blacksmiths hammering on their anvil; the horse and rider in three pieces, with four wooden pins for legs, the horse's tail forming a whistle, and the rider sometimes sporting a little feather in his cap – a great luxury, this, since these are penny toys, halfpenny toys, farthing toys. But do you really think such simple artefacts create a lesser reality in the child's mind than those New Year's Day marvels, which are the tribute paid by parasitic servility to parental wealth instead of a gift offering to the poetry of childhood?

For such is the poor child's plaything.<sup>1</sup> When you go out in the morning with the fixed intention of taking a solitary stroll along the great thoroughfares, you should fill your pockets with these little inventions, and outside the taverns, under the trees, offer them as tribute to the poor anonymous children, whom you meet. You will see their eyes widen unnaturally. At first they will not dare accept, unable to believe their luck; then their hands will avidly seize your offering and make off with it, like cats who go and eat at a careful distance the morsel you hand them, having learnt to be wary of men. It is certainly a most amusing way of passing your time.

On the subject of the playthings of the poor, I once observed something even more simple, but sadder, than the penny toy – namely the living toy. On a main road, behind the wrought-iron grille of a fine garden at the far end of which gleamed a handsome chateau, stood a handsome and blooming little boy, dressed in one of those country outfits that are so full of coquetry. Luxury, freedom from cares, and the daily spectacle of wealth have so prettified these children as to make them seem

---

<sup>1</sup>This and the following paragraph were later used to form the basis of Baudelaire's prose-poem *Le Joueur du pauvre*.

a different species from those born and bred in mediocrity and poverty. Beside him a magnificent doll lay on the ground, looking as neat and clean as its master, varnished and gilded, dressed in a beautiful tunic, covered in feathers and glass beads. But the child was paying no attention to his toy. This is what he was looking at: on the other side of the grille, on the road, among the thistles and nettles stood another boy, dirty, somewhat rickety, one of those urchins along whose cheeks the snot slowly winds a path through the dust and grime. Between those symbolic bars of iron, the poor child was showing his toy to the rich child, who was examining it greedily, as a rare and unknown object. And this toy, which the little brat was tormenting and shaking up and down in its makeshift cage, was a live rat. His parents, to save money, had drawn a toy from life itself.

I believe that children in general act upon their toys; in other words, that their choice is governed by their disposition and desires, vague, if you wish, and by no means formulated, but very real. However, I would not deny that the contrary can occur – that the toy can sometimes act upon the child – above all in cases of literary or artistic predestination. It would hardly be surprising if a child of this kind, to whom his parents chiefly give toy-theatres so that he can continue by himself the pleasures he experiences from the stage and from marionettes, should early grow used to regarding the theatre as the most delicious form of Beauty.

There is one kind of toy which has been on the increase for some time, and of which I have neither good nor bad to say. I refer to the scientific toy. The chief defect of these is their expense. But they can continue to amuse for a long time, and they develop in the mind of a child the taste for marvellous and unexpected effects. The Stereoscope, which creates a flat image in the round, is of this type, and has existed for some time. The Phenakistoscope, which is older, is less well known. Imagine some movement or other, for example a dancer's or juggler's performance, broken down and divided into a certain number of positions; imagine that each – perhaps as many as twenty – is represented by one image of the dancer or juggler, and that these images are depicted round the edge of a circular disc made of card. This card, as well as a second circular disc, perforated at equal intervals by twenty little windows, is attached to a picot at the end of a handle, which you hold as you would a hand-screen in front of the fire. The twenty little figures, representing the action of a single figure broken down into its constituent parts, are reflected in a mirror placed in front of you. Apply your eye at the level of the little windows, and spin the cardboard discs rapidly. The speed of rotation transforms the twenty openings into a single circular opening, through which you see twenty dancing figures reflected in the mirror, all exactly alike and executing the same movements with a fantastic precision. Each little figure has availed himself of the nineteen others. On the card the figure spins, and its speed makes it invisible; but in the mirror, seen through the revolving windows, it is motionless, executing on the spot all the movements that

are distributed between all twenty figures. The number of pictures which can thus be created is infinite.

I would like to say a few words about the customs and manners of children in relation to their toys, and about the notions of parents on this stirring question. — There are some parents who try never to give toys. These are solemn, excessively solemn individuals, who have made no study of nature, and who generally make everyone around them miserable. I do not know why I think of them as reeking of Protestantism. They can neither understand nor allow such poetic ways and means of passing the time. They are the same individuals who will gladly give a shilling to a poor man on condition that he stuff himself with bread, but refuse him a farthing to go and slake his thirst in the nearest tavern. When I think of a certain class of ultra-reasonable and anti poetic people at whose hands I have suffered so much, I always feel hatred pinching and gnawing at my nervous system.

There are other parents who look upon toys as objects for mute adoration. There are certain clothes which one is at least allowed to wear on Sundays, but toys must be handled with greater care! Thus no sooner has the family friend deposited his offering on the infant lap, than the fierce and parsimonious mother swoops it up and away into a cupboard, saying: 'It is far too lovely for a child of your age; *you can play with it when you are bigger!*' A friend of mine confessed that he had never been allowed to play with his toys: 'And when I was older,' he said, 'I had other things to do.' — Furthermore, there are some children who do the same thing of their own accord: they do not make use of their toys, but save them up, range them in order, make libraries and museums of them. Only rarely do they show them to their little friends, all the while imploring them *not to touch*. I would instinctively be on my guard against these *men-children*.

The overriding desire of most little brats, on the other hand, is to get at and *see the soul* of their toys, either at the end of a certain period of use, or on occasion *straightaway*. On the more or less swift invasion of this desire depends the lifetime of the toy. I cannot find it in me to blame this infantile mania: it is the first metaphysical stirring. When this desire has planted itself in the child's cerebral marrow, it fills his fingers and nails with an extraordinary agility and strength. He twists and turns the toy, scratches it, shakes it, bangs it against the wall, hurls it on the ground. From time to time he forces it to continue its mechanical motions, sometimes in the opposite direction. Its marvellous life comes to a stop. The child, like the populace besieging the Tuileries, makes a last supreme effort; finally he prises it open, for he is the stronger party. But *where is its soul?* This moment marks the beginnings of stupor and melancholy.

There are other children who must instantly break any toy that is placed in their hands, almost without inspecting it; as to these, I confess I do not understand the mysterious motive which causes their action. Are they seized by a superstitious

furor against these tiny objects which imitate humanity, or are they perhaps forcing them to undergo some Masonic initiation before introducing them into nursery life? — *'Puzzling question!'*<sup>2</sup>

*translated by* PAUL KEEGAN

---

<sup>2</sup>The words are taken from Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*: 'What Song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling Questions, are not beyond all conjecture.'