

A poet of silence: Edward Petherbridge and the Pyladean tradition¹

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*The focus of this article is the ancient pantomimic or Pyladean tradition and, specifically, its reception in the work of British actor Edward Petherbridge. Pantomime was a ballet-style entertainment, which flourished in the Graeco-Roman world between the end of the first century BCE and the end of the sixth century CE. It involved a solo dancer (predominantly male and masked), who enacted successively the various characters in a specified plot to the accompaniment of instrumental music and sung narrative. Its essential characteristic was corporeal eloquence. Petherbridge is an actor who uses both movement and stillness to communicate character in a way that is dance-like. The Pyladean qualities I believe he exemplifies include: the silent embodiment and exposition of character; precision in posture, gesture and rhythm; cheironomia (the measured motion of the hands); and display of mind in terms bodily. In the course of the article, I examine these Pyladean attributes in relation to the principles expounded by Lucian in his treatise *De Saltatione* (On Dancing). I look at Petherbridge's dancer's 'line', his training in movement and mime, and, with examples from a few of his most celebrated roles, his use of physical nuance in the delineation and undoing of character.*

ἀλλ' ὅπερ ἔφη ὁ Πυθικὸς χρησμὸς, δεῖ τὸν θεώμενον ὄρχησιν καὶ κωφοῦ συνιέναι καὶ μὴ λαλέοντος τοῦ ὄρχηστοῦ ἀκούειν.

In the words of the Delphic oracle, whosoever beholds dancing must be able 'to understand the mute and hear the silent' dancer.

(Lucian, *De Saltatione*, 62)

He instinctively expressed in his work his devotion to the Greek idea – for in his bones he felt its ancient fires revive. He danced, he did not merely walk – he sang, he by no means merely spoke.

(Edward Gordon Craig, *Henry Irving*, 1930)

Elsewhere I have contended that Fred Astaire (1899–1987) can rightfully be deemed a twentieth-century heir to Pylades, reputedly the greatest exponent of the ancient art of pantomime dancing, and that his artistry, although revolutionary in itself, bore a demonstrable and intriguing relationship to the somatic principles expounded by Lucian in his second-century treatise *De Saltatione* (On Dancing).² Here I wish to propose that Pylades has

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1 I am indebted to Edward Petherbridge for generously making available to me some rare footage and a wealth of yet-to-be-published material and for being, in the first place, such an inspiring subject.

2 See 'A Pylades for the Twentieth Century: Fred Astaire and the Aesthetic of Bodily Eloquence', in Macintosh (2010).

another exemplary modern legatee in British actor Edward Petherbridge (b. 1936) and that, consequently, the Pyladean or pantomimic tradition is not confined to dance.

Known as *pantomimos*, *saltatio* or *orchêsis*, the genre of pantomime enjoyed a long period of popularity in the Graeco-Roman world between the end of the first century BCE and the end of the sixth century CE. Not to be confused with modern pantomime, and the conventions it evokes, it was, according to Ismene Lada-Richards, ‘an expression-filled dance form, predicated on the mute delineation of character and passion’.³ It involved a solo dancing star (*pantomimos* or simply *saltator*, *orchêstês*), predominantly male and masked, who enacted successively the various characters in a specified plot or *fabula* to the accompaniment of instrumental music and sung narrative. Lucian’s treatise is presented in the form of a dialogue, by the end of which the Cynic Crato is converted, by pantomime enthusiast Lycinus, to the merits of an entertainment he has hitherto denounced as unworthy and effeminate. In the course of Lycinus’ apologia, his assertion of ‘how much culture and instruction [pantomime] gives; how it imports harmony into the souls of its beholders’ (καὶ ὅσα παιδεύει καὶ ὅσα διδάσκει, καὶ ὡς ῥυθμίζει τῶν ὁρώντων τὰς ψυχὰς 6),⁴ we learn about the physical and mental qualities required of a successful dancer and about the genre’s distinctive corporeal dramaturgy.

Edward Petherbridge is a consummate actor with a dancer’s ‘line’, who uses both movement and stillness to communicate the history and psychology of a character in a way that is dance-like. The Pyladean qualities I believe he exemplifies include: the silent embodiment and exposition of character; precision in posture, gesture and rhythm; *cheironomia* (literally the measured motion of the hands); and display of mind in terms bodily.

I am not proposing that these qualities have been consciously ‘received’ or appropriated. Indeed, expanding Colin Burrow’s thesis of the ‘unintended consequences’ of reception,⁵ I would argue that the reception of ancient material is not an exclusively conscious or premeditated act, but rather that, very often and illuminatingly, it is a matter of unconscious appropriation, unstudied reinvention, and, perhaps unavoidably, implicit or complicit engagement with the classical past. In Astaire’s case, his ambitions, unlike those of Jean-Georges Noverre in the second half of the eighteenth century, certainly did not extend to a conscious crusade to revive or reinvent ancient pantomime. His own *ex cathedra* statement of artistic philosophy and motivation was almost ludicrously reductive: ‘I just dance.’⁶

In the case of Petherbridge, the inheritance of Pyladean attributes is probably no less fortuitous, although he is a trained mime, experienced in the use of masks, and well-versed in theatre history from the Greeks to the moderns. Recently, he composed for a revised radio version of his one-man show *Pillar Talk: A Theatrical Sketch for St Simeon Stylites and Column* a letter in which a Roman actor describes his pantomimic tour de force in impersonating in turn Pandora, the various ills she unleashed, and Hope. The actor also describes, in

3 Lada-Richards (2007: 13).

4 It should be noted that Lycinus’ praise of the dancer’s intellectual qualities, and his insistence on the pantomime as influential educational discourse, are the product of skilful rhetoric and not indicative of common perceptions of the genre. On the question of whether the ‘élite mentality as a carefully self-constructed subject-position would have been prepared to endorse Lycinus’ fashioning of pantomime as a highly polished, educated genre’, see Lada-Richards (2007: 104–12).

5 Burrow (2004: 9–27, esp. 15 and 24).

6 Astaire (1959: 325).

a way Lycinus could not have surpassed, the pantomime's 'special power to haunt the imagination . . . to ravish the senses and throw his audience into raptures'⁷:

Before they actually 'see' anything, it's a question of getting the audience to swallow the convention, without realizing that it is a convention, that I not only see the ills of the world before they do, but then with a handful of masks and some exhaustive, and exhausting, mime and dance – become them. The most horrific evils draw the loudest reactions; my depiction of monstrous pride surprised me at the premiere by drawing laughter, but there are groans too – for cruelty, for instance. The best reaction is the silence when the drumming and the reed pipes and horn players stop and the audience can't even gasp. . . . Our leading flautist composed a theme good enough to prevent applause from greeting the dove's tremulous entrance, but not loud enough to cover the occasional sound of strong men sobbing. When the storm of applause comes it is not for me, nor the dove, but for Hope: they are fanning the embers of hope in themselves, hoping to chase the worlds evils away.⁸

In conceiving this passage, Petherbridge says he 'remembered a short definition of the ancient pantomimists from a reference book — recollecting this was all I had to go on for the Pandora piece'.⁹ He has subsequently read Lucian's *De Saltatione* in translation. But, whatever his awareness of the basic precepts of ancient pantomime, Petherbridge, like Astaire before him, has consciously developed and convincingly demonstrated an aesthetic of silent, corporeal eloquence, which, to the classically trained eye at least, corresponds strikingly to the art form expounded by Lucian and practiced by Pylades. And, while I accept that the discernible presence of Pyladean qualities does not constitute a unique or unmediated link to the physical dramaturgy of the Graeco-Roman genre, my aim is to establish that Petherbridge's acting, like Astaire's dancing, is part of a longer tradition than is generally recognized, one with imperial Roman pantomime at its root.

The line of a dancer

Although equipped with a beautiful and versatile speaking voice, Edward Petherbridge excels at the silent embodiment and exposition of character. I am not the first person to discern the dance-like quality of his wordless eloquence or even to draw an analogy between him and Astaire. In a review of Petherbridge's co-production (with David Hunt) of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Lloyd Rose of the *Washington Post* observed:

Slender and pale with a sharp, clean profile, Petherbridge is already slightly stylized, one of those streamlined models, like Fred Astaire, who make ordinary mortals look slightly lumpish. His acting has a similar clean and simple grace – like a dancer, he has 'line.' Petherbridge's austerity isn't cold; it focuses and displays a deep warmth. Eccentricity has a home here, as well as humor and compassion, and everyday human appetites.¹⁰

'Line' is here defined as a streamlinedness, a physical leanness and economy. This is something akin to the pantomime dancer's requisite *symmetria*, which Lucian explains as

7 Lada-Richards (2007: 13 and 71).

8 *Pillar Talk* premiered at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on 3 August 2005. The script was published the same year. The letter is a later unpublished addition.

9 In correspondence with the author, 25 January 2009.

10 'Last Tape: Maximally Minimal', *Washington Post*, 19 June 1998.

a litheness and grace as well as the commensurability of all parts of the body to one another and to the whole, a body in accord with the canon of Polyclitus (75). Line is further defined by Rose as a certain poise and precision, a simplicity and subtlety of movement that command attention. But this line, he emphasizes, is not merely or coldly aesthetic; it has depth. It concentrates and delineates character in all its richness and intensity. Compare Lucian's tenet at *De Saltatione* 81:

Ὅλως δὲ τὸν ὄρχηστὴν δεῖ πανταχόθεν ἀπηκριβῶσθαι, ὡς εἶναι τὸ πᾶν εὐρυθμον, εὐμορφον, σύμμετρον, αὐτὸ αὐτῷ εὐκόσ, ἀσυκοφάντητον, ἀνεπίληπτον, μηδαμῶς ἑλλιπές, ἐκ τῶν ἀρίστων κεκραμένον, τὰς ἐνθυμῆσεις ὀξύν, τὴν παιδείαν βαθύν, τὰς ἐνοίας ἀνθρώπινον μάλιστα.

(In general, the dancer should be perfect in every point, so as to be wholly rhythmical, graceful, symmetrical, consistent, unexceptionable, impeccable, not wanting in any way, blent of the highest qualities, keen in his ideas, profound in his culture, and above all, human in his sentiments.)

Lucian also remarks on the pantomime dancer's pliancy, his ability 'to bend like a withe' (ὡς λυγίζεσθαι 77). Citing a particular line of Krapp's ('Have just eaten, I regret to say, three bananas, and only with difficulty refrained from the fourth.'), Rose notes Petherbridge's capacity to 'curl up inside this sort of absurdly elegant line like a cat',¹¹ an image which implies that this feline facility is as much a matter of physicality as of vocal resonance and suppleness. Rose continues: 'He proves equally feline in his surefootedness regarding the banana peels, which succeed in making their presence felt but fail to capsize him.'¹²

A good example of the precision, economy and depth of Petherbridge's line can be seen in the 1987 television adaptation of Dorothy L. Sayers's *Have His Carcase* in which he plays Lord Peter Wimsey. In the story, Lord Peter has just re-entered the ballroom of the Hotel Resplendent in Wilvercombe. He pauses at the top of the steps, and there is a supreme moment of stillness as he catches sight of Harriet Vane dancing with one of the hotel's professional partners. His bodily attitude, the slight inclination of his head, the way he puts his hands in his pockets, his half-smile and the focus of his eyes are all eloquent of quiet suffering beneath a surface of urbane composure. They are also the manifestation of a technique — the actor's and the character's — so well honed and assimilated as not to be obvious or distracting. The moment is made even more riveting by the fact that Petherbridge occupies, as Astaire's dancing figure invariably does, the central third of the frame. The camera then follows his elegant passage across the crowded dance floor. The entire sequence is of only seconds' duration, but it tells us a great deal about the psychology of the character and something of the emotional complexity and the fragile, self-imposed constraint of his relationship with Harriet Vane.

There is another moment of spellbinding stillness in *Have His Carcase*, in which not only Petherbridge's line is apparent but also his pantomimic meaningful use of his eyes.¹³ As Harriet and Peter sit poring over a list of murder suspects in her seaside bedsit, she draws her chair nearer to him and the effect on Peter of her unusual physical proximity is indicated

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The importance of the eyes to the pantomime dancer's corporeal dramaturgy, and the concomitant fact that masks were not always worn, is suggested, for example, by Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 10.32: 'et nonnumquam saltare solis oculis' (and sometimes she would dance with her eyes alone). See also, Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 5.107 and Libanius, *Oration* 64.103.

entirely by Petherbridge's eyes. They convey the eroticism of the moment and, however transitorily, his unguarded and concentrated longing, stripped of its protective layers of erudite piffle and carefully cultivated lightness. As Harriet catches his gaze and shifts slightly under its intensity, his eyes articulate fleeting hopefulness, then discomfiture and withdrawal.

Even within the context of a television sitcom, Petherbridge's dance-like line is easily perceptible and we learn much about his character's psychological situation from his bodily eloquence. In a short scene from the Yorkshire Television series *No Strings* (1989), which centres on two middle-aged people abandoned by their respective spouses and thrown together by their shared predicament, his role is mostly one of reaction. He says very little but, again like Astaire, he tends to command our attention even when he is still, silent or on the periphery of a scene. In this instance, our eyes are drawn to his noiseless movements in the background rather than to co-star Jean Marsh's spoken monologue in the foreground. As he enters Marsh's living room and is invited to sit down, his unease is palpable. His initial attempt to relax is subverted by sudden alarm, registered in his whole upper body, at an obtrusive plant behind him. He tries to redress this loss of equilibrium by assuming a nonchalance he does not feel. As he listens to Marsh's delicate and disjointed narrative, his movements become more contained, even inhibited, through a combination of bafflement, ambivalence and diffidence. At the end of the scene, now standing and with his back to the door through which Marsh has exited, he executes a beautifully timed and expressive turn on hearing her re-enter and uncharacteristically use his Christian name. This is immediately followed by a nice bit of comic business with an erupting beer can, as, finally and paradoxically, he is jolted into a state of relaxation and amused resignation.

A king of infinite space

Almost from the very start of his career, Edward Petherbridge understood, or had instilled in him, what an infinitely expressive and versatile thing the human body was, that stage acting was an athletic as well as imaginative feat, demanding 'heart and head to toe commitment'.¹⁴ As a student at the Northern Theatre School in Bradford from 1953 to 1956, where one of his teachers was Rudolf Laban's assistant Geraldine Stephenson, few limits had been placed on his physical training. His first-year acting tutor, Winnie Hodgkinson, had prophesied an exciting new dawn in the theatre, a time when actors would be required to be acrobatic, to sing, dance, mime and play musical instruments. And so Petherbridge and his fellow students were prepared accordingly. There was instruction in ballet, tumbling and fencing, as well as free movement classes in which they were asked to embody the classical elements (earth, air, fire and water), an autumn leaf, and everything from a moth to a leviathan, all to the accompaniment of études on the piano.

Even when he found himself in less avant-garde theatrical circumstances, he came to appreciate the benefits of this early preparation. In weekly rep, he discovered the surprising physicality and corporeal discipline involved in obeying 'simple' stage directions, such as *Enter or moves down R.*, and in handling the standard drawing-room accoutrements of cigarette cases, soda siphons and door knobs. While playing the part of Algernon Moncrieff in the New Zealand Players' production of Oscar Wilde's

¹⁴ Petherbridge, <<http://www.pethsstagingpost.com>>, 'Wimseycalities', p. 2 (accessed: 2 October 2009).

The Importance of Being Earnest in 1958, he realized ‘that High Comedy like this was a physical thing as much as vocal. . . . To find oneself effortlessly with one’s weight on the correct foot, to be able instinctively to know what to do — and more importantly what not to do — with one’s hands, to act with one’s whole body and soul within the confines of elegant West End drawing room comedy was to be ‘bounded in a nutshell and count oneself a king of infinite space’.¹⁵ Eventually his training in free movement came fully into its own, such as when he portrayed Voltore in Tyrone Guthrie’s production of Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* at the National Theatre in 1968:

I was sent off to the zoo in Regent’s Park to look at the vultures. And I thought, my God, this is just up my street on account of my interest in movement. . . . here I was, going to look at a real vulture, and to try to speak Ben Jonson as a vulture. Guthrie was in love with what I was doing physically and he used to say things like, ‘Fly up on to the bed,’ you know, with *Volpone* lying in it, ‘go on, fly on to it!’¹⁶

In 1962, at London’s City Lit, Petherbridge encountered the Lecoq-trained mime Claude Chagrin, with whom he subsequently worked at the Royal Court Studio and at the Old Vic on the National Theatre’s production of Peter Shaffer’s *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. She impressed on him the importance of fluidity and precision. Among the exercises she instructed the actors in was the realization of character at the anatomical point where one arrested one’s bodily undulations (for example, leading from the knees, one could suggest frailty; from the chest, romance or altruism; from the chin, aggression) and in one’s reaction to the common act of tripping. Her criticisms of her pupils’ improvisations, Petherbridge recalls, ‘were themselves poems of poised clowning and wordless eloquence’.¹⁷ Also at the Royal Court Studio he had his first experience of working with masks: the comic half-mask with William Gaskill and the neutral tragic mask under the near religious tutelage of George Devine. Three decades later, in the first of a series of seven videos on *The Elements of Acting*, he explored in rehearsal with students the imaginative use of both comic and neutral masks in their function in character portrayal and epic storytelling.

At the National Theatre in the 1960s, Petherbridge attended rather abstract movement classes conducted by Yat Malmgren, a former dancer, Laban collaborator and co-founder of the Drama Centre, London. Malmgren drew on Laban’s applied psychology of movement to develop a technique for expressing inner character through movement. Petherbridge remembers Malmgren’s propensity for enigmatic pronouncement: ‘Just remember that thought is expressed diagonally.’¹⁸

Petherbridge employs his physical training and his learned techniques all the time. But he has also appeared in, and very often devised, shows in which movement and mime are special features, for example, *Scrabble* (an experiment in modern *commedia dell’arte* devised by Claude Chagrin in 1969), his own adaptation of R. D. Laing’s *Knots for the Actors’ Company* (1973), and such solo turns as *Who Thought It?* (1972), *The Eight O’Clock Muse* (1989) and *Moveable Feast* (2007). This last was an illustrated lecture, presented at Royal

15 Ibid.

16 In Barkworth (2001: 177).

17 From the manuscript of Petherbridge’s forthcoming autobiographical collection of essays (under the working title *Unscheduled Appearances*).

18 Quoted in Petherbridge’s illustrated lecture, *Moveable Feast*, staged at the Boilerhouse Theatre, RHUL, 24 January 2007.

Holloway, on movement and the physical language of the theatre; it included masks, puppetry and a compelling realization of Edward Gordon Craig's model of perfect physical control — the Übermarionette.

Apart from his own training, Petherbridge has always been interested in acting methods that depend on artifice and stylization. While touring the Far East in the London Shakespeare Group's *Twelfth Night* in 1982, he was impressed by the completeness and control of the corporeal dramaturgy practised by the Peking Opera:

Everything is traditional and is still being handed on intact despite the Cultural Revolution: the way they hold their hands, tilt their heads, the way they take a step, hold their feet. Every single thing is taught; and the exercises they are given are to do with fighting, singing, speaking and dancing. They achieve a completely received technique which takes care of . . . their eyebrows, everything. And yet they imbued what they were doing with a great deal of personal involvement.¹⁹

Head-to-toe living portraits in real time

In general, Petherbridge feels it is important to suggest rather than emphasize, to let the audience have the fun of discovering what one's character is doing. Laurence Olivier once told him: 'You're very subtle and unusual, but I'd like to see you come out more. Raise the flag more.'²⁰ Certainly he does raise the flag, but it his subtlety, particularly his physical subtlety, that reveals most and that throws the bold statement into relief. I will now focus briefly on just a few of his most celebrated roles to demonstrate his ability to communicate, in a physically nuanced way, the life of a character and sometimes the *undoing* of a character.

On stage in London and New York in the mid-1980s, Petherbridge played the part of Charles Marsden, the 'immaculately timid' (Pt. 1, Act 1) novelist, purveyor of 'long-winded fairy tales for grown-ups' (Pt. 2, Act 8), and Nina's faithful surrogate father in Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, for which he collected an Olivier Award and a Tony Award nomination. The fairly static action of this five-hour, nine-act play is interwoven throughout with interior monologues, the characters' spoken thoughts. The reason Petherbridge proved to many critics the most telling exponent of the soliloquizing device was his power to suggest, to insinuate physically, and to 'convey more with the droop of an eyelid or a tilt of the head than many others manage in a torrent of words.'²¹ In the opening scenes, he appeared, as Michael Billington phrased it, 'like a tightly furled umbrella',²² self-contained, fussily circumspect, repressed, with, of course, occasional chinks in his delicate armour. He showed the cool conceit of a New England Brahmin, 'a detached Jamesian observer . . . [who] forever seems to be fastidiously picking at stray lint',²³ dispensing sophisticated rancour while prey to morbid imaginings and a 'prurient purity' (Part 1, Act 5). Perhaps best of all were the moments he winced and bristled at the casual cruelty of Nina's 'dear old Charlie', preserving his shell of ironic detachment but letting the audience glimpse the 'wild agony' beneath: 'Dear old Charlie! . . . descended again into hell!' (Part 1, Act 2).

Then came the bold, hyperbolic statement. Towards the end of the play he had a drunk scene in which the physical and emotional unfurling of his character — the shedding of his

19 In Barkworth (2001: 176–77).

20 Quoted by Petherbridge in Barkworth (2001: 177).

21 Richard Last, 'The heavy burden of guilt', *Telegraph*, 14 July 1986.

22 'O'Neill's epic', *Guardian*, 9 April 1984.

23 Frank Rich, 'A fresh look for O'Neill's *Interlude*', *New York Times*, 2 February 1985.

inhibitions, the outpourings of his heart — was magisterial. Lurching bodily between maudlin indiscretion and savage resolution, his mannerisms, previously so precise and controlled, loosened and expanded, as if, in Petherbridge's own words, 'he'd grown a pair of ludicrous wings!'²⁴ As he held forth about his determination to write his 'first *real* novel' (Part 2, Act 8) about Life, he enacted the corporeal equivalent of Whitman's 'barbaric YAWP over the roofs of the world'.

For many people, Dorothy L. Sayers's gentleman detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, represents his author's ideal man. His intellectual agility and physical assurance and his manifold skills, both intuitive and trained, are almost too good to be true. He has an Oxford Blue in cricket and a First in Modern History; he was awarded the DSO for his service in the Great War; he is an expert in music and incunabula; has a limitless facility for apt quotation; can handle a horse with 'god-like' ease;²⁵ and his talents even include campanology. Petherbridge, who definitively portrayed Lord Peter in three television adaptations, at times cleverly undermined the ideal without ever destroying it. Throughout the series, we see his Wimsey dancing gracefully, driving a golf ball onto the green, punting on the Cherwell, leaping from an open-top Lagonda, tossing a letter onto a tray with offhand accuracy and aplomb, and spontaneously leapfrogging a bollard and launching into a game of hopscotch. But we also see him slipping ever so momentarily on some soap suds as he walks along a prison corridor; distractedly and repeatedly evading a proffered plate of teacakes in Miss Climpson's office; getting his walking stick caught in the sand on the beach at Wilvercome; and being bumped unceremoniously through a revolving door in a hotel lobby. These moments, entirely of the actor's own invention, are subtle but humanizing touches, highlighting, in a very physical way, the character's essential vulnerability.

In the creation rather than the undoing of character, in the stitching-together of the threads of a character's history and the minutiae of his existence, stillness is as crucial a component of Petherbridge's corporeal vocabulary as movement. This was especially so in his portrayal of Beckett's Krapp, a sixty-nine-year-old man who sits and listens to the diary tape he recorded thirty years earlier, spooling it backwards and forwards, and begins to record a new tape. The austerity of the action (fumbling with keys, wrestling with drawers, peeling and eating a banana, etc.), and the need to avoid interpretive embellishment, imposed the most extraordinary discipline on Petherbridge. The critics were impressed by the poise, exactitude, and, above all, the eloquence of his most minimalist gesture: 'He can make the turning of a page seem an act of consequence';²⁶ 'he can convey exasperation with just a twitch of the wrist . . . and he can hold and stretch the silences of the play longer than anyone in any production I've ever seen.'²⁷ 'Like the playwright,' Lloyd Rose proclaimed, 'this actor is a poet of stillness.'²⁸ It was in the stillnesses, the silences, the spaces in between, that

24 In an interview with Yvonne Shafer, *The Eugene O'Neill Review*, vol. xxi, nos 1 and 2 (Spring/Fall 1997), repr. in Shafer (2000: 233–44, 240).

25 'Harriet was silent. She suddenly saw Wimsey in a new light. She knew him to be intelligent, clean, courteous, wealthy, well-read, amusing and enamored, but he had not so far produced in her that crushing sense of inferiority which leads to prostration and hero-worship. But she now realized that there was, after all, something god-like about him. He could control a horse.' (Sayers, *Have His Carcase*, first pub. 1932.)

26 Peter Marks, 'Haunted by Hope and Regret on Eternal Playback', *New York Times*, 29 May 1998.

27 Maggie O'Farrell, 'The Simple Bare Necessities', *Independent*, 30 August 1998.

28 'Last Tape: Maximally Minimal', *Washington Post*, 19 June 1998.

Petherbridge gave his audience a terrifying measure of Krapp's life, of its vastness and its smallness. He has said: 'Time is what actors deal in — timing, yes — but also the subtle interplay of past, present and future.'²⁹ It is this very interplay, the multi-layered temporality in which Beckett's play deals, which Petherbridge managed to encapsulate in his stillness and his silence.

Eloquent stillness was an equally crucial and compelling feature of Petherbridge's most recent characterization in the musical tragedy *Lost in the Stars*, Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson's adaptation of Alan Paton's anti-apartheid novel *Cry, The Beloved Country*.³⁰ Petherbridge played the part of James Jarvis, a white plantation owner whose son, Arthur, is killed by a young black man, Absalom Kumalo. Jarvis's journey takes him from an entrenched position of white supremacy to his reconciliation with preacher Stephen Kumalo, the father of his son's murderer, and ultimately his redemption. Clive Davis in *The Times* said Petherbridge 'injected depth and humanity into a slightly underwritten character'.³¹ He gave Jarvis a dimension, history and credibility that belied his time on stage and the number of lines at his disposal. Not only did he ensure Jarvis's pivotal importance to the plot, but, whenever he was on stage, he became a mesmerizing physical presence by virtue of his powerful stillness and nuanced bodily expression. This was particularly true of his reactions during the murder trial in which he remained a silent, almost spectral figure.

In Jarvis's first scene at Ndotsheni railway station, his son, a liberal lawyer, greets Stephen Kumalo as a friend and equal. Standing mutely outraged on the fringe of their exchange, Petherbridge's wounded expression and rigid bearing told us that, to him, Arthur's egalitarian behaviour was tantamount to a physical injury, an affront to his very being. The moment of Jarvis's epiphany, which occurs outside Stephen's church and in response to Stephen's admission that he has lost his faith in God, was convincingly communicated without the aid of words. The show's ending was also wordless and carried a visceral potency. As the hour of Absalom's execution draws near, the two fathers reconcile and the final image is of Jarvis holding Stephen in an extraordinary elemental embrace. Although his was the only non-singing role among the principal characters, in true Pyladean style, Petherbridge made us 'see' the tragic shape and soul of the music through the moving fluency of his gestures.

Petherbridge maintains that 'a performance literally stands or falls by the lived-in life history carried by the whole body, by what Brecht referred to as the *Gestus*: "an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions".'³² This is nowhere better illustrated than in his glorious Newman Noggs for the RSC's landmark eight-hour-and-forty-minute production of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, a performance which earned him the London Critics' Drama Award and another Tony Award nomination.³³

29 From the manuscript of Petherbridge's forthcoming autobiographical collection of essays (under the working title *Unscheduled Appearances*).

30 Directed by Jude Kelly and conducted by Charles Hazlewood, this revival of *Lost in the Stars* was performed on 23 and 24 June 2009 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London.

31 *The Times*, 25 June 2009.

32 From the manuscript of Petherbridge's forthcoming autobiographical collection of essays (under the working title *Unscheduled Appearances*).

33 *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* premiered at the Aldwych Theatre, London on 5 June 1980. It opened on Broadway at the Plymouth Theatre on 4 October 1981. The production was subsequently filmed for television, becoming the first major drama for the new Channel Four.

Because many of Noggs's speeches had been curtailed in the novel's translation to the stage, so much of the characterization was physical, and what made it so memorable was Petherbridge's extraordinary bodily eloquence and indeed lyricism. Significantly, in creating the character, he chose not to over-emphasize Noggs's Dickensian grotesquerie, as other actors have done. He gave Noggs a limp and, with a little bit of lank, the suggestion of a red nose, but he relied mainly on establishing an imaginative and quite physical empathy with the man. In conversation with Peter Barkworth in 1983, he revealed the inspired evolution of his character:

The famous drawings of Phiz gave me an image. They were caricatures of course, but I thought if I can capture some of the reality inside the caricature, it would be a good thing to do and luckily I was the right kind of shape to do it: I mean long and thin. And then there was all his history, suggested here and there in the book and barely hinted at in the play. David Edgar's dramatic telegrams were a marvellous exercise in economy. And then . . . I suppose the imaginative part was imagining him in his attic on his own, before he'd met Nicholas, or even after he'd met him. Newman Noggs spent hours in his little room, having his drink, fanning the four or five coals in his grate and feeling cold, and thinking about his past or trying to forget it. And I had to ask myself: how does he get from one minute to the next? How does he put up with it? Does he switch off, and does he think about other things. How did he cope with being so solitary, not only when he was alone, but at work too. Thinking about all that helped with his physical attitude: how he stood, how he was, how he stood inside his body.³⁴

Apart from perfectly capturing Noggs's physical eccentricities (the cracking finger-joints and twitching limbs), Petherbridge revealed the character's innate gentleness and gentility, the decency and sense of right that ultimately prevail. As Frank Rich wrote in the *New York Times*, he succeeded in elevating 'a comic type with rending poetry.'³⁵ His portrait of this funny fallen gentleman was, in fact, the tender soul of an epic production, its humane core. Leon Rubin called it 'perhaps the most detailed and brilliant characterization of any in the production. . . . He built up an extraordinary character, yet balanced it by bringing out the reality behind the outwardly crazy form. It was a Dickensian portrait with a totally credible, recognizable human quality and warmth.'³⁶

Speaking hands and display of mind

One pantomimic quality, above all, which Petherbridge shares with Pylades — and Astaire — is a masterly *cheironomia*. In the pantomime dancer's silent exposition of character, the hands were of paramount importance. Reference is often made in our ancient sources to the dancer's speaking hands. Cassiodorus talks of 'fingers that are tongues' ('linguosi digiti') and of 'the hand of meaning' ('illa sensuum manus') that, without writing, performs what writing has set forth (*Variae* 4.51.8–9). Antipater in the *Palatine Anthology* describes Pylades as having hands 'that can say everything', while Nonnus in his *Dionysiaca* tells of Polymnia, the muse of pantomime, sketching 'in the air an image of a soundless voice, speaking with hands and moving eyes in a graphic picture of silence full of meaning' (5.88). Lucian's Lycinus recounts the story of Demetrius the Cynic, whose hostility to the 'meaningless, idle movements' of pantomime is conquered by the ravishing performance of the leading Neronian

34 In Barkworth (2001: 175–76).

35 *New York Times*, 5 October 1981.

36 Rubin (1981: 145).

dancer, causing him to cry out: ἀλλά μοι δοκεῖς ταῖς χερσὶν αὐταῖς λαλεῖν ('You seem to me to be speaking with your very hands!' 63). Petherbridge follows in the Pyladean tradition of being *cheiriosophos* (handwise, *De Salt.* 69) and using his hands as graceful and expressive narrative instruments.

Closely related to *cheironomia*, in the pantomime dancer's corporeal language, is a rationality or appositeness of gesture and rhythm. At *De Saltatione* 69, Lycinus insists:

ἐν δὲ τῇ ὀρχήσει ἀμφοτέρα συμμέμικται. καὶ γὰρ διανοίας ἐπίδειξιν τὰ γινόμενα ἔχει καὶ σωματικῆς ἀσκήσεως ἐνέργειαν, τὸ δὲ μέγιστον ἢ σοφία τῶν δρωμένων καὶ τὸ μηδὲν ἔξω λόγου.

(In dancing both [soul and body] are combined. For there is display of mind in the performance as well as expression of bodily development, and the most important part of it is the wisdom that controls the action, and the fact that nothing is irrational.)

Choreographer Bob Fosse once commented of Astaire's unpredictable use of the off-beat: 'With Fred you could never know where the rhythm was going to go. It was always a surprise. It never exactly turned out the way you thought it was going to go and yet, when you heard it, you said, "Well, that's right. It can't be any other way."' ³⁷

Likewise, Petherbridge's use of gesture and movement is often eccentric and unpredictable but, nevertheless, entirely apposite. And he can make a meticulously considered and rehearsed action seem completely spontaneous. His rhythmical appositeness, his choreographic achievement in suiting the action to the word, is also analogous to Henry Irving's creation, as depicted by Edward Gordon Craig, of dances that captured the great and curious rhythm in Shakespeare:

Irving positively designed dances which fitted perfectly to the speeches given him by Shakespeare. . . . A faintest turn, another step, a word. That constituted one of his dances. . . . A slight step with his eyes. . . . From the first to last moment that Irving stood on the stage, each moment was significant. . . . every sound, each movement, was intentional – clear-cut, measured dance: nothing real – all massively artificial – yet all flashing with the light and pulse of nature. ³⁸

To appreciate Petherbridge's *cheironomia* and rationality of gesture in action, let us consider moments in the life and adventures of Newman Noggs. The influence of Claude Chagrin's comic mime techniques is evident; as Sir Mulberry Hawk and his dissolute coterie barge their way into Ralph Nickleby's office, our eyes are focused on Noggs, pushed up against the 'wall' by their intruding forms. Petherbridge subtly extends the familiar mimic archetype by steadying himself against the partition as he retreats to his clerk's room. Some of the most exuberant instances of his *cheironomia* occur when Noggs, in his solitude, acts out retributive fantasies against his employer, pummelling, kicking, and throttling him, and methodically making him swallow one of every English coin. With equal cheironomic exuberance, Newman expresses his pride in Nicholas's hot-headed gallantry. While counselling the fugitive Nicholas to exercise patience and not to take the part of everyone who is mistreated, he suddenly bangs the top of Nicholas's chair, swinging a punch at an imaginary Squeers and at the world's injustices, and declaring: 'Damn it, I'm proud of you. I would have done the same myself!'

³⁷ Fosse interviewed for the PBS television documentary *Fred Astaire: Change Partners and Dance*, directed by David Heeley, 1980.

³⁸ Craig (1930: 77–8).

In his penultimate scene, in which he confronts Ralph Nickleby, Noggs uses his hands to conduct himself in a triumphant aria of long-suppressed fury. The righteous extravagance of these gestures contrasts with his moving physical containment in his reunion with Nicholas at the end. This final scene epitomizes Petherbridge's belief that the most important things are centrally felt and thus contained, there being too much going on inside to risk movement. The peripheries, that is, the hands, are used sparingly, but are all the more effective or emphatic when they do come into play. Here, Newman, deeply affected and unable to give utterance to his feelings, literally tries to hold his emotions in with his hands. Similarly, at various points throughout the play, he uses his hands to dispel remembrance of what he once was and to suppress the urge to dwell on his reduced circumstances. As he composes his introductory letter to Nicholas, he stands perfectly still with his hands clasped around a glass of spirits. He begins to say 'Once no one was ashamed . . .' and, waving his right hand in resolute and self-admonitory fashion, continues, 'Never mind that. It's all over.' Then, as he utters his heartbreaking postscript, he is again motionless: 'You may say Mr Noggs there, for I was a gentleman then. I was indeed.'

* * *

In Edward Petherbridge, Pylades has another worthy successor; a poet of silence in the ancient pantomimic tradition, a *cheironomos* of subtlety and persuasion, whose characterizations are in many ways choreographic triumphs. In his corporeal eloquence, he resembles Lada-Richards's description of the pantomime dancer as one 'who can delight and educate the audience by virtue of a body that becomes a magical kaleidoscope of individual self-reflections'.³⁹

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39 Lada-Richards (2007: 89).