

Didier Plassard, « Edward Gordon Craig's *Drama for Fools* : A Journey through the Past ? », intervention au colloque *Action, Scene and Voice : 21st Century Dialogues with Edward Gordon Craig*, Pomona College (Claremont, California, 28-30 mars 2013).

### **Edward Gordon Craig's *Drama for fools*: A Journey through the Past?**

*You never knew that  
That I could do that  
Just walking the dead.*

David Bowie,  
*Where are we now?*

Much more than a theatre theorist or a stage director, Edward Gordon Craig is generally considered a utopian, and, as such, someone who was completely absorbed in his vision of a distant future. The Italian scholar Ferruccio Marotti, who was very close to him in the last years of his life, describes a man who had completely given up being practical for the present and who was only “living on his dreams of the future<sup>1</sup>”. Craig’s projects for an entirely moving and transformable stage, for a performer who should be his own dramatist, or, at least, who should surpass both the qualities of a living actor and of a puppet, as well as his appeal for an art based solely on movement and light, able to create a new “belief”, if not a new religion: all these strange ideas and these revolutionary declarations, often written in a prophetic style, leave us with the impression of a man who was so strongly magnetised by what should happen tomorrow that he would certainly have despised his today and proved no real interest for yesterday.

Furthermore, the visionary character of his best-known writings, engravings and drawings creates the sensation of an irremediable gap between the present and other times. Whether Craig is anticipating the theatre of the future or is fancying the origins of performing arts, no connections can be made with our ordinary experiments of what is a theatrical stage, or with our knowledge of what it was before. It is indeed as difficult to imagine his famous projects for the staging of *Macbeth* taking place in a theatre with a standard proscenium arch than to link his considerations on ancient Egyptian drama or Indian Puppet theatre, as expressed in *The Actor and the Übermarionette*, with any kind of historical facts. Craig’s quotation from Herodotus in this essay, with the wonderful description of a “fair brown queen” dancing in an Egyptian temple-theatre, is obviously a fake, and his tale of the Indian origins of puppetry by the River Ganges doesn’t

pretend to be something else than a nice legend, which could very well have been written for children.

But actually Craig, as we all know, could also demonstrate a real interest for the past – namely, for the past of performing arts, and moved progressively from this “nostalgic, Romanticised conception of history<sup>2</sup>”, to quote Olga Taxidou, to a passionate inquiry into the material history of theatre: for example, for the Bibiena stage-designers family, about which he planned to publish a book in the 1920s’, or for historical theatre buildings in Italy, to which he devoted several numbers of *The Mask*. Even then, however, Craig’s idea of history remained very idealistic, taking the form of an immemorial tradition, more or less forgotten during the last centuries, and to be restored in a distant future: a consideration which reveals how far away he stood from the modernist conceptions of history, all oriented by the ideology of human societies’ constant progress, and how much – although having invented a “belief” all his own – he borrowed from religious mental frames. In the similarities he sees between the past and the future, we can easily recognize the old Christian myth of a proximity to God which was lost and will be found again, a Paradise which stays behind us and whose backdoor we will find someday in front of us when, following Heinrich von Kleist’s statement in his essay “On the marionette theatre”, we will have completed our journey all around the world.

My purpose here will be to examine how and why Edward Gordon Craig, in his dramatic cycle *Drama for Fools*, written during World War I, shifted temporarily from this utopian and idealistic frame to adopt a completely different attitude: an attitude we can characterize both as a meditation upon the problem of origins and as a debate with the society of his time.

### **Craig’s path towards the Past**

“As early as 1914, looking back into the past becomes much more important for his work than prophesying about the future<sup>3</sup>”, writes Olga Taxidou in her study of the journal *The Mask*. This, I may suggest, was the result of an evolution which had begun seven years before, in February 1907, when Craig, walking in the streets of Florence where he had moved, felt himself almost physically surrounded and pushed forward by the spirit of the artists who had lived there during the Renaissance. The variations of his projects for a theatre school clearly reveal his new interest in history: when a first *Plan for School* stressed above all the necessity of teaching “movement” and

“voice” techniques, in October 1911 another *Plan* shows an organization in three major sections: “Past”, “Present” and “Future”<sup>4</sup>. Even if it could obviously not compete with the 128 people whose work should have been dedicated to the “Future”, the “Past” section would have employed no less than 50 people in the “Studies”, for “courses of lectures etc. as at a College”. At the Arena Goldoni, two years later, this part of the work would only take the form of evening discussions about the books gathered for the library. It is therefore not surprising if, despite its programmatic title, Craig’s book *Towards a New Theatre*, published in 1913, bears on its cover the plan of a Roman theatre, taken from a 16<sup>th</sup> Century edition of Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*, and begins with a discussion about Greek, Middle-Age and Renaissance stage design: knowing more and more about the past had become, for Craig, the path leading to the future.

If a first impulse in this direction was given to him by his will to reconsider theatre history from the point of view of architecture, stage design, actor playing, and to minimize the part of literary drama, a second one came from outside events: namely the war, which reduced to nothing his plans, forced him to close the Arena Goldoni and cut the financial help he received for it from Lord Howard de Walden. The sight of all of Europe sinking into the conflict soon convinced Craig, as an orphan of the future and a prisoner of a present where his artistic dreams couldn’t find their place any more, to seek a shelter in the past. “Country? I have none, or the Theatre is my ‘country’. Patriotism? I have none – My love is given to the Theatre”<sup>5</sup>, he writes in a note for *The Drama for Fools*, his grandiose project of a dramatic cycle for puppets, to which he dedicates intensively himself during the four years of World War I. Craig’s original intention was to write 365 plays: he published a half-dozen of them (mostly in his monthly journal *The Marionnette*), completed 30, left other 30 unfinished, wrote introductions, drew many plans, sketches, portraits and scenes till the beginning of the 1920s. Then, from time to time, his whole life long, he used to come back to his manuscripts and to amend his *Drama* most accurately, as we can infer from his uncountable comments on the manuscripts. The first edition of this extraordinary material has recently been published<sup>6</sup>, mostly on the basis of a collection of manuscripts Roman Paska bought for the International Institute for Puppetry in Charleville-Mézières (France) ten years ago.

The first drafts Craig writes for *The Drama for Fools*, in 1914, appear as a continuation of *The Actor and the Übermarionette*. The *First Prologue*, a discussion between two puppets, ends with the discovery of a backstage, showing a house in Burma: there, a very old master of puppets, before he dies, sends his creatures to the West, so that they would become apostles of his art. This myth

of the origins of puppetry should have been the point of departure for the whole drama: the two puppets, Buddha and Aha, would have made “a long journey” all around the world. They would have gone to Rome, to Egypt, to the Equator, and also back to their homeland Burma, meeting “mythological figures”, “historical figures” as well as new characters on their way<sup>7</sup>.

### ***Katabasis: the origin before the origin***

But Edward Gordon Craig soon abandoned Buddha and Aha, and he left the old Burmese puppet master dying in his house. The protagonists of *The Drama for Fools* would be a symbol of eternal Evil, Cockatrice, a Blind Boy from London and an American parrot named Columbus. They would travel not only around the world, but also through the ages, from Genesis till today. And, above all, Craig decided that their adventures would begin in a more “classical” manner, with a descent into Hell: a *katabasis*, as if Cockatrice, Blind Boy and Parrot were some new Orpheus or Aeneas.

So the first scene of *The Drama for Fools* shows Blind Boy and Parrot, with Cockatrice still in his egg, entering the underworld. Craig’s description of Hell is clearly influenced by traditional puppet shows: not only for its comical atmosphere, with devils singing lullabies, but above all because it mixes Greco-Roman mythology with Christian imagery: the king of Hell is Pluto, surrounded by snakes, boiling cauldrons and devils waving forks. This melting of classical culture and religious belief is typical for popular puppet theatres: it can be found, for example, in the *Temptation of St Anthony*, the play which was usually given by fairground puppeteers in North-Western France, and where Pluto also appeared as the king of Hell. But much less traditional is the way Edward Gordon Craig portrays the everyday life in the underworld: it is located in the London cockney area of Cheapside, and looks like a comfortable modern lodging-house – till some visitors come, and the whole scenery has to be changed in order to look like a “normal” Hell.

If this first episode of *The Drama for fools* depicts a *katabasis*, its models are not to be found in Homer’s *Odisey* or in Virgil’s *Aeneid*: the Blind Boy’s curiosity is the only reason he visits the underworld, and there he doesn’t meet the souls of dead people, as Aeneas did, nor does he try like Orpheus to take away one of them. In order not to be thrown into a boiling cauldron, Blind Boy offers the egg to Pluto, and lets Cockatrice appear out of it, frightening everybody. Then, he

tells the story of their mutual encounter, when Jupiter, disguised as a cock, asked him to be the “mother” of his son, still in his egg: a story which is staged as a “scene within a scene”, in front of Pluto, his devils and his visitors, like the “Mousetrap” scene in *Hamlet*. So this first part of *The Drama for Fools*, which introduces to us the main characters, opens onto a previous episode, a beginning before the beginning. In the same way, the *First Prologue* ended with a distant vision of the dying Burmese master, and many pages of *The Drama for fools* insert excursus, commentaries, footnotes, exchanges between different stages, etc.: sometimes to introduce a joke or an allusion, sometimes to quote a saying or a book, but always to break the continuity of speech, to split the unity of time and space, and to shift from one fictional level to another.

Travelling through the Past, therefore, is anything but walking a straight line between yesterday and today. *The Drama for Fools* begins as a quest for origins which reveals, behind any origin, the existence of a previous one. If we can see, in its first scene, Cockatrice being born of an egg to frighten all the inhabitants of the underworld, the play within a play shows us another of his births, in modern London, where Jupiter has entrusted the egg to Blind Boy. There, Cockatrice explains to the boy that he has already lived “more than a ’undred times a ’undred [years]”, that he has been born a thousand times, and that Adam, Abraham and Arlequin, all together, shut him in a box for “a cool thousand years<sup>8</sup>”. The Second Prologue, in which we saw the egg of Cockatrice appearing amid a crowd of Gods, Semi-Gods and Heroes, under the Tree Yggdrasil of Scandinavian mythology, had already suggested that, in *The Drama for Fools*, action results from the encounter of two dimensions of time: the eternity of Evil, as impersonated by Cockatrice, and the various contexts of his adventures.

### **Dialogues of the dead**

If the first scene of *The Drama for Fools* doesn’t borrow much from Greco-Roman models of the *katabasis*, it is more reminiscent of the most famous trip to the underworld, Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. An early draft for this scene reveals that Craig intended like Dante to represent Hell as organized in circles. He thought namely of a “circle of the impatient” – completely unknown to Dante – where he projected to place “the most patient men in History – ancient and modern<sup>9</sup>”, such as Job, William Blake and Giacomo Leopardi: Craig’s purpose was clearly satirical, for he wanted to show that the men whose patience had been most celebrated were in fact extremely “impatient”. The only example he develops is the case of William Blake, in the moment in which he was commissioned by John Linnell to make illustrations for Dante’s *Divine*

*Comedy*: we see Blake discussing with a Lord who came to buy one of his engravings, then with Linnell, then with Henry Crabb Robinson about the prices that his works would reach one hundred years later – that is, exactly when Craig is writing the scene.

This “circle of the impatient” is therefore not intended as a place where sinners would be punished after their death, but as a kind of re-enactment where the truth concerning some historical figures would finally be revealed to the audience. Another attempt in the same direction is a pair of unfinished interludes, where Craig shows women trying to charm Lord Byron, failing, and then denouncing him for sexual harassment<sup>10</sup>. The puppet stage is here used as a didactic and moralistic institution, a platform for imposing a revision of past events and past personalities – first of all the ones (Blake, Byron) with whom Craig would most identify himself.

Much closer to the model given by the *Divine Comedy*, a longer draft for the Hell scene begins with the description of a “classical section”: there, the damned are tortured by a set of Roman authors, Ovid, Plautus, Horace, Lucian, Tacitus, Cicero, Martial and Juvenal, who read steadily their works to them, as a punishment for a sin which Craig leaves unknown. This scene serves as a background for a discussion between Dante and Virgil, no more travelling through the underworld, but now comfortably set up in this section where the Italian poet has even put on weight. The decoration is an imitation of Biedermeier and Art Nouveau, and the shades of such great designers as Arthur Liberty, Paul Poiret or Leon Bakst “flit anxiously behind the arras<sup>11</sup>”, while Aubrey Beardsley is snuffing the candles. Beyond its satirical atmosphere, this scene can remind us of the “dialogue of the dead”, the literary genre inaugurated by Lucian of Samosata, where famous people who lived in different centuries could finally meet and discuss philosophical problems. But Dante and Virgil are not discussing at all, they are mutually boring themselves by reading to each other excerpts from their works. Twenty lines from the beginning of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* make Virgil faint, and his body is taken away by some blue devils. A further reading of Dante takes place in Pluto’s presence, but has no effect upon his audience, composed from his English translators and commentators such as Henry Francis Cary and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Edward Gordon Craig, who had many difficulties at school, here obviously settles his differences with the classics as well as with literature in general.

## **A Debate with the Present**

From these preliminary sketches for what became the first scene of *The Drama for Fools*, Craig kept only a few elements: Dante, Virgil, artists and intellectuals don't appear any more in the last two versions, replaced in one by a comic scene where Jupiter, after a night of partying with Mercury, turns back home and tries to go to bed without awakening Juno. She of course awakes, has a terrible row with her husband and decides to avenge herself by fetching two snakes from Hell to kill the baby Hercules – her husband's illegitimate son. In another version, the first scene takes place directly in Hell, where Pluto receives the visit of Blind Boy and Parrot. What remains of the first drafts is only the fact that Hell looks like a modern and cosy English interior, often a rich one, which has to be completely transformed when visitors are announced.

This indicates how little interest Craig had, in fact, in discussing past events and personalities. He much preferred to use the puppet stage as a satirical weapon against his contemporaries: mostly to fight some tendencies of modern societies, as we can see in many interludes of *The Drama for Fools* where the ridicules of politicians, educators, diplomats, trade-unionists, journalists and above all women are cruelly mocked, but also to express his anger against some individuals who he considers real dangers for the (English) society. The one he most despises and hates is Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe, owner of *The Times* and many other newspapers, and above all founder of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*. As a press magnate and the inventor of tabloids, Harmsworth had an enormous influence on public opinion in Great Britain during World War I, even causing the fall of the liberal government in 1915. In the last versions of the Hell scene, he is the only non-fictional character to appear, not as one of the damned, but as a servant to Pluto. If Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, put many of his contemporaries in Hell, they were always dead or, if they were not yet, their place and punishment had already been prepared, and they were expected to come as soon as possible. Craig goes further than his model and delights himself in portraying Lord Neville as a devil's assistant, a domestic of the Underworld, even during his lifetime. In this way, he manages a significant turn in the whole strategy of his drama, which moves away from any intention to debate with cultural backgrounds and dedicates itself to the fights of the present.

In fact, when observing what kind of narrative materials are used in *The Drama for Fools*, it appears clearly that Craig, despite his project of letting his heroes travel through time and history, had much more interest and fun writing contemporary social and moral micro-comedies. The main story, that of Cockatrice, Blind Boy and the parrot Columbus, gives birth only to a parody of

Greco-Roman mythology (*Jupiter and the Sphinx*) and an adaptation of a tale of the Brothers Grimm (*The Roman Adventure*). With the exception of *The Gordian Knot* episode, almost all historical plays and interludes – *Noah's Ark*, *Robin Hood*, *Cockatrice and the Gunpowder Plot*, *Luclezia Borgia and the Holy Terror* – remained unfinished, and very often just a first draft had been made. Nothing seems to have been written about many of the great figures Craig wanted to convey as protagonists of his drama, such as Julius Caesar or Talleyrand, and Cleopatra – here called Cleo di Patra – appears almost only, together with the Queen of Sheba and Gustave Flaubert, in a parody of *The Temptation of St Anthony*.

But to conclude from these observations that Craig was not interested in historical figures would certainly be a mistake. He amused himself, on the contrary, in putting on stage many of them in the form of little apparitions. It can be, for example, a short metamorphosis, when Cockatrice, in order to demonstrate his powers, transforms himself in “Enery the Eighth” (the music-hall transformation, made famous by the singer Harry Champion, of Henry VIII of England). More often these figures appear as witnesses of the drama, even in its most modern parts, as though the society of today would be a comic performance for the audience of yesterday. In the interlude *Shopping*, for example, we see a “Real Lady” trying to buy, in a shop, a man who could act as her “foil” when she visits her friends. After a salesman proposes that she buy the “Van Gogh model”, a giant who grunts every time he hears the word “money”, she takes one of the “Real Gentlemen” with whom she leaves the shop, keeping him on a leash. The whole scene is watched and laconically commented upon by the silhouettes of two men, through the shop-window: Charles Darwin and John Ruskin. A last example: in Craig’s modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, a choir of three witches, Madame de Staël, Miss Milbanke (Lord Byron’s wife) and Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, appears at the end, while Francis Bacon and William Shakespeare himself, together with Max Reinhardt, lament on the transformations introduced in the play.

Maybe Craig’s attempt to write a dramatic cycle which should cover, with its 365 scenes, both a whole year of performances and the whole history of humanity, could be best defined therefore as a continuous cross-reading of present and the past, a play of shifting and reversing from one into the other, where time is experienced as a multi-dimensional and metamorphical environment. *The Drama for Fools* is less, for its author, a journey through the past than a way of looking at his contemporaries through the broken magnifying-glass of Western cultural heritage.



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- Jean-Manuel Warnet, "L'école de l'Arena Goldoni, ou la difficile invention d'un laboratoire", *L'Annuaire théâtral*, no 37 (Spring 2005), 45-64.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferruccio Marotti, "Gordon Craig, la solitudine, il futuro", in *Gordon Craig in Italia*, ed. Gianni Isola, Gianfranco Pedulla (Rome: Bulzoni editore, 1993), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Olga Taxidou, *The Mask, A Periodical Performance by Edward Gordon Craig* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem, ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, *Plan for School*, 1911g; *Idem, Plan Showing the Three Sections of the Studios & the Sub-divisions of Each Section*, October 1911f. Both held at Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Arts du spectacle, Fonds E. G. Craig, *Prospectus Forms 1906-1914*.

See also: Jean-Manuel Warnet, "L'école de l'Arena Goldoni, ou la difficile invention d'un laboratoire", *L'Annuaire théâtral*, no 37 (Spring 2005): 50, 54.

<sup>5</sup> E. G. Craig, *Marionnettes*, Mss 18 (*Marionnettes: notes et croquis*, Ms. A. 52), 1916, Collection E. G. Craig, Département des Arts du spectacle. Bibliothèque nationale de France (page dated: Parma, September 1916).

<sup>6</sup> E. G. Craig, *Le Théâtre des fous / The Drama for Fools* (Montpellier : L'Entretemps, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> E. G. Craig, "These two puppets..." (July 31, 1916), *The Drama for Fools: The Third Prologue*, typed booklet with handwritten annotations, coll. Institut International de la Marionnette, Charleville-Mézières.

<sup>8</sup> E. G. Craig, *Le Théâtre des fous / The Drama for Fools* (Montpellier : L'Entretemps, 2012), p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> E. G. Craig, *Drama for Fools*, Mss Book 23, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>10</sup> E. G. Craig, « Byron – A Mystery Unsolved » and « Byron – A Mystery Unveiled », *Le Théâtre des fous / The Drama for Fools*, op. cit. pp. 386 and 388.

<sup>11</sup> E. G. Craig, *Drama for Fools*, Mss Book 23, op. cit.