

The Moral and Aesthetic Implications of the Mastery of Falling Objects

By Arthur Chandler

from *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 25, #3 (winter 1991)

VIRTUOSITY AND VICE

According to the Random House Dictionary, to juggle is "to keep several objects, such as balls, in motion in the air simultaneously by tossing and catching." It also means, says the same source, "to manipulate in order to deceive, as by trickery." Other dictionaries and encyclopedias say much the same thing: "The dexterous manipulation of objects," as well as "the action of a person who tries to do something dishonest, especially with money." Dexterity and dishonesty, virtuosity and vice - our culture has always both admired and distrusted this most ancient act.

The roots of this ambivalence reach down thousands of years. The Greek words for juggler referred to both workers of wonders and perpetrators of tricks and falsehoods.¹ The terms also applied to wizards and conjurers, and were allied to another word, *magos*, that referred to magicians who came from India and China. The Roman term for juggler was *præstigiator*, which likewise referred to both tossers of balls and to sleight-of-hand tricksters. In all cases, the terms carried connotations of both admiration and contempt - admiration for the skill, contempt for - or at least suspicion of - the deception involved in the act.

The history of juggling in China presents a somewhat different picture. For centuries, all kinds of juggling were admired by the people, who were willing to applaud and pay for feats of manual dexterity. Fu Qifeng, the leading Chinese scholar of acrobatics in China, speculates that juggling began during the Stone Age as a sporting variation of boomerang-throwing. The connection makes sense, since an activity which sharpened the skills necessary for successful hunting and fighting would have obvious survival value. What we do not know, and probably never will, is the point at which practising a useful skill becomes an activity which is valued for its own sake. Juggling was born at this very point: that moment when the warrior or hunter found that the tossing and catching of weapons was a pleasurable act itself, even in the absence of the enemy or prey.

The connection between juggling and combat appears often in Chinese literature; and there are some wonderful tales about the power of juggling virtuosity that make practitioners today sigh with envy. Lan Zi, who performed in the Song State during the Warring States era, could juggle seven swords, and was amply rewarded for his skillful performances at court. But the grand prize for effective juggling must go to the incomparable Xiong Yiliao of Shinan. Quifeng relates the following story about Yiliao, juggler extraordinaire in the time of the Warring States:

*Once, in a battle between the states of Chu and Song, the troops of the two sides were confronting each other in a fight at close quarters. Yiliao appeared in front of the Chu troops and calmly, in the face of the enemy's axes and spears, juggled nine balls at the same time. His superb performance stupefied the officers and warriors. The Song troops fled helter-skelter without fighting and the Chu troops won a complete victory.*²

It was during the time of the Han Dynasty that juggling truly came into its own. During this era, an entertainment extravaganza called "The Hundred Entertainments" grew up in the courts of the Chinese ruling classes. To the traditional daring of sword-juggling and the sheer virtuosity of numbers juggling with balls was added a host of innovations: gyroscopic juggling with diabolos and devil sticks, foot juggling, plate spinning, and "swinging meteors." In addition to the juggling specialists, the Hundred Entertainments shows included acrobats, magicians, fire-eaters, pole balancers, lion dancers, animal trainers, equestrians, - in short, everything Europeans would much later come to associate with the circus.

For centuries, Chinese jugglers and other virtuosos of manual dexterity enjoyed the applause and patronage of the upper class. But beginning with the advent of the Ming Dynasty (1368 A.D.), and carrying through into the middle of the twentieth century, these performers fell out of favor with aristocrats, who began to feel that such entertainments were too vulgar for their refined taste. Chinese jugglers returned to their village roots for the support and patronage now denied to them at court. There were exceptions, of course. But even when jugglers performed at court, they were treated as charlatans and buffoons, not as artists or even as skilled artisans. Only in the twentieth century, with the new emphasis on "the people's culture," have jugglers regained something of their old status as artists.³

In Europe, jugglers suffered no such loss in status - because they never had any to lose. For centuries, the light-spirited juggler was usually considered a harmless entertainer, a kind of jester (the Latin term *joculator* is the root-word of "juggler" and "jester") who performed before kings or crowds for enjoyment and patronage. Some moralists considered the juggler's occupation trivial, a squandering of precious time on frivolity. But simple tossing and catching seemed minor failings; and so the moralist's wrath rarely descended on the juggler.

During the Middle Ages, however, church and state sometimes frowned more sternly on the juggler. "The duties of the king," said the edicts of the Sixth Council of Paris during the Middle Ages, "are to prevent theft, to punish adultery, and to refuse to maintain jongleurs." ⁴ What did these jugglers do to provoke the ire of churchmen? It is difficult to say with certainty, since the jongleurs were often jacks-of-all-trades. At times they were auxiliary performers who worked with troubadour poets in Europe, especially the south of France and Spain. The troubadours would write poetry, and the jongleurs would perform their verses to music. But troubadours often performed their own poetry, and jongleurs chanted street ballads they had picked up in their wanderings. Consequently, the terms "troubadour" and "jongleur" are often used interchangeably by their contemporaries. These jongleurs might sing amorous songs or pantomime licentious actions. But they might be also jugglers, acrobats, sleight-of-hand artists or outright mountebanks. Historian Joseph Anglade remarks that in the high Middle Ages:

"We see the singer and strolling musician, who comes to the cabaret to perform; the mountebank-juggler, with his tricks of sleight-of-hand, who well represents the class of jongleurs for whom his name had become synonymous; and finally the acrobat, often accompanied by female dancers of easy morals, exhibiting to the gaping public the gaggle of animals he has dressed up - birds, monkeys, bears, savant dogs and counting cats - in a word, all the types found in fairs and circuses who come under the general name of jongleur." ⁵

To be sure, they might also be musicians and poets playing the whole range of winds, strings, and percussion instruments, and setting the word of poets or jokers to song. But, as Anglade observes, "Poetry alone seems to have been one of their lesser occupations." First and foremost, they were performing jugglers. Listen to the advice that one jongleur gives to a would-be apprentice:

You must know how to sing and jump, to speak well and play witty word-games with your audience; you have to be able to keep time with a tambourine and castanets, and to keep a whole musical

ensemble going; learn how to toss and catch several apples with two knives; learn how to do bird songs and work marionettes; you have to learn to play the guitar and mandola, and how to jump through four hoops. . .teach a dog to jump over a stick, and teach him to hold the stick between his paws. . ." ⁶

Vain pursuits, idle occupations! Small wonder that the sterner and more upright members of the community held the juggler's antics in disapprobation. Given the buffoonery, salacious songs, and social satire that often accompanied the juggler's routine, it should come as no surprise that jongleurs were often refused the sacraments of the church because, in the words of the churchmen, "jongleurs are the ministers of Satan." ⁷

It would be a mistake, though, to see the medieval juggler only through the eyes of the church. In several popular tales of the time the juggler comes off as a shrewd fellow who survives by the dexterity of his wit. Jean de Beaume (flourished 1290-1310), in one of his sermons, relates a delightful anecdote about an old juggler who had lost his ability to perform and please. This juggler, one "Roland" by name, came upon a wedding feast and was invited to eat. When a silver cup was later discovered missing, the men of the house accused Roland of the theft. Roland protested his innocence, but the men demanded that he submit to "the ordeal of the hot iron." If Roland could hold the heated metal and release it unscathed, the miracle would clearly be a sign from God of his innocence. The iron was fired, lifted with tongs, and passed to the juggler; Roland, however, held out his wassail bowl to receive the glowing bar.

"No! You must hold it in your hand to prove your innocence," shouted his accusers. Roland replied: "You all say you are innocent. So, if you want me to believe you, go ahead and touch it first. I'll grasp it after you, but not before!" ⁸

An even more poignant version of the "old juggler past his prime" story can be found in the often-retold tale of the "Juggler of God." In this tale, the young juggler (or acrobat, in some versions), pursues his career, struggling from one performance to another. He meets and befriends a group of monks (or friars), whose kind behavior gives him a glimpse of the religious calling. They tell him that he, too, fulfills the will of God by pleasing people with his juggling. Later, when the juggler is at the end of his life, he witnesses a procession honoring the Virgin and Child. After the crowd leaves, he approaches the stained glass images of Christ and Mary in the chapel and then goes through his old juggling routine one last time as a present to the Holy Family. Astonished monks come upon the old juggler tossing and catching, then rush to inform the abbot of the "sacrilege." When the holy men return

to the scene, however, they find the old juggler lying dead in front of the holy images. To their amazement, the monks behold new smiles on the once-stern faces of the Christ-child and His mother.⁹

Though tales of the resourceful juggler and the juggler of God show the "dexterous manipulator" in a favorable light, it is probable that most thoughtful members of society did not hold the juggler's profession in high esteem. Both of the stories cited above point to morals beyond the act of juggling. Jean de Beaume makes his point quite explicit: "The preacher who wishes to persuade his audience to get to heaven by charitable acts must himself grasp the iron bar. He must not only speak rightly but act rightly, or else the people will have no faith in him."¹⁰ The Juggler of God is clearly a version of the Biblical parable about the old woman who gave her two mites to Jesus (Mark 12:42-44): no matter how lowly our offering might be, if we give our all in the spirit of love, we have given a gift that is cherished in the sight of God.

NOW YOU SEE IT. . .

Throughout the Middle Ages and into our own time, jugglers have sought to amuse themselves and, if possible, to earn a living at something they enjoy doing. But one can excel in "the dexterous manipulation of objects" with other motives than simple enjoyment or the honest desire to earn a living by showmanship. Throughout history, the more mercenary juggler appears as the shell-game con-artist. His success at the shell game depends on his ability to fool the eye and place bets with the suckers who foolishly believe in their own ability to follow the juggler's sleight-of-hand. In this sport -- for the shell game is a gambling sport of hands versus eyes -- the juggler use his deft moves, not to amaze and delight, but to deceive.

Shell-gaming compounds the "dexterous manipulation" of ball juggling with the bluff and deception of poker. Guardians of public morals have long regarded the shell-game juggler with suspicion, classed his activity as a particularly sordid form of gambling, and condemned him to haunt the back alleys of carnivals and fairs. Even today, at the Clignancourt flea market in Paris, the shell-gamer sets up his collapsible table, shouts insults and dares to passers-by, and practices his craft with a watchful eye for the gendarmes. When an officer of the law draws near, the juggler vanishes quickly and quietly into the throng.

Akin in spirit to the shell-shifter is the dishonest accountant: a kind of juggler who used financial sleight-of-hand not just to fool, but to cheat. "To juggle the books" implies the ability to keep one set of numbers "on hand" (that is, in view of the auditor who scrutinizes the figures) and another set - the real ones - "in the air" (that is, passing invisibly through the columns of figures so that the books appear balanced). Pulling a fast one - the image applies to the supple wrist-flicks of the ball-tosser, the sly shifts of the shell-gamer, and the crafty moves of the accountant who subtracts money as it flies through the double-entries of his official ledgers.

Here we confront one of the basic moral dilemmas posed by the act of juggling: the ethics of playing for keeps. Once money becomes a major consideration, a new question of balance presents itself: the equilibrium between the love of an activity for its own sake and the desire to earn a living by its public performance. The professional ball and club juggler knows what it means to pass from the simple joy of the sport to the necessities of pleasing a crowd. New arts of human interaction must be added to the accomplishments of manual dexterity. The first childish urge of the public juggler - "Hey, look at me!" - must be transmuted into the more mature desire to please others. If the desire to earn money mutates into selfishness, the juggler turns shifty.

The juggler could become something even more maligned than the fast-handed trickster or the larcenous businessman. The eleventh edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1910-1911) states that "the term [juggler] is practically synonymous with conjurer." In this incarnation, the juggler may still be seen as the charlatan, brother to the shell-shifter, amazing the locals with flash and smoke in order to pick their pockets. But the epithet "conjurer" carries another, more sinister meaning. In the secrecy of his study, with "spells of waving arms and woven paces," the conjurer-juggler becomes the sorcerer who attempts to draw forth elemental powers and make them obey his behest.

As this juggler delves deeper into the labyrinth of this subterranean branch of his art, balls are replaced by drops of mercury, throwing clubs by the centrifuge, the public stage by a private laboratory of alembics where the juggler-sorcerer struggles with what even the most carefree ball-tosser must confront: gravity, entropy, the universal tendency towards decline into stasis and chaos.

EXOTIC ENTERTAINMENT

Before the twentieth century, there was never any question about the status of juggling in Western culture. It ranked near the bottom of legitimate activity - impish entertainment at best, outright deception at the worst. There was no question of juggling being considered an art, even in the more restricted sense of artisanship. Jugglers belonged to no guild. They were considered vagabonds, and little (if at all) better than Gypsies. For centuries, time did little to improve their status. Even William Hazlitt, in his classic essay on "The Indian Jugglers" (1821-22), though left breathless with admiration at the technical skill of a human being who could juggle four brass balls, finds little transcendent merit in the activity. He apostrophizes: "Man, thou art a wonderful animal, and thy ways past finding out! Thou canst do strange things, but thou turnest them to little account." ¹¹

For much of the nineteenth century, juggling was seen by Europeans as a form of entertainment for which non-Western practitioners had a peculiar aptitude. Hazlitt's wonder was aroused, not by any English juggler, but by a professional from India - in all likelihood, either Mooty or Medua Samme. Later in the century, travelling troupes from Japan, including the renowned Awata Kats-no-Shin, amazed European audiences with their skillful balancing, ball juggling and devil stick manipulation.

Part of the enjoyment of European and American audiences was based on a complex mixture of real appreciation of the routines performed, along with a fascination for the exotic. As we have seen, there was an old tradition in Western culture that associated juggling with conjuring. As a consequence, audiences in the nineteenth century considered the feats of Indian and Japanese jugglers in the same class with fire-walking and sword-swallowing - dazzling performances colored with arcane tints of the Mysterious East. By the middle of the last century, such was the fascination with Oriental performers that the German juggler Karl Rappo had to wear a turban and make himself up to look like an East Indian in order to attract an audience.

Not until the first part of the twentieth century did Europe and America produce jugglers of the quality that would attract large audiences. The talents of Enrico Rastelli and Bobby May made European and American audiences aware that juggling was a skill that could be mastered by serious practitioners from any culture.

In terms of sheer technical mastery, no one has surpassed the incredible feats of Rastelli, who could juggle seven balls, twirl three rings on one leg and spin balls on a mouthpiece while he balanced on a board mounted on a rolling cylinder - all at the same time. Bobby May gave a kind of art deco class to American juggling with his off-tempo moves and the stylish suavity of his presentation.¹² Both of these men earned fame and modest fortune in their lifetimes - a fact that symbolized a new prestige for jugglers in the twentieth century. So the question arises: if Fred Astaire and Charlie Chaplin were artists, why not Enrico Rastelli and Bobby May?

THE ART CLUB

It should come as no surprise that in the twentieth century, when everything from cinema to pansy pressing clamors to be christened an art, that jugglers should also covet this title. "Juggling IS an art!"¹³ insists Art Jennings, one of the grand old masters of American juggling. Before we brave the thicket of "What is art, and does juggling qualify?" it would be well to assess the state of the activity today. What are the practitioners doing?

The routines that jugglers themselves go through vary in mood from slapstick comedy to deadpan seriousness. For some, it seems to be a matter of innate temperament as to which course they follow. "I could never do a straight act," said 92-year old juggler Homer Stack, a veteran of vaudeville. "And neither could W.C. Fields. Fields was a funny looking guy; he could never do a straight act."¹⁴ So some jugglers, by determination or nature's capricious gifts, turn to comedy juggling. Often - usually, in fact - comic juggling is accompanied by a patter of words. Sometimes the patter is scatological, sometimes political, sometimes self-referential. But in comedy juggling of this type, the smoothness of the juggling is counterpointed against a certain rhythm of word delivery. The best practitioners along this line are very funny people who have mastered their juggling routines to perfection. The juggling itself need not be complicated - in fact, comedy juggling with patter is almost always fairly simple, performed with no more than three balls. Silent comedy juggling, though practised expertly by W.C. Fields and others, seems to be largely a European, and especially French, specialty today, perhaps because of the pervasive and powerful influence of Marcel Marceau.

Serious juggling is not necessarily deadly serious - in fact, it is usually done with as much flash and elan as the performer can muster - but the emphasis here is on dazzle: difficult tricks performed with ease. Hazlitt says it precisely: "It is skill surmounting difficulty, and beauty triumphing over skill. It seems as if the difficulty once mastered naturally resolved itself into ease and grace, and as if to be overcome at all, it must be overcome without an effort." ¹⁵ Or "overcome without apparent effort," we should add. With juggling, as with music and dance, the most graceful movement comes only with arduous practice. For the educated eye, there is a clearly observable distinction between first-rank jugglers and all the rest. Lesser practitioners present individual "incidents": a cascade, then a shower, then crossed-wrists moves, etc.; the best performers present one fluid routine, in which the individual incidents pass seamlessly from one to another, as if each pattern evolves naturally, even inevitably, out of the last. In the perfection and grace of individual moves and in the transition from one set of moves to another jugglers reveal their own personal sense of style and grace most completely.

Most moves of every juggling routine are standard - that is, they are patterns that countless jugglers have used for decades, or even centuries. But the number of variations one can work with three, four, or five objects is, if not infinite, sufficiently vast for everyone to find a signature pattern. The signature pattern is the juggler's own invention, the one move he or she has discovered, and wrought to perfection. It is the one part of the routine where even the novice of one year might have something to offer to the veteran of twenty. Bobby May's drum trick, Fields' cigar boxes, Dimitri Karamazov's "I can juggle anything" challenge - these are all new contributions to the tradition which bear the stamp of the innovator's personality. ¹⁶

The signature pattern is the unique cardinal virtue of every good juggling routine. The universal deadly sin of every routine is The Drop. Dropping is so common in juggling that every performer must come to terms with the inevitable accident that breaks the rhythm of the routine and calls one's skill into question. The comedy jugglers have a stock of set lines that they can pull out at a moment's notice:

"A sudden surge of gravity!"

"It's part of the act!"

"That ball's been falling down on the job!"

Serious (i.e., non-comic) jugglers, though, have no such recourse. Like the classical musician who flubs a note, the juggler must go on. A dropped ball, though, is far more apparent to most people than a missed sixteenth note. Professional serious jugglers therefore spend enormous amounts of time engraving their routines into muscle memory for just this reason. When serious jugglers drop a ball or club, they can only pick it up as quickly and unobtrusively as possible, and continue their act. One drop in the course of a routine is a minor embarrassment. Two drops constitute a marred performance. Three or more drops mean failure.

Since drops are inevitable, and even the most accomplished professional jugglers drop in public performance of their routines, one might well ask why a drop should be considered such a disaster. Part of the reason has to do with the psychological interaction between the audience and the performer. If a routine is going along splendidly, audience and performer alike can relax and let their attention focus on the action itself. Like Yeats's dancer and the dance, the juggler becomes one with his routine. Admiration for the juggler becomes submerged in the more general feeling of wonder at what the human mind and body can accomplish together. It is the overcoming of gravity with style and grace, and produces the kind of internal affirmation that comes with any art or sport done supremely well.

The drop breaks the spell. The audience is reminded of human fallibility when the juggler has to stop and start all over again. Now the creeping doubt has entered everyone's mind: will the juggler drop again? The second drop confirms this doubt, and the audience now sees only a struggling human being endeavoring to ward off disaster. After the third drop, even the memory of the magic is gone, as both performer and audience only wait for the ordeal to conclude.

There is one genre of juggling where the drop is not so devastating - in fact, where the drop merely concludes the effort: numbers juggling. In some respects, the purest form of serious juggling is numbers juggling. No flashy pirouettes or under the leg moves here. The idea is to put as many objects in flight as possible, and to keep them up as long as possible. Numbers routines are performed with tense earnestness on the part of both performer and spectator. They represent the supreme matchup between the human nervous system and the forces of gravity. Gravity always triumphs in the end; but the juggler who lasts longest wins the palm.

Numbers competitions are an integral part of juggling competitions held throughout Europe and America. These competitions - which also feature serious and comic juggling of every type imaginable - bring out the sporting, competitive side of juggling. This is not to deny that there may be art involved in the individual routines. But the overall setting of the International Juggler's Association competitions closely resembles the setting and administrative structures of gymnastics, skating, and other sports whose practitioners usually waste no breath trying to convince the public that they are artists. Judging is done by a panel of experts, and marks are given for technique and "artistic impression" to arrive at a composite score. Competitors are ranked, and prizes distributed as in many other sports. Successful competitors often go on to pursue a full- or part time career as professional jugglers, usually with a circus troupe or in a Las Vegas show setting.

All this is no argument for or against juggling as a sister art to music or poetry. After all, these venerable arts too have their contests and categories, prizes and performances. But the question can be avoided no longer: even admitting that skill, beauty, and many other admirable qualities belong to juggling, is it an art in the same sense that literature and the fine arts are? I submit that any work aspiring to that lofty company must satisfy these two requirements:

- 1) It must show excellence in its style.
- 2) It must manifest some moral significance in its content.

If some readers find these criteria restatements of the old "instruct by pleasing," they are right. The great expression-forms of the traditional arts have all been capable of forceful presentation of the great dramas of human existence: love and hate, birth and death, hope and fear, and all the fine and coarse gradations that the human spirit can supply to these dramas. That juggling has the capability of developing style, and engendering elaborate schemata of stylistic excellence, is undeniable. Casual crowds can be pleased or awed by a performer juggling three flaming torches or three chainsaws; but even intermediate-level jugglers know this is only razzle-dazzle for the yokels. The practiced eye can usually (but not always) tell at once whether a particular move is really difficult or merely looks so.

Those who have mastered difficult patterns, those who can juggle a great number of objects, and those who work with only three objects but have a smooth routine interspersed with difficult tricks and a confident flair in their execution - they are the jugglers who excite the admiration and imitation of knowledgeable colleagues. Juggling at its best, I would argue, can fulfill the first category: the

attainment of style, and the ability to please by the masterful execution of difficult actions. Master jugglers can please, and have pleased for thousands of years, by all accounts.

But juggling per se - the "dexterous manipulation of objects" by itself, not counting the music or patter that accompanies it - has nothing to do with moral significance. It is pure play, done for its own sake. Even when jugglers speak their patter with their routines, the stories are almost always old hat, and their comedy the humor of gags and breezy mockery. This is not the realm of Shakespeare, Michelangelo, or Beethoven. It is not even the domicile of Horatio Alger, Norman Rockwell, or John Phillip Sousa. The act of juggling, like the act of doing mathematics or hitting a home run; is morally neutral. Individual jugglers can, and sometimes do, try to relate their movements to yin and yang, centering the body in order to center the spirit ¹⁷, enacting Newton's Third Law of Thermodynamics ¹⁸, etc.; but none of this homespun goes very far or deep. Some people juggle because they simply enjoy it, some because they are good at it and can show off or make money, some because it is their own particular obsessive affinity, or all of the above. Whatever metaphor they may make of their activity may be privately comforting. But it is not art.

In some respects, it is rather sad that jugglers, like so many other practitioners of hobbies, games, and sports, feel the necessity of being taken as seriously as painters and poets. As Gerald Nachman observes, "Jugglers, no matter how great, get no respect." ¹⁹ And what he means by "no respect" is "no respect as artists." Photographers went through the same seizures of inferiority in the mid-nineteenth century, with the final result that they have worked their way into the Art Club. Even the canonical H.W. Jansen's History of Art now has a section on photography, and photographers can pride themselves seeing Julia Margaret Cameron and Ansel Adams ending a volume that begins with Stone-Age cave paintings and moves in majesty through the ages under the mantle of Art.

It is highly unlikely that any comprehensive volume dealing with the arts or humanities of the future will include a chapter on juggling, for some of the reasons discussed above. The problem of evanescence, endemic to all performing arts before the introduction of film, is not the issue. The unscalable difficulty is that juggling does not address the issues that traditional arts do. Juggling may find its way into volumes dealing with sports, games, popular entertainment (such as the circus or commedia del' arte), or even "How to have fun and stay fit" books. In the final analysis, Mr. Nachman was correct: jugglers get no respect.

The exclusion from the higher ranks of humanistic society, though, may be a long-term blessing. Film - long admitted to the ranks of art by reviewers, critics, and philosophers of aesthetics - constantly suffers from a comparison, often unstated, with drama. Imaginative and significant use of camera, or painstaking studio work are often dismissed as "mere special effects" by critics who always seem to be secretly seeking a Strindberg drama on the screen. Painting, too, has exerted its influence over the theory and practice of photography, almost always to the detriment of the younger "Art." How much better it might have been to consider photography, not as the newly-elected member to the Art Club, but as photography - complete with an inherent set of possibilities that bear only superficial resemblances to painting. If juggling were welcomed into the august company, it would be as the junior partner to drama or dance, and would surely suffer as the expectations of the older disciplines were tacitly but surely inflicted upon the tossers of balls and clubs. Juggling is not art; it is juggling, complete with its joys of execution and the lessons of discipline that come from any activity with an ever-receding benchmark of perfection.

In all true jugglers there is a bit of the child, a bit of the con-man, a bit of the demonic conjurer. Juggling can be pure fun, a solo game with no winners or losers. It can win prestige or money by dazzling others with skill. It can seize the soul with an unquenchable desire to master the seemingly impossible. Taken to heart, the act of juggling raises basic issues of human existence:

Where is the true balance point between casual enjoyment and serious mastery?

Between "Look at me!" and "Watch this:..."?

Between sincere commitment and foolish obsession?

Though juggling by itself carries no inherent morality, the thoughtful person who practices this ancient rite often comes to draw analogies where none were seen before. Perhaps any activity, pursued with dedication, discipline, and passion will lead to such analogies between the beloved activity and (what we imagine to be) the True Principles of All Reality. Jugglers can find their own special metaphors for their own brand of metaphysics:

Objects fly through the air, stars wheel through the universe. All fall eventually. If we become obsessed with definitively mastering the decline, we are lost. If we achieve peace within the intervals of rising and falling, we find grace.

NOTES

- ¹ The last-named term can also denote a puppet showman. It is worth reflecting upon the fact that the term, which implies wonder-working and illusion, does not refer to stage drama or to acrobatics, but only to puppetry. *magos*, the word from which "magic" is derived, is yet another synonym for "juggler."
- ² Fu Qifeng, *Chinese Acrobatics Through the Ages* (Beijing, 1985), page 8.
- ³ There may be a political ideology at work among Chinese scholars writing about this subject today: the vitality of the people versus the snobbish repression by the moneyed or titled classes. In addition to Qifeng's study, see also *Literature and the Arts*, compiled by the China Handbook Editorial Committee, translated by Bonnie McDougall and Hu Liuyu (Beijing, 1983): "The variety arts [such as acrobatics and juggling] were treated with contempt by the old ruling class and often suppressed." - page 210.
- ⁴ Robert Briffault, *The Troubadours* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1965) page 265
- ⁵ *Les Troubadours* (Paris, 1919) page 46
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, page 48
- ⁷ Briffault, *op. cit.*, page 266. It should be noted that the French term "jongleur" could apply to jugglers, troubadour-like singers, or circus-type entertainers in general. This term, when borrowed by other languages (such as English) presents the same problem. Jugglers today are fond of citing Pierre Gringoire, the famous/infamous medieval poet and model for Victor Hugo's character of the same name in *Notre Dame de Paris*, as the first juggler whose talents were referred to with respect by his contemporaries. But the contemporary title, "Roi des Jongleurs," may well refer to his gifts as a versifier, and not his ability to juggle. See Karl-Heinz Ziethen and Andrew Allen, *Juggling: The Art and Its Artists* (Berlin, 1985), pages 10 ff.
- ⁸ The de Baume sermon is included in *Histoire Littéraire de la France*, Volume XXVII, page 154. This and other tales of jugglers are collected and translated in G.G. Coulton's *Life in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1931), Volume I, page 156 and *passim*.

⁹ The story has been retold countless times. Among the most recent versions are "The Little Juggler" by Alexander Woollcott and *The Clown of God*, written and illustrated by Tomie de Paula. A short animated film of the story has been made, using the visuals of the de Paula book.

¹⁰ de Baume, *op. cit.*

¹¹ William Hazlitt, "The Indian Jugglers," essay number IX in *Table Talk*. The edition quoted here is in *Hazlitt: Selected Essays*, edited by George Sampson (Cambridge, England, 1950), page 126.

Footnote to the footnote: for juggling aficionados only :

For those who know juggling, there is one vexing problem with Hazlitt's account: is the Indian juggler showering four balls with one hand or two? Hazlitt is obscure on this point. Four ball juggling is difficult; but, at least by 20th century standards, it represents only an intermediate level of achievement. Any determined juggler can master a basic four-ball cascade in a year, and perform the tricks Hazlitt describes - over the back tosses, etc. - in two years. If the Indian juggler was circling those four brass balls with one hand, Hazlitt was indeed privileged to observe a rare master of the art. Not more than half a dozen jugglers alive today could keep up a steady one-handed shower with four balls for more than ten or fifteen seconds; and none could perform the behind-the-back tricks described in the essay. Here is the relevant passage:

To catch four balls in succession in less than a second of time, and deliver them back so as to return with seeming consciousness to the hand again, to make them revolve round him at certain intervals, like the planets in their spheres, to make them chase one another like sparkles of fire, or shoot up like flowers or meteors, to throw them behind his back and twine them round his neck like ribbons or like serpents, to do what appears an impossibility, and to do it with all the ease, the grace, the carelessness imaginable, to laugh at, to play with the glittering mockeries, to follow them with his eye as if he could fascinate them with its lambent fire, or as if he had only to see that they kept time with the music on the stage - there is something in all this which he who does not admire may be quite sure he never really admired any thing in the whole course of his life. (pp. 126-127)

One of the problems is the time involved. I cannot conceive of a human being who could juggle four in one hand and do a cycle in "less than a second." Such a cycle, even for those very few who could master it, would require high tosses and much more than a second's time. Using two hands, such a cycle would be possible - though it would still be quite rapid. However, Hazlitt says that the juggler caught the balls "in succession," which means a shower pattern in which one hand does all the throwing, the other all the catching and quickly passing over to the throwing hand. Such a style - showering - is the one commonly practised in India and Oceania.

But enough such over-meticulous speculation that only jugglers might find intriguing! The passage itself so perfectly captures the quality of admiration we feel when watching a master at work that we should not lose our appreciation of the vision by trying to form too exact a mental image of what was happening before Hazlitt's eyes.

¹² There is no complete film record of Rastelli's performance. For some brief clips, see the videotape *Juggling* (Strider Productions, Corte Madera, California, 1986). An entire videotape of Bobby May film clips has been assembled by Stuart Lippe: *Bobby May: America's Greatest Juggler* (New York, 1988).

¹³ Art Jennings, letter in *Juggler's World*, Winter, 1987-88. Examples could be multiplied indefinitely.

¹⁴ Homer Stack, speaking on the videotape *Juggling* (Strider Productions, Corte Madera, California, 1986).

¹⁵ Hazlitt *op. cit.*, page 127.

¹⁶ There is the further question of etiquette, or even morality, involved in the act of borrowing or stealing another juggler's signature pattern. In general, jugglers are quite open and willing to share their knowledge, since secrets in this area are obviously difficult to conceal. But among professionals there is some concern over the borrowing of material - though there seems to be little recourse to the juggler who finds his dearest signature pattern incorporated into the routine of a rival.

¹⁷ "When you see somebody throwing seven objects in the air at a circus and keeping them going, that person is balanced. That person is centered. He's controlling the trajectory of inanimate objects. His

heart and mind is [sic] going a mile a minute. It's an amazing thing to see." - Larry Pisoni, founder of the Pickle Family Circus, quoted in *The Pickle Family Circus* (San Francisco, 1986), page 75.

¹⁸ Hovey Burgess, "The Classification of Circus Techniques," in *The Drama Review*, Vol. 18, #1 (March, 1974), page 70.

¹⁹ "A Juggler in Search of a New Self" (review of Frank Olivier's "On the Edge" performance at Life On The Water, Fort Mason, San Francisco), *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 9, 1988, Section E, page 8.