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THE MELANCHOLY ANDROID

Spike Jonze's film *Being John Malkovich* (1999) intimates a troubling undercurrent of puppetry. Moving mannequins may not, after all, provide merry escapes from the difficult world but might rather highlight the day's most painful yearnings. The intricately realistic puppet shows of Craig Schwartz, the film's protagonist, emphasize the enduring agitations of human existence. A puppet alone in a room bursts into a disturbing lament born of his isolation. Marionette forms of Heloise and Abelard from separate chambers pine for erotic contact. These displays of puppetry, brilliant and moving though they are, undercut the expectations we bring to the marionette show—those hopes for a mild, slightly ribald respite from the rigors of the daily grind.

The puppet is most often associated with the child. Perhaps many of us recall going to a park on a summer Saturday afternoon, sitting on the bright green grass, and watching the shenanigans of puppets. Perhaps a version of the old Punch and Judy routine, harmlessly violent and vaguely libidinous, whipped us into belly laughs. Possibly a gentler sort of show, a rendering of Aesop or the Bible, warmed us into sentimentality. This more didactic marionette feature likely resembled the puppets we watched on television—the Muppets or Howdy Doody. These and other instances of puppet merriment make it hard for us to accept Jonze's more troubled visions, his use of diminutive mannequins to figure the glooms of the human soul.

But it is precisely our conventional expectations of puppetry that grant aberrant marionettes their uncanny power. Associating the puppet with joy, we feel disoriented when we behold a mannequin doubling human angst,

or worse, evil. This latter situation—the sinister puppet—has in recent years become increasingly prominent. Possibly drawing on the famous 1963 *Twilight Zone* episode in which the doll Talky Tina kills an oppressive stepfather, Tom Holland's *Child's Play* (1988) features as its monstrous villain a child's doll, Chucky, animated by the soul of a recently slain serial killer. Throughout this film and its sequels, audiences are treated to the weirdness of the child's doll coming to murderous life. The same eerie conflict between innocence and experience informs another spate of puppet horror pictures. Beginning in 1989 with David Schmoeller's *The Puppet Master*, this sequence of pictures (totaling, according to my count, seven volumes) also draws for its effects on the creepy antagonism of the marionette, its blending of sweet nostalgia and dark magic.

The puppet and the moving doll, its sibling, are microcosms of the android, a life-size mannequin that resembles the human being. The diminutive puppet differs in significant and obvious ways from the larger android. However, this smaller mannequin shares with the android important characteristics. Both constitute artificial humans seemingly come to life. Both fascinate the child in us keen on harmless magic, the escapism of the fantastic. Both stoke our worries over the blurring of living and dead. The puppet and the android comprise reminders of a paradise from which we have fallen and toward which we yearn. They also prove signs of our horror of collapsing categories and our faith in meaningful distinction. To ponder the puppet is to enter into the psychology of the android, the sadness of lost grace and gloomy hope.

These animated mannequins, regardless of size, reveal the secret and duplicitous origin of our fascination with humanoid machines. We yearn for their unaffected grace. We fear their awkward weirdness. In unveiling our hidden fixations on mechanical doubles, these humanlike contraptions manifest our more general vexation in relation to all machines: our entrapment between loving efficient pistons and loathing aloof metal. Since the industrial revolution of the romantic age, this double bind has been especially troublous. Now, in an age that has pushed the industrial threat to human sovereignty to the digital threat to human identity, this bind is more pronounced than ever. We love what undoes us; we hate our essential familiar. To study the android is to get to the core of this classic case of sleeping with the enemy, this self-annihilation inherent in the age of living machines, this transcendence and this suicide.

KLEIST AND THE PUPPETS OF PARADISE

In "The Puppet Theatre" (1810), Heinrich von Kleist meditates on the uncanny theology of marionettes. The piece features a famous dancer,

Mr. C., describing to an unnamed narrator the elegance of puppets. Against convention, C. claims that these mechanical dolls dance with more grace than humans for this reason: inanimate figures lack the “affectation” that thwarts the aesthetic designs of men and women.¹ Freed from the self-consciousness that forces humans to think about what they are doing, puppets never lose their perfect “centre of gravity” and thus are unhindered by the “inertia of matter.”² In this way, puppets, seemingly dumb stuff, approach gods, intelligent spirits. Here, C. claims, is “where the two ends of the round earth meet”—where the absence of consciousness meets complete consciousness.³

C. clarifies this theory by invoking the “third chapter of Genesis,” the account of the fall of man. He claims that dancing puppets recall the innocence of Adam and Eve before they ate from the tree of knowledge. Human dancers, however, suffer from the postfall experience: melancholy self-consciousness. C. suggests that there exist two paths by which fleshly dancers—and all women and men—might return to the graceful state from which they have declined: a backward and a forward way. The backward path requires a return to unthinking matter, the unconscious puppet; the forward way necessitates an ascent to total consciousness, the condition of a god.⁴

C. exemplifies this double vision in two ways. Two lines “intersecting at a point after they have passed through infinity will suddenly come together again on the other side.” Likewise, the “image in a concave mirror, after traveling away into infinity, suddenly comes close up to us again.” C.’s conclusion: “When consciousness has . . . passed through an infinity, grace will return; so that grace will be most purely present in the human frame that has either no consciousness or an infinite amount of it, which is to say either in a marionette or in a god.”⁵

If the puppet can reveal a potential grace, and thus provide an ideal of untroubled unconsciousness, it can also mark the human being’s distance from this same elegance, and therefore constitute a reminder of the fall. Moreover, as a symbol of one pole of redemption—the lack of self-awareness opposing (yet agreeing with) complete self-consciousness—the puppet not only reveals the human’s separation from innocence. It also shows his painful limbo, his hovering between two inaccessible alternatives: unknowing and total knowledge. Pulled between Adam unfallen and Adam restored, people are doomed to double longing, nostalgia for dumb matter or omniscient spirit.

This is the duplicity of the puppet. On the one hand, it intimates the double path of redemption, the way back and the way forward—the bliss of the idealized childhood (retrospective dreams of thought and deed harmonized) and the joy of adulthood realized (prospective reveries of self and consciousness reunited). On the other hand, it hints at a

twofold mode of alienation, the distance from prefall innocence and the separation from postrapture experience: the unrequited nostalgia for graceful ignorance (the sad yen for bodily unity) and the unfulfilled hope for effortless knowledge (the gloomy gaze toward mental oneness). In inspiring visions of happiness, the former strain is likely to cause melancholia, for it reminds us of what we have lost and what we cannot recover. In inducing feelings of bereavement, the latter current might result in exhilaration—the quest for infinity that elevates finite life. Whichever way the puppet pushes, there is weirdness—the strangeness of disorientation, the eeriness of fevered longing.

Now we likely imagine more unsettling encounters with puppets, no more displayed in green daylight but in the chiaroscuro of twilight. In the curious gloaming, the marionette theater fades into the mystery of the fall. The wondrous leaps and dives of the wooden figures, not vexed by gravity or yearning, hint at the gestures of Adam—God's fine figurine—before he lapsed. But in recalling this fluency, the marionettes also remind the people in the gloomy rows of what they have lost and what they must suffer. The unaffected forms enjoy a unity between being and knowing that Adam lost when east of Eden he was cast. Still burning near the flaming blades of the cherubim, this first being of flesh was doomed to hurt in a gap between hunger and wholeness. In this rift we still ache, and long for a moment when matter and mind might once more merge. This instance never comes, and we begin to believe it never will. Saddened, we vow never again to make our way in the shadows toward the marionette stage. But while trying to ignore the beautiful dolls, we envision the sinister side of puppetry: the solitary manikin after the show suspended between ceiling and floor. This is the sadness on the faces of all discarded humanoids, no matter what their size, a register for our own melancholy hovering between matter and spirit. We see in the alienated puppet the emptiness of abandonment mixed with the silent hope that someone might come.

THE MELANCHOLY ANDROID AND SACRED TECHNOLOGY

People require spiritual technologies to help them overcome this aching paralysis, this endless vacillation between dust and deity. Most settle for the prayers, rituals, and icons that their religions offer, modes of worship that might carry over to the grace of the garden or the omniscience of the divine city. However, some especially wounded souls, burdened with excessive sensitivity to the rift between matter and spirit, need more than the temporary poultices of orthodox piety.

They want immediate identification with either unfallen Adam or Adam restored: the perfection of unknowing, or perfect knowledge. They create artifices unsanctioned by orthodox laws: humanoid machines that move with no thought of stumbling and prophetic androids attuned to the world axle. Sad over their alienation from the divine, men have concocted mummies that might carry them from the pain of time to the western land of the stately dead; statues capable of drawing down and voicing gods; alchemical homunculi that marry spirit and matter; golem approximating Adam before he fell; automata untouched by messy emotions.

But these same sacred machines frequently fail to redeem. They often exacerbate the melancholia that they were designed to assuage. Automata suggest that there is little difference between human and machine. The golem can turn murderous. The diminutive homunculus is a reminder that man is a speck of matter trying to contain cosmic consciousness. The talking statue manifests the cruel duality of body and soul. The mummy proves an uncanny return of this horror: all that seems alive is dead.

The psychology of the android, like that of the puppet, oscillates between miracle and monster. The humanoid machine is vehicle of integration and cause of alienation, holy artifice and horrendous contraption. The android is fully sacred, *sacer*: consecrated and accursed. It is a register of what humans most desire and fear, what they hate in life and what they love in death. To track the psychological dimensions of the humanoid is to sound what is constant in the Western soul informed by Plato's pining for eternal forms and Augustine's heart that will not rest on sordid earth. This questing for the mind of the humanoid is also a search for the intense core of our contemporary identity crisis, the Platonic and Augustinian conundrums made horrifically new in the digital age. What is the difference between artificial and real? How can we know this difference? Who is the agent that knows in the first place?

The place to begin this analysis of the melancholia behind the creation of androids is the work of Marsilio Ficino, the fifteenth-century Italian philosopher and translator. The meditations of Ficino lead us into the labyrinths of noble melancholia and its connection to statues that might come to life. This relationship between sadness and stone itself takes us to the strange world of late antiquity, the cradle of the wildly eclectic Hermetic texts, dialogues, and tractates devoted to the lacerations and cures of the soul. The *Hermetica*—which Ficino translated into Latin and made a cornerstone of his thought—constitutes a nexus not only between East and West (Alexandria and Rome) but also between ancient Egyptian mummification and early modern golem making.

FICINO'S NOBLE MELANCHOLIA

The Florentine philosopher Ficino thrived on the interstice between melancholy and magic. Born under the sign of sad Saturn in 1433, Ficino spent his life brooding over relationships between matter and spirit, being and knowing, fall and redemption. The results of these constant meditations were *The Book of Life* (1489) and a translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (c. 200–300 AD) from Greek to Latin. The former is a psychological treatise on the connection between melancholy and genius as well as a manual for how to avoid becoming overwhelmed by black bile. The latter is a second- and third-century collection of eclectic philosophical dialogues influenced by an ecstatic mix of spiritual movements, ranging from Egyptian theurgy to Neoplatonism to Gnosticism. These dialogues focus on links between matter and spirit and on ways that pious men might channel spirit into matter. Together, these works lay the foundation for psychological theories that illuminate the sadness of android building. To establish this ground, I shall first describe Ficino's notions of melancholia and then connect these notions to the animated statues of the Hermetic tradition.

As Frances Yates explains, Ficino, a deep classical scholar, was aware of a question asked in *Problems*, a work from the fourth century BC often attributed to Aristotle:⁶ “Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?”⁷ As Ficino knew, this question moved against the grain of the prevailing theory of melancholy, emerging from Hippocrates and Galen in the ancient world and solidified by Hildegard of Bingen and Avicenna in the medieval period. This traditional theory saw melancholy as a condition of fearfulness, moroseness, misanthropy, or madness caused by an overabundance of the most sinister of the four humors, black bile. Aware of more positive visions of melancholia in Euripides and Plato, Aristotle's disciple countered this unfavorable perspective. In the plays of Euripides, the most extreme symptoms of the black disease—delusion and dread—often vex great heroes. The madness of Heracles, Ajax, and Bellerophon results not from petty moroseness but from brilliant defiance.⁸ Plato developed this idea further when he associated frenzy, *furor*, with visionary ecstasy. In the *Phaedrus* (c. 380 BC), Socrates admits that frenzy is perhaps an evil, but it also is much more: “We receive the greatest benefits through frenzy . . . in so far as it is sent as a divine gift.”⁹ Hence, although Plato did not connect melancholy with holy madness—he in fact related the black disease to moral weakness—he married the main symptom of melancholy to greatness.

A leading exponent of the rebirth of classical ideas, Ficino recovered this tradition of noble melancholy in his *Book of Life*. According to Ficino, melancholy is most likely to afflict not sullen neurotics but profound scholars. This is so for three reasons. First, meditative souls are born under the planetary influences of Mercury, “who invites us to begin our studies,” and Saturn, “who works them out and has us stick to them and make discoveries.” These planets pass to their children their natures: coldness and dryness—characteristics necessary for calm, lengthy study but also traits of black bile, associated with the frigid, desiccated core of the earth. To this heavenly cause of scholarly melancholy, Ficino adds a natural one. In pursuing knowledge, gloomy scholars must pull their souls from “external to internal things, as if moving from the circumference to the center.” To penetrate to the center of their beings, they must remain “very still,” must “gather [themselves] at the center.” Fixed on the middle of their beings, they dwell in a place very much like “the center of the earth itself, which resembles black bile.” One with the earth’s middle, these scholars descend to the “center of each thing.” Delving to the core, they paradoxically rise to the “highest things,” for the dark axis of creatures is in accord with melancholy Saturn, “the highest of planets.” The human cause of the scholar’s melancholy is inseparable from the heavenly and natural causes. Influenced by Saturn to migrate to the center, sad scholars contract their own beings and thus dry and freeze their brains and hearts, turning both “earthly and melancholy.” Moreover, this perpetual thinking, a movement between circumference and center, external and internal, exhausts the spirit. To continue in their difficult motions, tired spirits require the nourishment of thin blood. These spirits’ consuming of lighter, clearer blood leaves the remaining blood “dense, dry, and black.” Together, these causes of scholarly melancholy separate mind from body. Obsessed with “incorporeal things”—invisible interiors and vague interstices—melancholy scholars dwell on thresholds between souls and bodies. Holding to the “bodiless truths” of the invisible, they turn their bodies “half souls”; unable to escape bodies entirely, they remain partly corporeal.¹⁰

Ficino, a student of Plato, does not believe that melancholy thinkers should engage in endless vacillations between boundary and center, depth and height, body and soul. He holds that dejected philosophers should end in spiritual tranquility—find rest on the still point of the spiritual axis, in the untroubled air of Saturn’s sphere, in the palaces beyond space and time. Yet, until thinkers achieve these unearthly *topoi*—if ever—they must suffer the pains of his special geniuses, their double sights: mania. Recalling the theories of Plato and the Aristotelian author of *Problems*, Ficino admits that “the poetic doors are beaten on in vain without rage,” that “all men . . . who are distinguished in some faculty

are melancholics.”¹¹ In his *Book on Life*, Ficino hopes to ease the pains of this *furor* without extinguishing its lights, to instruct sad geniuses to channel their nervous dispositions into salubrious directions. He offers remedies for debilitating melancholy, most of which center on the idea that saturnine interiority can be counterbalanced by exteriority. Sullen philosophers might eat foods associated with the social impulses of Jove or the amorous designs of Venus. They might surround themselves with colors imbued with joviality and flirtatiousness. They might, through the aid of magical talismans, draw nourishment from Jupiter’s conviviality and Venus’s libido.¹²

THE LACERATIONS OF THE *POIMANDRES*

This last therapy for melancholy connects to Ficino’s work as a translator of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This ancient text made it into Ficino’s hands by way of Cosimo de Medici, who in 1460 had attained a copy from Byzantium. Cosimo and Ficino thought that they had discovered a great treasure: a document espousing the wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus, the Thrice-Great Hermes, an Egyptian sage believed to be older than Moses and Plato. Cosimo ordered Ficino to cease his present task, a translation of Plato from Greek to Latin, and to go to work without delay on the more important translation of the philosophical father of Platonism and Judaism. For the next three years, Ficino carried the Greek over into Latin, believing all the while that he was transcribing the oldest truths in the universe.¹³ Unaware of what would become known in the sixteenth century, that the *Corpus Hermeticum* is actually a gathering of second- and third-century works set down by many anonymous hands,¹⁴ Ficino would have been especially moved by the *Poimandres*, a meditation on the creation of the cosmos and the nature of man.

The *Poimandres* is a dialogue between the mind of God and Hermes Trismegistus. As the *Poimen Anthropos* (the shepherd of men), the heavenly nous attempts to lead Hermes from his physical limitations to metaphysical freedom. This he does by illuminating the origin and nature of the cosmos and man. In the beginning, Poimandres—“Life and Light”—sent his creative word to organize dark, seething chaos into a lucent, harmonious cosmos. Next, Poimandres, being “bisexual,” gave birth to a second mind, a demiurge who combined with the logos to separate the seven planetary orbits, reflections of eternal reason, from the mundane planet, nature devoid of reason. Poimandres next created man, a “Being like to Himself” capable of dwelling in the spiritual sphere of the demiurge, his brother.¹⁵

This primal man, the *anthropos*, a perfect copy of his eternal father, knew the mysteries of the seven orbits. He sent his gaze down through their circlings until he broke through the lowest sphere, that of the moon. Man beheld nature, and nature saw man. She “smiled with insatiate love of Man” and revealed to him, in the mirrors of her waters, “his most beautiful form,” the “form of God.” Man witnessed his gorgeous image imbedded in the mundane surface. He fell in love with the planet. He “took up his abode in matter devoid of reason.” Nature “wrapped him in her clasp, and they were mingled in one.” This is why, says Poimandres, all particular, earthbound men, offspring of this primal union, are, in contradistinction to all other creatures, “twofold”: mortal “by reason of his body,” and immortal “by reason of the Man of eternal substance.” Double, humans are controlled by destiny and able to control all things. A sublunar man is slave and master. He is asleep and awake. He is carnal and consecrate.¹⁶

This split in man between eternal mind and temporal matter, further aggravated by a later severance between male and female halves, leaves earthlings in chronically awkward positions. Unlike gods, purely immortal, and unlike animals, thoroughly mortal, humans are pulled by opposing poles: matter bent on seducing spirit into its warm though deathly rhythms, mind keen on escaping matter to an ever-living realm beyond the stars. Likewise, in contrast to gods, whose spiritual wants are fulfilled, and animals, for which physical satisfaction is enough, men and women are incomplete. Soul thwarts the unthinking urges of body; body stymies the pristine quests of soul. Conflicted and hungry, most men, as Poimandres claims, descend into ignorant sensual pleasure. Led “astray by carnal desire,” setting “affection on the body,” earthlings delve into the “darkness of the sense-world” and suffer the “lot of death.” A few men, however, strain to extricate themselves from profane motion and rest in the sacred stillness of the “Good which is above all being.” To identify with the “Life and the Light,” his true self, the pious seeker must reverse the error of the *anthropos*. He must “loathe the bodily senses” of dying earth and love the invisible mind beyond the planets.¹⁷

But, as Ficino would explain sixteen years after he translated these ideas, denying the vibrancy of the senses is melancholy work that can only be undertaken by melancholy philosophers. Saturnine thinkers are skeptical of outward appearances. They suspect that warm, moist flows—organic vitalities—are at best illusions hiding deeper truths, at worst invitations to consume drafts of death. These philosophers are compelled to pull away from lubricious surfaces, to contract inward to cold, dry regions where nothing moves: the frigid core of the earth, chilly pages in the midnight, Saturn ringed with ice.

However, as Ficino makes clear, this extreme interiority, this drive toward the inanimate, is exhausting and dangerous. It threatens to drain thinkers of vitality, to reduce them to husks. These philosophers cannot forsake organic energy entirely. They must balance their spiritual attractions to petrification with bodily desires for the charms of Venus or the conviviality of Jove. This effort at redress places these philosophers on a delicate threshold between stillness and motion, inorganic and organic. Though they might find occasional contentment on this boundary, they are generally doomed to dejection. As long as they are trapped in a soft shell desirous of nature's waves, these melancholy scholars will, despite their frozen cores, be torn between unquenched metaphysical thirst and physical needs they cannot satisfy.

THERAPEUTIC STATUES IN THE *AESCLEPIUS*

While melancholy philosophers can temporarily fortify their ruined geniuses by channeling Venus and Jove, they can escape their wounds permanently only by healing the vicious split between body and soul. This emancipation can be achieved through two distinct modes, one based on ascent, the other dependent upon decline. As Ficino learned in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the first way of liberation begins when the body dies. For pious people who have experienced "gnosis" of the true relationship between their souls and the eternal Mind, death reverses the fall of the first man. The body falls away from the skyward soul and returns to the gross elements from which it came. Meanwhile, the soul rises through the seven planetary spheres, shedding a particular type of earthly ignorance as it crosses each orbit. Eventually, this soul enjoys consummation: total identity with God and the good, light and life.¹⁸

This paradigm troubles traditional notions of life and death, happiness and sadness. Organicity, the rhythm of the physical world normally associated with life, becomes death, the decay of space and time. The inorganic, the soul untouched by nature and often connected to death, turns into life itself, eternal vitality above corrosion. To be tied to a warm body is to be imprisoned. Floating in a cold space is freedom.

In another text ostensibly by Hermes, the *Aesclepius*, Ficino encountered another healing technique. This dialogue between Hermes and Aesclepius, in Western circulation before Cosimo attained the *Corpus Hermeticum* and well known to Ficino, considers, like the *Poimandres*, the relationship between soul and body. In contrast to the vision of the Shepherd of Men, this text proclaims that the double nature of humans actually makes them superior to gods. Hermes says that the "two substances" of men and women, "one divine, the other mortal," render

humans not only “better than all mortal beings” but “also better than the gods, who are made wholly of immortal substance.”¹⁹ Enjoying a more expansive awareness than the gods, human beings are able to command the gods, call these holy creatures down to earth. This they do through magic capable of initiating decline: the descent of the divine into dirt. This practice requires that the humans fashion statues of gods that can be animated with a divine afflatus. Just as God made other gods in his eternal image, certain pious people “fashion their gods in likeness of their own aspect.” This stone anatomy—stiff and inorganic, as cold and dry as the sable soul—turns into a magnet drawing down from the heavens the Mind of God. Charged, it becomes “living and conscious” and able to do “many mighty works”: predict the future, inflict and remove diseases, dispense woe and weal “according to men’s deserts.”²⁰

The paradigm of descent also blurs time-honored distinctions. Like the ascent detailed in the *Poimandres*, the decline in the *Aesclepius* suggests this: what normally passes for life, thermal oscillations, are deathly; what generally intimates death, cold shapes of marble, are vital. Likewise, just as the *Poimandres* questions the traditional distinction between joy and happiness, so the *Aesclepius* maintains that what often translates into dejection—the split between soul and body—grants the power to draw deities to dust, while what is often a sign of joy—unified consciousness—is divorced from the marriage between opposites.

The general similarities between these Hermetic texts quickly open into important differences. The *Poimandres* exudes a Gnostic atmosphere, a sense that matter is inherently botched and beyond redemption. The Shepherd of Men claims that the eternal, boundless, omniscient soul is trapped in body, a realm of decay, contraction, ignorance. Awareness of this tension between soul and body breeds a melancholia that can be relieved only through the transcendence of matter—the partial transcendence of asceticism, the total transcendence of bodily death. The cosmic rift between soul and body is beyond repair. Only beyond the cosmos can one find health.

In contrast, the *Aesclepius* operates in an alchemical environment, a domain in which matter is the womb in which spirit is born and thus the ground of redemption. Hermes believes that the fall of immortal energy into the mortal coil offers the possibility of a capacious, though painful, double vision. To become conscious of this twofold perspective is to become a melancholy magus desirous of marrying the great antipodes of the universe. This healing union arises through the animation of matter with spirit, statues with gods. The gap between time and eternity is momentarily closed. In the mire of the mundane, one finds the jewel: the philosopher’s stone, the sacred illuminating the profane, the profane bearing the sacred.²¹

As Ficino suggests in his *Book of Life*, this latter, alchemical mode is more appealing to the earthbound philosopher than is the Gnostic way. Close to the *Aesclepius*, Ficino claims that melancholy awareness of the conflict between body and soul is not a sad result of an inherently botched cosmos but a rich inspiration for holy magic. He also follows this Hermetic dialogue in stating that one way to heal the melancholy wound is to channel appropriate spirits to ailing matter: the warm Venus to the cold soul, the convivial Jove to the dry disposition.

Yet underneath Ficino's positive theories of melancholy lurk negative currents. Though Ficino's melancholy philosophers appear to be attuned to the vital flows necessary to ameliorate the hurting cosmos, they are at their cores cold and dry, motivated and sustained by Saturn's ice. Likewise, even if the sad philosophers in the *Book of Life* seem able to animate matter with spirit, they are finally, as students of the *Aesclepius*, fixated on dead things: inanimate statues. These are the disturbing paradoxes of melancholy magicians who craft sacred statues. Though desirous of life, they are in love with death. Though hungry for the currents of spirit, they are obsessed with stone.

FREUDIAN MELANCHOLIA AND NARCISSISM

If Ficino's Hermetic melancholia points to the hopeful longing behind Kleist's puppets, Freud's psychology of sadness reveals the reverse: a neurotic love of death that fixates on wooden folks. Like Ficino, Freud believes that melancholia can grant people "a keener eye for truth than others who are not melancholic." But Freud also maintains that the price for this sight is high: perpetual dread, self-loathing, obsession with corpses.²²

In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud argues that melancholy, like mourning, is based on the loss of a beloved entity—a real lover, an ideal condition. But while the work of mourning eventually redirects love to another object and ends the pain of loss, the labors of melancholy never cease, for melancholics, instead of releasing the lost beloved, identify with it. Unconsciously, melancholics turn their feelings concerning the lost other toward their own egos. These sentiments are a mixture of love and hatred—affection for the lost object's virtues, disdain toward the pain caused by the object's removal. Loving the object, melancholics incorporate it into their egos; hating the object, they loathe themselves. For Freud, this self-hatred is the mark of melancholia. What is really unconscious sadism toward the lost other becomes overt masochism. This "extraordinary fall in . . . self-esteem" results in a sense that the ego's every action and thought is inferior, shameful, sinful. The

predictable result of this anxiety is “sleeplessness and refusal of nourishment, and by an overthrow, psychologically very remarkable, of that instinct which constrains every living thing to cling to life.”²³

This is the dark underside of Ficino’s philosophical melancholia. Sad philosophers enjoy more profound visions of life’s lacerations than do happy people; however, these thinkers sleep and wake with a sense of irrevocable loss and thus also struggle to overcome suicidal urges. This loss can be the loss of a particular beloved—a mother or a father, a friend or a lover. It can be the lasting absence of a pristine state, possibly a childhood idyll, potentially a dream of Eden. Whatever the form of this bereavement, it always resolves into a loss of blissful unity, harmony with self, other, cosmos.

Freudian melancholics, like the sad souls of Ficino, long to heal their lacerations by reconnecting to some pristine concord. However, in contrast to Hermetic melancholics who quest for union with the divine, Freud’s despondent patients become angry at the source of their loss. Incorporating this source into their own beings, they come to loathe those parts of themselves that love the lost person or state. If they should try to recover this state or person through creating artificial copies—automatons resembling their lovers or statues that look like Adam—these melancholics will hate the unnatural forms as much as they love them, will view these forms as monsters as much as miracles. The creations of these melancholics will not be pious, self-effacing emanations of hunger for cosmological unity. They will be neurotic, narcissistic projections of yearning to possess the one thing that has been lost.

A BRIEF TYPOLOGY OF THE ANDROID

Thus far, I have used terminology loosely, roughly equating moving puppets, statues that talk, and the mannequins a twentieth-century neurotic might make. Now, before continuing to introduce the mental life of the android, I should clarify my concepts. “Android,” “synthetic human being,” forms a general category instanced by several particular examples. Puppets, dolls, and statues in human form; mummies and homunculi and golem; human automatons and robots: all of these are subsets of the android, similar in kind yet different in degree. Though each of these humanoids is, properly speaking, an android, each instances one of the three main types of artificial human: the humanoid made uniformly of stiff, inanimate, natural material; the humanoid crafted uniformly from flexible, possibly organic material; and the humanoid created with a blend of unyielding, dead, possibly synthetic parts and pliable, living, potentially organic parts. One can respectively designate

these types as the mummy, the golem, and the automaton. The category of the mummy includes androids comprised of dead things: mummies, of course, but also puppets, dolls, and statues. The division of the golem subsumes androids made of living earth: golem, obviously, but also homunculi. The automaton classification includes those humanoids combining the stiff and the soft, the synthetic and the organic, the dead and the living: automatons, clearly, but also robots.

These categories are not only differentiated by bodily composition. They are also distinguished by psychological condition. The category of the mummy is beset by melancholia over this conundrum: the hunger for eternal *physical* life forces one to become obsessed with dead things—with corpses that might gain reanimation, inanimate stone that could serve as spirit's vessel, lifeless wood preserving the face of the deceased. The golem class is agitated by a different sort of sadness: a desire for undying *spiritual* existence that results in bitterly vexed attempts to transcend matter through matter. Both golem makers and creators of homunculi attempt to approximate the unfallen Adam beyond space and time by delving into the grossest parts of the physical world—moist dust that might cohere into a giant, and semen-soaked mud that might grow into a little fellow. The category of the automaton is connected to another sort of gloom. Not bent on horizontal transcendence beyond yet dependent upon time, not keen for vertical transcendence above but contingent upon matter, fashioners of automatons and robots wish to replace the contingent flux of the organic world by surrounding themselves with predictable machines. However, to achieve this mechanical paradise, these automaton makers must mimic the organic world they loathe, must imitate with their cogs the laws by which cells thrive. This double bind offers automaton makers the possibility only of ironic transcendence: an escape from changing matter based on the laws of matter and thus doomed to fail even as this escape gestures toward inaccessible stasis.

THE SPECTRUM OF THE ANDROID: FROM Gnostic TO Gothic

These three types of android constitute a spectrum, flanked on one side by divine mummies and holy statues grown from noble, spiritual melancholia—the longing detailed by Ficino—and on other side by weird automatons and robots emerging from neurotic, physical melancholy—the gloom described by Freud. The two extremes of this spectrum—whose midpoint would feature golem makers caught between the spirit they love but cannot achieve and matter they loathe but require—can conveniently be termed the “Hermetic” and the “neurotic.” Hermetic

magicians attempt to transform their sad moods into sacred technologies. Wasted neurotics convert their dejected states into profane substitutions. Hermetic melancholics rise to religious ecstasies, their souls flowing out into animated androids. Nervous types fall into secular frenzies, their minds fervidly trying to repossess the beloveds that their copies mimic. Hermetic makers are charitable, wishing to vanquish their egos to become one with the primal man, anthropos. Edgy craftsmen are selfish; they want to incorporate into their egos the particular women or states from which they have been divorced. Magicians aspire to be gnostics, reconcilers of body and soul, engineers of eternity.²⁴ Neurotics turn gothic, compulsive wreckers of soul and body, mad scientists unconsciously concocting horrors.

This spectrum of androids begins in the sacred and ends in the sacred—the sacred as holy, the sacred as accursed. On the gnostic side of the continuum, the region devoted to knowledge of and participation in the spiritual abyss, the sacred takes an uncanny form. According to Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) is a mode of exploration in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar and the strange turns intimate. Sometimes, after one has long meditated on the Being generating and sustaining all beings, one on a certain day, perhaps when bored or in reverie, feels the common things fall away. The everyday objects—this particular volume of Proust, that grocery list—become crepuscular, ghostly, weirdly inaccessible. At the same time, the invisible ground of these existences strangely arises, becomes, though still unseen, palpable, attractive, luminous. In a flash, one *knows*. The ostensible essentials of life, the familiar objects composing the particular biography, are superfluous: strange others hindering the authentic. Likewise, the apparent dream, the primal abyss of Being, is the hidden core of life: the most intrinsic principle. Extended into this nothing, this abyss—not this or that—one is unsettled, insecure. Yet because this nothing is everything, the absence generating all presences, one is also reassured, buoyed by a profound vision of the origin. This uncanny eruption is gnosis, intuitive knowledge of the whole.²⁵

If the Hermetic statue is a vehicle of the gnostic uncanny, holy vision, the neurotic manikin is a site of another kind of uncanny, the gothic: accursed experience. In his 1919 essay “The Uncanny,” Freud offers a psychology of horror. A moment of terror is caused by an unexpected eruption of a fear that has long been repressed. The return of the repressed is uncanny, a troubling mixture of unfamiliar and familiar. On the one hand, the repressed material is shocking, monstrous, for it has long been hidden and forgotten. On the other hand, this same underground energy is intimate and integral because it has been an essential force of organization and motivation.²⁶ Envision someone in a secular

age, alone in a poorly lighted museum, who witnesses an inanimate doll come to life. This person is horrified at the spectacle but also undergoes *déjà vu*, the experience of having suffered this same moment before. The animated doll embodies an archaic fear of the dead coming to life. It blurs the categories essential for a rational civilization. Because the person in the museum, a rational adult in a secular society, has long repressed this primitive, occult fear, the doll catalyzes repulsion and attraction—repulsion toward eruption of the intractable, attraction toward deep revelation.

THE ANDROID'S CONTINUUM: MUMMY TO AUTOMATON

The movement from divine mummy to demonic automaton corresponds to a historical development. The androids that fall into the class of the mummy tend to belong to the ancient world—the middle and new kingdoms of Egypt, the classical and Hellenistic periods of Greece, the late antiquity of Rome and Alexandria. The humanoid in the golem category generally come from the European worlds of the Middle Ages and the early modern period—from the medieval visions of Abraham Abulafia and Eleazer of Worms, from the renaissance ideas of Paracelsus and Rabbi Loew. Automata emerge in the next phase of Western history: the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, when Descartes and La Mettrie were opining that men are engines, when Vaucanson was crafting his mechanical duck and von Kempelen his automatic chess player.

This temporal movement is a dramatic action. As Western intellectual history becomes increasingly secular and rational, melancholy becomes decreasingly noble, androids less and less holy, and the uncanny decreasingly gnostic. The obverse is also true: as minds in the West turn decreasingly religious and intuitive, depression descends to disease, humanoid machines metamorphose into horrifying wonders, and the uncanny becomes gothic. The great turning point of this development is the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. From the days of the ancient Egyptian priests to the time of the early renaissance magi, the various forms of androids—mummies and talking statues and homunculi and golem—were largely viewed as religious technologies, modes for overcoming the split between soul and body. During the seventeenth century, the period of Bacon and Descartes, the humanoid machine began to lose its holy density and started to gain an almost exclusive scientific signification. Even though this century constitutes a fecund hybrid of occult passions and rational pursuits, it in the end spawned the Age of Reason, the eighteenth century, when

scientific gadgets took the place of the artifices of eternity. The mechanical automaton edged out the esoteric android.

This picture of straight historical development from religion to science does not tell the whole story. Certainly the Egyptian priests and Hellenic statue makers and medieval Cabbalists and early modern alchemists were committed to a scientific understanding of the laws of nature and mechanics, to the idea that they could penetrate and harness the cosmos. Likewise, the automaton builders of the seventeenth century were struck by the religious overtones of their creations, by the idea that their mechanically concocted Adams might replace the organic one of old. This overlapping of the extremes of the continuum opens into several pairs of opposites that structure android building through its historical changes. In each period, an android can be either a *realization* of cosmic law, a return to the perfection of the unfallen human, or a *violation* of universal dictate, a blasphemous affront to the way things are.²⁷ Whether the humanoid is miracle or monster depends on the values placed on the *inorganic* and the *organic*. If the inorganic is ascendant, then the undying, unemotional android will be an ideal. However, if the organic is predominate, then the artificial, inhuman robot will be aberrant. Depending on the culture in which the android is built, the machine can be either a way of *integration* or a mode of *alienation*. The humanoid might reconnect its maker with the spiritual perfection from which the world has fallen. It might sever its creator from the natural laws that should be imitated.

As I have suggested, the romantic age of the early nineteenth century was beset by an especially troubling mixture of these extremes. Faced with the horrific yet exhilarating possibility that the industrial machine might take the place of humans, this age inevitably loathed mechanisms as much as it loved them. This vexed obsession—a consuming fixation on the various android types and their sundry significations—has, not surprisingly, persisted into our digital age and become even more intense. In a time when the very distinctions between organic and inorganic as well as integration and alienation have become blurred, the android in its heterogeneous forms serves as a critical register of our secret longings and terrors. Regardless of historical period or enduring type, we must keep this closely in mind: whether creaking in ancient Egypt or humming in renaissance France, the android is our familiar and our contemporary.

PLATO'S PUPPETS

In book 7 of *The Republic* (360 BC), Plato pictures an ancient version of the modern cinema. Imagine men in a dark cave manacled so that

their heads can face only the wall opposite the entrance. Behind these men burns a fire. Between the fire and these inmates rises a low wall. This wall resembles a screen one might find at a puppet show, the barrier between audience and puppeteer. Above this screen, artifacts ceaselessly move, carried back and forth by men behind the wall. Stone birds and fish, tigers and a bull glow over the scene, sometimes silent, other times singing out animal sounds. Likewise, statues of human beings make their way to and fro on the stage—tall like Achilles, lithe and slim such as Patroclus, like Homer himself cautiously blind. Sometimes these shapes speak words that men would say. Often, though, they oscillate soundlessly as ghosts. All the imprisoned men can see are the shadows these artifacts cast on the dim surface. These sad prisoners are doomed for life to witness simulacra of simulacra in a lurid hallucinarium—to watch a never-ending film in a theater that will not close. There is hope for liberation. On an unexpected day, one of these chained men might be freed. Unaccustomed to light and objects, he would at first behold the fire and the puppets with pain and confusion. Later, after he had for a time sat by the flames and played with the manikins, he would turn toward the cave's mouth and become curious about the even brighter sights beyond the dimness. He would grope into the blinding sun and the bewildering blur of colored birds. If he were hungry to know about this new world, he would endure the doubt until he realized that the wings fluttering in the dawn are real, the ideal forms that the puppets in the cave only copy. Now wise, but still saddened by his wasted life, he might remember with nostalgia his time as a puppet watcher, and wonder if these artificial forms were sacred vehicles that pointed him to the truth. In another mood, he might regretfully think that these gloomy dolls formed pernicious obstacles to his quest for truth. This man would never forget his life with the puppets. He would continue to be hounded by visions of wooden gods and demons made from blocks. His dreams would be divided between mummies fumbling in their tombs and metallic men gliding over surfaces that shine.²⁸