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Automatopoietica [1962]

“Le fou entend un autre tic-tac”
Henri Michaux

I.

Automata Venus signifies “benevolent Venus” in the writings of Servius, a commentator on Virgil. According to Cornelius Nepos and Plutarch, Automatia is the kindly goddess Timoleon invented out of a sense of modesty in order to explain a number of successes he had enjoyed. And Pygmalion’s pretend girl is revealed, Cipro giving life to the ivory limbs, exemplary wife and mother (of Paphos).

In contrast, when Mérimée’s *Venus d’Ile* (1832) descends from the greenish pedestal, her footfall is as heavy as those of Hoffmann’s automated criminal, *The Sandman*, or Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein with his patently homicidal intentions. For all automata are now indiscriminately fated to destruction, either sowing death around them or coming a cropper in some dreadful fate, their inner workings spilling out (in Hoffman’s story, Olimpia Coppelia’s eyes fall out; Villier’s *Eve Future*, also around 1890, is burnt “alive” in a fire).

The transition from the automata of the Classical world to those of Romanticism did not occur as a brutal transformation; instead it was a gradual development, which can be divided into various phases.

The first device in our literature that can genuinely be described as automatic can be found in Homer’s *Iliad* (Book 5): “The gates of heaven creaked spontaneously (*autòmatai*), the gates which the hours guarded”.¹ The door in question opens to reveal Zeus’ mother and daughter, who emerge in a chariot, making the echo of remote-controlled garage doors even more apparent, although the device, according to the text, was a simple clockwork mechanism (and, to boot, with no extra lubricant: note the absence of any suggestion of Ali-Baba-style magic).

The first automata, or rather androids, also appear in Homer’s *Iliad*, in Book XVIII, in the form of young girls, which Vulcan, rising up to meet with Thetis, used as remote-controlled devices: “the mighty monster hobbled off from his anvil, his thin legs plying lustily under him. [...] There were golden handmaids also who worked for him, and were like real young women, with sense and reason, voice also and strength”.²

1 Translation: Theodor Alois Buckley, London, 1873.

2 Translation: Samuel Butler, 1898.