Bodily Grace and Consciousness: from the Enlightenment to Romanticism

The mechanistic view of the soul as an extension of the body, propounded by de la Mettrie in 1747, finds later variations in Schiller’s theory of grace in Anmut und Würde (1793), in Kleist’s Über das Marionettentheater (1810) and in Hoffmann’s Der Sandmann (1815). Schiller binds body and soul in his definition of physical grace; Kleist first removes and then reinstates consciousness as a requisite for grace. Finally, Hoffmann tells of a failed alliance between consciousness and the mechanical.

The logical methods of inquiry and deduction introduced during the Enlightenment, and the emphasis on empirical evidence as the basis for certain knowledge, inclined the age towards a mechanistic explanation both of the creation of the world and of the origins of the human being. A further consequence was that an increased degree of interest focused on the workings of the world and the mechanics of the human being. One of the more radical philosophical views about the composition of human beings was put forward by the French philosopher Julien Offray de la Mettrie, who pushed beyond Cartesian body-soul dualism in his essay *L’homme machine* of 1747. De la Mettrie argues against the assumption he attributes to Leibniz and Descartes and his followers, that man is composed of two distinct substances. They assert this, he says, as though they had actually seen the two parts and counted them. The title of de la Mettrie’s essay alone sums up his own stance very succinctly: we are organised mechanically, he says, like clocks: “Le corps n’est qu’une horloge”. Each part is dependent upon the operation of all other parts through a motion evocative of a clock’s pendulum; de la Mettrie fittingly describes it as “oscillation”. Descartes had already established the comparison between the human body and an automaton but now de la Mettrie extends the metaphor so that it will hold true not only for our physical, but for our spiritual dimension as well. He is guided in this matter by empirical observation alone, and he is persuaded that the senses reveal spiritual as well as material things. He provides several instances which show how physical indisposition affects the spirits and how, on the other hand, physical signs indicate feelings when, for example, the circulation of the blood quickens in response to emotional change. In short, consciousness and sensations are, for de la Mettrie, simply a variation within matter or an extension from it. I shall argue that the problematics of bodily grace in relation to consciousness, as expressed by German writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries through the vehicle of the mechanical being, have their origins in de la Mettrie’s explanation of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual.

From de la Mettrie’s position one needs only to take a small step to imagine constructing a mechanically correct physical being whose heartbeat and circulation would call forth a corresponding emotion. The possibility of creating a mechanical body, and the conceivable consequences of such an act, fascinate poets and thinkers alike, in the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century. For a poetic expression of the new-found freedom from the orthodox concept of God as sole creator, one need look no further than Goethe’s poem ‘Prometheus’. There the figure of Prometheus celebrates the new understanding of the poet as autonomous self, with productive powers, and capable of creating in his own right. What used to be the preserve of the divine is now firmly grasped by the human; the supernatural is reduced to the level of nature. However, when the focus shifts from the creator to the object created, the mechanistic view is expressed through examples which show the difficulty in determining the boundaries between the mechanical and the real. Goethe’s flesh and blood Mignon in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (1795/96) is repeatedly described using phrases suggesting marionettes and wind-up devices. Although human, she is jerky and puppetlike in her movements (“wie Pulcinellpuppen”; “wie es eigentlich nur Holzpuppen aushalten können”). In a special dance routine, Mignon accompanies herself on the castanets, whose clacking sound further emphasizes her mechanical execution of the steps, and she moves as “relentlessly as clockwork” (unaufhaltsam, wie ein Uhrwerk”), as the narrator observes. The division within Mignon is symbolized by her ambiguous appearance, her insistence on wearing male clothing. It is also reflected in her inarticulate pattern of speech and her penchant for gnomic utterances. Only in song can she make clear her awareness of the difficulty of communication between the inner and the outer part, as she sings of her fatal inhibitions: “Ich möchte dir mein ganzes Innre zeigen / Allein das Schicksal will es nicht”. Although not literally mechanical, Mignon suffers from another form of the fundamental dualism which constitutes the central tension between the body and consciousness in the main works under discussion here: Kleist’s essay Über das Marionettentheater and E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story Der Sandmann.