

THE MECHANICAL MIRROR-IMAGE:
AUTOMATA AS DOPPLEGÄNGERS

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Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, who founded modern stage magic in the second half of the nineteenth century, once retreated to an isolated cottage for eighteen months in order to make a special automaton--a self-moving image of a human being. Before becoming a magician, Robert-Houdin had been a highly skilled clockmaker who often had occasion to repair very elaborate clocks and automata; nevertheless, he claimed in his memoirs, his technical skills were stretched to their limit by the task of creating a mechanical figure that could write and draw in a realistic manner. For the figure to be truly lifelike, it had to replicate not only human actions, but also human appearances--a requirement that Robert-Houdin at first found difficult to meet. The face of the automaton was critical to the success of his illusion. It was vital that the features be expressive and individual.

Robert-Houdin rejected the heads that he had commissioned from two different artists as too wooden or vacuous before he decided to take the task into his own hands. His first effort at sculpting without a model was unsatisfactory; though the face he made had regular (dare I say, "symmetrical?") features, it lacked character. Needing a model in his isolation, he turned to a mirror and beheld the character he sought. Even though he says that he studied his reflection carefully as he carved, he insists that when the automaton was complete, he was surprised that he had "unconsciously produced an exact image of myself." His surprise turned to wonder as he set the automaton in motion. Tears came into his eyes, he tells us, when he asked it "who is the author of your being?" and saw his creation "fix an attentive glance on the paper" while its arm, until then "numb and lifeless," began to write his own signature.

Now this is a very curious story, regardless of whether or not it is true (and we can be fairly sure that Robert-Houdin, a consummate showman, wrote his memoirs with more concern for their effect than for their veracity). The magician tells us that he deliberately set out to copy his own image in the

mirror, yet once he had completed the work, he expresses surprise at its resemblance to himself and tells us that he has captured his likeness "unconsciously." Once he sets the automaton in motion, he finds the figure coming to life before his eyes. His subsequent elation is so great when the figure produces his own signature that he makes it sign his name "a thousand times."

Where does Robert-Houdin's surprise come from? Why does he suggest that the capture of his own image was an unconscious act? How can we appreciate the significance of the moment in which the automaton takes on Robert-Houdin's sign of identity, his signature, in an act that simultaneously signifies that Robert-Houdin himself has been transformed into a god-like figure as the creator of a new being?

In Freud's sense of the term, the moment is "uncanny," as the familiar suddenly appears in an unfamiliar light and the unfamiliar takes on an aura of familiarity. At the moment when Robert-Houdin completes his work he suddenly recognizes it, as though he were seeing himself from the outside. His experience is similar to one that many of us have had when we turn a corner or glance around and glimpse an oddly familiar stranger. Suddenly, we recognize ourself; then on second take the image resolves into nothing more than an unexpected reflection. Houdin's experience is more intense, however, because the autonomy of the image persists beyond that first, uncanny instant, as though his image had been removed from the mirror altogether and brought to life.

In this respect, Robert-Houdin's story is very similar to a number of novellas and short stories, particularly popular during the Romantic era, in which the main character must cope with the consequences of being suddenly dispossessed of his mirror image, or, in some cases, his shadow, only to discover that the image has acquired a separate existence in his own world. The image is confronted as a second self, which often becomes a rival for love and for status in the world. In many of the stories, the main character becomes so obsessed with his second self that he can no longer cope effectively with the world. In most cases he is reduced to trying to destroy the image, only to find that in doing so, he has destroyed himself.

These stories belong to the same genre as that of the double or doppelgänger. Various literary, psychological and anthropological studies of the double have discussed the double's relations to ideas concerning the human soul, our attitudes towards death, and the problem of narcissism in human relations. In this paper, I will be discussing the ways in which the history of automata exhibits the themes of the double. I will demonstrate how certain

automata might be considered to be images or doubles of their makers. In particular, I will focus on the social and cultural implications of constructing mechanical mirror images of ourselves. I will be arguing that such independent doubles are potentially disruptive in social terms, unless we assign them to special categories that fall outside ordinary social-structural patterns. The automaton, then, functions most often as a liminal figure in human culture, marking the places where we must cope with the juncture of two different states of being.

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