

Moses Mendelssohn
The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream Vision¹

“I have seen it,” we were told yesterday in our meeting by a young speculative mind who has yet to choose his system; “I have seen the statue à la Bonnet and Condillac, which our friend Engel had brought from France in order to prove his philosophical proposition. I observed it precisely, was attentive to all its movements and utterances, glances and gestures. For it was not a mere statue so much as an ingenious self-moving invention, an automaton of the Vaucansonian type designed to imitate every human behavior, and moreover capable of numerous variations. I witnessed the entirety of its repertoire, but of course only in dream; or, rather: the *genius* of my dreaming only elaborated further the metaphysical-allegorical vision to which Engel, that astute philosopher, had led it.

The son of sleep and poetry was so gracious as to lead me to a hall adorned with many automata of this type. He had one of them step forward, walk to and fro in the hall, and finally sing and dance in a not at all unpleasant way. The mellifluous song filled my ears sweetly, although the words did not seem to have been written by Metastasio, nor the music by the Ritter von Gluck. The dance, likewise, was not of Noverre’s invention; but it made an all the more natural and simple impression. When I had taken sufficient pleasure in this spectacle, I cried: ‘Benevolent *genius*! I thank you for this lovely performance; but show me now also the internal workings that enable this Daedalian statue to entertain the senses so enjoyably. I should not like to feast my senses only, without also becoming more rational [*vernünftiger werden*] by virtue of your graciousness.’ ‘More rational?’ said the divine child. ‘Prim Lady Reason is seldom my friend. She has never been particularly well-disposed towards my father; and my mother, whom she claims to have brought up, has counseled me to show her outwardly all the respect due a matron, but otherwise to pay no mind to her moods and harsh criticisms. All the same: your wish, in part, is granted.’

He touched the image with the bouquet of poppies his mother had bestowed upon him, and the automaton was suddenly transformed into a choir of youths and maidens who, upon the cue of a choirmaster called

Mens or Human Mind seated on an elevated throne at the center, broke into a whirl of song and dance. Each one seemed to maintain unchanged its own position, gesture and expression, no less than its own style of vocal modulation. Meanwhile this all meshed into such a pleasant harmony that for a time I forgot my resolution to become more rational. Finally I called out: 'Propitious daemon! In this great manifold of sounds and movements I cannot keep anything apart. Let the dancers and the singers, both youths and maidens, step forward one at a time to demonstrate their arts. I should like to speak to each one individually and inquire after the manner of their upbringing, and by speaking to their choirmaster learn a thing or two more. Such information would, in our day, in which anything related to pedagogy meets with universal appeal' – 'Well, well, the dream-god replied: I see you desire only material for a society lecture – –. This wish too is granted.' In my dream I then had a long discussion with these *genii* in which I learned many an interesting fact that I planned to write down upon waking in the morning. I stepped up to my writing desk, and – behold! I found the sum of the entire discussion with the *genii* as well as with their leader written down by my own hand on a leaf of paper.

How – where – and when did I write this? While dreaming in the night? – I must have been sleepwalking; and why not? Having somnambulated once, or even several times in the course of one's life, does not make one a somnambulist any more than having been drunk a number of times makes one a drunkard. We all more or less have the capacity to produce, while dreaming, certain voluntary movements that correspond more to our dream state than to the state in which we really find ourselves. This occurs whenever the images dreamt are vivid enough to influence the organs of motion and trigger their corresponding movements. Now in the usual condition, of course, this dream and its influence on the limbs is interrupted after a duration too short to earn it the title of somnambulism. But if a dream is sufficiently coherent and composed of potent images, it can also bring forth compound changes in the sense organs and sustain them for a time. This series of voluntary changes brought forth by the dreamer we call somnambulism, and a person whose body has the capacity to do this often we call a somnambulist. – It will thus suffice if I merely copy down my nocturnal essay, here and there filling in the few remaining gaps.

There first appeared two youthful boys who called themselves Sight and Touch. The two lived in intimate friendship; having been schoolmates, they

shared everything they knew and all their sorrows and joys. The former had a brother he took in tow everywhere he went. He called himself Spacevision to distinguish himself from his brother, whom he called Colorvision. The brothers had everything in common except for the intimate friendship of Touch, which Colorvision was incapable of winning. Colorvision also took little interest in the collaborative studies of Spacevision and Touch, and abandoned himself to his own play whenever they discussed the sciences. – They had learned, among other things, the first principles of geometry; or had rather discovered [*erfunden*] them themselves, as Blaise Pascal boasts. Spacevision, a boy rife with imagination and hubris, took all the credit for the discovery himself, and the kind-hearted *genius* Touch for a long time allowed himself to be convinced that it was so. But one day, when the brothers Spacevision and Colorvision were absent from Professor Saunderson's class, Touch had a go at the whole of geometry and discovered that his knowledge sufficed on its own to invent this divine science, and that Spacevision had merely provided him with a few expressions and figures of speech to elucidate the propositions; but that these were by no means necessary. Indeed, he even went so far as to translate the entire theory they had set down together for Colorvision into his own personal concepts, language, and figures of speech, as meager as his contact with Colorvision had otherwise been. He thus invented an optics for people born blind, and had it taught publicly by Professor Saunderson.

When this *genius* later disclosed all this to his friend Spacevision, it seemed to cause a distance to develop between them. At the same time, the perspicacious *genius* Spacevision noticed that he too would have invented a kind of geometry without the assistance of Touch; even if it were not the same one they had invented together. For he would have proceeded from other, more one-sided foundational concepts and would have had to translate, as it were, all the words and figures of speech of their collective mathesis into his own language, premising other principles and postulates; and he would have come to conclusions suitable only for the sense of sight. This observation brought the friends closer together again. They saw that they had equal claims and equal accomplishments, and determined that it would thus be more beneficial to abstain from asserting unilateral rights in order to better cultivate the common element of their inventions and apply them in the most useful ways to the other sciences.

They thus pooled their knowledge and settled their concepts of space, distance, height, depth, line, angle, surface, motion, and other such words

as have their own specific meaning in the dialect of each sense; words that are constituted in such a way, however, that each sense can make itself understood through the language of the others. In the language of Sight, for instance, a straight line is one that, when viewed from one of its endpoints, cannot be distinguished from a point; or one that rises gradually from the horizon as its parts move further away from the eye. A sphere is a body whose shadow is circular from all sides. In the language of Touch, these explanations are expressed differently; according to their essence, though, they are the same. And not only did the boys always understand each other in discussing such matters; the reports of their observations and activities, which they were obliged to submit to the choirmaster, were lucid and received with applause.

The other boys' reports fell far short of this clarity. Their presentations seemed more sensation, or sensationalism, than pure understanding. Hearing – an impatient, voluptuous lad – seemed attentive, at some expense of effort, to time and its measurements; but ultimately more to the end of flattering sentiment and winning over the heart; or else in order to ignite the imagination rather than to educate the understanding. All his images had life and movement. Tenderness, sympathy, and compassion in both sorrow and joy; yet rage and audacity and all the more terrible passions were likewise well within the expressive range of his dialect. It was only to the understanding that his sound-images failed to bring any particular light.

Smell and Taste, whose sensuality was of a coarse, clumsy variety, were so beholden to pleasure that even Imagination wanted nothing to do with them. They lived side by side in much the same intimate way as Sight and Touch. Yet they were of a far more indolent nature and always stuck on the present; they cleaved so to the moment that when it disappeared, it seemed to take all pleasure and all reflection with it. As diverse as the range of their sensations was, they had done almost nothing to arrange them into classes or to express them in words and signs. Coarse sensuality is not particularly sympathetic, and has all the less need of language.

Those divine, inquisitive youths Sight and Touch once wanted to instruct the other *genii* in the mathematical sciences they had invented; but all their efforts to make them comprehensible to the others were in vain. Even if the pupils made use of the same words, they associated them neither with the same nor with similar concepts. At times they merely accepted empty signs from their teachers on faith without having any conscious idea of their meaning. Sometimes, of course, the signs also had some meaning in

their own dialect; but such meanings, being very distant from the signs' true sense, proved fruitless and inconsequential, for they were incapable of advancing their scientific insight. When Hearing spoke of heights and depths, or Taste called an impression sharp or blunt, their concepts were so distant from anything having to do with bodies and surfaces that neither geometric nor arithmetic principles could be of any consequence. In the end, their presentation was only made more confusing by the admixture of poorly understood neologisms; and Imagination, in whose house they had been educated, realized that the efforts to make them scientific had not improved upon their talents and that the reports they were obliged to make to the choirmaster had become neither more comprehensible nor more useful to him.

Full of indignation at her pupils' indocility, and chimeric as is this lady's wont, she arrived at the odd idea of dismissing them from her service completely. 'What they report of external objects,' she thought, 'the children of Reason are able to present just as comprehensibly in their scientific language, but with far more order, precision, and clarity. What is Hearing but a trembling in the nerve fibers of the ear in accord with the undulations of the resounding air? Everything this sense has to offer can thus be indicated by lines and proportions. And Colorvision? It ultimately all comes down to the light beam and the angle at which it is refracted and reflected from the surfaces of bodies. Everything he will ever have to present can thus be specified in terms of lines, angles, and surfaces. This *genius*,' she remarked, 'stands always in a double relation. In respect to his object and its spatiality, without which no color can be conceived, he is most precisely related to Spacevision; but in respect to his effect he has the most striking resemblance to Hearing; such that his perceptions can all be easily substituted with the reports of those kindred senses. In the future we can thus dispense completely with these incorrigible lads,' she went on saying to herself, 'Touch and Spacevision shall henceforth report most faithfully on everything having to do with bodies and their properties; and Hearing on all that depends upon time and its measurement; movement and stasis, and everything related to them, shall be their common task. The remaining *genii* may enjoy their existence in slumber.'

Considering these ideas one morning, Lady Reason and the philanthropic educator had the following conversation:

‘My child! Sound would then be, according to your theory, nothing more than the vibrating of a string, or the undulating of air particles?’

‘What else?’

‘Nonetheless, people hear neither a string nor air, neither vibrations nor undulations.’

‘Because they hear neither in the air nor in the string, but in their ear; or more precisely, in their brain.’

‘But they also hear neither ear, brain, nerve fibers, nerve fluids, nor nerve vibrations. Sound seems to me to be something altogether different.’

‘Rather different indeed. Sound is a sensual, obscure sensation, a sensation in which we do not see things as they are, do not perceive how they are related to objects other than ourselves, but only how we imagine them according to our own limitations.’

‘You think, then, that if sensual knowledge were clear, then people would no longer perceive sound, but instead white or grayish brain fibers vibrating more or less quickly or slowly with a fine nimble fluid flowing through them. Is that right?’

‘What else? What happens in the internal and external organ during hearing is nothing other than such modifications in the finest fibers and vessels, or else in their contents.’

‘My child! Do you not see what this would mean: that if sensual knowledge were more clear, human beings would hear with their fingers or with their eyes? Is this not evident to you?’

‘Not entirely!’

‘What does Hearing know of organs, fibers, fluid, and undulations? What of space, matter, and motion? Human beings owe all of these concepts to their fingertips and eyes. To dissolve sound into such characteristics is essentially to try to grasp it with one’s fingers or to see it with one’s eyes.’

‘But colors –’

‘With colors it is the same. To transform them by lines and angles into definite concepts is to try to grasp them with one’s fingers; – which is just as nonsensical as trying to hear them with one’s ears! Smell and Taste are no different, either. The usual attempt to explain them by reference to a stimulus in the nerve endings borrows both its words and its concepts from the language of Touch and Spacevision; and it does no more to explain the nature of the sensations of taste and smell than taste can be heard or smell be seen.’

‘Nonetheless, the seat of the soul is located somewhere in the brain; and whatever happens in this place during sensory experience can ultimately be nothing other than a movement of solid or fluid matter?’

‘Seat of the soul? – The blind-born man, before his vision was restored, believed nothing else than that his soul resided in the very tips of his fingers.’

‘Indeed, what a bizarre idea!’

‘Not as bizarre as it may seem to you, my daughter! This was the point where all his external sensations came together; the place from which all his clear and definite concepts arose. Did he not have to locate his soul there? – But of his fingertips themselves he did not have the visual concept that a seeing person has of them; not the same variable impression dependent upon light and shadow, brightness and darkness, and all the other modifications of color; but a merely tactile impression of something smooth or rough, hard or soft, raised or recessed. What he could grasp with these fingers – literally grasp with them – he could also grasp with his understanding; for which reason he must necessarily locate the seat of his ideas of things outside himself in the same place from which all his knowledge seemed to come to him.’

‘Right! But –’

‘A little patience! And then his eyes were opened. He gained visual impressions and compared them to the impressions of Touch; posited them both as outside himself, locating them in one and the same object because they