

Frankenstein Rather Than Faust? The Decline of Limit-Surpassing Forces

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Abstract

Giovanni Bottioli's article "Frankenstein Rather Than Faust?" aims to problematize and investigate further the challenge to the notion of «rigid identity» proposed by extant scholarship. In order to do so, Bottioli dismantles a univocal understanding of «identity», bringing to light the polysemy and porosity intrinsic to this term. In order to do so, the author discusses here different modes of identity, concentrating on two in particular: coincidence and non-coincidence with oneself. Taking this distinction as his point of departure, Bottioli applies these interpretative frameworks to two of the most significant figures of Western imagination, Frankenstein and Faust.

Keywords

Identity, Faust, Frankenstein

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1. No Identity Without a Mode of Identity

No considerations on the possible decline of Western civilisation can afford to ignore the polysemy of identity. The first step in this process entails setting aside mental habits that are extremely common: identity has very often been discussed as equivalent to «rigid identity», a notion that has helped to set up forms of nationalistic, regional and racial isolationism. The end of identity is hailed as a liberating event, books are written 'against identity', as if this were a univocal concept. Such oversimplifications are disastrous and should be vigorously eschewed. Identity may be described in many ways, and in order to respect this polysemousness, adjectives (or at any rate some kind of determination) must be added to what would otherwise remain an equivocal noun. I shall first of all distinguish two modes of identity: coincidence and non-coincidence with oneself. In order to describe these more clearly I shall refer to two figures of the Western imagination, Frankenstein and Faust.

Are the two modes of identity equally possible? We can only give a positive answer to this in abstract terms. Anyone who considers realistically our history and life in contemporary society cannot but register the primacy of coincidence – even in contemporary society, which is defined as «liquid». It is therefore important to embark on a careful conceptual analysis, so as not to confuse the porousness of boundaries with true limit surpassing.

It was Nietzsche's thesis that man need not necessarily coincide with himself: man is a rope strung between the animal and the overman (I prefer this translation of the term *Übermensch*, in that it adheres to Heidegger's interpretation). That is to say: going beyond

oneself is the particular vocation of a species that is not simply a species, in that it has no essence, is flexible, made up of conflicts and determined by *polemos*. Going beyond oneself, becoming the overman, is a possibility, or rather, the highest form of possibility for what we continue to call man. *Übermensch* is another name for the principle of non-coincidence (or going beyond).

Surpassing one's limits, is the vocation of a land that is not simply *Abend-land*, the «evening land», but the place where the impulse towards coincidence can set. It will never, it should be noted, completely disappear! On the contrary, it will oppose such a fate with inexhaustible obstinacy. This is Nietzsche's philosophy. The West is where the individual can feel out of place (*atopos*: the expression used by Plato to designate Socrates), capable, that is, of «transcending» their context of origin and enunciation. For the time being I shall use a term (transcendence) for which I have no particular affection, in order to stress its opposition to that immanence which some (the Deleuzians for example) continue, short-sightedly and anachronistically, to see as a space of rebellion and de-territorialisation.

Only in Nietzsche does the principle of going beyond find a suitable philosophical enunciation. However, this principle had already made its appearance in German culture between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and had already acquired a «form of subjectivity» in the character of Faust. It is not perhaps by chance that my reflections should repropose the closeness and affinity between two authors to whom Spengler, in the 1922 preface to *The Decline of the West*, declared he owed «almost everything» (5). We must, however, be more clear as to what is meant by Faust's identity, his way of being. Faust is not the will to power understood as the will to dominate and exploit the earth, though work is one of its manifestations. The Faustian spirit – I shall be returning shortly to this term – is a going beyond, a limit-surpassing, impulse, it is the will never to coincide with oneself. This is the meaning of a pact with the devil that is as colourless as the hierarchies of heaven (Spengler 187); Faust's antagonist is not Mephistopheles («For the solitude of the Faustian soul agrees not at all with a duality of world powers» 187), but the impulse towards coincidence; and Faust's victory will be the victory of an individual who will not be satisfied with any of the forms he has achieved and who will not say to the moment, «Stay a while, you are so beautiful» (Goethe v. 1699).

Goethe's conception of form is Faustian: form is transformation. But does this mean that every transformation is a going beyond? Quite the opposite; indeed, this is the misunderstanding that characterises modernity, and even more so the postmodern (and the posthuman). In order to understand such a misunderstanding, and in order to dissipate it, we must consider the figure I shall now set against Faust, that is, Frankenstein, and we should do so first in terms of his ontological status. The identity of the creature – as it is the creature and not his maker that I wish to discuss – is *mereological*, that is to say, essentially composed of parts. This is not meant as a negation of the fact that the character created by Mary Shelley may be defined by properties, or by relations with other characters; rather, it implies that a «property-based» or «relational» definition would not fully express what most eminently determines his identity.

2. The Death of Man and the Last Human Being. The Problem of the Parodying Doubles

Let us therefore leave aside the more conspicuous and sensationalist aspects of the 'creature'; what interests me is his ontological status, that is, his way of being. His identity is, self-evidently, mereological; it emerges from the seams that make up his body – it is a

composite entity, something that has been assembled. It is not, however, a simple sum of the parts, because, if it were so, life could not unite the parts of which he is composed. The borders *inter partes* are dissolved, the pieces of flesh gradually become an organism. The whole is the result of the parts, which implies that each part can be (at least theoretically) replaced, should they deteriorate. The creature's body reminds one of the identity puzzle known as the ship of Theseus (or by similar names). Let us imagine that certain parts of the mythical ship need to be replaced, and that this should happen, progressively, until a complete change has been brought about. Would this still be the same ship? The reason I mention this well-known paradox is merely to underscore that a mereological perspective almost inevitably results in a postulate of replaceability: each part may be substituted by another, similar or better than the preceding one as regards robustness, durability, functionality, etc. Therefore, among Frankenstein's heirs there is also the cyborg, an organism in which artificial prostheses have been substituted for some parts.

Let us therefore imagine a human individual who undertakes a more or less significant self-modification of his body and examine the results: is this still the same individual? His bodily shape, his mental activity itself, have undergone some transformations: can we consider these a metamorphosis, in Goethe's understanding of the word? Undoubtedly, a passing over the borders between the natural and the artificial has taken place: may we say that such an individual no longer coincides with himself? It seems to me evident that this type of problem can be adequately addressed only by philosophy.

I shall now return to the first steps of my reflection: if the term identity is understood in its more banal, and reductive, meaning of a rigid and static identity, then it will be easy to lay the emphasis on the passing over borders. From this emphasis derives all the chatter about non-identity and hybridisation that is so widespread, especially among sociologists and contemporary art commentators, in particular those who focus on the visual arts (see, for example, Macri 1996 and Braidotti 2014). The problem is the following: is the posthuman the going beyond man, or is it a variation of the last man, described by Nietzsche ahead of his time? Is the death of man, as enunciated by Foucault, a Nietzschean consequence, or is it a caricature? Are not the philosophers of difference (in particular Deleuze and Foucault who have read Nietzsche in an energetist key) perhaps parodying doubles, in a version which, while it is different from that of Nazism, is nonetheless deforming?

Before Nietzsche, though almost exactly in the same historical period, another writer was tormented by the problem of duplication. Dostoevsky, who, despite appearances, was close to Nietzsche in spirit, believed that every great idea is destined to conjure up its caricatural shadow, and that all individuals who passionately search for the truth will be accompanied by at least one parodying double. This is what happens to Raskol'nikov, to Ivan Karamazov, to Stavrogin (Bakhtin 1963). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the protagonist encounters a series of banalising and deforming doubles that reach their zenith in the «higher men» (*höheren Menschen*): an existential possibility which gives the impression of being something similar to the overman (*Übermensch*), even on a lexical level. These individuals say «yes» to life – and is this not the teaching of Zarathustra? Lack of space prevents me from looking further into this difference; but one should bear in mind how Nietzsche describes the last human being (*der letzte Mensch*), the new species of mankind, destined perhaps to triumph over the world.

Beware! The time approaches when the human beings no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whirl!

(...) Beware! The time of the most contemptible human is coming, the one who no longer have contempt for himself.

Behold! I show you the last human being (*Ich zeige euch den letzten Menschen*).

(...) Then the earth has become small, and on it hops the last human being, who makes everything small. His kind is ineradicable, like the flea beetle; the last human being lives longest.

«We invented happiness» – say the last human beings, blinking. (Nietzsche 9-10)

In the book announcing the overman and the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche confesses his nightmares: on the one hand man's never-ending desire for coincidence; on the other, the caricatures of non-coincidence. Even the will to surpass generates monsters.

3. The Desire for Identity in the Posthuman

Let us examine two examples taken from the news. The first is that of Pixee Fox, a Swedish woman, who recently (in 2015, according to the web) had six ribs removed, the last of a long series of plastic surgery operations she had undergone with the aim of looking like Jessica Rabbit, right down to her impossibly tiny waist. Nothing new under the sun, we might say, from the point of view of identity construction: Emma Bovary identified with the Romantic heroines of the novels she had read in the convent school, and Pixee Fox identifies – in an equally confusive way – with the female protagonist of the film *Who framed Roger Rabbit*. What is more relevant in both cases is that they exemplify the conception of identity which was put forward by Freud, starting with the essay on *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921): identity is the result of a series of processes of identification (in any case, of at least one identification). More than any other theory psychoanalysis has helped us to understand that to analyse identity exclusively from the point of view of its properties and from the mereological perspective is highly reductive: in the identification an *idem* subject absorbs the *alter*, becomes the *alter*. It may do so partially, and maintain the ability to reinvent what it absorbs. When an artist imitates and absorbs the style of another artist, he or she runs the risk of being dominated by this style. They must therefore rebel against the fascination of the model in order to affirm their originality.

For example, many great painters have frequented the workshop of a master, before coming truly into their own, before becoming themselves. Besides this possibility, however, there exists the confusive possibility, exemplified by Emma Bovary and Pixee Fox: the model devours the object, it moulds it with relentless inexorability.

The second example is a twenty-two-year-old American boy, Vinny Ohh, who underwent 110 operations to look like an alien. This case is slightly more complex than the former (Ohh has declared that he wishes to be *genderless*) and highlights how it is possible to identify not with another individual, but with a stereotype, transmitted by comics and films: the large darkened contact lenses, the claws which he has chosen to wear, are the symbol of an *impoverished identity*. In order not to coincide statically with himself, in order not to be just another American boy like so many in his age group, Vinny Ohh has consigned himself to a stereotype. This is the other face of coincidence: to become absorbed by the *alter*, thereby losing one's flexibility and creativity. This is not a form of limit-surpassing identity, as might appear to those who do not have at their disposal an adequate conceptual framework – on the contrary, it is its failure.

The mereological subject may hybridise with the artificial, modify himself or herself through internal prosthetics, or add external prostheses: he or she will remain a mereological subject, deprived of complexity.

Let us now take into consideration a third example. Stelarc is an Australian artist who decided to extend his body through electronic or robotised components. In 2007 he underwent surgery to implant on his left arm an ear that had been artificially created from his own cells in a laboratory; a microphone allows people to listen to what this ear perceives. How should we judge this, and other similar extreme experiments? For many, these are no doubt grotesque and sterile performances, too bizarre to be imitated. Aesthetic surgery is becoming more and more widespread, but on the whole it caters to that bodily physicality, with all its array of seductiveness, which Stelarc considers obsolete, though it reigns unchallenged daily throughout the web. The incursion of the formless into contemporary art should probably be considered an irreversible phenomenon, but it has not prompted, nor will it prompt the closure or the decay of the museums that we enter in search of beauty. Will beauty save the world – that is, will it save it from the real (in a Lacanian sense), from the shapeless, from sad monstrosity?

What interests me here is, however, the issue of identity, and of the subject-form. What may be inferred from the extreme examples we have mentioned? First, a porousness of borders: between the natural and the artificial a clear-cut demarcation no longer exists. We are therefore confronted with the passing of borders. We have, moreover, observed how widespread is the desire for transformation, and how it is articulated in at least two modalities that should not be confused, although they may overlap:

(a) the *mereological* transformation consists in the exchange or addition of parts: individuality is extended and amplified, through technological equipment. The body becomes a cyberbody; but what about the mind? Perception may be extended, as may memory, and even, perhaps, other faculties. The introduction of a chip into the brain is no longer a possibility to be ruled out. Nevertheless, we should ask ourselves once again, is *extended identity* a non-coincident identity or is it only a reinforcement of the old mode of identity? It is a variant of the last human being?

(b) the transformation that we may call *relational*, is, however, different, in that it is based on the relationship between two individualities, no matter whether these be real or fictional: this is the process of identification, the modelling of *idem* by *alter*. The trigger of this transformation is the desire to be. Pixee Fox desperately wants to be Jessica Rabbit, Vinny Ohh ardently wishes to be an alien. Technology allows these wishes to be granted, in that they privilege the material dimension, the physical aspect. These are *simple desires*, and they are very different from those that are embodied by Emma Bovary or other literary characters (Bottioli, 2016). They are simple desires of non-coincidence that shipwreck on their opposite: in both cases the transformations result in a rigid identity, and especially so in the choice of a pre-existing identity: there is no creativity, no invention of a new identity, only the hypnotic pull of a model that is already available and that has been built by others.

4. The Possibilities of the West

«Life is the process of effecting possibilities», states Spengler (37). One must look at life, and at the history of civilisations, from the point of view of the possibilities that have emerged, even conflictually, over the course of time. Possibility must here be understood as *power*, and not simply as «that which has not yet happened»: and the power of an individual in the eminent sense is not exhausted in the process of his realisation. Thus, Goethe and Nietzsche were for Spengler, and continue to be for us, eminent possibilities, which are renewed through interpretation.

What, therefore, is a limit-surpassing identity? It is to *never* coincide with oneself. Yet, as we have already mentioned, non-coincidence cannot be simply a *mereological* extension or a hybridisation. The outcome of the desire not to coincide with oneself may be an identity that is not coincident with the previous identity but is nevertheless equally rigid, and is indeed perhaps *more* rigid and stereotyped. Although we have put forward no evidence beyond mentioning Goethe and Nietzsche, we have said, that the West, as the *evening land*, the *Abend-land*, is the possibility of the overman. A possibility, however, may lose some of its power, it may be deviated or dispersed. Its interpreters may be aped or parodied. My thesis is that Frankenstein, the creature, is the parodic version of Faust. Mereological identity, with its possibilities (which are vast, perhaps unlimited) for replacement and extension, is the impoverished version of the limit-surpassing form of identity.

Non-coincidence demands flexibility. Not, however, the minor, adaptive, form of flexibility, but the ability to divide and transform oneself; which does not mean – and this is perhaps the last misunderstanding to clarify, should it be necessary – that what becomes divided is an “originary” identity. Flexible thought eschews all notions of ‘origin’ in that it affirms a process, whose drive is constituted and ruled by plastic forces. The plasticity of the human condition was enunciated by Greek tragedy, in the first chorus of *Antigone*, which states that «many things are formidable (*deinā*), and none more formidable (*deinòs*) than man» (vv. 332-33). *Deinòs* means wonderful, terrible, uncanny: it does not indicate a property (as would appear to be the case grammatically), but a way of being. Man is the most *deinòs* entity because he is the most flexible, because he possesses, that is, the greatest ability to go beyond himself. Thus, from the Greeks down to Nietzsche and Heidegger (1935), *non-coincidence* is designated as the highest possibility.

Will the West be able to grasp this opportunity? Or will the shrinkers, the small-makers prevail, as in Zarathustra’s nightmare? Perhaps everything depends on the possibility that Frankenstein might meet Faust, and that there should no longer be any opposition between these figures. Realistically, it should be admitted that the human condition is progressively mereological, composite, and assembled. Frankenstein’s legacy is not limited to mediocre experimenters in nipping and tucking, in wounding, in prosthetic connections (body art, cyber-performances, and so forth); it encompasses all the inhabitants of the web, which is, evidently, a mereological entity. For the moment, and while we await a growth in cyborgs, it is not so much the recent monsters, pathetic or grotesque as they may be, that are the creature’s heirs, but rather all those hyperconnected to the Great Prosthesis, which is composed of a limitless number of parts. Modern man proliferates in the multiplicity; but the multiplicity is not the flexible.

The growth of the multiplicity may give the impression of a greater flexibility, but its result is the very opposite. Nietzsche had understood this: «The time of the greatest events will be, despite everything, the time of the slightest, least important effects, if men will be of rubber and excessively elastic» («Das Zeitalter der grössten Ereignisse wird trotz alledem das Zeitalter der kleinsten Wirkungen sein, wenn die Menschen von Gummi und allzu elastisch sind» *Nachgelassene Fragmente* 3 [1]). Man can have no other essence but non-essence, that is *flexibility*; flexibility, however, is constantly banalised, most of all by multiplicity: as if by increasing the number of cells, and by changing prison every day, one could be free.

Thus, the *mereological condition* must be tackled by the virtue of selection; otherwise we shall be buried under the waste and refuse of the web. The two great solitary outsiders, Faust and Frankenstein, must meet: was this not the wish of the creature himself? To be

welcomed into the dimension of the spirit. Here we may once again reach out for a somewhat outdated term, which may recall a faded tradition – if we look carefully, however, this term indicates precisely the rebellion against coincidence, the desire for the beyond. Infinitely more flexible than the body, Geist is the only hope of salvation for mereological man.

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