

# Hyperrealities and Simulacra in Goethe's *Faust*

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Francesco Rossi

## Abstract

No other text calls for ongoing interpretations like Goethe's *Faust*. Reconsidered in relation to the progressive virtualisation of experience typical of our age, this two-part tragedy is interesting for us, its twenty-first-century audience, because of the crossing of boundaries between the real and the virtual. This encourages an interpretation of the text along the lines of Baudrillard's philosophy of the simulacrum, supplemented by further theoretical inputs. Virtuality and simulacrum are thus to be considered as parts of the same thematic field running through the work. Closely linked to this field is the mediatisation of experience, through which the subject becomes a hybrid, disembodied, decontextualised and non-situated presence floating in a sequence of hyperrealities. My interpretative hypothesis focuses on this aspect, which is closely linked to the question of the simulacrum and its relationship to the posthuman. It focuses particularly on the figures of Homunculus and Helena, in which the phantasmagoric side of *Faust* becomes evident. While in the former the simulation of the human *in vitro* is associated with a reduced form of life that privileges the mind over the body, with the latter the question shifts to the relationship between the main male character and the eternal feminine. These two characters invite us to reflect on disembodied experience, as well as on the poetic and aesthetic values of the simulacrum in this text and beyond it.

## Keywords

Virtuality; Theory of simulacra; Faust; Goethe's *Faust*; Thematic analysis

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## Introduction

The thematic field of virtuality, which includes the themes of the simulacrum and of the substitution or extension of reality, concerns the Faustian myth as a whole, even before Goethe's *Faust*. Indeed, a common feature of the myth's earliest articulations with the most recent ones is the question of overcoming the limits of the human, linked to the inexhaustible desire for knowledge and experience that has always characterised Faust. A forerunner of modern reality manipulators, he often found himself breaking the barriers between the real and the virtual, resorting to magical arts and to the help of demons and spectres of various kinds. These kinds of transgression – whether sanctioned as ungodly, as in the early modern age, or considered positively, starting with the Enlightenment, or even problematised (or de-problematised) in their moral, aesthetic, and cognitive assumptions, as in contemporary literature – are therefore to be considered as a constitutive feature of the Faustian macrotext.

In Goethe's masterpiece, however, the thematic field in question takes on a peculiar status, if only because, by transposition, it presents virtuality as a fundamental and distinctive mode of experience for modern man. In this respect, Goethe's *Faust* constitutes a paradigm of reference for various subsequent reworkings of the Faustian subject. This can be observed through a few examples, in which the reference to Goethe can be more or less evident, as happens in the work of Tommaso Landolfi, who measures himself with the German model not only in *Faust 67* (cf. Marola 2019), but also in the short story *La pietra lunare*, with ghostly scenes that are precise echoes of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century hypotext. Significant mentions of themes associated with virtuality, in relation to *Faust*, can also be found in Philip Dick's novels (cf. Carducci - Fambrini 2021: 19), for instance in *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, where extensive quotations from the second

part of Goethe's tragic play serve as keys to accessing the visions of the protagonist, obsessed with his own research into the hallucinogenic root of the divine.

The part of the Faustian macrotext informed by the thematic field of virtuality also includes the narratives of Adolfo Bioy Casares: the attempt to stop time, linked to the chance of a new lease of life and the defeat of old age – pre-eminently Faustian themes – is found not only at the centre of the short story *El relojero de Fausto*, but also, for example, in the more famous *Invención de Morel*, where the name of the main female character, Faustine, can be interpreted as a fairly direct reference to the archetype. In this case, the story is set on an island where there are no people, but holograms projected by a machine capable of indefinitely reproducing reality, i.e. simulacra that replace human beings. Bioy Casares thus thematises an immersive form of phantasmagorical experience that can be traced back to the Goethean model, as will be seen below.

This disembodied, decontextualised, self-referential and non-situated mode of experience plays a central role in Mark Ravenhill's play, *Faust is Dead*, a reworking of the Faust myth in the media-dominated contemporary world, which reads: «Reality died. It ended. / And we began to live this dream, this lie, this new simulated existence» (1997: 30). Ravenhill's play demonstrates in an exemplary way how, in the contemporary world, the Faustian myth is now centred on «the radical disruption of the concept of reality that the virtual dimension of modernity has generated»<sup>1</sup> (Zenobi 2013: 85). This aspect was later developed by the Catalan theatre company La Fura dels Baus in *F@ust Version 3.0* through an innovative fusion of theatre and digital technology.

The same Faustian interpretation of contemporaneity proposed by Ravenhill can also be found in Robert Menasse's *Doktor Hoechst*, in which the protagonist's attempt to give life to an artificial creature is a consequence and, at the same time, an emblem of the Prometheanism that characterises him from the very first lines (cf. Menasse 2015 and Serra 2018: 147-153). A noteworthy feature in the play is the intersection between the Faustian myth and post- and transhumanist fantasies, which, to limit ourselves to one last example drawn from contemporary German-language literature, informs Alexander Kluge's *Faust als Nationalsozialist* (2000: 486-496). Here the Faustian motifs of the stopping of time and the 'second chance' are

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of texts that are not quoted in the original language, unless otherwise indicated, is by the translator.

conceived in a dystopian and science-fiction sense, calling into play the most diverse technological devices, from genetic engineering to cryopreservation.

Virtuality, phantasmagoria, simulation, disembodiment, and the overcoming of the human self are closely interrelated concepts on the basis of which it is therefore possible to trace the perimeter of a thematic field that is essentially articulated in two ways within the Faustian macrotext. On the one hand, it is a space of illusoriness, i.e. the place of an absence or loss of contact with reality often conveyed by phantasmagorical vision devices<sup>2</sup>; on the other, it is an actual substitution of the real with a new parallel reality that, subverting at the root any principle of equivalence between signs and referents, goes in fact beyond the limits of representation to trespass into the sphere of simulation<sup>3</sup>. This correlation between virtuality as illusion and virtuality as simulation, i.e. between the thematic realm of the phantasmagorical and that of the simulacrum, plays a decisive role in Goethe's *Faust*. This will be demonstrated in the following paragraphs, on the basis of an in-depth analysis of the two simulacral characters at the centre of the second part of the tragic play, Helena and Homunculus, and their respective vicissitudes.

## Faustian hyperrealities

The overcoming of human limits is therefore a fundamental theme in Goethe's *Doppeldrama* – it is no coincidence that «Übermensch» (Schöne 2019a: 37, v. 490) is the epithet that the Earth Spirit ironically attributes to the protagonist right from the opening scene *Nacht* (*Night*) – and the driving force behind a narrative path that leads Faust to encounter all sorts of demons, spectres and simulacra along the way, exploring surreal places populated by illusory presences. Especially in the second part of the

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<sup>2</sup> In phantasmagoria, a form of performance anticipating the cinema, the overcoming of the purely representational character of dramatic action takes place in the form of projections of spectral figures that replace the actors' bodies. Simulacra, i.e. artificial beings that imitate or simulate real beings, are the products of a media contrivance, the magic lantern. On this topic, see Grespi - Violi 2019 and, in the German context, Milner 1989 and Andriopoulos 2013. From the point of view of media theory, the most thorough and complete research into the influence of phantasmagoria in Goethe's *Faust* is that of Jörg Robert currently being published.

<sup>3</sup> On the contrast between the two concepts, see Baudrillard 1994: 6.

tragedy, he progressively immerses himself in what could be described in some ways as an augmented reality; we see him conjure up virtual beings through procedures that involve a manipulation of reality (cf. Weber 2019). Finally, we see him repeatedly mistake appearance for reality, failing in his attempt to create his own artificial world in the third and fifth acts of the second part of the tragedy.

In order to define Faust's artificial worlds, it is possible to resort to the concept of «hyperrealism» in the sense attributed to the term by Jean Baudrillard, i.e. a structure of reality that does not simply imitate, but replaces reality, making itself self-referential and to some extent autonomous from it: a dimension in which one is dealing with «that which is always already reproduced» *per se*, in which «both art and the real» interpenetrate «by means of a mutual exchange [...] at the level of simulacra», and in which the subject finds himself immersed in «the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality» (1993: 73-74). There are therefore those who, like James M. van der Laan (2007: 117), without going into details, have already posited the concept of hyperreality, formulated with reference to the contemporary information world and often used to indicate the pervasiveness of the digital, in relation to the theme of virtuality in *Faust II*.

Since its first appearance, the second part of Goethe's *Faust* has been read as an allegorical representation of modernity through a series of dramatic modules characterised by the «absence of a vector line of development of the action» (Zagari 1999: 459). It thematises a disembodied and virtual mode of experience, which can be summarised in the verses of the final *Chorus mystichus*: «*Alles Vergängliche / ist nur ein Gleichnis*» (Schöne 2019a: 464, vv. 12104-5). With these words, from his vantage point as a poet and naturalist, Goethe is not only referring to the fleeting nature of existence, nor even only to the allegorical essence of his drama, but – this is the hypothesis underlying this contribution – to the intrinsically mediated character of Faust's experience and, through the character, of modern man. The verses tell us precisely that we are never dealing with pure and simple data of reality, with first-degree representations, but with reproductions, mediations and similes that, as such, never leave the circuit of the analogy that recalls other analogies. In them, the constitutive virtuality of human experience is expressed as a necessary correlate of its transience.

Although this research into the theme of the simulacrum in Goethe's *Faust* starts from these general premises, it is nonetheless necessary to go beyond the critical categories developed by Baudrillard and taken up by Simona Micali to indicate the features that are present in any simulacral character in literature: counterfeit, production and simulation, that is, the

interface, artificiality and spectral component (Baudrillard 1993: 50; Micali 2019: 124). The simulacra that appear in *Faust* are in fact very different from the automata of Jean Paul and E.T.A. Hoffmann: we are not talking about machines, but rather of creatures of ancient and pre-modern imagery, which can be explained by Goethe's well-known dislike for the triumph of the mechanistic paradigm of the sciences in his time.

## Helena

As is well known, the central character of *Faust II* is Helena, the most beautiful woman of the ancient world and, as such, the embodiment of the classical ideal of beauty. The encounter between Helena and Faust, which is topical in the Faustian macrotext<sup>4</sup>, could not but be present in Goethe's *Faust*. Indeed, the entrance of Helena is one of the first scenes of the second part conceived by the author<sup>5</sup>.

Critics are notoriously divided on the status of reality of the character of Helena: she is either a flesh-and-blood, living figure, and therefore to be placed on the same plane of reality as Faust, or a spectre, an illusory image (cf. Mommsen 1968: 8). This is an idle distinction only in appearance, not just because it affects the value system embodied by the heroine (the ideal of classicism cultivated by Goethe and many of his interpreters), but above all because the character of Helena is part of a fundamental isotopy of the text on which its overall interpretation depends, i.e. that of the

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<sup>4</sup> The Simon Magus legend, regarded as a possible forerunner of Faust's story, already included an encounter with Helen of Troy. In the *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* of 1587, two chapters are dedicated to her: chapter 49, 'Helena conjured up by magic on Low Sunday' (Spies 1980: 145-147), in which Faustus evokes the mythical woman in front of his students, in a scene that mingles lust for knowledge and lust for sex; and chapter 59, 'How the beautiful Helen of Greece lay with Doctor Faustus in the last year of the pact' (164), in which the woman, having become his concubine, bears him a son, Justus Faustus, who ominously disappears with his mother after his father dies. The character of Helena is naturally present in the tradition of the *Puppenspiel*, which, as is known, was very much in Goethe's mind from the earliest stages of the drama's elaboration.

<sup>5</sup> The verses «Helena im Mittelalter», roughly coinciding with the beginning of the third act of the completed tragedy, date from 1800 and were published separately in 1827 under the title *Helena. Klassisch-romantische Phantasmagorie. Zwischenspiel zu Faust* ('Helena. Classical-Romantic Phantasmagoria. Intermezzo for Faust').

eternal feminine (cf. Schöne 2019b: 817), which finds expression in the last couplet of the play, «*Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan*» (Schöne 2019a: 464, vv. 12110-1). Here, the eternal feminine component of existence takes on a salvific function as the bearer of grace and love and, as such, countering the impulse to action (even violent action) as well as the error of the eternal masculine which, instead, connotes the character of Faust. Helena is no less significant an embodiment of the eternal feminine than the Mater Gloriosa of the finale (on the references between the two figures see, again, Mommsen 1968: 134), as well as Margaret and Galatea, the nymph who appears at the end of the *Classical Walpurgis Night* and who, not coincidentally, precedes the Greek heroine's entrance onto the scene.

Hence the well-known hesitations of Goethe, who, in a letter of September 1800, confessed to Schiller that he did not want to turn his Helena into a farce character at all («Fratze» is the term used by the author, cited by Schöne 2019a: 780). On the contrary, his intention was to bestow a sense of tragic dignity on her, thus introducing a profoundly innovative element with respect to the tradition of the Faustian myth as it had been configured since the *Historia von Doktor Johann Fausten* and its subsequent theatrical adaptations. The Greek heroine would be given a status of exceptional reality, which would take into account her mythical quality and at the same time be welded to the modern spectral character of Faust's story. Given the tragic character that Helena was to assume, a kind of supernatural relying on tradition, or indulgence (fairy-tale), or ignorance, or least of all mockery, would not be enough. Rather, it would be necessary for the myth of Helena to enter a dimension in which virtuality should be the inescapable dimension of experience for modern man. Virtuality would thus become an essential component in the «supernatural relying on transposition»<sup>6</sup> that, in Goethe's *Faust*, represents the fictional correlate of the technological acceleration of a world on the threshold of the industrial revolution.

Now, the drama would not sink to virtuality in an abrupt way, but through a series of intermediate stages capable of creating the conditions for an epiphany of the classical myth in a world already torn with modern rifts. These are the well-known 'antecedents' (*Antezedenzien*), preparatory episodes through which Goethe anticipates his heroine's entrance onto the

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<sup>6</sup> Here I have recourse to the critical categories developed by Francesco Orlando in relation to the literary supernatural (2017). However, I employ the concept of transposition in a broader sense than he intended by clearly drawing inspiration in his reading from Lukács and the Marxist critique of *Faust*.

scene. It is common knowledge that Goethe did not at all write his *Faust II* in the sequence in which the work is known, but in stages, working on it discontinuously from 1800 to 1831 (on the genesis of the text, see Bohnenkamp 1994). During this long period of time, there were changes, even substantial ones, in the plot and in the definition of the characters.

At first, the story of Helena is conceived according to the schemes of a traditional type of the marvellous. This is to be traced to the text's earliest reference to the female character in the first part of the tragedy, more precisely in the scene *Hexenküche* (*The Witches' Kitchen*), in which Faust glimpses in a magic mirror the reflection of a beautiful woman, with whom he falls in love. This is a crucial moment in the action, as it links the two macrosegments that make up the first part of the play: the tragedy of knowledge and that of Margaret, whom Faust meets in the following scene. A line by Mephistopheles, however, unmistakably associates the image in the mirror with Helena<sup>7</sup>. This can be considered as an *ante litteram* example of a «precession of simulacra», i.e. the tendency of images to anticipate their own referents in the real world, foreshadowing them (Baudrillard 1994: 1-42). From the outset, the character of Helena is thus linked to the theme of virtuality, as one reads in a sketch of the work dating from 1816: «Helena gehört dem Orkus und kann durch Zauberkünste wohl herausgelockt aber nicht festgehalten werden»<sup>8</sup>. In the preparatory schemes, her appearance is still made possible by using a magic ring that restores her corporeity, while her encounter with Faust is set in a castle «mit einer Zaubergrenze umzogen [...] innerhalb welcher allein diese Halbwirklichkeiten gedeihen können»<sup>9</sup>.

As is well known, the original structure was considerably altered due to the decision to set the *Helena-Akt* (i.e. the third act of the second part of *Faust*) directly in Sparta, before the palace of Menelaus. In this way, if Helena's mythical dimension is preserved, it becomes necessary to locate Faust in Greece, with all the consequences that this entails on a narrative level in terms of filling the gap that separates modern man from Greekness. The solution to this problem is provided by the *Classical Walpurgis*

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<sup>7</sup> Schöne 2019a: 111, vv. 2604-5: «With that drink in your body, well then, / All women will look to you like Helen» (Goethe 2003: 107).

<sup>8</sup> Bohnenkamp 1994: 271 «Helena belongs to the Orc and can be lured out by magic, but not held».

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* «surrounded by a magical veil, within which these half-realities can thrive».



*Night*, a phantasmagorical journey undertaken by Faust in a Thessaly populated by spectres, mythological beings, monsters and deities. The entire macro-sequence serves precisely to prepare for Elena's entrance on stage in the third act. Although the dramatic action of the story undergoes a strong compression in the final version, the second and third acts of *Faust II* are clearly connected for at least two thematic reasons: the first is their common phantasmagorical trait (it is not by chance that the third act appeared in print separately from the rest of the drama with the subtitle *Klassisch-romantische Phantasmagorie*, a "Classical-Romantic Phantasmagoria"); the second is the great theme of genesis or origin (*Entstehung*) that runs through them both and which, as will be seen, is intrinsically linked to the question of the simulacrum.

The *Classical Walpurgis Night* is preceded, in turn, by two preparatory scenes that were significantly added just before its composition, i.e. at a late stage of the drafting process, between 1829 and 1830: *Finstere Galerie* and *Rittersaal* (*A Gloomy Gallery* and *The Hall of the Knights*; on the chronology of the text's genesis, see Bohnenkamp 1994: 279-290). A series of changes can already be observed in these scenes through the first real attempt to manipulate the image of Helena, which implies going beyond the magical world of *The Witches' Kitchen* in favour of a more specifically media-oriented one, i.e. a performance at the emperor's court, during which Faust evokes the spirits of the Greek heroine and Paris. This show is referred to in the text as a «Fratzengeisterspiel» (Schöne 2019a: 268, v. 6546; literally a 'farce of spectres'), even though the evocation of images no longer obeys criteria of pure magic, as it is clearly modelled on a phantasmagoria (cf. Schöne 2019b: 479-484) where Helena is cast as a full-length figure, but still behaves as a phantasmagorical image, remaining mute. However much Faust, seeing her before him, attempts to grasp her as if she were a living person, her projection remains unreachable.

A decisive step towards virtuality, however, might as well be noted in the preceding scene, *A Gloomy Gallery*, in which Faust's descent into the realm of the Mothers is described as a journey into a kind of upside-down hyper-uranium, a world «im Grenzenlosen», in which «Des Lebens Bilder, regsam, ohne Leben» (Schöne 2019a: 263, vv. 6428-6430; «the Forms of Life [...], active, not alive» Goethe 2003: 272) float around. It is among these images that Faust goes in search of Helena and Paris. *A Gloomy Gallery* and *The Hall of the Knights* thus represent two scenes that are fundamental to the entire *Faust II*, whose function and theme can be compared to the *Witches' Kitchen* scene in *Faust I*, because of the apparitions that occur there. As is well known, during the evocation of spirits at the emperor's court,

Faust begins to mistake appearance for reality in a way that absorbs him completely and from which he is destined never to recover. The key verses are the following, spoken by him:

Hier fass'ich Fuß! Hier sind es Wirklichkeiten,  
Von hier aus darf der Geist mit Geistern streiten,  
Das Doppelreich, das große, sich bereiten<sup>10</sup>.

From then on, Faust enters a phantasmagorical world, even though Helena is apparently characterised by a maximum level of reality in the central scenes of the third act. Even the preparatory notes mention that the queen is to return to Sparta «*als wahrhaft lebendig*» (Bohnenkamp 1994: 451 [H P123C]), i.e. as if she were really alive. Unlike in the previous scenes, we see her enter on stage, solemnly take the floor, flirt with Faust, live with him, even bear him a son, Euphorion, before vanishing into nothingness with her boy. All the same, the phantasmagorical component of these scenes remains evident. For we must not forget that this is a Helena returning from the land of the dead. Even though the episode of her redemption, set in Hades and described by Goethe in great detail in the paralipomena (H P123B and C, cf. Bohnenkamp 1994: 424-454), was later dropped in the final version of the tragedy, Helena's phantasmal character does remain decisive in the plot (cf. Mommsen 1968: 91; Schöne 2019b: 527). Despite the classical setting, a hint of hell thus lingers throughout the third act, and many textual references confirm this: for instance, the choretids accompanying Helena on the stage have a shadowy consistency, which reveals that they come from the Beyond (Mommsen 1968: 30-31). Helena herself is referred to as a simulacrum several times in the following verses:

Ich als Idol, ihm dem Idol verband ich mich.  
Es war ein Traum, so sagen ja die Worte selbst.  
Ich schwinde hin und werde selbst mir ein Idol<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Schöne 2019a: 268, vv. 6553-5; «Here's a foothold! Here's reality, / Where spirit dare with spirits disagree, / And prepare itself for its great, dual mastery» (Goethe 2003: 278).

<sup>11</sup> Schöne 2019a: 347, vv. 8879-8881: «As phantom, I bound myself to a phantom. / It was a dream, as the tales themselves tell. / I fade, now, become a phantom to myself» (Goethe 2003: 365).

This passage refers to his legendary union with Achilles (recalled in vv. 8876-8881), who thus becomes Faust's illustrious forerunner in the conquest of the most beautiful woman in Greece. The term «Idol» translates the Greek EIDOLON, used by Goethe in the specific sense of apparition, ghost, spectre and illusory image (*Trugbild*)<sup>12</sup>. But Helena's spectral identity has a long history to which the text of Faust itself makes explicit allusion in the following verses, referring to the female character:

Doch sagt man du erscheinst ein doppelhaft Gebild,  
In Ilios gesehen und in Aegypten auch<sup>13</sup>.

These verses allude to one of the main sources of the *Helena-Akt*, Euripides' *Helen*, a fictional drama centred on the theme of the double and developing the version of the myth in which the real woman, throughout the bloody war between the Achaeans and their adversaries, had actually remained in Egypt, safe and sound, while her simulacrum had travelled to Troy.

Goethe's Helena is thus closely related to that of Euripides. However, whereas in the ancient drama the latter and her double always remain two distinct beings (cf. Fusillo 1997: 11 and 2012: 53-70), Goethe gives life to one and irreparably torn character. The theme of the double, closely linked to that of the simulacrum, thus functions differently in Goethe's Helena than it does in Euripides' character, because while in the latter the split is projected outwards – via an image that attracts to itself any guilt the real Helena could be accused of –, in the former the split is entirely within the character: «*als wahrhaft lebendig*», Goethe's Helena is neither simply real nor simply unreal. She is, in fact, the embodiment of herself, as a myth acting directly on the scene, or a simulacrum, as «a fictional object that does not represent. It exists» (Stoichita 2008: 203). From this perspective, her erotic

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<sup>12</sup> As is demonstrated by the following parallel passage from the *Walpurgis Night* in the first part of the tragedy, in which Mephistopheles refers to an apparition of Margaret on the Blocksberg: «Es ist ein Zauberbild, ist leblos, ein Idol / Ihm zu begehnen ist nicht gut; / Vom starren Blick erstarrt des Menschen Blut, / Und er wird fast in Sein verkehrt / Von der Meduse hast du ja gehört» (Schöne 2019a: 179 vv. 4190-4); «It's a lifeless magic form, a phantom. / Encountering it will do you no good: / Its fixed state freezes human blood, / And then one's almost turned to stone; / Medusa's story is surely known» (Goethe 2003: 183).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 347, vv. 8872-8873. «Yet they say that you appeared in dual form, / Seen in Troy and, at the same time, in Egypt» (Goethe 2003: 364).

relationship with Faust exemplarily reflects the phantasmatic character of love in mediaeval and proto-Renaissance culture, i.e. the «loving by shadow or figure» (Agamben 1993: 98) that dissolves in the concupiscent contemplation of the image of the beloved.

## Homunculus

The final, decisive step on the path from the Helena of the *Fratzengeisterspiel* to that of the *Helena-Akt* is provided by the story of Homunculus, the most important of the «antecedents» of Helena's appearance. Conceived at a late stage, around 1826 (cf. Bohnenkamp 1994: 417), initially as Faust's assistant in his search for love, this character ends up taking on a central role in the plot. In addition to making Faust's dream of Helena's conception visible thanks to his telepathic powers, which anticipates the encounter between the two characters, it is Homunculus who will lead him to the Classical Walpurgis Night, becoming in fact the driving force of dramatic action throughout the entire second act of *Faust II*.

Homunculus is a *Flaschengeist*, a spirit with human features contained in a glass vial (in v. 8104 he is defined as «menschenähnlich», i.e. human-like, Schöne 2019a: 321). He was created in a laboratory by Wagner, Faust's pedantic pupil, in the presence of Mephistopheles. What characterises him is the fact that he is bodiless, and thus constitutively halved, «nur halb zur Welt gekommen» (Schöne 2019a: 326, v. 8248, «only half born» Goethe 2003: 343). In his case, the virtuality of the simulacrum is connected to his artificial genesis, thoroughly described in the second scene of the second act through images and concepts of clear alchemical origin. The main source from which Goethe draws inspiration is, of course, Paracelsus' *De Natura Rerum*<sup>14</sup>, even though, in describing the genesis of Homunculus, the author does not resort to the Swiss scientist's medieval formula, but rather to an already entirely modern biochemical procedure<sup>15</sup>. This confirms, among other things, the marked tendency found in the second part of *Faust* towards anachronism and the allegorical transposition of historical facts.

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<sup>14</sup> On the influence of alchemical imagery in Goethe's work, Gray's (1952) classic study remains a point of reference. As for pre-modern theories on homunculi, see LaGrandeur (2017: 48-77); see Albrecht – Willand (2018) on the literary history of the character.

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the passage is known to have been inspired by the pioneering research of Friedrich Wöhler; cf. Schöne 2019b: 506-508.

A substantial implication in the configuration of the artificial character is its parthenogenesis, resulting from the exclusion of the female element from the process leading to its birth. The goal of the alchemists, i.e. to create humanoids without the input of a physical mother, has thus been interpreted as pure «Männerphantasie» (Drux 2005: 97, male fantasy). Totally devoid of the female element associated with nature, Homunculus therefore embodies the element traditionally attributed to the male sphere, so to speak, in matters of purity, i.e. spirituality. As he is free from the limits imposed by matter, he is pure thinking spirit, which, among other things, allows him to read Faust's mind. He shares Faust's impatient desire and unquenchable thirst for experience, as well as the marked agency that leads him almost immediately to emancipate himself from his creator. In this respect, Mephistopheles' closing remark is significant: «Am Ende hängen wir doch ab / von Kreaturen, die wir machten.» (Schöne 2019a: 672, vv. 7003-4 «In the end we're dependent on / The creatures we've created» Goethe 2003: 295)

The striking consequence of Homunculus' artificial genesis is therefore, first and foremost, his boundless knowledge, and it is only thanks to this that Faust, as has been said, is able to overcome the space-time barriers that separate him from Helena. From the very outset, his creator, Wagner, considers him as «ein Hirn, das trefflich denken soll» (Schöne 2019a: 279, v. 6869, «brains, with thoughts to celebrate» Goethe 2003: 290), with a metonymy that gives this creature the traits of an artificial intelligence<sup>16</sup>. Goethe emphasizes this aspect much more in the character's original conception than is apparent in the final version of the play. To portray him, in the paralipomena, the author uses a metaphor taken from the media world of his time, calling Homunculus an «allgemeines historisches Weltkalender» (Bohnenkamp 1994: 438 [H P123C], «general historical world calendar»), a term indicating a utilitarian text type meant for entertaining the lower and middle classes, a kind of almanac that, in addition to astronomical and meteorological information, could contain practical advice, elements of factual knowledge, curiosities and general wisdom. Now, with

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<sup>16</sup> Lohmeyer 1975: 184-186 dwells on this aspect, with precise references to earlier criticism. In the essay *Niegeschichte* (2019: 139-140), Dietmar Dath, author of the successful science-fiction novel *Die Abschaffung der Arten*, associates the artificial memory of Homunculus with the way in which *science fiction* narratively transfigures scientific knowledge into «deep decor» (the term is taken up by Jones 1999). The artificial nature of the character thus implies more than a satire of Romanticism (as argued by Höfler 1972).

this metaphor (which he later did not develop in the final version), it is as if Goethe was imagining a sort of forerunner of a modern search engine: a mechanical repertoire of information, an artificial intelligence endowed with a universal memory of an encyclopaedic nature. The knowledge of Homunculus, however, was soon to show its limits: it would be boundless, but also abstract and superficial, because it was not connected to any sort of experience. An encyclopaedic knowledge, but a virtual one too, disembodied like its possessor. As Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer wrote in a note dated 30 March 1833, the simulacrum in the vial was supposed to represent «den Geist des Menschen, wie er vor aller Erfahrung ins Leben tritt» («the spirit of the human being as it comes into being before any experience»; quote from Mommsen 1968: 168).

Homunculus too, however, undergoes a substantial evolution over the course of Goethe's writing. If, in the first phase, he is conceived as a fixed and passing figure, in the final version he becomes the protagonist of a palingenesis which, in many respects, anticipates that of the protagonist in the last scene of *Faust, Bergschluchten (Mountain Gorges)*. In fact, as happens several times in the *Classical Walpurgis Night* (vv. 7831, 7858 and 8133), we see him achieve his aim to take bodily form, i.e. to be born in the fullest sense of the term, also organically. To achieve this, he is accompanied by the philosopher Thales before Nereus, and later Proteus, the embodiment of the incessant mutability of nature, through whom he finally approaches the nymph Galatea. The vial enclosing him breaks against her shell chariot, dispersing its contents into the sea. This death, however, is associated with a sense of rebirth, as the circle of life closes in with this umpteenth embodiment of the eternal feminine.

With his *petite mort*, Homunculus concludes and consummates the process of his own genesis, which had begun in the *Laboratorium* scene, through the symbolic representation of the union between spirit and nature, male and female<sup>17</sup>. As anticipated, his transfiguration presents more than one analogy with that of the protagonist in the very last scene, *Moun-*

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<sup>17</sup> On the meanings and possible interpretations of Homunculus' death, in relation to Goethe's work and the scientific discourse of the time, see Schöne 2019b: 529-533. As a side note, it may be interesting to note that the path of palingenesis of the artificial creature is accompanied by the presence of more or less ghostly simulacra, such as the Pygmies and the Dactyls, that Homunculus renounces to command. Later, the figures of the Telchines of Rhodes and the Cabiri are even more specifically related to the theme of the simulacrum; the former for being the first to have erected statues to the gods (Schöne 2019a: 328, vv. 8301-2),

*tain Gorges*, conceived, not by chance, in parallel with the last part of the *Classical Walpurgis Night* in 1830<sup>18</sup>. And it is because of such analogies that the simulacrum can be considered a mirror image («Spiegelbild», Schöne 2019b: 529) of Faust himself: ultimately, Galatea performs the same anagogic function towards him as the Mater Gloriosa towards the protagonist in the finale. The element that differs in the two episodes is, so to speak, the backdrop: pagan in the first case, mystical-Catholic in the other.

Finally, one is left to wonder in what sense Homunculus prepares Helena's entrance onto the scene. Traditionally, the most widely held interpretation is the one that considers the artificial creature to be the embodiment of Goethe's concept of entelechy, in the sense of a being that bears within itself the germ of its own formal development (Mommsen 1968: 168-182). If read according to Goethe's morphology and philosophy of nature, the entelechy of the android would thus foreshadow the epiphany of the perfect form of the human being. There seems to be no doubt about this, except that this clearly allegorical interpretation can be supplemented by taking into account the thematic dynamics that have emerged so far.

As has been seen, Helena and Homunculus belong to the same phantasmagorical dimension that permeates the second and third acts of Goethe's tragedy: as simulacra, they both fall within the complex phenomenology of virtuality that Goethe deploys in his drama, highlighting the ephemeral character of the artificial creature. Although they stem from similar premises, the two simulacra are defined in oppositional terms: Helena belongs to the pole of eros and femininity, while Homunculus belongs to that of the daimon and masculinity. Furthermore, while Helena, with her mythical beauty, represents the *tèlos* of the human, Homunculus reaches his *tèlos* beyond the human, vanishing into the sea before Galatea's shell; in other words, he reaches it in the post-human.

Despite being *menschenähnlich*, Homunculus ultimately chooses not to incarnate in a human form. Proteus advises him against this, explicitly exhorting him in the finale: «*Nun strebe nicht nach höheren Orden: / Denn bist du erst ein Mensch geworden, / Dann ist es völlig aus mit dir*» (Schöne 2019a: 329, vv. 8330-2; «Don't wrestle with the higher orders: / Once man, inside

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the latter as ancient pre-Olympian gods similar to the Penates, depicted as terracotta idols or in the form of dwarfs on ancient coins, symbolising the impulse that Homunculus shares with Faust himself to go beyond (cf. Lohmeyer 1975: 262-266 and Schöne 2019b: 566-568).

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, see Bohnenkamp 1994: 398.

a mankind's borders, / Then all will be over with you» Goethe 2003: 345). In order to enter the cycle of life, he must renounce his monadic being and vanish into the sea, the origin of all things:

Gib nach dem löblichen Verlangen,  
Von vorn die Schöpfung anzufangen!  
Zu raschem Wirken sei bereit!  
Da regst du dich nach ewigen Normen,  
Durch tausend abertausend Formen,  
und bis zum Menschen hast du Zeit. (Schöne 2019a: 329, vv. 8321-6)<sup>19</sup>

These words, put into Thales' mouth, describe quite a different post-human from what one might possibly associate with the cybernetic and digital revolution (Hayles 1999), since the disembodiment of the subject does not obey a purely material or informational logic. In accordance with Goethe's philosophy of nature – which is attentive to the holistic and aesthetic aspects of natural processes – this disembodiment rather pivots on an idea of evolution that implies a substantial continuity between the different realms of being. The palingenesis of Homunculus in Goethe's poetics takes on the features of a sacrifice or renunciation on the one hand – the theme of *Entsagung* is central in Goethe's late work – and of a true apocatastasis on the other. The fact that Helena's entrance onto the scene – or, rather, her return from the realm of the dead – requires that someone, before her and in her stead, should retrace the stages of creation backwards, has anthropological implications that cannot be explored here. The fact that this 'someone' is an artificial creature can be read both as a proof of nihilism and as an affirmation of a scheme of thought according to which the human being would still represent the teleological climax of creation – as Thales himself states in the verses just quoted, «*und bis zum Menschen hast du Zeit*». But Goethe's masterpiece recomposes these conceptual schemes, surpassing them in their very assumptions and enacting the highest possible affirmation of the anthropocentric model, even in the face of its initial, most radical disavowal.

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<sup>19</sup> «Yield to your praiseworthy wish, / Start at the beginning, with the fish! / Be ready for the swiftest working! / Be ruled by the eternal norms, / Move through a thousand, thousand forms, / And you'll ascend in time to Man» (Goethe 2003: 345).



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## About the author

### Francesco Rossi

Associate Professor of German Literature at the University of Pisa (Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics). His main research areas are the German 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Romantic period, Decadentism and the Modern, descriptive translation studies, the theory and history of literary and non-fiction genres. Among his publications are *Gesamterkennen Zur Wissenschaftskritik und Gestalttheorie im George-Kreis* (2011) and *Spazi e figure del politico nell'opera di Thomas Mann* (ed. by, with Simone Costagli, 2020).

Email: francesco.rossi@unipi.it

## The article

Date sent: 31/03/2022

Date accepted: 31/07/2022

Date published: 30/11/2022

## How to cite this article

Rossi, Francesco, "Hyperrealities and Simulacra in Goethe's *Faust*", *Entering the Simulacra World*, Eds. A. Ghezzani - L. Giovannelli - F. Rossi - C. Savettieri, *Between*, XII.24 (2022): 441-459, [www.betweenjournal.it](http://www.betweenjournal.it)

, *Hyperrealities and Simulacra in Goethe's Faust*